

The Post and Courier

Concerns about SPA's cruise plan are misplaced

BY JOSEPH P. RILEY JR.

Saturday, July 9, 2011

Because of the controversy over cruise ships and the fact that there has been a great deal of misinformation and fear-mongering on this issue, I would like to set out the facts. There are a number of facets to this issue, and I'll present them in two articles -- 1) the concerns and 2) the benefits.

Several concerns have been raised over the cruise business in Charleston, including:

Harbor pollution: The fact is that cruise ships do not pollute Charleston harbor. Cruise ships are regulated through extensive federal and international laws and regulations, governing every waste stream and discharge.

In addition, the industry's Cruise Lines International Association has adopted its own practices and procedures that go beyond what's required by law.

For example, any blackwater -- waste from toilets -- is extensively treated through a Coast Guard-approved or internationally certified on-board sewage treatment system. Even then, it is not released from ships into the harbor. The industry's practice is to discharge at least four miles from shore while underway at least 6 knots, exceeding the regulations.

Carnival Cruise Line's treated blackwater discharge practice is to be underway and at least 12 miles offshore. In Charleston, this means that after the ships stop at the "C" buoy, 12.9 miles offshore, the harbor pilot disembarks and the ship sails into the open ocean. When they are underway at least 6 knots and they are 12 miles or further from shore, then the treated water can be released, and the release is so gradual and diluted that the EPA says it is almost not measurable. This eliminates any real threat to the natural environment or our coastline.

In short, our harbor is not polluted by cruise ships, and there is no evidence that existing regulations are either ineffective or insufficient to protect our environment here.

Air pollution: All ships calling on Charleston -- including cruise ships -- are subject to air emissions regulations. And these regulations are getting tougher. Just last year, the North American coast -- including Charleston -- was designated as an Emission Control Area by the International Maritime Organization and the EPA. This dramatically reduces ship emissions by requiring much cleaner fuel and will become enforceable in August of next year.

The EPA estimates this action will reduce fine particulate pollution by more than 85 percent. In fact, the resulting levels will be so low as to obviate the benefits of shore-side power, which is cost-prohibitive for a port like Charleston with such a low level of cruise activity.

Traffic: The most discussed and visible aspect of cruise ships calling is automobile traffic when passengers arrive to board. Currently, a portion of Washington and Concord streets are closed between

Hasell and Market Street for about five hours on cruise days. While it does create an inconvenience, the street is closed only about 4 percent of the time. And the number of cars that arrive in Charleston on cruise days, several hundred over a five-hour period, causes less impact on the city's traffic than, for example, a sold-out event at the 2,700-seat Gaillard Auditorium or the 5,000-seat College of Charleston arena.

In any case, the need to close this street goes away when the new terminal is completed, hopefully by the end of next year, and Concord Street will be reopened for its full length as well. The traffic inconveniences that now exist will be gone.

Managing growth: I requested that the Port set a limit of two cruise ships a week on average, and they have agreed -- in writing -- to cap the number at 104 ships a year. Last year there were 67 ships, and this year there will be 89 ships, with 83 currently set for 2012. The Ports Authority does not expect to get to 104.

I believe that 104 ships a year is a reasonable limit and I would oppose any more without greater assurances on how it would be managed. The Ports Authority does not foresee a market that supports more than 104. And, of course, only one berth will be built at the new terminal and they have given a written commitment to only one ship at a time.

The Ports Authority has committed that if ever there is a business opportunity to go beyond 104, which it does not expect and which I do not favor, but if that did happen, the Port would involve the community to evaluate such a request. That would begin a year-long fact-finding process to determine whether or not the community would support such an increase.

In addition, the Ports Authority has also committed that the size of ships would reflect those that have previously called on Charleston, so it cannot, under this commitment, go to larger ships without that same process of community engagement.

So, for the foreseeable future we will have less than an average of two ships a week, with the written commitment that a yearlong community input process would be required before that could ever be changed.

The Ports Authority has put the size and parameters of its cruise business in writing. Some have said this isn't enough and demand ordinances. Were it to codify those limits, the Port could potentially be forced to establish legal limits on other segments of its maritime business. And, since no other substantial port is subject to such legal limits, our state's port would become uncompetitive in the marketplace. With a quarter of a million port-related jobs throughout our state, this could be very damaging to Charleston and to one of the primary economic engines in South Carolina.

Legitimate concerns can and have been addressed in a thorough and balanced way.

Tomorrow: The benefits of cruise ships and the Union Pier Plan.

Joseph P. Riley Jr. is mayor of Charleston.

Copyright © 1995 - 2011 Evening Post Publishing Co..