

The Post and Courier

Cruise critics steering away from the facts

BY JOHN F. HASSELL III

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A commentary column and an editorial in Sunday's Post and Courier made, respectively, an important misstatement of fact and a mischaracterization of the cruise issue.

First, the column incorrectly claimed that the Ravenel Bridge is a limiting factor for commercial cargo vessels. This is simply incorrect and is a commercially damaging statement that cannot be left to stand.

The bridge does not constrain our port for the largest container ships. In fact, the current and future needs of cargo shipping were taken into account when designing our bridge, which is actually wider and taller than Savannah's Talmadge Memorial Bridge.

Second, anyone following the Union Pier planning would see that it is neither fair nor correct to suggest that the Ports Authority is putting forth a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. The reality is quite different.

In 2009 the Port launched the most open and public planning process I've witnessed in 30-plus years of public service. This exercise started as an initiative to modernize the existing cruise terminal and upgrade the surrounding 15 acres.

Through more than 100 public meetings, the Port was encouraged to study all of Union Pier, improve traffic flow, keep cruise activities in scale, stabilize the Bennett's Rice Mill façade, provide waterfront access, establish new view corridors, and reduce industrial activity on the peninsula.

The Port not only listened, it acted and modified its plan to incorporate this input. In addition, the Port agreed to design the terminal for one ship, and memorialized its commitments to a cruise management plan-- in writing -- by a formal resolution of its board of directors.

The key to unlocking all the benefits of the Union Pier plan is shifting the cruise terminal north from its current location in a congested area at the end of Market Street, to the north end of Union Pier where cargo operations have occurred for generations.

This move brings significant opportunities. It means traditional cargo operations would cease on Union Pier, removing this activity -- including cargo ships, trains and trucks -- from the lower peninsula for the first time in 331 years.

And, with cargo relocated to an improved Columbus Street Terminal, the door will open to revitalizing the balance of Union Pier -- about 35 acres -- in what can only be described as a phenomenal opportunity.

The new passenger terminal design itself also incorporates public input, such as re-opening Concord Street in Phase I, removing 5,000 feet of chain link fence, intensively landscaping the terminal area and reducing the terminal building's mass by 20 percent.

Shifting cruise north is the maritime justification that allows for the southern redevelopment. Otherwise, the Port would keep the cruise terminal where it is and rebuild cargo operations on Union Pier, consistent with its legislated mandate and its original plan.

This is not a threat, as those opposed to cruise would suggest. It is the business reality.

The idea that we stop time, conduct additional studies, and reconsider issues that have long ago been addressed is unacceptable. Before wasting more time and money, why not just look around?

We hosted the Norwegian Majesty as a seasonal home-port for weekly embarkations over several years starting in 2003, and are fortunate to have hosted more than 14 months of year-round embarkations with the Fantasy.

Beyond the inconvenience of a street closing during embarkation -- which goes away with the new terminal -- one is hard pressed to point out negative impacts. Where's the evidence of environmental degradation or the police reports of rowdy cruise passengers?

The biggest impacts of the cruise operation are the dollars it is pumping into our local economy, at a time of near-record unemployment.

But much of the cruise opposition is by those for whom time is not an issue. They propose more studies, more forums and more delays.

For them, it's only time. They may not feel affected by the Port's economic development mandate. But a quarter of a million South Carolinians do. Their jobs are port-related. They want to work and need the jobs that ships support.

Voltaire first wrote about how "perfect is the enemy of the good." The idea is that perfection is not possible, and at some point more work becomes wasteful and inefficient, perhaps at the sacrifice of something good.

The community helped develop a beautiful plan. And now is the time to move forward, before we miss out on something good.

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