

The Post and Courier

Cruise plan will benefit Charleston

BY JOSEPH P. RILEY JR.

Sunday, July 10, 2011

The new cruise terminal and the Union Pier Plan will transform our city's waterfront, benefiting the citizens of this community now and in the future.

The new terminal will be built on the northern part of Union Pier, just south of Laurens Street; the State Ports Authority will rehabilitate an existing warehouse structure, transforming it from something pretty dismal looking to a very attractive cruise terminal.

The lower half of Union Pier, or more roughly from Hasell Street south to Waterfront Park, will then be planned with you -- the citizens of Charleston. With the help of planners and architects, it will become an extension of the historic city from East Bay Street to the water.

This is an extraordinary, once in forever opportunity for our community. Under this plan we will see reconnected streets, reopened view corridors, new parks, and eyesores will be removed. Public access along or near the water's edge will extend from essentially the Waterfront Park north all the way to the new Charlotte Street Park north of the South Carolina Aquarium. This will fulfill a long time dream of enhancing citizens' access to the water in that part of our city.

The Union Pier Plan will also create opportunities for additional places for people to live and work in our city. Part of this plan will include the removal of the existing cruise ship terminal building, which blocks the view from the end of Market Street and from the Custom House. There, the natural shoreline will be reestablished -- a wonderful gift to our citizens. This plan will remove 5,000 feet of chain link, barbed wire fence, and the passenger terminal area and its parking will not be fenced, but rather will be lined with trees and shrubs. Concord Street will be reestablished so you will be able to drive, bike or walk along Concord Street all the way from the Waterfront Park to Charlotte Street.

The Bennett Rice Mill façade that looks quite lonely in the middle of the Port storage yard will become the centerpiece of a small park -- as suggested by citizens during the planning process. This will be an exciting project for all of us to work on.

What are the benefits of the cruise industry to our city? They are many.

The cruise business generated \$37 million for the area economy in 2010, including more than 400 jobs. When a cruise ship is embarking, more than 200 local residents are working in support of this operation. This includes agents, longshoremen and stevedores, security personnel and others.

The ships also buy a number of products and services locally, including health care, flowers, water, paper products, ground transportation, financial services and fuel. Crew members shop in local resident-oriented businesses, such as grocery stores, electronics shops, the vegetable market, the hardware store and others.

In addition, there are tourism benefits as arriving passengers eat in our restaurants, visit our attractions, stay in our hotels and shop in our wonderful local businesses. We are importing wallets, eager to spend money and pay visitor-related taxes which further support our tourism economy.

Based on surveys of cruise passengers who drive to Charleston, 42 percent said they were visiting the city for the first time. And 97 percent said they would return -- a tremendous endorsement of their experience. Some 83 percent of cruise passengers cited some element of Charleston's historical context as what they liked most about their visit. Cruise visitors appreciate -- and support -- our historical sites.

Clearly, cruise ships are beneficial to the tourism sector of our economy, and the ripple effects extend to other sectors as well, as more exposure for our wonderful city ultimately means more business opportunities and more job opportunities for all of our citizens.

Charleston has welcomed visitors to our city by water since it was founded. The Union Pier plan will allow us to continue to do so, always at a moderate and acceptable scale for our city. We will have beautiful new access to the water's edge, handsome new neighborhoods and additional job opportunities along our waterfront, which is a part of Charleston's proud heritage.

Joseph P. Riley Jr. is mayor of Charleston.

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