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The cruise ship industry is good for Charleston businesses

By John Keener, Erin Mellen, John Hassell and David Dunlap
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There is absolutely no question that cruise ships bring jobs and spending to our area -- they are good for our economy and our community.

Recognizing the tremendous benefits cruise ships bring to our local economy, we recently formed a "Cruise Business Council" to bring together the many businesses in the area that recognize and welcome the benefits of the cruise industry in Charleston and to drive further economic benefits to the region.

Our port's role as an economic driver for South Carolina includes cruise ships as a vital part of its mission. The cruise business supplies jobs, work and spending during challenging economic times. Last year, the cruise industry supported more than 400 jobs and resulted in \$37 million in total economic output for Charleston, including \$16 million in wages and \$3.5 million in tax revenues.

From a maritime industry perspective, each time a cruise ship is at the dock, more than 200 men and women -- including line handlers, longshoremen, harbor pilots and others managing terminal operations and security -- are on the job. Cruise ships, for their part, buy products and services here from local suppliers. And crew members support resident-oriented businesses.

From the broader business perspective, passengers spend money in shops, restaurants, hotels and attractions. In fact, it was recently announced that accommodations tax revenues exceeded expectations in 2010, and the cruise industry clearly played a role in that.

Cruisers themselves have told us that they love our attractions, restaurants, retail and hotels through nearly 1,800 personal surveys taken by the Ports Authority since last year. These surveys reveal that: nearly 37 percent of cruisers visit area attractions, 50 percent dine in restaurants while in Charleston, 30 percent stay one or more additional nights in Charleston hotels and lodging before or after their cruise, 83 percent cite some element of Charleston's history and architecture as what they liked best, 40 percent are visiting Charleston for the first time, and 97 percent of those first-time visitors say they are likely to return to experience Charleston events or further explore its history and attractions.

Cruisers have specifically named more than 220 local businesses in the surveys as well, and a new interactive map found at www.UnionPierPlan.com details all of the businesses that cruisers have said they have visited.

It's exciting to see so many businesses benefiting from cruise visits, including restaurants such as the Charleston Crab House and Hank's Seafood, retail shops all along King Street and Market Street, attractions including Middleton Place and Drayton Hall, and hotels spanning from North Charleston, through West Ashley and downtown, and into Mount Pleasant.

As part of the Cruise Business Council efforts, our goal is to support businesses and encourage even more cruise visitors to visit those businesses.

Through an open, transparent planning process, the Ports Authority has committed to maintaining a one-berth, one ship at a time facility, and balancing the context and character of Charleston with the cruise industry.

The Ports Authority's leaders continue to demonstrate that understanding with the Union Pier Concept Plan and by moving forward with the new cruise terminal at the north end of the Union Pier property. The plan will provide even greater benefits for our community, by opening up more than 35 acres available for non-maritime uses, including unparalleled access to the waterfront.

We encourage all business leaders to join the Cruise Business Council, which they can do by visiting www.UnionPierPlan.com and filling out the online form. There is no fee to becoming a member, and many benefits exist by becoming involved, including regular updates and input sessions with port leadership, exposure in the Ports Authority's online and print publications and invitations to future cruise-related announcements and events.

We look forward to working with the Charleston business community to reap the continued and growing benefits related to the cruise industry.

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