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Don't scuttle grand Union Pier plan

BY RON BRINSON
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A couple of years ago, the State Ports Authority decided it was time to fix up Union Pier's 35-year-old cruise ship passenger terminal. Actually it was past time; the Concord Street corridor fronting Union Pier has been a peninsular eyesore for decades.

The Authority seemingly did everything right working with the City of Charleston to formulate an expanded redevelopment plan largely based on neighborhood associations' input. Now the plan is being rejected by neighborhood groups that helped create it and supported it. This could turn out to be the beginning and the end of neighborhood-based port planning in Charleston.

On the eve of yet another big public forum, the Authority surely is tempted to return to its intentions to just fix up the Union Pier passenger terminal. The cruise business generates only 7 percent of the Authority's annual revenues and the redevelopment project would be financed largely with bonded debt collateralized by the Authority's general revenues. So if the redevelopment does not pay for itself, the Authority's other business units -- like containership operations -- will be subsidizing the Union Pier enterprise.

For the SPA, this is a core business issue. This project, with its risks and planning headaches, has become a disproportionate demand on the Authority's time, money and marketing attention. In other words, the Authority has bigger fish to fry and we should not be surprised by an SPA corporate decision to shuck the Union Pier redevelopment and return to its maritime knitting.

But let's hope that doesn't happen, at least any time soon. Beyond the strident tones of neo-neighborhood input, this is a promising project to renew property that needs it. There's a lot to learn here and a clear lesson is that neighborhood-based planning, the grail for urban center port development, is not always a reliable foundation for decisions.

The Authority made a planning partnership with the City. Neighborhood associations, the Historic Charleston Foundation and the public were invited to help define the project and identify impacts to be mitigated. The process quickly created a consensus that the initial plan should be expanded to a full redevelopment of the Union Pier footprint. The SPA and City agreed.

But as it turns out, the process was running dangerously ahead of the neighborhoods represented at the planning table. Members of some associations have revolted, recalling officers and board members and bringing a reversal of plan endorsements.

Not surprisingly, the SPA team and no doubt many at City Hall see a sophisticated, systematic and well-coordinated hand pushing the governance upheavals of these neighborhood groups -- and impeachment of the plan's conception and support. There's something very curious about this reversing tug of wills.

Some detractors want the Authority's pledge to limit cruise ship calls to two per week formatted in some legally enforceable code. The SPA shouldn't agree to that. To submit any part of its business to local government restrictions would create an open-ended precedent that could haunt Charleston's future port operations.

Some want Union Pier redeveloped and the cruise terminal moved to the Columbus Street property. This smacks of having and eating the proverbial cake. Columbus Street is a strategically important terminal, especially for the long term. It can't be sacrificed for a cruise terminal. Others just don't like the "looks" of the cruise industry.

Cruise ships can be graceful logos for a hospitable old port city's modernity, or they can be viewed as gaudy out-scaled shadows dimming the Old South's greatest ensemble of history and architecture. Charleston has been hosting passenger ships and passengers for more than three centuries. If port development choices are to be determined by ship appearances, then Charleston needs to rethink its commitment as a thriving seaport, and a competitor for the giant post-Panamax container ships.

And some peninsula residents gratuitously grade "quality" of tourists based on preference or acceptability, and then conclude that the folks who follow cruise ships don't qualify as either. This arrogance simply distorts constructive debate. Rich people who prefer shorts, tattered golf shirts and flip-flops enjoy Charleston; and many of more modest and limited means will dress up and spend well-budgeted dollars to walk the peninsula streets.

Since when does appearance define a visitor's validity in a city that welcomes tourists from all over the world? Since when is there an economic test for a visitor's admission to the peninsular city?

Old Charleston is not a prissy boutique. It's a city of diversity, hospitable and known for its charm. Whether visitors come in an airplane and limousine, a rickety old station wagon, or as part of a cruise ship experience, they are welcome, right? If they aren't, then, pray tell, who is?

Owning a home and living in old Charleston actually is exposure to a constant flow of tourists, not immunity from tourism.

So the grand Union Pier plan seems in jeopardy, in the neighborhoods that now oppose it, and in the SPA boardroom. Will the SPA and the city ever again rely as heavily on community associations for input?

This could all lead to an unfortunate end to a promising redevelopment concept and a terrible blow to neighborhood-based planning.

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