

Cruise ships can benefit Charleston

BY JIM NEWSOME

As a newcomer to Charleston, I am impressed daily with the character and scale of this historic city. No wonder Charleston is one of the world's most desirable places to live and visit.



Newsome

At the Ports Authority, our mission is to serve our customers while creating jobs, investment and economic well being.

During this challenging economic time, that mission is more important than ever.

The cruise industry contributes more than a quarter of a million dollars of revenue to the local economy every time a ship is in port. That's obviously very good for our economy.

Cruise ships are attracted to Charleston for the very same attributes that we enjoy here every day. Our job is to make certain that the cruise industry fits well into Charleston and does not diminish those qualities.

Unfortunately, we did not do a good job of that when a ship was in port on Nov. 2. While we have successfully handled similar ships dozens of times in the past, several things that could go wrong did. The results were traffic congestion for both visitors and those who live and do business near the terminal.

Since then, we've worked closely with the city and others to take immediate action for future embarking cruise ships:

Re-routed traffic. Enabling traffic to flow more smoothly.

Queuing on the terminal, not the public streets. Another step to minimize traffic.

Better signage. Making it easier to avoid potential traffic.

Better communications. Helping visitors, residents and businesses know what we're doing, where and when.

Our long-term solutions will be even better. The team creating the Union Pier Cruise Terminal master plan is led by the internationally recognized firm of Cooper, Robertson & Partners. They are already known well in Charleston for their work on Waterfront Park, the Charleston Visitor Center, Daniel Island and the Charleston Judicial Center.

Created with extensive community involvement, that plan will include an attractive, functional cruise terminal that meets today's enhanced security requirements and is in keeping with the character of historic Charleston. We believe that visitors will understand and appreciate Charleston even more with a higher quality and more appropriate cruise terminal experience.

And let me assure you that our cruise terminal will continue to be a one-berth, one-ship terminal. The ships calling here will be of a size and scale that fits with Charleston.

After all, we want the cruise business to complement Charleston, not compromise it.

Our plan will also include specific ways to mitigate impacts on infrastructure and traffic. We recognize the traffic challenges currently associated with cruise ship presence here, and we are confident that there are creative ways to address them.

During the last four months of conversations with people throughout the community, we've been encouraged to think contextually and beyond the footprint of our current cruise terminal. We have instructed our planning team to do precisely that. They will now be looking at our entire Union Pier property and beyond.

The planning team will consider the larger context of other plans relating to the historic peninsula: the recently completed Charleston Preservation Plan, the Calhoun East plan, the Downtown plan, the Market Street plan and Concord Walk, along with several other resources. Our goal is to create a plan that fits with and serves the entire community. We hope to present some options to the public in early February.

We are fortunate that several of the world's best and most recognized cruise ship operators have chosen Charleston.

We will work collaboratively with these companies, our partners and the City not only to maximize the visitor experience, but also to mitigate any potential impacts on Charleston's traffic, environment and quality of life.

We will also continue to work with the community to ensure that Charleston gains the economic benefits of the cruise ship industry while maintaining the city's character and quality.

Jim Newsome is president and CEO of the S.C. State Ports Authority.