

Downtown neighborhoods back SPA on cruise ships

BY CHARLES RHODEN
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We've heard a lot lately about the South Carolina State Ports Authority and its supposed unwillingness to put commitments in writing regarding "reasonable standards" for cruises in Charleston. We've heard that cruise ships are totally unregulated and pollute at will. We've seen "quality of life" surveys with leading questions suggesting how they should be answered. We've even seen full-page newspaper ads critical of the SPA, with half-truths and altered perspectives portraying cruise ships as being taller than any structure in the City. There are accusations that the SPA is aloof to questions and has not acted in good faith in communicating with residents.

I think it's actually quite the opposite. The leadership of the neighborhoods most directly affected are quite supportive of the Union Pier Concept Plan and cruise ship management. They are supportive because the SPA, under the leadership of Jim Newsome, has hosted numerous community meetings, met with virtually every downtown neighborhood association along with the Peninsular Neighborhood Consortium and offered an opportunity for public feedback via their website. A better plan with a relocation of the passenger terminal to the north is a direct result, an example of interactive community dialogue at its best. Leaders of the proximate neighborhoods are quite happy to exchange 200 container ships per year and three train trips per day for 100 cruise ship visits per year, while reclaiming waterfront land twice the size of our present Waterfront Park.

The SPA has been accused of being unwilling to provide written commitments, but let's consider what they have actually put in writing:

--The new cruise ship terminal will be designed to accommodate only one ship at a time.

--Existing cargo operations would be moved out of the Union Pier Terminal.

--About 200 cargo ships would no longer come in and out of that terminal.

--There would be no cargo rail activity south of Charlotte Street, eliminating the multiple train switches that occur there daily.

--Approximately 1,800 truck and cars a week associated with cargo operations would be taken off East Bay and Washington streets.

--The southern end of the Union Pier property would be open to non-maritime development, effectively providing public and other uses for property that has been solely used for maritime purposes.

There is no specific commitment regarding an absolute limit on cruise ship numbers, but rather a commitment to "consult with the City and our neighbors to discuss accommodating those changes." Many Charlestonians feel that this is inadequate and would prefer a limit. Arriving at that number should not be an arbitrary process, however, but should be determined in the same way that resulted in the relocation of the proposed new passenger terminal -- by healthy dialogue between the SPA, the City, and the residents of Charleston. And this should be done before making any changes in the same spirit of cooperation the SPA has demonstrated to date.

Why do we have this persistent element of mistrust anyway? Is there any record of the SPA lying to us? There are no known cases of illegal dumping reported to the Coast Guard in Charleston during at least the last 10 years of record keeping. To my knowledge, there have been no cruise ship violations of any kind during that period. Cruise ships are regulated by international, federal and state laws and all ships calling on Charleston are members of the Cruise Lines International Association, which has voluntary standards in excess of the numerous applicable regulations. Ships' logs show the time and place of discharge and are inspected by the Coast Guard. Falsification of ships' logs is an extremely serious offense with significant consequences.

I would further maintain that casino ships, such as those at Myrtle Beach and proposed for North Charleston, are a much greater environmental threat. I would hope that North Charleston leaders will demonstrate the same openness and cooperation in considering casino ships that the SPA has exhibited regarding cruise ships. Preliminary estimates are that proposed casino cruises will attract approximately the same number of passengers as cruise ships in Charleston. They are not under SPA control and are subject to a lower category of federal regulation than cruise ships.

They travel off shore only far enough to reach international waters and have no voluntary standards for dumping such as cruise lines have. This has become such a problem for Florida that the Department of Environmental Protection enacted special regulations concerning releases from gambling vessels in April 2010. These ships should be of much greater concern to environmental groups than the heavily regulated cruise ship industry. Perhaps those who are so vehemently attacking the cruise industry are chasing the wrong target.

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