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SPA's Union Pier plan is best for city

BY THEODORE D. STONEY JR.,
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As a life-long resident of Charleston's Historic District, former board member and president of the Preservation Society of Charleston, member of the Charlestowne Neighborhood Association, and member and supporter of the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League, I must take issue with the opposition to the redevelopment of the Union Pier Terminal into a state of the art passenger terminal with redevelopment on the south end.

Why? The SPA Union Pier Passenger Plan was developed after numerous meetings with concerned residents, organizations, and land planners. The SPA actively sought and responded to public input. The new administration's open meetings, seeking public input, were a far cry from the SPA administrations of the past in which they brazenly condemned and took over city streets, incorporating them into the Union Pier and Columbus Street Terminals, or tried to push through an unsuccessful Global Gateway Terminal on Daniel Island.

The new SPA plan will allow the southern end of Union Pier to be re-developed and re-connected to the city. This will eliminate the last portion of urban blight on the lower peninsula waterfront, and transform it into an active, beautiful, and vibrant part of the historic district. The open space provided from the City Market area to the waterfront will increase the size and effect of the Waterfront Park and enrich the experience of citizens and visitors alike. This will also generate new revenue to the city through business licenses and taxes.

Rail traffic and truck cargo traffic will be eliminated below Calhoun Street. Just ask someone who lives in Dockside, Laurens Place, or Anson House how disruptive this can be.

Cargo vessels will no longer dock at Union Pier. Talk about ugly, the "roll on roll off" car and equipment carriers are just as tall, if not taller than cruise ships, and have no redeeming features, offering only a solid wall to block views. These vessels outnumber the cruise ships and also continuously run their engines while at the dock; not to mention the fumes from the trucks, heavy equipment, and automobiles while loading and unloading.

Concord Street will no longer be blocked off to vehicular traffic. This is the biggest problem with the current situation, and my pet peeve as I live on Prioleau Street south of the terminal and my office is north of the terminal.

The Union Pier plan will allow passengers from embarking and disembarking vessels to walk directly from the ship into the Historic District and vice versa. More importantly, it will allow passengers from ships making just a day call to be able do the same without having to take a shuttle bus or car and further tie up traffic. Moving the terminal to the north end of the Columbus Street Terminal will not allow this.

In spite of all the hype otherwise, the visiting passengers and crew members do spend money in Charleston. The estimated \$37 million pumped into the local economy last year is not chickenfeed; it equates to over \$3 million per month. Most cities would love to have this added revenue and business.

Also, if the new terminal is built and performs as planned, the cruise lines will buy more goods and services locally rather than bring them in from out-of-state. I believe that more spin-off businesses will develop over time as Charleston becomes a regular port of call.

Each cruise ship call requires the employment of harbor pilots, docking pilots, tugboats, ILA line handlers, ILA employees as clerks and baggage handlers, customs, agricultural, and immigration agents, ship chandlers, etc., all of whom live and work in the Charleston community.

Should the SPA have a written agreement with the city? I wish that it would, but it is a state agency, and quite frankly, some of what is being asked is totally unrealistic and in direct conflict with their stated mission. I do, however, agree with the Coastal Conservation League that the cruise ships should use shore-side power when in port and adhere to strict environmental guidelines. I also think that there should be a per passenger fee to help offset some of the impact on the city.

Finally, I would like to point out to some of Charleston's new residents that Charleston became a great and affluent city because of the fact that it was a natural port. The historic district, its historic layout, and many of its restored buildings are a direct result of the port development over time.

Not only were Rainbow Row and most of the buildings north on East Bay Street and the adjoining side streets originally maritime related, but also the U.S. Customs House, the Exchange Building, and other significant homes built because of, or due to wealth derived from shipping.

The fact is that Charleston is, always has been, and always should be a vibrant port. I remember when there were industrial shipyards and drydocks with dilapidated docks and wharfs extending all the way from the old Cooper River Bridge to South Adger's Wharf and in front of East Bay Playground. I vividly remember when the old Clyde Line docks, located in that area, burned in the mid-1950s as one of my kindergarten classmate's father, who was a fireman, died in that horrific fire.

The entire eastern waterfront was a blighted eyesore that no one visited. It has been transformed over time, and Mayor Riley and the city, as well as private developers, have done a wonderful job in cleaning up and providing public access to Charleston Harbor. The time is long overdue to clean up Union Pier, the last remaining eyesore on the historic district waterfront.

For these reasons and more, I believe that it is time for all sides to come together and make the SPA's passenger terminal plan the best that it can be for our beloved Charleston.

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