

The Post and Courier

City Council should opt for stronger cruise ship rules

Sunday, August 14, 2011

The Historic Charleston Foundation has prepared a solid proposal to provide reasonable and legally enforceable restrictions on cruise ship operations on the peninsula. City Council should give the forthcoming Foundation plan its consideration instead of a weaker proposal scheduled for review on Tuesday.

On today's Commentary page, Foundation executive director Katharine S. Robinson describes a substantive, sane and practical position for the city to consider. It recognizes that cruise ships should be allowed to operate in Charleston, and that the city has the right to put land-side zoning restrictions on those operations -- as it does for other businesses in the historic district.

In contrast, the ordinance on Tuesday's agenda, recommended by Mayor Joe Riley, essentially would codify an existing agreement with the State Ports Authority to provide for public notification if it chooses to expand its cruise ship business.

The plan would assure citizens a chance to talk about those expansion plans and give their advice. But it says nothing about the SPA being bound to comply. It's more sop than substance.

By comparison, the Foundation, after more than a year of work, has crafted a comprehensive proposal that Ms. Robinson believes will satisfy citizens, the SPA and the city.

And if she is correct about that, a lawsuit against Carnival Cruise Lines by the Southern Environmental Law Center, the Coastal Conservation League, two neighborhood associations and the Preservation Society of Charleston might disappear. The city plans to join the suit on behalf of Carnival.

The mayor has said that the city does not have the authority to place restrictions on cruises, but HCF's research tells another story. Other cities have exercised such authority.

Still, the Historic Charleston Foundation is careful to keep its recommendations within appropriate bounds -- the Old City and Old Historic districts only. It does not attempt to meddle in maritime business -- only to codify some land-side restrictions to protect the fragile peninsula from damage. It establishes legally the number of cruise ship visits allowed in the districts (104 a year) and the size of the ships (no more than 3,500 passengers). It allows no more than one cruise ship at a time.

It also addresses traffic and limits surface parking for cruise ships, estimated by the SPA to take up 10 acres.

The HCF ordinance in its final form will benefit from information being gathered as part of an independent economic study contracted for by the Foundation. The National Trust for Historic Preservation, which has put Charleston on a watch list because of concerns about how the the cruise industry could negatively impact the city, is helping pay for the study. It is intended to get a good reading of the actual economic impact of the cruise industry here.

The port of Charleston is essential to the economic health of the state, and especially to the Lowcountry. Cruise ships are a viable part of their work.

But City Council should be willing to ensure that cruise ship operations don't tip the delicate balance between commerce and livability downtown.

Council should wait for the completion of the HCF ordinance, which promises a plan to protect that balance, and to resolve the rancorous cruise ship debate.

Copyright © 1995 - 2011 Evening Post Publishing Co..