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It's time for the SPA to sell Union Pier

The Advocate

By Jay Williams, Jr.

As Venice, Italy plans a multi-billion dollar mainland cruise terminal in response to cruise ship damage to the historic island city, the South Carolina State Ports Authority (SPA) is fixated on opening a new cruise terminal as close as possible to Charleston's Historic District.

As Venetian officials voted to divert large cruise ships weighing over 96,000 tons away from St. Mark's Square, the Grand Canal and the Ducal Palace, Carnival Cruise Lines announced that the 103,000 ton *Carnival Sunshine* will be home-ported near the end of Market Street.

As "Venice has faced an onslaught of tourism that has challenged the city's character, clogged its narrow waterways and chased its local population away," reports *The New York Times*. There emerged no clearer symbol for the invasion of tourists than the cruise ships drifting, lunar-like, through the lagoon. They eclipsed church towers, famous views and, occasionally, the

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Local and right for the fireside

Lucky readers found early January's "Snowmageddon" the right time to enjoy new books from local authors. If you did not find Mr. Alexander's latest in your Christmas stocking, the Rambler is here to help. This writer would also suggest another local book as well as one you should not have missed a couple of years ago. Our Prioleau Alexander has everyone laughing and thinking after reading his *Dispatches Along The Way: An American Humorist Staggers Across Span in Pursuit of Happiness, Truth, and a Cold Beer*. Another one not to miss is *Palmettos & Pluff Mud: Tales of Lost Lowcountry Life* by S. Guilds Hollowell, Jr. Another is from just a few years ago and is the work of another Charleston native, Herb Frazier. Published by Evening Post Books, the non-fiction work is entitled *Behind God's Back: Gullah Memories of Cainhoy, Wando, Huger, Daniel Island, St. Thomas Island, South Carolina* and features not only carefully researched history, but numerous interviews and recollections by the region's oldest residents. These three will carry you through every snow flurry and

sun."

Ironically, it's the *Sunshine*, the largest Carnival ship ever home-ported here, that will block our sun and views. She accommodates 3,002 passengers, 50 percent more than the *Ecstasy* she'll replace.

Charleston is sailing backwards, refusing to grasp the enormous damage the worldwide cruise industry has inflicted on historic port cities. We must confront the issue of a downtown cruise terminal head on.

Since 2011, citizens opposing the Union Pier site have proposed an elementary solution: Locate the new cruise terminal away from historic downtown. Potential sites include the Columbus Street Terminal, now mostly used as a parking lot and a shipping site for BMWs and the 110-acre Veterans Terminal at the old Navy base, not used for much of anything, yet near highways and able to handle cruise traffic without creating congestion.

Predictably, the SPA has repulsed every suggestion offered to mitigate the impacts of a cruise terminal downtown, including shore power and that includes moving it.

Now there's a new question: Is the SPA attempting to ensure that it can't be moved?

Last December, the SPA announced that it was selling 7.2 acres along with a 9,100 square foot building on Morrison Drive at the entrance to the Columbus Street Terminal. This on-street parcel, well away from downtown, would have provided an ideal entry for cruise terminal traffic.

Then last month, the SPA announced that it's been negotiating a land swap that would hand over the Veterans Terminal to the Coast Guard and Homeland Security. Yet "in 2016," reported the *Post and Courier*, "the SPA objected to a proposal to locate a new cruise ship facility at Veterans Terminal, saying that repairs would cost too much and that the terminal would play a key role in supporting a new cargo terminal being built at the nearby former Navy Base."

The explosive growth in cruise travel

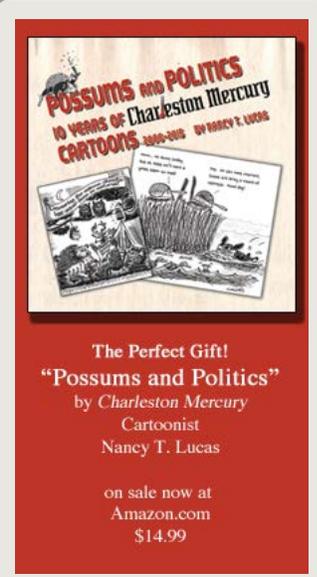
In May, 2015, SPA CEO James Newsome told city council that the "one sector that has not grown at all is the cruise sector" citing similar passenger counts of 186,000 for both 2011 and 2015. "It's not a growth industry, we've said that from the start." He added, "The



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'But, Mom, they did it on CNN!'

Meanwhile, it seems CNN took an unconventional "smoke break" during Anderson Cooper's coverage of New Year celebrations, deciding to air a segment from Colorado where it is legal for adults to inhale cannabis. Reporter Randi "Kush" Kaye was on a party bus in Denver and thought it would edify viewers to hold a joint, light a bong and express interest in a special gas mask only stoners would appreciate. Dude, it seems the network has gone from the Clinton New Network to the Cannabis News Network in a puff of smoke; however, just as Bill Clinton's tawdry actions in office became an excuse for youth to imitate the philanderer in chief, we expect that more youngsters will see this broadcast as a reason to eschew wise counsel about drugs.

Haley's star rises

Speaking of experiencing a high of sorts, South Carolina's Nikki Haley recently made the Top 10 in Gallup's poll about The Most Admired Women

market for cruise ships in this port is not that big, it will never be that big."

Later in that speech, Newsome said that "In 2010 ... we had 67 cruise ships." What he didn't say was that in 2015, Charleston would host 93 ships.

This year we've reached the SPA's voluntary annual limit of 104 ships, for the second year in a row. And starting next year, Carnival predicts that the *Sunshine* alone will carry 220,000 passengers annually — "roughly matching the total number of passengers all ships brought to Charleston last year." That's a significant jump, because an additional 28 non-Carnival ships will visit Charleston this year.

Worldwide, cruise passengers soared from 4 million in 1990 to 25 million today.

Cruise passenger growth troubles many downtown residents. Although the SPA voluntarily agreed to limits of 104 ships annually with a maximum of 3,500 passengers per ship, those limits aren't binding. A much-heralded city ordinance didn't codify those limits as many thought; it only obligated the SPA notify the city a year in advance if it wants to break through those limits.

So far, the SPA has lived up to its voluntary limits and claims that will continue. Yet the SPA is still awaiting permission to build a terminal downtown at Union Pier, with an existing 1800-foot pier that can dock the world's biggest ships.

If the SPA's terminal application survives a citizens' appeal in the S.C. Supreme Court and if its application is approved by the Army Corps of Engineers — in other words, if the SPA gets everything it wants — what will happen to those voluntary limits?

It's not just the added traffic, noise, pollution, the high potential for irreversible environmental damage to the Historic District and the ever-growing discharge of cruise passengers onto our small-scale city that so strongly argues against a downtown cruise terminal. It's economics and common sense.

That 63-acres on Union Pier may represent the most prized undeveloped waterfront property in the Southeast.

"It's quite valuable," one prominent commercial broker said, "it would depend on building heights and zoning

in America. President Trump appointed Haley as our chief voice at the United Nations, despite her savaging remarks about him during the presidential campaign. Is it possible President Trump put his ego aside and picked the best person for the job? Is it possible he did something even a far-left voter would consider good? So far, the Rambler hasn't heard much praise.

allowed, of course, but harbor and waterfront property is very, very hard to come by. And private development is certainly a higher and better use than industrial or a cruise terminal.”

Hard evidence supports that opinion — the SPA's 3.5-acre Concord Street waterfront headquarters sold for \$38 million.

The lowest and worst use

The SPA plans to develop the southern 40 acres of the property. But using the remaining 23 prime acres for a cruise terminal, especially with nine acres of paved surface parking for cruise passengers, must be the lowest and worst use for this exceptional property.

“Acres of land for surface parking there is illogical,” said Jason Crowley, director of Communities and Transportation for the Coastal Conservation League, “and it doesn't make any sense to sell any SPA property until we have a solution to the cruise terminal location that the city is involved in.”

“We should be addressing our resilience issues and restoring the shoreline back to a spongy, natural state that can absorb the velocity of water as it comes in,” Crowley said. Union Pier's “hard edge” and acres of pavement that allows the water to “run off and flood our streets,” is inimical to resilience planning.

The SPA's Newsome, quoted about an entirely different parcel, said selling off that property “will allow us to focus on our business as well as benefit the economy by returning public property to the local tax base.”

Union Pier is also “public property,” and the SPA can no longer stonewall public involvement. And the terminal's “hard edge” with nine acres of paved parking is inexcusable and unacceptable.

Cruise ships represent just five percent of SPA revenues, the city receives no passenger revenue whatsoever and because Carnival passengers sail to become tourists in Nassau or Freeport, they don't spend much money here.

A cruise terminal at Union Pier would constitute a misuse of this exceptional property, yet a planned 63-acre downtown development would transform the city, adding millions in tax revenues.

Charleston can't afford this terminal plan. And if we don't stop it, Venice won't be the only city under water.

Jay Williams, Jr. arrived in Charleston in 2001 to escape the cold and relax in the warmth of a better culture and climate. This all worked well until May of 2011 when he attended a cruise terminal discussion at Physicians Hall.

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