

Aiken City Council Minutes

September 13, 2004

WORK SESSION

Present: Mayor Cavanaugh, Councilmembers Clyburn, Cuning, Price, Smith, Sprawls and Vaughters.

Others Present: Roger LeDuc, Bill Huggins, Gary Smith, Ed Evans, Richard Pearce, Glenn Parker, Sara Ridout, Philip Lord of the Aiken Standard, Josh Gelinas of the Augusta Chronicle, and about 70 citizens.

Mayor Cavanaugh called the meeting to order at 6:14 P.M. He stated Council had two items that they would like to discuss in the work session.

WASHINGTON CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Aiken Theater Committee

Hofstetter, Thomas C.

Playhouse

Mr. LeDuc stated that the Washington Center for the Performing Arts is entering its third season and provides several benefits to our citizens. The theater is a community-wide resource designed to provide a wide array of productions and is a prime contributor to the image of the City of Aiken. It also has the ability to draw audiences from a wide population of the Central Savannah River Area and beyond. The performances at the theater help to build an image of Aiken as a desirable place to live and to conduct business, thus providing an improved and expanded quality of life for both current and prospective employers. Lastly, our strategic plan for tourism indicates a major draw for visitors should involve theatrical performances at the Performing Arts Center.

The theater is primarily used by the Playhouse, which offers eight to ten productions yearly. For the past year, staff has discussed ways to increase the utilization of the theater and to broaden the venues offered to the community. In particular, we have been working with Tom Hofstetter about attracting visiting artists to Aiken to broaden the cultural offerings and to further enhance the downtown. Mr. Hofstetter has worked with tourism and theater groups in several locations throughout the United States. He has stated that the attraction of visiting artists is not a simple process and will require help from many individuals within our community. In particular, it requires an accurate understanding of the possible audience, contacts in the regional and national performing arts world, operational support and capital to attract quality venues. We have discussed several possible scenarios to increase the utilization of the theater and to broaden the offerings. We believe the best way to get the plan accomplished is through a separate committee dedicated to this task. The proposed organization would help raise funding, select artists, and support new productions for the theater.

A non-profit status is necessary to help provide the support for this new organization, and Aiken Corporation was asked to supply initial support to this committee. At their August meeting they voted to back this committee and to help create a group of dedicated individuals to sponsor quality entertainment at the theater. Tom Hofstetter is willing to help organize the committee. The goal is to raise the necessary financial support to bring regional and national talent to Aiken through a series of performances at the theater. Initially, one or two performances would be scheduled for early next year. Their ultimate goal would be to develop a series of four to six offerings during the year for our community and as a tourism draw. Since the theater is owned by the City, the committee would support the goals of the City for the theater to be a community-wide resource designed to provide a wide range of productions. Like the Friends of Hopelands, they would raise capital to enhance the theater and in turn provide a benefit for the entire community.

Mr. LeDuc stated Tom Hofstetter is present to answer any questions Council may have concerning this new committee. It is important for the committee to get started as soon as possible in order to develop contracts for performances next spring. There is a lot of work ahead to attract these venues and to develop the overall series. Mr. Hofstetter is committed to working with the City to initiate this process and to helping contribute to the great image that we have at the Washington Center for the Performing Arts.

Mr. Hofstetter, 115 Scotch Pine Court, stated he had been asked by Mr. LeDuc to discuss the on-going plan to broaden and increase usage at the Washington Center for the Performing Arts. He reviewed the process which had taken place so far. He stated in the fall of 2003 he began a series of studies of the Washington Center and talked with other similar facilities and started to discuss what the city could do to enhance its viability, its use and its draw.

He said in January, 2004 he attended the Annual Conference of the Association of Performing Artists Presenters in New York City. He said he made a number of valuable contacts with agents and artist representatives. He said the Washington Center is now registered as a potential site for performances by nationally recognized artists. He said in June he met with members of the Executive Committee of the Aiken Corporation. It was decided to include among the committees of the Aiken Corporation a new committee, the "Aiken Performing Arts Group," with the purpose of increasing the utilization of the theatre and broadening its offerings to include the full spectrum of the residents of Aiken. He said it was his feeling that broadening the offerings of the theatre will further enhance the public purpose for which it was constructed.

Mr. Hofstetter stated the new committee will be a hybrid between the Aiken Downtown Merchants Association, the Friends of Hopelands and Rye Patch. It will not be a stand alone corporation like the Friends, but will function within the purposes of the Aiken Corporation and under its tax exempt status. Unlike the Friends, which raises and provides funds to the city for its projects, the Aiken Performing Arts Group will be directly involved in the nuts and bolts of the presentation, i.e. contracting with artists, accommodations and technical arrangements, solicitation of sponsors and advertisers, and other activities associated with the performances. He said the primary focus of the efforts will be on music, dance, and other non-theatrical performing arts. He pointed out the Aiken Community Theatre does an outstanding job in the production of live theatre. He said it was not the intention to impose on the successful enterprise of the theatre, but to cooperate in whatever way will most benefit the community.

Mr. Hofstetter stated the goal is four performances in the 2004-05 season. He said the vision is to be a strong working partnership between the city and the community. He said despite the relatively small size of the audience seating, with appropriate sponsorship, advertising, and ancillary income, outside artists may be contracted to perform and the theatre could be operated on a break-even/profitable basis.

Council then briefly discussed the proposal, asking questions. It was pointed out that the city is looking at a possible package with local restaurants, along with the proposed series, so there would be a number of opportunities and a variety, along with the theater ticket. It was also pointed out that the tourism efforts of the city can be worked in coordination with the theater efforts. It was pointed out one key is getting sponsors to supplement the cost of the shows to make them affordable for the citizens. It was also pointed out that there will have to be a good working relationship and partnership between the committee and other organizations involved in the arts. After discussion it was the general consensus of Council that the committee was a very good idea and that staff should move forward with formulating the committee and working to bring some performances to the theatre.

Mr. LeDuc stated Mr. Hofstetter has agreed to formulate the committee and form a board of directors for the committee. The group would solicit artists and sponsors for the performances.

TOURISM ORDINANCEBusesMotor CoachesTours

Mr. LeDuc stated Aiken has a unique, rich history and has supported the horse community and the historic areas of the city for years. He said as the city started to look at the tourism issue there were comments from individuals throughout the community. It became obvious that as the city looks at promoting and marketing Aiken as a place for visitors to come, that at the same time there is a conflict as more tour buses and individuals come to Aiken. He said there were questions as to how the city should protect the uniqueness of Aiken and the horse community.

Mr. LeDuc stated that this past spring, as part of developing our tourism plan, the City conducted three strategic planning sessions to determine what the businesses and citizens desired. One of the sessions focused on tours and tour buses as ways to market Aiken and to attract out of town visitors. Currently, the city operates a Saturday morning historic tour lasting 90 minutes through various older neighborhoods, the Horse District, and downtown Aiken. Several times a year, motor coach tours also travel these same areas, staying through lunch and occasionally overnight. Occasionally several churches also have tours of these areas using their own buses. For the last several months, we have been discussing with a group of concerned citizens the conflicts between horses, historic neighborhoods, and the increased vehicular traffic in these areas. The citizens in these areas have listed their concerns and stated that Aiken is historically a sporting community whose present life style is being threatened by the invasion of their privacy. They are concerned that the same reason they located here (safe, quiet roads with low density) is being threatened. This is especially true concerning the roads where horses can be safely ridden or driven on the streets from barns to training areas. They are especially concerned about large vehicles, particularly diesel motor coaches and their incompatibility with horses, whether ridden or driven. Over the past several months, we have discussed various options and whether or not to restrict these buses. In all these discussions, it has been stressed that a reasonable solution must be developed between those living in these areas and the tourism industry that we want created in Aiken. We have contacted several cities to determine what tourism ordinances exist, with Charleston and Beaufort as prime examples of horse carriages and buses alike traveling through sensitive areas. Before we proceed with a possible ordinance that would restrict motor coaches and limit the city bus to certain areas and times of day, we wanted Council's opinion. At this meeting we can begin this discussion and determine if Council wants to have a public hearing to discuss this in greater detail at a later date. Glenn Parker has been working on this and can give Council his thoughts, and there are citizens present who might like to express their concern about a potential ordinance.

Mr. LeDuc stated he felt the issues should be discussed and then try to make some determination as to what to do. He said Aiken does enjoy having visitors, and many of the visitors eventually move to Aiken. He said the question is how to continue to make Aiken a great city from a visitor's standpoint, but yet provide protection that is needed in the horse district and historic districts.

Mr. Glenn Parker, Recreation Director, stated that he had been working on establishing the city's tourism division and had been working with various groups in these efforts. He pointed out that the tourism arm of the Lower Savannah Council of Governments solicits motor coaches to come to Aiken. He said in 2004 there have been 7 motor coach tours in Aiken with about 33 per tour bus. In 2003 there were 12 tours with an average of about 30 people. Henri Wade with Aiken Tours has had 8 motor coach tours, 4 van tours, 9 private tours using the city bus and 26 private auto tours of Aiken from October, 2003 thru August, 2004. Mr. Parker suggested in considering a tourism ordinance that the hours of operation must be considered for buses. What days should tours be allowed, and what restrictions should be on the type of and size of vehicles allowed on the dirt roads? What areas can be covered in the tour? Possibly a drop off point could be established for big buses and then the people put on smaller buses. This would put a local driver in the area who is more familiar with the horse industry and Aiken and give a city tour guide on the bus. Another consideration is to consider permitting the tour buses before they can go

on the streets. Any decisions made by Council will be conveyed to the motor coach industry through the Lower Savannah. Mr. Parker pointed out the city's Saturday tours now average about 22 people per weekend.

Ms. Mary Ann Mellor, Regional Tourism Director of Lower Savannah Council of Governments, stated because of marketing and partnering being done by Lower Savannah, there has been an increase in the tour buses in Aiken. She stated she was responsible for marketing the tourism region which is Aiken, Allendale, Bamberg, and Barnwell Counties. She pointed out Aiken is not a destination on its own, but because of its location between Atlanta, Charleston, Savannah and Myrtle Beach. In order to increase the marketing partnerships have been created with the Myrtle Beach Chamber, Charleston, Columbia, etc. to be incorporated into their itineraries so when motor coaches come through, Aiken is something to do along the way. She stated she is the information and marketing source. If a motor coach is interested in coming to Aiken she puts them in contact with the Aiken tour guides.

Council continued to discuss the matter at length. It was pointed out that most of Council probably does not want to put more tour buses in the horse area. It was felt there probably should be a way to manage tours in the area. It was felt there probably should be an ordinance to help control and set regulations for tours in Aiken. It was suggested that Council extend its worksession to hear the people who are present and wish to speak on the issue of tour buses. Councilwoman Vaughters moved, seconded by Councilman Cunning and unanimously approved, that Council extend the worksession to hear those present who wish to speak on tour buses.

Mr. Randy Wolcott, 221 Third Avenue, read a letter from Michael Ruben, a property owner in the Horse District, who owns three properties, including the property which he has renovated at Grace and Two Notch, Buckland. He felt it would be a mistake to allow tour buses in the horse district, as this is a real danger to the race horses, and he also felt the tour buses would cause more damage to the dirt roads, which are already costly to maintain.

Mr. Wolcott stated he lives on Third Avenue and he was opposed to the tour buses in the area also. He felt the horse industry needs to be protected.

Mr. Jack Wetzel, 494 Powderhouse Road, also spoke against tour buses in the horse district, citing privacy, safety, traffic and wear and tear on the dirt roads as reasons for opposing tour buses and also an increase in traffic in the horse district. He stated the tours do not just affect the horse district, but the side streets as well. He said he did not want the tour buses interrupting the horse business.

Ms. Joan Schisler, of 328 Orangeburg Street SE, stated she has three interests. She said she has a restaurant in downtown Aiken and the tour buses help her business. She said she also drives horses almost every day on the dirt roads, and she lives in the horse district where people want to visit. She said she was not against the big buses coming in and going to a destination. She suggested continuing the small buses to handle small groups, such as what has been done for the last 10 to 12 years for tours of Aiken. She said if Aiken says no to all tour buses she felt there may be a problem. She felt the citizens need to be open and work with the city in trying to work out something. She said the horse industry contributes greatly to the economy of Aiken, and the city is sensitive to their needs. She suggested they work together on this matter.

Mr. Bill MacKay, Powderhouse Road, stated he was concerned about heavy tour buses on the dirt roads damaging the roads. He pointed out many people ride their horses on the dirt roads on the weekends. He asked "what is not for sale?" He felt that the horse industry had done a lot for Aiken. He said if people come to Aiken and want to see horses, then they should walk in the area. He pointed out many people in the horse district have renovated their homes and now they have tour buses along their front yards. The tours bring safety problems for the horses and a lack of privacy for the residents. He stated the horse industry had changed. It used to be race horses, but now it is horse shows and other events.

Mr. Robert D. White, 435 Orangeburg Street, stated he moved to Aiken three years ago with a specific horse discipline in mind at the old H & D Stables. He said they have 27 stalls every winter. He said groups come from all over the country to his barn, and he probably had about 100 horses from January to March. He said over 20 of the horses were 4 star with a value starting at \$100,000 and go to \$500,000. He said many of the horses leg up on the dirt roads. He said the weather is great for the horses and the dirt roads are a real plus. He was concerned about the safety of the horses. Aiken has become a center for three day eventing, which is growing around the country. He pointed out the horse industry in Aiken has changed dramatically and horses keep coming because people love the area.

Mr. Christopher King stated he grew up on Kershaw Street and Burgundy Road in Aiken. He said he currently lives and works in the City of Charleston. He said he works for the Historic Charleston Foundation. He said they have been dealing with the tourism issue since the 1940's. He said it had been a constant struggle. He said they might have a model ordinance, but the burden of tourism falls upon the residents. Charleston has had to enact and create a livability court, the first of its kind in the nation to specifically address the residents. He said tourism affects them every day. He said Aiken, however, is not Charleston. He pointed out Aiken's tourism is very small now, and may not affect a lot of people in Aiken yet, but it will grow. He said Charleston's tourism has come a long way and is a huge industry. He said it is very important that as Aiken begins this process that proper attention is given to control it and make sure that it is done correctly, and most importantly that it is compatible with the existing uses. He said Aiken is a small community, of which the equestrian community is a very large part. He said it was very important to have the full input of the residents and the persons affected. He said it is important that the character of the neighborhood and the community be preserved.

Ms. Jenny Stoker read a letter from Dacre Stoker, 331 Kershaw Street SE, who thanked the city for asking Glenn Parker to solicit input from people who live and work in the horse district and surrounding neighborhoods. He pointed out the horse district is one of the many unique aspects of Aiken that makes the whole town desirable for a broad cross section of people to live, work and visit. He stated the horse district is a work environment for many people, and low density traffic on the dirt roads is imperative, as it allows relatively safe and free movement of horses and carriages between barns and training venues at all hours throughout the day. The training of horses which used to be a seasonal industry has transformed into a year round endeavor. He said the horse industry provides jobs for many people in the community, and people who live in the area have supported and organized events which cater to the general public. He asked that tour buses be limited in the horse district. He asked that, as Council considers the pros and cons of encouraging and permitting the intrusion of tour buses into these delicate neighborhoods, Council realize, for the equine industry to flourish in downtown Aiken, the elements that are necessary for the safety and convenience of the industry.

Ms. Holli Houghton, 422 South Boundary SW, stated others had spoken about the problems that tourism brings to the horse industry. She said it is a question of how you get large groups broken up into small Aiken tours. She said this is Council's chance to set some standards original for Aiken so others will be looking to Aiken for setting the standard of the quality.

Mr. Bill Rappleye, 347 Fairfield Street SE, stated he moved to Aiken because it is a charming city. He said he was all for improvement of the city, but he wondered if the tour business is the best way to improve it. He said he would like to see a cost benefit analysis on the tour business. He wondered if Council should consider discouraging tourism, at least the big buses. He wondered if tourism, which is a form of commercialism, would make Aiken a better city or let it keep its charm. He felt the quality of life in Aiken is superb and was concerned about tourism changing the charm of Aiken.

William Bernard, 109 Iroquois, stated he had lived in Aiken since 1969 and been employed at the Aiken Training Track since 1981. He said he had seen a lot of changes in Aiken. He pointed out race horses are different and are frightened easily. He said tour

people don't understand how quickly the horses can move. He asked that Aiken be kept as quiet as possible.

The President of the Aiken Driving Club, stated he agreed with the remarks made by Jack Wetzel. He stated he felt that tour buses should not be allowed in the horse district. He said he moved to Aiken about 3 years ago.

Mr. Richard Cram, 118 Surrey Circle, stated he was in the business of promoting Aiken with the events that he puts on in the city. He said he puts on 12 events a year, having started in 1987. He said he had seen the town grow by leaps and bounds and change in character. He said one thing that has stayed the same is the horse industry. He said he was excited about the concept of tourism and bringing people to Aiken, since that is what he does. He said he felt the city would have to adopt an ordinance that would complement the horse industry. He said why not have horse drawn carriages in the horse district or trolleys. He said there could be different ways to have tours in different areas. He said you can't discourage tourism. You can't say you don't want people to come to Aiken, as that is how we all got here. He said it will be a big job to create an ordinance that will accommodate the existing industries in Aiken and not take away from what they have achieved.

Mayor Cavanaugh stated he had received letters from Betty Witham, Laura Witham, Semi Moore, and Eric and Sally Radford with concerns about bus tours in the horse district.

Mr. LeDuc stated one reason for discussing this matter at this time is that in the future there may be a lot more tour buses than come through Aiken at this time. The concern is to try to set regulations now for control of the matter.

Mr. LeDuc stated the Chamber of Commerce in the past had been heavily promoting tour buses in the City of Aiken, inviting tour groups to come to Aiken since the 1990's. He said that has been a mission of the Chamber in the past. He pointed out tourism is one of Mary Ann Mellor's jobs with the Lower Savannah Council of Governments. He said staff has been meeting with a group for several months, talking about the various issues to try to find out what can possibly be done. He stated permitting is one possibility. Permitting could have certain regulations attached such as size and safety with no tour buses being allowed in certain areas. If Council wanted to continue to have some tours in the areas, they could be limited to a certain size vehicle. He said one thought was to have the city bus guided by someone like Henri Wade, who is very sensitive to the areas and would know how and what to do if they came around horses in the area. Another alternative is for the bus tours to stay on the main roads and not go on streets like Grace, Sumter or Mead. Also, a consideration is to limit tours in the area to certain times of the day. He said staff could continue to talk to the group and come back to Council with some guidance as to where and what would be practical for the city. He said the city had been running the Saturday morning tour bus since 1990, at least one time a week. He said that might expand so Council needs to determine what the limitations on the time and areas might be. He said he felt one of the major causes of the problem is the motor coaches and this will probably increase. He said perhaps motor coaches could be restricted from the areas due to safety issues. He said the city would have to research this because the streets are public streets. He said perhaps smaller vehicles could be used in the areas. He said if Council would like, staff could bring something back in October at a worksession. If Council feels comfortable with it, then Council could have first and second reading of the ordinance. Council felt some members of the Equine Committee should be involved in the group discussions with staff. It was also mentioned that a speed limit should be considered, as well as signage such as slow, etc.