



Ad Hoc Motorcoach Task Force

**Meeting Minutes
11 August 2008
City Hall, Room 2000**

Attendees

Task Force Members: Rob Aronson, Rich Baier (chair), Stephanie Brown, Mayor William D. Euille, Lt. Cleveland Spruill (Alexandria Police Department for Chief David Baker), Hubert Herre, Greg Ogden, Ellen Stanton, Councilman Paul Smedberg, Tara Zimnick-Calico, Yon Lambert (staff), Vanessa Turner-Maybank (City of Charleston, Director of Tourism/Clerk of Council).

Guests: Van Van Fleet, Julie Crenshaw Van Fleet, Louis Marcus, Betty Ward, Joanne Platt, Elizabeth Baldwin, Dick Moose.

Below is a summary of the City of Alexandria's Ad Hoc Motorcoach Task Force meeting conducted on 11 August 2008.

Executive Summary:

1. Welcome & Introductions

Mr. Baier welcomed everyone to the Motorcoach Task Force meeting and reviewed the topics of the evening.

2. Review Minutes & Report Back from Constituent Groups

Mr. Baier reviewed the minutes of the July 28 meeting and asked for comments. An amendment was discussed and adopted. The minutes were adopted by a unanimous vote.

Ms. Brown reported that the Alexandria Convention and Visitors Association has formed a stakeholders group to keep informed of the work of the Task Force. The stakeholders group has met twice to explore in detail the issue of how to handle permits, registration and possible places for short-term parking. The ACVA plans to collaborate with the City on these issues and others that are being considered by the Task Force.

Mr. Smedberg asked Ms. Brown who represented the Task Force on the Chamber of Commerce legislative subcommittee. Ms. Brown reported that she and Charlotte Hall attended the meeting. Ms. Christine Michaels had contacted Mr. Baier but both he and Mr. Lambert were unable to attend the meeting. Mr. Lambert provided the subcommittee with minutes and the list of key issues to be addressed by the Task Force.



3. Presentation: City of Charleston Director of Tourism, Vanessa Turner-Maybank

Mr. Baier introduced Ms. Turner-Maybank and referred the Task Force to the handouts provided. He specifically referenced the Issues memo pad and said that Ms. Turner-Maybank would address the issues and questions the Task Force had raised.

Ms. Turner-Maybank said that in 1980 the City created a blue ribbon committee to study the effects of tourism on Charleston since tourism is a vitally important industry which maintains the tax base. However, along with bringing in visitors there is also a need for management techniques. The Committee took four years to enact an ordinance, which was adopted in 1984. Ms. Turner-Maybank was hired as the City's first and only Tourism Director. The Committee - which was made up of representatives from neighborhoods, carriage operators and those concerned with the economy - considered many ideas, including many of those outlined in the (Alexandria) Task Force charter. Recognizing that tourism is an important aspect of the committee but that the quality of life of people who live in the City was just as important, so the need for balance between those entities is very important.

Ms. Turner-Maybank provided a general overview of the city's ordinance and began with the hours of touring. Beginning in 1984, the City had touring hours between 8 am and 6 pm for touring (or 7:30 pm during daylight savings time). The ordinance has been tweaked a number of times because the Tourism Commission meets monthly. It had major overhauls in 1994 and 1998.

The City also established a framework for licensing tour guides. Charleston first began licensing tour guides in 1952. When the ordinance went into effect, there were many licensed tour guides who were doing tours but there were no guidelines on the number of tour vehicles that could be in the tour district at a specific time.

There were also no specific guidelines about the size of vehicles. There were concerns about double-decker buses and the turning radius of vehicles because some of the buses could not make the turns. The City came up with categories of buses. The first category is the small bus which is not longer than 25' and must be approved by the Commission to become a certified tour vehicle. The specific application (a certificate of appropriateness) speaks to pollution control and the buses are physically measured so the City knows what vehicles are best suited on narrow streets as compared to larger streets and state highways.



Certified vehicles have mostly free range in the City. The only streets they are restricted to are cobblestone streets, brick streets and certain areas with blind spots. They are regulated and must use the flow of traffic and speed limits. Even though they may have visitors, they are not allowed to impede traffic. They often pull over for descriptive purposes; the ordinance does not say this but the City does not want them to impede traffic.

Years ago the City had a category for Charter buses which is not used any longer. This category included the buses used by public utilities for transportation. This category included buses longer than 25' but not longer than 35'. These buses had prescribed routes and were used on major streets that would accommodate buses and a lot of the buses were the same as their regular (transportation routes). This category is no longer used.

The City currently has a category for over-the-road motorcoaches which can be up to 45' in length and can carry 45 to 55 people. These vehicles use perimeter routes (refer to map) which are streets highlighted in blue and are the only vehicles allowed for use by motorcoaches. The City does not mail maps or permits; buses must have permits (yellow) for touring. Permits say that tour guides are responsible for making sure that buses adhere to certain streets. If the bus deviates from the streets (unless for an obstruction) then the tour guide is cited, not the driver.

The City also has a green permit which is for transportation. This clearly outlines the route for this particular size vehicle to get from Point A to Point B. The city does not allow buses into the City Market but it does have loading/unloading areas. Buses are permitted in the restricted areas, for instance, to go to hotels but they are specifically permitted using widest streets and then depart again using large streets as well.

A City parking permit also indicates where buses may be officially parked.

Ms. Turner-Maybank said that in 1984, there were 12 motorcoaches allowed to tour per hour in conjunction with the certified tour buses and the City had 20 certified tour buses. The City now has 33 certified tour buses. The City has a system in place by which its traffic and transportation experts (working with consultants) have indicated that City streets, in conjunction with carriages and other traffic, can utilize approximately 35 certified tour buses. The City does not have 35 buses out at any time and the owners have multiple vehicles since tours go in different directions.



Regarding motorcoaches, in 1984, the City allowed 12 motorcoaches per hour to tour perimeter routes. The ordinance was tweaked in 1994 and reduced to eight (8) because of traffic congestion. The number (8 per hour) was established after a comprehensive study by consultants who considered the City's traffic patterns for carriage traffic, pedestrians and typical commuter traffic. During the lunchtime hour the number was reduced to four (4). In 1998, the number was reduced again to six (6) buses and the City is currently looking at this number again. The six buses are those on two-hour tours.

The City has worked with Savannah, Newport, New Orleans and San Antonio to assist in the development of tour bus management strategies.

The City devised a system where within the City buses avoid conflicts by touring in two hour spans. The tour guides are told how many may be out during a certain time and the direction they may travel (north or south) which affords them the opportunity to utilize loading zones without causing congestion in certain zones.

Originally there were concerns that Charleston was going to turn the motorcoach industry away, but that did not occur. Ms. Turner-Maybank said that the Convention & Visitors Bureau said that it initially thought the ordinance would be a lemon but instead it became lemonade.

Ms. Turner-Maybank said that the buses that are regulated are specifically for those that are touring, not transportation. However, loading and unloading zones may be used for transportation. The limited number (six buses) is only for designated touring vehicles - motorcoaches.

The 25' vehicle is a certified tour vehicle and has free range of the City, including streets in the market.

Larger motorcoaches are considered perimeter route vehicles, not certified tour buses. If buses come in (such as church vehicles) and are not certified then it is treated like any other vehicle on the perimeter route and is treated as one of the six allowed buses per hour.

Ms. Turner-Maybank addressed a question about the time buses run in Charleston. Transportation related buses run 24 hours but not in residential districts. If they are conducting special events outside the City and coming back inside at midnight to a hotel, the permit would indicate what streets it uses to get to the hotel.

Ms. Turner-Maybank addressed a question about how buses work with traffic. Buses pull over to avoid impeding traffic but the ordinance specifically addresses carriages and that they may pull over for descriptive purposes.



Ms. Turner-Maybank addressed a question about tour guide licenses. Charleston began licensing tour guides in 1952 and now administers tests for tour guides, which are both written and oral.

Ms. Turner-Maybank addressed a question about bus arrival. She said that prior to getting to their destination, buses come to a visitor reception and transportation center in the northern portion of the City away from the historic district. Buses come into the center to obtain a permit and meet a registered guide who then comes to the tour office to pick up their permits.

Ms. Turner-Maybank addressed a question about enforcement, which is done by the City police department. Initially, the City used officers that reported to Ms. Turner-Maybank but the City found that it was important to have sworn officers for enforcement and who could address speeding or accidents.

Ms. Turner-Maybank said that she has 10 staff persons assigned to tourism management and the budget for the program is roughly \$650,000. The cost for permits is \$14 per day, per vehicle. The cost for a motorcoach that is spending three days in Charleston would be: $\$14 \times 3 = \42 . They may need nine permits (including touring and parking permits) but it is a \$14 daily permit fee for as many permits as a vehicle needs.

Costs do go to offset the operation of the office of tourism management, which is relatively self-sufficient. Carriages contribute a lot to the costs as well.

Ms. Turner-Maybank referred to the parking maps provided and referenced long-term parking, including a large garage that encourages people to park - including up to nine motorcoaches. The City does have a great deal of parking as it relates to buses. By managing the number of people who get to loading zones, it makes it better for the drivers as well as the City.

Regarding fees, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that in addition to permits the certified tour buses also pay annually to the City \$300 per bus and \$50 per passenger seat.

Carriage companies are also regulated because of the associated environmental issues. They pay a fee of \$17,500 to put one carriage in the loading zone. It is an annual fee. Some companies elect to buy two spots for a total fee of \$35,000. The annual fee is what they pay to have a slot in the loading zone.



They also pay a fee to the gatekeeper that is a part of the tourism division. The City is organized into five zones. In order for a carriage to get from the loading zone into the City (Zones 1-3) there is a gatekeeper system that uses a “bingo machine” type device that tells the carriages what zone they may be able to go into.

Charleston has five carriage companies each with between 85 and 100 carriages. The system has changed several times but there are never more than 20 carriages on the street at any given time. The City knows this because the carriages must have a medallion to get onto the street. If they are caught on the street without a medallion, they must go to the City’s livability court and the City has lawyers that prosecute them. Ordinances may carry 30 days in jail and up to \$500 in fines so this is taken seriously. Small tickets are \$167.

The city’s zones of operation are also used by certified tour vehicles. While the City allows 35 buses, they are not on the street at the same time. At the beginning of the year, each company must provide the City with a copy of the route it plans to use for each vehicle and when presented to the City staff ensures there is no overlap to avoid having a wagon-train effect. The ordinance continues to evolve and is tweaked by staff.

In response to questions, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that there is a Police Department Tourism Enforcement Office and her office does work with police officers to deal appropriately with buses. Police do differentiate between buses that have visited the City before and those that habitually break rules. Ms. Turner-Maybank said that Charleston is 115,000 people with 36,000 in the peninsula. It is approximately 150 square miles including all islands.

In response to a question, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that Charleston does have designated signage which it works on with its traffic and transportation staff. The City has signs for the following areas: Loading & Unloading, Long-term, Carriage Loading Zones, and Certified Tour Buses areas.

Permits are never mailed and staff goes over details when issued, always in person. Local tour guides understand the parking areas best and City staff reviews routes, parking areas and loading/unloading with tour guides to be sure there are no questions.

Ms. Turner-Maybank said that the ordinance has been changed recently to ensure there are more guides for each group.

In response to a question about carriage fees, Ms. Turner-Maybank said there are 20 slots for carriages to do tours in Zones 1-3. There are five companies that pay \$17,500 annually to operate as well as a \$3 gate fee when they go through the gate each time.



In response to a question about routes, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that motorcoaches are not used on residential streets and that it is very rare for there to be after-hours events in residential areas. The City does not limit transportation routes because it has state highways but it can control for touring. (Alexandria does control all roadways in the City except for Interstates and sections of the George Washington Memorial Parkway inside City limits.)

In response to a question about medallions, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that the City owns medallions and issues them. The 20 medallions that are owned by the City are provided to carriages as they pass through the gate and carriages are allowed to operate under the same hours as buses. The medallions are "good" for 75 minutes although most tours are 45 minutes. If they are keeping medallions for longer than 75 minutes, then they are impeding someone else's right to use a medallion. The City does run out of medallions at certain times of the year, such as during Easter. During Easter, the City also opens up other Zones and encourages carriages to use Zones 4 and 5.

In response to a question about the number of tour buses entering the City, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that the City has become a year-round destination. However, the majority of buses come in April, May and June, followed by late August, September, October and some of November. The City issues between 2,600 and 2,800 permits annually to motorcoaches. Of these, it is a combination of types but typically many touring permits are issued.

A citizen in the audience commented that although the system sounds complicated and heavily regulated, the experience for the consumer is superior.

Mr. Baier mentioned the Task Force primary issues which include routes, short-term/long-term parking, enforcement, loading/unloading and communication. Mr. Baier said that while no city is the same Ms. Turner-Maybank's presentation did touch on each of these.

In response to a question from a resident about the Tourism Commission, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that the Commission had representation from residents, historians and economists. Issues are sent to subcommittees and worked on monthly. The Commission provides a checks-and-balances system.

In response to a question from a Task Force member, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that the Charleston visitors' center began operating in 1991 - several years after the ordinance. Prior to the opening of the visitor's center, the City used a small visitor's center in an existing building which worked well but did not provide the experience of the new visitors' center.



Ms. Turner-Maybank said that in 1984 the Mayor had outlined the vision for the visitors' center and for how Charleston would become a leader in tourism management. The City owns the Visitors Center and staffs it, but works with its local Convention and Visitors Bureau.

In response to a question about walking tours, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that the City has a number of walking tours and that groups are limited to 20 people per tour (or 25 people for school children). Ms. Turner-Maybank said that Charleston has ghost tours and that the City uses the tour guide exam to be sure that they are providing accurate history. However, she is aware that tour guides do occasionally embellish from time to time.

In response to a question about loading and unloading, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that only a few zones are also designated as bus stops for transit vehicles. Most loading and unloading zones for tour buses are assigned, although there are a few on major thoroughfares that are also designated for local bus stops.

In response to a question about idling, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that buses may only idle for five minutes. When buses use loading and unloading, they can only stay for five minutes before going to short-term parking areas. It then comes back to pick up later.

In response to a question about restrictions on loading/unloading at hotels, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that buses can stay as long as it takes to load or unload but that some areas still may require special permits. The buses are not allowed to idle indefinitely; they are limited to five minutes. Once it unloads, the bus must go to parking areas. There are no restrictions about when they can access but they must follow the designated routes. Most of the hotels in Charleston are north of Broad Street and away from residential areas.

In response to a question about buses' length of stay, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that Charleston does get "day trip" buses, for instance from Myrtle Beach. However, to take a two hour tour they must also get a permit.

In response to a question about jitneys, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that a service such as this was considered but it is not used. The city determined that this was an added expense to those who scheduled the tours and that there was a way to balance the need by having permits. The people are getting an opportunity to see the intricate areas they want to see, but they have to walk. The larger vehicles are restricted to certain routes (with loading and unloading zones) but for others to see certain areas they must walk.



In response to a question about accessibility for persons with mobility impairments, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that if there are people with mobility impairments they allow a special permit for that person and others with them to disembark at certain locations but not for the entire group.

In response to a question about signage, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that Charleston previously had its own signs. However, they found that some people were not paying attention to certain colors and are instead more familiar with international signs. The signs have been changed to international colors (red and white).

In response to a question about long-term parking, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that the City knew that it needed to find a place for people to park in the lower part of the peninsula. So, there are certain areas in the lower part of the peninsula that have both short-term and long-term parking. The visitors' center was kept for people in the upper part of the peninsula, with the first floor designated for motorcoaches. The center is also across the street from the museum with parking (long-term and short-term) for cars on the street at the museum.

In response to a question about short-term parking, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that most parking is located on major streets with ample width without a lot of traffic. The loading and unloading is on major streets and not in residential areas, except for the museum which is located near a residential area.

Ms. Turner-Maybank said that Charleston had conducted several traffic studies, including studies performed by outside consultants. In addition, Planning and GIS staff helped determine routes.

In response to a question about financing and the source of revenues, Ms. Turner-Maybank outlined the following:

- Tour permits (\$14 per day)
- Certified Tour Buses (annually \$300 plus \$50 per passenger seat) for 33 buses
- The carriage fee is \$17,500 for each of the five companies, but usually this is multiplied by seven (7) because some companies want opportunities to put two carriages in the loading zone
- Carriages also contribute a \$3 gate fee each time it goes into the market. (This is not paid at the time, but it accounted for by City Staff.)
- Additionally, the City does not clean up after horses. There is an equine sanitation fee. The carriage operators are required to pay the monthly fee for equine sanitation to the City to manage the annual contract. The most recent bid was between \$140,000 and \$160,000 annually for the carriage companies, which is divided and paid by the companies based on the number of carriages they send through the gate.



- Walking tours have a tour fee. Each person pays a \$0.50 fee for the tour which is used for beautification. This is incorporated into the ticket price.
- Tour guides pay a \$50 fee to take the exam, as well as the purchase of the book which is also \$50.

In response to a question about visitors per year, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that Charleston has 4 million tourists annually and it is a \$3.09 billion industry. (Ms. Brown said that the estimates of Alexandria tourism are about 2 million visitors per year and \$500 million in spending by visitors but that new and more accurate numbers may be available soon.)

In response to a question about the proximity of residential and commercial areas, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that there are a number of mixed-use areas in the City and there are ordinances that address the issues. The perimeter routes allow buses to get into residential areas without being intrusive and people have the right to walk in residential areas anytime (or during touring hours if part of a tour). There is not much residential activity near the loading and unloading areas.

The City does have police that circle the touring areas.

In response to a question about how she would counsel a City with no designated routes, Ms. Turner-Maybank said in Charleston certified tour buses are able to use any routes in the residential district but that large buses are not. Certified tour buses are small vehicles less than 25 feet in length and can be accommodated in the residential district without being intrusive. However, the City does provide transportation access to hotels, etc...

Ms. Brown said that Alexandria's challenge is that there are hotels, boat companies and businesses on the waterfront and that it is difficult to come up with a route that does not impact on residents.

Ms. Turner-Maybank said that the City might come up with loading and unloading areas that are close enough to these areas but not within the concentrated residential areas and indicate to visitors that they will have to walk.

In response to a question about whether the City needed to change any streets to one way, Ms. Turner-Maybank said that the City had not and, in fact, had converted several streets to two-way.



4. Next Steps/Preparation for Group Exercise at Next Meeting

Mr. Baier said that Deputy City Manager Mark Jinks would attend a future meeting to provide a review of the 2003 Alexandria Visitors Center Report. In addition, the Task Force agreed to address its Primary Issues (#1 through 5) and its next meeting and Mr. Baier encouraged input by the Task Force prior to the next meeting.

There being no further comment, the Task Force adjourned.