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City strives for horse sense

Debate over care of draft animals heats up amid mandates, court case

The Post and Courier - August 9, 2009

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Only with the best of intentions did Charleston city officials set about creating a set of standards for the carriage tour industry.

But getting the handpicked task force to agree on the new regulations took nearly three years. Then the city allowed the companies some time to prepare for enforcement.

And that grace period turned into two years.

Finally, this summer, the city hired a veterinarian from St. George with a taste for Eastern philosophy — a la equine acupuncture and chiropractic services — to apply those long-sought regulations to each of Charleston's five horse-drawn tour operations.

When city officials released the findings, tourism director Vanessa Turner-Maybank gave little commentary other than to say the inquiry uncovered "myriad problems."

In the long period between when the city began its odyssey to create horse-drawn carriage standards and the hurried cleanup going on now, some of the harshest local critics fell away from the debate. But up stepped animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, the same organization that effectively quashed Mepkin Abbey's egg-raising operation in late 2007.

What remains now, in the throes of tourist season and oppressive summer heat, includes an active court case, a host of city mandates for each company and a renewed scrutiny of one of Charleston's most iconic downtown fixtures.

Policing an industry

With the city's 50 cents-per-passenger fee, carriage tours contributed more than \$185,000 to city coffers last year, a slight drop from the 2007 tourism boom time. At about \$20 per adult ticket, that translates to a \$6 million industry, assuming half the passengers are children.

Maintaining a respectable image historically meant taking horses' temperatures when the weather outside reached 95 degrees and calling it a day when it climbed to 98. The city hired a veterinarian for surprise inspections throughout the year and, in 2003, refined its temperature rule to send horses home for the day when combined heat and humidity totaled 185.

In early 2004, the city's Tourism Commission called for a more comprehensive study of the treatment and working conditions for the animals. The suggestion touched off a debate from some long-standing operators who called it a waste of tax money.

Those discussions generated a six-person committee charged with drafting an ordinance. Its membership included representatives from the industry, animal control and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Just as the city task force emerged, so did a group of residents calling itself the Carriage Horse Safety Committee. That group fought the regulations as too lax but eventually let the debate die as the city gradually adopted and implemented them anyway.

The new standards refined heat regulations, including the requirement that companies take horses' temperatures when the mercury outside reached 90 degrees. It said horses must receive a proper quantity and quality of feed, that stalls must be a certain size and remain clean and that operators must keep records and make them available at the city's request.

On another city-hired veterinarian's recommendation, the Tourism Commission chose Dr. Amy Hayek, owner of East Coast Equine, to implement the rules at a flat rate of about \$2,000. She spent May and June visiting the five stables around town and wrote candidly about what she saw.

Hayek said only one company fed its horses enough, that some companies barely maintain records and that others did not know weight limits or how to properly attach carriages to prevent injuries. She took particular offense to stall size.

City officials issued strict deadlines for each company to make changes that would bring its operation up to code. Company representatives, facing public scrutiny, criticized Hayek for relying on opinions over medical fact.

During the fallout days later, Hayek told The Post and Courier: "None of my report was in any way intended to make these carriage companies not be able to do their business. The purpose of my inspection was to help them have healthier animals, less expense and to look better in the public eye."

Controversy continues

PETA ratcheted up the debate in April, when it sent a letter to Mayor Joe Riley requesting he shut down all the carriage tours because of six safety-related "incidents" in a little more than a year. Riley issued a brief response, politely but firmly dismissing the suggestion.

Just months later, a woman who boarded horses for a local company contacted PETA and the animal-rights group, renewed its charge. The woman, Nancy Lane, then sent an 18-page letter to the city about Carolina Polo and Carriage Co., touching off an animal-neglect investigation that remains open.

Unrelated to Lane's allegations, Carolina Polo representatives appeared in court last month for 11 citations — six from Hayek's inspection and five for allegedly not meeting deadlines to bring its operation up to code.

Attorneys for both Carolina Polo and the city said they anticipate a resolution before the scheduled Aug. 17 trial date. The case remains on the docket.

Beasts of burden

Dr. John Malark numbers among the few people who know Charleston's carriage companies intimately. He counts four of the city's five companies among his veterinary clients and conceded that some do a better job than others.

Malark began discussions with Hayek prior to the Carolina Polo court hearing. Together they hope to find solutions that could remedy the alleged code violations.

"I think the fact of the matter is they've been doing a good job overall," Malark said. "Could they use a little polish here and there? Yes, especially on their records."

An Atlanta veterinarian recently interviewed him, according to Malark, asking about how local companies care for their horses.

"They all feel the Charleston industry is the gold standard across the country," Malark said. "If carriage horses looked and were cared for like this everywhere, there would not be an issue."

He makes a frank point about the oversized, aging horses: "They'd be euthanized if they weren't out there."

As Malark explains it, affluent parents aren't going to buy their little girls happy-birthday draft horses.

"There's literally not a place for them to go," he said. "I think the industry around the country provides a good home."

But those who disagree have renewed reason for their cause, given the inspection's findings, PETA's call for a ban and the Carolina Polo trial. Rep. Chip Limehouse, R-Charleston, said every summer he hears from constituents concerned about the horses' well-being, yet the complaints this year seemed louder.

"I'm not sure the current system is exactly working," Limehouse said, adding that he began meeting with city leaders and carriage tour operators in response. His goal is not to legislate change, just create a dialogue.

"This is all a city matter," he said. "It seems to me the city might want to take a whole overall look at the industry."