

Charleston Riverfront “Think Tank” Session

November 9, 2004

An open public meeting regarding Charleston’s riverfront was held on November 9, 2004 in Parlor A of the Charleston Civic Center, beginning at 6:30 p.m. The purpose of the meeting was to solicit and receive public input, ideas, suggestions and concerns regarding possible future development of Charleston’s riverfront. The meeting was conducted jointly by the Charleston Area Alliance and the Riverfront Development Committee of Charleston City Council.

Approximately 130 people attended the meeting. A copy of the list of attendees is attached to these meeting notes. Meeting participants appeared to represent a diverse cross-section of the community, and persons from neighborhoods throughout the city attended.

Mr. Joe Jones, Chairperson of the Charleston Area Alliance, opened the meeting by welcoming everyone present, and explaining the background to and purpose of the meeting.

Mr. Joe Jones introduced Mayor Danny Jones, who encouraged everyone to participate actively in helping shape Charleston’s future, and to provide their thoughts, ideas and suggestions. Mr. Joe Jones noted the attendance of representatives of Environmental Design Group, who were present to provide consultation and artistic rendering services as people brainstormed ideas, and introduced Tom Heywood, who served as facilitator of the meeting.

Mr. Heywood briefly outlined the structure, purpose and agenda of the meeting. The meeting was structured as a public brainstorming process, to elicit ideas, thoughts, suggestions and concerns. Mr. Heywood encouraged attendees to be bold in their thinking and dreams, noting that there is no such thing as a right or wrong vision or dream. Through a public brainstorming process, the city’s leaders hoped to better be able to determine whether there is public consensus regarding aspects of the possible re-development of Charleston’s riverfront, and if so, what the essential elements of a common vision might be.

The attendees were seated in groups of roughly 10-12 persons each. Each group was encouraged to identify a scribe and a reporter, to capture thoughts and ideas, and report the group’s work product at the end of the meeting. Numerous pictures, maps and photos of Charleston’s riverfront areas were available to assist participants in their brainstorming activities. Facilitators were present to assist each group with discussion and brainstorming.

The brainstorming session lasted approximately one hour, followed by reports from each of the groups to all those in attendance.

People were enthusiastic and focused in their brainstorming activities. Presenters from the breakout groups were uniformly articulate and effective in summarizing and communicating the ideas from their groups. All persons in attendance were respectful of one another, and of the ideas presented by others.

Attached to this meeting summary is a copy of the meeting notes prepared by Susie Salisbury, who served as a reporter of the ideas presented at the meeting. These notes capture the specific thoughts, ideas, observations and suggestions of the various groups at the meeting. In addition to the notes appended to this meeting summary, copies of the flip chart notes of the working groups themselves are available for review and inspection at the offices of Charleston Area Alliance.

There was broad consensus, approaching unanimity, on many ideas and themes. There were many ideas offered which people present seemed to react positively to, even though that particular idea may not have been suggested within several of the groups. Following is a summary of several broad themes which emerged from the brainstorming session.

1. Attendees Were Overwhelmingly Open to Change and Redevelopment of Charleston's Riverfront. Without exception, people in attendance voiced the belief that we can or should do something to better take advantage of Charleston's riverfront. The level of consensus on this fundamental issue – doing something versus doing nothing – was extremely high.

2. Any Redevelopment Activities Should be Thoughtfully Undertaken. There was broad consensus that any future redevelopment should be done thoughtfully, with due attention given to historic preservation, riparian, environmental, traffic and safety issues and considerations. A professional planning and development process is called for.

3. Creation of Green Space and Recreational Opportunities Should Be Priorities in the Redevelopment of Charleston's Riverfront. There was extremely broad consensus that the proper focus of any redevelopment effort should be to make the riverfront more accessible and user friendly for such activities as walking, biking, relaxing, enjoying the view, and possible water access. Possible use of boardwalks, viewing decks, benches and shade trees were mentioned by several groups.

4. The Viewshed on the South Bank of the River is an Asset and Should be Enhanced as Part of an Overall Plan. Several groups noted that the south bank of the river is the viewshed for all of downtown Charleston, and there was broad consensus that consideration should be given to enhancing this viewshed as part of an overall development effort.

5. There is Strong Public Support for Closing Down One or Two Lanes of the Boulevard as Part of an Overall Development Plan. Virtually every brainstorming group expressed support for, or openness to, closing down at least one or two lanes of the Boulevard as part of an overall riverfront redevelopment plan. The level of consensus on this point was extremely high, and was a striking aspect of the meeting. One group suggested possibly making Piedmont Road or another road the primary route of vehicular traffic from downtown to the East End, thereby permitting closure of the Boulevard altogether. Some groups suggested closing portions of Kanawha Boulevard

6. The Land at the Confluence of the Kanawha and Elk Rivers (currently occupied by the Elk River Town Center Inn) Should be Studied for Possible Public Acquisition and Use as Part of the Overall Riverfront Redevelopment Plan. Several groups suggested linking linear green space along the Kanawha and Elk Rivers, and using the Town Center Inn property as a public park with significant potential in connection with any redevelopment plans.

7. Restaurants and Shops, Rather than Office Buildings, Should be Considered for Possible Inclusion in the Redevelopment Plan. Participants were strong in their consensus that more office buildings should not be a part of the riverfront development plan. Several groups did suggest that restaurants and shops would be an appropriate part of a user-friendly redevelopment area, provided that such restaurants and shops were not heavily massed and did not impede public access to and use of recreational or green space.

8. Boat Slips and Possibly Other Waterfront Facilities Should be Considered as Part of An Overall Redevelopment Plan. Most groups noted that some sort of boat docking facilities should be included as part of an overall plan. Several groups also suggested that redevelopment plans should include water taxis, which would carry people from one side of the river to the other. Some groups and individuals suggested more substantial waterfront development, possibly including house boat docking facilities or development of a marina complex. While there seemed to be strong consensus regarding the addition of some additional boating facilities, the structure of the meeting did not permit exploration of the level of consensus regarding the development of more extensive waterfront amenities.

9. Any Riverfront Redevelopment Should Include Attractions. There was strong consensus that any redevelopment effort should include elements of attraction. Several groups specifically mentioned construction of a lighted fountain, and suggested Magic Island as a good location for such a feature (to attract the attention of those traveling through Charleston on the Interstate Highway). Other suggestions for attractions that could be included as part of a riverfront redevelopment plan included an aquarium and an outdoor, riverfront movie screen.

10. Existing Riverfront Amenities Should be Improved, to Encourage Use. Several groups suggested that existing riverfront amenities could be improved to enhance use. Many groups suggested building some sort of canopy over Haddad Riverfront Park, to create shade and make the facility more usable on hot summer days. Groups suggested elevating Magic Island and/or planting more trees on Magic Island to make the park more usable. Some groups suggested installing decking or a boardwalk around the Union Building, and otherwise exploring means of creating access around or through the Union Building.

There was broad consensus among persons in attendance as to the ideas noted above. Many, many other ideas were offered at the meeting. However, the structure of the meeting did not permit exploration of the level of consensus that may exist in the community for all ideas suggested. Many of the ideas offered and reflected in the attached notes fall within the broad elements of consensus noted above. All ideas suggested at the meeting are worthy of further consideration and review.

The level of excitement at the meeting for riverfront development was exceptionally high. At the conclusion of the meeting, attendees voiced appreciation for what they had heard and learned at the meeting, and expressed their desire to continue to participate in a public discussion of the future of Charleston's riverfront. People in attendance expressed their thanks to City Council and to the Charleston Area Alliance for facilitating a public discussion about riverfront development, and encouraged our city's leaders to continue the Charleston riverfront study and development process.

Respectfully submitted,
Tom Heywood, Facilitator
January 30, 2005

Attachments as indicated