

COMMENTARY

Watermen's Museum should rethink cruise ship partnership



The Watermen's Museum in Yorktown is part of an agreement to bring Princess Cruise Line ships to the city's waterfront. York County

BY ELIZABETH WILKINS AND JACQUES VAN MONTFRANS GUEST COLUMNISTS

We are a group of York County citizens who very much appreciate the contribution of the Watermen's Museum to our community. Some of us remember when the buildings were donated and barged across the York River to their current location.

We especially value museum founder Marian Bowditch's vision of honoring the working watermen of the Chesapeake Bay and donating the assets necessary to realize that vision. The museum has provided superb cultural enrichment opportunities for the entire community through its regular programming and special events, and the youth summer camps have been recognized as some of the best available to families in the region.

With the recent announcement of a partnership among Princess Cruise Lines, the Watermen's Museum and York County to bring large cruise ships to Yorktown as a port of call, and future plans for a permanent docking facility at the Watermen's Museum, we are left wondering exactly how the museum's stated mission is enhanced by this project.

Watermen's Museum Mission Statement:

Preserve the heritage of the watermen of the Chesapeake Bay. Interpret their culture and their contribution to the region. Provide and support educational opportunities. Preserve and enhance the environment of the Chesapeake Bay

The prospect of a 950-foot massive cruise ship, with its 2,200-3,000 passengers and 1,000-plus crew, docking and disembarking immediately upriver from this half-mile historic waterfront seems completely inappropriate, and something that would have negative impacts on the character of the Historic District. This would include the potential impact of cruise ship disturbance to the Yorktown Shipwrecks Maritime Archeological Site of scuttled British Revolutionary War ships (the first underwater listing on the National Register of Historic Places). How would the presence of cruise ships "preserve the heritage of the watermen of the Chesapeake Bay" and "preserve and enhance the environment of the Chesapeake Bay"?

Cruise ships are notorious polluters, and Princess has a record worse than most.

In 2016, Princess pleaded guilty to criminal discharges of contaminated wastewater, with an attempted cover-up, and paid a fine of \$40 million, "the largest-ever criminal penalty involving deliberate vessel pollution" according to the U.S. Justice Department. Then again in 2019 and 2022, Princess was fined a total of \$21 million for criminal violations of its probation terms. Apparently Princess views such fines as simply the cost of doing business.

Let us be clear: We are not against tourism or cruise ships in general.

It is the sheer scale of these large ships and their inevitable large impact that concerns us. Yorktown already receives American Cruise Lines ships regularly,

but they are a fraction of the size of the Island Princess and Emerald Princess, and carry only about 180 passengers.

Why not enhance the experience of those visitors, and encourage them to engage with and support our small businesses and cultural offerings?

Many small coastal towns now suffer from the effects of large cruise ships, and are seeking ways to either ban them or limit their size and impact.

Tourism can be a great thing for local economies, but there is a scale at which the returns are diminished relative to the costs, and the massive Princess Cruise ships surely cross that line here.

The plans for this partnership were developed without public knowledge or input, and on Monday Princess will hold a so-called “information meeting,” which is by invitation only, despite the fact that we were assured by the York County Board of Supervisors that this would be a public session.

For the above reasons, we would urge the Watermen’s Museum board to rethink any commitment to Princess Cruise Lines, and we certainly support other reasonable efforts to boost the financial well being of the museum. The handful of establishments that may benefit from such a venture cannot justify selling the character and national historic resources of Yorktown to the highest bidder.

Elizabeth Wilkins and Jacques van Montfrans are residents of Yorktown. They wrote this on behalf of Preserve Yorktown.