



Reining in carriage criticism

Editorial

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By Brian Hicks

The folks who want to bring down the horse-carriage industry must be champing at the bit right about now.

Last week, a judge fined Carolina Polo and Carriage Co. nearly \$1,800 for code violations related to the care and feeding of its horses.

Depending on who you talk to, either the company got a slap on the wrist or the citations were excessive.

The big problem here -- for the industry and Charleston -- is how the news is perceived by the majority of people who don't have strong feelings either way.

"I worry about the long-term effects," says Tommy Doyle, general manager of Palmetto Carriage. "It is a poor reflection for people who don't know there are five different carriage companies."

Doyle, who is also president of the Carriage Operators of North America, says the ruling is proof that the city's monitoring system works.

He's right. So don't make any sweeping generalizations.

You can't judge an entire industry on a problem at one company.

'The gold standard'

Dr. John Malark, a local equine veterinarian, says the horses and mules that ferry folks around the peninsula are in very good health. And he should know -- he's the doctor for most of them.

In fact, Malark says equine vets in New York, Boston and Atlanta routinely praise the locals for the way they treat their animals.

"Charleston is the gold standard in the United States," Malark says. "Maybe a lot of folks don't appreciate what a good job they do."

Malark rates Palmetto and Old South Carriage Co. as "phenomenal" and says the other three are only a notch below that. Quite a testimonial.

And many former employees have told the newspaper that the horses and mules are practically pampered: they get long vacations at the farm, work a couple of hours a day, have free room and board, free medical and dental, a place to live when they retire.

Free medical care? Huh, who knew we had socialist horses here.

Horse sense

Aside from the nuts that ran the Mepkin Abbey monks out of the egg business, there are reasonable people who worry about the horses and mules pulling carriages on Charleston streets. It's fairly hot much of the time here -- say, about 360 days a year -- and it looks like hard work.

But Malark says most of these animals come from farms where they spent their days pulling plows. Compared to that, this is retirement. And it's better than the alternative most would face otherwise. There are no "Born Free" moments or Budweiser commercials in their future.

"A nice family from Mount Pleasant is not going to put it in the back yard and feed it," Malark says. "Ninety-nine percent of them would be euthanized if not bought by these carriage companies."

So let the city monitor the horse-carriage companies, and drop by the barns and see for yourself if you don't believe the city. Most of them are happy to give tours. Take a look and make up your own mind.

We don't need PETA coming back to town.