June 24, 2014

Mayor Edna Jackson, Aldermen and City Manager Stephanie Cutter:

Across the country cities are dealing with the quality of life issues associated with the rise of short-term rentals. The issues associated with the increased use of residential properties for tourism related business, are significant. In a recent Downtown Neighborhood Association (DNA) membership meeting, residents voiced numerous concerns about trash, noise, disorderly behavior, parking and the inability to enjoy their property because of these issues.

The DNA is encouraged that the City of Savannah is taking a proactive step in confronting the issues associated with the rise of these properties in Savannah. We support the ordinance as written, with one suggested change: total occupancy should be limited to 8 people. If a property owner wants to rent to more than 8 people, they should be classified as an Inn and subject to all life safety regulations. We are requesting that the City complete a full review of this ordinance, and its impact, six months after it has been adopted. In addition, we recommend a moratorium on additional licenses being issued until the completion of that report.

The DNA believes strongly in the value of owner-occupied property and that it should be encouraged. We recommend exploring a modification to the proposed zoning language and ordinance that provides for either:

a. An expansion of the existing definition of B&B Guest Units to allow for up to three rooms on a property.

b. A separate (fifth) category of lodging use specifically defined for owner-occupied parcels from two to three rooms.

In either case, this could coincide with a Homestead Exemption. Also, the definition should be by parcel, not by unit, such that if an owner lives on a parcel with a separate carriage house or apartment, that does not count against them. As long as the owner lives on the property and is available to respond to neighbors and any issues that come up, we support allowing more flexibility.

The business use of these residential properties has created parking issues for many residents. Specific relief for parking issues should be undertaken immediately and not wait for the completion of current or future studies. For example, the city needs to work quickly to adjust street sweeping days so that downtown streets are available on the weekends when demand is heaviest.

The DNA encourages the City of Savannah to continue in this proactive and positive step that this ordinance takes to balance tourism with the preservation of the historic and neighborhood fabric of the Landmark District, by developing a Tourism Master Plan. We urge you to develop a plan that looks comprehensively at the nature of tourism in our city and its impact on the City of Savannah and the Landmark Historic District.

John Buckovich
President, Downtown Neighborhood Association