

Perceptions leave Center City backers in a quandary

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are accustomed to seeing. That worries Geoffrey Brooks of Charlotte.

"I think the city will put up a front for the tournament but will the businesses really open up to people of color?"

Brooks, a Johnson C. Smith University graduate, said he generally avoids uptown when he goes out on the town.

"It really isn't a lot going on up there for African Americans," he said.

After allegations surfaced that an uptown club discriminated against black patrons following the Rivalry Classic last month, e-mails have swirled around casting a negative light on Center City.

Former Mayor Pro Tem Patrick Cannon said the city council launched an investigation into Menage Ultra Lounge to determine if the city's Public Accommodation Ordinance has been violated. According to the ordinance, it is unlawful to deny use of a public facility to people based on race, religion or national origin.

The owner, Stefan Lattore, denied the allegations and said the party promoter misrepresented himself.

Lattore is a member of the Charlotte Center City board of directors. Smith said he believes the incident is a misunderstanding.

"All you can do is share the truth and share the opportunity. Make sure people are aware of the amenities," he said. "We want people to come here and spend time and it's going to be different for everybody."

Smith said uptown is Charlotte's back yard, and everyone is welcome.

"We have a hospitality forum and it is the restaurants, clubs and hotels in Center City and we will be getting together in January and that meeting will be dedicated to 'guys we have this great opportunity coming up,'" he said. "In a month there's a weeklong celebration where there's a lot of good basketball, family reunions and alumni getting together. These people come to town and they're here to have a good time. It's a great opportunity for you and it's a different kind of customer and

they're going to have different kinds of tastes and desires of your normal clientele and a normal convention that comes to town."

Smith said meetings like the one planned for January happen whenever big events come uptown because different groups have different needs.

At that meeting, which the CIAA planning committee will be a part of, Smith said different things will be highlighted as to what businesses can do to welcome the CIAA fans.

Of the 120,000 fans expected to attend the tournament, the majority will be black. Lenny Springs, chairman of Charlotte's CIAA organizing committee, said in August, "Fans that come to the CIAA tournament will be treated with the same respect and dignity as fans that come here for the ACC. Charlotte has a way of doing things right."

"I've said to the city and county we're going to do it right as it relates to this tournament. It's no secret that 99.9 percent of the folks coming to Charlotte are people of color," Springs said. "We're going to be working with the police department as it relates to community relations and sensitivity. Leave here today assured that if Lenny Springs has anything to do with it, we're going to work in partnership to get it right."

On Wednesday, Springs

repeated that sentiment. "We want Charlotte to embrace (CIAA fans) from a diversity standpoint," he said.

Springs said businesses in Center City stand to make a lot of money during the week long tournament.

Though he doesn't expect any problems, Springs said the CIAA committee is working with businesses so that they can attract the CIAA fans.

"We want to ensure that people feel welcomed. We're telling restaurants to ensure that their menus cater to the diets of African Americans and that their entertainment reflects the African American culture," he said.

Springs added that there will be uptown ambassadors stationed on the streets to help people find their way around.

Law enforcement will attend a session centered around sensitivity, Springs said.

"We don't want people to walk away thinking that Charlotte is a racist town, because it isn't," he said.

Springs said any business owner that would discriminate against African Americans is "economically stupid."

"The CIAA will benefit all of us economically," he said. And Springs said discrimination of any kind won't be tolerated.


"We're going to make uptown a fun place to be," he said.

The CIAA tournament runs Feb. 27-March 4.

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BLACK OFFICIALS Charlotte residents honored

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role that local elected leaders can play in improving the quality of life in their communities.

Giovanni, a professor at Virginia Tech, is winner of the NAACP Image Award for Literature in 1998 and the Langston Hughes award for Distinguished Contributions to Arts and Letters in 1996.

Among other events sponsored by NBC-LEO is a reception recognizing excellence among African-American leaders at 7:30 p.m., at the Spirit Square, North Carolina Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, 130 Tryon St.

Among the Charlotte residents to be honored include Madine Fails, president of the Urban League of Central Carolinas; Dr. Otis Speight of Piedmont Medical Center; Lewis McKinney of Anheuser Busch Companies; Rai Glover of Bank of America and Reggie Hubbard, owner of Hubbard Automotive.



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