

Trusting the tour guides

City's new certification program aims to push industry forward, ensure better experience for visitors

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The Tourism Leadership Council — after months of working with local experts and historians — has unveiled a new tour guide certification program to fill the void for the city of Savannah revised its Tour Service for Hire Ordinance at the beginning of this year, eliminating the required test.

TLC president Michael Owens and

Vice President Molly Swagler said the voluntary certification, which consists of a 100-question test and background check, was developed after getting feedback from the tourism community and guides who wanted the option to become certified.

"People are glad that the certification is continuing," Swagler said.

The licensing requirement means that tourists will be getting more accurate

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information, and officials hope that will benefit the multimillion-dollar industry and ensure public trust.

Charlotte Landon, an independent tour guide, was the first to receive the certification. Landon, who has worked as a guide since 2012, said the certification fills the city's need for a non-governmental professional tour guide association. And while every visitor is different, she said she feels it's her responsibility to demonstrate achievement in her field, which the certification does.

"Tourism is part of the livelihood of our city. Over 13 million visitors a year come here to walk our streets, look at our buildings, enjoy our squares and learn our history. They deserve an authentic experience and deserve to hear information from guides who have proven — through some means — that they know the city's stories. How the guide chooses to relay that information is up to them," Landon said.

"...Certification helps to demonstrate my ability to perform my profession competently."



Certified tour guide Charlotte Landon in Lafayette Square, one of her favorite parts of the city. (Steve Blisson/Savannah Morning News)

check is also an aspect the organization felt necessary to include after the city eliminated that requirement. TLC reserves the right to not certify anyone who has Part I crimes — which include crimes such as rape, murder, arson, aggravated assault and burglary — in their background. That's an issue they have already faced since the program was rolled out at the end of April.

manager of Old Town Trolley, said the company is also working to ensure that all of their trolley operators become certified.

"I think there is value in making sure our expertise in what we do is certified in some measure," Brazil said. Brazil said he had mixed feelings about the previous city requirements, but was pleased that the TLC picked

Developing the test

The changes to the city's ordinance stem from a lawsuit filed against the city by a group of tour guides alleging that the test violated their First Amendment rights. Council voted in October to eliminate the test, background check, physical exam and licensing fee.

"I think the lawsuit focused on free speech issues, but there is more to the licensing issue than telling people what to say, which I don't believe was ever the case anyway," said District 2 Alderman Bill Durrence, whose district includes the downtown area.

Durrence said the license requirement made guides more responsible for knowing the rules like where they could go and when touring times or group sizes were limited — but without that, the voluntary program is the next best thing.

"We will know those who go through the process have a solid knowledge of the city's history and that they have had background checks. With that program in place, we can then encourage visitors to only use the services of certified guides to be sure they get a quality, safe experience," he said.

To get moving in the right direction, the TLC created a working 10-member committee, which includes historians from Armstrong State University, the Georgia Historical Society and expert tour guides to develop the test. Having the working committee will allow the test to change as new information and history is presented, Swagler said.

"The CSS Georgia was just brought up from the water and we're still looking at what that means and what history we can learn from that and we have a fluid working committee that can update the manual with the new information," Swagler said.

The required background

"Certification is not just about knowing the history and being able to regurgitate history," Owens said, adding that some hotels will be making it their policy to only recommend guides and tour companies that are certified.

"...Without the certification, without the background check it's incumbent on every concierge to background check every tour company in the city? It's not feasible."

Becoming a certified guide

The cost to take the test is \$50, which includes two attempts within the year. Any additional attempts are \$20, and certification lasts for two years. Since the program is still in its early days, only a few guides have taken the test, but Owens said they currently have about 120 people studying to take the exam.

Landon said the certification doesn't set her apart — but, rather, holds her accountable.

"Savannah has many, many marvelous guides and many, many fabulous companies that train those guides who work for them," Landon said. "But we also have guides giving inaccurate information — I hear it every day — and walking the streets wearing old ID badges from the city, which are no longer valid."

"In my opinion, this hurts the industry and devalues the profession. Sally, the industry does not seem to be policing itself well enough now that the city has dropped the licensing requirement."

Landon said she believed the new certification benefits both the tourism industry and the public by demonstrating a level of competency.

"Quite frankly, if I knew the information and was confident in my ability as a guide, why wouldn't I prove that by pursuing a level of voluntary certification?" she said.

Charlie Brazil, general

up the program so quickly. "I think with the TLC stewarding the program it's a much better structure and good for the industry," he said. "We've excited to see where the process takes us."

Promotion and moving forward

Guides that become certified will be listed on SavannahTourGuides.com, which is forthcoming. The test is open to any tour guide in the city, not just those who are members of the TLC. They'll also receive a certified tour guide badge that fulfills the city's requirements to have a badge present during all tours.

"We'll be promoting (the website) not just to hotels — it'll go directly to guests, with the message of, before you book, check and look for the certification logo. There will certainly be a very strong message to visitors to check before you book your tour reservation," Owens said. "You don't have to be a member, there are no discounts if you are. It has nothing to do with membership within the organization — it has to do with the integrity of the industry and the safety of our visitors as a whole."

Moving forward, Owens said the organization aims to continue ongoing education opportunities for certified guides.

"For something that should be etched in stone history changes every day or interpretation and understanding of history changes every day," he said.

"We want to make sure our certified guides have the opportunity to learn new things."

MORE INFORMATION

For more information about the Tourism Leadership Council's tour guide certification, go to tourismleadershipcouncil.com/tourguides or call 912-232-1225.