

Port opponents lobby Soles to nix state funds for NCIT study Southport, Bald Head Island vote to oppose port

By Sarah Wilson, Reporter

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As the N.C. Senate debates the state budget, a concern for many locals is the chance that \$5 million may be allocated to pay for a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers feasibility study of the N.C. International Terminal project near Southport.

The N.C. House budget, approved earlier this month, included an amendment to take the state's portion of costs for the feasibility study off the table.

The amendment, introduced by Rep. Pricey Harrison, D-Guilford, passed 104-11.

For the next step in the NCIT project to go forward, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers must have a funding partner for the \$10 million feasibility study. If the House amendment is not upheld in the House and Senate budget reconciliation process, the corps could use state money for the study.

Members of No Port Southport have been fighting the NCIT project since it was first announced. They have been meeting with lawmakers and staffers in Raleigh to discuss their concerns about the economic and environmental effects they believe the project could have.

"The point of Pricey Harrison's amendment was to preclude any dollars from being re-allocated or moved to fund that feasibility study," No Port Southport Steering Committee member Toby Bronstein said this week.

The group wants to make sure the amendment is upheld in the final budget, so Bronstein sent a letter last Friday to Sen. R.C. Soles, D-Columbus, asking he consider it.

"We had been hearing from a lot of folks in Raleigh that Soles was pivotal in this decision," Bronstein said. "It's frustrating because [lawmakers] are looking at it as a local issue, except the truth is people

from the coastal plain to the piedmont to the mountains will be paying and paying and paying for this. We decided to take a stand.”

The letter states, “We urge you to consider alternate facts than those provided to you by the N.C. State Ports Authority. We would also urge you to sort through the public relations campaign that forms the basis of the NCSPA’s pitch and compare that to the reality of fact-intensive, diligent research provided by No Port Southport.

“The study process will spend \$10 million (conservatively) to determine if this project should go forward. Many of the questions that will be ‘answered’ in feasibility should have been addressed in the reconnaissance phase. Instead, the Corps punted on these critical issues, pushing instead for a \$10 million study. To suggest that feasibility will provide an ‘unbiased’ assessment is disingenuous at best.”

Asked to respond, Corps spokesperson Penny Schmitt said this week the agency has done what was required, and now it’s up to legislators to do what they believe is right.

“We completed the recon study, and, despite what keeps being said by No Port, that is the appropriate level of study for this stage in the game. If the state decides to proceed, we’ll proceed.

“We are here to carry out projects that the public and Congress want us to pursue,” Schmitt said. “We don’t have an agenda. We have done our project.”

Soles did not return calls seeking comment.

Recently, Bronstein and other committee members met with House Speaker Joe Hackney, Senate Majority Leader Martin Nesbitt, representatives with the governor’s office and various staffers in Raleigh to discuss their concerns about the project.

“In the governor’s office, we basically suggested, ‘What’s the rush? Why not hold off on issuing a letter of intent until there is unbiased, objective oversight?’”

As for the lawmakers, “We urged them to exercise whatever influence they have to stop the port in this budget year.”

At the local government level, the Southport Board of Aldermen and the Village Council of Bald Head Island recently voted to oppose the NCIT project.

The Bald Head council voted unanimously last week to oppose the project and requested no more taxpayer money be allocated to the project.

According to a town news release, “further expansion of the navigation channel is certain to intensify the rate and extent of the damage to BHI and its unique ecosystems, as well as to the thousands of acres of adjacent natural areas under the care and protection of state and federal authorities.

“Increased light, air, sound and water pollution, as well as severe security issues at the adjacent Brunswick Nuclear Power Plant and Sunny Point Military Ocean Terminal, would result from the NCIT. The highly desirable natural resource-based recreation, tourism and retirement nature of the Brunswick County coast would be lost forever to the citizens of North Carolina.”

A news release states the town “fully supports” creating more jobs in the state—“sustainable jobs that are cost effective for North Carolina taxpayers, but a newer, bigger port on the same river will not dramatically improve North Carolina’s struggling economy.”

The Southport Board of Aldermen voted 4-1 earlier this month to oppose the project, with alderman Nelson Adams dissenting. The majority said the port’s potential negative impacts on the environment and the economy outweigh the purported benefits.