

Is NCIT project still on the state's 'to-do' list?

By Sarah Wilson, Reporter

Tuesday, July 20, 2010 at 1:19 pm

Is the proposed N.C. International Terminal project still in Brunswick County's future?

U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre and six Brunswick County municipalities have expressed opposition to the 600-acre, deepwater terminal proposed for Southport, and the state legislature denied any funds to help pay for a feasibility study this year, leaving many to question whether the project has a future.

Representatives from the N.C. Ports Authority say the multi-million dollar project, tentatively planned for 2017, is still on the table, but questions raised by opponents will be addressed.

"We're examining all the concerns raised by the community, but we continue to believe in the opportunities and potential that the project could provide to the community" such as potential jobs, Shannon Moody, director of communications for the ports authority, said recently.

Jeff Etheridge Jr. of Whiteville, a member of the ports authority's board of directors, said it's too early to call off the NCIT because it's a long-term project and the issue of the existing ports limitations needs to be addressed.

"Because the funding didn't occur immediately at the state and federal levels, that's not a real issue to me," Etheridge said this week.

He explained while the state has good ports, they are limited in the size of the ships they can handle, and the ports authority has to consider the future of the ports.

"We know we're going to have to have a deepwater port in order to be competitive worldwide. I'm sure there are other options available to us, but it wouldn't be smart at this time to say we're not going to do [the NCIT]."

The project is still a part of the list of projects for the Governor's Logistics Task Force, which Gov. Bev Perdue created in December of 2009. The task force, led by Lt. Gov. Walter Dalton, includes four subcommittees including one dedicated to "inland port design."

The N.C. Department of Transportation (DOT) provides support for the task force.

According to the DOT website, the subcommittee is supposed to work with a research team from N.C. State University to “explore the feasibility of regional transportation hubs to improve the flow of goods and services across the entire state.”

Lt. Gov. Dalton’s communications director Karla Buitrago explained the task force is having meetings at various locations throughout the state to receive public input and will soon be scheduling meetings in the eastern region, where the NCIT project will be a topic of discussion.

“We have not yet examined the issue of the North Carolina International Terminal, but they are certainly expecting to have to study the issues of the existing ports and the possibility of the NCIT as we go to the eastern part of the state,” Buitrago said.

“Lt. Gov. Dalton and other members are committed to hearing from both sides of the issue.”

Locally, the issue has hit rough water in the past several weeks.

Soon after McIntyre issued a statement of opposition, saying the ports authority has not sought input of local towns or address residents’ concerns, Oak Island became the sixth municipality to adopt a resolution opposing the port.

Previously, the towns of Caswell Beach, Bald Head Island, St. James, Southport and Boiling Spring Lakes also adopted resolutions opposing it.

Mayor Betty Wallace explained recently the council had been learning about the project before taking a position on it.

“We had talked about a possible resolution back at our retreat in January, but several council members wanted to be better educated about port before making any kind of public statement,” Wallace said.

When the issue was first discussed, council members opinions varied, she explained, from one who “would have loved” to embrace the port project “he could have satisfied himself they could provide the number of jobs they promised,” while another opposed it from the start because of the probable environmental impacts.

After learning about the project, Wallace said one of the main reasons the council voted to oppose it was the ports authority couldn’t show there would have been a large enough increase in jobs to make it worth the impact on the environment and infrastructure.

Another major factor was the proposed dredging of the Cape Fear River to make the NCIT a reality.

“When you look at the river as it is today and the amount they plan to dredge to get those big ships in, that’s horrifying. It would have completely changed the Cape Fear River.”

A group of local residents who oppose the port—No Port Southport—has spent money on their own studies of the project and lobbied state officials to take a closer look at it before allocating money.

Jim Bradshaw, director of the Brunswick County Economic Development Commission, said the commission is still supportive of the feasibility study to determine whether the port is an appropriate use for the land in Southport.

“We still support the feasibility study to see if environmental issues can be [worked out] and transportation provided to that site. If so, it could provide some great employment opportunity,” Bradshaw said.

If the study finds the port would not be viable at that location, the EDC would work to find alternatives for the property, which is zoned industrial, to provide jobs, he added.