

No Port seeking alternative use for NCIT site, continues fight against mega-port

Ports authority says advertising vendor not to be used for NCIT promotion

By Sarah Wilson, Reporter

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No Port Southport is continuing its mission to oppose construction of a deepwater container terminal in Southport by seeking alternative uses for the N.C. Ports Authority property now that the project has officially been placed “on hold.”

Recently, No Port members met with representatives from the Brunswick County Economic Development Commission (EDC) and made a presentation to county commissioners asking for their assistance with locating other industries that might use the 600 acres.

“We basically explained we had started an initiative on our own to approach other stakeholders in that property,” such as surrounding towns, “inviting them to join the discussion on finding a good use for that land that would generate well-paying jobs—jobs that were also eco-friendly,” explained No Port member Harry Burrell.

Bradshaw said the EDC still supports the idea of a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers feasibility study for the NCIT project, which No Port members have opposed.

If the feasibility study doesn’t go forward or doesn’t recommend the NCIT on the Southport property, Bradshaw said the EDC is open to discussions about recruiting other industries to the site.

“We emphasized [in the meeting] that that site would remain industrial,” Bradshaw said. “We want to create jobs and bring nonpolluting industries to the site.”

He said both groups agreed jobs are one of the county’s top goals.

“This is one of the best sites on the East Coast for water-related industries to locate. There’s a 42-foot channel right there, and sewer and water from county is located nearby. We’ll be glad to work with any group to work toward bringing job opportunities.”

Burrell said the meeting went well.

“We were very pleased to hear [the EDC’s] directive is to recruit industry that is nonpolluting,” he said.

After meeting with EDC representatives, Burrell made a presentation to the Brunswick County Board of Commissioners asking members to participate in the process and to possibly consider purchasing the NCIT land.

County commissioners chairman Bill Sue said commissioners were not at a point to consider purchasing the NCIT land.

In addition to contacting government representatives, Burrell and No Port members have also approached several environmental groups about preserving some of the land as green space.

“We will be very interested to see what the mayors of the six municipalities viewpoints are on this, and we’ll continue our discussion with the environmental groups. We would also like to open up discussion with the possible business interests including chambers of commerce and get their viewpoints,” Burrell said.

The goal, he said, is to come up with a “multi-use plan” for the land to generate good-paying jobs that support families and do not damage the environment.

Once a plan is created, Burrell said he hopes the ports authority would listen to the recommendations.

“They’re a part of the state government, and since we all are residents and taxpayers to the state, we hope the state would listen to what our suggestions are.”

In addition to finding alternative use for the NCIT property, No Port Southport will continue its fight to stop the multi-million dollar project from happening in the future.

“We’re going to continue doing what we had been doing—trying to educate legislators, talk to candidates...continue our trips to Raleigh,” committee member Toby Bronstein said recently.

On Sept. 21, the steering committee will give a presentation to the Governor’s Logistics Task Force, which is charged with helping the state becoming globally competitive.

“NCIT is very much a part of that,” Bronstein said.

Gov. Bev Perdue created the task force in December of 2009. Led by Lt. Gov. Walter Dalton, the group 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 port design 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.”

The members of the No Port steering committee say they want to continue to get their message across to as many state officials as possible.

The state ports authority agreed to place the NCIT project “on hold” last month after six local municipalities and U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre publicly opposed the idea, and the state legislature specifically barred state funds from being used for a project feasibility study.

After the project was placed on hold, ports authority chairman Carl Stewart said it couldn’t go forward without the support of the state and federal governments, and the authority apparently hadn’t communicated its message well.

“Obviously, we need to address it further as we move along or else we need to make sure that the members of Congress and their staffs are adequately briefed,” Stewart said. “We’ve been trying to do that for several years, but we obviously could do a better job in getting those points across.”

That’s what worries members of No Port Southport.

“My concerns are they’re not saying it’s a bad idea at all,” Bronstein said. “They’re saying they just didn’t sell it properly. I think they’re going to lay low for a while and wait for the economy to come back, then come back with a vengeance with a glitzy PR campaign.”

Recently, the authority announced it has hired the public relations firm Capstrat for \$375,000 per year for up to three years.

“No Port Southport would like to know where the money is coming from to pay Capstrat the \$375,000, what exactly the Ports Authority is paying for, and if their effort will include a public relations blitz for NCIT,” the group stated in a recent press release.

Shannon Moody, the N.C. Ports Authority’s communications director, said that isn’t the case at all. In fact, such contracts are signed on a routine basis. The one with Capstrat is no different.

“The N.C. State Ports Authority has held advertising services contracts with vendors for decades to drive additional business to and awareness around N.C.’s ports,” Moody said.

During the latest request for proposals process, the authority selected Capstrat to provide services on an annual renewal basis of up to three years beginning with the current fiscal year, at a cost of up to \$375,000 per year. The amount was reduced in April to \$351,000 in an effort to save money.

The authority spent \$364,000 last year with its previous vendor, Moody said.

“The advertising services contract’s scope includes the preparation and placement of advertising for the authority’s business development and communications and to carry out other promotional activities as might be required to assist the NCSPA.

“This includes such services as market research, new media, video production, radio, television, billboards, collateral/sales materials, exhibits and print advertising in international, national, state and local markets.

“When the contract was procured originally, the NCIT was a priority for the authority,” Moody added. “As you know, that project has now been put on hold. Capstrat is not performing any work on the proposed international terminal.”