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## Steer clear

The notion of spending taxpayers' money on a proposed North Carolina mega-port didn't float many boats in the state House late last week, and that's good news for the coastal environment and the state's finances. This is a well-intentioned project that simply doesn't make sufficient sense.

The House's emphatic 104-to-11 vote against funding a port study was on the mark. The Senate, in contrast, has endorsed the study (estimated to cost the state about \$5 million) and no decision is final until the legislature adjourns. To avoid a taxpayer commitment to what Rep. Pricey Harrison of Greensboro called "a Global TransPark on steroids," the House's view should prevail.

No offense to the good people at the TransPark, but we can't afford another mega-dump of taxpayer dollars on a visionary transportation/industrial project that amounts to pie in the sky. Sure, the N.C. Ports Authority, which is pushing the plan for a big new port for a big new generation of container ships, has some points to make. International ocean trade is growing, but the state's existing ports at Wilmington and Morehead City aren't suited to accommodating the largest vessels. With dredging, the lower Cape Fear River could, and the Ports Authority has a 600-acre riverside site on the northern edge of Southport. An entirely new port would offer the latest in technology and efficiency - a competitive edge for North Carolina.

But at what cost? The estimates are staggering. More than \$1 billion for the dredging (although the federal government would share in that cost). The shipping terminal itself, another \$1 billion-plus. There'd be a new 20-mile-long four-lane access road, and a new railroad line. In all, it's easy to see this as a \$3 billion project, with in-state taxpayers footing much of the bill. (Private investors are not yet aboard.)

There's more: A nuclear power plant borders the site, posing complications. The consequences of extensive dredging on seafood and wildlife in such a marshland-rich region are sobering. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service envisions "a permanent loss of environmental resources." Local governments have weighed in against the port.

The biggest black mark against the proposed N.C. International Terminal, however, is its iffy business case. To succeed, the new port would have to lure business away from existing, highly competitive East Coast ports, in particular Hampton Roads, Va., Charleston, S.C., and Savannah, Ga. To say the least, these potential rivals would not take the prospect of a Southport container terminal lying down. They are already big and modern and will no doubt become more so. Their labor forces, distribution centers and transportation routes are well-established. Do we really want to place a multibillion-dollar bet that a sufficient number of shippers would switch? More than 100 state House members say no, at least to any plan that would have the state as the main stakeholder. Sensible senators should join them.