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Deepwater port plans put on ice

The N.C. Ports Authority scrapped plans for a controversial \$3 billion international shipping terminal near Southport in response to public concern about potential environmental damage and economic perils.

The authority said Wednesday that it has not given up on building a deepwater terminal. But for the time being, the ports agency, which has spent more than \$10 million studying the costs and benefits of the N.C. International Terminal, will focus on expanding existing ports in Wilmington and Morehead City.

"We have several projects here that will expand our capacity and operations at these facilities," said spokeswoman Shannon Moody. "The authority is examining all other options beyond the N.C. International Terminal for deepwater ports access."

The about-face closes a contentious chapter in the authority's five-year effort to build a deepwater port on a former pecan grove near the mouth of the Cape Fear River. The authority had projected that the international port would create 16,000 jobs in the state in loading, trucking and railroads, as well as from a network of distribution centers built to supply major retail chains.

But the port authority's decision may only put off the dispute.

Toby Bronstein, a resident of Caswell Beach who was active in NoPort Southport, an opposition group, said the Southport site is still in play until the authority sells the 600-plus acres it acquired for the project. Opponents warned the proposed port would overwhelm small, tourism-dependent communities with heavy truck traffic, industrial noise and pollution.

"Until that land is sold or an alternative use is proposed, it is not over," Bronstein said. "Our fear is they're going to lay low for a while, let all this pass until the economy improves, then come back with a public relations blitz to try to sell this project."

Supersized shipping

The authority was intensely committed to the project. The organization had said the deepwater terminal, at least 15 times bigger than the Port of Wilmington upriver, would have brought an economic boom to North Carolina from a new generation of supersized cargo ships that are expected to dominate shipping after the widened Panama Canal opens in 2014.

The proposed terminal was to be sandwiched between Progress Energy's Brunswick twin-reactor nuclear plant and the U.S. Department of Defense Military Ocean Terminal at Sunny Point, one of the world's largest ordnance depots. The terminal would have required new roadways and rail links to move freight inland.

Critics' concerns

Opponents said the economic claims were bogus and doubted that adding a third shipping port could attract enough business from better-established ports in Virginia and South Carolina to become financially viable. Ports make their money by charging fees to ships and freight distributors.

In addition to coastal communities and environmental groups, the skeptics included the politically influential Baptist State Convention, which operates a 240-acre camp and conference center on nearby Oak Island.

"We are convinced that the impact on the environment in that area will be severe, and are further convinced that the positive economic projections from the project's proponents are unrealistic and unattainable," the group's executive leader for business services, John Butler, wrote to Gov. Bev Perdue last month. "Please know that these opinions are not merely those of emotional pastors and uninformed laypersons - I personally have an Economics degree from Davidson College and our Business Services Committee includes professionals from the finance and legal fields across North Carolina."

The authority's international port proposal suffered a major setback last month when the N.C. General Assembly overwhelmingly voted to withhold state funding for the project. Financial participation from the state was a prerequisite for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to proceed with a \$10 million feasibility study that would take five years to complete.

'It seemed like folly'

The General Assembly vote all but killed the Southport terminal, unless the Ports Authority found another source for the \$4.7 million needed to pay for the state's half of the feasibility study. The legislative maneuver to kill state funding was pushed by state Rep. Pricey Harrison, a Democrat from Guilford County who often argues for environmental causes.

"That site, clearly near the nuclear reactor and munitions facility, is totally unsuitable," Harrison said. "It seemed like folly to spend \$10 million to study that site when it was never going to work."

The project was opposed in resolutions passed by a half-dozen coastal communities, including Southport and Bald Head Island.

U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre, a Democrat who represents Eastern North Carolina in Congress, issued a statement praising the Ports Authority for canceling the project.

"I applaud the leadership at the Ports for listening to the communities that will be most affected by this project and deciding to focus on immediate ways we can make the Wilmington Port stronger and create more jobs right now," he said.

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