

Editorial - Cost, economy, sneaky budget trick reasons to put off study

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The way to determine whether a proposed port at Southport would be a boon or a \$2 billion-plus boondoggle is to conduct an impartial study – one that is not commissioned either by the Ports Authority or by groups that oppose a port under any circumstance.

Now is not the time for such a study, however, for numerous reasons. Chief among them: cost, timing and the sneaky way the study found its way into a House budget proposal. (It was removed by an overwhelming vote.)

The Honorables' undivided attention should be focused on a huge budget gap that will get even worse if extra federal Medicaid money doesn't materialize. Officials say a feasibility study would cost \$10 million, almost half of which would have to be paid by the state. The state can't spare it.

And before any study is authorized, someone needs to explain why it would cost so much. Ten million dollars?

Rep. Frank Iler, R-Brunswick, had a good suggestion: The Ports Authority board and staff should present the project to the General Assembly in person. And, we might add, they should be prepared to take tough questions.

The state and the nation are still trying to dig out of a recession that cut port traffic worldwide. Taxpayers are right to ask whether the need really exists for a brand-new port, or whether existing ports could handle the increased traffic.

We also need to know whether the proposed international port would build its traffic by pulling business from other East Coast ports – including Norfolk, Va.; Morehead City; Wilmington; and Charleston, S.C. – and the long-range effects on the environment, public safety, traffic, and other infrastructure and the quality of life in Brunswick County.

But the most compelling reason to put off this study is the way it was slipped into the budget as a blank line item, with the understanding that the Department of Environment and Natural Resources could move money around to pay for it. This apparently is a normal course of action for such items, but it smacks of the sort of backroom deal brokering that has prompted plenty of people to throw tea parties.

That's no way to build confidence.

The port project is controversial, and many questions need to be answered before the taxpayers can be asked to spend more than \$2 billion. There is pressure by both supporters and opponents to take definitive action, but it's too important to ram through – or to kill it without considering that the Ports Authority's study indicating significant job and revenue creation may be right.

A large port could disrupt the relaxed lifestyle that many retirees and families sought in southeastern Brunswick County. If the Ports Authority is correct, however, it also could provide jobs in the region and throughout the state – and good employment opportunities also contribute to quality of life.

It's a difficult balancing act. We need a study that answers the many pointed questions residents have. But the Honorables need to attend to the budget crisis first.

Five million dollars wouldn't have much effect on a revenue gap that's estimated at \$800 million or more.

But it could pay some teachers, or for services to keep some elderly residents out of nursing homes.

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