



Megaport dealt possibly fatal blow as McIntyre announces his opposition

Is project dead now? Ports agency says no

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Supporters of the proposed N.C. International Terminal near Southport took a one-two punch Tuesday, as U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre voiced his opposition to the project and a state representative said she believes it is "on life support." The developments came the day after lawmakers declined to include money in the state budget for a federal port feasibility study, a necessary next step in the port development process.

It is possible that the N.C. State Ports Authority could find another way to fund the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' study, although it was immediately unclear whether it would do that. Authority officials declined to say Tuesday what their next step would be, but they made it clear that they planned to try to forge ahead.

McIntyre, the Democrat from Lumberton who is vying for re-election to the U.S. House, expressed concerns Tuesday about national security, the environment, the multibillion-dollar cost amid growing national debt and the impact on the quality of life for Brunswick County residents.

"I have come to the conclusion that the proposed international port is too risky and too costly and could cause irreparable harm both economically and environmentally," the congressman said in a prepared statement.

His support for the project is critical because the federal government is expected to pay half of the \$10 million study cost, with the state paying the other half.

The Ports Authority, in a prepared statement, said the authority shared many of the concerns and questions about the project but argued the only way to address the issues is through the Corps of Engineers' study process.

"The Authority continues to believe in the opportunities and potential this project could provide the residents of North Carolina," the statement said. "We remain hopeful that we can explore opportunities to further address these concerns in the future."

Chrissy Pearson, a spokeswoman for Gov. Beverly Perdue, said the governor still believes in the port's potential to bring "tremendous economic development and jobs to North Carolina" and issues that must be addressed before moving forward would likely come up during a feasibility study.

"Therefore, she feels this project could not move ahead without that study being completed," Pearson said. "As to who or what funds the study, that could be open to discussion."

Meanwhile, state Rep. Pricey Harrison, D-Guilford, who had a hand in ensuring the General Assembly didn't pay for the port feasibility study this year, said she believed the port project was "on life support."

She said the state should consider selling the 600-acre port property on the west bank of the Cape Fear River near Southport, or perhaps turn it into a state park. The Ports Authority purchased the land in 2006 for \$30 million.

"That could make a really great park or access to the water for folks who don't have it right now," Harrison said.

When the House considered its version of the state budget a couple weeks ago, Harrison proposed an amendment to ensure that the state wouldn't pay for the feasibility study in its next budget. It passed overwhelmingly, 104-11.

Harrison said she believes the International Terminal is a pie-in-the-sky idea with too many lingering concerns, including its \$2 billion to \$3 billion price tag, its impact on the environment, and the site's proximity to Progress Energy's Brunswick Nuclear Plant and the Army's Military Ocean Terminal at Sunny Point, a key location for the transfer of weapons, ammunition, explosives and other military equipment.

She said state budget woes are likely to get worse in coming years.

"I just didn't think in this current budget climate that the state should go down the road of paying for a project that would never be permitted," she said.

Harrison also said she believed the port is a "relic of the Easley administration," referring to former Gov. Mike Easley.

"I don't know how much of an appetite there is for it," she said.

Toby Bronstein, a spokeswoman for the port opposition group No Port Southport, deemed the McIntyre announcement a step in the right direction for the group.

"This makes no sense for any reason," she said of the port project. "It's just time to stop. Stop spending money. Stop spending time. Stop the project now."

Ilario Pantano, the Republican candidate challenging McIntyre in the November election, said he also is opposed to the International Terminal, having heard residents' concerns in his travels around the district.

Pantano said Southeastern North Carolina needs economic development and more jobs, but he agrees with the state's decision to withhold funding for the port study. He said the port is not a good fit for the region or the coast at this time.

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