



After string of setbacks, Ports Authority reassessing megaport

By Patrick Gannon
Patrick.Gannon@StarNewsOnline.com

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The N.C. State Ports Authority has spent about \$10.2 million planning the proposed megaport in Brunswick County, but after a tumultuous few days, the agency is "re-evaluating where we are" with the project, a ports spokeswoman said Thursday.

Exactly what that means is unclear, but the words came in response to StarNews questions about the project's future, including whether ports officials still believed there is economic justification for the \$2 billion-plus N.C. International Terminal and whether it still hoped to open the facility in this decade.

"Your questions are part of our re-examination of the project based on recent events," Ports Authority spokeswoman Shannon Moody said in an e-mail.

It was a rough week for the Ports Authority, which has been planning the huge container terminal for several years.

Early this week, the General Assembly declined to pay its share of a federal feasibility study, a required step in the development process. A day later, U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre, D-Lumberton, citing a laundry list of concerns, voiced his opposition to the project in a strongly worded news release, putting overall federal support for the project in peril.

Also, a state representative suggested the state sell the proposed port site – 600 acres on the Cape Fear River near Southport – or use it as a park.

Authority officials "heard the Congressman and we've heard the General Assembly," Moody said.

"The feasibility study remains the only avenue for addressing many of the outstanding questions, but we are re-examining what we know about the project at this time," she wrote.

The comments are the first indication that the Ports Authority is wavering in its bid to build a huge container port on the Cape Fear River. During the five years since the project's inception, the authority has spent roughly \$10.2 million on it, including planning, engineering technical reports, debt service on the property, and legal and financial fees, Moody said.

More recently, the authority has forged ahead in the face of growing opposition from environmental groups and visitors, residents and elected officials of coastal Brunswick County.

Moody also said the authority is aware of developments south of North Carolina, where the states of Georgia and South Carolina have put a huge, joint port project on hold until demand justifies the cost.

In a recent article in The Journal of Commerce, a Georgia ports official estimated that the economic justification for the proposed Jasper Ocean Terminal in Jasper County, S.C., may not be there until 2020 or 2025. Although planning continues, the project is on the back burner until the economy rebounds and enough demand returns.

That article changed the mind of state Rep. Danny McComas, R-New Hanover. Though he voted recently – contrary to the vast majority of his House colleagues – to keep funding for the federal feasibility study in the state budget, he said Wednesday his opinion changed after reading the article.

McComas said he believes the Ports Authority should step back and reevaluate the project.

"Nobody else is doing it. Why should we?" he said.

He also indicated that the Ports Authority risks alienating the General Assembly if it pushes forward with the feasibility study without lawmakers' blessing. The authority could partner with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to do the study without the state's financial backing.

"If they go ahead and fund it, they're going against the wishes of the General Assembly," McComas said. "They could do it, but it would be a long-term loss for them."

Patrick Gannon: (910) 264-8328