



N.C. Ports Authority hires PR company

By Patrick Gannon

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The N.C. State Ports Authority, hoping to boost – or repair – its image inside and outside North Carolina, has hired a prominent, Raleigh-based public relations firm and made staffing changes to improve communications.

The Ports Authority inked a contract with Capstrat, which, according to its website, is one of the largest communications firms in the Southeast and one of the top 40 agencies in the United States. Its clients include Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the N.C. Economic Developers Association, among many others.

The Ports Authority will pay the company about \$375,000 a year for up to three years for the contract, which began July 1. A Capstrat official referred questions to the Ports Authority.

Ports Authority spokeswoman Shannon Moody said the authority has held advertising contracts with outside firms for decades. Lewis Advertising held the most recent contract. It was paid \$364,000 last year.

The Capstrat contract, Moody said, includes placing advertising and performing other promotional activities, such as research, new media, video production, radio, television, billboards, sales materials and print advertising in international, national, state and local markets.

The Ports Authority recently suffered setbacks in its mission to build a huge container terminal in Brunswick County, known as the N.C. International Terminal. The state legislature recently denied funding for a mandatory feasibility study for the project and U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre, D-Lumberton, expressed his opposition to it. As a result, the authority put the project on hold and is researching other options, ports officials have said.

Tom Eagar, authority chief executive officer, said in a recent interview that the authority failed in communicating the importance of an international port. He credited opposition groups with doing a better job of getting their message across.

“We will certainly become more engaged with the community, the economic development community as well, (and) the elected officials,” Eagar said. “And we’re going to spend a lot of time with those stakeholders.”

Moody said Capstrat would not lobby state legislators about the NCIT. The contract, she said, is about driving new business to the ports of Wilmington and Morehead City.

“The message does not include awareness around the N.C. International Terminal as this is no longer a focus for the authority,” she said.

But a spokeswoman for No Port Southport, which opposes the NCIT, pointed out that both Eagar and Carl Stewart Jr., chairman of the Ports Authority board of directors, have recently made statements indicating that they still hoped to build a huge new container port. Stewart said last week he still believed the 600-acre site near Southport was an “excellent site.”

Toby Bronstein of No Port Southport questioned whether Capstrat’s effort would include a public relations blitz for the International Terminal. Group members have questioned whether “on hold” is an accurate representation of where the Ports Authority is on the project.

“The governor and the Ports Authority owe the taxpaying citizens of North Carolina a full and complete accounting and an honest, forthright assessment of the true status of NCIT,” Bronstein said. “It is long overdue.”

Meanwhile, the Ports Authority this week announced changes in staffing to strengthen promotion of the ports. Effective Monday, longtime spokeswoman Karen Fox, currently vice president of communications, will join the business and economic development team as director of customer service and internal sales.

Jimmy Yokeley, currently director of distribution services, will join the executive team as director of community economic development.

Yokeley, along with Moody and government relations director Laura Blair, will work with Eagar to “engage local, state and federal leadership, economic development and other business groups, as well as the residents of North Carolina to communicate the significance of the jobs, personal income and tax revenues that vibrant ports bring to their communities and state,” according to a letter from Eagar to authority employees.

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