



SPA vows to revisit plan

NoPort group says it'll keep fighting until property is sold

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While plans for an international port near Southport have been officially put on hold, opponents of the project say they will not let up until the port site is let go.

Two days after announcing the North Carolina International Terminal's change in project status, the N.C. State Ports Authority regrouped last Friday over a hastily called board of directors meeting held via teleconference.

Board chairman Carl Stewart, recently reappointed by Gov. Bev Perdue to a second six-year term, started the meeting expressing disappointment with the turn of events of the past couple months, which saw a surge in opposition to the proposed \$2-billion-plus project.

But his message was more optimistic for the future of the project than what was gleaned from the official announcement, which some observers took to mean the end of the nearly five-year-old effort to establish a deepwater port near the mouth of the Cape Fear River.

"I have not changed my opinion. I continue to believe the site we have chosen is the best site we could ever find," Stewart said by phone. "At the same time, it is important to me to respect the position of the General Assembly. And you cannot build a project in a congressional district where the resident congressman has come out against it."

The meeting was the first opportunity the board has had to discuss the events of the past two months, which saw opposition to the megaport spread among municipalities and championed by U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre, just as the General Assembly was ensuring that funding for the project was not included in the state budget.

Referring to the rise in opposition to the port, Stewart remarked, "Had I been aware of the events that have occurred over the past several weeks, I certainly would have had a full meeting of the board in Wilmington so we could have discussed those events. I have not talked

to any board member prior to those events. Other than that, I have not thought it appropriate to talk to any of the board or solicit any view from them.

“Of course, I was very saddened by the decision of the General Assembly and by the position taken by congressman McIntyre. I personally was taken off-guard by the General Assembly and certainly by the statement from the congressman,” he said.

“We are going to have to revisit our strategic plan and make the adjustments we need to make. At the same time, I feel we need to go back and dust off those plans from five and six years ago,” he said, referring to expansions for the Port of Wilmington and the Port of Morehead City.

Directors’ directive

Stewart’s comments echoed points made by ports CEO Tom Eagar, who announced in an interview last week that the authority would be redirecting its energies to existing facilities. Regarding the terminal, Stewart continued, “My request to Tom and his staff is to try and understand all that has happened and make some suggestions on an appropriate response.”

If the authority failed to communicate the project as Eagar has said, Stewart stressed, staff needs to come up with a course of action to remedy that in the future, “so we are perceived as not being a closed shop, and go into some of those communities more than we have done.”

Stewart said the board had not anticipated meeting until August or September due to a lack of business requiring board action. But state statute requires that the board meet at least once every 60 days, and Stewart said the meeting’s short notice was due to meeting that requirement.

Following brief updates on other business from staff and other board members, Eagar read a statement reiterating the authority’s decision to put the terminal project on hold.

“Given the events that have evolved over the last six weeks, culminating with congressman McIntyre’s opposition to the proposed N.C. International Terminal, the ports authority will regroup and move ahead to examine all options to keep North Carolina globally competitive,” Eagar said.

“We will consider alternatives that include existing ports in Wilmington and Morehead City, the existing Brunswick County site, and other sites yet to be identified. We are no longer requesting nor anticipate the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers letter of intent to be signed this year.

“We have heard and respect the concerns voiced by local communities and our elected officials concerning port expansion,” he said. “The ports authority will assess how to best keep North Carolina’s ports competitive and to continue our mission to enhance the economy of the entire state.”

Following the interview with The State Port Pilot in which Eagar announced the status change, the ports authority issued a statement last Wednesday confirming that the project is on hold. “We believe that access to a deepwater port is important to keeping North Carolina globally competitive,” the statement concluded. “We will examine all options beyond the N.C. International Terminal.”

In response to that announcement, McIntyre issued the following statement:

“The decision to place the proposed North Carolina International Terminal on hold by the North Carolina Ports Authority is a positive step forward. The voices of concern have been heard, and now it is time to move forward.

“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,” the statement continued. “Working together, we can and will make the Wilmington port the crown jewel of the East Coast and help the citizens and communities of southeastern North Carolina.”

Site use debated

A less celebratory tone came from opposition group NoPort Southport, which remained skeptical of the ports authority’s intentions for the project. In its own statement, the group said the project remains likely until the port site is sold and put to some other use.

The group promised to “focus on working with the elected officials in the region to get the 600 acres purchased for the port back into the hands of the people. ... Until the port is officially dead, work will continue to ensure the ports authority does not renew any efforts to restart the NCIT. In addition, new initiatives are being made to establish relationships with regional officials to identify valid uses for the site to generate good jobs while protecting the environment.”

In response to Stewart’s comments, the group also issued the following statement:

“NoPort Southport is concerned about the arrogance of a state agency seeking to reach its own internal goals regardless of the desires of the people, the effects on the environment or the cost it will place on all of the state’s taxpayers. Of equal concern is the willingness of Governor Perdue to allow this ill-conceived project to continue. It is folly for the governor, Carl Stewart or the ports authority to think that the facts surrounding the economics, the aquifer, the channel, the infrastructure, the associated health issues or the billions of taxpayers’ dollars will change.

“It is evident that the people of the Lower Cape Fear River region will need to continue to work to save this beautiful region from destruction. In addition the municipalities need to band together to fight against this port.”

Located upriver from Southport between Archer Daniels Midland and the Progress Energy nuclear plant property, just south of Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point, the 600-acre tract was purchased in late 2005 for \$30 million. The ports authority has spent more than \$10 million on planning for the project, with the next step in the process a feasibility study that would cost almost \$10 million itself.

While opponents want to see the site sold and put to a different use, Jim Bradshaw, executive director of the Brunswick County Economic Development Commission, said the county remains committed to attracting industry to the site, regardless of whether the terminal proceeds.

“If the port is not built, and that’s a big ‘if,’ we will work closely with the North Carolina ports authority to bring industries to the site,” Bradshaw said. “It’s zoned heavy industrial, and the types of projects we would look at include plastics, metal fabrication, boat building, chemical plants like ADM next door, non-polluting, and similar water-related industries.

“One of the top priorities of Brunswick County is jobs, and this site is one of the prime sites on the East Coast for deepwater ships to come in for industrial development,” he said, noting the availability of county water and sewer and the possibility of extending rail to the site.

“In the Southport area, citizens are concerned about not having job opportunities in the county, and many parents are seeing their kids leave the county. We need to have sites that are compatible, such as this one, for industrial development,” he said. “And we are not referring to polluting industries. We’re talking about creating jobs for Brunswick County.”