

Port project adrift: NCIT opponents raise funds, make noise, sway politicians

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By Josh Spilker

What started as a traditional “not-in-my-back-yard” protest group, No Port Southport has been raising money and raising what its members consider to be legitimate environmental issues.

“What’s interesting is as we started really getting into this and pulling apart the data, the NIMBY issue completely went away, because there were so many more important issues,” said Toby Bronstein, a member of No Port South—port.

Meanwhile funding for an NCIT feasibility study was barred from this year’s state budget and ports authority CEO Tom Eagar has hit some rocky shores on his quest to make the North Carolina International Terminal a reality.

Relations between the ports authority and Southport have been tense as of late. The city of Southport recently withdrew its support of the project.

U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre also distanced himself from the project, announcing last week that he would not support the proposed port.

Ports Authority CEO Tom Eagar was quoted in the Raleigh News and Observer in late May as saying that those against the port are small in number, new to the area, “extremely biased” and “misinformed.”

Soon after, on June 10, the city of Southport passed the resolution against NCIT stating that the ports authority “has failed, despite numerous requests to meet with the citizens and Aldermen of Southport in a public setting” and that the economic benefits of the port have been “grossly exaggerated.”

Funding for a feasibility study of NCIT failed to make it into the final state budget. In response to the failure of the budget vote in the House in early June, the ports authority released a statement affirming its belief in “the process to study the impacts of the proposed NC International Terminal.”

Also in the budget is a provision that other funds from DENR could not be used to study NCIT, according to State Sen. R.C. Soles who is in his final term representing Brunswick, Columbus and Pender counties. For the NCIT feasibility study, the state would be required to pay \$4.5 to \$5 million of the \$10 million study with the federal government paying the rest.

Ports authority board member Jeff Etheridge said he still supports Eagar's position as CEO of the authority and that he believed the legislators support the overall value of the NCIT project.

"I think Tom Eagar is an excellent administrator and is very knowledgeable within his industry," Etheridge said. "There has been a strong interest from our legislative leaders in developing the new port to be competitive with the other ports, when the new mega ships come on board."

The governor still supports the port project, according to her press secretary Chris Mackey.

"The Governor supports the concept of an International Terminal in North Carolina because it has potential to bring thousands of jobs, millions of dollars in new state and local revenues, and could be a catalyst for new economic development. Before moving forward she stresses that there must be ample opportunity for public input in order for concerns about growth, the environment and financing to be addressed," Mackey wrote to the Business Journal.

But No Port Southport is getting an audience with high-level politicians in Raleigh. Members of the group met recently with Gov. Perdue's chief of staff Britt Cobb along with representatives from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

They also met with House Speaker Joe Hackney, State Sen. Marc Basnight and State Sen. Martin Nesbitt.

"They've heard of the project, but know none of the details," said Toby Bronstein, one of the No Port South—port members, who has made the rounds in Raleigh.

"They are just clueless about what the implications are."

Bronstein hopes No Port Southport gets a meeting with the governor soon for their concerns to be addressed.

The group's mission has evolved from a NIMBY protest into one with more heft about the environment, economics and health and safety issues, he said.

No Port Southport has also received some modest financial grants. The group recently received two \$5,000 grants and a \$14,300 for a total of \$24,300. No Port Southport grant manager Harry Burrell said the group actively solicited the grants and that they have applied for additional grants.

“We definitely would like to expand our efforts and since we’re a non-profit organization, we generally do that through public donations or donations through our own members,” Burrell said.

The \$10,000 from the two grants will be used to conduct an environmental impact study and the \$14,300 is for operating expenses of the organization, he said.

According to Burrell, the grants are a confirmation that No Port Southport’s position has validity.

“I think you can see a trend,” he said.

“We certainly are interested in obtaining larger grants that would help us do larger things.”

One of the \$5,000 grants is from the Corps Reform Network, another is from the Anderson-Rodgers Foundation in New York City and the third grant is from the Raymond Fund, part of the Schwab Charitable Fund network.