



# Cape Fear Firebird

*The Light of Save the Cape*

April 1, 2015

*There's a place in the sun  
Where there's hope for ev'ryone  
~ Stevie Wonder*

## ***More Than You Expect for the State Ports***

Wilmington has a proud maritime heritage. Once the largest city in North Carolina due to commerce in the State's tobacco and forest products, the "lifeline of the Confederacy" during the Civil War, and the builder of 246 ships during the Second World War, Wilmington is now the State's primary representative on the roster of the nation's seaports.

Alas, Wilmington is not a significant player. Taking into account freight moved through the private terminals on the Cape Fear River as well as the State Port, Wilmington is ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> in the US based on tonnage. It is also regarded as a high-cost, low-volume port, requiring more Federal funds for maintenance dredging than the Harbor Maintenance Tax yields. Thus it must be subsidized by the busier ports. In the great Federal scheme, Wilmington is not nationally significant nor is it regionally significant, but is in the third tier, a local port. We don't get no respect.

That is about to change. The State Ports Authority recently presented its new strategic plan, a plan to "position ourselves to be in the game." This is based on investing for the new generation of workhorse container ships, rated at 8500 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEU), about twice the capacity of the largest ships now calling at Wilmington. These are grand ships indeed, 1200 feet long, with a beam of 140 feet, drawing 45 feet. For some perspective, the USS North Carolina, proudly moored at Wilmington, is 728 feet long with a beam of 108 feet and a draft of 33 feet. Won't each of those wonderful new container ships, with the proud markings of an Asian shipping line, be an event as it passes the Southport waterfront? Even if each is full of products we once made ourselves.

Of course, positioning ourselves in the game would involve some cost. Only about \$75 million for improvements to the port itself, but dredging the present 42-foot channel to 47 feet would be on the far side of \$700 million, the cost of a similar project for Savannah. The State share would be about \$266 million, but if Georgia can do that for Savannah, why North Carolina surely can do that for Wilmington. Otherwise our tax money would only be frittered away on teachers' pay and such.

And while Ports Authority management is in Raleigh to bring back the bacon for the project, the sales team has a plan to double container traffic in five years to show the world what we can do. It would be an impressive performance, achieving an annual growth rate of 13.6%, about 5½ times the historical rate of 2.4%. Mind you, they have not promised any profits or cash return to the State; the State Ports Authority has never done that. Glory is what we'll get. Pride. A place in the sun.

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