



# Cape Fear Firebird

*The Light of Save the Cape*

April 1, 2016

*Giving money and power to government is like giving whiskey and car keys to teen-age boys.*  
~ P.J. O'Rourke

## **Ports Profligacy**

A few days ago, the North Carolina State Ports Authority released a statement to the press with this passage: “The Authority is moving forward with a \$100 million investment in infrastructure improvements. ... [T]he Port of Wilmington will be prepared to handle post-Panamax vessels up to the 10,000 TEU class by this summer.”

What? \$100 million? Where is that coming from? From us, mostly. Senator Rabon has arranged a State appropriation of \$35 million per year from taxpayers' funds. That's only slightly less than the Ports Authority's annual revenues. There is no evidence of benefit/cost or other analysis.

What are the Ports going to do with that largess? “[N]ew cranes, an enhanced berth, a wider turning basin and further expansion... .” All for 10,000 TEU (twenty-foot equivalent unit) container ships from Asia bringing in the goods we used to make ourselves.

A little perspective on 10,000 TEU ships. They are about 1100 feet long and draw 48 to 49 feet when fully loaded. And they need three to four feet of underkeel clearance. So, 52 feet.

But the channel in the Cape Fear River is maintained at 42-foot depth. The “design vessel” used by the Corps of Engineers in planning the existing channel in 1996 was a 4500 TEU container ship, 965 long, drawing 38 to 39 feet. Those dimensions represent the largest vessel then able to navigate the Panama Canal. What's driving the rash statements by the Ports Authority is the planned enlargement of the locks in the Canal, a project due to be available for use at the end of June. Then those 10,000 TEU ships can pass. The Asian shipping lines, the Ports Authority's largest customer, have told the Ports Authority they will soon stop using the 4500 TEU ships and put into service ships of 6500 to 9500 TEU. The economies of scale would make Asian goods more competitive.

What's the Ports Authority to do? The larger ships couldn't navigate the river. The solution comes from the same source as the problem, Asia. Magnetic levitation to reduce the draft of vessels in the river. China and Japan have built “Maglev” trains, suspended above the track by electro-magnetic repulsive forces. Very efficient, and very fast. The technology is mature, used worldwide.

So the Maglev technology would be applied to levitate ships over parallel linear electromagnets placed in the bed of the channel. After all, those ships are made of steel. Much less expensive than dredging. The ships would only have to be lifted high enough to clear the bottom. A \$700 million, ten-year dredging project avoided. To say nothing of the aquifers that would not be damaged.

You read it right here in the Cape Fear Firebird for April 1.