



Cape Fear Firebird

The Light of Save the Cape

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All studies had a hidden political agenda that tended to cloud real issues and the final results.
–Statewide Logistics Plan

Store-Bought Studies

The State Ports Authority has spent nearly \$7 million in the past six years on port studies from various consultants. Most of the studies provide useful information, if only someone would read them. We have found no evidence anyone has done that, except us. Of course, the reports are tucked away, available only by request. We did that, got them, put them on our Web site.

Except one. A recent report, *Economic Contribution of North Carolina Ports*, is a dreadful piece of academic prostitution, designed not to inform but to support misleading claims. That's what the Ports Authority wanted, why it spread \$145,686 over every university in the State for a project a single investigator with access to IMPLAN could have done in a few weeks. The State Ports Authority has that posted on its Web site. We do not. It hurts our eyes.

Comes now the Maritime Strategy Study. After inheriting the State Ports Authority and the project for a megaport at Southport, the NC Department of Transportation chose not to put staff to work to review that \$7 million collection of information and learn the story the data tell. Instead, NCDOT spent \$2 million more to engage favorite engineering firms, AECOM and URS, to tell its own story. "Positioning North Carolina as a portal to the global maritime economy." That moves along as we speak, and is now due in March.

In most of the previous studies we found a workmanlike job of data gathering, analysis, and presentation. But as for conclusions and recommendations, the consultants became very timid. Consultants recognize that the customer is always right, and understand that the function of a store-bought study is not to advise but to provide justification for an action the customer wishes to take, whatever that is. Such as building a deepwater port where the water is not deep.

The NCDOT's Maritime Strategy Study will be no different. The project manager assured us that the study will not provide specific recommendations, but a "menu of alternatives." Any decision will be left to, ahem, "policy." Is there a difference between "policy" and "politics"?

The General Assembly must look elsewhere for objectivity. The Governor and NCDOT have their own agenda. Consider the process at the Federal level: the US Congress does not depend on the administration or agency-sponsored reports. Congress has its own resources—the Congressional Research Service and the Government Accountability Office. And they tell it like it is.

Does the General Assembly have access to such staff? Will they exercise the oversight a \$4.4 billion scheme deserves? Will we ever see an objective review from Raleigh? We hope so.

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