



Cape Fear Firebird

The Light of Save the Cape

December 14, 2010

A process that can't be seen can lead to suspicion.
-Corps of Engineers, Institute for Water Resources

Too Good to be True

On December 7, Dee Freeman, Secretary of the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, sent a letter to the Wilmington District of the US Army Corps of Engineers expressing the intent of the State to participate in the cost of a feasibility study for these dredging projects in the Cape Fear River to “accommodate slightly larger vessels”:

- modifications to the channel at the mouth of the river near Bald Head Island,
- modifications to the channel turn at Bald Head Island, and
- modifications to the size of the turning and anchorage basin at Wilmington.

The letter included this phrase “While the State of North Carolina does not desire to serve as the non-federal sponsor for the NCIT project,” (NCIT is North Carolina International Terminal, the dreaded and dreadful container terminal planned for Southport.)

That phrase in the letter has been regarded widely by the press and others as the death of the NCIT, a project rejected by the General Assembly in June and opposed by Congressman McIntyre and six municipalities at the Cape Fear. We think the reports of its death are greatly exaggerated.

All three of the Secretary’s study items were parts of the Wilmington Harbor Improvement Project authorized in 1998; that involved deepening the channel to 42 feet for Panamax container ships. That project is still in progress; the items listed in the Secretary’s letter are all problems with that project and should be addressed without additional State expense.

So why is a new feasibility study necessary, unless something more is planned? Two of the three projects listed by the Secretary would be applicable to the NCIT project, should it be revived. The letter of intent is a blank check: no cost is specified to be shared, no description or scope for the study, no mention of channel depths or widths or size of ships to be accommodated. A similar study for the Savannah River has gone on for 14 years and has cost, at last count, \$36 million.

We have asked to see the draft report that should describe this study, and been refused. We have asked for details, such as how large the container ships would be, how wide and deep the improvements would be, and been stonewalled by both the NC State Ports Authority and the Corps of Engineers. The former doesn’t know and the latter won’t say.

But for this secrecy, we might be rejoicing, too. But we are not. If it seems too good to be true, it probably is.