



Cape Fear Firebird

The Light of Save the Cape

February 9, 2012

Giving government money and power is like giving car keys and whiskey to a teenage boy.
–P.J. O'Rourke

Slush Funds

The State budget language for water resource projects—dredging and the like—has traditionally listed specific projects and amounts. But there is language at the end permitting funds not spent on the specified projects to be used for other water resource projects and studies, whether listed or not. So the Department of Environment and Natural Resources has a large fund—\$4,535,000 this year—to use on various projects, *whether or not specifically authorized by the General Assembly*.

When the fiscal year 2011 State budget was being prepared in 2010 and the folly of the megaport project at Southport was becoming apparent, our friends Representatives Pricey Harrison and Frank Iler introduced an amendment to prohibit funding from this slush fund for the megaport. The House of Representatives adopted the measure by a huge majority—104-11, and the resulting bill was passed by the Senate and became law. This rejection of the megaport project by the General Assembly was instrumental in the project being put “on hold” by the State Ports Authority.

Then in 2011, when the fiscal year 2012 budget was being prepared, the House included similar language to prohibit funding of the megaport. But when the bill went to the Senate, that language vanished without explanation. We later sat in a room with the Senate leadership and Senator Rabon and none of them admitted knowing how or why the prohibition was stricken.

So here we are with a slush fund permitting spending by the State on the megaport. And various people itching for a feasibility study by the Corps of Engineers of improvements to the channel in the Cape Fear River—a study that could easily be redirected to the megaport dredging needs. Because, indeed, the authority for that study was originally for the megaport.

We took some comfort in the absence of an appropriation by Congress of the Federal matching funds necessary for a study to go forward, and the moratorium on earmarks.

But the fiscal year 2012 Energy and Water Resources Appropriations bill also has a slush fund—a big one, \$507 million for unspecified Corps of Engineers projects. Yesterday, the Corps released its “work plan” for spending that money. To the alarm of opponents of unwise projects and proponents of government accountability across the nation, the plan includes projects rejected by the President’s budget and the U.S. House of Representatives. One such is the Wilmington Harbor Improvements feasibility study, a study that can be redirected to the megaport with a stroke of the pen. Sending the State down a road leading to a \$4.4 billion vanity project.

The leak of State funds can be stopped. Reinsertion of the missing section of the budget bill—section 30.8—will do it. Our representatives in Raleigh can do that. Demand that they do.