



Cape Fear Firebird

The Light of Save the Cape

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Since taking office, Secretary Conti has directed a sweeping reform of the NCDOT. He has focused on removing politics from the decision-making process so that projects are selected based on objective, data-driven analysis of their benefits and costs.

–<http://www.ncdot.gov/about/leadership/secretary.html>

Objectivity, Where Art Thou?

When the North Carolina Department of Transportation began its \$2 million Maritime Strategy Study a year ago, we looked upon the event with dismay. The State Ports Authority had already spent nearly \$7 million in borrowed funds for store-bought studies. Every aspect of the State's ports facilities and the planned megaport at Southport had been examined, more than once.

The body of knowledge then available was huge. Perhaps that's why no one seems to have read those reports. Or they didn't like what they said: The cost of the megaport—\$4.4 billion. A business plan requiring 15 times the container traffic at Wilmington. A black hole for public funds.

Yet the Maritime Strategy Study did offer an element missing from the previous reports: objective analysis. The scope of work promised “a unique transportation analysis tool: one which can evaluate and compare the relative costs and benefits – social, environmental, and economic – of individual investment scenarios.” And a project “deliverable” would be “a technical memorandum describing all sources, methods, and findings in a transparent way.”

But that has not been delivered. Instead, we are told the final report will present a “menu of alternatives.” If the draft report is any indicator, those alternatives will be supported only by unstated assumptions, rosy projections, understated costs, and unrelated benefits – and will ignore social and environmental effects. We have been told by the project manager that this flabby analysis is deliberate—to permit the final decision to be made to “align with other priorities.”

Oh. “Other priorities.” A phrase to strike fear into anyone familiar with the traditions of transportation decisions in North Carolina. A process rife with cronyism and manipulation.

Tom Bradshaw, the new State czar of the State Ports Authority, announced last Thursday the mechanism for aligning port projects with other priorities. First, review by a staff team comprising officials of NCDOT, the State Ports Authority, and Global Transpark. How appropriate is that?

These brave bureaucrats will then offer a draft Strategic Plan to a “Logistics Strategic Planning Subcommittee” comprising selected members of the State Board of Transportation, the State Ports Authority Board, and oh, yes, the Global TransPark Board.

This is a recipe for indecision. Or worse. And another meal for consultants. Demand your representatives to stop it now. Here's how: www.ncleg.net/representation/WhoRepresentsMe.html