



Cape Fear Firebird

The Light of Save the Cape

May 22, 2013

The General Assembly recognizes that a critical need exists in this State to protect, preserve, and conserve the lands in our State that have natural or cultural significance.

–NC Senate Bill 402, May 20, 2013

A Plan for a Park

Back in 2005 when the North Carolina Council of State was asked to approve the purchase of a 600-acre site on the Cape Fear River by the State Ports Authority, some members of the Council were skeptical of the Ports Authority's nascent plans for a massive container terminal there. But they did think it was piece of land the State should own. So they voted to approve the purchase.

Indeed. The megaport plan proved to be awful, and has no credence whatever. And a State agency now owns one of the last beads in an emerald necklace of biodiverse, significant natural habitats along both shores of the lower Cape Fear River.

So it's time for plan B. A State park. A State park in a County (Brunswick) where none exists. A State park in the center of a diverse assemblage of natural heritage areas supporting the largest number of rare species in the State. One of the last unmolested estuarine sites in the East.

We have put together a draft plan. A plan for a park for people as well as birds and Venus fly-traps. Go to www.savethecape.org and click on the plan for a State park in the right sidebar.

Although the site is in the State inventory, it is held in the name of the State Ports Authority. So this plan will take some effort to implement. The General Assembly is somewhat, ahem, stingy with funds for parks. The Senate's new budget bill, S402, would redirect the revenue flow for park improvements from the excise tax on deeds (about \$24 million annually) to the State General Fund, and substitute an annual appropriation. For next year, that would be \$11 million. Less than half.

Here's how the plan would work: The State Ports Authority needs money for new capital projects. They will seek that money from the General Assembly. Our plan is for the State Ports Authority to transfer the property to the State in return for the new capital it needs. So the State gets something for its money, and can put that something in the hands of NCDENR for a new park.

There is more at stake here than our natural heritage. Studies for both the national parks and the North Carolina State parks show that parks generate annual economic benefits about ten times their annual operating costs. When the capital cost is included, the annual economic benefits are approximately four times the total cost of the parks.

That's the obvious part. Less obvious, but more important, is that parks are an essential part of our State's complex of features and amenities that induce business to locate, relocate, expand, and stay in North Carolina. Help us out here, folks. We shall all benefit.