



Cape Fear Firebird

The Light of Save the Cape

June 11, 2012

Sunshine is said to be the best of disinfectants, electric light the best policeman.
–Justice Louis Brandeis.

The Public Be Damned

In our last newsletter, May 31, we speculated whether we could count on the State Senate and our State Senator, Bill Rabon, to ensure a transparent process as the Senate took up the budget bill passed by the House.

Alas, we cannot. The first action of the Senate was to release its proposed substitute for the House bill with many and substantial changes. As expected. And those changes are clearly marked—deletions shown with strikethrough, additions and changed language underscored. As is the correct procedure. But, faithful readers, a very significant change has not been marked. Indeed, it appears to have been deliberately concealed. Concealed from you and us, concealed from Senate colleagues not in the know, concealed from the State House of Representatives.

That change was the removal of language prohibiting State spending on the megaport proposed for Southport at the Cape Fear. It simply vanished, the gap closed up. The removal of section 26.3 left section 26.4 to follow section 26.2. But if section 26.4 had been renumbered as it should have been, the change would call attention to the deletion. And not a hint in the Committee report accompanying the proposed substitute bill. Indeed, that report shows the section in which that language had appeared as not having been revised.

What if this back-room dealing stands? The Secretary of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources has signed an open-ended agreement with the US Army Corps of Engineers to pay half the cost of a study based on a Corps report that treats the megaport as an alternative. The NCDENR Water Resources capital budget includes \$500,000 for that study, and has another \$13 million that can be moved around to that or other studies. The Department of Transportation has an immense budget from the general fund and trust funds, and indeed just spent \$2 million on a study of ports that revived the megaport, and gave it a new price tag of \$6.1 billion. Without the prohibitive language the House provided, more of the State's money can be fed to the megaport.

The State is well on its way to that \$6.1 billion. Since 2006, the State Ports Authority has spent \$48 million, \$44 million of which was borrowed and remains outstanding. Add the \$2 million spent by NCDOT, the Ports Authority's proprietor, and \$50 million has gone down the river.

Also in our last newsletter, we reported that similar language was removed just as surreptitiously last year, and that no one admitted responsibility. Senator Bill Rabon recently admitted to the *Star-News* that he was “partially responsible for that.” And Senator Rabon asserted he would delete the language again this year. Apparently, he's a man of his word.