



Cape Fear Firebird

The Light of Save the Cape

June 18, 2011

All studies had a hidden political agenda that tended to cloud real issues and the final results.
–NC State’s report for the Statewide Logistics Plan

Consultants’ Concerto

We soon will hear another song sung by consultants for the State of North Carolina. A lovely study, skillfully presented, inspirational. Accompanied by a chorus of compliments from the proud sponsors who have directed taxpayers’s money to these worthy enterprises.

This latest composition, commissioned by the North Carolina Department of Transportation, is the *North Carolina Maritime Strategy Study*, a \$1.7 million project comprehensive in scope and competent in design. It even has a Web site: www.ncmaritimestudy.com. But will that study provide answers to the questions officials face? Advice? Recommendations?

No. The study certainly could provide answers, if the right question is asked. The consultants are skilled and they have available abundant data and useful analytical tools. But the study scope does not pretend objectivity nor unbiased analysis of the factors that would shape a maritime strategy. The premise of the study portends promotion: “How can North Carolina prepare itself to become a portal to the global economy?”

That is not the question that should be asked; it presumes too much and clearly suggests that investment in deepwater ports is in the offing. The question should be “How can the State best facilitate international commerce for North Carolina business?” That’s what business is interested in—moving their goods. Not promoting the State ports. Ports are a means to serve business, not an end. Especially when the State ports do not produce revenue for the State but instead require regular subsidy for capital investment and harbor maintenance. This inquiry should be for the sake of business, not for the sake of the ports. Consider the questions businesses ask, not the bureaucrats.

We have seen that only 20% of North Carolina’s international commerce moves through State ports. All of the rest goes through the larger, better served ports in other states. Ports that are closer, in most cases. Ports that are subsidized by those other states. And what is wrong with that?

The Maritime Strategy Study has the potential to provide an important tool for transportation decisions in North Carolina—cost-benefit analysis of alternatives. That should have a broad scope, to include the interstate transportation network of which the State is a part. A quantitative, objective assessment to replace the political factors that drive investment decisions in Our State.

But even that won’t provide answers directly. Useful facts, yes, but advice, no. Decisions are the business of the client. The consultant is there to serve. To sing the song the client wants to hear. Who’s going to call the tune? Who decides what will be played?