



# Cape Fear Firebird

*The Light of Save the Cape*

August 22, 2012

*“God gave Norfolk that advantage,” [Secretary of Transportation Gene Conti] said with a chuckle of the natural deep water in and around Hampton Roads. “I can’t compete with God.”*  
–Star-News, August 13, 2012.

## ***What Hath God Wrought?***

With this statement, Secretary Conti put the megaport at Southport “on the shelf for the foreseeable future.” After seven years and \$50 million spent on the project, a realistic official view.

The Cape Fear River is not a deepwater harbor and never will be. The natural depth of the river is 12 to 16 feet in the main channel, and that channel has a sharp “S” turn that cannot be negotiated safely by the larger vessels. Over the years, the Corps of Engineers has dredged the silt out of the river to achieve a depth of 42 feet, but the river relentlessly fills back in, and \$16 million per year is required to maintain the depth—a depth required by only two ships per week. From Asia.

Other river ports in the East long ago gave up any ambition of serving heavy ocean commerce. As ships became larger and land transportation mechanized a hundred years ago, cities on the Connecticut, Hudson, Potomac, and James Rivers turned to nearby deep coastal harbors linked by road and rail for international commerce, and took their natural place serving smaller vessels and barges for local needs. So also, 80% of North Carolina international commerce now moves through ports in other states. Commerce is blind to state borders and chooses the most efficient path.

In the great scheme of things, if any, the Cape Fear River offers much more than an inadequate harbor. It is one of the last relatively unmolested river mouths in the East. The National Park Service recommended the Cape Fear for National Monument Status in 1967. The State has since set aside large areas for recreation and wildlife refuge: Fort Fisher Recreation Area, Zeke’s Island, Bald Head Island State Natural Area, including Battery Island and other islands. Outside of these reserves are Significant Natural Heritage Areas, and large tracts have been reserved by the North Carolina Coastal Land Trust. Enlightened private owners do their share of conservation.

The area has been identified as a “Biodiversity Hotspot” by The Nature Conservancy, with a greater diversity of plant and animal species than any area north of Florida. The Cape Fear is home to 300 species of plants and animals, 82 of which are Federally or State endangered or threatened. Forty-one of these species grow nowhere else. And the area extends the same hospitality to the human species, with wide beaches, flourishing fisheries, pleasant vistas, and an agreeable climate.

All of this drives a local economy based on recreation and tourism, retirement homes, and the arts—including movies. The incompatibility of a major seaport, its destructive potential, is obvious.

A refreshing perspective, Secretary Conti. Accept God’s work—don’t try to change it. A deepwater port at Southport – where the water is not deep – will not improve on that work.