



Ports board receptive to plan to turn Southport site into state park

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Save the Cape's Mike Rice hands a copy of a suggested resolution to Chairman Danny McComas during Thursday's presentation to the N.C. State Ports Authority board. Photo by Jonathan Spiers.

It was a much different reception than Mike Rice and Toby Bronstein received from the same board just a few years prior, when the duo behind the environmental group Save the Cape urged the North Carolina State Ports Authority—albeit under a different board membership then—to put its focus elsewhere than on 600 acres upriver from Southport, slated for a new international shipping terminal.

That was before political support for the deepwater port—intended to compete with comparable ports up and down the East Coast—had waned both locally and in the General Assembly. Since then, the ports authority board of directors has changed its ranks, as well as its approach, as evidenced in board members' comments in a meeting Thursday morning that saw the group proposing a different idea for the still-vacant property.

A state park, they said, would not only benefit the state in terms of adding to the area's tourism draw; it would also help the authority alleviate a \$30-million financial burden that has remained since the board bought the property for that amount in 2006.

By giving the state the land for a park, Rice said the authority would also be giving it an inducement to help alleviate the authority's debt, which Rice said has increased significantly over the past several years—essentially double what it was when the Southport site was purchased.

"You need to do something about that debt," Rice said. "But probably the state will ultimately be compelled to give it to you, because of your debt burden. Let's make it easy for them. Give them an inducement to provide capital to the ports authority by giving them something that has value to the state."

Bronstein said the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources has not established a state park in the past four years. She said officials they had spoken with are interested in creating a park in Brunswick County.

"Brunswick County is the seventh-largest land area and one of the fastest-growing in the state, and yet it doesn't have a state park," she said, noting impacts of tourism on state and local economies.

Board members responded receptively to the concept, noting that Gov. Pat McCrory and Transportation Secretary Tony Tata, who serves on the board, were aware of the situation.

Tata, who attended Thursday's meeting at the Port of Wilmington, told board he would put the matter on the governor's radar over the next month or so.

George Rountree said some members of the board are "very sympathetic to what you're suggesting, as far as doing something with that property other than creating a super port."

"But we're all fiduciaries," Rountree said, adding that McCrory and Tata are looking at the board for "some recommendation or guidance about how to get our balance sheet in better shape."

"The important thing is not only getting the asset off the books but also the debt off the books. If you can help us with that," Rountree said, to which Rice agreed: "The debt is the most important part. And you've got to get rid of some of that debt."

"That facility is not going to add anything to your ability to serve the commerce of the state. Let's serve another purpose of the state," Rice said. "You do not

need this asset for your purposes.+

And what we're proposing here has absolutely no impact on current operations,+Bronstein added.

This property is not going to produce any income for the ports,+Rice continued. This property may produce income for the state and the county, so you give it to the state and have the state give you enough money to reduce your debt burden, with the leverage of federal grants.+

Board Chairman Danny McComas asked whether the group had approached Brunswick County, which he said could issue bonds or otherwise act on the plan more quickly than the General Assembly, which he noted is about to adjourn this year's session. Rice and Bronstein said they needed the authority's support before they could do so.

This is a project that's going to take some cooperative development between us and the ports authority to make the case,+Rice said. This is just the beginning. It's a germ of an idea.+

I can assure you,+McComas replied, that the vast majority of this board, if I were a betting man, would support your concept wholeheartedly.+

The board stopped short of endorsing a resolution that Bronstein presented, submitting it instead for a committee's recommendation. McComas encouraged the pair to seek similar resolutions from affected governments, prompting Bronstein to say they were starting with the authority.

That's our first stop,+she said, because if we can get you all on board with the concept, then that provides us with the leverage to further advance this idea.+

Added Rice: Our story will have very little credibility with the board of commissioners or anybody in the state unless we have some kind of showing of support from the ports authority. It's your property.+

Board member Michael Lee, who also serves on the state Board of Transportation, said there was no silver bullet+that would accomplish the plan, which he said may need to involve some other use than just a state park.

It's going to be a multifaceted funding process,+he said. Whether the entire property is a park or not, I'm doubtful the entire property- if it ever became a park- would be. I don't know that that makes the most sense- maybe a portion of it.

But I think it's something that needs to be drilled down in a real business plan as to where the funding sources are,+he said.

Addressing Rice and Bronstein, McComas reiterated: This board agrees with you wholeheartedly. I do believe that the vast majority of the members will support you. They will not support spending money to do a biological survey, economic impact analysis and all of that.

I would encourage you to get up with the people in Southport- to get Leland, Shallotte, Southport, Navassa- to pass resolutions in support and start lobbying the governor, and then for him to come and tell, This is the way it's going to be.☺

Outside the boardroom, Bronstein and Rice said they were encouraged by the board's response, which they acknowledged was far removed from previous exchanges over the past five years.

Former adversaries, potential allies- it's very nice,+Bronstein said. I like that.+

Nonetheless, Rice added, remaining resolute: We're not satisfied until something is done with that land.+

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