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600-acres near Southport
**Park lobbied
for 'port' site**
Save the Cape hopes state will make
riverfront acreage public accessible

By Lee Hinnant
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Just as public sentiment helped turn back plans for a major cargo container port near Southport, one of the groups involved in that effort is working to build support for a new state park on the 600- acre site.

Save the Cape Inc. is talking with political, ports and transportation and environmental leaders about the concept of turning the riverfront acreage into a state park that would include an arboretum, walkways and campsites.

With plans for a megaport dying if not dead, Save the Cape is offering something positive, said the group's Michael Rice. Brunswick is one of North Carolina's fastest-growing counties and is seventh in land area, yet it has no state park, unlike neighboring areas. Brunswick is the tenth most visited county. Many environmental preserves near Southport are passive.

"Most state parks are large natural areas with limited visitor access," Rice said. "I think the focus here would be on improvements—a botanical garden or arboretum, exhibits."

Rice also noted that the cleared, upland areas traditionally used for farming could make good RV or other campgrounds. The area offers views from a high bluff not common or publicly accessible downriver, along with forests and other habitats.

Several ideas, including a national seashore and motion-picture backstage, have been floated since port plans began to sink in 2010. The difference with Save the Cape's park proposal is that it plays to economics.



The 600-acre tract is currently assessed at around \$13 million, and Save the Cape, Inc. hopes state leaders will look to the numbers and give the state park concept some serious consideration.

“The (N.C.) State Ports Authority needs substantial amounts of capital for debt repayment and new business projects,” a preliminary prospectus states. “The State Ports Authority will be seeking those funds from the General Assembly. This is a plan for the state to receive direct value for its grants to the ports, instead of simply providing a subsidy. The State Ports Authority would obtain the needed funds and the state would obtain a valuable, unique and irreplaceable asset for the state parks system.”

Instead of providing millions of dollars a year for capital improvements, as has historically been the case, the state could “buy” the land from the State Ports Authority over time and build a state park. Such facilities help the local economy roughly 10 times more than they cost, according to the study. Brunswick’s seasonal population increases by 180,000—nearly doubling—providing a solid background market.

Rice credited Save the Cape’s Toby Bronstein with much of the legwork behind the park concept. “This is less of an exercise in tree-hugging and more about climbing the ladders of officialdom,” he said. “Toby Bronstein is good at that and likes it up there.”

Save the Cape’s analysis of State Ports Authority long-term finances agrees it can easily cover operating expenses, with revenues since fiscal 2008 from \$33-million to \$40-million. Long-term debt, averaging more than \$7-million, is more troublesome, the report stated. Depreciation, state and federal grants have covered many expenses.

In 2023, a \$27-million balloon payment on the new container crane leases comes due, the report states. Rice said it's likely the note could be refinanced, but is still worth considering. A state purchase of the property could offset some of these long-term issues, he said.

The State Ports Authority borrowed \$30-million for the site in 2006 and spent another \$14-million on studies and financing, Save the Cape's review states. The land is currently assessed at \$13-million. Rice said he hopes state leaders will look at the numbers and give the state park concept serious consideration.

"We're trying to get them to think about it," Rice said. "They have a need, and what we can do is bring together the environmental groups and get the support."