

THE STATE PORT PILOT

A Good Newspaper in a Good Community

March 6, 2013

Save the Cape

Group wants to preserve 25,000 acres of seashore

By Lee Hinnant
Staff Writer

They've shouldered a job so difficult it will literally require an act of Congress to accomplish, but Michael Rice and Toby Bronstein are not known for backing away from a challenge.

The founders of Save the Cape are talking up creation of a Cape Fear National Seashore, a 25,000-acre preserve that would encompass many of the undeveloped areas from Bald Head Island to Masonboro Island on the east side of the Cape Fear River. On the west bank, the seashore would encompass Town Creek south to Caswell Beach, excluding incorporated areas and Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point.

It's not a new idea—the Cape Fear region is mentioned eight times in a 1935 National Parks Service report on protected natural areas along the coast. In 1967, another report recommended National Monument status for the region.

Save the Cape has taken up the seashore mantle as efforts to construct a controversial megaport near Southport have dwindled.

"The idea here is to catch up before more nasty things happen," Rice said. "Development stopped five years ago, but it's coming."

To that end, the Bald Head Island Conservancy is hosting Rice and Bronstein for a social and informational gathering on Saturday, March 9, at 3:30 p.m. at the Barrier Island Study Center. "In addition to telling their story, Mike and Toby are interested in receiving input from the



This map outlines the 25,000-acre area Save the Cape members hope to preserve as the Cape Fear National Seashore.

community about how BHI can be involved and what is the best way forward for this effort," the conservancy said in a prepared statement.

Rice said he also hopes to get major landowners and others involved.

"This is a positive mission, not a negative one," Rice said. "You can't fight something with nothing, and this is something."

Rice credits Bronstein with moving the concept forward.

"She does provide most of the energy and drive in Save the Cape, and all of the chutzpah, which is useful in Raleigh, if not always appreciated," he said.

Rice said the area clearly meets the basic criteria of having unique natural characteristics, historical significance and large undeveloped areas.

The Cape Fear region has the highest biological diversity of any East Coast area north of Florida. There are 19 federally endangered or threatened species and 63 state threatened or endangered species. Geologically, an area of uplifted land known as the Cape Fear Arch may be responsible for many of the rare species.

'The idea here is to catch up before more nasty things happen. Development stopped five years ago, but it's coming.'

Mike Rice Save the Cape

There are scores of shipwrecks and numerous sites of regional and national historical significance, including Brunswick Town, Fort Anderson, Fort Caswell, Fort Fisher and Fort Johnston, along with several lighthouses and colonial-era plantations.

A 2009 study of Cape Hatteras National Seashore found it had 2.2-million visitors who spent \$108-million and made possible 1,551 jobs with a direct labor income of \$38.5-million.

National seashores are intended to preserve natural values while providing water-oriented recreation. They are less restrictive than national parks and can

fit around existing development and can include private property.

"It's a way to get economic value from the natural assets of a region without spoiling them," Rice said.

Even if the national seashore concept does not succeed, Save the Cape's efforts will attract attention to the beauty and significance of the region, Rice said.

If designation occurs, it will be a multi-year effort. An essential step in the project is a feasibility study by the National Parks Service, which carries a price tag of \$25,000.

Persons interested in the effort may learn more at the website savethecape.org.