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600 acres along the Cape Fear River Park plan for former port site unveiled

by Lee Hinnant
Staff Writer

A local environmental group has unveiled conceptual plans that would convert 600 acres once eyed for a new mega-port into a state park with trails, campsites, a botanical garden and other amenities.

Save the Cape first pitched the plan to what it called “a cordial reception” last summer to the N.C. State Ports Authority, which owns the land, adjacent to Archer Daniels Midland’s citric acid plant on the Cape Fear River. Some Brunswick County leaders were not as receptive, arguing that the area is zoned for heavy industry



This is a conceptual plan for what a state park near Southport might look like

Save the Cape’s Michael Rice pointed out that Brunswick County has thousands of acres of land designated for an industrial park that already has a four-lane highway and other amenities. But the trend is for “smokestack industry” to go away.

A major boat-builder in Navassa shuttered its doors in 2008. Last year, DAK Americas closed its plant, leaving 600 people without jobs. Gasket-maker Victaulic laid off 100 workers in March. New companies with plans for Brunswick County are employing a few dozen workers at most.

Meanwhile, developers continue to pour money into environmentally friendly mixed-use projects such as Brunswick Forest, Rice said. Plans for the senior living community The Charles would eventually create 3,500 jobs and a \$750-million investment within Oak Island town limits off N.C. 211.

“The Charles ought to tell you—and the county—something,” Rice said. “Capital is going into projects like Brunswick Forest.”

Brunswick is one of the state’s fastest-growing counties, and among the geographically largest, yet it has no state park.

“People are interested and excited about this idea,” said Save the Cape’s Toby Bronstein.

‘Southport cannot accommodate smokestack industry, but Southport needs a state park.’

Toby Bronstein

Save the Cape

The plan calls for walkway/bicycle paths looping along the high ridge next to the salt marsh on the eastern border, then connecting to a larger loop encompassing much of the tract. There would be a pontoon boat dock for guided tours and a restaurant on the high bluff nearby. Next door would be an amphitheater and pond.

Moving north, the concept envisions a coastal science center, visitor center, tent camping, RV camping, ranger housing, an arboretum and botanical garden.

Anchoring the facility to the north would be the Sea Biscuit Wildlife Shelter. The facility is now on Oak Island but needs considerably more room to rehabilitate wildlife, mainly birds.

“They need a permanent place and they need a place where people can visit,” Bronstein said. “This would give them enough space. The birds that cannot be released to the wild would be in natural-looking net cages so people could see them up close. “There isn’t anything like it around here.”

Bronstein and Rice said it would be crucial for the State Ports Authority, state and local leaders to support the plan to make it work. They are raising funds to fine-tune the plan and present it to a host of officials starting later in the summer.

There are two things interested persons can do, they said. First is to respond to the state’s survey of outdoor recreation needs, being conducted now on a five-year cycle. The survey is at www.ncparks.gov.

“It’s really critical that people respond to this survey,” Bronstein said, adding that Brunswick County residents should be sure to note their residency near the end of the brief survey.

The other way to be involved is to participate in Save the Cape’s online photography gallery, being managed by Fine Art America. Images from the region are available in a variety of sizes and formats, with a sizable portion of the proceeds benefitting the nonprofit Save the Cape, she said.

There are a dozen galleries currently available, with another seven or eight planned, Bronstein said. The site is <http://gallery.savethecape.org>.

“Also, let your county commissioner, your state House member and your state senator know that Southport cannot accommodate smokestack industry, but Southport needs a state park,” Bronstein said.

For more information, visit savethecape.org or call (910) 294-0456. Save the Cape will make a formal presentation of the plan to the public sometime in June, Rice said.