

State Port Pilot, June 13, 2012

NCIT-funding ban not in Senate budget

by Ben Brown

Language in the N.C. House version of the state budget that would block funding from the controversial N.C. International Terminal project is nowhere to be found in the Senate's substitute version released this week.

One area grassroots group has suggested senators removed the language in a "concealed" manner to avoid debate.

Save the Cape, a locally based group ardently opposed to the "megaport" NCIT eyed for land north of Southport, noted in a newsletter Monday that H950, the House's version of the State budget, included language to prohibit state dollars from NCIT studies or development.

"State funds ... shall not be used to fund the North Carolina International Terminal of the North Carolina State Ports Authority (SPA)," one catch-all section read.

But when the Senate produced its budget this week, that language was absent, without notation about the language's removal.

"The deletions of Sections 26.2 and 26.3 (of H950) are not marked, as is the custom," Save the Cape's Toby Bronstein said in an email, noting that "marked deletions leave fingerprints and accountability. Backroom dealing does not. Because deletion of the language has been concealed, there is no opportunity for debate, discussion or deliberation. Nor is there transparency."

This is the second year in a row where a House budget with NCIT-blocking language was followed by a Senate version without it. Save the Cape's members have said they suspect Southport's Sen. Bill Rabon has played a role.

Rabon gave a denial when asked Tuesday, calling Save the Cape's remarks about him "not even half-truths."

"The truth is this," Rabon said. "House budget is House budget. Senate budget is Senate budget. That's the truth."

He said the House's and Senate's respective versions of the budget are "two, different legal documents" that often do not align.

When asked about the apparently undocumented removals of the NCIT-money-blocking language, he said he didn't know what Save the Cape was talking about.

"They have been slanderous toward me," Rabon said.

Save the Cape's latest newsletter, dated June 11, begins this way: "In our last newsletter, May 31, we speculated whether we could count on the state Senate and our state senator, Bill Rabon, to ensure a transparent process as the Senate took up the budget bill passed by the House.

"Alas, we cannot. The first action of the Senate was to release its proposed substitute for the House bill with many and substantial changes. As expected. And those changes are clearly

marked—deletions shown with strikethrough, additions and changed language underscored. As is the correct procedure. But, faithful readers, a very significant change has not been marked. Indeed, it appears to have been deliberately concealed. Concealed from you and us, concealed from Senate colleagues not in the know, concealed from the State House of Representatives.”

Reached Tuesday afternoon, N.C. Rep Frank Iler of Oak Island, who aided the language into the House budget, did not name senators who might have planned to strip it out of that chamber’s version. But he said he was aware that economic development officials were lobbying to that end.

The Brunswick County Economic Development Commission and several other similar bodies statewide were involved in those efforts. In 2010, the Brunswick County group as well as North Carolina’s Southeast, a regional marketing group based in Elizabethtown, passed resolutions supporting a proposed feasibility study for NCIT.

But Save the Cape and others aligned against NCIT have called its development a money pit. Estimates for the project have swung from \$4.4-billion to \$6.1-billion. The project itself—though officially “on hold” as far as SPA is concerned—already has millions of dollars behind it in studies alone. SPA purchased the 600-acre tract marked for the port in 2006 for \$30-million.

Save the Cape and NoPort Southport, another opposition group, have decried the project as one that could ruin the environment-driven quality of life in southeastern Brunswick County. They have also argued the port would not generate the jobs or revenues that planners claim; after the 2014 Panama Canal expansion, other ports will compete more successfully for the container ship business.

To throw more money at it would be waste, the groups say. But, according to Bronstein, it could easily be arranged.

“The Secretary of (the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources) has signed an open ended agreement with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to pay half the cost of a study based on a corps report that treats the megaport as an alternative,”

Bronstein said. “That is the Wilmington Harbor Project study, but both the corps and the ports authority have confirmed that without language preventing further expenditures, a stroke of the pen could add the Southport facility to the Wilmington Harbor Project study, increasing the cost by many millions of dollars.”

Parties against the NCIT have said they won’t let up on their resistance as long as the state owns the 600-acre site and studies nod to the project’s potential role in making North Carolina a competitive maritime state.

Those factors led SPA in summer 2010 to place the project “on hold indefinitely.”

But Rabon insisted the NCIT’s fate is darker than that.

“It’s not on hold,” he said. “It’s dead.”