

State Port Pilot, June 27, 2012

NCIT funding cut from budget

by Ben Brown

Language in North Carolina's newly ratified budget prohibits the state from pumping money to the North Carolina International Terminal (NCIT) project for one year, prompting celebration from anti-"megaport" groups like Save the Cape, which lobbied for the freeze.

"This is just a one-year-fix and we'll continue to fight for a permanent solution, but we'll take this good news with gratitude," Save the Cape's Toby Bronstein wrote in an email Sunday, a few days after the state legislature finalized its budget-update.

Section 26.3 of the document says state dollars "shall not be used to fund the North Carolina International Terminal of the North Carolina State Ports Authority. ...This section shall expire on June 30, 2013."

Similar language appeared in a House version of the budget draft but disappeared after it crossed over to the Senate for revisions. While groups opposed to NCIT tried to question Sen. Bill Rabon about it, he asserted the project was dead already.

The N.C. State Ports Authority (SPA) placed NCIT on hold indefinitely in summer 2010 after resistance to the project mounted from the area's municipalities and from U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre. The issue for organizations like Save the Cape, though, was that the state still owned the Southport area 600-acre tract purchased specifically for NCIT. As long as the state owns the land, or until the state determines another use for it, the anti- NCIT groups plan to keep up their fight.

The planned major port was intended to address the growing need for deepwater access as container ships grow in size. Those larger ships will head to the East Coast after the 2014 expansion of the Panama Canal.

While SPA argued NCIT, a project in the billions of dollars, would earn North Carolina a worthy piece of the maritime commerce pie, foes like Save the Cape and NoPort Southport declared it an environmental disaster in the making. It could air harmful particulate matter and mar the pristine coastal character that lures so many tourists and new home-owners, they said.

NCIT opponents, not convinced that the project was ever truly on hold—documents like the recently completed, \$2-million N.C. Maritime Strategy study noted its potential place in the industry—lobbied at the state level to block funding for its development or related studies.

Save the Cape's members are cautiously pleased with the prohibitive language ratified with the new budget. In a newsletter Sunday night, one that invokes the comparison between lawmaking and sausage-making, they called it a "tasty Bratwurst."

"But we can't savor it with any confidence," the letter continued. "There will be another budget bill next year. Until the megaport property in Southport is devoted to a use suitable for our special Cape Fear, we have to keep working."