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Group seeks to stop talks of a megaport

Save the Cape wants local residents to have input

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Founders of the advocacy group Save the Cape say they've had both victories and defeats in the agency's first year in existence, specifically in their quest to stop the state from pursuing a megaport project at the mouth of the river near Southport.

The agency recently celebrated its first anniversary with a dinner at Duffer's Pub and Grill in Caswell Beach. Founders Toby Bronstein and Mike Rice said they were happy with the support they've received and don't plan to slow their efforts.

Save the Cape's most recent fight is advocating for the N.C. Department of Transportation to have a public hearing in the Southport area for the state-funded Maritime Strategy study. The study's goal is to determine how the state can be more competitive in the global maritime industry. Members of the study committee have met with numerous groups and agencies in Brunswick County but have only scheduled public meetings in North Carolina's port towns, rather than Southport, which Bronstein and Rice say should have more input into the process.

Save the Cape formed last year, just as the N.C. Ports Authority announced the North Carolina International Terminal project had been placed on hold indefinitely. While the controversial study was out of the Ports Authority's purview, the Governor's Logistics Task Force soon recommended the maritime strategy study and included a deepwater port as a possibility.

About that same time, an advocacy group known as Yes Port began seeking donations and resolutions of support for a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers feasibility study for NCIT.

The previous year, as members of No Port Southport, Bronstein and Rice successfully persuaded N.C. Representatives Frank Iler and Pricey Harrison to include language in the state budget specifically prohibiting using state funds for anything related to NCIT, including the feasibility study.

This year, the House of Representatives included the language in its budget bill, but it was not included in the Senate bill, which was ultimately adopted.

"We had a group meeting with seven senators," Bronstein recalled. "We asked them what happened to the language, and they all said they didn't know."

"So right now, DOT or DENR (Department of Environment and Natural Resources) could designate money for a feasibility study or anything they want."

That's a main reason why Save the Cape and its allies asked the Brunswick County Commissioners recently not to approve the resolution supporting the feasibility study. But the commissioners voted 4-1 in favor of the resolution presented by Yes Port.

In his speech, Rice pointed out that the state had done 12 previous studies of various aspects of the NCIT project, and Oak Island Mayor Betty Wallace and Caswell Beach

Mayor Harry Simmons also asked the commissioners not to adopt the resolution.

"Each of the commissioners explained why they did it, and it had nothing to do with what we said to them," Rice said. "They said they could always use more information."

Yes Port has sent the resolution in support of the \$13 million feasibility study to 100 county boards and more than 400 municipalities.

So far, nine counties and a handful of towns have approved the resolution, and 118 people have signed Yes Port's online petition for a feasibility study.

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