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## State official doubts port foes' theory of scaled-down project

### Save the Cape expects new push

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Opponents of a proposed megaport near Southport have a theory: That the state plans to recommend construction of a smaller port in Brunswick County to pave the way for a much larger facility.

The theory of Save the Cape is that a \$2 million maritime study in the works by the N.C. Department of Transportation will recommend a smaller port on the 600 acres on the Cape Fear River near Southport that the N.C. State Ports Authority purchased about five years ago.

That smaller facility, Save the Cape said in its November newsletter, would serve as a "building block" for a larger port when the economy recovers, General Assembly support increases and the "opposition becomes weary."

The Ports Authority put the NCIT project on hold in mid 2010 after U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre, D-Lumberton, and some state lawmakers didn't want to move forward with it. But Carl Stewart Jr., chairman of the Ports Authority Board of Directors, said at the time that the Southport site was ideal for the development of a port and that the authority planned to hold onto the land. For the past several months, a group of consultants has been working on the N.C. Maritime Strategy study to evaluate the state's position and opportunities in global maritime commerce.

Roberto Canales, coordinator of strategic initiatives for DOT Secretary Eugene Conti, said Save the Cape's theory was "totally speculative" and "sounds like a conspiracy theory."

"I haven't seen anything from the consulting team that there would be a recommendation of that sort," he said. "And actually I hadn't thought about it until I read it in their newsletter."

Canales said the maritime study hasn't yielded any recommendations at this point. Initial "draft concepts," he said, should be released by January, and the study is expected to be finalized by early March.

The state's ultimate decision about port facilities will boil down to return on investment, and a more prudent strategy might be to expand existing ports in Wilmington or Morehead City, Canales added.

Ports Authority spokeswoman Shannon Moody said data from the maritime study will help define the future of the state's maritime industry, including any port development needs. The authority is participating in the study.

"This study and our current facilities remain our priorities," Moody said.

Save the Cape's Toby Bronstein said the group has no direct evidence to support its theory, but plenty of circumstantial evidence.

First, she said, the state and the Ports Authority have spent tens of millions of dollars buying the land and on port-related studies.

"They're not going to walk away from this," she said.

She also said the main question asked by the maritime study is how North Carolina can be competitive in the global maritime industry.

"That premise demands that North Carolina must be in the deepwater business to be globally competitive," she said.

Bronstein also said the study team has visited and toured the Southport site and met with area economic development officials in Brunswick County.

"No other potential site has enjoyed this type of attention," she said.

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