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Save the Cape group forms to protect coastal areas

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Southport resident Lauren Dail has been paying visits to her hometown waterfront since she can remember – taking time to enjoy the weather, feed the birds and appreciate the expansive view at the mouth of the Cape Fear River.

These days, Dail brings her two small children to her favorite spot, watching them chase the shore birds and play games near the Southport fishing pier. She says the riverfront is an important part of her life and worth protecting.

North Carolina's Cape Fear includes the mouth of the Cape Fear River at Southport and the surrounding estuaries, one of the most biologically diverse ecosystems in the country – home to 50 different natural communities, 300 species of animals and plants, 19 federally threatened or endangered species, 63 state threatened or endangered species, 100 percent of the world's Venus' flytraps and the oldest trees east of the Rocky Mountains.

It's for these reasons local activists Mike Rice and Toby Bronstein recently resigned from their posts on the steering committee of No Port Southport, a local group formed to oppose the N.C. Ports Authority's multimillion-dollar N.C. International Terminal project, to form Save The Cape, dedicated to all issues related to the Cape Fear River and with the ultimate goal of advocating for a Cape Fear National Seashore.

"No Port is about thinking locally. We're thinking globally," Bronstein explained, noting the two groups can co-exist.

No Port Southport formed in response to the N.C. Ports Authority's plans to dredge a new channel and build a container terminal on 600 acres between Southport and Boiling Spring Lakes.

The two decided to build upon the success they claim was due to the steering committee's advocacy efforts when the N.C. General Assembly voted earlier this year not to fund the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers feasibility study for the NCIT project.

"Up until the General Assembly cut the legs out from underneath them by cutting the funding, they thought we were a minor irritation," Bronstein said. "We thought the best way to move forward was Mike and I to keep doing what we were doing with No Port Southport on a larger scale."

After the General Assembly rejected funding the feasibility study, the N.C. Ports Authority announced the NCIT project had been put on hold indefinitely, but Bronstein and Rice are choosing to remain vigilant against the study and the project.

Save the Cape recently provided technical assistance and supported a complaint by retired Air Force Col. Al Willis of Southport to the Office of Inspector General for the Department of Defense.

The complaint states the corps violated section 904 of the Water Resources

Development Act of 1986, which prohibits reconnaissance studies from including project benefits “involving the transfer of economic activity from other regions.”

He argues that the economic benefit predictions for the NCIT are “substantially overstated” because they include container business transferred from other ports.

The N.C. Ports Authority did not return messages seeking comment.

Group’s mission

So far, Save the Cape has received positive responses from various scientific experts, including UNCW geologist Paul Hearty, formerly the director of conservation for Bald Head Island.

“I had frequent interactions with No Port group. ... When they started Save the Cape, I thought it was a fantastic idea to ... send a broader message about conservation and preservation of the Cape, something I’ve always believed in,” he said.

Rice and Bronstein are now working with Hearty to create position and mission statements and begin the process of educating the public about the environmental benefits of protecting the river.

“The port is the roadblock for all the things Save the Cape stands for,” Hearty said.

Dredging a straight channel, Hearty said, would allow more ocean water to reach the shore during storms, funneling ocean surge into interior lands – the same problems faced by cities like New Orleans and Houston.

The idea for “Save the Cape” came from “Save the Bay,” an effort to protect Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island, established in 1970 as a result of a number of grassroots groups. That saw the need for a permanent organization. Now, Save the Bay boasts 39 employees, regular funding and political clout in the state.

“When something comes up, they have a place at the table,” Rice said.

National seashore

Save the Cape’s ultimate plan – to create a Cape Fear National Seashore – may be the most difficult.

The group is proposing a protected area taking in Masonboro Island on the Atlantic Coast and all of the state parks and natural areas on the east side of the Cape Fear River south of Snows Cut to Bald Head Island.

On the west side of the river, the northern limit would be the Town Creek swamp forest, and the reserved area would extend south to the sea at Caswell Beach.

The reserved area would not include existing incorporated communities and the Military Ocean Terminal at Sunny Point.

“The history of national parks is they often face local opposition,” Rice said. “People are now recognizing how wrong they were.

“There’s a huge pride that’s built as a result of these parks. Because it’s a natural preserve, it attracts people who want to live near it, but it’s a difficult concept to develop and sell.”

Representatives from the N.C. Coastal Federation say they favor protecting the river and have provided assistance to the organization.

But both federation director Todd Miller and Coastkeeper Mike Giles say state preservation may be a better option.

“The land owned by the port could become the ‘anchor’ of the larger concept of a Cape Fear National Seashore or recreational area, but that also poses a lot of hoops that could be shortened if the state or a local jurisdiction acquired the property sooner rather than later,” Giles said.

“This property could provide a great public recreational area along the river, serve to protect water quality and stimulate tourism and other tourist-related economic development activities,” Miller said.

For more information about Save the Cape or how to get involved, visit www.savethecape.org.

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