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Opponents of megaport idea crowd hearing

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Residents of the Southport area came out in droves Tuesday to enthusiastically declare that a megaport on the Cape Fear River should not be part of any future plans for North Carolina's ports.

If there was any doubt of the crowd's sentiments at the gathering at the St. James Community Center, it vanished when Save the Cape co-founder Michael Rice took the microphone during a public comment session.

He said that the town of Caswell Beach came out against the megaport in 2008, and he asked those from Caswell Beach to stand if they were against the port.

Rice rattled off successive towns that had voted to oppose the port and asked those against the port to also stand.

In the end, nearly everyone of the at least 300 people in the crowd rose to their feet.

The open house and public comment session – more than 50 people signed up to speak – was held by AECOM and URS, the engineering firms conducting the N.C. Maritime Study. The study is meant to examine the role that North Carolina ports play in sustaining and strengthening the state's economy, and to find opportunities for the ports to expand on that growth and create jobs.

Some, including Toby Bronstein, the other co-founder of Save the Cape, see the maritime study as a way to justify building a multibillion-dollar International Port at Southport.

But Jim Bradshaw, executive director of the Brunswick County Economic Development Commission – and the first to speak – pointed out that of business projects afoot in the county, 38 percent were port-related.

"The Maritime Study will provide a glimpse of the sites in North Carolina and the challenges that a new port will have," Bradshaw said. "What we are looking at is support for a new feasibility study. That will answer the questions."

Other participants saw the latest study and a further feasibility study to be money wasted.

Reasons to oppose the port, speakers said, included security and safety problems with the site, which is located between the Sunny Point Military Ocean Terminal and Progress Energy's Brunswick Nuclear Plant.

Some who spoke at the meeting, including a retired Philadelphia policeman, worried what a mega-port would do to their lifestyle.

Others cited damage to birds, fish and the beaches.

But 95-year-old Margaret Connaughton, who said she had lived in "beautiful, little Southport" for 40 years, got the biggest rise from the crowd when she stood in opposition.

"I speak for myself and my family," she said. "What will this do to our once quiet area? Here are a few questions: How many locals will be hired? How is security going to be paid for? Is Southport prepared to deal with the traffic from the trucks. The pollution?"

Connaughton said, to roars of laughter and applause, that her husband picked Southport when he retired from military intelligence because he wanted a town that had "a Catholic church, a hospital, a library, a newspaper and a liquor store." Two more public workshops about the study are scheduled for this week – one on Wednesday in Wilmington and another on Thursday in Morehead City.

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