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NC megaport opponents turn to seashore project

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The people who fought a megaport on North Carolina's coast are in the early stages of trying to preserve much of the same area along the lower Cape Fear River.

Mike Rice and Toby Bronstein of the nonprofit Save the Cape have leased office space in Southport to give visibility to their effort to protect roughly 25,000 acres from development. They point to the Cape Hatteras National Seashore as an area that's worked under similar circumstances of protecting land around already existing towns.

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"This is really a very special area," Rice said. "It is unique. Because of the history of economic deprivation in Brunswick County, which led local leaders to believe any development is good development, they have failed to recognize its true value."

On the west side of the Cape Fear River, Town Creek swamp forest would be the northern limit of the national seashore, which would extend south to Caswell Beach. It would take in Masonboro Island, state parks and natural areas on the east side of the river south of Snow's Cut to Bald Head Island. Not included are the Military Ocean Terminal at Sunny Point and incorporated areas.

Save the Cape formed originally to fight the North Carolina International Terminal near Southport, a deepwater port that proposed for 600 acres near the Brunswick Nuclear Plant and Sunny Point. After the state paid \$30 million for the land, the state Ports Authority canceled the plans in July. The proposed megaport has since foundered in the face of funding issues and public opposition, including incoming Gov. Pat McCrory, who has said he doesn't support it.

"The megaport is in a coma," Bronstein said. "But until something happens with that land, we continue to be at risk."

Bronstein and Rice aren't certain how those 600 acres would fit with the seashore, but believe at least 200 acres could be included. Among their first tasks is to pursue changing the zoning for that area from heavy industrial to light industrial.

Jim Bradshaw, executive director of the Brunswick County Economic Development Commission, said that was not going to happen.

"We will not rest until that site is developed for industry, creating jobs for Brunswick County citizens," he said.

The National Park Service has 398 parks, which includes 10 national seashores and 15 national rivers, along with battlegrounds and other protected areas, said spokesman David Barna.

"All of these things are created by local people getting involved," he said.

Usually, the park service gets some money to study various places for possible inclusion, he said. Among considerations are the area's national significance and

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public access.

Some go through the House and Senate and then to the president for his signature. Under the Antiquities Act of 1906, however, the president can create a national monument with just his signature, Barna said. That happened in October, when President Obama the home of Latino labor leader Cesar Chavez in California as a national monument. That marked the fourth time Obama has used the act to designate a national monument.

Sometimes, as in the case of the Chavez home, nonprofits donate money to help the NPS open the new acquisition, Barna said. Or, a monument can go the way of the Franklin D. Roosevelt memorial in Washington, which Congress authorized in 1959. Because it wasn't funded for years, it wasn't dedicated until 1995, Barna said.

Save the Cape is now taking an inventory of the character of the area, and Rice and Bronstein area applying for grants. They are helped by NPS reports from 1955 and 1967 that said the area should be considered for preservation, they said.

"The historical significance is very clear," Bronstein said. "It's a matter of documenting these things in one place. We have stories of the natural character and heritage, and they're scattered all over the place."

Online:

<http://savethecape.org/stcwp1/>

<http://www.nps.gov/index.htm>

<http://www.brunswickedc.com/>

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