

Port foes lobby to block funds

Brunswick legislators disagree on budget proposal

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A group opposed to a new seaport in Brunswick County is pushing to have language inserted into the state budget to prohibit any additional state spending toward that end.

Members of the nonprofit, anti-port group Save the Cape have gone as far as to draft the language they want inserted into the budget bill. It would prohibit any money from the N.C. State Ports Authority, the state General Fund, Highway Fund or Highway Trust Fund or any other source from going toward building or studying a port on the Cape Fear River.

Rep. Frank Iler, R-Brunswick, said the House version of the 2012-2013 state budget, which is expected to be released soon, may include that provision.

"If I don't see it in the budget, I will try to amend it possibly," Iler said late last week.

Iler said he believes the benefits from any new port on the river in Brunswick County wouldn't outweigh the negatives, including potential environmental damage and impacts to the quality of life that attracts visitors and new residents to the county's beaches.

But state Sen. Bill Rabon, R-Brunswick, said he wouldn't shut down or embrace any study to appease a "special interest group."

"I am going to continue studying the ports of North Carolina..." he said. "We're at a pivotal point and we have to know the answers."

Rabon said a port won't be built near Southport. He mentioned a cost-benefit analysis included in the draft report of the \$2 million N.C. Maritime Strategy study, which suggested that a new container port at Southport would cost more than \$6 billion, when dredging and highway and rail improvements are added in. That's too much for the state to afford, he said.

The Wilmington-based Ports Authority bought land on the Cape Fear near Southport in the mid-2000s with the hope of building a huge new container terminal there but placed the project on hold after significant public outcry caused political will for the project to weaken. Opponents worry that the maritime study could reignite the project.

The previous state budget included a provision preventing funding for port studies, but the current budget does not. As the current budget was being drafted last year, similar language was included in the House version but was deleted in the Senate and final versions.

Rabon said Monday he was "partially responsible for that" because the language might have shut down the maritime study.

Shannon Moody, a Ports Authority spokeswoman, wrote Monday in an email that



the authority isn't pursuing anything in the budget related to the "formerly proposed port project in Brunswick County" and hasn't since it was placed on hold nearly two years ago.

But Save the Cape isn't taking any chances. Further study of the Brunswick County port project could be added to an ongoing U.S. Army Corps of Engineers feasibility study for improvements to the Wilmington harbor, said Toby Bronstein of Save the Cape.

"With the stroke of a pen, the megaport can be folded right into the ongoing feasibility study if there is no language to prohibit that," she said. "It's terrifically concerning."

Rabon suggested that Save the Cape "find another cross to bear."

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