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Gubernatorial candidates say they won't pursue port in Southport

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The once-proposed international port in Brunswick County became an issue in the governor's race last week, as both candidates said they would not pursue a new container terminal if elected, but gave different reasons as to why.

The statements released by Democrat Walter Dalton and Republican Pat McCrory would seem to put to rest any lingering notions that construction of a new shipping container port along the Cape Fear River near Southport is on the horizon.

Dalton, the current lieutenant governor, said the idea doesn't appear to have support from the federal government, including North Carolina's congressional delegation, and the N.C. General Assembly has opposed the project. The just-passed state budget for 2012-13 included language prohibiting any state spending on the proposed N.C. International Terminal.

Dalton also said the project would cost as much as \$6 billion in seaside and landside improvements and would take many years to build. He cited cost data from the recently released N.C. Maritime Strategy study, a \$2 million study looking at ways to make the state ports more competitive. Dalton is chairman of the Governor's Logistics Task Force, which recommended the study.

In his statement, Dalton said without political support, a project of that magnitude is unlikely to get done.

"For these reasons, I do not plan to pursue a deepwater port in Brunswick County as governor," Dalton said. "However, I will focus our efforts on improving our existing ports and expanding exports by creating niche markets, particularly in the areas of agribusiness and the reset of military equipment."

McCrory's campaign, meanwhile, said the former Charlotte mayor believes that the marketplace doesn't support a new port. He also questioned why the state, under Democratic control last decade, spent \$30 million to purchase land near Southport without first completing feasibility studies about the project.

"The deepwater port issue has become an Easley-Perdue-Dalton boondoggle and serves as yet another example of broken government and why new leadership from the outside is needed to fix it," the McCrory campaign said in its statement, referring to former Gov. Mike Easley and current Gov. Beverly Perdue, both Democrats.

As governor, McCrory would create and implement a strategy for existing ports in Morehead City and Wilmington, the statement said.

Dalton spokesman Schorr Johnson pointed out that Dalton was not on the N.C. Council of State in early 2006 when it signed off on the purchase of the 600-acre port property. He said two Republicans on the council at the time also voted for the purchase.

Port opponents and proponents responded to the candidates' statements Friday.

Said Toby Bronstein of the port opposition group Save the Cape: "This obituary's been written many times before, and it continues to rise from the dead. So while we're not ready to declare victory, we are encouraged."

But Jim Bradshaw, director of economic development for the Brunswick County Economic Development Commission, said the intention all along was that a private sector company would take on the costs of developing the port facility, with the state chipping in infrastructure costs, including the necessary rail and roads to serve the port.

"I can't imagine that the two candidates for governor would be against private-sector funding for the port, which would enhance the economy of North Carolina," he said.

In response to that, Johnson, Dalton's spokesman, said significant public expenditures still would be required.

"It's not politically or logistically or financially feasible," he said.

McCrory spokesman Ricky Diaz reiterated that McCrory doesn't believe the marketplace supports a new port and said it would be difficult to say whether McCrory would support a partially privately funded port "without knowing what the true cost to the state would be."

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