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Southport nonprofit aims to protect land at site of possible megaport

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A new Southport nonprofit will push for much of the area surrounding the mouth of the Cape Fear to be protected as a national seashore.

Earlier this month, Mike Rice, a member of No Port Southport, created a nonprofit called Save the Cape Inc., according to documents filed with the N.C. Secretary of State.

Rice said the highly ambitious project is the "ultimate solution" as the N.C. Ports Authority decides what to do with the 600-acre piece of land on which it had hoped to build a huge container terminal.

Plans for the N.C. International Terminal, which the authority says would bring jobs and boost the state's economy, were recently put on indefinite hold in the face of opposition from state and local elected officials.

Rice said the idea to create a national seashore came about two years ago when he discovered that much of the land along the river is zoned for heavy industry.

"I thought, this area is too important to let this happen," he said. "It just appeared to me that it needed to be protected."

While the megaport is one of the primary drivers behind his efforts, Rice hopes to preserve much more than that piece of land.

The proposed seashore encompasses the area south of Snow's Cut Bridge on the east side of the river and extend from the Town Creek swamp south to Caswell Beach on the west side.

A few areas on the east side of the river already are preserved. The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission and the N.C. Coastal Reserve manage several properties in the area.

But the west side is largely unprotected, and Rice said he fears the land could end up looking like the "Chemical Coast" of New Jersey.

Creating a national park or seashore requires federal legislation and a favorable report from the National Park Service.

The park service has visited the area once, in 1967, when an informal study looked at the possibility of creating a Cape Fear national monument, said Jeff Olson, spokesman for the National Park Service.

The study judged the area a viable addition to the park service. No more action was ever taken.

The process will not be easy, even if local members of Congress support the project. The office of U.S. Rep. Mike McIntyre, D-Lumberton, has not received any proposals so far.

The 600-acre tract is still owned by the N.C. Ports Authority, and other areas are privately owned. Ports Authority officials have said they are not abandoning the area as a site for a megaport.

Olson said the National Park Service generally does not buy land from unwilling sellers.

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