

Conservation group suggests park for port site

By Jenny Callison

July 25, 2013



Representatives from a local conservation organization want the N.C. Ports Authority board to transform more than 600 acres it owns in Southport into a state park.

Members of the Southport-based Save the Cape Inc. pitched the idea during the Port Authority's Thursday meeting. As part of the plan, representatives suggested the property and its associated debt would be transferred to the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation.

Michael Rice and Toby Bronstein, officials with the Save the Cape organization, emphasized that the Ports Authority pays \$6 million annually for debt service, including what is owed for the now defunct N.C. International Port Terminal that was purchased in 2006.

In 2023, a balloon payment on its crane financing -- spiking that year's debt service to \$20 million, according to the Ports Authority.

"The problem is that the Ports Authority needs money for debt service and capital projects, and the General Assembly is stingy," Rice said. He added that the solution is to transfer the land -- a "non-producing asset," in his words -- to another state agency that could benefit from it.

Rice and Bronstein said that North Carolina wants to create a new state park, and that Brunswick County, with its existing vibrant tourism industry, would be an ideal location. Bronstein cited the current economic impact of tourism on the county, including \$19.4 million in direct spending by about 180,000 visitors to Brunswick County in 2012.

"The port property has important natural characteristics not found at other state parks, and Brunswick County is underserved by state recreational facilities," she said.

Bronstein also presented recent tourism figures for Fort Fisher, which she said does a "bang-up business" with non-local as well as local visitors.

"Fort Fisher attracts 750,000 visitors annually, of which 45 percent are non-local," Bronstein said. "A total of \$14.5 million annually is spent in the area by those non-local visitors."

Board members seemed receptive to Save the Cape's proposal but asked that the organization continue to develop its concept and refine its financial projections and to come back to the board's strategic planning committee for further exploration.

Board member and Wilmington attorney Michael Lee encouraged the Save the Cape representatives to work with the strategic planning committee to come up with "tangible ways to recover what we need to recover" from the property.

There was also preliminary discussion of what the site might be worth at present and how much the state might be willing to pay the Ports Authority for the site. Rice said if the state developed some or all of the property as a state park, there would probably be federal funds available to help underwrite the cost.

Board members encouraged Rice and Bronstein to garner support from other quarters.

"Get up with people in the [Brunswick County] communities for their support and ask them to lobby the governor," said Danny McComas, who chairs the Ports Authority board.

"I hope to put this concept on the radar of the governor," said N.C. Department of Transportation secretary Tony Tata, who serves on the ports board.