



CARTERET COUNTY

CROSSROADS

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Environmental Activism Works... Again!

Last fall, the strength of local grassroots environmental activism was demonstrated when sustained local opposition and civic engagement led to a dramatic improvement in the NC Wildlife Resources Commission’s design for the renovation of the Curtis Perry Park boat ramp at the east end of Front Street in Beaufort. Crossroads Advisory Council member Bruce McCutcheon told the inspiring story in our last newsletter under the header, “Environmental Activism Works!”

In this issue, Mark Hooper reinforces this notion with his review of the remarkable events that led to this summer’s abrupt cancellation of an unpopular project by PCS Phosphate and the NC Ports Authority—a direct result of swift, well-organized, unified local opposition.

The Summer of Sulfur by Mark Hooper

The summer of 2011 in Carteret County was, from an environmental and public policy perspective, the Summer of Sulfur. The post that follows from our local newspaper lays out the crux of the story:

Carteret County News-Times
Published: Friday, July 8, 2011
Mark Hibbs

MOREHEAD CITY — Jet Matthews, developer and manager of the Morehead City Yacht Basin, says his investment and the lure of the downtown district to vacationers is at risk under an N.C. State Ports Authority plan to build a sulfur handling and melting facility next to the marina.

Officials with the state port here and its largest customer PotashCorp-Aurora have kept quiet for months regarding plans that have been in the works for at least a year to build a facility at the port to unload, store and melt solid sulfur.

As local citizens became aware of plans for this facility several basic question areas emerged. The first questions concerned the proposed facility: Where would it be? What would it look like? What would it smell like? Would it be dangerous for the neighboring community? The second questions concerned policy and governance: Why was this kept secret? Who knew this plan was in the works? How does the permitting process work? And, do citizens have a say in the overall make-up of their community?

When details of the proposed project came to light, there was a swift and concentrated effort to stop the project at the local government and citizen level. Local business leaders, environmental groups and concerned citizens provided technical information and a summary of potential health risks to elected officials. Weighing that input, the lack of awareness of the project at all levels, and urgency for action lest the “final approval be granted in the interim”, official letters opposing the facility were written by the Town of Beaufort, Morehead City, the Carteret County Commissioners, the County Economic Development Council and others. There were concerns about the secrecy of the proposed activity, a permitting process devoid of public comment to this point, and a failure to inform local municipalities and seek agreement that the proposed facility was consistent with the area businesses, tourism, and residential development values. A citizens group, Clean County Coalition, formed with the expressed intent to block the proposed sulfur melting plant at the Morehead City Port. On July 19, 2011, about 400 citizens attended the organizational meeting of this group held at the Crystal Coast Civic Center.

The Clean County Coalition developed a website, www.cleancounty.org, and established a Facebook page (currently with 433 friends). They thoroughly researched the ramifications of a sulfur melting facility on the environment, human health, physical risks and disruptions during operations, and risks/impacts to the existing business and community values

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Carteret County Crossroads is an all-volunteer, member supported non-profit organization dedicated to protecting our coastal environment since 1979. Please check your mailing label for membership status. As always, we appreciate your continuing support.

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THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

The Summer of Sulfur, continued:

of Morehead City, Beaufort and surrounding environs. This information was posted on their website and distributed at commission/town council meetings and in public statements and discussions with public officials. Coalition members engaged in a bit of public theater by demonstrating with signs and banners and wearing locally printed "SULFURIOUS" t-shirts. The public blitz was well covered in the local newspaper and even made some regional and national news.

The immediate issue of a sulfur melting facility was terminated on July 27, 2011—less than three weeks after the local paper broke the story—when Governor Beverly Perdue spoke at the Morehead City Port, signed Executive Order 99 (entitled Ports and Local Economy Compatibility) and announced that PCS Phosphate had voluntarily dropped its plans for a sulfur melting facility at the Morehead City Port.

The entire local environmental advocacy community was involved in the issue. The NC Coastal Federation rapidly unearthed and posted all relevant permits on their website and provided strategic guidance and expertise, and Carteret Crossroads—on the Coalition steering committee—participated in the overall effort. Our local newspaper, the Carteret County News-Times, did a tremendous job of reporting on the issue and providing extensive background material.

A sulfur melting facility at the Morehead City Port will not happen; handling of molten sulfur through the Radio Island facility will continue as it has in the past. There are other issues still in play. The Morehead City Planning Commission is looking into the zoning provisions under port/industrial classification. There is discussion of what agency has ultimate control over activities and transportation of materials to and from the Port. PCS Phosphate still intends to bring sulfur by ship into the Port in pelletized form, bulk storing on site, and transporting sulfur by barge to its Aurora facilities.

Governor Perdue, the NC Ports Authority and PCS Phosphate publically agreed that any new project at the Port will go through the proper permitting process with full transparency and everything done in "daylight". Local government and citizens will be more involved with PCS Phosphate and the NC Ports Authority regarding future projects. Informed citizen action won the day, and Carteret County Crossroads thanks everyone for their involvement in this Summer of Sulfur.

We have decisions to make as citizens of this treasured county. This crisis prompted a wonderful discussion of the value of our local environment. It is our belief that a healthy environment is the cornerstone for our local economy today and into the future. At a time when there is talk of abolishing the EPA at a national level and reducing air quality protection at the state level, is this what we want? It is said that somehow, regulations designed to protect the environment and quality of life are "ruining" our economy. This analysis is far too simplistic. If we had simply pushed aside regulations and ignored local concerns, work would be underway on a sulfur melting facility in downtown Morehead City.

Environmental Effects of Hurricane Irene by Jess Hawkins

Almost a month has passed since Hurricane Irene blew into Carteret County and coastal NC, but her effects remain. People are still clearing debris, drying and sanitizing homes and belongings, or lost their homes and are seeking shelter.

While meteorologists ranked Irene only as a Category 1 on the Saffir-Simpson Wind Scale, she left lasting memories for her destruction and she dramatically changed our coast. Several blowouts occurred on the barrier islands of the Outer Banks, with one being referred to as a new inlet near Rodanthe. Inlets along Core Banks were deepened and widened. Sand dunes along Shackleford and Core Banks were completely removed and over 50 sea turtle nests along these areas were lost. Sand was deposited across some of the barrier islands and anglers are reporting that the shoals off Cape Lookout have shifted dramatically.

Flooding was severe in some areas along the Neuse and Tar-Pamlico Rivers and Down East Carteret County. Flood water rose to levels beyond what were noted during Hurricane Hazel in some areas along the Pamlico River; folks remembered Hazel as one of the worst hurricanes to hit NC. The extremely rapid rise and fall of waters deposited tremendous amounts of plant (organic) debris into our swamps and marshes, and as this material decays it is producing putrid smells. Organic material can sap the oxygen levels in the water, stressing aquatic organisms such as fish and crabs. State officials have noted several fish kills in the low-lying areas of the Tar-Pamlico and Neuse Rivers.

Tremendous amounts of runoff or extreme fluctuation of water levels caused by hurricanes can sometimes trigger mass migrations of aquatic animals. Following Hurricane Floyd in 1999 scientists noted mass migrations of blue crabs towards the ocean to avoid fresh water. Runoff from Irene also caused shellfish waters to be closed temporarily for the entire state. Shellfish beds in some areas behind barrier islands have been covered by sand overwash or turbulence.

So, while wind and rain have long departed and our skies have returned to blue, North Carolina's people and its coastal environment continue to feel the wrath of Hurricane Irene.
