



NEW HANOVER COUNTY

BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

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September 17, 2026

The Honorable Thom Tillis
United States Senate
113 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Ted Budd
United States Senate
304 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable David Rouzer
U.S. House of Representatives
2333 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Tillis, Senator Budd, and Representative Rouzer:

Thank you for your service to our state and your efforts on behalf of the citizens of New Hanover County.

We are writing to request that Congress authorize an updated study of the current and future navigational needs of the Cape Fear River and Northeast Cape Fear River north of the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge, as well as additional funding to support the replacement of the bridge itself. Our entire region remains grateful for the \$242 million large bridge federal grant that you championed. We thank you for your support of that grant and your advocacy for the bridge's replacement.

As you are aware, the North Carolina Department of Transportation is proceeding with two proposed alternatives to replace the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge, which opened in 1969 and has been determined by the NCDOT to be functionally obsolete.

The two alternatives include a 135-foot-tall fixed span and a 65-foot movable span that can be raised to 135 feet. The alternatives are estimated to cost between \$1.03 billion and \$1.11 billion.

This significant investment, which is already supported by the federal grant, would benefit from a thorough analysis of the current and future navigational needs of the Cape Fear River and Northeast Cape Fear River from the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge north to the Dan Cameron Bridge, which is a 65-foot fixed span about 5 miles upriver.

The current Cape Fear Memorial Bridge is a movable span that is 65 feet above the mean higher-high water line when closed and can be raised to 135 feet.

The need for a 135-foot vertical clearance was determined by the U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers based on the 1996 federal authorization for a depth of 38 feet north of the bridge. The federal agencies concluded that a lower span would be injurious to that project.

NCDOT conducted a Navigational Impact Report as part of its process to replace the bridge. That navigational report, however, primarily examined the potential impact the bridge could have on access through the waterways and did not provide an assessment of the waterways' actual navigational needs.

That report further found that vessels using this stretch of river do not require clearance necessitating raising the span; bridge openings declined from 188 in 2019 to 63 in 2025.

An updated analysis of navigational needs north of the bridge could provide critical information to preserve federal interests in navigation.

Our suggestion is that this assessment should focus on current and future economic activity rather than be based on an analysis performed 30 years ago. As you may know, New Hanover County has prioritized conservation and preservation in this area, including through direct purchases of land north of the bridge with the intent of maintaining it as undeveloped property. Additionally, waterways north of the current bridge are shallower than the river channel south of the bridge.

Further, the county's comprehensive development plan, which will guide development and land use for at least the next 25 years, calls for a vision and policy focused on conservation, preservation, and low-impact development. The land around the waterways part of this assessment is fully within New Hanover County's jurisdiction.

We believe a navigational needs assessment would not conflict with the progress made toward the bridge's replacement and are supportive of project timelines to meet deadlines to protect federal investments that have been committed. We would further support an extension of the Large Bridge Project program to accomplish such an assessment.

Should a navigational analysis be harmful to the project's timeline and progress, the Board supports replacing the bridge with the movable span alternative that provides a similar structure to the existing Cape Fear Memorial Bridge. NCDOT's recent environmental assessment of the alternatives notes that the movable span would have fewer impacts to neighboring properties, the bridge's new footprint, and the viewshed.

However, given the federal determination that a costlier 135-foot clearance, either with a fixed span or movable span, is needed to support the federal project, it is appropriate for the federal government to provide greater cost-sharing to replace the bridge if it is confirmed that this approach is still most appropriate.

We therefore respectfully request that Congress authorize a navigational assessment that would provide a complete picture of the current and future navigational needs of the Cape Fear River and Northeast Cape Fear River and appropriate additional cost-sharing funds for the bridge's replacement.

Sincerely,



LeAnn Pierce, Chair



Dane Scalise, Vice Chair



Bill Rivenbark, Commissioner



Stephanie A.C. Walker, Commissioner



Rob Zapple, Commissioner