

Leadership Void Feared at Port Authority

Potential Upheaval Comes as Agency Looks to Tackle Major Transportation Projects



New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, left, and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo. Getty Images

By

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Dec. 29, 2014 8:53 p.m. ET

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A looming shake-up of the agency at the center of last year's George Washington Bridge scandal could leave it without two top leaders as it aims to tackle major transportation projects including new Hudson River rail tunnels.

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey's two top jobs would be replaced with a single chief executive, the entire board of commissioners would be asked to offer to resign and the agency's chairmanship would be potentially split in half under a plan endorsed by both states' governors.

The potential upheaval has some concerned that a leadership void could disrupt the agency as it tries to put the bridge scandal in the rearview mirror and shift its focus to public projects such as new rail tunnels between New Jersey to Manhattan.

"It's a concern that it doesn't slow down the movement" toward a transportation-focused agency, said New Jersey State Sen. Loretta Weinberg, a Democrat.

The authority's current management structure has been criticized for inviting abuses, such as the September 2013 closures of George Washington Bridge lanes as apparent political payback against Fort Lee, N.J.'s Democratic mayor who didn't endorse Republican New Jersey Gov. [Chris Christie](#).

The former authority official accused of engineering the closures worked for the New Jersey side of the agency's [bistate](#) structure. The agency's board chairman and deputy executive director are appointed by the New Jersey governor and are generally seen as advocates of that state's agenda, while the executive director and board vice chairman are appointed by the New York governor.

Under the new plan, the executive director and deputy would be replaced with a new CEO position, for which a national search will be conducted.

Whether current Executive Director Patrick [Foye](#) or his deputy, [Deb Gramiccioni](#), would apply to be the authority's new CEO remained to be seen. Mr. [Foye](#) said Monday he would work with the authority's board on transportation issues and its mission "in the months ahead."

Ms. [Gramiccioni](#), for her part, said she knew big changes were coming when she joined the authority a year ago to replace an official who resigned during the scandal. "I went into the job appreciating the likelihood that there would be major structural changes to come," she said.

[John Degnan](#), the agency's chairman, said he wasn't worried about a leadership vacuum at the authority as it searched for a CEO, beginning in earnest next year. The agency oversees key bridges and tunnels and PATH trains connecting New York and New Jersey as well as the region's major airports.

"If I had to leave tomorrow, I don't think they'd miss a beat," Mr. [Degnan](#) said of the agency's other managers. "And if Pat [Foye](#) had to leave tomorrow, I think it would be a loss, but I don't think we'd miss a beat."

The authority might also face vacancies on its 12-seat board. Under the proposal, commissioners would offer their resignations, which are expected to be rejected if they embrace an overhaul backed by Mr. Christie and Gov. [Andrew Cuomo](#), a Democrat.

An important piece of the Port Authority's new agenda could be helping to build new train tunnels underneath the Hudson River. Mr. Christie decided to stop a previous project known as Access to the Region's Core, or ARC, that would have put two tunnels under the Hudson in 2010, citing cost, but the Port Authority now cites increasing train capacity as a goal.

A Christie spokesman said the governor has always supported increasing rail service between the states so long as New Jersey doesn't end up footing an unfair share of the bill and the tunnels were appropriately located.

Port Authority officials said discussions about building new tunnels had been happening for months. The need gained urgency after Amtrak warned in October that repairs to fix damage caused by [superstorm Sandy](#) in 2012 might force it to close the tunnels, potentially snarling train traffic along the East Coast.

"It forced the issue," one New Jersey transportation official said about Amtrak's report. "Sometimes crisis creates opportunities."

The Port Authority wants to take a starring role in 2015 planning for expanding the transportation network between the two states, including a tunnel project. Officials said they realize the agency's limitations—chief among them, financial.

"We want to try and play a leadership role," said [Scott Rechler](#), the authority's vice chairman. But, he added: "We can't finance this by ourselves."

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