

# Addressing Dysfunction, Port Authority Plans to Install ‘Nonpolitical’ C.E.O.

By PATRICK MCGEEHAN

FEBRUARY 19, 2015

For decades, the [Port Authority of New York and New Jersey](#) has been a house divided, an agency overseen by people who owed loyalty to one governor or another. The internal division often devolved into dysfunction and has occasionally led to misfeasance, such as the move in 2013 to close some traffic lanes leading to the George Washington Bridge.

On Thursday, the commissioners of the Port Authority took a leap toward putting an end to that infighting by agreeing to hire a chief executive with no ties to either governor. The search for that executive could begin this spring and be completed by the fall, John J. Degnan, the chairman of the agency, said at a meeting of the authority’s board of commissioners.

The hiring of a “nonpolitical, professional, best-in-class C.E.O.” would sharply reduce the influence the governors of the two states have held over the agency, Scott H. Rechler, vice chairman of the Port Authority, said at the meeting.

For years, the top two managers at the agency — the executive director and the deputy executive director — have been political appointees, one chosen by the governor of New York, the other by the governor of New Jersey.

At the same time, Mr. Rechler announced, an end will also come to the longstanding practice of having the governor of New Jersey appoint the chairman of the board and the governor of New York choose the vice chairman.

Those changes were among reforms that the commissioners “conceptually” approved on Thursday that had been recommended by a panel convened at the behest of the two governors, Andrew M. Cuomo of New York, a Democrat, and Chris Christie of New Jersey, a Republican.

Highlighting just how fraught the process of fixing the agency has been, the commissioners backtracked on Thursday on a previous pledge to submit their resignations, which had been one of the reform panel’s recommendations. Mr. Degnan said some of the commissioners had voiced strong objections to resigning, and he said that he, too, had changed his mind about the idea, calling it “improvident.”

But Mr. Degnan said the turnabout was not a reaction to pressure from the governors, who late last year [vetoed legislation](#) aimed at reforming the Port Authority that had unanimously passed in both statehouses. “I haven’t been bullied by anybody,” he said.

Instead, Mr. Degnan repeatedly praised Mr. Christie and Mr. Cuomo for accepting the “most significant, transformative changes” in the modern history of the Port Authority. He said they deserved credit for “putting to rest decades of tension between the two states.”

Many of the other changes the board tentatively approved were intended to refocus the Port Authority on its original mission: fostering efficient movement of people and goods throughout the region. They called for improving the airports and the agency’s aging main bus terminal, devising a new operating model for the PATH commuter train, divesting real estate not essential to the mission and abolishing the “regional banks,” funds that the governors have used for pet projects.

A committee of the board is also drawing up a new code of ethics for the agency’s officials and employees that would supersede a complicated set of rules first created 35 years ago. One of the commissioners, Kenneth Lipper, said the document would be less like the Ten Commandments and more like the Talmud.

But Mr. Degnan, who identified himself as a “Jesuit-trained Catholic,” said, “I don’t want a Talmud.” He said he wanted a “brisk document” that contained all of the rules, including guidance for potential whistle-blowers, which he hoped would prevent a recurrence of an event like the lane closings. He pointed out that no member of the Port Authority Police Department tried to end the unannounced closings that tied up traffic in Fort Lee, N.J., for several days.

The days of the governors’ pulling the strings at the Port Authority may be waning, but another discussion on Thursday proved they are not over. The commissioners decided to wait until the end of April to choose a developer to rebuild the Central Terminal at La Guardia Airport.

That decision had been expected last year, but in October, Mr. Cuomo [announced an international competition](#) to redesign the entire airport. The governor said he had no intention of interfering with the Central Terminal contract, but the commissioners made it clear they had no intention of crossing Mr. Cuomo.