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## As Inquiry Widens, Port Authority Chief May Lose His Low Profile

By [RUSS BUETTNER](#) and [WILLIAM K. RASHBAUM](#) JAN. 15, 2014



Gov. Chris Christie, center, with David Samson, the chairman of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. Mel Evans/Associated Press

He has been a close adviser to three New Jersey governors and was appointed state attorney general by a fourth. He was a co-founder of one of the state's largest law firms. And for two years he has led the [Port Authority of New York and New Jersey](#). Yet outside of New Jersey political and legal circles, David Samson, 74, has steadfastly maintained a low profile.

That appears likely to change. After Mr. Samson spent decades as one of the state's most influential behind-the-scenes power brokers, his role in the aftermath of the bridge scandal and his ties to Gov. [Chris Christie](#), who appointed him, are expected to receive close scrutiny.

The Democratic-led State Legislature is set to authorize a new investigative panel on Thursday to look further into closings of lanes to the George Washington Bridge in September. The Assembly on Wednesday named Reid J. Schar, the former federal prosecutor who led the case against former Illinois Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich, as special counsel to the investigative committee.

Assemblyman John S. Wisniewski, the Democrat who is expected to lead the panel, has said he wants to subpoena all of the Christie associates whose names are on emails released under previous subpoenas, which would include Mr. Samson.

Those emails suggest that Mr. Samson, even though his vast agency is in charge of the region's ports, airports, bridges and tunnels, was unconcerned that thousands of people might have been trapped in a colossal traffic jam that was created to punish a Democratic mayor who would not endorse Mr. Christie, a Republican, for re-election. But the emails show Mr. Samson as very concerned about politics, specifically that Patrick J. Foye, the executive director of the Port Authority, was trying to get to the bottom of the jam.

"In this case, he's playing in traffic, made a big mistake," Mr. Samson wrote about Mr. Foye, who was appointed by the New York side of the bistate agency.

The scandal has already cast a cloud over what many see as the final role of Mr. Samson's political life. Perhaps with that in mind, he has explored the idea of retiring from his post in recent days, according to government officials who would not speak on the record. He has denied this, saying only: "The story is incorrect." The lane closings have already resulted in two resignations, and Mr. Christie's decisions to fire a top aid and cut ties with a second. Mr. Christie has denied any knowledge of the scheme.

Mr. Samson, who declined to be interviewed for this article, has been close to state officials for decades. He was an adviser to former Govs. Thomas H. Kean, a Republican, and James J. Florio, a Democrat, and was chief counsel to the New Jersey Turnpike Authority during the 1980s.

But his alliance with Mr. Christie appears to be the strongest. He was counsel to Mr. Christie's 2009 campaign and led his transition committee. And Mr. Samson was among the close advisers who went to Arizona with Mr. Christie in November, when he took on his new position as chairman of the Republican Governors Association, and he accompanied him to the Republican National Convention in 2012, according to an associate.

The law firm he helped found, Wolff & Samson, has been very close to the state's government for decades. The firm has served as outside counsel to state agencies and lobbied agencies on behalf of clients seeking state contracts, favorable regulation changes and approval for large development projects.

The firm's doors in West Orange and Trenton often spin from the wind of its lawyers departing for, and soon returning from, state government positions.

In 2010, Mr. Christie appointed one lawyer at the firm, Lori Grifa, to head the state Department of Community Affairs. In that position, she also chaired the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission. She returned to the law firm in 2012, and one of its clients, Triple Five, took over development of the stalled mall project in the Meadowlands previously called Xanadu.

Another lawyer at the firm, Jeffrey S. Chiesa, served as Mr. Christie's chief counsel before the governor appointed him first to be state attorney general and then to fill the United States Senate seat vacated by the death of Senator Frank R. Lautenberg. Mr. Chiesa returned to Wolff & Samson in November.

Last year, Wolff & Samson was among several firms selected for possible use by government agencies to audit the spending of [Hurricane Sandy](#) relief money, which has come under federal review for its spending on commercials that featured Mr. Christie.

“It would be like if Major League Baseball appointed A-Rod to audit their drug testing program,” said Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey branch of the Sierra Club. “The law firm is so close to the Christie administration that there’s barely any line of separation.”

Mr. Samson, who was born in Newark, was pulled into public view two decades ago, when the woman he was dating became the criminal obsession of her prior paramour, New York’s top judge, Sol Wachtler. Federal prosecutors charged Judge Wachtler with demanding a \$20,000 blackmail payment in exchange for turning over compromising photographs and tapes of the woman, Joy Silverman, with Mr. Samson. He later pleaded guilty to threatening to kidnap her 14-year-old daughter.

In 2002, Mr. Samson was appointed attorney general of New Jersey by Gov. James E. McGreevey, a Democrat, and served for a little more than a year to largely favorable reviews.

Peter C. Harvey, who was first assistant attorney general under Mr. Samson and then took over the agency, said, “I think he’s one of the smartest lawyers I ever met.”

“He’s very thoughtful and he sees the nuances of the situation as well as anybody, which is a significant skill for a lawyer,” added Mr. Harvey, who served as attorney general until 2006.

Mr. Samson’s wife, Joanna Dunn Samson, is a former deputy commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. They have a condominium not far from his firm’s main office, in West Orange, N.J., and a larger weekend home in Litchfield County, in Connecticut, where Ms. Samson has ridden horses with a local fox hunting club.

At least one other traffic jam caused by problems at the Port Authority resulted in Mr. Samson’s taking agency executives to task.

On Easter Sunday in April 2011, a manpower shortage left only one cash lane open at the Outerbridge Crossing connecting New Jersey and Staten Island. Mr. Samson publicly told the executive director at the time that it was “unacceptable” and “unthinkable.”

But in the gridlock in Fort Lee, N.J., his anger was directed at the current executive director, Mr. Foye, because he believed Mr. Foye had leaked information about the shutdown to a reporter.

“ ‘More evidence of reckless, counterproductive behavior,’ ” Mr. Samson wrote in an email to another Christie appointee.

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