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Lane Closings Scandal Shows Port Authority's Status as 2 Warring Fiefs

By [THOMAS KAPLAN](#) JAN. 10, 2014

After a top New Jersey political appointee [at the Port Authority](#), David Wildstein, ordered the lane closings at the George Washington Bridge that clogged Fort Lee, N.J., for four days in September, the authority's New York-appointed executive director, Patrick J. Foye, exploded with anger and ordered the lanes reopened. But then the authority's New Jersey-appointed chairman, David Samson, expressed outrage over Mr. Foye's outrage, accusing him of leaking the story of the lane closings.

The [Port Authority of New York and New Jersey](#) is a bistate agency that was designed to take politics out of the operation of the region's trade and transportation infrastructure. But as portrayed in email traffic released this week by investigators of the lane-closing scandal, it appears consumed by politics: a split personality beholden to the whims of the two rival governors who control it.

"It's like there's a [Berlin Wall](#) down the middle of the halls in there," said David J. Gallagher, the president of the Port Authority Retirees Association. "On the one side, it's New Jersey people working; on the other side, it's New York people working. A divided management just does not work."

The agency, created in 1921, operates a network of airports, bridges, tunnels, cargo terminals and real estate, including the World Trade Center — assets once seen as too important for politicians to be fighting over. That long ago proved to be a pipe dream. But the cross-Hudson competition, patronage and political intrigue appear to have reached new heights, as Gov. [Chris Christie](#), a Republican, faces a growing scandal over his appointee's decision to order the lane closings as an act of political retaliation.

"In the midst of this dysfunctional organization, the Port Authority manages to function and get its job done," said Robert E. Boyle, who served as executive director as an appointee of former Gov. George E. Pataki of New York. "But it's time to correct it. The structure is wrong."

In New Jersey, Mr. Christie has used the agency as a favored landing spot for political supporters and associates seeking patronage positions, a tendency that drew criticism even before the lane closings. But the actions of his appointees to the authority have become a major liability for him as he considers a bid for president.

The governor of New York, [Andrew M. Cuomo](#), has distanced himself from the scandal. But he has been critical of the authority in some respects: In his State of the State address on Wednesday, Mr. Cuomo, a Democrat, said that the condition of La Guardia Airport was a "disgrace" and that the State of New York would assume responsibility for construction projects there and at Kennedy Airport to speed up their modernization.

With 6,800 employees and a budget of \$7 billion in 2012, the authority is a complicated organization. Each governor appoints six commissioners and has veto power over the actions of the commissioners from his state. To ensure geographic balance in the leadership, the governor of New Jersey appoints the Port Authority's chairman and the governor of New York appoints its executive director.

Over time, however, the organization has become far more bifurcated, according to interviews on Friday with former employees and others who are familiar with it. At the same time, the authority has increasingly become a home for patronage appointments.

In the past, the New York-appointed executive director ran day-to-day operations in both states. But over the last decade, appointees in New Jersey have moved to take greater control of their own affairs, and now, the authority's deputy executive director — a New Jersey appointee — essentially runs a second chain of command consisting of New Jersey personnel. Mr. Foye testified in December that the deputy executive director reported to the Port Authority's board, not to him.

“If those patronage people weren't there, we wouldn't even be talking about ‘Bridgegate,’ ” said Mr. Gallagher — who, for the record, lives in New Jersey. “And if the patronage people who were there had any allegiance to the Port Authority, I don't think we'd be talking about this. But their allegiance is to Governor Christie, and he demands it.”

Martin E. Robins, the director emeritus of the [Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University](#), said the current scandal highlighted what he described as an “evolutionary breakdown of the organization.”

“You have people who are operating under their own rules,” Mr. Robins said. “It's like chickens coming home to roost, this incident.”

Richard L. Brodsky, a former Democratic assemblyman from Westchester County who wrote legislation to bring oversight to public authorities in New York, said the Port Authority was desperately in need of similar monitoring.

“This is a Soviet-style bureaucracy,” he said.

“As fascinating as Christie's personality is, this kind of thing would have happened if Calvin Coolidge were in charge. This is about an institution which operates outside of democratic checks and balances, and it inevitably fails.”

At his [marathon news conference](#) on Thursday, Mr. Christie acknowledged that the Port Authority was not known for internal harmony, saying, “This is a bistate agency with significant tension all the time.”

But he said that he and Mr. Cuomo worked well together to resolve disagreements that reached their level.

A spokesman for Mr. Cuomo declined to comment on Friday.