

Starting Over on Port Authority Overhaul



Govs. Chris Christie and Andrew Cuomo during memorial observances on Sept. 11, 2014. Associated Press

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By vetoing a proposed overhaul of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, Govs. [Andrew Cuomo](#) and [Chris Christie](#) reasserted their control over the embattled agency but left many wondering whether any real change would come more than a year after the George Washington Bridge scandal.

On Sunday, on both sides of the Hudson River, lawmakers fumed over the vetoes—particularly their timing on the Saturday night after Christmas—but said overriding them would be difficult.

“We have to start from square one,” said Vincent Prieto, the Democratic speaker of the New Jersey General Assembly. “We have to start again and move as quickly as we can.”

Jim Brennan, a Brooklyn Democrat who was a leading proponent of the reform bill in the New York State Assembly, called the governors’ vetoes “cynical” and “arrogant” but said they nonetheless don’t “mean that we won’t try to work with them.”

Mr. Christie’s office declined to comment on Sunday; the Cuomo administration said it was committed to enacting reforms as soon as possible.

A senior Cuomo administration official declined to say what part of the bills the administration disagreed with but said the legislatures should have waited for the governors’ proposals.

Others, though, pointed out that the influence exerted by Govs. Christie and Cuomo, on display in the vetoes, is among the Port Authority’s biggest problems; the agency operates the region’s major airports, the PATH train and major bridges and tunnels connecting the two states.

“They believe that if you have power, you use it. If you have power, you don’t give it up easily,” said Julian Zelizer, a political scientist and historian at Princeton University. “Both are very similar in that way.”

The vetoed legislation, which passed in both states with overwhelming support, would have imposed a raft of disclosure and other requirements aimed to rooting out patronage, curbing abuses and increasing transparency at the Port Authority.

It follows last year’s scandal over lane closures leading to the George Washington Bridge, which sparked investigations by prosecutors and legislators and led to top-level resignations at the Port Authority.

For their proposal, the governors backed recommendations developed by a so-called Special Panel on the Future of the Port Authority, including a far-reaching management and operational overhaul at the agency.

How the Port Authority is managed, by appointees of New York and New Jersey’s governors, has been blamed for making the agency prone to political abuse.

The governors, in their own proposal, said they want to install a chief executive selected by the Port Authority’s board through a national search process, doing away with the practice of New York picking the agency’s executive director and New Jersey picking that official’s deputy.

The governors also want each state to either rotate the authority’s chairmanship or have co-chairmen.

John Degnan, the authority’s chairman and a member of the special panel, applauded the governors’ proposal.

“I firmly believe that ‘Bridgegate’ would never have happened if the Port Authority management structure were in place,” he said.

Transportation experts largely praised the governors’ plan, saying it would help insulate the authority from narrow political interests and help it focus on the region’s transportation and infrastructure.

“They have gotten right at the heart of the problem,” said Martin Robins, director emeritus at the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University, and a former director of planning and development at the authority. “That is the single most important thing that has to be done, because the Port Authority has gone off the rails.”

But they also expressed qualms with a plan to seek all members of the authority’s board to offer their resignations, subject to whether they endorse the governors’ plan. The board members are nominated by the governors but appointed by their state’s senates.

“The resignations of all these commissioners would break down the insulation from political factions,” said Jameson Doig, an emeritus Princeton professor who wrote a book about the authority.

There was skepticism, too, of how the Port Authority would operate while its board actively sought to eliminate the positions of executive director and deputy executive director, currently held by Patrick Foye and Deb Gramiccioni, respectively.

Loretta Weinberg, the Democratic majority leader of New Jersey’s senate, questioned whether the search and replacing commissioners who resigned would impede the authority’s work.

“They will be spending a lot of time on that, rather than the business of the Port Authority,” she said.

Neither of the authority’s top staff members signaled their long-term plans. Mr. Foye said he would continue focusing on the authority’s transportation operations and mission while working with the board. Ms. Gramiccioni said she supported overhauling the authority’s management structure.

Mr. Degnan said the authority’s board would take steps to begin searching for a CEO early next year, though the exact timing remained unclear.

Also to be determined are how the authority would undertake other changes, such as potentially cutting overnight PATH service, when few riders use the trains.

The prospect, noted in the special panel’s report, drew swift criticism by politicians in northern New Jersey. Hoboken Mayor Dawn Zimmer said she would “vigorously oppose any efforts to cut PATH service.”

“The premise of the need for Port Authority reform was about corruption,” Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop added. “It was not about curtailing access to mass transportation.”

Mr. Degnan said the panel merely recommended examining reduced service as a way to stem PATH’s operating losses but was “far from implementing this.”

He also said the timing of the veto announcement wasn’t intended to avoid attention. It was stalled by last-minute sticking points, including discussions over changes in the Port Authority’s management and board.

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