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## Port Authority Vows to Build Trust, End Abuses

Federal prosecutions are likely to dredge up more of Port Authority's uncomfortable recent past



Former Port Authority official David Wildstein, right, leaves with his attorney after pleading guilty to his role in the lane closings at United States District Court in Newark, N.J., on Friday. *PHOTO: ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ANDREW TANGEL**

May 5, 2015 8:55 p.m. ET

Even as officials have declared that a “new day” has dawned at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, federal prosecutions stemming from the George Washington Bridge scandal are likely to dredge up more of the agency’s uncomfortable recent past.

The Port Authority has been buffeted by internal turmoil, investigations and intense public scrutiny for more than a year. All of it stemmed from the orchestrated closure of lanes leading to the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee, N.J., which choked the town with traffic.

After a wave of resignations and pledges of change, top Port Authority officials have since strained to bolster internal controls to prevent abuses and focus attention on improving transportation across the region.

But while the bridge-lane scandal may now generate fresh headlines, the cases could wind up boosting efforts to insulate the authority from the influence of elected officials.

“If nothing else, it’s going to keep politics, political pressures under control,” said Mitchell Moss, director of the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy & Management at New York University.

Federal prosecutors on Friday accused two former top Port Authority officials, along with a then-top aide to New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, of conspiring to shut down the bridge as political payoff for Fort Lee’s mayor declining to endorse Mr. Christie’s re-election bid, then engineering a coverup.

Indicted were Bill Baroni, a former deputy executive director at the authority, and Bridget Anne Kelly, Mr. Christie’s former deputy chief of staff. An attorney for Mr. Baroni said he was innocent; an attorney for Ms. Kelly said she was innocent. David Wildstein, a former Christie ally and authority official, pleaded guilty to two counts of conspiracy for his role in the alleged scheme.

The Port Authority said it had been working to rebuild the public’s trust and would review court documents to see what additional steps it might take to prevent similar abuses.

“There is more to be done, and we will continue to make the necessary changes to transform the Port Authority into a more open and accountable organization that the region deserves,” it said in a statement.

Political meddling by Albany and Trenton has been cited as a key contributor to the Port Authority’s problems, culminating in the bridge scandal.

In its aftermath, the Port Authority started retooling its internal practices. Those include how the agency runs its monthly meetings, responds to public-records requests and handles board members’ conflicts of interests. Authority officials also recently showcased what they billed as greater transparent financial reporting.

Late last year, the New York and New Jersey legislatures unanimously passed a set of Port Authority overhauls aimed at increasing transparency and oversight. But both states' governors vetoed the bills and instead endorsed their own changes, which included a restructuring of top positions that is aimed at reducing political pressure.

Any prosecution in the saga could provide a cautionary tale, said Jameson Doig, a Princeton University professor emeritus who wrote a book about the Port Authority.

Mr. Doig said criminal cases could provide a lesson to anyone trying to interfere with a public agency—"that they ought to back off and treat these agencies and their individual staff members with respect."

With an annual budget of about \$8 billion and about 7,000 employees, the Port Authority has enormous hand in the region's economy. In addition to the George Washington, the authority operates other major bridges and tunnels connecting New York and New Jersey.

It controls the PATH train between the two states, the World Trade Center site in lower Manhattan and shipping ports and airports in and around New York City.

The scandal surrounding the September 2013 bridge closures heated up in January 2014, when documents emerged showing Ms. Kelly suggested to Mr. Wildstein that it was "time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee."

Patrick Foye, a New York appointee who as executive director ordered the lanes in question reopened, said fixing the Port Authority's reputation won't be easy.

"A good deal of damage has been done to the good name of the Port by the actions of a few, and it is going to take a long time to repair that damage," Mr. Foye said in a statement before the criminal cases were announced.

Martin Robins, a former Port Authority official and director emeritus of the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University, was hopeful that any prosecutions eventually would restore public confidence in the agency.

"The cloud will lift step by step," Mr. Robins said.

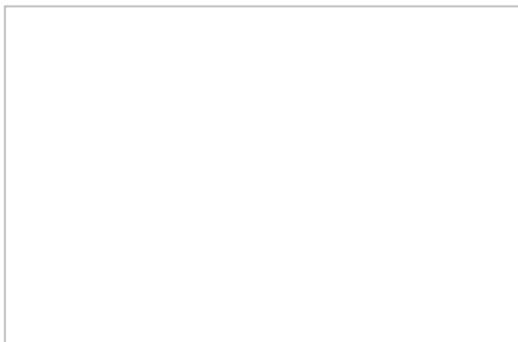
The Port Authority, meanwhile, has been focusing on big-ticket transportation projects such as replacing its eponymous Midtown Manhattan bus station and an aging terminal at La Guardia Airport. On Thursday, it plans to co-host a forum about expanding transportation across the Hudson River.

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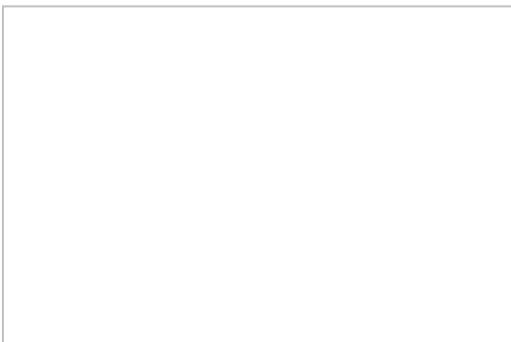
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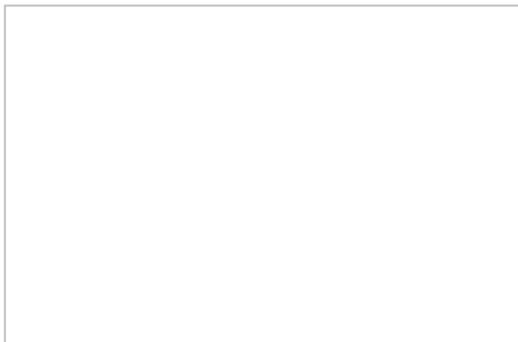
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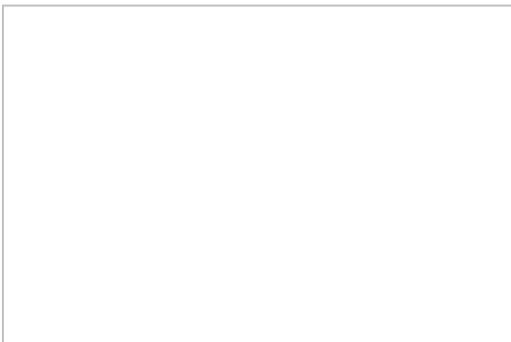
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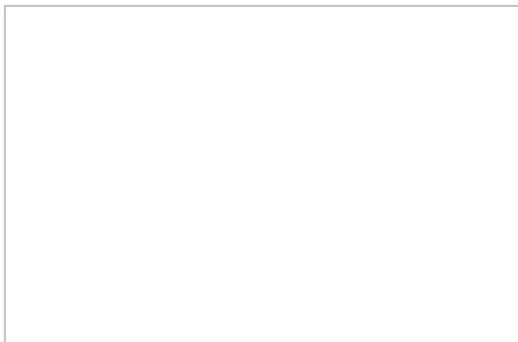
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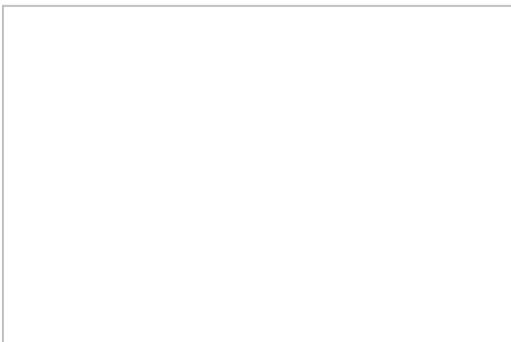
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