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New Drama at Port Authority

Governors' request for all 11 commissioners to tender resignations produces none so far



New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, left, and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By **ANDREW TANGEL**

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Commissioners of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey haven't offered their resignation letters nearly two months after the governors of both states requested them.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Dec. 27 called for all 11 Port Authority commissioners to tender their resignations, part of their efforts to overhaul the agency at the center of the September 2013 George Washington Bridge lane-closure scandal.

The resignation proposal was aimed as a way to gain assurances from commissioners that they would support what the governors heralded as "comprehensive and sweeping changes" recommended by a panel they appointed. The resignations are expected to be rejected if the commissioners embrace changes backed by the governors.

But the plan drew criticism by some Port Authority observers who said it could undermine the political independence of the board as the agency seeks to move on from

the bridge scandal and focus on transportation.

Port Authority commissioners haven't yet agreed on the terms of a draft resignation letter, said people familiar with the board's discussions.

One sticking point has been whether the offers to step down would expire on a certain date, or whether the governors could accept commissioners' undated resignation letters at any point, these people said.

At least two commissioners on the board have questioned whether they should even tender their resignations, said one of the people familiar with the board members' discussions.

"Most commissioners are prepared to sign a letter," said another person familiar with the discussions. "The question is, what does the letter say?"

Kenneth Lipper, a commissioner who heads a committee focused on retooling the authority's conflicts-of-interest and other governance policies, suggested resignation letters might be redundant, assuming the commissioners formally accept the reform proposals.

"It might or might not be necessary if everybody agrees in principle," Mr. Lipper said, adding the board hasn't yet discussed the topic as a group. "Nobody wants to have an exercise for its own sake."

Commissioners serve six-year terms after they are nominated by governors and then confirmed by their states' Senates.

Political influence over the Port Authority has been blamed for giving rise to the abuses that led to the September 2013 bridge scandal. The lane closures and other alleged abuses led to the resignations of top Port Authority officials and sparked probes by state legislators and prosecutors.

The governors announced their plans for Port Authority changes on the Saturday evening after Christmas. Messrs. Christie and Cuomo backed recommendations outlined in a 99-page report by the Special Panel on the Future of the Port Authority panel, whose members they appointed.

It wasn't clear whether the commissioners would publicly discuss offering to resign at a Port Authority board meeting on Thursday, the first since the governors announced their plans for changes at the agency. Commissioners are slated to vote on a resolution endorsing the special panel's plans in concept.

The measure would also establish an office within the authority to oversee implementation of the panel's recommendations.

The governors unveiled their plans at the same time they vetoed bills aimed at improving the Port Authority's management and transparency. The bills passed unanimously in both states, and their vetoes sparked widespread criticism in both statehouses.

New Jersey lawmakers have since begun mounting a push to override Mr. Christie's veto. In New York, where a new legislative session began this year, lawmakers are trying to pass their Port Authority bill once again.

A spokesman for Mr. Christie said his office would continue to work with Mr. Cuomo, the authority and legislators in putting in place the panel's recommendations.

"These are wholesale changes that simply won't happen overnight," the Christie spokesman said.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Cuomo didn't respond to a request for comment.

Mitchell Moss, director of the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy & Management at New York University, said more important than the governors' request for resignations was that the Port Authority commissioners had expertise in transportation and economic development and could provide independent oversight.

"The board of commissions is going to have to raise their game," Mr. Moss said.

On Thursday, the Port Authority's board is also expected to consider hiring a search firm to find a new Port Authority chief executive.

The governors' plans included doing away with the authority's bifurcated management structure, which includes an executive director from New York and a deputy executive director from New Jersey.

Deborah Gramiccioni, an appointee of Mr. Christie, stepped down as the authority's deputy executive director on Feb. 1.

Also unresolved is whether the Port Authority's board chairmanship would be split or rotate between the two states.

Write to Andrew Tangel at Andrew.Tangel@wsj.com

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