



Gov. Christie's Involvement in Bridge Lane Closures Inconclusive

The investigation into last year's controversial closing of lanes near the George Washington Bridge (connecting New Jersey and New York across the Hudson River) has found that a conclusion cannot be made regarding whether New Jersey Governor Chris Christie was aware of the plot to close the lanes. The bridge (shown) is said to be the busiest one in the world. The investigation's draft report, prepared by outside counsel, is scheduled to be formally released to the public following a meeting on Monday.



A panel of New Jersey lawmakers, led by Democratic Assemblyman John Wisniewski and Democratic Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg, has been conducting the investigation into the Port Authority's closing of two access lanes on the New Jersey side of the bridge in mid-September of 2013. The closing created a massive, weeklong traffic jam that blocked streets in Fort Lee. Police and lawmakers in Fort Lee were infuriated that they had not been notified of the lane closures, which delayed school buses, first responders, and commuters headed to New York City.

Shortly after the traffic jam, rumors began to circulate that the Port Authority's decision to close the lanes was politically motivated and intended to punish Fort Lee Mayor Mark Sokolich, a Democrat who had endorsed Governor Christie's opponent in the 2013 gubernatorial campaign.

Fox News reports,

Documents released earlier this year showed that [David] Wildstein, then an official at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, and [Anne] Kelly, then an aide to Christie, orchestrated the shutdown, apparently as retribution toward Fort Lee's Democratic mayor. In one email, Kelly told Wildstein, "Time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee."

Later, Wildstein stated that Christie knew about the lane closures — an assertion that Christie has adamantly denied.

Investigators have released a 136-page interim report that indicates there is no conclusive evidence of whether Christie was aware of the closures. The report states, however, that Wildstein and Kelly acted in disregard for public safety. The two aides acted with "perceived impunity" by closing the lanes, said the report, also noting that the Christie administration did not act quickly enough to resolve the closures.

The report undermines claims made by Port Authority officials, who stated that the lane closings were the result of a traffic study to measure the effect of closing two of Fort Lee's three access lanes to the bridge. Port Authority Deputy Director Bill Baroni — a Christie supporter — made that statement before the state Assembly Transportation Committee last November. The new report says there "is no evidence



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of a bona fide, professional managed traffic study. ... The record demonstrates that the purported study was, in fact, an excuse to cover up lane closures that were implemented for other reasons.”

But Christie’s role remains unclear. The committee “is not in a position currently to conclude what Governor Christie himself knew about the lane closures, or when and how his knowledge of these events developed,” according to the report. It added, “While there is evidence that the governor was informed of the lane closures while they were in progress, the committee cannot evaluate the reliability of this evidence as it has yet to hear from the witness — Wildstein — who has claimed to have contemporaneously told the governor of the closures.”

This is the second report to find no evidence of Christie’s involvement, the first being a report Christie commissioned that dismissed claims of wrongdoing on the New Jersey governor’s part.

In response to the latest report, Christie’s attorney Randy Mastro issued this statement:

The Committee has finally acknowledged what we reported nine months ago — namely, that there is not a shred of evidence Governor Christie knew anything about the GWB lane realignment beforehand or that any current member of his staff was involved in that decision.

Still, however, according to Fox News, the report will need to be supplemented, because a number of key witnesses did not testify, and some “important questions” have still not been answered. Clearly our work is not finished because we’ve not interviewed all the individuals we want to interview,” Wisniewski told *Bloomberg News*, though he would not specify whom the panel might call for questioning, or when.

NJ.com writes that the panel’s focus remains on why Kelly e-mailed Wildstein to say, “Time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee,” and if Kelly and Wildstein acted “entirely on their own initiative implementing the lane closures” or with the approval of someone else.

“Taken altogether, the evidence clearly suggests that the lane closures were intended as a punitive measure directed against Mayor Sokolich,” the report says. “What the Committee cannot say for certain is whether the closures were intended as retribution for the Mayor’s failure to endorse Governor Christie or for some other, unknown reason. Without current access to Kelly and Wildstein, and certain other witnesses and documents, the Committee remains unable to reach a definite conclusion as to what (and who) may have motivated them.”

Meanwhile, an investigation by the U.S. Attorney’s Office into the scandal is still in process.



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