



Charges Made in NJ Bridge Scandal Involving Governor Christie's Allies

Two people have been indicted and one person has pled guilty in the George Washington Bridge lane closures case that prompted a 16-month federal investigation into New Jersey Governor Chris Christie's administration.

The *New York Times* reports that Bill Baroni, former deputy executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, and Bridget Anne Kelly, former deputy chief of staff to Governor Chris Christie, were charged on multiple counts of conspiracy to commit fraud, including "knowingly converting and intentionally misapplying property of an organization receiving federal benefits."



"Throughout the course of the conspiracy, the conspirators concocted and promoted a sham story that reducing the number of lanes and toll booths accessible to the local approach was for a traffic study," the indictment charging Baroni and Kelly states.

Likewise, David Wildstein, a former Port Authority official and longtime ally of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, pled guilty on Friday to charges following the lengthy federal investigation into the George Washington Bridge lane closings. Wildstein ordered the closing of several access lanes to the bridge in September 2013 reportedly for the purpose of political retribution.

On Friday, Wildstein admitted to U.S. District Judge Susan Wigenton that he conspired with Baroni and Kelly in August 2013 to punish the Fort Lee mayor by reducing two of the three local access lanes connecting Fort Lee traffic with the bridge, and that he, Baroni, and Kelly had selected "to maximize the traffic congestion" by closing the lanes on the first few days of the school year.

A number of investigations had been launched into the Port Authority's decision to close 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.

The *New York Times* reports, "Documents later revealed that officials in the Christie administration and at the authority, which runs the bridge, purposely ignored communications from the town's mayor that pleaded with them to reopen the lanes and questioned whether he was being punished."



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Officials defended the closings for months, alleging they had been part of a traffic study, but that story was undermined by testimony from bridge workers before the State Legislature in December 2013.

The indictment against Kelly and Baroni references the efforts to cover-up the real reason for the lane closures. "The conspirators concocted and promoted a sham story that reducing the number of lanes and tollbooths accessible to the local approach was for a traffic study," according to the indictment. The story, the indictment states, was invented "to conceal the conspirators' true punitive purpose."

In 2014, subpoenaed documents uncovered damning e-mails from Kelly.

Fox News reported at the time,

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."

Wildstein's response to Kelly was, "Got it."

Later, Wildstein stated that Christie knew about the lane closures — an assertion that Christie has adamantly denied. But Wildstein has insisted that other "evidence exists" that Christie knew about the closings as they occurred.

On Friday, Wildstein's lawyer, Alan Zegas, reiterated these assertions. "There is a lot more that will come out," he said. "Unfortunately, I am not in a position to talk about the matter in detail." Zegas also stated that Wildstein "deeply regrets" what occurred, and that he intends to "shed truth on what occurred during the course of that week, what led to the events, and what ensued thereafter."

According to Paul J. Fishman, the federal prosecutor, Wildstein's charges could have warranted 15 years in prison, but that guidelines call for a much shorter sentence of 16 to 27 months, particularly as Wildstein is being fully cooperative in the investigation.

Meanwhile, other investigations into the scandal have failed to connect Christie to the lane closures. An [internal investigation conducted at the direction of the governor himself](#) had exonerated Christie of any guilt, instead blaming the bridge scheme on a rogue "black ops" operation devised by those involved in Christie's gubernatorial reelection campaign.

A special committee investigating Christie's involvement in the scandal also found no evidence tying Christie to the lane closures. According to the committee's 136-page report, there was "no conclusive evidence as to whether Governor Chris Christie was or was not aware of the lane closures either in advance of their implementation or contemporaneously as they were occurring."

However, State Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg and Assembly Deputy Speaker John Wisniewski, the cochairs of the committee, said the report left open key questions about Christie's behavior.

Senator Weinberg issued a statement in response to Friday's indictments on the steps of the statehouse in Trenton. "It was sickening to know that there are people who were in jobs and in positions of great responsibility" who willingly conspired to shut down access lanes for political retaliation against the mayor, she said.

Assemblyman Wisniewski, who stood beside Senator Weinberg, said that Wildstein's plea is not cause for celebration. "This is a not a day of vindication," he said. "It's a sad day when individuals who were



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given a high degree of trust by the people of the state of New Jersey, abused that trust so completely.”

And while Democratic lawmakers have not yet remarked on the Christie’s involvement in the scandal, Wisniewski seemed to take a jab at the governor. “There are a lot of people who have tried to shirk responsibility for this,” he said, when asked about Christie. “At least one person,” he added.

Whether any of this will effect Christie’s expected announcement for a 2016 presidential bid remains unknown.



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