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A Readers' Guide to the George Washington Bridge Scandal Trial

Trial of Bridget Kelly and Bill Baroni is expected to last six weeks



Traffic approaching the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee, N.J. In 2013, massive traffic jams ensued when access lanes to the bridge were closed in what prosecutors say was a scheme to punish the mayor of Fort Lee for not endorsing Gov. Chris Christie. PHOTO: DREW ANGERER/GETTY IMAGES

By **CORINNE RAMEY**

Sept. 17, 2016 5:30 a.m. ET

On Aug. 13, 2013, Bridget Kelly, a top aide to New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, emailed a Port Authority official, writing: “Time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee.” About a month later, during the first week of school, some local access lanes and toll booths on the Fort Lee side of the George Washington Bridge were closed, creating a five-day traffic jam and ensuing political scandal.

Now the trial of Ms. Kelly, former deputy chief of staff to Mr. Christie, and Bill Baroni, former deputy executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, is set to begin. Opening statements are scheduled for Monday in U.S. District Court in Newark, N.J., and the judge has indicated the trial will last six weeks.

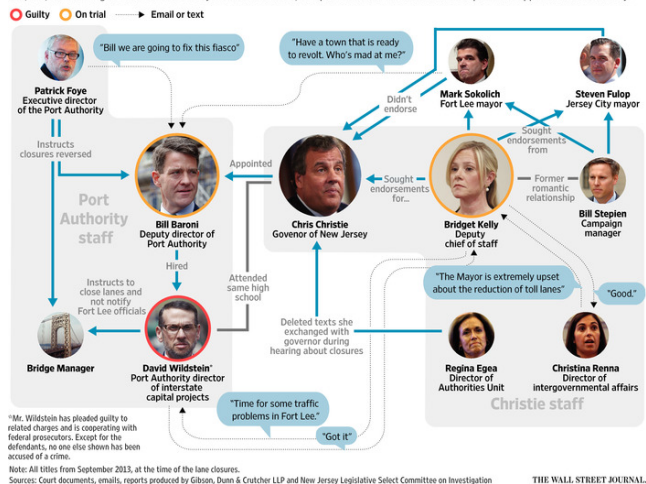
Here is a readers' guide to the trial based on conversations with defense attorneys and former federal prosecutors experienced in public-corruption cases.

The Alleged Scheme

Prosecutors say that for five days in September 2013, the defendants

Portrait of a Traffic Jam

Bridget Kelly and Bill Baroni are accused of a scheme to close lanes to the George Washington Bridge to punish the Democratic mayor of Fort Lee, N.J., for declining to endorse New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican. Here are some names expected to appear in trial testimony.



orchestrated a scheme to punish the mayor of Fort Lee by snarling traffic in the borough, which sits at the foot of the George Washington Bridge. The Democratic mayor, Mark Sokolich, had declined to endorse Mr. Christie, a Republican, for re-election.

The Charges

A nine-count federal indictment charges both defendants with conspiracy to obtain by fraud, knowingly convert and intentionally misapply property of an organization receiving federal benefits; obtaining these benefits by fraud; conspiracy to commit wire fraud; four counts of wire fraud; conspiracy against civil rights; and deprivation of civil rights.

These charges are uncommon for public-corruption cases, most of which include some sort of quid pro quo or abuse of government power for personal gain.

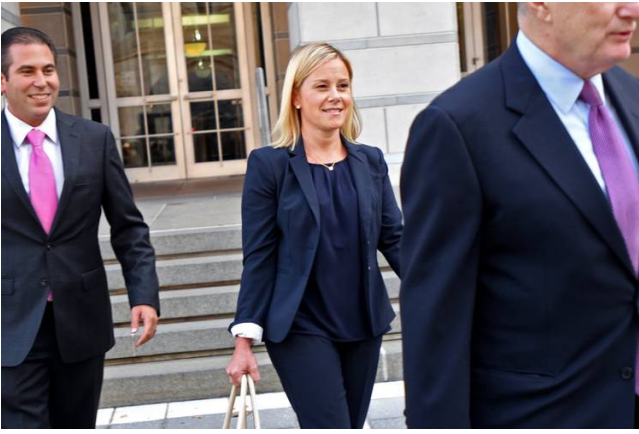
“Before the case was charged a lot of legal experts were scratching their heads,” said Jennifer Rodgers, executive director of Columbia Law School’s Center for the Advancement of Public Integrity. “There wasn’t an obvious charge for messing with traffic on the GW bridge.”

The Evidence

Numerous emails and text messages are likely to be used by both sides. Witnesses are expected to include officials at the Port Authority and members of Mr. Christie’s administration at the time. Much of the evidence expected to be presented at the trial hasn’t been made public.

The Star Witness

David Wildstein, a former ally of Mr. Christie, pleaded guilty to two conspiracy counts last year and is cooperating with federal



Bridget Kelly formerly served as deputy chief of staff to Gov. Chris Christie. PHOTO: CHRIS PEDOTA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

prosecutors. “He’ll be presented as an insider’s look into this conspiracy,” said Robert Mintz, a former federal prosecutor in New Jersey. While Mr. Wildstein will likely provide a road map to the alleged scheme, the government is unlikely to rest its entire case on him, he added.

One unusual aspect of the case is that Mr. Wildstein was arguably at the center of the conspiracy, which is uncommon for a cooperating witness, and the two defendants’ alleged roles were more tangential. Prosecutors say Mr. Wildstein, a former Port Authority official, told a manager to close tollbooths and lanes but not notify Fort Lee officials.

Defense attorneys, who have previously described Mr. Wildstein as a habitual liar, will likely try to undermine his credibility. A lawyer representing Mr. Wildstein didn’t comment on the allegation that his client is a liar.

The Prosecution

Federal prosecutors will likely keep their case tightly focused on the defendants. They may portray the lane closures as part of a pattern of conduct.

The judge has permitted evidence related to actions allegedly intended to punish the Democratic mayor of Jersey City, who also didn’t endorse Mr. Christie, and a text message with the “traffic problems” phrasing.

“We cannot cause traffic problems in front of his house, can we?” Ms. Kelly wrote to Mr. Wildstein, referring to a rabbi who was a Port Authority chaplain. Mr. Wildstein replied, “Flights to Tel Aviv all mysteriously delayed.”

The Defense

Lawyers for the defendants may argue Mr. Baroni and Ms. Kelly had



Bill Baroni, center, is a former deputy executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. PHOTO: MEL EVANS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

no intent to violate the law. In other words, joking about traffic may indicate a terrible sense of humor, but the defendants' intentions didn't extend beyond political high jinks. "Political mischief, even if distasteful or embarrassing, does not always rise to the level of criminal conduct," said criminal-defense attorney Benjamin Brafman, who isn't involved in the case.

Another possible argument, that the two were following orders, isn't a legal defense but can appeal to a jury, said defense attorney Elizabeth Crotty.

"They'll say, 'Why are you going after these two political operatives when it goes so much higher?'" she said.

The Christie Factor

Mr. Christie hasn't been charged with wrongdoing and has denied knowledge of the closures. But the trial is expected to provide an inside look at the workings of his administration at the time.

In a television interview last week, Mr. Christie said he had been thoroughly investigated. "No one has ever been able to prove that I knew anything or had any role in this," he said. "And this trial will just confirm that."

If You Go

The trial is open to the public, although the courtroom is expected to be extremely crowded. People coming from Manhattan who use the George Washington Bridge won't get there any faster, but will get a look at the scene of the alleged crime and the lanes and toll booths in question.

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