

Internal emails released Wednesday strongly suggest that a top aide to New Jersey Republican Gov. Chris Christie orchestrated massive traffic problems in Fort Lee, New Jersey, last fall as an act of political retribution against the city's Democratic mayor. For months, Christie and his administration have denied allegations that road closures in Fort Lee were politically motivated. The emails, released as part of an investigation by Democratic state legislators, could spiral into a major political scandal for Christie, a possible 2016 presidential candidate. Here's what you need to know.

How'd this begin? In mid-September, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey unexpectedly closed two access lanes on the New Jersey side of the George Washington Bridge, which spans the Hudson River and serves as a major commuter route between the two states. A massive, weeklong traffic jam ensued, clogging the streets of nearby Fort Lee.

Cops and lawmakers in Fort Lee said they were given no warning about the decision to close the lanes, which delayed school buses, first responders, and commuters bound for New York City. The Port Authority justified its decision by saying it was conducting a "traffic study."

Why is this political? Soon after the traffic jam, rumors emerged that the Port Authority closed the bridge lanes as political retribution against Fort Lee Mayor Mark Sokolich, a Democrat who endorsed Gov. Chris Christie's opponent in the 2013 gubernatorial campaign. As news outlets and New Jersey Democrats dug deeper into the circumstances of the bridge incident, they eventually connected the lane closures to two Port Authority officials with close ties to Christie: Bill Baroni, the deputy executive director of the agency, and David Wildstein, its director of interstate capital projects. Baroni and Wildstein have since resigned, and both men have retained criminal defense attorneys.

All along, the Christie administration had denied any connection to the decision to close the bridge lanes. In September, a Christie spokesman called the retribution claim "crazy." Christie told reporters at a December press conference that the Fort Lee traffic snarl was "absolutely, unequivocally not" a result of political score-settling.

What's new today? In response to a subpoena, Wildstein provided a bevy of emails sent by Christie's staff to a panel of state lawmakers investigating the road closures. The messages fly in the face of many of the claims Christie has made about the lane closures. Wildstein will testify about the documents before that panel on Thursday.

The messages, traded between several members of Christie's senior staff, his campaign manager, and his deputy chief of staff, were sent mostly from staffers' private accounts and did not loop in Christie. They strongly suggest that members of Christie's inner circle planned the lane closures as political retaliation against Sokolich. Other top Christie associates included in the email chain after the lanes were reopened include David Samson, the chairman of the Port Authority, and Michael Drewniak, Christie's spokesman. The emails contradict repeated statements by Christie that neither his staff nor anyone from his campaign was involved with the lane closures.

The messages also lay bare Christie's staff's gleeful anticipation of Fort Lee's traffic debacle. On the day of the lane closures and in the aftermath, Christie's top aids privately traded jabs at Fort Lee's mayor and mocked the town's residents as they struggled to deal with the traffic.

What are the highlights? "Time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee," Bridget Anne Kelly, a top Christie aide, wrote in an email to Wildstein. "Got it," Wildstein replied.

One text message sent to Wildstein on the day of the lane closures referenced mass school bus delays. "Is it wrong that I'm smiling?" the message read.

"No," Wildstein wrote.

"I feel badly about the kids. I guess," the person, who is unidentified, texted back.

Wildstein replied, "They are the children of Buono voters." Barbara Buono was the Democratic challenger to Christie who lost handily to the governor last November.

Numerous messages mock Fort Lee's mayor as he scrambled to learn the reason behind the closures from the Port Authority and spoke publicly about the closures in the aftermath. In one email sent the day of the closures, Wildstein assures Kelly that the Port Authority was responding to Sokolich with "Radio silence."

As Sokolich began speaking to press after the closures, Bill Sepien, Christie's campaign manager wrote, "The mayor is an idiot."

"It will be a tough November for this little Serbian," Wildstein wrote to Sepien, apparently referencing Sokolich's nationality. Elsewhere in the documents, Bill Baroni, the deputy executive director of the Port Authority, refers to Sokolich as "Serbian." Sokolich is Croatian.

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