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## Fed, State Probes Sought On Port Auth. Financials

REGION — The release of the first part of an audit on the operation of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey has caused politicians in Trenton and Washington to chime in on the scathing report. Among news accounts are that the World Trade Center project is \$48 million over budget.

New Jersey Governor Chris Christie and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo ordered the audit after the Pa. raised tolls \$4.50 through 2015 to a new toll of \$12.50 for EZPass users on bridges and tunnels and a \$6.50 hike to \$14.50 by 2015 for cash-paying customers using the Lincoln and Holland tunnels, the Outerbridge Crossing and the Goethals, Bayonne and George Washington bridges. In addition, the fare on PATH trains is increasing increase 25 cents a year to \$2.75 by 2015. The current tolls are \$9.50 with EZPass at peak and \$12 for cars on bridges and tunnels. The tolls were originally to be increased all at once, but the two governors ordered a phased-in approach.

According to news reports, the first part of an audit report by Navigant Consulting has found the Port Authority is "challenged and dysfunctional" with total compensation for employees averaging \$143,000, an amount that includes salary, overtime, and healthcare and pension benefits.

Following the release of the report the U.S. Senate approved a federal transportation bill that includes a provision introduced by Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) that would direct the U.S. Comptroller General to look into transparency and accountability issues at the Pa., thus permitting the authority to become the focus of a federal probe.

At the state level, Assemblyman

John Wisniewski (D-Middlesex), chairman of Assembly Transportation, Public Works and Independent Authorities Committee and state Democratic chairman, is seeking to have the committee granted subpoena power to order documents and testimony from Port Authority officials. The Assembly approved the resolution (AR-61) in a party-line vote.

"This step was made necessary by the Port Authority's sheer hubris and failure to respond to basic questions about its operations," Asm. Wisniewski said. "It hid information on its painful toll increase, wastes money on overtime, stacks its payroll with political cronies, fails to respond to public records requests and tried to obfuscate it all by declining hearing invitations. It's time to get straight answers once and for all."

In addition, Assemblywoman Vainieri Huttel (D-37, Englewood) and New York State Senator Andrew Lanza are seeking a bi-state probe of the agency and a rollback of the toll hike imposed last September.

Meanwhile, Assemblyman Dave Rible (R-30, Wall Twp.) has questioned the number of investigations on the Port Authority. "Within the last week, there is news of a joint bi-state hearing with New York, an Assembly resolution giving a committee subpoena power, and a potential federal probe. That is more than a coincidence, especially when the Assembly resolution and U.S. Senate bill are being pushed by Democrats."

"They can dress up these inquiries anyway they want, but in the end, the motivation behind them remains purely political. The goal should be a fair and objective evaluation of the authority, not one that is slanted," Asm. Rible said.



## Peyton's Peek at the Week In Politics

By Paul Peyton of *The Leader/Times*

### New Jersey Among Least Corruptible States

New Jersey is the least corruptible U.S. state, according to a report by the Center for Public Integrity. New Jersey merited a B-plus, the highest grade, ahead of Connecticut, which earned a B, and Washington, California and Nebraska, which each received B-minus. Nineteen states received C's and 18 received D's while eight states received failing grades, according to news reports.

State Senator Loretta Weinberg (D-37, Teaneck) told Bloomberg News that Governor Chris Christie, the former U.S. attorney for New Jersey, deserves credit and that ethics and transparency laws signed by former Democratic Governor Jon Corzine have changed the corruption culture in Trenton.

### Legislation Would Make Pol. Favors a Jailable Crime

Assemblymen Greg McGuckin and Dave Wolfe (both R-10, Brick) have introduced legislation making it a second-degree crime for potential candidates who promise to provide future favors or consideration to an individual if they are elected to office. A second-degree crime is punishable by a term of five to 10 years in prison and a fine of up to \$150,000, or both.

They said the recent federal court decision that dismissed all extortion and bribery charges against Jersey City mayoral candidate Louis Manzo because the bribery statute does not apply to those seeking office is what prompted the bill.

### Menendez Seeks to Have U.S. Produced Oil Stay in America

U.S. Senator Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) has sponsored the American Oil for American Families Act that would

require more oil that is produced in the United States to stay here in the U.S. and help reduce prices at the pump.

"For the first time since 1949, the U.S. is exporting more oil products than it imports," Sen. Menendez said at a recent news conference in Hoboken.

The average price for a gallon of gas in New Jersey is \$3.60, according to AAA. That's up 45 cents since January 1, 2012. Many experts predict prices could reach over \$4 by summer.

### Kaptur Beats Kucinich, Will Face 'Joe The Plumber'

Veteran Democratic Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich lost a congressional primary bid on March 6 to Rep. Marcy Kaptur. Rep. Kucinich has served in the House for 16 years. The primary fight was the result of the redistricting of Ohio's ninth congressional district. Ms. Kaptur defeated Mr. Kucinich by 24 percentage points.

She will now face Samuel "Joe the Plumber" Wurzelbacher, who made headlines in 2008 when GOP Presidential nominee John McCain heralded him as an average small business owner.

### Blagojevich Begins 14-Year Jail Sentence In Colorado

Former Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich has entered a federal prison in Colorado to start serving his 14-year sentence for corruption, highlighted by his attempt to sell the U.S. Senate seat previously occupied by President Barack Obama. He will have to serve a minimum of 12 years.

## Kean to Sweeney: Negotiate With GOP on Tax Relief

WESTFIELD — Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-3, Gloucester) has proposed a 10 percent reduction on property taxes.

Mr. Sweeney said the proposal would reduce the property tax burden of New Jerseyans earning less than \$250,000 a year. Renters would receive \$200 a year.

The Senator said a family earning the state's median income of \$69,811 with property taxes at the state average of \$7,758 would save \$775 annually.

"Under the governor's proposed income tax scheme (a 10 percent income tax cut over three years), they would save just \$97.78; while a

millionaire would get a \$7,265 tax break and those earning \$3 million would save \$25,200 a year," Sen. Sweeney said. Details of the plan can be viewed at [www.realreliefnj.net](http://www.realreliefnj.net). "Governor Christie would rather focus on giving millionaires another tax break that they don't need. The governor can't even bring himself to utter the words 'property taxes,' as it would be admitting that the middle class is paying 20 percent more under his watch."

Senate Republican Leader Tom Kean, Jr. (R-21, Westfield) said Sen. Sweeney's "about-face on middle class tax relief is welcome, but needs improvement in a bi-partisan fashion like we achieved on the historic 2 percent property tax cap."

"With a large majority of small businesses paying taxes at personal income tax rates and 9 percent unemployment, we cannot lose sight of income taxes that are higher than Pennsylvania, New York and Delaware," Sen. Kean said. "It is impossible to be in favor of attracting good, high paying jobs but against listening to the advice of job creators who say the income tax is a problem that prevents them from hiring and expanding."

"Property taxes can only be lowered by giving mayors and school boards the tools necessary to get costs under control and to ensure a fairer distribution of education funding. We can find common ground if the Senate President abandons his vow not to negotiate and instead works with Republicans and the Governor on a tax relief plan that addresses the needs of all New Jerseyans," Sen. Kean said.

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