Rutgers responds to NJ ‘Bridgegate’ controversy

By Katie Park / Correspondent

Since the beginning of the new year, New Jersey politics has been consumed by a scandal now known as “Bridgegate.”

From Sept. 9 to Sept. 12, 2013, two of the three lanes on the George Washington Bridge connecting Fort Lee, N.J. to New York City were shut down without warning on orders from David Wildstein, an aide of Gov. Chris Christie who had been appointed to a senior post at the Port Authority.

The unexpected closures were attributed to an ongoing traffic study at the time, according to records exchanged between Bridget Anne Kelly, Gov. Christie’s former Deputy Chief of Staff, Wildstein and Michael Drewniak, Gov. Christie’s spokesman.

On Oct. 1, 2013, Ted Mann, a transportation reporter for the Wall Street Journal, first aroused speculation that the lane closures were an act of political retribution against Mayor Mark Sokolich of Fort Lee. In response to the accusations, Gov. Christie denied that he had any prior knowledge of the closures.

Ruth Mandel, director of the Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics, said the scandal transcends into a national story because it hints at more problems than a simple traffic jam.

“There are questions and interests about power relationships, leadership, political ambitions and loyalty,” she said.

She said the scandal also raises questions about the relationship between politics and the media.

“It’s a case study in politics, power and investigative journalism. There’s so much to learn from following this as it unfolds,” she said.

Linda Stamato, co-director for the Center for Negotiation and Conflict Resolution at the University, commented on Gov. Christie and the Port Authority’s exercising of power during the scandal, according to her editorial in The Star-Ledger.

“With Bridgegate, clearly, it’s time for a rigorous assessment of the Port Authority’s structure, operations and accountability,” she said in the article. “While its existence remains essential — regional approaches will become even more paramount in the future — its integrity must be restored.”

The Port Authority, as a public agency, is neglecting to focus its attention on the public by making its operations transparent, according to the article.

“Governors have an obligation to see that allegiance to them is not the sole or even the primary condition for their appointment,” she said. “Authorities, after all, are set up to serve the public interest.”

Ross Baker, a distinguished professor in the Department of Political Science, said the scandal would reshape much of Gov. Christie’s administration, at least in the short term.

“This episode revealed some deep, dark secrets about Gov. Christie’s immediate circle, about those closest to him,” he said.

Adjustments to the management of the Port Authority are not as clear, he said.

“Things are really up in the air, and I wouldn’t hazard a prediction about what things are going to look like in a year,” Baker said.

Although the Republican presidential primaries are two years away, he said the scandal will likely stick to Gov. Christie if he runs, as many pundits predict.

The scandal will not necessarily forecast his success as a candidate, Mandel said, but it will most certainly affect his decision-making for the presidency.

“How [the scandal] unfolds in the weeks and months ahead and where it ends will say everything about where the governor ends up — that is, his image and effectiveness in the second term, as well as his presidential aspirations,” she said.

Gov. Christie is a larger-than-life figure that controls the ring of politics in the state, she said. A scandal such as this renders his future political prospects uncertain, whether he remains in New Jersey or not.