

New Jersey Transportation Chief Steps Down Amid Federal Investigation

By Tribune News Service

By Andrew Seidman

When Jamie Fox joined the Christie administration last fall as transportation commissioner, he sought to accomplish something that had eluded policymakers in Trenton for years: securing a long-term plan to fund New Jersey's road, bridge, and rail projects.

But a tenure that began with high expectations ended abruptly Friday amid scrutiny related to a federal probe into the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey's relationship with United Airlines, for which Fox used to lobby.

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And so in an ironic political twist, Fox, a beloved Democratic operative, appears to be the latest casualty of a Democrat-led investigation into the George Washington Bridge lane-closure scandal, which spawned several other probes into the Port Authority, including the one involving United.

United's CEO and two other top executives were forced to resign last month after the airline completed an internal investigation. Two former allies of Gov. Christie's have been charged in the bridge scheme, and another has pleaded guilty. Prosecutors allege that Christie's allies closed lanes at the bridge to retaliate against a Democratic mayor's refusal to endorse Christie's 2013 reelection.

Adding to the intrigue: Fox tried to halt the legislative probe into the lane closures before the scandal exploded in 2014, according to a source and a report last week by WNYC.

Beyond the bridge case, prosecutors are said to be investigating a special flight initiated by United for the Port Authority's former chairman, David Samson. The office of U.S. Attorney Paul Fishman also issued subpoenas to the agency seeking records involving United's flights to and from Atlantic City International Airport.

Statements released by Christie and Fox on Friday said the commissioner was leaving to return to the private sector.

David Redlawsk, a political science professor at Rutgers, said it may be better for Christie to dispense with distractions now while his presidential campaign isn't attracting much attention.

"It seemed like a shoe that was going to drop and may be better to drop now rather than later," Redlawsk said.

Even as Fox's name appeared in a slew of negative headlines last week, he was likely frustrated on another front, those close to him said: a lack of political will to raise revenue to fund transportation, in large part because of Christie's hard line against tax increases.

While Fox was considered by friends and Statehouse observers as a great political "chess player," he didn't seem to anticipate Christie's moves.

"A lot of people have asked: 'Why have I done this? Why did I come back to DOT?' " Fox, who previously served as Gov. Jim McGreevey's transportation commissioner, told a gathering at Rowan University in late 2014.

The answer, in part: "It's a special place. Most bureaucracies in government wake up and say, 'How am I going to say no today?' " he said. At the Transportation Department, he said, "they wake up and say, 'Given the money, what can we build today?' That's a big difference."

Fox characterized the lack of transportation funding as a crisis. Christie, a Republican, rejected that notion and recently signed an antitax pledge as he pursues the presidency.

Fox is known as a confident, tough negotiator. But "he's a Nervous Nelly," said State Sen. Richard J. Codey, a former governor. "Despite his ability to get things done and move government ahead, he's worried about it. Like, big time. Chain smoker."

Stymied on policy, Fox also was dogged by questions related to the federal investigation.

Before joining the administration, Fox lobbied for United, facilitating communications between the airline and the Port Authority, which operates the region's airports. His firm reported more than \$700,000 in total receipts in 2014.

Crucial to pulling Fox back into government, say those who know him well, was his close friend Samson, the agency's former chairman. Prosecutors are investigating the circumstances surrounding United's decision to initiate a money-losing route from Newark to an airport in South Carolina near Samson's vacation home. Fishman has subpoenaed Port Authority records of communications with United executives "and/or lobbyists," according to agency financial documents.

Samson's lawyer has described news reports about the flight as inaccurate.

Fox, who as Christie's transportation commissioner also served as chair of the authority that manages the Atlantic City airport, participated in a meeting last November during which the agency's board decided not to try to recoup \$104,000 it spent to market United's flights there, even though the airline had violated an agreement to stay for one year. The authority did keep nearly \$116,000 from an escrow account. Fox's spokesman says

the commissioner didn't play a role in the decision related to his former client and did nothing unethical.

Fox, who cut his teeth in politics in the Senate Democratic caucus in the 1980s, served as chief of staff to McGreevey before the governor resigned in disgrace in 2004 amid a patronage scandal and an extramarital affair.

He was also a top lieutenant to U.S. Sen. Robert Torricelli, whose 2002 reelection bid fell apart over an ethics scandal. By that time, however, Fox had joined the McGreevey administration.

That Fox even worked for McGreevey is somewhat remarkable, given that Fox helped Torricelli briefly challenge McGreevey for the Democratic nomination for governor in 2000.

"I've met very few people that are as shrewd, smart, and know where the lines are when it comes to politics," said Dale Florio, a lobbyist with Princeton Public Affairs Group Inc. and former longtime chairman of the Somerset County GOP.

Florio and others said they couldn't imagine Fox compromising state ethical standards.

Speaking to the Rowan crowd last year, Fox said: "Public service is really part of who I am. It's just part of my makeup. . . . I was in government for a long time. And I missed it. I wanted to be part of a team that brought DOT back to its heyday."

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