

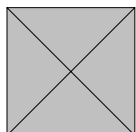
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Changes at GWB take toll on drivers

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The Port Authority, which runs the George Washington Bridge, cut the number of tollbooths from three to one on the big span and narrowed the traffic patterns on its approaches from two Fort Lee streets. Instead of three lanes, the approach from Bruce Reynolds Boulevard and Martha Washington Way funnels down to one lane that leads to a combination cash-and-E-ZPass tollbooth.



AMY NEWMAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER **A man got out of his vehicle to see what the backup**

was at the toll on the George Washington Bridge from Bruce Reynolds Boulevard.

"Other than after the 9/11 attacks, I've never seen such a fiasco of delays at the inbound, upper-level part of the bridge," said Ridgefield's Mildred Van Zwaren, who teaches in upper Manhattan. Driving south from Tenafly to the George Washington Bridge has never been an easy rush-hour ride, but at least Claude Lewin could take solace in knowing that the slow journey through Fort Lee and across the span to his Manhattan job was less time-consuming than it is for those who live farther west.

"Maybe 30 or 35 minutes," Lewin said. But not this week. "Two hours and 15 minutes!" he said of his Monday commute — a little less for Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, but not much less.

The reason: The Port Authority, which runs the bridge, cut the number of tollbooths from three to one on the big span and narrowed the traffic patterns on its approaches from two Fort Lee streets. Instead of three lanes, the approach from Bruce Reynolds Boulevard and Martha Washington Way funnels down to one lane that leads to a combination cash-andE-ZPass toll booth.

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"Ludicrous!" shouted Cresskill reader Chuck Ciocco. "Chronic delays like these destroy one of the two main reasons that most of us moved to this area — great schools and a short commute."

Why would the Port purposely quadruple commuting time for some of the people who live closest to one of the nation's busiest bridges?

Port officials aren't saying much more than this brief statement from spokesman Chris Valens: "The Port ... is reviewing traffic safety patterns at the ... bridge to ensure proper placement of toll lanes."

This was news to Keith Bendul and Mark Sokolich.

"It's not true," said Bendul, who is chief of the Fort Lee Police Department. "We first heard about this at 7:15 Monday morning, It was the first day of school. Our parents now have to get up an hour and a half early to get their kids to class. We couldn't clear all the residual traffic until 11:30."

Sokolich, who is Fort Lee's mayor, seemed even more perplexed than his police chief or the angry commuters who were jamming his borough hall telephone line.

"I've asked the Port for an explanation, but they haven't responded," said the Democrat. "I thought we had a good relationship. Now I'm beginning to wonder if there's something I did wrong. Am I being sent some sort of message?"

When dealing with the Port Authority, the bi-state monolith that has been accused of hiding its political rationales for hiking tolls, hiring cronies and nearly giving away the naming rights to one of its biggest assets, it doesn't take much to get the rumor mill going. The Road Warrior phone was ringing all Thursday afternoon with equal numbers of calls from road-weary bridge commuters and conspiracy theorists who insisted that the Port was punishing Sokolich — either for failing to endorse Governor Christie's election bid or for pushing through a \$500 million, 47-story high-rise housing development near the bridge, or for failing to support the Port's last toll hike.

"Those two tollbooths were purposely closed without notice to anyone," said a source close to the situation. "There is absolutely no legitimate traffic-safety rationale for this change."

Chief Bendul, too, had trouble understanding the move.

"On Monday while all this was going on, we had to contend with a missing 4-year-old, a cardiac arrest requiring an ambulance and a car running up against a building," he said. "What would happen if there was a very serious accident?"

During "four days of gridlock," he added, "we've been asking the Port Authority what problem they've

been trying to fix, and so far we haven't gotten any answers."

In an email, Valens insisted that Port police have "been in contact with Fort Lee throughout the transition." But the Port spokesman did not respond to questions about the nature of the improvements to "traffic safety" that he said the agency is trying to achieve. Typically, reductions in tollbooths are directly related to austerity — namely cuts in collectors who staff the booths — not safety.

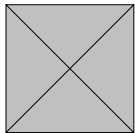
The lack of communications marks a direct break with a tradition of cooperation, Bendul said.

"Normally, we have good relations with the New Jersey command of the Port Authority police," said the chief, "but they tell us they don't know what's going on either."

Sokolich said he had written and phoned at least one Port Authority official for an explanation, to no avail. He would not name the official except to call him "a highly placed individual who has always been helpful to us."

"Please print this," the mayor noted. "I'm always proud and pleased with this administration even though I didn't support the toll increases. So I don't understand the basis for this. Is there a punitive overtone here? Is there something we should have done? I just don't know."

Long delays reach well beyond politics, said the Cresskill commuter Ciocco, who is attempting to organize political support for restoring the tollbooths. He said the delays could have a long-term effect on regional growth.



"Developers are putting up two big residential buildings near the bridge in Fort Lee, and one of the biggest selling points for living there is a short commute," Ciocco said. "But if the trip to work is longer than it would be for living farther away, who would want to live there?"