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Ex-blogger is Governor Christie's eyes and ears inside the Port Authority

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For a decade, he was a faceless force in New Jersey politics, an Internet blogger who delivered scoops while keeping his identity a closely guarded secret.

Now, David Wildstein, formerly known by the pen name Wally Edge, is playing a key behind-the-scenes role in Governor Christie's effort to get more control over the Port Authority, the bi-state transportation agency that has come under increased scrutiny since raising bridge and tunnel tolls in September.

The Port Authority, criticized as wasteful and dysfunctional, is the largest and most complex agency yet to be singled out by Christie as being in need of reform. And in Wildstein, an experienced political strategist who went to high school with the governor, the Christie administration may have found the perfect instrument to help shake things up, some say.


Longtime employees, however, privately describe a man intent on carrying out a political agenda rather than one built on reform or improving the region's transportation system. They believe the appointment of Wildstein and dozens of others recommended by the governor ♦ for jobs ranging from toll collector to deputy executive director ♦ are evidence that political loyalty trumps merit.

To Christie, though, they are needed to bring about change. And Wildstein figures prominently in that effort.

♦ He is there in that job because he is well suited to the task of playing a role in reforming the Port Authority in accordance with the governor's goals, ♦ said Christie's spokes♦man, Michael Drewniak.

Once an ambitious and brash young local politician, Wildstein now stays in the shadows, seldom attending the agency's public events or appearing in the news.

He did the same while building an Internet site, PolitickerNJ.com, which grabbed the attention of Trenton insiders and the traditional media. Wildstein launched the site while holding a day job ♦ running his family's floor mat manufacturing business. The Christie administration exposed Wally Edge's true identity when it tapped Wildstein for the newly created

 Yearbook photos of Chris Christie and David Wildstein from Livingston High School

Yearbook photos of Chris Christie and David Wildstein from Livingston High School

position of interstate capital projects director in May 2010.

At a recent public meeting of the agency's commissioners in Manhattan, he stood at the back of the conference room, next to the exit doors and behind rows of agency executives. When a reporter asked him about his job, past experience and relationship to the governor, he smiled and referred each question to the media relations office. Why, he was asked, would he not talk about his role at the agency?

“Because I don’t do anything publicly,” he said.

But inside the agency's headquarters, Wildstein plays a central role in decisions that affect the public.

He keeps a close watch on the agency's \$1 billion project to raise the Bayonne Bridge, a big priority for the governor, and construction of a new Goethals Bridge, a top official familiar with his work said. Wildstein helped carry out the decision to strip most Port Authority employees and retirees of free E-ZPass privileges after Christie criticized the perk.

He was also one of a handful of executives who planned the proposal for toll hikes in August and the subsequent public hearings, several sources said. As part of what sources said was a coordinated plan, union workers flooded the hearings to speak in favor of the toll hikes. The hearings were held on one day during rush hour and at hard-to-find venues, making it difficult for many commuters to attend. At the time, Christie said he was surprised by the size of the toll hike proposal and later agreed to a smaller increase.

Several executives said Wildstein has played a role in placing some of those recommended by the Christie administration in jobs and that he seems to serve as the administration's eyes and ears within the byzantine agency.

The Montville resident arrives at the agency's Manhattan headquarters before almost anyone, often at 6:30 a.m., several said. He walks the halls noting the comings and goings of other executives, some said. And he often attends high-level meetings in the place of Deputy Executive Director Bill Baroni, quietly tapping notes on his electronic tablet.

Eight current and past Port Authority colleagues agreed to speak about Wildstein, but insisted that their identities remain undisclosed because they feared retribution. They described Wildstein, one of 50 recommended for jobs by the Christie administration, as intimidating, hardworking, intelligent, private and fiercely loyal to the governor.

Some bristle that a senior executive post is occupied by someone with more experience with campaigns than with transportation issues.

“He became the watcher of the entire agency,” one person said. “What he was watching for was strict adherence to the Christie agenda.”

Wildstein hasn't won many friends among longtime agency executives, but that's just fine with Christie.

“If he's not liked for that role, and if he's accused of being zealous in that regard, then we plead guilty,” Drewniak said.

The Port Authority was created nearly a century ago to manage transportation and tensions between New Jersey and New York. Both governors have veto power over its decisions and appoint its commissioners and, by tradition, its two top executives.

But the vast majority of the agency's nearly 6,800 employees, including most of its senior staff, are career employees not beholden to either governor. Because the sprawling agency has been led by a revolving cast of political appointees the last decade, longtime executives have maintained a degree of independence both in terms of setting regional transportation goals and protecting their generous public sector benefits.

“There has always been a certain resistance to senior executives making decisions based on one governor's interests,” said one longtime employee. “Most staff view the agency as having a regional mandate.”

In an interview, Baroni, Christie's top executive appointee, said he hired Wildstein to be New Jersey's No. 2 executive at the agency in May 2010 to aggressively pursue two things.

To pursue New Jersey's and Governor Christie's priorities and to reform this agency, he said. If there are people who have been here for decades, who don't like the fact that we have a real aggressive approach to getting these projects done, they should get used to it. Our job here is not to make friends.

Executive Director Pat Foye, Cuomo's top executive appointee, called Wildstein smart and professional and cited his experience running his family's sizable business.

Wildstein declined several interview requests.

Wildstein got an early start in politics in his hometown of Livingston.

A change of allegiance led to one of his first appearances in the headlines. The local weekly newspaper matter of factly reported in a 120-word article that Wildstein had resigned from a group supporting one congressional candidate in favor of his opponent, Thomas H. Kean Sr., then a state assemblyman who lived down the block from Wildstein. A small photo made clear what the article did not: Wildstein was a 12-year-old.

At 16, he unsuccessfully sued to get on the ballot for the county Republican Committee. A year later, while he was still in high school, Wildstein ran for the local school board, even though he was not old enough by law to occupy the seat. He generated 37 votes and a minor controversy.

His high school social studies teacher publicly accused Wildstein of duping him into signing an endorsement letter that later appeared in the local newspaper. The pair later issued a joint statement calling it basically a misunderstanding.

Although Wildstein and Christie attended the same high school, they seemed to be of different molds. Christie, a year younger, was a perennial class president and baseball player who wrote in his senior yearbook in 1980 about high school sweethearts and going to concerts. There are no remembrances, school clubs or sports teams next to Wildstein's 1979 senior picture. The space is blank.

The bespectacled teenager was focused on a bigger popularity contest than the one playing out in Livingston's high school.

Four years later, after working on a presidential campaign and as a political consultant while in college in Washington, D.C., Wildstein returned to Livingston. At 23, he won a four-year term on the town council, including two as mayor. Around the same time, he began working as deputy clerk in the state Assembly.

His tenure in Livingston was marked by rancor, attributed by some to his aggressive and combative brand of party politics, learned in his work with Republicans on the state and federal levels.

Wildstein worked as a chief of staff to Assembly Minority Leader Chuck Hardwick, a legislative aide to state Sen. Louis Bassano and a staff assistant to U.S. Rep. Christopher Smith. He also later became an outside adviser to U.S. Rep. Bob Franks.

Locally, he alienated some in his own party.

It was a tumultuous time, said Wildstein's council running mate Thomas L. Adams. He was just a kid, a very ambitious kid.

Livingston's former Democratic Mayor Robert Leopold called Wildstein a political animal whose management style became overbearing. As mayor, Wildstein walked the halls of Town Hall observing employees, Leopold said. He frightened people, said the longtime member of Essex County Democratic Committee. He was a very contentious person.

He was also very outspoken. He trumpeted his opposition to low-income housing in Livingston. He said county government was wasting money. And he criticized a judge for not imposing bail on two Brooklyn men arrested on shoplifting charges at the local mall and offered a \$250 reward for information that led to their conviction. That drove Todd Christie, the governor's brother and a Livingston resident at the time, to offer Wildstein some advice in a letter to the local paper: ♦Save your political theater for the campaign trail.♦

At the end of his stint in local office, Wildstein withdrew from a reelection bid after a poor showing in a primary, saying he wanted to work full-time in his family's textile business. In his farewell speech, he vowed to stay out of local politics.

Wildstein was a top executive at his family's Georgia-based textile manufacturing business, Apache Mills, one the country's largest floor mat manufacturers, from the late 1980s until 2007.

But he also maintained connections to the Republican establishment, advising candidates and elected officials like Franks and created the website in February 2000. It was ♦a place for political junkies,♦ he wrote. His adopted pen name was a nod to Walter Edge, a former New Jersey governor who was instrumental in the Port Authority's creation in 1921.

Relying on anonymous tips from political operatives and officials, Wildstein published bite-size news breaks involving campaign strategies, horse trading and power plays, along with opinions and rumors. As the site became a must-read among the political class, speculation intensified about the author's identity and political affiliation.

He hired editors and reporters who also reportedly were not told of Wildstein's identity and communicated with him only through email. He sold the site in 2007 to Observer Media Group for an undisclosed amount but remained as a vice president and columnist. He retired Wally Edge in 2010, when he took on the Port Authority job.

In his last post, he wrote that retaining his anonymity ♦was a rather amazing feat in a state where few secrets remain behind closed doors.♦

He also quoted that great political strategist Machiavelli: ♦Whosoever desires constant success must change his conduct with the times.♦

Staff Writer John Reitmeyer contributed to this article. Email: boburg@northjersey.com