

Cloud darkens over Thunder Bay as mayor charged with extortion amid probes into police racism

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Thunder Bay Mayor Keith Hobbs has been charged with extortion and obstruction of justice. The charges have nothing to do with municipal business. *Dax Melmer/Postmedia News/File*



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July 21, 2017
9:04 PM EDT

this week, Thunder Bay was grappling with some fearsome public-relations challenges.

The northwestern Ontario city's police force has been accused repeatedly of racism in its handling of a string of drowning deaths of indigenous teenagers. The force and its civilian board are under separate provincial investigations, the police chief himself was charged in May with obstruction of justice, and the city as a whole recorded the highest rate of hate crimes in the country, according to Statistics Canada.

Then came Friday. To cap off the dismal news, Thunder Bay's mayor, an ex-cop named Keith Hobbs, was charged with extortion and obstruction of justice, as were his wife and another woman.

The facts of the case remain largely a mystery and Hobbs – who's taking a three-month leave — has strongly professed innocence. But clearly, the pall over the city grew noticeably blacker, even as acting mayor Trevor Giertuga tried to make the best of it.

The charges have nothing to do with municipal business, he stressed.

"We have issues within our community, like many communities do, but we have a very strong council, strong leadership team and we're working hard to confront those issues," Giertuga said in an interview. "Historically, we're a community that responds well to adversity, and we'll continue to do that."



Lawyer Julian Falconer *Peter J. Thompson/NP/File*

Julian Falconer, who represents the First Nations complainants behind the racism investigation of the police, stressed that the accused should be presumed innocent. But he says there is a thread tying the city's troubles together.

“Obviously, in circumstances where a city’s mayor and chief of police are criminally charged, it speaks volumes to the level of dysfunctionality,” said Falconer. “When political leadership don’t face a **true test of accountability by the public, when the local media do a terribly poor job of holding political leadership accountable ... it’s almost inevitable that leaders run amok.**”

Meanwhile, Ontario’s police watchdog agency, the Special Investigations **Unit, began Thursday looking into the death of another aboriginal man — in a police jail cell the night before.**

Perched at the north end of Lake Superior, Thunder Bay is a regional centre with a relatively large indigenous population. It’s also the place where many teenagers from remote First Nations communities travel to attend high school.

A string of deaths among those young people — most of them drownings in the city's rivers — has attracted ongoing controversy, and charges of prejudice on the part of police who mostly dismissed the deaths as accidental or suicide.

A coroner's inquest looking into seven teens who lost their lives between 2000 and 2011 concluded three were accidental, but that four were from undetermined causes.

And more recently, the deaths of two more indigenous teenagers — Tammy Keeash, 17, and Josiah Begg, 14, in Thunder Bay rivers have led to calls for the RCMP to intervene. There is a "crisis of confidence" in the force, said aboriginal leaders after what they considered perfunctory investigations.

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Meanwhile, another watchdog – Ontario's Office of the Independent Review Director – is already investigating the charges of systemic racism within the department.

Against that backdrop, a further bombshell went off in May with the charges of obstruction of justice and breach of trust against police chief J.P. Levesque. That relates to information he allegedly disclosed about Keith Hobbs.

And now that other high-level civic leader is staring at criminal charges, too. The OPP would say only that Hobbs and wife Marisa were facing "allegations of criminal wrongdoing that include a municipal official and a local resident."

It's unclear if it has anything to do with the case against Levesque, or to another, bizarre situation that led Hobbs to file a libel suit against lawyer Sandy Zaitzeff, who has since been charged with multiple counts of sexual assault. The lawsuit

dealt with a YouTube video that depicted Zaitzeff in an apparently drunken rant about various issues, as Hobbs and a woman named Marisa watched.

Brian Greenspan, the star criminal lawyer representing Hobbs, issued a statement saying the mayor and his wife “wish to express their clear and emphatic denial of the allegations which today have been brought against them.”

“These charges are unjustified and will be vigorously defended,” said the notice.

Meanwhile, there has been a local backlash against the growing drumbeat of bad press. The Chronicle-Journal newspaper published an editorial last week suggesting policing and racial problems had been exaggerated, citing in part the “peaceful coexistence” between the city and a neighbouring First Nations community.

In June, the acting police chief, Sylvie Hauth, said there was no policing crisis or need to bring in the RCMP and, despite the times being challenging, it was “business as usual.”

Falconer scoffed at the comment.

“The charges against the mayor are indeed business as usual, in Thunder Bay,” he said. “The problem is this usual business is an utter failure of leadership.”