

OPP charge Thunder Bay mayor, two others, with extortion

Thunder Bay Mayor Keith Hobbs and two others set to appear in court in September



Thunder Bay Mayor Keith Hobbs pictured at city hall. (RANDY RISLING / TORONTO STAR) | ORDER THIS PHOTO

By [TANYA TALAGA](#) Staff Reporter
[DAVID BRUSER](#) News Reporter
[AINSLIE CRUICKSHANK](#) Staff Reporter
Fri., July 21, 2017

The Ontario Provincial Police has charged Thunder Bay Mayor Keith Hobbs, a former police officer, with extortion and obstruction of justice in connection with an investigation into “allegations of criminal wrongdoing that include a municipal official and local resident.”

Hobbs' wife Marisa, 53, was also charged with extortion and obstructing justice.

The OPP alleges that Hobbs, 65, his wife, and a third person, Mary Voss, 46, attempted to induce a prominent local lawyer “to purchase a house (for Voss), by threats, accusations, or menaces of disclosing criminal allegations to the police, thereby committing extortion,” court documents show.

Hobbs' lawyer Brian Greenspan said his client denies the charges. Mayor Hobbs told the Star in an email that he felt “Confident! Calm! We’ve had hundreds of well-wishers call, text and e-mail us today. Those that really know us believe in us.”

The Star could not reach Voss for comment.

Mayor Hobbs and his wife's obstruction charges are both related to their alleged attempt to interfere with an investigation into an allegation of extortion reported to the RCMP, court documents show. Hobbs is now on a paid, indefinite leave, a city official said at a press conference. He has not been asked to resign.

The charges, which have not been proven in court, are the latest in a [breakneck series of criminal and civil allegations](#) that not only saw the prominent lawyer, Sandy Zaitzeff, arrested on sexual assault charges late last year but have also drawn in the police chief.

Zaitzeff is a well-known class-action litigator who built a reputation as a confident winner — the man who took on the RCMP. He has had a dramatic and public fall from prominence, including a YouTube video rant — that has increased scrutiny on a city already under pressure from a series of unrelated investigations.

Only slivers of information about the cases have been made publicly available. The strange YouTube video has offered locals one of the only clues about the ongoing scandal.

In the video, an emotional Zaitzeff, with his collection of clown dolls as a backdrop, pulls off his T-shirt, parades his bruised torso, alleges unnamed assailants tried to steal his fortune, expresses anguish over his dead son, then gets on his knees to propose marriage. Mayor Hobbs is seen in the video watching the rambling, cryptic monologue.

After the video was posted to YouTube, Mayor Hobbs sued Zaitzeff for defamation, claiming the video somehow harmed his reputation and chances for re-election, and on the same day as that lawsuit Zaitzeff's former law partner issued his own statement of claim which alleged Zaitzeff took his clients and threatened his life. That statement of claim has not yet been served on Mr. Zaitzeff, according to the former law partner, Chris Watkins, who told the Star he is "strongly considering never serving that claim."

Then, Thunder Bay police Chief J.P. Levesque was charged with breach of trust and obstruction of justice for allegedly disclosing confidential information about the mayor. Exactly what information was disclosed and to whom is not publicly known.

An OPP spokesperson said the charges laid against Hobbs, his wife, and Voss stem from the same investigation into Levesque, but did not provide details. The officer who charged Levesque is the same officer who charged Hobbs.

Zaitzeff's lawyer Scott Hutchison has said he denies the allegations against him. Chief Levesque has told the Star he cannot comment on his case.

Meanwhile, Mayor Hobbs and his wife have hired Greenspan and Naomi Lutes as their lawyers.

"The Truth will get us through this," Mayor Hobbs told the Star. "We have the best lawyer in Canada looking after us. We will be cleared of these charges."

A statement from Greenspan's office said the charges were "unjustified and will be vigorously defended."

Hobbs was arrested Thursday afternoon after he arrived at an OPP detachment with a lawyer, according to the OPP.

He was released on a "promise to appear" in court and conditions that include no communication with a number of people and that he remain in Ontario, according to OPP Det. Supt. Dave Truax, who was the major case manager on both the Levesque and Hobbs cases.

The three accused are scheduled to appear in court in Thunder Bay on Sept. 26.

On Thursday night, councillors were hastily called to Thunder Bay City Hall for an emergency meeting. The charges against Hobbs were made public Friday morning, followed by a news conference.

A city official said that a member of council can be away up to three months under city policy. After that, it will be in “council’s hands” to determine next steps, said Karen Lewis, spokesperson for the Thunder Bay City Council. “Council could extend the leave, the vacancy policy could kick in and then council has options around how to proceed around the vacancy policy,” she said, adding they could declare the seat vacant.

Councillor Trevor Giertuga will serve as acting mayor for July and Linda Rydholm will take over for August, Lewis said.

In a statement, Giertuga said council will work together to cover the mayor’s duties while he works through “this personal matter.”

“We’re going to remain positive, we’re going to work to confront any problems or issues that come forward and just look forward to the future,” he told the Star after the news conference.

Hobbs was first elected mayor in 2010 and re-elected in 2014.

Before municipal politics, he worked with the Thunder Bay Police for 34 years.

Thunder Bay has been in crisis, with racial tensions running high since the deaths of several Indigenous youth in the spring. They were from remote reserves and were in the city to either go to high school or access mental health services.

Among them was Tammy Keeash, a 17-year-old high school student from North Caribou Lake First Nation, who on May 6 of this year, failed to make curfew at her group home.

That same night, Josiah Begg, a 14-year-old from Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug First Nation vanished. He was in town with his father for Josiah’s medical appointments. Both teens were found dead in Thunder Bay waterways within two weeks of their disappearance.

For years, many Indigenous people have complained about the level of racism they face daily in the city.

During a recent eight-month long inquest into the deaths of seven other Indigenous high school students, who died between 2000 and 2011, many youth complained they were subjected to racial taunts, unprovoked assaults and had garbage thrown at them from passing cars.

Of the seven students whose deaths were investigated during the inquest, five were found in the rivers and of those, three of the deaths were ruled undetermined by the coroner's jury.

Indigenous leaders have said they no longer trust the local police force, and they held a Queen's Park news conference asking for the RCMP to be brought in to investigate the deaths of Keeash, Begg and the unexplained death of 41-year-old Stacy DeBungee, an Indigenous man found in the lake in October, 2015. Ontario's chief coroner has announced that York Region police would be brought in to investigate Begg's and Keeash's deaths.

The Thunder Bay Police have been under investigation for alleged systemic racism in how they handle all Indigenous death and disappearance cases since last November by the Office of the Independent Police Review Director — a civilian oversight body. Also under investigation is the Thunder Bay Police Services Board by their provincial oversight body.

Most recently, Ontario's Special Investigations Unit said it is investigating the [death of an Indigenous man](#) who died in Thunder Bay police custody Wednesday evening.

Meanwhile, Zaitzeff has hired Marie Henein's law firm, which represented former radio star Jian Ghomeshi, to deal with his considerable and lurid list of charges.

Zaitzeff, 68, is a self-proclaimed millionaire who has worked on some major class-action cases. He gained national attention as one of the main architects of a successful class action lawsuit filed by women against the RCMP, alleging workplace harassment. The Mounties established a \$100-million fund to settle claims.

Since Zaitzeff's on-camera outbursts, he has been arrested and charged with multiple counts of sexual assault, including allegedly inviting a minor to touch his penis. In all, there are five complainants. Most of the assaults allegedly happened last fall, before and after the video was reportedly recorded.

Zaitzeff faces four counts of assault; eight counts of sexual assault; and one count each of sexual interference, invitation to sexual touching, mischief under \$5,000 for allegedly damaging a door, breach of recognizance, unauthorized possession of a firearm and improper storage of a firearm, according to court documents.

His licence to practise law has been suspended. Zaitzeff did not tell the Law Society of Upper Canada about his charges, the regulator said.

As a condition of his bail, Zaitzeff had to give up his passport, cannot drink or buy liquor, and was ordered to attend the Bellwood addiction treatment centre in Toronto.

“Sandy Zaitzeff has consistently asked the people of Thunder Bay to reserve judgment until all the evidence surrounding his case can be aired before the courts,” Hutchison, Zaitzeff’s lawyer, told the Star in an email. “Today is an important step towards that day.”

Hutchison has previously said his client is “a respected lawyer, has battled the loss of his beloved son, addiction issues and health issues.”

In June 2014, Zaitzeff’s son Sandy Zaitzeff Jr., then 33 years old, was on crutches, hobbled by a broken ankle, when he slipped and fell while getting a snack from the fridge, suffered a severe head injury and died instantly, an obituary said.

Fourteen years earlier Zaitzeff’s wife, Marilyn, then 50, went missing, last seen reportedly leaving the family cottage and getting on her Sea-Doo around 9 p.m.

Marilyn Zaitzeff was a physical fitness enthusiast who often rode her Sea-Doo, sometimes at night and sometimes without a life-jacket or wetsuit, according to the OPP.

The next morning the Sea-Doo was found a kilometre away, overturned in the water not far from shore. The Sea-Doo was “undamaged, inspected to be mechanically sound and had a third of a tank of gas,” according to the OPP.

While Marilyn is presumed drowned, OPP Det. Supt. Dave Truax told the Star: “This is an open missing person investigation where the individual has not been located.”

With files from Julien Gignac