

Senator Murray Sinclair to investigate Thunder Bay Police board



Justice Murray Sinclair, the respected former Chair of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, will lead an investigation into the Thunder Bay Police Services Board. (ADRIAN WYLD / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

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Senator Murray Sinclair, the respected former Chair of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, will lead an investigation into the Thunder Bay Police Services Board.

The Ontario Civilian Police Commission announced Sinclair's appointment on Monday. The commission is a quasi-judicial agency that oversees all police boards in the province.

The commission, in a Monday statement, said it has “serious concerns about the state of civilian police oversight and public confidence in the delivery of police services in Thunder Bay.”

Specifically, the commission has concerns in the Thunder Bay board’s ability to address matters raised by Indigenous leaders relating to a series of deaths of Indigenous youths and the quality of the investigations into these deaths conducted by the Thunder Bay police.

The Thunder Bay Police Service is currently under investigation for allegations of “systemic racism” by the civilian watchdog group the Office of the Independent Police Review Director regarding how they handle Indigenous death and disappearance cases in the northern city.

Thunder Bay leadership has faced a [series of crises recently](#). The commission pointed to public confidence concerns in relation to the recent criminal charges that were laid against the former Thunder Bay Chief of Police J.P. Levesque, who was charged with breach of trust and obstruction of justice on May 23, 2017.

And last Friday, the Ontario Provincial Police 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.”

Sinclair’s investigation will examine the board’s performance in carrying out its responsibilities to ensure “adequate and effective” police services; he’ll probe the board’s role in determining “objectives and priorities with respect to police services” in Thunder Bay and their role in establishing policies for the effective management of the police.

The investigation will also examine the board’s role in ensuring that police service in the city complies with the Police Services Act, specifically, “The need to ensure the safety and security of all persons and property in Ontario,” and, “The importance of safeguarding the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Human Rights Code.”

An interim report will be out on Oct. 31, 2017 and a final report is expected March 31, 2018.

In May, the deaths of two Indigenous teens heightened racial tensions in the city. Both teens, Tammy Keeash and Josiah Beggs, went missing on the night of May 6.

Tammy Keeash, a 17-year-old high school student from North Caribou Lake First Nation, failed to make her curfew on that night and her body was discovered on May 7, lying in shallow water.

Begg, a 14-year-old from Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug First Nation, also vanished on May 6. He was in town for medical appointments and he was found dead in the McIntyre River on May 18 after an intensive community search.

For years, many Indigenous people in the Thunder Bay area have complained about the level of racism they face daily. That tension has heightened after the [July 4 death of Barbara Kentner](#), from Wabigoon Lake Ojibway Nation. Kentner was hit in the stomach by a metal trailer hitch in January, thrown at her out of a passing car. Her sister, Melissa, who was with her at the time, heard a car occupant say, “I ** got one of them.”

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 repeatedly requested something be done about the investigations into Indigenous deaths. They held a news conference at the end of May to say they no longer trust the local police force, and they asked 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 Dr. Dirk Huyer announced last month that York Region police would be brought in to investigate Begg’s and Keeash’s deaths.

The OPP alleges that Hobbs, 65, his wife, Marisa, 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 told the Star on Friday that his client denies the charges. 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 leave.

The charges have not been proven in court. But they are the latest in a 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.