



ASHE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Sheriff B. Phil Howell

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 15th, 2025

Ashe County Sheriff's Office Provides Update on September 2024 Felony Traffic Stop and Grand Jury Decision

Today, the Ashe County Sheriff's Office is providing a critical update regarding the traffic stop that occurred on September 13th, 2024, and the recent findings by the Grand Jury. This update is shared with the deepest respect for our community.

Since the incident, our office has refrained from public comment to allow the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) and the District Attorney's Office to conduct a thorough and unbiased investigation. Sheriff Phil Howell promptly requested that the SBI take over the scene and take full investigative responsibility. Body-worn camera video was immediately turned over to the SBI for evidentiary value. N.C.G.S. § 132-1.4A(c) states that "*Recordings depicting a death or serious bodily injury shall only be disclosed as provided in subsections (b1) through (b3) of this section*" (which subsections require a court order). Both disclosure (viewing) and release may be limited to a Superior Court judge's order since it appears that the recording may depict serious bodily injury or death. Therefore, the release of the bodycam footage was held until a Superior Court judge made a decision.

Mr. Mast was already the subject of ongoing investigations, one involving methamphetamine distribution. On September 11th, 2024, the Narcotics Division received information that Mr. Mast had left Ashe County to obtain illegal narcotics with the intention of distributing them locally. Based on this information, our patrol division planned to initiate a traffic stop if Mast was observed operating a motor vehicle and in violation of traffic laws.

We recognize and do not condone the inappropriate language used by officers during the encounter. However, there is no apparent correlation that the language used played a role in Mr. Mast's death. The autopsy conducted by the NC Office of the Chief Medical Examiner identified 13 contributing factors, the foremost being the rapid inflation of an air vest worn by Mr. Mast. As stated in the autopsy, "The cause of asphyxia in this death is multifactorial, and the death was complicated by the methamphetamine and the pre-existing heart disease; however, the death occurred during a physical altercation with other(s). The manner of death, therefore, is classified as homicide".

The case was presented in full to the Grand Jury by the District Attorney's Office. Expert witnesses, including personnel from the Medical Examiner's Office and the SBI, provided testimony, and Grand Jury members reviewed body camera footage. After reviewing all evidence, the Grand Jury rendered a "no true bill" decision on April 28th, 2025, meaning they declined to bring charges against the officers involved.

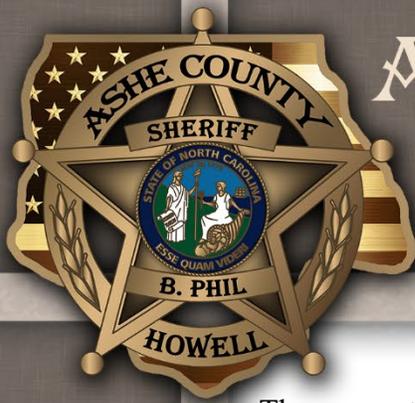
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The encounter began when deputies conducting passive patrol at Highway 16 and Highway 221 intersection observed a motorcycle without a license plate—only a piece of cardboard marked “notatag” with a sharpie marker. The motorcycle fled when deputies attempted a traffic stop on the highway in front of the Corner Market gas station. The pursuit ended approximately 3.3 miles later, just before Sheets Bridge, when a rolling roadblock was administered on Highway 16 south.

Deputy Bledsoe conducted a felony traffic stop and began giving verbal commands with his duty weapon drawn. After multiple attempts to ask Mast to “get off the bike”, Deputy Bledsoe holstered his firearm, took Mast by his arm, and removed him in an attempt to effect the arrest. Unbeknownst to deputies at the time, Mr. Mast was wearing an inflatable vest, which inflated as he stepped off the motorcycle. During the resulting struggle, Mr. Mast landed seated on the ground, with Deputy Bledsoe briefly on top of him as Deputy Call attempted to place him in handcuffs from behind. Soon after, deputies noticed Mr. Mast had lost consciousness.

Deputies immediately began administering life-saving measures. They removed his helmet and handcuffs, initiated CPR, and administered two doses of Narcan. An Automated External Defibrillator (AED) was also used, but did not advise a shock. Deputies continued resuscitation efforts until medics arrived. Deputy Call was transported to Ashe Memorial Hospital and was later released. The officers were put on administrative leave following the incident.

“As Sheriff, I understand that our silence over the past months may have been misinterpreted as indifference to the Mast family. That could not be further from the truth. This case was turned over to the NC SBI to ensure an impartial investigation. The Sheriff’s Office had no role in the SBI’s findings or the Grand Jury’s decision.”

We are not sharing these details to diminish anyone’s pain, but to clarify the facts. We have prayed for Mr. Mast’s family and our deputies. I also want to thank the staff of the Sheriff’s Office, who have faced unimaginable hate, including a flood of abusive and threatening calls to our 911 Dispatch Center and the entire Sheriff’s Office. These calls came from across the country, not our community, and included deeply disturbing messages directed at our staff and their families—malevolent threats of extremely disturbing acts of sexual violence. We have seen the worst in humanity during this, so much hatred and accusations. I will be praying for them, the Ashe County community, and all the families involved.

My prayer is for healing—for the Mast family, our deputies, their loved ones, and the entire Ashe County community. We are all grieving in different ways. My hope is that we will all heal together.”

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