

Driver fighting charge in death of Bucks officer

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A Middletown man pleaded guilty to 13 charges, but will contest a homicide by vehicle charge in the death of township Officer Christopher Jones.

The man charged in the fatal crash that killed a Middletown police officer pleaded guilty to 13 charges in Bucks County Court on Monday but is fighting the most serious offense - homicide by vehicle while driving under the influence - which carries a mandatory three-year prison sentence.

Frank Wallace Budka, 45, of Middletown, was the driver whose accident started a chain reaction that resulted in the death of Officer Christopher Jones.

About 10:40 a.m. on Jan. 29, Jones had stopped a car on the shoulder of the Route 1 Superhighway about 500 feet north of the I-95 southbound exit ramp. He had just issued a ticket and was walking back to his patrol car when Budka's Toyota Corolla clipped a Grand Prix in the left lane and swerved into the cruiser, pushing it over Jones and pinning him underneath.

The 37-year-old husband and father of three sustained massive head injuries and was pronounced dead at St. Mary Medical Center in Middletown at 12:28 p.m.

Witnesses recounted Monday how frantic police officers and citizens tried desperately to lift the vehicle off the fatally wounded officer. When they finally succeeded, Jones was bleeding near his mouth, nose and ears and had a compound fracture in one of his legs.

In the hospital, Jones did not regain consciousness, according to Dr. Burt Blackstone, who was on call at the trauma center when Jones arrived by ambulance.

Before Monday's testimony, Budka admitted guilt to several counts, including manslaughter of a law enforcement officer, a second-degree felony and homicide by vehicle, a third-degree felony. He also pleaded guilty to recklessly endangering another person, several drug charges and traffic offenses.

Budka, who's being held in Bucks County Prison on \$1 million bail, had been prescribed methadone as a treatment for pain and was being treated for circulation problems for several years.

According to court records, Budka's doctor had him sign a document stating he knew he was not to use cocaine or marijuana while taking methadone and Dilaudid and that a possible side effect of the prescriptions was impaired cognitive function.

Yet, blood tests showed there was THC - the active chemical in marijuana - and methadone in Budka's blood, according to court records. Urine tests also showed the presence of benzoylecgonine, a byproduct of metabolized cocaine, police said.

During a search of Budka's apartment on the night of the accident, police found 34 grams of marijuana and numerous pieces of drug paraphernalia commonly used for smoking marijuana and cocaine. They also confiscated three switchblades. A pipe for smoking drugs was also found inside Budka's vehicle. At the scene, he told authorities he had not been speeding but adjusting his car radio just before the accident. He had to be extricated from his vehicle and complained of pain in his left side and left knee.

Witnesses called Monday by Chief Deputy District Attorney Robert James described Budka at the scene as "mumbling and incoherent" and "confused and incoherent."

Sgt. Michael Lubold of the Middletown Police Department said Budka's eyes were "red, glassy. + He didn't blink very often. He kind of just stared.

"In my opinion he was under the influence of something."

Louis Colella, a paramedic with the Penn-del-Middletown Emergency Squad, said Budka's "actions led me to believe he was impaired."

In cross-examination, Budka's attorney Barnaby Wittels questioned whether it was possible Budka was in a confused state because he had just been in an accident and not because of drug use.

Judge Albert Cepparulo will rule on the case as Budka waived his right to a jury trial. Testimony is to continue today.

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