

# Office of the Carbon County Attorney

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December 5, 2022

Sheriff Josh McQuillan  
102 N. Broadway Ave.  
Red Lodge, MT 59068  
Re: Honest Tom investigation

Dear Sheriff McQuillan,

I am in receipt of the investigative file regarding the Honest Tom fire in Bridger, Montana. During the course of extinguishing the fire, two bodies were discovered inside the structure, both deceased. The deceased individuals were identified as Marla Murray and John Ahles. After evaluating the investigative reports, I have determined that no further action is required and further criminal investigation is not necessary. Further, a coroner's inquest is not required for either death.

## **Pertinent Facts**

### **I. Timeline**

On April 20, 2022, at 0929 hours, the Carbon County Sheriff's Dispatch received a report about smoke coming from Honest Tom's Casino, 215 South Main Street, Bridger, Montana. The reporting party was attempting to make a delivery. The reporting party attempted to enter the structure, but was overcome by the smoke. The Bridger Police Chief arrived on scene and expressed concern the structure could be occupied.

Fire fighters arrived on scene at 0929 hours. Because of the heat of the fire, the fire fighters were limited to battling the fire from the front doorway of the structure. Once fire fighters entered the structure, the body of John Ahles was discovered by the restrooms. He was removed from the structure to a waiting ambulance. Ahles was determined to be deceased.

Ahles was employed part time at Honest Tom's, but was not on the work schedule. It is unknown why Ahles was in the building. Ahles acted as the IT technician for the casino, and was familiar with the casino's surveillance system.

Marla Murray's body was found in the kitchen, and was subsequently determined to be deceased. Murray was employed at Honest Tom's and was working her scheduled shift. Murray opened the casino that morning.

Based on surveillance footage, Murray pulled into Honest Tom's parking lot at 0745 hours, and entered the casino. Surveillance footage shows Murray undertaking tasks to open the casino for business.

Based on surveillance footage from multiple sources, it was determined Ahles left his Bridger residence at approximately 0800 hours, and walked toward the alley behind Honest Tom's. At 0827 hours, Ahles can be seen approaching the back door of the casino, checking the back door, and sitting on a bench by the rear of the casino.

At 0829 hours, Ahles used his key to the business to unlock the back door, and entered the back door. Ahles remained in the dark entryway and did not enter the office.

At 0839 hours, Murray is seen walking into the backroom of the casino and retrieving money from her purse before returning to the casino area.

At 0847 hours, Ahles walks into a back room. He appears to be watching the security system monitor. Ahles is holding a red pry bar in his right hand. After standing by monitor for a short time,

Ahles walks back into the dark entryway. Ahles enters the backroom two more times. Both times, Ahles appears to be watching the security monitor while holding the red pry bar. During this time, Murray is gambling on machines in the casino.

The last video surveillance of Ahles shows Ahles walking to the security system control box. The security surveillance then ends abruptly.

When firefighters arrived on scene the rear door was dead bolted, and the firefighters had to cut the hinges off the door to obtain access.

As part of the investigation, several surveillance cameras around the casino were accessed. Review of the surveillance footage showed no indication that anyone other than Ahles and Murray entered the casino prior to the fire.

## **II. Investigation and Autopsy Results**

Murray's body was examined postmortem. Multiple "chop-type" wounds to Murray's head were visible. Autopsy results confirmed that Murray died as a result of the multiple head wounds, and that the cause of her death was homicide. The injuries were consistent with being struck repeatedly by a pry bar, which was found near her body. The pry bar appears to be the same pry bar held by Ahles in the surveillance video.

Ahles' body was also examined and subsequently autopsied. Ahles clothing was stained by apparent blood spatter. Ahles' shirt was taken into evidence and forwarded to the State Crime Lab for DNA analysis. Analysis confirmed that the staining was human blood spatter. The blood was not Ahles', and was consistent with Murray's DNA profile.

After an autopsy was conducted, Ahles's death was determined to be the result of smoke inhalation. Blood toxicology confirmed the presence of THC, amphetamine, and methamphetamine in Ahles' system.

Law enforcement conducted a fire investigation in an effort to determine the cause of the casino fire. The investigating team discovered the gas line to the furnace had been intentionally damaged, causing natural gas to leak into the building. The gas was most likely intentionally ignited, causing the fire.

Law enforcement could not explain why Ahles failed to leave the structure before being overcome by smoke. Review of Ahles' cell phone records indicated that Ahles had been researching suicide techniques.

### **Conclusion**

After review of all available information, it appears Murray's death was caused by Ahles. Importantly, Ahles had no reason to be in the casino the morning of April 20, and can be seen deactivating the security system while holding the pry bar that caused Murray's death. Further, surveillance footage from the casino and other nearby structures provide no evidence that anyone other than Ahles and Murray were in the casino prior to the discovery of the fire.

As Ahles subsequently died in the fire, criminal charges cannot be pursued. The homicide investigation can be concluded.

Similarly, no further action is required regarding Ahles' death. Ahles died of smoke inhalation caused by an intentionally started fire. Ahles' failure to leave the burning structure cannot be explained, but review of his internet activity shows possible suicidal ideation. Further investigation or other further activity is not required.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns. Absent concerns, the criminal investigation and coroner's reports require no additional action.

Sincerely,

  
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Alex Nixon  
Carbon County Attorney