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Cayce officer cleared in chase that led to death

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Article Text:

A Cayce police officer who initiated a chase after an apparent traffic infraction that prompted the fleeing driver to hit speeds of 90 mph and kill an innocent motorist has been cleared of any wrongdoing in the Dec. 14 incident.

The officer, John Reese, is back on duty now after an internal Cayce Department of Public Safety review found that Reese "worked within the guidelines of" the department's pursuit policy. "I ... find that the Cayce Department of Public Safety department policies were adhered to," said Chief Charles McNair in a letter released late last week and containing the findings on Reese. Cayce's chase policy does allow officers more freedom than some in deciding whether to begin and continue high-speed chases.

For example, it's possible that a chase like Cayce's deadly Dec. 14 pursuit would not be allowed in the city of Columbia.

That's because a Columbia police chase policy resolution adopted last week by City Council says that "except in exigent (critical) circumstances, pursuits for misdemeanor offenses and traffic offenses are prohibited."

Cayce's police contains no such clear language prohibiting most chases that begin as traffic violations. Instead, Cayce's police chase policy says, "If an officer attempts to stop a violator in accordance with the Department's procedures and the violator attempts to escape or elude the officer, the officer is obligated to make a reasonable attempt to pursue the suspect or vehicle." In deciding whether to continue a chase, Cayce officers are given wide latitude but are also instructed to consider a range of criteria, including seriousness of the original offense, weather and road conditions.

The Cayce police chase began when Reese saw Hyundai sedan running with only its parking lights on, around 12:30 a.m. on Dec. 14. Reese and the training officer with him, Luis Feliciano, then tried to make a routine traffic stop around 12th Street and Knox Abbott Drive. The Hyundai headed toward Columbia.

Reese flipped on his blue lights and followed the Hyundai for about a half-mile on Knox Abbott, trying to stop it for not having its headlights on.

"The vehicle didn't slow down or speed up. We got about halfway down Knox Abbott, by Parkland (Plaza) and I turned on my siren a couple of times and I finally turned it on for good. That's when they started speeding up," Reese told an investigating Highway Patrol officer shortly after the crash, according to an audio file of the interview.

Within a minute, the fleeing car was traveling an estimated 90 mph across the Blossom Street bridge – essentially a straightaway – and headed toward Huger Street, which intersects Blossom Street at right angles. Reese, knowing that they were approaching the intersection, slowed down after crossing the Blossom Street bridge.

It was at Huger Street that the fleeing Hyundai struck a van driven by Chamberlain Branch, longtime supervisor at the Governor's Mansion and father of three school-age children. He died of injuries inside his 2003 Ford van, which burst into flames shortly after being struck by the Hyundai, which was driven by Shy-born Belton, 23, of Columbia. Belton was also killed. Police later learned the Hyundai had been stolen and that there was cocaine in the car. But they didn't know that when the chase began.

Three passengers in Bel-ton's car were injured but survived the crash.

"It is apparent that the decisions made by Shy-born Belton caused not only his own death but the death of Chamberlain Branch as well as great bodily harm to other persons," Chief McNair wrote.

Lake Summers, a Columbia attorney representing Cayce's Department of Public Safety, declined comment Sunday on any differences between Columbia's and Cayce's police pursuit policies.

"I haven't had the opportunity to read Columbia's policy,' Summers said. "Right now, our policy is what it is, and a review was conducted."

Summers said that "in the course of reviewing this incident," Cayce officials also reviewed the city's pursuit policy and recommended no changes.

Last month, the S.C. Highway Patrol released its own report on the chase and found no fault in Reese's handling of the chase.

However, the Patrol investigation concerned only the chase itself.

The just-concluded Cayce internal review went further. It examined how the chase began and whether Reese acted according to the department's written chase policies when he began and carried out the Dec. 14 chase.

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