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CRIME & JUSTICE

Bail at close to \$1M for driver charged in deadly bicycle crash

Michael Vahey, 68, was charged Thursday with vehicular homicide while driving under the influence, police said.



A photo of Barbara Friedes rests against a tree during a vigil on the 1800 block of Spruce Street in Philadelphia on Sunday. Philly Bike Action held a vigil for Friedes and other cyclists killed ... [Read more](#)
David Maialetti / Staff Photographer

by Ellie Rushing and Nathaniel Rosenberg
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A 68-year-old man has been charged with homicide by vehicle after police said he drove while intoxicated, then crashed into a 30-year-old doctor, killing her, as she rode her bicycle near Rittenhouse Square last week.

Law enforcement officials announced Thursday that Michael Vahey has been charged with homicide by vehicle while driving under the influence, involuntary manslaughter, DUI, reckless driving, and related crimes after his vehicle fatally struck Barbara Friedes, a pediatric resident at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, as she rode her bike home on July 17.

Vahey surrendered to authorities Wednesday night and remains in custody, held on \$999,999 bail.

"This crime is horrible. The outcome is almost unspeakable," said District Attorney Larry Krasner.

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During Vahey's arraignment, assistant District Attorney Katherine Wood said that Vahey had been convicted of a DUI in 2009 after he drove the wrong way down Pine Street near 10th Street. At the time of his arrest, Wood said, his blood alcohol content was 0.20 — more than twice the legal limit.

The record was later expunged after Vahey completed a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program through the courts, Wood said.

Vahey's lawyer, Amato T. Sanita, said Thursday his client was "extremely remorseful" and was fully cooperating with law enforcement. Sanita did not object to the high bail to signify his client's cooperation, he said.

"If there had been a concrete barrier, this never would have happened," Sanita said.

Vahey was driving west in a Volkswagen about 7 p.m. on the 1800 block of Spruce Street when, video appears to show, he tried to steer around other cars in the street, swerving into the bike lane and running over the plastic lane dividers. Moving at a high speed, police say, Vahey's vehicle then struck Friedes, who was also riding west in the bike lane, from behind before crashing into multiple parked cars.

Vahey's blood alcohol content was 0.16 at the time of the crash, police said — twice the legal limit. He was driving more than 50 mph in a 25-mph zone when his vehicle struck Friedes, Krasner said.

The impact threw Friedes more than 20 feet in the air, police said. She was wearing a helmet but suffered a severe head injury and died at a hospital a short time later.

Vahey remained on scene and was taken to a hospital for treatment, police said. He was released as of Monday. Public records show he lives just two blocks from the scene of the crash.

Friedes' family declined to comment Thursday as they worked to plan her funeral. She was [remembered by loved ones as a devoted](#) friend, daughter, and wife who was on track to becoming a pediatric oncologist.

Parker responds to traffic safety criticism

Her death was one of four pedestrian and cyclist traffic fatalities within just four days last week. The deaths ignited a wave of concern among safe street [advocates who called for additional traffic calming measures](#) and bike lane protections across the city, and called on Mayor Cherrille L. Parker to [reinvest in Vision Zero](#), the push to reduce and ultimately end traffic-related fatalities and injuries.

Chris Gale and Nicole Brunet of the Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia, alongside law enforcement Thursday, lamented the city's use of flexible plastic posts to delineate bike lanes, saying that they are "meant to be driven over" and are not protective. In 2009, Brunet said, the coalition recommended that a concrete barrier be built along the bike lanes on Pine and Spruce Streets, but the proposal was rejected.

"There is little doubt that if that kind of barrier had existed here that Dr. Friedes might be alive today," Krasner said of the concrete divider.

"There is little doubt that that would have made a very substantial difference."

Brunet said the city is unable to upgrade bike lanes because of Vision Zero funding cuts, and questioned city leadership's priorities in eliminating traffic deaths.

"I have not seen that commitment as of yet, but I'm happy to see it any day now," she said.

Parker, in an interview with WHYY on Thursday, declined to commit to any specific traffic safety projects, reiterating her general support for the issue.

"There are multiple traffic calming measures needed across the city," she said. "Protected bike lanes are a part of that. It's just not one aspect that I want to take out and say 'This is the one thing.'"

She pushed back on criticism that she had cut Vision Zero's budget, saying the funds for speed cushions and traffic calming [had been shifted to the Streets Department](#). She did not explain the decision.

"Our commitment is to fulfilling the overall goals and objectives of Vision Zero," she said.

The charges followed growing calls from community members and advocates to charge the driver, and concerns over why it took a week. Fatal car crashes require significant forensic analysis, Krasner said, including blood and urine tests, and examining car geolocation data and technology.

It's "not about blowing into a breathalyzer. It's a much more robust process to make sure we have a strong case," said Police Commissioner Kevin Bethel.

Philly Bike Action has planned a protest ride from the Philadelphia Museum of Art to City Hall on Friday evening. Hundreds of cyclists are expected to take to the roads beginning at 6 p.m., according to the website, to protest Parker and "demand immediate installation of concrete barriers to protect all bike lanes in Philadelphia and the end permitted parking in bike lanes."

Staff writers Ryan Briggs and Rodrigo Torrejon contributed to this article.

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