

City of Punta Gorda, Florida



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Punta Gorda, Fla. – Punta Gorda City Manager Howard Kunik today made the following remarks about the decision by the State Attorney’s Office of the 20th Judicial Circuit to charge Police Chief Tom Lewis and Officer Lee Coel in the death of Mary Knowlton:

“As you’re aware, the State Attorney’s Office has charged Officer Lee Coel with first-degree manslaughter. This decision was reached after an investigation by the State Attorney’s Office and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE). Today, we delivered a notice of a pre-disciplinary hearing, which will be handled by the City’s Human Resources Manager and Labor Attorney. The purpose of this hearing is to determine his future employment status with the department. Officer Coel has the right to appeal any outcome to the City Manager, and as such, I cannot comment further, to protect the integrity of this process.

“We were also notified yesterday that Chief Tom Lewis has been charged with culpable negligence, a second-degree misdemeanor. In light of this development, Chief Lewis has been placed on administrative leave with pay pending further review. In the interim, Captain Jason Ciaschini will assume the role of acting chief of police while we sort this out.

“It’s important to note that at this time, the City Manager's Office has not received any of the investigative files from the State Attorney's Office or FDLE. We cannot make any determination about Chief Lewis’s future status without first reviewing this information. We will launch a full internal affairs investigation into the entire situation once we receive the investigative files.”

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