

Police charge state corrections officer with Grand Island hit-and-run

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A state corrections officer was arrested Wednesday, accused of being the motorist who seriously injured a Grand Island woman in a hit-and-run accident in June.

Edward J. Kuebler III, 27, of the Town of Tonawanda, an officer at Wende Correctional Facility, was charged with leaving the scene of a serious personal injury incident, a felony, in connection with the accident that injured Dana Papaj, State Police said.

Papaj, 53, suffered a serious head injury when she was struck by a pickup truck while walking her dog, Molly, on the shoulder of East River Road, between Whitehaven Road and Riverwoods Drive, just after 8 p.m. June 13.

Papaj remains in Erie County Medical Center with a traumatic brain injury, conscious but unable to walk or feed herself, said an attorney representing Papaj's family.

Papaj was walking home with her dog after visiting her daughter and grandson when she was struck. Kuebler fled the scene after his southbound vehicle hit Papaj, State Police said.



Edward J. Kuebler III

He came under investigation shortly after the accident occurred. State Police seized his vehicle the day after the accident, Kuebler's attorney Barry N. Covert told The Buffalo News on June 23. Although police said they believed Kuebler's vehicle hit Papaj, investigators had to determine who was driving the pickup truck at the time.

The vehicle has "damage that would be consistent" with striking a person, Lt. Brian Ratajczak of the State Police Bureau of Criminal Investigation said June 23.

Surveillance footage of the incident showed a pickup truck braking but not coming to a full stop before leaving the scene, according to a source.

Attorney Steven M. Cohen, of Hogan Willig of Buffalo, said Papaj's family is pleased that State Police made an arrest, but remain "deeply concerned" about Papaj's medical condition.

"We had hoped that she would be better by now, but it appears that her injuries are profound and permanent," said Cohen. "She has traumatic brain injury and is not able to walk and still has great difficulty moving her right side – her right arm and right leg."

"It's looking like there are going to be long-term ramifications from this accident," he said. "Certainly we are pleased that someone is being brought to justice, but it's hard to get too excited when a 53-year-old woman, a brand-new grandmother, is not able to enjoy life and the family can't enjoy her."

Cohen said that police found on Kuebler's vehicle DNA evidence indicating it struck Papaj. Cohen said the accident was videotaped by a security camera that a resident had installed because his mailbox on East River Road had been hit multiple times.

He said the family is considering filing lawsuits against the driver that hit Papaj and against the government entities responsible for the maintenance of the road. He said there is a tremendous number of pedestrians walking along the road but there are no sidewalks.

"We want to bring justice to Dana in form of enough compensation that would allow her to attend to considerable medical needs going on into the future," Cohen said.

If convicted of the charge, Kuebler faces up to four years in prison.

In an appearance Wednesday evening in Grand Island Town Court with his attorney, Covert, before Grand Island Town Justice Sybil E. Kennedy, Kuebler waived a felony hearing and his case will be sent directly to an Erie County grand jury. Kennedy set bail at \$5,000 cash or \$10,000 bond.

Papaj's daughter, Brittany Gruttadauria, was present for Kuebler's appearance in Grand Island Town Court with her husband, Michael, and infant son.

She declined to speak on camera to a television reporter afterward outside the courtroom. "We have a long road ahead of us," she said.

Erie County District Attorney John J. Flynn commended the State Police for their work on the case.