

Officials say evidence points to church fire suspect

By MELINDA DESLATTE
Associated Press

OPELOUSAS, La. — The white man charged in the burnings of three Louisiana black churches faces a mountain of evidence tying him to the crimes, documenting the fires on his cellphone and an interest in arson on Facebook, the state fire marshal said Monday at a hearing that offered new insight into how officials tracked their suspect.

Holden Matthews bought a gas can and oil rags similar to those found at the site of the fires, he recorded a conversation with a friend in which he talked about using gasoline to burn churches, and his cellphone held images of the fires before law enforcement even arrived to the blazes, Lou-

isiana Fire Marshal Butch Browning testified at Matthews' bond hearing.

The 21-year-old Matthews — the son of a sheriff's deputy — entered a not guilty plea Monday via video conference from the St. Landry Parish jail, as prosecutors added new charges declaring the arsons a hate crime.

"There is a substantial amount of evidence, it appears," state District Judge James Doherty said before denying Matthews' bond request, keeping him in jail.

In his testimony for prosecutors, Browning outlined a litany of evidence that he said tied Matthews to the torching of the three black churches over 10 days.

The fire marshal described cellphone records placing Matthews at the fire



Leslie Westbrook/The Advocate

Firefighters respond to an April 4 blaze at Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church, in Opelousas, La.

locations. On his phone, Browning said, Matthews had images of the church

fires in the early stages and the destruction days after the churches were set ablaze, in

addition to copies of news reports about the fires.

"He actually superim-

posed himself on those news reports, claiming responsibility for these fires," Browning said.

Video surveillance near the churches showed a truck similar to the one Matthews drives, Browning said. Matthews also exchanged text messages with a friend who asked about the fires: "Was that your work?" the fire marshal said.

In addition, Browning said Matthews posted on Facebook about and showed interest in a movie called "Lords of Chaos," which Browning said is a recent Norwegian film that involved church burnings.

"The evidence we have was unequivocal," Browning said. Later he added: "He has clearly demonstrated the characteristics of a pathological fire setter."

Pond: Construction could begin in May

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include a pond, along with a utility building, bathrooms and a kiosk to hold model boats. It will host field trips, summer camps and public rentals.

The grant represents the final one-third of the cost of the project, while the rest is borne by donations, said Bruce Jones, the deputy director of the museum and Astoria's mayor.

Steve Moore, the executive director of the Murdock trust, said in a news release that the organization awarded the grant because of the project's promise of bringing educational and historical subjects to life in ways that will inspire and entertain.

"The Columbia River Maritime Museum collects, preserves, displays and interprets the maritime history and culture of the

"SINCE OUR PURCHASE OF THE NORTH COAST AUTO PROPERTY REMOVED JUST UNDER \$7,000 IN ANNUAL PROPERTY TAX FROM THE COUNTY TAX ROLLS, WE BELIEVE IT'S IMPORTANT TO RETURN A GREATER VALUE TO THE COMMUNITY BY OPENING THE PARK TO THE PUBLIC, MAINTAINED BY THE MUSEUM"

Bruce Jones | deputy director of the Columbia River Maritime Museum and Astoria's mayor

Columbia River, its tributaries, and the waters of the North Pacific with engaging methods," he said. "We are grateful to partner with them as they work to inspire the next generation of engineers as well as inform and educate local students and families."

The museum still needs approval from the Planning Commission to transition the former auto dealership into a park.

Construction on the pond could begin in May, with a ribbon-cutting during the

125th Astoria Regatta Festival in August, Jones said. The pond and surrounding park will be open to the public but include security cameras and lighting to deter bad behavior.

"Since our purchase of the North Coast Auto property removed just under \$7,000 in annual property tax from the county tax rolls, we believe it's important to return a greater value to the community by opening the park to the public, maintained by the museum, and by reopening a viewshed

of the historic train depot and Columbia River which had been blocked for many decades," Jones wrote in an email.

Nate Sandel, director of education at the museum, said the park will include a wide array of boats for different ages and skill levels, from single-piece wooden hulls to radio-controlled vessels. The museum is still working out how public rentals will work.

"We'll have a flag on the kiosk we'll raise to let people know it's open," he said.

Jewell: Studies show health centers help reduce absenteeism

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Swearingen and Wammack remained in support of moving forward with the health center. Kaczinski was not at the meeting, but Swearingen said he had reached out and affirmed her support. Stahly said he would favor looking at the health center next year, while Meier said nothing had changed for him.

"All I'm going to say is they've had approval every time they've asked for it, and I personally wouldn't want to deal with an agency that basically pulls out and throws a fit," Meier said.

Phillips said he plans to report that a majority of the school board supports the

health center.

As of last year, there were nearly 80 school-based health centers in 25 Oregon counties. Studies have shown the centers help reduce absenteeism, tardiness and behavioral issues.

The Astoria School Board, facing a backlash by some residents concerned over reproductive health services and parent permission, voted in 2013 not to move forward with one. The Knappa School Board recently bowed out of pursuing a grant this school year after the public expressed concerns over location, safety, access, quality of providers, extra foot traffic, drug deals and child abuse.

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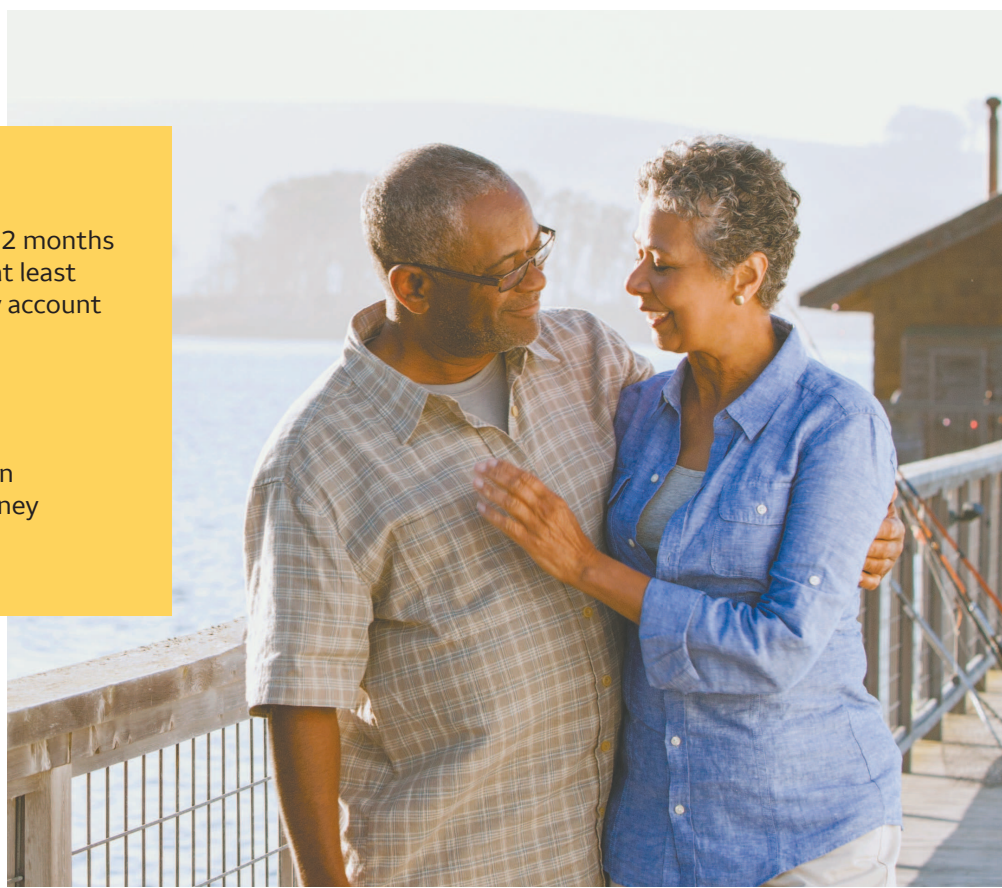
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