

Parole hearing scheduled next month for former Episcopal Bishop Heather Cook



Heather Cook, the former Episcopal bishop who pleaded guilty to manslaughter in the December 2014 killing of a cyclist in a drunken crash in North Baltimore, is eligible for parole next month.

Cook, 60, who has been incarcerated at the Maryland Correctional Institute in Jessup, is scheduled to appear before the Parole Board on May 9, according to a spokesman for the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS).

Cook had been [sentenced](#) on October 27, 2015, to seven years in prison for the crash, which claimed the life of Thomas Palermo, a married father of two who had been out riding his bike two days after Christmas.

Cook pleaded guilt to vehicular manslaughter, leaving the scene of a fatal accident, driving while under the influence and texting while driving.

Asked how the state calculated her eligibility for parole, less than two years into her prison term, DPSCS media relations specialist Gerard Shields explained it this way:

“She has a seven-year sentence, but because the crime is considered non-violent, she is eligible for parole after serving 25% of it,” Shields said.

“It does seem quick,” he agreed.

Drunk Driving History

The Cook case roiled the church and outraged the city’s bicycling community.

The first-ever female bishop for the Maryland diocese, Cook had been selected as a candidate by a search committee whose members had known of Cook’s 2010 drunk driving incident on the Eastern Shore, but failed to share it with others involved in the process of selecting her.

In that earlier case, Cook had been found by Caroline County sheriff’s deputies driving on a shredded tire, with marijuana paraphernalia and liquor bottles in the car and vomit on her shirt.

On a breathalyzer she’d blown .27, more than three times the legal limit. She received probation before judgment.

On December 28, 2014, *Baltimore Brew* broke this story – revealing that the driver who fled after fatally plowing into a 41-year-old Baltimore-area bicyclist was recently consecrated Episcopal Bishop Heather Cook. And we stayed with it through today’s report, breaking the news of Cook’s eligibility for parole. [Here](#) is just some of our past coverage.

In the fatal 2014 drunk-driving crash, Cook’s .22 on a breathalyzer was nearly three times the legal limit.

According to prosecutors, she had left her North Baltimore home, drunk and

texting, and struck the 41-year-old Palermo as he rode his bike along Roland Avenue in the bike lane.

Cook left the crash scene and later passed it as she returned home. Her lawyers said she wanted to drop off her dog before returning to the scene.

Arguing for a lesser sentence, Cook's attorneys had said she suffered from alcoholism and had no help for it.

Prosecutors, meanwhile, had pushed for a longer sentence of 10 years followed by probation. Prosecutor Kurt Bjorklund, at sentencing, said Cook's behavior that day warranted no leniency.

"She made sure her dog was okay, but she didn't care about another human," he said.

Parole Board Procedure

Asked whether the May 9 hearing will be open to the public or closed, Shields said that is decided according to the family's wishes.

He said he did not know if the family has expressed a preference. *The Brew* was unable to reach family members late today for comment.

Sheilds said the public may write to the Maryland Parole Commission at 6776 Reisterstown Road, Suite 307, Baltimore, MD 21215

Hunter L. Pruette, the lawyer handling Cook's appearance before the Parole Board, declined to comment today.