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Decision on death penalty may come soon

Case gets pushed back to February in Escobedo killings

BY MEGAN V. WINSLOW
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WEST PALM BEACH — Within two weeks, the U.S. Attorney's Office will decide whether to recommend pursuing the death penalty against murder suspects Ricardo Sanchez Jr. and Daniel Troya, a federal prosecutor announced Friday.

U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales should make the final decision

by Labor Day, said Steve Carlton, the assistant U.S. attorney prosecuting the suspects. The men are charged in the shooting deaths of Greenacres residents Jose and Yessica Escobedo and their two young sons, whose bodies were found on the side of Florida's Turnpike in Port St. Lucie on Oct. 13, 2006.

Carlton and attorneys for the two men and four others — indicted by a

grand jury in connection with a related drug operation — met Friday morning before U.S. District Judge Daniel Hurley.

During the meeting, to discuss the status of the federal case, the attorneys agreed with Hurley's decision to move the tentative trial date for all six defendants from October to February.

The delay is necessary so the law is "meticulously followed" to protect the "due process rights of all parties,"

See **ESCOBEDO**, page B10

ESCOBEDO CASE DEFENDANTS

Ricardo Sanchez Jr., 23 (aka "Rick"): Various illegal drug charges and carjacking conspiracy, armed carjacking resulting in death and use of a firearm in relation to a crime of violence resulting in death

Daniel Troya, 24 (aka "Homer"): Various illegal drug charges and carjacking conspiracy, armed carjacking resulting in death and use of a firearm in relation to a crime of violence resulting in death

Danny Varela, 26 (aka "D.V."): Various illegal drug and firearm possession charges

Liana Lee Lopez, 19 (aka "Negra"): Various illegal drug charges

Juan C. Gutierrez, 20 (aka "Flaco"): Various illegal drug charges

Kevin Vetere, 23: Conspiracy to possess cocaine with the intent to distribute.

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 A photo of the site is on TCPalm.com.

Former gas station will become bank

BY GEORGE ANDREASSI
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STUART — The Texaco gas station/convenience store at U.S. 1 and Indian Street faces demolition this month to make way for a new Seacoast National Bank and office building.

The bustling intersection is ideal for a new bank building because it is expected to gain even more traffic once the Indian Street Bridge is constructed, said Jim Morgan, of Treasure Coast Commercial Real Estate, who brokered the lease with Seacoast National.

"They ... are looking at the long-term future. They think that location will be a very visible location for them," Morgan said. "Seacoast has outgrown their space, which is nearby. Their business has substantially increased. They're looking to expand and grow."

Morris Stuart Associates of Rutherford, N.J., leased the 1.16-acre lot to Seacoast National for 10 years, with six renewal options at 10 years each, Martin County records show.

Seacoast National wants to construct a two-story building with five drive-through lanes, according to plans submitted to Martin County. There would be a 2,837-square-foot bank on the first floor and 2,641 square feet of office space on the second floor.

"The demolitions should start within the next two weeks," Morgan said. That will include removing the gasoline storage tanks.

Once the new building is completed, Seacoast National will move out of its branch office in the Wedgewood Commons shopping center, just two doors away from the old Texaco station, Morgan said.

Negotiations with another potential tenant for the branch office, at 3300 S. Federal Highway, are expected to conclude soon, Morgan said.

Based in Stuart, Seacoast National has 41 offices, including 11 in Martin County, eight in Indian River County, seven in St. Lucie County, and two in Okeechobee County, the bank's Web site shows.

Officials at Seacoast National and Chevron, the parent company of Texaco, could not immediately be reached for comment.

The Texaco was the third gas station at the intersection of U.S. 1 and Indian Street to close in recent years, Morgan said. There was once a Chevron on the northwest corner and a Mobil on the northeast corner.

Slipping and sliding into summer



JUAN DALE BROWN • juan.dale.brown@scripps.com

Vincent Iania, 2, of Port St. Lucie rolls and slides down the new playground equipment at Jaycee Park in Fort Pierce with his mother, Elizabeth Iania. The equipment at the Hutchinson Island park includes a multi-level play set with ramps, slides and climbing walls for children ages 5 through 12, and a lower play area for ages 2 through 5, divided by a swing set. There is also a water spray for children, said Bob Hood, director of Fort Pierce Public Works, which installed the equipment.

Sellers of fake jewels discover buyers are real police

BY WILL GREENLEE
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PORT ST. LUCIE — Some free advice: Selling bogus jewelry as the real thing to the police department's special investigations unit is a bad idea.

Three men on Friday apparently didn't get the memo before flagging down undercover Detective Garrett Canady off Enterprise Drive in St. Lucie West and asking whether he

was in the market for some bling.

Canady said maybe and told the men he needed to call his boss, undercover Sgt. Derek Brieske, who was shown some chains for a price of \$400.

"I said, 'I don't know if they're real,'" Brieske said. "I said, 'How do I know they're real?'"

One of the alleged jewelry salesmen pulled out a knife and began shaving off small pieces of metal,

and said, "'See, it's still gold as I'm trimming the pieces of metal off,'" Brieske recalled.

Officer Robert Vega, police spokesman, said at one point the men performed a test with muratic acid that supposedly would demonstrate the items were genuine, but the test works only with sulfuric acid.

Dozens of watches, chains, tennis bracelets and rings crowded the hood of a parked police cruiser as

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CAVEAT EMPTOR
 View the jewelry and the alleged salesmen online

one of the alleged jewelry salesman, who sported gold teeth and blue suspenders emblazoned with "Slum King," was escorted away.

See **JEWELS**, page B10

REDEVELOPMENT PLANS

Location: 3200 S. Federal Hwy., Stuart

Site size: 1.16 acres

Old use: Texaco gas station, food mart, car wash

New use: Seacoast National Bank and office building

First floor bank: 2,837 square feet with drive through lanes

Second floor office: 2,641 square feet

Molly Sharkey's family holds protest over fate of Molly's House

BY MEGAN KENNY
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STUART — Molly Sharkey's family is still sore nearly a month after they said executive officers denied them a position on the board of directors of Molly's House. The temporary home for families of seriously ill patients undergoing treatment locally bears

their late daughter's name.

"At this point, the only thing that can happen to resolve this is the executive board and executive director need to resign," said Kevin Sharkey, Molly's father.

Today, the Sharkey family is holding a rally at the gazebo downtown to "help preserve Molly's dream,"

according to a flier being distributed around Stuart by the family.

Expected to attend are former board members, current volunteers and friends of Molly's House, who have expressed their support since the Sharkeys ran an ad in the Stuart

See **MOLLY**, page B10

FAMILY SPEAKS OUT

What: Rally for Molly's House, to support the Sharkey family

When: Today, 9 a.m.

Where: Gazebo, corner of Ocean Boulevard and Flagler Avenue

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INSIDE
 Low water levels in Blue Cypress Marsh means boaters are bogged down. **B5**

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JEWELS

FROM PAGE B1

At least some of the watches were knock-offs of pricey name brands, such as Rolex and Movado. Many of the items were in boxes with papers that had Virgin Jewelers printed on them and tags with prices in the thousands. "They began to show us receipts for \$5,000 for the watches, hundreds of dollars for the gold chains, and the receipts all match what would appear to be a real watch — and they were selling them for pennies on the dollar," Brieske said. Brieske said a jeweler from

Jay's Fine Jewelry determined the items were fake. Had the items been real, they would have been valued at more than \$1 million. "We're trying to protect older folks in the community so that they don't get schemed," Brieske said. The men were identified as Reginald E. Barron, 41, of Miami; Tommie L. Carr, 44, of Umatilla; and Ronnie A. Baker, 32, of Reddick. All face a charge of organized scheme to defraud, though Carr also faces a possession of controlled substance without a prescription charge. The men declined to say where the jewelry came from.

MOLLY

FROM PAGE B1

News on May 19, decrying the board's decision, Sharkey said. The leadership of Molly's House plans to issue a statement on the matter after the board meeting next Tuesday, said spokesman Sam Yates. But a statement released by President Bill Rolo and posted on the house's Web site last month expressed concern over rumors surrounding Molly's legacy. "Molly's House has and will continue to be a tribute to the bravery of Molly and countless others who have experienced tragedy. It is unfortunate that a rumor would soil so many memories," according to the statement.

The statement also said Kevin Sharkey hadn't responded to an offer to serve as head an advisory council and then urged Sharkey to "maintain the heritage" and accept, though Sharkey said there is no committee for him to head up. "I'm very upset, if only for the one fact they would try to pretend that they have a love for Molly, and she might be shedding tears from heaven," Sharkey said. "I'm sure she does have tears from heaven, but they're over what they've done to her house."

Since Molly's House, 430 S.E. Osceola St., opened in 1996, the Sharkeys have alternated three-year terms on the board. The house was a dream of their daughter Molly, who died in 1992 after a six-year battle with leukemia. They never had an agree-

ment in writing that they would have a lifetime spot on the board, but Sharkey cited a verbal agreement with Martin Memorial Medical Center when plans for the house were being made.

So in March, when Sharkey, who also does regular maintenance work at the house, was asked by Executive Director Judy Cruz to step into her office an hour before the regular monthly board meeting, he didn't expect to be shown a list of potential board members that didn't include one of Molly's relatives.

"He hands me the slate of candidates, and I don't see Jessica's (McLain, another Sharkey daughter) or Debby's name on it, and they told me they had more qualified candidates," Sharkey said. "I said, 'You have candidates more qualified than Molly's mother?'"

Sharkey said he suspects his complaints about the group's fundraising might have prompted the executives' actions. In two years, there have been no fundraisers aside from the annual golf tournament, causing the board to have to dip into savings to operate the house.

Even with the problems they're experiencing, Sharkey said they still plan to help the house as much as they can, including continuing the maintenance work he does, because Molly wouldn't want residents to suffer. "Are we going to fight? Yes," he said. "But our daughter's name is on the street in front of the house. Her picture is on the wall inside. There's no way we're going to abandon it."

ESCOBEDO

FROM PAGE B1

charged with these "very, very serious crimes," Hurley said. To get the case moving, Hurley asked the appointed attorneys to meet with one another and establish a budget for defending the suspects with added projected costs if the death penalty is sought for Sanchez and Troya. Part of those funds will pay for the hiring of mitigation experts so defense attorneys may investigate Sanchez and Troya's backgrounds and establish factors that could help argue against the death penalty.

In April, Sanchez and Troya were indicted and pleaded not guilty to a variety of drug charges and two charges that could ultimately lead to execution: armed carjacking resulting in death and using a firearm in a crime of violence resulting in death.

According to St. Lucie County sheriff's reports, Jose Luis Escobedo, 28, and his fugitive brother ran one of the largest cocaine rings in the eastern United States. Sanchez, Troya and the other indicted suspects in the case — Danny Varela, Juna C. Gutierrez, Liana Lee Lopez and West Palm Beach resident Kevin Vetere — worked with or for him.

At about 2:15 a.m. Oct. 13, Sanchez and Troya had Escobedo stop his black Jeep Cherokee on the side of the turnpike in Port St. Lucie. Jose Escobedo and his 25-year-old wife and sons, Luis Damien, 4, and Luis Julian, 3, were shot between 20 and 50 times before Troya, in a burgundy van, and Sanchez, in the Jeep, sped off.

The Jeep was found three days later, abandoned in West Palm Beach. Drug ledgers in the Escobedo family's home and cell phone records between Sanchez and Jose Escobedo eventually led detectives to the suspects, according to reports.

The drug charges against the suspects stem from activity connected to Jose Escobedo's alleged drug ring, spanning from about May 4 to Oct. 25, 2006, according to the indictment.

Varela, Gutierrez, Lopez and Vetere all face up to life in prison.

None of the defendants appeared in court Friday, but all were represented by counsel.

Although an additional attorney specializing in death

penalty cases has yet to be secured for Sanchez, West Palm Beach attorney James L. Eisenberg made an appearance as Troya's newly appointed death penalty counsel.

And he did not appear overly optimistic about the impending result of Gonzales' de-

cision. "With this administration, the odds are this is a death penalty case," he said after the hearing. Unless an additional hearing is requested, the attorneys and Hurley will not meet again in court until October.

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