

METRO

BID TO DELAY MURDER TRIAL IS REJECTED

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333-4899

379 words

12 February 1998

The Evansville Courier

EVVL

Final

A5

English

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The trial of Robert Keith Woodall, charged with the Jan. 25, 1997, kidnapping, rape and murder of a 16-year-old Greenville, Ky., girl, is still set to open Feb. 23.

But public defenders appointed to represent Woodall say that doesn't give them enough time to adequately prepare his defense.

Special Judge Bill Cunningham of Eddyville, Ky., has rejected motions by the two-man defense team to delay the trial, and on Wednesday he declined to allow one of the attorneys to withdraw from the case.

The judge assured Central City attorney Mark Baker he would not be expected to defend Woodall alone.

Baker, in asking to withdraw, expressed concern that Cunningham's refusal to delay the start of the trial might leave him without assistance from the team's lead counsel, Mike Williams, of the state Office of Public Advocacy's capital trial unit in Frankfort, Ky.

Baker, an attorney since 1995, said he lacked the experience required under American Bar Association guidelines to serve as principal counsel in a death penalty case.

Williams is engaged in a death penalty defense in Graves County, and Baker had expressed concern that trial might not end before the start of Woodall's. (That case, though, went to the jury Wednesday afternoon.)

And Williams in earlier motions rejected by Cunningham had

argued for a delay, saying the back-to-back cases would not give him adequate time to prepare for Woodall's trial.

Woodall is accused of abducting Sarah Hansen, a Muhlenberg South High School student, from the parking lot of a Greenville convenience store. State police say he then took her to a nearby lake where he raped and killed her and threw her body into the water.

Woodall, 23, had been convicted of two counts of first-degree sexual abuse in 1993 and had served time at the Green River Correctional Complex at nearby Central City.

The trial was moved to Caldwell County because of publicity about the murder in Muhlenberg County. Cunningham was appointed as special judge because of the retirement of Muhlenberg Circuit Judge Dan Cornette and the subsequent appointment of Commonwealth's Attorney David Jernigan as judge there.

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