

Gulf bombing trial gears up

United Press International
HOUSTON — A former Texas college professor and two Colorado gun shop owners pleaded innocent Wednesday to charges in the \$15 million Gulf chemical plant extortion case.

The pleas before a magistrate formed the final battle lines for a multidefendant trial Dec. 28 in which the federal government will pit the testimony of one contrite extortionist against evidence concerning four suspects.

A lawyer for one of the four said he was considering asking that the trial of Ted McKinney, 45, be severed from the others because of the difficulty in representing McKinney in the trial where there are conflicting interests of defendants and a confession introduced from one.

"I'm toying with the idea because I would be concerned about trying the cases together if a confession is introduced and a defendant testified against the others," lawyer George Secrest said.

McKinney, a former professor at the University of Texas-San Antonio who recently ran a pack saddle excursion business in Durango, and gun shop partners McBride and Worth all pleaded not guilty before U.S. Magistrate Frank Waltermire

during arraignment Wednesday.

A fourth defendant, Jill Bird, 36, of Durango, previously pleaded innocent.

The fifth person indicted in the case, former Durango reserve police officer Tim Justice, 30, has pleaded guilty to two of the 12 charges in exchange for his testimony and for a prison sentence not to exceed 15 years.

Five bombs were found in Gulf Oil Chemicals Co.'s Cedar Bayou plant near Baytown, Texas, after Gulf officials received an extortion letter. The bombs were defused or exploded harmlessly.

Worth asked Wednesday for a reduction of his \$1 million bond, and a hearing was set for Monday.

Attorneys for McKinney and McBride said they might also ask for bond reductions.

None of the three Wednesday waived his right to a speedy trial within 70 days of indictment.

McBride was represented at the brief arraignment by court-appointed attorney Mike Canahan, who said he had convinced McBride not to represent himself in the trial.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Ron Woods told Waltermire he expected the trial to take three weeks.

Textbook censors criticized

United Press International
AUSTIN — As members of the State Board of Education prepared for three days of textbook adoption hearings, an anti-censorship advocate accused two fundamentalist textbook critics of opposing books that don't fit their religious philosophy.

Nationally-noted fundamentalist textbook critics Mel and Norma Gabler of Longview were scheduled to appear before the board Thursday.

The State Board of Education's textbook adoption proceedings, scheduled to run through Saturday, follow last summer's weeklong public hearing by a 15-member textbook

committee. The committee heard hours of protests from the Gablers and others.

Members of the Texas Institute of Letters, People for the American Way and the Texas Civil Liberties Union, who will not be allowed to testify at the hearings, voiced their opposition to censorship Wednesday night at a news conference at the University of Texas.

"If you look at those who are raising the biggest ruckus about what is on the shelves of school libraries, they're coming from a very narrow spectrum of the fundamentalist Christian right," John Duncan of the Texas Civil Liberties Union said.

"Essentially what they're

attempting to do is purge public schools of all books which do not meet the criteria of their very narrow religious philosophy."

Michael Hudson, of People for the American Way, said his group won the right this year for the first time to submit written comments in opposition to the protesters. But, unlike those who object to the books, he said citizens who want to defend ideas in the books or the books themselves will not be heard at

the public hearing.

"The process favors the Gablers because under the present system, the State Board of Education refuses to hear testimony in favor of books, in favor of including certain ideas or allowing people who desire to disagree or refute the Gablers," Hudson said.

During the news conference, members of the groups read excerpts from some of the forbidden books.

Beverly Lowry of the Texas Institute of Letters said any attempts at censorship were destructive and decried efforts in various cities across the nation to ban such books as "Huckleberry Finn," "Mary Poppins" and "The Diary of Anne Frank."

"The banning of one book, the lifting of one book from a library shelf, the tossing of one book into a bonfire affects us all," Lowry said.

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Consumer group wants counsel

United Press International
AUSTIN — A consumer advocacy group will ask a commission reviewing the operations of state agencies to establish a "public counsel" within the Public Utilities Commission to represent residential customers during rate hearings.

Rebecca Lightsey, director of the Texas Consumer Association, said once the PUC establishes higher rates in a utility rate case hearing, residential users have no voice in how that pie is divided up.

"They wind up paying more than they should," she said.

She said the group will ask the Sunset Commission, which is reviewing the operations of state agencies, boards and commissions, to establish a "public counsel" within the PUC to represent residential rate payers during rate hearings.

The Sunset Commission is conducting week-long hearings including sessions dealing with the PUC.

Lightsey said an independent public counsel and staff could be funded at the PUC through the gross receipts tax already imposed on utility companies.

The consumer group, she said, will also recommend the PUC conduct management audits on utilities, restrict the amount of construction costs passed on to customers and redesign rate structure to give residential customers a break.

While the PUC can audit utilities' books, Lightsey said, the PUC never looks into how well the utilities are actually being run.

"There is no ongoing record of whether management costs are higher than necessary," she said.

Lightsey said the current rate design used by the PUC "is contrary to a fair system based on equity and energy efficiency."

The largest users — industry — pay the cheapest rates, while residential customers pay the highest, she said.

Lightsey said the consumer association will also lobby the full Texas Legislature for a bill that would convert the PUC into an elected rather than appointed panel.

Legislation has been pre-filed

in the House and Senate to expand the PUC and make it an elected commission.

"No race would be more clearly understood by the average voter than the election of a utility commissioner who will vote on their utility rates," she said.

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