

The death penalty

Healey makes the right decision in Whitaker case

The decision by prosecutors to seek the death penalty against a man charged with plotting to kill his family was the only choice.

Along with alleged cohorts Chris Brashear and Steve Champaign, Whitaker, 26, is charged with capital murder in the deaths of his mother, Patricia, and his 19-year-old brother, Kevin.

Police charge that Bart Whitaker orchestrated the plot in order to collect more than \$1 million in life insurance money. They didn't say how the three men intended to split the money.

On Dec. 10, 2003, the entire Whitaker family — along with father Kent — returned home from dinner to their house on Heron Way in the Sugar Lakes subdivision in Sugar Land.

Brashear was allegedly waiting to ambush them inside their home, while Champaign was the wheel man, or getaway driver.

A masked intruder opened fire, killing Patricia and Kevin and wounding Bart and Kent. Police said Bart Whitaker was shot as a ruse to make it look like he was a victim.

If convicted of something so sick and diabolical, a defendant deserves to be executed.

However, if a jury hands down a capital murder conviction, it



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has the option imposing death or a life prison sentence.

In the last Fort Bend capital murder trial, District Attorney John Healey's office convicted Charles McKinney of killing three people, but he was sentenced to life, not death.

Healey hasn't announced whether the state will seek the death penalty against Brashear and Champaign. They will probably be asked to testify against Whitaker to spare their lives.

Capital murder trials are drawn out and costly, both in tax dollars for the state and emotionally for those in the courtroom, especially jurors who are faced with such a solemn duty.

Unlike other criminal trials, prospective jurors are interviewed individually in what can be a painstakingly slow process.

If sentenced to death, defendants also go through a myriad of appeals that takes years before an

execution can be carried out in Huntsville.

Bart Whitaker didn't do himself any favors after his indictment when he fled to Mexico. That's not what we think of innocent people doing. He was extradited by Mexican authorities and handed over in September to U.S. officials in Laredo.

Police also said Bart Whitaker plotted to kill his family on two other occasions, but those plans weren't carried out. That will not be admissible at trial.

Kent Whitaker, 57, said this week he begged the DA's office not to seek a death sentence against Bart. He said Patricia and Kevin wouldn't want that, either.

As far as human tragedies go, they don't get much worse than this. It's impossible to imagine the pain Kent Whitaker is going through, and will continue to experience the rest of his life. Our hearts and prayers go out to him.

Yet, as sad as that is, it's no reason for the state not to seek the death penalty.

The justice system must send the message that people convicted of such heinous crimes have to pay the ultimate price.

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