

Hilton lawyer asks for trial to be pushed back

By Amanda Curcio • DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER • Published: October 07, 2010 2:00AM

The high-profile murder trial of Gary Michael Hilton may be delayed for the third time — defense attorneys are asking for the trial to be pushed back to the spring. The defense plans to motion for continuance Oct. 22.

Hilton, 64, is charged with the kidnapping and killing of Cheryl Dunlap, a nurse and Sunday school teacher from Crawfordville. Dunlap, 46, was found slain in the Apalachicola National Forest on Dec. 15, 2007. Most of the physical evidence in the case has been sealed from the public to prevent any influence on future jurors.

The motion states that Hilton's defense attorney, public defender Ines Suber, has 400 category A witnesses, including eyewitnesses, alibi witnesses, investigating officers and expert witnesses, that she needs to talk to before the trial.

Suber said that three sets of discovery this September yielded 150 witnesses crucial in the penalty phase of the trial.

"I'm working very hard," Suber said. "There are days when I speak to 60 witnesses. I want to provide Mr. Hilton with effective assistance of counsel, as is his legal right."

"Back in June I told the court there was absolutely no way that I'd be able to do this case by January," she added. "I anticipate being ready by April."

However, prosecutors say they have been ready for trial and want to move forward.

Assistant State Attorney Georgia Cappleman said that it "doesn't take three years to prepare for a criminal trial," and that she hopes the defense isn't stalling to avoid a death penalty sentence.

The Hilton trial had been set for June 12, but it was continued to Jan. 31 after Suber asked for it to be pushed back.

Hilton pleaded guilty Jan. 31, 2008, to the bludgeoning and killing of Meredith Emerson, a 24-year-old hiker he abducted in North Georgia. He was sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole in 2038. And Hilton has been named as a person of interest in missing-person cases throughout the Southeast.

Law-enforcement officials named Hilton as a person of interest in the killing of John and Irene Bryant, an elderly couple who disappeared while hiking in North Carolina in October 2007.

Ormond Beach police officers believe that Hilton may be linked with the disappearance of Michael S. Louis, 27, who was reported missing in November 2007, officials have said. Louis' body was discovered in Tomoka State Park a month later.

Hilton is being held without bail in the Leon County Jail on charges of first-degree murder, kidnapping, grand theft auto and grand theft.