

Decision due in 2 weeks on trial site

By Cynthia Baran
Shoreline Bureau Chief

Carpenter murder case may move outside New London

NEW LONDON — Beth Carpenter's attorney says the evidence to change the location of her murder trial to Bridgeport is "compelling."

The prosecutor says the evidence is "underwhelming."

Within two weeks, Superior Court Judge Susan B. Handy, after wading through some 300 exhibits presented by the defense in support of its change-of-venue motion, will decide which it is.

Carpenter, 36, of Ledyard, is a lawyer accused of goading her Old Saybrook lover, Haiman Klein, into finding someone to kill her brother-in-law, Anson "Buzz"

Clinton III, in 1994. The state alleges the motive was Carpenter's belief that Clinton was an unsuitable stepfather for her niece.

Clinton, who grew up in Old Lyme and whose family still lives there, was found shot to death on the Rocky Neck Connector off Interstate 95 in East Lyme on March 10, 1994. Klein, 60, a lawyer, and the triggerman, Mark Despres of Deep River, have pleaded guilty in the case and are awaiting sentencing, which will not take place until they testify against Carpenter at her trial.

New Haven lawyer Hugh F. Keefe, representing Carpenter, attacked the articles about the case that appeared in the New London Day, the newspaper of widest circulation in the county, as "unusually prejudiced, inaccurate and viciously biased" against his client.

A survey of residents in the New London and Bridgeport judicial districts, Keefe noted, showed that 83 percent of those in the New London area had "heard or read about" Clinton's killing.

Jurors may be admonished when seated on a case not to talk about or allow anyone else to talk

with them about the case, but with the level of knowledge and interest in this case, which is bound to grow when the trial begins, that will be hard to enforce, Keefe argued.

Keefe said as a trial lawyer for more than 30 years, his own experience has been that in a high-profile case, he "cannot go out of the house, to the grocery store or the movies without people coming up to me, perfect strangers, and gratuitously rendering an opinion about the case."

"For the life of me, I cannot understand why the state objects to the change of venue," Keefe

argued. "The only downside to the transfer to another judicial district is that the prosecutor will have to travel a longer distance." For the defendant, it's a matter of going into trial "on a level playing field," he said.

Assistant State's Attorney Paul Murray argued that the people of the New London Judicial District have a right to have the case tried in the area where the crime occurred.

"The people have a right to a public trial in their venue without the inconvenience of traveling a long distance," Murray said. To that, defense attorney Tara

Night responded that the right to be tried in the same venue is the defendant's right, not the right of the people of the judicial district.

Murray also argued that moving the trial location isn't just a matter of the prosecutor traveling. Witnesses and physical exhibits would have to be transported, too, he said.

Referring to the defense survey of New London-area residents, Murray noted 68 percent of the people polled said it would be very easy or somewhat easy to put aside what they'd heard about the case and deal only with the evidence at trial, compared to 61 percent of the Bridgeport-area people surveyed.