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BECKHAM RULED INDIGENT

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The public will pick up the tab for the death-penalty trial of a retired Episcopal bishop's son in the beating of his wife.

Steve Beckham told a judge Friday he had only about \$200 in the bank and was too poor to afford attorneys to help him fight charges that he arranged the death of Vickie Lander Beckham. She was the daughter of state Sen. Jim Lander of Newberry. Circuit Judge Ralph King Anderson agreed and appointed two of the state's most high-priced and high-profile lawyers, **Jack Swerling** and Dick Harpootlian of Columbia, to represent Beckham.

Anderson's decision allows the attorneys to dip into the state's defense fund for the poor, which pays up to \$25,000 for each of two lawyers in a death-penalty case and up to another \$20,000 for expenses. Costs can go higher if approved by the judge.

The account is financed by fines imposed in criminal cases in South Carolina.

During testimony in Friday's one-hour hearing, Beckham didn't mention a defense fund that the Episcopal church set up for his father, William A. Beckham.

The elder Beckham is the former leader of the upper diocese of South Carolina. Last fall, the fund had about \$80,000 donated by Episcopalians at the request of the current bishop and church leaders.

The Rt. Rev. Beckham said at the time that he had paid some of his son's legal expenses from that account.

Prosecutor Townes Jones said after the hearing that he did not know about the defense fund, although it has been widely reported in newspapers. Jones said he will consider whether to object later to Beckham being found indigent.

Swerling and Harpootlian said outside the courtroom that they would start billing the state for their work after Friday. Their bill for months of work on the case until Friday is covered by the bishop, who hired them last year, **Swerling** said.

The pretrial hearing was held here because that's where Anderson is holding court this week. The Supreme Court assigned him Dec. 8 to preside over the case.

In other developments Friday:

Jones announced he will seek to add conspiracy and kidnap charges to the murder warrants already filed against Beckham and co-defendant Richard Anderson, a former barroom bouncer in Myrtle Beach.

Those accusations will be presented Monday to a Newberry County grand jury, Jones said. Authorities allege that Beckham hired Anderson to kill his estranged wife. (Anderson and the judge aren't related).

Vickie Beckham was found dead in her car June 12, 1994, on a roadside near Little Mountain.

The couple had been separated and she was last seen alive that Sunday evening, when she returned their three children to Beckham, who lived in a guest house on the grounds of his father's home near Pomaria.

The defense said prosecutors are withholding statements by Anderson that might exonerate Beckham or at least show inconsistencies they can exploit in a trial.

Jones discounted the inconsistencies, characterizing them as "nothing substantial that would point away from the guilt of the two men charged."

Harpootlian alleged that DNA tests of tissue found under Vickie Beckham's fingernails show it belonged to neither Beckham or Anderson.

Prosecutors heatedly denied that and said Harpootlian was "playing to the press." Jones said after the hearing that forensics show some blood found could have been Vickie Beckham's, but declined to elaborate.

Neither defense nor prosecuting attorneys would say much outside the courtroom, citing directives from Judge Anderson that they limit pretrial publicity. In a rarity for Harpootlian, he had little to say to reporters after the hearing.

Jones announced that he will try the defendants separately, beginning with Anderson. The prosecutor denied that it was a strategic decision because the case against Beckham is weaker. Detectives investigated the death for a year before filing charges last July and then only after Anderson implicated Beckham.

Anderson's trial won't occur before late February because of busy schedules for the judge and his attorneys.

Beckham's attorneys want to move him from the Saluda County jail to the Richland County Jail so they can have easier access to him. Harpootlian noted that would save on expenses they would have to bill to the Indigent Defense Fund.

Clif LeBlanc covers law enforcement and security issues. Call him with comments or suggestions at 771-8664 weekdays after 9 a.m., or fax your ideas to 771-8430 before 3 p.m.

1. Steve Beckham is led into the court of Judge Ralph King Anderson in Florence on Friday for a pretrial hearing in the death of Vickie Lander Beckham.

2. Co-defendant Richard Anderson, a former barroom bouncer in Myrtle Beach, is taken into the courtroom Friday. Authorities allege that Steve Beckham hired Anderson to kill his estranged wife.

TIM DOMINICK/THE STATE



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