Fathers of slain teens ask to witness execution

By MARSHA SHULER
Capitol news bureau

The fathers of the two St. Martin Parish teen-agers murdered by Elmo Patrick Sonnier want to witness the 35-year-old man's execution in Angola's electric chair Thursday, a Department of Corrections spokeswoman said Monday.

Spokeswoman Peggy Norris said requests have been received from Lloyd LeBlanc and Godfrey Bourque.

Ms. Norris said Corrections Secretary C. Paul Phelps is reviewing the requests and will interview each man before making a decision on whether he will allow them to witness the execution. She said Phelps interviewed LeBlanc on Monday and will talk to Bourque on Tuesday.

"My wife and I did not know what these children had done to get what they got. It doesn't make sense . . . Mr. Sonnier put himself in the place he is right now — he himself," LeBlanc said Saturday as he opposed a last-minute request for clemency for Sonnier.

LeBlanc said that, while those seeking clemency for Sonnier say he is a changed man:

"I have a son that is in the grave that I know who is the product (victim) of a 'rehabilitated man.'"

Last week Phelps approved the request of another father, Vernon Harvey of Covington, who wanted to witness the execution of Robert Lee Willie — convicted of the 1980 killing of his daughter, Faith Hathaway. Willie's execution, which had been scheduled for

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Tuesday was called off.

Ms. Norris said Sonnier has requested that his spiritual adviser, Sister Helen Prejean, be a witness. The nun, who has been pleading for Sonnier's life, had earlier asked Gov. Edwards if she could be a witness.

Sonnier is scheduled to die Thursday, shortly after midnight, for the 1977 slayings of David LeBlanc, 16, of St. Martinville and Loretta Bourque, 18, of New Iberia.

Evidence in the trial indicated Sonnier and his brother, Eddie James Sonnier, found the couple parked on a remote road in St. Martin Parish. The couple was taken to a remote oilfield in Iberia Parish where the young woman was raped. Then, the two young victims were forced to lie side by side on the ground and shot.

Elmo Patrick Sonnier fired six .22 caliber rifle shots alternately into the heads of the youths while his brother, Eddie, held a flashlight, the Louisiana Supreme Court said in affirming the condemned man's sentence.

Sonnier's attorney Millard Farmer has said that all legal appeals have been exhausted in the case. On Saturday, the state Pardon Board denied Sonnier's request for a commutation of his death sentence to life imprisonment.

Sonnier supporters indicated they would make a final plea to Gov. Edwards.

However, Edwards has said he would not intervene in executions unless some overriding reason came to light, such as new evidence.

Edwards' executive counsel Bill Roberts said Monday that he interprets state law to require a favorable recommendation for commutation from the Pardon Board in order for the governor to consider commuting the sentence from death to life.

However, he said the governor could still look at the case in the light of a reprieve, which would only be a temporary delay that would be granted for a reason and for a set time.

The administration of former Gov. Dave Treen interpreted the law to require Treen to consider commutation, regardless of what recommendation the Pardon Board made. Treen considered the case of Robert Wayne Williams even though the Pardon Board recommended against commutation of that sentence. Williams, executed in December, was the first man to die in the electric chair in 22 years.