

Panel reinvites Stone

By Howard Pankratz

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Feb. 15, 2001 - Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone, who has declined requests to testify before the Governor's Columbine Review Commission, has been invited again to appear before the panel in early March.

Commission chairman William Erickson said he's talked with Bill Tuthill, an assistant county attorney, in hopes of arranging Stone's appearance.

"I'm trying to get an agreement that Stone will testify," said Erickson, a retired chief justice of the Colorado Supreme Court. "But it is his (Tuthill's) opinion that, in all probability, he won't."

Tuthill and Stone didn't return phone calls.

Erickson said the March 2 hearing probably will be the commission's last.

The morning will be set aside for members of the public to speak. In the afternoon, the commission will hear from two witnesses. They will be Kathy Sasak, Assistant District Attorney in Jefferson County, and Joe Schallmoser, who will speak about school security issues.

Erickson said the commission has begun writing its report, which should be finished before the May 16 deadline.

Erickson has always wanted Stone to testify.

But Stone has declined to appear before the commission on the advice of the city attorney's office. Stone and his department are named in civil lawsuits filed by the families of victims who were killed or wounded at Columbine on April 20, 1999.

"This is a very difficult decision for the sheriff because he wants to assist the commission in achieving the governor's objective "to learn as much as possible from Columbine to prevent similar tragedies in the future," County Attorney Frank Hutfless wrote to Erickson in June.

Erickson wrote back a week later:

"(Stone) has expressed a desire to help the people of Colorado answer many of the remaining questions surrounding Columbine by testifying before the commission. As his counsel, you therefore have an ethical duty to assist him testifying before the Commission."

Gov. Bill Owens established the panel in the summer of 1999 to:

- Document the lessons learned from the tragedy,
- Recommend ways to prevent similar tragedies,
- Chronicle the major events that led up to and occurred during and immediately after the rampage.

The commission also is charged with reviewing the police response, the procedures and techniques used by the SWAT teams at the scene, coordination among law enforcement agencies, and the ability of the responding agencies to communicate with each other.