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Drakeford plea signals probe of triple slaying

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In the wake of David Darnell Drakeford's guilty plea Wednesday in the 1982 beating death of a Waco woman, the McLennan County District Attorney's office will shift its attention to investigating the 1982 stabbing deaths of three teen-agers near Lake Waco.

Officials in the district attorney's office had said they would not seek an indictment against suspects in the Lake Waco homicides until after Drakeford's trial ended. Attorneys in the case had expected the trial to last about six weeks.

But Drakeford's decision Wednesday to plead guilty to the murder of Genevieve Crawford, a gift shop clerk at the Waco Hilton, paved the way for investigators and prosecutors to devote more time to their investigation into the deaths of Jill Montgomery, Raylene Rice and Kenneth Franks.

Drakeford received a 99-year prison sentence after pleading guilty to the lesser charge. He could have been sentenced to death or life imprisonment if convicted of capital murder.

"With the successful completion of the Hilton murder case, our office will now be able to direct a great deal more attention to the investigation and preparation of the triple murder case," said John Ben Sutter, an aide to McLennan County District Attorney Vic Feazell.

Sutter said Feazell "wants to proceed as expeditiously as possible (but) insists that this case be prepared as comprehensively and completely as possible."

The case will be presented to the grand jury as soon as the investigation has been completed, he added.

Sutter said prosecutors are centering their investigation around three or four people, none of whom has been eliminated as a suspect. He declined to name the suspects, except for former Wacoan James Russell Bishop, who is not considered the primary suspect by investigators.

Bishop, a former groundskeeper at McLennan Community College, is serving a 79-year prison term in Chino, Calif., for the Feb. 21 assault of two high school girls.

Sutter has said the prime suspects in the case "are not going anywhere" while investigators continue to "tie up the loose ends."

He declined comment when asked if prosecutors will seek a capital murder indictment against the suspect or suspects or if the charge will be murder.

"We might be revealing a little too much about the case to say that one way or the other," he said.

The next meeting of the McLennan County grand jury will be Thursday.