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Man charged in serial killings isn't facing death penalty

By ASSOCIATED PRESS and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN |

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BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — Louisiana prosecutors aren't seeking the death penalty against a suspect charged with killing three men and wounding a fourth in a string of shootings last year.

District Attorney Samuel D'Aquila told The Associated Press on Monday that he informed Ryan Sharpe's defense attorney of his decision not to seek the death penalty against the 36-year-old man over a deadly shooting in East Feliciana Parish.

Sharpe is charged with first-degree murder in the Oct. 9 shooting of Boy Scouts employee Brad DeFranceschi, who was gunned down while trimming weeds in front of his house. DeFranceschi lived on Boy Scouts camp property in Clinton, a town of 1,600 people about 30 miles (50 kilometers) northeast of Baton Rouge.

The charges that he faces in the other three shootings aren't punishable by a death sentence.

Sharpe is charged with second-degree murder in the July 8 shooting of 62-year-old Tommy Bass, who was killed in the carport of his home. He is charged with attempted first-degree murder in the Sept. 12 shooting of 47-year-old Buck Hornsby, who was wounded while exercising on his property. And he is charged with second-degree murder in the Sept. 19 killing of 66-year-old Carroll Breeden, who was shot to death while doing yard work in front of his home in East Baton Rouge Parish.

D'Aquila said he based his decision on several factors, including the "very time-consuming" nature of capital murder cases. He said he expects Sharpe's attorneys to challenge his "mental capacity" to stand trial.

"We don't want to get into a lengthy battle with that," D'Aquila said.

Tommy Damico, one of Sharpe's attorneys, said a defense argument that Sharpe is mentally unfit for trial "may be on the table."

"Without getting into all of the evidence, this is a very unusual type of situation," Damico said.

A 2009 law amended Louisiana's first-degree-murder statute to make it easier for prosecutors to seek the death penalty against people accused of serial killings. But the change in the law "hasn't really been tested" yet in either the Louisiana Supreme Court or U.S. Supreme Court, D'Aquila said, citing that as another factor in his decision.

The four shootings happened in a rural area north of Baton Rouge and left residents on edge for weeks. The victims were middle-age or older white men who were shot at their homes or on their property. Sharpe, who owned a plumbing company, also is white.

A law enforcement official told the AP last year that Sharpe wasn't a suspect in the shootings until he called East Feliciana Parish Sheriff Jeff Travis' office on Oct. 11 and identified himself as the killer. The official spoke only on condition of anonymity because the investigation was ongoing.

Travis has said Sharpe confessed when investigators questioned him after his arrest. Travis also has said detectives found "significant physical evidence" linking Sharpe to the shootings.

Sharpe's trial in East Feliciana Parish is tentatively set to start on Aug. 27, but Damico said he expects it to be postponed.

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