

Prosecutors implicate Gladstone police Sgt. Lynn Benton in murder-for-hire plot - John Henry Hingson III, PC

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[2011 Cop domestic violence murder wife Lynn Benton](#)



By Steve Mayes, The Oregonian
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*Deborah
Higbee Benton
Lynn Benton*



campbell.JPG

Susan Campbell, who is accused of participating in the murder of Deborah Higbee Benton, reacts after she was denied bail Thursday in a Clackamas Court.

Gladstone police Sgt. Lynn Benton agreed to pay a close friend \$2,000 to kill his estranged wife, Clackamas County prosecutors said in court Thursday, but the victim didn't die easily, and the conspiracy quickly unraveled.

The friend, Susan Campbell, was arrested June 3 and charged with aggravated murder for "participating" in a murder-for-hire scheme. She made statements to police that implicated Benton, but until Thursday's two-hour hearing, prosecutors had never disclosed her statements or said who they believed was behind the plot. Testimony Thursday revealed extensive details about the May 28 death of Gladstone beauty salon owner Deborah Higbee Benton and ranged from the tragic to the unexpected.

Police quickly homed in on Campbell after receiving tips that she had talked about killing Higbee Benton.

Benton, who remains on paid administrative leave, has not been charged with a crime and did not attend Thursday's hearing. He hired Pat Birmingham, an experienced criminal defense attorney, who attended the hearing but declined to comment.



higbee-mug.jpg



lynnebentonmug.jpg

Prosecutors now face a dilemma. Unless Campbell agrees to testify against Benton, her statements cannot be used against the police sergeant.

It's uncommon to name, but not indict, a criminal co-conspirator.

"The proceedings were somewhat unusual," said John Henry Hingson III, a prominent defense attorney based in Oregon City. "But it's an unusual case. I don't think there was anything improper about it."

The allegations against Benton, a former homicide investigator, also rippled through law-enforcement circles.

"I can't remember a certified police officer ever accused of murdering anyone," said Eriks Gabliks, director of the Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards and Training. "This is a first, as far as I know."

The Oregonian's continuing coverage of the death of Deborah Higbee Benton in Gladstone.

Thursday's hearing was a legal requirement. A jailed defendant has the right to a release hearing where the state must show there is a strong presumption of guilt. To support a charge of aggravated murder, the state had to show Campbell was involved in a murder-for-hire plot. Prosecutors still have the option of bringing charges against Benton at a later

time.

Under questioning from prosecutor John Wentworth, lead investigator Brad Edwards, an Oregon City police detective, laid out the case against Campbell and Benton, based on his review of the evidence and two interviews he conducted with Benton the day after Higbee Benton's death.

Benton and Higbee Benton married in 2010 but it was a troubled relationship, Edwards said. Benton, formerly Lynne Irene Benton, underwent a female-to-male sex change operation, something Higbee Benton originally supported, then opposed. That led Benton to move out of their home a month before the killing.

Benton also admitted physically abusing Higbee Benton, once pressing his forearm to her throat and pinning her against the wall, Edwards said, and expressed concern that he would be fired if the abuse was reported.

During his interview, Edwards noted scratches on Benton's arms. Benton said he received them during a scuffle with a suspect two days earlier, but Benton made no mention of the scratches in a written report about the incident.

That was just one of many discrepancies in Benton's story, Edwards said.



gladstone-beauty-salon-memorial.JPG

A memorial outside Gladstone Beauty Salon in June shows Debbie Lee Higbee Benton, the slain owner of the salon.

When asked for all cell phones in his possession, Benton said he had just one — his work phone. Then a phone in Benton's jacket pocket rang. Benton gave the phone to Edwards, then buried his head in his hands and uttered an obscenity.

Investigators also found that the record of calls and text messages on May 28 — the day of the killing — had been erased from Benton's and Campbell's cellphones.

Benton and Campbell were under police surveillance. They were photographed meeting June 1 in a restaurant parking lot near Clackamas Town Center.

After the killing, a neighbor called police and reported her suspicions about Campbell's role in the killing. The neighbor spoke with Campbell, and police recorded the conversation. Campbell discussed plans to cover up the crime and said that Benton wanted his wife dead, investigators said.

Campbell's son told investigators he overheard Benton offering Campbell \$2,000 to commit the killing, Edwards said.

Campbell never received the cash. According to investigators, the payment was supposed to come from \$60,000 Higbee Benton kept in a bank safe deposit box. Police seized the keys to the lockbox and even if they had not, Higbee Benton had blocked Benton's access to it.

Prosecutors also detailed how they believe the crime unfolded:

On May 28, Campbell went to Higbee Benton's salon and shot her in the back with a .25 caliber handgun. But the shot wasn't fatal. Campbell immediately called Benton, who was working an overtime shift at police headquarters. Investigators later found .25 caliber ammunition in Benton's police locker.

Edwards stopped short of saying Benton went to the shop and beat Higbee Benton to death.

An autopsy cataloged the brutality: a dozen broken ribs, a lacerated liver, evidence of strangulation, including a fractured thorax. The medical examiner characterized it as an act of "kill, kill and overkill."

Prosecutors met their burden to show a strong presumption of guilt, said Circuit Judge Kathie F. Steele, who ordered that Campbell remain in jail.

Benton remains on the Gladstone payroll. However that may change.

"If Sgt. Benton is named a person of interest in a crime, then that will be taken into consideration," said Pete Boyce, Gladstone city administrator. Meanwhile, Boyce said Benton is currently under investigation for "unrelated allegations." He said a due-process hearing is set for Tuesday.

Reporter Rick Bella contributed to this story.

— Steve Mayes