

Justice at a gallop is no justice at all

Judge Cameron Mitchell did what the law and his conscience required when he declared a mistrial in the murder case of Vicente Ruiz.

Prosecutors allege Ruiz helped his cousin, Pedro Mendez-Reyna, shoot six men inside a Pasco garage in 1987. Five of them died.

The trial has been a long and convoluted one, and the evidence trail stretches back more than two decades.

Public frustration runs high over this case, primarily because of numerous delays, a previous trial that also ended in mistrial and an aggressive defense team that never seemed to run out of arguments for stopping the proceedings.

But Ruiz's attorney, Bob Thompson, during two days of digging at the Pasco police station, discovered more than 500 pages of documents related to the case that he never had seen before.

The 4 1/2-inch-thick binder labeled "Other subjects" contained police reports on at least 15 potential witnesses, including one informant who provided information "connecting the murders to a drug cartel and other murders on the West Coast."

Failing to turn over those documents to the defense before the trial started was a colossal mistake. The financial strain on Franklin County because of this case already was formidable before the second mistrial.

We're frustrated. Police and prosecutors should have done a better job of identifying all relevant evidence in the state's possession and getting it into the defense team's hands.

Certainly, the nearly 23-year gap between the shootings and the trial contributed to the missteps. Maybe the lion's share of blame belongs there.

It's easy to rail against the courts, the lawyers and the police in this case, but none of them murdered five people on Oct. 13, 1987, and blaming the defendant is equally pointless. He is simply using the tools the Founding Fathers provided for him when they wrote and adopted the Constitution of the United States, and still is innocent until proven guilty.

If police made mistakes in handling evidence connected to the crime over the past two decades, that's unfortunate.

But not a single Pasco police officer or commander came to work that day 22 years ago expecting carnage.

We give defense attorney Thompson full credit for his diligence in finding the missing evidence.

Our system has been tested by this case and come through soundly on the side of the Constitution.

And Ruiz, whether he participated in the crime or not, has been ably represented.

The prosecution says there will be another trial.

Good.

We will come closer to perfect justice in this case if the process is slow and deliberate rather than speedy and flawed.

In practice, our courts sometimes have failed us, just as we have failed them.

Five victims in this case, of course, will not appear in the courtroom, whenever this case is rescheduled.

They are Misael Barajas, 22; Juan Antonio Lopez Garcia, 20; Eliceo Guzman Lamas, 20; and Rafael Parra Magallon, 22, all of Pasco, and Francisco Venegas Cortez, 21, of Kennewick.

Aldo Montes, 20, who also uses the name Jesse Rocio, survived a gunshot wound to the stomach.

Mendez-Reyna is serving a life sentence after agreeing to testify in his cousin's trial as part of his plea agreement.

It's hard not to grumble about the compounded delays in the trial of Ruiz, but our better nature says we ought to be thankful that in one of the most shocking crimes ever committed in the Tri-Cities, justice, and not vengeance, is being served.

Read more: <http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2010/06/27/1071332/justice-at-a-gallop-is-no-justice.html#ixzz0sC4ba1Gh>