Each morning Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Judge Dick Ambrose speaks to a new group of potential jurors. The judge explains that Sowell is facing 11 counts of aggravated murder with felony murder specifications, which means it carries a possible penalty of death.

By JAMES W. WADE III

Staff Reporter

Jury selection is still going on for the Anthony Sowell trial. Sowell, the Cleveland man accused of killing 11 women and leaving their remains at his Imperial Avenue home.

Each morning Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Judge Dick Ambrose speaks to a new group of potential jurors. The judge explains that Sowell is facing 11 counts of aggravated murder with felony murder specifications, which means it carries a possible penalty of death.

If Sowell is found guilty, there will be two phases to the trial: the trial phase and the sentencing phase. Given the 11 aggravated murder counts, this is a death penalty case, however, the death penalty is not automatic if the defendant is found guilty.

Some relatives of victims of the Imperial Avenue murders want prosecutors to cut a deal so they do not have to be tortured by a trial. They handed a petition last week to the Cuyahoga County Prosecutor's Office as attorneys on both sides continued to select a jury. They want Prosecutor Bill Mason to accept a guilty plea and a sentence of life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Jim Allen presented a petition to the county prosecutor's office to stop the trial. His daughter, 25-year old LeShanda Long, was one of the 11 women whose bodies were found in and around Sowell's Imperial Avenue home in the fall of 2009.

"Out of all the victims, my daughter was the one that only the head was found. None of her remains were found, and so I haven't had any closure. I couldn't put a body to rest," Allen said.

Eight of the 11 families signed the petition, saying they do not want to endure a trial, which would spotlight their loved ones lives and reveal gruesome details about how they died.

Mason says the families have a right to make their request, but he would not elaborate because of a gag order that Judge Dick Ambrose has imposed. Sowell's attorney's Rufus Sims and John Parker have tried to get the gag order lifted.

Ambrose cited case law that supported his argument that the right to a fair trial trumps the right to free speech. It would be impractical, he said, to sequester 200 potential jurors during the selection process, just to protect them from exposure to news accounts of the case.

The judge did acknowledge that moving the trial to another jurisdiction remains a possibility if an impartial jury cannot be found. But that would cause severe delays and would increase the cost to taxpayers of what has already become the most expensive publicly funded criminal case in the county's history.

Representing Mason's office is Pinkey Carr and Rick Bombik. Carr has been an assistant criminal prosecuting attorney under Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Bill Mason since 2002. Before that, she spent nine years as Cleveland's law director for former Mayor Michael White. Carr was named after her paternal grandmother, but she said people still don't believe it's her real name.

"Someone in the legal profession told me that I should give thought to changing my name because they just didn't think I would be taken seriously," Carr said.

"When I'm in the office, yes, I'm smiling. But when I'm in trial, my colleagues will tell me 'You have your trial face on.' I mean it's personal for me. You would think the victim of that crime is my loved one," Carr said.

Carr has worked on several high-profile cases, including the prosecution of Antun Lewis, who was found guilty of arson. The fire on East 87th Street in Cleveland killed eight children and one woman during a sleepover in 2005. Lewis has not been sentenced.

Of the 130 prospective jurors who have been interviewed so far, 38 were asked to return for a second round of questioning. Attorneys predict they will select a jury by the end of next week.