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Death penalty panel needs more time

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**By TOM HESTER JR.
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TRENTON -- It's been 43 years since New Jersey executed anyone, a fact that prompted lawmakers to form a special commission to study the death penalty. In their first meeting, Friday, commission members decided that they need more time.

The law that created the commission gave it until Nov. 15 to forward prerecommendations to Governor Corzine and the Legislature on whether the death penalty should be abolished or the law prescribing it changed.

But the Rev. M. William Howard Jr., the commission chairman, said a date beyond Nov. 15 is needed.

"We shouldn't rush with this," said Howard, pastor at Bethany Baptist Church in Newark.

He said the group would ask the Legislature for an extension. Attorney General Zulima Farber, a commission member, suggested the panel seek an additional three months. She said that would allow the commission to work but not delay pending cases that could involve the death penalty.

The group was formed this year to study capital punishment in a state that reinstated the death penalty in 1982, but hasn't executed anyone since 1963. The state has 10 men on death row, but the legislation that created the commission imposed a moratorium on executions until 60 days after the panel completes its work.

No execution was imminent when the moratorium was imposed.

Sharon Hazard-Johnson, whose parents were killed in their Pleasantville home in 2001 by death row inmate Brian P. Wakefield, attended the hearing and said she was worried.

"I am very concerned that this is a bid to abolish the death penalty," she said. "I hope they can be fair and square."

The commission was formed to study whether the state's death penalty law is fairly applied, how much it costs, whether it deters crime and if it should be abolished.

Howard declined Friday to discuss his position on the death penalty. He is former president of the National Council of Churches, which opposes the death penalty.

The panel includes clergy, family members of murder victims, law enforcement officials, attorneys, the state's public defender, a retired state Supreme Court justice and the former senator, John Russo, who sponsored the death penalty law.

Corzine, a Democrat, opposes the death penalty. He is the first elected New Jersey governor to oppose it since Brendan Byrne, who left office in January 1982.

"The governor remains fundamentally opposed to the death penalty and looks forward to reviewing the committee's report," Corzine spokesman Anthony Coley said.

Last year, New Jersey Policy Perspective, a liberal think tank, said the state has spent \$253 million in the past 23 years on a death penalty that hasn't been used.

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