

Death penalty debate expected amid more property tax reform talks

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TRENTON, N.J. -- The cost of the state's seldom-used death penalty will dominate debate at the Legislature this week as relatives of murder victims get their say.

A death penalty study commission is scheduled to meet Wednesday to take testimony from witnesses, including relatives of murder victims. Officials want to hear whether there is a major cost difference between the death penalty and life in prison without parole.

The special commission formed last year has until mid-November to give recommendations on whether New Jersey's capital punishment law needs to be either revised or abolished. The state has 10 men on death row, but the law that created the commission imposed a moratorium on executions until 60 days after the panel completes its work.

No execution was imminent. New Jersey reinstated the death penalty in 1982 but hasn't used it since 1963.

Sharon Hazard-Johnson, whose parents were killed in their Pleasantville home in 2001 by death row inmate Brian Wakefield, has been wary of the commission's work.

"I am very concerned that this is a bid to abolish the death penalty," she said.

Death penalty foes are hopeful that will happen.

New Jerseyans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty recently released a report that detailed how 25 New Jerseyans were convicted of crimes they didn't commit.

"Our state is not immune from the types of errors that result in an innocent person being sentenced to die," said Celeste Fitzgerald, the group's executive director.

As the commission debates the death penalty, property tax reform talks also are to continue at the Statehouse, with lawmakers expected to discuss regional taxation and shared services.

The committee mulling whether the state can save money by consolidating its hundreds of local governments is slated to meet Wednesday to discuss delivering local services on a regional basis.

Senate Majority Leader Bernard F. Kenny, D-Hudson, said the committee studying if the state's constitution needs amending to provide property tax relief will consider whether New Jersey should replace local property taxes with statewide or regional property taxes.

A statewide property tax has been considered for years in New Jersey, but widely opposed, especially by shore communities with that tend to have lower local property taxes than the rest of the state.

The committee studying school funding plans to study how state and federal legal mandates influence school property taxes, while the panel studying public worker benefits plans to study health benefits for government workers.

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