

Woodburn mayor won't run for Oregon Senate, encourages Alonso Leon to pursue race

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OPB

State Rep. Teresa Alonso Leon came up short last month in a bid for Congress.

Now a shakeup in the race for a Salem-area state Senate district could give her a rare second chance to stay in public office despite the defeat.

Woodburn Mayor Eric Swenson, whom Democratic voters tapped as their nominee for Senate District II in May, announced Friday he's decided not to run after all. Swenson said he'll instead attempt to win another two-year term as mayor, and is encouraging Alonso Leon to pursue the Senate seat instead.



Alonso Leon

"Campaigning for the Oregon State Senate in the Democratic primary taught me many things, particularly in Woodburn, where I was reminded of how much I appreciate the chance to serve as our mayor," Swenson said in a statement shared with OPB. "This wasn't an easy decision to make, the chance to serve as a state senator was also calling."

Swenson's announcement was immediately met with speculation that he ran for the Senate district in order to act as a placeholder for another eventual candidate, rather than intending to hold the seat himself. Under state law, if a major-party nominee steps down prior to the November election, it's up to the party to select a replacement. That creates the possibility that the ultimate nominee could be someone who did not run for the seat in the first place.

Swenson filed for the Senate seat — currently held by Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem — four days before the filing deadline in March. He denied doing so as a placeholder candidate.

"I'm an awfully nice person, but I wouldn't have thrown myself into a Senate campaign and spent months knocking on thousands and thousands of doors to that end, and then given all of that up had not the desire to be my city's mayor been this strong," he said in an email.

Swenson defeated two other candidates to win the Democratic nomination for the district, which stretches from Salem to Woodburn. Swenson got 44% of the vote, compared to 34% for attorney Rich Walsh and 21% for Anthony Rosilez, director of the state's Teacher Standards and Practices Commission.

Rather than voicing support for one of his former opponents, Swenson said Friday he was instead backing Alonso Leon, a former Woodburn city councillor.

"Teresa is a transformational leader with a track record of public service to our community and she has my wholehearted support," Swenson said in a statement. "Senate District II is the most diverse district in Oregon, and there are currently no Latino/a members of the Oregon Senate. In a representative democracy, representation matters."

A three-term state representative, Alonso Leon was the first indigenous Latina immigrant elected to the Oregon Legislature. She opted not to run for re-election this year, choosing instead to pursue the Democratic nomination in the state's brand new 6th Congressional District. She wound up finishing seventh in the nine-way race.

Alonso Leon did not respond to an inquiry Friday morning about whether she would pursue the Senate seat. Oregon law bars failed candidates for a major party's nomination to run for the same seat during the general election under a separate party designation. But in this case, Alonso Leon would be running for an entirely different office.

It's unclear when Democratic precinct committee persons within Senate District II will meet to select a new nominee. Carina Perez Europa, chair of the Marion County Democrats, said Friday that the date would be set by the state party.

Whoever is ultimately nominated will face state Sen. Kim Thatcher, R-Keizer, whose home was included in SD II during redistricting last year. Given Thatcher's long political career, Alonso Leon's existing voter base within much of the district could give her an advantage over other possible nominees.

Michael Wolfe takes a guilty plea in Salem family's murders

Suspect avoids death penalty in kidnapping, homicide of mother, son

Whitney Woodworth and Capi Lynn

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

MCMINNVILLE — The man accused of kidnapping and killing a Salem woman and her 3-year-old son pleaded guilty Friday to murdering them.

Michael Wolfe's change of plea took the death penalty off the table. Under the stipulated agreement, agreed to by the court, he will serve life in prison with a chance of parole after 30 years.

Wolfe is scheduled to be formally sentenced on July 20.

It's been 1,131 days since Karrisa Fretwell, 25, and her son, Billy, vanished from their West Salem apartment.

Billy's biological father, Wolfe, 55, of Gaston, was arrested and charged with their kidnapping and murders.

For the first time in years, Wolfe appeared in person — not by video — in Yamhill County Circuit Court.

The man at the bench was almost a different person from the mug shot and driver's license photo shared by police during the search for Karissa and Billy.

He looked older. His hair was longer, and his clean-shaven face was replaced by a full, graying beard.

Deputies led Wolfe into the courtroom shackled and wearing a suit. The shackles on his hands were removed after he was seated at the table, but the restraints on his legs remained.

Three members of Karissa and Billy's family sat in the front row with a victim advocate during the five-minute proceeding. They were immediately escorted out of the courtroom and unavailable for comment. Family will have an opportunity to give impact statements during the sentencing.

The defendant's side of the courtroom was empty save for one woman. She wouldn't give her name but said she was related to Wolfe's ex-wife.

Wolfe responded to multiple questions from the judge with barely audible, single-word answers, yes, no and guilty. His defense attorney, Patrick John Sweeney, sat to his right and obscured the view for photographers.

His plea comes more than three years after Karissa and Billy's disappearance and subsequent deaths gripped the Willamette Valley community.

Wolfe had been scheduled to stand trial in June 2023.

Violence follows single mother's decision to seek child support

Fretwell survived her troubled teen years to commit wholly to raising her son while working part-time jobs and attending Western Oregon University. When she eventually sought financial support from Wolfe, who was married at the time of Billy's birth, it may have cost them their lives.

In April 2019, the court ordered Wolfe to pay Karissa \$904 a month. A judge signed the order May 10. Three days later, she and Billy disappeared.

Salem Police detectives interviewed several friends who told officers Karissa had recently been in court against Billy's father.

Wolfe and Karissa had met while she worked delivering sandwiches. He called Jimmy John's almost every day for delivery, asking specifically for Karissa to deliver his food.

She was in her early 20s. He was in his late 40s and married.

He worked in security at Cascade Steel Rolling Mills, Inc., a manufacturing facility that takes recycled metal and turns it into finished steel products such as rebar.

He helped Karissa get a job there in April 2015 as a part-time security guard. She was 21.

Wolfe was reportedly not happy when Karissa got pregnant, and their relationship ended.

Police questioned Wolfe on May 18 at his house in Gaston. Wolfe acknowledged having an intimate relationship with Karissa about four years prior but said he hadn't seen her since a child support hearing on April 15, 2019.

He told them the hearing "did not go well."

Wolfe was interviewed again at the Salem Police Department after being advised of his Miranda rights. He maintained he hadn't seen Karissa.

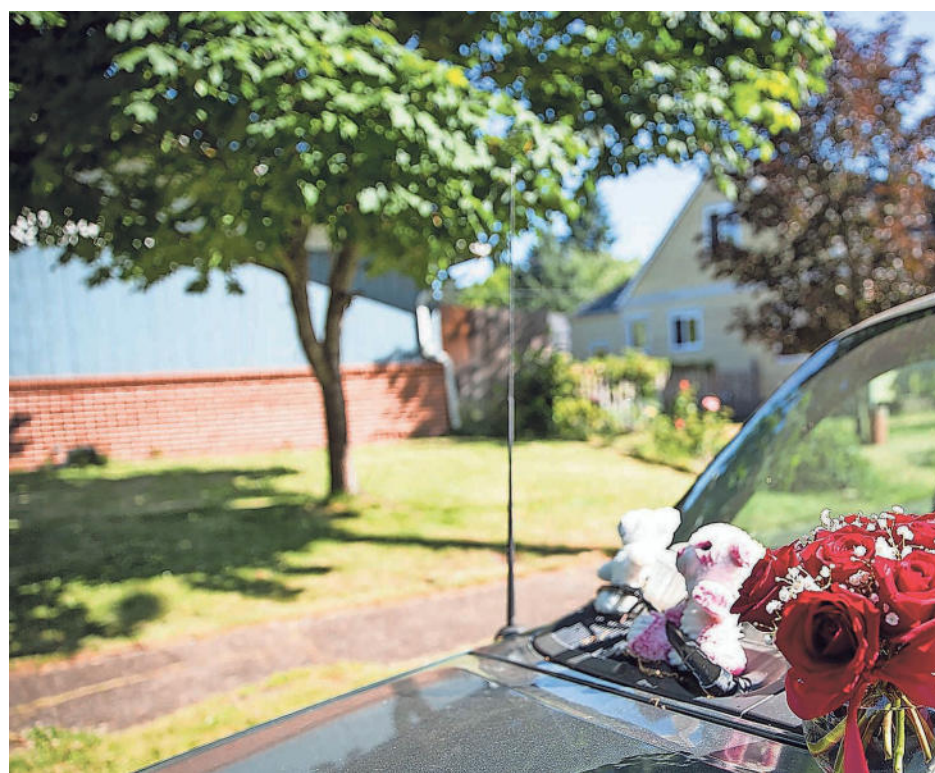
Cascade Steel video surveillance and AT&T phone records contradicted his claims, placing him near Karissa's apartment on the last day she was seen alive and her phone near his home the same day, according to court records.

Many of the details were outlined by Salem Police Detective Anthony VanDekoppel in the probable cause statement used to obtain a warrant for Wolfe's arrest.

"Based on the interviews of Karissa's family and friends, I believe the only known person who would benefit from the disappearance or criminal homicide



Tiny photographs of Fretwell and her son were handed out at their July 7, 2019 celebration of life. CAPI LYNN/STATESMAN JOURNAL



Flowers are placed on Karissa Fretwell's SUV outside her apartment in West Salem on June 14, 2019. STATESMAN JOURNAL FILE



Michael Wolfe sits behind his lawyer, Jack Sweeney, at his change of plea hearing, at the Yamhill County Courthouse on Friday, June 17, 2022, in McMinnville, Ore. BRIAN HAYES

of Karissa and William is Michael (Wolfe)," VanDekoppel wrote in the affidavit.

During the investigation, Wolfe also disappeared briefly. Salem police listed him as a wanted man.

They searched his rural home in Gaston and another property near Hopeville on May 23. Wolfe was taken into custody the next day at Blue Star Donuts in Portland.

He was charged with Karissa's and Billy's murders while they were still missing.

On June 15, 2019, the bodies of a boy and a young woman were discovered 10 miles west of Yamhill on heavily-wooded property owned by the timber company Weyerhaeuser.

They were identified as Karissa and Billy.

Investigators knew Wolfe was familiar with the area and had a permit to cut firewood there.

An autopsy determined Karissa died of a single gunshot to the head and her death was ruled a homicide.

The cause of Billy's death was undetermined in the autopsy. Officials have never publicly released information about whether additional testing helped determine the cause.

When the Statesman Journal asked about Billy's cause of death after the hearing, Yamhill County District Attorney Brad Berry said it was undetermined.

"That's how it will remain," Berry said. "Nothing about that will change."

Threat of death penalty leads to trial delays

Wolfe's trial was delayed numerous times, primarily due to a technical legal

fight over how a new state law impacted the county's ability to seek the death penalty.

Friends and family expressed frustration at the slow-turning wheels of justice.

Wolfe initially faced an aggravated murder charge for Karissa's death. It was dismissed and replaced with counts of first-degree murder and first-degree murder constituting domestic violence following the 2019 passage of Senate Bill 1013 — a law narrowing the scope of the death penalty.

Prosecutors pushed forward on charging Wolfe with aggravated murder for Billy's death. If convicted, a jury could have considered sentencing Wolfe to death.

Last year, Wolfe's attorneys unsuccessfully appealed to the Oregon Supreme Court to dismiss the charge for Billy. Attorneys took it a step further and filed an appeal in January with the U.S. Supreme Court.

On Feb. 28, the high court denied Wolfe's petition, sending the case back to Yamhill County Circuit Court to continue proceedings.

A settlement conference led to a plea hearing being scheduled for Friday.

Thirteen members of law enforcement, including from the Salem Police Department, and the Yamhill District Attorney's Office lined the back row of the courtroom Friday.

Detectives from Salem Police were relentless during the investigation, working around the clock and collaborating with counterparts from the Yamhill County Sheriff's Office. The case was heartbreaking for them. Some had children about Billy's age and tacked photos of the boy and his mom above their desks.

Berry lauded the work of investigators, highlighting the Salem Police and Yamhill County.

"This has been a case that the community has been very involved in," he said.

He said it had been a "long three years" leading to the guilty plea, and he was happy for Karissa's and Billy's family and the community.

"We're pleased for the family that this is coming to a close," Berry said. "I don't think you really have closure on these kinds of cases for the family, but it does end a chapter."

For questions, comments and news tips, email reporter Whitney Woodworth at wmwoodworth@statesmanjournal.com, call 503-910-6616 or follow on Twitter @wmwoodworth