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## Next arson trial starts

### Money possible motive in blaze

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Prosecutors contend a woman accused of burning down her north Forsyth home and trying to make it look like a hate crime had financial and drug problems.

In his opening statement Tuesday morning, Forsyth County Assistant District Attorney James Dunn said Pamela Morrow Graf, 48, had "no way out."



Graf

Dunn said the child support and alimony payments Graf had been receiving for three years stopped in July 2008. She was unemployed and "burning through her retirement," having spent \$95,000 in 2008.

"She had a problem and that problem was cocaine," Dunn said.

Graf's attorney, Parker McFarland, asked jurors to keep their minds open. He said there is "insufficient evidence for this to have been ruled incendiary."

"The state will not present to you any eyewitness who saw Ms. Graf or a confession by Ms. Graf," McFarland said.

Graf pleaded not guilty in December to one count each of first-degree arson, possession of cocaine and possession of marijuana less than

one ounce in connection with the Jan. 18, 2009, blaze.

Her former boyfriend, Steven Edward Strobel of Winder, was also charged in connection with the fire that destroyed her Lanier Drive home.

Strobel was convicted by a jury last week and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Opening arguments in Graf's trial began Tuesday after a jury of 10 men and four women was impaneled. Testimony was expected to continue today.

Dunn, who is joined in the prosecution by Forsyth County Chief Assistant District Attorney Sandy Partridge, argued Tuesday that Graf and Strobel concocted a plan to burn the house down and blame it on someone who didn't approve of her support of President Barack Obama.

"She thought she could use the history of Forsyth County to her advantage," Dunn said.

He said when Graf first spoke on the phone to the county's chief fire investigator, she didn't seem upset or concerned about the blaze.

She told him she was in Washington, D.C., for the presidential inauguration and wouldn't return until the end of the week.

But she did return and, during a Jan. 20, 2009, interview with authorities,

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# Arson

couldn't remember details about when she had left Georgia.

She also said she hadn't made any hotel reservations, planned to sleep in Strobel's van and paid for everything with cash.

Dunn said cell phone records show the couple got only as far as Charlotte, N.C. Authorities did find a credit card receipt for a hotel in the same city.

He said Graf told authorities she had two gasoline cans in her garage. However, authorities found four gas cans in the house and gas on samples of debris taken from areas of the house not near the garage.

Dunn said authorities searched the hotel room she stayed in after the blaze and found a small amount of marijuana. In her purse they found \$250 to \$300 worth of cocaine.

"At the end of this case there's going to be one person who had the motive to burn her house down, that's Pamela Morrow Graf," Dunn said.

McFarland argued that State Farm has an interest in the case and that samples collected from the home site were tested at a private lab not affiliated with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's crime lab.

He also said Graf's insurer paid off her mortgage and that they had

a policy not only for the structure of the house, but for the contents inside.

"The state will not present any evidence that Ms. Graf was late on making her mortgage payments," McFarland said.

He told the jury about a witness who does not agree the fire started where investigators said it did.

McFarland said the fire scene appeared to be contaminated and that large vehicles were used to clear the debris. Those vehicles, he noted, move around on rubber tracks, which can absorb and spread gasoline.

He said a lack of pour patterns throughout the home is significant.

McFarland said the possibility of a gas leak or electrical fire has not been eliminated. He said Graf filed insurance claims for flood damage to her basement and hail damage to her roof.

He said she used the money to fix the parts of her home that were damaged, rather than spending it on other things.

During his trial, the 47-year-old Strobel offered conflicting versions of what had happened.

Taking the stand in his own defense, Strobel refuted a video-recorded interview from January 2009 during which he implicated Graf in the blaze.

On the video, parts of which had been shown earlier in court, he is seen saying Graf burned the house down so she could move to the

Georgia coast.

But he testified in court that he had said that out of anger and because he wanted her to "pay dearly" after he lost his job and custody of his child.

On the stand, Strobel later confirmed he did take Graf to her house that night, but it was to look for a pet cat not start a fire. Neither of them, he said, set the blaze.

Later, citing previous testimony from two of Graf's three children, Strobel said he had come to believe Graf had set the fire.

Graf has been in custody since April 2009.

That was a month after she had been released on the arson and drug charges and required to wear an ankle monitor.

In the weeks that followed her release, however, she was arrested on suspicion of impaired driving at Central Park.

Before a hearing to revoke her previous bond could be held, she disappeared.

Authorities said she removed her ankle monitor on her way to court in Twiggs County, where she also faced drug charges.

She did not resurface until the next month, when she turned up at a hospital in Commerce, off Interstate 85 in northeast Georgia, for treatment of an apparent drug overdose.

In February, a Forsyth County State Court jury acquitted her of the driving charges.