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Salinas men to stand trial for 2009 killings

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SANTA CRUZ — Two alleged Salinas gang members accused of gunning down a teenager on a Watsonville basketball court more than a year ago will stand trial, a Santa Cruz Superior Court judge ruled Wednesday. Suspected gunman Julian Escobar, 25, and his accomplice and lifelong friend Jose Sandoval, 26, were held to answer on six charges: committing a gang-related murder with a gun, four counts of attempted gang-related murder with a gun and gang participation.

Judge Paul Burdick handed down the decision after a three-day preliminary hearing that outlined the men's alleged actions and how police identified the pair as the prime suspects in the slaying of Angel Escobedo, 19, in Watsonville's Apple Hill neighborhood on March 21, 2009.

Defense attorneys Brian Worthington and Kenneth Rutherford questioned the witness identification of their clients and the allegation that the shooting was done to benefit the Salinas Norte-o gang the defendants are allegedly a part of.

According to testimony from police officers, who interviewed witnesses, and the defendants' relatives, Escobar and Sandoval were at Stanford Medical Center in Palo Alto before the fatal shooting. Earlier in the day, Escobar's brother had been shot in the leg while on Main Street in Watsonville.

The two friends allegedly left the hospital and went to Watsonville to avenge Escobar's injured brother, according to testimony.

Escobar's relatives made conflicting statements: his sister testified that the two men were at the hospital all day, while his wife told police they left during the afternoon and returned later wearing different clothes. The defense attorneys questioned the men's ability to get from Palo Alto to Watsonville and back. The attorneys also attacked the gang allegations, saying the deadly attack — if their clients were involved — was done for family, not the gang.

"It's not a gang crime," said Worthington, Escobar's attorney. "It's his brother."

Sandoval's attorney challenged his client's alleged gang affiliation. The man with the shooter wore a hat commonly associated with a Watsonville Sure-o gang, a group that would have been a rival of Sandoval if he was a Salinas gang member.

Escobedo, a Cuesta College student whose family moved from Watsonville to Hollister shortly after his death, was playing basketball with his brother and three friends at a public court on Green Meadow Road around 2:20 p.m. when two men approached them and asked their gang affiliation. The pair left when the

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basketball players said no, but returned a few minutes later. One man pulled a gun and opened fire. Escobedo died at the scene.

Escobar and Sandoval were arrested in January after police got a tip Escobar was involved in the violence.

The men, who are being held in County Jail, face life in prison if convicted.

Several members of Escobedo's family sat through the entire hearing. Relatives of the defendants also were in court.