

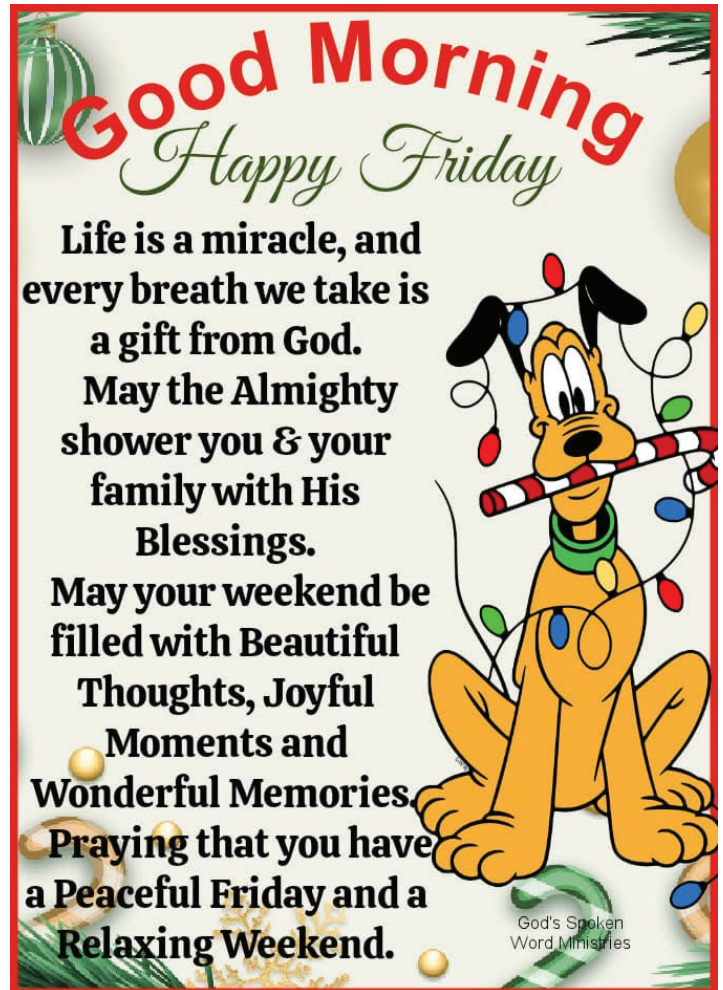
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Friday, Dec. 6

Senior Menu: New England Ham Dinner, California blend, peaches, dinner roll.
School Breakfast: Breakfast cookie.
School Lunch: Potato soup, ham sandwich.
St. John's Lutheran: Preschool Christmas Program, 7 p.m.
GBB hosts Timber Lake (C game at 5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m., varsity to follow)



Girls Varsity Wrestling at Watertown, 4 p.m.
Christmas Tour of Trees at Wage Memorial Library, 3:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.

Saturday, Dec. 7

St. John's Lutheran: Christmas Season Parents Day Out, 1-5 p.m.
Girls Varsity Wrestling at Dell Rapids, 9 a.m.
Boys Varsity Wrestling at Clark Tourney, 9:30 a.m.
JH GBB Jamboree at Groton Area, 10 a.m.
Olive Grove Holiday Party, 6 p.m. to midnight.
Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

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1440

Why 1440? The printing press was invented around the year 1440, spreading knowledge to the masses and changing the course of history. More facts: In every day, there are 1,440 minutes. We're here to make each one count.

Syrian Rebels Take Hama

A coalition of Syrian rebels captured the country's fourth-largest city of Hama yesterday, forcing the Syrian army further south. The conquest follows last week's takeover of the commercial capital, Aleppo, with the group reportedly continuing south toward Homs in the direction of the capital, Damascus.

The swift advance has surprised observers amid the fourth year of a relatively quiet ceasefire to the country's 13-year civil war. Before last week, the Russia- and Iran-backed Assad regime controlled roughly 70% of the country, with the rest divided among radical Islamists, Kurdish separatists, and the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. Leading the well-armed advance is former al-Qaida affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, long in control of the northwestern Idlib province.

Some governments, including neighbor Israel, are preparing for the possible collapse of the Assad regime. Roughly 900 US troops have been stationed in the country for years, officially to fight the long-degraded ISIS.

Colombian Drug Lord Released

Colombian drug lord Fabio Ochoa Vásquez was released from US prison this week after serving 25 years of a 30-year prison sentence. Ochoa is expected to be deported to Colombia in the coming days.

Ochoa was the Miami distributor for Colombia's infamous Medellín cartel, led by Pablo Escobar. At its height in the 1980s, the Medellín cartel supplied 80% of the world's cocaine market. By 1987, Ochoa was included in Forbes' list of billionaires.

After several years in prison in Colombia, Ochoa was extradited to the US on drug-trafficking charges in 2001. He was also implicated in the 1986 killing of Drug Enforcement Administration informant Barry Seal, the subject of the 2017 film "American Made" starring Tom Cruise. Ochoa's life was represented in the Netflix TV show "Narcos."

Colombia is the world's biggest cocaine producer and exporter, responsible for about 90% of cocaine seized in the US as of 2019.

Gaetz Report in Limbo

The House voted last night 206-198 against forcing the release of an ethics committee's report on former Rep. Matt Gaetz (R, FL-1). The vote returns the decision back to the House Ethics Committee for further deliberation.

Yesterday's vote, which fell mostly along party lines, follows a roughly three-and-a-half-year House Ethics Committee investigation into Gaetz over allegations of sex trafficking, drug use, corruption, and sex with a minor. Gaetz has denied the allegations against him; the Justice Department previously declined to bring charges. Last month, Gaetz resigned from Congress amid a since-dropped bid to become attorney general under President-elect Donald Trump.

Separately, Trump announced nominations for other key posts yesterday, including Caleb Vitello as acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Los Angeles Galaxy take on New York Red Bulls in 2024 MLS Cup Final tomorrow (4 pm ET, Fox).
2025 FIFA Club World Cup draw revealed; see full preview for the 32-team tournament.
"Scrubs" television series reboot in the works at ABC.
HBO's "Harry Potter" television series to begin filming in mid-summer 2025.
Art Basel, thought to be North America's largest art fair, begins today from Miami Beach; see full preview of events and exhibitions.

Science & Technology

NASA delays mission returning humans to the moon from 2026 to mid-2027, citing a flaw in the heat shield of the crewed landing module.
OpenAI releases its new o1 large language model; company says it can perform complex reasoning tasks and has 34% lower error rates on advanced problems.
Everything you need to know about OpenAI, from its failed coup to becoming the industry leader.
Dietary fructose can promote tumor growth, with the liver breaking down the substance into nutrients used by cancer cells for fuel; estimates suggest fructose consumption has increased 15-fold over the past century.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close lower (S&P 500 -0.2%, Dow -0.6%, Nasdaq -0.2%) ahead of latest jobs report to be released today.
Bitcoin retreats from \$100K record.
US judge rejects Boeing's guilty plea deal over 737 Max crashes in 2018 and 2019 that killed 346 people; judge says appointment of an independent legal compliance monitor should focus solely on competency, not diversity requirements.
Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield announces, quickly reverses plan to limit length of time anesthesia can be covered during medical procedures in Connecticut, New York, and Missouri following backlash.

Politics & World Affairs

Bullet casings discovered at scene of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson's shooting were inscribed with the words "deny," "defend," and "depose"; police have released additional photos of the suspect as search for shooter continues.
7.0-magnitude earthquake off of the coast of Northern California prompts temporary tsunami warnings, evacuation orders.
Democratic Republic of Congo investigates suspected respiratory illness behind at least 71 deaths last month; government says it is on high alert as it awaits laboratory results.

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When the winters get tough, the Cub Cadet[®] 2X gets tougher. This two-stage snow blowers are engineered for clearing between 12-18 inches of powder and slush. If you measure snow in feet instead of inches, step up to the commercial-grade 2X MAX[™] trim package to help tackle the deep stuff. Featuring trigger-controlled power steering, push-button electric start, dual LED headlights, 16-inch X-Trac[™] tires and a 3-year limited warranty.**

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- ▶ IntelliPOWER[®] engine technology delivers consistent power in heavy and wet snow conditions
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\$1,199*

Additional models available with 26", 28" clearing width



2X 26" TRAC WITH INTELLIPOWER[®]

Designed to provide steady traction in extreme weather conditions—try the 2X 26" TRAC with IntelliPOWER[®].

- ✦ TRAC drive designed for traction on slopes, inclines and gravel
- ✦ Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel side plates and auger housing
- ✦ 23" intake height
- ✦ Heated hand grips
- ✦ High-arc steel chute
- ✦ Cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty**

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2X 30" MAX INTELLIPOWER[®]

Take on winter with the 357cc Cub Cadet[®] engine with IntelliPOWER[®].

- ✦ 14" augers and impeller
- ✦ Sealed ball bearings on auger and wheel shafts
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- ▶ Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel side plates and auger housing
- ▶ 23" intake height
- ▶ Heated hand grips
- ▶ High-arc steel chute
- ▶ Cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty**

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✦ Indicates step-up feature

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Hutchinson County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash
Where: 28594 432nd Avenue, one mile east of Menno, SD
When: 9:40 p.m., December 04, 2024

Driver 1: 49-year-old male from Freeman, SD, fatal injuries
Vehicle 1: 2004 Cadillac Escalade
Seat belt Used: No

Hutchinson County, S.D.- A 49-year-old Freeman, SD man died Wednesday night in a single vehicle crash near Menno, SD.

The name of the person involved has not been released pending notification of family members.

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 2004 Cadillac Escalade was traveling east on US Highway 18. The vehicle went off the road into the north ditch, through a field, and then eventually collided with a tree. The driver was pronounced deceased at the scene.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The F

A festive graphic for a holiday party. It features a dark green background with a white border of pine branches and snowflakes. Two white golf balls are hanging from the top left. The text is centered and uses various colors and bolding for emphasis.

8th Annual Holiday Party
Live & Silent Auctions
Olive Grove Golf
Clubhouse
Groton, SD

Proceeds raised to replace cooler in clubhouse!

Saturday, Dec. 7, 2024
Holiday Party - 6 p.m. to close
A variety of snacks served.

Silent Auction Basket Items
Bidding closes at 8:30 p.m.
Live Auctions begin at 8:30 p.m.

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C&MA Christmas Pageant is Dec. 15

The Groton Christian & Missionary Alliance Church family will present a children's Christmas pageant portraying God's Gift of Love, on Dec. 15th at 5pm, at 706 N Main.

The adult choir will also share some Christmas numbers.

Following the program, a ham and turkey dinner, with all the trimmings will be served as a gift to the community.

No charge. The public is invited.

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NSU Mens Basketball

No. 8 Dragons Best the Wolves in NSIC Contest

Moorhead, Minn. – The Northern State University men's basketball team fell to No. 8 MSU Moorhead on Thursday evening on the road. Two Wolves scored in double figures, however poor 3-point shooting and 18 turnovers made it difficult to contend with the nationally ranked Dragons.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 50, MSUM 8-0

Records: NSU 1-6 (0-2 NSIC), MSUM 6-1 (1-0 NSIC)

Attendance: 1345

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern tallied 23 points in the first and 27 in the second, shooting 40.0% from the floor, 16.7% from the 3-point line, and 50.0% from the foul line

Moorhead shot 60.8% from the floor, 66.7% from the 3-point line, and 54.5% from the foul line, scoring 38 points in the first and 42 in the second

The Wolves recorded 23 rebounds, six assists, six steals, and one block in the contest

They scored 26 points in the paint, 12 points off the bench, ten points off turnovers and nine second chance points

Marcus Burks and Ethan Russell led the team with 11 and ten points respectively, with Russell knocking down the team's two made 3-pointers in the game

Kaleb Mitchell continued to lead the team off the bench with nine points and three rebounds

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Marcus Burks: 11 points, 1 rebound, 1 steal

Ethan Russell: 10 points, 57.1 field goal%, 1 rebound

Kaleb Mitchell: 9 points, 57.1 field goal%, 3 rebounds, 1 block

UP NEXT

The Wolves will remain on the road next weekend, facing off against Bemidji State and St. Cloud State. Tip-off times are set for 7:30 p.m. on Friday against the Beavers and 5:30 p.m. on Saturday versus the Huskies.

NSU Womens Basketball

Wolves Suffer Overtime Loss to Dragons

Moorhead, Minn. – MSU Moorhead mounted a late rally to defeat the Northern State women’s basketball team in overtime, 73-70. The game featured a back-and-forth battle, with the lead changing twice and the score tied five times. Four Wolves players scored in double figures, contributing to the team’s 41.9% shooting performance from the field.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 70, MSUM 73

Records: NSU 4-4 (NSIC 1-1), MSUM 3-4 (NSIC 1-0)

Attendance: 675

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern State totaled 12 points in the first quarter, 17 in the second, 20 in the third, 15 in the fourth, and six in overtime

The Wolves were efficient on the night, shooting 41.9% from the field, 28.0% from three-point range, and 73.3% from the free-throw line

NSU recorded 41 rebounds, 10 assists, 7 steals, and 6 blocks throughout the game

The Wolves scored 32 points in the paint, 18 points from their bench, and 15 points off turnovers

Michaela Jewett and Morgan Fiedler led the team in scoring, each finishing with 15 points and shooting better than 55% from the field.

Madelyn Bragg recorded her third double-double of the season, contributing 11 points and 12 rebounds.

Deontee Smith was the first player off the bench for the Wolves, scoring 10 points and grabbing 6 rebounds.

NORTHERN STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Michaela Jewett: 15 points, 4 rebounds, 4 blocks, 3 steals. 55.6 FG %

Morgan Fiedler: 15 points, 5 rebounds, 3 assists, 2 steals, 60.0 FG %

Madelyn Bragg: 11 points, 12 rebounds, 1 block, 1 steal

Deontee Smith: 10 points, 6 rebounds, 1 assist

UP NEXT

Northern State will hit the road again to face Bemidji State and St. Cloud State. The Wolves will play the Beavers on Friday, December 13, at 5:30 p.m. in Bemidji, Minnesota, and then take on the Huskies on Saturday, December 14, at 3:30 p.m. in St. Cloud, Minnesota.

Groton Area Middle and High School Winter Concert



The high school choir, under the direction of Landon Brown, and accompanied by Amy Warrington performed, "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen," "Aurora Borealis" and "White Winter Hymnal." (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The middle school band, under the direction of Desiree Yeigh, performed, "A Cartoon Christmas" and "African Bell Carol." (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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The high school band, under the direction of Desiree Yeigh, performed, "The Nutcracker Suite (Themes)" and "Joy to the World." (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The flex band, under the direction of Desiree Yeigh, performed, "A Charlie Brown Christmas." (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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The high school band, under the direction of Desiree Yeigh, performed, "Son of Santa the Barbarian." Ryan Olson did the narrative. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The middle school girls choir, under the direction of Landon Brown and accompanied by Amy Warrington, sang, "Infant Holy Infant Lowly." (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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The middle school choir, under the direction of Landon Brown and accompanied by Amy Warrington, sang, "Breath of Heaven." (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The middle school boys choir, under the direction of Landon Brown and accompanied by Amy Warrington, sang, "Sleigh Ride." (Photo by Paul Kosel)



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DECEMBER 10 -13

9:00 - 4:00 PM

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Today on **GDILIVE.COM**

St. John's Lutheran Pre School Christmas Program

7 p.m.

Free viewing of Christmas Program

Girls Basketball Action in Groton - hosting Timber Lake

JV at 6 p.m. sponsored by Adam and Nicole Wright

Varsity to follow

****LAND AUCTION****

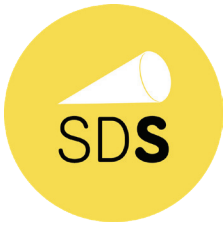
Up for auction is 66+/- acres land. 22.91 acres of tillable, 24.10 acres of CRP/CREP, 19.12+/- acres of hunting in Groton, SD on US Hwy 12. No easements on any of the acres. Unlimited possibilities ranging from recreational property of development property. You can bid online at HIBid.com up until we start the live auction Dec. 7th at 1 p.m. From there we will be taking live bids and internet bids. Auction will be held at the American Legion in Groton at 1 p.m.

Terms of the auction, 10% down on sale day (non-refundable). Closing within 20 days of auction at Kolker Law Office in Groton SD.

SAM HANSON, EXIT REALTY CONNECTION

1001 9th Ave SE., Watertown, SD 57201, 605-520-6349

shauctioneer@hotmail.com



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Lawmakers propose sales tax increase to provide property tax relief for homeowners

Proposal would raise state sales tax rate to 5%, reduce homeowner education levies to zero

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER AND SETH TUPPER - DECEMBER 5, 2024 5:52 PM

Several South Dakota legislators said Thursday they will introduce legislation that would provide property tax relief to homeowners by raising the state sales tax rate.

Rep. Tony Venhuizen, R-Sioux Falls, announced the effort.

"Property tax is the number one concern for my constituents and across South Dakota," Venhuizen told South Dakota Searchlight. "This is the year for major property tax relief."

Property tax reform has been a concern in the Legislature for years and was the subject of a legislative study last summer. Many legislators ran on the promise of property tax relief in the June primary and November general election. Since 2017, property tax payments have gone up 47% for owner-occupied homes and 36% for commercial property, while rising 3% for agricultural property.

Venhuizen said Sen. Randy Deibert, of Spearfish, will be the prime Senate sponsor of the property tax relief legislation. Sen. Amber Hulse and Rep. Trish Ladner, both of Hot Springs, and Rep. Tim Goodwin, of Rapid City, will be cosponsors. All are Republicans.

Ladner said she also plans to introduce legislation to complement Venhuizen's. The bill would cap increases in the valuation of owner-occupied homes and commercial properties at 3% annually, among other changes. Valuation escalation is a primary driver of property tax increases.

"3% is doable. You can plan for it," Ladner said. "There's a momentum we didn't have last year. I believe now is the time."

The proposals will be debated when the legislative session begins Jan. 14 at the Capitol in Pierre.

Venhuizen said his legislation would reduce the property tax levy on owner-occupied homes for general education and special education from \$4.167 to zero, thereby saving homeowners \$416.70 for every \$100,000 of a home's assessed value. He expects the proposal to save homeowners \$280 million in total, with an average property tax reduction of 35% per homeowner.

Because it's "just not possible" to deliver meaningful property tax relief without replacement revenue, Venhuizen said, the legislation would be funded by raising the state sales tax rate from 4.2% to 5%. The legislation would thus shift some of the burden for funding public education from homeowners to consumers.

"Owner-occupied property taxes are paid entirely by South Dakota residents. Sales tax is paid, in part, by visitors," Venhuizen said. "This is a tax cut for South Dakota residents."

Venhuizen said he expects the sales tax increase to raise an equivalent amount, \$280 million.

Neither Venhuizen nor Deibert could say what percentage of current sales tax is paid by tourists and out-of-state visitors. They hope to present some idea to the Legislature when the session begins.

Nathan Sanderson, executive director of South Dakota Retailers Association, said his primary concern — without seeing a draft bill yet — is ensuring property tax burdens aren't shifted onto commercial properties. He added that while property taxes for homeowners have been a concern in the last decade, he believes it will sort itself out eventually.

"The problem you've got is the thing that is being taxed is increasing at a tremendously high rate. That's not going to continue forever," Sanderson said. "As long as there are property taxes, there will be folks

who think they're too high."

The use of sales taxes to provide property tax relief would mean non-homeowning South Dakotans would not see a tax cut. They would only see a sales tax increase. Despite that, Deibert said the increase would not be very noticeable for South Dakotans, especially low-income residents.

"We're reducing property taxes by \$400 per \$100,000 valuation. It takes a lot of purchases — those normal or essential purchases — to accumulate \$400 in sales tax," Deibert said. "If someone is out there who can afford a car or TV or refrigerator, they'll contribute to this fund at a higher rate than someone who doesn't have the income to purchase those things."

Rob Monson, executive director of School Administrators of South Dakota, said relying on the "ebb and flow" of sales taxes for education funding concerns him, especially given the lower revenues reported this fiscal year.

"You have no control over what people are buying or not buying," he said. "Property is always there. It's a real thing. The valuation is a real thing that can change and be manipulated up or down. You don't have control over sales tax."

Venhuizen said when sales tax revenue dips, it's made up in future years. Deibert said schools' needs will be met.

"It's a legitimate concern, but another concern is managing your budget and reducing spending during lean years," Deibert said. "We have to educate our kids well, but not tax our people out of their homes to do that."

Republican Gov. Kristi Noem did not include any property tax relief proposals Tuesday in her annual budget address. She did call for tax relief.

"Last year during this speech, I asked you to make a permanent tax cut for the people of South Dakota — and I am reiterating that request today," Noem said. "Our people deserve better than a temporary sales tax holiday."

The "holiday" reference was to legislation she signed in 2023 that lowered the state sales tax rate from 4.5% to 4.2%, with a sunset in 2027. Legislators and then-Gov. Dennis Daugaard raised the state sales tax rate from 4% to 4.5% in 2016 as part of a plan to boost teacher pay, but the state currently ranks 49th in average teacher salaries.

Venhuizen expects more property tax relief proposals this session.

"If we want to really have a serious discussion about property tax relief as a Legislature, we need to start with a baseline of what that looks like, what the cost is and how to pay for it," Venhuizen said. "Every discussion starts with a proposal, and that's what we're offering here."

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.

Seth is editor-in-chief of South Dakota Searchlight. He was previously a supervising senior producer for South Dakota Public Broadcasting and a newspaper journalist in Rapid City and Mitchell.

Petition for mandatory big-game harvest reporting fails; state says e-reporting is in the works

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - DECEMBER 5, 2024 6:18 PM

A state commission denied a proposal Thursday for mandatory reporting of big-game kills, in part because a future electronic tagging system could accomplish the same goal.

Bowhunters submitted the petition to the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Commission. It would have required all licensed big-game hunters to report whether they killed their desired animal or not. Failure to comply would have barred hunters from applying for a similar license until they completed the report.

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Ronald Kolbeck, of Salem, submitted the petition on behalf of the South Dakota Bowhunters Association. The petition highlighted declining response rates to South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks' voluntary harvest surveys.

The bowhunters said hunter success rates and harvest reports are vital for estimating game populations and setting future license allocations. With response rates dropping below 50% for recent surveys, the petition asserted that wildlife management decisions are being made with incomplete data.

"Our pronghorn and mule deer populations are suffering," the petition stated. "Pronghorn numbers are estimated at only half the management objective, and mule deer are below objective in every unit."

Mandatory harvest reporting has been adopted in 45 states. The bowhunters argued it would enable the state to gather real-time data with a mobile app or online platform.

The commission's information packet showed over 100 comments were submitted in favor of the change, and one in opposition.

"We simply can not rely on subpar submitting for accurate biology information," wrote Ashley Kurtenbach of Spearfish. "Boots on the ground is some of the best free information for wildlife management there is."

"The state needs to know the current condition of its herd and a mandatory harvest report from each hunter would be a low-cost way to do this," wrote Roger Dekok of Mount Vernon.

"Other states have followed with this model, and I feel it is time we re-introduce better science to guide our decisions instead of revenue and tourism," wrote Mark Smedsrud of Sioux Falls.

The South Dakota Wildlife Federation and newly formed South Dakota Antelope Foundation also spoke in favor of the petition.

E-tagging discussed

Commissioners denied the petition after the Department of Game, Fish and Parks asserted that current voluntary reporting provides robust and statistically valid data for management decisions.

Wildlife Director Tom Kirschenmann said harvest reports are just one component of a broader data set that includes biological surveys and local feedback.

Commissioners also expressed concerns about potential logistical problems with enforcement of mandatory reporting. Commissioner Julie Bartling questioned the legality of denying licenses for noncompliance.

Kirschenmann emphasized the department's ongoing work on an e-tagging system, which could integrate real-time reporting. He said the department prefers ensuring the system is robust before implementing broader requirements.

The new "tags" would exist online and hunters would log into the department's website or app to report when the tag has been filled. Hunters are currently required to attach a physical, non-electronic tag to harvested big game such as deer.

The department aims to roll out the electronic system in 2026 and will test it next year.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

Custer State Park bison auction brings in nearly \$900,000

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - DECEMBER 5, 2024 6:09 PM

Custer State Park sold 482 bison during its 59th annual auction in November for a total of more than \$885,000.

That was an increase over last year's total of \$633,700 from 498 bison. The year before that brought in \$391,900 from 399 bison.

The Game, Fish and Parks Commission reviewed the numbers during its meeting Thursday in Pierre.

The Custer State Park Fall Classic Bison Auction follows the annual Buffalo Roundup, which has become

a tourist draw. The roundup involves herding and health checks on the bison, and separating part of the herd for the auction.

The auction aims to balance the size of the park's bison herd with the grass available for grazing. The funds go back into Custer State Park's annual operating budget.

Regional Park Supervisor Matt Snyder told commissioners prices were strong this year.

"What staff were telling me is that it's supply and demand," Snyder said.

He said a lot of the private herds in South Dakota experienced drought in recent years, resulting in a sell-off of animals. There are now fewer bison on the market to meet demand.

Snyder said the auction brought the herd down to 975. Last year, he said ideal habitat conditions can result in a herd up to about 1,050.

The average price of a buffalo at the auction was \$1,836.98, compared to \$1,272.49 in 2023 and \$982.21 in 2022.

There were eight bison buyers from South Dakota, three from Nebraska, three from Wyoming, two from Iowa, two from North Dakota, and others from Alabama, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee and Texas.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

Growth of sports betting may be linked to financial woes, new studies find

Missouri voters are the latest to approve it, making it legal in 39 states and the District of Columbia

BY: KEVIN HARDY, STATELINE - DECEMBER 5, 2024 3:44 PM

While states have cheered the new tax revenue from sports gambling, some new studies have linked the burgeoning industry to lower consumer credit scores, higher credit card debt and less household savings.

With access on their cellphones, gamblers can bet more often and easily than in traditional casinos, heightening concerns about problem gambling and the financial fallout for sports fans. The rate of gambling problems among sports bettors is at least twice as high as it is for other gamblers, according to the National Council on Problem Gambling.

Legal sports gambling is more widespread than ever. Missouri voters in November became the latest to approve it, making it legal in 39 states — including South Dakota — and the District of Columbia. Last year, Americans bet more than \$121 billion on sports, according to the American Gaming Association. While betting revenues are exploding, the industry is still relatively young — only blossoming after a 2018 U.S. Supreme Court ruling opened the door for states to authorize sports gambling.

So far, researchers have not reached a consensus about potential harms, though three papers released this year found poor financial results for consumers in states with legalized sports gambling.

In a working paper released in August, researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles and the University of Southern California determined access to legal online sports betting led to lower credit scores and higher rates of bankruptcies. That study examined credit bureau data of more than 4 million American consumers.

"Our results ultimately suggest that gambling legalization does harm consumer financial health," the report said.

That paper did not assess specific solutions but called on policymakers to find ways to protect residents at risk of becoming problem gamblers.

"If no action is taken, it is highly likely that the large increase in sports betting will lead to a long-term increase in financial stress on many consumers and policymakers and financial regulators should be prepared for this."

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A study led by a Southern Methodist University professor released in June found problem gambling increased in states that introduced online casino gambling alongside online sports gambling.

Another working paper from researchers at several U.S. universities found legalized sports betting drained household finances more than other types of gambling and diverted money from saving and investing.

The research comes as some state lawmakers have pursued new restrictions on sports gambling and federal lawmakers have eyed stricter regulations. Last month, New Jersey lawmakers introduced legislation to ban so-called prop bets — bets on a particular player's performance that may not affect the outcome of a game — on college athletes. If approved, it would join 13 other states that ban those bets. The measure has advanced out of an Assembly committee.

In September, congressional Democrats introduced legislation that would implement minimum national standards and authorize research on the public health implications of sports betting. Among other provisions, the bill would ban sports book advertising during live sporting events, prohibit more than five deposits from gamblers in a 24-hour period, and prohibit artificial intelligence tools that create specialized promotions by tracking individual gambler habits. But it is unlikely to progress in the GOP-controlled House.

"State regulation is faint-hearted and half-baked," Democratic U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut said at a news conference announcing the legislation. "That's why we need a national standard — not to ban gambling, but simply to take back control over an industry that is out of bounds."

Industry pushes back

Joe Maloney, senior vice president of strategic communications at the American Gaming Association, said legal betting is among the most regulated industries in the country.

Aside from providing new revenue streams for states, Maloney said, legal sports betting has brought many consumers out of the illegal betting markets, providing more transparency for consumers and money for problem gambling programs.

"You can go to any state that has yet to have an opportunity to erect a regulatory market and see a predatory and even more pervasive offshore, digital, illegal market that's targeting consumers in those states," he said.

Maloney pointed to long-standing research finding no correlation between financial hardship and proximity to casinos. But he acknowledged that it isn't yet clear whether sports betting has a different effect.

"I think that topic needs to be further explored, because the scale of legalized gambling online and in the digital space is still very much in its infancy," he said.

But Maloney is skeptical of the idea that sports gambling harms household finances. He noted that Americans last year had record 401(k) holdings and record mutual fund ownership.

Maloney highlighted a separate piece of recent academic research that determined the rapid rise of sports betting hasn't led to an increase in adverse mental health outcomes or financial difficulties. The paper examined self-reported data on mental and financial health from nearly 2 million survey responses across multiple states with legalized betting.

The results were somewhat surprising to lead researcher Timothy Bersak, an associate professor of economics at Wofford College in South Carolina. He said the findings contradict a popular narrative that sports betting leads to widespread harms.

"Our results suggest that there's not like a really large population of latent problem gamblers that would have these large gambling problems but for the prohibition on sports betting," he said.

Bersak said his findings don't negate other recent research: There is a segment of the population that is likely worse off because of sports betting, he said. But for now, a much larger share of the population said they are not being hurt and finding enjoyment from it.

"We really can't have any sense of the long-term impacts at this point," he said. "Because at least in the U.S., it's only been around for at most six years."

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'That money's gone'

Justin Balthrop, an assistant professor of finance at the University of Kansas, expected that legalized sports gambling would displace other forms of entertainment spending. Maybe someone would forgo a night out, for instance, and instead put a few bucks on Sunday's game.

But a paper he co-wrote — titled "Gambling Away Stability" — found that legalized betting led households to spend more on both entertainment and betting, while putting less in savings and investment accounts.

The paper examined financial transaction data from more than 230,000 households across 26 states with legal sports betting between 2018 and 2023. In households that placed bets, net investments dropped by 14% after legalization — a significant figure when factoring in the expected long-term gains of compound interest and rising stock prices.

"What's happening is they're pulling money from what I think we would argue are more long-term productive uses of their funds to do this instead," Balthrop said.

Researchers found that sports betting disproportionately hurts lower-income households as they run up credit card debt and overdraft checking accounts.

Balthrop said policymakers should do more to provide education and transparency to consumers, so they know the full extent of the odds against them.

A gambler himself, Balthrop said bettors should go into every bet financially and mentally prepared to lose because most bettors don't win.

"I would say the same thing as someone who goes to a casino: Pretend that the hundred bucks you're bringing to the casino is an entry fee, and maybe you get to leave with some of it," he said. "But you need to mentally know that money's gone."

West Virginia state Sen. Jason Barrett, a Republican, said he believes most people who have placed bets since the state legalized sports gambling in 2018 have done so for fun — not with the expectation of making money.

"The way I look at it is, if somebody decides that they'd rather spend \$50 on the outcome of an NFL game as opposed to going out to the movies, I think they should have the right to do that," he said. "I'm not aware that there are a lot of people that are doing this for a real investment."

Barrett, the treasurer of a national group of state lawmakers that works on gambling issues, noted that sports betting is still just a fraction of the overall spending on gambling in West Virginia. The American Gaming Association reported sports betting last year brought in about \$48 million in revenue in West Virginia; total casino revenues in the state reached nearly \$806 million.

While problem betting is always a concern, he said he's seen no evidence sports gambling has dramatically increased addiction.

"I don't think all of a sudden that we've offered one new product through sports betting, that all of a sudden we're going to create a bunch of gambling addicts," he said, "or that people have this illusion that they're somehow going to regularly beat the book, and that this is going to somehow replace their retirement."

The American Gaming Association reported that commercial gambling revenues hit a record \$66.66 billion last year — a 10.3% increase over 2022.

While casino revenues continue to rise, sports gaming revenues are exploding: Last year, when sports betting became available in five new states, the group reported a total of \$11 billion in sports betting revenue — a 46% increase from the previous year. That figure does not include sportsbooks operating at tribal casinos.

Those figures will likely continue to rise as more states approve sports betting.

Missouri regulators are currently crafting rules and a licensing framework for sports betting following the narrow approval of the ballot initiative last month.

Jan Zimmerman, chair of the Missouri Gaming Commission, said the state hopes to launch sports betting by summer. While the agency has heard concerns from state residents about increased problem gambling associated with sports betting, Zimmerman said regulators in other states have not reported a significant

uptick.

As it does with casinos, the gaming commission will funnel a portion of sports betting revenues to mental health work to address problem gambling. But because the initiative was passed as an amendment to the state constitution, the gaming commission has limited latitude to create new regulations or safeguards on sports betting.

"The constitutional language is that which was created by that initiative petition," she said. "So, there's no going back and maybe molding that to work better to fit our needs."

Kevin Hardy covers business, labor and rural issues for Stateline from the Midwest.

Latest 2024 farm income forecast shows overall decrease from 2023

BY: CAMI KOONS, IOWA CAPITAL DISPATCH - DECEMBER 5, 2024 9:26 AM

Farm income is forecasted to have decreased in 2024 by 4% from 2023, largely because of a decrease in cash receipts, or the gross income, from the sale of commodity crops, according to the December update of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's farm income forecast.

Carrie Litkowski, the farm income team leader with USDA Economic Research Service, presented the latest update in a webinar Tuesday, and said the forecast was very similar to its previous September iteration.

"But somehow it feels a little more important, as we near the end of the year, to evaluate the current state of the farm economy as a starting point for considering what challenges and opportunities may lie ahead for U.S. agriculture," Litkowski said.

Net cash farm income for 2024 is projected to be \$158.8 billion, which in inflation-adjusted figures is 3.5% lower than net cash farm income in 2023. The forecast shows the 2024 figure, however, is 9.8% above the 20-year average for net cash farm income, and represents a less gradual decline than that of 2022 to 2023.

Net cash farm income is the income minus expenses of the farm, including government payments, but excluding things like changes in inventories or economic depreciations, which are reflected in the "net farm income" figures.

The sale of agricultural commodities is projected to decrease by less than 1 percent overall as an over 8% increase in animal and animal product receipts nearly offsets the over 9% decrease in forecasted crop receipts.

Because of this, net cash income for all farm businesses specializing in crops is forecasted to be lower this year than last, but all farm businesses specializing in animal or animal products are expect to have higher net cash farm income than they did in 2023.

This could mean lower net cash income for the farming sector in South Dakota for 2024, as the first and third largest category of cash receipts on South Dakota farms in 2023 were corn and soybeans, which are projected to decrease, nationally, by 23% and 14% respectively in 2024.

The data used in the USDA ERS forecasts represents the entire farming sector of nearly 2 million farms and ranches. Litkowski said the reports are used to inform policy makers and lenders, and in determining the ag sector's contributions to the U.S. economy.

It's forecasted that farmers in 2024 will have a decreased need of supplemental and disaster assistance, as well as lower dairy margin payments. That will result in a forecasted \$1.7 billion decrease from 2023 in direct government payments to farmers.

Litkowski said natural disasters like hurricanes Helene and Milton have not yet shown up in the data, because much of the harvesting in the affected regions had already been completed at the time of the hurricanes, and payments have not yet been issued.

"Natural disasters have the potential to affect farm income, and historically, they have," Litkowski said. "Sometimes it just takes time to know the impacts."

USDA also forecasts overall lower input costs, primarily in feed fertilizers and pesticides for farmers in

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2024. Other inputs, however, like labor, interest rates and livestock and poultry purchases are forecasted to have increased.

Median farm income for 2024 is expected to increase to \$100,634, which is almost 3% higher, without adjusting for inflation, from 2023. Off-farm income, which represents the biggest share of income for most on-farm families, is projected to increase in 2024, after decreasing slightly over the past three years.

Litkowski clarified that "half of all farms are residential farms" where the owner's primary occupation is not farming, which typically leads the median on farm income to appear as a negative amount.

The forecast will be updated again Feb. 6 when the department will release its first projections for 2025.

Cami Koons is an Iowa Capital Dispatch reporter covering agriculture and the environment. She previously worked at publications in Kansas and Missouri, covering rural affairs.



Groton Community Transit
Invites you to their

Holiday Bake Sale
Friday, Dec. 20th, 2024
9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.
Coffee, cider and Christmas
goodies will be served!

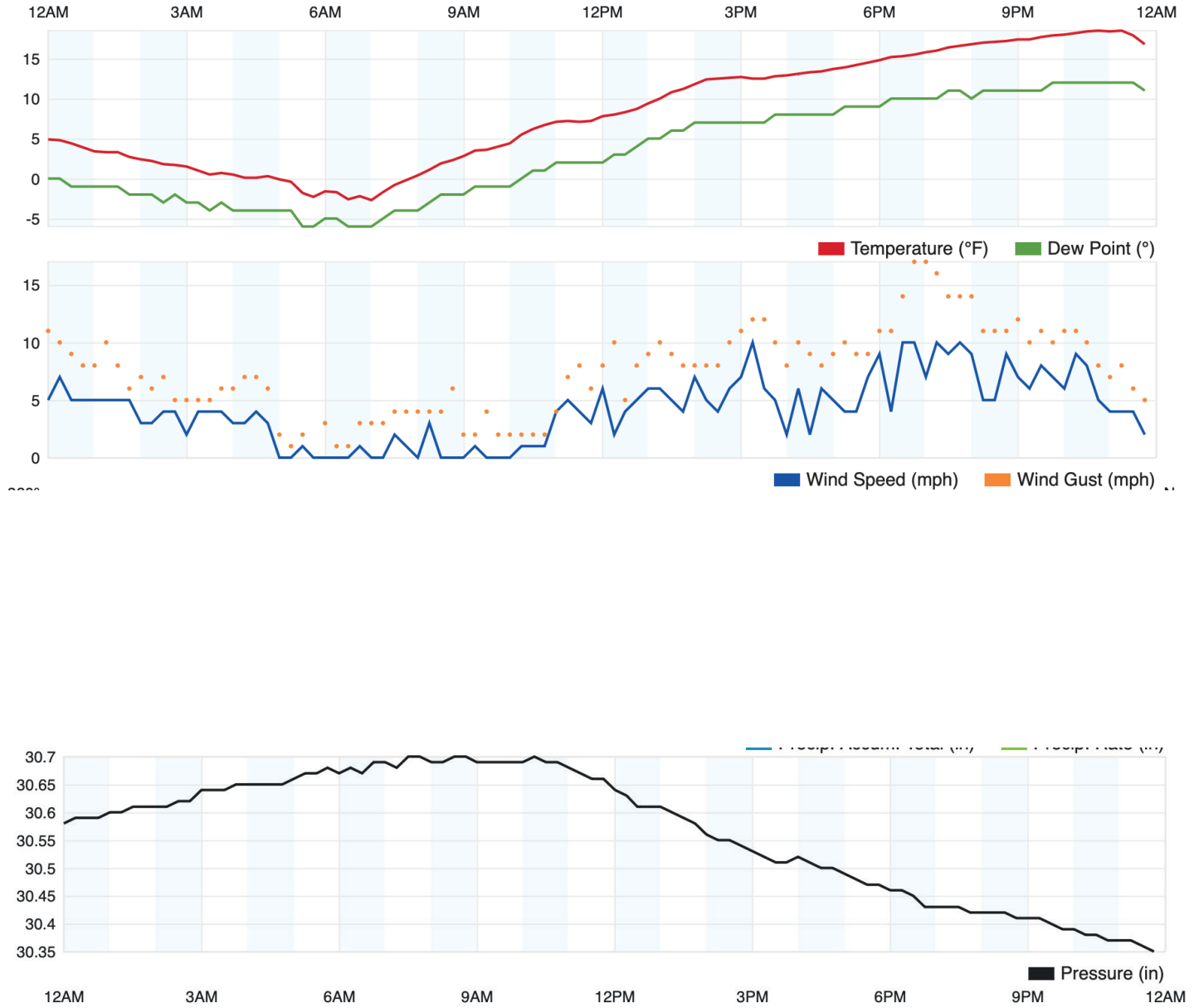
If you would like to donate baked goods, please contact Groton Community Transit office at 605-397-8661. Any and all donations are welcome!! We are looking forward to seeing you!!

Our address is 205 East 2nd Ave-Downtown Groton

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 33 °F

Mostly Sunny

Tonight



Low: 19 °F

Partly Cloudy

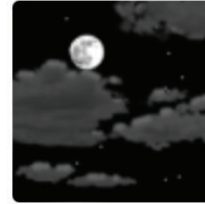
Saturday



High: 46 °F

Mostly Sunny

Saturday Night



Low: 24 °F

Partly Cloudy

Sunday



High: 43 °F

Mostly Cloudy
then Slight
Chance Rain

Friday	Highs: 28-51°	
	Lows: 19-28°	
Saturday	Highs: 40-59°	
	Lows: 25-32°	
Sunday	Highs: 39-52° 15-35% for Rain	

National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD
December 6, 2024 4:07 AM

Temperatures will start to warm Friday afternoon through the weekend, with partly cloudy skies starting to clear to mostly sunny skies Saturday. There is a chance for rain mainly over north central and north eastern South Dakota on Sunday.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 19 °F at 11:07 PM

Low Temp: -3 °F at 7:01 AM

Wind: 17 mph at 6:39 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 54 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 69 in 1939

Record Low: -30 in 1972

Average High: 32

Average Low: 11

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.12

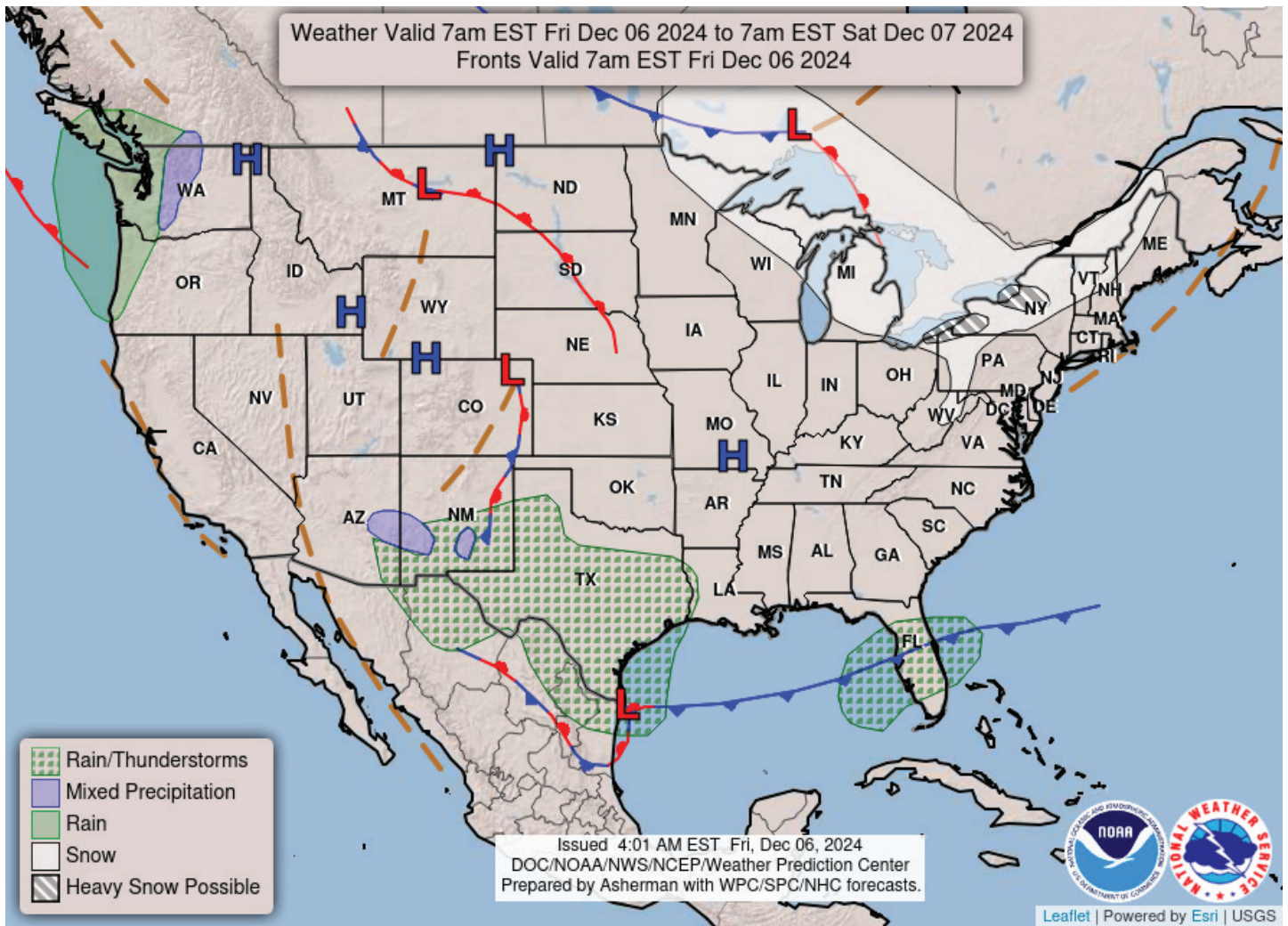
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.33

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 4:51:06 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:57:21 am



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Today in Weather History

December 6, 1969: An unusual period of almost continuous snow began in southern Minnesota and eastern South Dakota on the afternoon of the 5th and continued until late on the 10th. The Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport reported 88 2/3 consecutive hours of snowfall, which amounted to 14.2 inches total. The snowfall was 3-9 inches in the western half of Minnesota, with slightly lesser amounts in eastern South Dakota. Two inches snow fell at Summit and Sisseton; 2.5 inches at Watertown and Waubay; 3.0 inches at Clear Lake; 3.1 inches at Aberdeen; and 4.0 inches at Artichoke Lake, Webster, and Milbank.

1886 - A great snowstorm hit the southern Appalachian Mountains. The three day storm produced 25 inches at Rome GA, 33 inches at Asheville NC, and 42 inches in the mountains. Montgomery AL received a record eleven inches of snow. Columbia SC received one to two inches of sleet. (4th-6th) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1913: A snowstorm from December 1st through the 6th dumps a record total of 45.7 inches in Denver, Colorado. This storm produced the most snow ever recorded in a single Denver snowstorm.

The National Christmas tree in 1970 was a 78 foot spruce from South Dakota. On the way to Washington, the train carrying the tree derailed twice in Nebraska. On the weekend before the lighting event, the tree toppled in gusty winds and required new branches to fill it out.

1970 - A windstorm toppled the National Christmas Tree at the White House. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1987 - Another in a series of storms brought high winds and heavy rain to the northwestern U.S., with heavy snow in some of the higher elevations. In northern California, Crescent City was drenched with 2.58 inches of rain, and winds gusted to 90 mph. Up to fourteen inches of snow blanketed the mountains of northern California, and snow and high winds created blizzard conditions around Lake Tahoe NV. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - The morning low at Bismarck, ND, was eleven degrees warmer than the record low of 25 degrees at Meridian MS, and during the afternoon half a dozen cities in the north central and northwestern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date, including Alpena MI with a reading of 57 degrees. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Heavy snow blanketed the Central Rocky Mountain Region. Totals in the southern foothills of Colorado ranged up to 17 inches at Rye. Arctic air invaded the north central U.S. Lincoln NE, which reported a record high of 69 degrees the previous afternoon, was 35 degrees colder. International Falls MN was the cold spot in the nation with a morning low of 9 degrees below zero, and temperatures in northern Minnesota hovered near zero through the daylight hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)



“Love With Skin On It”

A young man, who grew up in a housing project, having little hope and few goods, heard an evangelist preaching “love” on a street corner. After listening for a few moments, he shouted to the preacher, “I’m sick and tired of you people talking about love. I want to see love. I want to feel love. I want to see love with some skin on it!”

That’s Christmas: “God’s love with skin on it.”

Paul wrote, “For in Christ the fullness of God lives in a human body!”

In Jesus, we see Someone bringing love to life – but a very special type of love. It is God’s love. We see this love coming to life when Jesus fed the hungry, gave sight to the blind, cleansed the lepers, healed the sick, offering water to a thirsty soul, calming the waves to relieve the fears of experienced fishermen, washing dirty feet, spending time with little children, teaching people the truth that brought meaning and purpose to their lives and finally hanging lifeless from a cross – abandoned and alone.

Jesus is God loving through a human heart, healing with a human hand, walking on errands of mercy with human feet, showing love, grace and mercy to those who would do Him harm.

Jesus is God loving the least, the last and the lost. In Jesus, God showed His love with “skin on it.”

Prayer: Help us, Father, to put Your “love in our skin” and take Your love to those in need. May we be as faithful in caring for others as You are in caring for us. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Colossians 2:9 For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

Tags: Colossians 2:9 God’s love

We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God’s grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God’s Word and we pray this good “seed” finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.03.24

52 60 61 66 67 23

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$579,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 27 Mins
DRAW: 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.04.24

10 13 32 42 44 9

All Star Bonus: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$16,420,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 42
DRAW: Mins 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.05.24

4 13 25 44 47 18

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 57 Mins
DRAW: 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.04.24

4 7 9 11 30

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$136,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 57
DRAW: Mins 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.04.24

14 35 43 48 54 1

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 26
DRAW: Mins 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.04.24

1 23 25 28 61 13

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$260,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 26
DRAW: Mins 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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Upcoming Groton Events

07/04/2024 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/09/2024 FREE SNAP Application Assistance 1-6pm at the Community Center
07/14/2024 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
07/17/2024 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm
07/17/2024 Pro Am Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/25/2024 Dairy Queen Miracle Treat Day
07/25/2024 Summer Downtown Sip & Shop 5-8pm
07/25/2024 Treasures Amidst The Trials 6pm at Emmanuel Lutheran Church
07/26/2024 Ferney Open Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
07/27/2024 1st Annual Celebration in the Park 1-9:30pm
08/05/2024 School Supply Drive 4-7pm at the Community Center
Cancelled: Wine on 9 at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
08/08/2024 Family Fun Fest 5:30-7:30pm
08/9-11/2024 Jr. Legion State Baseball Tournament
08/12/2024 Vitalant Blood Drive at the Community Center 1:15-7pm
09/07/2024 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
09/07-08/2024 Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
09/08/2024 Sunflower Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10am
10/05/2024 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/11/2024 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
10/31/2024 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
10/31/2024 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/16/2024 Groton American Legion "Turkey Raffle" 6:30-11:30pm
11/28/2024 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm
12/01/2024 Groton Snow Queen Contest, 4:30 p.m.
12/07/2024 Olive Grove 8th Annual Holiday Party with Live & Silent Auctions 6pm-close
12/14/2024 Santa Day at Professional Management Services, downtown Groton
04/12/2025 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt at the City Park 10am Sharp
04/05/2025 Dueling Duo at the Legion (Baseball/softball foundation fundraiser)
05/03/2025 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
05/26/2025 Memorial Day Services Groton Union Cemetery with lunch at Legion Post #39, 12pm
06/07/2025 Second Annual Day of Play at Groton Baseball Complex
07/04/2025 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary Salad Luncheon
07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
09/20/2025 NSU Gypsy Day
10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Freeman Academy-Marion 41, Parker 11

Marshall, Minn. 50, Harrisburg 26

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

A longer postseason brings challenges including fatigue and travel. FCS teams know the drill

By HANK KURZ Jr. AP Sports Writer

The expanded 12-team College Football Playoff will be a new experience for many teams that never participated in the four-team version. The potential for multiple postseason games means a lot more planning, travel and activity.

For teams in the Championship Subdivision, this is familiar ground.

Travel, fatigue and unfamiliar opponents make for hectic weeks of preparation, and the travel — sometimes three time zones' worth — can cut into that time to get ready to play.

"We have cut back. This is week 14 for us — 12 games, one playoff and one open week," said UT Martin coach Jason Simpson, whose Skyhawks won 41-10 at 16th-seeded New Hampshire on Saturday and will leave Friday for Bozeman to play top-seeded Montana State the next day.

"It's hard. These aren't professional players," Simpson said.

Major college football adding a true tournament feels new, but teams in the FCS have been at it for the past 46 years, dating to the split of Division I. Like the CFP, the FCS bracket started small, with four teams in 1978, but was expanded to eight teams in 1981 and in 1982 to 12 teams, including byes for the top four.

There have been 24 teams in the FCS playoffs since 2013, except for the pandemic season, with 16 seeds and eight teams enjoying a bye week before the grind.

Simpson's program is appearing in the playoffs for just the third time. Going on the road to face the top seed, which is making its 14th appearance, has benefits and drawbacks, Simpson said.

"Our kids are excited," Simpson said, adding that he's used the Bobcats and other FCS powerhouses as a measuring stick all season. "One of the things I use at practice every day is, 'Is this practice good enough to beat the Montana States or North Dakota States of the world?'"

"Well, guess what? You get to find out on Saturday," he said. "The scoreboard will tell you."

This Saturday's slate also has Montana, making its 28th playoff appearance, playing at South Dakota State, which beat the Grizzlies 23-3 in last year's national championship game.

Backing off a bit at practice is almost a necessity, Grizzlies coach Bobby Hauck said.

"These seasons are getting longer and longer," he said. "We're starting earlier and earlier, recruiting is getting crammed into the summer more and more and then you jump into the season and you're looking at how many games."

"It used to be that you played an 11-game schedule and that was it," he added, noting the season can extend another month if a team has success in the playoffs.

The Grizzlies won national championships in 1995 and 2001 and will go to Brookings, South Dakota, as the 14th seed facing the third-seeded and two-time defending national champions.

"There's a lot of pressure," he said because of the program's history. "However, that's good pressure. You don't want to be in a place where that's not a realistic goal."

Villanova is another program that will have to go a long way for this week's game. The 11th-seeded

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Wildcats are heading to San Antonio to face the sixth seed, Incarnate Word.

Coach Mark Ferrante said practices may be shortened "a little bit" this week to ease the fatigue of a long season, and he hopes a hostile environment will actually be good for the Wildcats.

"I think sometimes our guys like playing away, especially if it's a crowded stadium because there's just a little more excitement in the air whether they're cheering for you or against you," he said.

Lehigh, coming off a 20-18 win at ninth-seeded Richmond, will travel to Idaho to face the eighth-seeded Vandals, and coach Kevin Cahill said practices will be less physical this week. The NCAA-provided charter plane is a bonus, too, as is having another game to play.

"To play this time of year, you're okay with it. You figure it out." he said.

Trump names former Sen. David Perdue of Georgia to be ambassador to China

By COLLEEN LONG and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump said Thursday he has selected former Sen. David Perdue of Georgia to serve as his ambassador to China, leaning on a former business executive turned politician to serve as the administration's envoy to America's most potent economic and military adversary.

Trump said in a social media post that Perdue "brings valuable expertise to help build our relationship with China."

Perdue lost his Senate seat to Democrat Jon Ossoff four years ago and ran unsuccessfully in a 2022 primary against Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp. Perdue pushed Trump's debunked lies about electoral fraud during his failed bid for Georgia governor.

During his time in the Senate, Perdue was labeled as "anti-China" in a 2019 Chinese think tank report. The former Georgia lawmaker advocated that the U.S. needed to build a more robust naval force to cope with threats, including from China.

Before launching his political career, Perdue held a string of top executive positions, including at Sara Lee, Reebok and Dollar General.

Economic tensions will be a big part of the U.S.-China picture for the new administration.

Trump has threatened to impose sweeping new tariffs on Mexico, Canada and China as soon as he takes office as part of his effort to crack down on illegal immigration and drugs. He said he would impose a 25% tax on all products entering the country from Canada and Mexico, and an additional 10% tariff on goods from China, as one of his first executive orders.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington cautioned earlier this week that there will be losers on all sides if there is a trade war.

"China-US economic and trade cooperation is mutually beneficial in nature," embassy spokesman Liu Pengyu posted on X. "No one will win a trade war or a #tariff war." He added that China had taken steps in the last year to help stem drug trafficking.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian didn't comment on Perdue's nomination, saying only, "I have noted the relevant reports" when asked about it at a daily briefing in Beijing.

It is unclear whether Trump will actually go through with the threats or if he is using them as a negotiating tactic.

The tariffs, if implemented, could dramatically raise prices for American consumers on everything from gas to automobiles to agricultural products. The U.S. is the largest importer of goods in the world, with Mexico, China and Canada its top three suppliers, according to the most recent U.S. Census data.

Perdue, if confirmed, will have to negotiate a difficult set of issues that goes beyond trade.

Washington and Beijing have long had deep differences on the support China has given to Russia during its war in Ukraine, human rights issues, technology and Taiwan, the self-ruled democracy that Beijing claims as its own.

Chinese President Xi Jinping said in a meeting with outgoing President Joe Biden last month that Beijing stood "ready to work with a new U.S. administration." But Xi also warned that a stable China-U.S. relation-

ship was critical not only to the two nations but to the "future and destiny of humanity."

"Make the wise choice," Xi cautioned during his November meeting with Biden on the sidelines of an international summit in Peru. "Keep exploring the right way for two major countries to get along well with each other."

Trump's relationship with Xi started out well during his first term before becoming strained over disputes about trade and the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Trump seems particularly focused on using tariffs as a pressure point on Xi, even threatening he would use tariffs as a cudgel to pressure Beijing to crack down on the production of materials used in making fentanyl in Mexico that is illegally sold in the United States.

A second Trump administration is expected to test U.S.-China relations even more than the Republican's first term, when the U.S. imposed tariffs on more than \$360 billion in Chinese products.

That brought Beijing to the negotiating table, and in 2020, the two sides signed a trade deal in which China committed to improve intellectual property rights and buy an extra \$200 billion of American goods. A couple years later, a research group showed that China had bought essentially none of the goods it had promised.

Ahead of Trump's return to power, many American companies, including Nike and eyewear retailer Warby Parker, have been diversifying their sourcing away from China. Shoe brand Steve Madden says it plans to cut imports from China by as much as 45% next year.

Trump also filled out more of his immigration team Thursday, as he promises mass deportations and border crackdowns.

He said he's nominating former Border Patrol Chief Rodney Scott to head U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Scott, a career official, was appointed head of the border agency in January 2020 and enthusiastically embraced then-President Trump's policies, particularly on building a U.S.-Mexico border wall. He was forced out by the Biden administration.

Trump also said he'd nominate Caleb Vitello as acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the agency that, among other things, arrests migrants in the U.S. illegally. Vitello is a career ICE official with more than 23 years in the agency and most recently has been the assistant director for the office of firearms and tactical programs.

The president-elect named the head of the Border Patrol Union, Brandon Judd, as ambassador to Chile. Judd has been a longtime supporter of Trump's, appearing with him during his visits to the U.S.-Mexico border, though he notably supported a Senate immigration bill championed by Biden that Trump sank in part because he didn't want to give Democrats an election-year win on the issue.

Syrian insurgents enter 2 central towns, bringing them close to the city of Homs

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Syrian insurgents entered two central towns early Friday just north of the central city of Homs, bringing them closer Syria's third largest city, an opposition war monitor and pro-government media both reported.

The break into Rastan and Talbiseh came a day after opposition gunmen captured the central city of Hama, Syria's fourth largest, after the Syrian army said it withdrew to avoid fighting inside the city and spare the lives of civilians.

The insurgents, led by the jihadi Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, or HTS, have said that they will march to Homs and Damascus, President Bashar Assad's seat of power.

The city of Homs, parts of which were controlled by insurgents until 2014, is a major intersection point between the capital, Damascus, and Syria's coastal provinces of Latakia and Tartus where Assad enjoys wide support. Homs province is Syria's largest in size and borders Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan.

Insurgents are now 5 kilometers (3 miles) away from Homs, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitor.

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"The battle of Homs is the mother of all battles and will decide who will rule Syria," said Rami Abdurrahman, the Observatory's chief.

Pro-government Sham FM said the insurgents entered Rastan and Talbiseh without facing any resistance. There was no immediate comment from the Syrian military on whether it has withdrawn from the towns.

State news agency SANA quoted an unnamed military official as saying Friday that Syrian and Russian air force are attacking insurgents in Hama province, killing dozens of fighters.

After the fall of Hama, opposition activists said that thousands of Homs residents who are loyal to Assad were seen fleeing toward Damascus and the coastal region.

Syria's defense minister said in a televised statement late Thursday that the withdrawal of government forces from Hama was a tactical measure and vowed to gain back lost areas.

Gen. Ali Mahmoud Abbas said that the insurgents, whom he described as "takfiri" or Muslim extremists, are backed by foreign countries. He did not name the countries but appeared to be referring to Turkey, which is a main backer of the opposition, and the United States.

"We are in a good position on the ground," Abbas said, adding that Thursday's withdrawal of the Syrian army from Hama was "a temporary tactical measure and our forces are at the gates of Hama."

His comments were made before the insurgents marched south of Hama, getting close to Homs.

The offensive is being led by HTS as well as an umbrella group of Turkish-backed Syrian militias called the Syrian National Army. Their sudden capture of the northern city of Aleppo, an ancient business hub, was a stunning prize for Assad's opponents and reignited the conflict which had been largely stalemated for the past few years.

South Korea's governing party head supports suspending Yoon's powers, making impeachment more likely

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's governing party chief expressed support Friday for suspending the constitutional powers of President Yoon Suk Yeol for imposing martial law this week, in a bombshell reversal that makes Yoon's impeachment more likely.

Opposition parties are pushing for a parliamentary vote on Yoon's impeachment on Saturday, calling his short-lived martial law declaration an "unconstitutional, illegal rebellion or coup." But they need support from some members of the president's People Power Party to get the two-thirds majority required to pass the impeachment motion.

The turmoil resulting from Yoon's nighttime martial law decree has frozen South Korean politics and caused worry among neighbors, including fellow democracy Japan, and Seoul's top ally, the United States, as one of the strongest democracies in Asia faces a political crisis that could unseat its leader.

During a party meeting, PPP leader Han Dong-hun stressed the need to suspend Yoon's presidential duties and power swiftly, saying he poses a "significant risk of extreme actions, like reattempting to impose martial law, which could potentially put the Republic of Korea and its citizens in great danger."

Han said he had received intelligence that Yoon had ordered the country's defense counterintelligence commander to arrest and detain unspecified key politicians based on accusations of "anti-state activities" during the brief period martial law was in force.

"It's my judgment that an immediate suspension of President Yoon Suk Yeol's official duties is necessary to protect the Republic of Korea and its people," Han said.

Impeaching Yoon would require support from 200 of the National Assembly's 300 members. The opposition parties who jointly brought the impeachment motion have 192 seats combined. PPP has 108 lawmakers.

If Yoon is impeached, he would be suspended until the Constitutional Court rules on whether to remove him from office or restore his presidential power. Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, the country's No. 2 official, would take over presidential responsibilities.

The Defense Ministry said it suspended from duty the defense counter intelligence commander, Yeo In-hyung, who Han alleged had received orders from Yoon to detain the politicians. The ministry also

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suspended Lee Jin-woo, commander of the capital defense command, and Kwak Jong-geun, commander of the special warfare command, over their involvement in enforcing martial law.

In a closed-door briefing to lawmakers, Hong Jang-won, first deputy director of South Korea's National Intelligence Service, said Yoon called after imposing martial law and ordered him to help the defense counterintelligence unit to detain key politicians. The targeted politicians included Han, opposition leader Lee Jae-myung and National Assembly speaker Woo Won Shik, said Kim Byung-kee, one of the lawmakers who attended the meeting. Kim said Hong told lawmakers he ignored Yoon's orders.

The spy agency's director, Cho Taeyong, questioned Hong's account. Cho told reporters that such an order would have come to him, rather than Hong, and that he never received any orders from Yoon to detain politicians.

Han earlier said he would work to defeat the impeachment motion even though he criticized Yoon's martial law declaration as "unconstitutional." Han said there was a need to "prevent damage to citizens and supporters caused by unprepared chaos."

Thousands of protesters have marched in the streets of Seoul since Wednesday, calling for Yoon to resign and be investigated. Thousands of autoworkers and other members of the Korean Metal Workers' Union, one of the country's biggest umbrella labor groups, have started hourly strikes since Thursday to protest Yoon. The union said its members will start on indefinite strikes beginning on Dec. 11 if Yoon was still in office then.

South Korean Vice Defense Minister Kim Seon Ho promised the ministry's "active cooperation" with an investigation by prosecutors into the military's role in Yoon's martial law enforcement. He said military prosecutors will also be involved in the investigation. He denied media speculation that Yoon and his military confidantes might consider imposing martial law a second time.

"Even if there's a demand to enforce martial law, the Ministry of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff will absolutely not accept it," Kim said.

Kim became the acting defense minister after Yoon's office on Thursday accepted the resignation of Defense Minister Kim Yong Hyun, who has also been banned from traveling while he is investigated over the imposition of martial law.

Opposition parties and Han allege that it was Kim Yong Hyun who recommended that Yoon take the step. During a parliamentary hearing on Thursday, Kim Seon Ho said Kim Yong Hyun also ordered troops to be deployed to the National Assembly after Yoon imposed martial law.

Han leads a minority faction within the ruling party, and 18 lawmakers in his faction voted with opposition lawmakers to overturn Yoon's martial law decree. Martial law ultimately lasted about six hours, after the quick overrule by the National Assembly forced Yoon's Cabinet to lift it before daybreak Wednesday.

The main liberal opposition Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung said in a televised speech Friday that it was crucial to suspend Yoon as "quickly as possible."

Lee said Yoon's martial law enforcement amounted to "rebellion and also a self-coup." He said Yoon's move caused serious damage to the country's image and paralyzed foreign policy, pointing to criticism from the Biden administration and foreign leaders canceling their visits to South Korea.

Yoon has made no immediate response to Han's comments. He hasn't made public appearances since he made a televised announcement that his martial law decree was lifted.

Prosecutor General Shim Woo Jung told reporters the prosecution plans to investigate rebellion charges against Yoon following complaints filed by the opposition. While the president mostly has immunity from prosecution while in office, the protection does not extend to allegations of rebellion or treason. It wasn't immediately clear how the prosecution plans to proceed with an investigation on Yoon.

The Democratic Party is also considering filing a complaint against PPP floor leader Choo Kyung-ho, whom they accuse of attempting to facilitate Yoon's martial law enforcement.

Choo, a Yoon loyalist, had asked party lawmakers to convene at the party's headquarters rather than the National Assembly after martial law began. That meant fewer lawmakers were present for parliament's vote on lifting martial law.

Ailing kids wait months for Israeli permission to leave Gaza for treatment. Some die in the meantime

WAFAA SHURAFa and FATMA KHALED Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — The 12-year-old Palestinian boy was lying in a hospital bed in central Gaza, wracked with leukemia, malnourished and whimpering in pain despite the morphine doctors were giving him, when Rosalia Bollen, a UNICEF official, said she saw him in late October.

Islam al-Rayahen's family had asked Israeli authorities six times over the past months for permission to evacuate him from Gaza for a desperately needed stem cell transplant, Bollen said. Six times, the request was refused for unexplained security reasons, she said.

Islam died three days after she saw him, Bollen said.

Thousands of patients in Gaza are waiting for Israeli permission for urgently needed medical evacuation from Gaza for treatment of war wounds or chronic diseases they can't get after the destruction of much of the territory's health care system by Israel's 15-month military campaign.

Among them are at least 2,500 children who UNICEF says must be transported immediately.

"They cannot afford to wait. These children will die. They're dying in waiting and I find it striking that the world is letting that happen," Bollen said.

The Israeli military often takes months to respond to medical evacuation requests, and the number of evacuations has plunged in recent months. In some cases, the military rejects either the patient or, in the case of children, the caregivers accompanying them on vague security grounds or with no explanation.

The Israeli decisions appear to be "arbitrary and are not made on a criteria nor logic," said Moeen Mahmood, the Jordan country director for Doctors Without Borders.

COGAT, the Israeli military agency in charge of humanitarian affairs for Palestinians, said in a statement to The Associated Press that it "makes every effort to approve the departure of children and their families for medical treatments, subject to a security check." It did not respond when asked for details about Islam's case.

A military official said Israel's internal intelligence service reviews whether the patient or their escort have what he called "a connection to terrorism," and if one is found they are refused. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss confidential procedures.

Osaid Shaheen, who is nearly 2, now faces having his eyes removed after Israel rejected his evacuation for treatment of cancer in his retinas.

The toddler was diagnosed with the cancer in April, after his mother, Sondos Abu Libda, noticed his left eyelid was droopy. The World Health Organization requested his evacuation through the Rafah border crossing in southern Gaza, but the crossing was shut down in May when Israeli troops took it over in an offensive, Abu Libda said.

WHO applied again, this time for Osaid to leave through the Kerem Shalom crossing into Israel, now the only route for evacuees to travel. During the long wait, the cancer spread to the child's other eye and reached stage 4.

In November, Abu Libda was told Osaid was rejected on security grounds with no further explanation.

She was stunned, she said. "I didn't expect that a child could get a security rejection."

Doctors have given the boy three doses of chemotherapy. But with supplies short in Gaza, they're struggling to get more. If they can't, they will have to remove Osaid's eyes or the cancer will spread to other parts of his body, Abu Libda said.

"He's just a child. How will he live his life without seeing? How will he play? How will he see his future and how will his life turn out?" Abu Libda asked, standing outside the house where her family is sheltering in the Beni Suheil district of southern Gaza.

Nearby, little Osaid — who so far still has his sight — toddled around in the rubble of a building destroyed by Israeli forces, smiling as he played with chunks of rubble. When asked about his case, COGAT did not reply.

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WHO says 14,000 patients of all ages need medical evacuation from Gaza, the territory's Health Ministry puts the number higher, at 22,000, including 7,000 patients in extreme need who could die soon without treatment, according to Mohamed Abu Salmeya, a ministry official in charge of evacuation referrals.

Since the war began on Oct. 7, 2023, 5,230 patients have been evacuated, said Margaret Harris, a WHO spokesperson.

Since May, when the Rafah crossing shut down, the rate has slowed down, with only 342 patients evacuated, she said, an average of less than two a day. Before the war, when Israeli permission was also necessary, around 100 patients a day were transferred out of Gaza, according to WHO.

More than 44,500 Palestinians have been killed and more than 105,000 wounded by Israel's bombardment and ground offensives, launched in retaliation for Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on southern Israel. The casualty toll, by Gaza's Health Ministry, does not distinguish combatants from civilians — but more than half are women and children.

Gaza's health system has been decimated, with only 17 of the territory's original 36 hospitals functioning — and those only partially. They struggle with the waves of war wounded on top of patients with other conditions.

Carrying out specialized surgeries or treatments in Gaza is difficult or impossible, with equipment destroyed, some specialist doctors killed or arrested and medical supplies limited. Gaza's only dedicated cancer hospital was seized by Israeli troops early in the war, heavily damaged and has been shut down.

Doctors without Borders said in August, it sought to evacuate 32 children along with their caregivers, but only six were allowed to leave. In November, it applied for eight others, including a 2-year-old with leg amputations, but Israeli authorities blocked evacuation, it said

The military official said five of the eight requests in November were approved but the caregivers trying to travel with the children were rejected on security grounds. The official said Doctors Without Borders would have to resubmit the requests with alternate escorts. The official didn't say why the other three children weren't approved.

The rejected caregivers were the children's mothers and grandmothers, said Mahmood, the Doctor's Without Borders official, who said no explanation was given for the security concern.

Children long waiting for permission face dire consequences if they don't get treatment.

Nima al-Askari said doctors told her that 4-year-old Qusay could become paralyzed if her son doesn't get surgery in the next two or three months for a heart defect that constricts his aorta.

"Should I wait until my son becomes paralyzed?" al-Askari said. "Everyone is telling me to wait until he gets evacuated. ... This is my only son. I can't see him in a wheelchair."

Asma Saed said she has been waiting for three months to hear whether her 2-year-old son, Al-Hassan, can travel for treatment for kidney failure. In the meantime, they are living in a squalid tent camp in Khan Younis, with little clean water or food.

She said her son doesn't sleep, screaming all night.

"I wish I could see him like any child in the world who can move, walk, and play," she said. "He's a child, he can't express his pain."

Hunt for the gunman who killed UnitedHealthcare's CEO heads into third day as new clues emerge

By MICHAEL BALSAMO, JAKE OFFENHARTZ and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — As the investigation into a masked gunman who stalked and killed the head of one of the largest U.S. health insurers moved into its third day Friday, possible leads emerged about his travel before the shooting and a message scrawled on ammunition found at the crime scene.

UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson was killed in a dawn ambush Wednesday as he walked from his midtown hotel to the company's annual investor conference across the street, blocks from tourist draws such as Radio City Music Hall and Rockefeller Center.

But days later, the gunman was still at large and the reason for the killing remained unknown, with New

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York City police saying evidence firmly points to it being a targeted attack.

Investigators worked to piece together more of the timeline of the gunman's whereabouts before the shooting, examine security camera footage and even test a discarded water bottle and protein bar wrapper in a hunt for his DNA.

The words "deny," "defend" and "depose" were found emblazoned on the ammunition, echoing a phrase used by insurance industry critics, two law enforcement officials said Thursday, speaking to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss details of the investigation.

The messages mimic the phrase "delay, deny, defend," which is commonly used by lawyers and insurance industry critics to describe tactics used to avoid paying claims. It refers to insurers delaying payment, denying a claim and then defending their actions. Health insurers like UnitedHealthcare have become frequent targets of criticism from doctors and patients for denying claims or complicating access to care.

Investigators also now believe the suspect may have traveled to New York last month on a bus that originated in Atlanta, one of the law enforcement officials said.

Police and federal agents have been collecting information from Greyhound in an attempt to identify the suspect and are working to determine whether he purchased the ticket to New York in late November, the official said.

Investigators were also trying to obtain additional information from a cellphone recovered from a pedestrian plaza through which the shooter fled.

A tip that the shooter may have stayed at a hostel brought police Thursday morning to at least two such establishments on Manhattan's Upper West Side, according to one of the law enforcement officials briefed on the investigation. The photos made public Thursday were taken in the lobby of the HI New York City hostel.

"We are fully cooperating with the NYPD and, as this is an active investigation, can not comment at this time," hostel spokesperson Danielle Brumfitt said in an emailed statement.

Police released new photos Thursday of a person wanted for questioning in connection with Thompson's killing.

The images, showing an unmasked man smiling in the lobby of a Manhattan hostel, add to a collection of photos and video that have circulated since the shooting — including footage of the attack itself, as well as still frames of the suspected gunman stopping at a Starbucks beforehand.

Investigators believe the suspect used a fake New Jersey identification card when he checked in at the hostel, said one of the officials who spoke with the AP.

Employees who work at the hostel told investigators they remembered a man who almost always wore a mask when interacting with them or passing by the front desk. That person wore a jacket that looked like the one worn by the man pictured in surveillance images released after the shooting, the official said.

After the shooting, police said the gunman fled on a bicycle and was last seen riding into Central Park.

Based on surveillance video and evidence from the scene, investigators believe the shooter had at least some firearms training and experience with guns and that the weapon was equipped with a silencer, one of the law enforcement officials told the AP.

Investigators were also looking into whether the suspect had pre-positioned a bike as part of an escape plan, the official said.

Security video shows the killer approaching Thompson from behind, leveling his pistol and firing several shots, barely pausing to clear a gun jam while the executive tumbled to the sidewalk. Cameras showed him fleeing the block across a pedestrian plaza before getting on the bicycle.

Police released several images of the man wearing a hooded jacket and a mask that concealed most of his face — a look that would not have attracted attention on a chilly morning.

Thompson, a father of two sons who lived in a Minneapolis suburb, had been with Minnetonka, Minnesota-based UnitedHealthcare since 2004 and served as CEO for more than three years.

His wife, Paulette, told NBC News on Wednesday that he told her "there were some people that had been threatening him." She didn't have details but suggested the threats may have involved issues with

insurance coverage.

The insurer's parent company, UnitedHealth Group Inc., was holding its annual meeting in New York to update investors on its direction and expectations for the coming year. The company ended the conference after Thompson's death.

UnitedHealthcare provides coverage for more than 49 million Americans and brought in more than \$281 billion in revenue last year. It is the largest provider of Medicare Advantage plans in the U.S. and manages health insurance coverage for employers and state and federally funded Medicaid programs.

In October, UnitedHealthcare was named along with Humana and CVS in a Senate report detailing how its denial rate for prior authorizations for some Medicare Advantage patients has surged in recent years.

Trump talks up his transition and election victory as he receives Fox Nation award

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

GREENVALE, N.Y. (AP) — Not yet even in office, Donald Trump said Thursday he's already accomplished more than President Joe Biden did in his entire term, an outsized claim by the president-elect just a month out from the election.

Trump, who has been largely ensconced at his Mar-a-Lago club in recent weeks as he's worked to staff his new administration, made the comment as he ventured to New York's Long Island to be honored as part of Fox Nation's annual Patriot Awards on Fox's streaming platform.

"I think you have seen more happen in the last two weeks than you have in the last four years," Trump told the crowd at the Tilles Center for the Performing Arts.

"It was a tremendous day, a tremendous night," he said, recalling his election victory in a 10-minute acceptance speech that sounded like a highlight reel of his campaign rally speeches. It came complete with a live performance of "God Bless the USA" by the singer Lee Greenwood, calls to "get the criminals out of our country" and an embrace of all-paper election ballots and mandatory voter ID.

Trump also pointed to the conversations he's had with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum since he threatened two of the country's top trading partners with a 25% tariff on all imported goods unless they do more to tackle illegal border crossings and drug flows.

"Justin came flying right in," Trump said in reference to Trudeau's trip to Mar-a-Lago. That prompted some in the audience to chant "51!" — a nod to Trump apparently joking at his dinner with Trudeau that Canada could become the 51st U.S. state.

The annual awards "honor and recognize America's finest patriots, including military veterans, first responders and other inspirational everyday heroes," according to Fox. The event was hosted by Fox host Sean Hannity, a longtime Trump friend who stepped in after the president-elect nominated Pete Hegseth, the original host, as defense secretary.

Among those recognized Thursday night were conservative actor and evangelist Kirk Cameron; Gen. Dick Cody, who used his own helicopter to deliver supplies to people after Hurricane Helene; and Jonathan Diller, the New York Police Department officer who was killed during a traffic stop in Queens. His widow, Stephanie, received a standing ovation and thanked Trump for his support. Others invoked Trump as well.

The ceremony also honored Paws of War, an organization that provides service dogs to veterans and helps those serving overseas bring animals they meet in war zones to the U.S.

The heartfelt moments were juxtaposed against the kind of boisterous and incendiary political fare that loyal watchers of Fox hosts like Hannity expect.

The anchor used his introduction to take an election victory lap, boasting that Democrats "got their ass kicked." He played "YMCA" — the song Trump has long used to close out his rallies — and invited audience members to dance like the president-elect. And he offered a series of impressions, mimicking former vice presidential candidate Tim Walz's enthusiasm and Biden appearing lost, complete with a backdrop of the rainforest where he spoke during a recent trip to the Amazon.

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Later, he donned an orange safety vest — a nod to the one Trump wore when he delivered a press conference from a garbage truck during the campaign after Biden suggested Trump's supporters were garbage.

Trump's award marks the culmination of Fox's reembrace of the president-elect, who has had an up-and-down relationship with the network in recent years.

Fox paid \$787 million in 2023 to settle a defamation lawsuit by Dominion Voting Systems over false claims by Fox personalities who echoed Trump's lies that the 2020 election was stolen from him through mass voter fraud. For more than six months ending in spring 2023, Fox had what many considered a "soft ban" on Trump appearances, with its leaders looking to move on. But when it became clear that voters did not want to, Fox and its personalities were quick to embrace Trump again.

Individual personalities have undergone their own journeys: Former Fox host Megyn Kelly drew Trump's ire in a 2015 debate for her sharp question about his treatment of women; now she's a popular podcast host and Trump supporter. The Dominion lawsuit uncovered emails in which former Fox host Tucker Carlson spoke disparagingly of Trump, including saying he "truly can't wait" for Trump to become an ex-president. They've since made amends.

Through it all, Trump has been quick to take to social media to criticize Fox for content he deems insufficiently loyal.

On Thursday, he was more magnanimous.

"You have incredible people at Fox," he said before quipping, "A couple I don't like."

Trump has begun to emerge more in public since spending most of his transition so far behind closed doors at his club in Palm Beach, Florida. This week, he made an unannounced appearance at a memorial service for three Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office deputies who were killed in a car crash last month.

This weekend, he will travel to Paris to join other world leaders and dignitaries for a ceremony to celebrate the reopening of Notre Dame Cathedral, which was devastated by a fire five years ago.

Hamas official says Gaza ceasefire talks have resumed after weekslong hiatus

By ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

ISTANBUL (AP) — A Hamas official said Thursday that international mediators have resumed negotiating with the militant group and Israel over a ceasefire in Gaza, and that he was hopeful a deal to end the 14-month war was within reach.

Ceasefire negotiations were halted last month when Qatar suspended talks with mediators from Egypt and the United States because of frustration over a lack of progress between Israel and Hamas. But there has been a "reactivation" of efforts in recent days to end the fighting, release hostages from Gaza and free Palestinian prisoners in Israel, according to Bassem Naim, an official in Hamas' political bureau who spoke with The Associated Press in Turkey.

Another official familiar with the talks confirmed the return of Qatari mediators. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the negotiations with the media.

Since the talks broke down, there have been significant shifts in the global and regional landscape. Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential election, and a ceasefire was declared last week between Israel and Hamas ally Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Trump is a staunch supporter of Israel, but Naim said he believes the incoming administration could "affect the situation positively" given that Trump had made halting wars in the region part of his campaign platform. Trump this week called for the release of all hostages held in Gaza by the time he takes office on Jan. 20, saying there would be "hell to pay" if that doesn't happen.

Previous rounds of negotiations focused on variations of a proposal calling for a multiphased ceasefire — beginning with a preliminary six-week halt in fighting during which female, elderly and sick hostages would be freed in exchange for Palestinian prisoners.

During that time, Israel would pull back some forces, and displaced Palestinians would be allowed to return home. The sides would also begin talks on the next phase that would include the full withdrawal

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of Israeli forces, the release of remaining hostages and the terms of a permanent end to the war. A third, final phase would focus on reconstruction.

Naim said that no "solid, well-formed" new ceasefire proposal has yet been presented to Hamas. And even though ceasefire talks have broken down on multiple occasions throughout the war, he added: "I think it is not a big challenge to reach a deal ... if there are intentions on the other side."

Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking around 250 people hostage. Israel's blistering retaliatory offensive has killed at least 44,500 Palestinians, more than half of them women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, whose count does not distinguish between civilians and combatants.

In the negotiations to end the conflict, the two sides have been at odds on some major points, including whether any halt in the fighting would be permanent or temporary and whether Israeli forces would withdraw from all of the enclave, and on what timetable. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said Israel will maintain a long-term military presence in the territory and vowed to dismantle Hamas' military capabilities and ensure that the militant group never governs again.

Trump's Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff met separately in recent weeks with Netanyahu and Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani to discuss Gaza ceasefire talks, according to a U.S. official who spoke anonymously because they were not authorized to comment publicly.

In an interview with British broadcaster Sky News on Wednesday, the Qatari prime minister said officials in his country are aiming to reach a ceasefire before president-elect Trump takes office.

Naim said Hamas is sticking to the core demands it has held to during previous rounds of negotiations, including a permanent ceasefire, total withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip, and the right of internally displaced Palestinians in Gaza to return to their homes. But he also said the Palestinian militant group is "ready to show flexibility" on implementation, including on the timeline for withdrawal of Israeli forces from key parts of Gaza.

A previous round of talks in August reached an impasse in part because Israel demanded that it after any ceasefire it should maintain a military presence in the Philadelphi corridor, a strategic strip along the enclave's border with Egypt, and in the Netzarim corridor that cuts from east to west across the territory's midsection.

"There can be a discussion about these points, but at the end, Israel has to withdraw totally from the Philadelphi corridor, and the Rafah border (with Egypt) has to be opened immediately," Naim said.

Naim said Palestinian factions were also making progress in deciding who would rule Gaza politically after the war. He confirmed that Hamas and its rival Fatah — which dominates the Western-backed Palestinian Authority — have reached an agreement in principle on forming a temporary committee of Palestinian technocrats that would govern Gaza in the immediate aftermath of the war. Under this arrangement, Hamas would give up its political rule of the enclave, but not lay down its arms.

"Originally we are a Palestinian national liberation movement. We are not a movement to govern," he said. "When it comes to the military wing ... as long as we are people under occupation, we have all the right to resist this occupation by all means, including armed resistance.

Israel says it will never let Hamas rule Gaza again, and is demanding the group disarm.

Hamas political official Khalil al-Hayya had previously told AP that if an independent Palestinian state were established along 1967 borders, the group would lay down its arms. Naim said that remains the group's position.

"Resistance, including armed resistance, is a tool," he said. "It is not a goal in itself."

In California's 'earthquake country,' a 7.0 temblor prompts confusion and a tsunami warning

By OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Valerie Starkey was driving through Northern California to visit relatives when

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she suddenly felt shaking and feared her car had broken down, only to realize later that it was an earthquake so powerful that it triggered a tsunami warning for hundreds of miles of the U.S. West Coast.

The epicenter of Thursday's 7.0 magnitude shaker occurred in California's so-called "earthquake country" because it's where three tectonic plates meet. The temblor was the most powerful to rattle the state since a 7.1-magnitude quake hit Ridgecrest in 2019.

Its intensity shocked Starkey and many of the 5.3 million other people along nearly 500 miles (805 km) of the California and Oregon coasts who were under the tsunami warning for about an hour. It was lifted after no major waves arrived.

"I thought my axles had fallen apart," said Starkey, a Del Norte County supervisor representing Crescent City, a town of fewer than 6,000 near the Oregon border. "That's what I was feeling ... 'My axles are broken now.' I did not realize it was an earthquake."

The quake struck at 10:44 a.m. west of Ferndale, a small city in coastal Humboldt County, about 130 miles (209 km) from the Oregon border, the U.S. Geological Survey said. The shaking knocked items off grocery store shelves and sent children scrambling under desks at schools.

It was felt as far south as San Francisco, some 270 miles (435 km) away, where residents described a rolling motion for several seconds. It was followed by multiple smaller aftershocks. There were no immediate reports of major damage or injuries from the quake.

The tsunami warning issued shortly after the quake struck spanned from the edge of California's Monterey Bay north into Oregon.

"It was a strong quake. Our building shook. We're fine, but I have a mess to clean up right now," said Julie Kreitzer, owner of Golden Gait Mercantile, a store packed with food, wares and souvenirs that is a main attraction in Ferndale.

"I have to go. I have to try and salvage something for the holidays because it's going to be a tough year," Kreitzer said before hanging up.

The region — known for its redwood forests, scenic mountains and the three-county Emerald Triangle's legendary marijuana crop — was struck by a magnitude 6.4 quake in 2022 that left thousands of people without power and water. The northwest corner of California is the most seismically active part of the state because it's where three tectonic plates meet, seismologist Lucy Jones said on the social media platform BlueSky.

Shortly after the quake, phones in Northern California buzzed with the tsunami warning from the National Weather Service that said: "A series of powerful waves and strong currents may impact coasts near you. You are in danger. Get away from coastal waters. Move to high ground or inland now. Keep away from the coast until local officials say it is safe to return."

Numerous cities urged people to evacuate to higher ground as a precaution.

In Santa Cruz, authorities cleared the main beach, taping off entrances with police tape. Aerial footage showed cars bumper-to-bumper heading to higher ground on California highways 1 and 92 in the Half Moon Bay area south of San Francisco.

Cindy Vosburg, the executive director for the Crescent City-Del Norte County Chamber of Commerce, said she heard alarms sound just before shaking began, and the city's cultural center downtown started to creak.

"Just as it would start to subside, the building would roll again," Vosburg said.

White House spokesperson Jeremy Edwards said President Joe Biden was briefed on the earthquake and that FEMA officials are in touch with their state and local counterparts in California and Oregon.

Gov. Gavin Newsom signed off on a state of emergency declaration to quickly move state resources to impacted areas along the coast. State officials were concerned about damage in the northern part of the state, Newsom said.

Crews in Eureka, the biggest city in the region, were assessing if there was any damage. Eureka Mayor Kim Bergel, who works at a middle school, said lights were swaying and everyone got under desks.

"The kids were so great and terrified. It seemed to go back and forth for quite a long time," she said. Some children asked, "Can I call my mom?"

The students were later sent home.

Humboldt County Sheriff William Honsal said residents experienced cracks in their homes' foundations, as well as broken glass and windows, but nothing severe.

Honsal said he was in his office in the 75-year-old courthouse in downtown Eureka when he felt the quake. "We're used to it. It is known as 'earthquake country' up here," he said. "It wasn't a sharp jolt. It was a slow roller, but significant."

The San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District, known as BART, stopped traffic in all directions through the underwater tunnel between San Francisco and Oakland, and the San Francisco Zoo's visitors were evacuated.

This quake was a strike-slip type of temblor that shifts more horizontally and is less prone to cause tsunamis, unlike the more vertical types, said National Weather Service tsunami program manager Corina Allen in Washington state.

Slaying of UnitedHealthcare CEO spotlights complex challenge companies face in protecting top brass

By ADAM GELLER, CATHY BUSSEWITZ and MICHAEL LIEDTKE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — He's one of the most famous and widely admired corporate leaders in the world. But it's the haters that companies like Mark Zuckerberg's Meta worry about.

In an era when online anger and social tensions are increasingly directed at the businesses consumers count on, Meta last year spent \$24.4 million on guards, alarms and other measures to keep Zuckerberg and the company's former chief operating officer safe.

Some high-profile CEOs surround themselves with security. But the fatal shooting this week of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson while he walked alone on a New York City sidewalk has put a spotlight on the widely varied approaches companies take in protecting their leaders against threats.

Thompson had no personal security and appeared unaware of the shooter lurking before he was gunned down.

And today's political, economic and technological climate is only going to make the job of evaluating threats against executives and taking action to protect them even more difficult, experts say.

"We are better today at collecting signals. I'm not sure we're any better at making sense of the signals we collect," says Fred Burton of Ontic, a provider of threat management software for companies.

After Thompson's shooting, Burton said, "I've been on the phone all day with some organizations asking for consultation, saying, 'Am I doing enough?'"

Some of the biggest U.S. companies, particularly those in the tech sector, spend heavily on personal and residential security for their top executives.

Meta, whose businesses include Facebook and Instagram, reported the highest spending on personal security for top executives last year, filings culled by research firm Equilar show.

Zuckerberg "is synonymous with Meta and, as a result, negative sentiment regarding our company is directly associated with, and often transferred to, Mr. Zuckerberg," the Menlo Park, California, company explained earlier this year in an annual shareholder disclosure.

At Apple, the world's largest tech company by stock valuation, CEO Tim Cook was tormented by a stalker who sent him sexually provocative emails and even showed up outside his Silicon Valley home at one point before the company's security team successfully took legal action against her in 2022.

Cook is regularly accompanied by security personnel when he appears in public. Still, the company's \$820,000 allotted last year to protect top executives is a fraction of what other tech giants spent for CEO security.

Just over a quarter of the companies in the Fortune 500 reported spending money to protect their CEOs and other top executives. Of those that did, the median payment for personal security doubled over the last three years to about \$98,000.

In many companies, investor meetings like the one UnitedHealthcare's Thompson was walking to when he was shot are viewed as very risky because details on the location and who will be speaking are highly publicized.

"It gives people an opportunity to arrive well in advance and take a look at the room, take a look at how people would probably come and go out of a location," said Dave Komendat, president of DSKomendat Risk Management Services, which is based in the greater Seattle area.

Some firms respond by beefing up security. For example, tech companies routinely require everyone attending a major event, such as Apple's annual unveiling of the next iPhone or a shareholder meeting, to go through airport-style security checkpoints before entering.

Others forgo in-person meetings with shareholders, including Amazon, which holds its annual shareholder meetings virtually.

"But there are also company cultures that really frown on that and want their leaders to be accessible to people, accessible to shareholders, employees," Komendat said.

Depending on the company, such an approach may make sense. Many top executives are little known to the public, operating in industries and locations that make them far less prone to public exposure and to threats.

"Determining the need for and appropriate level of an executive-level protection program is specific to each organization," says David Johnston, vice president of asset protection and retail operations at the National Retail Federation. "These safeguards should also include the constant monitoring of potential threats and the ability to adapt to maintain the appropriate level of security and safety."

Some organizations have a protective intelligence group that uses digital tools such as machine learning or artificial intelligence to comb through online comments to detect threats not only on social media platforms such as X but also on the dark web, says Komendat. They look for what's being said about the company, its employees and its leadership to uncover risks.

"There are always threats directed towards senior leaders at companies. Many of them are not credible," Komendat said. "The question always is trying to determine what is a real threat versus what is someone just venting with no intent to take any additional action."

Burton, a former special agent with the U.S. Diplomatic Security Service, points out that despite the current climate, there is little in the way of organized groups that target companies.

Today, one of the primary worries are loners whose rantings online are fed by others who are like-minded. It's up to corporate security analysts to zero in on such dialogue and decide whether or not it represents a real threat.

And CEOs aren't the only targets of disgruntled customers. In the U.S., there were 525 workplace fatalities due to assault in 2022, according to the National Safety Council. Industries including healthcare, education and service providers are more prone to violence than others, and taxi drivers are more than 20 times more likely to be murdered on the job than other workers, the group said.

But the ambush of UnitedHealthcare's Thompson this week is bound to get some CEOs second-guessing.

"What invariably happen at moments like this in time is you will get additional ears listening" to security professionals seeking money to beef up executive protection, Burton says.

"Because I can guarantee you there's not a CEO in America who's not aware of this incident."

Russia's LGBTQ+ community is living in fear following new laws and court rulings, activists say

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — Gela Gogishvili and Haoyang Xu led a happy life as a gay couple in Russia, even as President Vladimir Putin's government took an increasingly anti-LGBTQ+ stance.

Their social media posts and videos drew thousands of followers, and they were greeted by them sometimes on the streets in Kazan, in Russia's Tatarstan region, where Gogishvili was a pharmacist and

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Xu, from China, studied international relations at a university.

But the online threats began after the Kremlin in December 2022 expanded its ban of “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations” from minors to adults, effectively outlawing any public endorsement of LGBTQ+ activities. Then came the complaints about them to authorities.

They were detained in 2023 and accused of spreading “LGBT propaganda” among minors. Gogishvili was given a hefty fine, while Xu was put in a detention center for migrants to await deportation.

They eventually fled abroad separately. Now reunited in France, where they’re seeking asylum, they look with concern at Russia, where new, even harsher anti-LGBTQ+ measures have been adopted.

Just over a year ago, Russia’s Supreme Court effectively outlawed any LGBTQ+ activism in a ruling that designated “the international LGBT movement” as extremist. The move exposed anyone in the community or connected to it to criminal prosecution and prison, ushering in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation.

“I’m scared for the queer community in Russia that remains in the country,” Gogishvili told The Associated Press.

Linking LGBTQ+ rights to the war in Ukraine

That community in Russia has been under legal and public pressure for over a decade but especially since the Kremlin sent troops to Ukraine in 2022. Putin has argued that the war is a proxy battle with the West, which he says aims to destroy Russia and its “traditional family values” by pushing for LGBTQ+ rights.

Putin insists Russia isn’t discriminating against LGBTQ+ people, but he also decries “perversions that lead to degradation and extinction.” Parliament Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin last year called gender transitioning “pure satanism” and “diabolical policy” that should stay in the U.S.

Any public representation of gay and transgender people is banned. Gender-affirming medical care and changing one’s gender in official documents are prohibited. With the Supreme Court’s ruling in November 2023, anyone involved with the LGBTQ+ community could be imprisoned for up to six years.

As a result, many left the country. But others remain — and find themselves in a community pushed into the shadows, marginalized even further and dogged by fear of repression.

“Six years, it’s not a joke,” Olga Baranova, head of the Moscow Community Center for LGBT+ Initiatives, said in an interview from outside Russia. “What is worth me going to prison for six years? Every person who’s doing something right now (in LGBTQ+ activism in Russia) has to answer this question these days.”

Targeting nightclubs, rainbow flags and gay tourism

Just days after the Supreme Court ruling, the LGBTQ+ community was rattled by news of police raiding gay bars, nightclubs and venues that hosted drag shows in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other cities.

Last spring, the first criminal case on charges of involvement with the “LGBT movement” extremist group was lodged against the owner and the staff of a bar in the southwestern city of Orenburg that held drag performances. A handful of similar cases came elsewhere.

Charges have been launched for displaying symbols such as a rainbow flag — even though many of those accused had nothing to do with the LGBTQ+ community, said human rights lawyer Max Olenichev.

More raids of bars and nightclubs were reported in Moscow last month, almost exactly a year since the Supreme Court ruling. State media quoted law enforcement as saying they targeted those spreading “LGBT propaganda.”

One man arrested for allegedly running a travel agency for gay customers faces charges of organizing activities of an extremist organization. Independent news outlet Mediazona reported that Andrei Kotov rejected the charges and said in court that law enforcement officers beat him and administered electric shocks during the arrest, even though he didn’t resist.

On Nov. 23, Putin signed into law a bill banning the adoption of Russian children by citizens of countries where gender-affirming care is legal. He also approved legislation outlawing the spread of material that encourages people not to have children.

“All this, in general, speaks more about the desire of the authorities to create some kind of atmosphere of fear. It’s not repressions, it’s terror,” said Vladimir, an LGBTQ+ rights advocate in Russia who like many interviewed by AP asked to be identified only by a first name out of security concerns.

Ikar, a fellow activist and transgender man, described the actions by authorities as “an attempt to in-

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timidate ... to make people lose their social connections, stay silent, stay home.”

Going underground, online or abroad

Vladimir and Ikar belong to an underground LGBTQ+ rights group that offers legal aid and holds offline events without fanfare. Activists thoroughly verify identities of anyone seeking its help.

The group is seeing a growing number of cases related to violence against LGBTQ+ people, Vladimir said.

Some regional organizations have shut down completely; others operate openly, but in a drastically different way. The Moscow Community Center for LGBT+ Initiatives moved its community-building efforts into a sprawling online network of chats and Zoom meeting rooms, according to Baranova.

“Our strategy today is to preserve the community in some form and size at least, for the people to just know each other, support each other,” she said.

Center T, a prominent trans rights group, closed its Moscow shelter after visits from police and opened one in Yerevan, Armenia, said group leader Yan Dvorkin. Center T helps emigres as well as those still in Russia to find doctors and medical care, trying to resolve crises and still be a part of a community, if only online.

Anna, a 25-year-old transgender woman in Moscow, said being part of the community provided the courage to transition. “I can’t imagine what it’s like for new people, who are only opening up the possibility for themselves,” she said.

Anna transitioned and came out to her family and friends last year, after the ban on gender-affirming care was enacted.

The ban and other repressive laws and rulings hit the already-vulnerable transgender community hard, Dvorkin said.

Finding a job has become more difficult, both for those who haven’t changed their gender marker in documents and those who have, he said. Access to gender-affirming medical care is a major issue, with doctors wary of working with transgender people and with many turning to shoddy underground medications.

Violence against transgender people has spiked, as has harassment and discrimination, Dvorkin said.

“Nowadays, you can intimidate people — blackmail them — by (saying) that ‘I will report you and you will go to prison for extremism,’” the activist said.

Those who stay in Russia, despite the risks

Anna considers herself lucky and “privileged.” She has a well-paying job, can afford a doctor advising her from abroad on hormonal therapy, and can get the medicine in Moscow. She wouldn’t elaborate on how and where she gets it, so authorities “don’t pull the plug.”

But she said she hasn’t come out to her colleagues for fear of losing her job, and she is sometimes harassed on the street because of her appearance. Her identity documents can’t be changed under the ban.

She says she has a support network of friends and doesn’t want to leave Russia, even though she’s acutely aware of the risks.

“I somehow have managed to adapt,” she said. “I know how to live here.”

Yulia, another transgender woman, also vowed to stay, describing it as sort of a mission to show that “people like me are not necessarily weak, are not necessarily useless.”

In her mid-40s, Yulia has a family and children, a successful career in a male-dominated industry, and the respect and acceptance from her colleagues and friends. For her, “it’s about normalizing” being trans, she said.

How much “normalizing” is possible in the current climate and the years ahead is still an open question.

The ban on “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations” forces print, TV and movie censorship of LGBTQ+ relations. In a recent example, two Russian streaming services cut a transgender character from the 1990 drama series “Twin Peaks.”

At the same time, there is abundant official rhetoric from politicians, the Russian Orthodox clergy and media figures condemning LGBTQ+ people.

Many like Gela Gogishvili, the gay man who fled Russia last year, worry about the next generation of LGBTQ+ people.

He said he's "even more scared for those who are born there and are currently growing up — from their childhood years onwards, they will be taught that (being queer) is bad."

"Like it was with me," Gogishvili adds. "I couldn't accept myself until I was 20 years old."

New clues emerge as investigators hunt for the gunman who killed UnitedHealthcare's CEO

By MICHAEL BALSAMO, JAKE OFFENHARTZ and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — New clues emerged Thursday in the hunt for the masked gunman who stalked and killed UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, including possible leads about his travel before the shooting and a message scrawled on ammunition found at the crime scene.

The words "deny," "defend" and "depose" were found emblazoned on the ammunition, echoing a phrase used by insurance industry critics, two law enforcement officials said Thursday.

The words were written in permanent marker, according to one of the two officials, who were not authorized to publicly discuss details of the investigation and spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity.

Investigators also now believe the suspect may have traveled to New York last month on a bus that originated in Atlanta, one of the law enforcement officials said.

Police and federal agents have been collecting information from Greyhound in an attempt to identify the suspect and are working to determine whether he purchased the ticket to New York in late November, the official said.

Police also released new photos Thursday of a person wanted for questioning in connection with Thompson's killing.

The images, showing an unmasked man smiling in the lobby of a Manhattan hostel, add to a collection of photos and video that have circulated since the shooting — including footage of the attack itself, as well as still frames of the suspected gunman stopping at a Starbucks beforehand.

Thompson, the head of one of the largest U.S. health insurers, died in a dawn ambush Wednesday as he walked from his midtown hotel to the company's annual investor conference at a Hilton across the street. The reason for the killing remained unknown, but New York City police say evidence firmly points to it being a targeted attack.

The messages on the 9 mm ammunition found at the scene of the shooting mimic the phrase "delay, deny, defend," which is commonly used by lawyers and insurance industry critics to describe tactics used to avoid paying claims.

It refers to insurers delaying payment, denying a claim and then defending their actions. Health insurers like UnitedHealthcare have become frequent targets of criticism from doctors and patients for denying claims or complicating access to care.

Investigators also recovered a cellphone from a pedestrian plaza through which the shooter fled. Inside a nearby trash can, they found a water bottle and protein bar wrapper that they say the gunman purchased from Starbucks minutes before the shooting. The city's crime lab is examining those items for DNA and fingerprints.

Investigators were still trying to obtain additional information from the phone Thursday, the law enforcement official said.

A tip that the shooter may have stayed at a hostel brought police Thursday morning to at least two such establishments on Manhattan's Upper West Side, according to one of the law enforcement officials briefed on the investigation. The photos made public Thursday were taken in the lobby of the HI New York City hostel.

"We are fully cooperating with the NYPD and, as this is an active investigation, can not comment at this time," hostel spokesperson Danielle Brumfitt said in an emailed statement.

Investigators believe the suspect used a fake New Jersey identification card when he checked in at the hostel, said one of the officials who spoke with the AP.

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Employees who work at the hostel told investigators they remembered a man who almost always wore a mask when interacting with them or passing by the front desk. That person wore a jacket that looked like the one worn by the man pictured in surveillance images released after the shooting, the official said.

After the shooting, police said the gunman fled on a bicycle and was last seen riding into Central Park.

Members of the public have flooded police with tips — many unfounded. Police searched a Long Island Rail Road train Wednesday night after a commuter claimed to have spotted the shooter, but they found no sign of the gunman.

“We’re following up on every single tip that comes in,” said Assistant Commissioner Carlos Nieves, a police spokesperson. “That little piece of information could be the missing piece of the puzzle that ties everything together.”

Based on surveillance video and evidence from the scene, investigators believe the shooter had at least some firearms training and experience with guns and that the weapon was equipped with a silencer, one of the law enforcement officials told the AP.

Investigators were also looking into whether the suspect had pre-positioned a bike as part of an escape plan, the official said.

Security video shows the killer approaching Thompson from behind, leveling his pistol and firing several shots, barely pausing to clear a gun jam while the executive tumbled to the sidewalk. Cameras showed him fleeing the block across a pedestrian plaza before getting on the bicycle.

Police released several images of the man wearing a hooded jacket and a mask that concealed most of his face — a look that would not have attracted attention on a chilly morning.

Thompson, a father of two sons who lived in a Minneapolis suburb, had been with Minnetonka, Minnesota-based UnitedHealthcare since 2004 and served as CEO for more than three years.

His wife, Paulette, told NBC News on Wednesday that he told her “there were some people that had been threatening him.” She didn’t have details but suggested the threats may have involved issues with insurance coverage.

The insurer’s parent company, UnitedHealth Group Inc., was holding its annual meeting in New York to update investors on its direction and expectations for the coming year. The company ended the conference after Thompson’s death.

UnitedHealthcare provides coverage for more than 49 million Americans and brought in more than \$281 billion in revenue last year. It is the largest provider of Medicare Advantage plans in the U.S. and manages health insurance coverage for employers and state and federally funded Medicaid programs.

In October, UnitedHealthcare was named along with Humana and CVS in a Senate report detailing how its denial rate for prior authorizations for some Medicare Advantage patients has surged in recent years.

Why the rebel capture of Syria’s Hama, a city with a dark history, matters

By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — It was one of the darkest moments in the modern history of the Arab world. More than four decades ago, Hafez Assad, then president of Syria, launched what came to be known as the Hama Massacre.

Between 10,000 to 40,000 people were killed or disappeared in the government attack on the central Syrian city. It began on Feb. 2, 1982, and lasted for nearly a month, leaving the city in ruins.

The memory of the government assault and the monthlong siege on the city, which at the time was a stronghold of Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood, remains visceral in Syrian and Arab minds.

Now Islamist insurgents have captured the city, tearing down a poster of Hafez Assad’s son, President Bashar Assad, and swarming security and government offices — scenes unimaginable 40 years ago.

The moment carried great symbolism in Syria’s long-running civil war, which began 13 years ago but many say is rooted in Hama.

A dark history

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Hama, Syria's fourth-largest city, is known for its quaint waterwheels, a landmark attraction along the banks of the Orontes River.

In the early 1980s, the city's name became synonymous with killings.

It was the scene of Muslim Brotherhood-led anti-government attacks that targeted military officers, state institutions and ruling party offices. In February 1982, Hafez Assad ordered an assault on the city to quell the unrest.

In a matter of days, government warplanes destroyed most of the city, opening the way for ground troops.

Hafez Assad's brother, Rifaat, led the artillery unit that shelled the city and killed thousands, earning him the nickname the "Butcher of Hama."

Only this year, Rifaat Assad was indicted in Switzerland for war crimes and crimes against humanity in connection with Hama. An international arrest warrant was issued for him three years earlier.

The massacre created resentment that fanned the flames of another uprising against Hafez Assad's son years later.

The epicenter of protests

In 2011, Hama and surrounding towns became the epicenter of some of the biggest protests against Bashar Assad, which started in 2011 during a wave of Arab uprisings.

The protests forced government security forces to withdraw from the city briefly in June 2012, leaving the opposition in control and fueling a brief sense of liberation, in a place that had once been pounded by Syrian warplanes.

Residents at that time painted walls around the city in red, threw red paint on the waterwheels to symbolize the Hama massacre and tried to organize local administration. About 800,000 people lived there at the start of the uprising.

"Erhal ya Bashar," a protest chant that means "Come on, leave, Bashar" was popularized in the Hama protests.

But government forces returned in August of that year, with a brutal assault that caused mass casualties in the first 24 hours. The leader of the chants was later killed, his throat slit by government forces.

Aron Lund, a longtime Syria expert at Century International, a New York-based think tank, said Hama has obvious symbolic value because of the history of the massacre. He described it as a "huge event in Syrian history and really formative for the opposition and the Islamist opposition in particular."

The brutal crackdown is commemorated each year.

It was also formative for government forces, because many of the current military leaders were young at the time, Lund said.

"When 2011 rolled around, they all realized that, you know, we all remember, you all remember Hama. So there's no there's no compromising here," he said.

In a video message Thursday, Abu Mohammed al-Golani, the de facto leader of the Syrian insurgency, announced that fighters had reached Hama "to clean the wound that has bled for 40 years." One of the opposition fighters' first moves was to free prisoners from the city's central prison.

The city's strategic importance

Hama is a major intersection in Syria that links the country's center with the north as well as the east and the coast.

It is about 200 kilometers (125 miles) north of the capital, Damascus, Assad's seat of power. Hama province also borders the coastal province of Latakia, a main base of popular support for Assad.

The region is predominantly Sunni Muslim but also has a minority from the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam, to which Assad's family belongs.

Hama's fall would have been a massive development in its own right, Lund said. But coming after the fall of Syria's largest city, Aleppo last week, which gave government forces the time to prepare their defense lines, it "will absolutely encourage Assad's enemies and discourage his supporters."

Next stop for the insurgents is the central province of Homs, which analysts say would be a game-changer if it falls into rebel hands. Insurgent groups have already said they are advancing toward Homs.

Homs, about 40 kilometers (25 miles) south of Hama, is where one of Syria's two state-run oil refiner-

ies is located and is also gateway to Damascus. It connects the capital to the coast, where Assad has his base and his village of origin, and home to a Russian naval base.

"Should the rebels be able to seize Homs, which they now have a shot at doing after seizing Hama, then they could theoretically have grabbed" three of Syria's largest cities and severed the capital from the coast, said Lund.

Biden is considering preemptive pardons for officials and allies before Trump takes office

By ZEKE MILLER and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is weighing whether to issue sweeping pardons for officials and allies who the White House fears could be unjustly targeted by President-elect Donald Trump's administration, a preemptive move that would be a novel and risky use of the president's extraordinary constitutional power.

The deliberations so far are largely at the level of White House lawyers. But Biden himself has discussed the topic with some senior aides, according to two people familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity Thursday to discuss the sensitive subject. No decisions have been made, the people said, and it is possible Biden opts to do nothing at all.

Pardons are historically afforded to those accused of specific crimes — and usually those who have already been convicted of an offense — but Biden's team is considering issuing them for those who have not even been investigated, let alone charged. They fear that Trump and his allies, who have boasted of enemies lists and exacting "retribution," could launch investigations that would be reputationally and financially costly for their targets even if they don't result in prosecutions.

While the president's pardon power is absolute, Biden's use in this fashion would mark a significant expansion of how they are deployed, and some Biden aides fear it could lay the groundwork for an even more drastic usage by Trump. They also worry that issuing pardons would feed into claims by Trump and his allies that the individuals committed acts that necessitated immunity.

Recipients could include infectious-disease specialist Dr. Anthony Fauci, who was instrumental in combating the coronavirus pandemic and who has become a pariah to conservatives angry about mask mandates and vaccines. Others include witnesses in Trump's criminal or civil trials and Biden administration officials who have drawn the ire of the incoming president and his allies.

Some fearful former officials have reached out to the Biden White House preemptively seeking some sort of protection from the future Trump administration, one of the people said.

It follows Biden's decision to pardon his son Hunter — not just for his convictions on federal gun and tax violations, but for any potential federal offense committed over an 11-year period, as the president feared that Trump allies would seek to prosecute his son for other offenses. That could serve as a model for other pardons Biden might issue to those who could find themselves in legal jeopardy under Trump.

Biden is not the first to consider such pardons — Trump aides considered them for him and his supporters involved in his failed efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election that culminated in a violent riot at the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. But he could be the first to issue them since Trump's pardons never materialized before he left office nearly four years ago.

Gerald Ford granted a "full, free, and absolute pardon" in 1974 to his predecessor, Richard Nixon, over the Watergate scandal. He believed a potential trial would "cause prolonged and divisive debate over the propriety of exposing to further punishment and degradation a man who has already paid the unprecedented penalty of relinquishing the highest elective office of the United States," as written in the pardon proclamation.

Politico was first to report that Biden was studying the use of preemptive pardons.

On the campaign trail, Trump made no secret of his desire to seek revenge on those who prosecuted him or crossed him.

Trump has talked about “enemies from within” and circulated social media posts that call for the jailing of Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, former Vice President Mike Pence and Sens. Mitch McConnell and Chuck Schumer. He also zeroed in on former Rep. Liz Cheney, a conservative Republican who campaigned for Harris and helped investigate Jan. 6, and he promoted a social media post that suggested he wanted military tribunals for supposed treason.

Kash Patel, whom Trump has announced as his nominee to be director of the FBI, has listed dozens of former government officials he wanted to “come after.”

Richard Painter, a Trump critic who served as the top White House ethics lawyer under President George W. Bush, said he was reluctantly in support of having Biden issue sweeping pardons to people who could be targeted by Trump’s administration. He said he hoped that would “clean the slate” for the incoming president and encourage him to focus on governing, not on punishing his political allies.

“It’s not an ideal situation at all,” Painter said. “We have a whole lot of bad options confronting us at this point.”

While the Supreme Court this year ruled that the president enjoys broad immunity from prosecution for what could be considered official acts, his aides and allies enjoy no such shield. Some fear that Trump could use the promise of a blanket pardon to encourage his allies to take actions they might otherwise resist for fear of running afoul of the law.

“There could be blatant illegal conduct over the next four years, and he can go out and pardon his people before he leaves office,” Painter said. “But if he’s going to do that, he’s going to do that anyway regardless of what Biden does.”

More conventional pardons from Biden, such as those for sentencing disparities for people convicted of federal crimes, are expected before the end of the year, the White House said.

7.0 earthquake off Northern California prompts brief tsunami warning

By OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — A 7.0 magnitude earthquake shook a large area of Northern California on Thursday, knocking items off grocery store shelves, sending children scrambling under desks and prompting a brief tsunami warning for 5.3 million people along the U.S. West Coast.

The quake struck at 10:44 a.m. west of Ferndale, a small city in coastal Humboldt County, about 130 miles (209 km) from the Oregon border, the U.S. Geological Survey said.

It was felt as far south as San Francisco, some 270 miles (435 km) away, where residents described a rolling motion for several seconds. It was followed by multiple smaller aftershocks.

There were no immediate reports of major damage or injuries from the quake, which was the most powerful temblor to hit California since a magnitude 7.1 quake hit Ridgecrest in 2019.

The tsunami warning was in effect for roughly an hour. Issued shortly after Thursday’s quake struck, it covered nearly 500 miles (805 km) of coastline, from the edge of California’s Monterey Bay north into Oregon.

“It was a strong quake. Our building shook. We’re fine, but I have a mess to clean up right now,” said Julie Kreitzer, owner of Golden Gait Mercantile, a store packed with food, wares and souvenirs that is a main attraction in Ferndale.

“I have to go. I have to try and salvage something for the holidays because it’s going to be a tough year,” Kreitzer said before hanging up.

The region — known for its redwood forests, scenic mountains and the three-county Emerald Triangle’s legendary marijuana crop — was struck by a magnitude 6.4 quake in 2022 that left thousands of people without power and water. The northwest corner of California is the most seismically active part of the state because it’s where three tectonic plates meet, seismologist Lucy Jones said on the social media platform BlueSky.

Shortly after the quake, phones in Northern California buzzed with the tsunami warning from the National

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Weather Service that said: "A series of powerful waves and strong currents may impact coasts near you. You are in danger. Get away from coastal waters. Move to high ground or inland now. Keep away from the coast until local officials say it is safe to return."

Numerous cities urged people to evacuate to higher ground as a precaution.

In Santa Cruz, authorities cleared the main beach, taping off entrances with police tape. Aerial footage showed cars bumper-to-bumper heading to higher ground on California highways 1 and 92 in the Half Moon Bay area south of San Francisco.

"I thought my axles had fallen apart," said Valerie Starkey, a Del Norte County supervisor representing Crescent City, a town of fewer than 6,000 near the Oregon border. "That's what I was feeling ... 'My axles are broken now.' I did not realize it was an earthquake."

Cindy Vosburg, the executive director for the Crescent City-Del Norte County Chamber of Commerce, said she heard alarms sound just before shaking began, and the city's cultural center downtown started to creak.

"Just as it would start to subside, the building would roll again," Vosburg said.

White House spokesperson Jeremy Edwards said President Joe Biden was briefed on the earthquake and that FEMA officials are in touch with their state and local counterparts in California and Oregon.

Gov. Gavin Newsom said he has signed off on a state of emergency declaration to quickly move state resources to impacted areas along the coast. State officials were concerned about damages in the northern part of the state, Newsom said.

Crews in Eureka, the biggest city in the region, were assessing if there was any damage. Eureka Mayor Kim Bergel, who works at a middle school, said lights were swaying and everyone got under desks.

"The kids were so great and terrified. It seemed to go back and forth for quite a long time," she said. Some children asked, "Can I call my mom?"

The students were later sent home.

In nearby Arcata, students and faculty were urged to shelter in place at California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt.

Humboldt County Sheriff William Honsal said residents experienced cracks in their homes' foundations, as well as broken glass and windows, but nothing severe.

Honsal said he was in his office in the 75-year-old courthouse in downtown Eureka when he felt the quake. "We're used to it. It is known as 'earthquake country' up here," he said. "It wasn't a sharp jolt. It was a slow roller, but significant."

The San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District, known as BART, stopped traffic in all directions through the underwater tunnel between San Francisco and Oakland, and the San Francisco Zoo's visitors were evacuated.

This quake was a strike-slip type of temblor that shifts more horizontally and is less prone to cause tsunamis, unlike the more vertical types, said National Weather Service tsunami program manager Corina Allen in Washington state.

The California Geological Survey says the state's shores have been struck by more than 150 tsunamis since 1800, and while most were minor, some have been destructive and deadly.

On March 28, 1964, a tsunami triggered by a powerful earthquake in Alaska smashed into Crescent City hours later. Much of the business district was leveled and a dozen people were killed. More recently, a tsunami from a 2011 earthquake in Japan caused about \$100 million in damages along the California coast, much of it in Crescent City.

Gunman who shot 2 kindergartners at a California school wrote about attack targeting children

By TERRY CHEA and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

OROVILLE, Calif. (AP) — A gunman who critically wounded two kindergartners at a tiny religious school in Northern California was mentally ill and believed by targeting children he was carrying out "counter-

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measures" in response to America's involvement in Middle East violence, a sheriff said Thursday.

Glenn Litton used a "ruse" of pretending to enroll a fictitious grandson to gain entry to the Feather River School of Seventh-Day Adventists in Oroville, Butte County Sheriff Kory L. Honea said during a news conference.

Litton used a handgun to shoot two kindergarten boys, ages 5 and 6, who remained in critical condition Thursday, the sheriff said. Litton then used the weapon — a so-called ghost gun, which is difficult for investigators to trace — to kill himself just yards (meters) from the school's playground.

While Honea said Litton, 56, also had a lengthy criminal history — mostly theft and identity theft — authorities said they did not find any violent crimes on his record.

Honea said the man is believed to have targeted the Feather River School in Wednesday's attack, though it's unclear why. Litton had attended a school of Seventh-Day Adventists in another town as a child, the sheriff said, and he possibly had a relative who attended Feather River as a young child.

But in Litton's writings, the sheriff said, the suspect wrote about taking "counter-measures" against the school in response to America's involvement in violence in the Middle East.

"That's a motivation that was in his mind. How it was that he conflated what's going on in Palestine and Yemen with the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, I can't speculate. I'm not sure that we'll ever know that," Honea said.

He said Litton had similarly scheduled an appointment at another Seventh-Day Adventist school, set for Thursday.

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church is a Christian denomination in which members consider the Bible their only creed and believe that the second coming of Christ is near. The shooting occurred shortly after 1 p.m. Wednesday at the private K-8 school with fewer than three dozen students in Oroville, on the edge of the tiny community of Palermo, about 65 miles (105 kilometers) north of Sacramento.

Law enforcement officials have documented Litton's history of mental illness back to when he was a teenager, though Honea said investigators have not found a concrete diagnosis.

In recent years, Litton searched online for guns and explosives and wrote notes to himself to plan a non-specific mass incident, though Butte County District Attorney Michael L. Ramsey said they were "just ruminations." Litton was a convicted felon and therefore could not legally possess a firearm.

The sheriff said the 6-year-old suffered two gunshot wounds that caused internal injuries, while the 5-year-old was shot once.

"The fact that they are currently still with us is a miracle," Honea said of the children, adding they will likely face additional surgeries and "have a very long road ahead of them, in terms of recovery."

Honea said the gunman was dropped off by an Uber driver for the fake meeting with a school administrator.

Following the shooting, the gunman's body was found near the slide and other playground equipment on school grounds, which abut ranchland where cattle graze. A handgun was found nearby, Honea said.

The school was closed Thursday but sheriff's deputies walked around the campus behind shuttered gates and staff members carried classroom items out to their cars.

Shawn Webber, an Oroville city councilmember, said the region was reeling.

"When you see this on the news or nationally and it's like, those things don't happen here. Well, yesterday it happened here," he said Thursday. "It just absolutely violated the peace of our community."

A candlelight vigil is planned for Friday.

It was the the latest among dozens of school shootings around the U.S. in recent years, including especially deadly ones in Newtown, Connecticut, Parkland, Florida, and Uvalde, Texas. The shootings have set off fervent gun control debates and frayed the nerves of parents whose children have grown accustomed to doing active shooter drills in their classrooms.

But the shootings have done little to move the needle on national gun laws. Firearms were the leading cause of death among children in 2020 and 2021, according to KFF, a nonprofit that researches health care issues.

"We know that the close-knit Feather River community will be grieving for a long time, as will the rest

of our conference," said Laurie Trujillo, a spokesperson for the Northern California Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy bring Trump's DOGE to Capitol Hill

By LISA MASCARO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Billionaire Elon Musk and fellow entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy spent several hours Thursday swapping ideas with lawmakers about President-elect Donald Trump's DOGE initiative to dismantle parts of the federal government.

Meeting behind closed doors at the Capitol, Musk told the mostly Republican lawmakers they would be keeping a "naughty and nice" list of those who join in the budget slashing proposals and those who don't, according to lawmakers who attended.

"We're going to see a lot of change around here in Washington," said House Speaker Mike Johnson, as Musk, with his young son on his shoulders, breezed by and into the private meeting.

Trump tapped the two business titans to head his Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, a nongovernmental task force assigned to find ways to fire federal workers, cut programs and slash federal regulations — all part of what he calls his "Save America" agenda for a second term in the White House.

Washington has seen this before, with ambitious efforts to reduce the size and scope of the federal government that historically have run into resistance when the public is confronted with cuts to trusted programs that millions of Americans depend on for jobs, health care, military security and everyday needs.

But this time Trump is staffing his administration with battle-tested architects of sweeping proposals, some outlined in Project 2025, to severely reduce and reshape the government. Musk and Ramaswamy have said they plan to work alongside the White House's Office of Management and Budget, headed by Trump's nominee Russ Vought, a mastermind of past cuts.

"DOGE has a historic opportunity for structural reductions in the federal government," Musk and Ramaswamy wrote in an op-ed in The Wall Street Journal. "We are prepared for the onslaught."

Trump said Thursday that he would also name venture capitalist and former PayPal executive David Sacks to be the "White House A.I. & Crypto Czar" and lead the Presidential Council of Advisors for Science and Technology. Trump said in a social media post that Sacks would help "steer us away from Big Tech bias and censorship." Trump's transition team didn't say whether Sacks would be a government employee or a temporary government worker who would not be bound by the same ethics and disclosure rules.

Sacks visited Mar-a-Lago earlier Thursday, according to an investor who held an event at Trump's Florida club. The longtime conservative was key to introducing Vice President-elect JD Vance to donors, helping him prove he could raise money. Sacks hosted a fundraiser for Trump and Vance at his San Francisco home.

Musk and Ramaswamy faced a first test as they sat on a auditorium stage in the Capitol basement, as House and Senate lawmakers, almost exclusively Republicans, lined up at the microphones to share ideas for ways to address the nation's budget imbalances.

Rep. Virginia Foxx, R-N.C., the chair of the Education and Workforce Committee, brought up the Department of Education as a good place to cut. Rep. Derrick Van Orden, R-Wis., said to look at office space and how little of it is being used. Others talked about the need for workers to return to their offices.

Afterward, Johnson declined to say if Medicare, Social Security or other popular programs were off limits for cuts, describing this first meeting as a "brainstorming" session with more to come.

"They said everything has to be looked at," said Rep. Aaron Bean, R-Fla., who joined with Rep. Pete Sessions, R-Texas, in launching what they are calling the DOGE caucus in the House, with more than 50 Republicans and two Democratic members.

Musk and Ramaswamy appeared to be taking it all in, Musk at times even taking notes, lawmakers said — experiencing a day in the life of congressional leadership, as the meeting went on and on, with lawmakers lined up 20-deep for their chance to speak.

"It was just what I'd hoped for, where it was a question and answer session, so that members could

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come up, express their ideas, concerns, ask questions," said Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., who will chair a House Oversight subcommittee in the new year on DOGE.

To be sure, it wasn't the full Congress participating, as most Democrats did not join.

New York Democratic Rep. Tom Suozzi said when he heard Musk mention that he was open to hearing from Democrats, he dashed over to join toward the end of the session.

"Let's do some things to try and make government more efficient — without hurting people," Suozzi said.

Musk and Ramaswamy left lawmakers with the impression they would be back for more, holding regular meetings and starting a podcast or some other way to share information with Americans to gauge public support — or opposition — to the proposals.

While neither Musk nor Ramaswamy have much public service experience, they bring track records in private business — Musk's operations have vast government contracts — and enthusiasm for Trump's agenda, having campaigned alongside him in the final stretch of the election.

The world's richest man, Musk poured millions into a get-out-the-vote effort to help the former president return to the White House. He is known politically for having transformed the popular social media site formerly known as Twitter into X, a platform embraced by Trump's "Make America Great Again" enthusiasts.

Despite its name, the Department of Government Efficiency is neither a department nor part of the government, which frees Musk and Ramaswamy from having to go through the typical ethics and background checks required for federal employment. They said they will not be paid for their work.

One good-government group has said that DOGE, as a presidential advisory panel, should be expected to adhere to traditional practices of transparency, equal representation and public input — as happened with similar advisory entities from the Reagan to the Obama administrations.

The Federal Advisory Committee Act "is designed expressly for situations like this," wrote Lisa Gilbert and Robert Weissman, the co-chairs of Public Citizen, in a letter to the Trump transition team.

"If the government is going to turn to unelected and politically unaccountable persons to make recommendations as grand as \$2 trillion in budget cuts, it must ensure those recommendations come from a balanced and transparent process not rigged to benefit insiders."

The nation's \$6 trillion federal budget routinely runs a deficit, which this year ran \$1.8 trillion, a historic high, according to the Congressional Budget Office. It has not been balanced since the Clinton administration more than two decades ago.

Republicans generally blame what they see as exorbitant spending for the deficit, while Democrats point to tax cuts enacted under Republican presidents Trump and George W. Bush as the major driver.

Receipts last year as a percentage of gross domestic product came in just below the average for the past 50 years, while outlays were equal to 23.4% of GDP, compared to the 50-year average of 21.1%.

Some of the biggest increases in spending last year occurred with politically popular programs that lawmakers will be reticent to touch. For example, spending on Social Security benefits went up 8%, Medicare outlays increased 9%, spending on defense went up 7% and spending on veterans health care rose 14%, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Rep. Clay Higgins, R-La., said the significance of the meeting was that it was even taking place, "that there's honest dialogue between Congress and two, like, rock star administration guys."

Rep. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., said he would like to see Musk testify before the House Armed Services Committee on the "bloated defense budget."

"I'd like to see Elon recommend some cuts. Let's have him testify," Khanna said.

Stowaway who boarded New York-to-Paris flight claims she sought asylum in France

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A Russian woman with permanent U.S. residency who was returned to the United States after authorities said she sneaked on board a flight from New York to Paris made her first appearance in court Thursday, claiming she has been abused.

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Svetlana Dali, wearing jeans, seemed agitated as she spoke through a Russian interpreter to her attorney during a brief appearance before a Brooklyn magistrate judge.

Her lawyer, Michael Schneider, said she claims she was poisoned after arriving in Paris and then was returned to the United States despite requesting asylum there.

She also claimed through Schneider that her treatment at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn amounted to torture after she was placed in a "very cold" room where she felt sick and eventually lost consciousness.

"She believes if she's staying at the MDC, her life will be in danger," Schneider said.

When he told Magistrate Judge Robert M. Levy that she was requesting a spectrometer be used to test her blood and determine if she had been poisoned, the judge responded that he's "not sure" the device was in the jail's commissary.

She will be housed in the federal lockup a second night after lawyers agreed to postpone a bail hearing until Friday so enough information could be gathered to create a bail package.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Brooke Theodora said the government's chief concern was that Dali was a risk of flight.

She did not protest when Schneider said the single federal stowaway charge she faced was a "minor charge" comparable to being arrested for jumping a turnstyle to enter the city's subway system.

A criminal complaint filed in Brooklyn federal court said Dali admitted to an FBI agent who interviewed her when she returned to Kennedy International Airport on Wednesday that she flew to Paris as a stowaway on a Delta Air Lines flight on Nov. 26.

The complaint said airport surveillance footage showed that she was initially rebuffed by a Transportation Security Administration official because she lacked a boarding pass when she first tried to enter Kennedy's Terminal 4.

Five minutes later, she successfully accessed the security screening machines without a boarding pass by entering a special lane for airline employees at the same time that a large Air Europa flight crew walked through, the complaint said.

It said she got onto the Delta flight without presenting a boarding pass as airline agents who were helping other ticketed passengers board failed to stop her or ask her to present a boarding pass.

Once on the flight but before it landed at Charles de Gaulle Airport, Delta employees realized she was not authorized to be on the plane and asked for her boarding pass, which she could not provide, the complaint said.

When the plane landed in Paris early on Nov. 27, French law enforcement met her at the gate and detained her before she entered customs, it said.

During her interview with U.S. law enforcement, Dali was shown images from airport security showing her bypassing TSA officials and Delta employees.

The complaint said she confirmed the images were of her and "also stated that she knew her conduct was illegal."

In a statement, Delta Air Lines thanked French and U.S. authorities for their assistance and said a review had concluded that its security infrastructure was "sound and that deviation from standard procedures is the root cause of this event."

It added: "We are thoroughly addressing this matter and will continue to work closely with our regulators, law enforcement and other relevant stakeholders. Nothing is of greater importance than safety and security."

House rejects Democratic efforts to force release of Matt Gaetz ethics report

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House shut down Democrats' efforts Thursday to release the long-awaited ethics report into former Rep. Matt Gaetz, pushing the fate of any resolution to the yearslong investigation

of sexual misconduct allegations into further uncertainty.

The nearly party-line votes came after Democrats had been pressing for the findings to be published even though the Florida Republican left Congress and withdrew as President-elect Donald Trump's nominee for attorney general. Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Calif., was the sole Republican to support the effort.

Most Republicans have argued that any congressional probe into Gaetz ended when he resigned from the House. Speaker Mike Johnson also requested that the committee not publish its report, saying it would be a terrible precedent to set.

While ethics reports have previously been released after a member's resignation, it is extremely rare.

Shortly before the votes took place, Rep. Sean Casten, D-Ill., who introduced one of the bills to force the release, said that if Republicans reject the release, they will have "succeeded in sweeping credible allegations of sexual misconduct under the rug." Gaetz has repeatedly denied the claims.

Earlier Thursday, the Ethics panel met to discuss the Gaetz report but made no decision, saying in a short statement that the matter is still being discussed. It's unclear now whether the document will ever see the light of day as lawmakers only have a few weeks left before a new session of Congress begins.

It's the culmination of weeks of pressure on the Ethics committee's five Republicans and five Democrats who mostly work in secret as they investigate allegations of misconduct against lawmakers.

The status of the Gaetz investigation became an open question last month when he abruptly resigned from Congress after Trump's announcement that he wanted his ally in the Cabinet. It is standard practice for the committee to end investigations when members of Congress depart, but the circumstances surrounding Gaetz were unusual, given his potential role in the new administration.

Rep. Michael Guest, R-Miss., the committee chairman, said Wednesday that there is no longer the same urgency to release the report given that Gaetz has left Congress and stepped aside as Trump's choice to head the Justice Department.

"I've been steadfast about that. He's no longer a member. He is no longer going to be confirmed by the Senate because he withdrew his nomination to be the attorney general," Guest said.

The Gaetz report has also caused tensions between lawmakers on the bipartisan committee. Pennsylvania Rep. Susan Wild, the top Democrat on the panel, publicly admonished Guest last month for mischaracterizing a previous meeting to the press.

Gaetz has denied any wrongdoing and said last year that the Justice Department's separate investigation against him into sex trafficking allegations involving underage girls ended without federal charges.

His onetime political ally Joel Greenberg, a fellow Republican who served as the tax collector in Florida's Seminole County, admitted as part of a plea deal with prosecutors in 2021 that he paid women and an underage girl to have sex with him and other men. The men were not identified in court documents when he pleaded guilty. Greenberg was sentenced in late 2022 to 11 years in prison.

Hegseth faces senators' concerns not only about his behavior but also his views on women in combat

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, LISA MASCARO and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Pete Hegseth has spent the week on Capitol Hill trying to reassure Republican senators that he is fit to lead President-elect Donald Trump's Department of Defense in the wake of high-profile allegations about excessive drinking and sexual assault.

But senators in both parties have also expressed concern about another issue — Hegseth's frequent comments that women should not serve in frontline military combat jobs.

As the former Army National Guard major and combat veteran fights to salvage his Cabinet nomination, meeting with senators for a fourth day Thursday with promises not to drink on the job and assurances he never engaged in sexual misconduct, his professional views on women troops have also come under scrutiny. He said as recently as last month that women "straight up" should not serve in combat roles.

North Dakota Sen. Kevin Cramer said Wednesday that he confronted Hegseth about the issue when they spoke one-on-one.

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"I said to him, just so you know, Joni Ernst and Tammy Duckworth deserve a great deal of respect," Cramer said, referring to two female senators who sit on the Senate Armed Services Committee. Both Ernst, R-Iowa, and Duckworth, D-Ill., are combat veterans who served in the Iraq war, and Duckworth lost both legs when a Blackhawk helicopter she was piloting was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade.

Ernst, a former Army National Guard member and a retired lieutenant colonel who spent more than two decades in the service, was circumspect after her own meeting with Hegseth, saying only that they had a "frank and thorough conversation." She has spoken openly about surviving sexual assault while in college and worked to ensure a safe environment for women in uniform.

The Iowa senator demurred again Thursday on whether she will support Hegseth's nomination, praising his service but telling Fox News that a "very thorough vetting" is needed.

Along with the reports of his previous behavior, the bipartisan concerns about Hegseth's comments on women have put his nomination in some peril, contributing to general uncertainty about whether his nomination will make it to a hearing next month. While Hegseth said that Trump is "behind us all the way," and he's put in a full week's work explaining himself to senators, some Republicans are not yet committing their support.

South Dakota Sen. Mike Rounds said after meeting with Hegseth on Thursday that he "went a long way today" in getting his full support, but "I want him to be able to answer in front of everybody else the questions that are there and to do a good job on it."

Rounds said the issue of women in combat didn't come up in his meeting but that Hegseth can explain himself in a hearing.

"Women are integrated into our armed forces today, and they do a great job," Rounds said.

The role of women in the military is another entry in the far-right's efforts to return the armed forces back to an earlier era, something Hegseth has embraced with Trump's approach to end "woke" programs that foster diversity, equity and inclusion in the ranks and fire generals who reflect those values.

Military and defense leaders, however, have argued that it would be fundamentally wrong to eliminate half the population from critical combat posts, and they have flatly denied that standards were lowered to allow women to qualify.

In remarks Wednesday, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin touted the service of women, including in his own combat units when he was a commander in Iraq.

"If I get a little fired up about this, it's just because this isn't 1950. It isn't 1948. It is 2024," Austin said.

Hegseth has so far pushed back questions about his views.

"We have amazing women who serve our military," Hegseth said Tuesday, "amazing women who serve in our military."

Pressed if they should serve in combat, Hegseth said they already do.

But he said as recently as last month that women "straight up" should not serve in combat. It "hasn't made us more lethal. Has made fighting more complicated," he said in a podcast before he was nominated by Trump. In his own writings, he has expanded on views of a more masculine-focused military.

As he tries to shore up votes in his own party, Hegseth has yet to meet with Duckworth or any of the other Democrats on the committee. Duckworth, a Democrat and Purple Heart recipient, also rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel before retiring after 23 years in the Reserve forces. She later served as an assistant secretary at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

North Dakota Sen. Cramer said he told Hegseth that his confirmation hearing "won't be pleasant" as Democrats, in particular, grill him on his views. As members of the Armed Services panel, both Ernst and Duckworth will have a chance to ask him questions.

Trump, for now, appears to be standing aside as Hegseth fights to preserve his nomination, even as suggestions float about a possible replacement pick, including former Trump rival Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, to lead the Pentagon.

Trump's closest allies in the Senate expressed cautious optimism that Hegseth will not be replaced — immediately at least. "It's not in trouble until it's over," said Sen. Markwayne Mullin, R-Okla. "Right now we've got to move forward."

"We're going to push as long as he's wanting to be there, and as long as the president still wants him in place, we're going to push and do all we can to get him confirmed," Mullin said.

At the same time, The Heritage Foundation, the conservative think tank behind Project 2025, said it would be spending \$1 million to put pressure on senators unwilling to support Hegseth, the group's president told The Associated Press on Thursday.

"The establishment is trying to take his scalp," said Kevin Roberts, president of The Heritage Foundation after an event in Mar-a-Lago. "He would be a wonderful secretary of defense."

About 17.5% of the more than 1.3 million active-duty service members are women, a total that has grown steadily over the past two decades. They have served in combat in a wide array of military jobs, including as pilots and intelligence officers for years.

The Pentagon formally opened all combat jobs to women in 2015, including frontline infantry and armor posts, and since then thousands of women have been in jobs that until that time were male-only.

As of this year, nearly 4,800 women are serving in Army infantry, armor and artillery job, more than 150 have completed the Army Ranger course and a small number have qualified for more elite special operations units, including as Army Green Berets.

Police test DNA and fingerprints on discarded bottle as they hunt for UnitedHealthcare CEO's killer

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

The masked gunman who killed the leader of one of the largest U.S. health insurance companies in front of midtown Manhattan surveillance cameras remained at large Thursday as the nation's largest police department hunted for him.

UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, 50, died in the dawn ambush Wednesday. Thompson was walking to the company's annual investor conference at a Hilton in Midtown, blocks from tourist draws like Radio City Music Hall and the Museum of Modern Art.

A law enforcement official said the shooter had used ammunition with the words "deny," "defend" and "depose" written on it in permanent marker. The official was not authorized to publicly discuss details of the ongoing investigation and spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity.

The words on the ammunition may have been a reference to strategies insurance companies use to try to avoid paying claims.

Police also said they found a water bottle and protein bar wrapper from a trash can near the scene of the ambush and think the suspect bought them from a Starbucks minutes before the shooting. The items were being tested by the city's medical examiner.

What happened?

Police said Thompson was heading to the company's annual investor conference at the New York Hilton Midtown around 6:45 a.m. when a person walked up behind him and shot him.

Thompson was alone and had no bodyguards, police said.

Officers found him on the ground with wounds to his back and right calf, according to Joseph Kenny, the NYPD chief of detectives. The CEO was pronounced dead at a nearby hospital at 7:12 a.m.

What do we know about the shooter?

Kenny said the shooter wore a black face mask, black-and-white sneakers and a distinctive gray backpack.

He arrived outside the hotel about five minutes before Thompson did, then waited and ignored other pedestrians before he approached Thompson from behind.

After the assailant began to fire, his 9 mm pistol jammed but he quickly fixed it and kept firing, Kenny said.

"From watching the video, it does seem that he's proficient in the use of firearms as he was able to clear the malfunctions pretty quickly," Kenny said.

The shooter ran into an alleyway near the hotel and later got on the e-bike that he took into Central Park.

Police initially said the shooter rode into Central Park on a bicycle from the city's bike-share program, CitiBike. But a spokesperson for the program's operator, Lyft, said police officials informed the company

Wednesday afternoon that the bike was not from the CitiBike fleet.

Kenny said police found a cellphone in the alleyway, but it was unclear if it belonged to the shooter.

What do we know about the search?

As of Thursday evening, police had released new photos taken inside the HI New York City hostel on Manhattan's Upper West Side of a person they said was wanted for questioning in connection with the shooting.

A hostel employee said police had visited but declined to more information. Spokesperson Danielle Brumfitt said the hostel is cooperating with the NYPD and can't comment on the investigation.

The hunt brought officers to another hostel in the neighborhood, Kama Central Park, on Thursday morning, according to the employee who said two detectives arrived at 7 a.m. and asked if staff recognized a photo of the shooter. They didn't, the employee said.

Who was Brian Thompson?

Thompson was the chief executive of UnitedHealthcare, the insurance wing of parent company UnitedHealth Group Inc.

He had worked at the Minnetonka, Minnesota-based company for two decades and led its insurance division since 2021. He was one of the company's highest-paid executives, with a \$10.2 million annual compensation package.

Thompson kept a low profile, with UnitedHealth Group Inc.'s CEO Andrew Witty taking on a more public-facing role that included testifying before Congress.

Thompson started his career as a certified public accountant and graduated from the University of Iowa. He lived in the Minneapolis suburb of Maple Grove and was the married father of two sons in high school.

His wife, Paulette Thompson, told NBC News that her husband said some people had been threatening him. She did not have details, but suggested they may have involved issues with insurance coverage.

Maple Grove Police Chief Eric Werner said his department had not received any reports of threats against the executive.

NASA's stuck astronauts hit 6 months in space. Just 2 more to go

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Known across the globe as the stuck astronauts, Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams hit the six-month mark in space Thursday with two more to go.

The pair rocketed into orbit on June 5, the first to ride Boeing's new Starliner crew capsule on what was supposed to be a weeklong test flight. They arrived at the International Space Station the next day, only after overcoming a cascade of thruster failures and helium leaks. NASA deemed the capsule too risky for a return flight, so it will be February before their long and trying mission comes to a close.

While NASA managers bristle at calling them stuck or stranded, the two retired Navy captains shrug off the description of their plight. They insist they're fine and accepting of their fate. Wilmore views it as a detour of sorts: "We're just on a different path."

"I like everything about being up here," Williams told students Wednesday from an elementary school named for her in Needham, Massachusetts, her hometown. "Just living in space is super fun."

Both astronauts have lived up there before so they quickly became full-fledged members of the crew, helping with science experiments and chores like fixing a broken toilet, vacuuming the air vents and watering the plants. Williams took over as station commander in September.

"Mindset does go a long way," Wilmore said in response to a question from Nashville first-graders in October. He's from Mount Juliet, Tennessee. "I don't look at these situations in life as being downers."

Boeing flew its Starliner capsule home empty in September, and NASA moved Wilmore and Williams to a SpaceX flight not due back until late February. Two other astronauts were bumped to make room and to keep to a six-month schedule for crew rotations.

Like other station crews, Wilmore and Williams trained for spacewalks and any unexpected situations that might arise.

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"When the crews go up, they know they could be there for up to a year," said NASA Associate Administrator Jim Free.

NASA astronaut Frank Rubio found that out the hard way when the Russian Space Agency had to rush up a replacement capsule for him and two cosmonauts in 2023, pushing their six-month mission to just past a year.

Boeing said this week that input from Wilmore and Williams has been "invaluable" in the ongoing inquiry of what went wrong. The company said in a statement that it is preparing for Starliner's next flight but declined comment on when it might launch again.

NASA also has high praise for the pair.

"Whether it was luck or whether it was selection, they were great folks to have for this mission," NASA's chief health and medical officer, Dr. JD Polk, said during an interview with The Associated Press.

On top of everything else, Williams, 59, has had to deal with "rumors," as she calls them, of serious weight loss. She insists her weight is the same as it was on launch day, which Polk confirms.

During Wednesday's student chat, Williams said she didn't have much of an appetite when she first arrived in space. But now she's "super hungry" and eating three meals a day plus snacks, while logging the required two hours of daily exercise.

Williams, a distance runner, uses the space station treadmill to support races in her home state. She competed in Cape Cod's 7-mile Falmouth Road Race in August. She ran the 2007 Boston Marathon up there as well.

She has a New England Patriots shirt with her for game days, as well as a Red Sox spring training shirt.

"Hopefully I'll be home before that happens -- but you never know," she said in November. Husband Michael Williams, a retired federal marshal and former Navy aviator, is caring for their dogs back home in Houston.

As for Wilmore, 61, he's missing his younger daughter's senior year in high school and his older daughter's theater productions in college.

"We can't deny that being unexpectedly separated, especially during the holidays when the entire family gets together, brings increased yearnings to share the time and events together," his wife, Deanna Wilmore, told the AP in a text this week. Her husband "has it worse than us" since he's confined to the space station and can only connect via video for short periods.

"We are certainly looking forward to February!!" she wrote.

US judge rejects Boeing's plea deal in a conspiracy case stemming from fatal plane crashes

By DAVID KOENIG Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — A federal judge on Thursday rejected a deal that would have let Boeing plead guilty to a felony conspiracy charge and pay a fine for misleading U.S. regulators about the 737 Max jetliner before two of the planes crashed, killing 346 people.

U.S. District Judge Reed O'Connor in Texas said that diversity, inclusion and equity or DEI policies in the government and at Boeing could result in race being a factor in picking an official to oversee Boeing's compliance with the agreement.

The ruling creates uncertainty around criminal prosecution of the aerospace giant in connection with the development of its bestselling airline plane.

The judge gave Boeing and the Justice Department 30 days to tell him how they plan to proceed. They could negotiate a new plea agreement, or prosecutors could move to put the company on trial.

The Justice Department said it was reviewing the ruling. Boeing did not comment immediately.

Paul Cassell, an attorney for families of passengers who died in the crashes, called the decision an important victory for the rights of crime victims.

"No longer can federal prosecutors and high-powered defense attorney craft backroom deals and just expect judges to approve them," Cassell said. "Judge O'Connor has recognized that this was a cozy deal

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between the government and Boeing that failed to focus on the overriding concerns -- holding Boeing accountable for its deadly crime and ensuring that nothing like this happens again in the future."

Many relatives of the passengers who died in the crashes, which took place off the coast of Indonesia and in Ethiopia less than five months apart in 2018 and 2019, have spent years pushing for a public trial, the prosecution of former company officials, and more severe financial punishment for Boeing.

The deal the judge rejected was reached in July and would have let Boeing plead guilty to defrauding regulators who approved pilot-training requirements for the 737 Max nearly a decade ago. Prosecutors said they did not have evidence to argue that Boeing's deception played a role in the crashes.

In his ruling, O'Connor focused on part of the agreement that called for an independent monitor to oversee Boeing's steps to prevent violation of anti-fraud laws during three years of probation.

O'Connor expressed particular concern that the agreement "requires the parties to consider race when hiring the independent monitor ... 'in keeping with the (Justice) Department's commitment to diversity and inclusion.'"

O'Connor, a conservative appointed to the bench by President George W. Bush, questioned Justice Department and Boeing lawyers in October about the role of DEI in selection of the monitor. Department lawyers said selection would be open to all qualified candidates and based on merit.

The judge wrote in Thursday's ruling that he was "not convinced ... the Government will not choose a monitor without race-based considerations."

"In a case of this magnitude, it is in the utmost interest of justice that the public is confident this monitor selection is done based solely on competency. The parties' DEI efforts only serve to undermine this confidence in the government and Boeing's ethics and anti-fraud efforts," he wrote.

O'Connor also objected that the plea deal called for the government to pick the monitor and for the appointee to report to the Justice Department, not the court. The judge also noted that Boeing would have been able to veto one of six candidates chosen by the government.

Todd Haugh, a business law and ethics expert at Indiana University, could not recall any previous corporate plea deals that were rejected over DEI. He said the larger issue was how the deal took sentencing power away from the court.

"That is a legitimate argument from which to reject a plea agreement, but this particular judge has really stood on this DEI issue," Haugh said. "It comes through loud and clear in the order."

The ruling leaves prosecutors in a bind because they can't simply ignore a government DEI policy that goes back to 2018, he said.

Prosecutors also must weigh the risks and uncertain outcome before pushing for a trial.

Boeing negotiated the plea deal only after the Justice Department determined this year that Boeing violated a 2021 agreement that had protected it against criminal prosecution on the same fraud-conspiracy charge.

Boeing lawyers have said that if the plea deal was rejected, the company would challenge the finding that it violated the earlier agreement. Without the finding, the government has no case.

The judge helped Boeing's position on Thursday, writing that it was not clear what the company did to violate the 2021 deal.

The Justice Department accused Boeing of defrauding Federal Aviation Administration regulators who approved pilot-training requirements for the 737 Max.

Acting on Boeing's incomplete disclosures, the FAA approved minimal, computer-based training instead of more intensive training in flight simulators. Simulator training would have increased the cost for airlines to operate the Max and might have pushed some to buy planes from rival Airbus instead.

When the Justice Department announced in 2021 that it had reached a settlement and would not prosecute Boeing for fraud, families of the victims were outraged. Judge O'Connor ruled last year that the Justice Department broke a victims-rights law by not telling relatives that it was negotiating with Boeing, but said he had no power to overturn the deal.

The 2021 deferred-prosecution agreement was due to expire in January, and it was widely expected

that prosecutors would seek to permanently drop the matter. Just days before that, however, a door plug blew off a 737 Max during an Alaska Airlines flight over Oregon.

That incident renewed concerns about manufacturing quality and safety at Boeing, and put the company under intense scrutiny by regulators and lawmakers.

The case is just one of many challenges facing Boeing, which has lost more than \$23 billion since 2019 and fallen behind Airbus in selling and delivering new planes.

The company went through a strike by factory workers that shut down most airplane production for seven weeks this fall, and announced that it will lay off 10% of its workers, about 17,000 people. Its shares have plunged about 40% in less than a year.

NASA pushes back astronaut flights to the moon again

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — NASA announced more delays Thursday in sending astronauts back to the moon more than 50 years after Apollo.

Administrator Bill Nelson said the next mission in the Artemis program -- flying four astronauts around the moon and back -- is now targeted for April 2026. It had been on the books for September 2025, after slipping from this year.

The investigation into heat shield damage from the capsule's initial test flight two years ago took time, officials said, and other spacecraft improvements are still needed.

This bumps the third Artemis mission — a moon landing by two other astronauts — to at least 2027. NASA had been aiming for 2026.

NASA's Artemis program, a follow-up to the Apollo moonshots of the late 1960s and early 1970s, has completed only one mission. An empty Orion capsule circled the moon in 2022 after blasting off on NASA's new Space Launch System rocket.

Although the launch and lunar laps went well, the capsule returned with an excessively charred and eroded bottom heat shield, damaged from the heat of reentry. It took until recently for engineers to pinpoint the cause and come up with a plan.

NASA will use the Orion capsule with its original heat shield for the next flight with four astronauts, according to Nelson, but make changes to the reentry path at flight's end. To rip off and replace the heat shield would have meant at least a full year's delay and stalled the moon landing even further, officials said.

During the flight test, NASA had the capsule dip in and out of the atmosphere during reentry, and gases built up in the heat shield's outer layer, officials said. That resulted in cracking and uneven shedding of the outer material.

The commander of the lunar fly-around, astronaut Reid Wiseman, took part in Thursday's news conference at NASA headquarters in Washington. His crew includes NASA astronauts Victor Glover and Christina Koch and Canadian astronaut Jeremy Hansen.

"Delays are agonizing and slowing down is agonizing and it's not what we like to do," Wiseman said. But he said he and his crew wanted the heat shield damage from the first flight to be fully understood, regardless of how long it took. Now they can focus with this "large decision behind us."

Twenty-four astronauts flew to the moon during NASA's vaulted Apollo program, with 12 landing on it. The final bootprints in the lunar dust were made during Apollo 17 in December 1972.

Nelson said the revised schedule should still have the United States getting astronauts back on the lunar surface before China, which has indicated 2030 for a crew moon landing.

The space agency has put all the Artemis contractors, including Elon Musk's SpaceX, on notice to "double-down" to meet the schedule deadlines, according to Nelson. SpaceX's mega rocket Starship — making test flights from Texas with increasing frequency — is how astronauts will get from the Orion capsule in lunar orbit down to the surface on the first two Artemis moon landings.

Nelson said he's already called Jared Isaacman, the SpaceX-flying billionaire nominated this week by Trump to lead NASA, and invited him to NASA headquarters in Washington.

Apex the \$45M stegosaurus is on display in New York. Here's what scientists hope to learn about it

NEW YORK (AP) — The most expensive dinosaur fossil ever discovered will be on view in New York starting this weekend, American Museum of Natural History officials announced Wednesday.

The giant stegosaurus fossil, dubbed "Apex," is 11 feet (3.3 meters) tall and 27 feet (8.2 meters) nose to tail. The display will start in a giant atrium at the museum's entrance before being moved to the museum's existing fossil halls next year.

The museum also confirmed the identity of the philanthropist who purchased Apex. Billionaire hedge fund manager and longtime museum donor Ken Griffin bought it at an auction in July for \$45 million, the most ever paid for dinosaur remains. Sean Decatur, president of the American Museum of Natural History, said that Griffin approved a long-term loan of Apex, as well as allowing scientists to take samples from the fossil for analysis.

"This partnership allows Apex to have pride of place at a museum world-renowned for its dinosaur collection and for its longstanding leadership in paleontology and, even more exciting, enables us to pursue specialized Stegosaurus research centered around this extraordinary and scientifically important specimen," Decatur said in a statement Wednesday.

Of the more than 80 stegosauri made available to scientific institutions, very few are substantially complete, the statement said. Apex is the most complete specimen ever found, Decatur said. With about 80% of its 320 bones preserved, it is miraculous for creature that has been dead for 150 million years. The specimen is also prized by scientists because it is estimated to have died at a relatively old age, and it could reveal insights into stegosaurus metabolism and bone growth.

Scientists will make CT scans of the internal structures of the dinosaur's skull and analyze a small sample extracted from one of its giant thigh bones, the statement said.

"As exciting as it is to have this dinosaur on display, it is even more exciting to have the opportunity to study it and make important scientific data available for research," said Roger Benson, who curates the American Museum of Natural History's fossil amphibians, reptiles, birds and plants.

The museum's paleontologists have a long record of breaking ground in dinosaur research, including identifying the first dinosaur eggs and early evidence of dinosaur feathers, the statement said.

Commercial paleontologist Jason Cooper discovered Apex on his land near Dinosaur, Colorado, on the Utah border near Dinosaur National Monument.

Griffin's successful \$44.6 million bid for Apex over the summer set a record for dinosaur remains, beating out the \$31.8 million paid for "Stan," the remains of a Tyrannosaurus rex sold in 2020. Like Apex, the Stan fossils were purchased by a private individual with plans to make it available to the public. The T. rex has been slated to be on display in Abu Dhabi, in United Arab Emirates, at a museum that opens in late 2025.

The Latest: Police search for man who killed UnitedHealthcare CEO, new photos of suspect released

By The Associated Press undefined

The masked gunman who stalked and killed UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson outside a Manhattan hotel used ammunition emblazoned with the words "deny," "defend" and "depose," a law enforcement official said Thursday.

The gunman is still at large and a manhunt is underway.

Here's the latest:

Water bottle and protein bar wrapper may hold clues to the shooter's identity

Just minutes before the shooting, the suspect was seen on surveillance footage purchasing the two items from a nearby Starbucks. Both the water bottle and protein bar wrapper were later recovered from a trash can in the vicinity of the killing, according to a police spokesperson.

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They've been sent to the city's medical examiner for expedited fingerprint testing. Tips about the shooting, many unfounded, are pouring in through a police hotline. As the suspect remained at large Thursday afternoon, New York police were sorting through a growing number of leads coming in through a public hotline.

Many have been unfounded, including a tip from a commuter who claimed to have spotted the shooter on a Long Island Rail Road train Wednesday evening. Police searched the train, but found no sign of the gunman.

Members of the public have also provided police with several different names of people who bear a resemblance to the gunman — though they have yet to confirm the shooter's identity.

NYPD spokesperson Carlos Nieves urged anyone with information to contact the department "even if it seems trivial."

"We ask you to call the tip line because that little piece of information could be the missing piece of the puzzle that ties everything together," he said.

Anger and vitriol against health insurers filled social media in the wake of Thompson's killing. Users' reactions — and in many cases jokes — populated comment sections teeming with frustration toward health insurers broadly and UnitedHealthcare in particular.

"I would be happy to help look for the shooter but vision isn't covered under my healthcare plan," one comment read on Instagram.

"Thoughts and prior authorizations!" wrote another user.

Police searched Upper West Side hostel seen in new images

Images released by police of a person they say is wanted for questioning in connection with the shooting match the lobby of the HI New York City hostel on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Both feature a black-and-white checkered floor and a distinctive bench in the shape of a semicircle.

Matheus Taranto, a guest at the hostel who's visiting from Brazil, says he saw police at the lodging Wednesday evening.

He said an officer wouldn't let him access a bathroom where he wanted to brush his teeth. "I asked why, he was like, no, nothing happened," said Taranto, 24.

He didn't connect the dots with the shooting until later.

Police in Minnesota say they believe bomb threat against Thompson's home was a hoax

In Minnesota, police in the Minneapolis suburb of Maple Grove, where Thompson lived, said Thursday they believe a bomb threat on Wednesday night was a hoax.

Maple Grove police put out a statement Thursday saying a "suspected swatting investigation" was underway. The department said it received a report of a bomb threat directed at two addresses around 7 p.m. CT Wednesday. The Minneapolis Bomb Squad and the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office assisted, but investigators found no suspicious devices or other items.

"The case is considered an active investigation, while the incident appears to be a hoax. No further comments will be made at this time," the police statement said.

Police reports provided to The Associated Press by the department show that officers made contact with family members at one of the homes and were told they had seen nothing suspicious and had received no direct threats.

In Minnesota, authorities investigate reported bomb threat against Brian Thompson's home

Back in Thompson's home state of Minnesota, authorities were investigating a bomb threat that reportedly was made against his home Wednesday night, after his death. It was first reported by TMZ.

City Prosecutor Andrew Draper confirmed to The Associated Press via email Thursday that he received an email Wednesday night "regarding a bomb threat. I reported it to the Maple Grove Police Department and do not have any additional information."

Maple Grove police officials did not immediately respond to requests for details Thursday.

Local ATF spokesperson Ashlee Sherrill said: "ATF was made aware of the incident in Maple Grove last night, but no ATF resources were deployed. We are unable to confirm any further details."

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A local FBI spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for information on the FBI's involvement in the investigation.

Words on ammunition were written in marker, AP source says

The words emblazoned on the ammunition used in the shooting – “deny,” “defend” and “depose” – were written in permanent marker, according to a law enforcement official.

The official wasn't authorized to publicly discuss details of the ongoing investigation and spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity.

— Jake Offenhartz

What's known about the search

As of Thursday morning, police were still searching for the shooter.

They released new photos of a person they said is wanted for questioning in connection with the shooting. The images match the lobby of the HI New York City hostel on Manhattan's Upper West Side, including its black-and-white checkered floor and a distinctive bench in the shape of a semi-circle.

An employee at the hostel said police had visited but declined to provide further information. Danielle Brumfitt, a spokesperson for the lodging, said in an emailed statement that they are cooperating with the NYPD but can't comment due to the active investigation.

According to the official who spoke to AP about the ammunition messaging, investigators are running DNA and fingerprint analysis on items found near the shooting, including a water bottle, that they believe the suspect may have discarded. Additionally, they're looking into whether the suspect had pre-positioned a bike as part of an escape plan.

What is the criticism of insurers?

Doctors and patients have become particularly frustrated with prior authorizations, which are requirements that an insurer approve surgery or care before it happens.

UnitedHealthcare was named in an October report detailing how the insurer's prior authorization denial rate for some Medicare Advantage patients has surged in recent years. The report from the U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations also named rivals Humana and CVS.

Insurers say tactics like prior authorization are needed to limit unnecessary care and help control spiraling medical costs.

Frustrations extend beyond the coverage of care. Expensive breakthrough medications to slow Alzheimer's disease or help with obesity are frequently not covered or have coverage limits.

How do Americans feel about insurers?

In the U.S. health care system, patients get coverage through a mix of private insurers such as UnitedHealthcare and government-funded programs such as Medicaid and Medicare. That can prove particularly frustrating for doctors and patients because coverage often varies by insurer.

Polls reflect those frustrations with the U.S. health care system in general and insurance companies in particular.

About two-thirds of Americans said health insurance companies deserve “a lot of blame” for high health care costs, according to a KFF poll conducted in February.

Thompson's wife said her husband had received previous threats

Thompson's wife, Paulette Thompson, told NBC News that he told her “there were some people that had been threatening him.” She didn't have details but suggested the threats may have involved issues with insurance coverage.

Eric Werner, the police chief in the Minneapolis suburb where Thompson lived, said his department had not received any reports of threats against the executive.

Words on ammo in CEO shooting echo common phrase on insurer tactics: Delay, deny, defend

A message left at the scene of an insurance executive's fatal shooting — “deny,” “defend” and “depose” — echoes a phrase commonly used to describe insurer tactics to avoid paying claims.

The three words were emblazoned on the ammunition a masked gunman used to kill UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, a law enforcement official told The Associated Press on Thursday. They're similar to the phrase “delay, deny, defend” — the way some attorneys describe how insurers deny services and

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payment, and the title of a 2010 book that was highly critical of the industry.

Police haven't officially commented on the wording or any connection between them and the common phrase. But Thompson's shooting and the messages on the ammunition have sparked outrage on social media and elsewhere, reflecting a deepening frustration Americans have over the cost and complexity of getting care.

□ Read more about the messaging left behind by the shooter

New photos released by the NYPD

The New York Police Department released photos Thursday morning, asking for the public's assistance in identifying the individual pictured. Police say the person is wanted for questioning in connection with the shooting of the UnitedHealthcare CEO.

UnitedHealthcare's history of claim denials

A Senate panel has been investigating how frequently three major insurers, including UnitedHealthcare, deny care to patients who are enrolled in Medicare Advantage plans. It has also investigated the use of artificial intelligence in deny those claims.

Medicare Advantage is the private version of Medicare, which provides health insurance to millions of older Americans.

The Senate's Permanent Subcommittee's report released earlier this year found that as UnitedHealthcare relied more on its automated system to review claims denials increased for post-acute treatment, which includes nursing home or rehabilitation care. The insurer denied nearly a quarter of claims, a rate that doubled over just a two-year period from 2020 to 2022.

What's known about the suspected shooter?

Joseph Kenny, the NYPD chief of detectives, says the shooter wore a black face mask, black-and-white sneakers and a distinctive gray backpack.

He arrived outside the hotel about five minutes before UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson did, then waited and ignored other pedestrians before he approached Thompson from behind.

After the assailant began to fire, his 9 mm pistol jammed but he quickly fixed it and kept firing, Kenny said, another sign of the shooter's professionalism.

"From watching the video, it does seem that he's proficient in the use of firearms as he was able to clear the malfunctions pretty quickly," Kenny said.

Hunt for the shooting suspect brought New York police to at least two hostels Thursday morning

The hostels were on Manhattan's Upper West Side and police were following a tip that the suspect may have stayed at one of the residences, according to a law enforcement official briefed on the investigation. The official requested anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss the ongoing search.

According to an employee of Kama Central Park, two detectives arrived at the hostel at 7 a.m. Thursday with a photo of the shooter and asked staff if they recognized the man. They did not, the employee said, and the detectives left soon after. An employee at the nearby HI New York City hostel also confirmed that police had visited the location Thursday, but declined to provide further information.

— Jake Offenhartz

New York Mayor Adams says he's 'never seen a silencer before'

New York Mayor Eric Adams said Thursday the shooter used a silencer — something he'd never encountered in his 22 years as a police officer.

"In all of my years in law enforcement I have never seen a silencer before," Adams, a retired NYPD captain, said in an appearance on MSNBC's "Morning Joe." "And so that was really something that was shocking to us all."

Deny, 'defend' and 'depose': Ammunition used in CEO's killing had writing on it, AP source says

The masked gunman used ammunition emblazoned with the words "deny," "defend" and "depose," a law enforcement official said Thursday. The official was not authorized to publicly discuss details of the ongoing investigation and spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity.

The words on the ammunition may have been a reference to strategies insurance companies use to try to avoid paying claims.

Investigators recovered several 9 mm shell casings from outside the hotel, NYPD Chief of Detectives Joseph Kenny had said earlier.

— Mike Balsamo, Jake Offenhartz and Michael R. Sisak

Just getting up to speed? Start here

The chief executive of UnitedHealthcare, one of the nation's largest insurers, was killed Wednesday in midtown Manhattan in what police described as a targeted attack by a shooter outside a hotel where the company was holding a conference.

Memphis' mayor pushes back against feds' calls for major reforms of city's police force

By ADRIAN SAINZ and JONATHAN MATTISE Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — Memphis' mayor pushed back Thursday against the need for a Justice Department deal to enact reforms in light of the scathing findings of an investigation into the Memphis Police Department, saying the city has already made hundreds of positive changes since the beating death of Tyre Nichols.

Although he didn't rule out eventually agreeing to a consent decree with the Justice Department, Mayor Paul Young said he thinks the city can make changes more effectively without committing to a binding pact. The 17-month federal investigation launched after Nichols' death found that Memphis officers routinely use unwarranted force and disproportionately target Black people.

"We believe we can make more effective and meaningful change by working together with community input and independent national experts than with a bureaucratic, costly, and complicated federal government consent decree," Young said at a news conference.

His remarks came minutes after a top Justice Department official warned that the DOJ could sue to require reforms of Memphis' police force should the city refuse to sign an agreement.

With a more police-friendly administration about to take over in Washington, the city could be biding its time in the hopes that the Justice Department under Donald Trump could let the matter drop. Neither Justice Department nor city officials were willing to delve into that issue — the mayor said he would have the same position regardless of the presidential election's outcome; and acting U.S. Attorney Reagan Fondren said federal prosecutors will continue their work regardless of who's in the White House.

The investigation determined that police in Tennessee's second-largest city have violated citizens' constitutional rights and civil rights, Assistant U.S. Attorney General Kristen Clarke said at a Thursday news conference, describing the lengthy review as "comprehensive and exhaustive."

The police department's practices violate the Constitution and federal law, and "harm and demean people and they promote distrust, undermining the fundamental safety mission of a police department," Clarke said.

The fatal beating of Nichols by officers after he ran away from a January 2023 traffic stop exposed serious problems in police department, from its use of excessive force to its mistreatment of Black people in the majority-Black city, according to the investigation report released Wednesday.

Nichols, who was kicked, punched and beaten with a baton, died three days after his encounter with police. Nichols was Black, as are the former officers involved in his beating. His death led to national protests, raised the volume on calls for police reforms in the U.S., and directed intense scrutiny towards the Memphis Police Department, more than half of whose members are Black, including Chief Cerelyn "CJ" Davis.

The federal probe looked at the department's "pattern or practice" of how it uses force and conducts stops, searches and arrests, and whether it engages in discriminatory policing.

It found that officers would punch, kick and use other force against people who were already handcuffed or restrained, which it described as unconstitutional but which were nearly always approved after the fact by supervisors. Officers resort to force likely to cause pain or injury "almost immediately in response to low-level, nonviolent offenses, even when people are not aggressive," investigators determined.

"Memphis police officers regularly violate the rights of the people they are sworn to serve," according to the report.

Memphis officers cite or arrest Black people for loitering or curfew violations at 13 times the rate it does for white people, and cite or arrest Black people for disorderly conduct at 3.6 times the rate of white people, the report said.

Police video showed officers pepper-spraying Nichols and hitting him with a Taser before he ran from a traffic stop. Five officers chased down Nichols just steps from his home as he called out for his mother. The video showed the officers milling about, talking and laughing as Nichols struggled with his injuries.

The officers were fired, charged in state court with murder, and indicted by a federal grand jury on civil rights and witness tampering charges. Two pleaded guilty to federal charges under plea deals. The other three were convicted at trial on split verdicts.

Although the report mentions the Nichols case, it also describes others, including one in which officers pepper-sprayed, kicked and fired a Taser at an unarmed man with a mental illness who tried to take a \$2 soda from a gas station.

The investigation cited police training that "primed officers to believe that force was the most likely way to end an encounter," rather than talking to a suspect to de-escalate a situation. In one training example, officers were told that, "If a fight is unavoidable, hurt them first and hurt them bad."

In a Wednesday letter to the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, the city attorney said Memphis had received the a DOJ's consent decree request but wouldn't agree to one until it had thoroughly reviewed the report.

A consent decree requires reforms overseen by an independent monitor and approved by a federal judge. The federal oversight can continue for years, and violations could result in fines paid by the city.

Other police departments have faced federal investigations in recent years, including Minneapolis' after the killing of George Floyd, and the police force in Louisville, Kentucky, following the fatal police shooting of Breonna Taylor.

From outsider to the Oval Office, bitcoin surges as a new administration embraces crypto

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Born from the ashes of the 2008 global financial crisis, bitcoin arrived after trust had withered in the financial system and in Washington's ability to protect those who must participate in it. Now, it's Washington's very embrace of bitcoin that's helping to send its price to records and lining the pockets of its believers.

Bitcoin briefly surged above \$103,000 after President-elect Donald Trump said he intends to nominate Paul Atkins, a former regulator who's seen as friendly to crypto, as the next chair of the Securities and Exchange Commission. He would replace Gary Gensler, who critics say has been overly aggressive in his oversight of crypto.

It's the latest leg in an astonishing run for bitcoin, whose swings in price are already notoriously extreme.

Bitcoin has more than doubled this year, with a particularly big jump coming after Election Day, when its price was sitting below \$70,000. During his campaign, Trump called for making the United States "the crypto capital of the planet."

The crypto industry, meanwhile, did its part to bring politicians friendly to digital currencies into Washington. Crypto corporations poured over \$119 million into influencing federal elections in 2024, primarily into a political action committee dedicated to electing pro-crypto candidates and defeating crypto skeptics, according to a recent review by Public Citizen.

It's a large amount. Crypto companies accounted for 44% of all the corporate money contributed during this year's elections, according to the consumer advocacy organization.

Such a tight embrace marks an interesting twist from bitcoin's early days, when someone or a group of someones under the name of Satoshi Nakamoto created a kind of electronic cash that wouldn't be

beholden to any government or financial institution.

In the white paper announcing bitcoin, Nakamoto said the traditional way of doing business on the internet "works well enough for most transactions." But, Nakamoto said, it "still suffers from the inherent weaknesses of the trust based model," where a third party like a bank needs to process payments.

Instead, Nakamoto suggested harnessing computing power around the world as a way to create a digital currency that can't be double-spent. "What is needed is an electronic payment system based on cryptographic proof instead of trust, allowing any two willing parties to transact directly with each other without the need for a trusted third party." That is what became the bitcoin network.

Since then, bitcoin has moved from the financial fringes toward the mainstream, in jagged fits and starts. While it hasn't taken off as a way to pay for groceries, it found popularity as a kind of "digital gold," or a way to store value in something that's not subject to the direct influence of a federal government or a central bank.

In its early days, it had a reputation for use by drug dealers, scammers, crypto enthusiasts, libertarians and others who were looking to move money without oversight by the government. Now, it's also found its way into more investor portfolios. Earlier this year, the SEC approved exchange-traded funds that track the spot price of bitcoin. Such ETFs give investors a relatively easy way to buy bitcoin directly in their existing trading accounts.

Through its life, bitcoin has soared through a series of manic bull runs as well as "crypto winters" that brought extreme declines. It went from just over \$5,000 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to nearly \$69,000 by late 2021, before crashing below \$17,000 following hikes to interest rates by the Federal Reserve and the 2022 collapse of crypto exchange FTX.

With bitcoin in its latest bull run, the man who's about to roll into the White House seemed to take at least some credit.

"CONGRATULATIONS BITCOINERS!!!" Trump said in a post on his Truth Social network. "\$100,000!!! YOU'RE WELCOME!!!"

Syrian insurgents capture central city of Hama in severe setback to the Syrian president

By BASSEM MROUE and KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Syrian insurgents swept into the central city of Hama on Thursday and government forces withdrew, dealing another major blow to Syrian President Bashar Assad days after insurgents captured much of Aleppo, the country's largest city.

The stunning weeklong offensive appeared likely to continue, with insurgents setting their sights on Homs, the country's third-largest city. Homs, which is about 40 kilometers (25 miles) south of Hama, is the gate to the capital, Damascus, Assad's seat of power and the coastal region that is a base of support for him.

The offensive is being led by the jihadi group HTS and an umbrella group of Turkish-backed Syrian militias called the Syrian National Army. Their sudden capture of Aleppo, an ancient business hub in the north, was a stunning prize for Assad's opponents and reignited the Syrian civil war that had been largely a stalemate for the past few years.

Hama is one of the few cities that has remained mostly under government control in the conflict, which broke out in March 2011 following a popular uprising.

By sunset, dozens of jubilant fighters were seen shooting in the air in celebration in live footage from Hama's Assi Square. The square was the scene of massive anti-government protests in the early days of the uprising in 2011, before security forces stormed it and got the city under control.

The Syrian army on Thursday said it redeployed from Hama and took positions outside the city to protect civilians.

Abu Mohammed al-Golani, the de facto leader of the Syrian insurgency, announced in a video message that fighters had reached Hama in a "conquering that is not vengeful, but one of mercy and compassion."

Al-Golani is the leader of the most powerful insurgent group in Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which previ-

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ously served as al-Qaida's branch in Syria and is considered a terrorist group by the United Nations as well as countries including the U.S. The group that was known as the Nusra Front in the early years of Syria's conflict changed its name and said in recent years that it cut ties with al-Qaida.

Al-Golani publicly toured Aleppo on Wednesday and spoke about Hama on Thursday from an undisclosed location in what appeared to be a video filmed with a mobile phone.

"This is a massive win for the rebels and a strategic blow for the (Syrian) regime," Dareen Khalifa, a senior adviser with the International Crisis Group and an expert on Syrian groups. She said the question is whether the opposition will be able to reach Homs and take over the area, which she said would be a game-changer.

"I think then we are going to have to pause and consider whether or not this regime can actually survive this war," she added.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose country supports the opposition fighters, reiterated during a telephone call with the U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres that the Syrian government should urgently engage with its people "for a comprehensive political solution."

Guterres said in a statement later that after 14 years of war in Syria, "it is high time" for all parties to engage seriously in talks to resolve the conflict in line with Security Council Resolution 2254."

That resolution, which was adopted unanimously in December 2015, endorsed a road map to peace in Syria. The measure called for a Syrian-led political process, starting with the establishment of a transitional governing body, followed by the drafting of a new constitution and ending with U.N.-supervised elections.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights — an opposition war monitor — said after fierce battles inside Hama, opposition gunmen now control the police headquarters in the city as well as the sprawling air base and the central prison from where hundreds of detainees were set free.

"The process leading to the fall of the regime has started," the Observatory's chief, Rami Abdurrahman, told The Associated Press.

Aleppo's takeover marked the first opposition attack on the city since 2016, when a brutal Russian air campaign retook it for Assad after rebel forces had initially seized it. Military intervention by Russia, Iran and Iranian-allied Hezbollah, and other militant groups has allowed Assad to remain in power.

The latest flare-up in Syria's long civil war comes as Assad's main regional and international backers, Russia and Iran, are preoccupied with their own wars in Gaza, Lebanon and Ukraine. This time, there appeared to be little to no help from his allies.

Tens of thousands of people have been displaced by the renewed fighting, which began with the surprise opposition offensive Nov. 27.

Hama is a major intersection in Syria that links that country's center with the north as well as the east and west. It is about 200 kilometers (125 miles) north of the capital. Hama province also borders the coastal province of Latakia, a main base of popular support for Assad.

The city is known for the 1982 massacre of Hama, one of the most notorious in the modern Middle East, when security forces under Assad's late father, Hafez Assad, killed thousands to crush a Muslim Brotherhood uprising.

AP's top songs of 2024: 'Texas Hold 'Em,' 'Not Like Us,' 'Igual Que Un Ángel' and more

By MARIA SHERMAN AP Music Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Ten of the best songs of the year, as determined by Associated Press Music Writer Maria Sherman, in no particular order.

"A Bar Song (Topsy)," Shaboozey

It is not only the biggest song of the year, but one of the longest-reigning No. 1s of all time, as far as the Billboard Hot 100 is concerned — Shaboozey's "A Bar Song (Topsy)" tied Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" with an impressive 19 weeks atop the charts. It makes sense that these two songs resonated in similar ways: Both are cross-genre, monolithic musical moments, classically country and an amalgamation of

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styles forming something completely modern. Shaboozey's earworm interpolates J-Kwon's "Topsy" and places it squarely on the faded bar stool of a hard-working weekend warrior. Like a few too many whiskey shooters, it'll inspire a singalong of "Oh my, good lord" from anyone.

"Not Like Us," Kendrick Lamar

There was a time where describing "Not Like Us" required a taxonomy of the freshly reignited beef between Kendrick Lamar and Drake, a period of diss tracks begetting diss tracks with dizzying alacrity — and a clear victor. The truth is, of course, the song stands on its own: a triumphant declaration of West Coast hip-hop, funny and bombastic.

"Like That," Future, Metro Boomin and Kendrick Lamar

Future and Metro Boomin have long made ideal collaborators, but this year's joint album, "We Don't Trust You," felt like a long time coming. It was an event. Immediately upon its release, "Like That" stood out, not only for its fiery guest verse from Lamar, or its hyper-speed sample of Rodney O and Joe Cooley's "Everlasting Bass" and Eazy-E's "Eazy-Duz-It," but for its ferocity. It's the big ... three?

"Good Luck, Babe!," Chappell Roan

Face it: 2024 belonged to Chappell Roan. A veteran of the music industry now experiencing what feels like an unparalleled rocket launch into fame, Roan has long wielded her theatricality and sexual candor like a wand (and a rabbit) in her songs. But it's "Good Luck, Babe!" that thrust her into the mainstream, a pop megahit that tackles lust, frustration and compulsory heterosexuality atop strings, '80s synths, and a soaring vocal performance. How could you not fall in love with her?

"Espresso," Sabrina Carpenter

For the caffeinated — or those in dire need of an energy boost — Sabrina Carpenter's "Espresso" emerged like all great pop hits should: Almost from nowhere, as addictive as its namesake and confounding in its lyrics, directly recalling the Y2K period of off-kilter pop songs with nonsensical lyrics atop sunny productions. ("That's that me espresso" is up there with the Backstreet Boys' declaration of "I never wanna hear you say / I want it that way.") But this one isn't simply fueled by nostalgia. It's disco-pop when the genre was dead and buried, revitalized and made clever through Carpenter's ever-present sense of humor. Cheeky!

"Texas Hold 'Em," Beyoncé

For career-long fans of Beyoncé, the memory of the once-teenaged singer who spoke with a soft, pronounced Texas twang is all but distant. For them, a hybridist country album from the superstar performer was simply a prophecy fulfilled. When "Cowboy Carter" arrived, it became immediately clear that B was dedicated to reclaiming country music as a Black woman. But it was the introduction of this new era with "Texas Hold 'Em" that solidified it — a honky-tonk stomper with a lot of western soul.

"Nasty," Tinashe

Give her No. 1 for the best lyric of the year — "Is somebody gonna match my freak?" Tinashe's "Nasty" is the hit fans of her smooth R&B-pop have been waiting for years; an exemplar of her particular talents. It's a sultry, goodtime hit — a kick, a snare, bare production and a scare beat — melodic and stacked with backing vocals. No wonder TikTok immediately embraced it. "Nasty" is for dancing, a song that evokes a quote regularly attributed to Oscar Wilde: a vertical expression of a horizontal urge.

"I Had Some Help," Post Malone and Morgan Wallen

Of any contemporary pop performer, Post Malone has benefitted the most from his ability to shapeshift. In an alternative universe, it might be hard to think of the "White Iverson" rapper launching a successful country career. In this one, it makes too much sense — the Texas musician has been dropping "ma'ams" and "sirs" in his speech since day one, and his signature autotuned vibrato works across the genre spectrum. (It's that same idiosyncrasy that had both Beyoncé and Taylor Swift calling him for features this year.) But it is his red solo cup collaboration with controversial hitmaker Morgan Wallen that undoubtedly made waves, an immediate anthem for hanging out in the bed of a pickup truck or at a backyard barbecue.

"Igual Que Un Ángel," Kali Uchis and Peso Pluma

One of the biggest music stories of the last few years has been the increasing popularity of regional Mexican music — a thrilling reflection of Latin music's continued global growth. But the artists at the center of the movement, including Peso Pluma, know that their music succeeds because it both celebrates tradi-

tion and transcends it, like in his gruff rapping over corridos. In Kali Uchis' "Igual Que Un Ángel," Pluma experiments with new genres entirely, and she welcomes him into her world. Here, Uchis' glossy, shimmering disco dream-pop is the foundation, and Pluma's stony vocal tone a smooth accent. It's an addictive song, and a reminder of the power at the heart of inventive collaborations.

"Right Back to It," Waxahatchee and MJ Lenderman

A vocal harmony between Waxahatchee's Katie Crutchfield and MJ Lenderman is a marvel from the jump — two kindred spirits, schooled in folky Americana and raised in DIY punk — but that's only one fraction of the magic of "Right Back to It." The song considers long-term relationships, the kind of love that can be tested, steady, reliable and, at times, restive. "I let my mind run wild / Don't know why I do it," she sings, "But you just settle in like a song with no end."

Key members of OPEC+ alliance are putting off production increases amid slack crude prices

By DAVID McHUGH AP Business Writer

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — Eight members of the OPEC+ alliance of oil exporting countries decided Thursday to put off increasing oil production as they face weaker than expected demand and competing production from non-allied countries — factors that could keep oil prices stagnant into next year.

The OPEC+ members decided at an online meeting to postpone production increases that had been scheduled to take effect Jan. 1. The plan had been to start gradually restoring 2.2 million barrels per day over the course of 2025.

That process will now be pushed back to April 1, 2025 and production increases will gradually take place over 18 months until October 2026.

OPEC+, which includes Saudi Arabia as the dominant member of the OPEC producers' cartel, and Russia as the leading non-OPEC member in the 22-country alliance, have imposed several sets of cuts to agreed output to support prices.

Oil prices have been slack due to weaker than expected demand from China as well as increased production from countries like Brazil and Argentina that aren't in OPEC+.

Among the beneficiaries of the current state of the oil market are U.S. motorists, who have seen gasoline prices fall to their lowest in 2 1/2 years to near \$3 a gallon.

Oil analysts have been busy reducing their estimates for demand for next year, meaning that OPEC+ could remain in a bind well into 2025.

The Saudis need oil revenue to carry out Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's ambitious plans to diversify his country's economy, including the development of Neom, a \$500 billion futuristic city in the desert. For Russia, oil export revenues are a key pillar of state finances and funding for the war against Ukraine. Holding back production risks losing market share. Yet increasing production and sales could lower prices in a global economy that analysts say is already well supplied with oil.

U.S. oil has been stuck around \$70 per barrel for weeks and traded little changed at \$68.75 on Thursday after the announcement, down from \$80 in August. International benchmark Brent crude traded at \$72.57 per barrel, down from around \$80 in July.

One result of those slack prices is that U.S. average pump prices for gasoline fell to \$3.03 a gallon this week, the lowest since May, 2021 and well down from their record peak of \$5.02 from June, 2022, according to motoring club AAA.

Thirty-one U.S. states now have average gas prices below \$3 a gallon.

U.S. oil price levels of \$70 or less "are great for consumers," said AAA spokesman Andrew Gross. Crude oil makes up about half the price of a gallon of gasoline, making crude the key factor on top of distribution costs and taxes. Motorists in Europe see far smaller fluctuations because taxes make up a much bigger chunk of the cost.

OPEC has cut its forecast for 2025 demand growth to 1.54 million barrels per day, from 1.85 million barrels per day in July. That is at the high end of estimates compared to those from the International Energy

Agency at 990,000 barrels per day, U.S. Energy Information Administration at 1.22 million and energy intelligence firm Rystad Energy at 1.1 million.

Analysts at Commerzbank foresee Brent prices averaging \$75 per barrel in the first quarter of next year and \$80 for the remaining three quarters.

In the United States, Donald Trump's return to the White House will likely lead to more fossil fuel production. Not only has the President-elect campaigned on more drilling, but his Treasury secretary nominee Scott Bessent has put together an economic plan with the goal of increasing domestic oil production by the equivalent of 3 million barrels a day. Bessent has indicated that the additional oil production would reduce inflationary pressures for U.S. consumers. But the Trump team has not fully outlined why oil producers would ramp up supplies and lower prices to levels that could hurt their profits.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is an intergovernmental organization founded in 1960, by Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela. It has since expanded to 12 member countries. In 2016, largely in response to dramatically falling oil prices due to U.S. shale oil output, OPEC signed an agreement with 10 other oil-producing countries to create OPEC+.

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As data centers proliferate, conflict with local communities follows

By DAN MERICA AND JESSE BEDAYN Associated Press

ALEXANDRIA, VA. (AP) — The sprawling, windowless warehouses that hold rows of high-speed servers powering almost everything the world does on phones and computers are increasingly becoming fixtures of the American landscape, popping up in towns, cities and suburbs across the United States.

Demand for data centers ballooned in recent years due to the rapid growth of cloud computing and artificial intelligence, and urban and rural governments alike are competing for lucrative deals with big tech companies.

But as data centers begin to move into more densely populated areas, abutting homes and schools, parks and recreation centers, some residents are pushing back against the world's most powerful corporations over concerns about the economic, social and environmental health of their communities.

In Northern Virginia, more than 300 data centers dot the rolling hills of the area's westernmost counties and butt up against wooded bike trails winding through the suburbs. But one of the latest proposals in the area, Plaza 500, would see a 466,000-square-foot facility and adjacent electrical substation built a few hundred feet from townhomes, playgrounds and a community center.

The pitch from Starwood Capital Group, the private investment firm founded by billionaire Barry Sternlicht, to Fairfax County officials promised jobs and a significant property tax boost. But data center critics say the incentives aren't enough to counteract the consequences of building the facilities so close to homes.

Tyler Ray, a leader in the fight against the Virginia project, worries that more data centers in the area could compromise the already stressed power grid: Over 25% of all power produced in Virginia in 2023 went to data centers, a figure that could rise as high as 46% by 2030 if data center growth continues at its current pace. Some estimates also show a mid-sized data center commands the same water usage every day as 1,000 households, prompting concerns over the cost of water. Ray also frets over air quality, as the massive diesel generators that help power the data centers' hardware send plumes of toxic pollutants into the atmosphere.

Ray and his neighbors tried to stop the development, but their efforts were largely unsuccessful. The Fairfax County Board of Supervisors in September said all newly proposed data centers must adhere to stricter zoning rules, but the Plaza 500 project was exempt.

"I don't know how a general resident, even someone who has been engaging intently on an issue, has any chance to go up against the data center industry," Ray said the night the supervisors voted.

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For local governments, attracting data centers to their municipalities means a financial boon: Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin said in 2024 that Virginia's current data centers brought in \$1 billion in tax revenue.

For average-sized facilities, data centers offer a small number of direct jobs – often fewer than 100 positions. Google announced recently that its investment in nearby Loudoun County, which included two data centers, created around 150 direct jobs, a figure that data center opponents say isn't worth the hassle. But data center advocates argue that the number of indirect jobs like construction, technology support and electrical work make the projects worthwhile. In that same announcement, Google said their investment spurred 2,730 indirect jobs.

Kathy Smith, the vice chair of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, voted in favor of the Plaza 500 proposal because, in her estimation, data center growth is inevitable in the region, and Fairfax County should reap the benefits.

"I have a responsibility to step back from what we do and look at the big picture," Smith said. "Data centers are not going away."

On the other side of the country, in Morrow County, Oregon, Amazon Web Services has built at least five data centers surrounding the 4,200-person town of Boardman, nestled among vast stretches of farmland flecked with mint patches and wind turbines, next to the Columbia river.

Last year, AWS paid roughly \$34 million in property taxes and fees stipulated in the agreements after receiving a \$66 million tax break. Those payments, in addition to \$1.7 million in charitable donations from the company in 2023, have been instrumental in updating infrastructure and bolstering services. These funds have gone toward a new ladder fire engine, a school resource officer and \$5,000 grants for homebuyers so far totaling at least \$2.8 million.

"This road right here? Wouldn't happen if it wasn't for AWS," said Boardman Mayor Paul Keefer, riding in the passenger seat of Police Chief Rick Stokoe's cruiser, pointing out the window at construction workers shifting dirt and laying pavement.

AWS has cultivated relationships with local officials including Keefer and Stokoe, who have both been in positions to vote on whether to authorize tax breaks with the company. Some former county commissioners and residents worry that those relationships are too cozy.

Kevin Miller, AWS's vice president of global data centers, said in an interview with the Associated Press that "our interest is in being a model corporate citizen, to really be partners with those communities."

Skepticism of the deals started years ago, when three formerly elected officials allegedly helped approve data center deals while also owning a stake in a company that contracted with AWS to provide fiber optic cables for the data centers. In June, they each paid \$2,000 to settle an ethics complaint.

Those officials are no longer in office. But the latest data center deal struck between Morrow County officials and AWS, which gives the company an estimated \$1 billion in tax breaks spread over the 15 years to build five new data centers, again raised eyebrows.

Two former Morrow County Commissioners, Jim Doherty and Melissa Lindsay, pushed unsuccessfully in 2022 for AWS to pay more in taxes in new data center negotiations.

"We didn't want to blow it up. We didn't want to run them off," said Lindsay. "But there were better deals to be made."

As data centers proliferate, conflict with local communities follows

By DAN MERICA and JESSE BEDAYN Associated Press

ALEXANDRIA, Va. (AP) — Richard Andre Newman thought he would live the rest of his life in his quiet, leafy neighborhood in suburban Virginia. He was born and raised in Bren Mar Park, where children ride their bikes and neighbors wave hello.

But now, as he's approaching 60, he's considering selling his Fairfax County home and moving away. That's because he's getting a new neighbor: Plaza 500, a 466,000-square-foot data center and an adjacent electrical substation to be built a few hundred feet from townhomes, playgrounds and a community center.

Newman feels helpless to stop it.

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"I planned on staying here until I died," he said, "until this came up."

The sprawling, windowless warehouses that hold rows of high-speed servers powering almost everything the world does on phones and computers are increasingly becoming fixtures of the American landscape, popping up in towns, cities and suburbs across the United States.

Demand for data centers ballooned in recent years due to the rapid growth of cloud computing and artificial intelligence, and local governments are competing for lucrative deals with big tech companies. But as data centers begin to move into more densely populated areas, abutting homes and schools, parks and recreation centers, some residents are pushing back against the world's most powerful corporations over concerns about the economic, social and environmental health of their communities.

Tyler Ray, a vocal critic of data centers and leader in the fight against the Virginia project, said the incentives offered are not enough to counteract the consequences of building a facility so close to homes.

"All that we are asking for is, as the county is trying to bring in this data center income, that they are doing it in a way that doesn't run residents away from their homes," he said.

Dotting the hills in Northern Virginia

In Northern Virginia, more than 300 data centers dot the rolling hills of the area's westernmost counties. Cyclists who ride the popular Washington & Old Dominion trail are at times flanked by data centers, and the thousands of commuters who head into the nation's capital each day can see them in the distance from the Metro.

Plaza 500, one of the latest proposals in the area, is encroaching on neighborhoods like never before, said Newman, who heads a homeowners association in the community.

The pitch from Starwood Capital Group, the private investment firm founded by billionaire Barry Sternlicht, to Fairfax County officials promised a significant property tax boost and, in addition to permanent positions in the data center itself, hundreds of temporary construction and electrical jobs to build the facility.

Tyler Ray and his husband moved to the Bren Pointe community in 2022, hoping to balance proximity to Washington with a desire for green space.

But shortly after the couple moved in, Starwood Capital began scoping out a commercial property near their new home as a possible location for the Plaza 500 project.

When Ray and his neighbors learned of the proposal, they held protests, attended regular county meetings and drew media attention to their concerns to try and stop the development. But their efforts were largely unsuccessful: the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors in September said all newly proposed data centers must adhere to stricter zoning rules, but the Plaza 500 project would be grandfathered in under the old rules.

Ray worries that more data centers in the area could compromise the already stressed power grid: Over 25% of all power produced in Virginia in 2023 went to data centers, a figure that could rise as high as 46% by 2030 if data center growth continues at its current pace. Some estimates also show a mid-sized data center commands the same water usage every day as 1,000 households, prompting concerns over the cost of water. Ray also frets over air quality, as the massive diesel generators that help power the data centers' hardware send plumes of toxic pollutants into the atmosphere.

A spokesman for the firm declined to respond to questions for this story.

"I don't know how a general resident, even someone who has been engaging intently on an issue," Ray said, "has any chance to go up against the data center industry."

Local leaders say data centers provide a financial boon

For local governments, attracting data centers to their municipalities means a financial boon: Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin said in 2024 that Virginia's existing data centers brought in \$1 billion in tax revenue, more than the \$750 million in tax breaks given to the tech companies that own them in 2023.

For average-sized facilities, data centers offer a small number of direct jobs — often fewer than 100 positions. Google announced recently that its two data centers in Loudoun County, which has about 440,000 residents, created only around 150 direct jobs. But data center advocates argue that the number of indirect jobs like construction, technology support and electrical work make the projects worthwhile. In

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that same announcement, Google said their investment spurred 2,730 indirect jobs.

Kathy Smith, the vice chair of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, voted in favor of the Plaza 500 proposal because, in her estimation, data center growth is inevitable in the region, and Fairfax County should reap the benefits.

"I have a responsibility to step back from what we do and look at the big picture," Smith said. "Data centers are not going away."

Amazon data centers welcomed by some in Oregon county

On the other side of the country, in Morrow County, Oregon, Amazon Web Services has built at least five data centers surrounding the 4,200-person town of Boardman, nestled among vast stretches of farmland flecked with mint patches and wind turbines, next to the Columbia river.

Last year, AWS, which is owned by Amazon, paid roughly \$34 million in property taxes and fees stipulated in the agreements after receiving a \$66 million tax break. The company also paid out \$10 million total in two, one-time payments to a community development fund and spent another \$1.7 million in charitable donations in the community in 2023.

That money has been instrumental in updating infrastructure and bolstering services for the roughly 12,000-person county, going toward a new ladder fire engine, a school resource officer, police body cameras, and \$5,000 grants for homebuyers among other things.

Still, some residents are skeptical of the scale of tax break deals. Suspicions started years ago, when three formerly elected officials allegedly helped approve data center deals while owning a stake in a company that contracted with AWS to provide fiber optic cables for the data centers. In June, they each paid \$2,000 to settle an ethics complaint against them.

Those officials are no longer in office. But some remain wary of the relationships between the company and local officials, and raised eyebrows at one of the latest data center deals which gives AWS an estimated \$1 billion in tax breaks spread over the 15 years to build five new data centers.

Former county commissioner Jim Doherty described a meeting with AWS officials soon after he was elected to office at an upscale restaurant in Boardman, where large windows opened onto the Columbia River.

The AWS representatives asked what Doherty wanted to accomplish as a commissioner. "They said, 'Tell us what your dreams are. Tell us what you need. Tell us what we can do for you,'" Doherty recalled. Other former officials have described similar interactions. Doherty said AWS didn't ask for anything in return, but the exchange left him uneasy.

"We engage with stakeholders in every community where we operate around the world, and part of that outreach is to better understand a community's goals," said Kevin Miller, AWS' Vice President of global data centers. "This helps AWS be a catalyst for communities to achieve those goals, and reflects our ongoing commitment to being good neighbors."

Doherty and another former county commissioner Melissa Lindsay said they pushed unsuccessfully in 2022 for AWS to pay more in taxes in new data center negotiations. They also lobbied to hire outside counsel to negotiate on their behalf, feeling outgunned by the phalanx of AWS-suited lawyers.

"We didn't want to blow it up. We didn't want to run them off," said Lindsay. "But there were better deals to be made."

Boardman Mayor Paul Keefer and Police Chief Rick Stokoe say their direct line to AWS allows them to get the most out of the company.

"This road right here? Wouldn't happen if it wasn't for AWS," said Keefer, riding in the passenger seat of Stokoe's cruiser, pointing out the window at construction workers shifting dirt and laying pavement. Both Keefer and Stokoe have been in positions to vote on whether to authorize tax breaks for AWS.

"These companies would not be here if they weren't getting some kind of incentive," Stokoe said. "There wouldn't be any money to talk about."

European satellites launched to create artificial solar eclipses in a tech demo

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A pair of European satellites rocketed into orbit Thursday on the first mission to create artificial solar eclipses through fancy formation flying in space.

Each fake eclipse should last six hours once operations begin next year. That's considerably longer than the few minutes of totality offered by a natural eclipse here on Earth, allowing for prolonged study of the sun's corona, or outer atmosphere.

The launch took place from India.

"We are a very happy science team here" in India, the European Space Agency's mission scientist Joe Zender said via email.

Billed as a tech demo, the two satellites will separate in a month or so and fly 492 feet (150 meters) apart once reaching their destination high above Earth, lining up with the sun so that one spacecraft casts a shadow on the other.

This will require extreme precision, within just one millimeter, equivalent to a fingernail's thickness, according to the European Space Agency. To maintain their position, the satellites will rely on GPS, star trackers, lasers and radio links, flying autonomously.

Each cube-shaped spacecraft is less than 5 feet (1.5 meters) across. The shadow-casting satellite holds a disk to block the sun from the telescope on the other satellite. This disk will mimic the moon in a natural total solar eclipse, with the darkened satellite posing as Earth.

"This has a huge scientific relevance" in addition to testing high-precision formation flying," said the European Space Agency's technology and engineering director Dietmar Pilz.

Scientists need the glaring face of the sun completely blocked in order to scrutinize the wispy crown-like corona encircling it, getting an especially good look close to the solar rim on this mission. They're particularly interested to learn why the corona is hotter than the surface of the sun, and also want to better understand coronal mass ejections, eruptions of billions of tons of plasma with magnetic fields out into space.

The resulting geomagnetic storms can disrupt power and communication on Earth and in orbit. Such outbursts can also produce stunning auroras in unexpected places.

With a lopsided orbit stretching from 370 miles (600 kilometers) to 37,000 miles (60,000 kilometers) away, the satellites will take nearly 20 hours to circle the world. Six of those hours — at the farther end of certain orbits — will be spent generating an eclipse. Other orbits will be strictly for formation flying experiments, according to the European Space Agency.

The first eclipse results should be available in March, following checkout of both craft.

Zender said eclipses will be created at least twice a week, with six hours of totality each time for corona observations. The frequency will depend on solar activity, he noted, and prove a boon for scientists who now must travel across the world for a mere three to five minutes of totality during the occasional eclipse.

The \$210 million mission, dubbed Proba-3, is aiming for at least 1,000 hours of "on demand" totality during its two-year operation. Once their job is done, both satellites will gradually drop lower until they burn up in the atmosphere, likely within five years.

Liftoff was delayed a day by a last-minute issue with the backup propulsion system of one of the satellites, crucial for precision formation flying. The European Space Agency said engineers relied on a computer software fix.

Yoon replaces the defense minister as South Korea's parliament moves to vote on their impeachments

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's president replaced his defense minister Thursday as opposition parties moved to impeach both men over the stunning-but-brief imposition of martial law that brought

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armed troops into Seoul streets.

The Democratic Party and other small opposition parties submitted a joint motion to impeach President Yoon Suk Yeol on Wednesday over his martial law declaration the previous night. Martial law lasted about six hours, as the National Assembly quickly voted to overrule the president, forcing his Cabinet to lift it before daybreak Wednesday.

Jo Seoung-lae, spokesperson of the Democratic Party, said it will push for a National Assembly vote on Yoon's impeachment motion on Saturday, calling his martial law declaration an "unconstitutional, illegal rebellion or coup."

On Thursday, Yoon's office said he decided to replace Defense Minister Kim Yong Hyun with Choi Byung Hyuk, a retired general who is South Korea's ambassador to Saudi Arabia.

Yoon's office didn't provide any further comments by him. He hasn't appeared in public since his televised announcement that martial law was lifted.

The opposition parties earlier submitted a motion to impeach Kim, alleging he recommended that Yoon impose martial law. Kim had offered to resign and apologized for causing disruption and concern to the public. Kim said that "all troops who performed duties related to martial law were acting on my instructions, and all responsibility lies with me," according to the Defense Ministry.

During a parliamentary hearing Thursday, Vice Defense Minister Kim Seon Ho said the decision to deploy troops at the National Assembly came from Kim Yong Hyun. Army chief of staff Park An-su, who served as head of the martial law command, said he didn't know how the troops were sent to parliament.

Kim Seon Ho also said he wasn't informed about Yoon's decision to impose martial law until the announcement was reported by the media. He said he didn't know who wrote the military proclamation announced after Yoon's martial law declaration, which stated that the activities of political parties would be suspended. Park said he proposed a legal review of the proclamation to Kim Yong Hyun, and Kim said a review had been completed.

"I had fundamentally opposed the deployment of troops over this martial law and I expressed a negative opinion about it," Kim Seon Ho said. "I would like to apologize to our citizens once again, and, on a personal level, I feel devastated."

Prosecutors in Seoul said they imposed an overseas travel ban on Kim Yong Hyun on Thursday.

Separately, opposition parties on Thursday voted to impeach Choe Jae-hae, chairman of South Korea's auditing board, and three senior public prosecutors. The four will be suspended until the Constitutional Court rules whether to remove them from office. Members of Yoon's governing People Power Party boycotted the votes, leaving the totals far over the threshold to impeach them.

Choe has been accused of softening a review of Yoon's 2022 decision to move the presidential office from a downtown palace to the Defense Ministry compound, which critics saw as inexplicable waste of money. The prosecutors face accusations that they watered down an investigation into suspected stock price manipulation involving Yoon's wife, Kim Keon Hee.

During his martial law announcement, Yoon described the Democratic Party's continued attempts to impeach senior officials and prosecutors as "anti-state activities" and "paralyzing the government."

The PPP said Thursday it has decided to oppose the motion to impeach Yoon. Observers say it could boycott a floor vote or cast ballots against the motion.

Impeaching the president would require support from two-thirds of the National Assembly, or 200 of its 300 members. The opposition parties together have 192 seats. Parliament's rejection of martial law passed unanimously Wednesday with support from 18 PPP lawmakers who belong to an anti-Yoon faction in the party.

But PPP leader Han Dong-hun, head of the anti-Yoon faction, told reporters Thursday he would work to defeat the impeachment motion even though he criticized Yoon's declaration as "unconstitutional." Han said there is a need to "prevent damage to citizens and supporters caused by unprepared chaos."

Experts say PPP factions could unite to avoid what happened after the 2016 impeachment of conservative President Park Geun-hye with the votes of some lawmakers in her own party. After she was removed

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from office, the liberals easily won the presidency in a by-election as conservatives remained in disarray. She went to prison but was eventually pardoned.

If Yoon is impeached, he would be suspended until the Constitutional Court rules on whether to remove him from office or restore his presidential power. Prime Minister Han Duck-soo would take over presidential responsibilities.

The impeachment motion against Yoon says he failed to meet the constitutional requirement that martial law should only be considered in wartime or a comparable severe crisis. It alleges he attempted a "self-coup" by mobilizing the military and that suspending political party activities and deploying troops to seal the National Assembly amounted to rebellion.

Thousands of protesters marched in Seoul's streets Wednesday, carrying candles and signs calling for Yoon to step down, and another large anti-government gathering was expected Thursday evening.

Reflecting the country's deeply polarized politics, hundreds of Yoon's conservative supporters rallied in downtown Seoul on Thursday afternoon, holding signs criticizing Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung, seen as a potential successor to Yoon despite facing trials over various corruption allegations.

With Yoon's declaration sparking concerns about South Korea's democratic status, officials have been trying to mitigate backlash.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lee Jaewoong said the ministry sent diplomatic notes to foreign missions emphasizing that martial law was lifted through democratic procedures and that travel advisories need not change, as public safety remains stable.

When asked about the U.S. Embassy in Seoul's move this week to cancel routine consular operations, including visa and passport interviews, based on its assessment that South Korea's "situation remains fluid," Lee said Seoul was maintaining "necessary communication" with the Americans. The U.S. Embassy later on Thursday said those services were resumed.

Yoon's martial law declaration came hours after his summit with Kyrgyzstan President Sadyr Japarov, who traveled to Seoul on an official visit. Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson reportedly canceled a plan to visit South Korea this week.

"We are continuously trying to ensure a seamless and consistent implementation of our ministry's diplomatic policies," Lee said.

Why Trump and the Federal Reserve could clash in the coming years

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump campaigned on the promise that his policies would reduce high borrowing costs and lighten the financial burden on American households.

But what if, as many economists expect, interest rates remain elevated, well above their pre-pandemic lows?

Trump could point a finger at the Federal Reserve, and in particular at its chair, Jerome Powell, whom Trump himself nominated to lead the Fed. During his first term, Trump repeatedly and publicly ridiculed the Powell Fed, complaining that it kept interest rates too high. Trump's attacks on the Fed raised widespread concern about political interference in the Fed's policymaking.

On Wednesday, Powell emphasized the importance of the Fed's independence: "That gives us the ability to make decisions for the benefit of all Americans at all times, not for any particular political party or political outcome."

Political clashes might be inevitable in the next four years. Trump's proposals to cut taxes and impose steep and widespread tariffs are a recipe for high inflation in an economy operating at close to full capacity. And if inflation were to reaccelerate, the Fed would need to keep interest rates high.

Why is there so much concern that Trump will fight Powell?

Because Powell won't necessarily cut rates as much as Trump will want. And even if Powell reduces the Fed's benchmark rate, Trump's own policies could keep other borrowing costs — like mortgage rates — elevated.

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The sharply higher tariffs that Trump has vowed to impose could worsen inflation. And if tax cuts on things like tips and overtime pay — another Trump promise — quickened economic growth, that, too, could fan inflationary pressures. The Fed would likely respond by slowing or stopping its rate cuts, thereby thwarting Trump's promises of lower borrowing rates. The central bank might even raise rates if inflation worsened.

"The risk of conflict between the Trump administration and the Fed is very high," Olivier Blanchard, former top economist at the International Monetary Fund, said recently. If the Fed hikes rates, "it will stand in the way of what the Trump administration wants."

But isn't the Federal Reserve cutting rates?

Yes, but with the economy sturdier than expected, the Fed's policymakers may cut rates only a few more times — fewer than had been anticipated just a month or two ago.

And those rate cuts might not reduce borrowing costs for consumers and businesses very much. The Fed's key short-term rate can influence rates for credit cards, small businesses and some other loans. But it has no direct control over longer-term interest rates. These include the yield on the 10-year Treasury note, which affects mortgage rates. The 10-year Treasury yield is shaped by investors' expectations of future inflation, economic growth and interest rates as well as by supply and demand for Treasuries.

An example occurred this year. The 10-year yield fell in late summer in anticipation of a Fed rate cut. Yet once the first rate cut occurred on Sept. 18, longer term rates didn't fall. Instead, they began to rise again, partly in anticipation of faster economic growth.

Trump has also proposed a variety of tax cuts that could swell the deficit. Rates on Treasury securities might then have to rise to attract enough investors to buy the new debt.

"I honestly don't think the Fed has a lot of control over the 10-year rate, which is probably the most important for mortgages," said Kent Smetters, an economist and faculty director at the Penn Wharton Budget Model. "Deficits are going to play a much bigger role in that regard."

OK, so Trump fights with Powell — so what?

Occasional or rare criticism of the Fed chair isn't necessarily a problem for the economy, so long as the central bank continues to set policy as it sees fit.

But persistent attacks would tend to undermine the Fed's political independence, which is critically important to keeping inflation in check. To fight inflation, a central bank often must take steps that can be highly unpopular, notably by raising interest rates to slow borrowing and spending.

Political leaders have typically wanted central banks to do the opposite: Keep rates low to support the economy and the job market, especially before an election. Research has found that countries with independent central banks generally enjoy lower inflation.

Even if Trump doesn't technically force the Fed to do anything, his persistent criticism could still cause problems. If markets, economists and business leaders no longer think the Fed is operating independently and instead is being pushed around by the president, they'll lose confidence in the Fed's ability to control inflation.

And once consumers and businesses anticipate higher inflation, they usually act in ways that fuel higher prices — accelerating their purchases, for example, before prices rise further, or raising their own prices if they expect their expenses to increase.

"The markets need to feel confident that the Fed is responding to the data, not to political pressure," said Scott Alvarez, a former general counsel at the Fed.

Could Trump just fire Powell?

He can try, but it would likely lead to a prolonged legal battle that could even end up at the Supreme Court. At a November news conference, Powell made clear that he believes the president doesn't have legal authority to do so.

Most experts think Powell would prevail in the courts. And from the Trump administration's perspective, such a fight might not be worth it. Powell's term ends in May 2026, when the White House could nominate a new chair.

It is also likely that the stock market would tumble if Trump attempted such a brazen move. Bond yields would probably rise, too, sending mortgage rates and other borrowing costs up.

Financial markets might also react negatively if Trump is seen as appointing a loyalist as Fed chair to

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replace Powell in 2026.

Haven't previous presidents criticized the Fed?

Yes, and in the most egregious cases, it led to stubbornly high inflation. Notably, President Richard Nixon pressured Fed Chair Arthur Burns to reduce interest rates in 1971, as Nixon sought re-election next year, which the Fed did. Economists blame Burns' failure to keep rates sufficiently high for contributing to the entrenched inflation of the 1970s and early 1980s.

Thomas Drechsel, an economist at the University of Maryland, said that when presidents intrude on the Fed's interest rate decisions, "it increases prices quite consistently and it increases expectations, and ... that worries me because that means inflation might become quite entrenched."

Since the mid-1980s, with the exception of Trump in his first term, presidents have scrupulously refrained from public criticism of the Fed.

"It's amazing, how little manipulation for partisan ends we have seen of that policymaking apparatus," said Peter Conti-Brown, a professor of financial regulation at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. "It really is a triumph of American governance."

Do other countries have independent central banks?

Yes, most advanced economies do. But in some recent cases, as in Turkey and South Africa, governments have sought to dictate interest-rate policy to the central bank. And soaring inflation has typically followed.

Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, for years pressured the country's central bank to cut interest rates even as prices spiked. He even fired three central bankers who had refused to comply. In response, inflation skyrocketed to 72% in 2022, according to official measures.

Last year, Erdogan finally reversed course and allowed the central bank to raise rates.

Today in History: December 6 13th Amendment ratified, abolishing slavery

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, Dec. 6, the 341st day of 2024. There are 25 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 6, 1865, the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, abolishing slavery, was ratified as Georgia became the 27th state to endorse it.

Also on this date:

In 1907, the worst mining disaster in U.S. history occurred as at least 361 men and boys died in a coal mine explosion in Monongah, West Virginia.

In 1917, more than 1,700 people were killed when an explosives-laden French cargo ship, the Mont Blanc, collided with the Norwegian vessel Imo at the harbor in Halifax, Nova Scotia, setting off a blast that devastated the Canadian city.

In 1923, a presidential address was broadcast on radio for the first time as Calvin Coolidge spoke to a joint session of Congress.

In 1957, America's first attempt at putting a satellite into orbit failed as Vanguard TV3 rose about four feet off a Cape Canaveral launch pad before crashing down and exploding.

In 1969, a free concert by The Rolling Stones at the Altamont Speedway in Alameda County, California, was marred by the deaths of four people, including one who was stabbed by a member of the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club that was hired to provide concert security.

In 1973, House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford was sworn in as vice president, succeeding Spiro T. Agnew.

In 1998, in Venezuela, former Lt. Col. Hugo Chavez (OO'-goh CHAH'-vez), who had staged a bloody coup attempt against the government six years earlier, was elected president.

Today's Birthdays: Actor JoBeth Williams is 76. Craigslist founder Craig Newmark is 72. Actor Tom Hulse is 71. Comedian Steven Wright is 69. Rock musician Peter Dinklage (R.E.M.) is 68. Animator Nick Park is 66. Actor Janine Turner is 62. Writer-director Judd Apatow is 57. Actor Sarah Rafferty is 52. NBA star Giannis Antetokounmpo (YAH'-nihs an-teh-toh-KOON'-poh) is 30.