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Friday, Dec. 20

Senior Menu: Bean and ham soup, egg salad sandwich, tomato spoon salad, fruit.

School Breakfast: Egg bake.

School Lunch: Cheese pizza, green beans.

End of Second Quarter

Elementary Christmas Program, 1 p.m., in the Arena.

Early Dismissal, 2 p.m.

Basketball hosts West Central: Gym: Boys C at 4 p.m.; Girls C at 5:15 p.m.; Arena: Girls JV at 4 p.m.,

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

People need to understand the difference between wants and needs.

I want abs but I need ice cream.



Boys JV at 5:15 p.m.; followed by girls varsity and boys varsity.

NEC Boys and Girls Wrestling at Groton Area, 4 p.m.

Saturday, Dec. 21

FIRST DAY OF WINTER

Girls Varsity Wrestling vs. South Border at Ashley, N.D., 9 a.m.

Boys Varsity Wrestling at Sioux Valley Tourney, 10 a.m.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main

Skating Rink open 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.

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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.

Government Shutdown Deadline

The House of Representatives last night voted down a stopgap funding bill backed by President-elect Donald Trump, pushing negotiations into the final 24 hours before tonight's midnight deadline. The vote came after Trump opposed a bipartisan continuing resolution featuring add-on bills.

Thirty-eight Republicans joined Democrats to vote 235 to 174 against the president-elect's new plan. The proposed resolution tied three months of stopgap funding to a two-year suspension of the debt ceiling and included aid to farmers as well as \$100B in disaster aid. The plan's announcement followed Trump's calls earlier in the day for the permanent repeal of the debt ceiling, a century-old rule capping how much the Treasury can borrow. The US debt has risen to roughly \$36T after the ceiling was suspended from June 2023; that suspension expires January 1, 2025.

A federal government shutdown would furlough millions of workers, though essential services like the military and air traffic control would stay open.

Pelicot Verdict Reached

Dominique Pelicot was convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison yesterday for the drugging and rape of his ex-wife, Gisèle Pelicot. The judgment caps a nearly four-month public trial likened to France's #MeToo moment.

Dominique and Gisèle, both of whom are 72 years old, had been married for 50 years when police revealed Dominique had drugged and sexually assaulted Gisèle from 2011 to 2020. Dominique had also invited at least 50 other men to participate and admitted to placing anti-anxiety medication in Gisèle's food to facilitate the assaults. The men, between the ages of 26 and 74, were each convicted of at least one charge yesterday, with sentences ranging from three to 15 years in prison.

Gisèle opted for a public trial to shed light on the issue of sexual consent in France. The decision to waive anonymity propelled Gisèle into the spotlight, with many heralding her as a hero.

AI Whiskey Master

A machine learning program was able to meet or outperform professional tasters in identifying whiskey notes, according to a new study. The demonstration marks a milestone in sensory perception using artificial intelligence.

Data analysts tested their program on 16 whiskey samples (seven American, nine Scotch) previously categorized by 11 human experts. The program—using statistical models and neural networks—identified molecules in each whiskey and used them to predict the sample's top five flavor notes. Researchers compared these findings against the top five flavor notes aggregated from human experts' descriptions.

This type of analysis has historically been challenging; while some chemical mixtures—like vanillin—are directly associated with a specific aroma, others—like whiskey—can rely on over 40 compounds. Notably, the program found molecules like menthol and citronellol unique to the American whiskeys and associated with "caramel-like" notes. Methyl decanoate and heptanoic acid, unique to Scotch whiskeys, were more likely to be associated with apple-like or solvent-like notes.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

2024 College Football Playoff begins tonight with No. 7 Notre Dame taking on No. 10 Indiana (8 pm ET, ABC/ESPN); see first-round schedule and predictions.

Fox News anchor Neil Cavuto to depart after 28 years; Cavuto was with the cable news network since its inception in 1996.

Slim Dunlap, singer-songwriter and The Replacements guitarist, dies at 73.

Megan Thee Stallion files petition for a restraining order against rapper Tory Lanez, alleging harassment by Lanez from prison; Lanez is serving a 10-year sentence for shooting Megan in 2020.

Science & Technology

Google releases test version of its reasoning AI model; company says it displays high-level comprehension of complex problems in math, physics, coding, and more.

James Webb Space Telescope detects supermassive black hole dating to 800 million years after the start of the universe; object is 400 million times the size of the Sun but has become nearly dormant.

Bioengineers develop bacteria that eat carbon dioxide, can convert the carbon from common chimney smoke into precursors for new chemical products.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 -0.1%, Dow +0.0%, Nasdaq -0.1%); Dow narrowly ends longest losing streak in 50 years.

Chipmaker Micron shares close down 16% on weaker-than-expected guidance in steepest drop since March 2020.

US economy grew at 3.1% annualized pace in Q3, stronger than previously estimated.

US existing home sales rose 6.1% year-over-year in November, the biggest annual gain since 2021; median home price is \$406K, up 4.7% from a year ago.

Amazon workers strike across seven US delivery facilities over labor contract; locations include four in California and one each in New York, Georgia, and Illinois.

Politics & World Affairs

Georgia appeals court removes District Attorney Fani Willis from state's stalled 2020 election interference case against President-elect Donald Trump; court cites "appearance of impropriety" given Willis' romantic relationship with the special prosecutor.

Federal Aviation Administration temporarily bans use of low-flying drones in 21 New Jersey towns, including near power substations, military installations, and airports; order authorizes use of government force to shoot down drones and is in effect until Jan. 17.

Food and Drug Administration updates 30-year definition of "healthy" packaged foods; rule sets limit on the amount of sugar that can be included, requires one or more of the following: fruit, vegetables, grains, dairy, or protein.

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Elementary Christmas Program

Friday, Dec. 20, 1 p.m.

on

GDILIVE.COM

**\$5 ticket or
GDI Subscription
required to watch the event.**

Coming up on GDILIVE.COM

Friday, Dec. 20

Groton Area West Central at Groton
Tigers

GT

4 p.m. Girls JV
Dorene Nelson
5:00 Boys JV
Anonymous

Girls Varsity
Boys Varsity



**\$5 ticket or
GDI Subscription
required to watch the games.**

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Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #7 Results

Team Standings: Jackelopes 17, Shihtzus 15, Coyotes 15, Foxes 13, Cheetahs 12, Chipmunks 12
Men's High Games: Tony Waage 214, Roger Spanier 213, Butch Farmen 207
Women's High Games: Hayley Johnson 186, Alexa Schuring 181, Vicki Walter 174
Men's High Series: Butch Farmen 573, Tony Waage 554, Roger Spanier 537
Women's High Series: Alexa Schuring 481, Vicki Walter 474, Hayley Johnson 466
Fun Game – Least Strikes – Cheetahs with 17!
Jackelopes won the first third!

We will bowl again on the 8th of January at 7:30 PM!



Christmas Bags Delivered

Enrich Groton SoDak Inc. board members and volunteers worked alongside Dacotah Bank employees Thursday morning packing Christmas food bags. Bags included all items for a full Christmas dinner with some food purchased by a Thrivent Action Team. Food items were delivered Thursday by city employees. Please contact Nancy at 605-397-7097 or Diane at 605-216-2350 if you would like to be included in future deliveries.

Pictured: Board Members: April Abeln, Nancy Larsen, Diane Warrington; Volunteers: Sue Stevenson, Ruby Larson, Lori Westby, Pam Heiser; Dacotah Bank Employees: Tammy Locke, Heidi Locke. (Courtesy Photo)

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Groton Community Transit
205 E 2nd Ave., Downtown Groton
invites you to its
Holiday Bake Sale
Friday, Dec. 20, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Coffee, cider and Christmas goodies will be served.
Groton Transit wishes you all a Merry Christmas and a Blessed Year!
If you would like to donate baked goods, please contact
the Groton Transit dispatch office at 605-397-8661.
Any and all donations are welcome!



Card Shower
Merry Jo Ball will be celebrating her
on December 24, 2024.



Greetings may be sent to
915 Arbor Lane Apt 37
Aberdeen SD 57401

Weather Expert Eric Snodgrass Predicts Dry Growing Season for South Dakota

By Lura Roti

In Farm and Ranch Country, weather gets a lot of attention. And Eric Snodgrass stands out among the climate experts farmers and ranchers follow, explained Miller rancher Andrew Canham.

"Eric explains the weather in a way that I can understand," Canham said.

Tabor farmer, Eileen Sestak agreed. "Eric taught us about the different facets of the weather – what impacts the weather – things you don't hear about on the 6 o'clock news."

Eileen and her husband, Terry say they are acutely tuned into the weather during haying season. "The heat and humidity affect haying and baling quite a bit. You have to time things just right," Eileen said.

Canham and the Sestak's were among a large crowd of family farmers and ranchers who got to hear from Snodgrass during the 109th South Dakota Farmers Union State Convention held in Huron Dec. 11 and 12.

Ocean atmosphere indicates dry growing season

The science behind the weather is complicated. But when Snodgrass explains the science, he does it in such a way that most can understand.

A previous professor of atmospheric sciences at the University of Illinois, Snodgrass' talk was filled with graphs and animated meteorological data. But he also included personal stories that helped listeners wrap their heads around the data and the factors that impact weather and weather forecasting.

"The teacher who first got me interested in becoming a meteorologist told me, 'The script of the atmosphere's behavior is written on the ocean's surface. Figure that out and you can figure out the future weather patterns,'" Snodgrass said. "And that was the day became a weather nerd."

Based on what the ocean's atmosphere is doing, Snodgrass predicts a dry growing season.

Snodgrass went on to explain: "Every single weather system that we deal with here in the Northern Plains isn't born here. It comes from some other source region. Usually that's either the Indian Ocean north of the Himalayan Mountains, or Siberia. That's where your weather systems are born. They go over the Rocky Mountains and they're invigorated. Why? The Rocky Mountains stick up there several 1000 feet into the sky and stir things up and give us fresh weather that then goes across the country, decays over the northeast, dies in the North Atlantic, and then just has a nice long funeral in a place called England. That's why the worst weather in the world is in the UK. Then it's reinvigorated across Asia and comes back to us."

And Snodgrass went on to say, that even though the moisture outlook is not favorable, even the best weather models in the world are only accurate 50 percent of the time.

He also shared scientifically why the Midwestern U.S. is the best place in the world to grow crops – and hail storms.

"Now, this is what's amazing about the United States. If you want to just look geographically at a place in the world that was designed to grow crops, it is the Midwestern United States. Why? Because we have

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a mountain chain that runs here called the Appalachian Mountains. They're nothing. They're little hills. You got big ones that run over here called the Rockies. And in the middle, there is no east/west running mountain chain. Do you understand that there's only us and Argentina on the whole planet that are not impacted by east/west running mountain chains? Think about Europe, think about Russia, think about the Himalayas, China, they all have big east /west running mountains. We don't. Which means moisture from there can go all the way to the Canadian Shield. And it's enough," Snodgrass said. "We usually get enough inches of moisture that we can do dryland farming. A lot of it comes in the middle of summer, big summer thunderstorms like this. And when that big Bermuda high is pumping all of that moisture there, it gets over the top of really hot ground and over hot ground. Guess what that air does? Shoots up in the atmosphere violently. Carries with it all that moisture, which then condenses and gives us some of the biggest and baddest thunderstorms on the planet."

After Snodgrass' talk, Terry Sestak said that although it was informative, the information Snodgrass shared does not change his 2025 growing season decisions.

"Eric admitted that even the best weather models are only correct 50 percent of the time," Terry said. "As farmers we need to be optimistic."

Sestak's response is exactly what Snodgrass was hoping for. "You are not allowed to make any strategic decisions about your financial well-being," Snodgrass said. "You bet the farm on the forecast, you're going to lose."

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GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT 06-6

MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL

P.O. Box 410
502 North 2nd Street
Groton, SD 57445
Fax: (605) 397-8453

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

P.O. Box 410
810 North 1st Street
Groton, SD 57445
Fax: (605) 397-2344

Groton Area School

Board

Grant Rix, President
Nick Strom, VP
Debra Gengerke
Martin Weismantel
Tigh Flihs
Travis Harder
Dr. Heather Lerseth-Flihs,
DVM

Superintendent

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Doubleheader Basketball Game

West Central @ Groton Area
Tuesday, December 20th, 2024

Game Times/Locations:

Main Court in Arena

- 3:00PM → Boys C
- 4:00PM → Girls JV
- 5:00PM → Boys JV
 - o **Halftime Entertainment:** FCCLA Shoot for a Pop
- 6:15PM → Girls Varsity
- 7:45PM → Boys Varsity
 - o **Halftime Entertainment:** High School Dance Team

Prior to the Girls Varsity game, the National Anthem will be first, with Varsity Introductions/Lineups to follow.

ADMISSION & SPECTATORS: Adults: \$6.00 Students: \$4.00.

CONCESSIONS: Will be available

LOCKER ROOM: West Central will use the two locker rooms down the JH hallway (two doors on the left). Boys Team will be in the first. The Girls' Team will be in the second.

Team Benches – Groton: South Bench
West Central: North Bench

ATHLETIC TRAINER: There will be an athletic trainer on site. AED is located near the ticket booth.

Livestream: www.GDlive.com or [Groton High School | High School Sports | Home | Hudl](#)

Varsity Officials: Eric Donat, Bryan Gaikowski, Joel Osborn

C Game Officials: Brock DeGroot, Kristi Zoellner

JV Game Officials: Jordan Kjellsen, Travis Kurth, Brock DeGroot

C Game Scorebook: Krissi Zak

C/JV/V Shot Clock Operator: Joe Schwan

JV/V/C Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

JV/V Official Book: Kristi Zoellner

Announcer: Mike Imrie

National Anthem: GHS Senior Rebecca Poor and Junior Natalia Warrington

*Thank you,
Alexa Schuring, Athletic Director*



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

U.S. House torpedoed new spending plan as government shutdown nears Friday night

SD's Rep. Johnson votes yes, but opposition prevails

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - DECEMBER 19, 2024 4:54 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House failed to pass a Republican stopgap spending package Thursday, sharply increasing the odds a partial government shutdown will begin after the current funding bill expires Friday at midnight.

The 174-235 House vote came less than three hours after GOP leaders released a second stopgap spending bill this week. The first version, released just two days ago, was widely rejected by President-elect Donald Trump as well as his allies on and off Capitol Hill.

A total of 38 GOP lawmakers and 197 Democrats voted against passage. Only two Democrats voted in support of the measure. One Democrat voted "present."

House Republicans tried to approve the new measure under a process called suspension of the rules, which required at least two-thirds of lawmakers to support the legislation for passage, including Democrats. Trump endorsed this new version, which included a two-year suspension of the debt limit.

GOP leaders could next try to put the failed bill up for a vote under a rule, which requires a simple majority vote to approve, but that path takes a few more steps and isn't a guarantee this legislation could pass.

House Appropriations Chairman Tom Cole, R-Okla., said during floor debate the bill was necessary to avoid a shutdown and provide disaster aid to states throughout the country.

"We need to provide the necessary disaster recovery aid for states and communities as our fellow citizens rebuild and restore. The relief efforts are ongoing — it will be months, if not years, before life returns to normal," Cole said.

No input from Democrats

Connecticut Rep. Rosa DeLauro, the top Democrat on the Appropriations Committee, rebuked GOP lawmakers for walking away from the deal both parties reached on the first stopgap package.

"There were things in it that Democrats liked and Republicans did not, and there were things in it that Republicans liked and Democrats would have preferred to leave out. But that is the nature of government funding bills," DeLauro said. "They require compromise and the support of Democrats and Republicans."

The legislation House lawmakers were about to vote on had no input from Democrats, she said.

While Republicans have a narrow majority in the House, Democrats control the Senate and the White House, making bipartisan agreement on legislation essential to it becoming law.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre wrote in a statement released Thursday just before the vote that the GOP was "doing the bidding of their billionaire benefactors at the expense of hardworking Americans."

"Republicans are breaking their word to support a bipartisan agreement that would lower prescription drug costs and make it harder to offshore jobs to China — and instead putting forward a bill that paves the way for tax breaks for billionaires while cutting critical programs working families count on, from Social Security to Head Start," she wrote. "President Biden supports the bipartisan agreement to keep the government open, help communities recovering from disasters, and lower costs — not this giveaway for billionaires that Republicans are proposing at the 11th hour."

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Trump calls new bill 'a very good deal'

The stopgap spending package that failed Thursday night would have kept the government funded through mid-March while boosting disaster aid by about \$100 billion.

The legislation would have suspended the nation's debt limit for an additional two years through January 2027 and given Congress until September to finish the much overdue farm bill.

Trump cheered the new version of the stopgap spending bill before the vote after rejecting the first version released just two days ago.

"Speaker Mike Johnson and the House have come to a very good Deal for the American People," Trump wrote on social media. "The newly agreed to American Relief Act of 2024 will keep the Government open, fund our Great Farmers and others, and provide relief for those severely impacted by the devastating hurricanes."

"A VERY important piece, VITAL to the America First Agenda, was added as well – The date of the very unnecessary Debt Ceiling will be pushed out two years, to January 30, 2027," Trump added. "Now we can Make America Great Again, very quickly, which is what the People gave us a mandate to accomplish."

Two days of tension

The second stopgap bill came after a dramatic 48 hours that began with the Tuesday night release of a different stopgap spending package before Trump's ally Elon Musk called on GOP lawmakers to reject the bill their leadership team on Capitol Hill had negotiated over weeks.

Trump then told Republicans to address the debt limit in the package or get rid of it entirely, throwing another complex issue into the mix at the last minute.

The core elements of the stopgap spending package House Republicans released Thursday afternoon were similar to the Tuesday night package, though it dropped dozens of measures, including a provision allowing the nationwide sale of 15% ethanol blended gasoline year round.

The new package, same as the old package, doesn't include a long-standing provision that prevents members of Congress from receiving a cost of living adjustment. Unless that's changed, lawmakers would receive a 3.8% raise next year increasing their annual salary from \$174,000 to \$180,600.

"It removed key provisions to limit the power of pharmaceutical companies, and abandons our bipartisan efforts to ensure American dollars and intellectual property are reinvested in American businesses and workers; instead of fueling the Chinese Communist Party's technology and capabilities," DeLauro said during debate.

The new 116-page stopgap spending bill was considerably shorter than the 1,547-page version released Tuesday.

Several new deadlines

The spending package would have given Congress until March 14 to complete work on the dozen annual government funding bills that were supposed to become law by the start of the new fiscal year on Oct. 1.

It would have given the House and Senate until Sept. 30, 2025, to reach agreement on the five-year farm bill, which lawmakers were supposed to negotiate a new version of more than a year ago.

The legislation would suspend the debt limit through Jan. 30, 2027.

The bill includes tens of billions in emergency spending to help communities throughout the country recover from various natural disasters, including wildfires, tornadoes and hurricanes.

A summary of the bill, released by House Democrats on Tuesday, showed the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Department of Agriculture would receive the bulk of the natural disaster recovery funding. House Republicans didn't appear to have altered any of the original funding levels for disaster aid in the updated Thursday version.

The USDA would get \$33.5 billion in funding, with \$21 billion of that designated for disaster assistance and another \$10 billion for economic assistance to farmers and producers.

Other agriculture assistance funding would go toward the Agriculture Research Service, Emergency

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Watershed Protection Program, Emergency Forest Restoration Program and Rural Development Disaster Assistance Fund, among several others.

The Department of Homeland Security would receive \$30.8 billion in funding, with \$29 billion for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's disaster relief fund.

An additional \$1.5 billion would go to the Hermit's Peak and Calf Canyon Fire fund "to continue efforts to support families who suffered damages due to the April 2022 wildfire," according to the summary.

The wildfire was the largest in New Mexico's history and caused about \$5.14 billion in damages, according to a report released this week.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grant program for disaster recovery would receive \$12 billion in additional funding.

Another \$8 billion would go to the Transportation Department to "reimburse states and territories for damage from natural disasters to roads and bridges in the National Highway System, including 100 percent of costs associated with rebuilding the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore," according to Democrats' summary.

The Forest Service would get \$6.4 billion for ongoing recovery efforts from natural disasters that took place in 2022, 2023 and this year. The National Park Service would receive \$2.3 billion as part of the Department of the Interior's \$3 billion total.

The Defense Department would get \$3.4 billion to repair damages related to natural disasters. The Army Corps of Engineers would receive \$1.5 billion for repairs and to increase resiliency.

The Small Business Administration would receive \$2.25 billion for disaster loans.

Filibuster threat

Shortly before House GOP leaders announced their second stopgap package, North Carolina Sen. Thom Tillis and South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham committed to holding a talking filibuster to delay passage of any stopgap funding measures if that bill doesn't include substantial disaster aid.

The two, along with North Carolina Sen. Ted Budd, all of whom are Republicans, held a press conference Thursday afternoon to urge GOP leaders in the House to keep the roughly \$100 billion in emergency disaster aid in any short-term spending package.

They also rejected calls from some members of their own party to find ways to pay for the new emergency spending, saying that's not how disaster aid packages have traditionally been handled.

"When you're in the middle of a crisis, I don't think anybody's going to want to hear somebody come to the floor and talk about the fiscal responsibility of giving these people a home again, or giving them an opportunity to open up a business again and employ people," Tillis said. "So, no I don't think \$10 billion or \$20 billion, and 'I promise we'll do something more in March' is an acceptable solution. We know what the need is today. It was negotiated in a package and it needs to be in a package to get my support to get out of here."

Graham sought to explain the realities of divided government and pointed out that even when Republicans control the House and Senate next year, they'll still need Democratic support on spending bills.

"We need 60 votes to get it done in the Senate," Graham said, referring to the chamber's legislative filibuster, which requires at least 60 lawmakers vote to advance bills toward final passage.

"Mike Johnson is going to have to pick up a handful, at least, of Democrats, because there's some Republicans who will never vote for anything," Graham added.

Tillis was unable to answer a question about whether a partial government shutdown beginning Saturday at 12:01 a.m. would affect the federal government's ongoing natural disaster response in his home state.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency, Department of Agriculture, Department of Transportation and numerous federal departments would be required to follow their shutdown guidance if Congress doesn't fund the government on time.

Those departments and agencies divide up their staffs into excepted employees, whose jobs address the protection of life or property, and non-excepted employees, who don't.

Neither category of federal employee gets paid until after the shutdown ends.

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American Federation of Government Employees National President Everett Kelley released a written statement Thursday that a shutdown would harm federal workers who "inspect our food, protect our borders, ensure safe travel during the holidays, and provide relief to disaster victims."

"Over 642,000 of them are veterans of our armed services," Kelley wrote. "Allowing them to go without a paycheck over the holidays is unacceptable."

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

COMMENTARY

South Dakota doesn't have to rob Peter to build a prison

by Seth Tupper

To understand South Dakota's state budget situation, imagine you're part of a family that's been saving up to build a dream home.

Perhaps you recently experienced a sad event — the death of a relative — that turned into financial gain with a large inheritance. You've worked a lot of overtime the past few years while times were good in your industry. You've paid down or paid off your credit cards, student loans and car loans. Your credit score has risen.

Because of all those factors in and out of your control, you've been able to do something remarkable. You've socked away more than two-thirds of the money you'll need to build that house.

Then your situation changes.

Things go south in your industry, and your boss cuts your hours at work. An unforeseen health problem pops up. Your kids become teenagers, and they need cars and car insurance and money for college.

Your plan to save the rest of that money for your dream home runs up against reality. But your living situation is getting worse. You're in an old house that's deteriorating.

Do you say to your family, "Sorry, you're going to have to postpone that doctor visit, we're all going to share one car, nobody's going to college, and we're also cutting back on food, clothing and fun, so we can pay cash when we build a house"?

I doubt it. Like most of us who live in the real world where compromise is unavoidable, you'd probably use your savings as a down payment on the house, and then use your good credit to get a loan for the rest, realizing you can always make extra payments and pay off the debt early.

How does this relate to state government?

For South Dakota, the sad event was the COVID-19 pandemic. The inheritance was billions in federal pandemic relief money. The overtime pay was sales tax revenue fueled by the federal dollars circulating in the economy. The savings are \$569 million that legislators set aside during the past few years.

And the dream home is a prison. That's an odd thing to dream about, but this is South Dakota, where Republicans have been in charge for decades.

Those Republicans showed commendable discipline by shoveling some money into savings while the state was flush with cash. But now things have changed. The federal pandemic money is spent. Sales tax collections are declining. The state penitentiary — parts of which date to 1881 — is so outdated that prison officials say it's unsafe. It's time to make difficult decisions.

Gov. Kristi Noem wants to put away more money to replace the penitentiary. Accounting for the interest she expects the state to earn from the \$569 million already in the prison savings account, she said the state needs another \$182 million to build the \$825 million facility without incurring debt.

To come up with that \$182 million, she's proposing cuts. Those include delaying maintenance and repairs of state buildings, giving only a 1.25% funding increase to schools, and making severe cuts to agencies including public broadcasting, the State Library, the Department of Social Services and the Department of Human Services. The latter two departments manage an array of programs including Medicaid, child care licensing, child protection, foster care, food assistance, and support programs for elderly and disabled

people.

Meanwhile, you may have heard some of our state's leaders brag about South Dakota's "triple-A" bond rating. That's an outstanding credit score. It means the state can borrow money at great rates.

Before legislators begin considering Noem's budget proposals next month, they should ask their constituents some questions. Do they want drastic cuts in public services so the state can pay cash for a new prison? Do they want to avoid some of those cuts by borrowing money to finance part of the prison project? Do they want lawmakers to take another look at factors affecting the project's cost, such as the size, design and proposed location south of Sioux Falls?

It seems clear South Dakota needs to do something about its penitentiary, and paying cash to build a prison sounds fiscally responsible.

But fiscal responsibility isn't just about balancing numbers. It's also about balancing goals like debt avoidance with other priorities, such as the services that South Dakotans need, want and expect to be delivered with the tax dollars they provide to their government.

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.

Phonics-based 'science of reading' on track for South Dakota implementation

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - DECEMBER 19, 2024 3:37 PM

Phonics-based instruction could soon be a state standard in South Dakota. The Department of Education is working to align state standards for English and language arts with the phonics-based "science of reading" framework.

The proposed standards revision had its second hearing Thursday in Sioux Falls during a South Dakota Board of Education Standards meeting. It'll be discussed at the board's meetings in Pierre and Rapid City next year before approval.

The revision follows a global debate — often called the "reading wars" — about how best to teach children to read. One side advocates for an emphasis on phonics, which is understanding the relationship between sounds and letters. The other side prefers a "whole language" approach that puts a stronger emphasis on understanding meaning, with some phonics mixed in. The "balanced literacy" approach gained popularity in the 2000s, which is phonics-inclusive but favors whole language instruction.

Gov. Kristi Noem and the Legislature invested \$6 million earlier this year to train teachers in the science of reading.

The timing for the standards review "couldn't be better," said Shannon Malone, director of the Department of Education's division of learning and instruction, during Thursday's meeting.

Most of South Dakota's teachers who were trained in phonics before "whole language" and "balanced literacy" was the standard have retired. Just under 50% of South Dakota students last school year didn't meet standards for English and language arts, according to the state report card.

"We hope to see those numbers go up. I believe there's good evidence they will," state Education Department Secretary Joe Graves told the board.

The department is wrapping up its current voluntary training program on phonics-based teaching and transitioning to courses through the South Dakota Board of Regents, using part of the \$6 million in funding from the Legislature. The department hopes to begin classes in fall 2025, open to all public, private and tribal school teachers in the state.

As part of the higher education system, state Department of Education officials hope the program will be used to train college students majoring in teaching before they graduate.

A \$54 million Comprehensive Literacy State Development grant awarded to South Dakota from the federal government will also be used to help local school districts implement a phonics-based approach

over the next five years. Those competitive grants, with applications opening in early 2025, can go toward improvements such as literacy coach salaries, teacher training or curriculum reviews.

The board also held hearings for optional content standards for computer science and the Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings, which educate students on culture and traditions of Indigenous South Dakotans. The computer science standards would be new standards to explore technology, such as artificial intelligence, in the classrooms and workforce. One person spoke against the revised OSEU standards, saying that the standards needed more tribal consultation and more representation of the Nakota and Dakota tribes.

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.

Rounds bill meant to boost veteran homeownership on tribal lands heads to president's desk

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 19, 2024 10:49 AM

A bill sponsored by South Dakota Republican Sen. Mike Rounds that's meant to make it easier for Native American veterans living on trust land to get or refinance mortgages is headed to President Joe Biden's desk.

Rounds' Native American Direct Loan Improvement Act was first introduced as standalone legislation in 2022. Its text was folded into a farther-reaching bill called the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act.

The U.S. Senate voted unanimously on Dec. 12 to pass the larger bill; the U.S. House voted 389-9 to pass it on Dec. 16.

The loan improvement act aims to simplify the mortgage lending process for veterans who want to buy homes on trust lands, whose titles are held by the U.S. Department of Interior for the benefit of tribes.

The loan program it means to improve is administered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, first passed in 1992 as a way to get past some of the complexity of lending on trust lands in impoverished areas.

According to a news release from Rounds, the bill would allow eligible veterans to use the program to refinance existing mortgages on the same property and expand outreach about the program through collaboration between local lenders and the VA. It would also create a relending program to let financial institutions called Native Community Development Financial Institutions — credit union-like conduits to lending on tribal lands such as the Kyle-based Lakota Fund — get loans through the program and funnel the funds to qualified Native American vets.

A 2022 study commissioned by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that the program originated 89 loans in the contiguous U.S. and 91 loans in Hawaii in the space of about a decade — representing about 1% of eligible veterans. The report said the VA did not collect and share meaningful data on the program, have adequate performance measures in place to track success or collaborate regularly with other agencies and local lending offices to educate people about their options.

In his news release, Rounds called homeownership "part of the American dream and key to building wealth."

"I am pleased this bill is heading to the President's desk to be signed into law, making the dream of homeownership a reality for more of our veterans," Rounds wrote.

John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

States to lose out on billions if GOP spurns disaster aid in spending bill, Dems say

Impact to South Dakota is said to be \$1.5 billion

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - DECEMBER 19, 2024 9:29 AM

WASHINGTON — U.S. House Democrats released details early Thursday on how much federal disaster aid each state would lose if Republicans drop it from a stopgap spending bill that's been rejected by their own members as well as President-elect Donald Trump.

The state-by-state breakdown of roughly \$100 billion came just hours after Trump and many of his closest allies, including tech billionaire Elon Musk, urged GOP leaders in Congress to walk away from a bipartisan year-end spending package.

That short-term spending bill, or some version of it, must become law before Friday at midnight, otherwise a partial government shutdown would begin. A partial shutdown would halt paychecks to federal employees and U.S. troops just ahead of the holiday season.

The breakdown shows states battered by hurricanes and other natural disasters such as California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia would miss out on more than \$2 billion each, though the figures for the larger states go above \$10 billion.

Misinformation over pay raise

The stalemate over the short-term spending bill began shortly after congressional leaders released the 1,547-page package on Tuesday evening.

Speaker Mike Johnson defended some of the extraneous measures during a press conference Tuesday before it was publicly released and during a Fox News interview Wednesday morning.

The Louisiana Republican reinforced the need for disaster aid and economic assistance to farmers, though the spending package includes dozens of unrelated items, including a provision that would allow the nationwide sale of 15% ethanol blended gasoline year round.

The bill also dropped a long-standing provision that blocked members of Congress from getting an annual cost of living adjustment salary increase.

There was considerable misinformation Wednesday around how much of a boost in pay lawmakers would stand to receive next Congress, riling up people who didn't have access to the correct figures.

The incorrect numbers were spread by many online, but received special attention from Musk, who advocated shutting down the government before Trump and Vice President-elect J.D. Vance weighed in later Wednesday.

Lawmakers would receive a maximum 3.8% salary increase, boosting their annual pay from \$174,000 to \$180,600, according to a report released in September by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service. Lawmakers haven't received a COLA increase since January 2009.

Sudden debt limit demand

The full package, which congressional leaders and committees spent weeks negotiating, would have given Congress until March 14 to negotiate a bicameral agreement on the dozen annual government funding bills that were supposed to become law by the start of the fiscal year on Oct. 1.

Republicans wanted to hold over the full-year spending bills until they have unified control of government next year.

The package would have given lawmakers until Sept. 30 to work out a deal on the five-year farm bill, which they should have completed work on well over a year ago.

Trump pressed Wednesday for lawmakers to add the debt limit to negotiations, with just about two days left before the shutdown deadline. Working out a bipartisan agreement to raise or suspend the nation's borrowing authority typically takes months of talks.

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Trump said he didn't want to have to deal with the debt limit debate once his second administration begins on Jan. 20 and would rather have had it on President Joe Biden's record.

Trump told NBC News on Thursday morning that he wanted Congress to eliminate the debt limit entirely, marking a substantial shift in how Republicans have approached the cap on borrowing.

The GOP typically leverages the debt ceiling debate to push for spending cuts, though not always successfully.

Democratic leaders in Congress maintain they are not going to renegotiate with Republicans, which would prevent any Republican-only bill from becoming law before the deadline. While the GOP controls the House, Democrats right now run the Senate and hold the White House.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, said Thursday morning in a floor speech that GOP infighting over the bipartisan bill was risking an unnecessary government shutdown.

"Unfortunately, it seems Republicans are in shambles over in the House," Schumer said. "But as they try to piece things together, they should remember one thing — the only way to get things done is through bipartisanship."

Jeffries urges vote on stopgap

House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., on didn't entirely rule out lawmakers from his party voting for a slimmed-down stopgap spending bill, but urged GOP leaders to stick with the version they spent weeks negotiating.

"This reckless Republican-driven shutdown can be avoided if House Republicans will simply do what is right for the American people and stick with the bipartisan agreement that they themselves negotiated," Jeffries said at a Thursday press conference.

Trump's insistence that the package address the debt limit in some way was "premature at best," he said. Jeffries also said Democrats would not give Johnson extra votes to secure the speaker's gavel in January, should several of his GOP colleagues refuse to vote for him during a floor vote.

Numerous far-right Republicans have hinted or said directly that they might not support Johnson continuing on as speaker due to their grievances over provisions in the stopgap spending bill.

Republicans will have an extremely narrow House majority next year, meaning Johnson can only lose a few votes before the GOP would begin the third prolonged speaker race in just two years.

Former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy began this session of Congress in January 2023 going through 15 floor votes before he was able to secure the votes needed to become speaker.

Republicans voting to oust him a little over a year ago led to several GOP speaker nominees, who were unable to get the 218 votes needed to become speaker on a floor vote or who opted to not even try.

Republicans nominated House Majority Leader Steve Scalise of Louisiana, Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan and Minnesota's Tom Emmer before landing on Johnson, who was able to win a floor vote.

Musk for speaker?

Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, who tried but failed to oust Johnson as speaker in May, has been leading the charge to select someone else, possibly Musk. The Constitution is silent on the question of whether the speaker must be a member of the House.

"The establishment needs to be shattered just like it was yesterday," Greene wrote on social media. "This could be the way."

SD impact: \$1.5 billion

FROM SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

U.S. House Democrats say South Dakota stands to lose out on \$1.5 billion, mostly for farmers, if Republicans drop disaster aid from a stopgap spending bill that's been rejected by their own members as well as President-elect Donald Trump.

Stripping funding to address agricultural disasters from the bipartisan agreement would prevent farmers

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in every state from receiving disaster and economic relief, House Democrats said. Their state-by-state breakdown says South Dakotans would lose out on \$951 million in ag disaster payments and \$540 million in economic assistance payments for agriculture.

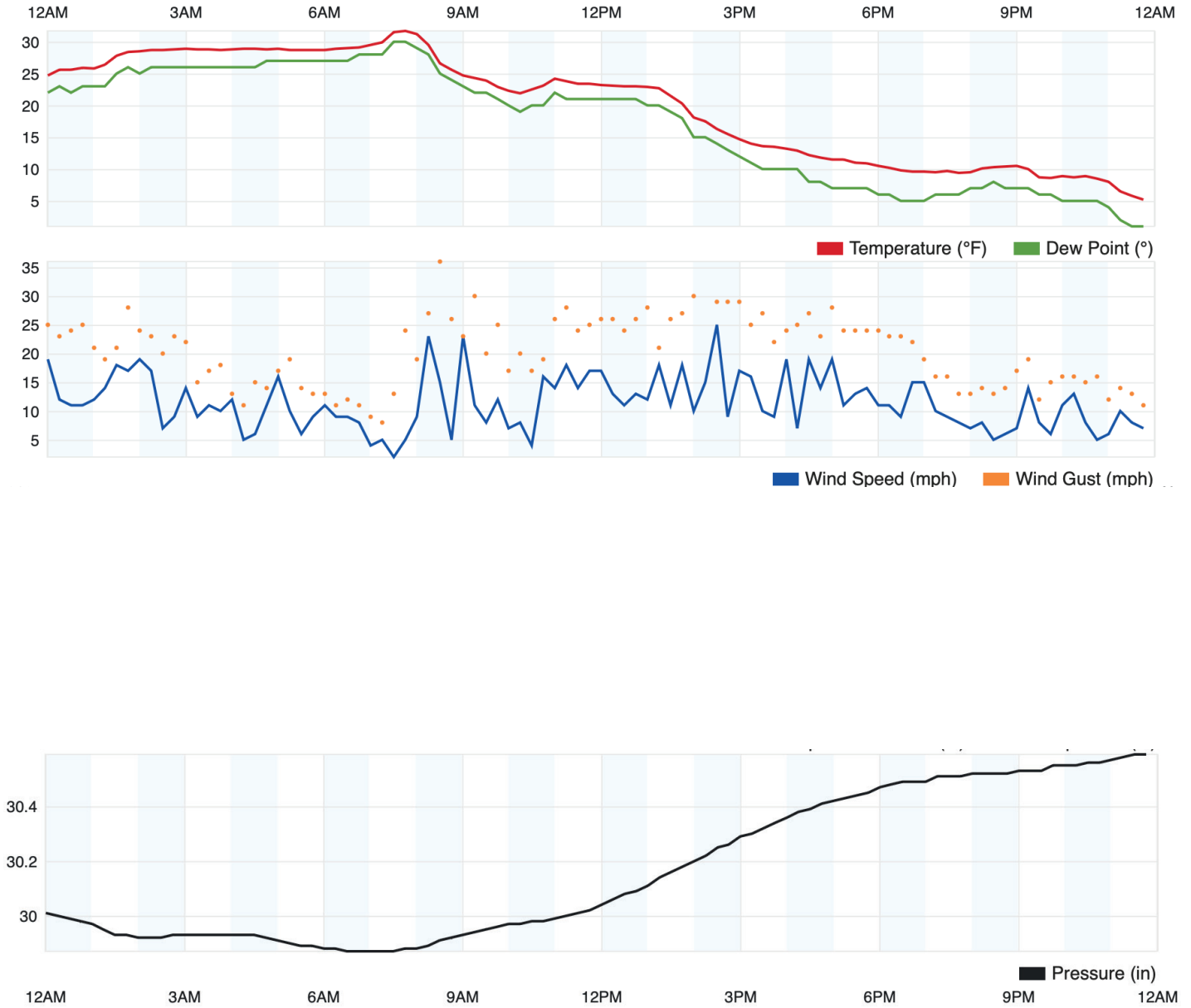
Beyond agriculture, House Democrats also say South Dakota would lose out on nearly \$40 million in combined aid for emergency repairs to roads and bridges in disaster-impacted areas, and grant assistance for long-term housing, infrastructure and economic recovery needs for areas most impacted by disasters.

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 14 °F

Mostly Sunny
then Slight
Chance Snow

Tonight



Low: 11 °F

Slight Chance
Snow then
Partly Cloudy

Saturday



High: 24 °F

Mostly Sunny

Saturday Night



Low: 12 °F

Partly Cloudy

Sunday



High: 32 °F

Mostly Cloudy

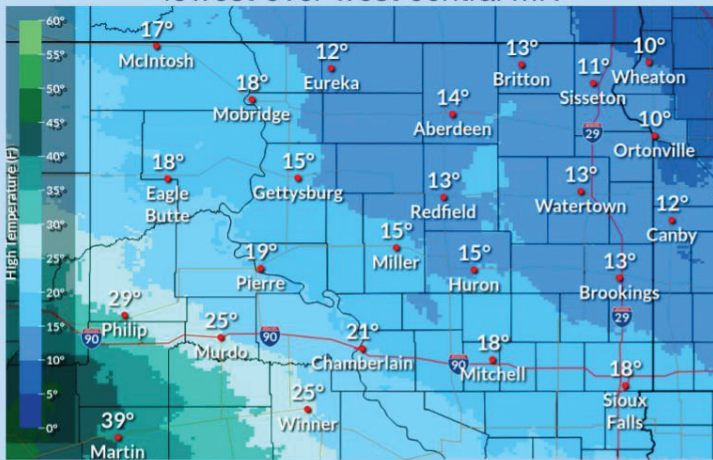


Today



Cold! A 20% chance of light snow over northeastern South Dakota through this evening. Little to no snow accumulation expected.

High Temperatures: 10 to 25°
lowest over west central MN



Temperature trends through Friday

	Maximum Temperature Forecast (°F)							
	12/20 Fri	12/21 Sat	12/22 Sun	12/23 Mon	12/24 Tue	12/25 Wed	12/26 Thu	12/27 Fri
Aberdeen	14	25	32	29	31	35	35	35
Miller	15	31	37	34	37	39	40	40
Mobridge	18	34	40	34	43	43	42	41
Murdo	25	44	47	39	45	46	44	43
Ortonville	10	23	29	27	29	32	33	35
Pierre	20	38	44	41	44	45	44	43
Sisseton	11	23	30	26	30	33	34	35
Watertown	12	24	31	28	30	33	33	35

The cold air will remain in place today, with a 20 percent chance of light snow over northeastern South Dakota through this evening. Temperatures will be on the increase Saturday. Temperatures Sunday through Monday will be 5 to 15 degrees above normal, with widespread 30s to mid 40s. The warmest air will remain west of the Missouri River.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 32 °F at 7:37 AM

Low Temp: 6 °F at 11:29 PM

Wind: 36 mph at 8:25 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 46 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 60 in 1893

Record Low: -29 in 1916

Average High: 27

Average Low: 7

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.38

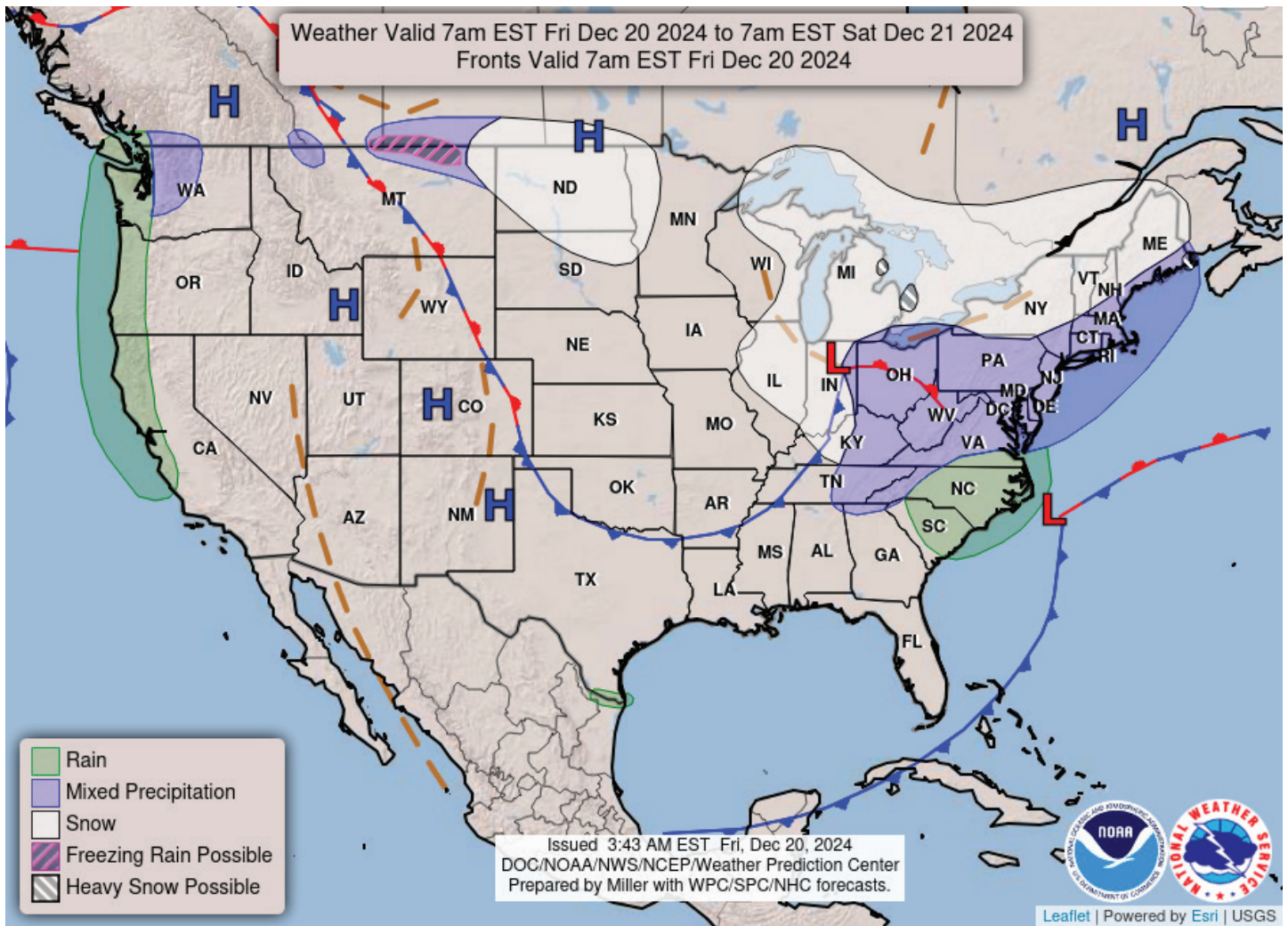
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.59

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 4:53:26 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:07:45 am



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Today in Weather History

December 20, 1991: Light freezing drizzle and freezing rain developed over northern South Dakota from Timber Lake to Webster. Numerous car accidents were attributed to slippery conditions. The Aberdeen Police Department reported 24 accidents in Aberdeen, but only one resulted in an injury. Numerous businesses closed and schools were canceled.

December 20, 2008: Arctic air combined with blustery northwest winds brought extreme wind chills to the central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota from the late afternoon of the 20th until the afternoon of the 21st. Wind chills of 35 below to 45 below zero were common across the area.

1836: A famous "sudden freeze" occurred in central Illinois. A cold front with 70 mph winds swept through around Noon, dropping the temperature from 40 degrees to near zero in a matter of minutes. Many settlers froze to death. Folklore told of chickens frozen in their tracks and men frozen to saddles. Ice in streams reportedly froze to six inches in a few hours.

1929: An exceptional storm produced snow from the Middle Rio Grande Valley of Texas to southern Arkansas on December 20 - 21st, 1929. The storm produced 26 inches of snow near Hillsboro, Texas, and 24 inches in 24 hours in Clifton.

1942 - An early cold wave sent the temperature plunging to 3 degrees below zero at Nantucket, MA, and to 11 degrees below zero at Boston MA. (The Weather Channel)

1977: A "Once in a Lifetime" wind and dust storm struck the south end of the San Joaquin Valley in California. Winds reached 88 mph at Arvin before the anemometer broke, and gusts were estimated at 192 mph at Arvin by a U.S. Geological Survey. Meadows Field in Bakersfield recorded sustained 46 mph winds with a gust of 63 mph. The strong winds generated a wall of dust resembling a tidal wave that was 5,000 feet high over Arvin. Blowing sand stripped painted surfaces to bare metal and trapped people in vehicles for several hours. 70% of homes received structural damage in Arvin, Edison, and East Bakersfield. 120,000 Kern County customers lost power. Agriculture was impacted as 25 million tons of soil was loosened from grazing lands. Five people died, and damages totaled \$34 million.

These strong winds also spread a large fire through the Honda Canyon on Vandenberg Air Force Base in southern California. This fire, which started from a power pole on Tranquillon Ridge being blown over, claimed the lives of Base Commander Colonel Joseph Turner, Fire Chief Billy Bell, and Assistant Fire Chief Eugene Cooper. Additionally, severe burns were experienced by Heavy Equipment Operator Clarence McCauley. He later died due to complications from the burns.

1984: Lili, a rare December hurricane, was officially declared a tropical system in the central Atlantic as a distinct eye type feature was apparent on satellite imagery. The hurricane peaked at sustained 80 mph winds and a pressure of 980 millibars or 28.94 inches of mercury, a very respectable Category 1 Hurricane in December.

1987 - Heavy snow fell in the northern mountains of Colorado, with 15 inches reported in the Mary Jane ski area. Strong and gusty winds prevailed from the Northern High Plains to the Great Lakes. Winds gusted to 54 mph at Buffalo NY, and reached 66 mph at Livingston MT. Rain, freezing rain, sleet and snow fell across New England, with up to seven inches of snow in Maine. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Strong southerly winds ahead of a cold front in the central U.S. gusted to 70 mph at Indianapolis IN. The high winds toppled a masonry wall killing a construction worker. Low pressure and a trailing cold front brought rain and snow and high winds to the western U.S. Winds gusted to 90 mph at the Callahan Ranch south of Reno NV. Soda Springs, in the Sierra Nevada Range of California, received 17 inches of snow in less than 24 hours. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Brutal northwest winds ushered bitter cold arctic air into the north central U.S. International Falls, MN, and Warroad, MN, tied for honors as the cold spot in the nation with morning lows of 34 degrees below zero. Minot ND reported a wind chill reading of 81 degrees below zero. Squalls produced more heavy snow in the Great Lakes Region. Erie PA received 21 inches of snow, including four inches in one hour, to bring their total snow cover to 39 inches, an all-time record for that location. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

2006 - A major winter storm affected Colorado, dumping several feet of snow on areas of the Rocky Mountains. The snowstorm temporarily closed the Denver International Airport.



No Mistake

Walter came home from Sunday school with a question all over his face. "Mom," he asked, "did the shepherds have washing machines where they kept their sheep?"

"Shepherds? Washing machines?" After a moment she said, "No, darling, they did not have washing machines. Why do you ask?"

"Well, Mrs. Mathis was reading the story of the birth of Jesus and she said, 'While shepherds washed their socks that night...' and I didn't understand what was going on."

While we often think of the shepherds in the field that night, the glory that appeared with the angel and the fear that gripped them, we seldom connect the shepherds in that field with the Good Shepherd.

Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd" twice in John's Gospel. In those statements, he summarized all of the prophetic images of His role as prophet in the Old Testament. This declaration is a claim to His divinity as revealed in the Old Testament and focuses on His love, protection, and guidance of us – His lambs – in the New Testament.

But there is more. Not only is He our Shepherd but He chose to identify Himself as the "good shepherd" – and good is a term that carries with it nobility. It stands in sharp contrast to shepherds who were hired hands who worked and cared only for their own self-interests.

Prayer: We thank You, Lord, for loving us, for being our Good Shepherd and for laying down Your life for us. May we always follow You, our "Good Shepherd!" In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

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:
12.17.24

56 66 67 68 69 18

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$825,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 15
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.18.24

5 10 35 39 47 5

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$17,920,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 15
DRAW: Mins 15 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.19.24

2 5 13 18 29 16

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 30 Mins
DRAW: 15 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.18.24

3 12 23 25 33

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$164,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 30
DRAW: Mins 15 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.18.24

41 45 52 56 67 6

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 59
DRAW: Mins 15 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.18.24

6 15 18 33 49 7

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$88,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 59
DRAW: Mins 15 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
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
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

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Centerville 64, Avon 38
Elk Point-Jefferson 46, Parker 35
Faith 59, Bison 40
Faulkton 56, Herreid-Selby 39
Flandreau 70, Beresford 36
Freeman 76, Canistota 42
Gayville-Volin High School 53, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 51, OT
Gregory 64, Colome 2
Hill City 69, New Underwood 42
Lennox 78, Madison 38
Leola-Frederick High School 77, Aberdeen Christian 68
McCook Central-Montrose 43, Chester 32
Parkston 57, Chamberlain 26
Platte-Geddes 52, Burke 21
Sioux Falls Jefferson 62, Brandon Valley 56
Stanley County 65, Philip 31
Todd County 71, McLaughlin 35
Wagner 64, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 56
Warner 47, Aberdeen Roncalli 46
White River 63, Tiospa Zina 39
Lakota Nations Invitational=
He Sapa Bracket=
Crazy Horse 76, Tiospaye Topa 38
Crow Creek Tribal School 55, Takini 14
Dupree 58, Wakpala 39
Marty 69, Oelrichs 38
Matosica Bracket=
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 59, Omaha Nation, Neb. 51
Santee, Neb. 62, Lower Brule 61
Oceti Sakowin Bracket=
Custer 60, Wall 32
Lakota Tech 61, Mahpíya Lúta Red Cloud 55
Pine Ridge 94, St. Francis Indian 64
Rapid City Christian 74, Little Wound 25

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Centerville 59, Avon 26
Colman-Egan 47, Dell Rapids St Mary 44
Elk Point-Jefferson 47, Parker 18
Flandreau 59, Beresford 39
Hill City 51, New Underwood 16
Lennox 65, Madison 21
Leola-Frederick High School 38, Aberdeen Christian 19

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McCook Central-Montrose 59, Chester 51
Newell 66, McIntosh High School 44
Parkston 65, Chamberlain 32
Philip 63, Stanley County 40
Potter County 55, Highmore-Harrold 50
Sioux Falls Washington 50, Harrisburg 22
Vermillion 55, Ponca, Neb. 33
Wagner 66, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 28
Winner 52, Burke 39
Lakota Nations Invitational=
He Sapa Bracket=
Pine Ridge 54, Takini 12
Santee, Neb. 75, Crazy Horse 14
Tiospa Zina 56, St. Francis Indian 48
Wakpala 57, Oelrichs 50
Makosica Bracket=
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 63, Marty 25
Crow Creek Tribal School 43, Dupree 33
Lower Brule 40, Todd County 38
Oceti Sakowin Bracket=
Lakota Tech 56, McLaughlin 43
Mahpiya Luta Red Cloud 84, Omaha Nation, Neb. 48
Rapid City Christian 63, White River 25
Wall 57, Custer 40
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Deuel vs. Redfield, ppd.
Miller vs. Mt. Vernon/Plankinton, ppd.

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

Gonsalves' 22 lead Utah Tech over South Dakota 92-87

By The Associated Press undefined

ST. GEORGE, Utah (AP) — Noa Gonsalves' 22 points helped Utah Tech defeat South Dakota 92-87 on Thursday.

Gonsalves shot 6 for 13 (6 for 11 from 3-point range) and 4 of 4 from the free-throw line for the Trailblazers (4-10). Beon Riley scored 21 points while going 7 of 11 and 6 of 9 from the free-throw line and added 14 rebounds. Samuel Ariyibi shot 5 of 7 from the field to finish with 11 points, while adding 12 rebounds.

Kaleb Stewart led the Coyotes (9-5) in scoring, finishing with 26 points and two steals. Chase Forte added 24 points, six rebounds, four assists and two steals for South Dakota. Isaac Bruns also had 12 points and six rebounds.

South Dakota State beats Chadron State 87-72

By The Associated Press undefined

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Kalen Garry's 16 points helped South Dakota State defeat Chadron State 87-72 on Thursday night.

Garry went 5 of 9 from the field (4 for 8 from 3-point range) for the Jackrabbits (9-5). Joe Sayler scored 16 points, going 6 of 8 (4 for 6 from 3-point range).

Zy Wright led the Eagles in scoring, finishing with 15 points, eight rebounds and two steals. Darrius Miles added 14 points, eight rebounds and two steals for Chadron State. Jalen Thomas had 13 points.

Snow, ice and strong winds make for dangerous conditions in upper Midwest

By JACK DURA and JIM SALTER Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — A fast-moving winter storm brought snow, ice, strong winds and bitter cold to much of the upper Midwest, snarling traffic in the Twin Cities and forcing North Dakota officials to shut down an interstate highway.

The National Weather Service issued a winter storm warning for large areas of Minnesota, Wisconsin and the Dakotas, where some interstates were snow-covered and treacherous. Several fender-benders and slide-offs were reported, some causing injuries. There were no immediate reports of deaths.

Up to 7 inches (18 centimeters) of snow were possible in Minnesota, including the Twin Cities, where Thursday morning rush hour slowed to a crawl and several accidents were reported as snowfall intensified.

North Dakota was getting the worst of it. Blustery winds of up to 50 mph (80 kilometers per hour) were common Wednesday night into Thursday morning. Snowfall totals were mostly under 6 inches (15 centimeters) — not a lot by North Dakota standards, but enough to make roads dangerous.

The North Dakota Highway Patrol says 15 people were injured early Thursday when a truck tried to stop at an intersection in the state's southwest corner but slid on an icy road, causing a crash with a van and an SUV. The crash happened amid high winds, blowing snow and sleet near Reeder, about 115 miles (185 kilometers) southwest of Bismarck. Apart from the drivers, those injured were young, ranging in age from 8 to 18. Five of the injuries were serious, according to the highway patrol.

Freezing rain only added to the slipperiness. The North Dakota Highway Patrol issued a "no travel advisory" urging motorists to stay off the roads. That wasn't an option for large vehicles in one corner of the state: "No Oversize loads in the Northwest Region until further notice," the patrol posted on Facebook.

A 50-mile (80-kilometer) stretch of Interstate 94 in North Dakota, starting at the Montana state line, was closed for about 90 minutes Thursday morning when snow and ice made the road virtually impassable, and eventually blocked by trucks.

"It's a section of the Badlands that goes through that area, so there's quite a few hills," highway patrol Sgt. Coby Hubble said. "We had commercial motor vehicles that could not pass through that area and became stuck."

Snowfall of 5 to 7 inches (13 to 18 centimeters) was expected in parts of Wisconsin and Minnesota. Minnesota forecasters called for gusty winds throughout the day, creating the potential for whiteout conditions.

Planes were grounded for a time Thursday morning at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport because of snow and ice. The airport's website said that as of early afternoon, 63 arriving flights were delayed and 89 departures were delayed.

Phil Helfrich was fueling up his car in windy and largely barren Bismarck in anticipation of a trip to Denver on Friday to see his grandchildren. The weather, he said, wouldn't stop him, noting that his car was equipped with snow tires. He also packed a winter survival kit.

"I'm excited and my grandboys are excited," Helfrich said.

In some ways, the snow was overdue. Until this week, less than 3 inches (8 centimeters) of snow had fallen in the Twin Cities, which typically gets over a foot (30 centimeters) of snow by mid-December.

Whether the snow sticks around long enough for a white Christmas is uncertain. The forecast through the holiday is snow-free for most of the upper Midwest, with temperatures rising above freezing early next week.

New House GOP budget proposal revives Farm Bill extension and aid money but drops ethanol provision

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — American farmers are hoping that aid to agriculture will be revived as Congress struggles to pass a short-term spending bill that would keep the federal government funded and avert a

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looming partial government shutdown set to begin after midnight Friday night.

A one-year extension of federal farm programs, around \$30 billion in economic relief and an agreement that would increase sales of a higher blend of ethanol, called E15, were part of a bipartisan deal that collapsed Wednesday after President-elect Donald Trump and his allies denounced the overall package. But even as he rejected that deal, Trump signaled that he was at least aware of concerns in farm country, which voted heavily for him in the election.

A new House Republican version announced Thursday kept the one-year Farm Bill extension and the economic aid but dropped the ethanol provision. It remained unclear whether it could clear both chambers amid opposition from Democrats and some conservative Republicans, and get President Joe Biden's signature, in time to prevent a shutdown.

Both versions of the proposed "continuing resolution" would extend Farm Bill programs for another year after lawmakers were unable to agree on a new five-year package despite months of negotiations. They also include \$10 billion to help farmers who've been struggling with high interest rates, declining crop prices and rising production costs that are outpacing farm revenues. Producers also would get \$20 billion of the \$100 billion in disaster aid in the package.

"SUCCESS in Washington!" Trump posted on social media. "Speaker Mike Johnson and the House have come to a very good Deal for the American People. The newly agreed to American Relief Act of 2024 will keep the Government open, fund our Great Farmers and others, and provide relief for those severely impacted by the devastating hurricanes."

Farm groups say the aid they seek wouldn't make producers whole, but it would give them some badly needed stability as they apply for loans this winter to prepare for the spring planting.

According to fresh projections from the U.S. Department of Agriculture this month, net farm income is expected to decline 4.1% for 2024 after falling 19.4% in 2023 from the record highs reached in 2022.

American Farm Bureau President Zippy Duvall urged Congress in a letter Wednesday night to preserve the farm provisions in a new agreement.

"Any alternative Continuing Resolution (CR) must include: a farm bill extension, aid to rebuild after natural disasters, economic assistance to bridge the gap until we can get to a new farm bill, and year-round E-15 sales," Duval wrote. "Weather-related natural disasters in 2023 and 2024 have crippled communities across the country. The weather events may have passed, but unthinkable wreckage remains. Entire communities must be rebuilt."

Carolyn Olson -- who raises organic corn, soybean and wheat near Cottonwood in southwestern Minnesota -- said relief would be helpful to farmers who've been affected by natural disasters, whether that's drought in the Midwest or hurricanes in the Southeast.

Olson, who is vice president of the Minnesota Farm Bureau, said November through February can be a critical time because it's when farmers make their big decisions for the next year.

"It's really important for farmers to have some certainty and for their leaders knowing that it will be OK to lend to their farms," she said. "That's kind of the big unknown that we're facing. Some farmers are very concerned about what their loan officers are going to say."

That includes the Olsons. While their corn crop was good, and they also make money from finishing about 14,000 conventional hogs a year, they lost their entire 2024 wheat crop to disease. So that has added to the stress they're facing, she said. And as organic farmers, they don't have the cost of herbicides but still face high costs for other expenses, such as fuel to heat their barns.

"We need Congress to vote yes on this," Olson said.

Corn growers had pushed hard for a provision in the failed proposal that would allow for permanent, year-round sales of gasoline with 15% ethanol, which is produced from corn. Standard unleaded gas can contain up to 10% ethanol. But House Republicans didn't include it in their stripped-down proposal. Industry groups were still hoping to restore it.

"Pulling E15 out of the bill makes absolutely no sense and is an insult to America's farmers and renewable fuel producers," Renewable Fuels Association President and CEO Geoff Cooper said in a statement.

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"It's a kick in the teeth to rural America, and we are urging members to vote 'no' on any package that doesn't include this simple E15 fix."

While the first Trump administration backed year-round sales, opposition by the oil industry, and concerns that the fuel could worsen smog during warm weather, made summertime E15 sales dependent on annual waivers during the Biden administration. The Environmental Protection Agency in February approved year-round E15 only for eight Midwestern states starting next year. That uncertainty has dissuaded many gas stations from carrying the fuel. The industry hopes year-round sales nationwide will increase its availability and support demand for corn.

Jim Kanten, who grows about 2,300 acres of corn and operates a custom manure-application business with his father and brother near Milan in western Minnesota, and serves as president of the Minnesota Corn Growers Association, said it's a critical issue in farm country.

"It's been a long process," Kanten said. "We've been working on this for over 10 years."

And while producers need a temporary Farm Bill extension, Kanten said they really need the stability of a fully updated five-year package.

But pork producers weren't happy with the proposal that emerged Tuesday. They wanted Congress to block a California animal welfare law that took effect last year banning the in-state production and sale of fresh pork from hogs born to sows kept in tight confinement. Producers in other states must meet those standards if they want to sell pork in California. Farm groups say that's raising costs for producers across the country and increasing prices for consumers nationwide.

"After years of losing money and forcing family farms out of business, we needed the certainty to make decisions yesterday," said Lori Stevermer, a pork producer from Easton in southern Minnesota, who's president of the National Pork Producers Council. "Congress' complete disregard and inability to adequately provide assurance for producers is sure to make this a bleak holiday season for many farming families across the country."

House rejects Trump-backed plan on government shutdown, leaving next steps uncertain

By LISA MASCARO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A day before a potential government shutdown, the House resoundingly rejected President-elect Donald Trump's new plan Thursday to fund operations and suspend the debt ceiling, as Democrats and dozens of Republicans refused to accommodate his sudden demands.

In a hastily convened evening vote punctuated by angry outbursts over the self-made crisis, the lawmakers failed to reach the two-thirds threshold needed for passage — but House Speaker Mike Johnson appeared determined to reassess, before Friday's midnight deadline.

"We're going to regroup and we will come up with another solution, so stay tuned," Johnson said after the vote. The cobbled-together plan didn't even get a majority, with the bill failing 174-235.

The outcome proved a massive setback for Trump and his billionaire ally, Elon Musk, who rampaged against Johnson's bipartisan compromise, which Republicans and Democrats had reached earlier to prevent a Christmastime government shutdown.

It provides a preview of the turbulence ahead when Trump returns to the White House with Republican control of the House and Senate. During his first term, Trump led Republicans into the longest government shutdown in history during the 2018 Christmas season, and interrupted the holidays in 2020 by tanking a bipartisan COVID-relief bill and forcing a do-over.

Hours earlier Thursday, Trump announced "SUCCESS in Washington!" in coming up with the new package which would keep government running for three more months, add \$100.4 billion in disaster assistance including for hurricane-hit states, and allow more borrowing through Jan. 30, 2027.

"Speaker Mike Johnson and the House have come to a very good Deal," Trump posted.

But Republicans, who had spent 24 hours largely negotiating with themselves to cut out the extras con-

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servatives opposed and come up with the new plan, ran into a wall of resistance from Democrats, who were in no hurry to appease demands from Trump — or Musk.

House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries said Democrats were sticking with the original deal with Johnson and called the new one “laughable.”

“It’s not a serious proposal,” Jeffries said as he walked to Democrats’ own closed-door caucus meeting. Inside, Democrats were chanting, “Hell, no!”

All day, Johnson had been fighting to figure out how to meet Trump’s almost impossible demands — and keep his own job — while federal offices are being told to prepare to shutter operations.

The new proposal whittled the 1,500-page bill to 116 pages and dropped a number of add-ons — notably the first pay raise for lawmakers in more than a decade, which could have allowed as much as a 3.8% bump. That drew particular scorn as Musk turned his social media army against the bill.

Trump said early Thursday that Johnson will “easily remain speaker” for the next Congress if he “acts decisively and tough” in coming up with a new plan to also raise the debt limit, a stunning request just before the Christmas holidays that has put the beleaguered speaker in a bind.

And if not, the president-elect warned of trouble ahead for Johnson and Republicans in Congress.

“Anybody that supports a bill that doesn’t take care of the Democrat quicksand known as the debt ceiling should be primaried and disposed of as quickly as possible,” Trump told Fox News Digital.

The tumultuous turn of events, coming as lawmakers were preparing to head home for the holidays, sparks a familiar reminder of what it’s like in Trump-run Washington.

Musk and Vice President-elect JD Vance tried to blame Democrats, though rank-and-file Republicans helped sink Trump’s plan.

“They’ve asked for a shutdown,” Vance said of Democrats. “That’s exactly what they’re going to get.”

For Johnson, who faces his own problems ahead of a Jan. 3 House vote to remain speaker, Trump’s demands left him severely weakened, forced to abandon his word with Democrats and work into the night to broker the new approach.

Trump’s allies even floated the far-fetched idea of giving Musk the speaker’s gavel, since the speaker is not required to be a member of the Congress. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., posted she was “open” to the idea.

Democrats were beside themselves, seeing this as a fitting coda after one of the most unproductive congressional sessions in modern times.

“Here we are once again in chaos,” said House Democratic Whip Katherine Clark, who detailed the harm a government shutdown would cause Americans. “And what for? Because Elon Musk, an unelected man, said, ‘We’re not doing this deal, and Donald Trump followed along.’”

As he left the Capitol, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said, “Now it’s time to go back to the bipartisan agreement.”

The debate in the House chamber grew heated as lawmakers blamed each other for the mess.

At one point, Rep. Marc Molinaro, who was presiding, slammed the speaker’s gavel with such force that it broke.

The stakes couldn’t be higher. Trump was publicly turning on those who opposed him.

One hardline Republican, Rep. Chip Roy of Texas, drew Trump’s ire for refusing to along with the plan. Roy in turn told his own GOP colleagues they had no self-respect for piling onto the nation’s debt.

“It’s shameful!” Roy thundered, standing on the Democratic side of the aisle and pointing at his fellow Republicans.

The slimmed-down package does include federal funds to rebuild Baltimore’s collapsed Key Bridge, but dropped a separate land transfer that could have paved the way for a new Washington Commanders football stadium.

It abandons a long list of other bipartisan bills that had support as lawmakers in both parties try to wrap work for the year. It extends government funds through March 14.

Adding an increase in the debt ceiling to what had been a bipartisan package is a show-stopper for Republicans who want to slash government and routinely vote against more borrowing. Almost three dozen

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Republicans voted against it.

While Democrats have floated their own ideas in the past for lifting or even doing away with the debt limit caps — Sen. Elizabeth Warren had suggested as much — they appear to be in no bargaining mood to save Johnson from Trump — even before the president-elect is sworn into office.

The current debt limit expires Jan. 1, 2025, and Trump wants the problem off the table before he joins the White House.

Musk, in his new foray into politics, led the charge. The wealthiest man in the world used his social media platform X to amplify the unrest, and GOP lawmakers were besieged with phone calls to their offices telling them to oppose the plan.

Rep. Steve Womack, an Arkansas Republican and senior appropriator, said the bipartisan bill's collapse signaled what's ahead in the new year, "probably be a good trailer right now for the 119th Congress."

The White House's Office of Management and Budget had provided initial communication to agencies about possible shutdown planning last week, according to an official at the agency.

Johnson left the Capitol late Thursday night with only two words when asked about a path forward. "We'll see," he replied.

For some, the pope's big Holy Year only aggravates housing crisis as overtourism pushes out Romans

By NICOLE WINFIELD and ISAIA MONTELIONE undefined

When Pope Francis left the Vatican earlier this month for his traditional Christmastime outing downtown, he acknowledged what many Romans have been complaining about for months: That his big plans for a Holy Year had turned their city into a giant construction pit, with traffic-clogging roadworks tearing up major thoroughfares, scaffolding covering prized monuments and short-term rentals gobbling up apartment blocks.

Francis urged Romans to pray for their mayor — "He has a lot to do" — but to nevertheless welcome the upcoming Jubilee as a time of spiritual repair and renewal. "These worksites are fine, but beware: Don't forget the worksites of the soul!" Francis said.

When he formally opens the Holy Year next week, Francis will launch a dizzying 12-month calendar of events that include special Jubilee Masses for the faithful from all walks of life: artists, adolescents, migrants, teachers and prisoners.

And while the Jubilee's official start means the worst of the construction headache is ending, the arrival of a projected 32 million pilgrims in 2025 is set to only increase congestion in the Eternal City and intensify a housing crunch that has been driving residents away.

Like many European art capitals, Rome has been suffering from overtourism as the Italian travel sector rebounds from COVID-19: Last year, a record high number of people visited Italy, 133.6 million, with foreign tourists pushing Italy over the EU average in growth of the travel sector, national statistics bureau ISTAT reported.

Rome, with its innumerable artistic treasures, the Vatican and Italy's busiest airport, was the top city in terms of nights booked in registered lodging, ISTAT said.

And yet for all its grande bellezza, Rome is hardly a modern European metropolis. It has notoriously inadequate public transportation and garbage collection. For the past two post-pandemic summers, taxis have been so hard to come by that the city of Rome authorized 1,000 new cab licenses for 2025.

Rome's growing housing crisis has gotten so bad that vigilantes have taken to going out at night with wire cutters to snip off the keyboxes on short-term apartment rentals that are blamed for driving up rents and driving out residents.

"The market is out of control and has definitely gotten worse with touristification, with the additional load of the Jubilee," said Roberto Viviani, a university researcher whose landlord recently refused to renew his lease in favor of turning the apartment over to an agency to run as a holiday rental. "The surprise was that he gave the Jubilee as the justification."

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All of which has set the stage for a Jubilee opening Dec. 24 that is being received as something of a mixed bag. For the Vatican, the Holy Year is a centuries-old tradition of the faithful making pilgrimages to Rome every 25 years to visit the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul and receiving indulgences for the forgiveness of their sins in the process.

For the city of Rome, it's a chance to take advantage of some 4 billion euros (\$4.3 billion) in public funds to carry out long-delayed projects to lift the city out of years of decay and neglect and bring it up to modern, European standards.

But for Romans who have seen the short-term rental market take over neighborhoods like Pigneto, on the eastern flank of the capital, it's just another pressure point in a long-running battle to keep the flavor of their neighborhoods with affordable rents for ordinary Romans.

"The Jubilee has significantly worsened this phenomenon that we have seen, above all in the last months," said Alberto Campailla, director of the association Nonna Roma, which has been slapping stickers "Your BnB, our eviction" on Pigneto keyboxes to protest the growth of tourist rentals.

Rome's relationship with Jubilees dates to 1300, when Pope Boniface VIII inaugurated the first Holy Year in what historians say marked the definitive designation of Rome as the center of Christianity. Even then, the number of pilgrims was so significant that Dante referred to them in his "Inferno."

Massive public works projects have long accompanied Holy Years, including the creation of the Sistine Chapel (commissioned by Pope Sixtus IV for the Jubilee of 1475) and the big Vatican garage (for the 2000 Jubilee under St. John Paul II).

Some works have been controversial, such as the construction of Via della Conciliazione, the broad boulevard leading to St. Peter's Square. An entire neighborhood was razed to make it for the 1950 Jubilee.

The main public works project for the 2025 Jubilee is actually an extension of that boulevard: A pedestrian piazza along the Tiber linking Via della Conciliazione to the nearby Castel St. Angelo, with the major road that had separated them diverted to an underground tunnel.

The project, at 79.5 million euros (\$82.5 million) the most ambitious of the 2025 Jubilee works, ran into a predictable glitch over the summer when archaeological ruins were discovered during the dredging of the tunnel. The artifacts were transferred to the castle museum and the digging resumed, with the grand opening scheduled for Monday, the eve of the Jubilee's start.

Mayor Roberto Gualtieri has pointed to another feature of the 2025 projects that previous Jubilees have largely ignored, an emphasis on parks and "green" initiatives, in keeping with Francis' focus on environmental sustainability.

But Francis himself has acknowledged the paradox of the Jubilee on the lives of everyday Romans. He wrote to Rome-area priests and religious orders earlier this year to ask them to "make a courageous gesture of love" by offering up any unused housing or apartments in their increasingly empty convents and monasteries to Romans threatened with eviction.

"I want all diocesan realities that own real estate to offer their contribution to stem the housing emergency with signs of charity and solidarity to generate hope in the thousands of people in the city of Rome who are in a condition of precarious housing," Francis wrote.

Gualtieri has gone farther, demanding alongside other mayors that the national government pass the necessary norms to let them regulate the proliferation of short-term rentals, which have been blamed for reducing the available long-term rental stock and driving up prices on average 10% over the past year.

"This for us is an emergency because we need to prevent entire blocks of the center from emptying out and turning into B&Bs, because the presence of residents in the center is fundamental," Gualtieri said.

But the Vatican's point-man for the Jubilee, Monsignor Rino Fisichella, defended the Holy Year as part of Rome's fabric and denied the influx of pilgrims was anything but a net gain for the city.

"As long as it has existed, Rome has always been called a 'common home,' a city that has always been open to everyone," Fisichella said on the sidelines of a Jubilee promotional event. "To think that Rome might reduce the presence of pilgrims or tourists would in my opinion inflict a wound that doesn't belong to it."

Man accused in UnitedHealthcare CEO killing faces federal charge that's eligible for death penalty

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, LARRY NEUMEISTER and MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The man accused of killing UnitedHealthcare's CEO was whisked back to New York by plane and helicopter Thursday to face new federal charges of stalking and murder, which could bring the death penalty if he's convicted.

Luigi Mangione was held without bail following a Manhattan federal court appearance, capping a whirlwind day that began in Pennsylvania, where he was arrested last week in the Dec. 4 attack on Brian Thompson.

The 26-year-old Ivy League graduate had been expected to be arraigned Thursday on a state murder indictment in a killing that at once rattled the business community and galvanized some health insurance critics, but the federal charges preempted that appearance. The cases will now proceed on parallel tracks, prosecutors said, with the state charges expected to go to trial first.

Mangione, shackled at the ankles and wearing dress clothes, said little during the 15-minute proceeding as he sat between his lawyers in a packed federal courtroom.

He nodded as a magistrate judge informed him of his rights and the charges against him, occasionally leaning forward to a microphone to tell her he understood.

After the hearing, a federal marshal handed Mangione's lawyers a bag containing his belongings, including the orange prison jumpsuit he had worn to court in Pennsylvania.

Mangione had been held in Pennsylvania since his Dec. 9 arrest while eating breakfast at a McDonald's in Altoona, about 233 miles (37 kilometers) west of Manhattan.

At a hearing there Thursday morning, Mangione agreed to be returned to New York and was immediately turned over to at least a dozen New York Police Department officers who took him to an airport and a plane bound for Long Island.

He then was flown to a Manhattan heliport, where he was walked slowly up a pier by a throng of officers with assault rifles — a contingent that included New York City Mayor Eric Adams and Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch.

The federal complaint filed Thursday charges Mangione with two counts of stalking and one count each of murder through use of a firearm and a firearms offense. Murder by firearm carries the possibility of the death penalty, though federal prosecutors will determine whether to pursue that path in coming months.

In a state court indictment announced earlier this week, Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg's office charged Mangione with murder as an act of terrorism, which carries a possible sentence of life in prison without parole. New York does not have the death penalty.

Mangione's lawyer, Karen Friedman Agnifilo, said it's a "highly unusual situation" for a defendant to face simultaneous state and federal cases.

"Frankly I've never seen anything like what is happening here," said Friedman Agnifilo, a former top deputy in the Manhattan district attorney's office.

She reserved the right to seek bail at a later point and declined to comment as she left the courthouse.

Mangione, of Towson, Maryland, is accused of ambushing the 50-year-old Thompson as the executive arrived to a Manhattan hotel for an investor conference.

Surveillance video showed a masked gunman shooting Thompson from behind. Police say the words "delay," "deny" and "depose" were scrawled on the ammunition investigators found at the scene, echoing a phrase commonly used to describe insurer tactics to avoid paying claims.

The gunman then pedaled a bicycle through Central Park, took a taxicab to a bus station and then rode the subway to a train station before fleeing to Pennsylvania, authorities said.

There, a McDonald's customer noticed that Mangione looked like the person in surveillance photos police were circulating of the gunman, prosecutors said.

When he was arrested, they say, Mangione had the gun used to kill Thompson, a passport, fake IDs and about \$10,000.

According to the federal complaint, Mangione also had a spiral notebook that included several handwritten pages expressing hostility toward the health insurance industry and wealthy executives. UnitedHealthcare is the largest health insurer in the U.S., though the insurer said Mangione was never a client.

An August entry said that "the target is insurance" because "it checks every box," according to the filing. An entry in October "describes an intent to 'wack' the CEO of one of the insurance companies at its investor conference," the document said.

Mangione initially fought attempts to return him to New York. In addition to waiving extradition Thursday, he waived a preliminary hearing on forgery and firearms charges in Pennsylvania.

The killing unleashed an outpouring of stories about resentment toward U.S. health insurance companies while also shaking corporate America after some social media users called the shooting payback.

Mangione, a computer science graduate from a prominent Maryland family, repeatedly posted on social media about how spinal surgery last year had eased his chronic back pain, encouraging people with similar conditions to speak up for themselves if told they just had to live with it.

In a Reddit post in late April, he advised someone with a back problem to seek additional opinions from surgeons and, if necessary, say the pain made it impossible to work.

"We live in a capitalist society," Mangione wrote. "I've found that the medical industry responds to these key words far more urgently than you describing unbearable pain and how it's impacting your quality of life."

He apparently cut himself off from family and close friends in recent months. His family reported him missing in San Francisco in November.

Thompson, who grew up on a farm in Iowa, was trained as an accountant. A married father of two high-schoolers, he had worked at UnitedHealth Group for 20 years and became CEO of its insurance arm in 2021.

Official says Wisconsin shooter was new student at Christian school where her victims had deep ties

By SCOTT BAUER, GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO and TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — The Wisconsin 15-year-old who shot and killed a teacher and a fellow student Monday was only in her first semester at the school but seemed to be settling in, a school official said Thursday as families of the victims remembered them as people of faith who had deep connections within the Christian school.

Abundant Life Christian School student Rubi Patricia Vergara, 14, of Madison and teacher Erin West, 42, of DeForest were killed Monday. Two other students who were shot remained hospitalized Thursday in critical condition.

Barbara Wiers, the school's director for elementary and communications, told The Associated Press that the attack lasted eight minutes — shorter than the school's regular snack break. She said the community's faith and connection to one another has sustained them as they struggle with the possibility that the shooter's motive might remain undetermined.

"Are we broken right now? Yes. Are we bruised and battered? Yes," she said. "But we will laugh again, and He will turn our mourning into joy again. And we will go on."

Police say student Natalie "Samantha" Rupnow killed herself at the school and died at a Madison hospital. Police have said her motivation for the attack remains a key part of their investigation.

This was Rupnow's first semester at ALCS, Wiers said. The school was working with her family on attendance, but teachers had no significant concerns, she said.

"I pray for this family because right now they've lost a daughter and they are wounded," she said. "And they're dealing with the fact that their daughter did this terrible thing and hurt these other people. It has to be one of the loneliest, bitterest places to be."

Vergara's funeral is set for Saturday at City Church, which is adjacent to the school, and West's funeral is Monday at Doxa Church in Madison, where she was a member, according to obituaries published Wednesday and Thursday.

West had worked at the school for four years and is the mother of three daughters, according to her

obituary. She enjoyed camping with family, attending school sporting events, serving at Doxa Church and spending time with her daughters and the rest of her family, the obituary said.

"ALCS is a better school for the work of Erin West," the school said in a statement.

West worked three years as a substitute teacher before accepting a staff position as the sub coordinator and in-building substitute teacher, according to the statement.

"She served our teachers and students with grace, humor, wisdom, and — most importantly — with the love of Jesus," the school said. "Her loss is a painful and deep one and she will be greatly missed not just among our staff, but our entire ALCS family."

Vergara was a freshman at the school and "an avid reader, loved art, singing and playing keyboard in the family worship band," according to her obituary.

The school described her as gentle and loving.

"Rubi was a blessing to her class and our school," the school said. "She was not only a good friend, but a great big sister. Often seen with a book in hand, she had a gift for art and music."

Attempts to obtain comment from relatives of West and Vergara have been unsuccessful.

The shooter brought two guns to the school. A man in California told authorities he had been messaging her about attacking a government building with a gun and explosives, according to a restraining order issued against him Tuesday under California's gun red flag law. The order required the 20-year-old Carlsbad man to turn his guns and ammunition in to police within 48 hours, but it's unclear Thursday whether he complied, would be charged or was in custody.

The order didn't say what building he had targeted or when he planned to launch his attack. It also didn't detail his interactions with Rupnow except to state that the man was plotting a mass shooting with her.

A spokesperson for the Carlsbad Police Department said federal authorities were leading the investigation and "we do not believe there is a threat to our city."

Police, with the assistance of the FBI, were scouring online records and other resources and speaking with the shooter's parents and classmates in an attempt to determine a motive, Madison Police Chief Shon Barnes said Wednesday.

Police don't know if anyone was targeted or if the attack had been planned in advance, the chief said.

While Rupnow had two handguns, Barnes said he does not know how she obtained them and he declined to say who purchased them, citing the ongoing investigation.

No decisions have been made about whether Rupnow's parents might be charged, but they have been cooperating, Barnes said.

Online court records show no criminal cases against her father, Jeffrey Rupnow, or her mother, Mellissa Rupnow. They are divorced and shared custody of their daughter, but she primarily lived with her father, according to court documents.

Abundant Life is a nondenominational Christian school of about 420 students that offers prekindergarten classes through high school.

Adam Rostad, who lives near Madison, went to ALCS from kindergarten through high school. His grandfather was pastor of the church that helped establish the school, and his mother and aunt both worked there.

Rostad said Thursday that even though he graduated about 20 years ago and doesn't even consider himself a "church person" any longer, ALCS is family.

He has collected a list of about 440 people who are eager to either cook meals or buy gift cards for those affected and is coordinating with the school and church to make sure that's the best way to help.

"Bullets don't really care what your faith is, or if you have one," Rostad said. "They really don't."

Gisèle Pelicot thanks backers after her ex-husband and his co-defendants are convicted in rape trial

By JOHN LEICESTER, TOM NOUVIAN and MARINE LESPRIT Associated Press

AVIGNON, France (AP) — Gisèle Pelicot spoke of her "very difficult ordeal" after 51 men were convicted

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Thursday in the drugging-and-rape trial that riveted France and turned her into an icon, expressing support for other victims whose cases don't get such attention and "whose stories remain untold."

"I want you to know that we share the same fight," she said in her first words after the court in the southern French city of Avignon handed down prison sentences ranging from three to 20 years in the shocking case that spurred a national reckoning about the blight of rape culture.

Pelicot's ex-husband, Dominique Pelicot, and all but one of his co-defendants were convicted of sexually assaulting her over a period of nearly a decade after he'd knocked her unconscious by lacing her food and drink with drugs. The other co-defendant was convicted of drugging and raping his own wife with Dominique Pelicot's help.

As campaigners against sexual violence protested outside the courthouse, the 72-year-old Gisèle Pelicot expressed "my profound gratitude towards the people who supported me."

"Your messages moved me deeply, and they gave me the strength to come back, every day, and survive through these long daily hearings," she said. "This trial was a very difficult ordeal."

Pelicot — a hero to many in France and beyond for courageously demanding that all the evidence be heard in open court — also said she was thinking of her grandchildren after enduring the more than three-month trial, where she sat in the same courtroom as her attackers.

"It's also for them that I led this fight," she said of her grandkids. "I wanted all of society to be a witness to the debates that took place here. I never regretted making this decision. I have trust in our capacity to collectively project ourselves toward a future where all, women and men, can live in harmony, with respect and mutual understanding. Thank you."

Maximum penalty for her ex-husband

The court found Dominique Pelicot guilty on all charges and sentenced him to 20 years in prison, which was the maximum possible. At age 72, he could spend the rest of his life behind bars. He won't be eligible to request early release until he's served at least two-thirds of the sentence.

Dominique Pelicot and the other defendants stood up, one after the other, as chief judge Roger Arata read out the verdicts and sentences, which took more than an hour.

Gisèle Pelicot sometimes nodded her head as verdicts were announced.

Dominique Pelicot's lawyer, Béatrice Zavarro, said she would consider an appeal, but she also expressed hope that Gisèle Pelicot would find solace in the rulings.

"I wanted Mrs. Pelicot to be able to emerge from these hearings in peace, and I think that the verdicts will contribute to this relief for Mrs. Pelicot," she said.

Supporters decry some sentences as too low

Of the 50 accused of rape, just one was acquitted but was instead convicted of aggravated sexual assault. Another man was also found guilty of the sexual assault charge he was tried for — producing 51 guilty verdicts in all.

In a side room where defendants' family members watched the proceedings on television screens, some burst into tears and gasped as sentences were revealed.

Protesters outside the courthouse followed the developments on their phones. Some read out the verdicts and applauded as they were announced inside. But disquiet grew as many of the sentences were lower than campaigners had hoped for, and cries of "shame on the justice system!" rose up from the crowd.

In addition to the 20 years they sought for Dominique Pelicot, prosecutors asked for sentences of 10 to 18 years for the others charged with rape. But the court was more lenient, with many defendants getting less than a decade in prison. The five judges voted by secret ballot, by majority for the convictions and sentences.

For the defendants other than Dominique Pelicot, sentences ranged from three to 15 years imprisonment, with some of the time suspended for some of them. Arata told six defendants they were now free, accounting for time already spent in pretrial detention.

Sophie Burtin, 53, who traveled from Lyon to show support for Gisèle Pelicot, said the trial "brought the subject of rape out into open" but expressed disappointment that "the sentences aren't at all exemplary."

"Some men will think, 'OK, it's alright, what they did wasn't really a rape,'" she said. "The message that's

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sent is, 'Is it really serious?' — with sentences that are so light. For me, It was meant to be a historic trial, but the feeling I have is that history hasn't been made."

Who is Gisèle Pelicot?

Gisèle Pelicot's courage during the bruising trial and her appalling ordeal, inflicted on the retired power company worker in what she had thought was a loving marriage, galvanized campaigners and spurred calls for tougher measures to stamp out rape culture.

She waived her right to anonymity as a survivor of sexual abuse and successfully pushed for the hearings and shocking evidence — including her ex-husband's homemade videos of the rapes — to be heard in open court, insisting that shame should fall on her abusers, not her.

The hearings fueled conversations on a national level in France and among families, couples and friends about how to better protect women and the role that men can play.

"Men are starting to talk to women — their girlfriends, mothers and friends — in ways they hadn't before," said Fanny Foures, 48, who joined other women in gluing messages of support for Gisèle Pelicot on walls around Avignon before the verdict.

"It was awkward at first, but now real dialogues are happening," she said.

"Some women are realizing, maybe for the first time, that their ex-husbands violated them, or that someone close to them committed abuse," Foures added. "And men are starting to reckon with their own behavior or complicity — things they've ignored or failed to act on. It's heavy, but it's creating change."

A banner that campaigners hung on a city wall opposite the courthouse read, "MERCI GISELE" — thank you Gisèle.

Ex-husband's sordid images

The defendants — strangers Dominique Pelicot recruited online — were all accused of having taken part in his sordid rape and abuse fantasies that he acted out with them and filmed in the couple's retirement home in the small Provence town of Mazan and elsewhere.

He first came to the attention of police in September 2020 when a supermarket security guard caught him surreptitiously filming up women's skirts.

Police subsequently found his library of images documenting years of abuse — more than 20,000 photos and videos in all, stored on computer drives and catalogued in folders marked "abuse," "her rapists," "night alone" and other titles.

The abundant evidence led police to the other defendants. In the videos, investigators counted 72 different abusers but weren't able to identify them all.

Although some of the accused — including Dominique Pelicot — acknowledged that they were guilty of rape, many didn't.

Some argued that Dominique Pelicot's consent covered his wife, too. Some insisted that they hadn't intended to rape anyone when they responded to the husband's invitations to come to their home. Some laid blame at his door, saying he misled them into thinking they were taking part in consensual kink.

Immigration agency deports highest numbers since 2014, aided by more flights

By VALERIE GONZALEZ AND ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

McALLEN, Texas (AP) — U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement deported more than 270,000 people to 192 countries over a recent 12-month period, the highest annual tally in a decade, according to a report released Thursday that illustrates some of the financial and operational challenges that President-elect Donald Trump will face to carry out his pledge of mass deportations.

ICE, the main government agency responsible for removing people in the country illegally, had 271,484 deportations in its fiscal year ended Sept. 30, nearly double from 142,580 in the same period a year earlier.

It was ICE's highest deportation count since 2014, when it removed 315,943 people. The highest it reached during Trump's first term in the White House was 267,258 in 2019.

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Increased deportation flights, including on weekends, and streamlined travel procedures for people sent to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador fueled the increase, ICE said. The agency had its first large flight to China in six years and also had planes stop in Albania, Angola, Egypt, Georgia, Ghana, Guinea, India, Mauritania, Romania, Senegal, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Also Thursday, U.S. Customs and Border Protection said authorities made 46,612 arrests for crossing the border illegally from Mexico in November, down 18% from 56,526 a month earlier and more than 80% from an all-time high of 250,000 in December 2023. Arrests fell by half when Mexican authorities increased enforcement within their own borders a year ago and by half again when President Joe Biden introduced severe asylum restrictions in June. The November numbers were the lowest since July 2020 and indicate that a widely anticipated spike after Trump was elected president didn't happen immediately.

Over the 12-month period ended Sept. 30, Mexico was the most common destination for deportees (87,298), followed by Guatemala (66,435) and Honduras (45,923), the ICE report said. Mexico and Central American countries are expected to continue to bear the brunt of deportations, partly because those governments more readily accept their respective citizens than some others and logistics are easier.

Still, ICE's detention space and staff limited its reach as the number of people it monitors through immigration courts continued to mushroom. The agency's enforcement and removals unit has remained steady at around 6,000 officers over the last decade while its caseload has roughly quadrupled to 7.6 million, up from 6.1 million in the last year alone.

ICE detained an average of 37,700 people a day over the recent 12-month period, a number determined by congressional funding. With detention space a potential hurdle for mass deportations, the state of Texas is offering rural land as a staging area.

ICE made 113,431 arrests during the latest period, down 34% from 170,590 a year earlier. The agency said a need to focus resources on the border with Mexico diverted attention from making arrests in the country's interior.

What to know about the debt ceiling debate as a government shutdown looms in Washington

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

A debate over the debt ceiling is at the center of a dispute over funding that is pushing Washington to the brink of a federal government shutdown.

President-elect Donald Trump has demanded that a provision raising or suspending the nation's debt limit — something that his own party routinely resists — be included in legislation to avert a government shutdown. "Anything else is a betrayal of our country," Trump said in a statement Wednesday.

Republicans quickly complied, including a provision in a revamped government funding proposal that would suspend the debt ceiling for two years, until Jan. 30, 2027. But the bill failed overwhelmingly in a House vote Thursday evening, leaving next steps uncertain.

Here's what to know about the debate over the debt ceiling and the role it's playing in the shutdown saga:
What is the debt ceiling?

The debt ceiling, or debt limit, is the total amount of money that the United States government can borrow to meet its existing legal obligations. For the Treasury Department to borrow above that amount, the limit must be raised by Congress.

The federal debt stands at roughly \$36 trillion, and the spike in inflation after the coronavirus pandemic has pushed up the government's borrowing costs such that debt service next year will exceed spending on national security.

The last time lawmakers raised the debt limit was June 2023. Rather than raise the limit by a dollar amount, lawmakers suspended the debt limit through Jan. 1, 2025. At that point, the limit will be automatically raised to match the amount of debt that has been issued by the Treasury Department.

The debt limit vote in recent times has been used as a political leverage point, a must-pass bill that can

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be loaded up with other priorities.

What is the debt ceiling fight all about?

Trump has tied a demand for dealing with the debt ceiling to the dispute over government funding, saying one should not be addressed without the other.

When he rejected the spending proposal on Wednesday, Trump said that he wanted the debt ceiling debate settled before he takes office next month.

Warning of trouble ahead for Johnson and Republicans in Congress, Trump told Fox News Digital, "Anybody that supports a bill that doesn't take care of the Democrat quicksand known as the debt ceiling should be primaried and disposed of as quickly as possible."

What happens if the debt ceiling isn't raised?

There's actually no need to raise the debt limit right now. On Jan. 1, when the debt limit is triggered, the Treasury Department can begin using what it calls "extraordinary measures" to ensure that America doesn't default on its debts.

Some estimate these accounting maneuvers could push the default deadline to the summer of 2025 — but that's exactly what Trump wants to avoid, since an increase would then be needed while he is president.

Lawmakers have always raised the debt ceiling in time because the consequences of failure are stark. Without action, the government would go into default on its debts, a first-ever situation that Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and economic experts have said could be "catastrophic" for the economy and global markets.

Raising or suspending the debt limit does not authorize new spending or tax cuts; it merely acknowledges past budgetary decisions — that is, current budget law — and so allows the federal government to meet its existing legal obligations. For that reason and others, some have advocated doing away with the limit altogether.

What could the debt ceiling fight mean for Speaker Mike Johnson?

Dealing with the debt ceiling could have ramifications for Johnson, as he angles to keep his job in the new Congress that begins on Jan. 3.

Trump said early Thursday that Johnson will "easily remain speaker" for the next Congress if he "acts decisively and tough" in coming up with a new plan to also increase the debt limit, a stunning request just before the Christmas holidays that has put the beleaguered speaker in a bind.

The last House speaker, Kevin McCarthy, worked for months with President Joe Biden to raise the debt limit. Even though they struck a bipartisan deal that cut spending in exchange for additional borrowing capacity, House Republicans said it didn't go far enough, and it ended up costing McCarthy his job.

Now, Trump is looking for Johnson to pass a debt ceiling extension just hours before a partial government shutdown.

What are Democrats saying about the debt ceiling debate?

After meeting with his caucus, Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries rejected any possibility that his members would bail out Republicans as the shutdown threat looms.

"GOP extremists want House Democrats to raise the debt ceiling so that House Republicans can lower the amount of your Social Security check," Jeffries posted Thursday on social media. "Hard pass."

Jeffries and other Democrats say Republicans should honor the spending agreement that was negotiated before Trump got involved. He called the new GOP plan "laughable."

In Florida, a race is on to save the Everglades and protect a key source of drinking water

By DORANY PINEDA and REBECCA BLACKWELL Associated Press

EVERGLADES, Fla. (AP) — In a region of Florida known as the River of Grass, John Kominoski plops into hip-deep waters. Blobs of brown periphyton — a mishmash of algae, bacteria and other organisms — carpet the surface.

The air is thick and sticky as Kominoski, a Florida International University professor, pushes a rod to

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secure a tube that collects timed and continuous water samples that will help his team investigate the impacts of climate change and freshwater flows in this unique, sensitive ecosystem.

The Everglades ecosystem was degraded and transformed when a highway connecting Tampa and Miami was built in 1928, cutting through a mosaic of prairies, sawgrass marshes, freshwater ponds and forested uplands. Sections of the road are now being elevated to restore water flows into the Shark River Slough – a vital restoration area deep in the Everglades National Park.

The highway elevation is part of a massive state-federal project, approved by Congress in 2000 with bipartisan support, that aims to undo damages wreaked upon these wetlands.

“This is the biggest, most complicated and most expensive ecosystem restoration project in the world,” said Eve Samples, executive director of Friends of the Everglades. “It’s really important that we get it right.”

More than two decades into it, there are signs of progress. Wildlife is returning to some areas, regions dominated by the invasive melaleuca tree have dropped 75%, and enthusiasm is high as significant projects are finally underway, others gain momentum and funding pours in. But there are also worries: the projects are billions of dollars over budget and questions remain about whether some will work.

Once about twice the size of New Jersey, today only half of the Everglades remains. Home to endangered and threatened species, the area buffers storms and is a vital source of drinking water for millions of Floridians. Decades of engineering projects for development and agriculture partitioned and drained water that once flowed freely from the Kissimmee River to Lake Okeechobee to the Florida Bay. Invasive species have transformed the land, and pollution from agriculture – primarily phosphorus – has impoverished water quality.

Efforts to repair the Everglades are projected to cost more than \$23 billion and take 50 years to complete. Water quality has improved, but challenges remain and accelerating salt water intrusion, sea level rise and higher temperatures are ongoing threats.

Since 2019, the South Florida Water Management District has completed, broken ground on, or celebrated other milestones on some 70 projects. This year, lawmakers earmarked \$1.275 billion for the next 12 months of restoration efforts – the largest annual amount allocated. It is unclear what Donald Trump may do with restoration efforts when he takes office, but during his first presidential term he allocated funds and helped pass the Great American Outdoors Act, which secured \$900 million annually in permanent funding to improve access to public lands, protect watersheds and more.

Big enough reservoir?

Northwest of Miami, excavators claw mounds of blasted limestone as crews replace acres of sugarcane fields in a massive project that aims to supply clean freshwater to the Everglades.

When the \$3.9 billion Everglades Agricultural Area Reservoir Project is complete, a reservoir and wetland will store and clean polluted water from Lake Okeechobee in central Florida before it’s discharged into the southern Everglades.

Considered by some the most important of the projects, the reservoir, at 10,500 acres (4,249 hectares), will have the capacity to store enough water for the equivalent of about 480,000 to 720,000 homes. Its adjacent 6,500-acre (2,630.5 hectares) wetland – or the stormwater treatment area – will clean reservoir water before it’s discharged.

Combined, the project will be nearly the stretch of a marathon.

“The wildlife and the mosaic of habitats that are here rely on getting the water right, and that’s what this project is about,” said Jennifer Reynolds, the director of ecosystem restoration and capital projects for the water district. “It’s about getting the water right for the natural habitats and also to sustain the population of people who live and recreate here.”

Although both the administrations of Democratic President Joe Biden and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, have called it a “priority,” it is also among the most controversial projects. The reservoir will be 82.5% smaller than its original plan due to insufficient land.

Questions remain about whether it will work when completed. Critics worry the project will be too small and too deep to significantly clean water. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which is constructing the reservoir, has itself indicated uncertainty about whether the water will meet standards.

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Climate and development threats

On that sticky May morning, Kominoski, the FIU professor, and research specialist Rafael Travieso wanted to know the water chemistry, including phosphorus concentrations.

While phosphorous levels are rising slightly with increased water flows, data shows the region's water quality is excellent. That's good news, considering phosphorous pollution has degraded water quality in the Everglades for decades and remains a challenge. The phosphorous has altered the ecosystem, contributing to toxic algae blooms, oxygen depletion and harmed native plants and wildlife.

But measurements downstream tell a different story. Salinity levels have gone up, from a few days at a time to weeks and months, Kominoski said, suggesting that sea level rise and salt water intrusion are accelerating.

South Florida's low elevation is especially vulnerable to storms and accelerating sea level rise, with some estimates of up to 4 feet (1.2 meters) by 2100. Experts have also warned of sea level rise impacts and rising temperatures that will decrease water runoff and increase evaporation.

In its most recent report to Congress, a committee of experts acknowledged the enormous challenge of accounting for climate change impacts in restoration efforts. They recommended several actions, including developing a set of climate scenarios that are consistently used across all planning and implementation.

The Everglades' long-term survival will depend partly on whether mangroves, among its most unique and threatened native species, can keep pace with climate impacts. These salt-tolerant trees that buffer erosion and hurricanes are shifting inland as sea levels rise. While restoration efforts have helped, higher seas remain a threat.

"There are certain points where they are overwhelmed with flooding and it will restrict their ability to stay alive and recoup, and then you experience wetland loss," said Kevin Montenegro, a student at FIU.

Saltwater intrusion also poses threats to biodiversity, drinking water, and peat soils, which store planet-warming carbon.

Then there are the people.

Florida has undergone decades of population growth, becoming the nations' fastest-growing state in 2022.

In Homestead, south of Miami, there's pressure to develop flood-prone, low lying farmlands between the Everglades and Biscayne national parks.

"That is a major hurdle and that's playing out in all 16 counties that encompass the greater Everglades region," said Samples from Friends of the Everglades. "Population growth and development are really intense threats right now.

Back at Shark River Slough, the airboat roared into action. For the next several hours, Kominoski and Travieso glided over the reflective waters, past tree islands and lily pad clusters, dodging alligators and watching birds take flight as tiger-striped dragonflies clung to their clothes.

Some signs of progress

Steve Davis looked down at the Tamiami Trail from the backseat of a small airplane some 2,500 feet in the air.

The wetlands surrounding the highway were once drier, but restoration efforts have helped increase flows. "To see water in the dry season, that's a big deal," said Davis, chief science officer for the Everglades Foundation. "We don't want areas to dry out completely."

As parts of the Everglades are rehydrated and habitats reemerge, so are native species such as the wood stork. Wading bird colonies have returned to the Kissimmee River floodplain. Habitats in swamps or shallow lakes called sloughs are increasing in some areas. And flamingos blown in by Hurricane Idalia have stayed in the Everglades.

"In the last 10 years, progress has ramped up significantly," said Davis. "It's more than optimism. We're starting to see the benefits."

A new plan for managing Lake Okeechobee's water levels aims to have widespread benefits for restoration efforts. It calls for sending more water south, reducing harmful discharges to the east and west coasts, and allowing more flexibility in water management decisions.

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Other parts of the Everglades need more help.

From the air, floating mats of harmful blue-green algae are sometimes visible on Lake Okeechobee – a sign of warm temperatures and excess nutrients.

In the west, sea level rise and salt water intrusion are impacting drinking water wells where the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida live, according to Betty Osceola, an environmental activist and tribe member. The tribe's ancestral tree islands have been flooded by water mismanagement, they've said, decimating plants and animals they've subsisted on. Other areas are drier and face ongoing threats from polluted water and wildfires.

"Restoration efforts are mainly to benefit Everglades National Park," said Osceola. "So maybe the national park sees benefits, but at the sacrifice to the tribe."

That's why the tribe has for decades advocated for the Western Everglades Restoration Project, whose goal is to improve the quantity, quality, timing and distribution of water. The project's first major feature broke ground in July.

The Everglades' future

Inside the Everglades, Michael Kennedy-Yoon looked out into the sawgrass marsh with binoculars.

The New York resident spotted a soft shell turtle. Earlier he saw two alligators. But he was most excited about the birds he ticked off his list, including an anhinga, a night heron and a swallow-tailed kite.

"I think that preserving and conserving wildlife and wildlife areas is some of the best and most useful uses of our taxpayer money," Kennedy-Yoon said, sweat glistening on his face. "Something has to change or else we're going to lose areas like this."

But it's more than just restoring and protecting the Everglades for recreation and its wildlife. As Samples from Friends of the Everglades notes, it's also about building climate resiliency in Florida.

She quoted the famous words popularized by author and conservationist Marjory Stoneman Douglas: "The Everglades is a test. If we pass it, we may get to keep the planet."

Faced with development pressures and climate change, Samples said those words are more true today than ever.

Musk ascends as a political force beyond his wealth by tanking budget deal

By THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

In the first major flex of his influence since Donald Trump was elected, Elon Musk brought to a sudden halt a bipartisan budget proposal by posting constantly on his X megaphone and threatening Republicans with primary challenges.

The social media warnings from the world's wealthiest man preceded Trump's condemnation of a measure negotiated by GOP House Speaker Mike Johnson, which effectively killed the stopgap measure that was designed to prevent a partial shutdown of the federal government.

Washington was scrambled a day after Musk's public pressure campaign. Trump on Thursday first declined to say whether he had confidence in Johnson. But later in the day, Trump praised him and House leaders for producing "a very good Deal," after they announced a new plan to fund the government and lift the debt ceiling.

Before the new deal was reached, Congressional Democrats mocked their GOP counterparts, with several suggesting Trump had been relegated to vice president.

"Welcome to the Elon Musk presidency," Democratic Rep. Robert Garcia of California wrote on X.

What was clear, though, is Musk's ascendance as a political force, a level of influence enabled by his great wealth. In addition to owning X, Musk is the CEO of Tesla and Space X.

"There is no doubt he does wield a lot of influence over Republicans right now due to his proximity to Trump," said Chris Pack, former communications director for the National Republican Congressional Committee and the Senate Leadership Fund.

But Pack also said that Musk's threats pose potential risks for House Republicans, who begin next year

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with a five-seat majority that will shrink temporarily because of Trump's nomination of some GOP lawmakers to administration posts.

"This isn't going to help pass the agenda if you are going to cost a bunch of Republicans in very razor-thin moderate seats if you're going to make them lose in primaries," Pack said. "All that does is give the keys to these districts over to the Democrats."

Musk spent an estimated \$250 million during the presidential campaign to support Trump, contributing heavily to America PAC, a super political action committee that deployed canvassers, aired TV ads and reached voters digitally in battleground states. He had signaled after the election he was willing to back GOP primary challenges to Republican members of Congress seeking re-election in 2026 who waver on Trump's appointments and agenda.

He renewed the threat pointedly Wednesday.

"Any member of the House or Senate who votes for this outrageous spending bill deserves to be voted out in 2 years!" he wrote on X. He also called it "one of the worst bills ever written."

Musk wasn't alone in fanning GOP anger against the bill, which included several compromise measures to get Democratic support in the Senate in the final weeks before Republicans take control of that chamber. Biotech entrepreneur and former GOP presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy, who is Musk's partner leading the new Department of Government Efficiency, also posted against the bill, as did Trump's eldest son, Donald Trump Jr.

Musk played down his role at times, suggesting after some praise online, "All I can do is bring things to the attention of the people, so they may voice their support if they so choose." And the president-elect told NBC News that he had spoken to Musk prior to the Tesla CEO's first posts.

"I told him that if he agrees with me, that he could put out a statement," Trump said.

Karoline Leavitt, the incoming White House press secretary, pushed back against Democratic critics who suggested Musk was calling the shots.

"As soon as President Trump released his official stance on the CR, Republicans on Capitol Hill echoed his point of view," Leavitt said in a statement, referring to the continuing resolution. "President Trump is the leader of the Republican Party. Full stop."

Throughout the day Wednesday, Musk replied to posts on X from Republican House members announcing opposition to the bill with words of thanks, and punctuating their public commitments.

And he took a victory lap after Trump came out against the bill: "The voice of the people was heard. This was a good day for America."

He was responding to Kentucky Rep. Andy Barr's post: "The phone was ringing off the hook today. And you know why? Because they were reading tweets...from Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy."

By late afternoon Thursday and before the new plan was put to a vote, Musk declared success and posted a picture of the new, slimmed down alternative alongside the voluminous, original measure he helped kill. "This shows how much your voice matters," he posted. "And having a President like @realDonaldTrump means that your voice is finally heard."

Conservative activists at the annual AmericaFest gathering in Phoenix cheered Musk Thursday and hailed the suggestion he could replace Johnson as speaker. There's no requirement that the speaker be an elected member of the House of Representatives.

"Should Mike Johnson remain speaker of the House?" conservative media host Jack Posobiec asked his audience during a live taping of his talk show, prompting a chorus of "Noooooo!!!" from his audience.

Johnson had been scheduled to attend AmericaFest, but canceled after the budget deal fell apart.

"Should Elon Musk be speaker of the House?" Posobiec asked his audience, prompting cheers.

Oklahoma man dies by lethal injection in the nation's final execution of 2024

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — An Oklahoma man who killed a 10-year-old girl in a cannibalistic fantasy died by lethal injection Thursday in the nation's 25th and final execution of the year.

Kevin Ray Underwood was pronounced dead at 10:14 a.m. at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester. It was Oklahoma's fourth execution of the year, and it took place on Underwood's 45th birthday.

Oklahoma uses a three-drug lethal injection process that begins with the sedative midazolam followed by a second drug that paralyzes the inmate and a third that stops their heart.

Underwood, a former grocery store worker, was sentenced to die for killing Jamie Rose Bolin in 2006. He admitted to luring Jamie into his apartment and beating her over the head with a cutting board before suffocating and sexually assaulting her. He told investigators that he nearly beheaded Jamie in his bathtub before abandoning his plans to eat her.

Strapped to a gurney inside the death chamber on Thursday, Underwood apologized to Jamie's family and to his own family "for all the terrible things I did."

"The decision to execute me on my birthday and six days before Christmas was a needlessly cruel thing to do to my family," Underwood said, "but I'm very sorry for what I did and I wish I could take it back."

Underwood looked over to members of his legal team and his family, including his mother, as the execution began at 10:04 a.m.. His breathing hitched slightly and his eyes closed a few minutes later. A doctor entered the execution chamber at 10:09 a.m., shook him a few times and declared him unconscious. He was pronounced dead five minutes later.

Jamie's sister, Lori Pate, who was among several relatives who witnessed the execution, thanked prosecutors for helping guide her family through the nearly 18-year process from Jamie's death to Underwood's execution.

"This doesn't bring our Jamie back but it does allow the space in our hearts to focus on her and allow the healing process to begin," Pate said.

During a hearing last week, three members of the state's Pardon and Parole Board unanimously voted against recommending clemency.

Underwood's attorneys had argued that he deserved to be spared the death penalty because of his long history of abuse and serious mental health issues that included autism, obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar and panic disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizotypal personality disorder and various deviant sexual paraphilias.

Prosecutors argued that many people suffer from mental illness, but that doesn't justify harming children.

In a last-minute request seeking a stay of execution from the U.S. Supreme Court, Underwood's attorneys argued that he deserved a hearing before all five members of the board and that the panel violated state law and Underwood's rights by rescheduling the hearing at the last minute after two members of the board resigned. The court rejected that bid earlier Thursday morning.

Prosecutor Fani Willis is removed from the Georgia election case against Trump and others

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A state appeals court on Thursday removed Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis from the Georgia election interference case against Donald Trump and others, the latest legal victory for the president-elect in criminal cases that once threatened his career and freedom.

The case against Trump and more than a dozen others had already been stalled for months over an appeal related to a romantic relationship Willis had with special prosecutor Nathan Wade, whom she had hired to lead the case.

Citing an "appearance of impropriety" that might not typically warrant such a removal, a Georgia Court

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of Appeals panel said in a 2-1 ruling that "this is the rare case in which disqualification is mandated and no other remedy will suffice to restore public confidence in the integrity of these proceedings." Willis' office immediately filed a notice of intent to ask the Georgia Supreme Court to review the decision.

But pursuing a criminal case against a sitting president is a virtual impossibility. And Trump will return to the White House having overcome efforts to prosecute him and empowered by a Supreme Court ruling granting him presumptive immunity for any "official acts" he takes in office.

The development comes weeks after Justice Department special counsel Jack Smith abandoned two federal prosecutions against the incoming president, and as sentencing in a separate hush money case in New York is indefinitely on hold as a result of Trump's victory in November over Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris.

A grand jury in Atlanta indicted Trump and 18 others in August 2023, using the state's anti-racketeering law to accuse them of participating in a wide-ranging scheme to illegally try to overturn Trump's narrow 2020 presidential election loss to Democrat Joe Biden in Georgia. The alleged scheme included Trump's call to Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger urging him to help find enough votes to beat Biden. Four people have pleaded guilty.

Trump told Fox News Digital that the case "should not be allowed to go any further." The president-elect added: "Everybody should receive an apology, including those wonderful patriots who have been caught up in this for years."

Steve Sadow, Trump's lead attorney in Georgia, said the ruling was "well-reasoned and just." He said the appeals court "highlighted that Willis' misconduct created an 'odor of mendacity' and an appearance of impropriety that could only be cured by the disqualification of her and her entire office."

"This decision puts an end to a politically motivated persecution of the next President of the United States," Sadow wrote in an emailed statement.

Representatives for Willis did not immediately respond to a text message seeking comment on the ruling.

The allegations that Willis had improperly benefited from her romance with Wade resulted in a tumultuous couple of months in the case as intimate details of Willis and Wade's personal lives were aired in court in mid-February. A defendant's motion alleged that Willis and Wade were involved in an inappropriate romantic relationship and that Willis paid Wade large sums for his work and then benefited when he paid for lavish vacations.

Willis and Wade acknowledged the relationship but said they didn't begin dating until the spring of 2022. Wade was hired in November 2021, and their romance ended in the summer of 2023, they said. They also testified that they split travel and other costs roughly evenly, with Willis often paying expenses or reimbursing Wade in cash.

Speaking at a historically Black church in Atlanta soon after the relationship allegations surfaced, Willis defended Wade's qualifications and her own leadership of her office. Defense lawyers said that speech included a series of improper and prejudicial comments against the defendants and their legal team, poisoning any potential jurors against them.

The appeals court majority opinion, written by Judge Trenton Brown and joined by Judge Todd Markle, said "the remedy crafted by the trial court to prevent an ongoing appearance of impropriety did nothing to address the appearance of impropriety that existed at times when DA Willis was exercising her broad pretrial discretion about who to prosecute and what charges to bring."

In a dissenting opinion, Judge Benjamin Land wrote that "the law does not support the result reached by the majority." Trial court judges, he said, have broad discretion to impose a remedy to fit a situation and the appeals court should respect that.

"We are here to ensure the law has been applied correctly and to correct harmful legal errors when we see them. It is not our job to second-guess trial judges or to substitute our judgment for theirs," he wrote.

"Where, as here, a prosecutor has no actual conflict of interest and the trial court, based on the evidence presented to it, rejects the allegations of actual impropriety, we have no authority to reverse the trial court's denial of a motion to disqualify," he said, arguing that the majority opinion goes against decades

of precedent in Georgia.

The ruling by the appeals court panel means it will be up to the Prosecuting Attorneys' Council of Georgia to find another prosecutor to take over the case, though that could be delayed if the state Supreme Court takes the case. It could be difficult to find another prosecutor willing to take it on given the extensive resources needed to prosecute the sprawling and complex case. That person could continue on the track that Willis has taken, decide to pursue only some charges or dismiss the case altogether.

Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee, the trial court judge, had ruled in March that no conflict of interest existed that should force Willis off the case. Trump and the others appealed that ruling.

McAfee wrote that the prosecution was "encumbered by an appearance of impropriety." He said Willis could remain on the case only if Wade left; the special prosecutor submitted his resignation hours later.

France's Macron says tour of cyclone-devastated Mayotte is a day he won't forget

By SAM MEDNICK, ADRIENNE SURPRENANT and SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press
MAMOUDZOU, Mayotte (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron arrived Thursday in the Indian Ocean island of Mayotte to survey Cyclone Chido's destruction and was immediately confronted with a first-hand account of devastation across the French territory.

"Mayotte is demolished," Assane Haloi, a security agent, told Macron after he stepped off the plane. Macron had been moving along in a line of people greeting him when Haloi grasped his hand and spoke for a minute about the harrowing conditions the islands faced without bare essentials since Saturday when the strongest cyclone in nearly a century ripped through the French territory off the coast of Africa.

"We are without water, without electricity, there is nowhere to go because everything is demolished," she said. "We can't even shelter, we are all wet with our children covering ourselves with whatever we have so that we can sleep."

Macron said it was a day he would not forget as he was embraced by some islanders and criticized for what others said was a slow response by France. He spoke of the emotion he had witnessed along with the anger and said he was impressed by the resilience of people after he spent the day touring a slum, visiting a hospital and viewing the damage from a helicopter.

"It's likely we'll see tragic situations that we're not aware of yet," he said of casualties that are expected to rise.

Numbers of dead unknown

At least 31 people have died and more than 2,000 people were injured, more than 200 critically, French authorities said. But it's feared hundreds or even thousands of people have died.

Macron arrived shortly after The Associated Press and other journalists from outside were able to reach Mayotte to provide accounts from survivors of the horror over the weekend when winds howled above 220 kph (136 mph) and peeled the roofs and walls from homes that collapsed around the people inside.

In the shantytown of Kaweni on the outskirts of the capital Mamoudzou, a swath of hillside homes was reduced to scraps of corrugated metal, plastic, piles of bedding and clothing, and pieces of timber marking the frame where homes once stood.

"Those of us who are here are still in shock, but God let us live," Nassirou Hamidouni said as he dug in the rubble of his former home. "We are sad. We can't sleep because of all of the houses that have been destroyed."

Long lines for scarce resources

The cyclone battered the island's infrastructure, knocking out power, leaving homes without water and putting a strain on the few places that could still provide essentials. Public health experts are concerned that a lack of access to clean water could lead to disease.

Supermarkets were running low on supplies and some shelves were bare. Throngs of cars and motorbikes packed the streets waiting up to five hours to get to gas pumps still in service. Residents, some who traveled across the densely populated island, stood in lines for hours to fill jugs at water pumps.

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"To have a drink," Ramou Madi, a mother of two, said as she explained the quest from her village to get water. "We don't eat. But to drink water is the main thing. You can't go shopping, there's nothing in the shops, the people are all pushing. I got pushed just trying to get water. But to have water for the kids so they can shower a bit, because they get smelly."

More help on the way

Macron sought to reassure people that tons of food, medical aid and additional rescuers had arrived with him and more help was on its way.

A woman who worked in the hospital's psychological unit emotionally pleaded for backup assistance because staff had become less effective from working around the clock. "Everyone from top to bottom is wiped out," she said.

Macron, who was wearing a traditional red, black and gold Mayotte scarf over his white dress shirt and tie, put his hand on her shoulder as she wiped away tears.

The visit took a testy turn when a man blasted Macron for being out of touch. He said people had gone six days in Ouangani without water or a visit from rescuers.

The president said it took the military four days to clear the roads and get a plan in place to deliver aid.

"If you want to continue shouting to get airtime," Macron said, as he was again interrupted by the man saying he didn't intend to shout. "If you are interested in my response, if not I will walk away."

Macron said about half of the electricity network and water system would be repaired by Friday but it could take several weeks to reach more remote areas.

About 1,200 police officers will be deployed by the end of the week to secure neighborhoods and prevent looting, he said.

Although there's a large population of migrants illegally on the island — a problem he said he plans to later crack down on — he said there must be "no distinction when it comes to saving, feeding, drinking." He said a doctor had he spoken with saw migrants who risked amputations because they had untreated injuries that got infected.

Residents have expressed anguish at not knowing if loved ones were dead or missing, partly because of the hasty burials required under Muslim practice to lay the dead to rest within 24 hours.

"We're dealing with open-air mass graves," said Estelle Youssoufa, who represents Mayotte in the French parliament. "There are no rescuers, no one has come to recover the buried bodies."

Macron acknowledged that many who died haven't been reported. He said phone services will be repaired "in the coming days" so that people can report missing loved ones.

France's poorest territory

Mayotte, with 320,000 residents and an estimated 100,000 additional migrants, is France's poorest territory.

It is part an archipelago located between mainland Africa's east coast and northern Madagascar that had been a French colony. Mayotte voted to remain part of France in a 1974 referendum as the rest of the islands became the independent nation of Comoros.

The cyclone devastated entire neighborhoods as many people ignored warnings, thinking the storm wouldn't be so extreme.

Signs of the disaster and its impact were everywhere.

Families sprawled out on blankets at a school where 500 people were taking shelter. Women washed clothing in buckets of water as children played with the pieces of a giant chessboard.

Alibouna Haithouna, a displaced mother of four, was with her own mother who had been forced to leave a hospital after her son died there.

"There was a tragedy. We lost my brother," Haithouna said, adding that they haven't yet been able to retrieve the body because of required fees and paperwork.

Macron waded into a crowd of people in Kaweni, kissing children and hugging residents who spoke of their hardship.

After a woman described how her home almost collapsed on her children, Macron compared recovery efforts to the recently reopened Notre Dame Cathedral after a disastrous fire.

He said he wants to pass special legislation in Paris to speed up the recovery, level the slums and replace tin shacks with more solid buildings.

"If we were able to rebuild our cathedral in five years, it would be a tragedy if we weren't able to rebuild Mayotte," he said.

Amazon workers are striking at multiple delivery hubs. Here's what you should know

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

Amazon workers affiliated with the Teamsters union launched a strike at seven of the company's delivery hubs less than a week before Christmas.

The Teamsters said the workers, who voted to authorize strikes in recent days, joined picket lines on Thursday after Amazon ignored a Sunday deadline the union had set for contract negotiations.

The company says it doesn't expect the strike to impact holiday shipments.

Amazon has a couple hundred employees at each delivery station. The Teamsters mainly have focused on organizing delivery drivers, who work for contractors that handle package deliveries for the company. But Amazon has rebuffed demands to come to the negotiating table since it doesn't consider the drivers to be its employees.

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters also says the union represents some Amazon warehouse workers.

Here's what else you need to know:

Where are the strikes happening?

The strikes are taking place at three delivery hubs in Southern California, and one each in San Francisco, New York City, Atlanta, Georgia, and Skokie, Illinois, according to the union's announcement.

The union hasn't said how many workers are participating in the strike, nor how long it will go on. Vinnie Perrone, the president of a local Teamsters union in metro New York, said Thursday that the walkout would continue "as long as it takes."

The union, which claims to represent 10,000 Amazon workers at 10 facilities, said workers in more locations were prepared to join the fight.

Employees at a company air hub in California have authorized a strike. So have workers at an Amazon warehouse in New York, which unionized with the nascent Amazon Labor Union in 2022 and has since affiliated with the Teamsters.

The Teamsters says its local unions are also putting up picket lines at other Amazon warehouses. A company spokesperson said Thursday the strikers were "almost entirely outsiders, not Amazon employees or partners, and the suggestion otherwise is just another lie from the Teamsters."

What do the workers want?

The striking workers are fighting for higher wages, better benefits, and safer work conditions.

The Teamsters have tried to get Amazon to come to the negotiating table since last year, when the labor organization first said it had unionized a group of delivery drivers in California who work for a contractor. Amazon -- which denies it employs the workers -- refused, leading the union to file unfair labor charges against the company at the National Labor Relations Board.

In August, prosecutors at the federal labor agency classified Amazon as a "joint employer" of subcontracted drivers. In September, the company boosted hourly pay for the drivers amid the growing pressure.

Amazon warehouse workers who voted to union in the New York City borough of Staten Island also have tried to get the company to engage in contract negotiations.

The National Labor Relations Board certified the Amazon Labor Union election, but the company objected to the representation vote and refused to bargain. In the process, Amazon also filed a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the labor board, which it accused of tainting the vote.

Some organizers involved with the unionization effort there have long believed Amazon would not come to the negotiating table unless workers went on strike.

What about holiday deliveries?

Amazon says it doesn't expect the strike to impact its operations, but a walkout — especially one that lasts many days — could delay shipments in some metro areas.

An Amazon spokesperson said Thursday that the company intentionally builds its sites close to where customers are, schedules shipping windows and works with other large carriers, such as UPS, to deliver products.

"We believe in the strength of our network and plan for contingencies to minimize potential operational impact or costs," the spokesperson said.

Former Uvalde schools police chief loses bid to toss criminal charges related to 2022 shooting

By NADIA LATHAN Associated Press/Report for America

UVALDE, Texas (AP) — A Texas judge on Thursday refused to throw out criminal charges accusing the former Uvalde schools police chief of putting children at risk during the slow response to the 2022 Robb Elementary School shooting, while a lawyer for his co-defendant said they want to move the upcoming trial out of the small town where the massacre occurred.

At a court hearing in Uvalde, Judge Sid Harle rejected Pete Arredondo's claim that was he improperly charged and that only the shooter was responsible for putting the victims in danger. Nineteen children and two teachers were killed in the shooting on May 24, 2022.

Harle also set an Oct. 20, 2025, trial date. An attorney for Arredondo's co-defendant, former Uvalde schools police officer Adrian Gonzales, said he will ask for the trial to be moved out of Uvalde because his client cannot get a fair trial there. Uvalde County is mostly rural with fewer than 25,000 residents about 85 miles (140 kilometers) west of San Antonio.

"Everybody knows everybody," in Uvalde, Gonzales attorney Nico LaHood said.

Both former officers attended the hearing.

Nearly 400 law enforcement agents rushed to the school but waited more than 70 minutes to confront and kill the gunman in a fourth-grade classroom. Arredondo and Gonzales are the only two officers facing charges — a fact that has raised complaints from some victims' families.

Both men have pleaded not guilty to multiple counts of abandoning or endangering a child, each of which carry punishment of up to two years in jail. Gonzales has not asked the judge to dismiss his charges.

A federal investigation of the shooting identified Arredondo as the incident commander in charge, although he has argued that state police should have set up a command post outside the school and taken control. Gonzales was among the first officers to arrive on the scene. He was accused of abandoning his training and not confronting the shooter, even after hearing gunshots as he stood in a hallway.

Arredondo has said he was scapegoated for the halting police response. The indictment alleges he did not follow his active shooter training and made critical decisions that slowed the police response while the gunman was "hunting" his victims.

It alleges that instead of confronting the gunman immediately, Arredondo caused delays by telling officers to evacuate a hallway to wait for a SWAT team, evacuating students from other areas of the building first, and trying to negotiate with the shooter while victims inside the classroom were wounded and dying.

Arredondo's attorneys say the danger that day was not caused by him, but by the shooter. They argued Arredondo was blamed for trying to save the lives of the other children in the building, and have warned that prosecuting him would open many future law enforcement actions to similar charges.

"Arredondo did nothing to put those children in the path of a gunman," said Arredondo attorney Matthew Hefti.

Uvalde County prosecutors told the judge Arredondo acted recklessly.

"The state has alleged he is absolutely aware of the danger of the children," said assistant district attorney Bill Turner.

Jesse Rizo, the uncle of 9-year-old Jacklyn Cazares who was killed in the shooting, was one of several

family members of victims at the hearing.

"To me, it's hurtful and painful to hear Arredondo's attorneys try to persuade the judge to get the charges dismissed," Rizo said.

He called the wait for a trial exhausting and questioned whether moving the trial would help the defense.

"The longer it takes, the longer the agony," Rizo said. "I think what's happened in Uvalde ... you'll probably get a better chance at conviction if it's moved. To hold their own accountable is going to be very difficult."

The massacre at Robb Elementary was one of the worst school shootings in U.S. history, and the law enforcement response has been widely condemned as a massive failure.

Nearly 150 U.S. Border Patrol agents, 91 state police officers, as well as school and city police rushed to the campus. While terrified students and teachers called 911 from inside classrooms, dozens of officers stood in the hallway trying to figure out what to do. More than an hour later, a team of officers breached the classroom and killed the gunman.

Within days of the shooting, the focus of the slow response turned on Arredondo, who was described by other responding agencies as the incident commander in charge.

Multiple federal and state investigations have laid bare cascading problems in law enforcement training, communication, leadership and technology, and questioned whether officers prioritized their own lives over those of children and teachers. Several victims or their families have filed multiple state and federal lawsuits.

California declared an emergency over bird flu. How serious is the situation?

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

California officials have declared a state of emergency over the spread of bird flu, which is tearing through dairy cows in that state and causing sporadic illnesses in people in the U.S.

That raises new questions about the virus, which has spread for years in wild birds, commercial poultry and many mammal species.

The virus, also known as Type A H5N1, was detected for the first time in U.S. dairy cattle in March. Since then, bird flu has been confirmed in at least 866 herds in 16 states.

More than 60 people in eight states have been infected, with mostly mild illnesses, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. One person in Louisiana has been hospitalized with the nation's first known severe illness caused by the virus, health officials said this week.

Here's what you need to know.

Why did California declare a state of emergency?

Gov. Gavin Newsom said he declared the state of emergency to better position state staff and supplies to respond to the outbreak.

California has been looking for bird flu in large milk tanks during processing. And they have found the virus in at least 650 herds, representing about three-quarters of all affected U.S. dairy herds.

The virus was recently detected in Southern California dairy farms after being found in the state's Central Valley since August.

"This proclamation is a targeted action to ensure government agencies have the resources and flexibility they need to respond quickly to this outbreak," Newsom said in a statement.

What's the risk to the general public?

Officials with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention stressed again this week that the virus poses low risk to the general public.

Importantly, there are no reports of person-to-person transmission and no signs that the virus has changed to spread more easily among humans.

In general, flu experts agreed with that assessment, saying it's too soon to tell what trajectory the outbreak could take.

"The entirely unsatisfactory answer is going to be: I don't think we know yet," said Richard Webby, an influenza expert at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

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But virus experts are wary because flu viruses are constantly mutating and small genetic changes could change the outlook.

Are cases becoming more serious?

This week, health officials confirmed the first known case of severe illness in the U.S. All the previous U.S. cases — there have been about 60 — were generally mild.

The patient in Louisiana, who is older than 65 and had underlying medical problems, is in critical condition. Few details have been released, but officials said the person developed severe respiratory symptoms after exposure to a backyard flock of sick birds.

That makes it the first confirmed U.S. infection tied to backyard birds, the CDC said.

Tests showed that the strain that caused the person's illness is one found in wild birds, but not in cattle. Last month, health officials in Canada reported that a teen in British Columbia was hospitalized with a severe case of bird flu, also with the virus strain found in wild birds.

Previous infections in the U.S. have been almost all in farmworkers with direct exposure to infected dairy cattle or poultry. In two cases — an adult in Missouri and a child in California — health officials have not determined how they caught it.

It's possible that as more people become infected, more severe illnesses will occur, said Angela Rasmussen, a virus expert at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada.

Worldwide, nearly 1,000 cases of illnesses caused by H5N1 have been reported since 2003, and more than half of people infected have died, according to the World Health Organization.

"I assume that every H5N1 virus has the potential to be very severe and deadly," Rasmussen said.

How can people protect themselves?

People who have contact with dairy cows or commercial poultry or with backyard birds are at higher risk and should use precautions including respiratory and eye protection and gloves, CDC and other experts said.

"If birds are beginning to appear ill or die, they should be very careful about how they handle those animals," said Michael Osterholm, a public health expert at the University of Minnesota.

The CDC has paid for flu shots to protect farmworkers against seasonal flu — and against the risk that the workers could become infected with two flu types at the same time, potentially allowing the bird flu virus to mutate and become more dangerous. The government also said that farmworkers who come in close contact with infected animals should be tested and offered antiviral drugs even if they show no symptoms.

How else is bird flu being spread?

In addition to direct contact with farm animals and wild birds, the H5N1 virus can be spread in raw milk. Pasteurized milk is safe to drink, because the heat treatment kills the virus, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

But high levels of the virus have been found in unpasteurized milk. And raw milk sold in stores in California was recalled in recent weeks after the virus was detected at farms and in the products.

In Los Angeles, county officials reported that two indoor cats that were fed the recalled raw milk died from bird flu infections. Officials were investigating additional reports of sick cats.

Health officials urge people to avoid drinking raw milk, which can spread a host of germs in addition to bird flu.

The U.S. Agriculture Department has stepped up testing of raw milk across the country to help detect and contain the outbreak. A federal order issued this month requires testing, which began this week in 13 states.

Putin boasts of gains in Ukraine at annual news conference meant to reinforce his authority

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — President Vladimir Putin boasted that his military operation in Ukraine has strengthened Russia and denied that the ouster of key ally Bashar Assad in Syria had hurt Moscow's prestige, as he took questions at his annual news conference and call-in show Thursday.

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He used the tightly choreographed event, which lasted about 4 1/2 hours, to reinforce his authority and demonstrate a sweeping command of everything from consumer prices to military hardware.

Sending troops into Ukraine in 2022 has boosted Russia's military and economic power, Putin said, adding that if he could do it over, "such a decision should have been made earlier" and Russia could have "prepared for it in advance and more thoroughly."

"Russia has become much stronger over the past two or three years because it has become a truly sovereign country," he said. "We are standing firm in terms of economy, we are strengthening our defense potential and our military capability now is the strongest in the world."

Putin, who has held power for nearly a quarter-century and began another six-year term earlier this year, said the military was "advancing toward achieving our goals" in what he calls the special military operation in Ukraine.

In response to a question about a new hypersonic ballistic missile that Russia used for the first time last month to strike Ukraine, Putin scoffed at claims by some Western experts that it could be intercepted by NATO's air defenses.

He mockingly challenged Ukraine's allies to a "high-tech duel," suggesting that Moscow could give advance notice of a strike on Kyiv with the Oreshnik missile and see if the West could protect the city.

"Let them select a target, possibly in Kyiv, put their air defense assets there and we shall strike it with the Oreshnik," he said with a dry smile. "Let's see what happens."

Speaking on a visit to Brussels, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy responded to Putin's comment by asking, "Do you think it's a sane person?"

Putin calls general's killing a security 'blunder'

Russia is making steady, if slow, advances in Ukraine, but has also suffered embarrassing setbacks. On Tuesday, Lt. Gen Igor Kirillov was killed by a bomb planted outside his apartment building in Moscow — a brazen assassination claimed by Ukraine that brought the conflict once again to the streets of the Russian capital.

Putin described Kirillov's killing as a "major blunder" by Russia's security agencies, noting they should learn from it and improve their efficiency.

Moscow's troops are also battling Ukrainian forces in the Russian region of Kursk, where they have launched an incursion. Asked when they would drive the Ukrainians out, Putin said "we will certainly kick them out" but wouldn't say how long it would take.

In a flourish typical of the marathon news conferences, he asked members of the audience to unfurl a banner presented to him by marines fighting in Kursk as he spoke about Ukraine.

Open to talks on Ukraine but reiterates Russia's demands

Putin said he was open to possible talks with U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, who has pledged to negotiate a deal to end the conflict in Ukraine.

"If we meet with Mr. Trump, we will have things to discuss," he said, without elaborating.

Putin said Russia also is open for compromise in potential peace talks on Ukraine.

"Politics is the art of compromise," he said. "We have always said that we are ready for both talks and compromises." At the same time, Putin added that the talks should be based on "the situation on the ground" referring to some of the conditions he previously laid out.

Putin has previously demanded that Ukraine renounce its bid to join NATO and recognize Russia's gains. Kyiv and the West have rejected those demands.

Putin says he'll ask Assad about missing American Tice

In his first comments on Assad's downfall, Putin said that he hadn't yet met the former Syrian ruler, whom he has given asylum in Moscow, but plans to. He said he will ask him about Austin Tice, an American journalist who vanished in Syria 12 years ago.

"We also can pose the question to people who control the situation on the ground in Syria," Putin said, responding to a question from NBC's Keir Simmons, who cited a letter he said Tice's mother wrote to the Russian leader seeking assistance.

Moscow has sought to establish contacts with the rebels who ousted Assad to secure its diplomatic and

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military personnel and try to extend the lease on its air and naval bases in Syria.

"If we stay there, we will need to do something in the interests of the host country," he said, adding that Moscow offered to use its Hemeimeen air base and naval base in Tartus for humanitarian aid deliveries. "What those interests could be, what could we do for them is an issue to be thoroughly examined by both parties."

But it's unclear how much influence Russia will have in Syria. Assad's fall has dealt it a painful blow after Russia fought for nine years to prop him up in the country's civil war.

Still, Putin denied the events had weakened Moscow, arguing it achieved its goal of destroying "terrorist" groups in Syria via an air campaign launched in support of Assad in 2015. He claimed that rebel groups fighting Assad have changed and the West is ready to establish ties with them.

"That means that our goals have been achieved," Putin said.

He described Israel as the "main beneficiary" of Assad's downfall, noting the deployment of Israeli troops in southern Syria and voicing hope for their eventual withdrawal.

He noted the Syrian army offered little resistance to the opposition offensive and said Russia flew 4,000 Iranian troops from Hemeimeem air base to Tehran.

Putin declines to criticize Biden over pardoning his son

Asked about President Joe Biden's decision to pardon his son, Hunter, to spare him a possible prison sentence for felony gun and tax convictions, Putin said he wouldn't criticize the U.S. leader.

"As for Biden, he's a politician, and it's always important which side prevails: political or human," he said. "It turned out that there was more human in Biden. I wouldn't condemn him for this."

Putin said Russia shouldn't rush to bury the body of Soviet Union founder Vladimir Lenin, which has been displayed in a mausoleum on Red Square for nearly a century, to avoid splitting society.

Like in previous years, the live show was dominated by domestic issues, with journalists and ordinary citizens asking about soaring consumer prices and mortgages, paltry pensions and a shortage of doctors. Russian state media reported that the public submitted over 2 million questions in advance.

Putin opened the session by saying the economy is on track to grow by nearly 4% this year. He acknowledged that consumer prices are high, with inflation at 9.3%, but insisted the situation remains "stable."

The show was as much spectacle as news conference as journalists in the hall near the Kremlin waved colorful signs and placards to attract Putin's attention, many of them acting as proponents of local issues.

Mystery drone sightings continue in New Jersey and across the US. Here's what we know

By DAVE COLLINS Associated Press

A large number of mysterious drones have been reported flying over New Jersey and across the eastern U.S., sparking speculation and concern over where they came from and why.

In response, the Federal Aviation Administration on Wednesday temporarily banned drone flights in 22 areas of New Jersey where critical infrastructure is located. FAA officials said the flight restrictions were requested by federal security agencies and are effective through Jan. 17.

The FBI, the Homeland Security Department and state agencies have been investigating, but officials say there has been nothing so far to suggest that any drones have posed a national security or public safety threat. In fact, authorities say, many of the drone sightings have actually been legal drones, manned aircraft, helicopters and even stars.

President Joe Biden said Tuesday night that there appears to be nothing nefarious about the flying objects.

Despite federal officials' comments, many state and municipal lawmakers have nonetheless called for stricter rules about who can fly unmanned aircraft — and for the authority to shoot them out of the sky.

Federal government agencies have the authority to track and disable drones deemed to be threatening, but that power was set to expire after Friday. A temporary spending bill before Congress that would extend that power and avert a government shutdown was in flux Thursday after President-elect Donald Trump called for its rejection.

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What has been seen in New Jersey?

Dozens of witnesses have reported seeing drones statewide since mid-November, including near the Picatinny Arsenal, a military research and manufacturing facility, and over President-elect Donald Trump's golf course in Bedminster.

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy, a Democrat, has said that drone-detection equipment supplied by the federal government has yielded little new information. He declined to describe the equipment except to say it was powerful and could even disable the drones, though he said that's not legal on U.S. soil.

Murphy urged Congress to give states more authority to deal with the drones.

Meanwhile, federal and local authorities are warning against pointing lasers at suspected drones, because aircraft pilots are being hit in the eyes more often. Authorities also said they are concerned people might fire weapons at manned aircraft that they have mistaken for drones.

But do the drones pose a threat?

The growing anxiety among some residents is not lost on the Biden administration, which has faced criticism from Trump for not dealing with the matter more aggressively.

White House national security spokesperson John Kirby said Monday that the federal government has yet to identify any public safety or national security risks.

"There are more than 1 million drones that are lawfully registered with the Federal Aviation Administration here in the United States," Kirby said. "And there are thousands of commercial, hobbyist and law enforcement drones that are lawfully in the sky on any given day. That is the ecosystem that we are dealing with."

The federal government has deployed personnel and advanced technology to investigate the reports in New Jersey and other states, and is evaluating each tip reported by citizens, he said.

About 100 of the more than 5,000 drone sightings reported to the FBI in recent weeks were deemed credible enough to warrant more investigation, according to a joint statement by the Department of Homeland Security, FBI, Federal Aviation Administration and Department of Defense.

Who is operating the drones?

Speculation has raged online, with some expressing concerns that the drones could be part of a nefarious plot by foreign agents or clandestine operations by the U.S. government.

Pentagon spokesperson Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said it's unlikely the drones are engaged in intelligence gathering, given how loud and bright they are. And he repeated Tuesday that the drones being reported are not being operated by the Department of Defense.

Asked whether military contractors might be operating drones in the New Jersey area, Ryder rebuffed the notion, saying there are "no military operations, no military drone or experiment operations in this corridor."

Ryder said additional drone-detecting technology was being moved to some military installations, including the Picatinny Arsenal in New Jersey.

Drone activity in the past week led to an hourlong closure of runways at New York's Stewart International Airport, about 60 miles (100 kilometers) north of Manhattan, a four-hour closure of air space around Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, and the arrests of two men in Boston accused by police of flying a drone too close to Logan International Airport.

Officials urge action against the drones

Trump has said he believes the government knows more than it's saying.

"Let the public know, and now. Otherwise, shoot them down!!!" he posted on Truth Social.

U.S. Sen. Andy Kim, a New Jersey Democrat, said he has heard nothing to support the notion that the government is hiding anything. He said a lack of faith in institutions is playing a key part in the saga.

"Nothing that I'm seeing, nothing that I've engaged in gives me any impression of that nature. But like, I get it, some people won't believe me, right? Because that's the level of distrust that we face," Kim said Monday.

Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut last week called for the drones to be "shot down."

A Senate bill that would expand federal agencies' authorities to track and disable drones has been pending since last year. It also includes a pilot program that would allow state and local law enforcement agencies to monitor and disable drones, under supervision by federal authorities. A similar bill in the House was introduced in June.

Advocates train immigrants to 'prepare to stay' in the US under Trump

By AMY TAXIN and SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Winston Leiva rattles off a long list of things immigrants should do to protect themselves against President-elect Donald Trump's promise to conduct mass deportations when he returns to the White House.

Make a plan for someone to care for your children if you are arrested. Don't open the door unless authorities slip a signed judicial warrant under it. And above all, exercise your right to remain silent.

"We already know this administration," Leiva told participants of a bilingual workshop in Los Angeles for immigrants who want to stay in the United States. "The truth is we don't know to what extent it will affect us."

The Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights meeting, in a conference room decorated with a colorful mural of civil rights icons and a large American flag, is one of many taking place nationwide as immigrant advocates steel themselves for Trump's second term. It's déjà vu for those who sprung to action during Trump's first four years, when he changed the nation's immigration system arguably more than any other U.S. president.

Advocacy groups from Utah to Massachusetts have hosted know-your-rights trainings to teach immigrants how to protect themselves, their friends and families from Trump's promise to start deportations on his first day back in office. The efforts are underway in immigrant-friendly states including California and Illinois — which both enacted protections for immigrants in response to Trump's focus on enforcement during his first administration — and those with more stringent laws affecting immigrants such as Florida.

Connecticut Students for a Dream, an advocacy group for undocumented youth, recently held a session in the city of Danbury, which is home to immigrants from Ecuador, the Dominican Republic and elsewhere. Organizers advised that you don't have to speak with immigration agents if they knock on your door, and warned in a Facebook post: "If you choose to speak, remember not to lie."

Advocates are also urging those who are eligible to complete applications for U.S. citizenship or other immigration benefits before next year, aiming to avoid potentially lengthy wait times under an incoming administration that seems focused on immigration enforcement rather than integration.

The Florida Immigrant Coalition is offering free clinics to help thousands of immigrants who may have a pathway to a legal status and can't afford a lawyer. Inside an already busy immigration court in Chicago, National Immigrant Justice Center attorneys who help run a legal help desk said they are trying to resolve as many cases as possible before Trump takes office.

"It feels a little different because we have a clear expectation of what is coming," said Lisa Koop, the Center's national director of legal services. "It is demoralizing that the electorate lived through what happened last time and decided to go back to it."

The Trump campaign has said the president-elect will start the largest deportation program in U.S. history during his second administration, but questions remain about how he will find and detain people.

Fear is widespread in immigrant communities. Advocates say they're fielding calls from immigrants with and without legal status and even from naturalized U.S. citizens worried about how the administration could affect them and their families — especially the American-born children of parents who wind up deported. Advocates are urging families to draft legal papers in case this happens.

"We know that separation is an issue, and we want to make sure that families are prepared for who takes care of their children, who takes care of their property," said Renata Bozzetto, deputy director at the Florida Immigrant Coalition.

In New Haven, Connecticut, immigrant advocates have been holding sessions in high schools.

"That's because they've reached out to us to request it," said Rachel Doft, director of legal services for Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services. "A lot of kids have questions, and especially kids in mixed-status families. They're really afraid of (Trump's deportation plan) and want to understand their rights."

In Chicago, immigration attorney Fiona McEntee said advocates learned a lot during Trump's prior admin-

istration, including better ways to organize. She was among hundreds of lawyers who provided free legal services to immigrants at O'Hare International Airport in January 2017, after Trump temporarily banned refugees and citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the U.S.

"As much as we didn't want to be here again, we're more experienced," McEntee said. "We are different immigration lawyers than we were eight years ago."

In Los Angeles, Julie Gomez, 50, sat and listened attentively to the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights workshop, filming key snippets on her cellphone. She came with an Armenian community member who needs help, and Gomez wants to learn and prepare so she can spread the word to others in her Guatemalan community. While she said she doesn't have reason to worry about Trump's immigration proposals, she knows many people who do.

"They're obviously worried because they could be deported and what would happen to their children?" Gomez said. "Confused, and worried."

Leiva, who manages community education programs at CHIRLA, spent more than an hour spelling out what immigrants should and shouldn't do if contacted by federal authorities. He said they should put all their important documents in one place and save money in case they need a lawyer. And if they are detained by authorities, Leiva said they should provide their name and birthdate — but nothing more — so relatives can look them up in an immigration detention database.

"Do not make their job easy," Leiva told the group. "They have a job. You have a right."

Elon Musk considers funding Nigel Farage's populist party, a move that could shake up UK politics

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — It's a photo that sent a tremor through British politics: Elon Musk flanked by British politician Nigel Farage and a wealthy backer, in front of a gilt-framed painting of a young Donald Trump.

Taken this week at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida, the image suggested that Musk, a key player in the incoming U.S. administration, could soon turn his disruptive attention to the U.K.

Farage, Trump's highest-profile British champion, confirmed talks are underway about Musk making a hefty donation to Farage's party Reform U.K. The Times of London reported it could be as much as \$100 million, which would be far and away the largest political donation in U.K. history. The reports have sparked calls for Britain's rules on political donations to be tightened — quickly.

"We did discuss money," Farage told broadcaster GB News after the meeting with Musk. "That's a negotiation we will go back and have again. He is not against giving us money. He hasn't fully decided whether he will."

Britain has strict limits on how much political parties can spend on elections, but they can accept unlimited donations, as long as the donors are U.K. voters or companies registered in Britain. Musk's social network X has a British arm, Twitter U.K. Ltd., with a registered address in London.

Critics say that is a loophole that allows foreign influence in U.K. politics. The voting watchdog, the Electoral Commission, is calling for changes including limiting the amount a company can donate, so that it can't put in more money than it earns in Britain.

"It's crucial that U.K. voters have trust in the financing of our political system," the commission's chief executive Vijay Rangarajan told The Guardian. "The system needs strengthening, and we have been calling for changes to the law since 2013, to protect the electoral system from foreign interference."

Britain's center-left Labour Party pledged during the summer election campaign to tighten the rules on political donations, though legislation is not scheduled in the coming year. Prime Minister Keir Starmer's spokesman Dave Pares said Wednesday that work is already underway to "reinforce existing safeguards" against "impermissible proxy donations."

Both the Labour government and the right-of-center opposition Conservatives are trying to figure out how to deal with Musk, who has taken a keen interest in the U.K. — and seemingly formed a strong dislike

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for Starmer.

Musk often posts on X about the U.K., retweeting criticism of Starmer and the hashtag TwoTierKeir – shorthand for an unsubstantiated claim that Britain has “two-tier policing,” with far-right protesters treated more harshly than pro-Palestinian or Black Lives Matter demonstrators. Musk has compared British attempts to weed out online misinformation to the Soviet Union, and during summer anti-immigrant violence across the U.K. tweeted that “civil war is inevitable.”

Farage has echoed some of those themes in his own social media output and his party’s anti-“woke” agenda, which includes pledges to slash immigration, scrap green-energy targets and leave the European Convention on Human Rights.

Founded in 2021, Reform U.K. is the latest in a string of small hard-right parties led by Farage that have had limited electoral success, but an outsized influence on British politics. Farage’s opposition to the European Union helped push the country toward voting in 2016 to leave the bloc, a seismic political and economic break with the U.K.’s nearest neighbors.

Reform U.K. won just five of the 650 seats in the House of Commons in July’s election, but came second in dozens more and secured 14% of the vote. Now it is pushing for fast growth, trying to professionalize its previously ramshackle organization and holding gatherings around the U.K. to recruit new members.

Farage, a strong communicator who has embraced TikTok and other platforms, aims to emulate Trump’s success in using the power of personality and social media to reach the “bro vote” — young men who are traditionally less likely to turn out at election time.

Farage told GB News that Musk has “already given me considerable help – understanding the process from start to finish, reaching disaffected communities who frankly feel there’s no point voting for anybody.”

The electoral power of social media was on show recently in Romania, where far-right candidate Călin Georgescu came from nowhere to win the first round of the presidential election in November, aided in part by a flood of TikTok videos promoting his campaign. Amid allegations that Russia had organized the social media campaign to back Georgescu, Romania’s Constitutional Court canceled the presidential election runoff two days before it was due to take place.

With Britain’s Conservative Party trying to recover from its worst election result since 1832, Farage dreams of making Reform the main opposition – or even the government — after the next election, due by 2029.

That’s a long shot, but Rob Ford, professor of political science at the University of Manchester, said a big donation from Musk could have “disruptive potential in all sorts of ways.”

He said Musk’s money would give Reform “the opportunity to try and build up a serious campaign organization, which is something that they have generally lacked.”

“It’s certainly adding a new joker to the pack of cards in British politics,” Ford said. “We’ve had no shortage of surprising developments here in the past few years. And maybe this is the next one.”

For airports, background music no longer is an afterthought

By DEE-ANN DURBIN and MANUEL VALDES Associated Press Writers

SEATAC, Washington (AP) — Background music is no longer an afterthought at many airports, which are hiring local musicians and carefully curating playlists to help lighten travelers’ moods.

London’s Heathrow Airport built a stage to showcase emerging British performers for the first time this summer. The program was so successful the airport hopes to bring it back in 2025. Nashville International Airport has five stages that host more than 800 performances per year, from country musicians to jazz combos. In the Dominican Republic, Punta Cana International Airport greets passengers with live merengue music.

Tiffany Idiart and her two nieces were delighted to hear musicians during a recent layover at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

“I like it. There’s a lot of people here and they can all hear it,” said Grace Idiart, 9. “If their flight got delayed or something like that, they could have had a hard day. And so the music could have made them feel better.”

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Airports are also carefully curating their recorded playlists. Detroit Metro Airport plays Motown hits in a tunnel connecting its terminals. Austin-Bergstrom International Airport in Texas has a playlist of local artists compiled by an area radio station. Singapore's Changi Airport commissioned a special piano accompaniment for its giant digital waterfall.

Music isn't a new phenomenon in airport terminals. Brian Eno's "Music for Airports," an album released in 1978, helped define the ambient music genre. It's minimalist and designed to calm.

But Barry McPhillips, the head of international creative for Mood Media, which provides music for airports and other public spaces, said technology is enabling background music to be less generic and more tailored to specific places or times of day.

Mood Media – formerly known as Muzak – develops playlists to appeal to business travelers or families depending on who's in the airport at any given time. It might program calmer music in the security line but something more energizing in the duty-free store.

"We see it as a soundscape," McPhillips said. "We design for all of these moments."

There's a science to Mood Music's decisions on volume, tempo, even whether to play a song in a major key versus a minor one, he added.

"How do we want to affect their mood at that moment?" McPhillips said. "It's not just like, 'Here's a load of songs.' It's a load of songs for that 10-minute segment, and then we move to the next 10 minutes."

At the same time, many airports are going low-tech, hiring local musicians to serenade travelers and give them a sense of the place they're passing through.

Chicago's O'Hare and Midway airports have more than 100 live performances each year. Phoenix's Sky Harbor International Airport began a live music program five years ago and now has two stages featuring local artists.

Tami Kuiken, the manager of airport music in Seattle, said the Seattle-Tacoma airport launched its live music program about a decade ago after a city commissioner heard live music at the airport in Austin, Texas.

"The idea was like, 'Man, why doesn't Seattle have music? We're a music city too,'" Kuiken said.

At first, the airport created a playlist featuring emerging artists along with famous ones like Pearl Jam. Then it decided to try live musicians for a 12-week trial. It was so successful that the airport now features live musicians daily and is building new performance spaces.

"People's anxiety levels are very high when they're traveling," Kuiken said. "The feedback that we started getting was that once they got through the checkpoint and they were greeted with music, all of a sudden their anxiety and stress levels dropped."

The programs also benefit musicians, who get paid to perform and gain wider exposure. When Colorado Springs Airport announced a live music program in March, more than 150 musicians applied. It now hosts two two-hour performances each week.

David James, a singer and guitarist who plays at Seattle's airport about once a week, said waking up in time for a daytime gig took some adjustment. But he's gained new fans from all over the world.

"I get really sweet responses from people all the time, saying, 'That was so soothing to be able to just sit and listen to music in between flights,'" James said. "So it feels like it's especially therapeutic for people."

Country stars like Blake Shelton and Keith Urban have come through Nashville's airport and interacted with local musicians, said Stacey Nickens, the airport's vice president of corporate communications and marketing. Shelton even gave one his guitar.

Otto Stuparitz, a musicologist and lecturer at the University of Amsterdam who has studied airport music, said airports should think carefully about their selections. Music that's meant to be actively listened to – like live music or catchy pop songs – can be very distracting in an already chaotic environment, he said. He has noticed some airports – especially in Europe -- turning off piped melodies altogether.

But McPhillips said big spaces like airports can feel cold and unwelcoming without background music.

"A well-crafted audio strategy is one that people aren't particularly cognizant of," he said. "They just know they're having a good time and that it's appropriate."

12-team college football playoff arrives after 100 years, a few billion dollars and many detours

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

It took more than 100 years, a few billion dollars and the cold, hard realization that you can't fight progress forever. And now, finally, college football has what the rest of sports have — a legitimate postseason tournament.

The first 12-team College Football Playoff kicks off Friday and Saturday with four first-round games on campuses steeped in gridiron tradition: Texas (hosting Clemson), Penn State (SMU), Notre Dame (Indiana) and Ohio State (Tennessee).

The winners advance to play over the New Year's holiday — Arizona State, Boise State, Georgia and Oregon are waiting — and the tournament concludes Jan. 20 with the national title game in Atlanta.

The concept of a postseason tournament is old hat for virtually every other major sport in the United States (including the lower levels of college football), but this postseason is a novel one for the top level of the game. Not surprisingly for an endeavor that took a century to create, it is teeming with prickly details that will ultimately shape the future of the playoff itself.

Can the college game compete with the NFL?

A deal struck decades ago as part of the NFL's anti-trust exemption deems Saturdays as college territory, prohibiting the league from televising games on college football's biggest day. But that ban is only in effect through mid-December, which is when the NFL jumps in.

On Saturday, it has a pair of standout games: Texans-Chiefs on NBC and Steelers-Ravens on Fox. The CFP has chosen to counterprogram those games with SMU-Penn State and Clemson-Texas, both of which were sublicensed to TNT as part of ESPN's original deal to broadcast the playoff.

How will this go? College football's most-watched game this season grabbed 16.6 million viewers, while last year's title game, when the playoff only consisted of four teams, drew 25 million.

A regular-season NFL game between the Bills and Rams earlier this month drew 24 million viewers and the NFL averaged around 38.5 million viewers for its first round of playoff games last season.

Does it matter? ESPN is signed to the deal (topping out at \$1.3 billion a year) through 2031, though if the ratings tank, it might be compelled to look for friendlier TV windows and avoid the ratings behemoth that is the NFL.

"I think it's important for them to get a reasonable rating," said Dan Durbin, the director of the Institute of Sports, Media and Society at USC. "I don't think beating the NFL really even counts."

Why did this take 100 years?

We can trace it back to the Rose Parade in Pasadena, California. Organizers of the annual parade wanted a way to pay for all those flower-covered floats cruising down Colorado Boulevard.

In 1902, they invited Michigan and Stanford to play (the Wolverines won 49-0). In 1916, it was Washington State and Brown, and from there, the game became an annual affair.

Other cities followed suit, mostly in warm-weather areas. By 1937, the Rose, Orange (Miami), Sugar (New Orleans) and Cotton (Dallas) were annual bowls. By the 1940s and '50s, the games had contractual tie-ins with conferences, which pledged to send their teams there.

The games entrenched themselves in the local tourism economy and, so, also became dug into the fabric of college football itself. While virtually all sports had moved toward some sort of playoff tournament by the 1960s, college football stood pat and the bowl games served as its postseason.

AP and other polls declared national champions for decades

The Associated Press started its poll of sports writers in 1936 and began awarding its national championship to whoever was ranked first at the end of each season. In 1968, the AP moved its final poll to after the bowls were over.

Other polls followed — more than 20 different systems or rankings have come and gone since the late 1800s — and for decades, those organizations crowned national champions. They often differed, including 11 seasons where AP and the coaches/UPI polls declared different champions.

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Because the bowl games were locked into inviting teams from certain conferences, the top two teams in the sport often never played each other.

"In college football, you had so many teams, so many conferences that it's just been unwieldy to try to create a real postseason," Durbin said.

The alphabet soup of determining a champion

That remains true to this day, even with the expanded playoffs.

The seeds of change were planted after back-to-back seasons with split titles in 1990 and 1991 made it clear something needed to be done. Over the ensuing 35 years, a cocktail of conference realignment, ever-growing TV contracts and, most recently, the financial realities of a sport that will soon share millions with its players spawned new ways for the sport to tackle its playoff problem.

In the 1990s, a two-decade period of systems — the Bowl Alliance, Bowl Coalition and Bowl Championship Series — tried to pair the two best teams in the country to play for the title. Rankings were based on a combination of polls, computer rankings and strength of schedule — a formula that has been tweaked many times but remains a sore spot to this day.

The beginnings of a 'real' playoff

The BCS turned into the College Football Playoff in 2014 with a four-team postseason that felt like progress.

One problem was that the gap grew even wider between what mattered and what didn't — three playoff games vs. dozens of bowl games that looked more and more like exhibitions, especially if players with NFL prospects opted out.

Another was the selection process. The March Madness selection committee in college basketball isn't truly in jeopardy of sidelining the eventual national champion if it makes a bad choice for, say, the last two teams in a 68-team field.

Not so in football, where the field is smaller, every game means more and the financial stakes are higher. The SEC and Big Ten, for instance, receive around \$22 million in playoff TV money before a single game is played. There is a pool of about \$115 million available to the conferences based on the results of the playoff.

Last year, when the football committee chose one-loss Alabama over undefeated Florida State for the fourth and final spot, it triggered investigations and threats.

The road to 12 teams was already paved by then, but it has been equally as fraught. Some reveled in the fact that the first team out of the bracket this time was the very Alabama program that was chosen a year earlier.

Will this work, and what might change soon?

There is also the issue of automatic bids that go to conference winners, which have not only put Boise State and Arizona State (teams ranked eighth and 10th in the latest AP Top 25) into the tournament but given them two of the four first-round byes.

There is the issue of travel — how many fans can afford to go to three neutral-site games to watch their team chase a championship? With scant time to prepare, can the schools and the CFP pull off campus games without a hitch? Oh, what about the lack of students on campus this week?

The eventual champion will also end up playing 16, maybe 17, games, carving into classroom time that's supposed to still mean something at the college level.

Within a year or two, this tournament will likely expand to 14 teams. The issue of "access" — which conferences get in and how many teams they are allowed — will top that debate. There is also growing separation between the SEC and Big Ten and the rest of college football that makes many in the sport uneasy.

Before all that, it's time to buckle up. College football's first wild ride through the playoffs will last a full month.

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The best Christmas movies for every mood

By LINDSEY BAHR and JAKE COYLE AP Film Writers

'Tis the season for spirited and winless debates about what the best Christmas movie is. No one needs us to remind you about the obvious holiday movies playing on repeat on cable, whether it's "It's a Wonderful Life," "Home Alone" or "Love, Actually," or even those holiday adjacent classics like "Eyes Wide Shut" and "The Godfather." But perhaps you are looking to go beyond the obvious this year (sorry, "Christmas Story," "White Christmas" etc, etc).

Associated Press Film Writers Jake Coyle and Lindsey Bahr have you covered with the best Christmas films for every mood.

A movie that feels like a Christmas movie but isn't, really

"Grand Budapest Hotel": Truthfully, there's nothing outside of a little snow to make Wes Anderson's 2014 delight a Christmas movie. But I don't think there's another movie that better resembles the experience of opening a present than "Grand Budapest Hotel." Unwrap Anderson's intricate designs and the movie's Russian doll-like narratives, and smile. (Available for digital rental) — Coyle

Best movie for feeling fancy

"Metropolitan" (1990): Who among us hasn't dreamt of doing debutante season in New York? Maybe don't answer that, but Whit Stillman's "Metropolitan," about a few privileged youths on the Upper East Side, is the ideal film to turn on when you're craving something that feels like an elegant evening on the town but doesn't require breaking out the white tie and ball gowns. (Streaming on Criterion, MAX, Hulu and Prime Video) —Bahr

Best performance next to felt

"A Muppets Christmas Carol" (1992): It's one thing to do Dickens with, you know, other humans. But Michael Caine gives an Oscar-worthy performance as Ebenezer Scrooge while sharing the screen with the likes of Beaker and Dr. Bunsen Honeydew. To be fair, though, Gonzo the Great and Rizzo the Rat are also really good in this. (Streaming on Disney+) — Coyle

Best Christmas cry

"The Umbrellas of Cherbourg" (1964): Jacques Demy's technicolor musical isn't exclusively set at Christmas, but its final tearjerker scene at that snowy gas station is enough for me. The whole candy-colored experience, from Catherine Deneuve's whimsical bows to Michel Legrand's sweeping, melancholy score just feels right around the holidays. (Streaming on The Criterion Channel) —Bahr

The best L.A. Christmas movie

"Kiss Kiss Bang Bang": Yuletide traditions don't normally include a motormouth Robert Downey Jr., but Shane Black's 2005 neo-noir black comedy is worth revisiting perennially whether or not it technically qualifies as a Christmas movie. In "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang," about a thief-turned-actor in Los Angeles, Christmas is more of a decorative ornament set ironically against all the deliciously unwholesome seediness. (Available for digital rental) — Coyle

Best house swapping fantasy

"The Holiday" (2006): Ok, so the cozy English cottage isn't real, but what is? The premise? The romances? Cameron Diaz's sprint through snowy fields and country roads in stilettos? Mr. Napkin Head? (Actually, maybe Mr. Napkin Head). The thing is it doesn't really matter, does it? Nancy Meyers' romantic fantasy is never trying to be anything other than a delightful movie, a little too earnest, a little too glossy and an unabashed ode to the classic movies Meyers loves right down to Eli Wallach teaching a new generation about the "meet cute." (Streaming on Hulu and Prime Video) —Bahr

A great Christmas thriller not named "Die Hard"

"Three Days of the Condor": I'll take any excuse to rewatch Sydney Pollack's 1975 spy thriller with Robert Redford and Faye Dunaway. But, like in "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang," the Christmas backdrop isn't accidental. If the holidays are the ultimate time of togetherness, "Three Days of the Condor" questions what that means in a post-Watergate world. (Streaming on Paramount+) — Coyle

Best recent kids Christmas movie

"Klaus": There's such a steady stream of mediocre or worse holiday movies that it can be easy to miss

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when a gem arrives. Sergio Pablos' 2019 animated Netflix film was basically an origin story for Santa Claus by way of a desperate postman stationed in a remote northern village. Further proof, along with "Miracle on 34th Street," that the best Christmas movies hinge on the postal service. (Streaming on Netflix) — Coyle

For the under-five set

"Shaun the Sheep: The Flight Before Christmas" (2021): Clocking in at only 30 minutes, this is the perfect film for the littlest ones in the house. It's sweet, funny and adventurous and not even a little bit scary (unless you fear flying sleighs and botched recipes). (Streaming on Netflix) —Bahr

Best general holiday-period movie

"Nobody's Fool": Robert Benton's 1994 Richard Russo adaptation, with Paul Newman, spans Thanksgiving through New Year's Eve. And while that covers Christmas, the richness of "Nobody's Fool" exceeds its vaguely holiday setting. It's a movie more about daily smalltown struggles and long-term regrets, yet its warmth could match that any of any more traditional Christmas movie, and then some. That's much owed to Newman, but there are countless great performances here, including Jessica Tandy (in her final film), a never better Bruce Willis and a young Phillip Seymour Hoffman as a sniveling police officer. It makes me happy just thinking about it. (Streaming on Kanopy, available for digital rental) — Coyle

For midcentury style and heartbreak

"Carol" (2015): Even if Rooney Mara didn't catch Cate Blanchett's eye while wearing a Santa hat behind the counter of a Manhattan department store, Todd Haynes' "Carol" would still be one of the loveliest, most achingly tender Christmas movies around. Romance, heartbreak, plaids and martinis, "Carol" is truly flung out of space. (Streaming on Netflix, Paramount+ and MUBI) —Bahr

The ultimate TCM Christmas movie

"Christmas in Connecticut" (1945): You don't have to watch it on TCM but it's certainly a fitting place to catch this 1945 screwball classic, with Barbara Stanwyck. She plays a popular homemaking column writer whose false persona as a family woman with a Connecticut farm is challenged when her boss (Sydney Greenstreet) comes for Christmas dinner. As a rule, it's good to watch everything with Greenstreet. But the central conceit of "Christmas in Connecticut" — that the perfect Christmas is a lie, and isn't that fun — has proved remarkably durable. (Streaming on WatchTCM) — Coyle

For 19th century New England vibes

"Little Women" (1994 and 2019): Gillian Armstrong's "Little Women" just feels like Christmas. Maybe part of that is because it came out around the holidays 30 years ago or that its DVD cover leans into it. But then you remember Beth's piano, the girls stomping through the snow with their Christmas feast, the caroling, the return of their father, the fireplaces and nightcaps and it makes sense. Those wanting all of this with a side of dancing Chalamet, Greta Gerwig's version is there for the taking too. (1994 version available for digital rental; 2019 streaming on Hulu) — Bahr

The very best Christmas movie

"The Shop Around the Corner" (1940): You can make a strong case for that other Jimmy Stewart Christmas movie. But in the knock-down, drag-out battle for the Christmas movie title, there's no greater delight than Ernst Lubitsch's timeless love story. One of the most charming movies ever made, partly because it doesn't shy away from real darkness, too. It also makes for a very effective drinking game if you sip something every time someone says "Mr. Matuschek." (Streaming on WatchTCM and Max) — Coyle

"Miracle on 34th Street" (1947): It's not even a remotely out of the box choice, but George Seaton's "Miracle on 34th Street" endures as the platonic ideal of a Christmas movie. It's strikingly modern for something that came out 77 years ago with Maureen O'Hara's single working mom, Natalie Wood's prematurely cynical New York kid and the litigious and capitalistic culture and yet it's all full of hope and holiday spirit (and a healthy amount of glossy capitalism), taking us from the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade through Christmas Day. (Streaming on Disney+, Hulu and Prime Video) — Bahr

Israeli airstrikes hit Yemen's rebel-held capital and port city after Houthi attack targets Israel

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A series of intense Israeli airstrikes shook Yemen's rebel-held capital and a port city early Thursday and killed at least nine people, officials said, shortly after a Houthi missile targeted central Israel.

Thursday's strikes risk further escalating conflict with the Iranian-backed Houthis, whose attacks on the Red Sea corridor have drastically impacted global shipping. The rebels have so far avoided the same level of intense military strikes that have targeted Palestinian militant group Hamas and Lebanon's Hezbollah, fellow members of Tehran's self-described "Axis of Resistance."

Israel's military said that it conducted two waves of strikes in a preplanned operation that began early Thursday and involved 14 fighter jets. The military said the first wave of strikes targeted Houthi infrastructure at the ports of Hodeida, Salif and the Ras Isa oil terminal on the Red Sea.

Then, in a second wave of strikes, the military said its fighter jets targeted Houthi energy infrastructure in Sanaa.

"After Hamas, Hezbollah and the Assad regime in Syria, the Houthis are almost the last remaining arm of Iran's axis of evil," said Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a statement released Thursday. "They are learning and they will learn the hard way, that whoever harms Israel pays a very heavy price for it."

The Houthi-controlled satellite channel al-Masirah said that some of the strikes targeted power stations in the capital, posting videos of flames engulfing one structure, as civil defense workers doused it in water, trying to extinguish the fire.

The strikes on the two power plants will worsen the electricity crisis faced by Sanaa, where those who can afford it run gas generators or get power from private providers because of the city's long-failing infrastructure.

"Approximately one quarter of Sanaa — particularly shops, stores and commercial facilities — will face immediate and severe disruptions," said Mohammed al-Basha, a Yemen analyst. "In a city already staggering under a profound economic crisis, 2025 is set to be exceptionally challenging."

The al-Masirah channel, citing its correspondent in the port city of Hodeida, said that at least seven people had been killed at Salif, while another two had been killed at the Ras Isa oil terminal. Others suffered wounds at the Hodeida port as well, it said.

An Israeli military statement offered no damage assessment.

Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, an Israeli military spokesman, said the strikes hit energy and port infrastructure, which he alleged the rebels "have been using in ways that effectively contributed to their military action."

"I suggest the leaders of the Houthis to see, to understand and remember: Whoever raises a hand against the state of Israel, his hand will be cut off. Whoever harms us, will be harmed sevenfold," Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said.

Rebel-held Hodeida, about 145 kilometers (90 miles) southwest of Sanaa, has been key for food shipments into Yemen as its decade-long war has gone on. There's also longstanding suspicion that weapons from Iran have been transferred through the port.

The strikes happened just after Israel's military said that its air force intercepted a missile launched from Yemen before it entered the country's territory. The waves of strikes on Yemen early Thursday weren't a direct response to the missile hit, said a military official, but rather a planned response to months of Houthi aggression. Israel's fighter jets were already in the air when the missile was launched.

"Rocket and missile sirens were sounded following the possibility of falling debris from the interception," the Israeli military said. Sirens sounded near Tel Aviv and the surrounding areas, and a large explosion was heard overhead at the time.

Following an investigation, the military said that the missile's warhead fell on a school building in Ramat Gan, a suburb of Tel Aviv. The warhead exploded, collapsing the building, the military said.

The military official said that the Houthis have fired more than 200 missiles and UAVs, or unmanned

aerial vehicles, at Israel since Oct. 7, 2023.

Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree, a Houthi military spokesman, claimed the attack hours later in a prerecorded video statement, saying the rebels fired two of its "Palestine" ballistic missiles at Israel.

Israel previously struck Hodeida and its oil infrastructure in July after a Houthi drone attack killed one person and wounded 10 in Tel Aviv. In September, Israel struck Hodeida again, killing at least four people after a rebel missile targeted Israel's Ben Gurion airport as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was arriving back to the country.

American forces have also launched a series of strikes on the Houthis over nearly a year because of Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea corridor. On Monday, the U.S. military's Central Command said that it hit "a key command-and-control facility" operated by the Houthis in Sanaa, later identified as the al-Ardi complex once home to the government's Defense Ministry.

But Israel appears to have carried out Thursday's strikes alone. A U.S. military official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the attacks, said that Washington had no part in them. While the U.S. has carried out strikes on the Houthis in the past, it's also balancing the desires of Saudi Arabia to reach a permanent ceasefire in its stalemated war with the rebels.

The Houthis have targeted about 100 merchant vessels with missiles and drones since the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip started in October 2023 after Hamas' surprise attack on Israel that killed 1,200 people and saw 250 others taken hostage.

Israel's grinding offensive in Gaza has killed more than 45,000 Palestinians, local health officials say. The tally doesn't distinguish between combatants and civilians.

The Houthis have seized one vessel and sunk two in a campaign that has also killed four sailors. Other missiles and drones have either been intercepted by separate U.S.- and European-led coalitions in the Red Sea or failed to reach their targets, which have also included Western military vessels.

The rebels maintain that they target ships linked to Israel, the U.S. or the United Kingdom to force an end to Israel's campaign against Hamas in Gaza. However, many of the ships attacked have little or no connection to the conflict, including some bound for Iran.

The Houthis have battled the Saudi-led coalition in the wider Yemen war, which has killed more than 150,000 people, including civilians. The conflict also has created one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters that's believed to have killed tens of thousands more.

But the Houthis are still standing even as Israel's campaign against Hamas and Hezbollah has decimated those militant groups. Meanwhile, Israel and Iran have exchanged direct fire while the government of Syria, an enemy of Israel since its founding in 1948, collapsed in the face of a rebel advance as the region's wars have upended Iran's network of allied proxy groups.

Ireland embraced the AI boom. Now its data centers are consuming too much of its energy

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

CLONDALKIN, Ireland (AP) — Dozens of massive data centers humming at the outskirts of Dublin are consuming more electricity than all of the urban homes in Ireland and starting to wear out the warm welcome that brought them here.

Now, a country that made itself a computing factory for Amazon, Google, Meta, Microsoft and TikTok is wondering whether it was all worth it as tech giants look around the world to build even more data centers to fuel the next wave of artificial intelligence.

Fears of rolling blackouts led Ireland's grid operator to halt new data centers near Dublin until 2028. These huge buildings and their powerful computers last year consumed 21% of the nation's electricity, according to official records. No other country has reported a higher burden to the International Energy Agency.

Ireland is a "microcosm of what many countries could be facing over the next decade, particularly with the growth of AI," said energy researcher Paul Deane of University College Cork.

Dublin's data center limits

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Twenty-six-year-old activist Darragh Adelaide lives in a working-class Dublin suburb just across a busy motorway from Grange Castle Business Park, one of Ireland's biggest data center clusters. It could get even bigger were Adelaide not a thorn in the side of Google's expansion plans.

"It's kind of an outrageous number of data centers," Adelaide said. "People have started to make the connection between the amount of electricity they're using and electricity prices going up."

Ireland has attracted global tech companies since the "Celtic Tiger" boom at the turn of the 21st century. Tax incentives, a highly skilled, English-speaking workforce and the country's membership in the European Union have all contributed to making the tech sector a central part of the Irish economy.

Nearly all of the data centers sit on the edge of Dublin, where their proximity to the capital city facilitates activities that require fast connections. Ireland's cool temperatures also make it easier to keep data center computers from overheating without drawing in as much water.

Still, buildings that for years went mostly unnoticed have attracted unwanted attention as their power demands surged while Irish householders pay some of Europe's highest electricity bills. Ireland's Environmental Protection Agency has also flagged concerns about pollution from data centers' on-site generators affecting areas near Dublin.

A crackdown began in 2021, spurred by projections that data centers are on pace to take up one third of Ireland's electricity in this decade. Regulators declared that Dublin had hit its limits and could no longer plug more data centers into its grid. The government urged tech companies to look outside the capital and find ways to supply their own power.

In June, Adelaide's campaign against the centers helped get him elected to a seat on the South Dublin County Council for the leftist People Not Profits Party. The council soon after rejected Google's plan to build another data center. Google appealed the decision in September.

The backlash from Dublin-area local planning authorities has frustrated data center developers.

"What's preventing us from being able to leverage that is the fact that the power constraints that we have, or the power moratorium that we have, is greatly impacting our ability to provide space for customers," said Dermot Lahey, who directs Digital Realty's data center implementation in Ireland.

Moving to the boglands?

Once colder weather sets in, the smoky fragrance of fireplaces burning briquettes of peat lingers over County Offaly, an area west of Dublin in a region known as the Midlands. It's places like this where some data center developers, thwarted by Dublin's constraints, now see opportunity.

A report commissioned by County Offaly's government pitches the bog-dotted region as a place to "create thousands of green jobs" and rival "Dublin, Frankfurt, London, Amsterdam and Paris in being an anchor for data centres powered by renewable energy."

Farmer and conservationist Brian Sheridan, 83, is doubtful. He's seen this region transformed once before, from a vast wetland known as the Bog of Allen to barren pockets of brownfields as people cut away trenches of dense peat soil, or turf, to create homegrown fuel.

"The bog started disappearing and it wasn't being replaced," said Sheridan, walking along a boardwalk over carpets of moss and sedges in the now-protected Clara Bog Nature Reserve.

Decades of rapid extraction fostered Ireland's energy independence and employed scores of workers in turf-cutting, briquette factories and power plants. But it also polluted the air and devastated a delicate environment. Bogs that naturally trapped large amounts of carbon dioxide were stripped down to the bedrock, contributing to global warming. When burned, peat is dirtier than coal.

Ireland has largely banned the sale of peat and shuttered the last remaining peat-fired power plants. But the state-supported company at the helm of peat extraction, Bord na Móna, still controls vast tracts of former bogland. It has refashioned itself as a renewable energy provider, laying down wind turbines and solar farms and partnering with Amazon to build a data center near the village of Rhode.

Bord na Móna declined multiple interview requests about its plans, and some residents feel left in the dark. Amazon also declined to talk about specific projects and has repeatedly signaled it may shift its new data center investments away from Ireland.

Could wind save Ireland's data centers?

A tech-driven race is on to harness the region's wind. Backed by a power purchase agreement with Microsoft, the Norwegian wind energy company Statkraft is building nine towering wind turbines in remote former boglands along County Offaly's eastern edge. Statkraft's managing director for Ireland, Kevin O'Donovan, said data centers are actually helping to accelerate Ireland's clean energy transition.

"For a lot of the mainland European countries, demand is going down and that's actually leading to a challenge to roll out renewables," O'Donovan said. "Whereas in Ireland we have demand that's increasing because the country is growing economically and obviously a part of that is the data center growth."

On the other side of Offaly, a group of residents who live along the Lemanaghan Bog near the site of a 7th-century monastery are skeptical of such claims. They are opposed to what a proposed Bord Na Móna wind farm will do to its cultural heritage and ecology.

KK Kenny took his concerns to Dublin this fall in a meeting with the country's taoiseach, or prime minister, Simon Harris. Kenny wants to see the bog preserved for biodiversity. He'd be happy to see data center developers follow through with their pledge to look to other European countries.

"They say, oh, they're going to pull out," Kenny said. "That would be a great thing. We can't sustain them."

Some neighbors of Amazon's proposed data center in Rhode are more open to the idea. One village resident already commutes all the way to Dublin to work at a data center. Another is hoping it will employ people who'd want to buy new homes.

"We're all for change," said Gerard Whelan. "I'll get work because I build houses. It's a domino effect."

What happens next for Ireland's data centers could depend in part on the new national government coming into power early next year.

Trump's words of opposition stop a bipartisan budget deal in its tracks with Musk's help

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump delivered a likely death blow to bipartisan congressional budget negotiations, rejecting the measure as full of giveaways to Democrats after billionaire ally Elon Musk whipped up outrage toward the bill and cheered on Republican lawmakers who announced their opposition.

Trump's joint statement Wednesday with Vice President-elect JD Vance stopped the bill in its tracks and punctuated a torrent of social media posts by Musk attacking the legislation for what he described as excessive spending.

"Stop the steal of your tax dollars!" Musk wrote on his social media platform X as he dangled primary challenges against anyone who voted for the budget deal, a threat Trump later echoed in a post of his own.

The episode showcased the growing political influence of Musk, whom Trump has selected alongside entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy to spearhead the Department of Government Efficiency, a nongovernmental task force formed to find ways to fire federal workers, cut programs and reduce regulations.

Rep. Andy Barr, a Republican from Kentucky, said his office was flooded with calls from constituents.

"My phone was ringing off the hook," he said. "The people who elected us are listening to Elon Musk."

In his statement with Vance, Trump said Republicans should restart negotiations over the legislation, arguing that "anything else is a betrayal of our country." He also called for including an extension of the debt ceiling while President Joe Biden is in office.

"Increasing the debt ceiling is not great but we'd rather do it on Biden's watch," they said. "If Democrats won't cooperate on a debt ceiling increase now, what makes anyone think they would do it in June during our administration? Let's have this debate over the debt ceiling now."

Trump's opposition to what was considered must-pass legislation reinjected a sense of uncertainty and political brinkmanship that was reminiscent of his first term in office. It was a dramatic turn of events for House Speaker Mike Johnson, who negotiated the bill and has been undermined by Trump as he faces reelection for his post in just a couple of weeks. Republicans have a slim majority, raising the possibility of a replay of leadership disputes that paralyzed the House a year ago.

Many lawmakers were in the middle of holiday and year-end celebrations with staff when Trump came out against the legislation.

"I've been here 14 years, OK? So nothing up here surprises me anymore," said Rep. Steve Womack, a senior Republican appropriator from Arkansas. "We shouldn't be in this mess."

The Biden administration criticized the possibility of a shutdown.

"Republicans need to stop playing politics with this bipartisan agreement or they will hurt hardworking Americans and create instability across the country," said White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre.

Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform and a veteran of Washington's budget battles, was concerned about the lack of a clear plan for resolving the dispute.

"There's got to be a second part of the strategy," he said.

Norquist has been enthusiastic about Musk's ability to generate public attention for efforts to reduce the size of government. But he suggested that the owner of a space rocket company wasn't the right person to spearhead a congressional spending debate.

"He doesn't know politics like he knows physics," he said.

But others were thrilled with Musk's involvement.

"In five years in Congress, I've been awaiting a fundamental change in the dynamic," posted Rep. Dan Bishop, a Republican from North Carolina. "It has arrived."

Musk began criticizing the measure as soon as it was released Tuesday evening, and he continuously posted about it Wednesday.

"Any member of the House or Senate who votes for this outrageous spending bill deserves to be voted out in 2 years!" he wrote. He also called it "one of the worst bills ever written."

Sometimes Musk amplified false claims, such as the idea that the legislation included \$3 billion for a new football stadium in Washington. In reality, the legislation would transfer ownership of the land from the federal government to the city, paving the way for eventual development.

Musk appeared emboldened by the experience.

"The voice of the people was heard," Musk wrote. "This was a good day for America."

Democratic House leader Hakeem Jeffries said the fallout would be Republicans' fault.

"You break the bipartisan agreement, you own the consequences that follow," he wrote on X.

Wisconsin school shooter had 2 guns and got messages from man accused of plotting his own attack

By TODD RICHMOND, SCOTT BAUER and RYAN J. FOLEY Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — The shooter who killed a student and teacher at a religious school in Wisconsin brought two guns to the school and was in contact with a man in California who authorities say was planning to attack a government building, according to authorities and court documents that became public Wednesday.

Police were still investigating why the 15-year-old student at Abundant Life Christian School in Madison shot and killed a fellow student and teacher on Monday before shooting herself, Madison Police Chief Shon Barnes said. Two other students who were shot remained in critical condition on Wednesday.

"We may never know what she was thinking that day, but we'll do our best to try to add or give as much information to our public as possible," Barnes said.

A California judge, meanwhile, issued a restraining order Tuesday under California's gun red flag law against a 20-year-old Carlsbad man. The order requires the man to turn his guns and ammunition into police within 48 hours unless an officer asks for them sooner because he poses an immediate danger to himself and others.

According to the order, the man told FBI agents that he had been messaging Natalie Rupnow, the Wisconsin shooter, about attacking a government building with a gun and explosives. The order doesn't say what building he had targeted or when he planned to launch his attack. It also doesn't detail his interactions with Rupnow except to state that the man was plotting a mass shooting with her.

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The student who was killed in Monday's school shooting was identified in an obituary released Wednesday as Rubi Patricia Vergara, 14, of Madison. She was a freshman at the school and "an avid reader, loved art, singing and playing keyboard in the family worship band," according to the obituary. The Associated Press' attempts to reach the girl's family by phone and email on Wednesday evening were unsuccessful.

The Dane County medical examiner Wednesday evening identified the teacher who was killed as 42-year-old Erin Michelle West, after initially identifying her as Michelle E. West. A man who answered the phone at a number listed for West in public records hung up when reached by a reporter Wednesday evening.

The school's communication director, Barbara Wiers, said in a statement Wednesday evening that Vergara had attended the school since kindergarten.

West worked as a substitute teacher for three years before accepting a position as the school's substitute coordinator and an in-building substitute teacher, Wiers said.

"Our hearts are heavy with these losses," Wiers wrote in an email to The Associated Press.

Police, with the assistance of the FBI, were scouring online records and other resources and speaking with the shooter's parents and classmates in an attempt to determine a motive for the shooting, Barnes said.

Police don't know if anyone was targeted in the attack or if the attack had been planned in advance, the chief said.

"I do not know if she planned it that day or if she planned it a week prior," Barnes said. "To me, bringing a gun to school to hurt people is planning. And so we don't know what the premeditation is."

While Rupnow had two handguns, Barnes said he does not know how she obtained them and he declined to say who purchased them, citing the ongoing investigation.

No decisions have been made about whether Rupnow's parents might be charged in relation to the shooting, but they have been cooperating, Barnes said.

Online court records show no criminal cases against her father, Jeffrey Rupnow, or her mother, Mellissa Rupnow. They are divorced and shared custody of their daughter, but she primarily lived with her father, according to court documents. Divorce records indicate that Natalie was in therapy in 2022, but don't say why.

The school shooting was the latest among dozens across the U.S. in recent years, including especially deadly ones in Newtown, Connecticut, Parkland, Florida, and Uvalde, Texas.

But the Wisconsin shooting stands out because school shootings by teenage females have been extremely rare in the U.S., with males in their teens and 20s carrying out the majority of them, said David Riedman, founder of the K-12 School Shooting Database.

Abundant Life is a nondenominational Christian school that offers prekindergarten classes through high school. About 420 students attend the institution.

AP Exclusive: Pro tennis player Jenson Brooksby talks about living with autism

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP National Writer

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — Jenson Brooksby tugged at the right shoulder of his red T-shirt and fiddled with some strands of his dirty blond hair as he spoke to The Associated Press about what he'd like the world — the tennis world, yes, but also everyone else — to know about him.

Once a member of an up-and-coming group of American men making their mark with big wins at Grand Slam tournaments, Brooksby wants folks to be aware of what went on while he was away from the tour for nearly two "frustrating" years that, he said, made it "easy to get depressed." Ranked No. 33 at age 21 in 2022, just a year after going pro, he's now unranked after being sidelined by injuries, operations and a ban connected to missed drug tests that eventually was reduced.

And, as Brooksby prepares to compete again in January, including at the Australian Open, he wants people — other players, yes, but also anyone else, including those who are, or know someone who is, autistic — to hear about his experience living with autism spectrum disorder, which he discussed publicly for the first time during a recent interview.

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"It's ... just something I don't want to have to keep to myself," Brooksby said over a post-workout lunch in a boardroom at the U.S. Tennis Association National Campus. About 20 miles east of Walt Disney World, it's the site of preseason training for about a dozen tennis pros.

"It's obviously a personal topic that, even with people you may feel very comfortable with — in my mind, at least for a long time — it wasn't (something) to just go blurting out as part of a conversation, you know?" said Brooksby, 24, a native Californian who said he was nonverbal until the age of 4. "But I've always thought about it and ... I, eventually, just wanted to talk about it."

As a kid, he said, he spent about 40 hours a week with therapists "to be able to even just start talking ... (and) then to get better at communication and social situations."

What is autism?

There are no blood or biological tests for autism, a developmental disability caused by differences in the brain identified by observing a child's behavior. Formerly only diagnosed in children with severe language difficulties, social impairments and unusual repetitive behaviors, autism is now defined in a broader way and used to describe a group of milder, related conditions, too.

Brooksby called the autism a "big strength" in "pressure moments" on court, allowing him to "focus on two or three specific details really well for a long period of time." He also mentioned "something that makes (tennis) a little tougher": He will have outbursts if he's losing or if he is upset about a certain shot or aspect of his technique, a tendency his athletic trainer, Paul Kinney, keeps an eye out for, along with signs of discomfort such as reaching for his clothing or hair or leaning forward with hands on knees.

Brooksby, who "presented as a very severe case" as a child, now "is on the very mild end of the spectrum," according to Michelle Wagner, a board-certified behavior analyst whose area of specialty is autism spectrum disorders. She said she first began working with Brooksby when he was 2 years, 9 months and had been diagnosed by others; the progress he made, Wagner said, is an "unusual and unique outcome."

Why was Jenson Brooksby's suspension shortened?

Brooksby was given what at first was an 18-month suspension by the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) in October 2023.

He was not accused of testing positive for a banned substance but, instead, of failing to show up for three drug tests within a 12-month period; according to the ITIA's initial report, his side argued that miscommunication with a doping control officer trying to find him at a hotel in the Netherlands "was not due to any negligence on (the player's) part."

Brooksby appealed, and he and the ITIA agreed to a reduced punishment, making him eligible to return in March 2024 instead of January 2025. The ITIA said his "degree of fault ... should be reassessed" due to "new information relating to the circumstances giving rise to the missed tests." The ITIA never announced what that new information was; a spokesman declined to comment on the case Wednesday.

But Wagner said the appeal included her input. She oversaw Brooksby's treatment plan until he was 6, including language development and age-appropriate self-help skills such as getting dressed alone or preparing a backpack for school.

"It was clear he needed intensive intervention" back then, she told the AP. "He presented with some severe behavioral challenges and he was ... behind his peer age group."

As part of the appeal, Wagner said, she explained how autism affects Brooksby's decision-making as an adult and leads to what she termed "a lack of executive functioning," meaning he has trouble understanding that, "If I do this, that might be the outcome; if I don't do this, then (certain other things) might happen."

Brooksby has been off the tennis tour for almost two full years

Brooksby plans to return on the lower-level Challenger Tour in Canberra, Australia, next month, before heading to the Australian Open, which begins Jan. 12. It was there, in January 2023, that Brooksby upset three-time Grand Slam runner-up Casper Ruud. Two days later, Brooksby lost to eventual semifinalist Tommy Paul.

That's where the "Activity" section of Brooksby's ATP Tour record ends. First came surgery on his left wrist that March. Then surgery on his right wrist in May. Then the ban.

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"Multiple bad things just happened at once," he said. "It was a lot to take, mentally."

After the suspension, Brooksby didn't play right away, partly because of shoulder pain when he resumed hitting and partly because he was assembling a new team (he now is with coaches Eric Nunez and Rhyne Williams, along with Kinney, who previously was with him in 2022).

Kinney said Brooksby has trained to improve his body, including his posture, and parts of his game, including his serve.

"Try to become better," Brooksby said. "That's the goal."

Brooksby's career highlights in tennis

The 6-foot-4 Brooksby already has shown enough talent, in-match smarts and unique shot-making to beat major finalists Ruud, Stefanos Tsitsipas, Taylor Fritz, Tomas Berdych and Kevin Anderson.

He earned high praise from 24-time Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic, against whom Brooksby claimed a set before losing in the 2021 U.S. Open's fourth round.

Told about some of what Djokovic said that night — "We're going to see a lot of him in the future" and "He has a bit of an unorthodox game" — Brooksby nodded and replied, "I'd say that's very accurate."

Emitting a grunt with most groundstrokes, he wore white tape strapped around both wrists for practices during the AP's visit — outdoors in the morning, indoors in the afternoon.

"It's hard to say what the ceiling is. ... He can be a top-10 player," Nunez said. "He only has one gear when he's competing at anything and that's full-on mode."

Why is Brooksby discussing his autism now?

"I just want people to know me for who I am fully, and that's just another part of me," Brooksby said. "I've had a lot of time out of playing and a lot of thinking I've had to do."

Took some getting used to the idea.

"He was worried," said his longtime advisor, Amrit Narasimhan, "about what people would think of him."

And now?

"He wants players to understand him better; that's a big part of it," Narasimhan said. "He wants to tell his story so people can understand who he is."

Today in History: December 20, the Louisiana Purchase is completed

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, Dec. 20, the 355th day of 2024. There are 11 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 20, 1803, the Louisiana Purchase was completed as ownership of the territory was formally transferred from France to the United States.

Also on this date:

In 1946, the classic holiday film "It's a Wonderful Life" premiered at the Globe Theater in New York City.

In 1986, three Black men were attacked by a group of white youths in the Howard Beach neighborhood of Queens, New York, resulting in the death of one of the men, Michael Griffith.

In 1987, more than 4,300 people were killed when the Doña Paz (DOHN'-yuh pahz), a Philippine passenger ship, collided with the tanker Vector off Mindoro island.

In 1989, the United States launched Operation Just Cause, sending troops into Panama to topple the government of Gen. Manuel Noriega.

In 2019, the United States Space Force was established when President Donald Trump signed the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020.

Today's Birthdays: Rock drummer Peter Criss (Kiss) is 79. Producer Dick Wolf ("Law & Order") is 78. Musician Alan Parsons is 76. Author Sandra Cisneros is 70. Actor Michael Badalucco is 70. Rock singer Chris Robinson (The Black Crowes) is 58. Filmmaker Todd Phillips is 54. Actor Jonah Hill is 41. Soccer player Kylian Mbappé is 26.