

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 1 of 76

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 News Headlines](#)
- [4- Today's Basketball Information](#)
- [5- Obit: Leonard Garness](#)
- [6- Brown County Commission Agenda](#)
- [7- Groton City Council Agenda](#)
- [8- Today on GDILIVE.COM](#)
- [9- SD SearchLight: Only 'political magic' can save \\$825 million prison plan, lawmaker says](#)
- [11- SD SearchLight: SD lawmakers endorse hurdles for eminent domain and environmental studies for carbon pipelines](#)
- [13- SD SearchLight: SD Senate supports 'forever chemical' labels on firefighting protective gear](#)
- [13- SD SearchLight: 'Election integrity' activists speak out against labels for political deepfakes](#)
- [15- SD SearchLight: Former Kristi Noem aide in South Dakota reported to be named senior ICE official](#)
- [15- SD SearchLight: SD House endorses student-teacher stipends to address educator shortage](#)
- [16- SD SearchLight: State budget cuts endorsed for business sales tax credit and high schoolers taking college courses](#)
- [17- SD SearchLight: School cellphone bans spread across states, though enforcement could be tricky](#)
- [20- Weather Pages](#)
- [25- Daily Devotional](#)
- [26- Subscription Form](#)
- [27- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [28- Upcoming Groton Events](#)
- [29- News from the Associated Press](#)

Tuesday, Feb. 25

Senior Menu: Meatballs, mashed potato with gravy, Italian blend, peaches, whole wheat bread.

Region 1A Girls B basketball tournament in Groton (6:00 p.m.: Groton Area vs. Redfield, 20 minutes after that, Sisseton vs. Britton-Hecla)

Common Cents Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., 209 N Main.

Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., Groton Community Center
Groton United Methodist Bible Study, 10 a.m.
City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

Happy Tuesday

Good Morning

May God manifest His Glory in your lives today. May He Bless You, Heal you, Protect you, and shower you with His abundant Favor.



Wednesday, Feb. 26

Senior Menu: Beef noodle strofanoff, capri blend, apple sauce, cookie, whole wheat bread.

Groton United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

Groton C&MA: Kid's Club, Youth Group, Adult Bible Study, 7 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 4 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.

Thursday, Feb. 27

Senior Menu: Potato soup, chicken salad sandwich, mixed vegetables, fruit, whole wheat bread.

Girls and boys state wrestling at Rapid City
Region 1A Girls B basketball tournament

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

© 2025 Groton Daily Independent

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 2 of 76

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.

French Abuse Trial

Former French surgeon Joël Le Scouarnec went on trial yesterday, accused of sexually assaulting nearly 300 patients, mostly minors, in the country's largest child sex abuse case on record.

Le Scouarnec was initially arrested in 2017 following accusations that he abused or raped four girls, and was sentenced to 15 years in prison. While investigating, police reportedly recovered journals with accounts written by Le Scouarnec, detailing hundreds of other incidents. The 74-year-old faces an additional 20 years behind bars if convicted.

The public has also cast blame on medical authorities—the doctor was originally convicted in 2005 on possessing child sexual abuse material charges but was allowed to continue practicing pediatric medicine until his arrest 12 years later.

The proceedings follow the conclusion of the Pelicot trial, in which a Frenchman was found guilty of repeatedly drugging his wife and inviting other men to rape her while unconscious. Both cases generated international condemnation and outrage.

Singer Roberta Flack Dies

Roberta Flack, the Grammy-winning R&B singer and pianist known for her soulful hits like "Killing Me Softly with His Song" and "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face," passed away yesterday at age 88. No cause of death was given, though Flack was diagnosed in 2022 with Lou Gehrig's disease, which left her unable to sing.

She rose to stardom in her early 30s after Clint Eastwood featured "The First Time I Ever Saw Your Face" in his 1971 directorial debut "Play Misty for Me," pushing the song to the top of the Billboard chart and earning her a Grammy for record of the year in 1973. Originally a folk song by Ewan MacColl, "The First Time I Ever Saw Your Face" was reinterpreted by Flack into a slower-paced romantic ballad.

Flack won record of the year again for "Killing Me Softly with His Song" in 1974, becoming the first to nab back-to-back wins in the category. A version of the song also topped the charts again in 1996 when hip-hop trio the Fugees recorded their take on the hit.

Apple Boosts US Investment

Apple announced yesterday plans to invest more than \$500B in the US over the next four years, marking its largest-ever spending commitment. The initiative includes hiring approximately 20,000 new employees across multiple states, primarily focused on research and development, silicon engineering, and artificial intelligence.

A significant portion will fund a new AI server manufacturing facility in Houston, Texas. The Houston facility will produce servers supporting Apple Intelligence (the company's AI-powered personal assistant system), shifting the production of these servers from outside the US to domestic facilities. The announcement comes amid renewed pressure from the Trump administration regarding tariffs on goods imported from China, where Apple assembles most of its products.

The investment follows previous commitments by Apple. In 2021, the company pledged \$430B in US investments and has since expanded domestic manufacturing, including chip production in Arizona.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 3 of 76

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Wu-Tang Clan announce "The Final Chamber" tour, their final concert tour as a group, which will hit 27 cities across North America.

Lester Holt stepping down as anchor of "NBC Nightly News" after a decade, will move to full-time role as anchor for NBC's "Dateline".

University of Texas tops women's college basketball AP poll for first time in 21 years ... and Auburn leads men's poll for sixth straight week.

Denver Broncos linebackers coach Michael Wilhoite arrested for felony assault over allegedly punching a police officer.

Science & Technology

AI startup Anthropic rolls out Claude 3.7 Sonnet, the field's first hybrid reasoning model; platform lets users get real-time answers or request longer, more thought out responses.

Breast cancer analysis estimates 1 in 20 women will be diagnosed with the disease during their lifetime, with 1.1 million breast cancer-related deaths per year worldwide by 2050.

Archaeologists discover fossilized footprints and tracks suggesting the oldest known use of a handcart; discovery sheds light on life at the end of the last ice age, roughly 23,000 years ago.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 -0.5%, Dow +0.1%, Nasdaq -1.2%) as President Donald Trump's latest trade comments continue to weigh on investor sentiment and tech stocks fall on Microsoft cutting data center spending.

DoorDash to pay New York delivery drivers nearly \$17M for claims it used their tips to cover wages.

Energy Transfer—oil company behind Dakota Access Pipeline—begins \$300M trial against Greenpeace, accusing the advocacy group of defamation and disruptions during 2016 and 2017 protests.

Starbucks to lay off 1,100 corporate workers globally this week, will eliminate several hundred unfilled positions; comes after same-store sales declined for four consecutive quarters.

Politics & World Affairs

Federal judge temporarily bars Department of Government Efficiency from accessing sensitive data from the Education Department and Office of Personnel Management related to plaintiffs who sued DOGE.

Federal employees sue Elon Musk for demanding to justify their jobs or risk getting fired.

Vivek Ramaswamy (R) launches bid for Ohio governor.

UN passes nonbinding resolution urging Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine; 93 countries vote in favor, 65 abstain, and 18 vote against, including the US.

President Donald Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron hold joint press conference, share diverging views on Ukraine.

Clint Hill, former Secret Service agent known for leaping onto President John F. Kennedy's car after the president was shot in 1963, dies at 93.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 4 of 76



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

Joseph J. Schwan
(605) 397-2351 ext. 1003
Joe.Schwan@k12.sd.us

High School Principal

Shelby Edwards
(605) 397-8381 ext. 1004
Shelby.Edwards@k12.sd.us

Elementary Principal

Brett Schwan
(605) 397-2317
Brett.Schwan@k12.sd.us

Business Manager

Becky Hubsch
(605) 397-2351 ext. 1008
Becky.Hubsch@k12.sd.us

Athletic Director

Alexa Schuring
(605) 397-8381 ext. 1068
Alexa.Schuring@k12.sd.us

Opportunity Coordinator

Jodi Schwan
(605) 397-8381 ext. 1015
Jodi.Schwan@k12.sd.us

K-12 School Counselor

Emily Neely
(605) 397-2317
Emily.VanGerpen@k12.sd.us

Technology Coordinator

Aaron Helvig
(605) 397-8381 ext. 1025
Aaron.Helvig@k12.sd.us

Region 1A Girls Basketball @ Groton Area

Tuesday, February 25th, 2025

Game Times/Locations: Main Court in Arena

- 6:00PM → #2 Groton Area (white) vs. #7 Redfield (dark)
- 7:30PM → #3 Sisseton (white) vs. #6 Britton-Hecla (dark)

*Prior to the first game, the National Anthem will be first, with Varsity Introductions/Lineups to follow.
*After the first game, the clock will be set for 20 minutes. Warm-ups will begin at the 15-minute mark.

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

- No passes will be accepted for regional play.
- AD's- please send me a pass list to leave at the ticket booth for spouses and admin.

CONCESSIONS: Will be available

LOCKER ROOM:

- Redfield – first locker room down the JH hallway
- Sisseton – HS Boys locker room
- Britton-Hecla – last locker room down the JH hallway

Team Benches – Groton/Britton-Hecla: South Bench
Redfield/Sisseton: North Bench

Fan Sections:

- East Side – Groton and Britton-Hecla
- West Side – Redfield and Sisseton

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, Scott Witlock, Paul Rozell

JV/V Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

C/JV/V Official Book: Alexa Schuring

C/JV/V Shot Clock Operator: Kristi Zoellner

Announcer: Mike Imrie

National Anthem: Pep Band, under the direction of Desiree Yeigh

Thank you,
Alexa Schuring, Athletic Director

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 5 of 76

The Life of Leonard Garness



Services for Leonard Garness, 90, of Sun City West, Arizona and formerly of Groton will be 2:00 p.m., Saturday, March 1st at Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton. Pastor Mike Kampa will officiate. Burial with military honors will be held in Union Cemetery, Groton.

Visitation will be held at the funeral chapel on Friday from 5-7 p.m.

Leonard passed away February 14, 2025, at Aria Ranch Assisted Living Center in Surprise, Arizona following a brief illness.

Leonard Eugene was born in Carthage, SD on December 2, 1934 to Olaf and Mabel (Sneesby) Garness. He attended and graduated from Carthage High School continuing his education at South Dakota State University. He took a break in his education to join the US army and was stationed in Chicago during the Korean War.

After his honorable discharge he returned to his education at Northern State Teacher's College where he met his future wife, Sheila Paetznick. He transferred to the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology for Geological Engineering. He nearly completed his engineering degree when he changed the direction of his education and chose to attend Worsham's School of Mortuary Science with intentions to run the family business. After receiving his mortuary science degree, the couple purchased the Paetznick Funeral Home and Furniture Store, changing the name to Paetznick-Garness Funeral Home and Furniture Store.

He was united in marriage with Sheila Ann Paetznick on June 15, 1959 and the couple made their home in Groton. Leonard, along with Sheila devoting their time to their family, friends, the furniture store, and the funeral home. They especially enjoyed the time they spent with family and friends at their lake cabin on Enemy Swim Lake, where they retired in 1999. Leonard and Sheila eventually began wintering in Sun City West, Arizona, where he spent much of his free time on the golf courses.

Leonard was a member of the Presbyterian Church and served on the Groton City Council. He was a member of the South Dakota Funeral Directors Association, where he served as district president multiple times and was awarded a lifetime membership in 2016. He was part of the committee that helped to bring the swimming pool to the Groton community and enjoyed investing in the future of the community and surrounding area. He was a member of the Groton Legion, Groton Kiwanis Club, a charter member of Olive Grove Golf Course, a member of the Valley View Country Club in Sisseton, and in Sun City West, AZ he enjoyed golfing with the Old Duffer's Golf League, the Heat Seekers Golf League, and the Stardust Golf League. Leonard enjoyed his time at Enemy Swim Lake, golfing, fishing, boating, visiting and entertaining family and friends.

Celebrating his life are his children, Leigh Ann (Randy) Giedt of Sun City West, Arizona; Patty Garness of Minneapolis, Minnesota; Charlie (Ken) Klauer of Blacksburg, Virginia; Thor (Emily) Garness of Lakeville, Minnesota, and six grandchildren: Jim (Erin) Giedt, Nicholas (Sadie Stoumen) Giedt, Garreth Klauer, Samantha, Allie, and Thorson Garness. One great-grandson Riley James Giedt, and expecting one great-grandson. Leonard is also survived by sister-in-law Jessie Garness of Mitchell, South Dakota, several nieces and nephews, and many close friends.

Preceding him in death were his wife, Sheila, of 52 years, his parents Olaf and Mabel Garness, 2 brothers Roger and Dennis Garness, his sister Carolyn Garness, sisters -in-law Alice Garness and Sondra Odland and brother-in-law Winston Odland, 1 niece, 2 great nephews.

Honorary Casketbearers are all of Leonard's friends.

Casketbearers are Jim Giedt, Nicholas Giedt, Garreth Klauer, Bryant Odland, Gary Petersen, and Robb Roettele.

Memorials may be directed to the American Heart Association or St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital.
www.paetznick-garness.com

Broton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 6 of 76

BROWN COUNTY
BROWN COUNTY COMMISSION AGENDA
REGULAR MEETING TUESDAY
February 25, 2025, 8:45 A.M.

COMMISSIONER'S CHAMBERS, COURTHOUSE ANNEX - 25 MARKET STREET, ABERDEEN SD

1. Call To Order - Pledge of Allegiance
2. Approval of the Agenda
3. Opportunity for Public Comment
4. Award Bid for Small Animal Barn
5. Fireworks Permit for Brown County Fair
6. Discuss County Lien
7. Consent Calendar
 - a. Approval of General Meeting Minutes of February 18, 2025
 - b. Claims/Payroll
 - c. HR Report
 - d. Claim Assignment
 - e. Abatements
 - f. Travel Request
 - g. Acknowledge revised Golf Cart, ATV, & UTV Rules & Regulations for BCF
 - h. Lease Agreement
 - i. Zoning Ordinances – Set Hearing Date/Authorize Advertising
 - j. Final Plats:
 - i. Leikvold Rath Addition
 - ii. NWE Generation Addition
8. Other Business
9. Executive Session (if requested per SDCL 1-25-2)
10. Adjourn

Brown County Commission Meeting

Please join my meeting from your computer, tablet, or smartphone.

<https://meet.goto.com/BrCoCommission>

You can also dial in using your phone. United States: [+1 \(872\) 240-3311](tel:+18722403311)

Access Code: 601-168-909 #

Get the app now and be ready when your first meeting starts: <https://meet.goto.com/install>

Public comment provides an opportunity for the public to address the county commission.

Presentations may not exceed 3 minutes.

Public comment will be limited to 10 minutes (or at the discretion of the board) - Public comment will be accepted virtually when the virtual attendance option is available.

Official Recordings of Commission Meetings along with the Minutes can be found at <https://www.brown.sd.us/node/454>

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 7 of 76

Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

February 25, 2025 – 7:00pm

City Hall – 120 N Main Street

(IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CALL IN TO THIS MEETING, PLEASE MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS TO DO SO BY CALLING CITY HALL 605-397-8422)

1. Approval of Agenda
2. Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1
(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)
3. Award Roof Repair Bid
4. Authorization to Bid 2025 Street Resurfacing Project
5. Authorization to Begin Accepting 2025 Gravel Quotes
6. Sign Audit Engagement Letter with Eide Bailly for 2023/2024
7. January Finance Report
8. Minutes
9. Bills
10. Reminder: Applications are Open for Summer Recreational Positions:
 - Baseball Coordinator
 - Softball Coordinator
 - Legion Coach
 - Jr. Legion Coach
 - Jr. Teener Coach
 - Girls' Softball Coaches (U8/U10/U12/U14)
 - Day Baseball/Softball Coach
 - Concessions Manager
 - Swimming Pool Manager
11. Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
12. Open Applications for Remaining Summer Employment Positions
13. First Reading of Ordinance No. 786 – 2025 Summer Salaries
14. Hire Summer Recreational Employees
15. Adjournment

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 8 of 76

GDILIVE.COM

Region 1A in Groton

GDILIVE.COM

Groton Area Tigers vs. Redfield Pheasants

6 p.m.



Good Luck Lady Tigers from these GDILIVE.COM sponsors!

Bary Keith of Valley Plains Equipment

Bierman Farm service

Blocker Construction

Dacotah Bank

Farmers Union Coop of Ferney and Conde

Greg Johnson Construction of Bristol

Groton Ag Partners

Groton Chamber

Groton Dairy Queen

Groton Ford

Hanlon Brothers

John Sieh Agency

Ken's Food Fair

Lori's Pharmacy

Olive Grove Golf Course

Rix Farms/R&M Farms

S & S Lumber

Spanier Harvesting

Sun & Sea Travel

The MeatHouse of Andover

Weismantel Agency of Columbia



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Only 'political magic' can save \$825 million prison plan, lawmaker says

Legislator's mistaken vote shuts down funding debate as Senate panel prepares alternate plan

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 24, 2025 7:33 PM

Full-throated support from South Dakota Gov. Larry Rhoden may not be enough to change the minds of skeptical lawmakers on a controversial plan to build an \$825 million, 1,500-bed men's prison south of Sioux Falls.

Less than two weeks after Rhoden declared that "failure is not an option" for the project, the state House of Representatives first knocked down an effort to launch its construction, then twice said no to an alternative plan that would've pumped \$142 million more into a savings account they set up three years ago to pay for it.

The second rejection came Monday, when an attempt to reconsider the legislation failed due to a lawmaker's mistake. Rep. Roger DeGroot, R-Brookings, said he voted against the reconsideration motion in error. The motion failed on a tie vote of 35-35.

"I'm for the prison," DeGroot said later via text.

Had DeGroot voted his intentions, House floor talk could have resumed Monday on the legislation, House Bill 1025.

Rep. Brian Mulder, R-Sioux Falls, voted against adding money to the prison fund on Friday, but voted for reopening debate on the idea Monday.

Yet Mulder told Searchlight he hadn't changed his mind on the bill. Instead, he wrote in a text, he'd wanted Howard Republican Rep. Tim Reisch, a former Department of Corrections secretary and vocal backer of the new prison, to have an opportunity to cast a vote. Reisch missed Friday's vote for a funeral.

"If any representative would miss something that is in their area of expertise, I would offer that same opportunity to them that I was offering to Rep. Reisch," Mulder wrote. "But I was still a no on the bill as written, as I have several concerns about the plan that is being brought forward."

Flubbed vote unlikely to change trajectory

HB 1025 was originally written to provide the last \$182 million needed to build the prison. It also would've let the DOC tap into the more than \$600 million now held in an incarceration construction fund, built up over the past few years by previous votes to fill it and interest earned.

Lawmakers can move money into the fund with a simple majority, but can't appropriate money to spend unless two-thirds of them agree to do so.

On Friday, the House accepted an amendment from Sioux Falls Republican Jack Kolbeck that stripped the bill down to do one thing: Put \$142 million into the prison fund, without approving construction, to keep saving money and keep the conversation going. The amended bill failed 34-35 Friday afternoon, while Reisch was missing.

Monday's move to reconsider that vote with Reisch in attendance came after a weekend during which supporters sought to sway their fellow lawmakers on the merits of saving money for prisons – regardless of where they're located or how big they might be.

Rep. Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, told South Dakota Searchlight after the vote on Friday that he felt

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 10 of 76

like his fellow lawmakers may have been voting against the \$825 million prison plan, not necessarily the idea of saving money to deal with demonstrable overcrowding across the system.

The hope, Mortenson said, was to work on changing minds.

Sioux Falls Republican Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt moved for reconsideration on the House floor Monday.

"The weekend should've given some people time to get some accurate information on what we are voting on," Rehfeldt said.

Reisch voted as expected, but DeGroot's erroneous no vote meant the reconsideration move still came up short.

Rhoden's office sent a statement similar to the one offered after the Friday vote.

"We look forward to continuing the conversation and will address next steps at the appropriate time," wrote Josie Harms, Rhoden's spokeswoman.

There are legislative maneuvers that could revive HB 1025 again. Lawmakers could use an empty "vehicle bill," meaning a bill with a generic title and text frequently used for last-minute proposals, to bring it back. Assuming DeGroot's continued support and Mulder's commitment to his colleague's right to be heard, that would give the bill to bank more prison cash another shot.

Even if that happens – and enough lawmakers change their minds to endorse the idea in both the House and Senate – the odds aren't great that the governor's preferred prison plan will earn the supermajority it needs, lawmakers said Monday.

"Unless they perform political magic to bring this back and get two-thirds support in both houses, this thing is dead," said Sen. Kevin Jensen, R-Canton, who represents landowners near the farmland selected as a prison site, located about 15 miles south of Sioux Falls in Lincoln County.

Jensen's comments came Monday morning, as a Senate panel advanced his bill to create an incarceration task force.

The envisioned group's charge: to study overcrowding across South Dakota's aging prison properties, what the state should build to address it, and how a new prison or prisons might serve to reduce the state's rate of repeat offenses.

New course suggested

The executive branch came out against Jensen's task force bill, Senate Bill 124, on Monday morning in the Senate State Affairs Committee.

Brittini Skipper, finance director for the DOC, told the panel that the state had already done its homework. Skipper pointed to a commissioned facility report from Nebraska's DLR Group, which listed a 1,372-bed men's prison as a top recommendation. The 1881-built state penitentiary it would replace is overcrowded and inefficient, the consultants concluded.

The Legislature already convened a task force in 2022, she said, and endorsed a new women's prison and the men's prison project.

Construction of the women's prison is underway in Rapid City; preparatory legwork is done for the men's prison.

"The provisions outlined in Senate Bill 124 have already been thoroughly examined by the Legislature," Skipper said. "The design for the new facility is complete. All utilities are contracted, and site preparation has already begun. These efforts were all authorized by the Legislature."

She also reminded the committee that the \$825 million price is only guaranteed until March 31.

Jensen disputed the claim on the prior task force's certainty. The task force was "mostly lawmakers," Jensen said, not the more expansive stakeholder group his bill would create. SB 124 would have four lawmakers, two Governor's Office representatives, two current or former wardens and representatives from the state court system.

"The incarceration pipeline starts at the arrest, and then goes all the way through adjudication and incarceration," Jensen said. "There's so many more players that really need to be at the table."

He also rejected the idea that the 2022 task force endorsed an \$825 million prison. The DLR report

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 11 of 76

recommends 17 projects, including new facilities and upgrades to existing ones, he said. The same report also noted that, while not ideal, a smaller tract of land near Sioux Falls known as West Farm, which the DOC already owns and uses for juveniles, could serve as a site for a men's prison.

The report put the price tag for a new men's prison at less than \$400 million. The task force, Jensen said, endorsed the two prisons because lawmakers "didn't want to spend" what it would take to do everything.

Sen. Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, pointed out that the lower price tag for the men's prison wasn't solid, but an "engineer's estimate," calling Skipper back up to confirm as much.

Sen. Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, had a different question for her: What's the state's position on its options now that it's clear the project doesn't have two-thirds support?

"We would keep pushing for the prison as it's designed," Skipper replied.

Karr said he appreciated the honesty, but he has doubts about that approach.

"So we're just going to wait, then come back to this same group of people, have this same discussion, and expect a different outcome?" Karr said.

He moved to pass the task force bill. It passed 5-4.

Money-blocking bill fails

Jensen didn't succeed on a companion bill, Senate Bill 204, which was also up for debate in the committee Monday morning. It sought to stop the DOC from using any more of the \$62 million lawmakers gave the agency during previous sessions to spend on prep work for the prison.

Ryan Brunner, a policy adviser with Rhoden's office, said there are bills to pay for contracts signed on the assumption the prison would be built as planned. The money used to sign them did earn a two-thirds vote.

A blanket stop work order from the Legislature would keep the state from writing checks for its part in a substation and water main to serve the facility, Brunner said.

The state invested in those projects with a utility provider and rural water system, which Brunner said had each planned the upgrades to serve both the area's residents and the new prison.

Jensen said he was willing to amend the bill to make sure the state doesn't "stiff anybody," but argued that lawmakers need reassurance that the DOC isn't moving farther than it should on a project they didn't agree to.

The funding shutoff bill failed 4-5. The decisive vote came from Sen. Liz Larson, D-Sioux Falls, who voted against it after voting for the task force bill.

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.

SD lawmakers endorse hurdles for eminent domain and environmental studies for carbon pipelines

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 24, 2025 7:58 PM

PIERRE — South Dakota lawmakers advanced legislation Monday at the Capitol that would make it more difficult for carbon dioxide pipeline companies to use eminent domain and would subject their projects to required environmental impact statements.

The bills are among several filed in response to controversy over Iowa-based Summit Carbon Solutions' proposed \$9 billion, five-state pipeline that would pass through eastern South Dakota.

New eminent domain requirements

Eminent domain is a legal process for obtaining land access from unwilling landowners with just compensation determined by a court, for a project beneficial to the public — traditionally for projects such as electrical power lines, crude oil pipelines, water pipelines and highways. A bill to ban eminent domain for

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 12 of 76

carbon pipelines passed the House last month and is awaiting action in the Senate.

Meanwhile, a bill approved by the Senate 17-16 on Monday would retain eminent domain as an option. But it would require entities using it to first attend mediation with the affected landowner and to also have a state permit before commencing eminent domain proceedings.

The bill failed last week in a close vote with two members absent, and then passed Monday when it was reconsidered and will head to the House next. It is sponsored by Sen. Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre. He said the measure strengthens landowner rights in condemnation proceedings.

"What it simply does is it requires a developer to go through that process and get a permit prior to gaining the privilege to use eminent domain," Mehlhaff said.

Opponents said mediation could serve as a tool to force landowners into talks they don't want to have.

"If a landowner said no thank you, their wishes should be respected," said Sen. Joy Hohn, R-Sioux Falls.

Some senators also hope to pass the ban on eminent domain for carbon pipelines rather than merely imposing new eminent domain restrictions.

Environmental impact statements

The House Commerce and Energy Committee voted 9-4 to send a bill to the House floor that would require an environmental impact statement for carbon dioxide pipelines.

The bill, sponsored by Rep. John Hughes, R-Sioux Falls, mandates state utility regulators to prepare or require the preparation of the statements before approving a carbon pipeline permit. The statements are detailed documents required at the federal level to assess the potential environmental effects of some projects.

"This is not an anti-pipeline bill," Hughes said. "This is a public safety bill and it's a bill that protects our resources."

Opponents, including representatives from the South Dakota Chamber of Commerce & Industry, utilities, and Summit argued that the bill would add an unnecessary regulatory burden.

"It's hard not to see this bill as directed at Summit Carbon Solutions," said Brett Koenecke, a lobbyist for the project.

Opponents also said the regulators serving on the Public Utilities Commission already conduct a rigorous permitting process.

"What we're doing is so much more robust than this process," Koenecke said. "We are doing the things that the sponsor wants us to do already."

The Summit pipeline would capture some of the carbon dioxide emitted by 57 ethanol plants and transport it for underground storage in North Dakota. The project has received permits in Iowa, Minnesota and North Dakota, while its application is pending in South Dakota. Nebraska does not have a permitting process.

The project would be eligible for federal tax credits incentivizing the capture of heat-trapping greenhouse gases to mitigate climate change. Hughes said other states, including Minnesota, mandate extensive environmental reviews.

"This project, when completed, will generate over \$1.5 billion in federal tax credits," Hughes said. "We've got to get this right."

Other carbon pipeline bills

Among other pending carbon pipeline bills this legislative session is one that would put a moratorium on carbon pipelines until new federal safety rules are finalized, and another empowering landowners to sue pipeline companies for the alleged abuses of their land agents.

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

SD Senate supports 'forever chemical' labels on firefighting protective gear

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 24, 2025 7:06 PM

South Dakota senators unanimously endorsed a bill Monday at the Capitol in Pierre to require protective firefighting equipment purchased by fire departments in the state to be labeled with its "forever chemical" status.

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) have been used in industry and consumer products since the 1940s and don't break down easily in the environment or in the human body. The chemicals can be found in everything from firefighting foam to thermal and water-resistant clothing to soil and water. Research indicates PFAS exposure may be linked to negative developmental and reproductive effects, and an increased risk of some cancers.

The federal government finalized phased-in limits on some types of PFAS in drinking water earlier this year. PFAS has been found in preliminary testing of Mount Rushmore drinking water and in the Big Sioux River.

Sioux Falls Democratic Sen. Liz Larson introduced Senate Bill 163, requiring South Dakota fire departments' future purchases of coats, coveralls, footwear, gloves, helmets, hoods and trousers to have a permanent label from the manufacturer identifying whether the material includes PFAS.

Occupational cancer is the leading cause of line-of-duty death in the fire service, Larson told lawmakers. She added that the International Association of Firefighters attributes 66% of firefighter deaths between 2002 and 2019 to cancer.

The legislation would drive awareness and encourage the development of PFAS-free protective gear "so that our firefighting departments have the information they need to manage their gear over time, as we hope safer gear becomes available in the future," Larson said. Similar bills have passed in other states.

The National Fire Protection Association, a nonprofit organization that develops and publishes safety codes and standards, issued new standards in August 2024. The standards require manufacturer-suppliers of firefighting safety gear to test their materials for some types of PFAS.

The bill heads to the House of Representatives next.

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.

'Election integrity' activists speak out against labels for political deepfakes

Opponents say labeling law for AI is a first step to 'weaponize' government against free speech, but committee endorses bill

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 24, 2025 5:45 PM

A half dozen people spoke out against mandatory labels for deepfake political messaging on Monday at the South Dakota Capitol in Pierre, citing concerns that such a law could be used to suppress free speech.

The activists weren't able to convince a panel of lawmakers to defeat the legislation, however.

Senate Bill 164 targets a narrow class of deepfakes, a term tied to phony images, audio or video of a person that are manipulated, typically with artificial intelligence programs, to appear real. The bill would require labels on deepfakes depicting candidates that appear within 90 days of an election "with the intent to injure" the depicted candidate.

People who disseminate or contract with another to disseminate such an unlabeled deepfake within the 90-day window would be subject to a class one misdemeanor, which carries up to a year in jail and a \$2,000 fine. They could also be subject to civil liability.

The law would apply to the person or people who make deepfakes to deceive. It wouldn't apply to satire

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 14 of 76

deepfakes, or to broadcasters and websites paid to run deepfakes, or to internet service providers that might host them.

The bill's sponsor, Sioux Falls Democratic Sen. Liz Larson, told the Senate State Affairs Committee that political deepfakes created with artificial intelligence "can erode public trust in the information that circulates about our democracy."

"They can sow chaos and confusion at strategic times," Larson said, citing examples of their use to influence elections in Turkey and for messaging during the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia.

Support for the bill came from Stephen Gemar of Attorney General Marty Jackley's office, as well as from Zebadiah Johnson of the Voter Defense Association.

"Our system of electoral democracy depends on having a shared reality," Johnson said, adding, "deepfakes pose a real and substantial threat to that shared reality."

Opponents call bill a threat to 'God-given right'

Larson attempted to pass a similar bill last year, but it failed on the Senate floor over fears of being overbroad.

The first to speak against this year's effort was Rick Weible, an Elkton resident who described himself as "a cyber expert and also kind of an election aficionado."

He also testified against the bill in 2024.

The bill "is really not ready," Weible said, noting that most candidate websites are hosted by domain name holders who operate outside the state, and therefore outside its jurisdiction.

He also said the state would be better served to tackle deepfakes meant to embarrass or harass young people.

"When we look at what's happening in the high schools, and where we're seeing some of the deepfakes there and the suicides that are being committed, that's a bigger issue that should be addressed before we address politicians," Weible said.

Others who've appeared alongside Weible to testify in Pierre on what they call election integrity – such as a push for paper ballots or shorter windows for absentee ballots – zeroed in on fears that the law could be used to suppress political messaging.

"This bill would weaponize the state government against those accused of using deepfakes," said John Kunnari, who ran for a District 11 House of Representatives seat last spring.

The bill targets "our God-given rights," he told the committee. He said "the media" has been "doing a form of deepfakes most of our lives, taking quotes, videos, photos out of context, and creating fake narratives against their opponents."

Kunnari told South Dakota Searchlight after the hearing he doesn't advocate the use of deepfakes to influence an election. Rather, he said, he's concerned that the law would be used by candidates to target legitimate political messaging, calling the bill "a slippery slope" to censorship.

Committee: Disclosure is not censorship

Larson said Weible had "a really good argument" about deepfakes involving non-politicians, such as deepfake pornography.

"I feel like legislation should absolutely be expanded in future years to take a serious look at that," she said. "This is a first step to that, and this is the first step to getting there."

Larson said labeling a deepfake ad doesn't stop speech.

"There's nothing in this bill that silences Americans," she said.

In response to committee questioning, Gemar of the Attorney General's Office confirmed that an out-of-state website host would fall outside the state's jurisdiction. Someone in South Dakota who contracts for the production or dissemination of a deepfake, he said, could be liable.

Sen. Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, moved to pass the bill. Given that deepfakes would be legal but labeled, Karr said he's not especially concerned about the suppression of speech.

"I think it's a good disclosure to have so people can be discerning," Karr said.

SB 164 passed 8-1, with Sen. Tom Pischke, R-Dell Rapids, casting the lone no vote. It now heads to the full Senate.

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.

Former Kristi Noem aide in South Dakota reported to be named senior ICE official

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - FEBRUARY 24, 2025 4:27 PM

WASHINGTON — Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem is planning to tap her former aide for a senior role in the agency tasked with immigration enforcement, as the White House pressures officials to carry out mass deportations, according to multiple media reports.

Madison Sheahan, who currently serves as Louisiana's head of Wildlife and Fisheries, is expected to be named deputy director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, according to the New York Times.

Acting ICE director Caleb Vitello has been reassigned, but is still listed as head of the agency's leadership.

A spokesperson for DHS said in a statement that leadership positions "are being reevaluated. We have nothing new to announce at this time."

Sheahan could not be reached for comment.

Sheahan is a former Noem aide from her time as South Dakota's governor, and she attended Noem's Senate confirmation hearing, sitting behind her.

As an aide for Noem, she worked on legislation about wildlife, agriculture and South Dakota's natural resources, according to her biography. She later became South Dakota's state party executive for the Republican Party.

She has a bachelor's degree in public affairs, public management, leadership and policy and agri-business from The Ohio State University.

Sheahan registered a business in South Dakota, MDS Enterprises LLC, in 2023, but the business was dissolved due to "failure to file the annual report(s) when due," according to South Dakota's Secretary of State business records.

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

SD House endorses student-teacher stipends to address educator shortage

BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 24, 2025 4:12 PM

With about 200 teacher openings statewide and neighboring states aggressively recruiting young educators, South Dakota needs to step up, said Rep. Chris Kassin, R-Vermillion.

The South Dakota House of Representatives agreed, voting 59-11 on Monday at the Capitol in Pierre to budget \$500,000 for the creation of a statewide student-teacher stipend program. The legislation goes to the Senate next.

"Folks, this is a simple and strategic step to strengthen our education workforce," Kassin said.

The state Department of Education could use the money to provide grants of up to \$5,000 per school district, for payment to one or more student-teachers. Kassin said districts could spend the money as needed, such as splitting it between two student-teachers or offering the full amount to one in a high-need subject or grade level.

Kassin said some South Dakota school districts already find creative ways to attract student-teachers, such as paying them to additionally serve as substitute teachers.

Meanwhile, some other states have created statewide stipend programs. Kassin said schools in Omaha, Nebraska, are offering student-teachers as much as \$9,000 per semester.

Kassin said if his bill passes, "we are signaling to our student-teachers that we value their contributions and we want them to stay in South Dakota."

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.

State budget cuts endorsed for business sales tax credit and high schoolers taking college courses

Committee also takes action on teacher program, adoption home studies, school lunches, McCook Lake

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 24, 2025 2:39 PM

Ensuring responsible use of taxpayer dollars in a tight budget year is the mantra for South Dakota lawmakers on the Legislature's budget committees this session, and that continued Monday as legislators endorsed a temporary repeal of a business sales tax credit and a reduction of assistance for dual-credit students.

The House Committee on Appropriations met Monday morning at the Capitol in Pierre. Members made decisions on several proposed budget cuts and also rejected some proposals to initiate programs with state funds.

Lawmakers include sunset clause on business tax credit repeal

South Dakota could add \$6.8 million to its annual budget by repealing a \$70 monthly credit for businesses that remit sales tax online. Bureau of Finance and Management Commissioner Jim Terwilliger told lawmakers on the committee earlier this session the program is no longer needed as an incentive because most businesses now remit their taxes electronically.

South Dakota Retailers Association Executive Director Nathan Sanderson opposed House Bill 1037 earlier in the session, saying the program helps cover fees charged to businesses by credit card companies on each transaction.

The committee voted to include a sunset clause on the program's repeal in fiscal year 2028. Rep. Chris Kassin, R-Vermillion, proposed the amendment, saying the program would be reinstated in three years unless future lawmakers choose to make the repeal permanent.

Although still opposed, Sanderson told South Dakota Searchlight the sunset "is a better option than repealing it outright."

"The legislative priorities when it comes to spending and revenue generation have not all been worked out yet," Sanderson said. "The Legislature is trying to keep a variety of options alive.

Lawmakers unanimously endorsed the bill, sending it to the House floor.

Dual credit cut earns endorsement

South Dakota high school students will pay 50% more to take dual credit college courses if legislators adopt the governor's plan to reduce the state's contribution to the program. The move would save about \$1 million a year, the Governor's Office projects.

Currently, students pay one-third of the cost per credit hour, \$50.84, while the state pays the rest. House Bill 1040 would split the cost in half, with the student and state each paying about \$76 per credit hour.

Education professionals worry that the increase would burden families and hamper their ability to enroll students. The program benefits not only them but the state as well, said Ashley Seeklander, government relations chair for the South Dakota School Counseling Association and a counselor in the Aberdeen school

district. She said the program introduces students to higher education options at public universities and technical colleges.

Rep. Terri Jorgenson, R-Rapid City, said the program still exists for families to use, allowing lawmakers to be “good stewards of taxpayer dollars” otherwise.

Lawmakers endorsed the bill in a 6-3 vote, sending it to the House floor.

Teacher program, adoption home studies, school lunches, McCook Lake

House Bill 1039 would have repealed an incentive program for teacher and counselor national certification, saving the state roughly \$88,000 a year. The committee amended the bill to keep the program intact but stop accepting new applications. That would allow staff who worked to earn their national certification to keep the benefit promised to them, said Rep. Al Novstrup, R-Aberdeen.

“Promise made and promise kept,” Novstrup said.

The committee also amended House Bill 1005, with the amendment requiring the state Department of Social Services to pay up to \$1,000 toward the cost of public and private adoption home studies, rather than repealing the state’s contribution as the original bill proposed. Families hoping to adopt children are required by state law to have a licensed child placement agency, certified social worker or the department determine if a home is safe for the adoptive child.

“DSS has always paid for that study for children within our care, but legislation was passed two years ago that would require us to pay for all of those within the state,” Departmental Chief Financial Officer Jason Simmons told the Joint Appropriations Committee earlier this session.

The department currently pays up to \$3,000 per home study, Simmons said. The original bill’s repeal of the state’s responsibility to cover home study costs would have saved the state roughly \$312,000 annually.

The committee rejected several other bills, including legislation requiring the state to reimburse school districts for providing meals to students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, and legislation to fund continued recovery efforts at McCook Lake following June 2024 flooding.

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.

School cellphone bans spread across states, though enforcement could be tricky

The research on social media’s harmful effects has moved lawmakers to bipartisan action

BY: ROBBIE SEQUEIRA - FEBRUARY 24, 2025 8:57 AM

Across the country, state lawmakers are finding rare bipartisan ground on an increasingly urgent issue for educators and parents: banning cellphone use in schools.

Fueling these bans is growing research on the harmful effects of smartphone and social media use on the mental health and academic achievement of grade to high school students.

In 2024, at least eight states — California, Idaho, Indiana, Louisiana, Minnesota, Ohio, South Carolina and Virginia — either expanded or adopted policies or laws to curtail cellphone use in schools.

This year, lawmakers in Alabama, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Texas and Wisconsin have proposed bans moving in their state legislatures.

Arkansas Republican Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders last week signed a law requiring schools to ban students’ access to cellphones and other personal electronic devices during the school day.

Iowa Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds introduced a broader electronics device ban this year.

Last month, New York Democratic Gov. Kathy Hochul unveiled her plans to ban smartphones at schools.

And last week, Illinois Democratic Gov. JB Pritzker proposed a statewide ban on cellphones in classrooms.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 18 of 76

Some experts warn, however, that these bans might be difficult to enforce — or may simply be outdated before they even take effect.

“The genie is out of the bottle, and squeezing it back in is going to be nearly impossible,” said Ken Trump, a longtime school safety expert and president of National School Safety and Security Services, a consulting firm. “Phones and social media have fundamentally changed society, and by extension, schooling. Outright bans may be unrealistic or difficult to enforce effectively.”

Trump thinks governors, in particular, are responding to a trend rather than conducting thorough research. “Our elected officials are running to say, ‘he [introduced a bill] so I’m going to do it too.’ ... Once Florida passed their bill, it’s been an explosion.”

Florida in 2023 became the first state to enact an outright ban on cellphone use during instructional time, followed by Louisiana and South Carolina last year. Other states, including Alaska and Connecticut, issued recommendations rather than mandates, encouraging local districts to develop their own policies.

In Minnesota, districts are required to implement their own policies under the law passed last year. But a bill sponsored by Democratic state Sen. Alice Mann would ban cellphones and smartwatches in elementary and middle schools, and restrict the use of those devices in high school classrooms beginning in the 2026-2027 school year.

Mann began considering the measure after hearing directly from students last year.

“We had a committee hearing where kids told us how distracting cellphones were. That really caught our attention,” she said. “We talked to school districts across the state — some had no policy, some had bans for one or two years, and some had bans for longer. The ones with bans all said the same thing: ‘It’s been wonderful.’”

Enforcement

Even where bans exist, enforcement varies widely. Some schools use Yondr pouches, lockable sleeves that prevent phone access during the school day. Others require students to store their phones in lockers or classroom pouches, while some schools rely on simple classroom rules prohibiting phone use.

According to the Pew Research Center, 72% of U.S. high school teachers say that cellphone distraction is a major issue in their classrooms. While many teachers and administrators report positive changes after bans, students have quickly adapted, finding ways to bypass rules by slipping calculators or dummy phones into pouches, or switching to smartwatches to check social media and send texts.

“Students are more tech-savvy than lawmakers,” said Trump, the school safety expert. “They find workarounds — whether it’s through smartwatches, Chromebooks or school Wi-Fi.”

States such as Arkansas, Delaware, Idaho and Pennsylvania allocated funding for programs that provide schools with lockable phone storage pouches, or financial rewards for districts that create their own restrictive policies.

A proposed bill in Texas would go so far as to charge students up to \$30 to retrieve a phone that was confiscated for violating a cellphone ban.

Schools have wrestled with how to regulate mobile devices for decades — with bans on devices such as pagers dating back to the late 1980s. In 2024, 76% of U.S. public schools prohibited cellphones for nonacademic use, notes the National Center for Education Statistics.

Total bans?

The Girls Athletic Leadership School Los Angeles has enforced strict no-phone policies since its founding in 2017. The charter school’s no-phone policy means no usage on campus, during off-campus experiences, or even on school buses — a step beyond most phone bans.

“Cellphones present a major distraction and temptation for students,” Vanessa Garza, Girls Athletic Leadership School Los Angeles executive director and founding principal, wrote in a statement to State-line. “This long-standing policy has allowed our students to foster deep friendships, experience enhanced learning, and regulate healthy emotions.”

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 19 of 76

Instead of top-down state mandates, Trump, the school security expert, thinks that schools should focus on reasonable restrictions and consensus-based policies that work for individual communities.

"If you try to ban phones entirely, enforcement becomes a nightmare," he said. "What happens when kids don't comply? Are schools going to dedicate staff just to cellphone discipline? If policies aren't enforced consistently, they become meaningless."

Trump said in school emergencies, students flooding 911 with calls can overwhelm emergency responders.

Mann, the Minnesota lawmaker, dismissed the idea that the pushback on phone bans is coming from students. Instead, she thinks parents are the ones most resistant to restrictions.

"Some parents are worried they won't be able to reach their kids, but they absolutely can. If a parent needs to get in touch with their child, they can call the school, just like they always could before cellphones were in every pocket," said Mann.

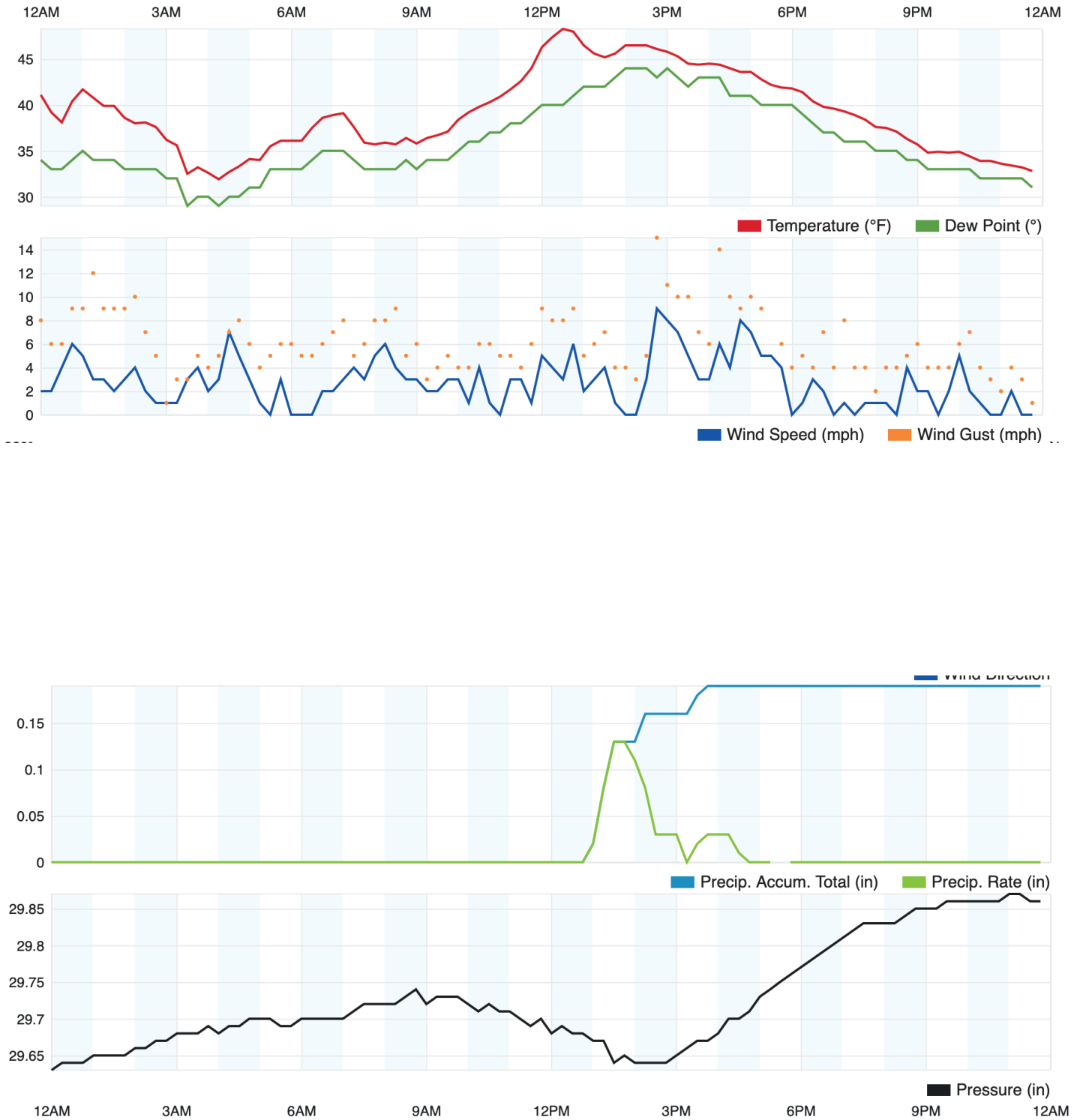
"What we're hearing from students is that their phones are pinging in class all day long — and a lot of it is from parents. Parents texting, 'What should we have for dinner?' or 'I'll be home late.' These are not emergencies."

Robbie Sequeira is a staff writer covering housing and social services for Stateline.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 20 of 76

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Broton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 21 of 76

Today



High: 56 °F

Mostly Sunny
then Chance
Rain

Tonight



Low: 29 °F

Chance Rain
then Partly
Cloudy

Wednesday



High: 50 °F

Mostly Sunny

Wednesday
Night



Low: 28 °F

Mostly Clear

Thursday



High: 54 °F

Mostly Sunny



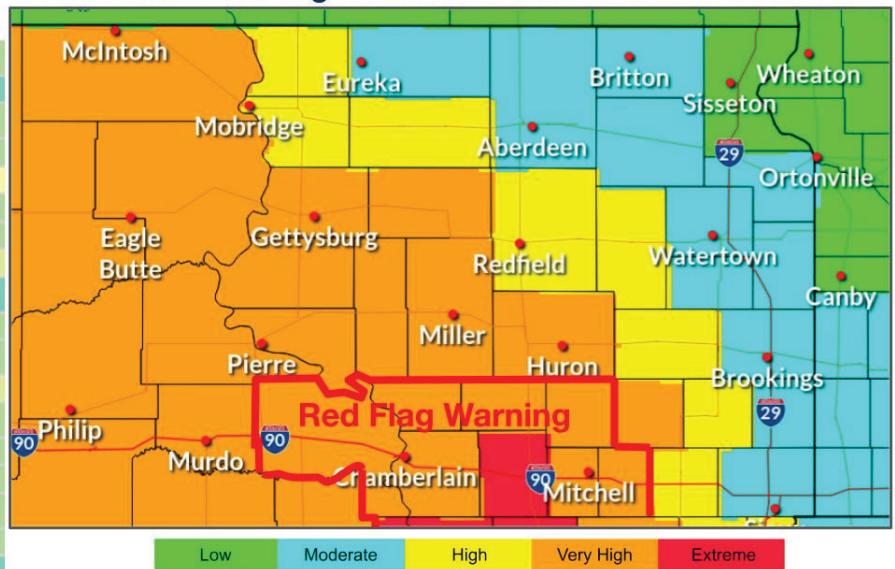
Another Mild - Breezy Day

February 25, 2025
3:12 AM

Highs in the 50s to low 60s

Wind Forecast	2/25 Tue					
	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am
Aberdeen	22↑	25↑	25☁	24☁	18☁	20☁
Britton	22↑	24↑	23↑	18☁	16☁	16☁
Chamberlain	21↑	28☁	31☁	28☁	23☁	23☁
Clark	23↑	26↑	26↑	23☁	20☁	20☁
Eagle Butte	28☁	39☁	43☁	40☁	31☁	31☁
Eureka	23↑	29↑	30☁	29☁	23☁	22☁
Gettysburg	24↑	31↑	33☁	32☁	24☁	23☁
McIntosh	30☁	41☁	44☁	40☁	28☁	28☁
Milbank	18↑	22↑	22↑	16☁	16☁	18☁
Miller	25↑	31↑	32☁	31☁	23☁	23☁
Mobridge	21↑	30☁	32☁	30☁	22☁	22☁
Murdo	30☁	39☁	40☁	37☁	26☁	26☁
Pierre	20↑	33☁	36☁	32☁	23☁	22☁
Redfield	24↑	30↑	29☁	26☁	21☁	21☁
Sisseton	20↑	23↑	20↑	17↑	18☁	21☁
Watertown	22↑	28↑	26↑	20☁	18☁	20☁
Webster	23↑	26↑	26↑	20☁	18☁	20☁
Wheaton	17↑	21↑	21↑	17↑	15☁	16☁

Elevated Fire Danger Across Central/North Central SD



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Another mild day across the region, with temperatures in the 50s and low 60s. This means, in combination with increasing winds this afternoon the potential for fires is elevated. Light showers will skirt across north central/northeast South Dakota late this afternoon into the evening.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 22 of 76



This Week's Weather

February 24, 2025

1:03 PM

Temperatures will be 10 to 30 degrees above normal through the rest of the week.

Tuesday



High:

49-63°

Low:

25-30°

Wind:

SW 10-20 mph
Gusts to 30 mph

Wednesday



High:

42-54°

Low:

29-33°

Wind:

NW 15-20 mph
Gusts to 30 mph

Thursday



High:

45-57°

Low:

26-31°

Wind:

W 10-15 mph
Gusts to 20 mph

Friday



High:

48-58°

Low:

30-37°

Wind:

NW 25-30 mph
Gusts to 40 mph

 National Oceanic and
Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Temperatures will remain 10-30 degrees above normal through the rest of the week, with no rain expected. Windy conditions Friday will help create Very High Fire Danger, mainly west of the James River.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 23 of 76

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 48 °F at 12:32 PM

Low Temp: 32 °F at 4:14 AM

Wind: 15 mph at 2:37 PM

Precip: : 0.19

Day length: 11 hours, 00 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 70 in 1958

Record Low: -29 in 1919

Average High: 32

Average Low: 10

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.54

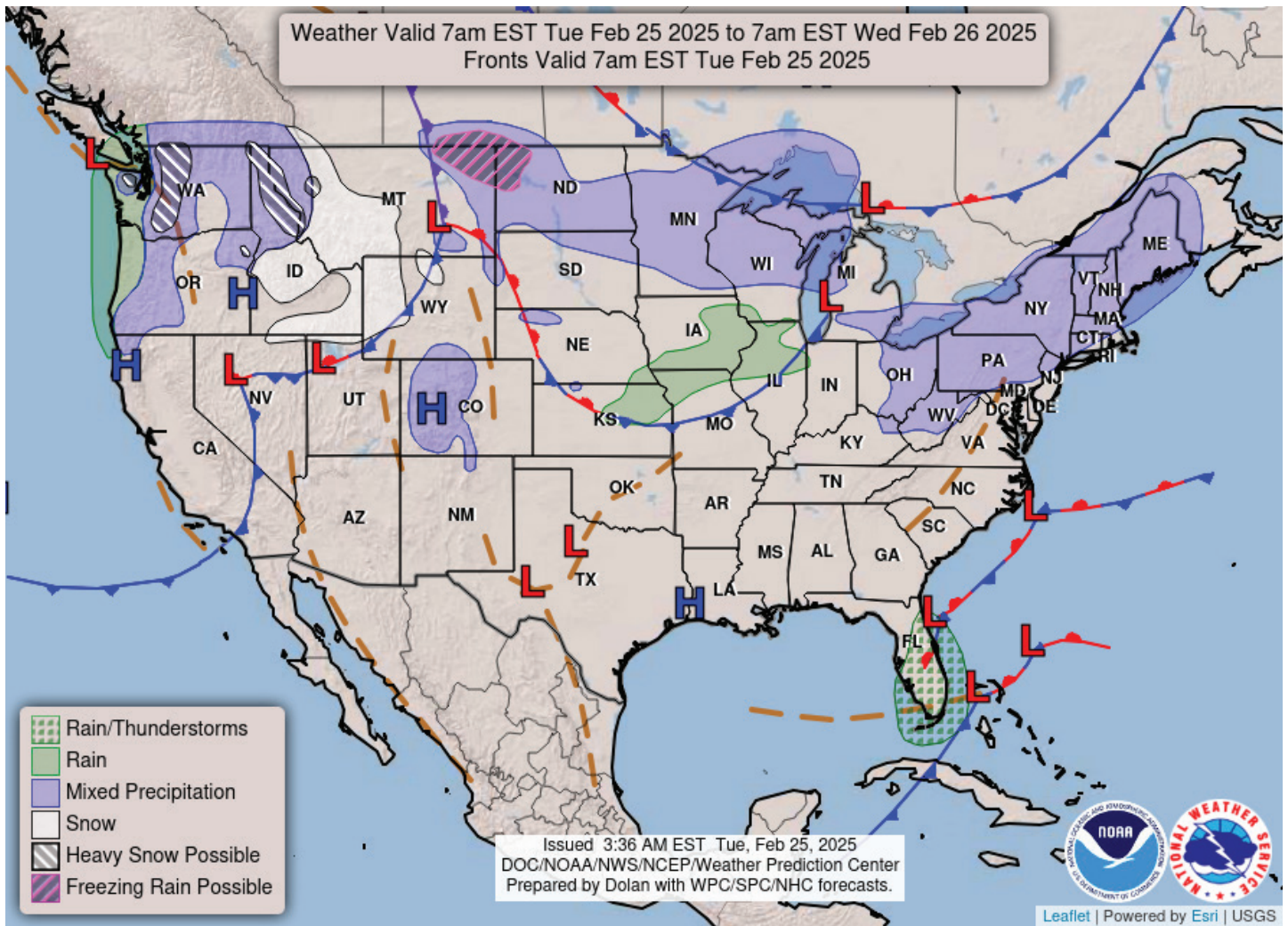
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.39

Average Precip to date: 1.09

Precip Year to Date: 0.39

Sunset Tonight: 6:15:37 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:13:18 am



Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 24 of 76

Today in Weather History

February 25, 1987: Six to thirty inches of snow fell on this date in 1987 across much of western and central South Dakota. Three to six inches of snow fell in the northeast part of South Dakota. Some of the most significant snowfall amounts reported were 30 inches at Phillip, 26 inches at Murdo, and Timber Lake, with 15 inches at Rapid City. Numerous accidents occurred in the western and central sections of the state. Many roads were closed, including Interstate 90, for most of the 27th. Slippery roads were a significant factor in the vehicle injuries of three women on Highway 12, six and one-half miles east of Ipswich, in the late afternoon of the 27th. The storm began on the 24th and lasted until the 28th.

February 25-March 1, 1998: An incredible amount of snow falls on Lead, South Dakota, from February 25 through March 01, 1998. The official storm total was 114 inches for the five days.

February 25, 2000: Unusual February severe thunderstorms produced nickel to quarter size hail in Lyman and Hand counties on this date in 2000.

1914: Heavy snow fell over a good portion of South Carolina and North Carolina on February 24-26, 1914. Snowfall amounts include 18 inches near Society Hill, SC, 14 inches in Fayetteville, NC, 13 inches at Darlington, SC, 11.7 inches at Columbia, SC, 8.1 inches at Charlotte, SC, and 7.2 inches at Greensboro, NC, and 7.0 inches at Raleigh, NC.

1934: An outbreak of six tornadoes killed nineteen in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. The hardest-hit areas were Bowden, GA, and Shady Grove, AL. An estimated F4 tornado damaged or destroyed 90 homes, many in the Shady Grove community. One home in Lauderdale County, Mississippi, was picked up, thrown 400 feet, and blown to bits. Six family members were killed in the house. Three deaths occurred in two homes, and one preacher was killed during services.

1991: Black rain fell over southeastern Turkey for 10-hours, causing panic among people. The black rain resulted from soot from burning oil fields in Kuwait.

2010: A powerful nor'easter spread significant snow and windy conditions across the Middle Atlantic region from Thursday, February 25 into Friday, February 26. An area of low pressure developed off the Carolina coast late Wednesday night, February 24, and then strengthened as it tracked northward to near Long Island, New York, by Thursday evening. As low pressure aloft deepened over the Mid-Atlantic coast Thursday night into Friday, the surface low retrograded and moved westward into northern New Jersey and southern New York. By February 27, the low pushed into southern New England and gradually weakened over the weekend. Strong wind gusts were measured throughout the Middle Atlantic region due to this coastal storm. Some of the highest wind gusts recorded include 62 mph measured at Cape May, New Jersey; 52 mph at the Atlantic City Marina; 51 mph at the Mount Pocono Airport and Lewes, Delaware; and 50 mph at Dover Air Force Base. In addition, wind gusts of 40 mph or higher were recorded in Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Allentown. Considerable blowing and drifting snow resulted, especially from the Poconos eastward into northern New Jersey. Snow drifts as high as 3 to 5 feet were seen across portions of Warren and Sussex counties in New Jersey. Total accumulations of 20 inches or more were recorded from Morris and Sussex counties in New Jersey, westward into Monroe County, Pennsylvania. In addition, a band of 12 to 18 inches of snow accumulation was measured from Warren and Morris counties in New Jersey westward to Lehigh County, Pennsylvania. In addition to snow that accumulated during the daytime on Thursday, many locations across the region experienced a heavier burst of snow with gusty winds Thursday night into early Friday, thanks to additional moisture wrapped around the low-pressure system. Some areas saw snowfall rates of 1 to 2 inches per hour, mainly from northern New Jersey and into the Poconos. Central Park ended the month with 36.9 inches of snow, making this the snowiest month since records began in 1869.

2017: An EF1 tornado was confirmed in Goshen and Conway County, MA. This tornado was the first-ever recorded in February for M.A. since records began. The graphic below is from a tweet by the N.W.S. Office in Boston, MA.



GREED

Years ago there was a pretzel stand in front of a building in New York. A generous businessman wanted to help the owner grow his business and eventually become successful. Each day he would put a quarter on the counter and walk away without taking a pretzel.

One day as he was leaving his quarter, the owner said, "Sir..."

Stopping quickly, he said, "I presume that you are going to ask me why I never take the pretzels?"

"No," she said rather haughtily. "I just wanted to tell you that the price of the pretzels is fifty cents."

In Paul's letter to the Colossians, he warned them to "Put to death...evil desires and greed which leads to idolatry and most other sins." He then made an astonishing suggestion to accomplish this: "consider yourselves as though you are dead." He suggests that we make a conscious effort every day to identify and banish any greedy desire as soon as we sense it growing in our minds, extinguish it and not allow it to grow which will lead to our destruction.

Everyday our minds are stimulated by ideas, thoughts, and suggestions that imply, "If only you had this, you would be satisfied or if you achieve this goal you will be successful and therefore happy." Not so! "Things" cannot fill the empty space in our hearts because it has been reserved for God Himself. Only Christ, Who stands at the door to our hearts, gently knocking and patiently waiting to come in, can remove the loneliness we feel without His presence.

Prayer: Lord, give us a clear vision of the peace and satisfaction that can be ours with You in our hearts. Convict us of any desire to put "things" in Your "space." In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Colossians 3:5

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

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 26 of 76

The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

- Black & White.....\$48.99/year
- Colored.....\$79.88/year
- Colored.....\$42.60/6 months
- E-Weekly*.....\$31.95/year

* The E-Weekly is a PDF file emailed to you each week. It does not grant you access to the GDI/Video Archives.

Name: _____

Mailing Address: _____

City _____

State, Zip Code _____

E-mail _____

Phone Number _____

Mail Completed Form to:

Groton Independent

P.O. Box 34

Groton, SD 57445-0034

or scan and email to paperpaul@grotonsd.net

Groton Daily Independent www.397news.com Subscription Form

This option will grant you access to the GDI/Video Archives.

- 1 Month.....\$15.98
- 3 Months.....\$26.63
- 6 Months.....\$31.95
- 9 Months.....\$42.60
- 12 Months.....\$53.25

Name: _____

Mailing Address: _____

City _____

State, Zip Code _____

Phone Number _____

The following will be used for your log-in information.

E-mail _____

Password _____

Pay with Paypal. Type the following into your browser window:

paypal.me/paperpaul

Pay with Venmo: [@paperpaul](https://venmo.com/paperpaul) Phone Number to Confirm: 7460

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 27 of 76



WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.21.25

1 13 28 37 46 10

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$181,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 9 Mins 6 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.24.25

1 21 30 35 41 3

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$25,110,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 24 Mins 6 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.24.25

7 16 23 33 40 8

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 39 Mins 5 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.22.25

6 9 13 14 17

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$45,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 39 Mins 5 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.24.25

22 48 61 63 66 17

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 8 Mins 6 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.24.25

10 11 34 59 68 14

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$248,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 8 Mins 6 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 28 of 76

Upcoming Groton Events

- 01/05/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/26/2025 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed at the Community Center 10am-1pm
- 01/26/2025 87th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm
- 02/02/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 02/05/2025 FB Live Electronic Hwy 12 Sign Drawing City Hall 12pm
- 03/02/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 03/22/2025 Spring Vendor Fair at the GHS Gym 10am-2pm
- 04/05/2025 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39, 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 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
- 06/07/2025 Day of Play
- 07/04/2025 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
- 07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm
- 08/09/2025 2nd Annual Celebration in the Park/Rib Cook-Off 1-9:30pm
- 09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1:30pm

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 29 of 76

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Monday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Christian 64, Redfield 48
Aberdeen Roncalli 66, Tiospa Zina 27
Baltic 65, Tri-Valley 41
Belle Fourche 65, Lemmon High School 53
Beresford 56, Wagner 51
Centerville 79, Mitchell Christian 52
Dell Rapids 59, Garretson 39
Flandreau 51, Deubrook 41
Gayville-Volin High School 61, Avon 51
Highmore-Harrold 55, Herreid-Selby 35
Hill City 51, Custer 48
Little Wound 63, Crazy Horse 48
Lyman 64, Stanley County 62
Madison 65, Milbank 39
Mahpiya Lúta Red Cloud 49, St. Francis Indian 36
Marty 82, Burke 62
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 56, McCook Central-Montrose 46
North Central 62, Wakpala 57
Parkston 63, Corsica/Stickney 43
Platte-Geddes 76, Todd County 62
Sioux Falls Christian 70, Yankton 48
St Thomas More 61, Hot Springs 35
Tri-State, N.D. 51, Wilmot 46
Vermillion 71, Canton 39
Wall 70, Kadoka 56
West Central 61, Elk Point-Jefferson 35
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Crow Creek Tribal School vs. Winner, ccd.

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Class B Region 1=
First Round=
Langford 42, Aberdeen Christian 18
Waverly-South Shore 51, Leola-Frederick High School 43
Class B Region 2=
First Round=
Canistota 60, Flandreau Indian 12
Estelline-Hendricks 58, James Valley Christian School 17
Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 61, Iroquois-Lake Preston 57
Class B Region 4=
First Round=
Irene-Wakonda 54, Alcester-Hudson 45
Tripp-Delmont-Armour 37, Freeman Academy-Marion 25

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 30 of 76

Class B Region 5=
First Round=
Kimball-White Lake 44, Colome 7
Class B Region 6=
First Round=
Ipswich 57, Sunshine Bible Academy 33
Potter County 65, Wakpala 37
Class B Region 7=
First Round=
Jones County 54, Crazy Horse 7
New Underwood 59, Oelrichs 13
Class B Region 8=
First Round=
Dupree 49, Bison 31
McIntosh High School 70, Takini 21

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

Pope Francis' health crisis sparks prayers from thousands outside the Vatican

By GIOVANNA DELL' ORTO Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Thousands of people gathered in St. Peter's Square to pray for an ailing Pope Francis, expressing sorrow for his suffering, hope for his recovery and gratitude for his efforts to steer the Catholic Church in new directions.

The 88-year-old Francis has pneumonia in both lungs and remains in critical condition despite showing a slight improvement after 11 days in the hospital. The Vatican said early on Tuesday that he had "slept well, all night."

As Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's No. 2, led prayers for 45 minutes on a chilly, rainy night Monday, the faithful fingered rosary beads while hoping for Francis' recovery. The Vatican issued a dose of optimism earlier in the evening, delivering a more upbeat health bulletin than in recent days.

Still, the mood was mostly grim in the monumental square, with many of the roughly 4,000 assembled understanding they may be in Rome for Francis' final days. Crowds sat under umbrellas on folding chairs or stood by the vast colonnades as they reflected fondly on the pontiff's legacy.

"To see him suffer hurts," said Robert Pietro, a Romanian seminarian who stood at the prayer holding a small, fragrant candle in tribute. "But we also pray in thanksgiving for what he has done for the Church."

The Rev. Roberto Allison, a priest from Guadalajara, Mexico, said members of his community had come together to show appreciation for "all that we have learned from him."

Stopping to deliver personal blessings to some at the end of the ceremony, Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco said the crowd's diversity — many world languages could be heard spoken — was "a big sign of comfort" for the Catholic Church.

The Argentine pope, who had part of one lung removed as a young man, has been hospitalized at Rome's Gemelli hospital since Feb. 14 and doctors have said his condition is touch-and-go, given his age, fragility and preexisting lung disease.

But in Monday's update, they said he hadn't had any more respiratory crises since Saturday, and the supplemental oxygen he is using continued but with a slightly reduced oxygen flow and concentrations.

A couple of Catholic tourists from Chicago, who arrived holding umbrellas well before the service started, said they prayed for the pope at daily Mass earlier at St. Peter's Basilica, and decided to come back. Like many, they found it "hard to process" they may be in Rome for Francis' final days.

"No one knows the day and time, but it's a historic moment nonetheless," said Edward Burjek.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 31 of 76

It felt the same for Hatzumi Villanueva of Peru. She was particularly fond of former pope St. John Paul II but said that Francis, as the first Latin American pope, "draws a bit closer."

"We came to pray for the pope, that he may recover soon, for the great mission he's sharing with his message of peace," said Villanueva, who praised his empathy for migrants.

Francis' papacy has also emphasized the defense of the environment and partial openness to LGBTQ+ rights.

Outside of the Vatican, Romans, pilgrims and even non-Catholics said they were offering special prayers for the hospitalized pope.

"We are all sorry," said Raniero Mancinelli, who has tailored ceremonial clothing for Francis and the two previous popes in his shop just outside the Vatican's walls.

Elisabetta Zumbo carried a 5-foot-long cross down a cordoned-off section of the street leading to St. Peter's as she prepared to lead a group of 34 pilgrims from the northern Italian city of Piacenza. With the rain pouring down, she pledged her group would pray intensely for the pope.

"There is a lot of emotion and a lot of sadness," Zumbo said.

Nearby, a couple from London visiting St. Peter's with their son said that even though they're not Catholic, they felt close to the pontiff "being there in his home" in the monumental basilica.

Coca-Cola's appeal to Palestinians fizzles as the Mideast war boosts demand for a local look-alike

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

SALFIT, West Bank (AP) — Order a Coke to wash down some hummus in the Israeli-occupied West Bank these days and chances are the waiter will shake his head disapprovingly — or worse, mutter "shame, shame" in Arabic — before suggesting the popular local alternative: a can of Chat Cola.

Chat Cola — its red tin and sweeping white script bearing remarkable resemblance to the iconic American soft drink's logo — has seen its products explode in popularity across the occupied West Bank in the past year as Palestinian consumers, angry at America's steadfast support for Israel in its war against Hamas in Gaza, protest with their pocketbooks.

"No one wants to be caught drinking Coke," said Mad Asaad, 21, a worker at the bakery-cafe chain Croissant House in the West Bank city of Ramallah, which stopped selling Coke after the war erupted. "Everyone drinks Chat now. It's sending a message."

Since Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack triggered Israel's devastating military campaign in the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian-led boycott movement against companies perceived as supportive of Israel gained momentum across the Middle East, where the usual American corporate targets like McDonald's, KFC and Starbucks saw sales slide last year.

Here in the West Bank, the boycott has shuttered two KFC branches in Ramallah. But the most noticeable expression of consumer outrage has been the sudden ubiquity of Chat Cola as shopkeepers relegate Coke cans to the bottom shelf — or pull them altogether.

"When people started to boycott, they became aware that Chat existed," Fahed Arar, general manager of Chat Cola, told The Associated Press from the giant red-painted factory, nestled in the hilly West Bank town of Salfit. "I'm proud to have created a product that matches that of a global company."

With the "buy local" movement burgeoning during the war, Chat Cola said its sales in the West Bank surged more than 40% last year, compared to 2023.

While the companies said they had no available statistics on their command of the local market due to the difficulties of data collection in wartime, anecdotal evidence suggests Chat Cola is clawing at some of Coca-Cola's market share.

"Chat used to be a specialty product, but from what we've seen, it dominates the market," said Abdulqader Azeez Hassan, 25, the owner of a supermarket in Salfit that boasts fridges full of the fizzy drinks.

But workers at Coca-Cola's franchise in the West Bank, the National Beverage Company, are all Palestinian, and a boycott affects them, too, said its general manager, Imad Hindi.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 32 of 76

He declined to elaborate on the business impact of the boycott, suggesting it can't be untangled from the effects of the West Bank's economic free-fall and intensified Israeli security controls that have multiplied shipping times and costs for Palestinian companies during the war.

The Coca-Cola Company did not respond to a request for comment.

Whether or not the movement brings lasting consequences, it does reflect an upsurge of political consciousness, said Salah Hussein, head of the Ramallah Chamber of Commerce.

"It's the first time we've ever seen a boycott to this extent," Hussein said, noting how institutions like the prominent Birzeit University near Ramallah canceled their Coke orders. "After Oct. 7, everything changed. And after Trump, everything will continue to change."

President Donald Trump's call for the mass expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza, which he rephrased last week as a recommendation, has further inflamed anti-American sentiment around the region.

With orders pouring in not only from Lebanon and Yemen but also the United States and Europe, the company has its sights set on the international market, said PR manager Ahmad Hammad.

Hired to help Chat Cola cash in on combustible emotions created by the war, Hammad has rebranded what began in 2019 as a niche mom-and-pop operation.

"We had to take advantage of the opportunity," he said of the company's new "Palestinian taste" logo and national flag-hued merchandise.

In its scramble to satisfy demand, Chat Cola is opening a second production site in neighboring Jordan. It rolled out new candy-colored flavors, like blueberry, strawberry and green apple.

At the steamy plant in Salfit, recent college graduates in lab coats said that they took pains to produce a carbonated beverage that could sell on its taste, not just a customer's sense of solidarity with the Palestinians.

"Quality has been a problem with local Palestinian products before," said Hanna al-Ahmad, 32, the head of quality control for Chat Cola, shouting to be heard over the whir of machines squirting caramel-colored elixir into scores of small cans that then whizzed down assembly lines. "If it's not good quality, the boycott won't stick."

Chat Cola worked with chemists in France to produce the flavor, which is almost indistinguishable from Coke's — just like its packaging. That's the case for several flavors: Squint at Chat's lemon-lime soda and you might mistake it for a can of Sprite.

In 2020, the Ramallah-based National Beverage Company sued Chat Cola for copyright infringement in Palestinian court, contending that Chat had imitated Coke's designs for multiple drinks. The court ultimately sided with Chat Cola, determining there were enough subtle differences in the can designs that it didn't violate copyright law.

In the Salfit warehouse, drivers loaded "family size" packages of soda into trucks bound not only for the West Bank but also for Tel Aviv, Haifa and other cities in Israel. Staffers said that Chat soda sales in Israel's predominantly Arab cities jumped 25% last year. To broaden its appeal in Israel, Chat Cola secured kosher certification after a Jewish rabbi's thorough inspection of the facility.

Still, critics of the Palestinians-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, or BDS, say that its main objective — to isolate Israel economically for its occupation of Palestinian lands — only exacerbates the conflict.

"BDS and similar actions drive communities apart, they don't help to bring people together," said Vlad Khaykin, the executive vice president of social impact and partnerships in North America for the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Jewish human rights organization. "The kind of rhetoric being embraced by the BDS movement to justify the boycott of Israel is really quite dangerous."

While Chat Cola goes out of its way to avoid buying from Israel — sourcing ingredients and materials from France, Italy and Kuwait — it can't avoid the circumstances of Israeli occupation, in which Israel dominates the Palestinian economy, controls borders, imports and more.

Deliveries of raw materials to Chat Cola's West Bank factory get hit with a 35% import tax — half of which Israel collects on behalf of the Palestinians. The general manager, Arar, said his company's success

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 33 of 76

depends far more on Israeli bureaucratic goodwill than nationalist fervor.

For nearly a month last fall, Israeli authorities detained Chat's aluminum shipments from Jordan at the Allenby Bridge Crossing, forcing part of the factory to shut down and costing the company tens of thousands of dollars.

Among the local buyers left in the lurch was Croissant House in Ramallah, where, on a recent afternoon, at least one thirsty customer, confronting a nearly empty refrigerator, slipped to the supermarket next-door for a can of Coke.

"It's very frustrating," said Asaad, the worker. "We want to be self-sufficient. But we're not."

Palestinians struggle to restart their lives in the ruins of Gaza

By FATMA KHALED and ABDEL KAREEM HANA Associated Press

BEIT LAHIYA, Gaza Strip (AP) — When night falls over northern Gaza, much of the cityscape of collapsed buildings and piled wreckage turns pitch black. Living inside the ruins of their home, Rawia Tambora's young sons get afraid of the dark, so she turns on a flashlight and her phone's light to comfort them, for as long as the batteries last.

Displaced for most of the 16-month-long war, Tambora is back in her house. But it is still a frustrating shell of a life, she says: There is no running water, electricity, heat or services, and no tools to clear the rubble around them.

Nearly 600,000 Palestinians flooded back into northern Gaza under the now month-old ceasefire in Gaza, according to the United Nations. After initial relief and joy at being back at their homes — even if damaged or destroyed — they now face the reality of living in the wreckage for the foreseeable future.

"Some people wish the war had never ended, feeling it would have been better to be killed," Tambora said. "I don't know what we'll do long-term. My brain stopped planning for the future."

The six-week ceasefire is due to end Saturday, and it's uncertain what will happen next. There are efforts to extend the calm as the next phase is negotiated. If fighting erupts again, those who returned to the north could find themselves once again in the middle of it.

A massive rebuilding job has no way to start

A report last week by the World Bank, U.N. and European Union estimated it will cost some \$53 billion to rebuild Gaza after entire neighborhoods were decimated by Israel's bombardment and offensives against Hamas militants. At the moment, there is almost no capacity or funding to start significant rebuilding.

A priority is making Gaza immediately livable. Earlier in February, Hamas threatened to hold up hostage releases unless more tents and temporary shelters were allowed into Gaza. It then reversed and accelerated hostage releases after Israel agreed to let in mobile homes and construction equipment.

Humanitarian agencies have stepped up services, setting up free kitchens and water delivery stations, and distributing tents and tarps to hundreds of thousands across Gaza, according to the U.N.

President Donald Trump turned up the pressure by calling for the entire population of Gaza to be removed permanently so the U.S. can take over the territory and redevelop it for others. Rejecting the proposal, Palestinians say they want help to rebuild for themselves.

Gaza City's municipality started fixing some water lines and clearing rubble from streets, said a spokesperson, Asem Alnabih. But it lacks heavy equipment. Only a few of its 40 bulldozers and five dump trucks still work, he said. Gaza is filled with over 50 million tons of rubble that would take 100 trucks working at full capacity over 15 years to clear away, the U.N. estimates.

Families try to get by day by day

Tambora's house in the northern town of Beit Lahiya was destroyed by an airstrike early in the war, so she and her family lived in the nearby Indonesian Hospital, where she worked as a nurse.

After the ceasefire, they moved back into the only room in her house that was semi-intact. The ceiling is partially collapsed, the walls are cracked; the surviving fridge and sink are useless with no water or electricity. They stack their sheets and blankets in a corner.

Tambora said her 12-year-old son lugs heavy containers of water twice a day from distribution stations.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 34 of 76

They also have to find firewood for cooking. The influx of aid means there is food in the markets and prices went down, but it remains expensive, she said.

With the Indonesian Hospital too damaged to function, Tambora walks an hour each day to work at the Kamal Adwan Hospital. She charges her and her husband's phones using the hospital generator.

Many of Tambora's relatives returned to find nothing left of their homes, so they live in tents on or next to the rubble that gets blown away by winter winds or flooded during rains, she said.

Asmaa Dwaima and her family returned to Gaza City but had to rent an apartment because their home in the Tel al-Hawa neighborhood was destroyed. It was only weeks after returning that she went to visit their four-story house, now a pile of flattened and burned wreckage.

"I couldn't come here because I was afraid. I had an image of my house in my mind — its beauty, and warmth. ... I was afraid to face this truth," the 25-year-old dentist said. "They don't just destroy stone, they are destroying us and our identity."

Her family had to rebuild the house once before, when it was leveled by airstrikes during a round of fighting between Israel and Hamas in 2014, she said. For the time being, they have no means to rebuild now.

"We need to remove the rubble because we want to pull out clothes and some of our belongings," she said. "We need heavy equipment ... There are no bricks or other construction tools and, if available, it's extremely expensive."

Desperation is growing

Tess Ingram, a spokesperson with UNICEF who visited northern Gaza since the ceasefire, said the families she met are "grieving the lives that they used to live as they begin to rebuild."

Their desperation, she said, "is becoming more intense."

Huda Skaik, a 20-year-old student, is sharing a room with her three siblings and parents at her grandparents' house in Gaza City. It's an improvement from life in the tent camps of central Gaza where they were displaced for much of the war, she said. There, they had to live among strangers, and their tent was washed away by rain. At least here they have walls and are with family, she said.

Before the war interrupted, Skaik had just started studying English literature at Gaza's Islamic University. She is now enrolled in online classes the university is organizing. But the internet is feeble, and her electricity relies on solar panels that don't always work.

"The worst part is that we're just now grasping that we lost it all," she said. "The destruction is massive, but I'm trying to remain positive." _____

Khaled reported from Cairo.

Apple shareholders to consider scrapping diversity programs amid backlash

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

Apple shareholders on Tuesday are expected to reject an attempt to pressure the technology trendsetter into scrapping its corporate programs designed to diversify its workforce.

The proposal drafted by the National Center for Public Policy Research — a self-described conservative think tank — urges Apple to follow a litany of high-profile companies that have retreated from diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives currently in the crosshairs of President Donald Trump.

It comes a month after the same group presented a similar proposal during Costco's annual meeting, only to have it overwhelmingly rejected. A similar outcome is expected during Apple's annual meeting despite the strident objections of critics.

Just as Costco does, Apple has steadfastly stood behind diversity and inclusion efforts that its management contends good business sense.

But the National Center for Public Policy Research's proposal has attacked Apple's diversity commitments for being out of line with recent court rulings and said the programs expose the Cupertino, California, company to an onslaught of potential lawsuits for alleged discrimination. The group estimated about 50,000 Apple employees could file cases against Apple without detailing how it arrived at that figure.

"It's clear that DEI poses litigation, reputational and financial risks to companies, and therefore financial risks to their shareholders, and therefore further risks to companies for not abiding by their fiduciary duties," the National Center for Public Policy Research says in its proposal.

The specter of potential legal trouble was magnified last week when Florida Attorney General James Uthmeier filed a federal lawsuit against Target alleging the retailer's recently scaled-back DEI program alienated many consumers and undercut sales to the detriment of shareholders.

In its rebuttal to the anti-DEI proposal, Apple said its program is an integral part of a culture that has helped elevate the company to its current market value of \$3.7 trillion — greater than any other business in the world.

"We believe that how we conduct ourselves is as critical to Apple's success as making the best products in the world," the company said in its statement against the proposal. "We seek to conduct business ethically, honestly, and in compliance with applicable laws and regulations."

In its last diversity and inclusion report issued in 2022, Apple disclosed nearly that three-fourths of its global workforce consisted of white and Asian employees. Nearly two-thirds of its employees at that juncture were men.

Other major technology companies for years have reported employing mostly white and Asian men, especially in high-paid engineering jobs — a tendency that spurred the industry to pursue what have been largely unsuccessful efforts to diversify.

What to know about air traffic control towers after a midair collision in Arizona prompts questions

By SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN Associated Press

Tens of thousands of planes take off, land and perform touch-and-goes at the Marana Regional Airport in southern Arizona every year. Without an air traffic control tower, it's a calculated dance that requires communication by pilots.

Two small planes collided in midair over one of the runways on the outskirts of Tucson last week. One hit the ground and caught fire, sending up a plume of black smoke. The remains of two people were found in the charred wreckage. The other plane was able to land, with those occupants uninjured.

The collision was the latest aviation mishap to draw attention in recent weeks. The circumstances vary widely with each case, however, and experts who study aviation accidents say they don't see any connection between them.

Chatter over the airwaves has provided some clues about what happened in Arizona. A chief flight instructor who was in the air with a student that day heard the commotion over the radio: One plane was attempting a touch-and-go when another clipped its propeller while attempting to land.

Erwin Castillo, who works for IFLY Pilot Training, recalled hearing one pilot scream: "Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! He just hit us."

It will be up to federal investigators to determine what caused the crash, a detailed process that will take months.

While some observers suggest having a control tower may have made a difference, experts say not having a tower doesn't mean the airport is any less safe; pilots just have a different set of communication procedures to follow.

How many airports in the US have control towers?

Of the 5,100 public airports across the country, only about 10% have towers staffed by people who direct the flow of traffic. These are the busiest of airports, with complex operations and large volumes of commercial flights.

For the airports without control towers, pilots rely on radio communications and the principle of "see and avoid" to ensure they can maneuver safely. The concept is drilled into pilots from Day 1 of their training and it's applicable regardless of the kind of airspace they're in, said Mike Ginter, a retired Navy aviator and senior vice president of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association's Air Safety Institute.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 36 of 76

He likened it to being behind the wheel of a car and practicing all the safety rules learned in driver's ed. "You don't have to tell the state police that you're getting ready to drive to the supermarket to get groceries. You just go out, and you look both ways before you turn, and you turn on your turn signal and you drive," he explained, saying there are basic tenets of safety that are ingrained in pilots.

The system has worked well, considering the sheer number of planes coming and going daily from small airports and the roughly 26 million hours of flight time logged by general aviation pilots.

What prompted regulation of the friendly skies?

It was a summer day in 1956 when two commercial flights left Los Angeles within minutes of each other — one en route to Chicago and the other to Kansas. Flying under visual flight rules, the planes collided over the Grand Canyon in Arizona, killing all 128 people aboard. The crash site is now a National Historic Landmark.

Even though U.S. air traffic had more than doubled since the end of World War II, it was this disaster that helped to fuel efforts to overhaul aviation safety.

Legislation was introduced in 1958 to create an independent federal agency that would provide for the safe and efficient use of national airspace. The bill was signed within months and the first Federal Aviation Agency administrator was appointed.

Responsibilities evolved, and the agency became the Federal Aviation Administration as air traffic control systems were being modernized.

Are new control towers being planned?

Through the FAA, airports can apply for federal grants to modernize and build air traffic control towers that are staffed by private companies and contract workers, rather than FAA staff.

Nearly 180 airports nationwide are eligible for funding under the program, with most looking to upgrade existing towers — some that date back to the 1940s and others that were meant to be temporary.

A review of funding awarded through the program over the past four fiscal year shows a handful of airports were awarded money specifically for site studies, environmental work and construction of new towers. That includes airports in Bend, Oregon; Boulder City, Nevada; and Mankato, Minnesota.

In the case of Marana, the airport was first accepted into the program in 2019 but the coronavirus pandemic stalled efforts to get a tower built by the five-year deadline. Airport officials have said they now are on track to complete the project by 2029.

Will federal job cuts affect air traffic safety?

U.S. President Donald Trump issued a memo in late January to top transportation officials, ordering an immediate assessment of aviation safety following the midair collision of an Army helicopter and commercial passenger jet over the Potomac River in Washington, D.C. Sixty-seven people were killed.

Trump raised questions about hiring practices within the FAA, suggesting previous Democratic administrations had shifted away from merit-based hiring.

Some FAA jobs have been eliminated as Trump streamlines the federal workforce and looks to ferret out waste and curb spending, but less than 1% of the agency's more than 45,000 workers were probationary employees targeted as part of the job cuts, federal officials have said.

In addition, the administration has said no air traffic controllers or critical safety personnel were fired as part of the effort. But labor and industry groups say even without cuts, air traffic control towers were already understaffed.

Trump has said that he would support legislation aimed at modernizing the nation's air traffic control system. In a letter sent to members of Congress last week, the industry group Airlines for America pushed for emergency funding for critical air traffic control technology and infrastructure as well as air controller staffing and training.

Illinois landlord charged with 2023 hate crime and murder of Palestinian American boy set for trial

By SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

Joliet, Ill. (AP) — The trial of a suburban Chicago landlord accused of murder, attempted murder and a hate crime in a 2023 attack on a Palestinian American woman and her young son is set to start Tuesday.

Joseph Czuba, 73, is charged in the fatal stabbing of six-year-old Wadee Alfayoumi and the wounding of Hanan Shaheen on Oct. 14, 2023. Authorities said the family was targeted because of their Islamic faith and as a response to the war between Israel and Hamas that erupted on Oct. 7, 2023 with a Hamas attack on southern Israel.

Opening statements start Tuesday morning in a trial that is expected to last about a week.

Czuba has pleaded not guilty to three counts of first-degree murder, one count of attempted murder and other charges. His defense attorney, George Lenard, declined to comment before the end of the trial.

The attack on the family in Plainfield, nearly 40 miles (65 kilometers) southwest of Chicago, has renewed fears of anti-Muslim discrimination in the Chicago area's large and established Palestinian community. The proceedings also come amid rising hostility against Muslims and Palestinians in the U.S. since Hamas attacked Israel in October 2023.

"We firmly pray and hope that Mr. Czuba will be locked up for the rest of his life, so we can send a message that hate crimes against anyone on the basis of their religion and national origin are not tolerated," Joe Milburn, a staff attorney for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, told reporters Monday ahead of jury selection.

Prosecutors allege Czuba became increasingly paranoid about the war because of listening to commentary on conservative talk radio. Shaheen told police that Czuba was upset over the war and attacked them after she had urged him to "pray for peace."

The boy — whose name was initially spelled Wadea Al-Fayoume by authorities — was stabbed 26 times. Shaheen had more than a dozen stab wounds and it took her weeks to recover.

The murder charge in the indictment against Czuba describes the boy's death as the result of "exceptionally brutal or heinous behavior." Czuba remained detained with prosecutors arguing that Czuba was a danger to Shaheen and others.

Hundreds attended the boy's janazah, or funeral service, where the boy was remembered as kind and into sports and Legos.

Separately, the father of the boy, who is divorced from Shaheen and did not live at the home, has filed a wrongful death lawsuit.

Nearly 40% of contracts canceled by DOGE are expected to produce no savings

By RYAN J. FOLEY Associated Press

Nearly 40% of the federal contracts that the Trump administration claims to have canceled as part of its signature cost-cutting program aren't expected to save the government any money, the administration's own data shows.

The Department of Government Efficiency run by Elon Musk last week published an initial list of 1,125 contracts that it terminated in recent weeks across the federal government. Data published on DOGE's "Wall of Receipts" shows that more than one-third of the contract cancellations, 417 in all, are expected to yield no savings.

That's usually because the total value of the contracts has already been fully obligated, which means the government has a legal requirement to spend the funds for the goods or services it purchased and in many cases has already done so.

"It's like confiscating used ammunition after it's been shot when there's nothing left in it. It doesn't

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 38 of 76

accomplish any policy objective," said Charles Tiefer, a retired University of Baltimore law professor and expert on government contracting law. "Their terminating so many contracts pointlessly obviously doesn't accomplish anything for saving money."

Dozens of them were for already-paid subscriptions to The Associated Press, Politico and other media services that the administration said it would discontinue. Others were for research studies that have been awarded, training that has taken place, software that has been purchased and interns that have come and gone.

An administration official said it made sense to cancel contracts that are seen as potential dead weight, even if the moves do not yield any savings. The official was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

In all, DOGE data says the 417 contracts in question had a total value of \$478 million. Dozens of other canceled contracts are expected to yield little if any savings.

"It's too late for the government to change its mind on many of these contracts and walk away from its payment obligation," said Tiefer, who served on the Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Tiefer said DOGE appeared to be taking a "slash and burn" approach to cutting contracts, which he said could damage the performance of government agencies. He said savings could be made instead by working with agency contracting officers and inspectors general to find efficiencies, an approach the administration has not taken.

DOGE says the overall contract cancellations are expected to save more than \$7 billion so far, an amount that has been questioned as inflated by independent experts.

The canceled contracts were to purchase a wide range of goods and services.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded a contract in September to purchase and install office furniture at various branches. While the contract does not expire until later this year, federal records show the agency had already agreed to spend the maximum \$567,809 with a furniture company.

The U.S. Agency for International Development negotiated a \$145,549 contract last year to clean the carpet at its headquarters in Washington. But the full amount had already been obligated to a firm that is owned by a Native American tribe based in Michigan.

Another already-spent \$249,600 contract went to a Washington, D.C., firm to help prepare the Department of Transportation for the recent transition from the Biden to the Trump administration.

Some of the canceled contracts were intended to modernize and improve the way government works, which would seem to be at odds with DOGE's cost-cutting mission.

One of the largest, for instance, went to a consulting firm to help carry out a reorganization at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, which led the agency's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The maximum \$13.6 million had already been obligated to Deloitte Consulting LLP for help with the restructuring, which included closing several research offices.

In Rome, talks to protect Earth's biodiversity resume with money topping the agenda

By STEVEN GRATTAN Associated Press

BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) — An annual United Nations conference on biodiversity that ran out of time last year will resume its work Tuesday in Rome with money at the top of the agenda.

That is, how to spend what's been pledged so far — and how to raise a lot more to help preserve plant and animal life on Earth.

The talks in Colombia known as COP16 yielded some significant outcomes before they broke up in November, including an agreement that requires companies that benefit from genetic resources in nature — say, by developing medicines from rainforest plants — to share the benefits. And steps were taken to give Indigenous peoples and local communities a stronger voice in conservation matters.

But two weeks turned out to be not enough time to get everything done.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 39 of 76

The Cali talks followed the historic 2022 COP15 accord in Montreal, which included 23 measures aimed at protecting biodiversity. Those included putting 30% of the planet and 30% of degraded ecosystems under protection by 2030, known as the Global Biodiversity Framework.

"Montreal was about the 'what' — what are we all working towards together?" said Georgina Chandler, head of policy and campaigns for the Zoological Society London. "Cali was supposed to focus on the 'how' — putting the plans and the financing in place to ensure we can actually implement this framework."

"They eventually lost a quorum because people simply went home," said Linda Krueger of The Nature Conservancy, who is in Rome for the two days of talks. "And so now we're having to finish these last critical decisions, which are some of the the nitty gritty decisions on financing, on resource mobilization and on the planning and monitoring and reporting requirements under the Global Biodiversity Framework."

The overall financial aim was to achieve \$20 billion a year in the fund by 2025, and then \$30 billion by 2030. So far, only \$383 million had been pledged as of November, from 12 nations or sub-nations: Austria, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Japan, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Norway, Province of Québec, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

Participants will discuss establishing a "global financing instrument for biodiversity" intended to effectively distribute the money raised. And a big part of the talks will be about raising more money.

'Completely off track' on larger financial goal

Chandler and Krueger both said the finance points at Colombia's talks were particularly contentious.

"It's really about how do we collect the money and how do we get it distributed fairly, get it to the ground where it's needed most, so that that's really the core issue," said Krueger.

Oscar Soria, chief executive of The Common Initiative, a think tank specializing in global economic and environmental policy, was pessimistic about raising a great deal more money.

"We are completely off track in terms of achieving that money," Soria said. Key sources of biodiversity finance are shrinking or disappearing, he said.

"What was supposed to be a good Colombian telenovela in which people will actually bring the right resources, and the happy ending of bringing their money, could actually end up being a tragic Italian opera, where no one actually agrees to anything and everyone loses," Soria said.

Susana Muhamad, Colombia's former environment minister and the COP16 president, said she's hopeful of "a good message from Rome."

"That message is that still, even with a very fragmented geopolitical landscape, with a world increasingly in conflict, we can still get an agreement on some fundamental issues," Muhamad said in a statement. "And one of the most important is the need to protect life in this crisis of climate change and biodiversity."

Global wildlife populations have plunged on average by 73% in 50 years, according to an October report from the World Wildlife Fund and the Zoological Society of London.

"Biodiversity is basically essential to our livelihoods and well-being," Chandler said. "It's essential to the the air we breathe, the water we drink, rainfall that food systems rely on, protecting us from increasing temperatures and increasing storm occurrences as well."

Chandler said deforestation in the Amazon has far-reaching impacts across South America, just as it does in the Congo Basin and other major biodiverse regions worldwide.

"We know that has an impact on rainfall, on food systems, on soil integrity in other countries. So it's not just something that's kind of small and isolated. It's a widespread problem," she said.

Pope Francis shows slight improvement and resumes some work, while still critical, Vatican says

By NICOLE WINFIELD and TRISHA THOMAS Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis remained in critical condition Monday but showed slight improvement in laboratory tests and resumed some work, the Vatican said, including calling a parish in Gaza City that he has kept in touch with since the war there began.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 40 of 76

The Vatican's evening bulletin was more upbeat than in recent days, as the 88-year-old Francis battles pneumonia in both lungs at Rome's Gemelli hospital. It was issued shortly before the Vatican's No. 2 led the faithful in a somber night-time recitation of the Rosary prayer in St. Peter's Square that evoked the vigils when St. John Paul II was dying.

"For 2,000 years the Christian people have prayed for the pope when he was in danger or sick," Cardinal Pietro Parolin told the rain-dappled piazza. Standing on the same stage where Francis usually presides, Parolin said ever since Francis had been hospitalized, a chorus of prayers for his recovery had swelled up from around the world.

"Starting this evening, we want to unite ourselves publicly to this prayer here, in his house," Parolin said, praying that Francis "in this moment of illness and trial" would recover quickly.

The Argentine pope, who had part of one lung removed as a young man, has been hospitalized since Feb. 14 and doctors have said his condition is touch-and-go, given his age, fragility and pre-existing lung disease.

But in Monday's update, they said he hadn't had any more respiratory crises since Saturday, and the supplemental oxygen he is using continued but with a slightly reduced oxygen flow and concentrations. The slight kidney insufficiency detected on Sunday was not causing alarm at the moment, doctors said, while saying his prognosis remained guarded.

Francis received the Eucharist Monday morning and resumed working in the afternoon.

"In the evening he called the parish priest of the Gaza parish to express his fatherly closeness," the statement said.

For over a year, Francis has checked in daily via videocall with the Argentine priest, the Rev. Gabriel Romanelli, who leads the Catholic community at the church, which during Israel's war had served as a shelter for Palestinians. Romanelli had reported hearing from Francis soon after he was hospitalized, but not since. He had sent Francis a video, and the pope called to thank him, the Vatican said.

Francis was in good spirits, was not in pain and was not receiving artificial nutrition, the Vatican said. The work he was doing included reading and signing documents, and indeed the Vatican's daily noon bulletin has included new bishop nominations nearly every day, even though most were decided in advance.

At the Gemelli hospital, the mood was nevertheless grim. Bishop Claudio Giuliadori presided over an emotional, standing-room-only Mass in the chapel named for John Paul, who was hospitalized there many times. Some of the estimated 200 people who attended were in white doctor's coats or green surgical scrubs; some knelt in prayer.

"We are very sorry. Pope Francis is a good pope, let's hope that he makes it. Let us hope," said a choked-up Filomena Ferraro, who was visiting a relative at Gemelli on Monday. "We are joining him with our prayers but what else can we do?"

Doctors have warned that the main threat facing Francis is sepsis, a serious infection that can occur as a complication of pneumonia. To date there has been no reference to any onset of sepsis in the medical updates provided by the Vatican.

At 10 full days, this hospitalization now stands as Francis' longest as pope. He spent 10 days at Rome's Gemelli hospital in 2021 after he had 33 centimeters (13 inches) of his colon removed.

US refuses to blame Russia for Ukraine war, splitting with European allies in UN votes

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — In a dramatic shift in transatlantic relations under President Donald Trump, the United States split with its European allies by refusing to blame Russia for its invasion of Ukraine in votes on three U.N. resolutions Monday seeking an end to the three-year war.

The growing divide follows Trump's decision to open direct negotiations with Russia on ending the war, dismaying Ukraine and its European supporters by excluding them from the preliminary talks last week.

In the U.N. General Assembly, the U.S. joined Russia in voting against a Europe-backed Ukrainian resolu-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 41 of 76

tion that calls out Moscow's aggression and demands an immediate withdrawal of Russian troops.

The U.S. then abstained from voting on its own competing resolution after Europeans, led by France, succeeded in amending it to make clear Russia was the aggressor. The voting was taking place on the third anniversary of Russia's invasion and as Trump was hosting French President Emmanuel Macron in Washington.

It was a major setback for the Trump administration in the 193-member world body, whose resolutions are not legally binding but are seen as a barometer of world opinion.

The U.S. then pushed for a vote on its original draft in the more powerful U.N. Security Council, where resolutions are legally binding and it has veto power along with Russia, China, Britain and France. The vote in the 15-member council was 10-0 with five European countries abstaining – Britain, France, Denmark, Greece and Slovenia.

The dueling resolutions also reflect the tensions that have emerged between the U.S. and Ukraine. In escalating rhetoric, Trump has called Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy a "dictator" for not holding elections during wartime, when much of Ukraine is under Russian occupation, its soldiers are on the frontlines and the country is under martial law.

Trump also has falsely accused Kyiv of starting the war and warned that he "better move fast" to negotiate an end to the conflict or risk not having a nation to lead. Zelenskyy responded by saying Trump was living in a Russian-made "disinformation space."

In a whirlwind of diplomacy, Trump's meeting with Macron will be followed by a visit on Thursday from British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, key U.S. allies who were in lockstep with Washington on Ukraine just over a month ago. They now find themselves on opposite sides on the best pathway for the UN to call for an end to the war.

The General Assembly voted 93-18 with 65 abstentions to approve the Ukrainian resolution. The result showed some diminished support for Ukraine, because previous assembly votes saw more than 140 nations condemn Russia's aggression and demand an immediate withdrawal.

The assembly then turned to the U.S.-drafted resolution, which acknowledges "the tragic loss of life throughout the Russia-Ukraine conflict" and "implores a swift end to the conflict and further urges a lasting peace between Ukraine and Russia," but never mentions Moscow's aggression.

In a surprise move, France proposed three amendments, which add that the conflict was the result of a "full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation." The amendments reaffirm the assembly's commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, and call for peace that respects the U.N. Charter.

Russia proposed an amendment calling for "root causes" of the conflict to be addressed.

All the amendments were approved and the resolution passed 93-8 with 73 abstentions, with Ukraine voting "yes," the U.S. abstaining, and Russia voting "no."

Both assembly resolutions were supported by U.S. allies in Asia, including Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, its neighbors Canada and Mexico and European countries, with the exception of Hungary.

Ukrainian Deputy Foreign Minister Mariana Betsa said her country is exercising its "inherent right to self-defense" following Russia's invasion, which violates the U.N. Charter's requirement that countries respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other nations.

"As we mark three years of this devastation — Russia's full invasion against Ukraine — we call on all nations to stand firm and to take ... the side of the Charter, the side of humanity and the side of just and lasting peace, peace through strength," she said.

Trump has often stated his commitment to bringing "peace through strength."

Britain's U.N. Ambassador Barbara Woodward warned the council, "If Russia is allowed to win, we will live in a world where might is right, where borders can be redrawn by force, where aggressors think they can act with impunity."

Denmark's Lotte Machon, a deputy foreign minister, stressed that in peace negotiations, "nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine, nothing about European security without Europe."

U.S. deputy ambassador Dorothy Shea, meanwhile, said multiple previous U.N. resolutions condemning Russia and demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops "have failed to stop the war," which "has now dragged on for far too long and at far too terrible a cost to the people in Ukraine and Russia and beyond."

"What we need is a resolution marking the commitment from all U.N. member states to bring a durable end to the war," Shea said before the vote.

In the Security Council, Russia used its veto to prevent European amendments to the U.S. resolution, which is legally blinding but essentially toothless. Its only operative paragraph "Implores a swift end to the conflict and further urges a lasting peace between Ukraine and Russia."

Shea called it "a first step, but a crucial one," saying it "puts us on the path to peace."

The General Assembly has become the most important U.N. body on Ukraine because the Security Council has been paralyzed by Russia's veto power. It has approved half a dozen resolutions since Russian forces stormed across the border on Feb. 24, 2022.

The Ukrainian resolution adopted Monday recalls the need to implement the previous resolutions, singling out the demand that Russia "immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine."

The resolution reaffirms the assembly's commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and also "that no territorial acquisition resulting from the threat or use of force shall be recognized as legal."

It calls for "a de-escalation, an early cessation of hostilities and a peaceful resolution of the war against Ukraine" and it reiterates "the urgent need to end the war this year."

Judge rejects immediately restoring AP's access to White House but urges government to reconsider

By MATT SEDENSKY AP National Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge on Monday refused to immediately order the White House to restore The Associated Press' access to presidential events, saying the news organization had not demonstrated it had suffered any irreparable harm. But he urged the Trump administration to reconsider its two-week-old ban, saying that case law "is uniformly unhelpful to the White House."

U.S. District Judge Trevor N. McFadden's decision was only for the moment, however. He told attorneys for the Trump administration and the AP that the issue required more exploration before ruling.

McFadden said the AP had not proven harm requiring an immediate restraining order. But he cautioned the White House that the law wasn't on its side in barring AP over continuing to refer to the Gulf of Mexico, not simply the "Gulf of America" as Trump decreed in an executive order.

"It seems pretty clearly viewpoint discrimination," McFadden told Brian Hudak, a government attorney.

With no ruling made, the White House is free to continue barring the AP from the Oval Office and beyond. The case promised to stretch at least until March 20, when an additional hearing was set.

AP spokesperson Lauren Easton had this to say after the hearing: "We look forward to our next hearing on March 20 where we will continue to stand for the right of the press and the public to speak freely without government retaliation. This is a fundamental American freedom."

The White House, meanwhile, began displaying a pair of monitors in the briefing room reading "Gulf of America" and "Victory," which it declared: "As we have said from the beginning, asking the President of the United States questions in the Oval Office and aboard Air Force One is a privilege granted to journalists, not a legal right."

Is singling out one news organization 'viewpoint discrimination'?

Hudak said that just because an AP reporter and photographer had long held a place in the White House press pool didn't mean the agency was entitled to it in perpetuity.

"That's not just special access. That's extra-special access," Hudak said, noting that AP journalists continue to access the White House and publish news from events, even when its journalists are not present in the room where they happen. "The president can choose who to speak with."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 43 of 76

Charles Tobin, an attorney representing the AP, said it wasn't a matter of whether Trump had to speak to the agency's reporters, but that singling the agency out amounted to a "constitutional problem."

"We're not arguing that the president of the United States has to answer The Associated Press' questions," Tobin said. "The issue is that once he lets the press pool in he can't say, 'I don't like you. You're fake news. Get out.'"

McFadden, a Trump nominee, subjected both sides to intense questioning.

Discussing the composition of the "press pool" that is chosen by the White House Correspondents' Association, he questioned why the government was obligated to follow those choices, saying "it feels a little odd that the White House is somehow bound by the decisions this private organization is making."

Later, though, in an exchange with Hudak, he said "The White House has accepted the correspondents' association to be the referee here, and has just discriminated against one organization. That does seem problematic."

The dispute is over AP style

Earlier this month, the Trump administration began barring the AP from the Oval Office, Air Force One and other areas — some of which have been open to the agency for a century as part of the White House press pool.

That came after the AP said last month that it would adhere to the "Gulf of Mexico" terminology because its audience is global and the waters are not only in U.S. territory. However, it is acknowledging Trump's rechristening as well.

The AP filed suit Friday, naming three Trump officials — White House chief of staff Susan Wiles, deputy chief of staff Taylor Budowich and press secretary Karoline Leavitt — as defendants. The agency, a not-for-profit news organization in operation since 1846, called the White House's move a "targeted attack" that "strikes at the very core of the First Amendment.

Budowich was in court at the defendants' table. The AP's chief White House correspondent, Zeke Miller, sat with the plaintiffs' attorneys; its executive editor, Julie Pace, sat in the front row of spectators.

Dozens of news organizations signed a letter last week urging the White House to reverse its policy. The signees included Trump-friendly outlets like Fox News Channel and Newsmax.

Trump has dismissed the AP as an organization of "radical left lunatics" and said "We're going to keep them out until such time as they agree that it's the Gulf of America."

In an email to AP, Wiles said the news organization was targeted because its influential stylebook is used as a standard by many journalists, scholars and students across the country, the lawsuit said. She said the administration was hopeful the name change would be reflected in the AP Stylebook "where American audiences are concerned."

The AP Stylebook is used by international audiences as well as within the United States. The AP has said that its guidance was offered to promote clarity, and that even though Gulf of Mexico will continue to be used, journalists should also note Trump's action to change the name.

A Trump executive order to change the name of the United States' largest mountain back to Mount McKinley from Denali is being recognized by the AP Stylebook. Trump has the authority to do so because the mountain is completely within the country he oversees, AP has said.

It isn't the first case of its kind, nor even the first to involve Trump. In Trump's first term, reporter Jim Acosta of CNN had his White House credentials revoked. After CNN sued, another federal judge appointed by Trump ruled in Acosta's favor to restore access.

Hegseth says he fired the top military lawyers because they weren't well suited for the jobs

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said Monday that he was replacing the top lawyers for the military services because he didn't think they were "well-suited" to provide recommendations when lawful orders are given.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 44 of 76

Speaking at the start of a meeting with Saudi Arabia's defense minister, Hegseth refused to answer a question about why the Trump administration has selected a retired general to be the next Joint Chiefs chairman, when he doesn't meet the legal qualifications for the job.

President Donald Trump on Friday abruptly fired the chairman, Air Force Gen. CQ Brown Jr., and Hegseth followed that by firing Navy Adm. Lisa Franchetti, the chief of naval operations, and Air Force Gen. James Slife, the vice chief of the Air Force. He also said he was "requesting nominations" for the jobs of judge advocate general, or JAG, for the Army, Navy and Air Force.

He did not identify the lawyers by name. The Navy JAG, Vice Adm. Christopher French, retired about two months ago, and there was already an ongoing effort to seek a replacement. The Army JAG, Lt. Gen. Joseph B. Berger III, and Air Force JAG, Lt. Gen. Charles Plummer, were fired.

The removals — which came without any specified reasons in terms of their conduct — sent a new wave of apprehension through the Pentagon. And they added to the broader confusion over the changing parameters of Elon Musk's demand that federal employees provide recent job accomplishments by the end of Monday or risk getting fired, even though government officials later said the edict is voluntary.

Throughout the Pentagon on Monday, military and civilian workers juggled their routine national security duties with a growing unease that anyone could be next on the firing block.

Hegseth has defended Trump's firing of Brown, saying it was not unusual and the president deserves to pick his own team. The defense chief argued that other presidents made changes in military personnel.

Trump's choice of retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Dan Caine is unusual. Caine would have to come back onto active duty, but he does not meet the legal requirements for the top post. According to law, a chairman must have served as a combatant commander or service chief.

Those requirements can be waived by the president. Historically, Pentagon leaders have deliberately shifted top admirals and generals into a job as service chief for even a brief period of time in order to qualify them for the chairman's post.

In recent decades, a number of three-star and four-star officers have been fired, but Pentagon leaders have routinely made clear why they were ousted. Those reasons included disagreements over the conduct of the Iraq or Afghanistan wars, problems with the oversight of America's nuclear arsenal and public statements critical of the president and other leaders.

Brown, a history-making fighter pilot and only the second Black general to serve as chairman, is the first in that post to be fired in recent history. Hegseth made it clear before he took the secretary's job that he thought Brown should be fired, and he questioned whether Brown got the job because he was Black.

Hegseth has also repeatedly argued that military officers would be reviewed "based on meritocracy." It's unclear, however, how Franchetti, Slife and the lawyers were evaluated and what meritocracy they were found to lack.

As a result, Pentagon workers are left to decipher whether the officers were fired due to political reasons or because of their race or gender. Hegseth has laid out a campaign to rid the military of leaders who support diversity and equity in the ranks. And there have been persistent threats from the Trump administration that military officers advocating diversity and equity — or so-called "wokeism" — could be targeted.

Hegseth has said that efforts to expand diversity and equity have eroded the military's readiness.

Trump expresses hope Russia's war in Ukraine is nearing an endgame as he meets with France's Macron

By SYLVIE CORBET, MATTHEW LEE and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump expressed hope that Russia's war in Ukraine is nearing an endgame as he met Monday with French President Emmanuel Macron on the third anniversary of the invasion. But France's leader cautioned that it's crucial that any potential agreement with Moscow does not amount to surrender for Ukraine.

Their talks come at a moment of deep uncertainty about the future of transatlantic relations, with Trump transforming American foreign policy and effectively tuning out European leadership as he looks to quickly

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 45 of 76

end the war in Ukraine.

While Macron and Trump made nice at the White House, their countries were at loggerheads at the United Nations over resolutions describing Russia as the aggressor in the war.

In broad comments on the state of the conflict, Trump said he believed Russian President Vladimir Putin would accept European peacekeepers in Ukraine.

"Yeah, he will accept it," Trump told reporters. "I have asked him that question. Look, if we do this deal, he's not looking for more war."

And Trump said he hoped that the war could end within weeks and that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy would soon come to the U.S. to sign a deal giving America access to Ukraine's critical minerals, which are used in key technology.

Trump is pressing the economic deal to help repay some of the \$180 billion in American aid for Kyiv since the start of the war — tens of billions of which is being spent in the U.S. to replenish older weapons sent to Ukraine.

"It looks like we're getting very close," Trump told reporters of the minerals deal before his meeting with Macron. He said Zelenskyy could potentially visit Washington this week or next to sign it.

Ensuring security for Ukraine

Ukraine also is looking for future security guarantees as part of any agreement. Trump, however, did not say whether the emerging deal would include such assurances from the United States: "Europe is going to make sure nothing happens."

A French official with knowledge of Macron's meeting with Trump said the U.S. president didn't object to the need for U.S. security guarantees in a possible peace deal but details were still being worked out. The official wasn't authorized to comment publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

At a joint press conference, Macron acknowledged that European nations must do more to bolster defense on the continent. But he also warned against capitulating to Russia.

"This peace must not mean a surrender of Ukraine," Macron said. "It must not mean a ceasefire without guarantees. This peace must allow for Ukrainian sovereignty."

Macron cut off direct communication with Putin after Russian forces carried out brutal operations in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha months into the conflict. But he said the moment has changed and he hopes Trump's engagement with Putin can lead to something fruitful.

"Now, there is a big chance because there is a new U.S. administration, so this is a new context," Macron said. "So there is good reason for President Trump to reengage with President Putin."

Putin said Monday that he has not discussed resolving the conflict in Ukraine in detail with Trump and neither did Russian and American negotiating teams when they met in Saudi Arabia last week.

Putin also said Russia does not rule out European countries — who were dismayed that they and Ukraine were not invited to the table in Riyadh — participating in a peace settlement.

America's foreign policy turnaround

The war's anniversary — and the talks at the White House — come at an unnerving moment for much of Europe as it witnesses a dramatic shift in American foreign policy under Trump.

Trump has made demands for territory — Greenland, Canada, Gaza and the Panama Canal. Just over a month into his second term, the "America First" president has cast an enormous shadow over what veteran U.S. diplomats and former government officials had regarded as America's calming presence of global stability and continuity.

Despite some hiccups, the military, economic and moral power of the United States has dominated the post-World War II era, most notably after the Cold War came to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union. All of that, some fear, may be lost if Trump gets his way and the U.S. abandons the principles under which the United Nations and numerous other international bodies were founded.

"The only conclusion you can draw is that 80 years of policy in standing up against aggressors has just been blown up without any sort of discussion or reflection," said Ian Kelly, a U.S. ambassador to Georgia during the Obama and first Trump administrations and now a professor at Northwestern University.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 46 of 76

European leaders in Washington

Trump is set to hold a meeting Thursday with another key European leader, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer.

Trump shook Europe with repeated criticism of Zelenskyy for failing to negotiate an end to the war and rebuffing a push to sign off on a deal giving the U.S. access to Ukraine's critical minerals, which could be used in the American aerospace, medical and tech industries.

Zelenskyy initially bristled, saying it was short on security guarantees. He said Sunday on X that "we are making great progress" but noted that "we want a good economic deal that will be part of a true security guarantee system for Ukraine."

Zelenskyy, who said Sunday in response to a question that he would trade his office for peace or to join NATO, had angered Trump by saying the U.S. president was living in a Russian-made "disinformation space."

In the public spat, Trump called Zelenskyy a "dictator" and falsely charged Kyiv with starting the war. Russia, in fact, invaded its smaller and lesser-equipped neighbor in February 2022.

Asked Monday if he thought Putin was also a dictator, Trump demurred: "I don't use those words lightly."

Some daylight between allies

While Macron and Trump held talks, including participating in a virtual meeting with fellow Group of Seven leaders, the United States split with its European allies at the U.N. by refusing to blame Russia for its invasion of Ukraine in a series of resolutions.

The U.S. abstained from voting on its own proposal after the Europeans, led by France, succeeded in changing it to make clear that Russia was the aggressor.

Before meeting with Trump, Macron said he intended to tell him that it's in the joint interest of Americans and Europeans not to "be weak in the face of President Putin."

"It's not you, it's not your trademark, it's not in your interest," Macron said. "How can you then be credible in the face of China if you're weak in the face of Putin?"

Yet, Trump said this month he'd like to see Russia rejoin the G7. It was suspended from the G8 after annexing Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014.

"I really believe he wants to make a deal," Trump said. "I may be wrong, but I believe he wants to make a deal."

Trump says Canada and Mexico tariffs are 'going forward' with more import taxes to come

By JOSH BOAK and FABIOLA SANCHEZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said Monday that his tariffs on Canada and Mexico are starting next month, ending a monthlong suspension on the planned import taxes that could potentially hurt economic growth and worsen inflation.

"We're on time with the tariffs, and it seems like that's moving along very rapidly," the U.S. president said at a White House news conference with French President Emmanuel Macron.

While Trump was answering a specific question about the taxes to be charged on America's two largest trading partners, the U.S. president also stressed more broadly that his intended "reciprocal" tariffs were on schedule to begin as soon as April.

"The tariffs are going forward on time, on schedule," Trump said.

Trump has claimed that other countries charge unfair import taxes that have come at the expense of domestic manufacturing and jobs. His near constant threats of tariffs have already raised concerns among businesses and consumers about an economic slowdown and accelerating inflation. But Trump claims that the import taxes would ultimately generate revenues to reduce the federal budget deficit and new jobs for workers.

"Our country will be extremely liquid and rich again," Trump said.

In an interview with Fox News late Monday, Macron said he hoped he had convinced Trump to avoid a possible trade war, noting the difficulty of taking on a traditional ally such as Europe while simultaneously

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 47 of 76

using tariffs to challenge China's industrial might.

"We don't need a trade war," Marcon said. "We need more prosperity together."

Most economists say the cost of the taxes could largely be borne by consumers, retailers and manufacturers such as auto companies that source globally and rely on raw materials such as steel and aluminum that Trump is already, separately, tariffing at 25%.

Still, Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum appeared confident Monday that her administration would reach agreements with the U.S. government before the deadline set by Trump.

"We would need to be reaching important agreements this Friday," Sheinbaum told reporters Monday morning before Trump's remarks. "On all of the issues there is communication and what we need is to complete this agreement, I believe we're in a place to do it."

If necessary, she said she would seek to speak directly with Trump again. In high-level discussions between both governments, Mexico has insisted that the U.S. also take a hard look at the drug distribution and consumption in its own country rather than pointing only at production in Mexico, Sheinbaum said.

Companies like Walmart have warned about uncertainty, while the University of Michigan's latest consumer sentiment index plunged by roughly 10% over the past month in part due to fears about tariffs and inflation worsening. In the 2024 presidential election, voters backed Trump on the belief that he could cool inflation that had spiked to a four-decade high in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic during President Joe Biden's time in office.

But Trump has persistently threatened tariffs and kept up those calls even as Macron, standing beside him, had previously suggested that talks on trade had produced some common ground.

"We want to make a sincere commitment towards a fair competition where we have smooth trade and more investments," Macron said at the news conference, according to a translation of his French remarks.

Macron said the idea is to help the U.S. and Europe both prosper, saying that further talks would be carried out by their respective teams to flesh out their ideas.

Investors, businesses and the broader public are still trying to determine whether Trump is merely threatening tariffs as a negotiating tool or if he sincerely backs the tax hikes as a way to offset his planned income tax cuts.

Despite talks the Trump administration has held with Canadian and Mexican officials, the U.S. president signaled Monday that he would end the 30-day suspension of tariffs that were initially set to take effect in February. Trump plans to tax imports from Mexico at 25% as well as most goods from Canada, with energy products such as Canadian oil and electricity being tariffed at a lower 10%.

Trump is placing tariffs on Canadian and Mexican goods with the stated goal of pressuring them to do more to address illegal immigration and the smuggling of illicit drugs such as fentanyl. While relatively little fentanyl comes from Canada, the country announced a czar to address the issue and appease Trump in addition to existing measures. Mexico has relocated 10,000 members of its National Guard to the border with the United States in addition to existing measures.

Trump also plans to impose new tariffs to match the rates charged by other countries. Set to begin as soon as April, the tariffs could be higher than what other countries would charge as subsidies, regulatory barriers and the value added tax — which is akin to a sales tax common in Europe — would be included in the calculations.

The possibility of retaliatory tariffs planned by Canada, Mexico and Europe could lead to a broader trade conflict that sabotage growth. In February, the Yale University Budget Lab estimated that the Canadian and Mexican tariffs could depress average U.S. incomes by \$1,170 to \$1,245 a year.

The FBI's new deputy director is a popular podcaster — who has had plenty to say about the agency

By ALI SWENSON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The popular right-wing podcaster Dan Bongino has built a career of unleashing sometimes inflammatory rants against the media, Democrats and the federal government.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 48 of 76

Now, the 50-year-old former New York police officer and U.S. Secret Service agent will return to the government he has so often criticized as President Donald Trump's selection for deputy FBI director. He said Monday he'll soon leave his daily show to take on the new role.

Bongino, who will serve under FBI Director Kash Patel, does not have any experience at the premier federal law enforcement agency. Nonetheless, he has strong opinions about how it should be run.

A sampling of Bongino's podcast commentary from the past year reveals he's a loyalist to Patel and wants to see sweeping changes, from clearing the bureau of anyone he views as inappropriately political to redirecting investigations away from domestic extremism.

Here's a closer look at how Bongino views the FBI, in his own words:

He thinks Patel is the only viable leader

Even before Trump nominated Patel for FBI director, Bongino was one of his loudest advocates, arguing on his podcast that Patel was the only potential candidate who could "go in there and clean that mess up."

"Kash knows where the bodies are buried," Bongino told his listeners last November. "And he's got shovels, man. He's ready to rock and roll. That's why they're so terrified."

Like Patel, Bongino says the FBI needs to expose political weaponization within the agency and move agents out of the nation's capital to chase criminals elsewhere in the country.

In January, Bongino urged his millions of listeners — whom he refers to as his "Bongino Army" — to call their senators on Patel's behalf.

"We don't get this guy in at the FBI, you're never going to get any answers at all," the podcaster said.

He often criticizes FBI employees, past and present

In Bongino's words, Patel's predecessor Christopher Wray was "incompetent," "awful" and "potentially corrupt." Andrew McCabe, the former acting director of the FBI who was a key figure in the bureau's Trump-Russia investigation, is an "absolute buffoon." And former FBI general counsel Andrew Weissmann, who served on special counsel Robert Mueller's team during Trump's first term, is an "absolute tool bag."

The podcaster isn't shy about bashing past FBI leadership, sometimes crudely. He views them as having compromised the agency's morals to unfairly target conservatives.

Bongino has also extended some harsh words toward the current FBI ranks. Earlier this month, after Trump's border czar Tom Homan accused the FBI of leaking information about planned immigration raids, Bongino called the supposed leakers "stupid" and said they would be caught and go to jail.

"Do you know how hard it was for me in my last line of work, how hard it was for me to listen to these stupid Obama speeches about big government?" Bongino said of his time as a Secret Service agent under President Barack Obama. "But I always took my job as serious as a freaking stroke. Because I swore to do a job, not to be a politician."

He's ready for sweeping changes — immediately

Bongino said in December the Republican trifecta in the U.S. government is fleeting — and that's one reason why he wants FBI reform to happen quickly, within the next two years.

What changes would he like to see? For one, he wants agents fired if they were involved in investigations into Trump.

"If you swore to uphold the Constitution of the United States as an FBI agent and engaged in a tyrannical investigation against Donald Trump with partisan intent and not the Constitution in mind, you do not deserve your job," he said on his podcast earlier this month.

The Justice Department has already demanded a list from the FBI of the thousands of agents who participated in investigations into the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol, a move some within the bureau see as a possible precursor to mass firings.

Bongino also has argued the FBI has placed too much focus on domestic intelligence-gathering and as a result dropped the ball on serious criminals and overseas threats. He has suggested federal law enforcement wasted time investigating Jan. 6 rioters and anti-abortion activists.

"These are threats to the United States?" he said on a podcast last December. "Grandma is in the gulag for a trespassing charge on January 6th."

He has also criticized the Department of Justice and former Attorney General Merrick Garland for directing the FBI to respond to harassment and threats directed toward school boards and educators.

"We are going to make the FBI great again, because if we don't have an FBI breaking up counterterror plots trying to kill us and they're worried about Moms for Liberty and pro-lifers, then we got a problem, folks," Bongino said on his podcast earlier this month, referring to the conservative parental rights group.

He may be motivated by a personal connection

Bongino frequently laments how he doesn't feel he can trust the FBI and says the agency has lost its credibility.

"Whatever the FBI says these days, I tend to believe the opposite," he said in January after Wray said in an interview that the agency wasn't tracking any specific or credible threats to Trump's inauguration.

But the new deputy director's interest in reforming the FBI may hold more personal significance than some realize. In March, Bongino said an FBI representative used to visit his high school when he was a teenager.

"All I wanted to be was an FBI agent. That is it, man. I, like, adored these guys, man," he said. "What happened to this agency?"

Western leaders visit Kyiv and pledge military support against Russia on the war's 3rd anniversary

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine on Monday marked the bleakest anniversary yet of its war against the Russia invasion, with the country's forces under severe pressure on the battlefield and U.S. President Donald Trump's administration apparently embracing the Kremlin in a reversal of American policy.

The three-year milestone drew more than a dozen Western leaders to Kyiv for commemorative events in a conspicuous show of support. They warned of the war's wider implications for global security and vowed to keep providing billions of dollars in aid to Ukraine as uncertainty deepens over the U.S. commitment to help. Washington did not send any senior official to the occasion.

Hours after the anniversary observances, Trump said he believed that Russian President Vladimir Putin would accept European peacekeepers in Ukraine as part of a potential deal to end the war. Separately, Putin suggested that European countries could be part of a settlement, but he also said that he had not discussed resolving the conflict in detail with Trump.

The fourth year of fighting could be pivotal as Trump uses his return to office to press for peace.

"The autocrats around the world are watching very carefully whether there's any impunity if you violate international borders or invade your neighbor, or if there is true deterrence," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen warned in Kyiv.

Some observers say Russian success in Ukraine could embolden China's ambitions. Just as Moscow claims that Ukraine is rightfully Russian territory, China claims the self-governing island of Taiwan as its own. North Korea and Iran have also aided Russia's war effort.

In a cascade of unwelcome developments for Kyiv, Trump has in recent days called Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy a dictator, suggested Ukraine is to blame for the war and ended Putin's three-year diplomatic isolation by the United States. U.S. officials have also indicated to Ukraine that its hopes of joining NATO are unlikely to be realized and that it probably won't get back the land that Russia's army occupies, which amounts to nearly 20% of the country.

On the battlefield, Putin's troops are making steady progress, while Ukraine grapples with shortages of troops and weapons.

Alarm bells sound in Europe as Washington changes course

The shift in Washington's policy has set off alarm bells in Europe, where governments fear being sidelined by the U.S. in efforts to secure a peace deal. They are mulling how they might pick up the slack of any cut in U.S. aid for Ukraine. The changes have strained transatlantic relations.

European Council President Antonio Costa announced Sunday that he would convene an emergency

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 50 of 76

summit of the 27 EU leaders in Brussels on March 6, with Ukraine at the top of the agenda.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron are both visiting Washington this week.

EU foreign ministers on Monday approved a new raft of sanctions against Russia. The measures target Russia's so-called "shadow fleet" of ships that it uses to skirt restrictions on transporting oil and gas, or to carry stolen Ukrainian grain. The EU said 74 vessels were added to its shadow fleet list.

Asset freezes and travel bans were imposed on 83 officials and "entities" — usually government agencies, banks or companies.

Britain, too, imposed new sanctions aimed at 107 businesses and individuals in what it says is its biggest package targeting Russia's war machine since the early days of the conflict in 2022. The measures are designed to disrupt the Kremlin's military supply chains.

Starmer said Ukrainian voices "must be at the heart of the drive for peace" and that Trump's intervention had "changed the global conversation" and "created an opportunity."

"Russia does not hold all the cards in this war," he said.

Coming off a victory in Sunday's German elections, conservative leader Friedrich Merz — also a staunch backer of Ukraine — posted on X: "More than ever, we must put Ukraine in a position of strength."

"For a fair peace, the country that is under attack must be part of peace negotiations," he wrote.

Diplomacy ramps up after record Russian drone attack

On Sunday, Russia launched its biggest single drone attack of the war, pounding Ukraine with 267 drones.

The EU's top diplomat, Kaja Kallas, insisted that the U.S. cannot seal any peace deal without Ukraine or Europe being involved.

"You can discuss whatever you want with Putin. But if it comes to Europe or Ukraine, then Ukraine and Europe also have to agree to this deal," Kallas told reporters in Brussels, where she led a meeting of EU foreign ministers.

Kallas is scheduled to travel to Washington on Tuesday for talks with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

Meanwhile, the U.N. Security Council approved a U.S.-sponsored resolution that called for a swift end to the Ukraine war but made no mention of Russian aggression. Earlier Monday, the U.N. General Assembly rejected the resolution, which passed only after it was amended to state that the conflict was the result of a "full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation."

Washington and Moscow draw closer

Trump said he thought Putin would not object to European peacekeepers in Ukraine as part of a potential deal to end the war.

"Yeah, he will accept it," Trump told reporters at the White House. "I have asked him that question. Look, if we do this deal, he's not looking for more war."

In remarks broadcast on state television, Putin said he had not talked with Trump in detail about ending the war, and neither did Russian and American negotiating teams when they met last week in Saudi Arabia.

Russia, he said, does not rule out European countries participating in a peace settlement.

Putin has previously said that European or U.S. forces in Ukraine would be a major security issue for Russia. He has never publicly indicated that he would accept Western troops in Ukraine, and multiple Russian officials have said that would be a red line for Moscow.

Referring to U.S. interest in Ukrainian rare earth minerals, Putin said he would be interested in exploring similar opportunities with Trump, saying Russia has "significantly more resources of this kind than Ukraine."

Russian and American officials discussed improving economic ties during their meeting in Saudi Arabia, and if U.S. companies come to work in Russia, it will be "a benefit and a considerable one," Putin said, suggesting cooperation could be in the rare earth minerals, aluminum and energy sectors.

Putin also said he is "not against" Trump's idea to cut defense spending by half and is "ready for discussion in this regard."

"I think it's a good idea. The U.S. would cut by 50 percent, and we would cut by 50 percent, and then China would join if it wanted," Putin said.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 51 of 76

Russia has massively ramped up defense spending since its invasion of Ukraine, and the economy has effectively pivoted to a war footing. Many Russians have become accustomed to higher salaries as a labor shortage caused by the war means the Russian military and employers compete to hire them.

Russia's foreign ministry said Saturday that preparations for a face-to-face meeting between Trump and Putin were underway.

Federal workers return to offices amid threat from Elon Musk

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

Federal employees across the country, many of whom have worked from home since the COVID-19 pandemic, were back at agency offices Monday under President Donald Trump's return-to-office mandate.

Billionaire Elon Musk, who is leading Trump's Department of Government Efficiency scouring government agencies for suspected waste, delivered a warning Monday to workers on his platform X.

"Starting this week, those who still fail to return to office will be placed on administrative leave," Musk wrote.

Lee Zeldin, Trump's new administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, said Monday on X, formerly Twitter, "Full-time, COVID-era remote work is DONE under @POTUS leadership."

In a video he posted, Zeldin said average attendance at EPA headquarters on Mondays and Fridays last year was less than 9% of employees.

"Our spacious, beautiful EPA headquarters spans two city blocks in D.C. across five buildings," Zeldin said. "But our hallways have been too vacant, desks empty and cubicles filled with unoccupied chairs."

It appears at least some federal agencies are not prepared for all remote workers to return to the office.

In an email to U.S. Department of Education Federal Student Aid employees on Friday obtained by The Associated Press, agency officials noted that some regional offices in Boston, Chicago, New York and San Francisco were not ready for workers to return. The message also noted that employees who live more than 50 miles from regional offices in some major cities would not be required to return to the office Monday.

"We should treat it like the first day of school — plan a little time in your calendar to get oriented, find your way around, and figure out how to connect in the conference rooms, etc.," the email said. "There will, no doubt, be some who get lost or are late to class or have to scramble to find a seat because of a snafu."

The email also noted that while some workers would begin reporting to offices Monday, others would begin relocating back to offices in phases through April and beyond.

Mike Galletly, president of American Federation of Government Employees Local 4016, said the information technology workers he represents at the U.S. Department of Agriculture across the country have been struggling to comply with the back-to-office mandate.

"For my bargaining unit members, it's been a whole lot of work scrambling to find hardware for people, monitors, docking stations," Galletly said. "You have an office that up until this month normally seated four people. Now they have to seat eight people."

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is directing its remote employees to return to offices, even if they were hired into a remote role.

Federal workers with the department received the formal notice Monday in an email that was sent to employees who work more than 50 miles from a regional office. It says they will need to report to an office by April 28.

The federal government employed more than 3 million people as of November of last year. That accounted for nearly 1.9% of the nation's entire civilian workforce, according to the Pew Research Center.

The Latest: Ukraine marks third anniversary of war as US shifts its policy under Trump

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A dozen leaders from Europe and Canada are in Ukraine to mark the third anniversary of Russia's invasion and discuss support with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. They include European

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 52 of 76

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

U.S. policies on Russia and Ukraine are shifting dramatically under President Donald Trump. Questions about possible peace talks and Ukraine's interest in European Union and NATO membership loom large.

Here's the latest:

Putin says he hasn't discussed resolving Ukraine in detail with Trump

MOSCOW — Russian President Vladimir Putin says he has not discussed resolving the conflict in Ukraine in detail with Trump, and that Russian and U.S. negotiating teams didn't discuss it when they met in Saudi Arabia last week.

Putin also said Russia does not rule out European countries participating in a peace settlement. Earlier Monday, Trump said Putin would accept European peacekeepers in Ukraine as part of a potential peace deal. The Kremlin did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Putin has previously indicated Russia will not accept Western forces in Ukraine. Putin's latest comments were broadcast on state television, and it is unclear when they were filmed.

Trump says Putin would accept European peacekeepers in Ukraine

WASHINGTON — Trump says Russian President Vladimir Putin would accept European peacekeepers in Ukraine as part of a potential deal to end the war.

Trump spoke to reporters at the White House.

"Yeah, he will accept it," Trump said. "I have asked him that question. Look, if we do this deal, he's not looking for world war."

Trump says U.S., Ukraine 'close' on critical mineral deal

WASHINGTON — Trump says he is hopeful the United States and Ukraine will soon come to terms on a rare earth minerals deal.

"It looks like we're getting very close," Trump told reporters. He added that Zelenskyy could potentially visit Washington this week or next to sign the deal.

But Trump did not say whether the emerging deal would include U.S. security guarantees. "Europe is going to make sure nothing happens," he said.

U.N. General Assembly rejects U.S. resolution on Ukraine

UNITED NATIONS -- The United States has failed to get the U.N. General Assembly to approve its resolution seeking to end the war without mentioning Russian aggression.

The assembly amended the U.S. draft resolution to add language making clear that Russia invaded its smaller neighbor in violation of the U.N. Charter.

The non-binding vote in the 193-nation world body was 93-8 with 73 abstentions, with Ukraine voting "yes," the U.S. abstaining and Russia voting "no."

U.N. adopts Ukrainian resolution calling for Russian withdrawal

The U.N. General Assembly has approved a Ukrainian resolution demanding an immediate withdrawal of all Russian troops.

The vote in the 193-member world body, whose resolutions are not legally binding, was 93-18 with 65 abstentions. That's lower than previous resolutions that saw over 140 nations condemn Russia's aggression and demand a reversal of its annexation of four Ukrainian regions.

Northern European countries pledge to train Ukrainian troops

KYIV, Ukraine — Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere says the seven Nordic and Baltic countries will train and equip a brigade of the Ukrainian army of between 3,000 and 5,000 soldiers. And Norway will offer the equivalent of \$11.2 million to strengthen Ukraine's and Moldova's energy systems.

Ukraine could join the EU before 2030, von der Leyen says

KYIV, Ukraine — The head of the European Union's executive branch, Ursula von der Leyen, has praised Ukraine's progress toward bloc membership and held out the possibility of entry before 2030.

She emphasized the process of EU accession is "merit-based" and candidates must comply with conditions and enact reforms. But she added, "Ukraine's merit-based process, if they continue at that speed and at that quality, perhaps they could be earlier than 2030."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 53 of 76

Russia opposes Ukraine joining the EU or NATO.

Lithuania calls for debate over European peacekeeping force

KYIV, Ukraine — Lithuanian Prime Minister Gitanas Nauseda says European countries will have to assess popular support for any European peacekeeping forces stationed in Ukraine to uphold any future peace agreement.

"We need clarity about the mandate of such forces on the soil of Ukraine," he said. Nauseda said enforcement was vital and "first time the peace is violated or a ceasefire is violated, the retaliation must be immediate and strong."

Zelenskyy appeals to Trump for continued US support

KYIV, Ukraine — The G7 group of leading industrialized nations is holding a virtual summit to discuss ways to end the war in Ukraine. Zelenskyy has appealed to Trump for continued U.S. support.

"President Trump, we would really like to hear from you because all our people, all our families are very worried — will there be support from America? Will America be the leader of the free world?" he said.

Tensions between Kyiv and Washington have risen under the Trump administration. But Zelenskyy said the two sides are "working productively on the economic agreement" on rights to Ukraine's valuable rare earth minerals.

He also argued for allowing Ukraine to join NATO, which the Trump administration opposes, calling it the "most cost-effective" path.

Finland urges European countries to 'wake up'

KYIV, Ukraine — Finnish President Alexander Stubb urges European countries to take a more muscular role in developing a strategy for negotiations over Ukraine.

"In the past two weeks, when we've seen a shift in the trans-Atlantic partnership ... we have to wake up to a new reality," he said, in a reference to the Trump administration. "I think we in Europe, we need to get our act together," he said, as "right now, the negotiations are happening above our heads without any kind of a planning strategy."

Zelenskyy hopes the war can end this year

KYIV, Ukraine — "We hope that we can finish this war this year," Zelenskyy says.

He said Ukraine and its allies must create a security infrastructure that would act as a deterrent to future aggression. "If Ukraine will be in EU and NATO in closest years, of course it will help us very much, and I think that they will not come back," he said.

Estonia warns against an unjust peace

KYIV, Ukraine — Estonian Prime Minister Kristen Michal warns that an "unjust peace" in Ukraine would threaten Europe and the broader world by demonstrating to other actors that aggression such as Russia's is tolerated.

"An unjust peace probably would hit everybody, also the United States, because Iran, North Korea, everybody would assess that they can do whatever they want," said Michal, whose country borders Russia.

EU says Moscow must show willingness for peace in return for sanctions relief

KYIV, Ukraine — European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen says any discussion of providing sanctions relief to Russia can only begin once Moscow has demonstrated it is committed to working with Western countries on achieving a lasting peace.

She told a conference in Kyiv with Western leaders that if not, "we will increase punitive sanctions against Russia."

EU Council President Antonio Costa said European leaders welcomed Trump's effort to push Putin and Russia to negotiate, but "only Ukraine can decide when we have conditions to do this."

UK imposes new sanctions on Russia and its ally North Korea

LONDON — Britain has imposed sanctions on 107 businesses and individuals in what it calls its biggest package targeting Russia's war machine since the early days of the conflict.

The measures target Russia's military supply chains, including companies in several countries — notably China — that Britain says are supplying machine tools, electronics and dual-use goods for Russia's military.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 54 of 76

Fourteen wealthy Russian businesspeople get asset freezes and travel bans, including billionaire Roman Trotsenko.

The sanctions also target defense officials in North Korea, which has sent thousands of troops to fight alongside Russia against Ukraine.

Scandinavian countries increase military aid

STOCKHOLM, Sweden — The governments in Sweden and Denmark have pledged more support for Ukraine as the Trump administration calls for Europe to spend more on its own defense.

The Swedish government said it will spend the equivalent of some \$11.2 million on Robot 70 and Tridon Mk2 air defense systems to be donated to Ukraine. Sweden will contribute to a donation by some countries of portable air defense missiles. Denmark has pledged an equivalent of \$280 million in ammunition for Ukraine.

Estonia will not recognize borders 'moved by tanks and missiles'

TALLINN, Estonia — Estonian Defense Minister Hanno Pevkur says the country will never recognize borders that have been "moved by tanks and missiles."

"Estonia will help Ukrainians fight for their land and people, because the values that Ukraine is currently fighting for are directly related to our values and freedoms," Pevkur said in Tallinn's Freedom Square.

Spain pledges aid to Ukraine as Denmark calls for more defense spending

KYIV, Ukraine — Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez says his country will provide a 1 billion-euro (\$1.05 billion) military systems package to Ukraine this year.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said NATO defense spending goals of 3% of gross domestic product are "simply not enough." She said that European leaders have "a couple of months to take all necessary decisions, otherwise it will be too late."

Starmer reaffirms willingness to send troops to Ukraine

LONDON — British Prime Minister Keir Starmer says Ukraine must have a seat at the table in any peace negotiations and strong security guarantees in any settlement.

He reaffirmed that Britain is prepared to put troops on the ground as part of that process. He repeated his call for a U.S. backstop that "will be vital to deter Russia from launching another invasion in just a few years' time." However, Trump has so far shown little interest in the idea.

Russia stands firm on opposition to Ukraine joining NATO

ANKARA, Turkey — Lavrov insists that Ukraine must be barred from NATO membership as part of talks to end the war.

"At the meeting in Riyadh with our American colleagues, we welcomed the fact that President Trump has publicly and repeatedly called the line on pulling Ukraine into NATO a mistake," Lavrov said.

In July, a NATO summit declaration said Ukraine was on an "irreversible" path to membership. But in Brussels this month, U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said NATO membership for Ukraine was unrealistic and suggested Kyiv should abandon hopes of winning all its territory back from Russia.

Von der Leyen says securing Ukraine's sovereignty will prevent future wars

KYIV, Ukraine — European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen says the destinies of Ukraine and the European Union are at stake in discussions over how the war can end.

"The autocrats around the world are watching very carefully," she said.

Von der Leyen said securing Ukraine's sovereignty would prevent future wars, and its "highly innovative and thriving defense industry" should be integrated into EU defense, with Ukraine as a member of the bloc.

She also said she would present a "comprehensive" investment plan to ramp up arms production and defense capabilities for the EU and Ukraine at an emergency meeting of EU leaders on March 6.

Turkey offers to mediate in talks to end the war

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan has voiced support for U.S. efforts to end the war in Ukraine and renewed a Turkish offer to mediate talks.

"We attach great importance to the new initiative of the United States, as a result-oriented approach," Fidan said at a news conference with Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov.

Lavrov met with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Riyadh last week. He said Russian and U.S. of-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 55 of 76

officials would soon hold comprehensive consultations toward the "normalization of embassy operations" in Moscow and Washington.

Turkey has balanced its close ties to both Ukraine and Russia and positioned itself as one of the few countries that can hold talks with both sides. It hosted peace talks in 2022. No agreement was reached.

Russia is willing to negotiate with Ukraine and Europe, Lavrov says

ANKARA, Turkey — Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov says Putin has made clear Russia is "ready to negotiate with both Ukraine and Europe" but will stop military hostilities only when negotiations yield a "firm, sustainable result" which suits Russia.

Lavrov suggested the position of Ukraine and European countries is changing frequently and that "against this background, the position of the United States stands out."

Canadian leader pledges support for Ukraine

KYIV, Ukraine — Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has pushed back on Russia's narrative, echoed in recent days by U.S. President Donald Trump, that Ukraine bore responsibility for igniting the conflict.

"This is a war started for one reason and one reason only: Russia's desire to erase Ukrainian history and expand their empire," Trudeau said.

"We will see a European Ukraine," Finnish president says

KYIV, Ukraine — Finnish President Alexander Stubb says that "we will see a European Ukraine. We will see eventually Ukraine in NATO."

He also said Europe needs "to make clear to the Russians and everyone else that there are a few things that are completely off the table in these negotiations" to end the war in Ukraine. They include EU membership and NATO membership.

Russia decries new EU sanctions and praises US approach

MOSCOW — Putin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said Russia does not see any way to resume "dialogue with Europe" after the EU adopted its 16th round of sanctions against Moscow.

Peskov said that contrasts with searching for ways to resolve "the conflict around Ukraine, which is what we are currently doing with the Americans." He welcomed "attempts by Washington to really understand what was the root cause of this conflict."

EU brings new sanctions against Russia

BRUSSELS — European Union foreign ministers have approved new sanctions against Russia which enter force on the third anniversary of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

They include measures targeting Russia's so-called "shadow fleet" of ships that it exploits to skirt restrictions on transporting oil and gas, or to carry stolen Ukrainian grain. The EU said 74 vessels were added to its list.

Asset freezes and travel bans were imposed on 83 officials and entities. More than 2,300 officials and entities have been hit since the invasion began, including Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Lester Holt to step down as anchor of NBC's flagship 'Nightly News' after a decade

By WYATTE GRANTHAM-PHILIPS AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — NBC's veteran Lester Holt is stepping down as anchor of the network's flagship "Nightly News" broadcast in the coming months.

Holt, who has been the face of "Nightly News" for a decade, won't be leaving NBC altogether, however. In a memo to staff Monday, he said he would be expanding his work on NBC's "Dateline," taking on a full-time role.

The transition is expected to take place early this summer. No firm date or successor for "NBC Nightly News" has been named yet.

"It has truly been the honor of a lifetime to work with each of you every day, keeping journalism as our true north and our viewers at the center of everything we do," Holt wrote in his note thanking colleagues. "A smile comes to my face when I think that with Nightly News, and Dateline, I have now anchored two

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 56 of 76

of the most successful and iconic television news programs in broadcast history.”

Janelle Rodriguez, executive vice president of NBC News Programming, applauded Holt’s legacy at “Nightly News” and reiterated that the anchor will stay at NBC “for years to come.”

“Quite simply, Lester is the beating heart of this news organization,” Rodriguez wrote in a prepared statement.

Holt, 65, joined NBC back in 2000. He became the permanent anchor of “Nightly News” in June 2015 — replacing Brian Williams after anchoring weekend editions of the show for eight years. And he has been the principal anchor of “Dateline” since September 2011.

According to NBC, “Nightly News” currently averages at around 7 million viewers each week. The network says the roots of its flagship show date back to 1948, when NBC first began broadcasting regularly-scheduled news programming each night. And the “NBC Nightly News” name was born in 1970.

NBC’s “Dateline” series, currently in its 33rd season, debuted in 1992. The series has made a name for itself in true crime programming — which has expanded into a top-ranked podcast and some scripted television content, including a spinoff of “The Thing About Pam.” But “Dateline” also covers a mix of breaking news, investigative journalism and other human interest stories.

NBC isn’t the only major news network to see a shift in its anchor line up this year. Holt’s announcement arrives just weeks after Norah O’Donnell’s final broadcast of “CBS Evening News,” for example, where she had been the network’s top anchor since 2019. And, on NBC’s dayside programming, Hoda Kotb’s last day as one of the lead anchors for “Today” was Jan. 10.

MSNBC, which is set to no longer have any corporate connection to NBC News once a spinoff formally takes effect later this year, is also seeing some changes to its prime time line up. In a Monday memo to staff, MSNBC’s new president Rebecca Kutler announced that Joy Reid would be leaving the network — marking an end to the political analyst and anchor’s show, “The ReidOut.”

The few Republicans who still oppose Trump gather in search of a path to oppose him

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Conservatives from across the country filled a ballroom a few blocks from the White House and lamented that the United States is abandoning the ideals that forged a great nation. Some attendees donned red hats with various inscriptions mocking President Donald Trump and his “Make America Great Again” movement.

It was the largest gathering to date of the “Principles First Summit,” expanded upon Trump’s second term to welcome independents and center-left Democrats under a shared pro-democracy, anti-authoritarian aim.

“This is not a time to bend the knee, to play along,” said Heath Mayo, the Yale-educated attorney who founded Principles First five years ago for self-identified politically homeless conservatives. “This is a time for stiffening your spine, standing up and getting ready for a long fight.”

Yet three days of conversations and recriminations still left 1,200 attendees without a clear roadmap to loosen Trump’s grip on the conservative movement and America’s national identity. There was not even consensus on whether to fight within Republican spheres at all, migrate to the Democratic Party or find a different path altogether.

“It makes you feel better to know that you’re not alone and that you’re not crazy,” said Jeff Oppenheim, a retired U.S. Army colonel from Austin, Texas. “The question is how to translate that into action in a political system that’s very difficult to influence, because it’s structured in a way that two parties have complete control.”

Mark Cuban, the entrepreneur and “Shark Tank” co-host who was one of then-Vice President Kamala Harris’ most prominent surrogates last fall, got a rousing ovation when he took the stage but vowed that he would not run for the White House. He dismissed the Democratic Party, profanely, as unable to sell its own message.

“I’m not here to throw him under the bus,” Cuban said of Trump, praising the Republican president’s

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 57 of 76

ability as a marketer who convinced voters he could help them.

Democrats, Cuban said, make their critiques of Trump moot because they “can’t sell worth s—.”

Trump’s allies mocked the gathering in advance as full of “RINOs,” or Republicans in name only. White House communications director Steven Cheung called it “the Cuck Convention” on his government account. The word “cuck,” which describes a man who likes to watch his wife have sex with other men, was frequently used during the campaign to insult and emasculate rivals.

Trump has far greater control of the Republican Party in his second term, with allies across Congress and the loyalty of most of the party’s base. But his few remaining rivals within the party argue there are still ways to break his hold.

Former U.S. Rep. Adam Kinzinger, a frequent Trump target who was among the people to receive a preemptive pardon from President Joe Biden, pointed to Republicans’ narrow 218-215 majority in the House and said lawmakers are privately nervous as recent town halls show voter anger over billionaire Trump adviser Elon Musk and his sweeping moves to fire federal workers, shut down agencies and limit federal services.

Kinzinger urged critics to ratchet up pressure in public settings because critical town hall audiences, he argued, offer the most “uncomfortable” moments of a politician’s job.

“Right now, Republican members of Congress fear one person: Donald Trump. They don’t fear you,” Kinzinger said. “When they start fearing you, that’s when they start having a different calculus.”

Julie Spilsbury, a councilmember from Mesa, Arizona, wants to maintain her place in Republican ranks. Like more than two dozen attendees and speakers interviewed by The Associated Press, Spilsbury cast her 2024 ballot for Harris for president. But she also publicly endorsed the Democratic nominee, saying it was a matter of “character and integrity.”

She now faces an ongoing recall effort by Trump backers in Mesa.

“If you’re looking for something you can do, send me \$10” for her retention campaign, Spilsbury told fellow conference attendees.

When Asa Hutchinson, the former Arkansas governor who ran in the 2024 Republican presidential primary, and Colorado Gov. Jared Polis, a centrist Democrat, offered carefully measured assessments of Trump’s opening weeks, they got mixed or muted responses. Especially tepid was the reaction when Hutchinson said he believes Trump when the president says he will respect court decisions in the many early challenges to his executive actions.

But roars rang out for the police officers who tried to protect the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, and their unyielding assessments of Trump and his pardon of 1,500 supporters who breached the seat of Congress, including many who violently attacked law enforcement.

“We need to hold on to the outrage and hold on to the anger and set aside the fear,” insisted Michael Fanone, a former Washington officer who was attacked by rioters. Asked whether he would accept an invitation to talk to Trump, Fanone said the president is incapable of being convinced he is wrong and dismissed him with a profanity.

Fanone and his fellow officers later were accosted in an upstairs lobby by Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrio, freshly freed from prison by Trump’s pardon. The following day, Principles First leaders received an emailed bomb threat specifically mentioning Fanone, his mother’s address and other potential targets. The summit space was evacuated as Washington police and Secret Service agents swept the area and found no bomb, allowing the conference to conclude Sunday evening. Organizers blamed the threat on Tarrio, who denied the claim in a post on his social media.

Maria Stephan, a progressive at her first Principles First gathering, called the evacuation “emboldening” given the weekend’s themes.

Yet Rich Logis of Broward County, Florida, offered caution as a former MAGA acolyte whose red hat now reads: “I LEFT MAGA.” Another wave of converts, Logis argued, is coming if Trump continues to impose tariffs, cut public services and impose policies that hurt Americans broadly.

“Everyone has to find their own breaking point,” Logis said. “Our job is to be there talking to people as

they find it.”

The fragile ceasefire in Gaza faces a key deadline. Will it last?

By SAMY MAGDY and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

The first phase of the ceasefire that paused 15 months of brutal warfare between Israel and Hamas militants is set to end on Saturday — and it’s unclear what comes next.

The two sides were supposed to start negotiating a second phase weeks ago in which Hamas would release all the remaining hostages from its Oct. 7, 2023, attack, which triggered the war, in exchange for more Palestinian prisoners, a lasting ceasefire and a full Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

But those negotiations have not begun — there have only been preparatory talks — and the first phase has been jolted by one dispute after another.

Hamas has freed all 25 living hostages included in the first six-week phase ending on March 1 in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners. It has also released the bodies of four captives and is expected to turn over four more, though it’s unclear if that will happen Thursday as planned.

That leaves it with more than 60 captives, around half of whom are believed to be dead. Israel has meanwhile delayed the release of some 600 Palestinian prisoners who were supposed to be freed last weekend over the treatment of the captives, who were paraded before crowds.

Israel is reportedly seeking an extension of the first phase to secure the freedom of more captives. But Hamas says it won’t negotiate anything until the prisoners whose release was delayed are freed.

Negotiations over Phase 2 will be even more contentious.

Phase 2 was always the biggest challenge

The second phase was always going to be the most difficult because it would likely force Israel to choose between its two main war goals — the safe return of the hostages and the annihilation of their captors.

Hamas, though weakened, remains in power with no internal challengers. In exchange for the remaining living hostages — its main bargaining chip — it is demanding a lasting ceasefire and the full withdrawal of Israeli forces. A third phase would see the exchange of remains and the start of Gaza’s daunting reconstruction process, which is expected to take years and cost billions of dollars.

Steve Witkoff, the Trump administration’s Mideast envoy, is returning to the region this week. In an interview with CNN’s “State of the Union” on Sunday, he said he will aim for an extension of Phase 1 to buy time for negotiating the second phase.

But Egypt, which has served as a key mediator, has refused to discuss an extension of Phase 1 until negotiations over Phase 2 begin, according to two Egyptian officials who were not authorized to brief reporters and spoke on condition of anonymity.

One official familiar with the negotiations said the mere launch of Phase 2 talks would keep the truce intact, according to the language of the deal. That would mean a continued halt in fighting and aid flowing into Gaza, though there would be no further hostage releases beyond what has already been negotiated, he said, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss closed diplomatic contacts.

Hamas has previously said it is open to a short extension to complete talks on Phase 2, but that was before Israel held up the release of the prisoners.

One of the Egyptian officials said Egypt is also demanding Israel complete its withdrawal from the Philadelphi corridor, on the Gaza side of the border with Egypt, before moving on to the next phase. The agreement calls for that withdrawal to begin this weekend and be completed within eight days.

Netanyahu has not publicly stated what he will do this weekend. He is under heavy pressure from hard-line coalition partners to resume the war against Hamas. But after images showed freed hostages returning home in poor condition, he also faces heavy public pressure to bring the remaining hostages home.

Witkoff said Netanyahu is committed to bringing back all the hostages but has set a “red line” that Hamas cannot be involved in governing Gaza after the war. Netanyahu has also ruled out any role in Gaza for the Western-backed Palestinian Authority, dominated by Hamas’ main rival, Fatah.

Hamas has said it is willing to hand over control of Gaza to other Palestinians.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 59 of 76

But the militant group, which does not accept Israel's existence, would still be deeply entrenched in Gaza. And it says it won't lay down its arms unless Israel ends its occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem, lands captured in the 1967 Mideast war that Palestinians want for a future state.

Hamas has also dismissed Israel's suggestion that its Gaza leadership go into exile.

Phase 1 is unfinished and has further embittered both sides

The first phase of the ceasefire has yet to be completed and has only deepened the bitter mistrust on both sides.

Israelis were shocked to see the captives — some of whom were emaciated — paraded before crowds upon their release, with some forced to smile, wave, deliver statements and, in one case, kiss a masked militant on the head. After returning to Israel, hostages said they were held under harsh conditions.

Last Thursday, Hamas displayed coffins holding what it said were the remains of Shiri Bibas and her two small children, who it said were killed in an Israeli airstrike. Israel said a forensic investigation showed the two children were killed by their captors. The third body turned out to be someone else. Hamas then released another body that was confirmed to be the mother.

On Saturday, Hamas filmed two hostages who were forced to watch the release of others, turning to a camera and begging to be released, in yet another public spectacle that infuriated Israel. That appears to have prompted Israel to postpone the release of the prisoners.

Hamas has accused Israel of violating the ceasefire by killing dozens of people who the army said had approached its forces or entered unauthorized areas. It also accused Israel of dragging its feet on the entry of mobile homes and equipment for clearing rubble, which entered late last week, and of beating and abusing Palestinian prisoners prior to their release.

Israel has also launched a major military operation in the occupied West Bank that has displaced some 40,000 Palestinians, according to the United Nations. Israel says it is cracking down on militants who threaten its citizens, while Palestinians see it as trying to further cement its decades-long rule.

Mixed signals from Trump

U.S. President Donald Trump took credit for the ceasefire, which Witkoff helped push across the finish line after a year of negotiations led by the Biden administration, Egypt and Qatar.

But Trump has since sent mixed signals about the deal.

Earlier this month, he set a firm deadline for Hamas to release all the hostages, warning "all hell is going to break out" if it didn't. But he said it was ultimately up to Israel, and the deadline came and went.

Trump sowed further confusion by proposing that Gaza's population of some 2 million Palestinians be relocated to other countries and for the U.S. to take over the territory and develop it. Netanyahu welcomed the idea, which was universally rejected by Palestinians and Arab countries, including close U.S. allies. Human rights groups said it could violate international law.

Trump stood by the plan in a Fox News interview over the weekend but said he's "not forcing it."

Oscar performers include Cynthia Erivo, Ariana Grande and Lisa.

Here's what to know about the show

By The Associated Press undefined

After devastating wildfires tore through Los Angeles, the 97th Academy Awards are going forward.

Like the Grammys and other awards shows this year, the ceremony will be transformed by the fires and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has pledged to help its members and the broader film community recover.

Here's everything you need to know about this year's show:

When are the Oscars?

The Academy Awards will be held on Sunday, March 2, at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles. The show, to be broadcast live by ABC, is scheduled to begin at 7 p.m. Eastern/4 p.m. Pacific.

Are the Oscars streaming?

In a first, the Oscars will be streamed live on Hulu. You can also watch via Hulu Live TV, YouTubeTV, AT&T

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 60 of 76

TV and FuboTV. With authentication from your provider, you can watch on ABC.com and the ABC app.

Who's hosting the Oscars?

Conan O'Brien is hosting the Academy Awards for the first time. O'Brien, the late-night host turned podcaster and occasional movie star, said upon the announcement: "America demanded it and now it's happening: Taco Bell's new Cheesy Chalupa Supreme. In other news, I'm hosting the Oscars."

How have the wildfires altered the show?

The wildfires that consumed large parts of Los Angeles in early January led some to call for the cancellation of the Academy Awards. The academy twice postponed the announcement of nominations but never pushed the March 2 date of the ceremony. Academy leaders have argued the show must go ahead, for their economic impact on Los Angeles and as a symbol of resilience.

Organizers have vowed this year's awards will "celebrate the work that unites us as a global film community and acknowledge those who fought so bravely against the wildfires."

Still, the fires have curtailed much of the usual frothiness of Hollywood's awards season. The film academy canceled its annual nominees luncheon.

For many involved in the Oscars, the fires have been felt acutely. O'Brien's Pacific Palisades home survived but his family has been unable to go back to it. O'Brien's assistant and podcast co-host Sona Movsesian lost her home.

"I know so many people who lost their homes and I'm just, was ridiculously lucky," O'Brien told The Associated Press. "So we want to make sure that that show reflects what's happening and that we put a light on the right people in the right way."

Who's presenting at the Oscars?

More stars were added to the presenter lineup last week, including Selena Gomez, Oprah Winfrey, Joe Alwyn, Goldie Hawn, Ben Stiller, Ana de Armas, Sterling K. Brown, Willem Dafoe, Lily-Rose Depp and Connie Nielsen. They'll join the likes of Halle Berry, Penélope Cruz, Elle Fanning, Whoopi Goldberg, Scarlett Johansson, John Lithgow, Amy Poehler, June Squibb and Bowen Yang, as well as last year's acting winners — Emma Stone, Robert Downey Jr., Cillian Murphy, Da'Vine Joy Randolph — on the Oscar stage. Though the academy initially said it would bring back the "fab five" style of presenting the acting awards, with five previous winners per category, organizers have reportedly abandoned those plans for this year's ceremony. Nick Offerman will also be participating as the Oscars announcer.

Will there be any performances?

The academy has announced that, unlike previous years, the original song nominees will not be performed this time. That doesn't mean there won't be music, though.

Doja Cat, LISA of Blackpink, Queen Latifah and RAYE will be part of "showstopping performances celebrating the filmmaking community and some of its legends," producers announced Monday, as will "Wicked's" Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande. (The songs from "Wicked" weren't eligible for best song since, hailing from the Broadway musical, they aren't original to the movie.) The Los Angeles Master Chorale will also appear.

What's nominated for best picture?

The 10 nominees for best picture are: "Anora"; "The Brutalist"; "A Complete Unknown"; "Conclave"; "Dune: Part 2"; "Emilia Pérez"; "I'm Still Here"; "Nickel Boys"; "The Substance"; "Wicked"

How can I watch the Oscar-nominated films?

Some of the nominees are still in theaters, but many of this year's Oscar nominees are streaming on various platforms. The AP has this handy guide to help with Oscar cramming.

Who are the favorites?

More than most years, that's a tricky question, but a front-runner had emerged after "Anora" took the top awards at the Producers Guild, Directors Guild and Independent Spirit Awards. The best picture race had been seen as unusually wide open, with "Anora," "Conclave," "The Brutalist," "A Complete Unknown" and "Emilia Pérez" all having legitimate hopes of winning — the hopes of "Conclave" further boosted by its Screen Actors Guild ensemble win.

In the acting categories, Demi Moore ("The Substance") is favored for best actress, although Mikey

Madison's BAFTA and Independent Spirit wins for "Anora" makes it more of a race. Adrien Brody ("The Brutalist") is most likely in best actor — though SAG winner Timothée Chalamet could threaten — while Zoe Saldña ("Emilia Pérez") is the supporting actress front-runner and Kieran Culkin ("A Real Pain") is the favorite for best supporting actor. None of those awards, however, is considered a definite lock.

What's the deal with 'Emilia Pérez'?

Jacques Audiard's "Emilia Pérez," a narco-musical about a Mexican drug lord who undergoes gender affirming surgery, comes in with a leading 13 nominations. The film, at one point, seemed like Netflix's best chance yet to land the streamer its first best picture win. Its star, Karla Sofía Gascón, made history by becoming the first openly trans actor nominated for an Oscar.

But no nominee has had a rockier post-nominations Oscar campaign. After old offensive tweets by Gascón were uncovered, the actress issued an apology. The fallout, though, has badly damaged a movie that was already a divisive contender, and led Netflix to radically refocus its flagging campaign.

Patients struggle with lack of consistent coverage for popular weight-loss drugs

By TOM MURPHY AP Health Writer

Supplies of high-demand obesity treatments are improving, but that doesn't mean it's easier to get them. Many employers and insurers are scaling back coverage of Wegovy and Zepbound and a key government program, Medicare, doesn't cover the drugs for obesity. Meanwhile, some big employers are adding coverage, but their commitment isn't guaranteed.

Treatment prices that can top hundreds of dollars monthly even after discounts make it hard for many people to afford these drugs on their own. That can make the life-changing weight loss that patients seek dependent on the coverage they have and how long it lasts.

Coverage complications are not unusual in the U.S. health care system. But the challenge is magnified for these obesity treatments because a wide swath of the population could be eligible to take them, and patients have to stay on the drugs to keep the weight off.

"There are a lot of people right now who want access to the medication and can't get it," said Katherine Hempstead, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation senior policy adviser.

Coverage varies depending on who pays the bill

Paul Mack dropped about 70 pounds after he started taking Wegovy. The Redwood City, California, resident said food noise — constant thoughts of eating — faded, and he was able to have a heart procedure.

The treatment was covered by California's Medicaid program, Medi-Cal. Then the 50-year-old security guard got a raise. He no longer qualified for Medi-Cal and lost coverage of the drug for several months starting last summer.

He regained two pants sizes.

"I couldn't control the eating," he said. "All the noise came back."

Coverage of these drugs remains patchy more than a year after Zepbound entered the market to challenge Wegovy.

The benefits consultant Mercer says 44% of U.S. companies with 500 or more employees covered obesity drugs last year. It's even more common with bigger employers.

More than a dozen government-funded Medicaid programs for people with low incomes also cover obesity treatments.

But few insurers cover the drugs on individual insurance marketplaces. And some plans restrict their coverage with things like requests for prior authorization or pre-approval.

The lack of Medicare coverage remains a concern as well, especially for people who retire and move to the government-funded program from employer-sponsored coverage.

"Patients come to us terrified about switching to Medicare and losing coverage," said Dr. Katherine Saunders, an obesity expert at Weill Cornell Medicine and cofounder of the obesity treatment company

FlyteHealth. "We start talking about backup plans a year before they transition."

Cost and uncertain payoff loom as concerns payer concerns

Philadelphia-area insurer Independence Blue Cross dropped coverage of the drugs solely for weight loss for some customers starting this year. Company officials say the insurer worried about premium hikes it would have to impose on all customers if it continued.

Cost also was a factor in decisions by West Virginia and North Carolina officials to end similar programs that provided coverage for state employees.

These concerns make Vanderbilt University researcher Stacie Dusetzina wonder how long employers who have added coverage will keep it, now that the drugs are no longer in short supply.

"That's probably going to spike spending," said Dusetzina, a health policy professor who studies drug costs.

Drugmakers tout the savings these drugs can provide by improving patient health and warding off future serious medical conditions like heart attacks or strokes.

But health care experts note that there are no guarantees that the employer or insurer who covers the drug will eventually reap those benefits because people may change jobs or insurers.

Will coverage ever become consistent?

There's no clear path toward widespread coverage of these drugs for obesity, even as polls show Americans favor having Medicaid and Medicare cover the costs.

Leaders at Zepbound maker Eli Lilly have seen coverage grow steadily for their drug, and they're optimistic that will continue.

Former President Joe Biden's administration proposed a rule that would allow for Medicare and broader Medicaid coverage. Its fate remains uncertain in President Donald Trump's administration.

A bill calling for Medicare coverage has been floating around Congress for years. But it isn't scheduled for a vote.

Drugmakers are currently testing several additional obesity treatments. Such potential competition could reduce prices and prompt more coverage.

Patchy coverage complicates treatment plans

Dr. Amy Rothberg says the lack of consistent coverage leaves her conflicted about writing prescriptions because she's not sure how long patients will be able to take the drug.

"We know from the studies that people go off these medications, they regain their weight," said Rothberg, director of the University of Michigan's weight-management program. "I don't want to do harm."

Some insurers require diet and exercise changes for the patient before they will cover a weight-loss medication. Those changes should happen in conjunction with starting the medicine, said Dr. Lydia Alexander, president of the Obesity Medicine Association.

She's also seen requirements for a body mass index of 40 or more, which equates to severe obesity, before coverage can start.

"We're saying that obesity is a disease, but we're not treating it like a disease," she said.

Starbucks lays off 1,100 corporate employees as coffee chain streamlines

By DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writer

Starbucks plans to lay off 1,100 corporate employees globally as new Chairman and CEO Brian Niccol streamlines operations.

In a letter to employees released Monday, Niccol said the company will inform employees who are being laid off by midday Tuesday. Niccol said Starbucks is also eliminating several hundred open and unfilled positions.

"Our intent is to operate more efficiently, increase accountability, reduce complexity and drive better integration," Niccol wrote in the letter.

Starbucks has 16,000 corporate support employees worldwide, but that includes some employees who

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 63 of 76

aren't impacted, like roasting and warehouse staff. Baristas in the company's stores — who make up most of the company's 361,000 employees worldwide — are not included in the layoffs.

Niccol said in January that corporate layoffs would be announced by early March. He said the company needed to reduce complexity and ensure that all work is overseen by someone who can make decisions.

"Our size and structure can slow us down, with too many layers, managers of small teams and roles focused primarily on coordinating work," Niccol wrote.

Starbucks' layoffs come as other big companies make similar moves. Southwest Airlines said last week it was eliminating 1,750 jobs, or 15% of its corporate workforce, in the first major layoffs in the company's 53-year history. And last month, tire maker Bridgestone Americas closed a plant in LaVergne, Tennessee, and laid off 700 workers there.

Starbucks hired Niccol last fall to turn around sluggish sales. He has said he wants to improve service times — especially during the morning rush — and reestablish stores as community gathering places.

Niccol is also cutting items from Starbucks' menu and experimenting with its ordering algorithms to better handle its mix of mobile, drive-thru and in-store orders.

Starbucks' global same-store sales, or sales at locations open at least a year, fell 2% in its 2024 fiscal year, which ended Sept. 29. In the U.S., customers tired of price increases and growing wait times. In China, its second-largest market, Starbucks faced growing competition from cheaper rivals.

However, in its most recent quarter, the company topped most sales expectations after Niccol made changes that were visible to customers, such as the decision to stop charging extra for non-dairy milk.

Starbucks shares rose less than 2% Monday.

Auburn atop AP Top 25 for 7th straight week; preseason No. 1 KU out, ending ranked run at 80 weeks

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Basketball Writer

Auburn remained atop the AP Top 25 for the seventh straight week on Monday, while preseason No. 1 Kansas dropped out of the men's basketball poll for the first time in nearly four years, ending the Jayhawks' ranked run at 80 consecutive weeks.

The Tigers earned all 60 votes from the national media panel after beating Arkansas and Georgia last week. They were followed by Duke and Florida, which traded places in the poll, with Houston and Tennessee rounding out the top five. Houston has the nation's longest active streak in the Top 25 at 102 weeks.

The Jayhawks were dropped from the poll for the first time since Feb. 8, 2021, when the season was played amid the COVID-19 pandemic. That had ended a record 231 consecutive weeks in the Top 25 for Kansas.

The Jayhawks' were dropped this week after a 74-67 loss at Utah and a 91-57 blowout loss at BYU, the biggest margin of defeat in school history for a ranked Kansas team against an unranked opponent. BYU entered the poll at No. 25 this week.

Kansas took out its frustration on Oklahoma State on Saturday, rolling to a 96-64 victory in Allen Fieldhouse.

"We're 1-0," Jayhawks coach Bill Self said afterward. "That's what we're talking about. And everybody's stat sheet in what they're averaging this year is exactly what happened today. And we're not even gonna talk about the other stuff right now."

Alabama fell two spots to No. 6 this week and was followed by St. John's and Michigan State, which jumped six spots after back-to-back ranked wins over Purdue and Michigan. Iowa State and Texas Tech rounded out the top 10.

Kansas dropped out along with Ole Miss, which had been ranked the last 13 weeks and 15 of the last 16. That made room for Saint Mary's, which beat Portland and Gonzaga to enter at No. 23, and BYU, which followed its win over the Jayhawks by beating then-No. 19 Arizona 96-95 on Saturday thanks to two free throws by Richie Saunders with 3.2 seconds left.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 64 of 76

It was the first time the Cougars had beaten ranked teams in consecutive games since 1988.

"My message to our group is, you know, whatever the next challenge in front of us, we're trying to attack it, whether that's practice, whether that's shoot-around, whether that's a game," first-year BYU coach Kevin Young said. "I know that sounds cliché but that's really been the recipe for us, to not look any further than what we have to do at that moment."

Rising and falling

Louisville joined Michigan State in making the biggest jump in this week's poll, climbing six spots to No. 19. The Cardinals beat Florida State in their only game last week for their fifth consecutive win, and they head into this week tied with No. 13 Clemson for second in the ACC behind the second-ranked Blue Devils.

Purdue fell seven spots to No. 20 after losses to Michigan State and Indiana, but the Boilermakers held onto a spot in the Top 25 for the 55th consecutive week. That is now the third-longest active streak behind Houston and Tennessee (76 weeks).

Preseason Top 25 checkup

Kansas isn't the only team ranked highly in the preseason poll to drop out altogether this season.

Two-time defending national champion UConn was No. 3 with 11 first-place votes in October but did not appear on any ballots this week. Gonzaga was sixth, Baylor eighth and North Carolina ninth in the preseason poll — and all are unranked.

In all, more than half of the teams in the preseason poll — 13 of them — failed to crack this week's Top 25.

Conference watch

The SEC continued its dominance with three of the top five and eight total in the Top 25 this week. The Big 12 had three in the top 10 and five ranked teams, while the Big Ten also had five teams in the poll. The ACC had three, the Big East had two and the American and West Coast conferences had one team apiece.

Ex-Secret Service agent and conservative media personality Dan Bongino picked as FBI deputy director

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Dan Bongino, a former U.S. Secret Service agent who ran unsuccessfully for office and gained fame as a conservative pundit with TV shows and a popular podcast, has been chosen to serve as FBI deputy director.

President Donald Trump announced the appointment Sunday night in a post on his Truth Social platform, praising Bongino as "a man of incredible love and passion for our Country." He called the announcement "great news for Law Enforcement and American Justice."

The selection places two staunch Trump allies atop the nation's premier federal law enforcement agency at a time when Democrats have raised alarms that the Republican president could seek to use the FBI to target his adversaries. Bongino would serve under Kash Patel, a Trump loyalist who was sworn in as FBI director at the White House on Friday and who has signaled his intent to reshape the bureau, including by relocating hundreds of employees from its Washington headquarters and placing greater emphasis on the FBI's traditional crime-fighting duties.

The deputy director serves as the FBI's second-in-command and is traditionally a career agent responsible for the bureau's day-to-day law enforcement operations. The position does not require Senate confirmation. But Bongino, like Patel, has never served in the FBI, raising questions about their experience level when the U.S. is facing escalating national security threats.

Natalie Bara, president of the FBI Agents Association, wrote in an internal newsletter to members sent Sunday before Bongino's selection was announced that Patel had agreed during a January meeting with her that the FBI deputy director "should continue to be an on-board, active Special Agent as has been the case for 117 years for many compelling reasons, including operational expertise and experience, as well as the trust of our Special Agent population."

The two are inheriting an FBI gripped by turmoil as the Justice Department over the past month has forced out a group of senior bureau officials and made a highly unusual demand for the names of thousands of

agents who participated in investigations related to the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol.

Bongino served on the presidential details for then-Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush, before becoming a popular right-wing figure. He became one of the leading personalities in the Make America Great Again political movement to spread false information about the 2020 election, which Trump and allies have continued to maintain was marred by widespread fraud even though such claims have been widely rejected as false by judges and former Trump attorney general William Barr.

For a few years following Rush Limbaugh's death in 2021, he was chosen for a radio show on the same time slot of the famous commentator.

Bongino worked for the New York Police Department for several years in the 1990s before joining the Secret Service. He began doing commentary on Fox News more than a decade ago, and had a Saturday night show with the network from 2021 to 2023. He is now a host of The Dan Bongino Show, one of the most popular podcasts, according to Spotify.

Bongino ran for a U.S. Senate seat in Maryland in 2012 and for congressional seats in 2014 and 2016 in Maryland and Florida, after moving in 2015. He lost the three races.

During an interview last fall, Bongino asked Trump to commit to forming a commission to reform the Secret Service, calling it a "failed" agency and criticizing it for the two assassination attempts last year.

"That guy should have been nowhere near you," Bongino said about the man who authorities say camped outside Trump's golf course in West Palm Beach, Florida, before he was spotted with a rifle.

During the same interview, Trump praised the Secret Service agent who saw the rifle's barrel coming out of a bush.

Patel and Bongino will succeed the two acting FBI leaders, Brian Driscoll and Rob Kissane, who have led the bureau since the departure in January of former Director Christopher Wray, who was appointed by Trump in 2017 and held the job for the next seven years before resigning at the end of the Biden administration to make way for his chosen successor.

Roberta Flack, Grammy-winning 'Killing Me Softly' singer with an intimate style, dies at 88

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Roberta Flack, the Grammy-winning singer and pianist whose intimate vocal and musical style made her one of the top recordings artists of the 1970s and an influential performer long after, died Monday. She was 88.

She died at home surrounded by her family, publicist Elaine Schock said in a statement. Flack announced in 2022 she had ALS, commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease, and could no longer sing,

Little known before her early 30s, Flack became an overnight star after Clint Eastwood used "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" as the soundtrack for one of cinema's more memorable and explicit love scenes, between the actor and Donna Mills in his 1971 film "Play Misty for Me." The hushed, hymn-like ballad, with Flack's graceful soprano afloat on a bed of soft strings and piano, topped the Billboard pop chart in 1972 and received a Grammy for record of the year.

"The record label wanted to have it re-recorded with a faster tempo, but he said he wanted it exactly as it was," Flack told The Associated Press in 2018. "With the song as a theme song for his movie, it gained a lot of popularity and then took off."

In 1973, she matched both achievements with "Killing Me Softly With His Song," becoming the first artist to win consecutive Grammys for best record.

A classically trained pianist so gifted she received a full scholarship at age 15 to Howard, the historically Black university, Flack was discovered in the late 1960s by jazz musician Les McCann, who later wrote that "her voice touched, tapped, trapped, and kicked every emotion I've ever known." Flack was versatile enough to summon the up-tempo gospel passion of Aretha Franklin, but she favored a more measured and reflective approach, as if curating a song word by word.

For Flack's many admirers, she was a sophisticated and bold new presence in the music world and in

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 66 of 76

the social and civil rights movements of the time, her friends including the Rev. Jesse Jackson and Angela Davis, whom Flack visited in prison while Davis faced charges — for which she was acquitted — for murder and kidnapping. Flack sang at the funeral of Jackie Robinson, major league baseball's first Black player, and was among the many guest performers on the feminist children's entertainment project created by Marlo Thomas, "Free to Be ... You and Me."

Flack's other hits from the 1970s included the cozy "Feel Like Makin' Love" and two duets with her close friend and former Howard classmate Donny Hathaway, "Where Is the Love" and "The Closer I Get to You" — a partnership that ended in tragedy. In 1979, she and Hathaway were working on an album of duets when he suffered a breakdown during recording and later that night fell to his death from his hotel room in Manhattan.

"We were deeply connected creatively," Flack told Vibe in 2022, upon the 50th anniversary of the million-selling "Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway" album. "He could play anything, sing anything. Our musical synergy was unlike (anything) I'd had before or since."

She never matched her first run of success, although she did have a hit in the 1980s with the Peabo Bryson duet "Tonight, I Celebrate My Love" and in the 1990s with the Maxi Priest duet "Set the Night to Music." In the mid-90s, Flack received new attention after the Fugees recorded a Grammy-winning cover of "Killing Me Softly," which she eventually performed on stage with the hip-hop group.

Overall, she won five Grammys (three for "Killing Me Softly"), was nominated eight other times and was given a lifetime achievement Grammy in 2020, with John Legend and Ariana Grande among those praising her.

"I love that connection to other artists because we understand music, we live music, it's our language," Flack told songwriteruniverse.com in 2020. "Through music we understand what we are thinking and feeling. No matter what challenge life presents, I am at home with my piano, on a stage, with my band, in the studio, listening to music. I can find my way when I hear music."

In 2022, Beyoncé placed Flack, Franklin and Diana Ross among others in a special pantheon of heroines name-checked in the Grammy-nominated "Queens Remix" of "Break My Soul."

Flack was briefly married to Stephen Novosel, an interracial relationship that led to tension with each of their families, and earlier had a son, the singer and keyboardist Bernard Wright. For years, she lived in Manhattan's Dakota apartment building, on the same floor as John Lennon and Yoko Ono, who became a close friend and provided liner notes for a Flack album of Beatles covers, "Let It Be Roberta." She also devoted extensive time to the Roberta Flack School of Music, based in New York and attended mostly by students between ages 6 to 14.

Roberta Cleopatra Flack, the daughter of musicians, was born in Black Mountain, North Carolina, and raised in Arlington, Virginia. After graduating from Howard, she taught music in D.C.-area junior high schools for several years in her 20s, while performing after hours in clubs.

She sometimes backed other singers, but her own shows at Washington's renowned Mr. Henry's attracted such celebrity patrons as Burt Bacharach, Ramsey Lewis and Johnny Mathis. The club's owner, Henry Yaffe, converted an apartment directly above into a private studio, the Roberta Flack Room.

"I wanted to be successful, a serious all-round musician," she told The Telegraph in 2015. "I listened to a lot of Aretha, the Drifters, trying to do some of that myself, playing, teaching."

Flack was signed to Atlantic Records and her debut album, "First Take," a blend of gospel, soul, flamenco and jazz, came out in 1969. One track was a love song by the English folk artist Ewan MacColl: "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face," written in 1957 for his future wife, singer Peggy Seeger. Flack not only knew of the ballad, but used it while working with a glee club during her years as an educator.

"I was teaching at Banneker Junior High in Washington, D.C. It was part of the city where kids weren't that privileged, but they were privileged enough to have music education. I really wanted them to read music. First, I'd get their attention. (Flack starts singing a Supremes hit) 'Stop, in the name of love.' Then I could teach them!" she told the Tampa Bay Times in 2012.

"You have to do all sorts of things when you're dealing with kids in the inner-city," she said. "I knew they'd like the part where ('The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face') goes 'The first time ever I kissed your

mouth.' Ooh, 'Kissed your mouth!' Once the kids got past the giggles, we were good."

More pressure on Rwanda as Congo says rebel uprising has killed over 7,000 people this year

By JEAN-YVES KAMALE and WILSON MCKIN Associated Press

KINSHASA, Congo (AP) — More than 7,000 people have died this year as Rwanda-backed M23 rebels have captured unprecedented amounts of territory in mineral-rich eastern Congo, Congo's prime minister said Monday, as the European Union announced it would review an agreement with Rwanda on critical raw materials.

Judith Suminwa Tuluka told the U.N. Human Rights Council that the security and humanitarian situation in the region "has reached alarming levels."

The conflict has accelerated in recent weeks, with the rebels taking the key city of Goma in January and Bukavu, another provincial capital, this month. M23 is the most potent of the many armed groups vying for a foothold in Congo's east, which has trillions of dollars of mostly untapped mineral wealth crucial to the world's technology.

Pressure grew on Rwanda. The European Union's top diplomat, Kaja Kallas, called Congo's territorial integrity "non-negotiable" and said EU defense consultations with Rwanda have been suspended — they cooperate on missions in Mozambique and elsewhere — and their memorandum of understanding regarding critical raw materials will be under review.

The EU and Rwanda a year ago signed the memorandum of understanding to "nurture sustainable and resilient value chains for critical raw materials," noting that Rwanda "produces tin, tungsten, gold and niobium, and has potential for lithium and rare earth elements."

The EU announcement comes as the government of Congo, far richer in minerals, has accused Rwanda of looting its resources, and after the United States last week urged an "immediate cessation of sourcing of minerals from areas controlled by M23."

There was no immediate comment from Rwanda on what could be a blow to its economy.

The U.N. has warned that the fighting poses a wider threat to the region, which has seen decades of simmering conflict that has displaced millions.

The M23 has spoken of unseating the government of Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi in distant Kinshasa, which has long had a tenuous grip on the east. The rebels are attempting to gain more ground despite calls for a ceasefire, bolstered by about 4,000 troops from neighboring Rwanda, a short drive from Goma.

M23 leaders have vowed to "cleanse" cities of alleged bad governance and insecurity. They now threaten the city of Uriva, where gunfire was reported over the weekend.

M23 says it's fighting to protect ethnic Tutsis and Congolese of Rwandan origin from discrimination and wants to transform Congo from a failed state to a modern one.

Analysts have called those pretexts for Rwanda's involvement.

Witnesses in Goma have asserted that the M23's intelligence branch is searching for former Congolese soldiers and criminals but some people are misidentified. They asserted that 11 young people were killed Sunday while waiting for a weightlifting class in the city after being misidentified as thieves.

Former Thai Prime Minister Thanin Kraivichien, a hard-line anti-communist in the 1970s, dies at 97

BANGKOK (AP) — Thanin Kraivichien, an anti-communist judge who became Thailand's prime minister after a 1976 military coup but was ousted by another coup a year later because of his hard-line policies, has died at age 97, his family announced.

A notice dated Sunday and posted online by his family did not give a cause of death for Thanin, who served as Thailand's 14th prime minister after his 1976 appointment by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej,

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 68 of 76

Just two months after being ousted as prime minister in 1977, the king appointed Thanin to his advisory Privy Council, where he served for almost 40 years.

The current prime minister, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, posted condolences on the X social network, calling him a notable figure.

Thanin had become prime minister after a tumultuous three-year period of liberal democracy that followed decades of military rule. The social conflicts that surfaced under democracy and the communist takeover of Thailand's three eastern neighbors — Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia — destabilized the country and set the stage for a right-wing comeback.

On Oct. 6, 1976, right-wing vigilantes assisted by security forces besieged Bangkok's Thammasat University where an anti-dictatorship protest was being held. Guns and grenades were fired into the campus and students lynched by the mob. The official death toll was 46 but many scholars believed it was more than 100.

The violence served as an excuse for the army to seize power, and two days later Thanin, a Supreme Court judge and staunch royalist, was appointed prime minister by the new ruling junta, on the advice of the king.

"Although Thanin had not previously taken part in politics nor had he ever held a Cabinet post, he quickly asserted himself forcefully," according to Thailand: A Country Study, compiled by American University as a U.S. Government publication.

"Ironically, it turned out that this man, a civilian and a lawyer, was more authoritarian and repressive than any of his military predecessors," the late historian David Wyatt wrote in his "Thailand: A Short History."

"Rigid censorship was imposed, labor unions silenced, the ranks of bureaucrats and teachers purged of dissidents and required to undergo anticommunist indoctrination."

Thanin proposed that at least 12 years of political education would be needed until full democracy could be restored, a headline-grabbing timeline that dismayed many Thais, including those in the military who believed that his anti-communist crusade was actually strengthening support for the jungle-based Communist Party of Thailand and its guerrillas.

In retrospect, he has been given credit for attacking the drug trade and corruption, two longtime scourges of Thai society, as well as appointing Thailand's first female Cabinet members.

On October 20, 1977, the same generals who staged the 1976 coup ousted Thanin from office.

The country study said the official explanation was that Thanin's authoritarian regime had led to disunity in the government, economic deterioration, delay in the democratic transition and popular discontent. There was evidence, however, that Thanin's tough actions against corruption undercut his support from powerful figures both in the government and outside.

Thanin was born in Bangkok on April 5, 1927, the son of a major pawnshop owner. He received a law degree from Thammasat University in 1948 and then studied law in London, where he was admitted to the Bar in 1953. While in England he met his Danish wife, Karen Andersen. She died in 1995.

The Latest: Opposition leader Merz set to form Germany's next government

By The Associated Press undefined

Germany's mainstream conservatives won the country's national election, while a far-right party surged to become the nation's second-largest party, according to provisional results following Sunday's election.

Opposition leader Friedrich Merz claimed victory and Chancellor Olaf Scholz conceded defeat. Alternative for Germany, or AfD, had the strongest showing for a far-right party since World War II.

Merz's conservatives won 208 seats in the 630-seat Bundestag, while the AfD won 152. The three parties in the former governing coalition lost seats, with the center-left Social Democrats falling to 120 seats and the Greens to 85.

The Left party got 64 seats, while the left-wing Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance came in just under the 5% hurdle. The pro-business Free Democrats, which triggered early elections by pulling out of the coalition,

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 69 of 76

also failed to reach the 5% of the vote required to win seats.

The election came as Germany and the rest of Europe grapple with the new Trump administration, the Russia-Ukraine war and security across the continent.

Here's the latest:

Merz wants to begin coalition talks immediately

Merz says he wants to begin coalition talks immediately with the center-left Social Democrats.

Merz's top three topics for negotiations: curbing migration, economy, and Europe's foreign and security policy.

Merz wants to quickly tackle Germany's struggling economy

Merz says Germany's troubled economy is one of the most important issues that he wants to tackle as quickly as possible.

"We have to preserve jobs in industry in Germany," he said, adding that he expects his prospective coalition partner, Scholz's Social Democrats, to also "have a very strong interest in maintaining industrial jobs in Germany."

Merz lists curbing migration as a top priority

Merz says curbing migration to Germany and all of Europe will be one of the top priorities if he becomes Germany's next chancellor.

He says that "none of us wants to close the borders. But we need to protect our borders better. We must regain control over those who come into our country. "

Merz's tough migration proposals during the election campaign triggered massive protests in some parts of German society that criticized his anti-migration sentiment as inhumane.

Merz is 'extremely worried' by AfD's gains

Merz says he is extremely worried about AfD's second-place finish, especially after the party won so many votes in the former communist east of the country.

He told reporters that "we are extremely worried about what is happening in the east."

He added: "We have to work together to solve the problems in Germany that are gradually removing the breeding ground for this party."

Merz says Europe needs to show unity for the future of NATO

Merz tells reporters that Europe needs to demonstrate unity when it comes to NATO's future role and also needs to clarify how much the continent is willing to spend on defense.

He says: "We will have a NATO summit in The Hague at the end of June. By then at the latest, it must be clear how the transatlantic relationship will develop. And by then at the latest, it must also be clear what contribution Europe is prepared to make to defense within NATO."

He adds that he remains "hopeful that the Americans will see it as in their own interests to be involved in Europe as well," though he warns that it is unacceptable "if the Americans strike a deal with Russia over the heads of the Europeans, over the heads of Ukraine."

Merz says he will find a way for Netanyahu to visit Germany without arrest

Merz says he told Netanyahu that he would find "ways and means" for the Israeli prime minister to visit Germany without being arrested.

Merz was asked Monday about a statement from Netanyahu's office that he will invite the Israeli leader to visit despite an International Criminal Court arrest warrant.

Merz confirmed that Netanyahu called him and said that he told the Israeli leader they should meet soon after a new government is formed.

He added: "in case he plans a visit to Germany, I agreed that we will find ways and means for him to be able to visit Germany and leave again without being arrested in Germany."

Merz said: "I think it's a really absurd idea that an Israeli prime minister can't visit the Federal Republic of Germany. He will be able to visit Germany."

Germany has been both a staunch ally of Israel and a strong backer of the ICC.

Merz says he wants to continue strong relationship with US

Merz says he will do everything he can to continue a good transatlantic relationship with the United

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 70 of 76

States — even if this may be more difficult with the new Trump administration.

He says that even though “all the signals we are getting from the USA indicate that interest in Europe is clearly waning ... I hope that we can convince the Americans that it is in our mutual interest that we continue to have good transatlantic relations.”

He told reporters that “if those who really do not just make America first, but almost America alone their motto, prevail, then it will be difficult. But I remain hopeful that we will succeed in maintaining the transatlantic relationship.”

He warned that if the good relationship “is destroyed, it will not only be to the detriment of Europe, it will also be to the detriment of America.”

Germany’s Olaf Scholz calls serving as chancellor ‘a great honor’

Chancellor Olaf Scholz says it has been “a great honor” to serve as Germany’s ninth postwar leader and that it’s important to him to bring his job to an orderly end.

Scholz said on Monday that the election result from the vote the day before was bitter for his party and “it hasn’t become better today.”

“I would like to stress that it is a great honor to be the ninth chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, the fourth Social Democrat who can fill this job in the history of the federal republic,” he said, speaking at his party’s headquarters.

“It is very, very important to me to carry out this work in an orderly way until the last day,” he added.

It’s unclear when that will be. Scholz’s outgoing minority government will remain in office while Friedrich Merz, who until now was Germany’s opposition leader, tries to put together a coalition.

Analyst says Merz will face pressure to solve some of Europe’s biggest problems

Wolfgang Merkel, a political analyst from the WBZ Berlin Social Science Center, says there will high pressure on Friedrich Merz as Germany’s next chancellor to help solve some of Europe’s most urgent problems.

Merz will be expected to help find a united European response to issues such as security and defense, especially when it comes to Russia’s aggressive stance.

“Interests are so different within the European Union, including the political majorities, that we shouldn’t expect a resounding common EU policy,” he said, adding that it will likely be “the usual game of muddling through.”

“We shouldn’t expect to hear one voice out of Brussels,” the analyst said.

After election win, Merz’s offers support for Ukraine in his first comments on Monday

Friedrich Merz’s first comments on Monday after his party became the highest vote-getter in national elections in Germany were words of support for Ukraine, which is marking the third anniversary of Russia’s full-scale invasion.

“Europe stands unwaveringly by Ukraine’s side,” Merz posted on X. “Now more than ever, it holds true: We must put Ukraine in a position of strength.”

“For a just peace, the attacked country must be part of peace negotiations,” Merz added, in an apparent rebuke of the Trump administration, which has begun talks with Russia on ending the war that have so far cut out Ukraine and Europe.

Germany’s far-right leader says she missed Elon Musk’s congrats call

Alice Weidel says she missed a congratulatory call from tech billionaire Elon Musk after the German election late Sunday. Her far-right party, the Alternative for Germany, finished in second place.

Weidel told reporters in Berlin that “this morning, when I turned my phone on or looked at it, I had received missed calls in the night from the USA, including from Elon Musk, who congratulated me personally.”

Musk, an ally of President Donald Trump, has waded several times into German politics during the election campaign and openly supported Weidel’s AfD.

Outgoing Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Friedrich Merz, who won the election, have sharply criticized Musk’s efforts to influence the election in Germany.

Stocks in major German companies rise after election

Stocks in major German companies rose on Monday on hopes for a stable coalition government that could end policy gridlock and tackle the country’s economic problems.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 71 of 76

The DAX share index — which includes Mercedes-Benz Group, engineering firm Siemens AG and business software firm SAP — rose 0.74% to 22,452.04 in morning trading.

A two-party coalition between the conservative Christian Democratic Union and the center left Social Democrats “will likely be seen as positive by Germany’s corporate sector,” say analysts at Deutsche Bank.

The outgoing three-party coalition was at odds over how to fix the stagnating economy. Gains were tempered by the fact that parties of the far left and far right gained enough seats to block constitutional change. That could make it difficult to loosen restrictions on government borrowing that have hampered spending on pro-growth infrastructure and investment.

Despite finishing second, no place for far-right AfD in Germany’s next governing coalition

Alternative for Germany has achieved the strongest showing by a far-right party since World War II, becoming the second strongest force in the national parliament and the most popular party in eastern Germany.

Yet the country’s mainstream parties still refuse to work with it. The principle is known as a “firewall” against extreme right forces after the trauma of the Nazi era.

Merz has ruled out a coalition with the AfD and Olaf Scholz, whose Social Democrats party might be necessary as a junior party in the next government, said on Sunday that he hopes all political parties continue their traditional refusal to work with the far right.

“No cooperation with the extreme right,” Scholz said.

Still, a growing number of Germans feel the other parties have failed to manage the large-scale immigration to Germany of the past decade.

Merz will invite Israel’s prime minister to Germany despite an arrest warrant, Netanyahu’s office says

The office of Israel’s prime minister says Friedrich Merz will invite Benjamin Netanyahu to visit Germany despite an arrest warrant for the Israeli leader from the U.N.’s top war-crimes court.

The two spoke by phone on Sunday night as Netanyahu congratulated Merz on his victory, the prime minister’s office said.

Merz’s party confirmed the phone call with Netanyahu but said it doesn’t comment on the contents of such conversations.

The ICC issued arrest warrants in November 2024 for Netanyahu, his former defense minister and Hamas’ military chief, who was later confirmed killed in Gaza, accusing them of crimes against humanity in connection with the war in Gaza.

The warrant puts Netanyahu at risk of arrest whenever he travels to a country that is a member of the court. Neither Israel nor its top ally, the United States, are members of the court.

Merz promises to unify Europe despite challenges from the US and Russia

Merz says his top priority is to unify Europe in the face of challenges coming from the United States and Russia.

Both Vice President JD Vance and President Donald Trump’s ally Elon Musk have openly supported the far-right AfD, which surged to second place in Sunday’s election.

“I have no illusions at all about what is happening from America,” Merz told supporters.

“We are under such massive pressure,” he added. “My absolute priority now is really to create unity in Europe.”

Turkish immigrant group in Germany criticizes far-right AfD’s election gains

The leader of one of Germany’s biggest immigrant groups has criticized AfD’s second-place finish in Germany’s election on Sunday.

Aslihan Yesilkaya-Yurtbay of the Turkish Community in Germany group says though the AfD won’t be part of the next government, it will still have the power to “determine the discourse and drive this country against the wall.”

About 25% of Germans have immigrant roots and people of Turkish descent are the biggest group.

Yesilkaya-Yurtbay adds that “many parties have followed the AfD’s narrative to varying degrees and have promised to solve the ‘migration problem’ — with the aim of pushing the AfD back. This has been a resounding failure.”

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 72 of 76

"People with a migrant roots are frightened and are thinking about leaving Germany," Yeşilkaya-Yurtbay said. "Without migration our country has no future."

NATO, Western allies and Zelenskyy congratulate Merz

NATO and Western allies, as well as Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy are congratulating Friedrich Merz on his election victory in Germany.

U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer wrote on X that he was looking "forward to working with the new government to deepen our already strong relationship, enhance our joint security and deliver growth for both our countries."

French leader Emmanuel Macron says he spoke to both Merz and Olaf Scholz following the election results — Merz to congratulate him, and Scholz to express his friendship to him.

"We are more determined than ever to achieve great things together for France and Germany and to work towards a strong and sovereign Europe," Macron wrote on X. "In this time of uncertainty, we stand united to face the great challenges of the world and our continent."

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called the results "a clear voice from the voters" and stressed the importance of the election to Europe.

"Europe must be able to defend itself, develop its industries, and achieve the necessary results. Europe needs shared successes, and those success will bring even greater unity to Europe," Zelenskyy wrote on X as Monday marked the third anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda wished Merz "success and prosperity" in leading Germany while Estonian Prime Minister Kristen Michal says Merz's victory is key to a stronger and united Europe.

"It is crucial to strengthen our support for Ukraine," Michal wrote on X.

European Council President Antonio Costa also congratulated Merz. "These might be challenging times. But I know that, just like in the past, the European Union will deliver and come out stronger," Costa wrote on X.

A political career once sidelined by iconic Angela Merkel

The top job has been late in coming for Friedrich Merz, a lawyer by profession, who saw his ascent derailed by former Chancellor Angela Merkel in the early 2000s and even turned his back on active politics for several years.

Merkel has described Merz as a brilliant speaker and complimented his desire for leadership, though she acknowledged this was a problem in their relationship.

"We are almost the same age ... We grew up completely differently, which was more of an opportunity than an obstacle," she wrote in her memoir "Freedom."

"But there was one problem, right from the start: We both wanted to be the boss," she said.

Merz aims to form new government by Easter

Friedrich Merz says he wants to form a new government by Easter, though it's not yet clear how easy that will be.

Merz said in a televised appearance with other party leaders Sunday evening: "We have nearly eight weeks until Easter now, and I think that should be enough time — the maximum time — to form a government in Germany."

Merz noted that, by then, Germany won't have had a government with a parliamentary majority for nearly six months.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz's outgoing government will remain in office on a caretaker basis until the Bundestag elects the new chancellor.

Who is Friedrich Merz, the man on course to take Germany's top job after election?

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Friedrich Merz, on course to become post-World War II Germany's 10th chancellor after the country's election, has vowed to prioritize European unity and the continent's security as it grapples

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 73 of 76

with the new Trump administration and Russia's war on Ukraine.

Pulling a divided Europe together won't be easy when many leaders are too preoccupied by domestic issues to devote much energy to answers to the continent's most pressing problems. But expectations will be high for Merz to help fill a leadership vacuum and craft a united response to recent U.S. policy shifts that have strained the transatlantic alliance.

"All the signals we are getting from the USA indicate that interest in Europe is clearly waning and that the willingness to get involved in Europe is decreasing," Merz told reporters at a press conference on Monday.

"Nevertheless, I hope that we can convince the Americans that it is in our mutual interest that we continue to have good trans-Atlantic relations."

Merz's task will be complicated by the need to form a coalition with the center-left Social Democrats of outgoing Chancellor Olaf Scholz. He has repeatedly pledged not to work with the far-right anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany party despite their second-place finish.

The 69-year-old conservative leader heads the center-right Union bloc, which won Germany's national election with 28.5% of the votes.

"I am also aware of the scale of the task that now lies ahead of us," he told supporters after his victory Sunday night. "The world out there isn't waiting for us, and it isn't waiting for long-drawn-out coalition talks and negotiations."

The top job has been late in coming for Merz, a lawyer by profession, who saw his ascent derailed by former Chancellor Angela Merkel in the early 2000s and even turned his back on active politics for several years. Despite his political experience, he is heading to the chancellery without previously having served in government.

The rivalry with Merkel

Merkel has described Merz as a brilliant speaker and complimented his desire for leadership, though she acknowledged this was a problem in their relationship.

"We are almost the same age ... We grew up completely differently, which was more of an opportunity than an obstacle," she wrote in her memoir "Freedom."

"But there was one problem, right from the start: We both wanted to be the boss," she said.

Merkel moved to consolidate her grip on Germany's center-right after the Union narrowly lost a national election in 2002. She pushed Merz aside as leader of its parliamentary group, taking the job herself in addition to the leadership of the Christian Democratic Union party she already held. She went on to lead Germany from 2005 to 2021.

A break from politics

Merz turned his back on active politics for several years after leaving the parliament in 2009.

He practiced law and headed the supervisory board of investment manager BlackRock's German branch. During that break, he often travelled for business to the United States and China, though he never lived outside Germany.

"Friedrich Merz is perhaps the most international chancellor Germany has had since the war — if he becomes chancellor," said Volker Resing, who wrote the recently published biography "Friedrich Merz: His Path to Power."

Merz "relies on personal initiative, on the freedom of the individual, on creativity and motivation. And only secondarily on the state," Resing said.

Political comeback

Merz launched his political comeback after Merkel stepped down as CDU leader in 2018 and announced that she wouldn't seek a fifth term of chancellor. However, he was narrowly defeated by centrist candidates more in Merkel's mold in party leadership votes in 2018 and early 2021.

Merz persisted and was elected party leader in the third attempt, after the center-right's defeat by current Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Germany's 2021 election. Merz cemented his power by also becoming the leader of the Union's parliamentary group.

According to Resing, Merz's "way of doing politics" is not to avoid confrontation at all costs. Instead, he

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 74 of 76

maintains a perspective that "a certain amount of provocation can set off a real debate and perhaps a real development in motion."

During the election campaign, Merz has vowed to make Germany's ailing economy strong again and curb irregular migration.

With President Donald Trump back in the White House and tensions rising over how to resolve the war in Ukraine, Merz, who has long supported a strong transatlantic relationship, said after his victory that his top priority is to unify Europe in the face of challenges coming from the United States and Russia.

"I have no illusions at all about what is happening from America," he told supporters. "We are under such massive pressure ... my absolute priority now is really to create unity in Europe."

Merz will be under pressure to help solve some of Europe's most urgent problems, according to Wolfgang Merkel, a political analyst from the WBZ Berlin Social Science Center, but "we shouldn't expect to hear one voice out of Brussels."

"The interests are so different within the European Union, including the political majorities, that we shouldn't expect a resounding common EU policy," he said and added that it will likely "be the usual game of muddling through."

Flirting with the far right?

Merz put toughening Germany's immigration laws at the forefront of the election campaign after a migrant killed two people in a knife attack in the Bavarian city of Aschaffenburg last month.

He brought a nonbinding motion before the parliament, calling for many more migrants to be turned back at Germany's borders. The motion was narrowly approved thanks to votes from the far-right Alternative for Germany, or AfD, party.

That prompted his opponents to accuse Merz of breaking a taboo in allegedly working with the AfD, and a public rebuke from Merkel. Critics pointed to the episode as an illustration of what they say is Merz's tendency to impulsiveness.

Since then, hundreds of thousands have taken to the streets to protest against both Merz' motion and also the rise of the far right.

Merz has insisted he did nothing wrong and never worked with AfD, and also repeatedly vowed to "never" work with the party if he becomes chancellor.

Roots in rural Germany

Merz represents his rural region in Germany's parliament — an area where people are "rather down-to-earth, perhaps a little reserved," Resing said. "That's what shaped him: rural life."

As a politician, Merz has always championed conservative values and stressed the importance of family.

He met his wife Charlotte, who is now a judge, while he was studying law. The couple has three adult children.

Merz joined the CDU in 1972 and was elected to the European Parliament in 1989. He first joined the German parliament in 1994.

In the pilot's seat

A pilot openly passionate about his hobby, Merz sometimes flies his own small plane from his home in the Sauerland region in western Germany to Berlin early on Monday mornings.

He has stuck to flying, despite the long hours imposed by his job as opposition leader and occasional criticism that he is indulging in a rich man's hobby.

"When you talk to him about flying, his eyes light up," Resing said. "He says that when you're above the clouds, that's freedom."

The biggest takeaways from Germany's election, which will bring change to the EU's leading power

By GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany faces its second change of leader in fewer than four years after the head of

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 75 of 76

the center-right opposition, Friedrich Merz, won Sunday's election, which saw a surge for a far-right party and a stinging defeat for outgoing Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

After the collapse of Scholz's three-party government in November, it's now up to Merz to restore stability to the European Union's most populous country and traditional political heavyweight, which also has the continent's biggest economy.

Merz faces a difficult task. But it could have been worse

Merz has one realistic option to form a government: a coalition with Scholz's Social Democrats. His Union bloc and its center-left rival have a combined 328 seats in the 630-seat parliament.

He says he hopes to do the deal by Easter. That's a challenging timeframe: The possible partners will have to reconcile contrasting proposals for revitalizing the economy, which has shrunk for the past two years, and for curbing irregular migration — an issue that Merz pushed hard during the campaign. That will likely require diplomacy and a readiness to compromise that often weren't evident in recent weeks.

It's still a much easier task than it might have been. For hours on Sunday night, it looked likely that Merz would need to add a second center-left partner, the environmentalist Greens, to put together a parliamentary majority.

Germany's traditional heavyweights erode further

The Union and Social Democrats were post-World War II Germany's heavyweights. But their support has been eroding for at least two decades as the political landscape has become more fragmented. Their combined showing Sunday was their weakest since the postwar federal republic was founded in 1949.

The Social Democrats had their worst postwar showing with just 16.4% of the vote. The Union had its second-worst with 28.5%. This is only the second time that the winning party polled less than 30%; the first was in 2021.

Geographical divide: The far right leads in the east

The far-right, anti-immigration Alternative for Germany, or AfD, emerged as the strongest party across the country's formerly communist and less prosperous east. That cemented its primacy in a region that has long been its stronghold, and where it won its first state election last year.

Other parties were stronger in only a few eastern constituencies outside Berlin. In western Germany, which accounts for most of the country's population, AfD trailed Merz's Union and sometimes other parties too but still polled strongly on its way to 20.8% of the nationwide vote, the highest postwar score for a far-right party.

Young voters lead a hard-left revival

While AfD made the biggest gains, the Left Party made the most unexpected. The party appeared headed for electoral oblivion at the start of the campaign but pulled off a resounding comeback to take 8.8% of the vote.

The Left Party appealed to young voters with very liberal positions on social and migration issues and a tax-the-rich policy, backed up by a savvy social media campaign.

It benefited from polarization during the campaign after a motion that Merz put to parliament calling for many more migrants to be turned back at the border passed thanks to votes from AfD. Merz's conservatives have long refused to work with the Left Party, so there was no prospect of it putting him in the chancellery.

Ukraine can still expect German support

Merz has been a staunch supporter of Ukraine as it fends off Russia's invasion. He wrote on social network X Monday that "more than ever, we must put Ukraine in a position of strength." He added that "for a fair peace, the country that is under attack must be part of peace negotiations."

Germany became Ukraine's second-biggest weapons supplier after the United States under Scholz. Merz has at times criticized the outgoing government for doing too little, notably calling for Germany to supply Taurus long-range cruise missiles to Kyiv. Scholz refused to do that.

Merz, like Scholz, has been tightlipped so far on whether Germany might contribute to a possible peace-keeping force, suggesting that the discussion is premature.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 245 ~ 76 of 76

Where Scholz went wrong

Scholz pulled off a narrow come-from-behind victory in 2021 after presenting himself as the safest pair of hands available.

But his government's agenda was quickly upended by the Ukraine war and the ensuing energy and inflation crises. His coalition became notorious over time for infighting and poor communication. Scholz has suggested recently that he maybe should have ended it sooner than he did.

Scholz sought another unlikely comeback. But too many voters, and even some in his own party, had cooled on the unpopular chancellor.

Today in History: February 25, Muhammad Ali wins heavyweight title

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Tuesday, Feb. 25, the 56th day of 2025. There are 309 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 25, 1964, Muhammad Ali (then Cassius Clay) became world heavyweight boxing champion for the first time as he defeated Sonny Liston in Miami Beach.

Also on this date:

In 1870, Republican Hiram R. Revels of Mississippi was sworn in as U.S. senator, becoming the first African American member of either house of Congress.

In 1913, the 16th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, giving Congress the power to levy and collect income taxes, was declared in effect by Secretary of State Philander Chase Knox.

In 1986, President Ferdinand Marcos fled the Philippines after 20 years of rule in the wake of a tainted election; opposition leader Corazon Aquino — the first woman to lead the country — assumed the presidency.

In 1991, during the Persian Gulf War, 28 American soldiers were killed when an Iraqi Scud missile hit a U.S. barracks in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

In 1994, American-born Jewish settler Baruch Goldstein opened fire with an automatic rifle inside the Tomb of the Patriarchs in the West Bank during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, killing 29 Muslims before he was beaten to death by worshippers.

In 1997, a jury in Media, Pennsylvania, convicted chemical fortune heir John E. du Pont of third-degree murder, deciding he was mentally ill when he shot and killed world-class wrestler David Schultz. (Du Pont died in prison in December 2010 while serving a 13- to 30-year sentence; he was 72.)

In 2020, U.S. health officials warned that the coronavirus was certain to spread more widely in the U.S.; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention urged Americans to be prepared. President Donald Trump, meanwhile, speaking in India, said the virus was "very well under control" in the United States.

Today's birthdays: Former talk show host Sally Jessy Raphael is 90. Actor Tom Courtenay is 88. TV journalist Bob Schieffer is 88. Film director Neil Jordan is 75. Rock musician-actor John Doe (X) is 72. Comedian Carrot Top is 60. Actor Tea Leoni is 59. Actor Sean Astin is 54. Singer Daniel Powter is 54. Comedian-actor Chelsea Handler is 50. Actor Rashida Jones is 49. Actor Jameela Jamil is 39. Golfer Hideki Matsuyama is 33.