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Wednesday, Feb. 26

Senior Menu: Beef noodle stroganoff, 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.

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PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

It's Wednesday

Heavenly Father,

You woke me up this morning to see another beautiful day. I am grateful, thankful, and blessed.

It's so awesome to wake up knowing that I have another opportunity to walk in the Grace, and Love of Christ today.

May this be a day of divine protection, open doors, miraculous healings, and comfort for those who mourn.

God's Spoken Word Ministries

In Jesus' Name, Amen.

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 Basketball tournament: Groton Area vs. Sisseton, 7 p.m., Groton Area Arena.

Friday, Feb. 28

Senior Menu: Spanish rice with hamburger, green beans, vanilla pudding with oranges, whole wheat bread.

Groton FFA CDE

Girls and boys state wrestling at Rapid City

Boys Basketball vs. Aberdeen Christian at the Aberdeen Civic Arena: 7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m., varsity to follow.

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1440

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

Staffers Exit DOGE

At least 21 federal workers resigned yesterday from the Elon Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency. In a joint resignation letter, the group of engineers, data scientists, and product managers said they refused to use their expertise to dismantle critical public services.

The group also claimed DOGE was recruiting politically motivated individuals who lack the necessary expertise and believed such hires undermine government systems and jeopardize sensitive data. The group of resignees once worked for an Obama-era office known as the United States Digital Service, which sought to modernize government technology and initially focused on issues related to the rollout of HealthCare.gov.

The mass exit comes amid a swath of legal challenges against DOGE as it leads the Trump administration's efforts to downsize the government and slash billions of dollars in federal spending. The lawsuits against DOGE focus on data access and privacy as well as the department's overall existence.

In related news, Nashville technology executive Amy Gleason was named interim administrator of the group late yesterday afternoon.

Why Mars is Red

A new NASA-funded study revealed yesterday the iron mineral ferrihydrite is likely responsible for Mars' distinctive red color, suggesting the planet once had a cool, wet, and possibly habitable environment. Researchers in the study analyzed data from Mars missions and replicated Martian dust in a lab.

The findings challenge previous theories that Mars' red hue was due to hematite, a dry iron oxide that forms in warm conditions. However, the study indicates ferrihydrite, which forms in cool water, is widespread in Martian dust and rock formations. The presence of ferrihydrite—commonly found on Earth in environments such as freshwater systems, hot springs, and volcanic settings—suggests water may have been present on Mars for a longer period than previously thought, potentially supporting the existence of life, and possibly even forming ancient beaches.

The red planet has captivated astronomers for millennia. Ancient Romans named Mars after their god of war due to its blood-like color, and ancient Egyptians called it "Her Desher," which means "the red one."

Golden Toilet Heist

Three English men went on trial yesterday for their alleged 2019 theft of a satirical golden toilet from an art exhibit at the sprawling 18th-century Blenheim Palace in southern England. Prosecutors claim five men broke through a window and removed the functioning, 200-pound gold toilet in under five minutes. The three men deny the charges, while a fourth pleaded guilty to burglary. The toilet has not been recovered.

The piece—insured for \$6M—was created by artist Maurizio Cattelan in 2016, an Italian known for creating provocative pieces often for comic effect. Titled "America," the piece debuted at New York's Guggenheim Museum where hundreds of thousands used it. In 2019, the piece was moved to Blenheim Palace, the traditional seat of the Dukes of Marlborough where Winston Churchill was born (whose father was the third son of the Duke).

The theft occurred days after the exhibition of Cattelan's works opened. The 18-karat gold—roughly 75% pure—is believed to have been quickly melted down and sold.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Lucasfilm President Kathleen Kennedy to step down at end of 2025 after leading the film production company behind "Star Wars" franchise since 2012.

Chris Jasper, Isley Brothers member and Rock & Roll Hall of Famer, dies at age 73.

Larry Dolan, longtime owner of the Cleveland Guardians, dies at 94.

More than 1,000 British musicians, including Kate Bush and Cat Stevens, release a silent album to protest proposed changes to UK law that may allow AI models to be trained on copyrighted material.

Science & Technology

Death toll from unidentified illness in the Congo rises to at least 50 over the past month; outbreak began after three children fell sick after eating a bat.

Second Intuitive Machines lunar launch window opens this evening; company made history last year with the first controlled landing of a device on the moon by a private company.

Researchers develop self-destructing bacteria for potential use in tuberculosis vaccines; disease kills an estimated 1 million people each year globally.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 -0.5%, Dow +0.4%, Nasdaq -1.4%).

US consumer confidence index in February registers largest monthly drop since 2021.

Hims & Hers shares close down 22% a day after the telehealth company releases Q4 results, prompting concerns over its weight-loss drug business's impact on margins.

Tesla shares close down 8.4% after reporting its European sales fell 45% year over year in January; company falls below \$1T market cap.

Perplexity AI reportedly launching \$50M venture fund to back early-stage AI startups.

Politics & World Affairs

The US, Ukraine agree on deal to jointly develop Ukrainian natural resources; agreement is reportedly step toward a ceasefire deal with Russia.

House passes budget bill in 217-215 vote, sets up reconciliation with Senate plan.

White House to take over access to press pool from White House Correspondents' Association.

US Supreme Court orders new trial for Oklahoma death row inmate Richard Glossip, finding prosecutors in the original 1998 trial failed to correct false testimony.

Vatican officials say Pope Francis remains in critical but stable condition following weekend respiratory crisis, has performed some duties from hospital.

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City Council adapts garbage collection routes amid seasonal frost concerns By Elizabeth Varin

In response to the seasonal challenges posed by thawing frost, the Groton City Council voted to temporarily adjust garbage collection routes.

The decision aims to safeguard city streets against potential damage from larger vehicles.

Residents need to bring their garbage to Main Street, Highway 37, Sixth Street or Railroad Avenue beginning on Tuesday, March 4.

Those who are unable to bring their garbage to those streets are encouraged to contact city hall for assistance.

Summer recreation staff hires begin

The council has begun hiring summer recreation staff.

The first four hires include Kami Lipp (swimming pool manager), Aaron Severson (junior legion coach), Sydney Kurtz (U10 softball coach) and Kyle Gerlach (junior teenager coach).

The council approved an ordinance setting summer recreation employee salaries. Those salaries include:

- Public works laborer/park caretaker at \$16.30 per hour plus 25 cents for each year of service
- Cemetery caretaker at \$16.30 per hour plus 25 cents for each year of service
- Swimming pool manager at \$16.30 per hour plus 25 cents for each year of service at the swimming pool
- Assistant part time swimming pool manager at \$14.30 per hour plus 25 cents for each year of service at the swimming pool
- Swimming pool lifeguard at \$11.50 per hour plus 25 cents for each year of service
- WSI lifeguards during swimming lessons at their regular salary plus \$1 and a \$25 bonus per private lesson
- WSI assistant lifeguard during swimming lessons at their regular salary plus 50 cents per hour
- Concessions manager at \$75 daily plus 50 percent of net profits
- Baseball coordinator at \$2,000 yearly plus \$77.32 per year of service
- Softball coordinator at \$2,000 yearly plus \$25.77 per year of service
- Legion baseball coach at \$4,000 yearly
- Junior legion baseball coach at \$3,000 yearly plus \$51.55 per year of service
- Junior teenager baseball coach at \$3,000 yearly plus \$51.55 per year of service
- Day baseball/softball coach at \$2,500 yearly plus \$50 per year of service
- Girls softball coach (U8, U10, U12, U14) at \$1,000 yearly plus \$20.62 per year of service
- Baseball groundskeeper at \$11.50 per hour plus 25 cents per year of service
- Baseball gatekeeper at \$11.50 per hour plus 25 cents per year of service

The council approved opening up applications for the remaining summer recreational positions.

Hail repair bid approved

The council awarded a bid for roof repair on ten city buildings.

Dakota Roofing will repair hail damage on the cemetery repair shop, police department, city shop, community center, park restrooms, park picnic shelter, pool bathhouse, pool gazebo, pool storage shed and city hall/library. The bid totaled \$99,985 with a 10-year warrantee on the work. The total is below what the insurance company approved paying out for the repairs.

Council invites bid on more projects

The council authorized city staff to bid street resurfacing work for 2025. While a map of work for the year wasn't available, the city will begin accepting sealed bids for approximately 44,000 square yards of bituminous seal coat and 2,200 square yards of bituminous prime coat.

The council also authorized the city to begin accepting quotes for gravel.

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The Life of Tobias Erickson



Tobias "Toby" Lee Erickson, 63, of Billings, Montana passed away suddenly at his home on February 5, 2025, following a cardiac event. His beloved wife, Missy, daughter, Emily, and dog, Bailey, were by his side as he left this world.

Christened a "turkey baby" by his mother, Toby was born on Thanksgiving Day, November 23, 1961, to Gertrude (Clifton) Erickson and Myron Erickson in Sisseton, South Dakota while the family resided in New Effington, South Dakota. Toby was the second youngest in a family of five children. Gertie and Myron set an excellent example of tenacity and industry for their children by opening their own company, Dependable Sanitation, in the face of many challenges including severe damage to their home by a tornado and Myron's suffering a debilitating stroke. These characteristics were present in every aspect of Toby's life and were values he instilled in

his children.

As a child, Toby loved creating mischief and cracking jokes, as well as many athletic pursuits, mainly wrestling and football. Toby went on to compete individually for Groton High School in the South Dakota State Championship Wrestling Tournaments of 1978, 1979, and 1980, taking home first place for his weight class (112lbs) in 1979. Following his graduation from Groton High School in 1980, Toby was offered a wrestling scholarship to attend Montana State University in Bozeman where he found his two great loves. MSU Bobcat Football and his soulmate, Missy Newville.

In June of 1981, Missy and Toby met at the now-defunct Bozeman bar, The Slide Company. She asked him to dance, and he filled her beer mug for a quarter; they have been inseparable since. They shared their first official date eating Pickle Barrel Cheesesteaks next to Hyalite Reservoir. Toby and Missy were married at the Holy Rosary Church in Bozeman on August 6, 1983, and shared 41 years of adventures. Toby was readily accepted by the Newville family and formed a close bond with Ron, Missy's father, based on their shared love for card games, hunting, and fierce competition.

After a brief stint in Aberdeen, South Dakota, Missy and Toby moved back to Bozeman, Montana in 1984 where they welcomed their first daughter, Emily Ann, in 1988. Toby returned to MSU shortly after Emily's birth and graduated in June 1992 with a B.S. in Chemical Engineering. It is here that he met his lifelong best friend, Camrin Koenig.

Toby's job then relocated the family to Tucson, Arizona where his second daughter, Addysin Nicole, was born in 1993. As Toby continued to excel in his career, the family moved to Houston, Texas then Corona, California, and finally settled back in Houston, Texas. For the next 13 years, Toby reveled in hosting numerous backyard pool parties, Thanksgiving celebrations, and countless motorcycle rides with Missy through the Texas backcountry. During this time, Emily married Darin Zanto in 2010, and he quickly became the son that Toby never had. In 2013, Emily proudly recruited Toby to Anvil Corporation as a Senior Project Manager, where he celebrated his 10th anniversary with the company in December of 2023. Working together was one of the greatest joys of both father and daughter. Missy and Toby happily relocated to Billings, Montana just in time for the birth of their first granddaughter Peyton Ella Zanto in 2014. In 2019, they welcomed their second granddaughter Paige Emerson Zanto. In the fall of 2022, Addy had the privilege of her dad escorting her down the aisle when she married Patrick Costello, and with this Toby's family was complete.

While Toby was a talented engineer and leader, he excelled in his roles as "Daddy" and "Papa," and he adored his girls. He walked the perfect line between a nonjudgmental protector and a trusted advisor. He beamed with pride anytime he talked about his family and was always happy to brag about their achievements to any passing stranger or co-worker.

Toby also had a unique gift of genuine play that inspired children and adults alike to have fun and cut loose. In his last few years, he leaned into all the things that brought him joy: hosting poker parties, movie line drops at work with Emily, camping trips with family, guiding giant flotillas down the Madison River, competitively fishing with Addy, perfecting his Old Fashioned recipe with Darin, golfing after work, playing made up games with his grand girls, spoiling his dog, Bailey, going to Bobcat football games with his nephew, Nick, and most of all traveling with his great love, Missy, all over the country in their camper

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the "Mellencamp Mansion".

He was an "expert" on everything (and he would tell you how you are doing it wrong), an insanely good corn hole and card game player, a devoted husband of 41 years, a fascinating storyteller, a Bobcat fan through and through, every kid's favorite playmate, a passionate trash talker, a steadfast friend, an excellent cocktail maker, the best Papa to his grand girls and about a million other wonderful things. To know him really was to love him! His presence will leave a lasting void in the lives of all who knew him.

He is survived by his wife, Missy of Billings, MT daughters; Addy (Patrick) of Bozeman, MT, and Emily (Darin), granddaughters; Peyton and Paige of Billings, MT; his mother Gertrude of Groton, SD, brothers; Mike (Carolyn) of Aberdeen, SD, and Terry (Marilyn) of Springfield, MO; sisters; Tami (Rich) Zimney of Ferney, SD, and Tracey (Neil) Erickson of Republic, MO; brothers-in-law; Sam (Jan) Newville of Bozeman, MT, and Tony (Deborah) Newville of Bozeman, MT, as well as, numerous nieces and nephews.

Toby was preceded in death by his father, Myron, father-in-law, Ron Newville, mother-in-law, Jeannine Newville, and many beloved family dogs - Jessie, Sadie, Molly, Monte, and Shayla.

Three celebrations of life will be held in different locations that were important to Toby. The first to be held in Billings on March 8th, 2025, from 3-7 pm at the Laurel Golf Club where drinks and appetizers will be served. Please come prepared to share your favorite "Toby" story. The Groton, SD Celebration of Life will be held in Spring 2025. The Bozeman, MT Celebration of Life will be held in Summer 2025. Details on these events will be announced as plans come together.

In lieu of flowers, Toby's family asks that you crack open a Miller Lite for him and/or contribute to the Montana Wildlife Federation to help conserve wildlife, habitat, and outdoor public access.

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Groton Community March Calendar

Saturday, March 1

State Wrestling Tournament in Rapid City

Sunday, March 2

Open Gym, 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Pancake Sunday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., Groton Community Center

United Methodist: Worship with communion at Conde, 8:15 a.m.; at Groton, 9:30 a.m.; at Britton, 11:15 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 10:30 a.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; No Sunday School; Meeting with Pastor Renee from Synod following worship; Choir, 6 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.

Monday, March 3

Senior Menu: Beef stew, corn, peaches, biscuit.

School Breakfast: Professor's Stuffed Bagels

School Lunch: Beef sticks, mashed potatoes.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

Tuesday, March 4

Senior Menu: Chicken fried steak, mashed potato with gravy, California blend, blushing pears, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Mrs. White's Waffles.

School Lunch: Tacos.

Region 1A Boys Basketball

City Council Meeting, 4 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Ladies Aid LWML, 1:30 p.m.

United Methodist: New Bible Study - Book of Ruth, 10 a.m.

Wednesday, March 5

ASH WEDNESDAY

Senior Menu: Baked fish, Mac n Cheese, peas, fruit, dinner roll.

School Breakfast: Colonel Mustard's Muffins.

School Lunch: Mac and cheese, mixed vegetables

Groton Chamber Meeting, Noon, City Hall

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.; Sarah Circle, 5 p.m.; Lenten Supper, 6 p.m. (Host-WELCA Board), worship, 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lenten Service, 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Community Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton Ash Wednesday Service, 6 p.m.

Thursday, March 6

Senior Menu: New England Ham Dinner, carrots, Mandarin Orange salad, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Ballroom Breakfast Pizza.

School Lunch: Hamburgers, fries.

Girls SoDak16 Basketball

Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.

Friday, March 7

WORLD DAY OF PRAYER

Senior Menu: Tuna noodle hotdish, mixed vegetables, baked apples, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Confidential Egg Wraps.

School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.

Region 1A Boys. Basketball

End of Third Quarter

Saturday, March 8

Sunday, March 9

SPRING FORWARD - Turn Clocks ahead 1 hour

Open Gym: 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:15 a.m.; at Groton, 9:30 a.m.; at Britton, 11:15 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 10:30 a.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship/Milestones for 7th and 8th graders, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45

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a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.;
Worship, 11 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship,
10:30 a.m.

Monday, March 10

Senior Menu: Beef tips on rice, Capri blend, oranges with vanilla pudding, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast sliders.

School Lunch: Frensch bread pizza, corn.

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

Groton Senior Citizens Meet, 1 p.m., Groton Community Center

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

United Methodist: PEO Meeting, 7 p.m.

Tuesday, March 11

Senior Menu: Tatertot hot dish, green beans, pineapple, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Egg Omelet.

School Lunch: Sloppy joe, tater tots.

Boys SoDak16 Basketball

Emmanuel Lutheran: Church Council, 6 p.m.

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

Wednesday, March 12

Senior Menu: Chicken alfredo, California blend, Cherry fluff, breadstick.

School Breakfast: Cereal.

School Lunch: Chicken nuggets, potato wedges.

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.; Lenten Supper, 6 p.m. (host - Emmanuel Men), worship, 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lenten Service, 7 p.m.

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

Thursday, March 13

Senior Menu: Salisbury steak, mashed potato with gravy, peaches, peas and carrots, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Biscuits.

School Lunch: Chicken nachoes, refried beans.

State A Girls Tournament, Spearfish (BHSU)
Groton Lions Club Meeting, 6 p.m., 104 N Main.

Friday, March 14

Senior Menu: Chicken strips, au gratin, mixed vegetables, tropical fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast cookie.

School Lunch: Fish nuggets, baby bakers.

State A Girls Tournament, Spearfish (BHSU)

Saturday, March 15

State A Girls Tournament, Spearfish (BHSU)

Sunday, March 16

Open Gym: 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:15 a.m.; at Groton, 9:30 a.m.; at Britton, 11:15 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 10:30 a.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.;
Worship, 11 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship,
10:30 a.m.

Monday, March 17

St. PATRICK'S DAY

Senior Menu: Corned beef cabbage, mashed potatoes, pistachio pudding salad, corn muffin.

St. John's Lutheran: Christian Literature Circle, 7:30 p.m.

School Breakfast: French toast.

School Lunch: Turkey gravy over mashed potatoes.

Groton Senior Citizens Meet, 1 p.m., Groton Community Center

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

Tuesday, March 18

Senior Menu: Parmesan chicken breast, wild rice, italian blend, cinnamon apple sauce, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Scones.

School Lunch: Pasta with meat sauce.

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Middle School Talent Show, 7 p.m., GHS Gym
City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Quilting, 9 a.m.
United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

Wednesday, March 19

Senior Menu: Hot pork sandwich, sweet potato, green beans, pears.
School Breakfast: Oatmeal.
School Lunch: Cheese stuffed breadstick, Marinaria sauce.
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.; Lenten Supper, 6 p.m. (Host - Sarah Circle), worship 7 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lenten Service, 7 p.m.
United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton Ad Council, 7 p.m.

Thursday, March 20

Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, corn, apple crisp, garlic toast.
State A Boys Basketball Tournament, Sioux Falls
Spring Break - No School
Emmanuel Lutheran: WELCA, 1:30 p.m. (Program - Nigeria, Host-Sarah)

Friday, March 21

Senior Menu: Vegetable soup, egg salad sandwich, tomato spoon salad, fruit.
State A Boys Basketball Tournament, Sioux Falls
Spring Break - No School

Saturday, March 22

State A Boys Basketball Tournament, Sioux Falls
Spring Vendor Fair, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., GHS Gym

Sunday, March 23

United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:15 a.m.; at Groton, 9:30 a.m.; at Britton, 11:15 a.m.; No Sunday School; Coffee hour, 10:30 a.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; No Sunday School
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; No Sunday School, Choir, 6 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS

Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.
First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.
Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.

Monday, March 24

Senior Menu: Creamed chicken, capri blend, fruit, biscuit.
School Breakfast: Stuffed bages.
School Lunch: Corn dogs, baked beans.
School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.
Groton Senior Citizens Meet, Noon Potluck., Groton Community Center
Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.
United Methodist: PEO Meeting, 7 p.m.

Tuesday, March 25

Senior Menu: Sloppy joe on bun, oven roasted potatoes, corn, fruited Jell-O.
School Breakfast: Waffles.
School Lunch: Chicken strips, tri taters.
Milbank FFA CDE
NSU Indoor Track Meeting, 1 p.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 4 p.m.; Lenten Supper (Host-Nigeria Circle), 6 p.m.; Worship, 7 p.m.
United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

Wednesday, March 26

Senior Menu: Pork chop, scalloped potatoes, winter blend, oranges, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Muffins.
School Lunch: Quesadilla, southwest corn.
Groton United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.
Groton C&MA: Kid's Club, Youth Group, Adult Bible Study, 7 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lenten Service, 7 p.m.
United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

Thursday, March 27

Senior Menu: Beef noodle stroganoff, mixed vegetables, pineapple, cookie, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.
School Lunch: Old school chili, cornbread.

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Friday, March 28

Senior Menu: Meatballs, mashed potato and gravy, carrots, strawberry ambrosia, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Egg wraps.

School Lunch: Garlic cheese bread, cooked carrots.

Saturday, March 29

Sunday, March 30

United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:15 a.m.; at Groton, 9:30 a.m.; at Britton, 11:15 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 10:30 a.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS

Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.

Monday, March 31

Senior Menu: Pork cutlet, creamy noodles, California Blend, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast sliders.

School Lunch: Chicken breast, mashed potatoes.

First Allowable Day of Girls Golf

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

Groton Dominates Redfield in Region 1A Tournament Opener

The Groton Area Tigers came out firing on all cylinders Tuesday night, overpowering the Redfield Pheasants 44-9 in the first round of the Region 1A Girls Basketball Tournament at Groton. From the opening tip, Groton's aggressive defense and efficient shooting set the tone for a dominant performance.

The Tigers wasted no time building an early advantage, jumping out to a 14-2 lead by the end of the first quarter. Their relentless pressure on defense forced numerous Redfield turnovers, and Groton capitalized with quick transition baskets. By halftime, the Tigers had widened the gap to 31-4, with their defense holding Redfield to just two made field goals in the first 16 minutes.

As the third quarter progressed, Groton's lead continued to grow. When Taryn Traphagen sank a mid-range jumper with 4:53 left in the period, the mercy rule was enforced as the Tigers reached a 35-4 advantage. By the time the quarter ended, Groton had stretched their lead to 41-6, putting the game well out of reach.

Faith Traphagen led the Tigers in scoring with 11 points, followed closely by her sister, Taryn Traphagen, who added 10. Brooklyn Hansen and Rylee Dunker each contributed 6 points, while Chesney Weber scored 4 and led the team with 5 rebounds and 4 assists. Talli Wright added 3 points, and Jerica Locke and Jaedyn Penning each chipped in 2.

Groton's defensive intensity was a difference-maker, as they racked up 17 steals, with Faith Traphagen leading the way with 7. The Tigers forced 30 Redfield turnovers and held them to just 14 percent shooting from the field (3-for-21).

For Redfield, Charli Jungwirth was the bright spot, leading the team with 5 points. Brynn Giblin and Kinley Smith each scored 2. The Pheasants struggled to find any rhythm against Groton's smothering defense and managed just three field goals the entire game.

Despite committing 15 turnovers of their own, Groton was efficient offensively, shooting 43 percent (12-of-28) on two-pointers and 36 percent (5-of-14) from beyond the arc. Their free throw shooting matched their three-point percentage at 36 percent (5-of-14).

With the dominant victory, Groton advances to the next round of the Region 1A Tournament, carrying momentum and confidence into their next challenge. Redfield, meanwhile, will look to regroup and build for the future after a tough night on the court. Groton Area will play Sisseton, 7 p.m., at the Groton Area Arena.



Taryn Traphagen launches a three-pointer. She made two three-pointers in the first half, contributing 10 points to the Tiger tally. (Photo by

Paul Kosel)

Groton Stats

Jerica Locke: 2 points, 1 rebound, 1 assist, 1 foul.
Jaedyn Penning: 2 points, 1 rebound, 4 fouls.
Kennedy Hansen: 1 rebound, 3 assists, 1 steal, 1 foul.
Brooklyn Hansen: 6 points, 1 rebound, 1 steal.
Rylee Dunker: 6 points, 4 rebounds, 1 assist, 2 steals.
Faith Traphagen: 11 points, 1 rebound, 7 steals.
Laila Roberts: 3 assists, 1 steal, 2 fouls.
Taryn Traphagen: 10 points, 2 rebounds, 1 steal.

- Story compiled by ChatGPT

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Talli Wright: 3 points, 1 rebound, 1 foul.

Mia Crank: 2 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 foul.

McKenna Tietz: 1 rebound, 1 steal.

Chesney Weber: 4 points, 5 rebounds, 4 assists, 1 steal, 1 foul.

Ashlynn Warrington: 1 rebound, 2 steals.

Sydney Locke: 1 rebound, 1 foul.

2-Pointers: 12-28 43%, 3-Pointers: 5-14 36%, Free Throws: 5-14 36%, 23 rebounds, 15 turnovers, 13 assists, 17 steals, 12 fouls.

Redfield: Charlie Jungwirth 5, Brynn Giblin 2, Kinley Smith 2. Field Goals: 3-21 14%, Free Throws 3-4 75%, 12 fouls, 30 turnovers.

Records: Groton Area 15-6. Redfield: 3-18.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Bary Keith of Harr Motors, 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 and Weismantel Agency of Columbia. Paul Kosel and Jeslyn Kosel were on hand for the action.

Gladiators pushing for a state win this weekend

After 4 Trips to the Finals in a Row, Team Gladiators is pushing for a win this weekend at the South Dakota State Championships at SDSU!

After being 2nd seed out of 24 going into the final matches, Team Gladiators just missed the win on February 15th in Spearfish, partnering with Mitchell and playing against 2 teams from Harrisburg. The last week and a half all the teams have been diligently focusing on strategy planning and speed, updating gears and doing the final tweaks necessary to focus on bringing home the Championship this weekend.

This tournament will be held on the SDSU campus this weekend at the University Student Union. Friday qualifying matches are from 6-8pm. Saturday they will start at 9am. The Groton Community is welcome to join us! Check us out on our Facebook page for a link to watch it live to watch or come see us in person!

Spearfish Robotics Tournament Rankings (2/15/2025):

9050F – Gladiators: Garrett Schultz, Lead; Rylee Hofer, Jameson Penning & Haden Harder

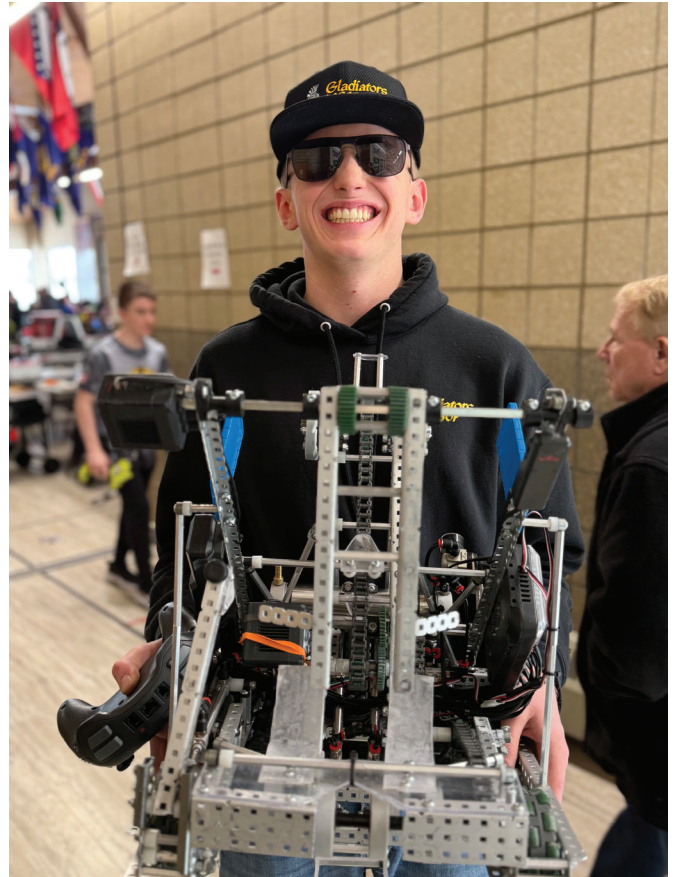
Qualifier Ranking – 2nd out of 24. (5 Wins/1 Loss) Won Quarter Finals, Semi Finals, Lost in the Championship 21 to 32.

9050E – Galaxy: Axel Warrington & Corbin Weismantel, Co-Lead; Illyanna Dallaire & Ayce Warrington

Qualifier Ranking – Rank 16th out of 24. (3 Wins/3 Losses) Loss in Quarter Finals 10 to 43.

9050B – Gearheads: Logan & Kira Clocksene, Co-Lead; Peyton Padfield & Emmett Zoellner

Qualifier Ranking – Rank 17th out of 24 (3 Wins/3 Losses) Loss in Quarter Finals 15 to 31.



Garrett Schultz - Team Lead - 9050F Gladiators. (Courtesy Photo)

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Groton Area February Students of the Month



Pictured in back, left to right, are Rylie Rose (9th), Jerica Locke (11th), Hallee Harder (10th) and Kennedy Hansen (12th); in front, left to right, are Zachary Flihs (8th), Liam Lord (7th) and Emmett Zoellner (6th).

Groton Area School works to ensure that all levels of academic instruction also include the necessary life skills teaching, practicing, and modeling that encourages essential personal life habits that are universally understood to facilitate helping our students become good human beings and citizens.

It is learning with our heads, hearts, and hands to be caring and civil, to make healthy decisions, to effectively problem solve, to be respectful and responsible, to be good citizens, and to be empathetic and ethical individuals.

Students are selected based on individual student growth in the areas of: positive behavior, citizenship, good attendance, a thirst for knowledge, and high academic standards.



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<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

'I'm embarrassed': SD House unanimously rejects repeal of veteran burial program

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 25, 2025 7:09 PM

In a moment of solidarity Tuesday at the Capitol in Pierre, South Dakota's House of Representatives unanimously voted against former Gov. Kristi Noem's proposal to eliminate funding for veteran burials in private cemeteries.

Rep. Terri Jorgenson, R-Rapid City, previously endorsed the legislation in the House Appropriations Committee because there are other funding options available for veterans buried in public veterans' cemeteries.

The state program provides a \$100 stipend to veterans and their families to etch the veteran's military information on the back of a privately purchased headstone and another \$200 stipend for the cost of the setting, Jorgenson said.

Jorgenson said South Dakota families also have access to two public veteran cemeteries in the state that cover all costs of burial and upkeep. The federal government provides some additional support, depending on the circumstances of the veteran's death.

The committee unanimously supported House Bill 1038 earlier this week. Jorgenson was tasked with carrying the bill on the House floor.

"I drew the short straw," she said.

What seemed like an acceptable idea at the committee level met staunch resistance in the House, including from Rep. Jeff Bathke, R-Mitchell.

"I'm embarrassed today that we have to sit on this floor and actually defend \$52,000 of over a \$7 billion budget to help bury our veterans," Bathke said.

Lawmakers are facing numerous potential budget cuts this legislative session, due in part to lower-than-anticipated sales tax revenues and rising Medicaid expenses. HB 1038 was one of many cuts proposed by Noem's administration, most of which are still pending. Noem has since departed to become secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Jorgenson, who is a veteran herself, told lawmakers in her closing remarks she was considering voting against the bill because of what she heard during the debate.

"I'm going to be kicked off of appropriations," Jorgenson joked.

The chamber ultimately voted unanimously to kill the bill, though two members of the budgeting committee (Reps. Mike Derby, R-Rapid City, and Al Novstrup, R-Aberdeen) initially held true to the committee's recommendation with yes votes before changing their votes to no.

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.

CO2 pipeline moratorium and land-agent regulations advance, but environmental analysis bill fails

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 25, 2025 7:59 PM

PIERRE – In South Dakota's ongoing debate over carbon capture pipelines, lawmakers advanced two bills to further regulate those projects Tuesday but rejected one that would have required in-depth environmental assessments.

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.

The project would transport captured carbon dioxide emissions from more than 50 ethanol plants to an underground storage area in North Dakota. While supporters view it as a critical step toward bolstering the ethanol industry, opponents are concerned about private property rights and safety risks from potential leaks.

Pipeline moratorium

One of the bills that passed the House of Representatives, 40-30, seeks to halt the construction of carbon dioxide pipelines in South Dakota until the federal Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration finalizes new safety regulations.

"This bill simply asks that we take the time to sit back, take a step back, and wait until these rules are finished," said the bill's sponsor, Rep. Richard Vasgaard, R-Centerville.

Supporters said the moratorium is essential to safeguard residents and ensure that comprehensive safety standards are in place before proceeding with such projects.

Opponents said existing regulations are sufficient and that delaying pipeline development could hinder economic opportunities and deter investment in the state's energy sector.

The bill goes to the Senate next.

Land agent accusations

Another bill headed to the Senate empowers landowners to sue for allegedly deceptive practices, fraud, harassment, intimidation or misrepresentation during the acquisition of land access agreements — known as easements — by carbon pipeline land agents. It passed the House 36-34.

Supporters alleged there have been numerous instances when landowners faced aggressive or misleading tactics from CO2 pipeline land agents. They said the bill provides the necessary legal recourse and promotes fair negotiations.

"Why is it OK for these companies to treat us like this?" said the bill's sponsor, Rep. Kaley Nolz, R-Mitchell.

Opponents said such misconduct is already illegal. They said the bill's provisions might be overly broad, potentially complicating legitimate infrastructure projects and leading to increased litigation.

"This bill is a lawyer's dream," said Rep. Steve Duffy, R-Rapid City.

Environmental impact statements

A bill failed that would have mandated any applicant seeking a permit for a carbon dioxide pipeline to have an environmental impact statement.

Opponents said the requirement could introduce bureaucratic delays, increase project costs and discourage companies from pursuing energy projects in South Dakota.

Supporters emphasized the necessity of thoroughly assessing potential environmental consequences, like the impact on the state's water resources, before project approval.

"We are literally, in my opinion, walking blind into a huge project that is going to use millions of gallons of water," said bill sponsor Rep. John Hughes, R-Sioux Falls.

However, because the bill also included a permanent application fee increase, the House speaker ruled that the bill required a two-thirds majority. The vote was 37-32, which was short of two-thirds, and the

bill failed.

Eminent domain bills pending

The Summit project may ultimately need eminent domain to gain land access from unwilling landowners. Eminent domain is a legal process for obtaining that access 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 carbon pipelines passed the House last month and is awaiting action in the Senate.

Another bill approved by the Senate earlier this week 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.

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.

Failure of task force bill complicates South Dakota's prison construction impasse

BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 25, 2025 7:48 PM

South Dakota lawmakers have reached an impasse on prison construction talks: They have a stalled \$825 million plan, and no path to a new plan for replacing the aging penitentiary or addressing prison population growth.

The latest twist happened Tuesday at the Capitol in Pierre when the state Senate voted 20-15 against the formation of a task force to study new options.

Sen. Kevin Jensen, R-Canton, summarized the situation as he tried unsuccessfully to save his task force proposal.

"What next? We have no other alternative," Jensen said. "We have no place to go."

Tuesday's Senate vote followed earlier drama in the House of Representatives.

Legislation to approve the final \$182 million needed for the \$825 million prison construction proposal failed to get a House vote Friday when it became clear it lacked the two-thirds support needed for a spending bill. The House also rejected a substitute effort Friday, and again on Monday, to keep talks alive by continuing to set aside money without approving a specific construction plan.

Meanwhile, there's more than \$600 million lingering in a prison construction account, the result of money lawmakers set aside during past legislative sessions and interest earned on that money.

There's also a lingering \$62 million of spending authority that lawmakers approved during previous legislative sessions to prepare a site for construction. That site is 15 miles south of Sioux Falls in rural Lincoln County, where the state Department of Corrections hopes to build a 1,500-bed men's prison that would largely replace the antiquated Sioux Falls penitentiary, parts of which date to 1881. Jensen's bill to freeze that money failed Monday in a committee, and his procedural attempt to force it onto the Senate calendar failed Tuesday.

The proposed prison site has been controversial and opposed by neighbors since it was announced in 2023. The plan has also been controversial for its cost and size. A new crop of lawmakers elected last year has tilted the scales against the plan in the Legislature.

Majority Leader Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, lamented that reality during his remarks on the task force bill. He said some legislators are trying to "grip the process in analysis paralysis."

"What we have here is this current Legislature trying to unwind the work of the previous Legislature

and do things over again," Mehlhaff said. "And the danger in that is that the other Legislature had already authorized and appropriated very significant funds to move forward on a certain plan."

Legislators expressed various other reasons for opposing the formation of a task force.

Sen. Tamara Grove, R-Lower Brule, worried the task force wouldn't consider sentencing reform, which she said is a root cause of the growing prison population. Sen. David Wheeler, R-Huron, said the task force idea lacked buy-in from the Department of Corrections and was therefore doomed to produce a failed plan.

Legislators now have about two weeks left in their annual lawmaking session to figure something out. The stalemate not only affects prison planning, but could also affect the formulation of next year's budget, since it leaves so much money hanging in the balance.

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.

U.S. House Republicans overcome own members' doubts to push through sweeping budget

SD Republican Rep. Dusty Johnson casts one of 217 yes votes

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 25, 2025 9:03 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. House Republicans despite their slim majority approved their budget resolution in a dramatic turn Tuesday night, following days of lobbying by leadership to sway a handful of members who originally planned to vote against the measure.

The 217-215 vote sends the budget to the Senate, where Republicans in that chamber need to vote to adopt it before GOP members can unlock the process they plan to use to approve policies they promised voters they'd enact with unified control of government. Those include border security and an extension of the 2017 tax cuts.

Approval followed a theatrical couple of hours in the House, where GOP leaders appeared to postpone the original vote and members left the chamber en masse. About 15 minutes later, lawmakers were frantically called back to vote on the budget resolution after Republican leadership secured the votes.

Kentucky's Thomas Massie was the only Republican to vote against the budget resolution, which was opposed by every Democrat voting. Tennessee's Tim Burchett, Ohio's Warren Davidson and Indiana's Victoria Spartz, who opposed approval earlier in the day, voted with their fellow GOP colleagues in support.

Massie said following a closed-door Republican Conference meeting Tuesday morning that he had gone from leaning against the budget resolution to being a solid no vote.

"If the Republican plan passes, under the rosier assumptions, which aren't even true, we're going to add \$328 billion to the deficit this year, we're going to add \$295 billion to the deficit the year after that, \$242 billion to the deficit after that," Massie said. "Why would I vote for that?"

Congress' budget resolution is a tax and spending blueprint that doesn't actually spend any money, but is intended to help lawmakers plan out how much they want the federal government to bring in through taxes and fees, and how much they want it to spend on government programs during the next decade.

Lawmakers must then implement any changes proposed in the budget resolution with either a reconciliation bill or regular legislation. Otherwise, the changes cannot take effect since the budget resolution isn't a bill and never goes to the president for his signature.

House Budget Committee ranking member Brendan Boyle, D-Pa., said during floor debate on the budget resolution that its reconciliation instructions call on committees that oversee Medicaid, nutrition assistance and education programs to cut hundreds of billions of dollars to pay for a portion of the tax cuts.

Boyle argued that the proposed reductions in spending would cut more than \$1 trillion, but not enough to cover the \$4.5 trillion in new deficits that the budget resolution allows Congress to implement on tax cuts.

Boyle said he expects the gap to add to the national debt.

"A massive increase to our national debt from the same crowd that for the last four years has done

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nothing but shed crocodile tears about the size of our national debt," Boyle said.

The House budget resolution proposes that Congress raise the nation's debt limit by \$4 trillion in the reconciliation process that will take place later this year.

GOP dissent

Burchett said in an interview Tuesday morning that if House Republican leaders wanted him to vote for the budget resolution, they should start by scheduling a meeting.

"That would be a good start, I would think," Burchett said.

"And second: We promised the people we're going to have cuts, and then we are just going to turn right around and spend the money up at the Pentagon. The war pimps will get theirs no matter what, anyway," Burchett added. "And President Trump has talked about permanent tax cuts. I don't think they're in there. They talk about all this DOGE cuts, which are great, America loves. But what they don't realize is they're just going to attack them right back on the money we save."

Burchett said he would like public verbal confirmation from GOP leadership that Congress will address some of the policy changes they promised voters they'd make.

He later posted a video on social media saying that he was heading to the speaker's office, "allegedly to have a conversation with him over this budget situation."

"I don't know if I'm getting called to the woodshed or what," he said. "But we'll get it figured out."

Identical resolutions needed

The House and Senate must vote to adopt the same budget resolution before Republicans can use the budget reconciliation process to move core policy goals through Congress without needing Democratic votes to get past the Senate's 60-vote legislative filibuster.

The Senate voted last week to approve its budget resolution following a marathon amendment voting session, but House GOP leaders have decided to try to move forward with their own version.

The Senate budget resolution proposes that Congress first approve legislation increasing defense and border security funding by hundreds of billions of dollars and remaking energy policy. Congress would then approve a second budget resolution that would allow lawmakers to extend the 2017 GOP tax law in another reconciliation bill.

The House budget resolution proposes all of those initiatives are bundled together in one reconciliation package.

President Donald Trump said a few hours before the House vote that he was trying to decide which plan to support, despite endorsing the House's one-bill plan last week.

"The House has a bill and the Senate has a bill, and I'm looking at them both, and I'll make decisions," Trump said. "But I don't know where they are in the vote. I know the Senate's doing very well, and the House is doing very well. But each one of them has things that I like, so we'll see if we can come together."

Turning an aircraft carrier

Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., said during a press conference Tuesday morning that the "objective and our commitment" with a budget reconciliation bill has always been that it not increase the deficit.

"If we can reduce the deficit, even better," Johnson said. "But here's another thing everybody needs to consider; not only are we working to find savings for the American taxpayer; to find a better, more efficient, more effective use of their dollars, which we are morally obligated to do. We also have a moral obligation to bend the curve on the debt."

The resolution under debate Tuesday could lead to increased deficits, as noted by GOP critics.

The annual deficit for fiscal year 2024 totaled \$1.8 trillion dollars, according to the Treasury Department. When combined with decades of deficits that brought the national debt to more than \$36 trillion.

Johnson said during his press conference the GOP can't address the entire deficit or begin to pay down the nation's debt in one bill, comparing it to turning an aircraft carrier.

"It takes miles of open ocean to turn an aircraft carrier because it's such a large vessel," Johnson said. "I think the metaphor is obvious here: We can't do it all at once. But we are going to take a big bite out of that. We are going to make a big course correction in this process."

"So stay tuned on the details," Johnson added. "We are going to do this methodically, we're going to do it in a very responsible manner and we're going to achieve the goals."

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

Noem's DHS will require migrants without legal status to register with U.S. government

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - FEBRUARY 25, 2025 8:07 PM

WASHINGTON — Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem late Tuesday announced a campaign to compel people in the United States without legal authority to register with the U.S. government and then self-deport.

In doing so, Trump administration officials could carry out their plans for mass deportations without using agency resources for physical removals.

Noem said in a press release that if a person without legal status fails to register online, that person will be subject to a fine, imprisonment or both.

It's unclear how much the fine is, or what charges would be levied that would result in imprisonment. In response to State Newsroom's request for comment, DHS said it was looking into those details.

"If you leave now, you may have the opportunity to return and enjoy our freedom and live the American dream," a DHS spokesperson said in a statement.

In order to return to the U.S. after a voluntary departure, an approved visa petition is needed, like a work visa, as well as a waiver of inadmissibility from a U.S. embassy or consulate.

The registry is not up and running, but a form and process will be made available in the coming days, according to the DHS website.

Registering would require submitting fingerprint information and other personal information. Adults and children 14 and older would be required to register.

"Compelling mass self-deportation is a safer path for aliens and law enforcement, and saves U.S. taxpayer dollars, in addition to conserving valuable Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) resources needed to keep Americans safe," according to the DHS press release.

Tuesday's late announcement comes as Noem has appeared in commercials where she has warned immigrants without legal authorization "will be hunted down and deported."

Those who are required to register include immigrants in the U.S. without legal authorization, "Canadian visitors who entered the United States at land ports of entry and were not issued evidence of registration" and those enrolled in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program, or those with Temporary Protected Status, according to the DHS website.

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

Washington state judge blocks Trump administration suspension of refugee program

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - FEBRUARY 25, 2025 4:38 PM

WASHINGTON — A federal judge in Washington state Tuesday granted a nationwide injunction requested by faith groups challenging President Donald Trump's executive order suspending the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, as well as the administration's withholding of funds appropriated by Congress for those services.

District Judge Jamal Whitehead of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Washington said that while the president has the discretion to suspend entry to refugees, "that authority is not limitless."

"I cannot ignore Congress' detailed framework for refugee admissions and the limits it places on the president's ability to suspend the same," Whitehead said. "The evidence before me shows that plaintiffs face concrete, irreparable harms, including refugees stranded after selling their possessions, agencies laying off hundreds of staff and family reunification suspended indefinitely."

Refugees who are plaintiffs in the suit include a family of three in Iraq; another family of three from the Democratic Republic of the Congo; a mother trying to be reunited with her daughter, who's in South Africa; a mother and son from Iraq waiting for resettlement from Jordan; and a man from Afghanistan, among others.

Whitehead, whom President Joe Biden appointed in 2023, said he would issue a more detailed order, and added that those who brought the suit against the Trump administration are "likely to show that the president's suspension of the U.S. (Refugee Admissions Program) has crossed the line from permissible discretionary action to effective nullification of congressional will."

Trump order on refugees, funding

The executive order that Trump signed on his first day in office suspended all refugee admission and processing, as well as funding for organizations that handle resettlement in the United States.

The order directed officials at the State Department and Department of Homeland Security to submit a report every 90 days to the White House. The president then will determine whether refugee resettlement is "in the interests of the United States."

Whitehead raised issues with the implementation of the executive order, "which likely violates bedrock principles of administrative law by vastly expanding the scope of the order with no reason(able) explanation, no advance notice and no (Administrative Procedure Act) compliant procedure."

August Flentje, who argued on behalf of the Department of Justice, asked Whitehead for a stay while the government seeks an emergency appeal. That appeal would go to the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

The International Refugee Assistance Project filed the lawsuit on behalf of faith groups Church World Service, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and Lutheran Community Services Northwest, as well as refugees who had their resettlement flights canceled, a local refugee sponsor and families trying to reunite.

Immediate harm argued

Deepa Alagesan, the litigator on the case for the International Refugee Assistance Project, argued that the executive order caused immediate harm for the religious groups in the suit and called the impact of the funding suspension "catastrophic."

Alagesan said the groups have had to lay off staff, end local partnerships and "face the prospect of shutting their doors."

Flentje argued that those groups had government contracts and a "contract dispute does not make out irreparable harm and should be resolved based on the terms of the contract."

Whitehead asked if funding from an already approved contract was withheld.

Flentje said he didn't know the full details and pointed out that the groups did not provide copies of their contracts to the Justice Department.

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Alagesan said the suspension of the refugee services went far beyond the executive order.

"It involved the cancellation of travel before the executive order took effect, which has left refugees, including plaintiffs, stranded, totally in limbo," she said.

She said that irreparable harm had been done to her clients.

Flentje pushed back on that argument.

He said that in the refugee program, refugees are usually "moved to a third safe location well before there's any refugee determination."

He argued that other than one plaintiff group, a family of three in Iraq, most of the refugees "have moved out of the areas where they face persecution."

"The plaintiff in Iraq has lived there for about 16 years since the allegations of persecution ... that he identified in the declaration, and State Department reports of current conditions in Iraq don't support the notion that there is the kind of irreparable harm alleged in that declaration," Flentje said.

According to the complaint, that plaintiff "lives under threat in Iraq with his wife and three-year-old child because of his association with the U.S. presence in that country and his membership in a persecuted ethno-religious minority."

The family's flight was scheduled to leave on Feb. 3, but was canceled.

Whitehead asked if Flentje agreed that irreparable harm had been done.

"In the record that's been put before the court, I have refugees stranded in dangerous places. I have families who sold everything they owned in advance of travel that was abruptly canceled. I've got spouses and children separated indefinitely from their refugee family members in the U.S. I see resettlement agencies that have already laid off hundreds of staff and face potential insolvency," Whitehead said.

He asked Flentje if those are not "textbook examples of harm."

Flentje said the harms need to be separated out, among the nine plaintiffs and three organizations. He then added that if the court determines there is harm, it should only limit the injunction to those who brought the suit.

"I think again, if there's relief based on that individual harm, it has to go to only those individuals who have made out a case for irreparable harm," he said.

Refugee Act conflict with Trump order

Alagesan argued that the executive order and suspension of funding conflict with the Refugee Act passed by Congress.

The Refugee Act establishes caps on the number of refugees admitted to the U.S. The number of refugees allowed for fiscal year 2025 is 125,000, and so far 44,000 refugees have been resettled into the U.S.

"Congress has already said that it is in the national interest to provide a permanent system for the resettlement of people who face persecution in their home countries pursuant to the systematic procedures the (Refugee) Act outlines," she said.

Alagesan said that while the president has the broad authority to suspend certain refugee entries, "Congress has specifically provided for consideration of these topics, and the executive order attempts an end run around Congress' plan."

"(The Refugee Act) exempts refugees from specific grounds of inadmissibility, including that they might be a public charge to the U.S.," she said. "And both in its stated purpose and its statutory provisions provides for a detailed system for their distribution around the U.S. and their integration into U.S. society."

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

Federal judge blocks Trump funding freeze, saying it produced a 'nationwide crisis'

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 25, 2025 4:23 PM

WASHINGTON — A federal judge issued a preliminary injunction Tuesday blocking the Trump administration from implementing the type of sweeping freeze on grant and loan programs proposed in a memo the Office of Management and Budget released in late January.

District Judge Loren L. AliKhan of the U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia wrote in the order that the Trump administration couldn't implement or reinstate the proposed pause on trillions of dollars of programs envisioned in the now-rescinded OMB memo.

AliKhan also told the organizations that filed the lawsuit and the Department of Justice to "confer and file a joint status report proposing next steps in this proceeding on or before February 28."

In a memorandum opinion accompanying the order, AliKhan wrote that the Trump administration's proposed pause was "irrational, imprudent, and precipitated a nationwide crisis."

"In the simplest terms, the freeze was ill-conceived from the beginning," she wrote. "Defendants either wanted to pause up to \$3 trillion in federal spending practically overnight, or they expected each federal agency to review every single one of its grants, loans, and funds for compliance in less than twenty-four hours. The breadth of that command is almost unfathomable."

'Significant confusion and fear'

AliKhan wrote the organizations that filed the lawsuit — the National Council of Nonprofits, American Public Health Association, Main Street Alliance and SAGE — showed a preliminary injunction was necessary to protect the public interest.

"Nonprofits and organizations across the country were left adrift as they scrambled to make sense of the memorandum and its effects. Entire funding portals were taken offline with no rhyme or reason, generating significant confusion and fear," AliKhan wrote. "Many organizations had to resort to desperate measures just to stay operational. The pause placed critical programs for children, the elderly, and everyone in between in serious jeopardy."

AliKhan declined a request from the Department of Justice to have the organizations that filed the case put up a bond, or financial guarantee.

"In a case where the government is alleged to have unlawfully withheld trillions of dollars of previously committed funds to countless recipients, it would defy logic—and contravene the very basis of this opinion—to hold Plaintiffs hostage for the resulting harm," AliKhan wrote. "That is especially so when Defendants—OMB and its director—will personally face no monetary injury from the injunction."

President Joe Biden nominated AliKhan and she was confirmed following a Senate vote of 51-50, with the vice president breaking the tie.

Memo issued Jan. 27

This case and another lawsuit filed by Democratic attorneys general began when the Office of Management and Budget issued a two-page memo on Jan. 27 instructing departments and agencies throughout the federal government to pause payments on grants and loans the next day at 5 p.m.

A footnote in the document said the pause wasn't to impact Medicare or Social Security, but it didn't mention programs relied on by tens of millions of Americans, like Medicaid or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

The administration put out guidance the next day that the freeze wouldn't impact "any program that provides direct benefits to Americans" and specifically exempted Medicaid and SNAP.

Later that day, Judge AliKhan issued a short-term administrative stay that was intended to block the freeze from taking effect, though several departments and agencies had already begun implementing the pause.

The following day the Office of Management and Budget rescinded the memo, but a social media post

from White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt caused confusion about what that meant in reality — especially as some organizations continued reporting they couldn't access their federal grants or loans.

"This is NOT a rescission of the federal funding freeze. It is simply a rescission of the OMB memo," Leavitt wrote. "Why? To end any confusion created by the court's injunction. The President's EO's on federal funding remain in full force and effect, and will be rigorously implemented."

AliKhan issued a temporary restraining order on Feb. 3, shortly after the Chief Judge John J. McConnell Jr. of the U.S. District Court in Rhode Island, who is overseeing the case filed by the Democratic attorneys general, issued a TRO on Jan. 31.

AliKhan held a hearing last week, on Feb. 20, over whether to issue a preliminary injunction in the case. McConnell held a hearing Feb. 21 over whether to issue a preliminary injunction in that case, but hadn't released his decision as of Tuesday afternoon.

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

Pilot program will allow new lawyers to swap public service for the bar exam

Pathway would require two years of work for entities like public defenders, state's attorneys

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 25, 2025 12:09 PM

As many as 50 South Dakota law students will be able to bypass the bar exam over the next five years under a set of rules for alternative licensure recently approved by the state Supreme Court.

The public pathways pilot program is an outgrowth of a yearslong debate on the value of the bar exam as a measure of fitness for legal service in the state. Those who pass an ethics test and successfully complete two years in a public service legal position, such as in a state's attorney's or public defender's office, would be in line for admittance to the state bar without a passing score on the exam.

For about a decade, bar exam critics in South Dakota have decried the timed test as a barrier to the profession that can prevent otherwise competent lawyers from service based not on their ability, but upon slower reading speeds or extra time spent fine-tuning their analysis.

The test, they've argued, doesn't mirror the day-to-day work of lawyering.

Several legislative efforts have failed to force the State Bar and University of South Dakota Knudson School of Law to embrace the concept of tying licensure to law school graduation and the successful completion of an ethics screening.

The exam's supporters, including South Dakota Supreme Court Chief Justice Steven Jensen, argue that the multi-part test constitutes a bare minimum measurement of competence. The exam requirement, they say, acts as a baseline bulwark against gross ineptitude and fosters trust in a field whose practitioners are responsible for protecting the rights of South Dakotans involved in the criminal and civil court system.

The South Dakota conversation mirrors a national one; the national organization behind the bar exam has itself spent years reworking the test in response to concerns similar to those raised in South Dakota. States including New Hampshire already have public service pathways similar to the one now poised to begin its piloting phase in South Dakota.

The public service option was born in part through a bar alternatives task force requested by Chief Justice Jensen and endorsed by lawmakers. The group backed the pitch of supervised public service for young graduates of the state's law school as a way to let them prove their mettle in a supervised setting. The program also aims to bolster the public service workforce in a state where rural areas struggle to sustain a reliable crop of lawyers.

The program will be jointly managed by the USD law school and the South Dakota Board of Bar Examiners. The examiner group will be responsible for monitoring the work product and supervisory reports of

each participant.

The program will only be open to students at USD Law and will accept up to 10 participants each year. After five years and an evaluation of the program's operational efficacy, the high court will need to decide whether to continue the public service pathway as a permanent alternative to the bar exam.

A complete list of program rules and eligibility criteria are available on the state Unified Judicial System's website.

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.

Jury selection begins in civil trial brought by Dakota Access Pipeline developer against Greenpeace

BY: MARY STEURER - FEBRUARY 25, 2025 7:57 AM

MANDAN, N.D. — A behemoth defamation lawsuit brought by the developer of the Dakota Access Pipeline against Greenpeace began its trial in a North Dakota courtroom on Monday.

Energy Transfer, a Texas-based oil and gas company, accuses Greenpeace of using underhanded means to back demonstrations against the pipeline in 2016 and 2017.

South-central North Dakota was the center of a roughly seven-month protest against the project. Thousands camped near the pipeline crossing on Lake Oahe in support of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, which asserts that the pipeline is a violation of its sovereignty, poses a contamination threat to its water supply and has disrupted sacred cultural sites.

Greenpeace was one of many activist groups supporting the effort at the time. Energy Transfer says Greenpeace used tactics including defamation, vandalism and harassment in an attempt to tarnish the company's reputation and sink the project. Attorney Trey Cox of Gibson Dunn, the law firm representing Energy Transfer in the case, told the courtroom on Monday the energy company seeks a little under \$300 million from Greenpeace.

Greenpeace denies these allegations, and maintains it never played a significant role in the protests. It claims the lawsuit is a veiled effort to harm Greenpeace and intimidate other activist groups.

Both parties have called the lawsuit, which stretches back six years and has thousands of filings, one of the longest civil cases in state history.

"This is a big trial, it has an impact on a lot of people," Southwest Judicial District Court Judge James Gion told the courtroom Monday morning.

At about 9 a.m., bailiffs escorted a group of roughly 30 people into the left side of the gallery.

Gion said this was the first of three groups of potential jurors that would go before the court for jury selection.

The court seeks nine jurors, plus alternates.

The trial is scheduled for five weeks, not including time for jury deliberation.

"It's an imposition on your time in business to be here, I understand that," Gion said to the jury pool.

Attorneys for Greenpeace previously asked Gion to move the case to a different court, arguing that jurors would be biased against the environmental group. Gion denied the request, finding their evidence inconclusive.

Several in the jury pool told the court Monday they have ties to the oil and gas industry.

Many also said they have negative memories of the Dakota Access Pipeline protests.

"It made me think of the destruction in our community," one woman remarked.

Some said they believed their opinion of the protests could make it difficult for them to be fair jurors. Others said enough time had passed that they could be objective.

Those selected to be on the jury will be forbidden from reading or watching news about the trial, or

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talking with friends and family about the case, Gion said. They also cannot discuss the lawsuit privately with any of the parties or with court personnel.

Jury selection is expected to take up the first two days. After a jury is seated, parties will present their opening statements.

In an unusual move for North Dakota courts, Gion has so far denied media requests for photography or recording inside the courtroom. He also has denied requests to livestream the trial.

An independent group monitoring the trial on Monday announced it will petition the North Dakota Supreme Court to review several of Gion's decisions related to public access. North Dakota Newspaper Association Attorney Jack McDonald also planned to petition the state Supreme Court for expanded media access on behalf of media organizations.

Greenpeace International recently counter-sued Energy Transfer in the Netherlands, asking the court to find that the company's legal challenges unfairly targeted Greenpeace and to award the environmental group damages, among other requests.

The case is the first lawsuit filed under a new European Union directive intended to protect organizations from freedom of speech attacks, attorneys for Greenpeace said in a press conference last week.

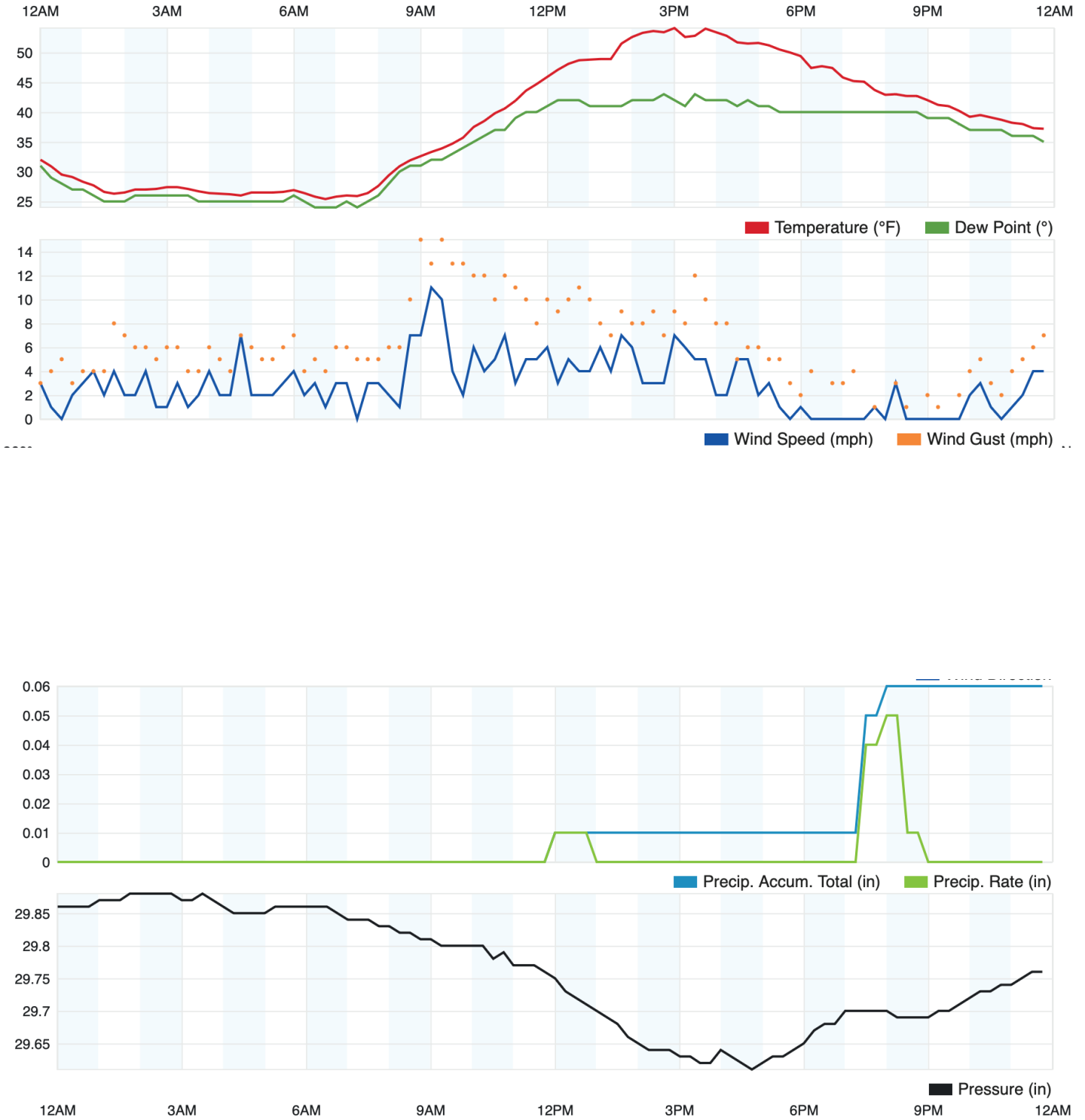
Many states have passed laws to protect people from being targeted by civil suits for exercising their First Amendment rights, but North Dakota is not one of them. The statutes aim to curb what is sometimes referred to as "strategic litigation against public participation," allowing defendants to file for the dismissal of lawsuits related to protected speech.

Mary Steurer is a reporter based in Bismarck for the North Dakota Monitor. A native of St. Louis, Steurer previously worked as the local government reporter for the Casper Star-Tribune newspaper in Wyoming.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 51 °F

Mostly Sunny

Tonight



Low: 27 °F

Mostly Clear

Thursday



High: 55 °F

Mostly Sunny

Thursday
Night



Low: 35 °F

Mostly Clear
then Partly
Cloudy and
Breezy

Friday



High: 50 °F

Mostly Sunny
and Windy

Brief Late Week Cooldown

Wed



Highs:
48 to 55
15 - 20
above normal

Thurs



Highs:
47 to 59
15 - 25
above normal

Fri



Highs:
46 to 59
**Falling
Temps**

Sat



Highs:
30 to 47
near normal

Sun



Highs:
47 to 60
15 - 20
above normal

Warmest Temps Across Central SD/Coollest in Far Northeast SD/Western MN

We will continue to see above normal temperatures, with minimal chances for moisture. Breezy conditions are expected Today and Thursday, but a cold front coming through Friday will result in gusts around 40 to 50 mph. This will usher in cooler temperatures, but that will only stick around for about a day.

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Very High Fire Danger Friday

February 26, 2025
3:18 AM

Strong winds and low humidity combine to create Very High Fire Danger Friday.

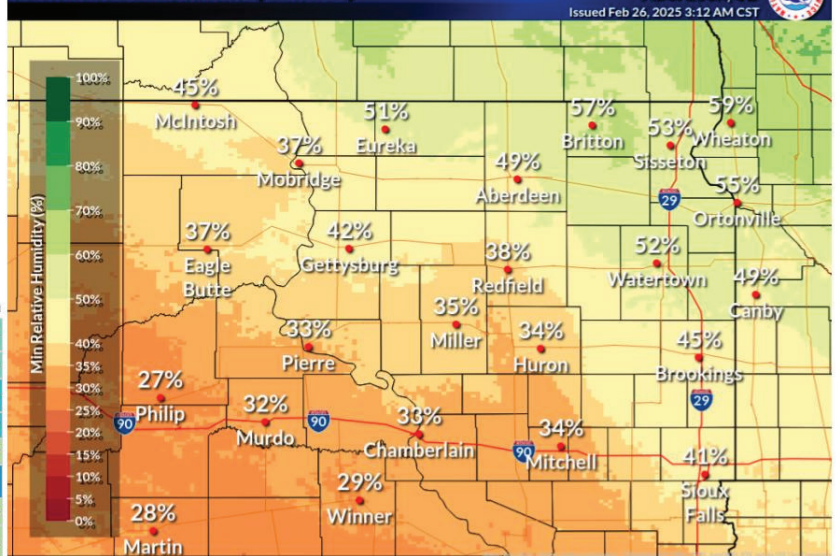
- Wind gusts up to 50 miles per hour or more across South Dakota Friday afternoon.
- Dry conditions will cause humidities to drop as low as 30%.
- Combination of strong winds and low humidity means that fires will spread easily and be difficult to put out.

Maximum Wind Gust Forecast (mph)

	2/27 Thu		2/28 Fri								3/1 Sat	
	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am
Aberdeen	15	24	30	32	41	47	49	48	31	25	21	18
Miller	16	30	31	32	37	43	44	41	30	22	17	15
Mobridge	17	28	31	31	37	40	40	40	30	22	16	13
Murdo	15	23	29	30	32	37	39	38	29	21	15	13
Ortonville	12	22	31	35	38	43	44	43	35	30	26	21
Pierre	12	21	26	28	31	37	40	39	28	17	12	8
Sisseton	15	26	35	37	41	45	45	41	32	29	24	21
Watertown	15	29	32	36	40	46	47	45	35	28	24	20

Minimum Humidity Friday

Weather Forecast Office
Aberdeen, SD
Issued Feb 26, 2025 3:12 AM CST



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.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 54 °F at 2:56 PM

Low Temp: 25 °F at 6:42 AM

Wind: 15 mph at 8:59 AM

Precip: : 0.06

Day length: 11 hours, 3 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 68 in 2024

Record Low: -20 in 1962

Average High: 33

Average Low: 11

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.57

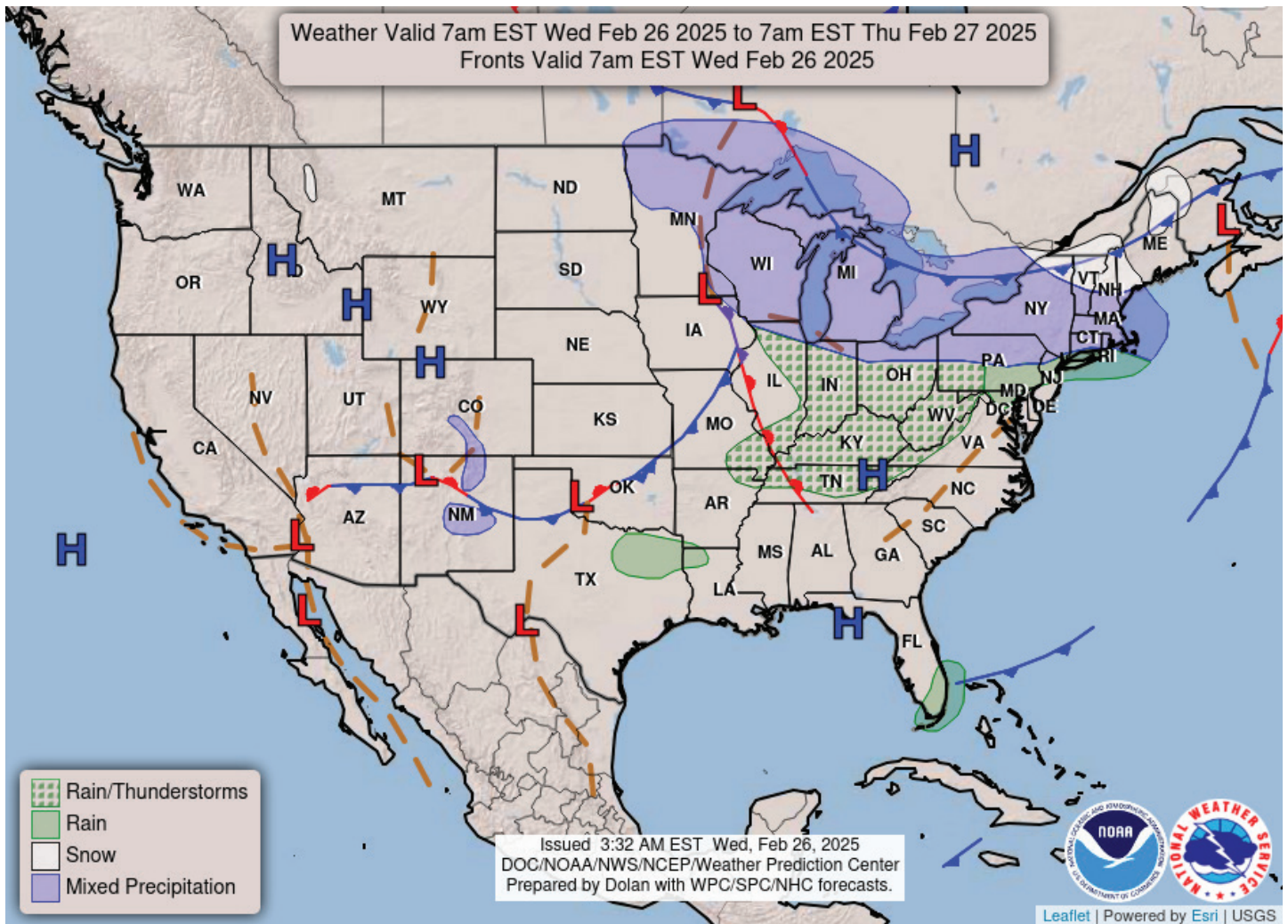
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.45

Average Precip to date: 1.12

Precip Year to Date: 0.45

Sunset Tonight: 6:17:01 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:11:33 am



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Today in Weather History

February 26, 1995: Heavy snow fell on the 26th and 27th in western and central South Dakota near the state's northern border. McLaughlin received 14 inches, Eureka 12 inches, and McIntosh 11 inches. Snowfall amounts dropped to two to four inches about 20 miles south of the northern border.

February 26, 1998: A substantial area of low pressure moved across central and northeast South Dakota from the morning of the 26th to the morning of the 27th. As the low moved northeast, cold north winds of 25 to 35 mph gusting to 45 mph caused widespread rain to change over to snow. Many roads became icy and poor visibilities in snow and blowing snow, and low wind chills developed. Four to 8 inches of snow fell across the counties bordering the Missouri River and in far western McPherson and far western Edmunds counties. Many area schools were dismissed early or canceled. Some residents, especially West River, lost power during the storm. Many McIntosh residents were without power for over 24 hours. Numerous activities and sports events were canceled. Some car accidents did not result in injury. A semi rolled onto its side northwest of Gettysburg on the 26th. Ranchers also experienced some calving problems as a result of the winter storm. Some snowfall amounts included 4 inches at Selby, Herreid, and Mobridge, 5 inches at Isabel, 6 inches at Gettysburg, 7 inches about 11 miles east of Hosmer, and 8 inches at McIntosh. Due to the heavy snow and strong winds, some large drifts also developed, especially West River.

February 26, 2009: A vigorous but relatively fast-moving winter storm system tracked across South Dakota Wednesday night and Thursday. Even with the reasonably quick movement of the system, storm total snowfall amounts were quite impressive. In fact, during the peak of the snowstorm, snowfall rates of 1" to 2" per hour were observed!

1910: Parts of Washington State were amid a storm that produced 129 inches of snow at Laconia between the 24th and the 26th, a single storm record for the state. A series of storms began on the 23rd and led to a deadly avalanche on March 1. Late on the 28th, the snow had changed to rain, setting the stage for disaster.

1972: The Buffalo Creek disaster occurred in the Buffalo Creek Hollow of Logan County in West Virginia. A coal slag dam on the Middle Fork of Buffalo Creek burst, sending a fifty-foot wall of water down a narrow valley killing 125 persons and causing 51 million dollars in damage. Three days of rain atop a six-inch snow cover caused the dam to break.

1987 - A slow moving storm in the southwestern U.S. spread heavy snow from the southern and central Rockies into the Central High Plains Region. Totals in Colorado ranged up to 62 inches at Purgatory. Colorado Springs CO reported a February record of 14.8 inches of snow in 24 hours. Lander WY received four inches in one hour, 13 inches in seven hours, and a record storm total of 26 inches. High winds created near blizzard conditions at Colorado Springs. Fairplay CO reported 43 inches of snow, with drifts ten feet high. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Eight cities in the central and western U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date, including Lamoni IA with a reading of 67 degrees. Temperatures in North Dakota were as warm as those in Florida. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - An upper level weather disturbance brought snow to parts of the central U.S. which just one day earlier were enjoying temperatures in the 60s. Snowfall totals in Missouri ranged up to nine inches at Rolla. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Unseasonably cold weather followed in the wake of the winter storm in the northeastern U.S. Ten cities reported record low temperatures for the date, including Syracuse NY with a reading of 10 degrees below zero. Freezing temperatures in southeastern Virginia caused considerable damage to plants and fruit trees. The barometric pressure reading of 30.88 inches at Wilmington NC was February record for that location. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2004 - A major snowstorm dumps up to 20 inches of snow in the Charlotte metropolitan area. Charlotte's third largest snowstorm on record accumulates 11.6 inches at the airport.

2011: The tallest tree in Wales falls after a wind storm. Located on the Lake Vyrnwy Estate, this 124-year-old Douglas fir stood at 63.7 m (208.9 feet). The tree reportedly was leaning over and had two substantial cracks in the main trunk. This tree would be carved into a giant hand.



THE VALUE OF COMMITMENT

There once was a jockey who lost his first race and felt humiliated. But he did not give up. In fact, he lost his next 250 races before he enjoyed victory. His name? Eddie Arcaro and he became one of the most famous jockeys of his day.

There once was a baseball player who struck out 1,330 times. But he is not remembered for striking out. He is remembered for being one of the greatest home run hitters of all time. His name? Babe Ruth, a true legend in the history of "the game."

There once was a man who failed 99 times while doing the same experiment before it turned out right. But he is not remembered for his failures. Thomas Edison is remembered for being one of the world's greatest inventors and is credited with 1,093 patents and his famous "trial and error" or Edisonian Approach to research: work until "you get the results you are seeking."

Failure need not be fatal. It can be an important part of our learning process and lead us to ultimately discover the plan that God has in store for each of us.

There once was a man who denied his Lord. He often spoke without thinking, was brash and impulsive, turned his back on Jesus at His trial and even denied Him three times. Yet, he became the recognized leader among the disciples, was one of the "inner three" and became one of the greatest voices of the Gospel Message.

Prayer: We are grateful, Lord, that You will not give up on us as long as we stay close to You and seek Your will for our lives. May we never do less than our best for You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take. Proverbs 3:1-6

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

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.25.25

4 8 11 32 52 13

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$197,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 16 Mins 10 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: 16 Hrs 31 Mins 10 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.25.25

6 10 14 16 25 11

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 46 Mins 10 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.22.25

6 9 13 14 17

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$45,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 46 Mins 10 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.24.25

22 48 61 63 66 17

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 15 Mins 9 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: 17 Hrs 15 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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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
05/12/2025 High School Girls Golf Meet at Olive Grove
05/26/2025 Memorial Day Services Groton Union Cemetery with lunch at Legion Post #39, 12pm
06/07/2025 Day of Play
06/13/2025 SDSU 4 Person Scramble at Olive Grove
06/21/2025 Groton Triathlon
06/23/2025 Ladies 2 Person Scramble at Olive Grove
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
07/16/2025 Men's Pro Am Golf at Olive Grove
07/25/2025 Ferney Open Scramble Golf at Olive Grove
08/01/2025 Wine on Nine Fundraiser at Olive Grove
08/09/2025 2nd Annual Celebration in the Park/Rib Cook-Off 1-9:30pm
08/23/2025 Glacial Tournament at Olive Grove
09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
09/07/2025 Sunflower Classic Couples Scramble at Olive Grove
10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1:30pm
12/06/2025 Olive Grove Holiday Party and Silent Live Auction Fundraiser

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Brandon Valley 42, Mitchell 36

Huron 65, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 64

Lennox 71, Beresford 54

Sioux Falls Jefferson 78, T F Riggs High School 64

Sioux Falls Roosevelt 66, Aberdeen Central 50

Sturgis Brown High School 64, Douglas 48

Tea 54, Sioux Falls Washington 49

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 53, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 48

Brandon Valley 60, Mitchell 34

O'Gorman High School 63, Huron 36

Sioux Falls Jefferson 70, T F Riggs High School 60

Sioux Falls Washington 70, Tea 33

Sturgis Brown High School 52, Douglas 28

Class A Region 1=

Semifinal=

Groton 44, Redfield 9

Milbank 63, Webster 28

Sisseton 62, Britton-Hecla 35

Class A Region 2=

Semifinal=

Clark-Willow Lake 63, Florence-Henry 37

Great Plains Lutheran 43, Elkton-Lake Benton 18

Sioux Valley 71, Deuel 32

Class A Region 3=

Semifinal=

Dell Rapids 59, Garretson 28

Tri-Valley 49, Madison 29

West Central 70, Baltic 22

Class A Region 4=

Semifinal=

Dakota Valley 92, Beresford 68

Lennox 50, Elk Point-Jefferson 41

Vermillion 71, Canton 36

Class A Region 5=

Semifinal=

McCook Central-Montrose 57, Hanson 36

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 50, Parker 39

Scotland 49, Bon Homme 42

Class A Region 6=

Semifinal=

Chamberlain 40, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 38

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Crow Creek Tribal School 55, Platte-Geddes 43
Miller 58, Stanley County 10
Class A Region 7=
Semifinal=
Lakota Tech 84, Todd County 31
Winner 60, Little Wound 27
Class A Region 8=
Semifinal=
Belle Fourche 52, Hot Springs 23
Hill City 49, Custer 48
Rapid City Christian 73, Lead-Deadwood 27
Class B Region 1=
Semifinal=
Northwestern 52, Waverly-South Shore 32
Warner 40, Langford 28
Waubay/Summit 55, Tiospa Zina 54
Wilmot 54, Hitchcock-Tulare 49
Class B Region 2=
Semifinal=
Arlington 49, Wolsey-Wessington 38
DeSmet 53, Estelline-Hendricks 29
Deubrook 78, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 54
Ethan 66, Canistota 11
Wessington Springs 49, Castlewood 48
Class B Region 3=
Semifinal=
Colman-Egan 60, Bridgewater-Emery 39
Dell Rapids St Mary 52, Chester 47
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 62, Howard 32
Class B Region 4=
Semifinal=
Avon 42, Viborg-Hurley 38
Centerville 55, Irene-Wakonda 24
Gayville-Volin High School 52, Freeman 50
Parkston 59, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 29
Class B Region 5=
Semifinal=
Andes Central/Dakota Christian 63, Lower Brule 25
Burke 68, Marty 49
Corsica/Stickney 59, Gregory 35
Lyman 49, Kimball-White Lake 23
Class B Region 6=
Semifinal=
Faulkton 49, Sully Buttes 32
Herreid-Selby 44, North Central 42
Highmore-Harrold 61, Potter County 49
Tiospaye Topa 57, Ipswich 39
Class B Region 7=
Semifinal=
Bennett County 59, New Underwood 32

Kadoka 45, Jones County 42
Wall 51, Philip 39
White River 57, Edgemont 56
Class B Region 8=
Semifinal=
Faith 41, Timber Lake 27
Harding County 62, Dupree 12
Lemmon High School 56, Newell 23
McLaughlin 56, McIntosh High School 23

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

Southwest Airlines flight abruptly rises to avoid another plane crossing Chicago runway

By COREY WILLIAMS and KATHLEEN FOODY Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Pilots on a Southwest Airlines flight attempting to land at Chicago's Midway Airport were forced to climb back into the sky to avoid another aircraft crossing the runway on Tuesday morning. Airport webcam video posted to X shows the Southwest plane approaching a runway just before 9 a.m. Tuesday before its nose abruptly pulls up. A smaller jet is seen crossing the runway that the passenger plane was set to use.

Southwest Flight 2504 safely landed "after the crew performed a precautionary go-around to avoid a possible conflict with another aircraft that entered the runway," an airline spokesperson said in an email. "The crew followed safety procedures and the flight landed without incident."

Audio recording of communication between the smaller jet and the control tower recorded its pilot misstating instructions from a ground tower employee, who repeated that the pilot should "hold short" of a runway. About 30 seconds later, the ground tower ordered the pilot "hold your position there."

The tower employee is then heard saying: "FlexJet560, your instructions were to hold short of runway 31 center."

Separately, a recording of communication between the Southwest crew and another ground tower employee captured its pilot reporting "Southwest 2504 going around" and following directions to climb back to 3,000 feet.

Seconds later, the audio captures the pilot asking the tower: "Southwest 2504, how'd that happen?"

The second plane, described as a business jet, entered the runway without authorization, according to the Federal Aviation Administration.

Flexjet, the plane's owner, said the company is aware "of the occurrence in Chicago."

"Flexjet adheres to the highest safety standards and we are conducting a thorough investigation," a spokesperson said in a statement. "Any action to rectify and ensure the highest safety standards will be taken."

Both the FAA and the National Transportation Safety Board say they are investigating.

The Southwest Flight was en route to Midway Airport from Omaha, Nebraska, according to FlightAware. Air traffic control audio makes clear that the business jet failed to heed clear instruction not to cross the runway, said Jeff Guzzetti, a former NTSB member and former FAA investigator.

Guzzetti called it a "very serious runway incursion," but added: "However, the sky is not falling because last year was the lowest recorded number of serious runway incursions in a decade."

There were 22 of these serious events in 2023, but just seven in 2024, he said, citing FAA data.

There can be several factors that contribute to these incidents, Guzzetti said: "Was the crew distracted? Was the controller overworked?"

U.S. Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy said Tuesday afternoon on X that while the NTSB and the FAA are investigating, one thing is clear: "However, it is imperative that pilots follow the instructions of air

traffic controllers. If they do not, their licenses will be pulled.”

John Goglia, a former NTSB member, said the near-crash shows “the system worked exactly as it was designed to.”

That is because the Southwest pilot was aware that the other plane wasn’t going to stop in time, he said.

Investigators will likely look at factors including how well-staffed the tower was and whether instructions coming out of the tower were clear, he said.

“Those things do happen,” he said, citing possible miscommunication, including a pilot mishearing instructions.

The past few weeks have seen four major aviation disasters in North America. They include the Feb. 6 crash of a commuter plane in Alaska that killed all 10 people on board and the Jan. 26 midair collision between an Army helicopter and an American Airlines flight at Washington’s Ronald Reagan National Airport that killed all 67 aboard the two aircraft.

A medical transport jet with a child patient, her mother and four others aboard crashed Jan. 31 into a Philadelphia neighborhood. That crash killed seven people, including all those aboard, and injured 19 others.

Twenty-one people were injured Feb. 17 when a Delta flight flipped and landed on its roof at Toronto’s Pearson Airport.

Pope Francis sits upright in an armchair as Argentines in Rome pray for his recovery

By NICOLE WINFIELD and SILVIA STELLACCI Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis was sitting upright and receiving therapy for double pneumonia Wednesday, the Vatican said, as Argentines and Romans alike gathered in the Eternal City to pray for his recovery. Francis remained in critical condition.

The Vatican said that it hoped to have information later in the day about the results of a CT scan taken Tuesday evening to check on the status of the complex lung infection that has kept him hospitalized since Feb. 14.

The Vatican said the pope had a peaceful night and was up, sitting in his armchair on Wednesday receiving therapy. Doctors have said he isn’t out of danger, but hasn’t had any further respiratory crises since Saturday.

The dean of the College of Cardinals, meanwhile, was designated to lead the Vatican’s prayer vigil in St. Peter’s Square on Wednesday night, thrusting a key figure in a future possible conclave into the spotlight.

On Tuesday night, the faithful from Francis’ homeland gathered in the Argentine church of Rome for a special Mass presided over by Cardinal Baldassarre Reina, the pope’s vicar for Rome.

The rector of the church, the Rev. Fernando Laguna, said that he hoped the pope could feel the embrace of the community’s prayer from the Gemelli hospital where he is recovering.

“I can’t go to Gemelli, because for him to recover he must be isolated,” he said. “I know that I hug him and that he hugs me when I pray. And now I would like to embrace the pope.”

Sister Nilda Trejo said that she knew Francis’ health has always been delicate, with problems breathing and speaking loudly, and that’s why she always prayed for him.

“We knew that he often found it difficult,” she said. “In fact, you see that at the beginning of Mass, the microphone always has to be turned up because he has a bit of trouble. But he always spoke to the people. To the heart of the people.”

Across town, Romans and others gathered in St. Peter’s Square for the nightly Rosary prayer, presided over by Filipino Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, who runs the Vatican’s office responsible for the church in the developing world.

The Vatican said that the Wednesday evening vigil in St. Peter’s would be presided over by Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, 91, the influential dean of the College of Cardinals. Francis recently extended Re’s term as dean, keeping him in the important job rather than naming someone new.

As is now popularly known thanks to the Oscar-nominated film “Conclave,” the dean is a key point of

reference for cardinals. He presides over a papal funeral and organizes the conclave to elect a new pope.

From 2000-2010, Re was prefect of the Vatican's congregation for bishops, one of the most powerful and influential positions in the Holy See. Francis made him dean in 2020 and confirmed him in the job in January despite the expiration of his five-year term.

Doctors said that Francis was in critical but stable condition and hadn't suffered any new respiratory crises. He underwent a follow-up CT scan on Tuesday evening to check the lung infection, but no results were provided. Doctors said that his prognosis remained guarded.

Francis continued to work from the hospital, and on Tuesday announced some major governing decisions that suggest he's getting essential work done and looking ahead.

18 dead in a bus crash in eastern Thailand

BANGKOK (AP) — A chartered bus overturned in eastern Thailand early Wednesday morning, killing 18 people and injuring 31, officials said.

The accident occurred in Prachinburi province during an overnight journey from northern Thailand to coastal Rayong province for a municipal study tour.

The Department of Land Transport said it would coordinate with police in investigating the latest road accident and would intensify inspections of all public transport vehicles to ensure they meet safety standards.

Road safety is a major problem in Thailand, which according to the World Health Organization ranks ninth out of 175 member countries for road traffic deaths.

The issue was highlighted in October last year, after 23 young students and teachers died in a horrific bus fire while on a school field trip. Negligent maintenance and inspections were suspected of contributing to the tragedy.

In December 2023, a bus crash in the western province of Prachuap Khiri Khan killed 14 people and injured more than 30 others. The vehicle was carrying 49 people when it ran off the road and hit a tree. Police investigated the possibility that its driver had fallen asleep.

Israelis bid farewell to a mother and her two young sons killed in captivity in Gaza

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Holding flags, orange balloons and signs that said "forgive us," tens of thousands of Israelis lined highways as the bodies of a mother and her two young sons, killed in captivity in the Gaza Strip, were taken for burial on Wednesday.

The plight of the Bibas family has come to embody the profound sense of loss and grief still permeating Israel after the militant Hamas group's Oct. 7, 2023 attack that triggered the war.

Footage of a terrified Shiri Bibas clutching her two redheaded sons — 9-month-old Kfir and 4-year-old Ariel — as they were taken to Gaza by militants is seared into the country's collective memory.

Israel says forensic evidence shows the boys were killed by their captors in November 2023, while Hamas says the family was killed along with their guards in an Israeli airstrike.

Their bodies were handed over earlier this month as part of a ceasefire deal that paused the Israel-Hamas war. Israelis endured another moment of agony when testing showed that one of the bodies returned by Hamas was identified as someone else. Shiri's body was returned the following night and positively identified.

Yarden Bibas was abducted separately and released alive in a different handover last month. His wife and their two children will be buried in a private ceremony near Kibbutz Nir Oz near Gaza, where they were living when they were abducted. The three will be buried next to Shiri's parents, who were also killed in the attack.

People — lined up on the side of the roads as far as the eye could see — sobbed and embraced each other as the casket made their way along the 100 kilometer (60 miles) route from central Israel to the cemetery.

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Hundreds of motorcycles, each with an Israeli flag and orange ribbons, rode solemnly behind the convoy. In the city of Tel Aviv, thousands gathered to watch a broadcast of the eulogies, many dressed in orange.

Kfir was the youngest of about 30 children taken hostage. The infant, with red hair and a toothless smile, quickly became well-known across Israel. His ordeal was raised by Israeli leaders on podiums around the world.

The extended Bibas family has been active at protests, branding the color orange as the symbol of their fight for the "ginger babies." They marked Kfir Bibas' first birthday with a release of orange balloons and lobbied world leaders for support.

Family photos aired on TV and posted on social media created a national bond with the two boys and made them familiar faces.

Israelis learned of Ariel Bibas' love for Batman. Photos from a happier time showed the entire family dressed up as the character.

On Wednesday, many people dressed up in Batman costumes and saluted as the caskets passed.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the delayed release of Shiri's remains a "cruel and malicious violation" of the ceasefire agreement.

"We waited for certainty, but it brings no comfort — only profound grief," Ofri Bibas Levy, the boys' aunt, said when the boys' remains were identified.

During the release of the bodies in Gaza, Hamas militants displayed coffins on a stage labeled with Shiri's name and those of her two boys as upbeat music blared. Behind them hung a panel where their pictures hovered beneath a cartoon of a vampiric-looking Netanyahu.

Some 1,200 people in Israel were killed in the Oct. 7 attack that triggered the war in Gaza and 251 were taken hostage. More than 48,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which does not differentiate between combatants and civilians.

Middle East latest: Hamas will return bodies of 4 dead Israeli hostages in exchange for prisoners

By The Associated Press undefined

Hamas will return the bodies of four dead Israeli hostages on Thursday in exchange for Israel's release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, the group said, just days before the first phase of the ceasefire between the warring parties was to expire.

Israel has delayed the release of about 600 Palestinian prisoners since Saturday to protest what it says is the cruel treatment of hostages during their release by Hamas.

The militant group has said that the delay is a "serious violation" of their ceasefire and that talks on a second phase aren't possible until the Palestinians are freed.

Hamas spokesman Abdul Latif al-Qanou told The Associated Press on Wednesday that Hamas would hand over the bodies of four Israelis the next day.

Here's the latest:

Israelis line highways as bodies of mother and her children are sent for burial

TEL AVIV, Israel — Tens of thousands of Israelis, some holding flags and signs that read "Forgive us," lined the highways as the bodies of an Israeli mother and her two children who were killed in Gaza were transported to their burial.

Shiri Bibas was kidnapped with her two sons — Ariel, 4, and Kfir, 9 months old — from their home on Kibbutz Nir Oz on Oct. 7, 2023. Hamas released their bodies last week as part of a fragile ceasefire deal, though initially the militant group did not release the correct body for Shiri Bibas.

Yarden Bibas, their father, was taken separately, and released during the ceasefire last month. The three will be buried on Kibbutz Nir Oz on Wednesday afternoon.

Hamas says the three were killed in an Israeli airstrike in November 2023. Israeli military spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari denies this and said Ariel and Kfir Bibas were killed by their captors.

Hamas to turn over bodies of 4 Israeli hostages in exchange for release of hundreds of prisoners

By SAMY MAGDY and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Hamas will return the bodies of four dead Israeli hostages on Thursday in exchange for Israel's release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, the group said, just days before the first phase of the ceasefire between the warring parties was to expire.

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Hamas spokesman Abdul Latif al-Qanou told The Associated Press on Wednesday that Hamas would hand over the bodies of four Israelis the next day.

In exchange, Israel would release the Palestinian prisoners, as well as an unspecified number of women and minors detained since the militant group's Oct. 7, 2023 attack on Israel that sparked the conflict.

An Israeli official confirmed that the bodies of four hostages were expected to be turned over but provided no further details. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak with the media.

Israel and Hamas had already said on Tuesday that an agreement had been reached to return the bodies of the hostages, but no date had been announced.

Hamas has released hostages, and the bodies of four dead hostages, in large public ceremonies during which the Israelis were paraded and forced to wave to large crowds.

Israel, along with the Red Cross and U.N. officials, have said the ceremonies were humiliating to the hostages, and Israel last weekend delayed the scheduled prisoner release in protest.

There will be no public ceremony when the four bodies in the latest exchange are returned to Israel in the early hours of Thursday, according to a senior Hamas official who wasn't authorized to speak with the media, so spoke on condition of anonymity.

The deadlock over the exchange had threatened to collapse the ceasefire when the current six-week first phase of the deal expires this weekend.

The latest agreement would complete both sides' obligations of the first phase of the ceasefire — during which Hamas is returning 33 hostages, including eight bodies — in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners.

It also could clear the way for an expected visit this week by the White House's Middle East envoy, Steve Witkoff, to the region.

Witkoff has said that he wants the sides to move into negotiations on the second phase, during which all remaining hostages held by Hamas are to be released and an end to the war is to be negotiated. The Phase 2 talks were supposed to begin weeks ago, but never did.

The ceasefire, brokered by the United States, Egypt and Qatar, ended 15 months of heavy fighting that erupted after Hamas' 2023 attack on southern Israel that killed about 1,200 people. About 250 people were taken hostage.

Israel's military offensive has killed more than 48,000 Palestinians, according to Palestinian health officials, displaced an estimated 90% of Gaza's population and decimated the territory's infrastructure and health system. The Hamas-run Health Ministry doesn't differentiate between civilian and militant deaths, but it says that over half of the dead have been women and children.

US and Ukraine near an economic deal with mineral rights but no security promise, officials say

By SUSIE BLANN, HANNA ARHIROVA and VASILISA STEPANENKO Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine and the U.S. have reached an agreement on a framework for a broad economic deal that would include access to Ukraine's rare earth minerals, three senior Ukrainian officials said Tuesday.

The officials, who were familiar with the matter, spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly. One of them said that Kyiv hopes that signing the agreement will ensure the continued flow of U.S. military support that Ukraine urgently needs.

The agreement could be signed as early as Friday and plans are being drawn up for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to travel to Washington to meet President Donald Trump, according to one of the Ukrainian officials.

Another official said the agreement would provide an opportunity for Zelenskyy and Trump to discuss continued military aid to Ukraine, which is why Kyiv is eager to finalize the deal.

Trump, speaking to reporters in the Oval Office, said he'd heard that Zelenskyy was coming and added that "it's okay with me, if he'd like to, and he would like to sign it together with me."

Trump called it a big deal that could be worth a trillion dollars. "It could be whatever, but it's rare earths and other things."

According to one Ukrainian official, some technical details are still to be determined. However, the draft does not include a contentious Trump administration proposal to give the U.S. \$500 billion worth of profits from Ukraine's rare earth minerals as compensation for its wartime assistance to Kyiv.

Instead, the U.S. and Ukraine would have joint ownership of a fund, and Ukraine would in the future contribute 50% of future proceeds from state-owned resources, including minerals, oil, and gas. One official said the deal had better terms of investments and another one said that Kyiv secured favorable amendments and viewed the outcome as "positive."

The deal does not, however, include security guarantees. One official said that this would be something the two presidents would discuss when they meet.

The progress in negotiating the deal comes after Trump and Zelenskyy traded sharp rhetoric last week about their differences over the matter.

Zelenskyy said he balked at signing off on a deal that U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent pushed during a visit to Kyiv earlier this month, and the Ukrainian leader objected again days later during a meeting in Munich with Vice President JD Vance because the American proposal did not include security guarantees.

Trump then called Volodymyr Zelenskyy "a dictator without elections" and claimed his support among voters was near rock-bottom.

But the two sides made significant progress during a three-day visit to Ukraine last week by retired Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, Trump's special envoy to Ukraine and Russia.

The idea was initially proposed last fall by Zelenskyy as part of his plan to strengthen Kyiv's hand in future negotiations with Moscow.

Oscar nominees gather for a chummy night of cocktails, dinner and the annual class picture

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

Five days before the Academy Awards, nearly every nominee gathered for a cocktail reception, dinner and class picture shoot that served as an Oscars orientation.

The event Tuesday night at the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures was a stand-in for the annual Oscars luncheon usually held about a month earlier but scrubbed because of the Southern California wildfires.

With the voting over and winners determined, contenders got chummy and the mood was cheerful. Best actress favorites Mikey Madison and Demi Moore hugged and chatted. So did best actor front-runners

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Timothée Chalamet and Adrien Brody.

"Everyone say Oscar nominee!" best actress nominee Cynthia Erivo shouted gleefully from the front row of the museum's David Geffen Theater, where the dozens of nominees sat for their group picture.

Clustered in front with Erivo were three best supporting actress nominees: her "Wicked" castmate Ariana Grande, Monica Barbaro of "A Complete Unknown" and Zoe Saldaña of "Emilia Perez" along with Madison, nominated for "Anora." The five women stood in a circle and talked happily together after the photo, and kept the conversation going as they descended the stairs together to dinner.

In the back of the theater, a trio of best actor nominees sat together: Sebastian Stan of "The Apprentice," Colman Domingo of "Sing Sing" and Brody, of "The Brutalist."

After the photo was taken, Academy President Janet Yang gave the orientation presentation, reminding everyone that the 97th Academy Awards will be held Sunday.

She greeted first-time nominees and acknowledged there were also some with more than one.

Denis Villeneuve, director of "Dune: Part 2" and a four-time nominee, raised his hand. Sixteen-time best original song nominee Diane Warren raised both of hers.

Yang emphasized that the wildfires made this year different, and emphasized "the importance of community and an atmosphere of support."

But, she said, "The show, the big show, the Oscar show, you know what I'm talking about, will of course go on, and we simply must honor the talent, your talents, this year, as we have every year."

She gave the annual, usually fruitless, guidance that acceptance speeches should be limited to 45 seconds, and had the class repeat the number back to her. "Forty-five!" they shouted.

"It doesn't sound like a lot, but you can definitely get a lot in there," she said. "What works best is to be heartfelt, humorous if you like, poignant, inspirational, but brief."

A straggling nominee then showed up, and Grande shouted to the official photographer, "are you ready to go again, Trevor?" and they reshot the picture.

As the big group broke up, Chalamet greeted several reporters by name and hugged them.

It was a fun night for the famous, but in some ways it's an even bigger evening, as Sunday will be, for the majority of nominees — from short film animators to sound mixers — who are neither famous faces nor household names.

Here they were treated as equals with their A-list peers. All were identified by the same black name tags.

Madison and Isabella Rossellini, up for best supporting actress for "Conclave," each wore theirs as they stood and talked at length during the cocktail reception. Many others dropped in on the conversation including Moore, "Anora" director Sean Baker, and best supporting actor nominee Jeremy Strong from "The Apprentice."

Rossellini and Madison pulled out their phones and shared dog photos.

"Yes, you have like a farm!" Strong said to Rossellini.

Samantha Quan, a best picture nominee as an "Anora" producer and Baker's wife, asked Rossellini, "Do you have any goats?"

"Oh yes," Rossellini replied.

"The Brutalist" director Brady Corbet stopped to talk to the women too, but stood aside when they were asked to get closer for a photo.

"I don't want to get them sick," he said.

The attire for the evening was listed as "cocktail" and the outfits ran the gamut. Madison, Grande and Moore wore evening gowns. Rossellini wore a smoking jacket and necktie with a gold brooch. Strong wore a brown bomber jacket with running shoes. Chalamet wore, if there is such a thing, a black, shiny, formal version of a denim jacket and jeans, with a blingy gold chain around his neck.

Media members, publicists, partners and all others were eventually told to stand aside while the nominees sat for a dinner that was exclusive to them.

The roll call that normally goes with the photo was skipped, so it was difficult to determine who wasn't there, but apparent absentees included Elton John, up for best original song, Ralph Fiennes, up for best actor for "Conclave," and Karla Sofía Gascón, nominated for best actress for "Emilia Perez."

The nightmare drags on for the families of hostages who remain in Gaza

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Yael Alexander has been watching the release of hostages from Gaza over the past six weeks with a mix of joy, envy and fear. Her son Edan, an American-Israeli hostage held for over 500 days, is not yet on the list of those to be freed.

As uncertainty swirls over the future of the fragile ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas, the families of hostages still in Gaza are struggling to maintain hope that they will see their loved ones soon.

"This is a critical time," said Alexander, whose son was a 19-year-old soldier when he was abducted by Hamas-led militants.

"I know my son is probably in tunnels, so I understand that he's not seeing sunlight, and the air is very thin underground," said Alexander. "It's very, very difficult for me to even think about it."

The ceasefire deal that paused the 15-monthlong war in Gaza has held despite repeated crises. But with its first stage coming to an end this week, its fate remains unclear.

The two sides were supposed to negotiate a second phase in which Hamas would release all of the remaining living hostages taken during its Oct. 7, 2023, attack, in exchange for more Palestinian prisoners, a lasting ceasefire and a full Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

But the sides haven't even started those talks, leaving the families of the remaining hostages terrified for the fate of their loved ones and desperate for progress.

Pinning hopes on the Trump administration

Since he is a soldier, Edan Alexander was not expected to be freed in the first phase of the ceasefire, during which Hamas is releasing 33 hostages — mostly women and older or sick men — for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners.

Still, every week, Yael Alexander hoped in vain she might see her son's name on a list of hostages to be freed. Each time she didn't was a punch to the stomach, she said. She is thrilled for every family that is reunited, but she dreams of her own jubilant embrace with her son and wonders if it will ever happen.

Alexander is pinning her hopes on the Trump administration. On Sunday, President Donald Trump's special envoy to the Middle East, Steve Witkoff, told CBS that Alexander was "front and center" for the administration.

"It's one of President Trump's most (important) objectives, is to get all Americans home and we're going to be successful in getting Edan home," Witkoff said.

That sparked hope for Alexander's mother.

"Every time they say Edan's name, it's like they didn't forget. They didn't forget he's American, and they're working on it," she said.

After months of talks with no progress, the Trump administration was "speaking the language of the Middle East," she said, giving credit to the president for applying pressure and clinching a ceasefire the day before his inauguration.

Hostage families grow desperate

The tenuous ceasefire has faced repeated stumbling blocks and, most recently, Israel delayed the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners over what it calls the "humiliating" hostage handovers in staged ceremonies in Gaza. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also faces pressure from his political allies to resume the war and crush Hamas.

There are 27 hostages still believed to be alive in Gaza and eligible for release as part of the second phase of the ceasefire. The remains of 35 others who were killed in the Oct. 7 attack or in captivity are also being held. There are also the remains of an Israeli soldier killed in 2014 whose body was taken to Gaza.

The families have been ratcheting up pressure on the Israeli government to move ahead with talks to release more hostages.

And Hamas' latest tactics are only fueling more desperation. On Saturday, it posted a video of two hostages, Guy Gilboa-Dalal and Evyatar David, whom it forced to witness the release of other hostages.

Hamas militants filmed them pleading for their freedom in a vehicle as they watched the three Israeli hostages on stage before their transfer to the Red Cross. Their distraught families called the video cruel and said it was proof of the urgent need to get everyone out.

"I don't know how, after this event they experienced yesterday, they will be able to gather their strength again," Galia David, the mother of Evyatar David, told Israel's Reshet Bet radio station on Sunday. "It's clearly staged, but their desperation is real."

A plea for progress before time runs out

Hamas released a video of Edan Alexander last November during the Thanksgiving weekend, his favorite holiday, his mother said. The video was difficult to watch as he cries and pleads for help, But it was a relief to see it, the most recent a sign that he was alive, she said.

A native of Tenafly, New Jersey, where his parents and two younger siblings still live, Edan Alexander moved to Israel in 2022 after high school and enlisted in the military.

Since his abduction, Alexander's relatives have divided their time between Israel, Washington, D.C., where they meet frequently with politicians, and their New Jersey home.

Edan Alexander's family has placed a Torah scroll in the room in his grandparents' Tel Aviv apartment where he often stayed. When she is in Israel, Yael Alexander enters the room twice a day to pray and send strength to her son. She said she often dreams about him.

Alexander said she is sick of hearing about talks. What she wants is action.

"We have had a lot of talking," she said, gesturing to a sticker on her jacket with the number 506, the number of days her son had been in captivity on Sunday. "There are more than two dozen young men who are waiting, and my son is among them. They are alive. They are waiting to be released."

"I can't wait for that day when they tell me, Yael, you have to come to Israel to get Edan back," she said, her eyes filling with tears.

Police video and 911 call play key role in trial of man accused in Palestinian American boy's murder

By SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

JOLIET, Ill. (AP) — A harrowing 911 call, disturbing police videos and other crime scene evidence are expected to play a key role as the murder and hate crime trial continues Wednesday for an Illinois landlord accused of killing a 6-year-old Palestinian American boy in 2023.

Joseph Czuba, 73, faces first-degree murder, attempted murder and hate crime charges in the death of Wadee Alfayoumi and the wounding of his mother, Hanan Shaheen, in October 2023 in suburban Chicago. Authorities allege that Czuba targeted them because of their Islamic faith and as a response to the war between Israel and Hamas that erupted days earlier.

During opening statements Tuesday, prosecutors described how Czuba allegedly pulled a knife from a belt holder and stabbed the child 26 times after attacking his mother.

"This happened because this defendant was afraid that a war that had started on Oct. 7, 2023, a half a world away in the Middle East was going to come to his doorstep," said Michael Fitzgerald, a Will County assistant state's attorney. "This happened because Hanan and Wadee were Muslim."

Czuba, of Plainfield, has pleaded not guilty. He did not speak as he watched the proceedings.

His attorneys previewed their defense during opening statements, saying jurors should consider each piece of evidence carefully, including explicit photos and video, because key parts were missing.

"It is easy to get lost in the horror of those images," said Kylie Blatti, a Will County public defender. "But the prosecution can't convince you of their case simply by showing you how horrible the death of a little boy was."

The family was renting two rooms from Czuba and his wife, who also lived at the single-family home where the murder killing in Plainfield, nearly 40 miles (65 kilometers) from Chicago. They shared a kitchen and living room with the Czubas.

Shaheen was the first witness Tuesday and recounted the events leading up to the attack. She said they had not had any issues previously in the two years they had rented from the Czubas.

But after the start of the war, Czuba told her they had to move out because Muslims were not welcome. She urged him to "Pray for peace." Later, he confronted Shaheen and attacked her, holding her down, stabbing her and trying to break her teeth, she testified in court.

"He told me, 'You, as a Muslim, must die,'" said Shaheen, who mainly spoke in English but had an Arabic translator who helped at times.

After the attack, Shaheen said, she was scared and locked herself in the bathroom, noting blood all over her body and the room. She called 911 when she heard her son screaming in another room.

"She seemed shocked, very quiet," testified Sean Kozak, a Plainfield police officer who was the first at scene. "She was trembling and kind of staring."

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

Victoria Janovyak, a Will County sheriff's deputy who found Wadee's body, wiped away tears as jurors watched video.

The screen was turned away from observers, including reporters and members of Wadee's family. But the shock of the officers on the video was audible. Some could be heard yelling profanities and "Oh my God!" as they saw the boy's stab wounds.

The attack, which generated headlines worldwide, 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.

Teachers union sues over Trump administration's deadline to end school diversity programs

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A new federal lawsuit in Maryland is challenging a Trump administration memo giving the nation's schools and universities two weeks to eliminate "race-based" practices of any kind or risk losing their federal money.

The lawsuit, filed Tuesday by the American Federation of Teachers union and the American Sociological Association, says the Education Department's Feb. 14 memo violates the First and Fifth Amendments. Forcing schools to teach only the views supported by the federal government amounts to a violation of free speech, the organizations say, and the directive is so vague that schools don't know what practices cross the line.

"This letter radically upends and re-writes otherwise well-established jurisprudence," the lawsuit said. "No federal law prevents teaching about race and race-related topics, and the Supreme Court has not banned efforts to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in education."

The memo, formally known as a Dear Colleague Letter, orders schools and universities to stop any practice that treats people differently because of their race, giving a deadline of this Friday. As a justification, it cites a Supreme Court decision banning the use of race in college admissions, saying the ruling applies more broadly to all federally funded education.

President Donald Trump's administration is aiming to end what the memo described as widespread discrimination in education, often against white and Asian American students.

At stake is a sweeping expansion of the Supreme Court ruling, which focused on college admissions policies that considered race as a factor when admitting students. In the Feb. 14 memo, the Education Department said it interprets the ruling to apply to admissions, hiring, financial aid, graduation ceremonies and "all other aspects of student, academic and campus life."

The lawsuit says the Education Department is applying the Supreme Court decision too broadly and overstepping the agency's authority. It takes issue with a line in the memo condemning teaching about "systemic and structural racism."

"It is not clear how a school could teach a fulsome U.S. History course without teaching about slavery, the Missouri Compromise, the Emancipation Proclamation, the forced relocation of Native American tribes" and other lessons that might run afoul of the letter, the lawsuit said.

The department did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

In the memo, Craig Trainor, acting assistant secretary for civil rights, had said schools' and colleges diversity, equity and inclusion efforts have been "smuggling racial stereotypes and explicit race-consciousness into everyday training, programming, and discipline.

"But under any banner, discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin is, has been, and will continue to be illegal," Trainor wrote in the memo.

The lawsuit argues the Dear Colleague Letter is so broad that it appears to forbid voluntary student groups based on race or background, including Black student unions or Irish-American heritage groups. The memo also appears to ban college admissions practices that weren't outlawed in the Supreme Court decision, including recruiting efforts to attract students of all races, the lawsuit said.

It asks the court to stop the department from enforcing the memo and strike it down.

The American Federation of Teachers is one of the nation's largest teachers unions. The sociological association is a group of about 9,000 college students, scholars and teachers. Both groups say their members teach lessons and supervise student organizations that could jeopardize their schools' federal money under the memo.

Liberal party leadership candidates in Canada debate who is best to deal with Trump

By JIM MORRIS Associated Press

VANCOUVER, British Columbia (AP) — The four candidates vying to become the next leader of Canada's Liberal party made the case during a debate Tuesday night why they are best suited to deal with U.S. President Donald Trump.

Former central banker Mark Carney, former Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, former government House leader Karina Gould and former Montreal-area Member of Parliament Frank Baylis all agreed Trump's tariff threats pose a danger to Canada's sovereignty.

Carney, who is considered the frontrunner to replace Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, said his experience dealing with financial crises as the former governor of both the Bank of Canada and Bank of England gives him an advantage.

"During a crisis it's important to distinguish what you can't control, what you can control," he said. "We cannot change Donald Trump, but we can control our economic destiny."

Carney said he would gather the Canadian premiers together and fight back with dollar-for-dollar tariffs against the U.S. that would have a minimal impact on Canada.

Freeland said she was part of the Canadian team that negotiated the U.S.-Mexico-Canada trade deal during Trump's first administration.

"I have the experience, the plan and the guts to stand up to Trump, to tell him that Canada is not for sale," she said. "If he hits us, we'll hit back."

Freeland also favors retaliatory tariffs. She would target Florida orange juice and the Wisconsin dairy industry and would put a 100% tariff on Tesla vehicles coming into Canada.

Trump said Monday his executive order to implement 25% tariffs on all Canadian imports, with a lower 10% levy on energy, would go ahead March 4.

Trump also has irritated Canadians by saying Canada should become the 51st state.

Baylis, a Montreal businessman, said he would meet with Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum and devise a unified strategy to deal with Trump.

"We're not going to let him take our jobs away and we're going to be putting into place very intelligent counter tariffs," he said.

Gould said she would spearhead a "Team Canada" approach in the U.S. to contact both business leaders and citizens.

"It is American citizens who are going to feel the impact of these tariffs and we need to let them know that is not Canada's decision," she said.

Gould would encourage Canadians to stop traveling to Florida and also to stop buying Florida orange juice. Freeland's surprise resignation in December prompted Trudeau to announce Jan. 6 he was stepping down as party leader and prime minister. The Liberals chose a new leader on March 9.

The next Liberal leader could be the shortest-tenured prime minister in the country's history. All three opposition parties have vowed to bring down the Liberals' minority government in a no-confidence vote after parliament resumes on March 24.

A fifth Liberal leadership candidate was disqualified from the race. The party said former MP Ruby Dhalla was removed because she violated multiple rules.

During the debate, the candidates also discussed topics such as improving Canada's health care system, affordability and improving the country's military.

A French language debate was also held Monday night in Montreal.

Pope Francis' friends around Rome pray for him as he fights pneumonia

By PAOLO SANTALUCIA Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis was a frequent visitor to Rome long before he became pope, and over time found his favorite shops and artisans who are now pulling for him as he battles double pneumonia.

"The pope is by now a friend, a beloved person for me, not a customer," said Francis' optician, Alessandro Spiezia. "I am praying for his recovery."

Francis' occasional unannounced visits to Spiezia's shop, on the tony Via del Babuino near Piazza del Popolo, often created mob scenes as tourists and Romans alike realized the pope was inside.

Francis has popped in a few times since becoming pope in 2013 to get new lenses for his glasses, arriving in a simple Ford or Fiat with minimal security detail and waving to well-wishers as he came and went.

The Argentine pope also has his favorite ice cream flavors, and a shop near his Vatican hotel has catered for years to his sweet tooth.

When Argentine ice cream maker Sebastian Padrón opened his gelato laboratory around the corner from the Santa Marta hotel, his dulce de leche ice cream, a typical Argentine caramel dessert, became the pope's favorite.

"He called me on the phone after COVID to invite me," Padrón told The Associated Press. "He wanted to meet me since he had been eating our ice cream for a few years. We went with my family, we talked to him for a long time. A very nice meeting, very friendly, very simple, as if we were neighbors and as if we had known each other our whole lives."

Padrón added: "After we came to know of the hospitalization we sent him our greetings, and as he always says, we must pray for him," he said.

A Vatican-area tailor also was following news of Francis' hospitalization.

"We are all saddened and we all pray for the recovery of the pope," said Raniero Mancinelli, who sold the modest pectoral cross that Francis has been wearing for the past few decades.

Before Francis' papacy, Mancinelli sold lavish crosses set with gemstones to cardinals and bishops. But afterward, the clerical style shifted to simpler crosses made of silver, Mancinelli said.

They are similar to the one that a bishop friend purchased in 1998 and later gave to the future pope, who at the time was archbishop of Buenos Aires. According to Mancinelli, the current cross that the pope still wears was bought in his shop.

"Francis immediately went on a much simpler and essential style," he explained as he cut the fabric for a bishop's garment in his historic workshop, steps away from the Vatican.

When he became pope in 2013, Francis decided not to live in the lavish, baroque papal apartments of the Apostolic Palace overlooking St. Peter's Square, but to stay in an austere room at the Santa Marta hotel inside Vatican City.

He has lamented that he can't walk around freely as he did when he lived in Buenos Aires, when he was known for taking public transportation.

As an archbishop, Francis came to Rome frequently on periodic visits to the Vatican and frequented his favorite shops, including a record shop where he would stock up on his beloved classical music and tango.

In 2022, when he went to bless the newly renovated shop and visit its owners, a Vatican reporter happened to be nearby and filmed him exiting. Francis later reached out and mused about the attention he draws during his local outings.

"I won't deny that it was (bad luck) that after taking all the precautions, there was a journalist waiting," Francis later wrote the journalist, Javier Martinez-Brocal. "You can't lose your sense of humor."

House GOP pushes 'big' budget resolution to passage, a crucial step toward delivering Trump's agenda

By LISA MASCARO, KEVIN FREKING and MATT BROWN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With a push from President Donald Trump, House Republicans sent a GOP budget blueprint to passage Tuesday, a step toward delivering his "big, beautiful bill" with \$4.5 trillion in tax breaks and \$2 trillion in spending cuts despite a wall of opposition from Democrats and discomfort among Republicans.

House Speaker Mike Johnson had almost no votes to spare in his bare-bones GOP majority and fought on all fronts — against Democrats, uneasy rank-and-file Republicans and skeptical GOP senators — to advance the party's signature legislative package. Trump made calls to wayward GOP lawmakers and invited Republicans to the White House.

The vote was 217-215, with a single Republican and all Democrats opposed, and the outcome was in jeopardy until the gavel.

"On a vote like this, you're always going to have people you're talking to all the way through the close of the vote," Majority Leader Steve Scalise said before the roll call.

"We got it done," the speaker said afterward.

Passage of the package is crucial to kickstarting the process. Trump wants the Republicans who control Congress to approve a massive bill that would extend tax breaks, which he secured during his first term but are expiring later this year, while also cutting spending across federal programs and services.

Next steps are long and cumbersome before anything can become law — weeks of committee hearings to draft the details and send the House version to the Senate, where Republicans passed their own scaled-back version. And more big votes are ahead, including an unrelated deal to prevent a government shutdown when federal funding expires March 14. Those talks are also underway.

It's all unfolding amid emerging backlash to what's happening elsewhere as billionaire Trump adviser Elon Musk is tearing through federal agencies with his Department of Government Efficiency firing thousands of workers nationwide, and angry voters are starting to confront lawmakers at town hall meetings back home.

Democrats during an afternoon debate decried the package as a "betrayal" to Americans, a "blueprint for American decline" and simply a "Republican rip-off."

"Our very way of life as a country is under assault," House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries said on the steps of the Capitol.

Flanked by Americans who said they would be hurt by cuts to Medicaid and other social programs, the Democrats booed the GOP budget blueprint. But as the minority party, they don't have the votes to stop it.

Slashing government is not always popular at home

Even as they press ahead, Republicans are running into a familiar problem: Slashing federal spending is typically easier said than done. With cuts to the Pentagon and other programs largely off limits, much of the other government outlays go for health care, food stamps, student loans and programs relied on

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by their constituents.

Several Republican lawmakers worry that scope of the cuts being eyed — particularly some \$880 billion over the decade to the committee that handles health care spending, including Medicaid, for example, or \$230 billion to the agriculture committee that funds food stamps — will be too harmful to their constituents back home.

GOP leaders insist Medicaid is not specifically listed in the initial 60-page budget framework, which is true. Johnson and his leadership team also told lawmakers they would have plenty of time to debate the details as they shape the final package.

But lawmakers wanted assurances the health care program and others will be protected as the plans are developed and merged with the Senate in the weeks to come.

Rep. Mike Lawler, R-N.Y., said Trump has promised he would not allow Medicaid to be cut.

"The president was clear about that. I was clear about that," Lawler said. "We will work through this, but the objective today is to begin the process."

At the same time, GOP deficit hawks were withholding support until they were convinced it wouldn't add to the nation's \$36 trillion debt load. They warned it will pile onto debt because the cost of the tax breaks, with at least \$4.5 trillion over the decade outweighing the \$2 trillion in spending cuts to government programs.

One key conservative, Rep. Thomas Massie, R-Ky., ended up the sole GOP vote against.

Trump had invited several dozen Republicans to the White House, including Rep. Juan Ciscomani, R-Ariz., who joined a group of GOP lawmakers from the Congressional Hispanic Conference raising concerns about protecting Medicaid, food stamps and Pell grants for college.

"While we fully support efforts to rein in wasteful spending and deliver on President Trump's agenda, it is imperative that we do not slash programs that support American communities across our nation," wrote Rep. Tony Gonzales, R-Texas, and several others GOP lawmakers from the Hispanic Conference.

Democrats protest tax cuts for wealthy

Democrats in the House and the Senate vowed to keep fighting the whole process. "This is not what people want," said Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., during a rules debate ahead of planned votes.

"We all know that trickle-down economics," he said about the 2017 tax breaks that flowed mainly to the wealthy, "don't work."

Trump has signaled a preference for "big" bill but also appears to enjoy a competition between the House and the Senate, lawmakers said, as he pits the Republicans against each other to see which version will emerge.

Senate Republicans launched their own \$340 billion package last week. It's focused on sending Trump money his administration needs for its deportation and border security agenda now, with plans to tackle the tax cuts separately later this year.

"I'm holding my breath. I'm crossing my fingers," said Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, who said he was rooting for the House's approach as the better option. "I think a one-shot is their best opportunity."

The House GOP faces pitfalls ahead

Johnson, whose party lost seats in last November's election, commands one of the thinnest majorities in modern history, which meant he had to keep almost every Republican in line or risk losing the vote.

The budget is being compiled during a lengthy process that first sends instructions to the various House and Senate committees, which will then have several weeks to devise more detailed plans for additional debate and votes.

Rep. Jodey Arrington, the Republican chairman of the House Budget Committee, said with economic growth assumptions, from 1.8% as projected by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office to 2.6% as projected by House Republicans, the package would generate about \$2.6 trillion in savings over 10 years and would ensure the plan helps reduce the deficit.

Some fiscal advocacy groups view the GOP's economic projections as overly optimistic.

Israel and Hamas agree on new exchange, leaving fragile ceasefire intact

By JOSEF FEDERMAN and ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli and Hamas officials said Tuesday they have reached an agreement to exchange the bodies of dead hostages for the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, keeping their fragile ceasefire intact for at least a few more days.

Israel has delayed the release of 600 Palestinian prisoners since Saturday to protest what it says is the cruel treatment of hostages during their release by Hamas. The militant group has said the delay is a “serious violation” of their ceasefire and that talks on a second phase are not possible until they are freed.

The deadlock had threatened to collapse the ceasefire when the current six-week first phase of the deal expires this weekend.

But late Tuesday, Hamas said an agreement had been reached to resolve the dispute during a visit to Cairo by a delegation headed by Khalil al-Hayya, a top political official in the group.

The breakthrough appeared to clear the way for the return of the bodies of four more dead hostages and hundreds of additional prisoners scheduled to be released under the ceasefire.

The prisoners previously slated for release “will be released simultaneously with the bodies of the Israeli prisoners who were agreed to be handed over,” along with the release of a new set of Palestinian prisoners, the Hamas statement said.

An Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media, confirmed an agreement to bring home the bodies in the coming days. He gave no further details.

But Israeli media reports said the exchange could take place as soon as Wednesday. The Ynet news site said the Israeli bodies would be handed over to Egyptian authorities without any public ceremony.

Hamas has released hostages, and the bodies of four dead hostages, in large public ceremonies during which the Israelis were paraded and forced to wave to large crowds. Israel, along with the Red Cross and U.N. officials, have said the ceremonies were humiliating to the hostages, and Israel last weekend delayed the scheduled prisoner release in protest.

The latest agreement would complete both sides’ obligations of the first phase of the ceasefire — during which Hamas is returning 33 hostages — including eight bodies — in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners.

It also could clear the way for an expected visit by the White House’s Mideast envoy, Steve Witkoff, to the region. Witkoff, who is expected in the region in the coming days, has said he wants the sides to move into negotiations on the second phase, during which all remaining hostages held by Hamas are to be released and an end to the war is to be negotiated. The Phase 2 talks were supposed to begin weeks ago, but never did.

The ceasefire, brokered by the U.S., Egypt and Qatar, ended 15 months of heavy fighting that erupted after Hamas’ Oct. 7, 2023, attack that killed some 1,200 people in Israel and took about 250 people hostage.

Israel’s military offensive has killed over 48,000 Palestinians, according to Palestinian health officials, displaced an estimated 90% of Gaza’s population and decimated the territory’s infrastructure and health system. The Hamas-run Health Ministry does not differentiate between civilian and militant deaths, but it says that over half of the dead have been women and children.

The White House says it ‘will determine’ which news outlets cover Trump, rotating traditional ones

By LAURIE KELLMAN Associated Press

The White House said Tuesday that its officials “will determine” which news outlets can regularly cover President Donald Trump up close — a sharp break from a century of tradition in which a pool of independently chosen news organizations go where the chief executive does and hold him accountable on behalf of regular Americans.

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The move, coupled with the government's arguments this week in a federal lawsuit over access filed by The Associated Press, represented an unprecedented seizing of control over coverage of the American presidency by any administration. Free speech advocates expressed alarm.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said the changes would rotate traditional outlets from the group and include some streaming services. Leavitt cast the change as a modernization of the press pool, saying the move would be more inclusive and restore "access back to the American people" who elected Trump. But media experts said the move raised troubling First Amendment issues because the president is choosing who covers him.

"The White House press team, in this administration, will determine who gets to enjoy the very privileged and limited access in spaces such as Air Force One and the Oval Office," Leavitt said at a daily briefing. She added at another point: "A select group of D.C.-based journalists should no longer have a monopoly of press access at the White House."

Leavitt said the White House will "double down" on its decision to bar the AP from many presidential events, a departure from the time-tested and sometimes contentious practice for more than a century of a pool of journalists from every platform sharing the presidents' words and activities with news outlets and congressional offices that can't attend the close-quarter events. Traditionally, the members of the pool decide who goes in small spaces such as the Oval Office and Air Force One.

"It's beyond time that the White House press operation reflects the media habits of the American people in 2025, not 1925," Leavitt said.

At an event later in the Oval Office, the president linked the AP court case with the decision to take control of credentialing for the pool. "We're going to be now calling those shots," Trump said.

There are First Amendment implications

The change, said one expert on presidents and the press, "is a dangerous move for democracy."

"It means the president can pick and choose who covers the executive branch, ignoring the fact that it is the American people who through their taxes pay for the running of the White House, the president's travels and the press secretary's salary," Jon Marshall, a media history professor at Northwestern University and author of "Clash: Presidents and the Press in Times of Crisis," said in a text.

Eugene Daniels, president of the White House Correspondents' Association, said the organization consistently expands its membership and pool rotations to facilitate the inclusion of new and emerging outlets.

"This move tears at the independence of a free press in the United States. It suggests the government will choose the journalists who cover the president," Daniels said in a statement. "In a free country, leaders must not be able to choose their own press corps."

The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press called it "a drastic change in how the public obtains information about its government."

"The White House press pool exists to serve the public, not the presidency," Bruce D. Brown, the group's president, said in a statement.

It comes in the context of a federal lawsuit

Leavitt spoke a day after a federal judge refused to immediately order the White House to restore the AP's access to many presidential events. The news outlet, citing the First Amendment, sued Leavitt and two other White House officials for barring the AP from some presidential events over its refusal to call the Gulf of Mexico the "Gulf of America" as Trump ordered. AP has said its style would retain the "Gulf of Mexico" name but also would note Trump's decision.

"As you know, we won that lawsuit," Trump said incorrectly. In fact, U.S. District Judge Trevor N. McFadden said the AP had not demonstrated it had suffered irreparable harm — but urged the Trump administration to reconsider its two-week-old ban, saying that case law in the circuit "is uniformly unhelpful to the White House."

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. Another hearing was scheduled for late March.

The AP Stylebook is used by international audiences as well as those within the United States. The AP

has said that its guidance was offered to promote clarity.

Another 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.

Fired cybersecurity chief for Veterans Affairs site warns that health and financial data is at risk

By BRIAN WITTE and RODRIQUE NGOWI Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Sensitive financial and health data belonging to millions of veterans and stored on a benefits website is at risk of being stolen or otherwise compromised, according to a federal employee tasked with cybersecurity who was recently fired as part of massive government-wide cuts.

The warning comes from Jonathan Kamens, who led cybersecurity efforts for VA.gov — an online portal for Department of Veterans Affairs benefits and services used by veterans, their caregivers and families. Kamens was fired Feb. 14 and said he doesn't believe his role will be filled, leaving the site particularly vulnerable.

"Given how the government has been functioning for the last month, I don't think the people at VA ... are going to be able to replace me," Kamens told The Associated Press Monday evening. "I think they're going to be lacking essential oversight over cybersecurity processes for VA.gov."

Kamens said he was hired over a year ago by the U.S. Digital Service, whose employees' duties have been integrated into presidential adviser Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency, which is leading the downsizing effort. Kamens was a digital services expert and the VA site's information security lead when he was fired by email at night, along with about 40 other USDS employees, he said.

Millions of people use the VA.gov website monthly, Kamens said, and the department is responsible for securing private health and financial information including bank account numbers and credit card numbers. Others on the team will focus on protecting the site, but his expertise can't be replaced, he said, noting he was the only government employee with an engineering technical background working on cybersecurity.

"VA.gov has access to a huge number of databases within VA in order to provide all of those benefits and services to veterans," Kamens said. "So if that information can't be kept secure, then all of that information is at risk and could be compromised by a bad actor."

Peter Kasperowicz, a Veterans Affairs spokesman, said the loss of a single employee wouldn't affect operations, and noted that hundreds of cybersecurity workers are among the department's staff of nearly 470,000.

Meanwhile, more than 20 civil service employees who'd also previously worked for USDS resigned Tuesday from DOGE, saying they refused to use their technical expertise to "dismantle critical public services."

Kamens said he was required to have a background check and a drug test before he was allowed to access any system containing veterans' data. He said he doesn't understand why Musk and DOGE shouldn't have to jump through the same hoops.

"I don't think they should have access to that data," Kamens said. "These are people who have never been background-checked. They're not confirmed to be trustworthy."

Kamens also said he's worried that DOGE is "trying to break down the walls of decentralization" that have kept data isolated in individual agencies. Centralization, he said, could increase the chances for abuse. He also described confusion since DOGE became involved — people didn't know who their manager was, work became isolated, and people were "frozen out."

"The only motive that I can think of," Kamens said, "is exactly because they want to be able to use that data to harm citizens that they perceive as enemies of the state."

Apple shareholders reject proposal to scrap company's diversity programs

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

Apple shareholders rebuffed an attempt to pressure the technology trendsetter into joining President Donald Trump's push to scrub corporate programs designed to diversify its workforce.

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

After a brief presentation about the anti-DEI proposal, Apple announced shareholders had rejected it. In a regulatory filing submitted Tuesday evening, Apple disclosed that 97% of the ballots cast were votes against the measure.

The outcome vindicated Apple management's decision to stand behind its diversity commitment even though Trump asked the U.S. Department of Justice to look into whether these types of programs have discriminated against some employees whose race or gender aren't aligned with the initiative's goals.

But Apple CEO Tim Cook has maintained a cordial relationship with Trump since his first term in office, an alliance that so far has helped the company skirt tariffs on its iPhones made in China. After Cook and Trump met last week, Apple on Monday announced it will invest \$500 billion in the U.S. and create 20,000 more jobs during the next five years — a commitment applauded by the president.

Tuesday's shareholder vote came a month after the same group presented a similar proposal during Costco's annual meeting, only to have it overwhelmingly rejected, too.

That snub didn't discourage the National Center for Public Policy Research from confronting Apple about its DEI program in a pre-recorded presentation by Stefan Padfield, executive director of the think tank's Free Enterprise Project, who asserted "forced diversity is bad for business."

In the presentation, Padfield 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. He cited the Trump administration as one of Apple's potential legal adversaries.

"The vibe shift is clear: DEI is out and merit is in," Padfield said in the presentation.

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.

Just as Costco does, Apple contends that fostering a diverse workforce makes good business sense.

But Cook conceded Apple may have to make some adjustments to its diversity program "as the legal landscape changes" while still striving to maintain 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 will continue to create a culture of belonging," Cook told shareholders during the meeting.

In its last diversity and inclusion report issued in 2022, Apple disclosed that nearly three-fourths of its global workforce consisted of white and Asian employees. Nearly two-thirds of its employees 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 largely unsuccessful efforts to diversify.

Supreme Court throws out Oklahoma inmate Richard Glossip's murder conviction and death sentence

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Tuesday threw out the murder conviction and death penalty for Richard Glossip, an Oklahoma man who was found guilty in the killing of a motel owner but has steadfastly maintained his innocence and averted multiple attempts by the state to execute him.

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Glossip's wife, Lea, called the decision "an answered prayer." Glossip, now 62, has spent nearly half his life behind bars for his role in a 1997 killing at a motel in Oklahoma City.

Prosecutors' decision to allow a key witness to give testimony they knew to be false violated Glossip's constitutional right to a fair trial, the justices ruled in a case that produced a rare alliance of his lawyers and the state's Republican attorney general in support of a new day in court for Glossip.

"Glossip is entitled to a new trial," Justice Sonia Sotomayor wrote for five justices.

Justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito dissented, voting to uphold the conviction and death sentence, while Justice Amy Coney Barrett would have allowed a state appeals court to decide how to proceed.

Thomas wrote that the majority had "cast aside" the interests of victim Barry Van Treese's family. The victim's relatives had told the high court that they wanted to see Glossip executed. A message left with Van Treese's brother, Ken Van Treese, was not immediately returned Tuesday.

Don Knight, Glossip's attorney, said the court was right to overturn the conviction because prosecutors hid critical evidence from the defense team. "Today was a victory for justice and fairness in our judicial system," Knight said in a statement. "Rich Glossip, who has maintained his innocence for 27 years, will now be given the chance to have the fair trial that he has always been denied."

Glossip's wife wrote in a text to The Associated Press: "Rich and I opened the decision together on the phone this morning, knowing it would be a life-changing moment. To say that we are overcome with emotion is an understatement. We are deeply grateful. Today is truly an answered prayer."

Glossip, who currently is housed at the maximum-security Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester, is expected to remain in prison, at least until the state decides whether to retry him, Oklahoma Attorney General Gentner Drummond said at a news conference following the Supreme Court decision.

"I do not believe Richard Glossip is innocent," Drummond said, though he sought and praised the court's ruling. He also conceded it might be difficult to put Glossip on trial again after so many years.

Drummond and Oklahoma County District Attorney Vicki Behenna, a Democrat, plan to confer about what will happen next. Behenna has previously said she would not consider the death penalty in the case.

Oklahoma's top criminal appeals court had repeatedly upheld the conviction and sentence, even after the state sided with Glossip.

Glossip was convicted and sentenced to death in the killing of Van Treese, who owned the motel where he was beaten to death with a baseball bat, in what prosecutors have alleged was a murder-for-hire scheme. Glossip was an employee.

He has always denied killing Van Treese, although he acknowledged misleading investigators in the aftermath of the crime. Another man, Justin Sneed, admitted robbing and killing Van Treese but testified he only did so after Glossip promised to pay him \$10,000. Sneed received a life sentence in exchange for his testimony and was the key witness against Glossip.

In 2023, Drummond said boxes of new evidence persuaded him that Glossip's trial was not fair.

The new evidence showed that prosecutors knew Sneed lied on the witness stand about his psychiatric condition and his reason for taking the mood-stabilizing drug lithium, Sotomayor wrote. Drummond also was concerned about a box of evidence in the case that was destroyed, she wrote. The evidence included motel receipts, a shower curtain and masking tape that Knight has said could have potentially proven Glossip's innocence.

At least five justices voted in 2023 to block Glossip's execution while his case played out. Thirteen months ago, the high court agreed to take up the claim that his trial was unfair. Justice Neil Gorsuch did not take part in the case, presumably because he participated in it at an earlier stage when he was an appeals court judge.

Oklahoma has set execution dates nine times for Glossip. He has eaten three "last meals" and been married twice while awaiting execution.

The court faced two legal issues, whether Glossip's rights were violated because the evidence wasn't turned over and whether the Oklahoma court decision upholding the conviction and sentence, reached after the state's position changed, should be allowed to stand.

Barrett, in her separate opinion, agreed with the majority that the appellate decision should be thrown out but was not convinced that the evidence clearly showed prosecutors knew Sneed testified falsely.

In Glossip's first hearing before the Supreme Court, the court stopped his execution in 2015, then ruled against him by a 5-4 vote in upholding Oklahoma's lethal injection process.

Sotomayor and Justice Elena Kagan, also part of Tuesday's majority, dissented 10 years ago.

Glossip avoided execution then only because of a mix-up in the drugs that were to be used.

Glossip was initially convicted in 1998 but won a new trial ordered by a state appeals court. He was convicted again in 2004.

Vatican says Pope Francis is critical but stable with no new respiratory crises

By NICOLE WINFIELD and TRISHA THOMAS Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis was in critical but stable condition Tuesday as he worked from the hospital while battling double pneumonia, and the Vatican announced some major governing decisions that suggest he is getting essential work done and looking ahead.

The Vatican's evening update said the 88-year-old pope had had no new respiratory crises and that his blood parameters were stable. He underwent a follow-up CAT scan Tuesday evening to check the lung infection, but no results were provided. Doctors said his prognosis remained guarded.

"In the morning, after receiving the Eucharist, he resumed work activities," the Vatican statement said.

Decisions on saints and a formal meeting of cardinals

The Vatican's Tuesday noon bulletin contained a series of significant decisions Francis had taken, most importantly that he had met on Monday with Cardinal Pietro Parolin and Archbishop Edgar Peña Parra, the Vatican "substitute" or chief of staff.

It was the first known time the pope had met with Parolin, who is essentially the Vatican prime minister, since his Feb. 14 hospitalization and the first outsider known to have called on Francis since Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni visited Feb. 19.

During the audience, Francis approved decrees for two new saints and five people for beatification — the first step toward possible sainthood. Francis also convened a consistory, or a formal meeting of cardinals, to set the dates for the future canonizations.

Francis regularly approves decrees from the Vatican's saint-making office when he is at the Vatican, albeit during audiences with the head of the office, not Parolin. A consistory is a necessary ceremonial step in that saint-making process, and it is normal that no date is given at first.

It wasn't clear, though, why there was such urgency to approve the decrees while the pope was in critical condition, when some of the new proposed saints have been waiting years if not decades for their causes to advance.

The signing of the decrees did serve to show the pope fully in charge and provided a public way to announce Parolin's audience. But it also raised some questions.

It was also at a banal consistory to set dates for canonizations on Feb. 11, 2013, that Pope Benedict XVI announced, in Latin, that he would resign because he couldn't keep up with the rigors of the papacy.

Francis has said he, too, would consider resigning after Benedict "opened the door" and became the first pope in 600 years to retire.

Giovanna Chirri, the reporter for the Italian news agency ANSA who was covering the consistory that day and broke the story because she understood Latin, said that she didn't think Francis would follow in Benedict's footsteps, "even if some would want it."

"I could be wrong, but I hope not," she told The Associated Press. "As long as he's alive, the world and the church need him."

Francis' English biographer, Austen Ivereigh, said that it was possible, and that all that matters is that Francis be "wholly free to make the right decision."

"The pope has always said that the papacy is for life, and he has shown that there is no problem with

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a frail and elderly pope," Ivereigh said. "But he has also said that should he ever have a long-term degenerative or debilitating condition which prevents him from fully carrying out the exercise of the papal ministry, he would consider resigning. And so would any pope."

Francis' ideas about resignation

Francis has said that if he were to resign, he would live in Rome, outside the Vatican, and be called "emeritus bishop of Rome" rather than emeritus pope given the problems that occurred with Benedict's experiment as a retired pope. Despite his best efforts, Benedict remained a point of reference for conservatives before he died in 2022, and his home inside the Vatican gardens something of a pilgrimage destination for the right.

Francis has also written a letter of resignation, to be invoked if he became medically incapacitated.

Speculation about a possible resignation has swirled ever since Francis was hospitalized, but the Vatican hierarchy has tamped it down. Parolin himself told *Corriere della Sera* over the weekend that such speculation was "useless" and that what mattered was Francis' health.

In addition to the audience with Parolin, the Vatican released Francis' message for Lent, the period leading up to Easter. And Francis named a handful of new bishops for Brazil, a new archbishop for Vancouver and modified the law for the Vatican City State to create a new hierarchy.

Many if not all of these decisions were likely in the works for some time and the Lent message was signed before he was hospitalized. But the Vatican has said that Francis has been doing some work in the hospital, including signing documents.

Doctors have said the condition of the Argentine pope, who had part of one lung removed as a young man, is touch-and-go, given his age, fragility and preexisting lung disease before the pneumonia set in.

Allies and ordinary faithful hopeful

Francis' right-wing critics have been spreading dire rumors about his condition, but his allies have cheered him on and expressed hope that he will pull through. Many noted that from the very night of his election as pope, Francis had asked for the prayers of ordinary faithful, a request he repeats daily.

"I'm a witness of everything he did for the church, with a great love of Jesus," Honduran Cardinal Óscar Rodríguez Maradiaga told *La Repubblica*. "Humanly speaking, I don't think it's time for him to go to Paradise."

At Gemelli on a rainy Tuesday morning, ordinary Romans and visitors alike were also praying for the pope. Hoang Phuc Nguyen, who lives in Canada but was visiting Rome to participate in a Holy Year pilgrimage, took the time to come to Gemelli to say a special prayer for the pope at the statue of St. John Paul II outside the main entrance.

"We heard that he is in the hospital right now and we are very worried about his health," Nguyen said. "He is our father and it is our responsibility to pray for him."

Federal technology staffers resign rather than help Musk and DOGE

By BRIAN SLODYSKO and BYRON TAU Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — More than 20 civil service employees resigned Tuesday from billionaire Trump adviser Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency, saying they were refusing to use their technical expertise to "dismantle critical public services."

"We swore to serve the American people and uphold our oath to the Constitution across presidential administrations," the 21 staffers wrote in a joint resignation letter, a copy of which was obtained by The Associated Press. "However, it has become clear that we can no longer honor those commitments."

The employees also warned that many of those enlisted by Musk to help him slash the size of the federal government under President Donald Trump's administration were political ideologues who did not have the necessary skills or experience for the task ahead of them.

The mass resignation of engineers, data scientists, designers and product managers is a temporary setback for Musk and the Republican president's tech-driven purge of the federal workforce. It comes amid a flurry of court challenges that have sought to stall, stop or unwind their efforts to fire or coerce thousands of government workers out of jobs.

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In a statement, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt was dismissive of the mass resignation. "Anyone who thinks protests, lawsuits, and lawfare will deter President Trump must have been sleeping under a rock for the past several years," Leavitt said. "President Trump will not be deterred from delivering on the promises he made to make our federal government more efficient and more accountable to the hardworking American taxpayers."

Musk posted on his social media site X that the story was "fake news" and suggested that the staffers were "Dem political holdovers" who "would have been fired had they not resigned."

The staffers who resigned had worked for the United States Digital Service, but said their duties were being integrated into DOGE. Their former office, the USDS, was established under President Barack Obama after the botched rollout of Healthcare.gov, the web portal that millions of Americans use to sign up for insurance plans through the Democrat's signature health care law.

All previously held senior roles at such tech companies as Google and Amazon and wrote in their resignation letter that they joined the government out of a sense of duty to public service.

Trump's empowerment of Musk upended that. The day after Trump's inauguration, the staffers wrote, they were called into a series of interviews that foreshadowed the secretive and disruptive work of Musk's Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE.

According to the staffers, people wearing White House visitors' badges, some of whom would not give their names, grilled the nonpartisan employees about their qualifications and politics. Some made statements that indicated they had a limited technical understanding. Many were young and seemed guided by ideology and fandom of Musk — not improving government technology.

"Several of these interviewers refused to identify themselves, asked questions about political loyalty, attempted to pit colleagues against each other, and demonstrated limited technical ability," the staffers wrote in their letter. "This process created significant security risks."

Earlier this month, about 40 staffers in the office were laid off. The firings dealt a devastating blow to the government's ability to administer and safeguard its own technological footprint, they wrote.

"These highly skilled civil servants were working to modernize Social Security, veterans' services, tax filing, health care, disaster relief, student aid, and other critical services," the resignation letter states. "Their removal endangers millions of Americans who rely on these services every day. The sudden loss of their technology expertise makes critical systems and American's data less safe."

Roughly one-third of the 65 staffers who remained at USDS quit on Tuesday rather than take on new duties under DOGE.

"We will not use our skills as technologists to compromise core government systems, jeopardize Americans' sensitive data, or dismantle critical public services," they wrote. "We will not lend our expertise to carry out or legitimize DOGE's actions."

The slash-and-burn effort Musk is leading diverges from what was initially outlined by Trump during the 2024 presidential campaign. DOGE, a nod to Musk's favorite cryptocurrency meme coin, was initially presented as a blue-ribbon commission that would exist outside government.

After the election, however, Musk hinted there was more to come, posting to his social media site, X, "Threat to democracy? Nope, threat to BUREAUCRACY!!!" He has leaned aggressively into the role since.

Last week he stood on stage at the Conservative Political Action Conference gathering outside Washington, where he boasted of his exploits and hoisted a blinged-out, Chinese-made chainsaw above his head that was gifted by Argentinian President Javier Milei.

"This is the chainsaw for bureaucracy," Musk bellowed from the stage.

Still, Musk has tried to keep technical talent in place, with the bulk of the layoffs in the Digital Service office focused on people in roles like designers, product managers, human resources and contracting staff, according to interviews with current and former staff.

Of the 40 people let go earlier this month, only one was an engineer — an outspoken and politically active staffer name Jonathan Kamens, who said in an interview with the AP that he believes he was fired for publicly endorsing Vice President Kamala Harris, a Democrat, on his personal blog and being critical

of Musk in chats with colleagues.

"I believe that Elon Musk is up to no good. And I believe that any data that he gains access to is going to be used for purposes that are inappropriate and harmful to Americans," Kamens said.

U.S. Digital Service veterans, who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear of reprisal, recalled experiencing a similar sort of shock about how government processes worked that Musk and his team are discovering. Over time, many developed an appreciation for why certain things in government had to be treated with more care than in the private sector.

"Move fast and break things' may be acceptable to someone who owns a business and owns the risk. And if things don't go well, the damage is compartmentalized. But when you break things in government, you're breaking things that belong to people who didn't sign up for that," said Cordell Schachter, who until last month was the chief information officer at the U.S. Department of Transportation.

USDS was established over a decade ago to do things like improving services for veterans, and it helped create a free government-run portal so tax filers did not have to go through third parties like TurboTax. It also devised systems to improve the way the federal government purchased technology.

It has been embroiled in its fair share of bureaucracy fights and agency turf wars with chief information officers across government who resented interlopers treading in their agency's systems. USDS' power across government stemmed from the imprimatur of acting on behalf of the White House and its founding mission of improving service for the American people.

Leavitt, the White House press secretary, is one of three administration officials who face a lawsuit from The Associated Press on first- and fifth-amendment grounds. The AP says the three are punishing the news agency for editorial decisions they oppose. The White House says the AP is not following an executive order to refer to the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America.

Want to be prescribed a new hospital drama? These TV doctors are ready to treat you

By HILARY FOX Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — No matter your ailment, there are plenty of TV doctors waiting to treat you right now on a selection of channels and streamers.

Whether it's Noah Wyle putting on his stethoscope for the first time since "ER," Morris Chestnut graduating to head doctor, Molly Parker making her debut in scrubs or Joshua Jackson trading death for life on a luxury cruise, new American hospital dramas have something for everyone.

There's also an outsider trying to make a difference in "Berlin ER," as Haley Louise Jones plays the new boss of a struggling German hospital's emergency department. The show's doors slide open to patients Wednesday on Apple TV+.

These shows all contain the DNA of classic hospital dramas — and this guide will help you get the TV treatment you need.

"Berlin ER"

Dr. Suzanna "Zanna" Parker has been sent to run the Krank, which is only just being held together by hardened — and authority-resistant — medical staff and supplies from a sex shop. The result is an unflinching drama set in an underfunded, underappreciated and understaffed emergency department, where the staff is as traumatized as the patients, but hide it much better.

From former real-life ER doc Samuel Jefferson and also starring Slavko Popadić, Şafak Şengül, Aram Tafreshian and Samirah Breuer, the German-language show is not for the faint of heart.

Jones says she eventually got used to the blood and gore on the set.

"It's gruesome in the beginning, highly unnerving. And then at some point, it's just the most normal thing in the world," she explains. "That's flesh. That's the rest of someone's leg, you know, let's just move on and have coffee or whatever."

As it's set in the German clubbing capital, the whole city seems to live at a frenetic pace and the staff deals with the pressure by partying. The music, the lighting and the pulse of the drama also rubs off on

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the audience.

"When I saw it the first time I was sitting there, my heart was racing," says Jones of watching the program. "I knew what was coming, but I just, you know, my body just reacted. And I think that really says a lot."

Would she agree to be treated by Dr. Parker? Jones reckons it depends on what day you catch her.

DIAGNOSIS: "This is Going To Hurt" gets the "ER" treatment — side effects include breathlessness and heartbreak.

"The Pitt"

Emergencies are often against the clock, but in "The Pitt," they are on a timer. Attached to a bomb.

Each episode shows an hour of Dr. Michael Robinavitch's emergency room shift on one of the worst days of his life. After avoiding all doctor roles since the finale of "ER" in 2009, Wyle pulls on the navy hoodie of a weary Dr. Robby — this time in Pittsburgh.

Initially an idea for a "ER" reboot with producer John Wells, the show morphed into a fresh take on the challenges medical professionals face in the wake of the world-shifting pandemic.

"It felt a little sacrilegious to try to walk back into that arena prematurely," says Wyle. "It was really only thoughtfully, soberly, cautiously and meticulously that we attempted it again."

Robby is calm and competent in showing his medical students how it's done, while keeping his own mental health crisis hidden. Not that there are many places to hide: Wyle explains that they are setting themselves apart from other hospital dramas by turning up the lights, cutting the mood-telegraphing music and showing the real dimensions of the department.

"All of those kind of lend themselves to doing something different," he says. "Rattling the cage, you know, trying to put a new spin on an old form."

Joining him in Max's "The Pitt" are co-stars Tracy Ifeachor, Katharine LaNasa, Patrick Ball and Supriya Ganesh.

As for his own medical knowledge, Wyle says there are procedures he feels adept at least pretending to do. With the amount of time he's spent playing a doctor, he could have earned his own degree by now.

"I've been doing this long enough," he says. "So I'm either the worst student or one of the best doctor actors around."

DIAGNOSIS: With front-line workers against the clock, it has a similar pathology to both "ER" and "24."
"Watson"

Also in Pittsburgh, you'll find The Holmes Clinic for Diagnostic Medicine, where it's still life-and-death, but your heart rate can afford to slow a little.

It's run by Dr. John Watson, former colleague of Sherlock Holmes, the famous sleuth who has bequeathed the funding for the medical center.

Chestnut plays the lead "doc-tective," as he puts it, leading a team trying to solve medical mysteries while avoiding old foe Moriarty (Randall Park) — Watson is still dealing with a traumatic brain injury from their last encounter.

And Chestnut is no stranger to the long words and Latin terms that accompany hospital dramas. Chestnut was a nurse in "ER," a former army doc in "Nurse Jackie" and a pathologist in "Rosewood." More recently, he was the ruthless and talented neurosurgeon Barrett Cain on "The Resident."

Luckily, his Watson has a better bedside manner and uses cutting-edge science to help puzzle out a unique selection of patients, alongside his staff, played by Eve Harlow, Inga Schlingmann and Peter Mark Kendall.

The Sherlock mythology is provided by show creator, Arthur Conan Doyle fan and ex-"Elementary" writer Craig Sweeny, who brings a case-of-the-week style to the program. Chestnut reckons it's this literary twist on the medical mystery formula that sets it apart from "House MD," whose lead character was more of a Sherlock.

And he wouldn't hesitate to be treated by Dr. Watson because "he wants to understand you as a person" and "truly cares" about his patients.

DIAGNOSIS: More tests needed to confirm if "Elementary" or "House" is the leading condition.

"Doc"

Over her 30-year career, Molly Parker has never played a doctor before. In "Doc," based on a true story,

she jumped right in with the top job, chief of internal medicine, at Minneapolis' Westside Hospital.

A car crash causes the overachieving, work-centric Dr. Amy Larsen to lose eight years of her memory, turning her into a patient with a traumatic brain injury. Parker portrays both versions of Larsen through Fox's debut season — the career woman in flashback and the mother learning to trust again in the present.

The focus of the show is on feelings over physical ailments, as Larsen has to deal, all over again, with the loss of her son.

"What I liked about this is that it has all the elements of that genre, like it has the high stakes and the mystery illness and the romantic love triangle," explains Parker, who stars alongside Anya Banerjee, Jon-Michael Ecker, Amirah Vann and Omar Metwally. "But at the center of it is this woman who is going through this really profound grief."

Parker has learned "not to diagnose yourself on the internet," a deeper respect for health care workers and that playing a doctor is not easy.

"The most you can do is sort of try to get the words right sometimes," she says with a smile, admitting she still can't pronounce the name of one particular drug.

"It's, like, so important in the entire season," Parker adds, "and I said it wrong every single time."

DIAGNOSIS: For fans of "Grey's Anatomy," where complications come from relationships rather than infections.

"Doctor Odyssey"

An honorable mention goes to Dr. Max Bankman of "Doctor Odyssey," who set sail at the end of 2024 and is finishing up Season One's maiden voyage March 6 on ABC.

Joshua Jackson, who previously portrayed real-life man of malpractice Christopher Duntzsch in "Dr. Death," is on board as the accomplished and smiley new head of a luxury cruise liner's medical team. "Doctor Odyssey" comes from super producer Ryan Murphy and is set in the same world as his "9-1-1" franchise, with an upcoming crossover episode starring Angela Bassett.

Phillipa Soo and Sean Teale complete the ship's medical threesome contending with a surprisingly frequent number of bizarre illnesses and accidents that befall the guest stars (episode one: a broken penis). Jackson acknowledges the cases are "absurd and fun and wild and over-the-top," much to the amusement of his brother, who runs an actual ER.

But that is the appeal, he says, for viewers to "exhale" and find "welcome relief" from the stress of real life.

"To have this, you know, pretty bauble in the middle of your week to just come in and go on an adventure," Jackson explains. "The stakes are high, the relationships are intense. Everything's very dramatic. And 42 minutes later, you realize you're just in the most beautiful place in the world."

Unfortunately, his own medical skills remain more Dr. Death than Dr. Bankman.

"I could really, really, deeply mess somebody up," he says. "I have just enough terminology and jargon to sound like I know what I'm doing, but none of the practical skills."

Jackson wouldn't hesitate to put his own health in the hands of Dr. Bankman, though, citing the miracles he's able to perform weekly on The Odyssey.

DIAGNOSIS: Call "9-1-1" for a therapeutic trip on "The Love Boat."

Relationship between Macron and Trump offers a study in the politics of touch

By THOMAS ADAMSON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The meeting between French President Emmanuel Macron and U.S. President Donald Trump was a spectacle of thigh-patting, prolonged hand-holding and other touch-heavy displays that have become a signature of their public appearances.

It was another chapter in a relationship where physicality has often spoken louder than words as the two men have engaged in an unusual degree of touch since their first meeting early in Trump's first term.

At the rendezvous Monday at the White House, Macron executed his signature maneuver: praise laced with correction. Calling Trump "Dear Donald" four times in a single news conference, he underscored their

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shared goals, particularly on Ukraine. But when Trump declared that Europe would “get their money back” for supporting Kyiv, Macron gently corrected him, explaining that allies had given more than loans.

A smiling Macron patted Trump’s forearm and thigh and countered: “We provided real money.”

When Trump mused about government employees who “don’t even exist,” Macron’s eyebrows lifted in an expression that flickered between curiosity and skepticism. But when Trump turned to him and proposed a visit to Fort Knox to “see if the gold is there, because maybe someone stole the gold,” Macron laughed. It was a moment of shared bonhomie, with Macron instinctively mirroring his American counterpart’s demeanor.

As Trump pivoted to praising Elon Musk and floated the idea of withholding pay from federal employees who failed to respond to an inquiry from Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency, Macron’s expression shifted again, his amusement fading into something more measured.

The politics of touch

Theirs is a relationship best understood not in words, but in gestures.

Perhaps the most revealing moment came when Trump became irked by Macron slipping into French. Trump cut him off with a compliment: “That is the most beautiful language,” followed by a firm thigh pat. An unfazed Macron then placed his hand atop Trump’s.

Nothing sums up their connection better than a prolonged, almost 30-second handshake in 2017, when Macron acknowledged he wanted to prove he was no pushover. With their knuckles turned white and jaws clenched, Trump tried to pull away, only to find Macron holding firm.

That first grip battle set the tone for the relationship that followed — part power play, part theater.

When Trump visited Paris for Bastille Day in 2017, Macron turned a day of national pride into a grand Franco-American showcase, dazzling Trump with a military parade and a carefully staged series of handshakes. One particularly revealing moment saw Trump yanking Macron off balance, clinging to his hand even as they greeted their wives.

Gestures have become more refined over time

Now their physical exchanges are more refined. The handshakes still linger a second too long and look like something between camaraderie and control.

At one point on Monday, Trump slapped Macron’s arm — half-friendly, half-assertive — before seizing his hand. They burst into hearty laughter.

“He’s a smart customer,” Trump said, after suggesting Macron had once twisted a conversation they had at the Eiffel Tower by speaking in French, which Trump could not understand.

Their hands remained clasped, a near-fist-like grip stretching just past the moment of comfort. Then, as if recalibrating the balance, Macron placed a hand on Trump’s thigh.

Macron and Trump have perfected the political pas de deux. And in the high-stakes world of diplomacy, sometimes a well-placed pat says more than words ever could.

Dodgers’ deferred payments increase to \$1.051 billion with Tanner Scott, Teoscar Hernández deals

By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Los Angeles Dodgers owe \$1.051 billion in deferred pay to eight players from 2028-46 following Tanner Scott’s \$72 million, four-year contract and Teoscar Hernández’s \$66 million, three-year deal.

Los Angeles’ high payment point is \$100.95 million in both 2038 and ‘39, according to details obtained by The Associated Press.

Major League Baseball proposed during collective bargaining on June 21, 2021, to put an end to the practice, but the players’ association rejected the change.

“The Dodgers have gone out and done everything possible, always within the rules that currently exist, to put the best possible team on the field and that’s a great thing for the game. That type of competitive spirit is what people want to see,” baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred said last week.

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"By the same token," he added, "it's clear that we have fans in some markets that are concerned about the ability of the team in their market to compete with the financial resources of the Dodgers. And I think if we've been consistent on one point it is we try to listen to our fans on topics like this and I have heard people on this, believe me, I get a lot of emails about it."

Scott's contract includes \$21 million in deferred money and Hernández's \$23.5 million.

Hernández is owed a total of \$32 million in deferred pay from the team. He already was due \$8.5 million as part of his \$23.5 million, one-year deal for 2024, to be paid in 10 equal installments each July 1 from 2030-39.

Ohtani, Betts, Snell and Freeman among others owed deferred

Los Angeles also owes deferred payments to two-way star Shohei Ohtani (\$680 million from 2034-43), outfielder/infielder Mookie Betts (\$115 million in salaries from 2033-44 and the final \$5 million of his signing bonus payable from 2033-35), left-hander Blake Snell (\$66 million from 2035-46), first baseman Freddie Freeman (\$57 million from 2028-40), catcher Will Smith (\$50 million from 2034-43) and utilityman Tommy Edman (\$25 million from 2037-44).

"It's just how you account for it," Dodgers president of baseball operations Andrew Friedman said when Snell was introduced. "We're not going to wake up in 2035 and (say): 'Oh my God, that's right. We have this money due.' We'll plan for it along the way."

Dodgers deferred obligations reach peak in 2038 and 2039

The Dodgers' deferred obligations total \$4 million each in 2028 and '29, \$7.2 million annually from 2030-32, \$17.2 million in 2033, \$90.2 million in 2034, \$98.95 million a year from 2035-37, \$100.95 million in 2038 and '39, \$98.75 million in 2040, \$93.75 million annually from 2041-43, \$20.75 million in 2044 and \$7.25 million a year in 2045 and '46.

Los Angeles must fund the deferred money in an amount equal to its present-day value by the second July 1 following the season in which it is earned, according to MLB's collective bargaining agreement.

Hernández received a \$23 million signing bonus payable on Feb. 1 as part of the deal announced by the World Series champions on Jan. 3.

His agreement includes salaries of \$10 million this year, \$12 million in 2026 and \$14.5 million in 2027. The Dodgers will defer \$7.5 million from this year and \$8 million in each in 2026 and '27, and that \$23.5 million will be paid in 10 equal installments each Dec. 1 from 2030-39.

Scott's deferred money is due in a dozen \$1.75 million payments each Dec. 1 from 2035-46.

Asteroid 2024 YR4 is no longer a threat to Earth, scientists say

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Scientists have finally given the all-clear to Earth from a newly discovered asteroid.

After two months of observations, scientists have almost fully ruled out any threat from the asteroid 2024 YR4, NASA and the European Space Agency said Tuesday.

At one point, the odds of a strike in 2032 were as high as about 3% and topped the world's asteroid-risk lists.

ESA has since lowered the odds to 0.001%. NASA has it down to 0.0017% — meaning the asteroid will safely pass Earth in 2032 and there's no threat of impact for the next century.

Paul Chodas, who heads NASA's Center for Near Earth Objects Studies, said there is no chance the odds will rise at this point and that an impact in 2032 has been ruled out.

"That's the outcome we expected all along, although we couldn't be 100% sure that it would happen," he said in an email.

But there's still a 1.7% chance that asteroid could hit the moon on Dec. 22, 2032, according to NASA. Chodas expects the odds of a moon strike will also fade.

The world's telescopes will continue to track the asteroid as it heads away from us, with the Webb Space Telescope zooming in next month to pinpoint its size. It's expected to vanish from view in another month

or two.

Discovered in December, the asteroid is an estimated 130 feet to 300 feet (40 meters to 90 meters) across, and swings our way every four years.

"While this asteroid no longer poses a significant impact hazard to Earth, 2024 YR4 provided an invaluable opportunity" for study, NASA said in a statement.

A mystery illness in Congo has killed more than 50 people hours after they felt sick

By JEAN-YVES KAMALE Associated Press

KINSHASA, Congo (AP) — An unknown illness first discovered in three children who ate a bat has rapidly killed more than 50 people in northwestern Congo over the past five weeks, health experts say.

The interval between the onset of symptoms — which include fever, vomiting and internal bleeding — and death has been 48 hours in most cases and "that's what's really worrying," said Serge Ngalebato, medical director of Bikoro Hospital, a regional monitoring center.

These "hemorrhagic fever" symptoms are commonly linked to known deadly viruses, such as Ebola, dengue, Marburg and yellow fever, but researchers have ruled these out based on tests of more than a dozen samples collected so far.

The latest disease outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo began on Jan. 21, with 419 cases recorded and 53 deaths.

The outbreak began in the village of Boloko after three children ate a bat and died within 48 hours, the Africa office of the World Health Organization said Monday.

There have long been concerns about diseases jumping from animals to humans in places where wild animals are popularly eaten. The number of such outbreaks in Africa has surged by more than 60% in the last decade, the WHO said in 2022.

After the second outbreak of the mystery disease began in the village of Bomate on Feb. 9, samples from 13 cases were sent to the National Institute for Biomedical Research in Congo's capital, Kinshasa, for testing, the WHO said. All samples were negative for common hemorrhagic fever diseases, although some tested positive for malaria.

Last year, another mystery flu-like illness that killed dozens of people in another part of Congo was determined likely to be malaria.

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

By RYAN J. FOLEY Associated Press

Nearly 40% of the federal contracts that President Donald Trump's 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 Trump adviser Elon Musk, published an updated list Monday of nearly 2,300 contracts that agencies 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, 794 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 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."

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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 the condition of anonymity.

The Trump administration says it's targeting fraud, waste and abuse in the government. DOGE said Monday that its cost-cutting efforts have saved an estimated \$65 billion, including canceling leases and grants, cutting employees and selling assets. That figure has not been independently verified.

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

Other 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 President Joe Biden's administration to Trump's.

"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 \$9.6 billion, an amount that has been questioned as inflated by independent experts.

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.

DOGE's data update came the same day The Associated Press appeared in court as part of its lawsuit against three White House officials as it seeks to restore the AP's access to presidential events. The AP says the three are punishing the news agency for editorial decisions they oppose. The White House says the AP is not following an executive order to refer to the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America. A federal judge refused Monday to immediately restore access, saying the AP had not demonstrated it had suffered any irreparable harm, but urged the Trump administration to reconsider its ban.

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 No-

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vember, 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.

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.

Starbucks is cutting some 'less popular' drinks from its menu. Here's what will be removed next week

NEW YORK (AP) — Starbucks is making cuts to its menu, with some of the coffee giant's "less popular beverages" set to take their final bow next week.

In an announcement Monday, Starbucks outlined plans to remove a selection of its drinks — including several blended Frappuccino beverages, the Royal English Breakfast Latte and the White Hot Chocolate — starting on Tuesday, March 4.

"These items aren't commonly purchased, can be complex to make, or are like other beverages on our menu," Starbucks wrote. The Seattle-based company added that simplifying its menu would allow it to "focus on fewer, more popular items, executed with excellence."

Starbucks says these cuts will reduce wait times, improve consistency and "make way for innovation." The chain says it will continue to introduce a handful of other new items and seasonal specials, such as its Cortado beverage introduced last month and a new "Iced Cherry Chai" set to debut in the spring.

The menu changes arrive amid wider restructuring at the Seattle-based company. Starbucks also said that it would be laying off 1,100 corporate employees globally this week — with CEO Brian Niccol citing needs to "operate more efficiently." Niccol joined the chain as CEO in August.

Beyond next week's menu cuts, Starbucks says that additional beverages and food will also exit its menu in the coming months — representing a roughly 30% reduction by the end of the 2025 fiscal year in the U.S. But here's a list of the drinks that are set to be removed on March 4, which the company shared with The Associated Press:

1. Iced Matcha Lemonade
2. Espresso Frappuccino
3. Caffè Vanilla Frappuccino
4. Java Chip Frappuccino
5. White Chocolate Mocha Frappuccino
6. Chai Crème Frappuccino
7. Caramel Ribbon Crunch Crème Frappuccino
8. Double Chocolatey Chip Crème Frappuccino
9. Chocolate Cookie Crumble Crème Frappuccino
10. White Chocolate Crème Frappuccino
11. White Hot Chocolate
12. Royal English Breakfast Latte
13. Honey Almondmilk Flat White

Desperation grows in northern Gaza as Palestinians struggle to rebuild their homes

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

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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. 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.

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.

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.

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"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.

Today in History: February 26 World Trade Center bombing of 1993

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Wednesday, Feb. 26, the 57th day of 2025. There are 308 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 26, 1993, a truck bomb built by Islamic extremists exploded in the parking garage of the North Tower of New York's World Trade Center, killing six people and injuring more than 1,000 others. (The bomb failed to topple the North Tower into the South Tower, as the terrorists had hoped; both structures were destroyed in the 9/11 attack eight years later.)

Also on this date:

In 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte escaped from exile on the Island of Elba, sailing back to France in a bid to regain power.

In 1919, President Woodrow Wilson signed an act making the Grand Canyon a national park.

In 1952, Prime Minister Winston Churchill announced that Britain had developed its own atomic bomb.

In 1987, the Tower Commission, which had probed the Iran-Contra affair, issued its report, which rebuked President Ronald Reagan for failing to control his national security staff.

In 1998, a jury in Amarillo, Texas, rejected an \$11 million lawsuit brought by Texas cattlemen who blamed Oprah Winfrey's talk show for a price fall after a segment on food safety that included a discussion about mad cow disease.

In 2012, Trayvon Martin, 17, was shot to death in Sanford, Florida, during an altercation with neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman, who said he acted in self-defense. (Zimmerman was later acquitted of second-degree murder.)

In 2013, a hot air balloon burst into flames during a sunrise flight over the ancient Egyptian city of Luxor and then plummeted 1,000 feet (305 meters) to earth, killing 19 tourists.

In 2017, At the Academy Awards, "Moonlight" won three Oscars, including best picture of 2016; in a startling gaffe, the musical "La La Land" was mistakenly announced as the best picture winner before the error was corrected.

Today's birthdays: Singer Mitch Ryder is 80. Singer Michael Bolton is 72. Hockey Hall of Famer Joe Mullen is 68. Actor Greg Germann is 67. Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., is 67. Singer Erykah Badu (EHR'-ih-kah bah-DOO') is 54. Filmmaker Sean Baker is 54. Football Hall of Famer Marshall Faulk is 52. Olympic swimming gold medalist Jenny Thompson is 52. Singer Corinne Bailey Rae is 46. Tennis Hall of Famer Li Na is 43. Singer Natalia Lafourcade is 41.