

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 1 of 58

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 News Headlines](#)
- [4- Chamber December Minutes](#)
- [5- Groton Chamber Reviews December Activities](#)
- [6- Rhoden Not Addressing Affordability Challenges](#)
- [6- Stange's 102nd Birthday](#)
- [7- GDI Fit Ad](#)
- [8- Olive Grove Holiday Ad](#)
- [9- SD SearchLight: New corrections leader says SD's synthetic drug troubles 'not any different' from other states](#)
- [11- SD SearchLight: North Dakota judge rules in favor of landowners, finds carbon storage law unconstitutional](#)
- [12- SD SearchLight: US Senate panel seeks speedy bipartisan deal on health insurance subsidies](#)
- [15- SD SearchLight: Trump administration puts a hold on immigration applications from 19 nations](#)
- [17- Weather Pages](#)
- [21- Daily Devotional](#)
- [22- Upcoming Events](#)
- [22- Subscription Form](#)
- [23- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [24- News from the Associated Press](#)

## Thurs. Dec. 4

Senior Menu: Goulash, green peas, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast; Cereal.

School Lunch: Chicken patty, mashed potatoes.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.

3rd Grade GBB Practice, 5 p.m.

3-5 GBB hosts Langford, 6 p.m.

4th Grade BBB Practice, 6 p.m.

## Fri., Dec. 5

Senior Menu: Parmesan chicken, creamy noodles, California blend, fruit.

School Breakfast: Egg wraps.

School Lunch: French bread pizza, cooked carrots.

Girls Wrestling at Watertown, 4 p.m.

Tour of Tress at City Hall, 3:30 p.m.



## Sat., Dec. 6

Boys Wrestling at Clark/Willow Lake, 9 a.m.

Girls Top of the Rock Wrestling at Dell Rapids, 9 a.m.

HOSA Remembrance Dinner, 2 p.m.

Olive Grove Holiday Party, 6 p.m.

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

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# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 2 of 58

# 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.**

## Boat Strike Suit

A Colombian family yesterday filed the first legal challenge against US airstrikes on alleged drug-smuggling boats in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific with an inter-American human rights watchdog.

Alejandro Andres Carranza Medina, a 42-year-old fisherman, was among over 80 people killed in 21 confirmed airstrikes carried out by the Trump administration since September. Carranza's wife and four children insist he was on a fishing expedition and not carrying drugs when his boat was struck Sept. 15. Their complaint alleges Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered the strike without knowing who was aboard, violating Carranza's right to due process and a fair trial. Hegseth is also facing scrutiny from US lawmakers over a follow-up strike on another alleged drug boat days earlier that killed two survivors of the first strike.

Separately, the Pentagon's internal watchdog determined Hegseth endangered US troops earlier this year when he shared details about military operations in Yemen via a private Signal group chat.

## New Orleans, Minnesota Crackdown

Federal agents began immigration enforcement efforts yesterday in New Orleans, Louisiana, and two Minnesota cities: Minneapolis and St. Paul. The crackdown follows similar endeavors in Los Angeles, Chicago, Charlotte, and Memphis.

Federal officials specifically named 10 people in Louisiana for arrest and deportation: men from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Jordan, and Vietnam who had been arrested for crimes including child endangerment, robbery, and domestic abuse. The Department of Homeland Security says the men had been inappropriately released from custody due to New Orleans' sanctuary city laws. Federal agents are separately targeting unauthorized Somali immigrants in Minnesota, according to reports. The crackdown comes after President Donald Trump used derogatory language to refer to Somalis and Somali-born Rep. Ilhan Omar (D, MN-5).

It is not clear to what extent officials will arrest people without criminal records. Out of more than 370 unauthorized immigrants arrested in North Carolina, federal officials say at least 44 had criminal records.

## MH370 Flight Search

Malaysia announced yesterday that a search for Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 will resume this month, more than a decade after the jet's disappearance—and months after the effort was postponed due to poor weather. The government has pledged \$70M to the US robotics company Ocean Infinity if it can produce wreckage.

On March 8, 2014, the Beijing-bound Boeing 777 aircraft stopped transmitting location data, 39 minutes after taking off from Kuala Lumpur. After exiting Malaysian airspace, the plane veered off course with satellite data indicating the aircraft continued flying for hours. Multiple international search efforts failed to reveal the jet's location; the plane is believed to have crashed somewhere in the Indian Ocean, killing all 239 people on board.

Ocean Infinity says its technology has improved since a previous search failed in 2018. Beginning Dec. 30, the company will scour a 5,800-square-mile site in the Indian Ocean for 55 days.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 3 of 58

## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Spotify Wrapped reveals Bad Bunny as the platform's most-streamed global artist in 2025, dethroning Taylor Swift's two-year reign.

"The Joe Rogan Experience" is Spotify's most-listened-to podcast for fifth straight year.

Matthew Perry's doctor is sentenced to 30 months in federal prison for selling ketamine to the late actor weeks before his fatal overdose.

Germany selected to host UEFA Women's Euros in 2029, marking the nation's first major women's soccer tournament since the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup.

## Science & Technology

Waymo begins testing self-driving vehicles in Philadelphia and launches manned drives in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis to collect road data.

Chemists synthesize a fungal compound with potential to fight diffuse midline glioma, an aggressive pediatric brain cancer that has few treatment options.

NASA scientists find bioessential sugars and a gum-like material rich in oxygen and nitrogen in an asteroid sample, offering clues about how life's molecular building blocks arrived on Earth.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +0.3%, Dow +0.9%, Nasdaq +0.2%) as weaker-than-expected private payrolls data spurs interest rate cut bets.

Delta Air Lines reports this year's 43-day-long US government shutdown cost the airline an estimated \$200M.

OpenAI to acquire Neptune, a startup that builds monitoring and debugging tools used in training AI models; deal terms were not disclosed.

## Politics & World Affairs

President Donald Trump pardons Rep. Henry Cuellar (D, TX-28) and his wife, indicted last year on charges of receiving almost \$600K in bribes from Mexican and Azerbaijani companies.

House Oversight Committee releases 10 images, four videos taken in 2020 of late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein's two private islands.

European Commission proposes using over \$150B in frozen Russian assets to fund reparations-style loan to Ukraine despite Belgium's concerns of Russian retaliation.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 4 of 58

## Groton Chamber of Commerce

December 3, 2025

12pm City Hall

• Members present: Brian Dolan, Karyn Babcock, Douglas Heinrich, Ashley Bentz, April Abeln, Topper Tastad, and Carol Kutter

• Prior to the meeting, Audrey Smalley, GHS Student, was awarded Chamber Bucks for winning the window cling design contest. Micaela Merkel was welcomed for her new business, Unload Laundry.

• The minutes from the previous meeting were approved by Heinrich and seconded by Dolan. All members present voted aye.

• The treasurer's report was given. Dacotah Bank checking account balance is \$12,518.78 in addition to the \$10,000 CD.

The bucks account balance is \$3,074.80. A total of 46 members have paid dues for 2026 so far. The report was approved by Abeln and seconded by Dolan. All members present voted aye.

• No correspondence was received.

• A prior email motion was made by Abeln and seconded by Locke to sponsor one individual for BIO Girls for \$270. All members present via email voted aye.

• Only a limited number of shirt orders were received following the distribution of fliers to elementary students. Dolan reported that an upcoming In Touch with Dakota Broadcasting segment in January may help increase donations by providing additional information to the public. Fundraising efforts will continue. To date, \$1,921.38 has been raised for the seesaw project.

• There are still 3 contracts available for advertising on the Hwy 12 sign. Abeln has contacted businesses that paid for initial contracts with one choosing to renew so far.

• Board members and regular meeting attendees are invited to a Christmas party on January 7th during our regular meeting. Ken's Food Fair will cater for lunch. Abeln will send invites and reach out to Ken's.

• Kutter recommended posting on Facebook to encourage residents to participate in the Tour of Trees event and bring non-perishable items to put under the Chamber tree. Deadline to bring items has been extended with donors receiving a 605 shirt or hat as supplies are still left.

• It was suggested we set up a table at a GHS sporting event encouraging shirt orders and give away free popcorn. Abeln will reach out to the school for details and will email out January dates. It was suggested that examples of the shirt be available.

• Window clings will remain \$2 each from BK Custom T's and 72 will be ordered.

• Motion by Tastad, seconded by Kutter, to retain all board member positions as previously held. All members present voted aye.

• Motion by Abeln, seconded by Heinrich, to sponsor the Groton Independent for Rosewood Court for 2026. All members present voted aye.

• It was decided to hold off on shopping for the Angel Tree for this year.

• Motion by Kutter, seconded by Tastad to place ½ page ads in the last 3 issues of 2026 in the Aberdeen Magazine and SD Magazine. All members present voted aye.

• Motion by Abeln, seconded by Tastad, to donate \$200 to Silver Skates. All members present voted aye. Abeln will make sure we are listed in the program and on the GDI Live broadcast.

• It was decided not to donate to the Groton Transit bake sale since we hadn't prior.

• Motion by Kutter, seconded by Abeln to donate a giveaway basket to the Olive Grove Holiday Party. All members present voted aye. Basket will contain a Chamber tumbler, 605 shirt and hat, and \$50 in Chamber Bucks.

• There are no new businesses to welcome currently.

• Abeln will post 2026 events soon, so be sure to get dates to her at [city.april@nvc.net](mailto:city.april@nvc.net)

• Next Meeting: January 7th, 12pm at City Hall

Upcoming events:

o 12/05/2025 Tour of Trees at Wage Memorial Library 3:30-5:30pm

o 12/06/2025 Olive Grove 8th Annual Holiday Party 6pm

o 12/12/2025 Holiday Open House Cookies & Calendars Dacotah Bank 9am-4pm

o 12/18/2025 Groton Community Transit Holiday Bake Sale 9am-3pm

o 12/18/2025 Holiday Lighting Contest 6pm

o 12/20/2025 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9-11am

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 5 of 58

## Groton Chamber Reviews December Activities

The Groton Chamber held its December meeting, welcoming two guests and highlighting local student work and small-business development.



**Groton Area High School student Audrey Smaller attended the meeting to receive recognition for her window cling design, which was selected for this year's Chamber Bucks artwork. Pictured are Doug Heinrich, Carol Kutter, April Abeln, Audrey Smaller, Ashley Bentz, Karyn Babcock, Topper Tastad and Brian Dolan. (Courtesy Photo)**



**Micaela Merkel introduced Unload Laundry, a new in-home laundry service operating in the Groton area. Merkel outlined the service model, which offers pickup, laundering and folding, and delivery to customers. Pictured are Doug Heinrich, Carol Kutter, April Abeln, Micaela Merkel, Ashley Bentz, Topper Tastad and Brian Dolan. (Courtesy Photo)**

## Rhoden Not Addressing Affordability Challenges

Pierre, SD - Following Governor Larry Rhoden's budget address, the Joint Democratic Caucus issued the following statement:

"We appreciate the Governor's commitment to fiscal responsibility and his honesty about slowing revenues and the realities of a lean budget year. We also welcome several bipartisan priorities in his proposal, including investments in National Guard training, women's prison staffing and services, technical colleges, rural broadband, and IT infrastructure."

"Despite these positives, the budget does not adequately address the most urgent challenge facing South Dakotans: affordability. Families across the state are being strained by rising costs—food, housing, childcare, and health care—and this proposal does not meet the scale of that crisis."

"Our biggest concern is the lack of any increase for schools, community service providers, or state employees. A zero-percent increase for the "Big Three" is effectively a cut in an inflationary year. Asking schools and essential services to do more with less erodes opportunity and weakens the system that prepares our children for the future."

"Food security also remains largely unaddressed. Last year, we drastically cut funding for programs that help families, and we are concerned we are still not fully funding these essential supports. Thousands rely on TANF, SNAP, food banks, and other safety nets, and leaving these needs unmet—especially amid unstable federal funding—is deeply troubling."

"Finally, while South Dakota holds historic reserves, we could have offered more in one-time funds to address urgent needs. Simply maintaining high reserve levels while underinvesting in families and communities is difficult to justify."

Minority Leader Sen. Liz Larson (District 10)

Minority Leader Rep. Erin Healy (District 10)



**ELDA STANGE'S  
102nd BIRTHDAY  
is on Sunday, Dec. 14, 2025.**  
Please join us in helping her celebrate her  
special day by sending her a card at:  
PO Box 305  
405 N. 3rd Street  
Groton, SD 57445



What can \$20 get you?



for  
**Senior Citizens**

or anyone using physical therapy  
a gym membership at

15 N Main - Ste. 101

*Open 24/7*

**GDI Living  Fitness**

Call/Text Paul at 605/397-7460

Call/Text Tina at 605/397-7285

for details



**Annual Membership Rates**

Student is \$29.82 per month or \$255.60 per year  
Single is \$35.15 per month or \$319.50 per year  
2-Person is \$55.45 per month or \$575.10 per year  
Family is \$67.10 per month or \$702.26 per year

**Month-to-Month Rates**

Student is \$35.15 per month  
Single is \$40.48 per month  
2-Person is \$59.78 per month  
Family is \$72.43 per month

**While many other rates have gone up, ours has not.  
Same rates for several years!**

## 9th Annual Holiday Party Live and Silent Auctions Olive Grove Golf Clubhouse

Groton, SD

**Sat., Dec. 6**

Holiday Party:  
6 p.m. to close  
A variety of snacks  
served

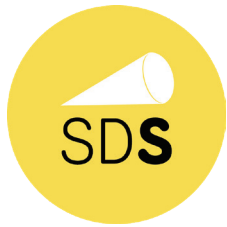
**Come on out for a fun  
evening and support  
your local golf course**



**Silent  
Auction  
Basket Items**

Bidding closes  
at 9 p.m.  
Live Auction  
begins at  
9 p.m.

Proceeds raised for maintenance  
of course and clubhouse!



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### **New corrections leader says SD's synthetic drug troubles 'not any different' from other states**

**Legislative member of commission says 'inmate deaths are sickening' and 'we have to own the responsibility'**

**BY: JOHN HULT**

In some of his first public remarks since taking the helm of the South Dakota Department of Corrections, Secretary Nick Lamb told an oversight commission Wednesday that the state "has a long way to go" to address challenges in its prison system.

Gov. Larry Rhoden appointed Lamb in late October, days after the departure of former Secretary Kellie Wasko, who announced her resignation weeks before the state Legislature voted to endorse the construction of a \$650 million men's prison in Sioux Falls.

Lamb came to South Dakota in mid-November with decades of correctional experience, most recently in Iowa.

He took the helm of an agency bedeviled for half a decade by controversies, among them:

A staff shakeup over allegations of nepotism and harassment by prison leadership, spurring a revolving door of wardens and cabinet secretaries.

Unrest among inmates that left offenders and staff members injured in Sioux Falls and Springfield.

Heated pushback against a men's prison construction proposal that forced Rhoden to restart discussions — and cost taxpayers \$20 million in sunk costs on a prison site in Lincoln County that was abandoned for a location in Sioux Falls.

A tally of fatal prison overdoses higher than the state has seen in recent memory, which have persisted in the face of investigations and arrests.

Lamb spoke for less than two minutes in his introduction to the Corrections Commission, which met virtually for the second time since the group's new leadership signaled their intention to expand their involvement in prison policy discussions.

The new secretary talked about "a very busy three and a half weeks" meeting staff and reviewing policy and thanked Wasko for her leadership and her "great work" during her three and a half years with the agency.

Lamb said much needs to be done, particularly with two new prisons in the works (a women's prison in Rapid City, in addition to the men's prison in Sioux Falls) and persistent challenges with staff retention, repeat offenses and security concerns inside existing prisons.



**The South Dakota State Penitentiary, pictured on March 27, 2024.** (Photo by John Hult/South Dakota Searchlight)

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 10 of 58

## Overdoses addressed in, out of commission setting

Lamb also offered a nod to the overdoses, the most recent of which came last week at the maximum-security Jameson Annex of the South Dakota State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls.

"South Dakota is not any different than any other state with its continued struggle with synthetic cannabinoids," Lamb said, referring to synthetic drugs like K2, which is responsible for most of the eight overdose deaths that have occurred in 2025.

Lamb did not elaborate on the extent of the drug problem in other states, but news reports on the issue have appeared in multiple states this year. Kansas officials cited K2, which typically lands in prison on paper that's been soaked with intoxicants and dried out for distribution, as the reason for restricting access to newspapers. A jail in Wisconsin signaled plans to scan all inmate mail for delivery via electronic tablet in an effort to restrict access to K2, mirroring a policy in place since 2021 at state institutions.

South Dakota has long had such a scanning policy for inmate mail, all of which is delivered via tablet.

Attorney General Marty Jackley's office has investigated each of the South Dakota overdose deaths, and issued charges for an inmate and Sioux Falls resident accused, respectively, of delivering the drugs involved in two of those deaths. Separate to those charges, Jackley's office indicted other inmates and a former correctional officer in September for allegedly distributing K2 in prison.

Three more inmates have died of overdoses since the September indictments. In an interview that aired Wednesday on South Dakota Public Broadcasting, Jackley told Lori Walsh that there are other investigations involving other correctional officers, and that he intends to work with lawmakers to stiffen penalties for drug-dealing Department of Corrections staffers.

"Absolutely these deaths are preventable," Jackley said.

## Commissioners pledge greater oversight

At the Corrections Commission meeting that began a few hours after Jackley's remarks hit the airwaves, the group's members doubled down on their September promise to take a more active role in prison policy.

The commission's role diminished under Wasko's tenure, typically only voting to approve meeting minutes and hear financial updates on prison industries, even as the law that created the group defined it as one meant to advise the Department of Corrections.

David McGirr, a longtime commission member, agitated for a more active role in mid-2024. On Wednesday, he again pointed out that past commissions had such a role, and encouraged the lawmakers now serving to endorse a return.

"Secretary Wasko felt like she didn't have to share anything with us because we aren't elected officials, but we're appointed by the governor," McGirr said.

Although some of the board members are not elected officials, others are. One of the new members, Sioux Falls Republican state Rep. John Hughes, told McGirr he agreed, and called out the overdose situation as proof that the group needs to step up its oversight.

Hughes said he spent the weekend reading up on K2, and was troubled by the impact it's had in South Dakota.

"The inmate deaths are sickening," Hughes said, adding that inmates are "our people" during their time in state custody.

"We have to own the responsibility for these people," he said.



**Nick Lamb, an Iowa corrections official, was announced as South Dakota's new Department of Corrections secretary on Oct. 20, 2025.** (Photo courtesy of Gov. Larry Rhoden's office)

Lamb did not speak up to address his view on the commission's role, and no commissioner asked him to. Rep. Kady Wittman, D-Sioux Falls, now chair of the group, said she intends to call more frequent meetings in the coming years, noting that she called December's meeting — one more than the group had on its calendar prior to her ascension — to set that tone.

"It didn't sit right that we met so infrequently," Wittman said.

*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.*

## North Dakota judge rules in favor of landowners, finds carbon storage law unconstitutional

**Case could impact Summit Carbon Solutions, other energy projects**

**BY: JACOB ORLEDGE AND AMY DALRYMPLE**

A district court judge on Tuesday sided with a landowner group and found a North Dakota law related to underground storage of carbon dioxide to be unconstitutional.

The ruling from Northeast Judicial District Judge Anthony Swain Benson could have implications for the controversial Summit Carbon Solutions pipeline project, which has a carbon dioxide storage permit from the state.

The Northwest Landowners Association in 2023 sued North Dakota and the state Industrial Commission, which approves permits for permanent underground storage of carbon dioxide. The landowner group challenged a state law that requires landowners to allow carbon dioxide storage beneath their property if at least 60% of the affected landowners agree to the project.

Benson writes in his order that the state law is unconstitutional because it allows a government-authorized taking of property without an avenue for "just" compensation determined by a jury. In this case, the property is pore space — cavities in underground rock formations where emissions can be trapped.

"The court is basically saying the constitution trumps that law, so that law can't be enforced," said Derrick Braaten, attorney for the landowner group.

North Dakota Attorney General Drew Wrigley said late Tuesday his office was beginning to evaluate "possible legal avenues forward."

"It's a critically important question, and one where we believe the state, the duly elected state Legislature, properly balanced all of the interests involved and reached an outcome that respects private property rights, but also the needs of an economy moving forward," Wrigley said.

In the case of Summit, about 92% of landowners in the storage area had chosen to participate in the project when the Industrial Commission approved the storage permit last year.



**Attorney Derrick Braaten and Troy Coons, head of the Northwest Landowners Association, listen during a March 27, 2025, legislative hearing. On Tuesday, a district judge ruled in favor of the landowner group in a lawsuit related to property rights.** (Photo by Mary Steurer/

North Dakota Monitor)

Troy Coons, chair of the Northwest Landowners Association, encouraged companies to move forward by working with landowners to obtain 100% voluntary participation in carbon storage projects. When that isn't possible, eminent domain could be used for projects that have a public benefit, Braaten said.

"Be a good partner. Show us it's a good project, people will be involved," Coons said.

Braaten said he believes the judge's decision voids all orders issued by the Industrial Commission to require the participation of landowners in a carbon storage facility, a process known as amalgamation.

Wrigley said he was still digesting the order late Tuesday and could not comment on potential impacts to project permits.

Benson initially dismissed the landowner group's lawsuit, citing procedural issues. In August, the North Dakota Supreme Court sent the case back to the district court for another look.

Summit Carbon Solutions and other energy companies with carbon dioxide storage projects in the works intervened in the case in support of North Dakota law. The North Dakota Farm Bureau and other landowners joined the landowner group in the lawsuit.

Braaten said he anticipates the state and Summit will likely appeal to the state Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, Braaten is representing a group of landowners challenging the legality of the permit granted by the Industrial Commission for Summit Carbon Solutions' carbon storage project. The parties are awaiting a decision from South Central Judicial District Judge Jackson Lofgren in that case.

Summit proposes to transport emissions from ethanol plants in five states via pipeline for permanent storage in North Dakota.

*Jacob Orledge is a reporter based in Bismarck through ProPublica's Local Reporting Network. He most recently worked for the Tioga Tribune in Williams County. You can reach him at jorledge@northdakotamonitor.com.*

*Amy Dalrymple is editor-in-chief of North Dakota's States Newsroom outlet. She previously was editor of The Bismarck Tribune and a newspaper journalist in Williston and Fargo. You can reach her at adalrymple@northdakotamonitor.com.*

## US Senate panel seeks speedy bipartisan deal on health insurance subsidies

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate committee that oversees health care started coalescing around an approach to lower costs for Americans during a Wednesday hearing, though several hurdles lay ahead.

Republicans and Democrats on the panel appeared to accept that enhanced tax credits for people who purchase their health insurance from the Affordable Care Act marketplace should not expire at the end of the year. Just days are left for open enrollment and premiums are expected to greatly increase.

The bipartisan momentum among a select group of senators will need to build significantly in the days ahead if an extension of the subsidies is going to speedily garner the 60 votes needed to advance in the Senate and then move through the GOP-controlled House.

It will also need President Donald Trump's signature to become law, and he has so far not signaled support for an extension.

"I'm hoping that we can find a bill that can get 60 votes, that can fix the problem with the exchanges for January 1, 2026," Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Chairman Bill Cassidy, R-La., said. "It shouldn't be a Republican solution. It shouldn't be a Democratic solution. It should be an American solution."

Cassidy cautioned lawmakers on the panel from pressing for "grandiose ideas," saying Congress must "have a solution for three weeks from now."

### A 'political problem' seen for the GOP

But extending the ACA marketplace subsidies, possibly with tweaks, is just a short-term solution that



**Louisiana Republican U.S. Sen. Bill Cassidy talks with reporters in the Dirksen Senate office building on Wednesday, Dec. 3, 2025.** (Photo by Jennifer Shutt/States Newsroom)

senators on the committee agreed will need to be followed up with an overhaul of the American health care system.

Any efforts on larger-scale legislation will bump up against the deeply entrenched politics of the Affordable Care Act, well-funded lobbyists and next year's midterm elections, none of which will make the process easy.

Vermont independent Sen. Bernie Sanders, the ranking member on the panel, said he appreciated Cassidy's "sentiment about wanting to do something quickly," but said Republicans should have focused on the expiring ACA tax credits earlier in the year, instead of leaving it until now.

"The reason for this hearing, to be frank, is that my Republican friends understand they've got a political problem," Sanders said. "Their political problem is that all over America today, people on the Affordable Care Act are opening up packages coming from the insurance companies, and guess what? Their premiums on average are doubling and in some cases in my state are tripling or quadrupling."

Sanders said Congress should extend the enhanced ACA marketplace tax credits for another year, or two, or three, while lawmakers sort through larger, structural issues around health care costs.

"Yes, the current system is broken. Yes, we need to create a new system," Sanders said. "But unfortunately, we aren't going to do it in two weeks."

Sanders suggested the committee hold a series of hearings in the months ahead featuring leaders from other developed countries that provide health care to all of their residents.

## **Extensions of tax credits debated**

Maine Republican Sen. Susan Collins said "there's a limit to what we can do in this first year" and that lawmakers are "going to need a two-year plan."

Collins indicated that she wants to see "reasonable" income caps to limit eligibility for ACA marketplace tax credits in any short-term extension that Congress may pass.

Washington state Democratic Sen. Patty Murray said Republicans who are serious about addressing the spike in costs for ACA marketplace enrollees should work with Democrats to pass a "clean, one-year extension" of the enhanced subsidies.

"And if their call for reforming tax credits is serious, we should look at that. We can talk about those reforms ahead of the 2027 year," Murray said. "But I have to say, I'm not optimistic that most Republicans are serious about this because they refused to talk about this problem before right now, and I've been down this road before."

Murray also rebuked Cassidy for not focusing the committee's attention on the expiring tax credits earlier in the year by taking a swipe at his vote to confirm Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

"This is about as serious as expressing concern about RFK Jr.'s anti-vax crusade after voting to make him the most powerful public health official in the country," Murray said.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 14 of 58

## 'Reasonable caps' backed

Alaska Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski said members of the committee need to focus on what the next few months and years look like for Americans' health care costs.

"I think we're going to need to have a short-term extension. But I think we can put reasonable caps on. I think that we can put some of the parameters that we have been talking about. There's no great secret sauce here to how we're going to deal with this particular dilemma that we're in," Murkowski said. "But we've got to be looking longer term to — how do we ultimately reduce these costs of care?"

Murkowski said she was also concerned about a decrease in funding for public health and prevention initiatives, before asking the witnesses appearing before the committee what their top recommendations would be for "prevention-type programs that have the strongest evidence for reducing long-term costs."

Joel White, president of the Council for Affordable Health Coverage in Washington, D.C., said Congress should allow "premium discounts in the individual market for wellness programs," which he said is currently illegal.

Marcie Strouse, owner and partner at Capitol Benefits Group in Des Moines, Iowa, suggested lawmakers open up health savings accounts "to allow for more holistic and preventive services." She also said Congress could highlight "direct primary care and making sure people are actually getting the care that they need."

Dr. Claudia M. Fegan, national coordinator at Physicians for a National Health Program in Chicago, suggested enhanced primary care and screening people for diseases like cancer that can be easier to treat when caught early.

Wisconsin Democratic Sen. Tammy Baldwin said the hearing clearly demonstrated that there is "underlying agreement that this system needs a lot of reform."

But, she said, Congress needs to take a look at the entire health care system, not just the Affordable Care Act.

"I want to make a point that just under 50% of Americans get their health insurance through employers or group insurance, 20% are on Medicaid, 15% on Medicare, 1% on TRICARE or VA, and just over 6% are in this market," Baldwin said. "There are problems with this market. But I have to say that abandoning the ACA ... is not going to solve the system as a whole."

Ohio Republican Sen. Jon Husted appeared supportive of a short-term extension of the enhanced ACA tax credits to provide Congress more time to address larger issues with health care affordability.

"We can freeze the subsidies where they're at right now for a temporary period of time. I don't know if that's one year or two years to help give some relief," he said. "And by the way, just because we continue those tax credits does not drive down the cost. It transfers the burden to the taxpayer and future generations. But it is a little help right now that we both can agree on. And then we've got to fix it."

Husted said there are easily a dozen bills that Congress could take up individually to start bringing down health care costs.

## Hawley offers plan for health costs tax exemption

Missouri Republican Sen. Josh Hawley also appeared to side with extending the enhanced ACA marketplace tax credits in the short term.

"We are looking at a massive crisis unless Congress acts and acts soon," Hawley said. "And my message is to the leadership of this body — to the leaders of the House, the leaders of the Senate — maybe it's time we all locked ourselves in a room and got to a solution here."

Hawley pitched a bill he just introduced to exempt health care from taxes.

"If you pay premiums, you ought to be able to deduct that from your taxes. If you have out-of-pocket medical expenses, you ought to be able to deduct every dollar off of your taxes. You want to lower the cost of health care immediately. Do that. No taxes on health care for any American," Hawley said. "And you set an upper limit so you don't have rich people gaming the system. I get it. That's fine. But let's think about working people in this country who cannot afford health care."

Hawley said it should be allowed whether an American itemizes on their taxes or not.

All three panelists seemed initially supportive of the idea.

## Redoing tax credits in 2026

Cassidy said after the two-hour hearing he's working to get support from lawmakers in both political parties for an integrated approach for next year.

"You could use the income that would be used to extend the subsidies, apply them to the bronze plan, because the bronze plan is so much less expensive. You could then put that balance into the health savings account," Cassidy said, referring to coverage levels in plans on the ACA marketplace. "So it does continue the support using the existing mechanisms we have, but integrates the HSA, which gives first dollar coverage and could potentially lower the net deductible."

Cassidy said Congress could extend the open enrollment period for the ACA marketplace and then fund the Health Savings Accounts, which are tax-advantaged savings accounts, before the end of March.

"People would save their receipts and submit them for payment," he said. "People do that all the time."

*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.*

## Trump administration puts a hold on immigration applications from 19 nations

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration late Tuesday paused all immigration applications from 19 countries the president earlier had listed for restricted travel into the United States, a move that freezes processing for green card holders and citizenship applications.

After two West Virginia National Guard members were shot in the District of Columbia by an Afghan national who was granted asylum, the Trump administration has moved to halt and reexamine all forms of legal immigration, which is handled by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

One guard member, U.S. Army Spc. Sarah Beckstrom, 20, died, and U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Andrew Wolfe, 24, remains critically wounded, although his condition is said to be stable. The suspect, Rahmanullah Lakanwal, pleaded not guilty to several charges on Tuesday.

The memo says that USCIS will place a hold on processing benefits requests — including citizenship processing — from immigrants hailing from the 19 "high-risk" countries and the agency will re-review any of those approved requests for



**People are sworn in as new U.S. citizens during a special U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services naturalization ceremony on the Hollywood Sign Terrace at historic Griffith Observatory on Oct. 21, 2024 in Los Angeles.** (Photo by Mario Tama/

Getty Images)

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 16 of 58

immigrants who entered the U.S. after Jan, 21, 2021, or under the Biden administration.

The 19 countries with travel restrictions into the U.S. are: Afghanistan, Burma, Burundi, Chad, Cuba, Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Haiti, Iran, Laos, Libya, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Turkmenistan, Venezuela and Yemen. In June the president issued a travel ban on those 19 countries.

The hold will remain in place until otherwise directed by USCIS Director Joseph Edlow, according to the memo.

The memo also states that USCIS will delay action on all applications for asylum and withholdings for removal, regardless of country of origin, "pending a comprehensive review." A withholding of removal is granted by an immigration judge when a country is deemed too dangerous for an immigrant for deportation, so a third, safer country must be chosen.

"USCIS has considered that this direction may result in delay to the adjudication of some pending applications and has weighed that consequence against the urgent need for the agency to ensure that applicants are vetted and screened to the maximum degree possible," according to the memo. "Ultimately, USCIS has determined that the burden of processing delays that will fall on some applicants is necessary and appropriate in this instance, when weighed against the agency's obligation to protect and preserve national security."

President Donald Trump and his administration have often criticized immigrants who were granted temporary legal protections under the Biden administration, arguing they were not properly vetted.

THAT HAS INCLUDED A SPECIAL PROGRAM CREATED FOR AFGHAN ALLIES FLEEING THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER AFTER THE CHAOTIC WITHDRAWAL BY THE U.S. IN 2021, AS WELL AS LATIN AMERICANS GRANTED HUMANITARIAN PAROLE FROM CUBA, HAITI, NICARAGUA AND VENEZUELA.

*Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include immigration, congressional policy and legal challenges with a focus on how those policies impact the lives of immigrants and migrants coming to the U.S.*

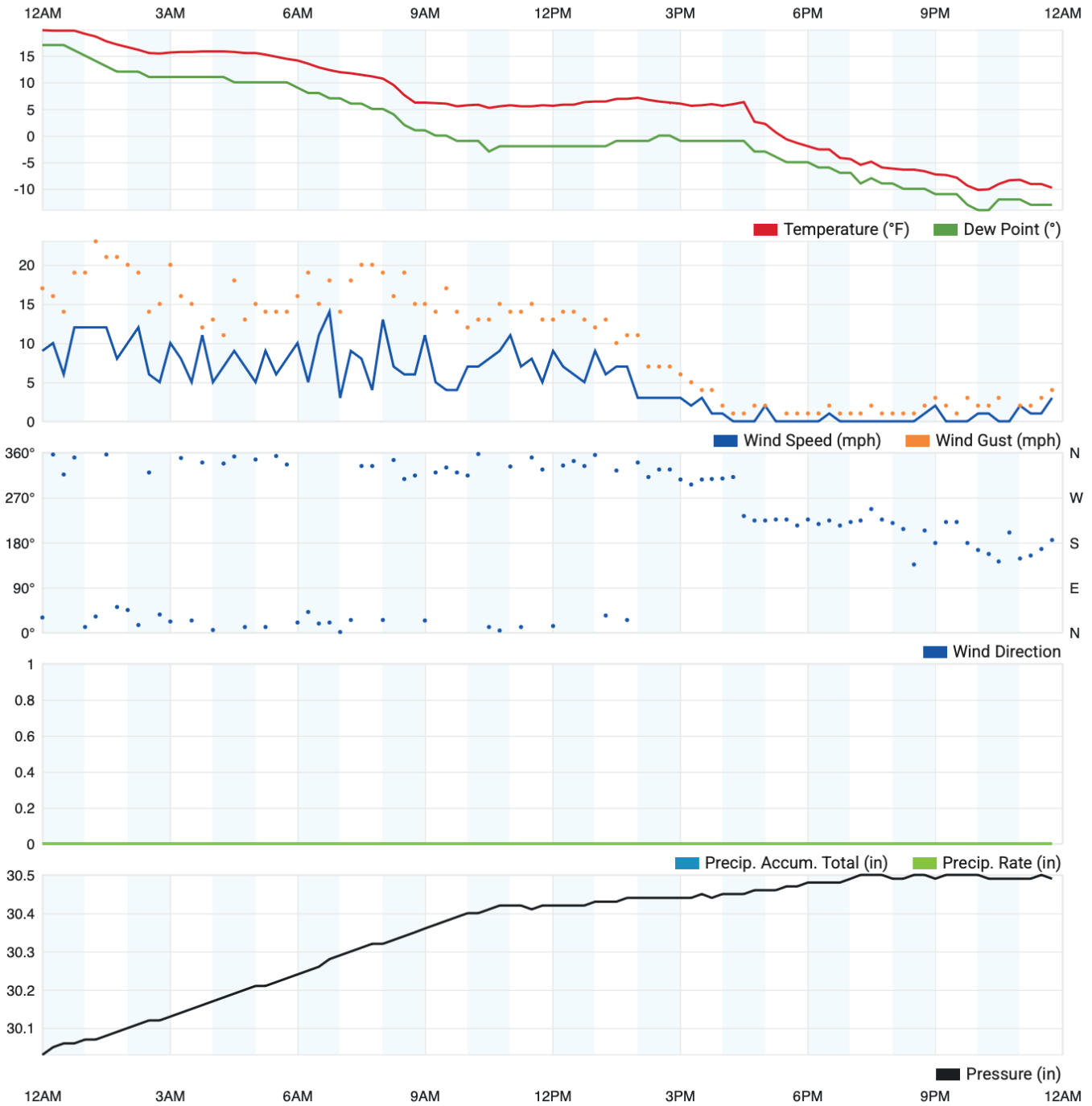
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# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 17 of 58

## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

December 3, 2025



# Broton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 18 of 58

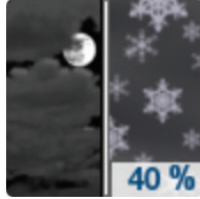
Today



High: 25 °F

Partly Sunny

Tonight



Low: 16 °F

Mostly Cloudy  
then Chance  
Snow

Friday



High: 31 °F

Chance Snow  
then Mostly  
Cloudy

Friday Night



Low: 5 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Saturday



High: 13 °F

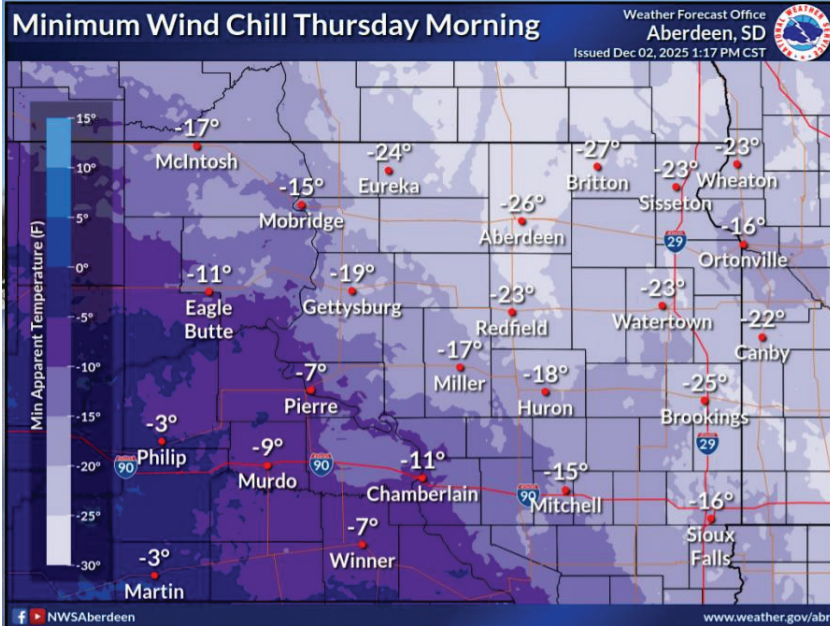
Chance Snow



## Thursday Morning Wind Chill

December 2, 2025  
1:59 PM

Another blast of cold air moves in Wednesday into Thursday.



→ Overnight low temperatures Wednesday night into Thursday morning are expected to be below 0° over north central and northeastern South Dakota.

◆ *Temperatures will reach as low as -15° in the James River Valley.*

→ **The combination of 15-25 mph gusts and cold temperatures will create wind chills of -25° or lower.**

◆ **At these wind chills, frostbite can occur in as little as 30 minutes.**

◆ Be sure to bundle up for the morning commute! Bring your pets inside!



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Overnight low temperatures Wednesday night into Thursday morning are expected to be below 0° over northern South Dakota, reaching as low as -15° in the James River Valley. When combined with wind, the wind chill is expected to dip below -25° at times. At these wind chills, frostbite can occur in as little as 30 minutes.

# Groton Daily Independent

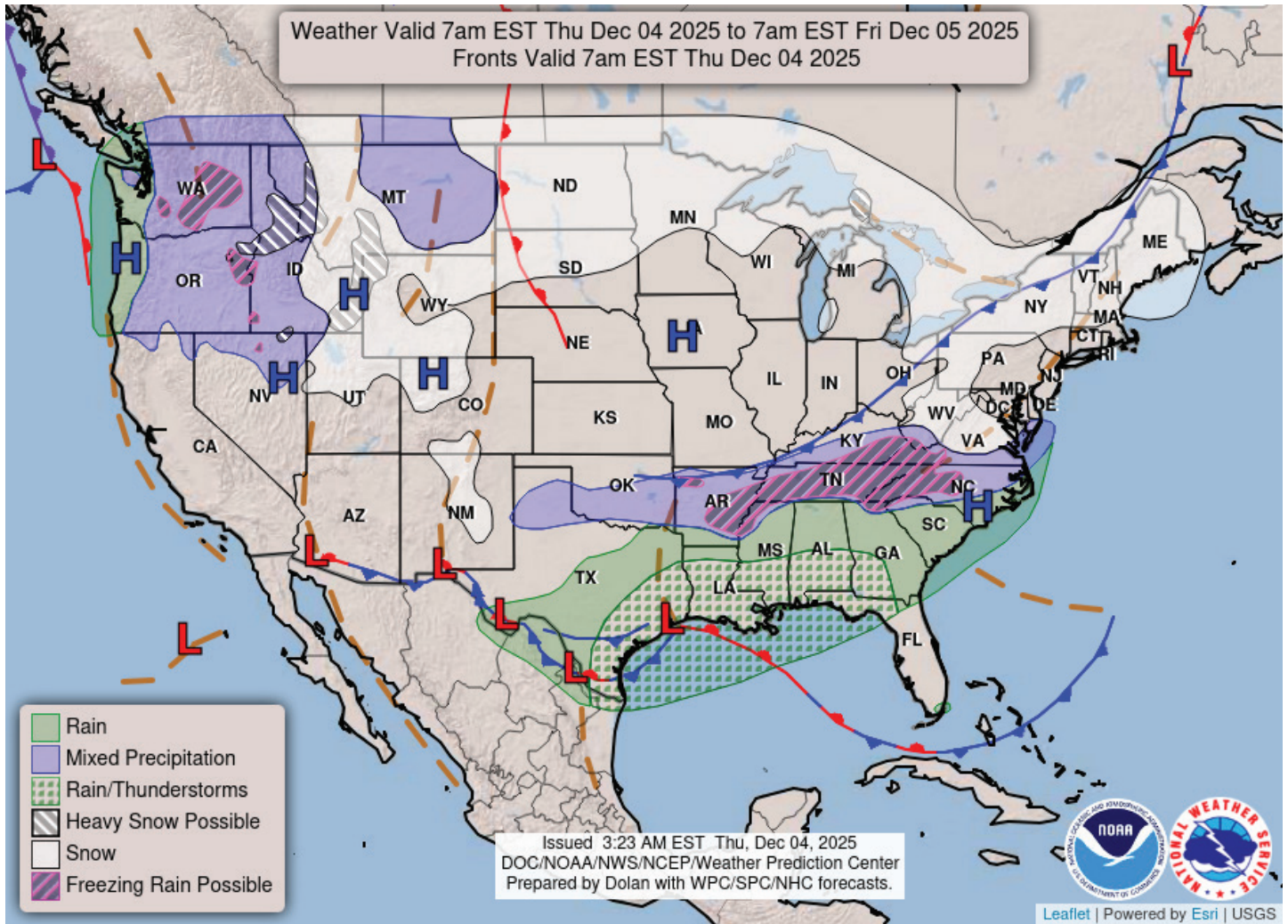
Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 19 of 58

## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 20 °F at 12:01 AM**  
**Low Temp: -10 °F at 9:59 PM**  
**Wind: 23 mph at 1:12 AM**  
**Precip: 0.00**

## Today's Info

Record High: 56 in 1979  
Record Low: -18 in 1927  
Average High: 33  
Average Low: 12  
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.08  
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00  
Average Precip to date: 21.29  
Precip Year to Date: 24.81  
Sunset Tonight: 4:50 pm  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:56 am



# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 20 of 58

## Today in Weather History

December 4, 1993: Winds gusting to 40 to 60 mph combined with snow cover along with new snow to cause blizzard conditions making travel hazardous across north central and northeast South Dakota. Several vehicles were stranded or slid into ditches. The winds toppled a private building under construction at Selby in Walworth County. New snowfall amounts were generally from one to three inches.

December 4, 1952: The month of December started off with chilly temperatures in London. This cold resulted in Londoners to burn more coal to heat up their homes. Then on December 5, a high pressure settled over the Thames River causing a dense layer of smog to develop. The smog became so thick and dense by December 7 that virtually no sunlight was seen in London. Most conservative estimates place the death toll at 4,000, with some estimating the smog killed as many as 8,000 individuals.

1786 - The first of two great early December storms began. The storm produced 18 inches of snow at Morristown NJ, and twenty inches of snow at New Haven CT. It also resulted in high tides at Nantucket which did great damage. (David Ludlum)

1972 - Winds gusting to 70 mph sent the temperature at Livingston, MT, plunging from 52 degrees to 18 degrees in just twenty minutes. (The Weather Channel)

1982 - The temperature in New York City's Central Park reached 72 degrees to establish a record high for December. The month as a whole was also the warmest of record. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A cold front crossing the Pacific Coast Region brought high winds and heavy rain to California. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 55 mph at Newport Beach CA, and Mount Wilson CA was drenched with 2.17 inches of rain in six hours. Gale force winds prevailed along the Northern Pacific Coast, and winds in the Tehachapis Mountains of southern California gusted to 60 mph. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Gale force winds continued to usher cold arctic air into the northeastern U.S. Winds gusted to 65 mph at Windsor Locks CT. Up to a foot of snow blanketed the higher elevations of Vermont. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Seventeen cities in the eastern U.S., including nine in Florida, reported record low temperatures for the date. Lakeland FL reported a record low of 31 degrees, and Watertown NY was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 20 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2002 - An early season winter storm brought an expansive shield of snow and ice through much of the eastern U.S., from the lower Ohio Valley, southern Appalachians and into the Northeast. Snow accumulations of 4-8 inches were common along the northern edge of the precipitation shield, while a significant accrual of glaze occurred in the Carolinas. The storm caused at least 17 fatalities, mostly from traffic accidents (CNN). In the Carolinas, electric utilities provider Duke Power characterized the ice storm as the worst in the company's history, with 1.2 million customers or nearly half its entire customer base without power on the morning of the 5th. This surpassed electrical outages inflicted by Hurricane Hugo as it swept through the central Carolinas in September 1989.

December 4, 2002: A total solar eclipse was experienced by millions of people from Africa to Australia, and from space.

## Our Best Friend Is Jesus

### Jesus is our Friend—what does that mean to you?

John 15:9-17: 9 "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. 12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command. 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. 17 This is my command: Love each other.

There's a children's Sunday school song with a little chorus that says, "My best friend is Jesus." As adults, we probably don't sing this song on a regular basis, but we should not forget the truth that Jesus is indeed our friend.

As believers learn more about God, they rightly elevate Him. It is easier to think of our Creator, Savior, and Lord as high and mighty than to "lower" Him in our estimation to the status of a friend. But Jesus makes a point of telling His disciples that He is both the Son of God and their companion (John 15:15).

His offer of friendship extends to us as well. Like the original 12 followers, we are privileged to say that Christ laid down His life for us in a supreme act of love and devotion (v. 13). What's more, His Spirit reveals the truth of Scripture to our heart so we can learn more about God and His ways. In other words, Jesus has made known to us the things He heard from His Father, just as He did to the men who followed Him in the first century.

Teaching children to sing of their friendship with Jesus is a good idea. But it's also wise for grown believers to acknowledge that special relationship. May we never become so religious, so pious, or so full of our own maturity that we cannot say, "My best friend is Jesus Christ."

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

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 22 of 58

## Upcoming Groton Events

- 11/15/2025 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm
- 11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving 11:30am-1:30pm Community Center (Thanksgiving)
- 11/30/2025 Snow Queen Contest, 4 p.m.
- 12/06/2025 Olive Grove Holiday Party and Silent Live Auction Fundraiser

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# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 23 of 58



## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.02.25

17 25 26 53 60 16

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$50,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 55  
Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.03.25

14 19 27 30 41 10

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$8,570,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 10  
Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.03.25

20 21 22 41 43 17

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 25 Mins 38  
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.03.25

4 13 18 25 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$111,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 25  
Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.03.25

9 31 35 37 58 11

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 54  
Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.03.25

1 14 20 46 51 26

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$820,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 54  
Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

## News from the **AP** Associated Press

### **South Dakota State defeats Northern Arizona 75-62 behind 20 points from Joe Saylor**

By The Associated Press undefined

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — Joe Saylor had 20 points in South Dakota State's 75-62 victory against Northern Arizona on Wednesday.

Saylor also contributed three steals for the Jackrabbits (5-4). Damon Wilkinson scored 13 points while shooting 4 of 6 from the field and 5 for 7 from the line and added five rebounds. Kalen Garry had 11 points.

The Lumberjacks (4-3) were led in scoring by Arne Osojnik, who finished with 16 points. Zack Davidson added 11 points and two steals.

### **Portland State wins 77-71 over South Dakota**

By The Associated Press undefined

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Terri Miller Jr. scored 26 points and grabbed 11 rebounds as Portland State beat South Dakota 77-71 on Wednesday.

Keyon Kensie scored 22 points and added 10 rebounds for the Vikings (5-2). Jaylin Henderson finished with 11 points.

Isaac Bruns led the Coyotes (5-4) with 28 points, nine rebounds and four steals. Cameron Fens added 15 points, six rebounds, two steals and two blocks for South Dakota. Uzziah Buntyn finished with 11 points and two steals.

### **Putin says there are points he can't agree to in the US proposal to end Russia's war against Ukraine**

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

Russian President Vladimir Putin says that some proposals in a U.S. plan to end the war in Ukraine are unacceptable to the Kremlin, indicating that any deal is still some way off despite intense shuttle diplomacy by American envoys.

U.S. President Donald Trump has set in motion the most intense diplomatic push to stop the fighting since Russia launched a full-scale invasion of its neighbor nearly four years ago. But the peace efforts have once again run into demands that are hard to reconcile, especially over whether Ukraine must give up land to Russia and how it can be kept safe from any future Russian aggression.

Putin said in comments published Thursday that his five-hour talks with U.S. envoys this week were "necessary" and "useful," but also "difficult work." Some of the proposals were unacceptable to the Kremlin, he said.

Meanwhile, Trump's special envoy, Steve Witkoff, and son-in-law Jared Kushner, are set to meet with Ukraine's lead negotiator, Rustem Umerov, on Thursday in Miami for further talks, according to a senior Trump administration official who wasn't authorized to comment publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Putin spoke to the India Today TV channel before his visit to New Delhi on Thursday. Before the full interview was broadcast, Russian state news agencies Tass and RIA Novosti quoted some of Putin's remarks in it.

Tass quoted Putin as saying in the interview that at the talks in the Kremlin on Tuesday, the sides "had to go through each point" of the U.S. peace proposal, "which is why it took so long."

"This was a necessary conversation, a very concrete one," the Russian president said.

There were provisions that Moscow said it was ready to discuss, while others "we can't agree to," Putin

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 25 of 58

said, adding "it's difficult work."

Trump said Wednesday that Witkoff and Kushner came away from their marathon session confident that he wants to find an end to the war.

"Their impression was very strongly that he'd like to make a deal," Trump said.

Putin refused to go into details as to what Russia could agree to and what it finds unacceptable. None of the officials involved in the negotiations has offered details of the talks.

"I think it is premature. Because it could simply disrupt the working regime" of the peace effort, Tass quoted Putin as saying.

European leaders, left on the sidelines by Washington as U.S. officials engage directly with Moscow and Kyiv, have accused Putin of feigning interest in Trump's peace drive.

Russian barrages of civilian areas of Ukraine continued overnight into Thursday. A ballistic missile struck Kryvyi Rih on Wednesday night, wounding six people, including a 3-year-old girl, according to city administration head Oleksandr Vilkul.

He said that the strike damaged more than 40 residential buildings, a school and domestic gas pipes in the city, which is Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's hometown.

A 6-year-old girl died in Kherson, a southern port city, after Russian artillery shelling wounded her the previous day.

"Doctors fought until the very end to save her life, but her injuries were too severe," regional military administration chief Oleksandr Prokudin wrote on Telegram.

Russia also struck Odesa with drones, wounding six people, while civilian and energy infrastructure was damaged, said Oleh Kiper, the head of the regional military administration.

Overall, Russia fired two ballistic missiles and 138 drones of various types at Ukraine overnight, officials said.

Meanwhile, in the Russia-occupied part of Ukraine's Kherson region, two men were killed by a Ukrainian drone strike on their vehicle Thursday, Moscow-installed regional leader Vladimir Saldo said.

A 68-year-old woman was also wounded in the attack, he said.

## **ID of Thai agricultural worker's remains leaves 1 final hostage in Gaza**

By AUDREY HOROWITZ and BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Remains that militants in Gaza handed to Israel as part of the first phase of the ceasefire deal were those of a Thai agricultural worker, Israeli and Thai officials said Thursday. The return of Sudthisak Rinthalak's remains leaves just one more hostage to be returned under the agreement.

Sudthisak was an agricultural worker who had been employed at Kibbutz Be'eri, one of the hardest-hit communities in the attack. Israeli officials said the 42-year-old was killed on Oct. 7, 2023, during the Hamas-led attack in Israel that triggered the Israel-Hamas war and that his body was taken by the militant group Islamic Jihad.

He was officially declared dead on May 16, 2024.

Sudthisak's remains were returned Wednesday, a day after militants handed over remains that didn't match either of the last two hostages.

Thai Foreign Ministry spokesperson Nikorndej Balankura said Sudthisak's family has been notified and thanked the Israeli government for assistance that led to the release of all 31 Thai hostages taken at the start of the war. Of them, 28 were returned alive and three dead.

Thais were the largest group of foreigners to be held in captivity. The Thai Foreign Ministry has said in addition to the hostages, 46 Thais have been killed during the war.

Israeli Ran Gvili is now the last hostage whose remains have yet to be returned. Gvili was an Israeli police officer who helped people escape from the Nova music festival during the Oct. 7 attack and was killed fighting at another location.

Since the Oct. 10 start of the ceasefire, 20 living hostages and the remains of 27 others have been

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 26 of 58

returned to Israel. In exchange, Israel has released the bodies of hundreds of Palestinians to Gaza. Most remain unidentified.

The return of all the hostages is an essential element of the first phase of the U.S.-brokered ceasefire that began in October, which both Hamas and Israel have accused the other of breaking. In exchange, Israel has been releasing Palestinian prisoners.

The plan is still in the early stages and many questions linger over its implementation. The plan to secure and govern the territory authorizes an international stabilization force to provide security, approves a transitional authority to be overseen by U.S. President Donald Trump and envisions a possible future path to an independent Palestinian state.

## More violence in Gaza

In Gaza, the Kuwait Specialty Hospital in Rafah said Thursday it had received the bodies of five people, including two children, following an Israeli airstrike in the south of the strip late Wednesday.

Another 32 people were treated for wounds sustained in the strike on the town of Muwasi, the hospital said.

Israel said it launched an airstrike targeting a Hamas militant in retaliation for an attack earlier in the day that wounded five Israeli soldiers.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Hamas violated the ceasefire when, according to the army, militants emerged from a tunnel and attacked Israeli soldiers in an area under their control.

## Grieving relatives angry at deaths during ceasefire

Relatives of the dead Palestinians wept and wailed over their loved ones' bodies being transported in white body bags through the city of Khan Younis on Thursday.

All five of the dead belong to the same family. Blood stains still marked the mattresses on the floor of a tent encampment that was struck.

Some relatives voiced their outrage that people are still being killed during what's supposed to be a cessation of fighting.

Aisha Abu Jazar, a woman living near where the Palestinians were killed, said she was shocked to hear "unusually intense fire" by Israelis overnight.

"They fired a missile at a tent made of cloth, plastic, and wood. The children were asleep. What did the children do to deserve being torn apart in their sleep? What did they do to deserve this?" she said.

"We were supposed to be in a ceasefire," she added.

## The war's grim toll

More than 360 Palestinians have been killed across Gaza since start of the ceasefire, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. Israel still carries out strikes in response to what it has called violations of the truce, and bodies from earlier in the war are being recovered from the rubble.

The war began with a Hamas-led attack on southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, in which around 1,200 people were killed and more than 250 others were taken hostage. Almost all of the hostages or their remains have been returned in ceasefires or other deals.

The Palestinian death toll has surpassed 70,100 since the war began, according to Gaza's Health Ministry which operates under the Hamas-run government. It is staffed by medical professionals and maintains detailed records viewed as generally reliable by the international community.

## Lawmakers to hear from Navy admiral who ordered attack that killed boat strike survivors

By STEPHEN GROVES and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Navy admiral who reportedly issued orders for the U.S. military to fire upon survivors of an attack on an alleged drug boat is expected Thursday on Capitol Hill to provide a classified briefing to top congressional lawmakers overseeing national security.

The information from Adm. Frank "Mitch" Bradley, who is now the commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, comes at a potentially crucial moment in the unfolding congressional investigation into how

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 27 of 58

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth handled the military operation in international waters near Venezuela. There are mounting questions over whether the strike may have violated the law.

Lawmakers are seeking a full accounting of the strikes after The Washington Post reported that Bradley on Sept. 2 ordered an attack on two survivors to comply with Hegseth's directive to "kill everybody." Legal experts say the incident amounts to a crime if the survivors were targeted, and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle are demanding accountability.

Bradley will speak to a handful of top congressional leaders, including the Republican chairs and ranking Democrats of the House and Senate committees on Armed Services, and separately to the GOP chairman and Democratic vice chairman on the Senate Intelligence Committee.

"This is an incredibly serious matter. This is about the safety of our troops. This is an incident that could expose members of our armed services to legal consequences," Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer said in a floor speech Wednesday. "And yet the American public and the Congress are still not hearing basic facts."

As Bradley appears for questions in the classified setting, lawmakers will be seeking answers to key questions: What orders did Hegseth give regarding the operations? And what was the reasoning for the second strike?

Democratic lawmakers are also demanding that the Trump administration release the full video of the Sept. 2 attack, as well as written records of the orders and any directives from Hegseth. While Republicans, who control the national security committees, have not publicly called for those documents, they have pledged a thorough review.

"The investigation is going to be done by the numbers," said Sen. Roger Wicker, the chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "We'll find out the ground truth."

Pressure builds on Hegseth

President Donald Trump has stood behind Hegseth as he defends his handling of the attack, but pressure is mounting on the defense secretary.

Hegseth has said the aftermath of an initial strike on the boat was clouded in the "fog of war." He has also said he "didn't stick around" for the second strike, but said Bradley "made the right call" and "had complete authority" to do it.

Also on Thursday, the Defense Department inspector general was expected to release a partially redacted report into Hegseth's use of the Signal messaging app in March to share information about a military strike against Yemen's Houthi militants.

The report found that Hegseth put U.S. personnel and their mission at risk by using Signal, according to two people familiar with the findings. The Pentagon, however, has cast the report as an exoneration of Hegseth.

Who is Adm. Bradley?

At the time of the attack, Bradley was the commander of Joint Special Operations Command, overseeing coordinated operations between the military's elite special operations units out of Fort Bragg in North Carolina. About a month after the strike, he was promoted to commander of U.S. Special Operations Command.

His military career, spanning over three decades, was mostly spent serving in the elite Navy SEALs and commanding joint operations. He was among the first special forces officers to deploy to Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. His latest promotion to admiral was approved by unanimous voice vote in the Senate earlier this year, and Democratic and Republican senators praised his record.

"I'm expecting Bradley to tell the truth and shed some light on what actually happened," said Virginia Sen. Mark Warner, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, adding that he had "great respect for his record."

Sen. Thom Tillis, a North Carolina Republican, described Bradley as among those who are "rock solid" and "the most extraordinary people that have ever served in the military."

But lawmakers like Tillis have also made it clear they expect a reckoning if it is found that survivors were targeted. "Anybody in the chain of command that was responsible for it, that had vision of it, needs to

be held accountable," he said.

What else are lawmakers seeking?

The scope of the investigation is not yet clear, but there is other documentation of the strike that could fill in what happened. But obtaining that information will largely depend on action from Republican lawmakers — a potentially painful prospect for them if it puts them at odds with the president.

Sen. Jack Reed, the top Democrat on the Armed Services committee, said he and Wicker have formally requested the executive orders authorizing the operations and the complete videos from the strikes. They are also seeking the intelligence that identified the vessels as legitimate targets, the rules of engagement for the attacks and any criteria used to determine who was a combatant and who was a civilian.

Military officials were aware that there were survivors in the water after the initial strike but carried out the follow-on strike under the rationale that it needed to sink the vessel, according to two people familiar with the matter who spoke on the condition of anonymity. What remains unclear — and what lawmakers hope to clarify in their briefing with Bradley — was who ordered the strikes and whether Hegseth was involved, one of the people said.

Republican lawmakers who are close to Trump have sought to defend Hegseth this week, standing behind the military campaign against drug cartels that the president deems "narco-terrorists."

"I see nothing wrong with what took place," said Sen. Markwayne Mullin, an Oklahoma Republican, as he argued that the Trump administration was justified in using war powers against drug cartels.

More than 80 people have been killed in the series of strikes that started in September. And for critics of the campaign like Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., the pressing questions about the legality of killing survivors are a natural outgrowth of military action that was always on shaky legal ground. He said it was clear that Hegseth is responsible, even if he didn't explicitly order a second attack.

"He may not have been in the room, but he was in the loop," Blumenthal said. "And it was his order that was instrumental and foreseeably resulted in the deaths of these survivors."

## **A vocal Jeffrey Epstein accuser is urging judges to unseal his court records**

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — One of Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell's most vocal accusers urged judges on Wednesday to grant the Justice Department's request to unseal records from their federal sex trafficking cases, saying "only transparency is likely to lead to justice."

Annie Farmer weighed in through her lawyer, Sigrid S. McCawley, after the judges asked for input from victims before ruling on whether the records should be made public under a new law requiring the government to open its files on the late financier and his longtime confidante, who sexually abused young women and girls for decades.

Farmer and other victims fought for the passage of the law, known as the Epstein Files Transparency Act. Signed last month by President Donald Trump, it compels the Justice Department, FBI and federal prosecutors to release by Dec. 19 the vast troves of material they've amassed during investigations into Epstein.

The Justice Department last week asked Manhattan federal Judges Richard M. Berman and Paul A. Engelmayer to lift secrecy orders on grand jury transcripts and other material from Epstein's 2019 sex trafficking case and a wide range of records from Maxwell's 2021 case, including search warrants, financial records and notes from interviews with victims.

"Nothing in these proceedings should stand in the way of their victory or provide a backdoor avenue to continue to cover up history's most notorious sex-trafficking operation," McCawley wrote in a letter to the judges.

The attorney was critical of the government for failing to prosecute anyone else in Epstein and Maxwell's orbit.

She asked the judges to ensure that the orders they issue do not preclude the Justice Department from releasing other Epstein-related materials, adding that Farmer "is wary" that any denial could be used "as a pretext or excuse" to withhold information.

Epstein, a millionaire money manager known for socializing with celebrities, politicians, billionaires and the academic elite, killed himself in jail a month after his 2019 arrest.

Maxwell was convicted in 2021 by a federal jury of sex trafficking for helping recruit some of Epstein's underage victims and participating in some of the abuse. She is serving a 20-year prison sentence.

In a court filing Wednesday, Maxwell's lawyer again said that she is preparing a habeas petition in a bid to overturn her conviction. The lawyer, David Markus, first mentioned the habeas petition in court papers in August as she fought the Justice Department's initial bid to have her case records unsealed. The Supreme Court in October declined to hear Maxwell's appeal.

Markus said in Wednesday's filing that while Maxwell now "does not take a position" in the wake of the transparency act's passage, doing so "would create undue prejudice so severe that it would foreclose the possibility of a fair retrial" if her habeas petition succeeds.

The records, Markus said, "contain untested and unproven allegations."

Berman, who presided over the Epstein case, ordered victims and Epstein's estate to respond to the Justice Department's unsealing request by Wednesday and gave the government until Dec. 8 to reply to those submissions. Berman said he would make his "best efforts to resolve this motion promptly."

Engelmayer, who's weighing whether to release records from Maxwell's case, gave her and victims until Wednesday to respond. The government must respond by Dec. 8, he said, moving up his original Dec. 10 deadline to match Berman's. Engelmayer said that will enable him "to render an earlier decision on this motion."

Lawyers for Epstein's estate said in a letter to Berman on Wednesday that the estate takes no position on the Justice Department's unsealing request. The lawyers noted that the government had committed to making appropriate redactions of personal identifying information for victims.

Last week, a lawyer for some victims complained that the House Oversight Committee had failed to redact, or black out, some of their names from tens of thousands pages of Epstein-related documents it has released in recent months.

Transparency "CANNOT come at the expense of the privacy, safety, and protection of sexual abuse and sex trafficking victims, especially these survivors who have already suffered repeatedly," lawyer Brad Edwards wrote.

## **Pentagon knew boat attack left survivors but still launched a follow-on strike, AP sources say**

By LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon knew there were survivors after a September attack on an alleged drug boat in the Caribbean Sea and the U.S. military still carried out a follow-up strike, according to two people familiar with the matter.

The rationale for the second strike was that it was needed to sink the vessel, according to the people familiar with the matter who spoke Wednesday on the condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss it publicly. The Trump administration says all 11 people aboard were killed.

What remains unclear was who ordered the strikes and whether Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth was involved, one of the people said. The details are becoming crucial as lawmakers have launched investigations and are seeking to determine whether the U.S. acted lawfully during its military operations.

The questions are expected to emerge Thursday during a classified congressional briefing with the commander that the Trump administration says ordered the second strike, Adm. Frank "Mitch" Bradley.

The Pentagon did not respond Wednesday to a request for comment about the reported new details about the Sept. 2 attack.

Hegseth is under growing scrutiny over the department's strikes on alleged drug traffickers in the Ca-

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 30 of 58

ribbean and eastern Pacific Ocean, and in particular the follow-on strike that reportedly killed survivors. Some legal experts and lawmakers say that strike would have violated peacetime laws and those governing armed conflict.

Hegseth has defended the second strike as emerging in the "fog of war," saying during a Cabinet meeting this week at the White House that he didn't see any survivors but also "didn't stick around" for the rest of the mission.

The defense secretary has also said that Bradley, as the admiral in charge, "made the right call" in ordering the second hit, which he "had complete authority to do."

President Donald Trump was asked Wednesday whether he would release the video of the follow-on strike, as leading Democratic lawmakers have demanded. He replied: "I don't know what they have, but whatever they have we'd certainly release. No problem," he told reporters.

The Trump administration has said the U.S. is in "armed conflict" with drug cartels, even though Congress has not approved any authorization for the use of military force in the region.

A strike later in September has led to the family of a Colombian man filing a formal challenge to the premier human rights watchdog in the Americas, arguing that his death was an extrajudicial killing. The petition from the family of Alejandro Carranza says the military bombed his fishing boat on Sept. 15 in violation of human rights conventions.

The follow-on strike on Sept. 2 was on the first vessel hit in what the Trump administration calls a counterdrug campaign that has grown to over 20 known strikes and more than 80 dead.

The information about the follow-on strike was not presented to lawmakers during a classified briefing in September, in the days after the incident. It was disclosed later, one of the people said, and the explanation provided by the department has been broadly unsatisfactory to various members of the national security committees in Congress.

In a rare flex of bipartisan oversight, the Armed Services committees in both the House and Senate swiftly announced investigations into the strikes as lawmakers of both parties raise questions.

Bradley is scheduled to appear Thursday in a classified briefing with the panels' two Republican chairmen and two ranking Democratic members.

## President Trump's contempt shocks the country's largest Somali community

By TIM SULLIVAN and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Even for a president who has long made clear he's no fan of Somalia, the latest round of White House contempt was a shock Wednesday in the country's largest Somali community.

"They contribute nothing. I don't want them in our country," President Donald Trump told reporters during a Tuesday Cabinet meeting. "We can go one way or the other, and we're going to go the wrong way if we keep taking in garbage into our country."

On Wednesday, he doubled down: "Somalians should be out of here," he told reporters during an Oval Office event. "They've destroyed our country."

As for Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, who has repeatedly criticized the president's rhetoric, Trump dismissed him as a "fool."

"I wouldn't be proud to have the largest Somali population," in the U.S., he said.

Hamse Warfa, a Somali-born entrepreneur who now lives in the Minneapolis area, sees things differently.

"I am not garbage," said Warfa, who has started a series of successful businesses and now runs a nationwide education nonprofit, World Savvy. "I'm a proud American citizen."

He notes that anti-immigration rhetoric has long been a powerful political tool, such as the Haitian migrants in Ohio who Trump vilified ahead of the 2024 elections.

"Last presidential election it was the Haitians and how they eat cats and dogs," he said. "The next iteration now is Somalis."

An African diaspora in Minnesota

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 31 of 58

The Minneapolis-St. Paul area is home to about 84,000 people of Somali descent, who make up nearly one-third of the Somalis living in the U.S.

Trump made his comments Tuesday soon after reports that federal authorities are preparing a targeted immigration enforcement operation in Minnesota focusing on Somalis living illegally in the U.S., according to a person familiar with the planning. But most of the state's Somalis are U.S. citizens, many born in this country.

Some Somali leaders said Wednesday they had received anecdotal reports about community members being detained by federal agents, but had no details. Federal immigration officials did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Refugees from the East African nation have been coming to the frigid plains of Minnesota since the 1990s, drawn in part by the state's generous social services and then by the ever-growing diaspora community.

They have become fixtures in the Twin Cities, opening businesses and revitalizing neighborhoods of empty storefronts. They are also increasingly politically prominent, serving in the state Legislature and on the Minneapolis and St. Paul city councils. Democratic Rep. Ilhan Omar — a regular target of Trump, who on Tuesday singled her out as "garbage" — serves in the U.S. House.

Immense fraud and the Somali community

Over the past few years they have also struggled with being typecast after dozens of people, many of them Somalis, were arrested in connection with schemes to defraud social service agencies of what some officials say could total hundreds of millions of dollars. Many of the arrested Somalis are U.S. citizens.

Last week, Trump called Minnesota "a hub of fraudulent money laundering activity" after a report by a conservative activist said fraud money flowed to the militant group al-Shabab, an affiliate of al-Qaida that controls parts of Somalia. But there has been little, if any, evidence, showing such a link, and federal prosecutors have not charged any defendants with supporting terrorists.

Trump's recent comments also came days after his administration announced it was halting all asylum decisions following the shooting of two National Guard soldiers in Washington. The suspect is originally from Afghanistan but Trump has raised questions about immigrants from other nations, including Somalia.

Also Tuesday, the administration said it was pausing all immigration applications for people from 19 countries, including Somalia, that were banned from travel to the U.S. after the National Guard shooting.

Somali leaders and allies like Gov. Tim Walz and Frey have vowed to protect the community.

"Minneapolis is — and will remain — a city that stands up for our residents," Frey said in a statement.

Several Democratic legislators and Minneapolis City Council members held a news conference Wednesday to reinforce that message.

They called on Republican lawmakers to denounce the president's attacks, saying history will judge them.

"Where are the Republicans now?" asked state Sen. Zaynab Mohamed, of Minneapolis, who said she had urged Republican political leaders to attend the news conference.

As for Warfa, he just wishes the rhetoric would die down. One of his daughters is a high school senior mulling her next steps.

"I would rather spend time with my daughter thinking about college, and taking her to different college tours," he said, instead of being "spoken about as garbage, you know, by the president of the United States."

## **Pentagon watchdog finds Hegseth's use of Signal posed risk to US personnel, AP sources say**

By LISA MASCARO and BEN FINLEY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon's watchdog found that Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth put U.S. personnel and their mission at risk when he used the Signal messaging app to convey sensitive information about a military strike against Yemen's Houthi militants, two people familiar with the findings said Wednesday.

Hegseth, however, has the ability to declassify material and the report did not find he did so improperly, according to one of the people familiar with the findings who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 32 of 58

the information. That person also said the report concluded that Hegseth violated Pentagon policy by using his personal device for official business and it recommended better training for all Pentagon officials.

Hegseth declined to sit for an interview with the Pentagon's inspector general but provided a written statement, that person said. The defense secretary asserted that he was permitted to declassify information as he saw fit and only communicated details he thought would not endanger the mission.

The initial findings, which were first reported by CNN, ramp up the pressure on the former Fox News Channel host after lawmakers called for the independent inquiry into his use of the commercially available app.

Lawmakers also just opened investigations into a news report that a follow-up strike on an alleged drug-smuggling boat in the Caribbean Sea in September killed survivors after Hegseth issued a verbal order to "kill everybody."

Hegseth defended the strike as emerging in the "fog of war," saying he didn't see any survivors but also "didn't stick around" for the rest of the mission and that the admiral in charge "made the right call" in ordering the second strike. He also did not admit fault following the Signal revelations, asserting that the information was unclassified.

"The Inspector General review is a TOTAL exoneration of Secretary Hegseth and proves what we knew all along — no classified information was shared," Sean Parnell, the Pentagon's chief spokesman said in a statement. "This matter is resolved, and the case is closed."

President Donald Trump "stands by" Hegseth, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said in a statement, adding that the probe affirms that "no classified information was leaked, and operational security was not compromised."

Journalist was added to a chat where sensitive plans were shared

In at least two separate Signal chats, Hegseth provided the exact timings of warplane launches and when bombs would drop — before the men and women carrying out those attacks on behalf of the United States were airborne.

Hegseth's use of the app came to light when a journalist, Jeffrey Goldberg of The Atlantic, was inadvertently added to a Signal text chain by then-national security adviser Mike Waltz. It included Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and others, brought together to discuss March 15 military operations against the Iran-backed Houthis.

Hegseth had created another Signal chat with 13 people that included his wife and brother where he shared similar details of the same strike, The Associated Press reported.

Signal is encrypted but is not authorized for carrying classified information and is not part of the Pentagon's secure communications network.

Hegseth previously has said none of the information shared in the chats was classified. Multiple current and former military officials have told the AP there was no way details with that specificity, especially before a strike took place, would have been OK to share on an unsecured device.

The review was delivered to lawmakers, who were able to review the report in a classified facility at the Capitol. A partially redacted version of the report was expected to be released publicly later this week.

Hegseth said he viewed the investigation as a partisan exercise and did not trust the inspector general, according to one of the people familiar with the report's findings. The review had to rely on screenshots of the Signal chat published by the Atlantic because Hegseth could not provide more than a small handful of his Signal messages, the person said.

When asked about the investigation in August, Pentagon press secretary Kingsley Wilson told reporters that "we believe that this is a witch hunt and a total sham and being conducted in bad faith."

Lawmakers had called for inspector general to investigate

The revelations sparked intense scrutiny, with Democratic lawmakers and a small number of Republicans saying Hegseth posting the information to the Signal chats before the military jets had reached their targets potentially put those pilots' lives at risk. They said lower-ranking members of the military would have been fired for such a lapse.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 33 of 58

Some Democrats on the House and Senate intelligence committees suggested Wednesday that Hegseth's actions would be a fireable offense for anyone else.

"This was not an isolated lapse. It reflects a broader pattern of recklessness and poor judgment from a secretary who has repeatedly shown he is in over his head," Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia said in a statement.

The inspector general had opened its investigation into Hegseth at the request of the Republican chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, and the committee's top Democrat, Sen. Jack Reed of Rhode Island.

It all ties back to the campaign against Yemen's Houthis

The Houthi rebels had started launching missile and drone attacks against commercial and military ships in late 2023 in what their leadership had described as an effort to end Israel's offensive against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Their campaign greatly reduced the flow of trade through the Red Sea corridor, which typically sees \$1 trillion of goods move through it annually.

The U.S.-led campaign against the Houthis in 2024 turned into the most intense running sea battle the Navy had faced since World War II.

A ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war had begun in January before falling apart in March. The U.S. then launched a broad assault against the Houthis that ended weeks later when Trump said they pledged to stop attacking ships. The latest Gaza ceasefire began in October.

Following the disclosure of Hegseth's Signal chat that included the Atlantic's editor, the magazine released the entire thread in late March. Hegseth had posted multiple details about an impending strike, using military language and laying out when a "strike window" starts, where a "target terrorist" was located, the time elements around the attack and when various weapons and aircraft would be used in the strike. He mentioned that the U.S. was "currently clean" on operational security.

Hegseth told Fox News Channel in April that what he shared over Signal was "informal, unclassified coordinations, for media coordinations and other things."

## Israel launches airstrike in southern Gaza after earlier attack by militants wounded 5 soldiers

By JULIA FRANKEL and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel said it launched an airstrike on a Hamas militant in southern Gaza late Wednesday in retaliation for an attack earlier in the day that wounded five Israeli soldiers.

The strike was the latest test for a fragile ceasefire that has mostly held up since early October, despite claims of violations by both Israel and Hamas. Hamas put out a statement condemning the Israeli strike in Khan Younis.

Earlier Wednesday, Israel received remains of what could be one of the last hostages in Gaza and said it would begin allowing Palestinians to leave the territory through a border crossing with Egypt.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Hamas violated the ceasefire Wednesday when, according to the army, militants emerged from a tunnel and attacked Israeli soldiers in an area under their control.

Israel has accused Hamas of ceasefire violations before launching previous airstrikes. Strikes killed 104 people in late October and 33 people in late November, according to local health officials.

The remains found Wednesday by militants in northern Gaza were returned to Israel, where they were being examined by forensics experts. Remains militants handed over Tuesday did not match either of the last two hostages.

The return of all the hostages taken on the Oct. 7, 2023, attack that started the war is a key element of the first phase of the ceasefire that began in October. In exchange, Israel has been releasing Palestinian prisoners.

Last hostages in Gaza are an Israeli and Thai national

Once the last hostages' remains are returned and Israel releases more Palestinian prisoners in exchange, the U.S.-backed ceasefire plan is supposed to advance to the next phases, which call for creating an in-

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 34 of 58

ternational stabilization force, forming a technocratic Palestinian government and disarming Hamas.

Earlier Wednesday, Netanyahu said forensic testing showed that partial remains returned by militants Tuesday did not match either of the hostages still in Gaza. Palestinian militants later said they had found more remains in northern Gaza and turned them over to the Red Cross, which is acting as an intermediary.

The two remaining bodies of hostages taken into Gaza are Israeli Ran Gvili and Thai national Sudthisak Rinthalak. Gvili was an Israeli police officer who helped people escape from the Nova music festival during the Oct. 7 attack and was killed fighting at another location. Sudthisak Rinthalak was an agricultural worker from Thailand who had been employed at Kibbutz Be'eri, one of the hardest-hit communities in the attack.

A total of 31 workers from Thailand were abducted, the largest group of foreigners to be held in captivity. Most of them were released in the first and second ceasefires. The Thai Foreign Ministry has said in addition to the hostages, 46 Thais have been killed during the war.

### Opening of Rafah crossing complicated by dispute

Under the terms of the ceasefire, the long-closed Rafah crossing is to be opened for medical evacuations and travel to and from Gaza. The World Health Organization says there are more than 16,500 sick and wounded people who need to leave Gaza for medical care.

It was not immediately clear when the border crossing would be opened, however.

Egypt wants Palestinians to be able to return to Gaza through the crossing and says it would only be opened if movement is allowed both ways. Israel says Palestinians will not be able to return to Gaza through the crossing until the last hostages' remains are returned from Gaza.

The Israeli military body charged with facilitating aid to Gaza, COGAT, said Israel would coordinate with Egypt on the exit of Palestinians, under the supervision of a mission from the European Union. Those wishing to leave Gaza will require "Israeli security approval," COGAT said.

Palestinians who want to leave Gaza will be able to move through Rafah if Egypt agrees to receive them, Israeli government spokesperson Shosh Bedrosian said. But the crossing won't be open for Palestinians seeking to return to Gaza until all of the hostages in the territory are returned to Israel, she said.

Citing an unnamed Egyptian official, Egypt's State Information Service said, if an agreement is reached, the crossing will be opened for travel in both directions in accordance with the ceasefire plan advanced by U.S. President Donald Trump.

Egypt fears that Palestinians allowed to leave Gaza might not be able to return.

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi has warned that Israel might prompt an exodus from Gaza as a way to permanently expel people and "eliminate the Palestinian cause" for statehood. More than 100,000 Palestinians that left Gaza after the war started, including those wounded in the conflict, have been living in Egypt, according to Egyptian authorities.

The Rafah crossing was sealed off in May 2024 when Israel's military invaded the area. It was briefly opened in February this year as part of a previous ceasefire for the evacuation of sick and wounded Palestinians.

### Fighting in Gaza City leads to 1 Palestinian death

In Gaza City, a Palestinian man was killed by Israeli fire, a hospital said, marking the latest reported Palestinian fatality in the territory.

Israeli forces shot the 46-year-old man in the Zeitoun neighborhood, according to the Al-Ahli hospital, which received the body. Israel's military did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The hospital said the man was shot while in the "safe zone," which, under the terms of the ceasefire, is not controlled by the Israeli military. The Gaza Health Ministry says more than 360 Palestinians have been killed across Gaza since the ceasefire took effect on Oct. 11.

### Return of Palestinian bodies in flux

Twenty living hostages and the remains of 26 others have been returned to Israel since the ceasefire began.

Israel has been releasing 15 Palestinian bodies for the remains of each hostage as part of the ceasefire agreement. The Gaza Health Ministry said the total number of remains received so far is 330. Health of-

ficials in Gaza have said they have only been able to identify a fraction of the bodies handed over by Israel, and the process is complicated by a lack of DNA testing kits.

The ceasefire aims to wind down the war that was triggered by the Hamas-led attack on southern Israel, which killed about 1,200 people and saw 251 taken hostage.

The Gaza Health ministry says the total Palestinian death toll from the war is over 70,100. The ministry does not distinguish between militants and civilians, though it says roughly half of those killed have been women and children. The ministry operates under the Hamas-run government. It is staffed by medical professionals and maintains detailed records viewed as generally reliable by the international community.

## Doctor who sold ketamine to 'Friends' star Matthew Perry gets 2 1/2 years in prison

By ANDREW DALTON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A doctor who pleaded guilty to selling ketamine to Matthew Perry was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison on Wednesday at an emotional hearing over the "Friends" star's overdose death.

Judge Sherilyn Peace Garnett handed down the sentence that included two years of probation and a \$5,600 fine to 44-year-old Dr. Salvador Plasencia in a federal courtroom in Los Angeles.

The judge emphasized that Plasencia didn't provide the ketamine that killed Perry, but told him, "You and others helped Mr. Perry on the road to such an ending by continuing to feed his ketamine addiction." "You exploited Mr. Perry's addiction for your own profit," she said.

Plasencia was led from the courtroom in handcuffs as his mother cried in the audience. He might have arranged a date to surrender, but his lawyers said he was prepared to do it today.

Perry's family describes their grief

Perry's mother, stepmother and two half sisters gave tearful victim impact statements before the sentencing.

"My brother's death turned my world upside down," sister Madeline Morrison said, crying. "It punched a crater in my life. His absence is everywhere."

She talked about the broad effect of losing him.

"The world mourns my brother. He was everyone's favorite friend," Morrison said, adding "celebrities are not plastic dolls that you can take advantage of. They're people. They're human beings with families."

Perry struggled with addiction for years, dating back to his time on "Friends," when he became one of the biggest stars of his generation as Chandler Bing. He starred alongside Jennifer Aniston, Courteney Cox, Lisa Kudrow, Matt LeBlanc and David Schwimmer for 10 seasons from 1994 to 2004 on NBC's megahit.

Who's responsible for Perry's death

Plasencia was the first person sentenced of the five defendants who have pleaded guilty in connection with Perry's death at age 54 in 2023.

The doctor admitted to taking advantage of Perry, knowing he was a struggling addict. Plasencia texted another doctor that Perry was a "moron" who could be exploited for money, according to court filings.

Prosecutors had asked for three years in prison, while the defense sought just a day in prison plus probation.

Perry's mother talked about the things he overcame in life and the strength he showed.

"I used to think he couldn't die," Suzanne Perry said as her husband, "Dateline" journalist Keith Morrison, stood at the podium with her.

"You called him a 'moron,'" she said, addressing Plasencia. "There is nothing moronic about that man. He was even a successful drug addict."

She spoke eloquently and apologized for rambling before getting tearful at the end, saying, "this was a bad thing you did!"

Plasencia apologizes to Perry's family

Plasencia also spoke, moments after Suzanne Perry, breaking into tears as he imagined the day he would have to tell his now 2-year-old son "about the time I didn't protect another mother's son. It hurts me so

much. I can't believe I'm here."

He apologized directly to Perry's family. "I should have protected him," he said.

Perry had been taking the surgical anesthetic ketamine legally as a treatment for depression. But when his regular doctor wouldn't provide it in the amounts he wanted, he turned to Plasencia.

Plasencia's lawyers tried to give a sympathetic portrait of him as a man who rose out of poverty to become a doctor beloved by his patients.

His mother stood to speak after Perry's mother had spoken, but the judge told her it wasn't appropriate for this hearing.

Outside the courthouse after, Luz Plasencia told reporters, "I'm sorry to the family of Matthew Perry."

"I'm feeling what they feel," she said. Speaking about her son, she said, "I know his heart."

Plasencia pleaded guilty in July to four counts of distribution of ketamine. He did not plead to causing Perry's death, and the amount he distributed was relatively small given that he sold only to Perry.

The judge said she largely agreed with a probation report suggesting the appropriate sentence was between eight and 14 months, but she went well beyond that.

"I think the judge was very well-reasoned," Keith Morrison told reporters.

At the start of the hearing, she said that family impact statements may not be appropriate because legally, "there is no identifiable victim in this case. The victim is the public."

But Plasencia's lawyers said they didn't object to family members speaking.

A doctor or a drug dealer?

The defense sought to cast Plasencia as a doctor treating a patient who was overcome by recklessness and greed.

"It was a perfect storm of bad decision-making, everybody agrees," attorney Karen Goldstein said, adding "absolutely his judgment was clouded by money."

Prosecutors said he was never acting as a doctor.

"He wasn't a negligent or reckless medical provider," Assistant U.S. Attorney Ian Yanniello said. "He was a drug dealer in a white coat."

Garnett generally agreed, pushing back against the defense argument that Perry was Plasencia's patient, and that the doctor had diagnosed him in a phone call they had before the sales began.

"Mr. Plasencia kept pushing it," the judge said. He literally was offering to sell ketamine."

When another defense attorney, asked "Is your honor confused about how this all went down?" Garnett replied, sternly, "No I'm not."

The other four defendants who reached deals to plead guilty will be sentenced at their own hearings in the coming months. Garnett said she would seek to make sure all the sentences made sense in relation to one another.

## Trump pardons Texas Democratic Rep. Cuellar in bribery and conspiracy case

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump pardoned Texas Democratic Rep. Henry Cuellar and his wife in a federal bribery and conspiracy case on Wednesday, citing what he called a "weaponized" justice system.

Trump, who has argued that his own legal troubles were a partisan witch hunt, said on social media without presenting evidence that Cuellar and his wife, Imelda Cuellar, were prosecuted because the congressman had been critical of President Joe Biden's immigration policies.

Trump, a Republican, said in a social media post that Cuellar "bravely spoke out against Open Borders" and accused Biden, a Democrat, of going after the congressman and his wife "for speaking the TRUTH."

Federal authorities had charged Cuellar and his wife with accepting thousands of dollars in exchange for the congressman advancing the interests of an Azerbaijan-controlled energy company and a bank in

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 37 of 58

Mexico. Cuellar is accused of agreeing to influence legislation favorable to Azerbaijan and deliver a pro-Azerbaijan speech on the floor of the U.S. House.

Cuellar has said he and his wife are innocent. The couple's trial had been set to begin next April.

"Henry, I don't know you, but you can sleep well tonight," Trump wrote in his social media post announcing the pardon. "Your nightmare is finally over!"

Cuellar thanks Trump for the pardon

Cuellar, who spoke to reporters outside his congressional office on Wednesday, thanked Trump in a brief statement.

"I think the facts have been clear about this, but I would also say I want to thank God for standing during this very difficult time with my family and I," he said. "Now we can get back to work. Nothing has changed. We will continue working hard."

Cuellar was asked if he was changing parties and said, "No, like I said, nothing has changed."

A spokesperson for Biden did not respond to messages seeking comment.

The U.S. Constitution gives the president broad power to grant pardons for federal crimes. The pardons don't erase a recipient's criminal record but can be seen as act of mercy or justice, often in cases that further public welfare.

Trump's pardons this year have included a string of unlikely beneficiaries who are boldfaced names and frequently politically aligned with the president. He pardoned dozens of Republicans accused of participating in his efforts to overturn his 2020 election loss to Biden. He gave clemency to all of 1,500-plus people charged in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. He's also pardoned a former Republican governor of Connecticut, an ex-GOP congressman and reality TV stars who had been convicted of cheating banks and evading taxes.

In addition to Cuellar, Trump on Wednesday also pardoned Timothy J. Leiweke, a veteran of the sports and entertainment industry who co-founded Oak View Group.

Leiweke was indicted in July — by Trump's own Justice Department — for, as federal prosecutors put it at the time, "Orchestrating a conspiracy to rig the bidding process" for a university arena in Austin, Texas. Leiweke had pled not guilty but received what Trump called "a full and conditional pardon" in a clemency statement that didn't include details on why the president was reversing the case.

Cuellar's daughters sought a pardon for him

In Trump's social media post, he included a copy of a letter that Cuellar's two daughters, Christina and Catherine, had sent to him on Nov. 12 asking that he pardon their parents.

"When you and your family faced your own challenges, we understood that pain in a very human way," Cuellar's daughters wrote in their letter. "We watched from afar through the eyes of daughters who knew what it felt like to see parents under fire."

Cuellar later told reporters, "I know that my daughters sent a letter, but letters are sent not knowing what's going to happen on that."

One of Henry Cuellar's lawyers, Eric Reed, said Wednesday that his legal team made a "pretty substantive presentation" to the Justice Department several months ago seeking dismissal of the charges. He declined to comment on what specifically Cuellar's legal team discussed with the department but said the arguments made were not political in nature.

In a statement, Imelda Cuellar's lawyers said Wednesday they were gratified by Trump's pardon of their client.

"She has always maintained her innocence," the statement said.

Henry Cuellar still faces an Ethics Committee investigation in the House. It began in May 2024 shortly after his indictment and was reauthorized in July. The committee said it was in contact with the Justice Department about mitigating the risks associated with dual investigations while still meeting its obligations to safeguard the integrity of the House.

Cuellar, who has served in Congress for more than 20 years, is a moderate Democrat who represents an area on the Texas-Mexico border and has a history of breaking with his party when it comes to im-

migration and firearms.

He was among the most vocal critics of the Biden administration's response to a record number of migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. He also is one of the last Democrats in Congress who opposes abortion rights.

Trump was asked later Wednesday by a reporter if he spoke with GOP leaders in the House about pardoning the Democratic congressman and if there were any concerns it might strengthen Cuellar's prospects next year.

Trump said, "It didn't matter" and that Cuellar was targeted for his comments critical of immigration.

"He represents the people on the border and he saw what was happening," Trump said

The Democrat earlier Wednesday filed to run for reelection.

Cuellar is not the only Democrat Trump has pardoned this year. February, he pardoned former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich, five years after he had commuted his sentence in a political corruption case.

Like in Cuellar's case, Trump suggested that New York City Mayor Eric Adams, a Democrat, faced federal corruption charges because he made comments critical of Biden's immigration policies.

Trump did not pardon Adams, but after Trump took office, the Justice Department moved to drop the case against the mayor, who had begun working with the Republican administration on immigration issues.

A top Justice Department official, who was also Trump's defense lawyer in several of his cases, stepped in to seek dismissal in the case.

## Trump proposal would weaken vehicle mileage rules that limit air pollution

By MATTHEW DALY and ALEXA ST. JOHN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump on Wednesday announced a proposal to weaken vehicle mileage rules for the auto industry, loosening regulatory pressure on automakers to control pollution from gasoline-powered cars and trucks.

The plan, if finalized next year, would significantly reduce fuel economy requirements, which set rules on how far new vehicles need to travel on a gallon of gasoline, through the 2031 model year. The administration and automakers say the rules will increase Americans' access to the full range of gasoline vehicles they need and can afford.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration projects that the new standards would set the industry fleetwide average for light-duty vehicles at roughly 34.5 miles per gallon in the 2031 model year, down from a projected 50.4 miles per gallon in 2031 under the Biden-era rule.

The move is the latest action by the Trump administration to reverse Biden-era policies that encouraged cleaner-running cars and trucks, including electric vehicles, and it sparked criticism from environmental groups. Burning gasoline for vehicles is a major contributor to planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions.

"From day one I've been taking action to make buying a car more affordable," Trump said at a White House event that included top executives from two of the largest U.S. automakers.

The rule reverses a Biden-era policy that "forced automakers to build cars using expensive technologies that drove up costs, drove up prices and made the car much worse," Trump said.

Automakers applaud and environmentalists decry rule change

The action is expected to save consumers about \$1,000 off the price of a new car, Trump said. New cars sold for an average of \$49,766 on average in October, according to Kelley Blue Book.

Automakers applauded the planned changes, which came amid industry complaints that the Biden-era rules were difficult to meet.

Ford CEO Jim Farley said the planned rollback was "a win for customers and common sense."

"As America's largest auto producer, we appreciate President Trump's leadership in aligning fuel economy standards with market realities. We can make real progress on carbon emissions and energy efficiency while still giving customers choice and affordability," he said.

Stellantis CEO Antonio Filosa said the automaker appreciates the administration's actions to "realign" the

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 39 of 58

mileage standards "with real world market conditions."

Since taking office in January, Trump has relaxed auto tailpipe emissions rules, repealed fines for auto-makers that do not meet federal mileage standards and terminated consumer credits of up to \$7,500 for EV purchases.

Environmentalists decried the rollback.

"In one stroke Trump is worsening three of our nation's most vexing problems: the thirst for oil, high gas pump costs and global warming," said Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Transport Campaign for the Center for Biological Diversity.

"Gutting the (gas-mileage) program will make cars burn more gas and American families burn more cash," said Katherine Garcia, director of the Sierra Club's Clean Transportation for All program. "This rollback would move the auto industry backwards, keeping polluting cars on our roads for years to come and threatening the health of millions of Americans, particularly children and the elderly."

'People want the gasoline car'

Trump has repeatedly pledged to end what he falsely calls an EV "mandate," referring incorrectly to Democratic President Joe Biden's target that half of all new vehicle sales be electric by 2030. EVs accounted for about 8% of new vehicle sales in the United States in 2024, according to Cox Automotive.

Trump called Democrats' efforts to promote EVs "insane," adding, "People want the gasoline car."

No federal policy has required auto companies to sell EVs, although California and other states have imposed rules requiring that all new passenger vehicles sold in the state be zero-emission by 2035. Trump and congressional Republicans blocked the California law earlier this year.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy urged his agency to reverse existing fuel economy requirements, known as Corporate Average Fuel Economy, or CAFE, soon after taking office. In June, he said that standards set under Biden were illegal because they included use of electric vehicles in their calculation. EVs do not run on gasoline. After the June rule revision, the traffic safety administration was empowered to update the requirements.

The new rules "are going to allow the automakers to make vehicles that Americans want to purchase, not vehicles that Joe Biden and (former Transportation Secretary Pete) Buttigieg want to build," Duffy said Wednesday.

Under Biden, automakers were required to average about 50 miles (81 kilometers) per gallon of gas for passenger cars by 2031, compared with about 39 miles (63 kilometers) per gallon today. The Biden administration also increased fuel-economy requirements by 2% each year for light-duty vehicles in every model year from 2027 to 2031, and 2% per year for SUVs and other light trucks from 2029 to 2031. At the same time, it called for stringent tailpipe rules meant to encourage EV adoption.

The 2024 standards would have saved 14 billion gallons of gasoline from being burned by 2050, according to the traffic safety administration's 2024 calculations. Abandoning them means that in 2035, cars could produce 22,111 more tons of carbon dioxide per year than under the Biden-era rules. It also means an extra 90 tons a year of deadly soot particles and 4,870 additional tons a year of smog components such as nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds going into the air in coming years.

Mileage rules have been implemented since the 1970s energy crisis, and over time, automakers have gradually increased their vehicles' average efficiency.

"Weakening fuel economy standards won't do much to make cars more affordable but is certain to make Americans buy a lot more gasoline," said Albert Gore, executive director of the Zero Emission Transportation Association.

The action also harms domestic manufacturers that have invested heavily in EV technologies and hired thousands of employees to build them, Gore said.

GM CEO skips White House event

Notably absent Wednesday was General Motors CEO Mary Barra, who was attending a previously scheduled event in New York City, a company spokesperson said. A GM plant manager represented the automaker at the White House instead.

Like Ford and Stellantis, GM has poured billions of dollars into electrification of its fleet. In a statement,

the company said it "supports the goals" of the proposed rule. "We remain committed to offering the best and broadest portfolio of electric and gas-powered vehicles on the market," GM said.

## Federal agents launch immigration crackdown in New Orleans

By JACK BROOK and SARA CLINE Associated Press/Report for America

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Federal agents began hitting the streets of New Orleans on Wednesday in the Trump administration's latest immigration crackdown across the U.S., looking to round up immigrants accused of violent crimes, a Homeland Security official said.

Masked agents patrolled a heavily Hispanic suburb in marked and unmarked vehicles, and a resident told The Associated Press he watched agents arresting men outside a home improvement store in New Orleans — a familiar scene that has played out in several major cities in recent months.

Border Patrol commander Gregory Bovino, who led enforcement operations in Chicago, Los Angeles and Charlotte, North Carolina, met up Wednesday with agents assembling in a Home Depot parking lot.

There are more than 200 Customs and Border Protection and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials working on the New Orleans operation, according to a U.S. official who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly. The objective is to make as many arrests as possible over at least 60 days.

Homeland Security Department Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin said in a statement that the New Orleans operation is targeting immigrants who were released after arrests for crimes such as home invasion, armed robbery and rape.

Immigration officials have blanketed big cities and small towns across the nation since January while carrying out Republican President Donald Trump's mass deportation efforts. Another operation is expected soon in Minnesota, targeting Somali immigrants. The enforcement tactics have been met with protests and lawsuits.

The operation in Louisiana is called "Catahoula Crunch," continuing Homeland Security's pattern of assigning region-specific names to the crackdowns. The Catahoula leopard dog is Louisiana's official state dog. Planning documents obtained by the AP referred to the Louisiana operation as "Swamp Sweep."

Federal operations begin at big box stores

Fear and uncertainty have weighed heavy on the immigrant community in New Orleans — a one-of-a-kind American city known as the birthplace of jazz and for its Mardi Gras celebrations and rich blend of French, Spanish, African and Native American cultures.

A witness saw federal agents chase down and arrest people in the parking lot of a Lowe's store in New Orleans on Wednesday morning.

"They tried to run across the street but they caught them," said Jody Styles.

A convoy of marked and unmarked vehicles slowly drove past gas stations and a Walmart in Kenner, a suburb with the highest concentration of Hispanic residents of any city in the state.

Agents pulled over and spoke with a man mowing a lawn before they continued along. In another neighborhood, around a dozen agents surrounded a home where a man stood on the roof, waiting for officers to leave. Residents and advocates stood nearby, filming the encounter.

Border Patrol and immigration officials did not immediately respond to messages seeking how many arrests were made on the first day.

The immigrant community prepares

Some business owners in heavily Hispanic areas say they will remain closed until the operation is over. Other storefronts have signs barring federal immigration agents from entering.

Posted on the door of Los Hondureños, a restaurant in Kenner, was a handwritten note saying it was closed until further notice. It ended: "Thank you, The Hondurans."

Twenty years ago, New Orleans relied on thousands of Latino workers who helped rebuild after Hurricane Katrina. But it has not escaped the escalating tensions over immigration.

Earlier this week, dozens of people took to the streets, despite rain and chilly temperatures, to protest the coming crackdown. On Wednesday, the City Council launched an online portal where residents can

report alleged abuse by federal officers.

Sanctuary policies under fire

Louisiana Republican Gov. Jeff Landry has singled out crimes in which the suspect's immigration status is in question, such as the killing of a French Quarter tour guide by a group that included a Honduran man who entered the country illegally.

Attorney General Pam Bondi has accused New Orleans of undermining federal immigration enforcement. The Department of Justice includes New Orleans in a list of 18 cities it considers to be providing sanctuary to immigrants without legal status.

New Orleans officials deny the city's policies thwart immigration enforcement. City police Chief Anne Kirkpatrick has said she considers it to be a civil matter outside her jurisdiction.

'It's going to run until we get them all off the street'

Louisiana has been preparing for weeks for the crackdown. The governor, a close Trump ally who has moved to align state policy with the White House's enforcement agenda, said Wednesday that the operation will target the "worst of the worst, criminal illegal aliens that have broken the law."

"It started today and it's going to run until we get them all off the street," Landry said during an interview on the Walton & Johnson radio show.

In addition to the deployment of federal agents, Landry said he expects National Guard members to arrive in New Orleans before Christmas to join the efforts to combat crime.

The immigration operation's planning documents showed border agents intended to launch a monthslong crackdown in southeast Louisiana and into Mississippi.

The deployment, which aims to arrest 5,000 people, was expected to be led by the Border Patrol, whose agents have drawn scrutiny for aggressive tactics in other cities, including Chicago and Los Angeles.

A Louisiana immigrant rights group asked a judge Wednesday to block a new state law that gives prosecutors wider latitude to charge people accused of delaying, hindering or interfering with a federal immigration enforcement.

New Orleans-based nonprofit Immigration Services and Legal Advocacy said the law has had a chilling effect on their freedom of speech. The group said it was worried about running afoul of the law so it halted workshops explaining legal rights during an immigration-related arrest and the rights for bystanders to film or record.

## **Steve Cropper, guitarist and member of Stax Records' Booker T and the M.G.'s, has died at age 84**

By ADRIAN SAINZ Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — Steve Cropper, the lean, soulful guitarist and songwriter who helped anchor the celebrated Memphis backing band Booker T. and the M.G.'s at Stax Records and co-wrote the classics "Green Onions," "(Sittin' on) the Dock of the Bay" and "In the Midnight Hour," has died. He was 84.

Pat Mitchell Worley, president and CEO of the Soulsville Foundation, said Cropper's family told her that Cropper died on Wednesday in Nashville. The foundation operates the Stax Museum of American Soul Music in Memphis, located at the site of the former Stax Records, where Cropper worked for years.

A cause of death was not immediately known. Longtime associate Eddie Gore said he was with Cropper on Tuesday at a rehabilitation facility in Nashville, where Cropper had been after a recent fall. Cropper had been working on new music when Gore visited, he said.

"He's such a good human," Gore said. "We were blessed to have him, for sure."

The guitarist, songwriter and record producer was not known for flashy playing, but his spare, catchy licks and solid rhythm chops helped define Memphis soul music. At a time when it was common for white musicians to co-opt the work of Black artists and make more money from their songs, Cropper was that rare white artist willing to keep a lower profile and collaborate.

'Play it, Steve!'

Cropper's very name was immortalized in the 1967 smash "Soul Man," recorded by Sam & Dave. Mid-

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 42 of 58

way, singer Sam Moore calls out "Play it, Steve!" as Cropper pulls off a tight, ringing riff, a slide sound that Cropper used a Zippo lighter to create. The exchange was reenacted in the late 1970s when Cropper joined the John Belushi-Dan Aykroyd act "The Blues Brothers" and played on their hit cover of "Soul Man."

In a 2020 interview with The Associated Press, Cropper discussed his career and how he mastered the art of filling gaps with an essential lick or two.

"I listen to the other musicians and the singer," Cropper said. "I'm not listening to just me. I make sure I'm sounding OK before we start the session. Once we've presented the song, then I listen to the song and the way they interpret it. And I play around all that stuff. That's what I do. That's my style."

Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards, asked once about Cropper, said simply, "Perfect, man." On a YouTube instructional video, guitar virtuoso Joe Bonamassa says Cropper's moves are often copied.

"If you haven't heard the name Steve Cropper, you've heard him in song," Bonamassa said.

He got his first guitar at 14

Cropper was born near Dora, Missouri, but moved with his family to Memphis when he was 9 and got his first mail-order guitar at age 14, according to his website, [playitsteve.com](http://playitsteve.com). Chuck Berry, Jimmy Reed and Chet Atkins were among his early influences.

Cropper was a Stax artist before the label was even called Stax, which Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton had founded as Satellite Records in 1957. In the early 1960s, Satellite signed up Cropper and his instrumental band the Royals Spades. The band soon changed its name to the Mar-Keys and had a hit with "Last Night."

Satellite soon was later renamed Stax, where some of the Mar-Keys became the label's horn section while Cropper and other Mar-Keys formed Booker T. and the M.G.'s. Featuring Cropper, keyboard player Booker T. Jones, bassist Donald "Duck" Dunn and drummer Al Jackson, they were known for their hit instrumentals "Green Onions," "Hang 'Em High" and "Time Is Tight," and backed Otis Redding, Sam & Dave and others.

The racially integrated band, a rarity in its day, was so admired that even non-Stax artists recorded with them, notably Wilson Pickett. Jones, who is the only surviving member of the band, and Jackson are Black. Dunn and Cropper are white.

"When you walked in the door at Stax, there was absolutely no color," Cropper said in the AP interview. "We were all there for the same reason — to get a hit record."

Inspired by gospel song

In the mid-1960s, Atlantic Records executive Jerry Wexler brought Pickett to work with the Stax musicians. During a 2015 gathering with the National Music Publishers Association, Cropper acknowledged he had never heard of Pickett before working with him. He found some gospel recordings by Pickett, was taken by the line "I'll see my Jesus in the midnight hour" and with a slight change helped write a secular standard.

"The man up there has been forgiving me for this ever since!" he said.

Cropper was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1992 as a member of Booker T. and the M.G.'s. That year, Cropper, Dunn and Jones played in an all-star tribute at Madison Square Garden to Bob Dylan. Al Jackson died in 1975, Dunn in 2012.

Rolling Stone magazine ranked Cropper 39th on its 100 Greatest Guitarists list, calling him "the secret ingredient in some of the greatest rock and soul songs."

Cropper was especially close to Redding. In an interview on his website, Cropper recalled collaborating on "(Sittin' on) the Dock of the Bay," completed shortly before Redding's death in a December 1967 plane crash and a No. 1 hit in 1968.

The brooding, folkish ballad was a bittersweet reflection on his triumphant appearance a few months earlier at the Monterey Pop Festival. Cropper would remember adding the final touches on the recording while still grieving for Redding.

"We had been looking for the crossover song," he said. "This song, we knew we had it."

Cropper was in the 1980 movie "The Blues Brothers" and its follow-up, "Blues Brothers 2000," portraying "The Colonel" in the Blues Brothers band. In real life, he toured with them.

He was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2005, and two years later received a Grammy Award for lifetime achievement.

Cropper continued recording into his later years, including 2024's "Friendlytown," which was nominated for a Grammy. Earlier this year, Cropper received the Tennessee Governor's Arts Award, the state's highest honor in the arts.

## More angst-filled coaching changes are inevitable unless college football overhauls its calendar

By MARK LONG AP Sports Writer

Lane Kiffin's awkward and angst-filled departure from Ole Miss will happen again.

It's inevitable unless college administrators and football coaches agree to reimagine an imperfect calendar that has been a mess for decades.

Under the current format, national signing day happens during conference championship week, the transfer portal opens during the College Football Playoff and some coaches are secretly interviewing for other jobs before Halloween.

Clunky and clumsy at best. Chaotic and conflicted might be more accurate.

No one has an ideal solution. Even the thought of adopting an NFL-like format seems flawed.

"You want the best idea? Blow it up and start from scratch," UNLV coach Dan Mullen said. "It's a shame you're going to lose a lot of things that are great in college football, but you already have."

Three Southeastern Conference programs — Florida, LSU and Ole Miss — courted Kiffin for weeks before he finally picked the Tigers and left the other two fanbases in emotional shambles. The Gators pivoted to Tulane coach Jon Sumrall; the Rebels stayed in-house and promoted defensive coordinator Pete Golding.

Florida and Ole Miss were left trying to convince themselves they're better off without Kiffin. Anyone who has witnessed his messy exits from basically every job he's held might not have needed much convincing.

But the real villain is a college football calendar that essentially forces teams to scramble to get coaches in place before signing day for high school recruits, which was moved last year from the third to the first Wednesday in December.

Even in an era of the quick fix through the transfer portal, football teams need high school athletes to build out rosters. What happens when things go bad? Take a look at Penn State, which fired its coach in October but has yet to hire a replacement. The Nittany Lions have lost dozens of commitments in recent days, have locked down just a handful of signees, all of which has prominent boosters demanding answers.

While Kiffin left right away, some others finish out the season at their 'old' jobs

A handful of Power Four schools hired Group of Five head coaches and allowed them to remain in place even though it made for a trickier signing day.

Kiffin, meanwhile, wanted to coach the Rebels through the CFP but was told no thanks; Ole Miss officials surely didn't want him having daily contact with players who could follow him to Baton Rouge.

"Somebody's got to get all this stuff under control," said new Oklahoma State coach Eric Morris, who is remaining with North Texas through the season. "Just makes no sense at any level that we're sitting here talking about people that are going to be in the College Football Playoff, a team and their coach isn't going to be there to help them get through the whole entire season.

"It's not sustainable. There are so many things that are not sustainable right now in what we're doing."

Signing day a moving target for decades

Since the early 1980s, the much-anticipated — often overhyped — signing day had been in early February. It seemed perfectly placed, set weeks after the last bowl games had been played and a national champion had been crowned.

But coaches grew tired of having to continuously court high school kids during the football season and wanted a chance to lock them up long before February. In response, the NCAA delivered an early signing period in 2017.

That worked well for a while. But with the CFP expanding the postseason and stretching games well into January, the early signing period started to muddy the calendar.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 44 of 58

It prompts ADs to fire struggling coaches in the middle of the season to get a jump on their search for a replacement, and the transfer portal made roster management even messier.

"It's a game of musical chairs, and we all know what happens to the guy who doesn't get a seat," Florida athletic director Scott Stricklin said.

Stricklin has a solution, or at least a working theory of something that might work. His idea includes eliminating spring practice, moving signing day back to February, opening the transfer portal between March and April, and mandating that only players who were with a team last season can take part in offseason conditioning programs. And then newcomers would be allowed to join for summer workouts that would include the 15 practices normally held in the spring.

"Coaches don't want to hear that because they think, 'Oh my gosh, I've got to have eight months before I kick the ball off with these kids,'" Stricklin said. ... "The football schedules combined with the semester structure, and the idea that everybody wants their teams put together in January, unless we fix that, it's never going to work."

Texas Tech coach Joey McGuire had a different suggestion. He wants to start the season a week earlier than usual, play conference title games over Thanksgiving weekend and play postseason games every seven days.

"You could play the national championship on January 1st and then the portal would open on January 2nd, so the season would actually be over," he said. "Until you do that, we're still going to have this."

Would an NFL-style calendar be the best solution?

There has been rampant talk about college football adopting an NFL-style calendar, which would mean coaching movement after the season in January and February, player movement in March and then team workouts after. And there are penalties for tampering with coaches and players under contract.

McGuire said colleges should consider something similar. He offered that teams who hire coaches who leave other teams in the middle of a playoff run — much like Kiffin did at Ole Miss — would be ineligible for the CFP the following year. He added that those coaches making a jump would not be allowed to bring players with them.

"They can get in the transfer portal, but they've got to go somewhere else; they can't follow you," he said. "Until there's some penalties in that, we're going to get the same thing over and over."

And it will lead to more Kiffin-like exits and fanbase excitability.

"Does anybody have a perfect solution? No," Mullen said. "Here's why: There are 136 Division I teams. There's a lot of different conferences. Every one of those 136 teams operates on a different schedule. I know it's like, 'Hey, let's look at a pro model.'"

Maybe the biggest problem with the pro model is that, even though college sports look more like the pros every day, there is still school — and a school calendar — involved.

"Then let's go to every president and every chancellor and say, 'If you're a Division I school, classes start on this day and end on that day.' That's a way to fix it because then you can really set the calendar. But it's hard when some people are on quarters, some people are on trimester, some are on semester. ... When everybody's working on a different calendar, it's hard to come up with the exact thing."

## Europeans accuse Putin of feigning interest in peace after talks with US envoys

By LORNE COOK and ILLIA NOVIKOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine and its European allies accused Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday of feigning interest in peace efforts after five hours of talks with U.S. envoys at the Kremlin produced no breakthrough.

The Russian leader "should end the bluster and the bloodshed and be ready to come to the table and to support a just and lasting peace," said U.K. Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha urged Putin to "stop wasting the world's time."

The remarks reflected the high tensions and gaping gulf between Russia on one side and Ukraine and

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 45 of 58

its European allies on the other over how to end a war that Moscow started when it invaded its neighbor nearly four years ago.

A day earlier, Putin accused the Europeans of sabotaging the U.S.-led peace efforts — and warned that, if provoked, Russia would be ready for war with Europe.

Since the 2022 invasion, European governments, along with the U.S., have spent billions of dollars to support Kyiv financially and militarily. Under President Donald Trump, however, the U.S. has tempered its support — and instead made a push to end the war.

Putin's foreign affairs adviser, Yuri Ushakov, said Tuesday's talks at the Kremlin between Putin and U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner were "positive," but he wouldn't release any details.

Witkoff and Kushner are set to meet with Ukraine's lead negotiator, Rustem Umerov, on Thursday in Miami for further talks, according to a senior Trump administration official who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Trump said Witkoff and Kushner came away from their marathon session with Putin confident that he wants to find an end to the war. "Their impression was very strongly that he'd like to make a deal," Trump said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said "the world clearly feels that the possibility of ending the war exists."

In comments from his evening address posted on Telegram, Zelenskyy said the effort depends on "constructive diplomacy plus pressure on the aggressor. Both components work towards peace."

Unclear where peace talks go now

Where the peace talks go from here depends largely on whether the Trump administration decides to increase the pressure on Russia or on Ukraine to make concessions.

A U.S. peace proposal that became public last month was criticized for being tilted heavily toward Moscow because it granted some of the Kremlin's core demands that Kyiv has rejected as nonstarters.

Many European leaders worry that if Putin gets what he wants in Ukraine, he will have free rein to threaten their countries, which already have faced incursions from Russian drones and fighter jets, and an alleged widespread sabotage campaign.

The Russian and American sides agreed Tuesday not to disclose the substance of their Kremlin talks, but at least one major hurdle to a settlement remains — the fate of four Ukrainian regions Russia partially occupies and claims as its own.

After the talks, Ushakov told reporters that "so far, a compromise hasn't been found" on the issue of territory, without which the Kremlin sees "no resolution to the crisis."

Ukraine has ruled out giving up territory that Russia has captured.

Asked whether peace was closer or further away after the talks, Ushakov said: "Not further, that's for sure."

"But there's still a lot of work to be done, both in Washington and in Moscow," he said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday it was "not correct" to say that Putin had rejected the U.S. peace plan. He declined to elaborate on the talks.

"We're deliberately not going to add anything," he said. "It's understood that the quieter these negotiations are conducted, the more productive they will be."

Europeans step up assistance for Ukraine

Foreign ministers from European NATO countries, meeting Wednesday in Brussels, showed little patience with Moscow.

"What we see is that Putin has not changed any course. He's pushing more aggressively on the battlefield," Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna said. "It's pretty obvious that he doesn't want to have any kind of peace."

Finnish Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen struck the same note. "So far we haven't seen any concessions from the side of the aggressor, which is Russia, and I think the best confidence-building measure would

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 46 of 58

be to start with a full ceasefire," she said.

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte said Ukraine's partners will keep supplying military aid to ensure pressure is maintained on Moscow.

"The peace talks are ongoing. That's good," Rutte said.

"But at the same time, we have to make sure that whilst they take place and we are not sure when they will end, that Ukraine is in the strongest possible position to keep the fight going, to fight back against the Russians," he said.

Canada, Germany, Poland and the Netherlands announced they will spend hundreds of millions of dollars more together to buy U.S. weapons to donate to Ukraine.

Unlike the Biden administration, the Trump administration has not approved donations of weapons to Ukraine. Instead, it has sold them directly to Kyiv or to NATO allies that give them to Ukraine.

The war claims more lives

Russia and Ukraine are engaged in a grim war of attrition on the battlefield and are using drones and missiles for long-range strikes behind the front line. Many analysts have noted that the slow slog favors Russia's larger military, especially if disagreements between Europe and the U.S. or among Europeans hampers weapons delivery to Ukraine.

Russian drones hit the town of Ternivka in Ukraine's Dnipropetrovsk region, killing two people and wounding three more, according to the head of the regional military administration, Vladyslav Haivanenko. Two people were in critical condition, he said, after the attack destroyed a house and damaged six more.

Overall, Russia fired 111 strike and decoy drones overnight, Ukraine's air force said.

Meanwhile, the Russian Defense Ministry said it destroyed 102 Ukrainian drones overnight.

Falling drone debris sparked a fire at an oil depot in the Tambov region, about 200 kilometers (120 miles) south of Moscow, Gov. Yegveniy Pervyshov said.

## **The World Cup draw is usually a spectacle. This time, FIFA hopes bigger is better**

By RONALD BLUM AP Sports Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A record 64 nations will be in Friday's World Cup draw, more than 30% of FIFA's members, as soccer's leaders insist a bigger tournament is better.

FIFA expanded the field from 32 teams to 48, and just 42 spots have been determined going into the convoluted ceremony in which balls representing nations are plucked from bowls and assigned to groups per rules that restrict who goes where. Twenty-two teams in Friday's draw are headed to playoffs that determine the final six berths on March 31.

There will be 104 games instead of 64 in the World Cup running from June 11 through July 19 at 16 venues throughout North America. Seventy-eight games will be at 11 NFL stadiums, including all from the quarterfinals on, and 13 each in Mexico and Canada. The final is at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey, where there will be a halftime show for the first time.

In addition to 12 group winners and second-place nations, eight third-place teams advance to a new round of 32. The World Cup winner will play eight games.

"I've always thought that what FIFA should do is do it like the Final Four and do 64 teams with no groups, just a knockout," said Alan Rothenberg, the head organizer of the 1994 World Cup in the U.S., comparing soccer with the NCAA basketball tournament.

Led by captain Lionel Messi, who turns 39 during the tournament, Argentina seeks to become the first nation to win consecutive World Cups since Brazil in 1958 and 1962. Messi and Portugal's 40-year-old Cristiano Ronaldo are expected to play in a record sixth World Cup.

At least four countries have qualified for the first time

Cape Verde (ranked No. 68), Curaçao (82), Jordan (66) and Uzbekistan (50) have qualified for the first time and four playoff teams could become debutantes: Albania (63), Kosovo (80), New Caledonia (149) and Suriname (123).

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 47 of 58

Curaçao, an autonomous territory of about 156,000 people within the Netherlands kingdom, is the smallest nation by population to qualify,

Haiti is in for the first time since 1974 and Austria, Norway and Scotland for the first time since 1998.

"I'm a little bit worried," said former U.S. goalkeeper Kasey Keller, now an ESPN analyst. "We talked about it when they expanded from 24 that it was going to leave some teams that got into the World Cup that weren't quite at the level, and now expanding it to 48 I think you're looking at some teams that are going to really struggle."

World Cup ticket prices are setting records

FIFA has set record initial prices of up to \$6,730 for a ticket along with as much as \$175 for a parking place and \$73,200 for a hospitality package — up from \$25 to \$475 for the 1994 tournament in the U.S.

Almost 2 million tickets among what is expected to be more than 6 million have been sold, the governing body said.

"I'm not sure that FIFA's number one goal is to grow the sport in America," former U.S. goalkeeper Tony Meola said. "I always hate that people miss out on this because they get priced out of it."

Ticket holders who require visas to enter the U.S. have been promised priority appointment scheduling by the U.S. government.

High temperatures could be an issue at some US venues

A key could be whether teams are drawn to play in open-air stadiums where summer heat could be a factor. Only four of the 11 U.S. World Cup venues have roofs, including one that isn't temperature controlled.

At this year's Club World Cup in the U.S., six games were delayed by weather for a total of 8 hours, 29 minutes.

"I will be interested when we find out the teams, as to who is playing in indoor climate-controlled venues more as opposed to outdoor, because I do think that there is a significant difference and obviously a potential competitive advantage," said former American defender Alexi Lalas, Fox's lead analyst.

Kickoff times will be announced Saturday. The average noon temperature over the past 30 years in East Rutherford on July 19 is 84 degrees with a RealFeel index of 91, according to AccuWeather.

Political element

The 1994 World Cup draw in Las Vegas featured performances by Stevie Wonder, Barry Manilow, James Brown and Vanessa Williams plus comedian Robin Williams, who called the draw screen "the world's largest keno board" and yelled "Bingo!" when Greece was pulled out of a bowl.

This draw figures to be more akin to the December 2017 ceremony in Moscow, opened by Russia President Vladimir Putin.

After negotiating to hold this month's event in Las Vegas, FIFA placed it to the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, taken over this year by President Donald Trump and his supporters. Trump, who mingled among Chelsea players on the awards stand after the Club World Cup final last summer, is expected to be at the draw along with Mexico President Claudia Sheinbaum and Canada Prime Minister Mark Carney.

Retired stars Tom Brady of the NFL, Shaquille O'Neal of the NBA and Wayne Gretzky of the NHL along with three-time AL MVP Aaron Judge will be on stage for the draw, to be run by former England captain Rio Ferdinand with broadcaster Samantha Johnson. Brady, O'Neal and Judge are American and Gretzky is Canadian, but there is no Mexican sports representative.

Model Heidi Klum co-hosts Friday along with actors Kevin Hart and Danny Ramirez, and entertainment includes Tony Award and Olivier Award winner Nicole Scherzinger, Andrea Bocelli and Robbie Williams. The Village People will perform Trump favorite "Y.M.C.A." and FIFA will award its own peace prize, likely to Trump. Former NFL star Eli Manning will be the red carpet host.

## Republicans emerge victorious and anxious after Tennessee special election

By MEG KINNARD and JOEY CAPPELLETTI Associated Press

Republicans held onto a reliably conservative U.S. House district in Tennessee's special election, but

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 48 of 58

only after a late burst of national spending and high-profile campaigning helped them secure a margin less than half of last year's race.

Even with that victory, the outcome contributed to a gloomy outlook for the party going into the 2026 midterms that will determine control of Congress. Republicans will need to defend much more vulnerable seats if they have any hope of keeping their House majority, while Democrats are capitalizing on President Donald Trump's unpopularity and the public's persistent frustration with the economy.

"The danger signs are there, and we shouldn't have had to spend that kind of money to hold that kind of seat," said Jason Roe, a national Republican strategist working on battleground races next year.

He said that "Democratic enthusiasm is dramatically higher than Republican enthusiasm."

Republican Matt Van Epps, a military veteran and former state general services commissioner, defeated Democratic state Rep. Aftyn Behn by 9 percentage points on Tuesday for the seat vacated by Republican Mark Green, who retired over the summer. Green had won reelection in 2024 by 21 percentage points.

Special elections provide a limited window into the mood of voters and take place under far different conditions than regular campaign cycles. But some Republicans are acknowledging the warning signs, especially after Democrats had convincing victories in New Jersey, Virginia and elsewhere last month.

Tennessee was the fifth House special election this year, and Democratic candidates have outperformed Kamala Harris' margins in the 2024 presidential race by an average of 16 percentage points in the same districts.

"We could have lost this district," U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, told Fox News after The Associated Press called the race for Van Epps. Cruz said his party must "set out the alarm bells" because next year is "going to be a turnout election and the left will show up."

Trump dismisses affordability concerns

Although inflation has dropped since Democratic President Joe Biden was in office, Behn focused her campaign on the lingering concerns about prices.

Trump has played down the affordability issue, saying during a Cabinet meeting Tuesday that it was "a con job" by his political opponents.

"There's this fake narrative that the Democrats talk about, affordability," he said. "They just say the word. It doesn't mean anything to anybody, they just say it."

Roe viewed things differently. He said the Tennessee race had "better be a wake-up call that we've got to address the affordability problem, and the president denying that affordability is a political issue is not helpful."

Maintaining House control is crucial for Trump, who fears a repeat of his first term, when Democrats flipped the House and launched an impeachment inquiry. The Republican president has been leaning on GOP-led states to redraw congressional maps to improve the party's chances.

Playing down the impact of Tuesday's vote, U.S. Rep. Mike Lawler, R-N.Y., said, "There's nothing unique about the party out of power performing better in a special election."

The Republican National Committee deployed staffers and partnered with state officials to get voters to the polls. MAGA Inc., the super political action committee that had gone dark since supporting Trump in 2024, reemerged to back Van Epps with about \$1.7 million.

U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., visited the Nashville-area district on Monday.

"When you're in a deep red district, sometimes people assume that the Republican, the conservative will win," he said Tuesday. "And you cannot assume that, because anything can happen."

Chip Saltsman, a political strategist and former Tennessee Republican Party chair, said his party had brought in its heaviest hitters simply because there were not other competing contests, not because Republicans feared a loss.

"It's the only election going on. Why wouldn't the speaker come?" he asked. "There was one race, and you would expect everybody to do everything they could."

Despite concerns about low turnout for the post-Thanksgiving election, about 180,000 people voted, similar to the number in the 2022 midterms.

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 49 of 58

Democrats see promise despite loss

The House Majority PAC put \$1 million behind Behn, who said her campaign had “inspired an entire country.”

U.S. Rep. Pete Aguilar of California, the No. 3 House Democrat, said Republicans “see the writing on the wall” and “it’s a mess over there.”

“They’re fighting amongst themselves right now,” he said Wednesday.

Although Democrats were optimistic, the result contributed to some murmuring within the party about the best path forward as it grasps for a path back to power in Washington.

Among special elections this year, the shift in Behn’s direction was the second smallest, providing an opening for some factions that believe more moderate candidates would fare better.

“Each time we nominate a far-left candidate in a swing district who declares themselves to be radical and alienates the voters in the middle who deliver majorities, we set back that cause,” said a statement from Lanae Erickson, a senior vice president at Third Way, a centrist Democrat think tank.

Republicans tried to turn Behn’s own words against her in television ads, such as when she described herself as a “radical” or claimed to be “bullying” immigration agents and state police officers. Also cited were comments Behn made about Nashville years ago, when she said, “I hate this city,” and complained about bachelorette parties.

Several high-profile progressive leaders, including U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., had rallied for Behn in the campaign’s final days.

## What to know about the hepatitis B shot — and why Trump officials are targeting it

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A federal vaccine advisory committee this week is expected to discuss whether newborns should still get the hepatitis B vaccine — the first shot found to prevent cancer.

Federal health recommendations now suggest that all babies be vaccinated against the liver infection in their first day of life, but U.S. Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s committee on Thursday is expected to change that — contradicting previous public health advice.

It’s not clear exactly what the committee is considering, but the American Academy of Pediatrics will still urge a birth dose, said the organization’s Dr. Sean O’Leary.

“We are going to continue to recommend it because it saves lives,” he said.

Here’s a look at the disease, the vaccine and the debate over changing the recommendations.

Liver disease can cause lifelong health issues

Hepatitis B is a serious liver infection that for most people lasts less than six months. But for some — especially infants and children — it can become a long-lasting problem that can lead to liver failure, liver cancer and scarring called cirrhosis.

In adults, the virus is spread through sex or through sharing needles during injection-drug use.

But it can also be passed from an infected mother to a baby. As many as 90% of infants who contract hepatitis B go on to have chronic infections, meaning their immune systems don’t completely clear the virus.

As many as 2.4 million people in the U.S. are estimated to have hepatitis B, and as many as half are unaware they are infected, according to information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Dr. Baruch Blumberg, a federal scientist, identified the virus behind the infection in 1965. He won the Nobel Prize for the discovery, which led to tests and vaccines. The first hepatitis B vaccine was licensed in the U.S. in 1981.

Shots for newborns have been recommended for years

For decades, the nation’s vaccine guidance has been influenced by a government-appointed panel of experts, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices. Its recommendations have usually been adopted as national guidance that is widely heeded by doctors.

In 1991, the committee recommended an initial dose of hepatitis B vaccine at birth. The guidance was

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 50 of 58

modified a little over the years and currently suggests a dose within 24 hours of birth for all medically stable infants who weigh at least 4.4 pounds (2 kilograms), plus follow-up shots to be given at about 1 month and 6 months.

Why a dose right at birth? Health officials used to rely on screening expectant mothers to find babies that might have been exposed to the virus. But many cases were missed, experts say, because some women weren't tested or test results were incorrect. Also, the virus can live on surfaces for more than seven days at room temperature, so unvaccinated children living with a person with a chronic infection can catch it.

Newborn hepatitis B vaccinations are widely considered to be a public health success story. Over about 30 years, cases among children fell from about 18,000 per year to about 2,200.

A collaboration of public health researchers, the Vaccine Integrity Project, this week released its analysis of more than 400 studies and reports spanning 40 years. The group concluded the birth dose is safe, and is an important reason U.S. pediatric hepatitis B infections have fallen.

Committee revisits the newborn recommendation

Kennedy, a leading anti-vaccine activist before becoming the nation's top health official, fired all 17 members of ACIP earlier this year and replaced them with a group that includes several anti-vaccine voices.

The panel has raised concerns about giving a vaccine to a baby so early in life.

"Are we asking our babies to solve an adult problem?" committee member Dr. Evelyn Griffin asked at a September meeting.

Peppered with questions about why a change was necessary, committee member Dr. Robert Malone said: "The signal that is prompting this is not one of safety. It's one of trust. ... It's one of parents uncomfortable with this medical procedure being performed at birth in a rather unilateral fashion without significant informed consent."

The committee tabled a vote at the September meeting, but it's slated to be acted on during Thursday's meeting, according to the agenda. Federal officials have not answered questions about exactly how much of a delay is being proposed, or disclosed what research is being used as a basis for such a decision.

What would happen if the shots are delayed?

Not knowing what the committee is contemplating makes it difficult to guess the potential impact. But some have tried.

This week, public health researchers collaborating with hepatitis-focused advocacy organizations released a report estimating that delaying the birth dose to 2 months could result in at least 1,400 hepatitis B infections in children and 480 deaths. The report — which has yet to be peer reviewed or published in a medical journal — estimated the toll would be higher if the first dose was given even later.

But an ACIP change to the recommendation may have limited impact, O'Leary said.

The committee's most direct power comes over what's covered by the government Vaccines for Children program, which pays for shots for uninsured children from low-income families. Hepatitis B shots often have been bundled into the final hospital bill for childbirth. So a new ACIP recommendation likely would not be an economic obstacle for the current practice continuing at many hospitals, he said.

But any change stands to confuse and frighten parents, he added.

"If it scares, it shares" on social media, O'Leary said.

Several medical and public health organizations — and even some state government officials — have said, in advance of the meeting, that changing the recommendation is a terrible idea. Among them is a recently formed coalition of government leaders from several Northeastern states, which this week issued a statement saying they would continue to urge families to get a birth dose within 24 hours of delivery.

U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, a Democrat from Washington, this week called on Congress to compel Kennedy to appear at a hearing and explain ACIP's actions.

"Ending the decades-long recommendation that babies born in the U.S. get vaccinated against hepatitis B is a heartless choice to allow babies to die," Murray said in a statement.

## The PlayStation turns 30: Looking back at the console that gave us Lara Croft and 'The Last of Us'

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — When Kendrick Lamar began his Super Bowl halftime show earlier this year, he picked a stage design likely familiar to anyone tuning in: a square, triangle, cross and circle.

The Grammy-winning rapper — in front of more than 133 million people — chose to perform on a massive, industrialized grid of flashing lights resembling a giant PlayStation controller.

It was a nice surprise present for Sony's PlayStation, which this year is celebrating its 30th anniversary in North America and Europe. Lamar's nod to the console — which Sony had nothing to do with — was another sign of how far the brand has penetrated the culture, in ways big and small.

From big-budget Hollywood fare like "Lara Croft: Tomb Raider" starring Angelina Jolie, to Juice WRLD's video for "Hear Me Calling" to "The Last of Us" on HBO Max, the PlayStation experience has leapt far past the console. Chandler Bing on "Friends" played a PlayStation 1 and the title character fired at PlayStation zombies in the cult movie "Shaun of the Dead."

"We made gaming cool. When we came out we were a little edgy, we were a different, but it was really about being disruptive," says Eric Lempel, senior vice president of Business and Product at Sony Interactive Entertainment. "We feel we are a premier entertainment brand, not just a gaming brand."

From bedroom to living room

Part of the enduring popularity of the PlayStation has been its ability to evolve with the technology, starting in 1995 by picking CD-ROMs that opened the door to 3D gaming. At the time, clunky cartridges were king.

The PlayStation — sparked by a failed partnership between Nintendo and Sony — entered a marketplace dominated by Sega and Nintendo. Sony wanted to bring the arcade experience home and a crucial decision was to consult with game developers first, before building their system.

"Sony realized they needed developers in place from the get-go before they even started designing it," says Anthony Caulfield, who with his wife, Nicola, run Gracious Films and made the independent documentary "The PlayStation Revolution."

"Hardware manufacturers up to that point basically didn't care what the developers wanted. They just made what they thought was the best piece of hardware," he says.

Some critical steps helped right from the launch. Sony had a number of games ready to go, a development pipeline in place and a killer retail price — \$299 — that was less expensive than the rival Sega Saturn.

Sony also picked its market carefully, Caulfield says. With Sega and Nintendo largely targeting children, Sony aimed the PlayStation at teens and young adults — catnip for their younger brothers and sisters.

"If you grew up loving Nintendo games, the PlayStation was like a really good next step," says Tyler Treese, the editor-in-chief of PlayStation LifeStyle, an online forum and news site for fans.

When the console first arrived, it was a sensation, going on to sell more than 100 million units globally. "It's when games grew up," says Caulfield. "It's where the gaming went from the bedroom to the living room."

Making the hardware slap

Sony kept up with the technology, packing a DVD into the PlayStation 2 so that buyers had another reason to buy the system. The PlayStation 2 remains the best selling console of all time, with some 160 million units sold.

"It was one of the best-priced DVD players that also happened to be the best gaming system at the time," says Lempel. "I know so many people who said, 'That was my DVD player. That's how I started in DVD.'"

Sony hit a wobble with the PS3, which used a Blu-ray deck. "It made the thing so expensive and it kind of broke that original PlayStation feeling of availability and great value for money," Caulfield says. The 2011 PlayStation network hack that shut down the network for 24 days didn't help. "If they got the PS4 wrong it could have been the end."

But the PlayStation 4 in 2013 stabilized the console, offering immersive online multiplayer options, stream-

ing services and a library of exclusive games. Sony kept going with in-app purchases, 4K resolution and a controller that has haptic feedback and adaptive triggers in the current PlayStation 5.

"Every console has to have a purpose, it has to have a reason to exist, and when we find that we have the right amount of new technology that can enable developers to do great things, we push forward," says Lempel.

From the living room to Hollywood

The list of movies and TV shows that have had their origin on the PlayStation is long. It includes: "Uncharted" starring Tom Holland on the big screen, "The Last of Us" with Pedro Pascal on HBO, "Twisted Metal" on Peacock and "Gran Turismo" with Orlando Bloom from Columbia Pictures.

More are on the way, including a live-action "Horizon Zero Dawn" movie that's eying a 2027 release, an upcoming movie version of "Ghost of Tsushima" directed by Chad Stahelski, and Amazon's "God of War" TV series.

Treese says PlayStation games often make the leap to TVs and theater screens because they're realistic, use motion capture and employ talented actors.

"They do really lend themselves to movies because they definitely led that charge of making more cinematic video game experiences," he says. It also doesn't help that Sony Pictures is nearby.

Lempel says PlayStation franchises are finding new audiences in other media because, at base, they're good entertainment. "We have great stories, we've got great IP, and it transcends the category."

That has even spilled out into fashion — British Nigerian multidisciplinary artist and designer Yinka Ilori has a line of PlayStation-inspired loungewear — and footwear, thanks to rapper Travis Scott's Nike Dunk Low Cactus Jack X PlayStation sneakers.

"We know that we've struck a chord that goes just well beyond a consumer product," says Lempel. "This is something that people love. It's a big part of people's lives and they love to talk about it. They love to express it in different ways."

Lempel recently got a taste of that expression firsthand. He was at a restaurant in Manhattan when he spotted the PlayStation symbols tattooed on someone's arm. "These are permanent markings on someone's body," he says in wonder. "That's the passion people have."

## House Republicans subpoena Jack Smith for closed-door interview about his prosecutions of Trump

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Republican-led House Judiciary Committee has subpoenaed former Justice Department special counsel Jack Smith for a closed-door interview later this month even though he had earlier volunteered to appear for an open hearing about his prosecutions of President Donald Trump.

Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, the committee's Republican chairman, directed Smith in a letter dated Wednesday to appear for a private deposition on Dec. 17 as part of the panel's investigations into the prosecutor's work.

"Due to your service as Special Counsel, the Committee believes that you possess information that is vital to its oversight of this matter," Jordan wrote. He also asked Smith to produce records to the committee in addition to his testimony.

A lawyer for Smith, Peter Koski, said in a statement that Smith had offered nearly six weeks ago to appear before the committee in an open hearing but would nonetheless appear as requested for the deposition.

"We are disappointed that offer was rejected, and that the American people will be denied the opportunity to hear directly from Jack on these topics," Koski said. "Jack looks forward to meeting with the committee later this month to discuss his work and clarify the various misconceptions about his investigation."

Smith was appointed in 2022 to oversee the Justice Department investigations into Trump's efforts to overturn his 2020 presidential election loss and his hoarding of classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida. Smith's team filed charges in both investigations.

Smith abandoned the cases after Trump was elected to the White House again last year, citing Justice Department legal opinions that prohibit the indictment of a sitting president.

Republicans who control Congress have sought interviews with members of Smith's team and in recent weeks have seized on revelations that the team, as part of its investigation, had analyzed the phone records of select GOP lawmakers from on and around Jan. 6, 2021, when pro-Trump rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol to try to halt the certification of the Republican president's election loss to Democrat Joe Biden.

Smith's legal team has noted that the records that investigators obtained did not include the contents of the conversations but instead merely captured incoming and outgoing call numbers, the times the calls were placed and how long they lasted.

"Mr. Smith's actions as Special Counsel were consistent with the decisions of a prosecutor who has devoted his career to following the facts and the law, without fear or favor and without regard for the political consequences," Smith's lawyers wrote to lawmakers in October.

"His investigative decisions were similarly motivated, and the subpoena for toll records was entirely proper, lawful, and consistent with established Department of Justice policy. While Mr. Smith's prosecutions of President Trump have predictably been politicized by others, politics never influenced his decision making," they added.

## **Billionaire spacewalker is back before the Senate seeking NASA's top job**

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Billionaire spacewalker Jared Isaacman urged senators on Wednesday to take swift action on his bid to lead NASA, after being yanked and then renominated by President Donald Trump.

Isaacman appeared before the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee in Washington eight months after his first nomination hearing. The tech entrepreneur who's rocketed into orbit twice with SpaceX stressed the need for "full-time leadership" at NASA as the space agency prepares to send astronauts back to the moon early next year.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy has been filling in as NASA's acting administrator since summer.

Returning astronauts to the moon for the first time in more than 50 years will be "a challenging endeavor to say the least," Isaacman told the committee led by Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas.

NASA is targeting early next year for a lunar flyaround by four astronauts. They won't land on the moon; that would happen in another mission. The goal is to beat the Chinese there by the end of the decade.

"This is not the time for delay but a time for action because if we fall behind -- if we make a mistake -- we may never catch up, and the consequences could shift the balance of power here on Earth," Isaacman told the committee.

Cruz agreed. "NASA cannot take its eyes off the ball," he said, referring to China's looming moon plans. "The United States must remain the unquestioned leader in space exploration."

Isaacman was within days of being confirmed by the Senate as NASA's 15th administrator when Trump pulled his nomination in May. The move came soon after Trump's falling out with SpaceX's Elon Musk. The president renominated Isaacman last month.

Cruz said Isaacman's second appearance "feels a bit like Groundhog Day" and hopes to have him confirmed by the end of the year.

In response to questioning by senators, Isaacman described both the moon and Mars as priorities for exploration by U.S. crews, with parallel efforts underway. He said he supports Duffy's recent move to reopen the contract for the lunar lander needed for the first touchdown by astronauts under NASA's Artemis program.

Elon Musk's SpaceX won the original crew lunar lander contract with Starship, but the mega rocket remains in flight testing. Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin is hustling to gain the lead with its Blue Moon landers; a prototype is due to launch early next year.

Isaacman assured the senators that NASA will go with the first company capable of delivering U.S. astronauts to the lunar surface. "The best thing for SpaceX is a Blue Origin right on their heels, and vice

versa," he said. He also supports competition among world powers — "just as long as we don't lose."

The 42-year-old founder of the payment processing company Shift4 performed the world's first private spacewalk last fall. He bankrolled both of his spaceflights. Several astronauts were present for the hearing, including some of Isaacman's own crewmates.

## **Marine robotics firm will resume deep-sea search for MH370 plane that vanished a decade ago**

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — Malaysia's transport ministry said Wednesday that a private firm will resume a deep-sea hunt for Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 later this month, more than a decade after the jet vanished without a trace.

The search will be carried out by Texas-based marine robotics firm Ocean Infinity, which signed a new "no-find, no-fee" contract with Malaysia's government in March.

It is unclear if the company has new evidence of the plane's location. Ocean Infinity CEO Oliver Punkett reportedly said last year that the company had improved its technology since 2018, when the firm made its first seabed search operation under a similar deal and found nothing. Punkett has said the firm is working with many experts to analyze data and had narrowed the search area to the most likely site.

Earlier this year the firm restarted the seabed search operation at a new 15,000-square-kilometer (5,800-square-mile) site in the Indian Ocean after Malaysia's government gave it the greenlight, but the search was halted in April due to bad weather.

Ocean Infinity will be paid \$70 million only if wreckage is discovered.

The Boeing 777 plane disappeared from radar shortly after taking off on March 8, 2014, carrying 239 people, mostly Chinese nationals, on a flight from Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur, to Beijing. Satellite data showed the plane turned from its flight path and headed south to the far-southern Indian Ocean, where it is believed to have crashed.

An expensive multinational search failed to turn up any clues to its location, although debris washed ashore on the east African coast and Indian Ocean islands. Apart from those small fragments, no bodies or wreckage have ever been found.

Malaysia's transport ministry said in a brief statement Wednesday that Ocean Infinity will search intermittently from Dec. 30 for a total of 55 days, in targeted areas believed to have the highest likelihood of finding the missing aircraft.

"The latest development underscores the government of Malaysia's commitment in providing closure to the families affected by this tragedy," it said.

In Beijing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said, "We ... appreciate the efforts made by the Malaysian side."

Ocean Infinity declined to comment on the search Wednesday in response to an Associated Press email requesting details.

## **Slender Man attacker won't fight extradition to Wisconsin after fleeing group home**

By TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — The Wisconsin woman who won release from a mental institution after almost killing her sixth grade classmate in the name of horror villain Slender Man only to flee the state weeks later won't fight extradition from Illinois.

Morgan Geyser agreed not to contest her transfer from jail in Cook County, Illinois, to Wisconsin during a hearing Tuesday, a court spokesperson said. Wisconsin authorities now have 30 days to pick her up.

Wisconsin health officials could revoke Geyser's conditional release and send her back to the facility where she spent most of the past eight years. She also could face new charges in connection with her escape.

Escape to Illinois

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 55 of 58

According to police, Geyser cut off her GPS monitoring bracelet on Saturday evening and fled her Madison group home with a 43-year-old companion. Police found them Sunday evening sleeping on a sidewalk outside a truck stop in Posen, Illinois, a village of 5,300 people about 25 miles (40 kilometers) south of Chicago, and arrested them.

Police have identified Geyser's friend as male, but Geyser can be heard on officers' body camera footage during their arrests saying that the individual is transgender and refers to the person as "she."

Her friend has been charged with trespassing and obstruction, but The Associated Press isn't naming the companion because the person hasn't been charged with aiding Geyser's escape. The AP's attempts to contact that person have been unsuccessful.

The companion did call WKOW-TV on Monday, however, saying the two became friends at church and had seen each other daily for the past month. Geyser decided to flee because she was afraid her group home would no longer allow them to see each other, the person said.

"She ran because of me," the friend told the television station.

'You're not wanted for murder, right?'

Geyser and her companion took a bus overnight into Illinois, the friend said. The Posen officers' body camera footage shows Geyser and her friend shivering in the cold outside the truck stop as officers try to ascertain their names and where they're from. Geyser does most of the talking while her friend gathers their belongings and places them in a backpack, saying only "south" when asked where they're from and giving officers a fake name. Her companion initially refused to give a name.

As officers threaten to arrest them, Geyser clutches a stuffed dog toy and clings to her companion's arm. When officers separate them, she insists that her friend doesn't know Geyser's name or what she's done.

When Geyser refuses to give her real name, an officer asks her: "You're not wanted for murder, right?"

Geyser repeatedly begs the officers to let her companion go. Pressed by officers, Geyser says: "I did something really wrong."

Geyser finally writes her real name on an officer's notepad. As they're running her for warrants, she tries to go to her friend, but an officer pushes her back.

"Let me say goodbye, please," Geyser says. "I'll never see her again."

After they're led into squad cars, one of the officers remarks: "I hope she didn't commit a homicide. The way she's talking, she's saying it's really, really bad."

The footage shows another officer discovering a notebook in the couple's bags entitled "Homeless Couples Guidebook."

Companion: Geyser trying to move beyond Slender Man attack

Geyser's friend told WKOW that they understand each other and communicate in a "really good, healthy way" and she had explained her past.

"I was like, 'I don't hate you. I think you're clearly not that person anymore. You're trying very hard to move away from it. That much is obvious,'" the companion said, adding later that Geyser was going to flee the group home with or without the friend and the person chose to go with her because Geyser wasn't going to make it on her own.

Stabbing meant to please horror character

Geyser and her friend, Anissa Weier, lured one of their classmates, Payton Leutner, to a Waukesha park in 2014. Geyser stabbed Leutner 19 times, narrowly missing her heart, while Weier cheered her on. All three girls were 12 years old at the time. Leutner barely survived.

Geyser and Weier later told investigators they attacked Leutner in hopes of impressing Slender Man and becoming his servants. They said they were afraid Slender Man would hurt their families if they didn't carry out the attack.

Slender Man was created online by Eric Knudsen in 2009 as a mysterious figure photo-edited into everyday images of children at play. He grew into a popular boogeyman, appearing in video games, online stories and a 2018 movie.

Both Geyser and Weier were ultimately committed to a state mental institution — Geyser for 40 years

and Weier for 25. Wisconsin law allows people committed to state institutions to petition for release. Weier earned conditional release in 2021. Geysler, now 23, won conditional release this past September after four requests and was placed in the group home.

## Trump-backed Republican Matt Van Epps wins US House special election in Tennessee

By JONATHAN MATTISE and KRISTIN M. HALL Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Republican Matt Van Epps won a nationally watched special election in Tennessee for a U.S. House seat Tuesday, maintaining his party's grip on the conservative district with help from President Donald Trump. But the comparatively slim margin of victory fueled Democratic hopes for next year's midterms as the party grasps for a path back to power in Washington.

A military veteran and former state general services commissioner from Nashville, Van Epps defeated Democratic state Rep. Aftyn Behn to represent the 7th Congressional District.

With 99% of votes counted, Van Epps' lead was around 9 percentage points. The previous Republican who held the seat won by 21 points last year, and Trump carried the district by 22 points.

Behn, who ran as an unapologetic progressive, ran up a huge margin in Davidson County, which is the most Democratic county in the district and home to Nashville. But Van Epps carried the rest of the district, including many deep-red counties throughout central Tennessee, as he tied himself tightly to Trump.

"Politicians who run from the president or abandon the common-sense policies that the American people gave us a resounding mandate on do so at their own peril," Van Epps said at his victory party. "No matter what the D.C. insiders or liberal media say, this is President Trump's party. I'm proud to be a part of it and can't wait to get to work."

Trump congratulated Van Epps in a social media post, saying he won even though "the Radical Left Democrats threw everything at him."

Democrats say Republicans are 'on the ropes'

At her own campaign gathering, Behn took the stage with a burst of energy, singing Dolly Parton's "9 to 5" in a western-style rhinestoned suit. Despite falling short, Behn said the result was "the beginning of something" powerful.

She noted that Republicans redrew the district three years ago to make it harder for Democrats to win, and "nobody in Washington believed we could get even this close."

"Tonight isn't the end. It is the beginning of a next chapter of Tennessee and American politics — one of possibility, one of power and one of progress for the people that we love," Behn said.

Democratic National Committee Chair Ken Martin said Republicans should be "shaking in their boots" ahead of the midterms, which will determine control of Congress.

"What happened tonight in Tennessee makes it clear: Democrats are on offense and Republicans are on the ropes," Martin said in a statement.

The special election drew big money

Van Epps benefited from nearly \$1.7 million in spending from MAGA Inc., according to a memo from the Trump-aligned group, with nearly half going toward digital advertising targeting people streaming video online. It was the first time the organization spent money on a campaign since last year's presidential race, a reflection of the special election's outsize importance.

House Speaker Mike Johnson and national Republican chair Joe Gruters rallied supporters in Tennessee on Monday. Trump addressed a crowd at a rally in the state by phone and later in the day held a tele-rally for Van Epps, his second of the general election.

Chip Saltsman, a political strategist and former Tennessee state party chair, said Republicans were slow to organize after a competitive primary.

"In Tennessee, it's been a long time since we thought about beating Democrats," Saltsman said. "It's been a lot more important to beat Republicans in a primary."

# Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 57 of 58

"This time," he added, "we had to pay attention."

Republican leaders had hoped for a convincing victory to scuttle Democratic claims that even red districts are now in play as Trump struggles with low approval ratings and persistent economic dissatisfaction. In addition, Democrats recently won by wide margins in New Jersey, Virginia and elsewhere.

Behn had national support of her own, and the House Majority PAC put \$1 million behind her. Party chair Ken Martin visited to campaign for Behn, and former Vice President Kamala Harris participated in a canvassing kickoff while in Nashville on a book tour. Former Vice President Al Gore and U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez headlined a virtual rally for her Monday night.

Van Epps stuck with Trump

Republican state lawmakers redrew the 7th District and two others in 2022 to help prevent liberal-voting Nashville from electing another Democrat to Congress. Only about 1 in 5 voters in the district, which spans 14 counties, are in the city.

The seat was vacated when Republican former Rep. Mark Green, retired this summer. The single-race election came at an odd time to be casting ballots, with early voting ending the day before Thanksgiving and Election Day the following Tuesday.

Van Epps aligned with the president as closely as possible, telling him during the November tele-rally, "I will have your back 100%." He won a crowded primary by a wide margin in October with a late endorsement from Trump.

Behn focused her campaign on fiery criticisms of economic policies that she said prioritize wealthy people and corporations, including Trump's tariffs and budget and spending law, both of which Van Epps supports.

But Republicans created a steady drumbeat of Behn's own words used against her in television advertising, such as when she described herself as a "radical" and made harsh remarks about Nashville and its tourist draws.

Trump supporter Anthony Bordonaro, 37, said Tuesday that he wants the president's policies to move forward but pointed to those anti-Nashville comments as extra motivation to vote for Van Epps.

"I just didn't really like what I was hearing about the other candidate not liking Nashville," he said.

## Today in History: December 4, Terry Anderson freed after nearly seven years as hostage

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, Dec. 4, the 338th day of 2025. There are 27 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 4, 1991, after being abducted and held hostage for nearly seven years by Hezbollah militants in Lebanon, Associated Press correspondent Terry Anderson was freed from captivity.

Also on this date:

In 1783, Gen. George Washington bade farewell to his Continental Army officers at Fraunces Tavern in New York.

In 1956, Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis and Carl Perkins, dubbed the "Million Dollar Quartet," gathered for the first and only time for a jam session at Sun Records in Memphis.

In 1964, police arrested some 800 students at the University of California, Berkeley, one day after the students stormed the administration building and staged a massive sit-in to protest university restrictions on political activity on campus.

In 1965, the United States launched Gemini 7 with Air Force Lt. Col. Frank Borman and Navy Cmdr. James A. Lovell aboard on a two-week mission. (While Gemini 7 was in orbit, its sister ship, Gemini 6A, was launched on Dec. 15 on a one-day mission; the two spacecraft were able to rendezvous within a foot of each other.)

In 1969, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark of the Black Panther Party were shot and killed during a raid by Chicago police.

In 2016, a North Carolina man fired several shots from an assault rifle inside Comet Ping Pong, a Wash-

# Groton Daily Independent

**Thursday, December 04, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 183 ~ 58 of 58**

ington, D.C., pizzeria, as he attempted to investigate an online conspiracy theory that prominent Democrats were harboring child sex slaves at the restaurant; no one was hurt, and the man surrendered. (Edgar Maddison Welch was later sentenced to four years in prison; in 2025, police shot and killed him during a traffic stop in which officials said he pulled out a handgun and pointed it at one of the officers.)

In 2018, long lines of people wound through the Capitol Rotunda to view the casket of former President George H.W. Bush.

In 2024, United Healthcare CEO Brian Thompson was fatally shot on a midtown Manhattan sidewalk. (The accused shooter, Luigi Mangione, has pleaded not guilty to state and federal charges.)

In 2024, France's far-right and left-wing lawmakers joined together in a no-confidence vote prompted by budget disputes, forcing Prime Minister Michel Barnier to resign, a first since 1962. President Emmanuel Macron insisted he would serve the rest of his term until 2027.

Today's Birthdays: Actor-producer Max Baer Jr. is 88. Actor Gemma Jones is 83. Actor Jeff Bridges is 76. Actor Patricia Wettig is 74. Jazz singer Cassandra Wilson is 70. Basketball Hall of Famer Bernard King is 69. Baseball Hall of Famer Lee Smith is 68. Olympic pole vault gold medalist Sergey Bubka is 62. Actor Marisa Tomei is 61. Actor-comedian Fred Armisen is 59. Rapper Jay-Z is 56. Actor Kevin Sussman is 55. Actor-model Tyra Banks is 52. Football Hall of Famer Joe Thomas is 41. Musician Jelly Roll is 41. Singer-songwriter Jin (BTS) is 33.