

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 1 of 77

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 News Headlines](#)
- [3- Baby-sitter Ad](#)
- [4- Ace of Hearts](#)
- [5- No school today](#)
- [6- GDI Fitness Center Ad](#)
- [7- Ehresmann takes eighth at state middle school wrestling tournament](#)
- [8- SD SearchLight: Tie vote stalls permanent sales tax reduction effort as proposed sales tax increase advances](#)
- [10- SD SearchLight: 'Rights of a parent' measure passes state Senate over concerns about unintended consequences](#)
- [11- SD SearchLight: State Senate backs school cellphone ban](#)
- [12- SD SearchLight: South Dakota plans shift to digital medical marijuana cards](#)
- [12- SD SearchLight: After Minnesota church protest, states including SD move to crack down on disruptions](#)
- [15- SD SearchLight: Bill to allow publicly funded charter schools in South Dakota narrowly advances](#)
- [16- SD SearchLight: Governor signs bill allowing more direct-to-consumer meat sales if federal government acts](#)
- [17- SD SearchLight: Push for stricter laws on mining explosives, inspired by Piedmont situation, fails in state House](#)
- [18- SD SearchLight: A 'servant leader' honored: The nation pays tribute to Jesse Jackson, civil rights icon](#)
- [21- Weather Pages](#)
- [27- Daily Devotional](#)
- [29- Subscription Form](#)
- [30- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [31- News from the Associated Press](#)

Tuesday, Feb. 17

- Senior Menu: Scalloped potatoes with ham, carrots, fruit, dinner roll.
- School Breakfast: Muffins.
- School Lunch: Chicken breast, baby bakers.
- St. John's Lutheran: Quilting, 9 a.m.
- City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.
- United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.
- Pickleball, elementary gym, 5:30 p.m.
- 3/4VB, HS Gym, 6 p.m.
- 6th Grade BBB hosts Warner, Arena, 6:15 p.m.

BLIZZARD WARNING IN EFFECT UNTIL 3 PM CST THIS AFTERNOON...

Blizzard conditions. Additional snow accumulations up to two inches. Winds gusting as high as 55 mph.



Wednesday, Feb. 18

ASH WEDNESDAY

Senior Menu: Chicken noodle soup, cold cut sandwich, fruit.

School Breakfast: Oatmeal.

School Lunch: Cheese quesadilla, refried beans.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 4 p.m.; soup supper, 6 p.m. (Host executive board); League, 6:30 p.m.; Lenten Service, 7 p.m.

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

United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton Service, 6 p.m.; Groton Ad Council, 7 p.m.

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

HOSA Teddy Bear Clinic, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., HS Gym Pickleball, Elementary Gym, 5:30 p.m.

6th Grade Boys Basketball, HS gym, 6 p.m.

3rd/4th Volleyball Practice, 6 p.m., Arena

5th Grade BBB, HS gym, 6 p.m.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 2 of 77

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.

Civil Rights Icon Dies

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, the civil rights leader and two-time Democratic presidential candidate, died yesterday at age 84 after battling progressive supranuclear palsy, his family announced.

Born in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1941, Jackson rose from student activism to become a close aide to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and a leading voice in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. An ordained Baptist minister, he helped lead the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Jackson founded Operation PUSH in Chicago in 1971 and later the Rainbow Coalition, merging them to advocate for racial, economic, and political justice. He ran for president in 1984 and 1988. He also negotiated the release of American prisoners, including three US soldiers held in Yugoslavia in 1999. In 2000, President Bill Clinton awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

PSP is a rare neurodegenerative disease similar to Parkinson's that affects an estimated five people per 100,000 worldwide.

Iran Closes Oil Port

Iran announced yesterday it is temporarily and partially closing the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20% of the world's oil passes. The announcement came as the US and Iran held their second round of nuclear negotiations in Geneva, which ended without a date scheduled for further talks.

Iranian officials reportedly signaled they're willing to pause uranium enrichment for up to three years and move some of their stockpile offshore (most of Iran's uranium stockpile is believed to be buried under rubble after strikes by the US and Israel last year). In exchange, Iran is seeking sanctions relief and access to \$6B in blocked oil revenue. The negotiations ended after three and a half hours and took place against the backdrop of a US military buildup in the Middle East.

Separately, the third round of Russia-Ukraine negotiations also began yesterday in Geneva, with Russia pressing for control of the Donbas region. The talks come a week before the fourth anniversary of Russia's large-scale invasion.

Weeding Out Lawsuits

German agrochemical giant Bayer proposed a \$7.25B settlement yesterday to resolve tens of thousands of current and future US lawsuits alleging its Roundup weedkiller causes cancer.

If approved, the deal would fund up to 21 years of annual payments to people exposed to Roundup and later diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma. The weedkiller's active ingredient, glyphosate, is classified as a probable carcinogen by a World Health Organization agency, but the Environmental Protection Agency says it's unlikely to cause harm when used as directed. Bayer, which maintains Roundup is safe, says the settlement is intended to alleviate mounting legal costs. Bayer paid roughly \$10B in 2020 to settle pending lawsuits and now faces about 65,000 new plaintiffs.

The Supreme Court will hear a case in April on whether the EPA's approval of Roundup without cancer warnings preempts state-level lawsuits against Bayer. A ruling in Bayer's favor would leave the proposed settlement unchanged, while preventing future lawsuits.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 3 of 77

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Interview with Democratic Texas Senate candidate pulled from "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert" broadcast to comply with Trump administration's equal-airtime rule for all candidates.

Anderson Cooper resigns from "60 Minutes," citing desire to spend time with his children; Cooper plans to stay at CNN.

DNA on gloves found about 2 miles from Nancy Guthrie's home yields no matches in national database; the search continues without a named suspect.

Bruce Springsteen announces tour with the E Street Band, beginning March 31 in Minneapolis.

Frederick Wiseman, an honorary Oscar-winning documentarian, dies at age 96; notable films include the once-banned "Titicicut Follies".

Science & Technology

Ford Motor is developing all-electric vehicles with high-voltage batteries similar to those used in Tesla Cybertrucks; the technology is expected to lower the cost of Ford's EVs, with a \$30K pickup truck slated for release next year.

Researchers create AI-powered algorithm that classifies pediatric brain tumors with 92% accuracy from liquid biopsies; the noninvasive method of diagnosis and monitoring tumors may be applicable across many pediatric cancer types.

Seal pup communication appears more similar to human communication than previously believed; pups speak in turn and adopt each other's vocal features when they spend time together, according to over 1,000 hours of audio.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close up (S&P 500 +0.1%, Dow +0.1%, Nasdaq +0.1%).

Warner Bros. Discovery reopens deal talks with Paramount, says media giant has until Feb. 23 to submit best and final offer to rival Netflix.

Shein faces EU probe over sale of illegal products and alleged addictive design features.

Cloud startup Render raises \$100M in funding at \$1.5B valuation as AI app surge drives cloud demand.

Nvidia to sell Meta millions of chips for Meta's AI data centers in multiyear deal; financial terms not disclosed.

Politics & World Affairs

US government releases information on alleged Chinese nuclear test in June 2020, which it says triggered a magnitude 2.75 earthquake detected in Kazakhstan.

Peru ousts interim President José Jerí amid corruption probe.

Ramadan begins today in Saudi Arabia, with many other Muslim-majority countries following the kingdom's lead; nearly 2 billion Muslims begin the month of fasting after sighting the crescent moon.

Eighteen-year-old arrested after carrying a loaded shotgun toward the US Capitol; police have not provided a motive as of this writing.

Need a **Babysitter** or **House Cleaner?**

♥ **Babysitting Available!**

House Cleaning Offered!

Text Jeslyn Kosel at (605)-290-7821

I'm in Groton but am willing to drive to nearby towns!

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 4 of 77



Jackpot will be over \$25,000.

Text Paul at 605-397-7460 if you would like to purchase a ticket.

Tickets are \$5 each or 5 for \$20.

Deadline to purchase from Paul is 4 p.m. Thursday. Or stop in at the Groton Legion by 5:30 p.m. Thursday.

Ace of Heart drawing

The Ace of Heart drawing was held last Thursday with the jackpot at \$24,608. Ticket sales for the week were \$1,240. The name of Kathy Falk was drawn and she won the consolation prize of \$120. She picked card number 13 which was the 4 of spades. The next drawing will be held Thursday at the Groton American Legion.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 5 of 77



**The Groton Area School District
will be closed on Wednesday,
February 18 due to the Blizzard
Warning for our area.**

Power Outage this morning

There was a power outage in the southeast side of Groton this morning. The main breaker tripped. The cause of the trip remains unknown and remains under investigation.

What can **\$20**
get you?



for
**SENIOR
CITIZENS**

Open 24/7

GDI Living



Fitness

or anyone using physical therapy

15 N Main • Ste. 101

**BEST
RATES
AROUND!**

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP

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

MONTH-TO-MONTH

Student: \$35.15 per month
Single: \$40.48 per month
2-Person: \$59.78 per month
Family: \$72.43 per month
Senior/PT: \$20 per month



Call or Text Paul at 605/397-7460
Call or Text Tina at 605/397-7285

Same rates for several years!



Members of the Groton Area middle school wrestling team competed at the State Middle School Tournament in Pierre this past weekend. Pictured from left are Xzander Logan, Preston Hinkelman, Parker Zoellner, Bentley Ehresmann and Greyson Warrington; front, Simon Simunek. (Photo from GT facebook page)

Ehresmann takes eighth at state middle school wrestling tournament

Six members of the Groton Area middle school wrestling team capped off their seasons by competing at the State Middle School Tournament this past weekend in Pierre.

Bentley Ehresmann led the way for the Tigers, earning an eighth-place finish in his respective weight class. The other five Groton wrestlers competed in challenging 32- and 64-man brackets, each finishing just one win shy of reaching the placing rounds.

Despite narrowly missing the podium, the group demonstrated steady improvement and determination throughout the season. Coaches praised the athletes for their work ethic, growth and competitiveness against some of the top middle school wrestlers in the state.

The strong showing at the state tournament highlights a promising future for Groton wrestling as these young athletes continue to develop within the program.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Tie vote stalls permanent sales tax reduction effort as proposed sales tax increase advances

Lieutenant governor does not cast tiebreaking vote amid challenge to his role

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER

Two contradictory bills met different fates on Tuesday at the Capitol in Pierre as South Dakota lawmakers continued to wrestle with the best way to provide tax relief.

A bill that would keep South Dakota's sales tax at its temporarily reduced rate stalled in the Senate with a 17-17 tie vote that the lieutenant governor did not break, amid an ongoing challenge to his legal authority in cases of ties. Earlier in the day, a House committee advanced a bill to increase the sales tax rate over the next two years and use the proceeds to ease the property tax burden on homeowners across South Dakota.

Permanent sales tax reduction

Legislators considered rival tax relief programs in 2023, including a Senate-backed statewide property tax rebate program and a House-backed decrease in the state sales tax rate of 4.5% to 4.2%. Both had a price tag of roughly \$100 million. The Legislature at the time adopted the sales tax rate reduction with a three-year sunset clause that's scheduled to raise the rate back to 4.5% next year.

This is the third year since the sales tax cut that Senate President Pro Tempore Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, has tried to repeal the expiration date and make the sales tax reduction permanent, failing in 2024 and 2025. Karr said the permanent sales tax cut is the fairest way to provide relief, since it wouldn't divert sales tax dollars — paid by renters, tourists and others who may not own property — toward property tax credits.

Karr told lawmakers raising the tax would stagnate the economy and that the state has "been able to meet our obligations," citing better-than-anticipated revenue projections adopted by the legislative budget committee last week.

Other lawmakers pointed to the opposite. Sen. Paul Miskimins, R-Mitchell, referenced lagging maintenance and repair funding for government buildings and proposals for lower-than-inflation increases for public education, state employees and Medicaid providers.

"I really appreciate that when we can lower taxes it makes all of us look good and it makes the people of South Dakota feel better about what we do up here," Miskimins said. "But I don't think this is that time. I think this is a time for vision, courage and discipline to do the right thing for the health of our state."

When the vote tally on the bill was announced as a tie, Lt. Gov. Tony Venhuizen, who presides over the Senate, paused before declaring the bill's fate. Earlier this legislative session, Karr challenged the lieutenant governor's legal authority to break a tie, and Gov. Larry Rhoden asked for an opinion from the state Supreme Court, which the court has yet to deliver. The issue arose due in part to the prolonged health-related absence of Sen. Arch Beal, R-Sioux Falls, which has reduced the number of senators from 35 to 34.

Venhuizen ultimately declared the sales tax reduction bill defeated due to its lack of an 18-vote majority of members-elect. Karr announced his intent to seek a later reconsideration of the bill.

When asked by South Dakota Searchlight whether the dispute over his tiebreaking authority influenced his non-vote on Karr's bill, Venhuizen said, "I guess I'd just say that discretion is the better part of valor."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 9 of 77

Two-stage sales tax increase for property tax relief

Lawmakers in the House Taxation Committee voted 10-2 earlier Tuesday to advance House Bill 1308. It would set general and special education property tax mill levies to zero on owner-occupied homes and replace the revenue with an increase in sales tax collections to 5%. The increase would occur over two years, increasing the sales tax from 4.2% to 4.7% this July and to 5% in July 2027.

Rep. Tim Czmowski, R-Sioux Falls, said the bill would also direct a portion of the increased sales tax revenue to annual funding increases for public education, state employees and Medicaid providers. But, as with a 3% annual increase already set in law for education funding increases, future Legislatures could determine if that money needs to be spent elsewhere.

Overall, the proposal would raise state sales tax revenues by \$337 million in the first two years and reduce property taxes by 29-44% per home on average throughout the state, Czmowski said. South Dakota currently has the 36th highest sales tax rate in the nation.

"It balances the revenue with a sales tax adjustment that remains competitively low amongst our neighboring states and the nation as a whole," Czmowski said. "Additionally, it provides time for a sensible cost cutting and economic development stimulus to improve our overall budget."

Derek Johnson, state economist with the Bureau of Finance and Management, said the proposal is too broad, since property tax concerns are limited to areas in the state experiencing the highest valuation increases over the past few years. He added that the proposal would require "significant administrative work for the state and for retailers," since there would be two sales tax increases.

Johnson said the bill "raises questions about enforceability, equity and administrative feasibility."

No other proponents or opponents testified on the proposal. The bill will head to the House floor next.

Other property tax bills considered

Lawmakers on the committee rejected another property tax proposal in a 9-3 vote, which would have rolled back home valuations to 2020 levels for people who have lived in their home since then and capped annual valuation increases.

Wendy Semmler, property tax division director for the state Department of Revenue, said the proposal would favor wealthier, older property owners over younger families and first-time homebuyers since less expensive homes tend to turn over more often.

"This bill will permanently lock in inequity into our property tax system," Semmler said.

The Senate shot down another bill that would have raised the state's cap on property tax increases attributable to new construction and growth, in response to complaints from some local officials that the cap restrains their ability to provide services necessary to accommodate rapid population increases. The bill, which required two-thirds support due to its effect on taxes, failed on an 18-16 vote.

Three other property tax bills survived the Senate on Tuesday and will go to House committees:

Senate Bill 20 would appropriate \$425,000 for a property tax refund program for older adults and people with disabilities.

Senate Bill 183 would expand taxpayer notice requirements before a vote to exceed property tax levies by requiring notification be sent to all property owners by mail or electronically at least 21 days before a public hearing on the matter.

Senate Bill 223 would reduce the number of petition signatures needed to refer a school district's decision to "opt out" of property tax limitations to an election and lengthen the time petitioners have to gather signatures.

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

'Rights of a parent' measure passes state Senate over concerns about unintended consequences

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

South Dakota state senators revived and approved a bill Tuesday that was described by its sponsor as strengthening parental rights, but was criticized by opponents for its potential to undercut protections against abuse and neglect, delay urgent health care decisions and encourage lawsuits.

The bill had failed last week in the Senate on a vote of 17-16, which was one vote short of a majority with two senators absent. After a reconsideration vote Tuesday, senators voted 19-15 to approve it. The bill now goes to a House committee.

South Dakota is currently "aligned with some of the most liberal states" in the country, Sen. Tamara Grove, R-Lower Brule, told a Senate committee Feb. 10. She is the bill's sponsor.

"PARENTS KNOW AND LOVE THEIR CHILDREN THE BEST," SHE SAID. "THEY HAVE THE RIGHT AND RESPONSIBILITY TO MAKE DECISIONS THAT ARE IN THE CHILD'S BEST INTEREST WITHOUT UNDUE INTERFERENCE FROM GOVERNMENT."

The legislation states that a parent has the right to "direct the upbringing" of their child, including the "moral and religious training." It would give parents a stronger hand in their child's medical decisions and education, Grove said. It would also authorize parents to file a lawsuit if its provisions are violated.

The bill says parents could not use the legislation to "abuse or neglect" their child, but some senators worried about a parents' rights overriding concerns voiced by a mandatory reporter — a person in a profession such as teaching who is required by law to report abuse.

"That sounds fine in theory, but in practice, I don't feel that can possibly work," said Sen. Glen Vilhauer, R-Watertown. "You've got somebody that knows what is going on at home, and yet we have to assume that the parents have the best interest of the child at heart when that is definitely not the case."

The bill doesn't affect who, under state law, is a mandatory reporter.

Medical care

Under Grove's proposal, parents would have to give consent for their child to receive a surgical procedure, medical or mental health exam and mental health treatment.

Physicians could administer emergency care without parental consent if "exercising competent medical judgment," or if the child is accompanied by a person who either has written consent from a parent or that the physician believes "in good faith on the representation of an individual, that the individual has been granted authority by the minor child's parent to make decisions regarding the minor child's health."

Some lawmakers said those clauses may cause health care providers to hold off on performing needed services for children. Sen. Sydney Davis, R-Burbank, said in instances when a teenager comes into an emergency room without blatantly life-threatening injuries, health care providers might exercise undue caution.

Davis said the bill's authorization of lawsuits by parents could send up red flags for providers.

"We need to get some CT scans, we need to do an MRI, we need to know if this is a life-threatening situation," she said. "Or would you like us to pause and wait until things are so bad that now we can intervene?"

Sen. Tim Reed, R-Brookings, expressed concern for children who may be facing sexual abuse at home. He said the legislation could prevent a child from getting an exam if a parent does not consent to it, concealing the abuse.

"Unless you're 18, no medical examination can happen," he said on the Senate floor. "We're losing the protection we have on our children because of this bill."

Education

Grove's proposal would also prevent a school employee from withholding or concealing information from

a parent about their child's "curricular or extracurricular projects, assignments, or activities," and "physical, emotional, or mental health."

It would require that school boards work collaboratively with parents and teachers to set a plan for parent participation in the school and establish a process for parents to review their child's curriculum and participation in extracurricular activities.

Parents also would have to be made aware of and consent to having their child "receive any instruction in or presentation on human sexuality, human sexual behavior, gender identity disconnected from or inconsistent with the biological reality of an individual's sex, or the idea that an individual is able to identify with a gender that corresponds to an individual's internal and subjective sense of self, disconnected from the biological reality of the minor's sex."

Parents would also have to consent before their child could go by a name or nickname other than their legal name or a name derived from their legal name.

Heath Larson, executive director of the Associated School Boards of South Dakota, said during committee testimony against the bill that schools already share information with parents.

"Every school I've ever been familiar with, every teacher I've been familiar with, is very open, transparent about what they're teaching, the homework they're giving," he said. Parents are often "involved in their child's education, they're watching, and they're doing homework with their children."

Meghan O'Brien is the audio reporter for South Dakota Searchlight where she covers the state government and its impact on South Dakotans. She's previously reported in Nebraska with a focus on health care and rural communities across the state.

State Senate backs school cellphone ban

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

PIERRE — The South Dakota Senate voted Tuesday to approve legislation that would ban student cellphone use during the school day, unless the use is for a health or educational purpose.

Members of the chamber voted 19-15 to approve the bill, after it was advanced by a Senate committee without recommendation. The bill will head to a House committee next.

Senate President Pro Tempore Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, introduced the legislation.

"What we have today is uneven," he said. "In some classrooms, teachers enforce restrictions, and others, they're left to manage alone. That inconsistency is frustrating for educators, confusing for families and does not provide the best learning environment for our children."

He said cellphones cause students to be distracted during the day, can contribute to declining academic performance and negatively impact students' mental health.

Opponents said the state should trust school boards to make the decision that's right for their students and educators.

"It's not just about phones. From my perspective, it's about our trust in local control, as well as trust in our school boards," said Sen. Stephanie Sauder, R-Bryant. "This is not a one-size-fits-all situation."

Joe Graves, secretary of the state Department of Education, said during earlier committee testimony that the department would include the policy requirement in its school accreditation process if the bill is signed into law. But he said the department wouldn't monitor students or schools to ensure enforcement.

According to a South Dakota Searchlight survey last year, about 60% of districts do not allow cellphones for at least part of the school day, although in some schools, students can keep the devices in their backpacks or lockers. About one-third of the districts in the state remove or lock away high school students' cellphones for at least part of the school day.

Thirty-eight states and Washington, D.C., have enacted some form of statewide restriction or requirement for districts to limit student phone use, according to a recent Stateline report.

Meghan O'Brien is the audio reporter for South Dakota Searchlight where she covers the state government and its impact on South Dakotans. She's previously reported in Nebraska with a focus on health care and rural communities across the state.

South Dakota plans shift to digital medical marijuana cards

BY: JOHN HULT

PIERRE — South Dakota medical marijuana cards will soon be primarily digital.

The cannabis card news came Tuesday at the Capitol during a meeting of the House of Representatives' Health and Human Services Committee.

Rep. Josephine Garcia, R-Watertown, had planned to testify on her bill to create digital cards, but instead sat down before the committee and asked its members to table it.

Garcia is the chairwoman of the state's Medical Marijuana Oversight Committee, which had discussed legislation to require the Department of Health to provide digital cards.

On Tuesday, Garcia announced that the Department of Health had agreed to pursue digital cards without legislation.

The department is looking for vendors now and will select one during the summer, Garcia said, reading from a letter to the committee from Health Secretary Melissa Magstadt. The vendor will build the digital card system in the fall. Once the system is ready, the department will begin issuing digital cards to anyone who doesn't ask for a plastic card. No implementation date was offered.

The shift to digital cards will "enhance convenience for patients and caregivers," the letter said.

Magstadt was in the room for the hearing and thanked Garcia for reading the letter. The committee voted 13-0 to table Garcia's bill.

Patients with a medical recommendation for marijuana pay initial and annual fees for plastic, driver's license-sized cards, which let them legally purchase marijuana products at dispensaries around the state. Recreational marijuana use remains illegal in South Dakota.

Digital cards would be accessible on patients' smartphones.

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.

After Minnesota church protest, states including SD move to crack down on disruptions

Republican legislators in several states are advancing felony-level penalties, raising First Amendment concerns

BY: ANNA CLAIRE VOLLERS

When Oklahoma Republican state Sen. Todd Gollihare introduced a bill last year to strengthen state law protecting places of worship from protesters, it stalled.

This year, his church protest bill sailed through the legislature. Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt signed it into law three days after Gollihare reintroduced it.

In recent weeks, Republican and Democratic lawmakers in states including Alabama, Idaho, Ohio and South Dakota have pushed legislation (none has passed yet) that would increase the penalties for disrupting religious services at houses of worship in the wake of a widely publicized incident last month at a Minnesota church. On Jan. 18, protesters disrupted a worship service to confront a pastor who is a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement official and to demand justice for Renee Good, who was shot and killed by an ICE agent 11 days before.

Such incursions are already prohibited by trespassing laws, which make it illegal to enter private property without an owner's permission.

Meanwhile in New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul and New York City Council Chair Julie Menin, both Democrats, want to create new buffer zones around houses of worship. Their proposals come in response to recent anti-Israel protests, including one outside a New York City synagogue in November where protesters chanted pro-Hamas slogans.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 13 of 77

Hochul has proposed a 25-foot buffer zone around churches, temples, mosques and other houses of worship, in addition to penalties for protesters who "alarm and annoy" worshippers. Menin has taken it further, proposing to let the police ban protests within 100 feet.

Oklahoma's law also establishes buffer zones that restrict protesting at places of worship.

The recent push has sparked a constitutional debate: Critics on both sides of the political aisle say such measures infringe on the First Amendment right to free speech, even as supporters tout them as safeguards against those who would impede the free exercise of religion.

The new laws could be challenged in court. If so, the idea of creating buffer zones, in particular, would be contested on familiar ground: A 2000 U.S. Supreme Court decision upheld a Colorado law that restricted protesters from coming within a certain distance of reproductive health clinics or people trying to access them. Then in 2014, the court unanimously struck down a broader Massachusetts law, saying it went beyond the limits accepted in the Colorado case.

Last year, the Supreme Court declined to consider overturning the 2000 buffer zone precedent.

In Oklahoma, Republican state Sen. Kendal Sacchieri was one of several conservative legislators who opposed Gollihare's bill.

"A lot of us conservatives saw it as a violation of the freedom of speech and the freedom to protest," Sacchieri said. "I couldn't in good conscience vote for that. I saw it as a way to incriminate more people."

Ken Paulson, director of the Free Speech Center at Middle Tennessee State University and former dean of the school's College of Media and Entertainment, said such legislation "strikes me as completely unnecessary and has to be motivated by political concerns, because the law is already clear."

"If someone enters onto private property and refuses to leave when you ask them to leave, they can be charged for trespassing," Paulson said in an interview. "The fact that it occurs in a church is no different than if it occurs in a movie theater or any other privately owned setting to which the public is invited."

Ohio state Rep. Tex Fischer, a Republican, told Stateline he doesn't expect many prosecutions under proposals like his. He recently introduced a bill, currently in committee, that would raise penalties for protesters who disturb religious worship from a first-degree misdemeanor to a fifth-degree felony.

But he hopes such a law would deter protesters from using places of worship as backdrops for political theater.

Fischer said his proposal is ultimately about "letting people feel comfortable and safe being able to practice their religion within the walls of their own church or synagogue or mosque, without having to worry about their service getting crashed by a bunch of people chanting, regardless of what their point is."

First Amendment concerns

This month, an Alabama House committee unanimously approved a Republican-sponsored bill that would make intentionally disrupting the proceedings in a house of worship by engaging in "a riot, unlawful protest, or disorderly conduct" — a felony punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

In South Dakota, a Republican legislator and the governor both proposed legislation in response to the Minnesota church protest. Republican state Rep. Brandei Schaeffbauer introduced a bill that would create a new felony crime of entering or remaining in a place of worship with the intent to "menace or harass" or for the purpose of "political intimidation" or inciting "fear of violence."

The bill failed in the South Dakota House, amid concerns that its 50-foot perimeter and one-hour time buffer — barring protests within an hour before or after a religious service — could interfere with lawful protesting or speech.

But a bill filed on behalf of South Dakota Gov. Larry Rhoden, a Republican, passed the Senate and now awaits action in the House. It would raise penalties in an existing law that criminalizes intentionally preventing another person from performing lawful religious acts. The bill would boost the crime from a misdemeanor to a felony, punishable by two years in state prison, a \$4,000 fine or both.

These kinds of laws can run afoul of the First Amendment when they try to punish the content of speech, rather than the manner or location of it, said Eugene Volokh, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 14 of 77

Institution, a conservative-leaning think tank.

"You can't treat a certain type of speech differently based on the content of that speech," he said. And vague language is also unconstitutional.

For example, he said, Idaho's bill would outlaw disrupting a worship service with "profane discourse" or "rude or indecent behavior" but doesn't define what those mean or explain how speech would be determined to meet those standards.

"You can't just punish speech or criminalize behavior because it's rude," he said, though a law could, for example, punish speech that's unnecessarily loud.

The issue doesn't always split neatly along party lines. Democrats helped pass Alabama's bill out of committee following assurances from the bill's sponsor that it doesn't apply to anyone on public property.

In Oklahoma, the Democratic caucus was split on the new measure, with some voting in favor and some against. Shortly after the bill passed, Democrat Julia Kirt, the Senate minority leader, expressed unease and some skepticism while talking with reporters.

"I'm concerned about some of the ambiguous definitions in there, about faith communities and about what 'disruption' [means], or how it would be implemented, who would be targeted with it," said Kirt, who ended up voting against the bill.

"I think we can all agree we want folks to have a safe space to worship and that we need to make sure that happens. I'm just not sure that was the way to take it."

In South Dakota, Republican state Rep. John Hughes told a committee earlier this month that he had a "pit in his stomach" over the legislation, calling its reach overly broad. He noted the state already has criminal trespassing laws. South Dakota also has an existing law that makes it a misdemeanor to intentionally prevent someone from performing a lawful religious act.

Sacchieri, the Oklahoma Republican, said some of her concerns center on the new law's implications for Christians Christians preaching or proselytizing outside other religions' places of worship.

"This bill would criminalize a pastor that wants to preach outside a mosque," she said. "There's no language defining a religious meeting and what 'oral protest' is, or if you want to pass out a flyer."

And she believes the law could trigger lawsuits designed to test the U.S. Supreme Court's stance on buffer zones.

Volokh is skeptical that the Oklahoma law could be used to test the court's precedent. There have been calls, he said, mostly from conservatives, to overrule *Hill v. Colorado*, the 2000 Supreme Court case that allowed some buffer zones outside abortion clinics.

"The court has had opportunities to revisit *Hill v. Colorado* in abortion protest cases, and some justices have urged it to do that," Volokh said. "But the other justices haven't been interested. I don't think that's going to change with a law like this."

Fischer, the Ohio lawmaker, said he's met with Ohio's attorney general and other stakeholders, and is working on an amendment to his bill to ensure it wouldn't apply to protests on public spaces like sidewalks.

"We're not going to interfere with what anybody does out on the sidewalk," he told Stateline. "I think the First Amendment is very clear. People have a right to do that and I'm not looking to change anything about that."

"What I have a problem with is people entering and disrupting a religious service to make a political point. That's what we're looking to crack down on."

He also wants to amend the bill to give the state attorney general the ability to go after such protesters if local prosecutors choose not to.

Religious and abortion protections

Gollihare, the sponsor of Oklahoma's new law, originally introduced his bill last year when conservative protesters who were upset about his vote against an anti-abortion bill showed up at his church in Oklahoma, he said, causing a disturbance and refusing to leave when asked.

He modeled part of Oklahoma's new law on the 2000 Supreme Court decision that upheld the Colorado

law.

In Oklahoma, anyone within 100 feet of the entrance to a place of worship now must give worshippers an 8-foot pathway unless invited to approach. Violators face a penalty of up to a year in jail on the first offense. Gollihare said that the buffer zone in his law “comes right out of” the Supreme Court case.

Paulson, the First Amendment scholar, said buffer zones are well-established and are intended to be relatively small, to place protesters at a distance so they don’t interfere with the business or event that’s occurring.

But they do have to be “reasonable, rational, and can’t be used as a weapon to limit free speech,” he said.

Complicating the issue is a federal law, the 1994 Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances (FACE) Act, which prohibits using violence, threats or physical barriers to stop people from accessing reproductive health care clinics, such as those that offer abortion services, and places of religious worship.

Last year, the Department of Justice pivoted away from broadly enforcing that law against abortion protesters. President Donald Trump pardoned 23 people previously convicted of violating the FACE Act in relation to abortion clinic blockades. More recently, his administration has used the FACE Act to prosecute people protesting at houses of worship.

Gollihare said he believes Oklahoma’s new law balances Supreme Court precedent with state law, and protects all of the First Amendment — the parts that deal with freedom of religion, as well as freedoms of speech and assembly.

“There’s a balancing between people advocating or protesting, and people who just want to be left alone,” he said. “They came to worship and they weren’t wanting to be part of a political protest. So that’s what this bill is all about. If you don’t want to be in the battleground, you have a right to walk away unbothered and unhindered.”

Stateline reporter Anna Claire Vollers can be reached at avollers@stateline.org.

This story was originally produced by Stateline, which is part of States Newsroom, a nonprofit news network which includes South Dakota Searchlight, and is supported by grants and a coalition of donors as a 501c(3) public charity.

Anna Claire Vollers covers health care for Stateline. She is based in Huntsville, Alabama.

Bill to allow publicly funded charter schools in South Dakota narrowly advances

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR

Lawmakers advanced a bill to allow charter schools in South Dakota on a 4-3 committee vote Tuesday, after debate over whether the proposal would expand opportunity or further strain public schools.

Charter schools are publicly funded, privately run, tuition-free schools that operate independently of the local school district and with some autonomy over scheduling and curricula. The schools receive public money based on the number of students they enroll.

A handful of states, including South Dakota, do not allow charter schools.

Sen. Lauren Nelson, R-Yankton, introduced the bill. It would authorize charter schools to operate with their own boards under contract with the state Department of Education. The schools would have autonomy over staffing and curriculum, but would have to comply with certain state standards and requirements, or risk closure. They would be funded via per-pupil dollars that would follow students from their current school district.

Nelson and other supporters said charter schools provide families with more public-school options and support students with specialized needs. They emphasized that schools must demonstrate demand before opening.

Charlie Bufalino is the state advocacy director for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. He said that, on average, charter schools nationwide outperform traditional public schools.

“When public charter schools exist in a community, over time, it lifts the results of all public schools in

that area," he told lawmakers.

Supporters said charter schools could help students who struggle in traditional settings. Numerous examples of specialized programs that improve outcomes and help dropouts earn diplomas were cited.

Representatives of public school administrators, school boards and teachers urged lawmakers to reject the bill, warning it could create a "separate school system" and drain funding from traditional districts.

Rob Monson is the executive director of the School Administrators of South Dakota. He said South Dakota's funding formula is based on enrollment counts. If students leave for charter schools, districts would lose funding while still paying fixed costs for buildings, buses and staff.

"If we start to siphon students off and send them to this charter school, it's going to have an impact on all schools, but it's certainly going to have an impact on rural schools more than larger schools," he told lawmakers.

Opponents also said charter schools would be exempt from many state laws governing public schools and that the bill would require only 75% of teachers to be certified. They said the proposal could conflict with the state constitution's requirement for a "uniform system of public schools."

Additionally, opponents said districts already have tools to innovate without creating a new system. They said the state should fully fund existing schools before creating new ones.

The bill now moves to the full Senate for consideration.

Meanwhile, Gov. Larry Rhoden recently opted South Dakota into a federal program under President Donald Trump's "One Big Beautiful Bill." Under that program, South Dakotans who owe federal income taxes can either send up to \$1,700 to the federal government, or they can donate that \$1,700 to a government-recognized scholarship-granting organization benefiting public, private or homeschool entities in the state. The program starts next year.

South Dakota also has a program called Partners in Education that provides tax credits for insurance companies that fund scholarships for lower-income students to attend private school.

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

Governor signs bill allowing more direct-to-consumer meat sales if federal government acts

BY: SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT STAFF

South Dakota Gov. Larry Rhoden signed a bill into law Tuesday that will make it easier for South Dakotans to buy meat directly from cattle producers, if Congress changes a related federal law.

Currently, consumers can't buy cuts of meat directly from cattle producers if that meat was not processed at a state- or federally inspected facility. A common workaround is buying the animal from the producer and having it processed at a meat locker that has "custom-exempt" status. Those facilities are exempt from the Federal Meat Inspection Act requirements for carcass-by-carcass inspection, but are reviewed periodically for safety.

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The bill that passed both legislative chambers and earned the governor's signature will allow South Dakotans to buy individual cuts of meat from a cattle producer if the meat was processed at a custom-exempt facility — but only if Congress first changes federal law to permit those sales.

The state law would apply to meat from cattle, sheep, swine or goats raised by the producer for at least 90 days, then slaughtered at a custom-exempt meat locker. The law would limit sales to direct, in-person transactions by the producer to a consumer at the producer's primary residence, at a farmers market, or at another temporary sales venue.

Rep. John Shubeck, R-Beresford, who farms and raises cattle, was the bill's main sponsor. He said meat processed at a custom-exempt locker is already widely consumed. He said reputational accountability between the producer, butcher and consumer minimizes risk.

"In that case, you're saying, 'Hey, I trust the farmer,'" he said. "In the other case, you're saying, 'I trust the inspector.'"

Push for stricter laws on mining explosives, inspired by Piedmont situation, fails in state House

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR

Piedmont residents' hopes of tightening the regulation of mining explosives went up in smoke Monday in the South Dakota House after lawmakers split over whether the issue should be handled statewide or locally.

The bill is sponsored by Rep. Terri Jorgenson, R-Piedmont, who said it was a response to constituents' concerns about a planned 300-acre limestone quarry on the edge of the Black Hills that will use blasting. The House vote to approve the bill failed 29-37.

The bill would shift any mining that uses explosives to South Dakota's more stringent mining permit process, rather than the simpler annual mining license system used for the extraction of materials such as sand, gravel, construction rock and limestone. It would phase existing explosive-use operators onto those permits over five years. The bill would also require operators to report explosives use 90 days in advance.

Jorgenson told lawmakers the change was needed to close what she called a gap in state law.

"South Dakota currently treats a limestone quarry blasting daily with high-grade explosives the same as a front-end loader scooping loose sand," she said.

Opponents countered that blasting and mining are already regulated by federal agencies, state permitting and local governments, and warned that the bill would impose a statewide mandate to address the Piedmont-area dispute.

Piedmont is in Meade County. Rep. Kevin Van Diepen, R-Huron, said Meade County voters had repeatedly rejected zoning.

"If they want to control what's going on in Meade County, have the county commission come up with zoning ordinances that would control the explosives and the mining in that area," he said. "But the residents of Meade County have said they don't want that. But now they want the state of South Dakota to come in and say, 'Big brother's here, we're gonna force you to do this.'"

Jorgenson unsuccessfully urged lawmakers to keep the issue alive, calling the proposal "a small step" toward stronger protections for communities and the environment.

Earlier Tuesday, a House committee rejected another Jorgenson bill that would have authorized cities and counties to adopt laws governing sand, gravel and aggregate mining operations that don't conflict with state laws or administrative rules, and would have made state permits contingent on an applicant's earning of local permits.

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

A 'servant leader' honored: The nation pays tribute to Jesse Jackson, civil rights icon

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA AND JACOB FISCHLER

WASHINGTON — Tributes poured in across the country for the revered civil rights figure the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Sr., who died Tuesday morning at 84.

The two-time Democratic presidential hopeful and Greenville, South Carolina, native died peacefully, surrounded by his kin, according to his family.

Jackson, who was active in the civil rights movement as a college student, worked alongside the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. as a young adult before King's 1968 assassination.

Leading his own political movement, Jackson became known for his populist message, charismatic delivery and organizing prowess that elevated the role and influence of Black political leaders and helped shape the modern Democratic Party.

"Our father was a servant leader — not only to our family, but to the oppressed, the voiceless, and the overlooked around the world," Jackson's family said in a statement.

"We shared him with the world, and in return, the world became part of our extended family," his family added. "His unwavering belief in justice, equality, and love uplifted millions, and we ask you to honor his memory by continuing the fight for the values he lived by."

Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker, a Democrat, ordered flags to fly at half-staff Tuesday in Jackson's honor in the state where he lived and worked for many years.

The family statement did not list a cause of death. Jackson was diagnosed in 2013 with Parkinson's disease. His diagnosis was updated last year to progressive supranuclear palsy, according to a November statement from the Rainbow PUSH Coalition that Jackson founded.

Tributes from Obama, Trump and Biden

Former President Barack Obama, the first Black president, and his wife, Michelle Obama, said Jackson's runs for the presidency "laid the foundation" for Barack Obama's successful 2008 campaign. And Chicago native Michelle Obama's "first glimpse of political organizing" was at the Jacksons' kitchen table, they said.

"From organizing boycotts and sit-ins, to registering millions of voters, to advocating for freedom and democracy around the world, he was relentless in his belief that we are all children of God, deserving of dignity and respect," they wrote. "Reverend Jackson also created opportunities for generations of African Americans and inspired countless more, including us."

President Donald Trump paid tribute, dubbing Jackson "a force of nature like few others before him" and a "good man, with lots of personality, grit, and 'street smarts,'" in a social media post Tuesday.

House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, the highest-ranking Black member of Congress, honored Jackson as a "legendary voice for the voiceless, powerful civil rights champion and trailblazer extraordinaire," in a social media post.

"For decades, while laboring in the vineyards of the community, he inspired us to keep hope alive in the struggle for liberty and justice for all," the New York Democrat said.

Jeffries expressed gratitude for Jackson's "incredible service" to the country and "profound sacrifice as the people's champion."

Former President Joe Biden called Jackson "a man of God and of the people. Determined and tenacious. Unafraid of the work to redeem the soul of our Nation."

South Carolina legacy

U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn, a South Carolina Democrat and longtime friend of Jackson, said the civil rights leader lived a life "defying odds," in a statement Tuesday.

"Reverend Jackson showed us that if we all work together — we can bend the arc of the moral universe and change history," Clyburn said while also pointing to Jackson's impact on "the nation, Black Americans,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 19 of 77

and movements to encourage civic participation around the world.”

U.S. Sen. Tim Scott, a South Carolina Republican who is the party’s highest-ranking Black elected official, honored Jackson’s legacy as a leader and role model.

“I don’t have to agree with someone politically to deeply respect the role Jesse Jackson, a South Carolina native, played in uplifting Black voices and inspiring young folks to believe their voices mattered,” Scott wrote on social media. “Those that empower people to stand taller always leave a lasting mark. Rest in peace.”

Jackson’s legacy will live on in the next generation, South Carolina state Sen. Deon Tedder said during a news conference Tuesday.

“The future generation, they’re picking up that torch, they’re picking up that mantle,” said Tedder, a Democrat, gesturing to students from the state’s historically Black colleges and universities. “The baton has been passed, and now what you see is the future.”

South Carolina state Rep. Hamilton Grant recalled seeing Jackson at the July 9, 2015, signing ceremony of the law that removed the Confederate flag from Statehouse grounds entirely. The flag was taken down the next day, 15 years after it came off the Statehouse dome in a compromise Jackson opposed.

“For him, being from South Carolina, to see that moment, and me being there in close proximity with him, meant the world to me,” Grant told the South Carolina Daily Gazette. He said Jackson paved the way for Black leaders like him and helped instill in him pride in his identity.

The South Carolina House and Senate held moments of silence in Jackson’s honor Tuesday.

“There are so many little boys and little girls in South Carolina who can look in the mirror now and say, ‘I am somebody!’ because of this native son,” state Sen. Karl Allen, a Democrat, said.

Shaping Democratic politics

Jackson leaves behind a legacy of political and social justice work that spanned decades.

He founded the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, a national social justice organization whose name evoked Jackson’s multiracial voter base and the theme of his 1984 Democratic National Convention speech. That organization was formed by a merger between Operation PUSH, which Jackson founded in 1971, and the Rainbow Coalition.

In his 1988 bid for the presidency, Jackson based his campaign in Iowa prior to that state’s presidential caucuses and made the official announcement of his candidacy at a farm in Greenfield on Oct. 10, 1987.

He finished in fourth place in the caucuses but went on to briefly become the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination by winning a coalition of Black and Latino voters and white liberals, though he ultimately came in second in delegates to Michael Dukakis.

Similar blocs propelled Obama to victory two decades later and continue to form national Democrats’ base.

Two of Jackson’s sons, Jesse Jackson Jr. and Jonathan Jackson, would represent Illinois in the U.S. House. Jonathan Jackson remains in office after first winning election in 2022.

U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders, a democratic socialist from Vermont who endorsed Jackson’s 1988 campaign, said in a Tuesday statement Jackson had been a friend and ally for nearly 40 years and credited Jackson with founding modern progressivism.

“His creation of the Rainbow Coalition, a revolutionary idea at the time, that developed a grassroots movement of working people — Black, white, Latino, Asian-American, Native-American, gay and straight — laid the foundation for the modern progressive movement which is continuing to fight for his vision of economic, racial, social and environmental justice,” Sanders wrote. “Jackson has had a profound impact upon our country. His politics of togetherness and solidarity should guide us going forward.”

‘Equal justice is not inevitable’

Georgia U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock, a Democrat and a Baptist pastor, recalled the influence Jackson’s presidential runs had on a young Warnock growing up in public housing.

“With an eloquence and rhythmic rhetoric all his own, Jesse Jackson reminded America that equal justice

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 20 of 77

is not inevitable," he said. "It requires vigilance and commitment, and for freedom fighters, sacrifice. His ministry was poetry and spiritual power in the public square. He advanced King's dream and bent the arc of history closer to justice."

Jaime Harrison, a former chair of the Democratic National Committee, said Jackson's 1988 run, which culminated with a speech at the party convention that lauded the United States' multiracial identity, inspired him.

As "a poor Black kid from South Carolina," Harrison said he was drawn to Jackson's command of the convention hall after accumulating more than 1,000 delegates.

"He did not win the nomination," Harrison wrote. "But he won our imagination."

Adrian Ashford contributed to this report.

Shauneen Miranda is a reporter for States Newsroom's Washington bureau. An alumna of the University of Maryland, she previously covered breaking news for Axios.

Jacob covers federal policy and helps direct national coverage as deputy Washington bureau chief for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.

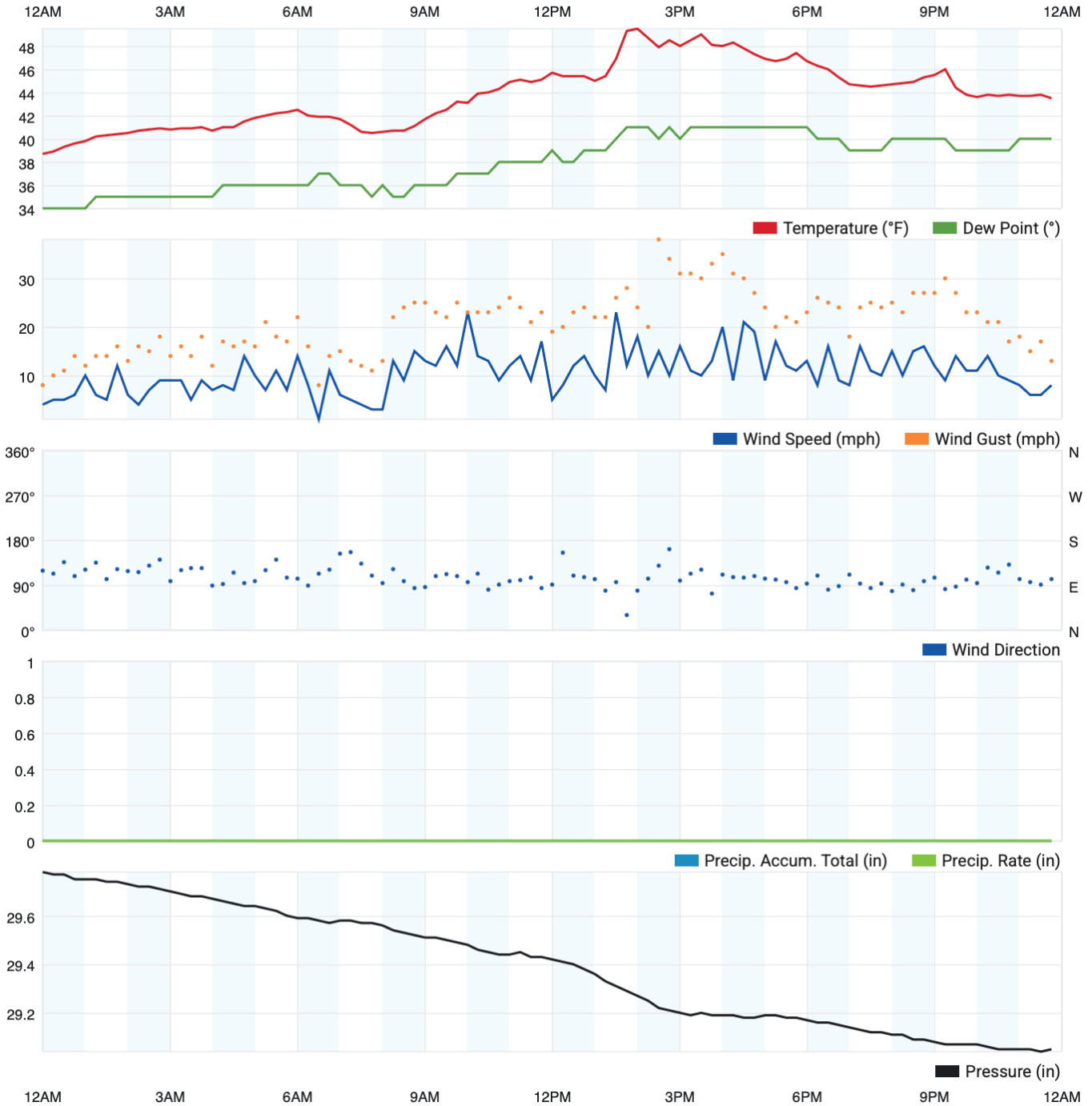
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Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 21 of 77

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs






February 17, 2026



Broton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 22 of 77

Blizzard War...

Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday
				
60% → 30%		20%	30%	20%
High: 36 °F	Low: 19 °F	High: 25 °F	Low: 9 °F	High: 22 °F
Snow Likely and Areas Blowing Snow	Patchy Blowing Snow and Blustery	Slight Chance Snow and Patchy Blowing Snow	Chance Snow	Slight Chance Snow then Partly Sunny

Blizzard Warning And Winter Weather Advisory Today February 18, 2026 5:09 AM

Snow and Blowing Snow Create Hazardous Conditions Especially This Morning

Key Messages

- West northwest winds 25 to 40 mph with gusts 45 to 65 mph persist for at least the first half of today over northeast South Dakota into west central Minnesota
- While snow is falling, the strong winds will create blowing snow and periods of whiteout conditions and zero visibility.
- Travel will be extremely dangerous or impossible! Travel should be restricted to emergencies only.



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Falling snow combined with strong winds has created whiteout conditions over parts of northeastern and north central South Dakota this morning. A Blizzard Warning is in effect until 3 PM CST today with visibility expected to remain below a quarter of a mile. Travel should be restricted to emergencies only.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 23 of 77

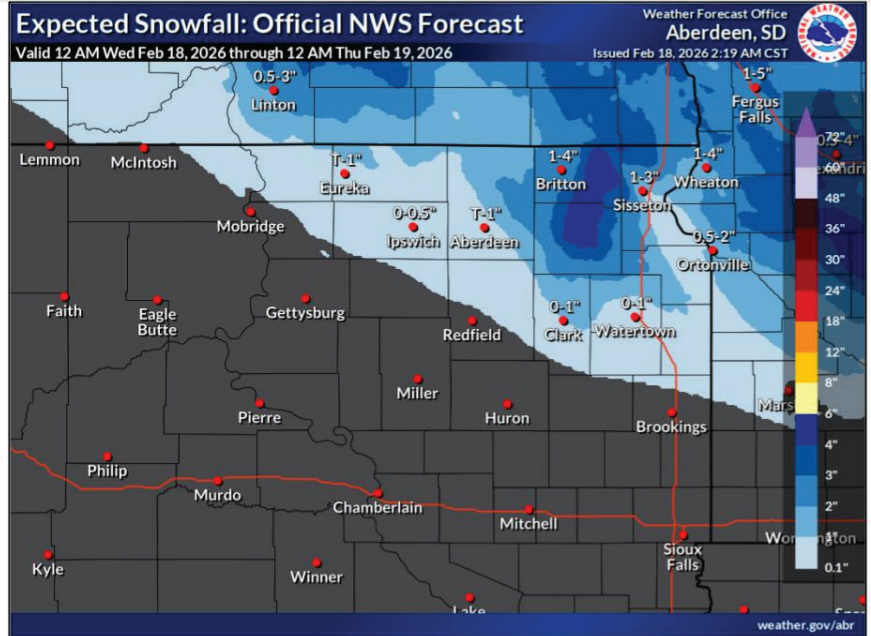


Light To Moderate Snow Today

February 18, 2026
5:09 AM

Accumulations of 1 to 4 inches with locally higher amounts possible

- **Rain** has transitioned to snow over north central South Dakota and is transitioning to **snow this morning** over northeast SD.
 - ◆ Light snow will eventually overtake all of northeast South Dakota and west central Minnesota this morning.
- Generally up to an inch of snowfall is expected north of a Herreid to Clark line. **However, 1 to 4 inches of snow with locally higher amounts are expected over the Prairie Coteau of northeast South Dakota.**



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD



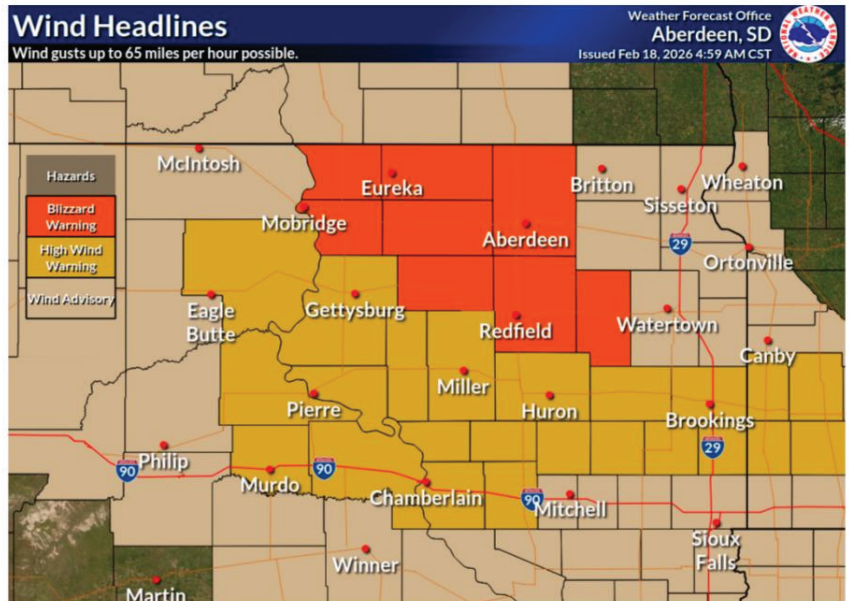
High Wind Warning And Wind Advisory This Morning

February 18, 2026
5:09 AM

Wind gusts up to 65 miles per hour will be possible this morning.

Key Messages

- **High Wind Warning** in effect this morning.
 - Winds out of the west-northwest with gusts of **45 to 65 mph**.
 - Winds will diminish this afternoon and evening.
 - Wind Advisory remains in effect for parts of northeastern and north central SD, as well as western MN.
- **Very High Grassland Fire Danger in Central SD:** Due to the combination of dry grasses, low relative humidity values, and gusty winds.
 - Any fires that ignite could spread rapidly and become difficult to control or suppress!



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Broton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 24 of 77



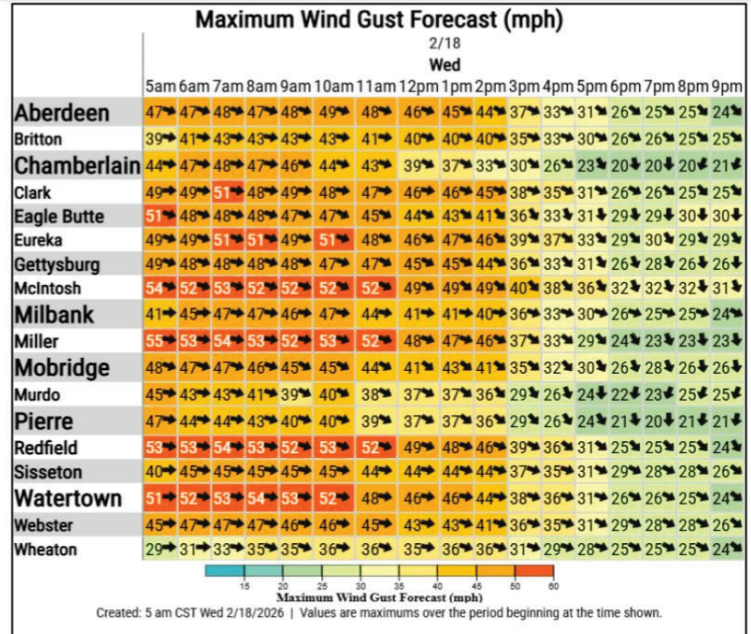
Wind Gusts and Timing

February 18, 2026
5:09 AM CST

Strongest winds through the first half of Wednesday as highlighted below

Key Messages

- Winds out of the west-northwest through Wednesday, with gusts of **45 to 65 mph**,
 - Gusts are expected to diminish this afternoon and evening.
- Winds will become northerly on Thursday with gusts of 25 to 35 mph.



Groton Daily Independent

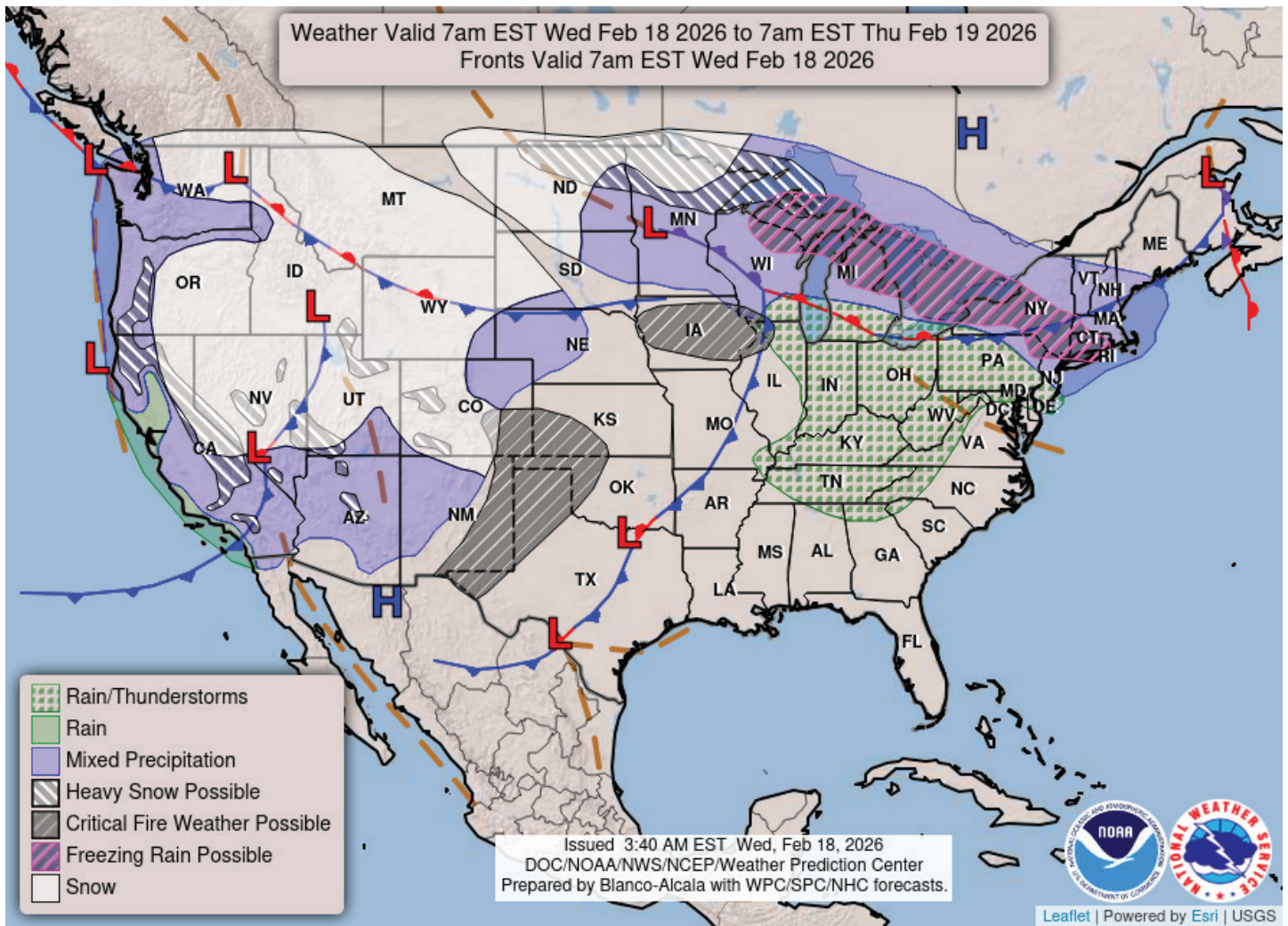
Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 25 of 77

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 50 °F at 1:50 PM
Low Temp: 39 °F at 12:00 AM
Wind: 38 mph at 2:27 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 67 in 1913
Record Low: -32 in 1903
Average High: 29
Average Low: 7
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.37
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.92
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 6:03 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:27 am



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 26 of 77

Today in Weather History

February 18th, 1962: It started raining during the afternoon of the 18th, and by evening temperatures dropped below freezing resulting in a glaze up to three-quarters of an inch on trees and power lines. Many utility lines were downed by the ice or by falling trees and branches. Temperatures continued to drop during the night, changing the rain to snow by the 19th. Strong winds accompanied this snow causing local blizzard conditions.

1899 — While much of the central and eastern U.S. was recovering from the most severe cold wave of modern history, the temperature at San Francisco soared to 80 degrees to establish a record for month of February. (David Ludlum)

1959 — Some of the higher elevations of California were in the midst of a five day storm which produced 189 inches of snow, a single storm record for North America. (13th-19th) (David Ludlum)

1965: A massive avalanche kills 26 men at the Granduc Copper Mine in British Columbia on this day.

1987 — A small but intense low pressure system combined with northerly upslope winds to produce eight inches of snow in five hours at Meeteetsie WY, located southeast of Cody. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 — Thunderstorms soaked the Central Gulf Coast Region with heavy rain. Totals in southern Louisiana ranged up to 8.50 inches near the town of Ridge, with 6.55 inches at Plaquemine. Thunderstorms in northern Florida drenched Apalachicola with 5.41 inches of rain in 24 hours, and produced wind gusts to 75 mph at Mayo. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 — Low pressure off the coast of North Carolina brought freezing rain and heavy snow to Virginia and the Carolinas. Snowfall totals in Virginia ranged up to 18 inches at Franklin. Freezing rain reached a thickness of two inches around Charlotte NC. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 — An intense but slow moving Pacific storm worked its way across Utah over a two day period. The storm blanketed the valleys with 4 to 12 inches of snow, and produced up to 42 inches of snow in the mountains. Heavy snow also fell across northern Arizona. Williams received 22 inches of snow, and 12 inches was reported along the south rim of the Grand Canyon. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1992: A thunderstorm spawned a powerful F4 tornado for so far north for the time of the year in southern Van Wert County in Ohio. The tornado touched down just west of US Route 127 and traveled northeastward for about 3 miles. One house was completely leveled, and nine others experienced severe damage. Six people were injured.

Unshakeable Faith

Because Daniel and his friends knew and trusted God, they courageously responded to difficulty with faith.

Daniel 1:1-20: 1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

2 The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the vessels of the house of God; and he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god.

3 Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles,

4 youths in whom was no defect, who were good-looking, showing intelligence in every branch of wisdom, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king's court; and he ordered him to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.

5 The king appointed for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and from the wine which he drank, and appointed that they should be educated three years, at the end of which they were to enter the king's personal service.

6 Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.

7 Then the commander of the officials assigned new names to them; and to Daniel he assigned the name Belteshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach and to Azariah Abed-nego.

8 But Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's choice food or with the wine which he drank; so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself.

9 Now God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials,

10 and the commander of the officials said to Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink; for why should he see your faces looking more haggard than the youths who are your own age? Then you would make me forfeit my head to the king."

11 But Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah,

12 "Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink.

13 "Then let our appearance be observed in your presence and the appearance of the youths who are eating the king's choice food; and deal with your servants according to what you see."

14 So he listened to them in this matter and tested them for ten days.

15 At the end of ten days their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all the youths who had been eating the king's choice food.

16 So the overseer continued to withhold their choice food and the wine they were to drink, and kept giving them vegetables.

17 As for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams.

18 Then at the end of the days which the king had specified for presenting them, the commander of the officials presented them before Nebuchadnezzar.

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

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 28 of 77

19 The king talked with them, and out of them all not one was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's personal service.

20 As for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm.

Daniel's faith was unwavering. His trust in the Lord sustained him when he was taken into captivity and sent to a foreign country. It also strengthened and encouraged him as he served under kings and faced many daunting challenges.

Knowing God and trusting Him are the two key elements of faith. Daniel learned about the Lord from a young age. While he was in captivity, his words and actions demonstrated that he knew the Scriptures and wanted to obey God. When offered a meal that was incompatible with Jewish dietary laws, he took a risk by requesting other food. In verse 9 of today's passage, we see that God caused the official to show him favor. Like Daniel, we are to spend our lives learning and carrying out what pleases our heavenly Father (Colossians 1:10).

Daniel knew what the Scriptures said, but he also trusted the Lord to do as He had promised. Every time Daniel took a stand for godliness, he was demonstrating his confidence in God. His friends—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego—had unshakeable faith as well. They did not know if God would rescue them from the fiery furnace, but they believed He could (Daniel 3:16-18).

Do you want to have a deeper faith in God? Ask for His help to trust Him the way Daniel did.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 29 of 77

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Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 30 of 77



WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.17.26

3 37 44 52 63 14

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$416,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 51 Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.16.26

1 7 18 36 40 3

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$15,550,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 6 Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.17.26

12 21 28 32 34 7

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 21 Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.14.26

4 14 15 17 23

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 21 Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.16.26

14 24 32 37 49 7

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 50 Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.16.26

16 18 19 56 58 6

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$169,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 50 Mins 13 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the **AP** Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Christian 79, Langford 41
Andes Central/Dakota Christian 73, Sunshine Bible Academy 58
Avon 48, Gayville-Volin High School 24
Baltic 50, Flandreau 39
Brandon Valley 62, Tea 33
Bridgewater-Emery 55, Irene-Wakonda 42
Centerville 51, Dell Rapids St Mary's 39
Chamberlain 58, Hanson 44
Chester 62, Arlington/Lake Preston 57
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 73, St. Francis Indian 44
Clark-Willow Lake 69, Tiospa Zina 23
DeSmet 78, Estelline-Hendricks 42
Emery 55, Irene-Wakonda 42
Faith 46, Lemmon High School 31
Flandreau Indian 77, Mitchell Christian 37
Freeman 65, Ethan 58
Great Plains Lutheran 52, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 50
Gregory 59, Wagner 50
Hamlin 70, Britton-Hecla 29
Howard 53, Canistota 33
James Valley Christian School 49, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 48
Lennox 57, Beresford 36
Lyman 60, Bennett County 58
Marty 78, Burke 66
McLaughlin 64, Wakpala 51
Miller 51, Faulkton 36
Mitchell 52, Sioux Falls Washington 49
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 70, Bon Homme 45
New Underwood 90, Crazy Horse 51
Northwestern 70, Redfield 63
Oelrichs 83, Takini 35
Parker/Marion 63, Garretson 58
Platte-Geddes 60, Winner 50
Rapid City Central 65, Douglas 30
Sioux City, West, Iowa 78, Dakota Valley 64
Sioux Falls Christian 74, Yankton 71
Sioux Falls Lincoln 59, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 47
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 63, Harrisburg 55
Sioux Valley 50, Castlewood 47
Sisseton 56, Deuel 43
Spearfish 54, Rapid City Christian 44
St Thomas More 57, Hot Springs 44
Stanley County 52, Mobridge-Pollock 46
Sturgis Brown High School 62, Belle Fourche 58
T F Riggs High School 56, Brookings 47

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 32 of 77

Tri-Valley 48, McCook Central-Montrose 46, OT
Tripp-Delmont-Armour 62, Corsica/Stickney 50
Viborg-Hurley 65, Scotland/Menno 24
Wall 84, Philip 26
Warner 61, Wolsey-Wessington 52
Watertown 69, Aberdeen Central 45
West Central 67, Canton 33
Wilmot 64, Tri-State, N.D. 52

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

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 52, Watertown 43
Aberdeen Roncalli 55, Florence-Henry 41
Bennett County 76, Lyman 58
Bon Homme 52, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 42
Centerville 66, Dell Rapids St Mary's 49
Chester 67, Arlington 62
Clark-Willow Lake 65, Tiospa Zina 20
Colman-Egan 60, Iroquois-Lake Preston 38
Corsica/Stickney 51, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 41
Estelline-Hendricks 71, DeSmet 23
Flandreau 58, Baltic 25
Freeman 53, Ethan 51
Garretson 41, Parker/Marion 35
Gayville-Volin High School 52, Avon 41
Great Plains Lutheran 58, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 42
Hamlin 67, Britton-Hecla 19
Hanson 42, Chamberlain 34
Herried-Selby 58, Gettysburg 43
Highmore-Harrold 55, Ipswich 24
Hill City 56, Custer 42
Hot Springs 42, Edgemont 24
Howard 39, Canistota 21
Irene-Wakonda 58, Emery 46
Jones County 56, White River 25
Kadoka 49, Timber Lake 34
Lakota Tech 65, Vermillion 62
Langford 69, Aberdeen Christian 22
Lennox 57, Beresford 27
Mahpiya Lúta Red Cloud 79, St. Francis Indian 30
McIntosh High School 59, Dupree 31
Milbank 61, Madison 46
Miller 40, Faulkton 31
Mobridge-Pollock 70, Stanley County 21
New Underwood 42, Newell 27
North Central 58, Leola-Frederick High School 45
Northwestern 39, Redfield 33, OT
Oelrichs 70, Takini 10

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 33 of 77

Rapid City Central 55, Douglas 16
Rapid City Christian 54, Spearfish 38
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 59, James Valley Christian School 18
Sioux Falls Christian 62, Yankton 23
Sioux Falls O’Gorman 81, Harrisburg 29
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 53, Sioux Falls Lincoln 32
Sioux Falls Washington 51, Mitchell 41
Sioux Valley 73, Castlewood 49
Sisseton 55, Deuel 28
Sturgis Brown High School 38, Belle Fourche 23
Sully Buttes 46, Sunshine Bible Academy 30
T F Riggs High School 50, Brookings 49
Todd County 66, Little Wound 35
Viborg-Hurley 36, Scotland/Menno 29
Wagner 51, Gregory 16
Wakpala 52, McLaughlin 51
Wessington Springs 50, Kimball-White Lake 18
West Central 70, Canton 45
Winner 50, Platte-Geddes 29
Wolsey-Wessington 57, Warner 49

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

The American-made hemp shirt experiment

By MATT HUDSON/Montana Free Press Montana Free Press

In 2020, a northcentral Montana hemp crop was harvested, beginning a trial run by two Montana companies to produce clothing without the material ever leaving the United States.

When the shirt finally went to market last year, it was proof of a concept that had long since moved overseas.

Hemp is often held up as a versatile crop with all sorts of applications: fabrics, home insulation, even edible seed oils, to name a few. But it was illegal to grow or distribute hemp in the U.S. for nearly a century until 2018 when Congress lifted federal restrictions on the marijuana-adjacent plant. So, when a Fort Benton hemp processor and a Great Falls-based apparel company sought to make a line of U.S.-made hemp shirts, they had to scrap together a supply chain to make it happen.

“Honestly, it was just: Can we do it? Because it hadn’t happened in, arguably, 100 years,” Morgan Tweet, co-founder and CEO of IND Hemp, told Montana Free Press. “No one had grown (hemp) fiber and been able to process it to a quality that they were able to spin with in the U.S.”

IND Hemp was formed in 2018 and started producing hemp seed oils from regionally grown crops for various food applications. But hemp-based textiles, known for their sturdiness, were on the company’s radar, and after two years of planning, IND started up its fiber production line in 2022.

It was around that time that Great Falls-based apparel company Smith and Rogue approached IND with a proposal. The brand is an offshoot of the North 40 Outfitters chain of farm and outdoors supply stores, which is also based in Great Falls and has 12 stores across the northwestern United States.

Smith and Rogue already had hemp-based clothing lines, but those were produced internationally. Brandon Kishpaugh, apparel merchandiser at Smith and Rogue, was interested in the possibility of a clothing line that didn’t leave American borders.

“We saw there was a demand for a more durable, more sustainable, higher quality fiber,” Kishpaugh said. “And now it’s how do we get it sourced in the U.S.?”

It was a stroke of luck that a hemp fiber processor opened up less than an hour away in Fort Benton.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 34 of 77

But that was just one early step in a long manufacturing chain.

FROM PROHIBITION TO PRODUCTION

Despite being illegal for much of the 20th century, hemp is intertwined with American history. Grown by founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson, it was seen not only as a reliable crop but also a source of domestic pride amid boycotts of British goods during the American Revolution.

Hemp is a sibling of marijuana, although modern hemp has tiny levels of the psychoactive chemical that's sought in the recreational drug. But the two were the same in the eyes of Congress, which passed a prohibitive tax in 1937 that outlawed both plants. Aside from a brief U.S. government push for hemp-based rope, parachutes and water hoses during World War II, industrial hemp production shuttered in America for the rest of the century.

The Montana Legislature legalized the cultivation of industrial hemp in 2001, but it didn't spark a green rush. It wasn't until 2009 that the state issued its first industrial hemp license to a Bozeman medical marijuana business.

Like medical marijuana, hemp remained federally prohibited and languished in jurisdictional purgatory. Montana's hemp licenses included language that warned about the plant being federally illegal, and the DEA declined at first to recognize Montana's industrial hemp law. Another licensed hemp farmer near Helena saw her crops die in 2017 because she couldn't get access to federally controlled water.

Congress relaxed its stance in 2018 and lifted the restrictions on industrial hemp through that year's farm bill, and Montana farmers harvested 2,400 acres of hemp in 2024, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. That makes Montana a middling state for hemp production, beaten out by larger producers such as South Dakota, Texas and California.

The prohibition is gone (at least for now), but over the preceding decades, the institutional knowledge around hemp production largely disappeared in the United States. In addition, American textile manufacturing of all kinds witnessed precipitous declines around the turn of the century.

Sofi Thanhauser, author of the book "Worn: A People's History of Clothing," told MTFP that prolonged prohibition made it difficult for hemp to return to American clothing manufacturing. What was left of the industry centered mostly on cotton. Hemp was more like a niche material, sometimes more difficult to process, and U.S. companies weren't equipped to handle it.

"Over time, that infrastructure has disappeared," Thanhauser said. "And so it's really hard for companies who want to do supply chains in the U.S., because a lot of the time the equipment and expertise is not here."

IND's main fiber-processing equipment was manufactured in France, where a stable European hemp industry has existed. The Fort Benton plant is dedicated to a process called decortication, which separates the outer fiber material, called bast, from the hemp straw's woody core, called hurd. The machines are massive and can process five tons per hour.

After hemp cultivation became federally legal in 2018, Tweet said lots of people started growing the plant. Few were getting into fiber processing.

"We are still always optimizing our line," Tweet said. "But there's not a playbook. You can't really call up a company and say, 'We want to make hemp fiber for T-shirts' and they say, 'I've got you covered.'"

THE SHIRT

Smith and Rogue's test run for an American-manufactured line of clothing was limited — initially, 239 men's work shirts. Kishpaugh said he focused on a shirt for this experimental run because it was something his New York sewing contractors could work with.

"I wanted to go with something very heritage, very workwear," he said. "I knew our factory could execute."

The result was the Benton work shirt, a \$150 piece of clothing made from a blend of IND's Montana-grown hemp fibers and cotton grown in Arizona. The raw fibers traveled from Fort Benton and Arizona to North Carolina to be refined and blended. The material was then sent to another North Carolina company for spinning before heading to South Carolina for weaving. The fabric was finished in Georgia before being trucked to New York City for cutting and sewing.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 35 of 77

The difficult part wasn't finding the companies to work with, because there are few players in American textiles. The challenge was convincing some of the companies to fit a small run of hemp-based material into their schedules.

"We were able to piece this thing together, which made it very costly," Tweet said. "The fiber moved probably 10 more times than it had to, and freight is your biggest enemy in all these things."

More than 97% of clothing sold in the United States is made overseas. The efficiencies of overseas production lie in scale, labor costs and experience in making modern clothing. But there are many examples of exploitative or dangerous conditions for the workers who meet the demands of a quick-turn, affordable fashion industry.

While smaller operations are coming online in the United States, some parts of the process require highly specialized equipment that startups may not be able to afford.

"It's things like the spinning mill that turns the fiber into thread that is hugely capital-intensive and involves huge, complicated machines," author Thanhauser said. "And also the weaving, the spinning mills. You can't, as a small business, just buy a couple of those."

For the Benton shirt, nearly every step required a different company. That affected the cost of the final product, but it also cost time. When Kishpaugh received a prototype in the fall of 2024 that didn't fit right, fixing the issue meant going back through multiple hands to refine the shirt.

The Benton shirt may have debuted early in 2025, but a shipment of finished fabric went missing en route to New York City. The roll of textiles — one of the first domestic hemp fabric runs since prohibition that was painstakingly coordinated across multiple states — vanished and hasn't been found.

"So there's 600 yards of this historic fabric that's warehoused somewhere," Tweet said.

The process was once again delayed, but thankfully, there was enough additional fabric to resume production.

Smith and Rogue debuted the shirt in December, both online and in its affiliated retail stores, along with a marketing plan to showcase the effort put into it.

"You can't just put it on the rack," Kishpaugh said. "If you don't know what it is, it's just going to look like another button-up shirt. And then you look at the price tag."

The \$150 price reflects the costs of the USA manufacturing chain, Kishpaugh said, adding that Smith and Rogue's margin isn't as strong on this shirt as some of the company's other clothing made overseas. He said there is a segment of consumers who respond to marketing about a USA-made shirt, even at that price.

"That is hard for some people to come to grips with," he said. "This is \$150, and this is why. We have to pay for all those other touch points."

LINKS IN THE SUPPLY CHAIN

The hemp for the Benton shirt run was grown in 2020 at a Meissner family farm north of Fort Benton. The fiber material was part of a crop primarily meant for other products IND was producing at the time.

"What we probably didn't appreciate then that we most certainly do now is how much agronomic impacts and the variables that happen in the field affect the finished quality," Tweet said.

Those factors are numerous. The variety of hemp chosen, planting density, harvest timing, soil microbes and annual precipitation all influence the crop's suitability for textile production. There are some quality factors that Tweet can control at the Fort Benton processing plant. But if a bad crop comes in, that's what they have to work with.

It took years to refine that process to routinely receive higher-quality hemp fibers, Tweet said. The ability to use those early 2020 crops for a shirt that was released in late 2025 was a proof of concept. Today, IND has more consistent quality fibers for use in textiles.

"No one has at scale been able to decorticate and get fibers to a point that they can be spun," Tweet said. "Maybe it's a reach to make that claim, but I am hard pressed to find something else."

Plans for the second-generation Benton shirt are underway, Kishpaugh said. He hopes to scale up the process to produce larger quantities and a wider range of clothing, including outerwear and pants. He said the experience gained from producing the Benton shirt could help bring costs down a bit, but Kishpaugh

and Tweet said a hybrid model is also a good avenue for Montana hemp.

"We have good factories overseas that we work with," Kishpaugh said. "And if we can get the hemp to them, they're set up to do the bibs, jackets. Now we're just using American-sourced hemp versus overseas hemp."

The constraints of cost and scale still limit growth in domestic manufacturing.

"Will there always be these opportunities to promote a full domestic supply chain? Absolutely," Tweet said. "But they're never going to be able to serve the larger demand to get it into everyone's closet."

Envoys signal no breakthrough on bridging Russia and Ukraine's political and military differences

By JAMEY KEATEN and ILLIA NOVIKOV Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — The latest U.S.-brokered talks between Russian and Ukrainian envoys over Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine ended Wednesday with no sign of a breakthrough and with both sides saying the talks were "difficult" as the war's fourth anniversary approaches next week.

The negotiations in Switzerland were the third round of direct talks organized by the U.S., after meetings earlier this year in Abu Dhabi that officials described as constructive but which also yielded no major progress.

The head of the Russian delegation, Russian President Vladimir Putin's adviser Vladimir Medinsky, told reporters that the two days of talks in Geneva "were difficult but businesslike." He said another round of talks will be held "in the near future."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy also described the discussions as "difficult," and accused Russia of "trying to drag out negotiations that could already have reached the final stage."

U.S. President Donald Trump's envoy, Steve Witkoff, said on social media that Washington's push for peace in Ukraine over the past year has "brought about meaningful progress," without elaborating.

The two armies remain locked in battle on the roughly 1,250-kilometer (750-mile) front line, while Russia bombards civilian areas of Ukraine daily.

Hours after the first day of talks ended on Tuesday, Russian drones killed a woman and injured a 6-year-old girl and 18-month-old toddler in the southern Ukraine city of Zaporizhzhia, officials said.

Overnight, Russia launched one ballistic missile and 126 long-range drones at Ukraine, according to the Ukrainian air force.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that it's "too early" to speak about the outcome. Putin has been receiving reports about the talks' progress, he said.

The head of the Ukrainian delegation in Switzerland, Rustem Umerov, said that officials are trying to bridge their political and military differences.

"Consultations are taking place in working groups by areas within the political and military tracks," the head of the Ukrainian delegation, Rustem Umerov, wrote in English on X. "We are working on clarifying the parameters and mechanisms of the decisions discussed yesterday."

Zelenskyy said the delegations also were to discuss further exchanges of prisoners of war and the release of civilian prisoners.

He revealed that the Ukrainian and American envoys in Geneva met with representatives from the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland. Europe's participation in the process is "indispensable," Zelenskyy said.

European leaders, mindful of Putin's wider ambitions, say their own security is at stake in Ukraine and have insisted on being consulted in peace efforts.

Russia and Ukraine appear to still be far apart on their demands for a settlement.

Zelenskyy has offered a ceasefire and a face-to-face meeting with Putin. But Moscow wants a comprehensive agreement before committing to a truce.

Putin's key goals remain what he declared when Russia invaded its neighbor on Feb. 24, 2022: Ukraine must renounce joining NATO, sharply reduce the size of its army and protect Russian language and culture

to keep the country in Moscow's orbit.

Additionally, Putin wants Kyiv to withdraw its forces from the four regions Moscow has occupied but doesn't fully control.

Zelenskyy says Ukraine won't surrender land to Russia.

FBI, St. Paul police probing ICE arrest that resulted in skull fractures

By JIM MUSTIAN, MICHAEL BIESECKER and JACK BROOK Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Minnesota and federal authorities are investigating the alleged beating of a Mexican citizen by immigration officers last month, seeking to identify what caused the eight skull fractures that landed the man in the intensive care unit of a Minneapolis hospital.

Investigators from the St. Paul Police Department and FBI last week canvassed the shopping center parking lot where Alberto Castañeda Mondragón says Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents wrested him from a vehicle, threw him to the ground and repeatedly struck him in the head with a steel baton.

ICE has blamed Castañeda Mondragón for his own injuries, saying he attempted to flee while handcuffed and "fell and hit his head against a concrete wall."

But hospital staff who treated the man told The Associated Press such a fall could not plausibly account for the man's brain hemorrhaging and fragmented memory. A CT scan showed fractures to the front, back and both sides of his skull — injuries a doctor told the AP were inconsistent with a fall.

Earlier this month, the AP published an interview with Castañeda Mondragón in which he said the arresting officers had been "racist" and "started beating me right away when they arrested me." His lawyers have contended ICE racially profiled him.

In separate visits to the shopping center last week, local and federal investigators requested surveillance footage from at least two businesses, whose employees told the AP their cameras either did not capture the Jan. 8 arrest or the images had been overwritten because more than a month passed before law enforcement asked for the video.

Johnny Ratana, who owns Teepwo Market, an Asian grocery store that faces the parking lot where the arrest occurred, said St. Paul police twice sent investigators to the business in recent days. The second time, he said, a data technician sought to recover images automatically overwritten after 30 days.

Ratana said he also was visited by FBI agents interested in the same footage.

The St. Paul Police Department did not respond to requests for comment. The FBI declined to comment.

The investigations come amid another federal probe into whether two ICE officers lied under oath about a shooting in Minneapolis. Federal prosecutors dropped charges against two Venezuelan men — who had been accused of attacking one of the officers with a snow shovel and broom handle — after video evidence contradicted the officers' sworn testimony.

The FBI, meanwhile, notified Minnesota authorities last week it would not share any information or evidence it collected in the Jan. 24 fatal shooting of Alex Pretti by federal immigration officers. That killing is the subject of a Justice Department civil rights investigation.

For weeks, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security refused to discuss any aspect of Castañeda Mondragón's injuries. It has not answered detailed questions from the AP, including whether its officers recorded body-worn camera footage of the arrest.

Agency insists man injured himself

But the agency last week doubled down on its claim that Castañeda Mondragón injured himself.

"On January 8, 2026, ICE conducted a targeted enforcement operation to arrest Alberto Castaneda Mondragon, a 31-year-old illegal alien from Mexico who overstayed his visa," said Tricia McLaughlin, the department's assistant secretary for public affairs. "While in handcuffs, Castaneda attempted to escape custody and ran toward a main highway. While running, Castaneda fell and hit his head against a concrete wall."

McLaughlin's assertion that Castañeda Mondragón had been targeted for removal was contradicted by a Jan. 20 court filing in which ICE said officers only determined the man overstayed his work visa after he

was in custody. McLaughlin did not respond to questions about which account was correct.

Castañeda Mondragón's lawyers declined to comment on ICE's statement.

Delay could affect investigations

The criminal investigations could be complicated by the amount of time it took law enforcement to look into the arrest, even as several elected officials called for answers.

St. Paul police told the AP on Feb. 5 that it was aware of "the serious allegations" surrounding the arrest but that it could not begin investigating Castañeda Mondragón's injuries until he filed a police report — a step that was delayed weeks because of the man's hospitalization and uncertainty over his immigration status. Police finally took his statement a week ago at the Mexican consulate.

By that point, at least one nearby business had overwritten its surveillance footage.

"It is my expectation that we will investigate past and future allegations of criminal conduct by federal agents to seek the truth and hold accountable anyone who has violated Minnesota law," John Choi, the chief prosecutor of Ramsey County, said in a statement.

Castañeda Mondragón has been summoned to meet with ICE on Feb. 23 at its main detention facility in Minneapolis, raising the potential he could be taken back into custody and deported.

Tremors from the Epstein files rattle the age-old foundations of Britain's House of Lords

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Fallout from the Jeffrey Epstein files has landed on the gilded wood and plush red benches of Britain's House of Lords.

Parliament's upper chamber is in the spotlight after former U.K. ambassador to Washington Peter Mandelson was forced to resign as a member of the Lords because of his friendship with the late sex offender.

The episode has emboldened critics who say the unelected house is antiquated, undemocratic and far too slow at punishing bad behavior by its members. Supporters say the chamber of more than 850 members-for-life who sport the titles of "Lord" or "Lady" is an unwieldy but essential part of parliamentary democracy.

Almost everyone agrees it needs reform, but that task has eluded successive governments.

"It's a mess," said Jenny Jones, one of two Green Party members of the Lords. "In spite of our being supposedly a modern democracy, we have a semifeudal system."

Relic of the past

For most of its 700-year history, the House of Lords was composed of noblemen — not women — who inherited their seats, alongside a smattering of bishops. In the 1950s, these were joined by "life peers" — retired politicians, civic leaders and other notables appointed by the government, among them the first female members of the Lords.

In 1999, the Labour government of then-Prime Minister Tony Blair evicted most of the more than 750 hereditary peers, though to avoid an aristocrats' rebellion, 92 were allowed to remain temporarily.

A quarter century on, Prime Minister Keir Starmer's current Labour government finally introduced legislation to oust the remaining "hereditaries," calling them an indefensible relic of the past.

The lords have put up a fight, forcing a compromise that will see some hereditary members allowed to stay by being "recycled" into life peers.

"Hereditary peers actually work harder than average peers," said Charles Hay, the 16th Earl of Kinnoull, who leads the group of cross-bench, or non-party affiliated, peers in the Lords. "It means that you chuck out a lot of people who are actually being effective."

Most agree that the House of Lords plays an important role in reviewing legislation passed by the elected House of Commons. The lords can amend bills and send them back to lawmakers for another look. But when push comes to shove, the upper house is supposed to give way to the will of the elected chamber.

Critics say the upper chamber has sometimes overstepped the mark by blocking legislation, as with a current bill to legalize assisted dying. It was approved by the Commons but has become bogged down with hundreds of amendments in the Lords.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 39 of 77

Lords-a-misbehaving

Long gone are the days when out-of-favor lords could be imprisoned in the Tower of London or beheaded for treason.

Until recently there was little parliamentary authorities could do about peers who committed ethical breaches or crimes.

Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare, otherwise known as the thriller-writer Jeffrey Archer, was imprisoned for perjury in 2001, while Lord Black of Crossharbour — the media baron Conrad Black — served a U.S. prison sentence after a 2007 fraud conviction. Under the rules of the time, neither could be kicked out of the Lords.

Since then, the law has been changed to allow members to be expelled for breaching the Lords code of conduct, imprisonment or non-attendance. To this day, no one has been expelled for bad behavior, though a couple have quit before being kicked out, including one who committed sexual assault and another filmed allegedly snorting cocaine with sex workers.

Ex-peers get to keep their lordly titles and the cachet they bring. Mandelson — who in one message asked Epstein: "Need a Lord on the board?" — has lost his job and faces a police investigation for misconduct in public office. But he remains Lord Mandelson.

Also under pressure is Starmer's former chief of staff Matthew Doyle, now Lord Doyle, appointed to the House of Lords despite his friendship with a man later jailed for possessing indecent images of children.

Removing disgraced lords' titles would require new legislation, something that has not been done since 1917, when several lords were stripped of their titles for siding with Germany in World War I.

Slow pace of change

Labour remains committed to eventually replacing the House of Lords with an alternative second chamber that is "more representative of the U.K."

But change is slow. In December, the Lords set up a committee to look at introducing a retirement age of 80 and tightening up the participation requirement.

"Lords reform is glacial," said Meg Russell, a politics professor who heads the Constitution Unit at University College London. "Things are talked about for decades before they happen."

The fall of Mandelson, who was appointed to the Lords in 2008 by a previous Labour government, has renewed concern about the quality of members and the way they are selected. Anger among Labour lawmakers about Mandelson escalated into a crisis for Starmer that could yet end his leadership.

Russell says the Mandelson and Doyle controversies show the need to change the way Lords members are chosen. While crossbenchers are appointed by an independent committee, most life peerages are handed out by the prime minister, often to reward aides, allies and donors.

"There's really no proper quality check and there's no limit on numbers and it just looks so anachronistic," she said. "It's clear that there ought to be more rigorous processes to check people on the way in."

The Green Party that Jones represents wants to go further and abolish the Lords, replacing it with an elected upper house.

"We should call it the Senate or something and stop this ridiculous class-based nomenclature," said Jones, whose formal title is Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb. "I'd be happy to be called senator and not lady."

Paris prosecutors open 2 Epstein-linked probes and call on victims to come forward

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Paris prosecutors opened on Wednesday two new investigations into potential sex abuse crimes and financial wrongdoings linked to Jeffrey Epstein following the release of millions of files of the millionaire financier and convicted sex offender, and called on possible victims to come forward.

Paris prosecutor Laurence Beccuau said the investigations are seeking to use the files released by the U.S. administration, media reports and new complaints that are being filed.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 40 of 77

"All that data ... some will shed light on others to be able to get a well-informed, very broad, panoramic view," Beccuau said on France Info news broadcaster.

One investigation will focus on sex abuse crimes, the other on financial wrongdoing, each involving specialized magistrates, she added.

The move comes after the release by the U.S. Justice Department of more than 3 million pages of documents, as well as thousands of videos and photos related to Epstein, who died behind bars in 2019.

"These publications will inevitably reactivate the trauma of certain victims," she said. "We are convinced that some (victims) are not necessarily known to us, and that perhaps these publications will lead them to come forward."

She called on victims who may have never spoken up before to file formal complaints or make witness accounts to feed French and foreign investigations.

Beccuau also said some material from old investigations is to be revisited in the light of new revelations.

She was referring to the investigation into a French modeling agent, Jean-Luc Brunel, accused of rape and sex trafficking of minors.

The probe was closed in 2022 after he was found dead in his jail cell in Paris. Brunel, a frequent companion of Epstein, was considered central to the French investigation into alleged sexual exploitation of women and girls by Epstein and his circle.

Epstein traveled often to France and had apartments in Paris.

In France, the highest-profile figure impacted by the recent release of the Epstein files in France is former Culture Minister Jack Lang, 86, who stepped down earlier this month as head of the Arab World Institute in Paris over suspicions of tax fraud.

The financial prosecutors' office opened an investigation into Lang and his daughter Caroline Lang's alleged links to Jeffrey Epstein through an offshore company based in the U.S. Virgin Islands in the Caribbean Sea.

Former army chief seen as Zelenskyy's top rival reveals to AP a rift between them

By SAMYA KULLAB and SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Ever since he was ousted as the head of Ukraine's army in 2024 and appointed as the country's ambassador to Britain, Valerii Zaluzhnyi has widely been seen as the top political rival to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Zaluzhnyi, 52, refuses to discuss his political ambitions, saying he doesn't want to risk harming national unity during a war with Russia that is approaching its fourth anniversary. Yet in a sign of his possible desire to run for the presidency — after the war is over — Zaluzhnyi spoke publicly for the first time about a deep rift between himself and Zelenskyy in a recent interview with The Associated Press.

Tensions emerged soon after Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, and tempers often flared between the two men over how best to defend the country, Zaluzhnyi said. The strained relationship reached a boiling point later that year, when dozens of agents from Ukraine's domestic intelligence service raided Zaluzhnyi's office, he told the AP.

Zaluzhnyi alleges that the previously unreported incident was an act of intimidation. It risked exposing their rivalry at a time when national unity was paramount.

Zelenskyy's office and Ukraine's security service, known as the SBU, declined to comment for this story. The AP could not independently confirm Zaluzhnyi's account of the raid.

Even years later, the revelation threatens to polarize public opinion in Ukraine at a critical moment in the war. Russian forces are making slow, steady gains across Ukraine's eastern front, and both sides are clinging to incompatible demands as the U.S. presses them to reach a peace deal.

Zaluzhnyi said that during the 2022 raid on his office he called Zelenskyy's chief of staff warning him he was prepared to call in the military to stop it and protect the command center: "I will fight with you and have already called in reinforcements to the center of Kyiv for support."

While that near crisis early in the war passed, disagreements between Zaluzhnyi and Zelenskyy over how

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 41 of 77

to defend their country persisted, according to Zaluzhnyi, who said he often challenged the president's military strategy.

A dispute over a counteroffensive in 2023 that ultimately failed was particularly contentious, the former general said. Although Zaluzhnyi's popularity with the public had been cemented by several successes on the battlefield, Zelenskyy dismissed him as army chief in February 2024, and later announced he would be headed to London.

The move was widely seen by political analysts as an effort by Zelenskyy to limit Zaluzhnyi's potential as a political rival by distancing him from day-to-day affairs in Ukraine.

Polls consistently give Zaluzhnyi a slight lead over Zelenskyy in a hypothetical race. Zelenskyy's once-robust popularity has waned as the war drags on. A corruption scandal implicating several of Zelenskyy's top officials has eroded public trust, according to lawmakers and activists. Zelenskyy recently reshuffled his leadership team in an effort to restore confidence.

The U.S. has been ramping up pressure on Russia and Ukraine to end the war. While a deal remains elusive, Zelenskyy has agreed in principle to a plan laid out by U.S. President Donald Trump that calls for elections once the war is over and security guarantees are in place.

'I know how to fight'

One evening in mid-September 2022, as Ukraine was mounting an effective counteroffensive in the northeast, Zaluzhnyi, then army commander, emerged from a tense meeting at Zelenskyy's headquarters and headed back to his office in Kyiv.

Hours later, dozens of agents from Ukraine's security service showed up at Zaluzhnyi's office to search the premises, Zaluzhnyi said. Over a dozen British officers were there at the time, he said.

The Ukrainian agents did not say what they were looking for, according to Zaluzhnyi, who says he prevented them from rifling through documents and computers.

The raid was clearly a threat, Zaluzhnyi said. In the presence of the agents, he phoned Zelenskyy's chief of staff at the time, Andrii Yermak, and made a stark warning: "I told Yermak that I would repel this attack, because I know how to fight."

Zaluzhnyi then phoned the head of the security service at the time, Vasyl Maliuk, to ask what was happening. Maliuk said he knew nothing about the raid and promised to look into it, according to Zaluzhnyi.

Later, he learned that Maliuk's agency had sought a search warrant from a district court in Kyiv two days earlier to inspect that same address. The agency was seeking to search a strip club allegedly run by a criminal organization, according to a court document obtained by AP.

But the strip club named in the filing had been closed at that location since before Russia's full-scale invasion, two employees who work at the club's new location told the AP.

Zaluzhnyi believes the search warrant was a pretext and that the agency could not plausibly have mistaken the location of the country's main war command center.

Diluted striking force

The 2023 counteroffensive drew widespread criticism from military experts for being too ambitious and coming too late, giving Russian forces time to fortify positions.

Zaluzhnyi says the plan he had crafted with help from NATO partners failed because Zelenskyy and other officials wouldn't commit the resources it required.

The original plan was to concentrate enough forces into a "single fist" to retake the partially occupied region of Zaporizhzhia — home to a vital nuclear power plant — and then have them advance south to the Sea of Azov. This would sever a corridor of land the Russian army had been using to resupply Crimea, which it illegally annexed in 2014. Success required a large, concentrated buildup and tactical surprise, Zaluzhnyi said.

What happened instead, he said, was that forces were dispersed over a wide area, diluting their striking power.

His account of how the counteroffensive diverged from the original plan was corroborated by two Western defense officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because they aren't authorized to speak publicly

to the media.

A diplomat with political intentions?

Zaluzhnyi's office at the Ukrainian Embassy in London reflects his years as a general. The walls are adorned with posters of military aircraft, army medals he was awarded and children's drawings of battle scenes. There are toy drones on a mahogany table.

Behind his desk, screens show real-time feeds from drones flying over the battlefield of eastern Ukraine.

Zaluzhnyi's key criticisms of Ukraine's war strategy are that it depends on an unrealistic number of troops and is not organized well in how it develops and deploys new technologies to the battlefield. He watches developments closely, but says he has not been involved with military decision-making since Zelenskyy pushed him out. Zaluzhnyi said he and Zelenskyy had "absolutely friendly" conversations on the two occasions they met since then.

Some analysts say Zaluzhnyi's lack of involvement in Ukraine's day-to-day political affairs could weaken his popularity.

Still, an Ipsos poll published last month showed support for Zaluzhnyi in a hypothetical future election at 23%, compared with Zelenskyy's 20%, making him the president's top competitor.

Many Ukrainians see him as a figure capable of changing the system, said Volodymyr Fesenko, a political analyst based in Kyiv. "People will vote not only for Zaluzhnyi but also against Zelenskyy — blaming him for the failures of his presidency," he explained.

Zaluzhnyi avoids discussing politics, he says, for fear of fomenting division among Ukrainians. "Until the war is over or martial law ends, I am not discussing this and have done nothing toward that," he said.

Despite his reticence, a number of campaign consultants, party figures and political insiders continue to approach Zaluzhnyi and offer to help craft a campaign.

Zaluzhnyi said a "fairly well known" American political consultant approached him in the spring of 2025. An official close to Zaluzhnyi, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly, told AP it was Paul Manafort, who served as chairman of Trump's 2016 presidential campaign before he was convicted in 2018 of crimes that included secretly lobbying for Ukraine's former pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich.

"I thanked him for paying attention to me, but said that I did not need his services," Zaluzhnyi said.

Manafort, who was pardoned by Trump at the end of his first term, did not respond to calls and messages from the AP.

World shares, US futures gain as most Asian markets stay closed for Lunar New Year holidays

By ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writer

Shares in Europe and Asia were higher on Wednesday, with Japan's benchmark gaining more than 1% after a quiet finish for U.S. stocks.

Germany's DAX rose 0.6% to 25,137.90, while the CAC 40 in Paris edged 0.2% higher to 8,379.68. Britain's FTSE 100 added 0.6% to 10,622.73.

The futures for the S&P 500 and the Dow Jones Industrial Average were up 0.5%.

Most markets in Asia stayed closed for Lunar New Year holidays.

In Tokyo, the Nikkei 225 added 1% to 57,143.84 as Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi was reappointed by the parliament following a landslide victory for her ruling Liberal Democrats in a Feb. 8 election.

Technology companies led the advance, with computer chipmaker Tokyo Electron gaining 2.9%.

Japan reported its exports jumped nearly 17% in January from a year earlier. The jump was partly driven by seasonal factors, but the AI boom also boosted shipments of computer chips and other components.

Shares in technology and energy giant SoftBank Group fell 2.8%, extending a more than 5% loss on Tuesday, after the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump announced that its subsidiary SB Energy will participate in a \$33 billion natural gas facility, said to be the world's largest, near Portsmouth, Ohio.

That agreement is part of Japan's commitment of \$550 billion in U.S. investments as part of a trade deal

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 43 of 77

that raised tariffs on Japanese exports to the United States by 15%.

In Australia, the S&P/ASX 200 closed 0.5% higher at 9,007.00, while India's Sensex was flat. In Bangkok, the SET advanced 0.6%.

On Tuesday, U.S. stocks flipped between gains and losses.

The S&P 500 rose 0.1% and the Dow added 0.1%. The Nasdaq composite gained 0.1%.

Paramount Skydance helped lead the market, gaining 4.9% after Warner Bros. Discovery said it would allow Paramount a chance to give its "best and final" bid to buy the entertainment company. Paramount is trying to top an offer from Netflix.

Warner Bros. Discovery rose 2.7%, and Netflix added 0.2%.

On the losing end of Wall Street was General Mills, which sank 7% after the company behind Cheerios and Pillsbury warned that its customers are feeling uneasy.

Several surveys have recently shown weakening confidence among U.S. households as they struggle with inflation that remains higher than anyone would like, a lackluster job market and worries about tariffs.

Drops for some Big Tech stocks were the heaviest weights on the market Tuesday, including a 1.2% fall for Alphabet.

The moves were tentative, though, and Nvidia swung between being one of the market's heaviest weights and one of its biggest strengths.

Stocks of software and other companies have tumbled as investors hunted for companies that could be potential losers if AI ends up remaking the world and their industries.

The market has seen a sharp turnaround from last year, when the promise of AI helped drive U.S. stock indexes to record after record. Now, companies in industries as varied as software and legal services and trucking have seen investors suddenly turn against them when worries flare that AI-powered competitors could steal their customers.

The companies spending big on AI are feeling their own pressure, too.

"So we have a market that simultaneously believes AI will destroy everything and, at times, deliver nothing. That tension is why single stocks are being whipsawed like penny names even though we are talking about trillion-dollar balance sheets," Stephen Innes of SPI Asset Management said in a commentary.

A survey of global fund managers by Bank of America found a record percentage is saying that companies are "overinvesting." That could mean an eventual pullback in spending on chips from Nvidia and other companies.

In other dealings early Wednesday, U.S. benchmark crude oil added 14 cents to \$62.47 per barrel. Brent crude, the international standard, picked up 15 cents to \$67.57 per barrel.

The U.S. dollar bought 153.73 Japanese yen, up from 153.29 yen. The euro slipped to \$1.1836 from \$1.1854.

The price of gold rose 0.6%, while the price of silver was up 3%.

Bitcoin's price was flat at about \$68,200.

Gisèle Pelicot's memoir launches in 22 languages, turning horror into hope for survivors

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Gisèle Pelicot's memoir was released on Tuesday in 22 languages worldwide, sharing details of the horror she went through and sending a powerful message of hope and support to victims of sexual abuse.

"I wanted my story to help others," Pelicot told French national channel France 5 last week ahead of the release of her book, "A Hymn to Life, Shame has to Change Sides."

Pelicot recounted her story of survival in the book and in her first series of interviews since the landmark 2024 trial that turned her into a global icon against sexual violence and imprisoned her husband, who drugged her so other men could assault her.

"Today I'm doing better, and this book allowed me to engage in self-reflection, to take stock of my life," she said. "I had to try to rebuild myself on this field of ruins. Today I am a woman standing strong."

Pelicot said her book is meant to deliver "a message of hope to all the women who are going through a very complicated period in their lives."

The shocking case — and Pelicot's decision to waive her anonymity and speak publicly — prompted a reckoning over rape culture in France and beyond, as her dignity and strength impressed many across the world.

Gymnastic superstar and Olympic gold medalist Simone Biles, herself a survivor of sexual abuse, paid tribute to Pelicot in a message broadcast by the BBC.

"Gisèle has demonstrated to the world that it's not for victims of sexual abuse to feel shame — it's the perpetrators," Biles said. "By waiving her anonymity and refusing to feel shame, Gisèle paves the way for other victims to come forward."

At the "Des Femmes" ("Women's") bookstore in Paris, several readers were eager to buy Pelicot's book on the day of its release.

"I want to read it," said Cécile Megueulle, who admires Pelicot. "But I tell myself that reading it will be ... actually a little scary. The fact of not being in her shoes but being able to see the other side of the mirror, how she experienced it and how she managed — I don't know if we can say that — to get through it."

Selma Memic, a lawyer from Geneva, Switzerland, said: "The case was known as the 'Pelicot case' ... and now we're going to hear about 'Gisèle'. So, that's maybe what I'm looking for. Who is Gisèle? What are her feelings? How does she look back at it (the trial)?"

In December 2024, Pelicot's ex-husband, Dominique Pelicot, and 50 other men were convicted of sexually assaulting her between 2011 and 2020 while she was under chemical submission. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison, while the other defendants received sentences ranging from three to 15 years.

An appeals court later increased the sentence handed to Husamettin Dogan, a construction worker who was the only defendant who challenged his conviction.

Dominique Pelicot, whom Gisèle Pelicot had been married to for nearly 50 years, acknowledged that for years he mixed sedatives into her food and drink so he could rape her and invite other men to do the same.

The unprecedented trial exposed how online pornography, chat rooms and distorted notions of consent can fuel sexual violence.

France passed a law last October that defines rape and other sexual assault as any non-consensual sexual act in the wake of the Pelicot case, joining many other European nations that have similar consent-based laws, including neighboring Germany, Belgium and Spain. Until then, rape under French law was defined as penetration or oral sex using "violence, coercion, threat or surprise."

Somalia renews its US-backed fight against al-Shabab militant group. Here is why it matters

By OMAR FARUK Associated Press

MOGADISHU, Somalia (AP) — U.S.-backed airstrikes and recently expanded ground operations have shifted momentum in Somalia's long-running war against al-Qaida-linked al-Shabab militant group, the government says, touting successes in the fight such as efforts to reclaim territory from the extremists and the targeting of the group's leadership and bomb-making network.

The turn comes at a pivotal moment: African Union peacekeeping forces are gradually drawing down and Somalia is assuming greater responsibility for its own security, nearly two decades after al-Shabab emerged as a dominant insurgent force.

Here is a look at what has changed and what remains uncertain in the conflict.

How Somalia got here

Al-Shabab emerged in the mid-2000s as the armed wing of the now outlawed Islamic Courts Union coalition before aligning itself with al-Qaida. At its peak, it controlled much of southern and central Somalia,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 45 of 77

including parts of Mogadishu, the country's capital.

African Union troops pushed al-Shabab out of Mogadishu in 2011, but the group adapted, reverting to guerrilla warfare, suicide bombings, and targeted assassinations. It continues to raise millions of dollars annually through taxation and extortion, according to U.N. monitors.

The United States has carried out airstrikes in Somalia for more than a decade. In 2020, during his first term in office, President Donald Trump ordered most U.S. troops withdrawn. In 2022, President Joe Biden approved the redeployment of U.S. forces to Somalia, restoring a more sustained advisory and counter-terrorism presence.

Retaking territory from al-Shabab

Authorities say Somali troops have retaken areas in the regions of Lower Shabelle, Hiiraan, Middle Shabelle and parts of Jubbaland that had been under the militants' control for years.

Omar Ali Abdi, Somalia's state minister for defense, told The Associated Press that locations in Lower Shabelle, including Jilib Marka, Gendershe, and Dhanaane, which had long served as al-Shabab strongholds, are now in military hands.

The minister also cited gains in the central Hiiraan region, including Taydaan and Yasooman, and operations near Masjid Ali Gaduud in Middle Shabelle. In the Kudhaa area of Jubbaland, he said joint operations involving regional Darawiish forces and Somalia's U.S.-trained Danab special forces have killed dozens of militants and seized vehicles.

Al-Shabab has not confirmed the reported losses. Access to many contested areas is restricted, making independent verification difficult.

The role played by the US

The U.S. carries out airstrikes across areas under U.S. Africa Command, or AFRICOM, targeting al-Shabab leaders, training sites and weapons facilities in coordination with Somalia's federal government.

Abdi, the state minister, said recent air operations destroyed facilities used to manufacture improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, and neutralized explosive-laden vehicles before they could be deployed. He said Somali intelligence services provide verified targeting information.

AFRICOM says it conducts precision strikes and assesses the risk of civilian harm before carrying them out. In past years, U.S. strikes in Somalia have drawn criticism from rights groups over civilian casualties. AFRICOM has acknowledged some cases and says it investigates allegations.

How airpower has changed the battlefield

Mogadishu-based security analyst Abdullahi Ahmed Ali said the expansion of aerial surveillance and strike capability altered what had previously been a more evenly matched fight.

In earlier phases, he said, both government forces and al-Shabab possessed similar types of ground weapons. What the government lacked was sustained airpower and persistent surveillance.

Expanded drone coverage has allowed forces to identify al-Shabab's underground hideouts and supply routes that were previously difficult to reach, he said. Once these locations were targeted from the air, it was easier for the government troops to advance into those areas.

Somali officials say drones now provide early warning of militant movements near Mogadishu, where al-Shabab continues to carry out bombings despite tightened security.

The timing of the renewed offensive is also significant as it coincides with the transition from African Union troops — known as the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia — that are gradually reducing their footprint in the country as Somali forces assume greater control.

Analysts say that makes air support and intelligence coordination with international partners more critical.

At the same time, Somalia faces overlapping pressures, including climate-related drought, political tensions between federal and regional authorities, and funding shortfalls affecting security and humanitarian operations.

Some security experts caution that territorial gains from al-Shabab must be consolidated through governance and services. In previous offensives, al-Shabab managed to move back into areas after government forces withdrew or failed to maintain a presence.

Next steps in a tough fight

Somali authorities say thousands of al-Shabab fighters have been killed since the campaign intensified, including dozens in recent operations in the coastal town of Kudhaa and elsewhere. Those figures could not be independently verified.

Experts warn that territorial control in Somalia remains fluid, particularly in rural regions. While government forces appear to have expanded their presence in several areas, al-Shabab is still able to reach vast parts of central and southern Somalia.

Somali officials say operations will continue in coordination with international partners, combining ground offensives, intelligence gathering, and reconstruction efforts in retaken towns.

According to Abdi, the government plans to rebuild homes and deliver aid in newly captured areas to prevent al-Shabab from reestablishing control. Still, despite the reported government gains, al-Shabab remains one of Africa's most resilient militant groups and a top threat.

That means it will now be up to the government to translate gains on the ground into lasting stability. And that will depend on Somalia's ability to secure and govern territory as international peacekeeping forces scale back their role.

Takaichi reelected as Japan's prime minister with a goal of pushing to the right

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi was reappointed Wednesday by Parliament to form her second Cabinet, following last week's landslide election win that she hopes will allow a hard-right move to the country's policies. All previous ministers are expected to be retained.

Takaichi will look to use the symbolism of the day, seen as a formality, to further boost her ruling Liberal Democratic Party as it looks to capitalize on a two-thirds supermajority in the lower house, the more powerful of Japan's two parliamentary chambers.

Her goals include an increase in military power, more government spending and strengthened conservative social policies.

The power of a supermajority

Having two-thirds control of the 465-seat lower house allows Takaichi's party to dominate top posts in house committees and push through bills rejected by the upper house, the chamber where the LDP-led ruling coalition lacks a majority.

Takaichi wants to bolster Japan's military capability and arms sales, tighten immigration policies, push male-only imperial succession rules and preserve a criticized tradition that pressures women into abandoning their surnames.

Her ambition to revise the U.S.-drafted postwar pacifist Constitution might have to wait, for now, as she is facing pressure to deal with rising prices, a declining population and worries about military security.

Addressing rising prices

Her first urgent task is to address rising prices and sluggish wages and pass a budget bill to fund those measures, delayed by the election.

Takaichi proposes a two-year sales tax cut on food products to ease household living costs.

Experts caution that her liberal fiscal policy could drive up prices and delay progress on trimming Japan's huge national debt.

Courting Trump

Takaichi is maneuvering for a crucial summit next month with U.S. President Donald Trump, who will visit Beijing in April.

The U.S. president endorsed Takaichi ahead of the Japanese election, and hours before Takaichi's reappointment as prime minister, U.S. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick announced Japan will provide capital for three projects under a \$550 billion investment package that Japan pledged in October.

Japan is committed to the \$36 billion first batch of projects — a natural gas plant in Ohio, a U.S. Gulf Coast crude oil export facility and a synthetic diamond manufacturing site.

Japan is also under pressure to increase annual defense spending.

"Japan will keep spending more and more for the U.S. ... The question is whether the public wants her to speak out against Trump or be obedient to ensure Japanese security," said Masato Kamikubo, a Ritsumeikan University professor of policy science. "For China, it's simple. Japanese people want her to be tough."

A hawk on China

Takaichi in November suggested possible Japanese action if China makes a military move against Taiwan, the self-governing island that Beijing claims as its own. That has led to Beijing's diplomatic and economic reprisals.

Many Japanese, frustrated by China's growing assertiveness, welcomed her comments on Taiwan.

Emboldened by the big election win, Takaichi could take a more hawkish stance with China, experts say.

Takaichi, soon after the election, said she is working to gain support for a visit to Tokyo's controversial Yasukuni Shrine. Visits to the shrine are seen by Japan's neighbors as evidence of a lack of remorse for Japan's wartime past.

A stronger military that spends more and sells more

Takaichi has pledged to revise security and defense policies by December to bolster Japan's military capabilities, lifting a ban on lethal weapons exports and moving further away from postwar pacifist principles. Japan is also considering the development of a nuclear-powered submarine to increase offensive capabilities.

Takaichi wants to improve intelligence-gathering and establish a national agency to work more closely with ally Washington and defense partners like Australia and Britain.

She supports a controversial anti-espionage law that largely targets Chinese spies. Some experts say it could undermine Japanese civil rights.

Stricter on immigration and foreigners

Takaichi has proposed tougher policies on immigration and foreigners, something that resonates with a growing frustration in Japan.

Her government in January approved tougher rules on permanent residency and naturalization as well as measures to prevent unpaid tax and social insurance.

Promoting traditional family values

Takaichi supports the imperial family's male-only succession and opposes same-sex marriage.

She is also against a revision to the 19th-century civil law that would allow separate surnames for married couples so that women don't get pressured into abandoning theirs.

In a step that rights activists call an attempt to block a dual-surname system, Takaichi is calling for a law to allow the greater use of maiden names as aliases instead.

Rescuers push through winter storm to 6 survivors of a California avalanche. 9 others are missing

By OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Crews pushed through mountainous wilderness near Lake Tahoe during a snowstorm to rescue six backcountry skiers who survived an avalanche but were trapped by its snow and ice. Nine others from their tour group remained missing.

Two of the six were taken to a hospital for treatment, said Ashley Quadros, a spokesperson for the Nevada County Sheriff's Office.

The sheriff's office said Tuesday night that there were 15 skiers on the trip — not 16 as initially believed.

Search and rescue crews were dispatched to Frog Lake in the Castle Peak area, northwest of Lake Tahoe, after a 911 call reporting an avalanche and people buried. A powerful winter storm was moving through California at the time.

Extreme conditions in the Northern California mountains slowed the rescue effort. It took crews several hours to reach the skiers and take them to safety, where they were evaluated by the Truckee Fire Department.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 48 of 77

The sheriff's office said it would provide another update on rescue efforts at a news conference Wednesday morning.

A three-day ski trip

The skiers were on the last day of a three-day backcountry skiing trek, said Steve Reynaud, a Tahoe National Forest avalanche forecaster with the Sierra Avalanche Center, which had contact with people on the ground in the area. He said the skiers spent two nights at huts on a trip that required navigating "rugged mountainous terrain" for up to 4 miles (6.4 kilometers) while bringing along all food and supplies.

Nevada County Sheriff Capt. Russell Greene said authorities were notified about the avalanche by the ski tour company that led the expedition, Blackbird Mountain Guides, and by emergency beacons the skiers were carrying. Rescuers made their way cautiously toward the scene of the avalanche because of the danger of more avalanches.

Blackbird Mountain Guides said in a statement on its website that it was coordinating with authorities on the rescue operation.

Dangerous backcountry conditions

California is being walloped this week by a powerful winter storm bringing treacherous thunderstorms, high winds and heavy snow in mountain areas.

"It's particularly dangerous in the backcountry right now just because we're at the height of the storm," said Brandon Schwartz, Tahoe National Forest lead avalanche forecaster at the Sierra Avalanche Center, based in Truckee.

The center issued an avalanche warning for the area in the Central Sierra Nevada, including the Greater Lake Tahoe region, starting at 5 a.m. Tuesday with large slides expected into Wednesday.

The town of Soda Springs, near where the avalanche took place, recorded at least 30 inches (76 centimeters) of snow during a 24-hour period, according to the Soda Springs Mountain Resort.

The dangerous conditions were caused by rapidly accumulating snow piling on fragile snowpack layers coupled with gale-force winds.

The storm wreaked havoc on roads from the Sierra Nevada to Sonoma County. Traffic was halted temporarily in both directions on I-80 over and around Donner Summit due to spinouts and crashes, the authorities reported.

Several Tahoe ski resorts were fully or partially closed due to the weather. Resorts along highways have avalanche mitigation programs and were not expected to be at as high of a risk as the backcountry, where travel in, near or below avalanche terrain was strongly discouraged, the center said.

Area has dark history

Castle Peak, a 9,110-foot (2,777-meter) mountain north of Donner Summit, is a popular backcountry skiing destination. The summit, which can be perilous in snow, is named for the infamous Donner Party, a group of pioneers who resorted to cannibalism after getting trapped there in the winter of 1846-1847.

In January an avalanche in the region buried a snowmobiler in snow and killed him, authorities said. Each winter, 25 to 30 people die in avalanches in the U.S., according to the National Avalanche Center.

Training in avalanche assessment and rescue and safety equipment is highly recommended for backcountry skiing, also known as off-piste skiing, involves venturing deep into the wilderness far outside the confines of a resort. Backcountry skis are wider and heavier and have other features to handle going up and down ungroomed terrain, unlike cross-country skis, which are narrower and designed for flat, more groomed trails.

New Orleans celebrates Mardi Gras, the indulgent conclusion of Carnival season

By SARA CLINE Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — People leaned out of wrought iron balconies, hollering the iconic phrase "Throw me something, Mister" as a massive Mardi Gras parade rolled down New Orleans' historic St. Charles Avenue on Tuesday.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 49 of 77

Mardi Gras, also known as Fat Tuesday, marks the climax and end of the weeklong Carnival season and a final chance for indulgence, feasting and revelry before the Christian Lent period of sacrifice and reflection. The joyous goodbye to Carnival always falls the day before Ash Wednesday.

In Louisiana's most populous city, which is world-famous for its Mardi Gras bash, people donned green, gold and purple outfits, with some opting for an abundance of sequins and others showing off homemade costumes.

The revelers began lining the streets as the sun rose. They set up chairs, coolers, grills and ladders — offering a higher vantage point.

As marching bands and floats filled with women wearing massive feathered headdresses passed by, the music echoing through the city streets, people danced and cheered. Others sipped drinks, with many opting for adult concoctions on the day of celebration rather than the usual morning coffee.

Each parade has its signature "throws" — trinkets that include plastic beads, candy, doubloons, stuffed animals, cups and toys. Hand-decorated coconuts are the coveted item from Zulu, a massive parade named after the largest ethnic group in South Africa.

As a man, dressed like a crawfish — including red fabric claws for hands — caught one of the coconuts, he waved it around, the gold glitter on the husk glistening in the sun.

Sue Mennino was dressed in a white Egyptian-inspired costume, complete with a gold headpiece and translucent cape. Her face was embellished with glitter and electric blue eyeshadow.

"The world will be here tomorrow, but today is a day off and a time to party," Mennino said.

The party isn't solely confined to the parade route. Throughout the French Quarter, people celebrated in the streets, on balconies and on the front porches of shotgun-style homes.

One impromptu parade was led by a man playing a washboard instrument and dressed as a blue alligator — his paper-mache tail dragging along the street, unintentionally sweeping up stray beads with it. A brass band played "The Saints" as people danced.

In Jackson Square, the costumed masses included a man painted from head to toe as a zebra, a group cosplaying as Hungry Hungry Hippos from the tabletop game and a diver wearing an antique brass and copper helmet.

"The people are the best part," said Martha Archer, who was dressed as Madame Leota, the disembodied medium whose head appears within a crystal ball in the Haunted Mansion attraction at Disney amusement parks.

Archer's face was painted blue and her outfit was a makeshift table that came up to her neck — giving the appearance that she was indeed a floating head.

"Everybody is just so happy," she explained.

The good times will roll not just in New Orleans but across the state, from exclusive balls to the Cajun French tradition of the Courir de Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday Run — a rural event in Central Louisiana featuring costumed participants performing, begging for ingredients and chasing live chickens to be cooked in a communal gumbo.

Parades are also held in other Gulf Coast cities such as Mobile, Alabama, and Pensacola, Florida, and there are other world-renowned celebrations in Brazil and Europe.

One of the quirkiest is an international Pancake Day competition pitting the women of Liberal, Kansas, against the women of Olney, England. Pancakes are used because they were thought to be a good way for Christians to consume the fat they were supposed to give up during the 40 days before Easter.

Contestants must carry a pancake in a frying pan and flip the pancake at the beginning and end of the 415-yard (380-meter) race.

Mark Zuckerberg set to testify in watershed social media trial

By KAITLYN HUAMANI and BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writers

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Mark Zuckerberg will testify in an unprecedented social media trial that questions whether Meta's platforms deliberately addict and harm children.

Meta's CEO is expected to answer tough questions on Wednesday from attorneys representing a now

20-year-old woman identified by the initials KGM, who claims her early use of social media addicted her to the technology and exacerbated depression and suicidal thoughts. Meta Platforms and Google's YouTube are the two remaining defendants in the case, which TikTok and Snap have settled.

Zuckerberg has testified in other trials and answered questions from Congress about youth safety on Meta's platforms, and he apologized to families at that hearing whose lives had been upended by tragedies they believed were because of social media. This trial, though, marks the first time Zuckerberg will answer similar questions in front of a jury. and, again, bereaved parents are expected to be in the limited courtroom seats available to the public.

The case, along with two others, has been selected as a bellwether trial, meaning its outcome could impact how thousands of similar lawsuits against social media companies would play out.

A Meta spokesperson said the company strongly disagrees with the allegations in the lawsuit and said they are "confident the evidence will show our longstanding commitment to supporting young people."

One of Meta's attorneys, Paul Schmidt, said in his opening statement that the company is not disputing that KGM experienced mental health struggles, but rather that Instagram played a substantial factor in those struggles. He pointed to medical records that showed a turbulent home life, and both he and an attorney representing YouTube argue she turned to their platforms as a coping mechanism or a means of escaping her mental health struggles.

Zuckerberg's testimony comes a week after that of Adam Mosseri, the head of Meta's Instagram, who said in the courtroom that he disagrees with the idea that people can be clinically addicted to social media platforms. Mosseri maintained that Instagram works hard to protect young people using the service, and said it's "not good for the company, over the long run, to make decisions that profit for us but are poor for people's well-being."

Much of Mosseri's questioning from the plaintiff's lawyer, Mark Lanier, centered on cosmetic filters on Instagram that changed people's appearance — a topic that Lanier is sure to revisit with Zuckerberg. He is also expected to face questions about Instagram's algorithm, the infinite nature of Meta's feeds and other features the plaintiffs argue are designed to get users hooked.

Meta is also facing a separate trial in New Mexico that began last week.

Japan's exports surge 17% in January, on strong shipments to China and other Asian markets

By YURI KAGEYAMA AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Japan's exports surged nearly 17% in January from a year earlier, lifted by seasonal factors and strong demand in China and other Asian markets.

Imports slipped 2.5% from the same month a year earlier to 10.3 trillion yen (\$67 billion), while exports climbed 16.8% to 9.19 trillion yen (\$59.8 billion), the Finance Ministry reported Wednesday.

That left a deficit of 1.15 trillion yen (\$7.5 billion), less than half the trade deficit recorded a year earlier. Analysts noted that a key reason for the big jump early in the year was because the Lunar New Year occurs later than usual, falling on February 17.

Japan's economy depends heavily on exports and dramatic increases in tariffs by U.S. President Donald Trump have taken a toll.

The economy expanded at an anemic 0.2% annual pace in the last quarter, with growth for 2025 at just 1.1% as weaker exports offset a modest increase in private consumption.

Exports to the U.S. fell 0.5% in January, the latest data showed, while imports from the U.S. rose 3%. Exports to the U.S. of vehicles, which account for about a third of the total, fell nearly 10%.

Despite antagonisms with Beijing over comments by Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi about Taiwan, Japan's exports to China jumped 32% year-on-year in January. Exports to all of Asia were robust, surging 26%, the data show.

Imports of semiconductors and other computer components showed the fastest growth, likely reflecting

the impact of the boom in artificial intelligence, which has supercharged demand for data center equipment and computer chips.

"But the currently strong tailwind from the US AI boom is unlikely to last, suggesting that gains in exports to Asia excluding China will moderate," Norihiro Yamaguchi of Oxford Economics said in a commentary.

He said exports were "highly likely to moderate next month."

Rescuers race to save 6 skiers trapped by California avalanche that's left 10 more missing

By OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Rescue crews on skis and snowcats battled blizzard conditions in an effort to reach six backcountry skiers still alive but trapped Tuesday after an avalanche high in the rugged Northern California mountains that left 10 other skiers missing as the danger of more slides remained high.

The search and rescue crews were dispatched to Frog Lake in the Castle Peak area, northwest of Lake Tahoe, after someone called 911 at about 11:30 a.m. to report an avalanche with people buried as a powerful winter storm moved through the state.

Hours later, Ashley Quadros, a spokesperson with the Nevada County Sheriff's Office, said six skiers had been located and were asked to shelter in place "as best they can" until they can be reached.

The group was on the last day of a three-day backcountry skiing trip, said Steve Reynaud, a Tahoe National Forest avalanche forecaster with the Sierra Avalanche Center. Reynaud said his group has had contact with people on the ground in the area. He said the skiers had spent two nights at huts on a trip that required navigating "rugged mountainous terrain" on backcountry skis for up to 4 miles (6.4 kilometers) and bringing along all food and supplies.

Nevada County Sheriff Capt. Russell Greene said authorities were notified about the avalanche by the ski tour company that took the group to Castle Peak and by emergency beacons the skiers were carrying.

The skiers are in communication with officials through their emergency beacons, which can send texts, Greene told KCRA-TV.

"They are doing the best they can. They have taken refuge in an area, they have made up a makeshift shelter with a tarp and are doing everything they can to survive and wait for rescue," Greene told the television station.

He said rescue teams are making their way to the group cautiously because the danger of triggering more avalanches remains high.

"We have brought in snowcats. We have snowmobiles on standby. We have individuals on skis. We have several different ways that people are attempting to get there," he said. "It's just going to be a slow, tedious process."

Backcountry conditions are dangerous

The company leading the trip, Blackbird Mountain Guides, said in a statement on its website that it was coordinating with authorities on the rescue operation. It said 12 clients and four guides were in the group.

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"It's particularly dangerous in the backcountry right now just because we're at the height of the storm," said Brandon Schwartz, Tahoe National Forest lead avalanche forecaster at the Sierra Avalanche Center based in Truckee.

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Area has dark history

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In the nearby town of Soda Springs, at least 30 inches (76 centimeters) of snow had fallen in the last 24 hours, according to the Soda Springs Mountain Resort.

Forecasters said the western slope of the Sierra Nevada in northern Shasta County — including portions of Interstate 5 — and parts of the state's Pacific Coast Range could see up to 8 feet (2.4 meters) of snow before the storm moves through late Wednesday.

The storm wreaked havoc on roadways spanning from Sonoma County to the Sierra Nevada. Traffic was halted temporarily in both directions on I-80 near the Nevada state line due to spinouts and crashes, the California Department of Transportation reported.

In January, an avalanche in the region buried a snowmobiler in snow and killed him, authorities said. Each winter, 25 to 30 people die in avalanches in the U.S., according to the National Avalanche Center.

Billionaire Les Wexner to be deposed in congressional probe of Epstein files

By JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Les Wexner's long-time friendship with Jeffrey Epstein will be the subject of a closed-door congressional deposition in Ohio on Wednesday, where the billionaire retail magnate is expected to face questions about new revelations contained in the latest release of Justice Department documents related to the late sexual predator.

Wexner, 88, the retired founder of L Brands, has said he plans to cooperate with a subpoena from Democrats on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

As one of Epstein's most prominent former friends, Wexner has already spent years answering for their decades-long association. In court documents, prominent Epstein victim Virginia Giuffre claimed that Wexner was one of the men Epstein trafficked her to.

Wexner has consistently denied any knowledge of or involvement in the millionaire financier's crimes and says he never met Giuffre. He told L Brands investors in 2019 that he was embarrassed that he ever got close to someone "so sick, so cunning, so depraved."

He has never been accused of wrongdoing and the overall picture provided by the DOJ documents is that Epstein did not run a sex trafficking ring.

Wexner's name appears more than 1,000 times in the Epstein files, which his spokesperson said is not unexpected given their longstanding relationship. The documents shed new light on his relationship to Epstein — which ended bitterly after Wexner and his wife Abigail learned he'd been stealing from them — while raising many new questions.

'A most loyal friend'

Epstein first met Wexner through a business associate around 1986.

It was an opportune time for Wexner's finances. The successful Ohio businessman had grown a single Limited store in Columbus into a powerhouse suite of '80s mall-culture staples: The Limited, Limited Express, Lane Bryant and Victoria's Secret. Abercrombie & Fitch, Lerner, White Barn Candle Co. and others would follow.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 53 of 77

Within a couple years, Wexner had turned over management of his vast fortune to Epstein. He gave his now-trusted associate his power of attorney in 1991, allowing Epstein to make investments and do business deals and to purchase property and help develop what would become the vast Wexner estate in then-rural New Albany, Ohio, documents show. Wednesday's deposition will take place either there or nearby, according to participating lawmakers.

Epstein had "excellent judgment and unusually high standards," Wexner told Vanity Fair in a 2003 interview, and he was "always a most loyal friend."

Epstein recalls 'gang stuff'

In one of the newly released documents, Epstein sent rough notes to himself about Wexner saying: "never ever, did anything without informing les" and "I would never give him up." Another document, an apparent draft letter to Wexner, said the two "had 'gang stuff' for over 15 years" and were mutually indebted to each other — as Wexner helped make Epstein rich and Epstein helped make Wexner richer.

A spokesperson for Wexner said he never received the letter.

"It appears Epstein was furious that Mr. Wexner refused to meet with him years after Mr. Wexner terminated Epstein and cut off all ties with him following Mr. Wexner's discovery of Epstein's theft and criminal conduct," the spokesperson, Tom Davies, said. "The draft appears to fit a pattern of untrue, outlandish, and delusional statements made by Epstein in desperate attempts to perpetuate his lies and justify his misconduct."

A relationship unravels

Wexner did not publicly reveal until after Epstein's arrest on federal sex trafficking charges in July 2019 that he had severed their relationship. In a Wexner Foundation letter that August, he said that happened in 2007. However, the Justice Department's newly released records show the two were in touch after that.

Wexner emailed Epstein on June 26, 2008, after a plea deal was announced that would require him to serve 18 months in a Florida jail on a state charge of soliciting prostitution from a minor in order to avoid federal prosecution. He wound up serving 13 months.

"Abigail told me the result... all I can say is I feel sorry. You violated your own number 1 rule...always be careful," Wexner wrote. Epstein replied: "no excuse."

Davies said the 2007 date Wexner cited in 2019 applied to firing Epstein as financial adviser, revoking his power of attorney and removing his name from Wexner's bank accounts.

Wexner also said in the 2019 letter that Epstein had misappropriated "vast sums" of his and his family's fortune while overseeing his finances. An investigative memo from the latest document release says that Wexner's attorneys told investigators in 2008 that Epstein had repaid him \$100 million, thought to be just a portion of what he stole.

Continuing fallout for Wexner

Newly released documents emboldened sexual assault survivors in ways that have increased pressure on Wexner.

Epstein survivor Maria Farmer has said she was vindicated by a redacted FBI report contained in the documents, which confirms that she filed one of the earliest complaints against Epstein.

Though the complaint reported his possession of nude photos of underage girls, the records have drawn new attention to the harrowing account of an alleged sexual encounter forced on her by Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell in the summer of 1996 at Epstein's home in New Albany. The home was located about a half mile from the Wexners' home. The Wexners have said they had never heard anything about Farmer's account of the crime until it appeared in news accounts years later.

Meanwhile, survivors of another sexual predator — the late Dr. Richard Strauss, a team doctor at the Ohio State University who was found to have sexually abused at least 177 male students over years — are citing Wexner's association with Epstein to try to get his name removed from a campus football complex built with his contributions. Their request is pending before a university committee. Davies declined comment.

The alumni group scored a legal victory last week, though, when a district court judge said they can compel Wexner to testify in their lawsuit against the university. He sat on Ohio State's board of trustees during the period when Strauss, who died before his deeds came to light, committed his crimes.

Separately, a spokesperson for Ohio State said the head of its Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Dr. Mark Landon, is cooperating with the school's investigation into his mention in the Epstein files. Newly released documents indicated that Epstein had Landon on retainer in 2006 for \$25,000 a quarter.

"I did not provide any clinical care for Jeffrey Epstein or any of his victims," Landon said in a statement. "I was a paid consultant for the New York Strategy Group regarding potential biotech investments from 2001 to 2005." A statement from Davies said the advice Epstein was soliciting was on the Wexners' behalf.

Shooter killed ex-wife and a son in Rhode Island ice rink attack, police say

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, MICHAEL CASEY and PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

PAWTUCKET, R.I. (AP) — The person who opened fire Monday during a youth hockey game at a Rhode Island ice rink was specifically targeting family members, killing an ex-wife and son as many fans dived for cover while a handful rushed the shooter to stop the attack, authorities said.

Pawtucket Chief of Police Tina Goncalves said the shooter's ex-wife Rhonda Dorgan and adult son Aidan Dorgan were killed and three others were injured: Rhonda Dorgan's parents, Linda and Gerald Dorgan, and a family friend Thomas Geruso, all of whom remained in critical condition Tuesday afternoon, Goncalves said.

Police identified the shooter as 56-year-old Robert Dorgan, who died from an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound. Dorgan also went by the names Roberta Esposito and Roberta Dorgano, authorities said.

Goncalves said there was "no indication" there would be violence at the ice rink in Pawtucket on Monday afternoon, adding that Dorgan had been to many hockey games to watch family members play before without incident.

Gender identity apparently was a contributing factor to Dorgan's wife filing for divorce in 2020 after nearly 30 years of marriage.

Court filings show Rhonda Dorgan initially wrote "gender reassignment surgery, narcissistic + personality disorder traits" as reasons for filing but crossed that out and wrote "irreconcilable differences which have caused the irremediable breakdown of the marriage."

Court documents show that two shared the same last name even prior to getting married. Authorities have not provided additional details about the same name.

Under the name Roberta Dorgano, Dorgan posted on X that Rhonda Dorgan "hates the person who stole her husband" while posting about the couple's marital troubles in 2018. A year later Dorgan wrote on social media: "Transwoman, 6 kids : wife – not thrilled," and encouraged people to not let being transgender stop them from creating a family.

A day before the shooting, Dorgan responded on X to anti-transgender posts by actor Kevin Sorbo and Infowars conspiracy theorist Alex Jones by saying that constant criticism of transgender people is "why we Go BERSERK."

Brutal attack ended when fans rushed to stop shooter

Goncalves on Tuesday credited several "good Samaritans" who intervened and quickly stopped the attack

At least three bystanders were able to contain Dorgan in the middle of the stands as the crowd fled and ran around them, but said Dorgan was still able to reach for a second firearm and died of a self-inflicted gunshot, Goncalves said.

The hockey game was livestreamed by LiveBarn, a streaming platform for youth sporting events, whose videos have been shared on social media showing players on the ice as popping sounds are heard. Chaos quickly unfolds as players on benches dive for cover, those on the ice frantically skate toward exits and fans flee their seats.

LiveBarn's social media account has been issuing warnings to those who shared the video that they do not have permission to do so.

Michael Steven, who recorded video after the shooting, recalled crying parents trying to locate their children outside the arena and young people being taken out on stretchers.

"It happens far too often in our nation," Steven told reporters.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 55 of 77

Members of the community held a vigil at Slatersville Congregational Church in North Smithfield in the evening Tuesday.

"It's absolutely mind-boggling that this could happen to people we know and love and support through everything," said Amy Goulet, whose son is a hockey player in the community.

Shooter known for bad temper, co-worker says

Dorgan was an employee of General Dynamics Bath Iron Works, a ship building facility in Bath, Maine, that contracts with the U.S. Navy, David Hench, a spokesperson for the shipyard, said Tuesday. Co-workers said Dorgan often used the first name Roberta at work.

A colleague, Destiny Mackenzie, recalled that she and Dorgan would often talk about family. Mackenzie said Dorgan's ex-wife never came up in conversation but a hockey-playing son was a frequent topic.

"What was supposed to be some seniors' only chance at playoff games is now ruined," she wrote in a message to The Associated Press. "Images that these kids and family's now have to live with. That's who I send my condolences to is those families."

Mackenzie also said Dorgan had a bad temper that sometimes led to screaming matches with colleagues.

Another co-worker said Dorgan appeared to be split on the issue of transgender acceptance, one second being proud of transitioning and the next, embarrassed. That co-worker, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of workplace reprisals, said they knew Dorgan owned guns but was unsure how many.

Dorgan briefly served in the Marine Corps, enlisting on April 26, 1988, according to military records provided by the service. Less than three months later, on July 13, Dorgan was separated from the service with the lowest military rank.

Maj. Jacoby Getty, a Marine Corps spokesman, told The Associated Press that the rapid discharge indicated Dorgan's character "was incongruent with Marine Corps' expectations and standards."

Getty declined to provide more detail.

Monday's shooting came nearly two months after the state was rocked by a shooting at Brown University that killed two students and wounded nine others, as well as left a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor dead. Authorities later found Claudio Neves Valente, 48, dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound at a New Hampshire storage facility.

California walloped by winter storm with high winds and heavy rain and snow

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI Associated Press

California was walloped Monday by a powerful winter storm carrying treacherous thunderstorms, high winds and heavy snow in mountain areas.

Millions of Los Angeles County residents faced flash flood warnings as rain pounded the region and people in some areas scarred by last year's devastating wildfires were under an evacuation warning through Tuesday because of the potential for mud and debris flows.

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass ordered emergency crews and city departments to be ready to respond to any problems.

The storm wreaked havoc on roadways spanning from Sonoma County to the Sierra Nevada. Traffic was halted temporarily in both directions on I-80 near the Nevada state line due to spinouts and crashes, the California Department of Transportation reported. In Santa Barbara County, a large tree toppled onto US-101, shutting down southbound lanes.

Forecasters said the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, northern Shasta County — including portions of Interstate 5 — and parts of the state's Coast Range could see up to 8 feet (2.4 meters) of snow before the storm moves through late Wednesday. The heavy snow, wind and low visibility could also make travel conditions dangerous to near impossible, forecasters added.

"It has seemed 'springlike' for a large part of 2026, but winter is set to show it's not quite done yet," the Shasta County Sheriff's Office said in a social media post urging residents to stay aware of the storm.

California's Office of Emergency Services said it was placing fire and rescue personnel and resources in

areas most at risk for flooding, mud and debris flows.

In Southern California, Six Flags Magic Mountain was closed Monday due to the storm, and Knotts Berry Farm amusement park shut its doors early. But the winter weather was celebrated by local ski resorts that have waited weeks for snow.

Other states on Monday braced for different threatening weather events. Residents in parts of eastern Colorado received warnings that they could be in fire danger due to a combination of abnormally high temperatures, gusty winds and dry conditions. The risks were expected to continue further into the week as gusts up to 60 mph (96 kph) are likely to hit the Colorado eastern plains on Tuesday. Parts of Texas, New Mexico and Kansas were also under red flag warnings.

The latest storm comes amid a snow drought across much of the American West, with snow cover and depth measuring at the lowest levels scientists have seen in decades. Most states saw half their average precipitation or less in January, though California fared better others due to heavy rains in December.

It was the first of several days of stormy weather forecast for California. A coastal flood advisory was in effect for San Francisco until Tuesday afternoon, with cooler showers and a chance of hail on Tuesday, while nearby mountains were expecting snow, the National Weather Service in Monterey reported.

Kashawna McInerny, a Realtor in the mountain community of Wrightwood, about 80 miles (130 kilometers) northeast of Los Angeles, on Monday said she was still dealing with several tons of rock and debris on her property from Christmas and New Year's storms that pummeled the community. After the last one, she said she got help trenching part of her side yard to direct stormwater down the street and placed a barrier of metal and wood by a door in hopes of keeping out mud and debris.

"We're not panicking yet. At least I'm not," she said with a laugh.

Peru's Congress removes interim President Jerí as he faces a corruption probe

By FRANKLIN BRICEÑO and MANUEL RUEDA Associated Press

LIMA, Peru (AP) — Peru's Congress voted Tuesday to remove interim President José Jerí from office as he faces corruption allegations, triggering a fresh wave of political instability just weeks before the nation's April presidential and congressional elections.

Jerí is under a preliminary investigation into corruption and influence peddling, stemming from a series of undisclosed meetings with two Chinese executives.

With 75 votes in favor, 24 against and three abstentions, Peru's legislature voted to remove Jerí from the position he had assumed on Oct. 10 when predecessor Dina Boluarte was dismissed as a crime wave gripped the country.

Jerí's removal from office is the latest chapter in a prolonged political crisis in a country that has seen seven presidents since 2016, and is about to hold a general election amid widespread public outcry over the surge in violent crime.

Lawmakers will choose a new president from among their members to govern until July 28, when the interim leader will hand over the office to the winner of the April 12 presidential election. Jerí will return to his position as a legislator until July 28, when the new Congress also takes office.

A vote on the interim leader will take place Wednesday, after lawmakers register their candidates.

The accusations against Jerí stemmed from a leaked report regarding a clandestine December meeting with two Chinese executives. One attendee holds active government contracts, while the other is currently under investigation for alleged involvement in an illegal logging operation.

Jerí has denied wrongdoing. He said he met the executives to organize a Peruvian-Chinese festivity, but his opponents have accused him of corruption.

Despite a revolving door of presidents, Peru's economy has remained stable. The Andean nation had a public debt to gross domestic product ratio of 32% in 2024, one of the lowest in Latin America, and the government has welcomed foreign investment in areas like mining and infrastructure.

As Peru heads into this year's general election, Rafael Lopez Aliaga, a conservative businessman and

former mayor of Lima is leading a crowded field that also includes Keiko Fujimori, a well known former legislator whose father was Peru's president in the 1990s. If none of the candidates gets 50% of the vote there will be a runoff in June between the top two contenders.

Lawmakers in Peru have gained increasing leverage over the nation's executive branch over the past decade, using corruption investigations to remove presidents who have struggled to build congressional majorities.

A clause in Peru's constitution that allows presidents to be removed if they are found "morally incapable" of leading the country has been broadly interpreted by legislators and has been used several times to vote presidents out of office.

Boluarte, Jeri's predecessor, lasted almost three years in office and survived violent protests in which police killed dozens of protesters. But she eventually was removed on moral incapacity grounds, with lawmakers citing the high crime rate and corruption scandals.

Pedro Castillo, a leftist union leaders who won the 2021 presidential election, was voted out of office by legislators in late 2022 after he tried to dissolve congress in order to skirt anti-corruption proceedings. Last year Castillo was sentenced to 11 years in prison for trying to overthrow the nation's institutions.

Police in Nancy Guthrie investigation say glove DNA didn't match anything in national database

By ED WHITE Associated Press

DNA from gloves found a few miles from the Arizona home of Nancy Guthrie did not match any entries in a national database, authorities said Tuesday, the 17th day of her disappearance.

"There were no DNA hits in CODIS," the Pima County Sheriff's Department said, referring to the national Combined DNA Index System.

"At this point, there have been no confirmed CODIS matches in this investigation," the department said, suggesting that other DNA samples had been put through the system.

CODIS is a storehouse of DNA taken from crime suspects or people with convictions. Any hits could identify possible suspects in Guthrie's disappearance.

The sheriff's department said it's looking to feed DNA evidence into other "genetic genealogy" databases. It did not elaborate.

Investigators, meanwhile, were seen inspecting exterior cameras at a neighbor's house Tuesday. Vehicles were also arriving and departing from Guthrie's Tucson-area home while a thick line of news media watched from the street.

The 84-year-old mother of NBC "Today" co-anchor Savannah Guthrie was reported missing from her home on Feb. 1 after spending the previous night with family, police said. Her blood was detected on the porch.

A porch camera recorded video of a man with a backpack who was wearing a ski mask, long pants, a jacket and gloves. The FBI said the suspect is about 5 feet, 9 inches (1.75 meters) tall with a medium build.

Gloves were found about 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) from Guthrie's home. The FBI has said that the gloves appeared to match those worn by the man in the video.

"There is additional DNA evidence that was found at the residence, and that is also being analyzed," the sheriff's department said.

In addition, the department said it's working with experts to try to locate Guthrie by detecting her heart pacemaker.

Parsons Corp. said its BlueFly device, which weighs less than a pound (.45 kilograms) and has a range of up to 218 yards (200 meters), can detect signals from wearable electronics and medical devices. The company said the technology has been used from the air and on the ground in Arizona. It declined further comment about the search.

The sheriff's department released numbers to show how the public is reacting to Guthrie's disappearance and the appeal for any information. There were 28,000 phone calls from Feb. 1-16, a 54% increase over the same period a year ago. Not all calls were tips.

Savannah Guthrie posted an Instagram video Sunday in which she issued an appeal to anyone with information about what happened to her mother.

"It is never too late to do the right thing," she said. "And we are here. And we believe in the essential goodness of every human being, that it's never too late."

Iran says it temporarily closed the Strait of Hormuz as it held more indirect talks with the US

By JAMEY KEATEN and STEPHANIE LIECHTENSTEIN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Iran announced the temporary closure of the Strait of Hormuz on Tuesday for live fire drills in a rare show of force as its negotiators held another round of indirect talks with the United States over the Islamic Republic's disputed nuclear program.

It was the first time Iran has announced the closure of the key international waterway, through which 20% of the world's oil passes, since the U.S. began threatening Iran and rushing military assets to the region. It was not immediately clear if the strait had been closed, but such a rare and perhaps unprecedented move could further escalate tensions that threaten to ignite another war in the Middle East.

As the talks began, Iran's state media announced that Iranian forces had fired live missiles toward the strait and would close it for several hours for "safety and maritime concerns."

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei meanwhile warned that "the strongest army in the world might sometimes receive such a slap that it cannot get back on its feet."

Iranian diplomat sees 'new window' in talks

Iran's foreign minister later adopted a different tone, expressing optimism about the talks and saying "a new window has opened" for reaching an agreement.

"We are hopeful that negotiations will lead to a sustainable and negotiated solution which can serve the interests of relevant parties and the broader region," Abbas Araghchi told a U.N. disarmament conference after leading the Iranian delegation at the talks held in Geneva.

He added that Iran "remains fully prepared to defend itself against any threat or act of aggression," and that the consequences of any attack on Iran would not be confined to its borders.

He made no specific mention of the military drills or the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

U.S. President Donald Trump, who scrapped an earlier nuclear agreement with Iran during his first term, has repeatedly threatened to use force to compel Iran to agree to constrain its nuclear program. Iran has said it would respond with an attack of its own. Trump has also threatened Iran over the killing of protesters.

Vance says talks went well 'in some ways'

Trump's envoys, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, led the U.S. delegation at the latest indirect talks, held inside the residence of the Omani envoy to Geneva. Oman, a longtime regional mediator, had hosted an earlier round on Feb. 6.

There was progress in the talks but many details remained to be discussed, according to a U.S. official who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity. The Iranian delegation said they would present more detailed proposals in the next two weeks to narrow gaps, the official said.

"In some ways, it went well," U.S. Vice President JD Vance said in an interview with Fox News Channel after he spoke with Witkoff and Kushner. "But in other ways, it was very clear that the president has set some red lines that the Iranians are not yet willing to actually acknowledge and work through."

The U.S. also hosted talks between envoys from Russia and Ukraine in Geneva on Tuesday and Wednesday, days ahead of the fourth anniversary of the all-out Russian invasion of its neighbor.

Araghchi, who led the Iranian side, also said he met with Director-General Rafael Grossi of the International Atomic Energy Agency on Monday in Geneva. The Iranian minister said they discussed the agency's role in helping to achieve an agreement.

A live fire drill

Iran said its Revolutionary Guard started a drill early Monday in the Strait of Hormuz, the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, which are crucial international shipping routes. It was the second time in recent

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 59 of 77

weeks that Iran has held a live fire drill in the Strait of Hormuz.

Iran often carries out military drills in the strait that can impede maritime traffic, but the announced closure went a step further. Danny Citrinowicz, an Iran expert at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies, said Iran last closed the strait during the war with Iraq in the 1980s, when it mined the waterway.

He said the latest announcement was a message to the international community that any strike on Iran would have global impact.

Oil prices fell after the talks concluded. US oil was down 1.3% at \$62.06 per barrel while international benchmark Brent crude was off fully 2.3% at \$67.03 per barrel. Oil prices had risen several dollars per barrel after Trump began bolstering the U.S. military presence in the Middle East, but remain subdued on expectation that an eventual deal would send prices lower.

Khamenei meanwhile stepped up his warnings to the U.S. over its military buildup.

"Of course a warship is a dangerous apparatus, but more dangerous than the warship is the weapon that can sink the warship," Khamenei said, according to Iranian state TV. He also warned the U.S. against "forcing the result of talks in advance."

US increases military presence

Last week, Trump said the USS Gerald R. Ford, the world's largest aircraft carrier, was being sent to the Mideast. It will join the USS Abraham Lincoln and its accompanying guided-missile destroyers, which have been in the region for three weeks.

The USS Gerald R. Ford and its escort of three destroyers are now in the mid-Atlantic after being ordered to depart the Caribbean for the Middle East last week, a Navy official confirmed Tuesday.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive ship movements, said the Ford, along with the destroyers USS Mahan, Bainbridge, and Winston Churchill, are in the mid-Atlantic and no longer with the U.S. Southern Command's area of operations.

Given its current location, the Ford and its escorts are likely more than a week away from reaching the waters off the coast of Iran.

U.S. forces shot down an Iranian drone that approached the Lincoln on the same day last week that Iran tried to stop a U.S.-flagged ship in the Strait of Hormuz.

Gulf Arab nations have warned any attack could spiral into another regional conflict in a Mideast still reeling from the Israel-Hamas war.

The Trump administration is seeking a deal to limit Iran's nuclear program and ensure it does not develop nuclear weapons. Iran says it is not pursuing weapons and has so far resisted demands that it halt uranium enrichment on its soil or hand over its stockpile of highly-enriched uranium.

The U.S. and Iran were in the middle of months of meetings when Israel's launch of a 12-day war against Iran back in June halted the talks. The U.S. bombed Iranian nuclear sites during that war, likely destroying many of the centrifuges that spun uranium to near weapons-grade purity. Israel's attacks decimated Iran's air defenses and targeted its ballistic missile arsenal as well.

Before the June war, Iran had been enriching uranium up to 60% purity, a short, technical step away from weapons-grade levels.

New Mexico legislators launch 'truth commission' investigation into Jeffrey Epstein's secluded ranch

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — State legislators in New Mexico launched an investigation Tuesday into past activity at a secluded desert ranch where financier and sex offender Jeffrey Epstein once entertained guests and whether local authorities looked the other way.

A bipartisan, four-member panel of state House representatives is investigating allegations that the ranch may have facilitated sexual abuse and sex trafficking. New Mexico lawmakers also say they want to know why Epstein was not registered as a sex offender after pleading guilty in 2008 to soliciting prostitution from an underage girl and whether there was corruption among public officials.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 60 of 77

Democratic state Rep. Marianna Anaya of Albuquerque, a member of the truth commission, urged people during a news conference Tuesday to come forward with information about any abuse at the ranch linked to Epstein and other people who may have it possible.

"That perpetrator could not act alone. They could not run a sex ring alone, they could not commit these types of financial crimes alone. So we know as a commission that enablers must also be held accountable, including the state itself, if needed," said Anaya. "If you do want to share, we'll be here and we will be operating with confidentiality."

Revelations of ties to Epstein have led to the departure or ousting of multiple high-profile people in recent days.

Epstein purchased the sprawling Zorro Ranch in New Mexico in 1993 from former Democratic Gov. Bruce King and built a 26,700-square-foot (2,480-square-meter) hilltop mansion with a private runway.

The property was sold by Epstein's estate in 2023 — with proceeds going toward creditors — to the family of Don Huffines, a Republican candidate in Texas for election to the office of state comptroller. In a social media post on X, Huffines said the property has been renamed San Rafael Ranch after a saint associated with healing and that his family plans to operate a Christian retreat there.

Huffines said any request by law enforcement for access would be met with immediate and full cooperation.

Epstein killed himself in a Manhattan jail while awaiting trial in 2019 on charges that he sexually abused and trafficked dozens of underage girls.

Truth commission chairwoman and state Rep. Andrea Romero of Santa Fe has said that several survivors of Epstein's abuse have signaled that sex trafficking activity extended to the ranch, which is about 35 miles (56 kilometers) south of Santa Fe.

"We've heard years of allegations and rumors about Epstein's activities here. But unfortunately, federal investigations have failed to put together an official record," Romero said Tuesday. "This truth commission will finally fill in the gaps of what we need to know."

Commission members also include retired FBI agent and Republican state Rep. William Hall of Aztec and former district attorney and Rep. Andrea Reeb of Clovis. State House legislators who were present voted unanimously on Monday to create the commission with subpoena power and a budget of over \$2 million.

While Epstein never faced charges in New Mexico, the state attorney general's office in 2019 confirmed that it was investigating and had interviewed possible victims who visited the ranch.

In 2023, New Mexico Attorney General Raúl Torrez ordered an investigation into financial businesses utilized by Epstein and their legal obligations, resulting in agreements with two banks that dedicate \$17 million to the prevention of human trafficking, according to a spokesperson for Torrez's office.

Winter Olympics recap: Japanese pair upstage 'Blade Angels,' Germany sweeps 2-man bobsled

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, Italy (AP) — Ami Nakai and Japanese teammate Kaori Sakamoto upstaged Alysa Liu and the rest of the "Blade Angels" from the U.S. to take the lead after the short program in the women's figure skating competition at the Milan Cortina Olympics on Tuesday.

Nakai rode her opening triple axel to a career-best 78.71 points, while Sakamoto was right behind with 77.23 as she chases just about the only gold medal she has yet to win. Liu was third with 76.59, keeping her within range of the top step of the podium.

Things didn't go quite so well for the rest of the American team.

Isabeau Levito lost a level on her step sequence and wound up eighth with 70.84 points, while three-time reigning U.S. champ Amber Glenn likely had her medal hopes dashed when she doubled up a triple loop, making the jump invalid and worth no points.

Glenn, trying to hold back tears as she stepped off the ice, was in 13th place with 67.39 points.

Mone Chiba gave Japan three women capable of stacking the podium when the women's free skate on Thursday wraps up the figure skating program at the Winter Games. She scored 74.00 points.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 61 of 77

Germany sweep in two-man bobsled

Germany swept the medals in the two-man bobsled race in a show of absolute dominance. It was the second Olympic sweep in bobsled history; the other was by the Germans, also in two-man, at the Beijing Games four years ago.

And leading the way was Johannes Lochner, who got his first gold medal while posting the biggest Olympic two-man winning margin in nearly a half-century. The U.S. was the closest to thwarting the sweep; Frank Del Duca and Josh Williamson were fourth.

Snow postpones women's slopestyle snowboarding

The Olympic final for women's snowboarding slopestyle was scrubbed off Tuesday's schedule due to a heavy snowstorm in Livigno.

The slopestyle final was scheduled to start at 1 p.m. local time, but organizers said it was called off. A new date for the final has not been announced.

It delays New Zealander Zoi Sadowski-Synnott's attempt at a repeat. She qualified first on Sunday — an opening round that was moved up a day because of the storms rolling in.

Italian men back on top in speedskating pursuit

Italy's Davide Ghiotto, Andrea Giovannini and Michele Malfatti beat U.S. world record-holders Casey Dawson, Emery Lehman and Ethan Cepuran by 4 1/2 seconds to win the men's team pursuit gold medal in speedskating.

Buoyed by raucous cheering from the home crowd at the Milano Speed Skating Stadium, the Italian men finished in 3 minutes, 39.20 seconds to give their country its first Olympic title in this event since the 2006 Turin Games.

The United States started the final well and led for the early stages. But the Italians charged ahead over the closing laps, extending their advantage. When it ended, Ghiotto, Giovannini and Malfatti raised their arms and pumped their fists.

Canada collected its second consecutive Winter Games title in women's team pursuit when Ivanie Blondin, Valerie Maltais and Isabelle Weidemann — the same athletes who won gold four years ago in Beijing — finished in 2:55.81, nearly a full second ahead of runner-up Netherlands.

Late surge lifts France to gold in biathlon relay

France went from last place on the first leg to being first on the final lap to secure the country's first Olympic gold medal in men's biathlon relay.

World Cup champion Eric Perrot, skiing the final leg for France, missed two shots in his last standing shooting bout and was only seven seconds ahead of Norway's Vetle Sjaastad Christiansen as they headed out to ski tracks packed with fresh snow.

Perrot stayed ahead of Christiansen and took his team of Fabien Claude, Emilien Jacquelin and Quentin Fillon Maillet across the line first, in a time of one hour, 19 minutes and 55.2 seconds.

Norway's Oftebro earns second Nordic combined gold

Norway's Jens Luraas Oftebro won his second Nordic combined gold medal in a week, taking the large hill ski jump and 10-kilometer ski race. Johannes Lamparter of Austria earned his second silver in Italy and Ilkka Herola of Finland won bronze.

New subpoenas issued in inquiry on response to 2016 Russian election interference, AP sources say

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department has issued new subpoenas in a Florida-based investigation into perceived adversaries of President Donald Trump and the U.S. government's response to Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, according to multiple people familiar with the matter.

An initial wave of subpoenas in November asked recipients for documents related to the preparation of a U.S. intelligence community assessment that detailed a sweeping, multipronged effort by Moscow to help Trump defeat Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 62 of 77

Though the first subpoenas requested documents from the months surrounding the January 2017 publication of the Obama administration intelligence assessment, the latest subpoenas seek any records from the years since then, said the people, who spoke on condition of anonymity to The Associated Press to discuss a nonpublic demand from investigators.

The Justice Department declined to comment Tuesday.

The subpoenas represent continued investigative activity in one of several criminal inquiries the Justice Department has undertaken into Trump's political opponents. An array of former intelligence and law enforcement officials have received subpoenas and lawyers for former CIA Director John Brennan, who helped oversee the drafting of the assessment, have said they have been informed he is a target but have not been told of any "legally justifiable basis for undertaking this investigation."

The intelligence community assessment, published in the final days of the Obama administration, found that Russia had developed a "clear preference" for Trump in the 2016 election and that Russian President Vladimir Putin had ordered an influence campaign with goals of undermining confidence in American democracy and harming Clinton's chance for victory.

That conclusion — and a related investigation into whether the 2016 Trump campaign colluded with Russia to sway the outcome of the election — have long been among the Republican president's chief grievances, and he has vowed retribution against the government officials involved in the inquiries. Former FBI Director James Comey was indicted by the Trump administration Justice Department last year on false statement and obstruction charges, but the case was later dismissed.

Multiple government reports, including bipartisan congressional reviews and a criminal investigation by former special counsel Robert Mueller, have found that Russia interfered in Trump's favor through a hack-and-leak operation of Democratic emails as well as a covert social media campaign aimed at sowing discord and swaying American public opinion. Mueller's report found that the Trump campaign actively welcomed the Russian help, but it did not establish that Russian operatives and Trump or his associates conspired to tip the election in his favor.

The Trump administration has freshly scrutinized the intelligence community assessment in part because a classified version of it incorporated in its annex a summary of the "Steele dossier," a compilation of Democratic-funded opposition research that was assembled by former British spy Christopher Steele and was provided to the FBI. That research into Trump's potential links to Russia included uncorroborated rumors and salacious gossip, and Trump has long held up its weaknesses in an effort to discredit the entire Russia investigation.

The investigation in Florida appears to be part of a broader administration effort to revisit years-old findings and decisions from the Russia investigation.

A declassified CIA tradecraft review released last July by current Director John Ratcliffe did not refute the conclusion of Russian election interference but found "multiple procedural anomalies" in the intelligence community assessment and chided Brennan for the fact that the classified version referenced the Steele dossier.

Brennan testified to Congress, and also wrote in his memoir, that he was opposed to including information from the dossier in the intelligence assessment since neither its substance nor sources had been validated, and he has said the dossier did not inform the judgments of the assessment. He maintains the FBI pushed for its inclusion.

The new CIA review sought to cast Brennan's views in a different light, asserting that he "showed a preference for narrative consistency over analytical soundness" and brushed aside concerns over the dossier because he believed it conformed "with existing theories." It quotes him, without context, as having stated in writing that "my bottomline is that I believe that the information warrants inclusion in the report."

It is unclear whether the investigation in Florida will result in any criminal charges.

In a letter last December addressed to the chief judge of the Southern District of Florida, Brennan's lawyers challenged the underpinnings of the investigation, questioning what basis prosecutors had for opening the inquiry in the state and saying they had received no clarity from prosecutors about what

potential crimes were even being investigated.

"While it is mystifying how the prosecutors could possibly believe there is any legally justifiable basis for undertaking this investigation, they have done nothing to explain that mystery," the lawyers wrote, describing the investigation as "manufactured."

Minnesota's Legislature braces for a federal immigration fight as the enforcement surge winds down

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Democrats hope to rein in the power of federal immigration officers in Minnesota as the state's legislative session gets underway Tuesday, while Republicans will focus on combatting fraud in taxpayer-funded programs that President Donald Trump cited to justify the recent immigration enforcement surge.

While White House border czar Tom Homan said over the weekend that more than 1,000 officers have left the Twin Cities area, and hundreds more will depart in the days ahead, the aftermath will continue to reverberate at the state Capitol during the session, which runs through May.

Close divisions will require compromise

It's unclear whether any significant changes can pass the closely divided Legislature. The House is tied with a Republican speaker, while Democrats hold only a one-vote majority in the Senate. So nothing can pass without bipartisan support. And it's an election year, with all 201 legislative seats on the ballot. House Speaker Lisa Demuth is among the GOP candidates running for governor and has expressed hope she will win Trump's endorsement. All of that could make compromise difficult.

"There are definitely going to be priorities on both sides of the aisle. ... But when it comes right down to it, we need to have bipartisan votes to move bills through the committees and get the work done for Minnesotans," Demuth told reporters Monday.

Capitol security is tighter this session following the assassination of Democratic former House Speaker Melissa Hortman and her husband last summer. All visitors now undergo weapons screening.

Democrats propose restrictions on ICE

Democratic Gov. Tim Walz last week proposed a \$10 million package of relief for small businesses that lost customers and workers during the surge, and more aid proposals could be coming.

Just ahead of the session, House and Senate Democrats unveiled 11 bills to counter what they consider some of the worst excesses by federal immigration officers during the surge.

They're meant to keep federal officers away from schools, childcare centers, hospitals and colleges. They would also ban federal agents from wearing face masks, while requiring them to display visible identification. They would also require that federal authorities allow state investigators to participate in investigations of shootings by federal agents, such as the deaths of Renee Good and Alex Pretti. The state remains frozen out of those cases. The FBI officially notified the state Monday that it won't share information or evidence from its investigation into Pretti's death.

The top House Democrat, Zack Stephenson, said they don't expect support from Republican leaders, but they're hoping some GOP lawmakers will break with their party.

"What we've seen these last six weeks has been so exceptional, so damaging, that I don't know how you can be human and not respond to it," Stephenson said. "But even if it's not that, we also know it's an election year and voters are watching, and voters will hold people accountable if they don't stand up to this administration."

Stephenson also acknowledged that any restrictions the state tries to impose on federal law enforcement are likely to be challenged in court.

"But some things are worth fighting for," Stephenson added. "And if we're not going to fight for this, what are we doing here?"

Republicans seek to shift focus to fighting fraud

Republicans have expressed little enthusiasm for taking on federal authorities and hope to shift the focus to fighting fraud.

"Minnesotans want our state and local law enforcement to cooperate with federal immigration enforcement," said Rep. Harry Niska, the No. 2 House Republican.

One of the top GOP anti-fraud priorities is legislation to create an independent Office of Inspector General to investigate and prevent the misuse of public funds. The Senate passed a similar proposal last year on a bipartisan 60-7 vote. House Democratic leaders blocked a vote at the end of the session, but the proposal remains alive this year.

Republicans also want to require more accountability for agencies and officials who let fraud happen on their watch.

Journalist and activist plead not guilty in church protest case

The final two of the nine people charged for their alleged roles in a protest that disrupted a Sunday service at a Southern Baptist church in St. Paul, where an ICE official served as a pastor, have pleaded not guilty.

Minnesota-based independent journalist Georgia Fort and Trahern Crews, co-founder of Black Lives Matter Minnesota, entered their pleas during a brief hearing before U.S. Magistrate Judge Douglas Micko. Other defendants pleading not guilty to civil rights charges at previous arraignments included former CNN host turned independent journalist Don Lemon.

Fort told reporters and a crowd of supporters afterward that she was exercising her freedom of the press to cover the story of the protest at Cities Church on Jan. 18 while centering the voices of people who otherwise would not be heard.

"As a journalist who is from Minnesota, this case doesn't just leave me fighting for my freedom, it is the government trying to muzzle me, to make me unable to report on one of the most historic cases, not just in our state, but in our country," Fort said.

Police arrest man who ran toward the US Capitol building holding a shotgun

By GARY FIELDS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. Capitol Police in Washington, D.C., arrested an 18-year-old man Tuesday after he ran from his vehicle toward the west side of the Capitol Building armed with a shotgun.

Capital Police Chief Michael Sullivan said the man, identified as Carter Camacho of Smyrna, Georgia, was arrested after he parked a Mercedes SUV near the Capitol, got out and ran "several hundred yards" toward the building with a shotgun before officers intercepted him and ordered him to put down the firearm and get on the ground.

Speaking at a press conference following the arrest, Sullivan said Camacho was wearing a tactical vest and gloves and had a Kevlar helmet and gas mask in the vehicle. The shotgun was loaded and he had additional rounds on him, the chief said.

Sullivan said the motive was under investigation, including whether members of Congress were the target. Congress is not in session.

Sullivan said the department has video footage, but he asked the public for any footage they might have of the incident.

"Who knows what would have happened if we wouldn't have officers standing here?" the chief said, adding that the department had run active shooter drills in almost the identical spot in recent months.

Sullivan said Camacho was not known to authorities and described him as not being from the area. The chief said the vehicle was not registered to the suspect, who has multiple addresses. He is being held for unlawful activities and carrying a rifle without a license, an unregistered firearm and unregistered ammunition, the Capitol Police said in a press release.

There have been incidents at the Capitol in recent years, including a Capitol Police arrest in 2023 where an Atlanta man armed with a rifle was spotted in a park near the Senate.

Tuesday's arrest comes one week before President Donald Trump's State of the Union address before

Congress. Sullivan said the incident does not change the agency's plans. "We take the State of the Union very, very seriously," he said.

Crime in Washington is down considerably so far in 2026 from 2025, a year when there was a huge drop-off from the previous year. Trump declared an emergency in the city last August to battle crime, leading to the deployment of more than 2,000 National Guard members as well as thousands of federal law enforcement officers and agents.

The officers and agents are still throughout the city. Last week, a Washington man was killed in an encounter with U.S. Marshals Service members. Authorities said the marshals were responding to a call about a person threatening to kidnap and hurt someone while holding a gun. Washington activists have asked for more transparency in that incident, which is under investigation by the city's Metropolitan Police.

What to know about the 'equal time' rule Stephen Colbert says led CBS to pull his Talarico interview

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

Stephen Colbert's comments that network executives pulled his interview with Democratic Texas Senate candidate James Talarico over fears it would violate regulatory guidance from the Trump administration has prompted a conversation about the rules governing how media outlets treat political coverage.

The concern about the interview, which the late-night host referenced in his Monday night show and later posted in full online, stems from a requirement that broadcast stations give equal time to political candidates when they appear on-air.

Although there are multiple exemptions to the provision, the Trump administration through the Federal Communications Commission — which regulates the nation's airwaves — has been moving to clamp down specifically on programs like Colbert's, which the agency has suggested may be "motivated by partisan purposes."

"He was supposed to be here, but we were told in no uncertain terms by our network's lawyers, who called us directly, that we could not have him on the broadcast," Colbert said on his program, "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert."

In a statement issued Tuesday, CBS said Colbert's show "was provided legal guidance that the broadcast could trigger the FCC equal-time rule for two other candidates" in the March 3 Democratic primary, "and presented options for how the equal time for other candidates could be fulfilled." Thereafter, the network noted, it was decided "to present the interview through its YouTube channel with on-air promotion on the broadcast rather than potentially providing the equal-time options."

Talarico, a critic of President Donald Trump, posted a nearly minute-long clip of his interview with Colbert on X and called it "the interview Donald Trump didn't want you to see."

What does equal time mean?

The Communications Act of 1934, the wide-ranging legislation that for nearly a century has broadly governed use of the nation's airwaves, includes a provision that applies specifically to coverage of political candidates. If a station gives airtime to one candidate, then the same station must offer comparable time to other candidates competing in the given contest, should they ask for it.

It also delves into campaign advertising airtime sold by stations and networks. If a station sells airtime to one candidate, then it also has to offer to sell the same amount of time to other candidates for the same office.

There are exceptions to this rule, including newscasts, "bona fide" interview programs, coverage of live events or documentaries. But if candidates host TV shows or appear in non-news, entertainment programming, that does trigger the provision.

Equal time also only applies to broadcast television and radio. So pieces on cable, streaming services or social media aren't included.

How the Trump administration has treated equal time

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 66 of 77

The rule requiring networks to give equal time to political candidates hasn't traditionally been applied to talk shows, but the Trump administration has made moves to change that.

In January, the Federal Communications Commission issued new guidance warning late-night and daytime hosts that they need to give political candidates equal time, with FCC Chairman Brendan Carr questioning the talk show exemption and positing that hosts were "motivated by partisan purposes."

"The FCC has not been presented with any evidence that the interview portion of any late night or daytime television talk show program on air presently would qualify for the bona fide news exemption," according to the public notice.

FCC eyes talk shows like 'The View'

The notice also said that television networks would need to apply for exemptions for individual programs.

In his comments, Colbert noted that the equal time provision applies to broadcast but not streaming platforms. Subsequently, his nearly 15-minute interview with Talarico was posted to the YouTube page for Colbert's show, with the host noting specifically that the segment was only appearing online and not on broadcast.

Carr, appointed by Trump to lead the agency last year, has often criticized network talk shows, suggesting last year that probing ABC's "The View" — whose hosts have frequently been critical of Trump — over the exemption might be "worthwhile."

The FCC did not immediately respond to messages seeking comment Tuesday.

What about the Fairness Doctrine?

Created by the FCC in 1949, this rule mandated that broadcasters present contrasting viewpoints when covering publicly important and controversial issues. Unlike the equal time provision of the Communications Act, this was an FCC rule, not a law.

It didn't apply specifically to political candidates, but topics. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the doctrine on a First Amendment challenge in 1969, with the court writing that the limited availability of broadcast spectrum justified regulation.

In 1987, the FCC repealed the rule, arguing that spectrum scarcity was no longer an issue, and then-President Ronald Reagan vetoed Congress' attempt to codify it into law.

Federal judge rules Kilmar Abrego Garcia can't be re-detained by immigration authorities

By TRAVIS LOLLER Associated Press

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement cannot re-detain Kilmar Abrego Garcia because a 90-day detention period has expired and the government has no viable plan for deporting him, a federal judge ruled on Tuesday.

The Salvadoran national's case has become a focal point in the immigration debate after he was mistakenly deported to his home country last year. Since his return, he has been fighting a second deportation to a series of African countries proposed by Department of Homeland Security officials.

The government "made one empty threat after another to remove him to countries in Africa with no real chance of success," U.S. District Judge Paula Xinis, in Maryland, wrote in her Tuesday order. "From this, the Court easily concludes that there is no 'good reason to believe' removal is likely in the reasonably foreseeable future."

Homeland Security Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin criticized the ruling in an email.

"If this matter were actually about the law or due process, Kilmar Abrego Garcia would already be deported and would never set foot in this country again; Judge Xinis will not be satisfied until he is authorized to live in the United States forever," she wrote.

Abrego Garcia has an American wife and child and has lived in Maryland for years, but he immigrated to the U.S. illegally as a teenager. In 2019, an immigration judge ruled that he could not be deported to El Salvador because he faced danger there from a gang that had threatened his family. By mistake, he was deported there anyway last year.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 67 of 77

Facing public pressure and a court order, President Donald Trump's administration brought him back in June, but only after securing an indictment charging him with human smuggling in Tennessee. He has pleaded not guilty. Meanwhile, Trump officials have said he cannot stay in the U.S. In court filings, officials have said they intended to deport him to Uganda, Eswatini, Ghana, and Liberia.

In her Tuesday order, Xinis noted the government has "purposely — and for no reason — ignored the one country that has consistently offered to accept Abrego Garcia as a refugee, and to which he agrees to go." That country is Costa Rica.

Abrego Garcia's attorney, Simon Sandoval-Moshenberg, argued in court that immigration detention is not supposed to be a punishment. Immigrants can only be detained as a way to facilitate their deportation and cannot be held indefinitely with no viable deportation plan.

"Since Judge Xinis ordered Mr. Abrego Garcia released in mid-December, the government has tried one trick after another to try to get him re-detained," Sandoval-Moshenberg wrote in an email on Tuesday. "In her decision today, she recognized that if the government were truly trying to remove Mr. Abrego Garcia from the United States, they would have sent him to Costa Rica long before today."

The government should now engage in a good-faith effort to work out the details of removal to Costa Rica, Sandoval-Moshenberg wrote.

Warner Bros reopens takeover talks with Paramount after receiving a waiver from Netflix

By MICHELLE CHAPMAN and WYATTE GRANTHAM-PHILIPS AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Warner Bros. Discovery is briefly reopening takeover talks with Skydance-owned Paramount to hear the company's "best and final" offer, while the Hollywood giant continues to back the studio and streaming deal it struck with Netflix.

In a Tuesday regulatory filing, Warner said it had received a waiver from Netflix to reopen talks with Paramount for the next seven days, or until Monday. Warner said this will allow the companies to discuss unresolved "deficiencies" and "clarify certain terms" of Paramount's latest bid.

But in the meantime, Warner's board is still recommending shareholders support of its proposed merger with Netflix. A special meeting is now scheduled for Friday, March 20 to hold a vote on that deal.

In a statement, Netflix said it was confident that its proposed transaction "provides superior value and certainty" — but recognized "the ongoing distraction for WBD stockholders and the broader entertainment industry caused by PSKY's antics." The streaming giant noted it had granted Warner a seven-day waiver to "finally resolve this matter."

Warner's leadership similarly reiterated its support for the Netflix deal.

Meanwhile, Paramount called Tuesday's actions from Warner's board "unusual" and said the company could have determined whether Paramount's offer was superior without a timed deadline. Still, Paramount said it was "nonetheless prepared to engage in good faith and constructive discussions."

Paramount added that it will continue to advance its tender offer priced at \$30 per share, which it maintained was better than Netflix's proposal, while also pursuing a proxy fight.

The battle for Warner Bros. Discovery is complicated because Netflix and Paramount want different things. In December, Netflix agreed to buy Warner's studio and streaming business for \$72 billion, now in an all-cash transaction that would cover its legacy TV and movie production arms, as well as HBO Max. Including debt, the enterprise value of the deal is about \$83 billion, or \$27.75 per share, and would be finalized after Warner completes a previously-announced separation of its cable operations.

Meanwhile, unlike Netflix, Paramount wants to acquire Warner's entire company — including networks like CNN and Discovery — and went straight to shareholders with an all-cash, \$77.9 billion hostile offer just days after the Netflix deal was announced.

The enterprise value of Paramount's bid currently stands around \$108 billion including debt, or \$30 per share. But Warner disclosed Tuesday that a Paramount representative separately informed the company it would up its offer to \$31 per share "pending engagement."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 68 of 77

Analysts at Raymond James said they had “long believed” Paramount was willing to raise its offer “and now it seems we are finally moving in that direction.” If Paramount were to up its price to \$32 or \$33 per share, they noted it would be “increasingly difficult to argue the Netflix agreement is superior,” although Netflix could then move to match the bid.

“Netflix is still in the driver’s seat, but now having to make its case,” the analysts added in a Tuesday research note.

Paramount has made more attempts to sweeten its offer recently. Last week, the company said it would pay Warner shareholders an added “ticking fee” if its deal doesn’t go through by the end of the year — amounting to 25 cents per share, or a total of \$650 million, for every quarter after Dec. 31. Paramount also pledged to fund Warner’s proposed \$2.8 billion breakup payout to Netflix under its merger agreement.

The company has been scrambling to solidify more shareholder support. Paramount has extended its tender offer three times, with the latest deadline set for March 2. According to company disclosures, more than 42.3 million Warner shares had been “validly tendered and not withdrawn” from its hostile bid as of the start of last week, down from over 168.5 million Warner shares on Jan. 21 — still a small fraction of Warner’s 2.48 billion shares outstanding in series A common stock.

But also last week, one activist investor, Ancora Holdings, publicly expressed opposition to Warner’s proposed merger with Netflix. And beyond its tender offer, Paramount has also promised a proxy fight. On Tuesday, the company reiterated plans to nominate its own slate of directors at Warner’s upcoming annual meeting.

What, if anything, changes after the next seven days of talks has yet to be seen. Paramount, Warner and Netflix have spent the last couple of months in a heated back and forth over who has a stronger deal on the table.

The prospect of a Warner sale to either company has raised tremendous antitrust concerns from lawmakers worldwide, who are calling on regulators to carefully scrutinize a merger of this size.

The U.S. Department of Justice has already initiated its reviews, and other countries may also scrutinize either deal. Both Paramount and Netflix have said they received securities clearance from German authorities last month.

Shares of Warner Bros. Discovery rose more than 3% in Tuesday trading. Paramount Skydance climbed over 5%, while Netflix’s stock inched up slightly.

Georgia students recall horror of being shot as father of accused school shooter goes on trial

By JEFF MARTIN and JOHN RABY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Georgia high school students on Tuesday testified in court about the horrors of being shot during their algebra class, and recounted through tears seeing a classmate in a pool of blood, then seeing blood on their own bodies and fearing they might die.

Various students took the stand at the trial of Colin Gray, the father of Colt Gray, who investigators said had carefully planned the Sept. 4, 2024, shooting at the school northeast of Atlanta that left two teachers and two students dead and several others wounded.

This is one of several cases around the nation where prosecutors are trying to hold parents responsible after their children are accused in fatal shootings.

A ninth-grade girl saw a hole in her wrist and began screaming moments after the gunfire began in her Algebra I class, she testified Tuesday.

“I was also worried that I was going to die and how that would affect my parents because my dad has a heart problem,” she said.

As paramedics carried her out of the school building, she saw Colt Gray on the floor with his hands behind his back and screamed obscenities at him as she passed by him.

“I remember yelling at him that we were kids, because we were kids,” she said. The faces of she and others who testified were not shown during a video livestream of the testimony because of their young ages.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 69 of 77

Other students said the trauma was not limited to their physical wounds, as they spoke of being depressed, anxious and slow to trust people even now, more than a year later.

"Just seeing what I saw that day, it just sticks with me ... and not being able to trust certain people, trust people," said one girl who sustained a gunshot wound to her left shoulder.

Many of the students said they were still in counseling to deal with nightmares, fears of loud noises and anxiety at school and at home. "Even to go on a walk around my neighborhood, anxiety would fill my head, and I feel like somebody driving past me would shoot me," a female student testified.

Colt Gray, who was 14 years old at the time of the shooting, faces 55 counts, including murder in the deaths of four people and 25 counts of aggravated assault. His father Colin Gray faces 29 counts, including two counts of second-degree murder and two counts of involuntary manslaughter.

Colin Gray should be held responsible for providing the weapon despite warnings about alleged threats his son made, a prosecutor said as the father's trial began Monday.

"This case is about this defendant and his actions in allowing a child that he has custody over access to a firearm and ammunition after being warned that child was going to harm others," Barrow County District Attorney Brad Smith said in his opening statement.

Prosecutors argue that amounts to cruelty to children, and second-degree murder is defined in Georgia law as causing the death of a child by committing the crime of cruelty to children.

But Brian Hobbs, an attorney for Colin Gray, said the shooting's planning and timing "were hidden by Colt Gray from his father."

"That's the difference between tragedy and criminal liability," he said. "You cannot hold someone criminally responsible for failing to predict what was intentionally hidden from them."

With a semiautomatic rifle in his book bag, the barrel sticking out and wrapped in poster board, Colt Gray boarded the school bus, investigators said. He left his second-period class and emerged from a bathroom with the gun and then shot people in a classroom and hallways, they said.

Smith told the jury that in September 2021, Colt Gray used a school computer to search the phrase, "how to kill your dad." School resource officers were then sent to the home, but it was determined to be a "misunderstanding," Smith said.

Sixteen months before the shooting, in May 2023, law enforcement acted on a tip from the FBI after a shooting threat was made online concerning an elementary school. The threat was traced to a computer at Gray's home, Smith said.

Colin Gray was told about the threat and was asked whether his son had access to guns. Gray replied that he and his son "take this school shooting stuff very seriously," according to Smith. Colt Gray denied that he made the threat and said that his online account had been hacked, Smith said.

That Christmas, Colin Gray gave his son the gun as a gift and continued to buy accessories after that, including "a lot of ammunition," Smith said.

Colin Gray knew his son was obsessed with school shooters, even having a shrine in his bedroom to Nikolas Cruz, the shooter in the 2018 massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, prosecutors have said. A Georgia Bureau of Investigation agent had testified that the teen's parents had discussed their son's fascination with school shooters but decided that it was in a joking context and not a serious issue.

Three weeks before the shooting, Gray received a chilling text from his son: "Whenever something happens, just know the blood is on your hands," according to Smith.

Colin Gray was also aware his son's mental health had deteriorated and had sought help from a counseling service weeks before the shooting, an investigator testified.

"We have had a very difficult past couple of years and he needs help. Anger, anxiety, quick to be volatile. I don't know what to do," Colin Gray wrote about his son.

But Smith said Colin Gray never followed through on concerns about getting his son admitted to an inpatient facility.

There was 'a bridge called Jesse Jackson' across decades of civil rights advocacy

By AARON MORRISON and SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — From the moment the Rev. Jesse Jackson stepped forward as torchbearer to what was then a largely Southern civil rights struggle — a movement with much unfinished business — he created a bridge.

From the South's fight with Jim Crow to the North's battle with systemic racial inequality, from the buttoned-up, conservative generation of King's circle to the dashiki-wearing Black Power leaders and the activists of the hip-hop generation, Jackson forged a link between improbable dreams and political power.

"From Martin Luther King to Barack Obama, there's a bridge called Jesse Jackson," the Rev. Al Sharpton said.

Jackson, a protégé of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. who led the Civil Rights Movement for decades after the revered leader's assassination, died on Tuesday, his family said. He was 84.

Jackson kept up his public advocacy for racial justice, economic and political inclusion, and civil and human rights for more than a half-century, even after a neurological disorder in his later years affected his ability to move and speak.

Weighing in on political events, supporting the families of Black Americans killed by police and participating in COVID-19 vaccination drives to battle hesitancy in Black communities, Jackson built on a career that included running for president, international diplomacy and influencing the lexicon of racial identity in America.

Jackson clearly wasn't the lion he had been toward the end, but his presence at racial justice protests and COVID-19 advocacy events, and his arrest outside the U.S. Capitol while calling on Congress to end the filibuster to protect voting rights displayed the bite left in his bark.

"We've always had a place for him," said the Rev. William Barber II, co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign and one of many activists who have followed in his footsteps. Jackson urged them to "live life so that it's not your alarm clock that awakes you in the morning, but a purpose. ... A purpose will get you up when you want to stay down."

Still relevant later in life

At George Floyd's memorial service, Jackson's plaintive call, "I can't breathe!" pierced the collective silence in a Minneapolis cathedral. He cried out twice more as the minutes ticked by to symbolize how long Floyd had a police officer's knee pressed on his neck.

It was not only Jackson's powerful expression of his own grief over Floyd's death, which sparked global protests against racial injustice. It was a reminder that his voice still carried the singular resonance that for decades made him an international figure for civil and human rights.

Jackson returned to rally demonstrators marching through downtown Minneapolis, and stood with Floyd's family when a jury convicted former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin of murder in Floyd's death. "Even if we win," he told the marchers, "it's relief, not victory. They're still killing our people. Stop the violence, save the children. Keep hope alive."

"I think the fact that he came and then came back for the judge's verdict, suffering with Parkinson's, shows the determination that Jesse Jackson had all the way to the end," Sharpton said about his longtime mentor. "He once said to me, years before he was diagnosed with Parkinson's, 'I'm not going to stop until I drop. I'm going to die on the battlefield.'"

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, Jackson got vaccinated and urged others to get the shot. He pointed out racial disparities in health care and partnered with the National Medical Association, which represents Black physicians and patients, on a public health campaign to improve testing and treatment data and to recruit more African Americans to the medical field.

"It's America's unfinished business — we're free, but not equal," Jackson told The Associated Press in a 2020 interview. "There's a reality check that has been brought by the coronavirus, that exposes the weakness and the opportunity."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 71 of 77

Seeking the spotlight and redefining what was possible

Jackson had his share of critics both within and outside the Black community. Some considered him a grandstander, too eager to seek out the spotlight.

Jackson was widely known for his appearance in photographs taken moments after King was assassinated on the balcony of a Memphis hotel on April 4, 1968. For two days afterward, Jackson wore a turtleneck he said was soaked with the venerated civil rights leader's blood, including at a King memorial service where he told the Chicago City Council: "I come here with a heavy heart because on my chest is the stain of blood from Dr. King's head."

Two decades later, Jackson made history with his runs for the White House. Until Barack Obama's election in 2008, Jackson was the most successful Black candidate for the U.S. presidency, winning 13 primaries and caucuses for the Democratic nomination in 1988, four years after his first failed attempt.

"I was able to run for the presidency twice and redefine what was possible; it raised the lid for women and other people of color," he told the AP in 2011. "Part of my job was to sow seeds of the possibilities."

Jackson's cultural impact extended to the American lexicon on race and identity. In 1988, he was among a group of leaders to assert that Black people wanted to be called "African Americans," establishing an identity that honored the population's origins as well as their citizenship.

As the founder and leader of Operation PUSH, which later evolved into the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, Jackson channeled cries for Black pride and self-determination into corporate boardrooms, pressuring executives to make America a more open and equitable society. His high-profile diplomatic victories included the release of American civilians abroad during conflicts.

Pushing for change at an early age

Jesse Louis Jackson Sr. was born Oct. 8, 1941, in Greenville, South Carolina, to Helen Burns, an unmarried high school student, and Noah Louis Robinson, a married man who lived next door. Jackson was later adopted by Charles Henry Jackson, who married his mother.

Jackson played quarterback at Sterling High School in Greenville and accepted a football scholarship from the University of Illinois, but said he was told Black people couldn't play quarterback. So he transferred to North Carolina A&T in Greensboro, arriving just months after students there launched the sit-in movement to desegregate restaurants across the South. He became first-string quarterback, student body president, and an honor student in sociology and economics.

Jackson was soon leading demonstrations, and traveled to Alabama to meet King during the march for voting rights from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. He was moving to Chicago to study theology, so King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference assigned him the task of launching Operation Breadbasket, a campaign to pressure companies to hire more Black workers.

He later called his time with King "a phenomenal four years of work," learning how to agitate within the law for social change.

The constant campaigns often left the college sweetheart he married in 1963, Jacqueline Lavinia Brown, taking the lead in raising their five children: Santita Jackson, Yusef DuBois Jackson, Jacqueline Lavinia Jackson Jr., and two future congressmen, former Rep. Jesse L. Jackson Jr., and Rep. Jonathan Luther Jackson. A frequent houseguest was Santita's friend Michelle Robinson, the future first lady.

Jackson, who was ordained as a Baptist minister in 1968 and earned his Master of Divinity in 2000, also acknowledged fathering a child, Ashley Jackson, with one of his employees at Rainbow/PUSH, Karen L. Stanford. He said he understood what it means to be born out of wedlock and was supporting her emotionally and financially.

When the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Jackson parted company in 1971, Jackson formed his own sweeping civil rights organization based in Chicago's South Side, with a mission ranging from social services in communities of color to persuading corporate executives to hire more minorities. He formed the Rainbow Coalition after his first presidential run, then merged the political and social justice organizations into the Rainbow PUSH Coalition in 1996.

While Jackson was known for his powerful voice, his words sometimes got him in trouble. In 1984, he apologized for calling New York City "Hymietown," a derogatory reference to the city's large Jewish popu-

lation, in what he said he believed were private comments to a reporter.

And in July 2008, he made headlines when a hot mike caught him complaining that Obama was "talking down to Black people." Still, tears streamed down his face when he joined the immense crowd in Chicago's Grant Park to celebrate Obama's 2008 election victory.

"I wish for a moment that Dr. King or (assassinated civil rights leader) Medgar Evers ... could've just been there for 30 seconds to see the fruits of their labor," he told the AP years later. "I became overwhelmed. It was the joy and the journey."

Elevate Prize winners gain more than \$300K in funding. They learn to better tell their own stories

By GLENN GAMBOA AP Business Writer

For Mónica Ramírez, being named one of this year's 10 Elevate Prize winners means so much more than the monetary and structural support that comes with it.

It means the work she does with her Fremont, Ohio-based nonprofit Justice for Migrant Women, which advocates for the rights and needs of migrant and rural women and other marginalized communities, is still valued despite the Trump administration's immigration crackdown.

"As immigrant and migrant community members are being threatened and attacked around our country, it's really important to have shows of support like the Elevate Prize is providing because we've seen a retraction -- a big retraction -- in support," said Ramirez, who burst into tears when she learned she had won. "The award means we are able to do the work that we know is so urgently needed."

Like all Elevate Prize winners announced Tuesday, Justice for Migrant Women will receive \$300,000 in unrestricted funding and Ramirez, its founder and president, will receive support and training on organizational growth and increasing the group's visibility.

Elevate Prize Foundation CEO Carolina Garcia Jayaram told The Associated Press that a group's public profile has become more important these days. Not only does it help with fundraising and informing the public, but visibility "is also a form of protection," she said.

"It's more important than ever to double down on leaders like Monica," said Jayaram.

To help Elevate Prize winners get more attention for their work, Jayaram said the foundation is launching "Good Is Trending," an initiative that will include taking over NASDAQ's Times Square billboards on Tuesday to shine a spotlight on the winners.

That bigger spotlight is something prize winner Mara Fleishman, CEO of Chef Ann Foundation, which brings made-from-scratch meals to schools, hopes will bring her nonprofit to the next level. The Boulder, Colorado-based organization has already attracted support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Waverley Street Foundation for its work, which supports elementary and secondary schools in developing menus that are less dependent on processed foods and utilize more fresh local produce.

"We've worked with over 17,000 schools and reached more than five million kids," Fleishman said. "But how do we take the work we've done and turn it into something digestible for legislators and advocates to understand what is possible?"

Fleishman said her foundation needs to find ways to get the public to become a "force multiplier" for its message and carry it into school board meetings and statehouses around the country.

A lot of that work can be done through storytelling, Jayaram said. And the Elevate Prize selection panel took the potential stories the nominees could tell into account when choosing the winners.

"People pay more attention to people than they do to issues," Jayaram said. "So when you can ground an issue in the story of a person, of a community, of a neighborhood, suddenly the whole world can start to engage and relate to that because it's not that different from a community and a neighborhood and a family somewhere else."

The Elevate Prize Foundation has believed in the power of storytelling for years. Last year, it even launched its own production house Elevate Studios to tell the stories of its prize winners more effectively, on platforms ranging from YouTube videos to feature-length documentaries released in theaters.

Ramirez says she looks forward to telling the stories of the people she supports through Justice for Migrant Women.

"I really think that the Elevate Prize is going to help us give a microphone to the people that we serve," she said. "That's my hope."

The 2026 class of Elevate Prize winners are: Shabana Basij-Rasikh, president and co-founder of SOLA (School of Leadership, Afghanistan), an Afghan-led organization advocating for social change through girls' education; Hillary Blout, founder and executive director of For the People, which helps people get released from prison; Manu Chopra, CEO of Karya, which brings AI advancements to low-income communities; Mara Fleishman, CEO of Chef Ann Foundation, which brings made-from-scratch meals to schools; Aisha Nyandoro, CEO of Springboard to Opportunities, which supports residents living in federally subsidized affordable housing; Tom Osborn, founder and CEO of Shamiri, which brings mental health care to underserved regions, starting with Africa; Ai-jen Poo, executive director of Caring Across Generations, which centers care as a national priority; Mónica Ramírez, founder and president of Justice for Migrant Women, which supports migrant and rural women's rights; Krutika Ravishankar, co-founder and executive director of Farmers for Forests, which protects and restores forests across India; Utkarsh Saxena, executive director of Adalat AI, which develops AI tools for the court system.

Russian and Ukrainian officials meet in Geneva for US-brokered talks after almost 4 years of war

By EMMA BURROWS and JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Delegations from Moscow and Kyiv met in Geneva on Tuesday for another round of U.S.-brokered peace talks, a week before the fourth anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of its neighbor.

However, expectations for any breakthroughs in the scheduled two days of talks in Switzerland were low, with neither side apparently ready to budge from its positions on key territorial issues and future security guarantees, despite the United States setting a June deadline for a settlement.

The head of the Ukrainian delegation, Rustem Umerov, posted photos on social media of the three delegations at a horseshoe-shaped table, with the Ukrainian and Russian officials sitting across from each other. U.S. President Donald Trump's envoy, Steve Witkoff, and son-in-law Jared Kushner sat at the head of the table in front of U.S., Russian, Ukrainian and Swiss flags.

"The agenda includes security and humanitarian issues," Umerov said, adding that Ukrainians will work "without excessive expectations."

Tough talks expected

Discussions on the future of Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory are expected to be particularly tough, according to a person familiar with the talks who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the person was not authorized to talk to reporters.

Russia is still insisting that Ukraine cede control of its eastern Donbas region.

Also in Geneva will be American, Russian and Ukrainian military chiefs, who will discuss how ceasefire monitoring might work after any peace deal, and what's needed to implement it, the person said.

During previous talks in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates, military leaders looked at how a demilitarized zone could be arranged and how everyone's militaries could talk to one another, the person added.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov cautioned against expecting developments on the first day of talks as they were set to continue on Wednesday. Moscow has provided few details of previous talks.

Trump describes the talks as 'big'

Ukraine's short-handed army is locked in a war of attrition with Russia's bigger forces along the roughly 1,250-kilometer (750-mile) front line. Ukrainian civilians are enduring Russian aerial barrages that repeatedly knock out power and destroy homes.

The future of the almost 20% of Ukrainian land that Russia occupies or still covets is a central question in the talks, as are Kyiv's demands for postwar security guarantees with a U.S. backstop to deter Moscow

from invading again.

Trump described the Geneva meeting as “big talks.”

“Ukraine better come to the table fast,” he told reporters late Monday as he flew back to Washington from his home in Florida.

It wasn't immediately clear what Trump was referring to in his comment about Ukraine, which has committed to and taken part in negotiations in the hope of ending Russia's devastating onslaught.

Complex talks as the war presses on

The Russian delegation is headed by Russian President Vladimir Putin's adviser Vladimir Medinsky, who headed Moscow's team of negotiators in the first direct peace talks with Ukraine in Istanbul in March 2022 and has forcefully pushed Putin's war goals. Medinsky has written several history books that claim to expose Western plots against Russia and berate Ukraine.

The commander of the U.S. military — and NATO forces — in Europe, Gen. Alexis Grynkewich, and Secretary of the U.S. Army Dan Driscoll will attend the meeting in Geneva on behalf of the U.S. military and meet with their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts, said Col. Martin O'Donnell, a spokesman for the U.S. commander.

Overnight, Russia used almost 400 long-range drones and 29 missiles of various types to strike 12 regions of Ukraine, injuring nine people, including children, according to the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Zelenskyy said tens of thousands of residents were left without heating and running water in the southern port city of Odesa. He said Moscow should be “held accountable” for the relentless attacks, which he said undermine the U.S. push for peace.

“The more this evil comes from Russia, the harder it will be for everyone to reach any agreements with them. Partners must understand this. First and foremost, this concerns the United States,” the Ukrainian leader said on social media late Monday.

“We agreed to all realistic proposals from the United States, starting with the proposal for an unconditional and long-term ceasefire,” Zelenskyy noted.

The talks in Geneva took place as U.S. officials also held indirect talks with Iran in the Swiss city.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's Security Service, or SBU, used long-range drones to strike an oil terminal in southern Russia and a major chemical plant deep inside the country, a Ukrainian security official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly told the AP.

Drones targeted the Tamaneftgaz oil terminal, one of the biggest ports of its type on the Black Sea, in Russia's Krasnodar region for the second time this month, starting a fire, the official said.

Drones also hit the Metafrax Chemicals plant, which manufactures chemical components used in explosives and other military materials, in Russia's Perm region, more than 1,600 kilometers (1,000 miles) from the Ukrainian border, according to the official.

EU privacy investigation targets Musk's Grok chatbot over sexualized deepfake images

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — Elon Musk's social media platform X faces a European Union privacy investigation after its Grok AI chatbot started spitting out nonconsensual deepfake images, Ireland's data privacy regulator said Tuesday.

Ireland's Data Protection Commission said it notified X on Monday that it was opening the inquiry under the 27-nation EU's strict data privacy regulations, adding to the scrutiny X is facing in Europe and other parts of the world over Grok's behavior.

Grok sparked a global backlash last month after it started granting requests from X users to undress people with its AI image generation and editing capabilities, including putting females in transparent bikinis or revealing clothing. Researchers said some images appeared to include children. The company later introduced some restrictions on Grok, though authorities in Europe weren't satisfied.

The Irish watchdog said its investigation focuses on the apparent creation and posting on X of “potentially harmful” nonconsensual intimate or sexualized images containing or involving personal data from Europeans, including children.

X did not respond to a request for comment.

Grok was built by Musk’s artificial intelligence company xAI and is available through X, where its responses to user requests are publicly visible.

The watchdog said the investigation will seek to determine whether X complied with the EU data privacy rules known as GDPR, or the General Data Protection Regulation. Under the rules, the Irish regulator takes the lead on enforcing the bloc’s privacy rules because X’s European headquarters is in Dublin. Violations can result in hefty fines.

The regulator “has been engaging” with X since media reports started circulating weeks earlier about “the alleged ability of X users to prompt the @Grok account on X to generate sexualized images of real people, including children,” Deputy Commissioner Graham Doyle said in a press statement.

Spain’s government has ordered prosecutors to investigate X, Meta and TikTok for alleged crimes related to the creation and proliferation of AI-generated child sex abuse material on their platforms, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez said on Tuesday.

“These platforms are attacking the mental health, dignity and rights of our sons and daughters,” Sánchez wrote on X.

Spain announced earlier this month that it was pursuing a ban on access to social media platforms for under-16s.

Representatives from X, Meta and TikTok did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the Spanish probe.

Earlier this month, French prosecutors raided X’s Paris offices and summoned Musk for questioning. Meanwhile, the data privacy and media regulators in Britain, which has left the EU, have opened their own investigations into X.

The platform is already facing a separate EU investigation from Brussels over whether it has been complying with the bloc’s digital rulebook for protecting social media users that requires platforms to curb the spread of illegal content such as child sexual abuse material.

Bangladesh’s new prime minister is sworn in after his party’s landslide election win

By JULHAS ALAM Associated Press

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) — Bangladesh’s new prime minister was sworn in on Tuesday after his party’s landslide win in parliamentary elections last week, the country’s first since the massive 2024 uprising and a vote billed as key to the nation’s future political landscape after years of intense rivalry and disputed polls.

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman, whose term will last for five years, is the son of former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and former President Ziaur Rahman. He is also Bangladesh’s first male prime minister in 35 years. Since 1991, when Bangladesh returned to democracy, either Rahman’s mother or her archrival Sheikh Hasina had served as prime ministers.

The country’s figurehead President Mohammed Shahabuddin administered the oath of office for Rahman. Dozens of Cabinet members and members of the new government were also being sworn in on Tuesday.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its partners won 212 seats in the 350-member Parliament while an 11-party alliance led by the Jamaat-e-Islami party, the country’s largest Islamist party, won 77 seats to be the opposition.

A new party — the National Citizen Party, or NCP — formed by the student leaders who led the 2024 uprising was part of the 11-party alliance led by Jamaat-e-Islami. The NCP secured six seats.

In Bangladesh, voters elect 300 members of Parliament directly while the remaining 50 posts are reserved for women and distributed proportionately among the winning parties.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 76 of 77

Rahman, 60, who returned to the country in December — after 17 years in self-exile in London and shortly before his mother's death — has promised to work for democracy in Bangladesh, a country of 170 million people.

An interim government led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus, that took over after Hasina was toppled, oversaw the election. The vote was largely peaceful and deemed as acceptable by international observers.

Foreign dignitaries and diplomats attended the ceremony Tuesday. Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu, Bhutanese Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay and an Indian delegation were among the guests, as well as dignitaries from Nepal, Sri Lanka and other countries.

Earlier on Tuesday morning, head of the election commission A.N.M. Nasir Uddin administered the oath of office separately to all the newly elected lawmakers.

But lawmakers from the BNP refused to take a second oath as members of a proposed Constitutional Reform Council in line with a referendum held simultaneously with Thursday's balloting. The interim government said the "Yes" side won the referendum and it made the arrangement with a set of reforms proposals to change the constitution keeping all the elected lawmakers as its members.

The referendum stemmed from a national charter in light of the uprising and major parties including the BNP signed it. Lawmakers elected from the Jamaat-e-Islami and its allies took the second oath, signaling complexity in the new Parliament.

The referendum refers political reforms that include prime ministerial term limits, stronger checks on executive power and other safeguards preventing parliamentary power consolidation. But critics say rising Islamists are pushing hard for its implementation while the referendum has some agenda that could even change the character of Bangladesh's largely secular constitution.

Rahman's main rival Bangladesh Awami League party headed by Hasina — who was ousted in the 2024 mass uprising — was banned from the race. The Yunus-led administration also banned all activities of Hasina's party, which had ruled the country for 15 years.

From her exile in India, where she has lived since Aug. 5, 2024, Hasina slammed the vote as unfair to her party, which still remains a major political force. At home, Hasina was sentenced to death on charges of crimes against humanity because of hundreds of deaths stemming from the uprising.

She denied the allegation and termed the court as a "kangaroo court."

Today in History: February 18, Dale Earnhardt Sr. dies in Daytona crash

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Wednesday, Feb. 18, the 49th day of 2026. There are 316 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 18, 2001, auto racing star Dale Earnhardt Sr. died in a crash in the final lap of the Daytona 500; he was 49.

Also on this date:

In 1885, Mark Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" was published in the U.S.

In 1930, the dwarf planet Pluto was discovered by American astronomer Clyde Tombaugh.

In 1970, the "Chicago Seven" defendants were found not guilty of conspiring to incite riots at the 1968 Democratic National Convention; five were convicted of violating the Anti-Riot Act of 1968 (those convictions were later reversed).

In 1983, 13 people were shot to death at a gambling club in Seattle's Chinatown in what became known as the Wah Mee Massacre. (Two men were convicted of the killings and were sentenced to life in prison; a third was found guilty of robbery and assault and served 28 years in prison before being deported to Hong Kong in 2014.)

In 1994, in the final race of his Olympic career at the Winter Olympic Games in Lillehammer, Norway,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 258 ~ 77 of 77

U.S. speedskater Dan Jansen broke the world record in the 1,000 meters, winning the gold medal.

In 2001, veteran FBI agent Robert Philip Hanssen was arrested, accused of spying for Russia. (Hanssen later pleaded guilty to espionage and attempted espionage and was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole; he died in prison in 2023.)

In 2003, an arson attack involving two South Korean subway trains in the city of Daegu claimed nearly 200 lives.

In 2013, some \$42 million (40 million euros) worth of diamonds and other gems were stolen at Brussels' international airport by eight gunmen who cut through a perimeter fence, drove onto the tarmac and took the gemstones as they were being transferred from an armored car to a plane bound for Switzerland.

In 2021, the NASA rover Perseverance successfully landed on Mars, where it continues to explore the planet's surface.

Today's Birthdays: Artist-singer Yoko Ono is 93. Restaurateur-TV host Prue Leith (TV: "The Great British Baking Show") is 86. Singer Irma Thomas is 85. Musician Dennis DeYoung is 79. Actor Cybill Shepherd is 76. Actor John Travolta is 72. TV personality Vanna White is 69. Actor Matt Dillon is 62. Rapper-music executive Dr. Dre is 61. Actor Molly Ringwald is 58. Actor Ike Barinholtz is 49. Football Hall of Famer Dwight Freeney is 46. Musician Regina Spektor is 46. Actor Kylie Rogers is 22.