

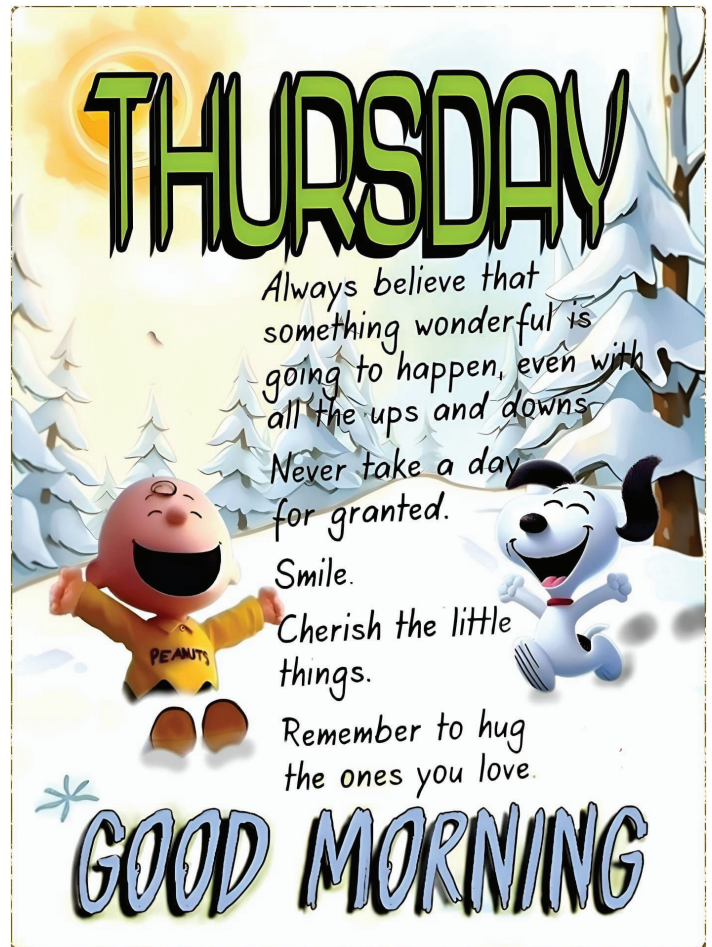
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Thursday, Feb. 19

Senior Menu: Meatloaf, baked potato, broccoli, fruit, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Maple French Toast Bake.
School Lunch: Lasagna bake, corn.
Region 1 Girls Wrestling Tournament, 3:30 p.m., at De Smet
2nd Grade BB, 5 p.m., Elementary Gym
4th Grade BB, 6 p.m., HS Gym
HS Softball, 6 p.m., HS Gym
JH Boys Basketball hosts Warner (7th at 6 p.m., 8th at 7 p.m.)



Friday, Feb. 20

Senior Menu: Breaded fish, rice pilaf, green beans, fruit, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Breakfast boats.
School Lunch: Fish nuggets, puzzle tots.
3rd Grade Boys Basketball, 3:30 p.m., elementary gym.
Basketball doubleheader vs. Britton-Hecla in Groton: (Gym:BC-4, GC-5, Arena: JVGBB-4, JVBBB-5, VGBB-6:15, VBBB-7:30)

Saturday, Feb. 21

Pickleball. 9:30 a.m., elementary gym.
Region 1B Boys Wrestling Tournament, 9:30 a.m., Webster
Youth Wrestling Tournament Set-Up, 5 p.m.

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

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1440

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

Talk Show Scrutiny

The Federal Communications Commission yesterday confirmed a probe into whether ABC's daytime talk show "The View" failed to give rival Texas Senate candidates equal airtime following an interview with Democratic candidate James Talarico earlier this month.

The news comes after CBS' "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert" pulled a separate interview with Talarico from its Monday broadcast over concerns about the equal-time rule. The 1934 provision requires broadcasters who give airtime to one political candidate to provide comparable time to competing candidates upon request. Talk shows have historically been treated as news programs and, therefore, exempt from the rule. But last month, the FCC issued guidance warning it would vet talk shows for partisan intent when granting exemptions.

Since the equal airtime provision applies to broadcasts but not streaming platforms, Colbert's show released the Talarico segment on YouTube. Talarico's campaign yesterday reported a record \$2.5M in donations within 24 hours of his Colbert interview being pulled from broadcast.

Zuckerberg in Court

Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg testified yesterday before a jury in a high-profile case accusing social media companies of fostering addiction. Zuckerberg told the jury that some young users lie about their age on Instagram, among other comments.

The case centers on a now-20-year-old identified as KGM. She says she began using social media at age 10, alleging "addictive design" by Meta and YouTube—including notifications and recommendation features she says contributed to a decline in her mental health. Meta and YouTube are relying in part on Section 230, a federal law protecting platforms from liability for content posted by their users. Instagram's chief this week also sought to differentiate between social media addiction and clinical addiction. (TikTok and Snap were originally part of the suit but have settled.)

The outcome of the case could influence more than 1,000 similar lawsuits. Some observers have drawn comparisons between the case and lawsuits against tobacco companies in the 1990s.

California's Deadliest Avalanche

Authorities have retrieved the bodies of eight backcountry skiers following an avalanche near Lake Tahoe—the deadliest in California history. Six skiers were rescued after issuing a 911 call; one is still missing, with rescue efforts ongoing as of this writing.

The group of 15 had been staying near Frog Lake, below the 9,100-foot-tall Castle Peak—one of the Sierra Nevada's most popular skiing destinations. Before the avalanche at 11:30 am Tuesday, local authorities had issued a warning due to strong winds and rapid snowfall (nearly 3 feet of snow had accumulated within two days). It was not immediately clear whether the group—which included four guides from Blackbird Mountain Guides—had seen the warning.

Search and rescue efforts were impeded by ongoing avalanche conditions. Rescuers used a snowcat to get within 2 miles of the survivors then skied toward them to avoid triggering another avalanche.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

US skier Mikaela Shiffrin wins gold in slalom race, marking the four-time Olympian's first medal since the 2018 Winter Games.

Norwegian cross-country skier Johannes Hoesflot Klaebo ties Michael Phelps for a record 10th Olympic gold.

Seattle Seahawks up for sale less than two weeks after winning the Super Bowl; the sale follows the wishes of late owner Paul Allen, who bought the team for \$194M in 1997 and died in 2018.

Bad Bunny to star in historical drama directed by fellow Grammy-winning Puerto Rican artist Residente.

Pulp Fiction actor Peter Greene died of an accidental gunshot wound, says New York City medical examiner.

Science & Technology

Food and Drug Administration reverses course, agrees to review Moderna's mRNA flu vaccine after the company revises its study approach.

White House taps National Institutes of Health director, Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, to serve as acting director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Google introduces AI-powered music generation feature to Gemini app, enabling users to create songs from text, video, and image prompts.

Bioelectric device enables scientists to map neural activity inside lab-grown human brain-like tissues; the invention could facilitate discoveries about how human brains develop and function.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close up (S&P 500 +0.6%, Dow +0.3%, Nasdaq +0.8%) as traders assess Federal Reserve's January meeting minutes.

Fed officials appear split over whether to cut, raise, or hold interest rates, with most wanting to see further progress on inflation.

Elon Musk's xAI secures \$3B investment from Saudi Arabia's state-backed AI firm Humain; investment is part of xAI's recent \$20B funding round, which completed before SpaceX acquired the startup.

Christine Lagarde to reportedly step down as president of the European Central Bank before her eight-year term expires in October 2027, fueling succession talks.

Politics & World Affairs

Former Victoria's Secret CEO Leslie Wexner testifies before House Oversight Committee for its Jeffrey Epstein investigation, maintains he did not know about Epstein's wrongdoing, did not participate in criminal activity.

The US will reportedly withdraw all of its 1,000 troops in Syria over the next two months, ending decade long presence; officials say the decision predates recent tensions with Iran.

Vatican declines to join 19 countries on President Donald Trump's Board of Peace to supervise Gaza governance; says the United Nations is the right body to oversee global conflicts.

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!

The advertisement features a colorful illustration of a teddy bear, a baby bottle, and a stack of colorful blocks on the left, and a yellow bucket with cleaning supplies on the right. At the bottom, there is a small house and a red car on a road.

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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.

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Blizzard conditions hit the area Wednesday morning. Visibility was reduced to near zero at times. This photo taken on Groton's downtown area looking north. Around 3" of snow fell in Groton with .35 of rain falling prior to the snow. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Due to the road conditions, the Groton Area School District will open two hours late on Thursday, February 19, 2026. OST will open at 7:00 AM.

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!

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Groton Squadron #39 Sets Quorum, Discusses Fundraising at February Meeting

GROTON — Groton Squadron Sons of the American Legion #39 met Feb. 17, 2026, with Commander Travis McGannon calling the meeting to order.

Members in attendance included Dylan McGannon, Aaron Grant, Aaron Severson, Rylan Blackwood, Mark Abeln, Tanner McGannon, Travis McGannon, Aaron Grant Jr., and Paul Kosel. Ben Smith was also present.

The meeting opened with a prayer offered by Aaron Grant Jr., followed by the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance and the Preamble to the American Legion. The POW/MIA flag was placed on the chair in observance.

One of the key items of business was establishing a quorum requirement for future meetings. Following discussion, members approved setting a minimum of four members to constitute a quorum.

Smith spoke about the benefits of the organization and highlighted opportunities for growth and involvement. Discussion also centered on the squadron's checking account, with members noting that paperwork needs to be submitted to the bank. A flagpole will also be ordered, along with a preamble display.

The squadron approved the minutes from the Jan. 19, 2026, meeting.

Members also discussed fundraising opportunities to support the organization. Ideas included a gun raffle, Ace of Hearts, a 50/50 drawing, and a Wheel of Meat fundraiser. Smith noted there are ample opportunities to raise funds in the community.

In addition, Aaron Grant shared items of his grandfather's World War II memorabilia with those in attendance.

The meeting adjourned with the closing prayer.

Paul Kosel serves as adjutant for the squadron.

Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #13 Results

Team Standings: Cheetahs 19, Coyotes 13, Shihtzus 12, Jackelopes 10, Foxes 9, Chipmunks 9

Men's High Games: Brad Waage 210, 189, 181, Brad Larson 179, Randy Stanley 175

Women's High Games: Suzie Easthouse 183, Deb Schuelke 163, Sam Bahr 153

Men's High Series: Brad Waage 580, Brad Larson 489, John Sippel 462

Women's High Series: Suzie Easthouse 445, Sam Bahr 436, Brenda Madsen 412

Fun Game: Lowest Series - Chipmunks with 1389!

New World Screwworm awareness resources

Hi everyone,

I wanted to share awareness resources on New World screwworm (NWS). NWS is a parasitic infestation of fly larvae (maggots) in live tissue in animals and humans. It is important to note that this maggot feeds on living tissue, much different than the flies and their larval offspring (maggots) endemic to South Dakota that feed only on dead tissue. When NWS larvae feed on living tissue, they can cause massive tissue destruction and severe wounds/infections. While NWS is typically a disease of livestock, in the past, human cases have been reported among U.S. travelers returning from endemic regions in the Caribbean and Central and South America. A current outbreak in the Americas raises concerns about northward spread and potential reintroduction into the United States via domestic animals, wildlife, or humans. As of this writing, we are not aware of any active cases of NWS infestations in the United States.

Two new fact sheets (next two pages) have been developed for the agriculture industry to raise awareness among individuals who may be at increased risk. Although infestations do not spread directly from person to person or from animals to people, understanding how they spread is important for prevention. These resources highlight clinical indicators, populations at higher risk, prevention strategies, and how to report concerns.

Given the overlap with outdoor exposure, wounds (including insect bites), and surveillance activities, we are sharing these materials with mosquito control partners to support broader awareness and prevention efforts. NWS resources will be available on the South Dakota Department of Health (SDDOH) website soon.

Thanks, as always, for your partnership. Please feel free to share these resources with your networks.

Reporting:

- All suspected human cases should be reported immediately to the South Dakota Department of Health at 800-592-1861.
- Veterinarians should report suspected animal cases to the South Dakota Animal Industry Board at 605-773-3321.

Best,
Anita Bharadwaja, MPH
Vectorborne Epidemiologist
Epidemiology, Surveillance and
Informatics Center
605.367.7103 | 4101 W 38** St Suite 102,
Sioux Falls, SD 57106

Stop New World Screwworm

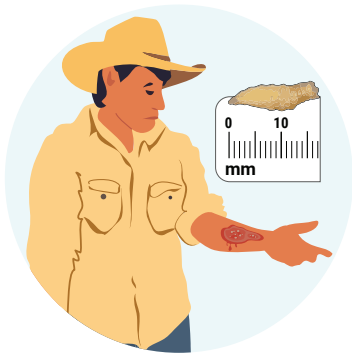
New World screwworm (NWS) flies lay eggs in open wounds on animals and people. Their maggots eat living flesh, making wounds larger and more painful. Flies can lay eggs in wounds as small as a bug bite.

NWS is a danger to people and animals. Here's how you can help stop the spread of NWS:



Protect your skin.

- Clean and cover any cuts and wounds.
- Wear long-sleeved shirts, pants, socks, and hats to prevent bug bites.
- Wear bug repellent spray.
- Do not apply insecticide meant for use on animals to your skin.



Know the symptoms.

- Maggots in wounds or open sores
- Painful or stinky wounds that won't heal
- Movement or an itching sensation in the wound



Get help.

- Tell a supervisor if you see any sign of maggots in people or animals.
- Do not try to remove the maggots yourself.
- See a healthcare provider to get treatment right away if you think you have an NWS infestation.



Learn more:
www.screwworm.gov



Stop New World Screwworm

New World screwworm (NWS) is a type of maggot that eats living flesh. It can infest livestock, wildlife, pets, and sometimes birds and people. NWS causes severe wounds and can be deadly if it's not treated.

NWS flies lay eggs in open wounds or other body openings (eyes, ears, nose, mouth, or genitals). The eggs hatch into maggots, which burrow into the wound and feed on living flesh. Screwworm flies can lay their eggs in a wound as small as a bug bite.

As producers or farm owners, you play a crucial role in keeping your farm and employees safe. Help your employees protect themselves by teaching them how to recognize NWS, sharing steps to prevent NWS infestations, and supporting them if they report a possible case.

1. Know the signs of NWS

Train employees to look for signs in people:

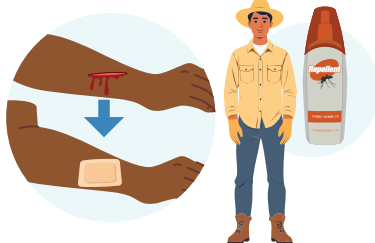


- Seeing or feeling maggots moving in a wound or sore, ears, nose, eyes, mouth, or genitals
- Painful skin wounds or sores that get worse or don't heal after a few days
- A bad smell or bleeding from a wound
- Movement or an itchy feeling in the wound

Encourage employees to report concerns of NWS and seek medical care right away if they notice any of these signs.

2. Prevent NWS at work

Help employees protect their skin and prevent bug bites.



- Encourage employees to keep open wounds clean and covered.
- Provide adhesive bandages, disinfectants, and gauze pads for employees to cover any break in the skin.
- Encourage employees to wear loose, long-sleeved shirts, pants, socks, and hats to limit bug bites.
- Provide EPA-registered insect repellent and enough to reapply during their shift.
- Instruct employees to not apply insecticide for animals on their skin.

Explain why covering wounds and keeping bugs away are important to prevent NWS.

3. Make reporting and access to care easy

Plan ahead so employees know what to do if they see maggots in people or animals or think they have NWS.



- Encourage employees to report any sign of maggots right away.
- Make sure they know they won't be punished for reporting.
- Instruct employees to not remove the maggots themselves.
- Identify where employees can seek and receive medical care quickly to prevent NWS from spreading.

If maggots or eggs fall out of a wound, tell employees to collect them in a leak-proof container to save for a doctor or veterinarian. If available, add rubbing alcohol to the container to kill and preserve them.



For more information on NWS in animals, visit www.screwworm.gov



Do you need a measles booster?

By Mayo Clinic Press Editors



Press

News about measles outbreaks in the U.S. has some adults asking whether they should get a booster shot. First, it's important to know that most people in the U.S. are protected against measles. This is either because they were vaccinated or because they had measles as children before the vaccine was available. So the risk of a widespread measles outbreak remains low, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

But measles is extremely contagious, and people can spread the virus before they know they have it. This means it can easily spread among people who aren't immune. And that has some people wondering if they should get a measles booster, to be safe. The answer depends in part on when

you were born.

"Most people are asking, 'If I was born in a certain year, do I need to be vaccinated or revaccinated?'" says Denise M. Millstine, M.D., an internist at Mayo Clinic in Arizona. She says the quick answer is that if you were born before 1957, you probably don't need a booster. But, she adds, there are a few other things to consider.

Adults who may need a measles vaccine

Here's what Mayo Clinic experts say:

If you were born before 1957, you're considered immune because you likely had the measles as a child, before a vaccine was available.

If you were born after 1957 and were vaccinated before 1976, you may or may not have immunity. That's because the measles vaccines used in the U.S. between 1963 (when the first one was licensed) and 1976 had differing levels of effectiveness.

If you were vaccinated after 1976, you shouldn't need a booster unless you are in a high-risk group (noted below). All measles vaccines given in the U.S. after 1976 were effective, and most people who received at least one dose are considered immune.

If you have your vaccination records, you can check to see which of these groups you fall into. If you have documentation of two doses of a measles-containing vaccine given after 1976, you are protected and do not need any additional doses. The vaccine provides long-lasting immunity.

But if you don't have your records, you can get a simple blood test to see whether you have the measles antibody. You might see this referred to as an antibody titer test. Or you can just get the vaccine.

Testing also is something to consider if you believe you were vaccinated between 1963 and 1976. "The people in this group are the ones who probably need to think through being tested for protective measles antibodies or getting a booster," says Dr. Millstine.

But it's a different story if the test shows you don't have measles antibodies. "Either you weren't vaccinated, or you were vaccinated and it didn't last," says Dr. Millstine. In that case, it's a good idea to ask your healthcare professional or pharmacist about getting a measles vaccine.

If you are a healthcare worker or international traveler, you are at higher risk of being exposed to measles, so it is recommended that you have two doses of the vaccine.

The booster shot is the same as the measles vaccine and is given as a combination vaccine against measles, mumps and rubella (MMR). A single dose is about 93% effective at preventing measles infection. Two doses raise the effectiveness to 97%.

Adults who should not get a measles vaccine

For most adults, there's no harm in getting a booster, whether or not you have the blood test first. But you should not get the measles vaccine if you:

Are pregnant or could become pregnant in the next four weeks. You should not try to get pregnant until four weeks after receiving the vaccine.

Have a suppressed immune system due to illness or medical treatment.

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You are undergoing chemotherapy, radiation or immunotherapy.

You had an organ transplant and take medications to suppress your immune system.

You have poorly controlled HIV.

You have other conditions that mean your immune system doesn't work properly.

Recently had a blood transfusion.

Have had a serious allergic reaction to any vaccine components.

Talk with your healthcare professional or pharmacist if you have any questions.

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NEC Boys Basketball Standings

| | (C) | (S) |
|-------------------|-----|------|
| Clark/Willow Lake | 9-0 | 17-2 |
| Groton Area | 8-1 | 14-4 |
| Hamlin | 7-1 | 16-2 |
| Webster Area | 6-3 | 11-7 |
| Britton-Hecla | 5-4 | 12-7 |
| Roncalli | 4-5 | 5-11 |
| Sisseton | 4-6 | 9-9 |
| Milbank | 3-5 | 9-8 |
| Deuel | 2-7 | 6-13 |
| Tiospa Zina | 0-8 | 4-14 |
| Redfield | 0-8 | 2-16 |

















NEC Girls Basketball Standings

| | (C) | (S) |
|-------------------|-----|------|
| Clark/Willow Lake | 9-0 | 17-2 |
| Hamlin | 9-0 | 18-1 |
| Groton Area | 6-2 | 13-6 |
| Roncalli | 6-2 | 15-4 |
| Milbank | 5-4 | 15-4 |
| Sisseton | 5-5 | 8-10 |
| Webster | 3-6 | 7-12 |
| Deuel | 3-6 | 5-14 |
| Tiospa Zina | 1-8 | 5-13 |
| Redfield | 1-8 | 4-15 |
| Britton-Hecla | 1-8 | 4-15 |








Girls Region 1A

| # | Name | W | L | PCT |
|---|---|----|----|------|
| 1 |  Aberdeen Roncalli | 15 | 4 | .789 |
| 2 |  Groton Area | 13 | 6 | .684 |
| 3 |  Milbank | 15 | 4 | .789 |
| 4 |  Sisseton | 8 | 10 | .444 |
| 5 |  Webster Area | 7 | 12 | .368 |
| 6 |  Britton-Hecla | 4 | 15 | .211 |
| 6 |  Redfield | 4 | 15 | .211 |

















Girls State Standings

| # | Name | W | L | PCT |
|----|---|----|---|-------|
| 1 |  Hamlin | 18 | 1 | .947 |
| 2 |  Mahpiya Luta | 19 | 0 | 1.000 |
| 3 |  Sioux Valley | 17 | 2 | .895 |
| 4 |  Sioux Falls Christian | 16 | 4 | .800 |
| 5 |  Lennox | 16 | 3 | .842 |
| 6 |  Wagner | 16 | 2 | .889 |
| 7 |  West Central | 15 | 4 | .789 |
| 8 |  Clark/Willow Lake | 17 | 2 | .895 |
| 9 |  Aberdeen Roncalli | 15 | 4 | .789 |
| 10 |  Rapid City Christian | 16 | 3 | .842 |
| 11 |  Lakota Tech | 16 | 4 | .800 |
| 12 |  Mobridge-Pollock | 15 | 4 | .789 |
| 13 |  Groton Area | 13 | 6 | .684 |
| 14 |  St. Thomas More | 13 | 5 | .722 |
| 15 |  Milbank | 15 | 4 | .789 |
| 16 |  Miller | 14 | 5 | .737 |

Boys Region 1A

| # | Name | W | L | PCT |
|---|---|----|----|------|
| 1 |  Groton Area | 14 | 4 | .778 |
| 2 |  Webster Area | 11 | 7 | .611 |
| 3 |  Britton-Hecla | 12 | 7 | .632 |
| 4 |  Milbank | 9 | 8 | .529 |
| 5 |  Sisseton | 9 | 9 | .500 |
| 6 |  Aberdeen Roncalli | 5 | 11 | .312 |
| 7 |  Redfield | 2 | 16 | .111 |

Boys State Standings

| # | Name | W | L | PCT |
|----|--|----|---|-------|
| 1 |  West Central | 19 | 0 | 1.000 |
| 2 |  Sioux Falls Christian | 16 | 1 | .941 |
| 3 |  Hamlin | 16 | 2 | .889 |
| 4 |  Clark/Willow Lake | 17 | 2 | .895 |
| 5 |  Mahpiya Luta | 15 | 3 | .833 |
| 6 |  Stanley County | 16 | 2 | .889 |
| 7 |  Groton Area | 14 | 4 | .778 |
| 8 |  Vermillion | 13 | 5 | .722 |
| 9 |  Cheyenne-Eagle Butte | 14 | 3 | .824 |
| 10 |  St. Thomas More | 13 | 5 | .722 |
| 11 |  Lennox | 12 | 5 | .706 |
| 12 |  Flandreau | 11 | 7 | .611 |
| 13 |  Sioux Valley | 13 | 6 | .684 |
| 14 |  Winner | 12 | 6 | .667 |
| 15 |  Pine Ridge | 11 | 8 | .579 |
| 16 |  Rapid City Christian | 10 | 8 | .556 |



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Lawmakers advance stricter controls on state economic development board and fund

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR

The state's economic development board could be subjected to tighter conflict-of-interest requirements if a bill responding to South Dakota Searchlight reporting becomes law, and an economic development fund controlled by the governor could also be brought under stricter control by a bill advancing in the Legislature.

Board of Economic Development ethics

The bill dealing with board members cleared the House State Affairs Committee on a 7-4 vote on Wednesday, as lawmakers debated whether current disclosure and recusal laws go far enough to protect public trust.

Rep. Karla Lems, R-Canton, introduced the bill. It says a member of the state Board of Economic Development can't serve on the board of a company or have an ownership interest in a company that receives an award, disbursement, expenditure or grant approved by the board.

"This is not an accusation from me of wrongdoing," she said. "This is about shoring up public trust. We have seen in recent years how the absence of guardrails leads to controversy."

Lems cited South Dakota Searchlight reporting that the Board of Economic Development's longtime chairman, Jeff Erickson, also serves on the corporate board of CJ Schwan's and is part of a corporation that rents office space to the company. The company has benefited from \$69 million in state tax rebates, grants and loans in the past several years for the construction of a food production plant in Sioux Falls, though Erickson abstained from related discussions and votes.

Several committee members questioned whether a recusal eliminates a board member's influence. Lems said the bill draws a line that prevents self-dealing and the appearance of self-dealing.

Opponents, including Governor's Office of Economic Development Commissioner Bill Even, said the bill could backfire by making it "nearly impossible" to recruit qualified volunteer board members with the financial and industry expertise needed. He said the bill's "ownership interest" language could be interpreted broadly, discouraging participation by individuals with common investments, such as stock holdings or mutual funds.

Ryan Budmayr is the president and CEO of the South Dakota Chamber of Commerce and Industry. He said the bill "replaces accountability with a purity test."

"This is an extreme step that will harm our state's business climate," he said.

The bill now heads to the full House for consideration.

Another bill inspired by the same Searchlight reporting would make state officials involved in a big contract with a company wait longer before accepting a job with that company.

The bill comes in response to the situation of former state economic development commissioner Steve Westra. As reported by Searchlight, Westra took a job with CJ Schwan's a year after he left state government. While working for the state, Westra had signed the first pledge of state aid benefiting construction of the company's \$550 million, 650-employee food production plant in northern Sioux Falls.

That bill has passed the Senate and awaits action by a House committee.

Future Fund bill

Rep. Marty Overweg, R-New Holland, introduced a bipartisan bill to put more guardrails on how the

governor can award Future Fund economic development dollars. It passed 63-4 on Wednesday and goes to a Senate committee next.

The fund was created in 1987 at the request of then-Gov. George Mickelson. It was placed under the governor's exclusive control, enabling quick responses when economic opportunities arise. South Dakota employers contribute fees to the Future Fund when they remit payroll taxes for unemployment benefits.

Last week, Even testified in favor of the bill to the House State Affairs Committee, which approved it 12-0. "We had the opportunity to sit down and really be palms up around what the governor's office was looking for, and the governor, and GOED, as well as what the legislature was looking for," Even said. "And through that process, we were able to work on this draft."

The bill would clarify the definition of "purposes related to research and economic development," the only current limitation on Future Fund awards under state law. The new definition would include grants for industry research and equipment; scholarships, apprenticeships and career training; recruitment of out-of-state companies and workers; and development of infrastructure and projects aimed at business retention and expansion.

Rep. Eric Muckey, D-Sioux Falls, said clarifying what qualifies for funding makes it "a very effective bill" that addresses past controversies with the fund. Those controversies included Republican former Gov. Kristi Noem using it to pay for a fireworks show at Mount Rushmore, a Rapid City-area shooting range that legislators refused to fund, a Sioux Falls rodeo, and a workforce recruitment campaign that Noem starred in.

The bill would also require business applicants to submit a business plan, limit awards to reimbursement of actual project costs and, for awards over \$1 million, require itemized project invoices and proof of payment before reimbursement.

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.

County sales tax idea moves ahead as effort to prolong statewide sales tax reduction fails

New option for counties would be used to reduce homeowner property taxes

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR AND SETH TUPPER

A proposal to let counties reduce homeowner property taxes by charging a sales tax advanced Wednesday at the South Dakota Capitol in Pierre, while an effort to maintain a lower statewide sales tax rate failed.

The county sales tax plan is from Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden. It would let counties levy up to a half-percent sales tax and use the money to offset the county's portion of property taxes on owner-occupied homes, in the form of credits to property owners.

The Senate Taxation Committee voted 7-0 to send the bill to the Senate with a "do pass" recommendation. Rhoden's budget commissioner, Jim Terwilliger, testified in favor of the bill.

"It's optional," Terwilliger said. "It's targeted at the areas of the state that need property tax relief the most."

Those areas, the governor has said, include greater Sioux Falls and the Black Hills, where in-migration has driven up home prices and property taxes. Those are also areas with lots of visitors who pay sales taxes.

Counties are not currently allowed to impose a sales tax. They rely on property taxes, as do public schools. Cities receive revenue from property taxes and sales taxes. The state is reliant on sales taxes. In addition to the state's 4.2% sales tax, cities can charge up to 2%, and cities can also charge another 1% on alcohol, restaurants, lodging and event tickets.

The bill says a decision by county commissioners to impose a sales tax could be petitioned to an elec-

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tion. If sales tax collections exceed what's needed to offset owner-occupied property taxes, the remaining money would be used to reduce property taxes for agricultural and commercial property.

Opponents raised concerns about equity. South Dakota Retailers Association Executive Director Nathan Sanderson warned that when a county imposes a sales tax, shoppers from outside the county would pay higher sales taxes without receiving the property tax relief.

More tax bills receive action

That bill now heads to the full Senate, where Senate President Pro Tempore Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, failed to convince his colleagues Wednesday to reconsider his bill that would make a temporary statewide sales tax reduction permanent.

Lawmakers and then-Gov. Kristi Noem lowered the state's sales tax rate from 4.5% to 4.2% in 2023, and scheduled the reduction to expire in 2027. Karr wants to make the reduction permanent, but his bill failed on a 17-17 tie Tuesday, with one senator absent. Karr made a reconsideration motion Wednesday, but the motion failed 16-17 with two senators absent.

U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, an opponent of Rhoden's for the Republican nomination for governor in June, has proposed capturing revenue from the scheduled sales tax increase to provide statewide property tax credits to homeowners.

In related action on Wednesday in the House, a bill from Republican Majority Leader Scott Odenbach, of Spearfish, to change how owner-occupied and commercial property is valued passed 38-29 and will head to a Senate committee.

Instead of looking at the annual increase in property values, the bill would require counties to use an eight-year market average to set taxable values for individual properties (after excluding a county's highest and lowest property values). The idea would be to blunt the impact of spiking valuations. The bill would also bar a tax shift to agricultural land to cover any losses and place the onus on school boards to adjust budgets if necessary.

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.

Lawmakers support 'alternative setting' plan for aggressive or violent students

Budget committee will also consider funding for non-residential treatment facility

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

PIERRE — Legislation to address aggressive and violent student behavior passed with full support from the South Dakota House Education Committee on Wednesday, and legislation providing money to build a non-residential treatment center for children also advanced.

The bill addressing aggressive and violent students will be heard next by the full House of Representatives. The funding bill is headed to a budget committee.

Last month, state Education Department Secretary Joe Graves told the House Education Committee that teachers are increasingly facing aggressive and violent behavior from students, sometimes from elementary-age children, resulting in injuries to teachers and property damage.

Under House Bill 1017, a school board or its administrators would be able to send those students to an alternative learning setting with a written notice to parents, who could appeal the decision.

An alternative setting would be any place "other than the student's regular classroom or educational setting, as designated by a school administrator, where a student is provided educational instruction." If students are placed outside of school for more than five days, they would have to be referred to a be-

havioral health specialist.

The bill would also require that school boards report the alternative placements to the state Department of Education each year, which supporters said could help educators find other solutions to behavioral issues.

Mackenzie Decker, chief of staff for Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden, said the bill could lead to a better understanding of the problems teachers face in the classroom.

"The bill is not perfect, but it's also not required," she said. "They put in place a data collection system so that we may better understand what our next steps might be."

Schools can already suspend students or call law enforcement. Supporters of the bill said it gives schools another option.

Terry Dosch, executive director of South Dakota Council of Community Behavioral Health, said the legislation could be a way to help de-escalate aggressive or violent behaviors.

"One of the things that frustrates me is the willingness of people to pay for behavioral health on the back end, when we're building new prison systems, or when we're worried about instituting somebody," he said. "They could have had early identification, interdiction, and some correction on their behavior earlier on. Prevention, early identification, and treatment is always cheaper than a placement alternative."

The committee also advanced a bill that will be heard next in a joint budget-setting committee. The proposal, brought by Rep. Lana Greenfield, R-Doland, would give the state Department of Education \$2 million to grant to a qualified nonprofit to build a non-residential facility providing school-based, therapeutic services for students with behavioral health concerns.

One of the nonprofits that could apply for a grant, Children's Home Society, has day school locations in Sioux Falls and Rapid City and is considering adding services in Aberdeen. Mike Groher, business development officer at Children's Home Society, testified in favor of the bill.

"Utilization has remained consistent and predictable as access has expanded," he said. "A centralized location in Aberdeen would not create new demand. It would bring services closer to home for students who already need them."

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.

COMMENTARY

Book excerpt: 'Rethinking Rural' includes considering the impact of Native American communities

by Wayne Ducheneaux

The following excerpt is reprinted with permission from the new book "Rethinking Rural: Reflections on Changing Communities," which is edited by Matt Ehlman and published by the North Dakota State University Press as the second volume of the "Rethinking Rural" series.

I'd like to share some stories; one longer story from roughly seventy years ago that will highlight the understanding by non-Native populations of the impact Tribal nations have on rural America, and one from a more recent time that speaks to Tribal nations living in the spirit of *mitákuye oyás'ij*.

For the first story, I'd like to take us back to the 1950s. The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe was facing a forced removal of its Tribal headquarters at the "Old Agency" (the Cheyenne River Agency) along the shores of the Missouri River, thanks to the Pick-Sloan Act (Public Law 78-534), also known as the Flood Control Act of 1944. This legislation authorized, among other things, the construction of numerous dams along the Missouri River with six main interests:

To create hydroelectric power.

To improve recreation.

To create opportunities to grow rural water supplies.

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To ease navigation downstream.

To mitigate flooding.

To make more opportunities available for fish and wildlife.

With the adoption of this law, the Cheyenne River Agency was informed that they would have to pick up and move their entire agency from the river bottom area. This displacement forced the federal government to weigh a heavy decision — where to move their headquarters. There were several options bandied about. Each option carried with it pros and cons that exemplify how when aligned, Native and non-Native values can create a solution beneficial to all.

The first option was to simply combine the Standing Rock Agency and the Cheyenne River Agency and place the headquarters in the off-reservation town of Mobridge, South Dakota. Neither Tribe was keen on that idea, and there was also resistance from the powers that be in Mobridge at the time — they did not want to create a so-called “Indian problem” in their community. Tribal leaders who understood they would not be met with a warm welcome for this option lobbied hard against it.

They found allies in this resistance in two other non-Native communities. The first was the city of Gettysburg, South Dakota, which, because of its close proximity, conducted a lot of business with folks from the Cheyenne River Reservation. Gettysburg, also a potential site for the relocated Agency, held a lot of the same sentiments within its citizenry as Mobridge.

While residents didn’t want the Agency to be relocated to their town, they also didn’t want it moved to Mobridge because of the economic boost that business conducted with Native Americans had on their community. They were adamant that the Agency just be moved “up top” and remain located on the eastern side of the reservation so they could continue to benefit from a proximity to the Tribe without having to actually share space with them. Gettysburg understood the impact Indians could have when close by, but wanted to be allowed to keep some separation. Their advocacy efforts to keep the Agency out of Mobridge helped politically, but the quandary didn’t end how they expected, thanks to the city of Eagle Butte, South Dakota.

As all of the different scenarios were being considered, the leaders of Eagle Butte came to understand that having a Tribe place its headquarters in the city could be just the economic buttress it needed to help the city prosper, following the decline of the railroad industry, which had been a keystone of their economy.

To entice the move, the city of Eagle Butte offered several benefits. First, they agreed to help prepare the land to get it ready to be built upon. They also guaranteed the Tribe that it would have access to the water it needed to grow crops. These factors, along with its central location on the reservation, helped the city win the Cheyenne River Agency sweepstakes, and the Tribe moved its governmental headquarters there.

All these years later, you can still feel the ramifications of these stories and see the impact set off by the Pick-Sloan Act just a little over three generations ago. Eagle Butte’s population has remained consistent from 2000 to 2020, according to the U.S. Census, with population estimates of 2,782 and 3,137, respectively. They even have two stoplights now!

According to the U.S. Census, Gettysburg has shown a steady decrease in population — from 1,352 in 2000 to 1,104 as of 2020.

As for a modern expression of how values can shape positivity for a future together, I would like to draw your attention back to the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indian Country, whose population was very susceptible to the ravages of COVID-19, took many precautions. When the federal government made the first stores of the newly developed vaccines available, Indian Country was amongst the first to receive allotments to help protect their vulnerable communities.

As Tribes swiftly moved to inoculate their populations, it became evident that they would have surplus stores. Rather than hoard their stockpiles, Tribal nations began inviting folks from outside their communities to come to their hospitals and clinics to gain access to the vaccine. The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe was one of the first I had heard of doing this. They first made the vaccine available to other Native people not enrolled in their Tribe and soon thereafter, they made their stores available to anyone who would make the trip to their reservation. A cultural belief that we are all related made it clear to the leadership of the Leech Lake Nation (and many other Tribal nations) that it was important to help our neighbors,

both Native and non-Native.

For me, the clear lesson from this telling of history is that we as rural Americans and Indian Country need to recognize our shared struggles and mutual interests. Despite the hardships and historical injustices, there is an undeniable strength in our communities that stems from our shared values and interconnectedness. By fostering a spirit of cooperation and understanding, we can address our challenges and work together towards a brighter future.

Wayne Ducheneaux is a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and the chief advancement officer of the Intertribal Agricultural Council.

App-based age verification bill clears South Dakota House of Representatives panel

Legislation would require proof of age for downloads, mandate parental notification

BY: JOHN HULT

PIERRE — A South Dakota House of Representatives panel endorsed a bill that would require mobile app stores to use age verification to control access by minors.

House Bill 1275 passed the House State Affairs Committee 8-3 on Wednesday and heads to the House floor with a “do pass” recommendation.

The bill is the second attempt in as many years by state lawmakers to put the onus of age-gating on app stores. House Bill 1275 would force the mobile stores to verify a person’s age, require parents to approve app downloads for underage users and include age ratings for the apps.

The bill “gives parents of minor children a simple, private way to keep their kids safer online,” said its prime sponsor, Sioux Falls Republican Rep. John Hughes. “It establishes guardrails at the digital gateway.”

App-based age gating has only emerged as an online protection measure for children in the past few years, a time period during which the pace of discussion on protecting children has quickened in state-houses around the U.S. Many states, including South Dakota, have passed laws requiring pornographic websites to verify users’ ages.

The app-based age gating proposal has the support of companies like Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, and the opposition of Apple and Google, which operate the largest app stores in the U.S.

The social media platforms argue that app stores are better suited to protect children, as they already act as gatekeepers for access to the apps upon which questionable content would appear, and typically have the credit card information necessary to verify that a person is 18 or older. The app stores argue that they already offer extensive parental control features, and that app developers need to act to protect kids.

At the time lawmakers rejected an app-based age-gating bill from Sioux Falls Republican Sen. Sue Peterson last year, no state had passed such bills.

At this point, four state legislatures have endorsed them — Texas, Utah, Alabama and Louisiana.

“The Legislature wasn’t comfortable going in first, but now there are four,” said Norman Woods, who testified in support for a group called Family Voice Action.

Other supporters included the South Dakota Attorney General’s office, Concerned Women for America and the South Dakota Catholic Conference.

App industry: Invasion of privacy

Opponents included Doug Abraham, a lobbyist for The App Association. He said requiring age verification for access to an app store with potential adult content is akin to requiring it for entry into a mall with a liquor store.

He also said the proposal would require app stores to have more data about children, as companies would need to know their ages, and he suggested that “all South Dakotans” would need to give copies of

their state-issued IDs "to big tech."

"It's going to force you, if you want to use your iPhone, or you want to use your Android-based device, to do that, even though you're 18, even though you're a consenting adult," Abraham said.

The bill legislates parenting, Abraham said, and is unnecessary because app stores already offer the tools the bill would mandate to any parent who cares enough to use them.

Kouri Marshall, a lobbyist for a tech coalition called Chamber of Progress, called the bill "a tremendous encroachment on individual privacy" that's likely to cost the state in legal fees.

Alabama, whose lawmakers passed a version of the bill earlier this month, "is going straight to court," Marshall said, to defend itself in a lawsuit alleging the rules violate the First Amendment.

South Dakota should "wait and see how this plays out in court, so that you don't end up there," Marshall said, noting that Florida and Mississippi lawmakers said no to app-based age gating.

Bill endorsed as protection for children

Woods, the lobbyist for Family Voice Action, said in a rebuttal that the idea that South Dakotans would need to share driver's license data is false, as credit card information is typically enough to verify a person's age.

And Rep. Leslie Heinemann, R-Flandreau, said legal fees are worth the fight if it means protecting kids from harmful content or access to apps that could connect them with predators. He compared it to last year's bill requiring age verification by adult websites, which he said parents thanked him for backing.

"I see it as a way to bring to the parents that we have a way of dealing with this issue on a large scale," Heinemann said.

Rep. Erin Healy, D-Sioux Falls, referenced her own 13-year-old to explain her opposition to the bill. She said her husband got an alert when the teen did a web search for information on former South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem.

"I think that just shows the effort that can already be put into parental controls," said Healy, who was one of three committee members who voted against sending the bill to the full House of Representatives.

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.

Climate, health groups challenge EPA repeal of major greenhouse gas regulation

BY: JACOB FISCHLER

A coalition of public health and environmental groups filed a suit Wednesday challenging the Trump administration's recent finding that the Environmental Protection Agency could not regulate climate-warming greenhouse gases.

EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin and President Donald Trump announced last week the administration was finalizing a repeal of the 2009 endangerment finding, which declared the agency could regulate greenhouse gas emissions, particularly from vehicle emissions, because climate change posed a danger to human health.

The 17 groups who jointly filed the suit Wednesday include the American Public Health Association, Clean Wisconsin, Union of Concerned Scientists, Earthjustice and Natural Resources Defense Council.

'Required by law to protect us'

Their two-page filing in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit does not detail any of the groups' legal arguments against the repeal, but lawyers and officials for the groups said the EPA was legally bound, under the Clean Air Act, to protect people from greenhouse gas emissions.

"They are required by law to protect us from air pollution that endangers public health and welfare," Dr. Georges C. Benjamin, the CEO of the American Public Health Association, said on a video call with

reporters. "And that includes greenhouse gases that are driving climate change."

The law requires challenges to new nationwide agency actions on emissions to be filed in the D.C. Circuit.

In an email, EPA press secretary Brigit Hirsch said the agency had reviewed the endangerment finding, the Clean Air Act and related court decisions, including "robust analysis" of recent Supreme Court decisions. The agency concluded it did not have authority to regulate greenhouse gas emissions.

"Unlike our predecessors, the Trump EPA is committed to following the law exactly as it is written and as Congress intended—not as others might wish it to be," Hirsch said.

"In the absence of such authority, the Endangerment Finding is not valid, and EPA cannot retain the regulations that resulted from it," she continued. "EPA is bound by the laws established by Congress, including under the CAA. Congress never intended to give EPA authority to impose GHG regulations for cars and trucks."

Emissions are pollutants, opponents say

But the groups said the EPA's reasoning ignored that the agency has long regulated emissions as part of its mandate to protect clear air. The omission of the term "greenhouse gases" in the Clean Air Act is "a manufactured problem" by opponents of regulation, Hana Vizcarra, a senior attorney at Earthjustice, said.

"The Clean Air Act was intended to cover air pollutants, full stop. Air pollutants include greenhouse gases," she said. "This argument that Congress needs to do something different to be able to regulate greenhouse gases... it's just a way to avoid the issue and avoid regulation."

The matter is "settled law," the groups said, as federal courts have affirmed and reaffirmed the EPA's power to regulate emissions.

A 2007 U.S. Supreme Court case established that the Clean Air Act "was unambiguous" in authorizing the EPA to regulate greenhouse gases as pollutants, Meredith Hankins, a senior attorney at NRDC, said.

That decision led to the EPA's so-called endangerment finding two years later, during President Barack Obama's first year in office.

Attorneys general likely to weigh in

Wednesday's challenge will likely be consolidated with other challenges, including those from "blue-state attorneys general," Hankins said.

In the announcement last week, Trump said the endangerment finding, and the tailpipe emissions standards that relied on it, had dragged down the automotive sector and the broader economy nationwide.

The administration has said the move will save Americans more than \$1 trillion by reducing regulations.

The repeal's opponents, though, said Wednesday that projection ignored more than \$100 billion in additional costs American drivers would see if fuel efficiency standards are relaxed or the enormous public health costs from worsened air quality and increased climate risks.

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.

Lieutenant governor can break tie in Senate, state Supreme Court says

BY: JOHN HULT

The lieutenant governor in South Dakota has the authority to break a tie vote in the state Senate, the South Dakota Supreme Court said Wednesday.

The ruling comes one day after Lt. Gov. Tony Venhuizen opted not to break a tie on a bill meant to make a temporary sales tax reduction permanent. The tie vote meant the bill was defeated, but the Senate could opt to reconsider it.

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Gov. Larry Rhoden had asked the state's high court for an advisory opinion on the lieutenant governor's tiebreaking authority in light of debate on the matter that followed an earlier tie vote on a measure meant to adjust the permitting process for energy transmission facilities.

Tie votes are an issue in the 35-member Senate this year because one senator, Sioux Falls Republican Arch Beal, has been away all session for medical reasons.

The day after Venhuizen voted to break the tie and defeat the permitting bill, Sioux Falls Republican Chris Karr raised a point of order and challenged the constitutionality of Venhuizen's tiebreaking authority under the state constitution.

The Senate supported Karr's challenge to the vote. The body then reconsidered the permitting bill, amended it and passed it on a majority vote.

In the advisory opinion, the high court ruled unanimously that the lieutenant governor has the right to break a tie.

One section of the state constitution says no bill can become law without "a majority of all members" of the Senate. Another says the lieutenant governor — who presides over the chamber as Senate president — has no vote in the Senate unless the members are "equally divided."

The Supreme Court ruled that the latter provision "explicitly authorizes the Lieutenant Governor to vote when necessary to break a tie."

In the absence of a majority vote from all members-elect, the ruling says, the provision on tiebreaking offers "a method by which a majority can be obtained."

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.

High housing costs, shortages propel movement on reform in Congress

BY: DAVID LIGHTMAN

WASHINGTON — Republicans, Democrats and the White House are methodically, calmly inching toward a common goal: agreeing on a thick package of laws that would do something quickly about slowing housing costs and boosting supply.

There's no talk of gridlock here. No partisan sniping. Just an under the radar effort to show constituents in an election year that their lawmakers realize there's a big problem when it comes to buying homes.

That's why the House earlier this month passed its version of housing reform with only nine dissenting votes. The Senate committee writing similar legislation approved it unanimously last year.

While there are still some obstacles ahead before anything reaches President Donald Trump's desk, what's happening is almost a throwback to the days when getting 80% of one's plan was a big victory, a policy prize to tout back home as midterm elections near.

"There is no silver bullet for fixing this problem," said Rep. Mike Flood, R-Neb., chairman of the Housing and Insurance Subcommittee.

But, he added, "I think that this bill, this legislation, includes a range of meaningful housing reforms that will add to housing supply and ultimately decrease housing costs."

Housing shortage

The House and Senate bills have a common purpose, said Emma Waters, senior policy analyst at Washington's Bipartisan Policy Center. "Both bills really are pushing to make it easier to build more affordable homes," she said.

Rep. Emanuel Cleaver, D-Mo., a member of the House Financial Services Committee, explained the House bill this way: "It ensures that every dollar we do spend goes further."

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An analysis by the Zillow Group, a real estate company that researches home prices and trends, last summer found that in 2023, about 1.4 million new homes were added to the housing stock, but there were 1.8 million newly formed families.

As a result, the housing shortage was up to 4.7 million units. Other estimates put it as high as 7 million.

The typical home price in January in the United States was \$359,078, up 0.2% from a year earlier, Zillow found. Prices depend on a wide variety of factors, including labor costs, cost of materials, interest rates, supply and demand and more.

What government can do

The congressional legislation tries to help ease supply and stabilize prices as much as the government can at this point.

The House and Senate bills share several similar provisions. The Bipartisan Policy Center, a Washington-based research organization, estimated that the House bill includes pieces of at least 43 different House or Senate bills, 27 of which have had bipartisan support.

Under the House plan, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development would update the department's construction standards for manufactured housing. The Senate bill has similar provisions.

Rep. John Rose, R-Tenn., a housing subcommittee member, explained the problem: "Municipalities across the country have restricted or outright banned homes built on permanent steel chassis. The result has been less construction, higher costs, and fewer opportunities for working families to own where they live."

The House bill would provide money for "pattern books" for such housing that would feature pre-approved plans that could speed up the approval process.

The legislation would also provide "a lot of provisions to make it easier for state and local governments to reduce regulatory barriers," said Waters.

The bills would allow money from Community Development Block Grants, which help fund neighborhood projects, to better support housing production.

The Senate bill would reward CDBG recipients that have, unrelated to their other CDBG projects, increased their housing production in the previous year.

As a reward for building more housing in the previous year, those jurisdictions would receive additional CDBG funding, but there are still restrictions on how those funds can be used.

The House bill, though, would change the restriction so that CDBG money could be used for housing construction.

Help for consumers

Housing experts believe a reason landlords balk is they're reluctant to endure the government's inspection process; the bills would streamline that process. Landlords would get incentives to accept tenants with rent vouchers.

The HOME Investment Partnerships Program, which aids state and local efforts to provide housing for lower income families, would also get a makeover of sorts in the bills.

For instance, the House bill says environmental impact statements would no longer be needed for many projects, and it would be easier to tap money from the HOME budget.

Also likely to help consumers: making it easier for banks, usually community institutions that focus on local needs, to invest in more affordable housing. The House bill would raise the public investment welfare cap, allowing more such investments.

Rep. French Hill, R-Ark., was enthusiastic about this provision. "Our bill helps banks access stable deposit funding, streamlines the exam process that's tailored particularly for our vital community banks, and helps promote more community banks to do what they do best, lend locally and support their communities," said Hill, chairman of the Financial Services Committee, in a statement.

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What's ahead

The banking provision is one of the few major areas where the Senate and House disagree. There's concern among some Democrats that the House bill lifts too many bank regulatory barriers.

"We have a bipartisan bill with unanimous support in the Senate that will help build more housing and lower costs for the American people. I'm glad to see the House move forward on housing proposals," said Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., top Democrat on the Senate Banking Committee.

But, she said, "House Republicans should not hold housing relief hostage to push forward several bank deregulatory bills that will make our community banks more fragile while harming consumers, small businesses, and economic growth."

Also having potential to stymie negotiations is the White House's eagerness to ban institutional investors from buying single family homes. There's not much congressional support for that idea.

Trump last month issued an executive order telling "key agencies to issue guidance preventing relevant Federal programs from approving, insuring, guaranteeing, securitizing, or facilitating sales of single-family homes to institutional investors."

Staying upbeat

There's still a sense in the Capitol that Republicans and Democrats will come together on a major housing bill, particularly since Congress and the White House agree on most key provisions and leading interest groups are helping push legislation forward.

The National Association of Realtors has been enthusiastic about the House and Senate bills.

"By addressing barriers at every level of government, the legislation will make it faster and cheaper to build new homes," the organization said after the House passed the housing reform bill. The Realtors had similar praise for the Senate version.

The Affordable Housing Tax Credit Coalition also liked the House bill, as CEO Emily Cadik called it "a set of common sense, bipartisan housing proposals that would increase the supply of affordable housing."

Most in Washington who follow housing policy closely are upbeat about the legislation's prospects.

"It's all pretty positive stuff," said Waters.

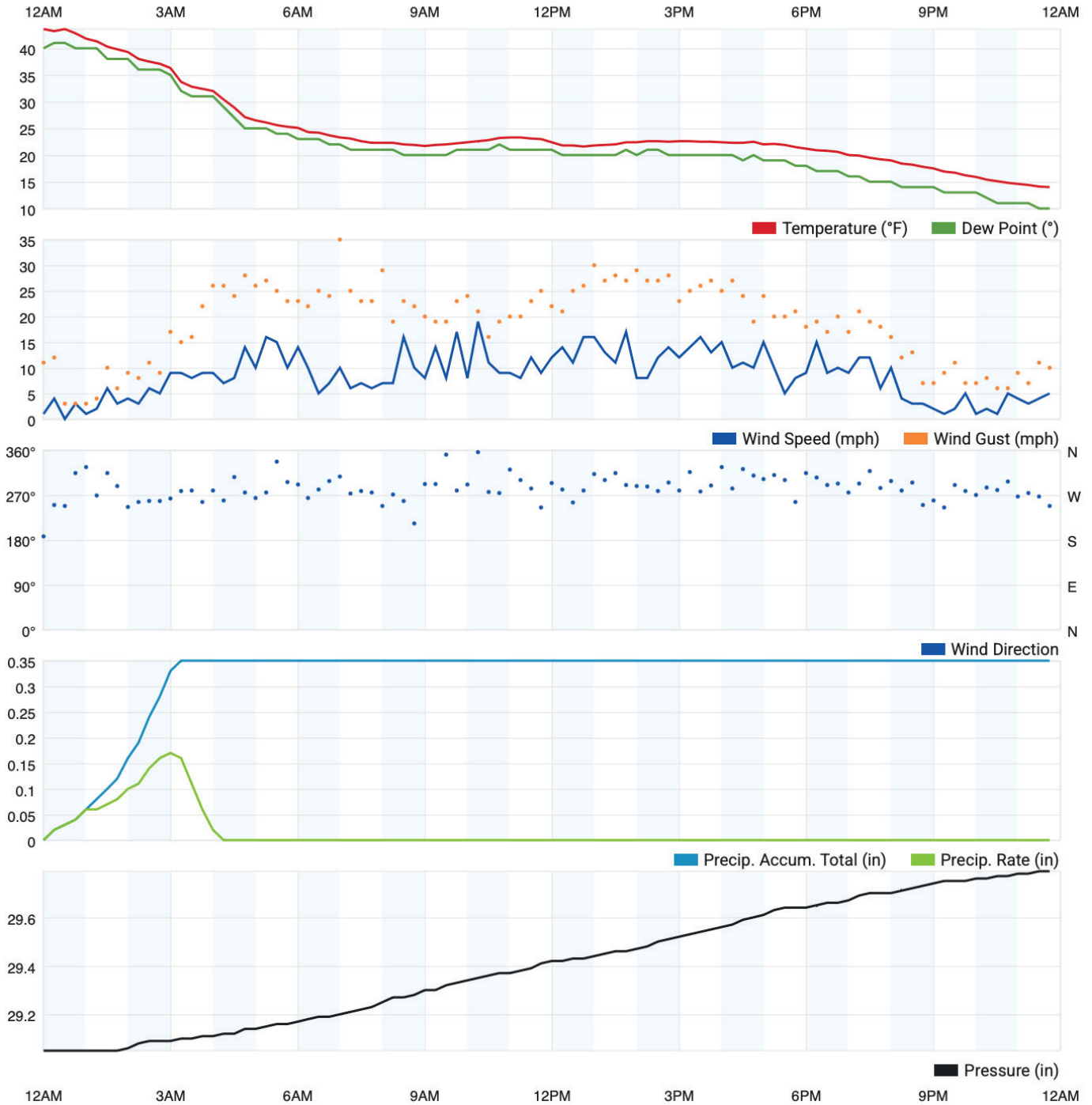
David Lightman has been a reporter or editor for more than 50 years. He's worked for the Hagerstown (Md.) Morning Herald, Riverside (Calif.) Press Enterprise, and then 10 years at the Baltimore Evening Sun, covering local news and, for six years, state government and the legislature. He spent 23 years as the Hartford Courant's Washington Bureau Chief, and 18 years at McClatchy's Washington bureau, where he covered the White House and Congress. He also served as regional editor, supervising the bureau's seven regional reporters. He was president of Washington's Gridiron Club in 2018 and won the David Lynch award for regional reporting in 2007.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

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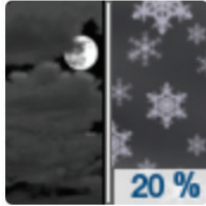
Today

Tonight

Friday

Friday Night

Saturday



High: 21 °F

Low: 9 °F

High: 20 °F

Low: 3 °F

High: 21 °F

Patchy
Blowing Snow
and Blustery

Mostly Cloudy
then Slight
Chance Snow

Mostly Cloudy

Mostly Cloudy

Mostly Sunny



Breezy Conditions Today

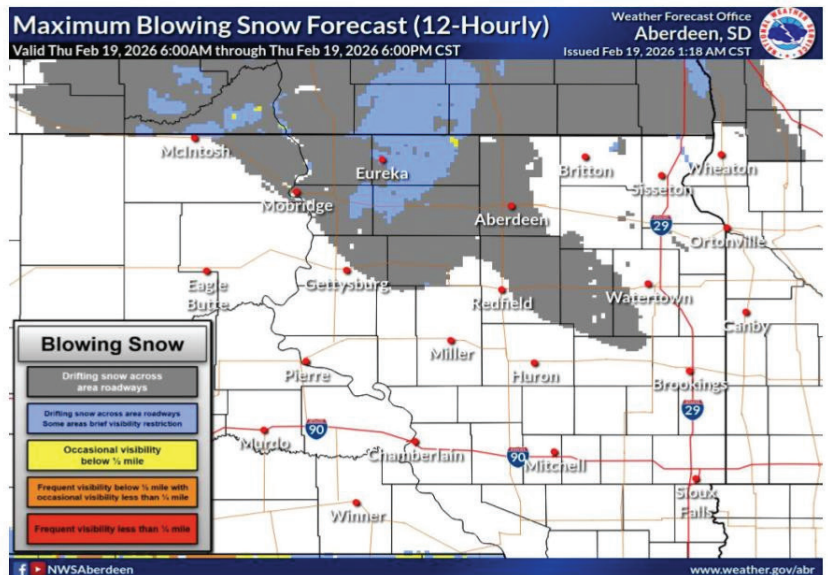
Today

- North-northwest winds gusts of 25 to 35 mph will continue today, leading to drifting snow across area roadways, which may lead to times where the lines on the road may be difficult to see.
- Temperatures will be colder than we've recently experienced
 - Today's Highs: 15-29°
 - Tonight's Lows: 3-17°

Impacts

- Roads may be snow covered and slippery in areas that received snow on Wednesday.
- Drifting snow may lead to times where the lines on the road may be difficult to see

Blowing Snow Potential Through 6pm Today



Updated: February 19, 2026 2:21 AM

National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD

North to northwest wind gusts of 25 to 35 mph across the region today will produce lingering drifting or minor blowing snow for some locations. In addition, temperatures will be much colder than we've experienced recently, with highs in the teens and 20s.



Low Temperatures Below Zero?

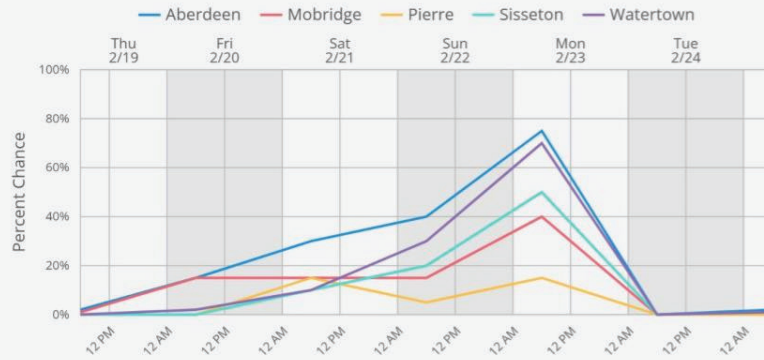
February 19, 2026
2:37 AM CST

Fresh Snow And Surface High Pressure This Weekend Into Early Next Week



Chance of Min Temperatures Less Than 0°F

Thursday Morning, Feb 19 - Wednesday Morning, Feb 25



Information:

The line chart shows the percent chance of a below zero low temperatures occurring based on model predictions from the National Blend of Models. A higher number means greater certainty.

Additional Details

⚠️ Lows Below Zero?

- Fresh snow covers portions of north central and northeast South Dakota
- Surface high pressure settles in over the weekend

↗️ Probability Of Lows Below Zero?

- Aberdeen and Watertown with the highest chance (70-75%) of seeing below zero low temperatures Monday morning
- Sunday also holds a 30-40% chance of seeing below zero low temperatures

Valid: Thu 06 am CST - Wed 06 am CST
Issued: Thu, Feb 19, 2026, 2 am CST



With fresh snow covering portions of north central and northeast South Dakota and cold Canada-sourced surface high pressure forecast to settle over the region this weekend, there is potential for low temperatures to fall below zero. Currently, the highest probabilities show up Sunday morning and Monday morning, particularly for Aberdeen and Watertown.

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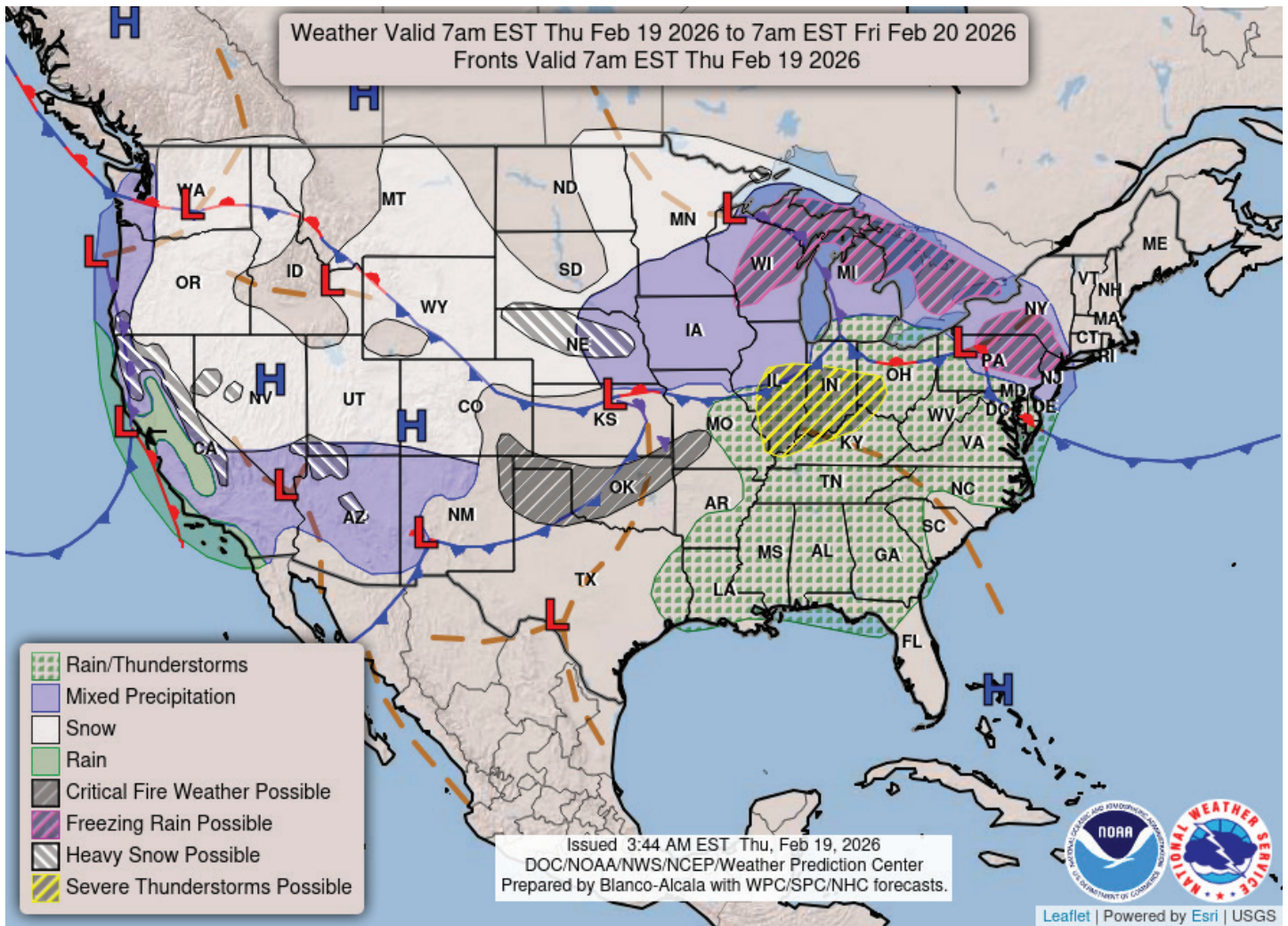
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 44 °F at 12:00 A
Low Temp: 14 °F at 11:27 PM
Wind: 35 mph at 6:54 AM
Precip: : 3" of Snow

Today's Info

Record High: 62 in 1930
Record Low: -34 in 1929
Average High: 30
Average Low: 8
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.40
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.95
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 6:04 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:26 am



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Today in Weather History

February 19th, 2000: Due to the arid and windy conditions, a fire believed to have been started by a discarded cigarette burnt about 1,300-acre of grassland between Kennebec and Lower Brule. The fire threatened a ranch but changed directions before anyone had to be evacuated.

February 19th, 2008: An Arctic air mass and blustery northwest winds brought extreme wind chills during the evening and early morning hours to northeast South Dakota. Wind chills ranged from 35 to 50 degrees below zero. The winds diminished in the early morning hours of the 20th, allowing air temperatures to fall to record or near-record lows across northeast South Dakota. Ten new record lows, ranging from 23 to 30 degrees below zero, were set for February 20th. Several water pipes were broken in Aberdeen and Roslyn. Also, many vehicles did not start along with late school starts or closings.

1884: Severe thunderstorms spawned sixty tornadoes in the southeastern U.S., killing more than 420 people and causing three million dollars damage. The tornado outbreak hit Georgia and the Carolinas the hardest.

1888: Severe thunderstorms over southern Illinois spawned a violent tornado in Jefferson County and devastated the southeast half of Mount Vernon. The tornado killed 24 people, injured 80 others, and destroyed or damaged 300 homes and 50 businesses. In addition, overturned wood stoves ignited many fires in the wreckage. The tornado currently stands as the 9th deadliest Illinois tornado on record and was one of the first disasters to which the American Red Cross responded.

1954 — High winds across the southern half of the Great Plains, gusting to 85 mph, caused the worst duststorms since the 1930s. Graders were needed in places to clear fence high dirt drifts. (The Weather Channel)

1987 — A winter storm over the southern and central Rockies produced 28 inches of snow at Echo Lake CO, and two feet of snow at Gascon NM and Los Alamos NM. Mora County NM was declared a disaster area following the storm. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 — Showers and thunderstorms in the southeastern U.S. drenched Valdosta GA with more than five inches of rain, and the 24 hour rainfall total of 7.10 inches at Apalachicola FL more than doubled their previous 24 hour record for February. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 — An upper level weather disturbance brought heavy snow to parts of Nebraska, with six inches reported at Loup City and Surprise. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 — A moist Pacific storm worked its way into New Mexico and southern Colorado. Up to 36 inches of snow blanketed the Wolf Creek and Red Mountain passes of southwest Colorado, and up to 15 inches of snow was reported around Trinidad. In New Mexico, the eastern slopes of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains were blanketed with 9 to 28 inches of snow, and 50 to 60 mph wind gusts were reported from Taos to Albuquerque. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2011 — Strong winds reaching as high as 40 mph with gusts to 53 mph topple the 48 year old National Christmas tree. The 42 foot tall Colorado blue spruce sat just south of the White House on the Ellipse. It was transplanted there from York, Pennsylvania in 1978. The Weather Doctor

Responding to Mistreatment

Don't be discouraged if persecution comes—God blesses those who suffer for the sake of righteousness.

1 Peter 3:13-18: 13 Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?

14 But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED,

15 but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence;

16 and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.

17 For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.

18 For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit;

Hardship has been a common experience in Christianity ever since the apostles first proclaimed the message of salvation. And though we may never face things like imprisonment or death for our beliefs, we've probably all felt the sting of rejection or ridicule.

Peter wrote to a group of believers who were treated harshly because of their faith. His goal was to offer encouragement and a reminder to follow Jesus' example: Our sinless Lord, who died on the cross to bring us to God, was openly mocked but never responded with anger. Instead, He patiently suffered in full submission to His Father, "entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:21-23).

Without this perspective, we could quickly descend into self-pity or angry resentment when we're mistreated. But Peter reminds us that we are blessed when we suffer for the sake of righteousness. Not only will we receive a reward in heaven (Matthew 5:11-12), but we may also have an opportunity to be a witness for Christ.

A wise response to ill-treatment flows from an understanding of God's ways. We can trust our heavenly Father, knowing that He can work every situation for our good and His glory.

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

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.17.26

3 37 44 52 63 14

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$416,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 35 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.18.26

6 14 19 25 44 6

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$15,800,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 50 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.18.26

3 11 16 18 41 8

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 5 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.18.26

2 8 10 24 27

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 5 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.18.26

6 13 14 16 47 26

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 34 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.18.26

9 33 52 64 66 1

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$190,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 34 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the **AP** Associated Press

North Dakota State earns 74-66 victory over South Dakota State

By The Associated Press undefined

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Damari Wheeler-Thomas' 23 points helped North Dakota State defeat South Dakota State 74-66 on Wednesday.

Wheeler-Thomas shot 6 of 11 from the field, including 3 for 6 from 3-point range, and went 8 for 11 from the line for the Bison (22-6, 12-1 Summit League). Noah Feddersen shot 6 of 7 from the field, including 2 for 3 from 3-point range, and went 5 for 6 from the line to add 19 points. Markhi Strickland had seven points and shot 3 of 6 from the field and 1 of 4 from the free-throw line.

Damon Wilkinson finished with 18 points and eight rebounds for the Jackrabbits (12-16, 5-8). South Dakota State also got 18 points from Matthew Mors. Luke Haertle also had eight points and four assists.

Transportation Department says more than 550 driving schools must close over safety failures

By JOSH FUNK AP Transportation Writer

More than 550 commercial driving schools in the U.S. that train truckers and bus drivers must close after investigators found they employed unqualified instructors, failed to adequately test students and had other safety issues, the federal Transportation Department announced Wednesday.

The move marks the Trump administration's latest effort to improve safety in the trucking industry. And unlike its actions last fall to decertify up to 7,500 schools that included many defunct operations, this latest step is focused on active schools inspectors identified as having significant shortcomings in 1,426 site visits completed in December.

The department has been aggressively going after states that handed out commercial driver's licenses to immigrants who shouldn't have qualified for them ever since a fatal crash in August. A truck driver who Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy says wasn't authorized to be in the U.S. made an illegal U-turn and caused a crash in Florida that killed three people. Other fatal crashes since then, including one in Indiana that killed four earlier this month, have only heightened concerns.

Duffy said 448 schools failed to meet basic safety standards. Inspectors found such deficiencies as employing unqualified instructors, failing to test students' skills or teach them how to handle hazardous materials and using the wrong equipment to teach drivers. Another 109 schools removed themselves from the registry of schools when they learned inspections were planned.

"American families should have confidence that our school bus and truck drivers are following every letter of the law and that starts with receiving proper training before getting behind the wheel," Duffy said.

Established schools welcome the effort

The list of schools officials want to decertify now are generally smaller ones, including a number of programs run by school districts. Five of the bigger, more reputable schools represented by the national Commercial Vehicle Training Association were audited but those all passed.

Jeffery Burkhardt, chair of the national trucking schools group, said established schools welcome the enforcement effort to eliminate bad schools that aren't meeting the standards. He said these audits mark the first time regulators have enforced the standards for driving schools that were passed in 2022.

"You know, the good players have no problem with it. Absolutely none," said Burkhardt, who is also senior director of operations at Ancora, which provides CDL training at colleges, community colleges and companies.

Another 97 schools are currently under investigation for compliance issues.

There has been limited oversight in the past

Part of the industry problem is that schools and trucking companies can essentially self certify themselves

when they apply to begin operating, observers note, and questionable operations might not be caught until much later when the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration gets a chance to audit them.

It wasn't immediately clear how many students were enrolled at these schools that are being decertified or how many graduated with questionable qualifications. A Transportation Department spokeswoman said officials may follow up on those graduates later. Burkhardt said that hopefully most of the unqualified drivers were weeded out before they got on the highway by the skills tests states administer before handing out commercial licenses.

There is steady demand for truck drivers because there is high turnover in the industry, and it has been difficult to attract enough drivers willing to spend days away from home delivering heavy loads. But there is some cushion in the industry right now because there are currently more drivers than needed in the midst of a 10% drop in shipments since 2022 owing to economic uncertainty. Nonetheless, many trucking companies still struggle to find enough well-qualified drivers with clean records.

Trucking industry groups praise the effort

Both the American Trucking Association and the Owner Operator Independent Drivers Association praised the decisive action to shut down "sham schools" that aren't meeting basic safety standards. Todd Spencer, President of the independent owners group, said the reliance of some companies on these questionable schools "fueled a destructive churn" in the industry.

"Rather than fix retention problems and working conditions, some in the industry chose to cut corners and push undertrained drivers onto the road. That approach has undermined safety and devalued the entire trucking profession," Spencer said.

Besides threatening to withhold federal funding from states that don't clean up their commercial driver's license programs, the administration has demanded truck drivers meet English proficiency standards. California is the only state to lose funding so far with the federal government planning to withhold \$160 million.

The Transportation Department is threatening to withhold \$128 million from Illinois after the latest state audit announced earlier this week found problems with nearly 20% of the 150 licenses they reviewed. The most common problems uncovered in state audits across the country have been licenses that remained valid long after an immigrant's authorization to be in the U.S. expired and instances when the states couldn't show that they checked a driver's immigration status before giving them a license.

Problems have been found in 10 states so far, including North Carolina, Pennsylvania, New York, Minnesota, South Dakota and Texas.

Former South Korean President Yoon receives life sentence for imposing martial law

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Former South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol was sentenced to life in prison for his brief imposition of martial law in a dramatic culmination to the country's biggest political crisis in decades.

Yoon was ousted from office after a baffling attempt to overcome an opposition-controlled legislature by declaring martial law and sending troops to surround the National Assembly on Dec. 3, 2024.

Judge Jee Kui-youn of the Seoul Central District Court said he found Yoon guilty of rebellion for mobilizing military and police forces in an illegal attempt to seize the liberal-led Assembly, arrest politicians and establish unchecked power for a "considerable" time.

Martial law crisis recalled dictatorial past

Yoon's martial law imposition, the first of its kind in more than four decades, harkened back to South Korea's past military-backed governments when authorities occasionally proclaimed emergency decrees that allowed them to station soldiers, tanks and armored vehicles on streets or at public places such as schools to prevent anti-government demonstrations.

As lawmakers rushed to the National Assembly, Yoon's martial law command issued a proclamation declaring sweeping powers, including suspending political activities, controlling the media and publications,

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and allowing arrests without warrants.

The decree lasted about six hours before being lifted after a quorum of lawmakers managed to break through a military blockade and unanimously voted to lift the measure.

Yoon was suspended from office on Dec. 14, 2024, after being impeached by lawmakers and was formally removed by the Constitutional Court in April 2025. He has been under arrest since last July while facing multiple criminal trials, with the rebellion charge carrying the most severe punishment.

Yoon's lawyers reject conviction

Yoon Kap-keun, one of the former president's lawyers, accused Jee of issuing a "predetermined verdict" based solely on prosecutors' arguments and said the "rule of law" had collapsed. He said he would discuss whether to appeal with his client and the rest of the legal team.

Yoon Suk Yeol told the court the martial law decree was only meant to raise public awareness of how the liberals were paralyzing state affairs, and that he was prepared to respect lawmakers if they voted against the measure.

Prosecutors said it was clear Yoon was attempting to disable the legislature and prevent lawmakers from lifting the measure through voting, actions that exceeded his constitutional authority even under martial law.

In announcing Yoon and Kim's verdicts, Jee said the decision to send troops to the National Assembly was key to his determination that the imposition of martial law amounted to rebellion.

"This court finds that the purpose of (Yoon's) actions was to send troops to the National Assembly, block the Assembly building and arrest key figures, including the National Assembly speaker and the leaders of both the ruling and opposition parties, in order to prevent lawmakers from gathering to deliberate or vote," Jee said. "It's sufficiently established that he intended to obstruct or paralyze the Assembly's activities so that it would be unable to properly perform its functions for a considerable period of time."

Protesters rally outside court

As Yoon arrived in court, hundreds of police officers watched closely as Yoon supporters rallied outside a judicial complex, their cries rising as the prison bus transporting him drove past. Yoon's critics gathered nearby, demanding the death penalty.

There were no immediate reports of major clashes following the verdict.

A special prosecutor had demanded the death penalty for Yoon Suk Yeol, saying his actions posed a threat to the country's democracy and deserved the most serious punishment available, but most analysts expected a life sentence since the poorly-planned power grab did not result in casualties.

South Korea has not executed a death row inmate since 1997, in what is widely seen as a de facto moratorium on capital punishment amid calls for its abolition.

Other officials sentenced for enforcing martial law

The court also convicted and sentenced several former military and police officials involved in enforcing Yoon's martial law decree, including ex-Defense Minister Kim Yong Hyun, who received a 30-year jail term for his central role in planning the measure and mobilizing the military.

Last month, Yoon was sentenced to five years in prison for resisting arrest, fabricating the martial law proclamation and sidestepping a legally mandated full Cabinet meeting before declaring the measure.

The Seoul Central Court has also convicted two members of Yoon's Cabinet in other cases. That includes Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, who received a 23-year prison sentence for attempting to legitimize the decree by forcing it through a Cabinet Council meeting, falsifying records and lying under oath. Han has appealed the verdict.

Yoon is the first former South Korean president to receive a life sentence since former military dictator Chun Doo-hwan, who was sentenced to death in 1996 for his 1979 coup, a bloody 1980 crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in Gwangju that left more than 200 people dead or missing, and corruption.

The Supreme Court later reduced his sentence to life imprisonment, and he was released in late 1997 under a special presidential pardon. He died in 2021.

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World shares are mixed, while US futures advance following a Wall St rally led by Nvidia

By ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writer

European shares opened lower and Asian shares were mostly higher Thursday after a rally on Wall Street that was led by computer chip giant Nvidia.

Oil prices rose as media reports said the likelihood was rising of U.S. conflict with Iran.

President Donald Trump has been weighing whether to take military action against Iran as his administration surges military resources to the region while holding indirect talks with Tehran over its nuclear program. That is raising concerns that any attack could spiral into a larger conflict in the Middle East.

U.S. benchmark crude oil gained 94 cents to \$65.99 per barrel. Brent crude, the international standard, picked up 98 cents to \$71.33.

Germany's DAX lost 0.5% to 25,157.56, while the CAC 40 in Paris slipped 0.6% to 8,379.90.

Britain's FTSE 100 gave up 0.4% to 10,647.82.

The future for the S&P 500 was up 0.1% while that for the Dow Jones Industrial Average was virtually unchanged.

Markets in Greater China were closed for Lunar New Year holidays, while some others in the region reopened for trading.

In Tokyo, the Nikkei 225 added 0.6% to 57,467.83, while in South Korea, the Kospi jumped 3.1% to 5,677.25 as markets reopened following holidays earlier in the week. Samsung Electronics, the market's biggest heavyweight, gained 4.9%.

Australia's S&P/ASX 200 advanced 0.9% to 9,086.20.

Southeast Asian markets surged, with Thailand's SET up 1.7%. India's Sensex shed early gains to fall 1.1%.

On Wednesday, the S&P 500 rose 0.6% and the Dow Jones Industrial Average added 0.3%. The Nasdaq composite gained 0.8%.

Nvidia helped lift the market and climbed 1.6% after Meta Platforms announced a long-term partnership where it will use millions of chips and other equipment from Nvidia for its artificial-intelligence data centers.

"No one deploys AI at Meta's scale," Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang said. Because his company is the most valuable on Wall Street, Nvidia's stock was the single most powerful force pulling the S&P 500 higher.

That performance demonstrated the upside of AI development for the U.S. stock market. But investors have also focused on the potential downsides recently, which has led to sharp swings in share prices.

Meta's stock fell as much as 1.7% before recovering and rising 0.6%.

Another worry is that if AI succeeds in creating tools to do complicated tasks more cheaply, it may undercut companies in industries as far flung as software, legal services and trucking logistics. Investors have suddenly and aggressively sold stocks of companies seen as under threat in what analysts have likened to a "shoot first-ask questions later" mentality.

Several profit reports from companies helped to lift stocks Wednesday. They continued what's been a strong reporting season for the big U.S. companies in the S&P 500.

Outside of earnings reports, Moderna jumped 6.1% after saying regulators at the Food and Drug Administration will review its flu vaccine candidate after earlier refusing to consider it.

Reports on the economy were better than expected, with one saying industrial production improved last month. Another said orders for computers, fabricated metal products and other long-lasting manufactured goods rose more in December than economists had forecast, when not including airplanes and other transportation equipment. A third report said homebuilders broke ground on more new homes in December than anticipated.

Such strong data could encourage the Federal Reserve to keep interest rates steady.

The Fed has put its cuts to interest rates on hold, but many on Wall Street expect it to resume later this year. The widespread forecast is that will come during the summer, after a new chair is scheduled to step in atop the Fed.

Minutes released Wednesday from the Fed's last meeting showed many officials want to see inflation

fall further before they would support additional interest rate cuts this year.

Lower rates can give a boost to the economy and prices for investments, but that comes at the cost of potentially worsening inflation.

In other dealings early Thursday, the dollar bought 154.80 Japanese yen, down from 154.83 yen. The euro rose to \$1.1800 from \$1.1782.

The price of gold gained 0.6% while that for silver was up 2.1%.

The price of bitcoin rose 1% to \$66,900.

UN experts say destruction by Sudan's rebels in el-Fasher in October bears 'hallmarks of genocide'

By JAMEY KEATEN and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — A "campaign of destruction" in October by Sudanese rebels against non-Arab communities in and near a city in Sudan's western region of Darfur shows "hallmarks of genocide," U.N.-backed human rights experts reported Thursday, a dramatic finding in the country's devastating war.

The Rapid Support Forces carried out mass killings and other atrocities in el-Fasher after an 18-month siege during which they imposed conditions "calculated to bring about the physical destruction" of non-Arab communities, in particular the Zaghawa and the Fur communities, the independent fact-finding mission on Sudan reported.

U.N. officials say several thousand civilians were killed in the RSF takeover of el-Fasher, the Sudanese army's only remaining stronghold in the Darfur. Only 40% of the city's 260,000 residents managed to flee the onslaught alive, thousands of whom were wounded, the officials said. The fate of the rest remains unknown.

Sudan plunged into conflict in mid-April 2023, when long-simmering tensions between its military and paramilitary leaders broke out in the capital Khartoum and spread to other regions including Darfur.

The devastating war has killed more than 40,000 people, according to U.N. figures, but aid groups say that is an undercount and the true number could be many times higher.

The RSF and their allied Arab militias, known as Janjaweed, overran el-Fasher on Oct. 26 and rampaged through the city. The offensive was marked by widespread atrocities that included mass killings and summary executions, sexual violence, torture, and abductions for ransom, according to the U.N. Human Rights Office.

They killed more than 6,000 people between Oct. 25 and Oct. 27 in the city, the office said. Ahead of the attack, the rebels ran riot in the Abu Shouk displacement camp, just outside of the city, and killed at least 300 people in two days, it said.

The RSF did not respond to an e-mailed request for comment. The group's commander, Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, has previously acknowledged abuses by his fighters, but disputed the scale of atrocities.

At least 3 criteria for genocide were met, team says

An international convention known colloquially as the "Genocide Convention" — adopted in 1948, three years after the end of World War II and the Holocaust — sets out five criteria to assess whether genocide has taken place.

They are: killing members of a group; causing its members serious bodily or mental harm; imposing measures aimed to prevent births in the group; deliberately inflicting conditions calculated to bring about the "physical destruction" of the group; and forcibly transferring its children to another group.

The fact-finding team, which doesn't have final say on the matter, said it found at least three of those five were met in the actions of the RSF. Under the convention, a genocide determination could be made even if only one of the five were met.

The RSF acts in el-Fasher included killing members of a protected ethnic group; causing serious bodily and mental harm; and deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about the group's physical destruction in whole or in part — all core elements of the crime of genocide under international law,

according to the fact-finding team.

The report cited a systematic pattern of ethnically targeted killings, sexual violence and destruction and public statements explicitly calling for the elimination of non-Arab communities.

'Not random' excesses of war, chair says

Team chair Mohamed Chande Othman, a former chief justice of Tanzania, said the RSF operation were not "random excesses of war" but pointed to a planned and organized operation that bore the characteristics of genocide.

El-Fasher's residents were "physically exhausted, malnourished, and in part unable to flee, leaving them defenseless against the extreme violence that followed," the team's report said. "Thousands of persons, particularly the Zaghawa, were killed, raped or disappeared during three days of absolute horror."

The fact-finding mission pointed to mass killings, widespread rape, sexual violence, torture and cruel treatment, arbitrary detention, extortion, and enforced disappearances during RSF's takeover of el-Fasher in late October.

The report documented cases of survivors quoting its fighters as saying things like: "Is there anyone Zaghawa among you? If we find Zaghawa, we will kill them all" and "We want to eliminate anything black from Darfur."

The report pointed to "selective targeting" of Zaghawa and Fur women and girls, "while women perceived as Arab were often spared."

A call for accountability

The fact-finding team was created in 2023 by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council, the U.N.'s leading human rights body, which has 47 member countries drawn from membership in the world body.

The team called for accountability for perpetrators and warned that protection of civilians is needed "more than ever" because the conflict is expanding to other regions in Sudan.

Over the course of the conflict, the warring parties were accused of violating international law. But most of the atrocities were blamed on the RSF: The Biden administration, in one of its last decisions, said it committed genocide in Darfur.

The RSF has been supported by the United Arab Emirates over the course of the war, according to U.N. experts and rights groups. The UAE has denied the allegations.

The RSF grew out of the Janjaweed militias, who became notorious for atrocities in the early 2000s in a ruthless campaign against people identifying as East or Central African in Darfur. That campaign killed some 300,000 people and drove 2.7 million from their homes.

A beloved teacher in Morocco unmasked: Frenchman investigated over abuse of 89 boys

KHENIFRA, Morocco (AP) — For decades in the Moroccan town of Khenifra, Jacques Leveugle was simply known as the thin Frenchman who swept the streets at dawn, offered free language lessons and organized outings for schoolchildren.

He spoke fluent Arabic and Morocco's dialect, as well as Shilha, a Berber language widely spoken in the region, skills neighbors said helped him integrate into the community. He rode his bicycle to the local market, dressed simply in jeans and a button-down shirt, and opened a small library for children in the working-class Lassiri neighborhood.

Now the 79-year-old is behind bars and under formal investigation in France, accused of raping and sexually assaulting 89 boys over more than five decades across several countries, a case made public by prosecutors in France last week. They said Leveugle also acknowledged smothering his mother to death when she was in the terminal phase of cancer, and later killing his 92-year-old aunt.

Many of the sexual abuses occurred in North Africa, where Leveugle spent much of his life and built a reputation as a devoted teacher and a respectful man.

The crimes were discovered when a relative of Leveugle's found his digital memoir on a USB drive and turned it over to authorities.

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In Morocco, where he lived until his arrest in 2024, he is suspected of abusing more than a dozen boys, Grenoble Prosecutor Etienne Manteaux told The Associated Press. In neighboring Algeria, where Leveugle worked as a foreign language teacher for eight years in the 1960s and 1970s, he is suspected of abusing at least two children.

The revelations have sent shock waves in both countries, and renewed attention to child exploitation in a region where activists say abuse remains persistent and underreported.

"This case is of exceptional seriousness and naturally provokes deep indignation," Najat Anwar, president of Moroccan child protection association Don't Touch my Child, told The AP. "We are prepared to join the case as a civil party ... if Moroccan witnesses or victims come forward."

The AP spoke with a dozen people who directly knew Leveugle, including neighbors in Morocco and former students in Algeria, as well as Moroccan officials briefed on the case. Those who knew him described a man widely viewed as discreet, helpful, and who loved to spend time with kids.

On the narrow streets of Khenifra's Lassiri neighborhood, home to many conservative Moroccans, the crisp sweetness of a winter morning contrasts sharply with what residents describe as a sense of shame they feel since prosecutor's revealed Leveugle's alleged crimes last week.

They feel insulted and humiliated. Many are now considering moving out. They all spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of harassment or retribution.

They pointed toward Leveugle's house, an unfinished, unpainted, single-story building surrounded by fig trees, sitting alongside a river. Children play nearby.

Residents said "Monsieur Jacques," as he was known, funded local projects and helped people find jobs, sometimes even giving out cash. Khenifra has long had one of the highest unemployment rates in the country, and many residents work in the informal sector. People often leave town in search of better prospects.

Residents described how Jacques once took children to a well-known regional lake, Agelmam Agezga, and told them to swim naked, starting by himself and claiming it was healthy. In Moroccan culture, and more broadly in Islamic tradition, men are not permitted to be naked in front of one another.

One neighbor said his ability to trust people is so shaken by the news that he refused to let his 5-year-old son sleep at his brother's house.

Leveugle was born in the 1940s in the French city of Annecy, and first arrived in Morocco in 1955, according to a Moroccan official with knowledge of the case. Leveugle's father worked at the French Embassy, and Leveugle attended school in the Moroccan capital during the final years of the French protectorate, the official said.

Leveugle later held Moroccan residency and had no known criminal complaints filed against him in the kingdom, according to a Moroccan justice official. Both officials were not authorized to be publicly named according to Moroccan government rules.

Neighbors said Leveugle moved in the early 2000s to Khenifra, settling in the Lassiri neighborhood. Residents said he frequently spent time with teenage boys between 13 and 15.

He worked as a private tutor and, according to neighbors, offered free lessons, organized school outings and sometimes provided financial assistance to families. Some neighbors said he also bought houses and vehicles for local residents and helped people immigrate to Europe.

His frequent time with teenage boys occasionally prompted questions about his limited interaction with adults.

French investigators identified 89 victims of Leveugle, boys aged 13 to 17, after examining a 15-volume digital memoir found on a USB drive that one of his relatives turned over to police, the Grenoble prosecutor said. He said Leveugle's victims in Morocco date back to at least 1974.

French authorities suspect there are more victims, and have issued an international appeal for witnesses. The prosecutor told The AP that French investigators are expected to travel to Morocco to gather evidence. Moroccan authorities have not made public comments.

The French prosecutor did not say whether an investigation had been opened in Algeria, where Leveugle

taught at three schools. The revelations have left his former students reeling.

"I was stunned when I learned that," Ali Bouchemla, who studied French under Leveugle in the late 1960s at a school in northern Algeria told The AP. He recalled a "devoted and very good teacher" who never raised suspicion.

Another former student, Lahlou Aliouate, similarly described a dedicated instructor with a professional demeanor.

Child protection advocates say Leveugle's profile reflects patterns seen worldwide.

"Perpetrators often present themselves through educational or cultural activities, cultivate a respectable image and leverage social or cultural prestige to gain trust," said Najat Anwar of Don't Touch my Child. "They then target children in vulnerable emotional or social situations."

Governors arrive in Washington eager to push past Trump's partisan grip

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI and STEVEN SLOAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In another era, the scene would have been unremarkable. But in President Donald Trump's Washington, it's become increasingly rare.

Sitting side by side on stage were Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt, a Republican, and Maryland Gov. Wes Moore, a Democrat. They traded jokes and compliments instead of insults and accusations, a brief interlude of cordiality in a cacophony of conflict.

Stitt and Moore are the leaders of the National Governors Association, one of a vanishing few bipartisan institutions left in American politics. But it may be hard for the organization, which is holding its annual conference this week, to maintain its reputation as a refuge from polarization.

Trump has broken with custom by declining to invite all governors to the traditional White House meeting and dinner. He has called Stitt, the NGA's chair, a "RINO," short for Republican in name only, and continued to feud with Moore, the group's vice chair, by blaming him for a sewage spill involving a federally regulated pipeline.

The break with tradition reflects Trump's broader approach to his second term. He has taken a confrontational stance toward some states, withholding federal funds or deploying troops over the objections of local officials.

With the Republican-controlled Congress unwilling to limit Trump's ambitions, several governors have increasingly cast themselves as a counterweight to the White House.

"Presidents aren't supposed to do this stuff," Utah Gov. Spencer Cox said about the expansion of executive power in recent administrations. "Congress needs to get their act together. And stop performing for TikTok and actually start doing stuff. That's the flaw we're dealing with right now."

Cox, a Republican, said "it is up to the states to hold the line."

Moore echoed that sentiment in an interview with The Associated Press.

"People are paying attention to how governors are moving, because I think governors have a unique way to move in this moment that other people just don't," he said.

Still, governors struck an optimistic tone in panels and interviews Wednesday. Stitt said the conference is "bigger than one dinner at the White House." Moore predicted "this is going to be a very productive three days for the governors."

"Here's a Republican and Democrat governor from different states that literally agree on probably 80% of the things. And the things we disagree on we can have honest conversations on," Stitt said while sitting beside Moore.

Tensions over the guest list for White House events underscored the uncertainty surrounding the week. During the back-and-forth, Trump feuded with Stitt and said Moore and Colorado Gov. Jared Polis were not invited because they "are not worthy of being there."

Whether the bipartisan tone struck Wednesday evening can endure through the week — and beyond — remains an open question.

"We can have disagreements. In business, I always want people around me arguing with me and pushing me because that's where the best ideas come from," said Stitt. "We need to all have these exchange of ideas."

Gov. Wes Moore on Trump: 'I pray for him and I just feel bad for him'

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI and STEVEN SLOAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump can't seem to stop talking about Maryland Gov. Wes Moore. He refused to invite him to a White House dinner later this week with state leaders from both parties, saying he was "not worthy" of the event. And he has castigated Moore for a sewage spill that has spoiled the Potomac River, even though the faulty pipe is part of a federally regulated utility.

There could soon be more reasons for Trump to complain about Moore, the nation's only Black governor currently in office. Moore is trying to redraw Maryland's congressional map to boost Democrats, part of a nationwide redistricting battle that Trump started to help Republicans in the midterm elections.

If Moore can overcome resistance from a key member of his own party in the state legislature, the tide could continue to shift in Democrats' favor.

Moore, who is frequently floated as a potential Democratic presidential candidate, is the vice chair of the National Governors Association, which is meeting in Washington this week for its annual conference. He sat down with The Associated Press on Wednesday at the start of his visit. Here is a transcript of the interview, edited for length and clarity.

Redistricting

Q: You met with Democratic House leader Hakeem Jeffries to talk about redistricting. Can you tell me what your understanding was leaving that meeting and whether there will be an up and down vote in the Maryland legislature?

A: All we're asking for is a vote. And however the vote goes, however the vote goes. But that's democracy.

Q: What do you see as your role in the party?

A: I don't look at it as I'm doing it because I'm trying to help a party per se. I'm doing it because I think we have an unchecked executive and right now Congress does not seem interested in actually doing its job and establishing real checks and balances.

And I'm watching what Donald Trump is doing. This would not be an issue had it not been for Donald Trump saying, you know what, let me come up with every creative way I can think of to make this pain permanent. And one of the ways he did was he said, let's just start calling states — the states I choose — to say let's have a redistricting conversation mid-decade.

This would not even be an issue had Donald Trump not brought this up and introduced this into the ecosystem.

Trump relationship

Q: Speaking of the president, do you have thoughts on why he's been stepping up his criticism of you on everything from not inviting you to the dinner to his criticism of the Potomac River sewage spill?

A: This one would actually be comical if it weren't so serious. This is a Washington, D.C., pipe that exists on federal land. How this has anything to do with Maryland, I have no idea. I think he just woke up and just said, I hate Maryland so I'm just going to introduce them into a conversation. This literally has nothing to do with us, with the exception of the fact that when we first heard about what happened, that I ordered our team to assist Washington, D.C.

The short answer is I don't know. I cannot get into the president's psyche.

Q: Do you think it's personal?

A: I know it's not for me. I have no desire to have beef with the president of the United States. I didn't run for governor like, man, I can't wait so me and the president can go toe to toe. I have no desire on that. But the fact that he is waking up in the middle of the night and tweeting about me, I just, I pray for

him and I just feel bad for him because that has just got to be a really, really hard existence.

Trump and Black History Month

Q: The White House is holding an event right now commemorating Black History Month. Could you share your thoughts on the president's relationship with the Black community?

A: Listen, I think the president has long had a very complicated history with the Black community. We're talking about a person who has been sued from his earliest days from his treatment of Black tenants. We're talking about a person who is one of the originators of birtherism. We're talking about a person who has now spent his time trying to ban books about Black history, a person who has spent his time now doing the greatest assault on unemployment of Black women in our nation's history. You know, so, I'm not sure what anyone is going to gain from an event by Donald Trump about Black history.

2028

Q: Do you think the next presidential nominee on both sides might come from this group of governors?

A: I see the governors as in many ways the final line of defense because I think it's never mattered more who your governor is.

Q: The country is so polarized. How do we break the fever?

A: You stay consistent with who you are. I think if you're a polarizing person or polarizing personality, then that's just who you are. That's just never been me.

As political pressure prompts exodus of Minnesota prosecutors, some defendants catch a break

By RYAN J. FOLEY and JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The federal prosecutor's office in Minnesota has been gutted by a wave of career officials resigning or retiring over objections to Trump administration directives. Because of the turmoil, 12-time convicted felon Cory Allen McKay caught a break.

With a three-decade record of violent crime that includes strangling a pregnant woman and firing a shotgun under a person's chin, McKay was scheduled to stand trial next month on methamphetamine trafficking charges that could have locked him up for 25 years. Instead, he walked free after the prosecutor on his case retired.

The Trump administration says its aggressive immigration enforcement in Minnesota has improved public safety. Left in its wake, though, is a greatly weakened U.S. Attorney's Office, where many prosecutors resented the way Trump's political appointees at the Justice Department managed them.

Offices in other states, from New York to Virginia, have also been hit by resignations as prosecutors object to what they see as the politicization of decision-making under Trump. But Minnesota has been hit especially hard.

A growing number of defendants like McKay are beginning to escape accountability, as the remaining prosecutors are forced to dismiss some cases, kill others before charges are filed and seek plea agreements and delays.

Local officials worry the office will be unable, at least temporarily, to bring charges against some of the state's most serious offenders.

"The result will be a diminished ability to target dangerous fraudsters, sexual predators, violent gangs and drug traffickers," said John Marti, a Minneapolis lawyer who was a longtime fraud prosecutor in the office until 2015.

After asking for a delay to find someone to take McKay's case, the office led by Trump appointee Daniel Rosen dropped it so abruptly McKay's lawyer didn't learn about the move until after her client had been released.

"This was completely surprising to me," said McKay's lawyer, Jean Brandl. While she hasn't been able to reach him, "I can guarantee you he's happy about it."

An exodus of prosecutors

Over the past year, the number of assistant U.S. attorneys in Minnesota has fallen from more than 40

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prosecutors before Trump retook office to fewer than two dozen. That's according to a former federal prosecutor who wasn't authorized to discuss personnel matters and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

The exodus began last year as several prosecutors "saw the writing on the wall" that their jobs — and the government's definition of justice — were going to be different under the new administration, the former federal prosecutor said.

It accelerated after Trump appointees in the Justice Department intervened to block a joint state-federal investigation into the Jan. 7 fatal shooting of Renee Good by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer Jonathan Ross. While Trump officials called Good a "domestic terrorist" and argued Ross fired in self-defense, some in the office viewed the killing as a potential murder.

Career prosecutors also objected to directives that they divert much of their resources to immigration cases, and they chafed at repeated violations of court orders by ICE that angered judges.

"They could not in good conscience participate in what they have seen," according to a letter released last week by eight former permanent or acting U.S. attorneys in Minnesota.

Among the many who left last month were the office's former acting leader, Joe Thompson, and its criminal division chief Harry Jacobs. Thompson was a Justice Department veteran known for high-profile fraud investigations. He and Jacobs had helped uncover the \$300 million Feeding Our Future scheme in which more than 75 defendants have been charged with defrauding a COVID-19-era child nutrition program.

Each time an experienced attorney leaves, leaders assess that prosecutor's caseload and make decisions about how many of their cases can be reassigned to remaining staff and which will be dropped due to diminished resources.

Court records show the office has been operating in crisis mode, bringing in prosecutors from other states, asking judges to delay hearings, and trying to make some cases go away through dismissals and plea agreements. Defense lawyers are seeking to capitalize by demanding speedy trials for clients and filing other motions that require responses from prosecutors.

The Justice Department and the U.S. Attorney's Office did not respond to requests for comment. The office's former spokesperson, prosecutor Melinda Williams, was among those who left.

Drug trafficking cases dismissed

McKay, 47, isn't the only drug trafficking defendant to benefit.

The office last month also dropped a case against a man who was arrested in September after investigators said they found him in possession of a stash of drugs set to be trafficked in the Twin Cities that included 7,600 fentanyl pills and 15 pounds of cocaine.

A third dismissed case involved a man who was charged with conspiracy to distribute methamphetamine after police in Rochester found three pounds of the drug in a search of his vehicle in January 2025.

"With everybody leaving there, it's presenting some challenges for everyone around the state," said Clay County Sheriff Mark Empting, who said McKay would present "a big public safety concern" if he returns to Moorhead. "Hopefully they are going to rebuild the office and take these cases on again."

10 pounds of highly pure meth

The case against McKay dated to 2024, when FedEx employees in Fargo, North Dakota, discovered a package containing nearly 10 pounds of highly pure meth arriving from California and addressed to McKay. Police estimated the street value at \$80,000.

A detective posing as a FedEx employee delivered the package to McKay, who was arrested. Investigators say they searched cellphones, and found text messages linking McKay to other suspected drug traffickers in Minnesota, California, Chicago and Mexico.

McKay was jailed for nearly a year awaiting trial on state charges, before a federal grand jury returned an indictment in May 2025 charging him with two methamphetamine distribution charges. The indictment included a sentencing enhancement because he had more than two prior violent felonies.

Those include aggravated assault in 2013, domestic assault by strangulation in 2017 and assault causing substantial bodily harm in 2021. Prosecutors said he had at least a dozen felony convictions, dating to

when he was 16 and fired a short-barreled shotgun under the chin of a victim.

An offender jailed, then set free

Longtime assistant U.S. Attorney Thomas Hollenhorst argued last summer that McKay was too dangerous to be released before trial, even to a substance abuse program, saying his history of violence would "put countless people at risk."

A judge agreed, noting McKay had repeatedly failed to show up for court proceedings, given police false names and had his probation revoked for violations.

But last month, the U.S. Attorney's Office noted that Hollenhorst was "retiring unexpectedly" and asked for a delay. A judge moved the trial date from Feb. 12 to March 2. The office still dropped the case days later in a filing that offered no explanation. A judge ordered McKay's immediate release. Hollenhorst declined comment.

On Jan. 31, McKay walked out of the Sherburne County Jail in Elk River, 30 miles outside Minneapolis. Attempts by AP to reach him were unsuccessful.

Brandl, McKay's lawyer, said that while the outcome was a victory for her client, Hollenhorst's retirement after 40 years with the Justice Department was "a huge loss."

"He was a very good prosecutor," she said. "He was reasonable and saw our clients as human beings, not just numbers."

Trump heads to Georgia, a target of his election falsehoods, as Republicans look for midterm boost

By JEFF AMY and STEVE PEOPLES Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — He is weighing military action against Iran, leading an aggressive immigration crackdown, and teasing a federal takeover of state elections.

But on Thursday, President Donald Trump's team insists he will focus on the economy when he visits battleground Georgia in a trip designed to help boost Republicans' political standing heading into the high-stakes midterm elections.

"Georgia is obviously a very important state to the president and to the Republican Party," said White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt on the eve of his visit. Trump's remarks in Georgia, she said, will highlight "his efforts to make life affordable for working people."

Trump's destination in Georgia suggests he has something else on his mind too. He's heading to a congressional district previously represented by Marjorie Taylor Greene, a former supporter who resigned in January after feuding with Trump. There's a special election to replace her on March 10.

The White House has long said Trump would focus more on the economy, and he frequently complains that he doesn't get enough credit for it. But recent months have been dominated by other issues, including deadly clashes during deportation efforts in Minneapolis.

As a reminder of his divided attention, Trump is scheduled to begin Thursday with one of his passion projects. He's gathering representatives from some of the more than two dozen countries that have joined his Board of Peace, a diplomatic initiative to supplant the United Nations.

False claims of voter fraud

The Georgia visit comes less than a month after federal agents seized voting records and ballots from Fulton County, home to the state's largest collection of Democrats.

Trump has long seen Georgia as central to his false claim that the 2020 election was stolen by Democrats and President Joe Biden, a fabrication that he reiterated Wednesday during a White House reception on Black History Month.

"We won by millions of votes but they cheated," Trump said.

Audits, state officials, courts and Trump's own former attorney general have all rejected the idea of widespread problems that could have altered the election.

Some Republicans are now pushing for Georgia's State Election Board, which has a Trump-aligned majority, to take control of elections in Fulton County, a step enabled by a controversial state law passed in

2021. But it's unclear if or when the board will act.

Leavitt, in the White House, said Wednesday that Trump was "exploring his options" when it comes to a potential executive order he teased on social media over the weekend designed to address voter fraud.

Trump described Democrats as "horrible, disingenuous CHEATERS" in the post, which is pinned to the top of his social media account. He also said that Republicans should feature such claims "at the top of every speech."

Leavitt, meanwhile, insisted Trump would be focusing on affordability and the economy.

Greene has not gone quiet

Trump may be distracted by fresh attacks from Greene, once among the president's most vocal allies in Congress and now one of his loudest conservative critics.

In a social media post ahead of Trump's visit, Greene noted that the White House and Republican leaders met earlier in the week to develop an effective midterm message. She suggested they were "on the struggle bus" and blamed them for health insurance costs that ballooned this year.

"Approximately 75,000 households in my former district had their health insurance double or more on January 1st of this year because the ACA tax credits expired and Republicans have absolutely failed to fix our health insurance system that was destroyed by Obamacare," she said. "And you can call me all the petty names you want, I don't worship a man. I'm not in a cult."

Early voting has already begun in the special election to replace Greene, and the leading Republican candidates have fully embraced Trump.

Trump recently endorsed Clay Fuller, a district attorney who prosecutes crimes in four counties. Fuller described Trump's endorsement as "rocket fuel" for his candidacy in a weekend interview and vowed to maintain an America First agenda even if he remains in Congress after Trump is no longer president.

Other candidates include Republican former state Sen. Colton Moore, who made a name for himself with a vociferous attack on Trump's prosecution in Georgia. Moore, the favorite of many far-right activists, said he's been in communication with Trump even after Trump endorsed Fuller, calling the choice "unfortunate."

"I think he's the greatest president of our lifetimes," Moore said.

The top Democrat in the race is Shawn Harris, who unsuccessfully ran against Greene in 2024. Democrats voice hope for an upset, but the district is rated as the most Republican district in Georgia by the Cook Political Report.

A judge weighs extending protections for refugees in Minnesota facing arrest and deportation

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A federal judge will hear arguments Thursday on whether he should extend an order that protects Minnesota refugees who are lawfully in the U.S. from being arrested and deported.

U.S. District Judge John Tunheim blocked the government from targeting these refugees last month, saying the plaintiffs in the case were likely to prevail on their claims "that their arrest and detention, and the policy that purports to justify them, are unlawful." His Jan. 28 temporary restraining order will expire Feb. 25 unless he grants a more permanent preliminary injunction.

Refugee rights groups sued the federal government in January after the Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in mid-December launched Operation PARRIS, an acronym for Post-Admission Refugee Reverification and Integrity Strengthening.

It was billed as a "sweeping initiative" to reexamine the cases of 5,600 Minnesota refugees who had not yet been granted permanent resident status, also known as green cards. The agencies cited fraud in public programs in Minnesota as justification.

Operation PARRIS was part of the Trump administration's broader immigration crackdown that targeted Minnesota, including the surge of thousands of federal officers into the state. Homeland Security said it was its largest immigration enforcement operation ever. It also sparked mass protests after the shooting

deaths of Renee Good and Alex Pretti. White House border czar Tom Homan announced last week the surge was ending, though a small federal presence would remain.

The lawsuit alleges that ICE officers went door to door under Operation PARRIS arresting refugees and sending them to detention centers in Texas, without access to attorneys. Some were later released on the streets of Texas and left to find their own way back to Minnesota, they said.

The judge rejected the government's claim that it had the legal right to arrest and detain refugees who haven't obtained their green cards within a year of arriving in the U.S. He said that would be illogical and nonsensical, given that refugees can't apply for permanent residency until they've been in the U.S. for a year.

Tunheim noted in his order, which applies only in Minnesota, that refugees are extensively vetted by multiple agencies before being resettled in the U.S. He wrote that none arrested in the operation had been deemed a danger to the community or a flight risk, nor had any been charged with crimes that could be grounds for deportation.

The judge cited several cases involving plaintiffs named in the lawsuit, including one man identified only as U.H.A., a refugee with no criminal history. He was admitted into the U.S. in 2024 and was arrested by ICE while driving to work on Jan. 18 this year. "He was pulled over, ordered out of his car, handcuffed, and detained, without a warrant or apparent justification," the judge wrote.

Tunheim stressed that the refugees impacted by his order were admitted into the U.S. because of persecution in their home countries. He prohibited further arrests under Operation PARRIS and ordered that all detainees still in custody from it be released and returned to Minnesota.

"They are not committing crimes on our streets, nor did they illegally cross the border. Refugees have a legal right to be in the United States, a right to work, a right to live peacefully — and importantly, a right not to be subjected to the terror of being arrested and detained without warrants or cause in their homes or on their way to religious services or to buy groceries," he wrote.

"At its best, America serves as a haven of individual liberties in a world too often full of tyranny and cruelty. We abandon that ideal when we subject our neighbors to fear and chaos," he continued.

In a follow-up order Feb. 9, Tunheim rejected a government motion to lift the temporary restraining order.

Trump gathers members of Board of Peace for first meeting, with some US allies wary of new body

By AAMER MADHANI and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump will gather Thursday with representatives from more than two dozen countries that have joined his Board of Peace — and several that have opted not to — for an inaugural meeting that will focus on reconstruction and building an international stabilization force for a war-battered Gaza, where a shaky ceasefire deal persists.

Trump announced ahead of the meeting that board members have pledged \$5 billion for reconstruction, a fraction of the estimated \$70 billion needed to rebuild the Palestinian territory decimated after two years of war. Members are expected to unveil commitments of thousands of personnel to international stabilization and police forces for the territory.

"We have the greatest leaders in the world joining the Board of Peace," Trump told reporters earlier this week. "I think it has the chance to be the most consequential board ever assembled of any kind."

The board was initiated as part of Trump's 20-point peace plan to end the conflict in Gaza. But since the October ceasefire, Trump's vision for the board has morphed and he wants it to have an even more ambitious remit — one that will not only complete the Herculean task of bringing lasting peace between Israel and Hamas but will also help resolve conflicts around the globe.

But ahead of the board's first gathering, the Gaza ceasefire deal remains fragile and Trump's expanded vision for it has triggered fears the U.S. president is looking to create a rival to the United Nations. Trump earlier this week said he hoped the board would push the U.N. to "get on the ball."

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"The United Nations has great potential," he said. "They haven't lived up to the potential."

Some US allies remain skeptical

More than 40 countries and the European Union have confirmed they will send officials to Thursday's meeting, according to a senior administration official who was not authorized to comment publicly. Germany, Italy, Norway and Switzerland are among more than a dozen countries that have not joined the board but are expected to attend as observers, the official said.

The U.N. Security Council held a high-level meeting Wednesday on the ceasefire deal and Israel's efforts to expand control in the West Bank. The U.N. session in New York was originally scheduled for Thursday but was moved up after Trump announced the board's meeting for the same date and it became clear that it would complicate travel plans for diplomats planning to attend both.

Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin told reporters earlier this week that "at the international level it should above all be the U.N. that manages these crisis situations." The Trump administration on Wednesday pushed back on the Vatican's concerns.

"This president has a very bold and ambitious plan and vision to rebuild and reconstruct Gaza, which is well underway because of the Board of Peace," White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said. "This is a legitimate organization where there are tens of member countries from around the world."

Mike Waltz, the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., also pushed back on skeptical allies, saying the board is "not talking, it is doing."

"We are hearing the chattering class criticizing the structure of the board, that it's unconventional, that it's unprecedented," Waltz said. "Again, the old ways were not working."

Questions about disarming Hamas

Central to Thursday's discussions will be creating an armed international stabilization force to keep security and ensure the disarming of the militant Hamas group, a key demand of Israel and a cornerstone of the ceasefire deal.

But thus far, only Indonesia has offered a firm commitment to Trump for the proposed force. And Hamas has provided little confidence that it is willing to move forward on disarmament. The administration is "under no illusions on the challenges regarding demilitarization" but has been encouraged by what mediators have reported back, according to a U.S. official who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto pledged to work closely with other leading Islamic countries invited by Trump to "join in the endeavors to try to achieve lasting peace in Palestine."

"We recognize there are still obstacles to be overcome, but at least my position is at least we have to try, and we have to do our best," he said at an event at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce on Wednesday, where he met with members of the business community.

On Thursday, updates are expected from the Gaza Executive Board, the operational arm of the board, about its efforts to create a functioning government system and services for the territory, according to the official who spoke on condition of anonymity to preview the broad outlines of the meeting.

In addition to Trump, the official said other speakers at the conference would include Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff, Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the executive board's high representative Nickolay Mladenov, and Waltz.

Michael Hanna, U.S. program director at the International Crisis Group, a nonprofit group focused on preventing conflicts, suggested the skepticism some U.S. allies are showing is not unwarranted.

"Without any clear authorization for the expansion of its mandate beyond Gaza, it is unsurprising that many U.S. allies and partners have chosen to decline Trump's offer to join the board," Hanna said. "Instead, many of the states most invested in Gaza's future have signed up with the hope of focusing U.S. attention and encouraging Trump himself to use the influence and leverage he has with Israel."

8 backcountry skiers found dead and 1 still missing after California avalanche

By BROOKE HESS-HOMEIER, JULIE WATSON and JOHN SEEWER Associated Press TRUCKEE, Calif. (AP) — Crews found the bodies of eight backcountry skiers near California's Lake Tahoe and were searching for one more after they were caught in an avalanche, the nation's deadliest in nearly half a century, authorities said Wednesday.

Authorities said the skiers had little time to react.

"Someone saw the avalanche, yelled 'Avalanche!' and it overtook them rather quickly," said Capt. Russell "Rusty" Greene, of the Nevada County sheriff's office.

Six were rescued six hours after the avalanche hit Tuesday morning as they were concluding a three-day trek in Northern California's Sierra Nevada during a monster winter storm. The tour included four guides, three of whom are presumed dead, authorities said.

The group was a mix of women and men between the ages of 30 and 55, authorities said. Some of the people killed were members of the Sugar Bowl Academy community, a private boarding school and ski and snowboard club on Donner Summit, according to the academy. School officials did not release the names of those killed or describe their connection to the academy.

Nevada County Sheriff Shannan Moon said investigators would look into the decision to proceed with the trip on Sunday despite the forecast. That morning at 6:49 a.m., the Sierra Avalanche Center issued an avalanche watch, indicating that large avalanches were likely in the next 24 to 48 hours.

Hours before the avalanche hit, the center increased the watch to a warning, which means avalanches are expected. It's unclear if the guides would have known about the change before they began their trek out of the wilderness.

With one person unaccounted for, authorities' mission moved from rescuing people to recovering bodies, Moon said.

Authorities were waiting to release the victims' names to give the families time.

"They're still reeling," Moon said. "I could not imagine what they're going through."

The victims were found fairly close together, Greene said. The crews have not yet been able to remove the victims from the mountain because of the extreme conditions.

Three to 6 feet (91 centimeters to 1.8 meters) of snow has fallen since Sunday. The area was also hit by subfreezing temperatures and gale force winds. The Sierra Avalanche Center said the threat of more avalanches remained Wednesday and left the snowpack unstable and unpredictable in an area known for its steep, craggy cliffs.

Rescuers were guided by beacons and a cellphone in dangerous conditions

Rescuers reached the survivors just before sunset on Tuesday.

The skiers all had beacons that can send signals to rescuers and at least one of the guides was able to send text messages, but it wasn't clear if they were wearing avalanche bags, which are inflatable devices that can keep skiers near the surface, Greene said.

While they waited to be rescued, the survivors used equipment to shelter themselves and fend off temperatures dipping below freezing. They found three others who had died while they waited, Moon said.

Rescuers used a snowcat to get within 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) of the survivors, then skied in carefully so they didn't set off another avalanche, the sheriff said.

One of those rescued remained hospitalized Wednesday, Moon said.

The area near Donner Summit is one of the snowiest places in the Western Hemisphere and until just a few years ago was closed to the public. It sees an average of nearly 35 feet (10.6 meters) of snow a year, according to the Truckee Donner Land Trust, which owns a cluster of huts where the group was staying near Frog Lake.

The avalanche is the deadliest in the U.S. since 1981, when 11 climbers were killed on Mount Rainier in Washington state. Each winter, 25 to 30 people die in avalanches in the U.S., according to the National Avalanche Center.

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It was the second deadly avalanche near California's Castle Peak this year, after a snowmobiler was buried by one in January.

Skiers were heading for the trailhead when the avalanche struck

Greene said authorities were notified about the avalanche by Blackbird Mountain Guides, which was leading the expedition, and the skiers' emergency beacons. The sheriff's office said Tuesday night that 15 backcountry skiers had been on the trip, not 16 as initially believed. One skier had pulled out at the last minute, Moon said.

The skiers were on the last day of the backcountry trip and had spent two nights in huts, said Steve Reynaud, an avalanche forecaster with the Sierra Avalanche Center.

Reaching the huts in winter takes several hours and requires backcountry skills, avalanche training and safety equipment. Blackbird said the tour was for intermediate-to-expert skiers.

The area near Donner Summit was closed for nearly a century before it was reopened by the Truckee Donner Land Trust and its partners in 2020. Donner Summit 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.

When asked what went through her mind as her staff and volunteers responded to the scene, Moon said she was hoping they would be able to make it there safely. Once they did, she said she was "immediately thinking of the folks that didn't make it, and knowing our mission now is to get them home."

Genealogical sites have helped solve major crimes. Police in Nancy Guthrie's case might turn to them

By ED WHITE Associated Press

Authorities trying to solve the disappearance of Nancy Guthrie say they might tap DNA genealogy databases, the same step that police took to unravel a decades-old series of murders in California and the fatal stabbings of four college students in Idaho.

The strategy could be fruitful: If unidentified DNA evidence can be connected to someone — even a distant relative — in a common genealogical database, it would give investigators more information and possibly lead to a suspect in Guthrie's kidnapping in Arizona.

"It's a fantastic tool," said Ruth Ballard, a geneticist in California who specializes in DNA and has testified in hundreds of court cases. "If it's a good quality sample and they're able to get a profile, they could find a hit on that fairly quickly."

The sheriff's department in Pima County, Arizona, said DNA collected so far in the investigation has not turned up any matches in a national criminal justice database known as CODIS, which has DNA profiles from convicted criminals and, in some states, people arrested for certain crimes.

"Investigators are currently looking into additional investigative genetic genealogy options for DNA evidence to check for matches. CODIS is one option of many databases that are available," the sheriff's department said Tuesday.

The department said Wednesday that biological evidence from Guthrie's Tucson-area home was being examined and that DNA profiles were at a lab for analysis.

Guthrie, the mother of NBC "Today" co-anchor Savannah Guthrie, has been missing from her home since Feb. 1. The FBI said gloves found about 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) away appeared to match those worn by a masked suspect who was recorded on a porch camera.

Genealogical sites Ancestry, 23andMe and MyHeritage say they can be asked to comply with court orders seeking information. Another genealogical site, GEDmatch, said its policy is to ask users if they want to opt-in to allow police to look at their data. The Associated Press e-mailed the companies late Wednesday, asking if they have a role in the Guthrie investigation.

GEDmatch has been credited with helping solve the case of the so-called Golden State Killer. Police used DNA from crime scenes to find a distant relative and build a family tree that led to Joseph DeAngelo Jr. In 2020, he pleaded guilty to 13 killings and dozens of rapes in California in the 1970s and '80s.

In Idaho, DNA from a knife sheath helped point to Bryan Kohberger in the killings of four University of

Idaho students in 2022. Investigators used genealogical sites to build a family tree and pulled trash from the Pennsylvania home of Kohberger's parents to make a connection. Kohberger pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life in prison.

Ballard said the source and quality of the DNA evidence held by police can be factors when trying to find matches on genealogical sites.

"It does require a much better sample than CODIS searching does," she said.

And there can be other hurdles.

"There are a lot of unknowns when you go into these databases," Ballard said. "The databases are not equal in terms of ethnic distribution. It's comparatively easier to find a Caucasian because more have uploaded their data and there are more family trees to mine."

Snow drought helped set the stage for deadly California avalanche, leading to unstable conditions

By TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

A weekslong "snow drought" in Northern California's Sierra Nevada helped set the stage for Tuesday's deadly avalanche, after several feet of new snow fell on an earlier layer that had hardened, making it unstable and easily triggered, experts said.

The new snow did not have time to bond to the earlier layer before the avalanche near Lake Tahoe killed at least eight backcountry skiers, said Craig Clements, a meteorology professor at San Jose State University, who has conducted avalanche research. Six skiers survived and rescuers were still searching for another one who was still missing on Wednesday.

The group was on a three-day backcountry trek in the Sierra Nevada on Tuesday morning when they were trapped by the avalanche as a winter storm pummeled the West Coast.

The dangers generally are highest in the first 24 to 48 hours after a very large snowfall, Clements said, and authorities had issued avalanche warnings.

Here's what to know.

What made conditions so dangerous?

When weather is dry and clear, as it had been in the Sierra Nevada since January, snow crystals change and can become angular or round over time, Clements said.

If heavy new snow falls on the crystals, the layers often can't bond and the new snow forms what is called a storm slab over a weaker layer.

"Because it's on a mountain, it will slide," when it's triggered by any change in the tension above or below, sometimes naturally but also because of people traversing the area, Clements said.

Authorities have not said what triggered Tuesday's avalanche.

If there had been more consistent snowfall throughout the winter, different layers could have bonded more easily, Clements said. But even when a snow slab forms, the danger often only lasts a couple of days until the new snow stabilizes, he said.

Was climate change a factor?

Although climate change can lead to weather extremes that include both drought and heavier precipitation, it's difficult to say how and whether it will affect avalanches or where they occur, scientists say.

Clements said this week's avalanche is fairly typical for California's Sierra Nevada and he doesn't believe it can be linked to climate change.

Avalanches are a mechanism of how much snow falls on weak or stable layers, and this one was "a meteorological phenomenon, not a climate phenomenon," he said.

About 3 feet to 6 feet of snow has fallen since Sunday, when the group started its trip. The area was also hit by subfreezing temperatures and gale force winds. The Sierra Avalanche Center said the threat of more avalanches remained Wednesday and left the snowpack unstable and unpredictable.

What's happening now?

Crews found the bodies of eight backcountry skiers near California's Lake Tahoe and were searching for

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one more following Tuesday's avalanche, which authorities say was the nation's deadliest in nearly half a century.

Six from the guided tour were rescued six hours after the avalanche.

Nevada County Sheriff Shannan Moon said Wednesday that investigators would look into the decision to proceed with the trip despite the storm forecast.

The skiers traveled Sunday to remote huts at 7,600 feet (3,415 meters) in Tahoe National Forest, carrying their own food and supplies. At 6:49 that morning, the Sierra Avalanche Center issued an avalanche watch for the area, indicating that large slides were likely in the next 24 to 48 hours.

Bernie Sanders and Gavin Newsom become adversaries over push to tax California billionaires

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD AP Political Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — As national Democrats search for a unifying theme ahead of the fall's midterm elections, a California proposal to levy a hefty tax on billionaires is turning some of the party's leading figures into adversaries just when Democrats can least afford division from within.

Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders traveled to Los Angeles on Wednesday to campaign for the tax proposal, which has Silicon Valley in an uproar, with tech titans threatening to leave the state. Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom is among its outspoken opponents, warning that it could leave government finances in crisis and put the state at a competitive disadvantage nationally.

At an evening rally near downtown, Sanders told cheering supporters that the nation has reached a crisis point in which "massive income and wealth inequality" has concentrated power over business, technology, government and the media within the "billionaire class," while millions of working-class Americans struggle to pay household bills.

He said enactment of the proposed tax would show "we are still living in a democratic society where the people have some power."

"Enough is enough," Sanders said to a pulse of applause. "The billionaire class cannot have it all. This nation belongs to all of us."

The senator, a democratic socialist, is popular in California — he won the 2020 Democratic presidential primary in the state in a runaway. He's been railing for decades against what he characterizes as wealthy elites and the growing gap between rich and poor.

Health care union is pushing proposed tax to fund services

A large health care union is attempting to place a proposal before voters in November that would impose a one-time 5% tax on the assets of billionaires — including stocks, art, businesses, collectibles and intellectual property — to backfill federal funding cuts to health services for lower-income people that were signed by President Donald Trump last year.

Debate on the proposal is unfolding at a time when voters in both parties express unease with economic conditions and what the future will bring in a politically divided nation. Distrust of government — and its ability to get things done — is widespread.

The proposal has created a rift between Newsom and prominent members of his party's progressive wing, including Sanders, who has said the tax should be a template for other states.

"The issues that are really going to be motivating Democrats this year, affordability and the cost of health care and cuts to schools, none of these would be fixed by this proposal. If fact, they would be made worse," said Brian Brokaw, a longtime Newsom adviser who is leading a political committee opposing the tax.

Split among Democrats comes as midterm elections loom

Midterm elections typically punish the party in control of the White House, and Democrats are hoping to gain enough U.S. House seats to overturn the chamber's slim Republican majority. In California, rejiggered House districts approved by voters last year are expected to help the party pick up as many as five additional seats, which would leave Republicans in control of just a handful of districts.

"It is always better for a party to have the political debate focused on issues where you are united and

the other party is divided," said Eric Schickler, a professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley. "Having an issue like this where Newsom and Sanders — among others — are on different sides is not ideal."

With the idea of taxing billionaires popular among many voters "this can be a good way for Democratic candidates to rally that side and break through from the pack," Schickler added in an email.

It's already trickled into the race for governor and contests down the ballot. Republicans Chad Bianco and Steve Hilton, both candidates for governor, have warned the tax would erase jobs. San Jose Mayor Matt Mahan, a Democratic candidate for governor, has said inequality starts at the federal level, where the tax code is riddled with loopholes.

Sanders did not mention Newsom in his nearly 30-minute speech but name-checked a handful of billionaires, including Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Google co-founder Sergey Brin, as examples of a wealthy elite that in many respects "no longer sees itself as part of American society."

Sanders urges support for billionaires tax

Citing protests against federal immigration raids in Minnesota, he urged the crowd to support the tax, saying Californians can show that "when we stand together, we can take on the oligarchs and the billionaires."

Coinciding with the Sanders visit and an upcoming state Democratic convention this weekend, opponents are sending out targeted emails and social media ads intended to sway party insiders.

It's not clear if the proposal will make the ballot — supporters must gather more than 870,000 petition signatures to place it before voters.

The nascent contest already has drawn out a tangle of competing interests, with millions of dollars flowing into political committees.

Newsom has long opposed state-level wealth taxes, believing such levies would be disadvantageous for the world's fourth-largest economy. At a time when California is strapped for cash and he is considering a 2028 presidential run, he is trying to block the proposal before it reaches the ballot.

Analysts say an exodus of billionaires could mean a loss of hundreds of millions of tax dollars for the nation's most populous state. But supporters say the funding is needed to offset federal cuts that could leave many Californians without vital services.

Afghanistan faces catastrophic hunger crisis as aid cuts force the WFP to turn away 3 in 4 children

By ABDUL QA HAR AFGHAN and ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The toddler cries as an oxygen mask is fitted to his face, its green elastic band stretched across his sunken cheeks. When he was first hospitalized a month ago, the 2 ½-year-old was fighting for his life.

Severely malnourished, Abu Bakar weighed just 6 kilograms (13 pounds), about half what he should. And yet, he is one of the lucky ones: His family got him to Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital in Kabul, where doctors are providing life-saving care.

But for every malnourished child receiving treatment, there are many more who cannot get help.

"We have a catastrophic nutritional crisis on our hands with two-thirds of the country in a very serious or crisis level for acute malnutrition," said John Aylieff, Afghanistan Country Director for the United Nations' World Food Program. "This is the highest surge in malnutrition ever recorded in the country. And the lives of 4 million children are hanging in the balance."

Desperate children turned away

Devastated by four decades of conflict, Afghanistan has long relied on foreign aid. But the Taliban take-over in 2021 saw direct foreign aid halted almost overnight, driving millions into poverty and hunger. The situation is compounded by a moribund economy, a severe drought, two devastating earthquakes in late 2025 and the return of 5.3 million Afghans expelled mainly from neighboring Pakistan and Iran.

Now, funding cuts to humanitarian organizations, including the halting of U.S. aid to programs such as

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the WFP's food distribution, have severed a lifeline for millions.

"The aid cuts have been devastating," Aylieff told The Associated Press. Of the 4 million acutely malnourished children, "we are forced now to turn away three out of four of them because we simply don't have the money."

This, he said, "is unprecedented and I've never seen this in my more than 30-year-old career as a humanitarian."

Of the 17.4 million people facing acute hunger, the organization can now only reach 2 million. And even for them, it is forced to provide less food.

No more food parcels

Donor countries' budgets are spread thin among humanitarian emergencies around the world, including famine in Sudan and the wars in Gaza and Ukraine. In 2024, the WFP's budget in Afghanistan was \$600 million after "very generous" donor contributions, Aylieff said.

Last year, the amount fell by half and the organization expects to receive even less – about \$200 million – this year. It's not enough to tackle a hunger problem that "is spiraling out of control," he added.

Abu Bakar's family was among those who saw aid dry up.

"We once received assistance from an organization that helped us a lot with food," said his mother, Latifa, 36, who, like many Afghans, goes by one name. But that stopped three years ago. Since then, there's been nothing.

Her husband, a construction worker, has been unemployed for a year. Now, at times, she has nothing at all to feed her five sons.

"I am trying to provide food for my kids," Latifa said, cradling her emaciated toddler in her arms. She doesn't care if she doesn't eat, she says. "I can control my hunger. I will handle it. But my child can't."

Children dying

Hunger is driving an increase in child mortality, Aylieff said, with the WFP logging more than 500 child deaths in recent months. The number, he noted, was "the tip of the iceberg" as many deaths during winter occur in villages blocked off by snow and are unregistered.

"How many more Afghan children will die here before the world wakes up and realizes that that's enough? Aylieff asked. "Before the world says, 'OK, we've crossed a threshold, we are not willing to stand by anymore, and we're coming now to help.' How many? What is the number? I really don't know."

Sharara, 21, is fighting to prevent her 6-month-old son Samir from becoming one of those children.

From the far northeastern province of Badakhshan, the young mother of two was bounced around hospitals there and in the northern city of Kunduz as doctors struggled to treat her gravely ill baby, suffering from a heart problem and severe pneumonia compounded by malnutrition.

Eventually, Sharara, who also goes by one name, made it to the malnutrition ward of Kabul's Ataturk Hospital. But she is still desperately worried.

"Doctors say his condition is currently critical," she said. In the 13 days Samir has been hospitalized, he hasn't gained any weight.

The government's response

Afghanistan's government is well aware of the country's hunger problem, and has expanded its malnutrition treatment facilities from 800 to about 3,200, Health Ministry spokesman Sharafat Zaman told the AP. In 2025, about 3 million malnourished children and mothers were treated, he added.

"Malnutrition is not a one-day problem. Malnutrition has been a problem in Afghanistan for decades due to poverty, war and other problems," said Zaman, who is also a medical doctor.

The government has been speaking with aid agencies, he said, including those that have reduced funding or suspended projects.

"Health is separate from politics. Providing health services is an inalienable right for all people," Zaman said.

Women bear the brunt

Women are especially affected by rising hunger. Banned from nearly all jobs by the Taliban government's

draconian restrictions on women, widows with children are especially vulnerable.

Many are so desperate they say they want to die.

"As WFP, we're getting more and more suicide calls from women because they just don't know how to feed their children and they don't know where to turn," the WFP country director said.

WFP nutrition programs have seen a 30% increase in the number of acutely malnourished pregnant and breastfeeding women, an increase Aylieff said nobody in the nutrition community had seen before.

"These are the women to whom the world pledged unwavering solidarity in the aftermath of the takeover of the country in 2021. ... Those same women are asking us, where is the solidarity of the international community?" Aylieff said.

"If I had one plea, it's to not walk away from Afghan women who are now facing abject misery, hunger, malnutrition and watching their children die."

Mark Zuckerberg quizzed on kids' Instagram use in social media trial

By KAITLYN HUAMANI and BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writers

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Mark Zuckerberg and opposing lawyers dueled in a Los Angeles courtroom on Wednesday, where the Meta CEO answered questions about young people's use of Instagram, his congressional testimony and internal advice he's received about being "authentic" and not "robotic."

Zuckerberg's testimony is part of an unprecedented social media trial that questions whether Meta's platforms deliberately addict and harm children. During questioning by the plaintiff's lawyer, Zuckerberg said he still agrees with a previous statement he made that the existing body of scientific work has not proved that social media causes mental health harms.

The plaintiff's attorney, Mark Lanier, asked Zuckerberg if people tend to use something more if it's addictive.

"I'm not sure what to say to that," Zuckerberg said. "I don't think that applies here."

Attorneys representing the plaintiff, a now 20-year-old woman identified by the initials KGM, claim 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.

Beginning his questioning, Lanier laid out three options of what people can do regarding vulnerable people: help them, ignore them, or "prey upon them and use them for our own ends." Zuckerberg said he agrees the last option is not what a reasonable company should do, saying, "I think a reasonable company should try to help the people that use its services."

Lanier questioned the Meta CEO extensively about a comment he made during a past congressional hearing, where he said Instagram employees are not given goals to increase amount of time people spent on the platform.

Lanier presented internal documents that seemed to contradict that statement. Zuckerberg replied that they previously had goals associated with time, but said he and the company made the conscious decision to move away from those goals, focusing instead on utility. He said he believes in the "basic assumption" that "if something is valuable, people will use it more because it's useful to them."

Lanier also asked Zuckerberg about what he characterized as extensive media training, including for testimonies like the one he was giving in court. Lanier pointed to an internal document about feedback on Zuckerberg's tone of voice on his own social media, imploring him to come off as "authentic, direct, human, insightful and real," and instructing him to not "try hard," or be "fake, robotic, corporate or cheesy" in his communication.

Zuckerberg pushed back against the idea that he's been coached on how to respond to questions or present himself, saying those offering the advice were "just giving feedback."

Regarding his media appearances and public speaking, Zuckerberg said, "I think I'm actually well known to be sort of bad at this."

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The Meta CEO has long been mocked online for appearing robotic and, when he was younger, nervous when speaking publicly. In 2010, during an interview with renowned tech journalists Kara Swisher and Walt Mossberg, he was sweating so profusely that Swisher asked him if he wanted to “take off the hoodie” that was his uniform at the time.

Lanier spent a considerable stretch of his time with Zuckerberg asking about the company’s age verification policies.

“I don’t see why this is so complicated,” Zuckerberg said after a lengthy back-and-forth, reiterating that the company’s policy restricts users under the age of 13 and that they work to detect users who have lied about their ages to bypass restrictions.

Zuckerberg mostly stuck to his talking points, referencing his goal of building a platform that is valuable to users and, on multiple occasions, saying he disagreed with Lanier’s “characterization” of his questions or of Zuckerberg’s own comments.

As was the case with head of Instagram Adam Mosseri’s testimony last week, Zuckerberg was grilled about policies relating to cosmetic beauty filters on Instagram. Zuckerberg said he didn’t believe there was enough evidence pointing to harm the filters could cause and said he has a “high bar” for blocking tools or features that would limit people’s expression. Lanier pointed to external experts Meta consulted to assess the filters and their potential impacts, saying that all 18 of them raised concerns.

Children’s advocates slammed Zuckerberg’s testimony as disingenuous.

“All Mark Zuckerberg accomplished with his testimony today was to prove yet again that he cannot be trusted, especially when it comes to kids’ safety,” said Josh Golin, executive director of Fairplay. “Under oath, Meta’s CEO testified that his company does not have an objective to increase users’ time spent on Instagram. But we know Zuckerberg and his fellow executives prevented Instagram from getting rid of features like visible like counts and plastic surgery filters — features that are by their very nature addictive.”

Zuckerberg has testified in other trials and answered questions from Congress about youth safety on Meta’s platforms. During his 2024 congressional testimony, he apologized to families whose lives had been upended by tragedies they believed were caused by social media. But while he told parents he was “sorry for everything you have all been through,” he stopped short of taking direct responsibility for it. This trial marks the first time Zuckerberg stands before a jury. Once again, bereaved parents are sitting in the courtroom audience.

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 are likely to play out.

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 disputing 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.

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

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 envoys from Moscow and Kyiv 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 made no major headway. Expectations for significant progress in Geneva were low.

“The negotiations were not easy,” Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said after the talks broke up and he spoke briefly by phone from Kyiv with his negotiating team.

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He earlier accused Russia of "trying to drag out negotiations" while it presses on with its invasion — an accusation he and European leaders have repeatedly made in the past.

Despite that, some progress was made on military issues although political differences remain deep, including over the future of land in eastern Ukraine that is occupied by the Russian army and that Russian President Vladimir Putin wants to keep, Zelenskyy said.

The head of the Russian delegation, Putin adviser Vladimir Medinsky, told reporters that the two days of talks in Geneva "were difficult but businesslike."

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

Both sides said a new round of talks is set to take place.

US will help monitor any ceasefire

Zelenskyy described the military discussions as "constructive," adding that the armed forces of both countries considered how any future ceasefire might be monitored.

"Monitoring will definitely be carried out with participation of the American side," he said in a voice message shared in a media group chat on WhatsApp.

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.

Europe is involved

Zelenskyy said 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 eastern regions Moscow has occupied but doesn't fully control.

Zelenskyy says Ukraine won't surrender land to Russia.

Seahawks sale process begins less than 2 weeks after winning Super Bowl, Paul Allen's estate says

By ANDREW DESTIN AP Sports Writer

SEATTLE (AP) — The Seattle Seahawks are going up for sale in accordance with the wishes of late team owner Paul Allen.

Allen's estate announced Wednesday that it has begun the process of selling the team, which is coming off its second Super Bowl victory in franchise history. The NFL did not immediately respond to a request for comment from The Associated Press, nor did Allen's estate have anything further to add beyond its brief statement, it said.

Ahead of the Super Bowl, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell commended Allen's estate on its time own-

ing the Seahawks.

"They're in the Super Bowl, and I think from that standpoint they've done a really important job in the context of the trust and the execution of that," Goodell said. "But eventually the team will need to be sold in accordance with that. That will be Jody's decision for when she does that, and we will be supportive of that."

Investment bank Allen & Company and law firm Latham & Watkins will lead the sales process, which is estimated to continue through the offseason. NFL owners must then ratify a final purchase agreement.

The estate said the sale is consistent with Allen's directive to eventually sell his sports holdings and direct all estate proceeds to philanthropy.

The Seahawks have been in the Allen family since 1997, when Paul Allen bought the team for \$194 million from then-owner Ken Behring. Allen was critical in keeping the Seahawks in Seattle, which is where the team is expected to remain after the sale is finalized. The Seahawks have a lease at Lumen Field that runs through 2032 with three 10-year options.

Since Allen, co-founder of Microsoft, died in 2018 from complications of non-Hodgkin lymphoma at 65, the Seahawks and the NBA's Portland Trail Blazers have been owned by his sister, Jody. The estate agreed in September to sell the Trail Blazers to an investment group led by Carolina Hurricanes owner Tom Dundon. The Trail Blazers will remain in Portland as part of the deal, which could be completed this spring.

The last NFL team to be sold was the Washington Commanders in 2023. A group led by Josh Harris that includes Magic Johnson bought the team from longtime owner Dan Snyder and his family for a record \$6.05 billion.

It already has been an offseason of change for the Seahawks less than two weeks removed from their Super Bowl victory over the New England Patriots.

The Las Vegas Raiders plucked away offensive coordinator Klint Kubiak and hired him as their head coach. The Seahawks are moving to hire San Francisco 49ers tight ends coach and run game coordinator Brian Fleury as their offensive coordinator, a person with knowledge of the hiring process said Sunday, speaking to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because a deal was still being worked on.

The Seahawks' roster could look quite different in 2026, too.

Defensive starters safety Coby Bryant, cornerbacks Josh Jobe and Riq Woolen and edge rusher Boye Mafe will become unrestricted free agents this offseason. Offensive standouts wide receiver/return specialist Rashid Shaheed and running back Kenneth Walker III will be unrestricted free agents in March, too.

Both Shaheed and Walker, who was the Super Bowl MVP, have said publicly they would like to return to Seattle next season.

Should the Seahawks' sale wrap up by this offseason, though, the team will not be owned by the Allen family for the first time in nearly three decades.

Billionaire Les Wexner says he was 'duped' by adviser Jeffrey Epstein, 'a world-class con man'

By JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press

NEW ALBANY, Ohio (AP) — The billionaire behind the retail empire that once blanketed shopping malls with names such as Victoria's Secret and Abercrombie & Fitch told members of Congress on Wednesday that he was "duped by a world-class con man" — close financial adviser Jeffrey Epstein. Les Wexner also denied knowing about the late sex offender's crimes or participating in Epstein's abuse of girls and young women.

"I was naive, foolish, and gullible to put any trust in Jeffrey Epstein. He was a con man. And while I was conned, I have done nothing wrong and have nothing to hide," the 88-year-old retired founder of L Brands said in a statement to the House Oversight and Reform Committee released before his interview.

The panel's Democrats had subpoenaed him after the latest Justice Department release of Epstein-related documents revealed new details about Wexner's relationship with the well-connected financier. Ranking member Rep. James Comer, a Kentucky Republican, said Wexner "answered every question asked of him"

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during the 6-hour proceeding. A video and transcript are to be released soon.

Wexner described himself to the lawmakers as a philanthropist, community builder and grandfather who always strove "to live my life in an ethical manner in line with my moral compass," according to the statement. He said he was eager "to set the record straight" about his ties with Epstein. Their relation ended bitterly in 2007, after the Wexners discovered he'd been stealing from them.

As one of Epstein's most prominent former friends, Wexner has spent years answering for their decades-long association and he sought to use the proceeding to dispel what he called "outrageous untrue statements and hurtful rumor, innuendo, and speculation" that have shadowed him.

Rep. Robert Garcia, a California Democrat who sat in on Wednesday's interview, expressed skepticism in comments to reporters gathered near the proceeding.

"There is no single person that was more involved in providing Jeffrey Epstein with the financial support to commit his crimes than Les Wexner," he said.

In response to allegations by the prominent late Epstein victim Virginia Giuffre, who claimed in court documents that Wexner was among men Epstein trafficked her to, Wexner testified to utter devotion to his wife of 33 years, Abigail. He said he'd never once been unfaithful "in any way, shape, or form. Never. Any suggestion to the contrary is absolutely and entirely false."

Wexner's name appears more than 1,000 times in the Epstein files, which does not imply guilt, and Wexner has never been charged with any crimes. His spokesperson said the number of mentions is not unexpected given their long-running ties.

'A most loyal friend'

Epstein first met Leslie Wexner through a business associate around 1986.

It was an opportune time for Wexner's finances. The Ohio business owner had grown a single Limited store in Columbus into a suite of 1980s mall staples: The Limited, Limited Express, Lane Bryant and Victoria's Secret. Bath & Body Works, Abercrombie & Fitch, Lerner, White Barn Candle Co. and Henri Bendel would follow.

Wexner told lawmakers that it was several years before he turned over management of his vast fortune to Epstein, after the "master manipulator" connived to gain his trust. He gave Epstein power of attorney in 1991, allowing Epstein to make investments, do business deals, purchase property and help Wexner as he developed New Albany from a small rural city to a thriving upscale Columbus suburb.

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

On Wednesday, the billionaire said he didn't circulate in Epstein's social circle, but often heard accounts of his encounters with other wealthy people.

Epstein "carefully used his acquaintance with important individuals to curate an aura of legitimacy," Wexner said. He said he visited Epstein's infamous island only once, stopping for a few hours one morning with his wife and young children while they were cruising on their boat.

"It is interesting that Mr. Wexner has already begun to clarify in his mind that somehow he and Mr. Epstein weren't even friends," Garcia told reporters. "We should be very clear that the two were very close, per reporting. They spent a lot of time together."

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.

Wexner's spokesperson said Wexner never received the letter, characterizing it as fitting "a pattern of untrue, outlandish, and delusional statements made by Epstein in desperate attempts to perpetuate his lies and justify his misconduct."

Wexner told the congressional representatives that Epstein "lived a double life," presenting himself to his wealthy clients as a financial guru with steady girlfriends while "most carefully and fully" hiding his misdeeds with underage girls. "He knew that I never would have tolerated his horrible behavior. Not any

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of it," he said.

Exploiting a sexy brand

Some accusers said Epstein touted his ties to Wexner and claimed he could help get them jobs modeling for the Victoria's Secret catalog.

One woman, an aspiring actor and model, told the FBI that Epstein said he was best friends with the longtime Victoria's Secret owner and that she'd have to learn to be comfortable in her underwear and not be a prude, according to recently released grand jury testimony. Another woman said she reported Epstein to police in 1997 after he groped her during what she thought was a modeling interview for the Victoria's Secret catalog.

After Epstein's 2019 arrest, Wexner's lawyers told investigators that the businessman had heard a rumor that Epstein might be holding himself out as connected to Victoria's Secret, prosecutors wrote in a recently disclosed memorandum summarizing the probe. When Wexner asked Epstein about it, Epstein denied doing so, the lawyers said, according to the memo.

Wexner did not address the specific issue in his statement Wednesday, but repeatedly lamented being deceived by Epstein — "an abuser, a crook, and a liar." L Brands sold off Victoria's Secret in 2020, in one of Wexner's final acts as chair.

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. But 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."

His spokesperson 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 Wexner's attorneys told investigators in 2008 that Epstein had repaid him \$100 million. Wexner said in Wednesday's statement that Epstein returned "a substantial amount" of the undisclosed total.

Garcia said congressional investigators have identified more than \$1 billion that was "either transferred, provided in stocks or given directly" by Wexner to Epstein — though Wexner "appears to be unaware" of much of it.

Continuing fallout for Wexner

On Wednesday, Wexner testified he had never seen Epstein with any young girls and acknowledged the "unfathomable" pain he inflicted, even as discoveries in the Epstein files have placed new pressure on him.

One survivor, Maria Farmer, said a redacted FBI report contained in the document release vindicated her longstanding claim that she filed one of the earliest complaints against Epstein while she was under his employ in 1996 working on an art project at the Wexners' estate.

Meanwhile, survivors of a sweeping sexual abuse scandal at the Ohio State University are citing Wexner's association with Epstein to try to get his name removed from a campus football complex and university nurses also want his name scrubbed from the Wexner Medical Center.

Winter Olympics recap: Shiffrin takes slalom gold, Canada and US advance with OT wins in hockey

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, Italy (AP) — Redemption, at last, for Mikaela Shiffrin at the Winter Olympics.

The American superstar put in two dominant runs to win the women's slalom on Wednesday by a massive 1.50 seconds, ending a run of eight straight Olympic races without a medal for perhaps the greatest

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Alpine skier of all time.

It was the largest margin of victory in any Alpine skiing event at the Olympics since 1998 and the third biggest in women's slalom, the event she won as a fresh-faced 18-year-old in Sochi in 2014.

After adding gold and silver to her collection in Pyeongchang in 2018, Shiffrin went 0 for 6 in Beijing in 2022 and failed to medal in either the team combined or giant slalom in Cortina before nailing the slalom. Shiffrin became the first American skier to win three Alpine gold medals.

Canada and U.S. need overtime to advance in men's hockey

Canada avoided what would have been a stunning quarterfinal exit in men's hockey by rallying to beat Czechia 4-3 in overtime. Nick Suzuki tied it on a deflection with 3:27 left and Mitch Marner scored in OT.

The United States also needed overtime before eventually topping Sweden 2-1. Quinn Hughes scored in OT to give the U.S. the win after giving up the tying goal to Mika Zibanejad with 91 seconds left in the third period.

Dylan Larkin deflected in Jack Hughes' shot for the only U.S. goal in regulation.

Canada stayed in the tournament but has a major concern after losing Sidney Crosby to injury five minutes into the second period. Crosby's right leg appeared to buckle bracing for contact from rugged Czechia defenseman Radko Gudas.

In the other quarterfinal matches, Finland also won in overtime, 3-2 against Switzerland, while Slovakia beat Germany 6-2.

Klaebo extends golden run

Johannes Hoesflot Klaebo's golden run continued as the Norwegian cross-country star secured his fifth gold at these Games — and a record 10th overall — by winning the men's team sprint.

Klaebo beat back a challenge from the United States to improve on his own record tally, racing with Einar Hedegart to win in 18 minutes, 28.9 seconds.

Americans Ben Ogden and Gus Schumacher were 1.4 seconds behind for the silver, while Italy's Elia Barp and Federico Pellegrino pleased the home crowd by taking bronze.

Sweden won gold in the women's team sprint.

Dubois beats Dutch brothers in speedskating

Steven Dubois prevented Dutch short track speedskating star Jens van 't Wout from making it three victories out of three at the Olympics by winning the men's 500 meters.

Melle van 't Wout even beat his younger brother to silver.

It was Dubois' first individual Olympic gold after helping Canada to the relay title in Beijing four years ago. He picked up bronze in the 500 then as well as silver in the 1,500.

South Korea recovered to edge out Italy and win the women's 3,000-meter relay, earning its first short track speedskating gold at these Games.

Slopestyle gold for China's Su Yiming

Su Yiming of China won the gold medal in men's slopestyle snowboarding.

Su earned his fourth career medal and his second of these Games on his 22nd birthday.

Taiga Hasegawa of Japan took silver and American rider Jake Canter took the bronze.

Su's first of three runs that earned him 82.41 points proved enough after no rival was able to better that score.

It was China's first gold of the Milan Cortina Games.

Nvidia leads the US stock market higher

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The U.S. stock market ticked higher on Wednesday, led by its most influential stock, Nvidia.

The S&P 500 rose 0.6% and pulled a bit closer to its all-time high set late last month. The Dow Jones Industrial Average added 129 points, or 0.3%, and the Nasdaq composite gained 0.8%.

Nvidia helped lift the market and climbed 1.6% after Meta Platforms announced a long-term partnership

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where it will use millions of chips and other equipment from Nvidia for its artificial-intelligence data centers.

"No one deploys AI at Meta's scale," Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang said. Because his company is the most valuable on Wall Street, Nvidia's stock was the single most powerful force pulling the S&P 500 higher.

That performance demonstrated the upside of AI development for the U.S. stock market. But investors have also focused on the potential downsides recently, which has led to sharp swings for Wall Street. Worries are rising, for example, about how much companies like Meta are spending on AI and whether they can make back their huge investments through higher profits and productivity in the future.

Meta's stock fell as much as 1.7% before recovering and rising 0.6%.

Another worry is that if AI succeeds in creating tools to do complicated tasks more cheaply, companies in industries as far flung as software and legal services and trucking logistics could see their businesses get undercut. That has pushed investors to suddenly and aggressively punish stocks of companies seen as under threat, and analysts have likened it to a "shoot first-ask questions later" mentality.

Several profit reports from companies helped to lift stocks Wednesday. They continued what's been a strong reporting season for the big U.S. companies in the S&P 500.

Cadence Design Systems climbed 7.6% after delivering both profit and revenue for the latest quarter that topped analysts' expectations. CEO Anirudh Devgan credited what he called "the essential nature of Cadence's engineering software," even as investors worry about AI threatening to remake the industry.

Analog Devices rose 2.6% after likewise topping analysts' estimates for profit and revenue. The chip company said it saw record orders during the quarter for its data center business.

Outside of earnings reports, Moderna jumped 6.1% after saying regulators at the Food and Drug Administration will review its flu vaccine candidate after earlier refusing to consider it.

They helped offset a 6.8% drop for Palo Alto Networks. The cybersecurity company reported a stronger profit for the latest quarter than analysts expected, but it gave profit forecasts for the current quarter and the remainder of its fiscal year that fell short of their estimates.

All told, the S&P 500 rose 38.09 points to 6,881.31. The Dow Jones Industrial Average added 129.47 to 49,662.66, and the Nasdaq composite climbed 175.25 to 22,753.63.

In the bond market, Treasury yields ticked higher following reports on the U.S. economy that came in better than economists expected. The yield on the 10-year Treasury rose to 4.08% from 4.05% late Tuesday.

One report said that industrial production improved last month by more than economists expected. Another said orders for computers, fabricated metal products and other long-lasting manufactured goods rose more in December than economists expected, when not including airplanes and other transportation equipment. A third report said homebuilders broke ground on more new homes in December than expected.

Such strong data could encourage the Federal Reserve to keep interest rates steady.

The Fed has put its cuts to interest rates on hold, but many on Wall Street expect it to resume later this year. The widespread forecast is that will come during the summer, after a new chair is scheduled to step in atop the Fed.

Minutes released Wednesday from the Fed's last meeting, though, showed many officials want to see inflation fall further before they would support additional interest rate cuts this year.

Lower rates can give a boost to the economy and prices for investments, but that comes at the cost of potentially worsening inflation.

In stock markets abroad, London's FTSE 100 climbed 1.2% after the latest update on U.K. inflation bolstered expectations that the Bank of England may soon cut interest rates.

Japan's Nikkei 225 rose 1% as Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi was reappointed by the parliament following a landslide victory for her ruling Liberal Democrats in a Feb. 8 election. The expectation is that she will push through policies to help the economy and markets.

Elsewhere in Asia, several markets were closed for the Lunar New Year holiday.

Sports helped shape Jesse Jackson's career and inspired the ex-quarterback to fight for equal rights

By CLIFF BRUNT AP Sports Writer

The Rev. Jesse Jackson stood mesmerized on the baseline, intently watching the Chicago Bulls warm up before an NBA playoff game against the Indiana Pacers.

He was comfortable and at ease in an atmosphere that clearly offered a familiar environment for the civil rights leader.

Jackson, who died on Tuesday at age 84, was an athlete from a young age, and throughout his life he immersed himself in the world of sports — as a player, as a fan and as an advocate. He accepted a football scholarship at Illinois, then transferred to historically Black North Carolina A&T after a year. He was a quarterback on the Aggies team that won a conference title in 1964 and was inducted into A&T's athletic Hall of Fame twenty years later.

"What is not a well-known fact is that Rev. Jackson, first of all, he was a football player," said CK Hoffler, Jackson's attorney for 38 years. "He himself, as a former athlete, understood the plight of athletes."

While Jackson was in his element at that Bulls-Pacers game back in 2011, he couldn't just blend in. Standing near professional basketball players, he had a 6-foot-3 presence that loomed largest of all. He even cast a shadow over Bulls star Derrick Rose — the league MVP that season and fellow Chicago icon whom he made the trip to Indianapolis to support.

His sports experiences fueled a deep passion for ensuring that athletes like Rose were given equal opportunities and treatment, regardless of race, gender, sport or native country.

"He's always been an advocate of greater inclusion, whether it was fair pay and other things for athletes throughout the country and throughout the world," Hoffler said. "Athletes from overseas, ensuring that they got a fair shake as well. That was part of what (he) felt was fair. That was part of his social justice."

Jackson's advocacy knew no boundaries. At times that meant taking bold, public stands. At others, that meant enduring tough negotiations behind closed doors.

"The Harlem Globetrotters, they had their own cartoon," Hoffler said. "They did a lot of community building, and they were just iconic in and of themselves. But they had no insurance. They had no benefits. And Rev. Jackson, upon hearing that, took it upon himself to negotiate their benefits."

Len Elmore, who played 10 seasons in the NBA and is a senior lecturer at Columbia University, said there is a strong connective tissue between Jackson's sports roots and how it threaded through his advocacy for equality and social justice in all areas of society.

Over the years, Elmore witnessed firsthand how Jackson didn't shy away from pushing for change at all levels, including in Major League Baseball, the NFL and NBA.

"He certainly had a vision and in trying to achieve that vision he was very forward and aggressive in stating what the world should be like," said Elmore, who lectures on athlete activism and social justice in sports. "He also was very critical of the timing of some of the actions that didn't come fast enough or they weren't capable enough."

"His understanding of the world and what it should be, what it should look like was amazing. And his leadership in trying to get there was something that inspired a lot of us."

Elmore, who had a sports agency in the early to mid-1990s, said one of his most prized possessions is an award he received from the sports arm of Jackson's Rainbow PUSH organization for its efforts to increase Black sports agent representation.

Jackson also championed minority coaches. Elmore remembers just how much Jackson pushed Pittsburgh Steelers owner Dan Rooney to adopt what became the NFL's Rooney Rule in 2003. That rule, aimed at addressing the low number of minority head coaches, originally required every team with a head coaching vacancy to interview at least one or more diverse candidates before making a hire.

Jackson, Elmore said, "wanted folks to have a piece of the pie. He wanted that pie to have diverse overtones."

But Jackson also didn't shy away from being critical of the Rooney Rule's lack of effectiveness. After Brian

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Flores sued the NFL for racial discrimination, Jackson called for tweaks in a 2022 USA Today editorial in which he called the rule a "toothless tiger."

"You recognize change and the type of change that he envisioned. It wasn't just a dream, it was active," Elmore said. "Whether it was either influencing to some extent Harry Edwards in the '60s, the Rooney Rule, the Nike boycott (demanding more Black employees) in 1990 — he wanted athletes to recognize their platform and the legacy they possess. Not just in the field, but in the boardroom. ... That is what Jesse Jackson envisioned and what he was about."

Hoffler said Jackson loved all sports and identified with the athletes who fought for equality. Though he was a football player, he had a special love for basketball. In recent years, he made appearances at NBA All-Star Weekend to specifically attend the HBCU Classic game showcasing underrepresented college players.

He could be seen on the sideline at basketball games well into his 70s and 80s.

"Even when he was physically not able to walk," Hoffler said, "he was still at some of those games in a wheelchair. That's how much he was committed to the plight of athletes."

Jesse Jackson's 1988 presidential run inspired generations to carry his message

By MATT BROWN Associated Press

When the Rev. Jesse Jackson announced his second presidential bid in 1988 in Pittsburgh, he saw the campaign as a chance for the country to realize its highest ideals.

"If I can become president," said Jackson, who grew up poor and Black in segregated South Carolina, "every woman can. Every man can. I'm giving America a chance to make a choice to fulfill the highest and best of an authentic and honest democracy."

While unsuccessful, the campaign captured the imaginations of countless Americans who were inspired by Jackson, who died Tuesday at 84.

Decades later, generations of young people who watched his historic campaigns or learned about his career have become veteran activists, clergy members, civic leaders and lawmakers. Many say that his unapologetic message of equality and justice informs their work today.

"Here I was, a kid growing up in public housing, and I got to witness this Black man running for president. He gave me a glimpse of what is possible, and he taught me how to say, 'I am somebody,'" said Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock of Georgia, referring to one of Jackson's slogans adopted from a poem.

Warnock also serves as the senior pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, the congregation once led by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. The Georgia Democrat said Jackson's example was "needed now more than ever" in response to the Trump administration's actions on elections, global affairs and immigration.

"His voice is now silent, but his example is eternal, and that work is left to us," Warnock said.

A life of advocacy

Jackson's life included work as a globe-trotting humanitarian, a champion for a progressive economic agenda and leadership of the Civil Rights Movement that was once led by King, Jackson's mentor. Jackson was present when King was assassinated at a Memphis hotel.

Jackson's 1988 presidential bid pushed many Americans to contemplate whether, two decades after King's killing, one of his protégés could be elected to the White House. His message of equality in the Democratic primary resonated with a broad set of voters and blindsided party leaders, who reformed the primary system in response to the surge of engagement.

Strategists credit those reforms with enabling the election of another Black candidate from Illinois to the presidency two decades later.

Barack Obama agreed in a statement praising Jackson's life.

Former first lady Michelle Obama "got her first glimpse of political organizing at the Jacksons' kitchen table when she was a teenager," Obama wrote. "And in his two historic runs for president, he laid the foundation for my own campaign to the highest office in the land."

The connection did not stop Jackson from criticizing Obama or mentoring activists who challenged the

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first Black president's administration.

"He continued to reach out to young Black activists throughout the protests that started in 2014," said DeRay McKesson, a racial justice activist who organized in Ferguson, Missouri, as part of the Black Lives Matter movement. "As an activist and organizer, I appreciate that Jesse, just like the generation of people he came up with, had a deep understanding of structural change."

Jackson remained a political force after his presidential bids. From the Chicago headquarters of his organization, the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, he mentored leaders for decades. After his death, scores of activists, political operatives and members of Congress credited their careers to Jackson.

Democratic Rep. Troy Carter of Louisiana was a young staffer to New Orleans Mayor Sidney Barthelemy when he first met Jackson.

"Over the years, since our first meeting, he encouraged me in every step of my political career. His legacy will endure in every life he inspired," Carter said.

Former Vice President Kamala Harris eulogized Jackson in a statement that remembered how his 1988 presidential run built a sense of community among supporters. When she was a law student in San Francisco, she recalled, people "from every walk of life would give me a thumbs-up or honk of support" upon seeing her car's "Jesse Jackson for President" bumper sticker.

"They were small interactions, but they exemplified Reverend Jackson's life work — lifting up the dignity of working people, building community and coalitions, and strengthening our democracy and nation," wrote Harris, who went on to become the first Black woman to be nominated by a major political party for president.

Even people with opposing views acknowledged Jackson's impact as a civil rights giant and a stalwart force for progressive, humanitarian values.

"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," Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, the lone Black Republican in the Senate, wrote on social media. "Those that empower people to stand taller always leave a lasting mark."

A mentor to a new generation

Tennessee state Rep. Justin Pearson was 8 years old when he first learned about Jackson from a picture book on Black history that his mother gave him. Jackson's face was on the cover.

Pearson, 31, thanked Jackson for "creating space for people like me to be where I am." He met Jackson after Republicans expelled him and another Black Democratic lawmaker after they joined a protest for gun control at the Tennessee Statehouse.

Pearson, who represents Memphis in the statehouse, later joined Jackson on a trip to lay a wreath at the site where King was killed. Pearson has appeared alongside Jackson at other civil rights events throughout the South. Even at memorials filled with towering figures, he said, Jackson stood out.

"You have a lot of civil rights elders who you read about, but it means something different when you have somebody who you can talk to, who can be present, who is there physically," said Tennessee state Rep. Justin Jones, the other lawmaker who met Jackson after being expelled. Both men were later reelected to their seats.

Jackson "was committed to raising the rising generation of civil rights voices and leaders and legislators, and somebody who has a whole movement that is standing on his shoulders," said Jones, 30.

Stacey Abrams was 10 years old in Gulfport, Mississippi, during Jackson's first presidential bid. The daughter of ministers, Abrams remembers being "transfixed" by a "larger than life figure who did not look like everyone else."

Now a former minority leader of the Georgia House, Abrams mounted two unsuccessful bids for governor. Each time, she sought to rally a wide range of voters, including voters of color and lower-income voters, in a strategy that emulated Jackson's political philosophy. Jackson advised her throughout both bids.

"I've been one of, I would say, thousands of people who received counsel and support from Jackson, but also got a phone call that said, 'I'm thinking about you,' or an offer to come and be a part of something

he was doing," Abrams said.

"I think that's the legacy that's most important, that he didn't stand as a single figure who wanted to be alone. He built community."

US star Mikaela Shiffrin becomes 3-time Olympic champion with emotional slalom win

By STEVE DOUGLAS and ANDREW DAMPF AP Sports Writers

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, Italy (AP) — Mikaela Shiffrin stood atop the Olympic podium, looking almost in disbelief at the gold medal around her neck.

The American skiing star hadn't simply won a slalom race to end her eight-year medal drought at the Winter Games and underline her status as surely the greatest Alpine skier of all time.

She'd also won a battle with herself.

"It's like," Shiffrin said, before pausing, "... being born again."

Racing in what she described as a "spiritual state," Shiffrin put in two dominant runs in gorgeous conditions amid the jagged peaks of the Dolomites to win by a massive 1.50 seconds, making her the first American skier to win three Alpine gold medals.

In emotional scenes after the race, the 30-year-old Shiffrin was embraced by Camille Rast of Switzerland, who took silver, and bronze-medalist Anna Swenn Larsson before fighting back tears as she approached her mom and coach, Eileen, for a long, deep hug next to the finish area.

Through it all, Shiffrin said, she never stopped thinking about her father, Jeff, who died at the age of 65 in an accident at the family home in Colorado in February 2020.

"This was a moment I have dreamed about — I've also been very scared of this moment," Shiffrin said. "Everything in life that you do after you lose someone you love is like a new experience.

"And," she added, her voice starting to tremble, "I still have so many moments where I resist this. I don't want to be in life without my dad. And maybe today was the first time that I could actually accept this, like, reality."

It was the largest margin of victory in any Olympic Alpine skiing event since 1998 and the third biggest in women's slalom — the event she won as a fresh-faced 18-year-old in Sochi in 2014 to buttress her rising status as a skiing superstar.

Twelve years later — and having failed to meet huge expectations at the 2022 Olympics, become the most successful World Cup skier of all time with a record 108 victories, and overcome the two biggest crashes of her career and an ensuing battle with post-traumatic stress disorder — she delivered again in her favorite event.

Her skiing career, in a sense, had just come full circle.

"Maybe," she added, "just today, I realized what happened to me in Sochi."

At the medal ceremony, she shook both of her hands by her side as she was about to receive her medal. When it was placed around her neck, she put one hand to her mouth.

For Shiffrin, this also was a release of the pressure that had been building after going eight Olympic races without a medal since adding gold and silver to her collection in Pyeongchang in 2018.

A nightmarish 0-for-6 performance in Beijing was followed in Cortina this year by a fourth-place finish in the team combined — when Shiffrin placed 15th in the slalom portion after teammate Breezy Johnson led the downhill leg — and then 11th place in the giant slalom.

It was fodder for the "keyboard warriors," Shiffrin acknowledged, but she ignored all of them in a masterpiece Tuesday.

"I couldn't think of a more well-deserved medal for an athlete to win," said Sophie Goldschmidt, president and CEO of the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association. "She's been so dominant but as we know these big sporting moments in the Olympics bring extra pressure and scrutiny. And to see her ski that well and just go for it, I couldn't be prouder of her."

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Shiffrin has now won three golds and a silver at the Olympics to add to her record total of World Cup wins — which include 71 in slalom, also a record. There's also world titles in slalom (four), giant slalom and super-G to fill out arguably the greatest career in Alpine racing.

"In another league," was how Larsson put it.

Shiffrin led by 0.82 seconds after the first run on a mostly flat course that Team USA officials described to her over the radio as a "high-tempo ripper."

There was one wobble when she struck a gate and for a fraction of a second, it appeared she was headed for another Olympic disappointment.

Not this time.

She snapped back into form to post a time, in the No. 7 bib, no one could get near.

"When I saw one second (behind) after the first run," Rast said, "I was like, 'OK, the gold is gone.'"

While she attempted to nap before her second run, Shiffrin said she started to cry because she was thinking about her dad.

"And then," she added, "I was thinking about the fact that I actually can show up today and honestly say in the start gate that I have all the tools that are necessary to do my best skiing, and to earn that moment."

Given her emotions, Shiffrin's second run was impressively smooth as she got through the tough top section without a hitch and pushed through the slower middle section.

After crossing the finish line, Shiffrin slowly squatted and took a private moment to think about all the people who'd got her to this moment.

"I felt every range of emotion in the last three months, the last four months, the last four years, the last eight years," Shiffrin said. "There's so many different journeys I've been on to just be here today."

New Jersey Catholic diocese agrees to \$180 million settlement of clergy sexual abuse allegations

By MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — A New Jersey Catholic diocese this week agreed to a \$180 million settlement to resolve allegations of clergy sexual abuse, a figure far exceeding agreements in some large dioceses but still dwarfed by other massive settlements.

Bishop Joseph Williams of the Diocese of Camden, covering southern New Jersey and its Philadelphia suburbs, announced the settlement Tuesday in a letter.

"For the survivors of South Jersey, this day is long overdue and represents a milestone in their journey toward restored justice and the healing and recognition they have long sought and deserve," Williams said.

Mark Crawford, state director of the Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests, said in a phone interview Wednesday that the settlement was long overdue but he was glad the ordeal was coming to an end. He praised the bishop for listening to survivors and for pledging transparency, contrasting him with his predecessor, who fought a legal battle over a state investigation into alleged clergy abuse.

"This settlement and this bishop have acted very differently," Crawford said. "I hope it sends a message that this is possible, that this is right."

Greg Gianforcaro, one of the attorneys representing victims suing the diocese, credited survivors' persistence in reaching the agreement. The diocese has said there about 300 survivors of abuse raising claims.

"It's been an extremely long and arduous battle," he said in a phone interview.

It's the latest agreement in a scandal set off more than two decades ago when the scale of the abuse and the church's effort to hide it came to light in Boston. The New Jersey settlement agreement is more than the roughly \$80 million settlements in Boston and Philadelphia, though settlements in California ranged much higher. In 2024, the Los Angeles Archdiocese agreed to an \$880 million payment.

The Camden settlement comes less than a year after the diocese withdrew its objection to the state of New Jersey's grand jury investigation into decades of alleged sexual abuse of children by religious. The state Supreme Court has since ruled the state's investigation could move ahead.

The Camden diocese, like others nationwide, filed for bankruptcy amid a torrent of lawsuits after the statute of limitations was relaxed.

In 2022, the diocese agreed to pay \$87.5 million to settle allegations involving clergy sex abuse against some 300 accusers, one of the largest cash settlements involving the Catholic church in the U.S. The latest settlement announcement includes these funds, according to victims' attorneys.

The diocese of Camden covers six southern New Jersey counties outside Philadelphia. The agreement must still be approved by a bankruptcy court.

What to know about avalanches, what causes them and how to stay safe

By The Associated Press undefined

An avalanche — a mass of snow moving down a slope — happens most often in the wilderness. Watching for forecasts, bringing the proper gear and getting training to prepare for them can help with outings, according to the National Avalanche Center.

Each winter, about 25 people on average die in avalanches in the United States, the center says, adding, "Some days are dangerous and some days are not."

Here's a look at avalanches, how they occur and some tips on how to stay safe:

How do avalanches occur?

It generally takes just two ingredients to create dangerous conditions: A slope of 30 degrees or more and layers upon layers of snow.

Extra pressure on top of that snowpack from weight, wind, rain, heavy snow or motion can cause some of the layers to shear off and slide downhill.

Sometimes a slide happens in the form of loose snow, called a sluff. Sluffs account for only a small percentage of deaths and property damage from avalanches, according to the Sierra Avalanche Center.

Other avalanches are made up of slabs, which happen when a large layer of snow breaks away. Those account for most fatalities.

Another kind of avalanche occurs when wind creates a cornice of snow that hangs over a ridge or the edge of a steep slope. The overhang can collapse suddenly, catching anyone underneath or on top of it by surprise, according to the Colorado Avalanche Information Center.

What triggers an avalanche?

Movement, rapidly changing weather, wind — any one of these things can set off an avalanche. But experts say 90% of slides that cause an injury or death are triggered by the victim or a companion.

That means people who ski, snowmobile, snowshoe or enjoy other winter backcountry activities should check the avalanche forecast before they head out and make sure they have the right safety gear.

Most ski resorts have avalanche protocols or mitigation systems. Often that means checking snowpack stability. Remote detonations are also used to trigger slides intentionally and remove risky buildup before skiers are allowed on the slopes, said Chris Lundy, an avalanche specialist with the National Avalanche Center.

How can one avoid an avalanche?

Don't think for a second that you can outrun one. Dry slab avalanches typically reach speeds up to 80 mph (129 kph) within seconds, according to the Sierra Avalanche Center. Wet avalanches usually travel around 20 mph (32 kph).

By comparison eight-time Olympic gold medalist Usain Bolt set a record of just under 28 mph (45 kph) in the 100-meter dash in 2009 — and that was on a flat track, not a snow-covered slope. Most people caught in avalanches are on the slope when they occur.

The better plan is to make sure you're not in a place where one is at risk of occurring. Outdoor enthusiasts can check forecasts at regional avalanche centers or www.avalanche.org.

If you do venture out, it's a good idea to use the buddy system and be versed in wilderness first aid.

Experts say three pieces of gear are essential: an avalanche beacon or transceiver, which sends location signals to others; a shovel to test snowpack or dig out companions; and a thin, folding pole to poke into the snow in search of anyone buried. An avalanche airbag backpack that inflates after the skier pulls the trigger giving the person a chance to stay above or close to the surface during an avalanche.

What were some recent avalanches?

On Jan. 5, an avalanche in California's Sierra Nevada buried a snowmobiler in snow and killed him, authorities said. The snowmobiler was initially reported missing but then was found under the snow several minutes later, the Nevada County Sheriff's Office said in a statement.

In June 2025, a skier died after being caught in an avalanche on Alaska's Mount McKinley, North America's tallest peak. The Denali National Park and Preserve said the skier and his climbing partner, a snowboarder, triggered the avalanche high on the 20,310-foot (6,190-meter) peak while descending a slope.

That March, a snowmachiner riding on the backside of a popular winter recreation area about 60 miles (97 kilometers) southeast of Anchorage, triggered an avalanche after riding over a weak layer of snow that was buried under newer snow, according to the Chugach National Forest Avalanche Center. He was buried about 10-feet (3-meter) deep in the slide that measured about 500 feet (152 meters) wide.

Earlier that month, three heli-skiers were killed. That accident happened when they were caught in an avalanche near Girdwood, about 40 miles (64 kilometers) south of Anchorage. Heli-skiing is a type of backcountry skiing that involves using a helicopter to access remote areas and slopes of fresh snow.

Following Trump's lead, some GOP states seek to limit environmental regulations

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Some Republican legislators are looking to restrict their states' ability to set environmental regulations, a move that comes as President Donald Trump's administration pushes to roll back environmental rules on power plants, water and greenhouse gases.

The Alabama Legislature on Tuesday approved legislation backed by business groups that would prevent state agencies from setting restrictions on pollutants and hazardous substances exceeding those set by the federal government. In areas where no federal standard exists, the state could adopt new rules only if there is a "direct causal link" between exposure to harmful emissions and "manifest bodily harm" to humans.

Supporters said the Alabama measure would ground standards in "sound science" and prevent regulatory overreach. Environmental groups said it would cripple the state's ability to respond to environmental or health risks, including a group of chemicals known as PFAS, or forever chemicals, that has contaminated swaths of the South.

Sarah Stokes, a senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, said the bill sets an "impossible hurdle" for state regulations since the bill specifies that an "increased risk of disease" is not enough to demonstrate harm to humans.

"It's a blank check to businesses. We're basically sacrificing human health for businesses," Stokes said. "That doesn't seem like the best calculation for our citizens."

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and business groups supported the legislation, and the bill's sponsor, Republican Sen. Donnie Chesteen, told a legislative committee this month that his bill is a "pro-business" piece of legislation.

"If we're going to be able to compete with states in the Southeast to attract and bring some of these businesses in, then we need to have these standards adopted so that it's clearly defined what our companies are working with," Chesteen said. Supporters also argued the bill follows Trump's deregulatory agenda.

"This does not remove the use of sound science and legitimate science," Republican Rep. Troy Stubbs said during debate. "What it does is protect Alabama and the people of Alabama from runaway government that can become overly burdensome and regulatory to a point that it drives the cost of living way up."

Stubbs disputed that it would weaken existing rules, saying current state regulations would stay in place. However, the environmental lawyer Stokes said she is concerned that businesses could use it as a basis

to challenge existing rules.

The measure is the latest effort to restrict state-level environmental regulations. Indiana Gov. Mike Braun signed an executive order last year saying Indiana can't have new environmental rules stricter than federal ones unless deemed necessary by state law or the governor. Tennessee lawmakers last year passed legislation requiring any regulations that are more stringent than federal regulations to be based on links to "manifest bodily harm in humans."

Stokes said the Alabama proposal goes further than the Tennessee law. A similar bill has been introduced in Utah.

Stokes said the Alabama legislation was introduced after advocacy groups persuaded the Alabama Environmental Management Commission to consider updating state standards for arsenic and cyanide and 11 other toxic pollutants.

Cara Horowitz, an environmental law professor and executive director of the Emmett Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at UCLA School of Law, said the legislation would prevent state agencies from making "independent decisions about how much to protect public health from things like water pollution, air pollution, and toxics."

"Alabama could adopt its own pollution standard only where the state's rationale for doing so relies on a very particular kind of science," Horowitz wrote in an email. "Alabama could not rely, for example, on studies showing a correlation between pollution exposure and an increased risk of disease."

The bill also bars agencies from using the EPA's Integrated Risk Information System, which characterizes the health hazards of chemicals found in the environment, as the default basis for water quality standards. A lobbying group for the chemical industry has criticized the system as overly burdensome and scientifically flawed.

Democrats in the Alabama Legislature spoke against the bill for two hours until GOP lawmakers voted to end debate and force a vote.

Democratic Rep. Chris England said the bill turns Alabama residents into test subjects. "We are a petri dish for businesses to do as they will until they kill people," England said.

Rep. Neil Rafferty, also a Democrat, said the bill is "defining sound science just to gut our ability to use it to drive science-based and data-driven policy."

The state House of Representatives voted 88-34 for the bill, which now goes to Republican Gov. Kay Ivey. A spokeswoman for Ivey did not have an immediate comment on the bill.

Trump wants his Board of Peace to solve world conflicts. It still has a lot of work to do in Gaza

By SAM METZ and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — U.S. President Donald Trump's Board of Peace is set to meet for the first time on Thursday in Washington, an early test of whether one of his marquee foreign policy initiatives can gain broad support and advance the shaky ceasefire agreement in the Gaza Strip.

Trump's ballooning ambitions for the board extend from governing and rebuilding Gaza as a futuristic metropolis to challenging the United Nations Security Council's role in solving conflicts. But they could be tempered by the realities of dealing with Gaza, where there has so far been limited progress in achieving the narrower aims of the ceasefire.

Palestinians, including many civilians, are still being killed in near-daily strikes that Israel says are aimed at militants who threaten or attack its forces. Hamas hasn't disarmed, no international forces have deployed, and a Palestinian committee meant to take over from Hamas is stuck in neighboring Egypt.

"If this meeting does not result in fast, tangible improvements on the ground — and particularly on the humanitarian front — its credibility will quickly crumble," said Max Rodenbeck, Israel-Palestine Project Director at the International Crisis Group, a global think tank.

A new international body

More than two dozen nations have signed on as the board's founding members.

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The list includes Israel and other regional heavyweights involved in ceasefire negotiations, as well as countries from outside the Middle East whose leaders support Trump or hope to gain his favor. U.S. allies like France, Norway and Sweden have so far declined.

Israelis are suspicious of the involvement of Qatar and Turkey, which have longstanding relations with Hamas. Palestinians object because their representatives weren't invited to the board, even as it weighs the future of a territory that is home to some 2 million of them.

Trump, the self-appointed chairman of the board, said earlier this week that member countries had pledged \$5 billion toward rebuilding Gaza and would commit thousands of personnel to peacekeeping and policing. No financial pledges — or an agenda for this week's meeting — have been made public.

"We want to make it successful. I think it has the chance to be the most consequential board ever assembled of any kind," Trump told reporters on Monday. He reiterated his criticism of the U.N.'s record on resolving international disputes.

Ambitious plans

Trump — along with son-in-law Jared Kushner and envoy Steve Witkoff — has laid out ambitious plans for rebuilding Gaza with international investment.

In Davos last month, Kushner suggested reconstruction could be complete in a matter of three years, even though U.N. forecasts suggest that clearing rubble and demining alone could take much longer.

Kushner's slides showed a reconstructed Gaza with a coastal tourism strip, industrial zones and data centers. He conceded that rebuilding would begin only in demilitarized areas and that security would be essential to attract investment.

The latest joint estimate by the U.N., European Union and World Bank says reconstruction will cost about \$70 billion.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said there will be no reconstruction until Hamas disarms, leaving Palestinians in limbo among the widespread devastation.

Halting progress

The ceasefire deal has halted major military operations, freed the last hostages held by Hamas and ramped up aid deliveries to Gaza. But a lasting resolution to the two-year war ignited by Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023 attack into Israel remains elusive.

The deal envisions Hamas handing over its weapons and Israeli forces withdrawing from Gaza as international forces deploy. It left some questions unanswered and set no timeline to secure buy-in and defer confrontation over those issues.

Israel and the U.S. say Hamas' disarmament is key to progress on the other fronts. Arab and Muslim members of the Board of Peace have accused Israel of undermining the ceasefire with its daily strikes and want the U.S. to rein in its close ally. They have called on Hamas to disarm but say Israel's withdrawal is just as important.

Israel defines demilitarization as extending from heavy weapons like rocket-propelled grenades all the way down to rifles. Netanyahu said Sunday that Hamas would have to give up roughly 60,000 automatic rifles.

Despite accepting the agreement, Hamas has made only vague or conditional commitments to disarm as part of a process leading to the establishment of a Palestinian state. Senior Hamas officials have said their security forces need to retain some weapons in order to maintain law and order during the transition.

Some of the ideas under discussion include Hamas "freezing" its arms by placing them in sealed depots under outside supervision or giving up heavy weapons while keeping some handguns for policing, according to two regional officials involved in the negotiations. One official said disarmament is a complicated process that could take months. The officials requested anonymity to discuss the negotiations.

It's far from certain that Israel or the United States would agree to such ideas.

A stabilization force

The ceasefire deal also calls for a temporary International Stabilization Force made up of soldiers from Arab and Muslim-majority countries to vet, train and support to a new Palestinian police force. Its mandate is not spelled out in detail, but would include securing aid deliveries and preventing weapons smuggling.

Countries being asked to contribute to the force insist that any deployment be framed as a peacekeep-

ing mission. They have refused to take part in the disarmament of Hamas, a job that could put them in harm's way. Another concern is the presence of armed groups allied with Israel.

Indonesia has begun training a contingent of up to 8,000 soldiers for the force, though its foreign minister said last week that they would not take part in disarmament.

Postwar governance

Under the ceasefire agreement, Hamas is to hand over power to a transitional committee of politically independent Palestinian administrators. The U.S. has named a 15-member committee and tapped former U.N. envoy Nikolay Mladenov to oversee them as the board's envoy to Gaza.

The committee, led by former Palestinian Authority deputy minister Ali Shaath, has not yet been granted Israeli permission to enter Gaza from Egypt. Israel hasn't commented on the matter.

Mladenov said last week that the committee will not be able to work unless Hamas hands over power and ceasefire violations stop.

"We're only embarrassing the committee and ultimately making it ineffective," he said at the Munich Security Conference. "All of this needs to move very fast."

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

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Paris prosecutors opened two new investigations Wednesday into potential sex abuse crimes and financial wrongdoing linked to Jeffrey Epstein and called on possible victims to come forward.

Paris prosecutor Laurence Beccuau said investigators will rely on files released by the U.S. administration related to the late financier and convicted sex offender, as well as media reports and new complaints that are being filed.

One investigation will focus on sex abuse crimes, the other on financial wrongdoing, each involving specialized magistrates, she said on France Info news broadcaster.

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 the 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.

In a separate case, French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot last week said he informed prosecutors of allegations involving a senior French diplomat, Fabrice Aidan, in relation with the Epstein files. "I am also launching an administrative investigation ... and a disciplinary procedure," Barrot said in a post on X, without providing details on allegations.

Aidan's name is mentioned over 200 times in the Epstein files, with exchanges dating back to 2010 when

he was working at the United Nations suggesting he shared diplomatic documents with the American financier.

Emails also show Aidan's apparent close relationship with Terje Rød-Larsen, a high-profile Norwegian diplomat facing scrutiny over contacts with Epstein, along with his wife.

Aidan's lawyer Jade Dousselin said in a written statement her client denies any wrongdoing and called on respecting the principle of the presumption of innocence.

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.

Ukraine's security service, known as the SBU, said that no search was ever carried out at Zaluzhnyi's office, though it acknowledged that the address was part of an investigation unrelated to him. Zelenskyy's office declined to comment for this story. The AP could not independently confirm Zaluzhnyi's account of the raid.

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 to defend their country persisted, according to Zaluzhnyi.

A dispute over a counteroffensive in 2023 that ultimately failed was particularly contentious, the former general said. 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.

While a deal to end the war 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, Zaluzhnyi 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. He says he prevented them from rifling through documents and computers.

The raid was clearly a threat, Zaluzhnyi said.

Later, he learned that Ukraine's security service had sought a search warrant from a district court in Kyiv two days earlier to inspect the address where Zaluzhnyi's office is located. The agency was seeking to

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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.

The SBU said it was looking into several addresses as part of an investigation into organized crime — unconnected to Zaluzhnyi.

Zaluzhnyi believes 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 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.

Many Democrats are still down on the Democratic Party, a new AP-NORC poll finds

By LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democratic candidates have notched a series of wins in recent special elections — but a new AP-NORC poll finds views of the Democratic Party among rank-and-file Democrats have not bounced back since President Donald Trump's victory in 2024.

Only about 7 in 10 Democrats have a positive view of the Democratic Party, according to new polling from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. While the overwhelming majority of Democrats still feel good about their party, they're much less positive than they've been in the past.

The midterm elections are still many months away, and lackluster favorability doesn't spell electoral doom. Other factors could benefit Democrats this year, including broadly negative views of Trump and

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other Republicans. Additionally, recent polling has found that independents tend to identify more with the party that's out of power, which could boost Democrats this year too. Historically, the party not in the White House has picked up seats in Congress in midterm elections.

But the lack of enthusiasm could be a longer-term problem for the party. Democrats' favorability of their party plummeted after the 2024 election, from 85% in September 2024 to 67% in October 2025. And despite overwhelming victories in November's off-season elections and a string of wins since then, those views haven't recovered. Other polling indicates that Democrats are deeply frustrated with their party.

At the same time, there's some potential good news for Democrats in the new poll. Although Republicans are slightly more enthusiastic about their own party, Americans in general don't think highly of either party. Health care is on many Americans' minds this year, and it's an issue where Democrats have a large advantage, according to the survey. Meanwhile, Republicans have lost some ground on two of Trump's signature issues, the economy and immigration, although Americans don't necessarily trust Democrats more on those issues as a result.

Many Democrats are frustrated

Other polling suggests that Democrats' post-2024 slump is unusually large.

In Gallup's measure of favorability, Democrats' positive views of their own party declined about 12 percentage points in the last year. That marked the lowest measure in that question's history, which dates back to 2001. Notably, Democrats did not see a similar decline after their first loss to Trump in 2016.

That diminished view of the Democratic Party in the AP-NORC polling is consistent regardless of Democrats' age, race, ideology or educational background — suggesting that appealing to a specific group or two won't fix the problem.

A separate survey from the Pew Research Center last fall found roughly two-thirds of Democrats in September said their own party made them "frustrated" compared to just 4 in 10 Republicans.

Among those frustrated Democrats, about 4 in 10 felt their party was not fighting hard enough against Trump while about 1 in 10 said there was a lack of good leadership or a cohesive agenda.

Many Americans are negative about both parties

It's not just Democrats — Americans aren't thrilled with either party right now.

Roughly one-quarter of Americans have a negative view of both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, according to the AP-NORC data. That double-negativity is especially sharp among independents and Americans under 45.

About half of U.S. adults only view one party positively, and only about 1 in 10 feel good about both parties.

But Democrats' loss of goodwill is more recent. Polling over the last 25 years from Gallup shows that Americans used to feel much more positively toward the Democrats. Around 2010, public sentiment turned against the Democrats. Since then, at least half of Americans have held unfavorable views of the party, according to Gallup.

Negative views of the Democrats now rival the most negative points in time for the Republicans.

Democrats hold health care as a strength

With health care at the top of Americans' priority lists as costs and premiums rise, Democrats have a possible advantage going into the midterm year.

About one-third of U.S. adults — 35% — trust the Democrats to do a better job handling health care, compared to 23% for the Republicans. That is broadly in line with the last time the question was asked in October 2025.

At the same time, Republicans have lost some ground on the issues that were key to Trump's reelection — the economy and immigration. But Democrats haven't managed to capitalize on it. Only about 3 in 10 U.S. adults, 31%, say Republicans are the party they trust to handle the economy, down slightly from 36% last year. But Democrats haven't made any gains on this issue; rather, slightly more Americans now say they trust "neither" party to handle the economy.

Neither party has an edge on who is better equipped to manage the cost of living, which was first asked in the most recent poll.

Republicans are also down slightly on handling immigration. Only about one-third of U.S. adults trust them to better handle immigration, an apparent decrease from 39% in October. Democrats didn't appear to benefit from that shift either.

Late-night host Stephen Colbert isn't backing down from public dispute with CBS bosses

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

Stephen Colbert isn't backing down in an extraordinary public dispute with his bosses at CBS over what he can air on his late-night talk show.

On "The Late Show" Tuesday, Colbert said he was surprised by a statement from CBS denying that its lawyers told him he couldn't show an interview with Democratic Texas Senate candidate James Talarico — which the host said had happened the night before.

He then took a copy of the network statement, wrapped it in a dog poop bag, and tossed it away.

Colbert had instead shown his Talarico interview on YouTube, but told viewers why he couldn't show it on CBS. The network was concerned about FCC Chairman Brendan Carr trying to enforce a rule that required broadcasters to give "equal time" to opposing candidates when an interview was broadcast with one of them.

"We looked and we can't find one example of this rule being enforced for any talk show interview, not only for my entire late-night career, but for anyone's late-night career going back to the 1960s," Colbert said.

Although Carr said in January he was thinking about getting rid of the exemption for late-night talk shows, he hadn't done it yet. "But CBS generously did it for him," Colbert said.

Not only had CBS been aware Monday night that Colbert was going to talk about this issue publicly, its lawyers had even approved it in his script, he said. That's why he was surprised by the statement, which said that Colbert had been provided "legal guidance" that broadcasting the interview could trigger the equal time rule.

"I don't know what this is about," Colbert said. "For the record, I'm not even mad. I really don't want an adversarial relationship with the network. I've never had one."

He said he was "just so surprised that this giant global corporation would not stand up to these bullies." CBS is owned by Paramount Global.

Colbert is a short-timer now at CBS. The network announced last summer that Colbert's show, where President Donald Trump is a frequent target of biting jokes, would end in May. The network said it was for economic reasons but others — including Colbert — have expressed skepticism that Trump's repeated criticism of the show had nothing to do with it.

This week's dispute with Colbert also recalls last fall, when ABC took late-night host Jimmy Kimmel off the air for a remark made about the killing of conservative activist founder Charlie Kirk, only to reinstate him following a backlash by viewers.

As of Wednesday morning, Colbert's YouTube interview with Talarico had been viewed more than five million times, or roughly double what the comic's CBS program draws each night. The Texas Democrat also reported that he had raised \$2.5 million in campaign donations in the 24 hours after the interview.

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

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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.

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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.

Today in History: February 19, FDR signs order authorizing Japanese-American internment

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, Feb. 19, the 50th day of 2026. There are 315 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 19, 1942, during World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which paved the way for the internment of 125,000 people of Japanese ancestry, including U.S.-born citizens.

Also on this date:

In 1473, astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus was born in Torun, Poland.

In 1847, the first rescuers reached members of the Donner Party, who had been snowbound in the Sierra Nevada near the California-Nevada border for nearly four months.

In 1878, inventor Thomas Edison was issued a patent for the phonograph.

In 1945, Operation Detachment began during World War II as the first wave of U.S. Marines landed at Iwo Jima, where they commenced a successful monthlong battle to seize control of the island from Japanese forces.

In 1976, President Gerald R. Ford, calling the issuing of the 1942 internment order for people of Japanese ancestry "a sad day in American history," signed a proclamation formally confirming its termination.

In 2003, an Iranian military plane carrying members of the elite Revolutionary Guards crashed in south-eastern Iran, killing all 275 people on board.

In 2008, an ailing Fidel Castro resigned the Cuban presidency after nearly a half-century in power; his brother Raúl was later named to succeed him. Fidel Castro died in 2016 at the age of 90.

In 2025, the ocean liner SS United States, which shattered the transatlantic speed record on its maiden voyage in 1952, departed Philadelphia's Delaware River waterfront under tow for Mobile, Alabama, for prep work before officials sink it off Florida's Gulf Coast to create the world's largest artificial reef.

Today's birthdays: Singer Smokey Robinson is 86. Rock musician Tony Iommi (Black Sabbath) is 78. Author Amy Tan is 74. Actor Jeff Daniels is 71. Actor Ray Winstone is 69. Actor Leslie David Baker is 68. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell is 67. Tennis Hall of Famer Hana Mandlíková is 64. Singer Seal is 63. Actor Benicio Del Toro is 59. Author-cartoonist Jeff Kinney is 55. NBA center Nikola Jokić is 31. Singer-songwriter Chappell Roan is 28. Actor David Mazouz is 25. Actor Millie Bobby Brown is 22.