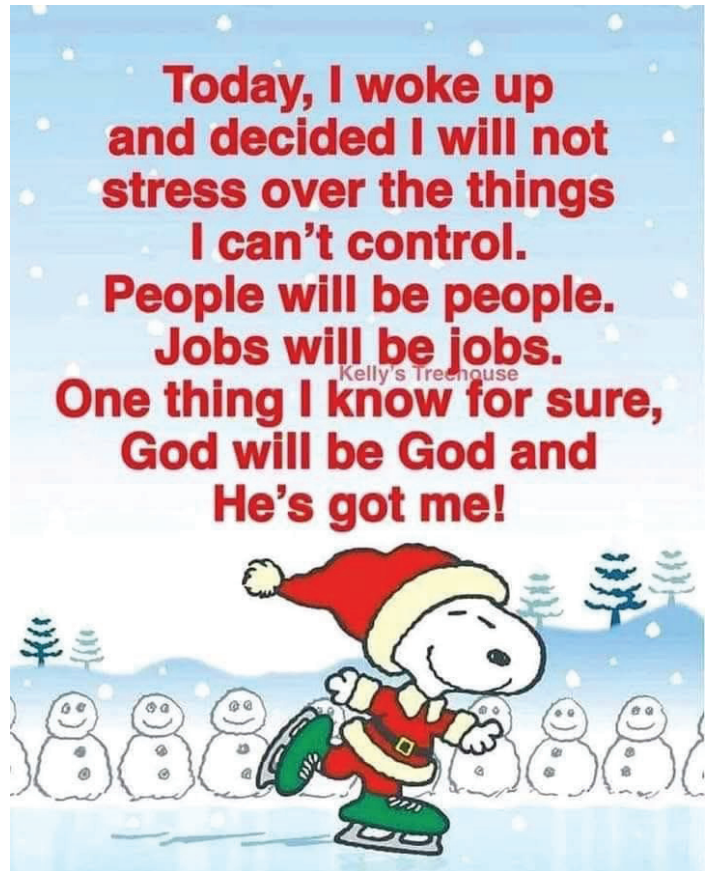


Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 1 of 77

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 News Headlines](#)
- [3- Baby-sitter Ad](#)
- [4- Groton Wrestlers are State Bound](#)
- [4- Today on GDILIVE.COM](#)
- [5- Wolves' Rally Comes Up Short in NSIC Tournament Loss](#)
- [6- Dragons Edge Wolves in Overtime Thriller, 68-67](#)
- [7- Today's Game Informatin](#)
- [8- GDI Fitness Center Ad](#)
- [9- SD SearchLight: 'I had an eye doctor visit,' says absent state senator after his colleagues launched a search](#)
- [10- SD SearchLight: SNAP soda ban headed to desk of South Dakota governor, who's concerned about costs](#)
- [12- SD SearchLight: South Dakota bill would legalize a psychedelic drug upon federal approval](#)
- [13- SD SearchLight: South Dakota Senate endorses \\$10 million for water quality](#)
- [15- SD SearchLight: USDA to give up massive DC office building as shift of staff to states begins](#)
- [16- SD SearchLight: Data center tax breaks are on the chopping block in some states](#)
- [19- Weather Pages](#)
- [24- Daily Devotional](#)
- [25- Subscription Form](#)
- [26- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [27- News from the Associated Press](#)



Thursday, Feb. 26

Senior Menu: Turkey, sweet potatoes, green beans, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Cereal.

School Lunch: Sloppy joes, fries.

SDHSAA State B Wrestling, Sioux Falls

2nd Grade BB, 5 p.m., elementary gym

4th Grade BB, 6 p.m., HS Gym

HS Softball, 6 p.m., HS Gym

Region 1A GBB: Milbank at Groton, 7 p.m.

Friday, Feb. 27

Senior Menu: Chicken pot pie casserole, mashed potatoes, broccoli, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Egg wraps.

School Lunch: Cheese bread stick with marinara, cooked carrots.

SDHSAA State B Wrestling, Sioux Falls

3rd Grade Boys Basketball, 3:30 p.m., Elementary Gym

Boys Basketball hosts Aberdeen Christian (HS Gym: 7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m.; Arena: JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity)

Saturday, Feb. 28

SDHSAA State B Wrestling, Sioux Falls

Britton-Hecla Boys Basketball JH Jamboree

Pickleball, 9:30 a.m., Elementary Gym

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 2 of 77

1440

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

Surgeon General Hearing

Dr. Casey Means, a strategist behind Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s Make America Healthy Again agenda, urged tackling the root cause of chronic diseases yesterday during her confirmation hearing to become the nation's next surgeon general.

Lawmakers across the aisle repeatedly pressed Means on vaccines, which she suggested should be a discussion between individuals and their doctors. The Stanford-educated physician dropped out of her surgical residency program in 2018, citing a belief that the healthcare system is broken. She went on to open an alternative medicine practice, cofound a health-tracking app, and write a bestselling book. Critics, including two former surgeons general, question her credentials, citing that her medical license lapsed in 2024 and the hundreds of thousands of dollars she reportedly made promoting health and wellness products, sometimes without disclosing her business interests.

An October survey found roughly four in 10 parents openly align with the Make America Healthy Again movement. Of those parents, 58% do not trust US health agencies to ensure vaccine safety and effectiveness.

Iran Talks Continue

The third round of US-Iran nuclear negotiations begins today in Geneva. Discussions come as the US has amassed its largest military force in the region in decades, with President Donald Trump threatening to strike by next week.

Trump reiterated this week that he would never allow Iran to have access to a nuclear weapon. Tehran maintains its nuclear ambitions are peaceful but has also enriched uranium to 60% purity, a threshold approaching the weapons-grade level of 90%. Satellite images show the country has fortified sites struck by the US last year, including by constructing a roof over part of the Natanz enrichment site. The US has meanwhile sent two aircraft carrier strike groups and dispatched F-22 fighter jets to Israel.

Military advisers reportedly believe it would be difficult to carry out a limited strike against Tehran. The negotiations do not cover Iran's ballistic missile program or crackdown on protests; those demonstrations have resumed in recent days.

The Ant Whisperers

Scientists have discovered how certain baby caterpillars use rhythm to trick ants into caring for them until they mature into butterflies. Findings released yesterday suggest rhythm—long studied in primates—plays a key role in insect survival and may influence animal interactions more broadly than thought.

Caterpillar species dependent on ants (see overview) produce vibrational signals that mimic the ants' communication patterns—like a rhythmic "secret knock." The signals prompt ants to carry the caterpillars into their nests, where the caterpillars receive protection and food. In some cases, the caterpillars feed on the ants' young.

Both ants and the most ant-dependent caterpillars generate a steady beat called isochrony. The caterpillars and ants also produce a rarer rhythmic pattern known as double meter, alternating long and short beats, which has been observed mainly in a few primates. The closer a species' survival depends on ants, the more closely its rhythms match the colony's. Watch ants adopting a caterpillar here.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 3 of 77

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Art historian Christophe Leribault named new director of the Louvre; the former head of the Palace of Versailles and Orsay Museum is tasked with overseeing a security overhaul and facilities renovation.

Phil Collins, Jeff Buckley, and Shakira are among 17 nominees for induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame (More, w/full list)

"Zootopia 2" surpasses "A Minecraft Movie" as the highest-grossing domestic release of 2025, with \$424.2M after 13 straight weeks in the domestic top 10.

Science & Technology

AI startup Anthropic faces evening deadline to allow unrestricted use of its platforms by the Defense Department or potentially be labeled a supply chain risk; contested points include use for mass surveillance, autonomous weapons.

The brains of super agers—those aged 80 or older who retain the mental clarity of people decades younger—produce new neurons at twice the rate of their peers.

Ketogenic diets help prevent seizures in some epilepsy patients via physical changes in the brain that dampen signals between cells; the diets are typically high in fat and low in carbohydrates.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close up (S&P 500 +0.8%, Dow +0.6%, Nasdaq +1.3%) led by gains in tech sector.

Prediction market Kalshi fines an editor for YouTuber MrBeast and a former Republican gubernatorial candidate in California for potential insider trading and market manipulation.

Nvidia reports record Q4 earnings and revenue, fueled by 75% year over year revenue growth from data center business.

Politics & World Affairs

Cuba's government says it killed four people in a Florida-registered speedboat in Cuban waters, wounded six others after passengers opened fire on their soldiers; US was gathering intelligence as of this writing to learn about the incident.

Larry Summers resigns as Harvard University professor following revelations of frequent email exchanges with late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

Sinkhole in Omaha, Nebraska, intersection traps two cars, with drivers escaping safely (More, w/video)

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Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 4 of 77



Groton Wrestlers are State Bound

These Groton Area Wrestlers are state bound this weekend in Sioux Falls. Pictured left to right are Liza Krueger (105), Gavin England (285), Layne Johnson (214), Kyson Kucker (126), Keegan Kucker (113), Donavan Block (157), Wyatt Hagen (alternate) and Walker Zoellner (190). (Photo by Alexa Sperry)

GT

Girls Region 1A

Milbank

at Groton Area

Thurs., Feb. 26, 2026

7 p.m.



Groton
Area
Tigers
Groton, SD

GDILIVE



A production of the
Groton Daily Independent



For more info: GDILIVE.COM

Wolves' Rally Comes Up Short in NSIC Tournament Loss

ABERDEEN, S.D. — A late push brought the Northern State men within striking distance, but the comeback bid fell just short as the Wolves dropped a 68-64 decision to MSU Moorhead in the opening round of the NSIC Tournament before 1,085 fans.

Northern battled back to tie the contest with just under three minutes to play after trailing for much of the night. However, the Wolves were unable to take the lead down the stretch as the Dragons closed the door to advance.

MSU Moorhead held a 34-31 advantage at halftime and matched that 34-point effort in the second half. Northern scored 31 points in the first half and added 33 after the break in the four-point defeat.

The Wolves shot 38.6 percent from the floor and struggled from long range at 20 percent, connecting on six 3-pointers. They were strong at the free throw line, converting 82.4 percent of their attempts. Northern finished with 36 rebounds, eight assists, four steals and two blocks in the contest.

Northern found success inside, outscoring Moorhead 28- in the paint, and received 16 points off the bench. The Wolves also tallied seven fast-break points and six points off turnovers.

Simon Akena led the way with 14 points and two steals. Tobi Obiora matched his career high on the glass with 14 rebounds while adding nine points and a block. Joshua Book contributed 13 points, four rebounds and a block, while James Glenn added 10 points with three rebounds and a steal.

Off the bench, Marshawn Smith and Nelson Reynolds each scored eight points, with Smith also handing out a team-best four assists.

The loss closes out Northern State's 2025-26 season at 12-17 overall under first-year head coach Matt Wilber.

Dragons Edge Wolves in Overtime Thriller, 68-67

ABERDEEN, S.D. – A hard-fought season came to a heartbreaking end for the Northern State University women's basketball team as Minnesota State University Moorhead escaped Wachs Arena with a 68-67 overtime victory in the opening round of the conference tournament.

The Wolves closed the year at 16-13 overall (11-11 NSIC), while the Dragons improved to 14-13 (10-12 NSIC) with the narrow win.

Northern finished the contest with 67 points on 36.9 percent shooting from the floor and 33.3 percent from beyond the arc. The Wolves were strong at the free-throw line, converting 84.6 percent of their attempts, and added 41 rebounds, 15 assists, five steals and four blocks.

After trailing through the first three quarters, Northern wasted no time drawing even in the fourth. Just 15 seconds into the period, Makenzie Carrier buried a 3-pointer to tie the game and swing the momentum. Carrier was efficient in her final game of the season, scoring 10 points while shooting 66.7 percent from the field and 50 percent from deep.

The final minutes of regulation were a back-and-forth battle. Minnesota State Moorhead grabbed a one-point edge with under two minutes remaining before Carli Kuyper calmly stepped to the free-throw line following a foul by Grace Massaquoi. Kuyper knocked down a free throw to force overtime.

In the extra period, the Wolves struggled to find offense early and were held scoreless for the first four minutes. Senior guard Morgan Fiedler sparked a late push, drilling a deep shot with under a minute to play to pull Northern within two. Moments later, after a Dragon turnover, Izzy Moore drove into the paint and finished to tie the game at 67 with nine seconds remaining.

The Dragons, however, had the final answer. Massaquoi was fouled with two seconds to play and converted the decisive free throw, ending Northern's season in dramatic fashion.

Moore led the Wolves with a 19-point, 12-rebound double-double, adding two steals, an assist and a block. The Sioux Falls native also surpassed the 1,000-point mark for her career, becoming one of more than 35 players in program history to reach the milestone.

Fiedler filled the stat sheet with seven points, six rebounds and six assists, while Kuyper added 12 points and four rebounds. Carrier chipped in 10 points, three boards and two assists.

For the Dragons, Massaquoi paced the attack with 18 points on 6-of-8 shooting from the field and a perfect 6-of-6 effort at the free-throw line. Ashton Safranski added 14 points, and both Safranski and Terryn Johnson grabbed eight rebounds apiece.

Though the Wolves' postseason run was brief, the contest showcased their resilience, battling back late in regulation and overtime before falling by the slimmest of margins.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 7 of 77



Region 1A Girls Basketball

Milbank Bulldogs @ Groton Area Tigers
Thursday, February 26th, 2026

Game Times:

Main Court in Arena

- 7:00 PM CT → #2 Groton Area vs. #3 Milbank

Ticket Takers - Report @ 5:45pm:

- Todd Peterson
- Joni Groeblichhoff
- Elizabeth Bahr

Admin on Duty: Alexa

*Prior to the Varsity game, the National Anthem will be first, with Varsity Introductions/Lineups to follow.

LOCKER ROOMS: Milbank will use the last locker room down the JH hallway.

TEAM BENCHES: South Bench- Groton Area | North Bench- Milbank

ATHLETIC TRAINER: There will be an athletic trainer on site.

AED – one is with the trainer, and one is also located near the ticket booth.

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

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

CONCESSIONS: Will be available

Officials: David Planteen, Justin Deutsch, Tanner Jondahl

Official Book: Alexa Sperry

Scoreboard: Kristen Swartz

Shot Clock Operator: Sean Schuring

Announcer: Mike Imrie

National Anthem: GHS Sisters: Senior Natalia Warrington and Freshman Novalea Warrington

Livestream: www.GDlive.com or Groton High School | High School Sports | Home | Hudl

(fan.hudl.com/usa/sd/groton/organization/12097/groton-high-school)

<http://www.bigstoneradio.com/>

Thank you,

Alexa Sperry, Athletic Director

Alexa.Sperry@k12.sd.us / 605-380-7887

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 8 of 77

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'I had an eye doctor visit,' says absent state senator after his colleagues launched a search

Lawmaker was missing during one of Legislature's busiest days and during two crucial votes on data center bills

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR

PIERRE — Republican state Sen. John Carley of Piedmont said his unexplained absence from the entire Senate floor session during one of the busiest days of South Dakota's annual legislative session — which led his colleagues to launch a search for him — was because of a medical appointment.

"I had an eye doctor visit," Carley told South Dakota Searchlight in a text message Wednesday morning, after his Tuesday afternoon absence.

When asked follow-up questions, Carley said he "had an unexpected health issue come up."

The Senate Journal for Tuesday lists Carley as missing 24 votes that afternoon. That included votes on two data center-related measures that were narrowly defeated — one to alter a sales tax rebate program to include data centers, and another to exempt backup generators, such as those used by data centers, from needing a state permit.

Data centers are buildings housing servers to process data for artificial intelligence and other technologies. South Dakota lacks the kind of massive data centers that have proliferated elsewhere, and there have been competing proposals this legislative session to incentivize them with tax exemptions and rebates, or more strictly regulate their power usage, water use for cooling, noise and other impacts.

Carley's absence was especially significant because the Senate has effectively been reduced from 35 to 34 members this session due to the ongoing health-related absence of Sen. Arch Beal, R-Sioux Falls. That creates the chance of tie votes.

Bills need a majority of the members-elect — 18 votes — to pass in the Senate.

Data center bill drama

Supporters of the two data center bills had been hoping for at least a 17-17 split that Republican Lt. Gov. Tony Venhuizen, presiding over the Senate as its president, could break in favor of passage. In fact, both bills were up for reconsideration Tuesday after one of them had suffered a tie vote the previous day, and the other one had previously failed 17-16 with a different senator absent. Carley voted against both bills Monday.

With Carley gone Tuesday, a tie was impossible, as was the potential for the lieutenant governor to break a tie in favor of passage, and both bills failed on the last day for bills to pass their chamber of origin. That's called Crossover Day, which is one of the most active days of the session.

In addition to saying he had an eye appointment, Carley added in his response to South Dakota Searchlight that "I also find it ironic that being absent worried some that the executive branch might not be able to break a tie, and by default it was actually me representing the request of my constituents because an absence now is more powerful than a no vote."

The data center bills could still come back as amendments to other bills during the final few weeks of the legislative session.

Senators did not appear to know that Carley would be gone Tuesday, or where he was. Sen. Mike Rohl, R-Aberdeen, invoked a "call of the house" to compel Carley to the floor, and Venhuizen dispatched the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 10 of 77

Senate's sergeant-at-arms on a search.

After a break of about 40 minutes, while the rest of the senators waited, the sergeant-at-arms returned with a report stating that Carley was not answering his phone — not even for the governor, who had been enlisted to make a call — and could not be found. The search included reviewing footage from Capitol security cameras that showed Carley in the building earlier in the day, as well as an unsuccessful search for Carley's vehicle in the parking lot.

Reaction ranges from criticism to comedy

Senate President Pro Tempore Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, and Senate Majority Leader Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, declined to comment Wednesday on whether Carley should face any disciplinary action.

Senate Minority Leader Liz Larson, D-Sioux Falls, said she didn't have enough information to say whether Carley should be disciplined.

"But as a general rule, you should be in your seat," Larson said. "Or let people know you'll be gone."

The South Dakota Supreme Court recently confirmed the lieutenant governor's ability to break tie votes in the Senate. That came about after Karr challenged that authority, and the governor requested the court's opinion on the matter.

Sen. Mykala Voita, R-Bonesteel, said the Supreme Court's advisory opinion has warped Senate incentives in a way that rewards gamesmanship. She said with one member excused and the chamber effectively reduced to an even number, a 17-17 tie hands the deciding power to the executive branch via the lieutenant governor, rather than requiring a true majority of elected senators.

In that environment, Voita said, "your absence matters more than your 'no' vote," because walking away can prevent a tie and block approval.

Karr said the Supreme Court decision, requested by the executive branch, incentivized the behavior. He worries that a precedent has been set for the remainder of the session through next month, and that future absences could result in more "call of the house" motions attempting to compel the attendance of senators.

"Two other branches interfered and have now created an incentive for gamesmanship," Karr said.

The Senate approved a bill Tuesday that would ask voters to remove the lieutenant governor's role as president of the Senate. That bill awaits action by the House.

Sen. Casey Cratree, R-Madison, sponsored the two data center bills that were defeated on Tuesday. On Wednesday, he introduced the Senate to his wife, Ashley, an optometrist who was visiting and watching from the gallery.

"And we know how important those eye doctors are," Cratree said. "So, I thought I'd have her come in here and make sure nobody needed to go anywhere else."

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.

SNAP soda ban headed to desk of South Dakota governor, who's concerned about costs

Bill earned veto-proof majority in state Senate and House

BY: JOHN HULT

The question of whether South Dakota moves to ban the use of government food assistance for sugary drinks is in the hands of Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden, who has signaled his opposition to the bill all through the 2026 legislative session.

The state Senate voted 27-6 on Wednesday to endorse House Bill 1056, after the House passed it earlier

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 11 of 77

58-11. Assuming the same levels of support, both margins are wide enough to overcome a Rhoden veto, should he choose to issue one.

The bill directs the Department of Social Services to ask for a federal waiver to allow the state to bar the use of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits for the purchase of soft drinks.

SNAP is a federal program, managed by the state, through which people with low incomes get a monthly allowance for food through a debit-like card that can be used at most stores to buy nearly any consumable grocery item save alcohol and prepared foods.

Representatives from Rhoden's office testified against the bill in House and Senate committees, arguing that the administrative costs would be too high. A fiscal note attached to the bill between its passage in the House and its appearance on the Senate's Wednesday calendar estimated that implementation would cost \$310,000 through the first two years. Those costs would come from hiring an extra employee and contracting for software to track sales, file reports and help retailers determine which drinks are banned.

Backers see long-term savings to the state, though. A high percentage of SNAP recipients are also on Medicaid, a taxpayer-funded health insurance program open to disabled and income-eligible people.

On Wednesday, Burbank Republican Sen. Sydney Davis noted the connection between excess soda consumption and health problems like obesity, diabetes and tooth decay. Medicaid dental costs alone add up \$51 million a year, she said.

Mitchell Republican Sen. Paul Miskimins, a retired dentist, told the body he once counted 32 cavities and seven abscesses in the mouths of 2-year-old twin boys who were covered by Medicaid.

He attributed the tooth decay to sugary beverages.

"I don't know if that first visit was more traumatic on the boys or on my dental staff and myself," said Miskimins.

Tamara Grove, R-Lower Brule, was the lone senator to speak in opposition on the Senate floor. She argued that some stores might stop accepting SNAP payments due to the administrative burden of sorting barred products from the rest of their inventories, and pointed out that the bill wouldn't do a thing to prevent SNAP recipients from loading up on sugary foods like ice cream or snack cakes.

"It gives this look as if there's going to be this big, huge change in the way that people buy products, but it's really not going to be," Grove said.

Some surrounding states, including Nebraska, have moved to ask for a waiver to ban soda sales through SNAP. Such waivers are now an option, as President Donald Trump's administration is willing to consider granting them. Former President Joe Biden's administration was not.

Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt, the South Dakota bill's prime sponsor, got a letter last week from Trump administration officials expressing support for her proposal.

In response, Rhoden spokeswoman Josie Harms told South Dakota Searchlight that the governor "has always been supportive of the Trump Administration's efforts to Make America Healthy Again," using a reference to the policy agenda branding used by U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

"We have met directly with his Administration on this issue, and at no point has our opposition been directed at President Trump or his efforts to reform SNAP," Harms said. "Our focus has always been on ensuring the implementation of SNAP reform works effectively for our state."

Harms said Wednesday that Rhoden would answer questions about the bill at a Thursday press conference.

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.

South Dakota bill would legalize a psychedelic drug upon federal approval

Legislation would become law with state Senate approval and a signature from Gov. Larry Rhoden

BY: JOHN HULT

A bill that would legalize a psychedelic medication upon its federal approval and legalization as a mental health treatment is one vote away from South Dakota Gov. Larry Rhoden's desk.

The Senate Health and Human Services Committee passed House Bill 1099 on a 6-0 vote Wednesday in Pierre. The lack of a no vote and the lack of opposition testimony cleared a path for the bill to appear on the Senate's consent calendar, which is a grouping of bills that are voted on in bulk unless a member asks to pull one for discussion.

The bill passed the House of Representatives Feb. 9 on a 58-7 vote.

The legislation is specific to crystalline polymorph psilocybin, a synthesized version of the hallucination-inducing psilocybin found in psychedelic mushrooms.

The Food and Drug Administration approved clinical trials for psychedelics in 2023 to investigate their potential as therapies for treatment-resistant depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health diagnoses.

Treatment resistant depression is diagnosed when symptoms don't improve after the use of multiple medications, and it impacts about a third of patients with major depressive disorder, according to Johns Hopkins Medicine. Australia approved psilocybin for treatment-resistant depression in 2023. In the U.S., a synthetic version of the drug ketamine has been approved by the FDA for the same.

Psilocybin is currently classified as a schedule I drug with no acceptable medical uses by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, however, and is illegal under South Dakota law.

If passed by the state Senate and signed into law by Rhoden, HB 1099 would instantly legalize the drug's use as a prescription medication in South Dakota upon its approval by the FDA and rescheduling by the DEA. Possession for recreational use would remain illegal.

Supporters say rapid access is needed

Lawmakers in South Dakota regularly adjust state law to match federal guidance on drugs, but HB 1099 would offer quicker access to the medicines if they're approved between legislative sessions.

"Acting now by passing this legislation is more urgent than ever, as so many South Dakotans struggle with serious mental health conditions," said Sen. Tom Pischke, R-Dell Rapids, the bill's prime sponsor in the Senate.

Patients failed by currently available treatments "need rapid access" to newer therapies, Pischke said.

Veterans' advocacy groups in particular have come to see the therapies as powerful alternatives to traditional psychiatric medications for combat veterans, who as a group have a higher risk of suicide than the general population.

Logan Davidson is a policy adviser for the nonprofit organization Veterans for Experimental Treatment Solutions, which advocates for the expansion of access to psychedelic treatments.

More than 125,000 veterans have died by suicide since 2001, Davidson told the committee, and just under a third of veterans from "the global war on terror" suffer from PTSD.

"Veterans are one of the most vulnerable populations when it comes to mental health," said Davidson.

Alexander Root, a lobbyist for drugmaker Compass Pathways, told the committee his company's formulation of psilocybin has shown "a highly statistically significant and clinically meaningful reduction in depressive symptoms" for patients with treatment-resistant depression during its most recent trials.

How it works

After the hearing, Compass Pathways Chief Patient Officer Dr. Steven Levine told South Dakota Searchlight

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 13 of 77

the drugs can help change the neural pathways in the brain responsible for the rigid, reflexive patterns of thought that drive certain mental health diagnoses.

Patients suffering from PTSD, for example, can be "triggered" by things like sounds, images or smells and be pulled back into traumatic experiences, reliving them as though they were happening in the moment. Those with treatment-resistant depression may find themselves trapped in crippling loops of self-criticism.

Patients prescribed psychedelics for those conditions wouldn't pick up a prescription at a pharmacy and take them on their own, Levine said. First, they have sessions with providers, where they're educated on the principles behind the therapy and on how to approach the drug experience to get the most out of it.

On the day the patient takes the drug, Levine said, "the medical team is just there to monitor and support them so that they can have a trusted, safe experience in this supervised setting."

Treatment through psychedelics is meant to allow patients under their influence to approach and process their traumatic experiences or unhelpful thoughts as observers, rather than participants.

In doing so, Levine said, patients can quickly rewire the parts of their brain marked by trauma or depressive ruminations.

"We are able to see in brain imaging studies that there are acute changes in the connectivity of regions of the brain," after the use of psychedelics, Levine said. "Essentially, they're initially kind of taken offline or desynchronized, and then they reconnect in ways that may facilitate people shifting from these ingrained patterns of thinking."

Back at the Senate Health and Human Services Committee, Sioux Falls Democratic Sen. Jamie Smith said he's "been following" developments in the use of psychedelic medications for "quite a while."

"I'm looking forward to the day that we can help these people that are suffering from this depression," Smith said. "And I do hope that this drug does ease that in many patients."

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.

South Dakota Senate endorses \$10 million for water quality

Money would fund buffer strip program launched in 2021, offer help for other projects

BY: JOHN HULT

The South Dakota Senate threw its support this week behind a bill that puts \$10 million toward water quality improvement programs.

Senate Bill 222, which offers \$8 million to incentivize water quality initiatives from landowners and \$2 million to help improve local water, wastewater and stormwater systems, passed the Senate 28-5.

The bill is sponsored by Sioux Falls Republican Sen. Chris Karr, who said he believes "water is life."

"If we fail to protect it, I think we fail our next generation," Karr said when his bill first appeared for a hearing last week in a Senate committee. "This is a caretaker bill for our most important resource in South Dakota."

Senate Bill 222 had the support of Andy Bruels of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources during that initial hearing, which took place Feb. 17 before the Senate Appropriations Committee.

"This bill will allow us to continue doing some of those good, positive things, and has some additional money then from what we currently would have," Bruels said.

Karr's concerns center on the Big Sioux River watershed, which has experienced reduced bacterial loads thanks to state-funded conservation efforts to control agricultural waste in recent years, but the money would be available for projects anywhere in the state.

The Big Sioux River flows through Sioux Falls and other cities in eastern South Dakota. It's considered impaired for one or more beneficial uses, according to the state's most recent biannual water quality survey. Agricultural waste flowing into its waters is classified as nonpoint source pollution, a category distinct

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 14 of 77

from point source pollution like discharge from a water treatment facility or industrial operation. The bill includes money to address both types of pollution. The money would be accessible through applications to the state Board of Water and Natural Resources.

The appropriations committee postponed action on SB 222 last week and brought it back up on Monday, passing it 8-0 without comment, sending it to the Senate floor. The full Senate took up the measure and passed it Tuesday.

Sen. Curt Voight, R-Rapid City, said his experience planting trees as buffer strips on his own land factored into his support. It stopped erosion, reduced runoff from his farmed acres and improved habitat for wildlife.

"You're going to take out 120 acres of good farm ground along those banks, but in return, you have a long-lasting effect and impact," Voight said.

\$8 million offered to continue ag pollutant control

The bill would put \$8 million toward incentives for riparian buffer strips, which are swaths of vegetation, typically grasses, that are between 50 and 120 feet wide and separate farming and ranching operations from river and stream banks.

Farmers can earn incentive payments through the program, which began with a \$3 million appropriation in 2021. Participants agree to keep the grasses uncut in the warmer months and allow grazing in colder months, and to install fencing and alternative water sources to control livestock access to the buffer strip areas.

Livestock defecate as they stand in rivers and streams to drink or cool off, sending bacterial loads downstream. Runoff also carries nitrates and other water contaminants from grazing zones and cropland to rivers and streams in the absence of vegetation, which can soak up water and waste in plant roots.

Initial uptake of the incentive payments was slow — no farmer signed up in the first year or so — but picked up significantly when the state boosted payouts and adjusted program rules to allow landowners to stack buffer strip payments with other federal incentives like the Conservation Reserve Program and Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, which pay incentives for planting grasses and other vegetation instead of crops. The program also changed to open up payouts to farmers to help them pay for animal waste containment systems in larger-scale livestock operations.

The initial \$3 million is spent. Sixty-seven landowners got payments for buffer strips through those funds, and the money also helped pay for two livestock waste systems.

According to the program's most recent progress report, the animal waste systems were built to manage the waste of 690 animals (350 at one site, 340 in the other), with \$89,000 of support altogether from the program.

The bulk of the remaining funds, around \$2.9 million, went toward incentives that created 83 miles of buffers along river and streambanks, with vegetation covering more than 1,200 acres of land.

On the Senate floor Tuesday, Karr told his colleagues that the ag department has requests for contracts on 67 more tracks of buffer strip land, and for contracts that would support nine more animal waste facilities.

The money in his bill would support that work, he said.

\$2 million offered for local projects

In addition to the \$8 million for the riparian buffer initiative, SB 222 adds \$2 million to an existing pool of funds available for local water infrastructure upgrades.

The Legislature gives around \$5 million to the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources each year for the infrastructure program, through which counties and municipalities can get assistance paying for things like water treatment facility upgrades.

Karr said the extra money will offer communities that lack the resources to follow through on needed upgrades a way to get started without asking as much from local taxpayers.

"There's always small communities that are dealing with these things, and when they have to take on those projects and they don't have this support, what happens?" Karr said. "They end up having to fund

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 15 of 77

it somehow in their communities, usually property taxes.”

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.

USDA to give up massive DC office building as shift of staff to states begins

BY: JACOB FISCHLER

The U.S. Department of Agriculture will transfer a large office building to the General Services Administration in a step toward shrinking the department’s footprint in and around Washington, D.C., Secretary Brooke Rollins said Wednesday.

More than 70% of offices at the USDA’s South Building, in Washington, sit empty on any given day, while deferred maintenance costs have piled up past \$1 billion, Rollins said at a press conference in front of the building.

“Behind me, along this entire city block in bricks and mortar, is what government that has grown too big, too bloated and too disconnected from its citizens looks like,” Rollins said. “That all changes starting today, because today we are officially starting the process of turning the South Building back over to the General Services Administration.”

The department will also vacate leased space at an office in Alexandria, Virginia, USDA Deputy Secretary Stephen Vaden said.

The moves are part of a plan the department outlined in July 2025 to shift its workers out of the capital region, reducing the workforce in D.C., Maryland and Virginia from 4,600 to around 2,000 while expanding regional hubs throughout the country.

Rollins said Wednesday the move was the “next step to right-size our federal real estate footprint to root out waste, fraud and abuse.”

Sen. Joni Ernst, an Iowa Republican who has long advocated for shrinking the federal government, applauded the move and urged department officials to consider her state as a target for relocation.

“Let’s just keep on draining the swamp, and, Secretary Rollins, moving our federal workers closer to the people that they represent,” Ernst said. “And I would say that the great state of Iowa is a good place to start.”

Workforce to relocate

Workers in the department’s Food and Nutrition Service who currently report to the Virginia office will relocate to Washington, D.C., Vaden said.

The broader reorganization would ramp up over the summer, allowing employees with school-aged children to finish the academic year in the capital area and complete their relocation in time for the next school year, he said.

That will require a series of steps required by laws, regulations and union contracts, Vaden said.

The July plan said the effort to spread the USDA workforce out from D.C. would take years. It included expanded regional offices in Raleigh, North Carolina; Kansas City, Missouri; Indianapolis; Fort Collins, Colorado; and Salt Lake City.

The department would also maintain administrative support locations in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Minneapolis and agency service centers in St. Louis; Lincoln, Nebraska; and Missoula, Montana, according to a July 24 memo.

South Building future unclear

GSA Administrator Edward Forst said the move represented “a very preliminary stage” and declined to

provide a timeline for the transfer to be complete.

"I don't want to commit to a time frame other than I have two years and 10 months left in this job," he said. "And we're going to get a lot done in that time frame."

Vaden said the USDA reorganization would be complete by the end of 2026.

Forst said USDA's transfer of the South Building triggered a long and comprehensive process to find a new use. The agency would consult with stakeholders, including the private sector, and that the district's prosperity was among its priorities.

"We're committed to economic prosperity for D.C.," he said. "That's one of our initiatives. We also talk to the private sector and others about the best case use and how we also deliver the best results for the American taxpayer. So it is a long, it's a comprehensive process. We want to be good listeners, and then we'll execute on this."

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.

Data center tax breaks are on the chopping block in some states

Rising energy costs and environmental concerns drive states to reconsider incentives

BY: MADYSON FITZGERALD

After years of states pushing legislation to accelerate the development of data centers and the electric grid to support them, some legislators want to limit or repeal state and local incentives that paved their way.

President Donald Trump also has changed his tone. Last year he issued an executive order and other federal initiatives meant to support accelerated data center development. Then last month, he cited rising electricity bills in saying technology companies that build data centers must "pay their own way," in a post on Truth Social.

As the momentum shifts, lawmakers in several states have introduced or passed legislation that aims to rein in data center development by repealing tax exemptions, adding conditions to certain incentives or placing moratoriums on data center projects. Virginia lawmakers, for example, are considering ending a data center tax break that costs the state about \$1.6 billion a year.

"Who is actually benefiting from these massive data centers that, in many cases, are the size of one or two shopping malls combined?" asked Michigan Democratic state Rep. Erin Byrnes, who introduced a proposal to repeal the state's data center tax exemptions. "They have a large footprint in terms of land and energy usage. And by and large, it's not going to be the average resident who lives near a data center who's going to benefit."

Over the past few years, more data centers have been built in an effort to meet the demand for digital processing power, which has rapidly increased as more artificial intelligence systems come online. Data centers house thousands of servers that are responsible for storing and transmitting data required for internet services to work.

But as local communities voice growing outrage over rising electricity prices and environmental concerns brought by data centers, such as water and energy use, lawmakers in several states are hoping to slow data center development. By limiting incentives or placing moratoriums on new projects, state legislators are hoping to give themselves more time to determine whether the massive facilities are worth losing millions or more in tax revenue each year.

Some experts also say that developers and tech companies have exaggerated some of the benefits they bring to local communities. While the promise of new jobs sounds attractive, local leaders may face other concerns, such as the effects of diverting construction resources away from other purposes and higher energy costs caused by AI, said Michael Hicks, an economics professor at Ball State University in Indiana.

"A lot of households — and the people that are elected by households — and local governments are becoming more unnerved by the public pushback to data centers," Hicks said.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 17 of 77

Tech developers and data center operators are concerned, however, that the changes could hurt the rapidly growing industry. And most states and localities already require developers using incentives to follow certain requirements, said Dan Diorio, the vice president of state policy for the Data Center Coalition, a lobbying group for the data center industry.

State lawmakers have to consider how changes to incentive programs could upend years of construction, which has long-term business impacts, Diorio said.

"I think data centers are very much the backbone of the 21st-century economy," he said. "We're generating economic activity in states, contributing to state-level GDP, contributing significantly to labor income and state and local tax revenue, and creating significant amounts of jobs. I mean, we're just jumping into something preemptively here."

Incentives granted

At least 37 states offer incentives that are available to data centers, including sales tax exemptions and property tax abatements, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Sales tax exemptions, the most common incentive, allow data center developers to buy computers and other equipment at a much lower cost.

"I think these are one of many factors that the data centers are looking at, along with the cost of electricity, the cost of construction, land and things like that," said Nicholas Miller, a policy associate at NCSL. "These incentives are one way that states are trying to pitch themselves as competitive to this industry."

These aren't the days of being able to build a data center, cut deals with NDAs, then start turning dirt before the constituents even know what's happened.

– Oklahoma House Speaker Kyle Hilbert, a Republican

In 2020, Maryland implemented a program that exempts data centers from sales and use taxes if they provide at least five jobs within three years of applying to the program and invest at least \$2 million in data center personal property. The first four years of the program cost the state \$22 million — but \$11 million of that came in 2024 alone, as the costs grew, Democratic state Del. Julie Palakovich Carr said.

Concerned about this and the impact of data centers on residents' electricity bills, Palakovich Carr introduced legislation this year that would repeal the state's sales and use tax exemptions for personal property used at data centers. The measure, which is under consideration in the House, would also restrict localities in the state from eliminating or reducing assessments for personal property used in data centers, which drew opposition from the Maryland Association of Counties.

The amount of money states are forfeiting to provide tax breaks for data centers is increasingly concerning, Palakovich Carr said.

"Unfortunately, that's the turn we're seeing across many other states," she said. "The price starts out maybe in line with what we think it's going to be. But over time it just costs more and more."

Similar bills that would repeal or halt state incentives for data centers have been filed in Arizona and Georgia.

"When we look at potential subsidies for businesses, I'm really looking at it from a frame of incentivizing new behavior rather than just giving away money for things that the companies were going to already do anyways," Palakovich Carr said. "I think it's really important that once these things get put in place, we look at the data and see what's happening on the ground."

In 2024, Michigan enacted sales and use tax exemptions on certain data centers through at least 2050.

Now, with developers looking at more than a dozen sites for potential data centers, public sentiment has soured, said Byrnes, who had voted against the measure. Communities across the state began organizing in an effort to stop data centers from coming to their neighborhoods because of environmental concerns and energy costs, she said.

The outcry prompted Byrnes to co-sponsor a bipartisan package of three bills that would repeal the 2024 law.

"We're taking a stand with this legislation to say that we don't believe data centers should be offered these exemptions," she said. "I believe it aligns with public sentiment."

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 18 of 77

Lawmakers in a handful of states — including New York, Oklahoma and Vermont — have filed bills that would place a temporary moratorium on all data center projects and require studies of their impacts.

Georgia Democratic state Rep. Ruwa Romman introduced a measure this session that would put a moratorium on new data center projects until March 2027. The proposal would give the legislature time to study the impact of data centers on the state's natural resources, environment and other areas.

"We have such a beautiful state and it would be a damn shame to completely and utterly wreck it and its landscape for short-term gain," Romman said. "These data centers aren't bringing jobs. They're saying they're bringing the revenue, but there's a ton of fine print on the revenue that's coming in. So, I've been urging my colleagues from every side of the political spectrum to just take a beat."

In 2021, the Oklahoma legislature approved a measure from current Republican House Speaker Kyle Hilbert that excludes new data centers from qualifying for an exemption program that allows certain manufacturers not to pay property taxes for their first five years in business. Any data centers that qualified for the program in the five years prior to the law, however, can continue to apply for exemptions.

This year, as more project proposals were made, Hilbert introduced legislation to ensure no data centers could "slip through the cracks."

"These aren't the days of being able to build a data center, cut deals with NDAs, then start turning dirt before the constituents even know what's happened," Hilbert said. "Those days are over, and data centers need to be proactive in their messaging and talking to people about their concerns."

Costs vs. benefits

Last year, Virginia, home to the most data centers in the country, gave up \$1.6 billion in sales and use tax revenues from data centers, state data shows. That's a 118% increase from the previous year, according to a report from Good Jobs First, a watchdog group that focuses on economic development incentives. Another report from the group said Georgia is expected to lose at least \$2.5 billion to data center sales tax exemptions this year, 664% higher than the state's previous estimate.

Virginia state lawmakers are considering legislation that would require data centers to achieve high energy efficiency standards and decrease their use of diesel backup generators in order to be eligible for the state's sales and use tax exemption. The measure, which passed the House, is now moving through the Senate.

Before the end of his term, former Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin, a Republican, suggested a provision in his proposed state budget that would extend the data center tax incentive from 2035 to 2050. The Senate's budget bill, however, would end the incentive altogether on Jan. 1, 2027. It's not clear if state leaders, including current Democratic Gov. Abigail Spanberger, support the measure.

While states can put a specific number on the tax losses, it's much more difficult to determine how much data centers contribute to local communities and the state, Miller said.

Virginia brings in a significant amount of revenue from the property taxes for each facility. Local construction firms, restaurants and other small businesses also benefit from ongoing projects, he said.

"This is the big question," Miller said. "With all economic development projects, it's generally a lot easier to measure the cost of the incentive directly versus the benefits."

The changing incentive landscape may cause instability within the data center industry, said Diorio, of the Data Center Coalition. Data center projects are large-scale capital investments that play out for several years, but changing policies could upend that progress.

"When states look at these policies or consider abrupt ends to programs, that creates significant market uncertainty," Diorio said. "It will have a significant long-term impact on the viability of that market for data center development. Industries are very responsive to market signals, and any kind of uncertainty will bring up a red flag because you're looking to invest for the long haul."

Stateline reporter Madyson Fitzgerald can be reached at mfitzgerald@stateline.org.

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

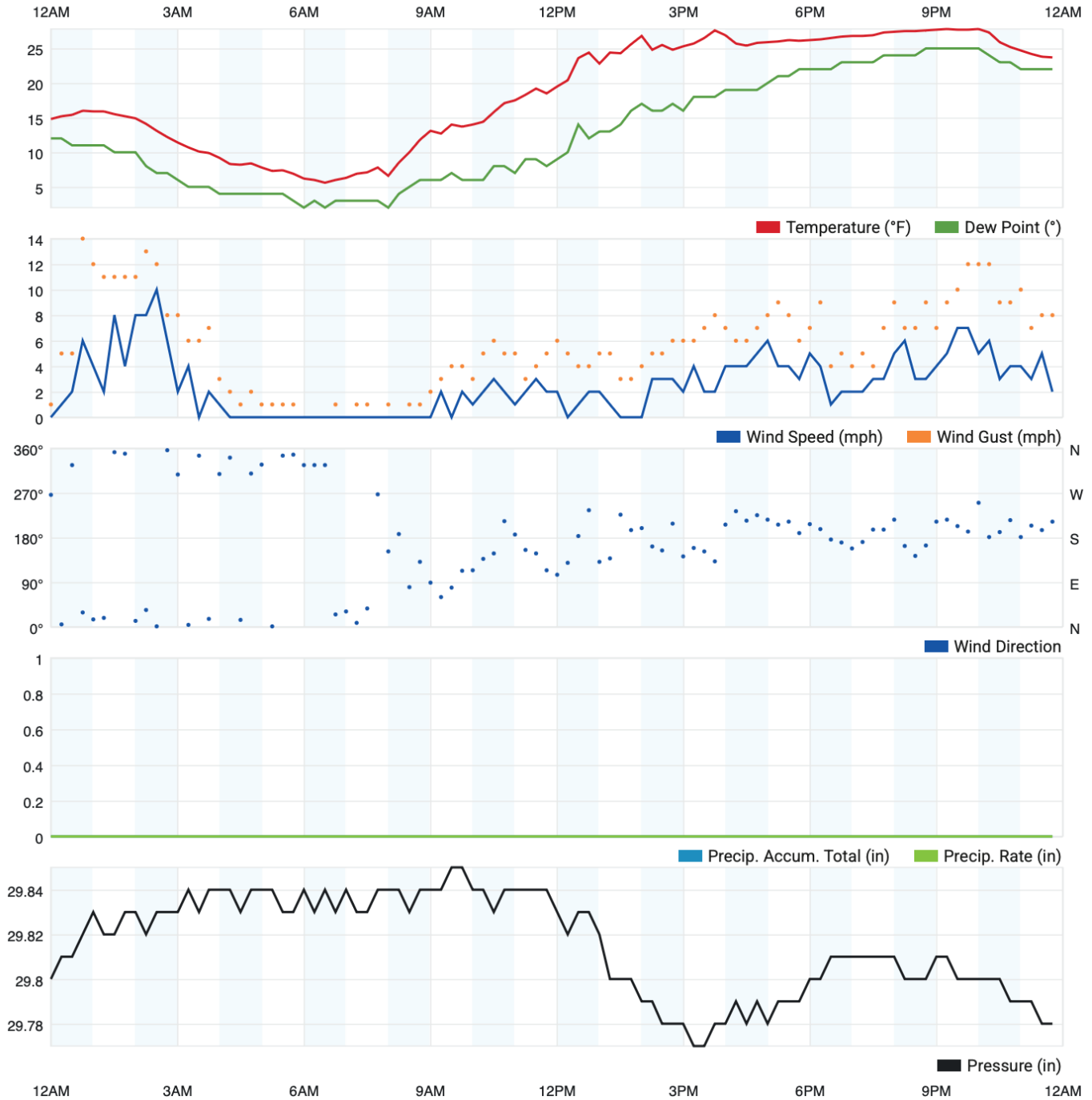
Madyson Fitzgerald is a content producer and staff writer for Stateline.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 19 of 77

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

February 25, 2026



Broton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 20 of 77

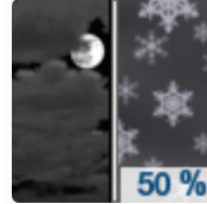
Today

Tonight

Friday

Friday Night

Saturday



High: 46 °F

Low: 30 °F

High: 44 °F

Low: 12 °F

High: 19 °F

Sunny

Partly Cloudy

Mostly Sunny
then Mostly
Sunny and
Breezy

Mostly Cloudy
then Chance
Snow

Chance Snow
then Slight
Chance Snow



Strong Winds & Elevated Fire Danger

February 26, 2026
3:43 AM

Elevated Fire Danger Across Central SD Expected Today and Friday



- **Westerly wind gusts between 25-35 mph Today and Friday**
- **Increasingly dry conditions will lead to high and very high Grassland Fire Danger Index Values west of the James River**
 - **Avoid outdoor burning and report any fires to local authorities**

Maximum Wind Gust Forecast (mph)

	2/26 Thu						2/27 Fri											
	6am		9am		12pm		3pm		6pm		9pm		12am		3pm		6pm	
Aberdeen	20	24	24	23	16	20	22	25	26	29	31	30	22					
Britton	17	21	22	22	17	20	24	26	26	30	32	31	24					
Clark	15	21	22	22	14	18	21	23	25	30	32	31	23					
Eagle Butte	29	35	36	35	23	22	26	28	28	30	31	29	24					
Ellendale	23	26	26	25	17	22	25	28	28	31	35	32	23					
Eureka	22	26	28	26	18	22	25	28	29	29	30	28	21					
Gettysburg	24	31	33	33	22	20	23	28	29	31	32	29	22					
Kennebec	24	31	36	35	20	17	21	24	26	32	33	31	20					
McIntosh	28	35	37	36	24	23	26	28	28	30	30	28	24					
Milbank	20	23	23	24	17	20	23	25	28	30	32	31	24					
Miller	25	30	32	32	20	21	23	28	28	32	33	31	22					
Mobridge	23	28	29	29	20	20	22	24	25	25	26	24	21					
Murdo	28	32	35	33	20	18	23	24	25	29	32	30	20					
Pierre	21	28	30	30	18	14	17	20	23	26	28	26	18					
Redfield	21	28	30	29	16	20	23	26	29	33	35	32	25					
Sisseton	22	24	26	26	20	23	26	29	30	32	35	33	25					
Watertown	16	23	25	24	15	18	22	23	26	30	32	31	22					
Webster	18	22	23	22	17	21	24	28	28	29	30	30	24					
Wheaton	13	18	20	20	15	17	22	24	28	31	33	32	26					



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Westerly winds gusting up to 25-35 mph and increasingly dry conditions Today and Friday will lead to high and very high Grassland Fire Danger Index values in areas west of the James River. Avoid outdoor burning during this time as any fire that does ignite could spread rapidly, and report any fires to local authorities.

Broton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 21 of 77

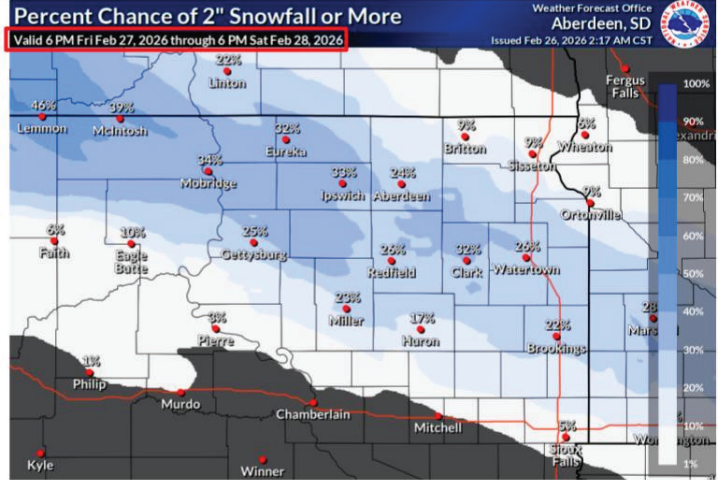
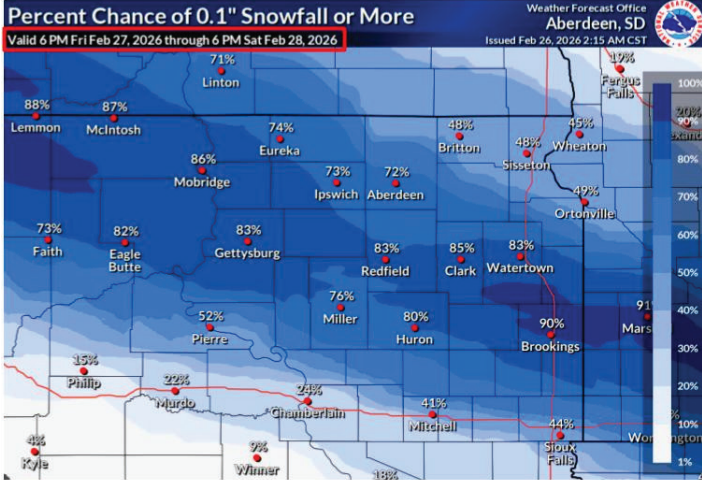


Probability of Upcoming Snow

February 26, 2026
3:51 AM

System Friday night through Saturday will bring snow to most of central and northeast SD and west central MN

- Snow will start late Friday evening across central/north-central SD, then spread into northeast SD/west-central MN overnight through Saturday
- **Highest chances(50-70%) of snowfall** stretch from north-central SD south and east into east-central SD
- There is still a lot of uncertainty in the track of this system, with amounts and locations of the heaviest amounts expected to change in future forecasts. **Travel will be impacted.** Keep an eye on the forecast, plan ahead, and drive to conditions



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

A disturbance will move southeast across the region late Friday through Saturday spreading light snow across most of central and northeast SD and west central MN. Accumulating snow is probable that could impact anyone with travel plans in the area on Saturday. Uncertainty in the track of the system at this time lends to a lower confidence in how much snow will fall and where the heaviest amounts could set up. Keep an eye on the latest forecast changes over the next day or two, especially if you have travel plans on Saturday.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 22 of 77

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 28 °F at 3:48 PM

Low Temp: 6 °F at 6:24 AM

Wind: 14 mph at 12:42 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 68 in 2024

Record Low: -20 in 1962

Average High: 33

Average Low: 11

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.57

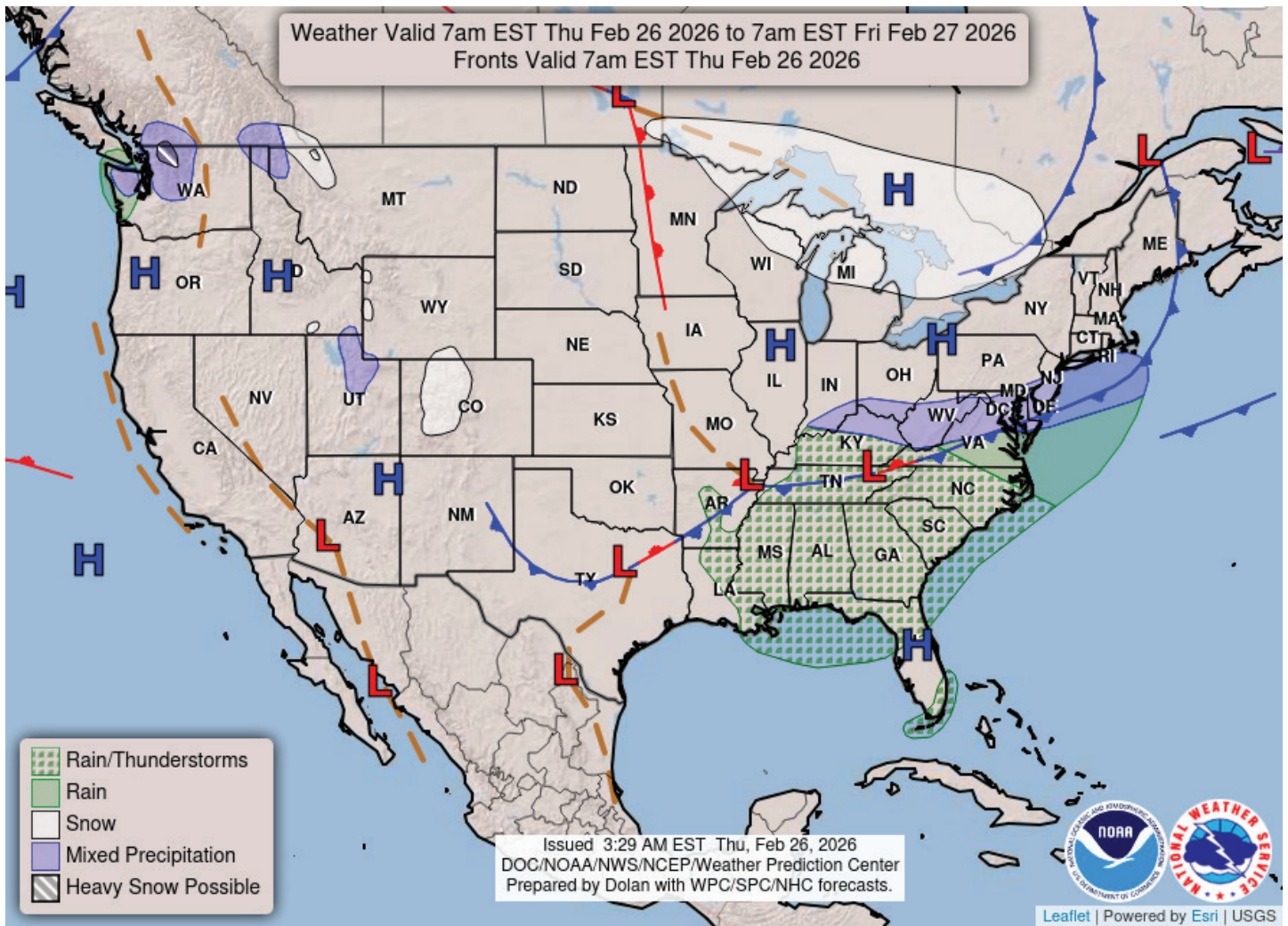
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.96

Average Precip to date: 1.12

Precip Year to Date: 0.96

Sunset Tonight: 6.14 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:14 am



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 23 of 77

Today in Weather History

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Daily Devotion

Understanding God's Peace

If you want God's peace, spend time in His Word and align your choices with His will.

Colossians 3:15-17: 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.

16 Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

17 Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Many Christians believe a sense of peace is a sign that they're following God's will. But sometimes tranquility is actually due to us feeling satisfied about a choice we have made. How can we tell the difference?

Today's passage talks about letting "the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (v. 15). This kind of settledness originates from Jesus. The word peace means to be bound or woven together in harmony and oneness. So to have God's peace about a matter means your decision must be aligned with His will. The only way to determine this is by comparing your thoughts and choices with His Word. Are you thinking the same way He does? Did you make your decision using scriptural principles or your own human understanding?

We may want a quicker method for finding an answer, but God molds us gradually, day by day, as we read the Word and let its truths sink into our mind.

Building a foundation of God's truth takes time and consistency. With His instructions as your basis, you can make decisions with confidence, knowing you are following His will. Then you'll have a sense of oneness with the Lord, and His peace will guard your way.

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

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 25 of 77

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Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 26 of 77



WINNING NUMBERS

MILLIONAIRE FOR LIFE

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02.25.26

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TOP PRIZE:
\$1,000,000/year

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 40 Mins 6 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.24.26

12 39 43 49 55 23

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$458,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 25 Mins 6 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.25.26

31 32 41 48 51 6

All Star Bonus: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$16,530,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 40 Mins 6 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.25.26

1 6 21 26 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 55 Mins 6 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.25.26

11 24 47 59 63 5

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 24 Mins 6 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.25.26

50 52 54 56 64 23

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$238,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 24 Mins 6 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Crawford's 26 lead South Dakota past Omaha 89-72

By The Associated Press undefined

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Jordan Crawford scored 26 points to help South Dakota defeat Omaha 89-72 on Wednesday night.

Crawford shot 8 of 12 from the field, including 5 for 7 from 3-point range, and went 5 for 6 from the line for the Coyotes (15-15, 7-8 Summit League). Uzziah Buntyn scored 18 points, going 6 of 13 from the floor and 5 for 5 from the line. Jesse McIntosh had 13 points and shot 2 of 8 from the field, including 1 for 4 from 3-point range, and went 8 for 9 from the line.

Paul Djobet led the Mavericks (15-15, 8-7) in scoring, finishing with 18 points and eight rebounds. Ja'Sean Glover added 15 points and two steals for Omaha. Tony Osburn finished with 11 points and seven rebounds.

South Dakota took the lead with 18:48 left in the first half and did not trail again. Buntyn led his team in scoring with 12 points in the first half to help put them up 45-35 at the break. Crawford scored a team-high 17 points in the second half.

The Associated Press created this story using technology provided by Data Skrive and data from Sportradar.

What Smithfield's move could mean for environment, economy

By MOLLY WETSCH/South Dakota News Watch South Dakota News Watch

Besides 120 acres of prime downtown real estate, Sioux Falls city leaders got something that has sometimes been elusive over the history of the Smithfield pork plant: an assurance that it's not leaving.

That's also good news for hundreds of farmers in three states that supply the 20,000 hogs slaughtered each day at what is one of the oldest and largest meatpacking plants in the country.

On Feb. 16, South Dakota Gov. Larry Rhoden, Sioux Falls Mayor Paul TenHaken and Smithfield Foods CEO Shane Smith announced that Smithfield's pork processing facility would move out of its century-old campus just north of Falls Park to a new location in an industrial park in northwestern Sioux Falls.

The downtown Sioux Falls site opened as John Morrell & Co. in 1909 and was purchased by Smithfield Foods in 1995.

The plant employs about 3,200 people, which puts it third in the top Sioux Falls employers not accounting for public institutions. It's Smithfield's second-largest processing facility and the largest producer of packaged meats in the country.

The new facility will be even larger, with an estimated \$1.3 billion price tag on 200 acres.

The move, which will be possible in part thanks to a \$50 million gift from billionaire Denny Sanford, raises questions for both Sioux Falls and South Dakota residents, especially for those familiar with the company's long history and deep impact in the area.

What is Smithfield's environmental impact?

Not surprisingly, any operation that slaughters thousands of head of livestock every day has an impact on the environment, and the plant has had issues with air and water pollution. Residents of the area are familiar with Smithfield's signature smell, which often wafts across downtown when the wind blows the wrong way.

The new plant will be markedly less smelly, Smithfield representatives said to city council, thanks to air-scrubbing technology that can be housed in a newly constructed facility.

The current site sits directly on the Big Sioux River, the state's most populated river basin. More than 40% of South Dakota's population lives in the river's watershed, which stretches across an area the size of New Jersey. The new location will place it about 3 miles away from that waterway and a mile from the nearest tributary, which is Willow Creek.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 28 of 77

Smithfield uses an estimated 3 million gallons of water a day, according to Friends of the Big Sioux River. Under the Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act, the company must acquire permits for its wastewater discharges and emissions from the South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Smithfield has run into compliance issues for those permits in the past.

In 2018, DANR fined Smithfield \$55,382 for violations of its discharge permit stemming from a wastewater treatment failure. In 2011, the company was fined \$44,000 for numerous permit violations, including for ammonia release violations.

At one point in time, it ranked first in the nation for total releases in the food industry. But the company has reported vast improvements in its adherence to environmental guidelines.

The city of Sioux Falls plans a \$90 million tax increment financing (TIF) district for the new campus, which Smithfield said would go toward funding a new wastewater treatment facility. The company previously spent \$45 million on the construction of a wastewater treatment facility at the current site just three years ago.

Ray Atkinson, senior director of external communications for Smithfield, told News Watch in 2024 that the new facility had resulted in a 47% decrease in nitrate discharge to the Big Sioux River.

"The \$45 million investment we have made in Sioux Falls is one of the largest infrastructure projects to have a direct impact on water quality in the Big Sioux River and has significantly reduced nutrient discharges and improved water quality in the Big Sioux River basin," Atkinson said at the time.

Sioux Falls city councilors were briefed on the TIF district proposal by the Planning and Development Department on Feb. 17.

City staff will formally bring the proposal to the city planning commission on March 4. If it passes there, it will see hearings in front of city council later in the month. On Tuesday, Minnehaha County commissioners said that the TIF was "absolutely necessary."

DANR did not respond to multiple requests for comment over the past week by the time of the story's publication.

Travis Entenman, executive director of Friends of the Big Sioux River, told News Watch that while the plant has historically been associated with river quality due to its high levels of wastewater discharge, the facility's move will not likely have a major impact on the river's quality. That's because of agricultural runoff at farms farther upstream, which contribute to the majority of harmful elements, Entenman said.

"This won't solve all of our river issues in terms of quality. I always hammer on that there's upstream and downstream things we need to be doing to really have a large scale impact," he said. "It's just a small drop in the bucket compared to everything that's going into it."

That doesn't mean that the move is unwelcome, though, Entenman said, if unexpected. When speaking to News Watch in 2024, he said that he did not think it was likely that Smithfield would move out of its downtown location.

"It's something I don't think I was expecting anytime soon. The idea that now they are going to go to a completely new facility, it's just a wonderful surprise," Entenman said.

Now, the dreaming can start for increased access to the river for pedestrian and recreation activities, Entenman said. Those access improvements will take time. The site will first need to be demolished and its environmental conditions assessed. Mayor TenHaken said the development process would take "several decades."

What is Smithfield's statewide impact?

Though Smithfield's operations in the state have shifted vastly – ranging from cattle, pork and sheep processing at its inception to its current output of more than 20,000 hogs a day – it has remained a key figure in the state's agriculture industry.

The plant works with more than 500 independent farmers in the region. Emma Davis, a representative for Smithfield Foods, told News Watch in a statement that most of the livestock comes from local farmers.

"The vast majority of hogs we process in Sioux Falls are from independent hog producers in South Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa," Davis said.

There are also eight contract farms in the state, which are those that have exclusive agreements to provide hogs to Smithfield. Nationwide, the company has 250 contract farms.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 29 of 77

Pork is far from the biggest moneymaker in the state's large agricultural industry, which makes up nearly 14% of the state's GDP. That title belongs to cattle, corn and soybeans. But Davis said that the local farming and agriculture economy gets a net benefit from the facility operating in the state.

"The proposed combined fresh pork and packaged meats facility will be the most modern of its kind in the United States and will support independent hog farmers, corn and soybean producers (that provide the grain we use to feed our animals) and other agricultural sectors that fuel the pork supply chain in South Dakota and the surrounding region," Davis said.

The new campus' impact will largely be felt in Sioux Falls, as the 120-acre site vacates and begins the slow redevelopment process in the next few years. The downtown land will be purchased by the Sioux Falls Development Foundation using Sanford's donation and will essentially double the current downtown area, TenHaken said.

Other, smaller communities might also see changes, though.

The neighboring town of Crooks, which sits about 12 miles outside of Sioux Falls with a population of 1,679, will soon be next-door neighbors with Smithfield. The town's city limits sit just at the edge of the new plant, and the Crooks City Council is hosting a public meeting March 9 to discuss the move, according to the meeting agenda.

What is Smithfield's economic impact?

The plant has long been an economic heavy-hitter: Smithfield said the Sioux Falls facility generated \$4.4 million in taxes in 2024 and pays about \$200 million in wages yearly.

Smithfield was notably purchased by China-based WH Group for \$4.72 billion in 2014. Smithfield retains its headquarters in Virginia, and its website states that "Smithfield has not, does not, and will not import any products from China to the United States. No Smithfield products come from animals raised, processed or packaged in China."

In 2020, the facility closed for about three weeks after COVID-19 broke out among employees. During that time, the company said that the plant processed 4-5% of the country's pork. It employs more than 3,200 people in Sioux Falls, making it one of the area's largest employers – just behind health care giants Sanford Health and Avera Health and the Sioux Falls School District.

Smithfield plans to spend \$1.3 billion to construct its new facility. The new plant will sit in Foundation Park, an industrial park that houses an Amazon distribution warehouse, FedEx and the future site of CJ Schwan Foods' production facility.

TenHaken said in his speech Feb. 16 that had the company chosen to move out-of-state rather than stay in Sioux Falls, the state would likely have seen a multi-billion dollar economic loss. He cited the closure of a similarly-sized Tyson beef processing plant in Nebraska, which the University of Nebraska said cost the state \$3.3 billion.

"I don't want to just take for granted that it was assumed that Smithfield would stay here, because it wasn't," TenHaken said.

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Iran would be outgunned in any war with the US but could still inflict considerable pain

By SAM METZ Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — As U.S. forces mass in the Middle East, Iran faces the threat of major strikes by the world's most powerful military, potentially targeting its leaders, military, nuclear sites and critical infrastructure.

Iran has nowhere near the same capabilities, and is even more vulnerable after last year's war launched by Israel and recent anti-government protests. But it could still inflict pain on American forces and allies, and may feel it has to if the Islamic Republic's survival is at stake.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 30 of 77

While Iran suffered major losses last June, it still has hundreds of missiles capable of hitting Israel, according to Israel's estimates. Iran boasts a much larger arsenal of shorter-range missiles capable of hitting U.S. bases in Gulf countries and offshore American forces, soon to be joined by a second aircraft carrier.

Iran has previously threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz, a vital waterway for the global oil trade, and claimed to have done so partially during military drills last week.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned that Iran could sink American warships, and top officials have said a U.S. attack would spark regional war. Iran's U.N. ambassador Amir Saeid Iravani said "all bases, facilities and assets of the hostile force in the region" would be legitimate targets.

Lingering capabilities

Israel carried out heavy strikes on Iran's longer range missile arsenals — as well as its military leadership and nuclear program — during the 12-day war in June. The U.S. struck Iran's main nuclear sites, and President Donald Trump said at the time that they had been "obliterated."

But the extent of the damage — and how much has been rebuilt — is still unknown. Iran continued to strike Israel with missiles and drones until the fighting stopped, increasingly eluding its vaunted air defenses.

Iran's shorter-range missile arsenal was largely untouched, said Danny Citrinowicz, an Iran expert at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies. That could make Iran more inclined to retaliate against tens of thousands of U.S. forces based in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere.

"Iran may be weak. But it still has ways to inflict real pain on the United States — and much more incentive to try than it did before," Nate Swanson, head of the Atlantic Council's Iran Strategy Project, wrote in Foreign Affairs. "Iranian officials feel they need to give Trump a bloody nose or they will perpetually be at risk."

Iran launched missiles at a U.S. base in Iraq after the killing of its top general in 2020 and targeted a U.S. base in Qatar near the end of last year's war. Those strikes, which appeared to have been telegraphed in advance, caused damage but no fatalities, as early warning systems and missile defenses swung into action.

Iran could also carry out attacks farther afield. The country has been accused of using criminal gangs and armed groups to plan or carry out attacks around the world, including on dissidents, Israelis and Jewish targets.

Learning curve

Last year's Israeli strikes killed several top generals and nuclear scientists, revealing major vulnerabilities. At one point, Trump said the U.S. knew where Khamenei was hiding, calling him an "easy target."

Fresh off the capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro, Trump may consider decapitation strikes aimed at bringing down Iran's decades-old Shiite theocracy, which he recently said "would be the best thing that could happen."

The Iranians have had eight months to learn from their mistakes and firm up internal security. Citrinowicz said there are likely contingency plans if Khamenei were to be killed. Rather than naming a single successor, power would probably shift to a small committee until hostilities subsided.

Experts say the death of the 86-year-old Khamenei, who has ruled Iran for over three decades, would not in itself spell the end of the Islamic Republic. Power might eventually pass to a member of his inner circle, as it did in Venezuela, or to Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

US allies could be targets

American allies are clearly concerned about a regional war, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has warned of a heavy response to any Iranian attack on Israel.

Arab Gulf states have long viewed Iran with concern and leaned on the U.S. for defense, but do not want to be drawn into war. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which host thousands of American troops, have said they would not allow their airspace to be used.

An Arab Gulf diplomat said regional leaders were talking to Iran and the United States to avert war, warning that it could have severe consequences, including a spike in oil prices. The diplomat spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive, closed-door talks.

Iran has its own allies, including Houthi rebels in Yemen, armed groups in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon

and Hamas in the Palestinian territories. But its self-described Axis of Resistance suffered major losses in the fighting that rippled across the region after Hamas' October 2023 attack from Gaza.

A global pressure point

Another close-in target could allow Iran to inflict wider pain.

Around one-fifth of all traded oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz, just off Iran's shore. The U.S. Navy is committed to keeping it open, but Iranian attacks could disrupt trade, as the far-weaker Houthis managed to do in the Red Sea for much of the past two years.

Iranian officials have not explicitly threatened to target the strait in the current standoff, but Iranian forces partially closed it last week during military drills, signaling it could be vulnerable if war breaks out.

Other critical oil assets would also be within range. In 2019, strikes on oil infrastructure temporarily halved Saudi Arabia's production. Yemen's Houthis claimed responsibility, but U.S. officials later blamed Iran.

The nuclear question

After initially threatening military action over Iran's killing of protesters, Trump shifted attention to its nuclear program, warning that "bad things" would happen if Iran doesn't agree to a deal. The two sides are set to hold another round of indirect talks in Geneva on Thursday.

Iran has always said its nuclear program is peaceful, while the U.S. and others have long suspected that Tehran intends to eventually develop weapons. After Trump scrapped a 2015 nuclear agreement, Iran ramped up its enrichment of uranium, building up a stockpile of near-weapons grade material.

Iran's biggest sites were hit by U.S. and Israeli strikes, causing significant damage above ground. But it's unclear whether enriched uranium was spirited away before they were hit or buried underground. Iran says it has been unable to enrich since then, but it has also barred inspections.

Iran is still believed to be a long ways from developing a usable nuclear weapon, but radioactive material could pose a risk in the event of widespread strikes.

US and Iran are holding a third round of nuclear talks as more American forces deploy to the Mideast

By JAMEY KEATEN, JON GAMBRELL and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Iran and the United States began indirect talks Thursday in Geneva over Tehran's nuclear negotiations viewed as a last chance for diplomacy as America has gathered a fleet of aircraft and warships to the Middle East to pressure Tehran into a deal.

U.S. President Donald Trump wants a deal to constrain Iran's nuclear program, and he sees an opportunity while the country is struggling at home with growing dissent following nationwide protests last month. Iran meanwhile has maintained it wants to continue to enrich uranium even as its program sits in ruins, following Trump ordering an attack in June on three of the Islamic Republic's nuclear sites, part of a bruising 12-day war last year.

If an American attack happens, Iran has said all U.S. military bases in the Mideast would be considered legitimate targets, putting at risk tens of thousands of American service members. Iran has also threatened to attack Israel, meaning a regional war again could erupt across the Middle East.

"There would be no victory for anybody — it would be a devastating war," Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told India Today in an interview filmed Wednesday just before he flew to Geneva.

"Since the Americans' bases are scattered through different places in the region, then unfortunately perhaps the whole region would be engaged and be involved, so it is a very terrible scenario."

Geneva talks are the third meeting since June war

Araghchi again is passing messages to Steve Witkoff, a billionaire real estate developer and friend of Trump who serves as a special Mideast envoy for the president. The two men held multiple rounds of talks last year that collapsed after Israel launched its war against Iran in June. These latest talks are again being mediated by Oman, a sultanate on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula that's long served as an interlocutor between Iran and the West.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 32 of 77

Araghchi met Oman's Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi after arriving in Geneva on Wednesday night. The men "reviewed the views and proposals that the Iranian side will present to reach an agreement on the Iranian nuclear program, based on the guiding principles agreed upon in the previous round of negotiations," a report from the state-run Oman News Agency said. Al-Busaidi will pass on Iran's offer to American officials on Thursday, it added.

An Associated Press journalist saw al-Busaidi after he met with the director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog. The Omani diplomat flashed a thumbs up to a question about whether he was hopeful for the talks.

Al-Busaidi returned Thursday to the Omani diplomatic residence on the shores of Lake Geneva. A convoy believed to be carrying American diplomats later arrived to the compound, followed by another believed to be carrying Iranian diplomats. Oman later published images of Witkoff and Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, meeting with al-Busaidi at the residence, signaling the start of the talks.

In this round of negotiations after the June war, Trump has pushed to halt Iran's enrichment of uranium entirely, as well as address Tehran's ballistic missile program and its support of regional militant forces. Iran has maintained the talks must remain focused only on nuclear issues.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio told reporters Wednesday that Iran is "always trying to rebuild elements" of its nuclear program. He said that Tehran is not enriching uranium right now, "but they're trying to get to the point where they ultimately can."

Iran has said it hasn't enriched since June, but it has blocked IAEA inspectors from visiting the sites America bombed. Satellite photos analyzed by The Associated Press also has shown activity at two of those sites, suggesting Iran is trying to assess and potentially recover material there.

The West and the IAEA say Iran had a nuclear weapons program until 2003. Before the June attack, it had been enriching uranium up to 60% purity — a short, technical step away from weapons-grade levels of 90%.

U.S. intelligence agencies assess that Iran has yet to restart a weapons program, but has "undertaken activities that better position it to produce a nuclear device, if it chooses to do so." While insisting its program is peaceful, Iranian officials have threatened to pursue the bomb in recent years.

"The principle's very simple: Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon," U.S. Vice President JD Vance told reporters at the White House on Wednesday.

Vance said Trump is "sending those negotiators to try to address that problem" and "wants to address that problem diplomatically."

"But, of course, the president has other options as well," Vance added.

Threat of military action sparks war fears

If the talks fail, uncertainty hangs over the timing of any possible attack.

If the aim of potential military action is to pressure Iran to make concessions in nuclear negotiations, it's not clear whether limited strikes would work. If the goal is to remove Iran's leaders, that will likely commit the U.S. to a larger, longer military campaign. There has been no public sign of planning for what would come next, including the potential for chaos in Iran.

There is also uncertainty about what any military action could mean for the wider region. Tehran could retaliate against the American-allied nations of the Persian Gulf or Israel. Oil prices have risen in recent days in part due to those concerns, with benchmark Brent crude now about \$70 a barrel. Iran in the last round of talks said it briefly halted traffic in the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf through which a fifth of all oil traded passes.

Satellite photos shot Tuesday and Wednesday by Planet Labs PBC and analyzed by the AP appeared to show that American vessels typically docked in Bahrain, the home of the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, were all out at sea. The 5th Fleet referred questions to the U.S. military's Central Command, which declined to comment. Before Iran's attack on Qatar in June, the 5th Fleet similarly scattered its ships at sea to protect against a potential attack.

Cuba says 4 killed in speedboat shooting were attempting to infiltrate the country

By ANDREA RODRÍGUEZ, DÁNICA COTO and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — Cuba's government said late Wednesday that the 10 passengers on a boat that opened fire on its soldiers were armed Cubans living in the U.S. who were trying to infiltrate the island and unleash terrorism.

The announcement came hours after Cuba said its soldiers killed four people and wounded six others aboard a Florida-registered speed boat that had entered Cuban waters and opened fire on the soldiers first, injuring one Cuban officer.

Cuba's government said the majority of the 10 people on the boat "have a known history of criminal and violent activity."

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio had told reporters earlier that he was made aware of the incident and that the U.S. is now gathering its own information to determine if the victims were American citizens or permanent residents.

"We have various different elements of the U.S. government that are trying to identify elements of the story that may not be provided to us now," Rubio said while at the airport in Basseterre, St. Kitts, where he was attending a regional summit with Caribbean leaders.

The Cuban government identified two of the boat passengers as Amijail Sánchez González and Leordan Enrique Cruz Gómez, who are wanted by Cuban authorities "based on their involvement in the promotion, planning, organization, financing, support or commission of actions carried out in the national territory or in other countries, in connection with acts of terrorism."

The government said it also had arrested Duniel Hernández Santos, adding that he was "sent from the United States to guarantee the reception of the armed infiltration, who at this time has confessed to his actions."

The Associated Press was not immediately able to independently verify that information.

Cuba's government said it obtained the details about the passengers aboard the boat from the suspects detained following the shootout.

It identified seven of the 10 passengers, including Conrado Galindo Sariol, José Manuel Rodríguez Castelló, Cristian Ernesto Acosta Guevara and Roberto Azcorra Consuegra. Cuba's government said that one of the four killed was Michel Ortega Casanova. Three others have not yet been identified.

"The investigation process continues until the facts are fully clarified," the ministry said in a statement.

Misael Ortega Casanova, brother of Michel Ortega Casanova, told The Associated Press late Wednesday that he was mourning his brother's death but lamented that he fell into what he called an "obsessive and diabolical" quest for Cuba's freedom.

"Only us Cubans who have lived over there understand," Misael Ortega Casanova said, referring to the "great suffering" that he and other Cubans on the island have faced.

He noted that his brother, who was a truck driver and an American citizen who lived for more than 20 years in the U.S., leaves behind his wife, his mother, two sisters — one of whom lives in Cuba — and a daughter who is pregnant.

"No one knew," Misael said of his brother's plans. "My mother is devastated."

He added: "They became so obsessed that they didn't think about the consequences nor their own lives."

Misael said that he did not recognize any of the names that the Cuban government released.

He said that while he doesn't believe in heroes — "because that is ignorance" — he hopes that his brother's death might be a worthwhile sacrifice: "maybe it will justify that some day Cuba will be free."

A 'highly unusual' shootout

U.S. President Donald Trump's top diplomat refused to speculate on what happened, saying that it could be a "wide range of things," and that the U.S. will not solely rely on what the Cuban authorities have provided thus far.

"Suffice it to say, it is highly unusual to see shootouts in open sea like that. It's not something that hap-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 34 of 77

pens every day. It's something, frankly, that hasn't happened with Cuba in a very long time," Rubio said. He said both the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Coast Guard are investigating the incident and stressed that he wants to verify the facts.

"The majority of the facts being publicly reported are those by the information provided by the Cubans. We will verify that independently as we gather more information, and we'll be prepared to respond accordingly," Rubio said. "We're going to have our own information on this. We're going to figure out exactly what happened."

He said it was not a U.S. government operation and that he wasn't "going to speculate about whose boat it was, what they were doing, why they were there, what actually happened."

One of the men identified by the Cuban government, Conrado Galindo Sariol, was interviewed in June 2025 by Martí Noticias, a U.S.-based news site that has long called for a change of government in Cuba.

Galindo, whom the host called "a legend" and a former political prisoner, was quoted as saying that he wants to support the struggles that Cubans face, especially in the eastern part of the island "to achieve the freedom that is needed."

He said that the protests in Cuba at that time were "not a spark that's going to be extinguished."

"The regime's leaders are crisscrossing Cuba, trying to mitigate what's coming very soon because ... they know they're out of power, that they can't do anything about it, and they're looking for ways to prevent the protests from growing in other parts of the country," Galindo was quoted as saying.

Fear over increased tensions

Rubio said he found out about the shooting before the Cuban government posted on social media, noting that the U.S. has "constant contact" with the country "at the Coast Guard level."

Earlier, Cuba's Interior Ministry issued a statement that provided few details about the shooting, but noted that the boat was roughly 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) northeast of Cayo Falcones, off Cuba's north coast.

The government provided the boat's registration number, but The Associated Press was unable to readily verify details of the boat because boat registrations are not public in the state of Florida.

It wasn't immediately known what the boat and its occupants were doing in Cuban waters. In the statement, the ministry said Cuba's government was "safeguarding its sovereignty and ensuring stability in the region."

The U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Florida said it would pursue answers "through every legal and diplomatic channel available," adding that "facts remain unclear and conflicting."

U.S. Vice President JD Vance said late Wednesday afternoon that Rubio had briefed him on the incident. He added that the White House was monitoring the situation.

"Hopefully it's not as bad as we fear it could be," Vance said.

The shooting threatens to increase tensions between the U.S. and Cuba. Following the ouster of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, Trump and top administration officials have taken an increasingly aggressive stance toward Cuba, which had been largely kept economically afloat by Venezuela's oil.

The energy crisis Cuba has been grappling with in recent years entered new extremes last month when Trump signed an executive order that would impose a tariff on any country that sells or provides oil to Cuba. The move put pressure on Mexico, which Cuba became largely dependent on for petroleum after Trump halted oil shipments from Venezuela.

Meanwhile, James Uthmeier, Florida's attorney general, said he has ordered prosecutors to work with federal, state and law enforcement partners to start an investigation.

"The Cuban government cannot be trusted, and we will do everything in our power to hold these communists accountable," he wrote on X.

Kenyan police arrest man accused of recruiting fighters for Russia's war in Ukraine

By EVELYNE MUSAMBI and VIVIANNE WANDERA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Police in Kenya have arrested a man named in the alleged scheme that duped Kenyans with promises of skilled work in Russia, only for them to end up on the front lines of the fighting in Ukraine.

Festus Omwamba was arrested on suspicion of human trafficking in the northern Kenyan town of Moyale, near the border with Ethiopia, and charged Thursday in an antiterror court in the capital, Nairobi, with specific charges of trafficking 25 Kenyans to Russia last year. Police spokesperson Michael Muchiri said Omwamba was fleeing after returning from Russia.

Omwamba, who was identified by three Kenyan recruits who spoke to The Associated Press, had gone missing after families started protesting the disappearances and deaths of their relatives in the war in Ukraine.

The Kenyan government last week said more than 1,000 Kenyans were recruited to fight for Russia in Ukraine and that at least 89 Kenyans were still on the front line, 39 were hospitalized, 28 were missing in action, and others had returned home. At least one person was confirmed dead.

An intelligence report presented to Kenya's Parliament by the majority leader, Kimani Ichung'wah, said Kenyan and Russian government officials colluded with rogue job recruitment agencies to lure Kenyans to the front lines.

The Russian Embassy in Nairobi denied the allegations, saying in a statement last Thursday that it never issued visas to anyone intending to travel to Russia to fight in Ukraine. It added: "The Russian Federation does not preclude citizens of foreign countries from voluntarily enlisting in the armed forces."

Kenya's Foreign Minister Musalia Mudavadi on Feb. 9 told the AP that he would travel to Russia for what he called a "diplomatic approach to rein in any dubious entities that are taking advantage of anyone in this misadventure."

Mudavadi added that efforts to secure the release of Kenyans in Ukrainian prisons and repatriate those in Russia were ongoing.

"You recall that even at the highest level, the president made an appeal that if indeed there are Kenyans who have found themselves on the wrong side of the law, the appeal was made to the Ukrainian government to look at how they can be processed and brought back," the minister explained.

Omwamba's arrest is a major development in the government's push to stop the recruitment of Kenyans to fight in Ukraine.

A recruit who escaped from the front line and sought refuge at the Kenyan Embassy in Russia, and was later processed for return home, John Kamau, told the AP he met Omwamba at a house in Nairobi where fellow recruits awaiting travel to Russia were kept.

Another recruit, who requested anonymity for fear of being tracked down by Russians, said Omwamba avoided contacting the recruits by text message and would instead call them or meet them in person.

The recruit had signed up after being told he would get a plumbing job in Russia, but on arrival, his passport was taken away and he was taken to a military camp for a few days before being deployed to the front line.

All recruits said Omwamba oversaw their tourist visa applications and ticket purchases, and two weeks after the first contact, they received visas and traveled to Russia.

World shares are mixed and US futures slip after Nvidia earnings beat expectations

By CHAN HO-HIM AP Business Writer

HONG KONG (AP) — U.S. futures fell while global shares were mixed on Thursday after strong-than-expected earnings from chipmaker Nvidia helped ease some investor worries over the artificial intelligence boom.

In early European trading, Britain's FTSE 100 gained 0.2% to 10,824.90. France's CAC 40 rose 0.4% to 8,593.83, while Germany's DAX down 0.2% to 25,133.39.

The future for the S&P 500 fell 0.1%, while that for the Dow Jones Industrial Average was down 0.2%.

Asian shares mostly advanced. Tokyo's Nikkei 225 crossed the 59,000 mark for the first time, although it later gave up some gains, rising 0.3% to 58,753.39. Shares of SoftBank Group, which has a focus on AI technology, rose 4%.

Share prices also pushed higher after Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi appointed two economists viewed as favoring keeping interest rates low to the board of the central bank. The Bank of Japan has been gradually raising rates from near zero.

South Korea's Kospi surged 3.7% to 6,307.27, driven by gains for tech-related stocks. The index surpassed the 6,000 level for the first time on Wednesday. It has gained 46% since the beginning of this year after enduring a year of political upheavals that ended with former President Yoon Suk Yeol being sentenced to life in prison.

Shares of Samsung Electronics, the country's biggest listed company, jumped 7.1%. Chipmaker SK Hynix gained 8%.

Hong Kong's Hang Seng lost 1.4% to 26,381.02. The Shanghai Composite index barely budged, closing at 4,146.63.

In Australia, the S&P/ASX 200 added 0.5% to 9,175.30.

Taiwan's Taiex was flat, while India's Sensex traded 0.1% higher.

Nvidia's earnings influence global financial markets both because it is the world's most valuable company and the biggest S&P 500 constituent and because it is benefiting from advances in AI-related technologies.

Its latest quarterly revenue jumped 73% from a year earlier to \$68 billion. The California-based company also gave a forecast of \$78 billion for revenue in the current quarter, which exceeded analysts' expectations.

Its CEO, Jensen Huang, said demand for Nvidia chips is still "skyrocketing."

"AI is here, AI is not going to go back," Huang said during a conference call.

Nvidia rose 0.2% in afterhours trading following its earnings announcement, which came after markets closed on Wednesday.

Its robust earnings helped alleviate some concerns over whether the AI craze is real and whether huge investments will pay off. But many investors remain cautious.

Thomas Mathews, head of markets for Asia Pacific at Capital Economics, however argued in a research note on Thursday that "strong profit growth, as emphasized by recent earnings reports", including Nvidia's, is a key reason to think the S&P 500 will do well in 2026. He forecast the S&P 500 at 8,000 by the year's end.

On Wednesday, the S&P 500 rose 0.8% and the Dow industrials climbed 0.6%. The Nasdaq composite gained 1.3%.

In other dealings early Thursday, U.S. benchmark crude oil shed 53 cents to \$64.89 per barrel. Brent crude, the international standard, gave up 44 cents to \$70.25 a barrel.

Gold and silver prices fell on Thursday. The price of gold lost 0.5% and the price of silver fell 4.1%.

The U.S. dollar fell to 156.09 Japanese yen from 156.39 yen. The euro fell to \$1.1800 from \$1.1812.

Despite differences, China's Xi and Germany's Merz seek to deepen ties in turbulent times

By KEN MORITSUGU and GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — There are many things that China and Germany do not see eye-to-eye on — notably Russia's war in Ukraine — but the leaders of the world's second and third largest economies nonetheless pledged Wednesday to work to deepen ties in an era of global turbulence.

Both countries have been buffeted by the policies of U.S. President Donald Trump, who lauded his import tariffs in a State of the Union address delivered just hours before German Chancellor Friedrich Merz met separately with Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang in Beijing.

"The more turbulent and complex the world becomes, the more China and Germany should strengthen strategic communication and enhance strategic mutual trust," Xi said at the government's Diaoyutai state guesthouse, a leafy and sprawling property dotted with grand buildings.

He noted the year had not begun peacefully and said, as he has before, that the world is undergoing the most profound changes since the end of World War II.

Merz replied that although the two countries have issues and challenges to discuss, they should "emphasize the things we have in common and face the challenges we stand before together."

'Legitimate concerns of all sides'

Merz, on his first trip to China since taking office last May, has championed building a stronger Europe both economically and militarily to assert itself in the shifting new world order.

Before departing for China on Tuesday, he stressed that for all the differences Europe has with China, "the big global political problems can no longer be tackled today without involving Beijing."

The chancellor told reporters after his talks that he asked the Chinese leaders to use their influence to end the war in Ukraine.

"We know that signals from Beijing are taken very seriously in Moscow — that goes for words as well as deeds," he said.

Many European governments have been frustrated that China hasn't done more to pressure Russia to end the fighting. It has maintained trade and close diplomatic ties with Russia and said its position on the conflict is impartial and objective.

Xi told Merz that China supports a political solution to the conflict in Ukraine, but emphasized that it would have to "address the legitimate concerns of all sides," and have "equal participation of all parties," China's official Xinhua News Agency reported.

Pushing against Trump's tariffs

Merz is the latest in a parade of world leaders to visit Beijing as China seeks support from other nations to push back against Trump's use of tariffs to demand concessions from trading partners, and his challenges to the United Nations and the global order that has governed international and economic relations in the post-World War II era.

Merz has also emphasized the importance of placing Germany's China policy in a European context, saying before his trip it was no coincidence that he is visiting not long after French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and ahead of a planned trip by Trump in early April.

"Our message from a European point of view is the same: We want a balanced, reliable, regulated and fair partnership with China," Merz said. "This is our offer. At the same time, it is what we also hope for and expect from the Chinese side."

Chinese export are threatening factory jobs in Europe. Germany's imports from China rose 8.8% to 170.6 billion euros (\$201 billion) last year, while its exports to China fell 9.7% to 81.3 billion euros.

European leaders want Chinese companies to build factories in their countries. They also want China to reduce manufacturing overcapacity that is driving down prices in industries such as electric vehicles and solar panels, and to remove barriers faced by foreign companies in what is the world's second-largest economy.

Protectionism and economic coercion

Merz said after Wednesday's meetings that he was satisfied with the talks, and underlined the potential for business deals — citing a plan for China to order up to 120 planes from European manufacturer Airbus.

However, he made clear that work still has to be done in further talks. He said Germany's trade deficit with China "has quadrupled since 2020 ... this dynamic is not healthy, so we are addressing it and want to open ways to cut this trade deficit."

Xinhua said in a commentary that the two countries have a shared responsibility as major economies to oppose protectionism and economic coercion.

Merz's two-day visit will take him on Thursday to the high-tech hub of Hangzhou, where he will visit Unitree Robotics, one of China's leading developer of humanoid robots. His trip to China comes shortly before he makes his third visit to Washington as chancellor.

A Hong Kong court quashes fraud conviction of ex-media mogul Jimmy Lai

By KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — A Hong Kong appellate court on Thursday quashed fraud convictions against one-time media magnate Jimmy Lai, a rare victory in the prominent activist's legal battles.

Lai, 78, an outspoken critic of China's ruling Communist Party who founded the now-defunct Apple Daily, will stay in prison because he was sentenced to 20 years weeks ago after being convicted in another case brought under a China-imposed national security law.

That came more than five years after he was arrested under the law, which was used in a yearslong crackdown on many of Hong Kong's leading activists. His plight has evoked grief over the city's loss of press freedom and sparked an international outcry, though the city's authorities insist his case had nothing to do with media independence.

The conviction that was overturned Thursday was from an earlier fraud case in which prosecutors alleged that a consultancy firm controlled by Lai had used office space that his media business rented for publication and printing purposes.

Lai was sentenced to five years and nine months in prison in 2022 after being found guilty of two fraud charges.

A lower court judge found that Lai and his co-defendant Wong Wai-keung had concealed that the firm was occupying space and had violated the lease agreement, saying he had used his media organization as a protective shield. He also fined Lai 2 million Hong Kong dollars (\$257,000).

Judges at the Court of Appeal wrote in their judgment that while Apple Daily Printing had breached the lease terms by allowing the firm to use part of the space, it didn't owe a duty to disclose its breach. They said even if it had owed and breached that duty, the same could not be attributed to Lai and Wong as matter of law.

The trial judge's "reasoning in concluding that the applicants were liable for the concealment as the prosecution contended is unsupportable," they said.

They also ruled that the prosecution had failed to prove beyond reasonable doubt that the defendants had made false representations, throwing out both convictions and sentences.

Neither defendant appeared in court.

The ruling could reduce Lai's total prison time. The judges handling Lai's national security case allowed the two sentences to be served concurrently for only two years, with the other 18 years to be added after the fraud sentence.

The government said in a statement that the Department of Justice would study the judgment thoroughly and consider whether to appeal.

It said that although the Court of Appeal found the breach of contract did not meet the threshold for a fraud conviction, it didn't change the fact that Lai had used the office space for illegitimate personal purposes.

The lengthy sentence has raised concerns that he could spend the rest of his life in prison.

Lai's children have expressed hopes that a visit by U.S. President Donald Trump to Beijing could help secure the release of their father, a British citizen. The White House has confirmed that Trump will travel to China on March 31 through April 2 to meet Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

U.K. Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper has said Lai was sentenced for exercising his right to freedom of expression and called on the Hong Kong authorities to release him on humanitarian grounds.

Chinese and Hong Kong authorities have defended Lai's sentencing in the national security case, saying it reflected the spirit of the rule of law. They also insisted the security law is necessary for the city's stability.

Third victim dies from wounds suffered in Rhode Island ice rink attack, police say

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — A deadly shooting during a youth hockey game in Rhode Island last week has claimed a third victim, a grandfather whose daughter and grandson were also killed in the attack, authorities said Wednesday.

Gerald Dorgan, who had been in critical condition, has died from his injuries, according to Pawtucket police.

Pawtucket Mayor Donald Grebien said he was heartbroken that another person has died because of the shooting.

"Our thoughts and prayers remain with the victim's family, friends, and all those impacted by this tragic act of violence," he said in a statement.

Dorgan's daughter, Rhonda Dorgan, and grandson, Aidan Dorgan, were also killed in the shooting.

Police identified the shooter as Robert Dorgan, 56, who died from an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound. Dorgan also went by the names Roberta Esposito and Roberta Dorgano, authorities said. Robert Dorgan's ex-wife was Rhonda Dorgan and adult son was Aidan Dorgan.

Officials have said the shooter was specifically targeting family members.

Rhonda Dorgan's mom, Linda Dorgan, and a family friend, Thomas Geruso, were wounded.

Law enforcement have credited several people who intervened and quickly stopped the attack. At least three bystanders were able to contain the shooter in the middle of the stands as the crowd fled and ran around them.

Residents want local governments to end contracts that let ICE train on their gun ranges

By AMY TAXIN Associated Press

ESCONDIDO, Calif. (AP) — Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers training at a local gun range largely went unnoticed by residents of one Southern California city for more than a decade, until President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown and the recent fatal shootings of U.S. citizens by federal agents.

The arrangement in Escondido, a city of about 150,000 people north of San Diego surrounded by farms and horse ranches, has sparked weeks of demonstrations. Residents have been demanding that the city stop allowing ICE agents to train at the local police department range, reflecting growing discontent across the country with the administration's immigration actions.

The debate reached a feverish pitch during a nearly five-hour discussion Wednesday as residents carrying signs reading "ICE Out" packed a City Council meeting and filled an overflow room while pleading for officials to end the contract that lets the agency train at the range. One council member wanted to end the deal, but four others opted to keep it to ensure federal agents who investigate human and drug trafficking are well-trained and to avoid a backlash.

"I believe that if the contract is canceled, I do believe that all these bad things that have happened are going to happen in Escondido," Council member Joe Garcia told the crowd.

A majority of Americans in recent polls have said Trump has "gone too far" in sending federal immigration agents into American cities. Beyond the mass street demonstrations in Minneapolis, people in communities

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 40 of 77

from New York to California are objecting to longstanding contracts between ICE and local governments for services ranging from the use of training facilities to parking spaces. The agency has also angered communities caught off guard by ICE's plans to occupy giant warehouses, some that could house as many as 10,000 immigration detainees.

Amid the debate, funding for the Department of Homeland Security has been put on hold. Democrats are saying they will not help approve more money until new limits are placed on federal immigration operations following the fatal shootings of U.S. citizens Alex Pretti and Renee Good last month in Minneapolis.

Immigration and policing

Unlike many California cities, Escondido had an especially close alliance with ICE in the past that allowed immigration officers to work at police headquarters and coordinate on vehicle stops. That partnership ended after California passed a law in 2017 limiting such collaboration with immigration officials.

Protesters in Escondido said they were unaware of the contract allowing ICE to train at the gun range in the city's hillsides until advocates found the agreement online. They said they fear word of the deal will make immigrants afraid to report crimes to local police, weakening public safety in a city where Latinos make up about half the population.

Some say they don't want to give ICE agents a reason to come to their community or lend support to an agency they don't trust will follow U.S. laws. The concern is high, both among immigrants and U.S. citizens who worry about masked federal immigration agents' use of deadly force.

"Tonight isn't about bullets and targets. It's about boundaries," Angela Spucces, an Escondido resident, said during the meeting. "If we value local control and community trust, we should draw the line now."

Escondido provides the space under a deal signed by ICE in 2024 and renewed this year, though ICE has been training at the outdoor range off a winding road outside Escondido's downtown for more than a decade, said Police Chief Ken Plunkett. More than 600 officers from 20 agencies train there, including those from the San Diego branch of ICE's Homeland Security Investigations, which investigates crimes including human trafficking and drug smuggling, he said.

"Members of Escondido Police Department do not provide training to outside law enforcement agencies that contract to rent the facility," he told the City Council. The city will receive \$22,500 a year for up to three years under the deal, he said.

The Department of Homeland Security, which oversees ICE, did not comment on the backlash and would not confirm locations where its officers train, citing security concerns.

Several of those locations have been brought to light as communities demand an end to such agreements.

Debates in other communities

In Cottage Grove, Minnesota, 20 miles (32 kilometers) southeast of Minneapolis, Ruth Jones and other residents have been asking the community to end its contract allowing ICE to use its regional training center. But Mayor Myron Bailey said the center was built with state bond funding and is rented out to some 60 law enforcement agencies and other groups, including ICE.

"Contractually we cannot discriminate against any public agency," Bailey said in a statement.

In Islip, New York, community members urged local officials last year to rescind a longstanding contract to use a rifle range for training, but the local government also kept the deal.

Hartford, Connecticut, has moved to end a contract for ICE employees to use a city-owned parking lot.

Not everyone in Escondido is opposed to the city's contract with ICE. During the meeting, Barry Speer said he doesn't see why residents so critical of ICE agents' training would want to make it harder for them to get prepared.

"The push to remedy that is to prevent them from training — it doesn't make any sense to me," he said.

But scores of residents of Escondido and nearby communities said ICE had access to other training locations and they didn't want to give agents any reason to come to the region.

"By inviting ICE into our community, you are putting us at risk," Escondido resident Richard Cannon said.

Memorial services for Jesse Jackson begin at Chicago headquarters of his civil rights organization

By SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Cross-country memorial services for the Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr. are set to begin Thursday in Chicago, the city the late civil rights leader called home.

The protégé of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and two-time presidential candidate will lie in repose for two days at the headquarters of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition before events in Washington, D.C., and South Carolina, where he was born.

"The outpouring of love and support received from around the globe has been abundant and deeply felt," Jackson's family members said in a recent statement.

Jackson died last week at age 84 after battling a rare neurological disorder that affected his mobility and ability to speak in his later years.

Remembrances have already poured in from around the globe, and several U.S. states, including Minnesota, Iowa and North Carolina, are flying flags at half-staff in his honor.

But perhaps nowhere has his death been felt as strongly as in the nation's third-largest city, where Jackson lived for decades and raised his six children, including a son who is a congressman.

Bouquets have been left outside the family's Tudor-style home on the city's South Side for days. Public schools have offered condolences, and city trains have used digital screens to display Jackson's portrait and his well-known mantra, "I am Somebody!"

His causes, both in the United States and abroad, were countless: Advocating for the poor and under-represented on issues including voting rights, job opportunities, education and health care. He scored diplomatic victories with world leaders, and through his Rainbow PUSH Coalition, he channeled cries for Black pride and self-determination into corporate boardrooms, pressuring executives to make America a more open and equitable society.

"We honor him, and his hard-earned legacy as a freedom fighter, philosopher, and faithful shepherd of his family and community here in Chicago," Mayor Brandon Johnson said in a statement.

Next week, Jackson will lie in honor at the South Carolina Statehouse, followed by public services with remarks from Gov. Henry McMaster and a wreath placement ceremony. Jackson spent his childhood and started his activism in South Carolina.

Details on services in Washington have not yet been made public. However, he will not lie in honor at the United States Capitol rotunda after a request for the commemoration was denied by the House Speaker Mike Johnson's office.

The two weeks of events will wrap up next week with a large celebration of life gathering at a Chicago megachurch and finally, homegoing services at the headquarters of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition.

Family members said the services will be open to all.

"His life is broad enough to cover the full spectrum of what it means to be American," his eldest son, Jesse Jackson Jr., told reporters recently. "We only ask people to come and be respectful in context of the extraordinary life he lived."

Kilmar Abrego Garcia asks US judge in Tennessee to dismiss his criminal case, saying it's vindictive

By TRAVIS LOLLER Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Attorneys for Kilmar Abrego Garcia will try to persuade a federal judge in Tennessee on Thursday to throw out human smuggling charges against him.

Abrego Garcia, whose mistaken deportation has galvanized both sides of the immigration debate, claims that the criminal prosecution is vindictive, pushed by officials from President Donald Trump's administration to punish him after they were forced to bring him back to the United States.

While Abrego Garcia is a Salvadoran citizen, a court order from 2019 prevents him from being deported

to that country. That's because an immigration judge determined he faced danger in El Salvador from a gang that had threatened his family. Abrego Garcia, 30, immigrated to the U.S. illegally as a teenager but has an American wife and child. He has lived and worked in Maryland for years under the supervision of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

After he was deported to El Salvador last year, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the Trump administration had to work to bring him back. He was eventually returned to the U.S. only to face criminal charges of human smuggling based on a 2022 traffic stop in Tennessee. Body camera footage from a Tennessee Highway Patrol officer shows a calm exchange with Abrego Garcia after he was pulled over for speeding. There were nine passengers in the car, and the officers discussed among themselves their suspicions of smuggling. However, Abrego Garcia was eventually allowed to continue driving with only a warning.

U.S. District Judge Waverly Crenshaw previously found some evidence that the prosecution against Abrego Garcia "may be vindictive." The judge said many statements by Trump administration officials "raise cause for concern." He specifically cited a statement by Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche that seemed to suggest the Justice Department charged Abrego Garcia because he won his wrongful deportation case.

Abrego Garcia's attorneys have been sparring with prosecutors for months over whether officials like Blanche would be required to testify at Thursday's hearing and what emails Justice Department officials would have to turn over to them. First Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Middle District of Tennessee Rob McGuire has argued that he alone made the decision to prosecute, so the motives of other officials were irrelevant.

Crenshaw personally reviewed many of the disputed documents. In an order that was unsealed in late December, he wrote, "Some of the documents suggest not only that McGuire was not a solitary decision-maker, but he in fact reported to others in DOJ and the decision to prosecute Abrego may have been a joint decision."

Most Americans see Iran as an enemy but doubt Trump's judgment on military force, AP-NORC poll finds

By LINLEY SANDERS and STEPHANIE LIECHTENSTEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As the U.S. and Iran head into their next round of nuclear talks in Geneva, a new AP-NORC poll finds that many U.S. adults continue to view Iran's nuclear program as a threat — but they also don't have high trust in President Donald Trump's judgment on the use of military force abroad.

About half of U.S. adults are "extremely" or "very" concerned that Iran's nuclear program poses a direct threat to the United States, according to the new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. About 3 in 10 are "moderately" concerned and only about 2 in 10 are "not very" concerned or "not concerned at all."

The survey was conducted Feb. 19-23, as military tensions built in the Middle East between the United States and Iran. The U.S. is seeking a deal to limit Iran's nuclear program and ensure it does not develop nuclear weapons, while Iran says it is not pursuing weapons and has so far resisted demands that it halt uranium enrichment on its soil or hand over its stockpile of highly enriched uranium.

Trump, who scrapped an earlier nuclear agreement with Iran during his first term, has repeatedly threatened to use force to compel Iran to agree to constrain its atomic program, which Trump claimed to have "obliterated" following the 12-day war in June where the U.S. bombed Iranian nuclear sites. Iran has said it would respond with an attack of its own. Trump has also threatened Iran over the killing of protesters. Both countries have signaled they are prepared for war if the talks on Tehran's nuclear program fail, and the U.S. has assembled its largest military force in the Mideast in decades as tensions with Iran have risen.

Most Americans, 61%, say Iran is an "enemy" of the U.S., which is up slightly from a Pearson Institute/AP-NORC poll conducted in September 2023. But their confidence in the president's judgment when it comes to relationships with adversaries and the use of military force abroad is low, the new poll shows, with only about 3 in 10 Americans saying they have "a great deal" or "quite a bit" trust in Trump.

Even some Republicans — particularly younger Republicans — have reservations about Trump's ability

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 43 of 77

to make the right choices on these high-stakes issues.

Most US adults have concerns about Trump's judgment on military force

The Trump administration this year has held two rounds of nuclear talks with Iran under Omani mediation, with a third round scheduled to begin Thursday. Similar talks last year between the U.S. and Iran about Iran's nuclear program broke down after Israel launched what became the 12-day war in June.

"We are in negotiations with them," Trump said during his State of the Union address on Tuesday night, which took place after the poll was conducted. "They want to make a deal, but we haven't heard those secret words: We will never have a nuclear weapon."

Americans have significant reservations about Trump's judgment on foreign conflicts, the AP-NORC poll shows. Only about 3 in 10 of U.S. adults have "a great deal" or "quite a bit" of trust in Trump's judgment on the use of military force, relationships with U.S. adversaries or the use of nuclear weapons. More than half trust him "only a little" or "not at all."

On each measure, Republicans are more likely than Democrats and Independents to trust that the president will make the right decisions. About 6 in 10 Republicans have a high level of trust in Trump, while roughly 9 in 10 Democrats have a low level of trust in him.

But some Republicans' confidence is more qualified. Younger Republicans — those under 45 — are less likely than older Republicans to say they trust Trump "a great deal" or "quite a bit" on his use of military force. About half of younger Republicans say this, compared to about two-thirds of older Republicans.

Many view Iran's nuclear program as a threat

The new finding that 48% of U.S. adults are "extremely" or "very" concerned that Iran's nuclear program poses a direct threat to their country is in line with an AP-NORC poll conducted in July 2025, indicating that even with recent escalations between the two countries, Americans have not changed their views.

Before the June war, Iran had been enriching uranium up to 60% purity, a short, technical step away from weapons-grade levels. The U.N. nuclear watchdog — the International Atomic Energy Agency — had said Iran was the only country in the world to enrich to that level that wasn't armed with the bomb.

Iran has been refusing requests by the IAEA to inspect the sites bombed in the June war, raising the concerns of nonproliferation experts.

Worries about Iran's nuclear program cross party lines in the U.S., though Republicans are currently more concerned. Most Republicans — 56% — say they are "extremely" or "very" concerned about Iran's nuclear program, compared to 44% of Democrats.

Younger Americans are less worried about Iran

Americans generally hold a negative view of Iran, but the view is sharper among older Americans.

About 6 in 10 U.S. adults say Iran is an "enemy" of the United States, up slightly from 53% from the Pearson/AP-NORC poll from 2023. Roughly 3 in 10 say the countries are "not friendly, but not enemies," and only about 1 in 10 Americans consider Iran a country that is "friendly" or "close allies."

At the same time, only about half of U.S. adults under 45 say Iran is an enemy, compared to about 7 in 10 Americans ages 45 and older. There is also a wide generational divide in concern about Iran's nuclear program, with only about one-third of Americans under 45 saying they are highly concerned, compared to about 6 in 10 older Americans.

Tensions over Iran's nuclear program have existed for decades, which may help explain why older Americans are more concerned. Nuclear talks had been deadlocked for years after Trump's decision in 2018 to unilaterally withdraw the U.S. from Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

FIFA's Infantino has 'complete confidence' in Mexico to host World Cup games despite cartel violence

By CARLOS RODRIGUEZ Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — The violence that erupted in Mexico after the death of a powerful drug lord has left many questioning whether the country will be able to co-host the World Cup in just over three months.

FIFA President Gianni Infantino thinks it can.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 44 of 77

"Of course, we are monitoring the situation in Mexico these days, but I want to say from the outset that we have complete confidence in Mexico, in its president, Claudia Sheinbaum, and in the authorities, and we are convinced that everything will go as smoothly as possible," Infantino said late Tuesday in a press conference in Colombia.

"Mexico is a great country, like in every country in the world, things happen; we don't live on the moon or another planet," Infantino added. "That's why we have governments, police, and authorities who will ensure order and security."

The Mexican army killed Nemesio Rubén Oseguera Cervantes, "El Mencho," who led the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, on Sunday, sparking several days of violence. Cartel members burned cars and blocked roads in nearly a dozen Mexican states and authorities report that at least 70 people have died.

Four high-level soccer matches from the local leagues were postponed last Sunday, including one in the central city of Queretaro, where Mexico defeated Iceland 4-0 late Wednesday in a friendly match.

Before the match, a minute of silence was held in the Corregidora stadium in honor of the soldiers who died during the operation to capture Oseguera.

Thirteen World Cup matches are scheduled to be held in Mexico, including the opening game in Mexico City on June 11 between the co-host and South Africa. Guadalajara, the central hub for the Jalisco cartel, is scheduled to host four.

Colombia is set to play one game in Mexico City and one in Guadalajara.

"Our first two matches are in Mexico, but we know they will overcome this and move forward," said Ramón Jesurún, the president of the Colombian Soccer Federation. "I have absolute and total confidence in my geopolitical thinking that this is an issue Mexico will overcome, and overcome very quickly."

Other nations have expressed more concern. The Portuguese soccer federation said Tuesday that it was closely monitoring developments ahead of a planned friendly against Mexico in March. Jamaica is set to play New Caledonia in Guadalajara on March 26 in an intercontinental playoff semifinal, with the winner advancing to face Congo for a World Cup spot.

"The games are at the end of March, so we still have another month to see what happens; but it is making me very nervous, to be honest," said Michael Ricketts, the president of the Jamaican Soccer Federation. "We will be listening out for CONCACAF and FIFA to give us instructions (on) whether they are playing the games or whether they are immediately looking for other options."

Another Mexican city, Monterrey, will host a playoff where Bolivia plays Suriname and the winner faces Iraq for a spot in the tournament.

On Monday, Sheinbaum said there is "every guarantee" that the World Cup matches in Guadalajara will be played as planned and added that there was "no risk."

"We are in regular contact with the presidency and the authorities in Mexico and we are monitoring the situation," Infantino said. "The World Cup is going to be an incredible celebration".

What to know about the LA superintendent whose home was searched by FBI

By HALLIE GOLDEN Associated Press

Los Angeles schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, who has developed a reputation for improving academics and graduation rates while leading two major U.S. districts, had his home searched Wednesday by the FBI as part of a federal investigation.

Agents served search warrants at the home as well as the headquarters of the Los Angeles Unified School District and a location near Miami, where Carvalho was superintendent previously.

Authorities have not given details on what they are investigating.

Here's what to know about Carvalho:

A challenging start in the country

Carvalho has described his background in numerous news conferences and interviews over the years.

He was born in Portugal and spent his childhood living in poverty. He came to the U.S. more than four

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 45 of 77

decades ago at age 17 and did not have legal status for a time.

Carvalho lived in New York City and then Miami. His first job in the U.S. was as a dishwasher, and he later worked as a day laborer.

After graduating with a biology degree in 1990 from Barry University, a small Catholic school near Miami, he taught science in Miami-Dade County.

"My world changed when I became a teacher," Carvalho said in 2021. "I still feel this journey is a fairytale."

He quickly moved up the administrative ranks in Miami, becoming a principal, district spokesperson, assistant superintendent and finally superintendent in 2008.

Many awards and accolades

During his 14-year tenure leading Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Carvalho was recognized for improving graduation rates and academic performance, especially among Black and Hispanic students.

In 2014 he was named Superintendent of the Year by the national superintendents association, and in 2021 he was knighted by Spain for his work expanding Spanish-language school programs.

That same year the Los Angeles Board of Education unanimously voted to make him superintendent, at a time when the district was both flush with funding from state and federal COVID-19 relief and also struggling with the impacts of the pandemic, including learning losses and declining enrollment.

Over the past five years, Carvalho has been lauded for the district's improvements in academic performance.

A Trump immigration policy critic

Carvalho has regularly opposed the administration's aggressive crackdown in and around Los Angeles, referencing his own history as an immigrant living in the U.S. illegally.

The district, the nation's second-largest, is made up of about 500,000 students, around 30,000 of them immigrants and some of them also without legal status.

Just before students returned to school last August, he urged immigration authorities not to conduct enforcement activity within a two-block radius of schools.

"We are appealing to the better senses of those who have the power to eliminate trauma from the streets of our community," Carvalho said.

He announced several measures meant to protect students and families, including changing bus routes to accommodate more students. The district also said it would distribute family preparedness packets that include know-your-rights information, emergency contact updates and tips on designating a backup caregiver in case a parent is detained.

Some scrutiny and criticism over the years

Back in Florida, Carvalho faced questions in 2020 after a nonprofit he founded solicited a \$1.57 million donation from an online education company the district planned to use but later dropped.

The district's inspector general concluded that the donation did not violate state or district ethics policies but said it created an "appearance of impropriety" and should be returned. The money went instead to Miami-Dade teachers in the form of \$100 gift cards.

Years before that Carvalho came under criticism for exchanging explicit emails with a former Miami Herald reporter. He denied having an affair but conceded that the exchanges were inappropriate.

In 2024, in Los Angeles, he touted the development of an AI chatbot named "Ed" for district students by the AI company AllHere. Three months after unveiling the technology and paying the company \$3 million, the district dropped its dealings with AllHere as it collapsed.

Carvalho denied personal involvement in the selection of AllHere, according to the Los Angeles Times. After its founder was charged with securities and wire fraud and identity theft, he said he would appoint a task force to examine what went wrong with the project. There have been no announcements of a task force being appointed.

Justice Department says it's reviewing whether any Epstein-related records were mistakenly withheld

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department said Wednesday that it was looking into whether it had improperly withheld documents from the Jeffrey Epstein files after several news organizations reported that some records involving uncorroborated accusations made by a woman against President Donald Trump were not among those released to the public.

The announcement followed news reports saying that a massive tranche of records released by the Justice Department did not include several summaries of interviews that the FBI conducted with an unidentified woman who came forward after Epstein's 2019 arrest and claimed to have been sexually assaulted by both Trump and Epstein when she was a minor in the 1980s.

"Several individuals and news outlets have recently flagged files related to documents produced to Ghislaine Maxwell in discovery of her criminal case that they claim appear to be missing," the Justice Department said in a post on X. "As with all documents that have been flagged by the public, the Department is currently reviewing files within that category of the production." Maxwell, Epstein's longtime confidant, is serving a 20-year prison sentence on a sex trafficking conviction.

It said that if any document is found to have been improperly withheld and is responsive to the federally enacted law mandating the files' release, "the Department will of course publish it, consistent with the law."

At issue is a series of interviews said to have been conducted in 2019 with a woman who made an allegation against Trump, who has consistently denied any wrongdoing in connection with Epstein. News reports from recent days say the accuser was interviewed by the FBI four times as it sought to assess her account but a summary of only one of those interviews was included in the publicly released files.

The missing records were earlier reported by the journalist Roger Sollenberger on Substack and NPR, and have since been documented by other news organizations, including The New York Times, MS Now and CNN.

Rep. Robert Garcia, the top Democrat on the House Oversight Committee, said in a statement that Democrats on the panel would investigate the withheld records. He said he had reviewed unredacted evidence logs and "can confirm that the DOJ appears to have illegally withheld FBI interviews" with the accuser.

The Justice Department last month said it was releasing more than 3 million pages of records related to Epstein, who took his own life in a New York jail cell in 2019 while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges. The department said at the time that, though it was attempting to be transparent, it was also entitled to withhold records that exposed potential abuse victims, were duplicates or protected by legal privileges, or related to an ongoing criminal investigation.

"Some of the documents contain untrue and sensationalist claims against President Trump that were submitted to the FBI right before the 2020 election. To be clear, the claims are unfounded and false, and if they have a shred of credibility, they certainly would have been weaponized against President Trump already," the department said in a statement last month as it released the records.

The redaction process was quickly revealed to have been flawed, with the department withdrawing some materials identified by victims or their lawyers, along with a "substantial number" of documents identified independently by the government.

Lawyers for Epstein accusers told a New York judge this month that the lives of nearly 100 victims had been "turned upside down" by sloppy redactions in the government's latest release of records. The exposed materials include nude photos showing the faces of potential victims as well as names, email addresses and other identifying information that was either unredacted or not fully obscured.

Other uncorroborated claims against Trump and other public figures were included in the publicly available files. The department did not say in its social media post Wednesday why records related to this specific accusation might have been withheld.

FBI fires agents who worked on Trump classified document investigation, AP sources say

By ERIC TUCKER and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The FBI has fired additional agents who worked on an investigation into President Donald Trump, this time terminating employees who participated in the probe into the Republican's hoarding of classified documents, people familiar with the matter said Wednesday.

The firings are part of a broader personnel purge under the leadership of Director Kash Patel, a Trump appointee who, over the last year, has pushed out dozens of employees who either contributed to investigations of the president or who were perceived as not in alignment with the administration's agenda. The Justice Department has engaged in similarly sweeping firings of prosecutors since Trump took office last year.

The FBI Agents Association condemned the firings as unlawful and endangering national security.

"These actions weaken the Bureau by stripping away critical expertise and destabilizing the workforce, undermining trust in leadership and jeopardizing the Bureau's ability to meet its recruitment goals — ultimately putting the nation at greater risk," the association said in a statement.

The latest round of terminations included employees who helped investigate Trump's retention of classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago resort, a case that involved a high-profile FBI search of the Florida property and resulted in a federal prosecution charging the now-president with holding onto top-secret records from his first term in office and obstructing government efforts to get them back.

The firings were confirmed to The Associated Press by multiple people familiar with the matter who spoke on anonymity because they could not publicly discuss the personnel moves. Several of the people said a total of 10 employees were fired, and one said at least 10 were fired.

The FBI has also fired agents who participated in a separate investigation into Trump's efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. That investigation also led to criminal charges, but like the Mar-a-Lago case, was abandoned by special counsel Jack Smith after Trump won the White House in November 2024 because of longstanding Justice Department legal opinions that say sitting presidents cannot be indicted.

The firings were revealed on the same day that Patel was quoted as telling Reuters the FBI during the Biden administration had subpoenaed his phone records and those of current White House chief of staff Susie Wiles. Patel said the action had occurred in 2022 and 2023 when they were private citizens.

Patel was subpoenaed by federal prosecutors in 2022 to testify before a grand jury in Washington in the Mar-a-Lago investigation, and appeared after being given immunity, the AP has previously reported.

No-parking zone in Nancy Guthrie's neighborhood widened amid complaints about journalists, streamers

By JACQUES BILLEAUD and SEJAL GOVINDARAO undefined

PHOENIX (AP) — The no-parking zone around the home of "Today" show host Savannah Guthrie's mother where journalists and social media streamers have stationed themselves over the past three weeks since her disappearance is being widened in response to bitter complaints from neighbors about congested roads, trespassing and trash left alongside roadways.

Pima County officials say an effort over the weekend to have one-way traffic flow on the road in front of Nancy Guthrie's house in the Catalina Foothills just outside Tucson hasn't worked as they hoped, leading to expanded parking restrictions.

The new restrictions take effect Thursday. Authorities say journalists and streamers can still have access to the area, but they will have to park elsewhere and get dropped off in the neighborhood. Violators would face a \$250 fine. The constant presence of news crews, bloggers and curious onlookers has drawn mixed reaction from neighbors. Some appreciated the attention the case has been getting. Others have placed traffic cones and signs on their properties to keep people off.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 48 of 77

Authorities say the tents, generators and satellite trucks set up along the road have created congestion and safety concerns.

Holly Vatter, who lives on a street perpendicular to the one Guthrie's house sits on, said the neighborhood used to be peaceful but now looks like a parking lot. She said she used to see fewer than a handful of cars travel down her road in a day, but they now "constantly" pass through or park on her street.

She's learned to keep her blinds down, avoids opening her screen door in the morning and afternoon to prevent hearing TV newscasters and doesn't want to sit in her backyard because drones are flying overhead. She said it was stressful to wind through the traffic to get to and from a surgery she is now recovering from and that she paused hair appointments with her clients who planned to come to her home.

"Nobody wants to, like, drive through a media circus to come to an appointment," Vatter said.

Vatter's street will be impacted by the parking restriction, and she's hopeful it'll offer some reprieve from the "chaotic" environment.

Neighbor Laura Gargano said she doesn't mind the media presence because it creates a "safety cocoon" in addition to any law enforcement around for neighbors worried about crime. More people on the streets seems to be a good thing, she said.

"I think it's a good thing to keep for the purposes of the investigation to keep the investigation front and center," she said.

Nancy Guthrie, 84, was last seen at her home just outside Tucson on Jan. 31 and was reported missing the following day. Authorities believe she was kidnapped, abducted or otherwise taken against her will. Drops of her blood were found on the front porch, but authorities haven't publicly revealed much evidence.

Despite the sheriff's request for people not to search on their own, volunteers have continued to look. A small group reported finding a black backpack on Sunday, but it wasn't the same brand as one identified in video surveillance that the FBI released of a masked person at Guthrie's home the night she disappeared.

Journalists and streamers aren't the only people to go into the neighborhood. Supporters of the Guthrie family have showed up outside of the home to drop off flowers, yellow ribbons, crosses and prayers.

Rubio defends US ouster of Venezuela's Maduro to Caribbean leaders unsettled by Trump policies

By MATTHEW LEE and DÁNICA COTO Associated Press

BASSETERRE, St. Kitts and Nevis (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Wednesday defended the Trump administration's military operation to capture Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro, telling Caribbean leaders, many of whom objected to that move, that the country and the region were better off as a result.

Speaking to leaders from the 15-member Caribbean Community bloc at a summit in the country of St. Kitts and Nevis, Rubio brushed aside concerns about the legality of Maduro's capture last month that have been raised among Venezuela's island-state neighbors and others.

"Irrespective of how some of you may have individually felt about our operations and our policy toward Venezuela, I will tell you this, and I will tell you this without any apology or without any apprehension: Venezuela is better off today than it was eight weeks ago," Rubio told the leaders in a closed-door meeting, according to a transcript of his remarks later distributed by the U.S. State Department.

Rubio said that since Maduro's ouster and the effective takeover of Venezuela's oil sector by the United States, the interim authorities in the South American country have made "substantial" progress in improving conditions by doing "things that eight or nine weeks ago would have been unimaginable."

The Caribbean leaders have gathered to debate pressing issues in a region that President Donald Trump has targeted for a 21st-century incarnation of the Monroe Doctrine meant to ensure Washington's dominance in the Western Hemisphere. The Republican administration has declared a focus closer to home even as Washington increasingly has been preoccupied by the possibility of a U.S. military attack on Iran.

His trip to the region came as Cuba's government announced that its soldiers killed four people aboard a speedboat registered in Florida whose occupants it said opened fire on officers in Cuban waters.

"Suffice it to say, it is highly unusual to see shootouts in open sea like that. It's not something that hap-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 49 of 77

pens every day. It's something, frankly, that hasn't happened with Cuba in a very long time," Rubio told reporters. He said that the U.S. is gathering its own information and that "we'll be prepared to respond accordingly."

Rubio downplays antagonism in US regional push

In his remarks to the group, America's top diplomat tried to play down any antagonistic intent in what Trump has referred to as the "Donroe Doctrine." Rubio said the administration wants to strengthen ties with the region following the Venezuela operation and ensure that issues such as crime and economic opportunities are jointly addressed.

"I am very happy to be in an administration that's giving priority to the Western Hemisphere after largely being ignored for a very long time," Rubio said. "We share common opportunities, and we share some common challenges. And that's what we hope to confront."

He said transnational criminal organizations pose the biggest threat to the Caribbean while recognizing that many are buying weapons from the United States, a problem he said authorities are tackling.

Rubio also said the U.S. and the Caribbean can work together on economic advancement and energy issues, especially because many leaders at the four-day summit have energy resources they seek to explore. "We want to be your partner in that regard," he said.

Rubio said the U.S. recognizes the need for fair, democratic elections in Venezuela, which lies just miles away from Trinidad and Tobago at the closest point.

"We do believe that a prosperous, free Venezuela who's governed by a legitimate government who has the interests of their people in mind could also be an extraordinary partner and asset to many of the countries represented here today," he said.

Trump plays up Maduro's ouster

Trump, in his State of the Union address Tuesday night, called the operation that spirited Maduro out of Venezuela to face drug trafficking charges in New York "an absolutely colossal victory for the security of the United States."

The U.S. had built up the largest military presence in the Caribbean Sea in generations before the Jan. 3 raid. That has now been exceeded by the surge of American warships and aircraft to the Middle East as the administration pressures Iran to make a deal over its nuclear program.

In the Caribbean, Trump has stepped up aggressive tactics to combat alleged drug smuggling with a series of strikes on boats that have killed over 150 people and he has tightened pressure on Cuba. Regional leaders have complained about administration demands for nations to accept third-country deportees and to chill relations with China.

One regional leader who has backed the U.S. escalation is Trinidad and Tobago Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar, whom Rubio thanked for her public support, the State Department said.

Persad-Bissessar told reporters that her conversation with Rubio focused on "Haiti; we talked about Cuba, of course; we talked about engagements with Venezuela and the way forward."

She was asked if she considered the latest U.S. military strikes in Caribbean waters as extrajudicial killings: "I don't think they are, and if they are, we will find out, but our legal advice is they are not."

Rubio had other one-on-one meetings with heads of government, including those from St. Kitts and Nevis, Haiti, Jamaica and Guyana.

Caribbean leaders point to shifting global order

Terrance Drew, prime minister of St. Kitts and Nevis and chair of the Caribbean Community bloc, said the region "stands at a decisive hour" and that "the global order is shifting."

Drew and other leaders said Cuba's humanitarian situation must be addressed.

"It must be clear that a prolonged crisis in Cuba will not remain confined to Cuba," Jamaican Prime Minister Andrew Holness warned. "It will affect migration, security and economic stability across the Caribbean basin."

Rubio told reporters that he talked to Caribbean leaders about how the "Cuba status quo is unacceptable. Cuba needs to change."

"What the Cuban people should know is this, that if they are hungry and they are suffering, it's not

because we're not prepared to help them. We are. It's that the people standing in the way of us helping them is the regime. It's their communist party," he said.

The U.S. Treasury Department on Wednesday slightly eased restrictions on the sale of Venezuelan oil to Cuba, which instituted austere fuel-saving measures in the weeks after the U.S. raid in Venezuela.

Vance says administration is pausing some Medicaid funding to Minnesota because of fraud concerns

By MICHELLE L. PRICE and ALI SWENSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Vice President JD Vance announced Wednesday that the Trump administration would "temporarily halt" some Medicaid funding to the state of Minnesota over fraud concerns, as part of what he described as an aggressive crackdown on misuse of public funds.

Vance, who made the announcement with Dr. Mehmet Oz, the administrator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, said the administration was taking the action "in order to ensure that the state of Minnesota takes its obligations seriously to be good stewards of the American people's tax money."

Oz, who referred to people committing fraud as "self-serving scoundrels," said the federal government would hold off on paying \$259.5 million to Minnesota in funding for Medicaid, the health care safety net for low-income Americans.

"This is not a problem with the people of Minnesota, it's a problem with the leadership of Minnesota and other states who do not take Medicaid preservation seriously," Oz said.

Wednesday's move is part of a larger Trump administration effort to spotlight fraud around the country. That effort comes after allegations of fraud involving day care centers run by Somali residents in Minneapolis prompted a massive immigration crackdown in the Midwestern city, resulting in widespread protests. President Donald Trump, in his State of the Union address on Tuesday, announced Vance would spearhead a national "war on fraud."

Trump also recently nominated Colin McDonald to serve as the first assistant attorney general in charge of a Justice Department division dedicated to rooting out fraud.

Minnesota pushes back

Oz said the administration was simultaneously notifying Minnesota's Democratic Gov. Tim Walz as he was making the announcement publicly.

"We will give them the money, but we're going to hold it and only release it after they propose and act on a comprehensive corrective action plan to solve the problem," Oz said.

He said Walz would have 60 days to respond and advised health care providers and Medicaid beneficiaries who were concerned to contact Walz's office.

Walz, former Vice President Kamala Harris' 2024 running mate, said in a pair of social media posts that the administration's move had nothing to do with fraud.

"This is a campaign of retribution. Trump is weaponizing the entirety of the federal government to punish blue states like Minnesota," Walz said. "These cuts will be devastating for veterans, families with young kids, folks with disabilities, and working people across our state."

Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison said in a statement that his team has secured over 300 Medicaid fraud convictions since he took office in 2019. And he noted that he called on the Legislature earlier Wednesday to give him more staff and new legal tools to combat Medicaid fraud.

"Courts have repeatedly found that their pattern of cutting first and asking questions later is illegal, and if the federal government is unlawfully withholding money meant for the 1.2 million low-income Minnesotans on Medicaid, we will see them in court," Ellison said.

Oz said the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services were also taking action to crack down on fraud in Medicare, the health care system relied upon by millions of older adults.

He said CMS for six months would block any new Medicare enrollments for suppliers of durable medical equipment, prosthetics, orthotics or other supplies used to treat chronic conditions or assist in injury recovery.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 51 of 77

The Office of the Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found last year that Medicare improperly paid suppliers nearly \$23 million for durable medical equipment from 2018 through 2024. But it found that most of that was before January 2020, when changes to the system were implemented.

Oz also announced a new crowdsourcing effort he said would help “crush fraud” by soliciting Americans’ tips and suggestions.

“All of us are smarter than any one of us,” he said.

In a news release accompanying the announcement, CMS said the funding being paused in Minnesota included some \$244 million in unsupported or potentially fraudulent Medicaid claims and about \$15 million in claims involving “individuals lacking a satisfactory immigration status.”

Immigrants who are not living in the U.S. legally, as well as some lawfully present immigrants, are not allowed to enroll in the Medicaid program that provides nearly-free coverage for health services.

CMS said in the release that if Minnesota fails to satisfy its requirements, it may defer up to \$1 billion in federal funds to the state over the next year. CMS spokesperson Catherine Howden said the agency’s review of potential fraud cases would include sampling claims to see if they comply with federal requirements, and potentially requesting more information about specific claims.

Akeiisa Coleman, the senior program officer for Medicaid at the Commonwealth Fund, said CMS was taking a “highly unusual step” in deferring funding. She said if the state doesn’t have enough funds available, it may have to halt payments to providers, which could affect care.

Democratic-run states face cutoffs

The administration has threatened to cut off funding for various programs for some Democratic-run states over fraud concerns over the last few months.

One judge blocked those actions and required that payments flowing to Minnesota and four other states — California, Colorado, Illinois and New York — for a variety of social service programs. The government had said that there was “reason to believe” that those states were granting benefits to people in the country illegally. It did not initially explain where that information came from, but a government lawyer told the judge it was largely in reaction to news reports about possible fraud.

Another judge said she would not let it cut off funding for administrative costs for 22 states that have refused to hand over information about applicants and recipients of food aid through the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program.

The latest action was prompted in part by a series of fraud cases, including a nonprofit called Feeding Our Future accused of stealing pandemic aid meant for school meals. Prosecutors have put the losses from that case at \$300 million.

Since then, Trump has targeted the Somali diaspora in Minnesota with immigration enforcement actions and has made a series of disparaging comments about the community. During his State of the Union address on Tuesday, Trump said “pirates” have “ransacked Minnesota.”

Federal agencies have also been enlisted to assist in targeting fraud in Minnesota.

Last December, the U.S. Treasury Department issued an order requiring money wire services that people use to send money to Somalia to submit additional verification to the Treasury.

The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services told Minnesota in January that it intended to freeze parts of payments for some Medicaid programs that were deemed high-risk. The state said that those cuts would add up to more than \$2 billion annually if they lasted and made an administrative appeal.

FBI searches Los Angeles school district headquarters and the superintendent’s home

By ERIC TUCKER, CHRISTOPHER WEBER and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The FBI served search warrants Wednesday at the Los Angeles Unified School District’s headquarters and the home of its leader, a former Superintendent of the Year who was knighted by Spain for his work.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 52 of 77

Federal officials would not give details of the nature of the investigation involving the nation's second-largest school district and Superintendent Alberto Carvalho's home. The district said in a statement that it "is cooperating with the investigation and we do not have further information at this time." The FBI also searched a third location near Miami, where Carvalho previously led the public schools.

TV news footage showed agents in FBI shirts and jackets outside Carvalho's home in the San Pedro neighborhood about 20 miles (32 kilometers) south of downtown LA.

Rukelt Dalberis, a spokesperson for the FBI's Los Angeles field office, confirmed that agents were at the properties to serve warrants but declined to comment further because affidavits laying out details for the basis for the searches were under seal.

Over the past five years in Los Angeles, Carvalho has been lauded for the district's improvements to academic performance. He won similar praise while overseeing Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Florida's largest school district, where the national superintendents association named him Superintendent of the Year in 2014.

But both districts also drew scrutiny under his watch.

In 2024, Carvalho heavily touted an education technology company that developed an AI chatbot named "Ed" for the Los Angeles district to help students, calling it "a game changer." But less than three months after unveiling the technology and paying the company \$3 million, the district dropped its dealings with AllHere, which collapsed into bankruptcy. Months later, founder, Joanna Smith-Griffin, was charged with securities and wire fraud, along with identity theft.

Carvalho denied personal involvement in the selection of AllHere, according to the Los Angeles Times. After Smith-Griffin was indicted, Carvalho said he would appoint a task force to examine what went wrong with the LAUSD project. There have been no announcements of any task force being appointed.

During his tenure in Florida, Carvalho also drew scrutiny in 2020 after a nonprofit he founded solicited a \$1.57 million donation from an online education company the district was planning to use but later dropped. The district's inspector general determined the donation didn't violate state or district ethics policies but did create the "appearance of impropriety" and should be returned. The nonprofit instead distributed the donation to Miami-Dade teachers in \$100 gift cards.

Spain knighted the Portugal-born administrator in 2021 for his work in expanding Spanish-language programs for Miami-Dade County schools.

Months later, Carvalho took the job in California and became a harsh critic of the Trump administration's aggressive immigration crackdown, especially following raids in Los Angeles last year. When its 500,000 students returned to classes in the fall, Carvalho urged immigration authorities not to conduct enforcement activity within a two-block radius of schools.

"I would be the biggest hypocrite in the world, regardless of my position today, if today I did not fight for those who find themselves in the same predicament I faced over 40 years ago when I arrived in this country at the age of 17 as an undocumented immigrant," Carvalho said at a news conference last year.

Carvalho arrived in Los Angeles at a critical moment, as the district found itself flush with funding from state and federal COVID-19 relief money but still struggling with the impacts of the pandemic, including learning losses and declining enrollment. He previously sparred with Florida Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis over his order that schools not require masks during the pandemic.

The Miami-Dade school system said in a statement that it was aware of the investigation involving Carvalho but did not have any comment at this time.

James Marshall, an FBI spokesman in Miami, told the AP that agents searched a residence in Southwest Ranches, which is in Broward County west of Fort Lauderdale, on Wednesday morning and "have since cleared the scene." He said no further information was available.

Wednesday's search was the second time in a week the Justice Department has taken action against the LA school district. On Feb. 19, the Trump administration joined a lawsuit alleging that the district discriminates against white students under its decades-old desegregation policy.

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass's office said it had no information about the search, noting the public school system operates independently of city government.

Iran accuses Trump of 'big lies' ahead of Geneva talks in face of major US military deployment

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran pushed back Wednesday against U.S. President Donald Trump's pressure tactics ahead of critical talks in Geneva over Tehran's nuclear program, alternating between calling his remarks "big lies" and saying negotiations may yield an agreement through "honorable diplomacy."

The remarks by two Iranian officials came a day before the talks and as America has assembled its biggest deployment of aircraft and warships to the Middle East in decades. The buildup is part of Trump's efforts to get a deal to constrain Iran's nuclear program while the country struggles at home with growing dissent following nationwide protests last month.

Trump has repeatedly threatened to attack Iran if negotiations fail. Mideast nations fear an attack could spiral into a new regional war as the embers of the yearslong Israel-Hamas war still smolder. Already, Iran has said all U.S. military bases in the Mideast would be considered legitimate targets, putting at risk tens of thousands of American service members.

Satellite photos shot Tuesday by Planet Labs PBC and analyzed by The Associated Press appeared to show the American vessels that typically are docked in Bahrain, the home of the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, all out at sea. The 5th Fleet referred questions to the U.S. military's Central Command, which declined to comment. Before Iran's attack on Qatar in June, the 5th Fleet similarly scattered its ships at sea to protect against a potential attack.

Iran responds to State of the Union speech

Trump touched on Iran and the nuclear negotiations in his State of the Union speech late Tuesday in Washington.

"They've already developed missiles that can threaten Europe and our bases overseas, and they're working to build missiles that will soon reach the United States of America," Trump said. "They were warned to make no future attempts to rebuild their weapons program, and in particular nuclear weapons, yet they continue. They're starting it all over."

Satellite photos analyzed earlier by the AP showed Iran beginning to rebuild its missile-production sites and doing some work at the three nuclear sites attacked by the U.S. in June. Iran has long maintained that its nuclear program is peaceful.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio told reporters Wednesday that Iran is "always trying to rebuild elements" of its nuclear program. He said that Tehran is not enriching uranium right now, "but they're trying to get to the point where they ultimately can."

The West and the International Atomic Energy Agency say Iran had a nuclear weapons program until 2003. Before the June attack, it had been enriching uranium up to 60% purity — a short, technical step away from weapons-grade levels of 90%.

Responding to Trump, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei sought to compare him to Joseph Goebbels, Adolf Hitler's propaganda minister. He accused Trump and his administration of conducting a "disinformation & misinformation campaign" against Iran.

"Whatever they're alleging in regards to Iran's nuclear program, Iran's ballistic missiles, and the number of casualties during January's unrest is simply the repetition of 'big lies,'" Baghaei wrote on X.

Trump said in his speech that at least 32,000 people were killed in last month's protests, which is at the far end of estimates offered by activists for the death toll. The U.S.-based Human Rights Activist News Agency has so far counted more than 7,000 dead and believes the actual figure is far higher. Iran's government, which long has downplayed death tolls in other unrest, offered its only toll on Jan. 21, saying 3,117 people were killed.

Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, Iran's parliament speaker, said separately that the U.S. could either try diplomacy or face Iran's wrath.

"If you choose the table of diplomacy — a diplomacy in which the dignity of the Iranian nation and mutual interests are respected — we will also be at that table," Qalibaf said, according to the semiofficial Student

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 54 of 77

News Network, a media outlet believed to be close to the all-volunteer Basij force of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard.

"But if you decide to repeat past experiences through deception, lies, flawed analysis and false information, and launch an attack in the midst of negotiations, you will undoubtedly taste the firm blow of the Iranian nation and the country's defensive forces."

Talks hang in balance

Iran and the U.S. are to meet Thursday for their third round of talks under the mediation of Oman, long an interlocutor between Tehran and the West. A flight carrying Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and his team arrived late Wednesday in Geneva, where they will meet American officials led by special U.S. Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff.

Rubio said the discussions will be largely focused on Iran's nuclear program and are important to gauge how serious the country is in reaching a deal to avoid potential U.S. military action. But he suggested a breakthrough was unlikely at this session, noting that the U.S. also has major concerns with Iran's conventional weapons.

"We hope progress can be made," Rubio told reporters during a trip to the Caribbean, saying diplomacy was Trump's preference. "But it's also important to remember that Iran refuses — refuses — to talk about the ballistic missiles to us or to anyone, and that's a big problem."

If the talks fail, uncertainty hangs over the timing of any possible attack.

If the aim of potential military action is to pressure Iran to make concessions in nuclear negotiations, it's not clear whether limited strikes would work. If the goal is to remove Iran's leaders, that will likely commit the U.S. to a larger, longer military campaign. There has been no public sign of planning for what would come next, including the potential for chaos in Iran.

The status of Iran's nuclear program is another mystery. Trump said last year that American strikes "obliterated" it. Now dismantling whatever remains of the program appears to be back on the administration's agenda. IAEA inspectors have not been allowed to inspect those sites and verify what remains.

There is also uncertainty about what any military action could mean for the wider region. Tehran could retaliate against the American-allied nations of the Persian Gulf or Israel. Oil prices have risen in recent days in part due to those concerns.

A Boston Celtics game-inspired friction test finally pinned down the sneaker squeak

By ADITHI RAMAKRISHNAN AP Science Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — As he watched the Boston Celtics play from the stands of TD Garden, one noise kept catching Adel Djellouli's ear.

"This squeaking sound when players are sliding on the floor is omnipresent," he said. "It's always there, right?"

Squeaky shoes are part of the symphony of a basketball game, when rubber soles rasp against the hardwood floors as players jab step, cut and pivot and defenders move their feet to stay in front of their assignment.

Returning home from the game, Djellouli wondered how that sound was produced. And as a materials scientist at Harvard University, he had a way to find out.

Djellouli and colleagues slid a sneaker against a smooth glass plate over and over. They recorded the squeaks with a microphone and filmed the whole thing with a high speed camera to see what was happening under the shoe.

In a study published Wednesday in the journal *Nature*, they described what they found. As the shoe works hard to keep its grip, tiny sections of the sole change shape as they momentarily lose then regain contact with the floor thousands of times per second — at a frequency that matches the pitch of the loud squeak we hear.

"That squeaking is basically your shoe rippling, or creating wrinkles that travel super fast. They repeat

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 55 of 77

at a high frequency, and this is why you get that squeaky noise," Djellouli said.

The grip patterns on the soles may also play a role. When researchers slid blocks of flat, featureless rubber against the glass, they saw a series of chaotic, disorganized ripples but didn't hear squeaks.

The ridge-like designs on the bottom of your shoes may organize the bursts to produce a clear, high-pitched sound.

Other researchers have studied these kinds of bursts before, but this sneaker study examines friction happening at much faster speeds. And for the first time, it links the speedy pulses with the squeaking sound they produce.

These insights don't just serve to satisfy the curiosity of a basketball fan. They could also help answer important practical questions. "Friction is one of the oldest and most intricate problems in physics," wrote physicist Bart Weber in an editorial accompanying the new research. Yet, despite its practical importance, he wrote, "it is difficult to predict and control."

Understanding friction better could help scientists better understand how the Earth's tectonic plates slide and grind during earthquakes, for example, or to save energy by reducing friction and wear.

It could also help eliminate moments off the court when squeaky shoes can be a little awkward or embarrassing, such as in a quiet office hallway.

This research doesn't offer a fix, though the internet has plenty of advice that may be risky, including rubbing soap or a dryer sheet on the soles. But some of the insights from the study could help to design squeak-free shoes in the future.

For example, one additional experiment found that changing the thickness of the rubber could make the squeak sound lower or higher in pitch. In the future, could we fine-tune our shoes to squeak in a pitch so high we can't even hear it?

"We can now start designing for it," said Weber, who is with the Advanced Research Center for Nanolithography and the University of Amsterdam, in an interview. "We can start making interfaces that either do it if we want to hear this sound, or don't do it if we don't want to hear it."

Larry Summers will resign from teaching at Harvard during review of Epstein ties, university says

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

Former U.S. Treasury Secretary Larry Summers will resign from teaching at Harvard University as the campus reviews his ties to the late convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, the university announced Wednesday.

Summers, who has been on leave since November and whose name appeared hundreds of times in newly released Epstein files, will step down at the end of the school year, according to a statement from Harvard spokesperson Jason Newton.

"Professor Summers has announced that he will retire from his academic and faculty appointments at Harvard at the end of this academic year and will remain on leave until that time," Newton said.

In a statement, Summers said it was a difficult decision and expressed gratitude to the students and colleagues he worked with over 50 years, including five as Harvard's president.

"Free of formal responsibility, as President Emeritus and a retired professor, I look forward in time to engaging in research, analysis, and commentary on a range of global economic issues," Summers said.

The Justice Department's latest release has rippled through academia, uncovering Epstein's ties to numerous researchers who sought his funding and his friendship even after he became a convicted sex offender. Summers' resignation follows that of Dr. Richard Axel, a Nobel laureate, who on Tuesday announced he would step down as co-director of Columbia University's Zuckerman Mind Brain Behavior Institute.

Summers served as treasury secretary under former President Bill Clinton and went on to lead Harvard for five years starting in 2001.

A trove of files released by the government cast new light on Summers' relationship with Epstein, which spanned years and included visits to one another at their homes in Massachusetts and New York. The two

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 56 of 77

traded emails on topics ranging from politics and the economy to women and romance.

Summers, who has been married for 20 years, consulted Epstein on a separate relationship with a woman he was tutoring in economics, according to emails from 2018 and 2019. Epstein described himself as Summers' "wing man" and encouraged persistence. In a 2018 email, Summers said the woman was never his student but he had "known her father for 20 plus years as Chinese economic official."

"I have a very good life w Lisa kids etc.," Summers said in a 2018 email, referencing his wife. "Easy to put at risk for something that might not materialize at all or if it does might prove transient."

In a 2016 email, Summers appeared to use a slur for Asian people while discussing an upcoming meeting between Epstein and an official from a Chinese university.

Responding to previous revelations, Summers last year said he had "great regrets in my life" and that his association with Epstein was a "major error in judgement."

Harvard officials have publicly said little about Summers' relationship. When Summers went on leave last year, the university said it was reviewing "individuals at Harvard" who were in the Epstein documents "to evaluate what actions may be warranted."

Epstein's ties to Harvard were the focus of a 2020 campus report finding that the financier gave more than \$9 million to the Ivy League school, mostly for a center founded by math and biology professor Martin Nowak. The report did not mention Summers' relationship with Epstein. Nowak was later disciplined by Harvard.

In December, Summers was dealt a lifetime ban from the American Economic Association, a nonprofit scholarly association dedicated to economic research, over his Epstein ties. He has also left the board of directors at OpenAI, the maker of ChatGPT.

At Columbia, Axel said in a statement Tuesday that he regretted his association with Epstein, calling it a "serious error in judgment." He said he is also giving up his position as an investigator at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute but will continue to research and teach in his laboratory at the Zuckerman Institute in Manhattan.

Axel was one of the 2004 winners of the Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine for discoveries related to the human olfactory system. His name appears more than 600 times in Justice Department files reviewed by The Associated Press, including in emails he exchanged with Epstein and on schedules noting their meetings, dinners and lunches.

In a news article published in 2007, while Epstein was initially under investigation in Florida, the scientist praised Epstein's intellect, telling New York magazine: "He has the ability to make connections that other minds can't make. He is extremely smart and probing."

The resignations are the latest fallout from the Justice Department's recent release of millions of pages of records pertaining to Epstein and his longtime confidant and former girlfriend Ghislaine Maxwell. Resignations have rippled across the academic, legal and business communities.

In Britain, former Prince Andrew and ex-diplomat Peter Mandelson were arrested because of their connections to Epstein and Maxwell.

Nvidia and other tech stocks lead Wall Street higher

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. stocks rose Wednesday and erased their losses for the week so far, as Nvidia and other technology companies led the way.

The S&P 500 added 0.8% for a second straight gain following Monday's swoon, when stocks dropped as investors tried to separate potential losers from winners in the artificial-intelligence boom.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average rose 307 points, or 0.6%, and the Nasdaq composite climbed 1.3%.

Nvidia was one of the strongest forces lifting the market and rose 1.4% ahead of its highly anticipated profit report, which arrived after trading ended for the day. The company whose chips are at the center of the AI revolution once again reported profit for the latest quarter that topped analysts' expectations. It also said it expects to make roughly \$78 billion in revenue this quarter, when analysts had been forecast-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 57 of 77

ing less than \$72.3 billion.

Because Nvidia has grown to become the U.S. market's largest stock by value, it has more influence on the S&P 500 than any other company.

Nvidia's profit reports have become a bellwether for the market, not only because it's so big but also because of how influential the AI boom has broadly become over the market's moves. In past years, the AI frenzy helped stocks run to record after record amid hopes that it would revolutionize the economy and make it more productive.

More recently, though, concerns have climbed about whether companies like Alphabet and Amazon are spending so much on chips from Nvidia and other equipment that they'll never be able to make back the investments through future gains in productivity. If that leads to a pullback in spending, it would hit Nvidia directly.

Investors have also begun focusing on companies and industries that could get undercut by AI-powered competitors. That has led to sudden and swift sell-offs for stocks seen as potentially under threat, and spasms have rolled through industries as seemingly disparate as software, trucking logistics and legal services.

That's on top of other worries already weighing on the market, including new tariffs announced by President Donald Trump to replace ones struck down by the Supreme Court.

"While those concerns are real, we believe investors would be wise to balance them out with offsetting trends that may be underappreciated in the current wall of worry headline cycle," according to Darrell Cronk, chief investment officer for Wealth & Investment Management at Wells Fargo.

Among them is the solid growth in profit that U.S. companies have been reporting so far for the end of 2025. That has helped strengthen corners of the U.S. stock market that had earlier been overshadowed by AI mania and Big Tech, including stocks of smaller companies.

Cava Group, the fast-casual Mediterranean restaurant chain, jumped 26.4% after delivering better profit and revenue for the latest quarter than analysts expected. Its revenue for a fiscal year also topped \$1 billion for the first time, up 22.5% from the year earlier.

Axon Enterprise leaped 17.6% after the seller of Tasers and body cameras with AI voice-activated assistants likewise reported bigger profit and revenue than analysts expected.

They helped offset a 13.6% drop for First Solar, which reported a weaker profit than analysts expected.

Lowe's fell 5.6% and was one of the heaviest weights on the market even though the home-improvement retailer reported a bigger profit than analysts expected. Investors focused instead on its forecast for profit over the course of 2026, which fell short of analysts' estimates.

CEO Marvin Ellison said the broad housing market remains pressured, and stocks for rival Home Depot and homebuilders also fell.

All told, the S&P 500 rose 56.06 points to 6,946.13. The Dow Jones Industrial Average gained 307.65 to 49,482.15, and the Nasdaq composite climbed 288.40 to 23,152.08.

In stock markets abroad, indexes rose across much of Europe and Asia.

Japan's Nikkei 225 climbed 2.2%, and South Korea's Kospi gained 1.9% for two of the bigger moves.

In the bond market, the yield on the 10-year Treasury rose to 4.05% from 4.04% late Tuesday.

Bill and Hillary Clinton, battle-tested, gear up for another Washington fight

By STEVEN SLOAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For some of their conservative critics, this is the scandal that could finally topple them. Their resistance to testifying proved futile. And now, staring down another epic fight, they're harnessing their considerable political skills to try and turn the table on their accusers.

For Bill and Hillary Clinton, the 1990s are back.

The Clintons are slated to testify Thursday and Friday in a House investigation into Jeffrey Epstein, part of a deal with Republicans after it became clear that Congress — with the help of some Democrats — was

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 58 of 77

on track to hold them in contempt if they refused to cooperate. For the battle-hardened couple, it amounts to one more Washington brawl. And like so many of the battles that came before, this one is another mix of questionable judgment, sexual impropriety, money and power.

During his 1992 campaign, Bill Clinton pitched his candidacy as “two for the price of one,” previewing a presidential marriage like none that had come before, with a spouse whose professional credentials rivaled his. In the years since, that partnership helped the Clintons weather repeated scandals, including those so personal that many other relationships would have shattered. When his political career was ending, hers was ascending when she was elected to the U.S. Senate from New York, then served as secretary of state before becoming the Democratic nominee for president in 2016.

For those who have long watched the Clintons, this moment is a reminder that the couple — weaned on the politics of the Vietnam War and Watergate — has never been far from the heat of a cultural fight. And with the Epstein case unfolding unpredictably around the world, the Clintons are once again ensnared in the scandal of the moment.

“It’s kind of a sad but fitting coda to extraordinary political lives,” said David Maraniss, who has written two biographies of Bill Clinton.

There’s no evidence of wrongdoing on the part of either Clinton when it comes to Epstein, a convicted sex offender who committed suicide in 2019 while he was in jail awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges.

But Epstein had ties to Bill Clinton for years, visiting the White House multiple times in the 1990s, according to visitor logs. After Clinton left office, Epstein was involved in his philanthropy and the former president flew multiple times on his private jet.

“Traveling on Epstein’s plane was not worth the years of questioning afterward,” Bill Clinton wrote in his 2024 memoir. “I wish I had never met him.”

Bill Clinton’s ties to Epstein

By last summer, the Republican-controlled House Oversight Committee issued subpoenas for the Clintons. For months, Bill Clinton, 79, and Hillary Clinton, 78, largely ignored the matter in public but that became harder to sustain in December when the former president was featured prominently in the first batch of Epstein files.

Among thousands of documents made public, some photos showed him on a private plane, including one with a woman, whose face is redacted, seated alongside him with her arm around him. Another showed Bill Clinton in a pool with Epstein’s longtime confidant, British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell, and a person whose face was redacted. Yet another photo portrayed Bill Clinton in a hot tub with a woman whose face was redacted.

The oversight panel’s chairman, Rep. James Comer of Kentucky, threatened to hold the Clintons in contempt if they didn’t comply with the subpoenas, a historic move considering a former president has never been compelled to appear before Congress. Between his first and second terms, Donald Trump invoked that precedent to fend off a subpoena from the committee investigating the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol.

While there was no context surrounding the photos of Bill Clinton, they underscored how his political promise has always been tempered by personal indiscretions.

The 1992 campaign that represented the emerging preeminence of the Baby Boom generation was the same one dogged by rumors of an affair with Gennifer Flowers. A presidency largely defined by economic prosperity was nearly derailed when Clinton was impeached in 1998 for lying under oath and obstructing justice when he denied engaging in a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

Each time, many Republicans thought they finally found leverage over the Clintons. But each time, the Clintons found a way out of the vise.

Asa Hutchinson, the former Republican congressman from Arkansas who was a House manager during Clinton’s impeachment trial, described the couple as “a smart lawyer and brilliant communicator.”

The Clinton playbook: fight back fiercely

As each crisis surfaced, a pattern emerged: the Clintons fiercely denied the allegations and often dismissed

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 59 of 77

women who came forward with claims. They villainized the GOP and re-centered the public's attention on more favorable themes like the booming economy of the era.

Bill Clinton, who famously told voters "I feel your pain," always managed to stay connected with the public. Indeed, he enjoyed some of the highest approval numbers of his presidency during his impeachment inquiry and trial, when about 7 in 10 U.S. adults approved of the way he was handling his job.

Hillary Clinton similarly dispatched Republicans who sensed an opening in her handling of a 2012 attack on a compound in Libya that killed four Americans. She came out of an 11-hour televised congressional hearing in 2015 appearing poised. Even the Republican chair of the committee probing the attack said he wasn't sure she revealed anything new about an issue many in his party considered a scandal.

That experience has informed how the Clintons are approaching this week's testimony. Hillary Clinton has been especially vocal in calling for the proceedings to happen in public, rather than in private as Comer currently plans.

"We have nothing to hide," she told the BBC earlier this month.

Bill Clinton's communication operation has taken a sharper tone, recalling the political "war room" popularized during the 1992 campaign to respond to negative storylines.

One release accused Comer of "lying in every appearance he's made this week." Another mocked GOP Reps. Scott Perry of Pennsylvania and Andy Biggs of Arizona with a "hypocrisy award of the day," noting how the Oversight committee members defied subpoenas from the Jan. 6 panel.

Meanwhile, the Clintons released a four-page letter to Comer on social media defiantly belittling a process they said was "literally designed to result in our imprisonment."

Much as they tried to refocus attention during the 1990s, the letter hit the White House for dismantling institutions, imposing a harsh immigration crackdown and pardoning those involved in the Capitol riot.

Conservative attacks on the Clintons

The Clintons' rise to power paralleled the explosion of talk radio as a political force, with Rush Limbaugh using his daily show as a platform to constantly berate the White House. Today, conservative podcasters like Benny Johnson have filled Limbaugh's space and were gleeful after the House panel moved last month to hold the couple in contempt.

"Do you understand Donald Trump made good on his oldest promise arguably which is he told all of us 10 years ago that Hillary Clinton would be going to jail?" Johnson said last month.

Still, some dynamics have changed.

The lockstep support the Clintons enjoyed among congressional Democrats has eroded as a new generation of lawmakers has taken office — nine Democrats joined with Republicans on the House committee to advance the contempt resolution. Trump, who has faced scrutiny over his own ties to Epstein and may be uncomfortable with the precedent of forcing a former president to testify, has expressed rare concern for the Clintons.

He told NBC News that it "bothers me that somebody is going after Bill Clinton." He has described Hillary Clinton as a "very capable woman."

Even Hutchinson, who helped make the case for Bill Clinton's impeachment, expressed sympathy for the couple.

"It's frustrating and disappointing that President Clinton and Secretary Clinton are having to go through this fact-finding ordeal," he said. "That's difficult for them."

Power outages, piles of snow vexing parts of Northeast in snowstorm aftermath

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, LEAH WILLINGHAM and JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press
PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — Power failures, waist-high canyons of snow and more flurries Wednesday bedeviled parts of the Northeast in the aftermath of a massive storm that dumped icy piles on streets and sidewalks from Maryland to Maine.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 60 of 77

The fallout persisted across the region: In Rhode Island, where 3 feet (0.9 meters) of snow surpassed the record set in the Blizzard of 1978, people were stuck in their homes for a third straight day as residential streets remained unplowed, trash pickup got postponed in places and some schools went virtual.

More than 138,000 customers were still without power Wednesday afternoon, nearly all of them in Massachusetts and particularly in Cape Cod, according to poweroutage.us. Utility crews were working 18-hour shifts to restore electricity and people huddled in warming shelters for respite and to recharge phones.

Anny Enos took her three grandchildren to a warming station in Barnstable, Massachusetts, on Wednesday to charge their devices and get a change of scenery. She said she hasn't had power since Sunday afternoon and was afraid that she might not get it back until Friday.

She threw out most of her fridge Tuesday and was just hoping for the best.

"I hate to say it but it doesn't seem like they were ready," she said.

Reinforcements, overtime and thousands of 'emergency shovelers'

The storm created "thousands" of damage sites that required workers in some cases to remove big snow piles with backhoes before new poles could be installed or old ones repaired, according to Doug Foley, president of electric operations for Eversource in Massachusetts. More crews from other states arrived to help on Wednesday.

Most unwelcome, up to 3 more inches (7.6 centimeters) of snow fell early Wednesday, adding to slippery conditions before temperatures rose, creating slushy messes.

The gigantic snowstorm this week has cities working overtime to clear towering heaps.

In New York City, Mayor Zohran Mamdani got creative: in addition to spreading 143 million pounds (65 million kilograms) of salt by Tuesday evening, the city signed up at least 3,500 people as emergency shovelers, working \$30-per-hour shifts to clear snow from bus stops and streets.

Police said carbon monoxide poisoning killed a man in an area of Rhode Island that had lost power. Joseph Boutrous, 21, had told a fellow Salve Regina student he was going to charge his phone in his car, Newport Police Capt. Joseph Carroll said. The exhaust pipe was obstructed by snow, police said, calling his death accidental. The sophomore from Bohemia, New York was an offensive lineman on the football team. A social media post said his teammates are heartbroken.

Some sidewalks are impassable for people with disabilities

There was plenty more work left to do. Parts of New York have people feeling marooned, according to Jeff Peters, spokesperson for the Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York.

"You'll find a portion of a sidewalk that is clear, and then there's maybe a 6-inch (15-centimeter) pathway that can only be walked with one foot in front of the other and no room for a stroller, rollator, walker or crutches," Peters said. "Then you get to the corner and not only is it unshoveled, but you have basically a glacier at the end of it."

Tina Guenette, who uses a motorized wheelchair, had to shovel out her yard this week after more than 33 inches (84 centimeters) fell in Harrisville, Rhode Island, a town about 17 miles (27 kilometers) northwest of Providence.

"I really have no choice if my service dog wants to go outside," Guenette said. Harrisville's volunteer snow-shoveling program hasn't had volunteers for years, she said.

The storm unleashed massive amounts of snow

Monday's storm blanketed the region with snow, canceled flights, disrupted transit and downed power lines.

Crunching the numbers, meteorologist Ryan Maue, former chief scientist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, calculated that all that snow held a total of 2.5 trillion gallons of water.

If all the snow that fell from Maryland to Maine fell just on Manhattan, it would have towered over a mile high. If the snowfall blanketed only on Rhode Island, which got hit hardest, it would bury the entire Ocean State in more than 92 feet of snow, The Associated Press estimated.

Melted, it's enough to fill the Empire State Building with water more than 9,000 times. New York State got the water equivalent of 680 billion gallons, while Pennsylvania got 410 billion gallons and Massachusetts got 28 billion.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 61 of 77

When it eventually melts, it will help mitigate the drought affecting parts of the Northeast, Maue said, but right now it's adding misery to an already punishing season.

"I think this storm took a severe winter and turned it into an extreme winter or a record extreme winter," he said.

In New York City, workers were setting up massive basins of warm water where large amounts of snow and ice will be dumped, acting Sanitation Commissioner Javier Lojan said. They helped melt 23 million pounds (11.5 metric tons) of snow during last month's storm.

Snowbound Providence, Rhode Island, is trucking snow to five locations, and more dumping grounds may be added, according to Josh Estrella, communications director for the city government.

Schools in NYC returning to normal. Not so much in Rhode Island, parts of Massachusetts

Some large school districts moved back to in-person classes on Wednesday, including Philadelphia, which had switched to online learning during the first two days of the week. Schools reopened in Boston after being closed since last week for the winter break.

But in hardest-hit Rhode Island, Providence officials decided to keep schools closed and switch to virtual learning for the rest of the week.

In New York City, it was another regular school day for more than 900,000 students in the nation's largest public school system, but many students and their caregivers had to scramble over mountainous snow banks and dodge salt spreaders during the morning drop-off.

Thousands of flights in and out of the U.S. have been canceled in recent days. By Wednesday the disruptions seemed to be subsiding, with nearly 200 grounded, according to the flight tracking website FlightAware. Rhode Island's T.F. Green International Airport reopened Tuesday. Some flights departed Wednesday, while others were canceled.

When Jamie Meyers' flight landed in New York from Buenos Aires, Argentina, Tuesday evening, the cabin full of relieved passengers burst into applause. The Manhattan resident was supposed to arrive home Sunday but faced a cancellation and significant delay.

Surgeon general nominee faces sharp questions about vaccines, birth control and qualifications

By ALI SWENSON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Wellness influencer, author and entrepreneur Dr. Casey Means on Wednesday shared a vision for addressing the root causes of chronic disease instead of feeding into "reactive sick care" during her confirmation hearing to become the nation's next surgeon general.

"Our nation is angry, exhausted and hurting," the 38-year-old said in Washington before the Senate health committee Wednesday. "If we're addressing shared root causes, we're going to be able to stop the whack-a-mole medicine that's not working for us."

It's a message that dovetails with that of Means' ally, Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., and his "Make America Healthy Again" movement. It also has some bipartisan support, with many Democrats and Republicans agreeing that the rise in chronic disease is a problem that needs solving.

But Means also faced tough questions from senators about topics that have become divisive in recent years, such as vaccines and hormonal birth control, as well as about her qualifications and potential conflicts. The Stanford-educated physician's disillusionment with traditional medicine drove her to a career in which she has promoted various products, at times without disclosing how she could benefit financially. She has no government experience, and her license to practice as a physician is not currently active.

"I have very serious questions about the ability of Dr. Means to be the kind of surgeon general this country needs," Vermont independent Sen. Bernie Sanders, the ranking member of the Senate health committee, said Wednesday.

Next, the committee will consider whether to advance Means' nomination, in which case it would go to a vote in the full Senate.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 62 of 77

Senators grill Means on vaccines

As the nation's doctor, the surgeon general is a leader for Americans on public health issues. If confirmed, Means could issue advisories that warn of public health threats. She also would be tasked with promoting Kennedy's sprawling MAHA agenda, which calls for removing food additives, rooting out conflicts of interest and promoting healthier eating.

Surgeons general also have sometimes used the office to advocate on issues related to vaccination — though the office has no role in creating vaccine policy. While Means has largely steered clear of Kennedy's debunked views on vaccines, senators from both parties grilled her on how she would approach the issue if confirmed.

Sen. Bill Cassidy, the Louisiana Republican who chairs the Senate health committee, asked Means whether she would advise Americans to vaccinate against flu and measles amid outbreaks across the U.S. She didn't make that commitment, instead emphasizing the importance of informed consent between patients and doctors.

Cassidy, a doctor himself, then asked Means if she accepts evidence that shows vaccines don't cause autism.

"I do accept that evidence," she said, referring to the research. "I also think that science is never settled."

Means said she looked forward to seeing the results of a federal effort to study environmental contributors to autism. The National Institutes of Health is funding such research, and it's not clear when those findings will be made public.

Means also was asked about concerns she has raised about the birth dose of the hepatitis B vaccine, which the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention stopped recommending for all children in a move criticized by scientific and medical groups nationwide. She said she supports the CDC's approach to the birth dose, but that promoting universal vaccination against the disease "at some point in childhood" was worthwhile.

Senators scrutinize Means' past comments on birth control, psychedelics

Washington Democratic Sen. Patty Murray asked Means to address her past comments that birth control pills were being prescribed "like candy" and showed a "disrespect of things that create life."

Means said she thinks oral contraceptives should be available to all women, but raised concerns about what she called "horrifying side effects" that can occur in certain populations.

"Doctors do not have enough time for a thorough informed consent conversation," she said.

According to the American College of Obstetricians & Gynecologists, hormonal birth control methods such as the pill, patch or ring are safe for most people but are associated with a small increased risk of deep vein thrombosis, heart attack and stroke. The risk is higher in some people, such as smokers older than 35 or those who have multiple cardiovascular disease risk factors.

Sen. Susan Collins, a Republican from Maine, noted that Means had touted the therapeutic use of psychedelic mushrooms in her book and tried them herself.

"What I would say as a private citizen is in many cases different than what I'd say as a public health official," Means replied, adding she wouldn't recommend psychedelics for the public.

Means isn't a traditional candidate for the role

During the hearing, Means said her goal is to "get more whole, healthy foods on American plates." It's a worldview she developed during her unconventional path in the medical field.

After graduating from Stanford University with a doctor of medicine degree, Means dropped out of her surgical residency program at Oregon Health and Science University in 2018. She later cited her belief that the health care system was broken and exploitative as the reason for her withdrawal.

Means then turned to alternative approaches to address what she has described as widespread metabolic dysfunction driven largely by poor nutrition and an overabundance of ultraprocessed foods.

Because she had completed enough postgraduate training to obtain a medical license, she did so and started her own functional medicine practice in Oregon, which later closed. She co-founded Levels, a nutrition-, sleep- and exercise-tracking app that can give users insights from blood tests and continuous glucose monitoring.

Financial disclosures show she made hundreds of thousands of dollars promoting wellness products, including specialty basil seed supplements, teas and elixirs, probiotic products and a prepared meal delivery service. An Associated Press investigation found that while recommending these products, she at times failed to disclose that she could profit or benefit from the sales.

Senators on Wednesday questioned Means about some of those cases. She said the claims were incorrect, and that she takes conflicts of interest seriously.

In an ethics filing, Means said that if she is confirmed, she will resign from her Levels position and forfeit or divest stock options and stock in the company. She also pledged to stop working for Rupa, a specialty lab work company for which she developed an online course. While she may continue receiving royalty payments from her book "Good Energy," she will not promote it, the filing said.

The filing also noted she will "not acquire any direct financial interest in entities listed on the Food and Drug Administration's prohibited holdings list."

At least two previous surgeons general have publicly suggested Means is not fit for the job.

Last May, former Bush administration surgeon general Dr. Rich Carmona wrote that Means' professional qualifications "raise significant concerns." Later that month, President Donald Trump's first-term surgeon general, Dr. Jerome Adams, wrote on social media that the surgeon general's traditional leadership of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps requires a medical license.

Means is seeking to join an administration for which her brother, Calley Means, already works. As a senior adviser to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, he has helped promote the Republican administration's warnings about ultraprocessed foods.

What to know about the risks of carbon monoxide poisoning after college student's death

By The Associated Press undefined

A Rhode Island college football player died from carbon monoxide poisoning after he tried to charge his phone in his car during a massive snow storm in a power outage.

The storm knocked out power for hundreds of thousands of people across the Northeast.

First responders found 21-year-old Salve Regina University student Joseph Boutros unresponsive in his car on Monday in Newport, Rhode Island, where he was parked outside of a university building. Police said the vehicle's exhaust pipe was obstructed by snow and that his death from carbon monoxide poisoning was accidental.

The area didn't have power at the time and Boutros told a fellow student that he was using his car to charge his phone, Newport Police Captain Joseph Carroll said. The university's football team said they were "heartbroken" about Boutros' death, which they announced in an Instagram post.

Many Rhode Island residents faced a third straight morning stuck in their homes on Wednesday as some residential streets remain unplowed.

Blizzards present a host of hazards, ranging from slippery ice to severe cold. But one of the most lethal risks posed by heavy snowfall is completely undetectable to humans.

Here is what to know about the risks of carbon monoxide poisoning — especially during power outages and cold weather.

Time of year with highest risk of carbon monoxide poisoning

The risk of carbon monoxide poisoning is higher in the winter and after heavy snowfall, according to the Centers for Disease Control. During cold weather, people are more likely to use furnaces and heaters that emit the lethal gas.

A number of malfunctions can obstruct proper ventilation, including snowfall that can block exhaust pipes or vents.

How does carbon monoxide affect the body

Carbon monoxide is often referred to as the "silent killer" because it is odorless, colorless and tasteless. Prolonged exposure to carbon monoxide reduces the ability of blood to carry oxygen to the body's organs.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 64 of 77

It can cause throbbing headaches, disorientation and drowsiness, followed by unconsciousness, convulsions and eventually death.

Why people die from exposure in the winter

When people use heating systems without proper air flow or ventilation — such as running their car in a closed garage, bringing grills inside or using gas stoves for personal heat — carbon monoxide can build up and become dangerous. That is especially common in tragic cases like the one that led to Boutros' death on Monday, where people wait in their cars for long periods of time without realizing that an exhaust pipe is obstructed.

One of the most notable examples happened in 1978, when a snowstorm dropped two feet (0.6 meters) of snow across New England over the course of roughly 30 hours. Snow fell so fast that it trapped roughly 3,000 cars and 500 trucks along eight miles (13km) of one highway in Massachusetts, according to the New England Historical Society.

That year, 14 people died of carbon monoxide poisoning while sitting in their snowbound vehicles.

But the risk is not limited to just cars. More than three dozen people died in a historic 2022 storm, and at least one died from snow covering furnaces and sending carbon monoxide into their New York homes.

How to know whether it's safe to stay in a car

Sitting in an idling car for a long time is usually safe, according to Jake Fisher, the senior director of auto testing at Consumer Reports. But drivers should keep an eye out for warning signs and have them inspected annually. Vehicles are more prone to exhaust leaks after a crash and should be inspected before they are put back on the road.

"Engines emit a lot of very dangerous chemicals and gases," Fisher said. "If your car is not running right and you hear it sounding funny, you really do need to get it checked out."

Soaring cost of food and other staples squeezes Iranians as threat of US attack looms

By NASSER KARIMI and MEHDI FATTAHI Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — Every day, Iranians go to stores and find prices rising. Some post photos on social media of the shrinking contents of their shopping carts as they struggle to buy enough basic staples for their families. The mounting cost of living is an extra weight bearing down as Iranians prepare for a possible war with the U.S. and wrestle with the aftermath of protests that swept the country last month.

"Everybody is under pressure: merchants, civil servants, laborers," said Ebrahim Momeni, a 52-year-old retired civil servant. "The weaker class of people is being crushed."

Iran's economy has struggled for years because of international sanctions and mismanagement.

It experienced some relief under a 2015 nuclear deal that lifted many sanctions, until U.S. President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the accord in 2018. Since coming back into office more than a year ago, Trump revived a "maximum pressure" campaign, expanding sanctions that target Iran's financial sector and energy exports. On Wednesday, his administration imposed new sanctions on 30 people and companies accused of enabling Iran's production of ballistic missiles and drones, and illicit oil sales.

The pressure has accelerated the devaluation of Iran's currency, the rial. In 2015, when the nuclear deal was signed, the rial traded at about 32,000 to the dollar. In late December, it was at 1.3 million to the dollar. On Wednesday, it had reached a new low at 1.65 million rials to the dollar — worsened by fears of a U.S. attack.

Lower classes desperate for relief as prices jump

Inflation has surpassed 46% compared with January of last year. Economists warn that the rial's accelerating decline risks feeding a vicious cycle of higher prices and reduced purchasing power. They expect double-digit inflation to plague Iran's economy — which also suffers from high unemployment among younger people — for years to come.

The plunging value of the rial was one trigger for protests that began in late December in Tehran's main bazaar and then spiraled nationwide.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 65 of 77

Prices for everyday items, from groceries to toiletries, are soaring.

Momeni said he makes about 700 million rials (about \$540) a month. Just in the past month, a kilo (2.2 pounds) of red meat increased from 13 million rials (\$10) to 22 million rials (\$17). In the same period, the price of a liter of milk (a quarter of a gallon) doubled from 520,000 rials to 1.1 million rials, and a box of pasta rose from 340,000 rials to 570,000 rials.

"Those with lower incomes and fixed salaries are suffering because of the price hikes," said Farhad Panahirad, a 44-year-old taxi driver. Together, he and his wife make about 600 million rials (about \$460) a month, he said.

Several people in the markets on Wednesday explained how they try to deal with rising financial pressures — they check social media every day to see news about the latest prices, or go shopping at night, when some produce is marked down to half price to get rid of inventory before it spoils.

Fearing the U.S. could launch strikes at any time, Iranians are also scrambling to purchase emergency supplies. That includes flashlights, small gas ovens, and tape for securing windows against explosions, said the owner of a tool shop in central Iran, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

Some try to purchase bulk amounts of beans, bread, rice and canned food despite the high prices. "I am not happy to buy this much stuff, but my wife said we had to be prepared for uncertainty in the coming days," said Saeed Ebrahimi, 43, an electrical technician and father of two.

Even items such as washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and refrigerators have doubled in price, according to Iranian media.

War fears hang over the economy

Tehran-based economist Farbod Molavi wrote in the independent Dona-e-Eghtesad newspaper that prices are higher because of uncertainty in the market and the rising costs of raw materials. Iran is suffering from both a recession and high unemployment, he added.

Unemployment was officially around 7.8% in October, up from 7.2% for the same period in 2024, and runs as high as 20% among young people. About 24 million Iranians are between 15 and 34 years old, according to official statistics.

Acknowledging the suffering, the government in January began distributing payments of 10 million rials a month each to some 70 million people, about 75% of the population, to spend on food. It has promised to increase the payments if prices go higher.

But the strain appears likely to continue. Trump has threatened strikes on Iran if it doesn't agree to a new accord curtailing its nuclear program. He has massed the largest buildup of warships and aircraft in the region in decades. The two sides have held two rounds of negotiations in recent weeks and a third is expected to be held in Geneva on Thursday.

Panahirad, the taxi driver, said he is pessimistic the negotiations will bring any relief for those struggling to buy food. "(Trump) is bullying them, to some extent. After all, he is a superpower and says what he wishes must be done," he said,

"Wherever you go now people are talking about war. If you go to a bakery to buy bread you see people talking about war," said Momeni. "This state of limbo is worse than war."

UK parliamentary speaker says he tipped off police over possible Mandelson flight risk

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The speaker of the U.K.'s House of Commons said Wednesday he tipped off police that Peter Mandelson, the former ambassador to the U.S. who is facing accusations of leaking information to the late convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, was a possible flight risk.

Mandelson was arrested Monday at his north London home on suspicion of misconduct in public office. He was released on bail early Tuesday morning after more than nine hours of questioning.

Lawyers for Mandelson, a former senior Cabinet minister, said the arrest was the result of a "baseless suggestion" that he planned to flee the country and was carried out despite an agreement that he would

speak to London's Metropolitan Police voluntarily.

Speaker Lindsay Hoyle told lawmakers that he passed "relevant" information to police, without disclosing the source.

"To prevent any inaccurate speculation I'd like to confirm that, upon receipt of information, that I felt it was relevant I pass this on to the Metropolitan Police in good faith, as is my duty and responsibility," Hoyle said. "It is regrettable this rapidly ended in the media."

Hoyle added that it would not be appropriate for him to say anything further because the investigation into Mandelson was ongoing.

The police force later apologized to Hoyle for "inadvertently revealing information," after reports that police had told Mandelson's lawyers about the speaker's tipoff.

"Peter Mandelson's overriding priority is to cooperate with the police investigation, as he has done throughout this process, and to clear his name," his lawyers at the firm Mishcon De Reya said after his release.

Mandelson's arrest came four days after the former Prince Andrew was arrested on a similar suspicion of misconduct in public office linked to Epstein.

Both men face allegations that they passed confidential government information to the disgraced financier. The claims surfaced after the U.S. Justice Department last month released a trove of more than 3 million pages of Epstein-related documents.

Mandelson, 72, appears to have sent Epstein, whom he referred to as his "best pal," sensitive government information that could potentially influence markets when he was a senior minister in the British government in 2009 and 2010.

One internal government report discussed possibly selling government assets to raise money for the U.K. after the 2008 global financial crisis. He also appeared to tell Epstein — who died by suicide in a New York prison in 2019 — he would lobby other members of the government to reduce a tax on bankers' bonuses.

Payment records suggest Epstein gave Mandelson or his husband, Reinaldo Avila da Silva, \$75,000 in 2003 and 2004. Mandelson said he had no recollection of receiving that money and questioned the authenticity of bank statements. He has denied wrongdoing.

Mandelson does not face allegations of sexual misconduct.

The former Prince Andrew, now known as Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, has also denied any wrongdoing over his links to convicted sex offender Epstein, but has not directly responded to the latest allegations stemming from the so-called Epstein Files.

Phil Collins, Lauryn Hill, INXS, Iron Maiden, Luther Vandross and Shakira get Rock Hall nominations

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Phil Collins, Mariah Carey, Lauryn Hill, INXS, Iron Maiden, Luther Vandross and Shakira are some of the 2026 nominees for induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, a wide net that includes rap, metal, R&B, hip-hop, Britpop, blues rock and pop.

The hall revealed the list of 17 performer nominees Wednesday, a list that also includes Melissa Etheridge, Jeff Buckley, Pink, New Edition, Sade and the Wu-Tang Clan.

Billy Idol, Joy Division/New Order return to the nominations after missing induction last year. The list this time also repeats two sets of musical brothers who have had public feuds and recent reunions — The Black Crowes and Oasis.

Collins, who already is in the Hall as a member of Genesis and had such solo hits as "In the Air Tonight" and "One More Night," has earned eight Grammys, including album of the year in 1985 for "No Jacket Required." Hill's "The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill" made history as the first hip-hop album to win the Grammy for album of the year in 1999.

Carey, nominated in 2024 and 2025, has had 19 No. 1 hits on the Billboard Hot 100, while soul-jazz vocalist Sade, also nominated in 2024, had such soft rock hits as "Smooth Operator" and "The Sweetest Taboo." The Wu-Tang Clan have been hailed as rap innovators since their game-changing 1993 debut

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 67 of 77

album "Enter the Wu-Tang."

INXS ruled the late 1980s charts with hits like "Need You Tonight," "Devil Inside" and "New Sensation." Two-time Grammy winner Etheridge is best known for her songs "Come to My Window" and "I'm the Only One." Iron Maiden helped power the new wave of British heavy metal with iconic albums like "The Number of the Beast."

New Edition had the hits "Cool It Now" and "Candy Girl," while Shakira has been lauded for her ability to bridge Latin music with rock and pop. Pink has had four No. 1 songs and three No. 1 albums, including "The Truth About Love."

Ten of the 17 nominees are on the ballot for the first time: Buckley, Collins, Etheridge, Hill, INXS, New Edition, Pink, Shakira, Vandross and Wu-Tang Clan.

Vandross, who sold more than 25 million albums and had the hits "Here and Now" and "Any Love," died in 2005. Buckley, whose 1994 debut album "Grace" is widely acclaimed, died in 1997.

"This diverse list of talented nominees recognizes the ever-evolving faces and sounds of Rock & Roll and its continued impact on youth culture," John Sykes, chairman of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Foundation, said in a statement.

The 2026 inductees will be revealed in April, along with inductees entering the hall under three special committee categories: Musical influence, musical excellence and the Ahmet Ertegun Non-Performer Award.

Artists must have released their first commercial recording at least 25 years before they're eligible for induction. Nominees will be voted on by more than 1,200 artists, historians and music industry professionals.

Last year, Cyndi Lauper, Outkast, Bad Company, Chubby Checker, Soundgarden, Joe Cocker, Salt-N-Pepa, The White Stripes, Carol Kaye, Nicky Hopkins, Lenny Waronker, Thom Bell and Warren Zevon all were inducted.

Trump's portrayal of 'golden age' is out of sync with how Americans see economy

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER and PAUL WISEMAN Associated Press Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump sought in his first State of the Union address to sell Americans on the idea of a booming economy, falling prices, and soaring jobs, yet he faces a skeptical public with a much gloomier view.

Barely 12 hours before his speech, in fact, The Conference Board, a business research group, released its latest consumer confidence report. It showed that overall confidence in the economy remains historically low, and is barely above the level it plunged to in the depths of the COVID recession.

In February, its index ticked up to 91.2, which is noticeably below a four-year peak reached in November 2024 of 112.8. Americans remain dejected by high prices and see few jobs available, the survey found.

Other polling has yielded similar results: Only 39% of Americans approve of Trump's economic leadership, according to the latest Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research survey. And the University of Michigan's consumer sentiment survey remains mired at recessionary levels.

Trump sought to overcome that gloom by pointing to economic data that paints a brighter picture, a tactic that President Joe Biden tried with little success. But on Tuesday night there were gaps between the president's claims and the economic reality many Americans are facing.

"Inflation is plummeting, incomes are rising fast, the roaring economy is roaring like never before," Trump said.

The economy grew last year, but more slowly

To begin with, the economy is growing but it is hardly "roaring."

It expanded 2.2% last year, down from 2.8% in Biden's last year and 2.9% in 2023. To be sure, most Americans were deeply dissatisfied with the price spikes under Biden that pushed inflation to a peak of 9.1% in 2022, a four-decade high.

A roaring U.S. economy typically looks more like the late 1990s, when growth topped 4% for four years in a row, or in the 1980s, when it rose by 3.5% or higher for six years in a row.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 68 of 77

Consumers are still struggling with high prices

Inflation has slowed in the past year, but many Americans still cite high prices in surveys as a key reason they are unhappy with the economy.

Trump correctly noted that core inflation, which excludes the volatile food and energy categories, fell to a five-year low in January. Yet other price measures show that inflation remains stubbornly elevated: A gauge of core prices closely monitored by the Federal Reserve was 3% higher in December than a year earlier, above the Fed's 2% target. It places less weight on housing costs, which have cooled, than the measure Trump cited.

Nearly half of the people responding to the University of Michigan's consumer sentiment survey in February "spontaneously mentioned high prices eroding their personal finances," Joanne Hsu, director of the survey, said in a statement.

Trump noted that the price of eggs has fallen sharply from its peak, which is true, but most necessities Americans rely on — groceries, rent, electricity — remain much more expensive than they were five years ago. And electricity prices rose another 6.3% just in the past 12 months.

Trump's tariffs have also pushed up the cost of many imported items, including furniture, auto parts, tools, and clothes. And groceries such as ground beef, coffee, and bananas have risen sharply in the past year. Ground beef prices, for example, are up 17%.

Hiring ground nearly to a halt last year

One reason for the consumer gloom is likely the sharp slowdown in hiring last year. Employers added just 181,000 jobs in 2025 — or 15,000 a month — making it the worst year for job growth outside of a recession since 2002.

And despite Trump's pledge to revive American manufacturing, factories lost 108,000 jobs in 2025 on top of the 202,000 lost in the last two years of the Biden administration. Auto and auto parts plants have cut nearly 74,000 jobs the past two years.

Trump's tariffs are partially to blame because they force many factories to pay more for imported raw materials and parts. But high interest rates have also hurt manufacturers over the past couple of years. And many of them hired aggressively — perhaps too much — in 2021 and 2022 when the U.S. economy was roaring back from pandemic lockdowns. Automation also means that many factories need fewer workers.

Hiring did come in unexpectedly strong in January at 130,000 new jobs, and factories added jobs for the first month in more than a year.

Benefits of tariffs remain unclear

Trump suggested his tariffs have directly contributed to an economic boom for the U.S., but most Americans have likely seen little benefit.

"Moving forward, factories, jobs, investment and trillions and trillions of dollars will continue pouring into the United States of America," Trump said.

Trump once again made his tariffs sound painless, insisting that they are paid by foreign countries. In fact, they are paid by U.S. importers who often try to pass the burden along to their customers through higher prices. Foreign companies might take a hit if they have to cut prices to maintain sales in the United States. But import prices haven't fallen significantly, suggesting that overseas exporters aren't feeling much pain.

A study by Harvard University economist Alberto Cavallo and two colleagues found that U.S. consumers were eating 43% of the higher tariff costs and that U.S. companies were absorbing most of the rest.

And so far Trump's sweeping import taxes haven't delivered much progress toward his goal of reducing the vast and longstanding U.S. trade deficit — the gap between what America sells to foreign countries and what it buys from them.

The U.S. trade deficit in goods such as automobiles and appliances — the focus of Trump's protectionist policies — actually hit a record \$1.24 trillion last year, increasing 2% from 2024.

The former Prince Andrew went from helicopter pilot to trade envoy to royal pariah

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — He was reportedly his mother Queen Elizabeth II's favorite, but the former Prince Andrew has long been a headache for Britain's royal family.

Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor was arrested Thursday, his 66th birthday, on suspicion of misconduct in public office in an inquiry stemming from his relationship with Jeffrey Epstein. He is the first senior British royal to be arrested since King Charles I, almost 400 years ago.

Born a prince in 1960, Andrew is the third child and second son of the queen and her husband Prince Philip. His elder brother Charles was destined for the throne. Andrew took a tried-and-tested route for younger royal sons: military service.

After 22 years in the Royal Navy, including combat operations as a helicopter pilot during the 1982 Falklands War, Andrew was named Britain's special representative for international trade and investment in 2001. His frequent taxpayer-funded travel saw him dubbed "Air Miles Andy" by the press.

The current police investigation stems from that period. It follows documents in recently released Epstein files that suggest Andrew passed on official government documents to the late financier when he was a trade envoy. The former prince has not been charged with a crime. He has long denied any wrongdoing over his Epstein links.

Links to questionable characters

Once a subject of media fascination for his love life, the man the tabloids dubbed "Randy Andy" became a regular source of headlines because of his money woes and links to questionable characters, including Epstein, the American financier and convicted sex offender.

The then-prince's business associations were the subject of tabloid stories stretching back to at least 2007, when he sold his house near Windsor Castle for 15 million pounds, 3 million pounds more than the original asking price, to Timur Kulibayev, son-in-law of then-Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, raising concerns that the deal was an attempt to buy influence in Britain.

A representative of Kulibayev said the purchase "was a commercial, arm's length transaction," and the price rose "as part of a competitive bidding process."

Mountbatten-Windsor was forced to step down from the trade role in 2011 amid growing concern about his friendship with Epstein, who had been sentenced to 18 months in prison in 2008 after pleading guilty to soliciting a minor for prostitution.

In 2015, U.S. court documents contained allegations that Andrew had sex with a woman three times between 1999 and 2002 in London, New York and on Epstein's private Caribbean island, including when she was a minor under U.S. law. He denied having ever met the woman, later identified as Virginia Roberts Giuffre.

After Epstein was arrested again in 2019, Andrew gave a disastrous interview to the BBC's Newsnight program, in which he tried to explain away his contacts with Epstein. It backfired — he was widely criticized for giving unbelievable explanations and failing to show empathy for Epstein's victims.

Royal exile

Amid the backlash, Andrew announced on Nov. 20, 2019, that he was giving up public duties and charity roles "for the foreseeable future."

In August 2021, Giuffre sued Andrew in a New York court, alleging that the prince had sex with her when she was 17. Andrew continued to deny the allegations, but he was stripped of all military affiliations and royal charity work.

Andrew ultimately settled the case for an undisclosed sum. While he didn't admit wrongdoing, Andrew did acknowledge Giuffre's suffering as a victim of sex trafficking. Giuffre died by suicide in April 2025, aged 41.

In 2024, a court case revealed Andrew's relationship with a businessman and suspected Chinese spy who was barred from the United Kingdom as a threat to national security. Authorities were concerned that the man could have misused his influence over Andrew, according to court documents.

After emails emerged showing Andrew remained in contact with Epstein longer than he previously claimed and Giuffre's posthumous memoir brought new allegations, King Charles III in October stripped his brother of his titles of prince and Duke of York and evicted him from his Royal Lodge mansion in Windsor.

The release of millions of pages of Epstein files by the U.S. Department of Justice last month sparked new scrutiny.

Andrew spent about 11 hours in police custody on Thursday before being released under investigation, meaning he has neither been charged nor exonerated.

Despite being stripped of his title, he remains eighth in line to the British throne. A law would have to be passed to remove him from the line of succession.

He married Sarah Ferguson in 1986 and they had two daughters, Princess Beatrice and Princess Eugenie, before divorcing a decade later. Ferguson also is facing questions about her friendship with Epstein.

What to know as the Louvre gets a new chief after a surprise resignation and a bruising year

By THOMAS ADAMSON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — After months of pressure, the Louvre has a new director.

Christophe Leribault was named to lead the landmark on Wednesday, half a day after the resignation of previous director Laurence des Cars. The leadership change at the world's most-visited museum comes after the October crown jewels heist and a string of failures that battered confidence in one of the country's most prized institutions.

The rapid handover is meant to restore order at a museum hit by a punishing run of crises: the heist, labor unrest, water leaks, aging infrastructure and a suspected, decade-long \$12 million ticket fraud scheme.

It also protects a politically loaded project for President Emmanuel Macron, who has made the Louvre overhaul a signature cultural legacy plan as he eyes the end of his term next year.

The government cast Leribault, a veteran museum director, as the steady hand for a battered institution, with responsibility for both the Louvre's security overhaul and its modernization.

An 18th-century specialist trained at the École du Louvre, Leribault has led France's biggest museums, including the Petit Palais and the Musée d'Orsay.

He most recently ran Versailles, one of France's biggest heritage sites, with heavy visitor traffic and an annual budget of about 170 million euros (\$200 million).

His résumé makes him a crisis-era choice: a curator-administrator shaped by France's museum system and used to public scrutiny, large crowds and the mechanics of state cultural power.

Why des Cars' exit landed so hard

Des Cars was not just any museum chief. Appointed in 2021, she became the first woman to lead the Louvre — a symbolic break at a palace built for kings.

For many in France's cultural world, her departure finally answered the question that had hung over the Louvre since the heist: How could a breach of that scale happen at one of the country's most symbolic institutions and no top official fall?

Macron's office accepted her resignation as an "act of responsibility," while saying the museum now needs calm and fresh momentum for security and modernization projects.

On Tuesday, she told Le Figaro that she had become a lightning rod and could no longer carry out the museum's transformation in the same institutional climate.

Crown Jewels stolen and a punishing run of crises

The 88 million-euro (\$102 million) jewels heist was the trigger, but not the whole story.

Labor unrest, leaks, aging infrastructure and a separate ticket-fraud scandal had already left the Louvre looking, in Paris and beyond, like a famous institution losing control of the basics.

A wildcat strike in June stranded visitors outside the pyramid and laid bare worker anger over overcrowding, understaffing and other conditions.

In a rare interview with The Associated Press just days before des Cars' resignation, the Louvre's No.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 71 of 77

2, general administrator Kim Pham, called fraud at a museum of this scale “statistically inevitable,” while also acknowledging shortcomings and saying controls had been tightened.

He cited the scale: 86,000 square meters, 35,000 works on display and about 9 million visitors a year.

The old-palace problem — and the Paris problem

Privately, Louvre officials and others in France’s museum world make a blunter point: Old stone buildings leak.

The Louvre is that problem multiplied by a thousand — a medieval-to-modern palace complex in the middle of a dense capital, not a contained site on the outskirts.

Pham made that argument in more diplomatic terms, describing the Louvre as a historic building with “many historical layers” dating back to the start of the 13th century.

The Louvre sits in central Paris, with tourist pressure, traffic, multiple access points and the daily wear that comes with being both monument and mass destination.

Macron’s Louvre project is about his legacy

As Macron heads toward the end of his time in office — his final term ends next year — the Louvre overhaul has become his signature cultural project — his version of the big museum-and-monument gambles French presidents are often remembered for.

He announced the “Louvre New Renaissance” plan in January 2025, a project now expected to cost about 1.15 billion euros (\$1.36 billion), according to the French state auditors.

It includes a new entrance near the Seine, new underground spaces, and a dedicated room for the “Mona Lisa” with timed access to ease the crush around the painting and improve visitor flow.

In France, presidents are often linked to major cultural works — Georges Pompidou with the Centre Pompidou, François Mitterrand with the national library, Jacques Chirac with the Quai Branly museum.

The Louvre is Macron’s project on that scale.

That is one reason some in France’s cultural world openly speculated why des Cars did not leave in October, right after the heist, even after offering her resignation: Macron had so much riding on the Louvre plan that an immediate departure risked making his flagship cultural project look like it was collapsing.

A lengthy security revamp

A key question is how far the museum has come in fortifying its security, and the answer is: not far enough or fast enough.

Findings of the French state auditor said the Louvre’s security overhaul is not expected to be completed until 2032, according to French media reports. The reports say that as of 2024, less than 40% of the museum rooms were equipped with cameras.

There have been concrete moves since the theft. Extra measures, including anti-intrusion devices and anti-vehicle barriers, were put in place by the end of 2025.

Des Cars also told lawmakers in November that the Louvre would install 100 external cameras by the end of 2026 and tighten coordination with police, including a police station within the Louvre estate.

President Donald Trump’s post-State of the Union sales job begins now

By SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump has delivered the State of the Union. Now the challenge for him is to make that message stick.

His address Tuesday was a declaration of pride in the achievements of his still-young second term, as he boasted of an economic renaissance at home while he’s imposed a new world order abroad. Trump is getting his first opportunity to test drive that midterm year message later this week, when he travels to Texas, where the Latino voters whose shift toward Trump in his successful 2024 reelection campaign highlighted how he had reshaped the Republican coalition.

The White House aims to promote that message to a broader electorate that’s largely disenchanted

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 72 of 77

with Trump's job performance, while a looming conflict in the Middle East threatens to shift focus from his domestic priorities. Trump also has a proclivity to go off-script during political rallies, such as during a speech last week in Rome, Georgia, asserting he's "solved" affordability when high prices remain a chief concern for voters.

Still, the themes of economic prosperity and a more secure America that Trump emphasized in his 108-minute speech Tuesday will underpin the broader narrative he and his fellow Republicans will seek to sell to voters this November. A slew of Cabinet officials — including Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins — blanketed the airwaves Wednesday, promoting the highlights from Trump's address.

"This is going to be setting the tone for the following year," Sen. Markwayne Mullin, R-Okla., who has close ties with Trump, told The Associated Press.

Trump is known for being a master of the 'big moments'

Presidents often travel immediately after delivering the State of the Union to amplify their agenda. President Joe Biden, for instance, went to swing states such as Wisconsin and Pennsylvania the day after his speech in the last two years of his term.

Vice President JD Vance will be first to hit the road with a Thursday visit to a Wisconsin factory. Trump won't leave the Washington area until Friday, when he heads to Texas, to talk about the economy and energy policies just days ahead of the state's March 3 congressional primaries. On the day after the State of the Union, the president will spend much of his time participating in meetings at the White House, including policy sessions and a sit-down with Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy.

But Trump — who wove a series of made-for-social media surprises into his address — is known for being able to command attention in a fractured news environment, and he's likely to find other ways to break through aside from the usual post-State of the Union blitz.

"Donald Trump is a master at the big moments, so he obviously cares a lot about how the speech goes, but what he cares a lot about are the clips that get replayed over and over again from the State of the Union," said Austin Cantrell, who served as an assistant White House press secretary in Trump's first term.

Cantrell, who's now with the Chattanooga, Tennessee-based firm Bridge Public Affairs, said: "I don't expect this to be some Aaron Sorkin-esque, perfectly choreographed post-State of the Union media fan-out."

Six years ago, it was Trump's move to award conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honor, that surprised the audience. Tuesday's address — record-breaking in its length — included similar attention-grabbing moments. He said he'd give the same honor to Connor Hellebuyck, goaltender for the U.S. men's hockey team, fresh off winning a gold medal at the Winter Olympics in Milano-Cortina, Italy. Trump called Hellebuyck and his teammates into the House chamber, where they were greeted with applause.

White House says Trump will get out on the trail for his party

Trump also used his speech to roll out new proposals to address affordability concerns, while castigating Democrats for opposing policies he said have led to a more prosperous, safer America. Virginia Gov. Abigail Spanberger, in Democrats' response, argued costs remain high for many Americans and families are still struggling under Trump's policies.

Trump called on both parties to "protect American citizens, not illegal aliens," and pushed for measures to limit mail-in ballots and tighten voter identification rules, while warning about the dangers of unchecked, illegal migration.

"I do think a lot of the success outlined in the State of the Union will be a part of the Republican message in the fall," Sen. Eric Schmitt, R-Mo., another close Trump ally, told the AP, pointing to the GOP's achievements on tax policy and border security. "As far as the president is concerned, I think he'll be anxious to get on the road and talk about the success."

Senior White House officials have promised that Trump will travel the country regularly until the midterms. He so far has hit critical battleground states such as Michigan, Pennsylvania and North Carolina on his economy tour, but he also traveled to reliably conservative Iowa and the congressional district of former

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 73 of 77

Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene. He has boosted candidates — in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, he bantered with Republican Michael Whatley and promoted his Senate run — while sometimes veering far away from the economic points the trips are meant to emphasize.

Just the optics of leaving Washington can help telegraph to voters that a president cares about connecting with them. Edward Frantz, a historian at the University of Indianapolis, said Herbert Hoover — an engineer, self-made millionaire and technocrat — believed he could solve the nation's ills by working with his team in isolation and rarely leaving Washington. That led to a perception among voters that Hoover simply didn't care, because they didn't see him connecting with Americans.

"If you think about a call and response ... the call is the State of the Union, and if you really do care about being in touch with others, then what's the response?" Frantz said. "The best way to be able to see that is by hitting the road."

How Americans feel about Trump has remained relatively stable throughout his second term, making it unlikely that one speech will meaningfully shift the way he's perceived. His approval rating has changed very little during his second term, Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research polling has found, falling only slightly from 42% in March 2025 to 36% in early February.

Nevertheless, the annual address offers Trump the chance to reframe his message, just as it has for presidents who came before him.

Presidential historian Timothy Naftali pointed out that in 1996, Bill Clinton used his State of the Union to set the themes of his Democratic reelection campaign. After George W. Bush's midterm drubbing in November 2006, the Republican struck a noticeably more conciliatory tone toward the new Democratic leadership that had just taken charge on Capitol Hill.

"The State of the Union, they're less important than they once were because with a president like Trump, he's always available," said Naftali, a senior research scholar at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University. "But the State of the Union is an opportunity to reset the president's agenda or to reaffirm it, and resetting an agenda in the social media era is different from resetting it in previous times."

UK leader Starmer faces an electoral test after Epstein fallout shakes his grip on power

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British Prime Minister Keir Starmer had a narrow escape this month, when tremors from the Jeffrey Epstein files shook his leadership and threatened to bring him down.

He faces new danger this week from a special election Thursday in northwest England, where his center-left Labour Party could face defeat by either the hard-line anti-immigration party Reform UK or the self-styled "eco-populist" Green Party. Losing to either would drive home to Labour members how unpopular the prime minister is with voters on both left and right.

The election is in Gorton and Denton, a seat in Greater Manchester that has been Labour turf for a century. Yet Labour's fortunes have fallen so far that University of Manchester political science professor Rob Ford says victory for Starmer's party when results are announced early Friday would be considered a surprise "man-bites-dog" outcome.

A three-way race

Local polling and betting markets suggest a close three-way contest between Labour local councilor Angeliki Stogia, Reform UK contender Matthew Goodwin an academic-turned-pundit, and the Greens' Hannah Spencer, a plumber.

The anti-immigration Reform UK, led by the veteran hard-right politician Nigel Farage, holds just eight of the 650 seats in the House of Commons — Labour has 404 — but has topped national opinion polls for months, ahead of both Labour and the main opposition Conservative Party.

The Green Party has just four seats, but under energetic leader Zack Polanski has expanded beyond environmental concerns to focus on issues including support for the Palestinian cause and the legalization

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 74 of 77

of drugs.

The election's outcome is hard to call, in a diverse area that has traditional working-class neighborhoods — once strongly Labour, now tilting toward Reform — as well as large numbers of university students and Muslim residents. Many of them feel disillusioned by Labour's centrist shift under Starmer and the government's perceived slowness at criticizing Israel's conduct of the war against Hamas in Gaza.

That makes it fertile ground for the Green Party. Spencer said a win for the Greens would "send shock waves through the political establishment."

Starmer on Wednesday railed against Green drug policies and urged voters to back Labour to counter Reform's "hate and division."

In part, the contest echoes the challenge from populist upstarts faced by mainstream parties around the world.

But some of Starmer's problems are of his own making.

The British leader has endured a string of setbacks since he led Labour to a landslide election victory in July 2024. He has struggled to deliver promised economic growth, repair tattered public services and ease the cost of living. He pledged a return to honest government after 14 years of Conservative government that ended in scandals and chaos, but has been beset by missteps and U-turns over welfare cuts and other unpopular policies.

The lackluster performance sparked discontent among Labour lawmakers that was ignited into crisis by revelations about former U.K. ambassador to Washington Peter Mandelson in a trove of Jeffrey Epstein files released by authorities in the United States last month.

Police are investigating emails suggesting Mandelson passed sensitive government information to Epstein a decade and a half ago. Mandelson was arrested and questioned by detectives this week before being released on bail. He does not face any allegations of sexual misconduct.

Starmer under pressure

Starmer fired Mandelson in September 2025 after evidence emerged that the ambassador had maintained a friendship with Epstein after the financier's 2008 conviction for sex offenses involving a minor.

The recent revelations reignited Labour lawmakers' anger at Starmer's poor judgment in appointing Mandelson to the Washington job, and pushed some to call for his resignation. After the leader of the Labour Party in Scotland joined those calls earlier this month, Starmer's chief of staff and communications director quit, and his premiership teetered on the brink.

Starmer vowed to fight on, and got a reprieve after potential leadership rivals publicly backed him. But his position remains precarious.

If Labour loses on Thursday, Starmer will face questions about why the party blocked Andy Burnham, the popular Labour mayor of Greater Manchester, from running. Burnham is widely seen as a potential leadership rival to Starmer.

A loss also would bolster those who argue that the government's efforts to win over "Reform-curious" voters with policies aimed at curbing immigration have alienated many liberal Labour voters.

The next national election does not have to be held until 2029, meaning the main threat to Starmer comes from within his own party.

Ford said a narrow Labour victory in Gorton and Denton "will buy him a reprieve," but Starmer still faces peril after May 7 elections for the Scottish and Welsh parliaments and local councils in England, when Labour is expected to do badly.

"It remains to be seen whether the (special election) result panics them into making a challenge now, or whether they bide their time and make a challenge in May — which is likely to be even more gruesome," Ford said.

The home of the 'Mona Lisa' has a new boss to steer the Louvre out of crisis after jewel heist

By SYLVIE CORBET and JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The home of the "Mona Lisa" is getting a new boss. Art historian Christophe Leribault, a veteran museum director, is taking over at the Louvre, shouldering the challenge of getting the world's largest museum out of crisis after the brazen heist in October of the French crown jewels.

French government spokeswoman Maud Bregeon announced Wednesday that Leribault is taking over from outgoing Louvre director Laurence des Cars, who resigned Tuesday.

The difficulties he inherits are formidable.

The daylight robbery — among the highest-profile museum thefts in living memory — exposed alarming security holes at the Paris landmark.

The former royal palace has also suffered a broad array of other problems that have presented a picture of a treasured national institution spiraling out of control.

They include a burst pipe near the "Mona Lisa," water leaks that damaged priceless books, aging buildings, staff walkouts over overcrowding, understaffing and ticket price hikes for most non-European visitors.

Pressure for new leadership deepened in recent weeks when authorities revealed a suspected decade-long ticket fraud operation linked to the museum that investigators say may have cost the Louvre 10 million euros (\$11.8 million).

Leribault brings a proven track record. He has been running another world-renowned French landmark and tourist attraction, the Versailles Palace, overseeing an annual budget of about 170 million euros (\$200 million). The former palace for French royalty west of Paris was the venue for Olympic equestrian sports when Paris hosted the summer games in 2024.

Leribault also is a previous head of Paris' Orsay Museum.

"He will be tasked with leading important projects that are crucial for the institution's future," Bregeon said as she announced Leribault's appointment at the Louvre.

They include security and modernization upgrades and the pursuit of a sweeping overhaul plan, branded "Louvre New Renaissance," that President Emmanuel Macron is championing.

Unveiled by Macron in January 2025, the renovation, which could take up to a decade, aims to modernize a museum widely seen as overstretched and physically worn down by mass tourism.

The plan includes a new entrance near the Seine River to ease pressure on I.M. Pei's pyramid, new underground spaces and a dedicated room for the "Mona Lisa" with timed access — all intended to improve crowd flow and reduce the daily crush of visitors that has become a symbol of the Louvre's success and its dysfunction.

The project is expected to cost about 1.15 billion euros (\$1.35 billion) according to a recent report from France's court of auditors. It will be partly funded by ticket revenue, state support, donations and income from the Louvre branch in Abu Dhabi.

Bregeon described Leribault as "very solid, trusted" and said he's expected to provide "vision" and "calm" to the museum.

In a statement, the Culture Ministry highlighted "his extensive experience at the helm of major institutions" and said Leribault will prioritize strengthening the security and safety of the Louvre's buildings, its collections and visitors and staff, and "restoring a climate of trust."

Pope Leo will visit 4 African countries as part of his packed 2026 travel plan

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — The Vatican on Wednesday announced a busy and lengthy foreign travel schedule for Pope Leo XIV in the first half of 2026, confirming the pontiff will visit Monaco, Spain and four African nations — Algeria, Cameroon, Angola and Equatorial Guinea.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 76 of 77

The announcement sets the stage for one of the busiest papal travel schedules in years, since Leo will also be undertaking a grand tour of Italy starting in May that will take him up and down the peninsula in a half-dozen one-day visits.

After Leo's election last May as the first U.S.-born pope, papal travel had largely been on hold. Leo had a packed calendar ministering to the 33 million pilgrims who came to the Vatican during the 2025 Holy Year.

But with the Jubilee now over, the 70-year-old Leo is freer to travel to meet his new flock. He is making similar get-to-know-you visits this Lent by visiting a Roman parish each Sunday.

The former Robert Prevost, who lived for two decades as a missionary in Peru, has said he loves to travel. He was on the road for much of his 12-year stint as Augustinian superior, visiting the order's communities around the world.

He took his first and so far only foreign trip as pope late last year, visiting Turkey and Lebanon. The trips fulfilled promises made by Pope Francis that he was unable to complete because of his failing health.

Now looking ahead to his own agenda, Leo will make a one-day visit to Monaco on March 28.

His next trip is a 10-day voyage starting soon after Easter: He will visit Algeria, Cameroon, Angola and Equatorial Guinea from April 13 to April 23. In recent times, only Francis undertook such an arduous and long foreign trip, when he visited Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, East Timor and Singapore in 2024. The Algeria stop is particularly significant to Leo given its strong connection to the life and death of St. Augustine of Hippo, the 5th-century inspiration of Leo's religious order.

Francis had largely avoided big, traditionally Catholic European countries during his 12-year pontificate, preferring to visit instead smaller Catholic communities on the peripheries. Leo will spend nearly a week in Spain, from June 6 to June 12.

He is widely expected to be in Barcelona on June 10 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the death of Antoni Gaudí, the architect of the famed Sagrada Família basilica. The massive church just last week reached its maximum height with the placement of the church's soaring central tower piece.

While the Vatican didn't announce further foreign travel, Leo is also expected to visit his beloved Peru, and possibly Argentina and Uruguay, in the second half of 2026. The Vatican has confirmed he will not travel to the United States this year, skipping out on the country's 250th independence anniversary.

On the anniversary itself, July 4, Leo will be visiting the southern Italian island of Lampedusa, the main arrival point of migrants who are smuggled to Europe from north Africa.

Today in History: February 26 The World Trade Center bombing of 1993

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, Feb. 26, the 57th day of 2026. There are 308 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 26, 1993, a truck bomb built by Islamic extremists exploded in the parking garage of the North Tower of New York's World Trade Center, killing six people and injuring more than 1,000 others, mainly due to smoke inhalation. (The bomb failed to topple the north tower into the south tower, as the terrorists had hoped; both towers were destroyed in the 9/11 attack eight years later.)

Also on this date:

In 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte escaped from exile on the island of Elba, sailing back to France in a bid to regain power.

In 1919, President Woodrow Wilson signed an act making the Grand Canyon a national park.

In 1952, Prime Minister Winston Churchill announced that Britain had developed its own atomic bomb.

In 1987, the Tower Commission, which had probed the Iran-Contra affair, issued its report, which rebuked President Ronald Reagan for failing to control his national security staff.

In 1998, a jury in Amarillo, Texas, rejected an \$11 million lawsuit brought by Texas cattlemen who blamed Oprah Winfrey's talk show for a price fall after a segment on food safety that included a discussion about

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, February 26, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 266 ~ 77 of 77

mad cow disease.

In 2008, the New York Philharmonic performed in North Korea as part of a historic cultural exchange in a feat of musical diplomacy. It was the first American orchestra to ever perform in the isolated communist nation.

In 2012, Trayvon Martin, 17, was shot to death in Sanford, Florida, during an altercation with neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman, who said he acted in self-defense. (Zimmerman was later acquitted of second-degree murder.)

In 2013, a hot-air balloon burst into flames during a sunrise flight over the ancient Egyptian city of Luxor and plummeted 1,000 feet (305 meters) to earth, killing 19 tourists.

In 2017, at the Academy Awards, "Moonlight" won three Oscars, including best picture of 2016; in a startling gaffe, the musical "La La Land" was mistakenly announced as the best picture winner before the error was corrected.

Today's birthdays: Singer Mitch Ryder is 81. Singer Michael Bolton is 73. Hockey Hall of Famer Joe Mullen is 69. Actor Greg Germann is 68. Democratic Sen. Tim Kaine of Virginia is 68. Singer Erykah Badu (EHR'-ih-kah bah-DOO') is 55. Filmmaker Sean Baker is 55. Football Hall of Famer Marshall Faulk is 53. Olympic swimming gold medalist Jenny Thompson is 53. Singer Corinne Bailey Rae is 47. Tennis Hall of Famer Li Na is 44. Singer Natalia Lafourcade is 42. Actor Teresa Palmer is 40. Actor Taylor Dooley is 33. Rapper Yeat is 26.