

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 1 of 70

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 News Headlines](#)
- [4- Groton Area posts strong showing at Rob Lu-ecke Invitational](#)
- [6- Elementary Spring Concert](#)
- [11- Weber Landscaping Greenhouse Ad](#)
- [12- SD SearchLight: How and when new South Dakota laws will reduce property taxes for homeowners](#)
- [13- SD SearchLight: Here's how much South Dako-tans could save on property taxes after accounting for higher sales taxes](#)
- [15- SD SearchLight: Homeowner property tax relief depends partly on choices by counties, and the debate is beginning](#)
- [17- SD SearchLight: Yes, sales taxes in South Dakota can add up to 10%](#)
- [18- SD SearchLight: King Charles III in historic speech to Congress cites 'checks and balances' on executive power](#)
- [21- SD SearchLight: Ex-FBI Director James Comey, targeted by Trump, indicted for '86 47' seashell photo](#)
- [23- Weather Pages](#)
- [28- Daily Devotional](#)
- [29- Subscription Form](#)
- [30- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [31- News from the Associated Press](#)

Wednesday, April 29

Senior Menu: French dip sandwich, vegetable pasta salad, fruit.

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: Cheese quesadilla, corn and black beans.

Grades 3-5 ELA & Math Testing

HOSA Banquet, 5 p.m., GHS Gym

Pickleball, 5:30 p.m., Elementary Gym

JVT Practice, 6 p.m., Arena

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

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

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 4 p.m.

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

Pole Vault & Javelin in Warner, 1 p.m.



Thursday, April 30

Senior Menu: Oven fried chicken, sweet potatoes, green beans, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Cereal.

School Lunch: Lasagna bake, green beans.

Grades 3-5 ELA & Math Testing

Girls Golf at Redfield, 10 a.m.

5th Grade Girls Basketball, 4 p.m., Elementary Gym

Pickleball, 6 p.m., Elementary Gym

High School Spring Concert/Awards Night/Art Show, 7 p.m., GHS Gym

Friday, May 1

Senior Menu: Tuna salad, California blend, fruit.

School Breakfast: Egg wraps.

School Lunch: Chicken Fajitas.

Grades 3-5 ELA & Math Testing

High School Track at Sisseton, 11 a.m.

Middle School Track at Oakes, 3 p.m.

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Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 2 of 70

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.

A Slick Exit

The United Arab Emirates announced yesterday it will leave the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, effective May 1, citing national interests and a desire for greater autonomy over its energy policy. The move signals a reshaping of Middle Eastern alliances exacerbated by the Iran war.

The 12-member group sets prices for more than a quarter of the world's oil by imposing production quotas on its members. Before the Iran war, the UAE was OPEC's third-largest oil producer, accounting for 3.6 million barrels per day, or 12% of the group's total output. The country now aims to produce 5 million barrels per day by 2027. The announcement heightens tensions with Saudi Arabia, already strained over differing policies on Israel and Yemen.

OPEC was founded in 1960, with Abu Dhabi joining seven years later. Today, the group includes Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and Venezuela. Watch a 15-minute video on how oil has shaped global power.

Sackler Sentencing

OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma was sentenced yesterday in its long-running opioid criminal case, clearing the way for a settlement that includes a \$225M forfeiture to the Justice Department and a broader deal that could reach \$7B over 15 years. Purdue will also be dissolved and replaced by a new company, Kinoa Pharma.

The sentencing follows years of litigation and a 2020 guilty plea in which Purdue admitted it failed to stop its painkillers from being diverted to the black market and used doctor-speaker programs to drive prescriptions. Under the settlement, the Sackler family, which owns Purdue, will pay state, local, and tribal governments, along with some individual victims, while family members who agree to the terms will be shielded from opioid lawsuits.

Opioid overdoses killed about 806,000 people in the US from 1999 through 2023. In 2023, about 76% of US drug overdose deaths involved opioids—averaging 217 people daily. Purdue's portion is roughly 12.8% of national opioid settlements.

Smell, Mapped at Last

Scientists have created the first-ever map of smell receptors in the nose, according to a study published yesterday. The breakthrough could pave the way for therapies to treat loss of smell, such as stem cell treatments or brain-computer interfaces.

A Harvard team used mice to detail the arrangement of smell receptors in the nose, which bind to odor molecules and send signals to the brain. The map reveals that the receptors are highly organized, clustering in horizontal bands by type. This layout mirrors the layout of the brain region that interprets smells, providing insights into how signals flow from the nose to the brain.

For more than three decades, scientists assumed the over 1,000 smell receptor types were randomly arranged, in part because their sheer number made patterns difficult to discern. The latest study is the product of new genetic techniques that enabled the analysis of about 5.5 million neurons across more than 300 mice.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 3 of 70

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Damon Jones, a former NBA player and assistant coach, is first person to plead guilty in sports betting scheme with over 30 arrests.

Actor Nathan Chasing Horse receives 37 years to life in prison for 13 charges, including 10 counts of sexual assault.

WNBA star Caitlin Clark to publish a children's book based on her life, expected Nov. 3.

NCAA basketball tournament set to expand to 76 teams, up from 68.

Taylor Swift files three new trademark applications to protect voice and likeness against AI deepfakes, one being "Hey, it's Taylor Swift".

Tony Wilson, the cofounder, bassist, and songwriter of British band Hot Chocolate, dies at age 89.

Ariana Grande announces eighth album "Petal," to be released July 31.

Science & Technology

Eli Lilly strikes \$2.25B deal with AI firm Profluent to create next-generation gene-editing therapies for conditions caused by hundreds of mutations in one gene, like cystic fibrosis.

Neanderthal brains may not have differed from those of early modern humans any more than brains vary among ethnic groups today, undermining the theory that Neanderthals went extinct due to cognitive limitations.

AIDS changes the frequency of immune-system genes in hard-hit region of South Africa, showing natural selection in action; drug intervention eventually slowed the DNA changes.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close down (S&P 500 -0.5%, Dow -0.1%, Nasdaq -0.9%) ahead of today's Federal Reserve interest rate decision.

Elon Musk testifies in trial determining the future structure and control of OpenAI, which Musk originally cofounded with Sam Altman in 2015.

Visa revenue rises 17% year over year in Q2, its strongest growth since 2022.

New York City's first-ever full-scale casino with live table games opens, expected to generate \$4B in annual revenue.

Politics & World Affairs

Justice Department indicts former FBI Director James Comey on allegations of threatening violence against President Donald Trump over May 2025 Instagram post with seashells spelling out "8647."

UK's King Charles III speaks before joint session of Congress, emphasizing historic ties between the US and the UK and environmentalism.

Germany's birth rate falls to the lowest level ever recorded last year.



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Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 4 of 70

Groton Area posts strong showing at Rob Luecke Invitational; finals events move to Warner

GROTON — The Groton Area track and field teams turned in a strong all-around performance Tuesday at the Rob Luecke Invitational, with the Tigers placing third in the boys division and fourth in the girls standings in a competitive multi-team field. The meet remains partially unfinished, with the pole vault and javelin events scheduled to be completed Wednesday, April 29, in Warner.

On the boys side, Groton Area tallied 72 team points to finish just behind Milbank (115) and Aberdeen Christian (74). The Tigers were powered by a dominant day from senior Keegen Tracy, who swept the sprint events. Tracy captured first place in the 200 meters (22.92) and 400 meters (51.31), while also finishing second in the 100 meters with a time of 11.23.

Distance standout Jayden Schwan also delivered a big performance, winning the 1600 meters in 4:38.20 and adding a third-place finish in the 800 meters (2:07.43). The Tigers' depth showed in the distance events as well, with Riley Shellenberger placing seventh in the 1600 meters.

Groton's relay teams contributed key points throughout the meet. The 4x800 relay team of Jace Johnson, Riley Shellenberger, Ethan Kroll, and Kyson Kucker claimed first place in 8:56.67, while the 4x400 relay (Keegen Tracy, Jayden Schwan, Jordan Schwan, Ethan Kroll) placed fourth. The sprint medley relay team finished third.

Additional contributions came from Kyson Kucker, who placed 10th in the 400 meters, and Jace Johnson, who added an 11th-place finish in the 800 meters.

In the girls division, Groton Area compiled 63 team points to place fourth behind Warner, Milbank, and Ipswich. The Tigers were especially strong in the relays, sweeping both sprint relays. The 4x100 team of McKenna Tietz, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy, and Makenna Krause raced to first in 52.38, while the same quartet captured the 4x200 title in 1:50.23.

Groton added another victory in the sprint medley relay, where Makenna Krause, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy, and Ryelle Gilbert finished first in 4:30.66. The 4x400 relay team also contributed with a runner-up finish.

Individually, McKenna Tietz led the way with a second-place finish in the 100-meter hurdles (17.28), while Emerlee Jones turned in a pair of strong efforts, placing third in the 300-meter hurdles (53.08) and adding a 12th-place finish in the high jump.

Groton's sprinters added depth scoring as Makenna Krause took third in the 100 meters, followed closely by Rylee Dunker in seventh and Raquel Tracy in ninth. Dunker also placed seventh in the 200 meters.

With several first-place relay finishes and standout individual performances on both sides, Groton Area positioned itself well heading into the final field events, which will wrap up the Rob Luecke Invitational on Wednesday in Warner.

Boy's Division

Team Scores: 1. Milbank 115, 2. Aberdeen Christian 74, 3. Groton Area 72, 4. Aberdeen Roncalli 61, 5. Timber Lake 60, 6. Leola 49, 7. Ellendale 48, 8. Warner 42, 9. Ipswich 38, 10. Hitchcock-Tulare 32, 11. Tri-State 28, 12. Sisseton 27, 13. Britton-Hecla 25, 14. Redfield 21, 15. Langford Area 6

100 Meters: 2. Keegen Tracy, 11.23; 11. Ryder Schwan, 11.98; 15. Lincoln Krause, 12.17; 45. Tate Johnson, 13.59; 48. Wesley Borg, 14.07; 53. David Jetto, 15.57; 54. Fernando Nava, 15.76.

200 Meters: 1. Keegen Tracy, 22.92; 27. Tate Johnson, 27.91; 30. Wesley Borg, 28.75; 35. David Jetto, 30.75.

400 Meters: 1. Keegen Tracy, 51.31; 10. Kyson Kucker, 55.72; 27. JJ Muller, 1:03.09; 31. Wesley Borg, 1:04.84; 38. Briggs Conn, 1:08.24.

800 Meters: 3. Jayden Schwan, 2:07.43; 11. Jace Johnson, 2:14.70; 23. Briggs Conn, 2:41.83.

1600 Meters: 1. Jayden Schwan, 4:38.20; 7. Riley Shellenberger, 5:06.62.

4x100 Relay: 10. Groton: (Lincoln Krause, Jordan Schwan, JJ Muller, Ryder Schwan), 48.87.

4x200 Relay: 5. Groton: (Lincoln Krause, Jordan Schwan, JJ Muller, Ryder Schwan), 1:36.47.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 5 of 70

4x400 Relay: 4. Groton: (Keegen Tracy, Jayden Schwan, Jordan Schwan, Ethan Kroll), 3:41.97.

4x800 Relay: 1. Groton: (Jace Johnson, Riley Shellenberger, Ethan Kroll, Kyson Kucker), 8:56.67.

SMR 1600m - [200-200-400-800]:

3. Groton: (Ryder Schwan, JJ Muller, Jace Johnson, Kyson Kucker), 4:05.15.

Discus - 1.6kg: 46. Jordan Schwan, 75' 10".

Girl's Division

Team Scores: 1. Warner 116.5, 2. Milbank 114, 3. Ipswich 66, 4. Groton Area 63, 5. Timber Lake 61, 6. Britton-Hecla 48, 7. Aberdeen Roncalli 40, 8. Langford Area 32, 9. Tri-State 26, 10. Aberdeen Christian 25, 11. Aberdeen Central 22, 12. Ellendale 13, 13. Redfield 12, 14. Hitchcock-Tulare 11, 15. Sisseton 9.5

100 Meters: 3. Makenna Krause, 13.40; 7. Rylee Dunker, 13.80; 9. Raquel Tracy, J 13.82; 39. Suri Jetto, 16.13.

200 Meters: 7. Rylee Dunker, 28.50; 12. Raquel Tracy, 29.25; 31. Suri Jetto, 34.26.

400 Meters: 8. Ashlynn Warrington, 1:05.62; 23. Suri Jetto, 1:19.86.

100m Hurdles - 33" / 0.838m: 2. McKenna Tietz, 17.28; 9. Ella Kettner, 18.98; 13. Teagan Hanten, 20.28; 17. Emerlee Jones, 20.88.

300m Hurdles - 30" / 0.762m: 3. Emerlee Jones, 53.08; 11. Ella Kettner, 57.05; 12. Teagan Hanten, 58.89.

4x100 Relay: 1. Groton: (McKenna Tietz, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy, Makenna Krause), 52.38.

4x200 Relay: 1. Groton: (McKenna Tietz, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy, Makenna Krause), 1:50.23.

4x400 Relay: 2. Groton: (McKenna Tietz, Taryn Traphagen, Ashlynn Warrington, Kella Tracy), 4:13.70.

SMR 1600m - [200-200-400-800]: 1. Groton: (Makenna Krause, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy, Ryelle Gilbert), 4:30.66.

Discus - 1kg: 14. Avery Crank, 79' 10".

High Jump: 12. Emerlee Jones, 4' 1".

Long Jump: 35. Teagan Hanten, 11' 1".

Triple Jump: 20. Teagan Hanten, 26' 2.5".

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 6 of 70



A large crowd was on hand for the Groton Area Elementary Spring Concert held Tuesday evening in the GHS Gym. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The fifth grade band, under the direction of Sharon Schwan, performed, "Ode to Joy," "Hard Rock Blues," "Banana Boat Song" and "Power Rock." (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 7 of 70



The junior kindergarten/kindergarten students, under the direction of Landon Brown, sang, "You Are My Sunshine" and "We've Got the Whole World." (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 8 of 70



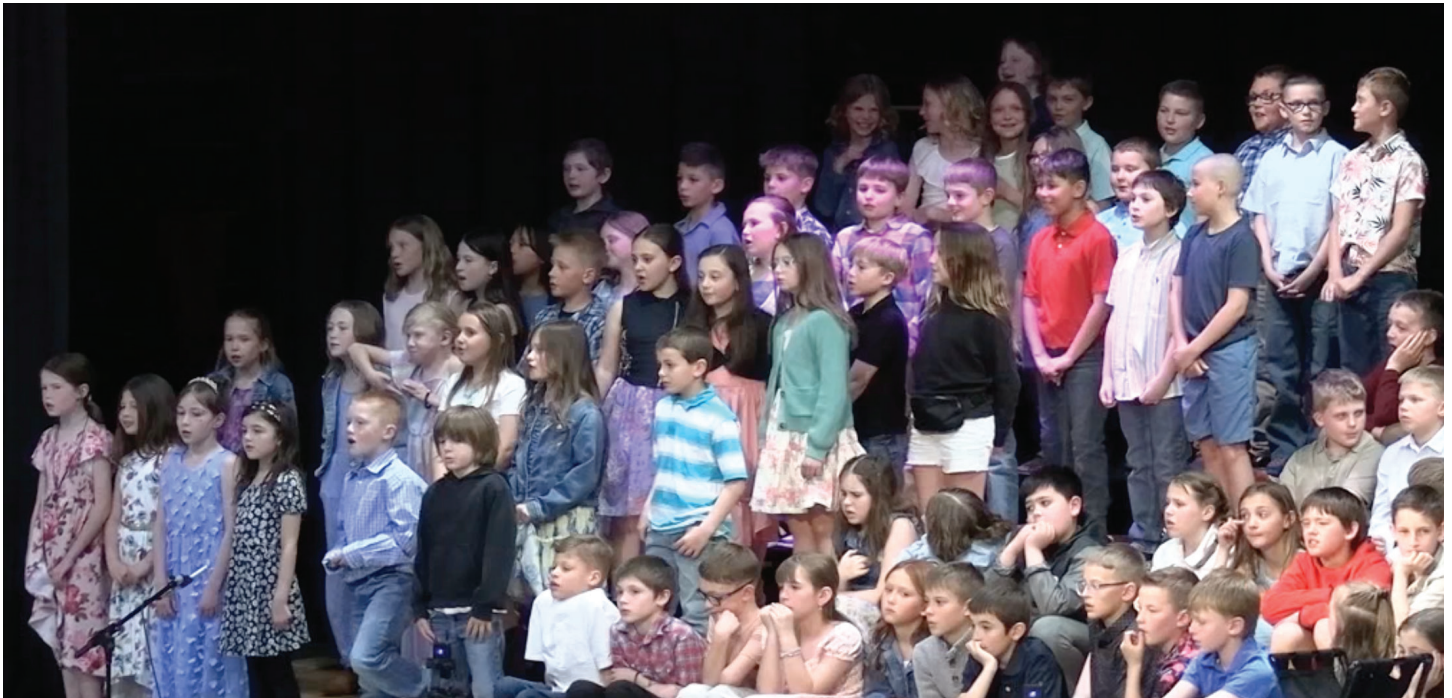
The first graders, under the direction of Landon Brown, sang, "Down by the Bay" and "Puff the Magic Dragon." (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)



The second graders, under the direction of Landon Brown, sang, "Rainbow" and "Love Grows Under the Wild Oak Tree." (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 9 of 70



The third graders, under the direction of Landon Brown, sang, "Brave" and "Fifty Nifty United States." (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)



The fourth graders, under the direction of Landon Brown, sang, "The Climb" and "Fireflies." (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 10 of 70



The fifth graders, under the direction of Landon Brown, sang, "Travelin' Soldier" and "Fire-work." (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)



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How and when new South Dakota laws will reduce property taxes for homeowners

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER

South Dakota homeowners will see the effects of two new property tax reduction laws as early as next year — automatically and without any formal notice in one case, and with notification from their county if it chooses to participate in the other case.

Both laws, approved in March, allow higher sales tax revenue to be applied toward the reduction of owner-occupied property taxes. One law uses revenue from a July 2027 restoration of the state sales tax rate from 4.2% to 4.5%, after several years of a temporary reduction. The other uses a new, optional sales tax of up to 0.5% at the county level.

County-level relief timing will vary, state financial officer says

The county sales tax can be implemented by county commissions or a vote of the public. In counties that enact a sales tax, the revenue will be used to reduce the county portion of property taxes on owner-occupied homes. Homeowners will see the reduction as a credit on their property tax bill.

The Governor's Office estimates the average credit could be \$660, although that could vary widely depending on individual circumstances.

The earliest counties can implement the sales tax is January 2027. The earliest they can provide property tax credits is on property tax bills for that same year — usually sent out in January and February.

South Dakota Bureau of Finance and Management Commissioner Jim Terwilliger said counties with larger populations and budgets — such as Pennington, Minnehaha and Lincoln — could credit homeowners' property tax bills as soon as next year with a "little planning and cash flow management."

Smaller counties with less dependable sales tax income would likely have to wait until 2028 or a year after the county sales tax is implemented to issue credits based on what is collected over a full year, said Lawrence County Commissioner Eric Jennings.

That means, Jennings said, that homeowners in some counties could pay a "double tax" for a year — a full property tax bill and an increased sales tax — before they see any property tax relief.

"At the end of the month, that makes a difference for people's budgets," Jennings said, "whether they think about it or not."

Statewide property tax relief to come next year

When the statewide sales tax rate increases in July 2027, South Dakota homeowners won't see a credit on their property tax bill specifically listing how much money they've saved on their property taxes. Instead, lawmakers will put the extra sales tax revenue into state funding for public schools, which will reduce the funding schools need from local property taxpayers.

Even though the state sales tax increase doesn't take effect until July 1, 2027, homeowners should see lower property taxes on their bills arriving in January or February of 2027. That's because lawmakers are using \$56 million in state reserve funds along with the first six months of revenue from the increase in the sales tax rate to fill a property tax reduction fund and kick-start the relief.

Many homeowners will save \$168.30 for every \$100,000 of their home's valuation, according to the state Revenue Department. That's \$547 in savings for a \$325,000 home.

Those figures apply to school districts that use the maximum allowable property tax levy on homes. Some school districts set their levy lower because they collect enough in taxes at a lower rate due to higher property values. Taxpayers in those districts will see a smaller, though still “meaningful level of savings,” said Kendra Baucom, of the state Department of Revenue.

In future years, the property tax reduction fund will rely entirely on revenue from the increased portion of the state sales tax. That’s expected to be about \$114 million annually at first.

Because the fund is dependent on sales tax collections, it can fluctuate.

“If those funds continue to grow, that means future levies could be reduced even further,” Terwilliger said.

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

Here’s how much South Dakotans could save on property taxes after accounting for higher sales taxes

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR

Estimates of homeowner savings abounded recently as South Dakota lawmakers and Gov. Larry Rhoden approved property tax reduction legislation.

It’s been difficult, however, to find two other estimates: 1) the extra money consumers will spend to fund reduced property taxes with higher sales taxes, and 2) the net savings for homeowners after their extra sales tax spending is subtracted from their property tax savings.

South Dakota Searchlight’s effort to answer those questions led to these estimates: The average South Dakota homeowner’s total savings if they receive both forms of property tax relief could be \$1,080 annually. Meanwhile, the average South Dakota household could spend \$360 more per year if subjected to both sales tax increases. When it’s all said and done, that’s a net yearly savings of about \$720 for homeowners.

To learn how Searchlight arrived at those rough estimates, keep reading. But first, a bit about the new laws.

The new laws

One of the new laws allows the statewide sales tax rate to return to 4.5% next year, after a temporary reduction to 4.2% since 2023. The revenue from the increase will be allocated to the school funding formula to reduce the amount of property taxes schools need from local homeowners.

The other new law allows counties to impose their first-ever sales tax at a rate of up to 0.5%. That revenue will go toward credits to reduce the county’s portion of homeowner property taxes.

Estimating property tax savings

To estimate average property tax savings for homeowners, Searchlight asked the state Department of Revenue for the average assessed value of owner-occupied homes in the state. The department did not provide that figure.

But it did provide the total taxable value of all owner-occupied properties for taxes payable this year: \$62,211,360,002.

The department also provided the total number of owner-occupied properties in the state: 253,263.

Dividing the total taxable value by the number of owner-occupied properties yields an average value of \$245,639.

“However,” the department said, “this number may include both houses and additional structures such as unattached garages.” The department added that the impact of those additional structures on the average valuation is minimal.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 14 of 70

The owner-occupied classification, which lowers the levy applied to an owner's primary residence, can be applied to a single-family dwelling, an attached or unattached garage, and the parcel of land where a home stands. The new property tax reduction law applies specifically to single-family dwellings.

To account for the minimal impact from additional structures, Searchlight rounded up to \$250,000 as the average taxable value of homes in the state.

Revenue from the increase in the statewide sales tax rate is expected to reduce property taxes by \$1.683 for each \$1,000 of a home's taxable value, according to the state Bureau of Finance and Management. For the average home with a taxable value of \$250,000, that's about \$420 of savings.

Homeowners' savings if their county enacts a 0.5% sales tax to fund property tax credits will vary across the state, because counties have different property tax rates and varying levels of potential sales tax revenue. But the Governor's Office has estimated that the average savings will be \$660. The office arrived at that number by taking the total, estimated new revenue generated if every county implemented the plan, and dividing it by the number of owner-occupied properties, which should approximate the average savings per homeowner.

Thus, the total annual property tax savings for the average homeowner receiving both forms of relief would be \$420 plus \$660, which adds up to \$1,080.

Estimating extra sales tax spending

To arrive at an estimated extra amount of spending for the average South Dakota household (meaning a house or apartment) on higher sales taxes, Searchlight first needed an estimate of the average household's annual sales-taxable spending.

Searchlight spoke with the Dakota Institute, a nonprofit economic research and analysis organization in Sioux Falls. The institute suggested dividing the total of certain categories of taxable sales (excluding categories that are likely purchases by businesses) by the state's 382,302 occupied housing units (including apartments), resulting in an estimate of about \$82,000 in annual taxable spending per household. However, institute CEO Jared McEntaffer noted many of those purchases were still probably made by businesses and tourists, so the true average is lower.

Gov. Larry Rhoden's finance commissioner pointed Searchlight to a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report stating that the average U.S. household spent \$77,280 in 2023. Sales tax does not apply to some expenses, such as prescription drugs or mortgage payments. After subtracting such categories of spending that are unlikely to be taxed and adjusting for inflation since 2023, Searchlight settled on \$45,000 as the estimated average annual sales-taxable spending per South Dakota household.

If that average household is subjected to both of the new sales tax increases, it would be the equivalent of an additional 0.8% tax. On \$45,000 of spending, that would be \$360 of extra sales taxes annually.

In a household subjected to only the 0.3-percentage-point statewide sales tax increase (without a county sales tax), that would be \$135 of extra sales taxes annually.

Estimating net savings, and complications

If the average homeowner saves \$1,080 annually on property taxes from both forms of relief and spends \$360 annually in extra sales taxes, that homeowner's annual net savings would be \$720.

Homeowners in counties that do not enact a sales tax for property tax relief would receive, on average, the \$420 in property tax relief from the statewide sales increase and spend \$135 on higher sales taxes, for a net savings of \$285.

Those are rough estimates. Actual situations will vary widely across the state. Household spending varies by income. Homes in rural areas are typically valued lower than in urban areas. Counties have different property tax rates, called levies. Some counties may choose to enact a sales tax for property tax relief, and others may not. In counties that do adopt a sales tax, the amount of revenue available for property tax relief will vary. And people who live in counties that do not adopt a sales tax will likely travel and spend money in counties that do.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 15 of 70

And, for households that rent rather than own their home, it's all just a sales tax increase.

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.

Homeowner property tax relief depends partly on choices by counties, and the debate is beginning

Commissioners and voters will choose whether to impose sales taxes authorized by Legislature and governor

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER

South Dakota has two new laws intended to reduce homeowner property taxes, but one of them depends on counties opting in.

The reaction of county commissioners across the state runs the gamut from opposition to uncertainty to eager support.

Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden signed a bill into law in March permitting counties to implement up to a half-percent sales tax and use the revenue to reduce the county-imposed portion of homeowner property taxes. When the law takes effect in July, it will be the first opportunity for South Dakota counties to charge a sales tax.

Thirty-nine of the state's 66 counties could collect enough from sales taxes to replace the entire county share of homeowners' property tax bills, Rhoden's office estimates, while the others could replace a portion. Homeowners would still pay property taxes to schools, cities, townships and other local entities such as water and fire districts, but the county portion of homeowners' property taxes would be eliminated or reduced. If a county has extra revenue from the sales tax after eliminating the county portion of homeowner property taxes, the extra revenue must be used to reduce taxes on agricultural and commercial properties.

Statewide, according to the Governor's Office, the average homeowner property tax savings from implementing the county sales tax would be an estimated \$660.

South Dakota homeowners have complained about owner-occupied property taxes since the COVID-19 pandemic, when a surge of in-migration and other factors drove up taxes along with home prices.

Yet that doesn't necessarily mean South Dakotans favor the use of higher sales taxes to reduce property taxes. A recent poll commissioned by South Dakota News Watch and the Chiesman Center for Democracy found 49% opposition when registered voters were asked whether counties should have the option to raise sales taxes in exchange for lowering property taxes, with 33% support and 17% undecided.

The other law adopted by Rhoden and lawmakers during the recently concluded legislative session relies on next year's expiration of a temporary state sales tax rate reduction. The revenue from allowing the tax to rise from 4.2% to 4.5% will be captured and used to reduce school-imposed homeowner property taxes statewide.

Some commissioners eager to move quickly

Many county commissioners plan to discuss the new sales tax option with their colleagues and county residents in the coming months.

The county sales tax can be implemented by commissions or a vote of the public. In counties that enact a sales tax, homeowners will see the property tax reduction as a credit on their property tax bill.

Members of the Lincoln County Commission discussed the potential half-percent sales tax at the board's March 24 meeting. Lincoln is the fastest growing county in the state based on the percentage increase in its population, according to U.S. Census Bureau data, and its homeowners pay the highest average

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 16 of 70

property taxes in South Dakota, according to the state Bureau of Finance and Management.

Lincoln County homeowners would save an average of 12% on their property tax bill if the optional county sales tax is adopted, according to the Governor's Office. That's about \$579 of savings on a home valued at \$325,000.

"I think it's critical we discuss this and we get on this as quickly as possible," Commissioner Jim Schmidt said.

Commissioner Betty Otten said she would ask county staff to draft an ordinance ahead of the July 1 effective date of the new state law.

Schmidt told South Dakota Searchlight he expects a majority of the five-member commission to support the idea — it's a matter of whether the sales tax should be implemented by the board or by a vote of the people.

Commissioner Joel Arends told his colleagues the proposal "doesn't pass the common sense test" because it trades one tax for another, but he wants to see the issue taken to a public vote.

"There's good, there's bad, it's suboptimal," Arends said, "and we need to hear from the public."

Custer County — the third fastest growing county in the state, based on its percentage increase in population — should "start acting on this right away," said Commission Chair Jim Lintz. Homeowners in the county would save an average of 12% on their property tax bill, or \$428 on a home valued at \$325,000, according to the Governor's Office.

A sizable portion of the sales taxes in Custer County would be paid by Black Hills tourists.

"This doesn't make the problem go away," Lintz said, adding that valuations still remain high in the county and agricultural property taxes are also rising. "We're still going to be looking at a problem, but this is a start."

Pennington County Commission Chair Ron Weifenbach said he supports the sales tax option "100%." He thinks residents would largely support the sales tax increase, since Rapid City and the Black Hills collect some of the highest sales tax revenues in the state, thanks to tourists and other visitors. Weifenbach said the board will consider the change carefully and ask for public input.

"Overall, it'll have a lot of traction," Weifenbach said. "I look at this as a positive step to alleviate taxes for people who are getting taxed out of their houses."

Other counties deliberate

Interest in the sales tax proposal will depend largely on each county's individual need for homeowner property tax relief, said Eric Jennings, a commissioner in Lawrence County in the northern Black Hills, and vice president of the South Dakota Association of County Commissioners. Tax increases on homes have not been as pronounced in some rural areas.

"I'd be surprised if there are very many counties away from the interstates that adopt this," Jennings said.

He hesitates to take a position, since people with lower incomes pay a larger share of that income on sales taxes than wealthier people, and the county sales tax would come on top of the statewide sales tax increase.

"I'm back and forth every day," Jennings said.

Minnehaha County Commission Chair Dean Karsky said he isn't convinced Minnehaha, which includes Sioux Falls, will implement a sales tax, but the commission "needs to have a discussion."

Karsky added that many counties will "wait and see" what happens in other counties before moving forward.

"It'll be a lot of waiting on the fence to see what happens, waiting to see what our constituents want us to do," Karsky said.

Some residents in lesser-populated counties across the state are concerned they'll foot the tax bill for residents in more populated counties that implement the tax. Rep. Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, warned lawmakers during the legislative session that the plan imposes a higher burden on people from smaller communities that won't benefit from the property tax relief if their county doesn't implement the plan.

"When we hear about these visitors, they don't just come from out of state, they come from rural com-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 17 of 70

munities," he said. "Because this bill is structured so that the property tax cut goes where the economic activity goes, you know who's getting the biggest tax cut? The people in the biggest houses, in the biggest towns."

Chad Erk, chair of the Butte County Commission, said the board will discuss the possibility of a sales tax increase, but he is opposed to the "tax shift." Erk would rather cut spending within the county government to provide property tax relief.

Butte County is a rural, agricultural area just north of the Black Hills. It wouldn't be able to take advantage of tourist sales tax spending to the extent some other counties could.

"So we'd literally just be taxing ourselves, but in a different way," Erk said.

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

COMMENTARY

Yes, sales taxes in South Dakota can add up to 10%

by Seth Tupper

When the governor challenged a gaggle of journalists recently, I felt obligated to respond.

The topic was taxation — specifically, criticism the governor is suffering for signing three bills into law that allow for new or higher sales taxes.

Two of the laws use revenue from a higher state sales tax rate and an optional county sales tax to reduce property taxes for homeowners. The third creates a sales tax that cities can use temporarily to pay for special projects such as building an arena.

One of Gov. Larry Rhoden's three opponents for the Republican nomination for governor is U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, who has said the new laws will raise the maximum sales tax rate to 10%.

During a recent press conference, Rhoden said that figure is "fabricated."

"Any one of you, you're all bright people," Rhoden said. "Tell me where he comes up with that number."

I replied that adding up all the mandatory and optional sales taxes would, in fact, produce a sum of more than 10%.

The governor and I went back and forth a bit and discovered that I was including the tourism tax, and he wasn't.

"That's not a sales tax," Rhoden said.

That's technically true, because it's a gross receipts tax. But it's a distinction without a difference for consumers who end up paying extra at lodging establishments, campgrounds, spectator events and other tourism-related businesses.

"It's just on a very few specific items," Rhoden added.

Well, yeah. Like hotels. When I drove to Pierre in December for Rhoden's budget address and paid for a room, the total tax rate of 8.7% consisted of:

The 4.2% state sales tax.

A 2% city sales tax.

The 1.5% tourism tax.

And a 1% city "bed, board and booze" tax.

The state rate was formerly 4.5%. Lawmakers reduced it three years ago, while scheduling a return to 4.5% in July 2027. Rhoden and lawmakers are letting that happen as planned, while inserting revenue from the increase into the education funding formula to reduce property taxes that homeowners pay to schools.

Rhoden and lawmakers also decided to let counties charge their first-ever sales tax, up to 0.5%, which can be approved by county commissioners or voters. The revenue will provide homeowners with credits against the county-imposed portion of their property taxes.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 18 of 70

Finally, Rhoden and lawmakers authorized a new, optional sales tax up to 1% that cities can enact temporarily for special projects, in addition to other sales taxes cities can already charge. The new tax has to earn 60% support from a city's voters.

Thus, when I go to Pierre in the future, the taxes on my hotel room could be 10.5%, consisting of:

The 4.5% state sales tax.

A 2% city sales tax.

The 1.5% tourism tax.

A 1% city bed, board and booze tax.

A 1% city special projects tax.

And a 0.5% county sales tax.

That's not including the possibility of a business improvement district, which property owners can use to fund infrastructure and beautification projects.

When I stayed in Pierre in December, my hotel was in one of those districts, which charged a \$2 occupancy tax in addition to the other taxes. My room rate was \$72.80, and the total tax was \$8.33, which means the effective tax rate was 11.44%.

As with any political debate, the truth is somewhere between the extremes. While it is possible to encounter taxes of more than 10% on purchases in South Dakota, it's only on some transactions, and only in places where the city and county enact all of the optional taxes.

For homeowners, the higher state sales tax rate and optional county sales tax hold the promise of property tax savings. A recent attack ad against Rhoden from a political action committee omitted that information while dragging South Dakota Searchlight into the fray.

The ad quoted the first part of a sentence from a Searchlight news story: "Rhoden did sign three bills into law during the recently concluded legislative session that allow for new or higher sales taxes." The ad did not include the rest of the sentence: "although two of them require the revenue to be used for property tax reduction while the other allows for temporary sales taxes with revenue going to specific city projects."

All of which is to say that when you're looking for truth in politics, ignore the rhetoric and check the receipts.

Seth is editor-in-chief of South Dakota Searchlight. He was previously a supervising senior producer for South Dakota Public Broadcasting and a newspaper journalist in Rapid City and Mitchell.

King Charles III in historic speech to Congress cites 'checks and balances' on executive power

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY

WASHINGTON — King Charles III did not name President Donald Trump Tuesday when he acknowledged before a joint session of Congress the transatlantic tension between the United States and the United Kingdom, but stressed "America's words carry weight and meaning" as he reflected on decades of diplomatic ties.

The monarch of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland told lawmakers that from "bitter division" 250 years ago, the two nations "forged a friendship that has grown into one of the most consequential alliances in human history."

"I pray with all my heart that our alliance will continue to defend our shared values with our partners in Europe and the Commonwealth and across the world," he said.

Charles is the first British king to address a joint session of Congress, and only the second monarch to do so after his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, spoke before lawmakers in 1991.

Charles was received with loud unanimous applause from both sides of the aisle — a notable difference from the usual one-party enthusiasm during the president's annual State of the Union address.

He punctuated his roughly 27-minute speech with laugh lines, including a quip that 250 years for America

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 19 of 70

is "just the other day" for the British.

To whoops and cheers, Charles nodded to the "bold and imaginative rebels with a cause" who declared independence but also "carried forward" the ideals of the Magna Carta, a 13th-century document outlining the protection of rights and property from the monarch.

Both sides of the aisle stood applauding in unison as the king cited U.S. Supreme Court cases that laid the "foundation of the principle that executive power is subject to checks and balances."

But the king also delivered his speech against the ominous backdrop of a breakdown of American support for Ukraine and an ongoing war in Iran, initiated by the United States and Israel, that has disrupted energy supply in the United Kingdom and around the world.

The conflicts "pose immense challenges for the international community and whose impact is felt in communities the length and breadth of our own country," he said.

As the king was still speaking on Capitol Hill, the White House shared on social media a photo of Charles and Trump together under the heading "TWO KINGS" and a crown emoji.

Trump attacks on British prime minister

U.S.-U.K. relations have frayed as a result of Trump's recurrent attacks on British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's decision to not join offensive operations targeting Iran.

Trump paused his scathing online screeds against the British government during the king's first full day of his state visit, which included a 21-gun salute and ceremonial flyover after Charles and Queen Camilla arrived on the White House South Lawn.

Shortly before Charles addressed Congress, Trump took aim on his Truth Social platform at another European leader, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, accusing him of thinking "it's OK for Iran to have a Nuclear Weapon. He doesn't know what he's talking about!"

Just over one month into the U.S. campaign in Iran, Trump, on Truth Social, told the U.K. and other allied partners to "Go get your own oil!" from the blockaded Strait of Hormuz.

"You'll have to start learning how to fight for yourself, the U.S.A. won't be there to help you anymore, just like you weren't there for us," he wrote.

Two weeks earlier, Trump attacked NATO allies, telling reporters in the Oval Office, "I've long said that, you know, I wonder whether or not NATO would ever be there for us. So ... this was a great test, because we don't need them, but they should have been there."

Charles recounted in his speech to Congress how the only time the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, invoked Article 5 was to defend the United States following the Sept. 11, 2001 attack.

The king and Camilla are scheduled to visit the 9/11 Memorial in New York City on Wednesday.

"We stood with you then, and we stand with you now in solemn remembrance of a day that shall never be forgotten," Charles said.

Just under 460 British troops died fighting alongside Americans in Afghanistan.

Epstein files

The king's trip to the U.S. also comes after the high-profile release of millions of records related to the disgraced hedge fund manager and sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, who had ties to Charles' brother, Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor.

Mountbatten-Windsor settled outside of court in 2022 with the late Epstein victim Virginia Giuffre, who accused Epstein and the former British prince of trafficking her for sex.

Mountbatten-Windsor has been stripped of his royal title of prince and is under investigation in Britain for allegedly sharing confidential government information with Epstein, which came to light in the publicly released files.

The king acknowledged victims of sexual abuse in his speech, according to a palace aide, when he remarked to lawmakers, "In both of our countries, it is the very fact of our vibrant, diverse and free societies that gives us our collective strength, including to support victims of some of the ills that, so tragically, exist in both our societies today."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 20 of 70

Answering questions about the king's address, the palace aide told reporters traveling with Charles, "It was certainly in (his majesty's) mind to acknowledge victims of abuse, so they are naturally incorporated in this line."

Sky Roberts, Giuffre's brother who has become an activist following his sister's death last year, was on Capitol Hill Tuesday for a roundtable about Epstein victims ahead of Charles' visit.

Roberts and the king did not meet.

King will visit Virginia

Charles, a vocal advocate for the environment, is also scheduled to visit Shenandoah National Park in Virginia Thursday to view America's "extraordinary natural splendor." The king emphasized to lawmakers the need for a collaborative effort to fight climate change.

"Even as we celebrate the beauty that surrounds us, our generation must decide how to address the collapse of critical natural systems, which threatens far more than the harmony and essential diversity of nature," he said.

"We ignore at our peril the fact that these natural systems, in other words nature's own economy, provide the foundation for our prosperity and our national security," he said.

Charles also celebrated the shared financial economy between the United States and U.K., highlighting \$430 billion in annual trade. Just over a year ago, Trump began a new tariff regime on British goods, and imports from many other trading partners.

Review of the troops

Trump and first lady Melania Trump welcomed the king and queen on the White House South Lawn Monday morning for a ceremony full of pomp and circumstance, including a review of the troops, a distinguished honor for a visiting head of state.

During brief and mostly scripted remarks, Trump highlighted a tree planted on the White House grounds by Elizabeth II in 1991. Trump described the tree as a "living symbol" of the relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom.

"In the centuries since we won our independence, Americans have had no closer friends than the British. We share that same root. We speak the same language, we hold the same values, and together our warriors have defended the same extraordinary civilization under twin banners of red, white and blue," Trump said.

Trump and Charles met in a closed-door Oval Office bilateral meeting following the ceremony.

The first lady and the queen met with American schoolchildren at the White House tennis pavilion, where the students donned Meta Quest headsets to view several U.K. landmarks, including Stonehenge and Buckingham Palace. The event was part of the first lady's effort to promote technology in education, according to the White House.

Charles and Camilla are scheduled to attend a state dinner at the White House East Room Tuesday night before heading to New York City Wednesday.

The king and queen are scheduled to visit the small town of Front Royal, Virginia, Thursday, as well as meet Interior Secretary Doug Burgum in Shenandoah National Park, according to the British embassy.

Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 21 of 70

Ex-FBI Director James Comey, targeted by Trump, indicted for '86 47' seashell photo

BY: JONATHAN SHORMAN

The U.S. Department of Justice on Tuesday obtained a second grand jury indictment of former FBI Director James Comey, long a target of President Donald Trump's anger for overseeing an investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election.

A federal grand jury in North Carolina indicted Comey related to a photo he posted on social media of seashells arranged to read "86 47." Comey took the photo while vacationing in North Carolina last year. The indictment alleges that Comey threatened to harm the president and that he used interstate commerce to transmit the threat when he posted the photo.

An arrest warrant was also issued for Comey. The indictment alleges that a "reasonable recipient who is familiar with the circumstances" would interpret the seashell photo as a serious expression of intent to harm Trump.

Trump supporters have interpreted the photo as a threat against the president, since "86" is a slang term for removing something and "47" could be seen as a reference to Trump as the 47th president. Comey has said the photo wasn't intended as a call to violence and deleted the post.

"While this case is unique and this indictment stands out because of the name of the defendant, his alleged conduct is the same kind of conduct that we will never tolerate and that we will always investigate and regularly prosecute," acting U.S. Attorney General Todd Blanche said at a Justice Department news conference.

In a video posted online after the indictment, Comey said he was "still innocent" and wasn't afraid.

"Well, they're back," he says at the start of the video.

"It's really important that all of us remember this is not who we are as a country, this is not how the Department of Justice is supposed to be," Comey said. "The good news is we get closer every day to restoring those values. Keep the faith."

Trump's feud with Comey

A federal grand jury in Virginia indicted Comey in September, accusing him of lying to Congress and obstructing a congressional proceeding. The allegations relate to his testimony in 2020 about the FBI's investigation into links between Russia and the Trump campaign. The indictment came days before the statute of limitations ran out.

Comey pleaded not guilty before a federal judge dismissed the case in November, finding the prosecutor in the case had been illegally appointed. The judge also dismissed a separate case against Democratic New York Attorney General Letitia James.

The new indictment marked another escalation in the Trump administration's efforts to prosecute Comey and other political enemies. Last week, the Justice Department obtained an indictment against the Southern Poverty Law Center, an organization that has long angered conservatives.

Hours before the Justice Department announced the indictment, a federal judge in New York ruled that a wrongful termination lawsuit brought by Comey's daughter, former federal prosecutor Maurene Comey, could proceed. Maurene Comey claims she was improperly fired from the Justice Department because of her father or for political reasons.

Blanche takes questions

The new prosecution also comes as Blanche, a personal defense attorney for Trump, leads the Justice Department following the departure of Pam Bondi. Trump has not yet nominated a permanent attorney general.

The Tuesday indictment was signed by Matthew Petracca, an assistant U.S. attorney in the Justice Department's Criminal Division.

"This is a ridiculous indictment against James Comey. The Department of Justice will lose in court, again,"

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 22 of 70

U.S. Rep. Ted Lieu, a California Democrat, wrote on social media.

At the news conference, Blanche fielded skeptical questions from reporters about how the case came together and why the criminal case wasn't brought until nearly a year after the post. He refused to discuss evidence in the case, saying that would be unfair to Comey and prosecutors.

"You are not allowed to threaten the president of the United States of America," Blanche said. "That's not my decision, that's Congress' decision."

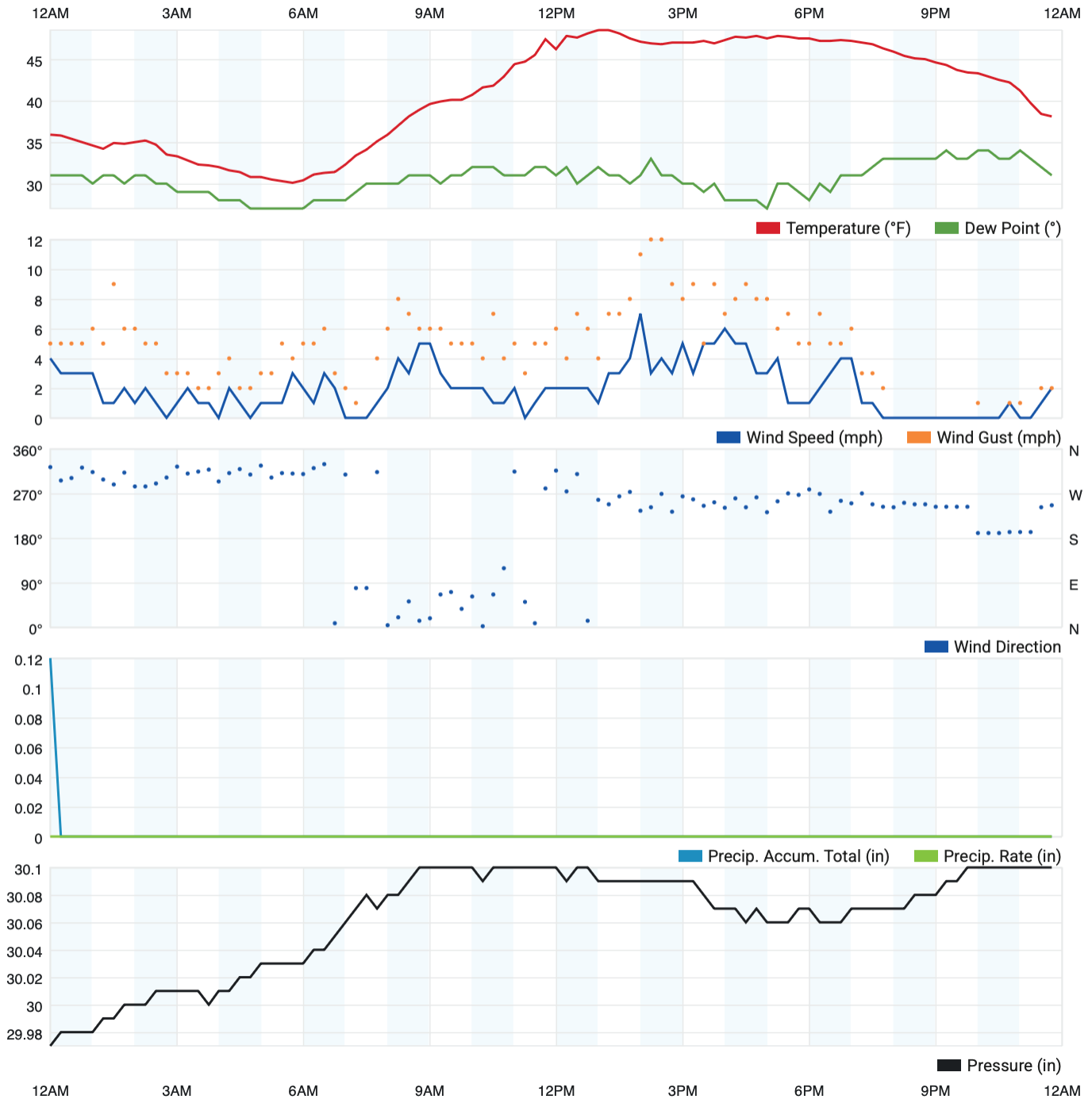
Jonathan Shorman covers democracy for States Newsroom. Based in Kansas City, his coverage area includes elections and voting rights, fights over state and federal power, civil liberties and more. An alumnus of the University of Kansas, he previously covered politics for The Kansas City Star.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 23 of 70

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

April 28, 2026



Broton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 24 of 70

Today



High: 56 °F

Mostly Sunny
then Slight
Chance
T-storms

Tonight



Low: 29 °F

Partly Cloudy

Thursday



High: 52 °F

Mostly Sunny
then Slight
Chance
Showers

Thursday
Night



Low: 29 °F

Partly Cloudy

Friday



High: 57 °F

Mostly Sunny

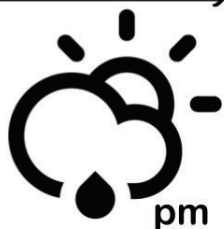


Through Saturday

April 29, 2026
3:21 AM

Forecast For Central - North Central - Northeast South Dakota & Western Minnesota

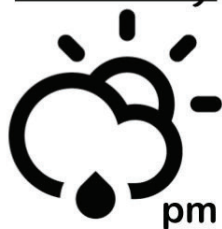
Wednesday



Highs:
50-60°

Grassland Fire Danger

Thursday



Highs:
46-57°

Grassland Fire Danger

Friday



Highs:
50-63°

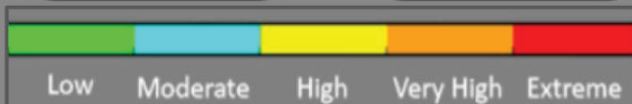
Grassland Fire Danger

Saturday



Highs:
61-74°

Grassland Fire Danger



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Limited chances for precipitation show up on Tuesday out across the Interstate 90 corridor of the forecast area, with increased areal coverage potential for showers on Wednesday during afternoon heating hours mainly over portions of central, north central and northeast South Dakota. There may yet be an isolated shower or two around on Thursday, but most of Thursday into Friday should be dry, with Friday holding the greatest potential for extended coverage of sunny skies. Overall, it still looks fairly cool for much of the rest of this week, as April closes out and May kicks off. And, with the recent rainfall, expecting green up this week to help keep the lid on the Grassland Fire Danger Index this week.

Groton Daily Independent

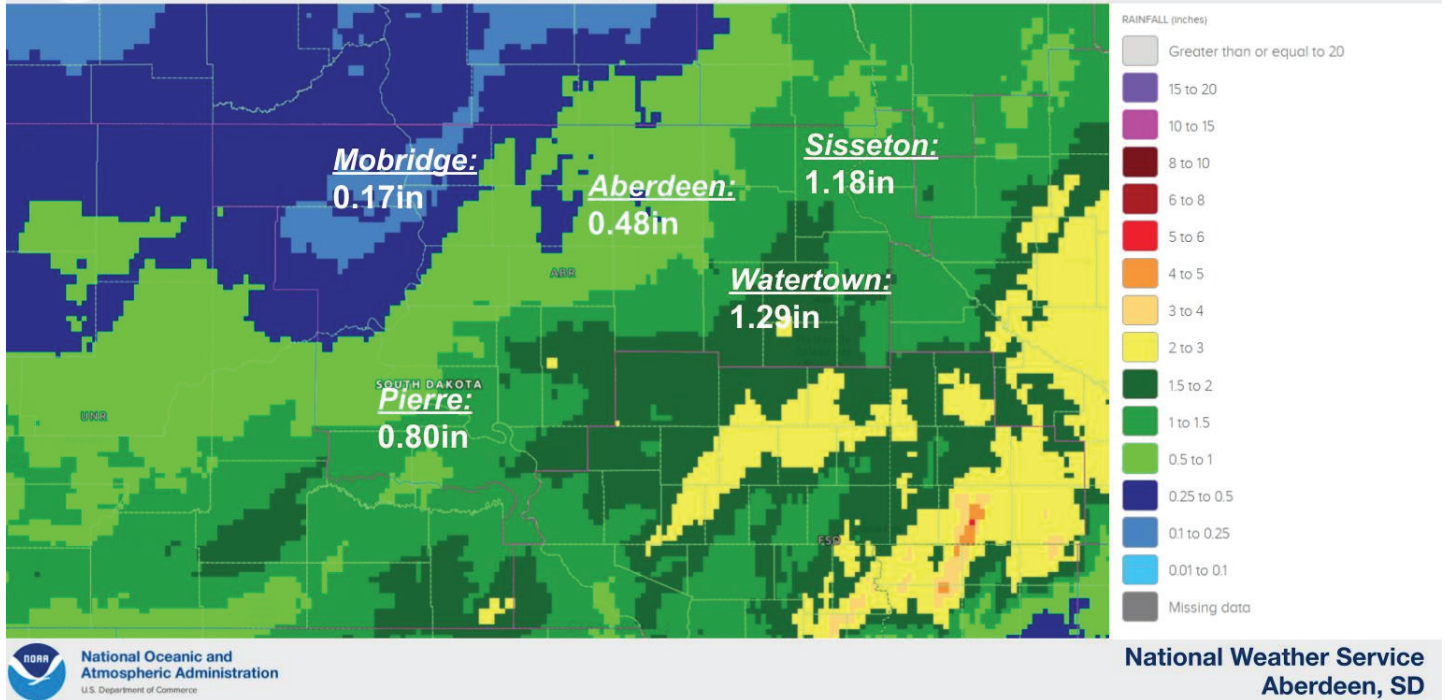
Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 25 of 70



Observed Precipitation Amounts

April 29, 2026
4:00 AM CDT

4-Day Totals From April 24th through April 27th



Over a 4 day span between last Friday evening and Monday afternoon, precipitation fell in multiple rounds across portions of the forecast area. Here is a map estimating the amount of precipitation that fell, including some observed totals at Aberdeen, Watertown, Pierre, Mobridge and Sisseton. How much rain fell where you are located?

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 26 of 70

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 49 °F at 1:05 PM

Low Temp: 30 °F at 5:39 AM

Wind: 12 mph at 2:24 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 92 in 1934

Record Low: 16 in 1966

Average High: 64

Average Low: 37

Average Precip in April.: 1.82

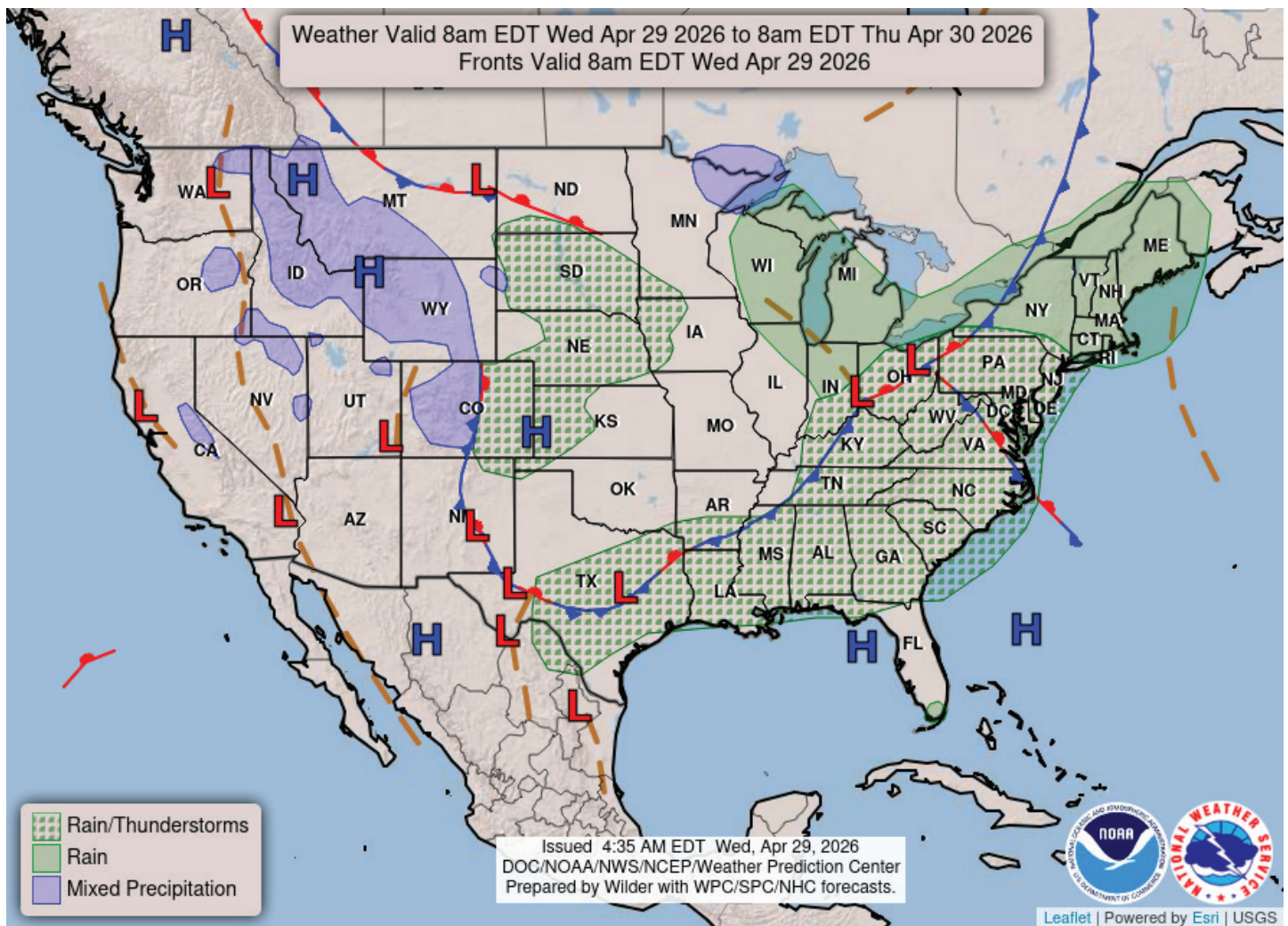
Precip to date in April.: 1.48

Average Precip to date: 3.88

Precip Year to Date: 3.10

Sunset Tonight: 8:35 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:21 am



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 27 of 70

Today in Weather History

April 29th, 1942: An estimated F3 tornado moved east through Marshall County, destroying almost every building on a farm northeast of Kidder. Barns were heavily damaged on two other farms. One person was reported killed, with five others injured.

1905 — The town of Taylor, in southeastern Texas, was deluged with 2.4 inches of rain in fifteen minutes. (The Weather Channel)

1910 — The temperature at Kansas City, MO, soared to 95 degrees to establish a record for the month of April. Four days earlier the afternoon high in Kansas City was 44 degrees, following a record cold morning low of 34 degrees. (The Weather Channel) (The Kansas City Weather Almanac)

1963 — A tornado, as much as 100 yards in width, touched down south of Shannon, MS. The tornado destroyed twenty-seven homes along its eighteen mile path, killing three persons. Asphalt was torn from Highway 45 and thrown hundreds of yards away. Little rain or snow accompanied the tornado, so it was visible for miles. (The Weather Channel)

1973 — The Mississippi River reached a crest of 43.4 feet, breaking the previous record of 42 feet established in 1785. (David Ludlum)

1987 — A storm off the southeast coast of Massachusetts blanketed southern New England with heavy snow. Totals of three inches at Boston MA, 11 inches at Milton MA, and 17 inches at Worcester MA, were records for so late in the season. Princeton MA was buried under 25 inches of snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 — Thunderstorms produced large hail and high winds in central Texas. Baseball size hail was reported at Nixon, and wind gusts to 70 mph were reported at Cotulla. Heavy rain in Maine caused flooding along the Pemigewasset and Ammonoosuc Rivers. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 — Thunderstorms produced severe weather in Arkansas, Louisiana and eastern Texas, with more than 70 reports of large hail and damaging winds. Softball size hail was reported at Palestine TX. Hail as large as tennis balls caused ten million dollars damage around Pine Bluff AR. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 — A storm system crossing northern New Mexico blanketed parts of the Rocky Mountain Region and the Northern High Plains with heavy snow, and produced blizzard conditions in central Montana. Much of southern Colorado was buried under one to three feet of snow. Pueblo tied an April record with 16.8 inches of snow in 24 hours. Strong canyon winds in New Mexico, enhanced by local showers, gusted to 65 mph at Albuquerque. Afternoon temperatures across the Great Plains Region ranged from the 20s in North Dakota to 107 degrees at Laredo TX. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 28 of 70



Daily Devotion

True Freedom

Have you accepted Jesus' free gift of salvation? His presence can change your life.

John 8:31-36: 31 So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ``If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine;

32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

33 They answered Him, ``We are Abraham's descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, `You will become free?'"

34 Jesus answered them, ``Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.

35 ``The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever.

36 ``So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

When Jesus was born, the Israelites were experiencing great oppression. That's why they looked forward to the promised Messiah, who they assumed would bring freedom and victory.

But instead of overthrowing the Romans, Jesus spoke about respecting authority and showing love to enemies. Rather than win victory for the Jews alone, He brought blessing even to Gentiles and the despised Samaritans (John 4:4-30; Luke 7:6-10). The people expected Him to overpower the domineering nation through battle, but He allowed those in authority to crucify Him.

So, thinking Jesus surely was not the promised Savior who would liberate God's chosen people, the Jews rejected Him. They failed to understand that Christ was most concerned about the freedom of our hearts. He came to release us from the bondage of sin in our life, but He does not always free us from our current circumstance.

Jesus came for you—He died to rescue you from sin. Have you accepted His free gift of salvation? His presence can change your life, and His truth can overcome harmful, faulty thinking. Walking with the Lord is truly walking in freedom. We can always lean on His strength and choose the right path.

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

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 29 of 70

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Pay with Venmo: @paperpaul Phone Number to Confirm: 7460



WINNING NUMBERS

MILLIONAIRE FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.28.26

11 21 34 39 45 5

TOP PRIZE:

\$1,000,000/year

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 30 Mins 40 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.28.26

14 36 41 47 66 15

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$178,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 15 Mins 40 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.27.26

20 25 26 31 36 1

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$23,540,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 30 Mins 40 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.25.26

7 14 15 17 19

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$69,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 45 Mins 40 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.27.26

20 31 33 44 65 19

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 14 Mins 41 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.27.26

18 31 33 36 62 3

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$143,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 14 Mins 41 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 31 of 70

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Asian stocks mostly gain and oil rises after the UAE says it will exit OPEC

By CHAN HO-HIM AP Business Writer

HONG KONG (AP) — Stocks mostly advanced in Asia on Wednesday despite losses on Wall Street, while oil prices gained on uncertainties over when the war in Iran will end and after the United Arab Emirates said it would leave OPEC in a blow to the powerful oil cartel.

U.S. futures edged higher.

Markets in Japan were closed for a holiday.

Elsewhere in Asia, South Korea's Kospi rose 0.8% to 6,690.90 and the Hang Seng in Hong Kong gained 1.5% to 26,050.90. The Shanghai Composite index traded 0.7% higher at 4,107.51.

Australia's S&P/ASX 200 slipped 0.3%, to 8,687.00.

Taiwan's Taiex lost 0.6%, and India's Sensex gained 1.4%.

The price of a barrel of Brent crude oil to be delivered in June rose 1.1% to \$112.47 early Wednesday. Brent to be delivered in July was also up 1.1% to \$105.50. Brent oil was around \$70 per barrel before the war began in late February.

Benchmark U.S. crude gained 1% to \$100.94 a barrel.

The UAE's departure from OPEC, due to happen on Friday, has been closely watched by oil markets. OPEC accounts for roughly 40% of global oil output, and the UAE is one of OPEC's largest oil producers. It has pushed back against OPEC production quotas in recent years, wanting to sell more oil to the rest of the world.

"The UAE's exit will increase (oil) output," ING Bank strategists Warren Patterson and Ewa Manthey wrote in a research note on Wednesday. "The UAE has been increasingly frustrated over recent years by its output being constrained by OPEC production quotas, which have kept it well below its potential."

"However, before this can be tapped, there must be a resolution in the Persian Gulf that allows for uninhibited energy flows through the Strait of Hormuz once again," they added.

As U.S.-Iran negotiations for a permanent end to the Iran war stalled and the Strait of Hormuz, where roughly one fifth of the world's oil passed through before the war, was still largely closed, short term impacts on oil prices will still depend mainly on prospects for reopening the waterway, analysts said.

The UAE was the third largest oil producer within OPEC before the Iran war. ING said its departure "will reduce OPEC's effectiveness in managing and influencing the global oil market through supply measures."

Investors are also awaiting more updates on U.S.-Iran peace talks, although limited progress has been made. Iran has offered to reopen the Strait of Hormuz if the United States lifts its blockade on its ports. So far, the U.S. appears to be ruling out a deal that excludes the Islamic Republic's nuclear program.

The Federal Reserve is expected to announce a decision on interest rates later Wednesday.

On Tuesday, Wall Street retreated from its recent record highs. The benchmark S&P 500 fell 0.5% from its latest all-time high to 7,138.80. The Dow Jones Industrial Average edged down 0.1% to 49,141.93, and the technology-heavy Nasdaq composite dropped 0.9% to 24,663.80.

Artificial intelligence-related stocks led the losses. Chip company Broadcom lost 4.4%, Nvidia fell 1.6% and Micron Technology lost 3.9%. Alphabet, Amazon, Microsoft and Meta Platforms are reporting quarterly results on Wednesday.

In other dealings early Wednesday the U.S. dollar rose to 159.68 Japanese yen from 159.62 yen. The euro was trading at \$1.1707, down from \$1.1712.

The yield on the U.S. 10-year Treasury was up slightly to 4.36%.

Anonymous tip system started in wake of Sandy Hook shooting has fielded nearly 400,000 reports

By DAVE COLLINS Associated Press

HANOVER, Mass. (AP) — Less than two years after her 6-year-old son was killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, Nicole Hockley was in an Ohio church basement teaching the first class of a program she hoped would help prevent future school shootings.

The program, born in the grief of one of the nation's worst mass shootings, teaches students how to identify warning signs among their peers and urges them to report any red flags to an anonymous tip system or a trusted adult to head off any violence.

Since that first class in a Columbus church, the program, "Say Something," has been presented to thousands of students nationwide. Nearly 395,000 tips have been sent in, ranging from threats of school shootings and suicides to drug use and bullying. One tip last year led to the arrest of an Indiana student who threatened a shooting at her school.

"It's been very successful," said Hockley, whose son Dylan was among the 20 first graders and six educators who died at Sandy Hook in Newtown, Connecticut, on Dec. 14, 2012. "Having had direct experience of both of my children being in a school shooting and my youngest one dying, I feel very compelled to honor that legacy by doing all that I can to prevent future acts of violence and school shootings."

Trainers with Sandy Hook Promise, a nonprofit founded in early 2013 by Hockley and other relatives of the Newtown victims, have traveled to all 50 states to show students how to spot signs of potential violence or self-harm — which can include threats on social media, an obsession with weapons or behavioral changes — as well as the importance of speaking up before something bad happens.

Shootings are on students' minds

For students who have grown up in an age where mass killings are often in the news and whose schools regularly run lockdown drills, having a way to take action can be comforting.

"School shootings are definitely very scary, and they do run through your head as a high school student," said Addison Hunt, a 17-year-old junior at Hanover High School in Hanover, Massachusetts. "But I think being able to have these outlets where you can report things definitely makes me feel a lot safer."

On a recent afternoon, a "Say Something" instructor took Hunt and her classmates through the program in the auditorium of the school, about 20 miles (30 kilometers) south of Boston.

Keely Rogers, a 28-year-old former high school music educator, explained to the group that research has found that nearly all school attackers showed warning signs beforehand, most commonly on social media.

"You are going to become the eyes and ears of your school through social media, right?" she said. "Your teachers and staff don't follow the same people as you. They can't keep an eye out. They can't keep everyone safe."

In a slideshow she pointed to an Instagram post, pulled from a real tip to the group's reporting system, that said, "Don't come 2 school tomorrow if you wanna live." Rogers said someone reported the post within three minutes and action was taken.

Ava Khouri, Hanover's senior class president, said one of the program's key points, for her, was not to worry about what others will think about you if you speak up.

"I think that definitely students are wary to bring these issues up to adults and administration in the school, because they're worried they're either going to be made fun of for tattling or getting someone else in trouble," she said. "So I think that this program definitely gave light to the fact that you're not a tattletale if you're helping someone and you're helping others."

Both Hunt and Khouri said they had reported troubling behavior to parents and educators before learning about the program.

A tip leads to an arrest

Trained crisis counselors staff the "Say Something" anonymous reporting system 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, referring serious situations to police and school officials. The most common tips are concerns about bullying, drug use, harassment and self-harm, according to Sandy Hook Promise.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 33 of 70

Every once in a while, the system receives an alarming tip that is immediately passed on to law enforcement.

Last year in Indiana, among many examples, someone used the system to report that a student was planning a shooting at Mooresville High School, near Indianapolis, on Feb. 14. That's the anniversary of the 2018 massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The student, 18-year-old Trinity Shockley, was arrested Feb. 12.

The tipster, a friend of Shockley, said Shockley was obsessed with the Parkland shooter and had access to an AR-15 rifle, according to a police report. Authorities said Shockley's social media postings included one that said "Parkland part two. Of course. I've been planning this for a YEAR."

Shockley pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit murder and was sentenced in November to 12 years in prison, though her lawyer insisted that Shockley would not have carried out the plan, local news outlets reported.

Sandy Hook Promise believes that its program and reporting system prevented a shooting in Mooresville, as well as in other communities, and has also stopped suicides.

"So it's bittersweet," said Shockley, the co-founder, "because I wish this had existed before Sandy Hook."

EU says Meta is failing to keep underage users off Facebook and Instagram

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — The European Union accused Meta on Wednesday of failing to stop underage users from accessing Facebook and Instagram, in violation of the bloc's tough digital rules that require social media sites to protect minors.

The EU's executive branch said Meta Platforms lacked effective measures to prevent children younger than 13 from signing up, and that it was not doing enough to identify and remove children after they had opened accounts.

Meta's own minimum age to open an account on Facebook or Instagram is 13.

The problem is not just that children are getting access. The European Commission said Meta is also inadequately assessing the risk of children younger than 13 being exposed to "age-inappropriate experiences" on the platforms.

Meta disagreed with the decision, saying that it has measures in place to detect and remove accounts for anyone younger than 13.

"Understanding age is an industry-wide challenge, which requires an industry-wide solution, and we will continue to engage constructively with the European Commission on this important issue," the company said in a statement, adding it will have more to share next week about additional measures it plans to roll out soon.

Brussels is targeting the Meta with the Digital Services Act, a sweeping set of regulations that requires tech companies operating in the 27-nation bloc to do more to clean up online platforms and protect internet users.

Meta now has the chance to respond to the preliminary findings, before the commission issues its final decision. Violations can result in hefty fines worth up to 6% of a company's worldwide annual revenue.

Henna Virkkunen, an executive vice president at the European Commission, said the bloc's investigation launched in 2024 found that Instagram and Facebook "are doing very little" to prevent children from getting access despite their own terms and conditions indicating "their services are not intended for minors under 13."

"The DSA requires platforms to enforce their own rules: terms and conditions should not be mere written statements, but rather the basis for concrete action to protect users – including children," she said in a statement.

Russia to hold Victory Day parade without military equipment for 1st time since invading Ukraine

By The Associated Press undefined

Russia's traditional parade marking the 81st anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II will take place without military equipment, the Russian Defense Ministry said in a statement late Tuesday.

It will be the first time since Moscow launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that no military equipment will rumble through Moscow's Red Square on May 9, the day Russia celebrates its most important secular holiday and showcases its military might.

The ministry statement cited the "current operational situation" as a reason for excluding a military equipment convoy, as well as cadets, from the parade. The statement didn't elaborate.

The parade will feature "servicemen from higher military educational institutions of all kinds and certain service branches of the Russian Armed Forces" and a traditional military aircraft flyover, the ministry said.

World War II is a rare event in the nation's divisive history under Communist rule that is revered by all political groups, and the Kremlin has used that sentiment to encourage national pride and underline Russia's position as a global power.

The Soviet Union lost 27 million people in what it calls the Great Patriotic War in 1941-45, an enormous sacrifice that left a deep scar in the national psyche.

President Vladimir Putin, who has ruled Russia for over 25 years, has turned Victory Day into a key pillar of his tenure and has tried to use it to justify the war in Ukraine.

Last year's parade was the largest since Russia sent troops into Ukraine, and drew the most global leaders to Moscow in a decade, including high-profile guests like Chinese President Xi Jinping, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico.

It featured over 11,500 troops and more than 180 military vehicles, including tanks, armored infantry vehicles and artillery used on the battlefield in Ukraine, as well as huge Yars nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles launchers and drones carried on military trucks. Fighter jets flew over Red Square, too.

Putin had declared a unilateral 72-hour ceasefire starting May 7, and the authorities blocked cellphone internet in Moscow for several days in an effort to avert Ukrainian drone attacks.

In 2023, the parade was scaled down, with fewer troops and military equipment on display and no flyover.

Australia moves to tax Meta, Google and TikTok to fund newsrooms

By ROD MCGUIRK Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Australia has proposed taxing digital giants Meta, Google and TikTok on a part of their revenue to pay for news reporters.

The government released draft legislation Tuesday it intends to introduce to Parliament by July 2 that would create a financial incentive for the social media companies to strike deals with news organizations to pay for journalism.

The platforms' criticisms included that the proposal was a "digital services tax" that misunderstood the evolving advertising industry and would fail to deliver a sustainable news sector.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said a monetary value needed to be attached to journalists' work.

"It shouldn't just be able to be taken by a large multinational corporation and used to generate profits for that organisation with no compensation appropriate for the people who produce that creative content," Albanese told reporters.

"We think that investment in journalism is critical to a healthy democracy," he added.

It's Australia's second legislative attempt to make the platforms pay for the Australian news text and images that their users view.

Digital platforms had been pressured to strike deals with Australian news publishers to pay for journalism

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 35 of 70

by legislation passed in 2021 that created the country's News Media Bargaining Code.

The platforms chose to reach commercial deals with news creators rather than be forced into arbitration and have a judge set the price.

But they have since avoided renewing those deals by removing news from their services.

The proposed News Bargaining Incentive would charge major platforms that choose not to strike commercial deals with news publishers a 2.25% tax on their Australian revenue.

The platforms would be given offsets and their overall costs would be lowered if they agree to pay publishers for journalism, the government said.

The government expects the incentive would raise between 200 to 250 million Australian dollars (\$144 million-\$179 million) a year. That was about as much as the platforms paid news outlets when the News Media Bargaining Code was working at its peak.

The government would distribute that income among news organizations based on how many journalists each organization employed, Communication Minister Anika Wells said.

The tax would apply to Meta Platforms, which owns Facebook and Instagram, Google, which is owned by Alphabet Inc., and TikTok, which is majority-owned by U.S.-backed investors.

Opposing the proposed legislation, Meta said news organizations "voluntarily post content on our platforms because they receive value from doing so."

"The idea that we take their news content is simply wrong. This proposed legislation, which would apply to platforms regardless of whether news content even appears on our services, is nothing more than a digital services tax," Meta said in a statement.

"A government-mandated transfer of wealth from one industry to another, with no connection to the value exchanged, will not deliver a sustainable or innovative news sector. Instead, it will create a news industry dependent on a government-administered subsidy scheme," Meta added.

Google said "we reject the need for this tax."

"It ignores the fact that Google already has commercial agreements with the news industry, misunderstands how the ad market changed and mandates payments from some companies while arbitrarily excluding platforms like Microsoft, Snapchat and OpenAI -- despite the major shift in how people consume news," a Google statement said.

TikTok did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

All the targeted platforms are American. U.S. critics have argued that Australia's News Media Bargaining Code had disproportionately cost American corporations.

Albanese was not concerned by potential pushback from the United States.

"We're a sovereign nation and my government will make decisions based upon the Australian national interest," Albanese said.

Rare earth mining is poisoning Mekong River tributaries, threatening 'the world's kitchen'

By ANTON L. DELGADO and ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL Associated Press

CHIANG SAEN, Thailand (AP) — Perched on the bow of his long-tail fishing boat, 75-year-old Sukjai Yana untangled a handful of small fish from his net, disappointed by his catch and fretting over whether he can sell them.

Some days Yana earns nothing: demand for fish is falling due to worries over contamination of the Mekong River and its tributaries by toxic runoff from rare earth mines upstream that is threatening millions who rely on those waters for farms and fisheries.

Chiang Saen, a fishing hub in northern Thailand, has been Yana's family's home for decades. "I don't know where else I'd go," he said.

Yana is one of 70 million people in mainland Southeast Asia who depend on the nearly 5,000-kilometer (3,100-mile) Mekong River. Rising demand for rare earth materials is driving an unregulated mining boom

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 36 of 70

centered in war-torn Myanmar, to the west, that is spreading to Laos, in the east.

The Mekong has long faced mounting pressures, from plastic pollution to hydropower dams hemming it upstream and sand mining devouring its banks. But experts warn that the toxic runoff from the mines could pose an existential threat.

Exposure to heavy metals such as arsenic, mercury, lead and cadmium raises risks of cancer, organ failure and developmental harm, especially for children and pregnant women.

Thailand is bearing the brunt of the mining boom as such toxins imperil its global food exports — from bags of rice in U.S. supermarkets to edamame snacks served in Japan and garlic used in Malaysian kitchens. Responses remain local and limited, while smuggling and Myanmar's civil war complicate regional fixes, raising concerns for downstream Cambodia and Vietnam.

Agriculture is the backbone of Southeast Asia's economies, said Suebsakun Kidnukorn of Mae Fah Luang University in northern Thailand's Chiang Rai, warning that rare earth mines are destroying "the world's kitchen."

Toxic runoff seeps into Thailand

While cutting banana bunches on a farm in the hilly Thai village of Tha Ton, 63-year-old Lah Boonruang taps his fingers to count the toxin-exposed crops he harvests — rice, garlic, corn, onion, mangoes and bananas.

He irrigates his fields with water from the Kok River, a Mekong tributary that flows into Thailand from Myanmar and is laden with toxins.

"Everyone is afraid of the toxins," he said. "If we can't export, a farmer is the first to die."

Thailand is one of the world's top rice exporters along with India and Vietnam. It exported over \$10 billion worth of rice and fruits in 2024, according to trade figures that rank the U.S. as the top rice importer.

"Our worry is that toxins accumulate in the rice we export. This would make our rice farming industry, which is our culture, collapse," said Niwat Roykaew, founder of the environmental institute The Mekong School in northern Thailand's Chiang Khong.

Thai scientists have found elevated heavy metal pollution in other Mekong tributaries, like the Sai and Ruak rivers.

The Mekong starts in China and flows through five Southeast Asian nations before emptying into the sea. Millions rely on fish from the Mekong Basin for protein.

Warnings to ethnic minorities in the hills of northern Thailand to avoid using river water are painful for the Lahu, who are famed as fisher people, said Sela Lipo, 56, a Lahu elder.

"The Lahu's way of life is always with a river," he said. "The contaminated river has cut off our lifeline."

Solutions are local and limited

Thailand's government says it has little leverage against mining operations across the border in strife-torn Myanmar and Laos. The Thai response has also been constrained by limited expertise, information and funds, said Aweera Pakkamart of Thailand's Pollution Control Department.

Instead, public universities, local governments and regional organizations like the Mekong River Commission, have mainly focused on monitoring levels of heavy metals and educating communities about risks.

Recent water, fish and sediment samples from Mekong tributaries had high levels of dangerous heavy metals, such as arsenic, mercury, lead and cadmium, from rare earth mining, said Warakorn Maneechuket, a researcher at Thailand's Naresuan University.

In a lab, she uses a scalpel to point out tell-tale signs of contamination — tumor-like growths, discolored scales, and unusual eye coloration — before dissecting a catfish caught from the Kok River.

The accumulation of heavy metals is insidious. Arsenic can cause organ failure. Mercury damages the nervous system. Lead impairs cognition and cadmium harms the kidneys.

To raise awareness of health risks, Tanapon Phenrat of Naresuan University helped develop a smartphone fish safety app, training fishers in Chiang Saen to use it to identify and upload images of suspicious fish. Building a citizen-science database for northern Thailand can help quantify the scale and spread of contamination, he said.

"Each and every sample is very important," he said.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 37 of 70

Rare earth demand rises

The ubiquity of rare earth elements means demand keeps rising.

Rare earths are vital to modern technology, from smartphones and electric vehicles to missiles and jets. Despite the name, they are common. It is the costly mining and complex refining process, concentrated in China, that makes them scarce.

The U.S.-based Stimson Center has used satellite photo analysis to identify nearly 800 suspected unregulated rare earth and other mining sites along Mekong tributaries in Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia.

Many in Myanmar are in areas of active fighting. The war has driven a "diversification of mines" geographically, according to Regan Kwan of The Stimson Center, who has tracked expansion of mining to 26 sites along rivers in Laos.

Rare earths are mined by digging up rock or washing chemicals through soil to extract the minerals, creating toxic waste. The physical footprint of this process is recognizable in satellite data, Kwan said.

Myanmar is China's leading supplier of heavy rare earths, exporting more than \$4.2 billion worth of such materials to China between 2017 and 2024, mostly after a military takeover in 2021.

U.S. President Donald Trump made securing America's supply of critical minerals and rare earths a key foreign policy objective. Used in fighter jets like the F-35, submarines, Tomahawk missiles, radar systems and smart bombs, according to the U.S. government, the need for more supplies is growing as the U.S. replenishes and expands military stockpiles drawn down by the wars in Iran and Ukraine.

This is bad news for the river that sustains mainland Southeast Asia.

Conflicts in last century — which include the Vietnam War and the Khmer Rouge genocide — were the most devastating for the Mekong region, but toxic runoff ranks a close second, said Brian Eyler of the Stimson Center, who called it an "atomic bomb" for river basin.

It's far more damaging than other threats like large dams and "it is not stopping."

Georgia officials warn wildfires are still a threat as firefighters report progress

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

SAVANNAH, Ga. (AP) — Officials battling two large wildfires that have destroyed dozens of homes in southern Georgia warned Tuesday that firefighters are bracing for a prolonged battle even after weekend rains gave a big boost to containment efforts.

"A little bit of rain is going to help us, but it's not going to get us out of this situation," Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp told a news conference after touring the fire areas Tuesday. "We're going to be in this for a while."

A fire that has burned roughly 35 square miles (90 square kilometers) and destroyed more than 80 homes in rural Brantley County was 32% contained, the command team overseeing the fire response said Tuesday. That's up from just 6% containment reported Monday.

Rains on Sunday slowed the fire enough to give crews an opening to widen containment lines along the perimeter and to snuff out some smoldering pockets, said Johnny Sabo, director of the Georgia Forestry Commission.

"As that number increases, our confidence at holding it in that footprint increases," Sabo told reporters. He added: "We have a long way to go. I just want to stress that."

A larger wildfire in sparsely populated Clinch and Echols counties has charred more than 50 square miles (130 square kilometers) at the Georgia-Florida line. Sabo said crews have held that fire to roughly the same footprint for four days. It was considered 23% contained Tuesday.

One home and several dozen sheds and other smaller structures were destroyed, said Don Thomas, a Georgia Forestry Commission spokesperson.

An unusually large number of wildfires are burning this spring across the Southeast. Scientists say the threat of fire has been amplified by a combination of extreme drought, gusty winds, climate change and dead trees and other vegetation.

No fire injuries or deaths have been reported in Georgia. A volunteer firefighter in Nassau County, Florida,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 38 of 70

died last week after suffering an unspecified medical emergency while suppressing a brush fire.

Progress made against the Brantley County blaze prompted local officials to lift evacuation orders Monday for roughly 1,500 people who had fled their homes. About 2,500 remained displaced, said Susan Heisey, a spokesperson for the fire command team.

Local officials have warned people returning home to be prepared to evacuate again if necessary.

Both Georgia fires ignited as the state's worst drought in two decades has rendered vast pine forests and swampy lowlands tinder dry and highly combustible.

Investigators concluded the Brantley County fire began April 20 when a foil balloon touched a power line, creating an electrical arc that set the ground ablaze. The fire in Clinch and Echols counties started April 18 by a falling spark as a man was welding a gate, according to state officials.

Forecasts showed a high chance of more rain over the fires this weekend. There's also a possibility of thunderstorms, which can produce lightning that causes new fires.

Officials haven't said how long the Georgia fires might burn, only that it will take significant rainfall to extinguish them.

Sabo noted that a vast fire sparked by lightning in the nearby Okefenokee Swamp in 2011 burned for just shy of a year.

Hegseth will be grilled by Congress for the first time since the Iran war began

By BEN FINLEY and STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth will face questioning from lawmakers Wednesday for the first time since the Trump administration launched the war against Iran, which Democrats have contested as a costly conflict of choice waged without congressional approval.

The hearing before the House Armed Services Committee is being held to discuss the administration's 2027 military budget proposal, which would boost defense spending to a historic \$1.5 trillion. Hegseth and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Dan Caine, are expected to stress the need for more drones, missile defense systems and warships.

Democrats are likely to pivot to the ballooning costs of the Iran war, huge drawdown of critical U.S. munitions and bombing of a school that killed children. Some lawmakers also may question how prepared the military was to shoot down swarms of Iranian drones, some of which penetrated U.S. defenses and killed or injured American troops.

While a ceasefire is now in place, the U.S. and Israel launched the war Feb. 28 without congressional oversight. House and Senate Democrats have failed to pass multiple war power resolutions that would have required President Donald Trump to halt the conflict until Congress authorizes further action.

Republicans have said they will keep faith in Trump's wartime leadership, for now, citing Iran's nuclear program, the potential for talks to resume and the high stakes of withdrawal. Still, GOP lawmakers are eager for the conflict to end, and some are eyeing future votes that could become an important test for the president if the war drags on.

Iran's closing of the Strait of Hormuz, a vital shipping corridor for the world's oil, has sent fuel prices skyrocketing and posed problems for Republicans ahead of the midterm elections. The U.S. has responded with a Navy blockade of Iranian shipping and further built up its military forces in the region — with three aircraft carriers in the Middle East for the first time in more than 20 years.

The countries appear locked in a stalemate, with Trump unlikely to accept Tehran's latest offer to reopen the strait if the U.S. ends the war, lifts its sea blockade and postpones nuclear talks.

Hegseth has avoided public questioning from lawmakers about the war, although he and Caine have held televised Pentagon briefings. Hegseth has mostly taken questions from conservative journalists, while citing Bible passages to castigate mainstream outlets.

The defense secretary will face a much different dynamic Wednesday as well as on Thursday, when he and Caine also are set to face the Senate Armed Services Committee. Lawmakers' questions are likely to

go beyond the budget and even the war to Hegseth's ousting of top military leaders.

Besides Navy Secretary John Phelan's departure last week, Hegseth recently ousted the Army's top uniformed officer, Gen. Randy George, as well as several other top generals, admirals and defense leaders.

"Tell us why. You know these are important positions. We are in a war posture with Iran," said North Carolina Sen. Thom Tillis, a Republican.

Tillis, who was a crucial vote to confirming the defense secretary, added that Hegseth's management of the Pentagon had caused him to have second thoughts on his support.

"He may be able to clean it up, but on its face, you don't go through the number of highly reputable, senior-level officials, admirals and generals," Tillis added.

Rep. Austin Scott, a Georgia Republican, condemned George's termination during a House Armed Services Committee hearing last week, saying that "some of us are not through asking the questions about that."

"I think the firing of Gen. George was an extreme disservice to the United States Army," Scott said. "And I think it was reckless conduct."

What to know about how a suspect in the killing of 2 Florida students used ChatGPT

TAMPA, Fla. (AP) — The investigation into the deaths of two University of South Florida doctoral students took a twist this weekend when prosecutors said that the suspect asked ChatGPT about body disposal in the lead-up to the students' disappearance, raising questions about the role tech companies have in preventing the misuse of the powerful chatbots.

It wasn't long after University of South Florida students Zamil Limon and his girlfriend Nahida Bristy went missing on April 16 that law enforcement began to suspect Limon's roommate Hisham Abugharbieh, 26, of killing both Bangladeshi students. Limon's body was found Friday under a bridge and a second body, found in a waterway near Limon's body, was recovered but has not been identified.

Now, court records filed by prosecutors on Saturday suggest that Abugharbieh's OpenAI search history has emerged as a prominent piece of evidence. Specifically, in the days before Limon and Bristy went missing, Abugharbieh asked the artificial intelligence chatbot a slew of questions about guns and the disposal of bodies.

Abugharbieh was charged with two counts of premeditated murder in the first degree with a weapon in the deaths of Limon and Bristy, and he was ordered held without bond at a hearing on Tuesday.

Ahead of the hearing, court records painted a clearer picture both about how people planning crimes may be using chatbots and how law enforcement is able to leverage the artificial intelligence data that usage creates. The case also raises questions about what obligation tech companies have to prevent criminal misconduct, as well as to cooperate with and aid investigations.

Here's what to know.

Chatbot history

Prosecutors filed a pretrial detention report on Saturday that detailed Abugharbieh's ChatGPT history both before and after Limon and Bristy went missing.

Days before the two students were last seen, Abugharbieh asked the artificial intelligence chatbot what would happen if a human body was put in a garbage bag and thrown in a dumpster.

Abugharbieh also asked the artificial intelligence chatbot whether the vehicle identification number on his car could be changed and whether he could keep a gun at home without a license, according to the report. ChatGPT responded that Abugharbieh's question sounded dangerous.

Three days after Limon and Bristy's April 16 disappearance, Abugharbieh asked Chat GPT, "Has there been someone who survived a sniper bullet to the head" and "will my neighbors hear my gun," according to the report. He also asked the chatbot four days after that, on April 23, "What does missing endangered adult mean."

OpenAI's growing role in investigations

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 40 of 70

Like texts, emails and regular search histories, artificial intelligence chatbot records can be obtained by law enforcement throughout the course of an investigation.

OpenAI spokesperson Drew Pusteri said Tuesday that the company was looking into the reports on Abugharbieh and would support law enforcement in any way with their investigation.

That cooperation comes on the heels of another inquiry into the company launched by Florida's Attorney General James Uthmeier last week, when he announced his office had opened a rare criminal investigation into whether ChatGPT offered advice to a gunman who killed two people and wounded six others last year at Florida State University.

Specifically, Uthmeier said that prosecutors had done an initial review of chat logs between ChatGPT and the alleged gunman, Phoenix Ikner, to determine if the AI app aided, abetted or advised the commission of a crime.

Prosecutors believe the chatbot advised Ikner on what type of gun and ammunition to use, whether a gun would be useful at short range, and the time and place that would allow for the most potential victims, Uthmeier said.

OpenAI spokeswoman Kate Waters called the FSU shooting a tragedy but said the company had no responsibility. The company proactively shared information with law enforcement and continues to cooperate with investigators, she said when asked last week.

"In this case, ChatGPT provided factual responses to questions with information that could be found broadly across public sources on the internet, and it did not encourage or promote illegal or harmful activity," Waters said in an email.

Uthmeier said on Monday that his office would expand the investigation into the FSU shooting to include Abugharbieh's case.

Widespread trends

Uthmeier also said last week that his office's probe marked "uncharted territory."

But there have been several criminal prosecutions and lawsuits across the country that delve into similar questions about how the powerful AI technology can be used in the commission of a crime, and the harmful impact that chatbots can have on mental health.

Last month, a man sued Google for the wrongful death by suicide of his son, the latest in a growing number of legal challenges against AI developers that have drawn attention to the mental health dangers of chatbot companionship.

Before that, in late 2025, OpenAI was sued for its alleged role in the murder of an 83-year-old Connecticut woman by her son, accusing the company's artificial intelligence chatbot of exacerbating her son's "paranoid delusions" before he killed her and died by suicide.

More recently, in criminal court, dozens of messages between former New York Jets linebacker Darron Lee and ChatGPT were presented in March as prosecutors outlined their case surrounding the death of Lee's girlfriend, Gabriella Perpetuo, who was found dead inside the couple's Tennessee home.

Hours before Perpetuo was found dead, prosecutors said, Lee asked the chatbot about whether certain injuries could resemble wounds from a fall, among other unusual questions.

Supreme Court to weigh Trump administration push to end protections for Haitian, Syrian migrants

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court will hear arguments Wednesday over the Trump administration's push to end legal protections for migrants fleeing war and natural disaster, one in a series of immigration cases the high court is considering against the backdrop of the president's far-reaching immigration crackdown.

The government is appealing lower court orders that blocked the Department of Homeland Security from quickly ending temporary protected status for people from Haiti and Syria. If the justices agree with the Trump administration, authorities could potentially strip protections from up to 1.3 million people from 17

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 41 of 70

countries, exposing them to possible deportation.

The court has sided with the administration before and allowed the end of the program for people from Venezuela as lawsuits continue to play out, though the justices did not detail their reasoning.

The Justice Department argues that the Homeland Security secretary has the power to end the program known as TPS, and the way the law is written bars judges from questioning those decisions. "No judicial review" means no judicial review," federal attorneys wrote in court documents.

But lawyers for about 350,000 migrants from Haiti and 6,000 from Syria say judges can consider whether authorities followed all the steps laid out in the law. They contend that in both cases, the government short-circuited the process.

Since the start of President Donald Trump's second administration, Homeland Security has ended the protections for 13 countries. Some people who have lived and worked in the U.S. legally for more than a decade have lost jobs and housing in a matter of weeks, attorneys said. Going back to Haiti and Syria is out of the question for many people because those countries remain wracked with violence and instability, said Sejal Zota, co-founder and legal director of Just Futures Law.

"This really is life or death," she said. Four Haitian women who were deported from the U.S. in February were found beheaded and dumped in a river several months later, lawyers said in court documents.

The Trump administration appealed to the high court after judges in New York and Washington, D.C., agreed to delay the end of protections. One found that "hostility to nonwhite immigrants" likely played a role in the decision to end protections for Haitians. During his presidential campaign, Trump amplified false rumors that Haitian immigrants were abducting and eating dogs and cats. Federal authorities have denied racial animus played any role in the TPS decisions.

Protections for Syrians were first granted protected status in 2012, during a civil war that lasted for more than a decade before the fall of President Bashar Assad's government in late 2024.

Haitians joined the program in 2010 after a catastrophic earthquake and have been extended multiple times amid ongoing gang violence that has displaced more than a million people, according to court documents.

Maryse Balthazar was on vacation in the U.S. when the earthquake hit her home country of Haiti. She's now been in the U.S. for 16 years with temporary legal status. She has two children and works as a nursing assistant to the elderly. The field relies on Haitian immigrants like her, and would be hobbled by a Supreme Court decision that allowed their status to end, an industry group said in court papers.

For Balthazar, losing those protections would be devastating. She lost her home in Haiti to the earthquake, and another house she could have lived in was destroyed in a fire, possibly due to gang involvement. "I'd be homeless," she said. "I'm scared ... it's a fear we are all living with."

Other immigration cases the high court is considering this year include Trump's push to restrict birthright citizenship and the administration's power to revive a restrictive asylum policy.

King Charles III and Queen Camilla visiting 9/11 Memorial and other NYC landmarks as part of US trip

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — King Charles III and Queen Camilla are headed to New York on Wednesday as part of their closely watched diplomatic visit to the U.S.

The royal couple's swing through the city comes midway through a four-day trip marking 250 years of American independence. It will be the first trip to New York by a reigning British monarch since Queen Elizabeth II visited in 2010.

They are expected to take part in a wreath-laying ceremony at the National 9/11 Memorial, where they will meet with first responders and the families of victims of the Sept. 11 attacks. New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani and other dignitaries are also expected to attend the ceremony, which comes ahead of the 25th anniversary of the attacks.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 42 of 70

The queen is then scheduled to visit the New York Public Library, where she'll deliver a new "Roo" doll to add to the library's famed collection of Winnie-the-Pooh stuffed animals, as the beloved children's character turns 100 this year.

The five dolls currently on display -- Winnie-the-Pooh, Piglet, Tigger, Eeyore and Kanga -- were the inspiration for the characters in A.A. Milne's children's books. They were owned by the English author's son, the real-life Christopher Robin, in the 1920s. The dolls were donated to the library in 1987 and are a centerpiece of the library's collection of children's literature. Roo, in the books, was a small brown kangaroo and son of Kanga.

The king, meanwhile, was expected to visit an after-school, urban farming effort that works with young people affected by food insecurity, as well as meet later with business and financial leaders in Manhattan.

The royal couple are then expected to attend a reception for the King's Trust, a charity Charles founded in 1976.

The four-day trip is Charles' first state visit to the U.S. since he became king. His mother, Queen Elizabeth II, made four state visits to the U.S.

Monday, the king and queen joined President Donald Trump and first lady Melania Trump for tea at the White House.

On Tuesday, Charles and Trump had a closed-door meeting in the Oval Office. The king then delivered a rare speech before Congress -- the first by a British monarch since his late mother in 1991 -- followed by a formal state dinner at the White House.

The monarchs are also expected to make stops in Virginia before wrapping up their U.S. visit back at the White House on Thursday with a formal farewell from Trump. Charles then travels solo to Bermuda on his first visit as king to a British overseas territory.

Many Democrats are stressed out by the news. They still can't turn away, a new poll finds

By ALI SWENSON, LINLEY SANDERS and MEG KINNARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Denver retiree Don Cohen spends about two-and-a-half hours each day consuming the news, between reading on his iPad and watching broadcast programs. But while the 72-year-old says he wishes he could avoid stories about President Donald Trump, he's accepted that's impossible.

"It would be to avoid media," said Cohen, an independent voter who has opposed Trump since he announced his 2016 presidential campaign.

Although Cohen has given up, others have not. A new Media Insight Project survey finds that about 6 in 10 U.S. adults say they actively try to avoid news stories about Trump "often" or "sometimes."

Most aren't finding hope in the news — particularly the people who are more apt to dislike Trump. Republicans are more likely to say the news they consume gives them a hopeful view of the world, while few Democrats say this is how they feel.

The findings from the new survey reflect divisions in an American electorate at a time when increased polarization and social media are changing the way people consume news.

David Sterrett, a principal research scientist at the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, which was a partner on the project, said Democrats may be exercising wishful thinking when they say they try to avoid news about Trump.

"They would like to avoid Trump news, but they're probably not because most national politics news is somewhat connected to the president," he said.

Most Democrats follow political news, but it doesn't make them hopeful

Democrats tend to have more faith in media, particularly national news outlets, compared to Republicans, and they're also more likely to regularly follow national political news, the survey found.

But Republicans are more likely to say the news they consume gives them a hopeful view of the world, while Democrats are more likely to say the news is too stressful to read or watch.

About two-thirds of Democrats and independents say that they "often" or "sometimes" actively try to

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 43 of 70

avoid news stories about Trump. Among them is Fernando Ocegueda, a Democrat in Los Angeles who said he recently cut back on consuming political news for precisely that reason.

"I don't agree with his decisions," the 50-year-old phlebotomist said of the president. "I don't think he's fit, so I don't even want to bother in paying attention to what he has to say."

Cohen, the retiree, said he thinks the president has created a sense of instability that puts many Americans in fight-or-flight mode. He thinks that's part of what keeps people coming back for more.

"People don't want to know, but they sort of want to know, because of the imminent sense of threat that is attached to him," he said. "You know it's a train wreck, and you just can't take your eyes off of it."

Even Republicans say they at times try to avoid Trump news

It's not just Democrats. About half of Republicans in the survey said they "often" or "sometimes" actively try to avoid news stories about Trump. Nicole Pratt, who identifies as a moderate Republican, is one of them.

The 62-year-old in Torrance, California said she supports some things the Trump administration is doing and wants to know the news, but she doesn't need to read any more stories about what she views as the president's narcissism.

"His fights with other people, his arguments — I don't bother with that anymore," she said. "It's like, I have other things to do."

Sterrett said some Republicans might say they avoid news about Trump not because they're tired of Trump updates but because they distrust traditional news sources.

"A lot of his followers do get news directly from him via social media, and his posts and announcements," he said.

Both parties get news on social — even as they say it's a misinformation haven

About 4 in 10 Republicans and Democrats say they get news from social media at least "daily," but they also recognize the pitfalls of what's shared there.

Most Democrats and Republicans point to social media users as having "a great deal" or "quite a bit" of responsibility for the spread of misinformation about events and important issues.

They're more divided on where to place the blame otherwise.

About three-quarters of Democrats say politicians have a high amount of responsibility for misinformation spreading, compared to 65% of Republicans. Another 64% of Democrats say that about social media companies such as Facebook or Meta, X, and YouTube, compared to 53% of Republicans.

Most Democrats, 58%, also see at least "quite a bit" of responsibility for misinformation coming from artificial intelligence companies that create and develop AI chatbots. A smaller share of Republicans, 47%, see AI companies as responsible.

Most Republicans, meanwhile, point to national news media as having "a great deal" or "quite a bit" of responsibility for the spread of misinformation about events and important issues. About half of Democrats say the same.

Partisans are hooked on news. Independents, not as much

While Americans aligned with one of the two major parties often differ on their specific views of trust in media, it's independents who are less engaged.

About 8 in 10 Democrats and Republicans regularly follow various news and information topics, compared to roughly 7 in 10 independents.

Other than Trump-related news, partisans are similarly likely to report avoiding news about celebrities, news in general, or news on their various devices — such as on social media or on their phone. Most on both sides of the aisle try to avoid the news when talking with friends or family at least sometimes.

Sterrett said even as the political parties differ in their news preferences, the survey shows some areas of overlap. For example, Americans in both parties are similarly likely to say they follow sports news, weather news or crime news.

"Especially when it comes to local issues and the stuff that affects people's daily lives, it does seem like Republicans and Democrats are following similar sources and following similar topics," Sterrett said.

Fed likely to leave rates unchanged at what may be Powell's last meeting, as Warsh to advance

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Wednesday will likely be a momentous day for the future of the Federal Reserve as Chair Jerome Powell could signal he will stay with the Fed even as a Senate panel is expected to confirm his replacement.

Powell will preside over what will probably be his last meeting as chair and hold a news conference Wednesday afternoon, when he may say whether he will take the unusual step of remaining on the central bank's board of governors, even after his term as chair ends May 15.

Separately, the Senate Banking Committee is scheduled to vote on the nomination of Kevin Warsh to succeed Powell. The nomination is expected to be approved on a party-line vote, and will then be taken up by the full Senate next month. President Donald Trump nominated Warsh, a former top Fed official, in January. Last year, Warsh echoed Trump's calls for the Fed to lower its key interest rate, leading many Democrats in Congress to question how independently he will operate as Fed chair.

The Fed is widely expected to keep its key rate unchanged Wednesday for a third straight meeting at 3.6%. Most policymakers believe at that level, the rate can still cool inflation by slowing borrowing and spending, but not so much that it will drag down hiring or raise unemployment.

Still, a key issue for the news conference Wednesday is what Powell says, if anything, about his future. Powell serves a separate term as a governor that lasts until January 2028. Chairs typically leave the board when their leadership terms end, but Powell has signaled he could remain. He would be the first chair to do so since 1948.

If Powell, who has made protecting Fed independence a key part of his legacy, chooses to stay, he would deprive Trump of the opportunity to pick his replacement and fill another seat on the Fed's seven-member board. Three of the seven current governors are Trump appointees.

At the same time, it could worsen tensions with the Trump administration and would create what some analysts refer to as a "two Popes" scenario, with a chair and former chair both on the Fed's board. In that case, divisions among policymakers could increase, if some decided to follow Powell's lead rather than Warsh's.

Warsh argued for rate cuts last year, but is unlikely to be able to reduce borrowing costs anytime soon, given that most policymakers have signaled they would prefer to wait and evaluate the Iran war's impact on the economy.

The leadership turmoil comes while the economy remains unusually murky, putting the Fed in a difficult spot. Inflation has jumped to 3.3%, a two-year high, as the war has sharply raised gas prices. That makes it harder for the central bank to reduce rates. The Fed typically leaves rates unchanged, or even raises them, if inflation is worsening.

At the same time, hiring has ground almost to a halt, leaving those without jobs frustrated by the difficulty of finding new ones. Typically, the Fed cuts rates when the job market is weak, to spur more spending and job gains.

But layoffs also remain low, as employers appear to be following a "low-hire, low-fire" strategy. Many Fed officials have suggested that as long as the unemployment rate is low, the central bank doesn't need to cut rates to spur more spending and hiring. Unemployment declined to 4.3% in March, from 4.4%.

A key change economists will look for Wednesday is whether the Fed alters the statement it issues after each meeting to signal that it is possible that their next move could be either a rate cut or a hike. Right now, the statement indicates that any change to its rate would be a cut. According to minutes of its last meeting in March, many of the 19 participants on the Fed's rate-setting committee support considering a hike, though it's likely short of a majority.

Oakland attributes a 6-decade low in homicides, in part, to life coaches

By JANIE HAR Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — Young men at risk of succumbing to gang violence slump over tables in an Oakland church. With them are prosecutors, clergy and survivors of shootings determined to show them they have more to look forward to than incarceration, injury or death.

The message is not one of punishment but of unceasing support. The men start to perk up.

"We're going to talk about keeping you and those you love alive and free," Jim Hopkins, emeritus pastor of Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church, says he told the men who gather at his church. "If you put down the gun, start taking the (city's) services, we'll help you find another way."

The California city has driven homicides to historic lows, and experts say part of the credit goes to a program that identifies people who are most likely to get pulled into gang violence and pairs them with life coaches to help turn their lives around.

City officials meet weekly to review recent shootings and identify the participants. The city's Department of Violence Prevention finds and talks to those people, one-on-one or in a group session at the church, and offers a host of services, including a life coach.

There is no single reason why a city's homicide rate falls, but officials say the Oakland Ceasefire-Lifeline program has been key, making a difference one person at a time.

Oakland records lowest homicide rate since the '60s

Homicides rates have plummeted in major cities across the U.S. in recent years but the shift in Oakland has been particularly dramatic.

Homicide rates have not been this low in the city of roughly 400,000 people since 1967, when the Black Panthers were a powerful force and hippies overran nearby San Francisco for the Summer of Love.

For nearly 25 years, Oakland ranked among the nation's most dangerous cities. City police recorded annual homicide rates ranging from 16.2 up to 36.4 deaths per 100,000 people, while the U.S. rate hovered around five per 100,000.

Oakland adopted the lifeline program, which originated in Boston, after gun violence in 2011 took the lives of three children ages 1, 3 and 5 in separate incidents. The city recorded a 43% reduction in homicides from 2012 to 2017.

Officials subsequently watered the program down until it was essentially dismantled during the pandemic, according to an audit in 2023.

It wasn't until city officials implemented changes recommended in the audit that the number of homicides declined, from 118 in 2023 to 78 in 2024.

Last year, Oakland hit a record low of 57 homicides.

Meeting people whose lives were changed by violence

Police are not involved except to provide the names of people expected to retaliate for a shooting that wounded or killed a friend or relative, or to be a victim of retaliation.

"People may underestimate how little the clients believe in themselves, and how little they value their own lives," said Holly Joshi, chief of the violence prevention department.

Once selected, the men meet or learn of people whose lives have been forever changed by gang violence, such as parents who have lost a child, or someone left paralyzed able to communicate only by clicking their tongue.

Last year, Bernard, a 27-year-old former gang member, was among 200 people matched with a life coach. He was contacted as he was leaving prison after serving six years for attempted robbery. Today, he has a full-time job, an apartment and a new outlook.

He's more aware of community ties, he says.

"When I was younger, I didn't realize I wasn't only hurting myself. I was hurting everybody around me, everybody who cared for me," said Bernard, who asked that his last name not be used because he fears sharing his background could hurt his future opportunities.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 46 of 70

Ready to turn his life around

At first, Bernard was standoffish with his life coach, 35-year-old LaSasha Long.

But then the young man who missed his mother's funeral because he was still behind bars when she died suffered another loss. A close childhood friend had died. He had to talk to someone.

"As soon as I called Sasha, she was there with advice," he says.

Long understood. She had a chaotic upbringing, bouncing between relatives after a stray bullet killed her mother when she was a toddler. She told him what she felt would have helped her move forward: That he'd lost a lot, but had a lot to live for too. And she reminded him his friend would have wanted him to live.

He listened.

"I can't take the credit for it because it was all him. He was the pilot," she says, adding that she helped with rides and reminded him of upcoming appointments. "But he wanted to change. He wanted that."

Now, they chat on the phone every day. He makes goofy faces at her while posing for photographs for The Associated Press. She says she'll be the best man at his wedding one day. He says she's not a man. She says he hasn't seen how good she looks in a suit.

Long describes life coaching as "heart work," helping someone see light in a dark tunnel.

Wanting to inspire others

Bernard aspires to be like Long one day, a coach who can offer a lifeline to others who grew up surrounded by violence and with bills to pay. His mother was loving but addicted to drugs. His father was in and out of jail.

He has discovered the joy of helping people.

On a recent day, Bernard was on break from his job cleaning streets in San Francisco when he saw a teen crash his bike. The old him would not have rushed over, much less reassured the embarrassed boy that everyone falls sometimes.

But Bernard helped wash the gravel burn on the boy's face and told him jokingly: "Tell your girl you got jumped."

"All some of us need is to see or know that people care," he said. "Once people realize that, I believe they start to do better, they want to do better. They figure there's more to life."

White House says funds to pay TSA and other Homeland Security workers will 'soon run out'

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House is warning Congress that funding to pay Department of Homeland Security personnel will "soon run out," sparking new threats of airport disruptions and national security concerns as the House slow-walks legislation to end what has been the longest-ever lapse in agency funding.

In a memo late Tuesday to lawmakers, the Office of Management and Budget said money that President Donald Trump tapped to pay Transportation Security Administration and other workers through executive actions will be exhausted by May. It called on the House to quickly approve the budget resolution senators approved in an all-night session last week that would pave the way for full funding for the department.

"DHS will soon run out of critical operating funds, placing essential personnel and operations at risk," the memo said.

The pressure from the Trump administration could help House Speaker Mike Johnson, whose narrow Republican majority has been stalled out, tangled in internal party disputes on a range of pending issues, including the Homeland Security funding. They have left the chamber at a virtual standstill.

The House is expected to vote as soon as Wednesday on the Senate budget resolution that is designed to unlock a multi-step process to eventually fund the department, and the administration warned GOP lawmakers off making changes that could prolong passage.

"Restoring funding for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has never been more urgent, as demonstrated by recent events," the memo said, a nod to the situation over the weekend when a man armed with guns and knives tried to storm the annual White House correspondents' dinner that Trump,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 47 of 70

the vice president and top Cabinet officials were attending.

Homeland Security shutdown is longest ever

Homeland Security has been operating without regular funds for more than two months after Democrats refused to fund Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Border Patrol without changes to those operations after the deaths of Americans protesting Trump's deportation agenda.

While immigration enforcement workers have largely been paid through the flush of new cash — some \$170 billion — that Congress approved as part of Trump's tax cuts bill last year, others, including TSA, have had to rely on Trump's intervention through executive action to ensure their paychecks.

But with salaries topping \$1.6 billion every two weeks, DHS Secretary Markwayne Mullin said recently, those funds are drying up.

Complicated budget strategy ahead

House and Senate Republicans have embarked on a go-it-alone strategy, attempting to approve funds for Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Border Patrol without Democrats. They want to provide \$70 billion for those immigration operations for the remainder of Trump's term to ensure no further interruptions.

It's a cumbersome process, the same that was used last year to approve Trump's tax cuts bill, that will play out over several weeks.

The Senate launched the process last week, and is now waiting on the House to act. Once that budget resolution is approved, both the House and Senate are expected to draft the actual funding bill, a process that can take weeks.

In the meantime, Johnson is expected to quickly turn this week to legislation that would fund the other parts of Homeland Security, including TSA, the Coast Guard and other agencies.

That bipartisan bill has support from Democrats and already passed the Senate a month ago, when Republicans reluctantly agreed to carve out the immigration-related funds that Democrats had opposed. But it has been stalled out in the House, as Republicans in that chamber disagreed with the Senate's approach.

What to know about singer D4vd and the killing of 14-year-old Celeste Rivas Hernandez

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Singer and songwriter D4vd has been charged with murder, sexual abuse and dismemberment in the killing of 14-year-old Celeste Rivas Hernandez.

His lawyers said he is not guilty and did not cause the death of the girl whose body, authorities said, was found in his towed Tesla SUV in Hollywood in September.

The music of D4vd, pronounced "David," became an online phenomenon when he was a teenager before he found more traditional success.

In a Los Angeles public hearing set to start Friday that will look much like a trial, prosecutors will present evidence against the 21-year-old whose legal name is David Anthony Burke. It's expected to last about five days before a judge will decide whether he should go to trial on charges of first-degree murder, lewd and lascivious acts with a person under 14, and mutilating a dead body.

Here are a few things to know about the case:

What is the evidence against D4vd?

Prosecutors will present evidence that the decomposing body of Rivas Hernandez was found cut into pieces in two bags in the trunk of a Tesla SUV registered in Burke's name at the Houston address of his parents' house. The vehicle was found seemingly abandoned in the Hollywood Hills near a home where he'd been living. They will likely introduce a medical examiner's report that said she died from two penetrating wounds.

Lead prosecutor Beth Silverman said the evidence includes child sexual abuse imagery taken from Burke's phone and iCloud accounts. But the vast majority of evidence remains secret. It was collected by police who served more than 50 search warrants and via three separate investigative grand juries.

Burke's attorneys have demanded that the evidence be revealed as quickly as possible by making the

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 48 of 70

unusual move of exercising his right to have a preliminary hearing within 10 court days of his arraignment. "We believe the actual evidence will show David Burke did not murder Celeste Rivas Hernandez," lead defense attorney Blair Berk said in court last week.

What is a preliminary hearing?

At a preliminary hearing, used in California and many other jurisdictions, witnesses are called and cross-examined and evidence is introduced in the same way they are at trial. But a judge, not a jury, makes the decision whether the evidence is sufficient for the case to move to trial. The standard used is probable cause, as opposed to the standard to convict: guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

Prosecutors generally provide only as much evidence as they think they need to clear that bar, which they usually do. The hearings can last several days but are usually far shorter than trials.

Who is D4vd?

D4vd, an online moniker that became Burke's stage name, was raised and homeschooled in Houston. He began making music for YouTube videos he made of the video game Fortnite.

For the most part written and recorded alone on his phone, his songs were a blend of indie rock, R&B and lo-fi pop. The music made him a phenomenon on TikTok, Instagram, Soundcloud and Spotify, where his top songs, including his 2022 breakthrough "Romantic Homicide," have more than a billion plays. In 2023, he released two EPs and opened for SZA on tour.

"It grew past Fortnite, it grew past YouTube, past everything like that, and it became such a music focused thing and the real artist in me came out," he told The Associated Press at last year's Coachella festival.

His first full-length album, "Withered," was released last year just two days after the date authorities estimate Rivas Hernandez was killed.

Who is Celeste Rivas Hernandez?

Rivas Hernandez was a 13-year-old seventh grader when her family reported her missing in 2024 from her hometown of Lake Elsinore, about 80 miles (130 kilometers) outside Los Angeles. Her body was discovered a day after she would have turned 15.

Prosecutors allege she was sexually abused in a relationship with Burke that lasted at least a year before she turned 14, the age at which they say she was killed. She was last known to be alive on April 23, 2025, when she went to his Hollywood Hills house, they said.

Her parents described her in a statement as "a beautiful, strong girl who loved to sing and dance."

Key players in court

Judge Charlaine F. Olmedo is best known for presiding over the two trials of actor Danny Masterson. The first ended in a mistrial and the second resulted in two rape convictions in 2023. Olmedo sentenced him to 30 years to life in prison.

Deputy District Attorney Beth Silverman, the lead prosecutor, is known for getting a Los Angeles serial killer who became known as the "Grim Sleeper" convicted and sentenced to death in 2016 for the murders of nine women and a teenage girl that went unsolved for years.

Blair Berk, who is representing Burke, has for many years been among the go-to lawyers for A-list clients. They've included Leonardo DiCaprio, Jennifer Aniston, Reese Witherspoon, Ozzy Osbourne, and Harvey Weinstein.

King Charles III highlights US-UK bond during busy day of diplomacy with Trump and Congress

By STEVEN SLOAN, JOSH BOAK, MARY CLARE JALONICK and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press WASHINGTON (AP) — King Charles III marked the 250th anniversary of American independence from Britain with gratitude that the two countries united to build "one of the most consequential alliances in human history" while urging "that we ignore the clarion calls to become ever more inward-looking."

Speaking Tuesday to a joint session of the U.S. Congress, Charles repeatedly highlighted the historical and cultural ties that he said have cemented an enduring bond between the United States and the United Kingdom. But even as he spoke in unifying, optimistic terms, he delivered a series of nuanced warnings

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 49 of 70

encouraging leaders in the U.S. to remain collaborative and engaged in global affairs.

He said the alliance between the U.S. and the U.K., tested anew by President Donald Trump's war in Iran, "cannot rest on past achievements." Charles urged "unyielding resolve" in backing Ukraine against Russia and heralded the NATO alliance that Trump has consistently undermined.

The king praised religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue in terms that are rare in Trump's Washington. As the White House rolls back regulations aimed at denting climate change, the king encouraged those in power to "reflect on our shared responsibility to safeguard nature, our most precious and irreplaceable asset."

At one point, Charles traced the notion of checks and balances on executive power to the Magna Carta, the foundational legal document sealed by King John in 1215. Trump told The New York Times earlier this year that he was constrained only by "my own morality."

And acknowledging a scandal that has roiled politics in both the U.S. and U.K., Charles subtly alluded to the victims of Jeffrey Epstein, the convicted sex offender with ties to British officials, including the king's brother, Andrew.

King celebrates independence and focuses on repairing a frayed relationship

Charles is on a four-day visit to the U.S. intended to both celebrate American independence and to repair the country's fraying relationship with the U.K. He hardly arrived in Washington as an oppositional figure to Trump. Joined by Queen Camilla, Charles had a warm greeting with the president and first lady Melania Trump at the White House earlier Tuesday.

In his welcome remarks, Trump also highlighted the shared history between the two countries.

"American patriots today can sing, 'My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty,' only because our colonial ancestors first sang, 'God save the king,'" Trump said.

The leaders met privately in the Oval Office for a meeting Trump later described as "really good," adding that Charles is a "fantastic person."

Trump hosted the royal couple for a jovial state dinner later Tuesday in the East Room of the White House. About 130 guests were seated at two long tables that were decorated with low floral arrangements. The guests included tech leaders such as outgoing Apple CEO Tim Cook and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, along with conservative Supreme Court justices and several Fox News journalists and hosts.

Charles and Camilla will continue their U.S. tour this week with stops in New York City and Virginia.

During his roughly 20-minute speech to Congress, the king, who is expressly apolitical, never directly criticized Trump. Still, the contrast was apparent at times and some British commentators described his speech as more political than they had expected.

Just two months earlier, Trump stood at the same lectern and chided Democrats for not standing during part of his State of the Union address. The king, for his part, elicited multiple standing ovations from Democrats and Republicans who listened with rapt attention.

Charles is just the second British monarch to address a joint session of Congress. His mother, Queen Elizabeth II, delivered a similar speech in 1991 highlighting the historic ties between both countries and the importance of their democratic values.

Charles acknowledges a 'more volatile and more dangerous' world

While the king paid tribute to those remarks, he acknowledged that today's environment is "more volatile and more dangerous than the world to which my late mother spoke."

Many of the lawmakers in the room were at Saturday's White House Correspondents' Dinner, which was disrupted by a shooting that authorities have described as an attempted assassination against Trump.

"Let me say with unshakeable resolve," Charles said. "Such acts of violence will never succeed."

Meanwhile, Trump's up-and-down relationship with British Prime Minister Keir Starmer has taken a particularly sour turn over the past several months as the Republican president has sought to rally international support for the war in Iran. Trump criticized Starmer, who has largely resisted his overtures, by saying, "This is not Winston Churchill that we're dealing with."

Trump has also imposed tariffs on the U.K. and warned of additional levies despite a Supreme Court ruling earlier this year that has made such unilateral moves more challenging. Trump threatened just last week

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 50 of 70

to slap a "big tariff" on the U.K. if it doesn't scrap a digital services tax on U.S. technology companies.

Trump has more broadly challenged the traditional trans-Atlantic alliance with efforts to annex Greenland and threats to walk away from NATO. He has repeatedly imposed tariffs on and taunted Canada, a member of the British Commonwealth.

Ahead of his speech, the king had faced some calls on Capitol Hill to meet with Epstein's victims while he is in the U.S. He didn't make a direct mention of the convicted sex offender, but did reference the "collective strength" in the U.S. and the U.K. to "support victims of some of the ills that, so tragically, exist in both our societies today."

If Charles offered low-key criticism of Trump, the president didn't seem to mind. He said later that the king "made a great speech."

"I was very jealous," he said.

Agents armed with search warrants keep focus on Minnesota in public fraud probe

By MARK VANCLEAVE and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Federal agents executed multiple searches in Minnesota on Tuesday, seizing records and other evidence in an ongoing fraud investigation by the Trump administration of publicly funded social programs for children, authorities said.

No details about possible crimes were disclosed, though armed agents were seen at childcare centers in the Minneapolis area. KSTP-TV said one crew even had a battering ram.

The searches occurred months after right-wing influencer Nick Shirley posted a video that said members of Minnesota's Somali community were running fake childcare centers to collect federal subsidies. It caught the attention of the administration and conservative activists, though inspectors said the centers were operating as expected.

Minnesota has been dogged by fraud: At least 65 people, many of them Somali Americans, have been convicted of ripping off a federal program that was meant to provide food to children. The investigation began during the Biden administration.

Separately, a federal prosecutor in December said as much as \$9 billion in federal funds that supported 14 Minnesota-run programs since 2018 may have been stolen.

Democratic Gov. Tim Walz, who has been on the defensive about not doing enough to root out fraud, welcomed the raids Tuesday. Minnesota's child welfare agency said it shared key information with law enforcement to "hold bad actors accountable."

"We catch criminals when state and federal agencies share information. Joint investigations work, and securing justice depends on it," Walz said.

The searches were being conducted at day cares, businesses and some residences, according to a person familiar with the matter who spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss the investigation.

Various state and federal agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security, participated in searches. At least two of the sites were in Shirley's video. Officers from Minnesota's Bureau of Criminal Apprehension were removing boxes at some locations.

Federal officials justify searches as smoking out fraud

"The American people deserve to know how their taxpayer money was abused. ... No stone will be left unturned," said DHS, which also noted the cooperation of local and state authorities.

On social media, FBI Director Kash Patel mocked Walz for taking credit "while we smoke out the fraud plaguing Minnesota under your governorship."

Jason Steck, an attorney who represents childcare centers, said some of the targeted businesses were operated by Somali immigrants. They were not his clients.

"A few childcare centers, a few autism centers, a few healthcare agencies of some type," Steck said,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 51 of 70

adding that it appeared to be a “particular sweep for fraud.”

The executive director of Child Care Aware of Minnesota, a nonprofit that serves childhood educators, said the publicity is unflattering.

“The majority are in business to do good business. You’re going to come across individuals who try to capitalize on systems that are broken and need to be fixed,” Candace Yates said.

Walz ended his bid for a third term as governor in early January amid President Donald Trump’s relentless focus on fraud allegations and the state’s Somali community. Trump has used dehumanizing rhetoric, calling Somali immigrants “garbage” and “low IQ.”

Tensions between Walz and the federal government subsequently rocketed during an extraordinary immigration crackdown that led to the deaths of two people before Operation Metro Surge was eased in February.

In February, Vice President JD Vance said the government would temporarily halt \$243 million in Medicaid funding to Minnesota over fraud concerns. Minnesota sued in response, warning it may have to cut healthcare for low-income families, but a judge on April 6 declined to grant a restraining order.

Walz told Congress in March that he wanted to work with the federal government in fraud investigations, but that the immigration surge had made it more difficult.

“The people of Minnesota have been singled out and targeted for political retribution at an unparalleled scale,” he said at the time.

Governor discusses fraud in State of the State

Walz touched on the searches Tuesday night when he delivered his final State of the State speech, noting that he promised to devote his energies to fighting fraud back in January when he dropped out of the governor’s race.

“I’ve said the buck stops with me,” he told a joint meeting of the state House and Senate. “Some of you will take that as an open invitation to play politics with every incident of fraud that takes place here in Minnesota, even though I have to tell you, statistics show it’s happening in red states more than here. But so be it.”

The governor said that if lawmakers take fraud seriously, they should help him out by passing the anti-fraud package he unveiled in February.

But Republican legislative leaders said afterward that Walz failed during his speech to take adequate responsibility for fraud on his watch.

“While the governor made hints at taking accountability, he immediately turned to pointing fingers — to pointing fingers at other states,” House GOP Floor Leader Harry Niska told reporters.

United Arab Emirates will leave OPEC in a blow to the oil cartel

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The United Arab Emirates said Tuesday it will leave OPEC effective May 1, stripping the oil cartel of its third-largest producer and further weakening its leverage over global oil supplies and prices.

The UAE’s decision had been rumored as a possibility for some time, as it pushed back in recent years against OPEC production quotas it felt had been too low — meaning it wasn’t able to sell as much oil to the world as it had wanted.

“Having invested heavily in expanding energy production capacity in recent years, the bigger picture is that the UAE has been itching to pump more oil,” Capital Economics wrote in an analysis. “The ties binding OPEC members together have loosened,” it said, particularly after Qatar withdrew from the cartel in 2019.

Regional politics are also likely at play. The UAE has had increasingly frosty relations with Saudi Arabia, OPEC’s largest producer, over political and economic matters in the Mideast, even after both came under attack by fellow OPEC member Iran during the war.

No immediate impact likely for world oil markets

The UAE’s withdrawal from OPEC won’t necessarily have any immediate effects in markets. That’s because

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 52 of 70

world oil supplies are sharply constrained by the war in Iran, which has closed off the Strait of Hormuz, a waterway through which one-fifth of global oil supplies — including much of the UAE's — is transported. On Tuesday, Brent crude, the international benchmark, traded above \$111 a barrel, or more than 50% above its prewar price.

OPEC accounts for roughly 40% of the world's oil output, but its market power had been waning in recent years as the United States ramped up production. While Saudi Arabia had been producing more than 10 million barrels of oil a day before the war, the U.S. pumps more than 13 million barrels a day.

U.S. President Donald Trump has been a steady critic of the cartel during his two terms in the White House.

The UAE, which joined OPEC through its emirate of Abu Dhabi in 1967, had been producing around 3.4 million barrels of crude a day just before the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran began on Feb. 28. Analysts say it has capacity to produce roughly 5 million barrels a day.

In its announcement on Tuesday, made via its state-run WAM news agency, the UAE said it also would leave the wider OPEC+ group, which Russia had led to try to stabilize oil prices.

"This decision reflects the UAE's long-term strategic and economic vision and evolving energy profile, including accelerated investment in domestic energy production," the UAE said, adding that it would bring "additional production to market in a gradual and measured manner, aligned with demand and market conditions."

The UAE's withdrawal removes one of OPEC's few members with the ability to quickly increase production, said Jorge Leon, head of geopolitical analysis at Rystad Energy.

"A structurally weaker OPEC, with less spare capacity concentrated within the group, will find it increasingly difficult to calibrate supply and stabilize prices," he said.

Saudi Arabia, UAE increasingly at odds

Saudi Arabia and the UAE increasingly have competed over economic issues and regional politics, particularly in the Red Sea area. The two countries had jointly fought against Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels in 2015. However, that coalition broke down into recriminations in late December, when Saudi Arabia bombed what it described as a weapons shipment bound for Yemeni separatists backed by the UAE.

As tensions rose in recent months, Saudi broadcasters long based in Dubai, the economic hub of the UAE, have pulled back to the kingdom.

"This exit of OPEC fits into the UAE need for flexibility with key energy consumers as well -- including a future relationship with China and a more competitive relationship with Saudi Arabia," said Karen Young, a senior research scholar at Columbia University's Center on Global Energy Policy.

While Saudi Arabia and OPEC had no immediate reaction, Emirati Energy Minister Suhail al-Mazrouei insisted his country's decision did not stem from any dispute with its Gulf neighbor.

"We've been working together for years and years. We have the highest respect for the Saudis for leading OPEC," al-Mazrouei told CNBC.

However, the UAE sent its foreign minister rather than its ruler to a Gulf Arab leaders' meeting held Tuesday in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, hosted by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The UAE hosted the United Nations COP28 climate talks in 2023, a conference that ended for the first time with a pledge by nearly 200 countries to move away from planet-warming fossil fuels. But the UAE still plans to increase its production capacity in the coming years, even as it pursues more clean energy at home, a move decried by climate activists.

"The demand for power is going to go up and up and up," U.S. Interior Secretary Doug Burgum told an Abu Dhabi oil conference in November. "Today's the day to announce that there is no energy transition. There is only energy addition."

He drew widespread applause from his Emirati hosts.

Mexican man pleads guilty to impersonating Border Patrol agent to 'disrupt deportation missions'

SAN DIEGO (AP) — A Mexican man in the United States has pleaded guilty to impersonating a Border Patrol agent and following federal immigration officers to divert them while they were out on immigration enforcement missions in Southern California.

Jamie Ernesto Alvarez-Gonzalez admitted to following a Border Patrol agent on Jan. 8 while he was driving in a neighborhood in San Diego, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of California.

Prosecutors said Alvarez-Gonzalez's black Ford F-150, a model also used by undercover federal officers, had a license plate with federal truck written on the frame in small letters, though the word federal was misspelled. He put a Border Patrol sticker in the windshield and non-working radio communications antennae on the roof, according to the complaint. Handcuffs were hung from the rearview mirror.

The agent aborted his mission when he saw Alvarez-Gonzalez following him, falsely believing other agents were responding, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office.

When Alvarez-Gonzalez was confronted by real agents, he "shouted obscenities and demanded agents leave the community of Linda Vista," prosecutors said. Three other cars also arrived at one point and began harassing departing agents and chasing them on the highway.

Prosecutors said Alvarez-Gonzalez had made a recording where he said he was actively looking for federal agents working on immigration enforcement and had brought in his "reinforcements." He also had a fake FBI badge.

He pleaded guilty to one count of impersonating a federal agent and three counts of illegally possessing firearms. His federal public defender did not respond to an emailed request for comment.

Alvarez-Gonzalez overstayed his tourist visa, which he used decades ago to enter the country, the U.S. Attorney's Office said.

US soldier pleads not guilty to using intel on Maduro raid to win \$400,000 on Polymarket

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A U.S. special forces soldier pleaded not guilty Tuesday to charges that he used classified information about the mission to capture former Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro to win more than \$400,000 on the prediction market Polymarket.

Gannon Ken Van Dyke, 38, entered the plea in Manhattan federal court after he was charged with the unlawful use of confidential government information for personal gain, theft of nonpublic government information, commodities fraud, wire fraud and making an unlawful monetary transaction.

He was released on \$250,000 bail and his travel was restricted to portions of New York, North Carolina, California and points necessary to travel between.

Prosecutors said evidence in the case will include information resulting from grand jury subpoenas, cryptocurrency exchange records, search warrants and social media accounts.

Defense attorney Zach Intrater told Judge Margaret M. Garnett he doubts there will be many disputes arising from "the actual event," but suspects the case will rise and fall on motions he will make on behalf of his client.

The judge ordered Van Dyke to return to court on June 8 for a pretrial conference.

The case comes during heavy scrutiny on prediction markets, which allow people to trade or wager on almost anything, as policymakers call for stricter regulation of the platforms amid concerns about insider trading.

The Trump administration has been supportive of the prediction market industry's expansion. The president's eldest son is an adviser for both Polymarket and its main competitor, Kalshi, and he is a Polymarket investor. Trump's social media platform, Truth Social, is launching its own prediction market called Truth

Predict.

Prosecutors said Van Dyke was involved in the planning and execution of Maduro's capture and had signed nondisclosure agreements centered on the operations, but he eventually placed a series of bets related to Maduro being out of power by Jan. 31.

According to a criminal complaint, the bets totaling \$33,000 were placed over a three-day period and resulted in "more than \$404,000 of profits."

Polymarket, one of the largest prediction markets, flagged the suspicious activity and turned it over to the government, according to CEO Shayne Coplan.

Van Dyke, who is stationed at Fort Bragg near Fayetteville, North Carolina, was granted bond after a court hearing in North Carolina last week and will continue his case in New York. He was represented in court by attorney Zach Intrater.

Spurned by Alex Cora, Phillies turn to Don Mattingly in the interim after Rob Thomson is fired

By DAN GELSTON AP Sports Writer

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Alex Cora had barely been out of a job after the World Series champion manager was fired by the Red Sox when his old boss offered him a professional lifeline.

Dave Dombrowski, the Phillies' president of baseball operations, wanted to know if Rob Thomson was fired, would Cora be interested in taking over a team with a \$284.7 million payroll and World Series expectations that had slogged through April as one of the worst teams in baseball.

Cora ultimately declined, citing family reasons, and a potential reunion with Dombrowski eight seasons after they won the World Series together in Boston was on hold.

Rebuffed by Cora, the Phillies looked down the bench to Don Mattingly.

Only four months after he was hired as Philadelphia's bench coach, Mattingly was named interim manager to replace Thomson, who was fired Tuesday after the Phillies lost 11 of 12 games and began the day tied for last place in the majors.

"Alex wasn't going to take the job at that point; should we still make the change? We came to the final conclusion that we were going to make the change, and that it was the best for the club," Dombrowski said.

Thomson led the Phillies to four straight playoff appearances, including the 2022 World Series, and consecutive NL East titles, but couldn't lead high-priced talent that included Bryce Harper, Kyle Schwarber and Trea Turner back to the top of the standings through the first month of the season.

"I still think, and I hope because I love these guys, that this team is going to turn this thing around," Thomson said hours after he was fired. "They're going to get hot. There's a bunch of different reasons why, but one is the fact there's a lot of talent in there."

Dombrowski, who has led baseball operations for Montreal, Miami, Detroit and Boston, winning World Series titles with the Marlins in 1997 and Red Sox in 2018, made it clear Tuesday that Cora was his first choice to succeed Thomson.

"We never got down to the nuts and bolts of things," Dombrowski said. "He called me Saturday night as a friend. I guess he calls me one of his mentors and we talked because he never had been through that before. We talked Sunday morning.

"I came to conclusion that if he took it, I would make a change. I thought he would take it. Until Monday morning it was apparent from his perspective he wanted to take time with his family. He wanted to be a father first and foremost and so that's what he had decided."

Mattingly will now work for his son

Mattingly, the former New York Yankees great, was named interim manager through the end of the season and third base coach Dusty Wathan was promoted to bench coach. Mattingly will now work for one of his sons — Preston Mattingly is the Phillies general manager — in what is believed to be the first father-son GM/manager combination in baseball history.

Mattingly said there was no awkwardness about essentially working for his son because they both had

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 55 of 70

the same vision for the franchise.

"We both want to win games," Mattingly said. "We're like every player. We're here to win."

Thomson is the second manager fired in baseball this season after the Red Sox fired Cora and five coaches on Saturday.

Dombrowski gave Thomson a vote of confidence last week during their losing streak. Dombrowski stood behind Thomson's work and said he'd been a good manager since replacing Joe Girardi in 2022.

Thomson went 355-270 and orchestrated a baseball resurgence in Philadelphia. The 62-year-old, a baseball lifer finally promoted to his first managerial stint in 2022, signed a contract extension in the offseason running through the 2027 season and was again expected to lead the Phillies into World Series contention.

Thomson made the rare move for a fired manager to address the media one final time and said he was so grateful for his time with the Phillies, he would like to stay connected to the organization in the future.

"I don't want to go anywhere else," Thomson said. "Maybe right now isn't the right time. But yeah, I'm all in on that."

The Phillies instead have been one of the biggest flops in baseball and lost 10 straight games before ace Zack Wheeler led them to a win against Atlanta on Saturday. The Phillies lost to Atlanta on Sunday and fell to 9-19 overall, tied with the division rival New York Mets.

Thomson led Philadelphia to the 2022 World Series after taking over for Girardi, losing to the Houston Astros in six games. Since then, the club has regressed in the postseason. It lost in the NL Championship Series in 2023 in seven games, and the NL Division Series in 2024 and '25 in four games.

Nicknamed Topper, Thomson has been with the club since the 2018 season, when he was hired as bench coach under former manager Gabe Kapler.

He was with the New York Yankees from 1990-2017, including 10 seasons on the major league coaching staff as bench coach (2008, 2015-17) and third base coach (2009-14). He earned his nickname in the Yankees organization for always being on top of details.

Thomson became only the fourth manager in big league history to reach the postseason in each of the first four full seasons to begin a managing career, joining Dave Roberts, Aaron Boone and Mike Matheny. He became only the third manager in Phillies history to win consecutive division titles, joining Charlie Manuel and Danny Ozark.

"I've played for a lot of guys over my 15-year career, and Topper is definitely one of the guys at the top," Harper said.

Phillies season goes off the rails

The Phillies have been awful in what was supposed to be a celebratory season with the franchise set to host the All-Star Game and surrounding festivities. Instead, they have collapsed in every aspect of the game, with regulars Alec Bohm and Schwarber both hitting under .200, while starters Jesús Luzardo, Aaron Nola and Andrew Painter all have 5.00-plus ERAs.

The Phillies recently released high-priced bust Taijuan Walker in the final year of a four-year, \$72 million contract and outfielder Nick Castellanos was released in February as he entered the final year of a five-year, \$100 million deal.

The Phillies haven't won the World Series since 2008 and had last made the playoffs in 2011 until Thomson led them to the surprise run to the 2022 World Series dubbed Red October that rejuvenated the fanbase and made 90-plus win seasons the norm.

The Phillies now will turn to Mattingly, who kept the coaching staff intact, to resuscitate their season and try to at least keep them in the hunt for an NL wild-card spot.

Mattingly is ready to lead Phillies into contention

Mattingly, spending his 23rd straight season as a major league manager or coach, had his mind set on retirement after he left his role as Toronto's bench coach under manager John Schneider following the World Series.

He reversed course after a talk with his family and latched on with the Phillies, enticed by the chance to work with his son and Thomson, his friend from their Yankees days.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 56 of 70

Mattingly managed the Dodgers from 2011-15 and the Marlins from 2016-22. He was the 2020 NL Manager of the Year after he led the Marlins to their first playoff appearance since 2003.

He said when the Phillies hired him in the winter that he no longer had interest in managing again. Mattingly said ahead of Tuesday's game against the Giants those comments were largely out of deference to Thomson's presence and that he indeed had the spark and desire to help bring the Phillies back into the playoff race.

"I've always felt good. I've been pretty healthy," Mattingly said. "I feel like I have energy. But I did want to say that from the standpoint that Thom's here. I didn't want anyone feeling like I was here to do something like this. So, I really wanted to leave it like that."

Mattingly played 14 seasons as a first baseman in the major leagues, all for the Yankees, from 1982-95. He was a six-time AL All-Star and the 1985 AL Most Valuable Player. Mattingly captained the Yankees in his final five seasons.

Much like Thomson did in 2022, Mattingly believes he can return the Phillies to greatness as an interim manager.

"We're talented enough," he said. "We know that. We believe that."

Ex-FBI Director Comey indicted again, in a probe over an online post officials call a Trump threat

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former FBI Director James Comey was indicted again Tuesday, this time over a social media photo of seashells arranged on a beach that officials said constituted a threat against President Donald Trump.

The criminal case is the second in months against Comey and is part of the Trump administration Justice Department's relentless effort to prosecute political opponents of the Republican president. The seashells photo was posted nearly a year ago, but the indictment was secured at a time when acting Attorney General Todd Blanche, a Trump loyalist who previously served as his personal lawyer, aims to prove to the president that he is the right person to hold the job permanently.

The fact that the Justice Department pursued a new case months after a separate and unrelated indictment was dismissed could expose the government to claims of a vindictive prosecution and to arguments that it is going out of its way to target Comey, who as FBI director had overseen the early months of an investigation into whether Trump's 2016 campaign had coordinated with Russia to sway the outcome of that year's election.

Comey was fired by Trump months into the president's first term as that investigation was underway, and they have openly feuded ever since.

The prosecution arises from a May post on Instagram in which Comey shared a photo of seashells he saw on a walk in the arrangement of "86 47." He has said he assumed that the numbers reflected a political message, not a call to violence. Comey deleted the post shortly after it was made, writing: "I didn't realize some folks associate those numbers with violence" and "I oppose violence of any kind so I took the post down."

Nonetheless, Comey was swiftly interviewed by the Secret Service after Trump administration officials asserted that he was advocating the assassination of Trump, the 47th president.

The case was filed in the Eastern District of North Carolina, the state where Comey found the seashells. "Well, they're back – this time about a picture of seashells on a North Carolina beach a year ago, and this won't be the end of it," Comey said in a video statement Tuesday. "But nothing has changed with me. I'm still innocent, I'm still not afraid and I still believe in the independent federal judiciary. So let's go."

The two-count indictment charges Comey with "knowingly and willfully" making a threat to "take the life of, and to inflict bodily harm upon" Trump and with transmitting a threat in interstate commerce. It does not provide evidence that Comey knowingly threatened Trump, especially since Comey has said the opposite, but suggested a "reasonable recipient who is familiar with the circumstances would interpret"

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 57 of 70

the message as a threat.

At a news conference Tuesday, Blanche refused to elaborate on any evidence of intent the government has but said: "How do you prove intent in any case? You prove intent with witnesses, with documents, with the defendant himself to the extent it's appropriate. And that's how we'll prove intent in this case."

And in an effort to rebut claims that Comey was being selectively prosecuted, Blanche contended the case against the former FBI director was similar to other threats cases the department routinely brings against the lesser known.

"While this case is unique and this indictment stands out because of the name of the defendant, his alleged conduct is the same kind of conduct that we will never tolerate and that we will always investigate and regularly prosecute," Blanche said.

Comey's legal team said in a statement that they "will contest these charges in the courtroom and look forward to vindicating Mr. Comey and the First Amendment." They said he "vigorously denies" the charges.

What 86 means

Merriam-Webster, the dictionary used by The Associated Press, says 86 is slang meaning "to throw out," "to get rid of" or "to refuse service to." It notes: "Among the most recent senses adopted is a logical extension of the previous ones, with the meaning of 'to kill.' We do not enter this sense, due to its relative recency and sparseness of use."

Trump, in a Fox News Channel interview in May, accused Comey of knowing "exactly what that meant."

"A child knows what that meant," Trump said. "If you're the FBI director and you don't know what that meant, that meant assassination. And it says it loud and clear."

Comey's first indictment

The former FBI director was indicted in September on charges he lied to Congress in 2020 about whether he had authorized information about an investigation to be provided to a journalist. He denied any wrongdoing. The case was dismissed after a judge concluded the prosecutor who brought the indictment was illegally appointed.

Comey was the FBI director when Trump took office in 2017, having been appointed by then-President Barack Obama, a Democrat, and serving before that as a senior Justice Department official in President George W. Bush's Republican administration.

But the relationship was strained from the start, including after Comey resisted a request by Trump at a private dinner to pledge his personal loyalty to the president -- an overture that so unnerved the FBI director that he documented it in a contemporaneous memorandum.

Trump fired Comey in May 2017 amid an FBI investigation into potential ties between Russia and Trump's campaign. That inquiry, later taken over by special counsel Robert Mueller, found that while Russia interfered in the 2016 election and the Trump team welcomed the help, there was insufficient evidence to prove a criminal collaboration.

Other politically charged prosecutions

Blanche was elevated earlier this month from deputy attorney general to acting attorney general, replacing Pam Bondi, who had frustrated Trump with the department's struggles to build successful criminal cases against his adversaries.

Blanche since then has moved quickly to accelerate politically charged prosecutions, including a case last week against the nonprofit Southern Poverty Law Center, which is accused by the Justice Department of misleading donors by using their money to pay informants who served as leaders in the hate groups the organization was founded to fight. The group has denied any wrongdoing.

Comey is among many Trump foes to face scrutiny over the last year.

The Justice Department, for instance, is also pursuing a criminal investigation into former CIA Director John Brennan, another key figure in the Russia investigation -- one of Trump's chief grievances and a saga he and his supporters have long sought retaliation for. Brennan has denied doing anything wrong.

CNN was the first to report the second indictment against Comey.

Elon Musk takes stand in trial vs. Sam Altman that could reshape AI's future

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — Elon Musk, the Tesla CEO, world's richest man and OpenAI cofounder, took the stand Tuesday in a high-stakes trial revolving around a bitter feud with his former friend Sam Altman that could reshape the future development of artificial intelligence.

His testimony at the Oakland, California, federal courthouse kicked off a legal drama that is expected to brim with intrigue and potentially embarrassing details about the two tech moguls. Musk filed the lawsuit against Altman and his top lieutenant, Greg Brockman, along with Microsoft over its investments in OpenAI, in 2024.

"Fundamentally, I think they're going to try to make this lawsuit ... very complicated, but it's actually very simple," Musk said. "Which is that it's not OK to steal a charity."

The nine-person jury was selected Monday and the trial is scheduled to take three weeks.

In the civil lawsuit, Musk accuses Altman and Brockman of double-crossing him by straying from the San Francisco company's founding mission to be a steward of a revolutionary technology. In his opening statement, Musk's attorney, Steven Molo, quoted OpenAI's mission statement when it was created as a nonprofit for the benefit of humanity, not constrained by the need to generate financial enrichment for anyone.

Altman and Brockman, aided by Microsoft, stole a charity "whose mission was the safe, open development of artificial intelligence," Molo said. Musk is seeking damages and Altman's ouster from OpenAI's board.

OpenAI has brushed off Musk's allegations as a case of sour grapes aimed at undercutting its rapid growth and bolstering Musk's own xAI, which he launched in 2023 as a competitor.

Both sides recount the start of a bitter divide

In his opening statement, OpenAI lawyer William Savitt told jurors "we are here because Mr. Musk didn't get his way with OpenAI."

Savitt said Musk used his promises of funding to bully OpenAI founding members and tried to take control of OpenAI and merge it with Tesla. In fact, he said Musk wanted to form a for-profit company and own more than 50% of it.

There is no record, Savitt said, of promises made to Musk that OpenAI was going to remain a nonprofit forever. What Musk ultimately cared about, he said, was not OpenAI's nonprofit status but winning the AI race with Google.

Musk's attorney said the case is not about Musk, but rather Altman, Brockman and Microsoft.

By 2017, about two years after OpenAI's founding, it became clear that OpenAI would need more money, and Molo said the founders eventually settled on the idea of creating a for-profit arm of OpenAI that would support the nonprofit. Terms were capped for investors so they "couldn't make infinite profit."

"There is nothing wrong with a nonprofit having a for-profit subsidiary, but (it) has to advance the mission," Molo said.

Microsoft initially invested \$2 billion in OpenAI. Then, in 2022, news spread that OpenAI had done a deal with Microsoft and it was a "game-changer," Molo said, which violated "every commitment" OpenAI made not just to Musk but to the world. It was no longer open source, it became a for-profit company for the benefit of the defendants and Microsoft was going to have control, through licensing, of much of its intellectual property, Molo said.

After opening statements, Musk's side began presenting a tale of alleged betrayal, deceit and ambition that caused OpenAI to pivot from its founding mission as an altruistic startup to a capitalistic venture now valued at \$852 billion.

Musk testifies on how he sees AI evolving

Musk was the first to testify, with his lawyer starting off asking about his life story. This included details about his move, at 17, from South Africa to Canada where for a time Musk said he worked as a lumberjack among other odd jobs, then to the U.S. He recounted the slew of companies he founded and runs,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 59 of 70

including SpaceX, Tesla, The Boring Company, Neuralink and others.

Asked how he has time for everything, Musk said he works 80 to 100 hours a week, doesn't take vacations and owns no vacation homes or yachts.

Molo also asked Musk about his views on AI. Musk said he expects AI to be "smarter than any human" as soon as next year. Musk said a longstanding concern about AI is the question of what happens when computers become much smarter than humans. Comparing it to having a "very smart child," Musk said when the child grows up "you can't control that child," but you can instill values such as honesty, integrity and being good.

Musk recounted his version of OpenAI's founding, which he said essentially happened because of a discussion he had with Google co-founder Larry Page, who called him a "specieist" for elevating the survival of humanity over that of AI.

The kinship between Musk and Altman was forged in 2015 when they agreed to build AI in a more responsible and safer way than the profit-driven companies controlled by Google's Page and Sergey Brin and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, according to evidence submitted ahead of the trial.

At that time, Musk said, Google had all the money, all the computers and all the talent for AI. "There was no counterbalance."

Musk recalled there was discussion early on about alternative sources for funding OpenAI beyond donations, and he wasn't opposed to it having a for-profit arm, but "the tail shouldn't wag the dog." There would be a profit limit, and once artificial general intelligence, or AGI, was "figured out," the for-profit would cease to exist.

Musk is expected to continue testifying Wednesday.

Altman, OpenAI's CEO, is also expected to testify, along with Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, one of the technology leaders who helped fund the late 2022 release of ChatGPT, the chatbot that unleashed the current AI boom that has propelled the stock market to record heights.

Altman's court appearance likely made him unavailable to attend an Amazon event across San Francisco Bay on Tuesday at which both companies announced an expanded partnership.

"I wish I could be there with you in person today," Altman told attendees of Amazon's event in San Francisco via a prerecorded video message. "My schedule got taken away from me today."

Teen charged with killing stepsister on Carnival Cruise faces trial in June

MIAMI (AP) — A teenager charged with sexually assaulting and killing his 18-year-old stepsister on a Carnival Cruise ship will go to trial in over a month, a judge said this week in an order.

Timothy Hudson's trial on charges of first-degree murder and aggravated sexual abuse will start June 1 in Miami, U.S. District Judge Beth Bloom said in an order Monday.

The 16-year-old was initially charged as a juvenile before the case was transferred to adult court. He entered a written plea of not guilty last week. Minors are rarely prosecuted in federal court.

His stepsister, Anna Kepner, had been traveling on the Carnival Horizon ship in November with her family, including Hudson. Before the ship was scheduled to return to Florida, her body was found concealed under a bed in a room she was sharing with Hudson and another teen, a criminal complaint said.

The cause of Kepner's Nov. 6 death was determined to be mechanical asphyxia, which is when an object or physical force stops someone from breathing.

Kepner's father, Christopher Kepner, released a statement, saying the family was placing "trust in the justice system to pursue the truth with care and integrity."

"The situation is deeply painful and complex for the entire family," Kepner said.

Anna Kepner was a high school cheerleader at Temple Christian School in Titusville, Florida, about 40 miles (65 kilometers) east of Orlando. At her memorial service in November, family members encouraged people to wear bright colors instead of the traditional black "in honor of Anna's bright and beautiful soul."

Ex-NBA player Damon Jones is 1st to plead guilty in gambling sweep that led to over 30 arrests

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A hot hand on the hardwood, former NBA player Damon Jones once proclaimed himself “the best shooter in the world.” As an assistant coach, he helped guide the Cleveland Cavaliers to their only championship in 2016.

But after his playing and coaching days ended, Jones betrayed the game he loved, solemnly admitting in court Tuesday that he exploited his fame and insider access to profit from sports betting and rigged poker games.

Jones, 49, became the first person to plead guilty in a gambling sweep that led to the arrests of more than 30 people, including reputed mobsters and other basketball figures. Sports bettor Marves Fairley is poised to become the second.

During back-to-back hearings in Brooklyn federal court, Jones entered guilty pleas to two counts of conspiracy to commit wire fraud for his role in schemes to defraud major sportsbooks, including DraftKings and FanDuel, and filch millions of dollars from unwitting poker players.

Sitting alongside his lawyer and reading from a prepared statement, Jones acknowledged that he aided the betting conspiracy with “insider information that I obtained as a result of my relationships as a former player.”

“I would like to sincerely apologize to the court, my family, my peers and also the National Basketball Association,” Jones told Magistrate Judge Joseph Marutollo.

Jones said the sports betting conspiracy, which ran from December 2022 to March 2024, involved using his knowledge of nonpublic information about injuries to NBA stars, including his one-time teammate, LeBron James, to gain an edge in sports bets.

Jones acknowledged that his actions not only broke the law, but that they also violated the NBA’s code of conduct and the sports betting websites’ terms of service.

A ‘face card’ for rigged poker games

At the second of his two hearings, Jones admitted he was paid to act as a “face card” at poker games in Miami and the Hamptons by using his NBA celebrity to “lure high-end bettors” to the table.

“I knew these games were rigged and that players were being cheated,” Jones said as he read from another statement. He apologized again, telling Marutollo: “I’m really sorry to everyone involved for my actions.”

Jones and his lawyer, Kenneth Montgomery, declined to comment as they left the courtroom. Swarmed outside by reporters, photographers and TV cameras, Jones said only: “To God be the glory.”

He remains free on bail and won’t be sentenced until early next year, Marutollo said.

Jones is scheduled for back-to-back sentencing hearings on Jan. 6 — before Judge LaShann DeArcy Hall in the sports betting case and before Judge Ramon Reyes in the poker games case.

In the sports betting case, sentencing guidelines call for a punishment of 21 to 27 months in prison. In the poker games case, Jones would face 63 to 78 months in prison, but prosecutors agreed to subtract 15 months from the sentence in exchange for Jones pleading guilty before April 30. That would put his potential sentence at 48 to 63 months in prison if the judge follows the guidelines.

Jones faces a longer prison sentence in the poker games case in part because it involved more than 10 victims and a loss to them of more than \$9.5 million.

As part of his plea agreements, Jones agreed to give up a total of \$73,000 and, at sentencing, could be ordered to pay additional sums as restitution.

The first defendant to plead guilty

None of Jones’ co-defendants have shown a willingness to plead guilty. On Monday, prosecutors said they were seeking more charges against another sports betting defendant, former Miami Heat guard Terry Rozier.

Jones was arrested in October along with Rozier and Chauncey Billups, who was head coach of the Portland Trail Blazers and is a Basketball Hall of Famer.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 61 of 70

Others charged include reputed members of the Gambino, Genovese and Bonanno crime families, which benefited from the poker scheme and used violence and threats to ensure the repayment of debts and success of the operation, prosecutors said.

Jones was one of three people charged in both the poker and sports betting schemes.

Originally from Galveston, Texas, Jones earned more than \$20 million playing for 10 teams in 11 seasons from 1999 to 2009. He and James played together in Cleveland from 2005 to 2008, and Jones served as an unofficial assistant coach for James' Los Angeles Lakers during the 2022-2023 season.

According to prosecutors, Jones sold or attempted to sell nonpublic information to bettors that James was injured and wouldn't be playing in a Feb. 9, 2023, game against the Milwaukee Bucks, texting an unnamed co-conspirator: "Get a big bet on Milwaukee tonight before the information is out" and "Bet enough so Djones can eat."

James wasn't listed on the Lakers' injury report at the time of the text, but the NBA's all-time scoring leader was later ruled out of the game because of a lower body injury and the Lakers lost the game 115-106, according to prosecutors.

On Jan. 15, 2024, Fairley, the sports bettor, paid Jones approximately \$2,500 for a tip that Anthony Davis, a Lakers' forward and center at the time, would see limited playing time against the Oklahoma City Thunder because of an injury, prosecutors said.

Fairley then placed a \$100,000 bet on the Thunder to win, prosecutors said, but the tip was wrong. Davis played his usual minutes, scored 27 points and collected 15 rebounds in a 112-105 Lakers win, prompting Fairley to demand a refund of his \$2,500 fee, prosecutors said.

In a court filing Tuesday, prosecutors said Fairley intends to plead guilty in the sports betting case and a separate case in which he and others are accused of scheming to obtain nonpublic information to bet on college basketball and Chinese Basketball Association games.

A message seeking comment was left for Fairley's lawyer.

In the poker scheme, prosecutors say Jones was among former NBA players used to lure unwitting gamblers to poker games that were rigged using altered shuffling machines, hidden cameras, special sunglasses and even X-ray equipment built into the table.

According to the indictment, Jones was paid \$2,500 for a game in the Hamptons where he was instructed to cheat by paying close attention to others involved in the scheme. When in doubt, Jones was told to fold his hand, prosecutors said.

In response, according to prosecutors, Jones texted: "Y'all know I know what I'm doing!!"

Iran's economy has been battered. Its leaders still think Trump will blink first

By AMIR-HUSSEIN RADJY, LEE KEATH and SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — In the heartland of Iran's famed carpet-making industry, manufacturing has ground to a near halt. Dairies struggle to find packages for milk and butter. Giant steel mills that once drove Iran's economy have gone silent. Hundreds of thousands have lost jobs, and millions more are at risk.

Over more than five weeks of bombardment, U.S. and Israeli strikes hit thousands of factories. The damage is reverberating across Iran's economy, threatening increasing waves of layoffs, even as Iranians face skyrocketing prices. The cost of chicken is up 75% the past month, and beef and lamb jumped 68%. Many dairy products have increased by half.

It could get worse as the United States blockades Iranian ports, choking off many imports and oil exports that bring in billions of dollars. Economic woes sparked the mass protests that were crushed before the war and could again push Iranians into the streets.

Still, Iran has its own weapon pointed at the global economy, with its grip on the Strait of Hormuz. Iran's leaders say they will only reopen the key waterway for global energy if the blockade is lifted and the war ends. They are betting that an economy built to be self-reliant under decades of international sanctions can endure the pain longer than U.S. President Donald Trump.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 62 of 70

Iran has lost at least 1 million jobs directly because of the war, Deputy Labor Minister Gholamhossein Mohammadi said, according to state media.

But the ripple effects put some 10 million to 12 million jobs at risk — half of Iran's labor force — warns Hadi Kahalzadeh, an Iranian economist.

Steel and petrochemical production is crippled

Israel claimed to have struck the industrial base of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard. But the strikes went well beyond, hitting facilities not owned by the force.

Airstrikes damaged 20,000 factories, some 20% of the country's production units, according to Kahalzadeh, a research fellow at Brandeis University. The stricken facilities included Tofigh Daru, Iran's largest pharmaceutical holding, producing anticancer drugs among other things. Optics and chemical developers, and aluminum and cement factories, were also hit.

Perhaps most damaging, Israel hit Iran's biggest steelmaking and petrochemical factories, most of them in a wave of strikes just before the April 8 ceasefire. The two biggest steel producers, Mobarakeh Steel and Khuzestan Steel, as well as smaller mills, halted production. More than 50 petrochemical complexes have been shut down, according to Iran's semiofficial Jamaran news agency.

That has crippled Iran's two biggest non-oil exports, and higher prices have affected everything from plastics to pipes, to fabrics and packaging for groceries like milk, butter and cheese.

Strikes are not the only cause of economic woes. The internet has largely been shut down since the protests, gutting small and medium-sized businesses reliant on online sales. Even before the U.S. blockade, Iranian strikes on the United Arab Emirates, on which it relied for around a third of its imports, led that country to cut off trade.

Ripple effects

Around 80% of rug and carpet manufacturers have stopped operations in the industrial zone of the city of Kashan, the center of Iran's rugmaking industry, said the son of a rugmaker. His family factory, which employs 20 to 30 people and used to machine-make hundreds of rugs a month, is among those that shut down, though his father still goes to the facility every day.

"Never have I heard my father so upset," said the son, who lives in the United States and spoke on condition of anonymity for his family's security.

Kashan, home to hundreds of carpet manufacturers, "relies on the rug industry and unfortunately it's been crippled," he said. Exports plummeted since the war began, and domestic sales are almost zero. Prices for synthetic fibers have leaped 30%- 50% — partly a downstream effect of hits on petrochemical facilities, he said.

Mehdi Bostanchi owns a ventilation and air conditioning factory, and a second producing household fans, with a total of more than 1,130 employees. Both still operate. But the HVAC factory heavily depends on the construction industry, and "construction is facing a massive shock," he said.

Most new building is on hold, while the price of iron sheeting has more than doubled.

Bostanchi, a member of a council representing Iranian industrialists, said "all the country's industries in some way rely on our petrochemical industry." Even companies that don't directly need steel or petrochemical products have contracts with those that do.

A chemical engineer working at one of Iran's biggest private construction contractors said it laid off half of its 180 headquarters staffers and had to shut down a project with Mobarakeh Steel, costing 1,000 jobs.

A Tehran resident quit his job as a consulting engineer just before the war, and the new job he had lined up is now uncertain.

"I am at the top 1% (of society), and I am without a job. I am super worried about my future," he said, adding that people's savings will start to run out in the coming weeks.

Both he and the chemical engineer spoke on condition of anonymity out of security concerns.

Projecting resilience

Hundreds of thousands took to the streets in January's protests that were triggered by worsening inflation but turned into calls for the end of the Islamic Republic, bringing a bloody crackdown.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 63 of 70

Officials are trying to reassure the public that Iran can withstand the economic pain. The government has promised to increase unemployment insurance. But the burden on Iran's social security system is rising even as its funding is gouged, since it depends heavily on its stakes in petrochemical companies and other key industries, Kahalzadeh said.

The U.S. blockade threatens to cut off export revenues: Iran sold some \$98 billion in exports in 2025, just under half of it from oil.

A complete blockade is difficult; around half of Iran's non-oil trade goes overland or through Caspian Sea ports, according to Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, an economic expert.

Iran has also built up significant resilience and "readiness for worst-case scenarios," Batmanghelidj wrote for the Bourse and Bazaar Foundation, a research group he heads on economic development in West and Central Asia.

Iran maintains large reserves of vital supplies. At the end of 2025, Iran had stored up enough electrical machinery for nearly eight months, cement to last nearly six months and enough steel and iron for four months, he wrote, adding that supplies could be further stretched by rationing.

Bostanchi, the factories owner, said he believes Iran's economy could bounce back once the war ends. But how much depends on whether Iran can win an end to international sanctions.

"If we cannot lift the sanctions in any agreements, then no, the optimistic forecast ... will not happen," he said.

Former Fauci adviser indicted for allegedly concealing communications related to COVID-19 research

WASHINGTON (AP) — A former senior adviser to Dr. Anthony Fauci was indicted on federal charges alleging he conspired to hide his communications related to COVID-19 research as the pandemic raged across the country, the Justice Department said Tuesday.

Dr. David Morens, 78, is accused of using his private email account to intentionally circumvent public records laws while employed at the National Institutes of Health. The Justice Department alleges that he concealed or destroyed records of discussions related to COVID-19 research grants, including an effort to revive a controversial coronavirus grant.

"These allegations represent a profound abuse of trust at a time when the American people needed it most — during the height of a global pandemic," Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche said in a statement Tuesday. "Government officials have a solemn duty to provide honest, well-grounded facts and advice in service of the public interest — not to advance their own personal or ideological agendas."

Morens faces charges of conspiracy against the United States; destruction, alteration or falsification of records in federal investigations; concealment, removal or mutilation of records; and aiding and abetting, according to a Justice Department news release. If convicted, he could face decades in prison. An attorney for Morens declined to comment.

The indictment reflects Republicans' long-held belief that the federal government covered up key information about COVID-19 as the pandemic unfolded. Despite numerous probes, the origins of COVID have never been proven. Scientists are unsure whether the virus jumped from an animal, as many other viruses have, or came from a laboratory accident. A U.S. intelligence analysis released in 2023 said there is insufficient evidence to prove either theory.

Blanche said Morens' alleged conduct was part of an effort to "suppress alternative theories" about COVID-19's origins. The Justice Department also accused Morens of having an improper relationship with a collaborator, including allegedly accepting a gift of wine and discussing COVID-19 research and potential publications in a prominent medical journal.

The indictment follows a probe by House Republicans into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic that scrutinized Morens' email communications and accused him of intentionally concealing records. In congressional testimony, Morens denied attempting to evade federal transparency laws by using his personal email.

GM expects a \$500 million tariff refund from Trump levies the Supreme Court struck down

By WYATTE GRANTHAM-PHILIPS AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — General Motors is expecting a \$500 million tariff refund after the Supreme Court struck down some of President Donald Trump's most sweeping levies.

That's boosted the Detroit auto maker's outlook for 2026. On Tuesday, GM said it's now looking to rake in \$13.5 billion to \$15.5 billion in earnings before interest and taxes this year — up from previous forecasts of \$13 billion to \$15 billion.

The refund is set to ease the company's total tariff expenses some. GM anticipates paying \$2.5 billion to \$3.5 billion in tariff costs for 2026, the company said Tuesday, down from an original estimate of \$3 billion to \$4 billion.

"We are clearly operating in a very dynamic environment, which isn't unusual for this industry," CEO Mary Barra wrote in a letter to shareholders. Still, she maintained the company was seeing solid growth and a strong balance sheet "to achieve our long-term goals."

For the first quarter of 2026, GM reported earnings of \$2.63 billion and a revenue of \$43.62 billion.

GM confirmed to The Associated Press that it hasn't received the refund yet, and doesn't have a specific estimate for when it will, but \$500 million is what it expects following the decision from the Supreme Court. The court in February ruled that the levies Trump imposed using the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, or IEEPA, were illegal.

Companies both big and small are seeking refunds for IEEPA tariffs they've already paid. The Customs and Border Protection agency launched an online system for claims last week.

If CBP approves a claim, it will take between 60 and 90 days for a refund to be issued, the agency said. But the system is being rolled out in phases, and only some tariff refunds will be returned in the first phase.

CBP said in court filings that over 330,000 importers paid a total of about \$166 billion on over 53 million shipments.

The now-overturned IEEPA tariffs included so-called "reciprocal" tariffs that Trump slapped on nearly every country in the world a year ago and "trafficking tariffs" on imports from Mexico, Canada and China — as well as separate duties on countries like Brazil and India, all of which the president imposed by declaring a national emergency.

February's Supreme Court decision marked a significant blow to Trump's economic agenda. But many other tariffs remain in effect — including punishing sectoral levies that Trump imposed using another law (Section 232 of the 1962 Trade Expansion Act) on foreign steel, aluminum, cars and other products. And companies like GM are continuing to pay those costs.

The administration has also signaled that more new duties are on the way.

Trump has publicly attacked companies who have warned of price hikes spanning from tariffs — and at times used the threat of new import taxes to strike deals. Last week, the president also said he'll "remember" those that do not seek refunds from his IEEPA tariffs.

"I think it's brilliant if they don't do that," Trump told CNBC of companies that hadn't yet sought reimbursements. "If they don't do that, they got to know me very well."

Man pleads guilty to plotting attack on a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna

By PHILIPP JENNE, MATTHIAS SCHRADER and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

WIENER NEUSTADT, Austria (AP) — A man accused of pledging allegiance to the Islamic State group and plotting to attack one of superstar singer Taylor Swift's concerts in Vienna nearly two years ago pleaded guilty as his trial began on Tuesday, his lawyer said.

The plot was thwarted, but Austrian authorities still canceled Swift's three performances in August 2024.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 65 of 70

The singer's fans, known as Swifties, who had flown to Austria from across the globe to attend a performance of her record-setting Eras Tour were devastated, but rallied to turn Vienna into a citywide trading post for friendship bracelets and singalongs.

The defendant, a 21-year-old Austrian citizen known only as Beran A. in line with Austrian privacy rules, faced charges including terrorist offenses and membership in a terrorist organization. He could be sentenced to up to 20 years in prison, and has been in custody since August 2024.

The Vienna plot drew comparisons to a 2017 attack by a suicide bomber at an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, England, that killed 22 people. The bomb detonated at the end of Grande's concert as thousands of young fans were leaving, becoming the deadliest extremist attack in the United Kingdom in recent years.

Defendant regrets his actions

Anna Mair, his defense attorney, said her client pleaded guilty to the charges related to the concert plot. "Of course, he deeply regrets it all," Mair said outside the court, adding that "he says it was the biggest mistake of his life."

Austrian media reported that he also pleaded guilty to being a member of a terrorist organization.

Beran A. is facing trial alongside Arda K., whose full name also has not been made public. They, along with a third man, planned to carry out simultaneous attacks in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates during Ramadan in 2024 in the name of the Islamic State group. Beran A. and Arda K. never carried out their attacks.

Only Beran A. was charged in connection with the concert plot. He pleaded not guilty to the charges related to the plot for simultaneous attacks.

He allegedly planned to target onlookers gathered outside Ernst Happel Stadium — up to 30,000 each night, with another 65,000 inside the venue — with knives or homemade explosives. The suspect hoped to "kill as many people as possible," authorities said in 2024. The U.S. provided intelligence that fed into the decision to cancel the concerts.

Beran A. also allegedly networked with other members of the Islamic State group ahead of the planned attack. Prosecutors say they discussed purchasing weapons and making bombs, and that the defendant also sought to illegally buy weapons in the days ahead of the performance. In addition, he swore allegiance to the militant group.

Authorities searched his apartment on Aug. 7, 2024, and found bomb-making materials. The concerts were scheduled to begin the next day.

"Having our Vienna shows canceled was devastating," Swift wrote in a statement posted to Instagram two weeks later. "The reason for the cancellations filled me with a new sense of fear, and a tremendous amount of guilt because so many people had planned on coming to those shows."

A representative for Swift did not immediately return a request for comment Tuesday.

The trial is being held in Wiener Neustadt, about an hour south of Vienna. The proceedings are set to continue May 12.

Three attacks planned in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and UAE

Prosecutors have also filed terrorism-related charges against Arda K. in the trial in connection with the plan for simultaneous attacks in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

The third man in that plot, Hasan E., allegedly stabbed a security guard with a knife at the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, on March 11, 2024. He was arrested and remains in pretrial detention in Saudi Arabia, Austrian prosecutors said.

Beran A. and Arda K. did not carry out their plans in Turkey and the UAE. Beran A. returned to Vienna and then allegedly began plotting to attack a Swift concert there.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 66 of 70

US consumer confidence inches higher in April despite Iran war, soaring gasoline prices

By MATT OTT AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. consumer confidence rose modestly in April despite growing anxiety over soaring energy prices brought on by the war in Iran.

The Conference Board said Tuesday that its consumer confidence index inched up to 92.8 in April from 92.2 in March.

Though the gauge measuring American consumers' confidence has ticked up the past two months, the reading remains mired near its lowest level since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Respondents' comments about prices, oil, gas and the war increased in April as the national average for a gallon of gas in the U.S. rose to \$4.18 this week, up more than a dollar since before the war began. The last time U.S. drivers were collectively paying this much at the pump was nearly four years ago, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The largest monthly jump in gas prices in six decades caused a sharp spike in inflation last month, creating major challenges for the inflation-fighters at the Federal Reserve.

Consumer prices rose 3.3% in March from a year earlier, the Labor Department reported earlier this month, up sharply from just 2.4% in February and the biggest yearly increase since May 2024. On a monthly basis, prices rose 0.9% in March from February, the largest such increase in nearly four years.

It's the first read on inflation to capture the effects of the Iran war. The surge in gas prices will stretch the budgets of lower- and middle-income households as it erodes their incomes, making it harder to afford other necessities such as food and rent.

"Consumers are singing the blues," said Heather Long, chief economist at Navy Federal Credit Union. "They aren't happy with high prices for gas, housing, electricity and many other items. It's clear consumers aren't going to feel much better until there's an end to the Middle East conflict."

Government data from earlier this month showed that the inflation gauge closely monitored by the Federal Reserve moved 2.8% higher in February from a year ago, a sign that prices were persistently elevated even before the Iran war caused spikes in oil and gas costs.

Those higher prices and the prospect of even higher inflation due to the Iran war makes it unlikely that the Federal Reserve will cut its benchmark interest rate when it wraps up its two-day meeting on Wednesday.

The Fed cut its benchmark interest rate three times to close 2025 in an attempt to support a flagging labor market. However, because lower rates can exacerbate inflation, which remains above the Fed's 2% target, the Fed has left its overnight lending rate alone at its past two meetings.

In the Conference Board's report Tuesday, a measure of Americans' short-term expectations for their income, business conditions and the job market rose 1.2 points to 72.2, but remained well below 80, a marker that can signal a recession ahead. It's the 15th consecutive month that reading has come in under 80.

The index for consumers' assessments of their current economic situation fell by 0.3 points to 123.8.

Takeaways from AP investigation: Adopted kids confined in for-profit institutions

By CLAIRE GALOFARO and SALLY HO Associated Press

An Associated Press investigation finds that a business known for tough-love boarding schools for rebellious, rich teenagers set its sights on a different demographic: adopted kids.

Adoptees are vastly overrepresented in what some call the "troubled teen industry," a sprawling network of loosely regulated, for-profit residential treatment centers, wilderness programs and boarding schools. Experts say that adoptees, only 2% of American children, account for an estimated 25-40% of those in residential treatment.

Adoptees told the AP they believe they've been enmeshed in a shadow orphanage system where chil-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 67 of 70

dren end up with the very fate that adoption was supposed to spare them — promised forever homes but institutionalized instead, some for years, in oppressive and sometimes abusive facilities.

Many said the programs felt like prison, except they had not been convicted of any crime, they had no sentence and no judge monitored their confinement. Parents alone usually decide to send their children away and for how long.

The AP interviewed dozens of program attendees and their families, former employees, public officials, attorneys and experts, and obtained hundreds of government and business records to examine why and how adopted kids land in such facilities despite the companies' disturbing track records.

You can read the full story here. Here are the takeaways:

A dubious diagnosis

Charging as much as \$20,000 a month, many of these facilities promise in their marketing pitches to treat adopted children for reactive attachment disorder, often called RAD. They offer a salve for desperate adoptive parents, claiming the child's behavioral problems are caused by a pathological failure to connect with caregivers, and they can learn to attach in faraway treatment.

But experts say most teenagers confined in these facilities almost certainly don't have RAD, and that the treatment offered wouldn't fix it even if they did.

The diagnosis is meant for young children who were so neglected in early life that they struggle to bond with caregivers, said Brian Allen, a psychologist who runs the mental health program at Penn State's Center for the Protection of Children.

It originally described the effects of confinement in orphanages abroad that were so understaffed that babies were rarely held and received no affection, Allen said. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders — the catalog of mental illnesses known as the DSM — says it applies to children who have become so withdrawn, they seek no comfort when they are distressed or scared. It is extremely rare and applies to children under 5 — not older children who suffer neglect when small and misbehave years later.

But some apply RAD to virtually any adopted preteen or teenager with behavioral challenges, Allen said. His clinic studied 100 adopted and foster children brought in for treatment. Around 40% of them had been diagnosed with RAD, but not a single one fit the criteria.

Allen argues the DSM should delete RAD from its listings. The diagnosis has been too "corrupted," he said. Yet many facilities advertise treatment for it.

"Often what sweeps in is this overpromise, a very seductive promise from residential treatment centers," said Sloan Nova, a psychologist at the University of California in San Francisco, who was adopted from South Korea in the 1980s and ended up in a treatment facility as a teenager.

"So it just sounds almost too good to be true."

Little oversight, big profits

There's a lot of money to be made from adopted children in distress. The AP found at least 80 private facilities advertise they treat adoption-related issues.

Many of these businesses started as small operations, with behavioral modification approaches historically rooted in Christian teachings, experts said. Today, public and private equity companies drawn to the promise of significant profits and an endless supply of struggling kids have been acquiring centers and commercializing treatment.

That reliable money flow allows investors to go "into these markets risk free," said Raj Kumar, an analyst at the financial services firm Stephens who tracks healthcare.

Promising a healthy 20% in profit margins, residential treatment centers make money based on minimizing staffing costs and maximizing how long kids are in care, Kumar said. That's easier to do, experts said, because there are so few regulations compared to other inpatient healthcare settings like nursing homes.

One company backed by private equity, Family Help & Wellness, operates more than a dozen facilities across the country and faces multiple lawsuits alleging abuse.

In a statement to the AP, the company said its programs are independently operated, and it supports legislation to tighten industry regulations and is committed to strengthening oversight and improving qual-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 68 of 70

ity of care that aligns with evolving best practices.

"The safety, well-being, and long-term success of every young person and family are our priority," it wrote in a statement. "We recognize this is an area of increasing public attention and scrutiny, understandably so, given the real impact on young lives."

The stakes are extraordinarily high: In the last two years, two of the company's properties in North Carolina shuttered after children died there.

A lost adolescence

Kate spent most of her teenage years in institutions, including two acquired by Family Help & Wellness. She says she was sexually assaulted by another girl at Asheville Academy, and later sent to Uinta Academy in Utah.

Kate was 13 when she arrived at Uinta Academy, she says. The AP is using only her first name at her request because it does not typically identify victims of sexual assault.

On her first night there, she says, she had a panic attack because her roommate turned off her night light. She'd been scared of the dark, she said, since the girl assaulted her at her previous facility. She ran and curled into a ball, heaving and weeping.

Three employees followed her — to comfort her, Kate thought. Instead, they threw her face first into the carpet, she said, yelling that she was "OIC" — "out of instructional control." For what seemed like an hour, they held her down, Kate said, one on each arm, the third holding her legs.

They held her to the ground, she said. She screamed "I can't breathe" as snot poured from her nose. Eventually, she went silent, exhausted, she said, and she was released. She went to bed, without a night light.

The girls there were required to do what they were told without question, with a neutral expression on their faces — no sighing, no frowning, no crying, she said. Break the rules and they had to scrub the floor on their knees with a toothbrush for hours or go outside in 100-degree heat, rake moldy hay or pull weeds all day, she said. The smell of freshly pulled weeds still makes her sick.

"We were afraid all of the time," she said.

She is not alone: A congressional investigation led by U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon found that in facilities across the country, chronic understaffing led to improper physical restraints, a lack of mental healthcare and rampant physical, sexual and emotional abuse. The report, entitled "Warehouses of Neglect," described the prevalence of improper physical restraints, a lack of mental healthcare and rampant physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

The facilities, the report found, often functioned more like confinement for kids in trouble, rather than places where vulnerable children find healing.

89-year-old man arrested for allegedly wounding at least 4 people with a shotgun in Greek capital

By ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Police in Greece on Tuesday arrested an 89-year-old man who allegedly opened fire with a shotgun in a social security office and a courthouse in central Athens, wounding at least four people.

Law enforcement authorities said the suspect was arrested near the city of Patra, some 210 kilometers (130 miles) west of the Greek capital.

The gunman initially opened fire at the social security office, wounding an employee, police said. Police officers who arrived at the scene treated the man, but the gunman fled the scene.

Local media aired security camera footage that it said was from a local store near the social security office, which showed a man walking calmly across the street carrying what appears to be a short-barreled shotgun in his right hand.

The same man was suspected of later opening fire on the ground floor of a court building in another part of central Athens, with several people wounded there, police said, adding that authorities had found

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 69 of 70

the shotgun.

Television footage showed ambulance crews transporting at least three people from the courthouse to waiting ambulances.

The head of the Athens Judicial Employees Union, Stratis Dounias, said that initial information indicated that the man had shot at the floor inside one of the offices in the court building. At least three female court employees were slightly wounded by ricocheting shotgun pellets, while media reports said that a fourth female employee was transported to a hospital without physical injuries.

The motive for the shooting was unclear. State broadcaster ERT said that the gunman had reportedly left envelopes with documents after the shooting at the courthouse, saying those were the reasons for his actions.

Alexandros Varveris, head of the National Social Security Fund known by its Greek acronym EFKA, said the gunman had gone to the fourth floor of the social security fund's offices in the Kerameikos area of central Athens and opened fire after calling out to an employee to duck. His shot hit another employee, who was wounded in the leg, Varveris said, adding that the gunman had been wearing a trench coat under which he had hidden the shotgun.

"He went in, went up to the fourth floor, raised his shotgun, told an employee to duck and hit another one," Varveris told ERT radio. He said the gunman didn't appear to specifically target the employee he hit.

The wounded employee was transported to a hospital, after police applied a tourniquet to his leg at the scene.

Gun violence is relatively rare in Greece, where firearm ownership is allowed but tightly regulated.

McDonald's is the latest fast food chain to offer fancier drinks

By DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writer

Fast food chains, thirsty for new ways to grow, are amping up their beverage offerings.

McDonald's said Tuesday it will launch six crafted beverages in U.S. restaurants on May 6. It's joining other chains, like KFC, Wendy's and Taco Bell, that have elevated their drinks in order to lure customers away from rivals like Starbucks and Dutch Bros.

McDonald's will offer three refreshers, including a mango pineapple flavor with strawberry boba and a blackberry passion fruit flavor with freeze-dried dragon fruit. It will also offer three crafted sodas, including a dirty Dr Pepper with vanilla flavoring and a topping of cold foam.

McDonald's said visual appeal — think bright colors and foams — and drinks as a form of self-expression are increasingly important to customers.

"Our fans have an obsession with beverages — to them, drinks are more than just drinks. And soon, our beverages won't just be a reason you come to McDonald's, they'll be THE reason," Alyssa Buetikofer, the chief marketing officer for McDonald's USA, said in a statement.

The drinks are also more profitable for fast food chains than the standard soda fountain drinks or plain coffees. A small Pineapple Citrus Sparkling Energy drink cost \$3.29 on Tuesday at a Michigan Wendy's, while a small drink from the restaurant's Coca-Cola Freestyle machine cost \$1 less.

McDonald's said it's also adding a "beverage specialist" role at its 14,000 U.S. restaurants. Those employees will have dedicated spaces behind the counter where they can focus on drinks. Initially, high-performing employees will be selected for those roles, but eventually all employees will be encouraged to rotate through the beverage positions.

McDonald's has been working on a beverage upgrade for years. In late 2023, the company announced it would open small stores called CosMc's which would sell customizable drinks and treats to appeal to afternoon snackers. McDonald's said its sales often slump in the afternoon between mealtimes, and it wants to change that.

"This is a \$100 billion category that's growing faster than the rest of (casual dining) and with superior margins. And it's a space that we believe we have the right to win," McDonald's Chairman and CEO Chris Kempczinski said at the time.

McDonald's got creative with the CosMc's menu, which included a turmeric spiced latte and a prickly

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, April 29, 2026 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 328 ~ 70 of 70

pear slushie with popping candy on top. But it wound up closing its eight CosMc's locations last spring. Kempczinski said many of the drinks were too complex for regular McDonald's store operations, but he said the company would test some drinks at U.S. stores in the future.

Other chains are also jumping on the beverage bandwagon. KFC's Kwench drink menu did so well in tests in Manchester, England, last year that it's rolling out to 3,000 stores this year in the U.K., Australia and Canada. The menu includes shakes, like a Strawberry Shortcake Krunch, as well as boba refreshers and iced coffees.

Taco Bell, which is also owned by KFC parent Yum Brands, has a separate beverage brand called Live Mas Café. At kiosks within U.S. Taco Bell stores, employees dubbed Bellristas blend drinks like Churro Chillers milkshakes, iced coffees and fizzy energy drinks. Taco Bell opened its first Live Mas Café at the end of 2024 and added 30 more locations last year.

In a November conference call with investors, Yum Brands CEO Chris Turner said that if sales perform well at those 30 locations, the Live Mas Café concept will likely be part of Taco Bell's long-term growth plan.

"Through Live Mas Café, (we) add a new consumer use case, which is the destination beverage visit," he said.

Wendy's added customizable cold foam iced coffees and two sparkling energy drinks to its U.S. menu last fall. Burger King has also upgraded its beverage options, starting with a Frozen Cotton Candy drink with an optional foam topping that debuted in 2024 and returned last summer.

Today in History: April 29 **Los Angeles riots after Rodney King verdict**

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Wednesday, April 29, the 119th day of 2026. There are 246 days left in the year.

On April 29, 1992, a jury in Simi Valley, California, acquitted four Los Angeles police officers charged with assault and using excessive force in the videotaped beating of motorist Rodney King; the verdicts were followed by six days of rioting in Los Angeles that destroyed hundreds of businesses and resulted in over 60 deaths.

In 1862, a Union naval force commanded by Flag Officer David Farragut captured New Orleans in the Civil War, striking a hard blow at the Confederacy. The North would eventually take control of the entire Mississippi River and drive a wedge through the South.

In 1916, the Easter Rising against English rule in Dublin collapsed as Irish nationalists surrendered to British forces.

In 1945, during World War II, American soldiers liberated the Dachau concentration camp in Nazi Germany.

In 1991, a powerful tropical cyclone made landfall in Bangladesh, creating a storm surge that resulted in more than 138,000 deaths.

In 1997, the Chemical Weapons Convention, a worldwide treaty banning the use of chemical weapons and mandating the destruction of existing chemical weapons, went into effect.

In 2008, Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama denounced his former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, for what he termed "divisive and destructive" remarks on race.

In 2011, Britain's Prince William and Kate Middleton were married in an opulent ceremony at London's Westminster Abbey.

In 2022, a British judge sentenced retired tennis star Boris Becker to 2 1/2 years in prison for illicitly transferring large amounts of money and hiding assets after he was declared bankrupt. (The three-time Wimbledon champion served eight months and was deported to his native Germany.)

Today's Birthdays: Musician Willie Nelson is 93. Baseball Hall of Famer Luis Aparicio is 92. Conductor Zubin Mehta is 90. Singer Tommy James is 80. Golf Hall of Famer Johnny Miller is 79. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld is 72. Actor Kate Mulgrew is 71. Actor Daniel Day-Lewis is 69. Actor Michelle Pfeiffer is 68. Singer-TV personality Carnie Wilson is 58. Tennis Hall of Famer Andre Agassi is 56. Actor Uma Thurman is 56. Actor Megan Boone is 43. NHL center Jonathan Toews is 38. Pop singer Foxes is 37. Golfer Justin Thomas is 33. TV Actor Grace Kaufman is 24. Actor and performer Shahadi Wright Joseph is 21.