

Groton Daily Independent

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DAIRY QUEEN HELP WANTED

Dairy Queen in Groton is now hiring. If you're looking for a fun job with part-time hours, flexible scheduling, please stop in for an application.

Open: Recycling Trailer in Groton
The recycling trailer is located at 10 East Railroad Ave.

The cardboard/paper
recycling trailer at the school is **Closed**

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Wednesday, April 5

St. John's Lutheran: Ladies Aid LWML at 1:30 p.m., Confirmation at 3:45 p.m., Lenten Service at 7 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Lenten meal (Sarah Circle serves) at 6 p.m., Lenten Service at 7 p.m.

United Methodist, Groton: Community Coffee Time from 9 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. with free coffee and rolls; Kid Zone at 3:30 p.m., Confirmation at 6 p.m., Lenten Service at 7 p.m. with coffee and dessert following.

Senior Menu: Oven fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, carrots, broccoli medley, fruit, whole wheat bread.

Thursday, April 6

St. John's Lutheran: Nursery Circle and Good Cheer Circle at 1:30 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle at 2 p.m.

Track at Oakes, N.D. at 4 p.m.

Senior Menu: Stir fry beef with rice, oriental blend vegetables, honey fruit salad, whole wheat bread.

Friday, April 7

State Student Congress in Pierre
9 a.m. to 3 p.m.: Groton FFA CDE

Senior Menu: Tuna noodle casserole, beets, peach upside down cake, whole wheat bread.

United Methodist: MOMS Group, 9:30 a.m.

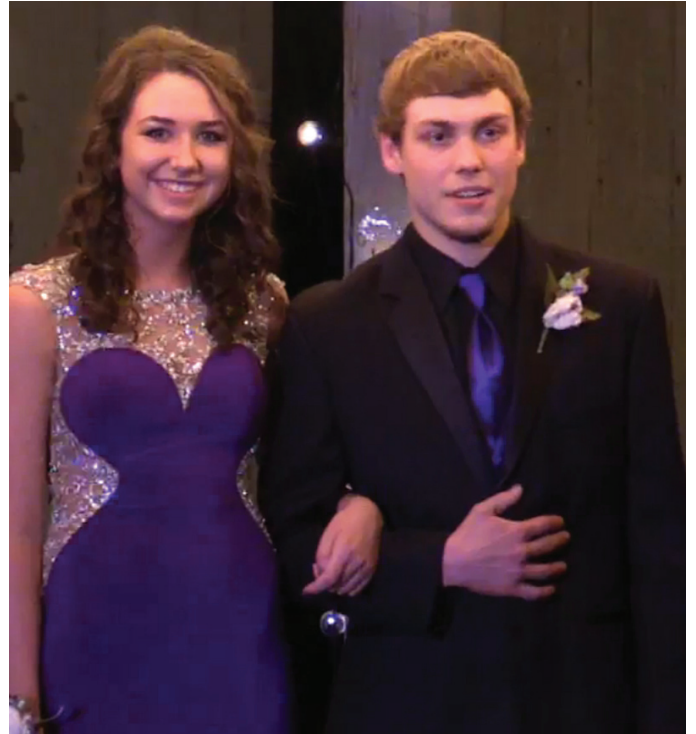
Groton Chiropractic Clinic

Carol McFarland-Kutter, D.C.
1205 N 1st St., Groton 397-8204

GHS Prom Couples - Part 4



Anthony Sippel escorting Erynn Heinert.



Braiden Craig escorting Madi Gill.



Nathan Fjelstad escorting Kailey Payne.



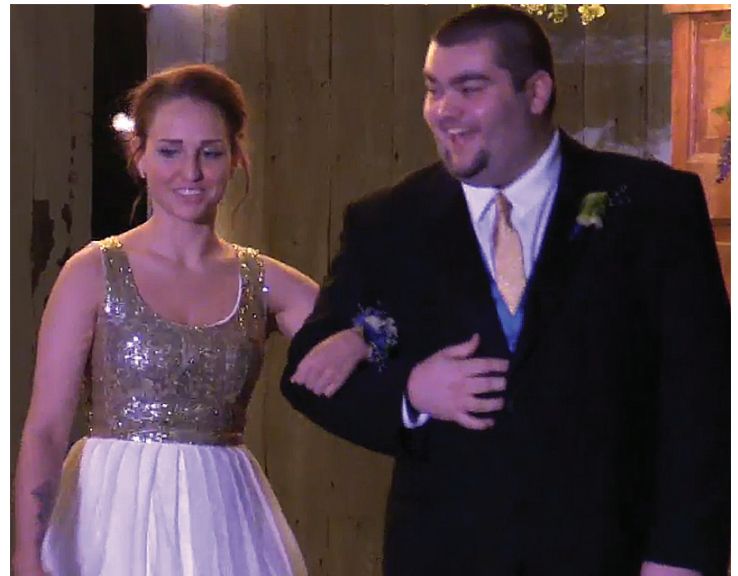
Tyler Richards escorting Jillian Barton.

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Jasmine Schinkel escorted by Brandon Lout.



Doug Dobbins escorting Kaitlyn Weisenburger.



Gabbie Kramer escorted by Canaan Smith.



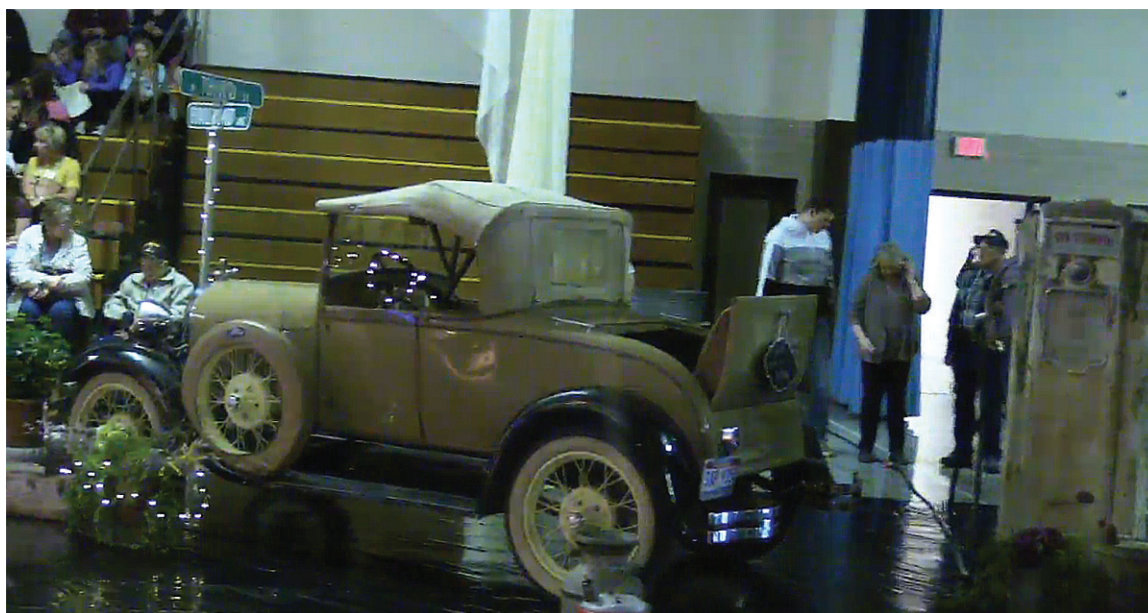
Aleaya Worlie escorted by Tylan Glover.

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Halie Yarborough escorted by Lucas Miller.



Vintage was the theme for this year's prom. Even the city contributed to the prom with an old street sign.

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Wanner qualifies for state, Thompson sets school record

Audrey Wanner qualified for state in the triple jump and Emily Thompson set a school record in the pole vault at the Ipswich Tiger Relay track meet held Tuesday.

Both the boys and girls teams placed third at the meet. Bennett Shabazz placed first in the triple jump and McClain Lone was first in the shot put. Wanner won both the long jump and the triple jump and the girl's 800m relay team also placed first.

Boy's Division

Team Points: Aberdeen Roncalli 101, Warner 85, Groton Area 78, Langford Area 73, Ipswich 67, Frederick 58, Faulkton 42, Leola 37, Sunshine Bible Academy 25, Edmunds Central 13, Aberdeen Christian 6.

110m Hurdles: 7, Garret Schroeder, 21.3.

300m Hurdles: 5, Tylan Glover, 48.8.

100m Dash: 4, Trevor Pray, 11.82; 6, Jackson Oliver, 12.11; 8, Lucas Hinman, 12.4.

200m Dash: Lucas Hinman, 24.0; Jackson Oliver, 25.5; Garret Schroeder, 27.08.

1600m Run: Mitchell Koens, 5:58; Hayden Pigors, 6:15.

400m Relay: 3, (Jackson Oliver, Trevor Pray, Thomas Cranford, Lucas Hinman), 47.62.

800m Relay: 2, (Jonathan Doeden, Austin Jones, Garret Schroeder, Thomas Cranford), 1:56.

1600m Relay: 3, (Austin Jones, Brandon Keith, Treyton Diegel, Sean Schuring), 3:54.

3200m Relay: 3, (Sean Schuring, Mitchell Koens, Brandon Keith, Treyton Diegel), 9:15.

High Jump: 5, Austin Jones, 5-3; Jonathan Doeden, 5-1.

Long Jump: 2, Bennett Shabazz, 19-8.75; Tylan Glover, 17-4; Thomas Cranford, 15-10.5.

Triple Jump: 1, Bennett Shabazz, 37-6.

Discus: 2, McClain Lone, 133-8; 5, Luke Thorson, 121-3.

Shot Put: 1, McClain Lone, 45-10; Luke Thorson, 39-6; Grady O'Neill, 27-1.

Pole Vault: 7, Tylan Glover, 8-9.

Girl's Division

Team Points: Ipswich 178, Aberdeen Roncalli, 143, Groton Area 84, Sunshine Bible Academy 42, Warner 34, Edmunds Central 26, Aberdeen Christian 23, Leola 19, Frederick 18, Langford Area 11, Faulkton 0.

100m Hurdles: 3, Eliza Wanner, 20.26.

300m Hurdles: 2, Payton Maine, 53.4; 7, Jodi Hinman, 1:03.

100m Dash: Tady Glover, 14.15.

200m Dash: 5, Eliza Wanner, 30.28; Tady Glover, 31.09.

400m Relay: 2, (Audrey Wanner, Heather Lone, Eliza Wanner, Alex Stange), 54.7.

800m Relay: 1, (Audrey Wanner, Payton Maine, Katie Koehler, Alex Stange), 1:42.

High Jump: Katie Koehler, 4-6.

Long Jump: 1, Audrey Wanner, 15-10.25; Katie Koehler, 13-3.25; Tady Glover, 12-8; Jodi Hinman, 11-3.

Triple Jump: 1, Audrey Wanner, 34-0.5 (state qualifier); 5, Katie Koehler, 30-1.

Discus: 2, Jessica Bjerke, 104-1; 4, Taylor Holm, 94-4; 5, Jennie Doeden, 90-11.

Shot Put: 3, Taylor Holm, 31-1.75; 6, Jennie Doeden, 30-0.

Pole Vault: 6, Emily Thompson, 6-3 (school record)

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Groton Area High School District Building projects op/ed

South Dakota rural communities offer wonderful opportunities for families to grow and prosper. The only thing better than being raised in a progressive community is seeing your grandchildren growing up in the same environment you did. Communities across South Dakota are all very proud of their heritage and accomplishments as they should be, because it takes a village working together to raise a family. I commend anyone who serves their community in any capacity helping others.

One such service some choose to give through is the local school board, a very worthy cause. It not only affects our youth's education and community activities. But, it touches every property owner and citizen in the school district through taxes they levy to fund our school.

On April 11th, 2017 Groton Area School District will vote on a bond measure vote to build a new Middle and High School levying 50 cents tax to every \$1000.00 assessed valuation just for this project alone which will be levied until the year 2036.

According to Grotonarea.com website the .50 cents added to our current local school tax burden from past school projects is a total of \$1.35 per \$1000.00 valuation which will not be termed off the tax role until 2023. This is only for bonded projects and capital outlay projects NOT general school funding taxes.. Groton City residents will pay additional levy due to city projects assessed to their properties until the year 2019.

Recently, I received a pamphlet distributed by Groton School Board containing helpful information pertaining to this new project. I want to point out this pamphlet ONLY contains tax information for the Middle and High School; it does not give you a total tax assessment for your real estate per year. Since family farmers carry the heaviest tax burden funding local schools and communities I feel you should hear in real numbers how a bond issue like this affects family farmers.

- How many farmers do you know who farm without real estate?
- On our farm one of our least valued quarters of land the tax valuation is \$189,285.00. Currently, we pay a school bond of .243 cents per \$1000.00 plus,
- School capital outlay of .81 cents per \$1000.00 plus,
- School general fund of \$1.568 cents per \$1000.00 plus,
- School special Education of .648 cents per \$1000.00. for a
- Total school funding tax of \$618.78 to date for 160 acres of real estate we use to make a living from. Add .50 per \$1000.00 our total tax to Groton School District for one quarter of real estate property will be \$713.42 annually, or \$4.45 per acre

- . Now, that doesn't sound so bad right? That's an increase of less than \$100.00 annually. In a business where you can share that per day or per item with the average consumer this would be easy to accept right. I mean as a banker, mechanic, doctor, insurance salesman or contractor you could share this expense with those who purchase your goods or services with a very mild increase in price.

- But, farmers don't get to share such added costs with those who purchase what they produce.
- Just to put this into perspective for you; using my lowest valuation figures shared above and figure the average farm in SD is 1500 acres times \$4.45 per acre to fund Groton School that means the average farm in the district will pay \$6675.00 annually just to fund the school with this new tax added in.

- Now on the same 1500 acre farm you need to know this family farmer is paying; Township, county, fire district and water district taxes of \$7950.00 annually. For a total real estate tax bill annually to an average family farmer of \$14,625.00 to fund local Schools, fire protection, water drainage, roads and bridges. Or, \$9.75 per acre tax annually.

- REMEMBER; these are conservative numbers. Actual numbers and figures will vary and I estimate they will be much higher. Especially for farmers north of Groton.

If we truly want to remain a progressive community and see young people live and farm here we must take care of them first and foremost. Building a new school at this time will only add to our tax burden adding stress to those already over stressed and allowing only the rich to survive.

Please Vote NO on April 11th.

Doug Sombke

Groton, SD 57445

A Farmer's Point of View

Please consider these points as you decide your vote on April 11:

1. Seven million dollars of your hard earned money will be spent remodeling the elementary school - without a vote. The school board can legally do this - but is it morally and financially right to tax people without a popular vote?

2. Seven million dollars will be spent on the elementary remodel with little to no input from farmers, teachers and constituents from all the surround communities. Groton, Bristol, Ferney, Columbia and Andover had a total of 95 people attend meetings of the approximately 2,600 people in the district.

3. Seven million of your dollars will be spent at a rate of over \$75,000 per day to remodel an obsolete pod-shaped design. This 48-year old elementary building has tiny trapezoid classrooms that will have less teachable space when your hard earned money is all spent.

4. Seven million dollars will be spent in 89 days, but there doesn't seem to be a clear budget or anyone at risk. What happens when it costs more because of weather and building delays from unforeseen problems that remodeling a 48-year old structure presents? If they exceed their bids, the board will want more of your tax dollars.

5. Seven million dollars would have gone a long ways to build a BRAND NEW elementary school!

6. \$14,500,000 of your hard earned tax dollars are being voted on April 11. The school board and administration are asking for huge projects at both the elementary school and the high school. One project we get to vote on - the other we did not. From a farmer's perspective, I want to see results from my tax dollars spent at the elementary school first. What is the rush?

7. Where was the competition among all the architectural firms for the best ideas on how to build or remodel these projects? The public has seen none! One plan for the elementary school and only one for the high school. Say "NO" to the high school.

A vote "NO" means we can think about all the above mentioned points and get the BEST plan for the BEST price that will promote the BEST future for our children and the teachers.

/s/ Robert Swisher

Farm property to take a hit on school bond issue

After discussion with the Groton Area School District Board of Education I realized that the procurement process for the selection of the Construction Manager for the elementary school project was a sole-source selection process. This is the single largest contract for the project and the only one that was not a competitive bid process. The school board pushed back when questioned and responded that they did not need to make this a competitive process, but when awarding an 18% fee to this group, why wouldn't you? A competitive process could have offered up multiple concepts and had the potential to save the school district several hundred thousand dollars. Unfortunately it is too late for the elementary school project because our school board has recklessly and ignorantly squandered district tax dollars by entering into a contract with this group at the aforementioned fee of 18% of the project cost. The high school and middle school project still has the potential to be a competitive process, but we must vote against the upcoming bond issue and force the school board to be held accountable as good stewards of the tax dollars entrusted to them.

The potential tax impact for farmers and agricultural land owners in the Groton Area Schools District for both elementary and high school projects could levy taxes at a rate of \$0.75/\$1000 of assessed value. For many landowners, this will be an increase in your annual tax bill of almost \$400/quarter or \$4000/annually for a landowner having at least ten quarters of land in the district. Please vote against the upcoming bond issue on April, 11th and send a message to our school district board of education that we support change, but we expect due diligence on our behalf in the process.

Cory Barber
GHS Class of 88

To backup Cory Barber's asking for a no vote, I felt what the ruling really is should be exposed for the voter's sake. South Dakota Law Section 5-18 states that procurement for professional services exceeding fifty thousand dollars shall be procured using a request for proposals. The school board is not being responsible by not asking for a competitive bid. It shows disrespect for the tax increase that is about to occur. No doubt we need some improvements that need to be addressed, but someone is pulling the wool over the eyes of the school board. Vote "NO" to be sure the next project goes through a competitive process and follows the law. It's only good business!

Harry Pharis

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About the election . . .

Next Tuesday is the election for the proposed Groton Area middle/high school building project. The closer we get to the election, the more comments are being made for or against the project.

The Groton Independent/Groton Daily Independent appreciates "Letters to the Editor." As you can tell in today's GDI, there are several comments to be considered.

Normally, we publish the weekly by this time; however, we are pushing back the weekly deadline to allow comments for or against the project before we assemble them all together into one package for our print readers.

If you would like to submit an editorial, please do so today. The weekly will come out either Thursday or Friday, but don't miss the boat.

But if there is one thing I can't emphasise enough -- VOTE!

You can go to the school now and get an absentee ballot to vote if you think you can't make it to the polls. And don't forget, in Ward 3 in Groton, there is an election for a council representative to the city council between Mary Fliehs and Karyn Babcock. Again, if you think you can't make it to the polls on Tuesday, stop down at city hall to vote absentee.

Too many times an important election is decided by a few people. I would like to see a very high voter turnout at both of these elections.

Construction of Highways 12 & 37 in Groton

ABERDEEN, S.D. – The South Dakota Department of Transportation says reconstruction of Highways 12 and 37 in Groton has begun with phases 1 & 2.

The planned improvements for the project include new surfacing, curb and gutter, storm sewer, sidewalk, lighting and traffic signals.

The six phases of construction established for this project are as follows:

Phases 1 & 2: Install traffic control on Highway 12 to move westbound traffic into a two-way traffic configuration in the eastbound lanes to allow for construction of the westbound lanes.

Phases 3: Install traffic control on Highway 12 to move all traffic into the westbound lanes to allow for construction of the eastbound lanes. Place asphalt concrete on Brown County 12E to use as detour for southbound traffic using Highway 37.

Phase 4: Install traffic control on Highway 12 moving eastbound traffic to the outside eastbound lane and westbound traffic to the outside westbound lane to allow for construction of the center lane. Use Brown County 12E as a detour for southbound traffic using Highway 37.

Phase 5: Install traffic control on Highway 37 to allow for the construction. Use Brown County 12E as a detour for southbound traffic using Highway 37.

Phase 6: Beginning of the project south of the railroad tracks to East Railroad Avenue will be built under construction. Traffic will be controlled by flaggers and a pilot car and the detour route will still be utilized.

The construction operations will reduce traffic to one lane in each direction on Highway 12. Highway 37 will be closed with a detour route for phases 3 through 6. Flaggers will be present at different times during construction.

This work is part of a \$5.1 million contract with Webster Scale, Inc. to do repair work on Highway 12 and Highway 37 in the Aberdeen region.

The project has an interim completion date of July 1, for work on Highway 12 and a substantial completion date of Oct. 15, for all work excluding permanent pavement markings and erosion control. The overall completion date is Nov. 1.

The public is invited to attend weekly meetings to discuss progress and sequencing.

Meetings will be held every Thursday at 1 p.m. at the Groton Community Center located at 109 N. 3rd St.

For complete road construction information, visit www.safetravelusa.com/sd or dial 511.



The old flashing lights were taken down yesterday as work on US12 in Groton begins.

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Today in Weather History

April 5, 2000: High winds of 35 to 50 mph gusting to around 70 mph blew across central and north central South Dakota from the late morning to the late afternoon hours. As a result, several trees and many tree branches were downed, many structures, roofs, billboards, and road signs were damaged, a few mobile homes were overturned, and some power outages occurred. Not only did the high winds make driving difficult but, at some locations, they stirred up dirt causing visibilities to drop to near zero at times. Some detours and traffic collisions resulted due to the low visibility in blowing dirt. Airborne objects broke some windows across the area. One house had all of the windows on the front porch blown out. Also, a few semi tractor-trailers were tipped over by the high winds. Wind gusts included 60 mph at Pierre, 63 mph at Kennebec, 64 mph at Mobridge, 65 mph at Pollock, and 71 mph at McLaughlin. The high winds and extremely dry conditions combined with downed and arcing electrical lines, out of control burns, and smoldering embers from previous fires resulted in several grassfires across central and north central South Dakota. Several thousand acres of grassland, hundreds of hay bales and haystacks, along with some trees and fences were burned. Also, the smoke from some of these fires created low visibilities and difficult driving conditions on some roads.

1945 - The temperature at Eagles Nest, NM, plunged to 45 degrees below zero to establish an April record for the United States. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1955 - The Northern Rockies and the Northern High Plains were in the midst of a four day storm which produced 52 inches of snow at Lead, located in the Black Hills of western South Dakota. (David Ludlum)

1972 - A tornado, 500 yards wide at times, touched down at a marina on the Oregon side of the Columbia River, and then tore through Vancouver WA killing six persons, injuring 300 others, and causing more than five million dollars damage. It was the deadliest tornado of the year, and the worst of record for Washington. (The Weather Channel)

1982 - An unprecedented April blizzard began in the northeastern U.S. One to two feet of snow fell across Massachusetts and Connecticut, and up to 26 inches was reported in Maine. New York City received a foot of snow. Winds reached 70 to 80 mph during the storm, and the storm also produced numerous thunderstorms, which contributed to the heavy snow. (Storm Data)

1987 - A storm produced unprecedented April snows in the central Appalachians. Mount Mitchell NC received 35 inches of snow, and up to 60 inches (six feet) of snow was reported in the mountains along the border of North Carolina and Tennessee. The total of 25 inches at Charleston WV easily surpassed their previous record for the entire month of April of 5.9 inches. The 20.6 inch total at Akron OH established an all-time record for that location. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)








1988 - Thirty-nine cities across the eastern half of the country reported record high temperatures for the date, including Saint Louis MO with a reading of 91 degrees. Laredo TX was the hot spot in the nation with an afternoon high of 100 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Unseasonably hot weather prevailed in the southwestern U.S. Afternoon highs of 100 degrees at Santa Maria CA and 105 degrees in Downtown Los Angeles established records for the month of April. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Afternoon and evening thunderstorms developing along a cold front produced severe weather in southern Oklahoma, southern Arkansas, and north central and northeastern Texas. Thunderstorms spawned a dozen tornadoes in Texas, including one at Fort Worth which caused a million dollars damage. There were nearly one hundred reports of large hail and damaging winds. Thunderstorms in Texas produced hail three and a half inches in diameter west of Fort Worth, and produced wind gusts to 80 mph at Cross Plains. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)


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Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
						
Isolated Showers then Scattered T-storms	Isolated T-storms then Mostly Clear	Sunny	Mostly Clear	Sunny then Mostly Sunny and Breezy	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny
High: 53 °F	Low: 28 °F	High: 56 °F	Low: 33 °F	High: 69 °F	Low: 47 °F	High: 77 °F

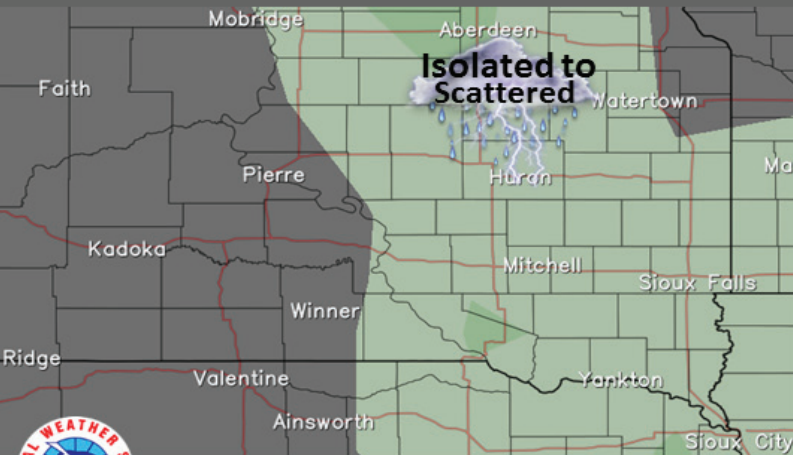
Light Isolated to Scattered Showers and Thunderstorms this Afternoon Dry Thursday, then Warmer Friday!

Today




Highs in the 50s


Afternoon showers and thunderstorms possible




Friday






Highs 65 to near 80°



FIRE DANGER
Breezy south winds 15 to 25 mph,
gusting to near 35 mph



weather.gov/Aberdeen
 Like
National Weather Service Aberdeen
 @NWSAberdeen



Published on: 04/05/2017 at 4:48AM

Light Isolated to Scattered showers and thunderstorms will be possible mainly across eastern South Dakota this afternoon. Otherwise, dry high pressure will slowly invade from Canada on Thursday, and exit to our southeast Thursday night. Breezy south winds and much warmer temperatures will be the rule Friday. Highs will range from the mid 60s to near 80 degrees. This will elevate fire danger across the region Friday afternoon! While the warm and dry weather remains for Saturday, the winds are not expected to be quite as strong.

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Yesterday's Weather

High Outside Temp: 61.3 F at 5:26 PM

Low Outside Temp: 33.8 F at 7:52 AM

High Gust: 27.0 Mph at 7:14 PM

Snow: Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 86° in 1991

Record Low: 6° in 1968

Average High: 51°F

Average Low: 28°F

Average Precip in April.: 0.22

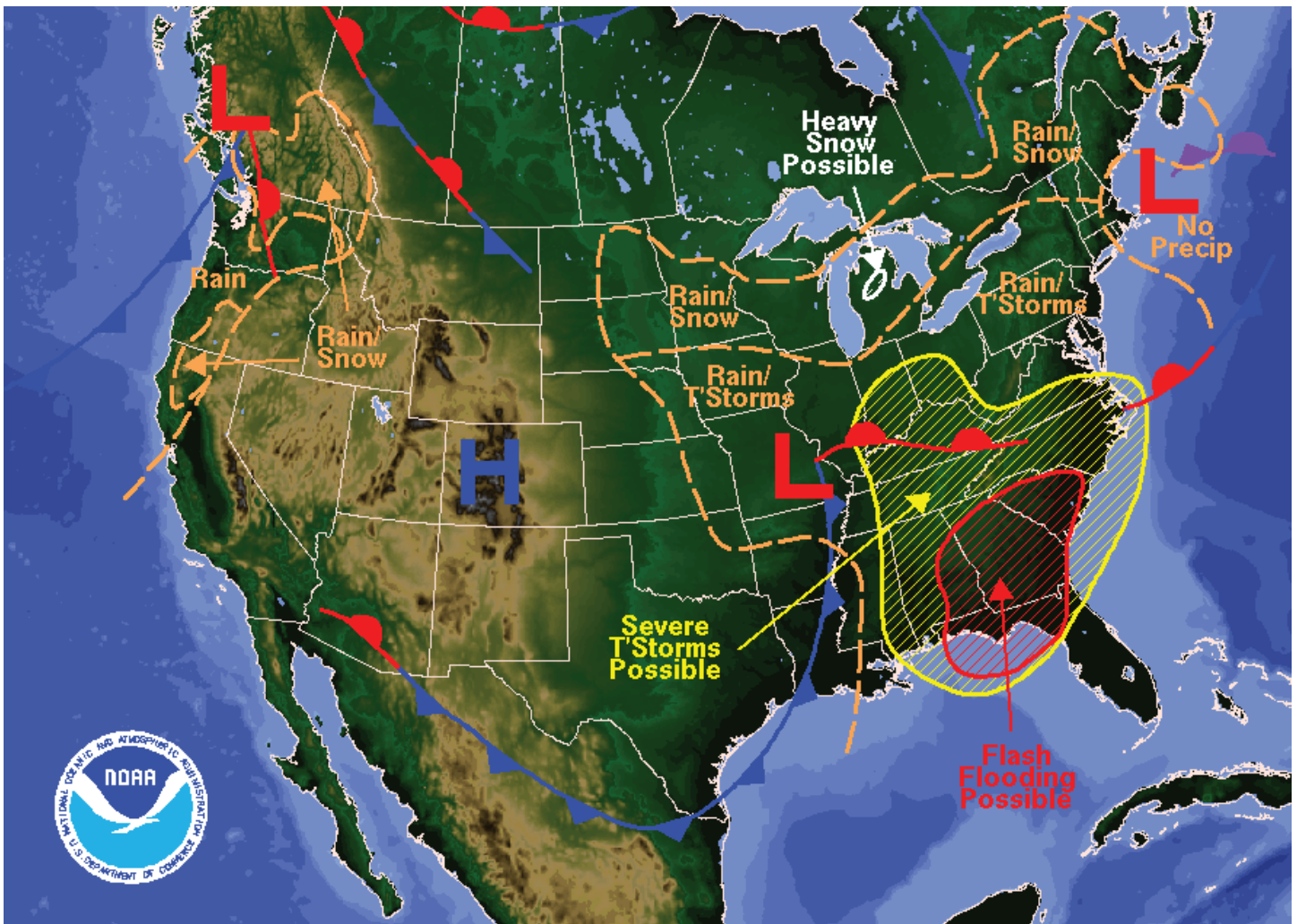
Precip to date in April.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 2.40

Precip Year to Date: 0.59

Sunset Tonight: 8:07 p.m.

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:04 a.m.



Weather Forecast for Wed, Apr 05, 2017, issued 4:40 AM EDT
DOC/NOAA/NWS/NCEP/Weather Prediction Center
Prepared by McReynolds based on WPC, SPC and NHC forecasts



FROZEN IN FEAR

A young man from Kansas dreamed of becoming a crew member of a "tall ship." Finally, his lifelong ambition was realized when he was offered an opportunity to sail on one of the few remaining tall ships. His enthusiasm was short lived when, after a few days, the captain ordered him to climb to the "crow's nest" and search the horizon for approaching vessels.

The higher up he climbed on the rope ladder, the more frightened he became and the slower his progress. Half way up he stopped, frozen in his tracks. He was unable to move. No amount of persuasion or encouragement from the sailors below inspired him to go higher. Finally, someone had to climb up behind him and slowly coax him down to safety.

Every now and then we all seem to get "stuck" when we are unable to overcome an old fear, when facing a new challenge or being forced to do something we have never done before. People all around us may provide insight and ideas to solve our problem and challenge us to "move on", but nothing seems to make sense and we "freeze" in our tracks.

However, God, in His Word, promises that "He gives power to the faint and weary, and might to him who has no strength."

When life's obstacles "freeze" us with fear, we must claim the promises of God and move forward in faith!

Prayer: Lord, may our faith in Your Word and our trust in Your promises give us the confidence and assurance that You will always provide for our safety. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture for Today: Isaiah 40:29-31 He gives power to the weak, And to those who have no might He increases strength.

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Tuesday:

Mega Millions

13-24-34-35-55, Mega Ball: 9, Megaplier: 5

(thirteen, twenty-four, thirty-four, thirty-five, fifty-five; Mega Ball: nine; Megaplier: five)

Estimated jackpot: \$15 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$40 million

Police: Blood on man wanted for questioning in wife's death

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Police say a South Dakota man detained for questioning in the death of his wife had blood on himself when he asked to use a gas station's bathroom just hours after her body was found.

Sioux Falls police say 43-year-old Irving Jumping Eagle was arrested on a warrant Tuesday in the death of 33-year-old Alicia Jumping Eagle. The warrant was on charges of first-degree murder, second-degree murder and manslaughter. Formal charges are expected Wednesday.

Alicia Jumping Eagle was reported missing Sunday. Her body was found in a Sioux Falls apartment Monday.

Police allege Irving Jumping Eagle had blood on himself while at a gas station Monday afternoon about 300 miles away near Streeter, North Dakota. He was detained Tuesday in eastern South Dakota.

Oklahoma to send crime victims' 'bill of rights' to ballot

By SEAN MURPHY, Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Oklahoma voters will decide whether to enshrine a so-called crime victims' bill of rights into the state constitution, despite concerns from defense attorneys and some prosecutors that the proposal could lead to costly unintended consequences.

With little discussion and no debate, the House voted 88-0 on Tuesday to send "Marsy's Law" to the ballot in November 2018.

If approved by voters, the measure would require crime victims be notified and heard in most criminal proceedings, a right to protection and "full and timely" restitution, the right to confer with prosecutors, and would prohibit "unreasonable delay" of criminal cases, among other things.

"What we're asking is to elevate the victims' rights to the same level as the defendants' rights," said Rep. Scott Biggs, a Chickasha Republican and a former prosecutor who authored the bill. "Not more, not less, but simply put the victims' rights at the same level as the defendants' rights."

The push to enact the constitutional amendment in Oklahoma, which included the hiring of nine lobbyists and two public relations companies, is being bankrolled by Henry Nicholas, a retired California businessman who made his fortune as the co-founder of Broadcom Corporation. Nicholas became a victims' rights advocate after his sister, Marsy, was shot and killed by her ex-boyfriend in 1983 and campaigned to have Marsy's Law approved by California voters in 2008. Similar proposals have been approved in Illinois, Montana, North Dakota and South Dakota, and efforts are underway to have the proposal placed on ballots in nine other states, including Oklahoma.

But those involved in the criminal justice system say the proposal is entirely unnecessary and could

actually divert resources from both prosecutors and law enforcement.

"The first thing one would have to do is establish the clear meaning of these provisions, and then people would have to be trained in terms of how to abide by these new requirements," said Oklahoma City University law professor Arthur LeFrancois, who noted the Oklahoma Constitution already spells out rights for crime victims, "so there would certainly be additional obligations created for both law enforcement and prosecutors."

In North Dakota, where a similar measure was approved by more than 60 percent of voters in November, the proposal faced opposition from prosecutors, defense attorneys, law enforcement and victims' rights groups.

"There will be constitutional clashes between well-established law and the provisions of this poorly conceived measure," Grand Forks County, North Dakota, state's attorney David Jones wrote in an editorial opposing the measure. "This will result in justice delayed as well as greater cost to the legal system."

Eric Schweitzer, a criminal defense attorney in California, described the measure's effect on that state as an "unmitigated disaster" that places too much emphasis on the will and desire of the victims of crime.

"No matter where you prosecute, it's the role of the prosecutor to seek justice, not vengeance," Schweitzer said. "Victims do not represent the people of the state. They represent their own interests."

"The question the Oklahoma voters have to ask is whether it will be a court of justice or a court of vengeance."

Online:

Senate Joint Resolution 46: <http://bit.ly/2ozPsMm>

Marsy's Law: www.marsyslaw.us

Follow Sean Murphy at www.twitter.com/apseanmurphy

Avera Sacred Heart buys Yankton hospital for \$13.2M

YANKTON, S.D. (AP) — The Avera Sacred Heart Hospital has purchased Yankton's Lewis and Clark Specialty Hospital for nearly \$13.2 million.

The hospital deal went into effect Saturday, giving Lewis and Clark the new name Avera Surgical Hospital on the Avera Fox Run Health Campus, the Yankton Press & Dakotan (<http://bit.ly/2oF1PE7>) reported.

The campus contains the surgical hospital, Avera Medical Group Family Medicine and Avera Fox Run Medical Plaza, which will include independent clinic offices. The purchase included all the buildings, property, and plant and hospital equipment.

Avera CEO Doug Ekeren said that all 55 Lewis and Clark employees will become Avera employees. He called the purchase "exciting."

"We all know there are a lot of moving parts right now in the health care systems nationally and a lot of uncertainty to how those systems might change and reform," Ekeren said. "One of the things that is fairly constant that we hear about is new, collaborative ways that health care providers need to work together." Ekeren added that Lewis and Clark employees still have some "reasonable" questions.

"The folks out here have two weeks to learn about those kinds of things (changes)," he said. "They have a very narrow window to make important decisions about benefits that will affect their families."

The campus will serve as a remote site of the Avera Sacred Heart Hospital. The medical group has been part of Yankton for 118 years.

Information from: Yankton Press and Dakotan, <http://www.yankton.net/>

Wisconsin proposal would give crime victims a host of rights

By **TODD RICHMOND, Associated Press**

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Republican lawmakers and crime victim advocates introduced a constitutional amendment Tuesday that would provide crime victims with a host of rights, including the right to have their personal information sealed in police records and allow them to speak out at more court proceedings.

The Wisconsin Constitution and state law already provide victims with a list of rights, including the right to privacy, the right to be treated with dignity, the right to attend court proceedings, the right to protection from defendants and the opportunity to make a statement during sentencing, restitution and compensation proceedings.

The new amendment, authored by Rep. Todd Novak of Dodgeville and Sen. Van Wanggaard of Racine, largely duplicates existing language but takes it a step further in several areas. In addition to the right to privacy, victims would have the right to have information or records that could be used to locate them or disclose confidential information sealed.

Bill Lueders, president of the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council, said that Wisconsin law already allows record custodians to redact information about crime victims if they decide the victims' privacy outweighs the public interest in the information.

"I would hope this does not shift the official standard from having a good reason to needing no reason," Lueders said.

The amendment also gives victims the right to be heard in plea, parole, revocation, expungement and pardon proceedings in court and allows victims to opt out of direct requests for interviews, depositions or discovery from defense attorneys. Discovery is the process in which one side in a case turns over all of its evidence to the other side.

Current state law allows victims to refuse interviews or depositions with defense attorneys in criminal cases. Prosecutors are automatically required to turn over their evidence to defense attorneys in criminal cases, so there's no need for the defense to demand discovery directly from a victim in a criminal case. The amendment's provision, however, could block criminal defendants from launching lawsuits against victims because victims wouldn't have to give up any information.

"Our focus needs to be on caring for and protecting ... victims, not coddling criminals," Wanggaard said in a news release announcing the amendment.

Attorney General Brad Schimel, who supports the proposal, appeared at a news conference with Novak and Wanggaard.

"We're really not talking about giving new rights to crime victims," Schimel said. "We're talking about the stature they're given in the courtroom."

A constitutional amendment in Wisconsin must pass two consecutive legislative sessions and a statewide referendum before it can become part of the document. Spokeswomen for Assembly Speaker Robin Vos and Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald didn't immediately return an email inquiring about support for the measure.

Tony Cotton, president of the Wisconsin Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, didn't immediately return a message.

A number of other states, including California, Illinois and both Dakotas have adopted similar victim rights constitutional amendments. Oklahoma's House voted unanimously Tuesday to send a similar amendment to voters.

Supporters have dubbed the amendments "Marsy's Law" for California college student Marsalee "Marsy" Nicholas, who was killed by an ex-boyfriend in 1983. Her brother, Henry Nicholas, a retired California technology company executive, has bankrolled an effort to put such amendments in place across the country.

The amendment has caused confusion in North and South Dakota. It has caused some law enforcement agencies to limit public information about crimes, including the locations of crimes and the identity of victimized businesses and the names of car crash victims. South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley convened a task force in December to figure out how to interpret the amendment.

Prosecutors in North Dakota have said they think the amendments' provisions are vague and could slow the justice system down because victims have to be notified of all proceedings relating to a defendant's release and sentencing, including bail hearings. Defense attorneys in that state have argued the amendment tramples defendants' rights.

Brian Reisinger, a spokesman for Marsy's Law for Wisconsin, a group promoting the amendment, said Wisconsin will fare better than other states that have adopted it because the state already recognizes victim rights.

Associated Press writer Scott Bauer contributed to this report.

Follow Todd Richmond on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/trichmond1>

Follow Scott Bauer on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/sbauerAP>

Dusty Johnson raises over \$127K in South Dakota House race

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Dusty Johnson's congressional campaign says that he raised more than \$127,000 in the first quarter of 2017.

Johnson's campaign on Tuesday announced fundraising numbers in his bid to succeed U.S. Rep. Kristi Noem in 2018. Johnson, a Republican, raised roughly \$105,000 in the fourth quarter of 2016.

Treasurer Greg McCurry says that Johnson is receiving support from "every corner of South Dakota." The campaign says he ended the quarter with more than \$200,000 in the bank.

Johnson was elected to the Public Utilities Commission in 2004 and re-elected in 2010. He later served as Gov. Dennis Daugaard's chief of staff until 2014.

Republican Secretary of State Shantel Krebs said last month that she's also running for Congress. Her campaign didn't immediately respond to an email seeking fundraising details.

Lake Andes man sentenced for crash that killed brother

LAKE ANDES, S.D. (AP) — A Lake Andes man has been sentenced to serve two months in the South Dakota State Penitentiary for a drunken driving crash that killed his brother.

Twenty-six-year-old Albert Fischer initially had been charged with vehicular homicide after the April 2016 crash that killed 22-year-old James Fischer, also of Lake Andes.

The vehicle later was crushed prematurely, destroying evidence and resulting in the charge being reduced to hit and run causing death or injury. Albert Fischer pleaded no contest to the charge in January.

The Daily Republic reports (<http://bit.ly/2oVxdxA>) he was sentenced Monday on that charge and a drunken driving count. He'll be on probation for five years. If he violates the terms of probation, he could end up in prison for two years.

Information from: The Daily Republic, <http://www.mitchellrepublic.com>

Car bomb kills at least 7 at restaurant in Somalia's capital

By ABDI GULED, Associated Press

MOGADISHU, Somalia (AP) — A massive car bomb blast at a restaurant in Somalia's capital killed at least seven people, police said Wednesday, as fears grew that al-Shabab extremists who have vowed to destabilize the country's new government were behind it.

Several others were injured in the blast near the ministries of internal security and youth and sports in Mogadishu, Col. Ahmed Hashi said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the blast. However, the al-Qaida-linked Islamic ex-

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tremist group al-Shabab group often carries out such attacks.

The powerful blast largely destroyed the restaurant. Police pulled the bloodied body of a man from the rubble and said there may be more. Soldiers pushed back a surging crowd and fired in the air to disperse people.

"Those blood-suckers give no care to human lives whether they are civilians or others," said police Capt. Mohamed Hussein, who blamed al-Shabab for the attack. He stood near the bloodied body of a man and shattered glass.

The extremists have been pushed out of the capital and other major urban areas in Somalia by national and African Union multinational forces, but they continue to carry out deadly bombings and attacks in Mogadishu and elsewhere. Targets have included hotels, military checkpoints and the presidential palace.

Al-Shabab has denounced new Somali-American President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed as an "apostate" and warned Somalis against supporting him. Al-Shabab was kicked out of Mogadishu under Mohamed's brief term as prime minister in 2010-2011.

Mohamed, who was elected in February, has vowed to make security a priority in the long-chaotic nation where the fragile central government is trying to extend its control beyond selected areas including the capital.

10 Things to Know for Today

By The Associated Press

Your daily look at late-breaking news, upcoming events and the stories that will be talked about today:

1. NORTH KOREA FIRES BALLISTIC MISSILE

The worry is that Pyongyang might conduct nuclear or long-range rocket tests ahead of the first summit between Trump and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping this week.

2. DEATH TOLL RISING IN SYRIA

A monitoring group says at least 72 are now dead from a suspected chemical attack on a northern town near Idlib and activists report renewed airstrikes on Khan Sheikhou.

3. WHERE RUSSIAN SUBWAY BOMB PROBE IS HEADING

Investigators search the suspected suicide bomber's home in St. Petersburg and examine footage that shows Akbardzhon Dzhililov with a bag and a backpack.

4. MCCONNELL SAY HE HAS VOTES FOR 'NUCLEAR OPTION'

The Senate majority leader says he can bust a planned Democratic filibuster of Trump's Supreme Court nominee, a showdown that could change the Senate, and the court, for generations.

5. 'WINTER WHITE HOUSE' IS ULTIMATE MARKETING PLOY

When Trump meets China's leader at Mar-a-Lago later this week, it's a pretty nice advertisement for the U.S. president, who owns the luxurious, oceanfront, members-only property in Florida.

6. DEFECTS FOUND ON OIL TRAIN ROUTES MAY EXPLAIN DERAILMENTS

U.S. government inspections of railroad routes used to haul volatile shipments uncovered almost 24,000 track defects that prompted 1,100 violation recommendations for safety gaps, AP finds.

7. WHO WON MAYORAL ELECTION IN FERGUSON

James Knowles III, the St. Louis suburb's top elected official in the tumultuous 32 months since the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown, gets another three-year term.

8. WHY DEADLY COLOMBIA FLOODS WERE NOT SURPRISING

Nearly 280 are confirmed dead in Mocoa, which government agencies, land use experts and environmental organizations had said for years could face dangerous flooding.

9. KENDALL JENNER'S PEPSI SPOT PROMPTS ONLINE BACKLASH

The model's turn as a soft-drink-wielding protester has some on social media decrying the imagery as appropriation of the Black Lives Matter movement.

10. WHAT LEFTY IS AIMING TO DO

Phil Mickelson arrives at Augusta National as a 46-year-old, three-time champion, trying to conjure up

the same magic Jack Nicklaus used in 1986 to win his sixth and final Masters title at the same age.

McConnell claims votes to bust Supreme Court filibuster

By ERICA WERNER, AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is claiming he has the votes necessary to thwart a planned Democratic filibuster of President Donald Trump's Supreme Court nominee, as a showdown draws near that could change the Senate, and the court, for generations.

"They seem determined to head into the abyss," the Kentucky Republican said of Democrats as debate began Tuesday over Judge Neil Gorsuch's nomination. "They need to reconsider."

Democrats made clear they had no plans to do so, and blamed Republicans for pushing them to attempt a nearly unheard of filibuster of a qualified Supreme Court pick. Forty-four Democrats intend to vote against proceeding to final confirmation on Gorsuch, which would be enough to block him under the Senate's existing parliamentary rules that require 60 votes to advance a nomination.

But McConnell intends to act unilaterally with the rest of the 51 other members of the GOP Senate conference and change the rules to eliminate the 60-vote threshold so that it would require just a simple majority to install Gorsuch on the high court bench, as well as all future Supreme Court nominees. Asked if he has the votes to do that, given misgivings voiced by many Republicans, McConnell answered simply "yes."

Democrats tried mightily to keep the focus on Republicans' plans to change Senate rules, rather than on their own plans to obstruct a nominee who would likely have gotten onto the court easily with no filibuster in earlier and less contentious political times.

And to dramatize their position, they sent one of their own to the Senate floor for a marathon speech. Sen. Jeff Merkley of Oregon talked through the night and was still speaking at daybreak, appearing in front of a blown-up, poster-style portion of the Constitution with the words "We the People" showing.

Schumer said, "Senator McConnell would have the world believe that his hands are tied. That the only option after Judge Gorsuch doesn't earn 60 votes is to break the rules, to change the rules. That could not be further from the truth."

In fact, a Senate rules change does appear to be the lone route that Republicans have to put Gorsuch on the court. And despite claims from Schumer and others that Trump and Republicans could go back to the drawing board and come up with a more "mainstream" nominee, it seems unlikely that any nominee produced by Trump would win Democrats' approval.

On Tuesday evening McConnell officially filed a "cloture" motion, the procedural step designed to end debate on a nomination and bring it to a final vote. That started the clock toward a showdown on Thursday, when Democrats are expected to try to block Gorsuch, at which point Republicans would respond by enacting the rules change. The change is known on Capitol Hill as the "nuclear option" because of the potential repercussions for the Senate and the court.

For the Senate, it would mean that Supreme Court nominees in future could get on the court with no assent from the minority party, potentially leading to a more ideologically polarized court. More immediately, Gorsuch's confirmation to fill the vacancy on the court created by the death of Justice Antonin Scalia 14 months ago would restore the conservative voting majority that existed before Scalia's death and could persist or grow for years to come.

And for the Senate, lawmakers of both parties bemoaned the further erosion of their traditions of bipartisanship and consensus. Some were already predicting that they would end up eliminating the 60-vote requirement for legislation, as well as nominations. But McConnell pledged Tuesday that this would not happen on his watch.

He drew a distinction between legislation being filibustered and the filibuster being used against nominees, something that is a more recent development.

Gorsuch now counts 55 supporters in the Senate: the 52 Republicans including McConnell, along with three moderate Democrats from states that President Donald Trump won last November — Joe Manchin

of West Virginia, Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota and Joe Donnelly of Indiana. A fourth Senate Democrat, Michael Bennet from Gorsuch's home state of Colorado, has said he will not join in the filibuster against Gorsuch but has not said how he will vote on final passage.

Gorsuch, 49, is a 10-year veteran of a federal appeals court in Denver where he's compiled a highly conservative record that's led Democrats to complain that he too often sides with corporations without regard to the humanity of the plaintiffs before him.

Associated Press writer Mary Clare Jalonick contributed to this report.

EU legislators tell UK on Brexit: no parallel talks

By RAF CASERT, Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — European Union lawmakers on Wednesday passed a resolution calling for phased negotiations in divorce proceedings with Britain, going against the wishes of London, which would like exit talks and discussions of a future trade arrangement to happen in parallel.

The lawmakers voted 516-133 for the resolution, with 50 abstentions, highlighting the tough task ahead for British Prime Minister Theresa May as she enters two years of negotiations with 27 EU nations.

EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier called parallel talks on Britain's exit from the EU and a future trade relationship "a very risky approach" that he is bent on avoiding.

Barnier told EU legislators in Strasbourg, France, that "to succeed, we need on the contrary to devote the first phase of negotiations exclusively to reaching agreement on the principle of the exit."

May last week sought hand-in-hand negotiations on exit and a future relationship, while the EU Council president and EU top legislators argued against it.

The Brexit talks are expected to start in late May once the negotiating guidelines of the 27 member nations have been sealed in a mandate for Barnier.

Britain insisted again, though, that it wanted to move on to discuss the future as soon as possible.

"The best interests of both sides of this negotiation will be served by getting on to the technical discussion about the future relationship as quickly as possible in the two years that we have available," said junior Brexit Minister Robin Walker.

Both sides have a general agreement that they want to tackle the fate of the 3 million EU citizens in Britain and some 1 million Britons residing in the other EU nations first of all.

"I really welcome the fact that the parliament and the (EU) Council have set that out as a first priority from the EU perspective as well," Walker said.

The parliament's Brexit coordinator, Guy Verhofstadt, said it was perhaps best that there was never much positive passion in the cross-Channel relationship. "It never was a love affair," he said, instead calling it "a marriage of convenience."

White House, lawmakers adrift over reviving health bill

By ALAN FRAM, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration and Republican lawmakers plan to continue their uphill effort to exhume the House GOP's health care bill, but remain adrift and divided over how to reshape it to attract enough votes to muscle it through the chamber.

White House officials and leading legislators aimed to resume talks Wednesday. Late Tuesday, they failed in a Capitol basement office meeting to shake hands on a White House proposal to let states seek federal waivers to drop coverage mandates that President Barack Obama's health care law slapped on the insurance industry.

"All of us want an agreement," Rep. Mark Meadows, R-N.C., told reporters after two dozen lawmakers from both ends of the GOP spectrum huddled with Vice President Mike Pence and other White House of-

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ficials. Meadows added, "There's a whole lot of things that we have to work out."

Meadows leads the conservative House Freedom Caucus, whose roughly three dozen members have largely opposed the GOP legislation for not going far enough to abrogate Obama's Affordable Care Act, and their opposition helped to thwart the measure in the House in late March.

The White House offers got an uneven reception earlier Tuesday from GOP moderates and conservatives, leaving prospects shaky that the party could salvage one of its leading legislative priorities. There was no evidence that the proposals won over any of the GOP opponents who humiliated President Donald Trump and House leaders on March 24, forcing them to cancel a planned vote on a Republican health care bill that was destined to lose.

"We want to make sure that when we go, we have the votes to pass this bill," House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., told reporters. He said talks were in "the conceptual stage."

Later Tuesday, Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., his party's chief vote counter, said discussions were not "where there is consensus" on health care and indicated a vote this week was unlikely. Congress leaves town in days for a two-week recess, when lawmakers could face antagonistic grilling from voters at town hall meetings and the entire GOP drive might lose momentum.

Under the White House proposal, states could apply for a federal waiver from a provision in Obama's law that obliges insurers to cover "essential health benefits," including mental health, maternity and substance abuse services. The current version of the GOP legislation would erase that coverage requirement but let states reimpose it themselves, language that is opposed by many of the party's moderates.

In addition, the White House would let states seek an exemption to the law's provision banning insurers from charging higher premiums for seriously ill people. Conservatives have argued that such restrictions inflate consumer costs.

Conservative Rep. Mo Brooks, R-Ala., said he remained a "no" votes, saying states should be allowed to opt out of Obama's insurance requirements without seeking federal permission "on bended knee."

Moderate Rep. Frank LoBiondo, R-N.J., also remained an opponent, citing the GOP bill's cuts in care offered low-income people under Medicaid and the higher out-of-pocket costs it would impose on many poorer and older consumers.

Some members of the Freedom Caucus were showing signs of accepting less than many originally wanted. Meadows said talks were boiling down to curbing several of Obama's coverage requirements — a sharp contrast to the full repeal of the statute that many initially demanded.

"It perhaps is as much of a repeal as we can get done," Meadows told reporters.

A poll by the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation flashed a warning for the White House, showing that 3 in 4 Americans want the Trump administration to make Obama's law work.

About 2 in 3 said they were glad the House GOP bill didn't pass last month. But people split evenly between wanting to keep or repeal Obama's statute.

The underlying House Republican bill would repeal much of Obama's 2010 law. It would erase its tax fines for consumers who don't buy policies, federal aid to help many afford coverage and Medicaid expansion for additional poor people.

Instead, opponents of the current measure say they want tax subsidies for health care to less generous than under Obama's program for many lower wage-earners and people in their 50s and 60s. They also would cut the Medicaid program and tax increases on higher earners would be eliminated. Consumers who let coverage lapse would face 30 percent premium hikes.

AP reporters Erica Werner, Richard Lardner, Kevin Freking, Ken Thomas and Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar contributed to this report.

North Korea may have tested new technology in latest missile

By HYUNG-JIN KIM, Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — The missile in North Korea's latest launch didn't fly very far, but it may have been the second test of a technology that worries experts.

The launch Wednesday into waters off North Korea's east coast came shortly before U.S. President Donald Trump's first meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping later this week, raising speculation that it might have been timed to get their attention.

Initial U.S. and South Korean assessments indicate it was a KN-15 medium-range missile, whose first known test by North Korea was in February.

The KN-15, known as "Pukguksong-2" in North Korea, uses pre-loaded solid fuel, which shortens launch preparation times, boosts its mobility and makes it harder for outsiders to detect ahead of liftoff. Most North Korean missiles use liquid propellant, which generally must be added to the missile on the launch pad before firing.

The South Korean military said the missile was fired from land near the east coast city of Sinpo and flew about 60 kilometers (40 miles). The earlier one in February flew about 500 kilometers (310 miles). Analysts were trying to determine if the shorter distance meant Wednesday's launch was a failure.

One expert said it could have been a test of a new missile intended as a stepping stone toward developing a solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile that could reach the U.S. mainland. Kim Dong-yub, an analyst at Seoul's Institute for Far Eastern Studies, questioned why North Korea would do a shorter launch of the KN-15.

"There's absolutely no reason for North Korea to fire the KN-15 again this way; the launch measurements show something similar to when developing missiles are flight-tested for the first time for data-gathering purposes," he said.

The KN-15 is believed to be an upgraded version of the submarine-launched "Pukguksong" launched last summer. Many experts say a "Pukguksong-2" missile would be a greater security threat, because it can be launched anywhere from a mobile vehicle. While submarines are a stealthy way to do that, North Korea doesn't have enough of them.

Ralph Cossa, president of the Pacific Forum CSIS think tank in Honolulu, said he was expecting North Korea would do something to coincide with the Trump-Xi summit, perhaps conduct a nuclear test. The missile launch may be a precursor, with more to come as the summit starts Thursday, he said.

"I've joked before that they don't mind being hated but they definitely hate to be ignored," Cossa said.

Recent satellite imagery shows possible preparations for a test at North Korea's main nuclear test site, including the laying of communication cables used to initiate a test and collect data.

North Korea's state media have said the world will soon witness what they called "eventful successes" in the country's space development. The United States, South Korea and others call North Korea's space program a cover for its long-range missile development program.

South Korea's Foreign Ministry called the North's latest missile launch a "reckless provocation" that posed a threat to international peace, while Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said his country lodged a strong protest over the launch.

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson acknowledged the launch in a brief statement but said the U.S. had spoken enough about North Korea and would not comment further.

Analysts say North Korea might time nuclear and long-range rocket tests to the April 15 birthday of North Korea founder Kim Il Sung, the late grandfather of current leader Kim Jong Un.

North Korea is pushing hard to upgrade its weapons systems to cope with what it calls U.S. hostility. Many weapons experts say the North could have a functioning nuclear-tipped missile capable of reaching the continental U.S. within a few years. North Korea carried out two nuclear tests last year.

The North's latest missile launch also came during annual military drills between the United States and South Korea. North Korea sees the drills as an invasion rehearsal.

Two weeks ago, the South Korean and U.S. militaries said they had detected a failed North Korean ballistic

missile launch. Earlier in March, North Korea fired four ballistic missiles that flew about 1,000 kilometers (620 miles), with three of them landing in waters that Japan claims as its exclusive economic zone.

Associated Press writers Audrey McAvoy in Honolulu and Kim Tong-hyung in Seoul contributed to this report.

Syria chemical attack death toll now at 72; new strikes hit

By SARAH EL DEEB, Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The death toll from a suspected chemical attack on a northern Syrian town rose to 72 on Wednesday as activists and rescue workers found more terrified survivors hiding in shelters near the site of the harrowing assault, one of the deadliest in Syria's civil war.

According to a Syrian opposition group, renewed airstrikes hit the town of Khan Sheikhoun a day after the attack that the Trump administration has blamed on the government of President Bashar Assad, saying that his patrons, Russia and Iran, bore "great moral responsibility" for the deaths.

The Damascus and Moscow governments denied they were behind the attack. A Russian Defense Ministry statement later said the toxic agents were released when a Syrian airstrike hit a rebel arsenal.

The U.N. Security Council was to hold an emergency meeting on Wednesday in response to the strike and in Brussels, officials from 70 nations gathered for a major donors' conference on the future of Syria and the region.

The attack on Khan Sheikhoun killed dozens of people on Tuesday, leaving residents gasping for breath and convulsing in the streets and overcrowded hospitals. Videos from the scene showed volunteer medics using fire hoses to wash the chemicals from victims' bodies. Haunting images of lifeless children piled in heaps reflected the magnitude of the attack, which was reminiscent of a 2013 chemical assault that left hundreds dead and was the worst in the country's ruinous six-year conflict.

Syrian doctors said a combination of toxic gases is suspected to have been released during the airstrikes, causing the high death toll and severe symptoms.

The World Health Organization said victims of the attack appear to show symptoms consistent with exposure to a nerve agent.

In a statement, the agency said "the likelihood of exposure to a chemical attack is amplified by an apparent lack of external injuries reported in cases showing a rapid onset of similar symptoms, including acute respiratory distress as the main cause of death."

Pope Francis said during his general audience that he was "watching with horror at the latest events in Syria," and said he "strongly deplored the unacceptable massacre."

Earlier, President Donald Trump denounced the attack as a "heinous" act that "cannot be ignored by the civilized world." German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel called on Russia to endorse a planned Security Council resolution condemning the attack.

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said "all the evidence" he had seen so far in the latest chemical weapons attack in Syria "suggests this was the Assad regime ... (that) did it in the full knowledge that they were using illegal weapons in a barbaric attack on their own people."

Syria's government denied it carried out any chemical attack. But early on Wednesday, Russia, a major ally of the Syrian government, alleged a Syrian airstrike hit a rebel arsenal, releasing the toxic agents.

The Russian Defense Ministry spokesman, Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov, said in a statement that Russian military assets registered the strike on a weapons depot and ammunition factory on the town's eastern outskirts. Konashenkov said the factory produced chemical weapons that were used in Iraq.

Wednesday's renewed airstrikes hit not far from the location of the suspected chemical attack, said Ahmed al-Sheikho, of the Idlib Civil Defense team. He said the strikes did not cause any casualties because the area had been evacuated following Tuesday's attack.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 20 children and 17 women were among the 72 killed. Abu Hamdu, a senior member of the Syrian Civil Defense in Khan Sheikoun said his group

has recorded 70 deaths.

He said his team of rescuers was still finding survivors, including two women and a boy hiding in an underground shelter beneath their home.

North Korea is increasingly a focus of US-China meeting

By **CHRISTOPHER BODEEN** and **JULIE PACE**, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House is talking in more urgent terms about North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons, as President Donald Trump's talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping approach. One senior administration official warned that the "clock has now run out" on Pyongyang.

Trump and Xi will huddle Thursday and Friday at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida, a venue chosen to give the summit a more informal feel. White House officials said Tuesday that trade and security would be high on the new American president's agenda, including pushing China to exert more economic pressure on North Korea.

Speaking at a White House business forum Tuesday, Trump called North Korea a "humanity problem." A White House official later said "all options are on the table" for the U.S., though the official would not say what steps Trump was willing to take to curb Pyongyang's pursuit of a nuclear weapon.

North Korea fired a ballistic missile into the waters off its east coast on Wednesday, U.S. and South Korean officials said, in a reminder of the simmering tensions on the Korean peninsula.

Like many nations, China is still grappling with Trump's mercurial nature after the relative transparency and predictability of the bilateral relationship under Barack Obama. Both during his campaign and after his victory, Trump complained repeatedly about China's allegedly unfair trade practices, its perceived lack of assistance in reining in North Korea and its drive to cement control over the South China Sea.

Some analysts believe Xi might be willing to hand Trump a symbolic victory on trade to put a positive spin on the meeting.

"Xi probably can't accommodate Trump on sovereignty and security issues, but he has a lot of leeway on economics," said Robert Sutter, a China expert at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

Yet even if Xi is able to offer Trump deliverables, he will still have to deal with "a restless U.S. president valuing unpredictability and seeking advantage for his agenda going forward," Sutter said.

Trump was seen as moving trade even more to the forefront when he signed a pair of executive orders Friday focused on reducing the trade deficit. Coupled together, the orders appeared to be a symbolic shot at China, which accounted for the vast bulk — \$347 billion — of last year's \$502 billion trade deficit.

While aides insisted the timing was coincidental, the administration touted the moves as evidence of an aggressive but analytical approach to closing a yawning trade gap that is largely due to the influx of goods from China.

Still, Trump told the Financial Times newspaper that during his meeting with Xi, he doesn't "want to talk about tariffs yet, perhaps the next time we meet." A second White House official said Tuesday that the topic may come up, though there was not expected to be any resolution.

The officials would only discuss the upcoming summit on the condition of anonymity in order to avoid pre-empting the president.

Looming over the visit will be North Korea's nuclear provocations. China continues to oppose the tough measures demanded of it to address the issue, fearing a collapse of the Pyongyang regime would bring a crush of refugees and possibly U.S. and South Korean troops on its border.

Trump told the Financial Times the U.S. is prepared to act alone if China does not take a tougher stand against North Korea's nuclear program.

"China has great influence over North Korea," he said. "And China will either decide to help us with North Korea, or they won't. And if they do that will be very good for China, and if they don't it won't be good for anyone."

Add to the mix the issue of the South China Sea, where Beijing has built and armed man-made islands

despite the concerns of neighboring countries; and Taiwan, the self-governing island democracy that China claims as its own territory, and which some in Trump's administration would like to see in a stronger relationship with the U.S.

Despite such divisions, Beijing seems committed to establishing a positive relationship between the two leaders.

"It is fundamental for them to improve understanding between each other," said Xiong Zhiyong, a professor at Peking University's School of International Relations. "Both sides have shown their willingness to cooperate and they are expected to make a commitment for cooperation."

China, Xiong said, realizes that Trump "is a leader with a strong personality."

The White House said Trump and Xi would hold meetings and a dinner on Thursday, then gather again Friday for more discussions and a working lunch. First lady Melania Trump and Xi's wife, famed songstress Peng Liyuan, plan to attend the dinner.

As personalities, Xi and Trump are a study in contrasts. A lifelong Communist Party apparatchik and son of a former vice premier, Xi has built his career with a cautious approach, avoiding controversial reforms and rarely speaking out in ways that would distract from his core message. His nearly five years as head of the ruling party have been defined by a campaign to achieve the "Chinese dream" of increasing prosperity while tackling endemic corruption.

Still, outwardly cordial relations with U.S. presidents are also a longstanding Chinese tradition, in recognition of the importance of the bilateral relationship. Xi had taken pains to appear at ease in the company of Obama, avoiding the rancor that characterized the relationship between the American leader and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Bodeen reported from Beijing. Associated Press writer Vivian Salama contributed to this report from Washington.

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Years of warnings preceded deadly flood in southern Colombia

By **BEN FOX and ALBA TOBELLA, Associated Press**

MOCOA, Colombia (AP) — People were caught off guard when a devastating flash flood surged through a small city in southern Colombia, but not everyone was surprised.

Government agencies, land use experts, and environmental organizations had said for years that Mocoa could face dangerous flooding. Many who lived in the most vulnerable areas were aware of the warnings, even if they didn't heed them. And yet the city continued to spread into the floodplains west of downtown.

"Unfortunately, in Colombia we don't have a good assessment of risk, or good land use policies to prohibit people from settling in areas like these," said Marcela Quintero, a researcher with the International Center for Tropical Agriculture, one of the organizations that raised the alarm about deforestation in the area.

Mocoa was vulnerable because of its location, amid a confluence of rivers in the wet subtropical Amazon region of southern Colombia. The danger had grown worse as trees were cut down for cattle ranching and other agriculture, removing critical protection against flooding and landslides. Then came an influx of new residents, many fleeing the violence from the government's long fight with guerrilla forces.

When a month's worth of rain fell in a single night late Friday and early Saturday, the long-predicted disaster had arrived.

Sixty-eight-year-old Deya Maria Toro, who moved to Mocoa 12 years earlier, said she realized what was happening in time and managed to flee to safety. "I woke up at 9 p.m. with this sensation: Is this when the avalanche comes?"

Many others didn't react in time.

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Three of the six rivers surrounding Mocoa overran their banks. A wall of muddy brown water and tree limbs raced through the streets, destroying homes and carrying away cars and appliances like driftwood. At least 279 people, many of them children, were swept away. More than 2,700 people who lost their homes were in shelters Tuesday and at least 200 people were still unaccounted for amid the wreckage.

It was one of the worst natural disasters in Colombia in recent years, and the finger-pointing started quickly. Headlines told of the "disaster foretold," a reference to "Chronicle of a Death Foretold," the 1981 novella by the late Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the country's most famous writer. Some media cited a 1989 report prepared by the Ministry of Agriculture, which outlined the scenario that played out over the weekend and recommended flood-control measures.

The Corporation for the Sustainable Development in the Southern Amazon, which has an office in Mocoa, has been warning of the danger as far back as 1995, when the government built a power station that was knocked out by the weekend's flood. The group says that similar disasters have occurred over the years in the area, the most significant in 1962.

A Catholic priest in Mocoa, the Rev. Omar Parra, said in an interview on radio station LA FM that he was dismissed as "paranoid" when he told local officials three years ago that the Taruca River was spilling over onto people's land and would soon burst. "It was a tragedy foretold and the authorities didn't do what they should have done," he said.

People in the city were also quick to lay blame, even when they acknowledged knowing that the steep, forested mountains looming above the river by their homes was a potential threat. "It's the government's fault for letting us build homes here," said Carlos Garces, who came to Mocoa more than a decade ago with his young son and wife. "Everyone knew that it was going to flood but nobody did anything."

The national attorney general's office announced Tuesday that it was questioning the mayor of Mocoa and other officials to determine if any action, or inaction, on their part was responsible and whether an investigation is warranted. President Juan Manuel Santos met Tuesday in the city with the director of the Corporation for the Sustainable Development in the Southern Amazon.

It's not clear that even with the warnings Colombia could have done much about the situation in Mocoa. The country only emerged about a decade ago from a period of intense drug violence and a wave of kidnappings tied to its long civil war. Santos signed a peace deal last year with the largest of the insurgent groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

By some estimates, nearly half the population of Mocoa, a city of about 40,000, had come to escape violence in other parts of the country.

It also might have been hard to get people out. Jaime Martinez, a 38-year-old construction worker whose home was left in ruins, said he and others didn't take the threat seriously enough. "People were warned. It was known that the mountain was coming but nobody did anything because we don't pay attention to rumors," Martinez said.

Santos has pledged to rebuild Mocoa and make it better than before, though the government has not yet said whether that includes moving people out of the flood zones. Those who study the region say what's needed are better land-use policies aimed at preventing the deforestation that takes away the best natural protection from flooding, and will be even more critical if climate change brings additional rainfall.

"The most important thing here is that people should not settle again in areas that are very high risk and prone to flooding and that measures are put in place to conserve the areas upstream," Quintero said. "With those two things we can mitigate the risk."

Associated Press writer Cesar Garcia contributed from Bogota. Fox reported from Bogota.

APNewsBreak: Thousands of defects found on oil train routes

By MATTHEW BROWN, Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — Government inspections of railroads that haul volatile crude oil across the United States have uncovered almost 24,000 safety defects, including problems similar to those blamed in derailments that triggered massive fires or oil spills in Oregon, Virginia, Montana and elsewhere, according to data obtained by The Associated Press.

The safety defects were discovered during targeted federal inspections on almost 58,000 miles of oil train routes in 44 states. The inspection program began two years ago following a string of oil train accidents across North America, including a 2013 derailment in Lac-Megantic, Quebec, that killed 47 people.

Federal regulators said the inspections resulted in 1,118 violation recommendations, prompting railroads to become more responsive to concerns raised by track inspectors and to improve safety.

Problems identified by federal inspectors included worn rails and other equipment; bolts meant to hold tracks in place that were broken, loosened or missing; and cracks in steel bars joining sections of track. They also noted failures by railroads to quickly fix problems identified through inspections.

Such issues are not uncommon across the nation's 140,000-mile freight rail network. But they've received heightened attention after rail shipments of crude oil increased and the number of major derailments spiked following a surge in domestic energy production.

A violation recommendation occurs when an inspector finds something serious enough to warrant a potential penalty, or a railroad fails to address a defect that's been found. Federal officials declined to say how many penalties had been issued under the crude-by-rail inspection program.

A former senior official at the Federal Railroad Administration, Steven Ditmeyer, reviewed the inspection data obtained by the AP. He said it reinforces the need for railroads to stay on top of regular maintenance for their sprawling networks of track.

Many of the defects found by inspectors posed serious safety issues, Ditmeyer said, adding that it can be difficult for railroads to know when a seemingly small problem will result in a derailment.

"All of this is a call for continued vigilance," said Ditmeyer, who directed the railroad administration's Office of Research and Development for eight years. "One defect or one violation of the right kind can cause a derailment. These statistics give a good indication of the track quality, but most (defects) won't cause a derailment."

Some safety gaps found by inspectors bear similarities to the circumstances surrounding prior accidents.

In Lynchburg, Virginia, cracks in the track that went unrepaired led to a CSX Transportation oil train coming off the rails and exploding along the James River in 2014. In Culbertson, Montana, a 2015 accident that spilled 27,000 gallons of oil from a BNSF Railway train was blamed on defective or missing fasteners used to hold the tracks in place. And in Mosier, Oregon, broken rail bolts were blamed in a Union Pacific oil train derailment and fire last year.

The rail industry views safety defects as warnings from regulators that action is necessary, said Association of American Railroads spokeswoman Jessica Kahanek. She said violations are a better indicator of safety problems because not all defects pose an immediate risk. Hundreds of the violation recommendations on oil train routes were "paperwork-related," Kahanek said, such as railroads not providing required forms to government inspectors.

Omaha, Nebraska-based Union Pacific received most of the violation recommendations issued under the targeted inspection program, with more than 800. A breakdown for violations involving other railroads was not available.

Union Pacific agreed to increase its inspection frequencies following the Mosier derailment under an agreement with federal regulators who said the railroad's inspection program was too lax.

Union Pacific spokeswoman Calli Hite said the railroad shares the Federal Railroad Administration's dedication to safety and safety compliance.

"Union Pacific has always paid close attention to track conditions and inspections," Hite said.

Most violations were found in the months after the inspection program began in January 2015 in the

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U.S. Southwest, where officials said Union Pacific runs a majority of the oil trains. In many cases, violation recommendations came after the railroad did not respond quickly enough to problems found by inspectors, said Marc Willis, a spokesman for the railroad administration.

Subsequent inspections turned up thousands of additional safety problems but far fewer recommendations for violations.

That was because the high number of violation recommendations for Union Pacific sent a message to the entire industry to quickly address any issue raised by inspectors, officials said.

"Railroads are paying closer attention," Willis said, adding that derailments have fallen 10 percent since the inspection program began. "Although many minor defects still are being identified ... both FRA and railroad inspectors are finding fewer serious conditions, resulting in significant safety improvements."

It's uncertain whether the targeted inspection program for oil trains will continue under the Trump administration, he said.

Since 2006, the United States and Canada have seen at least 27 oil train accidents involving a fire, derailment or significant fuel spill. Besides the targeted inspection program, U.S. and Canadian officials have responded with more stringent construction standards for tens of thousands of tank cars that haul oil and other flammable liquids.

The amount of oil moving by rail peaked in 2014 then dropped after crude prices collapsed. Major railroads reported moving more than 43,000 carloads of crude in the fourth quarter of 2016, down almost 50 percent from a year earlier, according to the railroad association.

Follow Matthew Brown on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/matthewbrownap>

Investigators search suspected Russian suicide bomber's home

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia (AP) — Investigators say they have searched the home of the suspected suicide bomber behind Monday's deadly explosion on the St. Petersburg subway.

The bomb went off on a train under Russia's second-largest city on Monday, killing 14 people and injuring dozens. Investigators said they suspect a 22-year old Kyrgyz-born Russian citizen, Akbardzhon Dzhaliilov, of having detonated the bomb.

The Investigative Committee said in a statement in the early hours on Wednesday that the investigators searched the man's home in St. Petersburg. They also examined CCTV footage from outside Dzhaliilov's home which shows him leave home with a bag and a backpack.

Another bomb, hidden in a bag, was found and de-activated at another St. Petersburg station just half an hour before the blast. Dzhaliilov's DNA was found on the bag.

Mayor who led Ferguson through turmoil is re-elected

By JIM SALTER, Associated Press

FERGUSON, Mo. (AP) — Ferguson, Missouri, voters opted for experience over change in re-electing a mayor who has led them through a tumultuous 32 months since the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown thrust the St. Louis suburb into the national debate over race.

James Knowles III won a third term, holding off a challenge Tuesday from city Councilwoman Ella Jones, who was seeking to become the St. Louis suburb's first-ever black mayor. It will be Knowles' final term in office, due to term limits.

Ferguson voters also approved a ballot measure adding strict police body camera requirements to the city charter. Officers already use cameras, but the new policy will require them to be on virtually all the time and seeks to make footage more accessible to the public.

Knowles, 37 and a lifelong Ferguson resident, was first elected as a councilman at age 25, and was just

31 when he was elected mayor. Jones, 62, a retired Mary Kay executive, was elected to the council in 2015, her first elected position.

Ferguson was thrust into the national consciousness after white police officer Darren Wilson fatally shot Brown on Aug. 9, 2014. The shooting of the unarmed, black 18-year-old led to months of sometimes violent protests and was a catalyst for the "Black Lives Matter" movement. Wilson was cleared of wrongdoing and resigned in November 2014.

But the investigation led to a U.S. Justice Department lawsuit over racially-biased police and court practices. A settlement calls for significant changes in operations — sensitivity training for officers, adoption of community policing techniques, court reforms, and other measures.

The process is expected to cost more than \$2 million and could take years. However, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced Monday that he'll review the effectiveness of existing and proposed consent decrees, including Ferguson's.

Knowles told The Associated Press he has had no contact with anyone at the Department of Justice.

"Nobody's talked to us," Knowles said. "We're not asking to have it changed."

Knowles said Ferguson has "voluntarily made a tremendous amount of reforms in our police department. We're not going back on those reforms."

Gary Kemp, a 68-year-old retiree, said he voted for Knowles because he's been a strong leader in the toughest of circumstances.

"He's led us through some difficult times," Kemp said. "We have faith that he's totally invested in Ferguson and he'll lead us through these difficult hours."

Ferguson officers have used body cameras since a few weeks after Brown was shot, when two companies donated cameras. But critics cite flaws, including too many cases when the cameras aren't on, limited public access to the footage, and a policy that allows officers to review footage before filing reports.

The ballot measure requires officers to have the cameras on virtually all the time, forces the city to maintain body camera video for at least two years, and makes footage from public places widely available. There is no estimate of the cost of the changes, Knowles said, but both mayoral candidates supported the measure.

Border turns quiet under Trump amid steep drop in arrests

By NOMAAN MERCHANT, Associated Press

MCCALLEN, Texas (AP) — Just five people were eating dinner on a recent weeknight at a Texas church that is a stopping point for newly arrived immigrants on the U.S.-Mexico border. On a typical night last year, hundreds of immigrants might come through the church.

Immigrants who are still coming say many people in their home countries are staying home amid fears about President Donald Trump's immigration rhetoric, putting off coming to the U.S. until they see how his policies play out.

"There are mothers who heard that Trump might change the law to remove parents and keep the children here," said Jose Gonzalez, a 29-year-old father of two from El Salvador. "That stopped a lot of people."

The first months of the new administration have seen a huge drop in the number of people being caught by agents on the U.S.-Mexico border, raising the possibility that a "Trump effect" is keeping migrants away.

Fewer than 12,500 people were caught at the southern border in March, the lowest monthly figure in at least 17 years and the second straight month that border arrests dropped sharply. Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly, in testimony submitted to a Senate committee, called the decline "no accident" and credited Trump.

But those working in shelters and experts on migration say it will take several more months to judge whether any drop-off is lasting, and that the numbers could surge again as quickly as they've fallen.

Trump's vows to step up deportations and build his signature border wall were widely spread in Central America, according to three migrants who recently arrived in Texas and spoke to the Associated Press. Kelly also announced last month that authorities might start separating adults and children crossing the

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border, to deter families from trying to enter the U.S.

For years, tens of thousands of migrants every month would cross the United States' southern border. Traffic has surged in recent years of people crossing into Texas from three Central American countries torn by gang violence and poverty: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Former President Barack Obama's administration also publicized deportations and tried to dissuade Central Americans from heading north, particularly during the 2014 surge of families and children traveling alone to cross the border. Officials took credit when border arrests fell during his tenure, only to see the numbers rise again.

Some think the real "Trump effect" was pushing fearful people to move up their journeys and get to the U.S. before he took office. Border arrests in October, November and December increased by about a third compared to the same period in 2015, before falling this year.

"The election and the possibility that the wall, everything was going to happen, encouraged them to come now," said Sister Norma Pimentel, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, which operates the shelter at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in McAllen.

Trump focused on the constant flow of migrants from the start of his campaign, when he denounced border crossers as criminals and rapists, and repeatedly promised to build a wall and step up deportations. His administration has started taking bids to build a wall and requested funding for more immigration judges and Border Patrol agents.

Most agree Trump's statements affected migrant traffic. Four shelters along the Texas portion of the border, where most crossers enter the United States, say they've seen their numbers fall to a fraction of what they were seeing late last year. And La 72, a shelter near the Mexico-Guatemala border, saw its numbers in February and March fall by nearly half compared to the same months in 2016, suggesting that fewer people are leaving Central America.

Traffickers that operate in cartel-dominated parts of Mexico, known as "coyotes," were rumored to use the American election as a marketing tool. Rumors spread that if Democrat Hillary Clinton won, would-be migrants were told to make it to the U.S. ahead of the election to get a free pass to stay in the country. And if Trump won, they should rush north before he could build a border wall.

Higher demand allowed the smugglers to charge more to get to the U.S. last year, according to Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, a professor at the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley.

Experts say they want to see if migrant numbers stay low during the summer months, when migration generally rises. Those who have long worked with migrants predict that as long as parts of Central America remain in turmoil, people will try to head north — whether or not the U.S. builds a wall or separates migrant parents and children.

"If things get worse in their countries, and the situation with gangs does not get better, we will see them come," Pimentel said.

Gonzalez said he left El Salvador because he feared the gangs and the constant threat of being robbed or attacked. Relatives in the United States lent him \$15,000 to hire a smuggler for him and his children, ages 10 and 8. They rode in buses and a trailer through Mexico before safely sneaking across the Rio Grande in a month-long journey.

Sitting at Sacred Heart last month, Gonzalez and his children finished bowls of soup and waited for a bus to take them west toward relatives in California.

He hoped that if even if he was deported, his children would be allowed to stay and go to school, while he tried to come back.

"You're conscious of taking that risk coming here," Gonzalez said. "But it's a risk you take to make things better for your family."

Associated Press writers Juan A. Lozano and Christopher Sherman contributed to this report.

Brazil's shy 'Car Wash' judge is loved and loathed celebrity

By PETER PRENGAMAN, Associated Press

CURITIBA, Brazil (AP) — A shy federal judge based in a provincial capital has become an unlikely celebrity in Brazil, where he is shaking up the nation's power structure while overseeing what may be the largest corruption probe in Latin American history.

Passers-by mostly cheer — but sometimes jeer — Sergio Moro when he goes into restaurants. Concertgoers break into applause when performers point him out in the audience. Tourists are bused in to gawk at the office where he works in the Parana state capital of Curitiba.

Many Brazilians see the 44-year-old judge as a hero who is cleaning up a nation plagued by corruption, while critics accuse him of unfairly targeting figures from the leftist Workers Party government that led the country from 2003 until mid-2016.

Over the past three years, Moro has been instrumental in the so-called Car Wash probe that already has sent dozens of top businessmen and politicians to jail and is still expanding.

"The Car Wash investigation could not have just one hero. There are judges, prosecutors, detectives," said Igor Romario, the lead federal police investigator on the case. "But Moro is the center of it. Without him, we wouldn't be where we are."

Friends, colleagues and journalists who have covered the case closely say Moro is a deeply private man — a law wonk who voraciously pores over legal cases in several languages.

He's noted for writing meticulous legal decisions — much faster than most Brazilian judges do — that are rarely overturned by higher courts.

"We are talking about the best lawyers, the most influential people in Brazil going up against Moro" in court, said Vladimir Netto, a journalist for Globo News who wrote a definitive book on the case. "These guys are used to always winning, but they have not this time."

He's also known as a stickler for even minor rules.

While teaching in 1996, he warned law student Rosangela Wolff de Quadros that she'd be marked absent and might flunk his course if she skipped a Friday night seminar to attend a friend's wedding.

"I detested him. Detested," Quadros told Netto for his book, "Car Wash."

A few years later, when Moro was no longer teaching, the two began dating and wed. Today they have two children.

That unforgiving streak has led to less happy outcomes for defendants.

Moro is famed for prying information out of suspects by imposing lengthy pre-trial detentions and prodding them into plea bargains that implicate higher-ups. That has helped turn what initially appeared to be a routine money-laundering case into a mega-scandal.

The investigation launched in March 2014 and exploded later that year when Paulo Roberto Costa, a top executive at state oil company Petrobras, and Alberto Yousseff, who delivered huge sums of money to politicians and others, cut plea deals that unveiled the depth of the corruption.

Piece by piece, Moro and a team of investigators revealed that top officials in construction companies such as Odebrecht, OAS and Andrade Gutierrez effectively formed a cartel handing out multi-billion dollar contracts that were inflated to pay kickbacks and bribes to scores of politicians.

Moro rarely grants interviews and he declined to comment for this story.

The son of two teachers, Moro grew up in Maringa, a city about 265 miles (425 kilometers) northwest of Curitiba in southwestern Brazil.

After graduating in law from Maringa State University, Moro began working as a federal judge in 1996 while also earning a doctorate and participating in an exchange program for lawyers at Harvard University.

Presiding over several money-laundering cases, Moro gained expertise with white-collar crime, and he took a particular interest in a massive corruption probe in Italy that ensnared many politicians there in the early 1990s.

In a 2004 article for a legal journal, Moro noted the way Italian judges used plea bargains to advance investigations, keeping suspects in jail while their cases were processed and taking advantage of news

media to shape public opinion.

"Leaks serve a useful purpose," wrote Moro. "The constant flow of revelations keeps public interest up and party leaders on the defensive."

Today, many legal experts see that article as a blueprint for his management of the Car Wash probe.

Critics in the highly polarized country often accuse Moro of taking sides.

Last year, he was sharply criticized for releasing a wiretapped conversation showing then-President Dilma Rousseff discussing the details of a chief of staff job for her mentor, former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. That appointment, eventually blocked, would have removed Silva from Moro's jurisdiction because only the Supreme Court can decide whether to prosecute elected federal officials and Cabinet members.

Moro defended the move in his legal decision, writing that "democracy in a free society requires that the governed know what their governors are doing, even when they seek to act within the protections of the shadows."

And Moro's judgments have hit those across the political gamut. Last week, he sentenced Eduardo Cunha, the former speaker of the lower Chamber of Deputies who led the impeachment push against Rousseff, to 15 years in prison.

Moro's prominence has earned him numerous international awards, but he appears more put off by the fame than moved by it. His daily life is like it always was — though now with bodyguards. He jogs at a park, has long days at work and his home life centers around family and a very small group of friends.

"It's hard to know who is close to him," said Christianne Machiavelli, head of the press department of the federal courthouse in Curitiba, where Moro works. "His private life is very separated from his work life."

Curitiba, however, is proud to claim him. Many in the city of 1.7 million have lawn signs and banners supporting the investigation and the judge. Interest in the case is so great that a tourism agency has begun offering tours that show the building where Moro works, art work that has been seized in Car Wash raids and the jail that houses suspects.

"Tourists often express their hope that Brazil is changing," said Bibiana Antonicomi, director of the tour company Special Parana. "When the investigation started, it was unimaginable that rich and powerful people would be arrested."

Court: Civil Rights law prohibits discrimination of LGBT

By MICHAEL TARM, AP Legal Affairs Writer

CHICAGO (AP) — A federal appeals court ruled for the first time Tuesday that the 1964 Civil Rights Act protects LGBT employees from workplace discrimination, setting up a likely battle before the Supreme Court as gay rights advocates push to broaden the scope of the 53-year-old law.

The 8-to-3 decision by the full 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Chicago comes just three weeks after a three-judge panel in Atlanta ruled the opposite, saying employers aren't prohibited from discriminating against employees based on sexual orientation.

The 7th Circuit is considered relatively conservative and five of the eight judges in the majority were appointed by Republican presidents, making the finding all the more notable.

The case stems from a lawsuit by Indiana teacher Kimberly Hively alleging that the Ivy Tech Community College in South Bend didn't hire her full time because she is a lesbian.

In an opinion concurring with the majority, Judge Richard Posner wrote that changing norms call for a change in interpretation of the Civil Rights Act, which bars discrimination based on race, color, religion, national origin or sex.

"I don't see why firing a lesbian because she is in the subset of women who are lesbian should be thought any less a form of sex discrimination than firing a woman because she's a woman," wrote the judge, who was appointed by Republican Ronald Reagan.

The decision comes as President Donald Trump's administration has begun setting its own policies on

LGBT rights. Late in January, the White House declared Trump would enforce an Obama administration order barring companies that do federal work from workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual identity. But in February, it revoked guidance on transgender students' use of public school bathrooms, deferring to states.

Hively said after Tuesday's ruling that she agreed to bring the case because she felt she was being "bullied." She told The Associated Press in a telephone interview that the time has come "to stop punishing people for being gay, being lesbian, being transgender."

"This decision is game changer for lesbian and gay employees facing discrimination in the workplace and sends a clear message to employers: it is against the law to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation," said Greg Nevins, of Lambda Legal, which brought the case on behalf of Hively.

Ivy Tech said in a statement that its policies specifically bar discrimination based on sexual orientation and that it denies discriminating against Hively, a factual question separate from the 7th Circuit's finding regarding the law.

The Chicago ruling came on the anniversary of the assassination of civil rights icon Martin Luther King, whose marches against racism prompted Congress to pass the landmark civil law. A GOP-majority House and Senate make it unlikely the current Congress will amend the Civil Rights Act, likely leaving it for the Supreme Court to decide.

Debate in the Hively case revolved around the meaning of the word 'sex' in Title VII, the section of the law that deals with discrimination. Other courts have concluded that Congress meant for the word to refer only to whether a worker was male or female. They said that it would be wrong to stretch the meaning of 'sex' in the statute to include sexual orientation.

The majority of the 7th Circuit sided with a broader meaning.

"Any discomfort, disapproval, or job decision based on the fact that the complainant — woman or man — dresses differently, speaks differently, or dates or marries a same-sex partner, is a reaction purely and simply based on sex. That means that it falls within Title VII's prohibition against sex discrimination ...," Judge Diane Wood, a President Bill Clinton appointee, wrote for the majority.

The dissenting opinion — written by Judge Diane Sykes, a conservative who was on Trump's list of possible Supreme Court appointees — said the majority were stretching the meaning of the law's text too far.

"We are not authorized to infuse the text with a new or unconventional meaning or to update it to respond to changed social, economic, or political conditions."

The dissent alludes to the judicial philosophy of Trump's high-court nominee, Neil Gorsuch, who advocates adhering largely to original legislative texts in deciding legal disputes.

"It's understandable that the court is impatient to protect lesbians and gay men from workplace discrimination without waiting for Congress to act. Legislative change is arduous and can be slow to come. But we're not authorized to amend Title VII by interpretation," Sykes wrote.

Posner, though, said sticking to outdated meanings and cultural standards didn't make sense.

"It is well-nigh certain that homosexuality, male or female, did not figure in the minds of the legislators who enacted Title VII," he wrote in his concurring opinion.

"(Lawmakers in the 1960s) shouldn't be blamed for that failure of foresight," he wrote. "We understand the words of Title VII differently not because we're smarter than the statute's framers and ratifiers but because we live in a different era, a different culture."

Cowboys QB Tony Romo retiring, replacing Phil Simms at CBS

By SCHUYLER DIXON, AP Sports Writer

DALLAS (AP) — Tony Romo couldn't bring himself to use the word "retired" and didn't have an answer for whether he would have decided to replace another former quarterback in Phil Simms as lead analyst for CBS if he hadn't lost his starting job in Dallas.

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This much Romo did know: Teams were interested in him continuing his chase for an elusive Super Bowl, and he couldn't pass up a chance to go straight from the field to a No. 1 booth with Emmy Award-winning play-by-play man Jim Nantz.

"It reminds me of my rookie year where you really don't know anything," Romo said. "You're walking into a brand new situation and you can kinda play the game. I can kinda talk. But this is a completely different world. I like that challenge."

Romo's release by the Cowboys and his deal with CBS were announced simultaneously Tuesday — roughly four weeks later than Dallas owner Jerry Jones told the franchise passing leader he would turn him loose to pursue other teams.

The delay gave Romo time to consider his future after two injury-filled seasons, which cost him the job he had for 10 years when rookie Dak Prescott directed a club-record 11-game winning streak after Romo's preseason back injury. It was his fourth back injury since 2013.

Now the married father of two young boys with a third child on the way has chosen the path taken by two former Dallas quarterbacks — Don Meredith of "Monday Night Football" fame and three-time Super Bowl winner and Hall of Famer Troy Aikman, the lead analyst for Fox since 2002.

"It wasn't a simple decision," said Romo, who will work Thursday night and Sunday games. "It got easier when I started to really get excited about working with CBS. That part of it got the juices flowing and started to get you excited to be a part of a team and go attack a craft."

As for that retirement thing, Romo left little doubt that his playing days were likely over while also saying there was "absolutely interest" from other teams.

Romo said his personal list was topped by Houston, which has unproven Tom Savage as the starter after dumping high-priced Brock Osweiler in a trade following one less-than-impressive season.

"I could play tomorrow. I'm making this decision with the choice to be able to play as well," said Romo, who turns 37 this month.

"Do I envision coming back and playing football? Absolutely not. I'm committed to CBS for good. Do I think I'm going to get some calls? I'm sure I will."

The four-time Pro Bowler who rose to stardom after going undrafted in 2003 out of lower-division Eastern Illinois is the franchise leader with 34,183 yards passing and 248 touchdowns. He's fourth all-time in passer rating (97.1).

But Romo never parlayed his regular-season success into deep playoff runs the way Roger Staubach and Aikman did before him, going 78-49 as the starter but 2-4 in the postseason, with no road victories and no trips to the NFC championship game.

Romo said his release was a financial consideration — he would have had to repay a portion of his signing bonus upon retirement — and he praised Jones despite the sudden change of plans when free agency opened early last month.

"As an organization, we did what he asked us to do in terms of his release, and we wanted to do what was ultimately in his best interest and in the best interest of his family," Jones said. "He is a young man who is just getting started on a long journey in life. All the best, my friend."

CBS Sports Chairman Sean McManus said the network planned to keep Simms and was working on finding another role for their lead analyst the past 19 seasons.

McManus said he first thought Romo had promise in that role after Romo gave him a breakdown of the New England-Seattle matchup during a Super Bowl party before the Patriots beat the Seahawks two years ago. He called Romo's sudden ascension a "very manageable risk."

"Will he be better Week 6 than he is Week 1? Yes he will be," McManus said. "Will he be better in Year 2 than he is in Year 1? Yes. But if we didn't have the faith in Tony, we didn't have the faith in the fact that he can be an outstanding analyst, we wouldn't be taking this risk."

Ultimately, Romo said he didn't trust himself to meet with teams that might view him as the missing piece for a Super Bowl title.

"I've known my nature and I've known my competitive side," said Romo, whose departure has been expected since a November speech conceding the Dallas job to Prescott. "And if I get in front of some of

these teams, I'm going to be enticed to really want to go to play."

Romo, who was signed through 2019, had a \$14 million base salary and a \$24.7 million salary cap hit for the Cowboys this season. The release will reduce Dallas' cap hit to about \$19 million, split roughly in half over two seasons.

His final play was a 3-yard touchdown pass to Terrance Williams in a meaningless regular-season finale at Philadelphia last season. His last snap in a home regular-season game was the last of three broken collarbones sustained in his career, on Thanksgiving in 2015 against Carolina.

Along with family, health and the chance to star at CBS right away, Romo acknowledged that finishing his career with another team weighed on him.

"I'm a Dallas Cowboy. I understand that," Romo said. "I really like to think that some guys have done it exactly right. Others probably wish they could do things a little bit different. There's a handful of guys that just get lucky and everything works out perfectly."

For Romo, the first Super Bowl figures to be in the booth when it's CBS' turn again in 2019.

For more NFL coverage: <http://www.pro32.ap.org> and http://www.twitter.com/AP_NFL

Poll: Most young people say gov't should pay for health care

By LAURIE KELLMAN and EMILY SWANSON, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Most young Americans want any health care overhaul under President Donald Trump to look a lot like the Affordable Care Act signed into law by his predecessor, President Barack Obama.

But there's one big exception: A majority of young Americans dislike "Obamacare's" requirement that all Americans buy insurance or pay a fine.

A GenForward poll says a majority of people ages 18 to 30 think the federal government should be responsible for making sure Americans have health insurance. It suggests most young Americans won't be content with a law offering "access" to coverage, as Trump and Republicans in Congress proposed in doomed legislation they dropped March 24. The Trump administration is talking this week of somehow reviving the legislation.

Conducted Feb. 16 through March 6, before the collapse of the GOP bill, the poll shows that 63 percent of young Americans approve of the Obama-era health care law. It did not measure reactions to the Republican proposal.

The most popular element of the law is allowing young adults to stay on their parents' insurance until age 26, which is favored by 75 percent of 18-30 year olds. It's not just that they personally benefit — an Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll conducted in January found that provision was equally popular among all adults. That proposal was included in the failed GOP overhaul.

But the Republican plan also contained provisions that most young Americans — the racially diverse electorate of the future — do not support, according to the poll. Two-thirds of young people agree with a smaller majority of Americans overall that the government should make sure people have health care coverage. And they understand that will cost more: Sixty-three percent want the government to increase spending to help people afford insurance.

Those feelings cut across racial lines and include most whites, who formed the base of Trump's political support in the presidential election.

"I do believe the government should offer it because we pay taxes," said Rachel Haney, 27, of Tempe, Arizona. "I do feel like it's a right."

GenForward is a survey of adults age 18 to 30 by the Black Youth Project at the University of Chicago with the AP-NORC Center. The poll pays special attention to the voices of young adults of color, highlighting how race and ethnicity shape the opinions of a new generation.

Only about a quarter of young people want "Obamacare" repealed. That includes 16 percent of young adults who want it repealed and replaced as Trump has vowed and another 10 percent who want it re-

pealed without a replacement.

Just over a third of young whites want to see the law repealed, making them more likely than those of other racial and ethnic groups to say so.

"He just wants to protect us from al-Qaida, and terrorism," said Kervin Dorsainvil, 18, a computer technician from Port Charlotte, Florida. "I feel like health care should be much higher on the list. I feel like we have the resources, the medical technology and everything in place to provide the health care to the people. So why wouldn't we do that?"

Young people are more likely than Americans overall to say the government should make sure people have health care. A recent AP-NORC poll of U.S. adults, conducted during and after the collapse of the GOP proposal, found just 52 percent called it a federal government responsibility to make sure all Americans have coverage.

Despite their overall approval of "Obamacare," young Americans' views on the law aren't all rosy. Just a third say the law is working relatively well, while another third think the health care policy has serious problems. About 2 in 10 consider the law to be fatally flawed.

The law's requirement that all Americans buy insurance or pay a fine is opposed by 54 percent of young people and favored by just 28 percent.

On the other hand, 71 percent favor the law's Medicaid expansion, 66 percent of young adults favor the prohibition on denying people coverage because of a person's medical history, 65 percent favor requiring insurance plans to cover the full cost of birth control, 63 percent favor requiring most employers to pay a fine if they don't offer insurance and 53 percent favor paying for benefit increases with higher payroll taxes for higher earners.

About a quarter of young adults say they personally have insurance through their parents, while another 1 in 10 have purchased insurance through an exchange.

The poll of 1,833 adults age 18-30 was conducted using a sample drawn from the probability-based GenForward panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. young adult population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4 percentage points.

The survey was paid for by the Black Youth Project at the University of Chicago, using grants from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

Respondents were first selected randomly using address-based sampling methods, and later interviewed online or by phone.

Online:

GenForward polls: <http://www.genforwardsurvey.com/>

Black Youth Project: <http://blackyouthproject.com/>

AP-NORC: <http://www.apnorc.org/>

NCAA 'reluctantly' agrees to let North Carolina host events

By AARON BEARD, AP Basketball Writer

GLENDALE, Ariz. (AP) — The NCAA has "reluctantly" agreed to consider North Carolina as a host for championship events again after the state rolled back a law that limited protections for LGBT people.

The governing body said Tuesday its Board of Governors had reviewed moves to repeal the "bathroom bill" and replace it with a compromise law. The NCAA offered a lukewarm endorsement, saying the new law "meets the minimal NCAA requirements."

The organization had been a key opponent of the original law. Its events carry major economic power: The North Carolina Sports Association had estimated more than \$250 million in potential losses from 130 event bids submitted to the NCAA.

The NCAA statement said a majority of the board "reluctantly voted" to allow for consideration of bids

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from North Carolina during current deliberations for sites running through 2022. Events for the 2017-18 season that have already been awarded to the state — such as opening-weekend men's basketball tournament games in Charlotte — will remain in place.

"We are actively determining site selections, and this new law has minimally achieved a situation where we believe NCAA championships may be conducted in a nondiscriminatory environment," the statement said. "If we find that our expectations of a discrimination-free environment are not met, we will not hesitate to take necessary action at any time."

The NCAA pulled seven events from the state in September for the 2016-17 season, including men's basketball tournament games from Greensboro in March. Those games were moved to Greenville, South Carolina, which had been banned from hosting events for years before that was lifted following the removal of a Confederate flag from state capitol grounds in 2015.

The NCAA's North Carolina ban didn't affect teams that earn home-court advantage during the season, such as the Duke women's team hosting NCAA tournament games in March.

The NBA will discuss whether to bring the 2019 All-Star Game to Charlotte at its Board of Governors meeting this week, according to a person with knowledge of the plans. The league moved this year's game from Charlotte to New Orleans because of the law.

That person told The Associated Press that the NBA board was already planning to discuss the matter at its meeting Thursday, though it's not known if a decision will be made. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the board's agenda is not publicized.

The Atlantic Coast Conference also pulled 10 neutral-site events from the state, including moving the football championship game from Charlotte to Orlando, Florida. The conference said after the compromise was reached its upcoming events would remain in place and the football title game would return to Charlotte.

The NCAA had made clear that more events already awarded to the state could be relocated, while also saying it would remove North Carolina bids from consideration as it prepared to announce its next wave of site announcements.

But Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper signed the compromise bill Thursday to repeal elements of the law after passage by the state legislature earlier in the day even while saying it wasn't a perfect solution. That came days after the NCAA said the state was down to its final days to get something done.

Cooper, who signed the replacement bill last week, said it was clear that the NCAA had wanted a complete repeal of House Bill 2, as did he. But Cooper has said the new law was the best compromise he could get given the Republicans' veto-proof majorities in the legislature.

The replacement bill eliminated a requirement that transgender people use restrooms corresponding to the sex on their birth certificates in many public buildings. The new law says only state legislators — not local governments or school officials — can make rules for public restrooms.

The original bill also invalidated any local ordinances protecting gay or transgender people from discrimination in the workplace or in public accommodations. The compromise prohibits local governments from enacting any new such protections until December 2020.

"We are glad that the NCAA is going to come back to North Carolina and join us in fighting for more protections and for more ways to keep people from being discriminated against," Cooper told reporters Tuesday.

Asked about the NCAA's tepid statement, Cooper said NCAA leaders still "recognized the progress in this legislation and they recognized that even though it wasn't everything they wanted, that it was enough for them to come back and to join us in the fight to help to continue to improve our laws so people can be protected from discrimination."

Republican House Speaker Tim Moore and Senate leader Phil Berger said in a statement they are "pleased with the NCAA's decision and acknowledgment that our compromise legislation 'restores the state to a landscape similar to other jurisdictions presently hosting NCAA championships.'"

The NCAA move drew immediate criticism from LGBT rights groups Human Rights Campaign and Equality NC, with HRC president Chad Griffin saying the NCAA "simply let North Carolina lawmakers off the hook."

"It is disappointing to see the NCAA backpedal after it stood strong against the deeply discriminatory HB2," Equality NC executive director Chris Sgro said in a statement. "HB142 continues the same discrimi-

natory scheme put forward by HB2 and does little to protect the NCAA's players, employees, and fans. The NCAA's decision has put a seal of approval on state-sanctioned discrimination."

The North Carolina Values Coalition, a socially conservative group that pushed to preserve HB2, said it was pleased with the NCAA's move but accused the sports organization of "bullying" the state into repealing HB2.

"The NCAA's boycott of North Carolina achieved what it wanted — the repeal of HB2 — proving that bullying works as long as you meet the demands of the bully," said Tami Fitzgerald, executive director of the coalition. "However, the NCAA had no business demanding anything of North Carolina lawmakers."

AP Basketball Writer Brian Mahoney in New York and Associated Press writer Gary Robertson in Raleigh contributed to this report.

More AP college basketball:

<http://collegebasketball.ap.org> and http://www.twitter.com/AP_Top25

VA defends work to fix troubled veteran suicide hotline

By HOPE YEN, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Grilled by lawmakers, the Department of Veterans Affairs insisted Tuesday it was well on its way to fixing problems with its suicide hotline and largely brushed aside the worst criticisms in an internal watchdog report released two weeks ago.

A March 20 audit by the VA inspector general had found that nearly a third of calls to the Veterans Crisis Line as recently as November were bounced to backup centers run by an outside contractor, as well as other problems including weak leadership and inadequate data to measure the quality of calls. The rollover calls happen when phone lines are busy, leading to possible waits of 30 minutes or more.

It was an early test for new VA Secretary David Shulkin, who has made suicide prevention a signature issue at the troubled agency, riven with scandal in recent years since reports of delays in treatment at veterans' hospitals.

Approximately 20 veterans take their lives each day. Testifying before a House panel, Steve Young, VA's deputy undersecretary for health for operations and management, pointed to a dramatic turnaround in calls answered by the hotline since November. He said it was now a "rare instance" that calls are bumped to a backup center and that calls are answered by live counselors within 8 seconds, on average.

The crisis hotline "is the strongest it has been since its inception in 2007," Young told the House Veterans Affairs Committee.

But pressed by lawmakers, the VA acknowledged it was still working to make other improvements it had promised to do by last September. It pledged to beef up quality control and hire a new permanent director as soon as possible.

"Fulfilling the IG's recommendations is a key step in raising the bar," Young said.

Shulkin, who previously served as VA's top health official, has previously described the issue as resolved. "Fixing the Veterans Crisis Line was a critical step in keeping our commitment to veterans," he said in a March 21 statement.

Lawmakers were unconvinced.

Minnesota Rep. Tim Walz, the top Democrat on the House panel, pointed to "re-occurring issues we see time and time again at VA." For more than a year, the crisis hotline has operated without a permanent director and has yet to issue a policy handbook.

"I would be very careful in saying you fixed the problems," Walz warned.

Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tenn., a physician who chairs the House committee, questioned whether the VA intended to fully implement reforms after repeated promises. "There is very clearly a need for more to be done — and soon — so that we can be assured that every veteran or family member who contacts the VCL gets

the urgent help he or she needs every single time.”

According to internal VA data, calls to the Veterans Crisis Line that rolled over to backup centers steadily declined from 31 percent in early November, to just 0.1 percent as of March 25. That came despite growing workloads in which weekly calls to the hotline jumped from 10,558 in November to 13,966 last month, the VA said.

As recently as mid-December, when the IG was finalizing its audit, the share of rollover calls had declined close to the VA’s goal of 10 percent. That figure dropped to less than 1 percent by early January, according to the VA.

VA inspector general Michael Missal said he cannot confirm the most recent VA data, and stressed that it was vital that the Veterans Health Administration follow through on proposed reforms dating back to February 2016. “Until VHA implements fully these recommendations, they will continue to have challenges,” Missal said.

Launched in 2007, the crisis hotline has answered nearly 2.8 million calls and dispatched emergency services more than 74,000 times. Featured in a documentary that won an Oscar in 2015, it later received negative attention after its former director reported frequent rollovers due to poor work habits. Last year, Congress passed a law requiring that all calls and messages to the hotline be answered in a timely manner.

The most recent problems appear to stem from the VA’s opening of a second call center last October.

Spurred by veterans’ complaints, the IG said the department launched a follow-up review to its February 2016 audit. Instead, it found many rollover calls, due in part to the VA’s decision to divert some staff from its upstate New York call center to help train new workers in Atlanta.

The IG suggested the Atlanta center was slow in becoming operational, but the VA says that rollover calls in fact began to fall significantly as workers became trained.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars organization said it worried the VA sometimes focuses too much on metrics — the number of calls received and handled.

“The VFW believes that while the number of calls going to backup centers decreasing at such a rapid rate is a positive, it is not a sign of the quality of work being provided,” said Kayda Keleher, VFW’s legislative associate.

Follow Hope Yen on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/hopeyen1>

More advertisers say they have ditched Fox’s O’Reilly show

By TALI ARBEL, AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Bill O’Reilly’s top-rated Fox News show may be starting to feel a financial sting after allegations that he sexually harassed several women.

A dozen major advertisers, ranging from automakers Hyundai and BMW, to financial firm T. Rowe Price, insurer Allstate and drugmaker GlaxoSmithKline, have pulled their ads from “The O’Reilly Factor.”

The moves come after a weekend report in The New York Times that O’Reilly and his employer paid five women \$13 million to settle harassment or other allegations of inappropriate conduct by Fox’s star.

O’Reilly is Fox News’ top revenue producer, according to research firm Kantar Media, bringing in over \$178 million in ad dollars in 2015 and \$118.6 million in the first nine months of 2016.

Fox News itself makes up one-fifth of parent company 21st Century Fox’s profit, according to estimates from Anthony DiClemente, a media analyst with the Nomura investment bank.

The advertiser boycotts, however, are likely manageable for Fox, said Pivotal Research Group analyst Brian Wieser in a note Tuesday.

Wieser noted some advertisers had already decided to stay away following the sexual harassment scandals of the network’s departed head, Roger Ailes, and newly concerned companies will wind up on other Fox News programs. Even if O’Reilly were forced to leave the network if the scandal broadened, the channel’s brand is bigger than its hosts, he said.

The other companies pulling ads Tuesday were automaker Mitsubishi, personal finance site Credit Karma,

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drugmaker Sanofi, pet food company Ainsworth, men's shirt seller Untuckit, and online marketing firm Constant Contact. They joined Mercedes Benz, which said Monday it was backing away from O'Reilly's show.

Hyundai said it currently has no ads on "The O'Reilly Factor," but it pulled spots on future episodes. The automaker said it wants to partner with companies and programming that share its values of inclusion and diversity.

BMW said it suspended advertising on the show due to the recent allegations, as did T. Rowe Price, Sanofi, Ainsworth and Constant Contact. Allstate said support for women is a company value and it had also suspended advertising on the show.

GlaxoSmithKline said it had "temporarily put a hold" on ads on O'Reilly's show while it reviews the situation.

A Mercedes-Benz spokesman said Monday night that the company had pulled ads from O'Reilly's show and reassigned them to other Fox News shows. Sanofi and Untuckit have the same plan. BMW said it wasn't sure where it would place its ads instead.

In a statement, Fox News said that advertisers who pulled their ads would be directed to the network's other programs.

AP Autos Writer Tom Krisher contributed to this report.

Today in History By The Associated Press

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, April 5, the 95th day of 2017. There are 270 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 5, 1792, President George Washington cast his first veto, rejecting a congressional measure for apportioning representatives among the states.

On this date:

In 1621, the Mayflower sailed from Plymouth Colony in present-day Massachusetts on a monthlong return trip to England.

In 1867, the original version of the poem "Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight" was written by 16-year-old Rose Hartwick (later Thorpe) under the title "Bessie and the Curfew."

In 1887, Anne Sullivan achieved a breakthrough as her 6-year-old deaf-blind pupil, Helen Keller, learned the meaning of the word "water" as spelled out in the Manual Alphabet. British historian Lord Acton wrote in a letter, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

In 1915, Jess Willard knocked out Jack Johnson in the 26th round of their fight in Havana, Cuba, to claim boxing's world heavyweight title.

In 1925, a tornado estimated at F-3 intensity struck northern Miami-Dade County, Florida, killing five people.

In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an executive order creating the Civilian Conservation Corps and an anti-hoarding order that effectively prohibited private ownership of gold.

In 1955, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill resigned his office for health reasons. Democrat Richard J. Daley was first elected mayor of Chicago, defeating Republican Robert E. Merriam.

In 1964, Army Gen. Douglas MacArthur died in Washington, D.C., at age 84.

In 1976, reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes died in Houston at age 70.

In 1986, two American servicemen and a Turkish woman were killed in the bombing of a West Berlin discotheque, an incident which prompted a U.S. air raid on Libya more than a week later.

In 1987, Fox Broadcasting Co. made its prime-time TV debut by airing the situation comedy "Married with Children" followed by "The Tracey Ullman Show," then repeating both premiere episodes two more times in the same evening.

In 1997, Allen Ginsberg, the counterculture guru who shattered conventions as poet laureate of the Beat

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Generation, died in New York City at age 70.

Ten years ago: A Greek cruise ship, the Sea Diamond, sank off an Aegean Sea island, forcing the evacuation of nearly 1,600 people; two French tourists went missing and were presumed to have drowned. FBI Special Agent Barry Lee Bush was accidentally shot and killed by a fellow agent as a stakeout team closed in on three suspected bank robbers in Readington, New Jersey. Darryl Stingley, a former New England Patriots player paralyzed during an on-field collision in 1978, died in Chicago at age 55.

Five years ago: President Barack Obama signed bipartisan jobs legislation intended to help small businesses and make it easier for startups to raise capital. Ferdinand Alexander Porsche, 76, grandson of the automaker's founder and developer of the Porsche 911, died in Salzburg, Austria. Guitar amplifying pioneer Jim Marshall, 88, died in Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, England. Barney McKenna, 72, the last original member of the Irish folk band The Dubliners, died in Dublin.

One year ago: The leak of millions of records on offshore accounts claimed its first high-profile political casualty as Iceland's prime minister, Sigmundur David Gunnlaugsson, stepped aside. Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant signed a law allowing religious groups and private businesses to deny services to gay and transgender people. R&B singer-songwriter Leon Haywood, 74, died in Los Angeles. UConn won an unprecedented fourth straight women's national championship, capping another perfect season by routing Syracuse 82-51.

Today's Birthdays: Movie producer Roger Corman is 91. Former U.S. Secretary of State and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell is 80. Country singer Tommy Cash is 77. Actor Michael Moriarty is 76. Pop singer Allan Clarke (The Hollies) is 75. Writer-director Peter Greenaway is 75. Actor Max Gail is 74. Actress Jane Asher is 71. Singer Agnetha (ag-NEE'-tah) Faltskog (ABBA) is 67. Actor Mitch Pileggi is 65. Singer-songwriter Peter Case is 63. Rock musician Mike McCready (Pearl Jam) is 51. Country singer Troy Gentry is 50. Singer Paula Cole is 49. Actress Krista Allen is 46. Country singer Pat Green is 45. Rapper-producer Pharrell (fa-REHL') Williams is 44. Rapper/producer Juicy J is 42. Actor Sterling K. Brown is 41. Country singer-musician Mike Eli (The Eli Young Band) is 36. Actress Hayley Atwell is 35. Actress Lily James is 28.

Thought for Today: "I know too much and not enough." — Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997).