

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, March 01, 2018 ~ Vol. 25 - No. 230 ~ 1 of 53



“Put your ear
down close to
your soul and
listen hard.”

- Anne Sexton

Chicken Soup
for the Soul

"From minor scratches to a complete rebuild . . . we can do it all"

NOW OPEN

Harris

Auto Body ABDN

**225 Brown County Hwy 19 South
Aberdeen: 605/725-4900**

Groton Prairie Mixed

Team Standings: Shih Tzus 9, Chipmunks 9, Cheetahs 9, Jackelopes 8, Coyotes 7, Foxes 6

Men's High Games: Brad Waage 220, Chris Kassube 205, Randy Stanley 203

Women's High Games: Darci Spanier 199, Vicki Walter 180, 174, Lori Wiley 173

Men's High Series: Brad Waage 593, Randy Stanley 535, Roger Colestock 530

Women's High Series: Darci Spanier 488, Vicki Walter 487, Lori Wiley 473

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Groton to host

"Round of 16" game

Groton Area will be hosting a "Round of 16" Class B Girls Basketball game in the Arena on Thursday, March 1st at 7pm. Warner will be playing Ipswich.

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

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

Activities association finalizes donor benefits

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — At its meeting on Wednesday, the South Dakota High School Activities Association Board of Directors approved a contract extension with one of its corporate sponsors and finalized the policy setting the benefits those sponsors will enjoy.

The board approved a five-year contract extension with Sanford Health. The contract calls for a yearly contribution of \$125,000.

The donation will be used to by the association to help member schools pay for catastrophic insurance. "They're clear on where this money is going," said SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos.

Last year corporate sponsors expressed an interest in switching their donations from the association to the SDHSAA Foundation, preferring to build the foundation's funds rather than contribute to the on-going expenses of the association and its member schools.

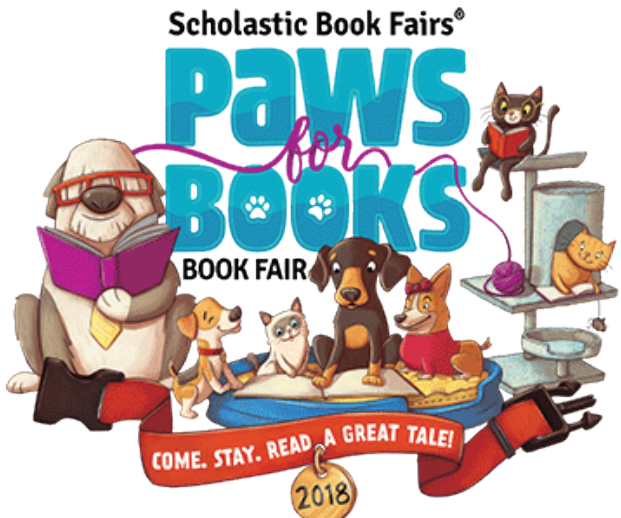
Swartos told the board that Sanford was continuing as a corporate sponsor for the association.

Other association corporate sponsors include First Premiere Bank/Premiere Bank Card, Farmers Union Insurance and the S.D. National Guard. Billion Auto makes an in-kind contribution of cars for the SDHSAA staff to use.

The benefits policy approved on Wednesday for corporate partners, contributing \$50,000 to \$125,000, allows from 12 to 20 tickets for state events, advertisements in event programs, logos on event-related clothing, help with trophy presentations and announcements on the public address system.

Foundation donors, with contributions ranging from \$10,000 to \$125,000, receive from four to 18 tickets, program advertisements and some game presentations.

—30—



Scholastic Book Fairs®
PAWS for BOOKS
BOOK FAIR
COME. STAY. READ. A GREAT TALE!
2018

"Paws for Books"
Scholastic Book Fair
When: Monday, March 5, 2018
3:30 to 7:30 p.m.
Where: Groton Area Elementary
School Library

Maintenance Supervisor Wanted:

Under the direction of the Facility Administrator, the Maintenance Supervisor oversees the daily operations of the Maintenance. Performs maintenance and repair of physical structures of buildings.

Day Shift C.N.A. Wanted

Sign-on Bonus

☆☆☆ **\$1,500 for CNAs** ☆☆☆

Contact Brynn Pickrel or Nellie Hatfield at 605-397-2365 or apply in person.

EOE/AA/M/F/V/D-Drug Free Workplace



1106 N. 2nd Street, Groton

SDHSAA creates open forum policy

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — The South Dakota High School Activities Association approved on Wednesday the first reading of open forum procedures designed to give some structure to public testimony at its meetings.

The rules include setting an agenda time limit of 30 minutes on a topic, giving each speaker five minutes, having speakers sign in ahead of time and keeping comments germane to items on the agenda.

The board chairman may adjust the time limits if there are more than six speakers who wish to address a topic. The board may also consent to extend the amount of time speakers are allowed. Information may also be submitted to the board in writing.

SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos said the chairman may cut off discussion if a speaker strays into an area that discussed a specific student or individual.

"It's not meant to silence people," Swartos said of the new policy, but rather to keep order in the meetings.
—30—

Broadcast option sought for district, region tourneys

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — The South Dakota High School Activities Association is considering a method for broadcasting district and region tournaments.

At its meeting on Wednesday, the SDHSAA Board of Directors heard about the NFHS Network, a service offered by the National Federation of State High School Associations.

SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos said the association could explore using the NFHS Network to broadcast substate or post season tournaments leading up to the state tournament. South Dakota Public Broadcasting would continue to broadcast state tournaments.

Swartos said the NFHS Network has a million monthly subscribers in 43 states. A search of the NFHS Network website found seven South Dakota schools listed: North Sioux City, Miller, Chamberlain, Pierre, Eureka, Selby and Leola.

According to the website, subscribers pay \$9.95 per month to see games from their school broadcast on the Internet. The website says that a portion of the fee goes back to the school.

Through the broadcast of substate contests, the association would be able to make some revenue, according to Swartos.

Representatives of the NFHS Network will attend the next meeting of the South Dakota high school athletic directors to tell them what the network offers.

Swartos said that the NFHS Network also offers an e-ticket a program through Huddle Tickets. He said those tickets could be used for substate and state tournaments at those venues that don't have a relationship with an online ticket vendor like Ticketmaster.

No action was taken by the board.
—30—

Three to join SDHSAA board

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — The annual meeting of the South Dakota High School Activities Association will include the election of three new board members.

At its meeting on Wednesday, the board accepted the resignation of board member Jim Aisenbrey of Baltic effective June 30. Aisenbrey has health issues that will keep him from serving on the board.

To replace Aisenbrey, member schools will choose a principal from one of the state's small schools for a three-year term.

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The terms of board members Sandy Klatt of Brandon Valley and Bud Postma of Madison will also conclude in this summer. Klatt represents board of education members from large schools and Postma's spot on the board will be filled by a superintendent from a medium-sized school.

Nominations will be offered at the SDHSAA annual meeting to be held on Monday, April 16. The board assigned SDHSAA staff with setting up a format for the annual meeting and the regular April board meeting.

—30—

Free text tips and reminders for your students and parents

With so many things to do to get ready for college or a future career, high school students and their parents can easily miss an opportunity or a deadline.

To ensure they get the important college planning and financial aid reminders, Mapping Your Future implemented a new texting service for South Dakota high school students, parents, and counselors. Anyone can subscribe to the service by texting #MYFUTURE to 41411 from a mobile phone.

"This texting service is designed specifically for South Dakota high school students, parents, and counselors," said Cathy Mueller, executive director of Mapping Your Future. "We will feature tips and reminders about state programs, as well as national programs that could benefit South Dakota students."

The service is part of a Mapping Your Future College Access and Success initiative in South Dakota, funded by the South Dakota Education Access Foundation. Mapping Your Future will only send 1-2 messages per month to remind subscribers about important college planning tips, reminders about deadlines, and other important college information.

Mapping Your Future encourages anyone to subscribe to the texting service and to share information about this texting service with students and parents. Contact Mapping Your Future at feedback@mappingyourfuture.org or 1-800-374-4072.

Damian Bahr hired as officer

The Groton City Council voted last night to hire Damian Bahr as the new full-time police officer in Groton. He replaces David Hunter who recently retired. Two councilmen, David Blackmun and Burt Glover, were in attendance via the telephone with council members Jay Peterson, Karyn Babcock and Mayor Scott Hanlon in attendance, in addition to Finance Officer Hope Block, Attorney Drew Johnson, Police Chief Stacy Mayou and Damian Bahr.

Bahr must complete a six month probation period and abide by the personnel manual as well as any Groton Police Department policies. His hourly rate will be \$24 an hour with a start date to be within two weeks. Bahr is from Groton and he has been working at the Brown County Sheriff's Department.

Gov. Dugaard Signs Bills Into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Gov. Dugaard signed the following bills into law Wednesday afternoon. You can click on the bill number to get more information about the bill.

- HB 1017 – codify legislation enacted in 2017.
- HB 1028 – revise certain provisions regarding trust companies.
- HB 1029 – increase certain fees for self-insurance by employers.
- HB 1031 – revise certain provisions and references regarding real estate licensing.
- HB 1032 – exempt credit unions from the requirements to be licensed as real estate brokers.
- HB 1050 – revise certain provisions regarding the prompt payment act.
- HB 1052 – authorize the executive director of the Board of Pardons and Paroles to issue a warrant in the event of any escape from extended confinement.
- HB 1072 – revise certain provisions regarding trusts.
- HB 1078 – revise certain provisions regarding the removal of security freezes.
- HB 1079 – authorize certain physical therapists to perform dry needling as a treatment technique.
- HB 1082 – revise certain provisions regarding licensure for the lending of money.
- HB 1084 – revise certain provisions regarding garnishment disclosure forms.
- HB 1085 – adopt the Uniform Unsworn Domestic Declarations Act.
- HB 1086 – exempt certain assisted living facilities from the salon license requirement.
- HB 1087 – allow certain students to test for cosmetologist, esthetician, and nail technician licensure.
- HB 1088 – revise the consignment sales requirements for dealers of motorcycles, off-road vehicles, snowmobiles, boats, and boat trailers.
- HB 1095 – revise certain provisions regarding clerk magistrate jurisdiction.
- HB 1096 – provide jurisdiction to magistrate judges for HOPE probation programs and to declare an emergency.
- HB 1097 – revise certain provisions regarding magistrate court jurisdiction over vulnerable adult protective or restraining orders.
- HB 1100 – require a name be printed on public contracts.
- HB 1112 – revise certain provisions regarding contested paternity.
- HB 1136 – revise certain provisions related to cooperatives.
- HB 1205 – require certain health benefit plans to provide coverage to persons with a serious medical condition for certain dental care services.
- HB 1219 – revise certain provisions regarding the use of night vision equipment in hunting.
- HB 1244 – revise certain provisions regarding the renewal of driver licenses by a member of the armed forces and their families.
- HB 1249 – authorize the training of tribal law officers at the Law Enforcement Training Center.

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CONNECTING WITH SOCIAL SECURITY

By: **Patty Hoffman**

Social Security Public Affairs Specialist

Every day thousands use it to do business with Social Security. We strive to offer the kind of services that meet people's needs. And sometimes you want fast and direct answers over the phone. We have that option.

You can call us toll free at 1-800-772-1213. Social Security offers some automated services that allow people to receive service without waiting to speak to a representative. The automated services are available 24 hours a day and include some of the most popular services that people need. With automated services, you can request a benefit verification (proof of income) letter, replace a lost SSA-1099 (tax summary needed for taxes), request a replacement Medicare card, ask for form SSA-1020 to apply for help with Medicare prescription drug costs, or request an SS-5 application for a Social Security card.

When our automated services ask such things as, "How can I help you?" Just say, "Get a proof of income letter" or "Replace Medicare card." Next, you will be asked for some personal information to identify yourself, then we will respond to your request. We will mail you the document or form you requested. It takes less time to use automated services than to reach a representative by phone on a busy day.

Sometimes, you just need Social Security information such as, "What date will my check arrive?" or "What is the SSI program?" Automated services feature some informational messages about these popular topics. If payment delivery date is the type of info you need, when asked "How can I help you?" just reply "Payment delivery date." You will hear a recorded message stating the current month and the future month's payment dates. Other topics include direct deposit, SSI messages, the cost-of-living adjustment, Medicare prescription drug program, tax information, representative payee, and fraud. Dial, and listen — what a simple way to stay informed.

Whether you use our automated services, speak to a representative by phone, use our website, or visit an office, Social Security wants to connect with you. Connection is a vital part of helping you secure your today and tomorrow. To connect with us through our automated services, visit <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/agency/contact/phone.html>.

Patty Hoffman is the Public Affairs Specialist for ND, SD and Western MN. You can write her c/o Social Security Administration, 4207 Boulder Ridge Road, Ste. 100, Bismarck ND 58503 or via email at patty.hoffman@ssa.gov.

Tiospa Zina has 24-point run and holds off Groton rally



Seric Shabazz dribbles the ball around the Wambdi defense. (Photo by Julianna Kosel)

Tiospa Zina went on a 24-point run in the first half and the deficit was too much for Groton Area to overcome as the Wambdi held off a Groton rally. Tiospa Zina won the first round region game at Agency Villatge with a 60-54 score.

Both teams were fired up at the beginning of the game with the Tigers hitting the first three-pointer. The game was tied at three. Tiospa Zina took a 5-3 lead before another Tiger three-pointer would give Groton a 6-5 lead. Then the drought began for Groton Area. The Tigers did not score for over eight minutes as the Wambdi scored 24 unanswered points to take a 29-6 lead. The Wambdi led, 18-6, after the first quarter and 33-14 at half time.

Groton Area had nine turnovers in the first half and that resulted in nine points. Tiospa Zina had four first half turnovers and Groton converted once for two points. In the first half, Groton Area made five of 24 field goals for 21 percent and the Wambdi made 13 of 32 field goals for 41 percent.

The Tigers started putting points on the board in the third quarter with four three-pointers being made and the 23-point deficit was reduced to 11 by the end of the third quarter, 44-33. The Tigers were six of 17 in shooting in the third quarter for 45 percent and Tiospa Zina was five of 11 for 45 percent.

Groton Area closed the lead to six points, 56-50, with three minutes left in the game and had a couple of opportunities to close the lead even more, but the ball wouldn't drop.

Coach Justin Hanson said, "The boys played hard for me all season. That is one thing no one can ever discredit us for is our effort. I never questioned one time this year after a game whether we left everything we had out on the court. It's always unfortunate that a season has to end, but it ended with me being proud of how far this group of boys has come this season."

Tiospa Zina went back on top by 10, 60-50, and would win by six at the end.

Three players hit double figures for Groton Area with Treyton Diegel making four three-pointers on his way to 16 points. Brodyn DeHoet made two three-pointers on his way to 14 points and Jonathan Doeden made two three-pointers on his way to 10 points. Seric Shabazz added seven points, Brandon Keith five and Kaden Kurtz added two points.

Divante Greeley led the Wambdi with 23 points while Jamison Pratt had 16, Johnny German and Peyton Halseide each had nine points, Nyton Owen had three and Jacob LaBlanc had two points.

An interesting note - Shabazz and Keith were the only seniors for both sides that scored points. Groton finishes the season with an 8-13 record.



Brandon Keith (20) looks to Brodyn DeHoet for a possible play. (Photo by Julianna Kosel)

NEC All-Conference Boys Basketball

FIRST TEAM

Jacob Prouty	Junior	Clark/Willow Lake
Dion Iyarpeya	Senior	Sisseton
Gus Reede	Senior	Roncalli
Preston Homan	Senior	Deuel
Benji Thompson	Senior	Sisseton

SECOND TEAM

John Roe	Senior	Hamlin
Bradyn Rusher	Senior	Clark/Willow Lake
Kyler Meyer	Junior	Britton/Hecla
Brady Morgan	Junior	Roncalli
Jonny Ash	Senior	Milbank

THIRD TEAM

Brodyn DeHoet	Sophomore	Groton Area
Dalton Howe	Senior	Redfield/Doland
Tayon Hawkins	Senior	Britton/Hecla
Max Baloun	Sophomore	Redfield/Doland
Divante Greeley	Junior	Tiospa Zina

Potential Storm: March 4-5th

A significant winter storm could develop Sunday+Monday across parts of the Northern Plains. Here's an idea of what's possible. Stay tuned for updates and details in the coming days.



Scope of Effects: Localized Average **Widespread**


Models are consistent in developing a large system

Precipitation Type: Rain Ice Wet Snow **Fluffy Snow**

Rain, mixed precipitation and snow are all possible with this system

Wind Potential: Light Breezy **Windy** Strong

Models develop a deep low pressure system, which generally means stronger winds

 National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD

Updated: 2/28/2018 4:15 PM Central

Published on: 02/28/2018 at 4:19PM

Heads up, we're keeping a close eye on a potential storm system for Sunday and Monday. Keep in mind we're still 4 to 5 days out, so we don't have any specific details to provide yet. Stay tuned to the forecast for updates in the coming days.

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Today in Weather History

March 1, 1970: Freezing rain and drizzle impacted much of South Dakota on March 1, 1970. Ice accumulation up to 1/8 of an inch thick was reported in Rapid City, with heavier amounts in the northwestern part of the state. Some utility lines were broken, but there was no extensive line damage. Also, some schools were closed due to icy roads.

March 1, 1998: Incredible amount of snow falls on Lead, South Dakota from February 25 through March 1. The official storm total was 103 inches for the five day period. Click [HERE](#) for more information from the NWS Office in Rapid City.

March 1, 2014: Arctic air combined with strong northwest winds to bring bitter cold wind chills to central and northeast South Dakota east of the Missouri River. Bitter wind chills of 35 below to around 40 below occurred. Some of the coldest wind chills include; 39 degrees below zero west of Long Lake; 40 degrees below zero at Highmore; 41 degrees below zero near Roy Lake; and 42 degrees below zero at Summit.

1910: The worst avalanche in US history regarding lives lost, occurred Wellington, Washington. Heavy snow occurred from February 26 through the 28th, which blocked the rail lines. Weather conditions turned on the 28th with a thunderstorm occurring over the area. Just after 1 AM on March 1st, a ten to 14 foot high mass of snow broke free from the mountainside and pushed the trains 150 feet down into the Tye River gorge. In all, 96 people were killed by this avalanche.

2006: The day's high temperature of 93 degrees at the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport in Texas broke a 107-year-old record. Other hot north Texas cities included Wichita Falls with 96 degrees and Fort Worth Meacham Airport with 90 degrees.

1914 - High winds and heavy snow crippled New Jersey and New York State. Two feet of snow were reported at Ashbury Park, and at New York City the barometric pressure dropped to a record 28.38 inches. The storm caused complete disruption of electric power in New Jersey. (David Ludlum)

1980 - Norfolk, VA, received 13.7 inches of snow to push their season total to a record 41.9 inches exceeding their previous record by more than four inches. (David Ludlum)

1980 - An unusually large Florida tornado, 500 yards in width at times, killed one person and caused six million dollars damage near Fort Lauderdale. (The Weather Channel)

1983 - A ferocious storm battered the Pacific coast. The storm produced heavy rain and gale force winds resulting in flooding and beach erosion, and in the mountains produced up to seven feet of snow in five days. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A storm crossing the Great Lakes Region produced heavy snow and gale force winds from Wisconsin to northern New England, with eight inches of snow reported at Ironwood MI. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Thunderstorms produced large hail and damaging winds in north central Texas. Baseball size hail was reported at Lake Kickapoo. Hail fell continuously for thirty minutes in the Iowa Park area of Wichita Falls. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - March came in like a lion, with snow and high winds, in the northwestern U.S. Winds gusted to 86 mph in the Rosario Strait of western Washington State. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)


1990 - A series of low pressure systems moving out of the Gulf of Alaska spread high winds and heavy snow across western Alaska. Winds in the Anchorage area gusted to 69 mph at Glen Alps, and Talkeetna was buried under three feet of snow in two days. Valdez received 21.4 inches of snow, raising their total for the winter season to 482.4 inches. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2011 - Snowfall across Idaho broke numerous accumulation records. Pierce received 15 inches, Powell 14.5 inches, Potlatch 12 inches and Kellogg and Plummer 7 inches. The same storm created high winds across the Pacific Northwest. A weather station at 10,000 feet on Mount Ranier measures a wind gust of 137 MPH with a sustained 1-minute wind reading of 112 MPH.

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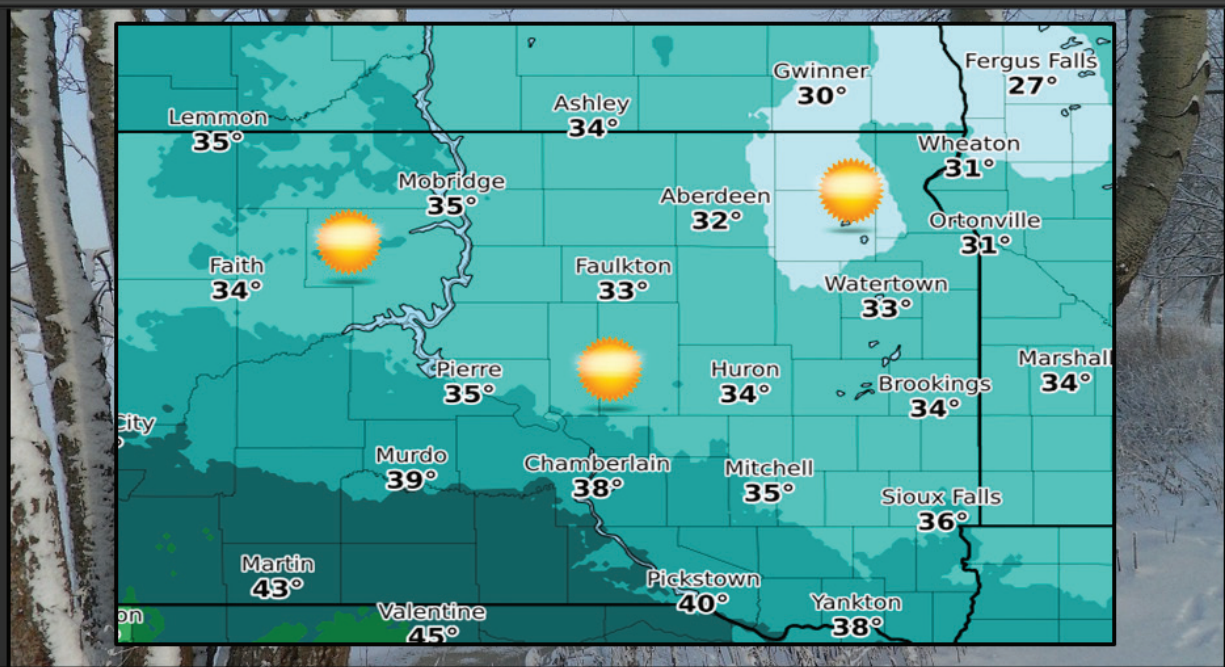
Thu Mar 1	Fri Mar 2	Sat Mar 3	Sun Mar 4	Mon Mar 5	Tue Mar 6	Wed Mar 7
31°F	37°F	40°F	41°F	32°F	25°F	25°F
9°F	25°F	27°F	25°F	15°F	8°F	11°F
SW 5 MPH	SE 18 MPH	SSE 12 MPH	E 11 MPH	NNW 23 MPH	NW 17 MPH	NW 11 MPH
			Precip 60%	Precip 70%	Precip 20%	



Staying Mild



March Arrives with Sun and Mild Temps!





Lemmon	35°	Ashley	34°	Gwinner	30°	Fergus Falls	27°
Mobridge	35°	Aberdeen	32°	Wheaton	31°	Ortonville	31°
Faith	34°	Faulkton	33°	Watertown	33°	Brookings	34°
Pierre	35°	Huron	34°	Marshall	34°	Sioux Falls	36°
Murdo	39°	Chamberlain	38°	Mitchell	35°	Yankton	38°
Martin	43°	Pickstown	40°	Valentine	45°		

National Weather Service – Aberdeen, SD

weather.gov/Aberdeen
 National Weather Service Aberdeen
  @NWSAberdeen
 Updated: 3/1/2018 5:42 AM Central

Published on: 03/01/2018 at 5:45AM

March will arrive with pleasant conditions, as we will see mostly sunny skies, light winds, and near normal temps in the 30s. This will allow for a bit more snow melt today, and it does appear mild temperatures will continue into the weekend! Eyes are still on a coming storm system for Sunday and Monday...

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Yesterday's Weather

High Outside Temp: 24.8 F at 4:09 PM

Low Outside Temp: 2.2 F at 5:55 AM

Wind Chill:

High Gust: 13.0 Mph at 3:31 PM

Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 73° in 1992

Record Low: -29° in 1962

Average High: 33°F

Average Low: 13°F

Average Precip in March: 0.03

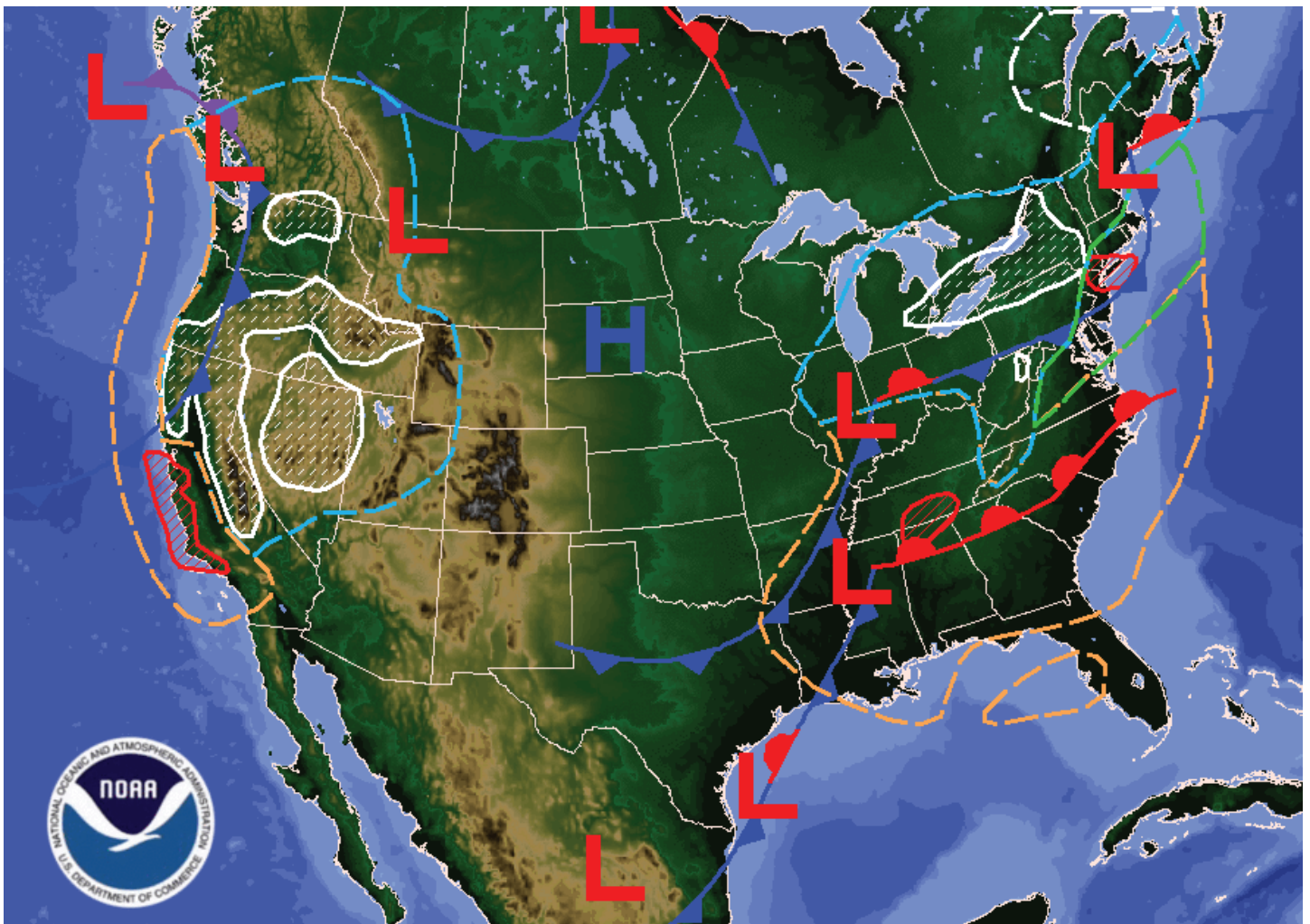
Precip to date in March: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 1.05

Precip Year to Date: 0.57

Sunset Tonight: 6:20 p.m.

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:10 a.m.



Day 1 National Forecast Chart

Valid Thu, Mar 01, 2018, issued 5:21 AM EST
DOC/NOAA/NWS/NCEP/Weather Prediction Center
Prepared by McCreynolds with WPC/SPC/NHC forecasts

Rain
Rain and T'Storms
Rain and Snow
Snow

Flash Flooding Possible (hatched)
Severe T'Storms Possible (hatched)
Freezing Rain Possible (hatched)
Heavy Snow Possible (hatched)



ANXIETY AND FAITH

Everyone feels anxious at one time or another. It is a normal part of life. It is our body's way of telling us that something might be wrong - that we might be facing some potential danger or are feeling symptoms of an illness. If we had no feelings of anxiety, we might put ourselves in all kinds of danger that could end up in disaster.

Anxiety for the Christian however can be more. It may be an "early warning system" that God has put in our hearts, through the Holy Spirit, to get our attention to let us know that something may be going wrong in our walk with Him and He wants us to make things right with Him.

God has many ways to use anxiety to get our attention. He may trouble our hearts when we read His word, listen to a hymn, hear a sermon, speak with Him in prayer, see a picture of His children suffering or when we are having a conversation with a friend. His Spirit is always at work in our hearts and it is good to be troubled with anxiety that comes from God.

The writer of Psalm 94 was having a huge problem with anxiety. He must have been deeply troubled by many things that were overwhelming him and seemingly beyond his control. Note his words: "When anxiety was great within me" - not simply a minor incident, but something very, very troubling.

Then note what happened: Your "consolation" or perhaps better understood as "comfort" - "brought joy to my soul." It is like Jesus saying, "Let not Your heart be troubled. Believe in me. This is my plan for You. Trust Me."

Prayer: Help us, Father, to realize that You love us so much You often trouble our hearts to get our attention. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture for Today: Psalm 94:19 In the multitude of my anxieties within me, Your comforts delight my soul.

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2018 Groton SD Community Events

- Groton Lion's Club Bingo- Wednesday Nights 6:30pm at the Groton Legion (Year Round)
- 11/18/2017-3/31/2018 Groton Lion's Club Wheel of Meat- Saturday Nights 7pm at the Groton Legion (Fall/Winter Months)
- 1/28/2018 Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm
- 3/24/2018 Easter Egg Hunt (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
- 4/13/2018 Elementary School Carnival, 5 p.m.
- 5/5/2018 Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales (1st Saturday in May)
- 5/28/2018 Groton American Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Program at the Cemetery, Lunch to follow at the American Legion (Memorial Day)
- 6/14/2018 Transit Fundraiser (Middle Thursday in June)
- 6/15/2018 SDSU Golf at Olive Grove
- 6/16/2018 Triathlon (Saturday before Father's Day)
- 7/4/2018 Firecracker Golf Tourney (4th of July)
- 7/22/2018 Summer Fest (4th Sunday in July)
- 9/8/2018 Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 10/6/2018 Pumpkin Fest (Saturday before Columbus Day)
- 10/12/2018 Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
- 10/31/2018 Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
- 11/10/2018 Groton American Legion Post #39 Turkey Shoot (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)

- Best Ball Golf Tourney
- SDSU Golf Tourney
- Sunflower Golf Tourney
- Santa Claus Day
- Fireman's Stag
- Tour of Homes
- Crazy Dayz/Open Houses
- School Events

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News from the Associated Press

Report: Midwest business conditions index rose in February

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — A report says a business conditions index for nine Midwest and Plains states rose over the past month, pointing to continued improvement in regional economic conditions.

The report released Thursday says the Mid-America Business Conditions Index hit 59.7 in February, compared with 57.3 in January. The December figure was 59.0.

Creighton University economist Ernie Goss oversees the survey, and he says manufacturing and other business sectors in the region are experiencing “very healthy growth in business activity.”

The survey results are compiled into a collection of indexes ranging from zero to 100. Survey organizers say any score above 50 suggests growth in that factor. A score below that suggests decline.

The survey covers Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma and South Dakota.

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Wednesday:

Dakota Cash

10-14-18-29-34

(ten, fourteen, eighteen, twenty-nine, thirty-four)

Estimated jackpot: \$22,000

Lotto America

11-15-18-36-40, Star Ball: 5, ASB: 2

(eleven, fifteen, eighteen, thirty-six, forty; Star Ball: five; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$22.05 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$243 million

Powerball

12-30-59-65-69, Powerball: 16, Power Play: 5

(twelve, thirty, fifty-nine, sixty-five, sixty-nine; Powerball: sixteen; Power Play: five)

Estimated jackpot: \$293 million

‘Marsy’s Law’ changes may go on June ballot in South Dakota

By JAMES NORD, Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Senate approved a measure Wednesday that would ask June primary voters to make changes to the “Marsy’s Law” constitutional bill of rights for crime victims previously passed at the ballot.

House lawmakers would have to agree with the unusual move to place the measure on the June ballot rather than wait for the November election. Lawmakers are advancing changes to the constitutional amendment under an agreement with a group that has persuaded voters in several states to approve versions of Marsy’s Law.

The new proposal would ask voters to make changes to the amendment including requiring victims to opt into many rights, explicitly allowing authorities to share information with the public to help solve crimes

and limiting the definition of a victim.

Republican Sen. Jim Bolin, a supporter of the changes, said Marsy's Law has caused unintended consequences for local governments and problems for authorities. He said the Marsy's Law campaign would like the vote "expedited" and that putting the measure on the June ballot could save counties money.

"I know this is unusual, but I believe the seriousness of this question and the willingness of the parties to work together should warrant our approval of this amendment to the bill," Bolin said in asking lawmakers to move up the vote from the general election to the primary.

Democrats, who currently don't have primary races for governor or U.S. House, oppose a June vote. Democratic Sen. Troy Heinert said turnout will be "exceptionally lower" for parties without primaries.

"Short of taking off of work, driving to town, coming to vote on this specific ... amendment, what is the incentive to get out and vote?" he asked.

But the chamber voted 27-8 to advance the measure. Bolin said the push would also require another bill.

South Dakota would be the first state to alter Marsy's Law out of the six that have enacted it. It guarantees crime victims and their family members the right to privacy, protection from harassment or abuse and timely notice of trial, sentencing and post-judgment proceedings.

It's named after California college student Marsalee "Marsy" Nicholas, who was stalked and killed in 1983 by an ex-boyfriend. The measure passed with about 60 percent support in 2016, but critics say it's causing problems for law enforcement and prosecutors and spiking costs for counties.

Yankton petition urges keeping federal prison open

YANKTON, S.D. (AP) — Yankton leaders are circulating a petition they hope will help keep open a federal prison.

U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions has proposed closing two minimum-security federal prison camps to save money. The category includes the Yankton Federal Prison Camp, though it's not known if it's a target.

The Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan reports community leaders are circulating a petition at the urging of U.S. Rep. Kristi Noem.

They say closure of the prison would mean the loss of 100 jobs, would hurt the local economy and would eliminate training and counseling opportunities for nearly 600 inmates.

The prison has already seen cuts under the Trump administration. The Regional Technical Education Center is no longer offering training in welding and other trades at the prison.

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

Bill imposing tougher penalties for meth dealing advances

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota House panel has advanced a bill that would impose harsher penalties for methamphetamine dealing and manufacturing.

The House Judiciary Committee voted 12-1 Wednesday to pass the bill to the chamber's floor.

Attorney General Marty Jackley's bill would make distribution and manufacturing a more serious felony with a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison and a \$30,000 fine, up from 10 years imprisonment and a fine of \$20,000.

The bill would also make changes so mandatory minimum sentences for drug distribution and manufacturing are more broadly applied, among other provisions.

Jackley says the panel has taken an "important step" to keep drug dealers out of South Dakota.

The panel also voted 11-2 to approve a bill that would enact stronger penalties for drug dealers whose product kills another person.

Minnehaha County attorneys struggle with homicide caseload

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A public defender's office in southeastern South Dakota said it doesn't have enough attorneys to handle the rising number of homicide cases in the county.

The Minnehaha County Public Defender's Office filed a motion last week to be dismissed from the latest Sioux Falls homicide case it's been tasked with, citing the lack of manpower to take on the case "diligently and ethically."

The county's public defenders are currently representing nine individuals charged with homicide, the Argus Leader reported. There aren't enough qualified attorneys to manage double-digit homicide defenses.

Public Defender Traci Smith said there's "an imbalance in the system" resulting from an increased focus on drug arrests.

"We represent the poorest of the poor, who have needs far beyond just their criminal case," said Smith. "Now we have more work than we can handle. Thus, in dealing with one crisis we have created another."

Smith said about 20 years ago, attorneys may have handled two homicide cases a year. The office had 10 pending homicide cases last year.

Of the county public defender office's 24 positions, only four attorneys are qualified to manage a homicide case, in which trial preparation often takes hundreds of hours.

Last year, more than 8,300 new cases were opened at the office, which is nearly a 60 percent increase over a five-year period. If distributed evenly, each attorney would handle about 380 cases.

The American Bar Association recommends a full-time attorney stick to 150 felony cases or 400 misdemeanor cases.

"We either need more bodies or limit the number of cases we can take," said Mike Miller, chief deputy public defender.

Smith said she'd like to see workload standards more strictly followed.

"If you have too many airplanes in the sky, that's dangerous," she said. "There are standards that have to be followed."

Information from: Argus Leader, <http://www.argusleader.com>

New rules for petition circulators head to SD Senate floor

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A Senate panel has advanced a pair of bills that would require ballot question signature gatherers to provide more information to voters or the secretary of state.

The Senate State Affairs Committee voted Wednesday to send the proposals to the chamber's floor.

One would require circulators to provide petition signers their name, email and phone number.

The second would mandate that circulators give the Secretary of State's office residency information including the length of time at their current address.

House Speaker Mark Mickelson, the second bill's sponsor, says it would make it easier for courts to decide if circulators are residents.

Rob Timm, president and CEO of the Chiesman Center for Democracy, says the bills would make it harder to put initiatives on the ballot because campaigns will have more trouble finding circulators.

Senators reject out-of-state money cap for ballot questions

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A Senate panel has rejected a proposal meant to cap the flow of money from outside South Dakota into the state's ballot question campaigns.

The Senate State Affairs Committee voted 5-4 Wednesday to defeat the plan.

The measure would have restricted out-of-state donors to \$100,000 in contributions to a South Dakota ballot question campaign per general election cycle.

House Speaker Mark Mickelson, a supporter, says lawmakers have a compelling public interest in preserving the initiative process for South Dakota citizens.

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The plan failed in the same committee last year. Critics say it's unconstitutional. A more restrictive ballot question sponsored by Mickelson that would ban out-of-state fundraising for citizens' initiatives will go before voters in November.

Pennington County OKs new regulations for mining operations

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Pennington County commissioners have approved a new ordinance intended to regulate mining operations in the southwestern South Dakota county. Some citizens don't think the changes go far enough.

The Rapid City Journal reports that the new rules increase groundwater monitoring provisions and gives commissioners the right to request greater setbacks.

However, commissioners did not make any changes related to the transfer of mining permits. Some citizens wanted the ordinance to require a public hearing before the county's planning commission or board of commissioners before transfers are approved, as well as public notice of the transfers.

Attorney Michael Hickey, who represents citizens who favor more regulation, says he and his clients will discuss putting the issue up for referral.

Information from: Rapid City Journal, <http://www.rapidcityjournal.com>

Agent who led terrorism probe to head FBI's Minnesota office

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The FBI agent who led the investigation into the San Bernardino terror attack has been named the new special agent in charge of the bureau's Minneapolis division.

Jill Sanborn will replace Rick Thornton, who is retiring.

Sanborn spent most of her 20-year career working in counterterrorism. The Star Tribune reports that she was an assistant special agent in charge of the FBI's Los Angeles field office in 2015 when a couple inspired by foreign terrorist groups killed 14 people in San Bernardino.

She most recently led an FBI international counterterrorism operations section at its headquarters, overseeing all of the bureau's counterterrorism investigations.

Sanborn will report to Minneapolis in April.

The FBI's Minneapolis division encompasses Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

Information from: Star Tribune, <http://www.startribune.com>

Soil moisture supplies in South Dakota remain low

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Soil moisture supplies in South Dakota remain low as spring planting season nears.

The Agriculture Department's monthly crop report shows both topsoil and subsoil moisture supplies in the state rated at 63 percent short or very short.

Many South Dakota farmers dealt with crippling drought last year. The most recent U.S. Drought Monitor map shows more than half of the state still in moderate to severe drought.

The Agriculture Department report shows that about one-third of the state's winter wheat crop is rated in poor or very poor condition as February ends.

Former Pierre business leader pleads guilty to theft

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A former downtown business leader in Pierre has pleaded guilty to stealing about \$3,100 from her former employer.

The Capital Journal reports that Jeanine Maskovich reached a deal with prosecutors in which she pleaded guilty to one felony theft charge, and other charges were dismissed.

She's likely to get a suspended prison sentence during an April 10 hearing.

Maskovich is a former president of the Historic Pierre Street Association. She was accused of stealing

from Pierre Monument Company. Under her plea deal, she also has agreed to pay \$561 in restitution to the Pierre Street Historic District.

Information from: Pierre Capital Journal, <http://www.capjournal.com>

Pierre voters to decide on new water treatment plant

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Voters in Pierre will get to decide if the city should get a new \$37 million water treatment plant.

Pierre's city commission on Tuesday approved putting the proposed project to voters in the June 5 primary. The Capital Journal reports the project would be funded over 30 years by raising water rates an average of about 60 percent.

Mayor Steve Harding proposed holding three public meetings from March to May to give residents a chance to see the plan in detail and ask questions.

Pierre residents have long complained about the high mineral content of the city water that stains everything from fixtures to sidewalks.

Information from: Pierre Capital Journal, <http://www.capjournal.com>

Man found dead in Miner County field died of hypothermia

FEDORA, S.D. (AP) — An autopsy has concluded that a Rapid City man found dead in a Miner County field over the weekend died from the cold.

The Daily Republic reports an autopsy concluded that 30-year-old Dirk Boardman died of hypothermia. Toxicology tests are pending.

The Miner County Sheriff's Office does not suspect any foul play.

Authorities say Boardman was staying with a friend at a farm near Fedora and left for a walk Friday morning. He was found dead about a mile away Saturday afternoon.

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

2 Rapid City-area elementary school principals suspended

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Principals at two Rapid City-area elementary schools have been suspended for undisclosed reasons.

Rapid City Area Schools spokeswoman Katy Urban confirmed to the Rapid City Journal that principals at Black Hawk Elementary and Valley View Elementary have been placed on paid administrative leave pending an investigation by school district officials.

She declined to comment on the reasons, calling it a "personnel matter." She did say there was no threat to student safety.

Urban says the investigations are expected to be completed this week.

Information from: Rapid City Journal, <http://www.rapidcityjournal.com>

SD House panel rejects bill to fill campaign finance gap

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A House panel has voted down a bill aimed at requiring ballot measure campaigns to disclose their donors while supporters gather signatures to qualify for the ballot.

The House State Affairs Committee voted Wednesday to reject the measure.

Democratic Sen. Reynold Nesiba, the sponsor, argued it would close a "loophole" in South Dakota campaign finance reporting.

It would have required initiative campaigns to submit new finance reports by July 1 in odd-numbered

years when supporters collect names needed to send initiatives to the voters.

Current state rules don't require the campaigns to disclose their donors until long after they've submitted their signatures to the state to qualify for the ballot.

House Speaker Mark Mickelson, who pushed to shelve the bill, says he supports the objective but didn't think the measure would work as intended.

Rapid City schools secured following gun report

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Three Rapid City schools were secured after police received a report of a boy pointing a gun at a girl in the area.

Authorities say the weapon turned out to be a pellet gun. Movement inside North Middle School as well as Knollwood and General Beadle elementary schools was limited for a time Tuesday as a precaution.

The juvenile suspect was located, but no further details were released.

Trump says some lawmakers too fearful of NRA to act on guns

By LISA MASCARO, MATTHEW DALY and CATHERINE LUCEY, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Putting fellow Republicans in the hot seat, President Donald Trump is calling for quick and substantial changes to the nation's gun laws even as he criticizes lawmakers for being too fearful of the National Rifle Association to act.

Trump held a freewheeling, televised meeting with lawmakers at the White House that stretched for an hour Wednesday, and he rejected both his party's incremental approach and its strategy that has stalled action on gun legislation.

Giving hope to Democrats, he said he favored a "comprehensive" approach to addressing violence such as February's shooting at a Florida high school, although he offered no details.

Instead, Trump again voiced support for expanded background checks. He endorsed increased school security and more mental health resources, and he reaffirmed his support for raising the age to 21 for purchasing some firearms. Trump mentioned arming teachers, and said his administration, not Congress, would ban "bump-stock" devices that enable guns to fire like automatic weapons with an executive order.

"We can't wait and play games and nothing gets done," Trump said as he opened the session with 17 House and Senate lawmakers. "We want to stop the problems."

Trump raised eyebrows by suggesting that law enforcement officials should be able to confiscate people's firearms without a court order to prevent potential tragedies.

"Take the guns first, go through due process second," he suggested.

Trump arose Thursday with the gun issue on his mind, tweeting that "Many ideas, some good & some not so good," emerged from the meeting.

He said "Background Checks a big part of conversation" and "Gun free zones are proven targets of killers."

"After many years, a Bill should emerge. Respect 2nd Amendment!" and the constitutional right to bear arms, the president said.

The president has previously supported ideas popular with Democrats, only to back away when faced with opposition from his conservative base and his GOP allies in Congress. It was not clear whether he would continue to push for swift and significant changes to gun laws, when confronted with the inevitable resistance from his party.

Still, the televised discussion allowed Trump to play the role of potential dealmaker. Democratic lawmakers made a point of appealing to the president to use his political power to persuade his party to take action.

"It is going to have to be you," Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., told Trump.

Trump's call for stronger background checks, which are popular among Americans, has been resisted by Republicans and the NRA. Republicans are leaning toward modest legislation designed to improve the background check system. Trump made clear he was looking for more and accused lawmakers of being "petrified" of the gun lobby.

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"Hey, I'm the biggest fan of the Second Amendment," Trump said, adding that he told NRA officials it's time to act. "We have to stop this nonsense."

Democrats said they were concerned Trump's interest may fade quickly. After the meeting, Murphy told reporters: "I'm worried that this was the beginning and the end of the president's advocacy on this issue. The White House has to put some meat on the bones. The White House has to send a proposal to Congress."

The White House is expected to reveal more on the president's plans for school safety this week. That announcement will likely include goals for background checks and bump stocks, though whether age restrictions will be specifically addressed remains unclear, according to an administration official who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations.

Trump rejected the way Republican leaders in Congress have framed the debate, saying the House-backed bill linking a background check measure with a bill to expand gun rights by allowing gun owners to carry concealed weapons across state lines was not the right approach.

The concealed carry measure is the gun lobby's top legislative priority. But "you'll never get it passed," Trump told lawmakers, reminding them that Democratic senators, including some in the room, strongly oppose it.

He suggested Republicans should focus on the background check bill, then load it up with other gun control and safety measures.

Among those at the meeting were Sens. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., and Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., who are pushing their bill to broaden background checks to include pre-purchase reviews at online and gun show sales. It failed twice in the Senate after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Connecticut.

Trump asked Toomey if his plan to expand background checks included raising the minimum age for young people to buy an assault weapon. Toomey told the president it did not.

"You know why," Trump scoffed. "Because you're afraid of the NRA."

In fact, Toomey is one of the most high-profile Republicans on gun legislation, and the bill was opposed by the NRA. After earlier votes on the bill, the group downgraded its rating of the senator as he ran for re-election.

The meeting came after one major retailer, Dick's Sporting Goods, announced it was halting sales of assault-style rifles and high-capacity magazines at all of its stores and banning the sale of all guns to anyone under 21. Walmart, the nation's largest retailer, followed late Wednesday, saying it would no longer sell firearms and ammunition to people younger than 21.

Associated Press writers Ken Thomas, Alan Fram, Andrew Taylor, Zeke Miller and Jill Colvin contributed to this report.

Follow Mascaro on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/LisaMascaro> and Daly <https://twitter.com/MatthewDaly-WDC>

Walmart, Dick's expand corporate rift with gun lobby

By DAMIAN J. TROISE, AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The rift between corporate America and the gun lobby is growing.

Retail heavyweights Walmart and Dick's Sporting Goods have taken steps to restrict gun sales. That follows moves by several other major corporations, including MetLife, Hertz and Delta Air Lines, that have cut ties with National Rifle Association following last month's school massacre in Florida.

Dick's said Wednesday it will immediately stop selling assault-style rifles and ban the sale of all guns to anyone under 21. Its CEO took on the NRA by demanding tougher gun laws.

Walmart, the nation's largest retailer, followed by saying it will no longer sell firearms and ammunition to people younger than 21. It had stopped selling AR-15s and other semi-automatic weapons in 2015.

The announcements from the major national retailers came as students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas

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High School in Parkland, Florida, returned to class for the first time since a teenager killed 17 students and educators with an AR-15 rifle two weeks ago.

"When we saw what the kids were going through and the grief of the parents and the kids who were killed in Parkland, we felt we needed to do something," Dick's Chairman and CEO Ed Stack said on ABC's "Good Morning America."

The announcements from Dick's and Walmart drew hundreds of thousands of responses for and against the moves on the companies' social media accounts.

"This is the moment when business leaders across the country get to decide if they want to stand on the right side of history," said Shannon Watts, founder of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. "Mothers make the majority of spending decisions for their families, and we want to shop with businesses that care about the safety of our families — making this a smart business move, too."

Sporting goods chain Bass Pro Shops, which owns Cabela's, didn't respond to requests for comment. Nor did the Outdoor Retail Association or Gander Outdoors.

Dick Sporting Goods had cut off sales of assault-style weapons after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. But sales had resumed at its smaller chain of Field & Stream stores, which consisted of 35 outlets in 16 states as of October.

On Wednesday, Stack said that would end, and he called on lawmakers to act now.

He urged them to ban assault-style firearms, bump stocks and high-capacity magazines and raise the minimum age to buy firearms to 21. He said universal background checks should be required, and there should be a complete database of those banned from buying firearms. He also called for the closing of the private sale and gun show loophole that enables purchasers to escape background checks.

"We support and respect the Second Amendment, and we recognize and appreciate that the vast majority of gun owners in this country are responsible, law-abiding citizens," Stack said in a letter. "But we have to help solve the problem that's in front of us. Gun violence is an epidemic that's taking the lives of too many people, including the brightest hope for the future of America — our kids."

Walmart said it was also removing items from its website that resemble assault-style rifles, including airsoft guns and toys. "Our heritage as a company has always been in serving sportsmen and hunters, and we will continue to do so in a responsible way," the retailer based in Bentonville, Arkansas, said.

One industry analyst said that other retailers that devote a small percentage of their business to hunting will probably follow suit. While guns can be bought from sporting goods stores or department stores, they can also be purchased online, at gun shows and from small local gun stores.

The NRA has pushed back aggressively against calls for raising age limits for guns or restricting the sale of assault-style weapons. Calls to the NRA were not immediately returned.

Stack also revealed that Nikolas Cruz, the 19-year-old arrested in the Florida attack, had bought a shotgun at a Dick's store within the past four months.

"It was not the gun, nor type of gun, he used in the shooting," the CEO wrote. "But it could have been. Clearly this indicates on so many levels that the systems in place are not effective to protect our kids and our citizens."

The vast majority of Dick's business is selling sporting goods like basketballs and sneakers. Joseph Feldman, a senior managing director at the Telsey Advisory Group, estimated that guns and ammunition account for 8 percent of the company's sales.

Dick's, which had net sales of \$7.92 billion in the fiscal year that ended in January 2017, has a much bigger stake in youth sports.

Dick's is based just outside of Pittsburgh in a state where the first day of deer hunting season is an unofficial holiday for many families. Stack said Dick's is prepared for any backlash but will never allow the sale of such guns in its stores again.

AP Retail Writers Anne D'Innocenzio and Joseph Pisani contributed to this report. Associated Press reporter Carrie Antlfinger contributed from Brookfield, Wisconsin.

Putin boasts of new Russian nuclear weapons

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV, Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia has tested an array of new strategic nuclear weapons that can't be intercepted, President Vladimir Putin announced Thursday, marking a technological breakthrough that could dramatically increase Russia's military capability, boost the Kremlin's global position and also raise Western concerns about a potential renewed arms race in the 21st century.

Speaking in a state-of-the-nation speech, Putin said the weapons include a nuclear-powered cruise missile, a nuclear-powered underwater drone and new hypersonic missile that have no equivalent elsewhere in the world. He said the creation of the new weapons has made NATO's U.S.-led missile defense "useless," and means an effective end to what he described as Western efforts to stymie Russia's development.

"I want to tell all those who have fueled the arms race over the last 15 years, sought to win unilateral advantages over Russia, introduced unlawful sanctions aimed to contain our country's development: all what you wanted to impede with your policies have already happened," he said. "You have failed to contain Russia."

The announcement comes as Putin is set to easily win another six-year presidential term in the March 18 election.

He said that the nuclear-powered cruise missile tested last fall has a "practically unlimited" range and high speed and maneuverability allowing it to pierce any missile defense.

The Russian leader said the high-speed underwater drone also has an "intercontinental" range and is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead that could target both aircraft carriers and coastal facilities. He said its operational depth and high speed would make it immune to enemy intercept.

Putin noted that the tests of the compact nuclear reactor to power the new drone were completed last fall.

He added, to applause, that names for the nuclear-powered cruise missile and the drone haven't yet been chosen, and suggested that the Defense Ministry run a nationwide contest for the best names.

Putin accompanied his statement to an audience of hundreds of senior officials and lawmakers with videos and computer images of new weapons, which were shown on giant screens at a conference hall near the Kremlin.

"No one in the world has anything like that," he said. "It may appear someday, but by that time we will develop something new."

The Russian leader said that another new weapon called Avangard is an intercontinental hypersonic missile that would fly to targets at a speed 20 times the speed of sound and strike "like a meteorite, like a fireball."

Putin said that Russia also tested a new heavy intercontinental ballistic missile, called Sarmat, with a range and number of warheads exceeding its Soviet-era predecessor, known in the West as Satan.

He said that another weapons system, called Kinzhal, already has been deployed in Russia's Southern Military District. He added that it's a hypersonic missile carried by an aircraft that can strike targets 2,000 kilometers (1,250 miles) away.

The Russian leader emphasized that the development of new weapons that have no equivalent in the West came in response to the U.S. withdrawal from a Cold war-era treaty banning missile defenses and U.S. efforts to develop a missile defense system.

He said that the U.S. has ignored Russian complaints.

"No one has listened to us," he said. "You listen to us now."

He said that Russian military experts and diplomats would be ready to discuss new weapons systems with their U.S. counterparts.

"We aren't threatening anyone, we aren't going to attack anyone, we aren't going to take anything from anyone," he said. "The growing Russian military might will guarantee global peace."

Hope Hicks leaving as Trump's communication director

By ZEKE MILLER and JILL COLVIN, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — White House communications director Hope Hicks, one of President Donald Trump's most trusted and longest-serving aides, abruptly announced her resignation, leaving a void around a president who values loyalty and affirmation.

The departure of Hicks, who worked as a one-woman communications shop during his campaign, came as a surprise Wednesday to most in the White House — and cast a pall over the West Wing at a trying time for the president. It leaves Trump increasingly without support of the familiar aides who surrounded him during his campaign, and marks the latest in a string of high-level departures in the administration's second year.

Hicks, 29, had a seemingly untouchable role in the West Wing, often viewed more as a surrogate daughter than a staffer. Perhaps most importantly, she served as Trump's glamorous shield and validator, always ready to provide "Mr. Trump" with a smiling dose of positive reinforcement, and controlling reporters' access. She was the fourth person to occupy the position since the president was sworn in, as the Trump White House has set modern records for staff turnover.

In a statement, Trump praised Hicks for her work over the last three years, saying he "will miss having her by my side." Hicks informed Trump of her decision Wednesday, a White House official said.

Hicks, who occupied the desk closest to the Oval Office in the West Wing, has been a central participant in or witness to nearly every milestone and controversy of the Trump campaign and White House. She began her White House tenure as director of strategic communications — a title that only partly captured her more expansive role as the president's gatekeeper to the press.

The news comes a day after Hicks was interviewed for nine hours by the House panel investigating Russia interference in the 2016 election and contact between Trump's campaign and Russia.

Hicks acknowledged to a House intelligence panel Tuesday that she has occasionally told "white lies" for Trump. But she said she had not lied about anything relevant to the Russia investigation. She has also been interviewed by special counsel Robert Mueller's team about her role in crafting a statement about Donald Trump Jr.'s 2016 meeting with Russians, as Mueller's expansive probe of Russian interference in the 2016 election and potential misdeeds committed by those in the president's orbit moves ever closer to the Oval Office.

Hicks' departure leaves a vacuum in the White House communications team, and in the president's collection of trusted aides. The announcement came a day after news broke of the impending departure of deputy communications director Josh Raffel, and just a few days after senior adviser Jared Kushner saw his security clearance downgraded — limiting his access to classified information.

"I can't imagine anyone here leaving a bigger hole in the White House than Hope on her departure," said White House lawyer Ty Cobb.

White House officials and outside advisers suggested Hicks' departure would strengthen chief of staff John Kelly's control over what has been an oftentimes chaotic West Wing.

In a statement, Kelly said Hicks had become "a trusted adviser and counselor," but behind the scenes the pair had occasionally clashed over her more informal role. Kelly had begrudgingly supported making Hicks communications director after the short-lived tenure of Anthony Scaramucci, in an effort to integrate her role into the rest of the White House's communications strategy.

Hicks said in a statement, "There are no words to adequately express my gratitude to President Trump." She added she wished Trump and his administration the "very best."

Before Wednesday's announcement, Hicks had not been happy for some time, according to two people with knowledge of her thinking who were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly. One person said Hicks had been increasingly feeling the stress of the position, especially in the wake of revelations about her relationship with former staff secretary Rob Porter. Since then, Hicks has been hounded by paparazzi, who have at times staked out her apartment building.

Hicks was an improbable campaign press secretary and senior White House official. A former Ralph Lauren fashion model and public relations pro who worked for Trump's daughter Ivanka, Hicks had no

political background when Trump asked her to serve on his campaign.

She was an unconventional press secretary, rarely mixing it up with reporters, almost never giving on-the-record interviews and, despite Trump's fondness for cable, staying off TV. She spoke at a rally exactly once in December 2016, after Trump beseeched her "to say a couple of words."

She said nine: "Hi. Merry Christmas everyone, and thank you, Donald Trump."

Within the White House, she was seen as a stabilizing force on Trump, who at times would grow unhappy when she was not around. As the West Wing was riven by rivalries in the early months of the administration, she allied herself with Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner in opposition, at times, to the nationalist forces led by then-chief strategist Steve Bannon.

Hicks, who has long tried to avoid media attention, was thrust into the spotlight recently when it was revealed she had been dating Porter. He left the administration after accusations that he had abused his two ex-wives became public.

Hicks helped craft the White House's initial supportive response — an effort some saw as inappropriate.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders told reporters that Hicks would remain at the White House "for several weeks" and denied that Hicks' decision to leave had anything to do with her lengthy testimony before the House Intelligence Committee.

"Don't try to read more into it than exists," Sanders said. "This is something that she's been thinking about for a while."

Associated Press writers Catherine Lucey and Ken Thomas in Washington and Jonathan Lemire in New York contributed to this report.

Russia says rebels shell exit corridor in Syria's Ghouta

By **BASSEM MROUE** and **NATALIYA VASILYEVA**, Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The Russian military on Thursday accused Syria's rebels of shelling a humanitarian corridor that Moscow set up with the Syrian government, offering residents of Damascus' besieged eastern suburbs a way out of the embattled enclave.

Russian President Vladimir Putin had ordered a five-hour daily humanitarian pause to allow civilians to exit the region. The daily pauses began on Tuesday but so far, no humanitarian aid has gone in — and no civilians have left the area, known as eastern Ghouta.

The eastern suburbs — a cluster of several towns and villages on Damascus' eastern edge — have faced a deadly and brutal onslaught for weeks by Syrian government troops, backed by Russia.

Residents say they do not trust the truce and the U.N. and aid agencies have criticized the unilateral arrangement, saying it gave no guarantees of safety for residents wishing to leave.

The eastern Ghouta residents also fear their region would meet the same fate as the eastern, rebel-held half of the city of Aleppo, where a similar Russian-ordered pause in 2016 called on residents to evacuate the area and for gunmen to lay down their arms.

A full ground assault followed, finally bringing Aleppo under government control.

Russian Maj. Gen. Vladimir Zolotukhin told Russia news agencies that the militants who control the suburbs are shelling the route, manned by Syrian and Russian forces, and preventing evacuations.

State-run al-Ikhbariya TV reported that dozens of civilians had gathered on the edge of eastern Ghouta to leave, but were prevented by insurgents from reaching a crossing point into government-controlled areas.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said before the truce went into effect at 9 a.m. on Thursday, government shelling and airstrikes on eastern Ghouta killed three people. The opposition's Syrian Civil Defense, also known as White Helmets, confirmed the casualty figure.

State-run Syrian Arab News Agency, SANA, said Thursday that a civilian was wounded by a mortar shell fired by the insurgents in eastern Ghouta at the Bab al-Salam area in the old city of Damascus.

The Russia-ordered pause came after a U.N. Security Council resolution calling for a nationwide 30-day cease-fire failed to take hold. While the relentless bombing has somewhat subsided in eastern Ghouta,

home to around 400,000 civilians, the Syrian government's push to squeeze the insurgents out of the region continued.

Elsewhere in Syria, a convoy of 28 trucks carrying aid entered the northern Kurdish enclave of Afrin, where Turkish troops have been on the offensive since Jan. 20 against Syrian Kurdish fighters. The government-controlled Syrian Central Military Media said Turkish troops and Turkey-backed opposition fighters targeting the convoy near the village of Marimameen.

The Observatory said Turkish warplanes conducted airstrikes as the convoy was heading toward Afrin. Ankara has said that Turkey would not suspend its military operations against the Syrian Kurdish fighters during the 30-day cease-fire demanded by the United Nations.

Turkish government spokesman Bekir Bozdag said Thursday that Turkish authorities read carefully the text of the U.N. Security Council resolution and claimed that it does not apply to the Afrin offensive since it excludes operations against terror groups.

Turkey considers the U.S.-backed Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units, or YPG, a "terrorist" organization connected to a Kurdish insurgency within its own borders. The YPG is a top U.S. ally in Syria in the fight against the Islamic State group.

Bozdag said the Turkish operations have not interrupted humanitarian aid and civilians have not been harmed in Afrin.

"An innocent civilian did not even get a nosebleed," he said.

Vasilyeva reported from Moscow. Associated Press writer Zeynep Bilginsoy in Istanbul contributed to this report.

This story has been corrected to show that the Turkish operation in Afrin started on Jan. 20, not June 20.

Shubhankar Sharma on a fast track from India

By DOUG FERGUSON, AP Golf Writer

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Each month brings a bigger stage and a new level of pedigree for Shubhankar Sharma.

He arrived in Mexico City for his first World Golf Championship at No. 75 in the world, making Sharma, at age 21, the highest-ranked player from India.

That's not what made him eligible to compete against Dustin Johnson, Jon Rahm, Jordan Spieth and the world's best players for a \$10 million prize fund. Sharma is the only two-time winner on the European Tour this season. He is leading the Race to Dubai.

And he hopes he is just getting started.

"I don't want to dwell on the past," Sharma said. "I still have so many things to do to get to the PGA Tour, and that's what I want to do."

And to think Sharma might never have seen a golf course except for the most unusual coincidence.

Sharma and Anirban Lahiri — the player he replaced as India's No. 1 — are both Army brats. Retired Col. Mohan Sharma was stationed at the same post as Lahiri's father, a gynecologist, when Sharma's younger sister was born.

"He was the doctor for my wife, and my wife was going through a tough time with blood pressure," Mohan Sharma said. "He's very kind and a fine doctor. His son was a top junior at that time. My son was turning 7. And he said to me, 'This is a great game. You'll find that if you take him to golf.'"

The Army colonel and his son went to the golf course together for the first time.

"No one in our family played golf," Shubhankar Sharma said. "He bought a set and I would tag along with him on the course. After a month or two, he got me a cut-down 2-iron. That was my first club."

Sharma didn't hit it very high, but he was straight. And he loved it. There was one course in Chandigarh, the northern city where India's first top player, Jeev Milkha Singh, was raised. Sharma was like many Indian kids. He played cricket after school. He played soccer.

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"But golf was different," he said. "That's what appealed to me. When I was 12 or 13, I knew I was going to be a professional golfer."

Mohan retired from the Army to look after his son, who turned pro when he was 16. Turning pro so early kept him from wearing his country's colors at the World Amateur Team Championship and other amateur competitions. But it made him determined to succeed.

"I always wanted to set the bar high," he said. "I thought setting the bar high helped me push myself. And it's the only thing that pushes me every day."

Singh saw the potential when he watched Sharma on the practice range at home. He was not surprised that Sharma has reached a world stage like the Mexico Championship, which starts Thursday at Chapultepec Golf Club.

"I am proud of the boy the way he has handled himself," Singh said Tuesday evening from India. "That's the most important thing when you see a young kid, and the conduct of this kid is amazing. I think he's got everything. He's humble. He knows you have to maintain your game and have the drive to keep it going. He's got a very good swing. But he's got a very strong mind. He's going to go far."

Sharma is not long and powerful off the tee, like so many young players. But he can score.

Two years ago, Sharma had two tournaments left to earn enough money for a full card on the Asian Tour. In the final round of the Manila Masters, he shot 62 to tie for fourth and lock up his card. At the end of his first full season, he shot 61 in the second round of the Joburg Open and went on to win. That was co-sanctioned with the European Tour, giving Sharma membership on two tours.

And then last month in Kuala Lumpur, Sharma again closed with a 62 to win the Malaysian Open and shoot to the top of Europe's money list.

"He's got such a great temperament," Lahiri said. "I played with him last year at the Malaysian Open. He got off to a rough start, hung in there and managed to finish in the top 10. I was really impressed with his grit. He's got a really stable head on his shoulders. And the best thing about his golf is he can really go low. He's not scared to make birdies in bunches."

They have a family connection through the birth of Sharma's sister, and Lahiri sees another parallel. Success in golf can come quickly. Three years ago, Lahiri won the Malaysian Open and the Hero Indian Open — both European Tour events — in a span of three weeks and rose to No. 34 in the world. Just like that, he was in World Golf Championships and heading to Augusta National for the Masters.

Later that year, he became the first Indian to play in the Presidents Cup.

"He's a really good kid. He comes from a humble background," Lahiri said. "He's kind of like myself — Army brats. We didn't have all the luxurious equipment or facilities. We're grinders."

Sharma already has a clear vision of where he wants to be, thanks to a road trip like none other in 2015.

On the range with him in Mexico was Gurbaaz Mann, who played sparingly at Arizona State as a walk-on and worked on golf equipment in Ohio before he needed to return home to India after his father died. He now is promoting the Indo-American PGA to help more Indian kids make it to America. Mann is caddying for him this week.

Sharma was among 10 players who flew to New York in the summer of 2015. They rented a 15-seat van, stacked the clubs in the back and off they went. Mann used social media to arrange pro-ams to raise money for the trip, and they had enough left over to send one of the players to Q-school in America.

They traveled south to Houston, northwest to Seattle, down the coast to San Francisco, over to Iowa, up to Cleveland. The trip covered some 12,500 miles over 45 days. If nothing else, Mann says it was a chance to see America and the ultimate destination for an aspiring golfer.

"There must be Americans who haven't done what we have," Sharma said with a laugh.

And now he's in Mexico City, hopeful of a big week that could lead to greater moments. The top 64 in the world qualify for the Dell Match Play in three weeks. He is trying to get into the top 50 over the next month to qualify for the Masters.

"Surely, this is the biggest event I've ever played," he said. "There will be a lot of learning."

TV ad aims to pressure Trump on transgender military service

By LOLITA C. BALDOR, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Activist groups are turning to television ads — including on President Donald Trump's go-to station, Fox News — to pressure the White House into allowing transgender people to keep serving in the military.

Trump has vowed to ban transgender troops from serving. He'll be able to see the 30-second commercial as of Friday, when it starts airing on Fox, CNN and MSNBC morning shows. It uses a series of quotes from Trump, a former senior military leader and several Congress members who were in the armed forces to argue that all qualified Americans should be able to serve.

"An unfit president tweets that transgender Americans won't be allowed to serve," the ad says. "But decorated military leaders say there's no reason to single out these brave heroes."

Sarah McBride, Human Rights Campaign's spokeswoman, said it's a "critical window of time" to take the fight directly to the White House.

The White House had no immediate comment.

The issue has become mired in a complicated string of political statements, court decisions and policy reviews since Trump first stunned his administration with tweets last July declaring that the government would ban transgender individuals from serving in the military. He later asked Defense Secretary Jim Mattis to send him a recommendation on how to proceed. That memo was delivered to Trump last week. The White House has said that a quick decision is unlikely.

Three federal courts have ruled against the ban, and the Pentagon responded by allowing those serving to stay in the military. It then began allowing transgender individuals to enlist beginning Jan. 1.

It's unclear how much impact the court decisions will have on Trump's decision. Activist groups worry the administration could enact such strict enlistment and health care restrictions that it would become all but impossible for transgender troops to join or continue serving.

"If they can't access health care, then they won't be able to serve," said McBride. "Then it becomes a ban in and of itself."

McBride didn't provide the exact cost of the ad buy, describing it as "five figures." She said it was the largest media campaign on this issue, with the backing of at least four other activist groups, including OutServe-SLDN, which represents the LGBT population in the military and is a plaintiff in the lawsuits.

In the last two months, several transgender people have visited recruiting stations for the military services and started the process of enlisting. The Pentagon says only one has made it through all the medical reviews, testing and paperwork and actually signed a contract. That person hasn't yet gone to basic training, but will likely do so in the coming months. The person hasn't been identified.

Under guidelines presented in December, the Pentagon can disqualify potential recruits with gender dysphoria, a history of medical treatments associated with gender transition and those who underwent reconstruction. Such recruits could be allowed in if a medical provider certifies they've been clinically stable in the preferred sex for 18 months and are free of significant distress or impairment in social, occupational or other important areas.

Transgender individuals receiving hormone therapy must be stable on their medication for 18 months.

The requirements make it challenging for a transgender recruit to pass. But they mirror conditions laid out by President Barack Obama's administration in 2016, when the Pentagon initially lifted its ban on transgender troops serving openly in the military.

Sessions pushes back on Trump criticism over handling of FBI

By SADIE GURMAN, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attorney General Jeff Sessions isn't staying quiet this time, pushing back after President Donald Trump used the word "disgraceful" to describe how Sessions is handling Republican complaints about the FBI.

Sessions insists he will "continue to discharge my duties with integrity and honor." That statement comes

following a Trump twitter tirade sparked by Sessions' suggestion that the Justice Department's inspector general will evaluate whether prosecutors and FBI agents wrongly obtained a warrant to monitor the communications of a onetime Trump campaign associate.

In his response, Sessions also says his department has taken the appropriate step and "will continue to do its work in a fair and impartial manner according to the law and Constitution."

It's not the first time Trump has aired his gripes against Sessions over the Russia probe.

Immigration head blames Oakland mayor for 800 missed arrests

By **OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ** and **ELLIOT SPAGAT**, Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — About 800 "criminals" avoided immigration arrests because Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf alerted the public to the surprise operation, an extraordinarily high number of missed targets, according to a federal official.

Thomas Homan, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's acting director, told Fox News that the mayor's warning on Twitter was "beyond the pale" and compared her to a gang lookout who tells people when a police car is arriving. Homan said the Justice Department is looking into whether Schaaf obstructed justice.

The mayor's unusual public warning last weekend came hours before the agency launched an operation in Northern California that resulted in more than 150 arrests as of Tuesday, according to the agency.

The agency declined to elaborate on the 800 who allegedly got away or answer other questions about the operation that began Sunday. Danielle Bennett, an agency spokeswoman, said more information would be released later in the week.

John Torres, the agency's director during the end of George W. Bush's administration and beginning of Barack Obama's, said agents generally capture about 40 percent of people they target in such sweeps.

Targets often elude authorities because agents don't have search warrants and advocacy groups have waged public awareness campaigns urging people not to open their doors. Other times, agents have outdated addresses or targets are not home.

It was unclear how many people would have eluded capture without the mayor's warning but Homan squarely blamed her for 800 and said her actions jeopardized officer safety.

"There's over 800 significant public safety threat criminals, these are people who are here illegally and committed yet another crime, been convicted of a crime," he told Fox. "She gave them warning, and there's 800 that we were unable to locate because of that warning, so that community's a lot less safe than it would have been."

Homan's statement of 800 missed targets — plus the 150 arrests — in only three days suggests an unusually large operation by the agency's standards. Two weeks ago, it arrested 212 in a five-day operation in the Los Angeles area. A Texas operation in February resulted in 145 arrests over seven days.

The agency said about half of the people arrested during the Northern California sweep have criminal convictions in addition to immigration violations, including convictions for assault, weapons offenses and driving under the influence. It is impossible to independently verify that claim because the agency refuses to name them. Its statement identified only one arrest by name.

Schaaf on Saturday issued a statement on Twitter that she learned from "multiple credible sources" that an immigration operation was imminent in the San Francisco area, including Oakland, possibly within 24 hours.

The mayor, who is running for another term this year, defended her actions again on Wednesday, saying she was not tipped off by "official sources" and that she didn't reveal specific locations.

Asked about Homan likening her to a gang lookout, she said the "Trump administration is trying to distract the American people, convince them that these immigrants are dangerous people. That could not be further from the truth and it is based in racism."

Lara Bazelon, an associate law professor at the University of San Francisco, said it was highly unlikely that the mayor would be prosecuted.

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"It's a tall order for ICE to show that she was obstructing justice because they would have to show she knew they were going after specific people and I just don't see the evidence for that," she said.

The warring words are the latest sign of escalating tension between California officials and the Trump administration over immigration enforcement and "sanctuary" jurisdictions. Homan vowed that immigration agents would have a stronger presence in California since a state law took effect in January to sharply limit cooperation between state and local law enforcement and federal immigration authorities.

San Francisco Public Defender Jeff Adachi, who attended a protest outside the agency's San Francisco office, said immigration officials did not respond to his demand that attorneys be allowed to interview people detained in the operation.

Booking logs at the Sacramento County jail show at least 12 people booked there by the agency on Sunday.

Dozens of protesters marching outside the agency's offices in San Francisco after Homan spoke chanted, "Shut down ICE!" David Chiu, a Democratic state assemblyman, said Trump "has declared war on our immigrant communities."

"We're here to stand united and say we do not want him ripping apart our families, ripping apart our economy, ripping apart California," he said.

Homan, in announcing the arrests late Tuesday, renewed his warning that California's limits on cooperating with ICE in local jails will lead to a bigger presence of immigration agents on the streets.

"Sanctuary jurisdictions like San Francisco and Oakland shield dangerous criminal aliens from federal law enforcement at the expense of public safety," he said.

Defenders of so-called sanctuary city practices say they improve public safety by promoting trust among law enforcement and immigrant communities and reserving scarce police resources for other, more urgent crime-fighting needs.

Spagat reported from San Diego. Associated Press writers Paul Elias and Terry Chea in San Francisco contributed.

Teams back at combine in search of 2018 success

By ARNIE STAPLETON, AP Pro Football Writer

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Lured out of the broadcast booth with a \$100 million contract that makes him the highest-paid football coach ever, Jon Gruden sauntered up to the podium and flashed that mischievous smile.

"I'm very excited to be back here in Indianapolis," Gruden declared. "I sure have missed the combine."

Gruden is navigating an offseason NFL landscape that's changed drastically since he last roamed the sideline nearly a decade ago.

"It's a lot different because you're not allowed to have any interaction with the players, and I've always complained about that since the new (collective bargaining agreement) came into place," Gruden said Wednesday. "A lot of players would come to see me in Tampa to get their football fix."

"So, you're not allowed to have contact with these guys. But what's most discouraging to me is we've got to make some decisions on our roster, on salaries, on players and their futures and you can't even meet them," Gruden grumbled.

"I don't know these guys. I've never coached them. I never met half of them. So, that's been very, very difficult for me and I've been emotional about it at times."

On the next podium was Matt Patricia, who, unlike his former colleague Josh McDaniels, didn't balk at leaving Bill Belichick's brigade.

Then there was Andy Reid, in the midst of another major roster shakeup, and his protege, Doug Pederson, still basking in Philadelphia's first Super Bowl triumph in just his second season as coach of the Eagles.

All are gathering this week in Indianapolis hoping to better their chances of winning in 2018.

Top college prospects, including a group of quarterbacks that could produce five first-round draft picks, will spend four days getting poked and prodded, tested and timed.

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GMs and coaches will pepper them with questions either in formal 15-minute interviews or during a mixed zone after their physical assessments.

"It's a chance to get to know these guys, to know exactly what you're getting when they come into the building," said new Texans general manager Brian Gaine.

He said their athleticism and acumen are already well-known, and they'll flash their strength, speed and swiftness this week at Lucas Oil Stadium.

What the GMs and coaches want to do is get a look under the hood.

"We'd like to talk about football as much as we can, but we need to know everything we can to find out about these players," Gaine said. "So when they come into our building (we know) that they're a good fit for us in the locker room, in the weight room, in the training room, in the meeting rooms, out on the practice field."

After this week, teams will retreat to their headquarters and begin preparing for the annual flood of free agents that will hit the market in mid-March.

NFL.com reported this week that teams will soon receive in-game player-tracking data on every NFL player in the league, something that could change the way they scout opponents and evaluate free agents.

The league has gathered the data since 2014 through sensors in players' shoulder pads. Until now, teams only had data on their own players.

Some teams have embraced the new tools more than others.

"Are you talking about the analytics, the GPS, all the modern technology?" Gruden said. "Man, I'm trying to throw the game back to 1998.

"You know, really as a broadcaster, I went around and observed every team, asked a lot of questions, took a look at the facilities, how they're doing business, there's a stack of analytic data or 'DAY-tuh,' however you want to say that word, people don't even know how to read it. It's one thing to have the data — or DAY-tuh — it's another thing to know how to read the damn thing.

"So, I'm not going to rely on GPSs and all the modern technology. I will certainly have some people that are professional that can help me from that regard. But I still think doing things the old-fashioned way is a good way, and we're going to try to lean the needle that way a little bit."

Also meeting in Indianapolis this week is the league's competition committee, which is looking into fixing the catch rule, something commissioner Roger Goodell said was his top offseason priority.

The committee is also pondering whether to change the defensive pass interference rule from a spot foul into a 15-yard infraction as it is in college.

Broncos coach Vance Joseph dismissed that possibility because of the harm it could cause to a league that just gave us a thrilling Super Bowl featuring 1,151 yards of offense, more than any NFL game ever played.

"The DPI rule's not going to change, guys. That's nice media talk," Joseph said. "The catch rule? It has to clear up what's an actual catch and what's not a catch. But the DPI rule's not going to change. It's a fun game. We like to see points being scored. If that rule changes, there's going to be a lot of defensive backs grabbing and pulling guys, so that won't change."

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

Follow Arnie Melendrez Stapleton on Twitter: <http://twitter.com/arniestapleton>

Walmart sets age of 21 to buy firearms, ammunition

BY ANNE D'INNOCENZIO, AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Walmart announced Wednesday that it will no longer sell firearms and ammunition to people younger than 21 and would also remove items resembling assault-style rifles from its website.

The move comes after Dick's Sporting Goods announced earlier in the day that it would restrict the sale of firearms to those under 21 years old. It didn't mention ammunition. Dick's also said it would immediately stop selling assault-style rifles, and its CEO took on the National Rifle Association by demanding tougher gun laws.

Walmart said its decision came after the company reviewed its firearm sales policy in light of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, that killed 17 people. The teenage gunman used an AR-15 rifle. It said it takes "seriously our obligation to be a responsible seller of firearms" and also emphasized its background of serving "serving sportsmen and hunters."

Several major corporations, including MetLife, Hertz and Delta Air Lines, have cut ties with the NRA since the Florida tragedy, but none were retailers that sold guns. The NRA has pushed back aggressively against calls for raising age limits for guns or restricting the sale of assault-style weapons.

Walmart Inc. stopped selling AR-15 guns and other semi-automatic weapons in 2015. It doesn't sell bump stocks, the accessory attached to a semi-automatic gun that makes it easier to fire rounds faster. It also doesn't sell large-capacity magazines. It also says it doesn't sell handguns, except in Alaska.

In announcing the change in policy, the company said it had processes in place to make sure it was applied for online sales.

In public spat, Trump taunts Sessions, AG doesn't keep quiet

By SADIE GURMAN, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Harshly criticized yet again by his boss, Attorney General Jeff Sessions on Wednesday abandoned his usual stony silence and pushed back against President Donald Trump for saying Sessions' response to Republican complaints about the FBI was "disgraceful."

Sessions gave no suggestion he would step down in light of the charge made on Twitter and insisted he would "continue to discharge my duties with integrity and honor."

Trump's latest tirade stems from a comment Sessions made Tuesday, when he suggested the Justice Department's inspector general will evaluate whether prosecutors and FBI agents wrongly obtained a warrant under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act to monitor the communications of a onetime Trump campaign associate. Sessions had asked the watchdog office to review the complaints in response to pressure from congressional Republicans, who, like Trump, have fumed about what they believe to be bias within the FBI.

Trump tweeted: "Why is A.G. Jeff Sessions asking the Inspector General to investigate potentially massive FISA abuse. Will take forever, has no prosecutorial power and already late with reports on Comey etc. Isn't the I.G. an Obama guy? Why not use Justice Department lawyers? DISGRACEFUL!"

Sessions answered hours later, saying his department had taken the appropriate step and "will continue to do its work in a fair and impartial manner according to the law and Constitution."

It was hardly the first time the president has aired his gripes against Sessions over the Russia probe. The former Alabama senator, an early supporter of Trump's candidacy, has endured a year's worth of Trump's wrath in order to hold onto the job he had long desired. But even for Trump, who once called the attorney general "beleaguered," Wednesday's volley elevated the rhetoric to a new level.

The exchange comes at a time of heightened tension between the Justice Department and the White House, which is mired in special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Trump campaign ties to Russia and possible obstruction of justice. Trump has long viewed Sessions' decision to step aside from that investigation as leading to Mueller's appointment.

Sessions has become a Trump scapegoat, allowing the president to avoid some of the political consequences of directly attacking Mueller as his probe escalates.

Trump this time is angry that Sessions referred the allegations of employee misconduct to the inspector general, but that's exactly what that office is charged with doing. Its lawyers are part of the department and, contrary to Trump's claims, can and often do refer matters for prosecution.

The office has been working on a separate review of the FBI's handling of the Hillary Clinton email investigation under former Director James Comey, but that report is not late and is expected to be released around March or April.

Inspector General Michael Horowitz's office has acknowledged receiving Sessions' request but hasn't said it is investigating. Horowitz was appointed to the post by President Barack Obama, as Trump noted.

But years earlier, Horowitz was named in the Bush administration to a seat on the Sentencing Commission, suggesting he has more bipartisan bona fides than Trump acknowledges. Horowitz also launched the review of the FBI's handling of the Clinton case — the stated reason by Trump and Sessions for the dismissal of Comey in May.

GOP Rep. Trey Gowdy of South Carolina, recently one of the FBI's toughest critics, defended Horowitz as "fair, fact-centric and appropriately confidential with his work."

Until now, Sessions had largely keep quiet in the face of Trump's verbal and social media volleys, faithfully executing the president's agenda on guns, drugs, violent crime and illegal immigration. Some within Sessions' own department had criticized that silence as straining morale and making him seem too eager to appease the president at the risk of dangerously politicizing the institution.

The two bonded early in Trump's campaign. But Trump has not been able to get over Sessions' withdrawal from the Russia investigation and has relentlessly belittled him and pressured him to investigate political rivals. The criticism was so harsh that Sessions offered last year to resign; Trump refused.

Sessions has since tried to get back into Trump's good graces. His request of the inspector general should have appeased Trump, as White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders suggested Tuesday it would.

"It's something that he's clearly had frustration over so I would imagine he certainly support the decision to look into what we feel to be some wrongdoing," she said. "I think that's the role of the Department of Justice and we're glad that they're fulfilling that job."

Associated Press writer Eric Tucker contributed to this report.

Teacher barricades himself in class, fires gun; no one hurt

By JEFF MARTIN and ALINA HARTOUNIAN, Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A social studies teacher barricaded himself inside a classroom at a Georgia high school on Wednesday and fired a handgun, sending students running outside or hunkering down in darkened gym locker rooms, authorities said.

No Dalton High School students were in the classroom when the teacher fired the weapon, and despite the chaotic lockdown and evacuation, the only injury was a student who hurt her ankle running away.

It wasn't immediately clear why the teacher, 53-year-old Jesse Randal Davidson, had the gun. Under questioning by detectives, he refused to discuss what led to the shooting.

The gunfire erupted with a nation on edge two weeks after a Florida school shooting left 17 students and faculty dead and ignited a new debate over gun control in America. Within minutes of the Dalton shooting, students there took to social media, calling for restricting gun rights. In the afternoon, President Donald Trump, who has advocated for arming teachers, convened a bipartisan group of lawmakers at the White House to address gun violence.

The teacher was taken into custody without incident after a 30- to 45-minute standoff with officers, police spokesman Bruce Frazier said. A teacher since 2004, Davidson also serves as the play-by-play announcer for the high school's football team.

Police noted that Davidson didn't appear to want to hurt the students or faculty. He fired the gun at an exterior window when the principal tried to enter the classroom.

"I don't know whether he was just firing the gun off to let people know to back off or what," Frazier said.

The shooting happened about 11:30 a.m. during Davidson's planning period. At first, students tried to get into the classroom, but they couldn't. The students told the principal, who tried to enter.

"I didn't get the door open very far, but he slammed the door and hollered 'Go away, don't come in here.' He had some nonsensical noises that were made as well," Principal Steve Bartoo said.

Bartoo returned a short time later and put his key in the door "and again he slammed the door before I could open it and he said, 'Don't come in here, I have a gun.'"

That's when Davidson fired and the school was placed on lockdown, authorities said.

Davidson faces six charges, including aggravated assault involving a gun and terroristic threats and

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acts, jail records showed. Other charges include carrying a weapon in a school safety zone and reckless conduct. It's not clear if he has an attorney.

Chondi Chastain told The Associated Press she was supposed to have Davidson's class at 2:30 p.m.

"My favorite teacher at Dalton high school just blockaded his door and proceeded to shoot. We had to run out the back of the school in the rain. Students were being trampled and screaming. I dare you to tell me arming teachers will make us safe," she tweeted in a post that was retweeted 15,000 times within hours.

She said Davidson himself had commented that arming teachers was a bad idea.

"I feel like there just shouldn't be guns at school at all," she said. "It's our basic student right to feel safe at school and if (teachers were armed), I wouldn't feel safe."

Student Emma Jacobs texted her mother while she hid inside a darkened classroom, said her mother, Annmarie Jacobs. Emma, a junior, said in texts that her teacher had turned the lights off and told the students to sit in a corner.

Then, in an act that brought home the danger of the situation, Emma texted her mother, "omg she's putting desk in front of the door."

Nathangel Lopez hunkered down with students and teachers in a gym locker room. While there, he tweeted a photo of teens sitting on benches and called for more gun control.

"This shouldn't happen to us," he wrote. "I hope a lawmaker somewhere will do something."

When he found out that a teacher was involved, he shifted his stance on arming educators.

"At first, I was thinking that that might have been a good idea. I am now totally against it," he said.

Several students said on social media they were outraged that some on Twitter questioned whether the incident was staged.

Davidson was described as laid back and smart. In 2012, he was recognized as the school's top teacher, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported. He moved to Dalton in 1995 and became sports and news director at WBLJ-AM radio.

"It was always about the students. He really wanted the students to understand the concept," said 18-year-old senior Rowdy Zeisig.

The principal said Davidson was an "excellent teacher" who was well thought of, and "as far as I know he was fit to be at work."

Twice in recent years, Dalton police say they encountered the teacher exhibiting odd behavior and wrote in one report that he "may be delusional."

Davidson had walked into the police department and told a rambling story about thinking a murder had occurred, police wrote in a 2016 report. But police said they investigated and were not able to verify that any of the information was true. Police said that after the interview, Davidson was taken to a hospital "based on him thinking about hurting himself."

Police said in another report last year that officers found Davidson during a school day sitting on the curb of a street, conscious but unresponsive and being held up by two school staff members. He was again taken to a hospital.

Both police reports were posted late Wednesday by the Chattanooga Times Free Press.

A week ago, police found a "threatening" note on the floor of a classroom at Dalton High, but it wasn't related to the shooting Wednesday.

Threats have been made at schools across the country in the wake of the Feb. 14 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

Dalton High has about 2,000 students. The school is about 90 miles (145 kilometers) north of Atlanta.

Hartounian reported from Phoenix. AP writer Jacob Jordan also contributed to this report.

Kushner's clearance downgrade could leave him 'flying blind'

By ZEKE MILLER and MATTHEW LEE, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — White House senior adviser Jared Kushner has lost his access to the nation's deepest secrets. His credibility as a negotiator may be next.

Kushner's loss of his top-secret clearance could be particularly problematic in his role overseeing the Trump administration's efforts to produce Mideast peace.

"I could not have done my job" with a security clearance at Kushner's level, says Frank Lowenstein, who served as special envoy to the region during Barack Obama's second term.

Others who have handled the Mideast portfolio say access to highly classified intelligence is essential in a negotiation. Without it, one likened the situation to "fighting with one hand tied behind your back," another to "flying blind."

The White House insists that Kushner's job will be unaffected by this week's downgrade to his security clearance. But the new limits on Donald Trump's son-in-law's access to information may well curtail his work — and raise questions about his longevity in the West Wing.

Separately, the White House announced Wednesday that Communications Director Hope Hicks, one of the president's most trusted aides, is resigning. The news of her leaving, the latest in a string of notable departures, came the day after she was interviewed for nine hours by the House panel investigating Russian interference in the 2016 election.

And late Wednesday, The New York Times reported that two companies made loans worth more than half a billion dollars to Kushner's family real estate firm after executives met with Kushner at the White House.

In a phone call with The Associated Press Wednesday night, Kushner Cos. spokeswoman Christine Taylor confirmed the loans but said the implication that Kushner's position in the White House had affected the company's long-standing relationships with lenders is "made up and without substantiation."

A spokesman for Kushner's lawyer, Abbe Lowell, said Kushner "has had no role in the Kushner Companies since joining the government."

Former U.S. and international officials say that even if Kushner stays at the White House, his job won't be the same.

Chris Hill, who was in charge of nuclear negotiations with North Korea during President George W. Bush's administration, said it would be nearly impossible to be effective without a full clearance.

"You can do the job, but you can't do it well," Hill said. "Or rather, you can do the job, but you will do it badly." When it comes to classified information, Hill said, "you have to know as much as you can because the other side knows as much as they can."

The downgrade is only the latest clipping of Kushner's once-sweeping foreign policy role.

During the presidential transition, Kushner, 37, was the principal liaison for more than a dozen foreign governments and world leaders who sought to build relationships with Trump. Last year, he played a significant role organizing the president's foreign trips to the Middle East and Asia, and made solo trips in his own right. But Kushner has seen his portfolio in the administration shrink steadily over the last year, amid concerns from chief of staff John Kelly and others that he was undermining Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

On foreign policy, officials said his recent focus has been the U.S.-Mexico relationship as well as the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

The impact of his clearance downgrade on his domestic assignments is expected to be minimal. He leads the Office of American Innovation, which is focused on public-private partnerships that can transform government, promote economic growth and repair the nation's infrastructure. As news of his reduced access to classified information broke on Tuesday, he was on Capitol Hill discussing the administration's plans for criminal justice reform.

Still, Kushner is losing access to the highly secret presidential daily brief, and his ability to remain in the room for some of Trump's most consequential domestic and foreign policy decisions.

Lowell, Kushner's attorney, said he had not been informed of any reason for the holdup in Kushner's permanent top-secret clearance. The presidential aide has been forced to repeatedly correct omissions in

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his "SF-86," the government form used to apply for clearances, as well as in his financial disclosure forms. Intelligence officials have expressed concern that his business dealings were a topic of discussion in conversations he was having with foreign officials about issues of interest to the U.S. government, a former intelligence official said.

The official, who spoke only on condition of anonymity to discuss Kushner's security clearance review, said there was a difference of opinion among intelligence officials about the significance of the conversations.

Some believed Kushner knew his business dealings would likely come up in the conversations and was too naive or inexperienced to know how to steer clear of the topic in light of his position as Trump's adviser, the official said. Others thought Kushner knew the topic would likely surface and used the opportunity while talking to the foreign officials to engage in conversations about his business interests.

In public, administration officials have hewed to the White House line that Kushner's work would be unaffected, citing an unusual statement from chief of staff Kelly last week that he had "full confidence in his ability to continue performing his duties."

State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert told Fox News on Tuesday that Kushner would remain focused on Middle East peace. "I can't see any change on the importance of that or his work on that issue," she said.

But privately, officials say there has been no internal communication about Kushner's status, leaving aides to learn of changes in the press and sparking speculation that more substantial changes may be afoot.

Aaron David Miller, a former Mideast peace negotiator under presidents of both parties, said losing access to top secret information wouldn't prevent Kushner from finishing the U.S. peace plan but would hamstring him when it comes to the next step: talks involving both sides.

"There's a prestige credibility factor. That's the way everyone is going to read this," Miller said. "Yes, he still has access to the president, but what's going on?"

Miller said eventually, if a deal is to be reached, highly sensitive details must be discussed regarding borders, surveillance and control of the electromagnetic spectrum. Other arms of the U.S. government such as the CIA and the Defense Department would be brought in, but Kushner wouldn't be able to attend certain meetings without high-level clearance.

Under normal circumstances, the point man for Mideast peace would have unfettered access to droves of classified information at the top secret/codeword sensitive compartmentalized information (TS/SCI) level, including possible U.S. intercepts of conversations, Miller said.

Uzi Arad, a former national security adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, said Kushner's security clearance issues would likely not affect his treatment by Israel.

If there was room for concern, he said, then "why would the U.S. send that envoy in the first place, if that person is not trusted by the United States itself?"

Associated Press writers Josh Lederman and Deb Riechmann in Washington, Bernard Condon in New York and Ian Deitch in Jerusalem contributed to this report.

Follow Miller and Lee on Twitter <https://twitter.com/ZekeJMiller> and <https://twitter.com/APDiploWriter>

Hugs, tears and police: High school reopens after shooting

By **KELLI KENNEDY, TERRY SPENCER and JOSH REPLOGLE, Associated Press**

PARKLAND, Fla. (AP) — Students and teachers hugged and cried Wednesday as they returned under heavy police guard to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High for the first time since a teenager with an assault rifle killed 17 people and thrust the huge Florida school into the center of a renewed national gun debate.

The half-day began with fourth period so that the nearly 3,300 students could first be with the people they were with during the shooting two weeks ago.

"In the beginning, everyone was super serious, but then everyone cheered up and it started being the same vibes we had before the shooting. People started laughing and joking around," said Kyle Kashuv, a

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junior who said he hugged every single teacher.

On the way in, teens were guarded by hundreds of police officers. The police were accompanied by comfort animals, including dogs, horses and a donkey. One of the horses had "eagle pride" painted on its side. A nearby woman held a sign offering "free kisses."

After school dismissed, members of the Guardian Angels wearing their trademark red berets lined the streets at a crosswalk.

Kashuv said he was amazed by the outpouring of support from the community, including the police presence, the animals and many well-wishers. There were letters from all over the world and "banners on every single wall," he said.

Some of the officers carried military-style rifles, and Superintendent Robert Runcie said the police presence would continue for the remainder of the school year. The heavy arms rattled some students.

"This is a picture of education in fear in this country." The National Rifle Association "wants more people just like this, with that exact firearm, to scare more people and sell more guns," said David Hogg, who has become a leading voice in the student movement to restrict assault weapons.

About 150 grief counselors were on campus "to provide a lot of love, a lot of understanding" and to help students "ease back" into their school routines, Runcie said.

The freshman building where the Feb. 14 massacre took place remained cordoned off.

Students were told leave their backpacks at home. Principal Ty Thomas tweeted that the school's focus would be on "emotional readiness and comfort, not curriculum."

In each classroom, colored pencils, coloring books, stress balls and toys were available to help students cope.

"It's not how you go down. It's how you get back up," said Casey Sherman, a 17-year-old junior. She said she was not afraid to be return, "just nervous."

Many students said the debate over new gun laws helped them process the traumatic event and prepared them to return.

Alexis Grogan, a 15-year-old sophomore, was concerned that it might be too soon to go on as usual without slain friends such as Luke Hoyer, who sat two seats behind her in Spanish class.

"Seeing everyone was good, but emotionally I was in shambles. I probably broke down into tears 10-plus times and had to walk out of my classes multiple times throughout the day," she said.

As classes resumed, Dick's Sporting Goods, a major U.S. retailer, announced that it would immediately halt sales of assault-style rifles and high-capacity magazines at all of its stores and ban the sale of all guns to anyone under 21. The company's CEO took on the NRA by demanding tougher gun laws. Later Wednesday, Walmart announced that it would no longer sell firearms and ammunition to people younger than 21 and would also remove items resembling assault-style rifles from its website.

At the Florida Capitol, a House committee voted Tuesday in favor of a bill to raise the minimum age to buy long guns from 18 to 21 and to create a program allowing teachers to carry concealed weapons in classrooms if their school district allows it. Those teachers would receive law-enforcement training and get deputized by the local sheriff's office.

State lawmakers continued their investigation of how the suspected shooter, Nikolas Cruz, managed to slip through local law enforcement despite previous warning signs.

The Florida House voted Wednesday to subpoena records from Broward County and the school board, as well as sheriff's offices in Broward and Palm Beach counties and the city of Coral Springs. Among items requested from the school were documents on a mentoring program aimed at alternatives to the juvenile justice system. Critics have suggested the program led to lenience for Cruz, but the superintendent said Wednesday that the suspect was never was part of the program.

Florida Gov. Rick Scott said he hopes a gun and school-safety bill is passed before the annual legislative session ends March 9. The measures he proposed did not include arming teachers, but he declined to say Tuesday whether he would veto a sweeping package that includes that provision.

The Broward superintendent has spoken out against the idea of arming teachers.

Marion Hammer, a lobbyist for the National Rifle Association and Unified Sportsmen of Florida, said she supports school security and keeping guns out of the hands of the mentally ill, but “guns are not the problem.”

Kashuv said he was most moved by a tattoo his teacher got that said “MSD Strong” with a giant eagle. “The shooting doesn’t define us,” he said. “We’re really moving past it and trying to heal right now.”

Associated Press writers Brendan Farrington in Tallahassee, Florida, and Curt Anderson in Miami contributed to this report. Video journalist Robert Ray also contributed.

Follow the AP’s complete coverage of the Florida school shooting here: <https://apnews.com/tag/Florida-schoolshooting> .

Jailed Instagram model wants to trade secrets for freedom

By TODD PITMAN and NATALIYA VASILYEVA, Associated Press

PATTAYA, Thailand (AP) — A Belarusian woman jailed in Thailand for offering sex lessons without a work permit says she has a story to tell involving the Kremlin, Russian billionaires and even the president of the United States.

Anastasia Vashukevich, whose extraordinary claims and racy selfies have propelled her to internet fame in recent weeks, told The Associated Press from a police van Wednesday that she fears for her life, and wants to exchange information on alleged Russian ties to Donald Trump’s campaign for her own personal safety. But she refused for now to offer any such evidence, and it’s not clear if she has any.

Vashukevich’s story offers a glimpse into the shady world of Russian oligarchs. Trump’s onetime campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, also had ties to that world through his consulting work for one of those oligarchs. Manafort has been indicted on money-laundering charges related to his overseas consulting work by special counsel Robert Mueller. But Mueller has offered no evidence that Manafort linked his Russian contacts to Trump’s campaign or helped Russia meddle in the 2016 U.S. election.

That has not stopped Vashukevich from claiming she has such evidence as she faces possible deportation.

Vashukevich shot to fame in early February when Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, one of President Vladimir Putin’s top foes, published an investigation drawing on Vashukevich’s social media posts suggesting corrupt links between billionaire Oleg Deripaska and a top Kremlin official, Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Prikhodko. The report featured video from Deripaska’s yacht in 2016, when Vashukevich claims she was having an affair with him.

Russians have focused on the ties between Deripaska and Prikhodko. But now Vashukevich says — so far without proof — that she can link the Kremlin to Trump and Manafort, who worked for Deripaska a decade before Trump hired him.

Even Navalny told the AP on Wednesday he has “certain doubts” that Vashukevich has any evidence about alleged direct ties between Russia and the Trump campaign.

“I think such statements are made because of fears for her own life because they have been detained in Thailand,” he said, adding he believes her fears are well-founded.

Navalny’s report made no claim that Vashukevich knew anything about a Russian campaign to influence the U.S. election, and she has produced no evidence that she does.

As for her claims of Deripaska’s ties to the Kremlin official, Deripaska has called them nonsense when Navalny alleged them.

In an emailed response Feb. 8, Deripaska’s spokesman said: “These scandalous and mendacious assumptions are driven by sensationalism and we totally refute these outrageous false allegations in the strongest possible way.”

Deripaska sued Vashukevich and her “sex guru,” Alexander Kirillov, for breach of privacy. The Russian court imposed an injunction, and communications providers blocked access to Navalny’s website for several weeks until he deleted the videos.

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A Feb. 15 statement from Deripaska said: "Mr. Deripaska's claim is to protect his right to privacy and has nothing to do with any political struggle between Mr. Navalny and his political opponents."

A request for comment Wednesday from the Russian government went unanswered.

Peter Carr, a spokesman for Mueller, declined to comment Wednesday.

On Sunday, Vashukevich was arrested along with nine other people, including Kirillov, in the Thai resort of Pattaya while giving sex lessons to Russian tourists. Immigration Police Maj. Satawat Srirattanapong said the 10 were charged with working without a permit, and one with having an expired visa.

Vashukevich said she won't give details of what she knows until she is guaranteed she won't be sent to Russia.

"I can say something only when I will be in a safe place, sorry, because I am worried about my life," Vashukevich told the AP from a police van that was taking the detainees from Pattaya to Bangkok's Immigration Detention Center.

Vashukevich had earlier posted a video on Instagram, also apparently made while in custody in Pattaya, addressed to "Dear American media."

"I didn't want to tell you about many things. Now they're trying to lock us up," she said. "But now I'm ready to put together all the pieces of the puzzle that you have been missing, and back it up with audio and video regarding the ties of our esteemed lawmakers with Manafort, Trump and all this buzz around the U.S. election. I know a lot."

Trump has repeatedly denied that he colluded with Russia to influence the U.S. election.

Kirillov, the "sex guru" known in Russia for staging high-profile sexual happenings that usually involve sending scantily clad women out in public, told AP from the police van that the Russian government was behind their arrests.

"Political reasons. We know so much. So that's why they want us to go to Russia," he said. "We think that in a few days, maybe even today, they will send us to Russia, very fast, and I think you will lose us, and never see us more."

Kirillov and Vashukevich have both recorded their activities on social media, with racy photos and videos taken in many countries. One of the tamer photos on Kirillov's feed shows him posing in front of Trump Tower in New York. Kirillov, who Thai police say is Russian, posts under the pseudonym Alex Lesley. Vashukevich, who is from Belarus, uses the name Nastya Rybka.

They were arrested in a hotel meeting room in Pattaya, a seaside resort noted for its sex industry and popularity with Russian visitors. The lessons were attended by about 40 Russian tourists, many wearing T-shirts bearing the English words "Sex animator" with an arrow pointing to the wearer's crotch. Thai news media cited police as saying that the meeting was raided because hotel staff reported hearing strange sounds.

Satawat, the police major, said all 10 arrested people have had their visas revoked and will be detained at the Immigration Detention Center in Bangkok until the charges of working illegally are resolved. He said police have up to 48 days to process the cases before handing them to prosecutors. If they plead guilty, he said, their cases could end without trial and they could leave the country.

Canceling a visa normally allows a country to expel a person without having to go through the legal process of extradition.

Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied Wednesday that the Russians' case had anything to do with a visit to Thailand by Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev. He said Patrushev often makes overseas visits arranged in advance.

"It's ludicrous to link this to the detention of Russian nationals in Thailand," he said.

Navalny said given recent events — including a cocaine bust at the Russian Embassy in Argentina — he wasn't so sure.

"I don't know what to think," Navalny told the AP. "Shows like 'Homeland' begin to look entirely realistic when you look at what is happening in Russia now. We thought the scriptwriters made the most impossible things up, but in Russia the most absurd things are possible."

Vasilyeva reported from Moscow. Associated Press journalists Tassanee Vejpongsa in Pattaya and Grant Peck in Bangkok contributed to this report.

Trump puts GOP in the hot seat on guns _ for now

By LISA MASCARO, MATTHEW DALY and CATHERINE LUCEY, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Putting fellow Republicans in the hot seat, President Donald Trump called for speedy and substantial changes to the nation's gun laws on Wednesday, criticizing lawmakers in a White House meeting for being too fearful of the National Rifle Association to take action.

In a freewheeling, televised session that stretched for an hour, Trump rejected both his party's incremental approach and its legislative strategy that has stalled action in Congress. Giving hope to Democrats, he said he favored a "comprehensive" approach to addressing violence like the shooting at Florida school earlier this month, although he offer no specific details.

Instead, Trump again voiced his support for expanded background checks. He endorsed increased school security and mental health resources, and he reaffirmed his support for raising the age to 21 for purchasing some firearms. Trump also mentioned arming teachers, and said his administration, not Congress, would ban bump-stock devices that enable guns to fire like automatic weapons with an executive order.

"We can't wait and play games and nothing gets done," Trump said as he opened the session with 17 House and Senate lawmakers. "We want to stop the problems."

Trump also raised eyebrows by suggesting that law enforcement officials should be able to confiscate people's firearms without a court order to prevent potential tragedies.

"Take the guns first, go through due process second," he suggested.

The president has previously backed ideas popular with Democrats, only to back away when faced with opposition from his conservative base and his GOP allies in Congress. It was not clear whether he would continue to push for swift and significant changes to gun laws, when confronted with the inevitable resistance from his party.

Still, the televised discussion allowed Trump to play the role of potential dealmaker, a favorite for the president. Democratic lawmakers made a point of appealing to the president to use his political power to persuade his party to take action.

"It is going to have to be you," Sen. Chris Murphy told Trump.

Trump's call for stronger background checks, which are popular among Americans, has been resisted by Republicans in Congress and the NRA. Republicans have instead been leaning toward modest legislation designed to improve the background system already in place. Trump made clear he was looking for more and accused lawmakers of being "petrified" of the gun lobby.

"Hey, I'm the biggest fan of the Second Amendment," Trump said, adding that he told NRA officials it's time to act. "We have to stop this nonsense."

The White House meeting came amid fresh public debate over gun laws, fueled by student survivors of the massacre at Florida's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, who have been meeting with lawmakers on Capitol Hill. The school reopened Wednesday for the first time since a Valentine's Day assault killed 17.

Gun legislation has lost momentum in Congress as Republican leaders showed little interest in pursuing stricter gun control laws.

Democrats said they were concerned Trump's interest may fade quickly. After the meeting, Murphy, D-Conn., told reporters: "I'm worried that this was the beginning and the end of the president's advocacy on this issue. The White House has to put some meat on the bones. The White House has to send a proposal to Congress."

The White House is expected to reveal more on the president's plans for school safety later this week. That announcement will likely include goals for background checks and bump stocks, though whether age restrictions will be specifically addressed remains unclear, according to an administration official who sought anonymity to discuss private conversations.

Trump rejected the way Republican leaders in Congress have framed the debate, saying the House-

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backed bill linking a background check measure with a bill to expand gun rights by allowing gun owners to carry concealed weapons across state lines was not the right approach. The concealed carry measure is the gun lobby's top legislative priority. But "you'll never get it passed," Trump told lawmakers, reminding them that Democratic senators, including some in the room, strongly oppose it.

Instead, he suggested Republicans should focus on the background check bill, then load it up with other gun control and safety measures.

Ever the marketer, Trump suggested that the leading bill adjusting the National Instant Criminal Background Check System — now known as "Fix NICS" — could use a new name. "Maybe you change the title, all right? The U.S. Background Check Bill, or whatever," Trump said.

The hour-long meeting with lawmakers was reminiscent of one in January on immigration, when he told lawmakers to come up with a good bill and he would take the "heat" from critics.

That effort, however, ended in failure in Congress amid Trump's shifting views and priorities in the debate.

Among those at the White House Wednesday were Sens. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., and Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., who are pushing their bill — which failed twice in the Senate after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting — to broaden background checks to include pre-purchase reviews at online and gun show sales.

Trump asked Toomey if his plan to expand background checks included raising the minimum age for young people to buy an assault weapon. Toomey told the president it did not.

"You know why," Trump scoffed. "Because you're afraid of the NRA."

In fact, Toomey is one of the most high-profile Republicans on gun legislation, and the bill was opposed by the NRA. After earlier votes on the bill, the group downgraded its rating of the senator as he ran for re-election.

The meeting came after one major retailer, Dick's Sporting Goods, announced it was halting sales of assault-style rifles and high-capacity magazines at all of its stores and banning the sale of all guns to anyone under 21. Walmart, the nation's largest retailer, followed late Wednesday, saying it would no longer sell firearms and ammunition to people younger than 21.

The discussion was billed as a session focused on "school and community safety," and two of those attending, Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and Rep. John Rutherford, R-Fla., have proposed new federal grant funding to stem school violence. The bill would offer money for law enforcement and school staff training, campus infrastructure upgrades and mental health resources.

Associated Press writers Ken Thomas, Alan Fram, Andrew Taylor, Zeke Miller and Jill Colvin contributed to this story.

Follow Mascaro on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/LisaMascaro> and Daly <https://twitter.com/MatthewDaly-WDC>

Bollywood mourners grieve for Sridevi, star of '80s and '90s

By RAFIQ MAQBOOL, Associated Press

MUMBAI, India (AP) — Lining up for hours and visibly grief-stricken, thousands of mourning fans paid their respects to Bollywood icon Sridevi, who redefined the importance of the lead actress in India's male-dominated film industry.

She died in Dubai over the weekend and her body was flown home late Tuesday night in a private plane owned by Anil Ambani, a Mumbai industrialist and entertainment baron.

By early Wednesday morning, people were lining up along a security fence outside the private club near Sridevi's home where the body had been laid out. A string of Mercedes and Audis ferried family members, Bollywood stars and VIPs through another gate, with squadrons of guards maintaining control.

One mourner, a man who gave his name only as Prashant, arrived at about 7 a.m., hours before anyone was to be allowed in.

"No matter how long I have to wait, I will wait," he said, clutching a small bouquet of flowers. "I'll wait

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until I'm able to pay my respects."

"I saw all her movies," he said, grief clearly visible on his face.

Inside the club, the actress's body was placed on a raised platform in a hall decorated with flowers. Her extended family, including her husband, producer Boney Kapoor, and her two daughters, stood by the platform as fans and colleagues walked past in respect.

While the family had requested that all media leave their cameras outside while viewing her body, some photographs emerged on news sites and showed Sridevi's body dressed in a vibrant magenta and gold sari with a heavy gold necklace around her neck and a large red bindi decorating her forehead. The mark many Indian women wear is colored red to signify the wearer married.

By late afternoon, her body, wrapped in an Indian flag, began its journey from the club to the crematorium where her funeral took place according to Hindu customs. The body was carried in a truck decorated with flowers and a giant poster of the actress. It passed the crowds of fans standing by the side of the street in Mumbai, the western coastal city that is home to the Indian film industry.

Sridevi, 54, was in Dubai for a wedding in her extended family when she drowned in a hotel bathtub Saturday after losing consciousness. Investigators said alcohol was found in her system but concluded her death was accidental and closed their case Tuesday and handed the body to her family.

Condolences have poured in since the death of the actress, who redefined the importance of the female lead in India's largely male-dominated film industry.

Sridevi, who used only one name onscreen, had been a child actress and worked in regional films in southern India before making her Bollywood debut in the late 1970s.

By the late 1980s, she was a name to reckon with in mainstream Hindi-language films and was able to command top billing and dominate screen space in a film industry in which the heroine's role was largely relegated to a few songs and a handful of romantic scenes as the leading man's love interest.

Despite a life spent entirely in the movie business, Sridevi was quiet and shy on film sets until she faced the camera, colleagues recalled, with several saying she would "transform" into the character she was playing.

In 1997, she married Kapoor, a producer on many of her films, and stepped away from cinema for many years while she raised her two daughters.

Her Twitter bio read: Actor-MOM-Housewife-Actor Again!

Sridevi returned to films in 2012 with "English Vinglish," where she played a quiet housewife who remains largely in the background until she decides to learn English to fit in with her family.

In 2017, she starred in "Mom," playing a woman out to seek vengeance for the rape of her teenage stepdaughter.

Over the last few years, Sridevi had been grooming her older daughter, Janhvi Kapoor, for her debut Bollywood film slated for release later this year.

Blackmun resigns as CEO as USOC addresses wide abuse scandal

By EDDIE PELLIS, AP National Writer

Scott Blackmun resigned as chief executive of the U.S. Olympic Committee on Wednesday, stepping aside so he can tackle his worsening bout with prostate cancer and to allow the federation to move forward under new leadership to address the sex-abuse scandal that has rocked gymnastics and other sports.

The 60-year-old CEO was diagnosed with prostate cancer in January and did not attend the Pyeongchang Games.

Blackmun leaves as calls for his ouster were growing louder — from two U.S. senators and, more notably, from a number of gymnasts and other athletes who said neither he nor the USOC at large reacted properly to cases including those involving Larry Nassar, the doctor who sexually abused members of the U.S. gymnastics team.

The USOC is conducting an independent review of when Blackmun and others learned the details about abuse cases at USA Gymnastics and whether they responded appropriately.

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Susanne Lyons, a member of the board, will step down from that position and serve as acting CEO while the search for Blackmun's replacement begins.

At a news conference to kick off the Olympics, chairman Larry Probst said Blackmun had served the USOC with distinction and the board found no reason to relieve him. In an interview with The Associated Press on Wednesday, Probst said Blackmun has since received more information about the treatment he'll need.

"We need a CEO in place who can (tend) to this current situation and work hard to get things back on a positive track," Probst said.

The USOC said it was starting several initiatives, including providing new funding and resources for Nassar victims and others in Olympic sports who have been subject to abuse; sex-abuse cases in swimming, taekwondo and speedskating have also occurred during Blackmun's tenure. The USOC also will review its relationships with national governing bodies of Olympic sports and double funding to the U.S. Center for SafeSport.

John Manly, an attorney representing Nassar victims in a lawsuit that seeks monetary damages and court oversight of USA Gymnastics, said it was victims speaking out about the USOC that forced Blackmun to resign.

"USOC has focused nearly all its efforts on money and medals while the safety of our athletes has taken a back seat," Manly said.

Blackmun's last several years at the helm of USOC have focused on establishing the SafeSport organization, which formed to compel all Olympic sports organizations to use the same rules for reporting and handling abuse cases.

It was a herculean task that involved raising millions of dollars to start an entity independent of the USOC that could police abuse cases in a similar manner as the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency runs the anti-doping system in the United States.

But most of the cases in question occurred before the new protocols came into play. The shocking testimony in January from dozens of gymnasts who were abused by Nassar led to calls for a complete turnover of the USA Gymnastics board, and then for Blackmun's removal.

"The U.S. Olympic Committee must now bring on new leadership determined to deliver answers and accountability regarding how Larry Nassar was able to freely abuse young girls for decades, as well as answers to questions about abuse in other Olympic programs," said U.S. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H.

Blackmun started as CEO just before the 2010 Vancouver Games and settled an organization that had been rife with infighting after the surprise removal of Jim Scherr and his replacement with Stephanie Streeter, who lasted barely a year.

Blackmun patched rocky relationships with national governing bodies and with the International Olympic Committee, renegotiating an agreement over sharing revenues from TV and sponsorship deals that caused problems between the two entities for years.

The reworked deal smoothed the way for the USOC to bring the Olympics back to the United States for the first time since 2002, when it landed the 2028 Games for Los Angeles. Some, however, criticized that deal as a consolation prize; LA really bid for the 2024 Games, which were awarded to Paris, and the IOC ended up granting 2028 to Los Angeles at the same time as the only other candidate for 2024.

Lyons has been on the board since 2010. In January, she was tasked with leading a USOC working group to address failings the Nassar case brought to light.

"The lesson we learned from the Nassar tragedy is, it's a wakeup call for parents, coaches and universities that the work is never done," Lyons said.

AP Sports Writer Will Graves in Pittsburgh and Associated Press writer Phuong Le in Seattle contributed to this report.

For more AP Olympic coverage: <https://wintergames.ap.org>

MAGA hat, #MeToo pin? High court weighs voter clothing law

By JESSICA GRESKO, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — They were all dressed in basic black robes, but the Supreme Court's nine justices had a serious discussion about fashion Wednesday as they heard arguments over a Minnesota law that bars voters from wearing political clothing to the polls.

Almost every one of the justices had some hypothetical article of clothing to talk about as they explored the issue of free speech at polling places and whether various clothing items could be prohibited.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg asked about a #MeToo pin. Justice Elena Kagan wanted to know about clothing that says "Resist" or "Make America Great Again." And Justice Samuel Alito's laundry list of items included a National Rifle Association T-shirt, shirts with the text of the First and Second Amendments and a shirt with a rainbow flag.

Amid the arguments over apparel, several justices suggested support for at least some polling place restrictions. Chief Justice John Roberts told the attorney arguing against Minnesota's law that he wondered if, after months of a "maybe bitter, sharp, political campaign," if "maybe, just before you cast your vote, you should be able to have a time for some quiet reflection or to do that important civic obligation in peace and quiet without being bombarded by another campaign display."

Most states have laws restricting what voters can wear to the polls, but Minnesota's law is one of the broadest. It bars voters from casting a ballot wearing clothing with the name of a candidate or political party or related to an issue on the ballot. But Minnesota voters also can't wear clothing promoting a group with recognizable political views. That means no tea party T-shirts, AFL-CIO hats or MoveOn.org buttons.

Opponents of Minnesota's law say it's too broad. The state says it's a reasonable restriction that keeps order at polling places and prevents voter intimidation.

Both sides agree that there are about 10 states with laws like Minnesota's, though they have disagreed on which ones. Other states have narrower laws just barring voters from wearing campaign clothing.

During an hour of arguments Wednesday, some justices questioned Minnesota's broader ban. Justice Neil Gorsuch suggested Minnesota's law is "a bit of an outlier" in its sweep. And Alito said it invites "arbitrary enforcement." He then asked for answers on whether Minnesota's law would permit more than a half dozen different T-shirts.

Daniel Rogan, who argued in support of Minnesota's law, said it wouldn't allow the NRA shirt or Second Amendment shirt Alito asked about. The First Amendment shirt was fine, he said. And the rainbow flag shirt was OK unless there was an issue on the ballot that related to gay rights, Rogan said.

The case the Supreme Court was hearing dates back to 2010 and involves a dispute that began over tea party T-shirts and buttons with the words "Please I.D. Me," a reference to legislation then under discussion in Minnesota that would have required voters to show photo identification. It was later defeated.

Pointing to the state's statute, Minnesota officials said before the election that neither item would be permitted at the polls. In response, a group of voters and organizations sued. One of those voters, Andy Cilek, was in the courtroom Wednesday. Lower courts have sided with Minnesota.

The Supreme Court has previously upheld some restrictions at the polls on voters' free speech rights. In 1992, the court upheld a Tennessee statute prohibiting the display or distribution of campaign materials within 100 feet of a polling place.

On Wednesday, J. David Breemer, the attorney arguing against Minnesota's law, said the court's previous decision to uphold restrictions dealt with active campaigning rather than the passive wearing of clothing. But Justice Gorsuch suggested that distinction was "slippery" and then launched into his own hypothetical.

"A T-shirt, you say, is passive. What if it were instead a sign on my head, you know, flashing lights? Is that active or is that passive?" he asked. "How are we supposed to police the line ... you're suggesting?"

A decision in the case, 16-1435 Minnesota Voters Alliance v. Mansky, is expected by the end of June.

Astronomers glimpse cosmic dawn, when the stars switched on

By **SETH BORENSTEIN, AP Science Writer**

WASHINGTON (AP) — After the Big Bang, it was cold and black. And then there was light. Now, for the first time, astronomers have glimpsed that dawn of the universe 13.6 billion years ago when the earliest stars were turning on the light in the cosmic darkness.

And if that's not enough, they may have detected mysterious dark matter at work, too.

The glimpse consisted of a faint radio signal from deep space, picked up by an antenna that is slightly bigger than a refrigerator and costs less than \$5 million but in certain ways can go back much farther in time and distance than the celebrated, multibillion-dollar Hubble Space Telescope.

Judd Bowman of Arizona State University, lead author of a study in Wednesday's journal *Nature*, said the signal came from the very first objects in the universe as it was emerging out of darkness 180 million years after the Big Bang.

Seeing the universe just lighting up, even though it was only a faint signal, is even more important than the Big Bang because "we are made of star stuff, and so we are glimpsing at our origin," said astronomer Richard Ellis, who was not involved in the project.

The signal showed unexpectedly cold temperatures and an unusually pronounced wave. When astronomers tried to figure out why, the best explanation was that elusive dark matter may have been at work.

If verified, that would be the first confirmation of its kind of dark matter, which is a substantial part of the universe that scientists have been searching for over decades.

"If confirmed, this discovery deserves two Nobel Prizes" for both capturing the signal of the first stars and potential dark matter confirmation, said Harvard astronomer Avi Loeb, who wasn't part of the research team. Cautioning that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence," he said independent tests are needed to verify the findings.

Bowman agreed independent tests are needed even though his team spent two years double- and triple-checking their work.

"It's a time of the universe we really don't know anything about," Bowman said. He said the discovery is "like the first sentence" in an early chapter of the history of the cosmos.

This is nothing that astronomers could actually see. In fact, it's all indirect, based on changes in the wavelengths produced by radio signals.

The early universe was dark and cold, filled with just hydrogen and helium. Once stars formed, they emitted ultraviolet light into the dark areas between them. That ultraviolet light changes the energy signature of hydrogen atoms, Bowman said.

Astronomers looked at a specific wavelength. If there were stars and ultraviolet light, they would see one signature. If there were no stars, they would see another. They saw a clear but faint signal showing there were stars, probably many of them, Bowman said.

Finding that trace signal wasn't easy because the Milky Way galaxy alone booms with radio wave noise 10,000 times louder, said Peter Kurczynski, advanced program technology director for the National Science Foundation, which helped fund the research.

"Finding the impact of the first stars in that cacophony would be like trying to hear the flap of a hummingbird's wing from inside a hurricane," Kurczynski said in an NSF video.

Because the high end of the frequency they were looking in is the same as FM radio, the astronomers had to go to the Australian desert to escape interference. That was where they installed their antennas.

They then labored to confirm what they found, in part by testing it against dummy signals in the lab, and it all showed that what they spotted was the existence of the first stars, Bowman said.

So far, the scientists know little about these early stars. They were probably hotter and simpler than modern stars, Ellis and Bowman said. But now that astronomers know where and how to look, others will confirm this and learn more, Bowman said.

The research does not establish exactly when these stars turned on, except that at 180 million years after the Big Bang, they were on. Scientists had come up with many different time periods for when the

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first stars switched on, and 180 million years fits with current theory, said Ellis, a professor at University College London.

When this signal was found and examined, it showed that the hydrogen between stars was "even colder than the coldest we thought possible," said Rennan Barkana, a Tel Aviv University astrophysicist who wrote a companion study on the dark matter implications of the discovery. The researchers expected temperatures to be 10 degrees above absolute zero, but they were 5 degrees above absolute zero (minus 451 degrees Fahrenheit, or minus 268 degrees Celsius).

"The only thing we know from this signal is that something very weird is going on," Barkana said.

What seems likely is dark matter — which scientists have never seen interacting with anything — may be cooling that hydrogen, he said. Dark matter makes up about 27 percent of the universe, but scientists know little about it except that it's not made of normal matter particles called baryons.

Scientists have known dark matter exists, indirectly, through measurements based on gravity. If this interpretation of the data is correct, it would be the first confirmation of dark matter outside of gravity calculations, Barkana said.

It also potentially reveals something new about the nature of dark matter.

"If the result is correct it constitutes an indirect detection of dark matter and, moreover suggests something of fundamental importance (its interaction with baryons)," Johns Hopkins University astrophysicist Marc Kamionkowski, who wasn't part of the study, said in an email. "This therefore is about as important as you can get in cosmology."

Plenty of opinions, but few solutions to fix college hoops

By RALPH D. RUSSO, AP College Sports Writer

The cracked facade of NCAA hoops appears to be crumbling and while LeBron James, John Calipari and many agree that college basketball should be overhauled, there's no consensus on how to repair the system.

A federal investigation has alleged hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes and kickbacks being funneled to influence recruits, an FBI probe that many fans believe reveals just a tiny slice of potential corruption in college sports.

In September, the Justice Department arrested 10 people, including four assistant coaches from Arizona, Southern California, Auburn and Oklahoma State. Payments of up to \$150,000, supplied by Adidas, were promised to at least three top high school recruits to attend two schools sponsored by the shoe company, according to federal prosecutors.

A report last week by Yahoo! Sports revealed documents showing dozens of prominent players, coaches and schools could be involved in — while likely not criminal behavior — breaking NCAA rules. All this looms over college basketball as March begins, the month when championship tournaments and brackets take center stage across America. The cash cow of college sports that brings in hundreds of millions of dollars to the NCAA annually.

The NCAA has already announced the formation of the commission on college basketball, headed by former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, to recommend changes.

"I don't know if there's any fixing the NCAA. I don't think there is," said James, who never played in college, jumping from high school to the NBA at a time when that had not yet been prohibited by the league.

"The NCAA is corrupt — we know that," the Cleveland Cavaliers superstar said.

Fingers point in several directions about the reasons for the problems, including the NCAA itself, the age limit to enter the NBA, paying college athletes. Here is a more in depth look at some of them:

THE NCAA IS THE SCHOOLS

CURRENTLY: The most common misconception about college sports' governing body is that it is an independent organization that governs the schools. The NCAA is a voluntary association of the schools and that membership ultimately determines the rules — like what payments to an athlete or his family members are allowable. NCAA President Mark Emmert is the face and voice of the association, but — unlike

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a commissioner of a professional league — he has very limited power beyond being a potential catalyst for change. Or protector of the status quo.

THE TALK: There are 351 schools that play Division I basketball from powerhouse Kentucky to tiny St. Francis College in Brooklyn, New York. Priorities range far and wide and what an Atlantic Coast Conference school sees as a potential fix to the system, an Atlantic Sun school could see as a threat to what little competitive balance exists in D-I. The result is: Many of the potential remedies floated for corruption in college sports don't actually involve NCAA changes.

ONE-AND-DONE

CURRENTLY: The NBA instituted a rule 12 years ago that prohibited players from entering the draft before they were at least 19 and a year removed from high school. The NCAA has no control over this rule. The NFL rule — which requires players be three years removed from high school — is also problematic, but high school aged football players are not generally as close as basketball players to being pro-ready.

THE TALK: There is much buzz about change. One option would be to let pro-ready high school seniors enter the NBA draft and make players who chose to attend college stay at least two years. The rule only impacts the top players. Since 2006, 66 one-and-done players have been NBA draft lottery picks — and that's after a record 11 in last year's draft.

And while age is a hot-button issue, several players who played two or more college seasons were listed in probe documents as potentially accepting impermissible payments, according to Yahoo.

When Pistons coach Stan Van Gundy slammed the NCAA recently as "maybe the worst organization in sports," he pivoted to point blame at the league where he works, even suggesting the one-and-done rule was racist in how it limits black athletes.

"I don't get it. You can get out of high school, you can turn 18, let's say, and go to work anywhere else," Van Gundy said.

NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said during the recent All-Star break his league is "conflicted" about one-and-done. The players' union and teams both benefit from players using a year of college to develop skills, mature and grow name recognition before they enter the NBA and start pressuring veteran players.

FARM SYSTEMS

CURRENTLY: The NBA and NFL essentially set up college sports to be a de facto farm system for professional teams and the people who defend college sports want no part of that.

THE TALK: James said the NBA should explore expanding its developmental G League to make it more like major league baseball's farm systems. He also wondered why the United States does not have an athlete development model more like what exists in Europe, where elite soccer players, for example, can get professional development outside of higher education.

"We have to figure out a way that we can shore up our farm league and if kids feel like they don't want to be a part of that NCAA program, then we have something here for them to be able to jump back on and not have to worry about going overseas," said James, who said he wants to meet with Silver to discuss his ideas.

PAYING ALL COLLEGE PLAYERS

CURRENTLY: Nixing the one-and-done rule would still leave some college players with value to agents, coaches and shoe companies. And the NCAA has no means to compensate players at full value. But facing pressure from antitrust lawsuits, NCAA schools changed rules in 2015 to allow athletic scholarships to include a cost-of-attendance stipend. Those payments range from about \$2,000 to \$5,000 per year.

THE TALK: Paying athletes akin to a salary is nonstarter for those in college sports. It goes against the notion that athletics is part of the educational experience. Hence, the term student-athlete. From a practical standpoint it is problematic because of tax issues and federal Title IX requirements. More importantly, schools could never pay an elite athlete enough to eliminate the potential for corruption.

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"Whatever you pay them, there's somebody who can pay them more, the guys that they think will be pro prospects, because when they leave, they become a very hot commodity," Tennessee coach Rick Barnes said.

COMPENSATION FOR THE BEST

CURRENTLY: The NCAA not only doesn't allow schools to pay players beyond the value of a scholarship, but also prohibits others from paying athletes for being athletes. This could be where a realistic solution lies. A federal judge ruled in 2014 the NCAA used the names, images and likenesses for athletes for years without proper compensation for things such as video games and merchandise.

THE TALK: "There may be something similar to the Olympic model," Golden State Warriors coach Steve Kerr said. "It used to be the Olympians couldn't make a dime. Now you see Michael Phelps or Lindsay Vonn in commercials. They're still in the Olympics. Still doing great. People loved the Olympics. So, there's a way."

AGENTS

CURRENTLY: The NCAA's five wealthiest conferences — the Atlantic Coast Conference, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-12 and Southeastern Conference — recently passed legislation allowing college hockey players to be represented by an agent before entering school. Similar allowances were already available to baseball players. In both those sports, major professional leagues draft high schoolers.

THE TALK: If the NCAA allowed athletes to have financial agreements and business dealings with agents and companies that wanted to capitalize on their fame and long-term earning potential, the current scandal might not be a scandal at all.

Calipari, whose Kentucky program has embraced and thrived with a foundation of NBA-bound players, said the NCAA needs to consider some way to provide advisers to basketball players. And as for providing money, the coach suggested the NBA Players' Association as a possible solution.

"Let their family get a loan from the Players Association," Calipari said. "What's the problem? For travel to the games in the NCAA Tournament and everything."

It would require a seismic shift in how the NCAA has long defined amateurism.

What used to be cheating would no longer be cheating.

AP Sports Writers Tom Withers in Cleveland, Janie McCauley in Oakland, California, Steve Megargee in Knoxville, Tennessee, Gary B. Graves in Lexington, Kentucky, and Associated Press freelance writer Jodie Valade in Charlotte, North Carolina, contributed to this report.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <http://collegebasketball.ap.org> and http://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Graham praised by Trump, politicians as 'America's pastor'

By LAURIE KELLMAN, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The president gently touched the bare wood of Billy Graham's casket. The speaker of the House bowed his head. And hundreds of other lawmakers, family and friends stood in a rare salute Wednesday to the man they called, "America's pastor."

"He ministered to all walks, from some of the greats whose statues line this hall — Eisenhower, King, Ford, and Reagan — to the everyday citizens lining up today to pay their respects," said House Speaker Paul Ryan, gesturing to Graham's casket under the eye of the Capitol Rotunda.

President Donald Trump, who met Graham but is closer to his son, Franklin, nonetheless recalled that the elder Graham had long been part of his life. Trump said his father, Fred, "said to me, 'Come on, son ... Let's go see Billy Graham at Yankee Stadium.' And it was something very special."

He called Graham "an ambassador for Christ who reminded the world of the power of prayer and the gift of God's grace."

Graham's influence stretched far beyond the city where he counseled presidents and lawmakers to a

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global flock over the better part of seven decades. He is known for having met every president, Trump included, and counseled most.

But he learned to be wary of the heat of politics. Close to Richard Nixon, Graham later said the details of the Watergate scandal made him feel used.

But the world of American politics and government embraced Graham on Wednesday, a week after he died at age 99. Those gathered, including Vice President Mike Pence, some members of Trump's Cabinet and members of the House and Senate, stood around the casket. They were ringed by paintings of the nation's founders.

"The man we recognize today shared the Gospel with more people, face-to-face, than anyone else in history," said Sen. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.

As the leaders stood by the casket, Trump reached out to touch it. Ryan, nearby, bowed his head.

Some 30 family members accompanied Graham's casket to Washington, where he had befriended presidents of both parties. Graham's son, Franklin, tweeted a photo Wednesday of family members loading the casket onto a jet emblazoned with "Samaritan's Purse," the name of a Christian relief charity that he chairs.

Graham is lying in honor before a funeral Friday near his home in North Carolina. The Rotunda entrances were draped with black fabric, and Graham's casket rested on a black-draped catafalque beneath the soaring ceiling and its painting, the "Apotheosis of Washington."

Graham felt burned by Nixon for years. Nixon's White House tapes released in 2002 included Graham's voice telling the president that Jews "don't know how I really feel about what they're doing to this country." He apologized.

Nonetheless, he ministered to other presidents until his health began to fail.

Former President Bill Clinton recalled seeing one of Graham's crusades as a child, a profound experience that became more amazing over his life. Graham counseled him as Arkansas governor, and later as president in the White House itself.

"In that little room, he was the same person I saw when I was 11 on that football field," Clinton said Tuesday after viewing the casket at Graham's home.

Former President George W. Bush and his wife, Laura, visited Graham's home earlier in the week.

In Washington, Ryan said there had been no doubt that Graham would receive the honor of a public viewing in the Rotunda. He told reporters that almost immediately upon hearing of Graham's death he, Trump, McConnell and Rep. Patrick McHenry, who represents the Graham family's district, agreed it would happen.

Trump met Graham at the pastor's 95th birthday party in 2013, but is closer to Franklin Graham Jr.

Graham shares the honor of a public viewing in the Rotunda with 11 presidents and other distinguished Americans, starting with Sen. Henry Clay of Kentucky in 1852 and, most recently, Sen. Daniel Inouye of Hawaii in 2012.

Graham is only the fourth private person to lie in honor since 1998. The others are two U.S. Capitol Police officers who died in the line of duty in 1998 and civil rights hero Rosa Parks in 2005.

Follow Kellman at <http://www.twitter.com/APLaurieKellman>

McCain's daughter says Trump's reference to dad was hurtful

NEW YORK (AP) — Sen. John McCain's daughter Meghan says it was incredibly hurtful to see President Trump talk about her father at a conservative conference last week, where the president talked about how McCain derailed last year's bill to repeal his predecessor's health care law.

"The View" co-host Meghan McCain said Wednesday on that show that she had talked with Trump last year and was led to believe the attacks on her father would end. She says she was naive to believe that.

Her mother, Cindy, was also on the show and says Americans need more compassion from their leaders and not bullying. She says she's tired of it.

The Arizona senator and 2008 Republican presidential nominee is battling brain cancer.

Slain Slovak journalist worked on story of links to mafia

BRATISLAVA, Slovakia (AP) — An investigative journalist shot dead in Slovakia last week was working on a story about the activities of the Italian mafia in his country and their links to people close to Prime Minister Robert Fico.

Jan Kuciak's Aktuality.sk news website published his last, unfinished story Wednesday. It describes the activities of members of the Italian 'Ndrangheta criminal group in eastern Slovakia, and the business ties of one of them with a senior assistant to Fico and another official close to him.

The bodies of the 27-year-old Kuciak and his girlfriend, Martina Kusnirova, were found Sunday evening in their house in Velka Maca, east of the capital, Bratislava. Kuciak was the first journalist to be slain in Slovakia.

In his story he described, among other details, the activities in agriculture, real estate and other sectors of a Slovak-based Italian man believed to belong to the criminal group.

He also detailed the man's business ties to Maria Troskova, a former model who is now the chief state adviser at the government office, and Viliam Jasan, who currently serves as the secretary of Slovakia's security council, a body that deals with key security issues.

In a joint statement, Troskova and Jasan announced Wednesday they were stepping down until the investigation into the shootings was completed.

They said they were shocked by the slayings and expressed their condolences to the relatives. But they "categorically" rejected any links to the killings.

After the first details of the story appeared in Aktuality.sk and a newspaper, Sme, on Tuesday, Fico dismissed the reports.

"You link innocent people to a double murder without any evidence," Fico said. "Don't do it."

The opposition wasn't impressed and called on national police chief Tibor Gaspar and Interior Minister Robert Kalinak to resign.

A thousand people attended a protest rally organized by the opposition in Bratislava.

Culture Minister Marek Madaric announced earlier Wednesday that he was resigning from his government post.

Madaric, a member of Fico's leftist Smer-Social Democracy party, said it was his personal decision.

"As the culture minister, I am not able to cope with the fact that a journalist was killed during my time in office," he said.

Also Wednesday, Justice Minister Lucia Zitnanska, from a junior coalition partner of Fico's Smer, said it was "absolutely unacceptable" that anyone with ties to organized crime would be working at the government office.

Students plan marches to honor Kuciak in a number of Slovak cities on Friday.

Gaspar, the police chief, said on Wednesday "one of the most likely versions" still was that Kuciak was killed because of his investigative work.

Giving few details, Gaspar said the two were killed with the same weapon which police still don't have.

Gaspar said that during the investigation in an unrelated case, police found out two people known for drugs related crimes were planning to meet in Velka Maca on Friday and take guns with them.

Police estimated the killings took place between Thursday and Sunday. He said another suspected person was seen in the town.

Gaspar said police conducted raids during which they seized some ammunition and a weapon. One suspect was detained. He said police still were investigating what the two were planning to do in Velka Maca.

Aktuality.sk said Kuciak cooperated on the story with the Czech Centre for Investigative Journalism, the Investigative Reporting Project Italy and the international Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project.

The Czech center said it had been working with Kuciak for more than 18 months.

Ex-Trump campaign chief rebuked by judge for public comments

By CHAD DAY, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's former campaign chairman was reprimanded by a federal judge Wednesday for speaking publicly in violation of her gag order in his criminal case.

The rebuke of Paul Manafort came as he pleaded not guilty to the latest charges brought by special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigators.

Manafort appeared at the federal courthouse to enter a formal plea to a second indictment accusing him of acting as an unregistered foreign agent and directing an international money-laundering conspiracy stemming from his political work in Ukraine.

It was his first court appearance since his co-defendant and longtime business associate, Rick Gates, pleaded guilty and agreed to cooperate with prosecutors.

Manafort had previously pleaded not guilty in the case, but the latest indictment, which mirrored the charges filed against him last October, required him to formally enter a second plea. Manafort also faces charges in Virginia accusing him of tax evasion and bank fraud.

During the hearing, Judge Amy Berman Jackson set a Sept. 17 trial date for Manafort and reprimanded him for making a public statement last week about Gates' plea. She said his statement violated an order she put in place early in the case, which bars Manafort, the prosecution and witnesses from making public statements that pose a "substantial likelihood" of prejudicing potential jurors.

"I can certainly understand the impulse to not let that go by without asserting your innocence," Jackson told Manafort, referring to Gates' plea and "hundreds" of news articles about it. But it can't happen again, she said, or she could hold him in contempt.

Manafort's lawyer, Kevin Downing, told the judge his client would appreciate more guidance from the judge on what he can and can't say publicly. Downing also said he plans to file a motion challenging her order.

Manafort's statement last week took aim at the prosecution, saying Gates' plea didn't change his commitment to defend himself against "the untrue piled-up charges contained in the indictments against me."

Manafort also said he had hoped and "expected" Gates would have had "the strength to continue the battle to prove out innocence."

"For reasons yet to surface he chose to do otherwise," Manafort said.

Manafort is due back in court later this week, this time in Virginia, where he faces a separate indictment involving bank fraud and tax charges.

The allegations stem from much of the same conduct outlined in the Washington case, and prosecutors attempted to have all the charges brought in the pending case there. But Manafort objected, resulting in his facing two indictments in two different places at the same time.

On Wednesday, Jackson said the situation could lead to a lot of duplication for both sides.

Prosecutor Greg Andres acknowledged the overlap in the two indictments but said any request to combine the case would be Manafort's to make.

___ Follow Chad Day on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/ChadSDay>

Hog wild: Pigs outnumber people in Denmark, No. 1 in Europe

BERLIN (AP) — Statistics show pigs are hogging the market in Europe as the largest livestock category and outnumber people in Denmark by more than two-to-one.

European statistical agency Eurostat said Thursday that with a population of about 150 million in the European Union, pigs far outnumber cattle and other bovines, the second-largest livestock category with 89 million head.

Eurostat says 40 percent of the EU's pigs are in Spain and Germany, with significant numbers also in France, Denmark, Netherlands and Poland.

Denmark is the only country where pigs outnumber people, with 215 pigs to every 100 residents. Not coincidentally, it's also a country known in Europe for its quality bacon.

The Netherlands is next with 70 pigs per 100 people, Spain with 63 to 100, and Belgium with 54 to 100.

Asian shares lower as sentiments get dragged by Wall Street

By YURI KAGEYAMA, AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Asian shares were mostly lower Thursday as sentiments got dragged down by a slide on Wall Street.

KEEPING SCORE: Japan's benchmark Nikkei 225 lost 1.6 percent in early trading to 21,726.26. Australia's S&P/ASX 200 shed 0.9 percent to 5,962.90. Hong Kong's Hang Seng lost 0.4 percent to 30,718.11, while the Shanghai Composite edged up 0.2 percent to 3,266.03. South Korean markets were closed for Independence Movement Day, a national holiday.

WALL STREET: The S&P 500 fell 30.45 points, or 1.1 percent, to 2,713.83, while the Dow Jones industrial average lost 380.83, or 1.5 percent, to 25,029.20 and the Nasdaq composite dropped 57.35, or 0.8 percent, to 7,273.01. The dominant fear for the month was the threat of higher inflation and interest rates, and February was the worst month for the U.S. market in two years.

THE QUOTE: "Federal Reserve Chairman Powell erred to the hawkish side and had speculation running rampant that the Feds will trigger quicker pace of interest rate increases as the economy accelerates," says Stephen Innes, head of trading at Oanda, referring to remarks earlier in the week that has the market anticipating higher interest rates in the U.S.

ENERGY: Benchmark U.S. crude added 2 cents to \$61.66 per barrel. Brent crude, the international standard, fell 1 cent to \$64.72 per barrel.

CURRENCIES: The dollar dipped to 106.68 Japanese yen from 107.18 yen late Wednesday. The euro fell to \$1.2189 from \$1.2202.

Follow Yuri Kageyama on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/yurikageyama>

Her work can be found at <https://www.apnews.com/search/yuri%20kageyama>

Today in History By The Associated Press

Today in History

Today is Thursday, March 1, the 60th day of 2018. There are 305 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 1, 1790, President George Washington signed a measure authorizing the first United States Census. (Census Day was Aug. 2, 1790.)

On this date:

In 1565, the city of Rio de Janeiro was founded by Portuguese knight Estacio de Sa.

In 1781, the Continental Congress declared the Articles of Confederation to be in force, following ratification by Maryland.

In 1867, Nebraska became the 37th state as President Andrew Johnson signed a proclamation.

In 1893, inventor Nikola Tesla first publicly demonstrated radio during a meeting of the National Electric Light Association in St. Louis by transmitting electromagnetic energy without wires.

In 1932, Charles A. Lindbergh Jr., the 20-month-old son of Charles and Anne Lindbergh, was kidnapped from the family home near Hopewell, New Jersey. (Remains identified as those of the child were found the following May.)

In 1940, "Native Son" by Richard Wright was first published by Harper & Brothers.

In 1954, four Puerto Rican nationalists opened fire from the spectators' gallery of the U.S. House of Representatives, wounding five members of Congress. The United States detonated a dry-fuel hydrogen bomb, codenamed Castle Bravo, at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy signed an executive order establishing the Peace Corps.

In 1968, Johnny Cash married June Carter at the First Methodist Church in Franklin, Kentucky.

In 1971, a bomb went off inside a men's room at the U.S. Capitol; the radical group Weather Underground

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claimed responsibility for the pre-dawn blast.

In 1981, Irish Republican Army member Bobby Sands began a hunger strike at the Maze Prison in Northern Ireland; he died 65 days later.

In 1990, the controversial Seabrook, New Hampshire, nuclear power plant won federal permission to go on line after two decades of protests and legal struggles.

Ten years ago: President George W. Bush, speaking at his Texas ranch, declined to promise more U.S. troop withdrawals from Iraq before leaving, underscoring the need for a strong military presence during Iraqi provincial elections. The USS New York, an amphibious assault ship built with scrap steel from the ruins of the World Trade Center, was christened at Avondale, Louisiana. New York's famed Plaza Hotel reopened after a three-year, \$400 million renovation.

Five years ago: President Barack Obama, still deadlocked with Republican congressional leaders, formally enacted \$85 billion in across-the-board spending cuts a few hours before the midnight deadline required by law. Actress Bonnie Franklin, who played divorced mom Ann Romano on the long-running sitcom "One Day at a Time," died in Los Angeles at age 69.

One year ago: Former Montana Rep. Ryan Zinke was sworn in as secretary of the Interior Department by Vice President Mike Pence, hours after being confirmed by the Senate by a vote of 68-31. The president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Cheryl Boone Isaacs, told The Associated Press that the two accountants responsible for the best-picture flub at the Academy Awards (in which "La La Land" was initially named the winner instead of "Moonlight") would never work the Oscars again. Paula Fox, author of "Poor George" and "Desperate Characters," died in New York at age 93.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Robert Clary is 92. Singer Harry Belafonte is 91. Actor Robert Conrad is 83. Rock singer Mike D'Abo (Manfred Mann) is 74. Former Sen. John Breaux, D-La., is 74. Rock singer Roger Daltrey is 74. Actor Dirk Benedict is 73. Actor-director Ron Howard is 64. Country singer Janis Gill (aka Janis Oliver Cummins) (Sweethearts of the Rodeo) is 64. Actress Catherine Bach is 63. Actor Tim Daly is 62. Singer-musician Jon Carroll is 61. Rock musician Bill Leen is 56. Actor Bryan Batt is 55. Actor Maurice Bernard is 55. Actor Russell Wong is 55. Actor Chris Eigeman is 53. Actor John David Cullum is 52. Actor George Eads is 51. Actor Javier Bardem (HAH'-vee-ayr bahr-DEHM') is 49. Actor Jack Davenport is 45. Rock musician Ryan Peake (Nickelback) is 45. Actor Mark-Paul Gosselaar is 44. Singer Tate Stevens is 43. Actor Jensen Ackles is 40. TV host Donovan Patton is 40. Rock musician Sean Woolstenhulme (WOOL'-sten-hyoolm) is 37. Actress Lupita Nyong'o is 35. Pop singer Kesha (formerly Ke\$ha) is 31. Rhythm-and-blues singer Sammie is 31. Pop singer Justin Bieber is 24.

Thought for Today: "Keep the circus going inside you, keep it going, don't take anything too seriously, it'll all work out in the end." — David Niven, British actor (born this date in 1910, died 1983).