

Groton Daily Independent

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Sperry Stump Removal
Tyler: 605/216-8431
Over 30 Years of Combined Experience!
TJ: 605/380-7915
TreeLine Tree Service

Bates Township ROW Notice

Bates Township Board of Supervisors reminds all landowners and tenants that the road right-of-way extends 33 feet from the center of the township road. This ditch is to be maintained and mowed. Any crops planted in the road right-of-way will be mowed and expenses charged to the landowner.

Landowner is responsible for spraying all noxious weeds.

Bates Township Board of Supervisors
Betty Geist
Township Clerk

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**

Governor Signs Additional Bills

PIERRE, S.D. – In addition to the budget bills, Gov. Dennis Daugaard signed the following bills into law yesterday:

SB 8 – An Act to establish provisions as to how campaign contribution limits apply to certain aggregate contributions.

SB 11 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding the time period during which petition sponsors may submit ballot measures to the Legislative Research Council for review and comment.

SB 13 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding the director of the Legislative Research Council issuing fiscal notes for certain ballot measures.

SB 62 – An Act to provide for the notification related to a breach of certain data and to provide a penalty therefor.

SB 63 – An Act to revise certain prohibitions regarding methamphetamines and to create a mandatory penalty for a violation thereof and revise certain sentencing criteria for methamphetamine and opioids.

SB 65 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding drug deliveries that result in death and to provide a penalty therefor.

SB 77 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding information provided to ballot question committees.

SB 204 – An Act to create and designate Peter Norbeck Day as a working holiday.

HB 1004 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding petition forms for initiated measures and initiated amendments to the Constitution.

HB 1005 – An Act to revise certain requirements for a recitation regarding the effect of a vote on certain ballot measures.

HB 1012 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding political party status and to declare an emergency.

HB 1016 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding the authorization to provide postsecondary education.

HB 1053 – An Act to provide certain earned discharge credits for inmates.

HB 1109 – An Act to provide for parole eligibility for certain inmates.

HB 1116 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding special interest motor vehicle license plates.

HB 1160 – An Act to transfer victim services from the Department of Social Services to the Department of Public Safety, to increase a surcharge to increase revenues to the crime victims' compensation fund, and to revise certain provisions regarding the awarding of claims from the fund.

HB 1161 – An Act to revise certain references to the International Building Code.

HB 1165 – An Act to repeal certain provisions providing for a pilot charter school for Native American students if the state had received a federal grant.

HB 1169 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding the commissioner form of municipal government.

HB 1174 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding rights for crime victims.

HB 1215 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding reorganization of certain school districts with low enrollment.

HB 1304 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding challenges to petition signatures.

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MINUTES FOR THE CITY OF GROTON LOCAL BOARD OF EQUALIZATION

The City of Groton Board of Equalization met in regular session on Monday, March 19, 2018 at 7:00 pm at the Groton Community Center. Board members present were Mayor Scott Hanlon, Council members: David Blackmun, David McGannon, Jay Peterson, and Burt Glover. Also present was Hope Block, Finance Officer.

There were no written notices of appeal in objection to property assessments.

No one else was present on March 19th to object to assessments. The board reviewed the property assessment list and recommended no other changes.

The Groton City Local Board of Equalization adjournment at 9:15pm.

ATTEST:

Scott Hanlon, Mayor
Dated: March 19, 2018

Hope Block, Finance Officer
Dated: March 19, 2018

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GFP Reminds Individuals that Gray Wolves Remain Protected in South Dakota

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) wants to remind individuals that gray wolves remain protected under the federal Endangered Species Act across the entire state. This federal protection has been in place since 2014.

Over the years, South Dakota has had gray wolves incidentally killed on both sides of the Missouri River.

South Dakota does not have suitable habitat to maintain a population of wolves. Transient wolves from surrounding states have been documented traveling through South Dakota, but are very uncommon.

Sportsmen and women as well as fur harvesters are reminded that gray wolves may occur in South Dakota and need to exercise caution if they believe a gray wolf is in the area. Hunters need to clearly identify their target before using their firearms when hunting coyotes. If a suspected wolf is in a trap, individuals should contact GFP officials immediately. The federal protections of the Endangered Species Act prohibit the take of a gray wolf unless it is threatening human life.

GFP does not have any plans or intentions of facilitating the establishment of gray wolves in South Dakota.

If livestock producers have concerns with a suspected wolf near their operation, they should contact a local GFP wildlife damage specialist or regional office. If the livestock loss is determined to have been possibly killed by a gray wolf, the department will work directly with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to address the situation.

For more information or to learn more about identifying gray wolves and coyotes, please visit gfp.sd.gov/wolf.

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

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WINTER STORM WATCH

...WINTER STORM WATCH REMAINS IN EFFECT FROM FRIDAY MORNING THROUGH SATURDAY MORNING...

* WHAT...Heavy mixed precipitation possible. Total wet snow accumulations of 3 to 5 inches, with localized amounts up to 9 inches in the Leola Hills, and ice accumulations of a light glaze are possible.

* WHERE...McPherson and Brown Counties.

* WHEN...From Friday morning through Saturday morning.

* ADDITIONAL DETAILS...Plan on difficult travel conditions, including during the morning commute on Friday. Significant reductions in visibility are possible.

A Winter Storm Watch means there is potential for significant snow, sleet or ice accumulations that may impact travel. Continue to monitor the latest forecasts.

Groton Prairie Mixed

Team Standings: Chipmunks 17, Jackelopes 16, Cheetahs 16, Shih Tzus 13, Coyotes 13, Foxes 9

Men's High Games: Mike Siegler 267, Brad Waage 253, 236, 234, Roger Colestock 193

Women's High Games: Brenda Waage 178, Sue Stanley 177, Vicki Walter 175

Men's High Series: Brad Waage 723, Mike Siegler 620, Roger Spanier 524

Women's High Series: Karen Spanier 456, Darci Spanier 448, Sue Stanley 433



All auto owners!
Save \$2-\$4 /tank
& grow your local economy
by choosing low carbon
Super Premium E30's
94 octane, more power,
same mileage, fewer
carbon deposits, lower
maintenance costs,
slashed benzene & related
genotoxic, carcinogenic
tailpipe emissions;
*see sdfu.org's E30 tab for
info, E30 prices\locations.

***Farmers Union's
PSA: Courtesy Merle
Anderson (Merle is 94
year old founder of Ace
and legendary ethanol
supporter... "because it is
the right thing to do")**

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Today in Weather History

March 22, 1966: The blizzard began on the 22nd in the west moving southeastward into Nebraska and then moving northeastward across the southeastern part of South Dakota. Winds up to 50 mph caused blowing snow which reduced visibility to near zero. Seven to 8 inches of snow fell on the plains of South Dakota with up to 2 feet in the Black Hills. Traffic was paralyzed due to snow-blocked roads. Schools and many businesses were closed. One death was attributed to the storm to exposure and exhaustion. A heart attack indirectly caused one death in Sioux Falls.

March 22, 1987: Snowmelt and rainfall caused some rivers and small streams to rise to very high levels in central South Dakota. Lowland flooding around the basins occurred, submerging some minor roads and streets. Also, high water levels and ice damaged some railroad bridges between Wakpala and Mahto in Corson County.

March 22, 2009: A stretch of warmer weather occurred from March 14th to 17th, which resulted in high temperatures in the 40s and low 50s. The snow depth in Fargo on the 14th was 15 inches with a melted water equivalent of 3.10 inches. By the 17th, the snow depth in Fargo had dropped to 6 inches. The snow was followed by a couple of colder days, which temporarily slowed down any additional snowmelt. The second period of warmer weather began on March 20th and continued through the 24th. During this period, high temperatures again climbed into the 40s and low 50s. Most of the remaining snow in Fargo melted during this stretch of warm weather, with the Fargo snow depth falling from 2 inches to 0. Conditions were about the same in Grand Forks, with the snow depth dropping to 0 by the 24th. These two warm-ups resulted in a quick response in river levels, especially across the southern Red River Valley and west central Minnesota. The Red River also showed a response, especially in the southern Red River Valley. With all the runoff moving into the river systems, water covered many roads and resulted in numerous road closures. The water covered entire sections of land as well and threatened many homes. A winter storm event on March 24th and 25th brought more snow to the region, along with a turn to colder temperatures. This resulted in the first crest for many rivers in the southern Red River Valley and west central Minnesota. However, river levels at most points along the Red River continued to stay high. Another winter storm event hit much of the area March 30th to 31st, dropping up to 2 feet of snow in the southern Red River Valley. There was a lot of moisture in this new snow, with snow to liquid ratios of less than 10 to 1. This set the stage for continued flooding into April and early May. The North Dakota Governor issued a statewide disaster declaration on March 13 in anticipation of spring flooding. Most counties in eastern North Dakota later received a Presidential Disaster Declaration.

1920 - A spectacular display of the Northern Lights was visible as far south as Bradenton FL, El Paso TX, and Fresno CA. At Detroit MI, the display was described so brilliant as to blot out all stars below first magnitude. (22nd-23rd) (The Weather Channel)

1936 - A great flood crested on rivers from Ohio to Maine. The flood claimed 107 lives and caused 270 million dollars property damage. (David Ludlum)

1954 - Six to ten inch rains caused the Chicago River to overflow its banks. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - An intense storm produced heavy snow in the southern and central Rockies, and high winds from southern California to West Texas. Wolf Creek Pass CO received 24 inches of snow, and winds gusted to 69 mph at Ruidoso NM. Blizzard conditions were reported in eastern Colorado. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Rain and high winds battered the Northern Pacific Coast Region, with wind gusts to 78 mph at Ocean Shores WA. The high winds uprooted trees and down power lines. Ten cities in the northeastern U.S. reported new record low temperatures for the date. Eight cities in the central U.S. reported record highs. Southerly winds gusting to 60 mph helped push the mercury at Ottumwa IA to a record warm reading of 83 degrees. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Six cities in the Great Lakes Region, and three in southern Texas, reported new record low temperatures for the date, including Alpena MI with a reading of 9 above zero, and Brownsville TX with a reading of 38 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

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Thu Mar 22	Fri Mar 23	Sat Mar 24	Sun Mar 25	Mon Mar 26	Tue Mar 27	Wed Mar 28
						
45°F	37°F	38°F	42°F	41°F	43°F	47°F
32°F	30°F	31°F	31°F	27°F	26°F	32°F
E 10 MPH	ESE 24 MPH Precip 100%	ESE 14 MPH	SSE 17 MPH Precip 80%	E 10 MPH Precip 70%	N 10 MPH	SW 9 MPH



Seasonally Mild Today

Highs: 40s

Spring Storm System w/ Rain & Snow Friday

Northeast South Dakota:
Heavy Snow Possible
Highs: Low/Mid 30s

Where Is The Transition?
Close to Aberdeen & Watertown

Central South Dakota:
Any Snow Changes To Rain
Highs: 40s & Low 50s

National Weather Service – Aberdeen, SD
[weather.gov/Aberdeen](https://twitter.com/weather.gov/Aberdeen)
Graphic Created 3/22/2018 5:29 AM

Published on: 03/22/2018 at 5:36AM

Enjoy the day because a system moving in early tomorrow will bring snow, though there will be a changeover to rain as the system continues to move overhead. How far into the state will this transition take place, well - that is more complicated. It looks like the rain snow line will set up from northwest to southeast near Aberdeen and Watertown. If you live northeast of this line, expect mainly heavy wet snow.

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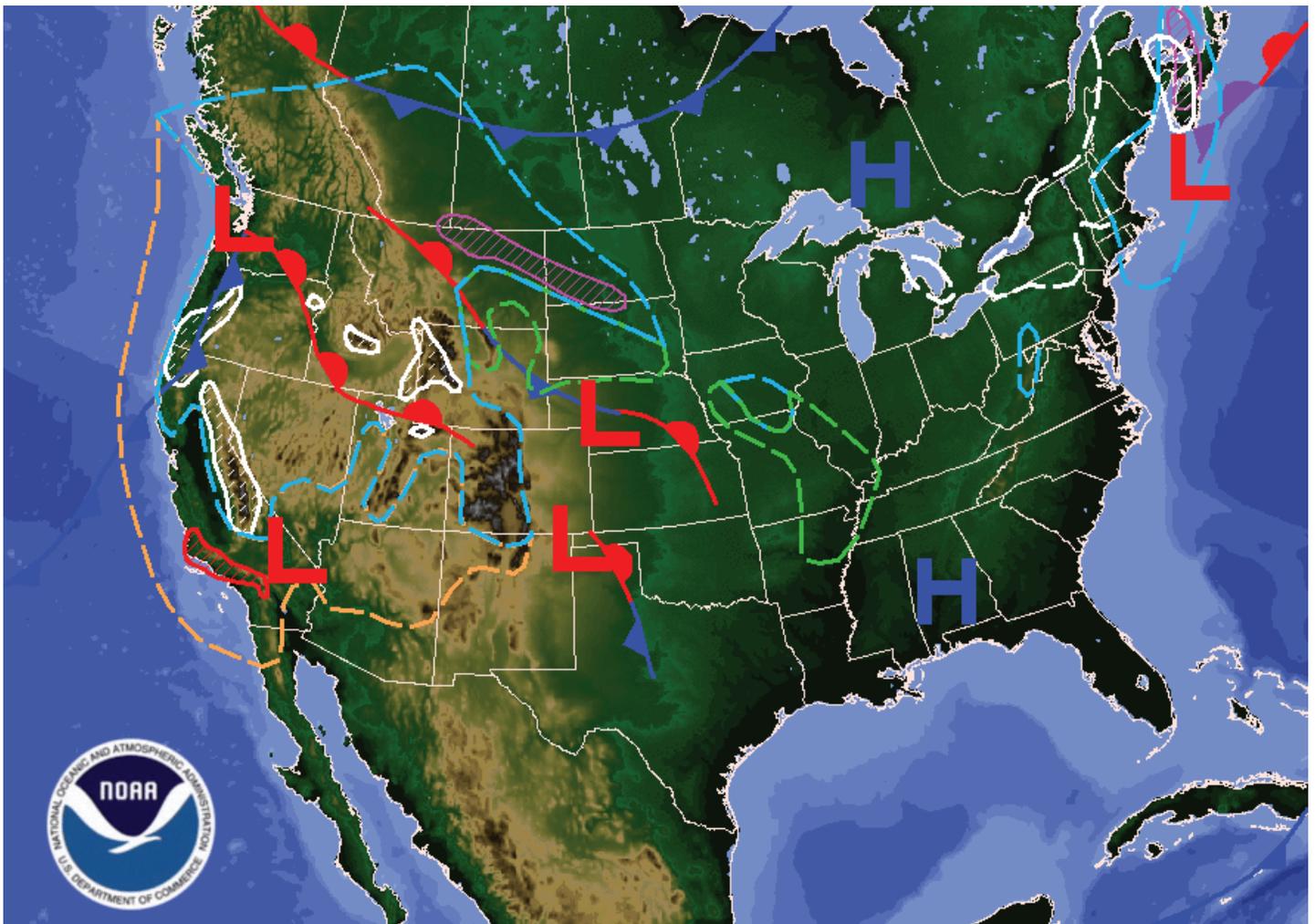
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Yesterday's Weather

High Outside Temp: 47.5 F at 5:48 PM
Low Outside Temp: 29.2 F at 6:58 AM
Wind Chill:
High Gust: 19.0 Mph at 10:38 AM
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 79° in 1907
Record Low: -16° in 1899
Average High: 43°F
Average Low: 22°F
Average Precip in March: 0.75
Precip to date in March: 1.14
Average Precip to date: 1.77
Precip Year to Date: 1.55
Sunset Tonight: 7:48 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:30 a.m.



Day 1 National Forecast Chart

Valid Thu, Mar 22, 2018, issued 4:55 AM EDT
DOC/NOAA/NWS/NCEP/Weather Prediction Center
Prepared by McCreynolds with WPC/SPC/NHC forecasts

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

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SEEING IS BELIEVING

A youth pastor and his "Win One Now" team were passing out tracts and talking to a group of young people in New York one Saturday evening. A gang leader went up to him and shouted, "I'm sick and tired of you people talking about love. I've never seen love so if you've got it let me see it!"

How many others want to see "it?" We talk about love, sing about love, preach about love but the world is still trying to find out what love looks like. Someone once said they wanted to see "love with skin on it." And that's what God's love is all about. He did not speak of an empty, greedy love - but a love that passes all human understanding.

The Psalmist said that "The Lord has made His salvation known." By God's faithfulness to protect and provide for the well-being of the Children of Israel "He made His salvation known and revealed His righteousness to the nations." He made His salvation known by His faithfulness and the fulfillment of His covenant with His children. That was then.

This is now. Years ago God sent His only begotten Son to be born in a manger, live a sinless life, die on a cross and then be resurrected from a borrowed tomb. Once again He made "His salvation known." This is His love that we can see: it is "love with skin on it."

If the world cannot see this love, we who are His disciples have only ourselves to blame. All around us are people waiting and wanting to see "love with skin on it."

Prayer: Forgive us Christians, Father, if we have failed to show Your love. May we live Your "love with skin on it." In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture for Today: Psalm 98:2 The Lord has made known His salvation; His righteousness He has revealed in the sight of the nations.

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)
- 5/27/2018 Historic Trinity Church Pump Organ Concert.
- 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)
- 12/01/2018 Olive Grove Golf Course 2018 Holiday Party

- 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

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press

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

Dakota Cash
02-11-20-26-34
(two, eleven, twenty, twenty-six, thirty-four)
Estimated jackpot: \$27,000

Lotto America
06-18-25-26-28, Star Ball: 8, ASB: 5
(six, eighteen, twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-eight; Star Ball: eight; ASB: five)
Estimated jackpot: \$2.16 million

Mega Millions
Estimated jackpot: \$421 million

Powerball
03-04-18-29-61, Powerball: 25, Power Play: 2
(three, four, eighteen, twenty-nine, sixty-one; Powerball: twenty-five; Power Play: two)
Estimated jackpot: \$40 million

SD Legislature may hold public forums on ballot measures

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A top South Dakota Republican lawmaker says legislators may hold public forums on ballot questions set to go before voters this year.

Senate President Pro Tempore Brock Greenfield said Wednesday after an Americans for Prosperity-South Dakota forum that the hearings are in the best interest of the public in “their quest to learn more about the issues.” Greenfield says lawmakers have expressed support for the idea.

Don Hagar, state director of Americans for Prosperity, says it would help people make informed decisions.

South Dakota lawmakers have approved questions for the ballot including a measure asking voters in November to make the state constitution harder to change. Citizens’ initiatives on government ethics, tobacco taxes and out-of-state funding in ballot question campaigns have also been approved for the general election ballot.

SD governor signs ‘compassionate parole’ measure into law

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Dennis Daugaard has signed a bill creating a “compassionate parole” system for seriously ill and elderly inmates.

The new law makes high-cost, terminally ill inmates age 65 and over who have been imprisoned for at least a decade for a Class 3 felony or below eligible for compassionate parole consideration. Inmates 70 and above who have served at least 30 years of a non-death sentence are also eligible.

Under the law signed Wednesday, the secretary of corrections can consider referrals for compassionate parole from the inmate’s warden or health care provider. The Board of Pardons and Paroles will decide whether to grant or deny compassionate parole.

A state Department of Corrections spokesman says about 65 inmates are eligible. But he says just meeting the eligibility criteria doesn’t mean parole.

Gov. Dennis Daugaard signs \$4.7B South Dakota state budget

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Dennis Daugaard has signed a roughly \$4.7 billion state budget that includes funding hikes for education, Medicaid providers and state employees for the upcoming budget year.

The Republican executive signed the measure Wednesday that sets state spending for the 2019 budget year, which begins July 1. Daugaard says South Dakotans can be proud of the balanced budget that funds increases for the state's "three priority areas."

The Legislature benefited from state tax collections projected to climb higher than Daugaard anticipated when he proposed his budget plan in December. The budget includes roughly \$1.63 billion in general state spending, about \$18 million above the governor's proposal.

The new budget includes funding increases of 1 percent for education, 1.2 percent for state employees and 2 percent for community-based Medicaid providers and 0.5 percent for other providers.

Tribal concerns delay South Dakota uranium mine project

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Concern over whether a South Dakota site has historic, cultural and religious significance to Native Americans has further stalled a company's plan to mine for uranium.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission issued a license in 2014 to Powertech, which has been pursuing a project to drill for uranium near Edgemont for 13 years.

But the Oglala Sioux Tribe argues that the license was improperly approved without an adequate survey of tribal cultural resources as required by the National Environmental Policy Act, the Rapid City Journal reported .

Lakota Sioux Native Americans controlled the area before the U.S. government seized it in the late 1800s.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission issued a letter last week proposing a cultural resource survey process and requesting a company response by March 30. The letter suggests hiring a contractor, meeting with tribal leaders, interviewing tribal elders and conducting a field survey. It says Powertech should consider reimbursing tribal members for their participation and pay the contractor an estimated \$250,000.

A federal appeals court is also considering the tribe's request for a review of the commission's actions. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia heard oral arguments Tuesday.

Attorney Jeffrey Parsons represents the Oglala Sioux Tribe. He argued that since the license has already been issued, Powertech could build its mine and destroy sacred tribal sites before they're even identified. "The tribe is essentially being pushed to the edge of this cliff," Parsons said.

Attorney Christopher Pugsley, who represents Powertech, argued that the license doesn't put the tribe in immediate jeopardy of losing cultural resources, since additional regulatory approvals are still needed.

The project still needs approval from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and the state of South Dakota.

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

Governor signs laws on data breaches, tougher drug penalties

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley says Gov. Dennis Daugaard has signed a bill that imposes harsher penalties for methamphetamine dealing and manufacturing.

Jackley's office said Wednesday the new law also includes mandatory prison sentences for meth dealing and the distribution of opioids. The office says mandatory sentences are in current law, but they aren't consistently applied.

Daugaard signed a second bill that enacts stronger penalties for drug dealers whose product kills another person. Jackley says the measures give authorities the tools they need to protect communities and send drug dealers the message that South Dakota is "off-limits."

Jackley says the governor also signed a data breach notification bill. The three measures were among the attorney general's priorities for the 2018 legislative session.

Flood warning issued for Big Sioux River

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The National Weather Service has issued a flood warning for the Big Sioux River at Interstate 90.

Forecasters say the river is expected to crest just over flood stage of 12 feet Wednesday evening. Minor flooding is expected on agricultural land in Sioux Falls.

Watertown airport board endorses ADI for new flight contract

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The Watertown airport board is recommending that federal officials choose Aerodynamics Inc. for another two-year subsidized contract providing flights to Denver.

The Capital Journal reports the U.S. Department of Transportation has opened bidding for the contract. The current contract held by Aerodynamics Inc., or ADI, expires in July. The company started flying Watertown-Pierre-Denver routes in Aug. 2016.

ADI, Boutique Air of San Francisco and Great Lakes Aviation of Cheyenne, Wyoming, have submitted bids with more than one option of service.

Watertown Regional Airport Manager Todd Syhre says the five-member board agreed with his recommendation to stick with ADI.

Pierre Mayor Steve Harding says an ad hoc air service committee plans to meet Monday at the airport to review the three airlines' bids and come to a recommendation.

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

Sioux Falls movie theater wants to sell beer and wine

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A Sioux Falls movie theater is seeking city permission to sell beer and wine to customers.

The Argus Leader reports the West Mall 7 Theater is applying for a liquor license. Owner Todd Fragor says theaters in other markets are selling booze, and he wants to "test the waters."

The ultimate decision will rest with the City Council. Members say they're open to the idea, but only if the theater can demonstrate an ability to keep alcohol out of the hands of minors.

The council could decide the matter April 3.

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

Funding challenge for agricultural education

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Dennis Daugaard and agriculture industry leaders are promising to contribute a combined \$1 million if the South Dakota Agriculture Foundation can raise \$4 million in the next five years for agricultural education.

In announcing the contribution promise Tuesday in Sioux Falls, Daugaard said South Dakota agriculture is more than producing food, fuel and fiber, it's about developing values and character in young people and society.

The Argus Leader says the South Dakota Agricultural Foundation was created just two years ago and has given funds to 23 organizations so far.

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

Future of Rapid City arena appears headed to public vote

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Rapid City residents likely will get a say in the future of Barnett Arena in the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center.

The Rapid City Journal reports that a citizens group has submitted nearly 2,900 petition signatures calling for a vote — well more than the 2,100 needed to put the matter on the June primary election ballot.

The signatures still need to be validated. If enough of them are, residents will vote on whether to renovate the arena for \$25 million or build a new one that would cost \$130 million.

Voters in 2015 rejected a new arena, but that project was much more ambitious, with an initial price tag of \$180 million.

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

Police: Austin bomber's motive still unknown, despite video

By JIM VERTUNO and WILL WEISSERT, Associated Press

PFLUGERVILLE, Texas (AP) — A 25-minute cellphone video left behind by the bomber whose deadly explosives terrorized Austin for weeks details the differences among the weapons he built and amounts to a confession, police said. But his motive remains a mystery.

Mark Anthony Conditt, an unemployed college dropout who bought bomb-making materials at Home Depot, recorded the video hours before he died after detonating one of his own devices as SWAT teams closed in. It seemed to indicate the 23-year-old knew he was about to be caught, said Austin Police Chief Brian Manley.

"It is the outcry of a very challenged young man talking about challenges in his own life," Manley said of the recording, which authorities declined to release amid the ongoing investigation.

Conditt was tracked down using store surveillance video, cellphone signals and witness accounts of a customer shipping packages in a disguise that included a blond wig and gloves. Police finally found him early Wednesday at a hotel in a suburb north of Austin.

Officers prepared to move in for an arrest. When the suspect's sport utility vehicle began to drive away, they followed. Conditt ran into a ditch on the side of the road, and SWAT officers approached, banging on his window.

Within seconds, the suspect had detonated a bomb inside his vehicle, blasting the officers backward, Manley said. One officer then fired his weapon at Conditt, the chief said. The medical examiner has not finalized the cause of death, but the bomb caused "significant" injuries, he said.

Law enforcement officials did not immediately say whether Conditt acted alone in the five bombings in the Texas capital and suburban San Antonio that killed two people and badly wounded four others. Fred Milanowski of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives said investigators were confident that "the same person built each one of these devices."

Investigators released few details about Conditt, except his age and that he was white. Neighbors say he was home-schooled. He later attended Austin Community College from 2010 to 2012, according to a college spokeswoman, but he did not graduate.

In a 2012 online blog that the college spokeswoman said Conditt created as part of a U.S. government class project, he gives his opinion on several issues, often in response to someone else's commentary. Conditt wrote that gay marriage should be illegal, argued in favor of the death penalty and gave his thoughts on "why we might want to consider" eliminating sex offender registries.

In the "about me" section of the blog, Conditt wrote that he wasn't "that politically inclined" but did view himself as conservative.

Jay Schulze, who lives in Pflugerville, said he was jogging Tuesday night when he was stopped by police and asked about the bombings. He said police flew drones over Conditt's home for about six hours between Tuesday evening and early Wednesday morning.

Schulze described the home as "a weird house with a lot of people coming and going" and a bit rundown.

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A neighbor who watched Conditt grow up said he always seemed smart and polite. Jeff Reeb said he has lived next to Conditt's parents for about 17 years and described them as good neighbors. Conditt had visited his parents regularly, he said.

Conditt's family released a statement saying they had "no idea of the darkness that Mark must have been in." His uncle, Mike Courtney, said his nephew was a "computer geek" who was intelligent and kind.

Austin was hit with four bombings starting on March 2. The first explosions were from packages left on doorsteps. Then a bomb with a tripwire was placed near a public trail. A fifth parcel bomb detonated early Tuesday at a FedEx distribution center near San Antonio.

Rep. Michael McCaul, a Republican from Austin, said Conditt's "fatal mistake" was walking into a FedEx store to mail a package because that allowed authorities to obtain surveillance video that showed him and his vehicle, along with his license plate number. From there, investigators could identify the suspect and eventually track him using his cellphone.

Police warned of the possibility that more bombs had yet to be found.

"We don't know where this suspect has spent his last 24 hours, and therefore we still need to remain vigilant to ensure that no other packages or devices have been left to the community," Manley said.

By late afternoon, federal officials had a "reasonable level of certainty" that there were no more package bombs "out in the public," said Milanowski, the agent in charge of the Houston division of the ATF. But authorities urged continued awareness just in case.

"We think we're on top of this, but we just don't know," FBI agent Chris Combs said.

Homemade explosives were recovered from Conditt's home in Pflugerville, a community where portions of "Friday Night Lights" were filmed. His two roommates were detained for questioning. One was later released.

Investigators said one room in the home contained bomb components and explosive materials but no finished bombs. They were analyzing Conditt's internet history to find out how he learned to make bombs.

Isaac Figueroa said he and his brother heard sirens and helicopters around 2 a.m. Wednesday in the area and drove toward them, then cut through nearby woods on foot after they hit a police roadblock.

The 26-year-old said they saw an SUV that was pinned between large vans and "looked like it had been rammed off the road." He said police later deployed a robot to go examine the vehicle.

The suspect's death followed a day of rapid-fire developments in the case. On Tuesday, the bomb at the FedEx shipping center in suburban San Antonio exploded on a conveyer belt.

Later, police sent a bomb squad to a FedEx facility outside the Austin airport to check on a suspicious package. Authorities subsequently said that package contained an explosive that was tied to the other bombings.

Officers then recovered footage of Conditt wearing a blond wig and gloves as he turned over packages to send at a FedEx store in south Austin. That was enough to set in motion the manhunt that ended with Wednesday's fatal explosion.

Associated Press writers Paul J. Weber, Emily Schmall and John Mone in Austin; Sadie Gurman in Washington; and Tim Jacobs in Chicago contributed to this report.

AP Exclusive: Toy co. CEO leads effort to salvage Toys R Us

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO, AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Toy company executive Isaac Larian and other investors have pledged a total of \$200 million and hope to raise four times that amount in crowdfunding in a bid to save potentially more than half of the 735 Toys R Us stores that will go dark in bankruptcy proceedings.

The unsolicited bid faces a number of hurdles like finding other deep-pocketed investors, as well as getting a bankruptcy judge to approve such an unusual plan. It is the first known plan to keep the Toys R Us brand alive.

The long-shot bid would be a huge benefit to Larian. Nearly 1 in every 5 sales made by Bratz doll-maker

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MGA Entertainment, where Larian is CEO, is rung up at a Toys R Us store.

Larian says he and the other investors, which he declined to name, believe that saving part of Toys R Us will be good for the toy industry, customers and workers.

The announcement last week that Toys R Us would be lost generated an enormous outpouring of nostalgia. #SaveToysRUs became a trend on social media.

The group now trying to save a remnant of the toy chain is hoping that with Toys R Us on the brink, it can reach its goal of raising \$1 billion in funding. The website savetoysrus.com directs consumers to a GoFundMe campaign to do that.

Toys R Us sought court approval last week to liquidate its remaining U.S. stores, threatening the jobs of some 30,000 employees and spelling the end for a chain known to generations of children and parents for its sprawling stores, sing-along jingle and Geoffrey the giraffe mascot.

The store has an iconic place in American culture, said Larian. "We can't just sit back and just let it disappear."

Larian, a billionaire, is using his own money, not MGA funds, for the bid.

How could Larian save a store that has labored to remain relevant in the age of Amazon.com? For one thing, Larian would be free of the \$5 billion in debt that hampered the current owner of Toys R Us. The other reason is self-preservation.

The toy industry needs a national presence like Toys R Us, where designers can get real world reaction to new toys that children pull from shelves.

The demise of Toys R Us will have a "devastating effect" on the toy industry, said Larian, who believes that 130,000 U.S. jobs could be lost when layoffs at suppliers and logistic operations are included.

A total Toys R Us liquidation could mean layoffs at an MGA plant in Ohio that makes the Little Tikes toy vehicles. That brand accounts for 25 percent of MGA total sales.

Trouble at Toys R Us has already shaken big toy makers like Mattel and Hasbro. MGA, based in Van Nuys, California, is the world's largest privately held toy company. The planned liquidation would have a bigger impact on smaller toy makers that rely more on Toys R Us for sales.

"People do not realize the hole that can't be filled by other retailers," said Larian. "The pipeline is too big."

If as many as 400 stores can be saved, it is Larian's hope that a third of the 130,000 jobs he sees as lost could be rescued.

The shuttering of Toys R Us stores in coming months would be the final chapter of a company undercut by shifting currents that range from online shopping to mobile games.

When it filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection last fall, Toys R Us pledged to stay open. But in January, after what CEO David Brandon called a "devastating" holiday shopping season, 182 stores were marked for closure. Last week, a total liquidation was announced.

The company is trying to bundle its Canadian business with about 200 U.S. stores and find a buyer. Larian has personally aligned with another investor in a separate bid for those operations.

Toys R Us will likely liquidate its businesses in Australia, France, Poland, Portugal and Spain. It's already shuttering its business in the United Kingdom. That would leave it with the stores in Canada, as well as in central Europe and Asia. It operates more than 700 stores outside the United States.

Follow Anne D'Innocenzio at <http://www.Twitter.com/adinnocenzio>

Nor'easter rolls into New England as millions begin cleanup

By TED SHAFFREY and MICHAEL HILL, Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The latest nor'easter lost some punch as it rolled into New England on Thursday, as millions of others in the Northeast dug out from the storm that dumped more than a foot of snow in some places, knocked out power to tens of thousands of customers and had many wishing for more spring-like weather.

"We're supposed to be getting ready for Easter, not a nor'easter," said 46-year-old Raeme Dempsey,

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as her 6-year-old daughter, Jadalynn, pulled her toward a Philadelphia park so they could see the trees blanketed in freshly fallen snow.

While some parts of Pennsylvania saw more than a foot of snow, major cities along the Interstate 95 corridor saw much less. Downtown Philadelphia got 7 inches and New York City's Central Park recorded a little less than 7.

The storm weakened a bit in the early hours of Thursday, and Boston expected to escape with just a few inches of snow before it tapered off Thursday afternoon. Along the Massachusetts coast, winds gusted to 40 mph (64 kph) and some towns dealt with flooding.

"It's time to move on to another season," said Pancho Ortega, who was clearing the sidewalk outside his soon-to-open restaurant in Philadelphia.

Airlines canceled more than 4,000 flights Wednesday, but service was slowly being restored Thursday. On the ground, Amtrak scaled back service on the Northeast corridor between Washington and Boston, and continued a modified schedule Thursday. At least two traffic deaths were reported in New Jersey and on New York's Long Island.

Patience wore thin as the fourth major storm in three weeks pounded the region.

"I want warm! I'm done with the cold," said Yana Damoiseau, a pedestrian in New York City.

In New Jersey, some streets flooded along the shore, including one in Point Pleasant Beach where a pair of ducks cruised back and forth through an intersection where a plastic garbage can bobbed in the waves. The state's major utilities reported slightly more than 75,000 customers without service early Thursday.

The storm also unloaded snow on Virginia and West Virginia as it pushed into the Northeast. Virginia reported more 240 traffic accidents.

But not everyone was sick of the snow.

In Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania, about 90 miles outside Philadelphia, 10-year-old siblings Talia and Miles Broadhurst made their own fun on yet another day off from school, climbing onto the family SUV and sliding down the snow-slicked windshield and hood before plopping onto the snow.

"If the snow keeps me away from school, I'm fine with it," Miles said.

Hill contributed from Albany, New York. Also contributing were Kristen de Groot and Sharyn Flanagan in Philadelphia, Wayne Parry in Point Pleasant Beach, New Jersey, Michael Rubinkam in Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania, Kiley Armstrong and Larry Neumeister in New York City, Bruce Shipkowski in Toms River, New Jersey.

Trump to punish China on trade as US companies fear backlash

By PAUL WISEMAN, AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Farmers, electronics retailers and other U.S. businesses are bracing for a backlash as President Donald Trump targets China for stealing American technology or pressuring U.S. companies to hand it over.

The administration is expected Thursday to slap trade sanctions on China, perhaps including restrictions on Chinese investment and tariffs on as much as \$60 billion worth of Chinese products.

Dozens of industry groups sent a letter last weekend to Trump warning that "the imposition of sweeping tariffs would trigger a chain reaction of negative consequences for the U.S. economy, provoking retaliation; stifling U.S. agriculture, goods, and services exports; and raising costs for businesses and consumers."

The announcement will mark the end of a seven-month U.S. investigation into the hardball tactics China has used to challenge U.S. supremacy in technology, including dispatching hackers to steal commercial secrets and demanding that U.S. companies hand over trade secrets in exchange for access to the Chinese market. The administration argues that years of negotiations with China have failed to produce results.

"It could be a watershed moment," said Stephen Ezell, vice president of global innovation policy at the Information Technology & Innovation Foundation, a think tank. "The Trump administration's decision to go down this path is illustrative that previous strategies have not borne the hoped-for fruit."

Business groups mostly agree that something needs to be done about China's aggressive push in tech-

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nology — but they worry that China will retaliate by targeting U.S. exports of aircraft, soybeans and other products and start a tit-for-tat trade war of escalating sanctions between the world's two biggest economies.

"The sanctions are a very big deal," says Mary Lovely, a Syracuse University economist and senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics. "The Chinese see them as a major threat and do not want a costly trade war."

The move against China comes just as the United States prepares to impose tariffs of 25 percent on imported steel and 10 percent on aluminum — sanctions that are meant to hit China for flooding the world with cheap steel and aluminum but will likely fall hardest on U.S. allies like South Korea and Brazil because they ship more of the metals to the United States.

Trump campaigned on promises to bring down America's massive trade deficit — \$566 billion last year — by rewriting trade agreements and cracking down on what he called abusive commercial practices by U.S. trading partners. But he was slow to turn rhetoric to action. In January, he imposed tariffs on imported solar panels and washing machines. Then he unveiled the steel and aluminum tariffs, saying reliance on imported metals jeopardizes U.S. national security.

To target China, Trump has dusted off a Cold War weapon for trade disputes: Section 301 of the U.S. Trade Act of 1974, which lets the president unilaterally impose tariffs. It was meant for a world in which large swaths of global commerce were not covered by trade agreements. With the arrival in 1995 of the World Trade Organization, which polices global trade, Section 301 fell largely into disuse.

At first it looked like Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping were going to get along fine. They enjoyed an amiable summit nearly a year ago at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida. But America's longstanding complaints about Chinese economic practices continued to simmer, and it became more and more apparent that the U.S. investigation into China technology policies was going to end in trade sanctions.

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang this week urged Washington to act "rationally" and promised to open China up to more foreign products and investment. "China has been trying to cool things down for weeks. They have offered concessions," Lovely says. "Nothing seems to cool the fire. I fear they will take a hard line now that their efforts have been rebuffed. ... China cannot appear subservient to the U.S."

On Twitter follow Wiseman at <https://twitter.com/paulwisemanAP>

Leaders finalize US budget bill; voting could begin Thursday

By **ANDREW TAYLOR** and **LISA MASCARO**, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional leaders have finalized a sweeping \$1.3 trillion budget bill that substantially boosts military and domestic spending but leaves behind young immigrant "Dreamers," deprives President Donald Trump some of his border wall money and takes only incremental steps to address gun violence.

As negotiators stumbled toward an end-of-the-week deadline to fund the government or face a federal shutdown, House Speaker Paul Ryan dashed to the White House amid concerns Trump's support was wavering. Although some conservative Republicans balked at the size of the spending increases and the rush to pass the bill, the White House said the president backed the legislation.

Trump himself sounded less than enthused, tweeting late Wednesday: "Had to waste money on Dem giveaways in order to take care of military pay increase and new equipment."

Talks had stretched into Wednesday evening before the 2,232-page text was finally released.

"No bill of this size is perfect," Ryan said. "But this legislation addresses important priorities and makes us stronger at home and abroad."

Leaders hoped to start voting as soon as Thursday. A stopgap measure may be needed to ensure federal offices aren't hit with a partial shutdown at midnight Friday when funding for the government expires.

Negotiators have been working for days — and nights — on details of the bill, which is widely viewed as the last major piece of legislation likely to move through Congress in this election year. Lawmakers in both parties sought to attach their top priorities.

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Two of the biggest remaining issues had been border wall funds and a legislative response to gun violence after the clamor for action following recent school shootings, including the one in Parkland, Florida.

On guns, leaders agreed to tuck in bipartisan provisions to bolster school safety funds and improve compliance with the criminal background check system for firearm purchases. The bill states that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention can do research on gun violence, though not advocacy, an idea Democrats pushed.

But there was no resolution for Dreamers, the young immigrants who have been living in the United States illegally since childhood but whose deportation protections are being challenged in court after Trump tried to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA.

Democrats temporarily shut down the government earlier this year as they fought for that protection. But the issue only rose to a discussion item when Trump made a late-hour push for a deal in exchange for \$25 billion in border wall funds.

Instead, Trump is now poised to win \$1.6 billion for barriers along the border, but none of it for the new prototypes he recently visited in California. Less than half the nearly 95 miles of border construction, including levees along the Rio Grande in Texas, would be for new barriers, with the rest for repair of existing segments.

In one win for immigrant advocates, negotiators rejected Trump's plans to hire hundreds of new Border Patrol and immigration enforcement agents.

"We are disappointed that we did not reach agreement on Dreamer protections that were worthy of these patriotic young people," said House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi.

The emerging plan removes a much-debated earmark protecting money for a rail tunnel under the Hudson River. The item was a top priority of Trump's most powerful Democratic rival, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York, but Trump vowed to veto the bill over the earmark. Under the legislation, the project would remain eligible for funding, however, and a Schumer aide said it was likely to win well more than half of the \$900 million sought for the project this year.

The core purpose of the bill is to increase spending for military and domestic programs that have been sharply squeezed under a 2011 agreement that was supposed to cap spending. It gives Trump a huge budget increase for the military, while Democrats scored wins on infrastructure and other domestic programs that they failed to get under President Barack Obama.

That largesse has drawn opposition from some fiscal conservatives and could make passage a potentially tricky process.

Last month, Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul triggered a brief government shutdown over his objections to the deficit spending. On Wednesday, he tweeted his opposition to the emerging legislation, known as an "omnibus."

"It's a good thing we have Republican control of Congress or the Democrats might bust the budget caps, fund planned parenthood and Obamacare, and sneak gun control without due process into an Omni ... wait, what?" Paul tweeted.

Most essential was support from Trump, who has been known to threaten to veto legislation even when his team is involved in the negotiations.

Word of Trump's discontent sent Ryan to the White House, where he was invited to a face-to-face with the president, with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell on the phone.

White House aides said the president's support was never in doubt, but one senior White House official said the president was concerned that details of the package weren't being presented as well as they could be, both to members of Congress and the public.

The group discussed how they could better sell the package, said the official, who was granted anonymity to discuss the private conversation.

"The president and the leaders discussed their support for the bill," said White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, adding that it would fund Trump priorities such as wall construction, add money to combat the opioid crisis and provide new infrastructure spending.

Both parties touted \$4.6 billion in total funding to fight the nation's opioid addiction epidemic, a \$3 billion increase. More than \$2 billion would go to strengthen school safety through grants for training, security measures and treatment for the mentally ill. Medical research at the National Institutes of Health, a long-standing bipartisan priority, would receive a record \$3 billion increase to \$37 billion. Funding was also included for election security ahead of the 2018 midterms.

Child care and development block grants would receive a huge \$2.4 billion increase to \$5.2 billion. And an Obama-era transportation grant program known as TIGER would see its budget tripled to \$1.5 billion. Head Start for preschoolers would get a \$610 million boost, while an additional \$2.4 billion would go for child care grants.

Associated Press writers Jill Colvin, Alan Fram and Matthew Daly contributed to this report.

Alabama to execute convicted bomber nearly 30 years later

By JAY REEVES, Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — Judge Robert S. Vance was at his kitchen table on Dec. 16, 1989, when he opened a package that had been mailed to his home. The bomb hidden inside exploded with brutal force, killing Vance instantly and severely injuring his wife.

Two days later, a similar device killed an attorney in Georgia. Two other mail bombs were later intercepted and defused, one at a federal courthouse in Atlanta and the other at an NAACP office in Jacksonville, Florida.

The bombings created a wave of terror across the South. Now, nearly 30 years later, Alabama is preparing to execute the man convicted in Vance's killing, Walter Leroy Moody Jr. of Rex, Georgia. Moody is set for lethal injection next month.

The long-delayed resolution to the old crime comes as Texas officials grapple with a deadly spate of bombings over three weeks that ended Wednesday when the suspect blew himself up.

The complex investigation that led to Moody's prosecution is a reflection of how difficult it can be to get to the bottom of sporadic bombings like the ones in Texas. And it is also a testament to the lingering effects that such a crime can have.

Tom Thurman, who retired from the FBI's crime laboratory after handling cases including the Vance assassination, said bombings are "more complicated in many aspects" than other crimes.

"On the investigative side it's so different from other crimes that involve personal contact," he said. "An individual is there to stab, hit or shoot somebody ... and a lot of times law enforcement is fortunate to have someone who was there. In most bombing cases, the person who sets the device or sends it is not there. They've got some anonymity."

Vance's son, Robert Vance Jr., said he is thankful Moody is in prison, and he feels for the victims in Texas, where two people were killed and four were badly injured by package bombs.

"I've been in the place of the families down in the Austin area going through this. It's just so frustrating because you don't know who is responsible or why," said Vance, now a Democratic state court judge seeking the office of chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court.

Moody has always maintained his innocence. Agents arrested him in July 1990 after what leaders called one of the largest federal investigations ever.

Robert S. Vance was a member of the Atlanta-based 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, and prosecutors alleged Moody targeted him out of anger at the 11th Circuit's refusal to overturn a conviction that blocked Moody, who had attended law school, from ever practicing law.

The bomb that killed Robert E. Robinson, a black civil rights attorney from Savannah, Georgia, was meant to cast suspicion on the Ku Klux Klan, as was the bomb sent to the NAACP office, authorities said.

By reconstructing the two bombs that killed Vance and Robinson and disarming the two others, investigators determined they were wrapped in nearly identical packages and mailed using the same kind of stamps. There were also similarities between the materials used in the bombs, including improvised detonators and wiring methods, Thurman said.

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It's the same with any bombing case, Thurman said: Investigators have to consider a multitude of factors, starting with the components of the device. In Moody's case, the bomb was manufactured in a way that led back to its maker, he said.

After Vance's death, officials retrieved an intact bomb from the courthouse that housed 11th Circuit judges in Atlanta. Forensic chemist Lloyd Erwin of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives recognized a unique element of its construction from a previous case: The ends of the pipe bomb were made of flat, welded pieces of metal rather than the screw caps most commonly used.

That tidbit led investigators to Moody, who had been convicted in a 1972 case involving a bomb with flat, welded end pieces.

Moody's former wife testified that she purchased bomb-making materials at his direction, and evidence linked Moody to a manual typewriter with a misplaced "a" that experts said had been used to write a letter claiming responsibility for the bombs. One letter talked about a "declaration of war" against the judiciary and complained about the 11th Circuit's "callous disregard for justice," court documents show.

A prosecution team led by Louis Freeh, who later became FBI director, convinced a federal jury that Moody was to blame for the bombing wave, and a judge sentenced him to seven life sentences plus 400 years in August 1991.

Moody was convicted on a state capital murder charge in 1996 in Vance's killing, and he has been on death row since 1997. Now 82, he is the oldest inmate awaiting execution in Alabama.

The Alabama Supreme Court has set Moody's lethal injection for April 19, but Moody has sent a letter to Vance's son and others claiming he is the innocent victim of a government conspiracy. A federal defender has asked a federal court to block the execution, arguing the state can't execute Moody because he's technically in federal custody. A judge has not yet ruled.

Vance said he feels peace "that justice has been done" in his father's case, and he doesn't plan to witness Moody's execution. But every new bombing, like the string of blasts in Texas, dredges up old feelings.

"Usually these days I get up and don't really think about what happened 30 years ago," Vance said. "But when you see that in the media, you go back to December 1989."

Reeves can be reached at jreeves@ap.org or https://twitter.com/Jay_Reeves .

Will the Sweet 16 produce more upsets?

By JOHN KEKIS, AP Sports Writer

Back to the madness of March and the Sweet 16, starring Loyola-Chicago, Kansas State, Syracuse and whatever other underdog you might want to throw in there — maybe Florida State or Texas A&M.

For drama, look no further than the South Region, where the top four seeds are home watching the NCAA Tournament on TV. That includes Virginia, the overall No. 1 seed, plus No. 2 Cincinnati, No. 3 Tennessee and No. 4 Arizona. All were eliminated on the opening weekend, a tourney first .

Gone, too, from the field of 68 are high-scoring Xavier, a No. 1 seed, defending national champion North Carolina, and Michigan State, making the path to next week's Final Four that much more wide open.

"You've got a chance," said Bruce Weber, coach of ninth-seeded Kansas State. "Obviously, there's been so much chaos in this year's tournament and you say, hey, Kentucky is favored.

"Yeah, fine, so was Virginia, so was Michigan State, so was all the other teams, and they all are not playing and we're playing. I think we've got to have a good mindset."

Play resumes Thursday night with tournament darling Loyola-Chicago (30-5), an 11th seed, facing No. 7 seed Nevada (29-7), and Kansas State (24-11) playing No. 5 seed Kentucky (26-10) in the South at Philips Arena in Atlanta. The other two matchups are in the West, where No. 7 Texas A&M (22-12) meets No. 3 Michigan (30-7), and No. 9 Florida State (22-11) takes on No. 4 Gonzaga (32-4) at Staples Center in Los Angeles.

On Friday night, No. 1 seed Kansas (29-7) plays No. 5 Clemson (25-9), and second-seeded Duke (28-7) takes on 11th-seeded Syracuse (23-13) in an Atlantic Coast Conference matchup in the Midwest Regional in

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Omaha, Nebraska. In the East Region at TD Garden in Boston, it will be top seed Villanova (32-4) against No. 5 West Virginia (26-10), and No. 2 Purdue (30-6) against No. 3 Texas Tech (26-9).

For Florida State coach Leonard Hamilton, whose Seminoles haven't reached the Sweet 16 in a quarter century, all the upsets are just a sign of the times. It's just more painful for the Blue Bloods because more is expected of them.

"You have kids playing good basketball all over the country," Hamilton said. "But the schools that get the players with the most recognition have notoriety, and the expectations for those schools are at such a level that sometimes you get disappointed when the notoriety doesn't meet the success."

RAMBLING ON AGAIN?: Loyola and UMBC were the talk of the first weekend, but the 16th-seeded Retrievers were ousted by Kansas State after toppling Virginia in the first round, while the 11th-seeded Ramblers moved on with a last-second triumph over Tennessee.

Loyola, which also defeated Miami with a buzzer beater, is out to match its 1963 national championship team and ruin the bracket of 98-year-old Sister Jean, the team chaplain and erstwhile scout whose picks don't have her team advancing.

"These guys have been preparing for it and the reason why we can do it is these guys are winners," coach Porter Moser said. "It's been noted a lot that we have seven kids on our team that won state championships. They're winners and they're together. They're a connected team.

"We prepared for this every step, and they're locked in. They're going to embrace it."

Nevada coach Eric Musselman, in his third season in Reno, is out to halt the Ramblers' run. One thing the Wolf Pack will hope to avoid is a halftime deficit.

"If we get behind with this team, it'll be hard to get back in front because they execute so well offensively," Nevada point guard Hallice Cooke said. "They know how to control the pace of the game. It's very important for us to get off to a hot start, crash the offensive glass, take our time offensively and get great shots."

CONFIDENCE GAME: Texas A&M landed a seventh seed after an up-and-down season, and the Aggies have never advanced to the Elite Eight. Big man Robert Williams is out to change that.

"We plan on dominating the areas that we specify, so just keep that mindset," said the 6-foot-10 Williams, who played just 20 minutes in a 21-point victory last weekend over defending national champion North Carolina, long enough to snare 13 rebounds, block two shots, and sink all three shots he attempted.

Like 11th-seeded Syracuse, the Aggies use a zone defense to wreak havoc, and so far it's worked like a charm.

"Exact same thing as Syracuse, it's big. It's really big," Michigan coach John Beilein said. "I remember when I was at West Virginia. We got a guy wide open (against Syracuse) and Hakim Warrick blocked that shot into the 10th row, and that was the end of our night. I mean, our kids lost all confidence because of that length, and Texas A&M can do the exact same thing."

TOO MANY MEN: Florida State upset Xavier last weekend, and the Seminoles 10- and 11-man rotation played a big part.

Just wear 'em down, baby.

"I felt that that was the best way for me to compete with the rich tradition of programs that are always loaded with the top seven, eight players who are some of the top players in the country," Hamilton said. "Let's try to get a team of guys that would allow themselves to win by committee. We feel that we can compete a lot better if we have more guys to share the load where we don't put all that responsibility on one or two particular players."

CHALKBOARD FODDER: As the favorites have been bounced, the odds for the teams left standing change with each game, and the Wildcats of Kansas State haven't received much love. They've been relegated to the bottom of the heap an awful lot, and if the players haven't paid attention, Weber sure has.

"I don't know if they saw it, but we made sure they saw it, and we put it up on the board," Weber said. "Obviously, the game (against UMBC) was ugly, but I don't think people appreciate what UMBC did to Virginia. You're talking the best team in the country for most of the year, and that team was tough to play."

The Wildcats have won twice in the tournament despite playing without injured All-Big 12 forward Dean

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Wade, the team's leading scorer. But the 6-8 Wade is expected to return.

PAY NO ATTENTION: Fifth-seeded Kentucky is the favorite to win the South and advance to the Final Four, but don't bother telling Nevada's Musselman.

"I'm only worried about one game, one team, Thursday night at whatever time they tell us we're playing," Musselman said. "I don't even know who else is here."

More AP college basketball: <https://collegebasketball.ap.org> ; https://twitter.com/AP_Top25 and <https://www.podcastone.com/ap-sports-special-events>

Austin bombing suspect's uncle says he was smart, kind

By **DAVID WARREN, REESE DUNKLIN and P. SOLOMON BANDA, Associated Press**

A 23-year-old suspected of planting deadly bombs that struck fear across Austin was described Wednesday by his uncle as a smart and kind "computer geek" and a friend said he was an assertive person who would end up being "kind of dominant and intimidating in conversation."

Neither had any idea what might have motivated Mark Anthony Conditt, who authorities say died after detonating a bomb in his sport utility vehicle as officers moved in for an arrest near Austin. The attacks in the Texas capital and suburban San Antonio killed two people and wounded four others.

"I mean this is coming from nowhere. We just don't know what. I don't know how many ways to say it but everyone is caught off guard by this," Conditt's uncle, Mike Courtney of Lakewood, Colorado, told The Associated Press.

At a news conference Wednesday evening, Austin Police Chief Brian Manley said he considers a 25-minute recording on a cellphone found with Conditt a "confession," in which Conditt talks in great detail about the differences among the bombs he built.

But Manley suggested that there might never be a clear motive, noting where the explosives were placed or addressed seems random.

Conditt grew up in Pflugerville, a suburb just northeast of Austin where he was still living just a few miles from his parents' home after moving out. On Wednesday, authorities recovered homemade explosives from inside the residence, which he shared with roommates.

Conditt's family said in a statement they had "no idea of the darkness that Mark must have been in."

Conditt was the oldest of four children who were all home-schooled.

Jeff Reeb, a neighbor of Conditt's parents in Pflugerville for about 17 years, said he watched Conditt grow up and that he always seemed "smart" and "polite." Reeb, 75, said Conditt and his grandson played together into middle school and that Conditt regularly visited his parents, whom Reeb described as good neighbors.

Conditt attended Austin Community College from 2010 to 2012 and was a business administration major, but he did not graduate, according to college spokeswoman Jessica Vess. She said records indicate that no disciplinary actions were made against Conditt.

Although he worked for a time at an area manufacturing company, Gov. Greg Abbott told KXAN-TV in Austin that Conditt apparently was unemployed more recently and had no criminal record.

Conditt left little discernable trace on social media. Aside from a few photos of him on his family's Facebook pages, he addressed a range of topics in an online blog he created in 2012. Vess said he had created the blog as part of a U.S. government class project.

In the blog titled "Defining my Stance" he gives his opinion on several issues, often in response to commentary by someone else. Conditt wrote that gay marriage should be illegal, argued in favor of the death penalty and gave his thoughts on "why we might want to consider" eliminating sex offender registries.

Of gay marriage, Conditt wrote: "Homosexuality is not natural. Just look at the male and female bodies. They are obviously designed to couple."

In the "about me" section of the blog, Conditt wrote that he wasn't "that politically inclined," saying he viewed himself as conservative but didn't think he had enough information "to defend my stance as well

as it should be defended." He said he hoped the class would help him do that.

A friend of Conditt described him as smart, opinionated and often intimidating. Jeremiah Jensen, 24, told the Austin American-Statesman that he was close to Conditt in 2012 and 2013. Jensen said they were both home-schooled and he would often go to the Conditt home for lunch after church on Sundays and they attended Bible study and other activities together.

"I have no idea what caused him to make those bombs," Jensen told the newspaper .

He called Conditt a "deep thinker."

"When I met Mark, he was really rough around the edges," Jensen said. "He was a very assertive person and would ... end up being kind of dominant and intimidating in conversation. A lot of people didn't understand him and where he was coming from. He really just wanted to tell the truth. What I remember about him he would push back on you if you said something without thinking about it."

Jensen said "the kind of hate that he succumbed to" was not what Conditt believed in during high school.

"I don't know what happened along the way," Jensen said.

Jensen said Conditt had attended regular church services at Austin Stone Community Church but he didn't know if Conditt "held onto his faith." A spokesman for the church said no records of past engagement or past involvement by Conditt were found.

Congressman Michael McCaul told The Associated Press on Wednesday that the suspect matched the FBI's initial profile suspicion that the bomber was likely a white male. But McCaul said a psychological profile probably won't be known until investigators go through Conditt's writings and social media postings.

Warren and Dunklin reported from Dallas. Banda reported from Lakewood, Colorado. Associated Press journalists Shawn Chen in Chicago, and Emily Schmall, Jim Vertuno and Will Weissert in Pflugerville also contributed.

Can Zuckerberg's media blitz take the pressure off Facebook?

By **BARBARA ORTUTAY, DANICA KIRKA and GREGORY KATZ, Associated Press**

NEW YORK (AP) — In the wake of a privacy scandal involving a Trump-connected data-mining firm, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg embarked on a rare media mini-blitz in an attempt to take some of the public and political pressure off the social network.

But it's far from clear whether he's won over U.S. and European authorities, much less the broader public whose status updates provide Facebook with an endless stream of data it uses to sell targeted ads.

On Wednesday, the generally reclusive Zuckerberg sat for an interview on CNN and gave another to the publication Wired, addressing reports that Cambridge Analytica purloined the data of more than 50 million Facebook users in order to sway elections. The Trump campaign paid the firm \$6 million during the 2016 election, although it has since distanced itself from Cambridge.

Zuckerberg apologized for a "major breach of trust," admitted mistakes and outlined steps to protect users following Cambridge's data grab.

"I am really sorry that happened," Zuckerberg said on CNN. Facebook has a "responsibility" to protect its users' data, he added, noting that if it fails, "we don't deserve to have the opportunity to serve people."

His mea culpa on cable television came a few hours after he acknowledged his company's mistakes in a Facebook post, but without saying he was sorry.

Zuckerberg and Facebook's No. 2 executive, Sheryl Sandberg, had been quiet since news broke Friday that Cambridge may have used data improperly obtained from roughly 50 million Facebook users to try to sway elections. Cambridge's clients included Donald Trump's general-election campaign.

Facebook shares have dropped some 8 percent, lopping about \$46 billion off the company's market value, since the revelations were first published.

While several experts said Zuckerberg took an important step with the CNN interview, few were convinced that he put the Cambridge issue behind him. Zuckerberg's apology, for instance, seemed rushed and pro forma to Helio Fred Garcia, a crisis-management professor at NYU and Columbia University.

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"He didn't acknowledge the harm or potential harm to the affected users," Garcia said. "I doubt most people realized he was apologizing."

Instead, the Facebook chief pointed to steps the company has already taken, such as a 2014 move to restrict the access outside apps had to user data. (That move came too late to stop Cambridge.) And he laid out a series of technical changes that will further limit the data such apps can collect, pledged to notify users when outsiders misuse their information and said Facebook will "audit" apps that exhibit troubling behavior.

That audit will be a giant undertaking, said David Carroll, a media researcher at the Parsons School of Design in New York — one that he said will likely turn up a vast number of apps that did "troubling, distressing things."

But on other fronts, Zuckerberg carefully hedged otherwise striking remarks.

In the CNN interview, for instance, he said he would be "happy" to testify before Congress — but only if it was "the right thing to do." Zuckerberg went on to note that many other Facebook officials might be more appropriate witnesses depending on what Congress wanted to know.

At another point, the Facebook chief seemed to favor regulation for Facebook and other internet giants. At least, that is, the "right" kind of rules, such as ones requiring online political ads to disclose who paid for them. In almost the next breath, however, Zuckerberg steered clear of endorsing a bill that would write such rules into federal law, and instead talked up Facebook's own voluntary efforts on that front.

"They'll fight tooth and nail to fight being regulated," said Timothy Carone, a Notre Dame business professor. "In six months we'll be having the same conversations, and it's just going to get worse going into the election."

Even Facebook's plan to let users know about data leaks may put the onus on users to educate themselves. Zuckerberg said Facebook will "build a tool" that lets users see if their information had been impacted by the Cambridge leak, suggesting that the company won't be notifying people automatically. Facebook took this kind of do-it-yourself approach in the case of Russian election meddling, in contrast to Twitter, which notified users who had been exposed to Russian propaganda on its network.

In what has become one of the worst backlashes Facebook has ever seen, politicians in the U.S. and Britain have called for Zuckerberg to explain its data practices in detail. State attorneys general in Massachusetts, New York and New Jersey have opened investigations into the Cambridge mess. And some have rallied to a movement that urges people to delete their Facebook accounts entirely.

Sandy Parakilas, who worked in data protection for Facebook in 2011 and 2012, told a U.K. parliamentary committee Wednesday that the company was vigilant about its network security but lax when it came to protecting users' data.

He said personal data including email addresses and in some cases private messages was allowed to leave Facebook servers with no real controls on how the data was used after that.

Paul Argenti, a business professor at Dartmouth, said that while Zuckerberg's comments hit the right notes, they still probably aren't enough. "The question is, can you really trust Facebook," he said. "I don't think that question has been answered."

Danica Kirka and Gregory Katz reported from London. AP Technology Writer Mae Anderson in New York contributed to this story.

Peru president undone by corruption scandals he vowed to end

By FRANKLIN BRICENO and JOSHUA GOODMAN, Associated Press

LIMA, Peru (AP) — He took office in 2016 as a political outsider boasting that his strong business credentials would buoy Peru's economy while sweeping away endemic corruption. But with his offer of resignation, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski joins a long list of recent Peruvian presidents undone by scandals that have destroyed voters' trust in their elected officials.

Kuczynski, flanked by his cabinet, announced his decision to resign Wednesday in a nationally televised

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address, accusing opponents led by the daughter of former strongman Alberto Fujimori of plotting his overthrow for months and making it impossible to govern.

Shortly after, he exited the back door of the baroque presidential palace built by Spanish conquerors and was driven off, all alone, in an SUV.

Congress was expected to vote Thursday to accept his resignation, or if not, to impeach him.

It was an ignominious end to a presidency that started with the highest of expectations.

When Kuczynski, a former Wall Street investor, was elected in 2016, he was immediately thrust to the helm of a conservative revival in South America. Voters had grown tired of once-dominant leftist governments marred by corruption and blamed for squandering a decade-long commodities boom that had ended abruptly.

At home, he promised an investment windfall from old business buddies in the U.S., where he lived for decades and met his current and former American wives. He also surprised many by speaking out forcefully against Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro and leading a coalition of like-minded leaders to isolate the socialist leader for human rights abuses.

But the 79-year-old was hobbled almost immediately out of the gate. His self-tailored party, named for his own PPK initials, won just 18 seats in the 130-member congress. And instead of courting supporters on the left who pushed him to victory by a razor-thin margin over opponent Keiko Fujimori, he tried in vain to form an alliance with the former strongman's power-hungry, vindictive allies. Aides privately complained of stubbornness and political naiveté.

"When Kuczynski came in, everyone hailed him as Peru's salvation," said Laura Sharkey, a Bogota-based analyst at Control Risks consultancy. "But he just completely underestimated the strength of the opposition."

Even on the economy, his strong suit, Kuczynski fell short, as growth has slowed and promised mining and infrastructure projects never got off the ground.

What most outraged voters, however, was his seeming dishonesty, something that has long dominated Peruvian politics and he had vowed to end.

For months, as three of his predecessors were probed and one even jailed for taking bribes from Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht, Kuczynski steadfastly denied having any business or political ties with the company at the heart of Latin America's biggest graft scandal.

Then, Fujimori's party produced confidential bank documents from Odebrecht showing \$780,000 in decade-old payments to his consulting firm. Kuczynski said he had no knowledge of the payments that overlapped with his years as a government minister and said that in any case had paid taxes on all of his earnings.

To save his skin he cut the sort of closed-door deal that Peruvians have grown to abhor. A group of lawmakers led by Kenji Fujimori defied his sister's leadership of the Popular Force party to narrowly block Kuczynski's impeachment. Days later, Kuczynski pardoned the feuding siblings' father from a 25-year jail sentence for human rights abuses committed during his decade-long presidency.

Ultimately that alliance spelled his downfall. Popular Force this week revealed secretly shot videos of Kenji Fujimori and other presidential allies allegedly trying to buy the support of an opposition lawmaker with promises of state contracts.

Kuczynski denied any bribery attempt, but for Peruvians traumatized by the videos of Fujimori's longtime spy chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, handing out huge stacks of bills to politicians, military officers and media moguls, the damage was done.

To be sure, Keiko Fujimori seems unlikely to be able to fill the void. An Ipsos poll taken this month showed that while a dismal 19 percent of Peruvians approve of Kuczynski's presidency an even smaller number, 14 percent, have a favorable view of congress, where Fujimori's party is dominant. The poll had a margin of error of 2.8 percentage points.

In addition to the bitter feud with her brother, Fujimori herself is facing accusations that her own 2011 presidential campaign received never-declared contributions from Odebrecht, something she denies.

For many Peruvians, the clandestine videos that did Kuczynski in are a reminder of the corrupt, deceit-filled politics of the Fujimori era that they had hoped was behind them. In the coming days, as Peru works

its way through a messy presidential succession, that widespread outrage is likely to fuel louder calls for early elections — for both congress and the presidency.

“The only public institution with moral authority left in Peru is the fire department,” said Oscar Mendoza, a lawyer standing outside the presidential palace moments after Kuczynski waved goodbye to aides. “All the rest, when you touch them with your finger, puss comes out because they are fully corrupted by graft.”

Goodman reported from Bogota, Colombia. AP Writers Manuel Rueda and Christine Armario in Bogota contributed to this report.

With police near, suspected Austin bomber blows himself up

By JIM VERTUNO and WILL WEISSERT, Associated Press

PFLUGERVILLE, Texas (AP) — As a SWAT team closed in, the suspected bomber whose deadly explosives terrorized Austin for three weeks used one of his own devices to blow himself up. But police warned that he could have planted more bombs before his death, and they cautioned the city to stay on guard.

Mark Anthony Conditt, an unemployed college dropout who bought bomb-making materials at Home Depot, was tracked down using store surveillance video, cellphone signals and witness accounts of a customer shipping packages in a disguise that included a blond wig and gloves. His motive remained a mystery.

Police finally found the 23-year-old early Wednesday at a hotel in a suburb north of Austin. Officers prepared to move in for an arrest. When the suspect’s sport utility vehicle began to drive away, they followed.

Conditt ran into a ditch on the side of the road, and SWAT officers approached, banging on his window. Within seconds, the suspect had detonated a bomb inside his vehicle, blasting the officers backward, Austin Police Chief Brian Manley said.

One officer then fired his weapon at Conditt, the chief said. The medical examiner has not finalized the cause of death, but the bomb caused “significant” injuries, he said.

Police discovered a 25-minute video recording on a cellphone found with Conditt, which Manley said he considers a “confession” to the bombings. It described in great detail the differences among the bombs, he said, but no motive.

“It is the outcry of a very challenged young man talking about challenges in his own life,” Manley said of the recording.

Law enforcement officials did not immediately say whether Conditt acted alone in the five bombings in the Texas capital and suburban San Antonio that killed two people and badly wounded four others. Fred Milanowski of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives said investigators were confident that “the same person built each one of these devices.”

Investigators released few details about Conditt, except his age and that he was white. Neighbors say he was home-schooled. He later attended Austin Community College from 2010 to 2012, according to a college spokeswoman, but he did not graduate.

In a 2012 online blog that the college spokeswoman said Conditt created as part of a U.S. government class project, he gives his opinion on several issues, often in response to someone else’s commentary. Conditt wrote that gay marriage should be illegal, argued in favor of the death penalty and gave his thoughts on “why we might want to consider” eliminating sex offender registries.

In the “about me” section of the blog, Conditt wrote that he wasn’t “that politically inclined” but did view himself as conservative.

Jay Schulze, who lives in Pflugerville, said he was jogging Tuesday night when he was stopped by police and asked about the bombings. He said police flew drones over Conditt’s home for about six hours between Tuesday evening and early Wednesday morning.

Schulze described the home as “a weird house with a lot of people coming and going” and a bit rundown.

A neighbor who watched Conditt grow up said he always seemed smart and polite. Jeff Reeb said he has lived next to Conditt’s parents for about 17 years and described them as good neighbors. Conditt had visited his parents regularly, he said.

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Conditt's family released a statement saying they had "no idea of the darkness that Mark must have been in." His uncle, Mike Courtney, said his nephew was a "computer geek" who was intelligent and kind.

Austin was hit with four bombings starting on March 2. The first explosions were from packages left on doorsteps. Then a bomb with a tripwire was placed near a public trail. A fifth parcel bomb detonated early Tuesday at a FedEx distribution center near San Antonio.

Rep. Michael McCaul, a Republican from Austin, said Conditt's "fatal mistake" was walking into a FedEx store to mail a package because that allowed authorities to obtain surveillance video that showed him and his vehicle, along with his license plate number. From there, investigators could identify the suspect and eventually track him using his cellphone.

Police warned of the possibility that more bombs had yet to be found.

"We don't know where this suspect has spent his last 24 hours, and therefore we still need to remain vigilant to ensure that no other packages or devices have been left to the community," Manley said.

By late afternoon, federal officials had a "reasonable level of certainty" that there were no more package bombs "out in the public," said Milanowski, the agent in charge of the Houston division of the ATF. But authorities urged continued awareness just in case.

"We think we're on top of this, but we just don't know," FBI agent Chris Combs said.

Homemade explosives were recovered from Conditt's home in Pflugerville, a community where portions of "Friday Night Lights" were filmed. His two roommates were detained for questioning. One was later released.

Investigators said one room in the home contained bomb components and explosive materials but no finished bombs. They were analyzing Conditt's internet history to find out how he learned to make bombs.

Isaac Figueroa said he and his brother heard sirens and helicopters around 2 a.m. Wednesday in the area and drove toward them, then cut through nearby woods on foot after they hit a police roadblock.

The 26-year-old said they saw an SUV that was pinned between large vans and "looked like it had been rammed off the road." He said police later deployed a robot to go examine the vehicle.

The suspect's death followed a day of rapid-fire developments in the case. On Tuesday, the bomb at the FedEx shipping center in suburban San Antonio exploded on a conveyer belt.

Later, police sent a bomb squad to a FedEx facility outside the Austin airport to check on a suspicious package. Authorities subsequently said that package contained an explosive that was tied to the other bombings.

Officers then recovered footage of Conditt wearing a blond wig and gloves as he turned over packages to send at a FedEx store in south Austin. That was enough to set in motion the manhunt that ended with Wednesday's fatal explosion.

Associated Press writers Paul J. Weber, Emily Schmall and John Mone in Austin; Sadie Gurman in Washington; and Tim Jacobs in Chicago contributed to this report.

Facebook's Zuckerberg apologizes for 'major breach of trust'

By BARBARA ORTUTAY, DANICA KIRKA and GREGORY KATZ, Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Breaking five days of silence, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg apologized for a "major breach of trust," admitted mistakes and outlined steps to protect user data in light of a privacy scandal involving a Trump-connected data-mining firm.

"I am really sorry that happened," Zuckerberg said of the scandal involving data mining firm Cambridge Analytica. Facebook has a "responsibility" to protect its users' data, he said in a Wednesday interview on CNN. If it fails, he said, "we don't deserve to have the opportunity to serve people."

His mea culpa on cable television came a few hours after he acknowledged his company's mistakes in a Facebook post, but without saying he was sorry.

Zuckerberg and Facebook's No. 2 executive, Sheryl Sandberg, had been quiet since news broke Friday that Cambridge may have used data improperly obtained from roughly 50 million Facebook users to try

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to sway elections. Cambridge's clients included Donald Trump's general-election campaign.

Facebook shares have dropped some 8 percent, lopping about \$46 billion off the company's market value, since the revelations were first published.

In the CNN interview, Zuckerberg offered equivocal and carefully hedged answers to two other questions. He said, for instance, that he would be "happy" to testify before Congress, but only if it was "the right thing to do." He went on to note that many other Facebook officials might be more appropriate witnesses depending on what Congress wanted to know.

Similarly, the Facebook chief seemed at one point to favor regulation for Facebook and other internet giants — at least the "right" kind of rules, he said, such as ones that require online political ads to disclose who paid for them. In almost the next breath, however, Zuckerberg steered clear of endorsing a bill that would write such rules into federal law, and instead talked up Facebook's own voluntary efforts on that front.

Even before the scandal broke, Facebook has already taken the most important steps to prevent a recurrence, Zuckerberg said. For example, in 2014, it reduced access outside apps had to user data. However, some of the measures didn't take effect until a year later, allowing Cambridge to access the data in the intervening months.

Zuckerberg acknowledged that there is more to do.

In his Facebook post, Zuckerberg said it will ban developers who don't agree to an audit. An app's developer will no longer have access to data from people who haven't used that app in three months. Data will also be generally limited to user names, profile photos and email, unless the developer signs a contract with Facebook and gets user approval.

In a separate post, Facebook said it will inform people whose data was misused by apps. Facebook first learned of this breach of privacy more than two years ago, but hadn't mentioned it publicly until Friday.

The company said it was "building a way" for people to know if their data was accessed by "This Is Your Digital Life," the psychological-profiling quiz app that researcher Aleksandr Kogan created and paid about 270,000 people to take part in. Cambridge Analytica later obtained information from the app for about 50 million Facebook users, as the app also vacuumed up data on people's friends — including those who never downloaded the app or gave explicit consent.

Chris Wylie, a Cambridge co-founder who left in 2014, has said one of the firm's goals was to influence people's perceptions by injecting content, some misleading or false, all around them. It's not clear whether Facebook would be able to tell users whether they had seen such content.

Cambridge has shifted the blame to Kogan, which the firm described as a contractor. Kogan described himself as a scapegoat.

Kogan, a psychology researcher at Cambridge University, told the BBC that both Facebook and Cambridge Analytica have tried to place the blame on him, even though the firm ensured him that everything he did was legal.

"One of the great mistakes I did here was I just didn't ask enough questions," he said. "I had never done a commercial project. I didn't really have any reason to doubt their sincerity. That's certainly something I strongly regret now."

He said the firm paid some \$800,000 for the work, but it went to participants in the survey.

"My motivation was to get a dataset I could do research on," he said. "I have never profited from this in any way personally."

Authorities in Britain and the United States are investigating.

David Carroll, a professor at Parsons School of Design in New York who sued Cambridge Analytica in the U.K., said he was not satisfied with Zuckerberg's response, but acknowledged that "this is just the beginning."

He said it was "insane" that Facebook had yet to take legal action against Cambridge parent SCL Group over the inappropriate data use. Carroll himself sued Cambridge Friday to recover data on him that the firm had obtained.

Sandy Parakilas, who worked in data protection for Facebook in 2011 and 2012, told a U.K. parliamentary committee Wednesday that the company was vigilant about its network security but lax when it came to

protecting users' data.

He said personal data including email addresses and in some cases private messages was allowed to leave Facebook servers with no real controls on how the data was used after that.

"The real challenge here is that Facebook was allowing developers to access the data of people who hadn't explicitly authorized that," he said, adding that the company had "lost sight" of what developers did with the data.

Danica Kirka and Gregory Katz reported from London. AP Technology Writer Mae Anderson in New York contributed to this story.

Experts: Uber self-driving system should have spotted woman

By TOM KRISHER and JACQUES BILLEAUD, Associated Press

TEMPE, Ariz. (AP) — Video of a deadly self-driving vehicle crash in suburban Phoenix shows a pedestrian walking from a darkened area onto a street just moments before an Uber SUV strikes her.

The lights on the SUV didn't illuminate 49-year-old Elaine Herzberg on Sunday night until a second or two before impact, raising questions about whether the vehicle could have stopped in time.

The crash Sunday night in Tempe was the first death involving a full autonomous test vehicle. The Volvo was in self-driving mode with a human backup driver at the wheel when it struck Herzberg, police said.

The video shows the human backup driver in the SUV looking down until seconds before the crash. The driver looks up and appears startled during the last moment of the clip.

Tempe Police Chief Sylvia Moir has told the San Francisco Chronicle that the SUV likely wouldn't be found at fault. But two experts who viewed the video told The Associated Press that the SUV's laser and radar sensors should have spotted Herzberg and her bicycle in time to brake.

"The victim did not come out of nowhere. She's moving on a dark road, but it's an open road, so Lidar (laser) and radar should have detected and classified her" as a human, said Bryant Walker Smith, a University of South Carolina law professor who studies autonomous vehicles.

Smith said the video may not show the complete picture, but "this is strongly suggestive of multiple failures of Uber and its system, its automated system, and its safety driver."

Sam Abuelsmaid, an analyst for Navigant Research who also follows autonomous vehicles, said laser and radar systems can see in the dark much better than humans or cameras and that Herzberg was well within the range.

"It absolutely should have been able to pick her up," he said. "From what I see in the video it sure looks like the car is at fault, not the pedestrian."

Smith said that from what he observed on the video, the Uber driver appears to be relying too much on the self-driving system by not looking up at the road.

"The safety driver is clearly relying on the fact that the car is driving itself. It's the old adage that if everyone is responsible no one is responsible," Smith said. "This is everything gone wrong that these systems, if responsibly implemented, are supposed to prevent."

The experts were unsure if the test vehicle was equipped with a video monitor that the backup driver may have been viewing.

Uber immediately suspended all road-testing of such autos in the Phoenix area, Pittsburgh, San Francisco and Toronto. The National Transportation Safety Board, which makes recommendations for preventing crashes, is investigating the crash.

An Uber spokeswoman, reached Wednesday night by email, did not answer specific questions about the video or the expert observations.

"The video is disturbing and heartbreaking to watch, and our thoughts continue to be with Elaine's loved ones. Our cars remain grounded, and we're assisting local, state and federal authorities in any way we can," the company said in a statement.

Tempe police have identified the driver as 44-year-old Rafael Vasquez. Court records show someone with the same name and birthdate as Vasquez spent more than four years in prison for two felony convictions — for making false statements when obtaining unemployment benefits and attempted armed robbery — before starting work as an Uber driver.

Tempe police and the National Transportation Safety Board declined to say whether the Vasquez who was involved in the fatal crash is the same Vasquez who has two criminal convictions.

Attempts by the AP to contact Vasquez through phone numbers and social media on Wednesday afternoon weren't successful.

Local media have identified the driver as Rafaela Vasquez. Authorities would not explain the discrepancy.

The fatality has raised questions about whether Uber is doing enough to screen its drivers.

Uber said Vasquez met the company's vetting requirements.

The company bans drivers who are convicted of violent crimes or any felony within the past seven years — which Vasquez would have passed given that records show the offenses occurred in 1999 and 2000.

The company's website lists its pre-screening policies for drivers that spell out what drivers can and cannot have on their record to work for Uber.

Their driving history can't have any DUI or drug-related driving offenses within the past seven years, for instance. They also can't have more than three non-fatal accidents or moving violations within the past three years.

Krisher reported from Detroit. Melissa Daniels contributed to this report from Phoenix.

Follow Jacques Billeaud at [www.twitter.com/jacquesbilleaud](https://www.apnews.com/search/jacques%20billeaud). His work can be found at <https://www.apnews.com/search/jacques%20billeaud>.

Troopers to patrol at Florida school where massacre happened

By **TERRY SPENCER and CURT ANDERSON, Associated Press**

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — Already heightened security will be bolstered Thursday at the Florida high school where last month's massacre occurred as Gov. Rick Scott ordered eight highway patrol troopers to assist with securing the grounds. That step came after the suspect's brother was arrested there, two students were caught carrying knives and another made online threats.

The troopers will be stationed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School indefinitely along with Broward County deputies, leaving an armed guard at every campus entrance point, Scott said in a statement. Before the shooting, the school was patrolled by one armed deputy and unarmed guards. An unspecified number of deputies, some armed with rifles, were added after the school reopened.

"Parents, students and teachers have recently endured one of the worst tragedies in Florida history," Scott said. "They must be assured that every necessary step is being taken to increase safety and ensure no unauthorized people are allowed on campus."

The strengthened security comes three days after suspect Nikolas Cruz's younger brother, Zachary Cruz, was arrested on trespassing charges. Deputies said he was found Monday riding his skateboard on campus after dismissal after being told to stay away.

Zachary Cruz, 18, is being held on \$500,000 bond and Broward County Judge Kim Theresa Mollica has approved a search of his home for weapons. The Broward Sheriff's Office wants him barred from possessing firearms and also involuntarily hospitalized for a mental health evaluation under a state law passed after the Feb. 14 shooting spree that killed 17.

Zachary and Nikolas, 19, both attended Stoneman Douglas. They shared the same biological mother but had different fathers. Both were adopted at very young ages by Roger and Lynda Cruz, who moved them into their Parkland home. Lynda Cruz died in November and their father died some years earlier.

In a separate case, Mollica imposed a \$12,500 bail Wednesday on a Stoneman Douglas student who officials say pulled a small knife on a boy who she says was harassing her and a friend.

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The SunSentinel reports that Salter attorney Brian Reidy called the high bond “out of control” and “ridiculous” at a hearing and blamed it on fear from last month’s rampage.

“I don’t know when we all hit the fear button when everything is such an absolute emergency,” Reidy told the judge.

Meanwhile, Florida residents won’t get a chance to vote this fall on adding gun control restrictions to the state constitution. A state panel on Wednesday rejected several proposed restrictions on procedural grounds. A majority of the Florida Constitution Revision Commission voted that the gun control measures were out of order and couldn’t be considered under commission rules. The commission is allowed to propose changes to the state constitution.

Elsewhere, several media organizations including The Associated Press asked a judge to determine if additional surveillance video from the school shooting should be released. Last week, the Broward Sheriff’s Office released a 27-minute video depicting ex-deputy Scot Peterson’s actions remaining outside the building where the shooting took place.

Nickolas Cruz’s attorney has said he will plead guilty to 17 counts of murder and 17 counts of attempted murder if prosecutors will waive the death penalty, which they have refused to do.

Associated Press writer Gary Fineout in Tallahassee contributed to this report.

Follow Curt Anderson on Twitter: <http://twitter.com/Miamicurt>

Police: Maryland school shooter apparently was lovesick teen

By MATTHEW BARAKAT and BRIAN WITTE, Associated Press

GREAT MILLS, Md. (AP) — Tuesday’s school shooting in southern Maryland that left the shooter dead and two students wounded increasingly appears to be the action of a lovesick teenager.

Authorities on Wednesday released a few additional details into the shooting at Great Mills High School in St. Mary’s County.

Austin Rollins, 17, was killed after shooting a schoolmate, 16-year-old Jaelynn Willey. A school resource officer got there within a minute and fired a shot at Willey, but it’s not yet clear whether Rollins was killed by the officer’s bullet or took his own life.

A 14-year-old boy who was shot in the thigh during the encounter was released Wednesday from a hospital.

The St. Mary’s County Sheriff’s Office said Wednesday that Rollins and the girl had been in a relationship that recently ended. Authorities had previously only said that the two had had a relationship of some sorts.

“All indications suggest the shooting was not a random act of violence,” police said in a statement.

St. Mary’s County Sheriff Tim Cameron said earlier that a precise determination of Rollins’ motive may be impossible now that he is dead.

The girl, Jaelynn Willey, was still fighting for her life at the University of Maryland Prince George’s Hospital Center. A fundraising page to help Willey’s family has raised more than \$54,000.

Hospital spokesman Michael Schwartzberg said in an email Wednesday night that she remained in critical condition.

Attempts to reach Rollins’ family were unsuccessful.

A day after the eruption of gun violence in one of the sleepy community’s schools, the few residents who ventured out amid a snowstorm blanketing the East Coast praised the school resource officer who responded, Deputy First Class Blaine Gaskill.

“He did a very, very good job,” said Sharon Eglinton, manager of a cafe in nearby Leonardtown.

Eglinton, herself a Great Mills alumna, noted that Rollins, was by all accounts a good student who had not shown any warning signs. She said she thinks the best way to prevent future school shootings is to install metal detectors at schools.

“I have no problem paying for it,” she said. “If you can protect people getting on a plane with metal

detectors, you can protect people in schools.”

While investigators are still determining whether Rollins took his own life or was killed by the officer’s bullet, Cameron credited Gaskill with preventing any more loss of life.

Cameron said Gaskill, a six-year veteran with SWAT team training, responded within a minute and fired his weapon simultaneously with a final shot fired by Rollins. The officer was unharmed.

Gaskill was praised a couple of years ago for his handling of a confrontation with an armed suspect.

A Maryland man was charged in 2016 after he was accused of confronting Gaskill with a gun at an apartment in an incident captured on body camera video. Gaskill can be heard in the video giving several commands to drop the gun before the man eventually complies.

The Enterprise, a local newspaper, reports Cameron said at the time that Gaskill had “used exemplary judgment.”

On Wednesday, authorities said the Glock handgun used in the shooting was legally owned by Rollins’ father. In Maryland it is illegal for anyone under age 21 to possess a handgun unless it is required for their employment.

People who knew Rollins were trying to make some kind of sense of Tuesday’s hometown horror.

“Never in a million years could I have imagined he would do something like this,” said Adlai Traver, 18, who attended Great Mills and knew all three kids involved in the shooting. He recalled playing cards with Rollins during band class when the fellow percussionists had a little down time during class. “I was in the car when I heard it was him. I pulled over and almost puked.”

Associated Press contributors include David McFadden, Courtney Columbus and Sarah Rankin.

NYC agency investigating more than a dozen Kushner buildings

By BERNARD CONDON, AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — New York City’s buildings regulator launched investigations at more than a dozen Kushner Cos. properties Wednesday following an Associated Press report that the real estate developer routinely filed false paperwork claiming it had zero rent-regulated tenants in its buildings across the city.

The Department of Buildings is investigating possible “illegal activity” involving applications that sought permission to begin construction work at 13 of the developer’s buildings, according to public records maintained by the regulator. The AP reported Sunday that Kushner Cos. stated in more than 80 permit applications that it had zero rent-regulated tenants in its buildings when it, in fact, had hundreds.

The false filings were made while Kushner Cos. was run by Jared Kushner, now senior adviser to his father-in-law, President Donald Trump. The false filings were all signed by a Kushner employee, sometimes by its chief operating officer. None were signed by Jared Kushner himself.

The false documents allowed the Kushner Cos. to escape extra scrutiny during construction at 34 of its buildings, many which showed a sharp decline in rent-regulated units following the work. Housing Rights Initiative, a watchdog group that uncovered the false filings, says that made it easier for the Kushner Cos. to harass the low-paying, rent-regulated tenants so they would leave, freeing up apartments for higher-paying tenants.

The Kushner Cos. said Wednesday that it is the victim of “politically motivated attacks.” It said it values and respects its tenants and operates under “the highest legal and ethical standards.”

In earlier statements the company said it outsourced preparation of its permit applications to third parties, and described the wrong information as “mistakes or typographical errors.” It also said it corrected mistakes as soon as it spotted them.

The buildings department confirmed on Wednesday that its building marshal’s office had launched investigations into possible false paperwork.

“Our building marshal is a key part of our Tenant Harassment Task Force,” spokesman Joseph Soldevere said. “And when they inspect a building they look into everything from the roof to the cellar to find illegal

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construction, and that's what they are doing."

The agency has disciplined a contractor involved in false filings at two Kushner buildings, he said.

The Kushners Cos. filed more than one permit application at many of the buildings under investigation. At least 10 of the 29 applications under investigation were filed by prior owners.

On Monday, the city council launched a joint investigation with Housing Rights Initiative into the false filings.

The heads of the joint investigations, Councilman Ritchie Torres, a Democrat, and Housing Rights Initiative founder Aaron Carr, said in a statement that they were encouraged by the buildings department probe, but that more needed to be done.

"The predatory practices of Kushner Companies is symptomatic of a systemic failure in DOB enforcement," it said.

Lawmakers release huge budget; big military, domestic boosts

By **ANDREW TAYLOR** and **LISA MASCARO**, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional leaders finalized a sweeping \$1.3 trillion budget bill Wednesday that substantially boosts military and domestic spending but leaves behind young immigrant "Dreamers," deprives President Donald Trump some of his border wall money and takes only incremental steps to address gun violence.

As negotiators stumbled toward an end-of-the-week deadline to fund the government or face a federal shutdown, House Speaker Paul Ryan dashed to the White House amid concerns Trump's support was wavering. The White House later said the president backed the legislation, even as some conservative Republicans balked at the size of the spending increases and the rush to pass the bill.

Talks continued into Wednesday evening before the 2,232-page text was finally released.

"No bill of this size is perfect," Ryan said. "But this legislation addresses important priorities and makes us stronger at home and abroad."

Leaders still hoped to start voting as soon as Thursday. A stopgap measure may be needed to ensure federal offices aren't hit with a partial shutdown at midnight Friday when funding for the government expires.

Negotiators have been working for days — and nights — on details of the bill, which is widely viewed as the last major piece of legislation likely to move through Congress in this election year. Lawmakers in both parties sought to attach their top priorities.

Two of the biggest remaining issues had been border wall funds and a legislative response to gun violence after the clamor for action following recent school shootings, including the one in Parkland, Florida.

On guns, leaders agreed to tuck in bipartisan provisions to bolster school safety funds and improve compliance with the criminal background check system for firearm purchases. The bill states that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention can do research on gun violence, though not advocacy, an idea Democrats pushed.

But there was no resolution for Dreamers, the young immigrants who have been living in the United States illegally since childhood, but whose deportation protections are being challenged in court after Trump tried to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA.

Democrats temporarily shut down the government earlier this year as they fought for that protection. But the issue only rose to a discussion item when Trump made a late-hour push for a deal in exchange for \$25 billion in border wall funds.

Instead, Trump is now poised to win \$1.6 billion for barriers along the border, but none of it for the new prototypes he recently visited in California. Less than half the nearly 95 miles of border construction, including levees along the Rio Grande in Texas, would be for new barriers, with the rest for repair of existing segments.

In one win for immigrant advocates, negotiators rejected Trump's plans to hire hundreds of new Border Patrol and immigration enforcement agents.

"We are disappointed that we did not reach agreement on Dreamer protections that were worthy of

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these patriotic young people," said House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi.

The emerging plan removes a much-debated earmark protecting money for a rail tunnel under the Hudson River. The item was a top priority of Trump's most powerful Democratic rival, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York, but Trump vowed to veto the bill over the earmark. Under the legislation, the project would remain eligible for funding, however, and a Schumer aide said it was likely to win well more than half of the \$900 million sought for the project this year.

The core purpose of the bill is to increase spending for military and domestic programs that have been sharply squeezed under a 2011 agreement that was supposed to cap spending. It gives Trump a huge budget increase for the military, while Democrats scored wins on infrastructure and other domestic programs that they failed to get under President Barack Obama.

That largesse has drawn opposition from some fiscal conservatives and could make passage a potentially tricky process.

Last month, Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul triggered a brief government shutdown over his objections to the deficit spending. On Wednesday, he tweeted his opposition to the emerging legislation, known as an "omnibus."

"It's a good thing we have Republican control of Congress or the Democrats might bust the budget caps, fund planned parenthood and Obamacare, and sneak gun control without due process into an Omni ... wait, what?" Paul tweeted.

Most essential was support from Trump, who has been known to threaten to veto legislation even when his team is involved in the negotiations.

Word of Trump's discontent sent Ryan to the White House, where he was invited to a face-to-face with the president, with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell on the phone.

White House aides said the president's support was never in doubt, but one senior White House official said the president was concerned that details of the package weren't being presented as well as they could be, both to members of Congress and the public.

The group discussed how they could better sell the package, said the official, who was granted anonymity to discuss the private conversation.

"The president and the leaders discussed their support for the bill," said White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, adding that it would fund Trump priorities such as wall construction, add money to combat the opioid crisis and provide new infrastructure spending.

Both parties touted \$4.6 billion in total funding to fight the nation's opioid addiction epidemic, a \$3 billion increase. More than \$2 billion would go to strengthen school safety through grants for training, security measures and treatment for the mentally ill. Medical research at the National Institutes of Health, a long-standing bipartisan priority, would receive a record \$3 billion increase to \$37 billion. Funding was also included for election security ahead of the 2018 midterms.

Child care and development block grants would receive a huge \$2.4 billion increase to \$5.2 billion. And an Obama-era transportation grant program known as TIGER would see its budget tripled to \$1.5 billion. Head Start for preschoolers would get a \$610 million boost, while an additional \$2.4 billion would go for child care grants.

Associated Press writers Jill Colvin, Alan Fram and Matthew Daly contributed.

IS suicide bomber kills 33 as Afghans celebrate new year

By RAHIM FAIEZ, Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — An Islamic State group suicide bomber struck on the road to a Shiite shrine in Afghanistan's capital on Wednesday, killing at least 33 people as Afghans celebrated the Persian new year, authorities said.

Wahid Majro, spokesman for The Public Health Ministry, said 65 others were wounded in the attack, which was carried out by a bomber on foot.

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IS claimed responsibility in an online statement, according to the SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors jihadi websites. The group said the attack targeted "a gathering of Shiites celebrating Nowruz."

The Persian new year, known in Afghanistan as Nowruz, is a national holiday, and the country's minority Shiites typically celebrate by visiting shrines. The Sunni extremists of IS have repeatedly targeted Shiites, who they view as apostates deserving of death.

The attack took place near Kabul University and a government hospital, around one kilometer (mile) away from the Sakhi shrine, where people were gathered to celebrate the new year, said Gen. Daud Amin, Kabul's police chief.

Daud said the attacker managed to slip past police checkpoints set up along the road. He said an investigation into the security breach is underway, and that anyone found to have neglected his duties would be punished.

Earlier this month another Islamic State suicide bomber targeted Afghanistan's ethnic Hazaras, killing nine people and wounding 18 others. The bomber blew himself up at a police checkpoint near a gathering of the minority Shiites in western Kabul. The bomber was on foot and was trying to make his way to a compound where the Hazaras had gathered to commemorate the 1995 death of their leader, Abdul Ali Mazari, who was killed by the Taliban.

Kabul has recently seen a spate of large-scale militant attacks by both the Taliban and the Islamic State group. In late January, a Taliban attacker drove an ambulance filled with explosives into the heart of the city, killing at least 103 people and wounding as many as 235.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in a statement condemned Wednesday's attack, calling it a "crime against humanity."

The U.N. Security Council condemned "the heinous and cowardly terrorist attack" in the strongest terms and underlined the need to bring the perpetrators, organizers, financiers and sponsors to justice.

U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan John R. Bass said he was saddened by the "shameful" attack.

"I continue to hope that every citizen of Afghanistan soon will be able to live in peace, without fear of indiscriminate attacks by terrorists who have no respect for human life," he said in a statement. "The United States and its people remain steadfast in their commitment to working with our Afghan partners to combat terrorism and to secure peace in the year ahead."

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres also condemned the attack, calling Nowruz "a time of renewal and celebration" when the values of peace and solidarity should be promoted, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said, adding "those who have organized this attack must be brought to justice."

Despite the attack and loss of lives, people including women and children later came out on the streets, many wearing colorful clothes, and continued to celebrate the holiday.

Associated Press writer Edith M. Lederer at the United Nations contributed to this report.

Saccone concedes Pennsylvania US House race to Lamb

By MARC LEVY, Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Republican Rick Saccone conceded defeat to Democrat Conor Lamb on Wednesday night in a closely watched special election in Pennsylvania, more than a week after the end of a remarkable race that has shaken GOP confidence ahead of the November midterm elections.

Lamb, 33, claimed the seat by about 750 votes in a Republican-held district that President Donald Trump won by almost 20 percentage points just 16 months ago. Lamb, who struck a moderate tone during the race and was backed by the district's influential labor unions, beat Saccone, a state lawmaker who had compiled one of the most conservative voting records in Pennsylvania's Legislature.

Lamb also benefited from what Pittsburgh-area Democrats called the party's most energized electorate they had ever seen, driven by an anti-Trump fervor.

On Twitter, Lamb said he had just gotten off the phone with Saccone and congratulated him "for a close, hard-fought race." In a statement, Saccone said that, while fewer than 800 votes separated them, the

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people of the 18th District “deserve to have a voice representing them in Congress.”

Republicans considered seeking a recount request or a lawsuit to contest the result, even as vote-counting over the past week continued to pad Lamb’s lead. Officials from the National Republican Congressional Committee and state Republican Party said Wednesday night that they were dropping any such plans in light of Saccone’s concession. That means Lamb could be sworn in after April 2, when the last of the four counties in the district expects to finish certifying the result.

The seat became open in October when eight-term Republican Rep. Tim Murphy resigned amid a scandal in which it emerged that the anti-abortion lawmaker had asked a woman with whom he was having an extramarital affair to get an abortion when he thought she might be pregnant.

Locally, the outcome has a short-term effect.

The district is dissolving under a court-ordered redraw of Pennsylvania’s 18 congressional districts, leaving Lamb to seek the nomination to challenge three-term Republican Rep. Keith Rothfus in a newly drawn district west of Pittsburgh that is considered a toss-up. Saccone is running in a new, more Republican district in Pennsylvania’s southwest corner that retains much of the territory he and Lamb campaigned in for the last four months.

Nationally, Lamb’s win highlights Democratic potential and Republican vulnerabilities ahead of the fall campaign with the GOP trying to defend its majorities in Congress. Democrats are now 23 seats shy of the majority — though it effectively stays at 24 because Lamb is pursuing Rothfus’ seat.

In the race, Lamb downplayed opposition to Trump, who remains more popular in the district than nationally. Lamb opposed sweeping new gun regulations and supported Trump’s steel tariffs, but he is a fierce critic of Republicans’ tax cuts and their economic and health care policies.

Saccone, 60, adhered to Republican orthodoxy and openly embraced Trump, who tweeted numerous times on his behalf and campaigned in person twice, including a raucous rally the Saturday before voters cast ballots.

Outside Republican groups spent more than \$10 million — about seven times as much as outside groups spent for Lamb — with much of it attacking Lamb as a stooge for national Democrats, particularly House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi. Lamb, however, distanced himself from Pelosi and held national Democrats at arm’s length while he easily outraised Saccone in campaign cash.

Saccone, meanwhile, was hurt by an anti-union voting record in the state Legislature, which had motivated union members in a district with a long history of steel making and coal mining to vote against him.

Peru’s president offers resignation amid political turmoil

By FRANKLIN BRICENO and JOSHUA GOODMAN, Associated Press

LIMA, Peru (AP) — Embattled President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski offered his resignation Wednesday ahead of an impeachment vote, seeking to put an end to a fast-moving political drama playing out just three weeks before the Andean nation is set to host U.S. President Donald Trump for a regional summit.

In a nationwide televised address, Kuczynski, flanked by his cabinet, lashed out at opponents led by the daughter of former strongman Alberto Fujimori for allegedly plotting his overthrow with damaging leaks of confidential documents that raised doubts about his integrity and made it impossible to govern.

“I don’t want to be an obstacle blocking our nation from finding the path to unity and harmony that it so much needs and which I was denied,” he said, adding that the campaign in favor of his removal had caused “enormous damage” to Peru’s democracy.

Congress was scheduled to debate Thursday on whether to accept the resignation, which would transfer power to First Vice President Martin Vizcarra. It could also decide to reject his offer and plow ahead with impeachment proceedings, which a large majority of lawmakers had favored before Kuczynski resigned.

Beyond the conservative leader’s departure, the outlook is uncertain, with many Peruvians expressing disgust with their entire political class — not just Kuczynski but also his accusers, led by Fujimori’s daughter Keiko.

Vizcarra, who is in Canada, where he had been serving as Peru’s ambassador, hasn’t said whether he

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would form a government to try and finish Kuczynski's term ending in 2021. If he and the country's second vice president resign in solidarity with Kuczynski, as they vowed during a previous impeachment attempt in December, power would transfer to the head of congress, who would be required by the constitution to call new elections— for both president and congress — within a year.

"The only public institution with moral authority left in Peru is the fire department," said Oscar Mendoza, a lawyer standing outside the presidential palace moments after Kuczynski waved goodbye to aides and stepped into a tinted SUV for a lonely drive to his Lima mansion. "All the rest, when you touch them with your finger, puss comes out because they are fully corrupted by graft."

Pressure has been building on Kuczynski to resign after the shock revelation Tuesday of secretly shot videos in which several of the president's allies were caught allegedly trying to buy the support of an opposition lawmaker to block the conservative leader's impeachment.

The videos presented by Keiko Fujimori's party purportedly show attempts by Kuczynski's lawyer, a government official, and Fujimori's son Kenji trying to convince the lawmaker to back the president in exchange for a hand in lucrative state contracts.

Kuczynski said the videos had been heavily edited to smear him and recalled practices from "sad days of Peru's history that we thought had been overcome."

He was referring to Fujimori's longtime spy chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, who secretly recorded himself paying cash bribes to media moguls, military officers and politicians in efforts to gain leverage over potential rivals and boost his almost unlimited power.

Kenji Fujimori led a group of rebellious lawmakers in December who defied his sister's leadership of the Popular Force party to narrowly block Kuczynski's removal. Days later, Kuczynski pardoned the feuding siblings' father from a 25-year jail sentence for human rights abuses committed during his decade-long presidency.

A new impeachment vote had been scheduled to take place Thursday and Kuczynski had been scrambling for support.

Keiko Fujimori, who has publicly distanced herself from her father, had accused Kuczynski of orchestrating the alleged vote-buying scheme.

The videos released Tuesday portray the president's allies trying to lure lawmaker Moises Mamani to their side with promises of lucrative contracts.

In one exchange, Freddy Aragon, the head of the government agency regulating firearms, tells Mamani that he stands to pocket 5 percent of future public works projects authorized by the executive branch in his district. In another, Kuczynski's lawyer hands the waffling lawmaker the transportation minister's cell phone.

"Those who've voted in favor of impeachment have all the doors closed to them," Kenji Fujimori tells Mamani in one of the recordings.

Peru's chief prosecutor as well as congress said they would open a criminal probe into the videos.

Kuczynski is accused of lying as president about \$782,000 in payments his consulting firm received a decade earlier from Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht.

Odebrecht is at the center of Latin America's biggest graft scandal, having admitted to paying some \$800 million in bribes to officials across Latin America, including \$29 million to politicians in Peru.

Goodman reported from Bogota, Colombia. AP Writers Manuel Rueda and Christine Armario in Bogota contributed to this report.

Experts: Hard to convict officer in Australian woman's death

By AMY FORLITI and STEVE KARNOWSKI, Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The police officer who was with a Minneapolis officer charged with murder and manslaughter in the death of an unarmed Australian woman said both men "got spooked" when she approached their SUV, and that the partner feared for his life. But prosecutors say Officer Mohamed Noor

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acted recklessly and was not justified in using deadly force when he shot Justine Ruszczuk Damond last July after she called to report a possible sexual assault behind her home.

The case, which has drawn international attention, presents challenges for both sides. If it goes to a trial, a jury must decide if Noor acted reasonably in the moment. Here's a look at likely arguments and pitfalls as the case unfolds.

WHAT HAPPENED

Damond, a 40-year-old life coach who was engaged to be married, called 911 on the night of July 15 to report a possible sexual assault in the alley behind her home.

Noor responded with his partner that night, Officer Matthew Harrity, who was driving. Finding nothing, the officers were about to leave when Harrity heard a voice and a thump on the back of the squad car, and glimpsed a person's head and shoulders outside his window.

He said he was startled, thought his life was in danger, drew his gun and held it by his ribcage, pointing downward, the complaint said. Harrity then heard a sound like a light bulb breaking, saw a flash and looked to his right to see Noor with his arm extended. He didn't see Noor's gun. He then looked out his window and saw Damond with a gunshot wound on the left side of her abdomen. Damond put her hands on the wound and said "I'm dying" or "I'm dead."

"We both got spooked," Harrity told his sergeant, according to the complaint.

The officers did not turn on their body cameras until after the shooting. There was no squad camera video.

Noor was charged Tuesday with third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter. He made his first court appearance Wednesday.

PROBLEMS FOR THE DEFENSE

In announcing the charges Tuesday, Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman said Noor acted recklessly with disregard for human life. He said in the seconds between Damond approaching the squad car and Noor firing "there is no evidence that Officer Noor encountered a threat, appreciated a threat, investigated a threat or confirmed a threat that justified his decision to use deadly force."

According to Freeman, Harrity said he couldn't see whether Damond was a man or woman, adult or child, and he saw no weapons. Harrity was more experienced, closer to Damond and took his own gun out — but didn't shoot. That could all buttress the argument that Noor acted recklessly when he reached across Harrity from the passenger seat to fire at Damond.

While Harrity acknowledged being scared, the prosecution will likely argue that whatever threat the officers thought they faced was already over by the time Damond approached them, said Marsh Halberg, a defense attorney and former prosecutor who's not involved in the case.

"All you have at that point is a bump on the door or a noise. ... You shouldn't shoot into the dark based on that alone," he said.

PROBLEMS FOR PROSECUTORS

Under state law, police officers can use deadly force to protect themselves or their partners from death or great bodily harm — and Harrity allegedly told investigators that both men were scared. Halberg said he expects the defense's main argument will be that "hindsight is 20/20. It's easy to sit here now and dissect this but you have to look at it through the eyes of the officer and what he was thinking."

Another problem for prosecutors could be Freeman's own comments. He was captured on video at a holiday reception in December complaining that investigators hadn't brought him enough evidence to charge Noor. He then convened a grand jury to help him investigate the case because, he said, several officers weren't cooperating.

Noor's attorney, Thomas Plunkett, said in a statement Tuesday that it appears Freeman contemplated the charges before asking for a grand jury's help. Plunkett went on to say: "The facts will show that Officer Noor acted as he has been trained and consistent with established departmental policy."

Joe Friedberg, another defense attorney not involved in the case, said there's "virtually no probability of a conviction" on the third-degree murder charge because Noor's actions don't meet the legal definition

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for it. He expects the judge will dismiss that count. He said even the second-degree manslaughter charge looks like a "toss-up."

LIKELIHOOD OF CONVICTION

Freeman acknowledged that convicting a police officer in a fatal shooting is a challenge.

According to Philip Stinson, a criminologist at Bowling Green State University in Ohio who tracks fatal police shootings, 85 police officers have been charged with murder or manslaughter resulting from on-duty shootings since 2005. To date, 32 officers have been convicted of a crime, often for a lesser offense. Forty-one have been acquitted and 12 cases are still pending.

"It's difficult to get a conviction in these cases," Stinson said. He added that as soon as an officer testifies at trial that they feared for their life, juries tend to ignore the legal requirements of what an "objectively reasonable" officer would do, and they take that officer's testimony at face value.

"Juries and judges in bench trials are very reluctant to second guess the split-second, life-and-death decisions of police officers in potentially violent street encounters," he said.

Friedberg, Halberg and Earl Gray, another defense attorney not involved in the case, all agreed that prosecutors hope to use the more serious murder charge, with its higher presumptive sentence of 12½ years, as leverage to get Noor to plead guilty to the lesser manslaughter count. Halberg also said letting jurors reject the murder charge could make it easier for them to convict Noor of manslaughter, which carries a presumptive sentence of four years.

Corrects 'objectionably' to 'objectively.'

Democrats giddy about odds of retaking Illinois' top job

By SARA BURNETT, Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Democrats are giddy following Illinois' primary about their chances of reclaiming the governor's office from a GOP incumbent who barely survived his own nomination fight.

Billionaire J.B. Pritzker received almost 575,000 votes on Tuesday, consolidating support from Democratic voters who turned out in midterm numbers not seen in more than a decade to defeat his closest rival by 20 points. Pritzker's vote total was about 200,000 more than Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner received against a conservative state lawmaker who had huge disadvantages in fundraising and name recognition but still finished within 3 points of him.

Pritzker said the results are an indication of how motivated Democrats are across the U.S. since President Donald Trump was elected, and how unhappy people in Illinois are with Rauner's leadership.

"I've been involved in politics a long time and I've never seen Democrats as enthusiastic as they are right now," Pritzker said. "I think it means in the fall we stand a real good chance of beating Bruce Rauner."

Pritzker, an heir to the Hyatt hotel fortune who already has put about \$70 million into his own campaign, launched new campaign ads Wednesday blasting Rauner's "four years of failure." He also held an event with Illinois residents who said they'd been hurt by the more than two-year state budget crisis that resulted from disagreements between the first-term governor and Democratic leaders.

Rauner, a wealthy former private equity investor, made clear he won't go down without a fight.

He launched his own ads Wednesday, using clips of Pritzker's primary opponents blasting him as the "poster child for pay-to-play politics" and linking him to unpopular but powerful longtime Democratic House Speaker Michael Madigan.

"We're the reformers. We're for the people of Illinois," Rauner said during a stop at a suburban Chicago business where he called Pritzker "a corrupt insider who's a tax dodger" and who "works for the corrupt machine that's controlled by Madigan."

Rauner, 61, was one of a handful of Republican governors elected to lead Democratic-leaning states as part of a GOP wave four years ago. He won his first political office with promises to "shake up" the state with an anti-union, pro-business agenda including term limits on lawmakers and lower property taxes.

He also said he had "no social agenda," helping him pick up support from independents and even some

Democrats who hoped electing a businessman could solve some of Illinois' deep financial problems.

But his efforts to pass a more business-friendly agenda were stymied by the Democratic-controlled Legislature. Illinois also racked up billions in unpaid bills and other debts during the nation's longest state budget impasse, then was unable to stop lawmakers from passing an income tax increase as part of a deal to end the stalemate.

It was his approval of abortion and immigration legislation, though, that most angered the more conservative wing of his party and prompted state Rep. Jeanne Ives to launch a primary challenge.

She accused Rauner of betraying Republicans, and it appeared the two weren't putting the bad blood behind them even after Rauner's victory. In her concession speech Ives didn't pledge to support Rauner in the general election or call for other Republicans to do so. As of midday Wednesday they had not spoken.

That leaves Rauner with an even more difficult climb to a second term, said Northwestern University political science professor Jaime Dominguez.

"The Republican Party is disenchanting right now," he said. "They don't have anything to show for having a Republican governor. And (Rauner) barely squeezed through just with Ives, so that doesn't bode well."

Pritzker, however, has his own vulnerabilities. During the primary the Chicago Tribune published wiretap audio of Pritzker talking with former Gov. Rod Blagojevich, who's now imprisoned for corruption. Rauner used the audio, which was captured by the FBI, in a barrage of anti-Pritzker ads.

Pritzker also has had to answer questions about his connections with overseas trusts in low-tax countries, though he maintains they're focused on charitable giving and that he has no control over them.

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France: Ex-leader Sarkozy charged over Libyan money claims

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN and PHILIPPE SOTTO, Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy was handed preliminary charges Wednesday over allegations he accepted millions of euros in illegal campaign funding from the late Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi.

A judicial official told The Associated Press that investigating judges overseeing the probe gave the ex-president charges of illegally funding his successful 2007 campaign, passive corruption and receiving money from Libyan embezzlement.

The person was not authorized to speak publicly about the case.

The charges involving illegal campaign funding from a foreign dictator are the most serious faced by a former French president in recent history. They were presented after Sarkozy was questioned for two days by anticorruption police at a station in Nanterre, northwest of the French capital.

Investigators are examining allegations that Gadhafi's regime secretly gave Sarkozy 50 million euros (about \$62 million) overall for his presidential election bid.

The sum would be more than double the legal campaign funding limit at the time — 21 million euros. In addition, the alleged payments would violate French rules against foreign financing and requiring that the source of campaign funds be declared.

Sarkozy, 63, who was France's president during 2007-12, has repeatedly and vehemently denied any wrongdoing. According to the same source, he again proclaimed his innocence during his questioning by police.

The former president was released on Wednesday night, but placed under judicial supervision. Details of the restrictions he has been ordered to obey have not been revealed.

In the French judicial system, preliminary charges mean Sarkozy is personally under formal investigation in a criminal case. The judges will keep investigating the case in the next weeks and months.

At the end of their investigation, they can decide either to drop the preliminary charges or to send Sarkozy to trial on formal charges.

Sarkozy had a complex relationship with Gadhafi. Soon after winning the French presidency, he invited the Libyan leader for a state visit and welcomed him to France with high honors.

But Sarkozy then put France in the forefront of the NATO-led airstrikes against Gadhafi's troops that helped rebel fighters topple Gadhafi's regime in 2011.

Sarkozy has faced other campaign-related legal troubles in the past. In February 2017, he was ordered to stand trial after being handed preliminary charges for suspected illegal overspending on his failed 2012 re-election campaign. Sarkozy has appealed the decision.

In 2013, he was cleared of allegations that he illegally took donations from France's richest woman, L'Oreal heiress Liliane Bettencourt, on the way to his 2007 election victory.

His lawyer, Thierry Herzog, did not respond to requests for comment from The Associated Press.

Sarkozy's former top aide, the ex-minister Brice Hortefeux, was also questioned Tuesday, but not detained. He said on Twitter that the details he gave investigators "should help put an end to a series of mistakes and lies."

The investigation got a boost when French-Lebanese businessman Ziad Takieddine told the online investigative site Mediapart in 2016 that he delivered suitcases from Libya containing 5 million euros (\$6.2 million) in cash to Sarkozy and his former chief of staff, Claude Gueant.

Takieddine repeated his allegations during a live interview with France's BFM TV on Wednesday night.

He claimed he personally handed a suitcase containing 2 million euros (about \$2.5 million) in cash to Sarkozy at the then-candidate's apartment and another suitcase with 1.5 million euros (about \$1.9 million) to Sarkozy and a close aide at the French Interior Ministry. Sarkozy was interior minister at the time.

Takieddine alleged he gave a third suitcase with 1.5 million euros in cash to the aide alone. He said the money was not meant to finance Sarkozy's presidential campaign in 2007, but to honor contracts between France and Libya.

"He's a real liar," Takieddine said of Sarkozy.

Tempest over Trump-Putin call turns into uproar over leaks

By **ZEKE MILLER and JONATHAN LEMIRE, Associated Press**

WASHINGTON (AP) — The tempest over President Donald Trump's congratulatory phone call to Vladimir Putin quickly grew on Wednesday into an uproar over White House leaks, sparking an internal investigation and speculation over who might be the next person Trump forces out of the West Wing.

The White House, which has suffered frequent leaks — at times of notable severity — said in a statement it would be a "fireable offense and likely illegal" to leak Trump's briefing papers to the press, after word emerged that the president had been warned in briefing materials not to congratulate the Russian president on his re-election.

Trump did so anyway, and on Wednesday he defended the call, saying George W. Bush did not have the "smarts" to work with Putin, and that Barack Obama and his secretary of state, Hillary Clinton "didn't have the energy or chemistry" with the Russian leader.

Aides had included guidance in Trump's talking points for the call to Putin stating: "DO NOT CONGRATULATE," a senior administration official said Wednesday, speaking to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the official had not been authorized to discuss internal matters.

The document had been accessible only to a select group of staffers, two officials said, and had been drafted by aides to National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster. They also said there now is an internal probe of the leak but provided no other details. The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive internal deliberations. The White House is not formally acknowledging the veracity of the presidential guidance first reported by The Washington Post.

Trump defended his decision to congratulate Putin in his Wednesday tweets, saying Obama did the same in 2012.

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"Getting along with Russia (and others) is a good thing, not a bad thing," Trump said, adding that Russia can "help solve problems" from North Korea to "the coming Arms Race."

The White House statement earlier Wednesday about a possible firing was an unusual threat and an indication of the seriousness with which the administration is treating the latest breach. Trump and Chief of Staff John Kelly are both angry over the disclosure, officials said, especially because of the small circle of distribution.

Trump has told confidants that he believes the leak was meant to embarrass and undermine him, said White House officials and outside advisers familiar with the president's thinking but not authorized to publicly discuss private conversations.

The president has suggested it was done by "the deep state," they said. That's the catchall phrase for career officials and the Washington establishment who, Trump believes, have tried to protect their own grasp on power by sabotaging him.

Trump has insisted that maintaining a strong personal relationship with Putin is the United States' best chance of improving ties with Russia and has signaled to allies that he trusts his own instincts in dealing with the Russian president.

Other leaks of classified material — including partial transcripts of Trump's calls with foreign leaders — have not garnered specific warnings of termination or criminal action. It was not clear whether this week's document was classified, but it was included with other classified papers.

It also was unclear whether Trump, who prefers oral briefings, had read the talking points prepared by his national security team before Tuesday's call. McMaster briefed the president by phone before the conversation while Trump was in the White House residence.

The leak further cast doubt on McMaster's longevity in the top foreign policy post. Trump has been moving toward replacing McMaster on the advice of Kelly and Secretary of Defense James Mattis, but has not settled on timing or a successor.

Trump's call of congratulations to Putin drew bruising criticism from members of his own party even before the revelation that he was advised against it.

"An American president does not lead the free world by congratulating dictators on winning sham elections," said Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee and has pressed the Trump administration to respond aggressively to Russia's interference in the U.S. presidential election.

Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, told CNN, "I wouldn't have a conversation with a criminal."

The call was the latest indicator of Trump's personal reluctance to publicly criticize Putin. The White House said Trump did not raise Russia's meddling in the U.S. elections or its suspected involvement in the recent poisoning of a former spy in Britain in the call with Putin. Trump did discuss the attack against Sergei Skripal Wednesday in a call with French President Emmanuel Macron.

Trump also said he and Putin might meet "in the not too distant future" to discuss the arms race and other matters.

He said that during their hoped-for meeting the two men would likely discuss Ukraine, Syria and North Korea.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders defended Trump's call, noting Obama's similar call and saying, "We don't get to dictate how other countries operate."

Florida Sen. Marco Rubio called the leak a "bigger outrage" than Trump's congratulations for Putin. He said on Twitter that "this ongoing pattern of duplicity holds potential for serious damage to the nation."

Russia has received global condemnation after Britain blamed Moscow for the recent nerve agent attack that sickened Sergei Skripal and his daughter. Russia has denied the accusation.

Trump's call came at a period of heightened tension after the White House imposed sanctions on Russia for its interference in the 2016 U.S. election and other "malicious cyberattacks." Sanders insisted that the administration has scolded Putin at the appropriate times.

Vladimir Isachenkov in Moscow contributed to this story.

Fed raises key rate and foresees 2 more hikes this year

By MARTIN CRUTSINGER, AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve raised its key interest rate Wednesday in a vote of confidence in the U.S. economy's durability while signaling that it plans to continue a gradual approach to rate hikes for 2018 under its new chairman, Jerome Powell.

The Fed said it expects to raise rates twice more this year. And it increased its estimate for rate hikes in 2019 from two to three, reflecting more optimistic expectations for growth and low unemployment.

In a statement after its latest policy meeting, the Fed said it boosted its key short-term rate by a modest quarter-point to a still-low range of 1.5 percent to 1.75 percent. It also said it will keep shrinking its bond portfolio. The two moves mean that many consumers and businesses will face higher loan rates over time.

Taken together, the Fed's actions and forecasts suggest a belief that the economy remains sturdy even nearly nine years after the Great Recession ended.

The Fed's latest rate hike marks its sixth since it began tightening credit in December 2015, after having kept its benchmark rate at a record low near zero for seven years to help nurture the economy's recovery from the recession. Wednesday's action was approved 8-0, with the Fed avoiding any dissents at the first meeting Powell has presided over as chairman since succeeding Janet Yellen last month.

Bond yields and stocks initially rose after the Fed's announcement. But after wobbling for much of the afternoon, both ended modestly lower.

The Dow, having initially jumped as much as 250 points, ended down 44. The 10-year Treasury yield, a benchmark for mortgages and other loans, wound up at 2.88 percent, down from 2.90 percent a day earlier. It had traded as high as 2.93 percent after the Fed's statement came out.

Economists said the decision to raise rates despite some recent sluggish data in areas like consumer spending showed that the Powell-led Fed has faith in the economy's resilience.

"The Fed has more confidence in the economy's underlying momentum and appears to be more determined to normalize interest rates," said Mark Vitner, senior economist at Wells Fargo.

Vitner predicted that the central bank will end up raising rates four times this year despite its forecast for three.

Some investors had speculated that Powell might move to impose his mark on the Fed by signaling a faster pace of rate hikes for 2018. But the Fed's new economic forecasts, which include a median projection for the path of future increases, made no change to its December projection for three hikes this year.

If the Fed does stick with its forecast for three rate increases this year and three in 2019, its key policy rate would stand at 3.4 percent after five years of credit tightening. Wednesday's forecast put the Fed long-term rate — the point at which its policies are neither boosting the economy nor holding it back — at 2.9 percent.

At a news conference after the meeting, Powell said the Fed hasn't lowered its forecasts for growth because of the Trump administration's decision to impose tariffs on steel and aluminum imports. But he said the Fed's regional bank presidents have heard concerns from businesses about the consequences of the tariffs.

"Trade policy has become a concern going forward for that group," the chairman said, referring to business leaders.

But among the Fed officials who met in Washington this week, Powell said, "there's no thought that changes in trade policy should have any effect on the current outlook."

Powell's first news conference ended 15 minutes earlier than the roughly hour-long sessions Yellen typically held, primarily because he kept his answers shorter. Powell said he might choose to hold a news conference after each of the Fed's eight meetings each year, up from four now, but that he hadn't yet decided.

Wednesday's statement showed only minor changes from the text the Fed had issued in January after Yellen's final meeting. The statement described economic activity as rising at a "moderate rate," a slight downgrade from January, when the Fed described the economy as rising at a "solid rate."

The statement did not mention the extra government stimulus that has been added since the Fed's most

recent economic forecast in the form of a \$1.5 trillion tax cut and a budget agreement that will add \$300 billion in government spending over two years.

But the Fed's new forecast does envision somewhat stronger economic growth compared with its previous estimate: It raises the estimate to 2.7 percent growth this year, up from 2.5 percent in the December projection, and 2.4 percent in 2019, up from 2.1 percent.

Those higher estimates may reflect the expected impact of the additional government spending. But they fall far short of the 3 percent annual growth that the Trump administration has argued will be achieved with the implementation of its economic program.

The U.S. unemployment rate, now at a 17-year low of 4.1 percent, is expected to keep falling to 3.8 percent at the end of this year and 3.6 percent at the end of 2019, which would be the lowest rate in a half-century. The Fed expects inflation, which has run below its 2 percent target for six years, to stay at 1.9 percent this year and reach 2 percent in 2019.

A healthy job market and a steady if unspectacular economy have given the Fed the confidence to think the economy can withstand further increases within a still historically low range of borrowing rates.

AP Economics Writer Christopher Rugaber contributed to this report.

Review adds pressure to Weinstein investigation

By COLLEEN LONG, Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — New York's governor put unusual — and potentially problematic — pressure on Manhattan's district attorney to bring a criminal case against Harvey Weinstein this week when he ordered the state's attorney general to investigate the prosecutor's handling of an earlier sex abuse probe involving the film producer, legal experts said.

On Monday, Gov. Andrew Cuomo, the state's most powerful Democrat, directed Attorney General Eric Schneiderman to look into whether Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus R. Vance, Jr. bungled a 2015 investigation in which a model accused Weinstein of groping her breast. Vance decided not to bring charges in the case, citing a lack of proof.

The move put a harsh spotlight on Vance, who is already under fire from women's groups and others who have questioned why no criminal charges have been filed against Weinstein, despite rape or sexual assault claims by several other women.

Putting Vance under scrutiny for his handling of Weinstein in the past, while he is still trying to decide whether to bring a separate criminal case against Weinstein now, could create questions about fairness, lawyers said.

Weinstein's attorneys have said he denies any non-consensual sexual contact with anyone.

If Weinstein does get charged criminally, "it's going to look like they bowed to pressure," even if their case is solid, said Ellen Yaroshefsky, a legal ethics professor at the Maurice A. Deane School of Law at Hofstra University.

"This smacks of pure politics in a primary election season," Yaroshefsky said, noting Cuomo's directive came just hours after the actor Cynthia Nixon announced she was challenging the governor in the Democratic primary election.

"Prosecutors are accountable to electorate — if they do a bad job they get voted out. Their discretion on cases is not meant to be questioned by other elected officials," said Bruce Green, a law professor at Fordham University. "To me, there's something problematic about the attorney general looking over the shoulder of a D.A., and then reporting it to the governor."

The governor's office didn't respond to requests for comment.

Vance declined to comment, but he has said repeatedly that his investigation of Weinstein will be driven by facts and the law, not political considerations.

Schneiderman said his office is committed to a "full, fair and independent review."

There isn't much precedent for the type of investigation Cuomo has asked Schneiderman to conduct.

The authority to order the investigation likely comes under a state executive law that allows the attorney general, with the governor's OK, to inquire into matters of "public justice" and recommend changes. Those investigations typically result in the release of an investigative report, but not disciplinary action or a prosecution.

It isn't clear when the attorney general's office might start its investigation, or what steps it might take to avoid interfering with the prosecutors' ongoing criminal investigation of allegations that Weinstein raped a different actress in 2010. Cuomo said Vance's office expected to complete the criminal probe of the 2010 case, one way or another, in about 45 days.

Schneiderman's review would focus on Vance's handling of a complaint made in 2015 by Ambra Battilana Gutierrez, a model who accused Weinstein of groping her during a meeting. Police conducted a sting at the time in which they recorded Weinstein apologizing for his conduct.

Vance, however, split with police and decided there wasn't enough evidence.

On Monday, Time's Up, an anti-sexual misconduct campaign started by group of Hollywood industry women, asked Cuomo to order an investigation after a story in New York magazine questioned whether the district attorney's office had been influenced improperly during its probe.

Hours later, Cuomo announced that he would order Schneiderman to look into it.

"It's a very fraught situation," said attorney Joel Cohen, whose firm has represented Vance's political campaign organization before, but does not represent him now. "Just the notion of the AG's investigation is bizarre enough," he said, but now "there is a pending investigation related to the same person."

He said "a courageous prosecutor" wouldn't let an outside investigation factor into the decision, and he said he was confident Vance fell into that category.

The Associated Press does not typically identify people who say they are victims of sexual assault unless they speak publicly, as Battilana Gutierrez has done.

Boko Haram returns Nigeria girls, warns not to put in school

By HARUNA UMAR and KRISTA LARSON, Associated Press

DAPCHI, Nigeria (AP) — Boko Haram Islamic extremists brought back nearly all of the 110 girls they had kidnapped from a boarding school last month, dropping them off in the middle of the night Wednesday with a warning: "Don't ever put your daughters in school again."

Several of the girls interviewed by The Associated Press said they had been traveling for days before the convoy of vehicles arrived in the center of the town of Dapchi around 2 a.m. Residents who had fled upon hearing that Boko Haram was headed their way watched from hiding as dozens of girls descended from the vehicles apparently unharmed.

"We were freed because we are Muslim girls and they didn't want us to suffer. That is why they released us," said Khadija Grema, one of the freed girls who said a Christian classmate remained captive.

The extraordinary development brought elation to most of the families, but more heartache for the relatives of the six girls still unaccounted for. The sister of one girl fainted Wednesday upon hearing that she was not among those freed.

One 14-year-old released by the fighters told reporters that five girls had died. She did not provide other details and it was not immediately possible to independently verify her claim.

The abductions in Dapchi have evoked painful memories of the tragedy in Chibok, where 276 girls were kidnapped from their boarding school. Nearly four years later, about 100 of them have never returned home. Many had been forced to marry their captors and had children fathered by them.

The Nigerian government denied that it had paid a ransom or made a prisoner swap in exchange for the girls' freedom. The girls were released "through back-channel efforts and with the help of some friends of the country, and it was unconditional," Information Minister Lai Mohammed told journalists in the capital, Abuja.

"No money changed hands. They only had one condition — that they will return them to where they took them. So in the early hours of today, they did return the girls and most of them went to their parents,"

he said.

The girls were meeting with counselors at a nearby hospital, and "will be quarantined and be counseled before they go back to their schools," he added. Nigeria's government later said they were being taken to the capital on a military plane.

The fighters had rolled into Dapchi in nine vehicles and the girls were left in the center of town. As terrified residents emerged from their homes, the extremists issued an ominous warning, resident Ba'ana Musa told the AP.

"We did it out of pity. And don't ever put your daughters in school again," the residents said the extremists told them. Boko Haram means "Western education is forbidden" in the Hausa language.

Nigeria's government said 104 of the 110 schoolgirls had been confirmed freed.

The latest mass abduction is thought to have been carried out by a Boko Haram splinter group aligned with the Islamic State group that has criticized the leader of the main Boko Haram organization for targeting civilians and has focused instead on military and Western targets.

The release came a day after an Amnesty International report accused the Nigerian military of failing to heed several warnings of an imminent attack on Feb. 19 during which the girls were seized. The military has called the report an "outright falsehood."

Wednesday's miraculous development also brought renewed focus to the 100 Chibok girls still missing since April 2014. Coincidentally, some of the Chibok families had already made plans to travel to Dapchi that day to lend their moral support before it was known that most of the girls had been released.

Some of the Chibok families instead joined in rejoicing with the Dapchi parents, said Lawan Zannah, secretary of the Chibok parents' association.

"This development gives us light that ... we can take a message to our other colleagues at home that yes, what we have seen will give us hope that our own (girls) too will be released," Zannah said.

Larson reported from Dakar, Senegal. Associated Press writers Jossy Ola in Dapchi, Nigeria; Ismail Alfa Abdulrahim in Maiduguri, Nigeria; Ibrahim Abdulaziz in Yola, Nigeria; Sam Olukoya in Lagos and Bashir Adigun in Abuja, Nigeria, also contributed to this report.

Teen Palestinian protester gets 8 months in prison

By AREEJ HAZBOUN, Associated Press

OFER MILITARY PRISON, West Bank (AP) — Palestinian teenage protest icon Ahed Tamimi on Wednesday was sentenced to eight months in prison for slapping and kicking a pair of Israeli soldiers outside her West Bank home, capping a case that sparked uproar in Israel, turned the 17-year-old girl into a Palestinian hero and attracted international attention.

Tamimi's Israeli lawyer, Gaby Lasky, said Tamimi agreed to the sentence as part of a plea deal with prosecutors that allowed her to avoid more serious charges that could have imprisoned her for years. Under the deal, she is due to be released in the summer. She is also being fined the equivalent of about \$1,400.

Lasky called the legal proceedings a "farce." She said "they are trying to deter other Palestinian youth from resisting occupation as Ahed did."

The judge agreed to a similar plea deal for Tamimi's mother Nariman, who has been charged with incitement.

"This is injustice, this court is designed to oppress the Palestinians," her father Bassem said. He said they agreed to the deal because they had been threatened with three years in jail. Bassem had visited his daughter and wife for the first time in prison the day before. He said Ahed spends her time doing school work.

An Israeli supporter of Tamimi slapped a prosecutor after the ruling and was later arrested by police.

Tamimi was arrested in December after video surfaced of her kicking the soldiers outside her West Bank home. While some praised the soldiers for showing restraint, hard-line politicians criticized what they felt was a weak response and called for tough action against the girl, whose family has a long history of run-

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ins with the Israelis.

But the full-throttle prosecution of Tamimi, who turned 17 behind bars, has drawn widespread international criticism. An Israeli official's revelation that he had once had parliament investigate whether the blond, blue-eyed Tamimis are "real" Palestinians drew accusations of racism and helped stoke additional interest in the case.

The case touches on what constitutes legitimate resistance to Israel's rule over millions of Palestinians, now in its 51st year, in territories it captured in the 1967 war.

"No justice under occupation and we are in an illegal court," Tamimi said to reporters in court.

Ahed Tamimi's supporters see a brave girl who struck the soldiers in anger after having just learned that Israeli troops seriously wounded a 15-year-old cousin, shooting him in the head from close range with a rubber bullet during nearby stone-throwing clashes.

In Israel, she is seen either as a naive youth manipulated by her elders or a threat to Israel's military deterrence. The incident also sparked debate about the soldiers' refusal to act.

Israel has treated Tamimi's actions as a criminal offense, indicting her on charges of assault and incitement that carry up to 14 years in prison.

Since 2009, residents of Tamimi's village of Nabi Salah have staged regular anti-occupation protests that often end with stone-throwing clashes. Ahed Tamimi has participated in such marches from a young age, and has had several highly publicized run-ins with soldiers.

One photo shows the then-12-year-old raising a clenched fist toward a soldier towering over her.

Following her latest arrest, images of the girl became popular on posters in the West Bank. Some 1.7 million people worldwide have signed a petition calling for her release.

The case has drawn attention to Israel's military court system, which is used to try Palestinians in the West Bank. Israeli West Bank settlers, on the other hand, are tried under Israeli civilian courts.

The dueling justice systems have drawn criticism from international rights groups. The military courts have a near 100 percent conviction rate, in part because so many Palestinians agree to plea bargains. Critics say the system gives Palestinians few rights, and they are often coerced into plea deals. Hundreds of Palestinian minors are processed by the military court system each year.

"Ahed will be home in a few months, but Israel is putting this child behind bars for eight months for calling for protests and slapping a soldier, after threatening her with years in jail," said Human Rights Watch Middle East Director Sarah Leah Whitson.

Cynthia Nixon's political debut puts gay rights in spotlight

By CHRIS CAROLA, Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — In her first appearance as a New York gubernatorial candidate, "Sex and the City" star Cynthia Nixon hammered her Democratic opponent Gov. Andrew Cuomo on the crumbling subway, the "cesspool" of corruption in state government and inequality across the state. But she couldn't escape what she didn't mention in her speech, her sexual orientation.

Nixon, who if she wins would become the state's first openly gay governor, was asked by reporters about a comment made by former New York City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, a gay Cuomo supporter who called Nixon an "unqualified lesbian."

"My being a lesbian or her being a lesbian I think has nothing to do with why we're running for office," Nixon told the scrum on her way out of an appearance this week in Brooklyn.

"I think it's time for an outsider," she said. "I think it is time, not just in New York state but all over this country, to hear from the voices of real people who understand that our government ... is in the clutches of millionaires, billionaires and corporations."

The dustup over Quinn's remark, for which she later apologized, highlighted what could become a reality of Nixon's campaign leading to a September primary against the two-term incumbent Cuomo: Whether she likes it or not, Nixon will be forced to confront the issue of her sexuality and stand on gay rights.

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That's especially true against a governor who has long gotten strong support in the gay community for his staunch fight for legislation in 2011 that allowed same-sex couples in the state to marry.

Just last month, the nation's largest LGBT civil rights organization, the Human Rights Campaign, endorsed Cuomo for re-election and also honored Nixon with a Visibility Award for using "her talent and public platform to speak out for equality in this country and around the globe."

For now, Nixon's entry into the race this week hasn't appeared to shake Cuomo's support. Most major gay rights advocates and groups, both nationally and in New York, say they are either sticking with Cuomo or staying neutral, noting that LGBT issues are important but not the only factor to consider.

"Just because a candidate like Cynthia is LGBT, that doesn't mean that's just what she's running for," said Sean Meloy, political director for the LGBTQ Victory Fund, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that works to get LGBT people elected to government offices but has not yet jumped into this race. "I don't think people look at LGBT candidates purely as a LGBT candidate."

Nixon underscored that herself this week in her two-minute campaign announcement video on Twitter, mentioning such issues as crumbling infrastructure, income inequality and sagging upstate economies, but not a word about gay rights.

By Wednesday, she appeared to embrace the "unqualified lesbian" dig, going on Twitter to announce a campaign event at the Stonewall Inn, birthplace of the gay rights movement.

"Calling all qualified and unqualified lesbians and everyone who wants funded schools, affordable housing & working subways," she wrote.

The 51-year-old New York native and Grammy, Emmy and Tony winner has never held public office, but as an activist she has lobbied extensively for better education funding and advocated for gay rights.

Nixon, who had two children with longtime partner Danny Mozes, came out in 2004. Eight years later, she married Christine Marinoni, who worked for New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio as a special adviser for community partnerships in the city's education department. Nixon and Marinoni have a young son.

Nixon received some backlash in 2012 when she told The New York Times Magazine that being a homosexual was a conscious choice for her. "I understand that for many people it's not, but for me it's a choice, and you don't get to define my gayness for me," she said.

After some gay activists complained that Nixon's remarks could be used to deny a biological basis for homosexuality, she told The Advocate magazine, an LGBT publication, that she's technically bisexual, and not by choice.

For his part, the 60-year-old Cuomo is a career politician with an extensive record of championing gay rights. In addition to legalization of same-sex marriages, Cuomo ordered state authorities to prohibit discrimination based on gender identity, issued an executive order prohibiting health insurers from denying coverage based on gender identity and barred state mental health facilities from offering conversion therapy.

Cuomo "has the best record of accomplishment on gay rights of any elected official in America," said Richard Socarides, a former Clinton White House adviser on LGBT issues. "He's a true progressive and he will be hard to beat."

Ethan Geto, a gay-rights activist and political consultant, said Nixon had established her credibility as a thoughtful activist, but predicted that Cuomo would win "the lion's share" of the LGBT vote in the September primary. He said Cuomo "has been far and away the most progressive and effective champion of gay rights in the history of the governorship."

Human Rights Campaign President Chad Griffin called Cuomo "a national champion for the LGBTQ community, with a proven track record of increasing much-needed protections and advancing equality for all New Yorkers."

Still, Cuomo does have some vulnerabilities. Some in the LGBT community think he was late on some of its issues, noting New York was the seventh state to allow people of the same sex to legally marry, seven years after Massachusetts became the first and six years after Connecticut became the second.

"Nixon can make the case, did you lead the charge? Can we count on you to be a leader?" said Fordham political scientist Christine Greer.

Cuomo made his first public comments about Nixon at a news conference Wednesday on the nor'easter.

When asked about her, Cuomo responded: "We're in the political silly season now. I've been here before. We're in a democracy, anybody can run. Anybody can say whatever they want to say."

Associated Press National Writer David Crary contributed to this report.

Koreas, US conclude 'constructive' talks in Finland

By JARI TANNER, Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — Finland's government said Wednesday that delegates from North Korea, South Korea and the United States concluded "constructive" unofficial diplomatic talks in the Nordic country that were widely believed to be laying the groundwork for an upcoming meeting between the Koreas and a planned U.S.-North Korea summit.

The Finnish foreign ministry said in a brief statement said that the tripartite talks were held in a positive atmosphere and were aimed at "building confidence and reducing tensions on the Korean Peninsula."

Many observers believe the Finland meeting was geared toward preparing an upcoming summit between the leaders of the Koreas and a planned meeting between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Eighteen delegates, six from each country, plus observers from the United Nations and Europe attended the secretive two-day talks at a 19th-century manor house just outside Helsinki. The gathering kicked off Monday evening with a joint-dinner at a Helsinki restaurant where the delegations were seen arriving.

Media were largely kept in the dark about the identities of the delegates and issues on the table, apart from Finnish Foreign Minister Timo Soini saying Tuesday that denuclearization wasn't on the agenda.

What is known, however, is that senior North Korean diplomat Choe Kang Il, who handles North American affairs for his government, was among delegates from Pyongyang, while the U.S. delegation is believed to have included Kathleen Stephens, the former U.S. ambassador to South Korea.

It was the first in a series of planned meetings between the Koreas and the U.S. involving unofficial talks between current and former officials, and academics. The meetings are likely to be important for establishing summit expectations and possibly even agenda items.

The Helsinki talks took place just a few days after North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho concluded separate diplomatic talks in neighboring Sweden on Saturday.

Finnish President Sauli Niinisto said Monday that his country, which has a long history of hosting international summits, received a request to host the meeting "through middlemen."

"We're happy to host it and hope that discussions can bring issues forward," he told reporters before the talks.

Senior South Korean officials who recently visited North Korea's capital said that Kim agreed to hold talks with South Korean President Moon Jae-in in late April. They said Kim also proposed meeting with Trump.

Trump then agreed to meet Kim by the end of May. North Korea has yet to confirm talks with the U.S., but its official media on Tuesday carried a commentary saying there "has been a sign of change" in U.S.-North Korean relations.

The developments have raised hopes for a potential breakthrough in the North Korean nuclear crisis. But many experts say tensions could flare again if the summits fail to make progress, leaving the nuclear issue with few diplomatic options.

The South Korean officials who traveled to North Korea said that Kim is willing to discuss the North's nuclear weapons program.

Senators press Trump officials on safeguarding 2018 ballots

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY and CHAD DAY, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With the 2018 elections already underway, senators chided the current and former secretaries of Homeland Security on Wednesday for not more strongly warning the American public about

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past Russian intrusions in state election systems and for a lack of urgency to protect balloting this year. Kirstjen Nielsen, President Donald Trump's secretary of Homeland Security, testified alongside Jeh Johnson, secretary under former President Barack Obama, as the Senate intelligence committee launched an effort to protect the country's election security after Russian agents targeted election systems in 21 states ahead of the 2016 general election. There's no evidence that any hack in the November 2016 election affected election results, but the attempts rattled state election officials and prompted the federal government and states to examine the way votes are counted.

Senators on the panel have criticized both administrations for not moving quickly enough to stem the Russian threat, and continued to do so at the hearing. Maine Sen. Susan Collins, a Republican, critiqued Nielsen's opening statement, which described a series of efforts the department had already announced.

"I hear no sense of urgency to really get on top of this issue," Collins said, noting that 2018 elections are already underway.

Collins noted that many state election officials have remained without security clearances, making it harder for the department to share information with them.

To speed up communications and intelligence sharing, the department has been working to grant security clearances to up to three election officials in each state. Nielsen said Wednesday that just 20 of those officials have been granted full clearances.

"We are doing our best to speed up the process," Nielsen said, adding that the department has a policy in place to provide information on immediate threats to state and local election officials even if clearances have yet to be granted.

Communication and intelligence sharing by the federal government has been a key concern among state and local election officials. Those officials complained that it took the federal government nearly a year to inform them whether their states had been targeted by Russian hackers.

Collins, who has introduced legislation with other members of the committee to improve election cybersecurity, also pressed Johnson, asking if he should have issued stronger warnings in 2016 as it became clear that Russians were trying to intrude into the systems.

Johnson defended the way he alerted state and local election officials, noting that in the late summer and fall of 2016 he was repeatedly issuing public warnings for those officials to get cybersecurity assistance from the department.

"We were beating the drum pretty hard," Johnson said.

California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, a Democrat, also lambasted the Obama administration's response, saying it was not sufficient to warn the public "in any way, shape or form."

Before leaving office, the Obama administration designated the nation's election systems as "critical infrastructure," on par with the electrical grid and water supply. That decision prompted alarm among state election officials, who expressed concern the federal government was trying to take over elections that have long been the jurisdiction of state and local governments. Johnson said he had considered the move earlier, but had backed off because of resistance to states.

Johnson also testified that during the 2016 election he contacted The Associated Press because he was worried about the possibility the news cooperative's election results could be hacked. He said he called AP's CEO Gary Pruitt about his concerns and came away satisfied that the company was taking appropriate precautions as it counted votes and analyzed results.

The hearing follows a Tuesday news conference in which committee members from both parties said government efforts to protect state and local elections from Russian cyberattacks haven't gone far enough. Top U.S. intelligence officials have said they've seen indications Russian agents are preparing a new round of election interference this year.

Senators warned that it could be worse the next time around.

"What it looks like is a test," said Maine Sen. Angus King of the 2016 hacking attempts.

The committee is recommending that states make sure voting machines have paper audit trails and aren't capable of being connected to the internet. Senators also are pushing for better communication

among the various U.S. intelligence agencies and federal, state and local governments.

Senators are also urging state and local election officials to take advantage Homeland Security Department resources, such as comprehensive risk assessments and remote cyberscanning of their networks to spot vulnerabilities. As of last month, just 14 states had requested risk assessments and 30 had asked for remote cyberscans of their networks, according to Homeland Security officials. But even that was straining resources, since many of those risk assessments have not been completed.

The committee's recommendations preview an election security report expected to be released in full in the coming weeks. It is the first of four reports planned as part of the panel's wide-ranging investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election.

The recommendations come as Congress is eyeing \$380 million in state grants for election security in a wide-ranging spending bill expected to be unveiled as soon as Wednesday. The bill also contains \$307 million for the FBI to go after Russian cyberattacks.

The top Democrat on the intelligence panel, Virginia Sen. Mark Warner, has said he thinks the nation's election security needs to be more robust, especially since Trump has not addressed the matter as an urgent problem.

"It's pretty amazing to me we've had the director of the FBI, the director of national intelligence and the head of the NSA say in public testimony within the last month that they've received no direction from the White House to make election security a priority," Warner said.

Nielsen defended Trump at the hearing, saying, "the line he is drawing is that no votes were changed. That doesn't mean there's not a threat."

She added: "We think the threat remains high."

Read the Senate Intelligence Committee recommendations: <http://apne.ws/VXRyJOc>

This story has been corrected to show 'billion' should be 'million' in 23rd paragraph, beginning 'The recommendations...'

Creatures of the night inhabit Audubon Zoo's newest building

By JANET McCONNAUGHEY, Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — It's daylight outside, but with indoor lights simulating a full moon, hundreds of bats flap back and forth. On a nearby wall, what appears to be a talking stone face provides bat fun facts.

It's the night house at the Audubon Zoo in New Orleans, and it opens Friday. The Associated Press got a preview Tuesday.

The centerpiece of the \$1.6 million night house is the 42-foot-long (13-meter-long) flight cage for 200 Seba's short-tailed bats — fruit-eating mammals up to 2½ inches (6.4 centimeters) long, with a foot-wide (30 centimeter) wingspan.

"It's amazing going in there and having the bats fly by you," animal care staffer Dominique Fleitas said Tuesday. "You can feel the wind as their wings are flapping around you."

She said their echolocation — the ability to use sound to locate objects — is so precise that they easily go around her.

The animals in the Criaturas de la Noche (Creatures of the Night) Bat House all are from Central and South America. The building's interior simulates an abandoned warehouse set up to protect Mayan artifacts during a dig. One wall is painted with maps of the supposed site and its general area. Tiles, plates and other "artifacts" hang on other walls or sit on shelves.

Near one end of the flight cage is a giant simulated carving of a man with loudspeakers for earrings, topped by a movie projection of a speaking, sculpted face.

"Push my buttons. I dare you," it says at intervals. "I'd do it myself but I have no arms. I'm just a giant button-head."

Pressing the buttons elicits messages such as "Some bats live by themselves, while others live in caves

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with thousands of other bats. The largest bat colony in the world is found in Texas, at the Bracken Cave."

A much smaller colony — eight vampire bats — lives in one of a half-dozen exhibit cases set up as if a visitor were looking through a broken wall into the jungle. Their home is made to imitate a tropical ceiba-tree's buttress-like roots with cup-like green lichen growing from it. During the preview, a half-dozen bats hung together from one such cup, forming a clump that could fit easily into one hand, while a seventh lapped cow's blood from a small bowl on the ground.

Other cases hold giant cave cockroaches, reddish poison dart frogs with creamy white stripes, two kinds of tarantulas and thumb-sized green tree frogs. At each end are two more elaborate displays, one for the Nancy Ma's night owl monkeys, or douroucoulis, and the other for a ring-tailed cat — actually related to raccoons.

The roaches' home is made to imitate a huge football-shaped termite mound formed around several branches and later slashed open by an anteater. A half-dozen 3-inch-long (7.5-centimeter) cockroaches were aligned along one branch, just hanging out.

"They're creepy. Super creepy," said Ashley McClaran, vice president for construction and exhibits. "They hiss at you and they're giant. My son is going to love them. He's 7."

The ring-tailed cat and douroucoulis were wary of the strangers tromping near the quarters they'd just moved into.

Ignoring a slanted climbing wall designed to look like part of an intricately carved Mayan ball court, the ring-tailed cat occasionally left the shelter of a crate at one side.

The arboreal douroucoulis' exhibit, created to look as if thick ropes were being used to haul up an intricately decorated 2-foot-wide (0.6-meter-wide) pottery circle, has lots of places for above-ground clambering. But the monkeys were sitting on a shelf at the exhibit's top left corner and could barely be seen.

"We're going to move that little shelf today," to a much lower spot below the entrance to their sleeping quarters, on the other side of the enclosure, McClaran said. "It will give them an easy way to get into the back-of-house, and a platform to see them."



In this Tuesday, March 20, 2018 photo, a Vampire Bat drinks bovine blood in the Criaturas de la Noche (Creatures of the Night) Bat House, the Audubon Zoo's new night house in New Orleans. The various species are all from Central and South America, and the building's interior simulates an abandoned warehouse set up to protect Mayan artifacts during a dig. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

Chinese state media now with more Communist Party propaganda

By CHRISTOPHER BODEEN, Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese state media will be getting more propaganda now that the Communist Party has announced it will be in direct control of broadcasters and the regulators of everything from movies and TV to books and radio programs.

The move is part of a push by President Xi Jinping — emboldened by the removal of term limits on his time in office — to tighten party supervision over broad swaths of Chinese public life as he pushes for

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what he calls "unity in thought" among officials and citizens.

Analysts say having direct oversight of the media will help the party hammer home its message domestically and also work to improve its image internationally.

"It's one vast effort to get everybody thinking together," said David Zweig, director of the Center on China's Transnational Relations at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

Under the plan announced Wednesday, China Radio International, China National Radio and China Central Television, along with its international broadcast arm, China Global Television Network, will be merged into a new body with a name that translates to "Voice of China."

The government's regulator of the press and print publications, radio, film and television will cease to exist and its responsibilities and resources will be transferred to the party's Central Propaganda Department, along with control over the film industry, including the import and export of movies.

The new body's chief responsibilities include "implementing the party's propaganda guidelines and policies," the official Xinhua News Agency said.

The Communist Party newspaper Global Times quoted government expert Feng Yue of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences as saying the move will "concentrate the resources and authority to improve China's influence overseas and promote China's international image."

While Chinese media consumers have grown increasingly apolitical with an ever-expanding range of options, from foreign television shows to video games and online shopping, Xi has been steadily increasing the role of the party in the lives of many through new or newly invigorated branch committees in schools, offices and factories.

That could leave ordinary Chinese with "little choice" but to become active consumers of propaganda, Zweig said.

Writing on the website of the China Media Project at the University of Hong Kong, editor David Bandurski said the change gave the Propaganda Department — which formerly provided broad overall guidance of the media message — direct control over output.

"And that is largely the point that comes through here — the tighter, more centralized control of media and ideology," Bandurski said.

As its name suggests, the new media monolith appears modeled on outlets such as the U.S.'s Voice of America or Russia's Russia Today, now known simply as RT.

Xi has repeatedly stressed the role of state media as the party's "throat and tongue" — the equivalent of "mouthpiece" — especially since a 2016 visit to Xinhua and other major outlets during which he further reinforced the message by saying such outlets must "take the 'party' as their surname."

At the same time, China has faced opposition to its moves to consolidate territorial claims in the South China Sea and rapid economic expansion overseas, as embodied by Xi's signature trillion-dollar Belt and Road infrastructure initiative to tie China to Southeast Asia, Europe and Africa through roads, railways, ports and power plants.

China has spent vast sums to boost its overseas media presence in recent years, with CCTV opening broadcast centers in Washington and Nairobi, Kenya, and the English-language China Daily newspaper paying to have itself included as an insert in esteemed American papers such as the Washington Post.

Yet those efforts face an uphill battle in competing with well-established global media outlets such as CNN and the BBC, while much of the reporting on China smacks of party propaganda in contrast to reports about the country by foreign media outlets.

Cao Peixin, a professor at the Television School under Beijing's Communication University of China that has long trained much of the country's on-air talent, said the reorganization fits the trend toward greater efficiency and media convergence, but would also help present a more unified political message.

Integrating the various departments may not be easy, however, Cao said.

"If the system cannot be established in a modern, efficient and very flexible way, it will be very difficult for many organizations to work in step," he said.

Hurricane Harvey's toxic impact deeper than public told

By **FRANK BAJAK** of THE ASSOCIATED PRESS and **LISE OLSEN** of the HOUSTON CHRONICLE, Associated Press and Houston Chronicle

HOUSTON (AP) — A toxic onslaught from the nation's petrochemical hub was largely overshadowed by the record-shattering deluge of Hurricane Harvey as residents and first responders struggled to save lives and property.

More than a half-year after floodwaters swamped America's fourth-largest city, the extent of this environmental assault is beginning to surface, while questions about the long-term consequences for human health remain unanswered.

County, state and federal records pieced together by The Associated Press and The Houston Chronicle reveal a far more widespread toxic impact than authorities publicly reported after the storm slammed into the Texas coast in late August and then stalled over the Houston area.

Some 500 chemical plants, 10 refineries and more than 6,670 miles of intertwined oil, gas and chemical pipelines line the nation's largest energy corridor.

Nearly half a billion gallons of industrial wastewater mixed with storm water surged out of just one chemical plant in Baytown, east of Houston on the upper shores of Galveston Bay.

Benzene, vinyl chloride, butadiene and other known human carcinogens were among the dozens of tons of industrial toxins released into surrounding neighborhoods and waterways following Harvey's torrential rains.

In all, reporters catalogued more than 100 Harvey-related toxic releases — on land, in water and in the air. Most were never publicized, and in the case of two of the biggest ones, the extent or potential toxicity of the releases was initially understated.

Only a handful of the industrial spills have been investigated by federal regulators, reporters found.

Texas regulators say they have investigated 89 incidents, but have yet to announce any enforcement actions.

Testing by state and federal regulators of soil and water for contaminants was largely limited to Superfund toxic waste sites.

Based on widespread air monitoring, including flyovers, officials repeatedly assured the public that post-Harvey air pollution posed no health threat. But the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency official in charge now says these general assessments did not necessarily reflect local "hotspots" with potential risk to people.

Regulators alerted the public to dangers from just two, well-publicized toxic disasters: the Arkema chemical plant northeast of Houston that exploded and burned for days, and a nearby dioxin-laden federal Superfund site whose protective cap was damaged by the raging San Jacinto River.

Samuel Coleman, who was the EPA's acting regional administrator during Harvey, said the priority in the immediate aftermath was "addressing any environmental harms as quickly as possible as opposed to making announcements about what the problem was."

In hindsight, he said, it might not have been a bad idea to inform the public about the worst of "dozens of spills."

Local officials say the state's industry-friendly approach has weakened efforts by the city of Houston and surrounding Harris County to build cases against and force cleanup by the companies, many of them repeat environmental offenders.

"The public will probably never know the extent of what happened to the environment after Harvey. But the individual companies of course know," said Rock Owens, supervising environmental attorney for Harris County, home to Houston and 4.7 million residents.

The chairman of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Bryan Shaw, declined when asked by lawmakers in January to identify the worst spills and their locations. He told a legislative subcommittee hearing he could not publicly discuss spills until his staff completed a review.

The amount of post-Harvey government testing contrasts sharply with what happened after two other major Gulf Coast hurricanes. After Hurricane Ike hit Texas in 2008, state regulators collected 85 sediment

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samples to measure the contamination; more than a dozen violations were identified and cleanups were carried out, according to a state review.

In Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina's floodwaters ravaged New Orleans in 2005, the EPA and Louisiana officials examined about 1,800 soil samples over 10 months, EPA records showed.

"Now the response is completely different," said Scott Frickel, an environmental sociologist formerly at Tulane University in New Orleans.

Frickel, now at Brown University, called the Harvey response "unconscionable" given Houston's exponentially larger industrial footprint.

Reporters covered some environmental crises as they happened, such as AP's exclusive on the flooding of toxic waste sites and the Chronicle's Arkema warnings before fires broke out. But the sheer quantity of spills was impossible to document in real time.

Academic researchers are now trying to fill in the gaps in environmental monitoring, helped by grants from the National Science Foundation and National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. One project, a Harvey-related public health registry for Houston, was funded just this month but is not yet underway.

"People are left in a state of limbo of not knowing if they were exposed or not — or if they were, what the implications are for their health," said Dr. Nicole Lurie, who oversaw federal public health responses to the Superstorm Sandy and Deepwater Horizon disasters while at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Scientists say the paucity of data also could hamstring efforts to prepare for and mitigate damage from future violent weather events that climatologists predict will happen with increasing frequency.

'NOTHING SHORT OF CATASTROPHIC'

When it meets moisture, hydrogen chloride gas becomes hydrochloric acid, which can burn, suffocate and kill.

Between lulls in Harvey's pounding torrents on Aug. 28, an 18-inch pipeline leak at Williams Midstream Services Inc. unleashed a plume of the chemical near the intersection of two major highways in La Porte, southeast of Houston, where the San Jacinto River meets the 50-mile ship channel. It's the petrochemical corridor's main artery that empties into Galveston Bay.

A toxic cloud spread about a quarter-mile in an industrial sector as firefighters and police rushed to shut down roads, blared neighborhood sirens and robo-dispatched phone and text messages warning people to stay indoors.

Two hours ticked by before a county hazardous materials response unit — lucky to find a road not under water — arrived and ended the danger with the help of a crew from a nearby plant.

The spill was among dozens barely noticed at the time, records show. A county pollution control inspector, Johnathan Martin, wrote in his report that he could not safely monitor the toxic plume but believed it did not reach homes less than a mile away. There were no reports of injuries.

On land, the deluge — five feet of rain in some spots — appears to have scoured the top soil, according to separate testing efforts by scientists from Texas A&M and Rice universities.

The Texas A&M collection of 24 samples — taken in September from lawns mainly in a neighborhood near Valero Energy Corp.'s refinery — turned up only low traces of petroleum and petrochemical-related compounds.

"As expected the rains washed most things out," said Texas A&M research leader Anthony Knap.

Rice researchers tested soil at a school and park in Baytown, east across Upper Galveston Bay, where residents said floodwaters rushed in from the 3,400-acre ExxonMobil refinery and chemical plant. They also sampled in Galena Park, a community of 11,000 hemmed in by heavy industry along the ship channel, just east of downtown.

Only one of the nine samples collected by Rice researchers showed elevated levels of petroleum-related toxins, according to an independent chemical analysis funded by the AP-Chronicle collaboration. Collected in Galena Park, it showed the presence of benzo(a)pyrene, a known carcinogen, at levels just above what the EPA deems a cancer risk.

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Jessica Chastain lives a block away.

During Harvey's three-day downpour, the nearby Panther Creek swallowed Chastain's home, forcing the 36-year-old mother and four of her children to swim across the street to the safety of her parents' two-story house, through slimy brownish-black water that smelled like a "rotten sewer," said Chastain. "It had a coat of film over it. I'm not sure what it was. It was probably oil."

Her children — 15, 11, 9 and 6 — all developed skin infections and strep throat, she said.

Her youngest still "cries when it rains hard," she said. "Is it going to flood?" he asks."

The creek, which empties into the nearby ship channel, had backed up from flooded chemical plants and tank farms.

A number of Harvey-related spills occurred near Chastain's home, including the 460,000-gallon gasoline spill at a Magellan Midstream Partners tank farm and nearly 52,000 pounds of crude oil from a Seaway Crude Pipeline Inc. tank.

Samples taken in October at a Houston park upstream of the ship channel showed elevated levels of dioxins, PCBs and hazardous chemicals typically created in the burning of oil, coal and gas, said Jennifer Horney, an A&M epidemiology professor who conducted testing for the city.

Benzo(a)pyrene was among the chemicals found in sediment on the banks of Brays Bayou at the park, a popular recreation site with baseball diamonds, soccer pitches and bicycle pathways.

"It's coal tar and it's a known carcinogen and mostly you find it in industrial settings," said Horney. "We know the ship channel — or the bayou — was (up) in that park."

While worrisome, the levels at the park were not high enough to trigger a cleanup under EPA standards, she said. Neither Houston nor Texas A&M officials have publicly released those test results, which the city health department's chief environmental science officer, Loren Raun, said showed "nothing of concern for human health risk."

The surface soil scrubbing that scientists believe occurred during Harvey means contaminants likely migrated downstream, said Hanadi Rifai. The head of the University of Houston's environmental engineering program, she has been studying pollution in the watershed for more than two decades.

"That soil ended up somewhere," Rifai said. "The net result on Galveston Bay is going to be nothing short of catastrophic."

VAPOR CLOUD

Residents of the tidy, mostly Latino neighborhood off Old Industrial Road in Galena Park are accustomed to the foul odors that wind shifts can bring.

But no one told them about the gasoline spill at the Magellan terminal a mile away — one of more than a dozen Harvey-related releases in a two-mile radius. The release was initially reported to the Coast Guard at 42,000 gallons — and residents would only learn of it a week later through news reports. Not until 11 days after the spill did Magellan report that it was actually more than 10 times bigger.

Asked about the discrepancy, Magellan spokesman Bruce Heine said floodwaters prevented the company from accessing the ruptured tanks until Sept. 5. He said the company later removed 15 dump trucks of tainted soil.

The spill was reported to the Coast Guard on Thursday, Aug. 31 at 11:35 p.m. — six days after Harvey made landfall.

An explosion risk prompted workers to evacuate upwind as the nearly half-million gallons of gasoline gushed out failed storage tanks, state environmental and Coast Guard records show. The spill ranked as Texas' largest reported Harvey-related venting of air pollutants, at 1,143 tons.

The local fire department put down foam to suppress the fumes, records revealed, and a police report described "a vapor cloud."

Claudia Mendez, a 42-year-old housewife, said she later saw foam by the side of the road and wondered about its origin.

The fumes were so strong, Mendez said, "I thought my husband had brought the lawnmower gas can inside."

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Magellan has been cited for 11 environmental violations since 2002 by Texas regulators and fined more than \$190,000, more than half in August 2012 for a single violation of air quality standards.

Its spill is among at least three post-Harvey releases about which Harris County officials have withheld information, saying they remain under investigation.

The second involves W&P Development Corp., owner of an industrial park where about 100,000 gallons of oily wastewater were reported to have spilled into the San Jacinto from Aug. 29 to Aug. 31. The site was formerly Champion Paper Mill and a landfill there received wastes including turpentine- and lead-contaminated soil and mercury until 2008. For most of 2015 and 2016, the property was in violation of federal anti-pollution laws, EPA records show.

A spokesman for W&P Development, Dennis Winkler, said the company later determined that a smaller amount — 30,000 gallons — had escaped from a water treatment plant when the river overtopped a berm.

The third site is Channel Biorefinery & Terminals, where some 80,000 gallons of methanol spilled from a tank rupture into Greens Bayou, which enters the ship channel just downstream of the Magellan terminal. Highly flammable and explosive, methanol can cause brain lesions and other disorders.

The property, once the site of the nation's largest biofuels refinery, was in violation of federal hazardous waste-management rules the first half of 2017. Texas cited the property's owners for failing to prove they could manage licensed wastes, including oily sludge and petroleum distillates, records show.

Dennis Frost, the on-site manager for Gulf Coast Energy, the tenant of Channel Biorefinery, said he and co-workers did their best to prevent the spills.

"They were impossible to contain," he said. "The water here down by our facility was up over 20 feet."

INDUSTRY: NO DANGER

Companies are required under federal law to report spills to the state and federal government but not to counties, which are the first line of defense against industrial pollution.

Harris County pollution control investigators queried more than 150 plants on Harvey-related spills, but many did not provide estimates.

"Spill information is provided as a courtesy," said Latrice Babin, deputy director of the county's pollution control office. "Likewise, there is no requirement of notification of evacuation."

The largest spill, by far, was at ExxonMobil Corp.'s Olefins Plant in Baytown, east of the ship channel. Two days after Harvey hit, some 457 million gallons of stormwater mixed with untreated wastewater, including oil and grease, surged into an adjacent creek.

The spill was not reported to the public. In a water quality report filed with the county and obtained through an open records request, ExxonMobil said "available information does not indicate any potential danger to human health or safety or the environment."

It did not include results of third-party water testing that the company said had been done. The plant has a history of federal air pollution violations and reported emitting 228 tons of airborne pollutants during Harvey.

Other large spills found in official records include:

— More than 3,000 pounds of benzene from Royal Dutch Shell PLC's Deer Park complex on the ship channel's south bank. Initially, the company reported a half ton of phenol, which can burn skin and be potentially fatal, was spilled. It later revised that downward to just two pounds.

— About 34,000 pounds of sodium hydroxide, or lye, which can cause severe chemical burns, and unpermitted airborne emissions, including 28,000 pounds of benzene, from the Chevron Phillips Chemical Co. plant in Baytown, near where thousands of residents live along Cedar Bayou. A spokesman, Bryce Hallowell, said a containment pond kept about 38 percent of the lye from escaping the facility.

— About 60,000 tons of what Dow Chemical Co. called "non-hazardous biosolids" at the company's plant in Deer Park. The company now says that roughly 50 tons of that consisted of biosolids and that the rest was "primarily" stormwater.

Yvette Arellano of the advocacy group Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services surveyed the area by helicopter on Sept. 4.

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She reported seeing flooded tank farms, fluorescent liquid streaming from Exxon's outfalls, and refineries and chemical plants flaring gas intensely like giant candles.

"The entire skyscape looked like a birthday cake," Arellano said.

"HOT SPOTS"

As Harvey bore down on Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott's administration decreed that storm-related pollution would be forgiven as "acts of God." Days later, he suspended many environmental regulations.

On Sept. 1, just as residents in some areas of Houston started dragging soggy belongings to the curb, the city experienced Texas' worst ozone pollution of the year.

A top city health official emailed the EPA on Sept. 1 with a request marked "urgent," asking for help in determining whether spills and leaks at industrial and Superfund sites threatened the public. Three days later, after getting no response, she emailed again, records obtained in a public information act request show.

"We are finding alarming levels of benzene in the neighborhood next to Valero . Should EPA evacuate the residents?"

There was no record of an EPA email response, though the agency did send a mobile air-monitoring van on Sept. 5.

By then, Houston had done its own air monitoring, recording a high benzene level of 324 parts per billion — more than three times the level at which federal worker safety guidelines recommend special breathing equipment. The city was aided by the nonprofit Environmental Defense Fund, which dispatched a mobile van from California to track the toxic benzene plume.

On Sept. 7, state investigators took air samples near Valero and reported suffering headaches and dizziness, though they said they found pollutants "below levels of short-term health and/or welfare concern," according to a state report.

The EPA said it also conducted 28 flights over 12 days beginning Aug. 31 using a plane equipped to evaluate "unreported or undetected" chemical releases. It flew over nearly 700 industrial sites, municipal wastewater treatment plants and other facilities, and EPA said it found no pollution exceeding state-permitted levels.

In at least seven "status reports" the EPA and TCEQ posted online from Sept. 3 and Oct. 6, they said all measurements "were well below levels of health concern."

Coleman, who retired in January after 29 years with EPA, said he was comfortable with the advisories, saying they were general assessments. "Were there hotspots? Absolutely," he said in a recent interview. "But on any given day, within some isolated area, there could be a problem."

AP and Chronicle reporters asked the EPA and state regulators for a detailed accounting of any soil and water testing they did after Harvey, along with any investigations or sanctions.

The responses mostly cited online bulletins, in which the EPA said it had assessed all 43 Superfund cleanup sites in the hurricane-affected area and cleared all but one — the San Jacinto River Waste Pits, which was leaking dioxins. An examination of the 17 state Superfund sites found "no major issues," regulators said.

State officials said they didn't test any sediment that may have been deposited elsewhere by floodwaters. The EPA tested water at an unspecified number of industrial sites but did not disclose results.

Without elaborating, the state said it had a number of open investigations. The EPA refused to discuss whom it might be investigating, beyond Valero and Arkema.

With a few exceptions, companies with spills did not call local emergency responders, meaning the public was not informed in real time. Instead, the companies handled the spills in-house, the Chronicle and AP found in surveying local and county fire officials.

The Harris County Sheriff's Office, which handles countywide emergency response and routinely dispatches a special investigator to major spills, said it was not alerted to 22 of 23 spills that reporters asked about, based on size and potential toxicity.

The Arkema plant was the exception. Impossible to go unnoticed, its containers of liquid organic peroxides exploded after floodwaters disabled backup generators. Sickened first responders have filed suit, as have Harris and Liberty counties, which claim the company violated numerous environmental and safety

regulations.

Bob Royall, emergency operations chief for the county's Fire Marshal office, said his agency was alerted to Arkema and the Williams' hydrochloric acid leak but no one informed it at the time of the nearly half-million-gallon Magellan spill.

Like spills on land, unpermitted releases of air toxins are self-reported in Texas — a state that has long been friendly to heavy industry. As attorney general, prior to being elected governor, Abbott had sued the federal government more than a dozen times to challenge environmental regulations that he deemed over-reaching.

The governor's Harvey disaster declaration suspended environmental reporting and record-keeping rules as well as liability for unauthorized emissions for the duration of the disaster declaration, which was most recently renewed on March 16. A spokesman for the state environmental agency said the suspensions only apply when rules would hinder disaster response.

An attorney for the nonprofit Austin-based Environmental Integrity Project said that while federal environmental laws remained in effect, the governor's action essentially put state regulators on the sidelines and made it more difficult to hold polluters accountable. "The state tied its own hands before it knew the scope or the magnitude or any of the effects of the storm," said attorney Ilan Levin.

The TCEQ itself has a long track record of industry tolerance. State auditors in 2003 found it was late in ordering and collecting fines, giving polluters \$25 million a year in discounts. A study by Levin's group found the agency penalized only 3 percent of air pollution incidents reported by all companies statewide from 2011 to 2016.

Two Texas laws enacted since mid-2015 have weakened counties' ability to police polluters. The first caps at \$2.15 million what they can collect from polluters in lawsuits. The rest must go to the state. The second law took effect Sept. 1. It obliges counties to give the state right of first refusal on any pollution enforcement cases, which local officials say could mean less punitive action.

"Every time we've been able to make something — you get a large judgment against one of these companies, get some significant process-changing injunctive relief — they come back around behind us to the legislature," said Owens. "And they have clipped our wings."

Houston Chronicle reporter Alex Stuckey contributed to this story.

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Chase rarely lends to DC minorities _ and it's likely legal **By AARON GLANTZ and EMMANUEL MARTINEZ of REVEAL, REVEAL**

Across the street from the White House is the U.S. capital's only outpost of the nation's largest bank — tucked away on the ninth floor of a grey stone tower.

The bank's name, JPMorgan Chase & Co., appears on the directory in the building's lobby. According to the company's website, the office features "a team of dedicated specialists" who offer a "comprehensive range of financing choices, including mortgages and lines of credit."

But the office is not open to the public. Stop by and security will turn you away. And while the bank has a team of professionals designed to serve the district's rich, it is not technically a branch. So, in Washington, Chase doesn't have to abide by the Community Reinvestment Act — a 1977 law designed to reverse the legacy of redlining, or racial discrimination in lending. The law requires banks to lend in low- and moderate-income areas only if they have a branch in the area that takes deposits.

And so, even though Chase rarely lends to low-income residents or people of color, who make up a majority of the region's population, it is not breaking the law.

Chase is one of the biggest lenders in the Washington area. Yet African Americans received just 23 of the 1,119 conventional home purchase loans Chase made in the metro area in 2015 and 2016, according

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to government lending data reviewed by Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting. Latino borrowers received 35 loans.

An analysis of tens of millions of mortgage records by Reveal found 61 metro areas where people of color were significantly more likely to be denied a conventional home purchase loan than whites, even when they made the same amount of money, sought the same loan size or tried to buy in the same neighborhood. The Washington area was the only one where Reveal's analysis found statistically significant disparities for all four ethnic groups studied: African Americans, Asians, Latinos and Native Americans.

Chase had one of the highest denial rates for African Americans and Latinos among major lenders in Washington. The bank turned away 26 percent of African Americans and 18 percent of Latinos who sought conventional home purchase loans in 2015 and 2016. It denied 7 percent of applications from white homebuyers.

Not having branches in the district, advocates say, also skews Chase's applicant pool.

"Branches are really important," said John Taylor, president and CEO of the National Community Reinvestment Coalition, an advocacy organization. "They are not in a place where someone can be walking by and talk to a loan officer and get a mortgage. You're talking about a significant portion of people who want loans and excluding that option for them."

Chase officials would not grant an interview for this story, but in an email, company spokeswoman Keosha Burns said the bank is planning on "expanding our footprint to new markets," including opening branches in Boston, Philadelphia and Washington, which "will give us more access to serve new communities."

She said Chase would comply with the Community Reinvestment Act in each of those cities once its branches are open.

Bryan Hubbard, spokesman for the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, which regulates national banks, said Chase's lending patterns in Washington did not appear in his agency's most recent 599-page assessment of the bank's community lending because the bank's office across the street from the White House is a "limited service trust office."

"Trust offices by their nature are not deposit taking, do not meet the definition of a branch under CRA regulation, and are therefore excluded from the bank's assessment area under the regulation," he said.

Reveal's analysis of Chase's lending shows the bank made a much smaller percentage of loans in low- and moderate-income census tracts in the Washington area than the industry as a whole. Chase made 8 percent of its loans in those kinds of neighborhoods - where banks normally are required to solicit depositors and clients under the community lending law - compared with 20 percent for the mortgage lending industry as a whole.

The same pattern was present in Boston and Philadelphia, two other cities where Chase maintains a trust office that makes loans to the rich, but no retail branches that trigger enforcement of the Community Reinvestment Act. In both cities, Chase made an overwhelming percentage of its loans to white borrowers. In Boston, it made 6 percent of its loans in low- and moderate-income areas. In Philadelphia, that number was 4 percent.

Chase's lending patterns in the Washington area were whiter and richer than the biggest banks with many area branches. In its headquarters city of New York, where Chase has more than 600 branches, the bank's share of lending to low- and moderate-income neighborhoods was almost twice as high as in Washington.

In the Washington area, Chase concentrated its lending in affluent white neighborhoods - such as the district's Chevy Chase, American University Park and the Rosemont section of Alexandria, Virginia. But Chase rarely made loans in higher-income African American neighborhoods, including middle-class Woodridge and Prince George's County, Maryland.

The comptroller gave Chase a satisfactory grade under the Community Reinvestment Act in its most recent assessment, released in 2013. The bank was not unique in that regard. Over the past five years, the federal banking regulator has given 99 percent of banks satisfactory or outstanding reviews under the law.

The Trump administration has launched a review of the law, worrying consumer advocates, who say the changes most likely will lead to even more lax enforcement. Hubbard, the comptroller's spokesman,

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declined to comment on the changes, saying the office was still "a couple of weeks away from being able to share any detail as that comes together."

The administration already has begun loosening regulations under the law. In October, the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency made it easier for banks to pass their Community Reinvestment Act assessments. Under the new rules, banks still comply with the law if their "discriminatory or illegal credit practices" are found to be "limited, technical, or immaterial."

The website for Chase's Washington office includes pictures of five senior employees, representatives of its J.P. Morgan Private Bank brand, smiling in suits and ties - all of them white.

Managing Director and Market Manager Jacqueline Young Perrins is said to lead "a team of 50 professionals that oversee more than \$20 billion in assets from local families, public and private foundations, and endowments."

"She and her team help high-net-worth clients grow and sustain their wealth across multiple generations," the website says.

Reveal sent emails to Perrins and three other employees at the office but received no response. When Reveal called a local phone number for that Chase office, the call was connected with an operator at a call center in Chicago.

"All they do is paperwork," said the operator, who would not give her name. "It's not something you can walk into and do banking. The closest branch is in Trenton, New Jersey."

Reporter and producer Amy Walters contributed to this report.

This article was provided to The Associated Press by the nonprofit news outlet Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting. To read - or publish - a full version of this investigation, go to: revealnews.org/redlining. Curious about lending disparities in your neighborhood? Text "LOAN" to 202-873-8325.

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Asian shares mixed after Fed raises interest rates

By ELAINE KURTENBACH, AP Business Writer

BANGKOK (AP) — Shares were mixed in Asia early Thursday after U.S. stock indexes finished with small losses following the Federal Reserve's hike in interest rates.

KEEPING SCORE: Japan's Nikkei 225 index gained 0.5 percent to 21,488.07 while the Kospi in South Korea added 0.5 percent to 2,498.17. Hong Kong's Hang Seng dropped 0.5 percent to 31,267.45 and the Shanghai Composite index lost 0.8 percent to 3,254.31. Australia's S&P ASX 200 fell 0.2 percent to 5,935.80. Shares were mixed in Southeast Asia.

WALL STREET: Major U.S. stock indexes fell Wednesday while smaller companies fared better. The Federal Reserve raised interest rates, as investors expected, and said it could raise rates at a quicker pace next year. The Dow Jones industrial average climbed 250 points, but gave it all up as new Fed Chairman Jerome Powell addressed reporters. The Fed said the U.S. economy and the job market continued to improve over the last two months. It still expects to raise interest rates three times this year, and said it might raise rates three more times next year instead of two. The S&P 500 index slid 0.2 percent to 2,711.93. The Dow Jones industrial average lost 0.2 percent to 24,682.31. The Nasdaq composite fell 0.3 percent to 7,345.29.

ANALYST VIEWPOINT: "The market will have to get to know Jerome Powell a little bit and will have to test his credibility as Fed chairman," said Brent Schutte, the chief investment strategist for Northwestern Mutual Wealth Management. "I would imagine the bar is higher for him in the shorter term because he is not a trained economist," unlike Janet Yellen and other predecessors.

ENERGY: Benchmark U.S. crude rose 5 cents to \$65.22 per barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange. It gained \$1.63, or 2.6 percent, to \$65.17 a barrel on Wednesday. Brent crude,

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used to price international oils, shed 3 cents to \$69.04 per barrel. It added \$2.05, or 3 percent, to \$69.47 a barrel in London.

CURRENCIES: The dollar fell to 105.68 yen from 106.05 yen. The euro rose to \$1.2364 from \$1.2240.

AP Markets Writer Marley Jay contributed to this report. He can be reached at <http://twitter.com/Marley-JayAP>. His work can be found at <https://apnews.com/search/marley%20jay>

Today in History By The Associated Press

Today in History

Today is Thursday, March 22, the 81st day of 2018. There are 284 days left in the year.

Today's Highlights in History:

On March 22, 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced that Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the commander of American forces in Vietnam, would leave that post to become the U.S. Army's new Chief of Staff. Students at the University of Nanterre in suburban Paris occupied the school's administration building in a prelude to massive protests in France that began the following May. The first Red Lobster restaurant opened in Lakeland, Florida.

On this date:

In 1312, Pope Clement V issued a papal bull ordering dissolution of the Order of the Knights Templar.

In 1638, religious dissident Anne Hutchinson was expelled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for defying Puritan orthodoxy.

In 1765, the British Parliament passed the Stamp Act to raise money from the American colonies, which fiercely resisted the tax. (The Stamp Act was repealed a year later.)

In 1894, hockey's first Stanley Cup championship game was played; home team Montreal defeated Ottawa, 3-1.

In 1929, a U.S. Coast Guard vessel sank a Canadian-registered schooner, the *I'm Alone*, which was suspected of carrying bootleg liquor, in the Gulf of Mexico.

In 1933, during Prohibition, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a measure to make wine and beer containing up to 3.2 percent alcohol legal.

In 1941, the Grand Coulee hydroelectric dam in Washington state officially went into operation.

In 1958, movie producer Mike Todd, the husband of actress Elizabeth Taylor, and three other people were killed in the crash of Todd's private plane near Grants, New Mexico.

In 1978, Karl Wallenda, the 73-year-old patriarch of "The Flying Wallendas" high-wire act, fell to his death while attempting to walk a cable strung between two hotel towers in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

In 1988, both houses of Congress overrode President Ronald Reagan's veto of the Civil Rights Restoration Act.

In 1991, high school instructor Pamela Smart, accused of recruiting her teenage lover and his friends to kill her husband, Gregory, was convicted in Exeter, New Hampshire, of murder-conspiracy and being an accomplice to murder and was sentenced to life in prison without parole.

In 1992, 27 people were killed when a USAir Fokker F-28 jetliner bound for Cleveland crashed on takeoff from New York's LaGuardia Airport; 24 people survived.

Ten years ago: Vice President Dick Cheney, visiting the Middle East, said the U.S. had an "enduring and unshakable" commitment to Israel's security and its right to defend itself against those bent on destroying the Jewish state. Endeavour's astronauts embarked on the fifth and final spacewalk of their mission, this time to attach a 50-foot inspection pole to the international space station for use by the next shuttle visitors. Jeffrey Buttle of Canada won the men's title at the World Figure Skating Championships in Goteborg, Sweden.

Five years ago: Anxious to keep Syria's civil war from spiraling into even worse problems, President Barack Obama said during a visit to Jordan that he worried about the country becoming a haven for extremists

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when — not if — President Bashar Assad was ousted from power. The Internal Revenue Service said it was a mistake for employees to have made a \$60,000 six-minute training video spoofing “Star Trek” and “Gilligan’s Island.”

One year ago: A knife-wielding man plowed a car into pedestrians on London’s Westminster Bridge, killing four people, then stabbed an armed police officer to death inside the gates of Parliament before being shot dead by authorities. A northern Wisconsin man went on a shooting rampage, killing two of his wife’s co-workers, her divorce attorney and a police officer before being shot by police; he died 10 days later in the hospital. Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch wrapped up two days of Senate questioning to glowing GOP reviews but complaints from frustrated Democrats that he had concealed his views from the American public.

Today’s Birthdays: Composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim is 88. Evangelist broadcaster Pat Robertson is 88. Actor William Shatner is 87. Senate President Pro Tempore Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, is 84. Actor M. Emmet Walsh is 83. Actor-singer Jeremy Clyde is 77. Singer-guitarist George Benson is 75. Writer James Patterson is 71. CNN newscaster Wolf Blitzer is 70. Composer Andrew Lloyd Webber is 70. Actress Fanny Ardant is 69. Sportscaster Bob Costas is 66. Country singer James House is 63. Actress Lena Olin is 63. Singer-actress Stephanie Mills is 61. Actor Matthew Modine is 59. Country musician Tim Beeler is 50. Actor-comedian Keegan-Michael Key is 47. Actor Will Yun Lee is 47. Olympic silver medal figure skater Elvis Stojko is 46. Actor Guillermo Diaz is 43. Actress Anne Dudek is 43. Actor Cole Hauser is 43. Actress Kellie Williams is 42. Actress Reese Witherspoon is 42. Rock musician John Otto (Limp Bizkit) is 41. Actress Tiffany Dupont is 37. Rapper Mims is 37. Actress Constance Wu is 36. Actor James Wolk is 33. Rock musician Lincoln Parish (Cage the Elephant) is 28.

Thought for Today: “Do not the most moving moments of our lives find us without words?” — Marcel Marceau, French mime (1923-2007).