

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 1 of 86

Due to the road conditions, the Groton Area School District will open two hours late on Wednesday, January 6, 2021. OST will be open at 7:00 AM. Please travel safely.

- [1- Double header Postponed](#)
- [1- Upcoming Schedule](#)
- [2- Conde National Bowling](#)
- [2- Coming up on GDILIVE.COM](#)
- [3- Groton Area COVID-19 Report](#)
- [3- South Dakota School of Mines & Technology](#)
- [Fall 2020 Dean's List](#)
- [3- NS Fall Dean's List](#)
- [4- Obit: Gary Heitmann](#)
- [5-THINKING ABOUT HEALTH](#)
- [6- City Council Story](#)
- [7- Covid-19 Update by Marie Miller](#)
- [10- Jan. 5 COVID-19 UPDATE](#)
- [18- Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs](#)
- [19- Weather Pages](#)
- [22- Daily Devotional](#)
- [23- News from the Associated Press](#)



Upcoming Schedule

Thursday, Jan. 7: Wrestling triangular in Webster starting at 6 p.m. with Redfield and Webster; Boys Basketball hosts Sisseton with C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and then Varsity.

Friday, Jan. 8: Girls Basketball at Sisseton with C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and then Varsity.

Saturday, Jan. 9: Quad Wrestling at Wolsey-Wessington High School starting at 10 a.m.

Double Header Postponed

The doubleheader basketball games scheduled for Tuesday in Groton was postponed due to a number of close contacts in Warner. In addition, there were 10 that were sent home in Groton for close contacts and two sophomores have been diagnosed with COVID-19.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 2 of 86

Conde National League

Jan. 4 Team Standings: Cubs 11, Mets 11, Giants 9, Braves 8, Pirates 7, Tigers 2

Men's High Games: Larry Frohling 211, Lance Frohling 209, Russ Bethke 188.

Men's High Series: Ryan Bethke 545, Lance Frohling 527, Butch Farnen 503.

Women's High Games: Vickie Kramp 227, 175; Michelle Johnson 173; Joyce Walter 168

Women's High Series: Vickie Kramp 529, Joyce Walter 482, Michelle Johnson 437.



The service of
Gary Heitmann
Thursday, Jan. 7th, 10:30 a.m.
Groton United
Methodist Church

GDILIVE.COM
GDIRADIO Locally 89.3FM

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 3 of 86

Groton Area School District															
Active COVID-19 Cases															
Updated January 4, 2021; 4:10 PM															
JK	KG	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Staff	Total
0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2

Updated January 5, 2021; 3:07 PM															
JK	KG	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Staff	Total
0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	4

South Dakota School of Mines & Technology Fall 2020 Dean's List

RAPID CITY, SD (Jan. 5, 2021) – For the fall 2020 semester, 649 South Dakota Mines students were named to the Dean's List.

In order to merit a spot on the Dean's List, students must earn a grade point average of 3.5 or higher for the semester. Full-time students must have earned a minimum of 12 credit hours for the term, while part-time students must have earned between three and 11 credit hours that term.

Local students named to the Dean's List were Lily Cutler, Claremont and Landon Marzahn. Groton

NSU Fall Dean's List

ABERDEEN, S.D. – Northern State University in Aberdeen, S.D., has released the dean's list for the fall 2020 semester.

Students who have earned at least a 3.5 grade point average for the semester are eligible for the dean's list. Students who achieved dean's list status. Local students on the list are Paxton Steen, Bristol; Kayla Jensen and Alci Kelly, Claremont; Hattie Weismantel, Columbia; Lauren Geranen, Frederick; Jessica Adler, Katelyn Koehler, Jasmine Schaller, Alyssa Sippel and Audrey Wanner, Groton; Peyton Ellingson and Christine Stoltenberg, Stratford; Jack Braun, Warner; Lucas Fredrick, Trevor Goehring and Jessica Podoll, Westport

The Life of Gary Heitmann



Services for Gary Heitmann, 83, of Groton will be 10:30 a.m., Thursday, January 7th at the United Methodist Church. Pastor Brandon Dunham will officiate. Inurnment will follow at a later date in the Black Hills National Cemetery, Sturgis. Services will be live streamed through GDILIVE.COM

Visitation will be held at the church on Wednesday from 5-7 p.m. with a prayer service at 7:00 p.m.

Gary passed away January 1, 2021 at his home.

Gary Royce was born on October 21, 1937 in Britton to Harry and Mary Alice (Witham) Heitmann. The oldest of 4 children, he attended rural school near Lake City and graduated from Britton High School. Shortly after high school graduation, he went to U.S. Air Force Basic Training at Lackland AFB, TX and continued his service with 119th Fighter Wing in Fargo, ND as a reservist from 1956 - 1967 and received an honorable discharge. During this time period, Gary continued his education at SDSU where he majored in agronomy. The day following his college graduation, he eloped with the love of his life, Caralee Hagen. They were married on June 4, 1963 in Fergus Falls, MN. The couple made their first home in Ft. Yates, ND where Gary started his career with the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a soil scientist mapping soils on several reserva-

tions. Over the years, his career evolved and he was named Director of Natural Resources. His job led them over the Midwest, living in Nebraska, both North and South Dakota, Montana, and Utah. Gary spent 31 years with the BIA before his retirement in 1994. Never being one to sit idle and wanting to remain connected to agriculture, he continued working at Schuring Farms in Andover for the next 15 years. Being the senior employees at the farm, he and Bob Schuring completed many tasks that nobody else wanted to do - but they thoroughly enjoyed their time working together. Gary was an avid fan of the Minnesota Twins and the Minnesota Vikings so it goes without saying that he never gave up hope. He and his family made numerous trips to watch games in various locations across the country. Throughout his entire life, people, especially his family, always remained the most important aspect of his life. Gary was a devoted husband, father, grandfather, and friend.

Gary was a member of the United Methodist Church in Groton where he held multiple church offices over the years. He served as Groton City Councilman and was also a member of Kiwanis. He also was a driver for the Groton Transit as well as offering to drive people to Aberdeen for appointments. Gary was heavily involved for a number of years with organizing the Schliebe midget baseball tournament and tirelessly volunteered his time to the baseball program as an umpire, scorekeeper, or whatever was needed. Gary's favorite activity revolved around his sons while they were growing up and more recently his grandchildren. He so enjoyed being a proud supporter of all of their many events and attended most of them - near and far. He spent many hours sitting in the bleachers as a proud father and grandfather. Other activities that Gary enjoyed with family and friends included golfing, hunting, gardening and coffee time - four different coffee groups everyday!

Celebrating his life is his wife, Caralee of Groton, three sons, Grady (Bobbi Jo) Heitmann of Faulkton, Greg Heitmann (Angela Sandoval) of Santa Fe, New Mexico, Garrett (Sindi) Heitmann of Snoqualmie, Washington, grandchildren: Kristen (Taylor) Dykema, Kaitlin (Colby) Bunkers, Derek Heitmann, Shayna Heitmann, Estevan Sandoval, Catalina Sandoval, Antonio Heitmann, Alejandra Heitmann and one great-granddaughter Oaklee Bunkers. Gary's siblings: Gay Heitmann of Lake City, Linda Reiersen of Minot, ND and David (Susan) Heitmann of Lake City.

Preceding him in death were his parents Harry and Mary Heitmann and his in-laws Ed and Betty Jean Hagen.

Honorary Urn Bearers will be members of his coffee group: Jim Ackman, Tyke Nyberg, Gordon Nelson, Dave Blackmun, Jerry Bjerke, Jay Johnson, Marc Johnson, Dave McGannon, Randy Stanley and John Wheeting.

Final Rural Health Column

Dear readers, editors and publishers of our partner states,

The Community Health News Service has given you unbiased health and health care information for eight years. We have done all of this on a shoestring budget. That shoestring has now broken, and this column by Trudy Lieberman will be the last column of our service.

On behalf of the 17 state press association partners, I want to thank our readers, our state partners and the Nebraska Press Association for distributing our columns. Thanks, also, to Charlyne Berens, our editor, and, especially, to Trudy Lieberman our reporter/writer. Her passion for helping all of us understand the world of healthcare, insurance and research gave us expert insights and updates.

We hope that all of the newspapers we have served will continue to provide solid, verified health information to their readers. Thank you all for allowing us to help local newspapers to do what they do best: keep their readers in touch with a world that affects them all.

Below is the final column.

On behalf of our team,

Dennis Berens

Facilitator, Community Health News Service

THINKING ABOUT HEALTH

The Picture of Health in America Is Not So Rosy

By Trudy Lieberman, Community Health News Service

For end-of-the-year columns, it's customary to recap the events of the past 12 months, usually highlighting a mix of the good and the bad. Because this year has been dominated by health, in particular COVID-19, and my beat is health, it seems fitting to reflect on where we are. Where we are is not good.

A headline in the Los Angeles Times seemed to sum up the current state of the U.S. health care system: "Bodies pile up, patient care falters as COVID-19 devastates L.A. County hospitals." In the Times' story a hospital critical care nurse says, "No one would believe this is the United States." Indeed, they would not.

A story from Wisconsin tells us that a hospital pharmacist deliberately destroyed some 500 doses of vaccine. No reason given, at least none the media have reported. This behavior, I dare say, would have been unheard of in 1947 when New York City managed to vaccinate five million people against smallpox in two weeks.

At the end of 2020, the government's goal of vaccinating 20 million people against COVID by the last day of December fell way short with only 2.7 million doses administered. In some ways that is hardly surprising, given how chaotic the whole COVID affair has been since the beginning. First, we failed to recognize how lethal the virus was; then we were slow to get testing up and running; next came problems with contact tracing because Americans were reluctant to cooperate. Lab results were delayed. Americans flouted the rules and advice to stay home, and on it went until we find our nation in a very unenviable position at the beginning of 2021.

Yet the mythology surrounding our health care system – that it is the best in the world – continues. This year has shown that America, contrary to its self-image, does not have the most effective and efficient health care system in the world. That's a bitter pill for many Americans to swallow.

At the end of December, a new study emerged in the journal JAMA Internal Medicine that further deflates

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 6 of 86

America's standing. It found that wealthy, white Americans generally have better health outcomes than the average U.S. citizen but generally worse outcomes than average citizens in other higher income countries. In other words, the U.S. continues to spend gobs of money on health care but doesn't necessarily get a healthier population for its expenditures. Not a lot of bang for the buck!

Two pieces I wrote this year drove home that point for me. They showed the inadequacy of health care for too many rural Americans even in "normal" times when there's no virus lurking among us. One woman from a sparsely populated county in central Nebraska recently wrote to tell me about the lack of in-network doctors available to people who join Medicare Advantage plans. Those plans require seniors to use network physicians to get benefits. If they don't, the result is high out-of-pocket bills.

If people in those sparsely populated regions don't have doctors who pass muster with their insurance company, how many go without care?

Another piece I wrote discussed federally qualified health centers, which serve many low-income communities across the country. Doctors at one such health center in western Nebraska serve 17 low-population counties, and patients drive many miles to see a doctor. Those doctors also report that they examine more patients for dental problems than for other medical issues. That speaks to lack of access to oral health care for way too many Americans; another health problem policymakers brush off.

Although the pandemic has exposed serious flaws in America's health care arrangements, maybe, just maybe, it will spark a serious national discussion about the kind of health system we want for everyone when the postmortem on COVID-19 is done.

In the meantime, all of us will have to figure out how to get tested, get vaccinated, and stay safe without a lot of reliable information to guide us along the way. Because so much of the information from the federal government has been politicized, I turned to the website of Britain's National Health Service www.nhs.uk, which I've visited and written about several times.

It is a model of clarity and good information about COVID. For example, the advice for pregnant women and those thinking about becoming pregnant was the clearest I've seen. The website also tells visitors when it was last updated and when the next update will be.

That website shows how much better America could be.

James Valley Telecommunications bringing fiber to Groton

Representatives from James Valley Telecommunications came before the Groton City Council Tuesday evening to talk about future plans for the cooperative. Since 2013, JVT has been installing fiber lines in other towns in the cooperative service area. This year, JVT will be installing fiber lines in the city of Groton. All of the lines will be direct bored with some 200 pedestals being installed throughout the city. James Groft, CEO of JVT, said the interduct for the project will arrive in Groton in March. There will be 55,000 feet of fiber installed. Fiber will be brought to the homes only if they need service faster than what the existing cooper line can provide. The entire project is expected to be finished by the end of 2021.

City Attorney Drew Johnson informed the JVT group that the city is currently negotiating a franchise with MIDCO, which is also planning to install fiber line throughout Groton. Johnson said that the contacts with both groups has to be identical so what is negotiated with MIDCO has to be presented to JVT as well.

Four of the six council positions will be up for election this year on the Groton City Council. Terms up are two-year terms for Jon Cutler in Ward 1, Shirley Wells in Ward 2 and Karyn Babcock in Ward 3; as well as a one-year term for Emily Kappes in Ward 2. Kappes was appointed for a one-year term.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 7 of 86

#317 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Well, we're moving away from the holidays and the long weekends and all the wonky reporting, so we should be starting to get a clearer picture of where we stand today and into the rest of this week. You're not going to like the news much, I'm afraid. We're in the top-10 worst days for new cases, set another record for hospitalizations, and are on our third-worst day for deaths. Not one of our better days. I'm not much a proponent of wishing your life away, but I could get behind a fast forward to about mid-February about now—supposing I'm still kicking at that time. (I imagine if that weren't true, I wouldn't be in such a hurry after all.) Here goes:

There were 232,900 new cases reported today, raising our total cases by 1.1% from yesterday. More importantly, we passed 21 million cases today with 21,085,900. We are in a pattern where we add a million cases every five days pretty reliably now—except, of course, where we do it faster. That needs to stop. Here's the litany:

April 28 – 1 million – 98 days
June 11 – 2 million – 44 days
July 8 – 3 million – 27 days
July 23 – 4 million – 15 days
August 9 – 5 million – 17 days
August 31 – 6 million – 22 days
September 24 – 7 million – 24 days
October 15 – 8 million – 21 days
October 29 – 9 million – 14 days
November 8 – 10 million – 10 days
November 15 – 11 million – 7 days
November 21 – 12 million – 6 days
November 27 – 13 million – 6 days
December 3 – 14 million – 6 days
December 7 – 15 million – 4 days
December 12 – 16 million – 5 days
December 17 – 17 million – 5 days
December 21 – 18 million – 4 days
December 26 – 19 million – 5 days
December 31 – 20 million – 5 days
January 5 – 21 million – 5 days

In Los Angeles County, officials say a person is being infected every six seconds and, according to County Public Health Director, Barbara Ferrer, one is dying every 15 minutes. County Supervisor Hilda Sons told USA Today, "It took 10 months to hit 400,000 cases, but we have reached another 400,000 within the last month alone." 48 of the 100 hospitals in the US with the highest proportion of Covid-19 patients are in California. Let that sink in. There is no bubble that is safe there. Ambulances sit outside hospitals waiting for beds to open up for the patients they bear. Be aware that "beds opening up" is a euphemism for someone dying to free up a bed. Even people who are not afraid of this virus probably want to drive carefully and hope their high blood pressure doesn't precipitate a stroke or their heart disease a cardiac incident or their diabetes a crisis, make sure they don't do anything that might cause an injury because there's nowhere for those folks either in this mess we're in.

Our new-case growth rate has hung in there around 1.0 to 1.1 percent for a while now; that puts our doubling time at around 64 days. That puts us—are you ready for this???—at 42 million cases by somewhere around March 10. Unless we slow this train down. Now please understand 42 million is around 13% of the US population, nowhere near enough for herd immunity, but plenty enough for a lot of funerals.

Speaking of which, there were 3522 new deaths reported today. So far, 357,145 Americans have died

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 8 of 86

from this virus, 1.0% more than had died yesterday. The daily death toll has fluctuated quite a lot over the past couple of weeks, but I can't find an expert who thinks this is as bad as it gets. When I read that it is expected that we're going to start losing well over 4000 people a day, my blood runs cold. Even if I didn't give a good goddamn about all the dead people I don't know, the odds just keep rising there will be more folks I do know—and care about—in these numbers. You too.

We need to serious up about wearing masks, about staying the hell away from one another, about staying home when we can, about considering the effects of our activities on our friends and neighbors and total strangers who share air space with us. We also need to line up for vaccinations when our turn comes. We need to pull ourselves together and start doing things for the good of our fellow citizens and our society (and, incidentally, our economy if that's your primary value). And if at this point you feel impelled to deliver a speech about your freedoms and your rights and government overreach and liberty(!!!) and the Constitution, please take it somewhere else. I am not interested. At all.

Yesterday, second doses of vaccine commenced in the US, three weeks having elapsed since the first people were administered dose 1 of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. I am going to admit to feeling envious of them. We cannot roll these vaccines out fast enough to suit me. The goal should be that we run out of vaccine before each new shipment arrives because we are getting it into people just as fast as we have it. The only limiting factor should be vaccine availability.

I have a little more information on the issue of administering half-doses of the Moderna vaccine in order to stretch the supply. Here's the path forward for the science, a path that will take around two months to traverse and is one which has been projected in the study design from the start, so it's no Johnny-come-lately long-shot, but scientifically supportable: Since the hints this could work come from phase 2 trials, the first thing is to study blood samples from phase 3 trial participants to determine just what level of immune response correlates with protection against disease, what is called the threshold response. Then, you look back at those phase 2 patients (or conduct a new trial) to demonstrate that those who received the 50 microgram dose developed that threshold response. If that all works out, then you can put together a data package that might impress the FDA's regulators.

Right now, scientists at NIH and Moderna are analyzing the available data to see whether they already have what they need. One reason for phase 2 trials is to study various doses in order to establish what works, and so the information collected at that point might give the scientists what they need. If it does not, then further trials will ensue. No one wants to get this wrong and have a bunch of people running around thinking they've been immunized when they have not. The FDA statement from last night which I mentioned in a sort of afterthought says the proposal was "premature and not rooted solidly in the available science." We'll see whether it can be given those roots.

More church news: By now, you know what to expect, this from a church in Woburn, Massachusetts, which held four Christmas services on December 23 and 24. They observed a 35 percent capacity limitation; I am not sure what other precautions were taken. So far, over 10 percent of attendees have tested positive. Once again, I'm not hating on religion or church services; but we've said it before: Gathering together with folks you don't live with for an hour or more in an enclosed indoor environment, all breathing the same air, is just a bad idea. Worse if you're singing or calling out. Don't.

Scott McKenzie got laid off from his athletic director job because of the pandemic and decided he'd better make use of his time productively, so he made a commitment to learn something new every week. Week 1 was baking, and he made some chocolate chip cookies. Those were pretty good, so he posted photos on Facebook. Then his old friend, Jeremy Uhrich, saw the pictures, and it awakened his competitive spirit: He told McKenzie, "I bet my cookies are better than yours." That's all it took. The two of them prepared to bake lots of cookies in a bake-off and donate them to frontline workers—nurses, firefighters, grocery store workers. Before you know it, former students and a bunch of local volunteers—as many as 50—joined the effort. So now they assign four volunteers each week to bake cookies, and then Uhrich and McKenzie deliver them to the workers who so deserve them.

Uhrich told CNN, "That's the most meaningful day of our week, delivering to people, talking to them, thanking them, seeing their reactions that go from tears to smiles to shock and surprise." He and McKen-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 9 of 86

zie call themselves the "Cookie Dads," and they hope to inspire people all over the country to start their own cookie-loving groups to carry on the work. I get that what health care workers really need is a break instead of cookies; but I see this as an opportunity not to squander the time you have and to spread good will to many others. I hope this continues to warm hearts.

Little things can do great good, and the folks holding the health care system together for us are in sore need of those good things.

Look for a way to provide them support at this most difficult of times.

Keep safe. I'll be back tomorrow.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 10 of 86

Jan. 5 COVID-19 UPDATE

Groton Daily Independent from State Health Lab Reports

South Dakota: Community Spread for week of Jan. 4:

Moderate: Aurora, Gregory, Haakon, Marshall downgraded from Substantial to Moderate; Sully upgraded from Minimal to Moderate.

Minimal: Faulk, Hand, Jackson downgraded from Moderate to Minimal.

Positive: +434 (101,076 total) Positivity Rate: 12.8%

Total Tests: 3380 (779,006 total)

Total Persons Tested: 1006 (377,362 total)

Hospitalized: +22 (5764 total) 270 currently hospitalized (+2)

Avera St. Luke's: 12 (+4) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 2 (-1) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 1 (-1) COVID-19 ventilators.

Sanford Aberdeen: 9 (-2) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 0 (-0) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 0 (-0) COVID-19 ventilators.

Deaths: +0 (1513 total)

Recovered: +430 (93,529 total)

Active Cases: +3 (6034)

Percent Recovered: 92.5%

Vaccinations: +308 (27260)

Brown County Vaccinations: 1335

Beadle (37) +6 positive, +5 recovered (75 active cases)

Brookings (30) +24 positive, +21 recovered (258 active cases)

Brown (63): +29 positive, +33 recovered (284 active cases)

Clark (2): +0 positive, +1 recovered (13 active cases)

Clay (12): +3 positive, +7 recovered (90 active cases)

Codington (70): +14 positive, +17 recovered (244 active cases)

Davison (53): +8 positive, +10 recovered (101 active cases)

Day (20): +4 positive, +7 recovered (32 active cases)

Edmunds (4): +6 positive, +9 recovered (62 active cases)

Faulk (12): +1 positive, +0 recovered (4 active cases)

Grant (35): +5 positive, +3 recovered (30 active cases)

Hanson (3): +2 positive, +2 recovered (19 active cases)

Hughes (27): +6 positive, +10 recovered (104 active cases)

Lawrence (28): +13 positive, +5 recovered (124 active cases)

Lincoln (66): +26 positive, +35 recovered (457 active cases)

Marshall (4): +0 positive, +0 recovered (17 active cases)

McCook (22): +1 positive, +4 recovered (34 active cases)

McPherson (1): +3 positive, +0 recovery (10 active case)

Minnehaha (271): +102 positive, +101 recovered (1492 active cases)

Pennington (134): +63 positive, +63 recovered (838 active cases)

Potter (3): +7 positive, +2 recovered (15 active cases)

Roberts (32): +19 positive, +6 recovered (107 active cases)

Spink (24): +3 positive, +1 recovered (43 active cases)

Walworth (14): +2 positive, +3 recovered (43 active cases)

NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Jan. 5:

- 4.6% rolling 14-day positivity
- 262 new positives
- 3,746 susceptible test encounters
- 93 currently hospitalized (-5)
- 1,884 active cases (-31)
- 1,329 total deaths (+17)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 11 of 86

County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	414	386	786	8	Moderate	17.24%
Beadle	2526	2414	5241	37	Substantial	10.66%
Bennett	356	344	1088	8	Moderate	5.49%
Bon Homme	1482	1424	1886	23	Substantial	14.04%
Brookings	3068	2780	10124	30	Substantial	13.28%
Brown	4534	4187	11184	63	Substantial	22.44%
Brule	639	612	1700	7	Moderate	26.09%
Buffalo	411	399	854	10	Minimal	19.05%
Butte	902	842	2850	18	Substantial	15.96%
Campbell	115	107	210	4	Minimal	25.00%
Charles Mix	1130	1064	3553	12	Substantial	10.84%
Clark	317	302	862	2	Moderate	2.22%
Clay	1652	1550	4553	12	Substantial	17.89%
Codington	3508	3194	8572	70	Substantial	19.61%
Corson	454	428	897	11	Moderate	24.24%
Custer	685	652	2426	9	Substantial	12.79%
Davison	2745	2591	5770	53	Substantial	16.12%
Day	546	494	1564	20	Substantial	19.12%
Deuel	422	384	1007	7	Substantial	11.76%
Dewey	1306	1191	3504	12	Substantial	19.23%
Douglas	386	353	828	8	Substantial	27.78%
Edmunds	393	327	889	4	Substantial	9.09%
Fall River	460	430	2298	12	Substantial	10.59%
Faulk	314	298	607	12	Minimal	14.29%
Grant	835	770	1948	35	Substantial	22.08%
Gregory	485	450	1096	26	Moderate	0.00%
Haakon	234	203	473	8	Moderate	10.00%
Hamlin	614	544	1532	36	Substantial	9.78%
Hand	312	298	705	2	Minimal	0.00%
Hanson	317	295	615	3	Moderate	23.81%
Harding	89	85	156	1	Minimal	0.00%
Hughes	2040	1909	5678	27	Substantial	4.76%
Hutchinson	704	657	2056	17	Substantial	13.21%
Hyde	132	130	369	1	Minimal	0.00%

Groton Daily Independent

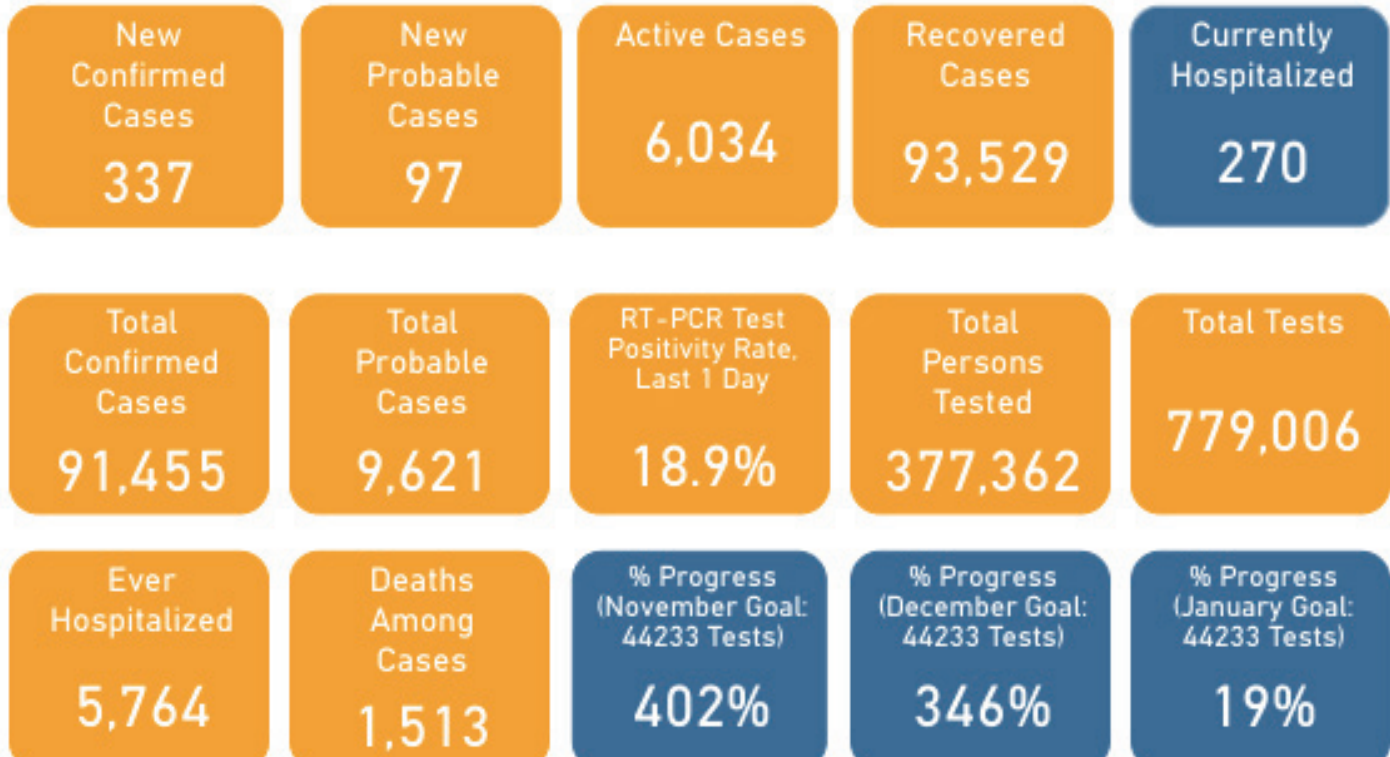
Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 12 of 86

Hutchinson	704	657	2056	17	Substantial	13.21%
Hyde	132	130	369	1	Minimal	0.00%
Jackson	263	246	855	8	Minimal	27.27%
Jerauld	264	235	501	15	Minimal	15.79%
Jones	69	65	187	0	Minimal	11.11%
Kingsbury	547	498	1438	13	Substantial	8.11%
Lake	1048	961	2799	16	Substantial	30.19%
Lawrence	2608	2456	7603	28	Substantial	11.54%
Lincoln	6937	6414	17650	66	Substantial	19.26%
Lyman	530	496	1708	9	Moderate	16.67%
Marshall	262	241	1016	4	Moderate	4.00%
McCook	689	633	1417	22	Substantial	29.31%
McPherson	186	175	507	1	Moderate	2.94%
Meade	2298	2128	6753	24	Substantial	20.97%
Mellette	223	211	661	2	Minimal	10.34%
Miner	230	203	504	7	Moderate	9.52%
Minnehaha	25435	23672	68524	271	Substantial	16.11%
Moody	543	496	1597	14	Substantial	24.44%
Oglala Lakota	1945	1801	6218	35	Substantial	16.17%
Pennington	11520	10548	34168	134	Substantial	20.97%
Perkins	292	248	683	11	Substantial	18.92%
Potter	312	294	720	3	Moderate	8.57%
Roberts	1021	882	3766	32	Substantial	19.55%
Sanborn	308	296	619	3	Minimal	40.00%
Spink	713	646	1881	24	Substantial	10.20%
Stanley	281	264	785	2	Substantial	6.52%
Sully	116	103	253	3	Moderate	10.00%
Todd	1169	1115	3849	19	Substantial	8.37%
Tripp	632	597	1339	12	Substantial	12.12%
Turner	978	882	2403	49	Substantial	22.00%
Union	1644	1486	5456	30	Substantial	14.33%
Walworth	639	582	1633	14	Substantial	23.76%
Yankton	2546	2303	8279	26	Substantial	12.66%
Ziebach	301	258	704	8	Moderate	14.29%
Unassigned	0	0	1929	0		

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 13 of 86

South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	3793	0
10-19 years	11156	0
20-29 years	18361	4
30-39 years	16726	13
40-49 years	14514	27
50-59 years	14347	78
60-69 years	11481	188
70-79 years	6064	327
80+ years	4634	876

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	52830	732
Male	48246	781

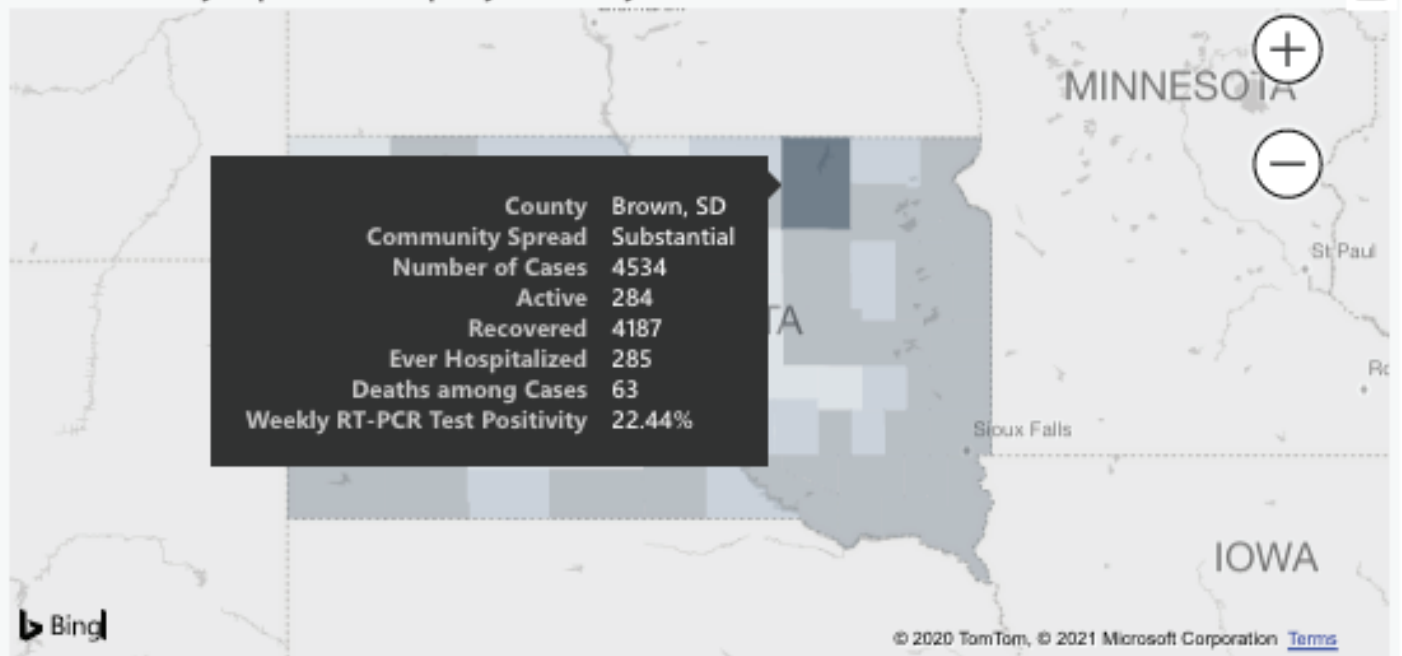
Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 14 of 86

Brown County

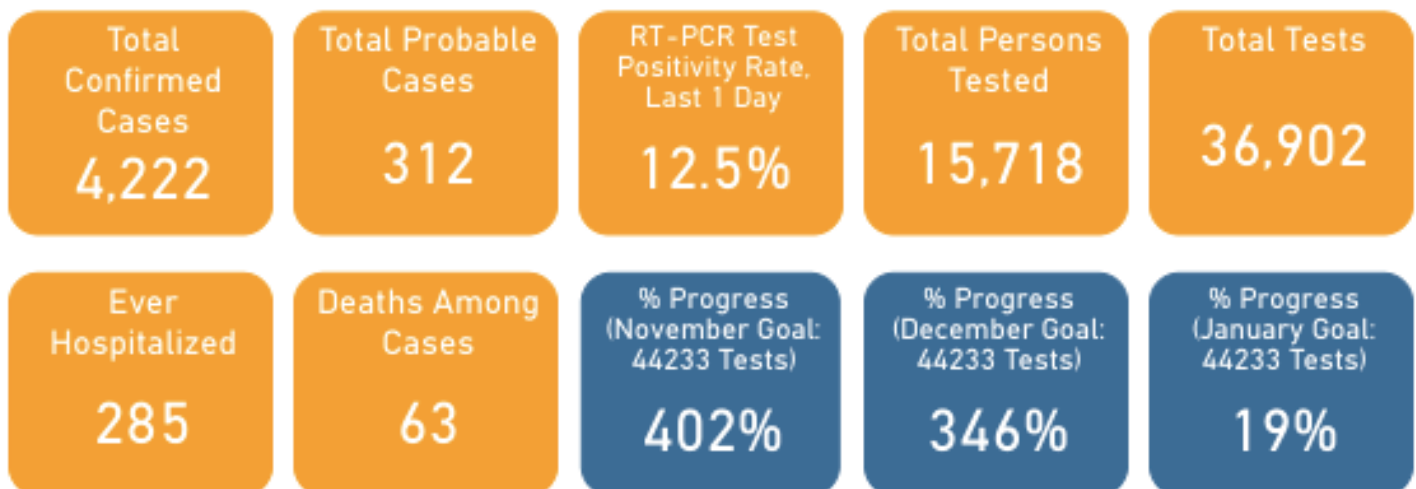


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread ● Minimal ● Moderate ● Substantial

Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



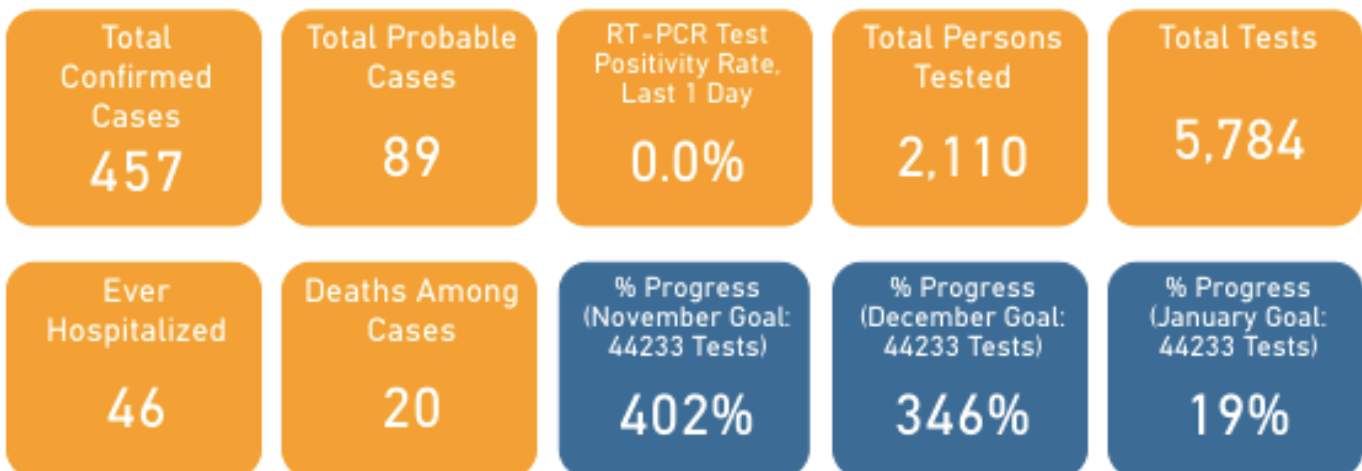
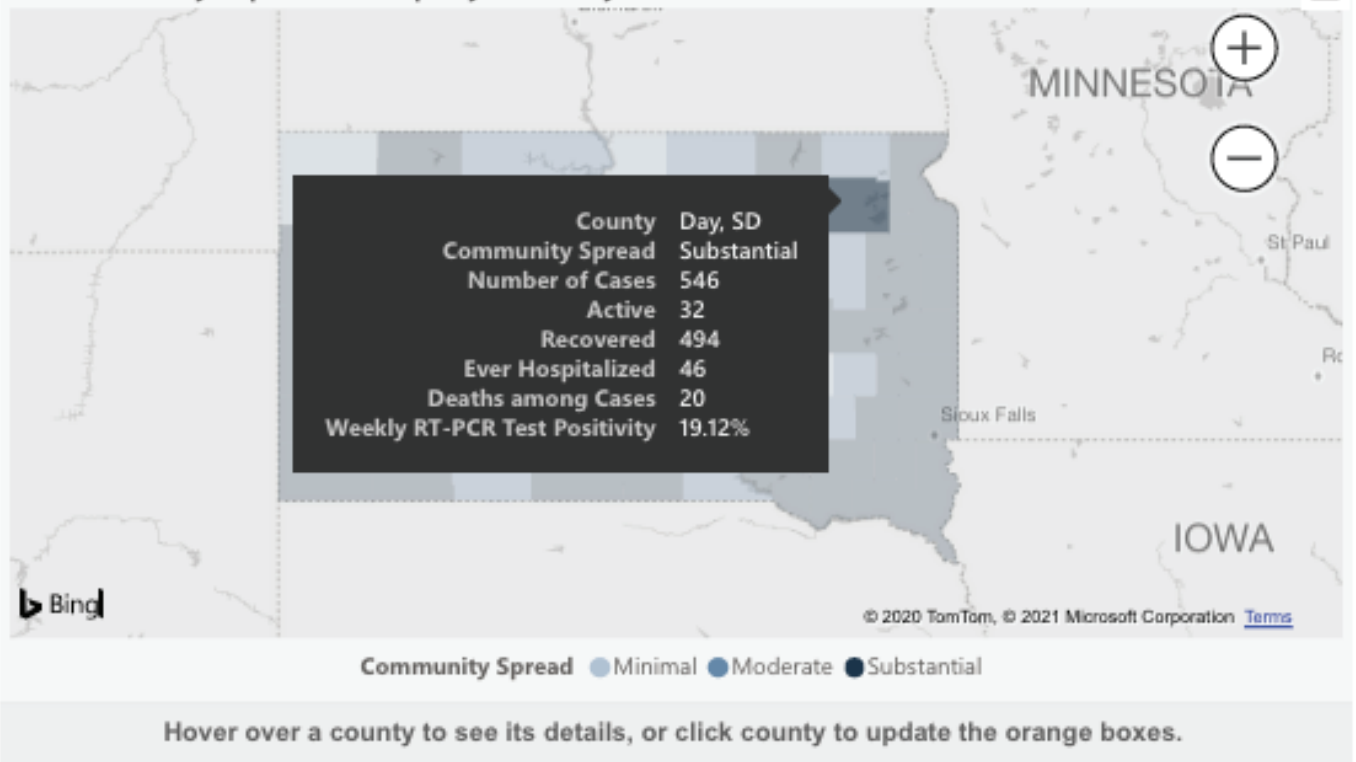
Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 15 of 86

Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 16 of 86

Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

27,260

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

27,260

Manufacturer	Number of Doses
Moderna	14,526
Pfizer	12,734

Doses	Number of Recipients
Moderna - 1 dose	14,526
Pfizer - 1 dose	12,734

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	Total # Persons
Aurora	46	46	46
Beadle	613	613	613
Bennett*	31	31	31
Bon Homme*	226	226	226
Brookings	889	889	889
Brown	1335	1,335	1,335
Brule*	104	104	104
Buffalo*	3	3	3
Butte	27	27	27
Campbell	126	126	126
Charles Mix*	235	235	235
Clark	71	71	71
Clay	429	429	429
Codington*	962	962	962
Corson*	8	8	8
Custer*	101	101	101
Davison	824	824	824
Day*	170	170	170
Deuel	92	92	92
Dewey*	51	51	51
Douglas*	102	102	102
Edmunds	99	99	99
Fall River*	85	85	85
Faulk	21	21	21
Grant*	209	209	209
Gregory*	172	172	172
Haakon*	47	47	47

Groton Daily Independent

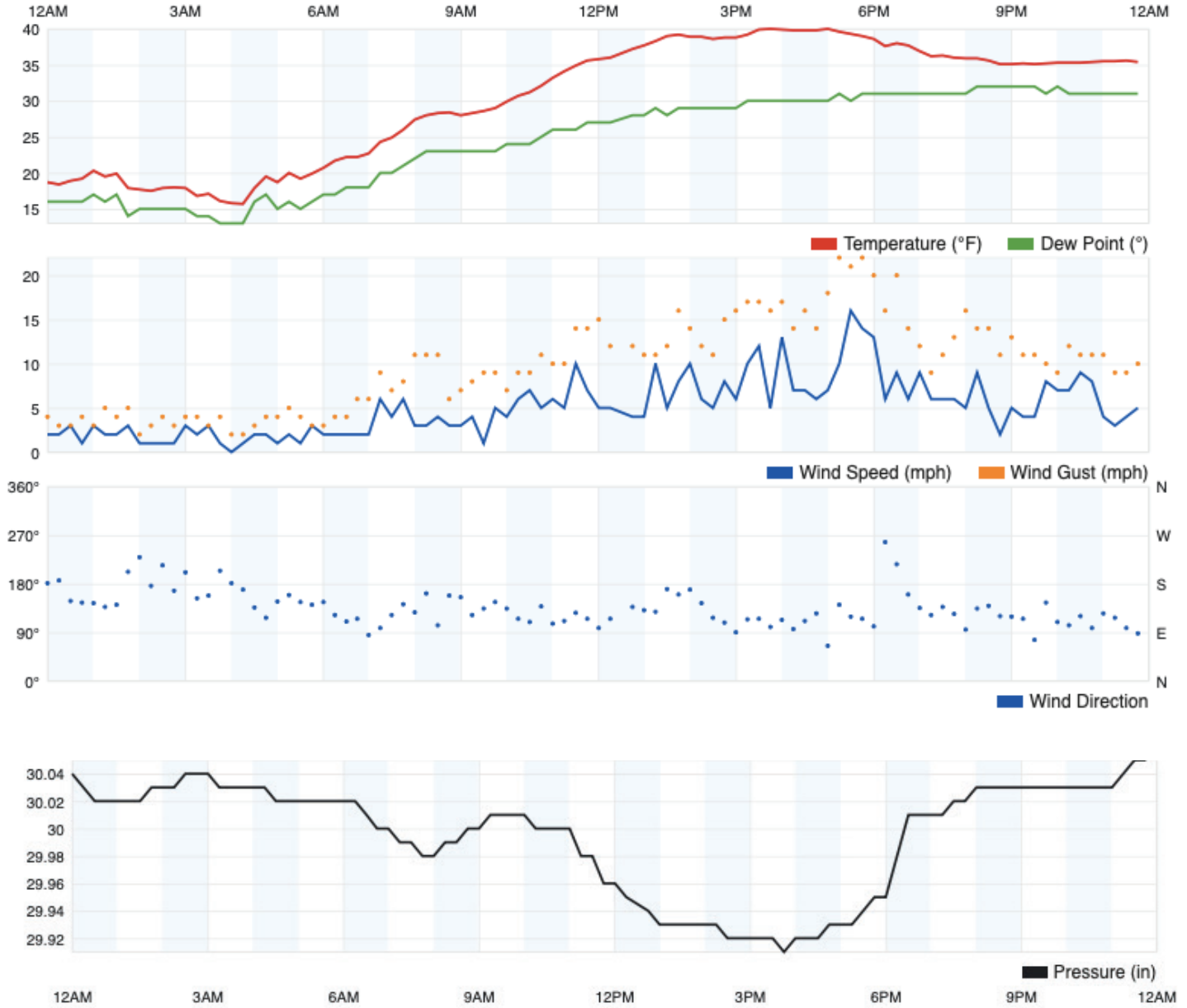
Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 17 of 86

Hamlin	145	145	145
Hand	113	113	113
Hanson	51	51	51
Harding	0	0	0
Hughes*	610	610	610
Hutchinson*	460	460	460
Hyde*	91	91	91
Jackson*	28	28	28
Jerauld	66	66	66
Jones*	25	25	25
Kingsbury	186	186	186
Lake	316	316	316
Lawrence	174	174	174
Lincoln	3336	3,336	3,336
Lyman*	39	39	39
Marshall*	116	116	116
McCook	191	191	191
McPherson	19	19	19
Meade*	214	214	214
Mellette*	2	2	2
Miner	69	69	69
Minnehaha	8627	8,627	8,627
Moody*	135	135	135
Oglala Lakota*	7	7	7
Pennington*	1821	1,821	1,821
Perkins*	20	20	20
Potter	72	72	72
Roberts*	120	120	120
Sanborn	79	79	79
Spink	246	246	246
Stanley*	83	83	83
Sully	21	21	21
Todd*	6	6	6
Tripp*	109	109	109
Turner	380	380	380
Union	144	144	144
Walworth*	195	195	195
Yankton	1032	1,032	1,032
Ziebach*	7	7	7
Other	827	827	827

Groton Daily Independent

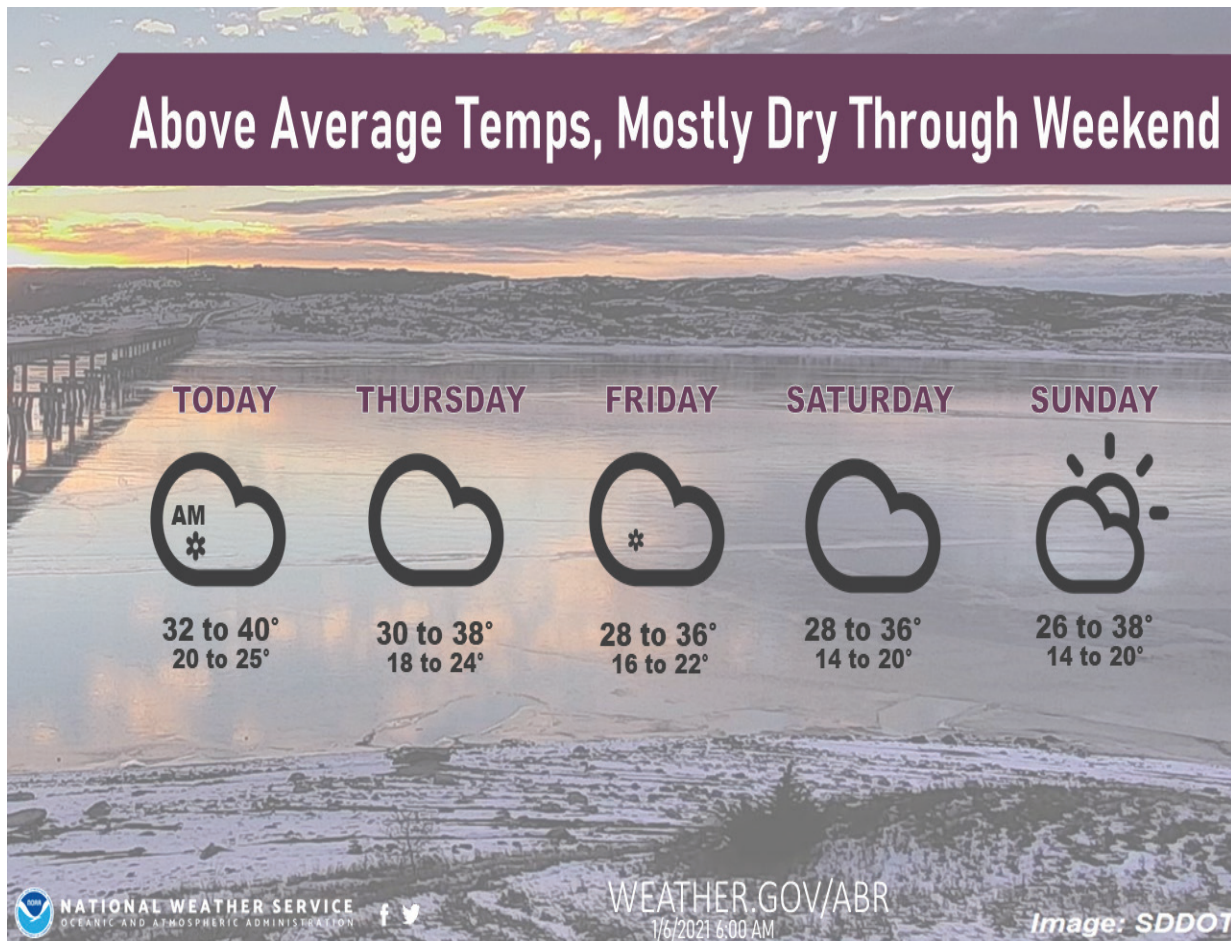
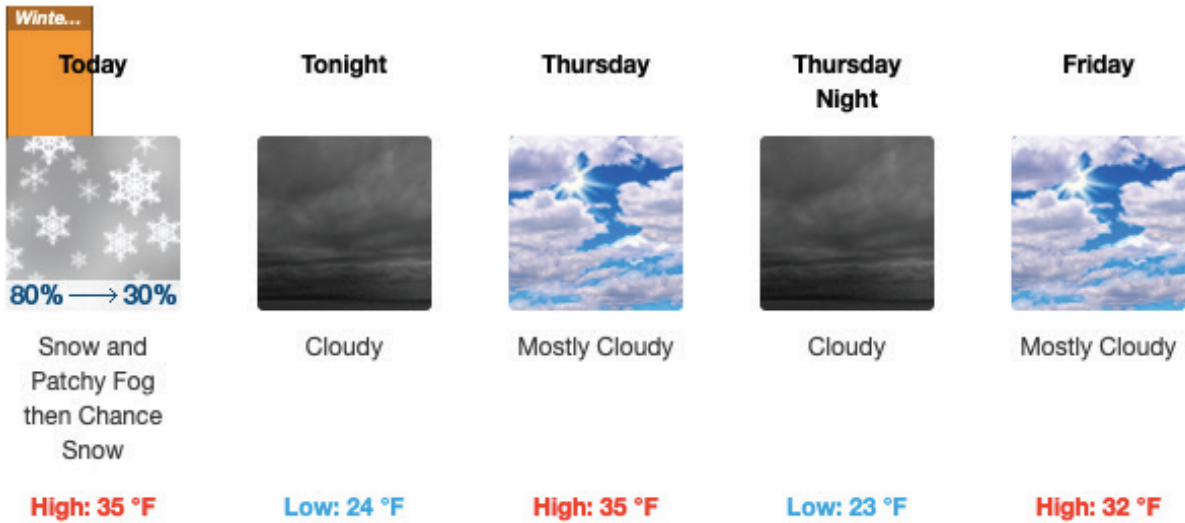
Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 18 of 86

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 19 of 86



Light snow lingers this morning, otherwise predominantly dry conditions are expected for the next several days (despite the cloud cover). Temperatures remain above average for mid-January as well.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 20 of 86

Today in Weather History

January 6, 1962: Snow, high winds, sub-zero temperatures, and near blizzard conditions caused hazardous driving conditions across the area from the 6th into the 9th. Snowfall of generally 2 to 6 inches with winds of 30 to 40 mph caused widespread low visibilities along with drifts up to 4 foot high across central and northeast South Dakota.

January 6, 2010: A strong Alberta Clipper system tracked southeast through the northern plains on Tuesday night, January 5th through Thursday, January 7th. Sufficient Pacific moisture interacted with bitter cold Arctic air surging south from Canada, resulting in widespread snowfall over northeast South Dakota. Snowfall amounts ranged from 6 to 11 inches. The snow began across northeastern South Dakota in the late evening of the 5th into the early morning hours of the 6th. Many schools closed on the 6th and the 7th. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches in Andover and Doland; 7 inches in Britton, Sisseton, and near Milbank; 8 inches in Aberdeen, Bryant, and near Summit; 9 inches at Wilmot and Castlewood; 10 inches in Clear Lake and 11 inches at Watertown.

January 6, 2014: The coldest air in recent history moved into the region during the early morning hours of the 5th and continued into the afternoon hours of the 6th. The combination of sub-zero temperatures with north winds produced dangerously cold wind chills from 40 below to around 55 degrees below zero. Winds gusted to over 40 mph at times. Several area activities were canceled, as well as many schools on Monday the 6th. Some of the coldest wind chills include; 56 below in Summit; 55 below near Hillhead; 54 below in Brandt and Webster; 53 below in Clear Lake; 52 below in Herreid; 51 below in Leola; 50 below in Watertown, Sisseton, Bowdle, and McIntosh.

1886: The "Great Blizzard of 1886" struck the Midwest with high winds, subzero temperatures, and heavy snowfall. These conditions caused as many as 100 deaths, and 80% of the cattle in Kansas perished.

1996: A severe nor'easter paralyzed the East Coast on January 6 to the 8. In Washington D.C., this storm is also known as the "Great Furlough Storm" because it occurred during the 1996 federal government shutdown. Snowfall amounts from this event include 47 inches in Big Meadows, Virginia; 30.7" in Philadelphia; 27.8" in Newark; 24.6" at the Dulles International Airport; 24.2" in Trenton; 24" in Providence; 22.5" in Baltimore; 18.2" in Boston; 17.1" in D.C.; and 9.6" in Pittsburgh.

Groton Daily Independent

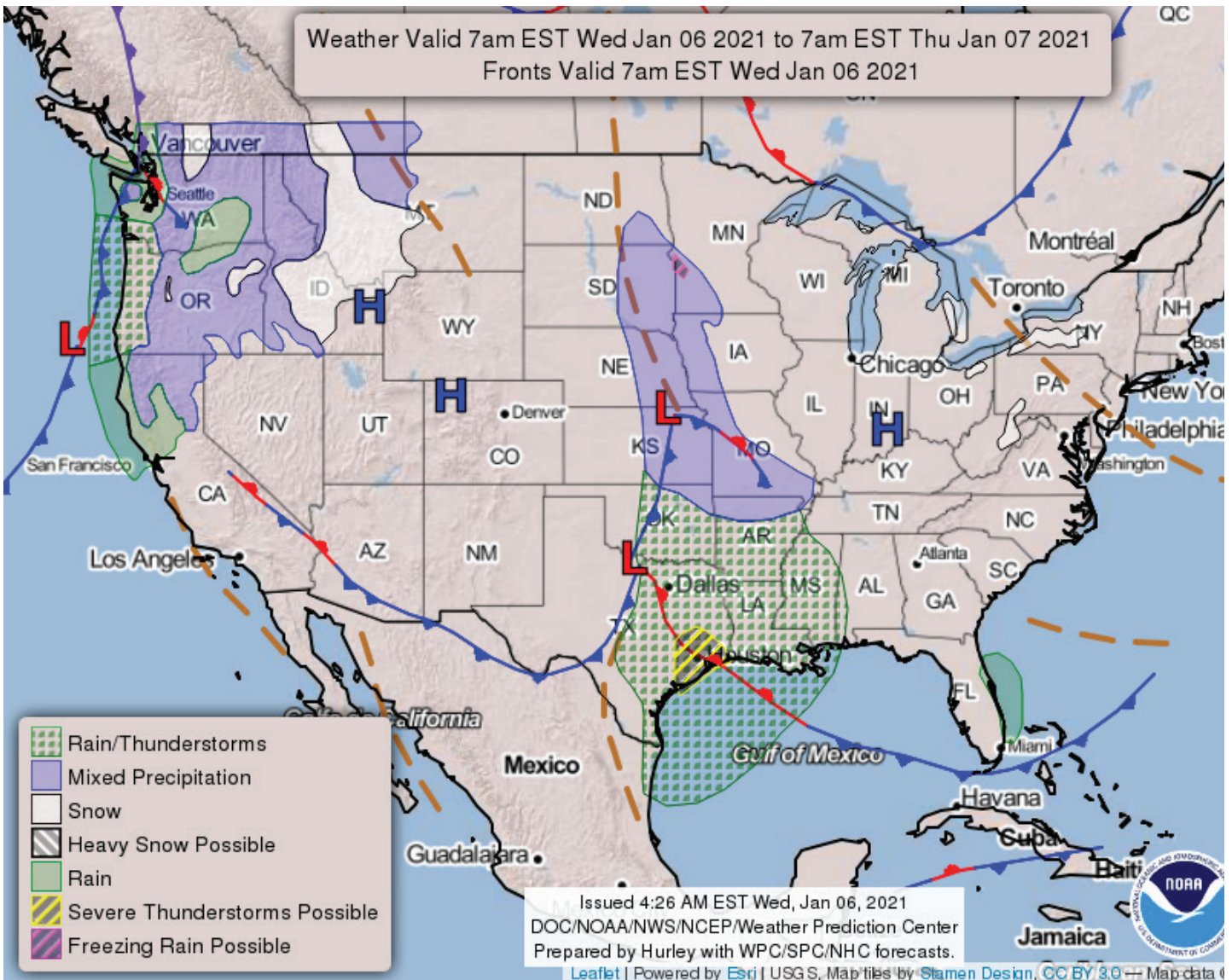
Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 21 of 86

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 40 °F at 3:30 PM
Low Temp: 16 °F at 3:55 AM
Wind: 23 mph at 5:21 PM
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 49° in 2012
Record Low: -30 in 1909
Average High: 22°F
Average Low: 2°F
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.09
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.09
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:07 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:13 a.m.



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 22 of 86



FROM TRIAL TO TRIUMPH

Lord Kelvin is recognized as one of the greatest Scottish engineers, mathematicians, and physicists of his day. He had a profound influence on the scientific thought of his generation.

On one occasion, while he was conducting an experiment with his students, it turned into a disaster. Looking at each student individually he said, "Gentlemen, when you are face to face with a difficulty, you are up against a discovery."

This is not only true in learning, it is true in living. When David was face to face with a major difficulty, he made a discovery that lasted throughout his entire life. Faced with a dilemma he cried to God, "Give me relief from my distress, be merciful to me and hear my prayer, O God."

If it had not been for the pain he was experiencing, we would not have his psalms of praise that originated in his pain. If he had not been tested and tried through his trials, we would not understand the triumphs he enjoyed. If he had not struggled to survive, we would not understand the strength he received from God.

Joseph began his path to a palace from a prison. He became the prime minister of Egypt after he served a sentence as a prisoner. Can anyone forget the boils of Job? Ultimately, they became a blessing to him. And, do not forget the letters the Apostle Paul wrote from a cell.

Whatever God brings into our lives is not to destroy or defeat us, but to develop us and our faith and to enable us to discover His goodness and grace.

Prayer: Father, we thank You for working in us, with us, and through us to develop us into the likeness of Your Son. Give us courage, grace, trust, and hope. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Answer me when I call to you, O God who declares me innocent. Free me from my troubles. Have mercy on me and hear my prayer. Psalm 4:1

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 23 of 86

News from the  Associated Press

Tuesday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS BASKETBALL=

Bridgewater-Emery 60, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 35

Brookings 55, Watertown 54, OT

Canistota 62, Elk Point-Jefferson 29

Centerville 48, Mitchell Christian 46

Custer 54, Sturgis Brown 23

Dakota Valley 88, Sergeant Bluff-Luton, Iowa 79

Deuel 72, Deubrook 45

Florence/Henry 72, Hamlin 45

Freeman 58, Irene-Wakonda 30

Freeman Academy/Marion 66, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 48

Gayville-Volin 50, Scotland 32

Hanson 63, Parkston 49

Harrisburg 67, Western Christian, Iowa 48

Highmore-Harrold 59, Stanley County 56

Howard 72, Menno 22

Ipswich 45, Northwestern 31

Jones County 40, Burke 36

Lake Preston 63, Hitchcock-Tulare 40

Leola/Frederick 62, Wilmot 36

Milbank 66, Canton 57

Mobridge-Pollock 80, Potter County 51

Mott-Regent, N.D. 58, Harding County 42

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 58, Lennox 47

Parker 66, Bon Homme 45

Rapid City Christian 78, New Underwood 42

Rapid City Stevens 62, Spearfish 31

Redfield 68, Langford 44

Sioux Falls Washington 74, Sioux Falls Lincoln 49

St. Thomas More 68, Belle Fourche 42

Vermillion 73, Tea Area 56

White River 73, Kadoka Area 46

Winner 59, Chamberlain 52

Wolsey-Wessington 62, Miller 35

Yankton 72, Sioux City, East, Iowa 59

GIRLS BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 59, Iroquois 56

Aberdeen Roncalli 50, Milbank 13

Avon 46, Alcester-Hudson 37

Bon Homme 54, Parker 49

Bridgewater-Emery 59, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 47

Canton 71, Elkton-Lake Benton 32

Castlewood 67, Flandreau 53

Centerville 60, Mitchell Christian 44

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 24 of 86

Corsica/Stickney 63, Platte-Geddes 38
Dakota Valley 62, Sergeant Bluff-Luton, Iowa 58
DeSmet 58, Clark/Willow Lake 55
Garretson 71, Dell Rapids St. Mary 60
Hamlin 57, Florence/Henry 40
Harrisburg 56, Western Christian, Iowa 42
Highmore-Harrold 36, Stanley County 31
Howard 69, Menno 42
Irene-Wakonda 52, Freeman 47
James Valley Christian 69, Sunshine Bible Academy 14
Jones County 58, Burke 34
Lakota Tech 68, Hot Springs 21
Lemmon 52, Flasher, N.D. 42
Madison 66, Arlington 58
McCook Central/Montrose 56, Dell Rapids 41
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 58, Lennox 47
New Underwood 57, Rapid City Christian 47
Newell 47, Wall 45
Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 54, Freeman Academy/Marion 24
Parkston 47, Hanson 43, OT
Rapid City Central 82, Douglas 29
Rapid City Stevens 62, Spearfish 31
Redfield 43, Tiospa Zina Tribal 30
Scotland 70, Gayville-Volin 26
Sioux Falls Christian 54, Wagner 33
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 58, Pierre 21
Sturgis Brown 44, Custer 39
Sully Buttes 42, Philip 33
Tea Area 51, Vermillion 44
Tri-Valley 66, Baltic 39
Waverly-South Shore 57, Waubay/Summit 45
West Central 55, Elk Point-Jefferson 29
Wilmot 55, Leola/Frederick 43
Winner 62, Chamberlain 22
Wolsey-Wessington 55, Miller 44
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Timber Lake vs. Faith, ppd.

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

20-43-51-55-57, Mega Ball: 4, Megaplier: 2

(twenty, forty-three, fifty-one, fifty-five, fifty-seven; Mega Ball: four; Megaplier: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$432 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$410 million

Custer County deputy shoots, wounds man who pointed gun

CUSTER, S.D. (AP) — Authorities say a deputy shot and wounded a man in Custer who refused to drop a gun and pointed it at the officer.

Custer County Sheriff Marty Mechaley said in a release that the shooting happened after a woman called 911 Sunday evening and requested help at her home. The call was disconnected before she could give further explanation, the release said.

A man inside the house was holding a firearm and refused to drop it after the deputy and woman told him to do so, the Rapid City Journal reported. The man raised and pointed the firearm at the deputy before the officer shot him, according to Mechaley and Tim Bormann, spokesman for the state attorney general's office.

Deputies began providing medical aid until an ambulance arrived to take the man to a hospital. His injuries appear to be non-life threatening, Bormann said.

The deputy is on administrative leave pursuant to the sheriff's office policy.

South Dakota COVID-19 update shows no deaths for 2nd day

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's COVID-19 update released Tuesday showed no new deaths for a second straight day, although the state Department of Corrections on Monday reported that a sixth prison inmate has died due to the coronavirus.

State health officials confirmed 444 positive tests in the past day, increasing the total number to 101,076 since the start of the pandemic. The death toll remained at 1,513.

The inmate whose death was reported on the corrections website Monday was being held in the Sioux Falls Community Work Center. Three inmates at the Mike Durfee State Prison in Springfield and two at the Jameson Annex to the state penitentiary in Sioux Falls died earlier of COVID-19 complications.

The number of hospitalizations increased by two, to 270. Of those patients, 56 are in intensive care units and 35 are using ventilators.

There were 631 new cases per 100,000 people in South Dakota over the past two weeks, which ranks 33rd in the country for new cases per capita, according to The COVID Tracking Project. One in every 295 people in South Dakota tested positive in the past week.

Tuesday's report showed that 308 people received their first doses of the COVID-19 vaccine in the last day, increasing the total numbers of those inoculated to 27,260.

Indiana woman pleads guilty to climbing Mount Rushmore

KEYSTONE, S.D. (AP) — An Indiana woman has pleaded guilty to climbing Mount Rushmore, a federal violation.

Molly Venderley, 20, entered the plea at a hearing in federal court in Rapid City, South Dakota Monday. Two other misdemeanor charges were dropped as part of a plea deal.

Venderley, from Bloomington, Indiana, was fined \$1,250 after entering her plea, the Rapid City Journal reported.

A report from a park ranger said Venderley told him she climbed in the dark Sunday because she knew it was against the law to scale the monument and knew the park was closed.

The ranger saw the woman's flashlight on a security camera and found she had made it to the base of George Washington's lapel.

Venderley was later taken to the Pennington County Jail while her car was towed.

Multiple signs at Mount Rushmore warn visitors that it's illegal to climb the talus slope — the pile of broken rocks at the base of the monument — and the sculpture itself.

The monument, depicting the giant faces of four U.S. presidents, including Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln, was completed in 1941.

Not guilty plea entered in fatal Christmas Eve shooting

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A man charged in a fatal shooting in Rapid City on Christmas Eve has pleaded not guilty to charges.

Elias Richard, 21, entered the plea Monday to second-degree murder in the death of Vernall Marshall. The 31-year-old Rapid City man was killed during a robbery, according to police.

Three others are charged with aiding and abetting first-degree robbery.

Pennington County Judge Todd Hyronimus set Richard's bond at \$250,000 cash. If convicted, Richard faces a mandatory punishment of life in prison without the chance of parole, the Rapid City Journal reported.

The investigation began after someone called 911 just after 11 p.m. on Dec. 24 to report they heard gunshots. Police said officers arrived and found the victim lying in the street.

Police spokesman Brendyn Medina said Marshall had multiple bullet wounds to his upper body and died at the hospital.

Marshall was the 12th victim of a homicide in 2020 in Rapid City and at least one other death is being investigated as a possible homicide.

EU agency approves Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine

By ALEKSANDAR FURTULA and MIKE CORDER Associated Press

AMSTERDAM (AP) — The European Union's medicines agency gave the green light Wednesday to Moderna Inc.'s COVID-19 vaccine, a decision that gives the 27-nation bloc a second vaccine to use in the desperate battle to tame the virus rampaging across the continent.

The approval recommendation by the European Medicines Agency's human medicines committee -- which must be rubber-stamped by the EU's executive commission -- comes amid high rates of infections in many EU countries and strong criticism of the slow pace of vaccinations across the region of some 450 million people.

"This vaccine provides us with another tool to overcome the current emergency," said Emer Cooke, Executive Director of EMA. "It is a testament to the efforts and commitment of all involved that we have this second positive vaccine recommendation just short of a year since the pandemic was declared by WHO."

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen welcomed the approval and added in a tweet: "Now we are working at full speed to approve it & make it available in the EU."

The EMA has already approved a coronavirus vaccine made by American drugmaker Pfizer and Germany's BioNTech. Both vaccines require giving people two shots.

Ahead of the meeting on the Moderna vaccine, the agency said in a tweet that its experts were "working hard to clarify all outstanding issues with the company." It did not elaborate on what those issues were. Moderna also declined to comment.

German Health Minister Jens Spahn — who has in the past been critical of the slow pace of the EMA — said he expected the Moderna vaccine to begin rolling out to EU nations next week. Germany would get 2 million doses in the first quarter and 50 million in all of 2021, Spahn told reporters in Berlin.

"The problem is the shortage of production capacity with global demand," he said.

Early results of large, still unfinished studies show both the Moderna and the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines appear safe and strongly protective, although Moderna's is easier to handle since it doesn't need to be stored at ultra-frozen temperatures.

The EU agency gave the green light to use the Moderna vaccine on people age 18 year and above.

Cook stressed that EU authorities "will closely monitor data on the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine to ensure ongoing protection of the EU public. Our work will always be guided by the scientific evidence and our commitment to safeguard the health of EU citizens."

The United States, Canada and Israel have already approved use of the Moderna vaccine. The U.S. gave it the green light for emergency use in people over 18 years on Dec. 18, followed by Canada five days later with an interim authorization also for people over 18. Israel authorized the vaccine on Monday.

Moderna said Monday that it is increasing its estimate for global vaccine production in 2021 from 500 to 600 million doses. The company said it is "continuing to invest and add staff to build up to potentially 1 billion doses for 2021."

Both Moderna's and Pfizer-BioNTech's shots are mRNA vaccines, made with a groundbreaking new technology. They don't contain any coronavirus – meaning they cannot cause infection. Instead, they use a piece of genetic code that trains the immune system to recognize the spike protein on the surface of the virus, ready to attack if the real thing comes along.

The EU officially began giving out Pfizer-BioNTech vaccination shots on Dec. 27, but the speed of each nation's inoculation program has varied widely. France vaccinated around 500 people in the first week, while Germany vaccinated 200,000. The Dutch were only beginning to give out vaccine shots Wednesday, the last EU nation to start doing so.

Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz tweeted that approval of the Moderna vaccine "is another important step in the fight against the pandemic. This means we have more vaccine available in the EU and can fight the pandemic faster."

Mike Corder reported from The Hague, Netherlands. Associated Press writer Frank Jordans in Berlin contributed to this report.

Follow AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>, <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

The Latest: European Union gives OK to Moderna vaccine

By The Associated Press undefined

AMSTERDAM — The European Union's medicines agency has given approval to Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine.

The decision Wednesday gives the 27-nation bloc a second vaccine to use against the coronavirus rampaging across the continent. The approval recommendation by the European Medicines Agency's human medicines committee, which must be OK'd by the EU's executive commission, comes amid high rates of infections in many EU countries.

There's also been strong criticism of the slow pace of vaccinations across the region of some 450 million people.

THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

Germany's health minister is defending the slow start of the country's vaccine campaign, saying he understands the desire for a faster rollout. The Dutch kick off virus vaccination program, the last of the European Union's 27 nations to do so. Meanwhile, the Balkan nations feel abandoned as EU vaccinates its own people first.

Dr. Fauci believes the U.S. could soon give 1 million vaccinations a day. California orders surgery delays as virus continues to swamp hospitals.

— Follow AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>, <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

ROME — Italy's health minister says coronavirus vaccinations are ramping up to the needed levels following the New Year's holiday.

Roberto Speranza made the comments with Italy's regional leaders, who are responsible for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine rollout. He says: "The needed acceleration in the vaccine campaign is under way. The vast majority of regions have reached significant percentages. The country is ready."

Italy has administered some 260,000 doses of the vaccine, the majority to health care workers. Overall,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 28 of 86

the shots administered represent 54% of the 479,700 doses that have been delivered to Italy's regions, a sign that the rate isn't terribly out of line with the number of doses Italy ordered.

Italy's rollout was at least initially slow because of the earlier-than-anticipated delivery of the first batches and the Christmas holiday, which in Italy runs through Wednesday. Local authorities have said they expect inoculations to ramp up significantly in the coming days.

BERLIN — Germany's health minister is defending the slow start of the country's vaccine campaign, saying he understands the desire for a faster rollout but that people should keep in mind that there is a global shortage of doses.

Health Minister Jens Spahn told reporters in Berlin on Wednesday that Germany expects to receive more than 5.3 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine by mid-February. If European regulators approve the Moderna vaccine, which they were considering in a meeting Wednesday, a further 2 million doses of that shot are expected to be delivered during the first quarter.

"The problem is the shortage of production capacity with global demand," he said.

Spahn said Germany would get a total of 130 million doses of vaccine from the two suppliers by the end of the year. Since each person needs two shots, that's enough to vaccinate about three-quarters of the country's population. Further orders have been placed with other suppliers whose vaccines have yet to be approved in the European Union.

Spahn added that Germany is working with BioNTech to open a newly production site in Marburg as early as next month, which would also boost global supplies of that vaccine this year.

BELGRADE, Serbia - Two Serbian politicians known for their staunch pro-Russian stance have received Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine in an apparent effort to show that the Russian-made shots are safe.

Parliament speaker Ivica Dacic and Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin were the first ones to receive the vaccine in Serbia. Sputnik V is not formally approved in the European Union after facing widespread criticism for a fast-track approval by Russia's health authorities.

Serbia has received some 25,000 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and some 2,400 doses of the Sputnik V vaccine.

Serbia's vaccination program began on Dec. 24 when Prime Minister Ana Brnabic received a Pfizer shot to increase public trust in the COVID-19 vaccines, as health authorities struggle to counter a strong anti-vaccination movement in the Balkan country.

Officials in Serbia say they will try to import all types of vaccines, including those made in the West, Russia and China, and will let people choose which to take.

JAKARTA, Indonesia — Indonesia logged yet another record in daily coronavirus infections on Wednesday as the government confirmed 8,854 new cases shortly after President Joko Widodo announced the vaccination program will kick off next week.

Widodo said in a televised address that he will receive the shots along with regional leaders on Jan. 13 to build confidence in the vaccine.

"Next week, I will be the first to be inoculated with the vaccine to show that it is safe and halal as the vaccination program to start nationwide," Widodo said.

Indonesia's state-owned pharmaceutical company Bio Farma have begun distributing 3 million doses of the vaccine, developed by China's Sinovac Biotech, to 34 provinces across the archipelago nation, home to more than 270 million people.

Indonesia's overall tally now is 788,402 cases and 23,296 confirmed virus deaths.

Widodo's government seeks to vaccinate 70% of the population — at least 182 million people — by next year, with health workers given the top priority. The government has ordered millions of vaccine doses from Sinovac, Novavax, COVAX, AstraZeneca and Pfizer.

THE HAGUE — Nearly two weeks after most other European Union nations, the Netherlands on Wednes-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 29 of 86

day began its COVID-19 vaccination program, with nursing home staff and frontline workers in hospitals first in line for the shot.

Sanna Elkadiri, a nurse at a nursing home for people with dementia, was the first to receive a shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine at a mass vaccination center in Veghel, 120 kilometers (75 miles) southeast of the capital, Amsterdam.

The Dutch government has come under fierce criticism for its late start to vaccinations. Prime Minister Mark Rutte told lawmakers in a debate Tuesday that authorities had focused preparations on the easy-to-handle vaccine made by Oxford University and AstraZeneca, which has not yet been cleared for use in the EU, and not the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

Dutch Health Minister Hugo de Jonge did not comment on the criticism as he spoke before Elkadiri rolled up the sleeve of her purple nurse's uniform to receive the first shot. Instead, he looked forward to a future with the virus under control.

"Finally, after 10 months of crisis, today we are starting to end this crisis," De Jonge said. But he warned that, "it will take a while before we have all the misery behind us."

BANGKOK — Authorities in Thailand say they plan to expand coronavirus testing to thousands of factories in a province near Bangkok as they reported 365 new cases around the country and one new death.

Authorities have focused their efforts on migrant workers in Samut Sakhon, a province next to the capital that has been the epicenter of a new outbreak and where thousands work in its mainly seafood processing factories and markets.

They have also focused on trying to trace itinerant gamblers who travel widely around the country and are blamed for a second major hotspot outside Bangkok.

Thailand's COVID-19 coordinating center said Wednesday that of the 365 new cases, 250 were local transmissions among Thais, 99 were migrant workers and 16 were arrivals to the country isolated in quarantine centers.

That brought the total since the pandemic began to 9,331, including 66 deaths.

Taweasilp Visanuyothin, a spokesperson for the COVID-19 coordinating center, said there were plans to test workers at more than 10,000 factories in Samut Sakhon, 100 of which have more than 500 employees each.

PRAGUE — Coronavirus infections in the Czech Republic are continuing to surge, hitting a new all-time high.

The Health Ministry says the day-to-day increase reached 17,278 cases on Tuesday. The previous record of 17,045 was set on Dec 30.

New infections started to surge again this week after slowing down during the New Year holidays.

A total of 7,001 COVID-19 patients are currently hospitalized, with 1,004 in serious condition, putting the health system under pressure. Hospitals are banned from providing any non-vital care to be able to focus on those infected.

A lockdown imposed by the government to contain the surge will be in place at least until Jan 10.

The country of 10.7 million has 776,967 confirmed cases, including 12,436 deaths.

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina — When thousands of people across the European Union began rolling up their sleeves last month to get a coronavirus vaccination shot, one corner of the continent was left behind, feeling isolated and abandoned: the Balkans.

Balkan nations have struggled to get access to COVID-19 vaccines from multiple companies and programs, but most of the nations on Europe's southeastern periphery are still waiting for their first vaccines to arrive, with no firm timeline for the start of their national inoculation drives.

What is already clear is that Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia — home to some 20 million people — will lag far behind the EU's 27 nations and Britain in efforts to reach herd

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 30 of 86

immunity by quickly vaccinating a large number of their people.

North Macedonian epidemiologist Dragan Danilovski compared the current vaccine situation to the inequalities seen during the 1911 sinking of the Titanic.

"The rich have grabbed all the available lifeboats, leaving the less fortunate behind," Danilovski told broadcaster TV 24.

TOKYO — The U.S. Navy in the Pacific has started administering COVID-19 vaccinations to thousands of sailors.

It comes a week after medical personnel and strategic forces were given their initial shots at Naval Hospital in Yokosuka, Japan, the 7th Fleet said.

The fleet includes about 20,000 sailors operating 50-70 ships and submarines and 140 aircraft. The vaccinations are part of a "prioritized, phased approach" adopted by the Department of Defense to "protect our people, maintain readiness, and support the national COVID-19 response," the fleet said.

Vaccinations are being provided on a voluntary basis. Among those vaccinated were sailors aboard the USS Ronald Reagan, the fleet's only forward-deployed aircraft carrier.

TOKYO — Tokyo has reported a daily record of 1,591 coronavirus cases as the national government prepares to declare a state of emergency this week to cope with a new wave of infections.

Those needing critical care in the capital also reached a record 113 people, according to the metropolitan government.

Toshio Nakagawa, head of the Japan Medical Association, called the situation "extremely serious" but stopped short of criticizing Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga for acting too slow to contain the latest outbreak, as some have suggested.

Japan has confirmed more than 250,000 cases, including over 3,700 deaths.

BEIJING — China's Hebei province is enforcing stricter control measures following a further rise in coronavirus cases in the province, which is adjacent to the capital Beijing and is due to host events for next year's Winter Olympics.

The National Health Commission on Wednesday reported 20 more cases had been detected in Hebei, bringing the province's total to 39 since Sunday.

The province's top official said Tuesday that residents of areas classified as medium or high risk, primarily neighborhoods in the cities of Shijiazhuang and Xingtai, were being tested and barred from going out.

People in neighborhoods ranked as medium risk can leave only if they show a negative virus test. Classes are shifting to online learning and school dormitories placed on lockdown.

ATLANTA — Georgia officials say they have confirmed the state's first case of the coronavirus variant that was first seen in the United Kingdom.

The Georgia Department of Health said Tuesday that lab tests found an 18-year-old Georgia man is infected with the variant. It says he man had no travel history and is in isolation at his home.

Cases of the United Kingdom variant have also been reported in Colorado, California, Florida and New York.

Georgia health officials say preliminary information suggests the variant is significantly more contagious. State health Commissioner Kathleen Toomey urged residents to continue wearing masks, practicing social distancing and washing their hands frequently.

HONOLULU -- Hawaii officials plan to have people make online reservations to receive the coronavirus vaccine in order to avoid crowding and long lines at distribution centers.

Health care officials are currently vaccinating health care workers, first responders and those living in long-term care facilities —all people in the highest-priority groups for getting doses.

Next up will be those over age 75, a group estimated to number 109,000 people. The state's health

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 31 of 86

director says she wants to avoid scenes witnessed in Florida where older adults waited in long lines to receive the vaccine on a first come, first serve basis.

SALEM, Ore. — Oregon health officials had a goal of administering 100,000 doses of coronavirus vaccine by the end of 2020, but as of Tuesday had only administered 51,283.

Gov. Kate Brown has now set a new goal of 12,000 vaccinations per day within the next two weeks. Health officials said Tuesday they are confident they can reach the new target if they expand the number of administration sites and adjust prioritization requirements.

In the first phase, priority was given to health care workers and residents and staff at nursing homes and other long-term care facilities. Effective this week, state officials will offer vaccinations to hospice programs, mobile crisis care, outpatient settings serving specific high-risk groups, in-home care services, non-emergency medical transport workers and public health workers.

OLYMPIA, Wash. -- Washington Gov. Jay Inslee says some pandemic restrictions will be eased next week and the state will change its reopening plan to move from a county-based oversight system to one focused on regions.

Inslee said Tuesday that the new guidelines will include "a small resumption of some activities statewide." He says some live entertainment with very tight capacity restrictions and some fitness programs will be allowed.

Also, instead of having each of Washington's 39 counties treated separately, the state will be divided into eight geographic regions based on health system resources when considering virus oversight.

Since the beginning of the pandemic there have been more than 256,000 confirmed coronavirus infections in Washington and more than 3,480 deaths related to COVID-19.

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan says the state is taking steps to speed up coronavirus vaccinations.

Some 270,150 doses were distributed to frontline vaccinators over the last three weeks, but as of Tuesday, only 76,916 people had been vaccinated. That is about 1.3% of the state's population.

The governor says that starting Wednesday, the National Guard will begin sending support teams across the state to help local health departments expand vaccination capacity.

Hogan also is ordering all providers to report data to the state within 24 hours after vaccines have been administered so officials can determine better where help is needed. He says any facility that has not administered at least 75% of its initial vaccine supply may have future allocations reduced until they can speed up vaccinations.

SAN FRANCISCO — A hospital in Northern California quickly vaccinated 850 people after a freezer that was holding doses of the Moderna coronavirus vaccine failed, prompting officials to do an emergency distribution before the shots spoiled.

The Adventist Health Ukiah Valley Medical Center in Mendocino County told the Ukiah Daily Journal that it sent 200 doses to the country that were dispensed to county workers, including sheriff's deputies and jail staff. Jail inmates also received shots.

Eighty doses were sent to nursing homes.

Hospital spokeswoman Cici Winiger says the rest were distributed at four makeshift clinics on a first-come, first-serve basis after the hospital sent out a social media blast alerting people that vaccinations were available.

Warnock makes history with Senate win as Dems near majority

By STEVE PEOPLES, BILL BARROW and RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 32 of 86

ATLANTA (AP) — Democrat Raphael Warnock won one of Georgia's two Senate runoffs Wednesday, becoming the first Black senator in his state's history and putting the Senate majority within the party's reach.

A pastor who spent the past 15 years leading the Atlanta church where Martin Luther King Jr. preached, Warnock defeated Republican incumbent Kelly Loeffler. It was a stinging rebuke of outgoing President Donald Trump, who made one of his final trips in office to Georgia to rally his loyal base behind Loeffler and the Republican running for the other seat, David Perdue.

Warnock said Wednesday he hadn't yet heard from Loeffler but told CBS "This Morning" "I'm hearing from the people of Georgia. People are feeling a sense of hope this morning."

He noted that he grew up in public housing as one of 12 children and was his family's first college graduate. "That I am serving in the United States Senate in a few days pushes against the grain of so many expectations but this is America and I want some young person who's watching this to know anything's possible."

"Georgia is in such an incredible place when you think of the arc of our history," Warnock told ABC's "Good Morning America." He added: "This is the reversal of the old southern strategy that sought to divide people."

The focus now shifts to the second race between Perdue and Democrat Jon Ossoff. The candidates were locked in a tight race and it was too early to call a winner. Under Georgia law, a trailing candidate may request a recount when the margin of an election is less than or equal to 0.5 percentage points.

If Ossoff wins, Democrats will have complete control of Congress, strengthening President-elect Joe Biden's standing as he prepares to take office on Jan. 20.

Warnock's victory is a symbol of a striking shift in Georgia's politics as the swelling number of diverse, college-educated voters flex their power in the heart of the Deep South. It follows Biden's victory in November, when he became the first Democratic presidential candidate to carry the state since 1992.

Warnock, 51, acknowledged his improbable victory in a message to supporters early Wednesday, citing his family's experience with poverty. His mother, he said, used to pick "somebody else's cotton" as a teenager.

"The other day, because this is America, the 82-year-old hands that used to pick somebody else's cotton picked her youngest son to be a United States senator," he said. "Tonight, we proved with hope, hard work and the people by our side, anything is possible."

The Associated Press declared Warnock the winner after an analysis of outstanding votes showed there was no way for Loeffler to catch up to his lead. Warnock's edge is likely to grow as more ballots are counted, many of which were in Democratic-leaning areas.

Loeffler refused to concede in a brief message to supporters shortly after midnight.

"We've got some work to do here. This is a game of inches. We're going to win this election," insisted Loeffler, a 50-year-old former businesswoman who was appointed to the Senate less than a year ago by the state's governor.

Loeffler, who remains a Georgia senator until the results of Tuesday's election are finalized, said she would return to Washington on Wednesday morning to join a small group of senators planning to challenge Congress' vote to certify Biden's victory.

"We are going to keep fighting for you," Loeffler said, "This is about protecting the American dream."

Georgia's other runoff election pitted Perdue, a 71-year-old former business executive who held his Senate seat until his term expired on Sunday, against Ossoff, a former congressional aide and journalist. At just 33 years old, Ossoff would be the Senate's youngest member.

Trump's false claims of voter fraud cast a dark shadow over the runoff elections, which were held only because no candidate hit the 50% threshold in the general election. He attacked the state's election chief on the eve of the election and raised the prospect that some votes might not be counted even as votes were being cast Tuesday afternoon.

Republican state officials on the ground reported no significant problems.

This week's elections mark the formal finale to the turbulent 2020 election season more than two months after the rest of the nation finished voting. The unusually high stakes transformed Georgia, once a solidly Republican state, into one of the nation's premier battlegrounds for the final days of Trump's presidency

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 33 of 86

— and likely beyond.

Both contests tested whether the political coalition that fueled Biden's November victory was an anti-Trump anomaly or part of a new electoral landscape. To win in Tuesday's elections — and in the future — Democrats needed strong African American support.

Drawing on his popularity with Black voters, among other groups, Biden won Georgia's 16 electoral votes by about 12,000 votes out of 5 million cast in November.

Trump's claims about voter fraud in the 2020 election, while meritless, resonated with Republican voters in Georgia. About 7 in 10 agreed with his false assertion that Biden was not the legitimately elected president, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 3,600 voters in the runoff elections.

Election officials across the country, including the Republican governors in Arizona and Georgia, as well as Trump's former attorney general, William Barr, have confirmed that there was no widespread fraud in the November election. Nearly all the legal challenges from Trump and his allies have been dismissed by judges, including two tossed by the Supreme Court, where three Trump-nominated justices preside.

Even with Trump's claims, voters in both parties were drawn to the polls because of the high stakes. AP VoteCast found that 6 in 10 Georgia voters say Senate party control was the most important factor in their vote.

Even before Tuesday, Georgia had shattered its turnout record for a runoff with more than 3 million votes by mail or during in-person advance voting in December. Including Tuesday's vote, more people ultimately cast ballots in the runoffs than voted in Georgia's 2016 presidential election.

In Atlanta's Buckhead neighborhood, 37-year-old Kari Callaghan said she voted "all Democrat" on Tuesday, an experience that was new for her.

"I've always been Republican, but I've been pretty disgusted by Trump and just the way the Republicans are working," she said. "I feel like for the Republican candidates to still stand there with Trump and campaign with Trump feels pretty rotten. This isn't the conservative values that I grew up with."

But 56-year-old Will James said he voted "straight GOP."

He said he was concerned by the Republican candidates' recent support of Trump's challenges of the presidential election results in Georgia, "but it didn't really change the reasons I voted."

Peoples reported from New York. Bynum reported from Savannah, Ga. Associated Press writers Haleluya Hadero, Angie Wang, Sophia Tulp, Ben Nadler and Kate Brumback in Atlanta contributed to this report.

UK leader to use 'every second' to vaccinate the vulnerable

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson pledged that his government would use "every available second" to shield the elderly and the vulnerable from the virus rampaging across Britain as he told Parliament why the country needed to return to a COVID-19 lockdown.

Lawmakers, who were recalled from their Christmas recess early to discuss the measures, are expected to approve the new rules because there is a wide consensus on the need for tougher restrictions to control soaring new infections.

"There's a fundamental difference between the regulations before the House today and the position we faced at any previous stage, because we now have the vaccines that are our means of escape," Johnson said. "And we will use every available second of the lockdown to place this invisible shield around the elderly and the vulnerable."

The U.K. is in a maelstrom of rising COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations and deaths. Britain reported more than 60,000 new daily coronavirus cases for the first time on Tuesday. More than 391,000 people have tested positive in the past seven days, up 44% from the previous week.

Rising infection rates are putting unprecedented strain on the nation's healthcare system. Hospitals in England are currently treating over 26,000 coronavirus patients, 40% more than during the first peak of the pandemic last April.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 34 of 86

When he announced the stay-at-home order, Johnson said it wouldn't be lifted before mid-February. By that time, the government hopes to have given one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine to about 13 million people who are most at risk, potentially allowing some relaxation of the restrictions.

"After the marathon of last year, we are indeed now in a sprint, a race to vaccinate the vulnerable faster than the virus can reach them, and every needle in every arm makes a difference," Johnson told the House of Commons on Wednesday.

The session came amid anger over the chaos in the government's education strategy during the pandemic.

As part of the latest lockdown, Johnson ordered schools across England to close, backtracking on the government's pledge to keep them open. Some lawmakers are seeking assurances that schools will re-open in mid-February.

"It's been a huge shambles," Robert Halfon, chairman of the House of Commons' education committee, told the BBC. "This has got to stop. The government has got to offer consistency, a consistent policy that doesn't change every couple of days."

Johnson ordered the national lockdown in England after public health officials warned that the rising infection rates threatened to overwhelm the National Health Service. On Tuesday, the Office for National Statistics estimated that 2% of people in the U.K. are currently infected with COVID-19.

The government is ramping up its mass vaccination program after regulators authorized a second vaccine. The U.K. is using both the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and one made by Oxford University and AstraZeneca. Both require two shots, but British authorities have made a decision to delay the second shot — shifting it from 21 days after the first to up to 12 weeks later — in order to vaccinate as many people as quickly as possible. That decision is being hotly debated by governments and scientists around the world.

As of Monday, the NHS had vaccinated 1.3 million people across the U.K. The government plans to have almost 1,000 vaccination centers operating across the country by the end of this week, Johnson said.

Follow AP's pandemic coverage:

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WikiLeaks founder Assange denied bail in UK

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — A British judge on Wednesday denied bail to WikiLeaks' founder Julian Assange, ordering him to remain in a high-security prison while U.K. courts decide whether he will be sent to the United States to face espionage charges.

District Judge Vanessa Baraitser said Assange must remain in prison while the courts consider an appeal by U.S. authorities against her decision not to extradite him.

The judge said Assange "has an incentive to abscond" and there is a good chance he would fail to return to court if freed.

On Monday, Baraitser rejected an American request to send Assange to the U.S. to face spying charges over WikiLeaks' publication of secret military documents a decade ago. She denied extradition on health grounds, saying the 49-year-old Australian was likely to kill himself if held under harsh U.S. prison conditions.

The ruling means Assange must remain in London's high-security Belmarsh Prison where he has been held since he was arrested in April 2019 for skipping bail during a separate legal battle seven years earlier.

Assange's partner, Stella Moris, said the decision was "a huge disappointment." WikiLeaks spokesman Kristinn Hrafnsson said "it is inhumane. It is illogical."

Lawyers for the U.S. government have appealed the decision not to extradite Assange, and the case will be heard by Britain's High Court at an unspecified date.

Clair Dobbin, a British lawyer acting for the U.S., said Assange had shown he would go "to almost any length" to avoid extradition, and it was likely he would flee if granted bail.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 35 of 86

She noted that Assange had spent seven years inside Ecuadorian Embassy in London after seeking refuge there from a Swedish extradition request in 2012.

Dobbin said Assange had the "resources, abilities and sheer wherewithal" to evade justice once again, and noted that Mexico has said it will offer him asylum.

But Assange's lawyer, Edward Fitzgerald, said the judge's decision to refuse extradition "massively reduces" any motivation to abscond.

"Mr. Assange has every reason to stay in this jurisdiction where he has the protection of the rule of law and this court's decision," he said.

Fitzgerald said it's also unclear whether the incoming Joe Biden administration will pursue the prosecution, initiated under President Donald Trump.

Fitzgerald said Assange would be safer awaiting the outcome of the judicial process at home with Moris and their two young sons — fathered while he was in the embassy — than in prison, where there is "a very grave crisis of COVID."

But the judge ruled that Assange still had a strong motive to flee.

"As far as Mr. Assange is concerned this case has not yet been won," she said. "Mr. Assange still has an incentive to abscond from these as yet unresolved proceedings."

U.S. prosecutors have indicted Assange on 17 espionage charges and one charge of computer misuse over WikiLeaks' publication of thousands of leaked military and diplomatic documents. The charges carry a maximum sentence of 175 years in prison.

American prosecutors say Assange unlawfully helped U.S. Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning steal classified diplomatic cables and military files that were later published by WikiLeaks.

Lawyers for Assange argue that he was acting as a journalist and is entitled to First Amendment protections of freedom of speech for publishing documents that exposed U.S. military wrongdoing in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The judge rejected that argument in her extradition ruling, saying Assange's actions, if proven, would amount to offenses "that would not be protected by his right to freedom of speech." She also said the U.S. judicial system would give him a fair trial.

But the judge agreed that U.S. prison conditions would be oppressive, saying there was a "real risk" he would be sent to the Administrative Maximum Facility in Florence, Colorado. It is the highest security prison in the U.S., also holding Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski and Mexican drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman.

"I am satisfied that, in these harsh conditions, Mr. Assange's mental health would deteriorate, causing him to commit suicide," she said in her ruling.

Assange's legal troubles began in 2010, when he was arrested in London at the request of Sweden, which wanted to question him about allegations of rape and sexual assault made by two women. In 2012, Assange jumped bail and sought refuge inside the Ecuadorian Embassy, where he was beyond the reach of U.K. and Swedish authorities — but also effectively was a prisoner in the tiny diplomatic mission.

The relationship between Assange and his hosts eventually soured, and he was evicted from the embassy in April 2019. British police immediately arrested him for breaching bail in 2012.

Sweden dropped the sex crimes investigations in November 2019 because so much time had elapsed, but Assange has remained in prison throughout his extradition hearing.

No charges against Wisconsin officer who shot Jacob Blake

By TODD RICHMOND and MICHAEL TARM Associated Press

KENOSHA, Wis. (AP) — A Wisconsin prosecutor declined Tuesday to file charges against a white police officer who shot a Black man in the back in Kenosha, concluding he couldn't disprove the officer's contention that he acted in self-defense because he feared the man would stab him.

The decision, met with swift criticism from civil rights advocates and some public officials, threatened to reignite protests that rocked the city after the Aug. 23 shooting that left Jacob Blake paralyzed. Gov. Tony

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 36 of 86

Evers, a Democrat, called the decision "further evidence that our work is not done" and called for people to work together for equity. Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes, who is Black, was more pointed on Twitter: "I wish I could say that I'm shocked. It's another instance in a string of misapplications of justice."

Kenosha County District Attorney Michael Graveley said investigators concluded Blake was carrying a knife when police responded to a report he was trying to steal a car. Officer Rusten Sheskey said he "feared Jacob Blake was going to stab him with the knife" as he tried to stop Blake from fleeing the scene.

"I do not believe the state ... would be able to prove that the privilege of self-defense is not available," Graveley said.

The shooting of Blake, captured on bystander video, turned the nation's spotlight on Wisconsin during a summer marked by protests over police brutality and racism. More than 250 people were arrested during protests in the days that followed, including then-17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse, a self-styled medic with an assault rifle who is charged in the fatal shootings of two men and the wounding of a third.

Blake family members expressed anger about the charging decision.

"This is going to impact this city and this state and this nation for many years to come," Justin Blake, an uncle, said. "Unless the people rise up and do what they're supposed to do. This is a government for the people by the people, correct? We talk about this constitution everybody's supposed to be so committed to, and yet we stand in the state that has the most convictions of African Americans in the United States. So they're weighing heavy on one side of justice, but they're allowing police officers to rain down terror on our communities. It's unjust."

Ben Crump, an attorney for Blake's family, said in a statement the decision "further destroys trust in our justice system" and said he would proceed with a lawsuit. In a later tweet, he questioned whether Blake threatened Sheskey with a knife, saying "nowhere does the video footage show a knife extended and aimed to establish the requisite intent."

A federal civil rights investigation into Blake's shooting is still underway. Matthew Krueger, the U.S. attorney for Wisconsin's Eastern District, said the Department of Justice will make its own charging decision.

The Blake shooting happened three months after George Floyd died while being restrained by police officers in Minneapolis, a death that was captured on bystander video and sparked outrage and protests that spread across the United States and beyond. The galvanized Black Lives Matter movement put a spotlight on inequitable policing and became a fault line in politics, with President Donald Trump criticizing protesters and aggressively pressing a law-and-order message that he sought to capitalize on in Wisconsin and other swing states.

Kenosha, a city of 100,000 on the Wisconsin-Illinois border about 60 miles north of Chicago, braced for renewed protests ahead of the charges, with concrete barricades and metal fencing surrounding the county courthouse, plywood protecting many businesses and the mayor granted power to impose curfews. Evers activated 500 National Guard troops to assist.

As temperatures dipped near freezing Tuesday evening, about 20 protesters gathered and marched in an area north of downtown, chanting "No justice, no peace." About 15 cars, some honking their horns, followed.

Vaun Mayer, a 33-year-old activist from Milwaukee who is Black, drove to Kenosha to protest. He said he didn't expect the officer to be charged, calling Graveley's decision just the latest in a line of prosecutors failing to charge police officers in Wisconsin.

"We're used to this and we didn't expect anything different than this," he said.

At a downtown park near the courthouse where hundreds gathered in the days after Blake was shot, there was no sign of any large, organized protests. Abdullah Shabazz, 36, who said he came from nearby Waukegan, Illinois, to show solidarity with the Blake family, blamed the weather.

Kris Coleman, 36, of Kenosha, stood nearby livestreaming National Guard troops manning an intersection. He said the city appeared to be better prepared than it was during the summer. "And I'm happy," he said. Later, a small group of protesters confronted Guard members briefly at the courthouse.

Graveley told reporters during a two-hour presentation Tuesday afternoon that investigators determined that the events leading up to the shooting began when the mother of Blake's children called police and

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 37 of 86

said Blake was about to drive off in her car. Officers determined en route that Blake had a felony warrant out for sexual assault.

They arrived to find Blake placing the couple's three children in the back seat of the woman's SUV. Graveley said officers had no choice but to arrest him since he was wanted. He said Blake resisted, fighting with the officers as they tried to handcuff him. Officers used a stun gun on him three times to no effect.

Noble Wray, a Black former police chief and a use-of-force expert who reviewed the investigation, said Blake had a knife that apparently fell to the ground during the struggle. Blake picked it up and officers disengaged and drew their guns. Blake then tried to get into the SUV, Wray said.

"Any officer worth their salt, they're not going to let someone leave under these circumstances," Wray said. "This is the stuff Amber Alerts are made of."

Sheskey grabbed the back of Blake's shirt, Graveley said. Blake turned and moved the knife toward Sheskey, the officer told investigators, leading him to believe his life was in danger, the district attorney said.

Sheskey fired seven times, hitting Blake in the back four times and in the side three times, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down. Graveley said the shots in the side show Blake had twisted toward the officer.

Graveley showed reporters an enlarged photo of what he said was Blake's knife, adding that Blake acknowledged to investigators he had it. The district attorney walked reporters through how he would have prosecuted the case, saying jurors would have had to put themselves in Sheskey's position and that the officer's self-defense claims would have held up given the circumstances of the case.

Jeffrey Cramer, a former federal prosecutor who has prosecuted officers, said Graveley presented a compelling case that showed why charges are not appropriate.

"There isn't anyone who would like to be in that officer's shoes -- but in that moment, he used what I feel was reasonable force to end the threat," Cramer said. For those who disagree, he said, "What should he have done, let him drive away with a child in the back, let themselves get stabbed? ... The only answer reasonably is -- they need to defend themselves."

The officers were not equipped with body cameras.

Sheskey, 31, has been the subject of five internal investigations since he joined the Kenosha department in 2013, including three reprimands for crashing his squad car three times over three years. He has also earned 16 awards, letters or formal commendations, his personnel file shows.

Rittenhouse, who was among armed people who took to Kenosha streets during the violence and said he was there to help protect businesses, faces multiple charges including intentional homicide. Bystander video showed Rittenhouse shooting Joseph Rosenbaum and Anthony Huber and wounding a third man. Rittenhouse, who is white, has claimed the three men attacked him and he fired in self-defense. Conservatives across the country have been raising money for his legal team. Rittenhouse was 17 at the time of the shooting.

Rittenhouse pleaded not guilty to all charges at a hearing Tuesday.

Prosecutors dropped the sexual assault charge against Blake in November as part of deal in which he pleaded guilty to two misdemeanor counts of disorderly conduct. He was sentenced to two years' probation.

This story has been corrected to reflect that Rittenhouse pleaded not guilty to all charges. Also, corrects prosecutor's narrative to show he asserted that Blake, not Sheskey, twisted toward the officer.

Richmond reported from Madison, Wisconsin. Stephen Groves in Kenosha, Scott Bauer in Madison and Amy Forliti in Minneapolis contributed to this report.

Congress set to confirm Biden's electoral win over Trump

By LISA MASCARO and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's extraordinary effort to overturn the presidential election is going before Congress as lawmakers convene for a joint session to confirm the Electoral College

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 38 of 86

vote won by Joe Biden.

The typically routine proceeding Wednesday will be anything but, a political confrontation unseen since the aftermath of the Civil War as Trump mounts a desperate effort to stay in office. The president's Republican allies in the House and Senate plan to object to the election results, heeding supporters' plea to "fight for Trump" as he stages a rally outside the White House. It's tearing the party apart.

The longshot effort is all but certain to fail, defeated by bipartisan majorities in Congress prepared to accept the results. Biden, who won the Electoral College 306-232, is set to be inaugurated Jan. 20.

"The most important part is that, in the end, democracy will prevail here," Democratic Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, among those managing the proceedings, said in an interview.

The joint session of Congress, required by law, will convene at 1 p.m. EST under a watchful, restless nation — months after the the Nov. 3 election, two weeks before the inauguration's traditional peaceful transfer of power and against the backdrop of a surging COVID-19 pandemic.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who warned his party off this challenge, is expected to deliver early remarks. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, set to gavel proceedings on her side of the Capitol, called it a day of "enormous historic significance." It is about "guaranteeing trust in our democratic system," she said in a letter to colleagues.

But it is Vice President Mike Pence who will be closely watched as he presides over the session.

Despite Trump's repeated claims of voter fraud, election officials and his own former attorney general have said there were no problems on a scale that would change the outcome. All the states have certified their results as fair and accurate, by Republican and Democratic officials alike.

Pence has a largely ceremonial role, opening the sealed envelopes from the states after they are carried in mahogany boxes used for the occasion, and reading the results aloud. But he is under growing pressure from Trump to tip it to the president's favor, despite having no power to affect the outcome.

While other vice presidents, including Al Gore and Richard Nixon, also presided over their own defeats, Pence supports those Republican lawmakers mounting challenges to the 2020 outcome.

"I hope that our great vice president comes through for us," Trump said at a rally in Georgia this week. "He's a great guy. Of course, if he doesn't come through, I won't like him quite as much."

It's not the first time lawmakers have challenged results. Democrats did in 2017 and 2005. But the intensity of Trump's challenge is like nothing in modern times, and an outpouring of current and elected GOP officials warn the showdown is sowing distrust in government and eroding Americans' faith in democracy.

"There is no constitutionally viable means for the Congress to overturn an election," said Sen. Tim Scott, R-S.C., announcing his refusal to join the effort on the eve of the session.

Still, more than a dozen Republican senators led by Josh Hawley of Missouri and Ted Cruz of Texas, along with as many as 100 House Republicans, are pressing ahead to raise objections to the state results of Biden's win.

Under the rules of the joint session, any objection to a state's electoral tally needs to be submitted in writing by at least one member of the House and one of the Senate to be considered. Each objection will force two hours of deliberations in the House and Senate, ensuring a long day.

House Republican lawmakers are signing on to objections to the electoral votes in six states — Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

Arizona will likely be the first to be disputed as the state tallies are announced in alphabetical order, and Cruz has said he will join House Republicans in objecting to that state.

Hawley has said he will object to the election results from Pennsylvania, almost ensuring a second two-hour debate despite resistance from the state's Republican senator, Pat Toomey, who said the tally of Biden's win is accurate.

Sen. Kelly Loeffler may challenge the results in her state of Georgia. But it's unclear if any of the other senators will object to any other state, as lawmakers were still devising a strategy.

Democrats have the majority in the House and the Republican-led Senate is divided over the issue. Bipartisan majorities in both chambers are expected to soundly reject the objections.

The group led by Cruz is vowing to object unless Congress agreed to form a commission to investigate the election, but that seems unlikely.

Those with Cruz are Sens. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, James Lankford of Oklahoma, Steve Daines of Montana, John Kennedy of Louisiana, Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee, Mike Braun of Indiana, Cynthia Lumis of Wyoming, Roger Marshall of Kansas, Bill Hagerty of Tennessee and Tommy Tuberville of Alabama.

Trump has vowed to "fight like hell" to stay in office. He said at a rally in Georgia the electors voting for Biden are "not gonna take this White House!"

Many of the Republicans challenging the results said they are trying to give voice to voters back home who don't trust the outcome of the election and want to see the lawmakers fighting for Trump.

Hawley defended his role saying his constituents have been "loud and clear" about their distrust of the election. "It is my responsibility as a senator to raise their concerns," he wrote to colleagues.

As criticism mounted, Cruz insisted his aim was "not to set aside the election" but to investigate the claims of voting problems. He has produced no new evidence.

Both Hawley and Cruz are potential 2024 presidential contenders, vying for Trump's base of supporters.

Lawmakers are being told by Capitol officials to arrive early, due to safety precautions with protesters in Washington. Visitors, who typically fill the galleries to watch landmark proceedings, will not be allowed under COVID-19 restrictions.

Associated Press writers Kevin Freking in Dalton, Ga., and Bill Barrow in Atlanta contributed to this report.

Hong Kong arrests 53 activists under national security law

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong police arrested 53 former lawmakers and democracy proponents Wednesday for allegedly violating the new national security law by participating in unofficial election primaries for the territory's legislature last year.

The mass arrests, including of former lawmakers, were the largest move against Hong Kong's democracy movement since the law was imposed by Beijing last June to quell dissent in the semi-autonomous territory.

"The operation today targets the active elements who are suspected to be involved in the crime of overthrowing, or interfering (and) seriously destroy the Hong Kong government's legal execution of duties," John Lee, Hong Kong's security minister, said at a news conference.

He said those arrested were suspected of trying to paralyze the government, via their plans to gain a majority of the seats in the legislature to create a situation in which the chief executive had to resign and the government would stop functioning.

In a video released by former lawmaker Lam Cheuk-ting on his Facebook page, police turned up at his house and told him he was "suspected of violating the national security law, subverting state power." Police told those recording the video to stop or risk arrest.

The legislative election that would have followed the unofficial primaries was postponed by a year by Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam, who cited the public health risks during the coronavirus pandemic. Mass resignations and disqualifications of pro-democracy lawmakers have left the legislature largely a pro-Beijing body.

Lee said the police would not target those who had voted in the unofficial primaries, which were held in July last year and attracted more than 600,000 voters even though pro-Beijing lawmakers and politicians had warned the event could breach the security law.

All of the pro-democracy candidates in the unofficial primaries were arrested, according to tallies of the arrests being reported by the South China Morning Post, online platform Now News and political groups.

At least seven members of Hong Kong's Democratic Party — the city's largest opposition party — were arrested, including former party chairman Wu Chi-wai. Former lawmakers Lam, Helena Wong and James To were also arrested, according to a post on the party's Facebook page.

Benny Tai, a key figure in Hong Kong's 2014 Occupy Central protests and a former law professor, was

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 40 of 86

also arrested, reports said. Tai was one of the main organizers of the primaries.

The home of Joshua Wong, a prominent pro-democracy activist who is serving a 13 1/2-month prison sentence for organizing and participating in an unauthorized protest last year, was also raided, according to a tweet posted from Wong's account.

American human rights lawyer John Clancey was also arrested on Wednesday. Clancey was the treasurer of political group Power for Democracy, which was involved in the unofficial primaries.

"We need to work for democracy and human rights in Hong Kong," Clancey said as he was being led away by police, in a video posted by local online news outlet Citizen News.

Police also went to the headquarters of Stand News, a prominent pro-democracy online news site in Hong Kong, with a court order to hand over documents to assist in an investigation related to the national security law, according to a livestreamed video by Stand News. No arrests were made.

Lee also pointed to a "10 steps to mutual destruction" plan among those arrested, which included taking control of the legislature, mobilizing protests to paralyze society and calling for international sanctions.

That plan was previously outlined by former law professor Tai. He predicted that between 2020 and 2022, there would be 10 steps to mutual destruction, including the pro-democracy bloc winning a majority in the legislature, intensifying protests, the forced resignation of Lam due to the budget bill being rejected twice, and international sanctions on the Chinese Communist Party.

The concept of mutual destruction — in which both Hong Kong and China would suffer damages — is popular among some protesters and pro-democracy activists.

"The plot is to create such mutual destruction that if successful ... will result in serious damage to society as a whole," said Lee. "That is why police action today is necessary."

Senior Supt. Steve Li from the national security unit said that 53 people were arrested in an operation that involved 1,000 officers. The 45 men and eight women were aged between 23 and 79, according to a police statement.

Six were arrested for subverting state power by organizing the unofficial primaries, while the rest were arrested for allegedly participating in the event, Li said. He said more arrests could be made and investigations were ongoing.

Alan Leong, chairman of the pro-democracy Civic Party in Hong Kong, said at a news conference held by the pro-democratic camp on Wednesday that plans to exercise voting rights to veto the budget and eventually oblige the chief executive to step down are rights enshrined in the Basic Law.

The arrests were an "affront to the constitutionally protected rights to vote" in Hong Kong, Leong said.

"We don't see how by promising to exercise such rights could end them up as being subversive," he added.

Beijing supports Hong Kong police in their carrying out of "their duties in accordance with the law," said Hua Chunying, a spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"The rights and freedom Hong Kong people enjoyed have not been affected in any way," Hua said at a daily briefing with journalists. "What was affected was that some external forces and individual people in Hong Kong colluded with each other in an attempt to undermine the stability and security of China."

In recent months, Hong Kong has jailed several pro-democracy activists, including Wong and Agnes Chow, for their involvement in anti-government protests, and others have been charged under the national security law, including media tycoon and outspoken pro-democracy activist Jimmy Lai.

The security law criminalizes acts of subversion, secession, terrorism and collusion with foreign powers to intervene in the city's affairs. Serious offenders could face up a maximum punishment of life imprisonment.

Lam had said at the time of the unofficial primaries last year that if their aim was resisting every policy initiative by the Hong Kong government, the election may fall under subverting state power, an offense under the national security law.

Beijing had also called the primaries illegal and a "serious provocation" of Hong Kong's electoral system.

Following the handover of Hong Kong to China by the British in 1997, the city has operated on a "one country, two systems" framework that affords it freedoms not found on the mainland. In recent years, Beijing has asserted more control over the city, drawing criticism that it was breaking its promise of Hong Kong maintaining separate civil rights and political systems for 50 years from the handover.

The sweeping arrests drew condemnation from Anthony Blinken, the U.S. Secretary of State nominee for the upcoming Biden administration, who said on Twitter that it was an "assault on those bravely advocating for universal rights."

"The Biden-Harris administration will stand with the people of Hong Kong and against Beijing's crackdown on democracy," Blinken wrote in his tweet.

Human Rights Watch said the arrests suggest Beijing has failed to learn that repression generates resistance. HRW senior China researcher Maya Wang said in a statement that "millions of Hong Kong people will persist in their struggle for their right to vote and run for office in a democratically elected government."

In further remarks to The Associated Press, Wang said it wasn't clear what provisions of the law were being cited to justify the arrests, but that local authorities seem less concerned with legal substance.

"The very nature of the national security law is as a draconian blanket law allowing the government to arrest and potentially imprison people for long terms for exercising their constitutionally protected rights," Wang said.

"The veneration of rule of law is also applied in mainland China stripped of any meaning. Hong Kong is looking more like mainland China but where one ends and the other begins is hard to discern," she said.

EXPLAINER: Hong Kong mass arrests chill democracy movement

HONG KONG (AP) — The sudden arrest of dozens of pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong, in the most sweeping use of a new national security law to date, is a clear sign of Beijing's determination to rein in political opposition in the former British colony.

The Wednesday morning roundup, widely condemned by Western government officials and human rights groups, will likely further chill an already dwindling protest movement in the semi-autonomous Chinese territory.

WHAT HAPPENED?

Police detained about 50 people, far more than in previous cases under the 6-month-old national security law. Those targeted appeared to include all candidates who had run in an unofficial opposition primary last year ahead of an expected election for Hong Kong's legislature. City leader Carrie Lam later scrapped the election, citing the coronavirus pandemic. Activists called her move a thinly veiled attempt to thwart expected opposition gains.

HOW CAN A PRIMARY BE A THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY?

Security Secretary John Lee said those arrested were suspected of trying to gain control of the legislature to paralyze government business. The subversion section of the national security law criminalizes "seriously interfering in, disrupting, or undermining the performance of duties and functions" of the Chinese or Hong Kong governments.

Lam said at the time of the primary that if its purpose was to resist every government initiative, it could amount to subverting state power. The central government labeled the primary illegal and a "serious provocation" to Hong Kong's electoral system.

WHAT'S THE LIKELY IMPACT?

The arrests will remove more activists from the scene, reducing the possibility of renewed protests and eliminating many as future candidates for office. They warn a younger generation that formed the backbone of protests in 2014 and 2019 that even holding an unofficial primary can result in legal action that can seriously impact their futures.

Human Rights Watch said of the move that repression generates resistance, but the tightening restrictions on opposition activity and the lingering effects of the coronavirus on public life and the economy could delay or permanently discourage the emergence of a new generation willing to take on Beijing.

WHY NOW?

Beijing has been unrelenting in its efforts to prevent any repeat of the 2019 protests, which grew increasingly violent in response to the government's refusal to entertain the protesters' demands. They plunged Hong Kong into its biggest political crisis since its return to Chinese rule in 1997.

China is also determined to drive out what it sees as unwarranted foreign government interference in its domestic affairs. The nation's newfound military, economic and political clout is emboldening it to take on the West, and it can take advantage of distractions resulting from pandemic and political disruptions in the U.S. and Europe.

This story has been corrected to show that the age of the security law is six months, not seven months.

Balkans feel abandoned as vaccinations kick off in Europe

By SABINA NIKSIC and DUSAN STOJANOVIC Associated Press

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina (AP) — When thousands of people across the European Union began rolling up their sleeves last month to get a coronavirus vaccination shot, one corner of the continent was left behind, feeling isolated and abandoned: the Balkans.

Balkan nations have struggled to get access to COVID-19 vaccines from multiple companies and programs, but most of the nations on Europe's southeastern periphery are still waiting for their first vaccines to arrive, with no firm timeline for the start of their national inoculation drives.

What is already clear is that Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia — home to some 20 million people — will lag far behind the EU's 27 nations and Britain in efforts to reach herd immunity by quickly vaccinating a large number of their people.

North Macedonian epidemiologist Dragan Danilovski compared the current vaccine situation in the Western Balkans to the inequalities seen during the 1911 sinking of the Titanic.

"The rich have grabbed all the available lifeboats, leaving the less fortunate behind," Danilovski told broadcaster TV 24.

Such sentiment as the world faces its gravest health crisis in a century has gained traction in the Western Balkans - a term used to identify the Balkan states which want to join but still are not part of the EU. It is actively being stoked by pro-Russian politicians in a region sandwiched between Western and Russian spheres of influence.

"I felt as if the bottom fell out of my hopes for a return to a normal life," 50-year-old Belma Djonko said in Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital, describing the emotional fallout of hearing that thousands of doctors, nurses and the elderly across the EU had received the first doses of a vaccine developed by American drugmaker Pfizer and Germany's BioNTech while her war-ravaged country is kept waiting.

Many Balkan nations are pinning their hopes on COVAX, a global vaccine procurement agency set up by the World Health Organization and global charity groups to address rising inequities of vaccine distribution. COVAX has secured deals for several promising COVID-19 vaccines but, for now, it will only cover doses to inoculate 20% of a country's population.

Alongside other politically unstable post-communist Balkan nations that have long professed their desire to join the EU but keep failing to fulfil conditions to achieve that goal, Bosnia has reserved vaccines through COVAX and expects to start receiving its first doses in April at the earliest.

That seems like an eternity from now.

"Meanwhile, I must continue depriving my 83-year-old father of the company and love of his grandchildren," Djonko said, referring to the low-tech but heartbreaking defense against the virus, keeping the elderly isolated from potential sources of infection.

Serbia is the only Western Balkan nation to receive vaccine shots so far, getting deliveries from Pfizer-BioNTech and the Russian-developed Sputnik V vaccine. However, Serbia does not have enough doses to begin mass vaccinations, as only 25,000 shots of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and 2,400 of the Russian vaccine have arrived.

Serbia's vaccination program began on Dec. 24, three days before the EU, when Prime Minister Ana Brnabic received a dose in a bid to increase public trust in the vaccine, as many Balkan governments also struggle to counter a strong anti-vaccination movement.

The EU's executive arm, the European Commission, recently agreed upon a 70 million-euro (\$86 million)

package to help Balkan nations get access to the vaccines, on top of 500 million euros (\$616 million) the bloc has already contributed to COVAX.

"Throughout the pandemic, the EU has shown that we treat the Western Balkans as privileged partners," said EU Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi.

Ursula von der Leyen, head of the Executive Commission, says the EU will have more vaccines than necessary for its residents in 2021 and indicated the bloc could share its extra supplies with the Western Balkans and countries in Africa.

Yet in the Balkans, the dominant impression is that the bloc has once again failed the underdeveloped European region. In the words of Albanian political analyst Skender Minxhozi, the EU has reached its "put up or shut up" moment.

"Either show us that you care about us, or don't be surprised if some of us follow the call of Russian or Chinese pied pipers who are traversing the world with pockets full of their vaccines," Minxhozi said.

The apparent lack of Western solidarity amid the pandemic is being exploited by local pro-Russian politicians to portray the EU as solely profit-oriented. Russia and China, meanwhile, are vying for political and economic influence.

"I trust (the Russian vaccine), I don't trust the commercial narratives that are coming from the West," Milorad Dodik, Bosnian Serb's leader, declared before he was hospitalized with coronavirus.

In the Albanian capital of Tirana, Prime Minister Edi Rama demanded an apology from the Russian embassy after it published a message on social media that Moscow stood ready to immediately supply Albania with the Sputnik V vaccine, although that shot is not certified in the EU.

"As a person I felt indignant and as a European I felt ashamed, while as Albania's prime minister I felt more motivated than ever not to allow Albanians from being excluded from the possibility of being protected simultaneously with other Europeans," Rama said while announcing a contract to buy 500,000 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

Some believe the vaccination delay might prove to be a blessing in disguise in a region where years of declining trust in government and public institutions have amplified the voices of virus deniers and vaccine skeptics.

"I cannot wait for life to return to normal and for that to happen we need a successful vaccine," said Belma Gazibara, an infectious disease specialist working in Sarajevo's COVID-19 hospital.

Gazibara says watching the coronavirus vaccine rollout elsewhere in Europe will increase Bosnians' desire to have the shots too.

"If, as I strongly hope, the approved vaccines keep their promise elsewhere in Europe, I expect the uptake to be much higher than it would have been right now," she said.

Stojanovic reported from Belgrade, Serbia. L Lazar Semini in Tirana, Albania, and Konstantin Testorides, in Skopje, Macedonia, contributed.

EXPLAINER: How Warnock won 1 of Georgia's 2 Senate runoffs

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

Two U.S. Senate runoff elections that together will determine which party controls the legislative chamber for the next two years were held in Georgia on Tuesday.

Early Wednesday, The Associated Press declared Democrat Raphael Warnock the winner of one of the races over appointed Republican Sen. Kelly Loeffler, a contest that will send him to Washington to finish the remainder of retired GOP Sen. Johnny Isakson's term. The other race between Republican David Perdue, who is seeking a second term, and Democrat Jon Ossoff remained too early to call.

Georgia has become a political focal point since the Nov. 3 general election, when none of the candidates in the state's two Senate contests earned more than 50 percent of the vote. That forced both races to the Jan. 5 runoff.

Here's a look at the contests:

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 44 of 86

WHY THE AP DECLARED WARNOCK THE WINNER

Warnock defeated Loeffler after an analysis of outstanding votes showed there was no way for Loeffler to catch up to him with the remaining ballots left to be counted in Republican-leaning areas.

Warnock held a lead over Loeffler of about 46,500 votes as of 2:15 a.m. ET Wednesday, an edge that is likely to grow as more votes are tabulated.

Almost all the votes left to be counted statewide are mail ballots and early in-person votes. Of those, most are in Democratic-leaning counties.

Warnock was winning mail ballots by 68%, the AP's analysis found. And most of the early in-person votes left to be counted were in DeKalb County; that method of voting in the county favored Warnock by about 70 percentage points.

WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER RACE?

The Senate race between Perdue and Ossoff was too early to call.

As of 2:15 a.m. ET on Wednesday, Ossoff had a lead of 9,527 votes out of nearly 4.4 million counted, or a margin of less than 0.2 percentage points.

There were still some mail ballots and in-person early votes left to be counted statewide, the majority of which are in Democratic-leaning counties.

Under Georgia law, a trailing candidate may request a recount when the margin of an election is less than or equal to 0.5 percentage points.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

The outcomes of the two races will help determine the country's political trajectory over the next two years. If Democrats win both, they will have a 50-50 seat split with Republicans in the Senate, with Vice President-elect Kamala Harris poised to cast tie-breaking votes.

That would enable President-elect Joe Biden to enact an ambitious agenda that includes liberal priorities like raising the minimum wage, approving additional economic stimulus to combat the effects of the pandemic and expanding health care.

But Republicans need to carry only one of the seats to hold a slim 51-49 majority that could serve as a conservative bulwark to limit Biden's ambitions.

The fact that Georgia will determine which of these two dueling visions could become reality speaks to its recent emergence as a swing state. Georgia has been a Republican stronghold for decades, like much of the rest of the South. These two elections are testing just how much the state has changed.

Georgia's government is dominated by the GOP. A Democrat hasn't won a U.S. Senate contest in the state since former Georgia Gov. Zell Miller in 2000. And until Biden won it by just under 12,000 votes in November, a Democratic presidential contender hadn't carried the state since Bill Clinton in 1992.

But it has slowly morphed into a battleground — a change driven in part by demographic shifts, particularly in the economically vibrant area of metropolitan Atlanta.

As older, white, Republican-leaning voters die, they've been replaced by a younger and more racially diverse cast of people, many of whom moved to the Atlanta area from other states — and carried their politics with them.

Overall, demographic trends show that the state's electorate is becoming younger and more diverse each year. Like other metro areas, Atlanta's suburbs have also moved away from Republicans. In 2016, Hillary Clinton flipped both Cobb and Gwinnett counties. Four years later, electoral maps showed a sea of blue in the more than half-dozen counties surrounding Atlanta.

In 2018, Democrat Stacey Abrams galvanized Black voters in her bid to become the country's first African American woman to lead a state, a campaign she narrowly lost.

Alabama's Smith becomes 1st WR to win Heisman in 29 years

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — On an Alabama team stacked with stars, DeVonta Smith emerged as the best player in college football while playing a position that rarely gets that kind of recognition.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 45 of 86

Smith became the first wide receiver to win the Heisman Trophy in 29 seasons Tuesday night, breaking the monopoly quarterbacks have had on the award by beating out three of them.

"Just to be one of the very few that played receiver to win the Heisman, it means a lot to me," Smith said.

Smith finished with 447 first-place votes and 1,856 points to easily outdistance Clemson's Trevor Lawrence (222, 1,187), Alabama teammate Mac Jones (138, 1,130) and Florida's Kyle Trask (61, 737).

Crimson Tide running back Najee Harris finished fifth in the voting, making No. 1 Alabama the second team in the 85-year history of the Heisman to have three of the top five vote-getters. Army did it in 1946 with Glenn Davis (first), Doc Blanchard (fourth) and Arnold Tucker (fifth).

"I want to thank my teammates," Smith said during his acceptance speech. "With team success comes individual success so without you all, I wouldn't be where I'm at today, winning this award."

Smith is just the fourth receiver to win the Heisman, joining Michigan's Desmond Howard in 1991, Notre Dame's Tim Brown in 1987 and Nebraska's Johnny Rodgers in 1972.

Quarterbacks had won 17 of the previous 20 Heisman trophies, including the last four.

Smith was presented the award in a virtual ceremony orchestrated by ESPN. The usual trip to New York for the finalists was called off because of the pandemic and the winner was announced later than it had ever been before.

Smith accepted the trophy in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, decked out in a deep crimson jacket and shiny black bow tie.

He got a big hug from his quarterback, who told Smith that he loved and was proud of him. Then Smith held back tears during his speech, recalling how many thought he was too small to become a football star.

"To all the young kids out there that's not the biggest, not the strongest, just keep pushing. Because I'm not the biggest. I've been doubted a lot because of my size and, really, it's just comes down to you just put your mind to it, no job's too big," said the 6-foot-1, 175-pound Smith.

Meanwhile, his parents watched from a community center in his hometown of Amite, Louisiana, where a socially distanced watch party was held.

"We love him. Everybody here is supporting him, we're so proud of him. Continue being humble. Let God lead him. And we are here to support him every step of the way," Smith's mother, Christina Smith-Sylve, said to ESPN.

Smith is the third Alabama player to win the Heisman, all since 2009. Like Tide running backs Mark Ingram ('09) and Derrick Henry (2015), Smith will play for the national championship as a Heisman winner.

Alabama faces No. 3 Ohio State on Jan. 11 in the College Football Playoff title game in Miami Gardens, Florida.

Smith said he returned for his senior season to earn his degree and win a national title.

"I checked one of those boxes. Just trying to check the other one now," Smith said during his Zoom news conference.

The Heisman voting was complete on Dec. 21, so playoff performances were not a factor. But Smith made those who supported him feel good about it with a brilliant three-touchdown game against Notre Dame in the CFP semifinals last weekend.

Smith has 105 catches for 1,641 yards and 22 total touchdowns going into the final game of his college career — which will also be his third national championship game.

Smith carved out a place in Alabama's storied history as a freshman, catching the winning touchdown pass from Tua Tagovailoa on second-and-26 in overtime against Georgia to give the Tide the 2017 national championship.

The story of the game was the guy who threw the walk-off TD pass. Tagovailoa became Alabama's Heisman contender and most beloved player for the next two years.

Smith was the overlooked star in the Tide's talented 2017 class of receivers that included All-American Jerry Jeudy and the blazingly fast Henry Ruggs. Both of those players decided to skip their senior seasons and enter the draft last year. Both were selected in the first round.

"I kind of like being out of the way and not in the mix," Smith said. "I'm not the most vocal person. I

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 46 of 86

don't like talking that much. It was enjoyable while it lasted."

He returned to school to form an explosive combination for the Tide with junior Jaylen Waddle. Then Waddle went down with a season-ending leg injury on Oct. 24.

As the Tide's undisputed No. 1 receiver, Smith shined. The week after Waddle went out, Smith had 11 catches for 204 yards and four touchdowns against Mississippi State.

Smith's soaring one-handed TD grab against LSU was not just his signature play, but one of the 2020 season's best.

A former four-star recruit, Smith came to Tuscaloosa from LSU's backyard, disappointing many Tigers' fans in his hometown.

The understated Smith quietly led the Tide in receptions and yards last year as a junior and became a second-team All-American.

Smitty — as teammates and coaches call him — didn't emerge as a Heisman contender this season until Waddle went down.

And then he took off.

Starting with that Mississippi State game, Smith went on a four-game tear with 35 catches for 749 yards and 11 touchdowns that earned him another nickname: Slim Reaper.

Whatever you want to call Smith, he's been quite a catch for Alabama.

Follow Ralph D. Russo at <https://twitter.com/ralphDrussoAP> and listen at <https://westwoodonepodcasts.com/pods/ap-top-25-college-football-podcast/>

More AP college football: <https://apnews.com/Collegefootball> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Warnock makes history with Senate win as Dems near majority

By STEVE PEOPLES, BILL BARROW and RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Democrat Raphael Warnock won one of Georgia's two Senate runoffs Wednesday, becoming the first Black senator in his state's history and putting the Senate majority within the party's reach.

A pastor who spent the past 15 years leading the Atlanta church where Martin Luther King Jr. preached, Warnock defeated Republican incumbent Kelly Loeffler. It was a stinging rebuke of outgoing President Donald Trump, who made one of his final trips in office to Georgia to rally his loyal base behind Loeffler and the Republican running for the other seat, David Perdue.

The focus now shifts to the second race between Perdue and Democrat Jon Ossoff. That contest was too early to call as votes were still being counted.

There were still some mail ballots and in-person early votes left to be counted statewide, the majority of which are in Democratic-leaning counties. Under Georgia law, a trailing candidate may request a recount when the margin of an election is less than or equal to 0.5 percentage points.

If Ossoff wins, Democrats will have complete control of Congress, strengthening President-elect Joe Biden's standing as he prepares to take office on Jan. 20.

Warnock's victory is a symbol of a striking shift in Georgia's politics as the swelling number of diverse, college-educated voters flex their power in the heart of the Deep South. It follows Biden's victory in November, when he became the first Democratic presidential candidate to carry the state since 1992.

Warnock, 51, acknowledged his improbable victory in a message to supporters early Wednesday, citing his family's experience with poverty. His mother, he said, used to pick "somebody else's cotton" as a teenager.

"The other day, because this is America, the 82-year-old hands that used to pick somebody else's cotton picked her youngest son to be a United States senator," he said. "Tonight, we proved with hope, hard work and the people by our side, anything is possible."

Loeffler refused to concede in a brief message to supporters shortly after midnight.

"We've got some work to do here. This is a game of inches. We're going to win this election," insisted Loeffler, a 50-year-old former businesswoman who was appointed to the Senate less than a year ago by the state's governor.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 47 of 86

Loeffler, who remains a Georgia senator until the results of Tuesday's election are finalized, said she would return to Washington on Wednesday morning to join a small group of senators planning to challenge Congress' vote to certify Biden's victory.

"We are going to keep fighting for you," Loeffler said, "This is about protecting the American dream."

Georgia's other runoff election pitted Perdue, a 71-year-old former business executive who held his Senate seat until his term expired on Sunday, against Ossoff, a former congressional aide and journalist. At just 33 years old, Ossoff would be the Senate's youngest member.

Trump's false claims of voter fraud cast a dark shadow over the runoff elections, which were held only because no candidate hit the 50% threshold in the general election. He attacked the state's election chief on the eve of the election and raised the prospect that some votes might not be counted even as votes were being cast Tuesday afternoon.

Republican state officials on the ground reported no significant problems.

This week's elections mark the formal finale to the turbulent 2020 election season more than two months after the rest of the nation finished voting. The unusually high stakes transformed Georgia, once a solidly Republican state, into one of the nation's premier battlegrounds for the final days of Trump's presidency — and likely beyond.

Both contests tested whether the political coalition that fueled Biden's November victory was an anti-Trump anomaly or part of a new electoral landscape. To win in Tuesday's elections — and in the future — Democrats needed strong African American support.

Drawing on his popularity with Black voters, among other groups, Biden won Georgia's 16 electoral votes by about 12,000 votes out of 5 million cast in November.

Trump's claims about voter fraud in the 2020 election, while meritless, resonated with Republican voters in Georgia. About 7 in 10 agreed with his false assertion that Biden was not the legitimately elected president, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 3,600 voters in the runoff elections.

Election officials across the country, including the Republican governors in Arizona and Georgia, as well as Trump's former attorney general, William Barr, have confirmed that there was no widespread fraud in the November election. Nearly all the legal challenges from Trump and his allies have been dismissed by judges, including two tossed by the Supreme Court, where three Trump-nominated justices preside.

Even with Trump's claims, voters in both parties were drawn to the polls because of the high stakes. AP VoteCast found that 6 in 10 Georgia voters say Senate party control was the most important factor in their vote.

Even before Tuesday, Georgia had shattered its turnout record for a runoff with more than 3 million votes by mail or during in-person advance voting in December. Including Tuesday's vote, more people ultimately cast ballots in the runoffs than voted in Georgia's 2016 presidential election.

In Atlanta's Buckhead neighborhood, 37-year-old Kari Callaghan said she voted "all Democrat" on Tuesday, an experience that was new for her.

"I've always been Republican, but I've been pretty disgusted by Trump and just the way the Republicans are working," she said. "I feel like for the Republican candidates to still stand there with Trump and campaign with Trump feels pretty rotten. This isn't the conservative values that I grew up with."

But 56-year-old Will James said he voted "straight GOP."

He said he was concerned by the Republican candidates' recent support of Trump's challenges of the presidential election results in Georgia, "but it didn't really change the reasons I voted."

"I believe in balance of power, and I don't want either party to have a referendum, basically," he said.

Peoples reported from New York. Bynum reported from Savannah, Ga. Associated Press writers Haleluya Hadero, Angie Wang, Sophia Tulp, Ben Nadler and Kate Brumback in Atlanta contributed to this report.

AP VoteCast: Competing coalitions define GA Senate races

By JOSH BOAK and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Georgia's Senate runoff elections were a clash of two closely matched coalitions,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 48 of 86

with Democrat Raphael Warnock edging out his rival in the one-time Republican stronghold.

Warnock and fellow Democrat Jon Ossoff — whose race was still too early to call — relied on the backing of Black voters, younger voters, people earning less than \$50,000 and newcomers to the state, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 3,700 voters in Tuesday's high-stakes Senate contests.

The Republican coalition backing Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue was the mirror opposite: white, older, wealthier and longtime Georgia residents.

The findings from AP VoteCast reveal the extent of Georgia's recent political transformation — from GOP bastion to electoral battleground where turnout is decisive. The state's runoffs will decide control of the U.S. Senate.

The survey found Black voters made up roughly 30% of the electorate and almost all of them — 94% — backed Ossoff and Warnock, who will be the first Black senator from Georgia. Voters under 45 and those earning less than \$50,000 also broke for Democrats. About 60% of recent arrivals — the force behind Atlanta's sprawling growth — voted for the Democrats.

The coalition closely resembles the one that narrowly handed Georgia's Electoral College votes to Joe Biden in November, making him the first Democratic presidential candidate to win the state since 1992.

But the survey showed Republicans also held firmly onto their supporters in the runoff, bringing out white voters and those older than 45 — groups that still account for majorities of Georgia voters. Republicans Perdue and Loeffler also fared better than Democrats among voters earning more than \$75,000 and those who have called Georgia home for more than 20 years.

President Donald Trump's false claims of voter fraud and misconduct in November dominated the final days of the race and left many Republicans worried that the president was turning Republican voters off. But the survey found Trump's grievances had gained traction within his party.

About three-quarters of voters who backed Republican candidates in Georgia's Senate runoffs say Biden was not legitimately elected two months ago. And, despite the courts, state officials and the Justice Department finding no evidence of widespread voter fraud, roughly 9 in 10 of the Republicans' backers said they were not very confident that votes in November's presidential contest were accurately counted. Half said they have no confidence at all in the vote count. That's roughly five times as many Republicans who said in November they had no confidence that votes would be counted accurately.

The poll points to a partisan divergence that has only worsened since November and suggests Biden may find it difficult to stitch the nation back together as it battles a pandemic and weakened economy. Roughly half of Perdue and Loeffler voters said they will not support Biden, while about as many say they will at least give him a chance.

Nearly two-thirds of all Georgia voters were pessimistic about the nation's future. While Democrats' attitudes have only improved somewhat, Republican views of the country have changed dramatically. In November, about three-quarters of Republican voters in Georgia considered the nation on the right track. Now, about 7 in 10 say the country is headed on the wrong track.

Georgia voters were keenly aware of what was at stake. About 6 in 10 said that control of the Senate was the single most important factor in their choice. After weeks of the GOP candidates warning about the impact of Democratic control of the White House, House and Senate, Republican backers were more likely to prioritize holding a Senate majority than Democratic supporters.

Democrats spent much of the campaign pounding Republicans over stalled negotiations of a \$900 billion stimulus package for an economy still reeling from the coronavirus pandemic. Even after the package passed, Ossoff and Warnock, as well as Loeffler and Perdue, backed additional aid money.

That position was in line with Georgia voters. A wide majority — 7 in 10 — said Congress is doing too little to help the financial situations of individual Americans and small businesses in response to the pandemic. That view was held by majorities of Democratic and Republican voters alike, though roughly a quarter of Loeffler and Perdue voters said Congress was providing the right amount of assistance.

About 40% of Georgia voters earn less than \$50,000 — and roughly 6 in 10 of that group supported Ossoff, a slight increase in his support from this group in November.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 49 of 86

The candidates' experience was a source of debate in both campaigns. Neither Ossoff, a 33-year-old media executive, nor Warnock, 51, the senior pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church, a congregation once led by civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr., has held public office.

Republican Loeffler was appointed to the Senate in 2019 after a career in the financial sector, having accrued a family fortune estimated to be more than \$500 million in large part from her husband's position as head of the company that owns the New York Stock Exchange and other financial markets.

Voters are closely split over whether Ossoff, Warnock or Loeffler each have the "right experience to serve effectively as senator," while about two-thirds say Perdue does. Perdue was elected to the Senate in 2014, but the term of the former CEO of Dollar General expired Sunday.

Both Republican candidates have faced scrutiny for extensive stock trades in office. A majority of voters, 56%, say they are very or somewhat concerned about allegations that Perdue and Loeffler engaged in insider stock trading. That includes about 2 in 10 of their own backers.

Democrats, meanwhile, were branded as "radicals" and "socialist" by their GOP rivals. The poll found voters were slightly more likely to view the Democratic candidates as being "too extreme" in their political views. About half say Warnock and Ossoff are, compared with about 4 in 10 for Perdue and Loeffler.

AP VoteCast is a survey of the American electorate conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago for Fox News and The Associated Press. The survey of 3,792 voters in Georgia was conducted for eight days, concluding as polls closed. Interviews were conducted in English. The survey combines a random sample of registered voters drawn from the state voter file and self-identified registered voters selected from nonprobability online panels. The margin of sampling error for voters is estimated to be plus or minus 2.1 percentage points. Find more details about AP VoteCast's methodology at <https://www.ap.org/votecast>.

GEORGIA TAKEAWAYS: Black turnout fuels Warnock victory

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The Rev. Raphael Warnock, a Democrat, defeated Sen. Kelly Loeffler in Tuesday's special election for an unexpired term for a U.S. Senate seat in Georgia. Warnock will become the first Black senator in Georgia history. It remains too early to call the second race between Democrat Jon Ossoff and Republican David Perdue, who's seeking a second term after his first term expired Sunday. Control of the Senate is in the balance.

Here are some key takeaways:

BLACK VOTERS TIP THE SCALE

Warnock, senior pastor of the church where Martin Luther King preached through the height of the Civil Rights movement until his assassination, made history with a surge in Black turnout.

To be sure, a narrow win out of 4.4 million votes involves plenty of variables. But Black voters were a force in the early vote and on Election Day. Notably, it wasn't just in metro Atlanta, but also in rural and small-town counties across South Georgia, where Black turnout has historically lagged.

That means it was an alliance spanning from the most affluent Black residents of Atlanta, including recent transplants to Georgia, to those Black Georgia natives who hail from the most economically depressed pockets of the state.

This election cycle a confluence of factors for Black voters: 2020 offered the first general election after the disappointment of Stacey Abrams' narrowly missing out in 2018 on becoming the first Black woman governor in U.S. history, and it was the first election after the death of Rep. John Lewis, Atlanta's civil rights icon who once marched alongside King and would publicly joust with Trump.

Loeffler and her Republican allies used the two-month runoff campaign to hammer Warnock with ads calling him "dangerous" and "radical." They used snippets of his sermons from Ebenezer Baptist Church to accuse him of "hate speech" and "racial" divisiveness.

But Black voters can point to Tuesday's vote count and take credit for that strategy ending in defeat.

GEORGIA SHOWING BATTLEGROUND BONA FIDES

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 50 of 86

When President-elect Joe Biden won Georgia by 12,000 votes out of 5 million, plenty of observers assumed it was about a Trump backlash. Certainly, that something to do with it. But following it up with one Senate runoff victory and potentially a second, Democrats proved its status as a two-party battleground going forward.

TRUMP'S FALSE CLAIMS FIND FAVOR WITH GOP VOTERS

Trump may have lost the presidency but his campaign to undermine the legitimacy of the election clearly succeeded with Republican voters in Georgia.

About three-quarters of voters who backed Perdue and Loeffler told the AP VoteCast survey that Biden was not legitimately elected in November. AP VoteCast interviewed more than 3,600 voters to measure the electorate's views on a range of topics.

Roughly 9 in 10 of the Republicans' backers said they lacked confidence that votes in November's presidential contest were accurately counted. Half said they have no confidence at all in the vote count. That's roughly five times as many Republicans who said in November they had no confidence that votes would be counted accurately.

That sentiment clearly tracks Trump's false rhetoric about election fraud, a claim that has been rejected by Attorney General William Barr, dozens of federal courts and several prominent Republican senators. And the findings demonstrate Trump's continued hold on the Republican base, something his fellow GOP politicians will contend with even after he leaves office.

TRUMP STILL A TURNOUT DRIVER -- FOR BOTH SIDES

Even though it carried risk, Perdue, who is trying to win a second term after his first one expired Sunday, and Loeffler, an appointed senator trying to win her first election, tethered themselves to Trump every step of the campaign.

Early returns and turnout projections show why.

Democrats were running stronger in the early voting than they did in November, and that had Republicans nervous. Those worries followed weeks of Trump railing that Biden stole the election, spurring GOP fears that he'd drive some of his loyalists to skip the runoff out of protest while also repelling moderate and GOP-leaning independents in urban and suburban areas.

GOP strategists felt somewhat better Tuesday as they watched turnout in conservative counties and across the outer ring of metro Atlanta where Republicans still have troves of votes.

But, as it goes in the era of Trump, Democratic turnout stayed strong, as well, with Fulton and DeKalb in the core of metro Atlanta on pace to nearly match or exceed their general election turnout. That makes a steep hill for Republicans in the newfound swing state.

RELATIVELY SMOOTH

Even with Trump's steady drumbeat of falsehoods about the voting process, state elections authorities and officials from both parties said Tuesday's voting and the count appeared smooth. There were no reports of hours-long lines. Elections officials also took advantage of rules changes since November that allowed advance processing of absentee ballots — so they can be counted more quickly. As the count moved into Wednesday, Georgia officials seemed to be managing the process without major issues.

KEMP FACES TROUBLE

Trump endorsed Georgia's Republican Gov. Brian Kemp during a contentious GOP primary in 2018, only to call him "incompetent" and promise to campaign against him in 2022 because he didn't heed the president's demands to reverse Georgia's presidential results.

According to AP VoteCast, Republican voters are siding with Trump: About 6 in 10 approve of Kemp's handling of the election aftermath. In November, AP VoteCast found about 9 in 10 Trump backers approved of Kemp's overall job performance.

Kemp already was facing the prospect of a strong general election challenge from Abrams, the Democrat who is expected to seek a rematch from her 2018 loss. She would come into the race with a boost from all her voter registration work that paid off with Biden's and Warnock's wins. And now Kemp has to shore up his standing in his own party before thinking about Abrams or any Democrat.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 51 of 86

DEMOCRATS HIGH-TOUCH GROUND GAME

Democrats seem to have had a broader reach than Republicans in contacting voters. About 6 in 10 voters say they were contacted on behalf of Democratic candidates, compared with about half for Republican candidates.

Democrats' ground game may have helped them turn out voters. Overall, about 4 in 10 said they were contacted and responded with a pledge or commitment to vote. These voters were more likely to favor Ossoff and Warnock than Perdue and Loeffler.

NEW RESIDENTS CHANGING POLITICS

AP VoteCast showed signs that newcomers to Georgia were more Democratic than longtime residents of the state. Those who have lived in the state for longer than 20 years leaned Republican, while those who have moved more recently favored Democrats.

Associated Press reporters Josh Boak and Hannah Fingerhut in Washington and Kate Brumback in Atlanta contributed.

Kim opens North Korean congress by admitting policy failures

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un admitted that his economic development plans have failed as he opened the nation's first full ruling party congress in five years, state media reported Wednesday.

In an opening speech at the congress that began Tuesday, Kim said that "almost all sectors fell a long way short of the set objectives" under a previous five-year development plan established at the 2016 congress, according to the North's official Korean Central News Agency.

"We should further promote and expand the victories and successes we have gained at the cost of sweat and blood, and prevent the painful lessons from being repeated," he was quoted as saying.

The Workers' Party Congress, one of the North's biggest propaganda spectacles, is meant to help Kim show a worried nation that he's firmly in control and to boost unity behind his leadership in the face of COVID-19 and other growing economic challenges.

But some observers are skeptical that the stage-managed congress will find any fundamental solutions to North Korea's difficulties, many of which stem from decades of economic mismanagement and Kim's headlong pursuit of expensive nuclear weapons meant to target the U.S. mainland.

Kim, 36, is holding the congress, which is expected to last a few days, amid what may be the toughest challenge of his nine-year rule and what he has called "multiple crises."

Authoritarian North Korea is one of the poorest countries in Asia, and the already besieged economy is being hammered by pandemic-related border closings with China, the North's major economic lifeline, the fallout from a series of natural disasters last summer and persistent U.S.-led sanctions over the nuclear program.

U.S. President-elect Joe Biden, who takes office later in January, will likely maintain the sanctions and avoid any direct meeting with Kim until North Korea takes significant steps toward denuclearization.

The congress met in Pyongyang to determine "a fresh line of struggle and strategic and tactical policies," with thousands of delegates and observers in attendance, KCNA reported.

In his speech, Kim described the present difficulties facing his government as "the worst-ever" and "unprecedented," according to KCNA.

Kim called for a new five-year plan and reviewed the present status of North Korea's metal, chemical, electric and other key industries and set unspecified tasks for future development, KCNA said.

It's not the first time for Kim has been candid about flawed systems and policies. Last August, he acknowledged economic "shortcomings" caused by "unexpected and inevitable challenges." Also last year he said that North Korea lacks modern medical facilities and that anti-disaster conditions in coastal areas is "poor."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 52 of 86

Few experts doubt Kim's grip on power. But a prolonged coronavirus-related lockdown may be further destabilizing food and foreign exchange markets and aggravating livelihoods in North Korea. That could possibly lessen Kim's authority, some observers say.

Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul, said that "the fundamental problem" is that "Kim wants regime-sustaining economic growth while retaining nuclear weapons."

"Pyongyang is thus likely to demand sanctions relief for merely reducing tensions rather than making progress on denuclearization," he said.

U.S.-led sanctions toughened after Kim's unusually aggressive run of nuclear and missile tests in 2016 and 2017. They maintain a ban on major export items such as coal, textiles and seafood. Nevertheless, Kim has still repeatedly pushed for an expansion of his nuclear arsenal to cope with what he calls U.S. hostility.

Kim entered talks with President Donald Trump in 2018, but their diplomacy has been deadlocked for about two years because of wrangling over the sanctions.

The pandemic and typhoons and flooding last summer — which destroyed houses, farming land and other infrastructure across North Korea — have further hurt the North's economy.

After a yearlong closure of its border with China, North Korea's biggest trading partner, bilateral trade volume plummeted by about 80% in the first 11 months of last year from the corresponding period in 2019, said analyst Song Jaeguk at Seoul's IBK Economic Research Institute. North Korea's GDP was estimated to have contracted by 9.3% in 2020, he said.

Following the sharp drop in external trade, North Korea experienced a fourfold increase of imported foodstuffs like sugar and seasonings at markets while its factory operation rate dropped to its lowest level since Kim took power because of a shortage of raw materials, South Korea's spy agency told lawmakers in late November.

"I can't think about any words to describe how difficult is the situation the North Koreans are going through now, rather than saying they're suffering tremendously," Song said. "If the coronavirus pandemic continues, they'll suffer harder."

Kim has been pushing to burnish an image as a caring leader.

State media said Kim sent New Year's Day cards to ordinary citizens in what Seoul called the first such letters by a North Korean leader in 26 years. During a speech in October, Kim shed tears while thanking the people for withstanding difficulties. He's also made an unusually large number of visits to rural areas hit by the typhoons and flooding.

Officially, the congress is the party's highest-level decision-making organ, though key day-to-day decisions are made by Kim and his inner circle. The delegates gathered for the congress are expected to endorse new initiatives by Kim without major debate. The congress would still provide Kim with a chance to solidify his authority by announcing a new vision, naming loyal lieutenants to top posts and calling for a stronger unity behind his leadership.

Many experts say North Korea has no other option but to maintain its border closure as the pandemic continues worldwide, because its public health care system remains broken and a major outbreak could cause dire consequences. Despite taking draconian anti-virus measures, North Korea has maintained that it hasn't found a single virus case on its soil, a claim widely doubted by foreign experts.

KCNA photos of the congress showed all no participants, including Kim, wearing masks while sitting right next to each other.

During the congress, the North may issue conciliatory messages in consideration of ties with the incoming Biden administration while underscoring its traditional ties with China and Russia, Seoul's Unification Ministry said in a report on the outlook for the congress.

Kim didn't mention the United States or South Korea in his speech Tuesday. He's expected to make a few more speeches before the congress ends.

Some experts say Kim won't likely launch a major provocation anytime soon because that would further dim the prospect for early talks with the Biden government, which faces many urgent domestic issues.

Netanyahu re-election hopes hinge on vaccination campaign

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — For media-obsessed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the coronavirus vaccine has arrived just in time.

With elections approaching in March, Netanyahu has placed his world-leading vaccination drive at the center of his reelection campaign — launching an aggressive media blitz portraying him as almost single-handedly leading the country out of the pandemic. He appears to be betting that a successful vaccination effort can persuade voters to forget about his corruption trial and the economic damage caused by the coronavirus crisis.

Netanyahu, like his good friend Donald Trump and other world leaders, frequently tries to use social media and tightly controlled press conferences to bypass the traditional media — and the scrutiny that has come along with it. While this strategy has often served Netanyahu well, his obsession with controlling the message also threatens to backfire.

It lies at the heart of a corruption case in which he is accused of granting favors to powerful media figures in exchange for positive coverage of him and his family. An expanded indictment released this week outlined 150 incidents showing detailed control he allegedly tried to exert over the media. This included pressure on a news site to drop critical coverage about a lacy dress worn by his wife, and pushing the site to publish photos of her meeting actor Leonardo DiCaprio.

Netanyahu's tactics have also contributed to a nascent uprising in his own party. Two prominent defectors accused him of creating a "personality cult" in their resignation speeches.

Since he became the first Israeli to be vaccinated two weeks ago in a festive event broadcast live on national television, Netanyahu's office has pumped out a constant stream of statements, tweets and videos showing the prime minister extolling the virtues of the vaccine and claiming credit for making it available to the broader public.

"I have brought the vaccines and you are giving the vaccines," he recently told health workers at a clinic in an Arab town in northern Israel as he implored residents to get the shot. "The whole world is amazed at Israel. They are writing that Israel is a wonder."

By many counts, Israel has pulled off a significant achievement so far. In just over two weeks, the country has given nearly 1.4 million people the Pfizer/BioNtech vaccine, roughly 15% of its population. That is the highest level in the world on a per capita basis, according to "Our World in Data," an open source research site that compares official government statistics. Israel aims to vaccinate most of the population by the end of March — just around election time.

Netanyahu has made the campaign deeply personal. He welcomed the first shipment of vaccines at the airport. He got vaccinated on national TV, and he made sure to be at health clinics to greet the 500,000th and 1 millionth people to be vaccinated — with both events streamed live on YouTube.

Netanyahu boasts of his relationships with the chief executives of Pfizer and Moderna, implying his connections helped acquire millions of hard-to-get doses of vaccines. "I speak to them all the time," he recently quipped.

Netanyahu rose to prominence in the 1990s in great part thanks to his mastery of the media. He is at ease on camera and capable of speaking in clear sound bites in both Hebrew and American-accented English. Despite his skill as a communicator, he has had a rocky relationship with the Israeli media.

Sounding much like Trump, he accuses the media of having a liberal bias and leading a "witch hunt" against him. He has embraced social media and brags about circumventing the traditional media to spread his messages. When he invites reporters to his press conferences, he rarely takes questions.

Last week, Netanyahu welcomed the convicted U.S. spy Jonathan Pollard to Israel, capping a 35-year saga. "What a moment," Netanyahu declared on the airport tarmac in the middle of the night. Only no media were invited to witness the moment. Netanyahu's office later released smartphone photos and video taken by an aide.

Materials distributed by his political party, Likud, go even further. In November, it released a video of

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 54 of 86

Netanyahu getting a haircut and going to a vegetable store — a message that he was doing his part to help struggling businesses hurt by the country's economic crisis.

"We thank you for the 24 hours every day that you give to the people of Israel," the barber told him. "Prime Minister No. 1!" a supporter shouted as he exited the minimarket.

Gideon Saar, a Netanyahu stalwart, broke away from Likud last month to form his own party, accusing Netanyahu of turning Likud into a tool for personal survival as he goes on trial.

Zeev Elkin, a longtime confidant of Netanyahu, later joined Saar. "Mr. Prime Minister, you've destroyed the Likud and brought an atmosphere of a cult of personality, sycophancy, fear of expressing criticism, and a Byzantine court," he said.

Saar's new party, courting other right-wing voters disenchanted with Netanyahu's rule, has emerged as a formidable force. Opinion polls forecast Saar's party finishing second, behind the Likud, but at the head of a mix of anti-Netanyahu parties that together could end Netanyahu's 12-year reign.

Netanyahu accuses his rivals of being motivated by little more than sour grapes and shared animosity toward him. He says they are focused on petty politics while he is carrying out "a giant vaccination operation" that will make Israel the first country to exit the coronavirus crisis.

It remains unclear whether Israel will procure enough vaccines to keep up the torrid pace of inoculations. It also is unclear whether Netanyahu's message will resonate with the legions of voters who have lost their jobs — especially with the country in its third lockdown as it faces a new outbreak.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu's corruption trial, set to resume in the coming weeks, looms. He has been charged with fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes. The most serious charges claim he promoted lucrative regulations that benefited the Bezeq telecom company in exchange for favorable coverage about him on the company's popular Walla news site.

"He wants to be loved by the media, but he hates the media at the same time," said Tehilla Shwartz Altshuler, a senior fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute.

More than a week later, FBI avoids terror label for bombing

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — The FBI investigation into whether the Nashville bombing was a terrorist act has sparked criticism about a possible racial double standard and drawn questions from downtown business owners whose insurance coverage could be affected by the bureau's assessment.

More than a week after an explosion that struck at the heart of a major American city, the FBI has resisted labeling it an act of terrorism, an indication that evidence gathered so far does not conclusively establish that the bomber was motivated by political ideology — a key factor in any formal declaration of terrorism. The bureau is still examining evidence and has not announced any conclusions, but investigators are known to be reviewing whether Anthony Warner believed in conspiracy theories involving aliens and 5G cellphone technology.

Warner died in the Christmas Day explosion of a recreational vehicle that also wounded three other people. "When we assess an event for domestic terrorism nexus, it has to be tied to an ideology. It's the use of force or violence in the furtherance of a political or social ideology or event. We haven't tied that yet," Doug Korneski, the FBI agent in charge of the agency's Memphis office, told reporters last week at a news conference.

The FBI investigates two types of terrorism that are defined not by the ethnicity or background of the suspect but by the person's motivation or ideology. International terrorism involves acts by people who are inspired by, or acting at the direction of, foreign terrorist organizations. Domestic terrorism generally involves politically motivated violence intended to further a particular cause or agenda.

The explosion in Music City's historic downtown damaged more than 40 businesses. Since then, a handful of state and city leaders have raised concerns about the terrorism designation, arguing that authorities would have acted differently if the 63-year-old Warner had not been a white man.

"To those bending over backward to not call this an act of terror, if Warner had been a Muslim/imm-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 55 of 86

grant/black, will you say the same thing or will you be one of the millions condemning not just him but his entire community?" Nashville City Council member Zulfat Suara tweeted just days after the bombing.

The classification of the attack could help determine insurance payouts for businesses that were damaged. At issue are the varying definitions of terrorism sprinkled throughout federal law.

Small business owners tend to opt out of terrorism coverage when selecting insurance policies, presuming that a terrorist act would be unlikely to affect their company, said Jason Schupp, founder and managing member of Centers for Better Insurance, an insurance industry think tank near Washington, D.C.

Pete Gibson is owner of Pride and Glory Tattoo Parlor, which is directly across from the bomb site. He said terrorism coverage was the farthest detail from his mind when he was selecting an insurance policy seven years ago. He is still unsure what will be covered, but he has a meeting with attorneys this week to go over his policy.

"I hadn't even heard of terrorism coverage back then," Gibson said. "So now it's just a big mess. I'm hoping to know more soon."

Gibson said he and other small business owners were approached earlier this year during Black Lives Matter protests about considering terrorism coverage, but they all brushed it aside.

He has been able to visit the bomb site to assess some of the damage, but his tattoo shop is still too unstable to walk through. He described "massive pieces of timber all around and lights flickering."

According to the Treasury Department, 30% to 40% of Tennessee businesses have excluded terrorism coverage from their policies.

A 2002 federal law — enacted by Congress shortly after the 9/11 attacks — allows the Treasury secretary to certify an event as an terrorist act regardless of how law enforcement officials regard it. To date, the Treasury has never done so, including after the 2013 Boston marathon bombing and the 2017 Las Vegas Strip mass shooting, Schupp said.

Furthermore, domestic terrorism can be challenging to define, especially when it comes to prosecution. Though there is a definition in the U.S. criminal code, there is no federal domestic terrorism statute, meaning that Justice Department prosecutors must turn to other crimes such as explosives charges to prosecute acts that might otherwise be thought of as terrorism.

The Nashville bombing occurred well before downtown streets were bustling with Christmas activity. Police were responding to a report of shots fired when they encountered the RV blaring a recorded warning that a bomb would detonate in 15 minutes. The audio then switched to a recording of Petula Clark's 1964 hit "Downtown" shortly before the blast.

Investigators have not uncovered a motive, but they have learned that Warner may have believed in conspiracy theories, including the idea that shape-shifting reptiles assume human form to take over society. He also discussed taking trips to hunt aliens, officials said.

The FBI has confirmed that Warner sent materials about his views to people he knew, but investigators have not released details about what the packages contained.

Tucker reported from Washington.

EXPLAINER: What's behind N. Korea's biggest political event

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea has opened the first full congress of its ruling party in five years, with leader Kim Jong Un admitting his previous economic development plans have failed. The congress could be crucial, coming as it does amid what some experts see as the most fraught moment of Kim's nine-year rule.

The Workers' Party congress, which was revived by Kim in 2016 after a 36-year hiatus, began on Tuesday as North Korea, one of the world's poorest countries, faces what Kim has called "huge challenges and difficulties" brought on by an economy hammered by pandemic-related border closings, a spate of natural disasters and harsh U.S.-led sanctions meant to stop the country from putting the finishing touches on its

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 56 of 86

illicit nuclear-tipped missile program.

The meeting will also be closely watched by, and may be meant to send a message to, US. President-elect Joe Biden, who will be inaugurated later this month. Biden has called Kim a "thug" and criticized his nuclear summitry with President Donald Trump.

Here are a few things to know about the biggest political event of the year in North Korea:

WHAT IS IT?

The congress is the top decision-making organ of the Workers' Party.

Kim, the party chairman, determines key day-to-day decisions together with members of his inner circle, but the congress' responsibilities include the formulation of new policies, reviews of past projects, revisions of party regulations and a reshuffling of officials' positions.

This year's congress is the eighth since Kim's grandfather, Kim Il Sung, held the first one in 1945. Kim Il Sung had six congresses before he died in 1994. His son, Kim Jong Il, who died in 2011, never held a congress. Some experts say Kim Jong Il's "military-first" policy helped undermine the influence of the Workers' Party during his 17-year rule.

Kim Jong Un revived the congress in 2016 as part of his efforts to increase the party's authority and cement his grip on power. It was the first congress since 1980, four years before he was born. Kim turns 37 on Friday.

It's unclear how long this year's congress will last. The 2016 congress met for four days. In 1980 it was five days, and 12 days in 1970.

WHY HOLD IT NOW?

Past party rules required North Korea to hold a congress every five years, but revised guidelines in 2010 don't specify how often it should be convened. Some experts say Kim needs a big state meeting like this to lay out a new vision for the nation and to strengthen public loyalty at a difficult time in his rule.

North Korea's yearlong closure of its borders to guard against COVID-19 saw its trade volume plummet with China, its biggest trading partner, by about 80% in the first 11 months of 2020. Typhoons and floods last summer destroyed crops, houses and infrastructure across North Korea. Pyongyang has said that persistent U.S.-led sanctions against its nuclear bomb program are meant to "strangle and stifle" the country.

During a public speech marking the party's 75th anniversary in October, Kim fought back with tears as he thanked his people for enduring the triple blow to the economy.

"On this planet at present, our country is the only one that is faced with (such) huge challenges and difficulties, like dealing with the anti-epidemic emergency and recovering from the catastrophic natural disasters, when everything is in short supply owing to the harsh and prolonged sanctions," Kim said.

North Korea, which has a broken medical infrastructure and deep poverty, has taken some of the world's toughest anti-virus measures, and claims to be coronavirus-free, an assertion widely disputed by foreign experts.

Experts also say that Kim shares a high level of responsibility for the economic woes. Kim has repeatedly told his people that nuclear weapons are a "powerful treasured sword" that are needed because of persistent U.S. hostility. But a string of high-profile weapons tests in past years aimed at acquiring the ability to launch precision nuclear strikes on the American homeland have led to tougher U.S.-led sanctions that experts say are gradually drying up North Korea's foreign currency reserves.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

During this month's congress, North Korea has said it will announce new economic developmental goals for the next five years.

State media said Wednesday the congress' gathering is meant to "discuss and decide on a fresh line of struggle and strategic and tactical policies for making a radical leap forward in the development of the party and socialist construction." An earlier Workers' Party statement said its previous "goals for improving the national economy have been seriously delayed."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 57 of 86

Some observers say North Korea may be forced to aim for modest objectives from this congress because it must continue to focus against the coronavirus. Others says North Korea, which recently completed an 80-day "productivity campaign," might call for more such campaigns to squeeze its people for increased labor.

During several speeches expected at the congress, Kim will likely repeat his commitment to his nuclear development program but may signal a willingness to engage with the incoming Biden administration and rival South Korea. Kim's state media, which previously called Biden "a rabid dog," have remained silent over the next U.S. president's election victory.

Other possible moves at the congress include Kim getting a new high-profile position, such as "generalissimo," a title held by his late father and grandfather; his influential sister, Kim Yo Jong, may also be appointed a member of the powerful Politburo in a bid to reinforce the Kim family's rule, experts say.

Republican Party faces defining moment under Trump's shadow

By JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The Republican Party is facing a defining moment.

The nearly 167-year-old party is divided over the typically mundane congressional certification of President-elect Joe Biden's Electoral College victory. The process, which will unfold Wednesday on Capitol Hill, is opening a schism between those wanting to honor democratic norms and those staying in lockstep with President Donald Trump out of hopes of avoiding his wrath and inheriting his supporters.

The final outcome is not in doubt: The results will eventually be certified for Biden, who will be sworn in as the nation's 46th president two weeks later. But what comes next for the Republican Party is anything but clear.

It is party engulfed in a civil war, a split caused by degrees of loyalty to Trump. At stake: whether the party will maintain its fealty to Trump even after he leaves office and the GOP turns its eyes toward regaining the White House in 2024.

"This is the moment for Republicans to choose between deciding to break themselves free from this maniacal hold Trump has had on them or seal themselves inside the tomb he has built for them," said Michael Steele, former head of the Republican Party. "The first shot out of the 2024 cannon will be fired. And they will either turn the cannon on themselves or move forward without the shackles of Trumpism around their ankles?"

The party's factions have emerged in stark relief in recent days. More than 100 members of the House of Representatives, long held in Trump's sway, have said they would object Wednesday to Biden's victory.

And now more than a dozen senators have done the same, defying the explicit wishes of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. Sens. Josh Hawley of Missouri and Ted Cruz of Texas, two 2024 presidential hopefuls, are at the forefront of the movement, looking to curry favor with a president who remains wildly popular within his own party.

But more than a dozen Senate Republicans have pushed back. Though nearly all couch their refusal in praise of the president, they have made clear that they would not go along with his attempts to overturn the election and remain in power.

"As I read the Constitution, there is no constitutionally viable means for the Congress to overturn an election wherein the states have certified and sent their Electors," Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, another potential presidential contender, said in a statement.

Trump's hold over his adopted party has been all but absolute in his time in office. He has defied GOP orthodoxy, shattered the norms of the presidency and publicly attacked Republicans who dared cross him.

But, with few outliers, his party has remained lockstep behind him, despite his impeachment and botched management of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed more than 350,000 Americans. Now, a swath of Republicans are going along with his baseless belief that the election was rigged, with even some of those elected in November claiming that the voting was fraudulent.

There was no widespread fraud in the election, which a range of election officials across the country,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 58 of 86

as well as Trump's former attorney general, William Barr, have confirmed.

Republican governors in Arizona and Georgia, key battleground states crucial to Biden's victory, have vouched for the integrity of the elections in their states. Nearly all the legal challenges from Trump and his allies have been dismissed by judges, including two tossed by the Supreme Court, where three Trump-nominated justices preside.

Still, clear lanes are emerging within the GOP as the congressional certification emerges as an inflection point.

While loyalists including Cruz and Hawley are siding with Trump, more moderate Republicans such as Sens. Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania and Mitt Romney of Utah reject the effort to oppose certification. And conservatives like Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas remain vociferous in their support of the president, but say they will not defy the Constitution.

The fracture, some Republicans fear, could damage the party's chances in elections to come.

"It's healthy when a party has disagreements over what we think is best for our constituents or how to win an election. But we are dividing into two camps that have nothing to do with policy," said Mike DuHaime, senior advisor on former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie's 2016 presidential campaign. "The two camps are divided as to whether we serve the whims of one person. It's the 'Trump Affection Party.'"

The unusual challenge to the presidential election, on a scale unseen since the aftermath of the Civil War, clouded the opening of the new Congress and is set to consume its first days.

Vice President Mike Pence will be closely watched as he presides over the session. Despite serving the president loyally, he has been under growing pressure from Trump and others to change the result. But Pence has a ceremonial role that does not give him the power to affect the outcome.

With mounting desperation, Trump declared at a campaign rally in Georgia on Monday that he would "fight like hell" to hold on to the presidency and he appealed to Republican lawmakers to reverse his election loss. But he also threw down a warning.

Trump pledged that in 2022 he would support primary challenges to the state's Republican governor and secretary of state, both of whom have refused to support his efforts to overturn the election results in Georgia. He also recently vowed to back an effort to unseat Sen. John Thune of South Dakota, who refused to go along with the Electoral College objections, and has told aides that he may target others who defy him on Wednesday.

Few Republicans expect Trump to go quietly back to private life after he leaves the White House. The president has held discussions about running again in 2024 and, even if he opts against a campaign, has signaled he wants to play kingmaker and shape GOP politics in the years ahead.

If he does, the Republican Party could continue to shape itself in his image.

"I believe he will have as much hold over the party as he wants to," said Alice Stewart, a Republican strategist who advised Cruz's 2016 campaign. "He still has the heart and support of his base. If he wants to keep being a player for himself or those carrying his message, he will certainly be powerful and the party will have to react."

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Protesters backing Trump roll into capital to cheer him on

By ASHRAF KHALIL and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's supporters have descended on the nation's capital to cheer his baseless claims of election fraud ahead of a congressional vote to affirm Joe Biden's election victory.

The president is expected to personally address his supporters during a Wednesday morning rally on the Ellipse, just south of the White House.

Just blocks from the White House, protesters — many without masks — gathered in Freedom Plaza on Tuesday to decry the vote in the Electoral College. As temperatures dropped to the low 40s and a steady

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 59 of 86

rain swept onto the streets, hundreds remained in the plaza into nightfall.

"I'm just here to support the president," said David Wideman, a 45-year-old firefighter who traveled from Memphis, Tennessee.

Wideman acknowledged he was "confused" by a string of losses from the president's legal team in their attempt to overturn the results of the election and didn't know what options Trump had left.

"I not sure what he can do at this point, but I want to hear what he has to say," Wideman said.

Trump tweeted his support for the protesters: "Washington is being inundated with people who don't want to see an election victory stolen by emboldened Radical Left Democrats. Our Country has had enough, they won't take it anymore! We hear you (and love you) from the Oval Office. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!"

The speakers included former Trump national security adviser Michael Flynn, whom the president pardoned after he was twice convicted of lying to the FBI in special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation.

"We stand at a crucible moment in United States history," Flynn told the mostly maskless crowd. "This country is awake now."

The protests coincide with Wednesday's congressional vote expected to certify the Electoral College results, which Trump continues to dispute.

In a Tuesday evening tweet, Trump called on Democrats and fellow Republicans to look at the "thousands of people pouring into D.C." In another tweet, he warned that antifa, the umbrella term for leftist militant groups that Trump has said he wants to declare a terrorist organization, should stay out of Washington.

The rallies had local officials and law enforcement bracing for potential violent street clashes. Many businesses in downtown Washington boarded up their windows, fearful that the protest could devolve into the unrest seen in May and June when dozens of businesses were vandalized.

District of Columbia Mayor Muriel Bowser called in National Guard troops to help bolster the city's police force. She urged residents to stay away from downtown Washington and to avoid confrontations with anyone who is "looking for a fight." But, she warned, "we will not allow people to incite violence, intimidate our residents or cause destruction in our city."

Election officials from both political parties, governors in key battleground states and Trump's former attorney general, William Barr, have said there was no widespread fraud in the election. Nearly all the legal challenges from Trump and his allies have been dismissed by judges, including two challenges rejected by the Supreme Court.

A pro-Trump rally Dec. 12 ended in violence as hundreds of Trump supporters, wearing the signature black and yellow of the Proud Boys, a far-right extremist group, sought out confrontations with a collective of local activists attempting to bar them from Black Lives Matter Plaza, an area near the White House. At least two local Black churches had Black Lives Matter banners torn down and set ablaze.

On Monday, police arrested the leader of the Proud Boys, Henry "Enrique" Tarrío, 36, after he arrived in Washington ahead of this week's protests. Tarrío was accused of burning one of the Black Lives Matter banners in December and was found with two high-capacity firearm magazines, police said. A judge signed an order Tuesday banning Tarrío from entering the District of Columbia, with very limited exceptions related to his criminal case.

In addition to the National Guard, federal agents were on standby, in case they were quickly needed in the city this week.

The federal Bureau of Prisons said about 100 "specially trained officers" were sent to the Justice Department headquarters to assist other security personnel but would remain "in a reserve capacity unless needed."

The Department of Homeland Security, meanwhile, said that unlike during the unrest in May and June in Washington, it did not plan to deploy agents from Customs and Border Protection to the demonstration Wednesday.

"Right now, we have not been asked to deploy. However, we have a modest quick reaction force that will be on standby just in case our assistance is requested," the agency's acting commissioner, Mark Morgan, said.

Organizers planned to rally into the night on Tuesday and again all day on Wednesday on the Ellipse. An afternoon march was also planned to the U.S. Capitol, where Congress will be voting to affirm the election results. A number of prominent Trump supporters were expected to attend, including Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton and longtime Trump ally Roger Stone, the recipient of a pardon by the president.

Stone was convicted of lying to Congress during the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election and sentenced to three years in prison. Trump commuted the sentence as Stone pursued an appeal and later issued a full pardon.

A November pro-Trump rally drew about 15,000 participants. The Dec. 12 rally drew smaller numbers, but a larger contingent of Proud Boys.

During previous pro-Trump protests, police sealed off Black Lives Matter Plaza itself, but the confrontations spilled out to the surrounding streets. Black Lives Matter Plaza was sealed off Tuesday.

"We know that historically over the last few demonstrations that BLM Plaza has been a focal point," Contee said a day earlier. "We want to make sure that that is not an issue."

Thailand scrambles to contain outbreak, secure vaccines

By BILL BREDESEN Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — For much of 2020, Thailand had the coronavirus under control. After a strict nationwide lockdown in April and May, the number of new local infections dropped to zero, where they remained for the next six months.

Thailand closed its borders, enforcing mandatory quarantines for its own citizens and the handful of foreigners allowed to visit. But aside from a few outward signs of the "new normal," like the ubiquitous wearing of masks and reminders to practice social distancing, life resumed as though the pandemic had largely run its course.

A new outbreak discovered in mid-December threatens to put the country back where it was in the toughest days of early 2020, when it tallied 3,045 cases and 59 deaths. Thailand's COVID-19 coordinating center has warned that the number of new daily cases could rise to more than 10,000 by later this month under a worst-case scenario if the government does not do more to curtail the virus's spread.

The outbreak identified in mid-December was centered in a seafood market in Samut Sakhon, southwest of the capital Bangkok, that employs thousands of Myanmar migrant workers. It has now spread to 56 of Thailand's 77 provinces.

On Tuesday, the country reported 527 new cases, most of them migrant workers linked to the market in Samut Sakhon. A day earlier, Thailand counted 745 new cases, an all-time high since the pandemic was first found in the country last January.

Thailand now has 8,966 total confirmed cases with 65 deaths.

Complicating its path to recovery, Thailand is playing catch-up in its bid to secure vaccines. Despite being a production hub for the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, the government has yet to secure enough doses to cover its population of nearly 70 million people.

Thailand signed a joint-venture agreement with AstraZeneca in October to produce up to 200 million doses of the vaccine in the country but only has been able to secure 26 million doses for itself. Thailand expects those vaccines, which will be produced locally by Siam Bioscience, to be delivered in June.

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha said Monday that Thailand is trying to obtain 63 million doses, enough to cover slightly less than half of its population. The cabinet on Tuesday approved a \$39 million budget for the vaccines, which will be offered at no charge to Thai citizens.

Meanwhile, China's Sinovac Biotech is expected to provide Thailand with 2 million vaccine doses, with an initial batch of 200,000 set to arrive in February, and later shipments expected in March and April.

"I hope they arrive soon. There are so many cases right now it's terrifying," said Watee Kongsilp, a street fruit seller in Bangkok.

Cin Amornchainon, an office worker, added: "If you ask me whether our vaccine orders are slower than other countries, yes they are. But I understand the limitations our country has in terms of budget."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 61 of 86

Neighboring countries in Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Vietnam and Cambodia, also are scrambling to procure vaccines.

Indonesia has been negotiating for months to secure millions of doses for its nearly 270 million people. It has deals with Sinovac, Novavax, AstraZeneca and COVAX and is in talks with Pfizer. Vietnam is still negotiating with pharmaceutical companies and trying to develop its own vaccines. Malaysia has signed deals to cover up to 40 percent of its population.

For now, Thailand is bracing for case numbers to continue to rise.

The Thai Navy has built four emergency field hospitals around the country, with up to 4,000 beds in Samut Sakhon and at least 500 beds in Rayong, on the eastern seaboard. Hospitals and expansions are also planned for Chantaburi and Chonburi, two coastal provinces southeast of Bangkok.

Prayuth, seeking to balance public health concerns with economic realities, has implemented a new round of restrictions, but he has stopped short of putting the country under a full lockdown, similar to what it experienced in the spring.

The economic concerns are daunting: Thailand's closure to most international travel helped limit domestic coronavirus outbreaks but gutted the tourism industry, which accounts for about a tenth of the economy and provides many jobs. The Bank of Thailand estimates the economy contracted 6.6% in 2020.

"We don't want to lock down the entire country because we know what the problems are. So can you all lock down yourselves?" Prayuth said at a press briefing on Monday.

"This is up to everyone. If you don't want to get infected, just stay home for 14 to 15 days. If you think like this, then things will be safe and easier for screening," Prayuth added.

On Jan. 3, the prime minister signed an order designating 28 provinces, including the capital, as "highly controlled zones," where public gatherings are prohibited and many businesses and other venues must close until at least the end of January. These include schools, gyms, childcare centers, Internet cafes, massage parlors and more.

Restaurants may not serve alcohol and can operate with strict social distancing requirements from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. but only serve takeaway from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. Tables must be at least 1.5 meters (5 feet) apart.

"We've learned the lessons from the previous lockdown," said Taweasilp Visanuyothin, a spokesperson for the COVID-19 coordinating center. "We have to consider imposing the measures as well as the impact on the economy."

The cabinet is expected to extend a national state of emergency, due to end on Jan. 15, until Feb. 28.

As has been true elsewhere, small lapses can be costly.

Thailand recorded no new local infections from May 26 until Nov. 7, when two women who crossed the border illegally from Myanmar tested positive for the virus, setting authorities off on a frantic contact-tracing effort. Thailand and Myanmar, which has been hit harder by the virus, share a 2,400-kilometer (1,500-mile) porous border.

Cambodia, which borders Thailand to the east and has been relatively lightly affected, stepped up security at land border checkpoints after at least 17 Cambodian laborers returning from Thailand recently tested positive for the coronavirus.

AP journalists Chalida Ekvitthayavechnukul in Bangkok, Hau Din in Hanoi, Vietnam, Victoria Milko and Edna Tarigan in Jakarta, Indonesia, Sopheng Cheang in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and Eileen Ng in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, contributed to this report.

EXPLAINER: Why Trump's ballot 'dump' tweet is misleading

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

As votes were being tabulated Tuesday night in Georgia's two tight Senate runoff contests, President Donald Trump predicted election officials in the state would release a large tranche of results that would overwhelm the Republican candidates. And he implied that it would be an act of voter fraud.

"Looks like they are setting up a big 'voter dump' against the Republican candidates. Waiting to see how

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 62 of 86

many votes they need?" the president tweeted just before 10:30 p.m. ET.

In reality, however, such lead swings and releases of voting results during an election are commonplace and ordinary.

HOW ARE THEY ORDINARY?

They reflect the usual ebb and flow of a process that entails tabulating and releasing massive batches of results, with leads often changing hands as counting continues.

For example, Floyd County, Georgia, a Republican stronghold where Trump has previously held a rally, released all of its results Tuesday in one big ballot drop around 10 p.m., which juiced the early returns in favor of GOP candidates Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue.

The candidate lead swings can be particularly pronounced when votes are recorded in population-dense counties, which often favor Democratic candidates.

WHY DOES THE PRESIDENT'S ASSERTION SOUND FAMILIAR?

Trump's tweet revisits a similar baseless claim that he made about his own loss in November to President-elect Joe Biden. Trump had jumped out to an early Election Day lead in multiple battlegrounds, but as mail-in ballots continued to be counted Biden eventually surpassed him.

HOW HAS HE BEEN INVOLVED IN GEORGIA SINCE THEN?

Trump has repeatedly — and falsely — claimed that his loss to Biden was the product of widespread voter fraud. And he's reserved special ire for Georgia, where the two contests were being held.

During a phone call with Georgia's Republican Secretary of State on Saturday — which was recorded and later leaked to the media — Trump repeatedly argued that the secretary, Brad Raffensperger, could change the certified results so that he would win. He also urged him to "find 11,780 votes" that would eclipse Biden's victory margin.

"We have at least 2 or 3 — anywhere from 250 to 300,000 ballots were dropped mysteriously into the rolls. Much of that had to do with Fulton County, which hasn't been checked," he said on Saturday during the phone call with Raffensperger.

Raffensperger repeatedly rebuffed Trump's request and his office has conducted several tallies and recounts. All of them confirmed Biden's win.

Hundreds of Trump supporters flock to DC ahead of vote

By ASHRAF KHALIL and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hundreds of supporters of President Donald Trump descended on the nation's capital Tuesday to cheer his baseless claims of election fraud a day before a congressional vote to affirm Joe Biden's victory.

Just blocks from the White House, protesters — many without masks — gathered in Freedom Plaza to decry the vote in the Electoral College. As temperatures dropped to the low 40s and a steady rain swept onto the streets, hundreds remained in the plaza into nightfall.

"I'm just here to support the president," said David Wideman, a 45-year-old firefighter who traveled from Memphis, Tennessee.

Wideman acknowledged he was "confused" by a string of losses from the president's legal team in their attempt to overturn the results of the election and didn't know what options Trump had left.

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Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 63 of 86

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The rallies had local officials and law enforcement bracing for potential violent street clashes. Many businesses in downtown Washington boarded up their windows, fearful that the protest could devolve into the unrest seen in May and June when dozens of businesses were vandalized.

Officials said there were six arrests by Tuesday night for a variety of offenses including weapons and ammunition possession, assaulting a police officer, simple assault and possessing a stun gun.

District of Columbia Mayor Muriel Bowser called in National Guard troops to help bolster the city’s police force. She urged residents to stay away from downtown Washington and to avoid confrontations with anyone who is “looking for a fight.” But, she warned, “we will not allow people to incite violence, intimidate our residents or cause destruction in our city.”

Election officials from both political parties, governors in key battleground states and Trump’s former attorney general, William Barr, have said there was no widespread fraud in the election. Nearly all the legal challenges from Trump and his allies have been dismissed by judges, including two challenges rejected by the Supreme Court.

A pro-Trump rally Dec. 12 ended in violence as hundreds of Trump supporters, wearing the signature black and yellow of the Proud Boys, a far-right extremist group, sought out confrontations with a collective of local activists attempting to bar them from Black Lives Matter Plaza, an area near the White House. At least two local Black churches had Black Lives Matter banners torn down and set ablaze.

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In addition to the National Guard, federal agents were on standby, in case they were quickly needed in the city this week.

The federal Bureau of Prisons said about 100 “specially trained officers” were sent to the Justice Department headquarters to assist other security personnel but would remain “in a reserve capacity unless needed.”

The Department of Homeland Security, meanwhile, said that unlike during the unrest in May and June in Washington, it did not plan to deploy agents from Customs and Border Protection to the demonstration Wednesday.

“Right now, we have not been asked to deploy. However, we have a modest quick reaction force that will be on standby just in case our assistance is requested,” the agency’s acting commissioner, Mark Morgan, said.

Organizers planned to rally into the night on Tuesday and again all day on Wednesday on the Ellipse. An afternoon march was also planned to the U.S. Capitol, where Congress will be voting to affirm the election results. A number of prominent Trump supporters were expected to attend, including Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton and longtime Trump ally Roger Stone, the recipient of a pardon by the president.

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During previous pro-Trump protests, police sealed off Black Lives Matter Plaza itself, but the confrontations spilled out to the surrounding streets. Black Lives Matter Plaza was sealed off Tuesday.

"We know that historically over the last few demonstrations that BLM Plaza has been a focal point," Contee said a day earlier. "We want to make sure that that is not an issue."

US: Hack of federal agencies 'likely Russian in origin'

By ERIC TUCKER and FRANK BAJAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Top national security agencies confirmed Tuesday that Russia was likely responsible for a massive hack of U.S. government departments and corporations, rejecting President Donald Trump's claim that China might be to blame.

The rare joint statement represented the U.S. government's first formal attempt to assign responsibility for the breaches at multiple agencies and to assign a possible motive for the operation. It said the hacks appeared to be intended for "intelligence gathering," suggesting the evidence so far pointed to a Russian spying effort rather than an attempt to damage or disrupt U.S. government operations.

The agencies made clear the Russian operation was "ongoing" and indicated the hunt for threats was not over.

"This is a serious compromise that will require a sustained and dedicated effort to remediate," said the statement, distributed by the FBI, the National Security Agency, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency.

It was not clear why the statement was issued Tuesday, especially since government officials and cybersecurity experts have for weeks believed that Russia was responsible. Even so, the announcement puts the imprimatur of national security agencies, albeit belatedly, on information that members of Congress had clamored for the White House to make public.

The Associated Press reported last month that officials at the White House had been prepared to issue a statement that accused Russia of being the main actor in the hack but were told at the last minute to stand down. The day of that report, Dec. 19, Trump tweeted that the "Cyber Hack is far greater in the Fake News Media than in actuality" and suggested without any evidence that China could be to blame.

Sen. Mark Warner, the Democratic vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, lamented the belated statement, saying "it's unfortunate that it has taken over three weeks after the revelation of an intrusion this significant for this Administration to finally issue a tentative attribution." He said he hoped "that we will begin to see something more definitive" as well as a warning to Russia, which has denied involvement in the hack.

With the public finger-pointing taking place in the final two weeks of the Trump administration, it will almost certainly fall to incoming President Joe Biden to decide how to respond to a hacking campaign that amounts to Washington's worst cyberespionage failure to date. Biden has said his administration will impose "substantial costs" on countries responsible for U.S. government hacks, but it is unclear whether the response in this case will involve sanctions, prosecution, offensive cyber operations or some combination of those options.

The hacking campaign was extraordinary in scale, with the intruders having stalked through government agencies, defense contractors and telecommunications companies for months by the time it was discovered. Experts say that gave the foreign agents ample time to collect data that could be highly damaging to U.S. national security, though the scope of the breaches and exactly what information was sought is unknown.

An estimated 18,000 organizations were affected by malicious code that piggybacked on popular network-management software from an Austin, Texas, company called SolarWinds. Of those customers, though, "a much smaller number has been compromised by follow-on activity on their systems," the statement said, noting that fewer than 10 federal government agencies have so far been identified as falling into that category.

The Treasury and Commerce departments are among the agencies known to have been affected. Sen. Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat, said after a briefing last month provided to Senate Finance Committee

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 65 of 86

staff that dozens of Treasury Department email accounts were compromised and that hackers had broken into systems used by the department's highest-ranking officials.

A senior executive of the cybersecurity firm that discovered the malware, FireEye, said last month that "dozens of incredibly high-value targets" have been infiltrated by elite, state-backed hackers. The executive, Charles Carmakal, would not name the targets. Nor has Microsoft, which said it identified more than 40 compromised government and private targets, most in the U.S.

Microsoft said in a blog post last week that hackers tied to the intrusions of government agencies and companies sneaked further into its systems than previously thought and were able to view some of the code underlying Microsoft software, but weren't able to make any changes to it.

The extent of affected targets remains undisclosed.

"I think it's highly unlikely at this stage of the investigation they can actually be certain that there are only 10 agencies impacted," said Dmitri Alperovitch, former chief technical officer of the cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike.

Ben Buchanan, a Georgetown University cyberespionage expert, said the fact that multiple investigating agencies are now attributing the hacking campaign to Russia "removes any remaining serious doubts about the perpetrators."

As for the number of federal agencies compromised, he said it's difficult to know "from the outside how they've evaluated this." While such assessments are difficult, Buchanan said, he believes the government must have evidence for the claim given the joint nature of the statement.

U.S. officials, including then-Attorney General William Barr and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and cybersecurity experts have in recent weeks said that Russia was to blame. But Trump, who throughout his term has resisted blaming Moscow for cyber operations, broke from the consensus within his own administration by tweeting that the media was afraid of "discussing the possibility that it may be China (it may!)."

Tuesday's statement makes clear that is not the case, saying the U.S. investigation reveals that a cyber actor, "likely Russian in origin, is responsible for most or all of the recently discovered, ongoing cyber compromises of both government and non-governmental networks."

"At this time, we believe this was, and continues to be, an intelligence gathering effort. We are taking all necessary steps to understand the full scope of this campaign and respond accordingly," the statement said.

Bajak reported from Boston.

Grammy Awards shift to March due to pandemic conditions

By MESFIN FEKADU AP Music Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The 2021 Grammy Awards will no longer take place this month in Los Angeles and will broadcast in March due to a recent surge in coronavirus cases and deaths.

The annual show would shift from its original Jan. 31 broadcast to March 14, according to a joint statement released Tuesday from the Recording Academy and CBS, which broadcasts the ceremony. The statement said the decision was reached "after thoughtful conversations with health experts, our host and artists scheduled to appear."

"The deteriorating COVID situation in Los Angeles, with hospital services being overwhelmed, ICUs having reached capacity, and new guidance from state and local governments have all led us to conclude that postponing our show was the right thing to do. Nothing is more important than the health and safety of those in our music community and the hundreds of people who work tirelessly on producing the show," read the statement from Recording Academy interim CEO Harvey Mason Jr., CBS executive Jack Sussman and Grammys executive producer Ben Winston.

"We want to thank all of the talented artists, the staff, our vendors and especially this year's nominees for their understanding, patience and willingness to work with us as we navigate these unprecedented times."

The Grammys will be held in Los Angeles at the Staples Center. Los Angeles County, the epicenter of the crisis in California, has surpassed 11,000 COVID-19 deaths and has had 40% of the deaths in California.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 66 of 86

It is the third state to reach the 25,000 death count.

An average of six people die every hour from COVID-19 in Los Angeles County, which has a quarter of the state's 40 million residents. County health officials fear the incoming Christmas and New Year's surge.

The new Grammys date coincides with the scheduled hosting of the Screen Actors Guild Awards, which is typically held at another downtown Los Angeles venue, the Shrine Auditorium. That show honors the best performances in film and television.

"The Daily Show" host and comedian Trevor Noah is set to host the 2021 Grammys, where Beyoncé is leading contender with nine nominations. She scored nominations for song and record of the year with "Black Parade," which she released on Juneteenth, while "Savage" — her No. 1 collaboration with Megan Thee Stallion — picked up bids for record of the year, best rap song and best rap performance.

Beyoncé's "Black Is King," which aired on Disney+, is nominated for best music film while "Brown Skin Girl," a song dedicated to dark- and brown-skinned women, is nominated for best music video. Her daughter Blue Ivy Carter sings on "Brown Skin Girl" and also earned a Grammy nomination.

Taylor Swift, Dua Lipa, Roddy Ricch, Jhené Aiko, Post Malone, Renée Zellweger, Billie Eilish and her producer-brother Finneas also scored nominations. First-time nominees include The Strokes, Megan Thee Stallion and Harry Styles.

Since the pandemic, a number of awards show were postponed and later revamped due to COVID-19 restrictions. The BET Awards was the first major awards show during the pandemic and was a success thanks to its artsy, highly produced, well-crafted pre-taped performances. The MTV Video Music Awards featured Lady Gaga winning awards and performing onsite in a mask, and the Latin Grammys pre-taped several performances the week of the show, handing out some of its awards to the winners who attended the show.

Performers at the upcoming Grammys will be announced at a later date.

Pandemic haunts new year as virus growth outpaces vaccines

By DANICA KIRKA and ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Despite growing vaccine access, January is looking grim around the globe as the coronavirus resurges and reshapes itself from Britain to Japan to California, filling hospitals and threatening livelihoods anew as governments lock down businesses and race to find solutions.

England headed back into lockdown. Mexico City's hospitals hold more virus patients than ever. Germany reported one of its highest daily death tolls to date Tuesday. South Africa and Brazil are struggling to find space for the dead. Even pandemic success story Thailand is fighting an unexpected wave of infections.

And as doctors face or brace for rising numbers of COVID-19 patients after end-of-year holiday gatherings, more and more countries are reporting cases of a new, more contagious variant that has already swept across Britain.

January is going to be "a tough one," said Dr. Margaret Harris, a spokeswoman for the World Health Organization. "This idea that seems to be 'Ah, we're all sick of it. We want to look at something else. Oh, this doesn't apply to me' ... that's got to go away. It really is all hands on deck."

While Britain rolled out a second vaccine this week and some U.S. states are starting to give the second round of shots, access to inoculations globally is sharply unequal. The supply isn't remotely close to meeting the epic demand needed to vanquish a foe that has already killed over 1.85 million people.

"We are in a race to prevent infections, bring cases down, protect health systems and save lives while rolling out two highly effective and safe vaccines to high-risk populations," said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. "This is not easy. These are the hard miles."

England is facing a third national lockdown that will last at least six weeks, as authorities struggle to stem a surge in COVID-19 infections and relieve hospitals, where some patients are left waiting in ambulances in a parking lot for access to overcrowded wards.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's tough new stay-at-home order for England took effect at midnight. It will shut schools, restaurants and all nonessential stores and won't be reviewed until at least mid-February.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 67 of 86

Scottish leader Nicola Sturgeon imposed a lockdown that began Tuesday.

The two leaders said the restrictions are needed to protect the National Health Service amid the emergence of the new variant that has sent daily infections, hospitalizations and deaths soaring.

The NHS "is going through probably the toughest time in living memory," said Siva Anandaciva, chief analyst of the King's Fund think tank.

Elsewhere in Europe, Italy and Germany extended their Christmastime lockdowns, Spain is restricting travel, and Denmark lowered the number of people who can gather in public from 10 to five. France is likely to announce tougher measures Thursday, and Ukraine is closing schools and restaurants starting Friday.

In Latin America, some warn the worst is yet to come.

"The boost we are experiencing here in Brazil is much more serious than what was happening months ago," said Domingos Alves, an adjunct professor at the University of Sao Paulo.

Brazil's number of patients in intensive care reached its highest level since August, just as the nation reopened shops and offices after the end-of-year holidays — and the vast country still hasn't approved or received any vaccines. Some Brazilian hospitals reinstalled refrigerated containers outside to hold the corpses of COVID-19 victims.

Mexico's capital has more virus patients than at any point in the pandemic and is flying in doctors from less hard-hit states. Its beach resorts are readying for more cases after thousands of U.S. and European tourists visited over the holidays.

"Probably in the third week of January, we are going to see the system stressed more, that there will be more ambulatory cases and cases requiring hospitalization," said Dr. Mauricio Rodriguez of Mexico's National Autonomous University. He blamed the rise on fatigue with social distancing, mixed messages from public figures and Mexicans lowering their guard during the holidays.

Zimbabwe reintroduced a curfew, banned public gatherings and indefinitely suspended the opening of schools. In South Africa, which is seeing yet another fast-spreading variant of the virus and is the continent's hardest-hit nation, authorities re-imposed a curfew, banned liquor sales and closed most beaches.

South Africa's undertakers are struggling to cope with the rise in deaths, National Funeral Practitioners Association of SA President Muzi Hlengwa told state broadcaster SABC.

"It is something that you have never seen before. ... We have run out of coffins, we have run out of space at the mortuary," he said. "We normally have cremations during the day, but now we have cremations even at night."

The pandemic is even reaching countries that seemed to have the virus under control.

Thailand is facing a surge that has infected thousands in the past few weeks, blamed on complacency and poor planning. The government is locking down large parts of the country, including the capital, Bangkok, and considering tougher measures.

Japan is getting ready to declare a state of emergency this week, beefing up border controls and speeding up vaccine approval after a surge of cases around New Year's Eve.

And holiday worries aren't over now that 2021 has arrived.

Pope Francis abandoned an annual ritual of baptizing babies in the Sistine Chapel tied to Wednesday's Epiphany holiday. Orthodox Christian countries like Russia and Greece could face more infections after they celebrate Christmas on Thursday. And China is closing schools early ahead of next month's Lunar New Year holiday, telling migrant workers not to go home and tourists to avoid Beijing.

Vaccinations are getting off to a slow start in many places. In the U.S., where over 350,000 people have died, some states are struggling to secure enough shots and organize vaccinations. The Netherlands has come under heavy criticism for being the last European Union nation to start inoculations, which it will do Wednesday. Australia isn't planning to do so until March. And most poorer countries are even further behind.

Opposition politician Geert Wilders called the Dutch government "the village idiot of Europe."

Yet India offers a glimmer of hope. Its infection rate is down significantly from a September peak, and the country is kicking off one of the largest inoculation programs in the world, aiming at vaccinating 300 million people by August.

AP reporters around the world contributed to this report.

Follow AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>, <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

Cruel twist: Browns lose coach for playoffs due to COVID-19

By TOM WITHERS AP Sports Writer

CLEVELAND (AP) — Amid a masked, muted celebration in the locker room after the Browns ended the NFL's longest playoff drought, coach Kevin Stefanski asked for a game ball and then told Pro Bowl guard Joel Bitonio to step forward.

Stefanski flipped the ball to Bitonio, who had survived seven long seasons, 0-16 in 2017, the Johnny Manziel mess and numerous coaching changes.

"You're going to the playoffs, 75," Stefanski told Bitonio.

Two days later, nothing is certain with the Browns.

Positive COVID-19 tests have knocked Stefanski, Bitonio, wide receiver KhaDarel Hodge and at least two assistant coaches out of Cleveland's wild-card game at Pittsburgh on Sunday night — the Browns' first playoff appearance since the 2002 season.

The Browns announced Tuesday — 18 years to the day since their last playoff game — that Stefanski tested positive for the coronavirus, which has plagued the team in recent weeks and has thrown Cleveland's plans this week into disarray for the wild-card game.

In less than 48 hours, joy for the Browns and their fans long-suffering fans was all but extinguished.

"Very sad," Browns center and NFLPA President JC Tretter said. "It's really unfortunate."

Now, after beating the Steelers last Sunday to make the playoff field, the Browns are implementing contingency plans drawn up when the pandemic began.

Stefanski, who in his first year returned the Browns to respectability, can only coach virtually from home this week. He'll be replaced by special teams coordinator Mike Priefer, and the Browns will have to make other staff adjustments as tight ends coach Drew Petzing and defensive backs coach Jeff Howard are also out.

Despite the Browns' issues — they now have eight rotational players and five coaches on the COVID-19 list — league spokesman Brian McCarthy said the game is on schedule.

McCarthy added the league is continuing to conduct contact tracing to identify any possible high-risk close contacts. NFL rules state that anyone testing positive must be away from the team at least 10 days.

"If any players or personnel are identified as such, they would remain apart from the team and facilities for five days from the last exposure to a positive individual," McCarthy wrote in an email. "They would be eligible to return to the team and play in the game."

It's still possible the Browns will lose other players after contact tracing is completed.

The genomic sequencing conducted by the league and its medical partner last week showed Cleveland's cases were unconnected, meaning the cases came from outside and weren't spread within the team's headquarters.

Tretter said on a union conference call that he expects the building to remain closed Wednesday, when the Browns were scheduled to have their first practice this week.

Tretter said he had been in touch with Bitonio.

"I feel for him," Tretter said. "Obviously with what he's gone through, what he's endured over his career and finally finding that success for the first time and then it being taken away at the last second, it's hard. I feel for all the guys that won't be able to play for the first playoff game.

"Extremely tough. This is just a terrible scenario for him and for everybody involved."

Because Bitonio and Hodge played in the 24-22 win over the Steelers last Sunday, there would seem to be concern that some Pittsburgh players could be infected.

However, McCarthy said the league has "found no evidence of player-to-player transmission from prac-

tices or games throughout this season.”

With Stefanski out, coordinator Alex Van Pelt will assume Cleveland’s play-calling duties.

Steelers coach Mike Tomlin, who spent a few minutes speaking with Stefanski on the field Sunday, said he’s not concerned about playing the Browns twice in eight days.

“I have complete confidence in the protocol outlined by the NFL,” Tomlin said. “We work hard to adhere to it; if we do that, we will minimize risk. That’s my mentality regarding it, so I won’t spend a lot of time worrying about those components.”

The Steelers have their own COVID-19 issues. Starting cornerback Joe Haden and tight end Eric Ebron missed Sunday’s loss after being placed on the COVID-19 list a day earlier. Haden tested positive; his status for the playoff game remains uncertain.

Cleveland has been one of the teams hit hardest by the virus. The Browns were without six players, including star cornerback Denzel Ward, and three assistants last weekend for their biggest game in years after a rash of positive tests.

Also, star defensive end Myles Garrett missed two games after contracting COVID-19. Garrett has had a difficult time shaking the disease and recently said he was still undergoing breathing treatments.

On Monday, Stefanski said he didn’t want to get into “hypotheticals” regarding Ward or any of the other infected players. Now, he won’t be able to be around his players or assistants while getting ready to play at Pittsburgh, where the Browns have lost 17 straight games.

The Browns are the second team to be without its coach during the pandemic. Detroit interim coach Darrell Bevell sat out the Lions’ Dec. 26 game at Tampa Bay because of COVID-19 protocols.

The Baltimore Ravens played a game against Pittsburgh without quarterback and reigning league MVP Lamar Jackson after an outbreak, and the Denver Broncos didn’t have any quarterbacks active for a game at New Orleans due to contact tracing.

Priefer, who is from Cleveland and spent several years on Minnesota’s staff with Stefanski, was an interim coach for one game in 2016 when Mike Zimmer had eye surgery.

AP Sports Writer Will Graves in Pittsburgh contributed to this report.

More AP NFL: <https://apnews.com/NFL> and https://twitter.com/AP_NFL

Trump administration scales back wild bird protections

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The Trump administration on Tuesday finalized changes that weaken the government’s enforcement powers under a century-old law protecting most American wild bird species, brushing aside warnings that billions of birds could die as a result.

Federal wildlife officials have acknowledged the move could result in more deaths of birds such as those that land in oil pits or collide with power lines or other structures.

A U.S. District Court judge in August had blocked the administration’s prior attempt to change how the Migratory Bird Treaty Act is enforced.

But urged on by industry groups, the Trump administration has remained adamant that the act has been wielded inappropriately for decades, to penalize companies and other entities that kill birds accidentally.

More than 1,000 species are covered under the migratory bird law, and the move to lessen enforcement standards have drawn a sharp backlash from organizations that advocate on behalf of an estimated 46 million U.S. birdwatchers.

Conservationists said Tuesday they would push President-elect Joe Biden to reverse the Interior Department rule, which blocks officials from bringing criminal charges unless birds are specifically targeted for death or injury.

Former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dan Ashe and independent scientists have said the change could cause a huge spike in bird deaths — potentially billions of birds in coming decades — at a time when species across North America already are in steep decline.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 70 of 86

A Trump administration analysis of the rule change did not put a number on how many more birds could die. But it said some vulnerable species could decline to the point where they would require protection under the Endangered Species Act.

Industry sources and other human activities — from oil pits and wind turbines, to vehicle strikes and glass building collisions — now kill an estimated 460 million to 1.4 billion birds annually, out of an overall 7.2 billion birds in North America, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and recent studies. Researchers say cats are the biggest single source of deaths, killing more than 2 billion birds a year.

Many companies have sought to reduce bird deaths in recent decades by working in cooperation with wildlife officials, but the incentive to participate in such efforts drops absent the threat of criminal liability.

The 1918 migratory bird law came after many U.S. bird populations had been decimated by hunting and poaching — much of it for feathers for women's hats.

The highest-profile enforcement case bought under the law resulted in a \$100 million settlement by energy company BP, after the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill killed approximately 100,000 birds.

Administration officials said the new rule was meant to match up with a 2017 legal opinion from within the Interior Department that effectively ended criminal enforcement under the act during most of Trump's presidency. In the August court ruling that struck down that legal opinion, U.S. District Judge Valerie Caproni in New York said the law applies to all bird deaths, not just those that were intentional.

But over the decades, federal courts have been split on whether companies can be prosecuted under the migratory bird law, with appeals courts ruling in favor of industry three times and siding against companies twice.

Noah Greenwald with the Center for Biological Diversity said Trump officials were giving oil companies and other industries "a license to kill birds."

Interior Secretary David Bernhardt said in a statement that the change, which goes into effect next month, "simply reaffirms the original meaning and intent of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act."

"The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will not prosecute landowners, industry and other individuals for accidentally killing a migratory bird," Bernhardt said.

An electric industry trade group said it expected its members would continue to take steps to reduce bird deaths. More than 30 million birds are killed annually in collisions with electric lines and from electrocution by power poles, according to government estimates.

"We live and work in the communities that we serve, and have a strong track record of voluntarily working to protect wildlife and their habitats," said Brian Reil with the Edison Electric Institute.

But companies taking voluntary steps won't protect against cases like the BP oil spill, said Defenders of Wildlife senior counsel Jason Rylander.

"Those types of egregious situations should not be beyond the enforcement power of the Fish and Wildlife Service," Rylander said. "There are good actors and bad actors in every industry."

Follow Matthew Brown on Twitter: @matthewbrownap

EXPLAINER: How will voting objections play out in Congress?

By The Associated Press undefined

On Wednesday, the latest extraordinary development in an extraordinary election will unfold. In a joint session of Congress designed as a ceremonial affirmation to President-elect Joe Biden's victory, some Republicans — but hardly all of them — are vowing to object to voting results in one or more states. Despite no evidence, they accuse the elections of being fraudulent.

Though their actions — at least outwardly — are designed to aid President Donald Trump's efforts to stay in office, the efforts face near-certain failure even as they carve an even deeper divide in the American public sphere.

Lisa Mascaro, congressional correspondent for The Associated Press, has been covering Congress since 2010 and is waist-deep in the current, extraordinary saga. Here, she breaks down exactly what's going

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 71 of 86

to happen Wednesday — and why it is highly unlikely to change anything related to Biden's impending inauguration.

WHY WON'T IT WORK?

This effort is all but certain to fail. The main reason is that there's a robust bipartisan majority in both the House and the Senate to accept the results of the election as they've been certified by the states. So the challenge that's being mounted comes from about a dozen Republican senators — I think we're up to 13 now — and as many as 100 House Republicans. But there are a total of 535 members of Congress (minus a few vacancies). Those are the numbers.

Democrats have the majority in the house. They will almost certainly agree with the results from the states that Biden won the election. Republicans are very split over this effort. Trump's efforts to challenge the results has splintered the party in ways we have not seen. The votes Wednesday will show that. This really is a time unlike any other in the Capitol.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Under the Constitution, the Electoral College is the way the votes are counted. Laws have been enacted to govern this process — and a joint session of Congress is sort of the final confirmation. We don't have a national election. The states confirm the results and the states determine the electors and then send that tally up to Washington.

So the House and Senate will convene for this session at 1 p.m. — all the lawmakers gathered in the House chamber to confirm the election results. And that's that Joe Biden won. Even William Barr, Trump's attorney general until last month, has said he found no evidence of fraud on a wide scale that could change the outcome. The outcomes have been repeatedly certified by state officials. That said, a number of Republicans are taking the president's challenge and splitting the party on this issue.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE JOINT SESSION OF CONGRESS CONVENES?

There are about six states that the Republicans concerned about the elections want to challenge. What's going to happen is that results from the states will be brought in in envelopes, and Vice President Mike Pence will open them and read the tallies. As he does, any member can object. And some will. But for any challenge to have currency, it has to have a member of the House and a member of the Senate join in writing. Right now, we have only a few senators saying they will join any of this in writing.

One of the first states to be challenged is expected to be Arizona. A number of House Republicans will challenge that. And Ted Cruz, a senator on the Republican side, has said he will challenge it. If there's a challenge, the proceedings come to a halt. The senators will go back to the Senate and deliberate, and the House members will stay in the house and deliberate. Each will have two hours of deliberation. And then they'll vote and they'll come back together and explain their vote. So this is expected to be a very long day.

WHY SO LONG?

In the Senate, the Republicans are split. So even though they have a majority, they're not all part of this group of a dozen or so who are willing to challenge the election. When the lawmakers come back in the joint session, we'll see that the challenge for Arizona is likely to fail. And we'll see this over and over through the day — Arizona, Pennsylvania, possibly Georgia, Nevada, Michigan and Wisconsin. The only other state we know for sure there'll be a challenge in is Pennsylvania. Sen. Josh Hawley has said he'll challenge it. But the Republican senator from Pennsylvania, Pat Toomey, has said he will not challenge it.

If all these states are challenged, that's many hours of debate. The leadership is expected to try to make certain there's an outcome — that they stay until the process is finished, even if that means working through the night and coming back the next day. The leadership is set to make sure this gets finished.

WHAT'S THE PRECEDENT FOR THIS?

Other vice presidents have also had to preside over their own defeats. Vice President Al Gore was presiding over the chamber in 2001 over the disputed 2000 election. He, too, had to sign off on the tally that essentially prevented him from becoming president. Lawmakers have made challenges before, but nothing on the scope we expect to see this time. So we're in extraordinary, unprecedented times here.

Dividing party, Republicans poised to challenge Biden win

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans mounting an unprecedented challenge to Joe Biden's election win are setting up a congressional showdown on Wednesday that threatens to divide their party and the country for years to come.

With protestors already gathering in Washington to support President Donald Trump, the House and the Senate will convene a joint session to count the electoral votes cast in November's election. Trump has repeatedly said there was widespread fraud, but his claims have been roundly rejected by Republican and Democratic election officials in state after state and by judges, including at the Supreme Court, further cementing Biden's victory.

Trump sees the joint session of Congress as one of his final attempts to overturn the results, even though there is no credible path for that to happen. Echoing Trump's baseless claims, some of his Republican allies in Congress plan to formally object to the results, focusing on six battleground states — Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. But a growing number of their GOP colleagues, especially in the Senate, said they would not sign on.

If an objection has support from both a House member and a senator in writing, then both chambers will vote on it. That could happen three or more times on Wednesday as Republican Sens. Josh Hawley of Missouri, Ted Cruz of Texas, and Kelly Loeffler of Georgia, along with at least ten other GOP senators, have indicated they will support at least some of the House challenges. It is unclear just what the Republican senators will do, but the process could drag into the night as the two chambers will have to consider each objection individually.

There could be more than 100 Republicans in the House willing to object.

The challenge to the presidential election is on a scale unseen since the aftermath of the Civil War, though the typically routine process of confirming Electoral College votes has been hit with brief objections before. In 2017, several House Democrats challenged Trump's win, but Biden, who presided at the time as the vice president, swiftly dismissed them to assert Trump's victory. In 2005, a challenge by a Democratic House member and a Democratic senator to George W. Bush's victory in Ohio was quickly dismissed by both chambers.

The effort this week is expected to be much broader, but is all but certain to fail. Biden is set to be inaugurated Jan. 20.

Republicans had not yet settled on a full strategy the night before the joint session. A late-night meeting on Monday convened by Cruz reached few conclusions, according to two Republicans familiar with the situation and granted anonymity to discuss it. Cruz will object to electoral results from Arizona, another Republican said — likely to be the first objection considered, in a state Biden won.

Hawley has said he will object to the Pennsylvania results, and Loeffler may object to Georgia, where she was vying to keep her seat in a runoff election on Tuesday.

With mounting desperation, Trump declared at a campaign rally for Loeffler and David Perdue in Georgia Monday that he would "fight like hell" to hold on to the presidency and he appealed to Republican lawmakers to reverse his election loss. Perdue is seeking another six years in the Senate, but his term expired Sunday.

The days ahead will be defining for his presidency. Trump is whipping up crowds and people are gathering in Washington, where security is on alert. Lawmakers are being told to arrive early at the Capitol and some are considering sleeping overnight in their offices to ensure they can safely access the building amid the protests.

Vice President Mike Pence will be closely watched as he presides over the session. He is under growing pressure from Trump and others to tip the results in Trump's favor. But Pence has a ceremonial role that does not give him the power to affect the outcome.

"I promise you this: On Wednesday, we'll have our day in Congress," Pence said while himself campaign-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 73 of 86

ing in Georgia ahead of Tuesday's runoff elections that will determine control of the Senate. But he did not detail what that meant.

The high-stakes decisions on whether to ally with Trump are splitting the Republican Party. A range of Republican officials — including Gov. Larry Hogan of Maryland; Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming, the third-ranking House GOP leader; and former House Speaker Paul Ryan — have criticized the GOP efforts to overturn the election. And more than a dozen Republican senators have said they will not support the effort.

"The 2020 election is over," said a statement Sunday from a bipartisan group of 10 senators, including Republicans Susan Collins of Maine, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, Bill Cassidy of Louisiana and Mitt Romney of Utah. Several others have said they, too, will not back objections, including Republican Sens. John Thune of South Dakota, the No. 2 Republican in the Senate who said last month he thought any challenges would go down "like a shot dog."

In a statement Tuesday, South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott said that as he reads the Constitution, "there is no constitutionally viable means for the Congress to overturn an election wherein the states have certified and sent their electors."

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has tried to prevent his party from engaging in the battle, which could help define the GOP in the post-Trump era and create lingering resentments among Republican voters.

Both Hawley and Cruz are potential 2024 presidential contenders, vying for Trump's base of supporters. Some other potential candidates, including Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton, have chosen not to challenge the results.

Cruz's coalition of 13 senators has said it will vote to reject the Electoral College tallies unless Congress launches a commission to immediately conduct an audit of the election results. Congress is unlikely to agree to that.

Facing the criticism from many in his own party, Cruz has attempted to put a finer point on his challenge. The commission remains his focus, he has said, not to undo the election results, even though that would be the practical effect of a successful objection.

"We are going to vote to object to the electors — not to set aside the election, I don't think that would actually be the right thing to do," Cruz said on Mark Levin's conservative talk radio show Monday. "But rather to press for the appointment of an electoral commission."

When the two chambers split to consider the objections and vote, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., will preside over the House. If Pence does not preside over the Senate, it will be Iowa Sen. Chuck Grassley, who serves as Senate pro tempore because he is the longest-serving senator in the majority.

Associated Press writers Kevin Freking in Washington, Bill Barrow in Atlanta, Steve LeBlanc in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Jim Salter in O'Fallon, Missouri, Alan Fram in Washington and Tali Arbel of the Technology Team contributed.

Sharpton: Firing officer who killed Andre Hill is not enough

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and ANDREW WELSH-HUGGINS Report for America/Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — The life of Andre Hill was commemorated Tuesday morning as family and lawmakers called for justice to be brought against the white Columbus police officer who fatally shot the 47-year-old days before Christmas.

"We don't want your sympathy. We want justice," the Rev. Al Sharpton said in delivering Hill's eulogy.

Dozens gathered at the First Church of God in the city's southwest side — clad in their Sunday best and Black Lives Matter masks — to honor Hill's life.

"We all want justice for Andre and change needs to come because, for Black people, we should not have to sacrifice our loved ones in order to be considered humans," Hill's sister Shawna Barrett said at the service.

Inside the church in Columbus, a photo of Hill surrounded by the faces of Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor and the other Black people killed by authorities in recent years leaned against the stage next to his open casket. A white mark was taped on every other chair to facilitate social distancing during the coronavirus

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 74 of 86

pandemic.

Sharpton saluted Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther and other city officials for ordering the firing of Coy less than a week after he shot Hill. But he said it's not enough.

"We cannot have a precedent that if you kill us, you just lose your job and keep living your life as you were," Sharpton told mourners.

State Sen. Hearcel Craig greeted guests at the door. The Democratic lawmaker is a minister at the church where Hill's service was taking place.

"This is the second time in three weeks I have been here to honor the life of a Black man taken by this city's officials," Craig said.

The first was for the funeral of 23-year-old Casey Goodson Jr., who was killed by a Franklin County Sheriff's Office deputy on Dec. 4.

Scarcely three weeks later, Columbus Police Officer Adam Coy can be seen in bodycam footage fatally shooting Hill early Dec. 22 as Hill emerged from a garage holding a cellphone in his left hand with his right hand obscured. He was visiting a family friend at the time.

Hill's daughter, Karissa Hill, broke down in tears while speaking about her father on stage.

"He was my gentle giant. He was my best friend," she said. "We had a special bond that nobody understood."

A city council member introduced a resolution called Andre's Law that would ensure Columbus police officers use their body cameras accurately by turning them on before shootings take place and to give victims aid within an appropriate timeframe.

"Being Black in America gives us cause to be cynical, and we must say enough is enough," Shannon Hardin, the Democratic chair of the Columbus City Council, said at the beginning of Hill's service.

Ginther, U.S. Rep. Joyce Beatty, state Rep. Erica Crawley were among a number of lawmakers and leaders in attendance.

Beatty, a Columbus Democrat and chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, noted that Hill died wearing a Black Lives Matter shirt, which she called a symbol of resistance against excessive police force.

"His death will not merely be a rallying cry at protests. His death will not be in vain. His memory will not be forgotten," Beatty said. "Instead his life will be celebrated as a call for justice, his legacy upheld by all."

In the moments after Hill was fatally shot, additional bodycam footage shows two other Columbus officers rolled Hill over and put handcuffs on him before leaving him alone again. None of them, according to the footage released Thursday, offered any first aid even though Hill was barely moving, groaning and bleeding while laying on the garage floor.

Coy, who had a long history of complaints from citizens, was fired Dec. 28 for failing to activate his body camera before the confrontation and for not providing medical aid to Hill.

Beyond an internal Columbus police department investigation, Ohio's attorney general, the U.S. attorney for central Ohio and the FBI have begun their own probes into the shooting.

Farnoush Amiri is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

VIRUS TODAY: Virus resurges and reshapes itself around world

By The Associated Press undefined

Here's what's happening Tuesday with the pandemic in the U.S.:

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

— January is beginning as a grim month around the globe as the coronavirus resurges and reshapes itself from Britain to Japan to California. It's filling hospitals anew and shutting down livelihoods as governments impose new lockdowns to keep people apart.

Mexico City hospitals hold more virus patients than they ever have. Germany reported one of its high-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 75 of 86

est daily death tolls to date Tuesday. Even virus success story Thailand is fighting an unexpected wave of infections. Doctors are facing or bracing for rising numbers of COVID-19 patients after end-of-year holiday gatherings. And more and more countries are reporting cases of a new, more contagious variant of the virus that has already rampaged across Britain.

— Distribution hiccups and logistical challenges have slowed the initial coronavirus vaccine rollout in California. Gov. Gavin Newsom said the pace is “not good enough.” Only about 1% of California’s 40 million residents have been vaccinated. About 454,000 doses of the vaccine have been administered — just a quarter of the 1.3 million doses the state has received so far. The state’s death toll on Monday topped 26,500 and confirmed cases neared 2.4 million since the pandemic began. California’s hospitals are swamped with more than 22,000 COVID-19 patients.

— Rhode Island emerged as a surprising COVID-19 hot spot last month, briefly posting the highest rate of new cases in the country. The nation’s smallest state has not experienced the number of deaths seen in more populous states. But experts say Rhode Island’s experience offers lessons for other states wrestling with the same factors, including high population density, an aging population and many nursing homes, plus poverty and an economy that relies on low-wage workers who cannot work from home.

THE NUMBERS: According to data through Jan. 4 from Johns Hopkins University, the seven-day rolling average for daily new deaths in the U.S. rose over the past two weeks from 2,655.3 on Dec. 21 to 2,664.9 on Jan. 4.

DEATH TOLL: The number of COVID-19-related deaths in the U.S. stands at 353,628.

QUOTABLE: “We are in a race to prevent infections, bring cases down, protect health systems and save lives while rolling out two highly effective and safe vaccines to high-risk populations. This is not easy. These are the hard miles.” — World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

ICYMI: If you’ve already had the coronavirus, it’s possible you could get it again, but such cases seem to be rare. Some reinfections have been confirmed, but two new studies suggest that would be unusual for at least several months and maybe longer. In one study of people in the U.S., only 0.3% of people who had been infected tested positive for the virus over the next several months. A similarly low rate of reinfections was found in a study of health workers in the U.K. The findings bode well for current COVID-19 vaccines, which trigger the kind of immune responses that the studies found protective.

ON THE HORIZON: Dozens of residents in an impoverished Miami neighborhood are staying fed thanks to the efforts of a woman whose generous acts have sparked widespread giving. Since August, Sherina Jones has been feeding the hungry through free community refrigerators. When word got out that one of the refrigerators was stolen just before Thanksgiving, donations began flooding in. Residents in a neighborhood where people can barely pay their rent came forward to all give a little something that ended up being quite a lot. A former classmate of Jones’ bought two fridges, and a local pastor donated another. Other people contributed enough money so that Jones was able to give Christmas presents to 400 families.

Find AP’s full coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

Fauci: US could soon give 1 million vaccinations a day

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

The U.S. could soon be giving at least a million COVID-19 vaccinations a day despite the sluggish start, Dr. Anthony Fauci said Tuesday, even as he warned of a dangerous next few weeks as the coronavirus surges.

The slow pace is frustrating health officials and a desperate public alike, with only about a third of the first supplies shipped to states used as of Tuesday morning, just over three weeks into the vaccination campaign.

“Any time you start a big program, there’s always glitches. I think the glitches have been worked out,” the nation’s top infectious disease expert told The Associated Press.

Vaccinations have already begun speeding up, reaching roughly half a million injections a day, he pointed

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 76 of 86

out.

Now, with the holidays over, "once you get rolling and get some momentum, I think we can achieve 1 million a day or even more," Fauci said. He called President-elect Joe Biden's goal of 100 million vaccinations in his first 100 days "a very realistic, important, achievable goal."

It's an optimistic prediction considering the logistical hurdles facing states and counties as they struggle to administer rationed vaccine supplies amid rising COVID-19 hospitalizations. Fauci pointed to California's swamped hospitals and exhausted workers even before holiday travel and family gatherings added fuel to the outbreak.

Fauci estimated that between 70% and 85% of the U.S. population will need to be vaccinated to achieve "herd immunity," meaning enough people are protected that it's difficult for the virus to continue spreading. That translates to as many as 280 million people.

He said he is hoping to achieve that by the start of next fall.

The coronavirus has killed more than 356,000 Americans, and the next few weeks could bring another jump in infections nationally that "could make matters even worse," Fauci said.

The Trump administration had promised to provide states enough vaccine for 20 million people in December, and fell short even as states struggled with their role — getting shots into people's arms, starting mostly with health care workers and nursing home residents.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, roughly 4.8 million doses of more than 17 million delivered had been used by Tuesday morning. That is probably an undercount because of delays in reporting, but it is far fewer than experts had hoped.

Still, Fauci pointed to a celebrated moment in history to back up his projection of ramped-up inoculations: In 1947, New York City vaccinated more than 6 million people against a smallpox outbreak in less than a month — and "one of them was me as a 6-year-old boy."

If a single city could do such mass vaccinations in weeks, "this is not something that is far-fetched" for an entire country, he said. "You can use school auditoriums, you can use stadiums. You can really ramp up the contribution of pharmacies."

At that stepped-up pace, the country could see an impact on infections as early as spring — and hopefully by early fall, "you could start thinking about returning to some degree of normality," Fauci said.

Amid mounting frustration over the slow vaccine rollout, governors and other politicians are talking tough and in some cases proposing to bend the rules to get people vaccinated more quickly. Health care workers and nursing home patients are still getting priority in most places.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo threatened to fine hospitals that don't use their vaccine allotments fast enough, saying: "Move it quickly. We're serious."

Gov. Henry McMaster of South Carolina said hospitals and health workers have until Jan. 15 to get a shot or they will have to "move to the back of the line." As of Monday, the state had given out less than half its initial allotment of the Pfizer vaccine to about 43,000 people.

In North Carolina, Gov. Roy Cooper called in the National Guard to help speed things up.

In California, where just 1% of the population has been vaccinated, Gov. Gavin Newsom said he wants to give providers the flexibility to dispense shots to people not on the priority list if doses are in danger of going to waste.

New York's mayor suggested vaccine eligibility be widened to get things moving.

There's no sign yet that a more contagious variant of the coronavirus first found in Britain — which forced England into another national lockdown on Tuesday — will outwit the vaccines. Fauci's colleagues at the National Institutes of Health are doing their own testing to be sure, just as vaccine manufacturers are.

While the variant has been found in several states "it is certainly not dominant," Fauci said. "We don't know where it's going. We're going to follow it very carefully."

The more contagious virus makes it even more important that people follow the public health precautions Fauci has preached for months, including wearing a mask, keeping your distance and avoiding crowds.

In addition, scientists are warily watching a different variant found in South Africa but not yet reported in

the U.S. There have been reports that the mutation might make treatments called monoclonal antibodies less likely to work. Fauci said he couldn't confirm that, but U.S. scientists will investigate.

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Judge bans Proud Boys leader from Washington after arrest

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A judge has banned the leader of the Proud Boys, a far-right extremist group, from the nation's capital after he was accused of vandalizing a Black Lives Matter banner at a historic Black church and found with high-capacity firearm magazines when he was arrested.

The order bans Henry "Enrique" Tarrío, 36, from entering the District of Columbia, with very limited exceptions to meet with his attorney or appear in court. It comes a day after he was arrested arriving in Washington ahead of protests planned by supporters of President Donald Trump to coincide with the congressional vote expected Wednesday to affirm Joe Biden's election victory.

Tarrío was arrested Monday by the Metropolitan Police Department and accused of burning a Black Lives Matter banner that was torn down from a historic Black church in downtown Washington last month. He was charged with destruction of property and is also facing a weapons charges after officers found him with the firearm magazines when he was arrested.

According to the criminal complaint, when police pulled Tarrío over on the warrant for vandalizing the Black Lives Matter sign, officers found two unloaded magazines emblazoned with the Proud Boys logo in his bag that have a capacity of 30 rounds each for AR-15 or M4-style weapons.

A large Black Lives Matter sign was ripped from Asbury United Methodist Church property, torn and set aflame in December. Tarrío was seen with the sign in video of the incident posted on YouTube, according to a police report.

Tarrío admitted to police, according to their report, that he posted a confession on the right-wing site Parler that he had set fire to the sign. "There was no hate crime committed," he wrote. "It isn't about the color of the someone's skin. Against the wishes of my attorney I am here today to admit that I am the person responsible for the burning of this sign. And I am not ashamed of what I did because I didn't do it out of hate ... I did it out of love."

Tarrío also said, according to a police report, that he sells the clips and the ones he was carrying were purchased by a customer. "I had a customer that bought those two mags, and they got returned 'cause it was a wrong address," Tarrío said, according to court papers. "And I contacted him, and he's like, 'I'm going to be in DC,' so I'm like, 'Okay, I'll take 'em to you.' So that I can show you proofI can give you, like my invoices and stuff like that from it, and, like, the USPS shipping label."

He was arrested in a tunnel near the Capitol, ahead of what is expected to be large far-right protests gathering in D.C. according to Tarrío's online postings: "The ProudBoys will turn out in record numbers on Jan 6th but this time with a twist," saying they'd spread out incognito.

Tarrío's attorney did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment.

EXPLAINER: Breaking down Biden's Iran problem

By MATTHEW LEE, ROBERT BURNS and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Joe Biden has an Iran problem. And, it's getting more complicated by the day.

Thanks to provocative moves by Iran and less-than-coherent actions by the outgoing Trump administration, the president-elect is facing an increasingly uncertain situation when it comes to Iran, a decades-long American nemesis that has been a target of blame for much of the Middle East's instability.

In the past week alone, President Donald Trump's team has dispatched B-52 bombers to the Persian Gulf in response to alleged Iranian attack planning and reversed an order to bring home the USS Nimitz,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 78 of 86

the only U.S. aircraft carrier in the region.

On Monday, Iran not only announced it had resumed advanced uranium enrichment in violation of the 2015 nuclear deal but also seized a South Korean-flagged oil tanker and its crew. This combustible combination coming just two weeks before the president-elect's inauguration threatens to derail or at least delay Biden's hopes to return the U.S. to the nuclear accord that Trump withdrew from in 2018.

A look at the latest developments:

DOES THIS AMOUNT TO A DANGEROUS ESCALATION OF TENSIONS?

Concerns have run high for some weeks about Iran stoking tensions, particularly around the Jan. 3 one-year anniversary of the U.S. killing of a top Iranian general in Iraq. U.S. officials have been on heightened alert for possible retaliation from Iran, including from allied militia in Iraq that have previously launched rockets at U.S. facilities in the country.

Although neither the enrichment announcement nor the seizure of the South Korean-flagged ship appeared linked to the death of the general, the two moves did raise tensions in the region, which has long been unpredictable.

DOES MILITARY ACTION SEEM LIKELY?

Part of the worry is that a single wrong move — or intentional provocation — has the potential to trigger war.

There is no sign the U.S. is planning an attack on Iran, although Trump has said he would respond to any attack by Iran or its affiliated militias in Iraq that resulted in the death of an American. The U.S. military has long had a wide variety of weapons and troops in the Middle East that could be called on if hostilities broke out. But Trump himself has derided the idea of getting further mired in Middle East wars.

The scenario that worries U.S. military officials is Iran conducting an attack, either inside Iraq or elsewhere in the Gulf region, that would prompt Trump to retaliate, leading to escalation that could spark a wider war. That is part of the reason the U.S. has kept an aircraft carrier in the region on a near-continuous basis since May 2019, when the White House first asserted that Iran was planning attacks on U.S. personnel.

WHY WOULD THE NIMITZ BE ORDERED HOME, THEN SENT BACK?

The highly unusual Nimitz flip-flop by the acting secretary of defense, Christopher Miller, seemed to undercut U.S. Central Command's efforts to convince Iran that it would not pay to launch an attack on U.S. forces.

The huge vessel, with a complement of attack and support aircraft, was literally leaving the region when it received word to turn around and head back.

Sending the Nimitz home had been on the table for weeks, since the carrier was on a lengthy deployment and was scheduled to be home by the end of 2020. Its tour was extended by a few weeks to provide backup for U.S. troop withdrawals in Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia. But as tensions with Iran rose in mid-December, Central Command wanted to keep the Nimitz nearby. Instead, on Dec. 31, Miller announced that he had ordered it to return home. Three days later, he reversed himself and said it would stay.

Canceling the go-home order for the Nimitz took some defense officials by surprise, suggesting that the decision may have been made at the White House rather than as a result of new arguments from military officers.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF FLYING B-52 BOMBERS IN THE GULF?

These long-range bomber flights aren't commonplace, but they've become a bit more routine in recent weeks as a show of military might. There have been three B-52 bomber missions to the region in less than two months, most recently on Dec. 30.

The roundtrip flights from the United States are meant to show how quickly bombers can get to the area. They can be equipped with either conventional or nuclear missiles. Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, the top U.S. commander for the Middle East, made the message clear this week, saying, "We do not seek conflict, but no one should underestimate our ability to defend our forces or to act decisively in response to any attack."

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR BIDEN'S IRAN POLICY?

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 79 of 86

Biden's transition team has declined to comment in detail about the latest developments and what they may mean for their plans. But, Biden and his top national security aides have laid out their approach to Iran in broad strokes. Top of that list is bringing Iran back into compliance with the nuclear deal and then expanding that pact to take into account non-nuclear behavior that wasn't covered by the initial agreement.

Biden, himself, supported the Iran deal but with some reservations. Former aides say he was convinced the agreement was solid but had concerns, including about whether it would ultimately prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. Biden's pick for national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, was involved in the very early days of the Obama administration's outreach to Iran but has won praise from deal critics for his skepticism of certain elements of the agreement.

In one sign that talks with Iran may be a Biden priority, a person close to the transition said the president-elect intends to nominate Wendy Sherman, the Obama administration's chief negotiator with Iran for the 2015 deal, to be deputy secretary of state. Sherman, who has also been involved in previous negotiations with North Korea, may face a tough confirmation process due to Republican complaints about how she handled the Iran talks.

In addition, the person close to the transition said Jon Finer, who served as former Secretary of State John Kerry's chief of staff during the Iran negotiations, would be named to be Sullivan's deputy at the National Security Council. The person was not authorized to discuss the personnel choices before they were publicly announced and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Iran, however, has said it will only return to compliance if the U.S. rejoins the deal and rescinds sanctions that Trump reimposed over the past two years. At the same time, Biden aides have said Iran cannot win sanctions relief unless and until it respects the deal.

Iran's latest actions, coupled with the Trump administration's movement of forces, complicate diplomacy and raise the risk of miscalculation, particularly as tensions continue to run high between Iran and its neighbors.

The increased tensions, which have triggered the highest alert levels for U.S. personnel in Iraq, may make it difficult for the incoming Biden administration to pivot the military more aggressively toward Russia and China.

EXPLAINER: Why Georgia won't affect Electoral College count

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Two high-stakes runoff elections in Georgia are poised to determine which party controls the Senate over the next two years. What the contests won't do is affect the certification of Electoral College results by Congress.

Republicans allied with President Donald Trump are pledging Wednesday to try to undo Democrat Joe Biden's victory by mounting a challenge to the election results during a joint session of Congress, a last-ditch effort that is almost certain to fail. Lawmakers who were sworn into office this week will vote on the objections.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Ever since Trump lost to President-elect Biden, he has made repeated and false claims that widespread voter fraud cost him the presidency. Yet almost every single legal challenge filed on his behalf has been rejected by the courts, including the Supreme Court. His own attorney general said there was no evidence of widespread fraud.

That hasn't swayed some of Trump's allies in Congress, who are launching their hail-Mary attempt during the Electoral College certification to subvert the will of voters on Trump's behalf.

Trump can count on about a dozen conservative senators, as well as scores of House Republicans, to press his case by objecting to the certification of results from some crucial battleground states.

Democrats, however, control the House, and are certain to reject any effort to overturn the outcome. Additionally, many Senate Republicans oppose the pro-Trump efforts.

That all but guarantees that after hours of debate, Congress will certify President-elect Biden's victory,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 80 of 86

clearing the path for his inauguration Jan. 20.

WHAT'S GOING ON IN GEORGIA

Georgia's had two Senate seats on the November ballot. But because none of the candidates garnered more than 50% of the vote, it forced dueling runoff races between the top two vote-getters in each contest.

Republican David Perdue, who is seeking a second term in office, faces Democratic challenger Jon Ossoff. Separately, appointed GOP Sen. Kelly Loeffler is running against Democrat Raphael Warnock to complete the remainder of retired Republican Sen. Johnny Isakson's term.

Republicans need to win only one of the races to secure a narrow 51-49 majority. But if Democrats take both seats, the Senate would be divided 50-50, with Vice President-elect Kamala Harris poised to cast tie-breaking votes once she takes office and assumes her duties as the Senate's presiding officer.

Both Loeffler and Perdue have run as staunchly pro-Trump candidates.

Regardless of the outcome of their races, it won't change the calculus in Congress when it comes to the Electoral College certification process. And thanks to quirks in Georgia election law, Perdue won't be able to cast a vote Wednesday even if he wins.

Because Perdue's contest went to a Jan. 5 runoff that is being held after his term ended, he is not a senator right now. If he wins, he can retake his seat after the results of his election are certified later this month and Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp issues a certificate stating he won.

Loeffler, on the other hand, is still a senator. Her appointment by Kemp remains in effect until the winner of the election is sworn in.

WHAT DOES THE LAW REQUIRE?

The Constitution requires Congress to meet and count the electoral votes. Bipartisan representatives of both chambers read the results from each state out loud and do an official count.

Any member can stand up and object to a state's vote on any grounds. But the presiding officer will not hear the objection unless it is in writing and signed by both a member of the House and a member of the Senate.

For the objection to be sustained, both chambers must agree to it by a simple majority vote. If they do not both agree, the original electoral votes are counted with no changes.

Biden's electoral win over Trump was decisive, 306-232. Trump won by the same margin in 2016, which he heralded at the time as a "landslide."

Gulf Arab leaders sign declaration to ease rift with Qatar

By AYA BATRAWY and AMR NABIL Associated Press

AL-ULA, Saudi Arabia (AP) — Gulf Arab leaders signed a declaration Tuesday to ease a rift with Qatar, following Saudi Arabia's decision to end a 3 1/2-year embargo of the tiny energy-rich country that deeply divided regional U.S. security allies and frayed social ties across the Arabian Peninsula.

Saudi Arabia also said it was restoring full diplomatic relations with Qatar, although it was not clear how soon the step would be followed by the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt, which had joined the kingdom in isolating the country over its regional policies.

On Monday night, the eve of the Gulf Arab leaders' summit in the ancient desert city of Al-Ula, the Saudis announced they would open the kingdom's airspace and borders to Qatar, the first major step toward ending the diplomatic crisis that began in 2017, when the Trump administration was starting to raise pressure on Iran.

It was unclear what, if any, significant concessions Qatar had made before the summit. Still, an immediate shift in tone was palpable as one of Qatar's Al Jazeera Arabic news Twitter accounts shared photos of the Riyadh and Abu Dhabi skylines on Tuesday following years of critical coverage.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan told reporters after the summit that diplomatic relations would be restored in full with Qatar, although no time frame was given.

"We are extremely pleased with having been able to achieve this very important breakthrough that we believe will contribute very much to the stability and security of all our nations in the region," Prince Faisal

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 81 of 86

said. "We are at a place where everybody is satisfied and happy ... the returning of diplomatic relations, flights, etc., all of that will now go back to normal."

The diplomatic breakthrough followed a final push by the outgoing Trump administration and Kuwait to mediate the dispute. It also came as Saudi Arabia seeks to unify Arab ranks ahead of the incoming administration of President-elect Joe Biden, which is expected to take a firmer stand toward the kingdom and re-engage with Iran.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif congratulated Qatar "for the success of its brave resistance to pressure & extortion." He also said in a message to other Arab leaders that "Iran is neither an enemy nor threat — especially with your reckless patron on his way out," referring to Trump.

Dania Thafer, executive director of Gulf International Forum, said Saudi Arabia is concerned about whether Biden will draw down the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf that had expanded under President Donald Trump and enter back into nuclear negotiations with Iran.

"If that is the case, then the (Arab) states need to respond with a regional solution to security. And I think resolving the Gulf crisis is one step forward towards that direction," she said.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who embraced Qatar's emir upon his arrival at the summit, said the region needed to unite and face challenges posed by Iran's proxies and its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

He said the declaration signed by Gulf leaders and Egypt "emphasizes Arab and Gulf solidarity and stability, and reinforces the continuity of friendship and brotherhood between our countries."

The four countries that jointly boycotted Qatar were hoping their embargo and media blitz would pressure it to end its close relations with Turkey and Iran. Egypt and the UAE view the support by Qatar and Turkey of Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood as a security threat. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are primarily concerned about Qatar's ties with Iran.

The boycott failed to change Doha's stance, however, instead buoying its young ruler domestically as patriotic fervor swept through Qatar in support of his resolve. It also pushed Qatar closer to Turkey and Iran, which rushed to assist the ultra-wealthy Gulf state as it faced medical and food supply shortages in the first days of the embargo.

While the Saudi decision to end its embargo marks a milestone toward resolving the dispute, the path toward full reconciliation is far from guaranteed. The rift between Abu Dhabi and Doha has been deepest, with the UAE and Qatar at sharp ideological odds.

The UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash, tweeted late Monday that his country was keen to restore Gulf unity but cautioned: "We have more work to do."

The conflict in Libya remains a contentious issue, with Egypt and the UAE supporting military commander Khalifa Hifter, who launched a 2019 assault on a Tripoli-based bloc backed by Turkey and Qatar.

Thafer said the issues that sparked the row haven't been eliminated.

"The core tensions are still lingering, and that leaves a major question mark on how will they move forward," she said. The summit and the declaration signed in Al-Ula to support Gulf unity "were confidence-building mechanisms more than they were a full reconciliation."

The presence of Qatar's Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani at the summit marked the first time he's attended the Gulf Cooperation Council meeting in Saudi Arabia since the boycott began. He sent an envoy to the past two summits there.

Images later appeared on social media of the Saudi crown prince driving Sheikh Tamim around Al-Ula's historic sites after the summit and before his return to Qatar.

Egypt's foreign minister also attended the meeting of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council, which comprises Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar. The meeting was chaired by the Saudi crown prince rather than his father, King Salman.

Qatar's finance minister arrived in Cairo on Tuesday for the opening of a luxury hotel on the Nile that was developed by the Qatari real estate company Diar. It is the first visit to Egypt by a senior Qatari official since the crisis began. Egypt's finance minister also attended, as did U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin.

Saudi Arabia's decision to end the embargo not only underscored the kingdom's assertion of its heavy-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 82 of 86

weight position among Arab states, but also its regional leadership, which has been challenged at times by the UAE's unilateral and politically shrewd moves.

This year's GCC summit is the first since Washington brokered normalization deals between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco in rapid succession, marking a major shift in regional alliances.

Trump adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner, who spearheaded those deals, was at the summit for the signing of the Gulf declaration.

The dispute had pitted regional U.S. allies against one another at a time when the Trump administration was working to pressure Iran. It also separated families who had intermarried with Qataris and ended years of visa-free travel for Qataris in parts of the Gulf.

Thafer said the dispute was seen as "low-hanging fruit" that the Trump administration felt it had the leverage to try to resolve quickly.

Qatar's only land border with Saudi Arabia, which it relied on for the import of dairy products, construction materials and other goods, has been mostly closed since June 2017.

The boycotting countries made a list of demands on Qatar that year, including that it shutter its flagship Al-Jazeera news network and terminate Turkish military presence in Qatar, which is also home to a major U.S. military base. Qatar rejected the demands and has denied support of extremists.

Batrawy reported from Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Associated Press writers Isabel Debre and Malak Harb in Dubai, and Samy Magdy in Cairo contributed.

If I've already had the coronavirus, can I get it again?

By The Associated Press undefined

If I've already had the coronavirus, can I get it again?

It's possible, but such cases seem to be rare.

It's not unusual to develop some immunity to a virus after an infection, since our bodies are generally better at recognizing and fighting off bugs they've encountered before. And that seems to be the case with the coronavirus as well, though scientists are still trying to figure out how long any protection might last.

Some reinfections have been confirmed, but two new studies suggest that's very unusual.

In one, only two out of 1,265 health workers in the United Kingdom who were previously infected ended up testing positive again for the coronavirus in the following six months. In another study of people in the U.S., only 0.3% of people who had been infected tested positive for the virus over the next several months – around the same rate of positivity as the U.K study.

The findings bode well for the COVID-19 vaccines that are being rolled out, which trigger the kind of immune responses that the studies found protective.

The AP is answering your questions about the coronavirus in this series. Submit them at: FactCheck@AP.org.

Read previous Viral Questions:

Can employers make COVID-19 vaccination mandatory?

Will children be able to get COVID-19 vaccines?

Which winter sports are safest to play during the pandemic?

American Airlines is grounding emotional-support animals

By DAVID KOENIG AP Airlines Writer

DALLAS (AP) — American Airlines is banning emotional-support animals in a move that will force most owners to pay extra if they want their pets to travel with them.

The airline said Tuesday that it will allow animals in the cabin free of charge only if they are trained service dogs. The change takes effect Monday, although passengers who already bought tickets can fly

with a companion animal until Feb. 1.

The move follows a similar decision by Alaska Airlines and is likely to be copied by other carriers. The U.S. Transportation Department cleared the way for the crackdown against companion animals last month.

American said passengers with a service dog will need to complete a government form vouching for the dog's health, training and temperament.

Other animals, including dogs not trained as service dogs, will only be able to fly in the cargo hold or a kennel that fits under a seat in the cabin. Either way, American will collect a pet fee ranging from \$125 to several hundred dollars.

Jessica Tyler, American's president of cargo, said the rules will help passengers with service animals and protect employees on planes and in airports.

The number of passengers flying with companion animals grew rapidly in recent years, with some saying the animals helped them overcome anxiety and other issues. Passengers only needed a note from a health professional, and a cottage industry sprang up to provide those notes along with vests and other accoutrements for their animals.

Airlines and particularly flight attendants took a more critical view, saying passengers were exploiting a loophole in federal regulations to avoid pet fees. In a few cases, including some involving serious injuries, companion animals bit other passengers.

Last month, the Transportation Department settled the matter, siding mostly with the airlines. It said carriers were free to ban any animal other than dogs formally trained to help people with physical or psychological disabilities.

The department estimated that under the new rules airlines will scoop up \$59.6 million a year in pet fees.

David Koenig can be reached at www.twitter.com/airlinewriter

Rescuers in Norway lose hope of finding landslide survivors

By JAN M. OLSEN Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Norwegian authorities said Tuesday they have given up hope of finding survivors of a landslide that swept away homes in a residential area almost a week ago, killing seven people.

Three people are still missing from the Dec. 30 disaster that destroyed at least nine buildings with more than 30 apartments in the village of Ask, located 25 kilometers (16 miles) northeast of Oslo. The landslide was among the worst in modern Norwegian history.

"It is with great sadness that I must say that we no longer have any hope of finding people alive after the landslide" local police chief Ida Melbo Oeystese said.

"We have done everything in our power. But this natural disaster had significant forces. Those who died have died relatively quickly," she added, visibly moved.

Search crews will continue "working to find everyone who is missing," Oeystese said.

The police chief spoke hours after a small dog was found alive in the rubble, raising hopes for rescuers. The dog was found late Monday "in good condition" in an area where rescuers had been working, police spokesman Ivar Myrboe said.

Another, smaller landslide just before midday Tuesday forced the search teams to evacuate the site and no one was injured, police said. One rescuer, Kenneth Wangen, said the landslide was "not dramatic" and that search teams received advance warning by drones and from other emergency personnel.

Geologists will assess the site before the search continues, authorities said.

Since the original landslide, search teams with dogs have been looking through the rubble in below-freezing temperatures while helicopters and drones with heat-detecting cameras flew over the ravaged hillside in the village of 5,000 residents.

At least 1,000 people were evacuated. Some buildings are now hanging on the edge of a deep ravine, which grew to be 700-meters-long ((2,300 feet) and 300-meters-wide (1,000 feet).

The exact cause of the landslide isn't yet known, but the area has a lot of quick clay, which can rapidly

change from solid to liquid form when it is disturbed. Experts said the quick clay, combined with excessive precipitation and damp winter weather, may have contributed to the landslide.

In 2005, Norwegian authorities warned people not to construct residential buildings in the Ask area, saying it was "a high-risk zone" for landslides, but houses were built there later in the decade.

A landslide in central Norway in 1893 killed 116 people. It was reportedly up to 40 times bigger than the one in Ask, where somewhere between 1.4 million and 2 million cubic meters of land tumbled down.

Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg said she received the news about the abandoned search for survivors "with great sadness" and that her thoughts were with the friends and families of the victims.

One Good Thing: Theft leads to community giving in Miami

By KELLI KENNEDY Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — Two days before Thanksgiving, on the eve of a turkey giveaway for dozens of jobless residents in an impoverished Miami neighborhood, Sherina Jones got word that one of the free community refrigerators she'd been stocking was stolen.

It could have been a holiday disaster. But it turned into a Christmas miracle.

Jones had been helping to feed the poor in Miami for months. Early on in the coronavirus pandemic, she was forced to shut down her beauty salon. By scrimping she managed to get by, but she knew that many in her mostly Black, low-income neighborhood were still hurting.

Worried that children were missing meals after COVID-19 closed schools, the 36-year-old cancer survivor used her meager savings to buy her first community refrigerator in August.

"Take what you need, donate what you don't," the sign on the fridge read.

Jones gets up at 5:30 every morning to serve hot breakfasts to residents in need. One homeless man who was a frequent visitor later told her proudly that he'd gained 10 pounds (4.5 kilograms).

With an online fundraising effort she named Village Freedge, Jones expanded to three refrigerators, which she placed in different neighborhoods of Miami. About half of her clients are homeless; others are day laborers who take to-go lunches or single moms who can't feed their kids.

When one of the refrigerators was stolen just before the Thanksgiving Day turkey giveaway, it was more than a theft. It felt like an act against a community in need.

"I cried for three days," Jones said. "I was devastated that someone would do something to hurt the community. You hurt the 80-something people I feed a day."

Just when it seemed the Grinch-like act would ruin the holiday, something magical happened: Residents of a community where many can barely afford rent pulled together, each giving a little until they ended up collecting quite a lot.

Jones' former high-school classmate Tamesha Glegg hadn't been in touch with Jones for years, but saw a post on social media and felt a tug on her heart. She and her husband decided to replace the fridge — and then some.

"I said, 'Let's just buy her two of them,'" said Glegg, an ICU nurse. "I just really love what she's doing. I really feel like it's our spiritual duty to do those things."

The Rev. Michael Daily heard about the stolen refrigerator on the news. He works at a community agency that helps local churches and knew that many parishioners were counting on those meals.

He used agency funds to buy Jones a fancy double-door refrigerator and enlisted a construction worker to help build protective housing so it can't be stolen. A group of artists designed T-shirts and donated the proceeds.

The Community Agency advertising firm scaled back on a fancy holiday party, donating huge boxes of food and about \$3,500 for the refrigerator project.

All together, more than 330 people raised over \$23,000 on a fundraising website.

Even after the pandemic upended her job, Joanne O'Brien still helped stock the refrigerator occasionally. But she wanted to do more. Jones introduced her to a single mom who feeds her kids breakfast from one of the community refrigerators. O'Brien bought the family a Christmas tree, as well as desks for online

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 85 of 86

schooling and curtains and bedding for the home.

"The kids were jumping up and down when I was finished with the tree," O'Brien said.

The 4-year-old told her with grave concern that this was going to be a bad Christmas with no presents, but O'Brien secretly purchased and collected toys, clothes and stockings with the children's names.

The community's response to a toy drive in December allowed Jones to give away dozens of bicycles, dolls and other presents to 400 families.

Jones still operates three free community refrigerators. She uses the extra ones to store food and donations. She has volunteers, but mostly runs the charity with her mom and aunt.

She has one leftover holiday wish: a van to transport food and warehouse space to store it in. She has applied for nonprofit status and is transitioning to become a food bank.

"People come by and stock the fridge during the evenings or buy a bulk of things and drop it off. I'm so appreciative," she said. "We've all come together to take care of each other."

"One Good Thing" is a series that highlights individuals whose actions provide glimmers of joy in hard times — stories of people who find a way to make a difference, no matter how small. Read the collection of stories at <https://apnews.com/hub/one-good-thing>.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Jan. 6, the sixth day of 2021. There are 359 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 6, 2001, with Vice President Al Gore presiding in his capacity as president of the Senate, Congress formally certified George W. Bush the winner of the bitterly contested 2000 presidential election.

On this date:

In 1412, tradition holds that Joan of Arc was born this day in Domremy.

In 1540, England's King Henry VIII married his fourth wife, Anne of Cleves. (The marriage lasted about six months.)

In 1912, New Mexico became the 47th state.

In 1919, the 26th president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, died in Oyster Bay, New York, at age 60.

In 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his State of the Union address, outlined a goal of "Four Freedoms": Freedom of speech and expression; the freedom of people to worship God in their own way; freedom from want; freedom from fear.

In 1968, a surgical team at Stanford University School of Medicine in Palo Alto, California, led by Dr. Norman Shumway, performed the first U.S. adult heart transplant, placing the heart of a 43-year-old man in a 54-year-old patient (the recipient died 15 days later).

In 1993, jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, 75, died in Englewood, N.J.; ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev died in suburban Paris at age 54.

In 1994, figure skater Nancy Kerrigan was clubbed on the leg by an assailant at Detroit's Cobo Arena; four men, including the ex-husband of Kerrigan's rival, Tonya Harding, went to prison for their roles in the attack. (Harding pleaded guilty to conspiracy to hinder prosecution, but denied any advance knowledge about the assault.)

In 1998, in a new bid to expand health insurance, President Clinton unveiled a proposal to offer Medicare coverage to hundreds of thousands of uninsured Americans from ages 55 to 64.

In 2003, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein accused U.N. inspectors of engaging in "intelligence work" instead of searching for suspected nuclear, chemical and biological weapons in his country.

In 2005, former Ku Klux Klan leader Edgar Ray Killen was arrested on murder charges 41 years after three civil rights workers were slain in Mississippi. (Killen was later convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Jan. 06, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 186 ~ 86 of 86

60 years in prison; he died in prison in 2018.)

In 2017, Congress certified Donald Trump's presidential victory over the objections of a handful of House Democrats, with Vice President Joe Biden pronouncing, "It is over."

Ten years ago: U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced he would cut \$78 billion from the Defense Department budget over the next five years, an effort to trim fat in light of the nation's ballooning deficit. Vang Pao, a revered former general in the Royal Army of Laos who'd led thousands of Hmong guerrillas in a CIA-backed secret army in the Vietnam War, died in Clovis, California, at age 81.

Five years ago: North Korea said that it had conducted a powerful hydrogen bomb test, a claim greeted with widespread skepticism. Ken Griffey Jr. and Mike Piazza were elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Actor-comedian Pat Harrington Jr., 86, died in Los Angeles.

One year ago: Throngs of Iranians attended the funeral of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who'd been killed in a U.S. airstrike in Iraq; Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei wept while praying over the casket. Former White House national security adviser John Bolton said he was "prepared to testify" if subpoenaed by the Senate in its impeachment trial of President Donald Trump. (The Senate voted against calling witnesses.) Facebook said it would ban "deepfake" videos, the false but realistic clips created with artificial intelligence, as it stepped up efforts to fight online manipulation. As he recovered from surgery on his injured hip, Alabama quarterback Tua Tagovailoa said he would enter the NFL draft. (He would be the fifth player drafted, and was chosen by the Miami Dolphins.)

Today's Birthdays: Country musician Joey Miskulin (Riders in the Sky) is 72. Former FBI director Louis Freeh is 71. Rock singer-musician Kim Wilson (The Fabulous Thunderbirds) is 70. Singer Jett Williams is 68. Actor-comedian Rowan Atkinson is 66. World Golf Hall of Famer Nancy Lopez is 64. Actor Scott Bryce is 63. Rhythm-and-blues singer Kathy Sledge is 62. TV chef Nigella Lawson is 61. Rhythm-and-blues singer Eric Williams (BLACKstreet) is 61. Actor Norman Reedus is 52. TV personality Julie Chen is 51. Actor Danny Pintauro (TV: "Who's the Boss?") is 45. Actor Cristela Alonzo is 42. Actor Rinko Kikuchi (RINK'-oh kih-KOO'-chee) is 40. Actor Eddie Redmayne is 39. Retired NBA All-Star Gilbert Arenas is 39. Actor-comedian Kate McKinnon is 37. Actor Diona Reasonover is 37. Rock singer Alex Turner (Arctic Monkeys) is 35.