

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 1 of 67

- [1- All-Star Football Game](#)
- [2- SD News Watch: Inventory down, prices up in booming used car market in South Dakota](#)
- [5- School Board Agenda](#)
- [6- Groton Transit Fundraiser Ad](#)
- [7- Prairie Doc: When Money is No Object](#)
- [8- Weekly Vikings Roundup](#)
- [9- Tower painting concludes](#)
- [10- Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021 Runs Away With Early Lead In Victory](#)
- [10- Truss Pros/Precision Wall Systems Ad](#)
- [11- Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs](#)
- [12- Weather Pages](#)
- [15- Daily Devotional](#)
- [16- 2021 Community Events](#)
- [17- News from the Associated Press](#)



All-Star Football Game

Groton Area Senior Jaimen Farrell participated in the SD All-Star Football game for the Blue team held in Vermillion last Saturday. The blue squad won 25-13. Groton Area Football Coach Shaun Wanner was also an assistant coach for the Blue team. (Courtesy Photo)



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

Inventory down, prices up in booming used car market in South Dakota

Andrew Rasmussen
South Dakota News Watch

Several economic outcomes from the COVID-19 pandemic have coalesced to create a booming used auto sales market in South Dakota, resulting in low vehicle inventories, strong consumer competition for cars and skyrocketing prices.

Good used cars at affordable prices are hard to come by and they don't last long, creating a fast-moving, high-priced market rarely seen in the state, according to some South Dakota auto dealers.

"It's been mind-blowing," said Dusty Johnson, general manager at CarSwap auto sales in Sioux Falls.

Johnson, an auto salesman for 18 years, said he is selling cars at a fast pace in Sioux Falls but is also seeing demand for cars from buyers living far beyond the borders of the state. The inventory shortage and high sticker prices in South Dakota are being seen in used car markets across the country.

"We've never sold so many cars or delivered so many cars to the coasts," he said.

The unusual market has its roots in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Production of new cars was slowed due to idled auto manufacturing plants during the pandemic. A sudden shortage of microchips that control how modern vehicles operate also led to vastly reduced output of new cars by manufacturers.

In turn, the reduced inventory of new cars has put more sales pressure on the used car market. With fewer used cars being traded in during new car transactions, fewer cars are available at auction to used car dealers, and the few cars that make it to a lot are selling fast and at much higher-than-normal prices.

Meanwhile, some buyers may have delayed purchasing a car in 2020 due to concerns over catching the coronavirus. Demand is now extremely high among potential buyers, many who are flush with pandemic stimulus money or tax-return funds. Lending rates also remain low, further boosting the prices dealers can charge and raising the price range consumers can reach into.

Across the country, the prices of used vehicles have increased more than 17% in the past 90 days and have jumped by more than 30% over the past year, according to CarGurus.com, a national sales website.

The average used car fair purchase price in South Dakota was about \$25,900 in the first five months of 2021, said Brenna Buehler, a spokeswoman for Cox Automotive, a national car sales group. Nationwide, the average used car fair purchase price was \$25,332.



Dusty Johnson, general manager at CarSwap auto sales in Sioux Falls, said the high consumer demand and low inventory of used cars in South Dakota has created a booming market he has never seen in his early two decades of selling cars. Photo: Andrew Rasmussen, South

Dakota News Watch

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 3 of 67

Prices for new cars are also on the rise across the U.S., but even more so in South Dakota, where trucks and sport utility vehicles dominate the market. The state had an average fair purchase price of \$44,500 for a new vehicle compared to the national average of \$37,943, which is in part attributable to the "vehicle mix" in South Dakota, according to Buehler.

The price increases have not deterred eager car buyers across the state.

Used car sales in South Dakota in March 2021 rose by 81% compared to March 2020, according to the state Department of Revenue. In March 2021, South Dakota dealers sold almost 5,400 used cars, compared to only about 2,960 sold the same month the year prior.

New car sales have also jumped in 2021 compared to 2020, according to the state. Dealers reported sales of about 4,350 new cars in March 2021 compared to about 2,650 sold in March 2020, a 64% increase.

Nationally, new vehicle sales were projected to reach 1,325,500 units in April 2021, a 110% increase over April 2020 compared to April 2020, J.D. Power said.

To quickly boost inventory, some dealerships in Rapid City are running radio advertisements urging car owners to trade in their cars and promising high trade-in values. Some people who recently bought cars have been contacted by dealers seeking to buy them back, sometimes at higher prices than they paid in the first place.

Mark Carstensen, owner of the Automax car dealership in Rapid City, said he typically has about 100 cars for sale on his lot on East North Street in Rapid City but now has only about 20.

Getting good used cars is difficult for sellers right now, he said.

"Because the inventory is so short, the trade-ins are being kept by new car dealers and there's hardly any cars available at auction," Carstensen said. "The whole equation is a lot of customers and not a lot of cars to sell."

The price increases for used cars have been most detrimental among buyers seeking lower-priced models, Carstensen said. Buyers seeking a drivable car in the \$2,500 to \$3,000 range are out of luck, with the minimum price for any car now at least \$5,000, he said.

"It's the lower end where prices have truly doubled or more," he said. "Those affordable cars that you could take care of and drive around for a couple years don't exist anymore."

The hot market has led to a rare situation in which some vehicles — especially late model, low-mileage used cars and trucks — have increased in value after being driven off the lot. Historically, cars almost always depreciate in value quickly after being sold, Carstensen said.

Carstensen said he doesn't have hard data but believes used car prices are somewhat higher in West River South Dakota compared to East River, not unlike how gas prices are higher West River during the tourism season in the Black Hills.

The unusually high prices for new cars has forced consumers to spend up and devote more of their incomes to car purchases, lease agreements or auto loans than in the past, experts said.

"Record prices and retail sales mean that, in aggregate, consumers will spend more money on new vehicles than any April on record," according to an April press release from J.D. Power and Associates, a



Prices for some used cars are rivaling those of new cars, such as this 2015 Ram truck for sale for \$34,000 in Sioux Falls. Photo: Andrew Rasmus-

sen, South Dakota News Watch



Mark Carstensen

Broton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 4 of 67



Matt Einspahr

national trade group.

Used car buyers are having to act fast or be willing to travel out of their local markets to land a vehicle in South Dakota right now.

"We are seeing a shortage of pre-owned vehicles as well, there is no doubt about that," said Matt Einspahr, general manager of Einspahr Auto Plaza in Brookings, who has worked at the dealership for 31 years. "We definitely have seen an increase in the value of pre-owned vehicles as well because there is a strong demand there."

Both the trade-in value and selling price of used vehicles are higher than normal, according to Einspahr, mostly due to the low inventory on both sides of the market.

"I think that people who have a good, clean, low mileage trade-in are in a great position right now because of the increased value of their trade-ins," Einspahr said.

Einspahr said customers appear to have ready funds available to upgrade their current vehicle, which strengthens market demand.

The reduced inventory in particular has made it a good time to sell a car, both for Individuals and for dealers, said Johnson. Busy dealers and anyone with a car to sell are making good money right now, he said.

"It's a seller's market," Johnson said. "For those who are selling a car, they have done well."

Dave and Rebecca Noordsy of Brookings purchased a vehicle in early May for their son, who is leaving for college in the Black Hills.

While they felt they found a good deal, they noticed a lack of choices on the lot.

"In Brookings, there was not really anything; it looked like they were closing," Rebecca Noordsy said.

The couple found a 2005 Infiniti with roughly 80,000 miles. Because there were no traditional financing options for the vehicle due to its year, they found it at a lower price than expected.

"What was different for me, the inventory is down and the prices were up overall," Dave Noordsy said. "We had never really looked at cars that were that old before."

The Noordsy family had to travel to Sioux Falls to find a vehicle, but they were able to find what they were looking for.

The market is not expected to stabilize until inventory levels return to normal.

"Ever since COVID became part of our world a little over a year ago, nobody in our industry really was able to predict how this thing would go," Einspahr said. "You just are at a point where I expect the unexpected at this point."

— News Watch reporter Bart Pfankuch contributed to this report.



ABOUT ANDREW RASMUSSEN

Andrew Rasmussen, a native of Brookings, S.D., is a journalism student at South Dakota State University who is the recipient of the 2021 Jeffrey B. Nelson Investigative Journalism Endowed Internship sponsored by SDSU and South Dakota News Watch.

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 5 of 67

GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

School Board Meeting

June 14, 2021 – 7:00 PM – Groton Area High School Conference Room

AGENDA:

1. Call to Order with members present. Approve agenda as proposed or amended.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

CONSENT AGENDA

1. Approval of minutes of May 10, 2021 school board meeting as drafted or amended.
2. Approval of May District bills for payment.
3. Approval of May 2021 Financial Report, Custodial Accounts, and Investments.
4. Approval of May 2021 Transportation Report.
5. Approval of May 2021 School Lunch Report.
6. Authorize request of 2021-2022 energy quotes (fuel/diesel/gas) with due date of 4:00 PM on June 28, 2021.
7. Authorize request of 2021-2022 newspaper specifications and quote form with due date of 4:00 PM on June 28, 2021.
8. Authorize Business Manager to publish 2021-2022 Groton Area School District Budget with 8:00 PM public hearing set for July 12, 2021.

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Volleyball uniforms (shorts) discussion.
3. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

NEW BUSINESS:

1. Discussion/Approval of Cooperative Agreement with Langford School District for sport of Boys Soccer for 2021-2022 school year.
2. Approve Administrative Negotiated Agreement and amended administrative contracts for 2021-2022.
3. Approve work agreements for Auxiliary Administrative Staff for 2021-2022.
4. Approve resignation/retirement of Loren Bahr, Transportation Director effective July 30, 2021.
5. Approve staff lane changes.
 - a. Lindsey DeHoet from MS to MS+15.
 - b. Diane Kurtz from MS+30 to MS+45.
 - c. Lindsey Tietz from BS+15 to BS+30.
 - d. Emily Dinger from MS to MS+15.
 - e. Sue Fjeldheim from BS+30 to BS+45.
 - f. Greg Kjellsen from BS to BS+30.
6. First reading of recommended MS/HS handbook changes.
7. Approve Open Enrollment Application #22-04.



**School Board
Meeting
Monday,
June 14, 2021
GHS
Multipurpose Room**

ADJOURN

Groton Transit

FUNDRAISER

**Thursday, June 17, 2021
4 p.m. to 7 p.m.**

**Due to the heat, the event
has been moved to the
Groton Community Center**

*Please join us and help
support Groton Transit!*

FREE WILL OFFERING!

*** Food * Fun * Door Prizes ***

When Money is No Object

I've been spending a lot of time talking with patients about the COVID-19 vaccine. Sometimes we celebrate being fully vaccinated. Some patients are skeptical about how serious COVID-19 infections actually were. And others are not convinced they can trust the vaccine.



By Deb Johnston, M.D. ~ Prairie Doc® Perspectives

When I talk to the first group, we chat about our plans to reunite with people and activities we love. With the second group, I share stories of my firsthand experiences as a doctor during this crisis. We talk about interpreting death rates, how death certificates are filled out, or how health care is reimbursed.

I particularly enjoy the conversations with the third group, many of whom share some of the same questions I had. I did not believe, at the beginning of the pandemic, we could possibly have a vaccine by the end of 2020. How could a vaccine for a brand-new disease be developed so quickly?

There are two lessons beautifully illustrated by the lightning-fast development of the COVID-19 vaccines. The first is what can happen when money is no object. The typical process of drug development involves a relatively small investment for initial testing, investing a little more only if those results are encouraging, rinse and repeat. With the COVID-19 vaccines, all needed funding was available almost immediately.

The second lesson is the importance of past research. Other coronaviruses caused outbreaks of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) in 2003, and MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome) in 2012. Researching these deadly infections taught us how coronaviruses invaded human cells, so we knew that the spike protein was a good target for a vaccine. Developing a vaccine for Ebola taught us how to safely edit the genes of a less harmful virus and use it to teach our immune systems to fight a more serious infection. Thirty years of mRNA research led to clinical trials of mRNA-based cancer therapies, and investigation of mRNA vaccines for influenza, rabies, and Zika. All this research and technology was used in COVID-19 vaccine development.

Chinese scientists published the genetic code for the virus in January 2020. Within days, using all that previous knowledge, researchers began production of vaccines. When the clinical trials began, the pandemic was raging, and many trial participants were exposed to COVID-19 over a short period of time. Trials could proceed faster than usual because when lots of people are getting sick, it doesn't take as much time to determine if a therapy, including a vaccine, is effective.

Were the COVID-19 vaccines developed in record time? Yes. Because money was no object, and because 30 years of scientific research and development left us poised to succeed.

Debra Johnston, M.D. is part of The Prairie Doc® team of physicians and currently practices family medicine in Brookings, South Dakota. For free and easy access to the entire Prairie Doc® library, visit www.prairiedoc.org and follow Prairie Doc® on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show streaming on Facebook and broadcast on SDPB most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.

Weekly Vikings Roundup

By Dominique Clare

The offseason is moving along as we inch one step closer to some football. To get you ready for the 2021 season, we'll break down the Vikings' roster position by position. The Vikings have available cap space and are likely to make a couple roster moves still. Those moves could be a number of different things from extending Danielle Hunter to signing an edge rusher. A move I would like to see would be to bring in a reliable third option at wide receiver.

This week, we continue our roster breakdown with the wide receivers.

Justin Jefferson – The Vikings struck gold last year with Justin Jefferson. He made sure the entire NFL knew he was special last season breaking several rookie receiving records held by players like Randy Moss and Anquan Boldin.

Jefferson finished the season with 1400 yards, 7 touchdowns, and 88 receptions. His yardage total was the 4th most in the NFL. For comparison DeAndre Hopkins had 1407 yards on 115 receptions with only 6 touchdowns. Imagine the production Jefferson would have had with that type of usage.

Entering the 2021 season Jefferson is expected to bring a lot of double teams. That will bring a big opportunity for a veteran on the roster looking to prove he is still a top wide receiver.

Adam Thielen – With all the hype around Justin Jefferson it is easy to forget about Adam Thielen. It wasn't that long ago when Thielen made his mark on the NFL as a top receiver. Now he is the veteran portion of one of the best duos in the NFL.

His production last year was still good. Most importantly he proved to be a serious threat in the redzone. He failed to reach 1000 receiving yards with 925, but he twice as many touchdowns as Jefferson. In fact, Thielen caught so many touchdowns, that he was third in the NFL in receiving touchdowns last season.

That is what makes him and Jefferson such a dynamic duo. They can beat you up all around the field and finish the drive as well. The only downfall of this duo is the lack of a good third receiver. So we will see if that changes this season and who steps into that role.

Olabisi Johnson – Bisi Johnson is a decent candidate to be the 3rd wide receiver for the Vikings. He has never lived up to the hype so this year is his make or break it year for him as a solid rotational player. Last year he accumulated 189 yards on 14 receptions. He was inconsistent and took a step back from the 2019 season.

Chad Beebe – Chad Beebe is in a very similar situation to Bisi Johnson. He is a decent candidate to be the 3rd receiver as well. With that being said he isn't someone that is going to be a serious threat from the position. The best hope for either of those two is the they can just provide competent play and catch over 90 percent of the balls thrown their way.

Ihmir Smith-Marsette – The rookie Ihmir Smith-Marsette is my favorite to win the WR3 position. He is having an excellent camp and provides the most upside to the team. In addition to being a receiver Smith-Marsette was an excellent returner at the University of Iowa. The Vikings had one of the worst special teams units last season and he could improve both the receiver room and special teams unit at the same time.

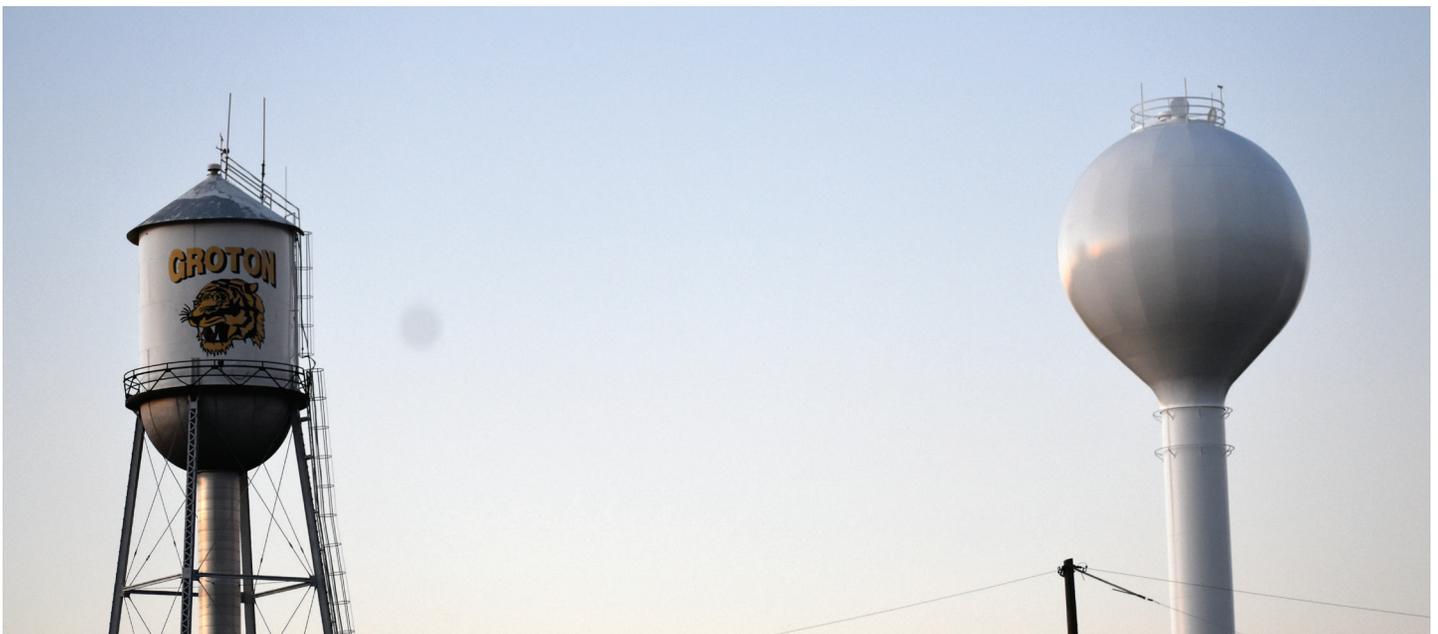
KJ Osborn – Speaking of bad special teams, KJ Osborn was supposed to be everything that I just described for Ihmir Smith-Marsette. He was a major disappointment. This is already a make or break year for him based on what we have seen from him. As a punt returner Osborn struggled with ball security and averaged under 4 yards a punt. He was nonexistent as a receiver. He went from being a dual threat to a single threat. But wasn't even a threat in the single thing he did for the team.

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 9 of 67



The new logo was painted on the new water tower (left) on Sunday. Remember yesterday I had the photo of the logo being painted on the southwest side. Well, apparently it was a mistake so the south photo is now the view from the south. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 10 of 67

Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021 Runs Away With Early Lead In Victory

Groton Legion Post #39 fell behind early and couldn't come back in a 10-0 loss to Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021 on Sunday. Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021 scored on a triple by Tyler H, a single by Aiden M, and a single by Josh S in the first inning.

The Groton Legion Post #39 struggled to contain the high-powered offense of Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021, giving up ten runs.

Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021 got things moving in the first inning, when Tyler tripled on a 1-1 count, scoring one run.

A single by Brodyn DeHoet in the second inning was a positive for Groton Legion Post #39.

Connor K took the win for Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021. The fireballer surrendered zero runs on two hits over five innings, striking out four and walking one.

Jackson Cogley took the loss for Groton Legion Post #39. Cogley surrendered ten runs on ten hits over four and two-thirds innings, striking out four.

Jace Kroll and DeHoet each collected one hit to lead Groton Legion Post #39.

Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021 had ten hits in the game. Josh and Aiden each managed multiple hits for Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021. Josh went 3-for-3 at the plate to lead Aberdeen Smittys Legion 2021 in hits.

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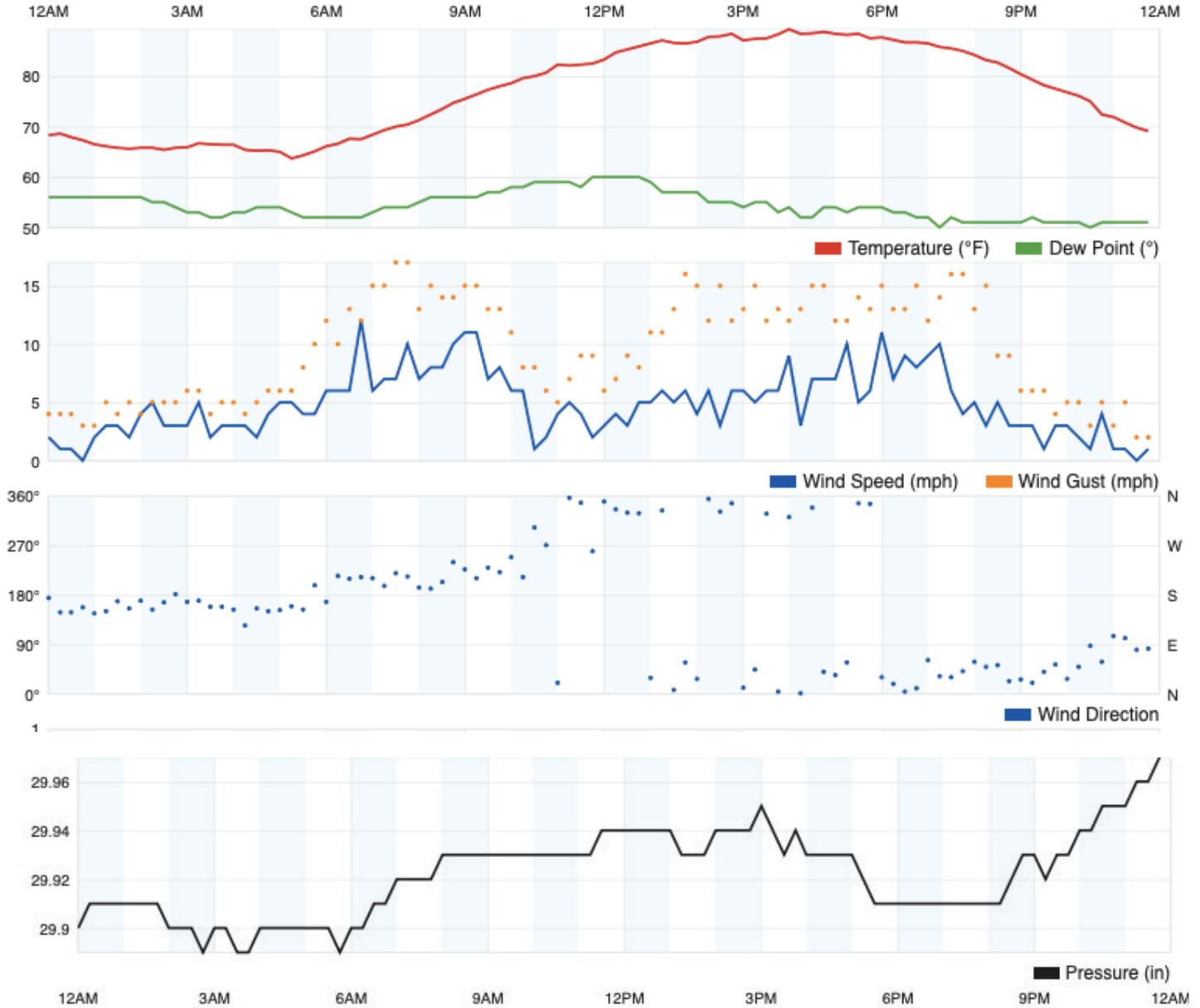
**Day shift
and night
shift
assemblers!**



Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 11 of 67

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 12 of 67

Today



Hot

High: 92 °F

Tonight



Clear

Low: 55 °F

Tuesday



Hot

High: 93 °F

Tuesday
Night



Mostly Clear

Low: 64 °F

Wednesday



Sunny then
Slight Chance
T-storms

High: 100 °F

Today

Early-mid morning
t-storms;
Otherwise, Sunny
through the
afternoon and
evening

 AM

T-storm activity this
morning mainly south &
east of Highway 212

 National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

weather.gov/abr

Graphic Created
6/14/2021 3:49 AM

There could be a few early morning storms hanging on mainly south and east of Highway 212, but they should be all done with by mid-morning. Not anticipating any organized severe weather. Otherwise, most of the area will experience a sunny sky and warm temperatures once again today. Daytime highs will reach the mid 80s to low 90s. A couple of isolated storms will be possible overnight tonight again. Then, the heat will come back at us for Tuesday and Wednesday with more widespread daytime readings in the 90s. In the case of Wednesday, afternoon temps will be pushing 100 degrees in some spots.

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 13 of 67

Today in Weather History

June 14, 1970: An estimated F3 tornado moved northeast from just southeast of Mound City. Barns and sheds were said to have been blown away on three farms.

June 14, 1985: A thunderstorm produced golf ball size hail in the Castlewood area causing considerable damage to grain, corn, soybeans, and gardens. Some areas just south of Castlewood had hail piled up to six inches deep. Leaves were stripped from several trees. Wind gusts to 60 mph accompanied the hail.

Another thunderstorm produced high winds and damaging hail in Grant and Roberts Counties. North of Milbank along both sides of Highway 15, crops incurred considerable damage. An area 17 miles northeast of Sisseton into Browns Valley, to Mud Lake, saw crop damage from golf ball size hail.

June 14, 2009: An upper-level disturbance combined with a warm front and very unstable air brought severe thunderstorms to parts of central and north-central South Dakota. Hail up to the size of golf balls, flash flooding, along with several tornadoes occurred with these storms. Heavy rain caused flash flooding on the Moreau River with the bridge on Route 14 being overtopped. The bridge had to be closed west of Green Grass. A basement was also flooded three miles east of Green Grass along with several roads in the area in Dewey Country. A tornado touched down west of Hayes in Stanley County and traveled almost a mile before lifting. No damage occurred. A second tornado touched down east of Hayes with no damage occurring.

1903 - The Heppner Disaster occurred in Oregon. A cloudburst in the hills sent a flood down Willow Creek, and a twenty foot wall of water swept away a third of the town in minutes, killing 236 residents and causing 100 million dollars damage. (David Ludlum)

1961 - The temperature in Downtown San Francisco, CA, soared to 106 degrees to establish an all-time record for that location. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Thirty-two cities in the central U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. The high of 97 degrees at Flint, MI, tied their record for June, and the high of 101 at Milwaukee WI marked their first 100 degree reading in 32 years. Thunderstorms brought much needed rains to South Texas, drenching McAllen with 3.2 inches in one hour. A thunderstorm soaked the town of Uncertain with 2.3 inches of rain in one hour. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Thirty cities in the eastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front produced severe weather from the Central Gulf States to the Middle Atlantic Coast Region during the day and into the night. There were 62 reports of large hail and damaging winds. Thunderstorm winds caused 28 million dollars damage in Montgomery County MD. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

Groton Daily Independent

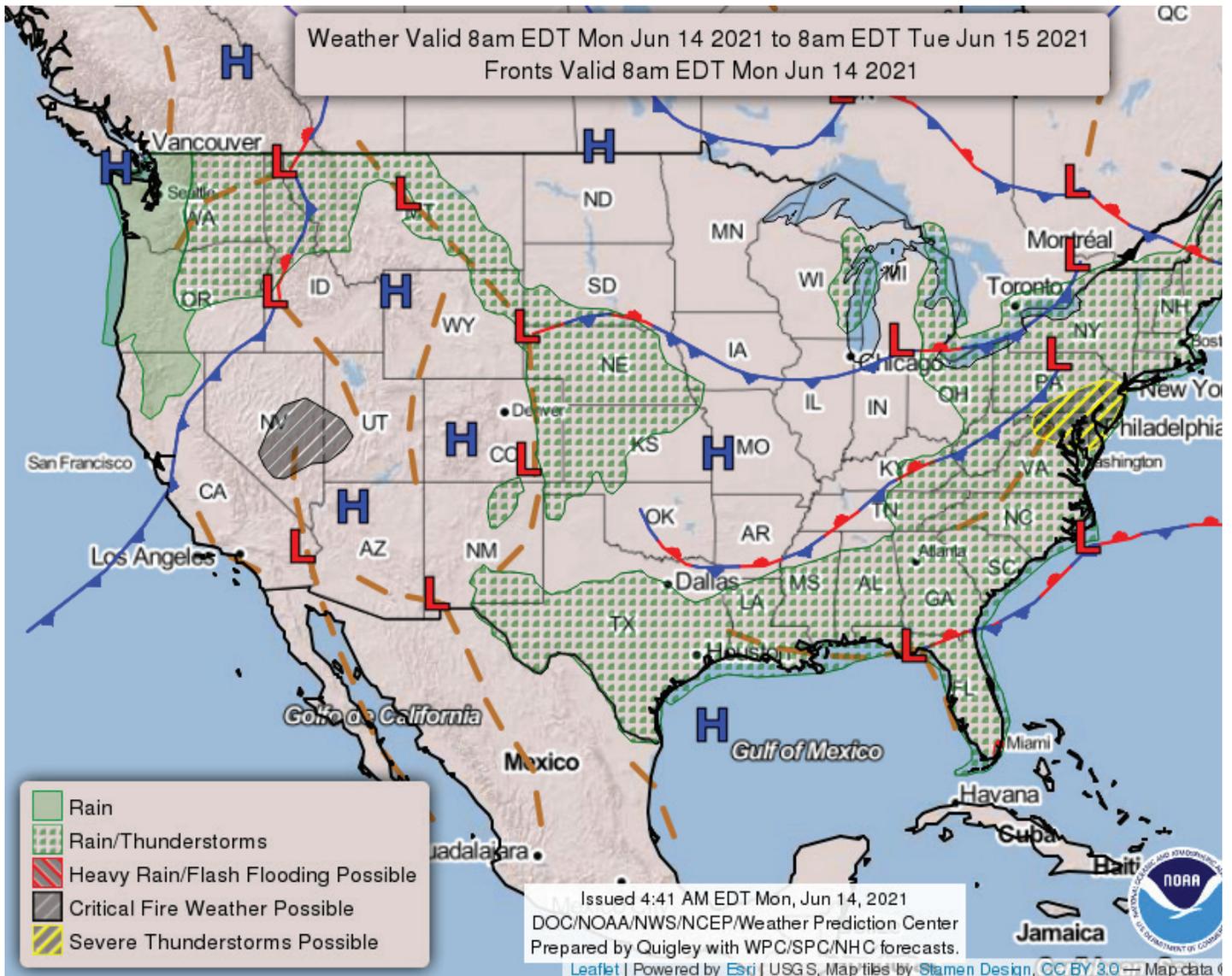
Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 14 of 67

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 89 °F at 3:55 PM
Low Temp: 63 °F at 5:19 AM
Wind: 17 mph at 7:28 AM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 99° in 1933
Record Low: 34° in 1969
Average High: 80°F
Average Low: 55°F
Average Precip in June.: 1.53
Precip to date in June.: 0.53
Average Precip to date: 8.78
Precip Year to Date: 4.50
Sunset Tonight: 9:22 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:45 a.m.



Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 15 of 67



FOLLOW THE LEADER

Getting lost is something that comes naturally to me. At times I feel as though I was born with no sense of direction or the ability to use a compass.

Once, while driving my sons to a birthday party, they could sense I didn't know where I was going. As I stared at the slip of paper in my hand that contained an address, I had a blank look on my face as I looked from side to side not knowing which way to turn. I was at a four-way stop sign, not knowing what to do next. My youngest son said, "Are we lost yet, Dad?" He knew if I wasn't, I soon would be. His confidence in me was inspiring!

Fortunately, a police officer on a motorcycle saw me looking at the piece of paper and offered to help me. With compassion he asked, "May I help you, Sir?" Of course, I said, "Please," and with a great sigh of relief gave him the address of the party. He gave me careful and complete instructions. Then, looking at me and realizing I had no idea what he was talking about, said with great compassion, "Never mind. Follow me, I'll get you there."

And it worked. In a few moments I looked at the name and address on the mailbox and knew that I had arrived at my destination safely.

In the maze of life with its constant confusion and complex choices we often need help. David said, "I cling to You; Your right hand upholds me." Jesus, realizing our lost condition said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. Follow me."

God keeps those safe who look to Him for His directions.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the directions we find in Your Word that provide us a map for life's journey. May we follow You always and be secure in You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I cling to you; your strong right hand holds me securely. Psalm 63:8

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 16 of 67

2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)
03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/25/2021 Princess Prom (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS
06/17/2021 Groton Transit Fundraiser, 4-7 p.m.
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
06/19/2021 U8 Baseball Tournament
06/19/2021 **Postponed to Aug. 28th:** Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon
06/26/2021 U10 Baseball Tournament
06/27/2021 U12 Baseball Tournament
07/04/2021 Firecracker Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
07/11/2021 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 10am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
07/22/2021 Pro-Am Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/30/2021-08/03/2021 State "B" American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
08/06/2021 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course
08/28/2021 Lions Club Crazy Golf Fest 9am Olive Grove Golf Course
09/11/2021 Lions Club Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
09/12/2021 Sunflower Classic Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
09/18-19 Groton Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/08/2021 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
10/09/2021 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm (Saturday before Columbus Day)
10/29/2021 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
10/31/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 17 of 67

News from the  Associated Press

Food insecurity worsens, even in America's breadbasket

By MIKE McCLEARY The Bismarck Tribune

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — As the sun set behind an overcast sky in early December, deepening the cold of the late afternoon, Jesse Rennich stood in line with about 30 others before an Adopt-a-Block food distribution drop at Tatley Place in south Bismarck.

Dressed in jeans and wearing a hoodie under an open flannel shirt, Rennich held onto the cold metal handle of a child-size red wagon with a gloveless hand. He used the wagon to transport what would amount to three meals for his family.

As a part-time worker, Rennich had been coming to the distribution site for several months.

"It helps supplement our food," said Rennich, who lives with his girlfriend and 3-year-old daughter. "It's hard asking for help. It's a subject that's uncomfortable to talk about."

But hunger also is a problem that has grown amid the coronavirus pandemic, The Bismarck Tribune reported.

America is the "breadbasket of the world" and North Dakota does its part filling up that basket, with the state ranking at the top in the production of 11 food commodities ranging from pinto beans to spring wheat. But even in the land of plenty, many still struggle to keep food in their refrigerators and kitchen cupboards.

"Hunger hides in plain sight," said Melissa Sobolik, president of Great Plains Food Bank, a not-for-profit organization that distributes millions of pounds of food each year to hunger-relief efforts in 99 communities across North Dakota and into eastern Minnesota. "No one wants to admit that they're hungry or ask for help, but it's out there."

So is help. Several efforts in the Bismarck region look to take a big bite out of the problem of food insecurity.

"Food insecurity" is not having access to enough food to live an active, healthy life. Low income, debt, unemployment, disability, homelessness, food price increases, age and environment all can play a role. The COVID-19 pandemic has added to the problem.

More than 50 million people have experienced food insecurity during the pandemic, up from 35 million in 2019, according to the Feeding America nonprofit, the nation's largest domestic hunger-relief organization.

The U.S. Census Bureau reported in March that as many as 9 million children live in a household where they don't eat enough because the parents can't afford it. North Dakota isn't immune -- an estimated 42,000 adults in the state, including 14,000 adults living with children, weren't eating sufficiently late last year because they couldn't afford it.

One in six people in the Great Plains Food Bank distribution area deals with hunger, compared to one in nine nationwide, according to Feeding America.

Fargo-based Great Plains -- North Dakota's only food bank -- has served nearly 200 million meals in its four-decade existence. But officials in 2008 discovered gaps in efforts to reach more children, seniors and people living in rural areas known as food deserts. That led to the creation of seven direct service programs such as a mobile food pantry and a weekend food backpack program for students.

"We saw large gaps in service geography-wise and in children that are going underfed and seniors who are saving their gas money in order to drive long distances to the nearest food pantry instead of buying their medications," Sobolik said. "We had heard a lot of stories from teachers and counselors that when kids were coming to school on Monday morning they hadn't eaten since Friday lunch. We knew that there was something that had to be done."

One of the goals of the \$5.1 million Feed the Future fundraising campaign was to expand food distribution by opening a regional service center in Bismarck. The 10,000-square-foot warehouse opened late last year and is expected to distribute 1.5 million pounds of food in the coming year across central and

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 18 of 67

western North Dakota.

The opening of the warehouse came as the food bank saw a 44% increase in meals served amid the pandemic. One of the benefits of the new facility is better serving of rural areas with the addition of the Mobile Food Pantry. In April food deliveries were made to Steele, Linton and Lincoln.

"Not only have we seen an increase in the food that we need to bring in, but our clientele jumped," Sobolik said. "We are hearing stories and having people come to us for the very first time in their lives. They've been food bank donors in the past, they have done food drives and now they need a little bit of assistance to help them get back on their feet."

The food bank last year witnessed an "unprecedented need for food assistance" -- a 39% increase in both pounds of food distributed and meals provided, and a 42% surge in the number of people receiving meals.

"We knew that it was a difficult year for so many," Sobolik said. "But this really puts things in perspective."

The onset of the pandemic in mid-March 2020 brought the economy to a near-standstill, with schools and businesses closed and people encouraged to stay at home. Surplus food quickly became scarce.

"Retailers obviously couldn't keep food on their shelves so they didn't have it to donate, and all of the companies that sell their products to grocery stores and retailers, they couldn't keep it on their shelves," Sobolik said. "So we just didn't have the donations coming in that we historically had in the past."

The food bank as a temporary remedy used money donations and grants to buy food products at market price. The cost is substantial, with three to five semitrailer loads of food purchased every month since March 2020 at a cost of \$25,000 to \$35,000 per truck load.

"We have this commitment and this burning desire to make sure that no one goes hungry," Sobolik said. "It has meant a shift in operations and even a shift in priorities for our entire organization, but we just know that this is what we are here to do and we are proud that we can still help so many people who are struggling right now."

Compassion also is a hallmark of Jim Barnhardt, co-owner of J & R Vacuum and Sewing in downtown Bismarck. In 2016, he and his wife, Cindy, attended a Pentecostal church convention in Hawaii with other members of the New Song Church from Bismarck.

"I woke up at 5 in the morning and I had meal ministry with services to help those in need just planted in my brain," Barnhardt said. "It didn't really seem like a dream. I didn't know what it was. So I asked my wife Cindy and she said 'you know what that is Jim, and you need to follow it.'"

On June 19, 2019, Barnhardt began Adopt-a-Block, a food distribution program in Bismarck. In the first week it served 45 families. In June 2020, the program was serving around 200 people a week after expanding to six locations in Bismarck-Mandan, Barnhardt said. By November that number was more than 2,700 people.

Now, the Barnhardts are adopting the model of the Los Angeles-based Dream Center network, which provides aid in the areas of hunger, domestic violence, human trafficking and addiction in 29 states and 11 countries.

The couple along with about 100 supporters and community leaders last month celebrated the ground-breaking of a two-story, 24,000-square-foot Dream Center facility in southeast Bismarck.

The \$3.1 million Dream Center will house a chapel, meeting rooms, a community food pantry, a warehouse for Adopt-a-Block food, a multipurpose center, and a kitchen and dining room for The Banquet community meals. The Banquet is a non-denominational outreach ministry for people in need in Bismarck-Mandan that serves meals four days a week. Jim Barnhardt, who serves as the nonprofit's board chairman, plans on expanding the meals to seven days.

"What we essentially put together was the idea of doing an Adopt-a-Block but taking the approach that the vision that I had was for food in general," Barnhardt said.

But taking food donations to people and families in lower-income neighborhoods is still foremost in Barnhardt's mind.

"If they know there is food in their cupboards, if we can get past those basic necessities, then they can think, 'Well, I don't have to struggle from week to week or day to day,'" he said.

Most of the food donations come from Great Plains Food Bank, and from surplus donations from Cash

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 19 of 67

Wise Foods, Natural Grocers, Costco and Dan's Supermarket.

While leaving the food distribution site at Jeannette Myhre Elementary School in January, roommates Katie Fulcher and Sabrina Kraus pull a pair of suitcases with boxes of food in each.

"We are very grateful," Fulcher said. "It really helps when you are in between. This will fill our fridge."

Each week as Barnhardt trucks food to the designated sites, he sees his vision coming together.

"I feel like I'm part of the solution," he said. "God asked me to do this, and so I'm following the lead there and I'm following doors as they open. But I see so many opportunities to help people in need by forming the connections that are truly there."

The community center in the small Standing Rock Indian Reservation community of Cannon Ball also is a connecting point.

On a cold, snowy December day, the Rev. Antone American Horse and several volunteers turned the large parking lot in front of the center into a staging point to distribute free boxes of food to an increasing number of people on and off the reservation reeling from the pandemic and food insecurity.

Throughout the course of the day, people arrived in pickup trucks with trailers, cars, SUVs or by foot to take boxes of fresh food.

The Trump administration initiated the Farmers to Families Food Box program in May 2020 in response to the pandemic. The Agriculture Department oversees the \$6 billion effort that aims to aid both struggling farmers and hungry people. More than 240 organizations across the country have distributed about 166 million food boxes containing fresh produce, dairy products, meat and seafood.

The nonprofit relief agency Wings as Eagles Ministries, based out of the Dream Center in Porcupine, South Dakota, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, was responsible for distributing food boxes to several reservations in the Dakotas and Wyoming. American Horse, a long-time Cannon Ball resident, was contacted by the ministry to oversee the distribution of the food on Standing Rock.

"People are happy to have it," he said. "I don't put a limit on anybody. I tell people to take it and give it to someone who needs it."

During a November food distribution, Sandi and Craig Imberi made the 70-mile trip from Mobridge, South Dakota, to Cannon Ball in their pickup pulling a utility trailer.

"This is amazing," Sandi Imberi said as they loaded dozens of boxes onto the trailer to distribute. "The need in Mobridge is huge."

Karen Heck, who volunteers to deliver food boxes to Fort Rice and Mandan, pulled her car alongside the pallet of boxes and asked if she could take 10.

"I think it's been a blessing for so many people," she said. "When I gave one fellow a box, he just hugged it."

The problem of food insecurity -- which has existed around the world for centuries -- has no easy solution.

"If food alone was the answer, we would have solved it by now," said Sobolik, with Great Plains Food bank. "Because there is enough food produced in the U.S. to feed every single person but not everyone has access to it. I think it's a bigger, broader solution that involves the food system from start to finish. To making sure people have access and that they can afford the food.

"It might tie a little bit into poverty as well," she said. "I don't know that if we can solve one without solving the other."

Barnhardt, with Adopt-A-Block, said the answer might lie with instilling better morals in children.

"If the kids have an opportunity to see what either is normal or at least what should be normal, we can affect the next generation," he said.

Jena Gullo, executive director of the Missouri Slope Areawide United Way, said access to food is the easy part of the food insecurity answer.

"The second part is much more complex -- it's targeting the root causes of generational poverty and breaking that cycle," she said. "We as a community have to have better coordination of services and improved access so that people can get the right kind of help that they need at the right time. Then we can prevent a lot of bigger issues like hunger and homelessness from happening in the first place."

Sturgis native ready for Olympic taekwondo after virus delay

By DENNIS KNUCKLES Black Hills Pioneer

SPEARFISH, S.D. (AP) — Sturgis native Paige McPherson's Olympic dream to participate in taekwondo is still alive.

McPherson was supposed to compete in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, but the COVID-19 pandemic forced the "Summer Olympics" to be postponed until 2021.

"There were a whole lot of mixed emotions. It was definitely frustrating just because we were starting our incline to our peak of our high performance plan for the Olympics," said McPherson. "So having to hear that it's been postponed a year our training schedule and strategy overall had to change, in order to adjust to a whole new year.

"At the same time we understood because by that time we heard about what was going on with the pandemic. Other sports, not just taekwondo were having trouble just qualifying let alone athletes that are in pools or using large facilities weren't able to train to get ready to go to the Olympics."

McPherson added that with everything going on with the COVID-19 pandemic it only made sense to postpone the 2020 Olympics, especially after Team Canada said they were no longer going to participate in the 2020 Olympics.

"The postponement gave us reassurance, because generally speaking, Olympics in the past were never postponed, they were just simply canceled. So it kind of gave us some hope that at least we would have a chance to compete come a year later in order to fulfill our dream that we spent grinding for the last four years," McPherson said.

McPherson will represent Team USA in taekwondo at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, competing in the welterweight class at 67kg (147 pounds).

By qualifying for the 2020 Summer Olympics, McPherson did not have to re-qualify to be a part of Team USA for the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, the Black Hills Pioneer reported.

McPherson said the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the 2021 Tokyo Olympics to be different than in years past.

First there have been changes in training for the Olympics.

"For me it has been a little bit different and unique, as far as the preparation. Before we were able to have competitions before the Olympics in order to assess where we are at," said McPherson. "COVID has changed competitions as far as the caliber and quality of the talent are generally in Europe, and the European tournaments have been canceled these past several months."

McPherson added, "In the Pan-Am region we are generally behind as far as medical and just overall dealing with this pandemic. So, we haven't had any Pan-Am or regional competitions.

McPherson was quick to point at that she isn't the only one facing these adverse training conditions.

"There have been other athletes that have been facing these same conditions. The only thing we can do is control what we can control, and we'll see what happens in Tokyo," McPherson said.

McPherson said training for this year's Olympics has been unique.

"I have tried to compartmentalize my motions and the way I approach this Olympics. It's really about focusing on my performance rather than what's going to happen come Tokyo, especially since there have been rumors going on as whether or not the Tokyo Olympics is going to happen."

The pandemic has caused changes to travel plans.

"We fly out the second week of July (16th or 17th), basically 10 days before I compete. We will be all the way until I compete on July 26, and then we fly out as soon as we are done competing, the very next day," McPherson said.

There are changes to how time is spent at the Olympic Village.

"We will only be able to be there a couple of days before we actually compete and then we have to leave, where as in 2016 we were able to enjoy the whole Olympic experience. We were able to get there early, stay there for the opening ceremonies, and the closing," said McPherson. "But this time because of

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 21 of 67

the COVID-19 protocol, in Japan specifically, they just want us to be there to get acclimated seven days before the competition, and then leave right after.”

McPherson finished 11th at the 2012 London Olympics, and she won a bronze medal at the 2016 Rio Olympics.

She turns 31 Oct. 1, and she has hinted this may be her last Olympics, as well as her final taekwondo competition.

“It’s important to just stay in the present to enjoy this process. This more than likely will be my last Olympics, even arguably my last competition. I’m trying not to focus on the “what ifs” because at the end of the day there is nothing I can control as far as the future. The future is non-existent at the now,” said McPherson. “I want to enjoy the process and see what everything entails in the future, and see how everything plays out. I want to get to my highest performance level. I’ve been sole focused on my performance at this Olympics.”

McPherson said she is looking at the Tokyo Olympic as her “last dance” competing in taekwondo.

“As they like to say with the Michael Jordan documentary, it’s my last dance, so I’m trying to just visualize the process, take the negative with the positive, and to be consistent in my high performance as an athlete on a day-to-day basis, because if I can become consistent now the chances are being consistent out the Olympics will be higher, and again just trust God and see what he has planned for me.”

Divers recover body of 10-year-old boy in river near Hudson

HUDSON, S.D. (AP) — Authorities say they have recovered the body of 10-year-old boy from a river near Hudson, in southeastern South Dakota.

The Lincoln County Sheriff’s Office posted a release on its Facebook page about 10:20 p.m. Saturday, stating that a dive team had located the body. No further information has been provided.

“We ask that you please respect the family’s privacy during this difficult time. Our sympathies are with the family and the first responders who assisted in the recovery,” the statement said.

Earlier posts referred to law enforcement efforts as a “large scale rescue operation.” The posts did not state where exactly the incident occurred, how he went missing, the cause of the boy’s death or when rescue efforts initially started, the Argus Leader reported.

NATO nations ready to jointly respond to attacks in space

By LORNE COOK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — NATO leaders on Monday will expand the use of their all for one, one for all, collective defense clause to include attacks in space, the military organization’s top civilian official said.

Article 5 of NATO’s founding treaty states that attack on any one of the 30 allies will be considered an attack on them all. So far, it’s only applied to more traditional military attacks on land, sea, or in the air, and more recently in cyberspace.

“I think it is important (with) our Article 5, which states that an attack on one will be regarded as an attack on all, that we all will respond,” NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said, at a German Marshall Fund think tank event.

“We will make it clear at this summit that, of course, any attack on space capabilities like satellites and so on or attacks from space will or could trigger Article 5,” he said, a few hours before chairing a summit with U.S. President Joe Biden and his counterparts.

Around 2,000 satellites orbit the earth, over half operated by NATO countries, ensuring everything from mobile phone and banking services to weather forecasts. Military commanders rely on some of them to navigate, communicate, share intelligence and detect missile launches.

In December 2019, NATO leaders declared space to be the alliance’s “fifth domain” of operations, after land, sea, air and cyberspace. Many member countries are concerned about what they say is increasingly aggressive behavior in space by China and Russia.

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 22 of 67

Around 80 countries have satellites, and private companies are moving in, too. In the 1980s, just a fraction of NATO's communications was via satellite. Today, it's at least 40%. During the Cold War, NATO had more than 20 stations, but new technologies mean the world's biggest security organization can double its coverage with a fifth of that number.

NATO's collective defense clause has only been activated once, when the members rallied behind the United States following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Former President Donald Trump raised deep concern among U.S. allies, notably those bordering Russia like Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, when he suggested that he might not rally to their side if they didn't boost their defense budgets.

Biden has been trying to reassure them since taking office and will use the summit as a formal opportunity to underline America's commitment to its European allies and Canada.

Americans stand trial in Japan, accused in Ghosn's escape

By YURI KAGEYAMA AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Two Americans charged with helping former Nissan chairman Carlos Ghosn flee Japan while he was facing accusations of financial misconduct agreed Monday that they took part in a scheme for him to escape the country.

Statements by Michael Taylor and his son, Peter, on the opening day of their trial in Tokyo suggest the pair don't plan to fight charges of assisting a criminal. That carries a possible penalty of up to three years in prison.

Keiji Isaji, one of the attorneys for the Taylors, told The Associated Press after the court session that he wants the trial to "proceed efficiently." He said ending the trial quickly is "in the best interests of his clients." He declined to confirm his team was hoping for a suspended sentence if they are convicted, meaning no time would be served. He stressed the decision was up to the judge.

The Taylors appeared calm as they were led into the courtroom in handcuffs, with ropes tied around their waists.

They said little except to answer the judge's questions, such as "Yes, your honor," and "I hear you well," when asked about simultaneous interpreting relayed through headphones.

Prosecutors read out a statement accusing Michael Taylor, a former Green Beret, and Peter Taylor of arranging to hide Ghosn in a box for musical equipment. It was loaded onto a private jet that flew him from the western city of Osaka to Lebanon via Turkey in December 2019.

Ryozo Kitajima, one of the prosecutors, said Peter Taylor met with Ghosn at a hotel several times in 2019 and introduced Ghosn to his father. He said Peter Taylor also received \$562,500 in two transfers to pay for chartering the jet and other expenses. Peter Taylor arranged for Ghosn to change his clothing at a Tokyo hotel. His father and another man, George-Antoine Zayek later accompanied Ghosn to the Osaka airport, Kitajima said.

Zayek has not been arrested.

The prosecutors said bitcoins worth \$500,000 were transferred from Ghosn's son Anthony's account to Peter Taylor in 2020, purportedly to cover the Taylors' defense costs.

After a brief discussion with Chief Judge Hideo Nirei and their defense lawyers, the Taylors agreed there were no mistakes in the statement.

Prosecutors said that during their detention the Taylors had expressed remorse and that the pair had been misled to believe helping someone jump bail was not illegal in Japan. They said Ghosn's wife Carole told them Ghosn was being tortured. The prosecutors quoted the Taylors as saying they were not tortured and were treated in a way that was "fair and professional."

The trial's next session is set for June 29, when prosecutors will continue their questioning.

The Taylors were arrested in Massachusetts last year and extradited to Japan in March. Ghosn has French, Lebanese and Brazilian citizenship and Lebanon has no extradition treaty with Japan. The authorities say Ghosn paid the Taylors at least \$1.3 million.

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 23 of 67

Ghosn led Nissan Motor Co. for two decades before his arrest in 2018. He was charged with falsifying securities reports in under-reporting his compensation and of breach of trust in using Nissan money for personal gain. He says he is innocent and says he fled Japan because he did not expect to get a fair trial. More than 99% of criminal cases in Japan result in convictions.

Peter Taylor told a Massachusetts court in January that he met Ghosn in 2019 in Japan to pitch his digital marketing company to help repair Ghosn's tarnished reputation. He said Ghosn asked him to bring him gifts, food and DVDs from his wife, and to deliver gifts, including to relatives in Lebanon.

Peter Taylor said he left Japan for Shanghai on Dec. 29, 2019, and was not in Japan when Ghosn is accused of fleeing. He denied he was in touch with his father at that time, court documents say.

No Japanese executives have been charged in the scandal at Nissan, Yokohama-based manufacturer of the Leaf electric car, March subcompact and Infiniti luxury models.

Extraditions between Japan and the U.S. are relatively rare, even for serious crimes. The possible penalty of three years in prison is the minimum required for an extradition.

Separately, the same court is trying another American, Greg Kelly, a former Nissan executive vice president, on charges he under-reported Ghosn's compensation. That trial began in September.

Kelly's trial has focused on whether reporting of deferred compensation for Ghosn may have violated the law. Several other senior executives at Nissan, including some non-Japanese, were aware of the arrangements.

Kelly says he is innocent and was only looking for lawful ways to pay Ghosn more to prevent him from leaving for a rival automaker.

Before his arrest, Ghosn was an auto industry star, having orchestrated Nissan's rebound from the brink of bankruptcy after he was sent to Japan by its French alliance partner Renault in 1999.

Ghosn's pay was halved, by about 1 billion yen (\$10 million), in 2010 when Japan began requiring disclosure of high executive pay.

The concern was that his relatively high compensation might be viewed unfavorably since Japanese top executives tend to draw lower pay packages than their peers in other countries.

Biden, unlike predecessors, has maintained Putin skepticism

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — President Joe Biden frequently talks about what he sees as central in executing effective foreign policy: building personal relationships.

But unlike his four most recent White House predecessors, who made an effort to build a measure of rapport with Vladimir Putin, Biden has made clear that the virtue of fusing a personal connection might have its limits when it comes to the Russian leader.

Biden, who is set to meet with Putin face to face on Wednesday in Geneva, has repeated an anecdote about his last meeting with Putin, 10 years ago when he was vice president and Putin was serving as prime minister. Putin had taken a break from the presidency because the Russian constitution at the time prohibited a third consecutive term, but he was still seen as Russia's most powerful leader.

Biden recalled to biographer Evan Osnos that during that meeting in 2011, Putin showed him his ornate office in Moscow. Biden recalling poking Putin — a former KGB officer — that "it's amazing what capitalism will do."

Biden said he then turned around and standing inches from Putin said, "Mr. Prime Minister, I'm looking into your eyes, and I don't think you have a soul." Biden said Putin smiled and responded: "We understand one another."

Biden's comment was in part a dig at former President George W. Bush, who faced ridicule after his first meeting with Putin when he claimed that he had "looked the man in the eye" and "was able to get a sense of his soul." But in replaying his decade-old exchange with Putin, Biden also has attempted to demonstrate he is clear-eyed about the Russian leader in a way his predecessors weren't.

Biden and Putin are now meeting again, at a moment when the U.S.-Russia relationship seems to get

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 24 of 67

more complicated by the day. Biden has repeatedly taken Putin to task — and levied sanctions against Russian entities and individuals in Putin's orbit — over allegations of Russian interference in the 2020 election and the hacking of federal agencies in what is known as the SolarWinds breach.

Despite the sanctions, Putin has been unmoved. Cyber attacks in the U.S. originating from Russian-based hackers in recent weeks have also impacted a major oil pipeline and the largest meat supplier in the world. Putin has denied Kremlin involvement.

Michael McFaul, a former U.S. ambassador to Russia who was with Biden for the 2011 meeting with Putin, said in an interview that Biden might have a deeper skepticism and perhaps more informed view of Putin than any of his White House predecessors.

"Biden's knowledge of the region may be better than anybody that's held the job," McFaul said. "Biden has spent time in Georgia. He spent a lot of time in Ukraine. I traveled with him to Moldova, and he's spent a lot of time in the eastern parts of the NATO alliance. He has been in those places and heard firsthand about Russian aggression and Russian threat. ... It has created a unique component of his analysis of Putin that other presidents have not had."

Indeed, as president, Biden has said he would take a far different tack in his relationship with Putin than former President Donald Trump, who showed unusual deference to Putin, and the three other past U.S. presidents, whose political lives overlapped Putin's time in power.

During his first visit of his presidency to the State Department, in February, Biden told agency employees that the days of "rolling over" for Putin were over — a not-so thinly veiled shot at Trump. Later, in an ABC News interview, Biden answered affirmatively that Putin was "a killer."

Trump's tendency to genuflect to Putin had many in Washington openly questioning whether the Russians had something embarrassing on the real estate mogul. Both Trump and Putin publicly denied the speculation.

Trump repeatedly tried to scotch the notion — underscored by U.S. intelligence findings — that Russia interfered in the 2016 U.S. election. Asked at their joint news conference at the end of their 2018 summit in Helsinki whom he believed — U.S. intelligence or Putin — Trump demurred.

The White House said that Biden would not hold a joint news conference with Putin, but would speak to media on his own after Wednesday's meeting. Administration officials say that Biden doesn't want to elevate Putin. Asked Sunday why years of U.S. sanctions haven't changed Putin's behavior, Biden laughed and responded: "He's Vladimir Putin."

Barack Obama came into office seeking a reset of the U.S.-Russia relationship, an effort to improve relations with Russian leadership and find areas of common interest.

Before his visit to Moscow early in his first term Obama spoke dismissively of Putin, saying the then-prime minister had "one foot in the old ways of doing business and one foot in the new." But after meeting face-to-face during the trip, Obama pronounced he was "very convinced the prime minister is a man of today and he's got his eyes firmly on the future."

That feeling didn't last.

By the time Obama and Putin met on the sidelines of the 2013 Group of Eight summit in Northern Ireland, the reset effort was on life support.

At the time, G-8 leaders were unsuccessfully pressing Putin to join a call for Syrian President Bashar Assad to step down and former U.S. National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden had been allowed to stay in Russia after releasing highly classified American intelligence.

Obama and Putin's disdain for each other was palpable. During a photo opportunity before the press in Northern Ireland, they sat grim faced and avoided looking at each other.

In 2014, after Russia invaded neighboring Ukraine, any vapor of hope for a reset had evaporated.

George W. Bush tried mightily to charm Putin, hosting him at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, and bringing him to his father's estate in Kennebunkport, Maine, where the 43rd and 41st presidents took the Russian president fishing.

But Putin ultimately flummoxed Bush and the relationship was badly damaged after Russia's 2008 invasion of its neighbor Georgia after Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili ordered his troops into the breakaway

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 25 of 67

region of South Ossetia.

Bill Clinton was the first U.S. president to deal with Putin, meeting him for the first time in 1999 at the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation gathering months before Putin would succeed Boris Yeltsin as president and a little over a year before the end of Clinton's presidency.

In a phone call with Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair in November 2000, Clinton called Putin "a guy with a lot of ambition for the Russians" but also expressed concern that Putin "could get squishy on democracy," according to a transcript of the call published by the Clinton Presidential Archives.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters last week that Biden has known Putin for a long time and "never held back" on voicing his concerns.

"This is not about friendship. It's not about trust," Psaki said. "It's about what's in the interest of the United States. And, in our view, that is moving toward a more stable and predictable relationship."

Biden has managed several complicated relationships with foreign leaders during his nearly 50 years in national politics. He's developed a rapport with China's Xi Jinping — spending days traveling with Xi in the U.S. and China. Biden in recent days has told aides that his relationship with Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan has remained strong despite differences over U.S. support for Kurds in northwest Syria and Biden disparaging Erdogan as an autocrat.

But Putin has left Biden with fundamentally more difficult problems that personal diplomacy can't fix, said Rachel Ellehuus, deputy director of the Europe, Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"With someone like Erdogan, Xi or the North Korean (Kim Jong Un), Biden has had this sense that we have something they want," Ellehuus said. "Biden has long recognized that the only thing Putin really wants is to undermine the U.S., to divide NATO, to divide the EU. Biden knows there's little common ground to work from with Putin."

Novavax: Large study finds COVID-19 shot about 90% effective

By LINDA A. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

Vaccine maker Novavax said Monday its shot was highly effective against COVID-19 and also protected against variants in a large, late-stage study in the U.S. and Mexico.

The vaccine was about 90% effective overall and preliminary data showed it was safe, the company said.

While demand for COVID-19 shots in the U.S. has dropped off dramatically, the need for more vaccines around the world remains critical. The Novavax vaccine, which is easy to store and transport, is expected to play an important role in boosting vaccine supplies in the developing world.

That help is still months away, however. The company says it plans to seek authorization for the shots in the U.S., Europe and elsewhere by the end of September and be able to produce up to 100 million doses a month by then.

"Many of our first doses will go to ... low- and middle-income countries, and that was the goal to begin with," Novavax Chief Executive Stanley Erck told The Associated Press.

While more than half of the U.S. population has had at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose, less than 1 percent of people in the developing world have had one shot, according to Our World In Data.

Novavax's study involved nearly 30,000 people ages 18 and up in the U.S. and Mexico. Two-thirds received two doses of the vaccine, three weeks apart, and the rest got dummy shots.

There were 77 cases of COVID-19 — 14 in the group that got the vaccine and the rest were in volunteers who received dummy shots. None in the vaccine group had moderate or severe disease, compared to 14 in the placebo group.

The vaccine was similarly effective against several variants including the one first detected in the U.K. that's dominant in the U.S., and in high-risk populations including the elderly and people with other health problems.

Side effects were mostly mild — tenderness and pain at the injection site. There were no reports of

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 26 of 67

unusual blood clots or heart problems, Erck said.

Novavax reported the results in a press release and plans to publish in a medical journal, where it will be vetted by independent experts. The Maryland-based company previously released findings from smaller studies in Britain and South Africa.

COVID-19 vaccines train the body to recognize the coronavirus, especially the spike protein that coats it, and get ready to fight the virus off. The Novavax vaccine is made with lab-grown copies of that protein. That's different from some of the other vaccines now widely used, which include genetic instructions for the body to make its own spike protein.

The Novavax vaccine can be stored in standard refrigerators, making it easier to distribute.

Novavax previously announced manufacturing delays due to supply shortages. The company now expects to reach production of 100 million doses a month by the end of September and 150 million doses a month by December.

The company has committed to supplying 110 million doses to the U.S. over the next year and a total of 1.1 billion doses to developing countries.

In May, vaccines alliance Gavi announced it had signed an agreement to buy 350 million doses of Novavax's vaccine, with deliveries estimated to begin in the third quarter. COVAX, the global initiative to provide vaccines to countries, is facing a critical shortage of vaccines after its biggest supplier in India suspended exports until the end of the year.

Novavax has been working on developing vaccines for more than three decades, but hasn't brought one to market. The company's coronavirus vaccine work is partly funded by the U.S. government.

8 hurt as vehicle crashes guard rail at Texas race track

FABENS, Texas (AP) — Eight people were injured Sunday night after a vehicle plowed into a crowd at a mud racing event in Texas.

The El Paso County Sheriff's Department said in a statement that at 6:35 p.m., a vehicle left the mud track and crashed through a guard rail and into spectators.

Three spectators were transported to a hospital in critical condition and five others with non-life-threatening injuries. None of the injured were identified by police.

"Today what happened was what we all hoped doesn't happen. Is a wreck while racing," said Scott Smith, owner of Rock Solid Protection, an El Paso-based security firm. Smith, speaking at a news conference, said that "the mud can tell the car where to go, at times" and that is what he said happened in this crash.

Karla Huerta, who was watching the race when it turned tragic, described the scene as "pretty ugly."

"Well, they started the race. And when they started, one of the trucks lost control and slammed into a pile of cars and people," Huerta said. She said there were a lot of ambulances at the scene after the crash and that a lot of people were taken away.

Three other vehicles were also struck as a result of the initial crash, the statement said. It was not immediately known what caused the vehicle to leave the track.

The track is located in Fabens, Texas, about 40 miles (64 kilometers) southeast of El Paso and less than a mile from the Mexican border.

Police said an investigation remains ongoing.

The Latest: NATO chief says it's time to set aside divisions

By The Associated Press undefined

The Latest on the NATO summit taking place in Brussels:

BRUSSELS — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg says the 30-nation military alliance aims to set aside the divisions of the Trump era and focus on the security challenges posed by Russia and China.

Stoltenberg says that NATO leaders are meeting Monday "at a pivotal moment for our alliance, and today we'll open a new chapter in our trans-Atlantic relationship."

His remarks in Brussels came before he chairs a first NATO summit involving U.S. President Joe Biden.

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 27 of 67

NATO was roiled for four years under President Donald Trump. Many allies are hoping to secure Biden's assurances that the United States will stand by them in times of conflict.

Stoltenberg says the leaders also want to reaffirm NATO's "dual-track approach" to Russia involving military deterrence, like the deployment of alliance troops in the Baltic countries and Poland, and dialogue.

After a series of meetings in Brussels, including with EU leaders, Biden heads to Geneva for talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday.

Stoltenberg played down the level of tensions with China, but he says NATO should take a firmer approach toward Beijing.

He says that "we are not entering a new Cold War, and China is not our adversary, not our enemy. But we need to address together as an alliance the challenges that the rise of China poses to our security."

Biden at NATO: Ready to talk China, Russia and soothe allies

By JONATHAN LEMIRE, AAMER MADHANI and LORNE COOK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — President Joe Biden makes his entrance at a NATO summit aiming to consult European allies on efforts to counter provocative actions by China and Russia while highlighting the U.S. commitment to the 30-country alliance that was frequently maligned by predecessor Donald Trump.

The summit Monday comes as Biden tries to rally allies for greater coordination in checking China and Russia, two adversaries whose actions on economic and national security fronts have become the chief foreign policy concerns in the early going of the Biden presidency.

Biden will use his time at the summit to underscore the U.S. commitment to Article 5 of the alliance charter, which spells out that an attack on one member is an attack on all and is to be met with a collective response.

"I will make it clear that the United States' commitment to our NATO alliance and Article 5 is rock solid," Biden told U.S. troops in the United Kingdom last week on the first stop of his eight-day European trip. "It's a sacred obligation."

The White House said the communique to be signed by alliance members at the end of the NATO summit is expected to include language about updating Article 5 to include major cyber attacks — a matter of growing concern amid a series of hacks targeting the U.S. government and businesses around the globe by Russia-based hackers.

The update will spell out that if an alliance member needs technical or intelligence support in response to a cyber attack, it would be able to invoke the mutual defense provision to receive assistance, according to White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan.

The president will begin his day meeting with leaders of the Baltic states on NATO's eastern flank regarding the "threat posed by Russia," China and the recent air piracy in Belarus, according to Sullivan. He'll also meet with NATO secretary Jens Stoltenberg and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Biden's itinerary in Europe has been shaped so that he would first gather with Group of Seven leaders for a three-day summit on the craggy shores of Cornwall and then with NATO allies in Brussels before his much-anticipated meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Geneva on Wednesday.

At the G-7, leaders sought to convey that the club of wealthy democracies — Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States — is a better friend to poorer nations than authoritarian rivals such as China and Russia.

The G-7 meeting ended with a communique that called out forced labor practices and other human rights violations impacting Uyghur Muslims and other ethnic minorities in the western Xinjiang province. The president declined to discuss private summit negotiations over the provision, but said he was "satisfied" with the communique, although differences remain among the allies about how forcefully to call out Beijing.

Biden is focused on building a more cohesive bond between America and allies who had become wary of U.S. leadership after enduring four years of Trump's name-calling and frequent invectives about the relevance of multilateral alliances like NATO.

The last administration was at odds with some leading NATO members, including Britain, Germany and

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 28 of 67

France, over Trump's 2018 decision to pull out of the Iran nuclear agreement that was brokered during the Obama administration. The accord limited Iran's uranium enrichment program in exchange for an easing of sanctions.

Trump and other critics felt the deal gave Tehran too many economic benefits without doing enough to prevent Iran from eventually developing a nuclear weapon. The Biden administration is now seeking a path to resurrecting the accord.

Trump also complained that the NATO alliance allows "global freeloading" countries to spend less on military defense at the expense of the U.S. and dismissed the alliance as "obsolete."

Biden offered a pointed rejoinder on Sunday, saying: "We do not view NATO as a sort of a protection racket. We believe that NATO is vital to our ability to maintain American security for ... the remainder of the century. And there's a real enthusiasm."

When alliance members last met for a summit in England in December 2019, Trump grabbed headlines by calling Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau "two-faced" and French President Emmanuel Macron "nasty."

Trump lashed out after Trudeau was caught on a hot mic gossiping with other leaders about Trump turning photo opportunities into long news conferences. Ahead of the summit, Macron had declared NATO "brain dead" because of a void in U.S. leadership under Trump.

Biden has already acknowledged during his Europe tour that the alliance needs to ensure better burden sharing and needs stepped up American leadership. He's also highlighted NATO members' contributions in the war in Afghanistan.

The U.S. and the alliance are winding down their involvement in the nearly 20-year war that killed tens of thousands of Afghans and more than 3,500 U.S. and allied troops, while raising profound questions about whether NATO's most ambitious effort was worth it.

The military effort followed the 2001 arrival of a U.S.-led coalition that ousted the Taliban for harboring al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

For now, NATO plans to leave civilian advisers to help build up government institutions. It's unclear who will protect them. The alliance is also weighing whether to train Afghan special forces outside the country.

NATO members are also expected to endorse the creation of a new cyber defense policy to improve coordination with countries impacted by the increasing frequency of ransomware attacks, a climate security action plan to reduce greenhouse gases from military activities in line with national commitments under the Paris Agreement and a commitment to strengthen NATO's deterrence to meet threats from Russia and elsewhere, according to the White House.

Biden will also meet with Turkey's President, Erdogan, on Monday on the sidelines of the summit.

Biden has known Erdogan for years but their relationship has frequently been contentious. Biden, during his campaign, drew ire from Turkish officials after he described Erdogan as an "autocrat." In April, Biden infuriated Ankara by declaring that the Ottoman-era mass killing and deportations of Armenians was "genocide" — a term that U.S. presidents have avoided using.

The two leaders were expected to discuss Syria and Iran as well as what role Turkey can play on Afghanistan following the U.S. troop withdrawal, according to the White House. Also on the agenda: how Washington and Ankara "deal with some of our significant differences on values and human rights and other issues," Sullivan said.

The unsettled security situation in Libya, as well as overlapping concerns on China and Russia are also expected to be discussed.

Some US allies near Russia are wary of Biden-Putin summit

By YURAS KARMANAU and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Central and Eastern European nations are anxious about the coming summit meeting between U.S. President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, wary of what they see as hostile intentions from the Kremlin.

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 29 of 67

Some in the countries that once were part of the Soviet Union or the Moscow-led Warsaw Pact during the Cold War worry that Washington could scale down support for its allies in the region in a bid to secure a more stable and predictable relationship with Russia.

"I think there have been doubts as to the resoluteness of the present administration to face Russian aggressive actions in a decisive manner," said Witold Rodkiewicz, chief specialist on Russian politics at Warsaw's Center of Eastern Studies, a state-funded think tank that advises the Polish government.

Both Russia and the U.S. have sought to moderate expectations about Wednesday's summit in Geneva, ruling out any breakthroughs amid the worst tensions between the two powers since Soviet times, especially after Moscow's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, accusations of Russian interference with U.S. elections and hacking attacks, as well as other strains.

Rodkiewicz, however, noted the White House's decision to waive sanctions against the German company overseeing the prospective Russian-built Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline running under the Baltic Sea to Germany. That project could potentially allow Moscow to bypass Ukraine, Poland and other countries in Eastern and Central Europe that collect transit fees on the energy.

"In a clear, unequivocal way the administration signaled that for them, Europe is Germany basically, and German interests are going to be taken into account, while the interests of other players in Europe are going to be sort of put on the back burner," Rodkiewicz told The Associated Press.

Nowhere else are worries about the summit more acute than in Ukraine. It has been locked in a tense tug-of-war with Russia ever since the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula following the ouster of Ukraine's Moscow-friendly president in 2014 and a Russia-backed separatist insurgency in the country's east — a conflict that has killed more than 14,000.

"Ukraine fears that agreements between Biden and Putin could turn it into a peripheral country," said Vadim Karasev, an independent Kyiv-based political analyst.

Kyiv worries that Nord Stream 2 would deprive it not only of transit fees for pumping Russian gas to Europe but also erode its strategic importance and weaken it politically.

A U.S. failure to block the pipeline would mark "a personal loss for President Biden" and a "serious geopolitical victory for the Russian Federation," said Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

He tried in vain to push for a meeting with Biden before the summit but has spoken with him by phone. Biden assured Zelenskyy of the unwavering U.S. support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Kyiv appeared overly eager to interpret the conversation in its favor. In its initial readout of the call, Zelenskyy's office claimed Biden emphasized the importance of offering Ukraine a specific roadmap for joining NATO. But it then changed that version to clarify it was Zelenskyy who pushed for providing Ukraine with a membership action plan; it said Biden promised that Kyiv's position will be taken into account when discussing strategic issues within NATO.

In an interview on Russian state television, Putin issued a strong, new warning that the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO was unacceptable for Russia. He noted it would allow the alliance's missiles to reach Moscow and other key targets in western Russia in only seven minutes, a destabilizing situation that he said was comparable to Russia putting its missiles in Mexico or Canada.

In 2008, NATO promised that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually be welcome to join the alliance despite protests from Russia. Four months later, Russia routed Georgia in a five-day war that erupted when the Georgian leadership tried to reclaim control of a separatist region.

Earlier this year, Russia bolstered its forces near Ukraine and warned Kyiv that it could intervene militarily if Ukrainian authorities try to retake the rebel-controlled east. Moscow has since pulled back at least some of its troops, but Ukrainian officials say Russia has kept a massive contingent close to the border.

"The Kremlin has signaled that Ukraine's NATO bid is fraught with a new, hot conflict in Europe, something that Washington definitely doesn't want," Karasev said.

Alex Petriashvili, senior fellow at the Rondeli Foundation think tank in Tbilisi, Georgia, deplored the lack of consensus within NATO on granting Ukraine and Georgia clear plans for membership.

"It is certainly negatively affecting the aspirations of the two countries and gives the advantage to Rus-

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 30 of 67

sia, which is fiercely opposing their membership," Petriashvili said.

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis argued that Russia seeks "to reestablish control of internal, foreign and security policies of the states in Central and Eastern Europe" that it considers part of its "privileged sphere of interests."

"Like in Soviet times, both conventional and hybrid measures are used to assert control," he told AP.

Russia has rejected allegations it is trying to destabilize the countries or draw them back into its orbit. It has accused the European Union and NATO members that once were part of the Soviet Union or the Warsaw Pact of "Russophobia," casting them as key instigators of Western sanctions that limited Moscow's access to global capital markets and restricted imports of modern technology.

Landsbergis has shrugged off concerns that Washington could leave its Central and Eastern European allies in the cold.

"We have no reasons to doubt our closest trans-Atlantic ally," Landsbergis told AP. "The Biden administration has on numerous occasions underscored its commitment to work in close coordination with its European allies."

Latvia's top diplomat, Edgars Rinkevics, has similarly emphasized that Washington "steadfastly remains the closest ally" and "plays a key role in European security."

Ondrej Ditrych, director of the Institute of International Relations think-tank, also said he expects Biden to take a firm stance in Geneva.

"Biden is not naive, even as ahead of the summit the administration seems to make overtures to make Russia amenable to discussing strategic issues in earnest," he said in Prague. "I would not be worried that a détente that would be detrimental to Central and Eastern Europe countries would be in the making."

Some others aren't so optimistic.

"The real reason to worry is that perhaps Putin might come out of this meeting encouraged by what he sees on the other side, and that might make him bolder to press his advantages in a regional context," said Rodkiewicz, the Warsaw-based analyst.

The Latest: Germany records fewest virus cases in 9 months

By The Associated Press undefined

BERLIN — Germany has recorded its lowest number of new daily coronavirus infections in nearly nine months, and officials are floating the possibility of loosening mask-wearing rules.

The Robert Koch Institute, the national disease control center, said Monday that 549 new cases were reported over the previous 24 hours. It's the first time since Sept. 21 that the figure has been under 1,000, though it's typical for numbers over the weekend to be relatively low because fewer tests are conducted and reported.

Germany has reported more than 3.7 million cases since the pandemic began. Another 10 deaths brought the country's toll to 89,844.

Infection figures have declined sharply in recent weeks and a discussion has started about the future of mask-wearing rules. Health Minister Jens Spahn told the Funke newspaper group that a step-by-step approach should be taken, with rules to wear them outdoors lifted first. He said they could be dropped "little by little" indoors in areas with very low infections and high vaccination rates.

MORE ON THE PANDEMIC:

- As COVID-19 cases wane across US, vaccine-lagging areas still see risk
- Follow more of AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic> and <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine>

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

TOKYO — Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said he felt reassured by other Group of Seven leaders showing "firm support" to his determination to host the Tokyo Olympics next month.

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 31 of 67

Suga told reporters while in Britain for the G-7 Summit that he explained to other leaders Japan's commitment to ensure through virus control measures that the Games would be safe and secure.

"I'm feeling reassured by the firm support I received from all the other leaders," Suga said Sunday before heading back to Tokyo. "I have renewed my determination to make the Tokyo Games a success at any cost."

With the Olympic coming up in about 40 days, Tokyo and other Japanese metro areas are under a state of emergency because of the number of infections and the resulting pressure on medical systems. Japan's vaccinations are beginning to pick up, but less than 5% percent of population was fully vaccinated through last week.

Suga is expected to decide later this week whether to extend or lift the emergency measures in Tokyo and other areas that are set to end on June 20.

Japan has had about 774,000 COVID-19 cases and 14,000 deaths.

BEIRUT — Lebanon has vaccinated a daily record of people against COVID-19, raising its total shots administered past 1 million.

The Health Ministry said nearly 23,000 people were vaccinated on Sunday alone on the third weekend of a COVID-19 vaccination "marathon" to speed up inoculations.

The ministry invited all residents who are 53 and older as well as people with special needs who are 16 and older to get Pfizer-BioNTech shots.

Lebanon, a small country with a population of 6 million including 1 million Syrian refugees, has registered more than 542,000 cases of coronavirus infection and nearly 7,800 deaths since February 2020.

Lebanon began a vaccination campaign in February and so far 317,000 have received two shots and nearly 684,000 have taken one shot.

CARBIS BAY, England — British Prime Minister Boris Johnson says Britain wants further investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, but that at the moment the country doesn't believe it came from a lab.

Speaking at the end of the Group of Seven summit in southwest England, Johnson says that while it doesn't look as if this particular disease came from a lab, the world needs to "keep an open mind."

Though the notion was once dismissed by most public health experts and government officials, the hypothesis that COVID-19 leaked accidentally from a Chinese lab is now under a new U.S. investigation ordered by President Joe Biden.

The G-7 leaders endorsed calls for a "timely, transparent, expert-led, and science-based" further investigation into the origins of the coronavirus.

Many scientists still believe the virus most likely jumped from animals to humans.

Johnson expected to announce delay in next England unlocking

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is expected to confirm Monday that the next planned relaxation of coronavirus restrictions in England will be delayed as a result of the spread of the delta variant first identified in India.

While hosting the Group of Seven summit in southwest England, Johnson conceded over the weekend that he had grown more pessimistic about the government lifting remaining limits on social contact on June 21 after daily cases reported across the U.K. hit levels not seen since February.

"Clearly, what you've got is a race between the vaccines and the virus, and the vaccines are going to win," he told the BBC. "It's just a question of pace."

With the delta variant estimated by some health experts to be at least 60% more contagious than the previous dominant strain, British scientists and doctors urged the prime minister to err on the side of caution and postpone implementing the fourth stage of his government's four-step unlocking plan for England.

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 32 of 67

Under his government's road map, nightclubs were set to reopen for the first time since the pandemic struck in March 2020 and all other legal limits on social contact were due to be scrapped by June 21 at the earliest, if coronavirus trends supported the moves.

Professor Andrew Hayward, an epidemiologist from University College London who is a member of a group advising the government, said that removing remaining restrictions could "fan the flames" of rising infections. He compared the process to driving a car around a bend without knowing what was around the corner.

"I think it's clear we will have a substantial third wave of infections, the really big question is how much that wave of infections is going to translate into hospitalizations," Hayward told the BBC.

On Sunday, the British government reported 7,490 new confirmed cases, one of the highest daily numbers since the end of February. While daily infections have increased threefold over the past few weeks, they are still way down from the nearly 70,000 cases recorded in January at the peak of the pandemic's second wave.

Still, the speed at which cases have been rising put pressure on Johnson to delay, potentially for four weeks or longer, so more people can get vaccinated before what has been dubbed by sections of the British media as "Freedom Day."

The U.K.'s vaccine rollout has won plaudits as one of the world's speediest and most coherent. As of Sunday, around 62% of the British population had received one shot, while about 44% had gotten the two needed to produce what health experts consider an acceptable level of immunity.

The government's aim is to have offered every adult in the U.K. one vaccine dose by the end of July. The devolved administration in Wales said it will have offered one jab to every adult by Monday, six weeks ahead of schedule.

The rapid rollout of vaccines and a strict months-long lockdown helped drive down the number of virus-related deaths in the U.K. in recent months. Despite that, the country has recorded nearly 128,000 deaths in the pandemic, more than any other nation in Europe.

The improved backdrop led to the loosening of lockdown restrictions, with stores, theaters, gyms and most sectors of the economy operating within social distancing guidelines. The four nations of the U.K. — England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland — have lifted restrictions at different paces but generally pursued similar plans.

Voices of Iranians ahead of the presidential election

By MOHAMMAD NASIRI Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — Iranians this week are preparing to vote in — or perhaps to boycott — a presidential election that many fear will only underscore their powerlessness to shape the country's fate.

Hopefuls are running to replace the term-limited President Hassan Rouhani, whose promises of a bright economic future withered as Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers collapsed. The backlash of disappointment in Rouhani's relatively moderate administration has given hard-liners an edge this time, analysts say, even as the U.S. and Iran now negotiate a return to the landmark accord.

Iran's clerical vetting committee has allowed just seven candidates on the ballot, nixing prominent reformists and key Rouhani allies. The presumed front-runner has become Ebrahim Raisi, the country's hard-line judiciary chief who's closely aligned with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

As Iran reels from the coronavirus pandemic, global isolation, sweeping U.S. sanctions and runaway inflation, the mood among potential voters appears to be one of apathy. Tehran, the vast and churning capital, has been eerily quiet in the days leading up to the poll, with some Raisi campaign posters scattered around the city and none of the huge rallies that drew roaring crowds to the streets during past election seasons.

With just a few days to go until the vote, The Associated Press spoke to Tehran residents about their hopes and fears. Few expect the vote to ease the nation's sense of crisis. Some say they'll vote for Raisi, known for his televised anti-corruption campaign, to protest Rouhani's failures. Others are undecided or

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 33 of 67

plan to boycott the vote, saying they have no trust in the government to improve their lives.

"I've watched the presidential debates but didn't see any of them offer real solutions," said 30-year-old Masoumeh Eftekhari, six months pregnant and strolling through the shop-lined promenades of Tehran's jam-packed Grand Bazaar. She pointed with astonishment to the skyrocketing prices of baby clothes. "It disappoints me, so I cannot say which candidate is my favorite. At the moment, none."

Consumed by fear of future economic decline, Fatemeh Rekabi, a 29-year-old accountant, also believes there's no candidate worth voting for.

"I don't have any trust in the candidates because I don't know what is going to happen next. What if the situation gets worse?" she asked. "Our people wouldn't survive."

Sasan Ghafouri, a 29-year-old who studied to become a lab technician but is now grinding out a living selling clothes at a Tehran mall, said he's exhausted from work and disillusioned with electoral politics that deliver nothing.

"I come here at 9 in the morning and work until 9-10 p.m., day in, day out. When I don't have any time left to have fun or study, continue my education and pursue my dreams, what is the meaning of life?" he said. "At the moment, I can't think about my dreams."

Those staking their hopes on Raisi say they're desperate for any change in their fortunes after watching their savings evaporate as the national currency, the Iranian rial, collapsed under Rouhani.

"Rouhani's administration was full of disappointment and incompetence. I deal with finances because of my job and have witnessed the adversity facing our citizens everyday," said Ali Momeni, a 37-year-old accountant at an upscale mall in west Tehran. He said he'll throw his vote behind Raisi, who he hopes will "hire a powerful team of economic advisers (to) ... improve the country's situation."

Loqman Karimi, a 50-year-old porter pushing laden carts through the narrow alleys of Tehran's Grand Bazaar, also said he'll support Raisi — not for his airy promises but for concrete things he'd already done as judiciary chief.

"Raisi reopened many bankrupt factories ... which of the previous judiciary chiefs have done such a thing? None of them had done such a good job," said Karimi. "Why should Iranian people be caught up in high prices? Why should they stand in lines to buy eggs and chicken meat?"

Although Iranians may disagree over whether and how to vote, they share a deep disenchantment with Iran's status quo — but also vast aspirations for a somehow better future.

For some, that means longing for a return to the nuclear deal, the years of optimism when Iran was a prospect for foreign investors before then-President Donald Trump withdrew America from the accord and re-imposed sweeping sanctions.

"We have reached a point now that we wish we could return to where we were five and six years ago ... even if we can't have things improved," said Nasrin Hassani, a 34-year-old dressmaker at a Tehran mall. Others regretted the disqualification of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose tenure, although marked by sanctions, violent upheaval and economic decline, now conjures nostalgia, they said.

Regardless of the election's outcome, many said their dream was for Iran to become "a normal country," free from sanctions, fear of war and the feeling of siege. Past elections in Iran have laid the ground for diplomatic negotiations and cultural openings, but moderate politicians say that's unlikely if Raisi wins.

"I just want the next president not to mess with other countries and the other way around," said Rekabi, the young accountant. "We are really fed up. ... We don't deserve to live this difficult, listless and awful life."

Such a grim assessment already has prompted hundreds of thousands to leave the troubled country and try their luck abroad.

"Those who have the means are leaving here. Many of my friends are leaving Iran," said Hassani, the dressmaker, who's still undecided about the vote. "I just hope things will become easier so that people will want to stay."

Ousted Myanmar leader on trial; critics say charges bogus

By GRANT PECK Associated Press

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 34 of 67

BANGKOK (AP) — Myanmar's ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi was set to go on trial Monday on charges that many observers have criticized as attempt by the military junta that deposed her to delegitimize her democratic election and cripple her political future.

Suu Kyi's prosecution poses the greatest challenge for the 75-year-old and her National League for Democracy party since February's military coup, which prevented them from taking office for a second five-year term following last year's landslide election victory.

Human Rights Watch charged that the allegations being heard in a special court in the capital, Naypyitaw, are "bogus and politically motivated" with the intention of nullifying the victory and preventing Suu Kyi from running for office again.

"This trial is clearly the opening salvo in an overall strategy to neuter Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy party as a force that can challenge military rule in the future," said Phil Robertson, the organization's deputy Asia director.

The army seized power on Feb. 1 before the new lawmakers could be seated, and arrested Suu Kyi, who held the post of special counsellor, and President Win Myint, along with other members of her government and ruling party. The coup reversed years of slow progress toward more democracy for Myanmar.

The army cited the government's failure to properly investigate alleged voting irregularities as its reason for seizing power — an assertion contested by the independent Asian Network for Free Elections and many others. Junta officials have threatened to dissolve the National League for Democracy for alleged involvement in election fraud and any conviction for Suu Kyi could see her barred from politics.

The junta has claimed it will hold new elections within the next year or two but the country's military has a long history of promising elections and not following through. The military ruled Myanmar for 50 years after a coup in 1962, and kept Suu Kyi under house arrest for 15 years after a failed 1988 popular uprising.

The military's latest takeover sparked nationwide protests that continue despite a violent crackdown that has killed hundreds of people. Although street demonstrations have shrunk in number and scale, the junta now faces a low-level armed insurrection by its opponents in both rural and urban areas.

Suu Kyi is being tried on allegations she illegally imported walkie-talkies for her bodyguards' use, unlicensed use of the radios and spreading information that could cause public alarm or unrest, as well as for two counts of violating the Natural Disaster Management Law for allegedly breaking pandemic restrictions during the 2020 election campaign, her lawyers said Sunday.

"All these charges should be dropped, resulting in her immediate and unconditional release," said Human Rights Watch's Robertson. "But sadly, with the restrictions on access to her lawyers, and the case being heard in front of a court that is wholly beholden to the military junta, there is little likelihood she will receive a fair trial."

Government prosecutors will have until June 28 to finish their presentation, after which Suu Kyi's defense team will have until July 26 to present its case, Khin Maung Zaw, the team's senior member, said last week. Court sessions are due to be held on Monday and Tuesday each week.

Two other more serious charges are being handled separately. Suu Kyi is charged with breaching the colonial-era Official Secrets Act, which carried a maximum 14-year prison term, and police last week filed complaints under a section of the Anti-Corruption Law that states that political office holders convicted for bribery face a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison and a fine.

Although Suu Kyi faced her first charge just days after the coup, she was not immediately allowed to consult with her lawyers. Only on May 24, when she made her first actual appearance in court, was she allowed the first of two brief face-to-face meetings with them at pre-trial hearings. Her only previous court appearances had been by video link.

A photo of her May 24 appearance released by state media showed her sitting straight-backed in a small courtroom, wearing a pink face-mask, her hands folded in her lap. Alongside her were her two co-defendants on several charges, the former president as well as the former mayor of Naypyitaw, Myo Aung.

The three were able to meet with their defense team for about 30 minutes before the hearing began at a special court set up inside Naypyitaw's city council building, said one of their lawyers, Min Min Soe. Senior lawyer Khin Maung Zaw, said Suu Kyi "seems fit and alert and smart, as always."

EXPLAINER: Who is Naftali Bennett, Israel's new leader?

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Naftali Bennett, who was sworn in Sunday as Israel's new prime minister, embodies many of the contradictions that define the 73-year-old nation.

He's a religious Jew who made millions in the mostly secular hi-tech sector; a champion of the settlement movement who lives in a Tel Aviv suburb, and a former ally of Benjamin Netanyahu who has partnered with centrist and left-wing parties to end his 12-year rule.

His ultranationalist Yamina party won just seven seats in the 120-member Knesset in March elections — the fourth such vote in two years. But by refusing to commit to Netanyahu or his opponents, Bennett positioned himself as kingmaker. Even after one member of his religious nationalist party abandoned him to protest the new coalition deal, he ended up with the crown.

Here's a look at Israel's new leader:

AN ULTRANATIONALIST WITH A MODERATE COALITION

Bennett has long positioned himself to the right of Netanyahu. But he will be severely constrained by his unwieldy coalition, which has only a narrow majority in parliament and includes parties from the right, left and center.

He is opposed to Palestinian independence and strongly supports Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem, which the Palestinians and much of the international community see as a major obstacle to peace.

Bennett fiercely criticized Netanyahu after the prime minister agreed to slow settlement construction under pressure from President Barack Obama, who tried and failed to revive the peace process early in his first term.

He briefly served as head of the West Bank settler's council, Yesha, before entering the Knesset in 2013. Bennett later served as Cabinet minister of diaspora affairs, education and defense in various Netanyahu-led governments.

"He's a right-wing leader, a security hard-liner, but at the same time very pragmatic," said Yohanan Plesner, head of the Israel Democracy Institute, who has known Bennett for decades and served with him in the military.

He expects Bennett to engage with other factions to find a "common denominator" as he seeks support and legitimacy as a national leader.

RIVALRY WITH NETANYAHU

The 49-year-old father of four shares Netanyahu's hawkish approach to the Middle East conflict, but the two have had tense relations over the years.

Bennett served as Netanyahu's chief of staff for two years, but they parted ways after a mysterious falling out that Israeli media linked to Netanyahu's wife, Sara, who wields great influence over her husband's inner circle.

Bennett campaigned as a right-wing stalwart ahead of the March elections and signed a pledge on national TV saying he would never allow Yair Lapid, a centrist and Netanyahu's main rival, to become prime minister.

But when it became clear Netanyahu was unable to form a ruling coalition, that's exactly what Bennett did, agreeing to serve as prime minister for two years before handing power to Lapid, the architect of the new coalition.

Netanyahu's supporters have branded Bennett a traitor, saying he defrauded voters. Bennett has defended his decision as a pragmatic move aimed at unifying the country and avoiding a fifth round of elections.

A GENERATIONAL SHIFT

Bennett, a modern Orthodox Jew, will be Israel's first prime minister who regularly wears a kippa, the

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 36 of 67

skullcap worn by observant Jews. He lives in the upscale Tel Aviv suburb of Raanana, rather than the settlements he champions.

Bennett began life with his American-born parents in Haifa, then bounced with his family between North America and Israel, military service, law school and the private sector. Throughout, he's curated a persona that's at once modern, religious and nationalist.

After serving in the elite Sayeret Matkal commando unit, Bennett went to law school at Hebrew University. In 1999, he co-founded Cyota, an anti-fraud software company that was sold in 2005 to U.S.-based RSA Security for \$145 million.

Bennett has said the bitter experience of Israel's 2006 war against the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah drove him to politics. The monthlong war ended inconclusively, and Israel's military and political leadership at the time was widely criticized as bungling the campaign.

Bennett represents a third generation of Israeli leaders, after the founders of the state and Netanyahu's generation, which came of age during the country's tense early years marked by repeated wars with Arab states.

"He's Israel 3.0," Anshel Pfeffer, a columnist for Israel's left-leaning Haaretz newspaper, wrote in a recent profile of Bennett.

"A Jewish nationalist but not really dogmatic. A bit religious, but certainly not devout. A military man who prefers the comforts of civilian urban life and a high-tech entrepreneur who isn't looking to make any more millions. A supporter of the Greater Land of Israel but not a settler. And he may well not be a lifelong politician either."

US documents solve mystery of war criminal Tojo's remains

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Until recently, the location of executed wartime Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo's remains was one of World War II's biggest mysteries in the nation he once led.

Now, a Japanese university professor has revealed declassified U.S. military documents that appear to hold the answer.

The documents show the cremated ashes of Tojo, one of the masterminds of the Pearl Harbor attack, were scattered from a U.S. Army aircraft over the Pacific Ocean about 30 miles (50 kilometers) east of Yokohama, Japan's second-largest city, south of Tokyo.

It was a tension-filled, highly secretive mission, with American officials apparently taking extreme steps meant to keep Tojo's remains, and those of six others executed with him, away from ultra-nationalists looking to glorify them as martyrs. The seven were hanged for war crimes just before Christmas in 1948, three years after Japan's defeat.

The discovery brings partial closure to a painful chapter of Japanese history that still plays out today, as conservative Japanese politicians attempt to whitewash history, leading to friction with wartime victims, especially China and South Korea.

After years spent verifying and checking details and evaluating the significance of what he'd found, Nihon University Professor Hiroaki Takazawa publicly released the clues to the remains' location last week. He came across the declassified documents in 2018 at the U.S. National Archives in Washington. It's believed to be the first time official documents showing the handling of the seven war criminals' remains were made public, according to Japan's National Institute for Defense Studies and the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records.

Hidetoshi Tojo, the leader's great-grandson, told The Associated Press that the absence of the remains has long been a humiliation for the bereaved families, but he's relieved the information has come to light.

"If his remains were at least scattered in Japanese territorial waters ... I think he was still somewhat fortunate," Tojo said. "I want to invite my friends and lay flowers to pay tribute to him" if further details about the remains' location becomes available.

Hideki Tojo, prime minister during much of World War II, is a complicated figure, revered by some con-

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 37 of 67

servatives as a patriot but loathed by many in the West for prolonging the war, which ended only after the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

About a month after Aug. 15, 1945, when then-Emperor Hirohito announced Japan's defeat to a stunned nation, Tojo shot himself in a failed suicide attempt as he was about to be arrested at his modest Tokyo home.

Takazawa, the Nihon University professor specializing in war tribunal issues, found the documents during research at the U.S. archives into other war crimes trials. The documents, he said, are valuable because they officially detail previously little-known facts about what happened and provide a rough location of where the ashes were scattered.

He plans to continue research into other executions. More than 4,000 people were convicted of war crimes in other international tribunals, and about 920 of them were executed.

Tojo and the six others who were hanged were among 28 Japanese wartime leaders tried for war crimes at the 1946-1948 International Military Tribunal for the Far East. Twenty-five were convicted, including 16 sentenced to life in prison, with two getting shorter prison terms. Two others died while on trial and one case was dropped.

In one of the newly revealed documents — dated Dec. 23, 1948 and carrying a "secret" stamp — U.S. Army Maj. Luther Frierson wrote: "I certify that I received the remains, supervised cremation, and personally scattered the ashes of the following executed war criminals at sea from an Eighth Army liaison plane."

The entire operation was tense, with U.S. officials extremely careful about not leaving a single speck of ashes behind, apparently to prevent them from being stolen by admiring ultra-nationalists, Takazawa said.

"In addition to their attempt to prevent the remains from being glorified, I think the U.S. military was adamant about not letting the remains return to Japanese territory ... as an ultimate humiliation," Takazawa said.

The documents state that when the cremation was completed, the ovens were "cleared of the remains in their entirety."

"Special precaution was taken to preclude overlooking even the smallest particles of remains," Frierson wrote.

Here's how the operation went.

At 2:10 a.m. on Dec. 23, 1948, caskets carrying the bodies of Tojo and the six others were loaded on a 2.5-ton truck and taken out of the prison after fingerprinting for verification, Frierson wrote in a Jan. 4, 1949 document.

About an hour and a half later, the motorcade guarded by truckloads of armed soldiers to protect the bodies arrived at a U.S. military graves registration platoon in Yokohama for a final check.

The truck left the area at 7:25 a.m. and arrived at a Yokohama crematorium 30 minutes later. The caskets were unloaded from the truck and placed directly "in the ovens" in 10 minutes, while soldiers guarded the area.

The remains were then transported under guard to a nearby airstrip and loaded onto a plane that Frierson boarded. "We proceeded to a point approximately 30 miles over the Pacific Ocean east of Yokohama where I personally scattered the cremated remains over a wide area."

Today, even without the ashes, bereaved families and conservative Japanese lawmakers such as former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe regularly pay tribute at Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine, where the executed war criminals are enshrined with 2.5 million war dead considered "sacred spirits" in the Shinto religion. No remains are enshrined at Yasukuni.

After the seven executed war criminals were enshrined there in 1978, Yasukuni has become a flashpoint between Japan and its neighbors China and South Korea, who see the enshrinement as proof of Japan's lack of remorse over its wartime aggression. Yasukuni also enshrines five other convicted wartime leaders and hundreds of other war criminals.

Hidetoshi Tojo said his great-grandfather was consistently made a taboo in postwar Japan, never glorified.

"Everything about my great-grandfather was sealed, including his speeches. Taking that into consideration, I think not preserving the remains was part of the occupation policy," he said. "I hope to see further

revelations about the unknown facts of the past.”

Cabinet secretaries sell Biden’s ambitious agenda across US

By ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Marty Walsh remembers what it was like when a Cabinet secretary would come to town.

“It really is a big deal. They give you the dates, and you just clear your schedule,” said Walsh, a former mayor of Boston.

He recalls 300 people packing into a room to hear Julián Castro, then Housing and Urban Development secretary. “He was speaking on behalf of President Obama and Vice President Biden, and people hung on every word.”

Now Walsh, as secretary of labor, is on the other side of the equation, crisscrossing the country on behalf of President Joe Biden’s American Jobs Plan. As the massive infrastructure package goes through torturous negotiations in Congress, Walsh and a handful of other Cabinet secretaries have launched an ambitious travel schedule to promote the plan and the larger Biden agenda.

“It’s clear the administration has decided to take their message on the road,” said Ravi Perry, head of the political science department at Howard University. “The amount of trips, how much they’ve traveled ... there really has been a shift.”

Starting around the beginning of May, Biden’s Cabinet members have made dozens of TV appearances and trips around the country, promoting the Biden agenda with an ambitious roadshow.

“I don’t know that I can think of an equivalent to this kind of rollout,” said HUD Secretary Marcia Fudge, who in recent weeks has traveled to Newark, New Jersey; Kansas City, Missouri; and Tulsa, Oklahoma. “We are an extension of the administration. We are carrying the president’s agenda.”

The Cabinet outreach campaign is particularly striking in the context of the country’s gradual emergence from the COVID-19 pandemic. Although restrictions on mass gatherings are being lifted all around the country, several Cabinet secretaries noted that the national mood is not quite ready for large political rallies.

“You’re not getting the crowds, of course,” said Walsh, who misses the intimacy of working lunches without social distancing restrictions. “It really restricts what you can do. You want to be around people.”

Much of the traveling has been done by Biden’s Jobs Cabinet: Walsh, Fudge, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm and Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo.

Buttigieg, who said he was “itching to get on the road since Day One,” said the presence of a Cabinet secretary brings particular gravitas. More than perhaps any position in government, he said, Cabinet secretaries are a direct extension of the president and his policies.

“You represent the administration and the president, writ large,” said Buttigieg, who has traveled to North Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee. “It’s a way to let people know that they’re important.”

A former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Buttigieg recalled, “It was a pretty big deal if a regional administrator for a federal agency came to town, much less a Cabinet secretary.”

The campaign is proceeding with active coordination from the White House. Fudge said her department plans her travel schedule, but the White House regularly makes requests for her to appear in certain places or arranges for her to team up with another secretary for a joint appearance. Biden announced the informal Jobs Cabinet grouping in April, telling reporters that the quintet would be asked “to take special responsibility to explain the plan to the American public.”

Anita Dunn, senior adviser to Biden, said the Cabinet members had largely been confined to long-distance television interviews for the first few months of the administration.

“It’s all been virtual until quite recently,” she said.

Dunn described the Cabinet members as “accomplished people who represent the administration and allow us to increase our reach.”

It also helps that several of the secretaries are former mayors, like Buttigieg and Walsh, or former governors like Granholm and Raimondo, enabling them to find easy common ground with local officials and

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 39 of 67

stakeholders.

"That's a huge advantage for the administration," Dunn said.

The logistics and cost of planning a secretary's visit are also far less daunting than they would be for the president or vice president. Dunn said the secretaries travel on a mixture of government planes and commercial airlines, and Cabinet secretaries have their own security details, but not Secret Service protections. As a result, the administration can get the impact of a direct presidential emissary for far less cost and hassle.

In some cases the secretary's role is to rally sympathy and momentum; in others they seek to reassure nervous audiences in deeply Republican states that the Biden agenda won't leave them behind.

Granholtz, speaking on the phone during a visit to West Virginia, said her primary goal on that trip was to reassure citizens of the coal mining-dependent state that Biden's clean energy plans won't destroy their economy. A former governor of Michigan, Granholtz compared West Virginia to her home state when the auto industry started contracting.

"I get that fear and nervousness when a state's whole identity and economy is wrapped around a sector that's shrinking. I get when a community has been on its knees," she said.

Her presence in West Virginia "means that the president of the United States deeply cares," Granholtz said.

The approach represents a direct departure from the previous administration. Former President Donald Trump's Cabinet secretaries did their share of pre-pandemic speaking engagements, but Trump generally preferred to be his own messenger and promoter through Twitter, interviews with sympathetic media outlets and famously raucous rallies with himself as the centerpiece.

"It's a huge shift in how Cabinet members are being used by the president," Perry said. "What we're seeing here is a much more decentralized executive branch. In some ways, it's a return to normalcy in terms of domestic diplomacy."

Justices consider Harvard case on race in college admissions

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With abortion and guns already on the agenda, the conservative-dominated Supreme Court is considering adding a third blockbuster issue — whether to ban consideration of race in college admissions.

The justices could say as soon as Monday whether they will hear an appeal claiming that Harvard discriminates against Asian American applicants, in a case that could have nationwide repercussions. The case would not be argued until the fall or winter.

"It would be a big deal because of the nature of college admissions across the country and because of the stakes of having this issue before the Supreme Court," said Gregory Garre, who twice defended the University of Texas' admissions program before the justices.

The presence of three appointees of former President Donald Trump could prompt the court to take up the case, even though it's only been five years since its last decision in a case about affirmative action in higher education.

In that Texas case, the court reaffirmed in a 4-3 decision that colleges and universities may consider race in admissions decisions. But they must do so in a narrowly tailored way to promote diversity, the court said in a decision that rejected the discrimination claims of a white applicant. Schools also bear the burden of showing why their consideration of race is appropriate.

Two members of that four-justice majority are gone from the court. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died in September. Justice Anthony Kennedy retired in 2018.

The three dissenters in the case, Chief Justice John Roberts and Justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito, remain on the court. Roberts, a moderating influence on some issues, has been a steadfast vote to limit the use of race in public programs, once writing, "It is a sordid business, this divvying us up by race."

The court's willingness to jump into major cases over abortion and gun rights also appear to turn on the new, more conservative composition of the court because similar appeals had been turned away in the past.

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 40 of 67

Like the abortion case, the Harvard case lacks a split among appellate courts that often piques the high court's interest in a case.

The Supreme Court has weighed in on college admissions several times over more than 40 years. The current dispute harks back to its first big affirmative action case in 1978, when Justice Lewis Powell set out the rationale for taking account of race even as the court barred the use of racial quotas in admissions.

In the Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, Powell approvingly cited Harvard as "an illuminating example" of a college that takes "race into account in achieving the educational diversity valued by the First Amendment."

Twenty-five years later, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor likewise invoked the Harvard plan in her opinion upholding the University of Michigan's law school admissions program.

Now it's Harvard program in the crosshairs of opponents of race-based affirmative action.

The challenge to Harvard is led by Edward Blum and his Students for Fair Admissions. Blum has worked for years to rid college admissions of racial considerations.

The group claims that Harvard imposes a "racial penalty" on Asian American applicants by systematically scoring them lower in some categories than other applicants and awarding "massive preferences" to Black and Hispanic applicants.

Harvard flatly denies that it discriminates against Asian American applicants and says its consideration of race is limited, pointing out that lower courts agreed with the university.

In November, the federal appeals court in Boston ruled that Harvard looked at race in a limited way in line with Supreme Court precedents.

The class that just finished its freshman year is roughly one-quarter Asian American, 15% Black and 13% Hispanic, Harvard says on its website. "If Harvard were to abandon race-conscious admissions, African-American and Hispanic representation would decline by nearly half," the school told the court in urging it to stay out of the case.

The Trump administration backed Blum's case against Harvard and also filed its own lawsuit alleging discrimination against Asian Americans and whites at Yale.

The Biden administration already has dropped the Yale suit and almost certainly will take Harvard's side at the Supreme Court if the case goes forward.

The lead attorney on the appeal is William Consovoy, who also represented Trump in his unsuccessful bid to shield his tax returns from the Manhattan district attorney.

When the court upheld the Michigan's law school program in Grutter v. Bollinger in 2003, O'Connor took note of the quarter-century that had passed since the Bakke decision.

"We expect that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today," O'Connor wrote.

O'Connor's timeline set 2028 as a potential endpoint for racial preferences. A more conservative court than the one on which she served could advance that expiration date by several years.

Prime Peke! Wasabi the Pekingese wins Westminster dog show

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

TARRYTOWN, N.Y. (AP) — The flavor of the year at the Westminster Kennel Club dog show: Wasabi.

A Pekingese named Wasabi won best in show Sunday night, notching a fifth-ever win for the unmistakable toy breed. A whippet named Bourbon repeated as runner-up.

Waddling through a small-but-mighty turn in the ring, Wasabi nabbed U.S. dogdom's most prestigious prize after winning the big American Kennel Club National Championship in 2019.

"He has showmanship. He fits the breed standard. He has that little extra something, that sparkle, that sets a dog apart," said Wasabi's handler, breeder and co-owner, David Fitzpatrick. Show judge Patricia Trotter said simply: "What's not to like about this dog? ... He stood there as though he was a lion."

Fitzpatrick, of East Berlin, Pennsylvania, guided the Peke's grandfather Malachy to the Westminster title in 2012. Still, he said, "I just don't always think lightning is going to strike twice."

How will Wasabi celebrate?

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 41 of 67

"He can have a filet mignon. And I'll have Champagne," Fitzpatrick said with a laugh.

The 3-year-old Pekingese, meanwhile, was "pretty nonchalant about the whole thing," his handler said. Indeed, Wasabi laid down on the dais, occasionally looking up as if to see what the fuss was all about, as Fitzpatrick spoke before a cluster of reporters and cameras.

It was a poignant win that came after one of his co-owners, archaeologist Iris Love, died last year of COVID-19. Besides Fitzpatrick, the dog is also co-owned by Sandra Middlebrooks and Peggy Steinman.

Wasabi — the name derives from his mother, Sushi — came out on top of a finalist pack that also included Mathew the French bulldog, Connor the old English sheepdog, Jade the German shorthaired pointer, Striker the Samoyed, and a West Highland white terrier named Boy. Altogether, 2,500 champion dogs entered the show.

It underwent big changes this year because of the coronavirus pandemic, moving out of New York City for the first time since the show's 1877 founding. This year's show was held outdoors at an estate in suburban Tarrytown, about 25 miles north of where the top ribbon is usually presented at Madison Square Garden, and it happened in June instead of February.

In a sign of the pandemic times, some handlers wore masks — though vaccinated people were allowed to go without — and the show was closed to the public.

"It's a miracle that they even had this show," Fitzpatrick said.

Striker went into the show as the top-ranked U.S. dog, with more than 40 best in show wins since January 2020. And Bourbon had also won the AKC National Championship.

The show was bittersweet for Jade's handler and co-owner, Valerie Nunes-Atkinson. She guided Jade's father, CJ, to a 2016 Westminster best in show win — and lost him last September, when the 7-year-old died unexpectedly of a fungal infection.

"The good part about it is: He's left an incredible legacy," said Nunes-Atkinson, of Temecula, California. She said Jade "had my heart" from birth.

Boy had come a long way to Westminster — all the way from Thailand, where one of his owners was watching from Bangkok, according to handler Rebecca Cross.

"He always makes us laugh," said Cross, of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

For many dog owners, just making it to Westminster is a thrill — even for baseball's all-time home run leader, Barry Bonds, who was cheering on a miniature schnauzer he owns with sister Cheryl Dugan.

The dog, Rocky, didn't win his breed, but the slugger said he was proud of Rocky simply for qualifying for the champions-only show.

"We won because we got here. That's all that matters," Bonds told Fox Sports. "I've been to a lot of playoffs, and I've been to the World Series, and I've never won. But for 22 years, I kept trying."

The 56-year-old Bonds holds baseball's career home run record with 762, though his feat was clouded by allegations of steroid use — he denied knowingly taking them.

While semifinal and final rounds were held in a climate-controlled tent, earlier parts of the competition unfolded on the grass at an estate called Lyndhurst.

Douglas Tighe, who handled a Brittany named Pennie second place in the sporting group, says he just goes with it if his dogs get distracted by birds and other attractions in the great outdoors.

"Let them have fun," said Tighe, of Hope, New Jersey. "That's what it's all about."

That's what it's about to Kole Brown, too. At age 9, he showed a bull terrier named Riley on Sunday alongside his parents, Kurtis Brown and U.S. Air Force Capt. Samantha Brown, and some of the family's other bull terriers.

"I have a lot of fun with this sport," said Kole, of San Antonio, Texas. "Every single time I go into the ring, I have a smile on my face."

Ned Beatty, titanic character actor of 'Network,' dies at 83

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Ned Beatty, the Oscar-nominated character actor who in half a century of American movies, including "Deliverance," "Network" and "Superman," was a booming, indelible presence in even

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 42 of 67

the smallest parts, has died. He was 83.

Beatty's manager, Deborah Miller, said Beatty died Sunday of natural causes at his home in Los Angeles surrounded by friends and loved ones.

After years in regional theater, Beatty was cast in 1972's "Deliverance" as Bobby Trippe, the happy-go-lucky member of a male river-boating party terrorized by backwoods thugs in "Deliverance." The scene in which Trippe is brutalized and forced to "squeal like a pig" became the most memorable in the movie and established Beatty as an actor whose name moviegoers may not have known but whose face they always recognized.

"For people like me, there's a lot of 'I know you! I know you! What have I seen you in?'" Beatty remarked without rancor in 1992.

Beatty received only one Oscar nomination, as supporting actor for his role as corporate executive Arthur Jensen in 1976's "Network," but he contributed to some of the most popular movies of his time and worked constantly, his credits including more than 150 movies and TV shows.

Beatty's appearance in "Network," scripted by Paddy Chayefsky and directed by Sidney Lumet, was brief but titanic. His three-minute monologue ranks among the greatest in movies. Jensen summons anchorman Howard Beale (Peter Finch) to a long, dimly lit boardroom for a come-to-Jesus about the elemental powers of media.

"You have meddled with the primal forces of nature, Mr. Beale, and I won't have it!" Beatty shouts from across the boardroom before explaining that there is no America, no democracy. "There is only IBM and ITT and AT&T and DuPont, Dow, Union Carbide, and Exxon. Those are the nations of the world today."

He was equally memorable as Otis, the idiot henchman of villainous Lex Luthor in the first two Christopher Reeve "Superman" movies and as the racist sheriff in "White Lightning." Other films included "All The President's Men," "The Front Page," "Nashville," and "The Big Easy." In a 1977 interview, he had explained why he preferred being a supporting actor.

"Stars never want to throw the audience a curveball, but my great joy is throwing curveballs," he told The New York Times. "Being a star cuts down on your effectiveness as an actor because you become an identifiable part of a product and somewhat predictable. You have to mind your P's and Q's and nurture your fans. But I like to surprise the audience, to do the unexpected."

He landed a rare leading role in the Irish film "Hear My Song" in 1991. The true story of legendary Irish tenor Josef Locke, who disappeared at the height of a brilliant career, it was well reviewed but largely unseen in the United States. Between movies, Beatty worked often in TV and theater. He had recurring roles in "Roseanne" as John Goodman's father and as a detective on "Homicide: Life on the Street."

On Broadway he won critical praise (and a Drama Desk Award) for his portrayal of Big Daddy in a revival of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," a role he had first played as a 21-year-old in a stock company production. His more recent movies included "Toy Story 3" (as the duplicitous stuffed bear Lotso) in 2010 and the villainous tortoise mayor in "Rango." He retired in 2013.

Ned Thomas Beatty was born in 1937 in Louisville, Ky., and raised in Lexington, where he joined the Protestant Disciples of Christ Christian Church. "It was the theater I attended as a kid," he told The Associated Press in 1992. "It was where people got down to their truest emotions and talked about things they didn't talk about in everyday life. ... The preaching was very often theatrical." For a time he thought of becoming a priest, but changed his mind after he was cast in a high school production of "Harvey."

He spent 10 summers at the Barter Theater in Abingdon, Virginia, and eight years at the Arena Stage Company in Washington, D.C. At the Arena Stage, he appeared in Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya" and starred in Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman." Then his life changed forever when he took a train to New York to audition for director John Boorman for the role of Bobby Trippe. Boorman told him the role was cast, but changed his mind after seeing Beatty audition.

Beatty, who married Sandra Johnson in 1999, had eight children from three previous marriages.

As COVID-19 cases wane, vaccine-lagging areas still see risk

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 43 of 67

By DYLAN LOVAN and LEAH WILLINGHAM Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — New COVID-19 cases are declining across most of the country, even in some states with vaccine-hesitant populations. But almost all states bucking that trend have lower-than-average vaccination rates, and experts warn that relief from the pandemic could be fleeting in regions where few people get inoculated.

Case totals nationally have declined in a week from a seven-day average of nearly 21,000 on May 29 to 14,315 on Saturday, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. For weeks, states and cities have been dropping virus restrictions and mask mandates, even indoors.

Experts said some states are seeing increased immunity because there were high rates of natural spread of the disease, which has so far killed nearly 600,000 Americans.

"We certainly are getting some population benefit from our previous cases, but we paid for it," said Mississippi State Health Officer Dr. Thomas Dobbs. "We paid for it with deaths."

More than 7,300 Mississippians have died in the pandemic, and the state has the sixth-highest per capita death rate.

Dobbs estimated that about 60% of the state's residents have "some underlying immunity."

"So we're now sort of seeing that effect, most likely, because we have a combination of natural and vaccine-induced immunity," Dobbs said.

Just eight states — Alabama, Arkansas, Hawaii, Missouri, Nevada, Texas, Utah and Wyoming — have seen their seven-day rolling averages for infection rates rise from two weeks earlier, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University. All of them except Hawaii have recorded vaccination rates that are lower than the US average of 43% fully vaccinated, according to the U.S Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The 10 states with the fewest new cases per capita over that time frame all have fully vaccinated rates above the national average.

Medical experts said a host of factors is playing into the drop in case counts across the country, including vaccines, natural immunity from exposure to the virus, warmer weather and people spending less time indoors.

But Dr. Leana Wen, a public health professor at George Washington University, said she is concerned that the natural immunity of those who have been exposed to coronavirus may soon wane. And she's worried that states with low vaccination rates could become hot spots.

"Just because we're lucky in June doesn't mean we'll continue to be lucky come the late fall and winter," said Wen, the former health commissioner for the city of Baltimore. "We could well have variants here that are more transmissible, more virulent and those who do not have immunity or have waning immunity could be susceptible once again."

In Mississippi, about 835,000 people have been fully vaccinated, or 28% of the population. But despite the lagging vaccination rate, the state's rolling average of daily new cases over the past two weeks has decreased by about 18%, according to Johns Hopkins.

Dr. Albert Ko, who chairs Department of Epidemiology of Microbial Diseases at Yale, said there is no accurate data to show what percentage of the population in "high burden" states such as Alabama or Texas have been exposed to the virus, but he said estimates have put it as high as 50%.

"I think it doesn't deny the importance of vaccination, particularly because the levels of antibodies that you get that are induced by natural infection are lower than that of what we have for our best vaccine," Ko said.

Ko said it is important that even those exposed to the disease get vaccinated because natural immunity does not last as long as vaccine immunity and the levels of antibodies are lower.

Wen said research strongly suggests that vaccinations provide a benefit to those who already have some antibodies due to infection.

"I think it is a fallacy that many people have that recovery means they no longer need to be vaccinated," she said.

Israel swears in new coalition, ending Netanyahu's long rule

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's parliament on Sunday narrowly approved a new coalition government, ending the historic 12-year rule of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and sending the polarizing leader into the opposition.

Naftali Bennett, a former ally of Netanyahu turned rival, became prime minister after the 60-59 vote. Promising to try to heal a divided nation, Bennett will preside over a diverse and fragile coalition comprised of eight parties with deep ideological differences.

But the 71-year-old Netanyahu made clear he has no intention of exiting the political stage. "If it is destined for us to be in the opposition, we will do it with our backs straight until we topple this dangerous government and return to lead the country," he said.

The vote, capping a stormy parliamentary session, ended a two-year cycle of political paralysis in which the country held four deadlocked elections. Those votes focused largely on Netanyahu's divisive rule and his fitness to remain in office while on trial for corruption charges.

To his supporters, Netanyahu is a global statesman uniquely capable of leading the country through its many security challenges.

But to his critics, he has become a polarizing and autocratic leader who used divide-and-rule tactics to aggravate the many rifts in Israeli society. Those include tensions between Jews and Arabs, and within the Jewish majority between his religious and nationalist base and his more secular and dovish opponents.

Outside the Knesset, hundreds of protesters watching the vote on a large screen erupted into applause when the new government was approved. Thousands of people, many waving Israeli flags, celebrated in central Tel Aviv's Rabin Square.

President Joe Biden quickly congratulated the new government.

"I look forward to working with Prime Minister Bennett to strengthen all aspects of the close and enduring relationship between our two nations," he said in a statement. He said his administration is fully committed to working with the new government "to advance security, stability, and peace for Israelis, Palestinians, and people throughout the broader region."

Bennett's office said he later spoke by phone with Biden, thanking him for his warm wishes and long-standing commitment to Israel's security.

The leaders agreed to consult closely on all matters related to regional security, including Iran, the White House said, adding that Biden said his administration intends to work closely with the Israeli government on advancing peace, security and prosperity for Israelis and Palestinians.

Much of the Israeli opposition to Netanyahu was personal. Three of the eight parties in the new government, including Bennett's Yamina, are headed by former Netanyahu allies who share his hard-line ideology but had deep personal disputes with him.

Bennett, 49, is a former chief of staff to Netanyahu whose small party is popular with religious Jews and West Bank settlers. As he addressed the raucous debate, he was repeatedly heckled and shouted down by Netanyahu's supporters. Some were removed from the chamber.

Bennett, an observant Jew, noted the Jewish people twice lost their homeland in biblical times due to bitter infighting.

"This time, at the decisive moment, we have taken responsibility," he said. "To continue on in this way -- more elections, more hatred, more vitriolic posts on Facebook -- is just not an option. Therefore we stopped the train, a moment before it barreled into the abyss."

The new Cabinet met briefly, and Bennett recited a prayer for new beginnings and said it was time to mend rifts. "Citizens of Israel are all looking to us now, and the burden of proof is upon us," Bennett said.

The millionaire former high-tech entrepreneur faces a tough test maintaining an unwieldy coalition from the political right, left and center.

The coalition, including a small Islamist faction that is making history as the first Arab party to sit in a coalition, agree on little beyond their opposition to Netanyahu. They are likely to pursue a modest agenda

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 45 of 67

that seeks to reduce tensions with the Palestinians and maintain good relations with the U.S. without launching any major initiatives.

"We will forge forward on that which we agree -- and there is much we agree on, transport, education and so on, and what separates us we will leave to the side," Bennett said. He also promised a "new page" in relations with Israel's Arab sector.

Israel's Arab citizens make up about 20% of the population but have suffered from discrimination, poverty and lack of opportunities. Netanyahu has often tried to portray Arab politicians as terrorist sympathizers, though he also courted the same Arab party in a failed effort to remain in power after March 23 elections.

Bennett, who like Netanyahu opposes the establishment of a Palestinian state, made little mention of the Palestinians beyond threatening a tough response to violence. He also vowed, like Netanyahu, to oppose U.S.-led efforts to restore the international nuclear accord with Iran.

"Israel will not allow Iran to arm itself with nuclear weapons," he said. "Israel is not party to the agreement and will maintain full freedom to act."

But he also thanked Biden for his support of Israel. He promised to take a different approach than Netanyahu, who has alienated much of the Democratic Party through his antagonistic relationship with then-President Barack Obama and close ties with former President Donald Trump.

"My government will make an effort to deepen and nurture relations with our friends in both parties -- bipartisan," Bennett said. "If there are disputes, we will manage them with fundamental trust and mutual respect."

While Bennett's speech was conciliatory, Netanyahu's was confrontational. He boasted of his achievements, including diplomatic treaties with four Arab states and a successful coronavirus vaccination drive, before belittling the man who is replacing him.

He accused Bennett of abandoning Israel's right-wing electorate and joining weak "leftists" to become prime minister. He said Bennett did not have the backbone to stand up to Iran or pressure from the U.S. to make concessions to the Palestinians.

"I will lead you in the daily struggle against this evil and dangerous leftist government in order to topple it," he said. "God willing, it will happen a lot faster than what you think."

In the opposition, Netanyahu remains head of the largest party in parliament. The new coalition is a patchwork of small and midsize parties that could collapse if any of its members decide to bolt. Bennett's party, for instance, holds just six seats in the 120-seat parliament.

Yohanan Plesner, president of the Israel Democracy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank, said the new government will likely be more stable than it appears.

Each party in the coalition will want to prove that it can deliver. For that, they need "time and achievements," he said. Still, Netanyahu "will continue to cast a shadow," Plesner said.

The driving force behind the coalition is Yair Lapid, a political centrist who will become prime minister in two years in a rotation agreement with Bennett, if the government lasts.

Lapid called off a planned speech, saying he was ashamed his 86-year-old mother had to witness the raucous behavior of his opponents.

"I wanted her to be proud of the democratic process in Israel. Instead she, along with every citizen of Israel, is ashamed of you and remembers clearly why it's time to replace you," he said.

Netanyahu's place in Israeli history is secure, having served as prime minister for a total of 15 years -- more than any other, including the country's founding father, David Ben-Gurion.

But his reputation as a political magician has faded -- particularly since he was indicted in 2019 for fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes.

He refused calls to step down, instead lashing out at the media, judiciary and law enforcement, going so far as to accuse his political opponents of orchestrating an attempted coup. Last year, protesters began holding weekly rallies across the country calling on him to resign.

Netanyahu remains popular among the hard-line nationalists who dominate Israeli politics, but he could soon face a leadership challenge from within his own party. A less polarizing Likud leader would stand a

good chance of assembling the right-wing coalition that Netanyahu had hoped to form.

Judge tosses hospital workers' vaccine requirement challenge

HOUSTON (AP) — A federal judge threw out a lawsuit filed by employees of a Houston hospital system over its requirement that all of its staff be vaccinated against COVID-19.

The Houston Methodist Hospital system suspended 178 employees without pay last week over their refusal to get vaccinated. Of them, 117 sued seeking to overturn the requirement and over their suspension and threatened termination.

In a scathing ruling Saturday, U.S. District Judge Lynn Hughes of Houston deemed lead plaintiff Jennifer Bridges' contention that the vaccines are "experimental and dangerous" to be false and otherwise irrelevant. He also found that her likening the vaccination requirement to the Nazis' forced medical experimentation on concentration camp captives during the Holocaust to be "reprehensible."

Hughes also ruled that making vaccinations a condition of employment was not coercion, as Bridges contended.

"Bridges can freely choose to accept or refuse a COVID-19 vaccine; however, if she refuses, she will simply need to work somewhere else. If a worker refuses an assignment, changed office, earlier start time, or other directive, he may be properly fired. Every employment includes limits on the worker's behavior in exchange for remuneration. That is all part of the bargain," Hughes concluded.

Jared Woodfill, a Houston lawyer representing Bridges and the other clients, promised an appeal.

"All of my clients continue to be committed to fighting this unjust policy," Woodfill said in a statement. "What is shocking is that many of my clients were on the front line treating COVID-positive patients at Texas Methodist Hospital during the height of the pandemic. As a result, many of them contracted COVID-19. As a thank you for their service and sacrifice, Methodist Hospital awards them a pink slip and sentences them to bankruptcy."

Employees had a June 7 deadline to complete their immunization.

In a Tuesday memo, the hospital system's CEO, Marc Boom, said that 24,947 employees had complied with the vaccination requirement and that 27 of the 178 others had received the first of a two-dose vaccine and wouldn't be fired if they got their second. The rest are subject to termination.

He also wrote that 285 other employees received medical or religious exemptions, and 332 were deferred because they were pregnant or for some other reason.

Djokovic claims 19th Slam with 5-set comeback at French Open

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN AP Sports Writer

PARIS (AP) — Novak Djokovic left the court to go the locker room for a little chat with himself after dropping the first two sets of the French Open final Sunday.

Part of him worried he was too diminished and depleted to overcome that deficit against his younger, fresher foe, Stefanos Tsitsipas. And another part of Djokovic insisted he would.

Guess which side was right?

Aided by flawless serving down the stretch, a determined Djokovic summoned his imperious best and came all the way back to beat Tsitsipas 6-7 (6), 2-6, 6-3, 6-2, 6-4 for his second championship at Roland Garros and 19th Grand Slam title overall — one away from the men's record shared by Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.

"There's always two voices inside: There is one telling you that you can't do it, that it's done, it's finished. That voice was pretty strong after that second set," Djokovic said. "So I felt that that was a time for me to actually vocalize the other voice and try to suppress the first one that was saying I can't make it. I told myself I can do it. Encouraged myself. I strongly started to repeat that inside of my mind, tried to live it with my entire being."

After ending the match with a leaping volley, Djokovic who spread his arms, tapped his chest and crouched to touch the red clay at Court Philippe Chatrier. When he went to the sideline, he handed his racket to a

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 47 of 67

boy in the stands he said had been offering advice throughout.

Once the third set was underway, Djokovic felt better and played better.

"After that," he said, "there was not much of a doubt for me."

Yes, his triumph went from in danger to inevitable: Djokovic did not face a break point in any of the last three sets.

Djokovic became one of three men — alongside Rod Laver and Roy Emerson — to have won each major twice. As the reigning champion at the Australian Open and French Open, he heads to Wimbledon, which starts June 28, eyeing another rare achievement: He is halfway to joining Laver and Don Budge as the only men with a calendar-year Grand Slam.

The 34-year-old Djokovic eliminated 13-time French Open champion Nadal — a challenge the Serb likened to scaling Mt. Everest — in a semifinal that lasted more than four hours Friday night.

That was only Nadal's third loss in 108 matches at the clay-court major tournament.

Djokovic also defeated Nadal in the 2015 quarterfinals before losing that year's final. It appeared the same fate awaited Sunday, when the 22-year-old Tsitsipas had the upper hand against a drained Djokovic.

"It was not easy for me," Djokovic said, "both physically and mentally."

But he eventually completed his sixth career comeback from two sets down — and second of the past week.

Djokovic — who trailed 19-year-old Lorenzo Musetti two sets to none in the fourth round — is the first man in the professional era to win a major title after twice facing a 2-0 deficit in sets during the tournament.

"Suddenly just felt cold and out of it," Tsitsipas said. "I felt like I kind of lost my game a little bit."

This was the first major final for Tsitsipas and the 29th for Djokovic, who also won the 2016 French Open, to go with nine titles at the Australian Open, five at Wimbledon and three at the U.S. Open.

Also key: Djokovic is 35-10 in five-setters — including a men's-record 32 wins at majors — while Tsitsipas is 5-5.

"Two sets doesn't really mean anything," said Tsitsipas, who was trying to become the first Greek to win a major.

He needed about 100 minutes to grab his lead on a sunny, breezy afternoon with the temperature approaching 80 degrees Fahrenheit (over 25 degrees Celsius) and attendance limited to 5,000, about a third of capacity, because of COVID-19 restrictions.

The footing on clay can be tricky, and both men took first-set tumbles.

Djokovic's left him prone on the sideline after a head-first fall near a net post; he said his body felt the effects for about a half-hour afterward. Tsitsipas slipped by the baseline, smearing his white shirt and purple shorts with the rust-colored surface.

While Djokovic switched tops soon after his spill, Tsitsipas kept his dirty clothes on — as if he viewed the mess as a badge of honor — until after losing the third set, when he requested a visit from a trainer to help him with a tight hip.

By then, the momentum had changed.

The first set was tight as can be: Tsitsipas won 43 points, Djokovic 42.

Djokovic began the second set with a double-fault and a swinging forehand volley that landed way long, then got broken with a wild forehand. Tsitsipas broke again to lead 5-2 in that set, and Djokovic pressed a white towel against his face at a changeover.

Trying to cool off? Perhaps. Trying to reset himself? Probably.

After the second set, Djokovic took one of each player's two allotted breaks.

The match was never quite the same; Tsitsipas thought Djokovic's anticipation and movement improved.

"I kind of felt like he could read my game a bit better, suddenly," Tsitsipas said.

A supreme returner and imposer of his will, Djokovic accrued early breaks of serve in each of the third, fourth and fifth sets.

Shadows were spreading across the court as the sun descended in the early evening and, though Djokovic complained to chair umpire Aurélie Tourte that the artificial lights were switched on, he shined

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 48 of 67

when it mattered most.

This was another match that lasted more than four hours, and Djokovic was up to the task again.

"I will definitely remember these last 48 hours," he said, "for the rest of my life."

So, likely, will everyone else.

The Latest: Bennett says Israel 'at outset of new days'

By The Associated Press undefined

The latest on Israel's incoming government (all times local):

10:45 p.m.

JERUSALEM — Naftali Bennett, Israel's first Orthodox Jewish prime minister, has opened the first meeting of his government with a traditional blessing for new beginnings, saying that now's the time to get to work to mending rifts in the nation.

Bennett addressed the newly sworn in Cabinet Sunday night, saying the country is "at the outset of new days."

"Citizens of Israel are all looking to us now, and the burden of proof is upon us," he said. "We must all, for this amazing process to succeed, we must all know to maintain restraint on ideological matters."

Alternate prime minister Yair Lapid, who will serve as foreign minister for the first two years of the government's term, said in brief remarks that "friendship and trust" built their government, and that's what will keep it going.

10:30 p.m.

JERUSALEM — Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's office has little to say about Israel's new government headed by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, calling it an "internal Israeli affair."

Abbas spokesman Nabil Abu Rdeneh said Sunday that the Palestinian position remains "adherence to international legitimacy and the two-state solution by establishing an independent Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital."

The new Israeli government includes a wide spectrum of parties ranging from hard-line nationalists to more dovish supporters of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Members of the new government have said they will avoid dealing with the divisive issue for the time being.

9:50 p.m.

JERUSALEM — U.S. President Joe Biden has congratulated Israel's incoming Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, and Alternate Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, saying he looks forward to working "to strengthen all aspects of the close and enduring relationship" between the two nations. In a statement released by the White House, Biden said that "Israel has no better friend than the United States," and that "the United States remains unwavering in its support for Israel's security."

8:31 p.m.

JERUSALEM — Israel's parliament has appointed a new speaker, taking a key step toward approving a new coalition government that would end Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's 12-year rule.

With 67 votes in the 120-member chamber, parliament named Mickey Levy of the centrist Yesh Atid party its new speaker. He is to succeed the current speaker, Yariv Levin, of Netanyahu's Likud party.

The move set the stage for a confidence vote to approve a new coalition government later Sunday.

7:49 p.m.

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Gaza's Hamas rulers say they will confront the new Israeli government that is expected to take office.

Fawzi Barhoum, spokesman for the Islamic militant group, said Sunday any Israeli government is "a settler occupier entity that must be resisted by all forms of resistance, foremost of which is the armed resistance."

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 49 of 67

Hamas and Israel fought an 11-day war last month. The bitter enemies have fought a total of four wars since Hamas, which seeks Israel's destruction, seized control of Gaza in 2007 from the rival Palestinian Authority.

Despite their enmity, the sides have been conducting indirect talks aimed at shoring up a cease-fire. Barhoum said "the behavior of this government on the ground will determine the way and nature of dealing with it on the ground."

7:16 p.m.

JERUSALEM — The head of an Islamist party in Israel's parliament says his faction will advance the interests of Palestinian citizens of Israel from within the new government.

Mansour Abbas said Sunday that his Raam party was making great sacrifices for the sake of his constituents, and will try "to advance a dialog that will bring about better, new, principled relations for all citizens of the state: Jews and Arabs."

Raam is the first Arab party to join an Israeli government, and Abbas said that the partnership in the new government "will also bridge the gaps on the national level and the religious level."

Abbas said that combatting crime and violence that has plagued Arab communities in Israel is a "top priority" for Israel's Palestinian minority.

Abbas spoke ahead of a parliamentary vote that was expected to approve the new coalition government. Arabs make up about 20% of Israel's citizens and largely identify with Palestinians in the neighboring West Bank and Gaza Strip.

5:25 p.m.

JERUSALEM — The Israeli politician who was the driving force in forming the country's new government has called off a planned speech to parliament, saying he was ashamed that his 86-year-old mother had to witness the raucous behavior of his opponents.

In a brief speech, Yair Lapid said he wanted to "ask for forgiveness from my mother."

"I wanted her to be proud of the democratic process in Israel. Instead she, along with every citizen of Israel, is ashamed of you and remembers clearly why it's time to replace you," he said.

Lapid led the efforts to form the new coalition, which is expected to be approved later Sunday. He is expected to be Israel's new foreign minister for two years, and then become prime minister in a rotation agreement for the final two years of the government's term.

5:20 p.m.

JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is vowing to lead his Likud Party back to power. Netanyahu is slated to become opposition leader later Sunday when parliament is expected to approve a vote of confidence in a new coalition formed by his opponents.

In a speech to parliament, Netanyahu made clear he has no plans on giving up leadership of the Likud Party.

He vowed to "continue the great mission of my life, ensuring the security of Israel." He added: "If it is destined for us to be in the opposition, we will do it with our backs straight until we topple this dangerous government and return to lead the country in our way."

4:45 p.m.

JERUSALEM — Israel's designated prime minister, Naftali Bennett, says that renewing the international nuclear deal with Iran will be a mistake.

In a speech to parliament, Bennett said that Israel remains ready to act against Iran. "Israel will not allow Iran to arm itself with nuclear weapons," Bennett said. He added that "Israel will not be a party to the agreement and will continue to preserve full freedom of action."

The strong comments maintain the confrontational policy by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Ben-

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 50 of 67

nett's new government is scheduled to be sworn into office late Sunday after a parliamentary vote.

4:05 p.m.

JERUSALEM — Israel's Knesset, or parliament, has convened for a vote that is expected to end the historic 12-year rule of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The parliament is to hold a debate ahead of a vote of confidence for a new coalition government formed by a collection of Netanyahu's opponents.

If the coalition is approved, Naftali Bennett, a former ally turned rival of Netanyahu, would become prime minister over a disparate coalition of parties from the political right, left and center. Netanyahu is slated to become the opposition leader.

Bennett, whose parents immigrated to Israel from the United States, is expected to stress the need for close relations with the U.S.

But Bennett, who shares Netanyahu's hardline ideology, is also expected to echo the outgoing prime minister's opposition to restoring the international nuclear deal with Iran.

Erdogan and Biden meet at a tense moment for Turkish-US ties

By SUZAN FRASER Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — President Joe Biden and Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan have known each other for years, but their meeting Monday will be their first as heads of state. And it comes at a particularly tense moment for relations between their two countries.

The list of disagreements is unusually long for the two NATO allies: There's U.S. support for Kurdish fighters in Syria, as well as Turkey's purchase of a Russian weapons system. And in April, Biden infuriated Ankara by declaring that the Ottoman-era mass killing and deportations of Armenians was "genocide."

Previous U.S. presidents had avoided using the term out of concern that it would complicate ties with Turkey, which is fiercely proud of its Ottoman history and insists that those killed in the early 20th century were victims of civil war and unrest.

However, besides blasting the decision in speeches, Erdogan didn't immediately hit back at Washington. The muted response suggests he wants a good relationship with Biden, said Rachel Ellehuus, an analyst at the Washington think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"Not least because he needs that economic relationship with the U.S. and the appearance of a cooperative relationship in order to retain his base, which is very much built on a functioning Turkish economy that is tethered into the West," Ellehuus said.

However, before leaving Sunday for the NATO summit in Brussels where he will meet Biden, Erdogan described the president's comments on the killings of Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire as "very negative" and an "approach (that) has seriously upset us."

Erdogan, in power for 18 years as prime minister and then president, also one-on-one meetings with French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson lined up during Monday's summit. He told reporters he plans to "underline the importance we attach to the alliance with our allies."

One name apparently not on his list: Italian Premier Mario Draghi, who called Erdogan a "dictator" earlier this year, touching off a diplomatic row. Draghi chuckled nervously Sunday when asked about seeing Erdogan for the first time since but insisted on Turkey's "very important" role in NATO.

Erdogan has dialed down his anti-Western rhetoric as his government grapples with an economic downturn made worse by the coronavirus pandemic. His ruling AKP party has recently been hit by a series of corruption allegations, including drug trafficking and arms smuggling, made by a fugitive mafia boss who has been releasing tell-all videos on social media, without evidence.

"The most important thing for the Turkish leader at this time is to give a veneer of positive relations with the U.S. in terms of Turkey's image," said Merve Tahiroglu, Turkey program coordinator at the Project on Middle East Democracy. "He seems to understand that to get any kind of international investment to

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 51 of 67

Turkey, he will need to project an image of positive relations with the U.S.”

Biden has often touted the personal relationships he’s developed with world leaders over nearly 50 years as a factor that makes him uniquely equipped to revitalize the reputation of the United States following the presidency of Donald Trump.

In recent days, he’s mentioned to aides that he’s developed a strong rapport with Erdogan over the years, according to a senior administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations.

Biden still fondly recalls making a house call to Erdogan in 2011 when he was in Turkey to speak at the Global Entrepreneurs Summit, according to the official. Erdogan did not attend because he was recovering from major surgery, but Biden stopped by to check in on him. Their conversation was supposed to be brief but lasted over two hours.

Still, the relationship has been complicated at times. In 2014, while vice president, Biden apologized to Erdogan after suggesting in a speech that Turkey helped facilitate the rise of the Islamic State militant group by allowing foreign fighters to cross Turkey’s border with Syria. During the 2020 presidential campaign, Biden drew ire from Turkish officials after an interview with The New York Times in which he called Erdogan an “autocrat.”

Erdogan enjoyed collegial relations with Trump, who didn’t give him a hard time about Turkey’s human rights record and agreed to withdraw U.S. troops from northern Syria in 2019, paving the way for a Turkish military offensive against Syrian Kurdish fighters who had fought alongside U.S. forces against IS militants. Biden was strongly critical of that decision, accusing Trump of selling out U.S. allies.

Erdogan waited several days before congratulating Biden on his election victory as Trump challenged the results. At the same time, Erdogan sent a message to Trump thanking him for his “warm friendship.”

After taking office, Biden waited three months before giving Erdogan a call, which was widely seen in Turkey as a snub. The first time they spoke after the election was when Biden called to tell Erdogan about the Armenian “genocide” announcement.

In an interview with Turkish state broadcaster TRT on June 1, Erdogan noted he had cordial relations with previous U.S. presidents, particularly Trump, and that he would ask Biden on the sidelines of the NATO meeting “why Turkey-U.S. relations are in such a state of tension.”

“There have been many rumors... we need to leave them behind and talk about what we can do and what we will do,” he said of U.S.-Turkey relations before departing from Istanbul’s Ataturk Airport for Brussels on Sunday.

Biden and Erdogan are expected to take up Turkey’s purchase of the S-400 advanced Russian defense systems, a procurement that angered Washington and resulted in Ankara being kicked out of the U.S. F-35 fighter aircraft production program, sanctions on senior Turkish defense industry officials, and bans on military export licenses.

Washington says the Russian system is a threat to NATO security and insists that sanctions cannot be lifted until Turkey gets rid of the system, which has cost the country \$2.5 billion.

Turkey repeatedly has called for dialogue to resolve the issue. Turkish media reports say Turkey is set to propose the deployment of the S-400s at Incirlik air base, which is home to a U.S. Air Force wing, where they would be watched by U.S. military officials. Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu told reporters the S-400s would be “100% under (Turkish) control” and that no Russian military official would be in Turkey.

Erdogan said Sunday that talks with Biden would be “very broad” but he focused on F-35 issue, accusing the U.S. of “not fulfilling its promise, not complying with the contract although Turkey has fulfilled its promise” and reiterating that Ankara was forced to purchase the S-400 system after Washington declined to provide U.S. Patriot missiles.

Erdogan is also expected to raise the issue of U.S. military support for Syrian Kurdish fighters, who Ankara argues are inextricably linked to a decades-long Kurdish insurgency in Turkey.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan said Biden and Erdogan will discuss Syria and Iran as well as what role Turkey can play on Afghanistan following the U.S. troop withdrawal. Also on the agenda is how

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 52 of 67

Washington and Ankara “deal with some of our significant differences on values and human rights and other issues,” Sullivan said.

The unsettled security situation in Libya, as well as overlapping concerns on China and Russia will also be on the agenda.

Sullivan added that Biden knows Erdogan very well.

“The two men have spent a good amount of time together, and they are both, I think, looking forward to the opportunity to really have a business-like opportunity to review the full breadth of their relationship,” Sullivan said.

After G-7, Biden says he’s reestablishing US credibility

By JONATHAN LEMIRE, AAMER MADHANI and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

NEWQUAY, England (AP) — President Joe Biden on Sunday said the United States had restored its presence on the world stage as he used his first overseas trip since taking office to connect with a new generation of leaders from some of the world’s most powerful countries and more closely unite allies on addressing the coronavirus pandemic and China’s trade and labor practices.

As he wrapped three days of what he called “an extraordinarily collaborative and productive meeting” at the Group of Seven summit of wealthy democracies, Biden said there was “genuine enthusiasm” for his engagement.

“America’s back in the business of leading the world alongside nations who share our most deeply held values,” Biden said at a news conference before leaving Cornwall to visit Queen Elizabeth II at Windsor Castle. “I think we’ve made progress in reestablishing American credibility among our closest friends.”

The president, who is on an eight-day, three country trip, left his mark on the G-7 by announcing a commitment to share 500 million coronavirus vaccine doses with the world and pressing allies to do the same. The leaders on Sunday confirmed their intent to donate more than 1 billion doses to low-income countries in the next year.

“This is going to be a constant project for a long time,” Biden said of the global vaccination campaign, adding that he hoped the world could stamp out the pandemic in 2022 or 2023. “It’s not just the right thing to do” from a moral standpoint, Biden said, but also the correct thing to do “in terms of our own health.”

He also said the U.S. might be able to donate an additional 1 billion vaccine doses to the world in the coming years.

Biden also fought for the leaders’ joint statement to include specific language criticizing China’s use of forced labor and other human rights abuses as he worked to cast the rivalry with Beijing as the defining competition for the 21st century. The president declined to discuss the private negotiations over the provision, but said he was “satisfied” with the tough rhetoric, though difference remained among the allies about how forcefully to call out Beijing.

Canada, the United Kingdom, France and Japan largely endorsed the Biden administration’s position, while Germany, Italy and the European Union showed hesitancy during the talks, according to a senior official who briefed reporters on the condition of anonymity.

Biden’s national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, played down the division, but acknowledged “countries had different levels of conviction about the depth of the challenge.”

“But when you add it all up, actually the whole became greater than the sum of its parts because there is a broad view that China represents a significant challenge to the world’s democracies, on a number of different dimensions,” Sullivan said.

The leaders also embraced Biden’s call for a 15% global minimum corporate tax rate.

The other G-7 allies did their part in creating the impression that Biden was part of “the Club” and sought to help reinforce Biden’s “America is back” mantra, including by embracing the his campaign slogan to “Build Back Better” from the pandemic.

Most European allies had been disenchanted with President Donald Trump’s grumbling of “global free-loaders” and espousing an “America First” policy, so Biden had the challenge of convincing a skeptical

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 53 of 67

audience that the last U.S. administration was not a harbinger of a more insular country.

"We're totally on the same page," British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said of Biden.

Implicitly criticizing his predecessor, who had said other countries should pay for the presence of America's military presence abroad, Biden said he does not view NATO as a "protection racket." Biden also reported that global leaders were gratified that the U.S. president accepted the science of climate change.

"One of the things some of my colleagues said to me when I was there was, 'Well, the United States' leadership recognizes there is global warming,'" Biden said.

The president was ending his day in Brussels for meetings with NATO and European Union leaders on Monday and Tuesday before his summit with Putin on Wednesday in Geneva. U.S. officials said that one-on-one meeting would test whether the two men could develop a constructive relationship even as Biden was poised to rebuke Putin for a range of rights abuses and election interference.

Pressed at the news conference on why Putin has not changed his behavior after waves of U.S. sanctions, Biden replied with a laugh. "He's Vladimir Putin."

The summit marked some of Biden's first face-to-face meetings with global leaders since taking office in January amid the COVID-19 pandemic, including France's Emmanuel Macron, with whom he was meeting for the first time.

The 43-year-old Macron, who came into office in May 2017, months after Biden's two terms as the U.S. vice president ended, appeared to have quick chemistry with the 78-year-old American. The two draped their arms around each other and chatted animatedly when they walked together after the leaders' photo at the beginning of Friday's summit.

In remarks to reporters, Macron did not utter Trump's name but offered an unambiguous shot at the former president. Macron noted his relief that with Biden, he was now working with an American president "willing to cooperate."

"What you demonstrate is leadership is partnership," Macron said of Biden.

During Trump's term, Macron tried to find common ground but often bristled at Trump's nativist rhetoric.

Macron, who has worked to portray France as a more prominent power in recent years, also used the rise of Trumpism to make the case for greater global European leadership.

He complained in November 2019 that a lack of U.S. leadership was causing the "brain death" of NATO, insisting in an interview with the Economist that the European Union must step up and start acting as a strategic world power. Biden, in his remarks, seemed to acknowledge Macron's concerns, noting that Western Europe was providing "backbone and the support for NATO."

During the summit, Biden also met with Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa.

At the news conference, Biden briefly confused Syria and Libya when he described the importance of providing humanitarian aid to countries torn apart by civil war. It was among a handful of verbal stumbles the president made.

Biden then traveled to Windsor Castle for a private audience with the queen — becoming the 13th president to have met with the 95-year-old monarch. Biden greeted the queen on a dais in the castle courtyard and reviewed an assembled ceremonial guard before he and first lady Jill Biden joined her for tea.

He said in a brief exchange with reporters that the queen asked him about Chinese President Xi Jinping and Putin during their meeting. The president described her as "very gracious" and invited her to visit the White House.

"I don't think she'll be insulted, but she reminded me of my mother," Biden said.

Caution on Iran nuclear deal as G7 leaders vow to stop bomb

By DEREK GATOPOULOS and PHILIPP JENNE Associated Press

VIENNA (AP) — Diplomats from outside the European Union cautioned Sunday that negotiations with Iran to salvage a landmark nuclear deal still need more time, as leaders of the Group of Seven wealthy nations reaffirmed a commitment to stop the Islamic republic from building nuclear weapons.

Iranian envoys held another round of negotiations with international delegations in Vienna a day after

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 54 of 67

EU coordinators suggested that differences over the 2015 accord limiting Iran's nuclear activities had narrowed further. But Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told Iranian state media he thought a deal was unlikely to emerge in the coming week. A diplomat from Russia also said more time was needed to work out details.

The Vienna meetings are aimed at rebuilding a nuclear containment agreement between Iran and major world powers that the Trump administration withdrew the United States from in 2018.

U.S. President Joe Biden and other G-7 leaders expressed support for the Vienna process after a three-day summit in southwest England that ended Sunday. The G-7 nations are Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States.

"We are committed to ensuring that Iran will never develop a nuclear weapon," the leaders said in a joint statement.

"A restored and fully-implemented (nuclear deal) could also pave the way to further address regional and security concerns," the statement said.

A resolution would see Iran return to commitments made in 2015, aimed at making the development of a nuclear weapon impossible, in exchange for lighter U.S. sanctions.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Sunday on CBS' "Face the Nation" that Iran had been "galloping forward" with its nuclear ambitions and violating the terms of the accord since the United States pulled out of the deal.

"I think puts some urgency in seeing if we can put the nuclear problem back in the box," Blinken said.

Sunday's bilateral meetings followed joint negotiations held Saturday involving senior diplomats from China, Germany, France, Russia, and Britain. The United States was not directly involved.

An Iranian pro-opposition group held a small protest outside the famed Vienna Opera House, near the downtown hotel where the talks are taking place. Organizers said local police in Austria's capital instructed them not to protest outside the hotel. The event ended peacefully. ____

A previous version corrected the spelling of the surname of Iran's deputy foreign minister to Araghchi, not Araqchi.

Southern Baptists meet amid controversy over leaked letters

By TRAVIS LOLLER and PETER SMITH Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — As Southern Baptists prepare for their biggest annual meeting in more than a quarter-century, accusations that leaders have shielded churches from claims of sexual abuse and simmering tensions around race threaten to once again mire the nation's largest Protestant denomination in a conflict that can look more political than theological.

More than 16,000 voting delegates are pre-registered for the two-day gathering that starts on Tuesday in Nashville. Southern Baptist Convention members have been a powerful force in conservative Republican politics for a generation. This year's convention follows weeks of internal controversies stoked by leaked letters, secret recordings and video rebuttals.

Despite claiming 14 million members, the denomination has been in decline for 14 years. Adding to long-term membership losses have been the recent loud departures of its top public policy official, a mega-selling author and several prominent Black clergy over issues that include sexual abuse, racism and the treatment of women.

Key votes on who leads the convention and where it stands on these issues will not only set the denomination's direction but determine whether more people head for the exits, including Black clergy who see the denomination regressing on racial issues.

Controversy is not new to SBC meetings, but this year it has reached a fever pitch thanks to leaked letters from Russell Moore, who resigned two weeks ago as head of the denomination's powerful public policy arm, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. Moore was a staunch advocate for abuse victims and an ally of the denomination's Black pastors.

The letters and subsequently released secret recordings purport to show some SBC leaders tried to

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 55 of 67

slow-walk efforts to hold churches accountable for sexual abuse and to intimidate and retaliate against those who advocated on the issue.

In the documents, Moore accused certain leaders of caricaturing sexual abuse victims as "at best, mentally disturbed and, at worst, as sexually-promiscuous sinners."

Mike Stone, a Georgia pastor who is running for SBC president this year, is specifically called out as pushing back against Moore's accountability efforts. In an interview, Stone said Moore's allegations were outrageous, especially considering that Stone is himself a victim of childhood sexual abuse. However, Stone said the fact that the convention is a loose affiliation of autonomous churches makes it difficult to act on the issue.

"The Southern Baptist Convention was not, and to a large degree is still not, set up today to do the kinds of things that Russell Moore wanted to see us doing," Stone said.

Amid calls for a third-party investigation of Moore's allegations, Executive Committee president Ronnie Floyd announced Friday that the panel had retained a firm to conduct it. But some pastors reacted with calls for an independent task force, saying they don't trust the committee to oversee an investigation of itself.

Another burning issue is how, or even whether, to address systemic racism. Stone is among those calling for a repudiation of critical race theory while some Black pastors are exiting the SBC in frustration over what they see as racial insensitivity from overwhelmingly white leadership.

Moore, who is white, says in a letter that his work on racial reconciliation led to "constant threats from white nationalists and white supremacists, including within our convention."

The role of women in ministry could also pop up after bestselling Christian author Beth Moore, not related to Russell Moore, left the denomination earlier this year. Women are not allowed to serve as pastors in SBC churches, but some members go further, believing that women should never preach to men or even teach them in Sunday school. Beth Moore accused them of using those beliefs as a litmus test for theological purity. Meanwhile, the SBC's second largest church, Saddleback, recently ordained three female ministers.

How Southern Baptists feel about these issues will likely determine who is elected SBC president. Stone is part of the Conservative Baptist Network, which accuses Russell Moore, current president J.D. Greear and others of contributing to a liberal drift.

Another leading candidate, Al Mohler, has been supportive of sex abuse victims but angered some Southern Baptists for endorsing Donald Trump last year and for signing a statement, in his capacity as president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, denouncing critical race theory.

Meanwhile, Ed Litton, an Alabama pastor, is supported by Fred Luter, the only Black pastor ever to be denomination president. The two are among the co-signers of a statement by a multiethnic group of Southern Baptists asserting that systemic racial injustice is a reality.

For all the Baptists who will be in the room this week, looming large will be the influence of a non-Baptist who's not present: Trump. The Conservative Baptist Network announced at its formation in February 2020 that members had been concerned over an effort to keep former Vice President Mike Pence from speaking at the 2018 meeting. Strong Southern Baptists support for Trump contributed to the estrangement between the denomination and Beth Moore and Russell Moore, both of whom had criticized the former president.

"One of the things that is happening is that many conservative evangelicals want their denomination and church to line up to what they are hearing on cable news," said Ed Stetzer, executive director of Wheaton College's Billy Graham Center. "So if they hear that critical race theory is a huge problem in the culture, they want it dealt with in the church, even though it's not a major issue there."

The meeting is shaping up as the most contentious since the late 20th century, when those championing more conservative views on the Bible, politics and male authority in homes and churches took control of seminaries and denominational offices. The current controversies are driving huge pre-registration numbers.

Eric Costanzo, pastor of South Tulsa Baptist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, said he's bringing more church members than normally attend.

"I've also assembled a team of leaders to dig in deeper to the issues facing the SBC," he said. "They have not enjoyed most of what they've seen."

AP source: Justice Dept secretly subpoenaed McGahn's records

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Apple informed former Trump White House counsel Don McGahn and his wife that the Justice Department had subpoenaed information about accounts belonging to them in 2018, a person familiar with the matter said Sunday, days after two House lawmakers disclosed they, too, had their information secretly subpoenaed.

It's not clear yet why the Trump administration sought the McGahns' records. But the others were part of a leak probe related to the investigation of Russian-related election interference. The extraordinary disclosure that the Justice Department sought records of a sitting White House counsel and others, which was first reported by the New York Times, raises questions about how far the Trump administration was willing to go to ferret out who it thought might be responsible for damaging information about the administration.

Separately on Sunday, the Senate's top Democrat called on the Justice Department's chief national security official — a Trump appointee who has remained in the Biden administration — to testify under oath voluntarily or face a subpoena to answer questions about secretly seizing the phone data from House Democrats and reporters as part of the aggressive investigations into leaks.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said it is "imperative" the Senate Judiciary Committee issue a subpoena to John Demers, the assistant attorney general for national security, in addition to former attorneys general Bill Barr and Jeff Sessions, if they refuse to appear voluntarily.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., on Sunday also called on Barr, Sessions as well as Rod Rosenstein, the no. 2 Justice official at the time, to testify under oath in the House about what they knew. She declined to say whether she would push for subpoenas if they refused to appear.

"The Justice Department has been rogue under President Trump, understand that, in so many respects," Pelosi told CNN's "State of the Union." "This is just another manifestation of their rogue activity."

Schumer and Pelosi's demands come days after news emerged that the Justice Department had secretly subpoenaed Apple for metadata from House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff and another Democratic member of the panel, California Rep. Eric Swalwell, in 2018, as their committee was investigating the former president's ties to Russia. Schiff at the time was the top Democrat on the panel, which was led by Republicans.

Demers has been in charge of the department's national security division since February 2018, being sworn in a few weeks after the subpoena was issued to Apple for the Democrats' records, and his division has played a role in each of the leak investigations. Schumer called on Senate Republicans to join in a demand to issue the subpoenas.

"This was nothing less than a gross abuse of power," Schumer said of the seized records. "I don't think we've ever had a record of this in the past. ... This is about separation of powers."

President Joe Biden has nominated Matt Olsen, an executive at Uber who has experience in the Justice Department and served as director of the National Counterterrorism Center and as general counsel for the National Security Agency, to be the next assistant attorney general for national security.

But Demers has remained in place while Olsen awaits a confirmation hearing in the Senate. The former Boeing airline executive is one of the few remaining Trump appointees still in office.

The records of at least 12 people connected to the House intelligence panel were eventually shared with the Justice Department by Apple after the subpoena was issued in 2018, including aides, former aides and family members. One was a minor.

The subpoena, issued Feb. 6, 2018, requested information on 73 phone numbers and 36 email addresses, Apple said. It also included a non-disclosure order that prohibited the company from notifying any of the people and was renewed three times, the company said in a statement.

On Friday, the Justice Department's inspector general launched a probe into the matter after a request from Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco. Inspector General Michael Horowitz said he would examine

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 57 of 67

whether the data subpoenaed by the Justice Department and turned over by Apple followed department policy and “whether any such uses, or the investigations, were based upon improper considerations.”

Horowitz said he would also investigate similar Trump-era seizures of journalists’ phone records.

In recent weeks, the Justice Department notified news organizations that it secretly seized phone records belonging to reporters at the New York Times, the Washington Post and CNN as part of criminal leak investigations.

Following an outcry from press freedom organizations, the Justice Department announced earlier this month that it would cease the practice of going after journalists’ sourcing information.

G-7 leaders agree on vaccines, China and taxing corporations

By JILL LAWLESS, SYLVIA HUI, DANICA KIRKA and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

CARBIS BAY, England (AP) — Leaders of the Group of Seven wealthy nations staked their claim Sunday to leading the world out of the coronavirus pandemic and crisis, pledging more than 1 billion coronavirus vaccine doses to poorer nations, vowing to help developing countries grow while fighting climate change and backing a minimum tax on multinational firms.

At the group’s first face-to-face meeting in two years, the leaders dangled promises of support for global health, green energy, infrastructure and education — all to demonstrate that international cooperation is back after the upheavals caused by the pandemic and the unpredictability of former U.S. President Donald Trump.

During their three-day summit in southwest England, the G-7 leaders wanted to convey that the club of wealthy democracies — Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States — is a better friend to poorer nations than authoritarian rivals such as China.

“This isn’t about imposing our values on the rest of the world,” British Prime Minister Boris Johnson told reporters at the end of the seaside summit on the rugged Cornwall coast. “What we as the G-7 need to do is demonstrate the benefits of democracy and freedom and human rights to the rest of the world.”

U.S. President Joe Biden, who was making his first foreign trip as leader, said it was an “extraordinary, collaborative and productive meeting” that showed “America’s back in the business of leading the world alongside nations who share our most deeply held values.”

But health and environmental campaigners were distinctly unimpressed by the details in the leaders’ final communique.

“This G-7 summit will live on in infamy,” said Max Lawson, the head of inequality policy at the international aid group Oxfam. “Faced with the biggest health emergency in a century and a climate catastrophe that is destroying our planet, they have completely failed to meet the challenges of our times.”

Despite Johnson’s call to “vaccinate the world” by the end of 2022, the promise of 1 billion doses for vaccine-hungry countries — coming both directly and through donations to the international COVAX program — falls far short of the 11 billion doses the World Health Organization said is needed to vaccinate at least 70% of the world’s population and truly end the pandemic.

Half of the billion-dose pledge is coming from the United States and 100 million from Britain. Canada said it also would give 100 million doses, and France pledged 60 million. Altogether, the leaders said they pledged 870 million doses “directly over the next year,” with further contributions taking the total to the “equivalent of over 1 billion doses.”

Former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said the lack of a more ambitious vaccination plan was “an unforgivable moral failure.”

But Biden said the leaders were clear that the commitments they made to donate doses wouldn’t be the end. The U.S. president said getting shots into arms around the world was a “gigantic, logistical effort” and the goal might not be accomplished until 2023.

The G-7 also backed a minimum tax of at least 15% on large multinational companies to stop corporations from using tax havens to avoid taxes, a move championed by the United States.

Biden also wanted to persuade fellow democratic leaders to present a more unified front to compete

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 58 of 67

economically with Beijing and strongly call out China's "nonmarket policies and human rights abuses."

The language on China in the G-7 leaders' communique from the meeting was more muted than the United States has used, but Biden said he was satisfied. On China's economic behavior, the group said it would "consult on collective approaches to challenging non-market policies and practices which undermine the fair and transparent operation of the global economy."

The leaders also said they would promote their values by calling on China to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms in Xinjiang, where Beijing is accused of committing serious human rights abuses against the Uyghur minority, and in the semi-autonomous city of Hong Kong.

Not every European power has viewed China in as harsh a light as Biden, who has painted the rivalry with the techno-security state as the defining competition of the 21st century.

"The G-7 is not a club hostile to China," French President Emmanuel Macron said. "It's an ensemble of democracies that (would) work with China on all world topics that China is ready to work on with us."

Johnson, the summit's host, wanted the three-day meeting to fly the flag for a "Global Britain," his government's push to give the midsized country, newly detached from the European Union, outsized global influence.

Yet Brexit cast a shadow over that goal during the summit on the coast of southwest England. European Union leaders and Biden voiced concerns about problems with new U.K.-EU trade rules that have heightened tensions in Northern Ireland.

But overall, the mood was positive: The leaders smiled for the cameras on the beach at cliff-fringed Carbis Bay, a village and resort that became a traffic-clogged fortress for the meeting.

The prime ministers and presidents also mingled with Queen Elizabeth II at a royal reception, ate steak and lobster at a beach barbecue and watched an aeronautic display by the Royal Air Force Red Arrows during their stay by the sea.

America's allies were visibly relieved to have the U.S. back as an engaged international player after the "America First" policy of the Trump administration.

Johnson called Biden "a breath of fresh air." Italian Premier Mario Draghi said the president "wanted to rebuild what were the traditional alliances of the United States after the period of Trump, during which these alliances were seriously cracked."

Biden flew from the summit in Carbis Bay to have tea with the queen at Windsor Castle. He is scheduled to attend a NATO summit in Brussels on Monday and to hold talks with Russian leader Vladimir Putin in Geneva on Wednesday.

The G-7 also made ambitious declarations during their meetings about girls' education, preventing future pandemics and financing greener infrastructure globally

On climate change, the "Build Back Better for the World" plan promises to offer financing for infrastructure — "from railways in Africa to wind farms in Asia" — to help speed up the global shift to renewable energy. The plan is a response to China's "belt and road" initiative, which has increased Beijing's worldwide influence.

All G-7 countries have pledged to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, but many environmentalists say that will be too little, too late.

Naturalist David Attenborough addressed the leaders by video Sunday, warning that humanity is "on the verge of destabilizing the entire planet."

"If that is so, then the decisions we make this decade — in particular the decisions made by the most economically advanced nations — are the most important in human history," the veteran documentary filmmaker said.

As the leaders met behind fences and barbed wire, thousands of environmental protesters gathered throughout the weekend outside the ring of steel to accuse the G-7 of missing a chance to prevent climate catastrophe.

Members of the Extinction Rebellion climate activism group blocked the main road of the town of St. Ives on Sunday, banging drums and sitting on the road. Elsewhere, hundreds of surfers and kayakers paddled out to sea to urge better protection for the world's oceans.

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 59 of 67

"G-7 is all greenwashing," protesters sang during one march. "We're drowning in promises, now's the time to act."

From vaccine sharing to climate, G-7 talks yield agreements

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

FALMOUTH, England (AP) — The Group of Seven wealthy democracies have wrapped up their first face-to-face summit in two years at a seaside resort in southwest England. The leaders of the G-7 — Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States — made commitments on a range of topics, from sharing coronavirus vaccines to tackling climate change and making corporate taxation fairer.

Their final agreement from the three-day meeting also included a section on challenging China over "non-economic" economic practices and calling on Beijing to respect human rights.

Here are details on the key topics they covered:

VACCINE SHARING

The presidents and prime ministers committed to sharing at least 1 billion vaccine shots with struggling countries over the next year, with deliveries starting in August. U.S. President Joe Biden pledged 500 million doses. Britain and Canada committed to 100 million shots each, and France said it would pitch in with 60 million doses.

However, the World Health Organization has said that 11 billion doses are needed to truly end the pandemic. Public health advocates also argue that promising vaccine doses isn't enough, and that money and logistical help are needed to get shots into the arms of people in poorer countries.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Leaders committed to ending new direct government support for "unabated international thermal coal power generation" -- the use of coal without technology to reduce carbon emissions - by the end of the year, and backed a \$2-billion coal transition fund.

They also pledged to conserve or protect at least 30% of their countries' land and marine areas by 2030 as part of global biodiversity targets. And they agreed to increase financing for projects to curb climate change until 2025 and reaffirmed their support for a target of producing net-zero carbon emissions no later than 2050.

Leading climate groups said the summit fell far short of delivering meaningful details. They urged rich countries to go beyond reiterating existing obligations and to put concrete new climate financing on the table.

CHINA

The G-7 leaders said they would work together to challenge China's "non-market policies." They also agreed to call on Beijing to respect human rights in Xinjiang, the remote western region where Chinese authorities are accused of committing serious rights abuses against the Uyghur minority, and in the semi-autonomous city of Hong Kong.

U.S. President Joe Biden had wanted to persuade fellow democratic leaders to present a more unified front to compete economically with Beijing and to strongly call out China's "nonmarket policies and human rights abuses."

The leaders committed to remove forced labor in global supply chains, "including state-sponsored forced labor of vulnerable groups and minorities." This section of their meeting communique did not mention China by name, but the White House said the language was aimed at the main supply chains of concern in the Xinjiang region.

CORPORATION TAX

G-7 leaders endorsed a global minimum tax of at least 15% on multinational corporations, a measure meant to stop businesses from using tax havens to shift profits and to avoid taxes.

Their agreement backed a plan outlined earlier by G-7 finance ministers. The seven countries hope many more will sign on, but that's a fraught proposal in nations with economies based on using low corporate

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 60 of 67

taxes to attract businesses.

GLOBAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Leaders agreed to an infrastructure proposal called "Build Back Better for the World" that calls for spending hundreds of billions of dollars in collaboration with the private sector to finance greener infrastructure projects in poorer countries.

It is designed to compete with China's multi-trillion-dollar "Belt and Road" initiative, which funds a vast network of infrastructure covering large portions of the world, primarily Asia and Africa.

FUTURE PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS

Leaders said that in the event of a future pandemic, they will seek to ensure the availability of safe and effective vaccines, treatment and diagnostic tests within the first 100 days.

Patrick Vallance, the British government's chief scientific adviser, said a "100 Day Mission" report gave leaders recommendations for speeding up responses to another pandemic but acknowledged that any such response must be global and include countries that don't belong to the G-7.

GIRLS' EDUCATION

The leaders said COVID-19 has exacerbated underlying inequalities and led to an education crisis, especially for girls. They backed a target of getting 40 million more girls in school by 2026 in poorer countries, and committed to a combined \$2.75 billion in funding over the next five years for the Global Partnership for Education.

Doctor: Eriksen 'was gone' before being resuscitated

By MATTIAS KARÉN Associated Press

COPENHAGEN (AP) — Denmark's team doctor said Sunday that Christian Eriksen's heart stopped and that "he was gone" before being resuscitated with a defibrillator at the European Championship.

Eriksen collapsed during Denmark's opening Euro 2020 group game against Finland on Saturday and was given lengthy medical treatment before regaining consciousness.

"He was gone. And we did cardiac resuscitation. And it was cardiac arrest," said team doctor Morten Boesen, who led the work in giving Eriksen treatment on the field. "How close were we? I don't know. We got him back after one defib. That's quite fast."

Eriksen was in stable condition at a Copenhagen hospital and had spoken to teammates via video link on Sunday, team officials said.

Boesen said it was still unclear what caused the midfielder's collapse.

"I'm not cardiologist, so the details about why it happened and further, I will leave to the experts," he said.

He also said the 29-year-old Eriksen may not have survived had the game not been played at a major soccer tournament with top-class medical equipment at hand.

"That was completely decisive, I think," Boesen said. "The time from when it happens to when he receives help is the critical factor, and that time was short. That was decisive."

Denmark coach Kasper Hjulmand said when he spoke to Eriksen, the Inter Milan midfielder was more concerned about his teammates' well being than his own.

"He said 'I don't remember much but I'm more concerned about you guys. How are you doing?'" Hjulmand said. "That's typical Christian. ... It was good to see him smile."

The Danish players and team staff were being given crisis management assistance as they process the incident. Eriksen fell face-forward to the ground late in the first half and his teammates formed a protective circle around him while the medics gave him treatment.

The game was suspended for about 90 minutes before resuming. Finland won 1-0 after scoring in the second half.

Denmark canceled a planned training session on Sunday but Hjulmand said they would try to go back to their normal routines on Monday. He insisted the players are determined to finish the tournament, with Denmark playing Belgium next in Group B on Thursday.

"(Eriksen) would like for us to play," Hjulmand said. "We are trying to get back to some normality tomor-

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 61 of 67

row. That is completely in line with what the psychologists are saying, and the way I want to try to lead this group forward.”

The decision to restart the game on Saturday has been heavily criticized by many in Denmark, including former players Peter Schmeichel and Michael Laudrup.

UEFA gave Denmark the option to resume the game Sunday at noon but the players opted to finish it Saturday evening instead. A later date was not possible because Finland plays its second group game on Wednesday in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Hjulmand said he remained proud of his players for finishing the game, but that he now had second thoughts about not insisting it should have been called off.

“In hindsight, I wonder if I could have done something differently,” Hjulmand said. “Because when I look back, I honestly do not think we should have been back on the field. I am so proud that the players were able to mobilize and give it a try. It was a huge effort. But I have a guilty conscience that we were back out there.”

Exodus of election officials raises concerns of partisanship

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

There is no shortage of job openings for local election officials in Michigan. It’s the same in Pennsylvania. Wisconsin, too.

After facing threats and intimidation during the 2020 presidential election and its aftermath, and now the potential of new punishments in certain states, county officials who run elections are quitting or retiring early. The once quiet job of election administration has become a political minefield thanks to the baseless claims of widespread fraud that continue to be pushed by many in the Republican Party.

The exits raise a pressing question: Who will take these jobs? Barb Byrum, clerk of Ingham County, Michigan, has an idea.

“These conspiracy theorists are in it for the long haul. They’re in it to completely crumble our republic, and they’re looking at these election administrator positions,” said Byrum, a Democrat. “They’re playing the long game.”

It’s difficult to quantify exactly how many election officials across the country have left their posts and why, since the departures are not generally tallied. Retirements also are common after presidential elections.

But in places that do track such information, along with anecdotal accounts from county officials, it is clear that many have recently left because of the newfound partisan rancor around the jobs and the threats many local election workers faced leading up to the November election and afterward as former President Donald Trump and his allies challenged the results.

About a third of Pennsylvania’s county election officials have left in the last year and a half, according to a spokesman for the state’s county commissioners association, who cited heavy workloads and rampant misinformation related to voting among the reasons.

“It was particularly challenging last year with all the misinformation and angst out there,” said Lisa Schaefer, executive director of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania. “And none of it was caused by county election officials.”

The executive director of a clerks association in Wisconsin said more than two-dozen clerks have retired since the presidential election and another 30 clerks or their deputies quit by the end of 2020. Thirteen have left since the beginning of this year. In Michigan, Byrum said she didn’t know a precise number of newly vacant positions but was able to rattle off several seasoned election officials who have recently left.

The local election jobs are being vacated as Trump’s false claims of fraud persist within the GOP and provide a platform for his loyalists to launch campaigns to become top election officials in several swing states.

In Georgia, U.S. Rep. Jody Hice, a Trump recruit who voted to overturn the presidential results in the House of Representatives, is challenging Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a Republican who has been attacked by his own party for upholding President Joe Biden’s victory.

Arizona state Rep. Mark Finchem, who was at the Jan. 6 rally outside the Capitol and is a chief supporter

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 62 of 67

of a partisan review of ballots in Maricopa County, is running for secretary of state. Former Nevada lawmaker Jim Marchant, who has clung to the conspiracy theory that the election was stolen from Trump, is campaigning to replace Republican Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske, who has repeatedly denied claims of election fraud. Cegavske can't run again because of term limits.

Sylvia Albert, voting and elections director for Common Cause, which advocates for expanded voter access, said that while the statewide positions come with more power, local officials generally have much discretion over how to solve common Election Day issues such as long lines, voter roll problems or trouble with voting machines.

"If you have an elections official who doesn't want to expand access to the ballot, who finds democracy disturbing to them, they're not going to fix problems and then they're going to multiply," she said.

Races for county offices receive far less attention than those for statewide positions, and many of those roles aren't up for election for another year or more. Still, partisanship has already seeped into the process.

Republicans in Michigan chose not to re-nominate a GOP member of the state election board after he voted to certify Biden's win in the state. In Scott County, Iowa, a GOP board chose not to hold a special election after the abrupt resignation of the longtime top elections official, a Democrat, and instead appointed a Republican.

The exodus comes as Republicans in a number of states pursue legislation that imposes new fines or criminal penalties on local election officials or makes it easier to remove them, as part of the GOP campaign to rewrite rules for voting and administering elections.

A new law in Iowa imposes a \$10,000 fine on election administrators for a technical infraction of election rules. A similar law in Florida could lead to \$25,000 fines for election supervisors if a ballot drop box is accessible outside early voting hours or is left unsupervised.

Republicans in Texas have pushed a measure to make it a crime for local election officials to send voters unsolicited absentee ballot materials. Georgia's new election law allows the GOP-dominated legislature to appoint a board that can replace a local election official.

Wendy Helgeson, president of the Wisconsin Municipal Clerks Association and clerk of the village of Greenville, said the new penalties, coupled with the charged atmosphere around election work, could make the job unpalatable to some.

"It's hard to convince someone it's a good way to give back to the community when you're afraid of going to clerk jail," she said. "It's harder and harder to get people to work in government as a whole."

Schools across US brace for surge of kindergartners in fall

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and CEDAR ATTANASIO Associated Press / Report for America

School districts across the United States are hiring additional teachers in anticipation of what will be one of the largest kindergarten classes ever as enrollment rebounds following the coronavirus pandemic.

As they await the arrival next fall of students who sat out the current school year, educators are also bracing for many students to be less prepared than usual due to lower preschool attendance rates.

"The job of the kindergarten teacher just got a lot harder," said Steven Barnett, senior co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. He coauthored a report that found that the number of 4-year-olds participating in preschool fell from 71% before the pandemic to 54% during the pandemic, with poor children much less likely to attend in-person.

Kindergarten is not required in most states, and in normal times, parents sometimes "red-shirt" children who would be young for their kindergarten class to give them an extra year of developmental readiness. This year, even children nowhere near the cutoff age were held out of school because of health concerns and the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Among them was the daughter of Christina Neu, who held her back even though her daughter has a December birthday and already would be relatively old for her class because the entry cutoff is the end of August. Across Kansas, kindergarten enrollment fell by nearly 9%.

"There was a little bit of fear, not wanting her to have to deal with kind of an unknown there," Neu said,

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 63 of 67

adding that her eldest daughter, who is 8, had just been diagnosed before the pandemic with 26 different food allergies and her immune system already was in overdrive. "We wanted to make sure that as a family we were being smart and being safe."

Neu, who works in retail in Wichita, Kansas, cooked with her daughters, bought educational workbooks and played educational games with them. She said she has no regrets but is apprehensive about the burden facing kindergarten teachers.

"I would be really concerned about stress and just the teacher getting everything done with a big class," she said.

With large amounts of federal relief money available, school districts are taking a range of approaches to prepare.

In Orange County, Florida, there are estimates that the incoming kindergarten class will be 17% bigger than in fall 2020 and officials are planning a 5 1/2 week transition program this summer at some of its neediest schools.

In Minnesota, the St. Paul district is anticipating nearly 22% more kindergartners than in fall 2020. The district plans to do testing over the summer to identify any special needs that have been missed, such as vision problems and speech delays, said Lori Erickson, a veteran kindergarten teacher who now coordinates the district's pre-kindergarten program.

She said the district also just learned it is getting more money to expand its jumpstart to kindergarten summer program, which will include a field trip to a strawberry patch and visits from a dancer and painter.

"The biggest thing on our radar is recognizing the trauma that has happened," she said, adding that the district has various staffers "who are ready to rumble."

It remains uncertain just how big kindergarten classes will be in the fall. The increase could be offset by parents who decide to wait an extra year to send 5-year-olds or opt for homeschooling because of safety concerns.

Regardless, education leaders say they expect to be addressing the effects of the pandemic for years.

Albuquerque Public Schools Superintendent Scott Elder said children who skipped kindergarten or were homeschooled last year may be a bit behind on their numbers and letters. The same goes for the kids who were enrolled and studied online, but couldn't always connect or get support from parents.

"When people talk about learning loss and kids being behind, it won't be a quick solution. That's going to be a multi-year solution, but it will be solved," Elder said.

In Connecticut, some school districts are targeting summer programs at incoming kindergartners who missed out on preschool. Irene Parisi, the state's chief academic officer, said in an interview that districts are also using federal relief money to add staff to help out and training them that they need to adjust their expectations.

"It is important that teachers realize that the routines are going to be different than perhaps what you may have expected of learners in the past," she said.

In the 900-student Freeman School District in Rockford, Washington, Superintendent Randy Russell just hired a new teacher as the district prepares to add a third kindergarten class. He said about one-third of the preschoolers and kindergartners in the mostly rural district about 15 miles (24.14 kilometers) south of Spokane skipped this school year and that other districts around the region experienced similar drops.

But the upcoming school year has him encouraged: "Even if you do have a gap, it is going to be closed pretty quickly. We are just excited that we are going to get the kids back."

GOP ramps up misleading attack on Democrats' policing policy

By THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — When Minnesota Republican Tyler Kistner announced his candidacy for the U.S. House in April, he asked voters to ponder two questions: "What America will we leave for our children?" and "Will they be taught to hate their police?"

Across the Mississippi River in Wisconsin, Republicans in the 3rd Congressional District aired a digital ad this spring to demand that their Democratic congressman "stand up to attacks on law enforcement."

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 64 of 67

And in Iowa, a Republican governor who had promised additional checks on police conduct after George Floyd was killed by a Minneapolis police officer plans to sign a law making it harder for police to be sued on the job.

As rising murder rates gain attention in American cities, Republicans have ramped up a misleading campaign to cast Democrats as anti-police and lax on public safety. It's a message they believe helped them stave off greater Democratic gains in last year's elections and one with renewed potency as cities consider cuts to department budgets as part of an effort to revamp policing.

It's not at all clear that the GOP strategy, which stretches back to President Richard Nixon and was used by President Donald Trump, is a winning one. But it may be prominent as Republicans search for ways to gain ground in suburban areas critical to winning control of the U.S. House next year.

A recent special election in New Mexico wasn't a good sign for the strategy. GOP candidate Mark Moore used Albuquerque's rising crime and city officials' decision to create an alternative public safety department to hit Democrat Melanie Stansbury. But Stansbury won easily, with a larger share of the district's votes than President Joe Biden garnered last year.

Stansbury's district is overwhelmingly Democratic, making it an imperfect test case. The National Republican Congressional Committee, the party's House campaign arm, believes the issue will have a larger impact in swing districts, where the party plans to tie moderate Democratic incumbents to their more liberal colleagues who have supported the "defund the police" movement. That term is used to describe diverting money from police budgets to other social services, such as mental health support and drug addiction mitigation.

The GOP focus is on places such as Wisconsin's 3rd Congressional District, where 13-term Democratic incumbent Ron Kind is being cast as insufficiently supportive of law enforcement, though he does not support defunding police departments.

It also includes Democratic Rep. Angie Craig of Minnesota, who beat Kistner in 2020 and represents the Minneapolis and St. Paul suburbs where rioting broke out last year after Floyd's death.

Since then, several cities have struggled with the police funding debate, while experiencing rising gun violence.

The NRCC chair, U.S. Rep. Tom Emmer of Minnesota, said he believes the message will resonate with voters because "crime is rising in America, yet Democrats still support the dangerous idea of defunding the police."

Neither statement is fully accurate.

It's true that violent crime has risen. The FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System recorded 25% more homicides in 2020 than in 2019, and 12% more violent assaults. But the increase in homicides is nationwide, including in some cities that increased police spending and in some cities led by Republicans.

Other crimes such as burglaries, drug offenses and other categories, however, have decreased.

It also is not accurate to describe Democrats as uniformly supportive of "defund the police" efforts.

The Democratic-controlled House passed a sweeping police overhaul bill in March that did not include a provision to allow diverting money away from police departments. Kind was one of only two Democrats to oppose the bill. He said it did not include sufficient protections for police. Craig voted for the measure.

The bill has stalled in the evenly divided Senate, where Republicans oppose it.

Like Emmer, U.S. House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., tried to preemptively blame Democrats — in this case, Biden — for what McCarthy claimed is widespread rising crime caused by cuts to police budgets.

"We are concerned about whether the Biden Administration is prepared to address the surge of violent crime in American cities," McCarthy wrote in a letter Friday to U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland.

It's a noticeable shift in tone from a year ago, when many Republicans across GOP-led states briefly joined with Democrats to ban specific physical restraints and require tighter scrutiny on police in the tumultuous aftermath of Floyd's death.

In Iowa, Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds said last June while signing a bill banning chokeholds: "This is not the end of our work. It is just a beginning."

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 65 of 67

A year later, Reynolds' proposed racial profiling ban quietly died in the GOP-controlled Legislature. Lawmakers passed a crime bill giving police greater protection from lawsuits and cracking down on protesters. Reynolds plans to sign the measure Thursday.

Republicans in other states have made it harder for cities to cut police budgets. The Republican-led legislature in Missouri made it easier this year for cities to be sued for approving deep cuts in police budgets. Similar laws were adopted in Florida, Georgia and Texas.

The change from a year ago reflects the general unpopularity of cutting police spending, especially in pivotal suburban areas, North Carolina-based Republican pollster Paul Shumaker said.

Though most racial justice demonstrations were peaceful, some scenes of violence and property damage left a lasting image and were highlighted in Republican campaign ads.

A majority of Americans support progressive criminal justice proposals such as programs to help people released from prison transition into society and changes in sentencing laws to allow probation or shorter prison sentences for some first-time convictions, according to a May poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

The poll also found that about 6 in 10 Americans oppose reducing funding for law enforcement agencies.

The Democrats' policing bill passed the U.S. House without a single GOP vote. It would ban chokeholds and end qualified immunity from lawsuits against police officers, while creating national policing standards in an effort to bolster accountability.

The bill does not back defunding police departments, and Democrats didn't even debate the idea, in part because swing-district representatives such as U.S. Rep. Abigail Spanberger, D-Va., who opposes defunding police, raised concerns about the political backlash.

Shumaker found the issue brought some independents who were unhappy with Trump's pandemic response and had fallen away from supporting Republicans back into the GOP's ranks last fall in parts of suburban North Carolina, including outside Charlotte and Raleigh.

"The defund the police movement gave Republicans a foundation to go back and repair some of the erosion with those suburban voters that was created by the coronavirus," Shumaker said.

It's not clear how crime will figure in the mix of issues in next fall's elections. The nation is now just emerging from a year of political battles over COVID-19, recovering from the economic fallout and getting a handle on Biden's agenda to rebuild the economy.

In an interview outside Richmond, Virginia, this past week, Spanberger said the message on crime can help Republicans unless Democrats speak up.

"It's always going to be difficult when a simple message is easy to gin up anxiety," Spanberger said. "It becomes difficult to counter that. But it takes a lot of effort."

Pope demands food aid reach starving people of Tigray

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis demanded Sunday that humanitarian aid reach hungry people in the war-torn Tigray region of northern Ethiopia, where Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers are blocking food deliveries and other assistance.

Francis called for an immediate end to the fighting in Tigray, the return of social harmony and for "all food aid and health care assistance to be guaranteed."

Speaking at his Sunday noon blessing, Francis said he was thinking of the people of Tigray who have been "struck by a grave humanitarian crisis that has exposed the poorest to famine. Today there is famine! There is hunger!"

The United Nations and aid groups say more than 350,000 people in Tigray face famine and 2 million more are a step away from the worst famine since 2011 in Somalia. Farmers, aid workers and local officials say food has been turned into a weapon of war, with soldiers blocking or stealing food aid.

More than 2 million of Tigray's 6 million people have already fled, unable to harvest their crops. The war in Tigray started in November, shortly before the harvest season, as an attempt by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to disarm the region's rebellious leaders.

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 66 of 67

On one side are guerrillas loyal to the ousted and now-fugitive leaders of Tigray. On the other are Ethiopian government troops, allied troops from neighboring Eritrea and militias from Ethiopia's Amhara ethnic group who see themselves as rivals to the Tigrayan guerillas.

Swiss narrowly reject tax hike to fight climate change

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Exit polls on Sunday indicated that Swiss voters appear to have narrowly rejected a proposed "carbon dioxide law" that would have hiked fees and taxes on fuels that produce greenhouse gases.

The Alpine country has been experiencing an outsized impact from climate change. Switzerland has faced a rise in temperatures that is twice as fast as the global average, the government says. Greenhouse gases — notably carbon dioxide — are seen as the primary culprit.

The proposal would have revised and strengthened an existing law that was aimed at reducing CO2 emissions by 2030. It would have enacted new taxes on CO2-generating fuel and natural gas, as well as on airline tickets.

The proposal was rejected by 51% of the vote, Swiss public broadcaster SRF reported. However, local media said not all votes had been counted and the final result was not expected before late Sunday or Monday.

The climate proposal was one of several measures that Swiss voters cast their ballots nationwide on Sunday.

Critics of the proposal called it ineffective since Switzerland's carbon-dioxide emissions amount to a mere 0.1% of the global tally.

Among other issues on the nationwide ballot was a referendum on the government's COVID-19 law, which was accepted. It will generate a surge in state spending.

Another initiative to improve the quality of drinking water in Switzerland was rejected — it would have made it harder for farmers to get state subsidies if they use some types of pesticides and antibiotics. A ban on the use of pesticides was also rejected.

A majority of Swiss voters supported an initiative to grant police enhanced surveillance powers and take preventative actions to help fight terrorism.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, June 14, the 165th day of 2021. There are 200 days left in the year. This is Flag Day.

Today's Highlight in History:

On June 14, 1993, President Bill Clinton nominated Judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court.

On this date:

In 1775, the Continental Army, forerunner of the United States Army, was created.

In 1777, the Second Continental Congress approved the design of the original American flag.

In 1846, a group of U.S. settlers in Sonoma proclaimed the Republic of California.

In 1911, the British ocean liner RMS Olympic set out on its maiden voyage for New York, arriving one week later. (The ship's captain was Edward John Smith, who went on to command the ill-fated RMS Titanic the following year.)

In 1922, Warren G. Harding became the first president heard on radio, as Baltimore station WEAR broadcast his speech dedicating the Francis Scott Key memorial at Fort McHenry.

In 1940, German troops entered Paris during World War II; the same day, the Nazis began transporting prisoners to the Auschwitz (OWSH'-vitz) concentration camp in German-occupied Poland.

In 1943, the U.S. Supreme Court, in West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette, ruled 6-3 that public school students could not be forced to salute the flag of the United States.

Groton Daily Independent

Monday, June 14, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 342 ~ 67 of 67

In 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed a measure adding the phrase "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance.

In 1972, the Environmental Protection Agency ordered a ban on domestic use of the pesticide DDT, to take effect at year's end.

In 1982, Argentine forces surrendered to British troops on the disputed Falkland Islands.

In 1990, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld, 6-3, police checkpoints that examined drivers for signs of intoxication.

In 2017, a rifle-wielding gunman opened fire on Republican lawmakers at a congressional baseball practice in Alexandria, Virginia, wounding House Whip Steve Scalise (skuh-LEES') and several others; the assailant died in a battle with police. Fire ripped through the 24-story Grenfell Tower in West London, killing 71 people.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama made a four-hour visit to Puerto Rico, becoming the first president since John F. Kennedy to make an official visit to the U.S. territory. The long-delayed, problem-plagued musical "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark" officially opened on Broadway.

Five years ago: President Barack Obama angrily denounced Donald Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric in the wake of the Orlando nightclub shooting, blasting the views of the presumptive Republican presidential nominee as a threat to American security; Trump responded by suggesting that Obama seemed angrier at him than he was at the gunman. A 2-year-old boy was dragged into the water by an alligator near Disney's upscale Grand Floridian Resort & Spa; the child's remains were found the following day. Actor Ann Morgan Guilbert (Millie Helper on "The Dick Van Dyke Show") died in Los Angeles at age 87.

One year ago: Atlanta police released video showing the sobriety check of Rayshard Brooks outside a Wendy's restaurant that quickly spun out of control, ending in police gunfire that left Brooks dead. Police said Officer Garrett Rolfe, who fired the fatal shots, had been fired, and officer Devin Brosnan was placed on administrative duty. (Rolfe's firing was later reversed after a review panel found the city failed to follow its own procedures for disciplinary actions.)

Today's Birthdays: Actor Marla Gibbs is 90. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., is 82. Country-rock musician Spooner Oldham is 78. Rock singer Rod Argent (The Zombies; Argent) is 76. Former President Donald Trump is 75. Singer Janet Lennon (The Lennon Sisters) is 75. Rock musician Barry Melton is 74. Rock musician Alan White (Yes) is 72. Actor Eddie Mekka is 69. Actor Will Patton is 67. Olympic gold medal speed skater Eric Heiden (HY'-dun) is 63. Jazz musician Marcus Miller is 62. Singer Boy George is 60. Rock musician Chris DeGarmo is 58. Actor Traylor Howard is 55. Actor Yasmine Bleeth is 53. Actor Faizon Love is 53. Actor Stephen Wallem is 53. International Tennis Hall of Famer Steffi Graf is 52. Actor Sullivan Stapleton is 44. Screenwriter Diablo Cody is 43. Actor Lawrence Saint-Victor is 39. Actor Torrance Coombs is 38. Actor J.R. Martinez is 38. Actor-singer Kevin McHale is 33. Actor Lucy Hale is 32. Pop singer Jesy Nelson (Little Mix) is 30. Country singer Joel Crouse is 29. Actor Daryl Sabara is 29.