

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 1 of 65

[1- Upcoming Events](#)

[1- No Livestreaming Today](#)

[2- Service Notice: Janice Bahr](#)

[2- Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller](#)

[7- City Council Agenda](#)

[8- Weather Pages](#)

[12- Daily Devotional](#)

[13- 2021 Community Events](#)

[14- Subscription Form](#)

[15- News from the Associated Press](#)

UpComing Events

Tuesday, Jan. 4

School resumes

Basketball Double Header at Warner. Girls JV at 4 p.m. followed by Boys JV, Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity.

5 p.m.: Junior High Wrestling Tournament at Groton.

Thursday, Jan. 6

6 p.m.: Wrestling Tri-angular at Groton with Redfield and Webster

Friday, Jan. 7

Penguin Classic Debate on-line

5 p.m.: Junior High Wrestling at Milbank

Girls Basketball hosts Sisseton with JV at 6 p.m. and varsity to follow

Saturday, Jan. 8

Groton Robotics Tournament, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Penguin Classic Debate on-line

Girls Basketball Classic at Redfield. Groton Area vs. Platte-Geddes at 3:30

Monday, Jan. 10

Boys' Basketball hosts Webster Area. C game starts at 5 p.m. with JV and Varsity to follow.

7 p.m.: School Board Meeting

Tuesday, Jan. 11

5 p.m.: 7th/8th grade basketball game with Wauabay-Summit at Wauabay. Single game so they may play extra quarters.

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460



6 p.m.: Girls' Basketball hosts Aberdeen Christian. JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity.

Thursday, Jan. 13

Boys' Basketball at Aberdeen Roncalli. at Elementary Gym: 7th grade game at 4 p.m., 8th grade game at 5 p.m. at Roncalli High School: C game at 5 p.m. followed by junior varsity and varsity.

Friday, Jan. 14

Silver Bowl Debate at Sioux Falls

No School - Faculty In-Service at Warner School

6 p.m.: Girls' Basketball hosts Aberdeen Roncalli. JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity.

No Livestreaming Today

We regret to say that we were turned down by the Warner School to install an internet line to livestream the games today. They did offer for us to use their wifi, but unfortunately, their network blocks certain ports that are needed for our livestream platform.

We have posted the Warner School's livestream video link at GDILIVE.COM

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 2 of 65

Service Notice: Janice Bahr

Janice Bahr (79) loved the Lord and went to be with Him for the new year on Saturday, January 1st. She died peacefully at Avantara Groton nursing home where she lived for four years.

Funeral services will be held 2:00 PM, Friday, January 7th at Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton with Rev. Lloyd Redhage officiating. Burial will follow at St. Paul's Lutheran Cemetery, Ferney, SD.

#502 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

We're still setting records: For six days running, we've set a new one for seven-day new-case average; at midday today, that number was 405,470. This is a 200+ percent increase in the last two weeks and 30 percent higher than the worst single-day count last winter, and the trajectory continues upward without pause. I expect it to actually accelerate this week after a couple of weak reporting days over the holiday weekend. And sometime yesterday we notched another million cases, just like that. This puts us at a grand total for the pandemic of 55,137,148. Please note below that the last three million have been added in just over a week. That's pretty horrifying.

April 28, 2020 – 1 million – 98 days

June 11 – 2 million – 44 days

July 8 – 3 million – 27 days

July 23 – 4 million – 15 days

August 9 – 5 million – 17 days

August 31 – 6 million – 22 days

September 24 – 7 million – 24 days

October 15 – 8 million – 21 days

October 29 – 9 million – 14 days

November 8 – 10 million – 10 days

November 15 – 11 million – 7 days

November 21 – 12 million – 6 days

November 27 – 13 million – 6 days

December 3 – 14 million – 6 days

December 7 – 15 million – 4 days

December 12 – 16 million – 5 days

December 17 – 17 million – 5 days

December 21 – 18 million – 4 days

December 26 – 19 million – 5 days

December 31 – 20 million – 5 days

January 5 – 21 million – 5 days

January 9 – 22 million – 4 days

January 13 – 23 million – 4 days

January 18 – 24 million – 5 days

January 23 – 25 million – 5 days

January 30 – 26 million – 7 days

February 7 – 27 million – 8 days

February 19 – 28 million – 12 days

March 7 – 29 million – 16 days

March 24 – 30 million – 17 days

April 8 – 31 million – 15 days

April 24 – 32 million – 16 days

May 18 – 33 million – 23 days

July 16 – 34 million – 59 days

July 31 – 35 million – 15 days

August 11 – 36 million – 11 days

August 17 – 37 million – 6 days

August 23 – 38 million – 6 days

August 30 – 39 million – 7 days

September 5 – 40 million – 6 days

September 12 – 41 million – 7 days

September 18 – 42 million – 6 days

September 27 – 43 million – 9 days

October 6 – 44 million – 9 days

October 18 – 45 million – 12 days

November 1 – 46 million – 14 days

November 13 – 47 million – 12 days

November 24 – 48 million – 11 days

December 4 – 49 million – 10 days

December 13 – 50 million – 9 days

December 20 – 51 million – 7 days

December 25 – 52 million – 5 days

December 28 – 53 million – 3 days

December 30 – 54 million – 2 days

January 2 – 55 million – 3 days

Almost the entire country is in trouble, but there are degrees of awful. The Northeast blew up a couple of weeks ago; even with their relatively high vaccination numbers, there are plenty of unprotected folks to get sick. Next up appears to be the Southeast and South with their resistance to mitigation measures of any kind and lowest-in-the-nation vaccination rates. Sharpest increases since

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 3 of 65

Christmas are in Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, and Florida. In Georgia, nearly a third of tests are coming back positive, and that number is closer to half in Atlanta. They're all setting records with case numbers; Louisiana has doubled its prior record. Could be that the surge will be muted by the seasonality of the virus: Typically summer has been a worse season for this in the South. And it could be that the earlier overwhelming waves of infection they've already experienced will have some residual protective effect in these populations. We know immunity from prior infection hasn't done much to prevent reinfection, but we're not sure whether or how much it will help to avoid hospitalization and deaths. Maybe these folks are just transmitting it to others without ending up in the hospital themselves, and maybe that's good enough for them. I guess we're going to find out. I'm deeply concerned.

Hospitalizations are also increasing, albeit not as fast as cases; they increased 35 percent over the last two weeks. We're now at a seven-day average of 93,322, but the actual number of people hospitalized at the moment is now north of 100,000, creeping up toward last winter's record of 142,000 from January 14. About three-fourths of hospital beds in the country are occupied today; 14 percent of them have Covid-19 patients in them. We have more than 18,500 ICU beds filled; that's 78 percent of them. A quarter of those are Covid-19 patients. A factor complicating this heavy hospital use is that in some locations as many as 20 percent of their workers are out with Covid-19; that's going to make it very difficult to maintain even normal utilization, much less a surge in demand.

Pediatric hospital admissions for Covid-19 increased 66 percent over the past two weeks, a new record, even higher than they were during the Delta surge this past summer and fall. New hospitalizations are over 500 per day, also a record. Almost all of these kids showing up with infections are unvaccinated. We already know that, weeks or even months after infection, some of these kids, even among those who had mild infections in the first place, are going to present with multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C), which runs to the very serious and can be fatal. Others, again irrespective of the seriousness of the initial infection, will end up with long-Covid, that prolonged presentation of symptoms we have little idea how to treat; we'll discuss that further later.

Of course, some hospitals have very few Covid-19 patients and are in pretty good shape while others are lining patients up in hallways again; this varies by region. The CDC tells us hospitalization rates through the end of November are eight times higher for unvaccinated adults and 10 times higher for unvaccinated children than for the vaccinated. I cannot find their data on vaccinated-and-boosted rates as a separate category.

Deaths are still holding fairly steady, now at a seven-day average of 1254; but with these increases in hospitalizations, this lagging indicator seems certain to change over the next few weeks. I don't think it's going to approach the levels we saw last winter when there were days over 4000 deaths, but then I've been wrong before; so we'll see. At any rate, almost all of that increase will be unvaccinated people, that is, preventable deaths. Total deaths are now at 824,422.

The big news today is that this morning the FDA extended the emergency use authorization for the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine to permit a booster dose for children ages 12 to 15. They also approved shortening the interval between the primary series and the booster to five months from six months for everyone 12 and over. And they authorized a third dose for immunocompromised children ages 5 to 11 years. The CDC must still sign off on this authorization before doses can proceed, but I'll expect that to be forthcoming this week. The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices has a meeting scheduled for Wednesday afternoon, and I would expect a decision from the director shortly thereafter. So if you have a child in that age range who was vaccinated five months ago, know that the booster will almost certainly be available by week's end. As I watch case numbers and hospitalizations increase in children, I view this as a very positive development. We're still waiting for clinical trial readout for the under-5 age group; I believe it is expected as soon as sometime this month.

A real concern being voiced by public health experts is that the economy's going to get shut down again due to this virus—not because some agency or governor is going to enact new policy, but because there will be insufficient workers to keep things running. We're already seeing significant interference with the travel industry, for example. Mass transit in some cities is also teetering on the edge, shutting down ser-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 4 of 65

vice to some parts of their service areas. We already know health care is experiencing significant trouble staffing the needed capacity; part of this is due to huge caseloads, but part is because so many workers are starting to call in sick or be placed in quarantine. Public services like fire and police are seeing similar issues. If we see cases in school personnel as kids go back after the holidays, that can cause closures, which are a problem in themselves and will also mean parents need to stay home to care for children, impacting their businesses as well. A cascade of further disruptions in retail, along the food supply chain, and such could grind things to a halt for some period. We learned early in the pandemic just how vulnerable we are to these sorts of disruptions, and the extreme transmissibility of this new variant could produce real instability in any number of sectors of the economy.

Something that is making our current situation particularly difficult is that we still have significant levels of infection with the Delta variant (around 40 percent of cases) even while there are also significant levels of infection with the Omicron variant. That is a problem because different therapies work on these two variants and there isn't any easy way to know which variant is involved in a particular case. Genome sequencing takes too long; waiting for those results would delay treatment beyond the point where we think it will be effective. We don't have the testing capacity to sequence every case anyhow. There is a PCR test work-around for picking up the genetic signature of Omicron, but there isn't a practical way to report those results at the volume we need these days as case rates soar.

If we had ample supplies of the monoclonal antibody from GlaxoSmithKline/Vir Technologies that we know works on both variants, that would be the smart thing to use; but there isn't even close to a sufficient supply just for the Omicron cases, even if we could identify them. Most hospitals are completely out of it and receiving only a trickle each week. And the other two monoclonals from Regeneron and Eli Lilly which only work on Delta would help people with those infections, but be a tremendous waste of money and health care resources if we gave them to everyone just in case. No one really has a solution to this dilemma; it's just where we are right now. It does put physicians in a bad spot who are treating those at risk for becoming severely ill—takes a valuable tool out of their toolboxes.

Here's another caution to go along with our ridiculous case numbers: A Penn State College of Medicine study of Covid cases worldwide in the past two years, that is, the entire pandemic, published in JAMA Network found that more than half of patients experience postacute sequelae of Covid-19 (PASC or long Covid) for up to six months. What this research team did was review and analyze 57 studies done around the world on more than 250,000 unvaccinated patients, adults and children. They looked at post-Covid health at one month (short term), two to five months (intermediate term), and six or more months (long term). The most prevalent health issues included chest imaging abnormality (62.2%), difficulty concentrating (23.8%), generalized anxiety disorder (29.6%), general functional impairments (44.0%), and fatigue or muscle weakness (37.5%). They also noted frequent problems with the heart, skin, digestion, and ear, nose, and throat.

They note "wide-spread neuropathological events occurring in major white matter bundle tracts, cortical gray matter, and subcortical gray matter" in the nervous system. They also noted abnormal chest imaging, abnormally high oxygen requirements, impaired mobility and reduced exercise tolerance, heart palpitations, diarrhea and vomiting, hair loss, and skin rash, in addition to pain, weakness, and other less observable symptoms. These are not malingerers; they are sufferers.

The researchers acknowledged we're not really sure of the mechanisms by which these symptoms are caused. They mention direct effects of the infection on tissues and systems and indirect effects from post-traumatic stress, social isolation, and economic factors. Importantly, they project that in coming years, we're going to see patients requiring care for psychiatric and cognitive problems as well as physical issues in numbers that will burden our health care system in the long term while also noting that we do not have any clear guidelines for postinfection care and recovery or management of PASC. When we complicate this by an inability of some fair proportion of these patients to work, the personal, social, and economic costs will be substantial and likely ongoing. We're going to have to plan and provide for that.

At this point people are going to do things whether there's risk involved or not. I worry about it, but I'm

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 5 of 65

trying not to judge. The simple fact is that none of us can stay locked up forever, and this has been going on for quite a while now. So I have something for you: a calculator that permits you to compute your risk with various kinds of gatherings. This one comes from Canada's National Institute on Ageing, and it quizzes you about the event and your community situation and then gives you a risk assessment that accords with the data you feed it. I did a trial run for my Christmas gathering last week, and the result comported well with my own assessment of the risk going in. It also gives you the opportunity to feed in varying information in an attempt to make your gathering safer; for example, you could re-run it with the what-if-everyone-got-tested-first option and see how much difference that actually makes. This looks to be useful as we navigate the treacherous weeks ahead. You can find a link to the calculator at <https://covidvisitrisk.com/riskscore-english.html>.

So there's a whole lot wrong just now. A summary of the greatest challenges facing us now was presented in the Washington Post by Michael Osterholm, Regents Professor and director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, and Ezekiel Emanuel, vice provost for global initiatives at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania and co-director of the Healthcare Transformation Institute. They wrote in the Washington Post about the potential for a million new cases a day in the US and what our near-term future looks like as a result. Here are the high points:

- While vaccines are our best bet for facing off with the Omicron variant, the window for getting vaccinated is closing fast for this rapidly-moving virus. People who initiate vaccination now probably may not be sufficiently protected in time to give them optimal protection against Omicron, and those who get boosters now have most of two weeks before those are very effective. In other words, there really is no time to waste.

- Masks are helpful, but not if they're cloth and not as much if they're surgical masks. Most likely you need to get serious about an N95 or a non-counterfeit KN95 or KF94. And you need to wear it right—snug against your face. If you're going to wear a surgical mask, consider double layering with a well-fitting cloth mask to eliminate gaps around the sides.

- Tests are another problem. The rapid antigen tests are not all equally useful for detecting the Omicron variant. A few days ago, I provided a link to FDA guidance on which rapid tests are not useful (<https://www.fda.gov/.../sars-cov-2-viral-mutations-impact...>). Be sure you're using tests that are considered reliable by checking this link often as it is updated.

- Recognize that case rates are vastly underreported at the moment. What with the inadequate quantities of tests available, the deficiencies of the tests we have, the reluctance of many people to test, the lack of reporting from at-home tests, and the number of mild or asymptomatic cases that are never detected, the true number of infections is going to be far higher than the reported number. As bad as things appear to be by the official numbers, they are vastly worse in real life. And every undetected case is as much a source of infection as the identified ones, maybe more so since they're likely not taking precautions.

- We have a serious shortage of effective therapeutics. As we discussed earlier, two of our three authorized monoclonal antibody therapies are ineffective against Omicron, and these are the drugs in best supply. The only effective one, sotrovimab which is made by GlaxoSmithKline and Vir Biotechnology, Incorporated, is in seriously short supply. Likewise, the Pfizer drug, Paxlovid, which has shown great promise against this virus, including the Omicron variant, is also seriously limited in supply and takes months to produce; so these therapies are not likely to be available as soon as we need them. They'll need to be carefully allocated to the highest-risk among us, which probably isn't going to include you or me.

- This surge is likely to cause catastrophic effects on our health care system, another point we've already discussed. It was stressed to the breaking point before this variant came along, and now that case numbers are soaring, it is likely that there will be collapses due to a health care worker shortage exacerbated by worker infections and quarantine. We don't have enough military and FEMA people to plug the holes this is going to leave. These experts suggest we could have a 20 percent reduction in an already strained-to-breaking work force. Try to stay healthy in these next few weeks; there is no guarantee there will be anyone to care for you if you fall ill from any cause, Covid or other. Drive carefully too; an emergency

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 6 of 65

department is no place to be these days—and they don't need you coming in either.

Travel disruptions continue: Another 2700 US flights were canceled and 2000 delayed Saturday. Add winter storms across the country, and things get worse fast. Chicago, with heavy snow and strong winds throughout the weekend, was especially hard-hit and accounted for almost half of the weekend cancellations by itself; Denver had weather-related troubles too. Now a big winter storm blew in over the MidAtlantic region, complicating things further. Yesterday's flights had over 2500 cancellations with another 3200 delays; and today we have 2600 flights canceled and 3100 delayed at midday. This should get worse as the FAA reports increasing case numbers among air traffic controllers. If those folks get short-handed, the agency will reduce traffic volume at affected airports. The good news is that the weather forecast is looking up and so far only 300 of tomorrow's flights have been canceled; that could change, but we're off to a better start anyway. Amtrak has reduced its schedule this week too and for the same reasons—illness among crew and bad weather. At least two dozen trains on Northeast and long-distance routes are affected so far. Cruise ship cases are also on the rise—at least 5000 cases in the past two weeks. At least one cruise has been canceled due to illness among crew, so that's something to watch too.

We talked about the supply problems for the monoclonal antibody called sotrovimab and the new antiviral, Paxlovid; it will be weeks or longer before these supply problems let up, which makes this next pretty good news: a couple of new studies published on the antiviral remdesivir. This drug has been in use for over a year in hospitalized patients where the results are not spectacular—shortening the course of recovery to 11 days from 15, but it has not been used in those who are not yet hospitalized because it was not at all clear it would be of benefit.

The first paper, published just before Christmas in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, took a look at 592 patients at high risk for severe disease. Half received infusions of the drug on three consecutive days, and the other half received a placebo. It reduced the risk of hospitalization or death by 87 percent. Two of 279 who received remdesivir were hospitalized for Covid-19 by day 28 of infection whereas 15 of 283 receiving placebo were. Interestingly, there is no evidence the drug reduced the upper respiratory tract viral load in the patients. That probably means it will not limit the period of infectiousness to others, but it does apparently limit progression of symptoms, preventing hospitalization. Remdesivir is a nucleoside analog, one of those copy-cat molecules that messes with viral replication by inhibiting viral-dependent RNA polymerase, the enzyme needed to produce copies of the viral RNA; in short, it inhibits viral replication so that the virus can't spread to new cells in the host. And since RNA polymerase is not a place we're seeing mutation in new variants, the drug is going to be as effective against a highly-mutated variant like Omicron as it was against the early variants. We should note that the clinical trial was done with unvaccinated patients, so we do not have any data on vaccinated people with breakthroughs. A factor that may limit its utility is that the drug is given as an infusion, so in a clinic or hospital, not at home, and must be given in three doses on consecutive days. That could be a real burden for many patients. Still, good news is good news, and the NIH has added use in nonhospitalized patients with mild to moderate disease to its treatment guidelines for remdesivir. That makes it available generally to this patient group. If you're diagnosed and carry risk factors, inquire about it.

The other study was done by Gilead, the manufacturer, and published in *Science Translational Medicine* just a few days ago. It reports on animal studies of an inhaled version of the drug in African green monkeys. They administered a 20-fold lower dose than the infusion provides and still got a 53 percent higher concentration of the drug in the lungs which did reduce replication of virus in the lungs. This use isn't going to be authorized anytime soon, but this study is a step along that path. We'll have to see how it works out in trials.

And that's a wrap for today. I hope you are continuing to play it safe; our hospitals do not wish to see you this week. Take care. We'll talk in a few days.

Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

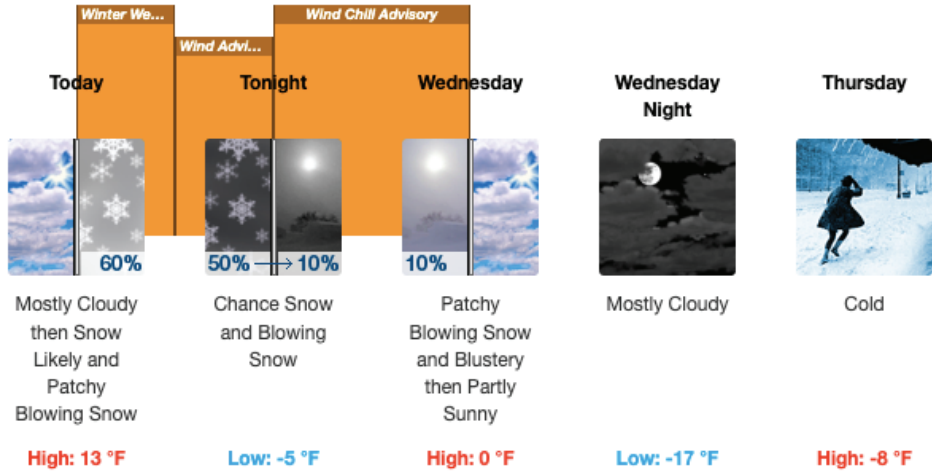
January 4, 2022 – 7:00pm
City Hall – 120 N Main Street

(IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CALL IN TO THIS MEETING, PLEASE MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS TO DO SO BY CALLING CITY HALL 605-397-8422)

1. Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1
(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)
2. Minutes
3. Bills
4. Employee salaries and volunteer list
5. Department reports
6. Election Date April 12, 2022
3-Year Term Ending: Scott Hanlon – Mayor
2-Year Terms Ending:
 David Blackmun – Ward 1
 Brian Bahr – Ward 2
 Kristie Fliehs – Ward 3
7. Resolution to Adopt the Brown County Hazard Mitigation Plan
8. SDPAA Intergovernmental Contract
9. Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
10. Adjournment

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 8 of 65



Hazardous Conditions Today into Wed AM

Expected Snowfall Noon Today through Noon Wed

What & When

- Strong northwest winds**
Wind gusts of 45 to 60+ mph across central SD & 40 to 50+ elsewhere this afternoon - tonight
- Light snow & Blowing snow**
Significantly reduced visibility from blowing snow is most likely where 1-2" of new snow accumulates this evening – Wed AM
- Dangerously cold wind chills**
-25 to -40 F tonight into Wed. Arctic air remains through Fri AM.

Impacts

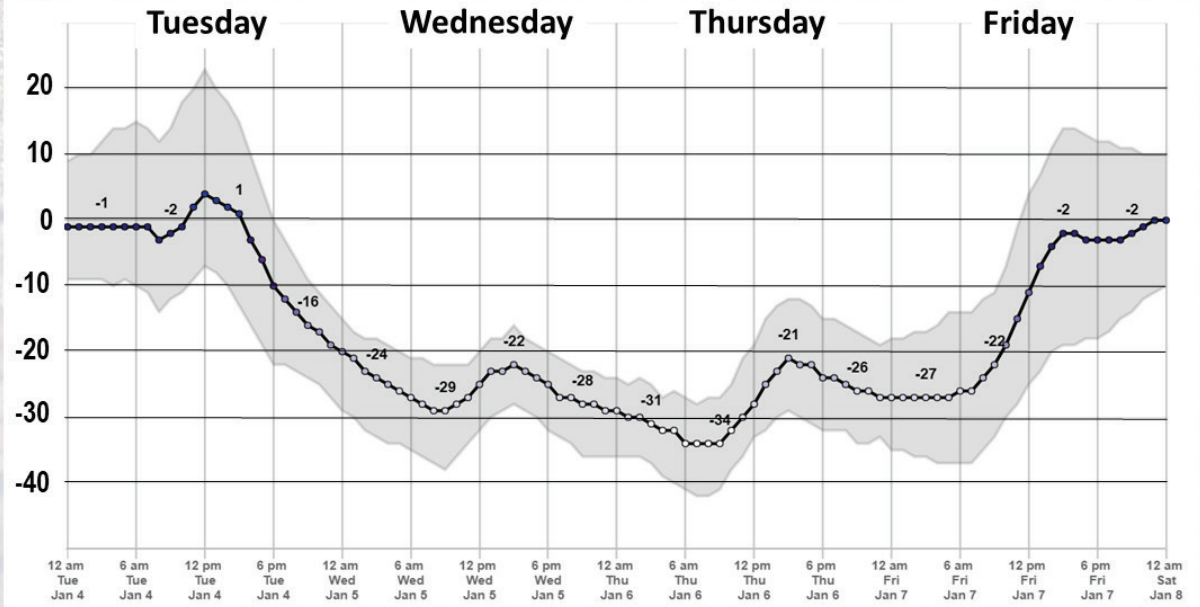
Slick roads and significantly reduced visibilities where sufficient snow accumulates. Frostbite possible in as little as 10 to 30 minutes.

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
 OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
www.weather.gov Updated: 1/4/2022 5:46 AM CT

Several weather hazards are anticipated today through Wednesday morning, including strong northwest winds, accumulating snow and dangerously cold air. The greatest concern is across far northeastern SD and west central MN, where potentially 1 to 2 inches of snow combine with strong winds to significantly reduce visibilities at times. Once in place, the dangerously cold Arctic air remains through Friday morning.

Arctic Chill For Mid Week

Range Of Wind Chills (Central/North Central/Northeast SD & West Central MN)



Visit www.weather.gov/abr for a detailed local forecast

Updated: 1/3/2022 11:03 AM CT

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

Another blast of arctic air moves in Tuesday afternoon and persists through late week. Wind chills will once again reach temperatures that can quickly freeze exposed skin. Take note if you plan to travel or are involved in outdoor activities Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 10 of 65

Today in Weather History

January 4, 1986: Snowfall amounts of 1 to 3 inches and winds gusting to around 40 mph produced ground blizzard conditions in western South Dakota. Visibility was near zero in many locations, with blowing and drifting snow blocking some roads. Some roads were closed in western South Dakota. Several accidents occurred, with many cars ending up in the ditch.

January 4, 2005: Heavy snow of up to 10 inches fell across much of Lyman and Jones counties from the 4th until mid-morning of the 5th.

1641: According to historical records, Mount Parker, a stratovolcano on Mindanao Island in the Philippines, erupted on this day. The eruption caused the formation of a crater lake called Lake Maughan.

1917: A tornado with estimated F3 damage cut a 15-mile path and struck a school at Vireton in Pittsburg County, Oklahoma, killing 16 people. It ranks as the 4th worst school tornado disaster in U.S. history.

2018: NOAA's GOES-East satellite caught a dramatic view of the Bombogenesis 'Bomb Cyclone' moving up the East Coast on the morning of January 4, 2018. The powerful nor'easter is battering coastal areas with heavy snow and strong winds, from Florida to Maine. Notice the long line of clouds stretching over a thousand miles south of the storm. The storm is drawing moisture all the way from deep in the Caribbean.

1888 - Sacramento, CA, received 3.5 inches of snow, an all-time record for that location. The heaviest snow in recent history was two inches on February 5th in 1976. (4th-5th) (The Weather Channel)

1971 - A blizzard raged from Kansas to Wisconsin, claiming 27 lives in Iowa. Winds reached 50 mph, and the storm produced up to 20 inches of snow. (David Ludlum)

1982 - Milwaukee, WI, was shut down completely as a storm buried the city under 16 inches of snow in 24 hours. It was the worst storm in thirty-five years. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A storm moving off the Pacific Ocean spread wintery weather across the southwestern U.S., with heavy snow extending from southern California to western Wyoming. Up to 15 inches of snow blanketed the mountains of southern California, and rainfall totals in California ranged up to 2.20 inches in the Chino area. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Frigid arctic air invading the central and eastern U.S. left Florida about the only safe refuge from the cold and snow. A storm in the western U.S. soaked Bodega Bay in central California with 3.12 inches of rain. (National Weather Summary)

1989 - Up to a foot of snow blanketed the mountains of West Virginia, and strong winds in the northeastern U.S. produced wind chill readings as cold as 60 degrees below zero in Maine. Mount Washington NH reported wind gusts to 136 mph along with a temperature of 30 below zero! (National Weather Summary)

1990 - A winter storm moving out of the southwestern U.S. spread heavy snow across Nebraska and Iowa into Wisconsin. Snowfall totals in Nebraska ranged up to 7 inches at Auburn and Tecumseh. Totals in Iowa ranged up to 11 inches at Carlisle. In Iowa, most of the snow fell between midnight and 4 AM. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1994 - A major winter storm blanketed much of the northeastern U.S. with heavy snow. More than two feet was reported in northwestern Pennsylvania, with 33 inches at Waynesburg. There were ten heart attacks, and 185 injuries, related to the heavy snow in northwest Pennsylvania. Whiteout conditions were reported in Vermont and northeastern New York State. A wind gusts to 75 mph was clocked at Shaftsbury VT. In the Adirondacks of eastern New York State, the town of Tupper reported five inches of snow between 1 PM and 2 PM. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

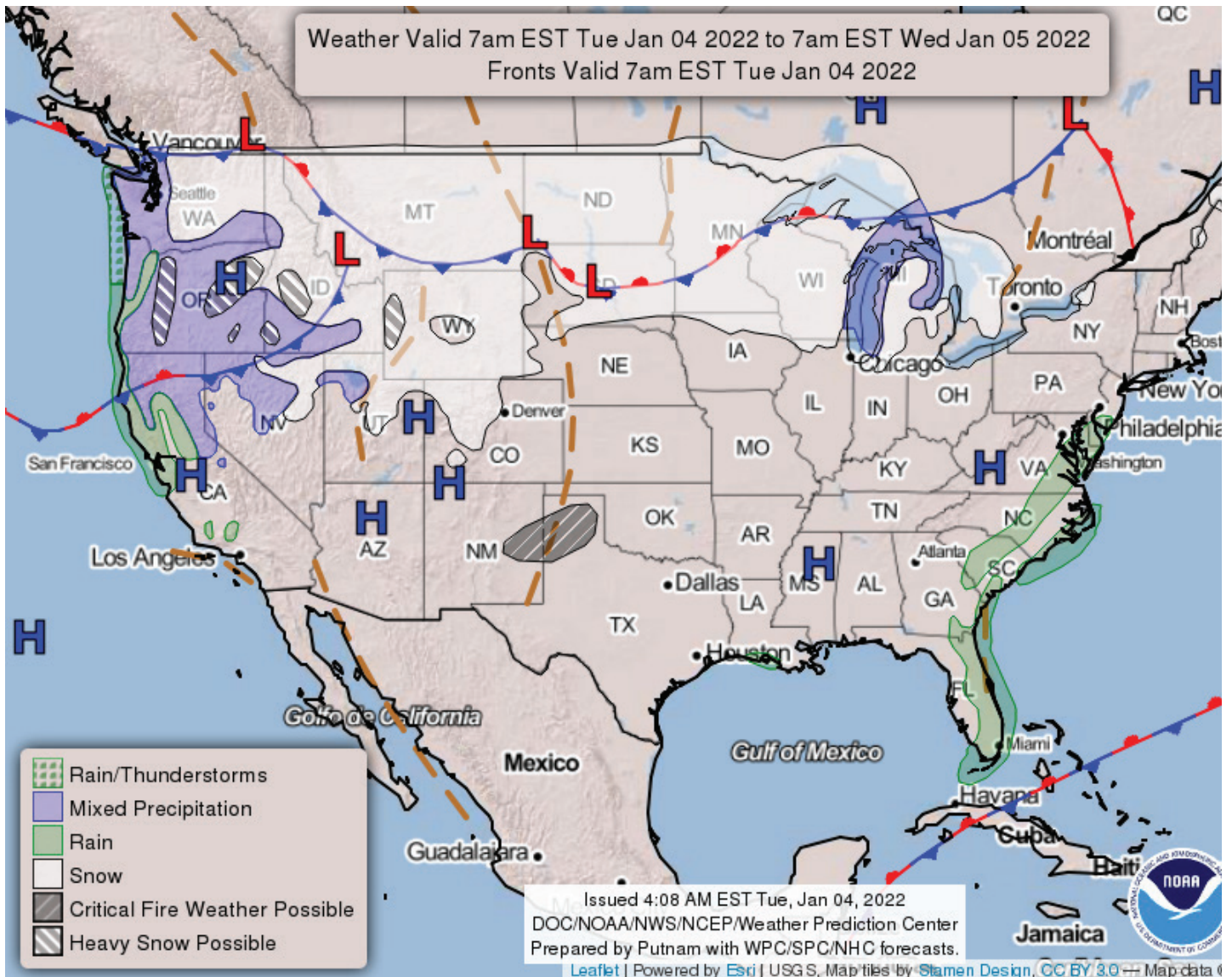
Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 11 of 65

Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 23 °F at 3:28 PM
Low Temp: 2°F at 8:32 AM
Wind: 22 mph
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 54° in 2012
Record Low: -34° in 1912
Average High: 24°F
Average Low: 3°F
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.08
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.08
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:04:35 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:10:13 AM



Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 12 of 65



WHEN COURAGE FAILS

"Pastor," said the voice on the phone, "I don't know what to do. My business that was doing well has crashed, and I've had to declare bankruptcy. I've never been sick a day in my life, and now my health is failing. And to add more grief, my wife told me a few moments ago that she is going to leave me. I can't go on any longer. My life is not worth living!"

Fearing he was about to do something desperate that would end his life, the pastor asked, "Where are you?"

"At wit's end," he replied.

"Yes, I can understand, but where can I find you?" asked the pastor.

He gave his location, the pastor hurried to meet him, and shared God's Words of love, salvation, and hope with him. The man surrendered his life to the Lord and was saved.

Psalm 107 contains a story of a group of merchants that remind us of this man. They went out to sea in ships. Things went well for a while. They marveled at "the works of the Lord." But suddenly things changed. "He stirred up a tempest...lifted high the waves...up to the heavens and then they came crashing down to the depths...and they were at wit's end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He brought them out of their distress."

Every now and then God has to bring us to the end of our resources - our wit's end - before we turn to Him and cry out for His "resources." How blest we are to know that He will calm the storm, still the waves, rescue us, bring out the stars and guide us safely into His harbor of hope.

Prayer: We thank You, Father, for the difficulties and challenges of life that force us to recognize Your greatness. Thank You for Your faithfulness and compassion. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: -They reeled and staggered like drunkards and were at their wits' end. Psalm 107:27

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 13 of 65

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
08/13/2021 Groton Basketball Golf Tournament
Cancelled Lions Club Crazy Golf Fest 9am Olive Grove Golf Course
08/29/2021 Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day at GHS Parking Lot (4-5 p.m.)
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
10/29/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/11/2021 Veteran's Day Program at the GHS Arena
11/21/2021 Groton Area Snow Queen Contest
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
11/30/2021 James Valley Telecommunications Holiday Open House 10am-4pm
12/04/2021 Olive Grove Tour of Homes
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 14 of 65

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Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 15 of 65

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$244 million

Powerball

02-13-32-33-48, Powerball: 22, Power Play: 2

(two, thirteen, thirty-two, thirty-three, forty-eight; Powerball: twenty-two; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$540 million

Monday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 49, Bullard Brook Hill, Texas 30

Avon 65, Colome 13

Baltic 66, Elkton-Lake Benton 52

Colman-Egan 65, Howard 59

DeSmet 45, Deuel 31

Deubrook 56, Sioux Valley 52

Lake Preston 53, Mitchell Christian 42

St. Thomas More 48, Belle Fourche 24

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

DeSmet 74, Deuel 37

Howard 80, Colman-Egan 32

Mitchell Christian 49, Lake Preston 41

Northwestern 70, Waverly-South Shore 58

Rapid City Christian 71, Wall 31

West Central 60, Dell Rapids 51

POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=

Waubay/Summit vs. Britton-Hecla, ppd.

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

South Dakota agency head resigns amid scrutiny of Gov. Noem

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The director of a South Dakota agency has resigned amid scrutiny over Gov. Kristi Noem's hands-on role in the agency prior to his arrival and as it evaluating her daughter's real estate appraiser license in 2020.

Scott Amundson, who took over the state's Appraiser Certification Program last summer, told The Associated Press on Monday he had resigned but declined to publicly comment on his reasons for doing so. Amundson last year replaced the longtime director of the Appraiser Certification Program, Sherry Bren, after she was pressured to retire by Noem's cabinet secretary during an episode that has drawn criticism of the governor from government ethics experts.

A legislative committee looking into the issue has focused on events that happened prior to when

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 16 of 65

Amundson took over, and he has not faced questioning from lawmakers about his leadership of the agency. Lawmakers have largely focused on a meeting the governor summoned Bren into while she was head of the agency.

Bren has told lawmakers that at the July 2020 meeting, which also included the governor's daughter, Kasidy Peters, and Noem's cabinet secretary, an agreement was formed that gave Peters an unprecedented third opportunity to meet federal requirements to obtain her appraiser license.

The Department of Labor and Regulation, which oversees the Appraiser Certification Program, did not respond to a request for comment on Amundson's resignation. Amundson had directed the agency since June last year.

Noem has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing, saying that instead of aiding her daughter's application, she was addressing a shortage of certified appraisers and working to cut red tape.

Medicaid expansion proposal OK'd for November ballot

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A proposal to expand Medicaid eligibility in South Dakota will appear on the November ballot, the secretary of state's office announced Monday.

Constitutional Amendment D was validated after an estimated 38,244 people signed petitions to put in on the ballot, more than 4,000 above the number necessary.

Medicaid is a federal-state health insurance program for low-income people. South Dakota is one of 12 states that has not accepted federal incentives to expand Medicaid eligibility, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported that Medicaid expansion has only failed once when put before voters, according to Health Affairs. Voters in Maine, Idaho, Utah, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Missouri approved expansion. Montanans rejected expansion — which would have been covered through a tobacco tax increase — but lawmakers later approved it.

The South Dakota amendment would expand Medicaid to people between 18 and 65 who earn 133% or less of the federal poverty level. The program would be made available to 42,500 additional South Dakotans in its first year, according to the nonpartisan Legislative Research Council.

The Medicaid expansion question could require 60% approval to pass depending on what happens with a proposed amendment on the state's June ballot. That amendment would require 60% approval, not 50%, for any measure that raises taxes by at least \$10 million or spends that amount.

State Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, a supporter of the amendment, has said he was motivated by making it harder to pass a Medicaid expansion, though the Watertown Republican also said it should apply to any ballot initiative that levies taxes or spends significant state money.

As South Dakota campaigns launch, Thune mulls retirement

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota political candidates are revving into full campaign mode this week with one big exception: Republican Sen. John Thune, who has delayed a reelection announcement as he considers retirement.

Thune, a longtime fixture as the state GOP's elder statesman and a likely pick to be the next Senate GOP leader, had indicated he would make a reelection decision over the holidays. But as South Dakota's campaign season officially opened this month with candidates allowed to circulate nominating petitions, Thune has made no indication he's any closer to a decision on seeking a fourth term.

His hesitancy provided further evidence of how serious he is about retiring — a potential development that would upend national GOP politics and create a scramble among South Dakota Republicans to fill the void. With the Senate in session this week — and a campaign announcement not expected until he can travel back to his home state — the waiting will likely last at least several more days.

Thune, who is currently the second-ranking Republican in Senate leadership, told the Black Hills Pioneer during an impromptu interview at a Christian bookstore last month that his wife wanted him to retire. Early

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 17 of 65

in 2021, he said he would likely make a campaign announcement in the fall, but his campaign's Facebook social media pages have been mostly dormant other than posts of pictures with his grandchildren. At the same time, he has been fielding calls from Republicans in South Dakota and nationwide urging him to run again.

"One has to respect his personal decision, but it would be tragic to lose him in this role at this time," said Tom Dempster, a former Republican state lawmaker who has remained a close political watcher.

He likened Thune's potential departure to a political "concussion" to the state's party, one that could rip open a divide between a right wing steadfastly loyal to former President Donald Trump and Republicans who have tried to exert a moderating influence.

"He's stoic, he believes in virtue, he believes in reason," Dempster said. "In the midst of this storm that the Republican Party is enduring, and America is enduring, you see in John Thune a sense of assurance."

Thune, who will turn 61 on Friday, has jockeyed with Sens. John Cornyn of Texas and John Barrasso of Wyoming to succeed Sen. Mitch McConnell at the helm of the Republican's Senate caucus. And powerful Republicans, from the 79-year-old McConnell to Trump ally Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, have urged Thune to seek another six-year term. The show of support from his Senate colleagues could prove crucial if Thune seeks reelection and makes a bid to become the next GOP Senate leader.

But Thune has shown signs of weariness after navigating a Congress and Republican Party indelibly marked by Trump. And as he walks the halls of Congress this week, Democrats will be serving up reminders of the Jan. 6 insurrection that sent Thune and his colleagues fleeing from the Senate floor.

In the hours after the attack last year, Thune expressed frustration, calling the rioting "thuggery" and connecting Trump's calls for demonstrations to the insurrection.

"When you sow the wind, you reap the whirlwind," he told reporters. "You could see this coming,"

But in his home state, Thune was facing pressure. A movement to oppose him in a primary — spurred by Trump's Twitter suggestion — was gaining support and would eventually produce one candidate who was among the crowd that demonstrated near the Capitol on Jan. 6.

Eventually, Thune backed away from holding Trump accountable, urging Congress to move past the attack on the Capitol. He helped cobble together support to kill bipartisan legislation that would have established an independent commission to investigate the Jan. 6 attack. Lately, he has mostly focused on scuttling the Democrats' plans.

Thune now appears well-positioned to win a fourth term. Fundraising by candidates willing to challenge him has been minuscule compared to his \$14.8 million accumulated after several easy election cycles.

But now the biggest obstacle to reelection is his own will. And that hesitation has set off concern, including among Republicans dissatisfied with Thune, that South Dakota's outsized influence in Washington would be greatly diminished by his departure.

Leslee Unruh, a prominent GOP donor and the founder of a Sioux Falls crisis pregnancy center, said she "expected more from those in high places, like John," and has tried to push him to take a harder stance on government spending and social issues.

But she said that after running into Thune at a restaurant last week, she left "satisfied with what he has said to me."

"In politics, it takes a long time to position yourself to be high in influence," she said. "Anyone new coming in would not have that same influence that John currently has."

But a Thune retirement could provide a window of opportunity for Democrats, who have seen their numbers and influence wane since Thune unseated Tom Daschle — the Democratic Senate leader at the time — in a close 2004 race. While an established official such as Rep. Dusty Johnson or Gov. Kristi Noem might jump into the Senate race if Thune retires, that would create a wide-open race that could split the vote of a divided Republican Party.

"The Democrats will come up with a good candidate," said Drey Samuelson, a South Dakota Democratic political strategist. "The political world will change if he doesn't run."

8 additional coronavirus deaths in South Dakota

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Department of Health reported eight additional coronavirus deaths on Monday, with another 779 people testing positive for COVID-19.

Health officials say the latest deaths include two people 80 or older, three people in their 70s, two people in their 60s and 50s and one person aged 40 to 49. Two were women and six were men, and two were residents of a long-term care facility. The deaths bring the state's total fatalities to 2,494.

Since the start of the pandemic, 179,983 state residents have tested positive for the virus, or about one in every five people. Most of the new cases are in Minnehaha County with 292.

The number of hospital beds occupied by COVID-19 patients declined by two to 238. They included 76 people receiving intensive care, including 54 people on ventilators.

According to health officials, 627,271 people in South Dakota have received at least one dose of vaccine.

Midwest Economy: December state-by-state glance

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The Institute for Supply Management, formerly the Purchasing Management Association, began formally surveying its membership in 1931 to gauge business conditions.

The Creighton Economic Forecasting Group uses the same methodology as the national survey to consult supply managers and business leaders. Creighton University economics professor Ernie Goss oversees the report.

The overall index ranges between 0 and 100. Growth neutral is 50, and a figure greater than 50 indicates growth in that factor over the next three to six months. A figure below 50 indicates decline.

Here are the state-by-state results for December:

Arkansas: The overall index for Arkansas expanded to 66.1 from 54.6 in November. Components of the survey were: new orders at 66.8, production or sales at 52.9, delivery lead time at 81.6, inventories at 72.3, and employment at 57.0. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Arkansas durable goods manufacturing experienced much stronger growth than nondurable goods producers in the state. Average hourly wages advanced by 3.5% during this same period of time, according to non-seasonally adjusted data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Iowa: The overall index rose to 60.6 from 59.4 in November. Components of the overall December index were: new orders at 66.9, production, or sales, at 53.1, delivery lead time at 74.2, employment at 57.6, and inventories at 51.2. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Iowa durable goods manufacturing experienced much stronger growth than nondurable goods producers in the state. Average hourly wages advanced by only 0.8% during this same period, according to non-seasonally adjusted data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Kansas: The overall index climbed to 61.7 from 61.2 in November. Components were: new orders at 66.8, production or sales at 52.9, delivery lead time at 81.6, employment at 57.0, and inventories at 50.0. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Kansas durable goods manufacturing experienced much stronger growth than nondurable goods producers in the state. Average hourly wages advanced by 4.4% during this same period, according to non-seasonally adjusted data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Minnesota: The overall index advanced to 70.2 from November's 65.1. Components of the overall December index were: new orders at 68.3, production or sales at 56.3, delivery lead time at 89.5, inventories at 70.5, and employment at 66.3. Since the beginning of the pandemic, nondurable goods manufacturing experienced much stronger growth than durable goods producers in the state. Average hourly wages advanced by 6.4% during this same period, according to non-seasonally adjusted data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Missouri: The overall index dipped to 65.3 from 66.3 in November. Components were: new orders at 60.3, production or sales at 54.9, delivery lead time at 86.3, inventories at 62.2, and employment at 62.5. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Missouri has yet to regain jobs lost in durable goods manufacturing and nondurable goods production. Average hourly wages advanced by 6.1% during this same period, according to non-seasonally adjusted data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 19 of 65

Nebraska: Nebraska's overall index fell to 64.1 from 67.0 in November. Components of the overall December index were: new orders at 53.9, production or sales at 67.7, delivery lead time at 83.8, inventories at 55.8, and employment at 59.6. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Nebraska durable goods and nondurable goods manufacturers have experienced slow growth with total manufacturing jobs above pre-pandemic levels. Average hourly wages advanced by 10.2% during this same period, according to non-seasonally adjusted data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

North Dakota: The overall index rose above growth neutral to 59.4 from November's regional low of 49.6. Components of the overall index for December were: new orders at 66.5, production or sales at 52.0, delivery lead time at 79.5, employment at 54.6, and inventories at 44.6. Since the beginning of the pandemic, North Dakota nondurable goods manufacturing experienced much stronger growth than durable goods producers in the state. Average hourly wages advanced by 8.7% during this same period, according to non-seasonally adjusted data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Oklahoma: The overall index expanded above growth neutral in December to a regional high of 70.3 from 62.4 in November. Components of the overall December index were: new orders at 68.3, production or sales at 56.3, delivery lead time at 89.5, inventories at 70.4, and employment at 66.3. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Oklahoma nondurable goods manufacturing experienced much stronger growth than durable goods producers in the state. Average hourly wages advanced by 9.8% during this same period, according to non-seasonally adjusted data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

South Dakota: The South Dakota overall index climbed to 60.5 from 55.0 in November. Components were: new orders at 65.4, production or sales at 49.5, delivery lead time at 73.8, inventories at 65.7, and employment at 47.9. Since the beginning of the pandemic, South Dakota nondurable goods manufacturing experienced much stronger growth than durable goods producers in the state. Average hourly wages advanced by 7.7% during this same period of time, all data non-seasonally adjusted.

December report: Midwest economy, confidence improve

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Business leaders in nine Midwest and Plains states indicated in a monthly survey that the region's economy continued to improve going into the new year, with confidence in the economy over the next six months soaring, according to 2021's final report released Monday.

The overall index for December of the Creighton University Mid-America Business Conditions grew to 64.6 from November's 60.2. Any score above 50 on the survey's indexes suggests growth, while a score below 50 suggests recession.

December's survey results indicate growth in manufacturing in the region and that the region's economic growth will remain solid, said Creighton University economist Ernie Goss, who oversees the monthly survey.

"In terms of supply chain disruptions and bottlenecks for the first half of 2022, approximately one-third of supply managers expect delays to worsen, with only 1 in 6 anticipating improvements," Goss said.

About half of supply managers expect the omicron variant of COVID-19 to slow deliveries, while more than 42% anticipate little or no impact on supply deliveries, he said.

The survey's business confidence index, which looks ahead six months, rocketed from a weak 46.2 in November to 64.0 in December.

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

Djokovic given medical exemption to play at Australian Open

By JOHN PYE AP Sports Writer

BRISBANE, Australia (AP) — Novak Djokovic will get a chance to defend his Australian Open title after receiving a medical exemption to travel to Melbourne, ending months of uncertainty about his participation because of the strict COVID-19 vaccination requirements in place for the tournament.

The top-ranked Djokovic wrote on Instagram on Tuesday he has "an exemption permission" to travel

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 20 of 65

to Australia.

Djokovic, who is seeking a record 21st Grand Slam singles title, has continually refused to reveal if he is vaccinated against the coronavirus. The Victoria state government has mandated that all players, staff and fans attending the Australian Open must be fully vaccinated unless there is a genuine reason why an exemption should be granted.

Australian Open organizers issued a statement later Tuesday to confirm Djokovic will be allowed to compete at the tournament, which starts on Jan. 17, and is on his way to Australia. He earlier withdrew from Serbia's team for the ATP Cup, which started last weekend in Sydney.

"Djokovic applied for a medical exemption which was granted following a rigorous review process involving two separate independent panels of medical experts," the statement said. "One of those was the Independent Medical Exemption Review Panel appointed by the Victorian Department of Health. They assessed all applications to see if they met the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation guidelines."

Tennis Australia said the process included the redaction of personal information to ensure privacy for all applicants, meaning Djokovic was not obliged to make his exemption public.

Australian Open tournament director Craig Tiley said "fair and independent protocols were established for assessing medical exemption applications that will enable us to ensure Australian Open 2022 is safe and enjoyable for everyone."

"Central to this process was that the decisions were made by independent medical experts and that every applicant was given due consideration," Tiley said.

Victoria state Deputy Premier James Merlino last month said medical exemptions were "not a loophole for privileged tennis players."

"It is a medical exemption in exceptional circumstances if you have an acute medical condition," Merlino said at a news conference.

The decision announced Tuesday will be widely debated in a city which endured months of strict lockdowns and harsh travel restrictions at the height of the pandemic.

Reaction on social media quickly turned to questions about the grounds for Djokovic's medical exemption, and what quarantine conditions he will have to meet on arrival in Australia.

Last year, all foreign players had to spend two weeks in hotel quarantine before the Australian Open, pushing the year's first major back from its usual mid-January start. There were also strict caps on crowd numbers, and several days when fans weren't allowed into Melbourne Park when coronavirus cases surged.

The 34-year-old Djokovic has won nine of his 20 major titles at the Australian Open. He shares the men's record for most majors with Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.

More AP tennis: <https://apnews.com/hub/tennis> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Less than half of GOP say 1/6 was very violent: AP-NORC poll

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The fighting — so primitive and ferocious that one Capitol Police officer described it as "medieval" and another as a "trip to hell" — left more than 100 law enforcement personnel injured, some beaten with their own weapons.

Video cameras captured the violence live, with rioters clubbing officers with flag poles and fire extinguishers, even squeezing one between doors as he begged for his life.

Yet nearly a year after the Jan. 6 siege only about 4 in 10 Republicans recall the attack by supporters of then-President Donald Trump as very violent or extremely violent, according to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. About 3 in 10 Republicans say the attack was not violent, and about another 3 in 10 say it was somewhat violent.

Their views were a distinct minority as overall about two-thirds of Americans described the day as very or extremely violent, including about 9 in 10 Democrats.

The findings reflect the country's political polarization, with a false portrayal of the siege taking hold

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 21 of 65

despite extensive footage that shows the ransacking of the building in harrowing detail. Trump and some allies in Congress and conservative media have played it down, falsely characterizing the attack as a minor civil disturbance.

It's a view that is shared by many Republicans, though few go so far as to defend the rioters themselves.

"My understanding was that a lot of it was pretty peaceful," Paul Bender, a self-described conservative from Cleveland, told The Associated Press in a recent interview. "I've seen some video of the people just like marching in through a velvet rope."

Bender, who said he didn't keep up with the news coverage, added, "There were certainly outlier people who were not peaceful and were breaking through the windows and stuff like that, but I wasn't aware of overt violence."

Meanwhile, the percentage of Americans who blame Trump for the Jan. 6 riot has grown slightly over the past year, with 57% saying he bears significant responsibility for what took place. In an AP-NORC poll taken in the days after the attack, 50% said that.

The uptick is seen among Republicans as well, even as relatively few think Trump bears significant responsibility. Twenty-two percent say that now, up from 11% last year. Sixty percent say he had little to no responsibility.

"I don't believe that he actively was like promoting people to do anything other than a peaceful protest," Bender, 53, said. "However, once things got out of hand, I think that it would have been appropriate for him to have reacted sooner, whether that was a statement or going on the radio or TV or whatever."

The insurrection was the closing act of Trump's desperate effort to overturn his election loss to Joe Biden. After Trump's baseless claims of voter fraud were soundly rejected in the courts, he shifted his focus to the Electoral College certification on Jan. 6, publicly pressuring then-Vice President Mike Pence to stop Congress from naming Biden the winner. Pence did not have that power under the law, as the vice president's function is largely ceremonial.

Trump promoted the Jan. 6 rally that preceded the attack, predicting it would be "wild," and in a speech that day urged his supporters to "fight like hell" as Congress convened to certify the election results. The attack halted that process for hours as rioters occupied the building.

Still, while few Republicans blame Trump, Republicans and Democrats alike overwhelmingly say that the individual rioters had a great deal or quite a bit of responsibility for their actions during the riot.

"I think there were strong supporters of President Trump that were there, but I think the people that caused the attacks might not have been true Trump supporters," said Mary Beth Bell of Jacksonville, Florida. "Because I know a lot of Trump supporters, and they see what happened on Jan. 6 as disgusting as I do."

About 7 in 10 Americans also say a House select committee should continue its investigation of the attack, while about 3 in 10 say it should not.

Robert Spry, a Democrat in Kingman, Arizona, said the congressional investigation is crucial for getting at the truth.

"We need a comprehensive report of that day. It has got to come to light what those people did to police and to that building," Spry said.

The 63-year-old, who used to vote Republican but now considers himself a conservative Democrat, said the protest-turned-attack appeared chaotic at first but the committee's findings are making it "more and more clear that it was planned in advance."

Forty-one percent of Republicans agree with Spry that Congress should continue to investigate, while 58% say it should not.

Bell said a federal investigation into what she saw as "a terrorist attack" is appropriate, but she objects to the way the nine-member panel has been conducting the investigation since July of last year.

"They're not listening to all the information. I feel like it's one-sided more or less than trying to investigate everything," she said of the committee, composed of seven Democrats and two Republicans. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi chose all the members of the committee after rejecting the choices of House GOP leadership.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 22 of 65

Rep. Bennie Thompson, Democratic chairman of the committee, said it's important for Americans to know that Democrats first tried to create a bipartisan commission with an equal number of members from each party. But Republicans in the Senate blocked it from passage.

"Only because Republican leadership failed this country did Speaker Pelosi have to step up and do what's in the best interest of the country to make sure that we produce a committee that looks into the facts and circumstances of Jan. 6," Thompson said.

The AP-NORC poll of 1,089 adults was conducted Dec. 2-7 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4.1 percentage points.

Anti-coup protests in Sudan amid turmoil after PM resigns

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Sudanese took to the streets in the capital, Khartoum, and other cities on Tuesday in anti-coup protests as the country plunged further into turmoil following the resignation of the prime minister earlier this week.

Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok was ousted in the October coup, only to be reinstated a month later following a deal with the military meant to calm tensions and anti-coup protests. Hamdok stepped down Sunday amid political deadlock, saying he had failed to find a compromise between the ruling generals and the pro-democracy movement.

Sudan has been politically paralyzed since the Oct. 25 coup. The military takeover came more than two years after a popular uprising forced the removal of longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir and his Islamist government in April 2019.

The military, under international pressure, reinstated Hamdok in November to lead a technocratic Cabinet. But the deal sidelined the pro-democracy movement behind the uprising against al-Bashir. Since then, Hamdok was unable to form a Cabinet amid relentless protests not only against the coup but also against his deal with the military.

Thousands took part in Tuesday marches in Khartoum and its twin city of Omdurman, denouncing the coup. Images posted online show young protesters singing, beating drums and waving Sudanese flags. There were similar demonstrations in other cities, including the eastern city of Port Sudan.

Ahead of the protests, authorities closed major roads and streets in Khartoum and Omdurman, according to activists, tactics that have been employed in the past two months to prevent demonstrators from reaching government buildings.

Since the coup, nearly 60 protesters have been killed and hundreds of others injured in a heavy security crackdown, according to a Sudanese medical group. The protests are called by the Sudanese Professionals' Association and the Resistance Committees, which were the backbone of the uprising against al-Bashir.

Hamdok's resignation has thrown the country into further uncertainty and "deprived the generals of the fig leaf" they used to continue their military rule, said Mohammed Yousef al-Mustafa, a spokesman for the association.

The protest movement insists on a fully civilian government to lead the transition, a demand rejected by the generals who say power will be handed over only to an elected government. Elections are planned in July 2023, in line with a constitutional document governing the transitional period.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for "meaningful dialogue" between all Sudanese parties to "reach an inclusive, peaceful and lasting solution," according to U.N. spokesman Stéphane Dujarric.

Sudan's largest Umma party called for the return to the 2019 constitutional document governing the transitional period, which calls for the military to relinquish the leadership of the ruling sovereign council.

"This is the only way for the salvation of the nation, the integrity of the transitional period and the accomplishment of its tasks within the agreed-upon timeframe," the party said in a statement.

Deliberations have been underway to find "an independent figure" to lead a technocratic Cabinet through

elections, according to a military official and a protest leader. They spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the negotiations. Among names floated was that of former Finance Minister Ibrahim Elbadawi.

Elbadawi, who resigned in 2020, was not immediately available for comment.

Jibril Ibrahim, a rebel leader who joined Hamdok's government last year following a peace deal with the transitional administration, urged for a "political compromise" to resolve the crisis.

"Let us agree to work together for the sake of Sudan," tweeted Ibrahim.

Al-Mustafa, the spokesman, said the association rejects talks with the coup leaders, warning of "deadly" street confrontations between protesters and security forces. He called on the international community to pressure the Sudanese military to allow the establishing of a fully civilian government.

Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan, head of the ruling Sovereign Council, said an independent Cabinet with "specific tasks" would be formed as the executive branch of the transitional government. The military, he said, would "protect the democratic transition" until Sudan is able to hold free and fair elections.

Insurrection prompts year of change for US Capitol Police

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A year after thousands of violent pro-Trump rioters overwhelmed police officers at the U.S. Capitol — severely injuring dozens in the process — the force dedicated to protecting the premier symbol of American democracy has transformed.

The leaders who were in charge of the U.S. Capitol Police on Jan. 6 were ousted following criticism for intelligence and other failures that left the legislative branch vulnerable to the stunning attack. And more broadly, the agency that was once little-known outside of Washington now has an elevated profile, leading to a roughly 15% increase in funding and a greater awareness of its role in the patchwork of groups that protect the region.

With the nation's political divide running deep and an unprecedented number of threats against lawmakers, there is still concern about the readiness of the Capitol Police to thwart another attack. But experts say the shock of the insurrection has prompted needed changes, including better communication among the Capitol Police, other law enforcement agencies and the public.

"It's a sea change between this year and last year in terms of how the Capitol Police are thinking, and operating," said Chuck Wexler, the head of the Police Executive Research Forum, an organization that focuses on professionalism in policing. "They're going to be over-prepared, and willing to be criticized for being over-prepared."

As the temporary public face of the department, then-acting Police Chief Yogananda Pittman conceded to Congress in February that multiple levels of failures allowed rioters to storm the building. But she disputed the notion that law enforcement had failed to take the threat seriously, noting how Capitol Police several days before the riot had distributed an internal document warning that extremists were poised for violence.

The police department had compiled numerous intelligence documents suggesting the crowd could turn violent and even target Congress. The intelligence documents, obtained by The Associated Press, warned that crowds could number in the tens of thousands and include members of extremist groups like the Proud Boys.

The Capitol Police Board has oversight of the force and is comprised of the House and Senate sergeants-at-arms and the architect of the Capitol, who oversees the building. It passed over Pittman in its search for a permanent chief and, in July, selected J. Thomas Manger, the former chief of the police departments in Fairfax County, Virginia, and Montgomery County, Maryland.

Manger has focused on making major changes to the agency, which includes 1,800 sworn police officers and nearly 400 civilian employees. He's ordered new equipment for front-line officers and officers assigned to the civil disturbance unit while expanding training sessions with the National Guard and other agencies. He's also pushed for stronger peer support and mental health services for officers.

"I think that the damage that was done on Jan. 6 was not just the physical damage to the Capitol itself.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 24 of 65

It was not just the harm, the injuries, the deaths that occurred to the men and women of the Capitol Police Department, to the demonstrators, to the folks that were on the Capitol grounds that day," Manger said in an interview with the AP in September. "The damage went beyond that. It went to where it damaged, I think, the confidence of the American public that the Capitol could be adequately protected."

In the last year, Capitol Police say they have also improved the way that investigators gather, analyze and disseminate intelligence and have brought on someone dedicated to planning major events to focus on intelligence and coordination. The agency has also started conducting planning sessions and exercises ahead of major events and is briefing officers in person.

Many officers within the department had criticized their own leaders, saying they had failed to recognize the threat ahead of the insurrection and didn't do enough to bolster staffing. Some officers were outfitted with equipment for a protest, rather than a riot.

But even with a new chief and major changes to operations, questions still remain about whether the Capitol is adequately protected. While many, both inside and outside the Capitol, were surprised by the attack that took place last January, some were cautioning the intelligence community to take the planned rallies by pro-Trump entities seriously.

Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., who chairs the Senate intelligence committee, said he had been calling the FBI for days leading up to the attack and had been assured officials were prepared. But as he made his way to the Senate floor for the certification of Democrat Joe Biden's electoral votes, he saw the crowd of protesters coming up the hill through the Capitol windows.

"I've been here a long time and lived in Washington for years, and never before had I seen protesters appearing to be that close to the building, and there was a lot of them," Warner told the AP last month. What happened next, he says, could only be described as chaotic, "ad hoc," and an embarrassment of a response.

The Capitol Police watchdog has said only a small number of the recommendations he made to make the Capitol complex "safe and secure" have been adopted. And he says there were clear systemic issues identified after the insurrection.

"The Department still lacks an overall training infrastructure to meet the needs of the department, the level of intelligence gathering and expertise needed, and an overall cultural change needed to move the department into a protective agency as opposed to a traditional police department," Inspector General Michael Bolton told lawmakers on the Senate Rules Committee last month.

Police say they have been focused on "completing the recommendations that could help prevent another attack" and have detailed plans in place to address the dozens of recommendations from the inspector general.

Still, the most pressing issue the force faces is staffing shortages. Manger plans to hire about 400 new officers and officials plan to bring on about 280 sworn officers this year.

"The United States Capitol Police is stronger than it was before January 6," the agency said in a statement. "We are incredibly proud of the work our dedicated employees have done during this challenging year."

Associated Press writer Colleen Long contributed to this report.

In locked down Chinese city, some complain food hard to get

Residents of the Chinese city of Xi'an are straining under a strict coronavirus lockdown, with some complaining of difficulties finding food, despite assurances from authorities that they are able to provide necessities for the 13 million people largely confined to their homes.

Stringent measures to stem outbreaks are common in China, which still maintains a policy of stamping out every COVID-19 case long after many other countries have opted to try to live with the virus. But the lockdown imposed Dec. 23 in Xi'an is one of the harshest in the country since a shutdown in 2020 in and around Wuhan, after the coronavirus was first detected there.

On Tuesday, authorities announced that another city, Yuzhou in Henan province, was placed under lock-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 25 of 65

down over the weekend after the discovery of just three asymptomatic cases.

The Chinese have largely complied with the tough measures throughout the pandemic, but complaints have cropped up over tough policies, despite the risk of retaliation from Communist authorities. The Xi'an lockdown, however, comes at a particularly sensitive time, as China prepares to hold the Beijing Winter Olympics, which open Feb. 4, and therefore is under especially intense pressure to contain this outbreak.

"Can't leave the building, and it's getting more and more difficult to buy food online," said one resident of Xi'an, who posted on the social media platform Weibo under the name Mu Qingyuani Sayno. The post was from a verified account, but the person did not respond to a request for further comment.

Zhang Canary, an expert with the State Council's epidemic prevention and control team, conceded that "there may be supply pressure in communities."

But he was quoted by the official Xinhua news agency as also saying: "The government will go all-out to coordinate resources to provide people with daily necessities and medical services."

The lockdown in Xi'an originally allowed people to leave the house every two days to shop for basic goods, but it has since been tightened, though the rules vary according to the severity of the outbreak in each district. Some people are not allowed to go out at all and must have goods delivered to them. People can only leave the city with special permission.

In recent days, people in Xi'an could be seen shopping at pop-up markets, served by workers in head-to-toe white protective suits. Community volunteers also visited people's homes to ask what they needed.

Yet the strain is beginning to show, with residents increasingly complaining on Weibo of being unable to source necessities. In one widely shared video, guards could be seen attacking a man who had tried to deliver steamed buns to family members. The guards later apologized to the man and were each fined 200 yuan (\$31), according to a Xi'an police statement posted on Weibo.

In an online diary on the popular Weixin site, a Xi'an-based writer said that following an initial wave of panic-buying and the closure of markets, residents soon began searching for food online.

"In this age of material surplus, when everyone is trying to lose weight, finding enough to eat has suddenly become a difficult task," Jiang Xue wrote. A message sent to the account was not immediately returned.

China's "zero tolerance" strategy of quarantining every case, mass testing and trying to block new infections from abroad helped it to contain previous outbreaks. But the lockdowns are far more stringent than anything seen in the West, and they have exacted a tremendous toll on the economy and the lives of millions of people.

The measures often fall into place after just a few cases are identified, as was seen in Yuzhou. Since the rules were imposed there on Sunday, residents have been allowed to return to the city of 1.7 million but are not permitted to leave and must isolate at home. Only emergency vehicles are allowed on city roads. Restaurants, sports facilities, and a wide range of other businesses have been ordered to shut, while markets can only offer basic necessities, an order from the city government said.

Meanwhile, Xi'an, home to the famed Terracotta Army statues along with major industries, has seen more than 1,600 cases in a surge that officials say is driven by the delta variant, which is less infectious than the newer omicron strain, of which China has reported only a handful of cases. Another 95 infections were announced Tuesday.

China has reported a total of 102,841 cases and 4,636 deaths since the pandemic began. While those numbers are relatively small compared to the U.S. and other countries, and likely undercounts as they are everywhere, they do show the persistence of the virus despite the sometimes draconian measures taken by China.

A third round of mass testing has been ordered for Xi'an, which is capable of swabbing 10 million people in just seven hours and processing up to 3 million results in just 12 hours, according to state media.

While Wuhan's health care system was overwhelmed after the pandemic began there in late 2019, China has not reported any shortages of beds or medical equipment and staff in Xi'an. Two dozen special teams have been formed to deal with COVID-19 cases and a pair of hospitals have been set aside to provide other types of care, Xinhua reported.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 26 of 65

China has vaccinated nearly 85% of its population, according to Our World in Data. The shots have helped reduce the severity of disease, although Chinese vaccines are considered less effective than used those elsewhere.

In a sign of the pressure authorities are under to curb this outbreak, officials have been put on notice that they will lose their jobs if they don't bring the numbers of new cases down. Already, the top two Communist Party officials in Yanta district, where half the city's cases have been recorded, have been fired, according to a statement from the government of the surrounding province of Shaanxi.

The head of a tourism firm reached by phone said Tuesday that supplies were basically sufficient, but that his business had been suffering since July.

"Now with the lockdown, the effect has been extremely big," said the man, who gave just his surname, Wen, as is common among Chinese.

Qin Huilin, who works at a traditional mutton soup restaurant, said the lockdown brought business to a screeching halt.

"We used to have about a hundred customers every day, but we've had none for more than a dozen days since the lockdown," Qin said by phone. "The impact on our business is significant, but I can go shopping once every few days in supermarkets and there are enough supplies there."

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

Jan. 6 attack posed loyalty test for Indiana Rep. Greg Pence

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Greg Pence watched the Jan. 6 insurrection unfold from an extraordinary perch. As chants of "Hang Mike Pence" echoed in the Capitol, the Republican congressman from Indiana and his better-known brother were whisked away from the Senate by the Secret Service shortly before a mob of Donald Trump supporters burst in, intent on stopping the vice president from certifying Democrat Joe Biden's win.

Their dramatic escape, caught on security cameras, came minutes after Trump excoriated Mike Pence on Twitter for lacking the "courage" to use his ceremonial post presiding over the certification of the 2020 election to overturn its outcome.

"My brother was being asked to do what we don't do in this country," Greg Pence recounted at a Republican fundraising dinner in his district last July, one of the rare instances he has spoken publicly about the attack. He later added, "I couldn't be prouder."

At the beating heart of the insurrection lies Trump's attempt to pressure his vice president to take the unprecedented step of overturning the election. And few had a better vantage point on the day of the attack than Greg Pence, who hunkered down in a secure area with his younger brother while the vice president worked the phone, pleading for help to clear rioters from the building.

That makes Greg Pence a tantalizing prospective witness for the House Jan. 6 committee, which is investigating the origins of the insurrection that Trump fomented when he urged his supporters to march on the Capitol and "fight like hell."

Pence has largely declined to discuss what transpired while he was with his brother that day, other than praising his brother as a hero for standing up to Trump.

His silence serves as powerful evidence of the grip that Trump still holds on his party, which has led many Republicans to dispute the seriousness of the attack and instead perpetuate the lie that Trump was wrongly denied a second term.

Pence declined last month to speak with The Associated Press at the Capitol. A spokesperson did not respond to multiple inquiries seeking comment.

First elected to Congress in 2018, 65-year-old Greg Pence represents a deeply Republican and largely rural district that his brother held for 12 years before he was elected Indiana governor and eventually selected by Trump to become vice president. Unlike his brother, who from a young age was fixated on a

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 27 of 65

career in politics, Greg Pence was always an unlikely congressman.

After graduating from Loyola University in Chicago, he joined the Marines and later fell into a series of petroleum industry jobs. He eventually served as president of Kiel Bros., a Midwest gas station empire his father helped build, a post he resigned from in 2004 after the company filed for bankruptcy and saddled the state of Indiana with more than \$21 million in unpaid environmental cleanup costs, a 2018 Associated Press investigation found.

Pence turned his focus in 2006 to operating antique malls he purchased with his wife, Denise, a business now worth between \$5 million and \$25 million, according to his congressional financial disclosure.

When Mike Pence's former congressional seat opened up in 2018, his brother ran a stealthy campaign. Granting few interviews and ducking debates, he coasted to victory.

"I looked into the mirror and said, 'If not me, who?'" Greg Pence told his hometown newspaper, The Columbus Republic, in a rare interview during the campaign.

But he also expressed deep ambivalence about the job, as well as a lack of conviction that would likely have doomed other candidates.

"What would be my positions, what would be my focus?" he said in a September 2017 interview with the Washington Examiner, a conservative publication, before formally launching his campaign. "I really haven't dug into or formed positions on anything yet."

Since then, Pence has had a muted presence in Congress, where he serves on the House Energy and Commerce Committee. Yet during the Trump administration, he enjoyed rarefied privileges, riding with the president on Air Force One for campaign and administration events where the president name-checked him.

One area in which he has excelled is fundraising, raising far more money than the average first-term member of Congress.

Pence also has enjoyed the trappings of political life, spending over \$49,000 at Trump-owned properties, while paying Trump's pollster \$137,000 during his 2018 race when there was little doubt he would win, campaign finance disclosures show.

Pence and his family also have collected money from his campaign account, including \$18,000 in rent paid to the company he runs with his wife, and \$35,000 paid to his daughter Nicole, a former TV reporter, who advised his 2018 campaign. He has also collected \$57,000 in reimbursements for travel and meals, records show.

For months it was unclear whether the committee would even seek interviews with members of Congress connected to the insurrection, which was viewed as a provocative step. But in late December, the committee announced it wanted to interview Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, a staunch Trump ally, as well as Rep. Scott Perry of Pennsylvania, who leads the hard-line House Freedom Caucus.

So far, Democrats who serve on the committee have been tight-lipped about whether Greg Pence could be called for an interview or asked to submit documents.

"I'm not going to talk about any individual being called," said Rep. Pete Aguilar, a California Democrat on the committee, when asked whether an interview with Pence would be sought.

Pence has repeatedly voted against attempts to shed light on the insurrection, or hold those who urged it on accountable. He voted twice against forming a committee to investigate the origins of the attack, calling it "bass-ackwards." He also voted against impeaching Trump.

But perhaps the most significant vote was in the immediate aftermath of the attack.

Hours after emerging from a secure location, Mike Pence gavelled the joint session of Congress back in and presided over the certification of the election, despite Trump's demands.

Greg Pence, meanwhile, joined scores of other Republicans who sided with Trump and cast a vote rejecting the outcome in Pennsylvania, the state that clinched the election for Biden.

Suspect in South Africa's Parliament fire appears in court

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — The man suspected of starting the fire that gutted South Africa's parliament

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 28 of 65

buildings appeared in court Tuesday and will remain in custody pending a bail hearing.

Zandile Christmas Mafe faces several charges including arson, theft, housebreaking and contravention of the National Key Points Acts, which restricts access to government buildings, according to the local Eye Witness News website.

Mafe's lawyer said he denies the charges. Mafe was arrested on the premises of the Parliament complex by police after they noticed the fire Sunday morning. The Parliament complex in the center of Cape Town includes some buildings that are 130 years old.

National Prosecuting Authority spokesman Eric Ntabazalila told journalists outside court that Mafe was also found with an explosive device, but didn't give further details.

Police haven't ruled out the possibility of more arrests, said Nomthandazo Mbambo, spokesman for the Hawks special investigative unit of the police.

"We're going to be conducting a full investigation and we think there may be other people involved but at this stage, the focus is on this one until the investigation can dictate otherwise," Mbabambo told media outside the courtroom.

The fire destroyed South Africa's main Parliament chamber, offices and other buildings nearby on Sunday. It flared up again Monday when winds picked up and burned through other offices. Firefighters battled the renewed blaze until midnight, officials said.

Parliament was closed for the holidays and no injuries have been reported in the fire.

Teachers at culture war front lines with Jan. 6 education

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — What students are learning about the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 may depend on where they live.

In a Boston suburb in heavily Democratic Massachusetts, history teacher Justin Voldman said his students will spend the day journaling about what happened and talking about the fragility of democracy.

"I feel really strongly that this needs to be talked about," said Voldman, who teaches history at Natick High School, 15 miles (24 kilometers) west of Boston. As the grandson of a Holocaust survivor, he said "it is fair to draw parallels between what happened on Jan. 6 and the rise of fascism."

Voldman said he feels fortunate: "There are other parts of the country where ... I would be scared to be a teacher."

Liz Wagner, an eighth and ninth grade social studies teacher in a Des Moines suburb of increasingly Republican Iowa, got an email from an administrator last year, warning teachers to be careful in how they framed the discussion.

"I guess I was so, I don't know if naïve is the appropriate word, perhaps exhausted from the pandemic teaching year last year, to understand how controversial this was going to be," she said.

Some students questioned Wagner last year when she referred to what happened as an insurrection. She responded by having them read the dictionary definition for the word. This year, she will probably show students videos of the protest and ask them to write about what the footage shows.

"This is kind of what I have to do to ensure that I'm not upsetting anybody," Wagner said. "Last year I was on the front line of the COVID war, trying to dodge COVID, and now I'm on the front line of the culture war, and I don't want to be there."

With crowds shouting at school board meetings and political action committees investing millions of dollars in races to elect conservative candidates across the country, talking to students about what happened on Jan. 6 is increasingly fraught.

Teachers now are left to decide how — or whether — to instruct their students about the events that sit at the heart of the country's division. And the lessons sometimes vary based on whether they are in a red state or a blue state.

Facing History and Ourselves, a nonprofit that helps teachers with difficult lessons on subjects like the Holocaust, offered tips on how to broach the topic with students in the hours after the riot.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 29 of 65

Within 18 hours of publication, it had 100,000 page views — a level of interest that Abby Weiss, who oversees the development of the nonprofit's teaching tools, said was unlike anything the group has seen before.

In the year that has followed, Weiss said, Republican lawmakers and governors in many states have championed legislation to limit the teaching of material that explores how race and racism influence American politics, culture and law.

"Teachers are anxious," she said. "On the face of it, if you read the laws, they're quite vague and, you know, hard to know actually what's permissible and what isn't."

Racial discussions are hard to avoid when discussing the riot because white supremacists were among those descending on the halls of power, said Jinnie Spiegler, director of curriculum and training for the Anti-Defamation League. She said the group is concerned that the insurrection could be used as a recruitment tool and wrote a newly released guide to help teachers and parents combat those radicalization efforts.

"To talk about white supremacy, to talk about white supremacist extremists, to talk about their racist Confederate flag, it's fraught for so many reasons," Spiegler said.

Anton Schulzki, the president of the National Council for the Social Studies, said students are often the ones bringing up the racial issues. Last year, he was just moments into discussing what happened when one of his honors students at William J. Palmer High School in Colorado Springs said, "You know, if those rioters were all Black, they'd all be arrested by now."

Since then, three conservative school board candidates won seats on the school board where Schulzki teaches, and the district dissolved its equity leadership team. He is covered by a contract that offers academic freedom protections, and has discussed the riot periodically over the past year.

"I do feel," he said, "that there may be some teachers who are going to feel the best thing for me to do is to ignore this because I don't want to put myself in jeopardy because I have my own bills to pay, my own house, to take care of, my own kids to take back and forth to school."

Concerned teachers have been reaching out to the American Federation of Teachers, which last month sued over New Hampshire's new limits on the discussion of systemic racism and other topics.

"What I'm hearing now over and over and over again is that these laws that have been passed in different places are really intended to chill the discussion of current events," said Randi Weingarten, the union's president and a former social studies teacher. "I am very concerned about what it means in terms of the teaching as we get closer and closer to January 6th."

The biggest fear for Paula Davis, a middle school special education teacher in a rural central Indiana district, is that the discussion about what happened could be used by teachers with a political agenda to indoctrinate students. She won't discuss Jan. 6 in her classroom; her focus is math and English.

"I think it's extremely important that any teacher that is addressing that topic does so from an unbiased perspective," said Davis, a regional chapter chair for Moms for Liberty, a group whose members have protested mask and vaccine mandates and critical race theory. "If it cannot be done without bias, then it should not be done."

But there is no way Dylan Huisken will avoid the topic in his middle school classroom in the Missoula, Montana, area town of Bonner. He plans to use the anniversary to teach his students to use their voice constructively by doing things like writing to lawmakers.

"Not addressing the attack," Huisken said, "is to suggest that the civic ideals we teach exist in a vacuum and don't have any real-world application, that civic knowledge is mere trivia."

Activists urge Tesla to close new Xinjiang showroom

BEIJING (AP) — American activists are appealing to Tesla Inc. to close a new showroom in China's northwestern region of Xinjiang, where officials are accused of abuses against mostly Muslim ethnic minorities.

Tesla on Friday announced the opening of its showroom in Urumqi, the Xinjiang capital, and said on its Chinese social media account, "Let's start Xinjiang's all-electric journey!"

The Council on American-Islamic Relations, an American organization based in Washington, D.C., on

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 30 of 65

Monday urged Tesla and its chairman, Elon Musk, to close the showroom and "cease what amounts to economic support for genocide."

Pressure on foreign companies to take positions on Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan and other politically charged issues has been rising. The ruling Communist Party pushes companies to adopt its positions in their advertising and on websites. It has attacked clothing and other brands that express concern about reports of forced labor and other abuses in Xinjiang.

"No American corporation should be doing business in a region that is the focal point of a campaign of genocide targeting a religious and ethnic minority," the group's communications director, Ibrahim Hooper, said in a statement.

Activists and foreign governments say some 1 million Uyghurs and members of other mostly Muslim minorities have been confined in detention camps in Xinjiang. Chinese officials reject accusations of abuses and say the camps are for job training and to combat extremism.

On Friday, the ruling party's discipline agency threatened Walmart Inc. with a boycott after some shoppers complained online they couldn't find goods from Xinjiang in its Walmart and Sam's Club stores in China.

In December, Intel Corp., the world's biggest maker of computer chips, apologized for asking suppliers to avoid sourcing goods from Xinjiang after the state press attacked the company and comments online called for a boycott of its goods.

The United States has barred imports of goods from Xinjiang unless they can be shown not to be made by forced labor.

China is one of Tesla's biggest markets. The company's first factory outside the United States opened in Shanghai in 2019.

Other foreign auto brands including Volkswagen, General Motors and Nissan Motor Co. have showrooms in Xinjiang operated by the automakers' Chinese joint-venture partners. VW also operates a factory in Urumqi.

Live updates: Germany relaxes restrictions on 8 nations

By The Associated Press undefined

BERLIN — Germany has relaxed restrictions on travel from the U.K., South Africa and seven other southern African countries that were imposed following the emergence of the new omicron coronavirus variant.

The nine nations were removed Tuesday from Germany's list of "virus variant areas." Airlines and others are restricted largely to transporting German citizens and residents from countries on that list. All arrivals must self-isolate for 14 days, regardless of vaccination status.

Germany's national disease control center had announced on Thursday that it planned to downgrade the countries' risk status but said at the time that "short-term changes" were possible.

They have now been added to Germany's list of "high-risk areas," which carries much less onerous restrictions. People arriving from such areas who either haven't recovered recently or been fully vaccinated have to self-isolate for 10 days, which can be cut to five with a negative test.

Omicron is advancing in Germany but authorities say official statistics currently show a very incomplete picture because of patchy testing and reporting over the holiday period.

The disease control center, the Robert Koch Institute, said Tuesday that 30,561 new coronavirus cases were reported over the past 24 hours, over 9,000 more than a week earlier. The officially recorded infection rate was 239.9 new cases per 100,000 residents over the past week. The health minister has said the real rate is probably two or three times higher.

HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW TODAY ABOUT THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC:

- How will pandemic end? Omicron clouds forecasts for endgame
- Fauci says CDC may add test requirement for infected people ending isolation
- Pentagon chief Austin says he has tested positive for COVID
- British government rushing tests to schools

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Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 31 of 65

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HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING TODAY:

NEW DELHI, India — Authorities in India's capital have imposed a weekend stay-at-home order because of a surge in coronavirus infections triggered by the omicron variant.

Residents must remain at home this Saturday and Sunday except to obtain essentials such as food or medicine, Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia said. All government workers except for those providing essential services will work from home. He emphasized, however, that very few people were extremely sick, with 124 people requiring oxygen support and seven on ventilators.

The capital recorded over 4,000 new COVID-19 cases on Monday and its test positivity rate surged to 6.5%. A week earlier, the capital detected 300 infections and the test positivity rate was less than 1%.

Meanwhile, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said he has tested positive for the virus and has mild symptoms.

The reported number of infections do not accurately reflect the true spread of the virus because it only includes recorded cases.

Cases are increasing in most parts of India. The northeastern state of Mizoram has a test positivity rate of over 11% -- the highest in India. That is followed by the eastern West Bengal state, which has a test positivity rate of over 9%.

PORTLAND, Oregon — Oregon reported more than 9,700 new cases of COVID-19 from the holiday weekend on Monday and smashed a previous record for weekly coronavirus cases with an average of about 2,400 new daily cases as the omicron variant took hold.

The state also hit a single-day high for new cases on Thursday, with 3,534 confirmed or presumptive infections.

The Oregon Health Authority says 18.2% of COVID-19 tests administered over the long weekend were positive for the virus, the highest rate to date.

Hospitalizations, however, hovered at 498 people, less than half the number at the previous peak. Eleven deaths were reported.

NEW ORLEANS — Costumed revelers will mark the beginning of New Orleans' annual Carnival season this week with a ride on a historic streetcar — carrying out a cherished tradition despite recent surges in COVID-19 infections.

A Monday announcement from the Phunny Phorty Phellows organization says participants "will be wearing masks covering their mouths as well as their eyes" when their streetcar rumbles down the tracks on Thursday night.

Carnival season begins each year on Jan. 6, the 12th night after Christmas. It ends with nearly two weeks of opulent parades that culminate on Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday, which falls on March 1 this year.

Festivities, including major parades that bring thousands to the streets, were largely canceled in 2021.

There had been concerns that the 2020 Mardi Gras celebration had been an unintended "super spreader" of coronavirus in the early days of the pandemic.

This year, city officials are moving ahead with plans for major parades in February, with precautions including vaccine or testing requirements for float riders and customers of bars, restaurants and other public places.

Louisiana's governor said last week that the state is setting records for new COVID-19 diagnoses, and the omicron variant surge is just beginning.

TOPEKA, Kansas — Kansas has reported a record seven-day average for new confirmed and probable COVID-19 cases.

State health department data released Monday showed that Kansas reported an average of 3,134 new COVID-19 cases a day for the seven days ending Monday. That's 13% higher than the previous record of

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 32 of 65

2,767 cases per day for the seven days ending Nov. 18, 2020.

Kansas has now reported more than 534,000 cases for the pandemic or more than one for every six of its 2.9 million residents.

The state also averaged 38 new COVID-19 hospitalizations and 11 new reported deaths a day for the seven days ending Monday. The new numbers came as the state starts to see reports of the omicron variant spreading.

While the average for new hospitalizations isn't a record, hospitals are still under stress, both because of new patients and infections among employees.

PHOENIX — Arizona health officials on Monday reported the highest number of new COVID-19 cases in a year.

The 14,192 new cases were the most ever tallied in a day except for Jan. 3, 2020, when more than 17,000 cases were counted.

The state Health Services Department said the new case count was boosted by lower than normal reporting on Sunday, when just 701 new cases were reported. However, the state said there has been a steep upward trend of cases in recent days.

According to Johns Hopkins University data, the seven-day rolling average of daily new cases in Arizona has risen sharply over the past two weeks from 2,945 new cases per day on Dec. 18 to 5,051 new cases per day on Jan. 1.

The state reported no new deaths on Monday and just one on Sunday, bringing the total number of people who died from the virus in Arizona since the pandemic began in early 2020 to 24,355.

WASHINGTON — Congress' top doctor urged lawmakers on Monday to move to a "maximal telework posture," citing surging numbers of COVID-19 cases at the Capitol that he said are mostly breakthrough infections of people already vaccinated.

The seven-day average rate of infection at the Capitol's testing center has risen from less than 1% to more than 13%, Brian P. Monahan, the attending physician, wrote in a letter to congressional leaders obtained by The Associated Press.

Monahan said there has been "an unprecedented number of cases in the Capitol community affecting hundreds of individuals." In what he said was limited sampling as of Dec. 15, about 61% of the cases were the new, highly contagious omicron variant while 38% were the delta variant.

Providing no figure, he said "most" of the cases are breakthroughs.

While such cases have not led to any deaths or hospitalizations among vaccinated lawmakers or congressional staff, Monahan said even mild infections can lead to six to 12 months of "long COVID." A "reasonable estimate" is that 6% to 10% of cases could end up that way, he added.

Monahan urged congressional offices to "reduce in-person meetings and in-office activities to the maximum extent possible."

NEW ORLEANS — A new vaccine and testing requirement is kicking in for children from the ages of 5 to 11 in New Orleans to battle the coronavirus.

Local media report that children in those age groups must now be vaccinated or show proof of a recent negative coronavirus test to visit certain locations in the city such as restaurants.

The new mandate comes as coronavirus cases have skyrocketed across the country, driven by the highly contagious omicron variant.

The mandate was announced in December by Mayor LaToya Cantrell. It already applies to adults and children 12 and up.

Starting on Feb. 1 the coronavirus vaccine will also be included in the list of required vaccines for children to attend school, although there is an option for families to opt out of the requirement.

What will Silicon Valley learn from Holmes' conviction?

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — The fraud conviction of former Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes could offer Silicon Valley's culture of hubris and hype some valuable lessons.

Will anyone in the tech industry actually take this moment to heart? Don't count on it.

Holmes was found guilty on Monday of duping investors into believing that Theranos had developed a revolutionary medical device that could detect a multitude of diseases and conditions from a few drops of blood. She could face up to 20 years in prison for each charge, although legal experts say she is unlikely to receive the maximum sentence.

Federal prosecutors depicted Holmes as a charlatan obsessed with fame and fortune. In seven days on the witness stand, she cast herself as a visionary trailblazer in male-dominated Silicon Valley who was emotionally and sexually abused by her former lover and business partner, Sunny Balwani.

The trial also laid bare the pitfalls of one of the go-to moves of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs — conveying a boundless optimism regardless of whether it's warranted, known as "fake it 'til you make it." That ethos helped hatch groundbreaking companies such as Google, Netflix, Facebook, and Apple — the latter co-founded by one of Holmes' heroes, Steve Jobs.

But few expect her conviction to lower the wattage on the brash promises and bold exaggerations that have become a routine part of the tech industry's innovation hustle.

Holmes' conviction "will send a message to CEOs that there are consequences in overstepping the bounds," suggested Ellen Kreitzberg, a Santa Clara University law professor who attended the trial. On the other hand, she said, "investors are still going to want to make more money on a promising idea. They will always go in for the golden ring."

Holmes remained seated and expressed no visible emotion as the verdicts were read. She bowed her head several times before the jury was polled by U.S. District Judge Edward Davila. After the judge left the courtroom to meet with jurors individually, Holmes got up to hug her partner, Billy Evans, and her parents before leaving with her lawyers.

The bold dream Holmes pursued when she founded Theranos in 2003 at the age of 19 had become a nightmare by the time she was indicted on felony charges in 2018.

During that span, Holmes went from an unknown to a Silicon Valley sensation who had amassed a \$4.5 billion fortune on paper to a vilified failure. Her downfall was dissected in documentaries, books, podcasts and will soon be rehashed in a Hulu TV series called "The Dropout" starring Amanda Seyfried in the lead role.

Holmes set out to create a less painful, more convenient and cheaper way to scan for hundreds of diseases and other health problems by taking just a few drops of blood with a finger prick instead of inserting a needle in a vein. She aimed to upend an industry dominated by giant testing companies such as Quest Diagnostics and Labcorp, starting with setting up "mini-labs" in Walgreens and Safeway stores across the U.S. that would use a small Theranos device called the Edison to run faster, less intrusive blood tests.

The concept — and the way Holmes presented it — enthralled wealthy investors eager to buy an early stake in a game-changing company. It helped Theranos raise more than \$900 million from savvy billionaires such as media mogul Rupert Murdoch and software magnate Larry Ellison, as well as well-to-do families such as the Waltons of Walmart and the DeVos clan behind Amway.

Holmes also wooed a well-connected board that included two former U.S. secretaries of state, Henry Kissinger and the late George Shultz; two former secretaries of defense, Gen. James Mattis and William Perry; former Sen. Sam Nunn; and former Wells Fargo CEO Richard Kovacevich. She charmed former President Bill Clinton in an on-stage presentation and impressed then-Vice President Joe Biden, who effusively praised her during a 2015 tour of a Theranos lab.

What most people did not know at the time was that Theranos' blood-testing technology kept producing misleading results. That forced patients to undergo regular blood draws instead of the promised finger sticks and led Theranos to secretly test those samples using conventional machines in a traditional labo-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 34 of 65

ratory setting. Evidence presented at the trial also showed that Holmes lied about purported deals that Theranos had reached with big drug companies such as Pfizer and the U.S. military.

The deception backfired in 2015 after a series of explosive articles in *The Wall Street Journal* and a regulatory audit of Theranos uncovered potentially dangerous flaws in the company's technology, leading to its eventual collapse.

During her testimony, Holmes occasionally expressed contrition for her handling of a variety of issues, but she often contended that she had forgotten the circumstance surrounding some of the key events spotlighted by the prosecution. She insisted she never stopped believing that Theranos was on the verge of refining its technology.

Instead, she heaped blame on Balwani, who she secretly lived with while he was Theranos' chief operating officer from 2009 to 2016.

Holmes testified that Balwani let her down by failing to address the laboratory problems that he had promised to fix and, in the most dramatic testimony of the trial, alleged he had turned her into his pawn through a long-running pattern of abuse while exerting control over her diet, sleeping habits and friendships. This all occurred, she said, after being raped by an unnamed assailant while she was still enrolled at Stanford.

Associated Press Business Writer Marcy Gordon contributed to this story from Washington.

A surge of evangelicals in Spain, fueled by Latin Americans

By ALBERTO ARCE Associated Press

SALAMANCA, Spain (AP) — When Kent Albright, a Baptist pastor from the United States, arrived as a missionary to Spain in 1996, he was unprepared for the insults and threats, or the fines from the police for handing out Protestant leaflets on the streets of Salamanca.

"Social animosity was big — they had never seen a Protestant in their life," said Albright, recalling one woman who whispered, "Be thankful we don't throw stones at you."

He couldn't have imagined that 25 years later, he would be pastoring an evangelical congregation of 120 and count about two dozen other thriving Protestant churches in the northwestern city. And there's a distinctive feature to the worshippers: Most of them are not Spanish-born — they're immigrants from Latin America, including about 80% of Albright's congregation.

The numbers reflect huge surges in Spain's migrant population and evangelical population in recent decades, producing profound changes in how faith is practiced in a country long dominated by the Catholic church.

"The Bible says there are no ethnicities, there are no races. I don't go down the street asking, nor do I ask for passports at the church door," Albright said. He marvels that in a course he teaches for deacons, his six students include one each from Peru, Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador.

One of the newest members of his congregation is Luis Perozo, 31, a former police officer from Maracaibo, Venezuela who arrived in Spain in February 2020 and applied for asylum with his wife, Narbic Escalante, 35.

While the couple wait for their status to be resolved, Perozo works in the laundry of a hotel. His wife does nursing in a retirement home.

"I was a lifelong Catholic," says Escalante. "When I arrived in Salamanca, I entered the church, looked everywhere, said hello, and they ignored me. I went to several churches — I felt absolutely nothing."

Perozo and Escalante soon visited Albright's church — one of Perozo's uncles had emigrated earlier and was already a member.

"The next day, Pastor Albright was helping us find a house, appliances and kitchenware. He moved us with his van," Escalante said.

She commended Albright's approach to pastoring, including services with lively music and less emphasis on repetitive prayer.

"I definitely feel better here than in the Catholic Church," she says. "It allows me to live more freely,

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 35 of 65

with less inhibitions.”

Before she and her husband were baptized at Albright’s church, she visited a Catholic priest. She recalls him responding, “If it makes you feel at peace with yourself, go. You’re not committing any sin.”

Albright sees similar reactions among other Latin American immigrants.

When they go to a Catholic church, he says, “they don’t feel that their problems are understood.”

“Latinos generally have a desire to participate in worship,” he added. “They need to have an active part in the celebration. The Catholic church feels static to them.”

With the arrival of the euro currency two decades ago, Spain experienced an economic boom that fueled migration. In 2000, there were 471,465 legally registered migrants in Spain; there are now about 7.2 million.

Albright was so intrigued by this phenomenon that he wrote a Ph.D. thesis about it at the University of Salamanca. He estimated that 20% of the migrants are evangelicals.

The last official census conducted by the Justice Ministry’s Observatory of Religious Pluralism found 1.96% of Spain’s population was Protestant in 2018 — more than 900,000 people. That’s up from 96,000 tallied in 1998.

The steady growth of the Protestant population coincides with a steady drop in the number of churchgoing Catholics. According to the Sociological Research Center, a public institute, 62% of Spaniards define themselves as Catholics, down from 85% in 2000 and 98% in 1975. Only about a third of those Catholics say they’re actively practicing the faith.

It’s a striking development in a country where Catholicism, for centuries, was identified with near-absolute power — from the long, often brutal era of the Spanish Inquisition to the 36-year dictatorship of Gen. Francisco Franco, who called his regime National-Catholic, in the 20th century.

Of the 23,000 Catholic parishes in Spain at present, more than 6,000 have no full-time priest. Some churches had to close when a priest died or retired, or be grouped together with other churches served by traveling priests who minister to multiple parishes.

The church’s challenges are evident in the province of Zamora, just north of Salamanca, which has lost 16% of its population since 2000. There are 304 parishes and only about 130 priests serving them.

One of the traveling priests, the Rev. Francisco Ortega, manages six parishes — trying to adapt as the number of churchgoers steadily declines. At age 40, he has been active on YouTube since the pandemic began, and is now back on the streets trying to stay up to date with his parishioners.

It’s a hectic agenda, but Ortega recently received some help — Rev. Edgardo Rivera, a 42-year-old missionary from El Salvador, joined him in November. It’s a reversal of the pattern several centuries ago, when hundreds of Catholic missionaries embarked for Latin America from Spain.

“Now it is the other way around,” Rivera said. “I saw the need for priests in Spain and I thought of offering myself. I never liked easy things.”

Overall, about 10% of the Catholic priests now serving in Spain were born elsewhere. The influx is welcome, given that the average age for a priest in Spain today is about 65.

How is it difficult for Rivera? “I am a missionary priest announcing the Gospel in a place that is not my culture,” he said. “I have to learn.”

He and Ortega strive to be good teammates. While Ortega blessed parishioners during one recent celebration, Rivera managed the church’s sound system via Bluetooth and changed the music tracks and volume from his phone.

They’ve both gone dancing with some residents of Morales del Vino, a small town where Ortega is the parish priest, winning praise from one of the revelers, 23-year-old lawyer Juan Manuel Pedrón.

“If the church wants to support us it has to be normal, it has to be with us, with the young people and do what we do,” Pedrón says.

His girlfriend, Tania Rey, 27, was on her first visit to Morales del Vino.

“In my town, the priest circulates with old ladies,” she said. “I am very shocked to see these two priests like this.”

She and Pedrón teased Rivera, saying he dances better than they do.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 36 of 65

The next day, after Sunday Mass, Rivera organized a gathering at the community center where he officiated. The official church building, 300 years old, is falling down.

"The walls of the church are giving way inward, the roof is in danger. We need to see what the strategy is for repair," he says, explaining that gifts from parishioners will be needed to supplement the diocese's repair budget.

The group then heads to the village bar; Rivera orders a glass of chilled white wine and sits with some of the parishioners.

His challenges are varied, he says. "I have to see how to ask for help to repair the church ... and get used to coming to the bar."

He couldn't imagine drinking a beer at a bar in his Salvadoran hometown after Mass. "But if this is where people gather and how people socialize here, this is where I have to be too."

But the momentum — in terms of church attendance and energy — is going in the other direction, toward the burgeoning ranks of Pentecostal and other evangelical congregations.

Many of those congregations rent space in industrial buildings on the outskirts of cities and towns — often filling them with zealous worshippers even as many large, centuries-old Catholic churches empty out.

One such Pentecostal venue in Salamanca has as neighbors a large carpentry shop and another evangelical church. On a recent Friday night, it hosted a rite of passage for Melanie Villalobos to celebrate her turning 13.

Two of her friends escorted her in a slow dance to a wall where a video was projected. There, her father appeared from Venezuela, wishing her a happy transition into adolescence. Onlookers from Honduras, the Dominican Republic and Brazil, seated at tables, were moved to tears.

Pastor Nedyt Lescano, 62, who came from Argentina in 2000, was mostly silent during the ceremony, but invited everyone to meet again Sunday morning.

Among those greeting the faithful was Roberto Siqueira, 32, a Brazilian who works in a cheese factory on the outskirts of Salamanca. On Sundays, he plays guitar and sings in a Christian rock band that performs dance-inducing songs in the Pentecostal church.

"This life is worth very little and the relationship with God is worth everything," goes one of the lyrics.

It's a bit like karaoke. The lyrics are projected on the wall, people sing along, gesturing and gyrating to the rhythm. Some seem in a trance, others cry out with emotion.

About 50 people are on hand, trying to comply with coronavirus social-distancing restrictions.

Lescano doesn't say much during the ceremony, letting the worshippers testify about challenges they faced and prayers that were answered.

In Lescano's services, there's a moving moment when she asks for help in paying the rent for the premises, along with other expenses, and the faithful, one by one, put an envelope in a cloth bag.

"Unlike the Catholic church, we don't receive any subsidies. We do it all by our own efforts here," Lescano says.

Indeed, Spain's Catholic church — though no longer recognized as the official national faith — received 301 million euros (about \$340 million) in 2020 under an agreement with the government. Spain's evangelicals — though now accounting for more than 4,500 registered places of worship — received a symbolic 462,000 euros (about \$523,000).

Lescano often feels like a psychologist, as well as a pastor, for those flocking to the makeshift church.

"Immigrants feel lonely and isolated, in a strange country, and here they receive love and hugs," she said. "Here they come and share, take pounds of weight and anxiety off their bodies and minds."

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

Future of prayer site in doubt under Israel's fragile govt

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 37 of 65

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — When Israel's new government took office last June, it indicated it would press ahead on an egalitarian prayer site at Jerusalem's Western Wall — a sensitive holy site that has emerged as a point of friction between Jews over how prayer is conducted there.

But the plan is coming up against the limits of Israel's fragile government, which is struggling to move forward on the issue due to its own internal divisions. The inaction has disappointed both Israeli groups that promote religious pluralism and their American Jewish allies, who view the issue as an important test of recognition from the Israeli government.

"Anyone can topple the government if they sneeze in the wrong direction," said Anat Hoffman, chairwoman of Women of the Wall, a group that advocates for pluralistic prayer at the holy site. "They are very cautious with the temperature of the hot potatoes that come their way and the Western Wall is a special hot potato."

The Western Wall is considered the holiest site where Jews can pray. Under ultra-Orthodox management, the wall is currently separated between men's and women's prayer sections.

Under the more liberal Reform and Conservative streams of Judaism, women and men pray together and women are allowed to read from the Torah, which Orthodox Judaism prohibits. Those streams are a minority in Israel but make up the majority of American Jews. Israel's refusal to recognize these liberal streams has long been a point of tension with American Jews.

After years of negotiations, Israel approved a plan in 2016 to officially recognize a special prayer area at the Western Wall. The \$9 million plan vowed to expand an egalitarian prayer site and make it more hospitable to prayer and religious events held by Jews who don't follow Orthodox traditions.

The deal was welcomed by Jewish American leaders and seen as a significant breakthrough in promoting religious pluralism in Israel, where the ultra-Orthodox authorities govern almost every facet of Jewish life. But then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu never implemented the plan due to objections from powerful ultra-Orthodox allies who had initially endorsed it.

He shelved the plan the following year, leading to strained relations with American Jewish leaders that continued until he left office last year. His tight relationship with President Donald Trump further unsettled the heavily Democratic-leaning Jewish community.

American Jews have long lamented that Israel should be as accepting of their religious practices as they are of their financial and political support.

The new government, led by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett — the child of American immigrants — brought hope that the plan may be revived.

As Israel's minister of diaspora affairs at the time, Bennett voted in favor of the plan when it was initially tabled and repeatedly expressed the importance he placed in the relationship with the U.S. Jewish community. That his coalition excludes any ultra-Orthodox parties only heightened the feeling that the time was ripe for the plan to move forward.

Under Bennett's leadership, contacts between U.S. liberal Jewish leaders and Israeli government officials have surged. Bennett himself met with the leaders in what was perceived as a major step in repairing ties.

But Bennett heads an unwieldy coalition of parties from across the political spectrum — ranging from nationalist parties to dovish liberal ones and even an Islamist faction — that was united behind the goal of ousting Netanyahu and very little else. While the Western Wall plan features in agreements that brought the coalition together, its leaders have generally chosen to sidestep divisive issues that might rattle its stability.

Moving ahead with the Western Wall plan could spark an outcry from ultra-Orthodox opposition parties, which in turn could exert pressure on more sympathetic elements of the coalition to oppose the move. And while the government isn't likely to fall over the Western Wall plan, a public brawl over the issue within government ranks could wear down the already delicate ties that bind the coalition.

"We need to be careful. The make-up of this government is complex," Diaspora Affairs Minister Nachman Shai told The Associated Press.

He said that Bennett had decided to hold off on the plan for now. "My bet is that it will happen in the

end but it won't happen tomorrow or the next day."

Bennett's office did not respond to a request for comment. In a statement, the Western Wall rabbi, Shmuel Rabinowitz, did not disclose his position on the agreement but said the site is "not the place to engage in political struggles."

Tensions at the Western Wall continue to flare. On Monday, dozens of women arrived to pray wearing skullcaps and prayer shawls — items reserved for men under Orthodox Judaism. In what has become a monthly ritual, they were met by young women shrieking in an attempt to drown out their prayers.

In November, thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews gathered to protest the Women of the Wall. They heeded a call by ultra-Orthodox leaders to not have the site "desecrated." Netanyahu, now in the opposition with his ultra-Orthodox allies, retweeted one such call.

Ultra-Orthodox rabbis strictly govern Jewish practices in Israel such as weddings, divorces and burials. The ultra-Orthodox religious establishment sees itself as responsible for maintaining traditions through centuries of persecution and assimilation, and it resists any inroads from liberals it often considers to be second-class Jews who ordain women and gays and are overly inclusive toward converts and interfaith marriages.

Bennett's government is taking steps to loosen the ultra-Orthodox hold. It has passed a reform in kosher certifications for restaurants and is attempting to allow conversions to Judaism outside of the ultra-Orthodox rabbinate.

The liberal streams have made strides in Israel in recent years, establishing synagogues, youth movements, schools and kindergartens. A former leader of the liberal Reform movement in Israel is now a lawmaker and Israel's secular majority has become more accepting.

But authorities have generally tended to regard them as a somewhat alien offshoot imported from North America that does not mesh with how religion is typically practiced in Israel. That helps explain why the Western Wall agreement is so important to them.

Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, said that if implemented, the agreement would open the door to other steps toward religious pluralism in Israel.

"This is an issue that won't change everything, but it will change and symbolically shifts things towards more respect or legitimacy," he said. "I hope this government will find the political will to do it."

Roethlisberger, Steelers top Browns to stay in playoff mix

By WILL GRAVES AP Sports Writer

PITTSBURGH (AP) — Ben Roethlisberger looked for the last time into the Heinz Field stands peppered with No. 7 jerseys bearing his name and tried to soak in a moment as inevitable as it was unimaginable for most of his career.

This is the end for the longtime Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback.

And rather than fight it, the player defined by his ability to fend off defenders with his left arm and make game-changing throws with his right embraced it.

Roethlisberger did a victory lap following a 26-14 win over Cleveland on Monday night that kept his team's faint playoff hopes alive. He hugged team president Art Rooney II. He unsuccessfully fought back tears. Then he grabbed the hand of his wife Ashley and their three children and walked into the tunnel and out of sight.

His on-field performance — 24 of 46 for 123 yards, with a touchdown and a pick — was remarkable only for its inefficiency. He became the first QB since at least 1950 to win a game with more than 40 attempts for fewer than 150 yards, according to STATS.

But the numbers — as has often been the case during an 18-year career that includes two Super Bowl victories — were beside the point.

Roethlisberger played. The Steelers won. And so it goes.

Pittsburgh (8-7-1) will finish at .500 or better for the 18th straight season, or every year since the Steelers selected Big Ben with the 11th overall pick in the 2004 draft.

"That's been the story of my career," he said. "Not always pretty, but we find a way."

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 39 of 65

The Steelers need a win over Baltimore next week and a loss by Indianapolis to lowly Jacksonville to make the postseason for the 12th time with Roethlisberger, a possibility he admits is slim.

Still, it exists, and that's thanks in large part to rookie Najee Harris, who ran for a career-best 188 yards and a touchdown, and linebacker T.J. Watt, who sacked Baker Mayfield four times to give him 21 1/2 on the season, one short of the NFL record set by Hall of Famer Michael Strahan in 2001.

Yet the night belonged to Roethlisberger. The "Let's Go Ben!" chants started immediately after he was introduced, replaced by "Thank You Ben!" after the 39-year-old took a knee in the final seconds to seal his 26th win over the team that bypassed the Ohio native in the draft nearly two decades ago.

"This is home, you know?" Roethlisberger said. "And I just, I know I was born in Ohio, but I live here and I'll always be here."

The only people more eager for Roethlisberger to retire than his family might be the Browns. Cleveland (7-9) — which was eliminated from postseason contention on Sunday — fell to 3-26-1 when facing Roethlisberger.

The Browns inexplicably put the game on Mayfield's tattered shoulders rather than feeding running back Nick Chubb against the NFL's worst rush defense. Chubb ran 12 times for 58 yards while Mayfield threw 37 passes, completing just 16, for 185 yards with two touchdowns and two picks.

"If anyone questions how much I want it, turn on this tape," Mayfield said. "I kept swinging. That's who I am. That's who I've always been."

Mayfield plans to have surgery on his ailing left shoulder soon, though his erratic season made his long-term outlook murky for a team where instability at the position has been the norm for decades.

Things are different in Pittsburgh.

Roethlisberger was 22 when he took over for an injured Tommy Maddox in Week 2 of his rookie season. He never let go, leading the franchise to an era of success that nearly rivaled the Super Steelers of the 1970s.

Roethlisberger finally admitted this week that "all signs" were pointing to his 18th season being his last. His tank might be running low, but it's not empty, and he showed flashes — briefly, anyway — of his "Ben being Ben" prime.

A shoulder fake here. A step up in the pocket there. The feet don't move as fast as they used to. His arm doesn't deliver with the precision of the past. The field-stretching heaves have been largely replaced by dinks and dunks designed in part to protect him behind an offensive line that isn't nearly as talented as the groups he led to the postseason with regularity.

Yet if there's been one constant during Roethlisberger's career, it's been his mastery of the Browns.

Roethlisberger's last win over Cleveland provided a small measure of revenge less than a year after he threw four interceptions in a first-round home playoff loss to the Browns last January.

That night was supposed to be the launching point for Cleveland heading into 2021. But injuries and inconsistent play from Mayfield among others will force the Browns to watch the playoffs from home for the 18th time in the last 19 years.

Not so for Pittsburgh, which heads into the finale of the NFL's first 17-game season with something to play for.

"We've got another game," Roethlisberger said. "We've got to keep fighting."

Same as it ever was.

INJURIES

Browns: Lost CB Greedy Williams in the first half to a shoulder injury and LB Sione Takitaki to a shoulder injury in the second half. CB Denzel Ward exited in the third quarter with a groin issue, further depleting a secondary already missing starting safeties Ronnie Harrison and John Johnson.

UP NEXT

Cleveland: Wraps up the season at home on Sunday against AFC North champion Cincinnati.

Pittsburgh: Looks to sweep Baltimore for the second straight season on Sunday while watching the score in Jacksonville.

More AP NFL: <https://apnews.com/hub/nfl> and <https://apnews.com/hub/pro-32> and https://twitter.com/AP_NFL

1st Cambodian American mayor in US takes office

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — A refugee who survived the Khmer Rouge's brutal rule has become the first Cambodian American mayor in the United States.

Sokhary Chau, a city councilor in Lowell, Massachusetts, was unanimously picked by his council peers to assume the legislative body's top post on Monday. He also became the city's first Asian American mayor. "God bless America, right? I was a refugee, now I'm mayor of a major city in Massachusetts," the 49-year-old, who works for the U.S. Social Security Administration, said after being officially sworn in. "I don't know if that could happen anywhere else in the world. I'm still trying to absorb it."

Chau, in his inaugural remarks, reflected on his family's perilous escape from Cambodia and the former industrial city of Lowell's deep immigrant roots.

Located on the Merrimack River near the New Hampshire state line, Lowell was an early center of America's textile industry, drawing waves of European and Latin American immigrants over generations.

Today, the city of more than 115,000 residents is nearly 25% Asian and home to the nation's second-largest Cambodian community.

"As a proud Cambodian American, I am standing on the shoulders of many immigrants who came before me to build this city," Chau said Monday before a crowd that included his wife and two teenage sons.

Chau recounted how his father, a captain in the Cambodian army, was executed by the communist Khmer Rouge in 1975 during the country's civil war.

He said his mother, who died last year, managed to keep her seven children alive for four years, surviving "landmines, jungles, hunger, sickness and uncertainty" to deliver them safely to the U.S.

Chau said America may not have "streets paved with gold" as his family imagined while living in refugee camps, but it's a land where democracy is possible because of "systems of checks and balances" and principles like fairness, equality and transparency.

In an interview later, Chau said he was around 9 years old when his family initially settled in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with the help of the Catholic Church — an experience that prompted the family to convert to Christianity.

They made their way to Lowell's growing Cambodian community in the mid-1980s, where some of his older siblings immediately set to work in local factories.

Chau, however, continued his studies and eventually earned a scholarship to Phillips Academy, a exclusive boarding school in nearby Andover. He went on to Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he studied economics and political science, also on a scholarship.

Before running for office, Chau said he worked mostly in financial services, including running a mortgage lending company in Lowell with his wife before the housing market crashed in the early 2000s.

Chau's election follows the ascendance of new Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, whose parents immigrated to the U.S. from Taiwan. She was sworn in last November as Boston's first woman and first person of color elected to the post.

Chau is also among the growing list of Cambodian American officeholders in Massachusetts: at least two other city councilors, a school committee member and two state lawmakers, all from Lowell, according to Vannak Theng, president of the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association of Greater Lowell.

But while Cambodian Americans served on local boards and state legislatures nationwide, none were elected mayor, according to the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies, a Washington nonprofit that helps Asian Pacific Americans pursue public office and maintains a listing of current officeholders.

In fact, Long Beach, California, home to the nation's largest Cambodian community, only elected its first Cambodian American city councilor in 2020, the organization noted.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 41 of 65

Chau's election also comes on the heels of a federal court lawsuit that argued Lowell's election process violated the voting rights of minority residents, who comprise nearly 50% of its population.

A recent settlement in the case prompted the city to change its election process, starting with the 2021 elections. The result was the city's most diverse class of officeholders, said Oren Sellstrom, litigation director at Lawyers for Civil Rights, a Boston group that brought the 2017 suit.

"Just four years ago, the city's elected officials were all white and largely unresponsive to the needs of the city's communities of color," Sellstrom said. "This historic change in the city's power structure would never have been possible under the old electoral system."

To be sure, the mayoral office in Lowell is largely ceremonial.

The city, about 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Boston, is run by a city manager picked by the council. The mayor is effectively the council president, leading its meetings and also serving as chair of the city's school committee.

Still, Chau acknowledged his election's significance to the wider Cambodian diaspora, calling on others to step up in their communities.

"We can no longer be just victims," he said as he closed his inaugural remarks. "It is our time now to be leaders and to succeed."

Why are so many vaccinated people getting COVID-19 lately?

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

Why are so many vaccinated people getting COVID-19 lately?

A couple of factors are at play, starting with the emergence of the highly contagious omicron variant. Omicron is more likely to infect people, even if it doesn't make them very sick, and its surge coincided with the holiday travel season in many places.

People might mistakenly think the COVID-19 vaccines will completely block infection, but the shots are mainly designed to prevent severe illness, says Louis Mansky, a virus researcher at the University of Minnesota.

And the vaccines are still doing their job on that front, particularly for people who've gotten boosters.

Two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines or one dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine still offer strong protection against serious illness from omicron. While those initial doses aren't very good at blocking omicron infection, boosters — particularly with the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines — rev up levels of the antibodies to help fend off infection.

Omicron appears to replicate much more efficiently than previous variants. And if infected people have high virus loads, there's a greater likelihood they'll pass it on to others, especially the unvaccinated. Vaccinated people who get the virus are more likely to have mild symptoms, if any, since the shots trigger multiple defenses in your immune system, making it much more difficult for omicron to slip past them all.

Advice for staying safe hasn't changed. Doctors say to wear masks indoors, avoid crowds and get vaccinated and boosted. Even though the shots won't always keep you from catching the virus, they'll make it much more likely you stay alive and out of the hospital.

The AP is answering your questions about the coronavirus in this series. Submit them at: FactCheck@AP.org. Read more here:

Do at-home COVID-19 tests detect the omicron variant?

How can I protect myself from the new omicron variant?

Can your pet get COVID-19?

Schumer: Senate to vote on filibuster change on voting bill

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Days before the anniversary of the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer announced the Senate will vote soon on easing filibuster rules in an effort to advance

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 42 of 65

stalled voting legislation that Democrats say is needed to protect America's democracy.

In a letter Monday to colleagues, Schumer, D-N.Y., said the Senate "must evolve" and will "debate and consider" the rule changes by Jan. 17, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, as the Democrats seek to overcome Republican opposition to their elections law package.

"Let me be clear: January 6th was a symptom of a broader illness — an effort to delegitimize our election process," Schumer wrote, "and the Senate must advance systemic democracy reforms to repair our republic or else the events of that day will not be an aberration — they will be the new norm."

The election and voting rights package has been stalled in the evenly split 50-50 Senate, blocked by a Republican-led filibuster with Democrats unable to mount the 60 votes needed to advance it toward passage.

So far Democrats have been unable to agree among themselves over potential changes to the Senate rules to reduce the 60-vote hurdle, despite months of private negotiations.

Two holdout Democrats, Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, have tried to warn their party off changes to the Senate rules, arguing that if and when Republicans take majority control of the chamber they can then use the lower voting threshold to advance bills Democrats strongly oppose.

President Joe Biden has waded only cautiously into the debate — a former longtime senator who largely stands by existing rules but is also under enormous political pressure to break the logjam on the voting legislation.

Voting rights advocates warn that Republican-led states are passing restrictive legislation and trying to install election officials loyal to the former President, Donald Trump, in ways that could subvert future elections.

Trump urged his followers last Jan. 6 to "fight like hell" for his presidency, and a mob stormed the Capitol trying to stop Congress from certifying the state election tallies for Biden. It was the worst domestic attack on a seat of government in U.S. history.

How the Senate filibuster rules would be changed remains under discussion.

It seems certain that a full-scale end of the filibuster is out of reach for Democrats. Changing the rules would need all 50 votes, and Manchin and Sinema have made it clear they are unwilling to go that far.

Senators are wary of a sweeping overhaul after seeing the fallout that came from Democrats ending the filibuster for some judicial and executive branch nominees. Once Republicans took power, Sen. Mitch McConnell, the GOP leader, did away with the filibuster for Supreme Court nominations — ushering three Trump-picked conservative justices to the high court.

But despite their reluctance on major filibuster changes, Manchin and Sinema both support the election legislation. In fact, Manchin helped craft the latest package in an unsuccessful effort to win Republican support. Now the two Democrats' colleagues are working on ways to change the filibuster so at least this legislation could pass.

Private talks with senators have been underway for weeks and continued during the holiday break.

Ideas include forcing senators to hold the floor, old-fashioned style, rather than simply raise their filibuster objections — a scene that would have echoes of the 1950s and 1960s when Southern segregationists filibustered civil rights legislation.

Other ideas are also being considered, and some Democrats have noted that Sinema has mentioned she is open to hearing the arguments as part of a full debate.

Republicans are so worried Democrats will end the filibuster that McConnell has taken other actions to try to keep Manchin and Sinema close so they don't join the rest of their party in making any drastic changes.

One Republican, Sen. Mike Lee of Utah, argued on Monday that ending the filibuster would turn the Senate into a "Lord of the Flies"-style institution where majority rules, no matter what.

"It is absurd and dangerous to the institution itself," said Lee in a statement. He said Schumer and his "disastrous plan" must be stopped.

Bucs coach: Antonio Brown didn't claim injury before walkoff

By FRED GOODALL AP Sports Writer

TAMPA, Fla. (AP) — Antonio Brown's latest messy departure from an NFL team, the Buccaneers, was not about an injury, coach Bruce Arians said Monday.

Yes, the Buccaneers are moving on from Brown, whose NFL career is on hold yet again after another in a series of incidents, including two women accusing him of sexual assault in 2019.

But Arians dispelled the notion that Brown stormed off the field Sunday — tossing some of his gear into the stands and waving to fans at the Jets' MetLife Stadium — after refusing to go back in because of an ankle injury that had sidelined him for several weeks.

Twice, Arians was asked about Brown claiming he was hurt. Both times, the coach answered "No," that Brown didn't tell him he was injured.

"It's pretty obvious what happened. He left the field and that was it," Arians said, declining to elaborate on an exchange the coach said he had with the receiver on the sideline.

Pressed for details on what was said and whether Brown claimed he was too injured to play, Arians replied: "We had a conversation and he left the field."

Asked what specifically was said that might move Brown to react the way he did, the coach added: "You have to ask him, brother. I don't have a clue."

"I just hope the best for him," Arians said, while shedding little light on what led to Brown taking off his jersey, shoulder pads, undershirt and gloves before walking off during the third quarter of Sunday's 28-24 Tampa Bay victory.

Arians added he has no regrets about giving the often-troubled receiver an opportunity to play with Tom Brady and revive a career derailed by on- and off-the-field issues — even though it ended in such a bizarre fashion. Tampa Bay was Brown's third team since his last full season in the NFL with the Pittsburgh Steelers in 2018.

The 33-year-old Brown also had messy departures from Oakland and New England — released before ever playing a game for the Raiders and then suiting up just once during a brief stay with the Brady-led Patriots in 2019.

"I wish him well. I hope if he needs help, get some," said Arians, who was Pittsburgh's offensive coordinator when the Steelers drafted Brown in the sixth round in 2010. "It's very hard because I do care about him."

Brown remained in the New York area, sitting courtside Monday night at the Brooklyn Nets' loss to the Memphis Grizzlies.

Brown hadn't played in the NFL in more than 13 months when he signed with the Bucs in October 2020 as he neared the end of an eight-game suspension for multiple violations of the NFL's personal conduct policy. At the time, Brown was also facing a civil lawsuit filed in September 2019 by a female personal trainer who accused him of sexually assaulting her on three occasions, including rape.

"I took a lot of time off from the game to re-evaluate myself, to look within, to get a better perspective of myself and work on myself within and without," Brown said in November 2020.

Brady welcomed Tampa Bay's decision to give Brown a chance and allowed the four-time All Pro to stay with him in a home the quarterback was renting from baseball Hall of Famer Derek Jeter.

"I won't say I'm a different person, but I'm a better person," Brown said then. "Learning a lot about myself, working on myself for a year and a half, I think I'm a better person."

Several members of Arians' staff in Tampa Bay, including offensive coordinator Byron Leftwich, also worked with Brown early in the receiver's career. Brown said he felt those relationships would help him make the most of the opportunity.

For a while, it worked.

Brown had 45 receptions for 483 yards and four TDs over the final eight games of last season. He also contributed during the playoffs and caught a TD pass in the Bucs' Super Bowl win over Kansas City.

He signed another one-year deal last May and was off to a strong start when he was sidelined with the

ankle injury at Philadelphia in mid-October.

Brown returned to the lineup two weeks ago after serving a three-game suspension for misrepresenting his COVID-19 vaccination status with a fake card, and had 10 catches for 101 yards in a win over Carolina.

He had three reception for 26 yards against the Jets, finishing the season with 42 catches for 545 yards and four TDs.

An impressive streak of six consecutive seasons with at least 100 catches and 1,000 yards receiving ended when Brown's erratic behavior on and off the field led Pittsburgh to trade him to Oakland in March 2019.

A tumultuous short stay with the Raiders ended with Brown demanding and being granted his release during training camp. By that time, the Raiders had voided guaranteed money in Brown's contract after a summer with the team began with Brown, among other things, missing a number of practices because of frost-bitten feet attributed to not wearing proper footwear during a cryotherapy session.

He also tangled with the NFL and threatened to retire if forced to wear a new helmet. He later was fined by the Raiders for what the team said were unexcused absences during camp.

Brown also had an ugly departure from New England after catching four passes for 56 yards and a touchdown in his only game with the Patriots, which released him after the ex-trainer accused him of sexual assault.

Over 12 NFL seasons, Brown has 928 receptions for 12,291 yards and 83 touchdowns. He's caught a pass in his last 144 games, the longest active streak in the league.

More AP NFL: <https://apnews.com/hub/nfl> and <https://apnews.com/hub/pro-32> and https://twitter.com/AP_NFL

Omicron upends return to US schools and workplaces

By JENNIFER PELTZ, GRETCHEN EHLKE and TERRY TANG Associated Press

Some school systems around the U.S. extended their holiday break Monday or switched back to online instruction because of the explosion in COVID-19 cases, while others pressed ahead with in-person classes amid a seemingly growing sense that Americans will have to learn to co-exist with the virus.

Caught between pleas from teachers fearful of infection and parents who want their children in class, school districts in cities such as New York, Milwaukee, Chicago, Detroit and beyond found themselves in a difficult position midway through the academic year because of the super-contagious omicron variant.

New York City, home of the nation's largest school system, reopened classrooms to roughly 1 million students with a stockpile of take-home COVID-19 test kits and plans to double the number of random tests done in schools.

"We are going to keep our schools open and ensure that our children are in a safe environment," newly sworn-in Mayor Eric Adams said.

New Yorker Trisha White said that she feels the risk is the same for her 9-year-old son in or out of school and that being with classmates is far better for him than remote learning.

"He could get the virus outside of school," she said as she dropped the boy off. "So what can you do? You know, I wouldn't blame the school system. They're trying their best."

While the teachers union had asked the mayor to postpone in-person learning for a week, city officials have long said that mask requirements, testing and other safety measures mean that children are safe in school. The city also has a vaccination mandate for employees.

New cases of COVID-19 in the city shot up from a daily average of about 17,000 in the week before the holidays to nearly 37,000 last week.

Across the U.S., new COVID-19 cases have tripled in the past two weeks to over 400,000 a day, the highest level on record, amid a rush by many Americans to get tested.

The high infection rates and resulting worker shortages are putting a heavy burden on employers large and small. Thousands of airline flights have been canceled in recent days, and many businesses have shelved return-to-work plans.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 45 of 65

Weekend garbage collection was delayed in New Orleans, and jury trials in several Colorado counties were suspended. Some libraries on New York's Long Island and a ski resort in New Hampshire had to close. A restaurant owner in Atlanta has spent \$700 on rapid test kits and resorted to testing workers in the parking lot to make sure he had enough help to staff a recent dinner shift.

Dawn Crawley, CEO of House Cleaning Heroes, a cleaning service based in Herndon, Virginia, said she had to cancel four of 20 cleaning jobs for Tuesday because four employees were sick — three with COVID-19. "The fear is it will run through the team" as well as customers, she said.

Policymakers and health authorities have been mindful of the toll on the economy and the education system.

Public health experts have said that eradicating the virus is unlikely and that the world will instead have to find a way to keep COVID-19 down to an acceptable level, the way it does with the flu.

Last week, after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cut the recommended COVID-19 isolation period from 10 days to five, CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said: "We want to make sure there is a mechanism by which we can safely continue to keep society functioning while following the science."

In another development Monday that could have a bearing on the ability of schools to stay open, the Food and Drug Administration gave its OK for Pfizer booster shots for children as young as 12. Boosters already are recommended for everyone 16 and older.

Elsewhere around the country, the Los Angeles Unified School District announced Monday that schools will now reopen Jan. 11 because of omicron's rise. Furthermore, the district's 600,000 students and roughly 73,000 employees will have to show a negative COVID-19 test result to enter campus. The district will have a testing site as well as take-home test kits available.

Syracuse, New York, canceled school Monday because of the increasing number of infections and a lack of substitute teachers.

In Wisconsin, the 75,000-student Milwaukee school system is going back to virtual instruction Tuesday because of rising cases among staff members. The district said it is aiming to return to in-person classes Jan. 10.

The Madison, Wisconsin, district also announced a shift to virtual learning, beginning Thursday.

Detroit School Superintendent Nikolai Vitti told parents there will be no in-person or online learning through Wednesday because of a high rate of infection among employees that could lead to extensive spread of COVID-19 and "excessive staff shortages."

The roughly 350,000 students in the Chicago school system returned, but a dispute between district leaders and the teachers union over safety measures could disrupt classes later this week. The union said it may vote Tuesday for remote teaching in the nation's third-largest district.

The Peoria, Illinois, district extended winter break by a week.

Schools in Davenport, Iowa, surprised parents early Monday by announcing the cancellation of all classes for the day because of a shortage of bus drivers that was blamed at least in part on COVID-19.

Minnesota's educators braced for a spike in cases as classrooms reopened as scheduled.

"What I've heard from superintendents is that they are nervous about omicron," said Bob Indihar, executive director of the Minnesota Rural Education Association. "It seems to be the new normal that changes are going to happen and quarantines and people being out are just part of the process now. Districts are kind of taking it in stride."

The president of the National Parents Union, a network of parent organizations, called the sudden switch back to virtual learning "an abomination."

"Once again, parents are left scrambling at the last minute and, worse, far too many children are being deprived of an in-person learning experience, which is critical for their academic and social-emotional development," Keri Rodrigues said in a statement.

Peltz reported from New York. Ehlke reported from Milwaukee. Tang reported from San Jose, California. Associated Press writers Margery Beck in Omaha, Nebraska; Anne D'Innocenzio in New York; Michael Hill

in Albany, New York; Kevin McGill in New Orleans; Rick Callahan in Indianapolis; Sophia Tareen in Chicago; Jennifer Sinco Kelleher in Honolulu; and Corey Williams in Detroit contributed to this report.

— This story corrects that garbage collection in New Orleans has been delayed, not suspended.

Trump, Ivanka, Don Jr. subpoenaed in New York AG's probe

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The New York attorney general's office confirmed Monday that it has subpoenaed former President Donald Trump and his two eldest children, Ivanka and Donald Trump Jr., demanding their testimony in an investigation into the family's business practices.

Attorney General Letitia James' office said in a court filing that it recently issued subpoenas seeking testimony and documents from the Trumps as part of a yearslong civil probe involving matters including "the valuation of properties owned or controlled" by Trump and his company.

Monday's filing, made public as James went to court in a bid to enforce the subpoena, was the first time that investigators publicly disclosed that they are also seeking information from Ivanka and Donald Trump Jr., both trusted allies of their father who've been executives in his family's Trump Organization.

Last month, it was reported that James' office had requested Trump sit for a deposition.

Lawyers for the Trumps filed court papers Monday evening seeking to block the subpoenas, calling them "an unprecedented and unconstitutional maneuver" and accusing James of attempting to obtain testimony that could then be used against the Trumps in a parallel criminal investigation being overseen by Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg.

James "seeks to circumvent the entire grand jury process" and nullify the Trumps' rights by forcing them to testify without the immunity that's guaranteed under state law if they were subpoenaed to testify in front of the grand jury in the criminal probe, the Trumps' lawyers wrote.

James, a Democrat, has spent more than two years looking at whether the Trump Organization misled banks or tax officials about the value of assets — inflating them to gain favorable loan terms or minimizing them to reap tax savings.

"Despite their names, they must play by the same rules as everyone else. These delay tactics will not stop us from following the facts or the law, which is why we will be asking the court to compel Donald Trump, Donald Trump Jr., and Ivanka Trump to testify with our office under oath," James said in a statement after the Trumps' move to block the subpoenas.

The dispute over the subpoenas had played out in secret until Monday, when a judge who had handled other subpoena fights arising from the Trump investigation agreed to entertain arguments over the new subpoenas. The court filing from James' office was then posted to the public court docket.

The judge, Arthur Engoron, previously sided with James on other matters relating to the probe, including making another Trump son, Trump Organization executive Eric Trump, testify after his lawyers abruptly canceled a scheduled deposition.

Last month, Trump sued James in federal court, seeking to put an end to her investigation. Trump, in the lawsuit, claimed that the attorney general had violated the Republican's constitutional rights in a "thinly-veiled effort to publicly malign Trump and his associates."

In the past, the Republican ex-president has decried James' investigation as part of a "witch hunt" along with a parallel criminal probe being run by the Manhattan district attorney's office.

Although James' civil investigation is separate from the criminal investigation, her office has been involved in both, dispatching several lawyers to work side-by-side with prosecutors from the Manhattan D.A.'s office.

Last year, then-District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr. gained access to the longtime real estate mogul's tax records after a multiyear fight that twice went to the U.S. Supreme Court. He also brought tax fraud charges in July against the Trump Organization and its longtime CFO Allen Weisselberg.

Before he left office last week, Vance convened a new grand jury to hear evidence in the investigation, but left the decision on additional charges to his successor, Bragg. The new district attorney has said he'll be directly involved in the Trump matter while also retaining the two veteran prosecutors who led

the case under Vance.

Weisselberg pleaded not guilty to charges alleging he and the company evaded taxes on lucrative fringe benefits paid to executives.

Trump has been subpoenaed before, testifying in October in a deposition for a lawsuit brought by protesters who say his security team roughed them up early in his presidential campaign in 2015. Some presidents were subject to subpoena while in office, including Richard Nixon in 1974 for his infamous Watergate recordings.

Still, it's exceedingly rare for law enforcement agencies to issue a civil subpoena for testimony from a person who is also the subject of a related criminal investigation.

That's partly because the person under criminal investigation could simply cite their Fifth Amendment right to remain silent. It is unlikely that Trump's lawyers would allow him to be deposed unless they were sure his testimony couldn't be used against him in a criminal case.

Both investigations are at least partly related to allegations made in news reports and by Trump's former personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, that Trump had a history of misrepresenting the value of assets.

James' office issued subpoenas to local governments as part of the civil probe for records pertaining to the estate, Seven Springs, and a tax benefit Trump received for placing land into a conservation trust. Vance later issued subpoenas seeking many of the same records.

James' office has also been looking at similar issues relating to a Trump office building in New York City, a hotel in Chicago and a golf course near Los Angeles.

Follow Michael Sisak on Twitter at twitter.com/mikesisak

Thousands of flights canceled, delayed at start of workweek

By DAVID KOENIG and MATT O'BRIEN Associated Press

A winter storm that hit the mid-Atlantic on Monday combined with pandemic-caused shortages of airline workers to push flight cancellations to a holiday-season high, creating more frustration for travelers just trying to get home.

More than 3,000 U.S. flights and about 4,800 worldwide were canceled by late afternoon Monday on the East Coast, according to tracking service FlightAware. Another 13,000 flights were delayed, including more than 6,000 in the U.S.

Travelers could take hope from an improving weather forecast: Airlines had canceled fewer than 400 U.S. flights scheduled for Tuesday.

First, however, they had to contend with a winter storm that dumped several inches of snow on the District of Columbia, northern Virginia and central Maryland before quitting Monday afternoon.

The cancellations and delays added to the despair felt over the weekend by holiday travelers trying to get home.

Jason Pevitt was stuck at the Atlanta airport for eight hours — and counting — by Monday evening, trying to get home to Virginia after spending the holidays with his family in Tampa, Florida. He was growing increasingly anxious about the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the terminal.

American Airlines canceled Pevitt's original flight to Washington's Reagan National Airport long before a winter storm system hit the Washington area Monday. He rebooked on Delta Air Lines but got hit with more cancellations after a stopover in Atlanta — this time clearly due to the storm.

"There is just never a reason given for anything. That's my biggest issue," said the 28-year-old, who works for an accounting company.

Many other travelers tweeted at the airlines to complain about last-minute cancellations and long delays, lost bags and hourslong hold times to reach anybody in customer service. Some said they slept in airports.

The toll of grounded flights in the U.S. was in the few hundreds per day the week before Christmas, then soared past 1,000 a day. Airlines blamed crew shortages on the spreading virus, including the highly transmissible omicron variant — new cases tripled over the past two weeks, according to figures from

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 48 of 65

Johns Hopkins University.

Airlines and passengers lucked out for several days with mostly favorable weather, but that changed when a winter storm hit the Midwest on Saturday and caused cancellations to spike again to new holiday-season highs.

Over the weekend, about 5,400 U.S. flights were canceled — nearly 12% of all scheduled flights — and more than 9,000 worldwide, according to FlightAware. By Monday afternoon, about 18,000 U.S. flights had been canceled since Christmas Eve.

Many of the cancellations were made hours or even a day in advance. Airlines believe they have a better chance to keep lighter schedules on track, and it saves passengers from making needless trips to the airport.

More than three-quarters of Monday's scheduled flights at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport and nearly half of those at nearby Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport were scrubbed, according to FlightAware. Both airports received more than six inches of snow.

Southwest Airlines had canceled about 600 flights, or 17% of Monday's schedule, by midday. Spokesman Brad Hawkins said storms over the weekend and on Monday affected operations at some of its biggest airports, including Chicago, Denver and Baltimore, and left planes and crews out of position.

United Airlines said the nationwide COVID-19 spike caused by the omicron variant has affected its flight crews, resulting in canceled flights. Delta cited winter weather and omicron, but said it expected fewer than half as many cancellations Tuesday and Wednesday. American cited the storm in the Washington area, and said the number of employees calling in sick because of COVID-19 was similar to the past few days, although it declined to give figures.

SkyWest, a regional carrier that operates flights under the names United Express, American Eagle and Delta Connection, grounded more than 350 flights Monday after scrubbing 500 on Sunday.

Thousands of miles from the snow storms, Hawaiian Airlines said it had to cancel several flights between islands and across the Pacific due to staffing shortages.

Airlines are paying temporary bonuses to encourage pilots and flight attendants to pick up flights left empty by co-workers with COVID-19. United will pay pilots triple their usual wages for picking up open flights through most of January. Spirit Airlines reached a deal with the union to pay flight attendants double through Tuesday.

Judge orders charges dropped against Epstein jail guards

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A judge on Monday ordered charges dropped against two Bureau of Prisons guards who admitted falsifying records after Jeffrey Epstein took his own life in jail over two years ago.

The guards — Tova Noel and Michael Thomas — had agreed to deferred prosecution deals last May that required them to admit their guilt with the understanding that charges in a federal indictment would be dismissed if they followed the rules of their agreement for six months. They also were required to do 100 hours of community service.

Prosecutors last week requested the charges be dropped, and Judge Analisa Torres ordered the dismissal Monday.

Epstein, 66, was awaiting a sex trafficking trial when he took his life in his cell at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in August 2019.

The death, a major embarrassment to the Bureau of Prisons, touched off intense scrutiny of operations at the federal jail adjacent to two large federal courthouses in lower Manhattan. It is currently closed.

In court papers, prosecutors said Noel and Thomas were at their desks just 15 feet (4.5 meters) from Epstein's cell as they shopped online for furniture and motorcycles and failed to make required rounds every 30 minutes. The indictment alleged that both appeared to have fallen asleep for one two-hour stretch.

Their lawyers blamed their sleepiness on staff shortages that caused them to work excessive overtime.

In a release, attorney Jason Foy said that Noel, his client, had provided the government with "truthful insight into the toxic culture, subpar training, staffing shortages, and dysfunctional management of the

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 49 of 65

now closed Metropolitan Correctional Center. In exchange for Ms. Noel's cooperation, all charges against her were dismissed."

He added: "The short comings and mistakes made by Ms. Noel were a result of inexperience, lack of proper and sufficient training, and being put in a position to fail by the leadership of MCC and the Bureau of Prisons."

Foy said Noel now faces administrative proceedings with the Bureau of Prisons.

A lawyer for Michael Thomas did not immediately comment.

Epstein's death sparked widespread anger that he wouldn't have to answer for the allegations. Last week, his former girlfriend, Ghislaine Maxwell, was convicted in Manhattan federal court of sex trafficking and conspiracy charges after a monthlong trial.

Schumer: Senate to vote on filibuster change on voting bill

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Days before the anniversary of the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer announced the Senate will vote soon on easing filibuster rules in an effort to advance stalled voting legislation that Democrats say is needed to protect America's democracy.

In a letter Monday to colleagues, Schumer, D-N.Y., said the Senate "must evolve" and will "debate and consider" the rule changes by Jan. 17, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, as the Democrats seek to overcome Republican opposition to their elections law package.

"Let me be clear: January 6th was a symptom of a broader illness — an effort to delegitimize our election process," Schumer wrote, "and the Senate must advance systemic democracy reforms to repair our republic or else the events of that day will not be an aberration — they will be the new norm."

The election and voting rights package has been stalled in the evenly split 50-50 Senate, blocked by a Republican-led filibuster with Democrats unable to mount the 60 votes needed to advance it toward passage.

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President Joe Biden has waded only cautiously into the debate — a former longtime senator who largely stands by existing rules but is also under enormous political pressure to break the logjam on the voting legislation.

Voting rights advocates warn that Republican-led states are passing restrictive legislation and trying to install election officials loyal to the former President, Donald Trump, in ways that could subvert future elections.

Trump urged his followers last Jan. 6 to "fight like hell" for his presidency, and a mob stormed the Capitol trying to stop Congress from certifying the state election tallies for Biden. It was the worst domestic attack on a seat of government in U.S. history.

How the Senate filibuster rules would be changed remains under discussion.

It seems certain that a full-scale end of the filibuster is out of reach for Democrats. Changing the rules would need all 50 votes, and Manchin and Sinema have made it clear they are unwilling to go that far.

Senators are wary of a sweeping overhaul after seeing the fallout that came from Democrats ending the filibuster for some judicial and executive branch nominees. Once Republicans took power, Sen. Mitch McConnell, the GOP leader, did away with the filibuster for Supreme Court nominations — ushering three Trump-picked conservative justices to the high court.

But despite their reluctance on major filibuster changes, Manchin and Sinema both support the election legislation. In fact, Manchin helped craft the latest package in an unsuccessful effort to win Republican

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 50 of 65

support. Now the two Democrats' colleagues are working on ways to change the filibuster so at least this legislation could pass.

Private talks with senators have been underway for weeks and continued during the holiday break.

Ideas include forcing senators to hold the floor, old-fashioned style, rather than simply raise their filibuster objections — a scene that would have echoes of the 1950s and 1960s when Southern segregationists filibustered civil rights legislation.

Other ideas are also being considered, and some Democrats have noted that Sinema has mentioned she is open to hearing the arguments as part of a full debate.

Republicans are so worried Democrats will end the filibuster that McConnell has taken other actions to try to keep Manchin and Sinema close so they don't join the rest of their party in making any drastic changes.

One Republican, Sen. Mike Lee of Utah, argued on Monday that ending the filibuster would turn the Senate into a "Lord of the Flies"-style institution where majority rules, no matter what.

"It is absurd and dangerous to the institution itself," said Lee in a statement. He said Schumer and his "disastrous plan" must be stopped.

Brazil's Bolsonaro hospitalized with intestinal obstruction

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro was taken to a Sao Paulo hospital for tests early Monday after experiencing abdominal discomfort, the government said in a statement.

The hospital where he was admitted, Vila Nova Star, said in a morning statement the president had an intestinal obstruction and was in stable condition. In the evening, the hospital said in a separate statement that Bolsonaro's condition had improved, though there was still no definitive evaluation of whether he will require surgery.

Bolsonaro, 66, has experienced a series of medical issues and underwent several surgeries since he was stabbed in the abdomen on the campaign trail in 2018. At the time, the president was operated on by Dr. Antônio Luiz Macedo, whose team is overseeing his treatment in Sao Paulo.

Macedo was on vacation and expected to return to Sao Paulo, Bolsonaro wrote on Twitter, along with a photo of himself laying on a hospital bed and giving a thumbs up. He had previously been on vacation in southern Brazil.

The president was admitted to hospital in July for another intestinal obstruction, following days in which he appeared to struggle with speaking at times and said he suffered from hiccups that could go uninterrupted for days. At the time, he didn't require surgery to recover.

\$29,000 for an average used car? Would-be buyers are aghast

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — A couple of months ago, a woman paid a visit to Jeff Schrier's used car lot in Omaha, Nebraska. She was on a tight budget, she said, and was desperate for a vehicle to commute to work.

She was shown three cars priced at her limit, roughly \$7,500. Schrier said the woman was stunned.

"That's what I get for \$7,500?" he recalled her saying. The vehicles had far more age or mileage on them than she had expected for something to replace a car that had been totaled in a crash.

The woman eventually settled on a 2013 Toyota Scion with a whopping 160,000 miles on it. Schrier isn't sure he made any profit on the deal. "We just helped her out," he said.

As prices for used vehicles blow past any seemingly rational level, it is the kind of scenario playing out at many auto dealerships across the country. Prices have soared so high, so fast, that buyers are being increasingly priced out of the market.

Consider that the average price of a used vehicle in the United States in November, according to Edmunds.com, was \$29,011 — a dizzying 39% more than just 12 months earlier. And for the first time that anyone can recall, more than half of America's households have less income than is considered necessary to buy the average-priced used vehicle.

The days when just about anyone with a steady income could wander onto an auto lot and snag a reli-

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 51 of 65

able late-model car or buy their kid's first vehicle for a few thousand dollars have essentially vanished.

"I've never seen anything remotely close to this — it's craziness," said Schrier, who has been selling autos for 35 years. "It's quite frustrating for so many people right now."

When the government reported that consumer inflation rocketed 6.8% in the 12 months that ended in November — the sharpest jump in nearly 40 years — the biggest factor, apart from energy, was used vehicles. And while the rate of increase is slowing, most experts say the inflated vehicle prices aren't likely to ease for the foreseeable future.

The blame can be traced directly to the pandemic's eruption in March of last year. Auto plants suspended production to try to slow the virus' spread. As sales of new vehicles sank, fewer people traded in used cars and trucks. At the same time, demand for laptops and monitors from people stuck at home led semiconductor makers to shift production from autos, which depend on such chips, to consumer electronics.

When a swifter-than-expected economic rebound boosted demand for vehicles, auto plants tried to restore full production. But chip makers couldn't respond fast enough. And rental car companies and other fleet buyers, unable to acquire new vehicles, stopped off-loading older ones, thereby compounding the shortage of used vehicles.

Bleak as the market is for used-car buyers, the computer chip shortage has also driven new-vehicle prices higher. The average new vehicle, Edmunds.com says, is edging toward \$46,000.

Even so, prices of used cars are likely to edge closer to new ones. Since the pandemic started, used vehicle prices have jumped 42% — more than double the increase for new ones. Last month, the average used vehicle price was 63% of the average new vehicle cost. Before the pandemic, it was 54%.

At this point, Schrier has to tell lower-income buyers that he has very few used vehicles to sell them.

"What used to be a \$5,000 car," he said, "is now \$8,000. What used to be \$8,000 is now \$11,000 or \$12,000."

Including taxes, fees, a 10% down payment, and an interest rate of around 7.5%, the average used vehicle now costs \$520 a month, even when financed for the average of nearly six years, Edmunds calculated.

Ivan Drury, a senior manager at Edmunds, said that while he doesn't track used vehicle prices relative to household income, he thinks November marked a record "in the worst way possible for affordability."

Monthly payments for the average used vehicle, he noted, were \$413 two years ago, \$382 five years ago and \$365 a decade ago. The November average payment of \$500-plus for a used vehicle, Drury said, is about the average that was needed five years ago for a brand-new vehicle.

Used vehicle prices are so high that Karl Hogan of Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh, was able last month to quickly sell his 2007 Toyota Tacoma small pickup truck, with more than 170,000 miles on it. Even with the vehicle's age and mileage, a man from Ohio forked over \$6,500 for it.

Hogan didn't have to budge from the asking price. When some would-be buyers offered him less money, he told them: "I've got 12 other guys behind you."

A week before the sale, when he bought his new Tacoma, Hogan had been on the other side of the equation. The dealer wouldn't budge from his \$38,000 sticker price.

"If I didn't take it," Hogan said, "there were three people waiting. I couldn't get any off, but I wanted a new truck."

David Paris, a senior manager at J.D. Power, noted that used vehicle prices are directly tied to the cost of new ones. Though some automakers report that the computer chip supply is gradually improving, prices paid by dealers at used vehicle auctions kept rising through November, Paris said.

"We're not seeing any softening in prices, which is extremely rare for this time of the year," he said.

New vehicle dealers have about 1 million vehicles available nationally — scarcely one-third of the normal supply, Paris said. And the vast majority have already been sold.

Given pent-up demand from consumers, prices for new vehicles are expected to remain historically high until the supply returns to around 2 million or 2.5 million and automakers resume discounting, which could take well into 2023. Once new vehicle prices do ease, the pressure on used-vehicle prices would eventually follow.

Yet even after that, the availability of vehicles will be tight because traditional sources of used vehicles — autos turned in from leases and trade-ins or sold by rental companies — have essentially dried up.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 52 of 65

For the past decade, cars returning from two- and three-year leases were a leading source of almost-new used vehicles. But that was when more than one-third of U.S. new vehicle sales were leases, a figure now down to 22%, said Edmunds' Drury. Because there aren't many new autos, people with expiring leases are often buying those cars once their leases end.

Rental companies, another key source of late-model used cars, can't buy new ones now and are holding the ones they have. Some rental companies are even buying used vehicles. Given all those factors, Paris expects the shortage of used cars to worsen through 2024.

Among the few consumers who stand to benefit are those who want to sell a used car and don't necessarily need to replace it. The average trade-in value in October, Paris said, was \$9,000 — twice what it was a year earlier.

But for people who have no vehicles to trade in and only modest incomes, the options are few to none. J.D. Power's Paris says that if they can afford it, buyers should consider a new vehicle. He recently managed to get a couple thousand dollars whacked off the sticker price on a new Ram pickup, though he had to travel from the Washington, D.C., area to Philadelphia to reach a willing dealer he had located by searching internet forums.

"If you look hard enough and are willing to wait and travel," he said, "you can find deals across most brands."

NASA's new space telescope 'hunky-dory' after problems fixed

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — NASA's new space telescope is on the verge of completing the riskiest part of its mission — unfolding and tightening a huge sunshade — after ground controllers fixed a pair of problems, officials said Monday.

The tennis court-size sunshield on the James Webb Space Telescope is now fully open and in the process of being stretched tight. The operation should be complete by Wednesday.

The \$10 billion telescope — the largest and most powerful astronomical observatory ever launched — rocketed away Christmas Day from French Guiana. Its sunshield and primary mirror had to be folded to fit into the European Ariane rocket.

The sunshield is vital for keeping Webb's infrared-sensing instruments at subzero temperatures, as they scan the universe for the first stars and galaxies, and examine the atmospheres of alien worlds for possible signs of life.

Getting the sunshield extended last Friday "was really a huge achievement for us," said project manager Bill Ochs. All 107 release pins opened properly.

But there have been a few obstacles.

Flight controllers in Maryland had to reset Webb's solar panel to draw more power. The observatory — considered the successor to the aging Hubble Space Telescope — was never in any danger, with a constant power flow, said Amy Lo, a lead engineer for the telescope's prime contractor, Northrop Grumman.

They also repointed the telescope to limit sunlight on six overheating motors. The motors cooled enough to begin securing the sunshield, a three-day process that can be halted if the problem crops up again, officials said.

"Everything is hunky-dory and doing well now," Lo said.

Ochs expects the tightening of the sunshield to be drama-free.

"The best thing for operations is boring, and that's what we anticipate over the next three days, is to be boring," he told reporters in a teleconference.

If that holds true, the telescope's gold-plated mirror — more than 21 feet (6.5 meters) across — could unfold as soon as this weekend.

Webb should reach its destination 1 million miles (1.6 million kilometers) away by the end of January. As of Monday, the telescope was more than halfway there. The infrared telescope should begin observing the cosmos by the end of June, ultimately unveiling the first stars and galaxies formed in the universe 13.7

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 53 of 65

billion years ago. That's a mere 100 million years after the universe-creating Big Bang.

Launched in 1990, Hubble, which sees primarily visible light, has peered as far back as 13.4 billion years ago. Astronomers hope to close the gap with Webb, which is 100 times more powerful.

In another bit of good news Monday, officials said they expect Webb to last well beyond the originally anticipated 10 years based on its fuel efficiency.

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EXPLAINER: What's next after resignation of Sudan's PM?

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok's resignation has plunged the country's already fragile democratic transition into further turmoil.

Hamdok told the country in a national address Sunday that he was stepping down after he failed to build a political consensus following an October military coup that rattled the transition. He called for talks to agree on a roadmap to complete the transition.

The Oct. 25 takeover came more than two years after a popular uprising forced the removal of longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir and his Islamist government after nearly three decades in power.

Here's a look at what happened and what comes next:

WHAT HAPPENED?

On Oct. 25, the military dissolved Hamdok's transitional government and the Sovereign Council, a power-sharing body of military officers and civilians that had been ruling Sudan since late 2019.

The military arrested Hamdok and several other senior officials and political leaders.

Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan, the coup's architect and head of the Sovereign Council, announced that the military would hold power until elections can be held in July 2023.

He said a government of technocrats would be formed to administer the country until elections are held.

Burhan came under mounting international pressure, with Western, Arab and African nations calling for a return to civilian rule. The U.S. suspended \$700 million in aid as it strongly condemned the coup.

The military allowed Hamdok to return to his residence the following day, and the two sides eventually reached an agreement in November that reinstated the prime minister but sidelined the pro-democracy movement.

Government officials and political leaders detained in the coup were also released as part of the November deal.

The generals have portrayed the reinstatement of Hamdok as a step toward stabilizing the country ahead of elections and the international community has cautiously welcomed the agreement and called for pre-coup arrangements.

Hamdok has defended his deal with the military, saying that he stuck it mainly to prevent bloodshed and help return to a path of democratic transition.

WHERE DOES THE PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT STAND?

At the time of the coup, the Forces for the Declaration of Freedom and Change, the movement's umbrella organization, was divided. Many organizations, including rebel groups that reached a peace deal with the transitional government in 2020, sided with the military.

Others, including the Sudanese Professionals Association and the Resistance Committees that were the backbone of protests against al-Bashir, rejected the deal to reinstate Hamdok and demanded power be handed over to civilians. They accused Hamdok of allowing himself to serve as a fig leaf for continued military rule.

For weeks, Hamdok failed to bridge a widening gap between the generals and the pro-democracy movement. He was unable to form a Cabinet amid relentless street protests denouncing not only the military's takeover but also his deal with the generals.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 54 of 65

Nearly 60 protesters have been killed and hundreds of others injured since the coup, according to a Sudanese medical group. The U.N. human rights office said it received reports that at least 13 women and girls suffered sexual violence, including rape or gang rape by security forces.

WHAT'S NEXT?

While groups leading the street protests insist that power be handed to a fully civilian government to lead the transition, the generals are not willing to step aside.

Burhan has repeatedly said the military would hand over power only to an elected government. That position is likely to prolong the stalemate as the country faces uphill security and economic challenges.

Volker Perthes, the U.N. envoy for Sudan, has urged citizens to engage in talks to find a way out of the crisis, saying the U.N. mission is ready to facilitate.

The U.S. State Department also urged Sudan's leaders to "set aside differences, find consensus, and ensure continued civilian rule." It called for the appointment of the next premier and Cabinet "in line with the (2019) constitutional declaration to meet the people's goals of freedom, peace, and justice."

Cameron Hudson, a former U.S. State Department official and Sudan expert at the Atlantic Council's Africa Center, called for the international community to help shape what comes next in Sudan.

"It's time for the deployment of an international mediator who can do the job Hamdok was incapable of — finding political compromise between the military, the street and the pro-democracy movement, to rewrite a roadmap for going forward," he said.

In his resignation speech, Hamdok urged for dialogue that charts a roadmap to complete the transition to democracy and said his resignation would allow a chance for another person to complete that transition. He warned the political stalemate could become a full-blown crisis and further damage the country's already battered economy.

"Now, our nation is going through a dangerous turning point that could threaten its entire survival unless it is urgently rectified," Hamdok said.

FDA expands Pfizer boosters for more teens as omicron surges

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

The U.S. is expanding COVID-19 boosters as it confronts the omicron surge, with the Food and Drug Administration allowing extra Pfizer shots for children as young as 12.

Boosters already are recommended for everyone 16 and older, and federal regulators on Monday decided they're also warranted for 12- to 15-year-olds once enough time has passed since their last dose.

But the move, coming as classes restart after the holidays, isn't the final step. A panel to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is expected to decide later this week whether to recommend boosters for the younger teens with a final decision by Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the CDC's director.

The FDA also said everyone 12 and older who's eligible for a Pfizer booster can get one as early as five months after their last dose rather than six months.

FDA vaccine chief Dr. Peter Marks said even though serious illness is uncommon in younger teens, a booster will help them avoid that risk — while also helping reduce the spread of omicron or any other coronavirus mutant.

"Hopefully this will be not just a call for people to go get their booster shot," but for the tens of millions of unvaccinated Americans to rethink that choice, Marks said. "It's not too late to start to get vaccinated."

The FDA based its latest booster decision largely on real-world data from Israel that found no new safety concerns when 6,300 12- to 15-year-olds got a Pfizer booster five months after their second dose.

Likewise, the FDA said even more data from Israel showed no problems with giving anyone eligible for a Pfizer booster that extra dose a month sooner than the six months that until now has been U.S. policy.

The chief safety question for younger teens is a rare side effect called myocarditis, a type of heart inflammation seen mostly in younger men and teen boys who get either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines. The vast majority of cases are mild — far milder than the heart inflammation caused by COVID-19 — and they seem to peak in older teens, the 16- and 17-year-olds.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 55 of 65

Marks said the side effect occurs in about 1 in 10,000 men and boys ages 16 to 30 after their second shot — but that a third dose appears less risky, by about a third. That’s probably because more time has passed before the booster than between the first two shots, he said.

While the FDA didn’t consult its independent scientific advisers before making that decision, the CDC’s own advisory panel is sure to closely weigh how much benefit this age group is likely to get before backing the extra shot.

Vaccines still offer strong protection against serious illness from any type of COVID-19. But health authorities are urging everyone who’s eligible to get a booster dose for their best chance at avoiding milder breakthrough infections from the highly contagious omicron mutant.

Children tend to suffer less serious illness from COVID-19 than adults. But child hospitalizations are rising during the omicron wave -- most of them unvaccinated.

Pediatrician and global health expert Dr. Philip Landrigan of Boston College welcomed the FDA’s decisions, but stressed that the main need is to get the unvaccinated their first shots.

“It is among unvaccinated people that most of the severe illness and death from COVID will occur in coming weeks,” he said in an email. “Many thousands of lives could be saved if people could persuade themselves to get vaccinated.”

The vaccine made by Pfizer and its partner BioNTech is the only U.S. option for children of any age. About 13.5 million 12- to 17-year-olds — just over half that age group — have received two Pfizer shots, according to the CDC.

For families hoping to keep their children as protected as possible, the booster age limit raised questions.

The older teens, 16- and 17-year-olds, became eligible for boosters in early December. But original vaccinations opened for the younger teens, those 12 to 15, back in May. That means those first in line in the spring, potentially millions, are about as many months past their last dose as the slightly older teens.

As for even younger children, kid-size doses for 5- to 11-year-olds rolled out more recently, in November -- and experts say healthy youngsters should be protected after their second dose for a while. But the FDA also said Monday that if children that young have severely weakened immune systems, they will be allowed a third dose 28 days after their second. That’s the same third-dose timing already recommended for immune-compromised teens and adults.

Pfizer is studying its vaccine, in even smaller doses, for children younger than 5.

What about timing of boosters for adults who got the Moderna or Johnson & Johnson vaccines?

The FDA said it didn’t have any new data from Moderna to back a timing change and people who’d already had two Moderna shots should continue to wait six months for a booster. As for people who originally got the single-dose J&J shot, the U.S. already recommends another dose of any vaccine two months later.

AP journalists Tom Murphy and Mike Stobbe contributed to this report.

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute’s Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Biden pushed to speak out more as US democracy concerns grow

By COLLEEN LONG and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has gotten the same troubling questions from worried world leaders, ones that he never thought he would hear.

“Is America going to be all right?” they ask. “What about democracy in America?”

While Biden has tried to offer America’s allies assurances, he has only occasionally emphasized the gravity of the threat to democracy from the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol and the repeated lie from the man he defeated, Donald Trump, that the 2020 election was stolen. And he’s not discussed the very real concerns about a growing collection of insurrection sympathizers installed in local election posts and changes by Republicans to election laws in several states.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 56 of 65

Now, as the anniversary of that deadly day nears, the Democratic president is being urged to reorder priorities and use the powers of his office to push voting rights legislation that its adherents say could be the only effective way to counter the rapidly emerging threats to the democratic process.

The tension in Biden's approach reflects his balancing of the urgent needs of Americans to make progress on the highly visible issues of the coronavirus pandemic and the economy and the less visible, but equally vital, issue of preserving trust in elections and government.

The president plans to deliver a speech on Jan. 6 focused on sustaining democracy — voting rights won't be part of the remarks but will be the topic of another speech soon, White House aides said.

In his recent commencement address at South Carolina State University, Biden's tone on the need for voting rights legislation took on added urgency.

"I've never seen anything like the unrelenting assault on the right to vote. Never," Biden said, adding, "This new sinister combination of voter suppression and election subversion, it's un-American, it's undemocratic, and sadly, it is unprecedented since Reconstruction."

And the world is taking notice. Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, also has said that the riot at the Capitol has altered the view many countries have of the United States.

"Jan. 6 has had a material impact on the view of the United States from the rest of the world, I believe from allies and adversaries alike," Sullivan said recently at the Council on Foreign Relations. "Allies look at it with concern and worry about the future of American democracy. Adversaries look at it, you know, more sort of rubbing their hands together and thinking, How do we take advantage of this in one way or another?"

In contrast, Republicans in numerous states are promoting efforts to influence future elections by installing sympathetic leaders in local election posts and backing for elective office some of those who participated in the insurrection.

White House officials insist Biden's relative reticence should not be interpreted as complacency with the growing movement to rewrite history surrounding the Jan. 6 riot. Rather, they say, the president believes the most effective way to combat Trump, election denialism and domestic extremism is to prove to the rest of the country — and to the world — that government can work.

"I know progress does not come fast enough. It never has," Biden said last fall. "The process of governing is frustrating and sometimes dispiriting. But I also know what's possible if we keep the pressure up, if we never give up, we keep the faith."

In Biden's view, many of Trump's voters didn't wholly embrace Trumpism. Instead, Trump exploited long-standing dissatisfaction with the nation's political, economic and social systems to build his coalition.

So Biden tailored his first-year domestic agenda to combating what he believed to be the root causes of the unease — the shaky economy and the pandemic's drag on it — essentially to prove that government can work effectively.

He has directed federal law enforcement to shore up security at national institutions and improve communication systems and procedures that were in part to blame for U.S. Capitol Police being left overwhelmed for hours during the mob assault.

The Justice Department has undertaken the largest prosecution in its history, charging more than 700 defendants and still looking for more.

But it is voting rights that many Democrats and activists concerned about what may happen in 2022 and beyond are urging the president to make a key priority.

"The insurrection was part of a larger movement to suppress elections and overthrow our democracy," said Christina Baal-Owens, a longtime organizer and the executive director of Public Wise, a group that researches and publishes information on candidates running for office who support the election lies.

Baal-Owens said efforts to discredit election integrity not only galvanize Trump supporters, they also make other voters less likely to vote. "We know — we've done some research on trust in the system — if voters don't trust elections, they may not vote. This is part of a larger movement of voter suppression and why it's so necessary for Biden to speak out."

The House has approved far-reaching voting rights legislation, but Democratic Sens. Kyrsten Sinema of

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 57 of 65

Arizona and Joe Manchin of West Virginia have been impediments, saying they oppose changing Senate rules to get around a GOP filibuster of the bill.

That legislation would restore the Justice Department's ability to review changes to election laws in states with a history of discrimination, a provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2013. According to the Brennan Center, 19 states have recently passed laws making it harder to vote.

Manchin and Sinema have helped draft separate voting rights legislation, but it lacks enough Republican support to overcome the filibuster.

"People are taking sides as opposed to looking at what the institutional threats are to maintaining our democracy," said Democratic Rep. Peter Welch of Vermont, a candidate to replace Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy, who announced his retirement.

Welch was at the Capitol on Jan. 6, and the violence that day is etched in his memory.

"The norms that have been the bedrock of our democracy, the free and peaceful transition of power and the renunciation of violence, they've been shattered," he said.

After Biden's speech in South Carolina, Senate Democrats renewed their push to pass voting rights legislation early in 2022. And the president said in an interview with ABC that he supported creating an exception to the Senate filibuster if that's what it takes to pass voting rights legislation.

For Biden, who served four decades in the Senate, it was a remarkable concession and underscored the gravity of the threat. And, he acknowledged, he knows the world is watching to see how the nation responds — and wondering if the country's democracy will survive.

"Did you ever think you'd be asked that question by another leader?" Biden said.

Ashli Babbitt a martyr? Her past tells a more complex story

By MICHAEL BIESECKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The first time Celeste Norris laid eyes on Ashli Babbitt, the future insurrectionist had just rammed her vehicle three times with an SUV and was pounding on the window, challenging her to a fight.

Norris says the bad blood between them began in 2015, when Babbitt engaged in a monthslong extra-marital affair with Norris' longtime live-in boyfriend. When she learned of the relationship, Norris called Babbitt's husband and told him she was cheating.

"She pulls up yelling and screaming," Norris said in an exclusive interview with The Associated Press, recounting the July 29, 2016, road-rage incident in Prince Frederick, Maryland. "It took me a good 30 seconds to figure out who she was. ... Just all sorts of expletives, telling me to get out of the car, that she was going to beat my ass."

Terrified and confused, Norris dialed 911 and waited for law enforcement. Babbitt was later charged with numerous misdemeanors.

The attack on Norris is an example of erratic and sometimes threatening behavior by Babbitt, who was shot by a police officer while at the vanguard of the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol. Former President Donald Trump and his supporters have sought to portray her as a righteous martyr who was unjustly killed.

Trump has called her "an incredible person" and he even taped a posthumous birthday greeting to her in October. Trump has also demanded the Justice Department reinvestigate Babbitt's death, though the officer who shot her was cleared of any wrongdoing by two prior federal investigations.

But the life of the Air Force veteran from California, who died while wearing a Trump campaign flag wrapped around her shoulders like a cape, was far more complicated than the heroic portrait presented by Trump and his allies.

In the months before her death, Babbitt had become consumed by pro-Trump conspiracy theories and posted angry screeds on social media. She also had a history of making violent threats.

Babbitt, 35, was fatally shot while attempting to climb through the broken window of a barricaded door leading to the Speaker's Lobby inside the Capitol, where police officers were evacuating members

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 58 of 65

of Congress from the mob supporting Trump's false claim that the 2020 presidential election was stolen. She was one of five people who died during or immediately after the riot, including a Capitol Police officer.

On social media, Babbitt identified as a Libertarian and ardent supporter of the Second Amendment. Her posts included videos of profane rants against Democrats, COVID-19 mask mandates and illegal immigration.

Her Twitter account, which was taken down after her death, was rife with references to the QAnon conspiracy theory, which centers on the baseless belief that Trump has secretly battled deep-state enemies and a cabal of Satan-worshipping cannibals that includes prominent Democrats who operate a child sex trafficking ring.

"Nothing will stop us," Babbitt tweeted Jan. 5. "They can try and try and try but the storm is here and it is descending upon DC in less than 24 hours....dark to light!"

Among Q followers, "The Storm" refers to the predicted day Trump would finally unmask the pedophile cabal, arrest and execute those deemed traitors and restore America to greatness.

Trump has repeatedly insisted Babbitt was murdered, and she has achieved martyr status among Trump supporters. Her name and likeness now appear on T-shirts and flags at pro-Trump rallies.

A Maryland personal injury lawyer representing Babbitt's husband, Aaron Babbitt, has raised \$375,000 through a Christian crowdfunding site and has threatened to file a lawsuit against the Capitol Police.

Key to that wrongful death claim is the contention that Babbitt, a former military police officer who was 5-foot-2 and weighed 115 pounds, would have peacefully surrendered had Capitol officers attempted to arrest her.

Aaron Babbitt declined to comment in October when a reporter knocked on the door of the San Diego apartment he shared with Ashli and another woman. In a June interview with Tucker Carlson of Fox News, Babbitt said he has been sickened by some of what he has seen written about his deceased wife.

"There's never been a person who Ashli ran across in her daily life that didn't love her," said Babbitt, 40.

That is not how Norris felt about her.

Court records involving the violent 2016 confrontation between Babbitt and Norris have previously been reported by media outlets, including the AP. But Norris, now 39, agreed to speak about it publicly for the first time in an interview with the AP and shared previously unreported details. She also provided documents and photos from the crash scene to support her account.

Norris was in a six-year relationship with Aaron Babbitt when she said she learned he was cheating on her with a married co-worker from his job as a security guard at a nuclear power plant near the Chesapeake Bay. She eventually found out the other woman was Ashli McEntee, who at the time went by the last name of her then-husband.

"He was telling me about this foulmouthed chick that's on his shift, blah, blah, blah," Norris recounted. "Come to find out a few months later ... they were basically having this relationship while they were at work."

When she learned of the affair, she reached out to Babbitt's husband, Timothy McEntee.

"You know, I was trying to keep my home life together," she said.

Norris said she tried for a few months to salvage her relationship with Aaron Babbitt before finally deciding to move out of their house. Within days, Norris said, Ashli moved in.

A few weeks later, Norris was waiting at a stop sign in Prince Frederick, about an hour southeast of Washington, D.C., when she says a white Ford Explorer passed her going the other direction.

Norris saw the SUV pulling a U-turn before speeding up behind her. She recounts that the SUV's driver began swerving erratically, laying on the horn and attempting to pass a Chevrolet Suburban that was in between them on the narrow two-lane road.

When the driver of the Chevy pulled over, Norris said the white Ford SUV accelerated and rammed into her rear bumper. She said the SUV rammed her a second time and then a third, all while the vehicles continued to roll down the road.

After Norris dialed 911, an emergency dispatcher advised her to pull over to the shoulder and stop. As she waited for help, Babbitt got out of her vehicle and came up to Norris' driver's-side window, banging on the glass.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 59 of 65

Norris said the force of the impact caused her seatbelt to lock tight, preventing her from getting out of her car. Within minutes, deputies arrived.

A case report from the Calvert County Sheriff's Office obtained by the AP shows Ashli Babbitt was issued a criminal summons on charges of reckless endangerment, a misdemeanor defined under Maryland law as engaging in conduct "that creates a substantial risk of death or serious physical injury to another" and punishable by up to five years in prison and a \$5,000 fine. She was also charged with malicious destruction of property for the damage to Norris' vehicle.

Court records show those charges were later updated to include traffic offenses — reckless driving, negligent driving and failure to control a vehicle's speed to avoid a collision.

Photos from the scene provided to the AP by Norris show Babbitt's white Ford Explorer with its front bumper smashed in. The SUV's grill is also pushed in and the hood dented. The rear bumper of Norris' Escape is pushed in on the passenger side, with the detached Maryland license plate from the front bumper of Babbitt's SUV wedged into it.

Following the altercation, Norris and a friend went to the courthouse in neighboring St. Mary's County, where she lived at the time, and petitioned for a peace order, a type of restraining order, against Ashli Babbitt. The resulting judicial order barred Ashli Babbitt from attempting to contact Norris, committing further acts of violence against her and going to her home or workplace.

A copy of the order, dated the same day as the altercation, contains Norris' contemporaneous account of what occurred, as written down by her friend. Norris' hands were still shaking so badly she couldn't write down what happened for herself, according to a note on the document.

In the weeks after the incident, Norris said, Babbitt falsely claimed to authorities that the collisions had occurred when Norris repeatedly backed her vehicle into Babbitt's SUV. But when the case went to trial, Norris said, Babbitt changed her story, admitting under oath that she had collided with Norris' vehicle but portraying it as an accident.

No transcript from the hearing was available, but Norris said the lawyer defending Babbitt made repeated references to her employment at the local nuclear power plant and years of military service, which included deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Babbitt served on active duty with the U.S. Air Force, and then in the reserves and the Air National Guard until 2016. A judge acquitted Babbitt on the criminal charges.

In February 2017, records show Norris asked for and received a second peace order against Ashli Babbitt, citing ongoing harassment and stalking. In a handwritten petition, Norris says that Babbitt had recently followed her home from work and that she had also received repeated calls in the middle of the night from an unlisted number.

"I lived in fear because I didn't know what she was capable of," Norris told the AP. "I was constantly looking over my shoulder."

In 2019, Norris filed a personal injury lawsuit against Ashli Babbitt, seeking \$74,500 in damages, and she said she settled out of court with Babbitt's insurance carrier for an undisclosed sum.

By then, Aaron and Ashli had moved to California, where she grew up and still had family. Timothy McEntee was granted a divorce in Maryland in May 2019. McEntee did not respond to voicemails and messages left at his home.

Ashli posted on Facebook that she married Aaron Babbitt the following month. Records show the couple owned a pool cleaning service with Ashli's brother. When a reporter visited the business the day after her death, a large sign on the locked door declared the building to be "Mask Free Autonomous Zone Better Known as America."

In the year since Babbitt's death, Trump and many Republicans in Congress have sought to recast the Jan. 6 insurrection as nonviolent — a contention directly contradicted by hours of video footage and the public testimony of Capitol Police officers, 140 of whom were injured in the melee.

In his video on Babbitt's birthday, Trump also said: "Together we grieve her terrible loss. There was no reason Ashli should have lost her life that day. We must all demand justice for Ashli and her family, so on this solemn occasion as we celebrate her life, we renew our call for a fair and nonpartisan investigation into the death of Ashli Babbitt."

Aaron Babbitt's lawyer, Terrell Roberts III, did not respond to numerous phone messages and emails seeking comment. But in written statements to the media, he has said her shooting "was tantamount to an execution without trial."

"Given her background as a 14-year veteran of the Air Force, it is likely that Ashli would have complied with simple verbal commands, thereby making the use of any force unnecessary," Roberts said.

The Capitol Police officer who shot Babbitt, Lt. Michael Byrd, said in a televised interview in August that he fired as a "last resort." When he pulled the trigger, he said, he had no idea whether the person jumping through the window was armed.

The U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia cleared Byrd of wrongdoing in April, concluding that he acted in self-defense and in the defense of members of Congress. The U.S. Capitol Police announced in August that they had also cleared Byrd.

"I tried to wait as long as I could," Byrd said. "I hoped and prayed no one tried to enter through those doors. But their failure to comply required me to take the appropriate action to save the lives of members of Congress and myself and my fellow officers."

Associated Press correspondent Elliot Spagat in San Diego contributed to this report.

Follow AP Investigative Reporter Michael Biesecker at <http://twitter.com/mbieseck>

Contact AP's global investigative team at Investigative@ap.org.

This story has been corrected to show the interviewer's surname is Carlson, not Carson.

Sheep, goats join in German efforts to encourage vaccination

BERLIN (AP) — Tasty bits of bread did the trick for about 700 sheep and goats to join Germany's drive to encourage more people to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

The animals were arranged on Monday into the shape of a roughly 100-meter (330-foot) syringe in a field at Schneverdingen, south of Hamburg.

Shepherd Wiebke Schmidt-Kochan spent several days practicing with her animals, news agency dpa reported. But she said in the end, it wasn't difficult to work things out — she laid out pieces of bread in the shape of the syringe, which the sheep and goats gobbled up when they were let out into the field.

Organizer Hanspeter Etzold said the action was aimed at people who are still hesitating to get vaccinated. "Sheep are such likeable animals — maybe they can get the message over better," he said.

The German government has made an accelerated vaccination campaign its top priority in attempting to beat back the latest wave of COVID-19 infections.

The percentage of the population that has received at least two shots stood on Monday at 71.2%. Those who have received a booster shot has increased much faster in recent weeks and now stands at 38.9% of the population.

Health Ministry spokesman Andreas Deffner said on Monday that the public debate over vaccinations in recent weeks appeared to have prompted some holdouts to change their mind.

In a more conventional contribution to the drive, Berlin nightclubs on Monday pitched in by offering vaccinations.

Lutz Leichsenring, spokesman for the Clubcommission, the association of Berlin nightclubs said that half of the vaccination appointments have already been taken up. Sage Beach and several other clubs are offering about 4,500 shots in total this week.

Authorities in Germany have recently closed or put restrictions on clubs in order to slow omicron variant's spread. Berlin authorities banned dancing, prompting many clubs to shut their doors.

"We all hoped that if you have such a high vaccination rate as we have in the club scene, that you can then also hold safe events, and that is unfortunately not the case," Leichsenring said.

Follow all AP stories on the pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

Series of attacks highlights reach of Iran-allied militias

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Yemen's Houthi rebels seized a ship in the Red Sea, armed drones targeted Baghdad's international airport, and hackers hit a major Israeli newspaper Monday — a string of assaults that showed the reach of Iran-allied militias on the second anniversary of America's killing of a top Iranian general.

All three coincided with a massive memorial in Tehran for Qassem Soleimani, the general killed by a U.S. drone strike in 2020 in Iraq. Iran's hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi demanded former U.S. President Donald Trump be "prosecuted and killed."

"If not, I'm telling all American leaders, don't doubt that the hand of revenge will come out of the sleeves of ummah," Raisi said, referring to the worldwide community of Muslims.

Monday's events highlight tensions in the Middle East, which has been roiled by Trump's 2018 decision to unilaterally withdraw America from a deal aimed at limiting Tehran's nuclear program. As talks continue in Vienna to try to resuscitate the accord, Iran remains able to apply pressure from outside of the negotiations even as it is squeezed by sanctions and a shadow war with Israel.

The taking of the Emirati ship *Rwabee* marks the latest assault in the Red Sea, a crucial route for international trade and energy shipments. The Iranian-backed Houthis acknowledged the seizure off the coast of Hodeida, a long-contested prize of the grinding war in Yemen between the rebels and a Saudi-led coalition that includes the United Arab Emirates.

First word of the *Rwabee's* seizure came from the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations, which only said an attack targeted an unnamed vessel around midnight. The coordinates it offered corresponded to the *Rwabee*, which has rarely given its location via tracking data in recent months unlike most commercial traffic in the region, according to the website MarineTraffic.com.

A statement from the Saudi-led coalition, carried by state media in the kingdom, acknowledged the attack hours later, saying the Houthis had committed an act of "armed piracy" involving the vessel. The coalition asserted the ship carried medical equipment from a dismantled Saudi field hospital in the distant island of Socotra, without offering evidence.

"The militia must promptly release the ship or the coalition forces will undertake all necessary measures and procedures to handle this violation, including the use of force if necessary," Brig. Gen. Turki al-Malki said in a statement.

The Houthis later aired footage from the *Rwabee* on their Al-Masirah satellite news channel. It showed military-style inflatable rafts, trucks and other vehicles on the vessel, a landing craft that lowers a ramp to allow equipment to roll on and off. One brief clip showed what appeared to be a collection of rifles inside a container.

"It is completely obvious today that the information that this ship was carrying a civilian field hospital is not correct," said Yahia Sarei, a Houthi military spokesman. "This is clearly military equipment."

Saudi state television alleged the Houthis transferred the weapons onto the ship.

An employee at the vessel's owners, Abu Dhabi-based Liwa Marine Services, told The Associated Press in a telephone call that the *Rwabee* appeared to have been the target but said they had no other information. The employee declined to comment further and hung up before giving their name.

A similar assault happened in 2016 involving the Emirati vessel *SWIFT-1*, which had been sailing back and forth in the Red Sea between an Emirati troop base in Eritrea and Yemen. The vessel came under attack by Houthi forces in 2016. The Emirati government asserted the *SWIFT-1* had carried humanitarian aid; U.N. experts later said of the claim that they were "unconvinced of its veracity."

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the hacking of the Jerusalem Post's website. The hackers replaced the Post's homepage with an image depicting a missile coming from a fist bearing a ring long associated with Soleimani.

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 62 of 65

The image also depicted an exploding target used during a recent Iranian military drill that was designed to look like the Shimon Peres Negev Nuclear Research Center near the Israeli city of Dimona. The facility is home to decades-old underground laboratories that reprocess spent rods from a nuclear reactor to obtain weapons-grade plutonium for Israel's nuclear bomb program.

Under its policy of nuclear ambiguity, Israel neither confirms nor denies having atomic weapons.

In a tweet, the Post acknowledged being the target of hackers.

"We are aware of the apparent hacking of our website, alongside a direct threat to Israel," the English-language newspaper wrote.

The newspaper later restored its site. It noted Iran-supporting hackers previously targeted its homepage in 2020.

The hack came after Israel's former military intelligence chief in late December publicly acknowledged his country was involved in Soleimani's killing. The U.S. drone killed the general as he was leaving Baghdad's international airport.

In Iraq on Monday, troops shot down two so-called "suicide drones" at that same airport, American and Iraqi officials said. No group immediately claimed the attack, though one of the drones' wings had the words "Soleimani's revenge" painted on it in Arabic. Militias backed by Iran have been suspected in similar assaults. No injuries or damage were reported.

As the head of the elite Quds, or Jerusalem, Force of the Revolutionary Guard, Soleimani led all of its expeditionary forces and frequently shuttled among Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. Quds Force members have deployed in Syria to support President Bashar Assad in that country's long war, as well as in Iraq in the wake of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein, a longtime foe of Tehran.

Soleimani rose to prominence by advising forces fighting the Islamic State group in Iraq and in Syria on behalf of the embattled Assad.

U.S. officials say the Guard under Soleimani taught Iraqi militants how to manufacture and use especially deadly roadside bombs against U.S. troops. Iran has denied that.

Associated Press writers Nasser Karimi in Tehran, Iran, Isabel DeBre in Dubai, Samy Magdy in Cairo and Qassim Abdul-Zahra in Baghdad contributed to this report.

Follow Jon Gambrell on Twitter at www.twitter.com/jongambrellAP.

Hong Kong news site to shut; pro-Beijing lawmakers sworn in

By HUIZHONG WU and ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — A group of lawmakers loyal to China's Communist Party were sworn in to Hong Kong's Legislature on Monday following an election without opposition candidates, as yet another pro-democracy news outlet announced it could no longer operate amid a growing crackdown on freedoms in the territory.

The former British colony that was returned to China in 1997 was once known as a haven for dissent and freedoms of the press and expression not seen on the mainland. But the central government in Beijing has clamped down in the last year, leading to the closure of independent news outlets, the removal of monuments to dissent, and a poorly attended election swept by pro-Beijing politicians.

The founders of news outlet Citizen News said the news site will stop publishing on Tuesday. While they have received no order to close, they said Monday that deteriorating media freedoms in the financial hub put them in an impossible position.

"We all love this place, deeply. Regrettably, what was ahead of us is not just pouring rains or blowing winds, but hurricanes and tsunamis," Citizen News said in a statement on Sunday, when it announced the closure.

The outlet is the third to close in recent months, following the shuttering of the territory's last pro-democracy print newspaper, Apple Daily, and the online site Stand News.

Citizen News was founded in 2017 by a group of veteran journalists. The small site focused on political

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 63 of 65

news and analysis pieces, as well as investigations — and in recent months became a refuge for many journalists who had lost their jobs when other outlets closed or faced other pressures.

“With Apple Daily’s sudden closure in the past summer, the journalism majors who were originally supposed to intern with them, Citizen News made arrangements to take them in, so that students wouldn’t lose this internship opportunity,” said Vivian W.W. Tam, a senior lecturer at the Chinese University of Hong Kong’s journalism school, in a public Facebook post. Tam declined to be interviewed.

But a new sweeping National Security Law — imposed on Hong Kong by China’s central Legislature — has made independent reporting increasingly dangerous. Journalists and political activists have been arrested under the law, and it has forced civil rights groups and unions to disband. Many more activists have fled.

Meanwhile, new laws have changed how Hong Kongers vote for their representatives, including a requirement that any who seek office must be “patriots,” effectively bringing the body under Beijing’s control.

“What we understood about press freedom has changed a lot,” said Chris Yeung, founder and chief writer at Citizen News.

Yeung said at a news conference on Monday that the trigger for their decision to shut down was what happened to Stand News. Last week, authorities raided Stand News and arrested seven people — including editors and former board members — for allegedly conspiring to publish seditious material. Stand News announced on the same day that it would cease to operate.

Two of Stand News’ former editors who were arrested were later formally charged with sedition.

In the summer, authorities forced the closure of Apple Daily, the newspaper owned by media tycoon and democracy activist Jimmy Lai. Lai is currently in jail and was newly charged with sedition last week.

“I fear that this will turn Hong Kong into a black box, that no one will be informed,” said Chung Ching Kwong, the project manager at the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong.

She said that although Citizen News had not been contacted by authorities, she views the closure as forced.

“I think in general the closures ... are basically involuntarily because there’s this fear that they cannot do real and genuine journalism in the current political environment in Hong Kong,” said Kwong, an activist from Hong Kong who now lives in Germany.

The Society of Publishers in Asia, a group based in Hong Kong that hosts an annual journalism award, also said Monday it is concerned about pressures against independent media in the city.

The U.S. and other Western governments have condemned the limits on media and civil freedoms that Beijing promised to uphold for 50 years following Hong Kong’s 1997 handover.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam last week defended the raid on Stand News, telling reporters that “inciting other people ... could not be condoned under the guise of news reporting.”

The only remaining independent news media with reach in the city are Hong Kong Free Press, an English-language news outlet, and Initium, a Chinese-language news outlet which moved its headquarters to Singapore in August, but still has staff in the city.

Citizen News likened itself to a small dinghy in rough waters.

“At the center of a brewing storm, we found (ourselves) in a critical situation. In the face of a crisis, we must ensure the safety and well-being of everyone who are on board,” it said.

This story has been updated to correct that the National Security Law was passed in 2020, not 2019.

Wu reported from Taipei, Taiwan.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, Jan. 4, the fourth day of 2022. There are 361 days left in the year.

Today’s Highlight in History:

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 64 of 65

On Jan. 4, 2007, Nancy Pelosi was elected the first female speaker of the House as Democrats took control of Congress.

On this date:

In 1821, the first native-born American saint, Elizabeth Ann Seton, died in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

In 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his State of the Union address, called for legislation to provide assistance for the jobless, elderly, impoverished children and the disabled.

In 1948, Burma (now called Myanmar) became independent of British rule.

In 1964, Pope Paul VI began a visit to the Holy Land, the first papal pilgrimage of its kind

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson delivered his State of the Union address in which he outlined the goals of his "Great Society."

In 1974, President Richard Nixon refused to hand over tape recordings and documents subpoenaed by the Senate Watergate Committee.

In 1987, 16 people were killed when an Amtrak train bound from Washington, D.C., to Boston collided with Conrail locomotives that had crossed into its path from a side track in Chase, Maryland.

In 1990, Charles Stuart, who'd claimed that he'd been wounded and his pregnant wife fatally shot by a robber, leapt to his death off a Boston bridge after he himself became a suspect.

In 1999, Europe's new currency, the euro, got off to a strong start on its first trading day, rising against the dollar on world currency markets. Former professional wrestler Jesse Ventura took the oath of office as Minnesota's governor.

In 2002, Sgt. 1st Class Nathan Ross Chapman, a U.S. Army Special Forces soldier, was killed by small-arms fire during an ambush in eastern Afghanistan; he was the first American military death from enemy fire in the war against terrorism.

In 2006, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a significant stroke; his official powers were transferred to his deputy, Ehud Olmert (EH'-hood OHL'-murt). (Sharon remained in a coma until his death in January 2014.)

In 2015, Pope Francis named 156 new cardinals, selecting them from 14 countries, including far-flung corners of the world, to reflect the diversity of the Roman Catholic church and its growth in places like Asia and Africa.

Ten years ago: Defying Republican lawmakers, President Barack Obama barreled past the Senate by using a recess appointment to name Richard Cordray the first director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

Five years ago: President Barack Obama urged congressional Democrats to "look out for the American people" in defending his legacy health care overhaul, while Vice President-elect Mike Pence stood firm in telling Republicans that dismantling "Obamacare" was No. 1 on Donald Trump's list. Macy's said it was eliminating more than 10,000 jobs and planned to move forward with 68 store closures after a disappointing holiday shopping season.

One year ago: At a campaign rally in Georgia for the Republican candidates in the state's U.S. Senate runoff elections the following day, President Donald Trump declared that he would "fight like hell" to hold on to the presidency and appealed to Republican lawmakers to reverse his election loss. Bracing for possible violence, the nation's capital mobilized the National Guard ahead of planned protests by Trump supporters in connection with the congressional vote to affirm Joe Biden's election victory. A British judge rejected the United States' request to extradite WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to face espionage charges, saying it would be "oppressive" because of his mental health. (An appellate court later overturned that ruling; Assange's lawyers are seeking to appeal.) Death claimed actors Gregory Sierra, 83, known for the 1970s sitcoms "Barney Miller" and "Sanford and Son," and Tanya Roberts, who was in the James Bond movie "A View to a Kill" and the TV sitcom "That '70s Show"; she was 65.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Barbara Rush is 95. Opera singer Grace Bumbry is 85. Actor Dyan Cannon is 83. Author-historian Doris Kearns Goodwin is 79. Country singer Kathy Forester (The Forester Sisters) is 67. Actor Ann Magnuson is 66. Rock musician Bernard Sumner (New Order, Joy Division) is 66. Country singer Patty Loveless is 65. Actor Julian Sands is 64. Rock singer Michael Stipe is 62. Actor Patrick Cassidy

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, Jan. 04, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 181 ~ 65 of 65

is 60. Actor Dave Foley is 59. Actor Dot Jones is 58. Actor Rick Hearst is 57. Singer-musician Cait O'Riordan is 57. Actor Julia Ormond is 57. Former tennis player Guy Forget (ghee fohr-ZHAY') is 57. Country singer Deana Carter is 56. Rock musician Benjamin Darvill (Crash Test Dummies) is 55. Actor Josh Stamberg is 52. Actor Damon Gupton is 49. Actor-singer Jill Marie Jones is 47. Actor D'Arcy Carden is 42. Christian rock singer Spencer Chamberlain (Underoath) is 39. Actor Lenora Crichlow is 37. Comedian-actor Charlyne Yi is 36. MLB All-Star Kris Bryant is 30. Actor-singer Coco Jones is 24.