

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 1 of 72

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- Batter up: girls' softball will start play in spring](#)
- [2- Three schools successfully appeal sports classifications](#)
- [3- Free, reduced-price lunches may decide school sports classifications](#)
- [4- 2022 SD Jr Snow Queen Court](#)
- [5- 2021 LATC Fall President's List](#)
- [5- USD Announces Fall 2021 Dean's List](#)
- [5- Bisbee takes second at state Junior Talent Show](#)
- [6- Groton Dynamics Dance Team](#)
- [6- Surplus Van for Sale](#)
- [7- Ben Schaller's Birthday](#)
- [8- Weather Pages](#)
- [13- Daily Devotional](#)
- [14- 2021 Community Events](#)
- [15- Subscription Form](#)
- [16- News from the Associated Press](#)

UpComing Events

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.

Saturday, Jan. 15

Silver Bowl Debate at Sioux Falls
Boys Basketball Classic at Redfield. Groton Area vs. Deubrook at 7:30
10 a.m.: Junior High boys basketball jamboree in Groton with Aberdeen Christian, Britton-Hecla and Webster Area.

10 a.m.: Wrestling at Potter County (Gettysburg) Invitational.

Monday, Jan. 17

Junior High Wrestling Invitational at Redfield
Girls basketball hosting Langford Area (JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity)

"A friend is someone who understands your past, believes in your future, and accepts you just the way you are."

-Author Unknown



Tuesday, Jan. 18

Wrestling Tournament at Hamlin
Junior High Boys Basketball at Mobridge. 7th at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade game.
Junior High Wrestling Invitational at the Aberdeen Civic Arena, 4 p.m.
The Junior High boys basketball game in Groton scheduled for Jan. 18th is cancelled.
City Council Meeting at 7 p.m.

Thursday, Jan. 20

Girls Basketball at Clark/Willow Lake. JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity.

Friday, Jan. 21

Debate Speech Fiesta at Watertown High School
Boys Basketball hosting Clark/Willow Lake. 7th grade at 4 p.m., 8th grade at 5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity game.

Wrestling Dual at Deuel High School, 6 p.m.

Saturday, Jan. 22

Debate Speech Fiesta at Watertown High School
Wrestling Tournament at Arlington, 10 a.m.

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

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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Batter up: girls' softball will start play in spring

By Dana Hess For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — High school girls' softball in South Dakota will start in March. The spring season was approved by the South Dakota High School Activities Association board of directors at its meeting on Wednesday, Jan. 12.

SDHSAA Assistant Executive Director Jo Auch told the board that AA schools were in favor of a spring season by a vote of 14-5. The minority of schools favored a fall season.

Auch said the schools that favor a fall season will likely decide to participate in the spring.

"They just want the board to make a decision," said Auch, who noted that at its last meeting the board approved of offering girls' softball, but did not decide on a time for the season.

There may be as many as 40 schools that offer the new sport. "That's really a guess," Auch said.

In the first-ever girls' softball season sanctioned by SDHSAA, the first practice will be allowed on March 20 and the first game on March 31. Regional tournaments will be held by May 25 and a state tournament will be held June 1-3.

Schools that wish to offer the sport must have their school board approve a resolution to fully implement softball at their February meeting.

Auch explained that schools can take on the financial responsibility for offering the sport right away, or partner with a local club team during a five-year transition period. This is similar to the way high school soccer was implemented.

During the transition, the school district would share support for the sport with the local club team.

"There are many that are ready to roll with it," Auch said, noting that a March start may be moving too fast for some school districts. She said some schools may choose to begin their participation in the sport's second year.

Three schools successfully appeal sports classifications

By Dana Hess For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — On Wednesday, Jan. 12, the South Dakota High School Activities Association board of directors heard appeals from five schools concerning adjustments to their student numbers. A school's average daily membership determines its classification for sports. Three of the appeals were successful.

Two of the appeals dealt with religious exemptions. Lake Preston and Hamlin both have students that belong to the Apostolic Lutheran religion that does not allow participation in extracurricular activities.

Lake Preston Superintendent Dana Felderman explained to the board that removing the four Apostolic Lutheran students from the school ADM would allow the school to continue to compete in Class B of nine-man football.

Lake Preston's appeal was approved. A similar appeal from Hamlin was the subject of quite a bit more discussion.

A letter to the board from Hamlin School District Superintendent Patrick Kraning said that 54.3% of the district's students would not be participating in extracurricular activities because of their religious beliefs.

He asked that Hamlin be allowed to continue to participate in 9AA football rather than move up to 11B. He also asked that the school be allowed to remain in Class B for golf and wrestling rather than moving up to Class A.

Board member Marty Weismantel of Groton said Hamlin is getting state aid for all of the students in its district. Allowing the school to participate in nine-man football means it will be competing against schools that have a third of its overall enrollment.

"It's not like they're struggling for numbers," Weismantel said.

The board approved the appeal on a vote of 8-1 with Weismantel dissenting.

A letter from Sisseton High School principal Jim Frederick explained that six of the students counted in its average daily membership have lost their eligibility to participate in sports. Removing those students from

the ADM allows Sisseton to keep its current classification. The board approved the appeal unanimously. On the borderline for jumping from Class B in cross-country to Class A, Kimball Activities Director Matt Dykstra said, "We just don't have the numbers now in certain sports."

Board member Kelly Messmer of Harding County said he was sympathetic but the numbers spoke for themselves.

"There are a lot of schools that have to deal with it," Messmer said.

The Kimball appeal died for a lack of a motion.

SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos asked the board to table an appeal from Kadoka which asked that four students taking classes entirely online not be included in the school's ADM. Swartos said he would talk with the school, as removing the four students would not change Kadoka's classifications.

Also at the meeting, the board approved the average daily membership counts of member schools. Those numbers, from the S.D. Department of Education, will be used to classify schools for the next two school years.

Free, reduced-price lunches may decide school sports classifications

By Dana Hess For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — An amendment to the constitution of the South Dakota High School Activities Association could change the way students are counted at some schools for the purposes of determining sports classifications.

The SDHSAA board approved the first reading of the amendment at its meeting Wednesday, Jan. 12.

The amendment includes a formula for using a school district's free and reduced lunch participation to lower its enrollment count. That count is used to determine each school's classification in SDHSAA activities.

In the formula, a school's enrollment count could be reduced by 30%. SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos gave an example to the board about a high school with an enrollment of 400 at which 85% of the students were eligible for a free or reduced lunch. Swartos' formula multiplies 30 by .85 for 25.5. That result is subtracted from 100 giving a percentage of 74.5% or .745. That number is multiplied by the 400 enrollment number to give a result of 298. That 298 number would then be used to determine the school's classification in sports.

Due to the federal government's Covid regulations, all students are currently eligible for free lunches. "That's completely different," Swartos said, noting that parents of students eligible for the free and reduced lunches still need to fill out paperwork so that the school district can get its federal funding.

SDHSAA rationale for offering the amendment says that schools with a high percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunches have "severe discrepancies in access to equipment and school/personal access to outside training opportunities as compared to similar sized schools with low populations of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch. This multiplier is used in several other states and free and reduced lunch percentages have been widely accepted as a major factor in athletic/activity success. This multiplier would allow schools to remain in a classification level that most appropriately reflects their opportunities."

Swartos said there are a "handful" of schools in the state where 100% of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunches. Others are in the 50% to 60% range. He said one school has just 3% of its students that qualify.

Board member Eric Denning of Mount Vernon asked if the federal policy of making lunches available to all students has put a crimp in the number of parents filling out the proper paperwork.

"We still pushed them to do it," said board chairman Tom Culver of Avon. "Our federal funding is based on those numbers."

Swartos characterized as "sad" the notion that some parents may be more willing to fill out the proper forms if they know that it could change the school's basketball classification.

If a second reading is approved at the board's March meeting, the amendment will be on a ballot sent to member schools after its April meeting.



2022 SD Jr Snow Queen Court

1st Runner Up: Jr Miss Langford, Jordis Jenner

2nd runner up: Jr Miss Wolsey-Wessington, Tatum Luce

2022 SD Jr Snow Queen: Jr Miss Faulkton, Amelia Currington

3rd runner up: Jr Miss Groton, Gretchen Dinger

4th runner up: Jr Miss Clark, Samantha Brenden

Miss Congeniality: Jr Miss Watertown, Katie Leadabrand

2022 SD Snow Prince: Ramsey Skinner

2022 SD Snow Princess: Madelyn Crossley

(Photo from Official South Dakota Snow Queen Festival Facebook Page)

2021 LATC Fall President's List

WATERTOWN, SD... Lake Area Technical College President, Michael Cartney announces the current President's List. The President's List is a directory of outstanding students who, through their initiative and ability, have indicated a seriousness of purpose in their educational program. The President's List is limited to full-time students who have achieved a semester grade point average of 3.5 to 4.0. Students with a 4.0 have been noted by an *.

Local and area students so honored include:

Austin Anderson, Tiara DeHoet* and Kale Pharis.

USD Announces Fall 2021 Dean's List

VERMILLION, S.D. -- More than 2,200 students at the University of South Dakota are being honored for their high achievement during the fall 2021 semester with the release of the Dean's List.

Full-time, undergraduate students are named to the Dean's List if they received a 3.5 GPA for courses they took in the fall 2021 semester, and they had no incomplete or failing grades.

Locals on the Dean's List are: Ashley Rose Gustafson, Claremont; Kaylin Marie Kucker and Madison Rose Sippel, Groton; Madilyn Elizabeth Wright, Houghton; Moira Faith Duncan, Mellette; Benjamin Thomas Fischbach and Bess Coral Hogue Seaman, Warner.



Bisbee takes second at state Junior Talent Show

Anna Bisbee took second place in the Jr talent at the SD Junior Snow Queen contest. (Courtesy Photo)

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 6 of 72



Groton Dynamics Dance Team

The Groton Dynamics Dance Team performed at halftime of the boys basketball game with Webster. This photo is lifted from the GDILIVE.COM video.

Surplus Van for Sale

The Groton Area School District is accepting sealed bids for the sale of a 1994 Chevy Beauville Van with liftgate. For more information or to see the vehicle, contact Transportation Director, Damian Bahr, at 605-397-8117 or Damian.Bahr@k12.sd.us. Bids can be dropped off at the high school office (502 N 2nd Street, Groton, SD) or mailed to Groton Area School District PO Box 410, Groton, SD 57445. Envelopes should be marked "Van Bid." Bids will be opened on Friday, January 28 at 2:00 PM. (0112.0119)



Happy 90th Birthday Grandpa!

Wish him a happy
birthday by a
Benny-salute.
Honk and a Wave



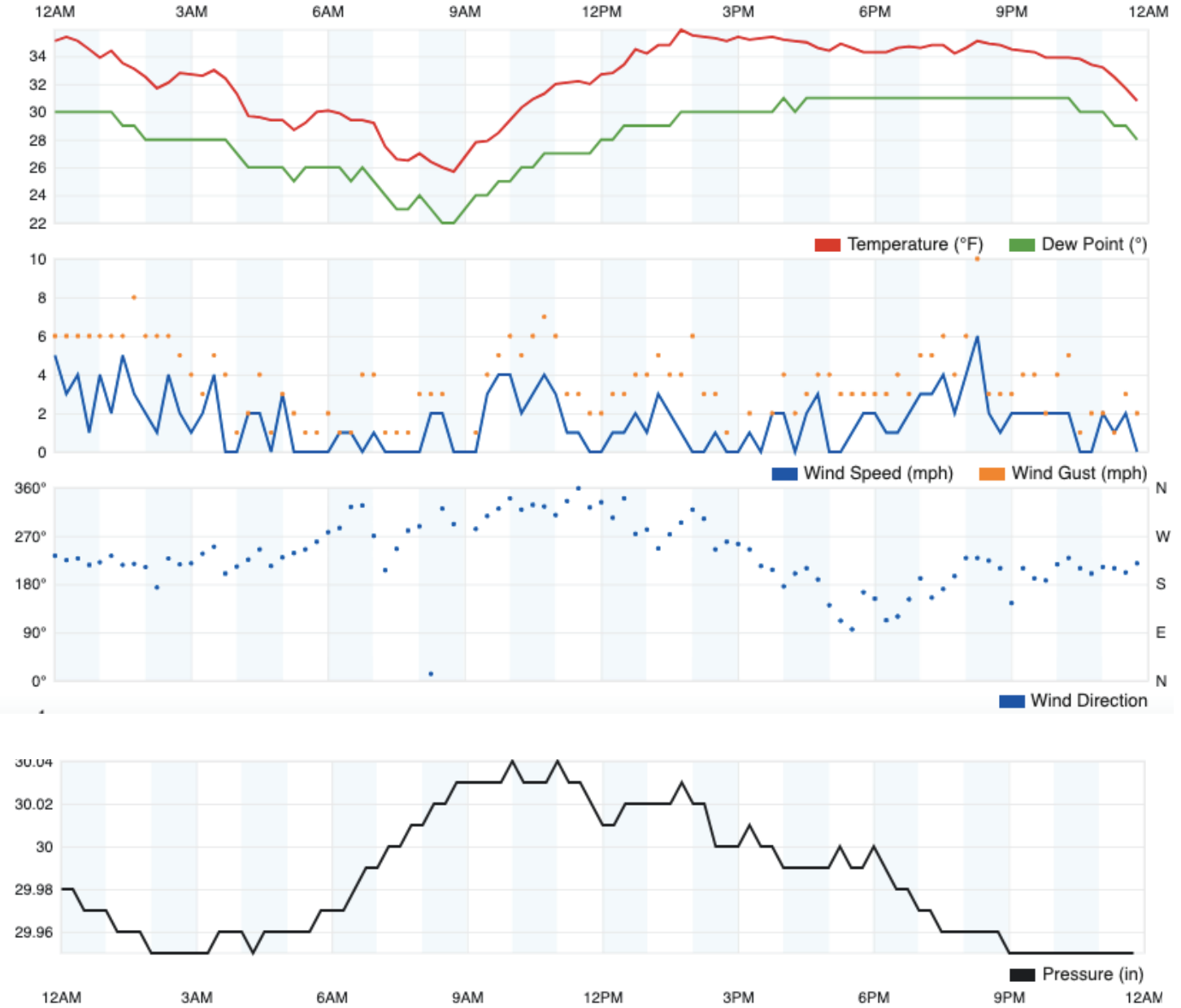
We Love You!

Laken, KO, Darinne, Riley, Brennan, Jace, Shea, and Ben

Groton Daily Independent

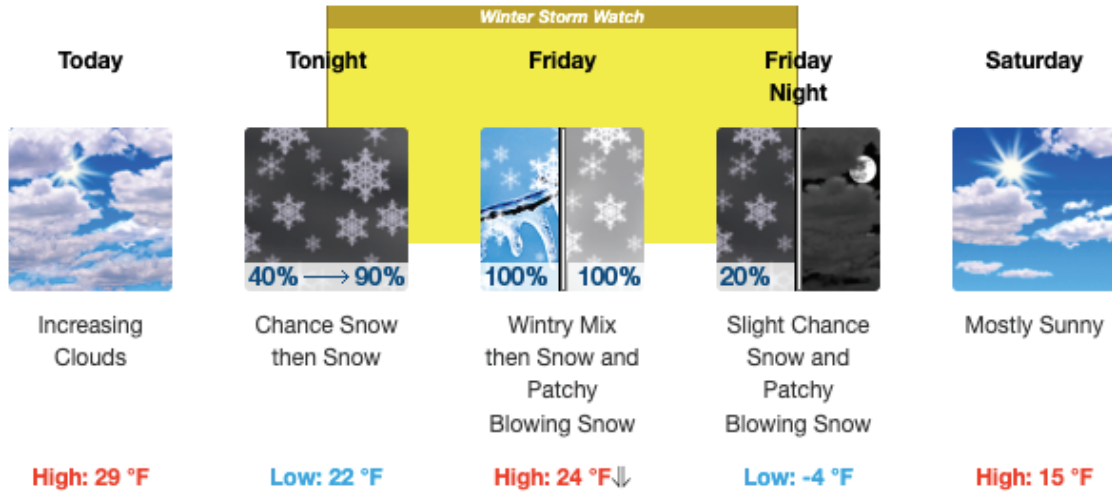
Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 8 of 72

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 9 of 72



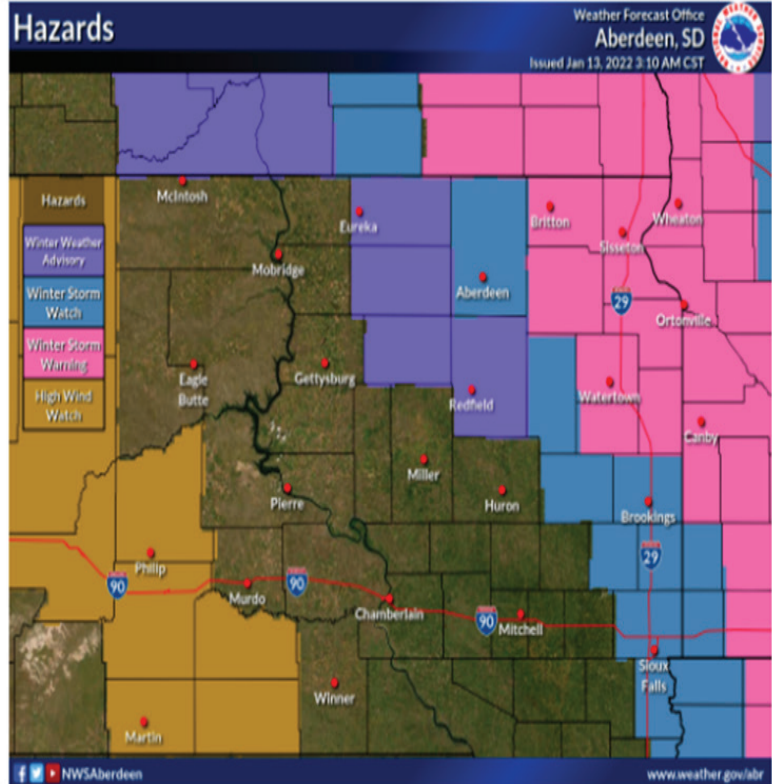
Moderate to Heavy Snow Friday

Plowable snow expected for areas east of the Missouri River

January 13, 2022 3:37 AM

Key Messages

- Moderate to heavy snow possible for northeast SD & western MN tonight through Friday.
- **Uncertainty:** Western extent of heavy snow remains in question. Most locations east of the Missouri River should receive at least an inch of snow.
- Strong northwest winds are possible over western SD, but the winds will be offset from the greatest snowfall.



Here is the synopsis for the system coming up. We are a little uncertain on the western extent of heavy snow, however the Sisseton hills and western Minnesota still look to be under the gun for a period of moderate to heavy snow tonight into Friday

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 10 of 72



Snowfall & Wind Timing

January 13, 2022
3:33 AM

Probability of Precipitation Forecast

	1/13 Thu			1/14 Fri						1/15 Sat			
	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am
Aberdeen	0	9	36	91	92	97	98	96	91	22	22	0	0
Britton	0	7	40	97	99	99	99	97	93	24	24	1	1
Eagle Butte		7	8	25	26	51	40	41	31	9	9	0	0
Eureka		12	56	74	75	97	97	92	62	14	14	0	0
Gettysburg	0	7	16	39	46	72	83	90	59	19	19	0	0
Kennebec		2	3	14	14	30	51	52	53	41	41	6	6
McIntosh		14	32	36	32	62	51	50	31	4	4	0	0
Milbank	0	2	17	84	96	99	99	99	99	45	45	4	4
Miller	0	3	15	41	54	68	88	92	73	45	45	3	3
Mobridge		12	28	46	46	85	82	80	51	11	11	0	0
Murdo		3	4	10	8	30	46	40	39	39	39	5	5
Pierre		6	6	19	21	31	54	53	52	32	32	1	1
Redfield	0	4	22	74	81	90	98	97	89	39	39	1	1
Sisseton	0	4	23	88	99	99	99	98	96	34	34	2	2
Watertown		1	20	92	97	99	99	99	99	48	48	4	4
Wheaton	0	3	17	79	95	99	98	97	89	27	27	1	1

Maximum Wind Gust Forecast

	1/13 Thu			1/14 Fri						1/15 Sat			
	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am
Aberdeen	12	15	16	18	22	20	23	28	31	31	26	24	18
Britton	14	14	16	18	24	21	26	30	30	29	23	22	17
Eagle Butte	14	21	22	23	23	33	45	47	45	38	30	25	22
Eureka	14	18	22	22	21	20	26	31	32	32	23	17	15
Gettysburg	13	20	23	23	22	22	32	39	39	37	29	26	22
Kennebec	12	17	18	21	21	17	32	41	41	37	28	28	23
McIntosh	16	18	22	22	21	26	40	45	43	36	26	20	15
Milbank	15	12	9	14	18	20	22	23	22	20	18	17	16
Miller	10	14	18	18	21	16	17	28	32	33	26	24	21
Mobridge	13	18	21	20	18	22	33	37	36	36	25	18	17
Murdo	13	18	22	22	20	29	44	48	47	39	30	29	25
Pierre	12	17	18	18	18	20	35	39	39	38	26	26	18
Redfield	13	14	16	20	21	21	16	25	31	33	24	23	20
Sisseton	15	9	10	17	20	21	22	24	24	23	20	20	17
Watertown	14	13	15	18	22	21	23	25	28	29	24	22	20
Wheaton	16	12	10	17	22	23	23	23	23	22	18	14	12



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Here is a look at when we can expect precipitation and wind to move into the area for a select number of cities. Heaviest snowfall is separate from strongest winds, so some uncertainty on how widespread blowing snow will impact travel. Stay tuned!

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 11 of 72

Today in Weather History

January 13, 1913: The temperature at Rapid City, South Dakota, rose sixty-four degrees in just fourteen hours.

January 13, 1916: An extreme cold affected central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota on January 13th, 1916. Record low temperatures were set at Kennebec, Timber Lake, Wheaton, and Watertown. Timber Lake recorded a low temperature of 37 degrees below zero. Wheaton fell to 38 degrees below zero. Kennebec recorded a low of 39 degrees below zero, with 40 degrees below zero recorded at Watertown on this day in 1916. Aberdeen and Mobridge recorded 38 degrees below zero and 36 degrees below zero, respectively.

January 13, 2009: After a clipper system dropped from 1 to 4 inches of snow on the 13th, Arctic air and blustery north winds pushed into the area. The coldest air and the lowest wind chills of the season spread across much of central and northeast South Dakota. Wind chills fell to 35 to 50 degrees below zero late in the evening of the 13th and remained through the 14th and into the mid-morning hours of the 15th. Across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota, wind chills were as low as 60 degrees below zero by the morning of the 15th. Many vehicles did not start because of the extreme cold, and several schools had delayed starts. The Arctic high-pressure area settled in on the morning of the 15th, bringing the region's coldest temperatures in many years. The combination of a fresh and deep snowpack, clear skies, and light winds allowed temperatures to fall to record levels at many locations on the 15th. Daytime highs remained well below zero across the area. This was one of the coldest days that most areas experienced since the early 1970s. The records were broken by 1 to as much as 7 degrees. Some of the record lows included -30 degrees at Kennebec; -31 degrees at Sisseton; -32 degrees at Milbank; -33 degrees at Mobridge; -35 degrees at Andover and near Summit; -38 degrees at Eureka; -39 degrees 8 miles north of Columbia and Castlewood; -42 degrees at Aberdeen; and -47 degrees at Pollock. Some near-record low temperatures included -24 degrees at Pierre, -29 degrees at Redfield and Victor; -32 degrees at Roscoe; and -34 degrees at Watertown. In Aberdeen, the low temperature of -42 degrees is the third coldest temperature ever recorded.

1862: Known as the Great Flood of 1862, a series of storms from December 1861 to January 1862 produced the largest flood in the recorded history of Oregon, Nevada, and California. Estimated property damage in California alone was \$10 million in 1862 dollars. More than 200,000 head of cattle lost their lives. The State of California went bankrupt, and the economy evolved from ranching to farm-based. The same areas are expected to be flooded again if another ARkStorm (USGS name) impacts California, which could cause over \$750 billion (2011 USD), making it more disastrous than California's long-overdue major earthquake. California is currently overdue for a Megastorm, and such an event would have severe impacts on the entire U.S. economy.

1886 - A great blizzard struck the state of Kansas without warning. The storm claimed 50 to 100 lives, and eighty percent of the cattle in the state. (David Ludlum)

1888 - The mercury plunged to 65 degrees below zero at Fort Keough, located near Miles City MT. The reading stood as a record for the continental U.S. for sixty-six years. (David Ludlum)

1912 - The temperature at Oakland, MD, plunged to 40 degrees below zero to establish a state record. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1950: January 1950 was one of the worst winter months on record for Seattle, Washington, and surrounding areas. By the end of the month, Seattle measured 57.2 inches of snow, the most snowfall in any month since records began in 1894. The normal January snowfall is 1.4 inches. On this day, a crippling blizzard produced 40 to 50 mph winds and an astounding 20 inches.

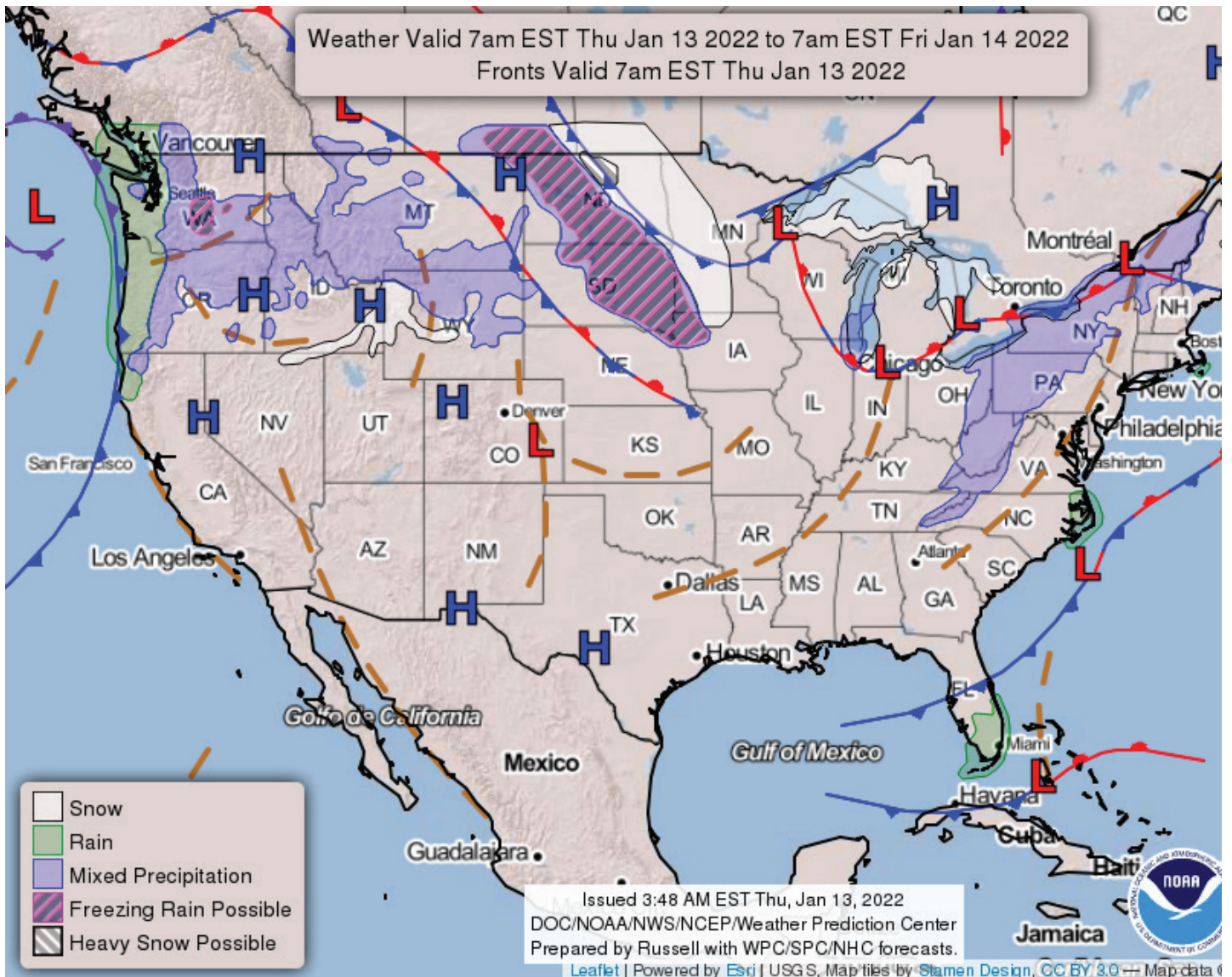
Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 12 of 72

Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 36 °F at 1:47 PM
Low Temp: 26 °F at 8:40 AM
Wind: 10 mph at 8:11 PM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 56 in 1987
Record Low: -40 in 1912
Average High: 23°F
Average Low: 2°F
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.26
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.26
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:14:45 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:07:04 AM



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 13 of 72



SOMETHING TO "CROW" ABOUT!

Early each morning, often before the sun rises, a "rooster" who lives nearby sends a message announcing to his neighbors that "a new day has arrived - get up and go."

For some, this is unwelcomed news. But for others it is an announcement that a new day has dawned, and there are new opportunities to serve and honor God.

How "roosters" got their name is interesting. All birds - and chickens are considered birds - "roost" at night. So, the one that wakes up first and "leaves the roost" and begins to "crow" is considered "the" rooster. What makes a rooster crow is not known. But how a rooster crows, is.

A rooster never crows with his neck bent and his head down. Whenever he crows, he lifts up his head proudly as if he is thanking his Creator. Roosters never crow with their heads bent.

Psalm 111:1 reminds me of the cry of a rooster as a good way to begin each day. "Praise the Lord! I will extol the Lord with all my heart." Why? The Psalmist then gives thirteen reasons:

"Great are the works of the Lord."

"Glorious and majestic are His deeds."

"His righteousness endures forever."

"The Lord is gracious and compassionate."

"He provides food for those who fear - stand in awe - of Him."

"He has shown His people the power of His world."

"The words of the hands are faithful - trustworthy - steadfast - upright - just - and He provides redemption."

Prayer: How great You are, Heavenly Father, for Your great gifts. Without shame or hesitation, we shout of Your greatness every day! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Praise the LORD. I will extol the LORD with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly. Great are the works of the LORD; they are pondered by all who delight in them. Psalm 111:1-2

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 14 of 72

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

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 15 of 72

The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

02-06-27-30-35

(two, six, twenty-seven, thirty, thirty-five)

Estimated jackpot: \$50,000

Lotto America

12-19-27-37-45, Star Ball: 9, ASB: 2

(twelve, nineteen, twenty-seven, thirty-seven, forty-five; Star Ball: nine; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$6.24 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$325 million

Powerball

12-21-22-30-33, Powerball: 24, Power Play: 4

(twelve, twenty-one, twenty-two, thirty, thirty-three; Powerball: twenty-four; Power Play: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$38 million

South Dakota AG unable to fund office for missing Indigenous

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg told state lawmakers Wednesday that he has been unable to find funds to hire someone to coordinate tribal, state and local law enforcement agencies to investigate missing Indigenous people.

The Legislature last year established a one-person office under the attorney general's office to coordinate law enforcement efforts across agencies as the state saw high numbers of Native American people, especially women, go missing. But the office did not receive a budget allocation, and lawmakers said they hoped it could be funded with federal or tribal funds.

That has not happened, Ravnsborg said Wednesday, calling it "basically an unfunded mandate."

He pointed to his work to bolster the state's website that lists missing people and claimed he had tried to raise the issue of funding in conversations with tribal leaders.

Rep. Peri Pourier, the Democrat who proposed the position last year, said tribal lobbyists had been working on getting federal funding for the attorney general's office, but were waiting on a formal request from the state.

Ravnsborg said his office has requested an allocation for the position in this year's state budget.

Lawmakers will shape the budget during the nine-week legislative session that started this week.

South Dakota Chief Justice's speech pushing care for staff

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Supreme Court Chief Justice Steven R. Jensen on Wednesday requested \$5 million to bolster court security while updating the Legislature on how the state's court system is tackling sexual harassment, mental health for judges and a shortage of court reporters.

In his annual State of the Judiciary Speech, Jensen said he has prioritized the staff of the state's court system as he has overseen the judicial system during the pandemic.

He explained that there is a growing awareness of the mental health risks judges face as they make decisions, such as child custody and prison sentences, that have long-term impacts on people's lives. With

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 17 of 72

the added pressure of the pandemic, there is a growing risk for burnout, depression and substance abuse among judges, Jensen said. The state's courts have created a program that allows judges to reach out for help and a referral for counseling.

"I firmly believe that maintaining excellence in our courts must start by focusing on the greatest resource that we have in the court system, and that is our people," he told the Legislature.

With the Legislature weighing how to spend plentiful funds this year, Jensen requested \$5 million for a grant program that would outfit county courthouses with features like security doors and ballistic glass.

He raised concerns about a shortage of court reporters, saying there was not a training program for the profession and the state's courtrooms would soon face a shortage of court reporters as many move to retire. He said the court system is studying ways to address the shortage.

Jensen also highlighted how the state's court system was trying to address the findings of a survey from the state bar that roughly one-quarter of respondents had experienced sexual harassment while working in the legal system. The court system has instituted mandatory sexual harassment training, as well as an ombudsman position in the state bar.

Jensen said it was his goal "to ensure that every person involved in the legal profession is treated with dignity and respect."

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. January 11, 2022.

Editorial: (More) Help Wanted For Finding More Help

South Dakota lawmakers have officially convened in Pierre for the start of the 2022 legislative session, which figures to be intriguing as the state contemplates what to do with more than \$200 million in federal aid for one-time projects.

In Tuesday's Press & Dakotan, local lawmakers said there are all kinds of requests for funds in the pipeline — with more money being asked for than is available, which is not uncommon in any year. There are also concerns about investing one-time funding into programs with ongoing costs, since that will result in more expense for taxpayers in future years.

One area that genuinely should see an investment in funding is in workforce recruitment — that is, attracting more workers to this state to address the acute shortage of manpower for jobs available.

This is not a new idea, of course, as state programs are already established to entice workers here, or to at least keep people some who might be looking elsewhere to stay at home.

But something more aggressive is needed. The state should seriously consider investing more in programs and outreach efforts to lure immigrant workers to South Dakota in order to meet the labor demands that exist and that are continually growing.

While the pandemic has painfully highlighted the shortages this state faces on the labor front, the lack of manpower was a problem years before we ever became acquainted with COVID. We have an aging population with a large wave headed toward retirement, a small younger base and, as a result, not enough bodies to fill the open slots.

Many communities, including Yankton, are already turning to immigrant labor to meet this demand, but to date, it hasn't been enough.

For instance, one problem on this front appears to be the severe restrictions on refugees imposed in recent years. South Dakota Public Broadcasting noted a multi-year decline in refugees settling in the state, having dropped from 439 in 2016 to just 52 last year. Nationally, the number of refugees allowed dropped from 85,000 in 2016 to just 18,000 in 2020, according to Lutheran Social Services. That number is expected to grow to 125,000 this year, with about half of that total anticipated to come from Afghanistan.

South Dakota needs programs that will enhance its ability to attract foreign laborers here. Every state is in the same predicament, so being more aggressive on this front is essential to keep up.

Investing in such recruitment can pay self-sustaining dividends in new wages and income growth for

companies reaping the benefits from an expanded labor pool. Owning one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country is a double-edged sword. Having more workers available for jobs and to pursue industrial expansion is essential to the state's economic future.

Hopefully, some ideas will emerge — and some bills will be introduced — along these lines. Aggressively attracting new workers seems like a vital investment opportunity that should be pursued.

END

Sen. Rounds pushes GOP to get 'louder' on false Trump claims

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds of South Dakota has been telling people for the last year that the 2020 election was fair, but this week he did something few other Republicans have dared — tell a national audience that.

Now he wishes more Republicans would join him.

Rounds, who is in his second Senate term, has been telling local newspapers, radio shows and Rotary clubs in South Dakota that he checked out the allegations of election fraud made by former President Donald Trump and, while there were some "irregularities," they all came up empty of anything that could counter the truth that Trump lost. So, when ABC News' "This Week" asked the senator to appear on its Sunday show to discuss the Jan. 6, 2020, attack on the Capitol, Rounds said his decision was simple: "Well, of course I will."

But the backlash from speaking was swift. Rounds said he wasn't looking to pick a fight with Trump, but that's exactly what happened. The former president called Rounds a "jerk" in a statement. Rounds stood by what he said, and argued there are many more Republicans like him — and they need to speak up.

"If we want to keep the trust and gain the trust of more individuals that are wondering, we have to probably say it a little bit louder and in more places that many of us normally either aren't invited to talk or have chosen not to get into the fray," Rounds told The Associated Press in an interview this week.

Rounds got backup after Trump's attack from several high-profile Republicans, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and fellow South Dakotan Sen. John Thune, who has had his own run-ins with Trump. But with the GOP still largely in the former president's grip, it's not clear whether Rounds' defiance represents a slip in that grasp or whether he's a lonely voice in the party.

Republicans have mostly avoided public talk of the deadliest domestic attack on Congress in the nation's history, calling memorials and inquiries into the insurrection "politicized." And Trump has clung to the notion that the election was stolen from him. In an interview Tuesday with National Public Radio, the former president said it was an "advantage" for Republicans to keep alleging fraud and that Rounds was "totally wrong."

Some Republicans have worried that Trump's attacks will wind up hurting the party, depressing turnout by conservatives and damaging them in future elections.

That's a point Rounds made. He wants to move on from Trump's baseless election fraud claims, but not before making it clear that Trump lost — fair and square. He said the party risks losing credibility and voters if Trump is allowed to undermine trust in the democratic process.

"We have to be more aggressive in reassuring conservatives that their vote counts," Rounds said, adding "to give them reassurance that they can trust us and that we will speak the truth. And even if it's the hard truth that's hard to swallow, we're not going to lie to them."

In South Dakota, the reaction to Trump's attack on Rounds has so far been muted compared to the backlash Thune faced last year when Trump lashed out at him for saying that the attempt to overturn the election would "go down like a shot dog" in the Senate.

Gov. Kristi Noem, who has aligned herself more closely with Trump than any other South Dakota politician, said Tuesday she was not aware of the exchange between Rounds and Trump. And Jeff Holbrook, the chair of the Pennington County GOP, one of the state's largest county parties that held "Stop the Steal" rallies in support of Trump after the 2020 election, said he had seen little reaction to Trump's attack on Rounds.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 19 of 72

Rounds said he has heard plenty about the exchange, acknowledging that some reaction was negative, but he said the "vast majority" was from people thanking him for speaking up.

Trump jabbed at Rounds by saying he only had courage to make those remarks because he doesn't face reelection until 2026, and he pledged that he would never again endorse Rounds.

Rounds acknowledged that some Republicans facing earlier primaries would not "disappoint a part of the base that really does have a loyalty to the former president."

But he argued it could be done, pointing to Thune, who recently mulled retirement before announcing last week he would seek another term. Though Thune has a large campaign fund and a seemingly clear path to reelection, he has drawn a handful of primary challenges from an insurgent group of conservatives seeking to unseat anyone who hasn't bought into the Trump brand of politics.

"He's not looking for a fight," Rounds said of Thune. "He just wants to be honest with the people."

One of Thune's challengers, Bruce Whalen, had cautionary words for Rounds.

"He needs to remember that South Dakota is predominantly MAGA and there are just so many angry people out there right now," Whalen said.

Drug charge filed after seniors consume marijuana brownies

TABOR, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota man is facing a felony drug charge after his mother unknowingly served his marijuana-laced brownies to a group of seniors at a local community center, according to officials.

The 46-year-old man is charged with possession of a controlled drug or substance, a felony that carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison and a \$10,000 fine upon conviction.

A report from Bon Homme County Deputy Sheriff Joel Neuman says dispatchers received several calls about possible poisonings on Jan. 4. All the calls involved seniors who had earlier been at a Tabor Community Center card game.

An investigation into the incident led Neuman to believe the patients were all under the influence of THC, the compound in cannabis that produces the high sensation and that the THC came from a batch of brownies brought by a woman to the community center, the Yankton Press and Dakotan reported.

Two seniors who ate the brownies identified the woman who brought them. The woman told Sheriff Mark Maggs that her son had baked the brownies she brought to the card game, according to the report. The woman gave Maggs the remainder of the brownies at her home.

Officials said the son admitted bringing some THC butter back from a recent visit to Colorado and using it to make the brownies.

He was arrested and released on an unsecured bond of \$3,000. An initial court appearance is scheduled Jan. 25.

China faces omicron test weeks ahead of Beijing Olympics

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Most access to a major city adjacent to Beijing was suspended Thursday as the government tried to contain an outbreak of the coronavirus's easily transmitted omicron variant ahead of next month's Winter Olympics in the Chinese capital.

Tianjin, a port and manufacturing center with 14 million people, is one of a half-dozen cities where the government is imposing lockdowns and other restrictions in response to outbreaks.

With the success of the Games and China's national dignity at stake, Beijing is doubling down on a "zero-tolerance" policy that has more than 20 million people under lockdown in Xi'an in the west and other cities. Some are barred from leaving their homes.

On Thursday, Tianjin suspended train, taxi, bus and ride-hailing services to other cities. Airline flights and high-speed train services were suspended earlier and highways closed. People leaving the city were required to present negative virus tests and receive special permission.

Trucks carrying food and medical will be allowed in but drivers were told to wear masks and take other steps to avoid transmitting the virus, according to a city government notice.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 20 of 72

Automaker Volkswagen AG said it shut down two factories in Tianjin on Monday and employees have been tested twice. "We hope to resume production very soon," it said in a statement.

Tianjin conducted mass testing for a second time Wednesday. The government asked residents to wait at home until they receive a negative result.

Tianjin's proximity to Beijing makes the timing particularly fraught. During the Tokyo Olympics in July, Japan saw a widespread outbreak driven by the delta variant.

Despite that, the disruptions for people in Tianjin remain relatively light.

"Everything is fine, the supermarkets and restaurants, you can go to all normally," said Yu Xuan, who works at a university in Tianjin.

Wang Dacheng, another resident, said his father who has trouble walking was able to get tested in their apartment.

"Tianjin people are pretty optimistic. Everyone's been very calm and collected," Wang said.

Elsewhere, restrictions in Xi'an, a city of 14 million people, and the central province of Henan have prompted complaints people sequestered in their apartments were running out of food.

China has imposed sweeping restrictions on movement since early 2020.

That started with the then-unprecedented step of sealing off 11 million people in the central city Wuhan, where the virus was first detected, and other parts of surrounding Hubei province.

The government also has prohibited most foreign travelers from coming into China and uses digital surveillance to track members of the public.

The measures have kept the virus from spreading into a full-fledged national outbreak so far. The country's vaccination rate now tops 85%.

The task has become more critical as support staff for the Olympics arrive ahead of the Feb. 4 start of the Games.

"I think it truly is a critical juncture for China. Can it stave off omicron?" said Dali Yang, a Chinese politics expert at the University of Chicago.

China reported 124 domestically transmitted cases on Thursday, including 76 in Henan province and 41 in Tianjin.

Authorities have reported a total of 104,379 cases since the pandemic began and 4,636 deaths, a figure that hasn't changed in months.

Anti-disease measures around the Olympics are stricter than Tokyo's, which were mostly effective in stopping transmission,, said Kenji Shibuya, research director at the Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research and a public health expert.

Beijing faces a potentially bigger risk because the more contagious omicron variant has shown itself adept at evading vaccines.

Moreover, the lack of widespread outbreaks means the Chinese population is protected only by vaccines and not by antibodies produced by previous infections, said Dr. Vineeta Bal, an Indian immunologist.

"The Olympics would be the first trial," said Bal. Omicron "can easily travel in China."

The Olympics are being conducted under a "closed loop" system that is meant to cut off all contact between athletes, journalists, staff and officials and the outside world.

They will travel between hotels and competition venues in special vehicles. Anyone who leaves the sealed environment will be required to quarantine for three weeks.

Police say anyone involved in a collision with an Olympics vehicle should avoid contact with people on board and wait for a special team to handle the situation.

Such measures should be able to prevent the spread of the virus within the bubble, said Kei Saito, a virologist at the University of Tokyo. But outside, it could be a different story.

"Omicron is three to four times more transmissible than delta," said Saito. "I think it's almost impossible to control the spread of omicron."

Organizers are determined the Games will go on despite the global pandemic and controversies including a U.S.-led diplomatic boycott over accusations of human rights abuses against mostly Muslim minorities

in China's northwest.

"The world is turning its eyes to China, and China is ready," said President Xi Jinping, who also is leader of the ruling Communist Party, during an inspection tour last week.

Italy marks 10 years since deadly Costa Concordia shipwreck

By TRISHA THOMAS and NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

GIGLIO, Italy (AP) — Italy on Thursday marked the 10th anniversary of the Costa Concordia cruise ship disaster with a daylong commemoration ending with a candlelight vigil marking the moment the ship slammed into a reef and then capsized off the Tuscan island of Giglio.

Church bells rang out as a commemorative Mass got underway in the Giglio church to honor the 32 people who died in the Jan. 13, 2012, shipwreck. It was the same church that opened its doors and took in hundreds of survivors on that freezing cold night, giving them shelter after they had arrived on shore in lifeboats, some of them having shimmied down the side of the liner.

"I invite you to have the courage to look forward," Grosseto Bishop Giovanni Roncari told relatives of the dead, survivors and the Coast Guard officials who helped coordinate the rescue that night. "Hope doesn't cancel the tragedy and pain, but it teaches us to look beyond the present moment without forgetting it."

Under a brilliant sun and blue sky, survivors and relatives later planned to place a wreath in the water where the hulking liner finally came to rest on its side off Giglio's coast. The Concordia's captain, Francesco Schettino, is serving a 16-year prison sentence for having ordered the crew to take the ship off course to come closer to Giglio in a stunt. He then delayed an evacuation order and abandoned ship before all the passengers and crew were evacuated.

The 10th anniversary is also recalling how the residents of Giglio took in the 4,200 passengers and crew, giving them food, blankets and a place to rest, and then lived with the Concordia's wrecked carcass for another two years until it was righted and hauled away for scrap.

Those residents gave a warm welcome to Kevin Rebello, whose brother Russel Rebello, a Concordia waiter, was the last person unaccounted-for until crews finally discovered his remains while dismantling the ship in 2014 in a Genoa shipyard.

Kevin Rebello had become close to many Giglio residents during the months that divers searched for his brother. And on Thursday, as he arrived at the church for the commemorative Mass, he was given an award from the Civil Protection Agency.

"This is for him," Kevin Rebello told reporters as he clutched the plaque. "He would be proud of it."

The anniversary comes as the cruise ship industry, shut down in much of the world for months because of the coronavirus pandemic, is once again in the spotlight because of COVID-19 outbreaks that threaten passenger safety. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control last month warned people across-the-board not to go on cruises, regardless of their vaccination status, because of the risks of infection.

For Concordia survivors, the COVID-19 infections on cruise ships are just the latest evidence that passenger safety still isn't a top priority for the industry. Passengers aboard the Concordia were largely left on their own to find life jackets and a functioning lifeboat after the captain delayed an evacuation order until it was too late: many lifeboats were unable to lower to the water because the ship was listing too heavily.

Passenger Ester Percossi recalled being thrown to the ground in the dining room by the initial impact of the reef gashing into the hull, which she said felt "like an earthquake." The lights went out, and bottles, glasses and plates flew off the tables and onto the floor.

"We got up and with great effort went out on the deck and there we got the life vests, those that we could find, because everyone was grabbing them from each other, to save themselves," she recalled. "There was no law. Just survival and that is it."

Costa didn't respond to emails seeking comment on the anniversary.

Cruise Lines International Association, the world's largest cruise industry trade association, stressed in a statement to The Associated Press that passenger and crew safety was the industry's top priority, and that cruising remains one of the safest vacation experiences available.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 22 of 72

"Our thoughts continue to be with the victims of the Concordia tragedy and their families on this sad anniversary," CLIA said. It said it has worked over the past 10 years with the International Maritime Organization and the maritime industry to "drive a safety culture that is based on continuous improvement."

EXPLAINER: Where does Djokovic's Australian visa saga stand?

By STEVE McMORRAN Associated Press

Novak Djokovic was included in the draw for the Australian Open — but he's still waiting to learn if he can stay in the country.

All eyes are now on Immigration Minister Alex Hawke, who must decide whether to deport the tennis star, effectively overruling a judge who said Djokovic could stay in Australia despite questions about his exemption to COVID-19 vaccination rules.

It's a decision that has legal, political, sporting and diplomatic consequences.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Australia has strict rules requiring vaccination against the coronavirus to enter the country. Djokovic's case is all about whether he had a valid exemption to those rules.

His lawyers have argued that since he had COVID-19 in December, he did. Victoria state government and Tennis Australia, the tournament organizer, approved that exemption, apparently allowing him to receive a visa to travel.

But federal government lawyers have argued an infection is only grounds for an exemption in cases where the coronavirus caused severe illness.

It's not clear why he was issued a visa if that's the case. Tennis Australia has complained that guidelines on exemptions were confusing and changed frequently.

The Australian Border Force revoked Djokovic's visa on arrival. They put him in an immigration detention hotel and intended to deport him.

But when the case went before a judge, he ruled in Djokovic's favor — on procedural grounds, saying the tennis player didn't get enough time to consult with his lawyers at the border.

WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

Hawke's office will consider the original decision to grant Djokovic a visa.

It will also likely consider the fact that Djokovic's travel declaration form contains errors. The tennis player acknowledged Wednesday on social media that the form incorrectly says he hadn't traveled in 14 days prior to his arrival in Australia.

Djokovic blamed "human error" by his support team and said it wasn't deliberate.

The immigration minister has significant discretion in the matter and can revoke Djokovic's visa again and deport him on public health grounds, character grounds and for a variety of other reasons.

While deliberating on the Djokovic case, Hawke is said to have separated his office from other parts of the government to avoid any impression of political interference.

WHAT HAPPENS IF AUSTRALIA REVOKES HIS VISA AGAIN?

Djokovic's lawyers are expected immediately to seek an injunction. That would send the matter back to Federal Court, and that could take a while to play out.

It could mean he's able to compete in the Australian Open in the meantime — attempting to win a record 21st Grand Slam title. Tournament organizers included him in the draw Thursday, and he is slated to play fellow Serb Miomir Kecmanovic next week.

But Djokovic also might have to return to a detention facility during the legal proceedings.

If he is ultimately deported, he might not be able to reapply for an Australian visa for three years. Djokovic is 34, and such a hiatus might mean he won't have another chance to win the Australian title.

WHAT IS THIS ABOUT HIM NOT ISOLATING AFTER BECOMING INFECTED?

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 23 of 72

It's not clear if this would affect his Australian visa, but Djokovic was out in public after his positive coronavirus test.

In his statement Wednesday, Djokovic acknowledged that he kept a date for an interview in December with French newspaper L'Equipe after learning he was positive — saying he maintained his distance from the journalists and was masked, except during a photo shoot. The writer who interviewed him said he has since tested negative; he did not mention the photographer.

Djokovic said he went ahead with the interview because he "didn't want to let the journalist down" but conceded it was an "error of judgment."

After the interview, he said he followed isolation rules. At the time, Serbia required those infected with COVID-19 to isolate for at least 14 days. But Djokovic was seen a little over a week after his positive test on the streets of Belgrade, though he said he had tested negative in between.

Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic indicated that her government will take a stand once it gets all the facts about Djokovic's whereabouts during the isolation period, but it has yet to publicly react.

HOW DO AUSTRALIANS FEEL ABOUT THIS?

Public support seems to have ebbed and flowed for Djokovic during the drama.

The initial decision to grant the unvaccinated star an exemption led to an outcry. Many felt Djokovic was being given special treatment, since Australians have faced almost two years of strict border controls during the pandemic.

Some also looked askance at allowing a prominent vaccine skeptic an exemption to pass through the border in a country in which 91.3% of the eligible population is vaccinated.

Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce summed up that discontent.

"The vast majority of Australians ... didn't like the idea that another individual, whether they're a tennis player or ... the king of Spain or the queen of England, can come up here and have a different set of rules to what everybody else has to deal with," he said.

But this drama has had a lot of plot twists.

Public sympathy turned a little in Djokovic's favor when he was held for four days in an immigration detention hotel. And when the Federal Circuit Court ruled in his favor, there was concern the mishandling of the visa cancellation painted Australia in a bad light.

More recent revelations of Djokovic's behavior after he tested positive may have swung the pendulum against him again.

Back in his native Serbia, many have rallied to Djokovic's side, particularly the country's politicians.

WHAT IS THE POLITICS OF THIS?

When news broke last week that Djokovic had been detained at the border and his visa canceled, Prime Minister Scott Morrison was quick to embrace the decision.

Morrison's government had been under pressure as the omicron variant swept across Australia, raising questions about his recent strategy to loosen restrictions. He may have sensed a political win in a decision that made him look tough on immigration. He has had less to say since the court overturned the cancellation of Djokovic's visa, allowing the legal process to play out.

But Anthony Albanese, leader of the opposition Labor Party, has been scathing in his criticism of the government.

"This has been diabolical for Australia's reputation, just in terms of our competence here and it is extraordinary that as we are speaking we still don't know what the decision will be," Albanese said. "The decision should have been made before he was granted a visa. Either he was eligible or he wasn't."

EXPLAINER: How Europe is trying to deal with its gas crisis

By DAVID McHUGH AP Business Writer

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — Europe's natural gas crisis isn't letting up. Reserves are low. Prices are high.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 24 of 72

Utility customers are facing expensive bills. Major Russian supplier Gazprom isn't selling gas like it used to.

It all raises the question: How exactly is Europe, which imports most of its energy, going to make it through the winter without a gas disaster, especially if the season turns out to be colder or longer than usual?

Here's how the European Union, home to 447 million people, will try to deal with the crisis:

THE PROBLEM IS LOW STORAGE LEVELS: Utilities turn to gas stored in underground caverns to handle sudden additional demand for gas for heating or electricity. Europe started 2021 with gas storage only 56% full, compared with 73% a year earlier. The reasons vary: cold weather last winter, lack of Russian deliveries on the spot market and robust demand in Asia for liquid natural gas that comes by ship. Europe's association of pipeline operators says cold weather would mean needing to import 5% to 10% more gas than the maximum volumes observed in recent years to avoid the risk of shutoffs.

AS A RESULT, GAS PRICES HAVE SOARED: The benchmark price in Europe is around 80 euros per megawatt hour, more than four times its level of 19 euros at the start of 2021 and up from as low as 4 euros in 2020. Prices have eased from as much as nine times their level at the start of last year. That price shock is hitting utility bills, alarming consumers and politicians.

EUROPE IS RELYING ON HIGH PRICES ATTRACTING MORE SUPPLY: Analysts at Rystad Energy used ship-tracking data last month to watch 11 tankers bringing liquid natural gas, or LNG, to Asia make U-turns in the middle of the ocean to take advantage of lucrative sales in Europe. With prices so high, traders were tempted to divert cargoes to Europe even if they had to offer 100% of the price as compensation, analysts at data firm Energy Intelligence said.

"I wouldn't say that LNG is 100% enough, but it will play a very important role" in Europe's energy solution, said Xi Nan, head of liquid natural gas markets at Rystad. But she added a caveat: "Depending on how much Europe is willing to pay."

RUSSIA HASN'T SENT AS MUCH GAS: State-owned Gazprom has sold less short-term gas through its pipelines crossing Poland and Ukraine and hasn't filled as much of its European storage as it normally does, though it appears to be fulfilling its long-term contracts. Analysts believe Russia may be underlining its desire for Europe to approve the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to Germany that bypasses Poland and Ukraine. There also are increased tensions with Europe over Russian troop deployments near the Ukraine border.

A MILD WINTER IS KEY: Weather in Europe and Asia has so far been relatively mild, more liquid gas is on the way, and high prices have forced industries to use less by cutting back on production. Meanwhile, Norway, among Europe's suppliers, has stepped up with more pipeline gas.

"It means we can get through this winter with Russian flows being as low as they are," said James Huckstepp, manager for Europe, Middle East and Africa gas analytics at S&P Global Platts. "I wouldn't say crisis averted yet, because there is still risk of low temperatures, and there is very little storage buffer."

If there's an unexpected freeze, "you go to a more extreme scenario, and you could have forced cutoffs of gas — it would start with industry, but eventually the consumers are at risk," Huckstepp said.

IN THE SHORT TERM: European governments are offering cash subsidies to consumers to soften the blow. Sweden became the latest Wednesday by announcing 6 billion kronor (\$661 million) to help households most affected by higher electric prices.

LONGER TERM: The solution is more investment in renewables such as wind and solar. Yet officials concede gas will play a role for years during that transition.

POLITICAL UNREST IN KAZAKHSTAN ISN'T CONTRIBUTING: The resource-rich Central Asian country supplies oil to the EU — but not gas — and the oil flow wasn't affected by violent protests that began over soaring fuel prices but quickly spread, reflecting wider discontent over Kazakhstan's authoritarian government.

IF ALL ELSE FAILS: EU legislation requires countries to help each other in the case of a gas shortfall. Governments can declare a gas emergency and shut off industrial customers to spare households, hurting the economy but sparing a humanitarian and political disaster.

In theory, they can demand cross-border gas supplies from each other. In recent years, Europe has built

more reversible pipeline connections but not enough to cover the entire continent, leaving some countries more exposed than others.

Yet the system has never been tested, and there are questions about how willing countries would be to share gas in a crisis. The European Commission, the EU's executive branch, is working on revising the rules to include joint gas purchases but on a voluntary basis, said Ruven C. Fleming, energy law blogger and assistant professor at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.

The revision "is a quite clear indication that even those who installed the mechanism don't think it would work very well," Fleming said.

French teachers go on strike over handling of pandemic

PARIS (AP) — French teachers have walked out in a nationwide strike Thursday to express anger at the way the government is handling the virus situation in schools, denouncing confusing rules and calling for more protection.

Exhausted by the pressures of surging COVID-19 cases, a large majority of teachers were expected to support the call by 11 unions to protest virus-linked class disruptions and ever-changing isolation rules.

Unions have staged a street protest in Paris city center on Thursday afternoon.

France is at the epicenter of Europe's current fight against COVID-19, with new infections topping 360,000 a day this week, driven by the highly contagious omicron variant. Teachers are upset and want clarifications on rules and more protections, such as extra masks and tests to help with the strain.

"The month of January is a tough one (for schools)," Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer acknowledged on France 2 television. His ministry counted 50,000 new COVID-19 cases among students in "recent days" and a huge number of classes shut down due to the virus: 10,553. The figures are expected to worsen in the coming weeks.

Unions estimated that 62% to 75% of teachers were supporting the protest movement, depending on which school they're posted. The government said 27% of teachers were on strike.

The SNUIPP teacher's union says discontentment is rising among French teachers. Since Jan. 6, authorities have already imposed two changes to the rules on testing schoolchildren, leaving many with whiplash.

"The situation since the start of the January school year has created an indescribable mess and a strong feeling of abandonment and anger among school staff," the union said.

SNUIPP is calling for a return to a previous rule that shuts classes down for a week if a child tests positive.

Teachers are also demanding higher quality masks, more testing at schools and devices in classes warning when ventilation is required.

The strike comes after French senators approved a bill requiring adults to provide proof of vaccination to enter restaurants and bars, cinemas, theaters, museums, sports arenas and inter-regional trains. Unvaccinated kids between 12 and 17 can show a negative test.

The measure will come into force after parliament approves the legislation by next week.

Biden highlighting federal 'surge' to help weather omicron

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is highlighting the federal government's efforts to "surge" military medical personnel to help overwhelmed medical facilities weather the spike in coronavirus cases and staff shortages due to the highly transmissible omicron variant.

Starting next week, 1,000 military medical personnel will begin arriving to help mitigate staffing crunches at hospitals across the country. Many facilities are struggling because their workers are in at-home quarantines due to the virus at the same time as a nationwide spike in COVID-19 cases. The new deployments will be on top of other federal medical personnel who have already been sent to states to help with acute shortages.

Biden planned to deliver remarks Thursday morning on the "surge response" to COVID-19, the White House said. The administration's focus is shifting to easing disruptions from the nationwide spike in cases

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 26 of 72

that is also contributing to grocery shortages and flight cancellations.

On Tuesday, Janet Woodcock, the acting head of the Food and Drug Administration, told Congress that the highly transmissible strain will infect "most people" and that the focus should turn to ensuring critical services can continue uninterrupted.

"I think it's hard to process what's actually happening right now, which is: Most people are going to get COVID, all right?" she said. "What we need to do is make sure the hospitals can still function — transportation, other essential services are not disrupted while this happens."

The White House said Biden would be joined by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, who recently recovered from his own case of COVID-19, and FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell. They will spotlight the work of the more than 800 military personnel who have been helping civilian hospitals since Thanksgiving and the more than 14,000 National Guard members whose work supporting vaccinations, testing and caring for patients is being covered by the federal government.

The White House said the trio would speak with federal personnel who are already on the ground in Arizona, Michigan and New York to hear about their experiences.

Biden will also announce that six additional military medical teams will be deployed to Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio and Rhode Island.

The White House said the teams will support Henry Ford Hospital just outside Detroit, University Hospital in Newark, the University of New Mexico hospital in Albuquerque, Coney Island Hospital in Brooklyn, Cleveland Clinic and Rhode Island Hospital in Providence.

UK ministers rally around embattled Boris Johnson, for now

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — With varying degrees of enthusiasm, senior British government ministers on Thursday expressed support for Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson and rejected demands he resign for attending a garden party during the country's first coronavirus lockdown.

Many other Conservatives held their tongues, waiting to see whether the crisis threatening Johnson's premiership will fade or intensify.

Johnson apologized in the House of Commons on Wednesday for attending a "bring your own booze" party in the garden of the prime minister's Downing Street office and residence in May 2020. About 100 staff were invited by a senior prime ministerial aide to what was billed as a "socially distanced drinks" event.

At the time Britons were banned by law from meeting more than one person outside their households as part of measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus. Millions were cut off from family and friends, and even barred from visiting dying relatives in hospitals.

Johnson said he understood public "rage," but stopped short of admitting wrongdoing, saying he had considered the gathering a work event to thank staff for their efforts during the pandemic.

Johnson urged people to await the conclusions of an investigation by senior civil servant Sue Gray into several alleged parties by government staff during the pandemic. Gray, a public service veteran with a reputation as a straight-shooter, is expected to report by the end of the month.

Johnson was spending Thursday holed up in Downing Street. A planned visit to a coronavirus vaccination center was called off after a family member tested positive for the coronavirus, the prime minister's office said.

Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis said Johnson's apology had been "very, very sincere" — but added that the prime minister did not believe he had done anything wrong.

"The prime minister has outlined that he doesn't believe that he has done anything outside the rules," Lewis told Sky News. "If you look at what the investigation finds, people will be able to take their own view of that at the time."

Gray does not have the power to punish officials, and Johnson did not say what he would do if she found he was at fault.

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss — often cited as a possible successor to Johnson — tweeted: "I stand behind

the Prime Minister 100% as he takes our country forward.”

Treasury chief Rishi Sunak, another potential rival for the top job, was more muted. He tweeted that “The PM was right to apologise and I support his request for patience while Sue Gray carries out her enquiry.” Sunak was notably absent from the House of Commons during Johnson’s statement on Wednesday; he was 200 miles (320 kilometers) away on a visit to southwest England.

Opposition politicians say Johnson should resign for attending the party and for his previous denials that any rule-breaking took place.

Many Conservatives fear the “partygate” scandal could become a tipping point for a leader who has weathered a series of other storms over his expenses, and his moral judgment.

Some have joined opposition calls for Johnson to quit. Douglas Ross, the leader of Conservatives in Scotland, said Johnson’s position “is no longer tenable.” Lawmaker Roger Gale called the prime minister a “dead man walking.”

If he does not resign, Johnson could be ousted by a no-confidence vote among party legislators, which would be triggered if 15% of Conservative lawmakers write letters demanding it. It’s unclear how many letters have already been submitted.

Labour Party home affairs spokeswoman Lisa Nandy said the police, and not just a civil servant, should be investigating.

“It’s strange that the police have not launched any kind of wider investigation given the number of pieces of evidence about what’s happening in Downing Street,” she said.

Nandy said there was “immense” public anger over the party revelations.

“Based on what I’m seeing pouring into my inbox this morning, I think the prime minister should not be confident that he’ll survive this,” she said.

Many Conservatives were waiting to see how reaction to the crisis develops in the coming days.

Conservative lawmaker Philip Dunne said the allegations were “very serious.”

“I think the prime minister was quite right to apologize yesterday, and I think it is right that we wait to see what the investigation from Sue Gray establishes,” he told Times Radio. “People will then have to suffer the consequences of whatever happens.”

Dems switch strategy on voting bill as Biden pushes action

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Democrats are trying to force a public showdown over their sweeping elections legislation, aiming to launch debate on a key party priority even though there’s no assurance the bill will come to a vote.

Majority Leader Chuck Schumer outlined the plan in a memo obtained Wednesday by The Associated Press, on the eve of President Joe Biden’s visit to meet privately with Senate Democrats about the path forward. It still leaves the Democrats in need of a way to force a vote on the legislation, now blocked by a Republican filibuster.

“We will finally have an opportunity to debate voting rights legislation — something that Republicans have thus far denied,” Schumer wrote in the memo to his Democratic colleagues, which described a work-around to avoid a Republican filibuster that for months has blocked formal debate over the legislation on the Senate floor. “Senators can finally make clear to the American people where they stand on protecting our democracy and preserving the right of every eligible American to cast a ballot.”

The strategy does little to resolve the central problem Democrats face — they lack Republican support to pass the elections legislation on a bipartisan basis, but also don’t have support from all 50 Democrats for changing the Senate rules to allow passage on their own. But the latest tactic could create an off-ramp from their initial approach, which was to force a vote by Monday on Senate filibuster changes as a way to pressure Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona to go along.

By setting up a debate, Schumer will achieve the Democrats’ goal of shining a spotlight that spurs senators to say where they stand. The floor debate could stretch for days and carry echoes of civil rights

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 28 of 72

battles a generation ago that led to some of the most famous filibusters in Senate history.

"I wouldn't want to delude anybody into thinking this is easy," Schumer told reporters Wednesday. He called the push an "uphill fight."

Democrats have vowed to counteract a wave of new state laws, inspired by Donald Trump's false claims of a stolen election, that have made it harder to vote. But after an initial flurry of activity, the Democrats' efforts have stalled in the narrowly divided Senate, where they lack the 60 votes to overcome a Republican filibuster, leading to their calls for a rule change.

Recently they have tried to breathe new life into the effort. Biden gave a fiery speech in Atlanta on Tuesday, where he told senators they would each be "judged by history" if they failed to act. He is to meet with Democratic senators at the Capitol on Thursday in a bid to jolt the effort forward.

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell gave a scathing rebuttal to Biden's speech Wednesday, objecting to his comparison of opponents of the voting legislation to racist historical figures, including George Wallace, the segregationist Alabama governor who ran for the presidency, and Jefferson Davis, who was the president of the Confederacy.

"You could not invent a better advertisement for the legislative filibuster than what we've just seen: a president abandoning rational persuasion for pure demagoguery," McConnell, R-Ky., said from the Senate floor. "A president shouting that 52 senators and millions of Americans are racist unless he gets whatever he wants is proving exactly why the framers built the Senate to check his power."

Asked Wednesday for a response to McConnell's comments, Biden turned, removed his black mask and said: "I like Mitch McConnell. He's a friend." That response came during Biden's trip to the Capitol to pay his respects to former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who died last month and was lying in state in the Rotunda.

Republicans are nearly unanimous in opposing the voting legislation, viewing it as federal overreach that would infringe on states' abilities to conduct their own elections. And they've pointed out that Democrats opposed changes to the filibuster that Trump sought when he was president.

For Democrats and Biden, the legislation is a political imperative. Failure to pass it would break a major campaign promise to Black voters, who helped hand Democrats control of the White House and Congress, and would come just before midterm elections when slim Democratic majorities will be on the line. It would also be the second major setback for Biden's agenda in a month, after Manchin halted work on the president's \$2 trillion package of social and environmental initiatives shortly before Christmas.

The current package of voting and ethics legislation would usher in the biggest overhaul of U.S. elections in a generation, striking down hurdles to voting enacted in the name of election security, reducing the influence of big money in politics and limiting partisan influence over the drawing of congressional districts. The package would create national election standards that would trump the state-level GOP laws. It would also restore the ability of the Justice Department to police election laws in states with a history of discrimination.

Many civil rights activists think Biden's push on voting rights is too-little-too-late in aggressively going after GOP-backed changes in state voting laws, which they view as a subtler form of ballot restrictions like literacy tests and poll taxes once used to disenfranchise Black voters. Some boycotted Biden's speech in Atlanta on Tuesday.

The New Georgia Project, a group founded by Georgia Democratic gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams, was among those that called on Biden to skip the speech.

"We've heard rhetoric like this before," the group said in a statement. "A goal without a plan is just a wish."

Schumer had set the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, on Jan. 17, as a deadline to either pass the voting legislation or consider revising the filibuster rules. It's unclear if the planned vote on rule changes will still happen.

Manchin, who played a major role writing Democrats' voting legislation, threw cold water on the hopes Tuesday, saying any changes should be made with substantial Republican buy-in — even though there aren't any Republican senators willing to sign on.

That befuddled South Carolina Rep. Jim Clyburn, the No. 3 Democrat in the House and a senior member of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Clyburn questioned the wisdom of reflexively seeking bipartisanship, noting that the right to vote was granted to newly freed slaves on a party-line vote.

"He seems to be supporting a filibuster of his own bill," Clyburn said of Manchin. "That, to us, is very disconcerting."

UK virus hunting labs seek to bolster global variant network

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The air conditioners hum constantly in the lab at the Wellcome Sanger Institute, countering the heat thrown off by rows of high-tech sequencing machines that work seven days a week analyzing the genetic material of COVID-19 cases from throughout the U.K.

The laboratory is one example of how British scientists have industrialized the process of genomic sequencing during the pandemic, cutting the time and cost needed to generate a unique genetic fingerprint for each coronavirus case analyzed. That made the U.K. a world leader in COVID-19 sequencing, helping public health authorities track the spread of new variants, develop vaccines and decide when to impose lockdowns.

But now researchers at the Sanger Institute in Cambridge and labs around the U.K. have a new mission: sharing what they've learned with other scientists because COVID-19 has no regard for national borders.

The omicron variant now fueling a new wave of infection around the world shows the need for global cooperation, said Ewan Harrison, a senior research fellow at Sanger. Omicron was first identified by scientists in southern Africa who quickly published their findings, giving public health authorities around the world time to prepare.

Since dangerous mutations of the virus can occur anywhere, scientists must monitor its development everywhere to protect everyone, Harrison said, drawing a parallel to the need to speed up vaccinations in the developing world.

"We need to be prepared globally," he said. "We can't just kind of put a fence around an individual country or parts of the world, because that's just not going to cut it."

Britain made sequencing a priority early in the pandemic after Cambridge University Professor Sharon Peacock identified the key role it could play in combating the virus and won government funding for a national network of scientists, laboratories and testing centers known as the COVID-19 Genomics UK Consortium. This allowed the U.K. to mobilize academic and scientific expertise built up since British researchers first identified the chemical structure of DNA in 1953.

The consortium is now backing efforts to bolster global sequencing efforts with a training program focused on researchers in developing countries. With funding from the U.K. government, the consortium and Wellcome Connecting Science plan to offer online courses in sampling, data sharing and working with public health agencies to help researchers build national sampling programs.

"There is inequity in access to sequencing worldwide, and (the project) is committed to contributing toward efforts that close this gap," the group said, announcing plans to offer the first courses early this year.

By sequencing as many positive cases as possible, researchers hope to identify variants of concern as quickly as possible, then track their spread to provide early warnings for health officials.

The U.K. has supplied more COVID-19 sequences to the global clearinghouse than any country other than the U.S. and has sequenced a bigger percentage of its cases than any large nation worldwide.

Researchers in the U.K. have submitted 1.68 million sequences, covering 11.7% of reported cases, according to data compiled by GISAID, which promotes rapid sharing of information about COVID-19 and the flu. The U.S. has supplied 2.22 million sequences, or 3.8% of its reported cases.

Most countries are doing some sequencing but the volume and speed varies greatly. While 205 jurisdictions have shared sequences with GSAID, more than half have sequenced and shared less than 1% of their total cases.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 30 of 72

Over the past two years, labs around the U.K. have refined the process of gathering and analyzing COVID-19 samples until it resembles just-in-time manufacturing strategies. Specific protocols cover each step — from swab to sequence to reporting — including systems to ensure that supplies are in the right place at the right time to keep the work flowing.

That has helped slash the cost of analyzing each genome by 50% while reducing the turnaround time from sample to sequence to five days from three weeks, according to Wellcome Sanger.

Increasing sequencing capacity is like building a pipeline, according to Dr. Eric Topol, chair of innovative medicine at Scripps Research in San Diego, California. In addition to buying expensive sequencing machines, countries need supplies of chemical reagents, trained staff to carry out the work and interpret the sequences, and systems to ensure that data is shared quickly and transparently.

Putting all those pieces in place has been a challenge for the U.S., let alone developing countries, Topol said.

Genomic sequencing “as a surveillance tool worldwide is essential, because many of these low- and middle-income countries don’t have the sequencing capabilities, particularly with any reasonable turn-around time,” he said. “So the idea that there’s a helping hand there from the Wellcome Center is terrific. We need that.”

At Wellcome Sanger’s state-of-the-art lab, samples arrive constantly from around the country. Lab assistants carefully prepare the genetic material and load it onto plates that are inserted into the sequencing units that decipher each sample’s unique DNA code. Scientists then analyze the data and compare it with previously identified genomes to track mutations and see if new trends are emerging.

With COVID-19 constantly mutating, the priority is to check for new more dangerous variants, including those that may be resistant to vaccines, Harrison said. The information is critical in helping researchers modify existing vaccines or develop new ones to combat the ever-changing virus.

Harrison praised South Africa for its work on the highly transmissible omicron variant and quickly sharing its research with international authorities. Unfortunately, many countries then restricted travel to South Africa, harming its economy.

Harrison said developing nations must be encouraged to publish data on new variants without fear of economic repercussions because punishing countries like South Africa will only hamper information sharing that is needed to combat COVID-19 and future pandemics.

“The key thing, obviously, is this constant routine surveillance,” he said. “And I think the most important step now is increasing that globally.”

For now, it also means lots of work, every day, to keep watch. But such vigilance has its benefits, said Tristram Bellerby, the lab’s manager.

“It’s been good to see that our work has been valuable in finding these new variants,” he said. “I hope at some point it could aid us in getting out of this situation we find ourselves in.”

Djokovic in Australian Open draw as visa saga continues

By JOHN PYE and ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Novak Djokovic remained in limbo even after he was included in the draw for the Australian Open on Thursday, with the tennis star still awaiting a government decision on whether to deport him for not being vaccinated for COVID-19.

Despite the cloud hanging over Djokovic’s ability to compete, Australian Open organizers included the top seed in the draw. He is slated to play fellow Serb Miomir Kecmanovic, who is ranked world No. 78., in the opening round next week.

No. 1-ranked Djokovic had his visa canceled on arrival in Melbourne last week when his vaccination exemption was rejected, but he won a legal battle on procedural grounds that allowed him to stay in the country.

Immigration Minister Alex Hawke has been considering the question since a judge reinstated Djokovic’s visa on Monday.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 31 of 72

Expectations of a pending decision were raised when Prime Minister Scott Morrison called an afternoon news conference after a national Cabinet meeting. Speculation heightened when the tournament draw was postponed by 75 minutes to a time after Morrison's news conference.

The wait continued after both events concluded, with Morrison referring questions on Djokovic to his immigration minister.

"These are personal ministerial powers able to be exercised by Minister Hawke and I don't propose to make any further comment at this time," Morrison said.

Australian Open tournament director Craig Tiley also declined comment after the draw ceremony for the tournament that starts Monday.

The 34-year-old Djokovic has been trying to focus his attention on the playing court in the four days since he was released from immigration detention. He held a practice session at Rod Laver Arena, his fourth this week, in the mid-afternoon.

He was on the practice court Wednesday when a statement posted on his social media accounts acknowledged that his Australian travel declaration form contained incorrect information.

In the statement, Djokovic blamed "human error" by his support team for failing to declare that he had traveled in the two-week period before entering Australia.

Giving false information on the form could be grounds for deportation. That could result in sanctions ranging up to a three-year ban from entering Australia, a daunting prospect for a player who has won almost half of his 20 Grand Slam singles titles here.

Djokovic acknowledged the lapses when he sought to clarify what he called "continuing misinformation" about his movements after he became infected last month. It also raised questions about his public appearances in Serbia last month, particularly a media interview he attended despite knowing he was positive.

It was another twist in a saga over whether the athlete should be allowed stay in Australia despite not being vaccinated.

The initial news that Djokovic was granted an exemption to strict vaccination rules to enter the country provoked an outcry and the ensuing dispute has since overshadowed the lead-up to the Australian Open.

Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce said most Australians disapproved of the nine-time and defending Australian Open champion coming to Melbourne to compete in breach of the nation's tough pandemic quarantine rules.

"Most of us thought because Mr. Djokovic hadn't been vaxxed twice that he would be asked to leave," Joyce said. "Well, that was our view, but it wasn't the court's view."

"The vast majority of Australians ... didn't like the idea that another individual, whether they're a tennis player or ... the king of Spain or the Queen of England, can come up here and have a different set of rules to what everybody else has to deal with," Joyce added.

The debate over Djokovic's presence in Australia rages against a backdrop of surging COVID-19 infections across the nation.

Victoria state, which hosts the Australian Open, on Thursday eased seven-day isolation rules for close contacts of those infected in sectors including education and transport to curb the number of employees staying away from work.

The state recorded 37,169 new cases in the latest 24-hour period on Thursday, as well as 25 deaths and 953 hospitalizations. With cases surging, the Victoria state government moved to limit ticket sales to the tennis tournament in a bid to reduce the risk of transmission.

Djokovic's visa status has been debated since he arrived more than a week ago, after posting on social media that he had received exemption permission.

At issue is whether he has a valid exemption to strict rules requiring vaccination to enter Australia since he recently recovered from COVID-19.

His exemption to compete was approved by the Victoria state government and Tennis Australia, the tournament organizer. That apparently allowed him to receive a visa to travel.

But the Australian Border Force rejected the exemption and canceled his visa upon arrival before a fed-

eral judge overturned that decision. Lawyers for the government have said an infection was only grounds for an exemption in cases in which the coronavirus caused severe illness — though it's not clear why he was issued a visa if that's the case.

If Djokovic's visa is canceled, his lawyers could go back to court to apply for an injunction that would prevent him from being forced to leave the country.

Rubble brings opportunity, and risk, in war-scarred Gaza

By FARES AKRAM Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — The Gaza Strip has few jobs, little electricity and almost no natural resources. But after four bruising wars with Israel in just over a decade, it has lots of rubble.

Local businesses are now finding ways to cash in on the chunks of smashed concrete, bricks and debris left behind by years of conflict. In a territory suffering from a chronic shortage of construction materials, a bustling recycling industry has sprouted up, providing income to a lucky few but raising concerns that the refurbished rubble is substandard and unsafe.

"It's a lucrative business," said Naji Sarhan, deputy housing minister in the territory's Hamas-led government. The challenge, he said, is regulating the use of recycled rubble in construction.

"We are trying to control and correct the misuse of these materials," he said.

Israel and Gaza's Hamas rulers have gone to war four times since the Islamic militant group, which opposes Israel's existence, seized control of the territory in 2007. The most recent fighting was in May. Israeli airstrikes have damaged or leveled tens of thousands of buildings in the fighting.

The United Nations Development Program says it worked with the local private sector to remove some 2.5 million metric tons of rubble left behind from wars in 2009, 2012 and 2014. Gaza's Housing Ministry says the 11-day war in May left an additional 270,000 tons.

The UNDP has worked on rubble recycling since Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Gaza. It also has played a key role in the latest cleanup, removing about 110,000 tons, or more than one-third of the rubble. That includes the Al-Jawhara building, a high-rise in downtown Gaza City that was damaged so heavily by Israeli missiles that it was deemed beyond repair. Israel said the building housed Hamas military intelligence operations.

Over the past three months, excavators lifted atop the building systematically demolished it floor by floor. Just one floor remains and the construction crews are now removing the building's foundations and pillars on the ground.

In a common scene outside every building destroyed by the war, workers separated twisted rebar iron from the debris, to be straightened out and re-used in things like boundary walls and ground slabs.

Israel and Egypt have maintained a crippling blockade on Gaza for the past 15 years, restricting the entry of badly needed construction materials. Israel says such restrictions are needed to prevent Hamas from diverting goods like concrete and steel for military use. Since 2014, it has allowed some imports under the supervision of the United Nations. But thousands of homes need to be repaired or rebuilt, and shortages are rampant.

The UNDP has put tight restrictions on its recycling effort. It says that renewed rubble is not safe enough for use in building homes and buildings. Instead, it allows it to be used only for road projects.

"We do not recommend any of the rubble to be used for any reconstruction as such, because it is not a good quality material for reconstruction," said Yvonne Helle, a UNDP spokeswoman. She said the metal is separated and returned to the buildings' owners because it "also has a value."

On a recent day, trucks trickled into a lowland in central Gaza near the Israeli frontier, carrying large chunks from the Al-Jawhara tower. The site, adjacent to a mountain of garbage serving as Gaza's main landfill, is overseen by the UNDP.

A wheel loader filled a bucket with debris that was tossed into a crushing machine. It produces large pieces of aggregate that the site supervisor said could be used as a base under the asphalt layer in street construction. Because of safety concerns, they are not allowed to crush the rubble into smaller aggregate

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 33 of 72

that could be used in house construction.

The trucks then return to Gaza City where the UNDP is funding a road project, providing a much-needed source of work in a territory with nearly 50% unemployment.

The U.N. road projects have provided a partial solution for the rubble problem, but most of Gaza's debris continues to make its way into the desperate private sector.

Sarhan, the Housing Ministry official, said it is forbidden to use recycled rubble in major construction. But he said enforcing that ban is extremely difficult and much of the material is creeping back into the local construction markets.

Ahmed Abu Asaker, an engineer from the Gaza Contractors' Union, said many brick factories use the local aggregate, which he said is not a "great concern." He said there have been a few isolated cases of it being mixed into concrete, which is far more dangerous.

There have not been any reports of building collapses. But Abu Asaker estimates that thousands of homes have been built with materials from recycled rubble since 2014.

Just north of the UNDP processing center, about 50 rubble crushers were hard at work at a private facility on a recent day, producing different kinds of aggregate.

The most popular items are the "sesame," which is used for making cinder blocks, and the "lentil-like" grind sent to cement-mixing factories.

Around the crushers were mounds of small aggregate, with tiny pieces of shredded plastic, cloth and wood clearly mixed in.

Antar al-Katatni, who runs a nearby brick factory, says he makes bricks using the sesame aggregate. He acknowledged the material has impurities like sand, but there is an upside. "It makes more bricks," he said.

He said engineers do not buy his blocks for internationally funded projects, because they are not allowed to do so, "but poor people do."

A brick costs two shekels, or about 65 cents, when it's made with higher quality Israeli-imported aggregate. The price for the ones he makes are slightly cheaper, at 1.7 or 1.8 shekels. When a typical project might require several thousand bricks, even the small price difference can add up for a poor family.

Sarhan said that given the blockade and Gaza's numerous other problems, it is difficult to regulate the gray market industry.

"We cannot patrol or control every citizen," he said. "That's why you may find someone used recycled rubble here or there."

GOP leader McCarthy says he won't cooperate with 1/6 panel

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House panel investigating the U.S. Capitol insurrection requested an interview and records from House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, as it continues to seek first-hand details from members of Congress on former President Donald Trump's actions on the day hundreds of his supporters brutally beat police, stormed the building and interrupted the certification of the 2020 election.

McCarthy issued a statement Wednesday saying he would refuse to cooperate. He said the investigation was not legitimate and accused the panel of "abuse of power."

Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, Democratic chairman of the panel, requested that McCarthy, R-Calif., provide information to the nine-member panel regarding his conversations with Trump "before, during and after" the riot. The request also seeks information about McCarthy's communications with former White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows in the days before the attack.

"We also must learn about how the President's plans for January 6th came together, and all the other ways he attempted to alter the results of the election," Thompson said in the letter. "For example, in advance of January 6th, you reportedly explained to Mark Meadows and the former President that objections to the certification of the electoral votes on January 6th 'was doomed to fail.'"

Without his cooperation, it remains unclear whether the panel will be able to gain testimony from McCarthy or any other congressional allies of Trump. While the committee has considered subpoenaing fellow

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 34 of 72

lawmakers, that would be an extraordinary move and could run up against legal and political challenges.

Lawmakers are seeking a window into Trump's state of mind from an ally who has acknowledged repeated interactions with the then-president. The committee also wants to question McCarthy about communications with Trump and White House staff in the week after the violence, including a conversation with Trump that was reportedly heated.

The committee acknowledged the sensitive and unusual nature of its request as it proposed a meeting with McCarthy on either Feb. 3 or 4. "The Select Committee has tremendous respect for the prerogatives of Congress and the privacy of its Members," Thompson wrote. "At the same time, we have a solemn responsibility to investigate fully the facts and circumstances of these events.

Democrats have been seeking more information about McCarthy's communications with Trump since the former president's second impeachment trial last year. At one point in the trial, Democrats said they would try and call Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Wash., as a witness because she had described a potentially pivotal call between the two men after hearing an account from McCarthy.

Herrera Beutler's statement said McCarthy told her he had asked Trump to publicly "call off the riot" and had said the violent mob was made up of Trump supporters, not far-left antifa members.

She said in the statement, "That's when, according to McCarthy, the president said, 'Well, Kevin, I guess these people are more upset about the election than you are.'"

In the end, Democrats read a statement from Herrera Beutler into the record. Trump, who had just left office, was acquitted by the Senate.

McCarthy had initially criticized Trump's actions after the 2020 election, saying he "bears responsibility" for the deadly Jan. 6 attack, which remains the most serious domestic assault on the building in its history.

"The saddest day I have ever had" in Congress, McCarthy said the night of the attack, even as he went on to join 138 other House Republicans in voting to reject election results.

The latest request from the panel also puts McCarthy face-to-face with its vice-chair, Rep. Liz Cheney, whom he dumped from the No. 3 House leadership position last summer as her very public criticism of Trump's lies about his 2020 election loss reverberated through the Republican Party.

The GOP leader had counseled Cheney to stay on message, but as she continued to warn the party off Trump's falsehoods, McCarthy groomed a newly transformed Trump acolyte, Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., as her replacement.

McCarthy is the third member of Congress the committee has reached out to for voluntary information. In the past few weeks, GOP Reps. Jim Jordan and Scott Perry were also contacted by the panel but have denied the requests to sit down with lawmakers or provide documents.

The panel, comprised of seven Democrats and two Republicans, has interviewed almost 350 people and issued public subpoenas to around 50 people and organizations as it seeks to create a comprehensive record of the Jan. 6 attack and the events leading up to it.

On Wednesday, former White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany spoke to the panel virtually, according to a person familiar with the interview who requested anonymity to discuss it. The committee subpoenaed McEnany in November.

The committee says the extraordinary trove of material it has collected — 35,000 pages of records so far, including texts, emails and phone records from people close to Trump — is fleshing out critical details of the worst attack on the Capitol in two centuries, which played out on live television.

Thompson told The Associated Press in an interview last month that about 90% of the witnesses subpoenaed by the committee have cooperated despite the defiance of high-profile Trump allies like Meadows and Steve Bannon. Lawmakers said they have been effective at gathering information from other sources in part because they share a unity of purpose rarely seen in a congressional investigation.

Abortion grows as priority issue for Democrats: AP-NORC poll

By HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With Roe v. Wade facing its strongest threat in decades, a new poll finds Demo-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 35 of 72

crats increasingly view protecting abortion rights as a high priority for the government.

Thirteen percent of Democrats mentioned abortion or reproductive rights as one of the issues they want the federal government to address in 2022, according to a December poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. That's up from less than 1% of Democrats who named it as a priority for 2021 and 3% who listed it in 2020.

Some other issues like the economy, COVID-19, health care and gun control ranked as higher priorities for Democrats in the poll, which allowed respondents to name up to five top issues. But the exponential rise in the percentage citing reproductive rights as a key concern suggests the issue is resonating with Democrats as the Supreme Court considers cases that could lead to dramatic restrictions on abortion access.

"The public have lots of things that they want to see government addressing," said Jennifer Benz, deputy director of The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. "You ask this kind of question in a time of economic turmoil and in the time of a pandemic and all of these other things going on, we might not expect abortion to rise to the top."

With a 6-3 conservative majority on the Supreme Court, Republicans see this as their best chance in years to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 decision legalizing abortion throughout the United States. In December, the Supreme Court left in place a Texas law that bans most abortions in the state and signaled during arguments that they would uphold a Mississippi law that bans abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy. That decision will be made public in June.

Calling the abortion polling numbers "stark," Benz noted that conventional wisdom holds that abortion is a motivating issue for Republicans and not for Democrats. Research from the 1980s and 1990s, Benz said, "regularly found that opponents of abortion had greater strength of attitudes and considered the issue important to them personally more than pro-choice people."

That may be changing. Sam Lau, senior director for advocacy media at the Planned Parenthood Action Fund, believes more Americans are recognizing this moment as a crisis for abortion access.

"I think what we have seen is absolutely an increase in awareness, an increase in urgency, an increase in the need to fight back," he said. "But I still actually think that huge swaths of this population still don't quite believe that the access to abortion and the 50-year precedent that is *Roe v. Wade* is really hanging in the balance."

The court's 1973 decision, reaffirmed in the 1992 ruling in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, allows states to regulate but not ban abortion up to the point of fetal viability, at roughly 24 weeks. If *Roe* and *Casey* are overturned in June, abortion would soon become illegal or severely restricted in roughly half the states, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a research organization that supports abortion rights.

That's just months ahead of midterm elections that are expected to be challenging for Democrats.

Lau thinks people are starting to recognize they "simply cannot rely on the courts to protect our rights and our access to essential health care."

"We are currently pushing for elected officials who are champions of sexual and reproductive health care to be bold and to go on offense and to pass proactive legislation to protect access to abortion," Lau said. "I think voters are going to go to the polls and want to vote for candidates who they can trust to protect their health care and their reproductive freedom."

Polling shows relatively few Americans want to see *Roe* overturned. In 2020, AP VoteCast, a survey of the electorate, showed 69% of voters in the presidential election said the Supreme Court should leave the *Roe v. Wade* decision as is; just 29% said the court should overturn the decision. In general, AP-NORC polling shows a majority of the public favors abortion being legal in most or all cases.

Still, Americans have nuanced attitudes on the issue, and many don't think that abortion should be possible after the first trimester or that women should be able to obtain a legal abortion for any reason.

For 41-year-old Rachelle Dunn, who knew girls in high school and women in college and her adult life who have needed abortions, it's "just health care."

"It's something that women I have known through my life have needed for different reasons," said Dunn, of Tarentum, Pennsylvania. "The government needs to step in because all of these laws are being written

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 36 of 72

and passed, but none of them are for medical reasons.”

She’s concerned about a domino effect from these Supreme Court cases, adding that she worries about how they will affect her two daughters’ futures, as well as her son’s.

“It just seems like, if it’s been affirmed, repeatedly, why are we still doing this?” Dunn said.

Nevada candidate seeks Trump’s favor with Florida TV spot

By SAM METZ AP/Report for America

CARSON CITY, Nev. (AP) — In a campaign ad, Nevada gubernatorial candidate Michele Fiore steps out of a Ford F-150 with a handgun holstered on her hip and tells viewers she was one of the first elected officials to endorse Donald Trump in the lead-up to the 2016 election.

“You better believe I was attacked for it,” Fiore says, affirming her commitment to the former president as a country rock-style guitar riff plays in the background.

She hopes Trump is watching.

In addition to purchasing ads in Nevada media markets like her competitors, Fiore is investing campaign funds to air her 60-second segment in Palm Beach, Florida, where the former president spends winters at his Mar-a-Lago club.

Her campaign spent \$6,270 to broadcast 62 television spots on Fox News in the West Palm Beach-Fort Pierce media market during in the final week of November, Federal Communications Commission filings show. Trump has been splitting his time since leaving office between Florida, his official residence, and his golf club in Bedminster, New Jersey, where he spent most of last summer.

When Fiore’s ads aired over the Thanksgiving holiday, he and his family were at Mar-a-Lago.

Candidates and interest groups have long used targeted cable ads as a way to reach the television-obsessed Trump, often lining up spots in Washington and Florida to catch his attention when he was in the White House or vacationing. Fiore’s move reflects Trump’s enduring post-presidential influence in the Republican Party and underscores how his endorsement is seen as a potential game-changer by Republicans embroiled in primary battles throughout the country.

Since Trump left the White House, much of the competition for his attention has played out in Florida. In one particularly vivid example, a multifaced billboard on the boulevard connecting Palm Beach International Airport to Mar-a-Lago is often emblazoned with messages from supporters and detractors.

At the club, Trump has held dozens of fundraisers and other events for Republicans running for U.S. Senate, governor and other offices, including for Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem and Sarah Sanders, his former press secretary now running for governor of Arkansas. The venue typically guarantees a strong showing, thanks to its loyal, paid membership and Trump often appearing, even at events he doesn’t host.

He’s also welcomed a succession of candidates seeking his support, including Idaho Lt. Gov. Janice McGeachin who is running against incumbent Republican Gov. Brad Little. Trump endorsed McGeachin a week after she visited Mar-a-Lago in November.

Fiore, a Las Vegas city councilwoman, is one of at least 10 candidates running for governor in Nevada, a swing state Trump lost narrowly in 2020.

She was elected in 2012 to the Nevada statehouse, where she championed gun rights and introduced a controversial proposal that would have dramatically curbed federal power to manage public lands and waters in Nevada. Her ties to and support of rancher Cliven Bundy and his family during armed standoffs between self-described citizen militia members and federal law enforcement thrust her into a national spotlight in 2014 and 2016.

This year, Fiore is running on a platform that includes opposition to coronavirus mandates, support for law enforcement against protesters she calls “domestic terrorists” and reversing Nevada’s decision to send all active voters mail-in ballots.

Other candidates running in the June 2022 Republican primary include former U.S. Sen. Dean Heller, Clark County Sheriff Joe Lombardo and Joey Gilbert, a Reno attorney who was outside the U.S. Capitol

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 37 of 72

during last year's insurrection. The winner will take on Democratic Gov. Steve Sisolak, who won by 5.1 percentage points in 2018.

Representatives for Trump did not respond to questions about whether he had seen Fiore's ad or planned to endorse in the Nevada governor's race.

The Fiore campaign also spent more than \$100,000 to air ads in Reno, Las Vegas and Salt Lake City, where the media market extends to rural northeastern Nevada. Targeting the Florida airwaves in addition to Nevada is simply about reminding the former president of her long-time support, her campaign consultant Rory McShane said.

"Many candidates are seeking Trump endorsements but if you look back at four and five years, a lot of those same candidates were disavowing Trump and even holding anti-Trump rallies," McShane said.

"It's important to remind the President's team that Michele Fiore is the only true America First candidate running for Governor," he added.

Heller, who told The Associated Press last week he would also welcome Trump's endorsement, clashed with Trump over efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act in 2017 but the two reconciled and campaigned together in 2018, when then-U.S. Rep. Jacky Rosen defeated Heller in Nevada's Senate race.

Since 2020, Fiore is the only candidate running for statewide office outside of Florida to purchase ads from Comcast, a cable provider in the region, according to a review of FCC filings.

"What it tells me is that — assuming that the goal here is to get noticed by former President Trump — the ads are targeted at an audience of one, as opposed to an audience of thousands or millions of voters," said Vanderbilt University professor John Sides, a political scientist who has written on the effects of television advertising on political campaigns.

"The calculation is that if you can get on the president's radar screen or earn his support," Sides said, "then that endorsement will be worth the investment of buying ads in a media market thousands of miles away."

Tarnished Gold: Illegal Amazon gold seeps into supply chains

By DAVID BILLER and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — The medals were billed as the most sustainable ever produced.

To match the festive spirit of South America's first Olympics, officials from Brazil, the host country for the 2016 games in Rio de Janeiro, boasted that the medals hung around the necks of athletes on the winners' podium were also a victory for the environment: The gold was produced free of mercury and the silver recycled from thrown away X-ray plates and mirrors.

Five years on, the refiner that provided the gold for the medals, Marsam, is processing gold ultimately purchased by hundreds of well-known publicly traded U.S. companies — among them Microsoft, Tesla and Amazon — that are legally required to responsibly source metals in an industry long plagued by environmental and labor concerns.

But a comprehensive review of public records by The Associated Press found that the Sao Paulo-based company processes gold for, and shared ownership links to, an intermediary accused by Brazilian prosecutors of buying gold mined illegally on Indigenous lands and other areas deep in the Amazon rainforest.

The AP previously reported in this series that the scale of prospecting for gold on Indigenous lands has exploded in recent years and involves carving illegal landing strips in the forest for unauthorized airplanes to ferry in heavy equipment, fuel and backhoes to tear at the earth in search of the precious metal. Weak government oversight enabled by President Jair Bolsonaro, the son of a prospector himself, has only exacerbated the problem of illegal gold mining in protected areas. Critics also fault an international certification program used by manufacturers to show they aren't using minerals that come from conflict zones, saying it is an exercise in greenwashing.

"There is no real traceability as long as the industry relies on self-regulation," said Mark Pieth, a professor of criminal law at the University of Basel in Switzerland and author of the 2018 book "Gold Laundering."

"People know where the gold comes from, but they don't bother to go very far back into the supply

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 38 of 72

chain because they know they will come into contact with all kinds of criminal activity.”

Much like brown and black tributaries that feed the Amazon River, gold illegally mined in the rainforest mixes into the supply chain and melds with clean gold to become almost indistinguishable.

Nuggets are spirited out of the jungle in prospectors’ dusty pockets to the nearest city where they are sold to financial brokers. All that’s required to transform the raw ore into a tradable asset regulated by the central bank is a handwritten document attesting to the specific point in the rainforest where the gold was extracted. The fewer questions asked, the better.

At many of those brokers’ Amazon outposts — the financial system’s front door — the gold becomes the property of Dirceu Frederico Sobrinho.

For four decades, Dirceu has embodied the up-by-your-bootstraps myth of the Brazilian garimpeiro, or prospector. The son of a vegetable grocer who sold his produce near an infamous open-pit mine so packed with prospectors — among them Bolsonaro’s father — they looked like swarming ants, he caught the gold bug in the mid-1980s and began dispatching planeloads of raw ore from a remote Amazon town. He secured his first concession in 1990, one year after the nation rolled out a permitting regime to regulate prospecting.

Today, from a high rise on Sao Paulo’s busiest avenue, he is a major player in Brazil’s gold rush, with 173 prospecting areas either registered to his name or with pending requests, according to Brazil’s mining regulator’s registry. In the same building is the headquarters of the nation’s gold association, Anoro, which he leads. Dirceu, until last year, was also a partner in Marsam.

But even with gold jewelry dangling from his fingers and wrist, Dirceu still proudly boasts his everyman garimpeiro roots.

“You don’t motivate someone to go into the forest if they’re not chasing after a dream,” he said in a rare interview from his corner office studded with a giant jade eagle. “Whoever deals in gold has that: They dream, they believe, they like it.”

“We have a saying among the garimpeiros: ‘I’m a pawn, but I’m a pawn for gold,’” he adds.

At the center of Dirceu’s empire is F.D’Gold, Brazil’s largest buyer of gold from prospecting sites, with purchases last year totaling more than 2 billion reais (\$361 million) from 252 wildcat sites, according to data from the mining regulator. Only two international firms that run industrial-sized gold mines paid more in royalties in 2021, a sign of how once artisanal prospecting has become big business in Brazil — at least for some.

In August, federal prosecutors filed a civil suit against F.D’Gold and two other brokers seeking the immediate suspension of all activities and payment of 10 billion reais (\$1.8 billion) in social and environmental damages.

The complaint alleges the companies failed to take actions that would have prevented the illegal extraction of a combined 4.3 metric tons from protected areas and Indigenous territories, where mining is not allowed. Dirceu said his company complies with all laws and has implemented extra controls, but he acknowledged that determining the exact origin of the gold it obtains is “impossible” at present. He has proposed an industry-wide digital registry to improve transparency.

The ongoing suit is the result of a study published in July by the Federal University of Minas Gerais which found that as much as 28% of Brazil’s gold produced in 2019 and 2020 was potentially mined illegally. To reach that conclusion, researchers combed through 17,400 government-registered transactions by F.D’Gold and other buyers to pinpoint the location where the gold was purportedly mined. In many cases, the given location wasn’t an authorized site or, when cross-checked with satellite images, showed none of the hallmark signs of mining activity — deforestation, stagnant ponds of waste — meaning the gold originated elsewhere.

Dirceu’s name and those of F.D’Gold and his mining company Ouro Roxo have popped up repeatedly over the years in numerous criminal investigations. He has been charged but never convicted.

A decade ago, federal prosecutors in Amazon’s Amapa state accused his company of knowingly purchasing

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 39 of 72

illegal gold from a national park that was later transformed into gold bars. The charges were dismissed in 2017 after a federal judge in Brasilia ruled that F.D'Gold made the purchases legally, as evidenced by the invoices. Separate money laundering charges against Dirceu were also dismissed, due to lack of evidence. Dirceu has denied wrongdoing.

Whatever its origin, all the raw ore purchased by F.D'Gold ends up at Marsam.

F.D'Gold accounts for more than one-third of the gold Marsam processes, according to André Nunes, an external consultant for Marsam.

After almost two years as a partner in the Sao Paulo-based refiner, Dirceu stepped down last year and his daughter, Sarah Almeida Westphal, assumed management responsibilities. It was part of an effort to put different family members in charge of their own businesses, which function as separate legal entities, said Nunes, who previously worked for F.D'Gold.

"As much as it's the same family, it's important that each monkey has its own branch," he said.

But the federal tax authority's corporate registry shows Dirceu and Westphal remain partners in a machine rental and air cargo venture based in the Amazonian city of Itaituba, the national epicenter of prospecting. And Westphal could be seen working on a computer at F.D'Gold's office on the day the AP interviewed Dirceu.

From Marsam, the gold travels far and wide. More than 300 publicly traded companies list Marsam as a refiner in responsible mining disclosures they are required to file with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. The refiner has been virtually the only supplier to Brazil's mint over the past decade, according to data provided to the AP through a freedom of information request.

"Why do they want our bars? Because they're accepted all over the world," said Nunes, who is also a member of Marsam's six-person compliance committee.

Enabling such robust sales around the world is a seal of approval from the Responsible Minerals Initiative, or RMI.

The certification program, run by a Virginia-based coalition of manufacturers, emerged with the passage a decade ago of legislation in the U.S. requiring companies to disclose their use of conflict minerals fueling civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Later, its standards were supplemented by tougher guidelines developed by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development or OECD

Marsam is one of just two refiners in Brazil certified as compliant with RMI's standards for responsible sourcing of gold, having successfully completed two independent audits. The last one was performed in 2018 by UL Responsible Sourcing, an Illinois-based consultancy.

But its ties to Dirceu's family and its strategic positioning at the pinch point between the Amazon rainforest and global commerce raises questions about its previously unexamined role in the processing and sale of gold allegedly sourced from off-limit areas.

Marsam hasn't been accused by prosecutors of any wrongdoing and insists that it only refines gold, not sell it, on behalf of third-party exporters and domestic vendors.

The company in 2016 introduced a supply chain policy, which it has updated over the years, requiring it to seek out information from suppliers whenever they are publicly linked to illicit activities. They are also expected to analyze a mandatory declaration of origin form submitted by each client. No such risks were identified in the most recent RMI report and Marsam was moved to a lower risk category requiring an audit once every three years.

Critics say one problem is that the OECD's guidelines RMI measures companies against pay scant attention to environmental crimes or the rights of Indigenous communities. Instead, they are geared toward risks stemming from civil wars and criminal networks. In Latin America, only Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela — where drug cartels or guerrilla insurgencies are active — are classified as conflict-affected and high-risk areas deserving greater scrutiny for sourcing practices.

But the influx of illegal miners into Indigenous territories has been on the rise in recent years in Brazil — sometimes ending in bloodshed.

In May, hundreds of prospectors raided a Munduruku village, setting houses on fire, including one that

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 40 of 72

belonged to a prominent anti-mining activist. The attack followed clashes farther north in Roraima state, where miners in motorboats and carrying automatic weapons repeatedly threatened a riverside Yanomami settlement. In one incident, two children, ages one and five, drowned when a shooting sent people scattering into the woods.

In their suits against F.D'Gold and the two other brokers, prosecutors blame expanding mining activity for the illegal clearing in 2019 and 2020 of some 5,000 hectares of once pristine rainforest located on Indigenous territories as well as exacerbating "internal rifts that may be irreconcilable."

Experts say these kinds of activities barely register in corporate boardrooms where sourcing decisions are made and given the seal of approval by international certification programs.

"Certification connotes a degree of certitude that isn't at all possible in the gold industry, especially in Brazil," said David Soud, an analyst at I.R. Consilium, which recently prepared a report for the OECD on illegal gold flows from neighboring Venezuela. "The result is a lot of blind spots that can easily be exploited by bad actors."

Some of those blind spots are created by Brazil's own weak oversight.

Under Brazilian law, securities brokers like F.D'Gold can't be held responsible if the prospector whose ore they buy lies about its provenance. Nor is there any effective way to track the information provided at the point of sale.

It's a system that inhibits tracking and accountability at best, and at worst enables willful ignorance as a means to launder illegal gold, according to wildcat mining experts including Larissa Rodrigues of the environmental think tank Choices Institute. For starters, experts say there need to be electronic invoices feeding a database that allows information to be verified.

"The supply chain is absorbing gold that doesn't come from that chain. We know this happens," said Rodrigues. "It's a fact that fraud exists, but you can't prosecute because you can't prove it."

Dirceu didn't deny the possibility that F.D'Gold has unwittingly bought dirty gold. But he insists F.D'Gold, as an entity regulated by Brazil's powerful central bank, follows the law and goes beyond what is required — such as hiring in 2020 two companies to monitor through satellite imagery the sources of its gold.

"The moment we had knowledge this could be happening, we hired them," he said.

As president of the nation's gold association, he claims to have been pushing since at least 2017 a plan to create a digital profile of every participant in the supply chain, complete with the garimpeiro's photo, fingerprints and ID number.

"Digitalization and automation is the start of traceability," he said. "The more legality, the more security there will be for our activities."

Yet for all the apparent industry goodwill, and the support of Brazil's tax authority, the proposal remains just that — an idea that hasn't even been taken up by Congress. In the past two decades, the central bank hasn't revoked authorization for any company that purchases gold.

For its part, Marsam says it uses its "best efforts" to identify the origin of the metals it refines. That includes requiring clients to sign affidavits attesting to the metal's legality, demanding original invoices and conducting client visits to verify they have systems in place to prevent fraud.

But it doesn't visit the mines themselves — something that RMI requires of refiners operating only in high-risk jurisdictions.

"We have to be diligent, but not do work that isn't ours," Nunes said. Asked when was the last time Marsam suspended a client it suspects of trading in dirty gold he shook his head, struggling to recall.

"I don't remember it ever happening," Nunes said before finally harkening back to one instance more than a decade ago.

RMI wouldn't discuss prosecutors' allegations against F.D'Gold, despite its close affiliation with Marsam, citing confidentiality agreements to encourage refiners to participate in its grievance process.

In a statement, it said that it takes all allegations "very seriously" and works with companies to address concerns. As part of that process, refiners are expected to trace activities all the way back to the mine

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 41 of 72

whenever red flags are detected. If they don't then address the concerns, they will be removed from the conformant list.

A 2018 report by the OECD found that while RMI's standards are aligned with its guidelines there are significant gaps in the way RMI and other industry initiatives carry out audits, relying more on a refiner's policies and procedures than its due diligence efforts. RMI-approved auditors also demonstrated a lack of basic technical skills and familiarity with the OECD guidelines, the study found.

"There was also an observed absence of curiosity, professional skepticism and critical analysis," according to the report. RMI said it has since strengthened implementation efforts and is awaiting the outcome of a new assessment being conducted for the European Union.

Additional analysis in 2017 by Kumi, a London-based consulting firm that advises the OECD, found that only 5% of 314 end-user companies then registered with RMI, most of them U.S. based, had policies on sourcing conflict materials that were in line with the OECD guidelines.

"End-user companies set the tone for what happens in their supply chains," said Andrew Britton, managing director of Kumi, which is conducting a new assessment of certifiers now for the European Commission. "It's really important that companies' due diligence on their supply chains really probes into potential risks and is not simply a box-ticking exercise."

While land grabbing by ranchers, loggers and prospectors is hardly new in the Amazon, never before has Brazil had a president as outspokenly favorable to such interests.

Bolsonaro campaigned for the nation's top job with promises of unearthing the Amazon's vast mineral wealth, and his support for prospectors has encouraged a modern-day gold rush.

Bolsonaro's father prospected for gold at Serra Pelada, where Dirceu first saw gold mining, and the president sometimes draws on his upbringing to rally support from prospectors. While campaigning, he aired videos in the Amazon region in which he boasted of sometimes pulling over at jungle stream and pulling a pan from a car to try his luck.

"Interest in the Amazon isn't about the Indians or the damn trees; it's the ore," he told a group of prospectors at the presidential palace in 2019, vowing to deploy the armed forces to allow their operations to continue unfettered.

Then in May 2021, he attacked environmentalists for trying to criminalize prospecting.

"It's really cool how people in suits and ties guess about everything that happens in the countryside," he said sarcastically.

Beyond the rhetoric, Bolsonaro's administration recently introduced legislation that would open up Indigenous territories to mining — something federal prosecutors have called unconstitutional and activists warn would wreak vast social and environmental damages.

Dirceu said he opposes allowing mining of Indigenous lands unless local people support the activity and are given first priority to pursue it themselves. But even as he fashions himself a reformer from the inside, he's also benefitted from the current free-for-all. For one, he doesn't even consider prospectors working without a permit to be illegal — just irregular.

Given persistent efforts to deregulate gold extraction, calls by Dirceu and the gold association to increase accountability over the gold supply chain "ring hollow," said Robert Muggah, who oversees an initiative on environmental crime in the Amazon at think tank Igarape Institute.

Soon, Dirceu may stand to profit even more. Recently, F.D'Gold received approval to begin exporting directly. Dirceu said the company is currently seeking clients abroad and hopes to begin shipments soon.

If he succeeds, it means that, for the first time, someone will have a hand in the entirety of Brazil's gold supply chain: from the Amazon where the gold is mined, to the outposts where it is first sold, to the planes that bring the ore to his daughter's refinery in Sao Paulo and, finally, into the hands of foreign buyers.

"It's really important to understand that the nature of gold extraction in countries like Brazil is linked, ineluctably, to the global markets," said Muggah.

Djokovic admits travel declaration had incorrect information

By JOHN PYE and ROD MCGUIRK Associated Press
MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) —

Novak Djokovic has acknowledged that his Australian travel declaration form contained incorrect information, as the government nears a decision on whether to deport the Serbian tennis star, who is not vaccinated against COVID-19, on public interest grounds.

The men's tennis No. 1 had his visa canceled on arrival in Melbourne last week when his vaccination exemption was questioned, but he won a legal battle on procedural grounds that allowed him to stay in the country. He still faces the prospect of deportation — a decision that is entirely at the discretion of Australia's Immigration Minister Alex Hawke if deemed to be in the public interest for health and safety reasons.

Hawke has been considering the question since a judge reinstated Djokovic's visa on Monday.

Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce said most Australians disapproved of the nine-time and defending Australian Open champion coming to Melbourne to compete in breach of the nation's tough pandemic quarantine rules.

"Most of us thought because Mr. Djokovic hadn't been vaxxed twice that he would be asked to leave," Joyce told Nine Network television on Thursday. "Well, that was our view, but it wasn't the court's view."

"The vast majority of Australians ... didn't like the idea that another individual, whether they're a tennis player or ... the king of Spain or the Queen of England, can come up here and have a different set of rules to what everybody else has to deal with," Joyce added.

The draw to determine men's and women's singles brackets at the tournament was scheduled to be held at 3 p.m. local time (0400 GMT) in Melbourne, but a tournament official told waiting media that the ceremony had been postponed until further notice and declined further comment.

There was speculation that the delay reflected uncertainty over whether Djokovic will be able to compete.

The debate over Djokovic's presence in Australia rages against a backdrop of surging COVID-19 infections across the nation.

Victoria state, which hosts the Australian Open, on Thursday eased seven-day isolation rules for close contacts of those infected in sectors including education and transport to curb the number of employees staying away from work.

The state recorded 37,169 new COVID-19 cases in the latest 24-hour period on Thursday, as well as 25 deaths and 953 hospitalizations.

Ticket sales to the tennis tournament have been limited to reduce the risk of transmission.

In a statement posted to his social media accounts on Wednesday, the tennis star blamed "human error" by his support team for failing to declare that he had traveled in the two-week period before entering Australia.

Giving false information on the form could be grounds for deportation, the latest twist in a saga over whether the athlete should be allowed stay in Australia despite not being vaccinated. The initial news that Djokovic was granted an exemption to strict vaccination rules to enter the country provoked an outcry and the ensuing dispute has since overshadowed the lead-up to the Australian Open.

Djokovic acknowledged the lapses when he sought to clarify what he called "continuing misinformation" about his movements after he became infected last month — though he did not spell out what inaccuracies he was referring to.

The statement was posted while Djokovic was in Rod Laver Arena holding a practice session, his third on the tournament's main court since being released from four nights in immigration detention.

Djokovic remains in limbo before the year's first tennis major starts Monday. The stakes are particularly high since he is seeking a men's record 21st Grand Slam singles title.

Deportation could result in sanctions ranging up to a three-year ban from entering Australia, a daunting prospect for a player who has won almost half of his 20 Grand Slam singles titles here.

Court documents detailing Djokovic's positive test sparked speculation over the star player's attendance at events in his native Serbia last month. Further questions also were raised about errors on his immigra-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 43 of 72

tion form that could potentially result in the cancellation of his visa yet again.

On the form, Djokovic said he had not traveled in the 14 days before his flight to Australia, despite being seen in Spain and Serbia in that period.

In his statement, Djokovic described recent commentary as "hurtful" and said he wanted to address it in the interest of "alleviating broader concern in the community about my presence in Australia."

The 34-year-old Serb said he'd taken rapid tests that were negative and he was asymptomatic before he received his positive result from a PCR test he undertook out of an "abundance of caution" after attending a basketball game in Belgrade on Dec. 14.

He received the result late Dec. 17, he said, and scrapped all his commitments except a long-standing interview with L'Equipe newspaper the following day.

"I felt obliged to go ahead ... but did ensure I socially distanced and wore a mask except when my photograph was being taken," Djokovic said.

The L'Equipe reporter who interviewed the athlete wrote in the newspaper that he and a photographer were also masked during the session — and kept their distance except for a brief moment as Djokovic said goodbye. The reporter said he tested negative for COVID-19 on Monday, and did not mention the photographer's status.

"While I went home after the interview to isolate for the required period, on reflection, this was an error of judgment," Djokovic said.

At the time, Serbia required those who were infected with COVID-19 to isolate for at least 14 days. But Djokovic was seen a little over a week after his positive test on the streets of Belgrade, though he said he had tested negative in between.

Meanwhile, Djokovic addressed the Australian travel declaration by saying it was submitted by his support team and "my agent sincerely apologizes for the administrative mistake in ticking the incorrect box."

"This was a human error and certainly not deliberate," he wrote. "My team has provided additional information to the Australian Government to clarify this matter."

The decision could take a while — but there is time pressure since the draw to determine brackets for the Australian Open is set to take place Thursday.

Hawke's office issued a statement on Wednesday saying Djokovic's legal team had filed further documents and added: "Naturally, this will affect the timeframe for a decision."

At issue is whether he has a valid exemption to strict rules requiring vaccination to enter Australia since he recently recovered from COVID-19.

His exemption to compete was approved by the Victoria state government and Tennis Australia, the tournament organizer. That apparently allowed him to receive a visa to travel.

But the Australian Border Force rejected the exemption and canceled his visa upon arrival before a federal judge overturned that decision. Lawyers for the government have said an infection was only grounds for an exemption in cases in which the coronavirus caused severe illness — though it's not clear why he was issued a visa if that's the case.

The initial decision to let him compete sparked complaints that Djokovic was being given special treatment — and the subsequent cancellation of his visa raised allegations that he was being targeted once the issue became political. The saga is playing out against the backdrop of growing concern in Australia over surging COVID-19 cases — and the government's strategy to contain them.

If Djokovic's visa is canceled, his lawyers could go back to court to apply for an injunction that would prevent him from being forced to leave the country.

Sydney-based immigration lawyer Simon Jeans said if Djokovic's visa were canceled, he would likely be held in immigration detention. Djokovic could apply for a bridging visa to compete in the tournament pending the appeal. The immigration department would have two business days to decide that application. If Djokovic were refused such a visa, an appeal would typically take weeks, Jeans said.

Dems switch strategy on voting bill as Biden pushes action

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 44 of 72

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Democrats are trying to force a public showdown over their sweeping elections legislation, aiming to launch debate on a key party priority even though there's no assurance the bill will come to a vote.

Majority Leader Chuck Schumer outlined the plan in a memo obtained Wednesday by The Associated Press, on the eve of President Joe Biden's visit to meet privately with Senate Democrats about the path forward. It still leaves the Democrats in need of a way to force a vote on the legislation, now blocked by a Republican filibuster.

"We will finally have an opportunity to debate voting rights legislation — something that Republicans have thus far denied," Schumer wrote in the memo to his Democratic colleagues, which described a work-around to avoid a Republican filibuster that for months has blocked formal debate over the legislation on the Senate floor. "Senators can finally make clear to the American people where they stand on protecting our democracy and preserving the right of every eligible American to cast a ballot."

The strategy does little to resolve the central problem Democrats face — they lack Republican support to pass the elections legislation on a bipartisan basis, but also don't have support from all 50 Democrats for changing the Senate rules to allow passage on their own. But the latest tactic could create an off-ramp from their initial approach, which was to force a vote by Monday on Senate filibuster changes as a way to pressure Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona to go along.

By setting up a debate, Schumer will achieve the Democrats' goal of shining a spotlight that spurs senators to say where they stand. The floor debate could stretch for days and carry echoes of civil rights battles a generation ago that led to some of the most famous filibusters in Senate history.

"I wouldn't want to delude anybody into thinking this is easy," Schumer told reporters Wednesday. He called the push an "uphill fight."

Democrats have vowed to counteract a wave of new state laws, inspired by Donald Trump's false claims of a stolen election, that have made it harder to vote. But after an initial flurry of activity, the Democrats' efforts have stalled in the narrowly divided Senate, where they lack the 60 votes to overcome a Republican filibuster, leading to their calls for a rule change.

Recently they have tried to breathe new life into the effort. Biden gave a fiery speech in Atlanta on Tuesday, where he told senators they would each be "judged by history" if they failed to act. He is to meet with Democratic senators at the Capitol on Thursday in a bid to jolt the effort forward.

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell gave a scathing rebuttal to Biden's speech Wednesday, objecting to his comparison of opponents of the voting legislation to racist historical figures, including George Wallace, the segregationist Alabama governor who ran for the presidency, and Jefferson Davis, who was the president of the Confederacy.

"You could not invent a better advertisement for the legislative filibuster than what we've just seen: a president abandoning rational persuasion for pure demagoguery," McConnell, R-Ky., said from the Senate floor. "A president shouting that 52 senators and millions of Americans are racist unless he gets whatever he wants is proving exactly why the framers built the Senate to check his power."

Asked Wednesday for a response to McConnell's comments, Biden turned, removed his black mask and said: "I like Mitch McConnell. He's a friend." That response came during Biden's trip to the Capitol to pay his respects to former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who died last month and was lying in state in the Rotunda.

Republicans are nearly unanimous in opposing the voting legislation, viewing it as federal overreach that would infringe on states' abilities to conduct their own elections. And they've pointed out that Democrats opposed changes to the filibuster that Trump sought when he was president.

For Democrats and Biden, the legislation is a political imperative. Failure to pass it would break a major campaign promise to Black voters, who helped hand Democrats control of the White House and Congress, and would come just before midterm elections when slim Democratic majorities will be on the line. It would also be the second major setback for Biden's agenda in a month, after Manchin halted work on the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 45 of 72

president's \$2 trillion package of social and environmental initiatives shortly before Christmas.

The current package of voting and ethics legislation would usher in the biggest overhaul of U.S. elections in a generation, striking down hurdles to voting enacted in the name of election security, reducing the influence of big money in politics and limiting partisan influence over the drawing of congressional districts. The package would create national election standards that would trump the state-level GOP laws. It would also restore the ability of the Justice Department to police election laws in states with a history of discrimination.

Many civil rights activists think Biden's push on voting rights is too-little-too-late in aggressively going after GOP-backed changes in state voting laws, which they view as a subtler form of ballot restrictions like literacy tests and poll taxes once used to disenfranchise Black voters. Some boycotted Biden's speech in Atlanta on Tuesday.

The New Georgia Project, a group founded by Georgia Democratic gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams, was among those that called on Biden to skip the speech.

"We've heard rhetoric like this before," the group said in a statement. "A goal without a plan is just a wish."

Schumer had set the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, on Jan. 17, as a deadline to either pass the voting legislation or consider revising the filibuster rules. It's unclear if the planned vote on rule changes will still happen.

Manchin, who played a major role writing Democrats' voting legislation, threw cold water on the hopes Tuesday, saying any changes should be made with substantial Republican buy-in — even though there aren't any Republican senators willing to sign on.

That befuddled South Carolina Rep. Jim Clyburn, the No. 3 Democrat in the House and a senior member of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Clyburn questioned the wisdom of reflexively seeking bipartisanship, noting that the right to vote was granted to newly freed slaves on a party-line vote.

"He seems to be supporting a filibuster of his own bill," Clyburn said of Manchin. "That, to us, is very disconcerting."

GOP leader McCarthy says he won't cooperate with 1/6 panel

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House panel investigating the U.S. Capitol insurrection requested an interview and records from House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy on Wednesday, as it continues to seek first-hand details from members of Congress on former President Donald Trump's actions on the day hundreds of his supporters brutally beat police, stormed the building and interrupted the certification of the 2020 election.

McCarthy issued a statement saying he would refuse to cooperate. He said the investigation was not legitimate and accused the panel of "abuse of power."

Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, Democratic chairman of the panel, requested that McCarthy, R-Calif., provide information to the nine-member panel regarding his conversations with Trump "before, during and after" the riot. The request also seeks information about McCarthy's communications with former White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows in the days before the attack.

"We also must learn about how the President's plans for January 6th came together, and all the other ways he attempted to alter the results of the election," Thompson said in the letter. "For example, in advance of January 6th, you reportedly explained to Mark Meadows and the former President that objections to the certification of the electoral votes on January 6th 'was doomed to fail.'"

Without his cooperation, it remains unclear whether the panel will be able to gain testimony from McCarthy or any other congressional allies of Trump. While the committee has considered subpoenaing fellow lawmakers, that would be an extraordinary move and could run up against legal and political challenges.

Lawmakers are seeking a window into Trump's state of mind from an ally who has acknowledged repeated interactions with the then-president. The committee also wants to question McCarthy about communications with Trump and White House staff in the week after the violence, including a conversation

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 46 of 72

with Trump that was reportedly heated.

The committee acknowledged the sensitive and unusual nature of its request as it proposed a meeting with McCarthy on either Feb. 3 or 4. "The Select Committee has tremendous respect for the prerogatives of Congress and the privacy of its Members," Thompson wrote. "At the same time, we have a solemn responsibility to investigate fully the facts and circumstances of these events.

Democrats have been seeking more information about McCarthy's communications with Trump since the former president's second impeachment trial last year. At one point in the trial, Democrats said they would try and call Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Wash., as a witness because she had described a potentially pivotal call between the two men after hearing an account from McCarthy.

Herrera Beutler's statement said McCarthy told her he had asked Trump to publicly "call off the riot" and had said the violent mob was made up of Trump supporters, not far-left antifa members.

She said in the statement, "That's when, according to McCarthy, the president said, 'Well, Kevin, I guess these people are more upset about the election than you are.'"

In the end, Democrats read a statement from Herrera Beutler into the record. Trump, who had just left office, was acquitted by the Senate.

McCarthy had initially criticized Trump's actions after the 2020 election, saying he "bears responsibility" for the deadly Jan. 6 attack, which remains the most serious domestic assault on the building in its history.

"The saddest day I have ever had" in Congress, McCarthy said the night of the attack, even as he went on to join 138 other House Republicans in voting to reject election results.

The latest request from the panel also puts McCarthy face-to-face with its vice-chair, Rep. Liz Cheney, whom he dumped from the No. 3 House leadership position last summer as her very public criticism of Trump's lies about his 2020 election loss reverberated through the Republican Party.

The GOP leader had counseled Cheney to stay on message, but as she continued to warn the party off Trump's falsehoods, McCarthy groomed a newly transformed Trump acolyte, Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., as her replacement.

McCarthy is the third member of Congress the committee has reached out to for voluntary information. In the past few weeks, GOP Reps. Jim Jordan and Scott Perry were also contacted by the panel but have denied the requests to sit down with lawmakers or provide documents.

The panel, comprised of seven Democrats and two Republicans, has interviewed almost 350 people and issued public subpoenas to around 50 people and organizations as it seeks to create a comprehensive record of the Jan. 6 attack and the events leading up to it.

On Wednesday, former White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany spoke to the panel virtually, according to a person familiar with the interview who requested anonymity to discuss it. The committee subpoenaed McEnany in November.

The committee says the extraordinary trove of material it has collected — 35,000 pages of records so far, including texts, emails and phone records from people close to Trump — is fleshing out critical details of the worst attack on the Capitol in two centuries, which played out on live television.

Thompson told The Associated Press in an interview last month that about 90% of the witnesses subpoenaed by the committee have cooperated despite the defiance of high-profile Trump allies like Meadows and Steve Bannon. Lawmakers said they have been effective at gathering information from other sources in part because they share a unity of purpose rarely seen in a congressional investigation.

Biden pays silent tribute as Reid lies in state at Capitol

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — The late Sen. Harry Reid was remembered Wednesday at the U.S. Capitol as a "legendary leader," a hardscrabble Democrat who rose from poverty in a dusty Nevada mining town to deliver landmark legislation from the Senate's most powerful position.

President Joe Biden, who has called the former Senate majority leader a "great American," paid silent tribute, stopping by briefly as Reid lay in state at the Capitol Rotunda. Biden made the sign of the cross

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 47 of 72

and let his hand linger for a moment on the flag-draped casket.

Reid's family and colleagues joined for an earlier ceremony that was almost as succinct as the senator's own dry-humored style of hanging up the phone rather than engaging in lengthy goodbyes. He was recalled as one of the Senate's more significant, and memorable, leaders and a soft-spoken "force of thunder." Reid, who had pancreatic cancer, died last month at age 82.

"Harry Reid made the world a better place," said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.

"To see him lead and legislate was to see a master at work," said Pelosi, who worked side by side with him when they were the top two Democrats in Congress. She called Reid "a legendary leader of great integrity."

Reid served longer in Congress than anyone from his state and was the Senate majority leader alongside two presidents. He led the Senate during one of its more consequential legislative sessions, securing the economic recovery bill during the Great Recession and President Barack Obama's landmark health care law.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., spoke of having to explain Reid's abrupt style to new senators.

"Even though Harry talked softly, what he said carried the force of thunder," Schumer said.

Schumer said Reid never forgot the struggles of families and places like the one he came from and believed government had a moral obligation to ensure Americans had opportunities to improve their lives.

"Few have shaped the workings of this building like our dear friend from Nevada," he said. "Few have dedicated their lives to the work of the people quite like Harry did."

The service was largely closed to the public under COVID-19 protocols, though former colleagues, staff and others streamed in to visit, most wearing masks. He was only the 15th senator to have the honor; his casket rested on the catafalque used for Abraham Lincoln.

Vice President Kamala Harris did not speak during the ceremony, but paused at the casket in tribute, as did the Republican leaders in Congress, Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and Rep. Kevin McCarthy of California. Later, Justices Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan stopped by, as did some Cabinet and administration officials.

Afterward, Biden paid a brief visit to the Senate, where Reid's family was gathered. By evening, the casket was removed for departure.

Biden, Obama and others paid tribute during a funeral service last weekend in Las Vegas recalling Reid's feisty wit, disinterest in Washington's social scene and fearless approach to governing.

The few words Reid did say were often flinty and fiery. He was unafraid to take on presidents (he called George W. Bush a "loser"), criticize the fossil fuel industry ("coal makes us sick") or declare the war in Iraq "lost." He titled his 2008 autobiography "The Good Fight."

Influential in retirement, Reid said that Biden won election, he should give his new presidency just three weeks to try to work with Republicans. If not, Biden should force changes in the Senate's filibuster rules to allow simple majority passage of legislative priorities, Reid said.

"The time's going to come when he's going to have to move in and get rid of the filibuster," Reid told The Associated Press.

With the Senate in difficult discussions this week on changes to the filibuster to push election and voting legislation past Republican objections, Schumer leaned on Reid's legacy as a "steward of the Senate."

"He also knew the Senate had to adapt to changing times," Schumer said.

Reid was born in the desolate mining town of Searchlight. His father was a hard-rock miner who committed suicide. His mother did laundry at home for bordellos. (Reid and other kids would swim in a brothel's pool.) Searchlight was a place, he said, that "had seen its better days."

The town had no churches, his family no religion. But a picture of President Franklin D. Roosevelt hanging in the Reid home would influence his political career.

Reid hitchhiked some 40 miles to attend high school and joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as he made his way through college and law school. An amateur boxer, he once leveled a punch at his future father-in-law after being denied a date with Landra Gould, who would become his wife. They

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 48 of 72

were married for 62 years.

During Wednesday's ceremony, Landra Reid held a black hat that her husband often wore in his final years, as she sat in the Rotunda with the couple's five adult children. As she approached the casket, she set the hat beneath it under the Capitol dome, before placing a hand out in a kiss goodbye.

First elected to the House in 1982 and reelected in 1984, Reid then served 30 years in the Senate, including a decade as the Senate Democratic leader.

Along the way, Reid rewrote the map of Nevada by expanding public lands, halting the planned Yucca Mountain nuclear waste outside of Las Vegas; and securing national monument status around artist Michael Heizer's "City" installation in the desert. He quietly ensured federal money to research UFOs.

A man of few words, Reid often wrote notes instead — to family, colleagues and a Nevada student advocate who had reached out on immigration law changes. He championed the Dream Act and Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals to protect young immigrants in the U.S. without legal status from deportation.

As his power rose, Reid engineered a Democratic legacy for his state with Nevada's early presidential caucus. He left behind a state party apparatus that was sometimes referred to as the "Reid Machine" for its enduring political power seeking to elect the next generation of Democratic leaders.

After an exercise accident at home, and with Democrats back in the Senate minority, Reid announced he would not seek reelection in 2016.

In his farewell address to the Senate, he acknowledged he had done things that "probably a lot of people wouldn't do." But he passed on his advice to those wondering how he made it from Searchlight to Washington.

"I didn't make it because of my good looks. I didn't make it because I am a genius. I made it because I worked hard," Reid said. "Whatever you want to try to do, make sure you work as hard as you can to try to do what you want to do."

Chicago teachers accept COVID deal, keeping kids in school

By SOPHIA TAREEN and KATHLEEN FOODY Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Students in the nation's third-largest school district returned to classrooms Wednesday after Chicago Public Schools canceled five days of classes amid a standoff with the teachers' union over COVID-19 safety protocols.

Their return happened the same day the full membership of the Chicago Teachers Union narrowly gave their stamp of approval to the hard-fought safety plan that includes expanded testing and metrics to shut down individual schools during outbreaks. It passed with roughly 56% of the vote.

Leaders of the union gave their tentative approval two days earlier allowing students to return. They urged members to accept it, acknowledging that teachers didn't get initial demands including a commitment to flip to remote learning districtwide during a surge of COVID-19 infections.

"This vote is a clear show of dissatisfaction with the boss," Union President Jesse Sharkey said in a statement, referring to Mayor Lori Lightfoot. "This agreement covers only a portion of the safety guarantees that every one of our school communities deserve ... Our members' vote today represents a union's, and a city's, frustration with a mayor that has simmered since the beginning of this pandemic.

Lightfoot and Schools CEO Pedro Martinez issued a joint statement saying they were pleased with the vote and the agreement would guarantee "predictability and stability for the rest of the school year" in the roughly 350,000-student district.

"We all agree we must prioritize the health and well-being of everyone in our school communities including our kids, families, and staff," they said.

Chicago's struggles to keep educating children during the omicron variant's surge are similar to those faced by districts across the country, but the latest high-profile fight between teachers and Lightfoot, a Democrat, forced attention from the White House and governor's office.

The union, which voted last week to revert to online instruction, told teachers not to show up to schools

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 49 of 72

starting Jan. 5 while talks took place. Lightfoot has referred to the union action as an "illegal work stoppage." Both sides filed complaints with a state labor board.

Lightfoot — who disclosed Tuesday that she had tested positive for COVID-19 and was isolating at home — repeatedly refused to agree to remote learning districtwide. She also opposed teachers' demands for a testing program that could randomly test all students unless their parents opted out.

For parents and students in Chicago, the return to schools brought mixed emotions, along with staffing and attendance issues due to infections.

Trinity Washington, a freshman at a high school on the city's Northwest Side, said she supported the teacher's push and plans to be more cautious about keeping a mask on at school. She noted that a school dean has contracted COVID-19 and is on a ventilator.

"I feel like everyone should just go home and stay virtual because it feels like everyone in our building is just getting sick and sick and sick," she said.

Some schools reported being short-staffed and lower attendance with students out sick or in required isolation following close contact to a person with COVID-19. District officials said about 89% of teachers reported to schools. The district's online COVID-19 infection tracker showed more than 13,000 students and adults were in quarantine on Wednesday.

Some individual classes reverted to remote instruction following infections in the two-day window students returned before the union standoff. One school in the city's heavily-Mexican neighborhood of Little Village was particularly hard hit with "up to 10 classrooms" flipping to remote learning Wednesday, according to the district.

Derrontae Gonzalez, the mother of a 5-year-old boy and a 12-year-old girl in Chicago schools, said she understands why teachers pushed for stricter COVID-19 protocols. But she told The Chicago Sun-Times that the days of cancelled classes were difficult, particularly for her son who has a learning disability.

"I'm not concerned," Gonzalez said of the return. "I think the school takes precautions to make sure kids are safe. And I make sure my kids have masks."

Ronnie Spector, '60s icon who sang 'Be My Baby,' dies at 78

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Ronnie Spector, the cat-eyed, bee-hived rock 'n' roll siren who sang such 1960s hits as "Be My Baby," "Baby I Love You" and "Walking in the Rain" as the leader of the girl group The Ronettes, has died. She was 78.

Spector died Wednesday after a brief battle with cancer, her family said. "Ronnie lived her life with a twinkle in her eye, a spunky attitude, a wicked sense of humor and a smile on her face. She was filled with love and gratitude," a statement said. No other details were revealed.

Tributes flooded social media, from Stevie Van Zandt saying it was an honor to produce her, to Brian Wilson, who wrote on Twitter: "I loved her voice so much and she was a very special person and a dear friend." Diane Warren called her "The voice of a million teenage dreams including mine."

The Ronettes' sexy look and powerful voices — plus songwriting and producing help from Phil Spector — turned them into one of the premier acts of the girl-group era, touring England with The Rolling Stones and befriending the Beatles.

Spector, alongside her sister Estelle Bennett and cousin Nedra Talley, scored hits with pop masterpieces like "Baby, I Love You," "Walking in the Rain," "I Can Hear Music" and "Be My Baby," which was co-written by Spector, Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich.

"We weren't afraid to be hot. That was our gimmick," Spector said in her memoir. "When we saw The Shirelles walk on stage with their wide party dresses, we went in the opposite direction and squeezed our bodies into the tightest skirts we could find. Then we'd get out on stage and hike them up to show our legs even more."

Spector, born Veronica Bennett, and her multiracial bandmates grew up in the Washington Heights area of Manhattan. They began singing and dancing in clubs as Ronnie and the Relatives, becoming noteworthy

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 50 of 72

for their liberal use of eyeliner and mascara.

"The louder they applauded, the more mascara we put on the next time," she wrote in her memoir. "We didn't have a hit record to grab their attention, so we had to make an impression with our style. None of it was planned out; we just took the look we were born with and extended it."

In March 1963, Estelle Bennett managed to arrange an audition in front of Phil Spector, known for his big, brass-and-drum style dubbed the "wall of sound." They were signed to Philles Records in 1963. After being signed, they sang backup for other acts until Spector had the group record "Be My Baby" and "Baby I Love You."

The group's debut album, "Presenting the Fabulous Ronettes Featuring Veronica," was released in 1964. Five of its 12 tracks had made it to the U.S. Billboard charts.

"Nothing excites me more than just being onstage, having fun and flirting and winking to the guys and stuff like that," she told People magazine in 2017. "I just have so much fun. It's just the best feeling when I go out and they say, 'Ladies and gentlemen...' —my heart stops for a minute—"...Ronnie Spector and the Ronettes!" Then I just go out there and the crowd reacts the way they react and I can go on singing forever."

After touring Germany in 1967, the Ronettes broke up. Spector married Ronnie in 1968, then she said he kept her locked in their Beverly Hills mansion. Her 1990 autobiography "Be My Baby: How I Survived Mascara, Miniskirts And Madness" tells an unhappy story of abuse. The couple divorced in 1974. Phil Spector was sent to prison in 2009 for the murder of actress Lana Clarkson and died in 2021.

Ronnie Spector's influence was felt far and wide. Brian Wilson became obsessed with "Be My Baby" and Billy Joel wrote "Say Goodbye to Hollywood" in Spector's honor. Amy Winehouse frequently cited Spector as an idol.

Martin Scorsese used "Be My Baby" to open his 1973 film "Mean Streets" and the song appears in the title sequence of "Dirty Dancing" and the closing credits of "Baby Mama." It also appeared on TV in "Moonlighting" and "The Wonder Years."

When the Ronettes were inducted in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones remembered opening for the trio in England in the mid-1960s. "They could sing all their way right through a wall of sound," Richards said. "They didn't need anything. They touched my heart right there and then and they touch it still."

After the Ronettes broke up, Spector continued to tour and make music, including "Take Me Home Tonight" with Eddie Money, recording Joel's "Say Goodbye to Hollywood" with Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band, and recording the 1999 EP "She Talks to Rainbows," which included her first ever recording of "Don't Worry Baby," written for her by Brian Wilson.

In 2006, she released "Last of the Rock Stars," her first album in 20 years and it featured appearances by the Raconteurs, Keith Richards, Patti Smith and the Raveonettes. In 2010 she released a doo-wop Christmas EP called "Ronnie Spector's Best Christmas Ever" and in 2016 released "English Heart," her covers of songs from Britain in the '60s.

She is survived her husband, Jonathan Greenfield, and two sons, Jason and Austin.

Will Smith, Lady Gaga, Ben Affleck score SAG nominations

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Oscar race may be missing in-person glitz this year, but it doesn't lack for star power. Will Smith, Lady Gaga and Ben Affleck landed individual nominations for the 28th Screen Actors Guild Awards on Wednesday, while the casts of "Belfast" and "CODA" were among those nominated for the guild's top award, best ensemble.

The nominees were announced Wednesday by actors Vanessa Hudgens and Rosario Dawson on Instagram Live. While the nominations were conducted virtually due to the surge in COVID-19 cases, the streamed announcement still represented one of the most meaningful mornings in an awards season largely snuffed out by the pandemic.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 51 of 72

Joining Kenneth Branagh's semi-autobiographical "Belfast" and the coming-of-age drama "CODA" for best ensemble were the casts for Ridley Scott's true-tale, high-camp "House of Gucci," Adam McKay's apocalypse comedy "Don't Look Up" and the family tennis drama "King Richard." Notably left out were the casts of Steven Spielberg's lavish "West Side Story" revival (which landed a supporting nod for Ariana DeBose) and Jane Campion's "The Power of the Dog." Campion's gothic drama, though, landed individual SAG nominations for Benedict Cumberbatch, Kirsten Dunst and Kodi Smit-McPhee.

The SAG Awards have more of the awards season spotlight this year since the Golden Globes — usually the kickoff party to final Oscar stretch — made barely a peep. The Globes were unceremoniously announced Sunday on Twitter in a private ceremony due to Hollywood's boycott of the beleaguered Hollywood Foreign Press Association over diversity and ethical issues. The omicron surge also prompted the Critics Choice Awards to postpone its Jan. 9 in-person gala. For the second straight year, Oscar season has gone virtual — and struggled to make much noise.

But the SAG nominations suggest that plenty of famous faces are in the hunt this year. Along with Will Smith ("King Richard") and Cumberbatch, the nominees for best male lead actor are: Denzel Washington ("The Tragedy of Macbeth"), Andrew Garfield ("Tick, Tick ... Boom!") and Javier Bardem ("Being the Ricardos").

Up for best female lead are: Lady Gaga ("House of Gucci"), Jessica Chastain ("The Eyes of Tammy Faye"), Olivia Colman ("The Lost Daughter"), Nicole Kidman ("Being the Ricardos") and Jennifer Hudson ("Respect").

Joining Dunst and DeBose in the best female supporting category are Caitriona Balfe ("Belfast"), Cate Blanchett ("Nightmare Alley") and Ruth Negga ("Passing"). The best male supporting nominees are: Affleck ("The Tender Bar"), Bradley Cooper ("Licorice Pizza"), Troy Kotsur ("CODA"), Jared Leto ("House of Gucci") and Smit-McPhee.

Kotsur is the first deaf actor to land an individual SAG nomination.

The SAG Awards, presented by the actors guild SAG-AFTRA, are among the most reliable Oscar bellwethers. Seldom does a movie or performance not nominated by the screen actors end up winning at the Academy Awards. Actors make up the biggest percentage of the film academy, so their choices have the largest sway.

But last year, SAG and the academy diverged more than usual. Only one of its acting winners — Daniel Kaluuya ("Judas and the Black Messiah") — repeated at the Oscars. (The other SAG winners were Chadwick Boseman and Viola Davis in "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," and Yuh-Jung Youn in "Minari.") The Aaron Sorkin courtroom drama "The Trial of the Chicago 7" won best ensemble at a virtual SAG Awards while Chloé Zhao's "Nomadland" — which included many nonprofessional actors and went un-nominated for SAG's ensemble award — triumphed at the Oscars.

That history will give hope to supporters of Kristen Stewart ("Spencer"), maybe the most notable performer overlooked Wednesday. Others that missed out include Peter Dinklage ("Cyrano"), Ciarán Hinds ("Belfast") and Rachel Zegler ("West Side Story").

While some have rooted for some of the year's most popular blockbusters to give the flagging Oscars a populist jolt, "Spider-Man: No Way Home," "Dune" and "No Time To Die" received no major nominations from the actors guild. "Dune" and "No Time to Die" did, though, join "Black Widow," "The Matrix Resurrections" and "Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings" in the stunt ensemble category.

Yet possibly the most popular TV series of 2021 did haul in plenty of recognition. Netflix's much-watched "Squid Game" was nominated for four SAG awards including best drama series.

Series creator Hwang Dong-hyuk on Wednesday recalled watching the hoopla at awards ceremonies held at the Shrine Auditorium across the street from the University of Southern California when he was studying there.

"At the time, I told myself I'd like to feature my work at American film awards one day," he said in an interview. "Now, I think back to those memories."

The series' star Lee Jung-jae said he felt an "electrical shock" when his name was announced among the nominees. A veteran of Korean TV and film, he's laughed off U.S. media questions about overnight success.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 52 of 72

"I've decided I'm now a newbie actor!" he said Wednesday, clutching a bottle of wine.

The television nominations were also led by HBO's "Succession" (four nods including best drama series and best actor for Jeremy Strong and Brian Cox); "Ted Lasso" (five nods including best comedy series); and "The Morning Show" (four nods including best drama series).

The 28th annual SAG Awards are to be held Feb. 27 and will be broadcast on TNT and TBS. The Oscars are scheduled for March 27.

Army ups bonuses for recruits to \$50K, as COVID takes toll

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. Army, for the first time, is offering a maximum enlistment bonus of \$50,000 to highly skilled recruits who join for six years, The Associated Press has learned, as the service struggles to lure soldiers into certain critical jobs during the continuing pandemic.

Maj. Gen. Kevin Vereen, head of Army Recruiting Command, told AP that shuttered schools and the competitive job market over the past year have posed significant challenges for recruiters. So heading into the most difficult months of the year for recruiting, the Army is hoping that some extra cash and a few other changes will entice qualified young people to sign up.

"We are still living the implications of 2020 and the onset of COVID, when the school systems basically shut down," said Vereen. "We lost a full class of young men and women that we didn't have contact with, face-to-face."

Two years of the pandemic has made it more difficult to recruit in schools and at public events, and the competition for quality workers has intensified as young people weigh their options.

Some, said Vereen, are taking what he calls a gap year, and "are making the decision that they don't necessarily need to work right now."

The annual recruiting goal fluctuates as currently serving soldiers decide whether to reenlist or leave. In the last two years, as the pandemic raged, many decided to stay in, lessening the pressure on recruiting to help keep the Army at its full strength of 485,000. Last year's recruiting goal was 57,500, and Vereen said it will be about the same this year.

To entice recruits, those who sign up for a six-year enlistment in one of several high-demand career fields can get bonuses that total as much as \$50,000. Given the high standards, it will be difficult for many to qualify for the top bonus.

The final figure depends on when they agree to ship out for training, if they already have critical skills and if they choose airborne or ranger posts. Certain careers — such as missile defense crew, special forces, signals intelligence and fire control specialists who coordinate battlefield weapons operations — can often come with the maximum bonuses. But other key jobs include infantry, intelligence analyst, combat medic specialist, military police, combat engineer and several others. And those may change every month, based on available spots in the training pipeline and other service needs.

Until now, the Army has offered a maximum bonus of \$40,000.

"We're in a competitive market," said Vereen. "How we incentivize is absolutely essential, and that is absolutely something that we know that is important to trying to get somebody to come and join the military."

Sgt. 1st Class Mary James has been working as a recruiter in Ohio since November 2020, and she said the early months — when COVID-19 was surging and there were no vaccines — were challenging. It's gotten better, and she said the higher bonuses will help her.

"Money isn't always the first thing that they talk about, but it does come into play," said James, who's been in the Army for 15 years. "It will be exciting to see what the return is on that. You know, I think it does put us in one of the top tier levels of competitive businesses."

James, who previously worked as a signals intelligence analyst, can also talk to recruits about deploying to war zones, and the exciting opportunities the military offers. And she said she hears a lot of questions and worries about stability, leaving home and a career that may have them moving from place to place every few years.

Vereen said the Army is doing more to address those types of concerns. Last fall the Army significantly

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 53 of 72

increased the option to enlist for two years, expanding it to a total of 84 different career fields. And some will be able to choose where they will initially be assigned — a benefit Army leaders approved in an effort to be more family friendly and bolster the recruiting effort, particularly in the pandemic.

According to Vereen, the total amount of bonuses available hasn't been set. But the money has decreased every year since a peak of more than \$485 million in 2018, after the Army failed to meet its annual recruiting goal. In the fiscal year that ended last Sept. 30, the Army spent more than \$233 million on bonuses, with about 16,500 recruits getting an average enlistment bonus of more than \$14,000.

"We want to promote the value of serving your country first," said Vereen. "But we also know that, this generation and I guess human nature, you know, it's all about compensation, too."

For James, the money may help her meet her recruiting goal as the Army heads into what it calls the "bathtub" months of February to May, when recruiting is historically at its low point. During the spring, the Army's more than 9,400 recruiters have to seek out and sign up people who have already graduated from high school and college. Recruiting traditionally spikes as students graduate in the spring and start looking for jobs.

James said her goal is to get 20 qualified candidates a week to take initial enlistment steps, and last week she made 75% of that. She had more success around the holidays, but it's more difficult now.

Compounding the issue is the highly contagious omicron variant, which is prompting some school systems to shut down — just as recruiters want to get into the schools or get out to sports events to woo candidates.

As a result, Brig. Gen. John Cushing, the deputy commander at Recruiting Command, said the Army decided to tweak its bonus systems. In previous years, said Cushing, the Army spread out the bonuses. "sort of evenly like peanut butter across the whole accessions (recruiting) year." This year, the money will be concentrated in the next few months when it is really needed.

"It is certainly a weapon that we have in our arsenal. And I think we've used it effectively and I'm very confident we'll get after it again this year," said Cushing.

After Kazakhstan unrest, relatives await detainees' release

ALMATY, Kazakhstan (AP) — With about 12,000 people arrested after anti-government protests in Kazakhstan last week, friends and relatives of those held by police waited outside a jail Wednesday, hoping to learn their fate. Some even went to morgues to see if a loved one was among the scores killed in the unprecedented violence in the Central Asian nation.

Authorities have refused to allow relatives or lawyers to see those in custody, giving little information about them, according to human rights activists.

The demonstrations began Jan. 2 in the western part of Kazakhstan over a sharp rise in fuel prices and spread throughout the country, apparently reflecting wider discontent with the government, which declared a state of emergency for the whole country and asked a Russia-led military alliance to send in troops to help restore order.

Another 1,678 people were arrested in the past 24 hours in Almaty, the largest city that was hit hardest by the turmoil, and more than 300 criminal investigations have been opened. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev blamed the unrest on foreign-backed "terrorists," but did not provide any evidence, and had given shoot-to-kill orders to security forces to quell the unrest.

Outside a branch of the Internal Affairs department that housed a large detention center, a man who gave his name only as Renat said he has been waiting nearly a week to see or get any information about a close friend, Zhandos Nakipovich. He said Nakipovich, whom he described as being like "a brother" to him, was taken into custody on Jan. 4 during a peaceful protest.

"He was at first held at a precinct, then they told us he was in the Internal Affairs department," Renat told The Associated Press. "Since Jan. 6, we've been here and we don't know whether he's alive or not."

Military checkpoints prevented anyone from getting close to the building.

"Neither lawyers nor relatives — no one is allowed inside. Lawyers should be present during interroga-

tion, but as you see, no one can pass," said Galym Ageleuov, head of the Liberty human rights group, who was waiting at the barricade.

"The checkpoint blocks the access for lawyers and relatives to see what's going on there. We don't even have the list of detainees," Ageleuov said.

More than a dozen men and women in dark winter clothes gathered outside one of Almaty's morgues, with some of them waiting to collect the bodies of relatives killed in the unrest. Huddled together in small groups, they stood at the gate of the facility, chatting quietly with each other but refused to talk to a reporter.

Although the official death toll was announced as 164, Tokayev has said hundreds of civilians and security forces were killed and injured.

Life in Almaty has started returning to normal after days of unrest that saw cars and buses torched, government buildings stormed and set ablaze, the airport seized and the sound of gunfire ringing out. The unrest had largely ended by last weekend.

Public transportation has resumed and shopping malls reopened, and the only reminders of the violence were occasional military roadblocks and the charred exterior of city hall, which was set ablaze at the height of the rioting.

Authorities in the energy-rich country of 19 million sought to mollify the anger at the government by capping fuel prices for 180 days. The Cabinet resigned, and longtime former leader Nursultan Nazarbayev was ousted from his influential post of head of the National Security Council. Nazarbayev had stepped down as president in 2019 after nearly three decades in power, but retained influence in the security forces.

Tokayev requested help from the Collective Security Treaty Organization, or CSTO, a Russia-led military alliance of six ex-Soviet states. The bloc sent over 2,000 troops to Kazakhstan, and Tokayev said the troops will start withdrawing Thursday.

Giuffre's Prince Andrew suit goes ahead despite Epstein deal

By LARRY NEUMEISTER and TOM HAYS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A judge has — for now — refused to dismiss a lawsuit against Britain's Prince Andrew by an American woman who says he sexually abused her when she was 17.

Stressing Wednesday that he wasn't ruling on the truth of the allegations, U.S. District Judge Lewis A. Kaplan rejected an argument by Andrew's lawyers that Virginia Giuffre's lawsuit should be thrown out at an early stage because of an old legal settlement she had with Jeffrey Epstein, the financier she claims set up sexual encounters with the prince.

Kaplan said the \$500,000 settlement between Epstein and Giuffre didn't involve the prince and didn't bar a suit against him now.

Giuffre sued the 61-year-old Andrew in August, saying she was coerced into sexual encounters with him in 2001 by Epstein and his longtime companion, Ghislaine Maxwell. Giuffre said she was sexually abused by Andrew at Maxwell's London home, at Epstein's New York mansion and his estate in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Andrew's lawyers had said the lawsuit lacked specificity and was disqualified by the deal she reached in 2009 with lawyers for Epstein. They also attacked Giuffre's credibility and motives, saying in October that the lawsuit was aimed at achieving "another payday at his expense and at the expense of those closest to him."

Kaplan said Giuffre's complaint is neither "unintelligible" nor "vague" nor "ambiguous."

"It alleges discrete incidents of sexual abuse in particular circumstances at three identifiable locations. It identifies to whom it attributes that sexual abuse," he wrote.

The judge included in his ruling facts alleged by Giuffre, including that Epstein and Maxwell were guests at the prince's 40th birthday party in 2000 and that Andrew invited Epstein to his daughter's 18th birthday party in 2006, a month after Florida state prosecutors charged Epstein with procuring a minor for prostitution.

The prince's lawyers have said that Andrew never sexually abused or assaulted Giuffre and that he

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 55 of 72

"unequivocally denies Giuffre's false allegations against him."

The prince himself has strenuously denied Giuffre's allegations. In late 2019, Prince Andrew told BBC Newsnight that sex with Giuffre "didn't happen" and he has "no recollection" of ever meeting her. His statements led critics to say he seemed insensitive to Epstein's victims. Afterward, the prince stepped back from royal duties.

His lawyers did not immediately respond to messages seeking comment Wednesday. Buckingham Palace told The Associated Press that it would not comment on the "ongoing legal matter."

Sigrid McCawley, an attorney for Giuffre, said in a statement that Kaplan's ruling "is another important step in Virginia's heroic and determined pursuit of justice as a survivor of sex trafficking."

While Andrew denies the allegations, Buckingham Palace will want him to settle the case so Queen Elizabeth II can move on without more sordid headlines that weaken the monarchy and taint every member of the royal family, said Mark Stephens, a specialist in international law at Howard Kennedy in London.

Stephens said Wednesday's ruling means the process of delaying every technical point open to them as a matter of law has effectively played itself out. Even though Andrew is likely to appeal, the case will move forward, and he will face the embarrassment of having to testify about his alleged activities with a 17-year-old.

"The practical realities of this position have stuck a noose around Prince Andrew's neck," Stephens said. "He's got to settle. He's got to get out. Or he's a dead man walking."

Kaplan noted that he was required by law, at this stage of the litigation, to assume Giuffre's allegations are true, though the prince's lawyers could cast doubt on the truth of the claims at trial. The judge has said a trial would not occur until late this year, at the earliest. Depositions of the prince and Giuffre would take place before then.

Giuffre's settlement with Epstein was reached a decade before the 66-year-old financier killed himself at a Manhattan federal lockup as he awaited a sex trafficking trial in 2019, over a decade after Florida federal prosecutors struck a deal with his lawyers not to prosecute him. His lawyers claimed the Florida deal prevented the New York charges.

Similarly, Andrew's attorneys cited language in the recently unsealed \$500,000 settlement by Epstein with Giuffre that said her claims against "potential defendants" were also disallowed by the deal.

But Kaplan wrote that there were substantial indications in the settlement that Epstein and Giuffre did not clearly intend to "directly," "primarily," or "substantially" benefit someone such as the prince. He noted that the prince was not a party to the agreement.

He also said the agreement was "far from a model of clear and precise drafting."

The judge's findings mirrored comments he made during oral arguments by both sides when he was particularly dismissive of the arguments made on the prince's behalf.

Epstein's death came more than two years before his former girlfriend, Maxwell, 60, was convicted of sex trafficking and conspiracy charges in Manhattan federal court. Giuffre's allegations against Andrew were not part of the criminal cases against Epstein or Maxwell.

Giuffre asserted that she met Andrew while she traveled frequently with Epstein between 2000 and 2002, when her lawyers maintain she was "on call for Epstein for sexual purposes" and was "lent out to other powerful men," including Andrew. Her lawsuit said she still suffers significant emotional and psychological distress and harm.

The AP does not typically identify people who say they are victims of sexual assault unless they choose to come forward publicly, as Giuffre has.

EXPLAINER: What's next in Prince Andrew sex abuse lawsuit?

NEW YORK (AP) — A judge's ruling against Prince Andrew in a sexual abuse lawsuit Wednesday was bad news for the British royal. But it doesn't say much about whether his accuser, Virginia Giuffre, will ultimately prevail in her civil suit, or even substantially increase the likelihood the case will wind up before a jury.

A look at the ruling and where the case stands:

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 56 of 72

THE RULING

Giuffre sued Andrew last year, saying that the American financier Jeffrey Epstein and his companion, Ghislaine Maxwell, arranged sexual encounters with the prince starting when she was 17.

U.S. District Judge Lewis A. Kaplan's ruling Wednesday in New York didn't address the truth of those allegations at all. It dealt with narrow legal challenges raised by Andrew's lawyers, who said the lawsuit should be dismissed now, at an extremely early stage.

They had argued that when Giuffre settled a similar lawsuit against Epstein in 2009 for \$500,000, she had signed away her right to sue any other potential defendants. They also questioned the constitutionality of a New York state law that temporarily waived the usual statute of limitations for lawsuits brought by victims of childhood sexual abuse.

The ruling was expected. Kaplan had all but ruled against Andrew last week when he shot down nearly every argument offered by the Duke of York's lawyers.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Since the judge's ruling dealt only with a few preliminary issues, there is a lot more ground to cover before the case gets to trial.

Andrew's lawyers could appeal the ruling. They will have opportunities to try to get the case dismissed on other grounds.

As the case develops, the two sides must exchange potential evidence — such as emails, text messages and telephone records — and submit to depositions at which lawyers can question potential trial witnesses.

Giuffre has been through many such depositions before in lawsuits against Maxwell and other people, but Andrew has never been questioned about the matter under oath — something he may want to avoid at all costs.

Once the exchange of evidence concludes, defense lawyers often make a new request to toss out the case judging by what they've learned. The judge then makes rulings that may help lawyers understand the risks of going to trial.

Before trial, a judge rules on what evidence can be shown to a jury, giving lawyers another opportunity to assess their chances of scoring a victory before a jury.

WILL THE CASE GET THAT FAR?

Maybe not.

Andrew has some incentives to settle the case quickly, rather than let Giuffre's attorneys seek to question him under oath, which could cause him problems later.

Maxwell's two 2016 depositions in a lawsuit Giuffre filed against her became the basis of criminal perjury charges that Manhattan federal prosecutors brought against her last year.

She was convicted of sex trafficking and conspiracy late last month but has yet to stand trial for perjury. Prosecutors have agreed to drop the perjury charges if her trafficking case goes to sentencing this year.

Andrew is also likely facing enormous pressure to settle to avoid sensational headlines that damage the reputation of the royal family. The negative headlines generated by the case may be seen as more costly than a settlement.

Any such deal would probably not elicit any admission of guilt or accountability.

THE LIKELY OUTCOME

Absent an outright dismissal, most civil litigation in the U.S. ends in some sort of settlement. Dozens of women, for example, have filed lawsuits against Epstein and onetime movie mogul Harvey Weinstein.

None so far have resulted in a trial.

Yanks' Balkovec living 'American dream' with manager role

By JAKE SEINER AP Baseball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Rachel Balkovec is aware of the negativity in her social media feeds and tries to leave it there. Her sisters see it, too, and can't help but pass along certain disparaging reactions to her barrier-breaking journey.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 57 of 72

"It's hilarious to me," Balkovec said. "Because it's the American dream."

In the clubhouse? She hasn't seen any of that toxicity there.

Balkovec was introduced Wednesday as manager of the New York Yankees' Low A affiliate in the Florida State League. In taking over the Tampa Tarpons, Balkovec will become the first female manager in the history of affiliated baseball, an appointment 10 years in the making for the former college softball player.

"If you know my story and you have a pulse, I think it's pretty hard not to get behind what's going on here," she said.

Nearly a decade after changing her name on resumes to disguise her gender and break into baseball, the 34-year-old has smashed several barriers en route to this title. She was the first woman to serve as a full-time minor league strength and conditioning coach, then the first to be a full-time hitting coach in the minors.

This promotion — a year after former Yankees employee Kim Ng became the majors' first female general manager with the Miami Marlins — is different. Balkovec will run the clubhouse in Tampa, charged with overseeing the development of future big leaguers for one of the most famous sports franchises in the world.

"The players that I've worked with, whether they like me, they don't like me, they like what I'm saying, they don't like what I'm saying, I do feel like they respect me," she said.

It's a trust she's earned via an unusual route — one that didn't exist 20 years ago, but not just because of her gender.

A former softball catcher at Creighton and New Mexico, Balkovec has a master's degree in kinesiology from LSU and another in human movement sciences from Vrije University in the Netherlands. She's worked in strength and conditioning with the St. Louis Cardinals and Houston Astros since first breaking into pro ball in 2012, and also spent time at Driveline Baseball, a data-driven center that has trained numerous major leaguers. She's an expert in performance science, precisely the expert teams are coveting.

When the Yankees hired her as a minor league hitting coach in 2019, she was at the forefront among women breaking into uniformed jobs, but she was hardly the only coach without a traditional playing background.

Hitting 95 mph isn't the same skill as teaching someone else to, and as teams have shifted their focus in the hiring process to reflect that, it's created a pathway for women like Balkovec or Alyssa Nakken, part of the San Francisco Giants' major league coaching staff since 2020.

"There wasn't a ton of debate as to whether baseball was ready or the world was ready," said vice president of baseball operations Kevin Reese, who made the decision to promote Balkovec. "We're trying to find the best people and put them in the best position to have an impact here."

Reese, introduced Wednesday under a new title after being promoted from senior director of player development, helped hire Balkovec in 2019 and has been overwhelmingly impressed with her expertise and ability to lead, including with young Latin American players. The Nebraska native taught herself Spanish after becoming Houston's Latin American strength and conditioning coach in 2016, and some of her most notable work has been with New York's Spanish-speaking players, including top prospect Jasson Dominguez.

General manager Brian Cashman has had a woman as an assistant general manager since hiring Ng in 1998. When she left in 2001, Jean Afterman was appointed to the role and has been there since. Balkovec has expressed interest in one day working in the front office and potentially becoming a GM herself.

"The sky's the limit," Cashman said. "She's determined. She's strong. She's got perseverance."

She's needed it. After serving her temporary role with St. Louis in 2012, she began applying for baseball jobs with what she knew was a rock-solid resume. And yet, only one team responded.

Her point of contact with that club said his bosses wouldn't let him hire a woman in a strength and conditioning role. Even worse, that person called around to other teams with vacancies, and they all told him the same.

"In that very moment, my level of naivete went from a 10 to a zero," she said.

One of her sisters suggested changing her name to "Rae Balkovec" on her resume, and the tactic worked to at least get hiring managers on the phone. The Cardinals brought her back as a full-time strength and

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 58 of 72

conditioning coordinator in 2014.

She's seldom had issues with players related to her gender — "so little it's hardly worth mentioning," she said. Being the only woman in that trail-blazing role was lonely, though.

Now, she believes there will be 11 women with on-field jobs in affiliated ball next year, and she's able to compare experiences with them. Tennis great Billie Jean King was among the many who congratulated her on the Tampa job, and she's developed a network of support that's reinforced her confidence that she's ready for the role.

"On behalf of Major League Baseball, I congratulate Rachel on this historic milestone," Commissioner Rob Manfred said. "As manager of the Tampa Tarpons, she will continue to demonstrate her expertise and leadership in the Yankees' organization. We wish Rachel well in this new capacity and appreciate her mentorship to the growing network of women in baseball operations and player development roles."

The job ahead of her, though, is the same as any other skipper — get the most out of the players in her clubhouse.

"My goal is really to know the names of the girlfriends, the dogs, the families of all the players," she said. "My goal is to develop them as young men and young people who have an immense amount of pressure on them. My goal is to support the coaches that are on the staff."

"We're going to be talking more nuts and bolts of pitching and hitting with them, and defense. It's really just to be a supporter, and to facilitate an environment where they can be successful."

Soaring COVID-19 cases renew US debate over mask mandates

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

Officials across the U.S. are again weighing how and whether to impose mask mandates as COVID-19 infections soar and the American public grows ever wearier of pandemic-related restrictions.

Much of the debate centers around the nation's schools, some of which have closed due to infection-related staffing issues. In a variety of places, mask mandates are being lifted or voted down.

The changes come as the federal government assesses the supply of medical-grade respirator face coverings, such as N95 or KN95 masks. During a briefing Wednesday, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients said officials were "strongly considering options to make more high-quality masks available to all Americans," noting the government has a stockpile of more than 750 million N95 masks.

The best mask "is the one that you will wear and the one you can keep on all day long, that you can tolerate in public indoor settings," said Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

On Monday, officials in Wyoming's capital city voted to end a mask mandate for students and teachers that had been in place since September. The Cheyenne school district also reduced COVID-19 isolation requirements, voting to require that only people with symptoms and positive tests — not just those exposed — need to stay home for five days and mask for five days thereafter.

The University of Missouri's governing board on Tuesday rejected the university system president's request to temporarily require masks on the Columbia campus, as well as a mandate specific to classrooms and labs.

A school board meeting was canceled Monday in Wichita, Kansas, after three new members refused to wear masks for a swearing-in ceremony. Meanwhile in the Topeka area, elected officials rejected a plea to mandate masks, urging people to be cautious but saying they were not ready for a requirement.

Some jurisdictions are making the move on their own toward more stalwart masking policies, including requiring higher-grade mask materials.

Last week, the University of Arizona announced it would require a medical-grade mask in indoor spaces where social distancing is not possible. The school said on its website that it no longer considers cloth masks to be adequate, although a cloth mask can be worn over a medical-grade mask to improve fit and increase protection.

A new indoor mask mandate takes effect Wednesday in New Orleans ahead of the Mardi Gras season.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 59 of 72

Louisiana's statewide coronavirus daily hospitalization numbers have increased sevenfold in three weeks — a spike that has strained hospitals, where emergency room waits are sometimes as long as 12 hours, according to the city's health director, Dr. Jennifer Avegno.

Health officials in Omaha, Nebraska, announced a temporary mask mandate on Tuesday, but the state has threatened to sue if the rule is imposed as planned. Omaha City Council President Pete Festersen said a majority of the council supported the move.

"This is not a decision I made lightly. This was not an easy decision at all, and I know that it's going to create some waves," Douglas County Health Director Lindsay Huse said. "But this is a tool that we have in our toolbox. We have research, evidence, out there showing that masks decrease transmission."

Other places hesitated to bring back requirements that ended months ago. In Michigan, where state officials said record-high COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations could peak in late January or early February before beginning to drop, health leaders remained reluctant to reinstate restrictions or masking mandates. They continue to implore people to get vaccinated, get booster shots, wear well-fitting masks in public and avoid large gatherings.

Elizabeth Hertel, director of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, recommended that people wear an N95 mask or two well-fitting face coverings. A parent group has called for school mask requirements, which are in place in a majority of individual districts but not at the statewide level.

In Utah, as lawmakers prepared to begin meeting for the year, GOP Gov. Spencer Cox exempted the Capitol and other state facilities from a municipal mask mandate. Jenny Wilson, Salt Lake County's Democratic mayor, said the governor did not have the authority to make exceptions to the policy, which requires N95 and KN95 or similar masks for a month in indoor spaces, including schools.

Review: In 'Belle,' a dazzling anime 'Beauty and the Beast'

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

Anime master Mamoru Hosoda makes movies that, even at their most elaborate, can reach such staggeringly emotional heights that they seem to break free of anything you're prepared for in an animated movie — or in most kinds of movies, for that matter.

Any talented Japanese filmmaker working in fantastical animation inevitably draws comparisons to the great Hayao Miyazaki. But the more appropriate touchstone for Hosoda may be Yasujiro Ozu. As dazzling as Hosoda's films may be visually or conceptually, they're rooted in simple and profound human stories.

His last film, the Oscar-nominated "Mirai," is one of the best movies made in recent years about family. It centered on a 4-year-old boy who, dealing with the arrival of a new baby sister and confronting new feelings of jealousy, is visited by his sister as a middle-schooler. Other time-traveling encounters follow, and a new understanding and empathy grows in the boy.

Hosoda's latest, "Belle," which opened in theaters Wednesday, is more complicatedly sketched. It's an ultra-modern take on "Beauty and the Beast" that transfers the fairy tale to a digital metaverse realm called "U." There, in a dizzying digital expanse that will satisfy any "Matrix" fan who felt let down by the virtual worlds of "The Matrix Resurrections," its 5 billion users can adapt any persona they like.

The 17-year-old Suzu (voiced by Kaho Nakamura in the subtitled version I saw; an English dub is also playing) reluctantly joins U as an avatar named Belle, a more exotic beauty than the modest and shy Suzu. In the U, Belle's songs find massive stardom that's much unlike Suzu's own life, where one of her only friends is Hiroka (Lilas Ikuta), a computer whiz who helps craft Belle. In U, Belle finds herself drawn to the metaverse's notorious villain called the Dragon (or the Beast) who's hunted by a police-like force that wants peace and free-flowing commerce in U.

You might be thinking that an anime "Beauty and the Beast" turned into internet parable sounds a tad overelaborate — and about the furthest thing from the sage simplicity of Ozu. It's indeed a lot that Hosoda is going for here, and "Beauty and the Beast" doesn't always seem a useful form for all the ideas floating around. At times, "Belle" bends and cracks under its grand ambitions.

But the heart of Hosoda's sincere film never falters. Taking place in both modern-day Japan and the

virtual U, its foot in reality is firmly planted. Our first vision of Suzu is as a young girl watching her mother, in an act of brave selflessness, lose her life saving a child from a flood. Loss and grief have consumed Suzu's childhood; her virtual transformation into Belle is a chance to free herself from some of her everyday struggles. Music had been part of her bond with her mother. That tragic backdrop — how we treat strangers — is also part of the lessons of U, where anonymity breeds good and ill. On the whole, this is a surprisingly positive view of the capacity of the internet for connection and liberation. But what's most striking is how Hosoda marries both realities despite their vast differences. Each world shimmers. Clouds are rendered as mesmerizing as anything in U.

The movie ultimately resides, intimately, with Suzu. Even with all that's going on, "Belle" is deeply attuned to its protagonist's hurts, memories and dreams. Every moment flits between her past and present, reality and virtual reality. These worlds ultimately merge in a scene of astounding catharsis — a song sung not by Belle, but Suzu — and it's one of the most intensely beautiful moments you're likely to see, anywhere.

"Belle," a GKIDS release, is rated PG by the Motion Picture Association of America for thematic content, violence, language and brief suggestive material. Running time: 121 minutes. Three and a half stars out of four.

Inflation at 40-year high pressures consumers, Fed and Biden

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Inflation jumped at its fastest pace in nearly 40 years last month, a 7% spike from a year earlier that is increasing household expenses, eating into wage gains and heaping pressure on President Joe Biden and the Federal Reserve to address what has become the biggest threat to the U.S. economy.

Prices rose sharply in 2021 for cars, gas, food and furniture as part of a rapid recovery from the pandemic recession. Vast infusions of government aid and ultra-low interest rates helped spur demand for goods, while vaccinations gave people confidence to dine out and travel.

As Americans ramped up spending, supply chains remained squeezed by shortages of workers and raw materials and this magnified price pressures.

The Labor Department reported Wednesday that a measure of inflation that excludes volatile food and gas prices jumped 5.5% in December, also the highest in decades. Overall inflation rose 0.5% from November, down from 0.8% the previous month.

Price gains could slow further as snags in supply chains ease, but most economists say inflation won't fall back to pre-pandemic levels anytime soon.

"U.S. inflation pressures show no sign of easing," said James Knightley, chief international economist at the financial services company ING. "It hasn't been this high since the days of Thatcher and Reagan. We could be close to the peak, but the risk is that inflation stays higher for longer."

High inflation isn't only a problem for the U.S. In the 19 European countries that use the euro currency, inflation rose 5% in December compared with a year earlier, the biggest increase on record.

Companies large and small are adapting as best they can.

Nicole Pomije, a bakery owner in the Minneapolis area, said she plans to raise prices for cookies because of surging ingredient costs.

Her basic cookies were priced at 99 cents each, while premium versions were selling for \$1.50 each. But Pomije said she will have to jack up the prices of her basic cookies to the premium price.

"We have to make money," she said. "We don't want to lose our customers. But I think we might."

Businesses struggling to hire have hiked pay, but rising prices for goods and services have eroded those income gains for many Americans. Lower-income families have felt it the most, and polls show that inflation has started displacing even the coronavirus as a public concern.

The United States hasn't seen anything like it since the early 1980s. Back then, Fed Chair Paul Volcker responded by pushing interest rates to painful levels — the prime rate for banks' best customers hit 20% in 1980 — and sent the economy into a deep recession. But Volcker succeeded in taming inflation that had been running at double-digit year-over-year levels for much of 1979-1981.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 61 of 72

High inflation has put President Biden on the defensive. His administration, echoing officials at the Fed, initially suggested that price increases would be temporary. Now that inflation has persisted, Biden and some congressional Democrats have begun to blame large corporations. They say meat producers and other industries are taking advantage of pandemic-induced shortages to drive up prices and profits. But even some left-of-center economists disagree with that diagnosis.

On Wednesday, the president issued a statement arguing that the drop in gas prices in December and a smaller increase in food costs showed progress.

One trend experts fear is a wage-price spiral. That happens when workers seek more pay to offset higher costs, and then companies raise costs further to cover that higher pay. On Tuesday, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell told a Senate panel that he has yet to see evidence that wages are broadly driving up prices across the economy.

The biggest driver of inflation, according to economists, are mismatches between supply and demand. Used car prices have soared more than 37% over the past year because a shortage of semiconductors has prevented auto companies from making enough new cars. Supply-chain constraints have driven furniture prices nearly 14% higher over the past year.

Shoppers are feeling the pinch all around them, from the gas station to the grocery store.

Vicki Bernardo Hill, 65, an occupational therapist in Gaithersburg, Maryland, says she no longer throws extra canned food, boxes of cereal or bakery items into her shopping cart at the Giant Food store.

"I am trying to stick to my list and buying things that are on sale," said Hill.

Because she couldn't find a good deal on a used car, Hill recently bought a new Mazda, spending \$5,000 more than she had planned.

Inflation could ease as the omicron wave fades and as Americans shift more of their spending to services such as travel, eating out and movie-going. That would reduce the demand for goods and help clear supply chains.

But some higher prices, such as rents, could prove to be stickier. Rental costs, which have accelerated since summer, rose 0.4% in December, the third consecutive monthly increase. That's significant because housing costs make up one-third of the government's consumer price index.

Powell told Congress that if it becomes necessary to fight high inflation more aggressively, the Federal Reserve is prepared to accelerate the interest rate hikes it plans to begin this year. The Fed's benchmark short-term rate, now pegged near zero, is expected to be bumped up at least three times this year.

Rate increases would make borrowing for a home or car more expensive, and therefore help to cool off the economy.

Some economists and members of Congress fear the Fed has acted too slowly to head off inflation and that this could eventually force even sharper rate increases that could damage the economy.

Republicans in Congress and even some liberal economists say Biden deserves at least some of the blame for high inflation, arguing that the financial rescue package he pushed through Congress last March added significant stimulus to an already strengthening economy.

Kids' low COVID-19 vaccination rates called a 'gut punch'

By LINDSEY TANNER AP Medical Writer

Distrust, misinformation and delays because of the holidays and bad weather have combined to produce what authorities say are alarmingly low COVID-19 vaccination rates in U.S. children ages 5 to 11.

As of Tuesday, just over 17% were fully vaccinated, more than two months after shots became available to the age group. While Vermont is at 48%, California is just shy of 19% and Mississippi is at only 5%.

Vaccinations among the elementary school set surged after the shots were introduced in the fall, but the numbers have crept up slowly since then, and omicron's explosive spread appears to have had little effect.

The low rates are "very disturbing," said Dr. Robert Murphy, executive director for the Institute for Global Health at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine. "It's just amazing."

Parents who hesitate "are taking an enormous risk and continuing to fuel the pandemic," Murphy said.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 62 of 72

Hospitalizations of children under 18 with COVID-19 in the U.S. have climbed to their highest levels on record in the past few weeks. Many have other conditions made worse by COVID-19, though many aren't sick enough to require intensive care.

The low vaccination rates and rising hospitalizations are "a gut punch, especially when we've been working so hard to keep these kids well," said Dr. Natasha Burgert, a pediatrician in Overland Park, Kansas.

The vaccines have proved highly safe and effective at reducing the risk of severe illness, hospitalization and death.

Overall, 63% of Americans are fully vaccinated. Among children 12 to 17, the rate is 54%.

COVID-19 shots for young children have been authorized in at least 12 countries. In Canada, where Pfizer shots were cleared for ages 5 to 11 in November, just 2% are fully vaccinated.

Snowstorms, tornadoes and other heavy weather in December are believed to have slowed the pace of vaccination in the U.S., along with the busy holiday season. Also, some parents are distrustful because the vaccine is so new, and many have other concerns.

Chicago mother Kendra Shaw has resisted shots for her two school-age children, saying she worries about possible risks and isn't convinced the benefits are worth it.

But this week, her 10-year-old daughter pleaded to get vaccinated so she wouldn't miss school, and her soon-to-be 7-year-old son asked for his shots so he could have a big birthday party.

Shaw scheduled their first doses for Wednesday but said: "I'm really on the fence."

Daniel Kotzin, of Denver, said he is convinced he made the right decision not to vaccinate his 5-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son because most omicron cases seem to be mild.

"They are essentially at no risk of harm, so I really don't understand the reason to vaccinate them," he said.

Doctors say that kind of thinking is misguided and part of the problem.

"It's true, kids in general do better than adults with COVID," said Dr. Elizabeth Murray, a pediatric emergency medicine physician in Rochester, New York, and a spokeswoman for the American Academy of Pediatrics, "but 'not too sick' still can mean miserable with fevers and muscle aches for a week. It can also mean MIS-C or long COVID."

MIS-C, or multisystem inflammatory syndrome, is a rare but serious condition linked to COVID-19 that can affect many organs and typically requires hospitalization.

Authorities don't think omicron is making children and adults more seriously ill than other variants, and say hospitalization rates are up partly because it is so much more contagious.

Some children have been admitted for conditions such as lung disease, diabetes and sickle cell disease that have worsened because of an omicron infection, doctors say.

Dr. Jesse Hackell, a pediatrician in Pomona, New York, said that at least 25% of his patients ages 5 to 11 are vaccinated, but that after an initial rush in the fall, the numbers have dwindled.

"It's a tough sell," he said. "We're not ready" is a common comment, Hackell said. "When I ask, 'What are you waiting for?' I get kind of a shrug. I've had a few say, 'We're not going to be the first million. We'll wait to see what happens.'"

A frustrated Hackell said the government's vaccination campaign is clearly struggling against misinformation and "pseudoscience," the likes of which he has never seen before in his 40-plus years as a pediatrician.

He said the government needs to get tough and mandate the shots.

"If we could get every kid vaccinated across the board, it would go a long way. It wouldn't end the pandemic, but it would end the severe disease," Hackell said. "It could help turn the virus into nothing more serious than the common cold, and we can deal with that."

No Ukraine breakthrough, but NATO and Russia eye more talks

By LORNE COOK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The United States and NATO rejected key Russian security demands for easing tensions over Ukraine but left open Wednesday the possibility of future talks with Moscow on arms control,

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 63 of 72

missile deployments and ways to prevent military incidents between Russia and the West.

The decisions came at a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, the first of its kind in over two years. That Russia's delegation did not walk out of the talks and remained open to the prospect of future discussions after having its main positions rebuffed were seen as positive notes in a week of high-level meetings aimed at staving off a feared Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin wants NATO to withdraw its troops and military equipment from countries that border Russia, which include Ukraine but also NATO allies like Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Putin also asked for the 30-nation military alliance to agree not to admit any more members.

Speaking after the meeting at NATO headquarters in Brussels, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman reaffirmed that some of Putin's security demands "are simply non-starters."

"We will not slam the door shut on NATO's open-door policy," she told reporters after almost four hours of talks. "We are not going to agree that NATO cannot expand any further."

The meeting was called as an estimated 100,000 combat-ready Russian troops, tanks and heavy military equipment are massed near Ukraine's eastern border. The buildup has caused deep concerns in Kyiv and the West that Moscow is preparing for an invasion.

Russia denies that it has fresh plans to attack its neighbor and in turn accuses the West of threatening its security by positioning military personnel and equipment in Central and Eastern Europe.

While noting that "escalation does not create optimum conditions for diplomacy, to say the least," Sherman also expressed optimism following the Brussels meeting given that Moscow did not dismiss the idea of further talks.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who chaired the meeting, said NATO nations and Russian envoys both "expressed the need to resume dialogue and to explore a schedule of future meetings."

Stoltenberg said NATO is keen to discuss ways to prevent dangerous military incidents or accidents involving Russia and the Western allies, reducing space and cyber threats, as well as setting limits on missile deployments and other arms control initiatives.

But Stoltenberg said any talks about Ukraine wouldn't be easy. Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine and backed a separatist insurgency in Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland in 2014. In the years since, the fighting has killed more than 14,000 people.

"There are significant differences between NATO allies and Russia on this issue" of Ukraine's potential NATO membership, Stoltenberg told reporters after what he said was "a very serious and direct exchange" with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko and Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin.

Stoltenberg underlined that Ukraine has the right to decide its future security arrangements and that NATO would continue to leave its door open to new members.

"No one else has anything to say, and of course, Russia does not have a veto," he said.

Grushko, who described Wednesday's talks as "serious, deep and substantive," countered by saying that "the freedom to choose ways of ensuring one's security mustn't be implemented in a way that infringes on legitimate security interests of others."

He did not rule out more discussions with the Western allies but scoffed at NATO's assurances that it doesn't threaten Russia and warned that the alliance's attempts to ensure its security by deterring Russia were doomed to fail.

"If NATO opts for the policy of deterrence, we will respond with a policy of counter-deterrence," Grushko said. "If it turns to intimidation, we will respond with counter-intimidation. If it looks for vulnerabilities in Russia's defense system, we will look for NATO's vulnerabilities. It's not our choice, but we don't have other options if we don't overturn this current very dangerous course of events."

The NATO-Russia Council was set up two decades ago, but full meetings paused when Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula nearly eight years ago. It has met only sporadically since.

Moscow's draft agreement with NATO countries and the offer of a treaty between Russia and the United States would require NATO to halt all membership plans, not just with Ukraine, and scale down its presence in countries close to Russia's borders.

Endorsing such an agreement would mean NATO abandoning a key tenet of its founding treaty, which

holds the alliance can invite in any willing European country that can contribute to security in the North Atlantic area and fulfill the obligations of membership.

The Russian draft also proposed mutual limits on war games and confidence-building measures to prevent accidents involving warships and aircraft. Grushko said Russia would be willing to continue discussions on those issues and arms control steps, such as the non-deployment of intermediate-range missiles in Europe.

In the United States on Wednesday, Senate Democrats released their White House-backed proposal for legislation that would ratchet up sanctions on Russia if it sends troops into Ukraine. The measures would target Putin, his top civilian and military leaders, and leading Russian financial institutions.

Partisan divide on COVID policy widens in state legislatures

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — In Democratic-led Washington state, just four lawmakers were present in the 98-member House this week as they convened a mostly remote session with an abundance of caution. Anyone working there is required to be tested for COVID-19 three days a week and show proof of vaccination — including a booster shot — to step onto the House floor.

By contrast, Missouri's Republican-led Legislature began a fully in-person session with no COVID-19 screening at the Capitol and no requirement to be vaccinated or wear masks. One week into their session, lawmakers already have filed nearly three dozen bills banning, discouraging or providing exemptions from vaccination requirements.

The differing approaches highlight a persistent partisan gap in pandemic policy as states begin a third year of legislative sessions amid a virus outbreak that many had assumed would be waning but is instead surging to near peak levels of hospitalizations because of the omicron variant.

As lawmakers in some Democratic-led states meet remotely because of renewed COVID-19 concerns, their counterparts in many Republican-led legislatures are beginning their 2022 sessions on a quest to outlaw vaccine mandates and roll back pandemic precautions.

"We have in effect pulled into two different camps with two different views of reality," said Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association, who described the "intellectual schism" as "very disturbing."

"In many ways, the data around vaccines, masks and all these things is kind of bearing out as a proxy for the role of government," Benjamin said.

The political divisions that began over government-ordered shutdowns, social distancing and mask mandates in the early stages of the pandemic have progressed as governments have shifted to vaccinations as a primary means of combating a virus that has killed more than 835,000 in the U.S.

Republican legislation opposing vaccine mandates has been spurred largely by rules from President Joe Biden's administration requiring COVID-19 vaccinations or regular testing for large and medium-sized employers, health care providers and federal contractors. Many Democratic governors also have issued vaccine or testing requirements for government workers, health care facilities, schools or child-care providers.

Though not always preventing illness, vaccines have proved effective at decreasing severe COVID-19 cases leading to hospitalization or death. Republican objections are rooted largely in libertarian ideology.

"To have something injected into your body as a condition of employment lest you be fired or not hired, well it's not American," said Missouri state Rep. Brian Seitz, a Republican from Branson. "It tends toward socialism, communism and whatever other -ism you want to talk about."

Seitz has filed bills barring vaccine mandates for health workers, prohibiting governments from doing business with entities requiring vaccinations and creating an individual right to refuse to be vaccinated and wear masks. Other Missouri bills would bar COVID-19 vaccine mandates in schools and hold employers liable for any injuries arising from their vaccination requirements.

Similar bills are pending elsewhere. After passing legislation last November making it easier for employees to refuse to comply with vaccine mandates, some conservative Republicans in the Kansas Legislature now want to go further and prohibit employers from imposing such mandates.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 65 of 72

Vaccine legislation has sparked internal divisions in some Republican-led states.

Legislation on a fast-track in the Indiana House would sharply limit COVID-19 vaccination requirements in workplaces, though Republican Gov. Eric Holcomb and GOP Senate leaders have opposed the bill as wrongly interfering with private business decisions. Some Republican lawmakers in Ohio also have continued pushing for a ban on vaccine mandates, despite a warning from fellow GOP Gov. Mike DeWine that he would veto the legislation.

The question of whether to prohibit businesses from mandating vaccines also is expected to be a hot topic when the Oklahoma Legislature convenes next month.

"The issue is a hard one to balance for people," said Senate President Pro Tempore Greg Treat, an Oklahoma City Republican. "I believe very much in the right of the individual, and I also believe very much in the right of businesses to conduct business as they see fit."

Though it received a hearing Tuesday, legislation from a Maine Republican to prohibit mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations for five years faces steep odds in that state's Democratic-led Legislature. The hearing was held via video conference — a practice that appears more common this year in Democratic-led states than Republican ones.

The 400-member New Hampshire House convened last week in a hotel expo center instead of its chamber to spread out lawmakers, but the Republican majority refused to allow remote participation. At least two lawmakers tested positive for COVID-19 after the first days of session.

Former New Hampshire House Speaker Dick Hinch was among eight lawmakers in various states to die from COVID-19 since the pandemic began. More than 500 state lawmakers have been sickened by the virus, according to an Associated Press tally, though the actual number almost certainly is higher because some legislatures haven't publicly confirmed cases.

In Democratic-led Massachusetts, the capitol has yet to reopen to the public after legislative leaders shuttered the building to all but lawmakers, some staff and the press at the beginning of the pandemic. Since then, the Legislature has largely gone online. Legislative leaders have announced plans to inch toward a reopening by requiring proof of vaccination — or show a medical or religious exemption — to work in the building.

In Vermont's Democratic-led Legislature, one of the first acts of 2022 was to authorize remote sessions because of spiking COVID-19 cases. Lawmakers also quickly passed a measure allowing municipal governments and school districts to pass budgets without in-person meetings.

In Washington state, Republicans voted against the COVID-19 protocols adopted by Democratic-led legislative committees. While allowing more members on the floor than the House, the Senate policy caps in-person attendance at 15 of the 49 senators. The rest are relegated to participating remotely. Senators and staff must test negative for COVID-19 before entering Senate rooms, regardless of whether they are vaccinated. Since Friday, at least five senators have tested positive.

The goal of the restrictions "is to make the operation of the Senate as safe as possible," said Washington Senate Majority Leader Andy Billig.

When am I contagious if infected with omicron?

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

When am I contagious if infected with omicron?

It's not yet clear, but some early data suggests people might become contagious sooner than with earlier variants — possibly within a day after infection.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says people with the coronavirus are most infectious in the few days before and after symptoms develop. But that window of time might happen earlier with omicron, according to some outside experts.

That's because omicron appears to cause symptoms faster than previous variants — about three days after infection, on average, according to preliminary studies. Based on previous data, that means people with omicron could start becoming contagious as soon as a day after infection.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 66 of 72

With previous variants, people became contagious two to four days after infection. And people remain contagious a couple days after symptoms subside.

Researchers say it's too early to know whether that shorter incubation period for omicron translates into earlier contagiousness. But it would help explain the variant's rapid spread.

Dr. Amy Karger of the University of Minnesota Medical School recommends that people test themselves at three days and five days after exposure if possible.

"A lot of people are turning positive by day three," Karger says, referring to omicron. "There's basically an opportunity here to catch people earlier than you would with the other variants."

If you only have one test, it's fine to wait until day five, Karger says.

People who have COVID-19 symptoms should get tested immediately if possible.

Lab-developed tests are more sensitive than rapid tests so they should be able to pick up the virus by day three after exposure, if not earlier.

People who don't develop symptoms generally have much lower viral levels, so it's far less clear when or if they become infectious.

Still, those who test positive but don't have symptoms should isolate for at least five days, under the latest CDC guidelines. The agency came under criticism for not requiring a negative test before leaving isolation, but even after tweaking the guidelines officials said that step should be optional.

People with symptoms should stay isolated until they have been fever-free for at least 24 hours.

UK's Johnson apologizes for attending party during lockdown

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prime Minister Boris Johnson apologized Wednesday for attending a garden party during Britain's first coronavirus lockdown, but brushed aside demands that he resign for breaching the rules his own government had imposed on the nation.

The apology, which stopped short of admitting wrongdoing, was Johnson's attempt to assuage a tide of anger from the public and politicians over accusations he and his staff repeatedly flouted pandemic restrictions by socializing when it was banned.

The "partygate" scandal could become a tipping point for a leader who has weathered a series of other storms, with some members of Johnson's governing Conservative Party saying he must quit for breaking the rules.

Douglas Ross, the leader of the party's Scottish wing, said Johnson's "position is no longer tenable," and "I don't think he can continue as leader of the Conservatives."

Trying to calm the furor, Johnson acknowledged for the first time Wednesday that he went to a May 2020 garden party at his Downing Street office, though he said that he had considered it a work event to thank staff for their efforts during the pandemic.

"I want to apologize," Johnson told lawmakers during his weekly Prime Minister's Questions session in the House of Commons. "With hindsight, I should have sent everyone back inside."

An invitation to "bring your own booze" to a "socially distanced drinks" gathering was emailed to about 100 government staff by a senior prime ministerial aide — though Johnson's office says he did not receive it.

Opponents and allies alike have been demanding Johnson come clean about the party, held when Britons were banned by law from meeting more than one person outside their households to curb the spread of the coronavirus. The gathering happened as millions were cut off from family and friends, and even barred from visiting dying relatives in hospitals.

Johnson said he understood the rage of people who "have made extraordinary sacrifices over the past 18 months ... at the thought that people in Downing Street were not following those rules" — though he didn't explicitly admit that he had broken any regulations and said the gathering might have been "technically" within the guidelines.

Johnson has previously said he and his staff followed the rules at all times.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 67 of 72

Members of the group COVID-19 Bereaved Families for Justice said Johnson's apology offered them little comfort.

Hannah Brady, whose father died in May 2020, accused Johnson of pouring "salt into the wounds of those who have already lost so much to this pandemic."

"If restrictions are needed to protect lives in the future, people will simply laugh at him," she said. "He has no moral authority and will cost lives."

Opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer said the British public thought Johnson was "lying through his teeth."

"He's finally been forced to admit what everyone knew, that when the whole country was locked down he was hosting boozy parties in Downing Street," Starmer said. "Is he now going to do the decent thing and resign?"

Johnson instead urged people to await the conclusions of an investigation by senior civil servant Sue Gray into several alleged parties by government staff. Gray, a public service veteran with a reputation as a straight-shooter, is expected to report by the end of the month.

Johnson did not say what he would do if Gray found he was at fault.

Such a finding would increase the chances of restive Conservatives calling for a no-confidence vote in their leader. Under party rules, such a vote can happen if 15% of Conservative lawmakers demand it. If it passed, the party would elect a new leader, who would take over as prime minister.

Wednesday's admission came amid a mounting list of troubles for Johnson, who already faced accusations that his Conservative government flouted pandemic rules at other times, by hosting garden gatherings, Christmas get-togethers and office quiz nights in Downing Street, which is both the prime minister's home and his office. He is also facing disquiet after allegations of financial and ethical misconduct against him and his government.

A string of opposition lawmakers accused Johnson of lawbreaking, lying and debasing his office.

Johnson can shrug off opposition criticisms — as he has during previous scandals — since his Conservatives have an 80-seat majority in the House of Commons. More worryingly for the prime minister, many members of his own party are increasingly concerned about his judgment and leadership.

The Conservatives picked Johnson as leader in 2019 for his upbeat manner and popular touch, despite the serial allegations of rule-bending and dishonesty that have followed him through his twin careers as journalist and politician. The choice appeared vindicated when he led the party to a big election win in December that year.

But support inside the party is being eroded by discontent over continuing pandemic restrictions, which some Conservatives view as draconian, and the growing list scandals. The question now is whether "partygate" might be a scandal too far.

The Conservatives have a history of ousting leaders if they become a liability — and a recent surprising loss in a special election for a district the party held for more than a century has increased their jitters.

Veteran Conservative legislator Christopher Chope said Johnson's apology had helped reassure the party.

"I think this apology has bought some time, and we will see what happens," he said.

But another senior Conservative lawmaker, Roger Gale, echoed Scottish leader Ross.

"Politically the prime minister is a dead man walking," he said.

Anti-vaccine protesters try to storm Bulgarian parliament

SOFIA, Bulgaria (AP) — Protesters opposing COVID-19 restrictions in Bulgaria clashed Wednesday with police as they tried to storm the Parliament in the capital of Sofia.

A heavy police presence prevented protesters from entering the building and some were detained. Several people, including police officers, were injured during the clashes. Eventually, the protesters were pushed back and police cordoned off the building.

The violence erupted at a protest rally against mask and vaccine mandates organized by a nationalist group that is fiercely opposing the Bulgarian government's anti-epidemic measures.

"The aim of the protest is to remove the restrictive measures and especially, first of all, the unconstitutional green certificate," Kostadin Kostadinov, leader of the Vazrazhdane party, said ahead of the protest.

The nationalist group, which holds 13 seats in Parliament's 240-seat chamber, has won support among opponents of coronavirus restrictions.

The nearly 1,000 protesters, who waved national flags and sang patriotic songs, remained at the square in front of the National Assembly, saying they planned to stay there until their demands for abolishing the mandatory face masks and green vaccination status passes are met.

Bulgaria, which is facing a new surge in infections, is the least vaccinated country in the 27-member European Union, with only a third of its population fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

Speaking from his home, where he is quarantined for contacts with an infected person, Prime Minister Kiril Petkov called for calm and invited representatives of the protesters to his office on Friday to discuss their demands.

Amid Djokovic backlash, Australia grapples with omicron wave

By KRISTEN GELINEAU Associated Press

SYDNEY (AP) — Like millions of others in the most locked-down place on the planet, Melbourne resident Rav Thomas dutifully spent 262 days confined to his home as the COVID-19 pandemic raged. He got vaccinated. And the single father of two found ways to pay the bills as Melbourne's lockdowns battered his entertainment and events company.

Then in October, the city's restrictions began to lift, along with Thomas' spirits. His company once again began booking events as Melbourne's nightclubs and bars reopened.

And then, omicron arrived.

The coronavirus variant has swept across Australia despite its high vaccination rate and strict border policies that kept the country largely sealed off from the world for almost two years. Those measures, which turned Australia into a virtually COVID-19-free utopia early in the pandemic, have garnered fresh scrutiny as the government has battled to deport unvaccinated tennis star Novak Djokovic ahead of the Australian Open.

They also have prompted questions from frustrated and fatigued Australians about why their country — which seemingly did everything to stop the spread of the virus — now finds itself infested with it.

"Tell your population, 'Stay in your houses, you can't go past your letterbox after 8 p.m. for days and months on end.' And then you're told, 'OK, we've put in the hard yards,'" says Thomas, whose company, Anthem Entertainment, is now facing its 23rd consecutive month of financial loss as bookings once again dry up. "But then here we go again. Again. Again!"

Officially, there are now more than 600,000 active cases across Australia's population of 26 million, though experts believe the actual number is far higher. The surge, health experts say, is partly due to two factors: Politicians were reluctant to renege on pre-omicron promises that they would relax restrictions such as mask-wearing, and the emergence of the incredibly contagious variant.

Faced with the explosion of infections, the government of the most populous state, New South Wales, ultimately backtracked and reimposed mask mandates last month. But by then, epidemiologists say, it was too late.

While deaths and hospitalizations remain relatively low, the vaccines have not stopped the spread of the virus. Australia's vaccine program — under which around 80% of the total population has received at least one jab — also began later than many other Western countries, leaving much of its population yet to qualify for a booster.

"Vaccination alone isn't good enough," says epidemiologist Adrian Esterman, chair of biostatistics and epidemiology at the University of South Australia. "We were doing so well, until New South Wales decided it didn't want to go into lockdown."

Esterman has urged politicians to enforce mask-wearing and social distancing, and to improve ventilation in schools, particularly as students prepare to return after the southern hemisphere summer break.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 69 of 72

Children between the ages of 5 and 11 only became eligible for the vaccines this month.

"We haven't got enough vaccines for youngsters," says Esterman, who previously worked for the World Health Organization. "We know how to keep schools safe: First, get kids and teachers vaccinated, make sure ventilation is very good and you get the kids to wear masks. Do we do that in Australia? No."

Though Australia's high vaccine uptake has prevented an even worse crisis at stressed hospitals, Australian Medical Association President Dr. Omar Khorshid acknowledged it was difficult to watch Australia plummet from its position as a poster child for COVID-19 containment.

"It is certainly frustrating to see our case per head of population rate sort of getting toward the highest in the world in New South Wales, for instance, when we were at the lowest in the world not that long ago," he said. "It's a little unfortunate that the opening up of the country coincided almost perfectly with the omicron outbreak starting around the world."

In recent months, the government has pivoted from its longstanding "COVID-zero" approach to a "live with it" approach, leaving many Australians confused.

"Omicron has changed everything," Prime Minister Scott Morrison said this week. "My government is for keeping Australia open and pushing through."

The policy whiplash also caught the health system off guard. Lines for PCR tests are often hours long, results take days, and a lack of rapid antigen tests has left sick Australians scurrying from store to store hunting for the kits.

Sydney resident Rodney Swan recently found himself among the hordes hunting for rapid tests. The 77-year-old's granddaughter is ill and her family has been isolating at home for days as they await the results of their PCR tests.

"If you do get a test that's a PCR test, then you wait ages," Swan says. "You can't get a rapid antigen test. My daughter can't get boosters for her children."

Swan is frustrated by what he views as the government's jumbled messaging, and is stunned by the skyrocketing case numbers.

"These are numbers that you get in England," he says. "I've got friends in London, because I lived in London, and I sense the smirk that they have now looking at Australia."

Australia's slow start to its booster program has left the population vulnerable to omicron, and has also increased the chances that its omicron wave will not decline as rapidly as other countries, says epidemiologist Dr. Nancy Baxter, head of the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health at Melbourne University.

Australia's politicians appear worried that any new restrictions will anger the public, Baxter says. But they can still help slow the spread by providing Australians with a limited number of free N95 masks and rapid tests, she says.

"We could manage the wave, but there's no political will to do so," Baxter says.

Djokovic, the world's top-ranked male tennis player and prominent vaccine skeptic, arrived in Australia as COVID-19 cases were rising across the country. He was denied entry last week at Melbourne's airport after officials canceled his visa because he was not vaccinated, an entry requirement for non-citizens. A judge reinstated the visa and ordered him released from immigration detention, but he continues to face possible deportation by the immigration minister.

Fury and fear prompted former Australian human rights commissioner Chris Sidoti to pen an opinion piece for the Sydney Morning Herald this week, detailing the terror he felt when his two immunocompromised grandchildren become ill with COVID-19 after Christmas, two weeks before they were eligible for the vaccine. Both children have been in and out of the hospital since then.

Sidoti blames his grandchildren's plight on the government. Why, he asks, wasn't it prepared with adequate supplies of rapid tests before the PCR system became inevitably overwhelmed? And why did the New South Wales premier roll back restrictions such as mask-wearing in November, before young children were eligible for vaccines and before most adults were eligible for boosters?

"We have gone wrong from day one because our politicians are not prepared to learn and to prepare," Sidoti said in an interview. "People have stopped listening because there's no consistency, there's no cred-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 70 of 72

ibility and there are no answers.”

Though policymakers seem averse to further lockdowns, the omicron outbreak has prompted many Australians to stay home anyway, leaving small business owners worried about their companies’ survival.

“People are quite broken,” says Zara Madrusan, who owns several bars and restaurants in Melbourne. “We are basically in some kind of self-imposed lockdown. No one is going out, but there’s no protection for us, there’s no advice for us, there’s no financial support available. So we’re just supposed to muddle through.”

For Thomas, whose company is facing a deluge of event cancellations, the state’s decision this week to shut down indoor dance floors in hospitality and entertainment venues was another gut punch. He wonders what of his once-vibrant city will be left when this all ends.

“What is our objective now?” he says. “What is our finish line?”

Omicron may be headed for a rapid drop in Britain, US

By MARIA CHENG and CARLA K. JOHNSON Associated Press

Scientists are seeing signals that COVID-19’s alarming omicron wave may have peaked in Britain and is about to do the same in the U.S., at which point cases may start dropping off dramatically.

The reason: The variant has proved so wildly contagious that it may already be running out of people to infect, just a month and a half after it was first detected in South Africa.

“It’s going to come down as fast as it went up,” said Ali Mokdad, a professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle.

At the same time, experts warn that much is still uncertain about how the next phase of the pandemic might unfold. The plateauing or ebbing in the two countries is not happening everywhere at the same time or at the same pace. And weeks or months of misery still lie ahead for patients and overwhelmed hospitals even if the drop-off comes to pass.

“There are still a lot of people who will get infected as we descend the slope on the backside,” said Lauren Ancel Meyers, director of the University of Texas COVID-19 Modeling Consortium, which predicts that reported cases will peak within the week.

On Tuesday, Janet Woodcock, the acting head of the Food and Drug Administration, told Congress that the highly transmissible strain will infect “most people” and that the focus should turn to ensuring critical services can continue uninterrupted.

“I think it’s hard to process what’s actually happening right now, which is: Most people are going to get COVID, all right?,” she said. “What we need to do is make sure the hospitals can still function — transportation, other essential services are not disrupted while this happens.”

The University of Washington’s own highly influential model projects that the number of daily reported cases in the U.S. will crest at 1.2 million by Jan. 19 and will then fall sharply “simply because everybody who could be infected will be infected,” according to Mokdad.

In fact, he said, by the university’s complex calculations, the true number of new daily infections in the U.S. — an estimate that includes people who were never tested — has already peaked, hitting 6 million on Jan. 6.

In Britain, meanwhile, new COVID-19 cases dropped to about 140,000 a day in the last week, after skyrocketing to more than 200,000 a day earlier this month, according to government data.

Numbers from the U.K.’s National Health Service this week show coronavirus hospital admissions for adults have begun to fall, with infections dropping in all age groups.

Kevin McConway, a retired professor of applied statistics at Britain’s Open University, said that while COVID-19 cases are still rising in places such as southwest England and the West Midlands, the outbreak may have peaked in London.

The figures have raised hopes that the two countries are about to undergo something similar to what happened in South Africa, where in the span of about a month the wave crested at record highs and then fell significantly.

“We are seeing a definite falling-off of cases in the U.K., but I’d like to see them fall much further before

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 71 of 72

we know if what happened in South Africa will happen here," said Dr. Paul Hunter, a professor of medicine at Britain's University of East Anglia.

Dr. David Heymann, who previously led the World Health Organization's infectious diseases department, said Britain was "the closest to any country of being out of the pandemic," adding that COVID-19 was inching towards becoming endemic.

Differences between Britain and South Africa, including Britain's older population and the tendency of its people to spend more time indoors in the winter, could mean a bumpier outbreak for the country and other nations like it.

On the other hand, British authorities' decision to adopt minimal restrictions against omicron could enable the virus to rip through the population and run its course much faster than it might in Western European countries that have imposed tougher COVID-19 controls, such as France, Spain and Italy.

Shabir Mahdi, dean of health sciences at South Africa's University of Witwatersrand, said European countries that impose lockdowns won't necessarily come through the omicron wave with fewer infections; the cases may just be spread out over a longer period of time.

On Tuesday, the World Health Organization said there have been 7 million new COVID-19 cases across Europe in the past week, calling it a "tidal wave sweeping across the region." WHO cited modeling from Mokdad's group that predicts half of Europe's population will be infected with omicron within about eight weeks.

By that time, however, Hunter and others expect the world to be past the omicron surge.

"There will probably be some ups and downs along the way, but I would hope that by Easter, we will be out of this," Hunter said.

Still, the sheer numbers of people infected could prove overwhelming to fragile health systems, said Dr. Prabhat Jha of the Centre for Global Health Research at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto.

"The next few weeks are going to be brutal because in absolute numbers, there are so many people being infected that it will spill over into ICUs," Jha said.

Mokdad likewise warned in the U.S.: "It's going to be a tough two or three weeks. We have to make hard decisions to let certain essential workers continue working, knowing they could be infectious."

Omicron could one day be seen as a turning point in the pandemic, said Meyers, at the University of Texas. Immunity gained from all the new infections, along with new drugs and continued vaccination, could render the coronavirus something with which we can more easily coexist.

"At the end of this wave, far more people will have been infected by some variant of COVID," Meyers said. "At some point, we'll be able to draw a line — and omicron may be that point — where we transition from what is a catastrophic global threat to something that's a much more manageable disease."

That's one plausible future, she said, but there is also the possibility of a new variant — one that is far worse than omicron — arising.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Jan. 13, the 13th day of 2022. There are 352 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 13, 2021, President Donald Trump was impeached by the U.S. House over the violent Jan. 6 siege of the Capitol, becoming the only president to be twice impeached; ten Republicans joined Democrats in voting to impeach Trump on a charge of "incitement of insurrection." (Trump would again be acquitted by the Senate in a vote after his term was over.)

On this date:

In 1733, James Oglethorpe and some 120 English colonists arrived at Charleston, South Carolina, while en route to settle in present-day Georgia.

In 1794, President George Washington approved a measure adding two stars and two stripes to the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 190 ~ 72 of 72

American flag, following the admission of Vermont and Kentucky to the Union. (The number of stripes was later reduced to the original 13.)

In 1898, Emile Zola's famous defense of Capt. Alfred Dreyfus, "J'accuse," (zhah-KOOZ'), was published in Paris.

In 1941, a new law went into effect granting Puerto Ricans U.S. birthright citizenship. Novelist and poet James Joyce died in Zurich, Switzerland, less than a month before his 59th birthday.

In 1982, an Air Florida 737 crashed into Washington, D.C.'s 14th Street Bridge and fell into the Potomac River while trying to take off during a snowstorm, killing a total of 78 people, including four motorists on the bridge; four passengers and a flight attendant survived.

In 1987, West German police arrested Mohammed Ali Hamadi, a suspect in the 1985 hijacking of a TWA jetliner and the killing of a U.S. Navy diver who was on board. (Although convicted and sentenced to life, Hamadi was paroled by Germany in December 2005 and returned home to Lebanon.)

In 1990, L. Douglas Wilder of Virginia became the nation's first elected Black governor as he took the oath of office in Richmond.

In 1992, Japan apologized for forcing tens of thousands of Korean women to serve as sex slaves for its soldiers during World War II, citing newly uncovered documents that showed the Japanese army had had a role in abducting the so-called "comfort women."

In 2000, Microsoft chairman Bill Gates stepped aside as chief executive and promoted company president Steve Ballmer to the position.

In 2001, an earthquake estimated by the U.S. Geological Survey at magnitude 7.7 struck El Salvador; more than 840 people were killed.

In 2011, a funeral was held in Tucson, Arizona, for 9-year-old Christina Taylor Green, the youngest victim of a mass shooting that also claimed five other lives and critically wounded Rep. Gabrielle Giffords.

In 2020, at a royal family summit in eastern England, Queen Elizabeth II brokered a deal to secure the future of the monarchy; it would allow Prince Harry and his wife, Meghan, to live part-time in Canada.

Ten years ago: The Italian luxury liner Costa Concordia ran aground off the Tuscan island of Giglio and flipped onto its side; 32 people were killed. (Capt. Francesco Schettino would be sentenced to 16 years in an Italian prison for abandoning ship and other crimes when he fled in a lifeboat and refused an order from the Italian Coast Guard to return to the listing ship.)

Five years ago: Federal prosecutors in Detroit announced that Takata Corp. had agreed to plead guilty to a single criminal charge and pay \$1 billion in fines and restitution for concealing a deadly defect in its air bag inflators. Lord Snowdon, the society photographer and filmmaker who married Britain's Princess Margaret and continued to mix in royal circles even after their divorce, died in London at age 86.

One year ago: Five-time Olympic swimming medalist Klete Keller was charged with participating in the deadly riot at the U.S. Capitol after video emerged that appeared to show him among those storming the building. (Keller later pleaded guilty to a felony charge of obstruction of an official proceeding and agreed to cooperate with authorities.) The U.S. government carried out its first execution of a female inmate in nearly seven decades; a Kansas woman, Lisa Montgomery, who strangled an expectant mother in Missouri and cut the baby from her womb, received a lethal injection at a federal prison complex in Indiana. Siegfried Fischbacher, part of the entertainment duo Siegfried and Roy who performed in Las Vegas with their famed white tigers, died at 81.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Frances Sternhagen is 92. TV personality Nick Clooney is 88. Comedian Charlie Brill is 84. Actor Billy Gray is 84. Actor Richard Moll is 79. Rock musician Trevor Rabin is 68. R&B musician Fred White is 67. Rock musician James Lomenzo (Megadeth) is 63. Actor Kevin Anderson is 62. Actor Julia Louis-Dreyfus is 61. Rock singer Graham "Suggs" McPherson (Madness) is 61. Country singer Trace Adkins is 60. Actor Penelope Ann Miller is 58. Actor Patrick Dempsey is 56. Actor Suzanne Cryer is 55. Actor Traci Bingham is 54. Actor Keith Coogan is 52. TV producer-writer Shonda Rhimes is 52. Actor Nicole Eggert is 50. Actor Ross McCall is 46. Actor Michael Pena is 46. Actor Orlando Bloom is 45. Meteorologist Ginger Zee (TV: "Good Morning America") is 41. Actor Ruth Wilson is 40. Actor Julian Morris is 39. Actor Beau Mirchoff is 33. Actor Liam Hemsworth is 32. NHL center Connor McDavid is 25.