

Groton Daily Independent

Tuesday, April 12, 2022 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 279 ~ 1 of 67

Groton Track Meet Cancelled

Due to wet conditions and Tuesday's forecast the Groton Invitational track meet has been cancelled.

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UpComing Events

Tuesday, April 12

ELECTION DAY! Polls open 7 a.m. to 7p.m. at the Groton Community Center.

Cancelled: Track meet in Groton

Catholic: Turton Mass, 5 p.m.

Emmanuel: 7 p.m. Church Council

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

School Breakfast: Blueberry French Toast Bake.

School Lunch: Hot dogs, fries.

Senior Menu: Hot turkey sandwich, macaroni salad, mandarin orange dessert, sherbet.

Wednesday, April 13

7 p.m.: "Way of the Cross" at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church

Catholic Mass: 5:00pm Turton, 8:30am Groton

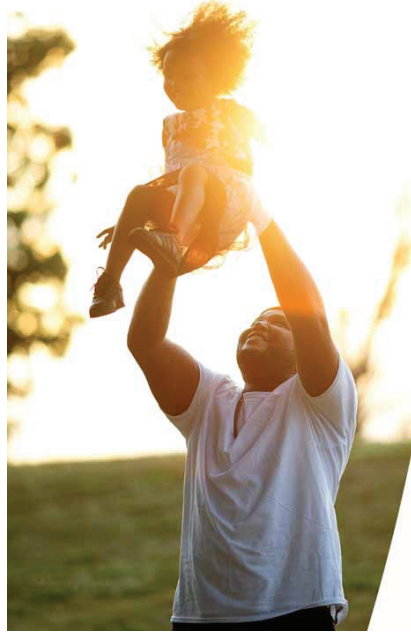
Emmanuel: 6 p.m. Confirmation, 6:30 p.m. League

School Breakfast; Eggs and sausage.

School Menu: Chicken nuggets, mashed potatoes.

Senior Menu: Oven fried chicken, mashed pota-

Chicken Soup
for the Soul.



"What we have once enjoyed deeply we can never lose. All that we love deeply becomes a part of us."

-Helen Keller

toes, mixed vegetables, buttermilk biscuits, banana pudding with bananas.

Thursday, April 14

Emmanuel: 7 p.m.: Worship with 1st communion for youth

St. John's: 7 p.m. Worship with communion

SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.

Catholic: 5:00pm Turton, 8:30am Groton

School Breakfast: muffins.

School Lunch: Tacos.

Senior Menu: Sweet and sour pork, steamed rice, carrot and broccoli medley, honey fruit salad, whole wheat bread.

Truss Pros Help Wanted

Truss Pros in Britton is looking to hire a CDL driver to deliver trusses in the tri-state area. Home every night. Competitive wage! Full benefit package!

To apply call 605-277-4937 or go to www.uslbm.com/careers and search for jobs in Britton, SD.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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

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High Wind Warning

URGENT - WEATHER MESSAGE
National Weather Service Aberdeen SD
312 AM CDT Tue Apr 12 2022

SDZ006>008-011-018>023-122200-
/O.UPG.KABR.HW.A.0003.220413T1200Z-220415T0600Z/
/O.NEW.KABR.HW.W.0004.220413T1200Z-220415T0600Z/
Brown-Marshall-Roberts-Day-Spink-Clark-Codington-Grant-Hamlin-
Deuel-
Including the cities of Aberdeen, Britton, Sisseton, Webster,
Redfield, Clark, Watertown, Milbank, Hayti, and Clear Lake
312 AM CDT Tue Apr 12 2022

...HIGH WIND WARNING IN EFFECT FROM 7 AM WEDNESDAY TO 1 AM CDT
FRIDAY...

- * WHAT...West winds 25 to 40 mph with gusts up to 55 mph expected.
- * WHERE...Brown, Marshall, Roberts, Day, Spink, Clark, Codington, Grant, Hamlin and Deuel Counties.
- * WHEN...From 7 AM Wednesday to 1 AM CDT Friday.
- * IMPACTS...High winds may move loose debris, damage property and cause power outages. Travel will be difficult especially for high profile vehicles.

PRECAUTIONARY/PREPAREDNESS ACTIONS...

People are urged to secure loose objects that could be blown around or damaged by the wind.

**HELP
WANTED!**

**Part time deli clerk and part
time cashier and stocker.
Apply at Ken's Food Fair, Groton**

Free lunches for all students to be discontinued

The Groton Area district will get about \$15,000 in one-time USDA funding. Funds are used to help offset costs related to COVID. Milk and locally processed beef would qualify - the meat qualifies, the processing does not. The local beef would also contain lower amounts of sodium than what the processed beef has and Superintendent Joe Schwan said that the low sodium requirement is real tough to meet. The free meals for everyone will end at the end of this school year. It will be back to the regular free and reduced meals to those that qualify for the next school year.

Schwan reported that the Governor's Executive Order is to require the Department of Education to examine its programs to make sure there are no inherently divisive concepts.

There are currently three vacancies in the Groton Area School with the reposting of the K-12 music with or without show choir, high school math and high school special education.

Due to a print-out error from the lender, the board had to budget an additional \$200,000 for the facilities purchase. In addition, \$90,000 needs to be budgeted for the roof project as the expenses are already coming in for the elementary roof project.

The James Valley Thunder basketball program had grown to 11 teams and 106 kids. The program has increased from 10 Groton Area kids playing summer basketball to nearly 40. "That's a pretty significant increase for the kids playing from Groton," said Justin Hanson. Ryan Tracy was also on hand. They had requested the use of the gym facilities.

Coaches take care of the bathrooms, donation to the facility and take care of the insurance, the board authorized the use of the gym for the James Valley Thunder organization as long as the district is covered with insurance.

The district is looking at a 14 passenger bus contingent on the bid opening at the Platte School. Groton Area would piggyback off of the Platte bid if they approve the bid.

The board approved the district membership for the North Central Special Education Cooperative.

The school year will not be extended. Three days were missed due to snow days and there were three late starts. Consensus was not to extend the school year by two days as they will not be productive. The board agreed to have the last student contact day remain at May 18th and the staff last contact day will be extended to May 20. Auxiliary staff will be able to work those days to get their hours; however, they will not be able to use sick days or personal leave days for those make-up days.

- Paul Kosel

Senior Legion Baseball Meeting

Groton Legion Post #39 will be having a Baseball Meeting on Tuesday April 12, 2022 @7:00 at the Post Home. This meeting is for all Senior Legion age players who are eligible to play in the 2022 season. This meeting is required attendance for all players and their parents or legal guardian.



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Superintendent's Report to the Groton Area School District 06-6 Board of Education

April 11, 2022

Governor Noem's Executive Order 2022-02. The essence of this order is an additional requirement placed on the SD Department of Education requiring examination of programs, policies, guidelines, professional development, content standards, etc. for the inclusion of "inherently divisive concepts" by July 1, 2022. The definition of "inherently divisive concepts" for this executive order "means advancing any ideas in violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964."

Vacant Positions. We currently have three vacant teaching positions [K-12 Music with/without Show Choir, HS Math, and HS Special Education]. The HS Math position and HS SPED position are scheduled to close at the end of this week. We currently do not have any active leads or applications for candidates to fill these positions.

Staff Negotiations. The board negotiators are scheduled to meet with GTA representatives after school on Wednesday, April 13 to continue discussions.

Requisitions. Mr. Weber and I met with the principals last week to review staff requisitions for FY2023. We'll now be working to get those items incorporated into the FY2023 budget proposal.

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Principal's Report

MS/HS Building

Mrs. Sombke

April 11, 2022

1) Spring Testing Update

- Smarter Balanced ELA and Math completed for grades 6, 7, 8, and 11
- Smarter Balanced Science will be completed for grade 8 each day during Science Class April 11-14
- Smarter Balanced Science will be complete for grade 11 during Science Class April 13 hours 1-4
- NWEA MAPS Assessment will be completed by grades 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 in English, Math, and Science classes April 28-May 12

2) 4th Quarter Midterm

- April 20, 2022 is the midterm for 4th quarter

3) Presentation for Students Grades 7-9 and 10-12

- Jessica Schneider from American Foundation for Suicide Prevention is going to be coming to present to our students
- May 4th Jessica will present to 10-12
- May 18th Jessica will present to grades 7-9

Attendees will learn:

- What mental health is and how it's both similar to and different from physical health
- How to notice signs of someone needing help
- Tips and strategies for having a caring conversation with someone they might be worried about
- Methods of self-care for mind, body, soul, and surroundings
- Examples of trustworthy resources
- How reaching out to trusted adults can help teens manage their mental health

4) 2022 Junior/Senior Prom

- The Groton Area Junior-Senior Prom will be held on Saturday, April 23rd with a post-prom to follow sponsored by PAC
- Students will receive the prom/post prom packets tomorrow during English classes or can pick up a copy from the MS/HS Office
- Grand March begins at 7:00pm in the GHS Gym
- Prom ends at 10:00pm
- Post-prom will run from 10:30-1:15am approximately, concluding after prizes are drawn and distributed in the High School Library
- Students staying for the entire prom and post prom will receive their registration fee back the following week

5) Requisitions

- Requisitions for the MS/HS Building have been completed and turned in for consideration in planning for the 2022-2023 school year

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Brett Schwan

Principal Report

4/11/22

Enrollment:

JK: 16

KG: 44 (+1)

1st: 36

2nd: 46

3rd: 47

4th: 40

5th: 42 (+1)

Elementary PAC Update: April 29 Bramble zoo will be coming to the elementary to present to small groups. PAC is also planning to give some type of reward for summer AR points.

OST Reminder: OST will be closed this Friday and Monday for Easter Break.

State Assessment (SBAC): The elementary grades (3-5) will be doing their state assessments during the last week of April - the 25th to the 29th - and fifth grade will take the science portion on April 19. We have until May 6th to get them all completely done, so if for some reason we can't take care of it all in one week, we'll have time to make them up. Ms. VanGerpen will be meeting with teachers after school on Friday for necessary training and scheduling.

Track and Field Day: Track and field day is scheduled for May 13 starting at 12:30. Parents/families are welcome to eat at the elementary with their child.

Connect 4Ed: I will be meeting with a few staff members tomorrow to look at student numbers and determine the best schedule and learning plan for students.

Summer Library: I met with Joni today to discuss summer library. She would like to work in conjunctions with our city library, so our students can better utilize our library and books. We would like to get a schedule out no later than the first week of May.

ESY (Extended School Year-SpEd): Starting to plan the earlier stages of ESY services. Our plan is to continue to do Tuesday and Thursday each week during June and July.

DARE: 5th Grade students will start this week. Graduation date is still in limbo but teachers are looking at possibly May 18th or 19th.

The Life of Lila Olson



Lila Ball Olson at the age of 98 went to meet her Savior and Lord on April 9, 2022. Services will be held at 2:00 p.m. on Thursday, April 14th at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Groton. Pastor Kari Foss will officiate. Following the service, Lila's wishes were to have her body donated to the USD Medical Program in order to help others. Visitation will be held at Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel on Wednesday from 5-7 p.m.

Lila was born on February 17, 1924 at a farmhouse in Day County near Butler, SD to Gladys (Simmons) and Edward Herr. The family moved to a farm in Beotia Township in Spink County. She attended a one-room school at Beotia No. 2. In those days there were many farms in each township and Lila enjoyed playing with neighbor friends that lived close enough that she could walk to their homes.

Even though she grew up in the dirty thirties her parents managed to give her a happy childhood. The community had high moral standards and expected their children to obey them. She attended Conde High School and rode with an older neighbor boy until the weather got bad. Then she stayed in a dormitory while attending school.

Henry Ball came with his friend on a blind date. The sparks must have flown as Lila was married shortly after graduating from high school. They lived with Henry's parents near Verdon until Janet was born in 1945. Then they moved to a farm near Verdon where they were full-time farmers. They raised cattle, pigs, sheep, chickens along with wheat, oats, barley, flax, corn, sorghum, cane, millet, and milk cows for family use. One of the highlights of the week for them was the trip to Conde to get groceries, socialize and go to the movies.

They were blessed with four children, Janet, Loretta, Roger and Barbara. Their children attended grade school at Verdon so that meant two trips a day while school was in session. Muddy roads were a challenge for the times it rained. Verdon school closed and the Conde school provided bus transportation so they all graduated from Conde High School.

Lila attended PTA meetings and sporting events with them. She also had interesting experiences being a band mother. Lila served as a 4-H leader for several years and learned right along with the girls in many activities especially in sewing, making most of her children's clothing. Lila also taught Sunday school while her children were attending. She was a member of ELCA and church circles.

Following the death of Henry in 1980, Lila married Maurice Olson in 1983 and moved into a home in Groton with Maurice. They enjoyed entertaining friends and family, traveling, and going to casinos.

Lila was widowed again at the passing of Maurice in 2002. She continued to live in Groton until May 1, 2017 when she moved to Bethesda Towne Square. Lila developed many friendships at her new residence. Lila also continued to travel and make new memories with her daughter Janet.

Lila's health declined in early 2022 and on March 14, 2022 it was necessary for her to move to Bethesda Nursing Home.

Preceding Lila in death were her parents, her siblings Ivan Herr, Elmer Herr, Beverly McComsey, Darlene Madsen; her husbands, Henry Ball and Maurice Olson; daughter Loretta Avery; son Roger Ball; sons-in-law Howard Dirksen, Earl Steinhoff, and Jerry Lehman; stepsons Roy Olson and Phillip Olson.

Left behind to celebrate her life are Janet Lehman, Barbara (Jerry) Hoefler, Ranae Ball (daughter-in-law), Merry Jo Ball (sister-in-law), Eileen Brandt (stepdaughter), Ginny Olson (stepdaughter-in-law), Debra McKiver (stepdaughter-in-law) and numerous grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-children.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests that a donation be made to the charity of your choice.

www.paetznick-garness.com

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That's Life by Tony Bender Spring storms

As I write this, North Dakotans are bracing themselves for what threatens to be an epic spring storm. It's bad enough for city-slickers, but for ranchers and all those fresh calves, its a potential disaster. The good news is that weather prognostications have gotten better, and although late shifts in a storm's trajectory are possible, we generally have enough lead time to prepare.

In 1997, when Dylan was just a toddler, we found ourselves stranded for four days in our rented farm home with a babysitter. By the time we returned from a date night, conditions were too dangerous to try to take her home. We lost power so Dylan was bundled up in layers of clothing to keep him cozy, and he happily rolled around on the floor.

The rest of the floor show was tragic. I had several aquariums, the largest 150 gallons, filled with rare, delicate marine animals, including a giant clown trigger I'd paid the insane price of \$300 for. I bought my first car for \$200. Over the course of the next few days, we watched as these beautiful creatures succumbed to the cold. As for us, we could go out and warm up in my Bronco from time to time. On the fourth day, the roads had been cleared but we were still socked in when there was a knock at the door. It was a young highway patrolman with an offer to get us to town and a cozy room at the Mirror Lake Lodge in Hettinger. He carried Dylan over a 20-foot snowbank on the north side of the shelterbelt. I no longer have aquariums but I do have generators, one of which was called into action years ago when an ice storm knocked out power in the Ashley area for the better part of two weeks. I had my big standby generator serviced a couple of months ago, so, fingers crossed, I hope we're ready. Unfortunately, my once-trusty Bobcat has been as dependable as a meth addict in recent winters. It's always something. Fortunately, my neighbor and his big Ford loader tractor are dependable.

The approaching storm has stirred memories of the blizzard of 1966 when snowbanks covered high line wires. We were living in Edgeley at the time in a two and half story home near the National Guard Armory. I remember sledding from the roof for what seemed miles. Two young twin teachers lived next door in a trailer home and my father spent hours digging them out from three feet of snow that had created monstrous drifts in high winds.

Afterward, we visited my grandfather, a dairy farmer south of Gackle, and I remember my mother driving our station wagon through what seemed like a one-lane tunnel, snow piled at least 20 feet high on either side, hoping we didn't meet the milk truck.

In what ranks as heroism in my books, my grandfather had managed to clear the yard with a 1940's-era loader tractor. The snowbanks extended to the roof of the massive old barn. Naturally, it made for epic sledding.

There was a great loss of livestock and some lives. We knew farmers who strung clotheslines from the house to the barn to guide them as they fed and watered their livestock. In 1997, there were also herds lost. Sometimes you can only do so much, and Mother Nature is bigger than we are.

I thought about swapping out the winter tires on the pickup about a week ago, which would have guaranteed a storm like washing your car guarantees rain. I never made the appointment, but I'm superstitious enough to think that it's the thought that counts, in this case, in the worst way possible. Blame me if you must.

We'll take the moisture and try to remember that spring is inevitable.

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JV Baseball Team beats Elkton

The Groton Area High School junior varsity baseball team defeated Elkton, 3-1. Colby Dunker pitched 2 innings and had 3 strikeouts. Kellen Antonsen pitched 1 inning and had 1 strikeout. Brevin Flihs had a single and scored, Dillon Abeln Abeln and Evin Nehls scored the other 2 runs.

- Seth Erickson

GROTON AREA

4/10 @ ELKTON 2PM (V/JV)

4/16 @ CANOVA

VS HOWARD & ORR/ARLINGTON 2PM, 4PM (V)

4/24 @ BRYANT

VS HAMLIN AREA & MADISON 4PM, 6PM (V)

4/30 @ VOLGA

VS SIOUX VALLEY 3PM (V/JV)

5/1 @ CASTLEWOOD 2PM (V/JV)

5/8 @ MILLER 2PM (V/JV)

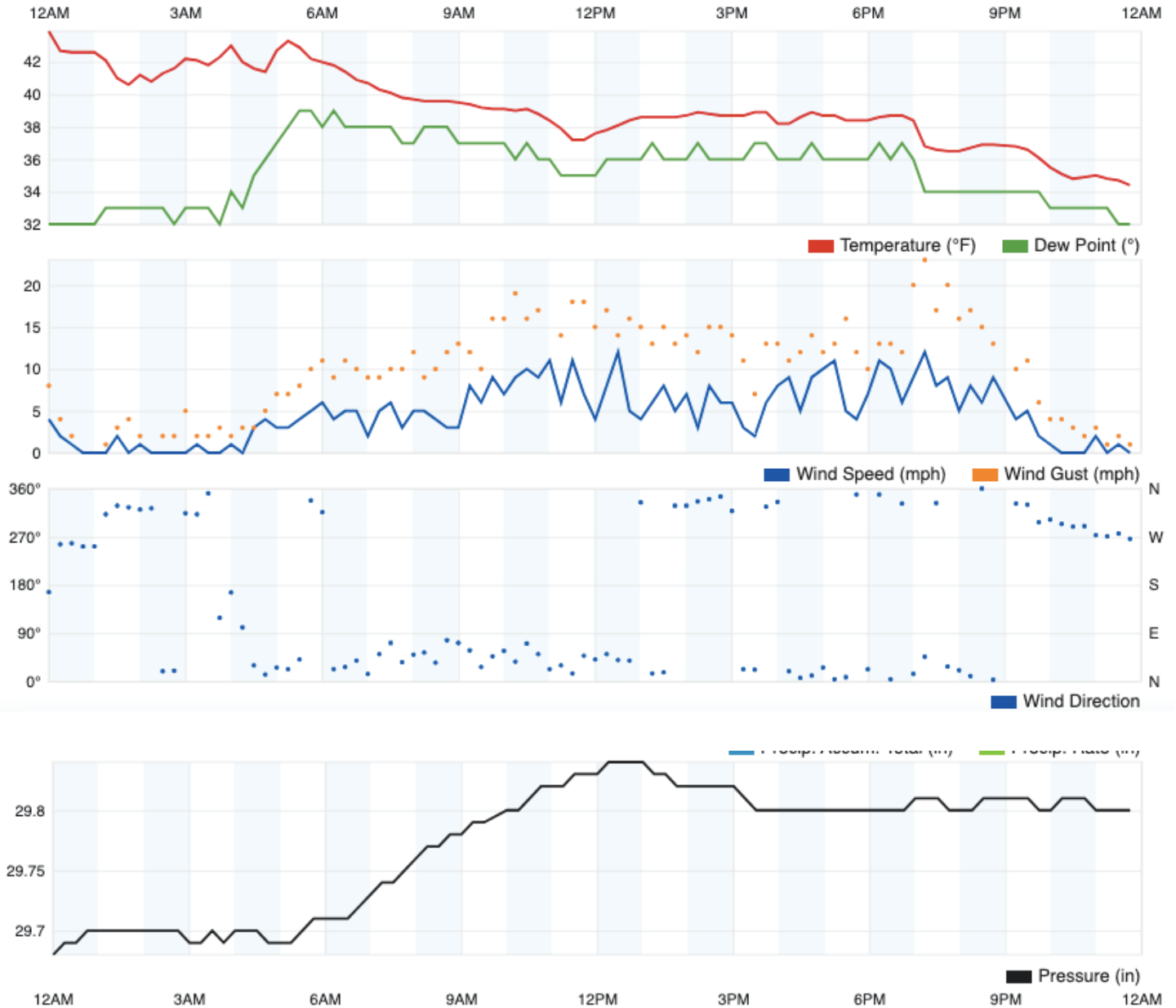
5/10 @ REDFIELD 6PM (V/JV)

TBD @ CLARK (V/JV)

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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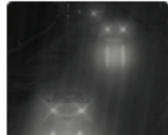
Tuesday



80% → 30%

Breezy. Rain then Chance Rain

Tuesday Night



50% → 20%

Chance Rain and Blustery then Slight Chance Rain and Breezy



Wednesday

20% 20%

Slight Chance Rain/Snow and Windy

Wednesday Night

20%

Slight Chance Snow and Breezy

Thursday

20%

Slight Chance Snow and Windy

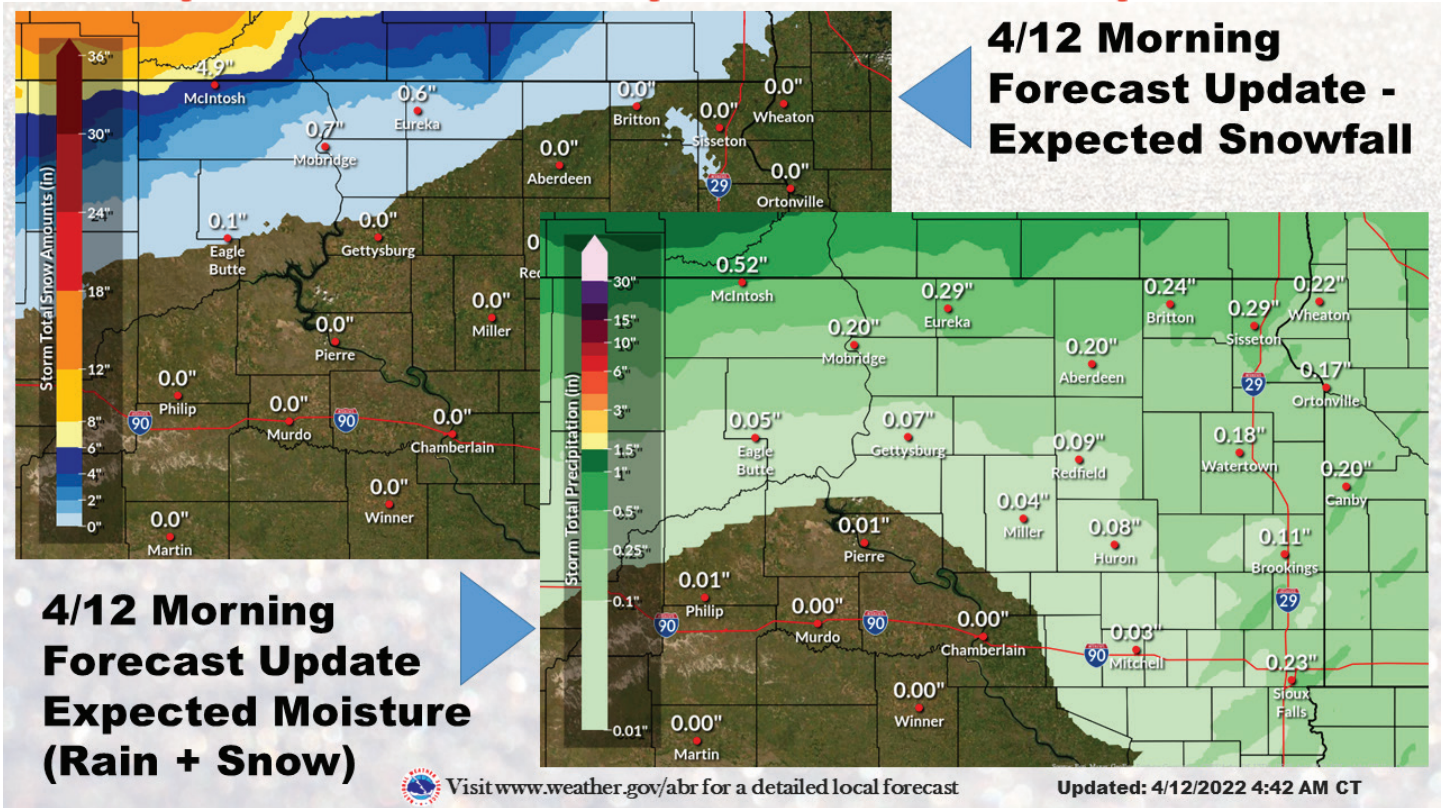
High: 50 °F

Low: 28 °F

High: 38 °F

Low: 24 °F

High: 34 °F



The track of the system continues to see minor adjustments, but each iteration has resulted in less moisture potential for our area. Areas most impacted by snowfall look to be west river and North Dakota.

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Wind Timing & Intensity

April 12, 2022
4:34 AM

Wind

- Easterly winds continue to strengthen today, before shifting to westerly this afternoon and overnight.
- West to northwest winds will remain prevalent through Thursday.
- Winds will draw abnormally cold air into the region that will persist through the next several days.

Maximum Wind Gust Forecast

	4/12 Tue										4/13 Wed										4/14 Thu										4/15 Fri									
	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm										
Aberdeen	33	36	36	35	32	35	38	39	39	43	46	45	41	41	41	39	43	47	47	46	41	36	35	36	35	38	38													
Britton	36	39	40	38	33	31	31	32	39	45	47	46	43	38	39	38	41	46	46	45	41	38	38	37	37	39	38													
Eagle Butte	39	37	33	36	40	44	41	40	44	49	53	53	49	41	43	41	40	44	47	48	43	33	33	32	29	35	40													
Eureka	45	45	44	39	36	39	40	39	41	48	51	49	45	41	45	41	44	48	48	48	43	36	33	35	33	39	40													
Gettysburg	43	40	38	38	40	44	40	39	43	49	53	53	48	47	47	44	45	49	49	47	44	39	35	33	32	39	43													
Kennebec	39	39	39	41	43	43	40	39	39	47	51	49	45	41	39	39	39	45	46	46	41	33	30	29	29	35	38													
McIntosh	46	44	40	39	40	44	40	39	46	52	55	55	51	46	48	46	44	46	49	49	45	37	35	33	32	38	41													
Milbank	22	31	33	31	23	24	29	30	36	39	40	39	35	31	32	36	41	49	51	46	40	35	31	31	32	35	37													
Miller	38	37	36	36	39	43	40	39	40	47	51	49	44	40	37	40	41	47	48	46	41	35	31	30	30	37	38													
Mobridge	41	40	38	36	40	44	40	40	40	46	48	48	45	43	46	40	40	43	44	41	40	36	32	30	28	33	37													
Murdo	38	38	39	43	45	43	40	39	40	48	53	53	48	43	39	39	40	45	47	46	39	32	29	28	29	35	36													
Pierre	35	33	35	39	43	44	40	39	39	46	49	49	45	40	40	39	45	45	44	40	32	30	29	28	35	38														
Redfield	37	38	38	36	35	38	40	39	39	44	47	47	43	38	38	39	40	46	48	47	40	35	35	32	29	36	39													
Sisseton	23	33	37	35	26	25	30	32	40	44	45	44	40	37	38	41	47	52	52	49	46	39	35	37	39	40	40													
Watertown	31	37	38	35	25	28	32	33	37	46	49	48	41	37	37	40	47	49	49	48	43	38	37	35	35	36	39													
Wheaton	25	32	35	32	26	24	25	25	33	38	40	39	35	30	32	36	39	44	44	44	39	32	32	35	35	36	35													

*Table values in mph
**Created: 3 am CDT Tue 4/12/2022
***Values are maximums over the period beginning at the time shown.

The storm system winds remain mostly unchanged despite slight adjustments in the storm track. Winds will be persistent across the area through the end of the work week, along with well below normal temperatures.



Precipitation Timing

April 12, 2022
4:35 AM

Precipitation

- Precipitation pivoting around the system will mostly affect North Dakota and western South Dakota
 - ◆ Far north central SD will see wet, heavy snow during the afternoon and overnight hours.
 - ◆ Blizzard to near blizzard conditions most likely during times of steadier, heavier snows.
 - ◆ Maybe a rumble of thunder with some showers in far eastern SD.

Probability of Precipitation Forecast

	4/12 Tue										4/13 Wed										4/14 Thu										4/15 Fri									
	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm										
Aberdeen	85	68	32	33	48	47	23	10	20	20	21	21	21	16	21	21	21	17	17	14	14	6	6	2	5	5	5													
Britton	69	82	49	34	54	61	36	17	22	22	22	22	22	18	29	29	29	28	28	19	19	11	11	5	6	6	6													
Eagle Butte	34	25	38	57	38	17	4	9	24	24	24	22	22	6	6	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	4	4	4	4	4													
Eureka	90	63	28	48	54	41	24	18	42	42	42	40	40	31	31	23	23	18	20	20	20	7	7	3	5	5	5													
Gettysburg	74	35	18	34	35	22	6	7	22	22	23	23	23	11	11	7	8	8	8	8	8	2	4	4	4	4	4													
Kennebec	22	8	17	31	20	7	1	1	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	1	1	0	1	1	3	3	3	1	1													
McIntosh	95	70	81	69	71	57	35	32	57	57	57	42	42	22	22	9	9	8	11	11	11	3	4	4	5	5	5													
Milbank	60	69	56	36	58	49	30	17	12	11	14	14	15	15	21	21	27	27	27	18	18	12	12	5	6	6	6													
Miller	65	21	18	35	42	23	5	3	8	8	9	9	9	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	1	2	2	2	2	2													
Mobridge	90	48	30	48	53	39	21	17	44	44	44	39	39	22	22	14	14	14	15	15	15	5	5	5	6	6	6													
Murdo	15	5	18	29	14	3	0	1	4	4	4	4	4	2	2	2	2	1	1	0	1	1	5	5	5	2	2													
Pierre	26	9	21	45	26	7	1	2	7	7	9	9	9	3	3	3	3	2	2	1	1	1	4	4	4	2	2													
Redfield	73	52	17	31	39	33	13	5	12	12	13	13	13	8	11	11	11	10	10	8	8	3	3	2	4	4	4													
Sisseton	67	87	62	41	56	59	35	20	17	17	18	18	18	16	27	27	32	32	32	20	20	13	13	6	7	7	7													
Watertown	77	60	35	36	51	43	24	11	10	10	10	10	11	11	15	15	16	16	16	10	10	5	5	2	4	4	4													
Wheaton	51	75	76	50	61	53	35	23	18	16	16	15	15	15	28	28	39	39	39	24	24	17	17	11	11	7	7													

*Table values in %
**Created: 3 am CDT Tue 4/12/2022
***Values are maximums over the period beginning at the time shown.

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Today in Weather History

April 12, 1970: A strong spring storm affected the northern and western two-thirds of South Dakota. Heavy snow fell throughout the morning hours dumping over a foot of snow over a large area of the state. Winds whipped the snow into 2 to 4-foot drifts across much of northern South Dakota. The Aberdeen area was the hardest hit with around 17 inches reported. While southeast South Dakota, southwest Minnesota, and northwest Iowa did not feel the effects of the storm, east-central South Dakota was not as fortunate. Freezing drizzle and freezing rain resulted in heavy icing in east central South Dakota causing extensive damage. The ice storm caused power outages to 20 to 80% of the rural electric service in the area.

1927: A tornado wiped out the town of Rock Springs Texas, killing 72 persons and causing 1.2 million dollars damage. The tornado was more than one mile in width and destroyed 235 of 247 buildings, leaving no trace of lumber or contents in many cases. Many survivors were bruised by large hail that fell after the passage of the tornado.

1934: Winds atop Mount Washington New Hampshire, averaged 186 mph for five minutes, with a peak gust of 231 mph, the highest wind speed ever clocked in the world at that time. In a report released by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), that record was topped in 1996 at Barrow Island, Australia during Typhoon Olivia. The new world record is now 253 mph. The 316 mph wind speed recorded at Moore, Oklahoma on 5/3/1999 logged during an F5 tornado was not recorded at ground level.

1945: A series of significant tornadoes raked Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, and Illinois. Antlers, Oklahoma were nearly obliterated by a massive F5 tornado that zigzagged from southwest to northeast across the town. 69 people died in the twister. Another tornado killed eight people in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The disaster was overshadowed by the loss of President Franklin Roosevelt, who died suddenly at his vacation home at Warm Springs, Georgia.

1987 - A cold front crossing the central U.S. produced heavy snow in the Central Rockies, and severe thunderstorms over Kansas and Oklahoma. Snowfall totals ranged up to 16 inches at Red Mountain Pass CO. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 87 mph at Ponca City OK. Winds associated with the cold front itself gusted to 69 mph at Tucumcari NM. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Snow blanketed the Southern Appalachians. Totals in North Carolina ranged up to 17 inches at Mitchell. Winds at Flat Top Mountain gusted to 80 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Twenty-two cities in the south central and eastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date, including Elkins WV with a low of 15 degrees, and Baton Rouge LA with a reading of 37 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Arctic air invaded the central U.S. Lincoln, NE, reported a record low of 17 degrees. Thunderstorms developing along the arctic cold front produced heavy snow in north central Kansas, wind gusts to 61 mph at Midland TX, and wind gusts to 69 mph at Rawlins WY. Warm weather prevailed in the southwestern U.S. Las Vegas NV reported a record high of 91 degrees, and on the 13th, Sacramento CA reported a record high of 95 degrees. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

2010 - One-inch diameter hail falls in Fresno, CA. Two condominiums are destroyed by thunderstorms in California's San Joaquin Valley. Up to three funnel clouds were also seen in the region.

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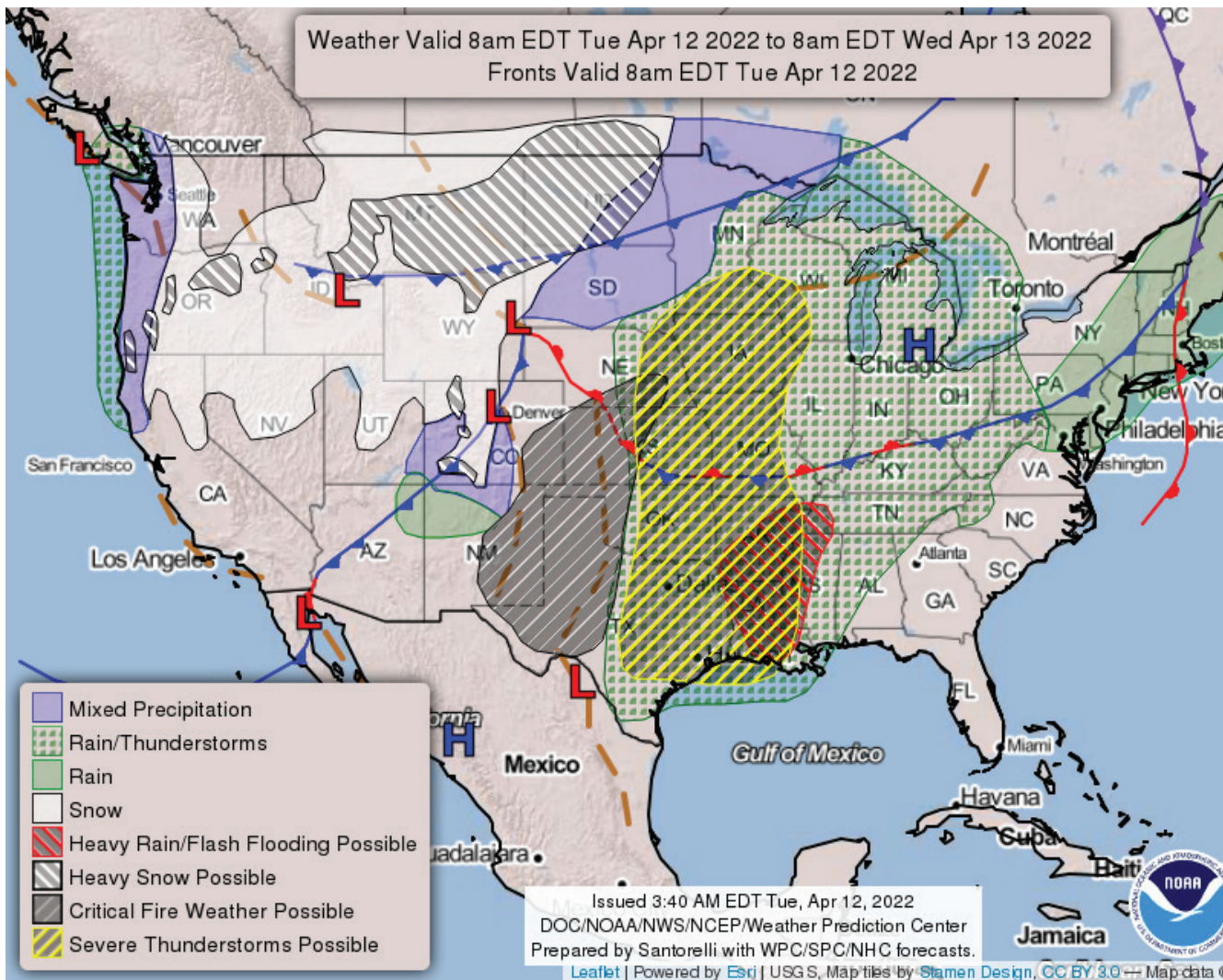
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 53 °F at 4:53 PM
Low Temp: 31 °F at 7:07 AM
Wind: 14 mph at 12:40 PM
Precip: 0.00

Day length: 13 hours, 25 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 85 in 1931
Record Low: 9 in 1961
Average High: 56°F
Average Low: 30°F
Average Precip in April.: 0.56
Precip to date in April.: 1.66
Average Precip to date: 2.62
Precip Year to Date: 3.46
Sunset Tonight: 8:16:04 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:16:04 PM



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WAITING WITHOUT WORRYING

Fishing often seems futile and foolish. There may be long periods of time when the only progress is the movement of the hands on a clock. While some would say it is a great way to relax and think, others would say it is ridiculous and unjustifiable in this fast-paced world.

There are many who consider prayer the same way. Why wait for the Lord to hear our prayers when we can get by on our own? The Psalmist gave us a good reason to wait: "I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in His Word I put my hope."

Some claim that waiting on the Lord is profitable and productive. Others say it is the best way to become efficient and effective. Is that really true? Don't we need to be moving?

The person who does not wait on the Lord may be going places - but they may not be the right places. Often, we move forward in haste and end up in a place other than what we had in mind. Often the consequences of rushing ahead of God results in destroying the plan He has laid out for us. Do you remember the wise bumper sticker that read, "Don't follow me. I'm lost."?

Waiting on the Lord is the way to empowerment. Not waiting on the Lord may lead to exhaustion. Our Lord is adequate to meet our every need, but there are times when we must wait on Him for whatever our need may be. We must wait on Him if we want His goodness and guidance, His wisdom and wealth, His healing and happiness.

The Psalmist said, "In His Word, I put my hope." In Hebrews we are reminded that "We have this hope as an anchor."

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for reminding us of our need to place our hope in You. Grant us the gift of trust as we learn to wait. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in His Word I put my hope. Psalm 130:5

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2022 Community Events

- 01/30/2022 84th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
01/30/2022 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am – 1pm, Groton Community Center, 109 N 3rd St, Groton,
04/07/2022 Groton CDE
04/09/2022 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
04/09/2022 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/23/2022 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/24/2022 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/07/2022 Lions Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
St John's Lutheran Church VBS 9-11am
05/30/2022 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
Transit Fundraiser at the Community Center 4-7pm (Thursday Mid-June)
06/17/2022 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm Start
06/18/2022 Groton Triathlon
Ladies Invitational at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration 10am Start
07/04/2022 Firecracker Couples Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start
(4th of July)
07/10/2022 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar 11am-1pm at the Groton Legion
Baseball Tourney
07/21/2022 Pro Am Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
Ferney Open Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
How can we... "Love Groton"? United Methodist Church 9:30am
Moonlight Swim at the Swimming Pool 9-11pm for 9th grade to age 20
Golf Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course 11a-1pm
08/05/2022 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
08/12/2022 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
United Methodist Church VBS 5-8pm
Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day 4-5pm GHS Parking Lot
09/10/2022 Lions Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3:30-5pm
09/11/2022 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm
Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/14/2022 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am (2nd Friday in October)
10/01/2022 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/31/2022 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2022 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/12/2022 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/24/2022 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/03/2022 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party at Olive Grove Golf Course
Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm
01/29/2023 Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)

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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 Monday:

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$106 million

Powerball

05-07-24-31-34, Powerball: 4, Power Play: 2

(five, seven, twenty-four, thirty-one, thirty-four; Powerball: four; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$288 million

South Dakota House to vote on impeaching attorney general

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota House is set to decide Tuesday whether Attorney General Jason Ravensborg should be impeached for his conduct before and after he struck and killed a pedestrian on the shoulder of a highway.

Troopers have said Ravensborg was distracted before the September 2020 crash that killed 55-year-old Joseph Boever. Ravensborg initially told authorities he thought he had struck a deer or other large animal. He went back the next day and found Boever's body.

Opponents of impeachment say Ravensborg need not be held accountable by the House because he wasn't on the job when the crash happened. He had been driving back from a Republican fundraiser.

Ravnsborg has cast Boever's death as a tragic accident. He pleaded no contest last year to a pair of traffic misdemeanors, including making an illegal lane change.

An investigation committee from the Republican-controlled House voted against recommending impeachment after arguments that Ravensborg's actions were not part of his official duties. Republican Gov. Kristi Noem has pushed for impeachment, saying Ravensborg lied to investigators.

The Highway Patrol concluded that Ravensborg's car crossed completely onto the highway shoulder before hitting Boever, and criminal investigators said later that they didn't believe some of Ravensborg's statements.

Republican Rep. Will Mortenson, of Pierre, brought articles of impeachment against Ravensborg more than a year ago. He did not return phone messages left Monday by The Associated Press.

Last week, at the request of Republican Rep. Tim Goodwin, of Rapid City, about 30 lawmakers took in a presentation by two Highway Patrol troopers outlining details of the investigation.

Goodwin said it raised doubts about the committee's recommendation. House Speaker Spencer Gosch, who chaired the committee, called it a sales pitch. Gosch did not respond to phone messages Monday.

While it's unclear whether the presentation would have any effect on the impeachment vote, Noem's spokesman referenced it Monday to sum up the feelings in the governor's office.

"The troopers' presentation speaks better than I ever could," Ian Fury said.

Democrat House Minority Leader Jamie Smith, a member of the impeachment investigation committee, said the troopers helped with unanswered questions, but he doesn't believe they will change any minds. He expects Tuesday's floor debate to last a couple of hours before the vote.

"As a member of the committee, I said I believed there were grounds for impeachment and I will stay with that," Smith said.

Regional behavioral health facilities to be expanded in SD

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Kristi Noem and the South Dakota Department of Social Services are working to expand the number of regional behavioral health facilities across the state.

The state received \$15 million in federal stimulus funding to support the expansion, which was approved

by legislators and included in the department's overall budget.

Over the next four years, an estimated \$3,750,000 will be spent annually for the construction and expansion of facilities across the state, Noem said in a news release.

The goal is to have at least one facility in all five of the state's behavioral health regions.

"Adding short-term regional crisis stabilization services in each region of the state is a very positive step for South Dakota," said DSS Secretary, Laurie Gill. "The Department is committed to working with its partners across the state to support crisis service delivery. This will require collaboration with state, county, and city entities as we all have a role to play in providing quality crisis services."

According to authorities, people in mental health crisis are often placed in jail or are involuntarily committed to inpatient psychiatric hospitals when they could be served in a less restrictive setting closer to their home and community.

"We want all South Dakotans, regardless of where they live, to have access to short-term comprehensive behavioral health crisis stabilization close to home 24 hours per day, seven days a week," Gill said. "This will also take pressure off law enforcement and first responders in our communities who have for a long time been the people responding to behavioral health crises."

Spring storm packing blizzard conditions for northern Plains

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — A significant spring storm headed for the northern Plains is packing blizzard conditions with significant snow accumulation and drifting, according to the National Weather Service.

Meteorologists posted a blizzard warning for a large section of western North Dakota and smaller areas of western South Dakota and eastern Montana beginning Tuesday through Thursday evening.

Travel may become difficult to impossible in some places, the weather service predicted.

A winter storm watch was issued for eastern North Dakota, northern South Dakota and northwestern Minnesota. Forecasters were expecting a foot to 2 feet (60.9 centimeters) of snow in some of the affected areas with lesser amounts elsewhere.

"Most long-term residents of the Northern Plains and Rockies know that April can deliver tremendous snowstorms," AccuWeather meteorologist Brandon Buckingham tell the Bismarck Tribune.

"For example, the Black Hills of South Dakota average 10 to 20 inches of snow during the month of April. It is possible that the Black Hills and other locations in the region could pick up an entire month's worth of snow from this one storm," he added.

Western North Dakota could use the moisture. The latest U.S. Drought Monitor map shows the region is abnormally dry or in some form of drought. Northwestern North Dakota is in extreme drought, the second-worst category.

Camper comes off hitch, sparks ignite grassfire in Watertown

WATERTOWN, S.D. (AP) — A camper that came unhooked from a pickup hitch caused sparks that ignited a grassfire Saturday in Watertown, authorities said.

Watertown Fire Rescue was called to the scene about 1:10 p.m. and discovered a fast-moving blaze that was moving toward a farm and a residence.

Crews were able to contain the fire in about 20 minutes, department officials said. No structures were damaged in the 2.5-acre fire, the Watertown Public Opinion reported.

The incident remains under investigation.

Biden waiving ethanol rule in bid to lower gasoline prices

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is visiting corn-rich Iowa on Tuesday to announce he'll suspend a federal rule preventing the sale of higher ethanol blend gasoline this summer as his administration tries to tamp down prices at the pump that have spiked during Russia's war with Ukraine.

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Most gasoline sold in the U.S. is blended with 10% ethanol. The Environmental Protection Agency will issue an emergency waiver to allow widespread sale of 15% ethanol blend that is usually prohibited between June 1 and Sept. 15 because of concerns that it adds to smog in high temperatures.

Senior Biden administration officials said the move will save drivers an average of 10 cents per gallon at 2,300 gas stations. Industry groups say most of those stations are in the Midwest and the South, including Texas.

Biden is to announce the move at a biofuel company in Menlo, west of Des Moines. Iowa is the country's largest producer of corn, key to producing ethanol.

The waiver is another effort to help ease global energy markets that have been rocked since Russia invaded Ukraine. Last month, the president announced the U.S. will release 1 million barrels of oil per day from the nation's strategic petroleum reserve over the next six months. His administration said that has helped to slightly reduce gas prices lately, after they climbed to an average of about \$4.23 a gallon by the end of March, compared with \$2.87 at the same time a year ago, according to AAA.

Members of Congress from both parties, as well as industry groups, had urged Biden to grant the E15 waiver.

"Homegrown Iowa biofuels provide a quick and clean solution for lowering prices at the pump and bolstering production would help us become energy independent once again," said Iowa Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley. He was among nine Republican and seven Democratic senators from Midwestern states who sent Biden a letter last month urging him to allow year-round E15 sales.

The trip will be Biden's first as president to Iowa, where his 2020 presidential campaign limped to a fourth-place finish in the state's technologically glitchy caucus.

After bouncing back to win the Democratic nomination, Biden returned for a rally at the Iowa state fairgrounds four days before Election Day 2020, only to see Donald Trump win the state by 8 percentage points.

Biden heads back to the state at a moment when he's facing yet more political peril. He's saddled with sagging approval ratings and inflation at a 40-year high while his party faces the prospect of big midterm election losses that could cost it control of Congress.

The president also planned to promote his economic plans to help rural families struggling with higher costs, while highlighting the \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure law enacted last fall. The law includes money to improve internet access, as well as for modernizing wastewater systems, reducing flooding threats and improving roads and bridges, drinking water and electric grids in sparsely populated areas.

"Part of it is showing up in communities of all sizes, regardless of the results of the last election," said Jesse Harris, who was a senior adviser to Biden's 2020 campaign in Iowa and directed get out the vote and early voting efforts for Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008.

Harris said most presidents who visit Iowa typically go to the state's largest cities. Hitting an area like Menlo, part of Guthrie County, which backed Trump over Biden by 35 percentage points in 2020, "does speak to the importance the administration places on infrastructure broadly but also infrastructure in rural and smaller communities."

The Biden administration plans to spend the coming weeks pushing billions of dollars in funding for rural areas. Cabinet members and other senior officials will travel the country to help communities get access to money available as part of the infrastructure package.

"The president is not making this trip through a political prism," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said. "He's making this trip because Iowa is a rural state in the country that would benefit greatly from the president's policies."

Still, administration officials have long suggested that Biden travel more to promote an economy that is rebounding from the setbacks of the coronavirus pandemic. The number of Americans collecting unemployment has fallen to the lowest levels since 1970, for example.

But much of the positive jobs news nationally has been overshadowed by surging gas, food and housing prices that have pushed consumer inflation to 7.9% over the past year ending in February. That's the

sharpest spike since 1982. Inflation figures for March, due out Tuesday, are likely to bring more bad news for the Biden administration.

"Maybe a trip back to Iowa will be just what Joe Biden needs to understand what his reckless spending, big government policies are doing to our country," Iowa Republican Party Chairman Jeff Kaufmann said in a statement.

After Iowa, Biden will visit Greensboro, North Carolina, on Thursday.

Psaki blamed Russia's war in Ukraine for helping to drive up gas prices and said the administration expects the consumer price index for March to be "extremely elevated" in large part because of it.

The EPA has lifted seasonal restrictions on E15 in the past, including after Hurricane Harvey in 2017. The Trump administration allowed for selling E15 in the summer months two years later but had the rule struck down by a federal appeals court.

Czechs provide free shooting training for local Ukrainians

By KAREL JANICEK Associated Press

BRNO, Czech Republic (AP) — Of the first four shots Olha Dembitska fired from an AK-47 assault rifle in her life, one hit the target.

"It's pretty difficult the first time," the 22-year-old Ukrainian woman acknowledged.

On this occasion, the target was the shape of a human body at a shooting range in the Czech Republic. Next time, it might be for real, in Ukraine, and the target could be one of the Russian troops who have invaded her homeland.

Dembitska is one of at least 130 men and women who have so far undergone free-of-charge training for Ukrainians living in the Czech Republic who want to learn how to fight the aggressor.

"I might return to Ukraine if they need me," she said.

Almost none of the participants had any experience with weapons before war struck their homeland.

Since Russia launched its brutal attack, Ukrainians from all parts of the country and elsewhere have been arriving in the Czech Republic's second-largest city, Brno, attracted by courses designed to teach them essentials and skills to safely handle lethal rifles while being able to inflict damage on their enemy.

Beside learning to shoot, the courses give them the basics about guns, movement around the battlefield and a lesson in providing first aid, something that can save lives if they're mobilized by their embattled country or decide to return home as volunteers to join the Ukrainian army.

They are all motivated.

"It's horrible," Dembitska said about the situation in her homeland. She gets her news from social media and from phone calls with a friend based in the southern city of Kherson, seized by Russian troops in the early stages of the invasion.

"She tells me everything. They haven't received humanitarian aid. It's a horror what the Russian soldiers are doing, I'm sick of it."

Michal Ratajsky, the owner of CS Solutions, a security company that offers the training program at its base on the outskirts of Brno, located some 200 kilometers (125 miles) southeast of Prague, called it "our contribution to the help for Ukrainians."

"We view it as a morale boost we're giving them in this situation, an effort to show we're supporting them and that we will do for them what we can at the given moment," Ratajsky said. "That was our motivation and goal."

A crowdfunding campaign helped secure enough money for the ammunition, while his company provides the rest, including experienced instructors, weapons and the shooting range.

Ratajsky said the brief, three-hour training can't do miracles but should be enough to introduce the Ukrainians to new, unfamiliar skills.

"We know that we don't make soldiers of them in those three hours," he said. "We try to do the maximum for them in the time, with the focus on their safety."

Some of the participants have returned for repeated lessons. Some have come from as far away as

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Vienna. in neighboring Austria. Some took the course on their way back to Ukraine from Western Europe, Ratajsky said.

He said the Ukrainians are united by anger about the Russian aggression, and determined to end it.

"They take it seriously and want to do something about it."

He said that because some 80% percent of troop losses in a war like the one in Ukraine are caused by artillery and missiles, a sense of self-preservation and knowledge of first aid might be more useful for survival than shooting.

"We're aware of the limits of what we can get them ready for and make no secret of it," Ratajsky said.

Yehor Nechyporenko, 38, who had traveled some 260 kilometers (160 miles) from the town of Mlada Boleslav to Brno for the second time said he is helping Ukrainian refugees who have arrived in the Czech Republic but wants to be ready to go back home to fight.

"It's very useful for me," he said of the training. "I really like it. I need to learn those things because I didn't do military service."

Nechyporenko said he was sure the Russians have no chance of taking the entire country.

"I think the war will be over in a couple of months," he said. "And if we see we're losing, we'll all travel home."

Seoul: North Korea destroying S. Korean-owned golf course

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea is destroying a South Korean-owned golf course at a scenic mountain resort in the second confirmed case of South Korean assets being eliminated in an area where the rivals once ran a joint tour program, officials said Tuesday in Seoul.

North Korea's demolition of South Korean-built facilities at its Diamond Mountain resort comes as ties between the countries remain strained over the North's recent series of high-profile missile tests.

Responding to queries by The Associated Press, Seoul's Unification Ministry said it has confirmed North Korea is demolishing the golf resort in addition to a South Korean-owned hotel there. Last Friday, the ministry said North Korea was dismantling the Haegumgang Hotel, a floating hotel docked at a coastal area in the resort.

The ministry said it strongly urges North Korea to stop destroying the South Korean facilities. It demanded North Korea return to talks to address the issue.

The two Koreas jointly ran a tour project at the resort for about 10 years during an earlier era of inter-Korean detente. The tours drew an estimated 2 million South Korean visitors and served as a rare source of foreign currency for the impoverished North. But South Korea suspended the project in 2008 after one of its tourists was fatally shot by a North Korean soldier there.

After their relations improved in 2018, the two Koreas pushed to resume stalled cooperation projects including the mountain tours. But Seoul eventually failed to do so without defying U.S.-led sanctions that kept the tours from restarting. In 2019, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un ordered officials to tear down South Korean-owned assets in the resort, but the demolition was delayed due to worries about the spread of the coronavirus.

North Korea has sought sanctions relief and other concessions from the United States and South Korea to revive its moribund economy. Some experts say its recent weapons testing activity was meant to perfect its missile technology and boost its leverage in future negotiations with its rivals.

Besides the golf resort and floating hotel, South Korea owns other facilities in the resort such as spas, a culture center, accommodations, a duty free shop, karaoke rooms and a building used for reunions of Korean families separated by war. The fate of those facilities was unclear.

The North's state media reported Tuesday that a fire in the Diamond Mountain area over the weekend destroyed unspecified facilities and hundreds of hectares of forests. It said the blaze was put out on Sunday.

It wasn't immediately known if the fire was related to the demolition of the South Korean facilities at the resort. The South Korean Unification Ministry said it was trying to find out if the fire caused any damage

to its facilities in the resort.

'It's not the end': The children who survived Bucha's horror

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

BUCHA, Ukraine (AP) — The coffin was made from pieces of a closet. In a darkened basement under a building shaking from the bombardment of war, there were few other options.

Six-year-old Vlad watched as his mother was carried out of the shelter last month and to the yard of a nearby home. The burial was hurried and devastating.

Now Russian forces have withdrawn from Bucha after a monthlong occupation, and Vlad's father, Ivan Drahun, dropped to his knees at the foot of the grave.

He reached out and touched the dirt near his wife Maryna's feet. "Hi, how are you?" he said during the visit last week. "I miss you so much. You left so soon. You didn't even say goodbye."

The boy also visits the grave, placing on it a juice box and two cans of baked beans. Amid the stress of war, his mother barely ate. The family still doesn't know what illness caused her death. They, much like their town, barely know how to move on.

Bucha witnessed some of the ghastliest scenes of Russia's invasion, and almost no children have been seen in its silent streets since then. The many bright playgrounds in the once popular community with good schools on a far edge of the capital, Kyiv, are empty.

The Russians used a children's camp in Bucha as an execution ground, and bloodstains and bullet holes mark a basement. On a ledge near the camp entrance, Russian soldiers placed a toy tank. It appeared to be connected to fishing wire — a possible booby trap in the most vulnerable of places.

Steps away from Vlad's home, some of the Russians used a kindergarten as a base, leaving it intact while other nearby buildings suffered. Casings of used artillery shells were left along a fence in the yard. In a nearby playground, white and red tape marked off unexploded ordnance. The booms of de-mining operations were so strong they set off car alarms.

At the apartment block where Vlad, his older brother Vova and sister Sophia live, someone had spray-painted "CHILDREN" in child-high letters on an outside wall. Under it, a wooden box once used for ammunition held a teddy bear and other toys.

It is here that Bucha's fragile renewal can be seen.

A small group of neighborhood children gathered, finding distraction from the war. Bundled up in winter coats, they kicked a football, wandered around with bags of snacks handed out by visiting volunteers, called out from a glass-less window above.

Their parents, taking in the feeble warmth of spring after weeks in freezing basements, reflected on how they tried to protect the children. "We covered his ears," said Polina Shymanska of her 7-year-old great-grandson Nikita. "We hugged him, kissed him." She tried to play chess and the boy let her win.

Upstairs, in a neighbor's apartment where Vlad's father for now has merged his family with that of the neighbor to help manage their collection of children, Vlad curled up on a bed with another boy and played cards. The radiator gave off no heat. There was still no gas, no electricity, no running water.

Not everyone in Vlad's family can stand to return to their own apartment nearby. The memories of Maryna are everywhere, from the perfume bottles on the table by the front door to the quiet kitchen.

In the living room, time has stopped. Limp balloons dangled from the overhead light. A string of colorful flags still hung on the wall, along with a family photo. It showed Ivan and Maryna holding Vlad on the day he was born. They celebrated his birthday on Feb. 19.

Five days later, the war began. And the family's life shrank to a dank concrete half-room in the basement, lined with blankets and scattered with sweets and toys. It was very, very cold, Ivan remembers. He and Maryna did what they could to muffle the sounds of shelling for Vlad and keep him calm. But they were afraid, too.

Two weeks ago, Ivan took Vlad to the makeshift toilet in the shelter and visited neighbors. Then he came to Maryna to tell her that he was going outside. "I touched her shoulder, and she was cold," he said. "I

realized she was gone.”

At first, he said, Vlad appeared not to understand what had happened. The boy said his mother had moved away. But at the burial, the boy watched Ivan kneel and cry, and now he knows what death is.

Death is inseparable from Bucha. Local authorities told The Associated Press that at least 16 children were among the hundreds of people killed. Those who survived face a long recovery.

“They’ve realized that now it’s calm and quiet,” Ivan said. “But at the same time, older children understand that it’s not the end. The war is not finished. And it’s hard to explain for the smaller ones that war is still going on.”

The children are adapting, he said. They have seen a lot. Some even saw dogs killed.

Now the war has slipped into the games they play.

In a sandbox outside the kindergarten, Vlad and a friend “bombed” each other with fistfuls of sand.

“I’m Ukraine,” one said. “No, I’m Ukraine,” said the other.

Russian war worsens fertilizer crunch, risking food supplies

By GEOFFREY KAVITI, CHINEDU ASADU and PAUL WISEMAN Associated Press

KIAMBU COUNTY, Kenya (AP) — Monica Kariuki is about ready to give up on farming. What is driving her off her 10 acres of land outside Nairobi isn’t bad weather, pests or blight — the traditional agricultural curses — but fertilizer: It costs too much.

Despite thousands of miles separating her from the battlefields of Ukraine, Kariuki and her cabbage, corn and spinach farm are indirect victims of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s invasion. The war has pushed up the price of natural gas, a key ingredient in fertilizer, and has led to severe sanctions against Russia, a major exporter of fertilizer.

Kariuki used to spend 20,000 Kenyan shillings, or about \$175, to fertilize her entire farm. Now, she would need to spend five times as much. Continuing to work the land, she said, would yield nothing but losses.

“I cannot continue with the farming business. I am quitting farming to try something else,” she said.

Higher fertilizer prices are making the world’s food supply more expensive and less abundant, as farmers skimp on nutrients for their crops and get lower yields. While the ripples will be felt by grocery shoppers in wealthy countries, the squeeze on food supplies will land hardest on families in poorer countries. It could hardly come at a worse time: The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization said last week that its world food-price index in March reached the highest level since it started in 1990.

The fertilizer crunch threatens to further limit worldwide food supplies, already constrained by the disruption of crucial grain shipments from Ukraine and Russia. The loss of those affordable supplies of wheat, barley and other grains raises the prospect of food shortages and political instability in Middle Eastern, African and some Asian countries where millions rely on subsidized bread and cheap noodles.

“Food prices will skyrocket because farmers will have to make profit, so what happens to consumers?” said Uche Anyanwu, an agricultural expert at the University of Nigeria.

The aid group Action Aid warns that families in the Horn of Africa are already being driven “to the brink of survival.”

The U.N. says Russia is the world’s No. 1 exporter of nitrogen fertilizer and No. 2 in phosphorus and potassium fertilizers. Its ally Belarus, also contending with Western sanctions, is another major fertilizer producer.

Many developing countries — including Mongolia, Honduras, Cameroon, Ghana, Senegal, Mexico and Guatemala — rely on Russia for at least a fifth of their imports.

The conflict also has driven up the already-exorbitant price of natural gas, used to make nitrogen fertilizer. The result: European energy prices so high that some fertilizer companies “have closed their businesses and stopped operating their plants,” said David Laborde, a researcher at the International Food Policy Research Institute.

For corn and cabbage farmer Jackson Koeth, 55, of Eldoret in western Kenya, the conflict in Ukraine was distant and puzzling until he had to decide whether to go ahead with the planting season. Fertilizer

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prices had doubled from last year.

Koeth said he decided to keep planting but only on half the acreage of years past. Yet he doubts he can make a profit with fertilizer so costly.

Greek farmer Dimitris Filis, who grows olives, oranges and lemons, said "you have to search to find" ammonia nitrate and that the cost of fertilizing a 10-hectare (25-acre) olive grove has doubled to 560 euros (\$310). While selling his wares at an Athens farm market, he said most farmers plan to skip fertilizing their olive and orange groves this year.

"Many people will not use fertilizers at all, and this as a result, lowers the quality of the production and the production itself, and slowly, slowly at one point, they won't be able to farm their land because there will be no income," Filis said.

In China, the price of potash — potassium-rich salt used as fertilizer — is up 86% from a year earlier. Nitrogen fertilizer prices have climbed 39% and phosphorus fertilizer is up 10%.

In the eastern Chinese city of Tai'an, the manager of a 35-family cooperative that raises wheat and corn said fertilizer prices have jumped 40% since the start of the year.

"We can hardly make any money," said the manager, who would give only his surname, Zhao.

Terry Farms, which grows produce on 2,100 acres largely in Ventura, California, has seen prices of some fertilizer formulations double; others are up 20%. Shifting fertilizers is risky, vice president William Terry said, because cheaper versions might not give "the crop what it needs as a food source."

As the growing season approaches in Maine, potato farmers are grappling with a 70% to 100% increase in fertilizer prices from last year, depending on the blend.

"I think it's going to be a pretty expensive crop, no matter what you're putting in the ground, from fertilizer to fuel, labor, electrical and everything else," said Donald Flannery, executive director of the Maine Potato Board.

In Prudentopolis, a town in Brazil's Parana state, farmer Edimilson Rickli showed off a warehouse that would normally be packed with fertilizer bags but has only enough to last a few more weeks. He's worried that, with the war in Ukraine showing no sign of letting up, he'll have to go without fertilizer when he plants wheat, barley and oats next month.

"The question is: Where Brazil is going to buy more fertilizer from?" he said. "We have to find other markets."

Other countries are hoping to help fill the gaps. Nigeria, for example, opened Africa's largest fertilizer factory last month, and the \$2.5 billion plant has already shipped fertilizer to the United States, Brazil, India and Mexico.

India, meanwhile, is seeking more fertilizer imports from Israel, Oman, Canada and Saudi Arabia to make up for lost shipments from Russia and Belarus.

"If the supply shortage gets worse, we will produce less," said Kishor Rungta of the nonprofit Fertiliser Association of India. "That's why we need to look for options to get more fertilizers in the country."

Agricultural firms are providing support for farmers, especially in Africa where poverty often limits access to vital farm inputs. In Kenya, Apollo Agriculture is helping farmers get fertilizer and access to finance.

"Some farmers are skipping the planting season and others are going into some other ventures such as buying goats to cope," said Benjamin Njenga, co-founder of the firm. "So these support services go a long way for them."

Governments are helping, too. The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced last month that it was issuing \$250 million in grants to support U.S. fertilizer production. The Swiss government has released part of its nitrogen fertilizer reserves.

Still, there's no easy answer to the double whammy of higher fertilizer prices and limited supplies. The next 12 to 18 months, food researcher LaBorde said, "will be difficult."

The market already was "super, super tight" before the war, said Kathy Mathers of the Fertilizer Institute trade group.

"Unfortunately, in many cases, growers are just happy to get fertilizer at all," she said.

EXPLAINER: What do new Alabama laws say on transgender kids?

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Alabama has become the first state to criminalize the use of puberty blockers and hormones to treat transgender people under age 19. In line with some other Republican-led states, legislators here also passed a law requiring students to use bathrooms corresponding to their sex at birth and prohibiting discussion of gender and sexual identity in the lower grades. Critics have derided the limitation on such discussions as the “Don’t Say Gay” law.

The two GOP bills were signed into law Friday by Republican Gov. Kay Ivey, a day after being passed by the Alabama Legislature. Advocacy groups quickly filed a lawsuit Monday challenging the medication ban.

Republicans argue the bills are needed to protect children and that decisions on gender-affirming medications should wait until adulthood. Critics say the politicians are interfering with medical decisions that belong with families and their doctors. Cathryn Oakley, state legislative director and senior counsel for the Human Rights Campaign, a national advocacy group for the LGBTQ community, called the two pieces of legislation “the single most anti-transgender legislative package in history.”

WHAT DOES THE TREATMENT BAN DO?

Titled the “Alabama Vulnerable Child Compassion and Protection Act,” the law makes it a crime to prescribe or administer to anyone under 19 puberty blockers or hormone treatment “for the purpose of attempting to alter the appearance of or affirm the minor’s perception of his or her gender or sex.”

Legislators made it a Class C felony to violate the law, meaning doctors who prescribe or administer such medication would be subject to up to 10 years in prison.

The law, which takes effect on May 8 unless blocked by the courts, also bans surgeries for the purpose of altering gender appearance, but doctors say those are generally not performed on minors.

Alabama’s legislation goes further than measures passed in other states. Arkansas was the first state to pass a ban on gender-affirming drugs, but its measure did not include criminal penalties. The Arkansas law was blocked by a federal judge before it could go into effect. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott ordered the state’s Department of Family and Protective Services to investigate as child abuse reports of youth receiving such care.

WHAT ARE THE CRITICISMS?

Doctors, families and advocacy organizations say politicians are inserting themselves into decisions that belong with families and medical teams. The measures have prompted swift backlash from medical experts, Democratic President Joe Biden’s administration, the U.S. Department of Justice and the families of trans youth. Doctors say the Alabama law is contrary to peer-reviewed research and applies a criminal label to standard medical care. Health experts also say that minors with gender dysphoria who do not receive appropriate medical care face dramatically increased risk of suicide and serious depression.

DOES THE LAW DO ANYTHING ELSE?

Yes. The law requires counselors, teachers, principals and other administrators — in both public and private schools — to tell parents if a child discloses that they think they may be transgender. It also prohibits school staff from encouraging students to withhold the information from their parents.

WHAT DOES THE BATHROOM/ “DON’T SAY GAY” LAW DO?

The second piece of legislation signed by Ivey involves public school bathroom use and classroom instruction.

The law requires students in grades K-12 to use multi-person bathrooms and locker rooms that correspond to their sex at birth rather than their gender identity. It also prohibits teachers and others who provide lessons to grades K-5 from talking about sexual orientation or gender identity “in a manner that is not age appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards.”

Critics have labeled a similar measure passed in Florida that applies to grades K-3 the “Don’t Say Gay” law.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Opponents of the medication ban who filed the lawsuit are hoping a judge will grant their request to block it. A legal challenge is also expected to be filed against the bathroom and classroom-instruction measures.

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The U.S. Department of Justice sent a letter to states warning that efforts to block transgender minors from accessing gender-affirming care may be violating federal law and the constitutional protections.

National Urban League finds State of Black America is grim

By MICHAEL WARREN Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The National Urban League released its annual report on the State of Black America on Tuesday, and its findings are grim. This year's Equality Index shows Black people still get only 73.9 percent of the American pie white people enjoy.

While Black people have made economic and health gains, they've slipped farther behind whites in education, social justice and civic engagement since this index was launched in 2005. A compendium of average outcomes by race in many aspects of life, it shows just how hard it is for people of color to overcome systemic racism, the civil rights organization says.

"These numbers change so little and so slowly. What it tells me is that this institutional disparity based on race seems to be built into American society," National Urban League President Marc Morial said in an interview.

The index shows not only that median household income for Black people, at \$43,862, is 37% less than that of white people, at \$69,823. Black people also are less likely to benefit from home ownership, the engine of generational wealth in America. Census data shows Black couples are more than twice as likely as whites to be denied a mortgage or a home improvement loan, which leads to just 59% of the median home equity white households have, and just 13% of their wealth.

"In that area of wealth, we've seen almost no change, none, since the civil rights days," Morial said. "The wealth disparity has gotten wider."

Among dozens of health measures, one stands out: Life expectancy has declined slightly for African Americans, so a Black child born today can expect to live to 74.7, four years less than a white baby. And lifelong inequities loom: Black women are 59% more likely to die as a result of bearing a child, and 31% more likely to die of breast cancer. Black men are 52% more likely to die of prostate cancer.

Overdoses afflict the races about equally, while white people are 55% more likely to drink themselves to death through cirrhosis or chronic liver disease. Among people 15-24, white people are more than twice as likely to commit suicide, while Black men are nine times more likely to die by homicide.

Educational gaps abound: Black and white preschoolers are roughly equally prepared, but the classrooms they enter are starkly different. Schools with more minority students are more likely to have inexperienced, less trained and even uncertified teachers. Fewer of these students are enrolled in the STEM classes that can lead to higher-paying jobs. Black students are less likely to graduate college.

The index uses U.S. Justice Department statistics to chart social justice differences, noting that Black people have been more than twice as likely as white people to experience threats or uses of force during police encounters, and three times more likely to be jailed if arrested. In 2020, they were 93% more likely to be victims of hate crime.

Measuring civic engagement, the index cites 2020 Census data showing that white people are about 5% more likely to be registered and to actually vote than Black people.

Morial chose to release the report in Atlanta, where a concentration of historically Black colleges have long represented high achievement among African Americans, in part because its survey shows a declining faith among young people that voting can make a difference. The Urban League is responding by launching a "Reclaim Your Vote" campaign.

"Georgia is ground zero for voter suppression. The legislature's actions after Jan. 6 have been sweeping in their aggressiveness to suppress the vote," Morial said. "We've got to remain resolute, to push back against this. We cannot give in. We cannot give up."

What do we know about "stealth omicron" so far?

By VICTORIA MILKO AP Science Writer

What do we know about “stealth omicron” so far?

It’s an extra-contagious version of the omicron variant, but it doesn’t seem to cause more severe disease. Since it was first identified in November, BA.2 has been spreading around the globe, driving new surges in parts of Asia and Europe. It’s now the dominant coronavirus version in the U.S. and more than five dozen other countries.

It was given the “stealth” nickname because it looks like the earlier delta variant on certain PCR tests, says Kristen Coleman at the University of Maryland School of Public Health. The original omicron, by contrast, is easy to differentiate from delta because of a genetic quirk.

In rare cases, early research indicates BA.2 can infect people even if they’ve already had an omicron infection. COVID-19 vaccines appear just as effective against both kinds of omicron, offering strong protection against severe illness and death.

Health officials also are tracking other variants including XE — a combination of BA.2 and BA.1, the original omicron — that was first identified in January in the United Kingdom. The World Health Organization is keeping tabs on XE but has not yet deemed it a variant of concern or interest.

Shooting challenges downtown Sacramento’s rebuilding efforts

By KATHLEEN RONAYNE Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — The mass shooting that police say was a gun battle between rival gangs that left six dead and 12 wounded earlier this month shook the downtown core of California’s capital — and created another challenge for a city trying to redefine itself as a destination for more than just government workers.

In recent years, downtown Sacramento has benefited from billions of dollars of development but has been rattled by rising crime, protests resulting in property damage and an economic drubbing caused by the pandemic. Now, the city is reeling from the aftermath of the April 3 shooting, when at least five gunmen fired 100 shots as people left bars and nightclubs.

The violence just blocks from the Capitol highlights the successes and challenges many U.S. urban centers are facing as struggles with crime and homelessness persist despite revitalization efforts.

Though Sacramento is home to more than 500,000 people, it’s considered sleepy by California standards. The derisive nickname “Cowntown” grew out of its agricultural roots.

Today, downtown is at the center of the city’s efforts to become an entertainment and food destination. Local officials have worked to rebrand the city as “America’s Farm to Fork Capital,” a nod to a large number of well-regarded restaurants that get ingredients from the region’s many farms.

A major part of the revitalization is a six-block strip of K Street anchored by a renovated convention center and the Golden 1 Center, home to the NBA’s Sacramento Kings and a regular stop for major concert tours. The shooting happened on a block that’s home to high-end nightclubs but also dotted by vacant buildings that once housed coffee shops and restaurants.

Police have made two arrests connected to the shootings, but no one has been charged with homicide. The violence “came at a really pivotal moment for downtown,” said Sacramento City Councilwoman Katie Valenzuela, who represents the area.

“It’s causing me to sort of reflect on where we go from here — and as a city, not just as downtown,” she said.

A century ago, K Street was a bustling, diverse center of activity. But the strip struggled as people moved into the suburbs — giving way to decades of failed revival efforts, including the construction of a mall in the late 1960s and the launch of a light rail commuter line in the 1980s.

A fresh wave of investment came to the area about a decade ago, with new businesses opening on K Street as part of an effort to revive downtown after the financial crisis. The Golden 1 Center’s 2016 opening sought to build on that, helping generate \$6.7 billion in nearby investment and spurring the opening of 150 new businesses, according to the Downtown Sacramento Partnership business group.

Then the pandemic hit, sending many of downtown’s 100,000 workers home and forcing some businesses

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closed. Now about 45,000 people work downtown daily, according to the partnership.

As employment fell, crime rose. Aggravated assaults, burglaries and vandalism were up in 2020 and 2021 compared to the five previous years for a roughly 100-square block area that includes the Capitol and the arena, according to Sacramento police crime data.

The city's central hub has also served as the epicenter for protests focusing on racial justice and police misconduct. Protesters in 2018 shut down a downtown freeway entrance and blocked fans from entering the arena after Sacramento police shot and killed a young Black man. Then demonstrations in 2020 over the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis swept the city. Many downtown properties were vandalized and some were ransacked.

"We've had a lot of different realities kind of hit downtown in different waves," said Dion Dwyer, director of public space services for business partnership.

Now Sacramento is among the ranks of cities recovering from recent mass shootings. Since 2017, there have been 133 mass shootings in the U.S., according to a database compiled by The Associated Press, USA Today and Northeastern University.

Dayton, Ohio, in 2019 was shaken when a gunman killed nine people and wounded 17 just after midnight at a bar in the main entertainment district for the city of 140,000. Sandy Gudorf, president of the Downtown Dayton Partnership, said officials mounted an "intentional strategy to reclaim the district" after the shooting.

Within three weeks of the violence, there was a free performance by Dave Chappelle, who lives outside the city. The community rallied to support local businesses, but it took time for people to feel comfortable returning to nightlife. The pandemic hit just as that activity was rebounding, Gudorf said.

"In people's minds and hearts they knew that this did not define who we are. It was an incident, it was a tragic incident where we lost lives and people were injured," she said. "I think it just took time to process all of that."

Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg repeatedly said people should continue to feel comfortable going downtown.

"It's not one or the other" when it comes to enjoying the city's entertainment offerings and feeling safe," he said last week.

Rachel Muro, a manager at the locally owned Capital Books several storefronts away from the shooting, said downtown has problems like any city but that people should not avoid it. The bookstore's owners recently opened a board game cafe just around the corner.

"We believe in this part of town enough to continue to help make it thrive," Muro said.

Elsewhere on the block, the area's troubles are obvious, with many office and restaurant spaces vacant. Homelessness downtown and elsewhere in Sacramento has been a vexing problem.

Last week the City Council voted to place a measure on the November ballot requiring the city build to more shelter beds and ban encampments on public land. Valenzuela, the councilwoman, opposed the plan and said it was inappropriate to debate that proposal so soon after the tragedy.

Crystal Sanchez, president of the Sacramento Homeless Union, said homeless people live downtown because the area has street lighting and lots of activity and plenty of alcoves near businesses where they can shelter.

"People are here because there are coves for protection," Sanchez said.

At a brewery a few blocks from the shooting site, co-workers enjoying a drink reflected on whether the shooting changed their view of the city.

Braden Kolb, who was at a downtown bar for a friend's 30th birthday the night before the shooting, said he patronizes downtown about once a month and that the shooting "is not going to change my behavior."

But his friend Jason Slieter said the incident made him wonder if Sacramento is the right place to raise his family, saying he felt a sense of heaviness downtown when coming to work after the six people were killed.

"It definitely felt like something had changed," he said.

Sticker shock: March inflation likely set new 40-year high

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — With ever-rising costs for food, gasoline, housing and other necessities squeezing consumers and threatening the economy, inflation in the United States likely set yet another four-decade high in March.

The government's consumer price index being released Tuesday is expected to show that prices shot up 8.4% from 12 months earlier, according to economists surveyed by the data firm FactSet. That would mark the fastest year-over-year inflation since December 1981. And it would surpass the 7.9% 12-month increase in February, which itself set a 40-year high.

Economists have also forecast that from February to March, consumer prices jumped 1.1%. That would be the sharpest month-to-month jump since 2005.

The March numbers will be the first to capture the full surge in gasoline prices that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24. Moscow's brutal attacks have triggered far-reaching Western sanctions against the Russian economy and have disrupted global food and energy markets. According to AAA, the average price of a gallon of gasoline — \$4.11 — is up 44% from a year ago, though it has fallen back in the past couple of weeks.

The escalation of energy prices has led to higher transportation costs for the shipment of goods and components across the economy, which, in turn, has contributed to higher prices for consumers.

"The war in Ukraine has complicated the inflation outlook," noted Luke Tilley, chief economist at Wilmington Trust.

Economists point out that since the economy emerged from the depths of the pandemic, consumers have been gradually broadening their spending beyond goods to include more services. A result is that high inflation, which at first had reflected mainly a shortage of goods — from cars and furniture to electronics and sports equipment — has been gradually emerging in services, too, like travel, health care and entertainment.

If the March price figures come in as expected, they will solidify expectations that the Federal Reserve will raise rates aggressively in the coming months to try to slow borrowing and spending and tame high inflation. The financial markets, in fact, now foresee much steeper rate hikes this year than Fed officials had signaled as recently as last month.

The central bank's rate increases will make loans sharply more expensive for consumers and businesses. Mortgage rates, in particular, though not directly influenced by the Fed, have rocketed higher in recent weeks, making home buying more expensive. Many economists say they worry that the Fed has waited too long to begin raising rates and might end up acting so aggressively as to trigger a recession.

For now, the economy as a whole remains solid, with unemployment near 50-year lows and job openings near record highs. Still, rocketing inflation, with its impact on Americans' daily lives, is posing a political threat to President Joe Biden and his Democratic allies as they seek to keep control of Congress in November's midterm elections.

Economists generally express doubt that even the sharp rate hikes that are expected from the Fed will manage to reduce inflation anywhere near the central bank's 2% annual target by the end of this year. Tilley, Wilmington Trust economist, said he expects year-over-year consumer inflation to still be 4.5% by the end of 2020. Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he had forecast a much lower 3% rate.

In Tuesday's government report, even excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called core inflation for the past 12 months is expected to have hit 6.6%, according to the FactSet survey. That would be the biggest such year-over-year jump since August 1982.

Inflation, which had been largely under control for four decades, began to accelerate last spring as the U.S. and global economies rebounded with unexpected speed and strength from the brief but devastating coronavirus recession that began in the spring of 2020.

The recovery, fueled by huge infusions of government spending and super-low interest rates, caught

businesses by surprise, forcing them to scramble to meet surging customer demand. Factories, ports and freight yards struggled to keep up, leading to chronic shipping delays and price spikes.

Critics also blame, in part, the Biden administration's \$1.9 trillion March 2021 stimulus program, which included \$1,400 relief checks for most households, for helping overheat an already sizzling economy.

Many Americans have been receiving pay increases, but the pace of inflation has more than wiped out those gains for most people. In February, after accounting for inflation, average hourly wages fell 2.5% from a year earlier. It was the 11th straight monthly drop in inflation-adjusted wages.

Mariupol mayor says siege has killed more than 10K civilians

By YURAS KARMAU, ADAM SCHRECK and CARA ANNA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The mayor of the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol said Monday that more than 10,000 civilians have died in the Russian siege of his city, and that the death toll could surpass 20,000, as weeks of attacks and privation leave the bodies of Mariupol's people "carpeted through the streets."

Speaking by phone Monday with The Associated Press, Mayor Vadym Boychenko also accused Russian forces of having blocked weeks of thwarted humanitarian convoys into the city in an attempt to conceal the carnage there from the outside world.

Mariupol has been cut off by Russian attacks that began soon after Russian President Vladimir Putin launched the invasion of Ukraine in late February, and has suffered some of the most brutal assaults of the war. Boychenko gave new details of recent allegations by Ukrainian officials that Russian forces have brought mobile cremation equipment to Mariupol to dispose of the corpses of victims of the siege.

Russian forces have taken many bodies to a huge shopping center where there are storage facilities and refrigerators, Boychenko said.

"Mobile crematoriums have arrived in the form of trucks: You open it, and there is a pipe inside and these bodies are burned," he said.

Boychenko spoke from a location in Ukrainian-controlled territory but outside Mariupol. The mayor said he had several sources for his description of the allegedly methodic burning of corpses by Russian forces in the city, but did not detail the sources of his information.

The discovery of large numbers of apparently executed civilians after Russian forces retreated from cities around the capital, Kyiv, this month already has prompted widespread condemnation and charges from Ukrainians and the West that Russia is committing war crimes in Ukraine.

Elsewhere Monday, U.S. officials pointed to new signs that Russia's military is gearing up for a major offensive in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, switching its focus after Russian forces failed in their initial drive to capture Kyiv.

Moscow-backed separatists have been battling Ukrainian forces in the Donbas region since 2014, and have declared independent states. A major confrontation between the two countries' fighters in Donbas would allow Russia to try to use its numbers and greater military might to capture more territory there. Western military strategists say Russia also hopes to force Ukrainian fighters out into the open in more conventional battles in the east, rather than the successful hit-and-run attacks Ukrainian fighters have often employed so far.

Russia has appointed a seasoned general to lead its renewed push in the eastern Donbas region.

A senior U.S. defense official on Monday described a long Russian convoy now rolling toward the eastern city of Izyum with artillery, aviation and infantry support, as part of redeployment for what appears to be a looming Russian campaign in the east.

More artillery is being deployed near the city of Donetsk, while ground combat units that withdrew from around the Kyiv and Chernihiv areas appear destined for refitting and resupplying before they position in Donbas, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal U.S. military assessments.

With their offensive in many parts of the country thwarted, Russian forces have relied increasingly on bombarding cities — a strategy that has flattened many urban areas and killed thousands of people.

Ukrainian authorities accuse Russian forces of committing atrocities, including a massacre in the town

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of Bucha, outside Kyiv, airstrikes on hospitals and a missile attack that killed at least 57 people last week at a train station.

In Bucha on Monday, the work of exhuming bodies from a mass grave in a churchyard resumed.

Galyna Feoktistova waited for hours in the cold and rain in hopes of identifying her 50-year-old son, who was shot and killed more than a month ago, but eventually she went home for some warmth. "He's still there," her surviving son, Andriy, said.

In Mariupol, about 120,000 civilians are in dire need of food, water, warmth and communications, the mayor said.

Only those residents who have passed the Russian "filtration camps" are released from the city, Boychenko said.

Ukrainian officials say Russian troops are confiscating passports from Ukrainian citizens then moving them to "filtration camps" in Ukraine's separatist-controlled east before sending them to distant, economically depressed areas in Russia.

Boychenko said Monday that improvised prisons were organized for those who did not pass the "filtering," while at least 33,000 people were taken to Russia or to separatist territory in Ukraine.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy warned Ukrainians on Monday that Russia might use chemical weapons in Mariupol. "We take this as seriously as possible," Zelenskyy said in his nightly address.

Western leaders have warned since before Russian troops moved into Ukraine that Russia could resort to unconventional weapons there, particularly chemical agents.

A Russia-allied separatist official, Eduard Basurin, appeared to urge their use Monday, telling Russian state TV that Russian-backed forces should seize a giant metals plant in Mariupol from Ukrainian forces by first blocking all the exits out of the factory. "And then we'll use chemical troops to smoke them out of there," he said.

A Ukrainian regiment, without evidence, also claimed Monday that a drone had dropped a poisonous substance in Mariupol but said there were no serious injuries.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said in a statement that the U.S. could not confirm the drone report out of Mariupol. But Kirby noted the administration's persistent concerns "about Russia's potential to use a variety of riot control agents, including tear gas mixed with chemical agents, in Ukraine."

Meanwhile, the United Nations children's agency said nearly two-thirds of all Ukrainian children have fled their homes in the six weeks since Russia's invasion began. The United Nations has verified that 142 children have been killed and 229 injured, though the actual numbers are likely much higher.

Elsewhere, Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer said he met Monday with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow for talks that were "very direct, open and tough."

In a statement released by his office, Nehammer said his primary message to Putin was "that this war needs to end, because in war both sides can only lose." Nehammer said he also raised the issue of war crimes committed by the Russian military and said those responsible "will be held to account."

Austria is a member of the European Union and has backed the 27-nation bloc's sanctions against Russia, though it so far has opposed cutting off deliveries of Russian gas. The country is militarily neutral and is not a member of NATO.

In other developments, the head of the separatist rebel government in Donetsk claimed Ukrainian forces have lost control of the port area of Mariupol.

"Regarding the port of Mariupol, it is now under our control," Denis Pushilin, president of the Donetsk People's Republic, told Russian state television, according to Russian news agencies. The claim could not immediately be confirmed.

But Mariupol's mayor said fighting continues at the port. "It is difficult, but our heroic military holds on," Boychenko said.

Both sides are digging in for what could be a devastating war of attrition.

Russian forces will likely try to encircle the Donbas region from the north and the south as well as the east, said retired British Gen. Richard Barrons, co-chair of the U.K.-based strategic consulting firm Universal

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Defence & Security Solutions.

The ground in that part of Ukraine is flatter, more open and less wooded — so the Ukrainian ambush tactics used around Kiev may be less successful, Barrons said.

“As to the outcome, it’s finely balanced right now,” Barrons said. If the Russians learned from their previous failures, concentrated more force, connected their air force to ground forces better and improved their logistics, “then they might start to overwhelm the Ukrainian positions eventually, although I still think it would be a battle of enormous attrition.”

In a video address to South Korean lawmakers Monday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy specifically requested equipment that can shoot down Russian missiles.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov claimed the military used cruise missiles to destroy four S-300 launchers near the central city of Dnipro on Sunday. He said the military also hit such systems in the Mykolaiv and Kharkiv regions.

The Pentagon said it had seen no evidence to support Russia’s claims. And Lubica Janikova, spokeswoman for Slovakia’s prime minister, denied Monday that the S-300 system it sent Ukraine had been destroyed.

Questions remain about the ability of depleted and demoralized Russian forces to conquer much ground after their advance on Kyiv was repelled by determined Ukrainian defenders.

Britain’s Defense Ministry said Monday that Ukraine has already beaten back several assaults by Russian forces in the eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions — which make up the Donbas — resulting in the destruction of Russian tanks, vehicles and artillery.

Western military analysts say Russia’s assault increasingly is focusing on an arc of territory stretching from Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second-largest city, in the north, to Kherson in the south.

A residential area in Kharkiv was struck by incoming fire on Monday afternoon. Associated Press journalists saw firefighters putting out the fire and checking for victims following the attack, and saw that at least five people were killed, including a child.

Oleh Synyehubov, the regional governor of Kharkiv, said earlier Monday that Russian shelling had killed 11 people over the last 24 hours.

Democrat Finkenaue knocked off US Senate primary ballot

By DAVID PITT Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — A state court judge has ruled that Democrat Abby Finkenaue cannot appear on the June 7 Iowa primary ballot for U.S. Senate because she didn’t gather enough petition signatures, potentially knocking off the candidate considered by many to be the party’s best chance to unseat Republican U.S. Sen. Charles Grassley.

Judge Scott Beattie, a 2018 appointee of Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds, filed a ruling late Sunday that overturned a decision by a three-member panel of state elected officials. The panel concluded last week that Finkenaue’s campaign staffers had substantially complied with Iowa law that requires candidates to obtain 3,500 names, including at least 100 signatures from at least 19 counties.

Finkenaue plans to appeal the decision and the Iowa Supreme Court scheduled a hearing Wednesday with a promise to rule on the matter by the end of the week to meet deadlines for sending ballots to overseas voters.

Two Republicans challenged Finkenaue’s petition papers, saying signatures from at least two counties did not have the required date accompanying them.

In the past, the panel, which includes the secretary of state, attorney general and state auditor, has found petitions to be in substantial compliance with the law even though signatures were missing or difficult to interpret. Attorney General Tom Miller and Auditor Rob Sand, both Democrats, voted to allow Finkenaue’s petitions citing past precedent for giving deference to campaigns that used the proper forms and made efforts to comply with the law. Secretary of State Paul Pate, a Republican, voted against Finkenaue’s petition.

Kim Schmett and Leanne Pellett, former Republican county elections officials, challenged the signatures and then filed a court appeal of the Iowa Objection Panel’s decision last week.

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Beattie concluded that the panel's legal interpretation was wrong and that the law clearly says each signature should be accompanied by a date. His decision knocked signatures from Allamakee and Cedar counties off of Finkenauer's nomination petitions, which meant her campaign failed to submit at least 100 signatures from at least 19 counties as required.

Beattie said he took no joy in the decision.

"This court should not be in the position to make a difference in an election, and Ms. Finkenauer and her supporters should have a chance to advance her candidacy. However, this court's job is to sit as a referee and apply the law without passion or prejudice. It is required to rule without consideration of the politics of the day. Here the court has attempted to fulfill that role," he said,

Finkenauer accused Beattie of doing the bidding of Grassley and his allies in Washington.

"This misguided, midnight ruling is an outrageous and partisan gift to the Washington Republicans who orchestrated this meritless legal action," she said. "We are exploring all of our options to fight back hard against this meritless partisan attack, and to ensure that the voices of Iowans will be heard at the ballot box."

Finkenauer said her petitions had more than 5,000 signatures and she's confident she has met the requirements to be on the ballot.

Beattie promised last week he would file a decision by midnight Sunday to give either side time to appeal to the Iowa Supreme Court. He filed the decision at 10:49 p.m. Sunday. Pate has said he must know whether Finkenauer qualifies for the ballot by Friday to give him time to have ballots printed and sent to overseas voters who must get their ballots by April 23 to comply with the law.

Finkenauer, who served one term in the U.S. House from 2019-2021, seeks to be on the ballot with Democrats Mike Franken, a retired Navy admiral, and Glenn Hurst, a doctor and Minden City Council member. The primary winner will face Grassley, who is seeking an eighth term in the Senate.

Federal fundraising data and statewide polling indicate that Grassley, who turns 89 in September, is well positioned to retain the seat he has held since 1981 for another six years.

Grassley has raised more than \$4.7 million, Finkenauer about \$1.9 million and Franken \$1.8 million. Hurst raised just over \$66,000. Republican state Sen. Jim Carlin, who will be on the Republican primary ballot opposite Grassley, raised \$282,151.

The Des Moines Register/Medicom Poll published in November gave Grassley a lead of 18 percentage points over Finkenauer.

Alan R. Ostergren, the attorney for Schmett and Pellett, said the judge's decision is a victory for the rule of law.

"Iowans expect candidates to follow state law and to follow the same rules as the hundreds of other candidates who successfully qualified to be on the ballot," he said in a statement. "Anyone who has ever been involved in a political campaign knows that you can easily avoid problems by turning in more than the bare minimum number of signatures. Abby Finkenauer didn't do this for some reason and got caught short."

Philadelphia to restore indoor mask mandate as cases rise

By MICHAEL RUBINKAM Associated Press

Philadelphia became the first major U.S. city to reinstate its indoor mask mandate on Monday after reporting a sharp increase in coronavirus infections, with the city's top health official saying she wanted to forestall a potential new wave driven by an omicron subvariant.

Confirmed COVID-19 cases have risen more than 50% in 10 days, the threshold at which the city's guidelines call for people to wear masks indoors, said Dr. Cheryl Bettigole, the health commissioner. Health officials believe the recent spike is being driven by the highly transmissible BA.2 subvariant of omicron, which has spread rapidly throughout Europe and Asia, and has become dominant in the U.S. in recent weeks.

"If we fail to act now, knowing that every previous wave of infections has been followed by a wave of hospitalizations, and then a wave of deaths, it will be too late for many of our residents," said Bettigole,

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noting about 750 Philadelphia residents died in the wintertime omicron outbreak. "This is our chance to get ahead of the pandemic, to put our masks on until we have more information about the severity of this new variant."

Health inspectors will begin enforcing the mask mandate at city businesses on April 18.

Most states and cities dropped their masking requirements in February and early March following new guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that put less focus on case counts and more on hospital capacity. The CDC said at that time that with the virus in retreat, most Americans could safely take off their masks.

Philadelphia ended its indoor mask mandate March 2, and Bettigole acknowledged "it was wonderful to feel that sense of normalcy again."

Confirmed cases have since risen to more than 140 per day — still a fraction of what Philadelphia saw at the height of the omicron surge — while only 46 patients are in the hospital with COVID-19. The CDC says community spread in Philadelphia remains low, a level at which the agency says that masking can be optional.

The restaurant industry pushed back against the city's reimposed mask mandate, saying workers will bear the brunt of customer anger over the new rules.

"This announcement is a major blow to thousands of small businesses and other operators in the city who were hoping this spring would be the start of recovery," said Ben Fileccia, senior director of operations at the Pennsylvania Restaurant & Lodging Association.

PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia said Friday that while it expects some increased transmission in the northern U.S. over the next several weeks, hospital admissions have remained low and "our team advises against required masking given that hospital capacity is good."

Bettigole said requiring people to mask up will help restaurants and other businesses stay open, while a huge new wave of COVID-19 would keep customers at home. She said hospital capacity was just one factor that went into her decision to reinstate the mandate.

"I sincerely wish we didn't have to do this again," Bettigole said. "But I am very worried about our vulnerable neighbors and loved ones."

In New York City, Mayor Eric Adams has paused his push to unwind many of the city's virus rules as cases have risen, opting for now to keep a mask mandate for 2 to 4-year-olds in city schools and preschools. But Adams, a Democrat who has said New Yorkers should not let the pandemic run their lives, has already lifted most other mask mandates and rules requiring proof of vaccination to dine in restaurants, work out at gyms or attend shows.

Adams was asked at a virtual news conference Monday afternoon if he was considering reimposing the New York City mask mandate in light of Philadelphia's decision. The mayor said he would listen to his team of medical doctors for their advice on whether to bring back any restrictions. Adams himself tested positive for COVID-19 on Sunday.

New York City is now averaging around 1,800 new cases per day, about three times higher than in early March when New York began easing rules. That does not include the many home tests that go unreported to health officials.

The latest outbreak has struck many high-profile officials in Washington, including Cabinet members and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and the governors of New Jersey and Connecticut. Some universities have reinstated mask mandates.

D.C. health officials say they have no immediate plans to change virus protocols, but they reserve the right to change course down the road.

EXPLAINER: Where do US opioid trials, settlements stand?

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

The effort to hold drug companies, pharmacies and distributors accountable for their role in the opioid crisis has led to a whirlwind of legal activity around the U.S. that can be difficult keep tabs on.

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Three trials are underway now, in Florida, West Virginia and Washington state. New legal settlements are being reached practically every week to provide governments money to fight the crisis and in some cases funds for medicines to reverse overdoses or to help with treatment.

In all, more than 3,000 lawsuits have been filed by state and local governments, Native American tribes, unions, hospitals and other entities in state and federal courts over the toll of opioids. Most allege the industry created a public nuisance in a crisis that has been linked to the deaths of 500,000 Americans over the past two decades.

Collectively, businesses already have faced settlements, judgements and civil and criminal penalties totaling more than \$47 billion. The main entities targeted are the companies that manufactured and sold the pills; the businesses that distributed them; and the pharmacies that dispensed them.

Here's an overview of the litigation and settlements involving the various companies:

PURDUE PHARMA

Purdue is the maker of OxyContin, an extended-release version of oxycodone that packed higher doses into pills. The drug, released in 1996, became a heavily marketed blockbuster drug — and is associated closely with the epidemic's first wave.

Like other opioids, it was promoted not just for post-surgery and cancer pain but for chronic pain — an area where doctors previously were reluctant to prescribe such powerful drugs.

Faced with thousands of lawsuits, the company went into bankruptcy protection in 2019 to help reach a settlement.

A deal is now in place, but it's not final.

It calls for members of the Sackler family who own the company to give up their stakes, making way for it to become a new entity — to be known as Kinoa Pharma — with profits funding the fight against the opioid crisis. Additionally, family members are to pay \$5.5 billion to \$6 billion over time, with a portion of the money going to victims.

Earlier this year, three members of the family attended an online hearing in which parents described losing children to addictions that started with OxyContin, and people recovering from addictions described their journeys.

As part of the exchange, Sackler family members would get protection from lawsuits over opioids.

For the settlement to be finalized, a higher court must overturn a judge's ruling that threw out an earlier version of the deal. A hearing on that is scheduled for April 29 before the U.S. 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals.

In the meantime, activists and some U.S. senators are asking the Justice Department to consider charges against family members.

OTHER DRUGMAKERS

In a major court victory for drugmakers last year, a California judge ruled against some local governments in their case against pharmaceutical companies Johnson & Johnson, Endo International and Teva Pharmaceutical Industries.

Some of those drugmakers — Johnson & Johnson, Allergan and Teva — are now on trial in West Virginia. But companies have largely been settling suits.

Mallinckrodt, which was a leading producer of generic oxycodone, also used bankruptcy court to reach a settlement, agreeing to a \$1.6 billion nationwide deal in 2020.

Johnson & Johnson has agreed to a \$5 billion nationwide settlement. It was announced alongside a separate settlement involving the three biggest drug wholesalers. The company's Janssen subsidiary stopped selling its fentanyl patches and pain pills in the U.S. in 2020. J&J was also the first drugmaker to be held liable for the opioid crisis in a trial, though the Oklahoma Supreme Court later overturned the ruling.

Endo made the opioid Opana, which was eventually removed from the market. The company has been reaching individual settlements with states. Deals since last year with Florida, New York, Texas, West Virginia and some district attorneys in Tennessee have totaled well over \$200 million.

Late last year, a New York jury found Teva partly responsible for the state's opioid crisis through its marketing of the fentanyl drugs Actiq and Fentora. Most of the other companies the state and two coun-

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ties sued settled before or during a trial last year. A separate trial is to be held to determine damages.

Since the New York trial, Teva has reached settlements with Texas, Florida and Rhode Island totaling more than \$250 million. It will also provide drugs to reverse overdoses and treat addictions.

Allergan, now a subsidiary of AbbVie, has been settling suits involving the extended-release morphine pill Kadian. It reached one major settlement with New York last year. Since then, it has been part of the multi-company settlements in Florida and Rhode Island.

Executives from drugmaker Insys were convicted in 2019 of bribing doctors across the U.S. to prescribe their sublingual fentanyl spray Subsys. Company founder John Kapoor was sentenced to 5 1/2 years in federal prison.

The company also paid \$225 million to resolve federal investigations into allegations that it paid kickbacks and used other illegal marketing tactics.

DISTRIBUTION COMPANIES

The three big national companies — AmerisourceBergen, Cardinal Health and McKesson — finalized their settlement, worth a total of \$21 billion over 18 years, in February.

The deal, combined with Johnson & Johnson's, is expected to be the single biggest settlement between companies in the drug industry and governments.

The total amounts include separate settlements covering all federally recognized Native American tribes.

With settlement money starting to flow to state and local governments, officials are figuring out how to prioritize it. The funds are arriving at a precarious time: The number of U.S. overdose deaths from all drugs topped 100,000 in a 12-month period for the first time last year. The majority of those deaths are from opioids — and particularly illicit synthetic versions including fentanyl.

Unlike the tobacco settlements of the 1990s, there are safeguards intended to steer most of the opioid settlement funds to addressing the crisis. Public health experts have ideas for how to do that, but the decisions are up to government officials.

The distribution companies also went to trial last year in West Virginia. A judge has not yet ruled.

Closing arguments in Washington state's trial against the distributors are expected this week.

PHARMACIES

Pharmacy chains have been sued less often than companies that make or distribute opioids. In one groundbreaking case, a federal jury in Ohio last year found CVS, Walgreens and Walmart recklessly distributed massive amounts of pain pills in Lake and Trumbull counties.

Late last month, CVS settled in Florida. That left Walgreens to go to trial Monday.

CONSULTING COMPANY

Global consulting firm McKinsey & Company also reached deals last year with the states, Washington, D.C., and U.S. territories for advising businesses on how to sell more prescription opioids amid the overdose crisis. Those settlements totaled more than \$600 million.

A group of U.S. senators is pushing for a federal investigation, saying there were conflicts when the company consulted on opioid-related issues both for companies and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Families, doctors contest Alabama transgender treatment ban

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Families with transgender teens sued the state of Alabama in federal court on Monday to overturn a law that makes it a crime for doctors to treat trans youth under 19 with puberty blockers or hormones to help affirm their gender identity.

The two lawsuits — one on behalf of two families and another on behalf two families and the physicians who treat their children— pose legal challenges to legislation signed into law Friday by Republican Gov. Kay Ivey.

"Transgender youth are a part of Alabama, and they deserve the same privacy, access to treatment, and data-driven health care from trained medical professionals as any other Alabamian," Tish Gotell Faulks, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Alabama, said in a statement. Faulks added that

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lawmakers are using children, as, "political pawns for their reelection campaigns." Ivey and legislators face primaries next month.

Unless blocked by the court, the Alabama law will take effect May 8, making it a felony for a doctor to prescribe puberty blockers or hormones to aid in the gender transition of anyone under age 19. Violations will be punishable by up to 10 years in prison. It also prohibits gender transition surgeries, although doctors told lawmakers those are not performed on minors in Alabama.

"The level of legislative overreach into the practice of medicine is unprecedented. And never before has legislative overreach come into pediatric examination rooms to shut down the parent voice in medical decision making between a parent, their pediatrician and their child," Dr. Morissa Ladinsky, a medical provider and a plaintiff in one of the lawsuits, told The Associated Press in an interview.

Ivey signed the legislation Friday, a day after it was approved by the Alabama Legislature. At a campaign stop Monday, the governor invoked religion when asked about her decision to sign the legislation.

"If the good Lord made you a boy at birth, then you are a boy. If the good Lord made you a girl at birth, then you are a girl," she said. "We should especially focus our efforts on helping these young people become healthy adults just like God wanted them to be rather than self-induced medical intervenors."

Asked if the law would survive a court challenge, she replied, "We'll wait and see."

The two lawsuits were filed by advocacy groups on behalf of families with transgender children, as well as by two medical providers. The children were not identified in the lawsuits because of their age,

"I know that I am a girl and I always have been," one of the 15-year-old plaintiffs said in a statement provided by the American Civil Liberties Union of Alabama. "Even before I learned the word 'transgender' or met other trans people, I knew myself."

In one of the lawsuits, parents described their fears that their transgender daughter, called "Mary Roe" in the suit, would harm herself or try to commit suicide if she loses access to the puberty blockers she began taking last year. "For Mary to be forced to go through male puberty would be devastating; it would predictably result in her experiencing isolation, depression, anxiety, and distress," the lawsuit states.

Similar measures have been pushed in other states, but the Alabama legislation is the first to lay out criminal penalties for doctors.

In Texas, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott has ordered the state's child welfare agency to investigate abuse reports of gender-confirming care for kids. And a law in Arkansas bans gender-affirming medications. That law has been blocked by a court, however.

Ivey also signed a separate measure that requires students to use bathrooms that align with their original birth certificate and prohibits instruction of gender and sexual identity in kindergarten through fifth grades.

UN: Nearly two-thirds of Ukraine's children have fled homes

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Nearly two-thirds of all Ukrainian children have fled their homes in the six weeks since Russia's invasion, and the United Nations has verified the deaths of 142 youngsters, though the number is almost certainly much higher, the U.N. children's agency said Monday.

Manuel Fontaine, UNICEF's emergency programs director who just returned from Ukraine, said having 4.8 million of Ukraine's 7.5 million children displaced in such a short time is "quite incredible." He said it is something he hadn't before seen happen so quickly in 31 years of humanitarian work.

"They have been forced to leave everything behind — their homes, their schools and, often, their family members," he told the U.N. Security Council. "I have heard stories of the desperate steps parents are taking to get their children to safety, and children saddened that they are unable to get back to school."

Ukraine's U.N. ambassador, Sergiy Kyslytsya, claimed Russia has taken more than 121,000 children out of Ukraine and reportedly drafted a bill to simplify and accelerate adoption procedures for orphans and even those who have parents and other relatives. He said most of the children were removed from the besieged southern port city of Mariupol and taken to eastern Donetsk and then to the Russian city of Taganrog.

Fontaine said UNICEF has heard the same reports, but added that "we don't have yet the access that

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we need to have to be able to look and verify and see if we can assist.”

He said that of Ukraine’s displaced children, 2.8 million are in Ukraine and 2 million more are in other countries. At the same time, he said, nearly half the estimated 3.2 million children still in their homes in Ukraine “may be at risk of not having enough food,” with those in besieged cities like Mariupol facing the most dire situation.

Fontaine said school closings are affecting the education of 5.7 million younger children and 1.5 million students in higher education.

“Hundreds of schools and educational facilities have been attacked or used for military purposes,” he said. “Others are serving as shelters for civilians.”

The council also heard from Sima Bahous, the executive director of the UN Women agency, who recently returned from Moldova, which is hosting an estimated 95,000 Ukrainian refugees.

Bahous said her agency is increasingly hearing allegations of rape and sexual violence. She said Moldova’s government and border police are also very concerned at the risk of human trafficking, especially of young women and unaccompanied teenagers.

“The combination of mass displacement with the large presence of conscripts and mercenaries, and the brutality displayed against Ukrainian civilians, has raised all red flags,” she said.

Ukraine’s ambassador said his country’s prosecutor’s office is now investigating a case in the Kyiv region in which a Russia soldier is alleged to have killed a local resident and then repeatedly raped his wife in their home. He said the alleged perpetrator has been identified.

Kyslytsya said the Prosecutor General’s Office, in cooperation with investigation agencies and health facilities, is also installing “a special mechanism” to document cases of sexual violence by Russian soldiers.

The Security Council meeting on the impact of the war on women and children was convened by the U.S. and Albania during Britain’s presidency of the body.

The three countries, Ukraine and other council members attacked Russia for creating the dire situation for women and children, which Russian deputy ambassador Dmitry Polyansky vehemently denied.

U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said that when men like Russian President Vladimir Putin “start wars, women and children get displaced,” hurt, raped and abused, and they die.

“Since the start of Russia’s unprovoked war against Ukraine, Russia has bombed orphanages and maternity hospitals,” she said. “We’ve seen mass graves with dead children stacked on top of each other.”

Albanian Ambassador Ferit Hoxha accused Russia of committing “unspeakable crimes” every day, including burning civilians, throwing bodies in mass graves, shooting into playgrounds, attacking schools on purpose, and leaving all Ukrainians suffering, especially women and children.

“In their normal life, children draw parents, houses and trees. Russia’s war has made Ukraine kids draw bombs, tanks and weapons,” Hoxha said.

Both the U.S. and Albanian ambassadors, and many others, pointed to the discovery of bodies, some with hands tied behind their backs, in the town of Bucha on the outskirts of Kyiv following the withdrawal of Russian troops, and the missile that killed at least 52 mainly women and children at the train station in eastern Kramatorsk. Hoxha noted that the missile had “a vicious signature, `for our children.””

Russia’s Polyansky blamed “Ukrainian Nazis” for civilian killings in Bucha and the bombing at the Kramatorsk station, which he called “a classic false flag operation.”

He accused Ukraine and its public relations experts, along with the West, of promoting “fakes and propaganda” as part of “the information war unleashed against Russia.”

“That war is as intense as the military operations on the ground,” he said.

Lord Tariq Ahmad, Britain’s minister of state for the U.N. who presided over the meeting, countered that Russia again was trying to deflect from the reality on the ground “by what can only be described as quite extraordinary statements, and even lies.”

“Yet, what is true, what is fact, is that Russian attacks on civilians and residential areas have been truly barbaric,” he said.

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EXPLAINER: 2 men in Gov. Whitmer plot could be tried again

By ED WHITE and MICHAEL TARM Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — A jury's inability to reach a unanimous verdict for two men charged in a conspiracy to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer means the federal government can take them to trial again.

The jury last week acquitted Daniel Harris and Brandon Caserta, whom prosecutors described as "soldiers" in the foiled plot, but deadlocked on the alleged leaders, Adam Fox and Barry Croft Jr. It was an extraordinary setback for the government, which claimed the men wanted to trigger a civil war before the 2020 election.

HUNG JURY

A hung jury is unable to unanimously agree on someone's guilt or innocence. It could be just one person on the 12-member panel who disagrees with the others.

Prosecutors can put someone on trial again or drop the case. U.S. Attorney Andrew Birge told reporters Friday that Fox and Croft are "awaiting trial and we'll get back to work on that." They remain in jail.

Mark Chutkow, who until recently led the criminal division of the U.S. attorney's office in Detroit, said he would be surprised if prosecutors fold, citing the significance of the allegations.

"The government has two cooperating defendants who pled guilty, who said they were part of the crime. That's pretty compelling evidence," Chutkow said, referring to Ty Garbin and Kaleb Franks, who testified for prosecutors.

SO WHAT HAPPENED?

Only the jury knows. U.S. District Judge Robert Jonker barred lawyers from contacting jurors for any post-trial intelligence, but jurors can reach out to them on their own.

Chutkow said it could help prosecutors and defense attorneys as they prepare for a second trial.

"As a litigant, sometimes you get in the fog of war," he said. "You've spent so much time with your case, you're not objective as to what it looked like."

Fox, who was living in the Grand Rapids area, and Croft, from Bear, Delaware, didn't testify. Their defense came through the cross-examination of the government's witnesses.

Fox and Croft might have been angry with Whitmer over COVID-19 restrictions, but there was no real plan to kidnap the Democratic governor, their lawyers insisted. They say undercover FBI agents and informants inside the group fueled wild talk.

Detroit-area defense lawyer Michael Rataj said the challenge for prosecutors in Grand Rapids will be picking a jury from western and northern Michigan.

"It's Trump country and they don't like Whitmer. Prosecutors have an uphill battle," Rataj said.

WHAT HAPPENED AFTER OTHER BIG CASES WITH HUNG JURIES?

Prosecutors sharpened their focus after a federal jury couldn't agree on 23 of 24 charges at former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich's 2010 corruption trial. Jurors said just one person was a holdout.

At Blagojevich's second trial, prosecutors skipped past his expensive taste for tailored suits and furs for his wife. He was convicted of multiple crimes, including an effort to sell an appointment to the U.S. Senate.

But prosecutors decided against retrying New Jersey Sen. Bob Menendez. Many jurors at his 2017 trial favored acquittal. A judge subsequently threw out key bribery charges.

"Sometimes, there is bluster and chest thumping" by prosecutors about a retrial after a deadlocked jury, said Alan Tuerkheimer, a Chicago-based jury consultant. "But when the dust settles and they think more clearly, they can change their minds."

Learning how jurors voted can be crucial. A jury that was one or two votes away from acquittal is a sign of a weak case, Tuerkheimer said, and can dissuade prosecutors from trying again.

WHO'S IN THE WINGS?

Eight other men face state charges in either Jackson or Antrim counties. They're accused of assisting the others in the Whitmer plot, among other crimes, and have pleaded not guilty.

Whitmer's vacation home is in Antrim. Fox and Croft, accompanied by undercover operatives, took a night ride to check the location and look at a bridge that could be blown up during a kidnapping, according to

evidence in the federal case.

The state cases have moved slowly since fall 2020; five men charged in Antrim still haven't had a key hearing at which a judge decides whether there's enough evidence to go to trial.

Defense attorney Kareem Johnson, who is representing Pete Musico, a founding member of the Wolverine Watchmen militia, compared the two acquittals in federal court to a thrilling basketball game.

"It's like when a teammate hits a 3-pointer. It motivates you to get back on defense and get a stop," Johnson said Monday.

Biden aims at 'ghost gun' violence with new federal rule

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Monday took fresh aim at ghost guns, the privately made firearms without serial numbers that are increasingly cropping up in violent crimes, as he struggles to break past gun-control opposition to address firearm deaths.

Speaking at the White House, Biden highlighted the Justice Department's work to finalize new regulations to crack down on ghost guns, and announced the nomination of Steve Dettelbach, who served as a U.S. attorney in Ohio from 2009 to 2016, to run the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

"Law enforcement is sounding the alarm," Biden said of ghost guns, briefly holding one up for cameras to see in the Rose Garden. "Our communities are paying the price."

He promised the new regulations would save lives.

Still, the announcement on guns highlights the limits of Biden's influence to push a sweeping congressional overhaul of the nation's firearm laws in response to both a recent surge in violent crime and continued mass shootings. Congress has deadlocked on legislative proposals to reform gun laws for a decade, and executive actions have faced stiff headwinds in federal courts — even as the Democratic base has grown more vocal in calling on Biden to take more consequential action.

Dettelbach's confirmation, too, is likely to be an uphill battle. Biden had to withdraw the nomination of his first ATF nominee, gun-control advocate David Chipman, after it stalled for months because of opposition from Republicans and some Democrats in the Senate.

Both Republican and Democratic administrations have failed to get nominees for the ATF position through the politically fraught process since the director's position was made confirmable in 2006. Since then, only one nominee, former U.S. Attorney B. Todd Jones, has been confirmed. Jones made it through the Senate in 2013 but only after a six-month struggle. Jones was acting director when President Barack Obama nominated him in January 2013.

The Biden administration's plan on guns was first reported by Politico.

For nearly a year, the ghost gun rule has been making its way through the federal regulation process. Gun safety groups and Democrats in Congress have been pushing for the Justice Department to finish the rule for months. It will probably be met with heavy resistance from gun groups and draw litigation in the coming weeks.

Gun Owners of America vowed that it would immediately fight the rule.

"Just as we opposed the Trump Administration's arbitrary ban on bump stocks, GOA will also sue Biden's ATF to halt the implementation of this rule," Aidan Johnston, the group's director of federal affairs said in a statement. The group believes the rule violates the U.S. Constitution and several federal laws.

But gun safety advocacy groups, like Everytown for Gun Safety, which pushed the federal government for years to take action on ghost guns, applauded Biden's moves and insisted that both Dettelbach's appointment and the finalized rule will help combat gun violence.

"Ghost guns look like a gun, they shoot like a gun, and they kill like a gun, but up until now they haven't been regulated like a gun," said John Feinblatt, Everytown's president.

Christian Heyne, the vice president of policy at Brady, another gun control group, said Dettelbach was "an unimpeachable public servant who has spent a career using the levers of government to hold negligent or nefarious actors accountable."

Justice Department statistics show that nearly 24,000 ghost guns were recovered by law enforcement

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at crime scenes and reported to the government from 2016 to 2020. It is hard to say how many are circulating on the streets, in part because in many cases police departments don't contact the government about the guns because they can't be traced.

The new rule changes the current definition of a firearm under federal law to include unfinished parts, like the frame of a handgun or the receiver of a long gun. It says those parts must be licensed and include serial numbers. Manufacturers must also run background checks before a sale — as they do with other commercially made firearms. The requirement applies regardless of how the firearm was made, meaning it includes ghost guns made from individual parts, kits, or by 3D-printers.

Federally licensed firearms dealers must retain key records until they shut down their business or licensed activity and then transfer the records to ATF as they are currently required to do at the end of licensed activity. Previously, these dealers were permitted to destroy most records after 20 years, making it harder for law enforcement to trace firearms found at crime scenes.

"A year ago this week standing here with many of you, I instructed the attorney general to write a regulation that would rein in the proliferation of ghost guns because I was having trouble getting anything passed in the Congress," Biden said.

The rule goes into effect 120 days from the date of publication in the Federal Register.

For years, federal officials have been sounding the alarm about an increasing black market for homemade, military-style semi-automatic rifles and handguns. As well as turning up more frequently at crime scenes, ghost guns have been increasingly encountered when federal agents buy guns in undercover operations from gang members and other criminals.

Some states, like California, have enacted laws in recent years to require serial numbers to be stamped on ghost guns.

Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro, who was attending Monday's event at the White House, applauded the move and pointed to a serious uptick in ghost guns being found by police. Police in Philadelphia have seen nearly a 500% increase in the number of ghost guns recovered in the past two years, Shapiro said. And just last week, a police officer there was shot by a ghost gun-wielding 18-year-old, who police said had also shot three others.

"This loophole has caused our nation countless lives," Shapiro said in an interview. "Today is a critically important step to close that loophole."

He said the move is likely to help drive down violence and aid both police and prosecutors in bringing their cases. The rule is also likely to help bring down the number of people who shouldn't be purchasing firearms before a gun lands in their hand, he said.

"There are two challenges: One, criminals can easily buy them without going through a background check. And two, they are unserialized and untraceable."

The critical component in building an untraceable gun is what is known as the lower receiver, a part typically made of metal or polymer. An unfinished receiver — sometimes referred to as an "80-percent receiver" — can be legally bought online with no serial numbers or other markings on it, no license required.

Police across the country have been reporting spikes in ghost guns being recovered by officers. The New York Police Department, for example, said officers found 131 firearms without serial numbers since January.

A gunman who killed his wife and four others in Northern California in 2017 had been prohibited from owning firearms, but he built his own to skirt the court order before his rampage. And in 2019, a teenager used a homemade handgun to fatally shoot two classmates and wound three others at a school in suburban Los Angeles.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk won't join Twitter's board after all

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Billionaire Elon Musk, one of Twitter's biggest shareholders, is reversing course and will no longer join the company's board of directors, less than a week after being awarded a seat.

Twitter CEO Parag Agrawal announced the news, which followed a weekend of Musk tweets suggesting changes to Twitter, including making the site ad-free. Nearly 90% of Twitter's 2021 revenue came from ads.

"Elon's appointment to the board was to become officially effective on 4/9, but Elon shared that same

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morning that he would not be joining the board," Agrawal wrote in a reposted note originally sent to Twitter employees. "I believe this is for the best."

Agrawal didn't offer an explanation for Musk's apparent decision. He said the board understood the risks of having Musk, who is now the company's largest individual shareholder, as a member. But at the time it "believed having Elon as a fiduciary of the company, where he, like all board members, has to act in the best interests of the company and all our shareholders, was the best path forward," he wrote.

It was just a week earlier that regulatory filings revealed Musk had swiftly amassed a slightly bigger than 9% stake in the social media platform. The mercurial billionaire had been buying shares in almost daily batches starting Jan. 31. Only Vanguard Group's suite of mutual funds and ETFs controls more Twitter shares.

Twitter quickly gave Musk a seat on the board on the condition that he not own more than 14.9% of the company's outstanding stock, according to a regulatory filing.

Now that Musk has backed out of the deal, he's free to build a bigger stake in Twitter, perhaps to try to take over the company or to push for a new slate of directors to change its direction.

"If you want to take over a company, you're usually in a better position to not be on its board," said Harry Kraemer, clinical professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

That's because a board member's responsibility is to get the best value for all the company's shareholders. "Going on a board has a very specific responsibility to make sure you're not doing something in your own personal interest," said Kraemer, also a former chairman and CEO of Baxter International.

In a regulatory filing Monday, Musk said he had "no preset plans or intentions" about how to use his influence on Twitter but that he may discuss with its board and management his thoughts on potential business combinations, strategy and other matters. He added that he may express his views "through social media or other channels."

If Musk had taken a board seat, it may have discouraged him from rocking the boat too much, said Chester Spatt, a finance professor at Carnegie Mellon University and former chief economist at the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

"There's an old cliché about keeping somebody inside the tent," Spatt said. "There were advantages to having him constrained a bit."

While Musk has been one of Twitter's loudest critics, the sudden withdrawal from the board, which became official Saturday, could signal that relations between Musk and Twitter will become more acrimonious.

"At some point he could throw the directors out, he could replace the board," Spatt said.

In a letter to employees announcing Musk's departure, Agrawal wrote that, "There will be distractions ahead, but our goals and priorities remain unchanged."

Shares of Twitter Inc., which jumped nearly 30% after Musk's stake became public last week, were 2.8% higher on Monday after swinging between gains and losses through the morning.

Musk's 81 million Twitter followers make him one of the most popular figures on the platform, rivaling pop stars like Ariana Grande and Lady Gaga. But his prolific tweeting has sometimes gotten him into trouble with the SEC and others.

Musk and Tesla in 2018 agreed to pay \$40 million in civil fines and for Musk to have his tweets approved by a corporate lawyer after he tweeted about having the money to take Tesla private at \$420 per share. That didn't happen but the tweet caused Tesla's stock price to jump. Musk's latest trouble with the SEC could be his delay in notifying regulators of his growing stake in Twitter.

Musk, before reversing course on the board seat, sent out a number of tweets over the weekend referencing potential changes at Twitter.

Many of them -- such as his proposal for an ad-free Twitter or turning the social media company's San Francisco headquarters into a homeless shelter -- have since been deleted.

Musk then posted a few cryptic tweets late Sunday, including one showing a meme saying, "In all fairness, your honor, my client was in goblin mode," followed by one saying "Explains everything." Another, later tweet was of an emoji with a hand over its mouth.

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Musk has described himself as a “free speech absolutist” and has said he doesn’t think Twitter is living up to free speech principles — an opinion shared by followers of Donald Trump and a number of other right-wing political figures who’ve had their accounts suspended for violating Twitter content rules.

Twitter’s CEO and many of its board members had publicly praised Musk last week, suggesting they might take his ideas seriously. But the company had made clear that as a board member he could not make day-to-day decisions or change policies, such as overturning the Trump ban.

Sharif sworn in as Pakistan’s new PM after week of drama

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Pakistan’s parliament on Monday elected opposition lawmaker Shahbaz Sharif as the new prime minister, following a week of political turmoil that led to the weekend ouster of Premier Imran Khan.

Sharif took the oath of office inside the stately, white marble palace known as the Presidency in a brief ceremony.

But his elevation won’t guarantee a peaceful path forward or solve the country’s many economic problems, including high inflation and a soaring energy crisis.

Sharif, the brother of disgraced former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, won with 174 votes after more than 100 lawmakers from Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, or Pakistan Justice Party, resigned and walked out of the National Assembly in protest.

Those 174 votes — two more than the required simple majority — are enough to pass laws in the 342-seat assembly. If Khan’s followers take to the streets, as he has vowed, it could create more pressure on lawmakers and deepen the crisis.

Khan, a former cricket star whose conservative Islamist ideology and dogged independence characterized his three years and eight months in office, was ousted early Sunday. He lost a no-confidence vote after being deserted by his party allies and a key coalition partner.

In a show of strength and a precursor to the political uncertainty ahead, Khan rallied hundreds of thousands of supporters in protests Sunday night, describing the new leadership as an “imposed government” that colluded with the U.S. to oust him. His backers marched in cities across Pakistan, waving large party flags and shouted slogans promising to return him to power. The crowds were dominated by youths who make up the backbone of Khan’s supporters.

The political drama began April 3 when Khan sidestepped an initial no-confidence vote demanded by the opposition by dissolving parliament and calling early elections. The opposition, which accuses Khan of economic mismanagement, appealed to the Supreme Court. After four days of deliberations, the court said Khan’s move was illegal and the no-confidence vote went ahead, leading to his ouster.

Khan has demanded early elections — the balloting is not due before August 2023. He has tapped into anti-American sentiment in Pakistan, accusing Washington of conspiring with his opponents to topple him. That conspiracy theory resonates with his youthful base, which often sees the U.S. war on terrorism after 9/11 as unfairly targeting Pakistan.

Khan claims Washington opposes him because of his independent foreign policy favoring China and Russia. He was criticized for a visit he made on Feb. 24 to Moscow, where he met with President Vladimir Putin as Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine.

The U.S. State Department has denied any involvement in Pakistan’s internal politics.

China, which is Pakistan’s key ally and investor, said Monday it would support any government.

“As Pakistan’s close neighbor and iron-clad friend, we sincerely hope that all factions in Pakistan will remain united and work together for national stability and development,” Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said at a briefing. “I would like to emphasize that no matter how the political situation changes in Pakistan, China will unswervingly adhere to its friendly policy toward Pakistan.”

China is heavily invested in Pakistan in its multibillion-dollar global initiative to link south and central Asia to Beijing.

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Pakistan's longtime rival India also sent congratulations to Sharif, with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi saying his country "desires peace and stability." The two countries have fought three wars, coming dangerously close to a fourth over the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir, which is divided between the two and claimed by both.

The opposition coalition consists of parties that cross the political divide, from the left to the radically religious. The two largest parties are the Pakistan Muslim League, headed by Sharif, and the Pakistan People's Party, co-chaired by the son and husband of Benazir Bhutto, the former prime minister who was killed in 2007.

A few wealthy and powerful families have dominated Pakistan's politics for decades, with power most often alternating between the Sharif and the Bhutto camps. Both political houses have been accused of and at times convicted of widespread corruption. They have dismissed the allegations as being politically motivated.

Nawaz Sharif was unseated by the Supreme Court in 2015 after being convicted of financial irregularities revealed in the so-called Panama Papers — a collection of leaked secret financial documents showing how some of the world's richest hide their money and involving a global law firm based in Panama. He was disqualified from holding office by the Supreme Court.

Asif Ali Zardari, Bhutto's husband who served as president of Pakistan after the 2008 election, has spent more than seven years in prison, convicted on corruption charges.

Khan came to power in 2018, promising to break the pattern of family rule in Pakistan, but his opponents said he was elected with help from the powerful military, which has ruled the country for half of its 75-year history.

Nawaz Sharif was also ousted in 1999, in a military coup, and Benazir Bhutto's government was ousted several times after the military sided with her opposition. In Pakistani politics, where loyalties are often fluid, Bhutto's fiercest opposition often came from Sharif's party.

Shahbaz Sharif has served three times as chief minister of Pakistan's largest, most influential Punjab province, home to 60% of the country's 220 million people. His son, Hamza, was elected last week as the new chief minister by the Punjab provincial parliament, ousting Khan's nominee. Khan's party is challenging that election, and the younger Sharif has yet to be sworn in.

EXPLAINER: What are ghost guns? Why is Biden taking action?

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is unveiling a completed rule aimed at reining in the proliferation of ghost guns, firearms without serial numbers that have been turning up at crime scenes across the nation in increasing numbers.

The White House and the Justice Department argue that regulating the firearms parts and requiring dealers to stamp serial numbers on ghost guns will help drive down violent crime and aid investigators in solving crimes. Gun groups, however, argue that the government is overreaching and that its rule violates federal law.

Here's a look at ghost guns and the debate brewing in the U.S.

WHAT ARE GHOST GUNS?

They are privately-made firearms without serial numbers.

Generally, firearms manufactured by licensed companies are required to have serial numbers — usually displayed on the frame of the gun — that allow officials to trace the gun back to the manufacturer, the firearms dealer and original purchaser.

Ghost guns, however, are made of parts and are then assembled together. The critical component in building an untraceable gun is what is known as the lower receiver. Some are sold in do-it-yourself kits and the receivers are typically made from metal or polymer.

An unfinished receiver — sometimes referred to as an "80-percent receiver" — can be legally bought online with no serial numbers or other markings on it, no license required. Under the current rules, the

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federal government does not consider unfinished lower receivers to be firearms.

WHAT DOES THE RULE DO?

It changes the definition of a firearm and will require federal firearms dealers to add serial numbers to ghost guns that come their way.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives has, for years, said that unfinished lower receivers don't meet the legal definition of a firearm. And there is nothing illegal about building your own firearm.

It's legal to make your own firearm if it's for your personal use and you don't intend to sell it. But if you open a business selling guns, you need a federal firearms license.

Under the new rule, the definition of a firearm would change to include unfinished parts, like the frame of a handgun or the receiver of a long gun. The rule also would require those parts to be licensed and include serial numbers. Dealers would also need to run background checks before a sale — just like they do with other commercially made firearms.

The requirement applies regardless of how the firearm was made, meaning it includes ghost guns made from individual parts, kits, or by 3D-printers.

It also will compel federally licensed dealers and gunsmiths who take in firearms without serial numbers to add serial numbers. That means, for example, if someone sells a ghost gun to a pawn broker — or other licensed dealer — the dealer must put a serial number on it before selling the gun to someone else.

HOW PREVELANT ARE GHOST GUNS?

Ghost guns aren't new. But they are becoming a growing problem for law enforcement agencies across the U.S.

Federal officials have been sounding the alarm about the growing black market for homemade, military-style semi-automatic rifles and handguns. And guns without serial numbers have been turning up more frequently at crime scenes. They have also been increasingly encountered when federal agents buy guns in undercover operations from gang members and other criminals.

Ghost guns really popped into the public consciousness in 2013 when a gunman, John Zawahri, opened fire on the campus of Santa Monica College in California. Six people were killed, including Zawahri's father and brother. The suspect had assembled an AR-15 after failing a background check at a gun dealer.

A gunman who killed his wife and four others in Northern California in 2017 had been prohibited from owning firearms, but he built his own to skirt the court order before his rampage. And in 2019, a teenager used a homemade handgun to fatally shoot two classmates and wound three others at a school in suburban Los Angeles.

The sale of ghost guns has exploded since then. It is hard to say how many are circulating on the streets, in part because in many cases police departments don't contact the government about the guns because they can't be traced.

Justice Department statistics show that nearly 24,000 ghost guns were recovered by law enforcement at crime scenes and reported to the government from 2016 to 2020. The New York Police Department said officers found 131 firearms without serial numbers since January.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The Justice Department said the rule goes into effect 120 days from the date of publication in the Federal Register. But it's likely the rule will be met with heavy resistance from gun groups and draw litigation in the coming weeks. Even reaching the point of introducing a rule has taken more than a year. Biden announced plans to impose tighter regulations on ghost guns in April 2021.

Gun Owners of America vowed that it would immediately fight the rule and that it would sue the ATF "to halt the implementation of this rule."

California utility to pay \$55 million for massive wildfires

By OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ and MIKE LIEDTKE Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Pacific Gas & Electric, the nation's largest utility, has agreed to pay more than \$55 million to avoid criminal prosecution for two major wildfires sparked by its aging Northern California

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power lines and submit to five years of oversight in an attempt to prevent more deadly blazes.

The company didn't acknowledge any wrongdoing in the settlement announced Monday with prosecutors in six counties ravaged by last year's Dixie Fire and the 2019 Kincade Fire. The utility still faces criminal charges for a 2020 wildfire in Shasta County that killed four people.

The civil settlements are designed to accelerate payments to hundreds of people whose homes were destroyed so they can start rebuilding more quickly than those who suffered devastating losses in 2017 and 2018 blazes ignited by PG&E's equipment. Those fires prompted the utility to negotiate settlements that included \$13.5 billion earmarked for victims — money that still hasn't been completely distributed.

The deal also thrusts the utility back into five years of independent oversight, similar to the supervision PG&E faced during its criminal probation after it was convicted of misconduct that contributed to a natural gas explosion that killed eight people in 2010.

Sonoma County District Attorney Jill Ravitch said that oversight was the biggest accomplishment to come from the settlement.

"We have limited tools and criminal law to deal with corporations and what we were able to do here was to get a five-year agreement that they will be overseen, that there will be an independent monitor, and that they will have to meet certain benchmarks," she said Monday.

All told, PG&E has been blamed for more than 30 wildfires since 2017 that wiped out more than 23,000 homes and businesses and killed more than 100 people.

PG&E's federal probation ended in late January, raising worries from the federal judge who tried to force the utility to reduce fire risks by requiring more maintenance and reporting. U.S. District Judge William Alsup warned that PG&E remained a "continuing menace to California" and urged state prosecutors to try to rein in the company that provides power to 16 million people.

In a joint statement covering five of the six counties that settled, prosecutors said PG&E will be "essentially on a five-year probation" to be overseen by Filsinger Energy Partners, which already acts as a safety monitor for California power regulators.

PG&E will have to underwrite the federal monitor's costs, up to \$15 million annually, in addition to the \$55 million in other payments and penalties that the utility expects to incur in the settlement.

As part of their settlement, Sonoma County prosecutors agreed to drop 33 criminal charges filed last year that accused PG&E of inadvertently injuring six firefighters and endangering public health with smoke and ash from the Kincade Fire that began in October 2019.

Fire officials said a PG&E transmission line sparked the fire, which destroyed 374 buildings in wine country and caused nearly 200,000 people to flee as it burned through 120 square miles (311 square kilometers), the largest evacuation in county history.

Prosecutors in the other five counties were exploring criminal charges in last year's Dixie Fire before cutting the deal that they said will result in far larger payouts than had they hauled PG&E into court. Because there were no deaths in the Dixie Fire, prosecutors said the utility would have paid a maximum penalty of about \$330,000 if it had been found guilty in a criminal case.

Ravitch said state laws that limit punishment against a corporation to probation and fines helped motivate the settlement. She said if PG&E had been successfully prosecuted in the Sonoma County case it would have paid a fine of just \$9.4 million, most of which would have gone to the state.

Instead, the county will now receive more than \$20 million earmarked for nonprofits that help people affected by wildfires and for Santa Rosa Junior College so that it can expand fire safety and vegetation management programs. It will also reimburse the DA's office for the costs of investigating and litigating the case, she said.

Even when PG&E pleaded guilty to 84 felony counts of involuntary manslaughter for the deaths in the 2018 Camp Fire, the company was fined just \$3.5 million.

In a statement, PG&E CEO Patti Poppe said the utility welcomed the chance to be more transparent — and ultimately more accountable — for its operations.

"We are committed to doing our part, and we look forward to a long partnership with these communi-

ties to make it right and make it safe," Poppe said.

The money that that PG&E will pay as part of the settlements will account for a just sliver of its anticipated liabilities in the Kincade, Zogg and Dixie fires. As of December 31, PG&E estimated it will likely be held responsible for at least \$2.3 billion in losses stemming from those wildfires. Some of the estimated \$1.15 billion in damages caused by the Dixie Fire may be paid by a state-backed insurance fund that California lawmakers created after PG&E filed for bankruptcy in 2019.

The Dixie Fire burned nearly 1 million acres (3,900 square kilometers) in Butte, Plumas, Lassen, Shasta, and Tehama counties and destroyed more than 1,300 homes and other buildings. The blaze started on July 13, 2021 when a tree hit electrical distribution lines west of a dam in the Sierra Nevada, according to investigators with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

The settlement for the Dixie Fire was made by district attorneys in Plumas, Lassen, Tehama, Shasta and Butte counties, which will receive nearly \$30 million.

Although her office participated in the Dixie Fire settlement, Shasta County District Attorney Stephanie Bridgett said she will continue to pursue a criminal case related to the Zogg Fire, which killed four.

Fearless Girl statue will stay put opposite NYSE for now

By KAREN MATTHEWS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The 4-foot bronze Fearless Girl statue that was deposited in front of New York City's Charging Bull in 2017 will remain in its current spot opposite the New York Stock Exchange at least until early next year while city officials wrestle with a permanent disposition for the popular symbol of female empowerment, a city board decided Monday.

Members of the Public Design Commission granted an 11-month permit extension and said they would spend the next six months exploring a way for New York City to take ownership of the statue, which is currently the subject of litigation between artist Kristen Visbal and State Street Global Advisors, the Boston-based asset-management firm that commissioned it.

"We today, the Public Design Commission, cannot make this a permanent piece of art," commission president Signe Nielsen said. "We can urge that steps be taken to enable this work to be considered for the public collection."

The statue of a spunky young girl was supposed to be a temporary installation when State Street commissioned it in 2017 to urge higher representation of women on corporate boards, but permits to keep it on display were extended several times once it became a major tourist attraction.

Fearless Girl was moved to its current location opposite the Stock Exchange in December 2018 and has continued to draw selfie-taking visitors there.

Visbal, meanwhile, began selling replicas of the statue around the world. State Street, which had an ownership contract with the artist, sued Visbal alleging the replica sales violated the agreement, and Visbal countersued, arguing that the company was infringing on her rights.

"The commission should be aware that State Street has sued me, which makes it impossible for them to act as fair agents on my behalf," Visbal told design commission members over Zoom.

She urged the city to take ownership of the piece itself. "I am convinced the only way artists' rights can be honored and acknowledged is if the city owns the work," she said.

Both Visbal and State Street indicated support for the board's vote to renew the statue's temporary permit while working toward a permanent solution.

"As the Artist and the creator of the 'Fearless Girl' statue, I am beyond grateful to New York City and the Public Design Commission for hearing my concerns," Visbal said in a statement. "I pledge to work with the City to identify a fair and reasonable solution in the coming six months."

A State Street spokesperson said in a statement: "We are appreciative the Fearless Girl statue will remain at her current location in front of the New York Stock Exchange. With the outcome of today's hearing with the City of New York's Public Design Commission, we will work together with the Department of Transportation, PDC and the artist regarding our desire to keep the Fearless Girl statue at her current

location for an extended period.”

Lakers fire title-winning coach Frank Vogel after 3 seasons

By GREG BEACHAM AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Frank Vogel masterminded the 17th championship in the Los Angeles Lakers’ remarkable history in his first season on their bench.

Exactly 18 months after that triumph, he also became part of the Lakers’ past.

The Lakers fired Vogel on Monday, choosing their title-winning coach to take the first fall for one of the most disappointing seasons in NBA history.

Los Angeles finished 33-49 and missed the 10-team Western Conference playoffs this season. It was a humiliating underachievement for LeBron James, Anthony Davis, Russell Westbrook, Carmelo Anthony and a veteran-laden supporting cast widely expected to contend for another championship.

Vogel was under contract through next season, but almost nothing has gone right over the past two seasons for the rosters assembled by general manager Rob Pelinka and coached by Vogel, who went 127-98 in his three seasons running the club.

Pelinka declined to elaborate Monday on why he and owner Jeanie Buss felt Vogel needed to be fired.

“Today is not going to be a day of finger-pointing and unwinding all the specific reasons,” Pelinka said. “We just felt organizationally, at the highest level, it was time for a new voice. ... That’s not to say anything against the incredible accomplishments that Frank Vogel has had. He was a great coach here, and he’s going to go on to be a great coach somewhere else.”

ESPN reported Vogel’s imminent firing immediately after the Lakers finished the season by beating Denver in overtime Sunday night. During an awkward postgame news conference, Vogel admitted he had not yet been told of the club’s decision before it was leaked to ESPN.

Pelinka dismissed the public relations embarrassment of the leak for the Lakers, calling the report “speculative and unsourced.”

But it was a tacky end to a tenure that began tremendously for Vogel, the former coach at Orlando and Indiana. The Lakers claimed a title in the Florida bubble in October 2020, but haven’t won another playoff round since.

Pelinka doesn’t plan to replace Vogel immediately, and he said he hasn’t even assembled a list of potential candidates. The GM said it “would be great” to have a coach in place before the draft in June, but the Lakers’ search will be “thorough and methodical.”

Los Angeles never resembled a championship team this season despite trading for Westbrook and signing Anthony to play alongside James and Davis. The Lakers stumbled along near .500 until Jan. 7, when they entered a 10-30 nosedive exacerbated by the latest lengthy injury absence for Davis, who has missed more games than he has played in the past two seasons.

“This was a disappointing Lakers season at every level,” Pelinka said. “In the face of disappointment, our fans expect more, and that’s in every facet. It starts in the front office led by me, and our ability to construct the right roster. It starts with the coaches holding players accountable and making sure there’s on-court execution.”

Despite another impressive season from the 37-year-old James, the Lakers never jelled this season with a roster built around nine players over 30 and 11 players who weren’t with the team last season. Davis managed to play in only 40 of their 82 games, while Westbrook struggled to fit into the Lakers’ team concept during one of the worst seasons of his professional career.

After so much preseason ballyhoo around the teaming of James, Davis and Westbrook, the trio managed to play in only 21 games together — and went 11-10. The Lakers used 41 different starting lineups.

“At the end of the day, the reason why we weren’t very good together is we weren’t on the damn floor together,” said James after the Lakers finished with the worst winning percentage of his 19 NBA seasons (.402). “You never got a chance to see what the ballclub could be.”

Although Vogel remained publicly confident in his ability to fix the problems created by the injuries and

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two years of high-risk roster assembly, the coach never came up with any consistent solutions to Los Angeles' woes.

But while Vogel received ample criticism for his curious decisions on player rotations and his lack of an offensive game plan, the Lakers' single biggest problem in Vogel's final two seasons was Davis' inability to stay healthy.

The eight-time All-Star big man was dominant in the bubble, but Davis has played in just 76 of the Lakers' 154 games over the past two seasons while battling several major injury problems.

James also struggled with injuries during the last two years, appearing in only 101 games. He played in just one of the Lakers' final eight games this season because of a sprained ankle, and Los Angeles was eliminated from playoff contention during that stretch despite Davis' return from a six-week absence for three late games.

James spoke to the media Monday morning before Vogel's fate was revealed by the Lakers' front office.

"I respect Frank as a coach, as a man," James said. "Our partnership that we've had over the few years here has been nothing but candid, and great conversations. This is a guy that gives everything to the game and prepared us every single night. ... I don't know what's going to happen with Frank being here, but I've got nothing but respect for him."

Vogel was hired in May 2019 to assemble a cohesive team around James and Davis, who was officially acquired from New Orleans two months later. Vogel's plans worked right away: His first team weathered the NBA's coronavirus shutdown and then won a ring, with Vogel leading a deep, defensively dominant group to the title.

Pelinka has thoroughly altered that championship roster since then, and the results have been catastrophic. Less than a full calendar year after the triumph in the bubble, only James, Davis and Talen Horton-Tucker remained on the roster to start this season — along with Dwight Howard, who left the team and returned.

Los Angeles went 42-30 last season while battling major injuries to Davis and James before losing to Phoenix in the first round of the playoffs. Pelinka then disassembled the Lakers' championship-winning supporting cast when he allowed Alex Caruso to leave for Chicago and traded Kentavious Caldwell-Pope and Kyle Kuzma in a package for Westbrook.

Pelinka hoped to build a Big Three of elite talent to be supplemented by low-cost veterans, rather than homegrown or long-tenured Lakers. Instead, Pelinka's moves forced Vogel to rebuild his defense from scratch with inferior defensive players.

The Lakers didn't come close to matching the last two teams' defensive success, finishing 21st in defensive rating after being a top-three team in Vogel's first two seasons, and their offensive output couldn't make up for it with Davis frequently unavailable.

EXPLAINER: What's ahead for politically volatile Pakistan?

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Months of economic discontent in Pakistan were capped by days of tense drama. When the week ended, one of the country's most charismatic prime ministers was ousted, and his replacement was a member of a prominent political dynasty.

And the turmoil may not be over yet, with implications for the whole region.

Veteran politician Shahbaz Sharif, the brother of a disgraced former premier, was sworn in Monday to head a coalition government of disparate parties spanning the political spectrum from the left to the radically religious. They also have a history of rivalry, and governing won't be easy.

Sharif replaces Imran Khan, a beloved cricket star turned conservative Islamist politician who was toppled by a no-confidence vote, after a fight that went all the way to Pakistan's Supreme Court.

A look at what happened and what may be ahead:

WHAT LED TO THE CHANGE?

On April 3, Khan sidestepped an initial no-confidence vote demanded by the opposition by dissolving parliament and calling early elections. The opposition, which accuses Khan of economic mismanagement,

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appealed to the Supreme Court. It ruled Khan's move was illegal and the no-confidence vote went ahead early Sunday, removing him from power.

Khan has tapped into anti-American sentiment in Pakistan since 9/11, accusing Washington of conspiring with his opponents to topple him because of his independent foreign policy. The U.S. State Department denies any involvement.

Still, the change in government may be good news for the U.S., whose chaotic departure from neighboring Afghanistan amid the Taliban takeover has left Washington in need of allies in the region.

WHO MAKES UP THE GOVERNMENT NOW?

The new government is a collection of disparate parties that have fought each other bitterly.

The largest are Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), led by the son and husband of Benazir Bhutto, the slain former prime minister. Both are family-run and family-dominated, allowing no leadership challenges.

The third biggest partner is the pro-Taliban and radically religious Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Pakistan or Assembly of Clerics. Its religious schools are spread across the northwest, not far from the Afghan border, and have supplied soldiers to the Afghan Taliban and the homegrown Pakistani Taliban. The leaders of the JUI also are a family dynasty, led by Fazl-ur-Rahman.

The leadership of all three parties are tainted by allegations of corruption. That includes Sharif, who was to have been indicted Monday on money-laundering charges. They deny the charges as politically motivated.

They joined forces to oust Khan, but have little in common politically, other than an agenda to change election laws and realign constituencies to improve their chances in the next election, which must take place by summer 2023. They also are united against a return of Khan, who seeks to end Pakistan's dynastic politics. There are no guarantees their shared agendas will keep them together.

Emboldened by nationwide rallies that brought out hundreds of thousands of his supporters Sunday, Khan also seems to want to force early elections through "street power." That could lead to violence, because his base is made up mostly of a passionate younger generation.

Even though the opposition ousted him by citing economic mismanagement, it's not clear if the new government has any easy solutions.

HOW WILL THE CHANGE AFFECT U.S. POLICY IN PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN?

When asked after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan if Pakistan would aid the U.S. with territorial rights, Khan said: "Absolutely not." saying his country would only be a partner "in peace, but not in war."

He was a strident critic of the U.S. war on terror after 9/11, a stand that resonates with many in Pakistan who feel they have been unjustly targeted and accused of "not doing enough" to stop the Taliban during Washington's 20-year war in Afghanistan.

About 80,000 Pakistani civilians died in militant attacks as a result of the war, and nearly 5,000 Pakistani soldiers have been killed, according to Khan, even though no Pakistani or Afghan was involved in 9/11 attacks by al Qaida. Its leader, Osama bin Laden, found a safe haven in Afghanistan to plot the attacks and was killed while hiding in Pakistan in 2011.

Khan has refused to give the U.S. any access to Pakistani territory or airspace for so-called "over-the-horizon" attacks on Islamic State targets in Afghanistan. That strategy allows the U.S. keep its forces out of Afghanistan by using air power to strike militant targets where they find them.

U.S. President Joe Biden did not have a phone call with Khan since his election, lending credence to the conspiracy theories of a rift between Islamabad and Washington. Khan says the U.S. wants a "subservient" Pakistan and opposes its warm relations with China and Russia.

Khan's government pushed hard for the world to engage more with Afghanistan's Taliban rulers and resisted U.S. attempts to punish them. Khan was deeply critical of Biden's decision to earmark \$3.5 billion in Afghanistan's reserves held in the U.S. for the families of 9/11 victims.

While Pakistan resisted recognition of the Taliban under Khan, it led efforts to move the world in that direction. He justified some of the Taliban's restrictive rules, such as stopping education for girls beyond the sixth grade, on tradition and culture. That raised the ire of many, even those in Afghanistan.

Washington is likely to find more willing and like-minded partners among the new government in dealing

with Afghanistan's Taliban rulers.

WHAT ECONOMIC TROUBLES LIE AHEAD?

The opposition said Khan had failed to properly manage the economy, with both inflation and energy prices soaring.

He tried last month to cut the price of gas at the pump by 10 Pakistani rupees (a few U.S. cents), but it's almost certain his successors will have to raise them again. Pakistan also is a net importer of oil and gas from Russia, which is waging war in Ukraine.

The family of the new prime minister controls one of Pakistan's biggest business houses, owning sugar and steel mills. Sharif's win strengthened the Pakistani rupee from 86 to 82 to the dollar, and the troubled Karachi Stock Exchange made modest gains.

Khan's government was praised internationally for managing the coronavirus pandemic with "smart lockdowns" that protected the important construction industry, which provides jobs to the poorest. His anti-corruption reputation encouraged Pakistanis abroad to send money home, returning \$29.4 billion in 2020-21. That amount is expected to climb to \$31 billion in 2021-22.

But the economic future still looks bleak: The Islamic Development Bank expects Pakistan's gross domestic product to slow to 4% from 5.6% last year, and inflation is expected to rise from 8.9% in 2021 to about 11% this year.

Macron, Le Pen kick off French presidential runoff campaigns

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron declared Monday that he wants to "convince" a broad range of French voters to back his centrist vision, kicking off a two-week battle against far-right challenger Marine Le Pen ahead of the country's presidential runoff vote.

Le Pen, meanwhile, is ready for the fight, eager to highlight rising prices for energy and food that have hit poorer households especially hard recently as Macron has focused his efforts on seeking a diplomatic solution to the war in Ukraine.

The two candidates came out on top in Sunday's first-round presidential vote, setting up an April 24 replay of their duel in 2017. Macron trounced Le Pen five years ago in the presidential runoff but all opinion polls show the leader of the National Rally is much closer this time to a potential win.

The outcome of the French presidential election will have wide international influence as Europe struggles to contain the havoc wreaked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Macron has strongly backed European Union sanctions on Russia while Le Pen has worried about their impact on French living standards. Macron also is a firm supporter of NATO and of close collaboration among the EU's 27 members.

Macron headed Monday to an economically depressed area of northern France where a majority of voters had chosen Le Pen, close to her electoral stronghold of Henin-Beaumont.

"I'm here, and I'm determined to fight," the 44-year-old president said during his visit to the town of Denain, adding that he has heard the concerns of people who struggle to find a job and earn more money.

"They need to be reassured," he said.

For her part, Le Pen met with National Rally officials to plan her strategy for the runoff and visited a cereal producer in the Burgundy region to speak about rising prices and making "strong, urgent decisions to protect the purchasing power of the French." The topic has been at the core of her campaign this year, but Macron's team argues that, due to the economic impact of the war in Ukraine, France does not have the financial means to meet Le Pen's campaign promises.

Macron said he wants to court those who voted for the "extremes" or opted to stay at home. He met with residents in Denain, many of whom criticized his proposed pension changes, which include raising the minimum retirement age from 62 to 65.

Denain Mayor Anne-Lise Dufour-Tonini told reporters she will vote for Macron "with no hesitation" in the second round, but intends to push for him to adopt more "leftist proposals."

Many of the 10 presidential candidates who were defeated in the first round Sunday encouraged voters

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to choose Macron in the second round, including conservative candidate Valérie Pécresse and the Green and Socialist candidates. Pécresse warned of “the chaos that would ensue” if Le Pen was elected.

Far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who came in third in Sunday’s vote, urged voters not to choose Le Pen, implicitly suggesting that just staying at home could be an option too.

Le Pen was backed by the other far-right candidate who was defeated, former TV pundit Eric Zemmour.

On her third attempt to become France’s first woman president, Le Pen was rewarded Sunday for her years-long effort to rebrand herself as less extreme. Macron is not buying it, however, accusing Le Pen of pushing a dangerous manifesto of racist, ruinous policies. Le Pen wants to roll back some rights for Muslims, banning them from wearing headscarves in public, and drastically reduce immigration from outside Europe.

Macron and Le Pen are to debate on national television next week.

“Our focus is now on the project and the values,” said Sen. Francois Patriat, a member of Macron’s party. Le Pen’s camp, meanwhile, is hoping to capitalize on anger at Macron over policies seen as favoring the rich.

“Now everything is possible,” said Aurélien Lopez Liguori, a councilor with Le Pen’s party in the southern city of Sete, adding that, compared with 2017, “now Macron has a record, a bad record.”

French Minister for European Affairs Clément Beaune told the AP that only five years ago “Le Pen was proposing — must not forget it — to leave the euro, to break Europe when Brexit and Frexit were trendy.”

Le Pen has dropped earlier threats to pull France out of the EU and abandon the shared euro currency if elected, but some of her proposals, including setting up a national border control, are contrary to EU rules.

With all first-round votes counted Monday, Macron had 27.8% support, Le Pen captured 23.1% and Melenchon was third with close to 22%.

St. Louis prosecutor, disciplinary panel reach agreement

By JIM SALTER Associated Press

ST. LOUIS (AP) — St. Louis Circuit Attorney Kim Gardner has reached an agreement with the Missouri Office of Disciplinary Counsel in which she acknowledges mistakes in her handling of the prosecution of former Missouri Gov. Eric Greitens but won’t face severe penalties for those mistakes.

The “joint stipulation” agreement was announced Monday at the outset of a disciplinary hearing before a three-person panel. In the agreement, Gardner concedes that she failed to produce documents and mistakenly maintained that all documents had been provided to Greitens’ lawyers in the 2018 criminal case.

The agreement states that Gardner’s conduct “was negligent or perhaps reckless, but not intentional.”

It calls for a written reprimand. A more severe punishment — suspension or disbarment — would likely cost Gardner her job because state law requires elected prosecutors to hold active law licenses.

The panel would still need to sign off on the agreement and make a recommendation within 30 days to the Missouri Supreme Court, which ultimately decides punishment. It’s unclear when the court might make a final decision.

Gardner, a 46-year-old Democrat, is St. Louis’ first Black female circuit attorney and is one of several progressive prosecutors elected in recent years with a focus on creating more fairness in the criminal justice system. She told the panel Monday that the mistakes were due to the fast-moving nature of the Greitens case.

“Yes, we had a process. But unfortunately, that process came up short,” she said, adding that her office has taken the case as a “lesson” moving forward.

The 2018 prosecution of Greitens played a pivotal role in his eventual resignation. Greitens is now attempting a political comeback and is a leading contender for the Republican nomination for a Senate seat, despite recent allegations of abuse by his ex-wife.

“Gardner represents the worst of establishment and dishonest officials who use their unfettered power to target innocent and law-abiding individuals, from the governor of Missouri to police officers to everyday citizens,” Greitens said in a statement. “The people of Missouri deserve better.”

The brash former Navy SEAL officer with presidential aspirations was a year into his first term when

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news broke in January 2018 of an affair three years earlier with his St. Louis hairdresser. The woman alleged that Greitens took a compromising photo and threatened to use it as blackmail if she spoke of their relationship.

"There was a victim, someone saying they had been attacked," Gardner's lawyer, Michael Downey, said in an interview.

But neither the FBI nor St. Louis police seemed inclined to investigate, Downey said. Gardner's in-house investigator was away on military duty.

So Gardner hired private investigator William Tisaby, a former FBI agent. The investigation led to Greitens' indictment on one felony count of invasion of privacy. Greitens claimed he had been the victim of a political witch hunt.

Jury selection had just begun when Gardner dropped the charge after a judge ruled she would have to answer questions under oath from Greitens' attorneys over her handling of the case. She said that it put her in an "impossible" position of being a witness in a case she was prosecuting.

Meanwhile, Gardner filed a second charge accusing Greitens of tampering with computer data for allegedly disclosing to his political fundraiser a list of top donors to a veterans charity he founded, without the charity's permission.

Under investigation by lawmakers as well, Greitens resigned in June 2018, and Gardner agreed to drop the criminal charges.

Attention then turned to how Gardner and Tisaby handled the investigation. In 2019, Tisaby was indicted on six counts of perjury and one count of evidence tampering. He pleaded guilty last month to misdemeanor evidence tampering and received a suspended sentence of one year of probation.

The case stemmed from Tisaby's statement that he had not taken notes during an interview with the woman when a video later showed that he had, and his statement that he hadn't received notes from the prosecutor's office before he interviewed the woman when a document later showed that he had.

Greitens' attorneys raised concerns about Gardner's failure to correct the record on Tisaby's statements, and whether she concealed evidence.

Downey said any mistakes were unintentional, the result of Gardner's heavy workload during the Greitens investigation.

Gardner has had plenty of clashes during her leadership of the circuit attorney's office.

Last summer, charges were dropped in three murder cases in one week because prosecutors failed to show up in court or weren't prepared after months of delay, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported. The newspaper also cited Circuit Court data showing that about one-third of felony cases were dismissed — triple the percentage of her predecessor.

Gardner contends that her reforms have made the city safer and the criminal justice system more equitable. She has expanded a diversion program and stopped prosecuting low-level marijuana possession, helping to significantly reduce jail overcrowding.

Gardner has often been at odds with police, especially in 2019, when she placed dozens of officers on an "exclusion list," prohibiting them from bringing cases. The list was developed after a national group accused the officers of posting racist and anti-Muslim comments on social media.

In 2020, Gardner filed a lawsuit accusing the city, a police union and others of a coordinated and racist conspiracy aimed at forcing her out of office. The lawsuit alleged violations of the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, which was adopted to thwart efforts to deny the civil rights of racial minorities.

Downey, in a court filing, said the ethical complaints involve "another attempt by Ms. Gardner's political enemies — largely from outside St. Louis — to remove Ms. Gardner and thwart the systemic reforms she champions."

Greitens had remained largely out of sight until Sen. Roy Blunt's announcement in March 2021 that he would not seek a third term. Republican leaders worry that Greitens could win the primary but lose to a Democrat in the general election, forfeiting what should have been a surefire GOP seat.

In a court filing last month in a child custody case, Sheena Greitens accused her ex-husband of being physically abusive to her and their children. Eric Greitens called the allegations "completely fabricated" and "baseless."

Austrian chancellor tells Putin to end Ukraine war

VIENNA (AP) — Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer said Monday that he urged Russian President Vladimir Putin to end the invasion of Ukraine and raised the issue of “serious war crimes” committed by the Russian military.

Nehammer was the first European leader to meet Putin in Moscow since Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine Feb. 24.

In a statement released after the meeting, the Austrian chancellor said his primary message to Putin in the “very direct, open and tough” talks was that “this war needs to end, because in war both sides can only lose.”

Nehammer told Putin all those responsible for war crimes in the Ukrainian city of Bucha and elsewhere would be “held to account.”

He also stressed the need to open humanitarian corridors so that civilians trapped in cities under attack can access basic supplies like food and water, according to his statement.

The Austrian leader called the Moscow trip to Moscow his “duty” to exhaust every possibility for ending the violence in Ukraine, coming just two days after travelling to Kyiv for talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Speaking at a news conference in Moscow, Nehammer said face-to-face talks to look “each other in the eye, discussing the horrors of war,” could have a greater impact over the long term.

But he said he walked away from the meeting without much optimism for an end to the war any time soon.

“It might be necessary to do it 100 times,” Nehammer said of the meeting. “But I think it’s necessary to do it, so that peace reigns again and the people of Ukraine can live safely.”

European Union-member Austria supported the 27-nation bloc’s sanctions against Russia, though it so far has opposed cutting off deliveries of Russian gas. The country is militarily neutral and is not a member of NATO.

But Nehammer and other Austrian officials have been keen to stress that military neutrality does not mean moral neutrality.

“We are militarily neutral, but have a clear position on the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine,” Nehammer wrote on Twitter Sunday when announcing his trip to Moscow. “It must stop!”

Nehammer said he told Putin the EU is “as united as it’s ever been” on the issue of sanctions, and that these will remain in place - and may even be strengthened - as long as Ukrainians continue to die.

Earlier Monday, Austrian foreign minister Alexander Schallenberg said Nehammer decided to make the Moscow trip after meeting with Zelenskyy in Kyiv and following contacts with the leaders of Turkey, Germany and the European Union.

Schallenberg said ahead of a meeting with his EU counterparts in Luxembourg that it was an effort to “seize every chance to end the humanitarian hell” in Ukraine.

He added that “every voice that makes clear to President Putin what reality looks like outside the walls of Kremlin is not a wasted voice.”

Study: Africa cyclones exacerbated by climate change

By WANJOHI KABUKURU Associated Press

MOMBASA, Kenya (AP) — Extreme rainfall in southeast Africa has become heavier and more likely to occur during cyclones because of climate change, according to a new analysis released Monday by an international team of weather scientists.

Multiple tropical storms that pummeled Madagascar, Malawi and Mozambique earlier this year were analyzed by the World Weather Attribution group, who determined that the storms were made worse by the increase in global temperatures. In just six weeks between January and March the region saw a record

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three tropical cyclones and two tropical storms make landfall. The heavy rains, storm surges and floods left more than 230 people dead and displaced hundreds of thousands across the region.

The countries remain vulnerable to devastating weather this year, with cyclone season set to end in May.

The team of climate scientists used established peer-reviewed methods, including weather observations and computer simulations, to model scenarios using both preindustrial global temperatures and today's — which is approximately 1.2 degrees Celsius (2.2 degrees Fahrenheit) warmer. The difference between the models determined the impact of human-caused global warming.

Sarah Kew, from the Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute and participated in the study, said they investigated the influence of climate change using 34 prediction models but data gaps made it difficult to determine the full impact of increasing greenhouse gas emissions.

"While our analysis clearly shows that climate change made the storms more damaging, our ability to establish precisely by how much was hampered by inconsistent data and lack of weather observations," said Dr. Kew. "This would also help to improve forecasts of extreme weather events and their impacts."

In both Madagascar and Malawi, the study was constrained by a lack of weather stations with suitable data. And of the 23 weather stations in the affected regions of Mozambique, only four had complete records dating back to 1981.

"Strengthening scientific resources in Africa and other parts of the global south is key to help us better understand extreme weather events fueled by climate change, to prepare vulnerable people and infrastructure to better cope with them," Dr. Izidine Pinto, a climate system analyst at the University of Cape Town, said.

The 33-page study was conducted by 22 researchers, including scientists from universities and meteorological agencies in Madagascar, Mozambique, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa, the UK and the US.

Once a retail giant, Kmart nears extinction after closure

By DAVID PORTER Associated Press

AVENEL, N.J. (AP) — The familiar sights and sounds are still there: the scuffed and faded floor tiles, the relentless beige-on-beige color scheme, the toddlers' clothes and refrigerators and pretty much everything in between.

There's even a canned recording that begins, "Attention, Kmart shoppers" — except it's to remind folks about COVID-19 precautions, not to alert them to a flash sale over in ladies' lingerie like days of old.

Many of the shelves are bare, though, at the Kmart in Avenel, New Jersey, picked over by bargain hunters as the store prepares to close its doors for good April 16.

Once it shuts, the number of Kmart stores in the U.S. — once well over 2,000 — will be down to three in the continental U.S. and a handful of stores elsewhere, according to multiple reports, in a retail world now dominated by Walmart, Target and Amazon.

The demise of the store in the middle-class suburb, 15 miles (24 kilometers) south of New York City, is the tale of the death of the discount department store writ small.

"You're always thinking about it because stores are closing all over, but it's still sad," said cashier Michelle Yavorsky, who said she has worked at the Avenel store for 2 ½ years. "I'll miss the place. A lot of people shopped here."

In its heyday, Kmart sold product lines endorsed by celebrities Martha Stewart and Jaclyn Smith, sponsored NASCAR auto races and was mentioned in movies including "Rain Man" and "Beetlejuice." It was name-dropped in songs by artists from Eminem to the Beastie Boys to Hall & Oates; in 2003, Eminem bought a 29-room, suburban Detroit mansion once owned by former Kmart chairman Chuck Conaway.

The chain cemented a place in American culture with its Blue Light Specials, a flashing blue orb affixed to a pole that would beckon shoppers to a flash sale in progress. Part of its success was due to its early adoption of layaway programs, which allowed customers who lacked credit to reserve items and pay for them in installments.

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For a time, Kmart had a little bit of everything: You could shop for your kids' back-to-school supplies, get your car tuned up and grab a meal without leaving the premises.

"Kmart was part of America," said Michael Lisicky, a Baltimore-based author who has written several books on U.S. retail history. "Everybody went to Kmart, whether you liked it or not. They had everything. You had toys. You had sporting goods. You had candy. You had stationery. It was something for everybody. This was almost as much of a social visit as it was a shopping visit. You could spend hours here. And these just dotted the American landscape over the years."

Kmart's decline has been slow but steady, brought about by years of falling sales, changes in shopping habits and the looming shadow of Walmart, which coincidentally began its life within months of Kmart's founding in 1962.

Struggling to compete with Walmart's low prices and Target's trendier offerings, Kmart filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in early 2002 — becoming the largest U.S. retailer to take that step — and announced it would close more than 250 stores.

A few years later, hedge fund executive Edward Lampert combined Sears and Kmart and pledged to return them to their former greatness, but the recession and the rising dominance of Amazon contributed in derailing those goals. Sears filed for Chapter 11 in 2018 and currently has a handful of stores left in the U.S. where it once had thousands.

Kmarts continue to operate in Westwood, New Jersey; Bridgehampton, on New York's Long Island, and Miami.

It didn't have to end this way, according to Mark Cohen, director of retail studies at Columbia University in New York and former CEO of Sears Canada. Trying to compete with Walmart on price was a foolish strategy, he said, and Lampert was criticized for not having a retail background and appearing more interested in stripping off the assets of the two chains for their cash value.

"It's a study in greed, avarice and incompetence," Cohen said. "Sears should have never gone away; Kmart was in worse shape, but not fatally so. And now they're both gone."

"Retailers fall by the wayside sometimes because they're selling things people don't want to buy," he continued. "In the case of Kmart, everything they used to sell, people are buying but they're buying it from Walmart and Target."

Transformco, which owns Kmart and Sears, did not respond to an email seeking comment and a phone number listed for the company was not taking messages.

Nationwide, some former Kmarts remain vacant while others have been replaced by other big-box stores, fitness centers, self-storage facilities, even churches. One former site in Colorado Springs, Colorado, is now a popular dine-in movie theater.

Employees at the Kmart in Avenel found out last month that the store would close.

Unlike 20 years ago, when news of impending Kmart closures around the country prompted an outpouring of support from loyal shoppers and a Detroit radio station even mounted a campaign to try and save a local store, the closing of the Avenel location was met mostly with an air of resignation.

"It's maybe a little nostalgic because I've lived my whole life in this area, but it's just another retail store closing," said Jim Schaber, a resident of nearby Iselin who said his brother worked in the shoe department at Kmart for years. "It's just another sign of people doing online shopping and not going out to the retail stores."

The closing packed a little more of an emotional punch for Mike Jerdonek, a truck driver who recalled shopping at Kmart in Brooklyn and Queens in his younger days.

"It's like history passing right in front of our eyes," he said as he sat in his car outside the Avenel store. "When I was younger I didn't have any money, so it was a good place to shop because the prices were cheap. And to see it gone right now, it's kind of sad."

Efforts to make protective medical gear in US falling flat

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

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UNIVERSITY CITY, Mo. (AP) — When the coronavirus pandemic first hit the U.S., sales of window coverings at Halcyon Shades quickly went dark. So the suburban St. Louis business did what hundreds of other small manufacturers did: It pivoted to make protective supplies, with help from an \$870,000 government grant.

But things haven't worked out as planned. The company quit making face shields because it wasn't profitable. It still hasn't sold a single N95 mask because of struggles to get equipment, materials and regulatory approval.

"So far, it has been a net drain of funds and resources and energy," Halcyon Shades owner Jim Schmersahl said.

Many companies that began producing personal protective equipment with patriotic optimism have scaled back, shut down or given up, according to an Associated Press analysis based on numerous interviews with manufacturers. Some already have sold equipment they bought with state government grants.

As COVID-19 was stressing hospitals and shuttering businesses in 2020, elected officials touted the need to boost U.S. production of protective gear. Yet many manufacturers who answered the call have faced logistical hurdles, regulatory rejections, slumping demand and fierce competition from foreign suppliers. After the initial scramble for PPE subsided, many industry newcomers had difficulty selling products.

"At the end of the day, when everybody said they wanted American-made, nobody's buying, not even the state," said Tony Blogumas, vice president of Green Resources Consulting, a rural Missouri firm that received an \$800,000 state grant but has sold only a few thousand masks. "We're kind of upset about the whole situation."

Missouri Gov. Mike Parson also is disappointed. His administration divided \$20 million in federal COVID-19 relief funds among 48 businesses for the production of masks, gowns, sanitizer and other supplies. Parson hoped to seed a permanent field of manufacturers.

"I'm still a firm believer in that — that we need to be making PPE here in this state," Parson said. "Unfortunately, a lot of entities went right back to where they were getting it before."

The onset of the pandemic revealed that the U.S. was highly dependent on foreign countries for protective gear. When China limited exports because of its own battle against COVID-19, U.S. stockpiles plummeted. Prices skyrocketed as federal officials, governors and health care systems competed for supplies.

Though federal stockpiles have been replenished, shriveling domestic production has raised concerns that state governments, medical facilities and others could again get stuck scrambling for gear during a future pandemic.

The AP identified more than \$125 million in grants to spur production of pandemic supplies made to over 300 business in 10 states — Alabama, Hawaii, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New York and Ohio. It's possible that grants were awarded in additional states, but there is no central clearinghouse to track them.

In November 2020, Alabama awarded one of the single largest grants — nearly \$10.6 million from federal pandemic relief funds — to HomTex Inc. The company was to equip a new Selma facility to make 250 million surgical masks and 45 million N95 masks annually. The plant has yet to make anything due to a lack of customers.

"I can't produce product that I can't sell," HomTex President Jeremy Wootten said.

Some PPE manufacturers point to federal regulations as part of the reason for their struggles. Three-ply masks need FDA approval to be marketed for medical use — an important designation for building a long-term customer base. Companies need approval from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health to market products as N95 respirators, which filter at least 95% of airborne particles.

During the first two years of the pandemic, NIOSH approved 30 new manufacturers — more than seven times the typical number during a similar pre-pandemic period, according to agency data. Some applications remain pending, while numerous others were denied.

Halcyon Shades' N95 certification was rejected in October because its samples didn't have head straps attached. While the company works on another application, its equipment sits idle, with partially finished masks paused on a conveyor belt.

Without federal approval, "we're just dead in the water," said Schmersahl, the company owner.

Progress reports filed with the Missouri Department of Economic Development show that nearly all its PPE grant recipients faced challenges by July 2021, especially with sales.

Ohio awarded \$20.8 million to 73 businesses to manufacture pandemic-related supplies, according to state data. Of 60 businesses that complied with a recent reporting deadline, more than one-third no longer produced PPE by the end of 2021.

Dozens of businesses banded together to form the American Mask Manufacturer's Association with the goal of sustaining the industry. But the group's membership has dwindled as more and more go out of business.

Association organizers say the industry has reached a critical point. They want the federal government to treat PPE manufacturers like the nation's defense industry — entering into long-term contracts to perpetually replenish a stockpile for future pandemics or emergencies.

"If the federal government doesn't come in and help support the U.S. manufacturing base, it's almost certainly going to go back to China, and we'll be just as vulnerable as we were in early 2020 and 2019," said Brent Dillie, the association chairman and co-founder of Premium-PPE, a Virginia manufacturer started during the pandemic that has shed about two-thirds of its roughly 300 employees.

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As COVID-19 was stressing hospitals and shuttering businesses in 2020, elected officials touted the need to boost U.S. production of protective gear: "All this stuff should be made in the United States and not in China," Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said in remarks echoed by others.

Yet many manufacturers who answered the call have faced logistical hurdles, regulatory rejections, slumping demand and fierce competition from foreign suppliers. On April 1, Florida-based American Surgical Mask Co. became one of the latest to close.

"I'm just done with the fight," CEO Matt Brandman told the AP.

After the initial scramble for PPE subsided, many industry newcomers faced difficulty selling products. Government agencies sometimes wanted huge quantities at tough-to-meet deadlines. Hospital systems tended to contract with established suppliers. Retail sales waned after every virus surge.

"At the end of the day, when everybody said they wanted American-made, nobody's buying, not even the state," said Tony Blogumas, vice president of Green Resources Consulting, a rural Missouri firm that received an \$800,000 state grant but has sold only a few thousand masks. "We're kind of upset about the whole situation."

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"I can't produce product that I can't sell," HomTex President Jeremy Wootten said.

Other companies also had trouble living up to political hype.

In October 2020, New York announced eight grants that then-Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul, now the governor, said were "a model for how we build back better for the post-pandemic future." Those included \$800,000 for newly formed Altor Safety and \$1 million for startup firm NYPPE.

But NYPPE's equipment wasn't ready until February 2021, by which time the market had changed, President Connor Knapp said.

So Knapp tapped the brakes on his plans. NYPPE still hasn't sold any N95 masks because it lacks regulatory approval. It just recently scaled up production of surgical masks, after obtaining a U.S. Food and Drug Administration certification that came with its purchase of Altor Safety.

Some PPE manufacturers point to federal regulations as part of the reason for their struggles. Three-ply masks need FDA approval to be marketed for medical use — an important designation for building a long-term customer base.

That process can be time-consuming. Facing delays, Angstrom Manufacturing in Missouri ended up buying another business that already had FDA approval, President Chris Carron said. By then, it was fall 2021 — a year after it received a state grant.

Companies need approval from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health to market products as N95 respirators, which filter at least 95% of airborne particles.

During the first two years of the pandemic, NIOSH approved 30 new manufacturers — more than seven times the typical number during a similar pre-pandemic period, according to agency data. Some applications remain pending, while numerous others were denied.

Halcyon Shades' N95 certification was rejected in October because its samples didn't have head straps attached. While the company works on another application, its equipment sits idle inside the clear plastic-sheet walls of a "clean room" specially built to shield materials from airborne contaminants. Partially finished masks remain paused on a conveyor belt, waiting to be deposited into a cardboard box.

Without federal approval, "we're just dead in the water," said Schmersahl, the company owner.

Progress reports filed with the Missouri Department of Economic Development show that nearly all its PPE grant recipients faced challenges by July 2021, especially with sales.

Patriot Medical Devices, which received \$750,000 from Missouri, hired nearly 100 people as it cranked out millions of masks during a COVID-19 surge in late 2020 and early 2021, CEO Rick Needham said. Fewer than 10 employees remain.

"We felt it was our patriotic duty to do something to help solve the problem," Needham said. But, he added, "It's frankly a little bit of a dysfunctional business model at this point."

Ohio awarded \$20.8 million to 73 businesses to manufacture pandemic-related supplies, according to state data. Of 60 businesses that complied with a recent reporting deadline, more than one-third no longer produced PPE by the end of 2021.

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Cleveland Veteran Business Solutions, which received a \$500,000 grant to get into the PPE business, made about 5 million surgical masks beginning in August 2020. It ultimately halted production in the face of cheaper imports and sold its machines this year, co-founder Taner Eren said.

"It was surprising and disappointing strategically that there wasn't support for a local PPE manufacturing industry," Eren said.

The business was among several dozen that banded together to form the American Mask Manufacturer's Association with the goal of sustaining the industry. The group's membership has dwindled as more and more go out of business.

Association organizers say the industry has reached a critical point. They want the federal government to treat PPE manufacturers like the nation's defense industry — entering into long-term contracts to perpetually replenish a stockpile for future pandemics or emergencies.

"If the federal government doesn't come in and help support the U.S. manufacturing base, it's almost certainly going to go back to China, and we'll be just as vulnerable as we were in early 2020 and 2019," said Brent Dillie, the association chairman and co-founder of Premium-PPE, a Virginia manufacturer started during the pandemic that has shed about two-thirds of its roughly 300 employees.

Infrastructure legislation signed by President Joe Biden took a step toward bolstering domestic suppliers. Effective in February, it required new contracts for PPE purchased by the departments of Health and Human Services, Homeland Security and Veterans Affairs to run for at least two years and be awarded to U.S. producers — unless there's not sufficient quantity and quality at market prices.

The health and veterans departments said they haven't bought anything yet. Homeland Security hasn't answered the AP's questions. Documents show the government solicited bids due Dec. 6 for up to 381 million U.S.-made surgical masks over three years for its stockpile. No deal has been announced.

Other documents show the government is looking to contract with three major suppliers — 3M, Moldex, and Owens & Minor — for a total of \$115 million in U.S.-made N95 masks over three years. A justification document says noncompetitive contracts are necessary to preserve capacity for future coronavirus surges or emergencies.

The Biden administration also formed a task force of experts from federal agencies, health care providers, PPE manufacturers and distributors to develop a national strategy for ensuring a "resilient public health supply chain." Its work is expected to extend for years.

Some manufacturers said they can't wait long for a federal life preserver.

Dentec Safety Specialists is wrapping up a contract to supply 125,000 rubber reusable respirators and 500,000 filtration cartridges from its Kansas facility for the national stockpile, said President Claudio Dente. It needs more orders soon to prevent layoffs, he said.

"I thought that COVID would really change the mindset of the people, the governments and manufacturing," Dente said. But he added: "The general marketplace is reverting back to their old ways -- meaning looking to buy product from China."

Iowa's political swing makes Obama's wins harder to repeat

By THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

NEVADA, Iowa (AP) — In 2008, this overwhelmingly white state was Barack Obama's unlikely launching pad to become the nation's first Black president. Fourteen years later, Iowans aren't showing a similar embrace for the woman running to become its first Black governor.

Democrat Deidre DeJear is finding Iowa a much changed place, trending staunchly conservative, endorsing many aspects of Trumpism, with an electorate that is so far displaying little interest in her history-making candidacy.

Educated younger adults who were once reliable Democratic voters have fled rural Iowa seeking opportunities elsewhere. The strength of organized labor has eroded. Obama's general election victories in 2008 and 2012 seem like distant memories.

The changes are part of a broader transformation that has spread through the Northern Plains over the

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past two decades, making it increasingly difficult for Democrats to compete in the region even as they make inroads in other places like the Deep South and Sun Belt.

"Times are so different from Obama's 2008 campaign," said Dave Leshtz, a veteran Democratic organizer from Iowa City, after a DeJear event in the liberal enclave. "It's an entirely different state."

DeJear, a 36-year-old Des Moines businesswoman, cemented her status as a rising political star in 2018 when she became the first Black candidate to win a statewide primary in Iowa. She lost the general election for secretary of state, but she won national attention and invitations from Democratic presidential hopefuls to serve as a state adviser.

She is struggling to translate that lower-wattage fame into support from voters. Only 31% of likely Iowa voters said they know enough about DeJear — running unopposed in the June 7 primary — to form an opinion, according to The Des Moines Register's Iowa Poll, conducted in late February and early March.

Meanwhile, she posted an anemic \$8,500 fundraising balance in January, raising less than \$300,000 since announcing her candidacy in August. It paled next to Republican incumbent Gov. Kim Reynolds' \$4.8 million balance and \$3.8 million in contributions.

Story County Democrat Barb Wheelock attributed part of DeJear's struggle to racism, both inside the party and among the state's voters.

"I think it's part that she's Black and people don't think she'll do very well — the people in our state party, the people with the money," Wheelock, a 70-year-old retired physical therapist, said while attending a DeJear stop in Story County last month.

DeJear told The Associated Press that she suspected her race may be on some minds as she seeks supporters.

"Of course no one has said that to me outright," DeJear said. "But there is a question of whether or not a Black woman could win. That is definitely a question."

DeJear tried to put any such doubts aside as she bounded onto the stage at an event in Nevada, a small farm town in central Iowa. With an upbeat style and a trace of her native Mississippi accent, DeJear reminded the audience that Iowans boasted a groundbreaking legacy, including an Iowa Supreme Court decision that made Iowa the first state to desegregate public schools after the Civil War.

"I believe in what's possible," she said. "We made a conscientious decision that no matter what your skin color was, no matter what your race was, each and every one of our students should have access to a quality public education."

It was a nod to an Iowa progressive streak that carried well into the 21st century.

In 2009, the Iowa high court ruled gay marriage legal, making the state the third to allow it, after similar rulings in Massachusetts and Connecticut but five years before the U.S. Supreme Court. A year before, Iowa voters had not only backed Obama by a healthy margin in the general election, they overwhelmingly sent liberal Democrat Tom Harkin to the U.S. Senate for a fifth term.

Iowans ushered in the new millennium with Tom Vilsack, a Democrat and former mayor from rural south-east Iowa, as governor. And during the 1988 Democratic presidential caucuses, the Rev. Jesse Jackson finished a notable fourth, relying on support from rural Iowa.

But a sharp decline of union jobs and an exodus of young, college-educated adults, have altered Iowa's once dynamic political map.

In a striking illustration, Obama carried the state in November 2008 by winning 52 of its 99 counties. Joe Biden, who on Tuesday will make his first trip to Iowa as president, lost the state in 2020, winning only six counties.

After decades of divided state government, Republicans have controlled the Legislature and the governorship for six consecutive years, cutting taxes and reining in voting and abortion rights. Today, five of Iowa's six members of Congress are Republicans.

State Rep. Ras Smith had hoped to interrupt the trend as a candidate for governor in this year's race. The 34-year-old Smith, who was voted the Iowa Democratic Party's "Rising Star" award recipient in 2019 and is Black, found it difficult to persuade some of the party's major donors in the state, who are white, to give him a look.

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Despite Smith's promising profile and DeJear's 2018 breakthrough, some wealthy Iowa Democrats sought out others to run, including state Rep. Todd Pritchard, who is from rural northern Iowa and white.

Smith said some influential donors declined his invitation to meet to discuss his campaign. Among them, he said, was Fred Hubbell, the 2018 Democratic nominee for governor. A wealthy Des Moines-area businessman, Hubbell spent \$7 million of his own money in narrowly losing to Reynolds.

"It wasn't about the dollars," said Smith, who ended his campaign in January, leaving DeJear unopposed in the primary. "He didn't come to an event and was turned off. We didn't have coffee and I said something that pissed him off. That's the part that felt disrespectful. It was disrespectful."

Smith said he and Hubbell spoke by phone but never met despite several invitations. Hubbell did not respond to requests for comment.

"My party doesn't think it's nearly as racist," said Tom Courtney, a former state senator and longtime union activist from the once-booming manufacturing corridor along the Mississippi River, who is white. "But some of that is going on."

The sentiment stings for Iowa Democrats, as national party leaders, frustrated by the state's lack of diversity, are taking steps to shift the early presidential nominating contest away from the traditionally first-in-the-nation caucus state.

Hubbell endorsed DeJear in a written statement last month, two months after Smith's withdrawal made her the Democrats' only candidate. Hubbell has since contributed to DeJear's campaign, though her campaign declined to say how much. Smith has also endorsed DeJear, one of several Black Democratic women running for statewide office around the country this year.

Georgia Democrat Stacey Abrams is again seeking the governorship. Former North Carolina Supreme Court Chief Justice Cheri Beasley is running for U.S. Senate as a Democrat. And Florida Rep. Val Demings is the leading Democrat to face Republican U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio.

But DeJear is the only Black woman campaigning in such a predominantly white state. In 2020, 90.4% of Iowans were white, according to census data. Roughly 62% of the nation's population was white, and more than 13% Black.

Still, DeJear, who campaigned for Obama as a college student at Drake University in Des Moines in 2008, is optimistic she can relight the flame.

"We also look to Obama and what he was able to accomplish," she said in the interview. "I believe that Iowans have this innate ability to see the humanity that exists in other folks. And that's what drives us."

Today in History: April 12, Civil War begins

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, April 12, the 102nd day of 2022. There are 263 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 12, 1861, the Civil War began as Confederate forces opened fire on Fort Sumter in South Carolina.

On this date:

In 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt died of a cerebral hemorrhage in Warm Springs, Georgia, at age 63; he was succeeded by Vice President Harry S. Truman.

In 1955, the Salk vaccine against polio was declared safe and effective.

In 1961, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first man to fly in space, orbiting the earth once before making a safe landing.

In 1963, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested and jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, charged with contempt of court and parading without a permit. (During his time behind bars, King wrote his "Letter from Birmingham Jail.")

In 1981, former world heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis, 66, died in Las Vegas, Nevada.

In 1985, Sen. Jake Garn, R-Utah, became the first sitting member of Congress to fly in space as the shuttle Discovery lifted off.

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In 1988, the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office issued a patent to Harvard University for a genetically engineered mouse, the first time a patent was granted for an animal life form.

In 1990, in its first meeting, East Germany's first democratically elected parliament acknowledged responsibility for the Nazi Holocaust, and asked the forgiveness of Jews and others who had suffered.

In 1992, after five years in the making, Euro Disneyland (now called Disneyland Paris) opened in Marne-La-Vallee, France, amid controversy as French intellectuals bemoaned the invasion of American pop culture.

In 2015, Hillary Rodham Clinton jumped back into presidential politics, announcing in a video her much-awaited second campaign for the White House.

In 2018, police in Philadelphia arrested two black men at a Starbucks; the men had been asked to leave after one of them was denied access to the restroom. (Starbucks apologized and, weeks later, closed thousands of stores for part of the day to conduct anti-bias training.)

In 2020, Christians around the world celebrated Easter Sunday isolated in their homes by the coronavirus. St. Peter's Square was barricaded to keep out crowds. Pope Francis celebrated Easter Mass inside the largely vacant basilica, calling for global solidarity in the face of the pandemic and urging political leaders to give hope and opportunity to people who had lost jobs.

Ten years ago: Jury selection began in Greensboro, North Carolina, for the corruption trial of former Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards, charged with six counts of campaign finance fraud. (The jury ended up acquitting Edwards of accepting illegal campaign contributions while deadlocking on the other five counts; federal prosecutors later dropped the remaining charges.)

Five years ago: The United States and China struck what appeared to be an unusual bargain as President Donald Trump said he wouldn't label China a currency manipulator and voiced confidence Chinese President Xi Jinping (shee jihn-peeng) would help him deal with North Korea's mounting threat.

One year ago: Police clashed with protesters for a second night in the Minneapolis suburb where an officer had fatally shot a Black man, 20-year-old Daunte Wright, during a traffic stop. Iran blamed Israel for sabotage at its underground Natanz nuclear facility that damaged its centrifuges. After months of lockdown from the coronavirus, shops, gyms, hairdressers and other "non-essential" businesses across Britain reopened. President Joe Biden said he would nominate Christine Wormuth, a former senior Pentagon official, to be the first woman to lead the Army. (Wormuth would be confirmed the following month.) India reported another record daily surge in coronavirus infections to overtake Brazil as the second-worst-hit country, behind the United States.

Today's Birthdays: Playwright Alan Ayckbourn (AYK'-bohn) is 83. Jazz musician Herbie Hancock is 82. Rock singer John Kay (Steppenwolf) is 78. Actor Ed O'Neill is 76. Actor Dan Lauria is 75. Talk show host David Letterman is 75. Author Scott Turow is 73. Actor-playwright Tom Noonan is 71. R&B singer JD Nicholas (The Commodores) is 70. Singer Pat Travers is 68. Actor Andy Garcia is 66. Movie director Walter Salles (SAL'-ihs) is 66. Country singer Vince Gill is 65. Model/TV personality J Alexander is 64. Rock musician Will Sergeant (Echo & the Bunnymen) is 64. Rock singer Art Alexakis (al-ex-AH'-kihs) (Everclear) is 60. Country singer Deryl Dodd is 58. Folk-pop singer Amy Ray (Indigo Girls) is 58. Actor Alicia Coppola is 54. Rock singer Nicholas Hexum (311) is 52. Actor Retta is 52. Actor Nicholas Brendon is 51. Actor Shannen Doherty is 51. Actor Marley Shelton is 48. Actor Sarah Jane Morris is 45. Actor Jordana Spiro is 45. Rock musician Guy Berryman (Coldplay) is 44. Actor Riley Smith is 44. Actor Claire Danes is 43. Actor Jennifer Morrison is 43. Actor Matt McGorry is 36. Actor Brooklyn Decker is 35. Contemporary Christian musician Joe Rickard (Red) is 35. Rock singer-musician Brendon Urie (Panic! at the Disco) is 35. Actor Saoirse (SUR'-shuh) Ronan is 28.