

# Groton Daily Independent

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## UpComing Events

### Wednesday, April 20

6 p.m.: FCCLA Banquet in GHS Arena Lobby  
Emmanuel: 6 p.m. Confirmation, Newsletter deadline  
United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton Ad Council, 7 p.m.  
School Breakfast: Hash browns, pizza.  
School Lunch: Grilled cheese sandwich, cooked carrots.  
Senior Menu: Baked chicken breast, noodles romanoff, lemon buttered broccoli, pineapple strawberry ambrosia, whole wheat bread.

### Thursday, April 21

Track Meet in Redfield  
School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.  
School Lunch: Chicken fries, mashed potatoes.  
Senior Menu: Ham and raisin sauce, sweet potatoes, mixed vegetables, crazy cake, dinner roll.

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



### Friday, April 22

School Breakfast: Waffles.  
School Lunch: Pizza, green beans.  
Senior Menu: BBQ beef sandwich, potato salad, carrots and peas, fresh fruit.

### Saturday, April 23

GHS Prom, 7 p.m.  
Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am

## 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.uslbn.com/careers](http://www.uslbn.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.

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**#529 in a series**

## **Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller**

The news isn't great: New-case rates are up by 43 percent in two weeks and are now at 39,152. Considering we're missing more new cases than we have for some time, they are undoubtedly up by a whole lot more than that. As of midday today, 37 of the 56 states and territories we're tracking are showing increasing case rates; 24 of those are up by more than 50 percent in two weeks. Many of those showing pretty substantial declines are places which have abandoned or sharply curtailed reporting, so who knows if they're really still decreasing? Can't tell from hospitalization rates anymore. Total reported cases are now at 80,595,074. The good news is that hospitalization rates are holding pretty steady at 14,653, so those new cases are, for the most part, doing pretty well. We do not yet, of course, know whether they'll be doing so well in a few weeks or months; long-Covid numbers for the Omicron variant are not yet known. Sadly, however, although the numbers continue to decline, we're still losing 425 people every day to this virus in the US. Total pandemic deaths are up to 987,545. Even as the situation improves, this virus has managed to hold its position as the third leading cause of death in the US for the month of March 2022, so things aren't fabulous.

Last time we talked, I reported that the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington had estimated the true number of daily new infections in the US is probably nine times the reported number. This week they're estimating only seven percent of positive tests are being detected, which makes case rates something like 14.5 times higher than the official numbers. Only time that detection rate has been this low was way back at the beginning when we didn't have any tests to speak of. While many states are completely disinterested in collecting positive test reports from at-home testing, I would still encourage you to report your positive test to your primary care provider. That person can assess your risk, attempt to acquire treatments for you if you are at risk for severe disease, and report the result if you live in a place that gives a damn about this stuff. These reports can also help public health officials plan for consequences of any surge noted.

We've talked since early on—April 2020—and repeatedly ever since about the potential for wastewater to serve as sort of an early-detection system for surges in Covid-19 cases. Most recently, we discussed this just last month in my Update #521 posted March 16 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/5750948708254821> when we took a look at the CDC's nationwide surveillance efforts. These grow in importance as we test and report such a small percentage of cases these days. If we hope to have any sort of line on what the virus is doing, we need detection methods that are independent of the traditional testing and reporting mechanisms we've been relying on for most of the pandemic. In places where this surveillance is underway, we can get a line on whether levels are rising or falling and which variants are circulating several days before anyone starts showing up with positive tests—and irrespective of whether they're getting tested at all. That seems like just what the doctor ordered.

Right now, the CDC's program is monitoring wastewater from sites that serve around 100 million people. We could cover a whole lot more of the population: Around 80 percent of households in the US are on sewer systems that can be sampled; however right now, fewer than half of states are reporting data to the CDC on a regular basis, and in some of these states, only one or two sites are being sampled. This means there's quite a lot of room for growth in the effectiveness of this tool. It takes funding and time to set these programs up; but the costs to run them are very reasonable. Whereas a single PCR test to diagnose one case costs well over \$100, the cost to run a sample from an entire community is around \$300. That's pretty good value for the dollar. What's more it detects virus from people who are having no symptoms at all; these are, for the most part, folks who will never get tested. It detects virus from people who don't have access to health care and who don't want to go for testing and who think they have a cold, but really have Covid-19.

As the children's book title says, "Everyone Poops," so virus from everyone who uses a public sewage system is detectable using wastewater surveillance. These data are available three or four days after the infected person flushes. They can't tell you precisely how many people or who are infected, but they can

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tell you if cases are doubling or tripling—or declining. One limitation is that 20 percent—the vast swaths of rural America where residents mostly use septic tanks—can't be sampled in this manner. Still, if you were to monitor sewage systems in a handful of larger towns/cities across even my very rural state where a whole lot of folks live out of town, you'd get a pretty good line on what's going on. We farm people do go to town, and while we're there, from time to time, we use a bathroom. Of course, we're also likely to spread our undetected infections while we're in town so that they'll turn up in the residents that way as well. So even out here in the hinterlands, I see some value at very reasonable cost.

Additionally, once you have a surveillance program in place, you can use it to track any number of other pathogens. We've had the technology for years, but never the return on investment to make this sort of thing practical for norovirus or antibiotic-resistant bacteria or E. coli, for example; but once the infrastructure's in place, it's fairly easy to broaden your scope. In fact one city, Tempe, Arizona, is tracking traces of albuterol, an asthma rescue medication, in wastewater. They've been using test results to spot locations around town where more trees are needed to improve air quality for residents. This means there are potential public health applications that extend even beyond infectious disease control and may well have value well after this nightmare has receded into history.

So what are we seeing around the country in our sewage? Increases, steady ones across most of the US. About two-thirds of testing sites that report are showing sustained growth in virus levels. The good news is that even now, as I mentioned above, we are not getting an accompanying bump in hospitalizations. Tracking these two things together can do a lot to help us get an idea how this new surge is going to go. More information is always better.

Pfizer and BioNTech announced on Thursday that they will ask for emergency use authorization (EUA) for a booster dose of their reduced vaccine dose for healthy children 5 to 11 years. They said a small (140 participant) study shows the booster at six months provides a 36-fold increase in antibody titers, a level that is effective against the Omicron variant. We should note here that their data have not yet been published or peer-reviewed; but application for EUA will trigger these processes.

I've read a paper in preprint from work done at the Medical University of Vienna that looks at antibodies generated in people infected with the Omicron variant. This preprint paper is in peer review right now. The findings were that both sublineages we've seen, BA.1 and BA.2, elicit antibodies that are variant-specific, that is, they neutralize only Omicron variant virus, not other variants. Worse, BA.2 infections are sublineage-specific too; they don't even really produce antibodies against BA.1. Two of the researchers, in an e-mail to Reuters, said the antibodies they saw "were very specific for the respective Omicron variant, and we detected almost no neutralizing antibodies targeting non-Omicron virus strains." What this means to those whose only immunity comes from prior infection with one of these two Omicron sublineages is that they have really no protection at all against whatever might come next unless it is very narrowly similar to Omicron. For the record, those with hybrid immunity, that is, elicited by a combination of vaccination and Omicron infection do have cross-neutralizing antibodies; it's the prior-infection-only folks who could see some serious trouble down the road. I'm left to consider the probability that an Omicron-specific vaccine might not be such a great plan then, which leads us right up to this next story. Read on.

We heard today from Moderna, which posted on a preprint server preliminary results from testing a redesigned vaccine; we will want to remember that being in preprint means the work has not yet been peer-reviewed. This phase 2/3 immunogenicity trial using 895 participants compared to a historical control group is for a bivalent (meaning it has two antigenic targets) vaccine named mRNA-1273.211 that incorporates (1) the same spike (S) proteins their currently-authorized vaccine (mRNA-1273) includes as well as (2) proteins from the Beta variant. Immunogenicity trials don't wait around for people to get sick and compute vaccine effectiveness; they simply raw blood at predetermined intervals and look for antibody responses to the vaccine given. If it seems crazy to include a virus like Beta that isn't even around anymore to speak of, you should know that many of the mutations turning up in the latest variants to emerge are also found in Beta, so it's not really crazy at all. This was an attempt to target just the sorts of spike proteins that we're seeing in new variants.

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This is a non-inferiority trial, which means they are trying, as a primary objective, to show this vaccine is at least as good as the current one (that is, non-inferior) when used as a booster dose. There is a secondary objective to show superiority, but of course, first you have to be non-inferior, right? There's a lot of statistical definition and gobbledegook around all of this, but these are the basic parameters.

Findings were that the reformulated vaccine, mRNA-1273.211, given around nine months after the primary mRNA-1273 series, "elicited higher neutralizing antibody responses" against the original wild-type virus, Beta, Delta, and Omicron than an mRNA-1273 booster did after 28 days and still higher against everything except Delta after 180 days. In science-speak, the non-inferiority criteria were met at both intervals against all variants tested; and the superiority criteria were met at the shorter interval against all the variants and at the longer interval against all except Delta. What's more, it could be these increased antibody levels are going to linger even longer than six months—seems likely if they haven't tapered off yet at this point, but they've only been measured for six months so far. That's pretty good durability with the possibility of more as we go along. There were no new safety concerns here that hadn't turned up with the mRNA-1273.

This is quite promising. The company intends to have final data within the next couple of months. If they want to have a supply of vaccine ready for fall boosting, they'll need to stay with the schedule. Time's ticking away: The regulatory process will take some time, even if expedited, and of course, production takes some time too. It helps that they're fairly well tooled up at high production capacity these days.

There's a new testing device that just received EUA from the FDA. It is the InspectIR Covid-19 Breathalyzer which can provide results from exhaled air within three minutes. This is not an at-home thing; it must be used under the supervision of a licensed health care provider. The device, which is about the size of a piece of carry-on luggage, tests with a combined technique using gas chromatography and mass spectrometry, which separates and identifies various components of exhaled breath. In a study of over 2400 individuals, symptomatic and asymptomatic, this test provided a negative predictive value of 99.3 percent (which means negative results are truly negative) and a positive predictive value of 91.2 percent with up to 160 tests per day; so it could be a valuable tool in screening large numbers of people because what you need for screening is to be sure negative test results are reliable. It appears positive tests might be best confirmed using a PCR test. Testing capacity is expected to increase quickly as the company expects to produce around 100 machines each week.

I've read a paper posted in preprint, so not yet peer-reviewed, from a research team in Israel who did some sophisticated laboratory analysis of SARS-CoV-2's tissue affinities and human tissue's innate immune responses to infection, looking specifically at the Delta and the Omicron variants. Because they were interested in tissue affinities and in the innate responses, there were two parts to this analysis.

What they did first in the laboratory was to establish nasal and lung tissues as organ cultures and infect separate cultures with the Delta variant and the Omicron variant, then observe how the viruses operated in those cultures. We should note that, because these organ cultures are relatively short-lived, only early events of infection could be modeled; nevertheless, the results are quite interesting. Findings were that in nasal cultures the two variants acted pretty much the same; but things were quite different in the lung culture where Delta was very able to replicate, but where Omicron's showed "reduced replicative competence." A virus that can't replicate in a tissue is very limited in its ability to do damage or cause disease in that tissue. Confocal microscopy, a very sophisticated electron microscopy technique that provides ultra-high resolution in a limited field, confirmed a "near-absence of infected cells in Omicron-infected tissues." This is a highly noteworthy finding.

This raises the question of why it is happening. The second part of the work explores this and involved measuring virus-induced innate immune responses in those organ models. It's been ages since we've talked about this stuff, so you may or may not recall that innate immune responses are the nonspecific (as to pathogen) first-line defenses in tissues that include the production of a group of cytokines called interferons or IFNs (because they interfere with viruses). Turns out in Omicron infection, one class of IFN in lung tissue, specifically IFN- $\lambda$ , is, as they say in the business, upregulated, which means its produc-



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tion is increased. Also, several interferon-stimulated genes (ISGs) in lung tissue are induced to pump out proteins with antiviral activity (MX1, IFI6, ISG15, and IFIT1) as well. Delta didn't do any of this. Interestingly, Omicron even induced a somewhat increased nonspecific response in the nasal culture too; and ultraviolet-inactivated Omicron retained the effect, that is, the virus did not have to be active or capable of replication to enhance these responses. They seem to be triggered by structural components of the virus after attachment and before its genes are even expressed in the host cell. In the words of the authors, "innate immune responses were remarkable and enhanced in the lung tissues against the Omicron variant, while [other variants] exhibited largely restricted responses."

Bottom line: "[R]eplication competence of Omicron in lung tissues is highly restricted compared to Delta and precedent VOC [variants of concern], whereas it remains relatively unchanged in nasal tissues. The susceptibility of the nasal viral entry site to Omicron may support person-to-person transmission, whereas its restricted replication in the lungs could contribute to the milder clinical course of Omicron." In normy-speak, the Omicron variant is as good at replicating in your nose as any other variant, but it has a very hard time setting up housekeeping in your lungs. That's why you can get infected and spread it so easily, even while it is generally bad at making you really sick. This fits with what we've observed out in the world; it's just that now we have a line on why it happens that way.

With so much changing these days, we should review CDC guidelines for precautions. Here's what I have.

(1) Masking guidelines are based on new hospital admissions, hospital capacity, and new cases. The CDC has an online tool for assessing your county's risk level. You can access it at this link: <https://www.cdc.gov/.../science/community-levels.html>....

(2) If you've been exposed to a positive-tested case: (a) If you're unvaccinated or unboosted, quarantine for five days. Get a test at any point symptoms become evident. If you do not develop symptoms, get tested after five days. In any case, wear a mask indoors around others and avoid travel for at least 10 days. (b) If you're vaccinated and boosted, there is no need to quarantine, but if you develop symptoms, get tested as soon as possible, and irrespective of symptoms, wear a mask around others for 10 days. (c) If you've tested positive in the 90 days prior, irrespective of vaccination status, no need to quarantine or get tested, but you should wear a mask around others for 10 days.

(3) If you have symptoms, get tested and isolate for at least five days; then wear a mask around others and avoid travel for an additional five days for a total of 10 days. After five days and, when you've been free of fever without medications for 24 hours and symptoms are improving, you can end isolation.

(4) If you test positive, isolate for at least five days, wearing a mask around others and avoiding travel. If you develop symptoms, start your five-day period over on the next day. Notify close contacts, even those who wore a mask around you. Stay in a separate room from housemates, and use a separate bathroom if possible. Wear a mask around others, including housemates. Improve ventilation by opening doors and windows if you can, and consider using a filter or portable air cleaner to protect others. If you are at high risk for developing severe disease, seek treatment quickly; the available medications are only known to be effective if begun within about five days after symptoms appear. The available drugs are Paxlovid and Lagevrio (molnupiravir). Go to the hospital if you have severe symptoms that may require quick care, for example, difficulty breathing, pain or pressure in the chest, gray or blue coloration in your skin, lips, or nail beds. Test again five days after your positive test; if it is negative, you may end isolation, but should still wear a mask for a further five days. If you test positive again, extend your isolation for another five days to 10 days total.

(5) If you are immunocompromised, isolate for 10 to 20 days after symptoms begin, relying on your physician's advice as to the steps you should take.

We have an update on that hybrid of BA.1 and Ba.2, XE. We talked a little about this in my Update #526 posted April 5 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/5806375236045501>. You may recall that this is a recombinant virus, that is, one produced by exchange of genetic material between variants co-infecting the same cell. Today we see many more cases in the UK than we had when I last wrote about it; they're up to 1179 of them now. There have been a few cases here and there in the world; these are

thought to be related to travel from the UK, but they're going to pose a threat wherever they land if they are more transmissible than the currently-circulating variants. So far, they seem to be slightly more transmissible than the BA.2 sublineage of the Omicron variant; but the data set is still too limited to draw any firm comparisons. We can say that, from available data, there is no reason to think this hybrid is going to cause more severe disease. This does point up, however, the need for a new generation of vaccines more targeted to at-risk situations. We can hope one of those in development, like the one we've already discussed today, can get that job done.

We're still watching to see what happens next, and no one's exactly sure which way this will go. My guess is it will be neither as bad as some expect nor as good as others predict. Keep yourself safe, and we'll talk again.

## Senior Legion Coach Wanted



**Groton Legion Post #39 is seeking qualified applicants for Head Coach for the Groton Legion Post #39 Senior Baseball Team. The applicant must have previous coaching experience. The application period will close on April 29, 2022.**

**Applications can be picked up at Groton City Hall and mailed to:  
Doug Hamilton  
411 N. 4th St.  
Groton, SD 57445**

## Garbage rates going up now, surcharge may be removed by October

The garbage rates will be increasing from \$13.50 to \$16.50 a month due to the increase in rates from Heartland Solid Waste Management. But there may be a glimmer of good news.

The city will be receiving grant monies to the tune of nearly \$900,000 for this year's water project. That will pay for most of the \$1.3 million loan. Councilman David Blackmun said the way he figures it, by October, the monthly \$8.50 surcharge could be removed. In addition, there will be two loans that will be paid off this year resulting in freeing up \$60,000 a year.

Waste Water Superintendent Dwight Zerr put a request for an increase to his budget. His budget was slashed due to the change in the grant program which will now all go to water. There is an excess of about \$50,000 in the pool budget so the council authorized a transfer of \$30,000 from the pool fund to the waste water fund to help with getting some camera work done this year. That will help dictate what needs to be done next year. Zerr also pointed out that if there is future development, the city's lagoon will need to be expanded. The city already owns the land and a fourth cell could be added, but it is something that may need to be considered.

There was discussion on installing water services at the Groton Municipal Airport. City Supervisor Terry Herron reported that. BDM offered to bore the road and install a water pit inside the airport property. That will cost \$4,000. The proposed building site would be an additional 1,300 feet north and the city would have to trench in a two-inch water line from the water pit to the building site. The council gave the go ahead for the water pit.

The city's street resurfacing project will be reduced in price. Prices came in higher than expected. The original proposed project had 56 blocks to be done, but the budget and the cost will reduce that project down to 40 blocks this year. The budget for street resurfacing is \$125,000.

There was discussion on the insurance for the spring baseball program. City Attorney Drew Johnson read a note from the South Dakota Public Assurance, which is the city's liability insurance carrier. It states that any outside group (defined as not being sponsored by the city), will need to have \$1 million liability insurance to protect this city's interest.

Valerie Baker and Beverly Sombke came before the council to discuss the possibility of a community garden. It was suggested that the property south of the community center would be a good place. But as discussion continued, other areas were also discussed. The plots would be 8'x22' and the charge would be \$10 plus water. More research will need to be done.



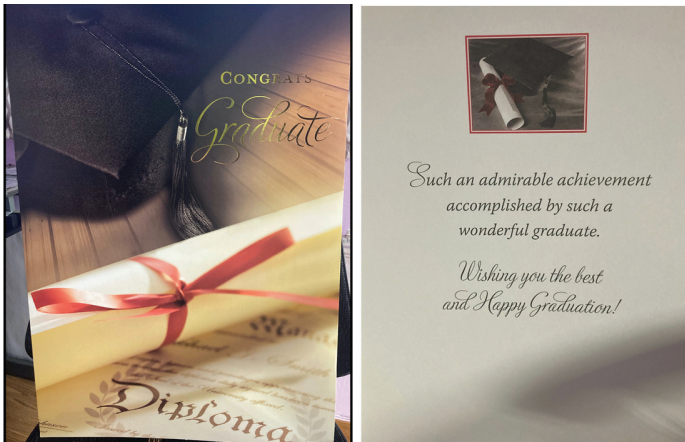
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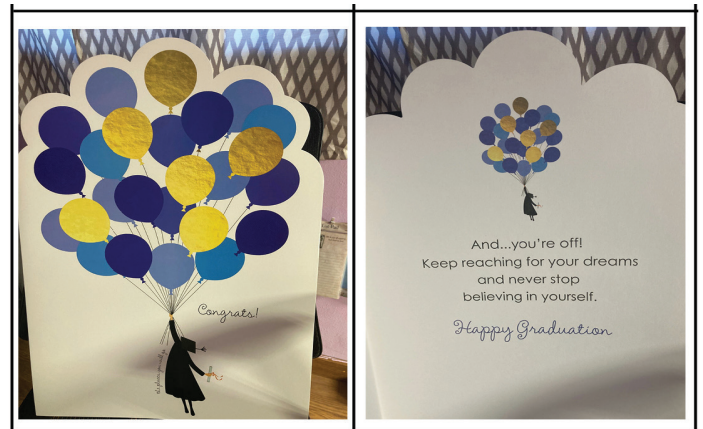
## Jumbo Graduation Cards

Only \$7.99 each ~ Card Size: 16.25" x 24"

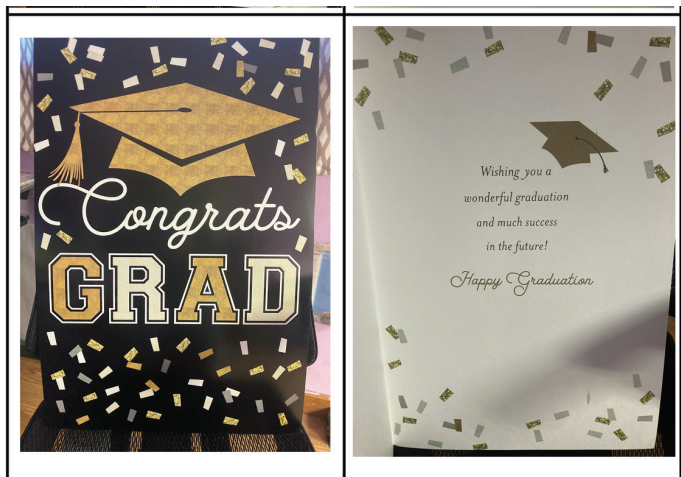
Can now be ordered on-line at [397news.com](http://397news.com) - Link on Black Bar  
Or Call/Text Paul at 605-397-7460 or Tina at 605-397-7285  
to reserve your card(s)



50-9903-C  
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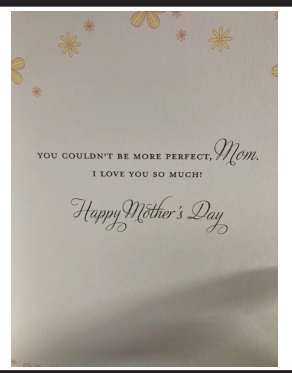
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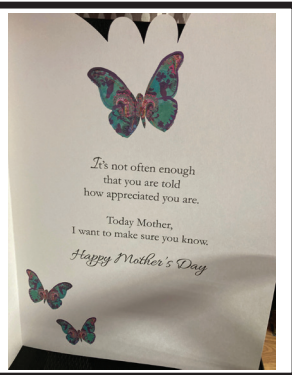
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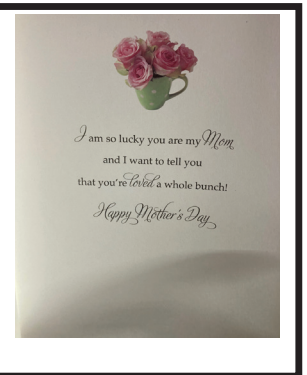
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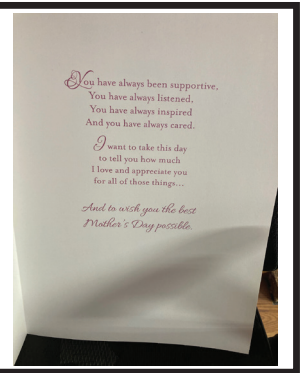
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## Groton City March Financial Report

March 2022

Dacotah Bank Checking Acct	\$ 3,714,037.83
General Cash	\$ 300.00
SD FIT Acct	\$ 1,554,881.31
Dacotah Bank Water CD	\$ 85,379.54
Cemetery Perp Care CD	\$ 32,876.69
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 5,387,475.37</b>

Invested In		
Cash	\$ 300.00	0.01%
Dacotah Bank	\$ 3,832,294.06	71.13%
SD Fit	\$ 1,554,881.31	28.86%
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 5,387,475.37</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

	Beginning	Revenue	Expenses	Transfers	Ending
	Cash Balance				Cash Balance
General	\$ 978,613.23	\$ 142,671.02	\$ 59,408.44		\$ 1,061,875.81
Bed, Board, Booze Tax	\$ 125,334.28	\$ 1,687.43			\$ 127,021.71
Baseball Uniforms	\$ 1,710.20				\$ 1,710.20
Airport	\$ 6,792.05	\$ 17,750.77			\$ 24,542.82
**Debt Service	\$ (56,938.80)	\$ 653.55			\$ (56,285.25)
Cemetery Perpetual Care	\$ 34,756.69				\$ 34,756.69
Water Tower	\$ 180,000.00				\$ 180,000.00
Water	\$ 277,687.20	\$ 274,606.68	\$ 52,816.87		\$ 499,477.01
Electric	\$ 2,725,915.17	\$ 174,739.58	\$ 97,290.97		\$ 2,803,363.78
Wastewater	\$ 468,118.17	\$ 18,560.06	\$ 149.32		\$ 486,528.91
Solid Waste	\$ 39,344.64	\$ 10,500.77	\$ 8,225.59		\$ 41,619.82
Family Crisis	\$ 10,873.92		\$ 40.00		\$ 10,833.92
Sales Tax	\$ 11,748.59	\$ 10,791.30	\$ 10,716.91		\$ 11,822.98
Employment	\$ (5,028.65)		\$ 731.25		\$ (4,297.40)
Utility Prepayments	\$ 75,536.28	\$ (899.02)			\$ 74,637.26
Utility Deposits	\$ 88,843.01	\$ 1,000.00	\$ 500.00		\$ 89,343.01
Other	\$ 524.10				\$ 524.10
<b>Totals</b>	<b>\$ 4,963,830.08</b>	<b>\$ 652,062.14</b>	<b>\$ 229,879.35</b>	<b>\$ -</b>	<b>\$ 5,387,475.37</b>

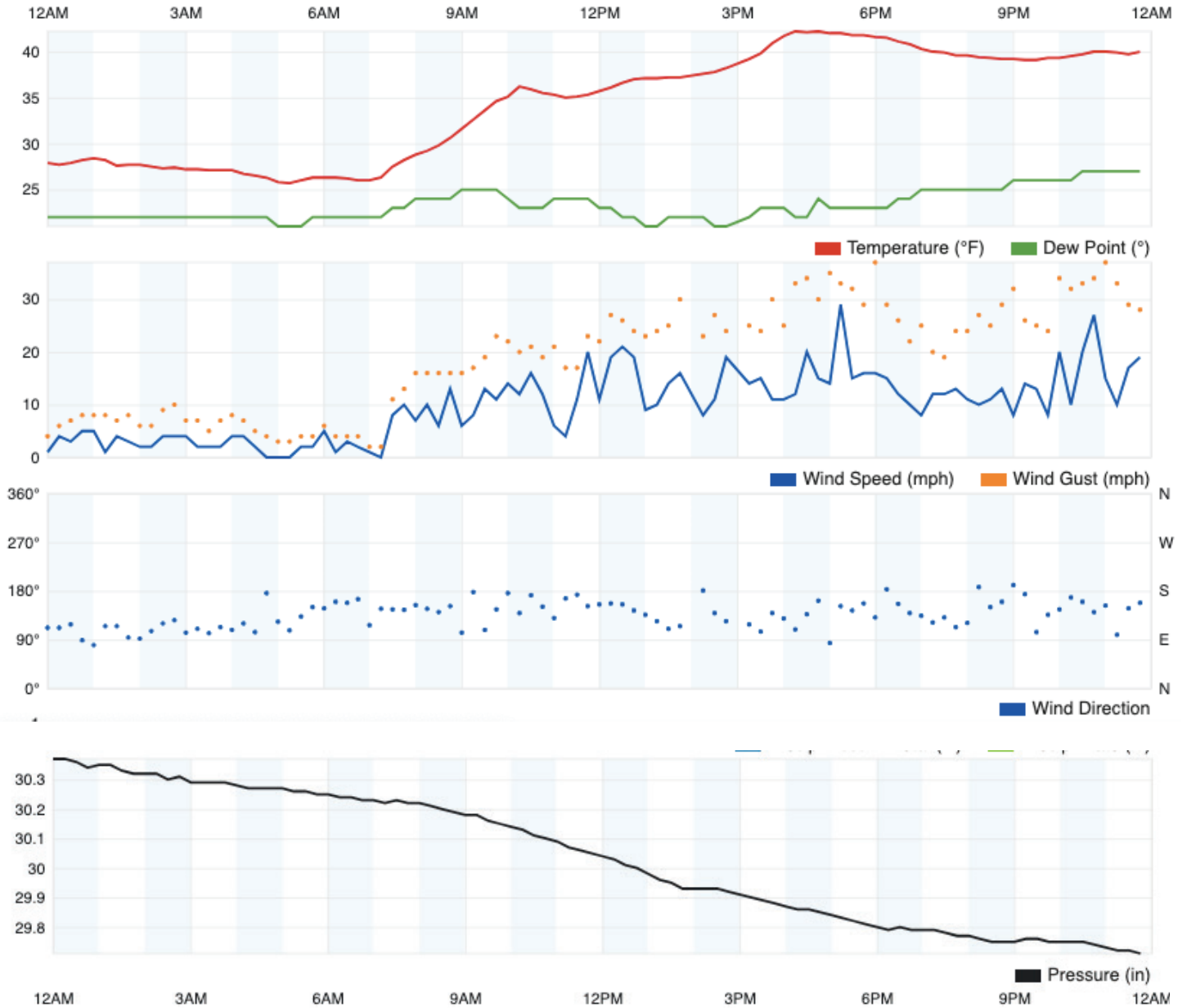
**Debt to be Paid	
**2015 Refinance	\$ 1,972,637.49 by 12/1/2035
**West Sewer	\$ 40,320.11 by 10/15/2022
**RR Sewer Crossing	\$ 20,521.91 by 7/15/22
<b>Total Debt</b>	<b>\$ 2,033,479.51</b>

\$131,884.64 ARPA GRANT (Received to General)  
 \$89,223.86 Water tower loan payment

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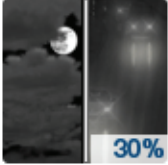

## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs





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Wednesday	Wednesday Night	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday
				
70%			30%	40% 40%
Breezy. Rain Likely then Becoming Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Sunny	Mostly Cloudy then Chance Rain	Breezy. Chance Rain then Chance T-storms
High: 59 °F	Low: 31 °F	High: 54 °F	Low: 42 °F	High: 62 °F

## Wednesday, April 20<sup>th</sup>

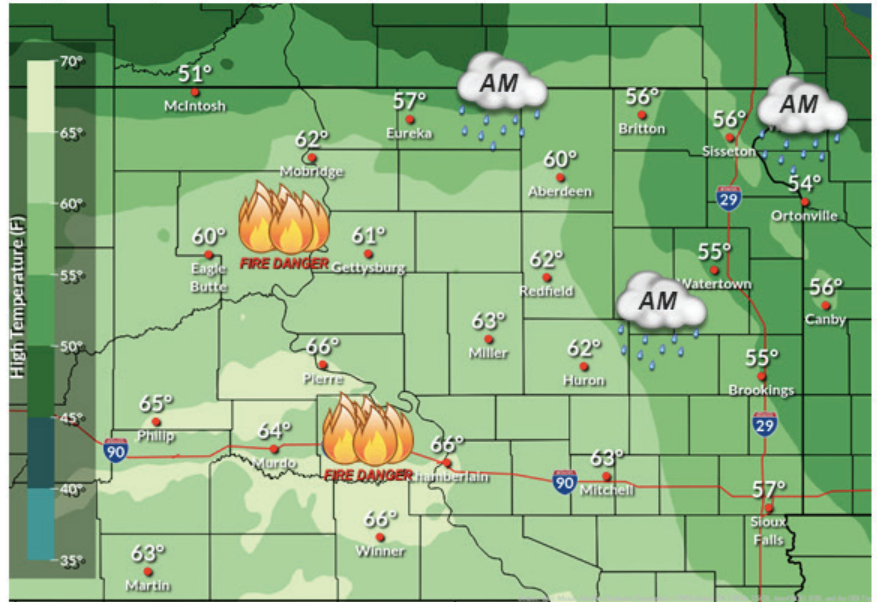
### Forecast

- 0.25 to 0.50" plus of rain along and east of the James River Valley by the time rain ends in the early afternoon
- Very high grassland fire danger across central SD this afternoon due to breezy winds and dry air & fuels

### Impacts

- Fires have the potential to ignite easily from any spark, cigarette, flying ember (including from burning barrels/pits), etc.
- Any fires that form will spread easily

### High Temperatures and Weather



 National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD

While rain will continue through the morning across northeastern SD, central SD should stay mostly dry. Grassland fire danger will be elevated across central SD both this afternoon and Thursday afternoon due to breezy winds and dry air and fuels.

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## Today in Weather History

April 20, 1966: Canadian high pressure brought frigid air to the Rockies and northern Plains. Record lows included: 3 below in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, two below in Cheyenne and Casper, Wyoming, two above in Rapid City, 11 above in Fargo, Williston, and Aberdeen, and 15 in Huron.

April 20, 2007: Severe thunderstorms moved through parts of central and northeast South Dakota during the afternoon and evening hours, producing large hail. The most significant hail measured 1.75 inches in diameter and fell 3 miles east of Westport, in Brown County.

1901 - A spring storm produced unusually heavy snow in northeast Ohio. Warren received 35.5 inches in thirty-six hours, and 28 inches fell at Green Hill. Akron OH established April records of 15.6 inches in 24 hours, and 26.6 inches for the month. Pittsburgh PA established April records of 12.7 inches in 24 hours, and 13.5 inches for the month. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1912: A tornado moved north-northeast from 5 miles southeast of Rush Center, KS across the east half of Bison, KS. Farms were wiped out near Rush Center. The loss at Bison was \$70,000 as half of the town, about 50 homes, were damaged or destroyed. There were 15 injuries in town. A dozen farms were nearly wiped out. Debris from the farmhouses was carried for 8 miles. A senior man who made light of the storm was killed with his granddaughter on a farm 2 miles southwest of Bison.

1920: Tornadoes in Mississippi and Alabama killed 219 persons. Six tornadoes of F4 intensity were reported. Aberdeen, Mississippi was hard hit by an F4 tornado that killed 22 people. This same tornado killed 20 in Marion County, Alabama. Nine people in one family died in Winston County, Alabama.

1952 - The tankers Esso Suez and Esso Greensboro crashed in a thick fog off the coast of Morgan City LA. Only five of the Greensboro's crew survived after the ship bursts into flame. (David Ludlum)

1984: A temperature of 106 degrees at Del Rio, Texas set a new record high for April.

1987 - Fifty-two cities in the central and eastern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date. The high of 92 degrees at Memphis TN was a record for April, and the high of 94 at Little Rock AR equalled their April record. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - A storm in the western U.S. brought heavy rain to parts of California. Mount Wilson was soaked with 4.15 inches of rain in 24 hours. The heavy rain caused some flooding and mudslides in the Los Angeles area, and a chain reaction collision of vehicles along the Pomona Freeway which resulted in 26 injuries. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Hot weather spread from the southwestern U.S. into the Great Plains Region. Twenty-three cities reported new record high temperatures for the date. The afternoon high of 104 degrees at Tucson AZ was an April record, and highs of 87 at Provo UT, 90 at Pueblo CO, and 85 at Salt Lake City UT, equalled April records. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - A fast moving Pacific storm produced heavy snow in the central mountains and the Upper Arkansas Valley of Colorado, with a foot of snow reported at Leadville. Thunderstorms in the south central U.S. produced wind gusts to 76 mph at Tulsa OK, and heavy rain which caused flooding of Cat Claw Creek in the Abilene TX area. Lightning struck the building housing a fish farm in Scott AR killing 10,000 pounds of fish. Many of the fish died from the heat of the fire. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2004: A strong F3 tornado moved across the town of Utica, near LaSalle-Peru in north-central Illinois. This tornado destroyed several homes, a machinery building, and a tavern. The roof of the tavern collapsed, killing eight people inside; many of these people had come into town from nearby mobile homes, seeking sturdier shelter. The tornado dissipated on a steep bluff on the northeast side of the city. Another tornado developed shortly afterward, crossing I-80 near Ottawa. Several other tornadoes developed across north central and northeast Illinois, affecting areas around Joliet and Kankakee.

2006 - Up to five feet of snow falls in the Dakotas. I-94 and other highways were closed, power was out for thousands and caused at least four deaths.

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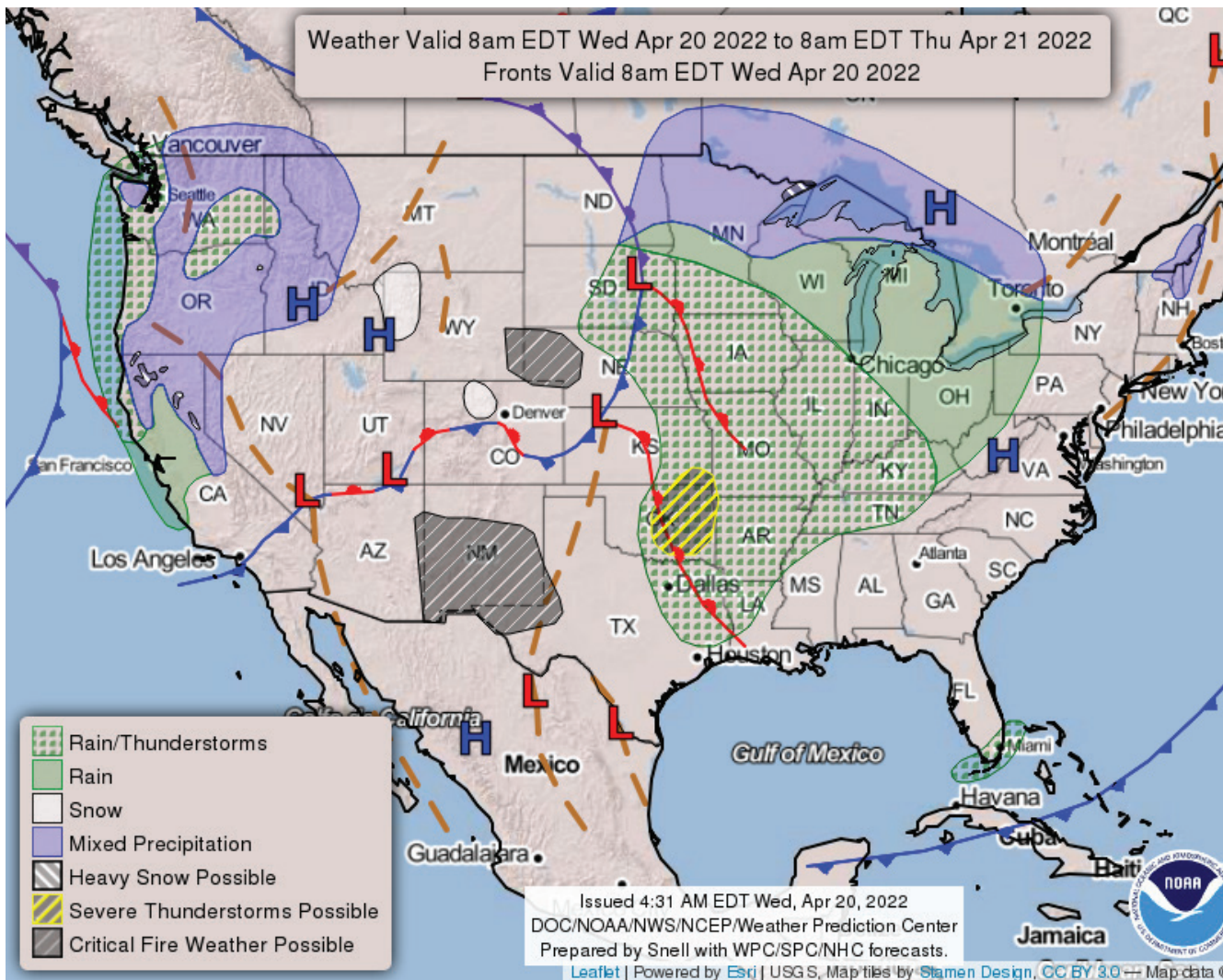
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 42 °F at 4:14 PM**  
**Low Temp: 26 °F at 5:05 AM**  
**Wind: 37 mph at 5:57 PM**  
**Precip: 0.00**

Day length: 13 hours, 50 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 93 in 1980  
Record Low: 11 in 2013  
Average High: 60°F  
Average Low: 33°F  
Average Precip in April.: 1.04  
Precip to date in April.: 1.79  
Average Precip to date: 3.10  
Precip Year to Date: 3.59  
Sunset Tonight: 8:26:24 PM  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:34:24 AM





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## WILL POWER OR HIS POWER?

"It's no use," said Tom to his youth minister. "I'm unable to resist the temptation to sin. I've tried again and again to resist the devil and run from him when I'm tempted, but it never works. Something must be wrong with my willpower, so why should I try any longer?"

"Perhaps that's the problem - trying to resist temptation with 'willpower.' No doubt it's time to turn to God's power," said Jeremy.

Then he opened his Bible to Psalm 138:3 and read, "As soon as I pray, you answer me; You encourage me by giving me strength."

The Psalmist had it right: Rather than using his power, he depended on God for His power. And as we read that verse, we can learn from his struggle how to be faithful to God. There must have been a period in the life of the Psalmist when he tried to "make it on his own" and was unsuccessful. From his failure came his success because he was willing to turn from will-power to God-power. Notice that he wrote, "As soon as I pray..."

He learned an important "life-lesson." He could not resist the temptation to sin if he depended on himself. But "as soon as" he turned from himself to his Savior, he got exactly what he needed: "encouragement and strength" that comes only from God. So, he literally "gave up" on himself and his willpower. His power did not work.

There is nothing that pleases God more than for one of His children to depend on Him for "survival." And, we must never forget that "as soon as" we call, He answers!

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to be strong enough to be weak and to call on You for encouragement and strength. Make us aware of our own limits, and Your boundless love. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: As soon as I pray, you answer me; you encourage me by giving me strength. Psalm 138:3

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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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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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## News from the Associated Press

### SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

02-09-33-47-53, Mega Ball: 24, Megaplier: 3

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

Estimated jackpot: \$20 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$370 million

### Ethics complaints against Noem to be discussed in May

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A board that investigates complaints against South Dakota officials is scheduled to take up a pair of ethics complaints against Gov. Kristi Noem in May.

Noem had until last Friday to respond to complaints alleging she misused state airplanes for personal use and that she improperly interfered with a state agency that was evaluating her daughter's application for a real estate appraiser license.

Neither Noem nor members of the South Dakota Government Accountability Board would say whether Noem responded by the deadline, the Argus Leader reported.

Noem has insisted she has done nothing wrong.

The board is scheduled to discuss both complaints at its May 2 meeting in Sioux Falls.

The board keeps the details of the complaints secret unless it decides they warrant a public hearing. In the past, it has dismissed complaints without requiring the targeted officials to respond to them.

Assistant Attorney General Katie Mallery, who serves as the board's liaison, said Noem's April 15 deadline remained in place, though she declined to say whether any response or responses were received by the board.

Noem's spokesman, Ian Fury, said the confidential nature of the board's work prohibits him or the governor from answering questions related to the complaints.

Members of the Government Accountability Board, which was created in 2017, are appointed by the governor with consent of the state Senate. Noem's lone appointment on the board, retired South Dakota Supreme Court Chief Justice David Gilbertson, has been abstaining from voting on complaints involving her.

Noem is accused of repeatedly using state-owned airplanes for personal travel since taking office in 2019. She has also faced repeated allegations that she abused her authority to give an advantage to her daughter, who'd been struggling to become certified as a state real estate appraiser through the Department of Labor and Regulation.

Former director of the state appraiser certification program, Sherry Bren, abruptly retired in March 2021, months after a closed-door meeting with Noem and her daughter.

### Division II star emerges among NFL's small-school prospects

By MICHAEL MAROT AP Sports Writer

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Fayetteville State cornerback Joshua Williams recites the Kyle Dugger story as if he wrote the book.

He talks about how the late-blooming safety chose to play Division II football in small town North Carolina after receiving just three scholarship offers. And how Dugger went from being an overlooked prep recruit to a second-round draft pick in just a few years.

So as Williams watched Dugger's journey from less than 200 miles away in Fayetteville, North Carolina,

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the budding cornerback figured he would follow Dugger's lead. Next week, it could become a reality.

"He ended up in New England and is doing great things now," Williams said during the NFL's annual scouting combine in March. "He went to the Senior Bowl like me, he went to the combine like me, and I'm hoping maybe I can follow in his footsteps and showcase my talents the same way he did."

There are many similarities between Williams and Dugger.

Both have the long, lanky body frames scouts want in defensive backs, possess top-end speed, and needed to prove they could outplay the more familiar big-time college names.

Dugger convinced the Patriots he was good enough in 2020. Now, it's Williams' turn.

NFL.com gives the 6-foot-3, 197-pound Williams a grade of 6.18 — an above-average backup who may eventually become a starter — though it's unclear where that puts him in next week's draft.

Still, Williams has already achieved more than most people ever expected.

The son of a track coach, he grew up in Fayetteville, a military town where nearly 20% of residents live in poverty. Locals follow basketball more than football and while Williams certainly looks as if he might have succeeded on the court, his dream always was to play in the NFL.

So after moving from receiver to defensive back as a high school senior, Williams went to a South Carolina prep school for one season before returning home.

It's a 10-minute drive from Fort Bragg Army Base to the Broncos' campus. The 5,000-seat Luther "Nick" Jeralds Stadium seems more suited to hosting a large high school game than college stars. But it was this turf that helped Williams emerge as a legitimate draft prospect and possibly the league's next big star from a historically Black college or university.

The list includes Hall of Famers such as the late Walter Payton of Jackson State, Jerry Rice of Mississippi Valley State, and Donnie Shell of South Carolina State, along with Super Bowl champs such as Ed "Too Tall" Jones of Tennessee State and Doug Williams of Grambling.

Last year, though, no players from HBCU schools were taken in the draft. The shutout prompted league officials to put a higher emphasis on those players at the Senior Bowl and the HBCU All-Star game in New Orleans.

This year, four players made the combine cut: Williams, defensive backs Markquese Bell of Florida A&M and Decobie Durant of South Carolina State, and offensive lineman Ja'Tyre Carter of Southern. Each understands the long odds they overcame to reach this point and the even longer odds they face in trying to replicate the success of Indianapolis Colts linebacker and South Carolina State grad Darius Leonard, a three-time All-Pro.

"Me and Darius, we always talk," said Durant, a high school quarterback. "He talks about keeping your mindset and going in and having that dog mentality, no matter the school, no matter the size, no matter the speed. Everybody's always got something bad to say, so just overcome the critics."

Even after getting noticed by the league's scouts, it hasn't been easy.

Durant traveled to the University of South Carolina for his pro day workout. Williams, who ran the 40-yard dash in 4.53 seconds at Indianapolis, then wound up at North Carolina State where he performed drills against the Wolfpack's top players. One of those, offensive tackle Ikem Ekwonu, is a top-five talent who some have discussed going No. 1 overall. Williams didn't flinch.

"I'm just appreciative they let me utilize their facilities," he said.

This year's list of small-school talent doesn't begin or end with the HBCU prospects.

Offensive lineman Trevor Penning of Northern Iowa and receiver Christian Watson of North Dakota State, two FCS schools, could be first-rounders. Tyler Smith of Tulsa and Cole Strange of Chattanooga, FCS offensive linemen, could go in Round 2.

Pierre Strong of South Dakota State, Adam Vinatieri's alma mater, impressed the league's decision-makers by completing the 40-yard dash in 4.37 seconds at the combine. He tied Isaih Pacheco of Rutgers for the fastest time among running backs.

Then there's Williams, who saw former college teammate Kion Smith sign with the Miami Dolphins as an undrafted rookie last year. Williams knows it could happen to him, too.

But after seeing Dugger's blueprint, Williams believes he will become the first Fayetteville State draftee

since the New York Jets took running back James Godwin in Round 16 in 1976.

"I want to put my best foot forward coming from Division II, a smaller school, showing what I have to offer, that there's no knock against D-II football," he said. "I want to show everyone I'm just as talented, if not more talented, than these other guys."

## 5 defendants accept plea deals in Porcupine overdose death

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Five defendants charged in the fentanyl death of a teen in Porcupine have accepted plea deals in the case.

The five have pleaded guilty to conspiracy to distribute a controlled substance in the death of 16-year-old Louis Sandoval.

A federal grand jury indicted 24-year-old Tarriah Provost, Donna Garnette, 25-year-old Kelly Grass, Jesse Grass and 30-year-old Kimberly Janis, with conspiracy to distribute a controlled substance, distribution of a controlled substance resulting in death, and distribution of a controlled substance to an individual under 21.

Court documents state that Provost is the one who physically supplied Sandoval with fentanyl, the Rapid City Journal reported.

A factual basis statement filed in the case states Provost purchased at least two blue fentanyl pills and that she and Sandoval "ingested one of the pills together in her car" outside of Sandoval's grandmother's residence in Porcupine on the evening before the teen was found dead of fentanyl toxicity.

Provost purchased the fentanyl pills from Donna Garnette at the home of Kelly Grass. Both Garnette and Grass have pleaded guilty to conspiracy to distribute a controlled substance.

A federal judge has sentenced Grass to nearly five years in prison. Sentencing is pending for the other defendants. They are facing up to 20 years in prison, a \$1,000,000 fine, or both.

## Ukraine war refugees top 5 million as assault intensifies

By MONIKA SCISLOWSKA and RAFAL NIEDZIELSKI Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — After spending weeks with no electricity or water in the basement of her family's home in Ukraine, Viktoriya Savyichkina made a daring escape from the besieged city of Mariupol with her 9- and 14-year-old daughters.

Their dwelling for now is a huge convention center in Poland's capital. Savyichkina said she saw a photo of the home in Mariupol destroyed. From a camp bed in a foreign country, the 40-year-old bookkeeper thinks about restarting her and her children's lives from square one.

"I don't even know where we are going, how it will turn out," Savyichkina said. "I would like to go home, of course. Maybe here, I will enjoy it in Poland."

With the war in Ukraine approaching eight weeks, more than 5 million people have fled the country since Russian troops invaded on Feb. 24, the U.N. refugee agency reported Wednesday. When the number reached 4 million on March 30, the exodus exceeded the worst-case predictions of the Geneva-based U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

The even bigger milestone in Europe's biggest refugee crisis since World War II was reached as Russia unleashed a full-scale offensive in eastern Ukraine that will disrupt and end more lives.

Ukraine had a pre-war population of 44 million, and UNHCR says the conflict has displaced more than 7 million people within Ukraine along with the 5.03 million who had left as of Wednesday. According to the agency, 13 million people are believed to be trapped in the war-affected areas of Ukraine.

"We've seen about a quarter of Ukraine's population, more than 12 million people in total, have been forced to flee their homes, so this is a staggering amount of people," UNHCR spokesperson Shabia Mantoo told The Associated Press.

More than half of the refugees, over 2.8 million, fled at least at first to Poland. They are eligible for national ID numbers that entitle them to work, to free health care, schooling and bonuses for families with children.

Although many of have stayed there, an unknown number have traveled on to other countries. Savyichkina said she is thinking about taking her daughters to Germany.



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"We hope we can live there, send children to school, find work and start life from zero," she said inside the vast premises of the Global EXPO Center in Warsaw, which is providing basic accommodations for about 800 refugees.

If "everything goes well, if the children like it first of all, then we will stay. If not..." Savyichkina said.

Further south, Hungary has emerged as a major transit point for Ukrainian refugees. Out of more than 465,000 who arrived, some 16,400 have applied for protected status, meaning they want to stay. Many are members of the ethnic Hungarian minority in Ukraine.

Hungary's government says it has provided around \$8.7 million to several charitable organizations and is giving subsidies to companies that employ Ukrainians granted asylum.

In March, a non-governmental organization, Migration Aid, rented an entire five-story building in Budapest, a former workers' hostel, to provide temporary accommodation for people escaping the war in Ukraine. It has helped some 4,000 refugees so far.

Tatiana Shulieva, 67, a retired epidemiologist who fled from Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine and wants to travel on to Egypt, said the night she spent in the hostel was "like a fairytale" after having sheltered in a basement for weeks to escape constant shelling.

Neighboring Romania has received over 750,000 refugees from Ukraine. Oxana Cotus, who fled the southern Ukrainian city of Mykolaiv with her four small children, initially decided to go to Denmark but ended up in Bucharest because she speaks Romanian and didn't want to be far from Ukraine.

She praised the help she received from the International Red Cross in helping her relocate and get settled.

The European nations hosting refugees say they need international help to manage the challenge, especially now as Russia has intensified attacks in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region.

"If we have a second wave of refugees, then a real problem will come because we are at capacity. We cannot accept more," Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski told The Associated Press.

About 300,000 war refugees are in the city of some 1.8 million, most of them staying in private homes, Trzaskowski said. Warsaw residents expected to host refugees for a few months, but not indefinitely, he said.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki was in Lviv, Ukraine, on Tuesday, visiting a refugee center made of mobile modules that the governments of Ukraine and Poland jointly built to house displaced individuals who do not want to leave Ukraine.

Organizations for refugees say the best help would be for the war to stop.

"Unfortunately, without an immediate end to the fighting, the unspeakable suffering and mass displacement that we are seeing will only get worse," UNHCR's Muntoo said.

Data from Poland show that some 738,000 people have crossed back into Ukraine during the war. Some of them shuttle back and forth to do shopping in Poland, while others return to Ukraine to check on relatives and property, electing to either stay or depart again depending on what they find.

More than half of the refugees from Ukraine are children, according to UNHCR. Thousands of civilians, including children, have been killed or wounded in shelling and air strikes.

Muntoo, called the "outpouring of support and the generosity" shown to arriving Ukrainian refugees has been "remarkable."

"But what is important is that it is sustained and that it is channelled across to ensure that refugees are enabled to receive that support while the fighting continues, while they are unable to return home," she said.

## Shanghai allows 4 million out of homes as virus rules ease

By JOE McDONALD Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Shanghai allowed 4 million more people out of their homes Wednesday as anti-virus controls that shut down China's biggest city eased, while the International Monetary Fund cut its forecast of Chinese economic growth and warned the global flow of industrial goods might be disrupted.

A total of almost 12 million people in the city of 25 million are allowed to go outdoors following the first round of easing last week, health official Wu Ganyu said at a news conference. Wu said the virus was

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"under effective control" for the first time in some parts of the city.

Under the latest changes, more than 4 million people are included in areas where the status shifted from closed to controlled, said Wu. He said some are not allowed to leave their neighborhoods and large gatherings are prohibited.

Meanwhile, the IMF reduced its forecast of Chinese growth this year to 4.4% from 4.8% due to the shutdowns of Shanghai and other industrial centers. That is down by almost half from last year's 8.1% growth and below the ruling Communist Party's 5.5% target.

China's case numbers in its latest infection surge are relatively low, but the ruling party is enforcing a "zero-COVID" strategy that has shut down major cities to isolate every case.

On Wednesday, the government reported 19,927 new cases in China's mainland, all but 2,761 of which had no symptoms. Shanghai accounted for 95% of the total, or 18,902 cases, of which 2,495 had symptoms.

The Shanghai city health agency reported seven people who had COVID-19 died Tuesday but said the deaths were due to cancer, heart disease and other ailments. All but two were over 60.

Shanghai shut down businesses and confined most of its population to their homes starting March 28 after a spike in infections. That led to complaints about lack of access to supplies of food and medicine. People in Shanghai who test positive but have no symptoms have been ordered into quarantine centers set up in exhibition halls and other public buildings.

Official data this week showed economic growth in the first three months of this year declined compared with the final quarter of 2021.

The lockdowns in China "will likely compound supply disruptions elsewhere" and might add to pressure for inflation to rise, the IMF said in a report.

The ruling party has promised tax refunds and other aid to businesses but is avoiding large-scale stimulus spending. Economists say that strategy will take longer to show results and Beijing might need to spend more or cut interest rates.

Chinese leaders have promised to try to reduce the human and economic cost of anti-disease controls by shifting to a "dynamic clearing" strategy that isolates neighborhoods and other smaller areas instead of whole cities. However, many areas appear to be enforcing more stringent controls after Shanghai officials were criticized for not acting aggressively enough.

Also Wednesday, the Ministry of Agriculture ordered local officials to avoid any measures that might interfere with spring planting by farmers who feed China's 1.4 billion people. The order followed warnings that production of wheat and other crops might be disrupted, which would boost demand for imports and push up already high global prices.

The government reported 26,760 people who tested positive but had no symptoms were released Wednesday from observation. That included 25,411 in Shanghai, where some residents of quarantine centers have complained they are unsanitary.

Other industrial and trading centers including Changchun, Jilin and Shenyang in the northeast, the port of Tianjin east of Beijing and Shenzhen and Guangzhou in the south have closed businesses, imposed travel restrictions or told residents to stay home.

Global automakers and other manufacturers reduced or stopped production because suppliers couldn't deliver.

This week, Volkswagen AG announced its Changchun factory resumed production and the automaker was considering when its Shanghai facility would reopen. BMW AG said its factory in Shenyang reopened.

While some cities were easing controls, the the government of Harbin, a city of 5.3 million in the northeast, suspended bus and subway service on Wednesday and barred the public from moving between districts.

## Russia pressures Mariupol as it focuses on Ukraine's east

By ADAM SCHRECK Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian forces pressured a stubborn pocket of resistance in Mariupol amid renewed hopes Wednesday for an evacuation of thousands of civilians from the shattered port city that is

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a key battleground in Moscow's new onslaught to take control of Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland.

In addition to pounding Mariupol, Russian forces have intensified their attacks along a boomerang-shaped front hundreds of miles long in what is known as the Donbas, home to coal mines, metal plants and factories vital to Ukraine's economy.

If successful, the offensive would give President Vladimir Putin a badly needed victory following the failed attempt by Moscow's forces to storm the capital, Kyiv, and stronger-than-expected resistance in the nearly two-month war.

Ukrainian troops said Tuesday the Russian military dropped heavy bombs to flatten what was left of a sprawling steel plant — believed to be the last holdout of troops defending Mariupol — and hit a makeshift hospital where hundreds were staying. The reports could not be independently confirmed.

Elsewhere, Russian Defense Ministry said Wednesday its forces kept up intense attacks on Ukrainian targets, hitting 1,053 with artillery and 73 with airstrikes. Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov also said there had been missile strikes on concentrations of Ukrainian troops and vehicles in the Kherson Region in southern Ukraine. Those claims could not be independently verified.

The General Staff of Ukraine's military said in a statement that taking control of the Azovstal steel mill and thus fully capturing Mariupol remains a top Russian priority. But it added that Moscow's forces were continuing to mount offensives across the east as its forces probe for weak points in the Ukrainian defensive lines.

A siege on Mariupol since the early days of the war has flattened much of the city on the Sea of Azov and inflicted some of the most dramatic suffering of the conflict, which has also pushed more than 5 million people to flee the country.

Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said that there was a "preliminary" agreement to open a humanitarian corridor for women, children and the elderly to leave Mariupol and head west to the Ukraine-controlled city of Zaporizhzhia on Wednesday afternoon.

Mariupol Mayor Vadym Boychenko urged locals to leave the city, though previous such agreements have fallen apart, with Russians preventing buses meant to pick up evacuees from entering the city or shelling escape routes.

"Do not be frightened and evacuate to Zaporizhzhia, where you can receive all the help you need — food, medicine, essentials — and the main thing is that you will be in safety," he wrote in a statement issued by the city council.

Boychenko asked people who had already left Mariupol to contact relatives still in the city and urge them to evacuate. He said 200,000 people had already left the city, which had a pre-war population of more than 400,000.

Boychenko said buses would be used for the evacuation and one pickup point will be near the Azovstal steel mill, where a Ukrainian police official has said civilians, including children, are sheltering among the city's last known defenders.

Many previous evacuation efforts relied on civilians using private cars after efforts to bring buses from Ukraine-held territory into the city failed. But with fuel supplies and the number of such vehicles dwindling in the city, that is becoming increasingly difficult.

There was no immediate confirmation on the evacuation from the Russian side, which issued a new ultimatum to the Ukrainian defenders to surrender Wednesday. The Ukrainians have ignored previous demands to leave the sprawling steel plant's warren of tunnels and bunkers.

The Russian Defense Ministry said those who surrender will be allowed to live and given medical treatment.

Capturing Mariupol holds strategic and symbolic value for both sides. The scale of suffering there has made it a focal point of the war for many outside Ukraine, and Russia's difficulty in definitively taking it is a prime example of the ways an under-gunned Ukrainian force has stymied Moscow's troops.

Mariupol's fall would also deprive Ukraine of a vital port, complete a land bridge between Russia and the Crimean Peninsula that Moscow seized from Ukraine in 2014 and would also free up Russian troops to move elsewhere in the Donbas.

A few thousand Ukrainian troops, by the Russians' estimate, remained holed up in the steel plant.



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The deputy commander of the Azov regiment, who was among the troops remaining in Mariupol, said the Russian military dropped heavy bombs on the steel plant and hit an "improvised" hospital.

Serhiy Taruta, the former governor of the Donetsk region and a Mariupol native, also reported the bombing of the hospital, where he said 300 people, including wounded troops and civilians with children, were sheltered.

Both sides have described stepped-up assaults along a broad front in the east that began Monday as a new phase of the war.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the Russian military was throwing everything it has into the battle, with most of its combat-ready forces now concentrated in Ukraine and just across the border in Russia.

"They have driven almost everyone and everything that is capable of fighting us against Ukraine," he said in his nightly video address to the nation.

Despite claims that they are hitting only military sites, the Russians continue to target residential areas and kill civilians, he said.

"The Russian army in this war is writing itself into world history forever as the most barbaric and inhuman army in the world," Zelenskyy said.

He also said the Kremlin has not responded to a proposal to exchange Viktor Medvedchuk, the jailed leader of a pro-Russia party, for the Mariupol defenders.

Weeks ago, after the abortive Russian push to take Kyiv, the Kremlin declared that its main goal was the capture of the mostly Russian-speaking Donbas, where Moscow-backed separatists have been fighting Ukrainian forces for eight years.

Military experts said the Russians' goal is to encircle Ukrainian troops from the north, south and east. Moscow has poured thousands more troops into Ukraine's south and east in recent days, including foreign fighters, according to Western officials.

Eyewitness accounts and reports from officials have given a broad picture of the extent of the Russian advance. But independent reporting in the parts of the Donbas held by Russian forces and separatists is severely limited, making it difficult to know what is happening in many places on the ground.

Western nations, meanwhile, are boosting their donations of military supplies to Kyiv.

U.S. President Joe Biden is expected to announce a new weapons package in the coming days that will include additional artillery and ammunition, according to a U.S. official, who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Canada and the Netherlands also planned to send more heavy weapons, their prime ministers said.

## Live updates | UN says 5 million have fled Ukraine

By The Associated Press undefined

BERLIN -- The United Nations' refugee agency says that more than 5 million people have now fled Ukraine since the Russian invasion began on Feb. 24.

The Geneva-based U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees on Wednesday put the total number of refugees at 5.01 million.

More than half of the total, over 2.8 million, fled at least at first to Poland. Although many have stayed there, an unknown number have traveled onward. There are few border checks within the European Union.

UNHCR said on March 30 that 4 million people had fled Ukraine. The exodus was somewhat slower in recent weeks than at the beginning of the war.

In addition to the refugees, the U.N. says that more than 7 million people have been displaced within Ukraine.

Ukraine had a pre-war population of 44 million.

### KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR:

— Russia hits Ukrainian cities, pours more troops into war

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- Japan formally revokes Russia's 'most favored nation' status
  - Russia's Chernobyl seizure seen as nuclear risk 'nightmare'
  - China looks to learn from Russian failures in Ukraine
  - Ukrainian opera singer in Japan prays for peace in melody
- Follow all AP stories on Russia's war on Ukraine at <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine>

## OTHER DEVELOPMENTS:

**KYIV, Ukraine** — Mariupol mayor Vadym Boychenko is urging residents to leave the city.

Boychenko appealed Wednesday to people who had already left Mariupol to contact relatives still in the city and urge them to evacuate. He said 200,000 people had already left the city, which had a pre-war population of more than 400,000.

"Do not be frightened and evacuate to Zaporizhzhia, where you can receive all the help you need -- food, medicine, essentials -- and the main thing is that you will be in safety," he wrote in a statement issued by the city council.

Boychenko said buses would be used for the evacuation and there will be three pickup points, one of them near the Azovstal steel mill which has become Ukrainian forces' last stronghold in the city. Many previous evacuation efforts relied on civilians being able to leave in private cars after efforts to bring buses from Ukraine-held territory into the city failed.

Mariupol, Ukraine's tenth-largest city, came under attack from Russian forces almost immediately after the invasion began in late February. The port city has strategic value as a link between territories in the south and east of Ukraine which are held by Russian forces or Russia-backed separatists.

**COPENHAGEN, Denmark** — Norway is donating about 100 air defense systems to Ukraine with the Scandinavian country's defense minister saying that "the country is depending on international support to resist Russian aggression."

Bjørn Arild Gram said Norway had donated French-made Mistral short-range missile systems which currently are being phased out by the Norwegian Armed Forces, "but it is still a modern and effective weapon that will be of great benefit to Ukraine," Arild Gram said.

The weapons have already left Norway which previously has donated 4,000 anti-tank missiles, protective equipment and other military equipment to Ukraine, he added.

**LONDON** — Britain's defense ministry says the Russian military is expanding its presence on Ukraine's eastern border as fighting in the Donbas region intensifies.

In an intelligence update released Wednesday morning, the ministry says Russian attacks on cities across Ukraine are an attempt to disrupt the movement of Ukrainian reinforcements and weapons to the east.

While Russian air operations in northern Ukraine are likely to remain at a low level following the withdrawal of forces from the Kyiv region, there is still a risk of "precision strikes against priority targets throughout Ukraine," the ministry says.

In a briefing released late Tuesday, the ministry said Ukrainian forces had repelled "numerous attempted advances" by Russian troops as shelling and attacks increased along the line of control that has separated Ukrainian and Russian-backed forces in the Donbas region for the past eight years.

"Russia's ability to progress continues to be impacted by the environmental, logistical and technical challenges that have beset them so far, combined with the resilience of the highly motivated Ukrainian armed forces," the ministry said.

**BERLIN** — Ukraine's ambassador to Germany is criticizing Chancellor Olaf Scholz's reluctance to commit to direct deliveries of heavy weapons such as tanks.

Scholz faces pressure from parts of his own coalition and Germany's main opposition party to deliver such weapons. But he avoided a direct response Tuesday, pledging further weapons deliveries but not specifying any system and saying one possibility is for eastern NATO allies to supply Soviet-era equipment

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that could be delivered and used quickly.

Ukrainian Ambassador Andriy Melnyk told German news agency dpa in comments published Wednesday that Scholz's comments were greeted in Kyiv "with great disappointment and bitterness."

Scholz said Germany is reaching the limits of its ability to supply Ukraine from its own stock and will finance Ukrainian purchases of equipment from a list drawn up by the German defense industry.

Melnyk, a frequent critic of German politicians in recent weeks, welcomed that readiness but said many questions remained and questioned the assertion that Germany's military can't deliver more.

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine says its evacuation efforts to bring some civilians out of the war-torn port city of Mariupol will resume Wednesday.

Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said Wednesday there is a "preliminary" agreement to operate a so-called humanitarian corridor route westward to the Ukraine-controlled city of Zaporizhzhia. It will apply to women, children and older people from Wednesday afternoon local time, she said in a statement on the messaging app Telegram.

She added that Mariupol was the focus of Ukrainian efforts to help civilians because of the "catastrophic humanitarian situation" in the city, which has seen intense fighting for weeks as Russian troops have pushed Ukrainian forces back and now have them encircled in a steel mill complex.

Vereshchuk previously said there would not be an agreed evacuation route out of Mariupol on each of the past three days, saying at the time that an agreement had not been reached with Russia. There was no immediate confirmation from the Russian side. Ukraine and Russia have frequently blamed each other for obstructing evacuations from Mariupol or firing along the agreed route, which has typically only been open to people traveling using private vehicles.

KYIV, Ukraine — The Ukrainian General Staff said Wednesday in a statement on Facebook that Russia is continuing to mount offensives at various locations in the east as its forces probe for weak points in the Ukrainian lines. The General Staff adds that defeating the last resistance in the Azovstal steel mill in Mariupol remains Russia's top priority.

UNITED NATIONS — U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres is calling for a four-day halt in fighting in Ukraine, starting Thursday to coincide with Orthodox Christians' Holy Week observances.

Noting that Orthodox Easter is coming amid an intensifying Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine, the U.N. chief said Tuesday that the need for a "humanitarian pause" is all the more urgent.

Ukrainian Ambassador Sergiy Kyslytsya called on Russia to heed Guterres' call. But Russian deputy Ambassador Dmitry Polyanskiy said Tuesday he was "a bit skeptical" about the idea.

Guterres said the goal is to allow for evacuating civilians from "current or expected areas of confrontation" and getting more humanitarian aid into desperately needy places such as Mariupol, Donetsk, Luhansk and Kherson. More than four million people in those areas need assistance, Guterres said.

The proposal comes after the U.N. recently helped to foster a two-month truce in Yemen's civil war, halting fighting as the Muslim holy month of Ramadan began.

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is expected to announce a new security assistance package in the coming days that will include additional artillery and ammunition, according to a U.S. official.

The official, who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity, said details of the latest package are being finalized.

Last week, in anticipation of Russia's offensive in eastern Ukraine, Biden approved an \$800 million package including additional helicopters and the first provision of American artillery. The U.S. has sent about \$2.6 billion in military aid to Ukraine since Russia invaded.

Asked by reporters whether he'd be sending more artillery, Biden said, "Yes."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said "providing more ammunition and security assistance to



Ukraine" was discussed by Biden and other allied leaders during a video call on Tuesday.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Italy Prime Minister Mario Draghi, Japan Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Polish President Andrzej Duda, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson took part in the more than 80-minute call.

## Netflix aims to curtail password sharing, considers ads

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — An unexpectedly sharp drop in subscribers has Netflix considering changes it has long resisted: Minimizing password sharing and creating a low-cost subscription supported by advertising.

Looming changes announced late Tuesday are designed to help Netflix regain momentum lost over the past year. Pandemic-driven lockdowns that drove binge-watching have lifted, while deep-pocketed rivals such as Apple and Walt Disney have begun to chip away at its vast audience with their own streaming services.

Netflix's customer base fell by 200,000 subscribers during the January-March quarter, the first contraction the streaming service has seen since it became available throughout most of the world other than China six years ago. The drop stemmed in part from Netflix's decision to withdraw from Russia to protest the war against Ukraine, resulting in a loss of 700,000 subscribers. Netflix projected a loss of another 2 million subscribers in the current April-June quarter.

The erosion, coming off a year of progressively slower growth, has rattled Netflix investors. Shares plunged by more than 25% in extended trading after Netflix revealed its disappointing performance. If the stock drop extends into Wednesday's regular trading session, Netflix shares will have lost more than half of their value so far this year — wiping out about \$150 billion in shareholder wealth in less than four months.

The Los Gatos, California, company estimated that about 100 million households worldwide are watching its service for free by using the account of a friend or another family member, including 30 million in the U.S. and Canada.

"Those are over 100 million households already are choosing to view Netflix," Netflix CEO Reed Hastings said. "We've just got to get paid at some degree for them."

To prod more people to pay for their own accounts, Netflix indicated it will expand a trial program it has been running in three Latin American countries — Chile, Costa Rica and Peru. In these locations, subscribers can extend service to another household for a discounted price. In Costa Rica, for instance, Netflix plan prices range from \$9 to \$15 a month, but subscribers can openly share their service with another household for \$3.

Netflix offered no additional information about how a cheaper ad-supported service tier would work or how much it would cost. Another rival, Hulu, has long offered an ad-supported tier.

While Netflix clearly believes these changes will help it build upon its current 221.6 million worldwide subscribers, the moves also risk alienating customers to the point they cancel.

Netflix was previously stung by a customer backlash in 2011 when it unveiled plans to begin charging for its then-nascent streaming service, which had been bundled for free with its traditional DVD-by-mail service before its international expansion. In the months after that change, Netflix lost 800,000 subscribers, prompting an apology from Hastings for botching the execution of the spin-off.

Tuesday's announcement was a sobering comedown for a company that was buoyed two years ago when millions of consumers corralled at home were desperately seeking diversions — a void Netflix was happy to fill. Netflix added 36 million subscribers during 2020, by far the largest annual growth since its video streaming service's debut in 2007.

But Hastings now believes those outsized gains may have blinded management. "COVID created a lot of noise on how to read the situation," he said in a video conference Tuesday.

Netflix began heading in a new direction last year when its service added video games at no additional

charge in an attempt to give people another reason to subscribe.

Escalating inflation over the past year has also squeezed household budgets, leading more consumers to rein in their spending on discretionary items. Despite that pressure, Netflix recently raised prices in the U.S., where it has its greatest household penetration — and where it's had the most trouble finding more subscribers.

In the most recent quarter, Netflix lost 640,000 subscribers in the U.S. and Canada, prompting management to point out that most of its future growth will come in international markets. Netflix ended March with 74.6 million subscribers in the U.S. and Canada.

## Widespread protests grip Sri Lanka after police shooting

By BHARATHA MALLAWARACHI Associated Press

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP) — Thousands of people across Sri Lanka took to the streets on Wednesday, a day after police opened fire at demonstrators, killing one person and injuring 13 others, reigniting widespread protests amid the country's worst economic crisis in decades.

Protesters used vehicles to block key roads in many parts of the country as they demonstrated against the shooting as well as rising fuel prices and the government's failure to resolve the deepening economic problems. The shooting was the first by Sri Lankan security forces during weeks of protests.

The shooting occurred Tuesday in Rambukkana, 90 kilometers (55 miles) northeast of Colombo, the capital. Fifteen police officers were also admitted to a hospital with minor injuries after clashes with protesters.

Police said the demonstrators had blocked railway tracks and roads and ignored police warnings to disperse. Police also said protesters threw rocks at them.

Also Wednesday, thousands of bank, port, health and other state employees demonstrated in front of the main railway station in Colombo, condemning the police shooting and demanding that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa resign.

They marched on the main road in front of the station shouting slogans and displaying placards that read: "Bring down the cost of living," "Bow down to the peoples' verdict" and "Gota go home." Gota is a shortened version of Rajapaksa's first name.

Rajapaksa has resisted calls to resign.

Much of the anger expressed in weeks of growing protests has been directed at Rajapaksa and his elder brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, who head an influential clan that has been in power for most of the past two decades. Five other family members are lawmakers, three of whom resigned as ministers two weeks ago.

Sri Lanka is on the brink of bankruptcy, with nearly \$7 billion of its total \$25 billion in foreign debt due for repayment this year. A severe shortage of foreign exchange means the country lacks money to buy imported goods.

U.S. Ambassador Julie Chung and U.N. Resident Coordinator Hanaa Singer-Hamdy urged restraint from all sides and called on the authorities to ensure the people's right to peaceful protest.

Chung also called for an independent investigation into the shooting.

Sri Lankans have endured months of shortages of essentials such as food, cooking gas, fuel and medicine, lining up for hours to buy the limited stocks available.

Fuel prices have risen several times in recent months, resulting in sharp increases in transport costs and prices of other goods. There was another round of increases earlier this week.

Thousands of protesters continued to occupy the entrance to the president's office for a 12th day Wednesday, blaming him for the economic crisis.

Mahinda Rajapaksa said Tuesday the constitution will be changed to clip presidential powers and empower Parliament. The prime minister said the power shift is a quick step that can be taken to politically stabilize the country and help talks with the International Monetary Fund over an economic recovery plan.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa concentrated power in the presidency after being elected in 2019.

The Rajapaksa brothers are likely to retain their grip on power even if the constitution is amended, since

they hold both offices.

Both the president and prime minister have refused to step down, resulting in a political impasse. Opposition parties have rejected the president's proposal of a unity government but have been unable to put together a majority in Parliament and form a new government.

## **African wildlife, coasts suffer effects of flooding, drought**

By WANJOHI KABUKURU Associated Press

MOMBASA, Kenya (AP) — Devastating floods in South Africa this week, as well as other extreme weather events across the continent linked to human-caused climate change, are putting marine and terrestrial wildlife species at risk, according to biodiversity experts.

Africa has already faced several climate-related woes in the past year: the ongoing fatal floods follow unrelenting cyclones in the south, extreme temperatures in western and northern regions, and a debilitating drought which is currently afflicting eastern, central and the Horn of Africa.

Conservation and wildlife groups say it's critical to protect species from these climate change-related weather events.

"Climate change is disrupting ecosystems and affecting the survival and suitability of species to live in their usual habitats," said Shyla Raghav, who heads the climate change division at Conservation International. "Massive disruption to ecological stability will occur if adequate adaptation and mitigation measures are not implemented. There is need to incorporate climate proofing of our protected areas. That way we boost nature's ability for resilience."

Multiple species, including Africa's famed "big-five" land animals and other terrestrial and marine life, are vulnerable to significant population loss. Ornithologist Paul Matiku, who heads the biodiversity watch group Nature Kenya, says shifting rainfall patterns and increased temperatures are having serious consequences for bird populations.

"Climate change causes seasonal variability in rainfall, temperature and food for birds. As such breeding aborts and bird populations automatically reduce over time," Matiku said. "Wetland birds are affected by reducing water levels due to droughts. The Sahara Desert gets hotter, and some migratory birds die along their migratory routes due to high temperatures and dehydration." He added that some birds are so weak from taxing migratory journeys that they are no longer breeding.

Ecosystems that thrive along Africa's popular white sandy beaches are also particularly vulnerable, according to Ibidun Adelekan, a geography professor at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. Africa's coasts are at risk of coral reef ecosystem collapse due to bleaching, potential saltwater intrusion on freshwater aquifers, and more intense tropical cyclones.

Adelekan warned that greater damage to Africa's coastal biodiversity will also have considerable consequences for populations in towns and cities along its shores. "Persistent deprivation of terrestrial and marine ecosystems by human actions is leading to increased vulnerability of coastal and island communities to climate impacts," she told the Associated Press.

Her concerns are echoed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, who earlier this year cautioned that African coasts with "high proportion of informal settlements and small island states are exposed and highly vulnerable to climate change."

But scientists are hopeful that improved coastal management of marine protected areas and better restrictions on the fishing industry will curb impacts on marine biodiversity.

"Our research indicates that the future of coral reefs will be much better if fisheries restrictions and protected areas are applied effectively throughout the region," said Tim McClanahan, a senior conservation zoologist at the Wildlife Conservation Society, who studied over 100 locations in the western Indian Ocean.

"While climate change may be outside of local control, the bad outcomes will be reduced if fisheries manage to reduce detrimental impacts on the coral reefs."



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## Mega dance company bred culture of sex, silence, dancers say

By JULIET LINDERMAN, MARTHA MENDOZA and MORGAN BOCKNEK Associated Press and Toronto Star  
LOS ANGELES (AP) — Every year, one of the world's leading dance competition companies sells the dream of Hollywood fame to hundreds of thousands of ambitious young dancers hoping to launch careers on television, in movies and on stage.

But behind the bright lights and pulsing music, some dancers say they were sexually assaulted, harassed and manipulated by the company's powerful founder and famous teachers and choreographers, according to a joint investigation by The Associated Press and the Toronto Star.

The problems date back to the founding of Los Angeles-based Break The Floor Productions; as the company has grown into an industry powerhouse, its leaders perpetuated a culture of sex and silence, according to interviews with dozens of former and current staff and students.

Break the Floor's reach extends across the entertainment industry to some of the biggest names in music, television and social media. Alumni and faculty have danced on stage with Lady Gaga and Taylor Swift, at the Oscars and the Super Bowl. Company instructors have appeared on "Dancing with the Stars," "Dance Moms" and "So You Think You Can Dance." When COVID-19 lockdowns suspended in-person workshops, Break the Floor enlisted social media superstar Charli D'Amelio, whose TikTok account has around 10.5 billion likes, to record instructional videos.

The company was launched 22 years ago by a charismatic dancer, Gil Stroming, who came to fame in the 1990s, performing in the off-Broadway show "Tap Dogs," described in The New York Times as a "beefcake tap-a-thon."

Break The Floor now draws around 300,000 dance students, some as young as 5, to packed hotel ballrooms across the U.S. and Canada for weekend workshops and competitions.

But in January, as the AP and the Star were investigating allegations of sexual misconduct against him and others involved in the company, Stroming announced that he had sold Break the Floor and stepped down as CEO.

The new owner, Russell Geysler, said the allegations have nothing to do with the current company, and that people involved with purported misconduct no longer work for Break The Floor. In his first 10 days as CEO, he said four people were "let go."

Allegations of sexual misconduct first hit the dance company in October, when the Toronto Star revealed allegations of widespread sexual harassment and predatory behavior by Break the Floor instructors.

A Toronto-born teen alleged a famous choreographer propositioned her for sex just hours after judging her at a 2012 Break the Floor convention. An Ottawa dancer working as an assistant for the company said the same choreographer groped him in public.

An ongoing investigation by the Star in partnership with the AP now has uncovered alleged sexual misconduct that stretches back to the dance company's early years, and involves Stroming himself.

Stroming was allegedly involved in a series of inappropriate relationships with students of the dance program he was running, according to more than a dozen former staff and students.

Of these sources, four say he sometimes brought young Break the Floor participants to parties or company events, where they were introduced as his girlfriend. Seven sources say they saw Stroming interact with students in ways that appeared intimate and inappropriate. One staff member said Stroming showed him a nude photo of one of the students.

All of these sources spoke on the condition of anonymity in fear of retaliation and damage to their careers in the tight-knit professional dance community.

One dancer said she met Stroming when she was a 16-year-old high school junior attending one of Break the Floor's first events with her parents. Stroming was three years older, she said, a magnetic 19-year-old running the whole show. At her first company event, when she was 17, she and Stroming had oral sex, she said.

A year or so later, shortly after her 18th birthday, Stroming flew the dancer to New York, where he told her he had lined up potentially career-launching dance auditions, she says. That night, they had sex in

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his apartment. The next morning, Stroming left abruptly for Las Vegas and handed her \$40 for a cab ride back to the airport. She says she didn't attend any auditions, and returned home devastated.

The AP and the Star spoke to the dancer's father, who said that in the years following, she told him about these sexual interactions with Stroming, which left her deeply upset.

Stroming declined repeated interview requests. But during a 2020 in-house training, a recording of which was reviewed by the AP and Star, Stroming addressed his own past misconduct.

"I was definitely inappropriate myself in a lot of ways," he told his staff. "As a student I was in inappropriate relationships with teachers, and vice versa, and just looking back I was like, oh wow, I think a lot of us don't even realize at first the power that we have in the dance world."

In a written statement, he told the AP and Star, "I have been very upfront that when I first started the company at 19, over 20 years ago, there were issues of inappropriateness." He didn't respond to the specific allegations.

While not all of the complainants in this story were involved with Break the Floor at the time of the alleged incidents, the instructors and executives accused of wrongdoing have played key roles in growing the company's revenue and popularity.

One dance instructor said she warns the children and teens she brings to conventions today to be watchful and aware of the potential for abuse of power. About two decades ago, when she was a dance teacher accompanying her students to a Break the Floor event, she said she refused Stroming's \$500 offer to join him in his hotel room.

## HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT, 'CONVENTION BOYFRIEND'

Break The Floor hosts conventions in cities across North America, putting on events in hotel ballrooms every weekend over the course of a six-month season. Hundreds of studios and schools from smaller communities bring teams of dancers to the events, branded by Stroming as JUMP, NUVO, 24seven, RADIX and DancerPalooza. The ultimate goal is winning first place under the spotlight at the annual Dance Awards.

In addition to competitions with cash prizes, Break The Floor conventions — which cost between around \$200 to \$350 per student — offer dozens of workshops, under strobing lights and thumping music. They typically end with parents on the sidelines shooting photos of their beaming children in leotards and makeup, striking poses alongside famous choreographers and dancers.

Jeremy Hudson, now a professional dancer, came of age on the convention circuit and won Outstanding Dancer of the Year at the first JUMP Nationals in 2004. Break the Floor helped launch his career, but an alleged assault by one of its star dancers continues to haunt him.

At 16, Hudson looked forward to the festive weekend gatherings. But he was uncomfortable when a dance teacher, Mark Meismer, in his early 30s, repeatedly told him how attractive he was. Still, he accepted a sought-after opportunity to assist Meismer as they toured various studios and conventions together. A year later, Hudson stayed with Meismer when he joined Break The Floor's fledgling NUVO convention as part of its original lineup of instructors.

"He called me his convention boyfriend," recalled Hudson. "I didn't know how inappropriate that was."

Meismer asked the young dancer, then 17, to come to his home.

Hudson said he was optimistic. This might just be his lucky break into professional dance. After all, Meismer was already an icon; he had toured with Britney Spears, Madonna and Paula Abdul.

But at Meismer's house, they didn't discuss work. Hudson alleges Meismer pushed him against a wall and performed oral sex on him. Meismer shushed him, he remembers, warning that someone was asleep in a nearby room.

In the years that followed, Hudson said Meismer continued to pursue him for sex. In dance studios, Hudson says Meismer would guide him into bathroom stalls for oral sex. On planes, Meismer would grope him in his seat, Hudson alleges. To surprise him, Hudson said Meismer would buy them matching outfits.

"I just didn't know myself enough to understand how harmful it was," Hudson said.

Hudson is now a famous dancer, with a resume that spans mega tours with Pink, Lady Gaga and Kylie Minogue, and appearances in more than a dozen films including "La La Land" and "FAME." For 17 years, he kept to himself about what happened with Meismer. But after speaking with the AP and the Star in

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February, Hudson went public and shared his experience in an emotional Instagram video, without naming Meismer.

"I took the word of this choreographer, and thought he was helping me build a dance career. Which in fact, he wasn't," Hudson said in his video, viewed over 6,300 times.

The next day Meismer was removed from NUVO's website and abruptly left the tour. He is no longer with the company, according to Break The Floor. Meismer didn't respond to repeated requests for comment. His representatives at the MSA Agency also said they had no comment on his behalf.

Marci A. Hamilton, a University of Pennsylvania professor who founded CHILD USA and is the author of "Justice Denied: What America Must Do to Protect its Children," said dance is one of the last forums where adults have unsupervised access to younger students.

"Dance organizations create wide opportunities for adults to single out a child, groom them and then get them alone to sexually abuse them," she said. "The dance world, it's not like it's different than any other world, it's just that they've been able to keep their secrets longer."

Hamilton also said perpetrators in many youth-focused organizations use hotel rooms — away from home — to exploit the power imbalance between teachers and students.

That's what Gary Schaufeld says happened to him. He was a teen in 2004, assisting a successful tap dancer named Danny Wallace, who wasn't with Break the Floor at the time, but would go on to run one of its subsidiary conventions. Schaufeld had fallen in love with tap at 7 years old, and assisting Wallace offered a chance to raise his profile and learn from one of the best.

One night, Schaufeld said, Wallace pushed him up against the wall of a hotel room they shared with a female assistant and forced oral sex on him.

"I was frozen in my own skin, I didn't know what to do," Schaufeld said.

Afterwards, Schaufeld said Wallace told him never to say anything; it would be bad for both of their careers. And so Schaufeld stayed quiet. But the secret ate away at him. His mental health deteriorated. He stopped eating and sleeping, and suffered from panic attacks, he said. In 2018, 14 years later, he decided to tell his family, and confront Wallace directly.

In a series of text messages between Schaufeld and Wallace, reviewed by the AP and the Star, Schaufeld laid out his accusations and Wallace said that although he couldn't remember anything, he "couldn't be more sorry."

"I'm not a monster but I feel like one," Wallace wrote, adding that he has "a lot of hazy memories and a huge list of regrets/mistakes" from that time period.

In an interview earlier this year with the AP and the Star, Wallace denied Schaufeld's allegations and said nothing sexual or physical ever transpired between them. He referred reporters to his lawyer, who didn't respond.

Schaufeld stopped dancing years ago and has no plans to return to the studio.

"It was my church," he said, but now "the whole dance scene feels dirty and tainted."

## CODE OF CONDUCT

By the mid-2000s, dance exploded into the mainstream with the debuts of popular television shows like So You Think You Can Dance and Dancing With The Stars.

Gil Stroming's company capitalized on all of that studio growth, an industry that reached about \$4 billion in value by 2021, employing more than 120,000 people, according to market research from analysts at IbisWorld. He added new conventions, and new locations, branching into Mexico, Costa Rica and Canada.

The televised dance shows brought fame to dancers Nick Lazzarini, Travis Wall and Misha Gabriel, who became big name attractions as Break The Floor instructors. Each of them has since left the company amid allegations of sexual misconduct.

Stroming picked up Lazzarini at the height of his fame to join the convention circuit, teaching hundreds of thousands of aspiring young dancers. In 2019, Stroming quietly fired him after he posted, then quickly removed, a video of himself masturbating on Instagram, as the Star previously reported.

The Star's prior investigation uncovered allegations that Lazzarini had subjected at least six dancers to

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unwanted sexual advances at Break The Floor events. Three of these dancers were under 18. One said Lazzarini groped him through a hole in his pants. Another said Lazzarini texted her a nude selfie when she was 16. A third said he and Lazzarini exchanged nude photos when he was 17.

Gabriel, another famous dancer and choreographer, allegedly sent a nude photo on Snapchat to a 16-year-old dancer who says she was so horrified she threw her phone across the room. Gabriel — who has performed with Mariah Carey, Christina Aguilera, Beyoncé and more — was recently removed from the JUMP faculty. His picture and profile disappeared from the website, though there was no formal announcement of his departure.

Lilli Maples had taken classes with Gabriel since she was 10 years old. She said once she turned 18, Gabriel, 29 at that time in 2017, invited her to his hotel room in a text message with a shirtless photo. After Maples showed the screenshots to friends who shared them on social media, Gabriel sent her a message threatening to ruin her career, she said.

Gabriel, when asked about Maples' accusation, said in a written statement that he had been drinking heavily that night to control fears about serious health problems in his family. He said he must have passed out and has no recollection of sending the text. He apologized and said he himself was a victim of abuse as a teen, and that his texts to Maples were a "one time ever brief exchange."

The AP and the Star haven't seen these messages because Maples said they'd been deleted. Maples' mother, however, told the news organizations that she saw the photos when they appeared on shared photo albums on their family's home computer.

"My heart dropped," she said.

As for the other allegation from the then 16-year-old, Gabriel denied sending the photo, saying he would never engage in "inappropriate behavior that would ever lead to sending something like this" to a teen.

Sexual abuse pervades the dance world, according to child advocates and industry leaders.

The combination of hyper-sexual dance content and the close contact between adult teachers and the young dancers creates an atmosphere ripe for abuse, said Jamal Story, a professional dancer who is co-chair of the National Dance Committee for The Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA).

"Professional dancers suffer a wide swath of sexual predation from irritating flirtation to full-out devastating attacks. And what's egregious about seeing it in the context of conventions is that it happens to kids. Nowhere in the world of education should students feel they are underneath the predators," he said.

Former Break The Floor instructors have been accused of abusing young dancers in other settings. Former DancerPalooza instructor, Eric Saradpon, has been charged by the Riverside County District Attorney with perpetrating lewd acts on minors in a private dance studio, and is awaiting trial. And five dancers are suing former Boston Ballet star Dusty Button and her husband, alleging sexual abuse and assault. Button taught at Radix conventions. Lawyers for Saradpon and the Buttons didn't respond to requests for comment.

At least four people removed from Break The Floor for alleged misconduct have continued to work around kids in other settings.

Earlier this year, after Geysler took the helm as CEO, Break The Floor published a new code of conduct. It banned inviting students to hotel rooms and said instructors shouldn't call students their "daughter" or "son." And it encourages discretion online regarding "Religion, Social Justice, Discrimination, Politics, Love and Romance, Abuse, Mental Health, Bullying, and Terrorism."

The new code of conduct also says educators are considered mandated reporters regarding suspected child abuse: "If you witness anything concerning, it is your duty to report it to the appropriate authorities."

## Macron, Le Pen square off for decisive debate as vote looms

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — In the climax of France's presidential campaign, centrist President Emmanuel Macron and far-right contender Marine Le Pen will meet Wednesday evening in a one-on-one television debate that could prove decisive before Sunday's runoff vote.



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Both candidates have carefully prepared for the highly scrutinized debate that's expected to last more than two hours.

Macron, 44, emerged ahead from the April 10 first round and is leading in opinion polls with a margin varying between 3 and 13 percentage points. But Le Pen, 53, has significantly narrowed the gap compared to the last presidential election five years ago, when she lost with 34% of the vote to Macron's 66%.

In 2017, a similar debate struck a decisive blow to her campaign.

Le Pen had looked hesitant, seeking answers from notes piled up in front of her, and appeared to lose her composure at some point. She also made basic mistakes on several economic topics — which Macron immediately pounced on.

That proved disastrous for her image. Even in her own camp, she was criticized for being insufficiently prepared.

Meanwhile, the then 39-year-old Macron, despite his little political experience, seemed comfortable speaking about all kinds of issues and able to go deep into details in what appeared as a proof of seriousness.

Le Pen recently called the 2017 presidential debate the "biggest failure" of her political career.

This time, she has pledged to be better prepared, working "at home" with her closest advisers.

Both candidates need to broaden support before Sunday's vote. Many French, especially on the left, say they still don't know whether they will even go to the polls.

Le Pen is expected to appeal to those who have anti-Macron feelings, criticize his record and present her nationalist, anti-immigration stance as an alternative. She also aims at demonstrating that she has the stature of a potential president, and at promoting what she says are realistic proposals.

Macron, meanwhile, will advocate his pro-European views as the way to make France stronger in the world. He will seek to convince leftist voters that his pro-business stance shouldn't deter them from choosing him.

In recent days, he acknowledged some would back him only to counter the far-right candidate.

"I want to convince women and men with diverse political points of view," Macron said.

## Russia's Chernobyl seizure seen as nuclear risk 'nightmare'

By CARA ANNA and INNA VARENYTSIA Associated Press

CHERNOBYL, Ukraine (AP) — Here in the dirt of one of the world's most radioactive places, Russian soldiers dug trenches. Ukrainian officials worry they were, in effect, digging their own graves.

Thousands of tanks and troops rumbled into the forested Chernobyl exclusion zone in the earliest hours of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February, churning up highly contaminated soil from the site of the 1986 accident that was the world's worst nuclear disaster.

For more than a month, some Russian soldiers bunked in the earth within sight of the massive structure built to contain radiation from the damaged Chernobyl nuclear reactor. A close inspection of their trenches was impossible because even walking on the dirt is discouraged.

As the 36th anniversary of the April 26, 1986, disaster approaches and Russia's invasion continues, it's clear that Chernobyl — a relic of the Cold War — was never prepared for this.

With scientists and others watching in disbelief from afar, Russian forces flew over the long-closed plant, ignoring the restricted airspace around it. They held personnel still working at the plant at gunpoint during a marathon shift of more than a month, with employees sleeping on tabletops and eating just twice a day.

Even now, weeks after the Russians left, "I need to calm down," the plant's main security engineer, Valerii Semenov, told The Associated Press. He worked 35 days straight, sleeping only three hours a night, rationing cigarettes and staying on even after the Russians allowed a shift change.

"I was afraid they would install something and damage the system," he said in an interview.

Workers kept the Russians from the most dangerous areas, but in what Semenov called the worst situation he has seen in his 30 years at Chernobyl, the plant was without electricity, relying on diesel generators to support the critical work of circulating water for cooling the spent fuel rods.

"It was very dangerous to act in this way," said Maksym Shevchuck, the deputy head of the state agency managing the exclusion zone. He was scared by it all.

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Russia's invasion marks the first time that occupying a nuclear plant was part of a nation's war strategy, said Rebecca Harms, former president of the Greens group in the European Parliament, who has visited Chernobyl several times. She called it a "nightmare" scenario in which "every nuclear plant can be used like a pre-installed nuclear bomb."

A visit to the exclusion zone, more desolate than usual, found that the invasion risked a catastrophe worse than the original explosion and fire at Chernobyl that sent radioactive material into the atmosphere and became a symbol of the Soviet Union's stumbling final years. Billions of dollars were spent by the international community, including Russia, to stabilize and secure the area.

Now authorities are working with Ukraine's defense ministry on ways to protect Chernobyl's most critical places. At the top of the list are anti-drone systems and anti-tank barriers, along with a system to protect against warplanes and helicopters.

None of it will matter much if Russian President Vladimir Putin resorts to nuclear weapons, which Shevchuck says he can't rule out anymore.

"I understand they can use any kind of weapon and they can do any awful thing," he said.

Chernobyl needs special international protection with a robust U.N. mandate, Harms said. As with the original disaster, the risks are not only to Ukraine but to nearby Belarus and beyond.

"It depends from where the wind blows," she said.

After watching thousands of Soviet soldiers work to contain the effects of the 1986 accident, sometimes with no protection, Harms and others were shocked at the Russian soldiers' disregard for safety, or their ignorance, in the recent invasion.

Some soldiers even stole highly radioactive materials as souvenirs or possibly to sell.

"I think from movies they have the imagination that all dangerous small things are very valuable," Shevchuck said.

He believes hundreds or thousands of soldiers damaged their health, likely with little idea of the consequences, despite plant workers' warnings to their commanders.

"Most of the soldiers were around 20 years old," he said. "All these actions proves that their management, and in Russia in general, human life equals like zero."

The full extent of Russia's activities in the Chernobyl exclusion zone is still unknown, especially because the troops scattered mines that the Ukrainian military is still searching for. Some have detonated, further disturbing the radioactive ground. The Russians also set several forest fires, which have been put out.

Ukrainian authorities can't monitor radiation levels across the zone because Russian soldiers stole the main server for the system, severing the connection on March 2. The International Atomic Energy Agency said Saturday it still wasn't receiving remote data from its monitoring systems. The Russians even took Chernobyl staffers' personal radiation monitors.

In the communications center, one of the buildings in the zone not overgrown by nature, the Russians looted and left a carpet of shattered glass. The building felt deeply of the 1980s, with a map on a wall still showing the Soviet Union. Someone at some point had taken a pink marker and traced Ukraine's border.

In normal times, about 6,000 people work in the zone, about half of them at the nuclear plant. When the Russians invaded, most workers were told to evacuate immediately. Now about 100 are left at the nuclear plant and 100 are elsewhere.

Semenov, the security engineer, recalled the Russians checking the remaining workers for what they called radicals.

"We said, 'Look at our documents, 90% of us are originally from Russia,'" he said. "But we're patriots of our country," meaning Ukraine.

When the Russians hurriedly departed March 31 as part of a withdrawal from the region that left behind scorched tanks and traumatized communities, they took more than 150 Ukrainian national guard members into Belarus. Shevchuck fears they're now in Russia.

In their rush, the Russians gave nuclear plant managers a choice: Sign a document saying the soldiers had protected the site and there were no complaints, or be taken into Belarus. The managers signed.

One protective measure the Russians did appear to take was leaving open a line routing communications

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from the nuclear plant through the workers' town of Slavutych and on to authorities in Ukraine's capital, Kyiv. It was used several times, Shevchuck said.

"I think they understood it should be for their safety," he said. The IAEA said Tuesday the plant is now able to contact Ukraine's nuclear regulator directly.

Another Ukrainian nuclear plant, at Zaporizhzhia in southeastern Ukraine, remains under Russian control. It is the largest in Europe.

Shevchuck, like other Ukrainians, has had it with Putin.

"We're inviting him inside the new safe confinement shelter," he said. "Then we will close it."

## Egypt collector preserves hundreds of classic cars

By AMR NABIL Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — The past frequently collides with the present in Cairo, with traffic snarling next to ancient sites.

Cars in the city can take a beating — between soaring temperatures, insidious desert dust and the crowded streets. Classic models are not uncommon, but they often languish in dusty alleys or garages. One man, however, has decided to try to preserve a slice of Egypt's four-wheeled history.

Car collector Mohamed Wahdan says he has accumulated more than 250 vintage, antique and classic cars. Most of them he discovered inside the country.

A fleet of this size would rank him among the world's top classic car collectors. Experts typically classify vehicles as vintage, antique or classic depending on their year of production.

The 52-year-old Wahdan runs a tourist company taking visitors to Egypt's famous landmarks. But he's devoted to his hobby. He owns several different garages to keep all of them, and employs a full time team of mechanics for maintenance.

He says one of the challenges is in getting the cars license plates. Government employees often aren't sure how to classify them.

Wahdan's oldest, a 1924 Model T Ford that belonged to Egypt's last monarch, King Farouk, is a museum piece, complete with a velvet rope to mark its parking place in his garage.

The country's layered history makes it a treasure trove for antiques. Egypt, a former British protectorate, was a destination for Europeans in the late 19th Century and the first half of the 20th century. Italian, Greek, and Jewish communities once flourished in Cairo and the Mediterranean city of Alexandria. Its historic markets, or souqs, sell many reminders of times gone by, replicas and genuine.

Wahdan has collected many of them. Rotary-dial telephones, gramophones, and old newspapers and stamps also fascinate him.

Recently, his cars have also made a name for themselves, with one appearing in a TV series set in the 1930s. He's noticed that interest in car collecting is growing among Egyptians, as more flock to classic car shows where his vehicles are displayed.

One of his dearest items is his first purchase, a 1970s Mercedes. Like his other cars, he doesn't drive it often. But he says he would never sell any of his collection.

"Anyone who is passionate about those cars is unable to do without them," he said.

## 'Wall of fire' forces evacuations near Arizona tourist town

By FELICIA FONSECA Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — Heavy winds kicked up a towering wall of flames outside a northern Arizona tourist town Tuesday, ripping through two-dozen structures and sending residents of more than 700 homes scrambling to flee.

Flames as high as 100 feet (30 meters) raced through an area of scattered homes, dry grass and Ponderosa pine trees on the outskirts of Flagstaff as wind gusts of up to 50 mph (80 kph) pushed the blaze over a major highway.

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Coconino County officials said during an evening news conference that 766 homes and 1,000 animals had been evacuated. About 250 structures remained threatened in the area popular with hikers and off-road vehicle users and where astronauts have trained amid volcanic cinder pits.

The county declared an emergency after the wildfire ballooned from 100 acres (40 hectares) Tuesday morning to over 9 square miles (23 square kilometers) by evening, and ash rained from the sky. The fire was moving northeast away from the more heavily populated areas of Flagstaff, home to Northern Arizona University, and toward Sunset Crater Volcano National Monument, said Coconino National Forest spokesman Brady Smith.

"It's good in that it's not headed toward a very populated area, and it's headed toward less fuel," Smith said. "But depending on the intensity of the fire, fire can still move across cinders."

Authorities won't be able to determine whether anyone was injured in the wildfire until the flames subside. Firefighters and law enforcement officers went door to door telling people to evacuate but had to pull out to avoid getting boxed in, said Coconino County Sheriff Jim Driscoll.

He said his office got a call about a man who was trapped inside his house, but firefighters couldn't get to him.

"We don't know if he made it out or not," Driscoll said.

Various organizations worked to set up shelters for evacuees and animals, including goats and horses.

The scene was all too familiar for residents who recalled rushing to pack their bags and flee a dozen years ago when a much larger wildfire burned in the same area.

"This time was different, right there in your backyard," said Kathy Vollmer, a resident.

She said she and her husband grabbed their three dogs but left a couple of cats behind as they faced what she described as a "wall of fire."

"We just hope they are going to be OK," she said.

Earlier in the day, the wildfire shut down U.S. 89, the main route between Flagstaff and far northern Arizona, and communities on the Navajo Nation. The high winds grounded aircraft that could drop water and fire retardant on the blaze.

Arizona Public Service Co., the state's largest utility, shut off power to about 625 customers to keep firefighters safe, a spokeswoman said.

About 200 firefighters were battling the flames, but more are expected as a top-level national management team takes over later this week.

The fire started Sunday afternoon 14 miles (22 kilometers) northeast of Flagstaff. Investigators don't know yet what caused it and have yet to corral any part of the blaze.

Ali Taranto rushed to Flagstaff from Winslow, where she works at a hospital, on Tuesday to check on a property she owns that was threatened by the wildfire. She also was getting messages to check on a neighbor who she found didn't have access to oxygen while the power was out and didn't have the strength to manually open her garage door to evacuate.

Taranto said the neighbor was "disoriented and gasping for air" when she reached her. Firefighters in the area helped get the garage door open and the neighbor to the hospital, she said. Taranto was looking for a shelter for the neighbor's two dogs.

By the time Taranto left the area, the highway into Flagstaff was shut down and she had to drive an extra two hours back home. At least two other neighbors didn't evacuate, she said.

"To see flames several yards away from your property line and to hear the propane tanks bursting in the background, it was very surreal," Taranto said. "Ash falling down. It was crazy."

The wind is expected to be a challenge the rest of the week, along with warmer-than-average weather and low humidity, the National Weather Service said.

"I don't see any significant decreases in wind, I don't see any big bump ups in humidity and, at this point, we're not really expecting any precipitation either," said meteorologist Robert Rickey.

Red flag warnings blanketed much of Arizona and New Mexico on Tuesday, indicating conditions are ripe for wildfires. Residents in northern New Mexico's Mora and San Miguel counties were warned to be ready



to evacuate as wildfires burned there amid dry, warm and windy conditions.

The National Interagency Fire Center reported Tuesday that nearly 2,000 wildland firefighters and support personnel were assigned to more than a dozen large wildfires in the Southwestern, Southern and Rocky Mountain areas. Scientists say climate change has made the U.S. West much warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive.

Elsewhere in Arizona, firefighters battled a wildfire in a sparsely populated area of the Prescott National Forest, about 10 miles (16 kilometers) south of Prescott.

Cory Carlson, the incident commander with the Prescott National Forest, said late Tuesday afternoon the high winds have been the biggest challenge, sending embers into the air that sparked new spot fires near State Route 261, along with the demand for crews at other fires.

"We do have a lack of resources," he said. "There's a lot of fires in the region."

Some areas were evacuated, and a shelter was set up at Yavapai College. Carlson appealed to residents to abide by evacuation orders.

The cause of the 600-acre (2.4 square-kilometer) wildfire was under investigation.

In southern Arizona, a principal highway route between Bisbee and Sierra Vista reopened Tuesday after being closed for about eight hours due to a brush fire in the hills overlooking Bisbee.

## China looks to learn from Russian failures in Ukraine

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — With its ground troops forced to pull back in Ukraine and regroup, and its Black Sea flagship sunk, Russia's military failings are mounting. No country is paying closer attention than China to how a smaller and outgunned force has badly bloodied what was thought to be one of the world's most powerful armies.

China, like Russia, has been ambitiously reforming its Soviet-style military and experts say leader Xi Jinping will be carefully parsing the weaknesses exposed by the invasion of Ukraine as they might apply to his own People's Liberation Army and his designs on the self-governed island of Taiwan.

"The big question Xi and the PLA leadership must be asking in light of Russian operations in Ukraine is whether a military that has undergone extensive reform and modernization will be able to execute operations that are far more complex than those Russia has undertaken during its invasion of Ukraine," said M. Taylor Fravel, director of the security studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Russia's armed forces have undergone an extensive process of reform and investment for more than a decade, with lessons learned in combat in Georgia, Chechnya, Syria and its annexation of Crimea helping guide the process. The Ukrainian invasion, however, has exposed weaknesses from the top down.

Experts have been collectively stunned that Russia invaded Ukraine with seemingly little preparation and lack of focus — a campaign along multiple, poorly-coordinated axes that has failed to effectively combine air and land operations.

Soldiers have been running out of food, and vehicles have been breaking down. With losses mounting, Moscow has pulled its bloodied forces away from the capital, Kyiv, to regroup. Last week, the guided-missile cruiser Moskva sank after Ukraine said it hit the ship with missiles; Russia blamed the sinking on a fire on board.

"It's very hard to see success at any level in the way that Russia has prosecuted the campaign," said Euan Graham, a senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies based in Singapore.

President Vladimir Putin, who has been closely involved in Russia's military reform, did not even appoint an overall commander for the operation until about a week ago, apparently expecting a quick victory and grossly misjudging Ukrainian resistance, Graham said.

"It's a very personal war on his part," Graham said. "And I think the expectation that this would be a cakewalk is obviously the biggest single failure."

Putin's decisions raise the question of whether he was given accurate assessments of the progress of military reform and Ukrainian abilities, or was just told what he wanted to hear.

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Xi, also an authoritarian leader who has taken a personal role in China's military reform, could now be wondering the same, Fravel said.

"Xi specifically may also wonder whether he is receiving accurate reports about the PLA's likely effectiveness in a high intensity conflict," he said.

China has had no recent major conflict by which to gauge its military prowess, having fought its last significant engagement in 1979 against Vietnam, said David Chen, a senior consultant with CENTRA Technology, a U.S.-based government services firm.

"The wakeup call for (China's) Central Military Commission is that there are more unknown factors involved in any such campaign than they may have anticipated," Chen said.

"Russia's experience in Ukraine has shown that what may seem plausible on paper at the Academy of Military Science or National Defense University becomes much more complicated in the real world."

Xi, the son of a revolutionary commander who spent time in uniform himself, began undertaking military reforms in 2015, three years after assuming leadership of the Central Military Commission.

Total troop strength was reduced by 300,000 to just under 2 million, the number of officers cut by a third and a greater emphasis given to non-commissioned officers to lead in the field.

China's military has a tradition of respect for initiative from lower-ranking soldiers dating from its revolutionary origins, said Yue Gang, a Beijing-based military analyst. By contrast, Russian forces in Ukraine have shown weaknesses where decisions have had to be made on the front lines, he said.

"Chinese soldiers are encouraged to put forward their thoughts and views when discussing how to fight," Yue said.

China's seven military districts have been reorganized into five theater commands, the number of group armies reduced and the logistics system reorganized to boost efficiency. The ratio of support to combat units was increased and a greater emphasis placed on more mobile and amphibious units.

Xi has also sought to end rampant corruption in the military, going after two former top generals shortly after taking power. One was sentenced to life in prison and the other died before his case was concluded.

China's military is highly opaque and outside the purview of civilian judges and corruption investigators, so it's difficult to know how thoroughly the organization has been exorcised of practices such as the selling of commissions and kickbacks on defense contracts.

For Xi, the military's primary mission remains to protect the ruling Communist Party, and he has followed his predecessors in fighting back hard against efforts to have the military shift its ultimate loyalty to the nation.

Xi's overriding political focus could mean the lessons he draws from the Ukraine conflict are off base, Graham said.

"Xi Jinping will always apply a political solution because he's not a military specialist or an economic specialist," Graham said. "I think the military lessons have to go through a political filter, so I'm not sure that China will take the lessons that are abundant and on show for everyone to see."

The stated goal of China's military reform is to "fight and win wars" against a "strong enemy" — a euphemism widely understood to refer to the United States.

China has pumped huge amounts of money into new equipment, has initiated more realistic training exercises with force-on-force scenarios, and sought to reform its fighting doctrine by studying American engagements in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo.

Gen. David Berger, the commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, said in a forum in Australia last week that Beijing would be watching the Ukraine conflict closely.

"I don't know what lessons they will learn but ... they're focused on learning, without a doubt, because they've been doing that for the last 15 years," he said.

Berger stressed the need for strong coalitions in the Pacific as a way to keep China's ambitions toward Taiwan in check.

China claims Taiwan as its own, and controlling the island is a key component of Beijing's political and military thinking. In October, Xi again reiterated that "reunification of the nation must be realized, and will definitely be realized."

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Washington's longstanding policy has been to provide political and military support for Taiwan, while not explicitly promising to defend it from a Chinese attack.

Like Putin's assessment of Ukraine, Xi's China does not appear to believe that Taiwan would try to put up much of a fight. Beijing routinely blames its problems with the island on a small group of hardcore independence advocates and their American supporters.

The entirely state-controlled Chinese media, meanwhile, draws on the imagined narrative that Taiwan would not willingly go to battle against what it describes as their fellow Chinese.

Now, the quick response by many nations to impose tough, coordinated sanctions on Russia after its attack on Ukraine, and the willingness to supply Ukraine with high-tech weaponry could make Xi rethink his approach to Taiwan, Fravel said.

With "the rapid response by advanced industrialized states, and the unity they have demonstrated, Xi is likely to be more cautious over Taiwan and less emboldened," he said.

Conversely, the Ukraine experience could prompt China to accelerate its timetable on Taiwan with a more limited attack, such as seizing an outlying island, as a real-world test of its own military, Chen said.

"A sensible course would be to mature the PLA's joint institutions and procedures through ever more rigorous exercises," Chen said.

"But as the world has witnessed, a central leader with a specific ambition and a shortening timeline may short-circuit the process in reckless fashion."

## **Palin on serving in Congress: 'It would be all about Alaska'**

By BECKY BOHRER and MARK THIESSEN Associated Press

WASILLA, Alaska (AP) — Sarah Palin isn't used to sharing the spotlight.

In the nearly 14 years since she burst onto the national political scene, the former Alaska governor has appeared on reality television programs, written books, spent time as a Fox News contributor, formed a political action committee in her name and been a rumored White House contender. She more recently revived her status as a conservative sensation with an ultimately unsuccessful lawsuit against The New York Times.

Now, the first Republican female vice presidential nominee is vying for what could be considered a less glamorous role: a member of the U.S. House.

Palin is among 48 candidates running for Alaska's lone House seat following the death last month of Republican Rep. Don Young, who held the job for 49 years. If successful, Palin would be one of 435 members in a chamber where ambition runs deep but legislating is tough, in no small part because of the populist politics that took hold in the aftermath of the 2008 election.

Given those dynamics, it would be easy to dismiss Palin's candidacy as the latest headline-grabbing twist in an unconventional career. Some of her critics have sought to cast her as an opportunist seeking to bolster her brand. The opinion section of the website of Alaska's largest newspaper is dotted with letters to the editor urging Alaskans to reject her run. Some remind readers she left the last major job she had in politics, as Alaska's governor, with about 16 months left in her term.

But in a recent interview with The Associated Press, Palin, 58, dismissed such critiques. She insisted her commitment to Alaska has not wavered and those who suggest otherwise "don't know me." She said she is serious about seeking the House seat and doesn't need a "launching pad for anything else."

In fact, she said, her unique place in American politics would put her in a stronger position in Washington. Unlike other freshmen lawmakers, she said, she could "pick up the phone and call any reporter and be on any show if I wanted to, and it would be all about Alaska."

"I love to work, and anyone who is around me, they know," she said. "What I'm doing is applying for a job, for Alaskans, saying: 'Hey, you guys would be my boss. Do you want to hire me? Because if you do, I'll do a good job for you, and I won't back down.'"

There's only one former governor who is currently a member of the House — Democrat Charlie Crist of Florida. Palin faces several hurdles to get there.

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One is navigating elections that will unfold in rapid order. A June 11 special primary will be the first statewide by-mail election. The four candidates who get the most votes will advance to an Aug. 16 special election, in which ranked-choice voting will be used. The winner will serve the remainder of Young's term, which expires in January.

There also will be an August primary and November general election to determine who will serve a two-year term starting in January. Palin is one of 16 candidates so far to have filed for the regular primary.

Some voters question Palin's decision to leave the governor's office, a move she has attributed to an onslaught of records requests and ethics complaints she said were frivolous and had become distractions.

She has spent time out of the state but maintains a home in Wasilla, her hometown and where she got her start in politics.

"Well, I'm sorry if that narrative is out there because it's inaccurate," she said of the perception she had left Alaska behind. She said Alaska is her home and that she was "shoveling moose poop" in her father's yard on a recent sunny day before calling a reporter.

She has regularly voted in state elections since leaving office, according to the Division of Elections.

"I'm still all about Carhartts and steel-toed boots and just hard work," Palin said, referring to a popular brand of outerwear. "I just have been blessed with opportunities and a platform to get out there and tell and show other people the beauty of being an Alaskan."

She mentions Alaskans' hunting lifestyles and the importance of responsibly developing the state's oil and gas resources. She said she plans to attend events, including this week's state Republican Party convention.

The contest in Republican-leaning Alaska will do little to change the balance of power in Washington. But the election is being closely watched as a barometer of former President Donald Trump's connection to the GOP's most loyal voters.

In Wasilla, Trump 2020 or Trump 2024 banners fly from several homes, the few political signs seen so far this election year. Palin said if Trump runs for president in 2024 and asks her to be his running mate, she'd consider it, though she said he could choose anyone and they haven't had such a candid conversation.

Palin said Trump was among those who contacted her after Young's death asking if she would be willing to run. She said this is a good time in her life to seek a return to office, politically and personally. Her family life has changed, she noted, with her four older children grown. Her youngest, Trig, is in middle school. Palin was divorced from Todd Palin, her husband of more than 30 years, in 2020.

Palin said she feels like she has "nothing to lose" in running. After having her political and personal life in the media glare for so long, "what more can they say?" she said, adding later: "To me, it's freedom."

Trump has endorsed Palin and has made the state's senior U.S. senator, Lisa Murkowski, one of his top targets this year after she criticized him and voted to convict him during his second impeachment trial.

Even if Palin doesn't win the election, she could emerge as a high-wattage critic of Murkowski, who faces voters later this year. Palin said she disagrees with Murkowski on some of her positions, including her vote to convict Trump during his second impeachment trial. But on issues like resource development in Alaska, Palin said she believed they would be "on the same sheet of music."

Palin has perhaps the highest profile among a list of candidates that includes current and former state legislators, a North Pole city council member whose legal name is Santa Claus, and Republican Nick Begich, who got into the race last fall and has been working for months to rack up conservative support.

Begich said he considers the Matanuska-Susitna region, a conservative hotbed that includes Wasilla, as one of his strongest areas. He said he is unaware of any of his supporters defecting since Palin joined the race.

"Everyone that has come to support me remains fully supportive, and that's a strong statement because a lot has changed," he said.

Tim Burney, who lives in Wasilla, said he supports Palin. He said she resigned "for the good of the state" after her detractors "came at her with guns ablazing."

"She just lives right down the road here, and, you know, she grew up here," he said while smoking a cigarette outside the Mug-Shot Saloon after finishing lunch on a recent day.

"Her heart's here in Alaska, and I think that she's good for Alaska," he said.



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Joe Miller, a former Republican and now Libertarian whom Palin endorsed in two of his unsuccessful Senate races, said Palin would be no ordinary House freshman and would have an "extraordinary" platform she could use to help Alaska. He said she's the "only anti-establishment, truly conservative" candidate in the race and that she could be the "natural repository" for voter angst over economic and other issues.

Holly Houghton, who works as a pharmacy tech, is willing to hear Palin out. Houghton, who was eating a take-out lunch with her son outside a restaurant in Wasilla recently, said she has mixed feelings about Palin and is also considering Begich.

Houghton said she doesn't like how Palin has carried herself in her personal life but also thought she was an "excellent" governor.

Houghton said she thinks of the Begich family as Democrats and wants to look more closely at Begich. Begich's grandfather, Democrat Nick Begich, held the House seat before Young. His uncle Mark was a Democratic U.S. senator and his uncle Tom is the state Senate's Democratic leader.

Jesse Sumner, a member of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough Assembly, said he thinks Begich is a good candidate. Sumner filed to run for the House seat as a joke at the filing deadline, on April Fool's Day. He later withdrew.

He said he doesn't see Palin around town much and that Palin's run seems to be "more like it's about the Sarah Palin show than about Alaska."

## **Moving beyond masks: Biden toils to put pandemic behind him**

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's administration has been working for months to prepare people to rethink their personal risk calculations as the nation gets used to the idea of living with an endemic COVID-19.

But that measured approach disappeared abruptly when a federal judge on Monday threw out the federal requirement to mask up when using mass transit. The ruling added to the urgency of the messaging challenge as the administration tries to move past the virus in the lead-up to midterm elections.

After the government last month eased indoor mask-wearing guidelines for the vast majority of Americans — even in schools — masking on planes was one of the last redoubts of the national COVID-19 restrictions. Now, as the policy falls, the administration turns to accelerating its efforts to provide the best advice for millions making their own personal safety decisions in the still-dangerous pandemic.

It's both a public health imperative and an important shift in emphasis for Biden's political future.

"There is an opportunity now, instead of saying this is a disappointing ruling, they could say this is a good time to have a conversation about how we move forward in this pandemic about risk calculation," said Dr. Amesh Adalja an infectious disease physician and a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security.

"With COVID-19, I think we're at a point with immunity from prior infections, vaccines, home tests and treatments that we can start to manage this the way we manage other infectious diseases," he said.

Biden himself went all-in on flexibility Tuesday when asked if Americans should mask up on planes.

"That's up to them," Biden declared during a visit to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. But his own White House nonetheless continues to require face coverings for those traveling with him on Air Force One, citing guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The shift toward less formal regulation was actually previewed in a 100-page plan released by the White House coronavirus response team in February. Back then, administration officials had hoped that children under 5 would be eligible for vaccination by now — a move that would have eased the concern of millions of parents and provided the umbrella of protection to nearly everyone in the U.S. who wanted it.

Monday's court order lifting the mask mandate came at a crossroads in the nation's pandemic response, just shy of a year to the day from when all American adults were eligible for vaccination against COVID-19. The ruling sent government agencies and the White House scrambling to comply, but that didn't stop momentary confusion among travelers as airlines and airports dropped their mask requirements — in some cases mid-flight.

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The administration stressed that Americans should still comply with CDC recommendations to wear face coverings, even in the absence of the mandate. Biden's press secretary, Jen Psaki, said as much just an hour before his "up to them" comment.

"The CDC continues to advise and recommend masks on airplanes. We're abiding by the CDC recommendations, the president is, and we would advise all Americans to do that," she said.

On Tuesday, Justice Department spokesman Anthony Coley said officials believe that the federal mask order was "a valid exercise of the authority Congress has given CDC to protect the public health." He said it was "an important authority the Department will continue to work to preserve."

But he said the department would only appeal the ruling if the CDC determined that the mask mandate was still necessary for public health. As of Tuesday evening, the agency hadn't made a determination, officials said.

Psaki on Tuesday indicated that while the administration was disappointed with the ruling, it didn't rank with Congress' inability to reach a compromise on additional COVID funding to purchase booster shots and antiviral treatments.

"Those are our biggest concerns," she said.

Face-covering requirements, which have proven to lower the risks of infection, have grown increasingly political in the U.S. over the last year, particularly as cases and severe outcomes have fallen.

The lingering mandate for public transit and air travel served as a daily reminder for many people that the pandemic they badly wanted to be over was still affecting their lives, even if vaccinations and antiviral treatments had dramatically lowered their risk. For others who are still fearful of the virus, each roll-back of pandemic restrictions has sparked fresh disquiet — and in some cases criticism of the Biden administration.

"There are still a lot of people in this country who still want to have masks in place — either they have immunocompromised relatives, they have kids under 5, whatever it may be," said Psaki.

Monday's court ruling hastened an outcome that was likely coming in weeks anyway. Many administration officials believed that last week's 15-day extension of the mask order to May 3 would be the last. The public health agency had asked for the additional time to monitor whether a recent rise in infections would result in increased hospitalizations or deaths. So far it hasn't.

The court's order caught the administration by surprise and left it struggling to grasp its impact — both on the requirement's end and on CDC's authorities going forward.

"CDC scientists had asked for 15 days to make a more data-driven durable decision," Dr. Aashish Jha, the new White House COVID-19 coordinator, tweeted on Tuesday. "We should have given it to them."

The uptick in cases and a recent spate of positive cases in Biden's orbit — including second gentleman Doug Emhoff and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi — was a potent reminder that the virus isn't going away.

Biden, 79, was never identified as a "close contact" under CDC guidelines, the White House said, and officials emphasized that he is strongly protected against the virus by being vaccinated and twice-boosted.

Controlling the virus that has killed 986,000 Americans has been a priority for Biden since taking office. The U.S. now averages about 35,000 confirmed cases per day, down from a high of more than 806,000 during January's omicron surge, but up slightly from lows of about 26,000 a month ago. Those figures are surely an undercount since many people don't report the results of at-home tests to public health authorities.

## Netflix shares drop 25% after service loses 200K subscribers

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Netflix suffered its first subscriber loss in more than a decade, causing its shares to plunge 25% in extended trading amid concerns that the pioneering streaming service may have already seen its best days.

The company's customer base fell by 200,000 subscribers during the January-March period, according to its quarterly earnings report released Tuesday. It's the first time that Netflix's subscribers have fallen since the streaming service became available throughout most of the world outside of China six years

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ago. The drop this year stemmed in part from Netflix's decision to withdraw from Russia to protest the war against Ukraine, resulting in a loss of 700,000 subscribers.

Netflix acknowledged its problems are deep rooted by projecting a loss of another 2 million subscribers during the April-June period.

If the stock drop extends into Wednesday's regular trading session, Netflix shares will have lost more than half of their value so far this year — wiping out about \$150 billion in shareholder wealth in less than four months.

Netflix is hoping to reverse the tide by taking steps it has previously resisted, including blocking the sharing of accounts and introducing a lower-priced — and ad-supported — version of its service.

Aptus Capital Advisors analyst David Wagner said it's now clear that Netflix is grappling with an imposing challenge. "They are in no-(wo) man's land," Wagner wrote in a research note Tuesday.

Netflix absorbed its biggest blow since losing 800,000 subscribers in 2011 — the result of unveiled plans to begin charging separately for its then-nascent streaming service, which had been bundled for free with its traditional DVD-by-mail service. The customer backlash to that move elicited an apology from Netflix CEO Reed Hastings for botching the execution of the spin-off.

The latest subscriber loss was far worse than a forecast by Netflix management for a conservative gain of 2.5 million subscribers. The news deepens troubles that have been mounting for the streaming since a surge of signups from a captive audience during the pandemic began to slow.

It marks the fourth time in the last five quarters that Netflix's subscriber growth has fallen below the gains of the previous year, a malaise that has been magnified by stiffening competition from well-funded rivals such as Apple and Walt Disney.

The setback follows the company's addition of 18.2 million subscribers in 2021, its weakest annual growth since 2016. That contrasted with an increase of 36 million subscribers during 2020 when people were corralled at home and starved for entertainment, which Netflix was able to quickly and easily provide with its stockpile of original programming.

Netflix has previously predicted that it will regain its momentum, but on Tuesday faced up to the issues bogging it down. "COVID created a lot of noise on how to read the situation," Hastings said in a video conference reviewing the latest numbers.

Among other things, Hastings confirmed Netflix will start crack down on the sharing of subscriber passwords that has enabled multiple households to access its service from a single account, with changes likely to roll out during the next year or so.

The Los Gatos, California, company estimated that about 100 million households worldwide are watching its service for free by using the account of a friend or another family member, including 30 million in the U.S. and Canada. "Those are over 100 million households already are choosing to view Netflix," Hastings said. "They love the service. We've just got to get paid at some degree for them."

To stop the practice and prod more people to pay for their own accounts, Netflix indicated it will expand a test introduced last month in Chile, Peru and Costa Rica that allows subscribers to add up to two people living outside their households to their accounts for an additional fee.

Netflix ended March with 221.6 million worldwide subscribers. The subscriber downturn clipped Netflix's finances in the first quarter when the company's profit fell 6% from last year to \$1.6 billion, or \$3.53 per share. Revenue climbed 10% from last year to nearly \$7.9 billion.

With the pandemic easing, people have been finding other things to do, and other video streaming services are working hard to lure new viewers with their own award-winning programming. Apple, for instance, held the exclusive streaming rights to "CODA," which eclipsed Netflix's "Power of The Dog," among other movies, to win Best Picture at last month's Academy Awards.

Escalating inflation over the past year has also squeezed household budgets, leading more consumers to rein in their spending on discretionary items. Despite that pressure, Netflix recently raised its prices in the U.S., where it has its greatest household penetration — and where it's had the most trouble finding more subscribers. In the most recent quarter, Netflix lost 640,000 subscribers in the U.S. and Canada,

prompting management to point out that most of its future growth will come in international markets.

Netflix also is trying to give people another reason to subscribe by adding video games at no extra charge — a feature that began to roll out last year.

## Russia pours in more troops and presses attack in the east

By ADAM SCHRECK Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia assaulted cities and towns along a boomerang-shaped front hundreds of miles long and poured more troops into Ukraine on Tuesday in a potentially pivotal battle for control of the country's eastern industrial heartland of coal mines and factories.

If successful, the Russian offensive in what is known as the Donbas would essentially slice Ukraine in two and give President Vladimir Putin a badly needed victory following the failed attempt by Moscow's forces to storm the capital, Kyiv, and heavier-than-expected casualties nearly two months into the war.

The eastern cities of Kharkiv and Kramatorsk came under deadly attack. Russia also said it struck areas around Zaporizhzhia and Dnipro west of the Donbas with missiles. Multiple explosions were heard early Wednesday in the southern city of Mykolaiv, the regional governor said. A hospital was reported shelled earlier in the nearby town of Bashtanka.

In Mariupol, the now-devastated port city in the Donbas, Ukrainian troops said the Russian military dropped heavy bombs to flatten what was left of a sprawling steel plant and hit a hospital where hundreds were staying.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said Moscow's forces bombarded numerous Ukrainian military sites, including troop concentrations and missile-warhead storage depots, in or near several cities or villages. Those claims could not be independently verified.

In what both sides described as a new phase of the war, the Russian assault began Monday along a front stretching more than 300 miles (480 kilometers) from northeastern Ukraine to the country's southeast. Ukraine's military said Russian forces tried to "break through our defenses along nearly the entire front line."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the Russian military was throwing everything it has into the battle, with most of its combat-ready forces now concentrated in Ukraine and just across the border in Russia.

"They have driven almost everyone and everything that is capable of fighting us against Ukraine," he said in his nightly video address to the nation.

Despite Russian claims of hitting only military sites, they continue to target residential areas and kill civilians, he said.

"The Russian army in this war is writing itself into world history forever as the most barbaric and inhuman army in the world," Zelenskyy said.

Weeks ago, after the abortive Russian push to take Kyiv, the Kremlin declared that its main goal was the capture of the mostly Russian-speaking Donbas, where Moscow-backed separatists have been fighting Ukrainian forces for eight years.

A Russian victory in the Donbas would deprive Ukraine of the industrial assets concentrated there, including mines, metals plants and heavy-equipment factories.

A senior U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the Pentagon's assessments of the war, said the Russians had added two more combat units, known as battalion tactical groups, in Ukraine over the preceding 24 hours. That brought the total number of units in the country to 78, all of them in the south and the east, up from 65 last week, the official said.

That would translate to about 55,000 to 62,000 troops, based on what the Pentagon said at the start of the war was the typical unit strength of 700 to 800 soldiers. But accurately determining Russia's fighting capacity at this stage is difficult.

A European official, likewise speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss military assessments, said Russia also has 10,000 to 20,000 foreign fighters in the Donbas. They are a mix of mercenaries from Russia's private Wagner Group and Russian proxy fighters from Syria and Libya, according to the official.



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While Ukraine portrayed the attacks on Monday as the start of the long-feared offensive in the east, some observers noted that an escalation has been underway there for some time and questioned whether this was truly the start of a new offensive.

The U.S. official said the offensive in the Donbas has begun in a limited way, mainly in an area southwest of the city of Donetsk and south of Izyum.

Justin Crump, a former British tank commander now with the strategic advisory company Sibylline, said the Ukrainian comments could, in part, be an attempt to persuade allies to send more weapons.

"What they're trying to do by positioning this, I think, is ... focus people's minds and effort by saying, 'Look, the conflict has begun in the Donbas,'" Crump said. "That partly puts pressure on NATO and EU suppliers to say, 'Guys, we're starting to fight now. We need this now.'"

President Joe Biden is expected to announce a new weapons package in the coming days that will include additional artillery and ammunition, according to a U.S. official, who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also said his country will send heavy artillery to Ukraine. And Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte told Zelensky that the Netherlands will send more heavy weapons, including armored vehicles.

Western arms have played a key role in enabling the outgunned Ukrainians to hold off the Russians.

Associated Press journalists in Kharkiv said at least four people were killed and three wounded in a Russian attack on a residential area of the city. The attack occurred as residents attempted to maintain a sense of normalcy, with municipal workers planting spring flowers in public areas.

An explosion also rocked Kramatorsk, killing at least one person and wounding three, according to AP journalists at the scene.

In Bashtanka, an unspecified number of people were wounded when Russian forces shelled the hospital, destroying the reception area and the dialysis unit, the head of the regional council, Hanna Zamazeeva, said on Facebook. Bashtanka is about 70 kilometers (40 miles) north of Mykolaiv.

Eyewitness accounts and reports from officials have given a broad picture of the extent of the Russian advance. But independent reporting in the parts of the Donbas held by Russian forces and separatists is severely limited, making it difficult to know what is happening in many places on the ground.

Military experts said the Russians' goal is to encircle Ukrainian troops from the north, south and east.

Key to the campaign is the capture of Mariupol, which would deprive Ukraine of a vital port and complete a land bridge between Russia and the Crimean Peninsula, seized from Ukraine in 2014. It would also free up Russian troops to move elsewhere in the Donbas.

A few thousand Ukrainian troops, by the Russians' estimate, remained holed up in a sprawling Mariupol steel plant, representing what was believed to be the last major pocket of resistance in the city.

Russia issued a new ultimatum to the Ukrainian defenders to surrender Wednesday after a previous ultimatum was ignored. The Russian Defense Ministry said those who surrender will be allowed to live and given medical treatment. There was no immediate response from the Ukrainian troops, but they have repeatedly vowed not to give up.

Instead, the deputy commander of the Azov regiment, who was among the troops remaining in Mariupol, said the Russian military dropped heavy bombs on the steel plant and hit an "improvised" hospital. "We are pulling people out from under the rubble," Sviatoslav Palamar told Radio Liberty.

Serhiy Taruta, the former governor of the Donetsk region and a Mariupol native, also reported the bombing of the hospital, where he said 300 people, including wounded troops and civilians with children, were sheltered.

The reports could not be independently confirmed.

Zelenskyy said the Kremlin has not responded to a proposal to exchange Viktor Medvedchuk, the jailed leader of a pro-Russia party, for the Mariupol defenders.

**Dede Robertson, wife of religious broadcaster, dies at 94**

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By BEN FINLEY Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — Dede Robertson, the wife of religious broadcaster Pat Robertson and a founding board member of the Christian Broadcasting Network, died Tuesday at her home in Virginia Beach, the network said in a statement.

Robertson was 94. The statement did not provide her cause of death.

Robertson became a born-again Christian several months after her husband found his faith. The couple, who met at Yale University in 1952, embarked on a journey that included living in a roach-infested commune in New York before Pat Robertson bought a tiny television station in Virginia that would become the Christian Broadcasting Network.

He later ran for president of the United States in 1988, with his wife campaigning by his side.

"Mom was the glue that held the Robertson family together," said Gordon Robertson, one of her four children, and the president and CEO of CBN. "She was always working behind the scenes. If it weren't for Mom, there wouldn't be a CBN."

Adelia "Dede" Elmer was born in Columbus, Ohio, to middle-class Catholic Republicans. She got her bachelor's degree from Ohio State and a master's in nursing from Yale.

Robertson's future husband was the son of a Southern Baptist, Democratic U.S. senator. Eighteen months after meeting, they ran off to be married by a justice of the peace, knowing that neither family would approve.

Robertson's husband was interested in politics until he found religion, she told The Associated Press in 1987. He stunned her by pouring out their liquor, tearing a nude print off the wall and declaring he had found the Lord.

They moved into the commune in Bedford-Stuyvesant because Robertson said God had told him to sell all his possessions and minister to the poor. Robertson told The AP she was tempted to go back to Ohio, "but I realized that was not what the Lord would have me do ... I had promised to stay, so I did."

Pat Robertson later heard God tell him to buy the small TV station in Portsmouth, Virginia, which would become a global religious broadcasting network. He ran the network's flagship program, the "700 Club," for half a century before stepping down last fall.

In her autobiography, Robertson recalled bridling at staying at home and her husband's refusal to help around the house.

"I was a Northerner, and Northern men just generally help around the house a little more," she said. "I noticed the further south we moved, the less he did."

Her attitude changed after she had her own born-again experience at a church service, she told The AP. "I began to see how important what he was doing really was."

Robertson said that women should not work outside the home while their children are young unless they must. She reared her kids and worked as a nursing professor after they went to school.

She had represented the U.S. on the Inter-American Commission of Women, which was established to ensure recognition of women's human rights. She also served on the board of Regent University, which her husband founded.

Pat Robertson said in a statement that his wife "was a woman of great faith, a champion of the gospel, and a remarkable servant of Christ who has left an indelible print on all that she set her hand to during her extraordinary life."

## Feds will appeal mask ruling only if mandate still needed

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and TERESA CRAWFORD Associated Press

The Justice Department said Tuesday it will not appeal a federal district judge's ruling that ended the nation's federal mask mandate on public transit unless the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention believes the requirement is still necessary.

In a statement released a day after a Florida judge ended the sweeping mandate, which required face coverings on planes and trains and in transit hubs, Justice Department spokesman Anthony Coley said

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officials believe that the federal mask order was “a valid exercise of the authority Congress has given CDC to protect the public health.” He said it was “an important authority the Department will continue to work to preserve.”

Coley said the CDC had said it would continue to assess public health conditions, and if the agency determined a mandate was necessary for public health, the Justice Department would file an appeal.

As of Tuesday, the agency hadn't made a determination, officials said.

The federal judge's ruling did away with the last major vestige of federal pandemic rules and led to a mishmash of new locally created rules that reflected the nation's ongoing divisions over how to battle the virus.

Major airlines and airports in places like Dallas, Atlanta, Los Angeles and Salt Lake City quickly switched to a mask-optional policy. Los Angeles County dropped its mandate for mass transit and a train conductor in New Jersey told commuters of their masks Tuesday: “Feel free to burn them at will.”

New York City, Chicago and Connecticut, however, continued to require masks for travelers.

The ride-sharing companies Lyft and Uber announced on their websites Tuesday that masks will now be optional while riding or driving.

Even Walt Disney World in Florida on Tuesday announced it was lifting its mask requirement for its monorail, buses and sky gondola.

For many, the news was welcome. A video showed some passengers on a Delta Air Lines flight cheering and applauding as they removed masks upon hearing the announcement they were now optional. One man happily twirled his mask on his finger.

However Brooke Tansley, a television producer and former Broadway performer, was incensed after boarding a flight with her 4-year-old and 8-month-old baby— neither old enough to be vaccinated — only to learn the mask mandate had ended mid-flight.

“Very very angry about this,” she said in a tweet, noting her baby was too young to wear a mask.

President Joe Biden went all-in on flexibility Tuesday when asked if Americans should mask up on planes.

“That's up to them,” Biden declared during a visit to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. But the White House continues to require face coverings for those traveling with him on Air Force One, citing CDC guidance.

In Portland, Oregon, transit employees immediately began taking down “mask required” announcements and signs, but said it would likely take several days to remove everything.

The city joined Atlanta, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Kansas City, Missouri, and two of Alaska's largest cities, Anchorage and Juneau, in making masking optional on mass transit.

Some passengers at Chicago's Union Station said the rules were confusing. Amtrak dropped its requirement. The Chicago Transit Authority and Metra, the regional commuter rail service, kept the requirement at first but dropped it late Tuesday.

“It's like this patchwork of different rules and enforcement of it,” said Erik Abderhalden, who wore a mask as he waited for a Metra train to his home in suburban Naperville. “I mean, it's like Swiss cheese ... there's no uniformity and it seems pretty laissez-faire.”

Subway rider Cooper Klinges was pleased that New York City's public transit system wasn't following the trend and planned to keep its mask requirement in place. As he waited at a Brooklyn train station, he said he canceled a flight earlier this year over concerns about the virus.

“I don't think we are out of the woods yet,” said Klinges, a teacher, citing concerns about the BA.2 omicron subvariant of the coronavirus. “It is still around. We have to still stick it out.”

The CDC had recently extended the mask mandate, which was set to expire Monday, until May 3 to allow more time to study the subvariant, which is now responsible for the vast majority of U.S. cases. But the court ruling puts that decision on hold.

After a winter surge fueled by the omicron variant that prompted record hospitalizations, the U.S. has seen a significant drop in virus spread in recent months that led most states and cities to drop mask mandates.

But several Northeast cities have seen a rise in hospitalizations in recent weeks, leading Philadelphia to bring back its mask mandate.

## **EXPLAINER: What happens in the post-mask world of travel?**

By DAVID KOENIG Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — A ruling by a federal judge has ended — at least for now — the requirement that people wear masks on planes and public transportation, and there is plenty of confusion about the new, post-mask world of travel.

The Justice Department left the door open Tuesday to a possible appeal of the ruling, but only if the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention thinks the mandate is necessary. An appeal could be a politically risky move for the Biden administration.

The decision by a lone judge in Florida toppled 14 months of government insistence that travelers wear masks to reduce transmission of COVID-19. Within hours, all major U.S. airlines and many airports announced — sometimes to passengers in the middle of flights — that travelers could take off their masks.

### WHAT EXACTLY WAS THE RULING?

In a 59-page opinion, U.S. District Judge Kathryn Kimball Mizelle in Tampa, Florida, said the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention overstepped its authority in issuing the original health order that the Transportation Security Administration used to impose the mask mandate. She said the CDC didn't follow proper rulemaking procedures.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Once TSA said it would no longer enforce the rule, airlines, airports, transit systems and ride-share services were free to decide for themselves whether to require masks. United, Delta, American, Southwest, Alaska, JetBlue and other airlines all made masks voluntary.

On the ground, however, requirements could vary from place to place. New York City's public transit system planned to keep its mask requirement in effect. In San Francisco, the regional commuter rail system known as BART made masks voluntary, but the city transit authority did not.

The transit agency serving Philadelphia and its suburbs said masks will no longer be required on subways, buses and trains or in stations, even though the city has a mask mandate.

Uber and Lyft said they won't require passengers to wear masks.

### HOW SAFE IS IT TO TRAVEL NOW?

Air filtration on planes is generally excellent, but boarding and exiting a plane can put people close together in spaces with poor ventilation, said Dr. Babak Javid, a physician-scientist at the University of California, San Francisco. The risk on other forms of transportation varies.

Dr. David Dowdy, an infectious-disease epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said planes can carry the virus from place to place, but that we should be focusing more on big indoor events such as concerts and sporting events — even large weddings — where people get together and talk, shout and sing.

### SHOULD I STILL WEAR A MASK ON PLANES?

The CDC continues to recommend that people mask up indoors while traveling.

### DO MASKS WORK IF NOBODY ELSE WEARS ONE?

Yes, masks still give some protection from COVID-19, but they work better if others wear them too.

High-quality masks work in two ways, said Carl Bergstrom, a University of Washington evolutionary biologist who studies emerging infectious diseases: They protect the wearer by limiting the number of infectious particles inhaled, and they protect others by limiting particles exhaled if the wearer is infected.

### WILL I STAND OUT?



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Probably not. Delta Air Lines CEO Ed Bastian, who favored dropping the rule, said before the judge's order that he expected to see a "surprising number" of passengers and airline employees wear masks even after the mandate expired.

"I may choose to wear a mask once in a while," he said.

Still, tension among passengers over mask-wearing could continue, said Eileen Ogintz, who writes about family travel and advises parents of small children who can't be vaccinated to keep masking up.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you got some dirty looks or nasty comments" from unmasked passengers, she said. "That's a conversation to have with the kids ahead of time — why you're wearing masks."

## CAN I GET A REFUND IF I DON'T WANT TO FLY NOW?

No, unless the airline cancels your flight.

However, if you call the airline and explain why you're not comfortable traveling without a mask mandate, most will let you change the flight for free or give you a credit that you can use later, said Scott Keyes, founder of Scott's Cheap Flights travel site.

## WILL THE LIFTING OF THE BAN AFFECT INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS?

When flying between two countries, expect your airline to follow the rules in whichever country is more restrictive. Passengers flying to Canada, for example, will have to don masks at some point during the flight, but it's not clear exactly whether that means when crossing into Canadian airspace or some other point.

Henry Harteveltdt, a travel analyst for Atmosphere Research Group, said there might be international airlines that will still require masks even on flights to and from the United States.

## WILL THIS MAKE MORE PEOPLE WILLING TO FLY?

Industry officials don't expect that. They say that there could be a small number of people who will start flying now because they don't have to wear a mask, but that will be offset by a few people deciding not to fly if others are unmasked.

Although the airline industry lobbied to kill the mandate — after supporting it originally — airlines don't expect the rule's demise to affect revenue. They are far more interested in seeing the United States repeal another pandemic-era rule: The requirement that people test clear of the virus within a day of flying to the U.S.

A Biden administration official said Tuesday that there were no changes expected to the pre-departure testing requirement.

## WHEN DID THE U.S. REQUIRE MASKS?

The mask mandate for transportation began in February 2021, shortly after President Joe Biden took office, and was extended several times. Last week, the CDC extended it again until May 3. The CDC said the extra time was needed to study the BA.2 omicron subvariant, which is now responsible for the vast majority of cases in the U.S.

## HOW CAN A SINGLE JUDGE HAVE SO MUCH POWER?

Usually, decisions by a federal judge affect only the people involved in one case, or a limited geographic area. But judges can also issue so-called nationwide or universal injunctions that apply across the country, and it is happening more often — a practice that has drawn criticism from conservative members of the U.S. Supreme Court.

## WHO IS JUDGE KATHRYN KIMBALL MIZELLE?

Mizelle was nominated in 2020 by former President Donald Trump and confirmed in a party-line vote in the Senate, which was then controlled by Republicans, after Trump had lost his bid for re-election. At 33 when confirmed, she was the youngest Trump appointee on the federal bench, and the American Bar As-

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sociation had rated her “not qualified” in part because she had been practicing law for only eight years.

## WILL THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION RESPOND?

The Justice Department said Tuesday it won’t appeal Mizelle’s ruling unless the CDC believes that the mask requirement is still necessary. The announcement doesn’t mean that an appeal is certain, but it signals that one could be filed if the CDC decides later that the mandate should be revived.

While the mask ban was popular in the beginning, support has waned over time, according to public-opinion polls. As state and local mask rules were scrapped, and Americans grew accustomed to going bare-faced, the mandate for transportation drew fire from Republican politicians and several Senate Democrats who face tough re-election fights in November.

## IS THE TIMING OF THIS RIGHT?

New reported U.S. cases of COVID-19 are relatively low compared with the past two years, but they have increased lately and are likely an undercount. Hospitalizations are nearly flat and deaths are still declining.

Dowdy, the Johns Hopkins epidemiologist, said it’s reasonable to consider removing the mask mandate on travel given the lull in severe disease.

“It would just be nice to do it when cases are falling rather than rising,” he said, “and for the decision to be made by people trained in public health rather than law and politics.”

## WHAT IF COVID CASES INCREASE?

A new surge in cases might not be enough to revive the mask rule, but it could roil travel in other ways. U.S. airlines canceled thousands of flights in late December and early January, largely because so many employees were out sick with omicron.

“Imagine what would happen if a critical mass of Southwest Airlines pilots are sick and can’t fly this summer?” said Harteveltdt, the travel analyst. “Whether it’s Southwest or any airline, it could be highly disruptive to summer travel.”

Medical Writer Carla K. Johnson in Washington state and Jessica Gresko and Zeke Miller in Washington, D.C., contributed to this report.

## Florida Gov DeSantis pushes to end Disney self-government

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis on Tuesday asked the Legislature to repeal a law allowing Walt Disney World to operate a private government over its properties in the state, the latest volley in a feud between the governor and the entertainment giant over what critics have dubbed the “Don’t Say Gay” law.

DeSantis, an ascendant GOP governor and potential 2024 presidential candidate, has battled with Disney over the company’s opposition to the new law barring instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade.

On Tuesday, DeSantis raised the stakes.

As lawmakers returned to the Capitol for a special legislative session on congressional redistricting, the governor issued a proclamation that allows the GOP-controlled statehouse to take up bills eliminating Disney’s self-governing district. Republicans quickly filed proposals to do so.

“I am announcing today that we are expanding the call of what they are going to be considering this week. And so, yes they will be considering the congressional map, but they also will be considering termination of all special districts that were enacted in Florida prior to 1968, and that includes the Reedy Creek Improvement District,” DeSantis said at a news conference, referencing the company’s governing district without mentioning Disney by name. He did not elaborate.

Disney representatives did not return an emailed request for comment on Tuesday. It was not imme-

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diately clear how the elimination of the district would affect the company or neighboring governments.

The Reedy Creek Improvement District is a private government controlled by Disney World and set up by the state Legislature in 1967 that allows it to provide government services such as zoning, fire protection, utilities and infrastructure.

The creation of the district, and the control it gave Disney over 27,000 acres (11,000 hectares) in Florida, was a crucial element in the company's plans to build near Orlando in the 1960s. Company officials said they needed autonomy to plan a futuristic city along with the theme park. The city never materialized, however; instead, it morphed into the EPCOT theme park.

The push to punish the company comes after Disney announced it would suspend political donations in the state over the new Parental Rights in Education law. Opponents dubbed the law "Don't Say Gay," arguing that barring lessons on sexual orientation and gender identity in early grades would marginalize LGBTQ people.

Disney is one of Florida's biggest private employers: Last year, the company said it had more than 60,000 workers in the state. LGBTQ advocates who work for the company criticized CEO Bob Chapek for what they said was his slow response speaking out against the bill. Some walked off the job in protest.

DeSantis has repeatedly lashed out at Disney and critics of the law, gaining considerable attention in conservative media spheres. He insists the policy is reasonable and says parents, not teachers, should broach subjects of sexual orientation and gender identity with children.

Republican lawmakers appear receptive to punishing Disney, filing proposals that would dissolve the district by June 2023. DeSantis has been a powerful governor, effectively pushing his priorities in the statehouse, and both the GOP Senate president and House speaker support him on the Disney issue.

Democrats were quick to criticize the governor's move as retribution for the company's stance on the education bill. Some pointed out that Disney has been a major economic driver in the state.

"What world are we living in right now?" asked Democratic Sen. Audrey Gibson. "It's the freedom state of Florida. If they disagree with the governor, he brings out the Gatling gun."

Retired Rollins College political scientist Richard Foglesong, whose book, "Married to the Mouse" recounts the formation of Reedy Creek, said he thought initially that "cooler heads would prevail" in the war of words between DeSantis and Disney.

"I believe I was wrong. I overestimated — or underestimated — Gov. DeSantis," Foglesong said. "I see it as a legitimate threat."

## Johnny Depp on stand: Ex-wife Heard's allegations 'heinous'

By MATTHEW BARAKAT Associated Press

FAIRFAX, Va. (AP) — Actor Johnny Depp told jurors Tuesday that he felt compelled to sue his ex-wife Amber Heard for libel out of an obsession for the truth after she accused him of domestic violence.

"My goal is the truth because it killed me that all these people I had met over the years ... that these people would think that I was a fraud," he said.

Depp flatly denied ever hitting Heard, calling the physical and sexual assault allegations against him disturbing, heinous and "not based in any species of truth."

"Nothing of the kind ever happened," Depp said in court.

Alluding to the fall his career has taken since Heard levied abuse allegations against him, the former "Pirates of the Caribbean" star said, "it's been six years of trying times. It's very strange when one day you're Cinderella, so to speak, and then in 0.6 seconds you're Quasimodo."

For the first hour-plus of testimony Tuesday, Depp gave long, stream-of-consciousness answers to questions about his childhood and his early movie career, speaking in his signature deep baritone. After one long answer, he admitted: "I forgot what the original question was."

Indeed, he acknowledged his meandering style, particularly as it relates to his writing style. He mentioned his long friendship and collaborations with the late gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, and said he sought to emulate a style that often incorporated brash language and embellishing thoughts.

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He said that led him at times to write text messages that he now finds embarrassing, and he apologized to the jury for the vulgar language he used in text messages introduced as evidence to describe Heard.

"In the heat of the moment, in the heat of the pain I was feeling, I went to dark places," he said.

But he said he'd been waiting for six years to tell his side of the story after Heard filed for divorce against him in 2016 and sought a restraining order against him.

The trial began more than a week ago, but, prior to Tuesday, jurors had only seen the Hollywood star sitting silently with his team of lawyers as each side has tried to embarrass the other in a trial that Heard's lawyers accurately predicted would turn into a mudslinging soap opera.

After denying Heard's abuse allegations, Depp spoke at length about a childhood in which physical abuse from his mother was "constant." When he became a father, Depp said, he made sure his children didn't experience that kind of upbringing.

Depp will continue his testimony Wednesday. In Tuesday's session, he testified primarily about the early years of his relationship with Heard, saying she seemed "too good to be true" at first.

"She was attentive," Depp said of the woman he married in 2015. "She was loving. She was smart. She was kind. She was funny. She was understanding ... We had many things in common, certain blues music ... literature."

He said there were little things, though, that gave him indications of a rocky relationship ahead. She became upset, he said, when he broke an established routine in which she took off his boots for him when he came home. And he said she was angry when he wouldn't go to bed when she was ready.

"I didn't understand why, as a 50-some-year-old man, I couldn't go to sleep when I wanted to," he said.

Depp, 58, said he was cognizant of the age difference between him and Heard, 35.

"I acknowledge the fact I was the old, craggy fogey and she was this beautiful, creature," he said.

But Depp said that within a year and a half, it was as if Heard had become another person.

So far, Depp's friends, family and employees have testified that Heard was the aggressor in the relationship, physically attacking him on multiple occasions. Heard's former personal assistant testified that Heard spit in her face in a fit of rage.

Heard's lawyers have said Depp physically and sexually assaulted her on multiple occasions, often in situations where he drank so much he later blacked out.

Depp said Heard's allegations of his substance abuse have been "grossly embellished" and that there have been no moments where he's been out of control.

"I'm not some maniac who needs to be high or loaded all the time," Depp said, though he admitted to doing "a line or two" of cocaine with Heard's sister, Whitney.

The actor said he was addicted to pain medication, which stemmed from an injury on the set of the fourth "Pirates of the Caribbean" movie. He also said he took his mother's "nerve pills" when he was a kid.

But Depp said he detoxed from the pain medication and has experienced long periods of sobriety over the years.

"The characterization of my 'substance abuse' that's been delivered by Ms. Heard is grossly embellished," Depp said. "And I'm sorry to say, but a lot of it is just plainly false. I think that it was an easy target for her to hit."

The lawsuit itself is supposed to be over whether Heard libeled Depp when she wrote a 2018 op-ed piece in The Washington Post about domestic violence. In the article, Heard referred to herself as a "public figure representing domestic abuse."

She never mentioned Depp by name, but Depp and his lawyers said it was a clear reference to accusations Heard made in 2016 when the couple divorced and she sought a restraining order against him.

Heard's lawyers, who have filed their own countersuit against Depp, said nothing in the article libels him. They say the abuse allegations are true, and that the damage to Depp's reputation — which he says got him booted from the lucrative "Pirates of the Caribbean" movie franchise — came from his own bad behavior.

**Biden launches \$6B effort to save distressed nuclear plants**



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By JENNIFER McDERMOTT and MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is launching a \$6 billion effort to rescue nuclear power plants at risk of closing, citing the need to continue nuclear energy as a carbon-free source of power that helps to combat climate change.

A certification and bidding process opened Tuesday for a civil nuclear credit program that is intended to bail out financially distressed owners or operators of nuclear power reactors, the U.S. Department of Energy told The Associated Press exclusively, shortly before the official announcement. It's the largest federal investment in saving financially distressed nuclear reactors.

Owners or operators of nuclear power reactors that are expected to shut down for economic reasons can apply for funding to avoid closing prematurely. The first round of awards will prioritize reactors that have already announced plans to close.

The second round will be opened up to more economically at-risk facilities. The program was funded through President Joe Biden's \$1 trillion infrastructure deal, which he signed into law in November.

"U.S. nuclear power plants contribute more than half of our carbon-free electricity, and President Biden is committed to keeping these plants active to reach our clean energy goals," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a statement. "We're using every tool available to get this country powered by clean energy by 2035, and that includes prioritizing our existing nuclear fleet to allow for continued emissions-free electricity generation and economic stability for the communities leading this important work."

A strong majority of states — about two-thirds — say nuclear, in one fashion or another, will help take the place of fossil fuels. A dozen U.S. commercial nuclear power reactors have closed in the past decade before their licenses expired, largely due to competition from cheaper natural gas, massive operating losses due to low electricity prices and escalating costs, or the cost of major repairs.

This has led to a rise in emissions in those regions, poorer air quality and the loss of thousands of high-paying jobs, dealing an economic blow to local communities, according to the DOE. A quarter or more of the fleet is at risk, the DOE added. The owners of seven currently operating reactors have already announced plans to retire them through 2025.

Most U.S. nuclear plants were built between 1970 and 1990 and it's costing more to operate an aging fleet. The only nuclear plant under construction in the United States is in Georgia. Costs have ballooned and another delay was announced in February.

The shuttered reactors include Indian Point Energy Center in New York, Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station in Massachusetts, Fort Calhoun Nuclear Generating Station in Nebraska and Duane Arnold Energy Center in Iowa. Entergy cited low natural gas prices and increased operating costs as key factors in its decision to close Indian Point last year. New York officials sought the shutdown, saying the plant 24 miles (39 kilometers) north of Manhattan posed too great a risk to millions of people who live and work nearby.

Twenty more reactors faced closure in the last decade before states stepped in to save them, according to the Nuclear Energy Institute, the industry's trade association. Illinois is spending nearly \$700 million to keep three plants open while additional renewable resources come online.

Low electricity prices are the main cause of this trend, though federal and state policies to boost wind and solar have contributed as well, the NEI added.

There are 55 commercial nuclear power plants with 93 nuclear reactors in 28 U.S. states. Nuclear power already provides about 20% of electricity in the U.S., or about half the nation's carbon-free energy.

If reactors do close before their licenses expire, fossil fuel plants will likely fill the void and emissions will increase, which would be a substantial setback, said Andrew Griffith, acting assistant secretary for nuclear energy at DOE.

While natural gas may be cheaper, nuclear power hasn't been given credit for its carbon-free contribution to the grid and that has caused nuclear plants to struggle financially, Griffith added.

The bailout for the nuclear industry is reminiscent of assistance the auto and airline industries received after the 2008 economic collapse and the coronavirus pandemic, respectively.

With barely a month left in office, former President George W. Bush authorized \$25 billion in loans to General Motors and Chrysler from a \$700 billion bailout fund initially intended to save the largest U.S. banks. After President Barack Obama took office in 2009, he appointed a task force to oversee GM and

Chrysler, both of which eventually declared bankruptcy. The companies took an additional roughly \$55 billion in aid and were forced to close factories and overhaul operations before recovering and adding jobs. Most of the industry's bailout loans have been repaid.

More recently, airlines received \$54 billion in taxpayer money to keep people employed through the pandemic, but they eliminated tens of thousands of jobs anyway by offering incentives for employees to quit or retire early.

David Schlissel, at the Ohio-based Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis, said he wishes the federal government, before it allocated the \$6 billion, had analyzed whether that money might have been better spent on ramping up renewables, battery storage and energy efficiency projects, which can be done quickly and cheaply to displace fossil fuels.

Now that the money is already set aside for nuclear plants, the federal tax credits for renewables should be extended and more should be invested in energy efficiency, he said, because the faster that's done, the faster the nation reduces its dependence on fossil fuels and its emissions. Also, the nuclear plants are going to eventually retire, some sooner than later, so carbon-free sources of energy need to be in place for when they do, he added.

The Sierra Club has a nuclear free campaign that says nuclear is not a solution to climate change, and "every dollar spent on nuclear is one less dollar spent on truly safe, affordable and renewable energy sources."

California is slated to close its last remaining nuclear power plant, Diablo Canyon, in 2025. Officials there think they can replace it with new solar, wind and battery storage resources, though skeptics have questioned whether California's all-in renewable plan can work in a state of nearly 40 million people.

The Energy Department intends to accept annual applications for the civil nuclear credit program through fiscal 2031, or until the \$6 billion runs out. Nuclear plant owners or operators can bid on credits for financial assistance to keep operating. To qualify, plant owners or operators have to show the reactors are projected to retire for economic reasons and emissions would increase. The department would also determine, with input from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, that they can operate safely.

Maria Korsnick, president and chief executive officer of NEI, said she thinks the federal program will level the playing field for nuclear energy and help clear a path to pass even more intensive policies, such as a nuclear production tax credit proposed in Biden's now-stalled Build Back Better plan.

Democrats have said they hope to resuscitate parts of the social and environmental package and win over voters weary of the two-year-old pandemic and coping with the worst inflation in decades.

## **Biden restores stricter environmental review of big projects**

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is restoring federal regulations that require rigorous environmental review of major infrastructure projects such as highways, pipelines and oil wells — including likely impacts on climate change and nearby communities. The longstanding reviews were scaled back by the Trump administration in a bid to fast-track projects and create jobs.

A rule finalized Tuesday will restore key provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act, a bedrock environmental law designed to ensure community safeguards during reviews for a wide range of federal proposals, including roads, bridges and energy projects authorized in the \$1 trillion infrastructure law Biden signed last fall, the White House said.

The White House Council on Environmental Quality said the new rule, which takes effect in late May, should resolve challenges created by the Trump-era policy and restore public confidence during environmental reviews.

"Restoring these basic community safeguards will provide regulatory certainty, reduce conflict and help ensure that projects get built right the first time," said CEQ Chair Brenda Mallory. "Patching these holes in the environmental review process will help projects get built faster, be more resilient and provide greater benefits to people who live nearby."

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Former President Donald Trump overhauled the environmental reviews in 2020 in a bid to accelerate projects he said would boost the economy and provide jobs.

Trump made slashing government regulations a hallmark of his presidency. He and his administration frequently expressed frustration at rules they said unnecessarily slowed approval for interstate oil and gas pipelines and other big projects. The rule change imposed in 2020 restricted the timelines for environmental reviews and public comment and allowed federal officials to disregard a project's role in cumulative effects, such as climate change.

The new rule comes as the Supreme Court reinstated a separate Trump-era rule that curtails the power of states and Native American tribes to block pipelines and other energy projects that can pollute rivers, streams and other waterways.

In a decision that split the court 5-4 earlier this month, the justices agreed to halt a lower court judge's order throwing out the Trump rule. The decision does not interfere with the Biden administration's plan to rewrite the Environmental Protection Agency rule. Work on a revision has begun, but the administration has said a final rule is not expected until next spring. The Trump-era rule will remain in effect in the meantime.

Contrary to frequent assertions by Trump and others in his administration, Mallory said a more rigorous environmental review will actually speed up completion of major projects, since they will be more likely to withstand a legal challenge by environmental groups or states. Many Trump-era environmental decisions were reversed or delayed by courts after findings they did not undergo sufficient analysis.

Environmental groups hailed the rule change, which they said restores bedrock environmental protections under NEPA, a 1970 law that requires the government to accept public comments and take environmental, economic and health impacts into consideration before approving any major project.

"NEPA plays a critical role in keeping our communities and our environment healthy and safe, and Donald Trump's attempts to weaken NEPA were clearly nothing more than a handout to corporate polluters," said Leslie Fields, the Sierra Club's national director of policy, advocacy and legal affairs.

Environmental groups and African American, Latino and tribal activists had protested the Trump-era rule change, saying it would worsen pollution in areas already reeling from oil refineries, chemical plants and other hazardous sites. The Biden administration has made addressing such environmental justice issues a key priority.

"Communities of color, especially, have relied on NEPA to make sure their voices are heard in decisions that have a profound impact on their health and their well-being," said Rosalie Winn, a senior attorney for the Environmental Defense Fund, which challenged the Trump-era rule.

The White House action "reestablishes essential NEPA safeguards and ensures they will continue to protect people and communities today and in future generations," she said.

Business groups and Republican lawmakers criticized the rule change, saying it would slow down major infrastructure developments.

"Important projects that address critical issues like improving access to public transit, adding more clean energy to the grid and expanding broadband access are languishing due to continued delays and that must change," said Chad Whiteman, vice president for environment and regulatory affairs for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Arkansas Rep. Bruce Westerman, the top Republican on the House Natural Resources Committee, said the White House action would "weaponize NEPA" by making it harder to navigate and more bureaucratic.

"At a time when we should be coalescing around bipartisan ways to lower gas prices, tame skyrocketing inflation and fix the supply chain crisis, President Biden is unfortunately reinstating archaic NEPA regulations that will only result in delays and red tape and feed activist litigation," he said.

## **For Russian diplomats, disinformation is part of the job**

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

As governments and social media companies have moved to suppress Russia's state media and the disinformation it spreads about the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin's diplomats are stepping up to do the dirty work.

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Russian embassies and consulates around the world are prolifically using Facebook, Twitter and other platforms to deflect blame for atrocities while seeking to undermine the international coalition supporting Ukraine.

Tech companies have responded by adding more labels to Russia's diplomatic accounts and by removing the accounts from its recommendations and search results. But the accounts are still active and are disseminating disinformation and propaganda in nearly every nation, in part because their diplomatic status gives them an added layer of protection from moderation.

With hundreds of social media accounts on every continent, Russia's diplomatic corps acts as a global network for propaganda, in which the same claims can be recycled and tweaked for different audiences in different nations. And, so far, steps to substantially curtail that effort have fallen short.

"Each week since the beginning of the war these diplomats have posted thousands of times, gaining more than a million engagements on Twitter per week," said Marcel Schliebs, a disinformation researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute at Oxford University. He has tracked more than 300 social media accounts linked to Russian embassies, consulates and diplomatic groups.

Some Russian embassies, like ones in the U.K. and Mexico, for example, are especially active, churning out pro-Russian propaganda and spreading falsehoods intended to support the invasion.

The Russian missile attack on a Ukrainian rail station that killed 50? Ukrainians were behind it, the Russian Embassy in the U.K. tweeted. Talk of Russian war crimes? It's a plot by Britain to make Russia look bad, the embassy claimed. Those Ukrainian soldiers fighting for their country? They're actually Nazis operating under U.S. orders, the embassy alleged.

The Russian Embassy in London tweeted out those and other conspiracy theories all on one day last week. Each post received hundreds or thousands of retweets, comments and likes, including dozens from other Twitter users pushing back on the propaganda.

"They must know better, but that's what it's like living in and working for a totalitarian regime," said Nicholas Cull, a University of Southern California professor who studies the intersection of diplomacy and propaganda. "A totalitarian regime requires a media bubble. It requires censorship at home, and it requires your own messaging, both for a domestic and foreign audience. That's what this is."

As representatives of their countries empowered to speak on their behalf, diplomats have always been known for pushing their nation's talking points. Russian diplomats in particular have long been known for spreading the Kremlin's disinformation. Russian diplomats used social media to spread disinformation about the invasion of Crimea in 2014 and about the poisoning of Russian dissidents.

Their status as representatives of a foreign government has often given them the freedom to speak. Sometimes they even try to rewrite history, as they did in 2019, when Russian diplomatic accounts used the hashtag #TruthaboutWWII to distort the Soviet Union's initial non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. That disinformation campaign was revealed by researchers at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, which determined that Russian diplomats play a pivotal role, along with state media and social media bots, in the country's sophisticated disinformation apparatus.

"The Kremlin tends to employ a full spectrum model of propaganda," the Atlantic Council researchers concluded.

Since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, tech companies and even governments have taken other actions to stop the flow of disinformation coming from Russia's state-controlled media. The European Union banned outlets like RT and Sputnik. Meta barred those outlets from platforms it owns, including Facebook and Instagram. Tech companies also cut off the outlets from ad revenue and expanded efforts to label their accounts.

A message seeking comment from the Russian Embassy in the U.S. was not immediately returned. A noticeable increase in pro-Russian propaganda regarding Ukraine began in the weeks and months before the invasion even began in February.

The accounts were tweeting about 2,000 times per week immediately after the invasion, resulting in more than 1 million likes, retweets and comments, according to Schliebs' research.

That engagement fell after Twitter announced earlier this month that it would no longer promote more



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than 300 Russian accounts or include them in search results, a technical move known as “demotion,” designed to limit the accounts’ reach. Yet despite Twitter’s action, the accounts Schliebs monitored are still earning about half a million likes, retweets and comments per week.

Twitter and Facebook have added “Russian government organization” labels to many of these accounts to ensure users know the source of the information. But Schliebs found many accounts still have no labels: Of the 300 or so accounts he’s looked at, only about a third have a label.

A Twitter spokeswoman said the company has already labeled 260,000 Tweets from Russian accounts since Feb. 28 and is continuing to add labels to accounts “on a rolling basis.”

Schliebs compared the response by tech companies to Russia’s invasion with their actions following the 2020 U.S. election, the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol and the COVID-19 pandemic. Then-President Donald Trump was kicked off Twitter for inciting violence ahead of the Jan. 6 riot. But the Russian diplomats — they have spread wild conspiracy theories and blamed Ukrainians for Russian atrocities — stay on.

“By no means am I defending him (Trump), but I fail to see the consistency in that policy,” he said.

Meta has implemented similar changes designed to label Russian diplomatic accounts and reduce their reach on its platforms.

Last month, the company also removed a post spread by Russian diplomats that suggested its deadly air strike on a children’s hospital in Mariupol was a hoax.

Schliebs said there is a danger in platforms like Facebook and Twitter coming down too hard on the diplomatic accounts. For one, it could worsen Russia’s antagonism toward U.S.-based tech companies. (Facebook, for instance, has been labeled an “extremist” organization.) But it could also force Russia and its supporters onto less transparent platforms like Telegram, where researchers and regulators can’t see what they’re saying.

It’s a shift that Russia’s diplomats are preparing for, as the Russian Embassy in the U.K. tweeted last week.

“Meet our DiploFamily on @telegram,” it wrote.

## California inmates study at 1st college based behind bars

By OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ Associated Press

SAN QUENTIN, Calif. (AP) — Behind a fortress wall and razor wire and a few feet away from California’s death row, students at one of the country’s most unique colleges discuss the 9/11 attacks and issues of morality, identity and nationalism.

Dressed in matching blue uniforms, the students only break from their discussion when a guard enters the classroom, calling out each man’s last name and waiting for them to reply with the last two digits of their inmate number.

They are students at Mount Tamalpais College at San Quentin State Prison, the first accredited junior college in the country based behind bars. Inmates can take classes in literature, astronomy, American government, precalculus and others to earn an Associate of Arts degree.

Named for a mountain near the prison, the college was accredited in January after a 19-member commission from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges determined the extension program based at San Quentin for more than two decades was providing high-quality education.

“This is a profound step forward in prison education,” said Ted Mitchell, president of the American Council on Education, the umbrella organization for all U.S. higher education institutions.

Mitchell said Mount Tamalpais College is “an extraordinary model” that will give it autonomy not seen in prison programs attached to outside schools.

The new designation will force the school to maintain the high standards set by the college association and hopefully catch the attention of donors to help the college expand, said President Jody Lewen. While it can accommodate 300 students per semester, another 200 are on a waiting list.

The college is one of dozens of educational, job training and self-help programs available to the 3,100 inmates in the medium-security portion of San Quentin, making it a desired destination for inmates statewide who lobby to be transferred there.

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"I wish I had learned this way coming up; instead I was in special ed my whole life," said 49-year-old Derry Brown, whose English 101 class "Cosmopolitan Fictions," was discussing "The Reluctant Fundamentalist," a novel by Mohsin Hamid.

Brown, who is serving a 20-year sentence for burglary and assault, earned his GED in prison and takes pride in now being a college student. He said he may pursue a career in music in his hometown of Los Angeles once he's released next year.

"There is joy in learning — that's why I want to continue," he said. "Even when I get out, I'm going back to college."

The college's \$5 million annual budget is fully funded by private donations, with a paid staff and volunteer faculty, many of them graduate students from top universities, including Stanford and the University of California, Berkeley.

The previous program started in 1996 and was later known as the Prison University Project and it also offered associate's degrees but Lewen, who started as a volunteer instructor in 1999, said she began the process to have an autonomous college three years ago when the university they partnered with closed.

"Very often in the field of higher ed, people will look at educational programs in prisons and they'll say, 'Well, that's a program or project. It's not a school.' Our hope is that by being an independent, accredited, liberal arts college that operates in a prison we make it more difficult for people to overlook those inside and we help them imagine our students differently," Lewen said.

Any general population San Quentin inmate with a high school diploma or GED certificate is eligible to attend. The prison's 539 death row inmates are excluded.

Guards check the IDs of students coming to classes held in trailers set up on one edge of the prison's exercise yard, where students stop to discuss their assignments — corrections officers watching from four towers above.

Overhearing those yard conversations made a big impression on Richard "Bonaru" Richardson after he was transferred to San Quentin in 2007 to finish serving a 47 years-to-life sentence for a home invasion robbery. Former Gov. Jerry Brown commuted Richardson's sentence, and he was released last year after serving 23 years.

"In other institutions, we were used to talking about gang activity, violence, knives, drugs, the next riot," he said.

In San Quentin, the conversations were often about what classes they were taking, how to write a thesis or how to defend an argument.

"I was taken aback. It was kind of like, 'Hold on, isn't this supposed to be a prison?'" he added.

He decided to sign up after seeing a group of female volunteers walk across the prison yard.

"I got into the classroom for all the wrong reasons, but I realized that I was actually learning something and that there were people who believed in you more than you believe in yourself. When you see that, you start believing in yourself," he said.

In his 14 years at San Quentin, Richardson, 47, rose to become executive editor of the inmate-led San Quentin News, a monthly newspaper distributed to California's 35 prisons that has highlighted the prison programs and often publishes inspirational stories of men who pursued higher education while incarcerated.

He now works as an advancement associate helping the college's communications and fundraising departments.

"Like me, some of them might be the only person in their family to ever have a college degree and that inspires your children to continue their education. For some of them, it's the greatest achievement of their lives," Richardson said.

Doug Arwine, a high school humanities teacher, began volunteering this year and teaches English 101, which focuses on developing critical thinking skills.

He said he cherishes helping his students "share experiences and share their humanity with one another."

"There's also moments of success when a student realizes that they've crafted a really elegant paragraph in their essay, and they've made some interesting points. As with any student, regardless of where you are, you can see how that helps them build confidence," Arwine said.

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Teaching at San Quentin is also a unique experience. The process of going through layers of security, teaching the two-hour class, then clearing security again at the end of the day takes about five hours, Arwine said. He invests many more hours grading papers and preparing for his twice-a-week lessons.

Many of his students dropped out of school at an early age or went to dangerous public schools, Arwine said.

"I really believe in the values that Mount Tamalpais College espouses, in terms of offering free educational opportunities for incarcerated people because as we know from social science research, the best way to reduce recidivism rates is through offering educational programming while they're incarcerated. It's arguably the best form of rehabilitation," said Arwine, whose father spent time in prison.

A 2013 Rand study found that inmates who participate in correctional education programs had 43% lower odds of re-offending than those who did not and were 13% more likely to obtain employment.

Jesse Vasquez, 39, said he was serving multiple life terms for attempted murder, a drive-by shooting and assault with a deadly weapon at a maximum-security facility when he read about the program in the San Quentin News and decided he would transfer there one day.

Vasquez had taken correspondence college programs at other prisons but studying in a classroom at San Quentin helped him see his potential and he realized he was at a "hub of rehabilitation."

The courses challenged him to question what he was learning and helped him build up critical thinking skills, which he called "a pivotal moment."

Vasquez's sentence was commuted by the governor in 2018 after he had served more than 19 years. He was released in 2019 and now works for Friends of San Quentin News, a nonprofit that supports the newspaper.

He said having the students be enrolled at an actual community college will be an even greater incentive for them to pursue higher education and hopefully encourage other prisons to have their own colleges.

"All of a sudden, more people might be more open to the idea of, 'Hey, what if we try this revolutionary idea somewhere else?'" he said.

## Johnson says sorry for partygate as critics prep censure bid

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Tuesday offered what he said was a "whole-hearted" apology for attending an illegal party during lockdown — but insisted he didn't knowingly break rules or mislead Parliament, and brushed off calls to resign.

Johnson told lawmakers in the House of Commons that it simply "did not occur to me" that the birthday gathering, complete with a cake, was a party.

That excuse was greeted with derision by opposition politicians — and some among the governing Conservatives — who have called with increasing frustration for Johnson to quit since stories began to circulate late last year of parties in the prime minister's office and other government buildings in 2020 and 2021, when millions in the country were barred from meeting with friends and family or even attending funerals for their loved ones.

Opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer branded the apology "half-hearted" and "a joke."

Last week, Johnson was fined 50 pounds (\$66) for attending his own surprise birthday party in 10 Downing St. in June 2020, making him the first British prime minister ever found to have broken the law while in office.

Speaking as the House of Commons returned from an 11-day Easter break, Johnson acknowledged people's "hurt and anger," but added that "it did not occur to me then or subsequently that a gathering in the Cabinet Room, just before a vital meeting on COVID strategy, could amount to a breach of the rules."

Starmer said that excuse would ring hollow with ordinary people who "understand that the rules apply to all of us," and he challenged Conservatives to "bring an end to this shameful chapter" and jettison Johnson.

"He knows he's dishonest and incapable of changing," Starmer said. "So he drags everybody else down with him."

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Starmer was told off by House of Commons Speaker Lindsay Hoyle for accusing another member of dishonesty — a breach of parliamentary rules. Minutes later, Labour lawmaker Karl Turner also was chastised by the Speaker after branding Johnson a liar.

"I withdraw the word 'liar,' Mr. Speaker," Turner said. "But the electorate will already have decided."

Labour has not given up on trying to get lawmakers to censure Johnson over the "partygate" scandal. Speaker Hoyle said he would allow Labour to hold a Commons debate and vote Thursday on whether Johnson should be investigated for allegedly misleading Parliament. Ministers found to have done that knowingly are generally expected to resign.

Johnson is due to be out of the country Thursday on a visit to India, and the big Conservative majority in Parliament means the measure is unlikely to pass. But the vote will force Tory lawmakers uneasy with the prime minister to publicly back him or criticize him.

Johnson insisted Tuesday that he was contrite, but argued it would be wrong to change leaders while Britain faces crises including the war in Ukraine and a cost-of-living squeeze driven by surging energy and goods prices.

Johnson's grip on power had appeared to be on a knife-edge earlier this year amid police and civil service investigations into the parties, and the departure of several top aides.

Allies feared "partygate" could become a tipping point for a divisive but resilient leader who has weathered a series of other storms over his expenses and his moral judgment. Some Conservative lawmakers were openly calling for a no-confidence vote in Johnson.

But Johnson has hung on, partly because Russia's invasion of Ukraine has seized public and political attention.

Johnson's international image, battered by Britain's messy exit from the European Union under his leadership, has been revived by his firm military, political and moral support for Ukraine. Johnson traveled to Kyiv earlier this month to meet with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Johnson's troubles are not over and he could still face more fines. London's Metropolitan Police force is investigating a dozen events, including "bring your own booze" office parties and "wine time Fridays," and Johnson is reported to have attended several of them. So far at least 50 tickets have been handed out, including those to Johnson, his wife Carrie and Treasury chief Rishi Sunak.

If Johnson is sanctioned again, calls for a no-confidence vote could grow among Conservatives. For now, many are biding their time, and looking to see whether public anger translates into losses for the party at local elections across the country on May 5.

Conservative lawmaker Geoffrey Clifton-Brown said his colleagues were "withholding their judgment and waiting to see what happens."

But fellow Conservative Mark Harper, a former government chief whip, said Johnson "broke the laws that he told the country they had to follow" and "hasn't been straightforward about it."

"I'm very sorry to have to say this, but I no longer think he is worthy of the great office that he holds," Harper said.

## Study: Redlining tied to more oil, gas wells in urban areas

By TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

Minority neighborhoods where residents were long denied home loans have twice as many oil and gas wells as mostly white neighborhoods, according to a new study that suggests ongoing health risks in vulnerable communities are at least partly tied to historical structural racism.

Black and Latino residents have complained that they are disproportionately exposed to health risks — including heart and lung problems and premature births — from urban oil and gas wells, some located just a few dozen feet from homes and schools. Some studies have found hazardous chemicals near oil and gas operations at levels above what is considered safe.

But researchers at the University of California, Berkeley and Columbia University wanted to determine if there was a connection to redlining — when Black and immigrant neighborhoods in the 1930s were



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shaded red on maps developed by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation. Residents in those areas often found it difficult to find homes anywhere else.

"These are critical questions," said David J. X. Gonzalez, an epidemiologist at UC-Berkeley and one of the study's authors. "If we want to reduce health disparities, if we want environmental justice, these are the kinds of questions that we want to understand."

Researchers compared the maps of 33 U.S. cities to records of oil and gas wells dating to the late 1800s. The maps graded neighborhoods A to D. Overall, redlined, or D-graded, neighborhoods not only had more wells before the maps were created, but many more wells were developed in those areas afterward, the researchers found.

The study was published last week in the *Journal of Exposure Science & Environmental Epidemiology*.

Gonzalez, who grew up in a community with oil wells and a refinery, said many policies led to race- and class-based segregation, not only redlining. The findings don't prove that wells were intentionally located in neighborhoods because residents were Black or Latino, and there also are wells in wealthier areas.

Even so, the higher concentration in minority areas "doesn't seem to have happened by accident," said Gonzalez.

In Los Angeles, Black and Latino residents often were forced to live in neighborhoods with oil wells because of racially restrictive covenants, said Martha Dina Argüello, executive director of the Los Angeles chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility. Even more drilling got pushed into Black and Latino neighborhoods when housing developers wanted land in more affluent areas, she said.

The study "is one more piece of evidence that really bears out what the community has been saying: that having oil wells in our communities is treating us like a sacrifice zone," she said.

Recently, some states and communities have started restricting new wells by limiting how close they can be to homes and schools.

Last fall, supervisors in Los Angeles County — home to some of the largest urban oilfields in the U.S. — voted unanimously to phase out oil and gas production and ban new wells in unincorporated areas following longstanding complaints from residents about health problems blamed on air pollution from the sites. The Los Angeles City Council voted in January to do the same, and Argüello said advocates are pushing for the state to take similar action in other urban areas.

Colorado last year required new wells to be located at least 2,000 feet from homes and schools. California has proposed a distance of 3,200 feet.

In Arlington, Texas, city officials in January refused to let a major energy company locate more gas wells near a daycare center playground. A statistical analysis by The Associated Press showed the density of Total Energies' wells is higher in neighborhoods where people of color live, and wells are often just a few hundred feet from homes.

Longxiang Li, a postdoctoral research fellow in environmental health at the Harvard School of Public Health, who was not involved in the study, said it showed a moderately strong connection between redlining and well location, and strengthens evidence that disadvantaged communities have fewer legal resources to defend themselves against drilling expansion. But he cautioned that historic redlining maps are not perfect indicators of past structural racism.

That is because discriminatory practices by private lenders and the Federal Housing Administration did not rely on the HOLC maps, and the HOLC itself did lend to Black homeowners in redlined areas, according to a recent paper by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Li also noted that many newer wells that use a technique called hydraulic fracturing are often clustered in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas because land leasing is inexpensive. Fracking uses a high-pressure mixture of water, sand and chemicals to released trapped oil and gas and is combined with horizontal drilling to reach formerly inaccessible reserves.

A report by Physicians for Social Responsibility and Concerned Health Professionals of New York, which reviewed dozens of scientific studies, found that the public health risks associated with these sites include cancers, respiratory diseases, rashes, heart problems and mental health disorders.

Even older plugged wells may pose risks because they can leak benzene and other volatile organic

compounds, as well as methane, a potent greenhouse gas, Gonzalez said.

"I think we've known for a long time that people of color are more likely to live near oil wells," Gonzalez said, "It's important... so we can make sure that as we shift the economy away from fossil fuels, that we prioritize communities" that have borne the brunt of pollution.

## 'Not my life': An apartment block reflects the new Ukraine

By CARA ANNA and SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

LVIV, Ukraine (AP) — The Soviet-era apartment blocks at the end of a tram line in this western Ukrainian city show an indifferent face to the world, blank and gray. But behind every lighted window is a story.

There is the couple who lament that they may never live in the house being built for them in bloody Bucha. There is the family that spent hours in their basement shelter in Irpin, trapped between armies. There is the woman who fled Kharkiv, becoming displaced for the second time in a decade.

They all escaped to Lviv, along with some 500,000 others -- a small fraction of the 10 million Ukrainians who have been chased by war from their homes and resettled elsewhere in the country.

Many sleep on mats in cultural centers and schools, shelter in crowded rooms with relatives and friends. Some plan to move on, perhaps crossing the border to nearby Poland and beyond. Others have put down the first fragile roots. The rest have little idea what to do.

Most just want to go home, if home still stands.

As many as 50 have found shelter in a nine-story building on Trylovs'koho Boulevard. It is quiet; they can look through their windows and see a school, a playground, not a tank or rocket fire. It's a world away from the danger that sent them running from their homes, though in recent days, Lviv too has been a target of Russian missiles.

The families live footsteps apart. They don't know each other, but they recognize displaced people like themselves on sight, without exchanging a word. Take the small, clanking elevator, walk down the dim corridors and visit with them in their temporary apartments, and you'll find limbo.

"It's not my flat. It's not my life," Marta Kopan says. "But now I'm here."

Marta is 40 weeks pregnant; the baby, a girl, kicks her vigorously as she goes through bags of children's clothing in the fourth-floor apartment the family borrowed from a cousin. Her birth plan, like so much else, has been abandoned — the place where she had expected to give birth was bombed.

"On the 24th of February, our happy life stopped," says Marta, 36. She remembers looking out the window of the family's Kyiv apartment and watching the lines of cars headed for safety. Within days, the Kopans — Marta, her husband and two sons — joined them.

Now, some 300 miles away, she sometimes feels nothing. Sometimes it is all too much.

"I don't need to read the news," she says, and starts to weep. "I just get the news from my friends." They tell her of homes destroyed and bodies found in pieces. One friend now works to deliver babies in an underground shelter. He sent her photos of nearly 200 pregnant women waiting to give birth.

Marta knows that could have been her.

Kyiv is not all the family left behind. A new home, designed by Marta's mother, had been waiting for the family in Bucha, just outside the capital. There are woods nearby, with trails for hiking and chances for mushroom and berry picking. Now the Russian occupiers have pulled back, leaving some of the war's worst horrors in their wake, and the family doesn't know if their dream home was left intact.

They want to stay in Ukraine, but they have no long-term plan. Marta and her husband are doctors and want to stay and help. For now, they live day to day. The elder son, 6-year-old Nazar, continues his schooling online.

Though he knows better, sometimes he asks to return home to Kyiv. "I want my normal life," he says.

Marta does, too. "I want to have my children to have their own rooms with their Legos, with their different pencils," she says.

The boy curls up and kisses his mother's belly, a comfort for her and a greeting for his sister. "I hope

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he'll like her when she'll be crying," Marta says.

Hours later, just after sunset, the air raid siren wails. The family, like many others here, doesn't go to the shelter. Marta sits in a puffy coat on the swings, alone in the dusk, while Nazar plays.

Iryna Sanina, 33, speaks in a stairwell on a concrete landing between floors. She leans on her husband, Volodymyr, and wears the only sweater she took with her when they fled Irpin. She has fuzzy slippers and her ankles are bare, even when she steps outside to smoke in the freezing weather.

Her eyes fill with tears as she tells her story. She and her husband were trapped for days between Ukrainian and Russian forces, quickly learning to distinguish between incoming and outgoing fire. The bridge to safety was destroyed by the Ukrainian side to slow the Russian advance. Even though her husband insisted that she leave, she wanted to stay.

They hid in a basement shelter in the yard. Whenever the shelling eased, they climbed out to shout to their neighbors, checking to see whether they were alive.

Volodymyr stayed in Irpin longer than she did, helping with evacuations, but it was a struggle; tires were quickly shredded by shrapnel on the ground. With communications out, Iryna could reach him only by text message. "I could see he received the messages, but he couldn't answer," she says. "I didn't know for days about his fate, and it was terrifying."

Eventually, elderly neighbors persuaded him to leave for the sake of his 14-year-old son. The boy now shelters three hours away from Lviv with his grandmother, in a safer place with no air raid sirens at all.

Iryna and Volodymyr share their sixth-floor apartment with four other adults from Irpin, all of them colleagues at the drug company where the couple works. It's very difficult to live with others, Iryna says, but "we know a lot of people lost everything."

The couple don't want to let others know they come from Irpin. They don't want to look like victims. They want to go home, no matter how devastated it is, and rebuild.

More than anything, says Iryna, "I want to go back and wake up on Feb. 24," before it all began. She is in tears again.

The kitchen ceiling is peeling. The bed is an air mattress. The rooms are mostly bare. But Olya Shlapak's 8-year-old daughter Zlata is pirouetting in her bedroom with a new friend and telling her parents, "Let's stay in Lviv."

Olya, 28, and her husband, Sasha, worry there's little to return to in Kharkiv, and the home they bought just six months ago. On the first day of Russia's invasion, they left it to seek safety in the subway, along with hundreds of other residents.

Olya recalls the "biggest fear of my life," awakening her daughter to tell her the war had started. Luckily, she says, Zlata didn't see much fighting, but "when she hears loud noises, she tries to hide."

A week later, they drove to Lviv, thinking they would stay a day or two. They live with their cocker spaniel, Letti, in an eighth-floor apartment found by "a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend." Securing a place in crowded Lviv was hard; some landlords objected to the dog, or even to Sasha. "Many people say the husband should be at the front," fighting, Olya says.

Sasha continues to work in information technology. Olya can't bring herself to look for a job. That would mean accepting they might be in Lviv forever. "I'm waiting," she says. "This is not life for me now."

Years ago, Olya fled the Donetsk region in eastern Ukraine amid the fighting there. That experience taught her not to panic. But she has been shaken by the effects of Russia's war propaganda on the people she loves. She can barely speak with her parents in Donetsk, for years under Russian sway, about the war. It is difficult to convince them that Ukraine isn't attacking its own people.

Friends in Russia sent similar messages, or worse. "You Ukrainians deserve to die," one wrote. Olya told her to lay off the drugs and alcohol. It seemed to be the best answer at the time.

For years, she had avoided watching the news. Now she watches it for hours on end. She cooks. She plays with her daughter. She volunteers, helping other displaced people.

To help fill the time, the family is putting together a jigsaw puzzle on the floor. But the dog has eaten a

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few of the pieces, and it might never be complete.

Olha Salivonchuk is not a displaced person, though she has long prepared to be one.

Unlike many Ukrainians, she took seriously the talk in the West about a Russian invasion and packed a "go bag" with clothes, medicine, food and documents in November. On Feb. 24, her husband awakened her: "It's begun." Recalling that moment, she is in tears.

Head of the local association of apartment owners, Olha watched the building empty out at the war's start. "People who lived here, especially with children, they just like disappeared in a moment," she says. "It was like an empty building. No light in the evening. No cars in the parking. It was very scary."

But then, realizing that Lviv wasn't on the front line, people returned. And in the days and weeks that followed, Olha, 41, watched as Ukrainians arrived from places like Chernihiv and Kharkiv, squeezing into apartments with friends, family and co-workers.

Olha herself hosted a dear friend from Kyiv in her ninth-floor apartment for several days before helping her move on. On the eighth floor, a Kyiv family moved in and asked what they could do to help. They pitched in to make the camouflaging nets that cover checkpoints in the city, using spare fabric.

Olha has never considered leaving, even when a Russian airstrike made their building shake. Her family has lived in the city for generations, and she has been in the apartment for a dozen years.

Every time the air raid siren sounds, she and her husband and 13-year-old daughter Solomiya take their bags to their makeshift shelter in their hallway. She has placed tape on her windows after seeing people who had fled eastern Ukraine do it. "Maybe they know something," she says.

Olha is aware of the tender nerves of the newly displaced people around her. "I just say 'You're new,'" she says. "I don't want to ask questions. I'm not sure they're eager to talk about the war. But if they start this conversation, I'm listening."

Little is needed to make a new home, she says: Tea, blankets, photos and conversation. The newcomers are learning that now.

"They are the same now, they are Ukrainians," Olha says. They speak with longing about communities left behind, but "they understand that here they have a home, too."

## **EXPLAINER: How Russia's eastern push in Ukraine may unfold**

By The Associated Press undefined

Russia's massive, new offensive in eastern Ukraine reflects Moscow's hope to reverse its battlefield fortunes after a catastrophic seven weeks of war.

Russian forces have sharply intensified artillery barrages and airstrikes on Ukrainian positions in the industrial heartland known as the Donbas.

A look at the war in Ukraine so far:

### **A FALTERING START**

Russian troops rolled to the outskirts of the capital of Kyiv days after invading Ukraine on Feb. 24, but the offensive was quickly stymied by staunch resistance.

The Russian military incurred heavy personnel and equipment losses, and the failed Kyiv offensive boosted the morale of the Ukrainian forces, allowing its leaders to rally vast international support and secure more weapons from the West. That raised the costs of war for Moscow.

Russian President Vladimir Putin switched the focus to the Donbas, where Moscow-backed separatists have been fighting Ukrainian government forces since 2014, after the Kremlin's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

After the retreat from Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy and other areas in northeastern Ukraine, Russian forces pulled back to the territory of Moscow ally Belarus, as well as areas in western Russia to be rearmed and resupplied for the new offensive.

Gen. Alexander Dvornikov was named the new commander for the campaign. At 60, Dvornikov is one of Russia's most experienced officers, credited with leading Moscow's forces to success in Syria in a ruthless



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campaign to shore up President Bashar Assad's regime in a civil war that saw whole cities flattened and millions displaced. His appointment is seen as reflecting the Kremlin's awareness to quickly improve poor coordination among various forces that hampered previous efforts

## THE NEW OFFENSIVE

Ukrainian officials said the push began Monday in the Donbas, with Russia trying to press the offensive along an arc-shaped front line stretching for more than 300 miles (480 kilometers) from the northeast to the southeast.

In what appeared to be a sharp increase in bombardment Tuesday, Russia said that in the last 24 hours, it struck 60 Ukrainian military facilities with its warplanes and 1,260 with its artillery, while attacking 1,214 troop concentrations. The claims could not be independently verified.

The Pentagon described the stepped-up campaign as "shaping operations" setting the stage for a broader offensive.

Justin Crump, a former British tank commander who leads Sibylline Ltd., a defense consultancy, said the Russians had escalated bombardments and appeared to be moving gradually to take chunks of territory, focusing mostly on the destruction of Ukraine's most capable forces in the Donbas.

"They are hoping to destroy effectively the largest part of the Ukrainian prewar regular army, the best Ukrainian forces," Crump told The Associated Press.

## THE RUSSIAN BATTLE PLAN

Ukrainian and Western experts expect Russia to try to encircle Ukrainian forces with a pincer movement by advancing from Izyum in the north and Mariupol in the south. Once Russian forces crush the last remaining pocket of Ukrainian resistance at a giant steel mill in Mariupol, they expect that will allow those forces to be freed up to enable the offensive to gain its full tempo.

Some predict Russia also may try to use its forces north of Crimea to try to capture the industrial hubs of Zaporizhzhia and Dnipro on the Dnieper River, effectively cutting Ukraine in half.

During the eight years of fighting the separatists, the Ukrainian government forces have built multiple rows of trenches along the line of contact that the Russians have failed to penetrate. But Crump and other experts noted that Ukraine was running out of weapons and supplies.

"They are firing through a lot of supplies," he said. "And part of the Russian strategy at this point is to keep probing, to keep searching for ways, keep shaping the battlefield, to get Ukraine to fire the missiles, to use things up, to fire its artillery so they have less supplies left when the bigger blows start to fall sequentially."

Ukraine has pleaded with the West for warplanes, long-range air defense systems, heavy artillery and armor to counter the massive Russian edge in firepower. The Western allies have increased arms supplies and started providing heavy weapons, but it could take time for these to reach Ukrainian troops, which must then learn how to operate them.

"New equipment is great, really helpful in many ways, but the problem is you've got to learn how to use it," Crump said, adding that Ukraine may put the new weapons in areas away from the fighting to give troops some practice with them and redeploy Soviet-era weapons to the eastern front.

## CHALLENGES FOR THE RUSSIANS

The Russian offensive will probably face the same logistical challenges its troops encountered early in the war.

During the botched attempt to storm Kyiv, Russian convoys stretched along highways to the capital, becoming easy targets for Ukrainian artillery, drones and scouts. The operations in the east could be equally hard, especially as foliage sprouts with the arrival of spring and provides natural cover for guerrilla attacks.

Crump said the Russians appear to have learned from their earlier mistakes and tried to avoid long supply lines. They also sought to ensure using railways instead of trucks to carry the bulk of their supplies.

While the terrain in the east is flatter and easier for the Russians, Crump noted that rain has made it difficult for off-road movement, constraining maneuvering.

"That makes it very hard to be unpredictable and to use tanks to their advantage," Crump said, adding that Ukrainian defenses will be stretched as the ground dries, offering Russian armor more options to

maneuver.

While the Russians appeared to be making better use of their assets than at the start of the campaign, he said, "they've still got morale problems" and many units "have been pushed together with little training."

The Washington-based Institute for the Study of War said that while Russian forces may be able to gain ground through the heavy concentration of artillery and larger numbers, its eastern campaign is "unlikely to be dramatically more successful than previous major offensives around Kyiv." It probably will be hampered by the same "poor coordination, the inability to conduct cross-country operations and low morale that impeded prior offensives," it said.

#### A PIVOTAL MOMENT

After the botched beginning, Putin badly needs a victory in the east to boost the Russians' morale and to try to negotiate an end to hostilities on his terms.

Bruised by Western sanctions, Russia lacks financial resources for a long fight. A protracted conflict will multiply the already heavy economic damage and fuel social tensions, eroding the Kremlin's base of support.

Russia already has put its most capable combat units in action, and continued fighting will likely force it to mobilize reservists and send fresh conscripts into combat — moves that could bring broad public discontent.

Putin probably hopes that routing Ukrainian forces in the east will allow him to force Kyiv to accept key Kremlin conditions for a halt in fighting — the acknowledgement of Moscow's sovereignty of Crimea and the recognition of the independence of the eastern separatist regions, including areas that had been under Ukrainian control before the war.

"I think we're at this pivotal point where we find out whether we're going to get a peace, a pause or a protracted conflict," Crump said.

## Gun safety activists decry inaction as US shootings surge

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Politics Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Democrats have spent years pledging to address the gun violence that plagues communities across the U.S. But a surge of mass shootings over the weekend that left dozens wounded and two dead served as a reminder of how little they have accomplished since taking control of Washington 15 months ago.

The struggle for the Biden administration and Democrats in Congress to enact any meaningful legislation to enhance gun safety reflects how the party's ambitious agenda has been frustratingly stunted by internal squabbling, the persistence of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The almost complete Republican opposition to Democratic priorities, including gun rules, has hobbled a party with razor-thin majorities in the House and Senate.

But that's little solace to gun safety advocates and tens of thousands of shooting victims who were told Democrats would reduce gun violence if given the chance to govern. In an already difficult election year, the inaction threatens to further undermine the coalition of young people, women, voters of color and independents who helped deliver Joe Biden the presidency in 2020 and will be needed again if Democrats are to hold control of Congress.

"I'm just angry," said David Hogg, a gun safety activist who survived the 2018 shooting that killed 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. "We took the House and then we took the Senate and now we have the White House, too, and still, nothing is changing."

Rep. Lucy McBath, D-Ga., whose son was shot to death nearly a decade ago, encouraged those frustrated with the pace of progress to be patient. She likened the fight to reduce gun violence to her parents' fight for civil rights a generation earlier.

"Change doesn't come as quickly as we ever want it to happen. Because understand, this is a culture that we're having to change," McBath said in an interview. "I know that we're making real progress on this issue. The fact that I am actually in Washington, and I was elected in Georgia with a gun violence policy agenda ... tells you there is progress."

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Yet McBath's return to Congress next year is far from assured. She's locked in a competitive primary against Rep. Carolyn Bourdeaux in a redrawn district in Atlanta's northeast suburbs.

Meanwhile, White House aides insist that Biden is doing all he can to keep the issue of gun violence front and center.

Just last week, the Democratic president signed an executive order to crack down on untraceable "ghost guns." He also devoted part of his first State of the Union speech to gun violence and called for major increases in police funding in his 2023 budget proposal.

But some of those same progressives who cheered the president's efforts insist he and his party are not doing enough.

"It's appalling, it's horrifying, it's so very sad and embarrassing that this is just continuing and getting worse," said Mark Barden, whose 7-year-old son, Daniel, was among 26 students and educators killed in a shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012.

Barden now serves as co-founder and CEO of Sandy Hook Promise Action Fund, one of the gun violence prevention groups that emerged over the last decade to help counter the gun lobby's influence on policy and politics.

"Congress needs to step up and get to work," Barden said, noting that this December marks the 10th anniversary of his first-grade son's murder.

Democrats' frustration around gun violence prevention is not new.

After the Sandy Hook shooting, President Barack Obama tried and failed to convince Congress to enact popular gun safety measures like universal background checks and an assault weapon ban.

There's little sign now that the Democrats who control Congress will send gun safety measures to Biden's desk anytime soon.

The House passed legislation last year to expand background checks to include private and online sales, including at gun shows. But Senate Democratic leaders haven't yet scheduled their version of the legislation for a vote. And facing near-unanimous GOP opposition, Democrats would need support from at least 10 Republicans in a 50-50 Senate to overcome any filibuster.

Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., tried to bring the background check bill up for a Senate vote in December, but that effort failed when Republicans objected. Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia also opposes the House bill.

Asked whether Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer would bring gun safety legislation up for a vote, an aide pointed to comments the New York Democrat made in February.

"Sen. Murphy had been trying to work with Republicans to get 60 votes. He hasn't given up on those efforts, although they've not gotten that far. But we're going to keep pursuing background checks. I believe in that very, very strongly," Schumer said at the time.

In the meantime, more Americans are dying from gun-related injuries than ever before.

In 2020, the most recent year for which federal data is available, 19,384 people were killed in gun homicides — a 35% increase from the previous year and the largest one-year increase in gun homicides on record.

Republicans have overwhelmingly opposed gun control measures, casting any tightening of current law as a threat to the constitutionally protected right to bear arms. The GOP has instead called for stronger policing and more gun ownership to combat the crime surge.

At the same time, Republicans have seized on the spike in violent crime under the broad umbrella of public safety as a wedge issue to reshape how voters view gun violence. Republicans did well across Virginia, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania in last fall's off-year elections with public safety as one of their primary talking points.

And the gun lobby is convinced that public safety concerns will help its Republican allies retake the House, if not the Senate, this fall.

"We see a lot of opportunity" heading into the midterms, said National Rifle Association spokesperson Andrew Arulanandam. "Whether the gun control lobby realizes it or not, there's an increased appreciation

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and realization in this country that gun control does not make people safer.”

The NRA has already celebrated sweeping successes at the state level in its push to allow people to carry concealed weapons without a license. Republican lawmakers in nine states enacted such laws since Democrats came to power in Washington in 2021. Overall, 25 states no longer require gun owners to have a permit to carry a concealed weapon in public.

Guns remain an incredibly divisive issue in American politics, though polling suggests the issue has been overshadowed over the last year by other events.

In an AP-NORC poll last December, 24% named gun laws in an open-ended question as one of five top issues for the government to work on in 2022. That ranked below other issues, like the economy, COVID-19 and even immigration, but the percentage prioritizing gun laws for 2022 grew from 5% for 2021 and 12% for 2020. The poll was conducted the weekend after a shooting at Oxford High School in Michigan killed four and injured seven.

Forty-one percent of Democrats named gun laws as a government priority in 2022, compared to just 6% of Republicans.

Meanwhile, gun safety groups like March For Our Lives are ratcheting up pressure on Democrats to take action. The group for the first time is backing primary challenges this spring and summer to Democratic incumbents who haven't prioritized the issue.

On Tuesday, Hogg and other young activists with March For Our Lives dropped body bags outside Schumer's New York office to protest his unwillingness to bring gun safety legislation to the Senate floor for a vote.

“Democrats suck at fulfilling these promises,” Hogg said.

## Energy shift creates opening for 'world's largest batteries'

By JOHN FLESHER AP Environmental Writer

LUDINGTON, Mich. (AP) — Sprawled like a gigantic swimming pool atop a bluff overlooking Lake Michigan is an asphalt-and-clay pond holding enough water to produce electricity for 1.6 million households.

It's part of the Ludington Pumped Storage Plant, which uses simple technology: Water is piped from a lower reservoir — the lake, in this case — to an upper one, then released downhill through supersized turbines.

Supporters call these systems “the world's largest batteries” because they hold vast amounts of potential energy for use when needed for the power grid.

The hydropower industry considers pumped storage the best answer to a question hovering over the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy to address climate change: where to get power when the sun isn't shining or the wind isn't blowing.

“I wish we could build 10 more of these. I love 'em,” Eric Gustad, community affairs manager for Consumers Energy, said during a tour of the Ludington facility.

But the utility based in Jackson, Michigan, has no such plans. Environmental and logistical challenges and potential costs in the billions led Consumers to sell another would-be site near the lake years ago. It's now upgrading the existing plant with co-owner DTE Energy.

Constructing a new one “doesn't make financial sense,” Gustad said. “Unless we get some help from the state or federal government, I don't see it happening any time soon.”

STUCK IN NEUTRAL

The company's decision illustrates the challenges facing pumped storage in the U.S., where these systems account for about 93% of utility-scale energy in reserve. While analysts foresee soaring demand for power storage, the industry's growth has lagged.

The nation has 43 pumped storage facilities with a combined capacity of 22 gigawatts, the output of that many nuclear plants. Yet just one small operation has been added since 1995 — and it's unknown how many of more than 90 planned can overcome economic, regulatory and logistical barriers that force long delays.



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Three projects have obtained licenses from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, but none are being built. Developers of a long-planned Oregon facility expect work to begin in 2023. A Montana company that got a license five years ago needs a utility to operate the plant and buy its storage capacity before construction starts.

By contrast, more than 60 are being built worldwide, mostly in Europe, India, China and Japan.

"The permitting process is crazy," Malcolm Woolf, president of the National Hydropower Association, complained during a January hearing of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, saying it involves too many agencies.

Although FERC permits new facilities and relicenses existing ones, other federal, state and tribal offices have roles, spokesperson Celeste Miller said. "Every project is unique. All have various case-specific issues," she said.

The industry is lobbying for an investment tax credit similar to what solar and wind get. President Joe Biden's Build Back Better plan includes the tax break but is stuck in Congress.

Pumped storage dates from the early 1930s. But most systems were built decades later to warehouse excess electricity from nuclear plants and release it when needed.

The storage facilities also serve as a safety net in sudden power interruptions. When a New England nuclear unit tripped offline in 2020, Woolf said, "the lights in Boston didn't flicker" because two pumped storage stations provided backup power.

While nuclear, coal and natural gas plants can operate continuously, wind and solar can't — so the market for reserve power likely will grow. National Renewable Energy Laboratory models show U.S. storage capacity may rise fivefold by 2050.

"We're going to bring hundreds of gigawatts of clean energy onto the grid over the next few years and we need to be able to use that energy wherever and whenever it's needed," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said last year.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Using computer mapping, Australian National University engineers identified more than 600,000 "potentially feasible" pumped storage sites worldwide — including 32,000 in the U.S. — that could store 100 times the energy needed to support a global renewable electricity network.

But the study didn't examine whether sites would meet environmental or cultural protection standards or be commercially viable. Its website acknowledged, "Many or even most ... may prove to be unsuitable."

Environmentalists are cool toward pumped storage because reservoirs typically are formed by hydropower dams, which block fish pathways, damage water quality and emit methane, a potent greenhouse gas. Also, most plants continuously draw water from rivers.

But recent designs envision "closed-loop" systems that tap a surface or underground supply, then repeatedly cycle that water between reservoirs. Water would be added only to make up for evaporation or leaks.

The Hydropower Reform Coalition, representing conservation groups, says it might support such projects under "very limited circumstances."

Yet some are drawing resistance, including the Goldendale Energy Storage Project in Washington state. It would pipe water between two 60-acre (24.3-hectare) reservoirs on opposite sides of a hill.

The facility could power nearly 500,000 homes for up to 12 hours, according to Rye Development, spearheading the project. It's seeking FERC licensing and is scheduled to go online in 2028 but still needs a state water quality permit.

Environmental groups fear harm to wetlands and wildlife habitat, while tribes say the project would encroach on a sacred site.

"What are we willing to sacrifice to get this technology online?" said Bridget Moran, an associate director of American Rivers.

Developers say the project would include cleanup of the polluted lower reservoir area.

The U.S. Department of Energy has launched a web-based tool to help developers find the best locations. A recent Michigan Technological University study identified hundreds of abandoned U.S. mines that

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could host pumped storage, with upper reservoirs at or near the surface and lower ones below ground. They are close enough to transmission and distribution infrastructure and to solar and wind generating facilities, the report says.

"All these holes in the ground are ready to go," said study co-leader Roman Sidortsov, an energy policy associate professor.

But while some decommissioned mines might be better for the environment, a project in New York's Essex County stalled over water pollution concerns.

## COMPETITIVE FUTURE

As the market for stored energy grows, new technologies are emerging.

Texas-based Quidnet Energy has developed a pumped storage offshoot that forces water underground, holds it amid rock layers and releases it to power turbines. The company announced a project in March with San Antonio's municipal utility.

Energy Vault, a Swiss startup, devised a crane powered by renewable energy to lift and stack 35-ton bricks. When energy is needed, the bricks are lowered by cables that spin a generator.

For now, batteries are the leading competitor to pumped storage plants, which can generate power for eight to 16 hours. Lithium-ion batteries typically last up to four hours but longer-duration ones are in the works.

"Are we going to get to the point where an eight-hour battery is cheaper than a pumped storage plant? That's the billion-dollar question," said Paul Denholm, an analyst with the National Renewable Energy Laboratory.

A 2016 Energy Department report said the U.S. network has a potential for 36 gigawatts of new pumped storage capacity.

"We don't think pumped storage is the be-all, end-all but it's a vital part of our storage future," said Cameron Schilling, vice president of markets for the hydropower association. "You can't decarbonize the system without it."

## Latest apps promise fast service but can they deliver?

By TALI ARBEL AP Technology Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — When Mahlet Berhanemeskel gets back to her New York City home from her 90-minute commute, she doesn't feel like cooking. So instead she orders food like BLTs, Cheez-Its and cookies from an app called Gorillas. It's affordable and takes 10 minutes.

"It's instant gratification," she said.

Gorillas is one of several companies that venture capitalists have poured billions into in the latest pandemic delivery craze: companies that promise to get you a bottle of Tylenol, an iced coffee, hummus, a cucumber or a roll of paper towels in 30 minutes — or even 15 minutes — or less. They typically deliver from mini-warehouses in residential and commercial neighborhoods.

Experts say they are unprofitable. Bigger companies are nonetheless muscling in. And officials in European cities and in New York, which has become the U.S. launching pad, have already started complaining about how they operate, saying it's bad for employees and residents.

"The problem I see is that quick commerce players, despite the huge valuations enjoyed and the seemingly unstoppable money flow that they get to grow, at some point they will have to find a path to profitability," said Bain partner Marc-Andre Kamel, the co-author of a recent report on the online grocery market.

Services are already shutting down. One, 1520, closed in late December, and two more, Buyk and Fridge No More, shut down in March, apparently having run out of money. Buyk's Russian founders reportedly were not able to provide money due to restrictions put in place during the Ukraine war; it did not respond to questions. Fridge No More, in a tweet, said it was closing after two years "due to growing competition and other industry related issues." Its founder did not answer questions.

Other delivery companies are having growing pains. Gorillas dropped its "10 minutes" delivery promise from its U.S. marketing — now it's just "in minutes." Gopuff recently laid off 3% of its workforce — more

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than 400 people.

It's not a sustainable business model, says Len Sherman, an adjunct professor at Columbia University's business school. "There is going to be a lot of consolidation on some very painful terms."

Getir, a Turkish company that operates in Europe as well as Boston, Chicago and New York, said the key to profitability is adding more mini-warehouses in the cities where it delivers.

"We're here for the long term," said Langston Dugger, Getir's head of U.S. operations.

The company recently raised \$768 million, valuing it at close to \$12 billion, and plans to expand in the U.S. Customers range from people "ordering a late night ice cream to somebody who is doing a full grocery shop for the week for a family and everything in between," he said.

Lee Hnetinka, the founder of FastAF, a delivery company with a two-hour delivery model in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles, said profitability is "just not a priority" right now as it invests in customer experience, saying their strategy is a long-term one and pointing to Amazon's early beginnings when it too was unprofitable.

There are new competitive threats from established restaurant delivery companies DoorDash, Grubhub and Uber and grocery delivery service Instacart that have noticed the appeal of the fast-delivery apps.

DoorDash has three "DashMarts" in New York that promise delivery of groceries and convenience-store items within 15 minutes, and says more locations are coming; it also aims to deliver from Albertsons Cos. grocery stores in more than 20 cities in half an hour. But its president, Christopher Payne, said at a recent conference that it may not be possible to make 15-minute delivery profitable.

Grubhub delivers items from 7-Eleven and other convenience stores, usually in under 30 minutes. Uber is partnering with Gopuff and FastAF, letting people choose those companies' items inside the Uber app. Uber also delivers from local grocers, although the delivery times are often over 30 minutes. And Instacart is planning 15-minute delivery, starting with customers of grocery chain Publix in Atlanta and Miami.

It's unclear how fast the services could be outside of the densest U.S. cities, like New York, or the neighborhoods where they cluster in more sprawling cities.

"For this type of model to work — 15 minutes, 10 minutes, 20 minutes, you name it — you need density, right?" said Stanley Lim, a Michigan State University professor who specializes in supply chains. "In a rural area, you can service these customers but not profitably. That's going to be a limit to the spread that these companies can go for."

But in the bustling city, regulatory pressure may loom. New York City Council members have spoken out against the fast-delivery apps, saying they may be breaking zoning laws. The New York City Department of Buildings is working with other government agencies to "explore the appropriate zoning districts" for the mini-warehouses. The centers are not mentioned in existing city zoning regulations since they are a new type of business, said Andrew Rudansky, the agency's spokesperson.

There are also worries about delivery apps offering discounts that will squeeze local businesses like bodegas and convenience stores as well as concerns about the safety of delivery people. Manny Ramirez, who works for DoorDash and a service called Relay and is an organizer for Los Deliveristas Unidos, which advocates for better conditions for app delivery workers, says he has been badly injured by a car while on his bike twice in the past year, and is still in physical therapy. And the bigger the order, the more dangerous it is for the rider.

"We don't have laws to protect bikers," he said.

The lack of bike lanes throughout the city, time pressures and fear for their safety drives delivery workers onto sidewalks, advocates say. That leads to worries from city residents.

Deborah Koncius, who lives on Manhattan's Upper West Side, said she feels like her neighborhood has gotten more dangerous with delivery people riding e-bikes on the sidewalk. Although neither she nor any of her family members have gotten hit, "I kind of feel like it's just a matter of time."

## **No war, no retreat: Mideast foes resume risky balancing act**

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

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JERUSALEM (AP) — Days of violence in Jerusalem and an exchange of fire in Gaza overnight have raised the possibility that Israel and Gaza's Hamas rulers will once again go to war, as they did less than a year ago under similar circumstances.

This time around, both Israel and Hamas have strong incentives to avoid all-out war. But neither wants to be seen as retreating from a Jerusalem holy site at the heart of the century-old Mideast conflict, so further violence cannot be ruled out.

"At this stage it's political theater in which everybody is playing his part," said Gideon Rahat, a senior fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute, a local think tank. "But sometimes the gun that appears in the first scene will shoot at the end."

For Hamas, another war would devastate Gaza, which has hardly begun to rebuild after the last one. And Israel would wield a potent new weapon — the ability to revoke thousands of work permits issued in recent months that provide an economic lifeline to Palestinians in the blockaded territory.

For Israel, war could set back efforts to sideline the conflict and damage burgeoning ties with Arab states. The broad-based governing coalition, which lost its majority this month, is at a small but growing risk of having a key Arab partner bolt, which would set the stage for new elections.

All of those factors help explain the relative restraint up until now: Israel intercepted the Gaza rocket, its airstrikes caused little damage, and no one was hurt. Neither Hamas nor any other group claimed the launch.

At the same time, neither Israel nor Hamas can be seen as backing down over a major holy site in east Jerusalem that is sacred to Jews and Muslims, where Palestinians and Israeli police clashed over the weekend.

The Al-Aqsa Mosque is the third holiest site in Islam. Palestinians view it as the one tiny part of their homeland that has yet to be taken over by Israel, which seized east Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza in the 1967 Mideast war.

Hamas' popularity skyrocketed last year when it was seen as defending the shrine — even at a devastating cost to Palestinians in Gaza. The internationally recognized Palestinian Authority, which cooperates with Israel on security, faced a massive backlash.

"Hamas would like the pressure against Israel to continue from the West Bank, from east Jerusalem, without giving Israel an excuse to launch a major war against Hamas and the Palestinians in Gaza," says Mkhaimar Abusada, a political science professor at Gaza's Al-Azhar University.

The hilltop on which the mosque is built is the holiest site for Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount because it was the location of the Jewish temples in antiquity. Under longstanding arrangements, Jews are allowed to visit the site but not pray there. But in recent years, large numbers of nationalist and religious Jews have regularly toured the site and discreetly prayed there under the protection of Israeli police.

The visits are seen as a provocation by both the Palestinians and neighboring Jordan, a close Western ally that serves as custodian of the site. But any effort to limit them would expose the government to severe criticism from Israel's dominant right-wing parties, which would portray it as a capitulation to the country's enemies.

Such a move would be even more fraught now, during the week-long Jewish holiday of Passover, which this year coincides with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Israeli authorities say they are committed to ensuring freedom for worship for Jews, Christians and Muslims, with Bennett blaming the recent violence on a "Hamas-led incitement campaign."

Israel hopes to prevent a repeat of last year, when weeks of protests and clashes in and around Al-Aqsa helped trigger an 11-day Gaza war.

In recent months, Israel issued thousands of work permits to Palestinians in Gaza, which has been under an Israeli-Egyptian blockade since Hamas seized power from rival Palestinian forces 15 years ago. It also allows tens of thousands of Palestinians from the occupied West Bank to work in construction and other mostly menial jobs in Israel, where wages are far higher.

Israeli leaders portray the permits as a goodwill measure, but they also help Israel maintain its military



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rule over millions of Palestinians, which is now well into its sixth decade.

The permits can be canceled at any time, and Israel — citing security concerns — prohibits nearly all forms of Palestinian opposition to the occupation.

For Hamas, the suspension or cancelation of the permits would push tens of thousands of Gaza residents back into severe poverty and halt the flow of millions of dollars into the economy.

Abusada says that might deter Hamas, but not if they believe Israel is crossing a red line at Al-Aqsa. "It's a limited deterrence that cannot be taken for granted forever," he said.

Israel faces risks of its own.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's government has worked to improve ties with neighboring Jordan and Egypt, Arab states that made peace with Israel decades ago but support the Palestinian cause.

The Jewish visits to Al-Aqsa have infuriated Jordan, which accuses Israel of violating longstanding arrangements at the site and summoned an Israeli diplomat in protest this week. Jordan's Prime Minister Bishr al-Khasawneh went so far as to praise Palestinians who "threw rocks in the face of the profane Zionists, protected by the occupation."

The United Arab Emirates, the first of four Arab countries to normalize relations with Israel through the so-called Abraham Accords in 2020, summoned a recently appointed Israeli ambassador on Tuesday over the events at Al-Aqsa.

The United States, Israel's closest ally, is calling on all sides to show restraint.

Within Israel, a small Arab party that made history last year by joining the governing coalition — giving it a razor-thin majority after four gridlocked elections — suspended its participation on Sunday over the rising tensions.

The move was largely symbolic, as parliament is currently in recess — one rival lawmaker compared it to dieting during the fasting month of Ramadan.

The tensions are unlikely to bring down the government because a majority of lawmakers would have to vote for early elections. That would likely require cooperation between the right-wing opposition, led by former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Arab parties that despise him — an even heavier lift at a time of war.

"If there will be a true conflict, I don't think in the short term it will threaten the current government," said Rahat, the Israeli political scientist. "In the long run, it all depends on the framing or the interpretation of the result of such a conflict."

## Moderna announces step toward updating COVID shots for fall

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Moderna hopes to offer updated COVID-19 boosters in the fall that combine its original vaccine with protection against the omicron variant. On Tuesday, it reported a preliminary hint that such an approach might work.

Today's COVID-19 vaccines all are based on the original version of the coronavirus. But the virus continues to mutate, with the super-contagious omicron variant — and its siblings — the latest threat.

Before omicron came along, Moderna was studying a combination shot that added protection against an earlier variant named beta. Tuesday, the company said people given that beta-original vaccine combination produced more antibodies capable of fighting several variants — including omicron — than today's regular booster triggers.

While the antibody increase was modest, Moderna's goal is to produce a combination shot that specifically targets omicron. "These results really give us hope" that next step will work even better, said Dr. Jacqueline Miller, a Moderna vice president.

Tuesday's data was reported online and hasn't been vetted by independent experts.

COVID-19 vaccines still are providing strong protection against severe disease, hospitalization and death, even against omicron. That variant is so different from the original coronavirus that it more easily slips past the immune system's defenses, although studies in the U.S. and elsewhere show an original booster

dose strengthens protection. Some countries offer particularly vulnerable people a second booster; in the U.S., that's anyone 50 or older or those with a severely weakened immune system.

Health officials have made clear that giving boosters every few months isn't the answer to the mutating virus. They've begun deliberating how to decide if and when to change the vaccine recipe.

Just switching to a vaccine that targets the latest variant is risky, because the virus could mutate again. So Moderna and its rival Pfizer both are testing what scientists call "bivalent" shots — a mix of each company's original vaccine and an omicron-targeted version.

Why would Moderna's earlier, beta-targeted combo shot have any effect on omicron? It includes four mutations that both the beta variant and the newer omicron have in common, Miller said.

Now Moderna is testing a bivalent shot that better targets omicron — it includes 32 of that variant's mutations. Studies of two booster doses are underway in the U.S. and Britain; results are expected by late June.

## Strong influences help mold 2022 US Teacher of the Year

By MARK GILLISPIE Associated Press

BERLIN, Ohio (AP) — It hardly seems a stretch to say Kurt Russell was born to be a history teacher.

Raised on his mother's stories about segregation and the civil rights movement in Alabama and influenced by teachers from his childhood, the 50-year-old Russell has spent the last 25 years teaching history and African American history at Oberlin High School outside Cleveland.

The Council of Chief State School Officers announced Tuesday that Russell is the organization's National Teacher of the Year for 2022. The group previously named him Ohio's teacher of the year.

"Kurt's extensive career shows the power of educators to shape the lives of students from the classroom to extracurricular activities to the basketball court," CCSO Chief Executive Officer Carissa Moffat Miller said in a statement.

Russell will spend the next year representing educators and serving as an ambassador for students and teachers across the country, the organization said.

His classroom journey to teaching began with his white kindergarten teacher, Francine Toss, who read a picture book about the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. as he and other students sat in a circle in her classroom.

"She had the audacity to introduce literature that was culturally relevant," Russell said. "I thought, 'Wow, that's a guy who looks like me.'"

The die was further cast for his future career as an eighth-grader when he walked into a math class taught by Larry Thomas, the first Black male teacher he had encountered. Russell said he was impressed by Thomas' demeanor and how he carried himself in the classroom.

"He was someone who looked like me in front of the classroom who all the kids enjoyed," Russell said. "This seemed like a profession that I could enjoy. It just changed my life."

His parents, Jerry and Retta Russell, who grew up attending segregated schools in Alabama, moved to Oberlin in the late 1960s, his father for construction work and his mother to escape the vestiges of the Jim Crow south.

His mother as a high school student in Linden, Alabama, marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who came to Linden at the invitation of the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, King's close friend and collaborator in the civil rights movement. Students left school that day to join the march.

"That's how I fell in love with history, by hearing those stories," Russell said.

Russell obtained his "dream job" of teaching in Oberlin, the city where he grew up, after graduating from the College of Wooster in 1994. He helped develop an African American history course at Oberlin High School in his first year there.

In addition to teaching two other general history classes, Russell and a music teacher have developed a class called Black Music in the African Diaspora that covers the blues, jazz and R&B.

He credited the school administration for supporting the creation of the class. "They could have said, 'No. We don't need that right now,'" Russell said.

Oberlin High School Principal Brent Betts lauded Russell's work.

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Russell also is the boys basketball coach at Oberlin. His team finished the season with a 16-6 record and a conference championship. Betts said Russell sees the development of young men as more important than developing basketball players.

"One of the greatest things about Kurt Russell is the classroom culture he's created," Betts said. "He's created a culture where everybody has a voice and students feel comfortable sharing their opinions."

Russell has high expectations and demands academic rigor, Betts said.

"He does not allow them to settle for less," Betts said. "They talk about tough subjects."

Asked about critical race theory, an academic framework about systemic racism decried by conservative politicians and commentators, Russell called it a "dog whistle."

"I always tell individuals I do not teach controversial courses," Russell said. "I teach different courses. There's nothing controversial about teaching about women's rights or the gay rights movement."

Russell led a discussion during his African American history class last week tracing seminal events leading to civil rights movement. He started with the Scottsboro Boys, nine Black teens who were falsely accused of raping two white women in the 1930s in Alabama, to Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black teen brutally murdered in Mississippi by two white men in 1955 after being accused of flirting with a white woman.

Students were then asked to form groups to list the four most important rights of Americans. Russell energetically guided the discussion, with all the students agreeing that access to the ballot box is a crucial right.

When Russell asked whether convicted murderers should have the right to vote, the students weren't able to reach a consensus before the dismissal bell rang. When asked about the question afterward, Russell said murderers don't have that right but he wanted to put the question before his students to consider it.

"That's a tough one," he said with a smile.

## Today in History: April 20, Columbine High School shooting

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, April 20, the 110th day of 2022. There are 255 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 20, 2010, an explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil platform, leased by BP, killed 11 workers and caused a blow-out that began spewing an estimated 200 million gallons of crude into the Gulf of Mexico. (The well was finally capped nearly three months later.)

On this date:

In 1812, the fourth vice president of the United States, George Clinton, died in Washington at age 72, becoming the first vice president to die while in office.

In 1861, Col. Robert E. Lee resigned his commission in the United States Army. (Lee went on to command the Army of Northern Virginia, and eventually became general-in-chief of the Confederate forces.)

In 1912, Boston's Fenway Park hosted its first professional baseball game while Navin (NAY'-vihn) Field (Tiger Stadium) opened in Detroit. (The Red Sox defeated the New York Highlanders 7-6 in 11 innings; the Tigers beat the Cleveland Naps 6-5 in 11 innings.)

In 1916, the Chicago Cubs played their first game at Wrigley Field (then known as Weeghman Park); the Cubs defeated the Cincinnati Reds 7-6.

In 1971, the Supreme Court unanimously upheld the use of busing to achieve racial desegregation in schools.

In 1972, Apollo 16's lunar module, carrying astronauts John W. Young and Charles M. Duke Jr., landed on the moon.

In 1986, following an absence of six decades, Russian-born pianist Vladimir Horowitz performed in the Soviet Union to a packed audience at the Grand Hall of the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow.

In 1999, the Columbine High School massacre took place in Colorado as two students shot and killed 12 classmates and one teacher before taking their own lives.

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In 2003, U.S. Army forces took control of Baghdad from the Marines in a changing of the guard that thinned the military presence in the capital.

In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI celebrated his final Mass in the United States before a full house in Yankee Stadium, blessing his enormous U.S. flock and telling Americans to use their freedoms wisely.

In 2016, five former New Orleans police officers pleaded guilty to lesser charges in the deadly shootings on a bridge in the days following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

In 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said reports of accidental poisonings from cleaners and disinfectants were up about 20 percent in the first three months of the year; researchers believed it was related to the coronavirus epidemic.

Ten years ago: A judge ruled that George Zimmerman could be released on \$150,000 bail while he awaited trial on a charge of murdering 17-year-old Trayvon Martin during a February 2012 confrontation in a Sanford, Florida gated community. (Zimmerman was acquitted.) In Pakistan, a Bhoja Air Boeing 737-200 crashed while on approach to the main airport in Islamabad, killing all 127 people on board.

Five years ago: Arkansas overcame a flurry of court challenges that derailed three other executions, putting to death an inmate for the first time in nearly a dozen years. Cuba Gooding Sr., who sang the 1972 hit "Everybody Plays the Fool," died in Los Angeles; he was 72.

One year ago: Former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin was convicted of murder and manslaughter for pinning George Floyd to the pavement with a knee on the Black man's neck in a case that triggered worldwide protests and a reexamination of racism and policing in the U.S. (Chauvin would be sentenced to 22 1/2 years in prison.) President Joe Biden said the conviction of Derek Chauvin could be "a giant step forward" for the nation in the fight against systemic racism, but he declared that "it's not enough." A 16-year-old Black girl, Ma'khia Bryant, was shot and killed by a white police officer in Columbus, Ohio, as she swung a knife at a young woman. The military in the central African nation of Chad announced that President Idriss Deby Into, who had governed for more than three decades, had been mortally wounded during a visit to troops battling a rebel group north of the capital.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Leslie Phillips is 98. Former Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., is 86. Actor George Takei is 85. Singer Johnny Tillotson is 84. Actor Ryan O'Neal is 81. Bluegrass singer-musician Doyle Lawson (Quicksilver) is 78. Actor Judith O'Dea is 77. Rock musician Craig Frost (Grand Funk; Bob Seger's Silver Bullet Band) is 74. Actor Gregory Itzin (iht-zihn) is 74. Actor Jessica Lange is 73. Actor Veronica Cartwright is 73. Actor Clint Howard is 63. Actor Crispin Glover is 58. Actor Andy Serkis is 58. Olympic silver medal figure skater Rosalynn Sumners is 58. Actor William deVry is 54. Country singer Wade Hayes is 53. Actor Shemar Moore is 52. Actor Carmen Electra is 50. Reggae singer Stephen Marley is 50. Rock musician Marty Crandall is 47. Actor Joey Lawrence is 46. Country musician Clay Cook (Zac Brown Band) is 44. Actor Clayne Crawford is 44. Actor Tim Jo is 38. Actor Carlos Valdes (TV: "The Flash") is 33.