

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 1 of 62

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- Groton Area receives CTE Innovative Equipment Grant](#)
- [2- Tour of Homes Ad](#)
- [3- Harry Implement Ad](#)
- [3- NSU Men's BB](#)
- [4- NSU Women's BB](#)
- [4- Prairie Mixed Bowling](#)
- [5- Column: True Holiday Spirit](#)
- [6- Groton Auxiliary doing service project for DTOM Ranch](#)
- [7- SD Searchlight: Chamberlain School ordered to pay \\$100,000 to family of disabled child](#)
- [7- Groton Chamber Ad](#)
- [9- SD Searchlight: A record-setting number of women will serve in state legislatures in 2023, including South Dakota](#)
- [10- SD Searchlight: U.S. House GOP to keep earmarks for local projects — with some 'tweaks'](#)
- [12- SD Searchlight: Disappearing nursing homes could suffer more under Noem's tax cut](#)
- [13- Weather Pages](#)
- [19- Daily Devotional](#)
- [20- 2022 Community Events](#)
- [21- Subscription Form](#)
- [22- News from the Associated Press](#)

Groton Community Calendar

Friday, Dec. 2

Senior Menu: Swiss steak with gravy, mashed potatoes, mixed vegetables, fruit, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Eggs and sausage
School Lunch: Cheese breadstick, marinara sauce.
North Area Honor Band at NSU
JH GBB at Britton, 7th at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade game.

Saturday, Dec. 3

North Area Honor Band at NSU
Wrestling Tournament at Clark, 10 a.m.
Junior High GBB Jamboree in Groton, 10 a.m.
(Schools Participating: Clark/Willow Lake, Enemy Swim Day School (K-8), Mobridge-Pollock Schools, Waubay-Summit, Groton Area)
Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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



Olive Grove Tour of Homes, 4 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Sunday, Dec. 4

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:45 a.m.
St. John's worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Sunday school, 9:45 a.m.; Zion's worship with communion, 11 a.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday school, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 7 p.m.
United Methodist Worship with Communion (Conde, 8:30 a.m.; Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Sunday school, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.)
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.
Open Gym: Grade JK-8, 2 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.; Grades 6-12, 3:30 p.m. to 4 p.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 2 of 62

Groton Area receives CTE Innovative Equipment Grant

The Groton Area School District is excited to announce that we have been selected as a recipient of a 2022 Career and Technical Education (CTE) Innovative Equipment grant award of over \$236,000 from the South Dakota Department of Education which will fund equipment for a brand new state-of-the-art health science simulation lab at Groton Area Middle/High School.

With the South Dakota Department of Education CTE Innovative Equipment Grant, dreamed and written by Groton Area teacher, Mrs. Becky Hubsch, Groton Area High School will transform an out-of-commission science room into a state-of-the-art health science simulation laboratory. The simulation laboratory will be equipped with hand-on, realistic health science equipment, including South Dakota's first SynDaver anatomy model, made from materials that imitate live human tissue, a Nursing Anne Simulator, and a Nurse Anne Trainer for students to learn optimal patient care.

The new health science simulation laboratory will allow student to reach beyond their potential in hands-on learning and emerge with workforce skills that will elevate their learning experiences and, overall, better prepare students for any post-secondary health science education or workforce career they wish to achieve.

The health science simulation laboratory will be operational in August 2023.

*Olive Grove's
6th Annual*

Christmas Tour of Homes & Holiday Party

**Charlie & Jenn Dirks
Tigh & Adrienne Flieds
Tom & Barb Paepke
Wage Memorial Library & City Office**

**SATURDAY,
DEC. 3, 2022**

**TOUR OF
HOMES
4-7 P.M.**

**HOLIDAY
PARTY**

4-CLOSE

**Silent Basket Items
Bidding closes at 8:30 p.m.
Live Auction begins at 8:30 p.m.**

Coffee, Apple Cider and Goodies at the Club House

A variety of snacks served.

**\$15 tickets available at
Lori's Pharmacy, Groton
Groton Ford**

**Hair & Company, Aberdeen
Olive Grove Golf Clubhouse**

**Come on out for a fun evening!
Support your local golf course!**

Four Score in Double Figures in Win over UMary

Aberdeen, S.D. – The (RV) Northern State University men's basketball team continued their home win streak on Thursday, defeating the University of Mary in NSIC action. The Wolves led for the entirety of the game, notching 43 points in the first half and 36 in the second.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 79, MARY 60

Records: NSU 6-2 (2-0 NSIC), MARY 4-1 (1-1 NSIC)

Attendance: 2346

HOW IT HAPPENED

- Northern shot over ten percentage points better than their opponents in the win, hitting 29-of-59 from the floor (49.2%) and 15-of-36 from the 3-point line (41.7%)

- The NSU defense held UMary to a 39.1 field goal percentage and 25.0 3-point field goal percentage

- The Wolves notched a game high 43 rebounds, 18 assists, 15 made 3-pointers, and four blocks in the game

- NSU tallied 26 points in the paint, 16 points off the bench led by Kobe Busch, 13 points off turnovers, and ten second chance points

- Four Wolves scored in double figures, led by Sam Masten with 20 points, as well as seven assists

- Jordan Belka led seven Wolves with multiple rebounds in the win, pulling down a season high ten off the glass

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STAND-OUTS

- Sam Masten: 20 points, 9 rebounds, 7 assists

- Jacksen Moni: 17 points, 3 rebounds

- Josh Dilling: 13 points, 55.6 field goal%, 3 assists

- Kobe Busch: 11 points, 5 rebounds, 2 blocks

UP NEXT

Northern State returns to action on Saturday at Minot State University. Tip-off is set for 3 p.m. between the Wolves and Beavers.

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- OVH crank chute control w/ high-arc steel chute
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\$1,599*



3X 30" HD

Gear up for the worst of winter weather with the 3X 30" HD powered by a 420cc Cub Cadet OHV engine.

- Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel auger housing and side plates
- LED light bar on auger housing plus dual LED in-dash headlights
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- OVH crank chute control w/ high-arc steel chute
- Heavy-duty cast aluminum gear box backed by 5-year limited warranty**

MSRP
\$1,999*



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Clear it all with the strength of the 3X 26" Trac featuring a powerful 357cc Cub Cadet OHV engine.

- Trac drive ideal for slopes, inclines and gravel driveways
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- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
- OVH crank chute control w/ high-arc steel chute
- LED light bar on auger housing plus dual LED in-dash headlights
- Heavy-duty cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty**

MSRP
\$2,099*

* Indicates step-up feature

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† See owner's manual for warranty details and information. Certain restrictions apply.

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Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 4 of 62

Wolves Drop NSIC North Battle to UMary

Aberdeen, S.D. – The Northern State women's basketball team dropped their first home contest of the season in Wachs Arena, falling by a score of 70-57 to UMary. The Wolves and Marauders played three quarters of back-and-forth basketball, however a 27-9 second period advantage for UMary proved too much for a Northern comeback.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 57, MARY 70

Records: NSU 6-2 (1-1 NSIC), MARY 2-2 (1-0 NSIC)

Attendance: 2,043

HOW IT HAPPENED

Laurie Rogers and Morgan Fiedler each scored a pair of baskets in the opening quarter, however UMary was able to grab a 12-11 lead with a pair of free throws in the closing seconds of the period

A jumper by Kailee Oliverson was able to briefly give Northern a 13-12 lead in the opening seconds of the second quarter, however five 3-pointers by the Marauders gave UMary a 19-point halftime lead

Rogers scored five points to power the Wolves to a 10-0 run that spanned the final two minutes of the third quarter and first minute of the fourth quarter, bringing the Marauder lead back to down to 12 points

12 points was all the closer Northern was able to get in the fourth period, as another back-and-forth stanza resulted in only 1-point advantage for NSU

Northern State out-scored UMary 37-31 in the second half and improved their field goal percentage from 31.0 percent in the first half to 40.6 percent in the second half

The Wolves where +5 in the turnover margin, and out-scored the Marauders 11-6 in points off turnovers

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Laurie Rogers: 18 points, 6 rebounds, 1 block

Morgan Fiedler: 11 points, 5 rebounds, 1 assist

UP NEXT

Northern State will face another NSIC North Division foe on Saturday afternoon when they travel to Minot, North Dakota, to battle Minot State. The Wolves and Beavers are scheduled for a 1 p.m. tip-off at the Minot State Dome.

Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #5 Results

Team Standings: Chipmunks – 14, Cheetahs – 10, Foxes – 10, Jackelopes – 9, Shihtzus – 9, Coyotes – 8

Men's High Games: Lance Frohling & Randy Stanley – 229, Mike Siegler – 224, Roger Spanier – 193, 193

Women's High Games: Vicki Walter – 190, Lori Wiley – 183, Sue Stanley – 177

Men's High Series: Mike Siegler – 557, Roger Spanier – 555, Lance Frohling – 545

Women's High Series: Vicki Walter – 503, Lori Wiley – 458, Sue Stanley – 449

True Holiday Spirit

By Bryan Golden

Among other things, the holidays are a time of giving and receiving gifts. The question most often asked of people is, "what did you get?" Much less frequently asked is, "what did you give?" Invariably, the inquiries concern material gifts. Purchasing a gift can certainly be thoughtful and a wonderful gesture, especially when it's backed up by your actions.

However, the most valuable presents are those that aren't sold in stores. When you give your love, your time, help someone in need, aid another in solving a problem or overcoming an obstacle, you give something priceless.

The true spirit of the holidays is giving. When you give, you receive. You can get anything in life you want by helping enough others get what they want. But only if you give without expecting anything in return. The impact of giving isn't limited to just the holiday season, it's something that has value all year.

The power of giving is often underestimated. When you give unconditionally, you don't just impact the recipient; you start a chain reaction. By brightening the life of one person you also affect all those who they then touch.

No gesture of giving or kindness is too small. Holding the door open at a store, helping someone carry groceries to their car, letting another car in front of you, saying please and thank you, and saying hello to a stranger you pass on the sidewalk, are some of the many things you can do daily.

For family and friends, your time is one of the most precious gifts you can offer. Are you there for others when they need you? Do you offer a hand without being asked? Do you help out when asked?

Too often, people get caught up in their own desires, thus losing sight of the needs of others. A person who tries to get through life by looking out for himself or herself first is invariably frustrated. Often this person views life as a competition to determine who can accumulate more.

On the other hand, those who are concerned for the wellbeing of others are happier, more content, and more satisfied. By giving without expecting, they in turn receive the things they need.

Giving is a simple concept that works every time it is applied. There will be people who don't appreciate what you do, but it doesn't matter. You are giving without anticipating anything in return. Besides, there will be many more who are thankful for your efforts.

If you don't treat others well, buying a gift won't compensate for your behavior. The recipient might like what you give them but it won't make up for your actions. You can't bribe someone to forgive the way you treat them with a present.

The best gift you can receive is the joy of making someone else happy. Being unselfish is a wonderful way to live. When you give with no ulterior motives, your actions are seen as genuine. Should you expect something in return, your behavior is always suspect. We all know people who do nice things only when they want something in return.

Make giving a daily routine. Don't start and end with the holiday season. Every day is a good day to do something nice. When people feel good due to your actions, you can't help but feel happy yourself. And that is priceless. The most significant action you can take is having a positive impact on the lives of others.

Bryan is the author of "Dare to Live Without Limits." Contact Bryan at Bryan@columnist.com or visit www.DareToLiveWithoutLimits.com Copyright 2022 Bryan Golden

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 6 of 62

Groton Auxiliary doing service project for DTOM Ranch

Groton ALA Unit 39 is doing a community service project from Dec. 5-12 to help support DTOM Ranch's "Operation Christmas Food Box" program. One food box will cost approximately \$60 so people can leave a donation instead of food if they prefer. Checks would go to DTOM Ranch. Families may also make/send a Christmas greeting card but it must not be sealed per their policy.

If any one in the community knows of a veteran or veteran's family that is in need, please put the information in a sealed envelop and give to Legion worker or Unit member who will deliver it to DTOM Ranch.

All gifts of food and other items will be delivered to the DTOM Ranch during the week of December 12 who will deliver them to our veterans and veterans families.

Groton Unit 39 greatly appreciates our community in helping us take care of our veterans and veterans families.

For more information, contact Jan Seibel at 605-448-3002.



**FOOD & GIFT DRIVE
FOR VETERANS**

LEAVE FOOD & GIFTS AT GROTON'S
LEGION POST 39 FROM DEC. 5-12.

FOOD ITEMS FOR CHRISTMAS FOOD BOX PROGRAM:
HAMS CANNED VEGETABLES INSTANT
POTATOES INSTANT GRAVY CANNED ROLLS
DESSERT ITEMS **** (REFRIGERATER ITEMS OR CASH
DONATIONS- GIVE TO LEGION WORKER) ****

BASIC NECESSITIES FOR BOTH MALE & FEMALES:
TOILET PAPER BODY & HAND SOAP TOOTHPASTE &
BRUSH DEODORANT DISH SOAP TOWELS AND WASH
TOWELS LAUNDRY DETERGENT DISPOSABLE RAZORS
SHAVING CREAM COMPRESSION SOCKS-KNEE HIGH-
SIZES S/M, M/L

SMALL GIFTS:
Our veterans love: LED flashlights, Multitools,
pocket knives, books (westerns, mystery,
military), camping items, coffee cups, (Travel),
water bottles, etc. Things they can use.

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SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Chamberlain School ordered to pay \$100,000 to family of disabled child

BY JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 1, 2022

A federal judge has ordered the Chamberlain School District to pay nearly \$100,000 to the family of a child with disabilities to cover the cost of the child's special education.

The judgment affirms the earlier conclusions of a hearing examiner who had ordered the district to reimburse parents Judith and Michael Steckelberg for the tuition and travel costs associated with a specialty care facility in Utah.

The ruling from Judge Lawrence Piersol was filed Wednesday in the Southern Division of the U.S. District Court in South Dakota.

The district's appeal centered on its responsibility to pay for Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students under the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act.

The Steckelbergs' child, now an adult, is identified in court documents as "AMS."

AMS was described as "an active child" who had a "sudden onset" of physical and behavioral conditions in the fifth grade. The child was soon diagnosed with Pediatric Acute Onset Neuropsychiatric Syndrome (PANS), obsessive compulsive disorder, Tourette's and random tic disorder, according to court documents.

As AMS moved through school in Chamberlain, the child's behavioral and attention problems prompted a series of district interventions and assessments, but outbursts and disruptive behaviors continued.

The child was hospitalized several times at Avera Behavioral Health in Sioux Falls and missed most of the fifth, sixth and seventh grade school years as a result. The school built multiple Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for the child, but by 2018, the Chamberlain High School principal told the Steckelbergs, "I'm at the point where I don't think being at CHS is the right setting for [AMS]."

AMS was sent home for remote learning for the 2018-2019 school year, but the court record says the child was unable to access the software needed to hear lectures, and that not all the teachers used it. The child also used Google Docs, but lost access to that software.

There was also a communication breakdown between the family and the district that year, and the principal didn't tell teachers that communication was mandatory under the IEP until near the end of the spring semester.

The family soon requested an out-of-district placement at a facility covered by Medicaid, but AMS was rejected for a spot at a psychiatric residential facility in Plankinton due to age. No other facilities in the nation would cover the child's tuition through Medicaid, the court record says.

The child eventually found a place at Kaizen Academy in Utah for the 2019-2020 year, but the district balked at payment because the private school didn't qualify as a psychiatric residential facility and didn't accept Medicaid.

The school district did not respond to the family's notice of placement at the school.

AMS graduated at Kaizen in 2020, earning A's and B's, and was attending a public university in South Dakota by the time the administrative hearing over the matter commenced.

The hearing examiner found that the Chamberlain School District's educational interventions were inadequate for the child, and that its refusal to recognize Kaizen as an appropriate placement was a violation of its FAPE obligations under federal law.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 8 of 62

"Administration for Respondent knew that AMS could not be placed within the school and the home placement was not working," the hearing examiner wrote. "AMS had to be placed in a facility that treated the behaviors as well as provided an education."

The school district appealed the ruling, but Judge Piersol sided with the family.

"The Court concludes that the Hearing Examiner properly weighed and considered the evidence and the credibility of the witnesses who testified at the hearing. The appropriateness of AMS's placement at Kaizen, considering [the child's] academic and behavioral needs, is supported by a preponderance of the evidence and is consistent with the IDEA," Piersol wrote. "The School District has failed to carry its burden to demonstrate otherwise."

The ruling is a victory for the family, according to their attorney, Gina Ruggieri, but the years of work to win their case, then later to fend off the district's appeal in federal court, have been costly — costly enough to make a deep cut in the value of Wednesday's monetary award.

"They shouldn't have had to spend that kind of money," Ruggieri said. "It's still not done. I need to file for attorney's fees so they can get back the money they paid me."



JOHN HULT ✉️ 🐦

John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

**'TIS THE
SEASON TO
SHOP LOCAL**

GROTON
Chamber Of Commerce



A record-setting number of women will serve in state legislatures in 2023, including South Dakota

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - DECEMBER 1, 2022 12:45 PM

WASHINGTON — A record number of women will soon serve in state legislatures, breaking the previous cap of female lawmakers by at least 69 seats and bringing total representation to more than 32%, according to the Center for American Women and Politics.

That includes South Dakota, where the new Legislature will convene with 31 women members next month. That's a record for the state, besting the previous record from the 2021-22 Legislature by one member.

Nationally, states will have at least 2,376 female lawmakers in 2023, including both women elected in 2022 and holdovers. That is an increase in the number of women writing and voting on state laws from the current record of 2,307 women set in 2022. Another 59 races this year with female candidates are too close to call.

Democrats hold the lead with 1,560 members, while Republicans have 795. The remaining female state lawmakers don't belong to a major party or are independent. CAWP, which is a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey, noted that means GOP female lawmakers make up just 33.5% of women state legislators.

The numbers are far from reflective of the nation's population, though women have reached parity in some states.

Colorado will join Nevada next year as the only two states that have at least half of their legislatures made up of women, according to CAWP's analysis of this year's elections.

"Nevada became the first state to reach this milestone following the 2018 elections. As of Election Day 2022, 58.7% of Nevada state legislators were women, and in 2023 Nevada's legislature will be 60.3% women," CAWP wrote in a summary of state legislative election results.

"Colorado's legislature will also be majority-women in 2023, with women holding 51% of state legislative seats," CAWP wrote.

Women hold exactly half of the seats in the Arizona and New Hampshire Senate chambers.



The South Dakota State Capitol, as seen on Nov. 2, 2022. (John Hult/South Dakota Searchlight)



JENNIFER SHUTT  

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

U.S. House GOP to keep earmarks for local projects — with some 'tweaks'

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - DECEMBER 1, 2022 12:32 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. House Republicans voted Wednesday to keep earmarks in place when they take over the chamber in January, a move that solidifies GOP support for the controversial spending practice that was brought back under new guardrails and transparency mechanisms less than two years ago.

Earmarking has become especially important to members of both political parties in the short time it's been back, with both Republicans and Democrats cheering their ability to direct lucrative federal spending to their home states and localities.

Congress directed \$9.1 billion in earmarked dollars to more than 5,000 community projects via earmarks during fiscal year 2022, according to an analysis from the Government Accountability Office.

State, local, tribal, or territorial governments account for about half of recipients, totaling more than \$4.1 billion, according to GAO.

The process will, however, undergo some changes under Republican leadership, according to incoming House Appropriations Chair Kay Granger, who said in a brief interview following the closed-door vote that she plans to "tweak" the way the House earmarks.

"The first thing is to make sure that everybody understands where we are right now. So [to] people that are new, say 'This is what we do and let me tell you about it,' and you tell me what's important to you," Granger said.

The Texas Republican said she doesn't think the way Democrats brought back earmarks during the last two years has gone well, though she declined to give specifics.

Granger also declined to say how she plans to tweak the process going forward, saying Republicans on Wednesday were focused on the "big picture."

She did say that earmarks can be "very important" for lawmakers, since they allow members to direct funding back to their congressional districts.

"You can do something for the community that elected you and there are rules that you go by," Granger said. "To be elected and say, 'This is what my community needs and how I can do it' — it's just very important."

Banned in 2011, back in 2021

The House GOP originally led the charge to ban earmarks in 2011 after years of scandals within the old earmarking process, adding a prohibition to their party rules in the House.

Democrats in the U.S. Senate followed suit the same year, keeping the practice of formally requesting federal spending for a congressional district or senator's home state barred until early 2021, when Democrats in the House and Senate brought back the practice.

Rep. Rosa DeLauro, chair of the House Appropriations Committee, officially brought back the practice in February of that year, saying that the rebranded community project funding, or congressionally directed spending, "will allow Members to put their deep, first-hand understanding of the needs of their communities to work to help the people we represent."

House Republicans voted in March to lift their earmark ban, allowing their members to participate in the process.

Senate Appropriations Chair Patrick J. Leahy, a Vermont Democrat, reinstated a formal process for earmarking in that chamber in April 2021.

He argued that the Constitution gives Congress and its members the power to determine federal spending, not unelected members of the executive branch. He also said lawmakers know their home states better and can direct resources more efficiently to needed projects.

"Every member of this chamber has their hands tied. Why? Because we ceded the power of the purse to unelected bureaucrats here in Washington when we instituted a ban on congressionally directed spend-

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 11 of 62

ing," Leahy said in a floor speech at the time.

"As a result, even though we appropriate the money, we can't even direct a tiny fraction of the tax dollars we collect from our hard-working constituents and send those tax dollars back into their communities," Leahy continued. "We turn it over to the executive branch and have no say in it."

Earmarking rules

While the U.S. House and U.S. Senate set different rules for their spending process, the two chambers currently have similar restrictions on when and how members can request and receive earmarked funds.

Both chambers prohibit earmarks from going to for-profit entities, limit which of the dozen annual appropriations bills are eligible for earmark requests, require members to publicly post their requests on their official website and call on the Government Accountability Office to audit a sample of the approved earmarks annually.

The House requires members to certify neither they nor their spouse have any financial interest in the project, while senators must certify that neither they nor their immediate family have a financial interest in the project.

The total amount of federal dollars flowing to member-requested projects cannot exceed 1% of discretionary spending, which totals about \$1.5 trillion for the current fiscal year.

In the House, members cannot request more than 10 projects, though there's no similar cap in the Senate.



JENNIFER SHUTT  

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

COMMENTARY

Disappearing nursing homes could suffer more under Noem's tax cut

Brad Johnson ~ DECEMBER 1, 2022 5:15 PM

Shortly before the Nov. 8 general election, South Dakota Senate President Pro Tempore Lee Schoenbeck said Gov. Kristi Noem's proposal to eliminate the state's sales tax on food would devastate the state's nursing homes.

"If you cut \$106 million out of the budget, you are going to close the nursing homes in our state," he said.

But the state doesn't have to cut money. Nursing homes already are closing.

"What is happening now is just unprecedented," said Mark B. Deak, executive director of the South Dakota Health Care Association. "In the last 12 months we have had six close; and now we just heard Elk Point is going to close. We have never seen a rash of closings like that.

"What started out as a crisis is quickly becoming a catastrophe."

In fact, 15 nursing facilities have closed in the past five years.

On Tuesday during her annual budget address, Gov. Noem is expected to make it more difficult to solve the nursing home crisis. During the last month of her re-election campaign, she unexpectedly vowed to eliminate the state's sales tax on food. That \$100 million revenue cut contrasts with the \$62.5 million needed to help close a funding gap in Medicaid, the federal-state insurance program that reimburses nursing homes and other providers for the health care of low-income people.

Methods of closing that gap are outlined in a Sept. 19 report commissioned by the state's Department of Human Services.

The state's current Medicaid formula causes Jenkins Living Center in Watertown to lose about \$62 a day for each Medicaid patient, which statewide are about 55 percent of nursing-home residents.

"It's a very difficult situation," said Jenkins' Acting Executive Director Loren Diekman. Jenkins has a long waiting list and the state's inadequate funding makes it difficult to find staff.

In the past year, the facility "pretty much emptied out its second floor, which had never been done in its history," he said.

At one point, Jenkins was licensed for 162 beds and often had about 140 residents. It now has 90 residents, and it dropped its license number to 110. It has had a waiting list of about 35 people but lacks staffing.

"Our hands are tied because we are so dependent on government funding," he said.

Deak noted that South Dakota nursing homes have 1,000 fewer employees than before COVID-19, while other health care organizations have kept staffing steady.

He blamed it on inadequate pay and staff burnout, because caring for frail people is hard work.

"That's pretty startling," Diekman said.

The September rate review report found that South Dakota's "cost coverage (of Medicaid reimbursement) is very low, at around 70.57 percent for the average current South Dakota nursing facility rate of \$200.63. Steps should be taken to improve this to an acceptable level."

The study said South Dakota's daily rate should be \$262.08 per day, still nearly \$100 a day below North Dakota's current \$360.14.

The low reimbursement rate also causes facilities to limit spending on building maintenance and rehabilitation. The report said the average age of the state's nursing facilities "is 49.5 years, and more than 70 percent of the facilities are 50 years old or older."

The current reimbursement system doesn't "incentivize providers to invest in maintenance (including renovations)." Moreover, the state's current funding system results in providers being "hesitant to invest in maintenance/renovations as it could be several years before the rate is adjusted to include the additional capital costs."

Deak said he has no idea what Gov. Noem will propose in her budget, but nursing home groups will

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 13 of 62

share their story at a townhall style meeting with the Legislature's Joint Appropriations Committee about a week after her budget address.

"It is pretty hard not to notice the closings," he said. "And you have to think about the impact that has on people who have to relocate to a new nursing center, how difficult it is because of their age."

It also impacts families and in many smaller communities, nursing facilities were among the larger employers.

Those closings will continue, Deak said, unless the state becomes more fiscally supportive.

"Staffing problems were bad before the pandemic," he said. "It's much worse now."



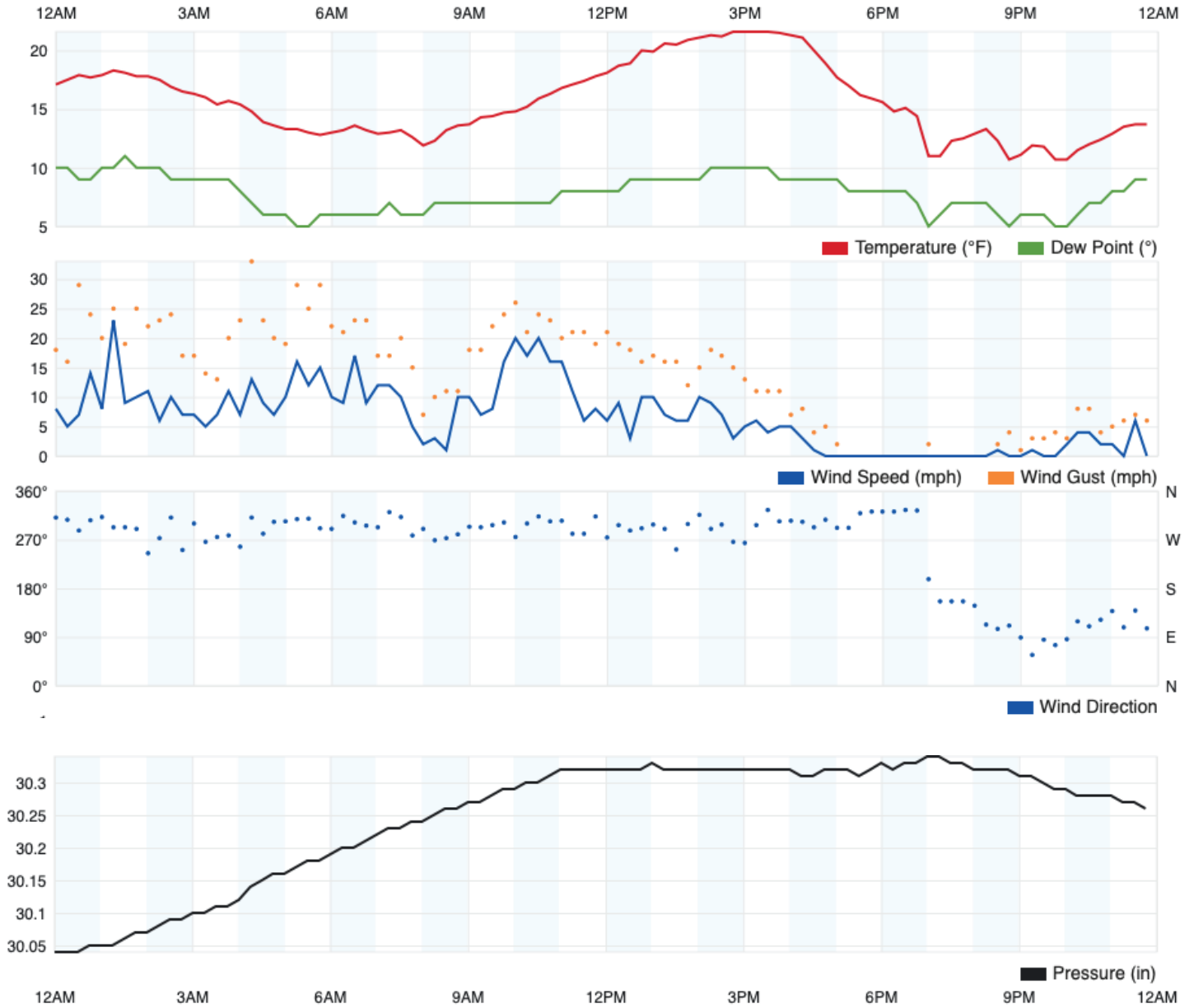
BRAD JOHNSON

Brad Johnson is a Watertown real estate appraiser and journalist whose previous career was as a Colorado newspaper reporter and editor. He has been writing regularly appearing opinion columns for at least 20 years.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 14 of 62

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Broton Daily Independent

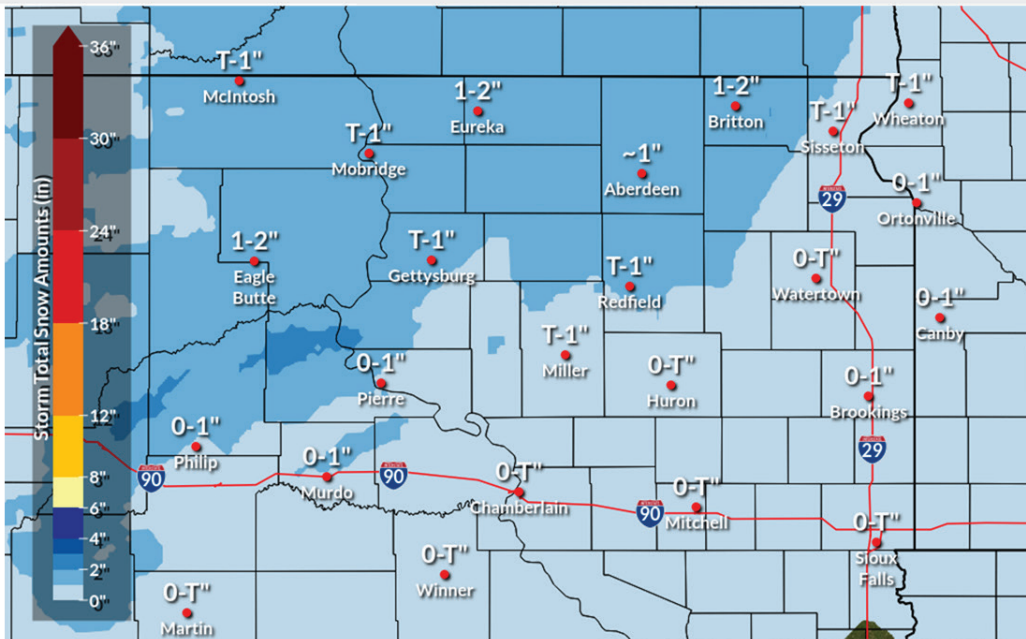
Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 15 of 62

Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
90%	20%					
Cloudy and Blustery then Snow and Patchy Blowing Snow	Slight Chance Snow and Blustery then Mostly Clear	Sunny	Mostly Clear	Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy
High: 30 °F ↓	Low: -2 °F	High: 26 °F	Low: 9 °F	High: 32 °F	Low: 17 °F	High: 25 °F



Expected Snowfall Today

September 23, 2022
3:32 PM



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Light snow expected today. #sdwx #mnwx

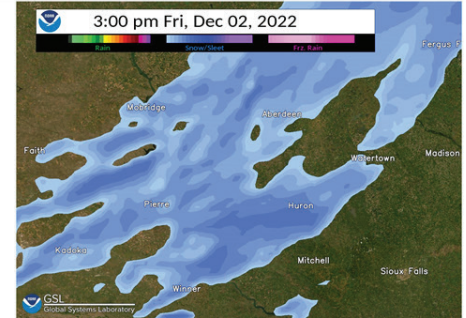
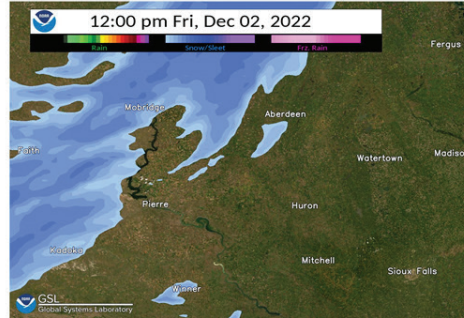
Broton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 16 of 62



Approximate Snow Timing

December 2, 2022
4:06 AM



Light to moderate snow timing today

- **Central SD:** Mid morning to mid Afternoon
- **Northeast SD & West Central MN:** Afternoon to early evening

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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD



Today's Hourly Temperature And Wind Forecast

December 1, 2022
2:30 PM

Increasing winds out of the northwest gusting 40 to 50 mph



Falling temperatures, into the single digits below and above zero by daybreak Saturday. Wind Chills -10 to -25 degrees Saturday morning.



Hourly Maximum Wind Gust Forecast

	12/2 Fri												12/3 Sat						
	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am	11am	12pm	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm	5pm	6pm	7pm	8pm	9pm	10pm	11pm	12am
Aberdeen	14	17	23	30	32	35	38	40	41	40	40	40	39	39	39	33	30	26	
Britton	12	16	18	24	30	32	35	39	43	43	41	40	40	39	39	37	35	32	31
Eagle Butte	33	35	36	37	38	39	41	43	44	43	43	41	39	36	33	31	28	23	22
Eureka	23	25	26	29	35	38	44	45	45	45	44	40	38	38	39	37	33	30	28
Gettysburg	24	29	30	35	39	44	46	46	48	47	47	45	43	41	39	38	35	32	26
Kennebec	14	20	28	30	37	43	44	45	46	45	45	44	41	40	38	32	31	29	24
McIntosh	36	38	38	38	40	43	46	47	49	49	48	45	40	40	38	33	31	28	23
Milbank	21	18	14	15	21	24	30	35	35	38	40	41	44	44	45	45	41	38	35
Miller	14	17	20	24	30	35	38	41	44	45	45	46	40	37	36	35	33	31	26
Mobridge	30	30	31	32	36	38	40	43	40	41	43	40	39	37	33	32	30	25	22
Murdo	23	30	35	37	38	43	43	45	45	44	45	43	43	38	35	33	30	26	23
Pierre	17	22	26	32	35	36	38	40	40	41	41	41	40	37	32	29	25	23	20
Redfield	12	14	20	26	30	35	38	41	44	44	44	43	41	41	38	36	35	32	28
Sisseton	13	12	15	18	24	30	35	37	39	43	44	43	43	45	46	45	40	38	37
Watertown	20	17	14	14	20	24	29	32	36	41	43	45	45	44	44	41	37	36	33
Webster	21	18	20	20	26	31	38	43	45	48	49	47	47	48	46	44	40	39	38
Wheaton	10	9	12	14	18	24	30	31	35	37	38	39	38	40	39	40	39	37	35

Hourly Temperature Forecast

	12/2 Fri												12/3 Sat						
	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am	11am	12pm	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm	5pm	6pm	7pm	8pm	9pm	10pm	11pm	12am
Aberdeen	28	29	28	28	26	25	24	22	20	19	17	15	13	11	9	8	6	5	5
Britton	31	29	28	27	26	24	23	22	19	16	15	14	11	10	9	7	5	4	3
Eagle Butte	26	25	24	22	21	20	18	18	17	16	16	14	11	10	9	7	5	4	4
Eureka	24	22	21	20	20	19	17	16	14	14	13	10	8	5	4	1	-1	-1	-1
Gettysburg	27	25	24	22	22	21	20	18	17	16	15	14	10	9	7	6	5	5	4
Kennebec	34	31	31	30	29	28	27	25	23	22	19	18	17	14	13	12	10	10	10
McIntosh	17	17	16	15	15	14	13	13	12	12	10	9	7	5	4	2	0	1	1
Milbank	37	38	38	38	37	33	31	29	27	23	21	18	16	13	12	11	9	9	8
Miller	33	32	31	30	29	28	25	24	21	19	17	14	13	12	9	8	7	6	5
Mobridge	26	22	21	20	20	20	19	18	17	14	13	10	9	7	5	4	4	4	4
Murdo	40	34	32	29	28	27	25	24	23	20	18	17	16	14	13	12	10	10	9
Pierre	33	32	30	28	27	27	26	23	23	22	20	19	16	15	14	12	11	11	12
Redfield	28	30	30	30	30	28	26	24	22	20	18	16	14	13	10	9	7	6	5
Sisseton	33	30	29	29	26	24	23	21	19	18	16	14	11	10	9	8	7	6	5
Watertown	29	30	31	31	31	30	28	25	22	20	18	16	12	11	9	8	7	6	4
Webster	33	32	31	31	27	26	25	22	21	18	16	15	11	10	9	8	6	5	4
Wheaton	27	28	28	28	27	26	25	22	21	20	18	14	12	11	9	7	6	5	4

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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 18 of 62

Today in Weather History

December 2, 1978: A low-pressure system moved northeast from Kansas, causing snow to fall over southern Minnesota south of a line from Alexandria to Duluth on the 2nd and 3rd, with the heaviest snow falling from west-central and southwest Minnesota to west-central Wisconsin. Snow depths of six inches or more fell in southwestern Minnesota, with 10 inches or more at Marshall, MN. Winds averaged near 20 mph, and temperatures ranged from 5 to 15 degrees above zero while the snow fell, but the snow did not cause extensive problems for the area. Wheaton had 2 inches, Artichoke Lake and Browns Valley had 3 inches.

December 2, 1984: Snow fell in the central and northeast parts of South Dakota from the late afternoon of the 1st to the morning of the 2nd, with amounts ranging from 3 to 10 inches. The most substantial amounts were in the northeast part of the state, with Day County reporting 8 to 10 inches. Five inches of snow fell at Clear Lake; six inches fell at Waubay, Clark, Miller, and 12 miles southwest of Harrold with 7 inches at Redfield.

1896: Early season snow and ice storm struck the southeastern U.S. Eleven inches of snow fell at Charlotte, NC, and 6 inches at Atlanta, GA.

1925 - A late season hurricane caused extensive damage across the Florida peninsula, then moved off the Georgia coast crossing Cape Hatteras as a tropical storm. The storm produced whole gales along the Middle Atlantic and Southern New England coast. Winds gusted to 60 mph at Block Island RI, and reached 64 mph at Atlantic City NJ. (David Ludlum)

1950 - A late season tornado killed four persons in Madison County and Bond County, east of St Louis MO. Three tornadoes touched down in Illinois that afternoon, compared to just half a dozen tornadoes in the month of December in 115 years of records up until that time. Thunderstorms also produced hail which caused more than four million dollars damage in the St Louis area, it was the most damaging hailstorm of record for Missouri. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1959: Between November 19 and December 2, an estimated 20 inches of rain fell near Frejus on the French Riviera. The rain caused the Malpasset Dam to collapse, which sent a 130-foot high wall of water into the towns of Malpasset and Bozon. The wall of water 10 feet tall reached Frejus, flooding the western half of the city. The dam breach killed 423 people and caused \$68 million in damages.

1968: The "Sacramento," a 250-foot fishing barge and former ferry between San Francisco and Oakland, succumb to a winter storm off Redondo Beach.

1970 - A tornado, 400 yards in width, touched down about one mile below the summit of Timpanogos Divide. Trees up to 18 inches in diameter were snapped, and some of the 38 inch snow cover was carried 1000 feet above the ground as the tornado traveled one mile. (The Weather Channel)

1982 - A tornado destroyed a home four miles south of Eastwood MO. The owners were not injured in that tornado, but ironically one was killed Christmas Eve when another tornado hit the replacement mobile home on the same site. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A powerful storm over the Gulf of Alaska continued to produced high winds and heavy rain along the northern and central Pacific coast. Winds gusted to 80 mph south of Port Orford OR, Stevens Pass WA was blanketed with sixteen inches of snow, and Blue Canyon CA was soaked with 1.63 inches of rain. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Squalls in the Great Lakes Region produced ten inches of snow at Union City, PA. Gale force winds gusted to 55 mph at Buffalo NY. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Squalls produced heavy snow in the Great Lakes Region. Totals in Upper Michigan ranged up to 20 inches at Ironwood. Heavy snow and high winds caused 150 auto accidents in Michigan, resulting in sixteen deaths and 22 injuries. Strong northwesterly winds gusted to 73 mph at Johnstown PA, and Lowville PA received 20 inches of snow in 36 hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Initially, He was named Jesus. Now we also call Him Christ.

Jesus was the name given to Him when He was born. It means the same as the Jewish name, Joshua, which literally means God is salvation! So, the message that God sent to Joseph through His angels was, "You shall call Him 'God is salvation' for He shall save His people from their sins." That name, Jesus, tells us all that we need to know because it reveals God's plan and purpose: God will save humanity through His only begotten Son.

Christ is more than a name. It is a title. It comes from the Greek word Christos, meaning "anointed" or "anointed one." Its meaning is the same as the Hebrew word Messiah. John quoted Andrew in a conversation that he had with his brother Peter. Said Andrew, "We have found the Messiah (which translated means Christ)."

So the terms Messiah and Christ are titles given to Jesus that assure us that He is the anointed one. Jesus is the One whom God anointed to fulfill the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament.

The name Jesus proves that He was human, lived life on our level and faced the same issues and problems that we face. But the title Christ assures us that this One, once called Jesus, can lift us up to God's level because He is the One whom God anointed to be our Savior.

Prayer: We thank You, Lord, for what You did for us through Your Son, our Savior. We rejoice in Your love, mercy and grace that brought our salvation through Him. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: John 1:41 He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated, the Christ).



We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 20 of 62

2022-23 Community Events

- 07/21/2022: Pro Am Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/22/2022: Ferney Open Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
07/24/2022: Moonlight Swim at the Swimming Pool 9-11pm for 9th grade to age 20
07/27/2022: 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
No Date Set: 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)
09/11/2022: 6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3-5pm
09/11/2022: Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10 a.m.
09/02-04: Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/01/2022: Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/07/2022: Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
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
11/13/2022: Snow Queen Contest
11/19/2022: 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
12/10/2022: Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm
01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
07/04/2023 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start (4th of July)
07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 21 of 62

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EPA seeks to mandate more use of ethanol and other biofuels

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday proposed increasing the amount of ethanol and other biofuels that must be blended into the nation's fuel supplies over the next three years, a move welcomed by renewable fuel and farm groups but condemned by environmentalists and oil industry groups.

"This proposal supports low-carbon renewable fuels and seeks public input on ways to strengthen the program," EPA Administrator Michael S. Regan said in a statement. "With this proposal, EPA seeks to provide consumers with more options while diversifying our nation's energy mix."

The proposal also includes new incentives to encourage the use of biogas from farms and landfills, and renewable biomass such as wood, to generate electricity to charge electric vehicles. It's the first time the EPA has set biofuel targets on its own instead of using numbers from Congress. The agency opened a public comment period and will hold a hearing in January.

The goal of the existing Renewable Fuel Standard is to reduce carbon emissions that contribute to climate change, expand the country's fuel supply, strengthen energy security and reduce fuel prices for consumers. Ethanol is a key part of the economy in many Midwest states, consuming about 40% of the nation's corn supply.

But environmentalists argue that it's a net ecological and climate detriment because growing all that corn fosters unsustainable farming practices, while the oil industry says ethanol mandates constrain free market forces and limit consumer choice, and that higher blends can damage older vehicles.

Geoff Cooper, president and CEO of the Renewable Fuels Association, told reporters on a conference call that the EPA's plan creates a "clear pathway for sustainable growth for our industry when it comes to the production and use of low-carbon fuels like ethanol." He said it also bolsters the industry's push for year-round sales of gasoline with a 15% ethanol blend, as well as sales of the 85% ethanol blend E85.

"As the administration is working to address climate change, we've long known that biofuels will play an important role in reducing greenhouse gases while having the added benefit of providing expanded opportunities for farmers," National Farmers Union President Rob Larew said in a statement.

But environmental groups said the plan offers false solutions to climate change.

"This is a toxic plan directly at odds with the Biden Administration's commitment to Environmental Justice," Sarah Lutz, climate campaigner at Friends of the Earth, said in a statement. "Charging electric vehicles with forests and factory farms should be a non-starter."

Geoff Moody, senior vice president of the American Fuel & Petrochemical Manufacturers said the Renewable Fuel Standard was meant to be a liquid fuels program, not an electric vehicle program. He urged the EPA to go back as it develops the final rule and reject "yet another massive regulatory subsidy for electric vehicle manufacturers."

The EPA proposes to set the total target for all kinds of renewable fuels at 20.82 billion gallons for 2023, including 15 billion gallons from corn ethanol. The target would grow to 22.68 billion gallons for 2025, including 15.25 billion gallons of corn ethanol. The plan also calls for growth in cellulosic biofuels — which are made from fibrous plant materials — biomass-based diesel and other advanced biofuels.

Republican U.S. Sen. Chuck Grassley, of Iowa, the country's top corn and ethanol producing state, said in a statement that the EPA should have gone further to require even more use of advanced biofuels to move freight, which he said would help lower prices for consumer goods.

Cooper said there's probably no way to meet the proposed higher targets without more use of E15 and E85 instead of the conventional 10% ethanol mix. That makes it important to eliminate regulations that block summertime sales of E15, he said.

So, he predicted, the EPA's proposal should bolster prospects for legislation introduced this week by

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 23 of 62

Democratic U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, of Minnesota, and GOP Sen. Deb Fischer, of Nebraska, to allow year-round sales of E15 nationwide. E15 sales are usually prohibited between June 1 and Sept. 15 because of concerns that it adds to smog in high temperatures.

Eight Midwest governors asked the EPA in April to allow year-round sales of E15 in their states. But Cooper said the new bill would provide a "nationwide fix" that even the American Petroleum Institute considers preferable to the current patchwork of temporary waivers and ad hoc solutions.

Eritrean forces still killing Tigray civilians, report says

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Eritrean troops have continued killing dozens of civilians in Ethiopia's Tigray region and committing other abuses weeks after the two main warring parties signed a peace deal, according to an official document seen by The Associated Press.

The forces from neighboring Eritrea, which has fought alongside Ethiopia's military in the two-year conflict, killed 111 civilians and injured another 103 in the eastern zone of Tigray, according to information compiled between Nov. 17 and 25 by the Tigray Emergency Center. Regional government offices, United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations participate in the ECC.

The report also says there were 39 "kidnapping/disappearances" of civilians by Eritrean forces and "widespread looting," including the destruction of 241 houses. One of the kidnapped civilians was later found dead.

The abuses threaten to harm the deal struck in South Africa between Ethiopia's government and Tigray leaders on Nov. 2. Tigray's forces are supposed to disarm within 30 days of the agreement, but they now say they will hand over their heavy weapons only after Eritrea's military leaves the region. Eritrea, however, is not a party to the peace talks.

Last week the AP reported that Eritrean forces and troops from Ethiopia's neighboring Amhara region were still looting and carrying out mass detentions in the Tigray region of more than 5 million people.

Eritrean troops entered the conflict alongside Ethiopia's government when fighting broke out in November 2020. They have been accused of widespread human rights abuses, including gang rapes.

In a rare public statement on the issue last week, the African Union mediator who brokered the peace deal, Olusegun Obasanjo, called on "foreign troops" to leave Tigray.

Aid has started to reach Tigray since the deal was signed, but some aid workers have said convoys of humanitarian supplies have been blocked by checkpoints manned by Eritrean soldiers. Currently, aid workers can only access 54 of 104 camps for displaced people in Tigray, according to the ECC report.

Yet some observers remain hopeful that the deal will be implemented. On Thursday, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the conflict had killed more people than the war in Ukraine and described the deal as an "an opportunity that Ethiopia cannot miss, that Africa cannot miss, and that the world cannot miss."

A joint committee comprising representatives from the federal government, Tigray leaders and the AU and tasked with drawing up plans for disarmament held its first meeting in the Tigray town of Shire on Wednesday. The government's communication service said its work has been "delayed due to technical factors."

LGBTQ chorus in Colorado Springs unifies community with song

By JESSE BEDAYN Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (AP) — Below the vaulted dome and dark wood beams of a church in Colorado Springs, a gay men's choir rehearsed for a concert that's taken on new meaning after a LGBTQ night club became the site of a gruesome shooting that killed five and wounded 17.

"There is no peace on earth, I said," the chorus sang. "For hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth."

The old lyrics that rang through the halls of the First Congregational Church were haunted by new

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 24 of 62

memories of the Nov. 21 violence at Club Q — the sound of screams over club music, the sight of bullet wounds plugged by napkins and people pleading with their friends to keep breathing.

In the 13 days since the shooting, Colorado Springs' LGBTQ community has worked to collect itself and forge ahead. Patrons of Club Q — those who survived the rampage as well as regulars who weren't there last Saturday — have organized donation drives for victims' families, leaned on queer-affirming clergy and renewed their commitments to LGBTQ spaces and organizations, including Out Loud Colorado Springs Men's Chorus.

Gay and lesbian choruses like Out Loud were borne out of the 1978 assassination of San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk and have remained steadfast pillars of the LGBTQ community from the AIDS crisis through mass shootings such as Orlando's Pulse nightclub in 2016.

In Colorado Springs, members of Out Loud prepared for three sold-out concerts, their first performances since the COVID-19 pandemic forced them to cancel shows. The rehearsals brought laughter, and at times damp eyes, chins raised and heads defiantly held forward. They're sending a clear message: "We are saying we are still here," said Marius Nielsen, a transgender man who sung from the front row at a Wednesday night rehearsal.

In one practice session, Nielsen broke down while singing. He said he felt the swelling strength of those around him through the music.

"Everyone has you, even if you falter," he said.

The concert's solemn notes punctuated a largely joyful event where talented singers belted out Christmas carol medleys, some more campy than others. Members of the chorus dressed as the robed three kings — but in feathery, neon scarves — and struck go-go dancer poses. Another performer wearing Claus-style short shorts swooned over Santa.

"We will grieve, we will feel anger and sadness, and in the midst of that we will feel joy and hope," said Bill Loper, the concert's artistic director.

Standing three rows back from Nielsen, Rod Gilmore said the choir was keeping him going. With the violent memories still fresh, Club Q shooting survivor Gilmore said he would have reentered the closet he left last year at age 55 if it wasn't for those standing next to him in the church.

"It's given me solace and a comfortable feeling that relaxes me and makes me feel like I'm a whole of something, not just a part," Gilmore said.

Colorado Springs residents are working to spread that feeling of togetherness throughout their city. Matthew Haynes, Club Q's co-owner, is looking to remodel and install a garden and memorial to celebrate the lives lost. A friend cooked a vegan casserole for the owners. A Las Vegas resident drove to Colorado Springs to play a piano fastened to the bed of his red Toyota pickup.

"There's no playbook for this," said Haynes, who has started a GoFundMe page committed to "bringing Club Q back as the safe space for Colorado Springs." His first goal is to ensure survivors and those mourning are supported.

At a memorial on Wednesday, Colorado Gov. Jared Polis paid his respects in front of a heaping row of flowers and gazed at photos of those lost. In 2018, Polis became the first openly gay man elected governor in the U.S.

A retired teacher who worked near Columbine High School during the 1999 mass shooting there dropped off flowers next to a stuffed pink flamingo and said he worried these tragedies have become so commonplace that people have become desensitized.

Amidst vigils, marches and outpourings of support on social media, Aaron Cornelius is among those in Colorado Springs demanding the tragedy be mourned and remembered.

"We are not going away," Cornelius told a large audience Tuesday night at Lulu's Downstairs, a bar just west of Colorado Springs that held a silent auction where poets, speakers and musicians performed. "This community is a lot stronger than they think. They think we are vulnerable; they think we are weak."

On stage, they oscillated between fiery calls to action to fight the status quo and gentler messages advocating love over hate.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 25 of 62

The faces of audience members were illuminated by candles as they chanted: "I am valid. I deserve to be safe. I may be afraid, but bravery is going out and living in the face of fear. I am brave. I am brave."

During the auction, a self-described "later-in-life lesbian" pastor perused bespoke wine bottles labeled with Club Q and the date of the massacre, as well as gift cards for haircuts and a dog bandana reading, "I heart my Dads."

Wyatt Kent, a drag queen who performed at Club Q the night of the shooting, read poems and anecdotes penned by their partner, Daniel Aston, who was killed while working behind the bar.

In one anecdote, Aston, who was a transgender man, wrote of moving to Colorado Springs from Tulsa, Oklahoma, and how he had grown into himself: "I'm less of a doormat, I'm more assertive, I have a job as a bartender that I love. I no longer want to die."

Kent then read one of Aston's poems, which Kent described as Aston helping the community move forward: "Some things never make any sense, like salmon downstream, like sweat rolling down your sleeve. That's just the way these things go."

"All of that is part of healing: the laughing, the crying, all of it. And then just being together. After something like this, you just naturally want a human to be with," event organizer Kittie Kilner said.

That mixture of pride and rage, laughter and tears, is what Out Loud aims for in their upcoming holiday concerts.

"Music is magical," chorus member Josh Campbell said. "We aren't talking to each other, but ... we connect on an emotional level."

The small audience sensed that magic at rehearsal as the chorus progressed through "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," a carol based on a Civil War-era poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow about his wounded son.

Their despair lifted as the music pulled toward resolution: "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: God is not dead, nor doth he sleep. The wrong shall fail ... the right prevail with peace on earth."

Official says over 10,000 Ukrainian troops killed in war

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A top adviser to Ukraine's president has cited military chiefs as saying 10,000 to 13,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed in the country's nine-month struggle against Russia's invasion, a rare comment on such figures and far below estimates of Ukrainian casualties from Western leaders.

Russian forces kept up rocket attacks on infrastructure and airstrikes against Ukrainian troop positions along the contact line, the Ukrainian general staff said Friday, adding that Moscow's military push has focused on a dozen towns including Bakhmut and Avdiivka — key targets for Russia in the embattled east.

Late Thursday, Mykhailo Podolyak, a top adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, relayed new figures about Ukrainian soldiers killed in battle, while noting that the number of injured troops was higher and civilian casualty counts were "significant."

"We have official figures from the general staff, we have official figures from the top command, and they amount to between 10,000 and 12,500-13,000 killed," Podolyak told Channel 24.

The Ukrainian military has not confirmed such figures and it was a rare instance of a Ukrainian official providing such a count. The last dates back to late August, when the head of the armed forces said that nearly 9,000 military personnel had been killed. In June, Podolyak said that up to 200 soldiers were dying each day, in some of the most intense fighting and bloodshed this year.

On Wednesday, Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Union's executive Commission, said 100,000 Ukrainian troops had been killed before her office corrected her comments — calling them inaccurate and saying that the figure referred to both killed and injured.

Last month, Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that as many as 40,000 Ukrainian civilians and "well over" 100,000 Russian soldiers have been killed or wounded in the war so far. He added that it was the "same thing probably on the Ukrainian side."

The U.N. human rights office, in its latest weekly update published Monday, said it had recorded 6,655

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 26 of 62

civilians killed and 10,368 injured, but has acknowledged that its tally includes only casualties that it has confirmed and likely far understates the actual toll.

The Ukrainian president's office reported on Friday that at least three civilians were killed and 16 wounded in Ukraine in the past 24 hours. Kyrilo Tymoshenko, the office's deputy head, said on Telegram that Russian forces had attacked nine regions in the southeast of Ukraine using heavy artillery, rockets and aircraft.

Ukrainians have been bracing for freezing winter temperatures as Russia's campaign has recently hit infrastructure including power plants and electrical transformers, leaving many without heat, water and electricity.

Ukraine has faced a blistering onslaught of Russian artillery fire and drone attacks since early October. The shelling has been especially intense in southern Kherson since Russian forces withdrew and Ukraine's army reclaimed the southern city almost three weeks ago.

Kherson's regional governor said Friday that three people were killed and seven injured in shelling on Thursday. The Russian army hit residential areas of the city of Kherson, part of which remained without electricity after power was knocked out by Russian strikes Thursday.

In the eastern Donetsk region, Ukrainian governor Pavlo Kyrilenko said Russian shelling has intensified significantly. The Russian army is seeking to encircle the key town of Bakhmut by capturing several surrounding villages and cutting off an important road.

Russian strikes targeting towns located across the Dnieper river from the Russian-held Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant also were reported. And in northeastern Kharkiv province, officials said that Russian shelling injured two women.

Pentagon debuts its new stealth bomber, the B-21 Raider

By TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — America's newest nuclear stealth bomber is making its public debut after years of secret development and as part of the Pentagon's answer to rising concerns over a future conflict with China.

The B-21 Raider is the first new American bomber aircraft in more than 30 years. Almost every aspect of the program is classified. Ahead of its unveiling Friday at an Air Force facility in Palmdale, California, only artists' renderings of the warplane have been released. Those few images reveal that the Raider resembles the black nuclear stealth bomber it will eventually replace, the B-2 Spirit.

The bomber is part of the Pentagon's efforts to modernize all three legs of its nuclear triad, which includes silo-launched nuclear ballistic missiles and submarine-launched warheads, as it shifts from the counterterrorism campaigns of recent decades to meet China's rapid military modernization.

China is on track to have 1,500 nuclear weapons by 2035, and its gains in hypersonics, cyber warfare, space capabilities and other areas present "the most consequential and systemic challenge to U.S. national security and the free and open international system," the Pentagon said this week in its annual China report.

"We needed a new bomber for the 21st Century that would allow us to take on much more complicated threats, like the threats that we fear we would one day face from China, Russia," said Deborah Lee James, the Air Force secretary when the Raider contract was announced in 2015. "The B-21 is more survivable and can take on these much more difficult threats."

While the Raider may resemble the B-2, once you get inside, the similarities stop, said Kathy Warden, chief executive of Northrop Grumman Corp., which is building the Raider.

"The way it operates internally is extremely advanced compared to the B-2, because the technology has evolved so much in terms of the computing capability that we can now embed in the software of the B-21," Warden said.

Other changes likely include advanced materials used in coatings to make the bomber harder to detect, new ways to control electronic emissions, so the bomber could spoof adversary radars and disguise itself as another object, and use of new propulsion technologies, several defense analysts said.

In a fact sheet, Northrop Grumman, based in Falls Church, Virginia, said it is using "new manufacturing

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 27 of 62

techniques and materials to ensure the B-21 will defeat the anti-access, area-denial systems it will face.”

Warden could not discuss specifics of those technologies but said the bomber will be more stealthy.

“When we talk about low observability, it is incredibly low observability,” Warden said. “You’ll hear it, but you really won’t see it.”

Six B-21 Raiders are in production; The Air Force plans to build 100 that can deploy either nuclear weapons or conventional bombs and can be used with or without a human crew. Both the Air Force and Northrop also point to the Raider’s relatively quick development: The bomber went from contract award to debut in seven years. Other new fighter and ship programs have taken decades.

The cost of the bombers is unknown. The Air Force previously put the price for a buy of 100 aircraft at an average cost of \$550 million each in 2010 dollars -- roughly \$753 million today — but it’s unclear how much the Air Force is actually spending.

The fact that the price is not public troubles government watchdogs.

“It might be a big challenge for us to do our normal analysis of a major program like this,” said Dan Grazier, a senior defense policy fellow at the Project on Government Oversight. “It’s easy to say that the B-21 is still on schedule before it actually flies. Because it’s only when one of these programs goes into the actual testing phase when real problems are discovered. And so that’s the point when schedules really start to slip and costs really start to rise.”

The Raider will not make its first flight until 2023. However, using advanced computing, Warden said, Northrop Grumman has been testing the Raider’s performance using a digital twin, a virtual replica of the one being unveiled.

The B-2 was also envisioned to be a fleet of more than 100 aircraft, but the Air Force ultimately built only 21 of them, due to cost overruns and a changed security environment after the Soviet Union fell.

Fewer than that are ready to fly on any given day due to the significant maintenance needs of the aging bomber, said Todd Harrison, an aerospace specialist and managing director at Metrea Strategic Insights.

The B-21 Raider, which takes its name from the 1942 Doolittle Raid over Tokyo, will be slightly smaller than the B-2 to increase its range, Warden said.

In October 2001, B-2 pilots set a record when they flew 44 hours straight to drop the first bombs in Afghanistan after the Sept. 11 attacks. But the B-2 often does long round-trip missions, because there are few hangars globally that can accommodate its wingspan. That limits where B-2s can land for needed post-flight maintenance. And the hangars needed to be air-conditioned — because the Spirit’s windows don’t open, hotter climates can cook cockpit electronics.

The new Raider will also get new hangars, to accommodate the size and complexity of the bomber, Warden said.

A last noticeable difference is in the debut itself. While both will have debuted in the Air Force’s Palmdale Plant 42, in 1989 the B-2 was rolled outdoors amid much public fanfare.

Given advances in surveillance satellites and cameras, the Raider will debut very much under wraps and will be viewed inside a hangar. Invited guests including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will witness the hangar doors open to reveal the bomber for its public introduction, then the doors will close again.

“The magic of the platform,” Warden said, “is what you don’t see.”

Elton John to play Glastonbury as epic tour draws to close

LONDON (AP) — Elton John is scheduled to perform at the Glastonbury Festival in June, in what organizers say will be his farewell show in Britain.

The festival announced Friday that the star will play the 2023 festival’s final night on June 25.

The festival tweeted: “We are incredibly excited to announce that the one and only @EltonOfficial will headline the Pyramid Stage on Sunday night at Glastonbury 2023, for what will be the final U.K. show of his last ever tour.”

Glastonbury draws upwards of 200,000 people to Worthy Farm in southwest England to see dozens of the world’s biggest stars. Last year’s lineup included Billie Eilish, Ziggy Marley, Foals, Kendrick Lamar, Olivia

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 28 of 62

Rodrigo and Paul McCartney — at 80 the festival's oldest-ever headliner.

John will be 76 when he plays Glastonbury.

John ended the North American leg of his Farewell Yellow Brick Road tour last month with a show at L.A.'s Dodger Stadium — the site of two career-highlight gigs in 1975 — that featured guests including Dua Lipa, Kiki Dee and Brandi Carlile.

The valedictory tour began in September 2018 in Pennsylvania with the first of 300-plus dates scheduled worldwide. It was suspended in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic and resumed in 2021 in New Orleans.

The final leg of the tour will include dates in Australia, New Zealand and Europe next year. It is set to conclude in Stockholm, Sweden in July.

Arizona county certifies election after judge's order

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — A rural Arizona county certified its midterm election results on Thursday, following the orders of a judge who ruled that Republican supervisors broke the law when they refused to sign off on the vote count by this week's deadline.

Two Republicans on Cochise County's three-member board of supervisors balked for weeks about certifying the election, even as the deadline passed on Monday. They did not cite any problems with the election results. Rather, they say they weren't satisfied that the machines used to tabulate ballots were properly certified for use in elections, though state and federal election officials have said they were.

Secretary of State Katie Hobbs filed suit Monday, as did a local voter and a group of retirees, asking a judge to force the supervisors to certify the election, a process formally known as a canvass. Hobbs said she is required to hold the statewide certification on Dec. 5 and by law can delay it only until Dec. 8.

At the end of a hearing Thursday, Judge Casey McGinley ordered the supervisors to convene within 90 minutes and to approve the election canvass by the end of the day.

"I am not ashamed of anything I did," said Supervisor Peggy Judd, one of the two Republicans who twice blocked certification. "And today I feel I must, because of a court ruling and because of my own health and situations that are going on in our life, I feel like I must follow what the judge did today."

The board's other Republican, Tom Crosby, skipped the meeting.

Two hours earlier, Supervisor Ann English, the board's lone Democrat, urged the judge to order the board to immediately certify the election and not wait another day. She said Crosby is trying to stage a "smackdown between the secretary of state and the election deniers" at a meeting scheduled for Friday.

"I think it's a circus that doesn't need to have to happen," English said. "So I've had enough. I think the public's had enough. So I'm asking for a swift resolution of this if that's possible."

The vote allows the statewide certification to go forward as scheduled on Monday.

Hobbs, a Democrat who was elected governor in November's election, had warned that she may have to certify statewide results without numbers from Cochise County if they aren't received in time, an outcome that could have tipped the balance of several close races. The county's 47,000 votes went overwhelmingly to Republicans.

The board members represented themselves in court after struggling to find someone willing to take the cases. The elected county attorney, who normally represents the board in legal disputes, refused to handle the cases, saying the supervisors acted illegally. The board voted hours before the hearing to hire a Phoenix-area attorney, but he was not able to get up to speed before the hearing and did not inform the court he was representing the supervisors.

Days before the Nov. 8 election, the Republican supervisors abandoned plans to hand count all ballots, which the court said would be illegal, but demanded last week that the secretary of state prove vote-counting machines were legally certified before they would approve the election results. On Monday, they said they wanted to hear again about those concerns before taking a vote on certification. A meeting is scheduled for that purpose on Friday.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 29 of 62

There are two companies that are accredited by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission to conduct testing and certification of voting equipment, such as the electronic tabulators used in Arizona to read and count ballots.

Conspiracy theories surrounding this process surfaced in early 2021, focused on what appeared to be an outdated accreditation certificate for one of the companies that was posted online. Federal officials investigated and reported that an administrative error had resulted in the agency failing to reissue an updated certificate as the company remained in good standing and underwent audits in 2018 and in early 2021.

Officials also noted federal law dictates the only way a testing company can lose certification is for the commission to revoke it, which did not occur.

Meanwhile, a federal judge in Phoenix sanctioned lawyers who represented Kari Lake and Mark Finchem, the defeated Republican candidates for governor and secretary of state, respectively, in a lawsuit seeking to require hand counting of all ballots.

Judge John Tuchi, a Barack Obama appointee, agreed with lawyers for Maricopa County, who argued the lawsuit was based on frivolous information, and ordered the lawyers to pay the county's legal fees.

The lawyers "made false, misleading, and unsupported factual assertions" in their lawsuit, Tuchi wrote. He said the court will not condone lawyers "furthering false narratives that baselessly undermine public trust" in the democratic process.

The lawyers for Lake and Finchem, including well-known Harvard Law School professor Alan Dershowitz, did not respond to a request for comment from The Associated Press. They told the court that their claims were "legally sound and supported by strong evidence."

Hungarian filling stations running out of price-capped fuel

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

MARTONVASAR, Hungary (AP) — Drivers in Hungary are increasingly running into gas and diesel shortages at filling stations as a government-imposed price cap squeezes the operators of independent stations and leaves the state energy company struggling to keep up with demand.

At hundreds of fuel stations across Hungary, a confusing mosaic of paper signs hang from the pumps to let customers know what is available — or not — and at what price and quantity.

A sign at one station in Martonvasar, a town 20 miles southwest of Budapest, Hungary's capital, informs motorists they may only purchase two liters (a 1/2 gallon) of fuel at a reduced price set by the government more than a year ago. The quantity limit, the station's owner said, is the result of state energy company MOL failing to make any fuel deliveries to his business and many others like it for the past three weeks.

"They reduced the supply to exactly zero, so fuel with a regulated price completely disappeared from the market for these stations," said Laszlo Gepesz, who owns the small station and is co-chair of Hungary's Association of Independent Filling Stations.

The cap on fuel prices that Hungary's populist government imposed in November 2021 set the maximum price for gasoline and diesel at 480 forints (\$1.22) per liter.

As market prices kept rising, especially following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February, Hungary's fuel imports plummeted; foreign suppliers found the country a less attractive place to sell given the mandated discount prices.

That left only the state energy company to produce diesel and gas for selling at the reduced rate, but it has strained to supply the cheaper fuel for the entire country.

MOL says its refinery in the central Hungary town of Szazhalombatta is only operating at around 50% capacity due to technical difficulties. Interruptions to Hungary's oil supply through the Druzhba, or Friendship pipeline, which delivers crude to Hungary from Russia via Ukraine, have also contributed to lagging supplies.

MOL did not respond to a request for comment.

During the more than a year the price cap has been in place, consumption has soared, said Gepesz, the Martonvasar station owner, exacerbating supply problems which have affected as many as 500 stations

across Hungary.

"Things that are cheap run out more easily, so people are buying fuel like there's no tomorrow," he said. "The country's total consumption (of fuel) is around 20 to 25% higher than it was last year, an amount that not even MOL is capable of supplying."

Speaking at a Wednesday news conference, Prime Minister Viktor Orban's chief of staff, Gergely Gulyas, said the price cap — set to expire on Dec. 31 after being extended several times — could only remain in place as long as MOL is able to keep up with demand.

"If it can't, and if (fuel) has to be imported, then obviously the import price is much more expensive. So the question is for how long we can supply the country with gasoline and diesel," Gulyas said.

Hungary is highly dependent on Russian oil and gas. Its government has campaigned vigorously against European Union sanctions against Moscow— especially those that would affect the import of fossil fuel products — and blamed them for rising energy prices and soaring inflation.

Marika Vastag, 73, a farmer in the village of Pusztaszabolcs, filled up a 10-liter jerrycan with gas on Wednesday, paying the market price since discounted fuel had not been delivered to the station in more than two weeks.

She echoed Orban's claims that EU sanctions against Russia were primarily responsible for the increase in energy prices, and blamed the bloc for pressuring Hungary to wean itself off Russian fossil fuels.

"Things would be better if the (European) Union would quit giving us a hard time and stop demanding that we get off of Russian energy because, unfortunately, we are dependent on them for fuel and oil," Vastag said. "Unfortunately, we aren't independent, we don't have everything (we need.) So we have to stick with those that help."

Ukrainian engineers scramble to keep mobile phones working

By VASILISA STEPANENKO and JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — With Ukraine scrambling to keep communication lines open during the war, an army of engineers from the country's phone companies has mobilized to help the public and policymakers stay in touch during repeated Russian missile and drone strikes.

The engineers, who typically go unseen and unsung in peacetime, often work around the clock to maintain or restore phone service, sometimes braving minefields to do so. After Russian strikes took out the electricity that cellphone towers usually run on, they revved up generators to keep the towers on.

"I know our guys — my colleagues — are very exhausted, but they're motivated by the fact that we are doing an important thing," Yuriy Dugnist, an engineer with Ukrainian telecommunications company Kyivstar, said after crunching through a half-foot (15 centimeters) of fresh snow to reach a fenced-in mobile phone tower on the western fringe of Kyiv, the capital.

Dugrist and his co-workers offered a glimpse of their new daily routines, which involve using an app on their own phones to monitor which of the scores of phone towers in the capital area were receiving electricity, either during breaks from the controlled blackouts being used to conserve energy or from the generators that kick in to provide backup power.

One entry ominously read, in English, "Low Fuel."

Stopping off at a service station before their rounds, the team members filled up eight 20-liter (5.3 gallon) jerrycans with diesel fuel for a vast tank under a generator that relays power up a 50-meter (160-foot) cell tower in a suburban village that has had no electricity for days.

It's one of many Ukrainian towns that have had intermittent power, or none at all, in the wake of multiple rounds of devastating Russian strikes in recent weeks targeting the country's infrastructure — power plants in particular.

Kyivstar is the largest of Ukraine's three main mobile phone companies, with some 26 million customers — or the equivalent of about two-thirds of the country's population before Russia's Feb. 24 invasion drove millions of people abroad, even if many have since returned.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 31 of 62

The diesel generators were installed at the foot of the cell phone towers since long before the invasion, but they were rarely needed. Many Western countries have offered up similar generators and transformers to help Ukraine keep electricity running as well as possible after Russia's blitz.

After emergency blackouts prompted by a round of Russian strikes on Nov. 23, Kyivstar deployed 15 teams of engineers simultaneously and called in "all our reserves" to troubleshoot the 2,500 mobile stations in their service area, Dugrist said.

He recalled rushing to the site of a destroyed cell tower when Russian forces pulled out of Irpin, a suburb northwest of Kyiv, earlier this year and getting there before Ukrainian minesweepers had arrived to give the all-clear signal.

The strain the war is putting on Ukraine's mobile phone networks has reportedly driven up prices for satellite phone alternatives like Elon Musk's Starlink system, which Ukraine's military has used during the conflict, now in its 10th month.

After widespread infrastructure strikes last week, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy convened top officials to discuss the restoration work and supplies needed to safeguard the country's energy and communication systems.

"Special attention is paid to the communication system," he said, adding that no matter what the Russia has in mind, "we must maintain communication."

For many Hawaiians, lava flows are a time to honor, reflect

By JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — When Willette Kalaokahaku Akima-Akau looks out at the the lava flowing from Mauna Loa volcano and makes an offering of gin, tobacco and coins, she will be taking part in a tradition passed down from her grandfather and other Native Hawaiians as a way to honor both the natural and spiritual worlds.

Akima-Akau said she plans to take her grandchildren with her and together they will make their offerings and chant to Pele, the Hawaiian deity of volcanoes and fire, who her grandfather used to pay reverence to as a kupuna, a word that can mean ancestor.

"This is the time for our kupuna, for our people, and for our children to come and witness what is happening as history is being made every day," she said, adding that today's experiences will be added to the next generation's stories, songs, dances and chants.

For many Native Hawaiians, an eruption of a volcano like Mauna Loa has a deep yet very personal cultural significance. For many it can be an opportunity to feel a connection with creation itself through the way lava gives birth to new land, as well as a time to reflect on their own place in the world and the people who came before them.

"A volcanic eruption is a physical manifestation of so many natural and spiritual forces for Hawaiians," said Ilihia Gionson, a Hawaii Tourism Authority spokesperson who is Native Hawaiian and lives on the Big Island. "People who are unfamiliar with that should understand that it's a very personal, very significant thing."

To be sure, not all Native Hawaiians will feel the need to make a trek to see the lava, but among those who do, some may chant, some may pray to ancestors and some may honor the moment with hula, or dance.

"Some people may be moved to just kind of observe in silence, meditate, you know, commune with their higher power or their kupuna in their own ways," Gionson said.

Kainani Kahaunaele said as a Native Hawaiian, she feels moved to honor the moment and will take her children, nieces, nephews and close friends as close to the lava flow as possible. There they will chant to Pele.

"Our hookupu will be our voice," she said, using the Hawaiian word for offering. "It's not for any kind of show. It's a connection that we're making to Pele, to the land, to Mauna Loa."

Many Hawaiians are practicing family traditions that have been passed down from elders.

Akima-Akau, who lives in Kawaihae on the west side of the Big Island, remembers hearing stories about

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 32 of 62

how her grandfather would fly from Maui or Oahu whenever there was a Big Island lava flow to honor Pele.

"He would jump on a plane and come to Hawaii Island to give his hookupu," offerings of gin, silver dollars and tobacco, she said.

Her grandfather died before she was born, so she doesn't know exactly why he chose those items, but he wasn't alone. She said she grew up knowing others who offered the same items, so that is what her family will bring. She said the children will offer Pele a ti leaf lei.

Hawaiians have different relationships with the spirituality of lava, said Native Hawaiian cultural practitioner Kealoha Pisciotta. To Pisciotta, the lava "brings good mana" — which can mean supernatural or divine power — "and cleanses where it needs cleansing."

There are also different relationships and connections to Pele, who some refer to as a god or goddess. Pele has great significance in Hawaiian culture, representing all the phenomena related to volcanoes — the magma, steam, ash, acid rain.

"Her primary form is the lava, not necessarily that she is a female, human person. But the image of her function is creation, which happens to be a very feminine image," said Kekuhi Keali'ikanaka'ole, a cultural practitioner in Hilo.

Pisciotta calls her "Tutu Pele," using the word for grandparent, because deities "are more ancient than we are."

Manua Loa's spectacular show is drawing thousands of people seeking nighttime views of the lava flowing down the mountain's northeast flank, clogging the main east-west road on the island. Among them are those coming to pay their respects, leaving altars or shrines along the roadway.

Cultural practitioners like Pisciotta want lava gawkers to be mindful of those who are chanting, praying or gathering in ceremonies amid the eruption: "Give them some space and respect."

"If a person doing something wants to invite somebody to participate or watch, there will be an invitation," said Gionson, the tourism official. "And if not, respect that and keep a respectful distance."

So far, the tourism authority hasn't received any complaints about people getting in the way of cultural practices, he said, adding that the agency focuses on educating tourists in general about being respectful and behaving appropriately when visiting the islands.

Kahaunaele, who teaches Hawaiian language and music at the University of Hawaii's Hilo campus and planned to gather with her family on Thursday night, knows that visitors to the island might be curious when they see and hear her family chanting.

"Don't film us. Don't even ask for permission, just don't," she said. "That even goes for locals. Don't infringe upon anybody else's moment."

AP sources: Biden tells Dems he wants SC as 1st voting state

By ZEKE MILLER, MEG KINNARD and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden said Thursday that Democrats should give up "restrictive" caucuses and prioritize diversity at the start of their presidential primary calendar — dealing a major blow to Iowa's decadeslong status as the state that leads off the process.

In a letter to the rule-making arm of the Democratic National Committee, Biden did not mention specific states he'd like to see go first. But he has told Democrats he wants South Carolina moved to the first position, according to three people familiar with his recommendation who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations.

The president's direction comes as the DNC rules committee gathers in Washington on Friday to vote on shaking up the presidential primary calendar starting in 2024. Members now expect to approve new rules putting South Carolina first, followed by New Hampshire and Nevada on the same day a week later.

Georgia and Michigan would move into the top five as new early states, and each would hold primaries in subsequent weeks, committee members say. The two battlegrounds were critical to Biden's 2020 victory over then-President Donald Trump, who had won both states in his 2016 White House campaign.

Much of the rest of the country would vote as part of Super Tuesday soon afterward.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 33 of 62

Such changes are set to come after years of calls from many top Democrats for the voting calendar to better reflect the party's deeply diverse base than mostly white Iowa, which holds the country's first caucus, and New Hampshire, which holds the first primary. The new calendar would still have to be approved by the full DNC in a vote likely to come early next year, but the DNC will almost certainly heed the rule-making panel's recommendations.

The proposed order of the early states was first reported by The Washington Post.

"For decades, Black voters in particular have been the backbone of the Democratic Party but have been pushed to the back of the early primary process," Biden wrote in a letter on personal stationery that did not carry the White House seal. "We rely on these voters in elections but have not recognized their importance in our nominating calendar. It is time to stop taking these voters for granted, and time to give them a louder and earlier voice in the process."

He said caucuses were "restrictive and anti-worker" because they require voters "to spend significant amounts of time" on one night gathering to choose candidates in person, "disadvantaging hourly workers and anyone who does not have the flexibility to go to a set location at a set time."

The changes could be implemented as soon as 2024 but would be rendered largely meaningless until 2028 if Biden opts to seek a second term. The president has said for months that he intends to run again, and White House aides and Biden allies have begun staffing and structural discussions for his likely 2024 bid while refraining from overt steps while the president weighs a final decision.

Such a shakeup would nonetheless be seismic given that Iowa's caucus has led off the Democratic voting calendar since 1976. Still, it would come two years after a series of technical glitches so marred party results that they prevented The Associated Press from declaring a 2020 Iowa Democratic caucus winner.

On the current Democratic calendar, Iowa has been followed by New Hampshire, which has held the nation's first primary since 1920. Nevada and South Carolina have gone next since the 2008 presidential election, when Democrats last did a major primary calendar overhaul.

The Republican National Committee, meanwhile, has already decided to keep Iowa's caucus as the first contest in its 2024 presidential calendar, ensuring that GOP White House hopefuls — which include Trump — will continue campaigning there frequently.

South Carolina holds special relevance to Biden. His victory in the state's first-in-the-South primary in 2020 kickstarted his presidential campaign after poor finishes in Iowa and New Hampshire on his way to winning the Democratic nomination.

Dick Harpootlian, a longtime Biden ally, fundraiser and former South Carolina Democratic Party chair, said Thursday that he and Biden discussed South Carolina's possible advancement the night of Biden's 2020 primary victory there. Harpootlian said he'd impressed upon Biden that the state was a better place than Iowa to hold an even earlier presidential voting contest — to which Harpootlian said Biden was receptive.

"I think he agreed that this was a much more dynamic process," Harpootlian said. "Iowa was just a nightmare."

The DNC rules committee has been discussing reordering the early calendar for months, touching off a fierce battle among many states to go first. In a joint statement Thursday night, Michigan Democratic Party Chair Lavora Barnes and U.S. Rep. Debbie Dingell said, "We have always said that any road to the White House goes through the heartland and President Biden understands that."

But Biden's wishes sparked anger in New Hampshire, where state law calls for holding the nation's first primary and where officials had for months threatened to simply move up their election regardless of what new rules the DNC approves. Other states have previously tried to violate party rules and jump closer to the front, only to be threatened with having their delegates not count toward their chosen candidate clinching the party's nomination.

New Hampshire Democratic Sen. Jeanne Shaheen issued a statement blasting "the White House's short-sighted decision," while fellow New Hampshire Democratic Sen. Maggie Hassan said, "I strongly oppose the President's deeply misguided proposal.

"But make no mistake," Hassan said in a statement. "New Hampshire's law is clear and our primary will

continue to be first in the nation.”

Bidens entertain more than 330 guests at 1st state dinner

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE and FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The first White House state dinner of President Joe Biden’s administration drew big names Thursday from fashion, entertainment, politics and business who turned out to help celebrate French President Emmanuel Macron and the return of large social events after the pandemic.

There were kisses all around as the Bidens stepped out on the North Portico to welcome the Macrons — Jill Biden in an off-the-shoulder navy Oscar de la Renta gown, Brigitte Macron in a high-necked ivory one by Louis Vuitton.

Jill Biden’s open invitation as the foursome headed inside: “Enjoy the evening.”

Other guests trickled in via a side entrance, seeming keen to do just that. First to arrive: Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards, followed not long after by Gov. John Carney, from Biden’s home state of Delaware.

Julia Louis-Dreyfus whizzed by the press, pausing only to say that, yes, she’d been to a state dinner before and it was all “very exciting.” Late-night TV host Stephen Colbert said nothing as guests passed through a White House decorated for the holidays and boarded trolleys for the ride down the South Lawn to a heated party tent.

Shoe designer Christian Louboutin — wearing a crystal bolo tie — said “I have no idea” when asked how many women might be wearing his red-soled shoes for the night, and wouldn’t hazard a guess. Vogue editor Anna Wintour also was among the 338 names on the guest list.

Biden family made the cut too: Adult children, Hunter and Ashley, and sister Valerie Biden.

Others attending: “Good Morning America” anchor Robin Roberts, actor Jennifer Garner, singer John Legend and his wife, Chrissy Teigen, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Ada Limon, poet laureate of the United States. Garner was among those wearing velvet, a popular choice on a night when temperatures dipped into the 30s.

Outgoing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., was there, as was House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy of California, who hopes to succeed Pelosi. She got a seat at the head table with the Bidens and Macrons; McCarthy did not.

Asked how he felt about attending a dinner with Hunter Biden, whom Republicans are keen to investigate when they take control of the House in January, McCarthy said, “I’m at dinner with my mom and I’m going to have a great time.”

Other lawmakers were excited to introduce family members who accompanied them. Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester, D-Del., who wore a royal blue one-shoulder gown and elbow-length black gloves, brought her niece, Hannah Carter, who told her aunt the affair “feels like Bridgerton,” referring to the Netflix romance series.

Before dinner, which ran late, Biden offered a toast “to the history that binds us and the values that still unite us, and the future we’re going to forge together. Vive la France and God Bless America.”

“I do hope you had a great dinner,” Macron joked as he opened his reciprocal toast to “Dear Joe.” Guests, many of them presumed to be hungry, laughed.

“This evening we are not just honored and moved, but we feel the importance of this moment,” Macron said. “It means a lot for all of us, because this is our history.”

Former Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms stopped to talk shop before Tuesday’s runoff Senate election in Georgia, where Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock is seeking reelection. “I think it’s going to be a great night for Georgia on Tuesday ... just gotta make sure people continue to turn out.”

With the tent ready and the tables set for the big dinner, hostess Jill Biden earlier Thursday took her French counterpart to a language museum to highlight their mutual interest in learning and their growing friendship.

“We are friends,” Brigitte Macron said as she and Biden clasped hands at Planet Word. “We are friends,” Biden repeated.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 35 of 62

The declaration of friendship fit the occasion. A state dinner is a high diplomatic honor, one the United States bestows only on its closest allies — like France, one of America's oldest.

Guests began trickling in to the White House as the sun set, dressed to impress and looking forward to saying they played a small part in history -- the first state dinner hosted by the Bidens.

Plenty of business luminaries attended, including French luxury goods magnate Bernard Arnault, movie mogul and investor Jeffrey Katzenberg, private equity legend Henry Kravis and IBM CEO Arvind Krishna.

The guest list also had a heavy presence of big Democratic donors who helped the party make a better-than-expected showing in the midterm elections. Among them, Katzenberg, a big Hollywood money man; Avram Glazer, who in recent years has given hundreds of thousands of dollars to Democratic causes; and Alexander Soros, the son of George Soros and deputy chair of Soros' Open Society.

Butter-poached Maine lobster, beef with shallot marmalade and American cheeses were on the menu for the red-white-and-blue themed dinner. Dessert was orange chiffon cake with roasted pears and crème fraîche ice cream. American sparkling wine will be served for the toasts.

Guests dined on rented tableware because place settings from the White House china collection are not allowed to be removed from the executive mansion. They were seated at a mix of square and rectangular tables with dark blue silk cloths, red candles and arrangements of red, white and blue flowers, including white irises, the official flower of France.

Jon Batiste, a Grammy Award-winning New Orleans native and the former bandleader and musical director of "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert," provided the after-dinner entertainment.

"It's going to be fire," Batiste promised ahead of his performance.

Before he came on stage, Jill Biden brought out Cris Comerford, the White House executive chef, and Susie Morrison, the White House executive pastry chef, to be recognized for the meal.

The White House had not held a state dinner since September 2019, largely because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which put a damper on gatherings of large numbers of people.

But entertaining is back at the White House.

Thursday's dinner followed last month's wedding of Biden's granddaughter on the South Lawn with 250 guests. And tens of thousands of people will stream through the White House this month, including tourists and others invited to nearly a month's worth of holiday receptions.

Lagoon dries up as drought grips Peru's southern Andes

By FRANKLIN BRICEÑO Associated Press

CCONCHACCOTA, Peru (AP) — From her home under the baking sun of Peru's southern Andes, Vilma Huamaní can see the small Cconchaccota lagoon, the axis of her community's life. It has been a source of trout, fun for children eager to swim, beauty as flamingos flew from over the mountains and water for thirsty sheep.

Nowadays, all Huamaní sees of the lagoon 4,100 meters (13,120 feet) above sea level is a plain of cracked and broken soil surrounded by yellow grass.

"It has totally dried up," she said.

The rainy season in this part of South America should have started in September, but the area is experiencing its driest period in almost a half century, affecting more than 3,000 communities in the central and southern Andes of Peru.

A light rain last week — only the second in almost eight months — prompted residents to set bowls outdoors to collect some water. The drops lifted dust as they hit the ground, and by the next morning, the sun had evaporated the scant moisture.

Dead sheep and lambs so weak they can barely stand can be found among sparse yellow grass. The planting of potatoes, which is the only crop that grows in Huamaní's village, has been delayed, leading many to expect food shortages in the coming months because people are already feeding themselves from their dehydrated potato reserves.

"Every day, I ask — I hope — the rain falls ... when there is rain the grasses grow, the potatoes (grow),"

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 36 of 62

said Huamání, 38, who moved with her four children from Peru's capital, Lima, to Cconchaccota in 2020 in an effort to flee the coronavirus pandemic.

The absence of rain in part of the Andes occurs as a result of the La Niña phenomenon, present in 2022 for the third consecutive year, according to the United Nations' meteorological agency. The drought is also hitting parts of Bolivia, Paraguay and Argentina.

Yuri Escajadillo, a climatologist with Peru's National Meteorology and Hydrology Service, said an index used to measure droughts qualified the region as "extremely dry."

"It is a record value," Escajadillo said.

In Cconchaccota, there is no drinking water, sewage or telephone service. People drink water they get from a nearby spring, though it sometimes dries up, too.

Residents say their appeals to local authorities for help went unanswered for more than two months.

So, Grisaldo Challanca, a young farmer, used his cellphone to record videos and prepare a report about the drought. He posted it on a Facebook page after he climbed to about 4,500 meters above sea level to get an internet connection.

The long-delayed response from the regional authorities arrived last week with the delivery of packages of fodder oats for the surviving sheep, cattle, alpacas and llamas.

"The animals are all bone," said John Franklin Challanca, a 12-year-old shepherd, whose family has lost 50 sheep.

The Andes is one of the world's most sensitive regions to climate migrations because of droughts, tropical storms and hurricanes, heavy rains and floods, according to the latest report by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

"Global warming has caused glacier loss in the Andes from 30% to more than 50% of their area since the 1980s. Glacier retreat, temperature increase and precipitation variability, together with land use changes, have affected ecosystems, water resources and livelihoods through landslides and flood disasters," the report says, adding that summer rainfall appears to be decreasing in the southern Andes.

Small farmers in various parts of the Andes in Peru and Bolivia are praying for rain. Prayers are held on the shores of Lake Titicaca, which is shared by both countries, and on mountains that Indigenous communities consider gods.

In the only evangelical church in Cconchaccota, Rossy Challanca said the drought was a punishment "for the sins of man" and a clear sign that the end of the world is soon to come.

But for climate experts, the lagoon could have dried up because it was less than a meter (3 feet) deep, depended exclusively on rainwater and was under strong solar radiation.

Wilson Suárez, professor of mountain hydrology and glaciology at Peru's La Molina National Agrarian University, said those factors constitute "an ideal cocktail" for the small lagoons in the high Andean areas to dry up.

"This has to put them on notice that times are changing," Suárez said of area residents who have long depended on the lagoons for watering their livestock. "A drought is not easy to handle ... the climate is changing."

EU edges closer to \$60-per-barrel Russian oil price cap

By RAF CASERT and FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union was edging closer to setting a \$60-per-barrel price cap on Russian oil — a highly anticipated and complex political and economic maneuver designed to keep Russia's supplies flowing into global markets while clamping down on President Vladimir Putin's ability to fund his war in Ukraine.

EU nations sought to push the cap across the finish line after Poland held out to get as low a figure as possible, diplomats said Thursday. "Still waiting for white smoke from Warsaw," said an EU diplomat, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the talks were still ongoing.

The latest offer, confirmed by 3 EU diplomats, comes ahead of a deadline to set the price for discounted

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 37 of 62

oil by Monday, when a European embargo on seaborne Russian crude and a ban on shipping insurance for those supplies take effect. The diplomats also spoke on condition of anonymity because the legal process was still not completed.

The \$60 figure would mean a cap near the current price of Russia's crude, which fell this week below \$60 per barrel, and is meant to prevent a sudden loss of Russian oil to the world following the new Western sanctions. It is a big discount to international benchmark Brent, which traded at about \$87 per barrel Thursday, but could be high enough for Moscow to keep selling even while rejecting the idea of a cap.

When the final number is in place, a new buyer's cartel — which is expected to be made up of formal and informal members — will be born. Western allies in the Group of Seven industrial powers led the price cap effort and still need to approve the figure.

One coalition official, who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity, expressed optimism that an agreement could be reached as early as Friday, but cautioned the negotiations would potentially roll into the weekend or perhaps even Monday.

The official added that putting the price cap in place will help end the war faster. On the flipside, the official said failure to put it in place would be "a win for Russia."

Oil is the Kremlin's main pillar of financial revenue and has kept the Russian economy afloat so far despite export bans, sanctions and the freezing of central bank assets that began with the February invasion. Russia exports roughly 5 million barrels of oil per day.

The risks of the price cap's failure are immense to the global oil supply. If it fails or Russia retaliates by stopping the export of oil, energy prices worldwide could skyrocket. Putin has said he would not sell oil under a price cap and would retaliate against nations that implement the measure.

U.S. and European consumers could feel the ramifications in more spikes to gasoline prices, and people in developing countries could face greater levels of food insecurity.

With the EU and U.K. banning insurance for Russian oil shipments, the price ceiling allows companies to keep insuring tankers headed for non-EU countries as long as the oil is priced at or under the cap. That would avoid a price spike from the loss of supplies from the world's No. 2 oil producer and put a ceiling on Russia's oil income near current levels.

The Treasury Department has released guidance meant to help firms and maritime insurers understand how to abide by the price ceiling, saying the price cap could fluctuate depending on market conditions.

Robin Brooks, chief economist at the Institute of International Finance in Washington, said the cap should have been implemented earlier this year, when oil was hovering around \$120 per barrel.

"Since then, obviously oil prices have fallen and global recession is a real thing," he said. "The reality is that it is unlikely to be binding given where oil prices are now."

Critics of the price cap measure, including former Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, have called the plan "ridiculous."

Mnuchin told CNBC during a panel in November at the Milken Institute's Middle East and Africa Summit that the price cap was "not only not feasible, I think it's the most ridiculous idea I've ever heard."

Rachel Ziemba, an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, said that while a worst-case scenario envisions Russia cutting off the global supply of its oil, "the Saudis and Emiratis would boost production."

"Russia has made it clear the countries that abide by the cap won't receive their oil and that could result in cuts to natural gas exports as well," she said. "This will be an interesting few weeks and few months."

High court to rule on Biden student loan cancellation plan

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court agreed Thursday to decide whether the Biden administration can broadly cancel student loans, keeping the program blocked for now but signaling a final answer by early summer.

That's about two months before the newly extended pause on loan repayments is set to expire.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 38 of 62

The administration had wanted a court order that would have allowed the program to take effect even as court challenges proceed. The justices didn't do that, but agreed to the administration's fallback, setting arguments for late February or early March over whether the program is legal.

President Joe Biden's plan promises \$10,000 in federal student debt forgiveness to those with incomes of less than \$125,000, or households earning less than \$250,000. Pell Grant recipients, who typically demonstrate more financial need, are eligible for an additional \$10,000 in relief.

The Congressional Budget Office has said the program will cost about \$400 billion over the next three decades.

More than 26 million people already applied for the relief, with 16 million approved, but the Education Department stopped processing applications last month after a federal judge in Texas struck down the plan.

The administration said it was pleased the nation's highest court had intervened, and Biden said on Twitter that the White House will keep fighting for the loan plan.

"Republican officials are throwing up roadblocks in order to prevent middle-class families from getting the student debt relief they need," he said in a tweet.

The Texas case is one of two in which federal judges have forbidden the administration from implementing the loan cancellations.

In a separate lawsuit filed by six states, a three-judge panel of the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in St. Louis also put the plan on hold, and that case is before the Supreme Court.

The moratorium had been slated to expire Jan. 1, a date that Biden set before his debt cancellation plan stalled in the face of legal challenges from conservative opponents.

The new expiration date is 60 days after the legal issue has been settled, but no later than the end of August.

Conservative attorneys, Republican lawmakers and business-oriented groups have asserted that Biden overstepped his authority in taking such sweeping action without the assent of Congress. They called it an unfair government giveaway for relatively affluent people at the expense of taxpayers who didn't pursue higher education.

Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt, a Republican, said in a statement following the high court order that the Biden plan "would saddle Americans who didn't take out loans or already paid theirs off with even more economic woes." Missouri is one of the six states that sued to block the plan, along with Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska and South Carolina.

The administration has argued that the loan cancellations are legal under a 2003 law aimed at providing help to members of the military. The program is a response to "a devastating pandemic with student loan relief designed to protect vulnerable borrowers from delinquency and default," the Justice Department said in court papers.

The law, the HEROES Act, allows the secretary of education to "waive or modify any statutory or regulatory provision applicable to the student financial assistance programs ... as the Secretary deems necessary in connection with a war or other military operation or national emergency."

In putting the program on hold, the 8th Circuit panel said there was little harm to borrowers because repayments have been suspended. Allowing the cancellations to proceed before a definitive court ruling would have had an "irreversible impact," the appeals court said.

U.S. District Judge Mark Pittman, an appointee of former President Donald Trump, issued a more sweeping ruling in the Texas case, finding that such a costly program required clear congressional authorization.

The justices also will confront an important procedural question, whether anyone who has sued faces any legal or financial harm.

The 8th Circuit judges, two Trump appointees and one judge selected by former President George W. Bush, determined there might be financial costs to the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority, and said that was enough.

In the Texas case, Pittman wrote that plaintiffs Myra Brown and Alexander Taylor could file their lawsuit, though neither faces financial harm. Brown is ineligible for debt relief because her loans are commercially held, and Taylor is eligible for just \$10,000 and not the full \$20,000 because he didn't receive a Pell grant.

But Pittman said it was enough that the government did not take public comments on the program, meaning neither person had a chance to provide input on a program they would be at least partially excluded from.

Hawaii eruption brings tourism boon during slow season

By ANDREW SELSKY, AUDREY McAVOY and HAVEN DALEY Associated Press

HILO, Hawaii (AP) — The spectacle of incandescent lava spewing from Hawaii's Mauna Loa has drawn thousands of visitors and is turning into a tourism boon for this Big Island town near the world's largest volcano.

Some hotels in and around Hilo are becoming fully booked in what is normally a slower time of the year for business. Helicopter tours of Mauna Loa, which began erupting Sunday after being quiet for 38 years, are also in high demand by tourists and journalists.

"Right now, it's boomed," said Marian Somalinog, who staffs the front desk at the Castle Hilo Hawaiian Hotel. "We're sold out until after Christmas."

She attributed the increase to people wanting to watch the rivers of bright orange molten rock gush from Mauna Loa, a shield volcano whose name means "Long Mountain" in Hawaiian. The glow from the eruption can be seen in the distance from parts of the hotel.

This time of year is normally a slow season for Hawaii's travel industry, falling between the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.

But this week thousands of cars have created traffic jams on Route 200, known as the Saddle Road, which connects the cities of Hilo on the east side of Hawaii Island and Kailua-Kona on the west side.

Volcanic flows pose a potential future threat to that main artery but are currently still several miles (kilometers) away and not a danger to any communities. That means onlookers can take in the spectacle while exposing themselves to little danger. Tourists and locals are in the crowds, many snapping photos and taking selfies.

Somalinog hasn't bothered to join them, however.

"The traffic is crazy," she said. "It's not worth it."

Brett Steen flew from Oahu to the island of Hawaii with his parents, who are visiting from Florida, on a trip booked months ago. The volcano began erupting right before their arrival on the Big Island.

"It's a bonus part of our trip," Steen said. "We're super excited to get out here."

At Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, spokeswoman Jessica Ferracane said many visitors know about Mauna Loa but aren't aware that Kilauea, a smaller volcano, is also erupting — and that they can see both from multiple spots near the latter's caldera.

"That hasn't happened since 1984. It's a really special time to be here," Ferracane said.

The number of visitors to the park hasn't increased since Mauna Loa's eruption began late Sunday, but she expects it to rise late next week in line with normal seasonal patterns.

Saddle Road, which is outside the park, might not remain a prime viewing spot for long. The red-hot lava is creeping toward it.

Ken Hon, scientist in charge at the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory, said the flow has "slowed considerably" and on Thursday was 3.3 miles (5.3 kilometers) south of the highway. At that rate, he said, it would be at least a week before it arrives.

"We don't really know which way the lava flow will ultimately go," Hon said.

A blockage of the road would pose problems, especially for those who use it to commute from Hilo and other parts of the island's east side, where housing is generally more affordable, to jobs on the west side, home to many of the larger beach resorts.

Unless some sort of bypass is constructed, commuters would need to take coastal routes to and from Kailua-Kona, adding at least an hour drive time each way.

Steve Solberg, general manager of Outrigger Kona Resort & Spa in Kailua-Kona, said many guests have headed up Saddle Road to see the eruption. Some people cancelled reservations at the resort because of

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 40 of 62

the volcano, but those were snapped up by others wanting to see the eruption.

"So it's really kind of a wash at this point, but we expect it to be a very positive thing in the next week or so," Solberg said.

He said that if Saddle Road is closed, the dozen or so employees who live in Hilo will be provided rooms at the resort during their five-day workweek so they don't have to make the long commute every day.

Gov. David Ige has issued an emergency proclamation to allow responders to arrive quickly or limit access as needed. If lava does cross the highway, the Hawaii National Guard can help plan for alternatives and try to set up bypass routes, the governor said.

Mauna Loa last erupted in 1984. The current eruption is its 34th since written record keeping began in 1843. Its smaller neighbor, Kilauea, has been erupting since September 2021.

China security forces are well-prepared for quashing dissent

BEIJING (AP) — When it comes to ensuring the security of their regime, China's Communist Party rulers don't skimp.

The extent of that lavish spending was put on display when the boldest street protests in decades broke out in Beijing and other cities, driven by anger over rigid and seemingly unending restrictions to combat COVID-19.

The government has been preparing for such challenges for decades, installing the machinery needed to quash large-scale upheavals.

After an initially muted response, with security personnel using pepper spray and tear gas, police and paramilitary troops flooded city streets with jeeps, vans and armored cars in a massive show of force.

The officers fanned out, checking IDs and searching cellphones for photos, messages or banned apps that might show involvement in or even just sympathy for the protests.

An unknown number of people were detained and it's unclear if any will face charges. Most protesters focused their anger on the "zero-COVID" policy that seeks to eradicate the virus through sweeping lockdowns, travel restrictions and relentless testing. But some called for the party and its leader Xi Jinping to step down, speech the party considers subversive and punishable by years in prison.

While much smaller in scale, the protests were the most significant since the 1989 student-led pro-democracy movement centered on Beijing's Tiananmen Square that the regime still views as its greatest existential crisis. With leaders and protesters at an impasse, the People's Liberation Army crushed the demonstrations with tanks and troops, killing hundreds, possibly thousands.

After the Tiananmen crackdown, the party invested in the means to deal with unrest without resorting immediately to using deadly force.

During a wave of dissent by unemployed workers in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the authorities tested that approach, focusing on preventing organizers in different cities from linking up and arresting the leaders while letting rank-and-file protesters go largely untouched.

At times, they've been caught by surprise. In 1999, members of the Falun Gong meditation sect, whose membership came to rival the party's in size, surrounded the leadership compound in Beijing in a show of defiance that then-leader Jiang Zemin took as a personal affront.

A harsh crackdown followed. Leaders were given heavy prison sentences and members were subject to harassment and sometimes sent to re-education centers.

The government responded with overwhelming force in 2008, when anti-government riots broke out in Tibet's capital Lhasa and unrest swept through Tibetan regions in western China, authorities responded with overwhelming force.

The next year, a police crackdown on protests by members of the Uyghur Muslim minority in the capital of the northwestern Xinjiang region, Urumqi, led to bloody clashes in which at least 197 were killed, mostly Han Chinese civilians.

In both cases, forces fired into crowds, searched door-to-door and seized an unknown number of suspects who were either sentenced to heavy terms or simply not heard from again. Millions of people were

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 41 of 62

interned in camps, placed under surveillance and forbidden from traveling.

China has been able to muster such resources thanks to a massive internal security budget that reportedly has tripled over the past decade, surpassing that for national defense. Xinjiang alone saw a ten-fold increase in domestic security spending during the early 2000s, according to Western estimates.

The published figure for internal security exceeded the defense budget for the first time in 2010. By 2013, China stopped providing a breakdown. The U.S. think tank Jamestown Foundation estimated that internal security spending had already reached 113% of defense spending by 2016. Annual increases were about double those for national defense in percentage terms and both grew much faster than the economy.

There's a less visible but equally intimidating, sprawling system in place to monitor online content for anti-government messages, unapproved news and images. Government censors work furiously to erase such items, while propaganda teams flood the net with pro-party messages.

Behind the repression is a legal system tailor-made to serve the one-party state. China is a nation ruled by law rather than governed by the rule of law. Laws are sufficiently malleable to put anyone targeted by the authorities behind bars on any number of vague charges.

Those range from simply "spreading rumors online," tracked through postings on social media, to the all-encompassing "picking quarrels and provoking trouble," punishable by up to five years in prison.

Charges of "subverting state power" or "incitement to subvert state power" are often used, requiring little proof other than evidence the accused expressed a critical attitude toward the party-state. Those accused are usually denied the right to hire their own lawyers. Cases can take years to come to trial and almost always result in convictions.

In a further disincentive to rebel, people released from prison often face years of monitoring and harassment that can ruin careers and destroy families.

The massive spending and sprawling internal security network leaves China well prepared to crackdown on dissent. It also suggests "China's internal situation is far less stable than the leadership would like the world to believe," China politics expert Dean Cheng of the Heritage Foundation wrote on the Washington, D.C.-based conservative think tank's website.

It's unclear how sustainable it is, he said. "This could have the effect of either changing Chinese priorities or creating greater tensions among them."

Aline Kominsky-Crumb, underground cartoonist, dies at 74

By JOCELYN NOVECK Associated Press

Aline Kominsky-Crumb, an American cartoonist known for her feminist themes and often brutally frank, highly personal and self-critical work, has died at the age of 74.

Kominsky-Crumb, who was a close collaborator of her cartoonist husband, Robert Crumb, died of cancer Tuesday at their longtime home in France, said Alexander Wood, manager of the website that sells Crumb's work.

"She was the hub of the wheel within her family and community," the website wrote in announcing her death. "She had a huge amount of energy which she poured into her artwork, her daughter, her grandchildren and the meals which brought everyone together."

Kominsky-Crumb was known for work that was not only autobiographical but often bracingly sexual — focusing on her insecurities — and explicit. Or just raunchy. An early cover of the "Twisted Sisters" anthology — on which she collaborated with cartoonist Diane Noomin during her early years in the Bay Area — depicted her sitting nearly naked on the toilet, wondering how many calories there were in a cheese enchilada.

"People said to me, 'That is so outrageous, how could you draw yourself sitting on a toilet?'" she said in a 2019 video interview. "I said, 'I don't know, it seemed natural to me.'" She noted that could only draw on herself in her work, because "it's the only thing I know about."

Kominsky-Crumb described as creative influences both German Expressionist art and the late Jewish comic Joan Rivers, whose standup routines she admired partly for their self-deprecating nature. Much

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 42 of 62

more recently, she also admired Lena Dunham and her show "Girls," and was thrilled to learn that Dunham had actually said she was influenced by Kominsky-Crumb's artwork.

Author Art Spiegelman made a similar connection.

"She has something in common with Lena Dunham, Amy Poehler, Amy Schumer, Sarah Silverman, women who are trying to grapple with their identities in a way that is not prettified," Spiegelman, author of "Maus," said in a 2018 article in The New York Times. "They are just trying to live and breathe as women with all their contradictions. And it's a liberated and liberating way of looking at oneself."

Kominsky-Crumb was born on Long Island, in the suburb of Five Towns.

"Reading and drawing and painting were the things that saved me from a very difficult childhood," she said in the 2019 interview, "with somewhat harsh parents."

She studied art in her college years at The Cooper Union in Manhattan, and later relocated to Arizona, earning a bachelor's in fine arts at the University of Arizona. She met Crumb — often known as R. Crumb — in the early 1970s in San Francisco, where she became part of the all-female Wimmen's Comix collective before breaking with the group and starting "Twisted Sisters" with Noomin, who died in September.

The break in the collective was between two factions with different approaches, she said — those who were "very militant feminists" and others, like her, "who were feminists but also liked men."

"I felt like I wanted to have as much sex as possible and be as promiscuous as I wanted to be on my own terms," she said. "Just as men did."

With Crumb, whom she married in 1978, she produced a series of comics called "Aline and Bob's Dirty Laundry" about their family. They had a daughter, Sophie, who is also a comics artist. In the early 1990s, the family moved to France, settling in a medieval village in the Languedoc-Roussillon region. A documentary about their life, "Crumb," was released in 1994.

Among her works, Kominsky-Crumb published a graphic memoir, "Need More Love," in 2007, a collection of her artwork over four decades. Her retrospective "Love That Bunch" was published in 1990 and expanded in 2018.

"I can't help seeing the absurdity of myself at all times," she said in the 2019 interview, trying to describe her ethos. "That's just the consciousness that I have and that I've always had of myself, as being an absurd creature on this planet."

Kominsky-Crumb is survived by husband Robert, 79, and daughter Sophie, 41.

Biden, Macron vow unity against Russia, discuss trade row

By COLLEEN LONG, SYLVIE CORBET and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Presidents Joe Biden and Emmanuel Macron vowed to maintain a united front against Russia on Thursday amid growing worries about waning support for Ukraine's war effort in the U.S. and Europe. Biden also signaled he might be willing to tweak aspects of his signature climate legislation that have raised concerns with France and other European allies.

Biden honored Macron with a grand state dinner Thursday evening — the first of the U.S. president's COVID-19 shadowed presidency for a foreign leader. But following up on Biden's upbeat comments might not go as smoothly as that fancy affair. Republicans who are about to take control of the House have shown less willingness than Biden to spend billions on Ukraine, and Democratic lawmakers said Thursday they were not about to jump back into the climate legislation.

In fact, for all the positive statements, Macron's visit to Washington has been tempered by his criticism of Biden's Inflation Reduction Act and the challenges both leaders face amid the mounting costs of keeping military and economic aid flowing to Kyiv with no end in sight for the Russian invasion.

Despite the differences, Biden and Macron sought to underscore that the U.S.-France alliance remains solid and that the West must hold steadfast against Russian President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine.

"Today, we reaffirm that, as I said, we're going to stand together against this brutality," Biden said. "Putin thinks that he can crush the will of all those who oppose his imperial ambitions by attacking civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, choking off energy to Europe to drive up prices, exacerbating the food crisis. That's

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 43 of 62

hurting very vulnerable people not just in Ukraine but around the world and he's not going to succeed."

Both leaders at an outdoor welcoming ceremony paid tribute to their countries' long alliance. But they acknowledged difficult moments lay ahead as Western unity shows some wear nine months into the war in Ukraine.

In Washington, Republicans are set to take control of the House, where GOP leader Kevin McCarthy has said his party's lawmakers will not write a "blank check" for Ukraine. Across the Atlantic, Macron's efforts to keep Europe united will be tested by the mounting costs of supporting Ukraine in the war and as Europe battles rising energy prices that threaten to derail the post-pandemic economic recovery.

Macron stressed that the issue has ramifications far beyond Ukraine's borders.

"What is at stake in Ukraine is not just very far from here, in a small country somewhere in Europe," he declared. "But it's about our values. And about our principles."

"Our two nations are sisters in the fight for freedom," he said.

Biden indicated he would be willing to talk with Putin if the Russian leader demonstrated that he seriously wanted to end the invasion. But the U.S. president, as always, conditioned such talks on support by NATO allies.

"I'm prepared to speak with Mr. Putin if in fact there is an interest in him deciding that he's looking for a way to end the war," Biden said. "He hasn't done that yet."

In addition to their talk of Ukraine — what White House officials said was at the top of the agenda — the two leaders discussed Macron's and other leaders' concerns about the recently enacted clean energy law.

Macron has made clear that he and other European leaders are opposed to incentives in the Inflation Reduction Act that favor American-made climate technology, including electric vehicles.

Biden acknowledged "glitches" in the legislation but said "there's tweaks we can make" to satisfy allies.

"The United States makes no apology. And I make no apologies since I wrote it for the legislation we're talking about," Biden added.

However, Macron said that while the Biden administration's efforts to curb climate change should be applauded, the subsidies would be an enormous setback for European companies.

"We want to succeed together, not one against the other," Macron added. He said the U.S. and France would "resynchronize" their clean energy efforts to ensure there's no "domino effect" that undermines clean energy projects in Europe.

On Capitol Hill, despite Biden's talk of possible changes in the law, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Ron Wyden, one of the bill's main architects, said, "Congress passed a law to rev up the American electric automobile industry, create good-paying American jobs and tackle climate change at the same time. I have no intention of reopening it."

The European Union has also expressed concern that tax credits in the law would discriminate against European producers and break World Trade Organization rules.

The leaders, with aides, met for about three hours after taking part in a formal ceremony with hundreds of people gathered on the South Lawn on a sunny, chilly morning. There was a 21-gun salute and review of troops, and ushers distributed small French and American flags to the guests.

Both Biden and Macron in their public comments sought to keep the focus on the situation in Ukraine.

The state visit should provide a boost to Macron diplomatically that he can leverage back in Europe. His outspoken comments help him demonstrate that he's defending French workers, even as he maintains a close relationship with Biden. The moment also helps Macron burnish his image as the European Union's most visible and vocal leader, at a time when Europe is increasingly concerned that its economy will be indelibly weakened by the Ukraine war and resulting energy and inflation crises.

To that end, Biden praised Macron as "not just the leader of France" and for being "very outspoken and very, very commanding in Europe." In his public comments, Macron repeatedly referred to the U.S. president as "dear Joe."

Still, at moments, Macron's rhetoric has rankled U.S. and Ukrainian officials, with calls for Ukraine and Russia to meet at the negotiating table. White House officials have publicly maintained that it is solely up to Ukraine's leadership to decide when it's appropriate to engage the Russians and have stressed the war

could end immediately if Putin ended his invasion.

Macron also raised eyebrows earlier this month in a speech at a summit in Bangkok when he referred to the U.S. and China as "two big elephants" that are on the cusp of creating "a big problem for the rest of the jungle." His visit to Washington came as both the U.S. and France are keeping their eyes on China after protests have broken out in several mainland cities and Hong Kong over Beijing's "zero COVID" strategy.

The state visit marked a return of a White House tradition of honoring close foreign allies that dates back to Ulysses S. Grant's presidency.

Macron and his wife, Brigitte, came to the U.S. bearing gifts carefully tailored to their American hosts, including a vinyl record and CD of the original soundtrack from the 1966 film "Un Homme et une Femme," which the Bidens went to see on their first date, according to the palace.

Among the gifts Biden and first lady Jill Biden presented the Macrons was a mirror framed by fallen wood from the White House grounds and made by an American furniture maker.

Vice President Kamala Harris hosted Macron for a lunch at the State Department before the evening state dinner in an enormous tented pavilion constructed on the White House South Lawn. The dinner for hundreds attracted big names from fashion, entertainment, business and politics.

Prosecutor: Donald Trump knew about exec's tax fraud scheme

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump "knew exactly what was going on" with top Trump Organization executives who schemed for years to dodge taxes on company-paid perks, a prosecutor said Thursday, challenging defense claims that the former president was unaware of the plot at the heart of the company's tax fraud case.

Manhattan prosecutor Joshua Steinglass lobbed the bombshell allegation during closing arguments. He promised to share more details when he resumes on Friday, buoyed by the judge's decision to grant prosecutors permission to veer into territory that had been considered off-limits because Trump is not on trial.

The tax fraud case is the only trial to arise from the three-year investigation of Trump and his business practices by the Manhattan district attorney's office. Thursday's closing arguments were the last chance for prosecutors and defense lawyers to sway jurors before they deliberate next week.

Judge Juan Manuel Merchan, overruling a defense objection after the jury had left court, said the company's lawyers opened the door by asserting in their closing arguments that Trump was ignorant of the scheme, hatched by his longtime finance chief just steps from his Trump Tower office.

"It was the defense who invoked the name Donald Trump numerous times," Merchan said, setting up a potentially explosive final day of arguments before jurors deliberate next week.

Prosecutors had given mixed signals about Trump's importance to the case, telling a judge early on, "this case is not about Donald Trump," but then repeatedly asking witnesses about him; showing a witness copies of Trump's tax returns and, ultimately, seeking to connect the dots to him in closing arguments.

Trump has denied any knowledge of the scheme, writing Tuesday on his Truth Social platform: "There was no gain for 'Trump,' and we had no knowledge of it."

Steinglass said the Trump Organization "cultivated a culture of fraud and deception" by lavishing luxe perks on executives and falsifying records to hide the compensation.

Steinglass' at-times fiery summation followed defense arguments that sought to focus blame for the fraud on Allen Weisselberg, the senior adviser and ex-CFO who has admitted scheming to avoid paying personal income taxes on a company-paid apartment, luxury cars and other goodies.

"Weisselberg did it for Weisselberg," Trump Organization lawyer Michael Van der Veen told jurors, punctuating his closing argument with the defense team's mantra for the monthlong trial.

Steinglass pushed back when it was his turn, telling jurors: "Both halves of that sentence are wrong. It wasn't just Weisselberg doing it and it wasn't just Weisselberg who benefited."

The Trump Organization — the entity through which Trump manages his real estate holdings and other ventures — is accused of helping Weisselberg and other executives avoid paying income taxes on company-

paid perks.

Steinglass argued that the Trump Organization — through its subsidiaries Trump Corp. and Trump Payroll Corp. — is liable because Weisselberg and an underling he worked with, controller Jeffrey McConney, were “high managerial” agents entrusted to act on behalf of the company and its various entities.

If convicted, the Trump Organization could be fined more than \$1 million. Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, who watched Steinglass’ closing from the courtroom gallery, has said that his office’s investigation of Trump is “active and ongoing,” and that no decision has been made on whether to charge him.

But company lawyers argued that Weisselberg was only intending to benefit himself with his tax-dodge scheme, not the Trump Organization, and that the company shouldn’t be blamed for his transgressions.

“We are here today for one reason and one reason only: the greed of Allen Weisselberg,” Trump Organization lawyer Susan Necheles said, her remarks accompanied at one point by the wail of a siren from an emergency vehicle outside.

Weisselberg pleaded guilty in August to dodging taxes on \$1.7 million in extras and testified against the Trump Organization in exchange for a promised sentence of five months in jail.

Weisselberg has worked for Trump’s family for nearly 50 years, starting as an accountant for his real estate-developer father Fred Trump in 1973 before joining Donald Trump’s company in 1986.

“Along the way, he messed up. He got greedy. Once he got started, it was difficult for him to stop,” Necheles said.

Necheles argued that the case against the company is tenuous and that the 1965 state law underlying some of the charges requires prosecutors to show Weisselberg intended to benefit the company, not just himself.

Weisselberg testified that he conspired to hide his perks with McConney by adjusting payroll records to deduct their cost from his salary.

The arrangement reduced Weisselberg’s tax liability, while also saving the company money because it didn’t have to give him a hefty raise to cover the cost of the perks and additional income taxes he would have incurred.

“I knew in my mind that there was a benefit to the company,” Weisselberg testified.

But Necheles argued that any benefit to the company was ancillary, minimal and unintentional.

“He is atoning for his sins, but as part of the plea deal, the prosecution forced him to testify against the company he helped build,” Necheles told jurors. “Now the prosecution’s case rests on one thing: convincing you, the jurors, that Mr. Weisselberg’s actions were done in behalf of the company.”

“You are going to see there was no such intent,” Necheles added. “The purpose of Mr. Weisselberg’s crimes was to benefit Mr. Weisselberg.”

College Football Playoff expands to 12 teams in 2024 season

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

Over the past 25 years, college football’s postseason format for crowning a national champion has grown from two teams to four and now, starting in 2024, to 12.

For a sport that started in 1869 and spent most of the 20th century using bowls and polls to determine who was No. 1, evolution has hit warp speed, racing from Bowl Championship Series to College Football Playoff 2.0.

“The times change, things change,” CFP Executive Director Bill Hancock said. “Things have moved pretty quickly relative to the last 153 years.”

The CFP announced Thursday it will expand to a 12-team event in two years, completing an 18-month process that was fraught with delays and disagreements. It is a momentous step that will bring in billions of dollars in television revenue and change the very fabric of the postseason.

The announcement came a day after the Rose Bowl agreed to amend its contract for the 2024 and 2025 seasons, the last hurdle CFP officials needed cleared to triple the size of what is now a four-team format.

“I never gave up,” Hancock said.

Expansion is expected to produce about \$450 million in additional gross revenue for the conferences and

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 46 of 62

schools that participate. The CFP's current 12-year contract with ESPN runs through the 2025-26 season. CFP officials have said they would like to explore having multiple broadcast partners in the next cycle.

The idea of major college football holding a playoff dates back decades and the Championship Subdivision has had one since 1978. The late Penn State coach Joe Paterno pined for one in the 1970s. Former Big Eight Commissioner Chuck Nienas proposed one in the late 1980s.

The creation of the BCS in the late 1990s was the first step toward a real playoff, Hancock said.

"The BCS for the first time gave an opportunity to decide a national champion on the field every year, not just at the whims of the bowl pairings," Hancock said.

The BCS used polls and computer rankings to ensure a 1 vs. 2 bowl game from 1998-2013, but at times produced questionable matchups that left fans unsatisfied.

"We had congressmen and senators getting involved in the selection process. There was a general unhappiness with the fact that somebody was always third on the outside looking in," former Big 12 Commissioner Bob Bowlsby said.

Former Big Ten Commissioner Jim Delany was a playoff opponent — or at least skeptic — for years, but even he grew weary of defending the BCS.

"Everybody threw confetti when (the BCS) happened, but within three years it was getting killed," Delany said.

Delany and the late former Southeastern Conference Commissioner Mike Slive, a playoff advocate, were instrumental in creating the current four-team format. The CFP debuted in 2014 with a 12-year contract, but less than halfway through it became apparent that fear of missing out had grown exponentially from the BCS days.

Bowlsby recalled Delany lamenting about how much more difficult it was to stomach being fifth in the selection committee's CFP rankings than it was being third in the BCS standings.

"It's hard being the one left out and you're drawing conclusions based on very thin evidence a lot of the time," Bowlsby said.

Delany compared the latest expansion of the playoff to NCAA men's basketball tournament expansion from 1975-85, when the field doubled from 32 to 64 teams. Much like the CFP now, that expansion wasn't so much about making sure a potential champion wasn't left out.

It was about increasing participation.

"It made it a truly national event," Delany said.

The latest plan to expand the playoff was unveiled in June 2021, but conference commissioners could not come to the unanimous consensus needed to push it forward. Expansion for the 2024 season was pronounced dead back in February.

"Getting from four to 12 didn't have to be this difficult," said Bowlsby, who was part of the four-person working group that spent more than two years developing the 12-team plan.

University presidents and chancellors who oversee the CFP stepped in and revived the process over the summer. They approved the original plan for use by 2026, and directed the commissioners to try to expand by 2024.

No longer haggling over the format, the commissioners needed to work through when and where the games will be played and whether bowl partners and championship game host cities could accommodate a change in schedule for 2024 and 2025.

The Rose Bowl issue was the last to be settled, as organizers for the 120-year-old bowl game were hoping to get some assurances from the CFP that they would keep their valuable New Year's Day time when new contracts go into effect in 2026.

CFP officials balked. Facing the possibility of being painted as an obstructionist and potentially being shut out of the expanded playoff in the long term, the Rose Bowl agreed to move forward in good faith.

"It's our intent to keep the Rose Bowl game on Jan. 1," said Laura Farber, chairwoman of the Rose Bowl Management Committee. "But we'll remain flexible in scheduling as needed."

That's important with how quickly things are moving in college football.

Delany speculated it was unlikely the next CFP contract would be as long as the last. He also noted that

when the playoff becomes it a four-week event, it would be fairly easy to add four more teams. Asked when to expect expansion to 16 teams, Hancock laughed. "Next question," he said.

Congress votes to avert rail strike amid dire warnings

By KEVIN FREKING and JOSH FUNK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Legislation to avert what could have been an economically ruinous freight rail strike won final approval in Congress on Thursday as lawmakers responded quickly to President Joe Biden's call for federal intervention in a long-running labor dispute.

The Senate passed a bill to bind rail companies and workers to a proposed settlement that was reached between the rail companies and union leaders in September. That settlement had been rejected by four of the 12 unions involved, creating the possibility of a strike beginning Dec. 9.

The Senate vote was 80-15. It came one day after the House voted to impose the agreement. The measure now goes to Biden's desk for his signature.

"Communities will maintain access to clean drinking water. Farmers and ranchers will continue to be able to bring food to market and feed their livestock. And hundreds of thousands of Americans in a number of industries will keep their jobs," Biden said after the vote. "I will sign the bill into law as soon as Congress sends it to my desk."

The Senate voted shortly after Labor Secretary Marty Walsh and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg emphasized to Democratic senators at a Capitol meeting that rail companies would begin shutting down operations well before a potential strike would begin. The administration wanted the bill on Biden's desk by the weekend.

Shortly before Thursday's votes, Biden defended the contract that four of the unions had rejected, noting the wage increases it contains.

"I negotiated a contract no one else could negotiate," Biden said at a news briefing with French President Emmanuel Macron. "What was negotiated was so much better than anything they ever had."

Critics say the contract that did not receive backing from enough union members lacked sufficient levels of paid sick leave for rail workers. Biden said he wants paid leave for "everybody" so that it wouldn't have to be negotiated in employment contracts, but Republican lawmakers have blocked measures to require time off work for medical and family reasons. The president said Congress should impose the contract now to avoid a strike that he said could cause 750,000 job losses and a recession.

Railways say halting rail service would cause a devastating \$2 billion-per-day hit to the economy. A freight rail strike also would have a big potential impact on passenger rail, with Amtrak and many commuter railroads relying on tracks owned by the freight railroads.

The rail companies and unions have been engaged in high-stakes negotiations. The Biden administration helped broker deals between the railroads and union leaders in September, but four of the unions rejected the deals. Eight others approved five-year deals and are getting back pay for their workers for the 24% raises that are retroactive to 2020.

With a strike looming, Biden called on Congress to impose the tentative agreement reached in September. Congress has the authority to do so and has enacted legislation in the past to delay or prohibit railway and airline strikes. But most lawmakers would prefer the parties work out their differences on their own.

The Senate took a series of three votes. The first was on a measure by Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, that would have sent both parties back to the negotiating table. But union groups opposed an extension, as did the Biden administration. The proposal was roundly rejected, with 25 senators in support and 70 opposed.

"An extension would simply allow the railroads to maintain their status quo operations while prolonging the workforce's suffering," leaders of the Transportation Trades Department of the AFL-CIO said.

The second vote the Senate took would have followed the path the House narrowly adopted the day before, which was to add seven days of paid sick leave to the tentative agreement. But that measure fell eight votes short of the 60-vote threshold needed for passage.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 48 of 62

The final vote was the measure binding the two parties to the September agreement. It passed with broad bipartisan support, as it had in the House. While lawmakers voiced consternation about having to weigh in, the economic stakes outweighed those concerns.

"A strike of that magnitude would have a painful impact on our economy and that is an unacceptable scenario as inflation continues to squeeze West Virginians and Americans heading into the holiday season," said Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va.

Democrats have traditionally aligned themselves with the politically powerful labor unions that criticized Biden's move to intervene and block a strike. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi told Democratic colleagues it was "with great reluctance" that Congress needed to bypass the standard ratification process for union contracts.

She did, however, hold an additional vote that would have added the seven days of paid sick leave that union workers wanted. That gave Democratic lawmakers in both chambers the ability to show their support for paid sick leave for rail workers while also avoiding a crippling strike.

The call for paid sick leave was a major sticking point in the talks, along with other quality-of-life concerns. The railroads say the unions have agreed in negotiations over the decades to forgo paid sick time in favor of higher wages and strong short-term disability benefits.

The unions maintain that railroads can easily afford to add paid sick time when they are recording record profits. Several of the big railroads involved in these contract talks reported more than \$1 billion profit in the third quarter.

The Association of American Railroads trade group praised the Senate vote to impose the compromise deal that includes the biggest raises in more than four decades. Still, CEO Ian Jefferies acknowledged that many workers remain unhappy with working conditions. "Without a doubt, there is more to be done to further address our employees' work-life balance concerns, but it is clear this agreement maintains rail's place among the best jobs in our nation," Jefferies said.

Union groups were unhappy with the final result.

"The Senate just failed to pass seven days of paid sick leave for rail workers. We are grateful to the 52 Senators who voted YES and stood with rail workers," tweeted the Transportation Trades Department labor coalition. "Shame on the 43 elected leaders who abandoned the working class. We will not forget it."

Trump probe: Court halts Mar-a-Lago special master review

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A unanimous federal appeals court on Thursday ended an independent review of documents seized from former President Donald Trump's Florida estate, removing a hurdle the Justice Department said had delayed its criminal investigation into the retention of top-secret government information.

The decision by the three-judge panel represents a significant win for federal prosecutors, clearing the way for them to use as part of their investigation the entire tranche of documents seized during an Aug. 8 FBI search of Mar-a-Lago. It also amounts to a sharp repudiation of arguments by Trump's lawyers, who for months had said that the former president was entitled to have a so-called "special master" conduct a neutral review of the thousands of documents taken from the property.

The ruling from the Atlanta-based U.S. Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit had been expected given the skeptical questions the judges directed at a Trump lawyer during arguments last week, and because two of the three judges on the panel had already ruled in favor of the Justice Department in an earlier dispute over the special master.

The decision was a unanimous opinion from the panel of Republican appointees, including two who were selected by Trump. In it, the court rejected each argument by Trump and his attorneys for why a special master was necessary, including his claims that various seized records were protected by attorney-client privilege or executive privilege.

"It is indeed extraordinary for a warrant to be executed at the home of a former president — but not in a way that affects our legal analysis or otherwise gives the judiciary license to interfere in an ongoing

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 49 of 62

investigation," the judges wrote.

A Trump spokesperson said Thursday's decision was "purely procedural" and did not address the "impropriety" of the raid, and promised that the ex-president would "continue to fight" against the Justice Department. Lawyers for Trump did not immediately respond when asked if they would appeal the ruling.

The special master litigation has played out alongside an ongoing investigation examining the potential criminal mishandling of national defense information as well as efforts to possibly obstruct the documents probe. Attorney General Merrick Garland last month appointed Jack Smith, a veteran public corruption prosecutor, to serve as special counsel overseeing that investigation.

It remains unclear how much longer the investigation will last, or who, if anyone, might be charged. But the probe has shown signs of intensifying, with investigators questioning multiple Trump associates about the documents and granting one key ally immunity to ensure his testimony before a federal grand jury. And the appeals court decision is likely to speed the investigation along by cutting short the outside review of the records.

The conflict over the special master began just weeks after the FBI's search, when Trump sued in federal court in Florida seeking the appointment of an independent arbiter to review the roughly 13,000 documents the Justice Department says were taken from the home.

A federal judge, Aileen Cannon, granted the Trump team's request, naming veteran Brooklyn judge Raymond Dearie to serve as special master and tasking him with reviewing the seized records and filtering out from the criminal investigation any documents that might be covered by claims of executive privilege or attorney-client privilege.

She also barred the Justice Department from using in its criminal investigation any of the seized records, including the roughly 100 with classification markings, pending the completion of Dearie's work.

The Justice Department objected to the appointment, saying it was an unnecessary hindrance to its criminal investigation and that Trump had no credible basis to invoke either attorney-client privilege or executive privilege to shield the records from investigators.

It sought, as a first step, to regain access to the classified documents. A federal appeals panel sided with prosecutors in September, permitting the Justice Department to resume its review of the documents with classification markings. Two of the judges on that panel — Andrew Brasher and Britt Grant, both Trump appointees — were part of Thursday's ruling as well.

The department also pressed for unfettered access to the much larger trove of unclassified documents, saying such records could contain important evidence for their investigation.

In its ruling Thursday, the appeals court directed Cannon to dismiss the lawsuit that gave rise to Dearie's appointment and suggested Trump had no legal basis to challenge the search in the first place.

"The law is clear. We cannot write a rule that allows any subject of a search warrant to block government investigations after the execution of the warrant. Nor can we write a rule that allows only former presidents to do so," the judges wrote.

"Either approach," they added, "would be a radical reordering of our caselaw limiting the federal courts' involvement in criminal investigations. And both would violate bedrock separation-of-powers limitations."

World Cup Viewer's Guide: Final day of group stage

By JENNA FRYER AP National Writer

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — Brazil and Portugal already advanced into the knockout round so the focus on the final day of World Cup group play should be on the six other teams trying to avoid elimination.

Serbia, Switzerland, Cameroon, South Korea, Ghana and Uruguay all have a chance on Friday to reach the last 16.

Alas, the spotlight will still be on Brazil and Portugal.

Both teams need to either win or draw in their games to guarantee top spot in their respective groups and avoid a head-to-head match in the knockout round.

"If we had to face each other, it would be a game between two great teams," Portugal coach Fernando

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 50 of 62

Santos said. "But our wish, and Brazil's, is that we meet later on."

Brazil will be without Neymar for its match against Cameroon. The star forward injured his right ankle in Brazil's opening match and the team plans to reevaluate his status after the game.

Cristiano Ronaldo is expected to play for Portugal even though he missed Wednesday's training. Santos didn't reveal whether he plans to rest the 37-year-old team captain for the knockout round

"If he is well enough physically, he will be playing," Santos said. "I don't even know if the chance is 50-50. It depends on our training session. I hope he'll be able to play."

CAMEROON-BRAZIL

Neymar is for sure out against Cameroon, and many of Brazil's stars may join him on the sideline.

Brazil can guarantee the top spot in Group G with a draw, so coach Tite was expected to make changes at nearly every position against Cameroon.

"Tite had already told us after the game against Switzerland that he intended to make changes in the lineup," Brazil midfielder Fabinho said. "He said he wanted everyone to play and we are happy with that decision."

Tite planned to use only reserve players: Ederson will replace Alisson in goal, and Dani Alves, Fabinho, Antony and Gabriel Martinelli are all expected to start.

If the 39-year-old Alves does play, he would become the oldest Brazilian to play at a World Cup — ahead of the 38-year-old Thiago Silva, who is Brazil's captain in Qatar. Alves' last game at a World Cup was in the round of 16 of the 2014 tournament in Brazil. He was injured four years ago in Russia.

Cameroon needs to beat Brazil and that might not be enough to advance past the group stage for the first time since its run to the quarterfinals in 1990. But Cameroon is at the mercy of other match results, and if both Serbia and Cameroon win its games, then advancing would come down to goal difference.

"We are going to be focused and very disciplined for the whole 90 minutes," Cameroon coach Rigobert Song said. "I want to see the determination and commitment that will allow us to get the three points."

Cameroon sent goalkeeper Andre Onana home for disciplinary reasons after a dispute with Song. He was dropped from the lineup before Cameroon's second game and the Inter Milan goalkeeper was sent home at the beginning of the week.

SERBIA-SWITZERLAND

It's a head-to-head elimination match between Serbia and Switzerland in Group G.

A draw for Switzerland is enough if Brazil wins or draws in its match against Cameroon. But if Cameroon beat Brazil and the Swiss take a point, then second place will be decided by goal difference.

Switzerland isn't even thinking about a draw.

"I don't know a single team in the world that would go on the pitch aiming for a 0-0. That's really dangerous," Switzerland midfielder Djibril Sow said.

Switzerland has advanced out of group play into the knockout round the past two World Cups and the past two European Championships.

Serbia hasn't played a World Cup knockout match since becoming an independent nation. Sergej Milinkovic-Savic said Serbia's must-win position was expected.

"Of course. When we saw the draw and the schedule, we knew that everything would depend on the last game," the midfielder said. "We need to take this opportunity with both hands."

Serbia's draw with Cameroon was a lost chance because Serbia was leading 3-1 in the second half.

GHANA-URUGUAY

The Ghana against Uruguay match is a repeat of one of the World Cup's most contentious games: Luis Suárez in 2010 used a deliberate handball on the goal line at the end of extra time in the quarterfinals to deny Ghana a certain goal and a place in history as the first African team to reach the semifinals.

Suárez was sent off for the handball but celebrated wildly on the sidelines when Asamoah Gyan hit the penalty off the crossbar. Uruguay won the ensuing penalty shootout.

"Truth is, it was worth it," Suárez said in 2010 and hasn't changed his mind in the 12 years since.

"I don't apologize, because I take the handball and the red card but the Ghana player missed the penalty."

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 51 of 62

It's not my fault because I didn't miss the penalty," Suárez said before the rematch.

A win by Ghana would avenge the moment by advancing the team to the round of 16 out of Group H. Uruguay would be eliminated.

"For me, it's not a big topic," Ghana coach Otto Addo said. "I would expect every player to do all he can to make sure his team goes through. Even sacrificing himself with a red card. What happened in 2010 is very sad, but we can't change it. We want to look forward and we want to win this game."

Uruguay still has Suárez, who at 35 is likely playing in his final World Cup. Uruguay must beat Ghana and hope South Korea doesn't beat Portugal to avoid elimination. Goal difference will decide it if Uruguay and South Korea both win.

Stoking it just a little bit more, Suárez said the 2010 game against Ghana does still mean something to Uruguay.

"We are going to put our lives and soul into this match," Suarez said. "Ghana is a good team, but we know them. We have beaten them before and we know how to beat them again."

SOUTH KOREA-PORTUGAL

Portugal needs a win or a draw against South Korea to guarantee first place in Group H.

That would also mean the team would avoid facing Brazil in the last 16 if the South American team also tops its group.

"If we had to face each other, it would be a game between two great teams," Portugal coach Fernando Santos said. "But our wish, and Brazil's, is that we meet later on."

Santos said he wasn't planning to rest too many key players against South Korea. Cristiano Ronaldo may be an exception.

Three games in nine days could prove to be too much for the 37-year-old forward, who hasn't played significant minutes this season for Manchester United.

Ronaldo missed team training on Wednesday, instead completing a session in the gym, and there's a chance he will be saved for the last 16. That would give the likes of Gonçalo Ramos or Andre Silva a rare chance to start up front.

The mind behind the Rubik's Cube celebrates a lasting puzzle

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — If you've ever had trouble solving a Rubik's Cube, a good piece of advice is to break it down into steps. It's worth a shot: That advice is from the man who invented it.

"Problem solving is a very basic activity of the human mind and if a problem is complex you need to divide the problem into smaller elements," says Ernő Rubik, who invented the cube in 1974.

Rubik has seen his color-matching puzzle go from a classroom teaching tool in Cold War-era Hungary to a worldwide phenomenon with over 450 million cubes sold and a mini-empire of related toys.

"For me, the cube represents what freedom means. Freedom is never endless," he said during a recent visit to New York. "It lets you do what is necessary to achieve your goal."

The original 3x3 Rubik's has more than 43 quintillion — that's more than 43,000,000,000,000,000,000 — possible configurations, but the principles behind the cube have been refashioned for 2x2, 4x4 and 5x5 cubes, a board game called Rubik's Race, a pyramid, a tower and a Christmas tree, among others.

It even made the transition to electronic media with Rubik's Revolution and Rubik's Touch. Spin Master acquired the brand in 2021. Their latest brainteaser is called the Phantom, which takes the 3x3 original cube and adds a memory test: Using thermochromic technology, the multi-color tiles revert to black unless the heat of the user's hand keeps them visible.

"The principle of the cube is not limited," says Rubik. "The complexity of the task is to stimulate our mind and it makes it a much more enjoyable activity."

The goal of all Rubik puzzles is to start with some randomized and shuffled messy configuration and, by rotating faces or parts, transform each side into a single color or a pattern of colors.

Practiced cube-solvers can complete the Rubik's Cube in a matter of seconds, with the current world-

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 52 of 62

record holder solving a cube in 3.47 seconds. There are also records at the World Cube Association for fastest solving while wearing a blindfold or using one hand.

It took 36 years after the invention of the toy for anyone to come up with an answer for the minimum number of moves to solve it. In 2010, a group of mathematicians and computer programmers proved that any Rubik's Cube can be solved in 20 moves.

Rubik was a budding artist who hoped to become a sculptor or a painter before he studied architecture, which he argues is art with a function: "Architecture is changing the environment according to our needs."

He got a degree in architecture at Budapest University of Technology and became a teacher in the interior design department at the Academy of Applied Arts and Crafts in Budapest.

Rubik regularly used physical models and materials to teach concepts in construction and design.

"As our body needs some kind of exercises, the brain needs that kind of exercise as well," he says. Thus was born an elegant teaching tool he named "The Magic Cube."

"I tried to make it as simple as possible because I thought the task itself is complicated enough," he says. "You don't need to complicate anymore."

The puzzle — which uses rounded elements for the center core — is easy to use, but also hard enough to solve that more than one cuber has thrown it across a room in frustration.

"One of the main keys of the cube is the contradiction between complexity and simplicity," Rubik says. "On one hand, the cube is a very simple form. And on the other hand, the potential of the variation of movement is so complicated."

The brain-bending elegance of the Rubik's Cube is part of the reason it has endured, while other faddish toys and games — Tamagotchi or Shopkins, anyone? — have not.

"Usually these kinds of crazes are ending very soon," Rubik says. "But the cube didn't die."

In 2014, it landed in the National Toy Hall of Fame, joining such childhood classics as Barbie, Hot Wheels, G.I. Joe and the hula hoop. The hall noted that the cube has caused its own medical condition, known as "cube's thumb" or "Rubik's wrist." The cube has also show up in TV shows and movies from "The Simpsons" to "The Pursuit of Happyness."

Rubik recalls the early days when some people were convinced the cube was impossible to solve. He knew it could be done and was asked to prove it.

"I tried to explain and show people it is possible and if something is possible for me, you can do it yourself," he says. "It's a very nice proof of the power of science."

Stéphanie Frappart makes history as 1st female World Cup ref

AL KHOR, Qatar (AP) — French referee Stéphanie Frappart became the first woman to take charge of a men's World Cup game on Thursday as she blew her whistle to start Germany's game against Costa Rica.

Frappart also had two women as assistants — Neuza Back of Brazil and Karen Diaz Medina of Mexico — to complete an all-female refereeing team on the field.

Kathryn Nesbitt of the United States was also working at the Al Bayt Stadium as the offside specialist in the video review team.

FIFA has two other women, Salima Mukansanga of Rwanda and Yoshimi Yamashita of Japan, on its list to referee games at the tournament in Qatar.

Frappart had been picked previously for duties as the fourth official.

The 38-year-old Frenchwoman was promoted in the men's game by European soccer body UEFA and in her home country and she has already refereed men's games in World Cup qualifying and the Champions League. She also took charge of this year's men's French Cup final and the 2019 Women's World Cup final for FIFA.

Racism uproar at home threatens to eclipse royal visit to US

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Renewed allegations of racism at Buckingham Palace threatened to overshadow Prince

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 53 of 62

William's trip to the United States after campaigners said the palace needed to acknowledge a wider problem that goes beyond one member of staff.

The controversy erupted Wednesday when a Black advocate for survivors of domestic abuse said a senior member of the royal household interrogated her about her origins during a reception at the palace for people working to end violence against women. Coverage of the issue filled British media on Thursday, clouding a much-anticipated visit the prince hoped will highlight his environmental credentials and show that the monarchy is still relevant in a multi-cultural world.

Shortly after the Prince and Princess of Wales arrived in Boston for a three-day visit, a royal spokesman said racism has "no place in our society" and noted that the household member involved had resigned and apologized "for the hurt caused."

But Mandu Reid, who witnessed the exchange, said she feared the response was an attempt to blame one individual and avoid responsibility for the culture at the palace. She said the latest incident validated allegations made last year by Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, who said a member of the royal family had asked about the color of her unborn baby's skin when she was pregnant with her first child. Meghan, Prince Harry's wife, is biracial.

"I want to see the royal household as a whole acknowledge that institutional racism is part of the culture, and I want to see them tackle that head on..." Reid, leader of the Women's Equality Party, told Sky News. "I think what's needed is something bigger, something more substantive."

The stakes were clear Thursday as Netflix released the first official trailer for "Harry & Meghan," a behind-the-scenes docuseries that is certain to contain more criticism of the monarchy. Harry and Meghan stepped away from royal duties almost three years ago, citing the racist attitudes of the British media. Since relocating to Southern California, they have used a series of media interviews to air their concerns about the royal family.

The one-minute, 12-second teaser opens with tender scenes of the happy couple and ends with Meghan appearing to wipe away tears with both hands and Harry throwing his head back, seemingly in distress.

"No one sees what's happening behind closed doors," Harry says. "I had to do everything I could to protect my family."

Concerns about racism at the palace flared after Tuesday's reception at Buckingham Palace.

Ngozi Fulani, chief executive of Sistah Space, an east London refuge for women of African and Caribbean heritage, said she was stunned by her exchange with Lady Susan Hussey, 83, William's godmother and a long-time lady-in-waiting to the late Queen Elizabeth II.

Fulani said the conversation began when Hussey reached out and moved her hair out of the way to read Fulani's name tag.

"I don't know who you are, but it is not OK to put your hand in my hair, whoever you are," she told the BBC.

Hussey then asked her over and over about where she came from, Fulani said. When she said she was from east London, the older woman responded, "No, what part of Africa are you from?"

Fulani said that what she experienced was racism, regardless of Hussey's age or how uncomfortable it may make other people feel to hear that term.

Hussey has apologized for "unacceptable and deeply regrettable comments," Buckingham Palace said in a statement.

Author and playwright Bonnie Greer said part of the problem is that many members of the royal household are older and "live in a bubble" isolated from broader British society. It's time to recognize their service to the crown is over, she told Times Radio.

"It's really not acceptable and an example of how his family better hurry up and modernize and do it fast," she said.

The timing could not be worse for the Prince and Princess of Wales. The trip is a big moment for William and Kate — the couple's first visit to the U.S. in eight years, and their first overseas trip since becoming Prince and Princess of Wales following the death of the queen. President Joe Biden plans to meet with

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 54 of 62

the couple during their stay.

The highlight of the three-day visit to Boston will come on Friday, when William hosts the Earthshot Prize awards ceremony, headlined by entertainers including Billie Eilish.

But the trip will also include visits to an anti-poverty program, child development researchers and local flood defenses.

The visit comes less than three months after the death of Elizabeth, whose personal popularity damped criticism of the crown during her 70-year reign. King Charles III, William's father, has made clear that his will be a slimmed-down monarchy, with less pomp and ceremony than its predecessors.

William and Kate arrived Wednesday at Boston Logan International Airport, where they were greeted by Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker and Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito. The couple later attended a Boston Celtics basketball game.

Upon landing, William thanked local residents "for their many tributes paid to the late queen," noting that his grandmother recalled her 1976 bicentennial visit to Boston "with great fondness."

Russian shelling cuts off power again in liberated Kherson

By INNA VARENYTSIA Associated Press

KHERSON, Ukraine (AP) — Russian shelling cut off power in much of the recently liberated Ukrainian city of Kherson on Thursday, just days after it was restored amid Moscow's ongoing drive to destroy key civilian infrastructure as freezing weather sets in.

In Kyiv, Mayor Vitali Klitschko warned the capital's millions of residents that they should stock up on water and preserved food to see them through a winter that could prove miserable if more energy infrastructure is damaged.

He also urged people to consider leaving the city to stay with friends or family elsewhere, if possible.

"Trying months lie ahead. The enemy still possesses substantial resources," Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov said. He added, however, that "signs are accumulating that (Russia) needs a pause at all costs."

Ukraine has faced a blistering onslaught of Russian artillery fire and drone attacks since early October. The shelling has been especially intense in Kherson since Russian forces withdrew and Ukraine's army reclaimed the southern city almost three weeks ago.

Ukraine's presidential office said Thursday that at least two civilians were killed and six others wounded nationwide by the latest Russian shelling. In Kherson, a 70-year-old woman was killed in her apartment and a 64-year-old man was wounded on the street. A 15-year-old boy died when a hospital in the northeastern Sumy region town of Bilopillia was hit, the presidential office said.

Local authorities said about two-thirds of Kherson had electricity as of Thursday night. Some residents congregated at the train station or at government-supported tents that provided heating, food, drinks and electricity to charge cellphones.

Walking gingerly toward an evacuation train, 79-year-old Liudmyla Biloshysta said she decided to leave and join her children in Kyiv because she feared conditions in Kherson would worsen.

"The strike was so massive our house even began to shake," Biloshysta said of the latest barrage. "These bombardments make me so scared."

Alluding to her birth during World War II, she said "I was a child of war and now I'm a granny in wartime."

In the eastern Dnipropetrovsk region, Russian forces fired "from evening till morning" at Ukrainian-held towns facing the Russian occupied Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant across the Dnieper River, the regional governor said Thursday.

"Eight shelling attacks per night. The Russians from evening till morning struck the Nikopol area with (multiple rocket launchers) and heavy artillery. Two districts -- Marhanets and Chervonohryhorivka -- came under enemy fire," governor Valentyn Reznichenko wrote on Telegram.

Elsewhere in eastern Ukraine, Russian forces continued their attempts to encircle the Donetsk region city of Bakhmut, focusing on several villages around it and trying to cut a key highway.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 55 of 62

Andriy Yermak, the head of Ukraine's presidential office, said Russia released 50 Ukrainian prisoners of war and Ukraine turned over the same number Thursday as the fighting continued.

In Berlin, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg praised the "heroic resistance of the Ukrainian people" against Russia's attacks, saying that with the help of allies "Ukraine has made significant gains" on the battlefield.

"But we should not underestimate Russia," Stoltenberg warned in a speech at the Berlin Security Conference. "Russian missiles and drones continue to rain down on Ukrainian cities, civilians and critical infrastructure, causing enormous human suffering as winter sets in."

The NATO chief said Russian President Vladimir Putin had made "two big strategic mistakes" when he invaded Ukraine in February: underestimating Ukraine and underestimating the support NATO and its allies were willing to provide so the country could defend itself.

In a related development, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Thursday strongly condemned a European Union proposal, issued the previous day, to set up a U.N.-backed court to investigate possible Russian war crimes in Ukraine.

"As for attempts to establish some kind of tribunals, they will not have any legitimacy and will not be accepted by us. They will be condemned by us," Peskov said during a media briefing.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in a video message Wednesday that the EU would work with international partners to get "the broadest international support possible" for the proposed war crimes court while continuing to support the International Criminal Court.

Neither Russia nor Ukraine are among the ICC's 123 member states.

Messi fans from Asia cheer on Argentina at World Cup

By CIARÁN FAHEY and LUJAIN JO Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — On their way to Argentina's decisive game against Poland, Mohit Daga and Aayush Verma approached the stadium carrying a massive painting of their heroes Lionel Messi and Diego Maradona with the World Cup trophy.

Daga had spent 17 days painting it. It weighed 5 kilograms (11 pounds). An offering. Anything for Messi, whom he described as a "God."

"He is the epitome of everything. He is the source of inspiration and happiness," said Daga, who is from Kolkata, India. "He brings happiness to our life."

Argentina is finding a legion of passionate superfans from India, Bangladesh and other Asian countries at the World Cup in Qatar.

Thousands have traveled to the Gulf nation specifically to see Messi and his team with their own eyes, while many others are among migrant workers that make up about 90% of the emirate's population of 3 million.

Other fans cheered from afar. In Indonesia, social media showed hundreds of people celebrating Argentina's team's 2-0 win over Poland after watching the game on large screens. They paraded on motorbikes waving flags after Argentina secured progress to the knockout stages. A newsreader wore an Argentina shirt during a broadcast.

Smitha Issac, originally from India, now living in Qatar, was attending the game with her family, including two sons who were "too excited" to see Messi.

"He is something like Messiah," Isaac said. "We are expecting that he will just make something like magic today."

Outside Stadium 974 shortly before kickoff on Wednesday, Argentina fans were still scrambling for any spare tickets to see the game. Demand far outstripped supply for the 44,000-capacity stadium.

Mohammed Haque from Bangladesh, now living in Australia, was one of the lucky ticket holders. He waved a large Argentina flag as he walked toward the flood-lit stadium made of shipping containers, approaching it like a holy shrine.

"It's unbelievable," Haque said of seeing Messi for the first time. "I've actually been preparing for the

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 56 of 62

last two or three weeks for this. I had a sleepless night last night.”

Argentina has had a big following in Bangladesh since the days of Maradona, one of the greatest to play the game, and an icon to fans around the world.

“Diego Maradona, he was exceptional. And from then I just loved this country and especially the soccer every time,” Haque said. “Then later, (Gabriel) Batistuta, (Hernan) Crespo, every Argentine player, and now Messi is the legend.”

Bangladesh, India and Pakistan — where cricket is king — have never played a World Cup. So when the tournament comes along, many soccer fans typically root for Argentina or Brazil, soccer powerhouses admired for their attacking style of play and a long line of international stars, including Messi, Maradona and Pele.

Fans who had traveled from Argentina to support their team in Qatar were delighted with the support from non-Argentines.

“We love to see other countries showing their love for Messi and Maradona,” said Mauricio Neraj from Mendoza, Argentina. He posed for pictures next to the Messi and Maradona painting by Daga outside the stadium.

Argentina’s soccer federation praised the support from Bangladeshis on social media on Thursday.

“Thank you for supporting our team. You are as crazy as we are!” the federation said in a Twitter post with photos showing Bangladeshi fans wearing Argentina’s sky blue and white jersey.

Some of the South Asian fans in Qatar said they were deeply hurt by speculation on social media and in some Western media before the tournament that they were hired actors, paid by Qatar to fill the stadiums. The World Cup organizing committee rejected the reports as false.

“It is coming from the bottom of our hearts. It is not coming from any outside forcing or anything like that,” said Binoy John, an Indian worker in Qatar who has been an Argentina fan since childhood when he saw Maradona lead Argentina to win the 1986 World Cup. “All the fans are true fans. There is nothing like fake fans out here.”

Argentina has a following among Arab soccer fans, too. Messi-devotion brought Ahmed Qassim Nasher from Yemen to see his favorite player as Argentina advanced.

“Football is a festival, joy, celebrations. It connects people from different nationalities, different languages, and different ethnicities,” Nasher said. “You will find Arabs and non-Arabs coming to cheer for Messi. It’s common sense that he will have the best audience and fans, because he is the best player throughout history.”

Spain: numerous devices found after Ukrainian Embassy blast

By CIARÁN GILES Associated Press

MADRID (AP) — Police in Spain detonated a suspicious parcel discovered at the U.S. Embassy in Madrid, Spanish officials said Thursday, a day after a similar package sent to the Ukrainian Embassy ignited upon opening and injured an employee.

“We can confirm a suspicious package was received at the U.S. Embassy in Madrid, and are aware of reports of other packages sent to other locations throughout Spain,” the American embassy said in a response to an Associated Press inquiry.

“We are grateful to Spanish law enforcement for their assistance with this matter,” it added.

Spain’s police said the detonated parcel “contained substances similar to those used in pyrotechnics.”

The action followed police reporting that multiple explosive parcels were sent in Spain over the past two days. Police said they were delivered to Spain’s Defense Ministry, a European Union satellite center located at the Torrejón de Ardoz air base outside Madrid and to an arms factory in northeastern Spain that makes grenades sent to Ukraine.

Authorities said a bomb squad also destroyed an explosive device that was dispatched by regular post to Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez on Nov. 24.

Spain’s interior ministry, which is in charge of the country’s police forces, said that the envelope intercepted

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 57 of 62

at the American embassy's security screening point was "of similar characteristics as the previous ones." It was then detonated by authorities after a wide area was cordoned off by Spanish police around the embassy in the center of Spain's capital.

Spanish authorities have yet to determine who was responsible for the letters or link them to the war in Ukraine.

The Russian Embassy in Madrid on Thursday condemned the letter bombs, saying in a tweet that "any threat or terrorist attack, especially those directed at diplomatic missions, are totally condemnable."

The package sent to the Ukrainian Embassy was addressed to the country's ambassador to Spain, Serhii Pohoreltsev. The employee handling it was slightly injured when it burst into flames.

In an interview Wednesday following the blast, ambassador Pohoreltsev told European Pravda, a news website linked to the Ukrainska Pravda newspaper, that the explosion could have been more serious but for the professional behavior of the injured employee.

He said the parcel looked suspicious to the secretary of the ambassador because there was no return address and it did not look like a typical diplomatic post.

"The package contained a box, which caused suspicion to the commandant and he decided to take it outside – with no one in the vicinity – and open it. After opening the box and hearing a click that followed, he tossed it and then heard the explosion," said the ambassador.

The embassy employee was treated for light wounds on his hand and later returned to work.

Spain's National Court is investigating the incident as a terrorist act.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba ordered stepped-up security at all of Ukraine's foreign embassies abroad and asked his Spanish counterpart for a fast investigation.

Two further Ukrainian embassies received threatening letters on Wednesday, Kuleba said on the sidelines of a high-level security meeting in Lodz, Poland, on Thursday.

Kuleba added, without giving details, that "other disturbing events took place" on Wednesday, involving "the sending of very concrete threats to Ukrainian embassies." He declined to specify the embassies in question.

An initial assessment indicated the first five packages were likely sent from within Spain, Secretary of State for Security Rafael Pérez said. Police said all but one of the letter bombs were disposed of.

Pérez said the one intact explosive device was from the air base and that it and its packaging would be part of the investigation.

Officials said that package was sent to the director of the European Union Satellite Center. The center, known as SatCen, is an EU geospatial intelligence body, and its missions include monitoring Ukraine.

"The Spanish authorities were immediately alerted, they safely disabled the parcel and they have started their investigations," said Nabila Massrali, EU spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

"Nobody has been injured and the situation is under control."

The Defense Ministry package was addressed to Defense Minister Margarita Robles, Pérez said. Spain has contributed both military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine since the start of the Russian invasion.

Robles was visiting Ukraine on Thursday to support its defense effort with another aid bundle. Authorities did not provide details about the aid, saying they did not want to give away sensitive information to Russia's forces.

Robles said the disturbing discoveries of recent days would have no effect on Spain's full backing of Ukraine.

"The police are investigating these packages, but let one thing be perfectly clear," she said in Spanish. "None of these packages or any other violent act will change the clear and firm support that Spain and other NATO and EU countries have for Ukraine."

The arms factory targeted is located in the northeastern city of Zaragoza. The parcel was addressed to the factory's director.

A government official in Zaragoza said that both the arms factory and Ukrainian Embassy packages had the same email address listed as the sender. No further details were given.

The sending of small explosive devices in postal parcels is not uncommon in many countries. They were

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 58 of 62

a common occurrence for many years in Spain, especially during the most active years of the now-defunct armed Basque group ETA.

Pérez said security was increased at public buildings following the discovery of the package sent to Spain's prime minister. The move now has been extended to embassies, which already had extra security measures in place after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February.

Applications for jobless benefits decline last week

By MATT OTT AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits came back down last week, hovering near levels suggesting the U.S. labor market has been largely unaffected by the Federal Reserve's aggressive interest rate hikes.

Applications for jobless aid fell to 225,000 for the week ending Nov. 26, a decline of 16,000 from the previous week's 241,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday. The four-week moving average of claims, which evens out week-to-week swings, inched up by 1,750 to 227,000.

Applications for unemployment benefits are a proxy for layoffs, and viewed with other employment data, shows that American workers are enjoying extraordinary job security at the moment, despite an economy with some glaring weaknesses.

To combat inflation that hit four-decade highs earlier this year, the Federal Reserve has raised its benchmark interest rate six times since March. The housing market has buckled under the strain of mortgage rates that have more than doubled from a year ago. Many economists expect the United States to slip into a recession next year with more Fed rate hikes expected to increase borrowing costs and slow economic activity.

Early this month, the Fed raised its short-term lending rate by another 0.75 percentage points, three times its usual margin, for a fourth time this year. Its key rate now stands in a range of 3.75% to 4%, the highest in 15 years.

On Wednesday, Fed Chair Jerome Powell said the central bank would push interest rates higher than previously expected and keep them there for an extended period until inflation was under control. Powell did add that the size and pace of those increases could be scaled back from the jumbo three-quarters of a point increases the Fed made at its last four meetings.

In spite of persistent inflation and rapidly rising interest rates, U.S. employers added 261,000 jobs last month and are creating an average of nearly 407,000 a month this year. That pace would make 2022 the second-best year for hiring — after 2021 — in government records going back to 1940. There are nearly two job openings for every unemployed American. The unemployment rate is 3.7%, a couple of ticks above a half-century low.

The government issues its November jobs report on Friday.

New weekly applications for unemployment benefits have been extremely low early this year -- staying below 200,000 for much of February, March and April. They began to tick up in late spring and hit 261,000 in mid-July before trending lower again.

The Labor Department said Thursday that 1.61 million people were receiving jobless aid the week that ended Nov. 19, up 57,000 from the week before.

The tech and real estate sectors have been outliers in an otherwise robust employment market, with Facebook, Twitter, Amazon, DoorDash, Redfin and Compass all announcing significant layoffs in recent months.

Chinese users play cat-and-mouse with censors amid protests

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Videos of hundreds protesting in Shanghai started to appear on WeChat on Saturday night. Showing chants about removing COVID-19 restrictions and demanding freedom, they would stay up only a few minutes before being censored.

Elliot Wang, a 26-year-old in Beijing, was amazed.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 59 of 62

"I started refreshing constantly, and saving videos, and taking screenshots of what I could before it got censored," said Wang, who only agreed to be quoted using his English name, in fear of government retaliation. "A lot of my friends were sharing the videos of the protests in Shanghai. I shared them too, but they would get taken down quickly."

That Wang was able to glimpse the extraordinary outpouring of grievances highlights the cat-and-mouse game that goes on between millions of Chinese internet users and the country's gargantuan censorship machine.

Chinese authorities maintain a tight grip on the country's internet via a complex, multi-layered censorship operation that blocks access to almost all foreign news and social media, and blocks topics and keywords considered politically sensitive or detrimental to the Chinese Communist Party's rule. Videos of or calls to protest are usually deleted immediately.

But images of protests began to spread on WeChat, a ubiquitous Chinese social networking platform used by over 1 billion, in the wake of a deadly fire Nov. 24 in the northwestern city of Urumqi. Many suspected that lockdown measures prevented residents from escaping the flames, something the government denies.

The sheer number of unhappy Chinese users who took to the Chinese internet to express their frustration, together with the methods they used to evade censors, led to a brief period of time in which government censors were overwhelmed, according to Han Rongbin, an associate professor at the University of Georgia's International Affairs department.

"It takes censors some time to study what is happening and to add that to their portfolio in terms of censorship, so it's a learning process for the government on how to conduct censorship effectively," Han said.

In 2020, the death from COVID-19 of Li Wenliang, a doctor who was arrested for allegedly spreading rumors following an attempt to alert others about a "SARS-like" virus, sparked widespread outrage and an outpouring of anger against the Chinese censorship system. Users posted criticism for hours before censors moved to delete posts.

As censors took down posts related to the fire, Chinese internet users often used humor and metaphor to spread critical messages.

"Chinese netizens have always been very creative because every idea used successfully once will be discovered by censors the next time," said Liu Lipeng, a censor-turned-critic of China's censorship practices.

Chinese users started posting images of blank sheets of white paper, said Liu, in a silent reminder of words they weren't allowed to post.

Others posted sarcastic messages like "Good good good sure sure sure right right right yes yes yes," or used Chinese homonyms to evoke calls for President Xi Jinping to resign, such as "shrimp moss," which sounds like the words for "step down," and "banana peel," which has the same initials as Xi's name.

But within days, censors moved to contain images of white paper. They would have used a range of tools, said Chauncey Jung, a policy analyst who previously worked for several Chinese internet companies based in Beijing.

Most content censorship is not done by the state, Jung said, but outsourced to content moderation operations at private social media platforms, who use a mix of humans and AI. Some censored posts are not deleted, but may be made visible only to the author, or removed from search results. In some cases, posts with sensitive key phrases may be published after review.

A search on Weibo on Thursday for the term "white paper" mostly turned up posts that were critical of the protests, with no images of a single sheet of blank paper, or of people holding white papers at protests.

It's possible to access the global internet from China by using virtual private networks that disguise internet traffic, but these systems are illegal and many Chinese internet users access only the domestic internet. Wang does not use a VPN.

"I think I can say for all the mainlanders in my generation that we are really excited," said Wang. "But we're also really disappointed because we can't do anything. ... They just keep censoring, keep deleting, and even releasing fake accounts to praise the cops."

But the system works well enough to stop many users from ever seeing them. When protests broke out

across China over the weekend, Carmen Ou, who lives in Beijing, initially didn't notice.

Ou learned of the protests only later, after using a VPN service to access Instagram.

"I tried looking at my feed on WeChat, but there was no mention of any protests," she said. "If not for a VPN and access to Instagram, I might not have found out that such a monumental event had taken place."

Han, the international affairs professor, said censorship "doesn't have to be perfect to be effective."

"Censorship might be functioning to prevent a big enough size of the population from accessing the critical information to be mobilized," he said.

China's opaque approach to tamping down the spread of online dissent also makes it difficult to distinguish government campaigns from ordinary spam.

Searching Twitter using the Chinese words for Shanghai or other Chinese cities reveals protest videos, but also a near-constant flood of new posts showing racy photos of young women. Some researchers proposed that a state-backed campaign could be seeking to drown out news of the protests with "not safe for work" content.

A preliminary analysis by the Stanford Internet Observatory found lots of spam but no "compelling evidence" that it was specifically intended to suppress information or dissent, said Stanford data architect David Thiel.

"I'd be skeptical of anyone claiming clear evidence of government attribution," Thiel said in an email.

Twitter searches for more specific protest-related terms, such as "Urumqi Middle Road, Shanghai," produced mainly posts related to the protests.

Israeli data analysis firm Cyabra and another research group that shared analysis with the AP said it was hard to distinguish between a deliberate attempt to drown out protest information sought by the Chinese diaspora and a run-of-the-mill commercial spam campaign.

Twitter didn't respond to a request for comment. It hasn't answered media inquiries since billionaire Elon Musk took over the platform in late October and cut back much of its workforce, including many of those tasked with moderating spam and other content. Musk often tweets about how he's enacting or enforcing new Twitter content rules but hasn't commented on the recent protests in China.

Jamie Lee Curtis to receive AARP Career Achievement Award

LOS ANGELES (AP) — "Scream Queen" Jamie Lee Curtis will be this year's recipient of AARP The Magazine's Movies for Grownups Awards career achievement honor.

Curtis will receive the honor at the AARP's annual Best Movies and TV for Grownups ceremony, the group announced Thursday. Alan Cumming returns to host the ceremony, which will be telecast on "Great Performances" on PBS on Feb. 17 at 9 p.m. Eastern.

"Jamie Lee Curtis' longstanding, ever-increasing career shatters Hollywood's outmoded stereotypes about aging, and it exemplifies what AARP's Movies for Grownups program is all about," AARP CEO Jo Ann Jenkins said in a statement.

Since stepping into the role of Laurie Strode in "Halloween" in 1978, the 64-year-old horror queen starred in her last installment of the slasher series "Halloween Ends," and the blockbuster indie film, "Everything Everywhere All at Once" this year.

"We are delighted to honor Curtis, who at 19 became an iconic 'scream queen' in 'Halloween,' then grew up to be a master in comic and dramatic roles, too," Jenkins said.

Curtis, whose other credits include, "True Lies," "A Fish Called Wanda," "Freaky Friday," "Knives Out" and the television series "Scream Queens," is an Emmy nominee and a British Academy Film Award winner. Her films have, over her four-decade-long career, earned \$2.5 billion at the box office, the statement said.

The AARP's Movies for Grownups program champions movies that resonate with viewers 50 and over, and fights ageism in the entertainment industry. Previous honorees include Lily Tomlin, George Clooney, Annette Bening, Kevin Costner, Robert De Niro and Michael Douglas.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 61 of 62

Today in History: December 2, Senate condemns McCarthy

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Dec. 2, the 336th day of 2022. There are 29 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 2, 1954, the U.S. Senate passed, 67-22, a resolution condemning Republican Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin, saying he had "acted contrary to senatorial ethics and tended to bring the Senate into dishonor and disrepute."

On this date:

In 1823, President James Monroe outlined his doctrine opposing European expansion in the Western Hemisphere.

In 1859, militant abolitionist John Brown was hanged for his raid on Harpers Ferry the previous October.

In 1942, an artificially created, self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction was demonstrated for the first time at the University of Chicago.

In 1957, the Shippingport Atomic Power Station in Pennsylvania, the first full-scale commercial nuclear facility in the U.S., began operations. (The reactor ceased operating in 1982.)

In 1980, four American churchwomen were raped and murdered in El Salvador. (Five national guardsmen were convicted in the killings.)

In 1982, in the first operation of its kind, doctors at the University of Utah Medical Center implanted a permanent artificial heart in the chest of retired dentist Dr. Barney Clark, who lived 112 days with the device.

In 1993, Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar was shot to death by security forces in Medellin (meh-deh-YEEN').

In 2000, Al Gore sought a recount in South Florida, while George W. Bush flatly asserted, "I'm soon to be the president" and met with GOP congressional leaders.

In 2001, in one of the largest corporate bankruptcies in U.S. history, Enron filed for Chapter 11 protection.

In 2015, a couple loyal to the Islamic State group opened fire at a holiday banquet for public employees in San Bernardino, California, killing 14 people and wounding 21 others before dying in a shootout with police.

In 2016, a fire that raced through an illegally converted warehouse in Oakland, California, during a dance party killed 36 people.

In 2020, in a video released on social media, President Donald Trump stood before a White House lectern and delivered a 46-minute diatribe against the election results that produced a win for Democrat Joe Biden, unspooling one misstatement after another to back his baseless claim that he really won. Britain became the first country in the world to authorize a rigorously tested COVID-19 vaccine, giving the go-ahead for emergency use of the vaccine developed by American drugmaker Pfizer and Germany's BioNTech.

Ten years ago: Hundreds of concrete slabs, each weighing more than a ton, fell from the roof of a highway tunnel west of Tokyo, crushing vehicles below and killing nine people. Dustin Hoffman, David Letterman, Led Zeppelin, Chicago bluesman Buddy Guy and ballerina Natalia Makarova received Kennedy Center Honors.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump changed his story on why he fired Michael Flynn as his national security adviser, now suggesting that he knew at the time that Flynn had lied to the FBI about his contacts with Russians. ABC News suspended investigative reporter Brian Ross for four weeks without pay for an erroneous report about Flynn. (Ross had reported that then-candidate Trump had directed Flynn to make contact with the Russians; Ross clarified the report hours later, saying that his source now said Trump had not done so as a candidate, but as president-elect.)

One year ago: Nevada's Supreme Court ruled unanimously that gun manufacturers could not be held responsible for the deaths in the 2017 mass shooting on the Las Vegas Strip because a state law shielded them from liability unless the weapon malfunctioned. Jason Meade, the Ohio sheriff's deputy who shot Casey Goodson Jr. in the back five times as the Black man entered his grandmother's house, was charged with murder, as Goodson's family also filed a federal civil rights lawsuit. (Meade has pleaded not guilty.)

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 02, 2022 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 147 ~ 62 of 62

Major League Baseball plunged into its first work stoppage in a quarter-century when the sport's collective bargaining agreement expired and owners immediately locked out players. (An agreement would end the lockout after 99 days; the start of the season was delayed by about a week.)

Today's Birthdays: Former Attorney General Edwin Meese III is 91. Actor Cathy Lee Crosby is 78. Movie director Penelope Spheeris is 77. Actor Ron Raines is 73. Country singer John Wesley Ryles is 72. Actor Keith Szarabajka is 70. Actor Dan Butler is 68. Broadcast journalist Stone Phillips is 68. Actor Dennis Christopher is 67. Actor Steven Bauer is 66. Country singer Joe Henry is 62. Rock musician Rick Savage (Def Leppard) is 62. Actor Brendan Coyle is 59. Rock musician Nate Mendel (Foo Fighters) is 54. Actor Suzy Nakamura is 54. Actor Rena Sofer is 54. Rock singer Jimi (cq) HaHa (Jimmie's Chicken Shack) is 54. Actor Lucy Liu (loo) is 54. U.S. Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough is 53. Rapper Treach (Naughty By Nature) is 52. Actor Joe Lo Truglio is 52. International Tennis Hall of Famer Monica Seles is 49. Singer Nelly Furtado is 44. Pop singer Britney Spears is 41. Actor-singer Jana Kramer is 39. Actor Yvonne Orji is 39. Actor Daniela Ruah (roo-ah) is 39. NFL quarterback Aaron Rodgers is 39. Actor Alfred Enoch is 34. Pop singer-songwriter Charlie Puth is 31.