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Groton Community Calendar

Thursday, Jan. 5

Senior Menu: Tater tot hot dish, green beans, grape juice, apple crisp, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.
School Lunch: Chicken sandwich, fries.
Girls Basketball hosts Clark/Willow Lake: C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity.
Emmanuel: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.

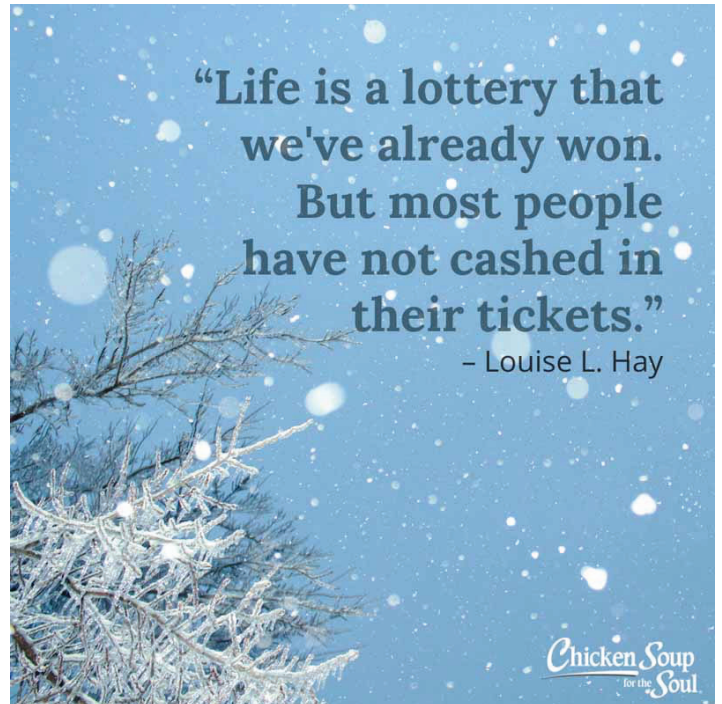
Friday, Jan. 6

Senior Menu: Ham and bean soup, egg salad sandwich, fresh fruit, cookie.
School Breakfast: Biscuits and jelly.
School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.
Boys Basketball at Clark: C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and then varsity.
Middle School Wrestling at Milbank, 5 p.m.

Saturday, Jan. 7

Wrestling at Garretson Invitational, 8 a.m.

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



Basketball hosts Sioux Falls Lutheran, Boys JV at 1 p.m., Girls JV at 2 p.m., Boys Varsity to follow. No Varsity girls game.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Sunday, Jan. 8

Open Gym: Grades JK-8; 2 p.m. to 3:30 p.m., Grades 6-12; 3:30 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:45 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.

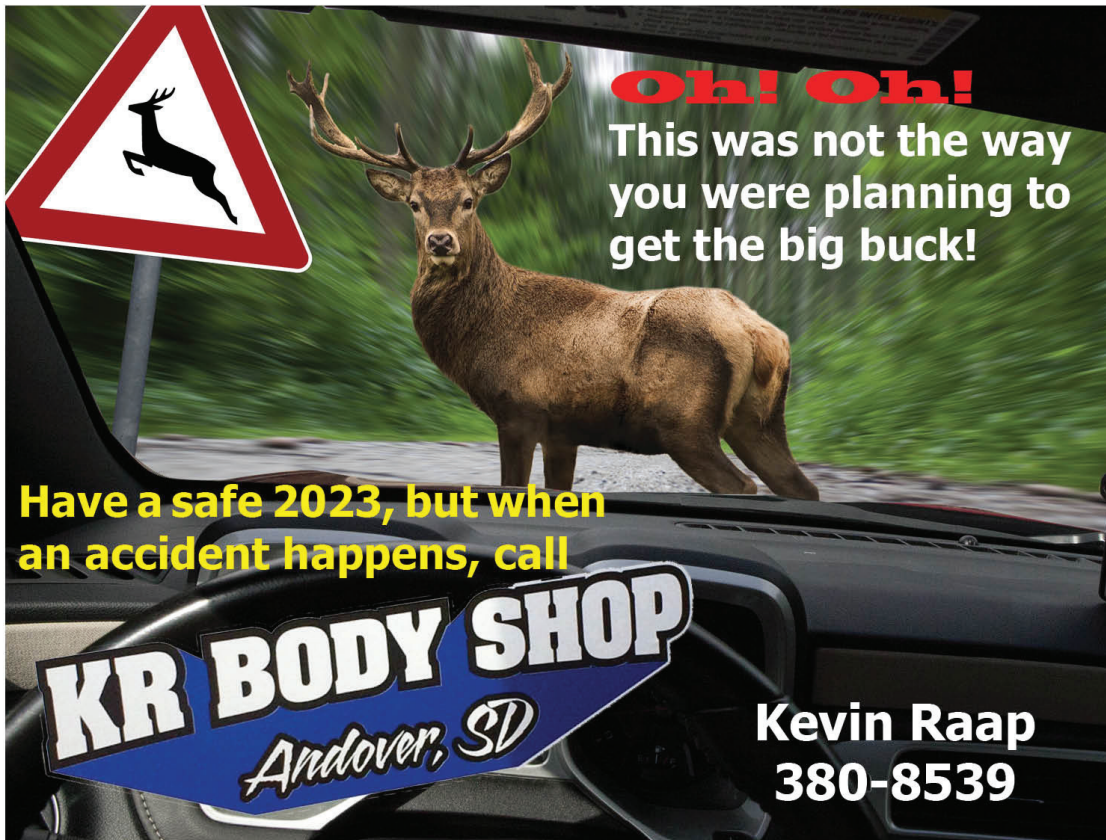
OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Oh! Oh!
This was not the way
you were planning to
get the big buck!

Have a safe 2023, but when
an accident happens, call

KR BODY SHOP
Andover, SD

Kevin Raap
380-8539

*Happy
New
Year!*



**Krueger Brothers Road Maintenance,
Gravel & Dirt**

Dave: 397-8387 ~ Roger & Dan: 397-2618

GDILIVE.COM

Girls Basketball

Thursday, Jan. 5, 2023

Clark/Willow Lake at Groton Area



**Livestreaming
C game at 5 p.m.**

Sponsored by Weber Landscaping

Junior Varsity Game to follow

Sponsored by Mr. Anonymous

followed by Varsity Game

Sponsored by

Bary Keith at Harr Motors

Bierman Farm Service

Blocker Construction

Dacotah Bank

Groton Chamber of Commerce

Groton Ford

John Sieh Agency

Locke Electric

Spanier Harvesting & Trucking

Bahr Spray Foam

Thunder Seed with John Wheeting

Anyone wanting to sponsor a JV or C game, Call/Text Paul at 605-397-7460

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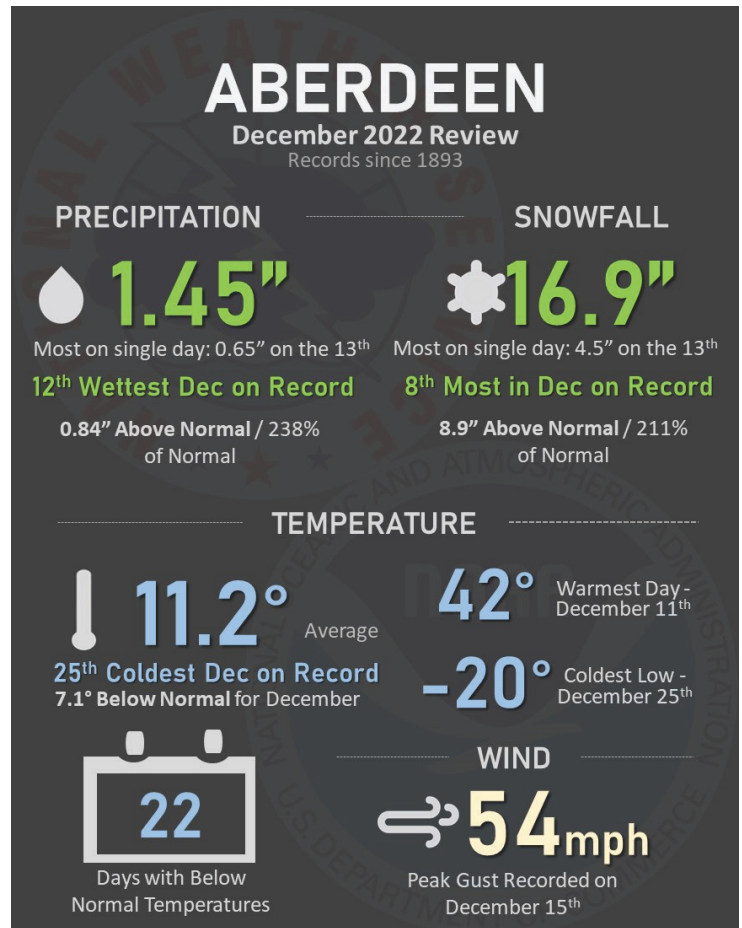
December 18-24th, 2022 Arctic Blast and Ground Blizzard

On the heels of a major winter storm just a week before on Dec 12-16th, Arctic cold air settled in across the region beginning on Sunday the 18th with high temperatures for most of 5 degrees or colder each of the next consecutive 6 days through the 24th. Low temperatures dropped into the minus teens. An unusually potent blast of cold air for December followed in behind a reinforcing Arctic front Tuesday night, Dec 20th, into Wednesday, Dec 21st, along with a trace to as much as 2 to 3" of new snowfall on top of the pre-existing snow pack. Wind gusts of 35 to 55 mph behind this front impacted the region from the 21st through the 23rd, resulting in an extended period of life-threatening wind chills in the -35 to -60 degree F range and ground blizzard conditions. A ground blizzard is a blizzard, but does not involve any new falling snow.

The extreme cold made the threat to stranded motorists even more dangerous, as numerous roads became impassable. Nearly the entire state was virtually shut down, for the second time this December, as roads were either deemed "No Travel Advised" or closed by the SDDOT. I29 closed from 6pm CST on Thu Dec 22nd from Sioux Falls to the ND state line until 9am on Fri Dec 23rd from Sioux Falls to Watertown and until noon from Watertown to the ND state line, and I90 closed from Rapid City to Chamberlain from 6pm MST on Wed Dec 21st until 2:30pm on Fri Dec 23rd from Rapid City to Murdo and until 4pm from Murdo to Mitchell. Additional impacts commonly included school closures. Governor Noem declared a Winter Storm Emergency on Dec 22nd, which activated the SD National Guard and allowed assistance from the state to county governments as needed.

This storm system was wide-reaching, impacting much of the eastern two-thirds of the United States with dangerous cold and precipitation. Among the hardest-hit was Erie County in New York State, which includes Buffalo. As of Dec 29th, 39 people were reported to have perished in the storm there.

December 2022 will go down in the books as having been cold and snowy, thanks in large part to a couple of potent winter storm systems in the middle and later parts of the month. Find all the details for select locations in the graphics below. Some of the highlights include: Pierre recorded their 4th wettest and 3rd snowiest December on record, Mobridge recorded their 5th wettest December on record, Sisseton recorded their 5th wettest and 2nd snowiest December on record, Kennebec recorded their 2nd wettest and 3rd snowiest December on record, Timber Lake recorded their 4th wettest and 3rd snowiest December on record, and Wheaton recorded their 2nd wettest December on record.





SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

1 million free COVID tests, one year later: Some used, some not, some nearly thrown out

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 4, 2023 5:38 PM

Mellette County Emergency Manager Karen O'Brien has hundreds of unused, free COVID-19 tests sitting in a box in her office.

With COVID-19 still circulating across South Dakota and the country, she'd gladly hand them out to any residents of the rural, south-central South Dakota county who want them. But they expired in November, according to the box.

She nearly threw them away — along with thousands of taxpayer dollars — until South Dakota Searchlight informed her that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration extended the expiration dates on the tests through August.

The tests were part of the state Department of Health's January 2022 initiative to distribute 1 million free Flowflex Antigen COVID-19 tests across South Dakota, paid for with \$7 million in federal funding. The state sent the tests to pharmacies, schools, public libraries, county courthouses, airports, food banks and other publicly accessible locations.

While distributors like O'Brien say the initiative was a public benefit to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, they also said they received little direction from the state on how to distribute the tests, were not informed that the tests' shelf life was extended by nearly a year and were not told they could request more tests once they ran out.

The state Department of Health does not have a public list of local distribution sites for people to find tests. It is unknown if other local distributors have mistakenly thrown away seemingly expired tests that are actually still authorized for use.

Other sites, like the Rapid City Public Library, were recently handing tests out "by the bag" to companies and individuals — hoping to distribute over 1,200 tests before their printed expiration dates, said Laurinda Tapper, who handles public relations at the library.

"We knew that they were expiring in December, so we wanted to get them into the hands of people who were going to use them before we couldn't distribute them any longer," Tapper said.

Tapper was informed by a library worker just weeks before the printed expiration date arrived that the shelf life was extended.

The tests the library rushed to hand out don't expire until September.

Feds, state still offering free COVID-19 tests

ACON Laboratories, which developed the Flowflex COVID-19 Antigen Home Test, announced in mid-November that its test shelf-life was extended by the FDA from 12 months to 21 months after testing product stability.

Future shelf-life expiration date extensions will be shared as they become available, the company added in its news release.

While some of the local distribution sites handed out the majority of their tests throughout the year, there's no easy way to know how many of the tests have gone unused or were thrown away, since many of the sites passed them on to other organizations to distribute, such as churches, food banks or fire stations.

State Department of Health spokesperson Kieran Tate did not say how many tests have not been distributed yet, but said the state "maintains an inventory of COVID-19 test kits" and will "continue to distribute

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them until they are gone.”

“While the initial distribution goal of 1 million test kits was planned as a one-time event, DOH continues to partner with healthcare providers, K-12 schools, and other groups to make COVID-19 tests available throughout South Dakota,” Tate said in an emailed statement.

The department will send more test kits to counties, businesses, municipalities and schools at their request, which can be done by emailing COVIDResourceRequests@state.sd.us. South Dakotans can also access free COVID-19 testing through the DOH website.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration is once again offering free, mail-order, at-home COVID-19 rapid tests. The program had ended amid an ongoing stalemate with Congress over additional funding to address the virus.

The program will allow each household to order four free COVID-19 tests as part of the White House’s plans to try to tamp down the number of diagnoses this winter amid an increase in coronavirus, flu and RSV.

The free COVID-19 test kits can be ordered through [COVIDTests.gov](https://www.covidtests.gov) or by calling 1-800-232-0233 between 8 a.m. and midnight Eastern.

Program gave little direction to distribution centers

Demand for the 1 million free tests in South Dakota was high at some of the distribution centers early in 2022, when COVID-19 was near its peak. But demand quickly dwindled into the spring and summer months.

Rapid City Public Library received about 17,000 tests in February 2022 and managed to whittle them down to 1,200 by early December. South Dakota State University started with about 15,000 and has about 7,500 left to distribute to campus staff, faculty and students.

Vermillion Public Library received over 2,000 tests, and Mellette County received somewhere between 600 and 900 tests, O’Brien estimated. The demand wasn’t that high for tests in the rural South Dakota county, she added, which is why she nearly threw out hundreds of “expired” tests in December.

“We should maybe have gotten 100 or so tests to start with, and then if we were running low we’d get more later instead of giving everybody so many to start with,” O’Brien said. “Fifty probably would have been enough for our county because there’s not that many people here, and if we needed more we could just ask for more.”

But even with thousands of tests being distributed right away, several distribution sites didn’t realize they could request more from the state, they said. The Vermillion Public Library gave tests to a nearby community center that quickly ran out, and then relied on a box of tests handed down from the University of South Dakota instead of asking the state Department of Health for more, Library Director Daniel Burniston said.

One of the sites that did order more tests throughout the year was Brookings County Emergency Management. Emergency Manager and County Development Director Robert Hill requested three more shipments after his original supply ran out in early 2022. He plans to request more in the next few weeks.

“I didn’t know if we could order more at first,” Hill said. “But I still had people contacting us about the tests, so I went through the Department of Health and they said, ‘by all means, if the public wants them and you have a way of giving them out, we’ll assist the public.’”

He’s distributed more than 3,300 kits since February — over 1,000 of which he requested from the state throughout the year.

Free at-home tests benefit to the community, distributors say

Overall, distributors throughout the state believe the program was a worthwhile investment of taxpayer money and are supportive of making public health and safety measures more affordable and accessible to South Dakotans.

Free tests make it easier for people to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, Burniston said, and keeping them at public places like libraries is more accessible than at pharmacies or other offices with more limited hours. The Vermillion library is open seven days a week, typically until 9 p.m.

The same is true for the Rapid City Public Library, which is typically open until 6 or 7 p.m.

“I think the most important thing about the COVID-19 tests is the access,” Tapper said. “Libraries offer access to technology and knowledge. How many of the people who use the library in Rapid City don’t have \$10 to get a test or the means to get to Monument Health to take a test? This was a value to our

community.”

As COVID-19 continues to spread across the state and becomes a seasonal disease alongside RSV and influenza, continuing to provide free at-home COVID-19 test kits could be a benefit, said Katie Wick, clinical initiatives manager with the City of Sioux Falls Health Department. The department received two boxes each containing 288 tests from the state, as well as thousands more free test kits from the federal government.

“I think the public would still take advantage of those tests and it might ease the burden on the health care system as well,” Wick said. “Instead of people making an appointment or going through a drive-thru, they can take advantage of these kits.”

The state has not said if it will continue funding programs like this in the future.

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.

COMMENTARY

The energy gap nobody wants to tussle with

by DAVE MARSTON

Many Western states have declared they will achieve all-renewable electrical goals in just two decades. Call me naïve, but haven't energy experts predicted that wind, sun and other alternative energy sources aren't up to the job?

Alice Jackson, former CEO of Xcel Energy's Colorado operation, was blunt at a renewable energy conference in February 2020: “We can reliably run our grid with up to 70% renewables. Add batteries to the mix and that number goes up to just 72%.”

Grid experts now say that Jackson's number is 80%, but still, how will that utility and others produce that missing power?

Bill Gates and a raft of other entrepreneurs see the answer in small, modular nuclear reactors, pointing to the small nuclear engines that have safely run America's nuclear submarines for decades.

Here's what we know about these efficient reactors: They're built in factories, and once in operation they're cheap to keep going. Each module is typically 50 megawatts, self-contained, and installed underground after being transported to its site. The modular design means that when more power is needed, another reactor can be slotted in.

Breakthrough features include safety valves that automatically send coolant to the reactor if heat spikes. This feature alone could have eliminated disasters like Fukushima or Chernobyl, where water pumps failed and cores started melting down.

If small nuclear modules don't fill the renewables gap, where else to find the “firm power” that Jackson says is needed? The Sierra Club calls on pumped hydro and geothermal as sources of reliable electricity you can just flip on when renewables slow down. But the best geothermal spots have been taken, and pumped hydro has geographic limits, and environmental resistance.

Another proposal is linking grids across the country for more efficiency. The idea is that excess wind blowing in Texas could be tapped after the sun goes down on California's solar farms. This holds incremental promise but progress has been routinely blocked by conservative lawmakers.

There's also the cost argument — that renewables are cheaper. In a fossil-fuel-dominated grid that's true. However, MIT points out that as renewables dominate the grid, on-demand forms of power rise in value.

The extreme danger to the grid is the dreaded “dunkelflaute,” a German word for cloudy, windless weather that slashes solar and wind power generation for weeks.

So the problem remains: To avoid rolling blackouts, we need reliable power at the right times, which are usually from 5 to 8 p.m. That's when people come home and fire up their gadgets and appliances.

The increasing demand for electricity only adds to the problem: A 2020 Washington Post article predicted that electrification of the economy by 2050 would result in a usage bump of 38%, mostly from vehicles.

Consider Ford's all-electric F150 Lightning, cousin to the bestselling gasoline F150. The \$39,000 entry-level truck was designed to replace gasoline generators at job sites, meaning vehicle recharge happens when workers go home, just as renewables flag.

This calls into question what many experts hope car batteries can provide — doing double duty by furnishing peak power for homes at night.

Longer-lasting storage batteries have long been touted as a savior, though Tara Righetti, co-director of the Nuclear Energy Research Center at the University of Wyoming, has reservations. "There are high hopes that better batteries will be developed. But in terms of what is technically accessible right now? I think nuclear provides an appealing option."

Meanwhile, small nuclear reactors are underway, with Bill Gates' TerraPower building a sodium-cooled fast reactor in the coal town of Kemmerer, Wyoming. One 345-megawatt reactor, which generates enough electricity for 400,000 homes, will be paired with a molten-salt, heat storage facility.

Think of it as a constantly recharging battery in the form of stored heat. In the evening as renewable power flags, it would pump out 500 megawatts of power for up to 5 hours.

These reactors also tackle the little-known problem of cold-starting the electrical grid after an outage. In 2003, suffering a blackout, the Eastern grid could not have restarted with renewables alone.

However we choose to close the energy gap, there's no time to lose. Wild temperature swings have grid operators increasingly nervous. California has come close to rolling blackouts, and temperatures in the West now break record after record.

As our climate becomes more erratic, reliable electricity is becoming a matter of life and death.

Dave Marston is the publisher of Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He lives in Colorado.

U.S. House paralyzed following second day of GOP failure to elect a speaker

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT AND ASHLEY MURRAY - JANUARY 4, 2023 3:18 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House adjourned without a speaker for the second day in a row Wednesday as Republicans' stalemate over who should lead the chamber for the next two years dragged on, with Kevin McCarthy failing to get the votes needed to become speaker on three more ballots.

The 216-214 vote to adjourn until noon on Thursday came after the House adjourned from around 4:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. Eastern to give McCarthy and his opponents more time to negotiate a path forward during a closed-door meeting.

The talks were unsuccessful, and Oklahoma Republican Tom Cole moved for the House to adjourn again as soon as it came back for the night-time session.

Without a speaker, lawmakers' only two options are voting for a speaker or adjourning.

The second day of floor votes saw 21 GOP lawmakers vote against McCarthy, despite ongoing efforts to turn members to his side. That was an increase of one from Tuesday, with Indiana's Victoria Spartz now voting present.

Until McCarthy wins enough votes, or the House elects another speaker, members-elect cannot be sworn in, meaning that while the 118th Congress is technically underway, the House has no members and no agreed-upon rules under which to operate, such as how legislation is brought to the floor. The clerk of the House has been conducting the proceedings.

Nebraska's Don Bacon said late Wednesday afternoon that some Republicans are putting together a back-up plan.

"There's a group of us that know that plan B has to be worked on," Bacon said on a call hosted by D.C.-based political organization No Labels, which advocates for bipartisanship.

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Bacon wouldn't reveal details about negotiations on a compromise candidate for House speaker. "We can't be public about it for the time being," he said.

A social media post by former Republican President Donald Trump in the morning didn't sway the hold-outs to McCarthy's side when the chamber came into session at noon.

"Republicans, do not turn a great triumph into a giant & embarrassing defeat," Trump wrote, adding that McCarthy would do a "good job, and maybe even a great job."

Colorado Republican Lauren Boebert, a McCarthy opponent, called on Trump to reverse course during a floor speech in the afternoon, saying that the party should work together and "stop with the campaign smears and tactics to get people to turn against us."

"Even having my favorite president call us and tell us we need to knock this off," Boebert said. "I think it actually needs to be reversed. The president needs to tell Kevin McCarthy that, sir, you do not have the votes and it's time to withdraw."

McCarthy said before the floor votes that Republicans plan to keep talking and that he had the "same game plan as yesterday."

"We'll find an agreement where we all get together, and we'll work through this," McCarthy told reporters around noon.

On a call with select Republicans on Wednesday morning, McCarthy touted his support from Trump, according to a GOP aide.

"I'm not going anywhere," McCarthy said on the call that he led with Majority Leader Steve Scalise of Louisiana and GOP Whip Tom Emmer of Minnesota.

Adjournment unsuccessful in unifying GOP

The House held three votes for speaker on Tuesday before the chamber adjourned for the night in an unsuccessful attempt for Republicans to unify around a candidate.

McCarthy lost the backing of 19 members on the first two votes before Florida's Byron Donalds joined the group of lawmakers opposing McCarthy's bid for speaker during the third ballot, bringing the toll of opponents to 20.

McCarthy needs the backing of at least 218 House members, a challenging task at the moment, given he can only lose four votes amid House Republicans' especially narrow majority. That means McCarthy and his backers need to get at least 17 of the 21 members who voted against him Wednesday to change their minds.

Floridian backed for speaker

The GOP lawmakers opposing McCarthy rallied around Florida's Donalds as their preferred candidate on the fourth, fifth and sixth ballots Wednesday, moving away from pushing for Ohio's Jim Jordan during the second and third ballots on Tuesday.

Texas Republican Chip Roy got a standing ovation from the entire House chamber when he noted that nominating Donalds for speaker, along with Democrats' nomination of New York Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, represented "the first time in history there have been two Black Americans placed into the nomination for speaker of the House."

The House held a second full standing ovation after Roy said that "we do not seek to judge people by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

But the GOP split over who should hold the speaker's gavel continued throughout the afternoon with the vast majority of the House Republican Conference pressing for McCarthy — both during floor speeches and in what appeared to be tense conversations on the House floor.

Wisconsin's Mike Gallagher, who nominated McCarthy on the fourth ballot, argued that the disagreement among Republicans was part of the democratic process, a clear attempt to rebuff criticism the party is in disarray.

"Sure it looks messy, but democracy is messy," Gallagher said. "That's a feature, not a bug of our system. We air it all out, in the open for the American people to see."

The floor speeches, however, didn't move Republicans any closer to actually electing a speaker.

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McCarthy for the moment is staying put in the speaker's race with the backing of 201 members of his conference.

Opponent list

Those voting for a speaker other than McCarthy were: Andy Biggs of Arizona, Dan Bishop of North Carolina, Boebert of Colorado, Josh Brecheen of Oklahoma, Michael Cloud of Texas, Andrew Clyde of Georgia, Eli Crane of Arizona, Donalds of Florida, Matt Gaetz of Florida, Bob Good of Virginia, Paul Gosar of Arizona, Andy Harris of Maryland, Anna Luna of Florida, Mary Miller of Illinois, Ralph Norman of South Carolina, Andrew Ogles of Tennessee, Scott Perry of Pennsylvania, Matt Rosendale of Montana, Roy of Texas and Keith Self of Texas.

Spartz, a potential candidate for an open U.S. Senate seat in Indiana in 2024, voted present.

Spartz said in a written statement that she changed her vote because House Republicans need to negotiate "until we have enough votes and stop wasting everyone's time."

"None of the Republican candidates have this number yet," she said. "That's why I voted present after all the votes were cast."

President Joe Biden, when asked about the process Wednesday morning before leaving for a trip to Kentucky where he was joined by Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, said it is "embarrassing" House Republicans hadn't elected a speaker.

"This is not a good look, this is not a good thing" for the country," Biden said. "I hope they get their act together."

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.

Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.

Trump fixation on Wisconsin, Ginni Thomas text regrets and more from the Jan. 6 panel

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - JANUARY 4, 2023 1:59 PM

In the final weeks of 2022, the Democrat-led U.S. House committee investigating the Jan. 6, attack on the Capitol disclosed thousands of pages of transcripts of interviews the panel's members and staff conducted with key witnesses.

The transcripts were central to a committee report released in December that held Donald Trump responsible for the 2021 insurrection and referred the former president to the U.S. Justice Department for criminal prosecution.

The voluminous deposition transcripts also revealed other details about what the committee described as a multipart scheme to overturn the 2020 presidential election.

Here are four things you may have missed from deep in the transcripts:

Trump continued to press state officials long after Jan. 6.

Wisconsin Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, a Republican, told the committee about Trump's pressure campaign to find fraud in the 2020 election long after President Joe Biden took office.

Vos, who has held that office since 2013, didn't speak with Trump between the 2020 election and August 2021, he testified in a Nov. 30, 2022, interview. But the two spoke by phone about 10 times from August 2021 to July 2022, he said.

In those calls, Trump was not nearly as explicit or persistent with Vos as he was with state officials in other parts of the country in the two months between the election and the Capitol attack. But Trump remained fixated on an investigation into potential fraud.

"He did not give any specific recommendations," Vos said in a deposition. "I believe that he would have liked us to use the things that we discovered to show that there were problems with the 2020 election.

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But he never specifically said to me, 'You need to overturn the election.'"

Trump spent a lot of time in those calls complaining of what he perceived to be problems in the 2020 election. He left Vos with the impression that a finding of wide scale fraud in 2021 or 2022 could undo the election.

Vos was sympathetic to Trump's complaints about voter fraud and told the former president he would seek legislative remedies to prevent issues in the future. But the Wisconsin speaker told Trump "more than once" that nothing could be done about the 2020 results.

Trump felt the election was unfair, and the result could not be justified, Vos said.

"He wanted us to go backwards to try and look and see what we could do about 2020," Vos said. "I have consistently said we need to look forward, that it's unconstitutional and impossible for us to go back to what occurred in 2020."

Vos said he was not involved in efforts to advance false slates of electors, who would cast the state's Electoral College votes for Trump, including in Wisconsin.

Ginni Thomas regretted her texts, but maintained election doubts

Virginia L. "Ginni" Thomas, a conservative activist with Nebraska roots who is married to U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, said in a Sept. 29, 2022, interview with the panel that she regretted the tone and content of her texts urging Mark Meadows, the White House chief of staff and a former Republican U.S. House member from North Carolina, to work to overturn the election.

"I would take them all back if I could today," she told committee member Adam Schiff, a California Democrat. "I'm not comfortable with any of them being — I wish I could have rewritten them. I wish I didn't send them... It was just an emotional time."

Thomas also said she still reserved doubts about the integrity of the election.

Thomas said that prior to the committee's revelations, she had been unaware that campaign and administration officials, including Attorney General Bill Barr and White House Counsel Pat Cipollone, had rejected claims of fraud. Asked by committee Vice Chair Liz Cheney, a Wyoming Republican, if Barr or Cipollone's comments or the Trump campaign's losses in 61 of 62 court cases would have changed her mind, she said no.

"Honestly, I don't think it would have," Thomas said. "There's a lot of people uncomfortable with the 2020 election despite what this committee is pushing. Okay? I just think there's still concern ... I still believed that there was fraud and irregularity, as millions of Americans do, Representative Cheney."

Thomas also expressed some annoyance at her texts with Meadows becoming public. Clarence Thomas was unaware of his spouse's communications with Meadows or the details of her "post-election activities," she said.

"He was completely unaware of the texts that I had with Mark Meadows until this committee leaked them to the press while my husband was in a hospital bed in March fighting an infection," she said.

"I don't know how many of you would want your texts to become public on the front page of The Washington Post," she said. "Certainly I didn't want my emotional texts to a friend released and made available."

Cassidy Hutchinson was among the most helpful witnesses

Before this summer, Hutchinson was a little-known aide to Meadows. But she delivered one of the committee's most captivating moments, appearing as a surprise witness in a hastily organized hearing.

Hutchinson's hearing testimony — when she described scenes of an infuriated Trump attempting to have metal detectors removed, grabbing a steering wheel from Secret Service agents and whipping his lunch against a White House wall that was left dripping with ketchup — was among the most explosive of any the panel heard in its series of seven hearings in June and July.

But the transcripts released in December show Hutchinson was also among the committee's most valuable witnesses outside the hearing room.

She met with the panel six times — more than any other witness — and provided details about Trump's legal strategy after the attack that other witnesses did not.

The committee interviewed Hutchinson three times while she was represented by her initial Trump-aligned

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attorney, Stefan Passantino, and three times after she'd replaced him.

In her later interviews, she told the panel Passantino had instructed her to downplay her knowledge and omit details.

"The less the committee thinks you know, the better, the quicker it's going to go," she said Passantino told her. ""Your go-to, Cass, is 'I don't recall.'"

Meadows was a two-time no-show

Hutchinson's White House boss, Meadows, never appeared before the committee, though he was scheduled for two interviews.

At the time of the first scheduled interview on Nov. 12, 2021, Meadows had not complied with the subpoena for records, claiming as a member of the executive branch he could not be compelled to testify.

The committee still provided a transcript for the second scheduled meeting, on Dec. 8, which consisted only of a committee staffer explaining the situation. The staffer said Meadows had agreed to the deposition as part of his cooperation with the subpoena, for which he also provided 6,600 pages of documents and 2,000 text messages.

The staffer said Meadows had dropped his earlier assertion of executive privilege to avoid answering all questions and the panel expected him only to raise privilege in response to certain questions, which the staffer said would have been valuable.

"We are disappointed in Mr. Meadows' failure to appear as planned, as it deprives the select committee of an opportunity to develop relevant information in Mr. Meadows' possession and to, more specifically, understand the contours of his executive privilege claim," the staffer said.

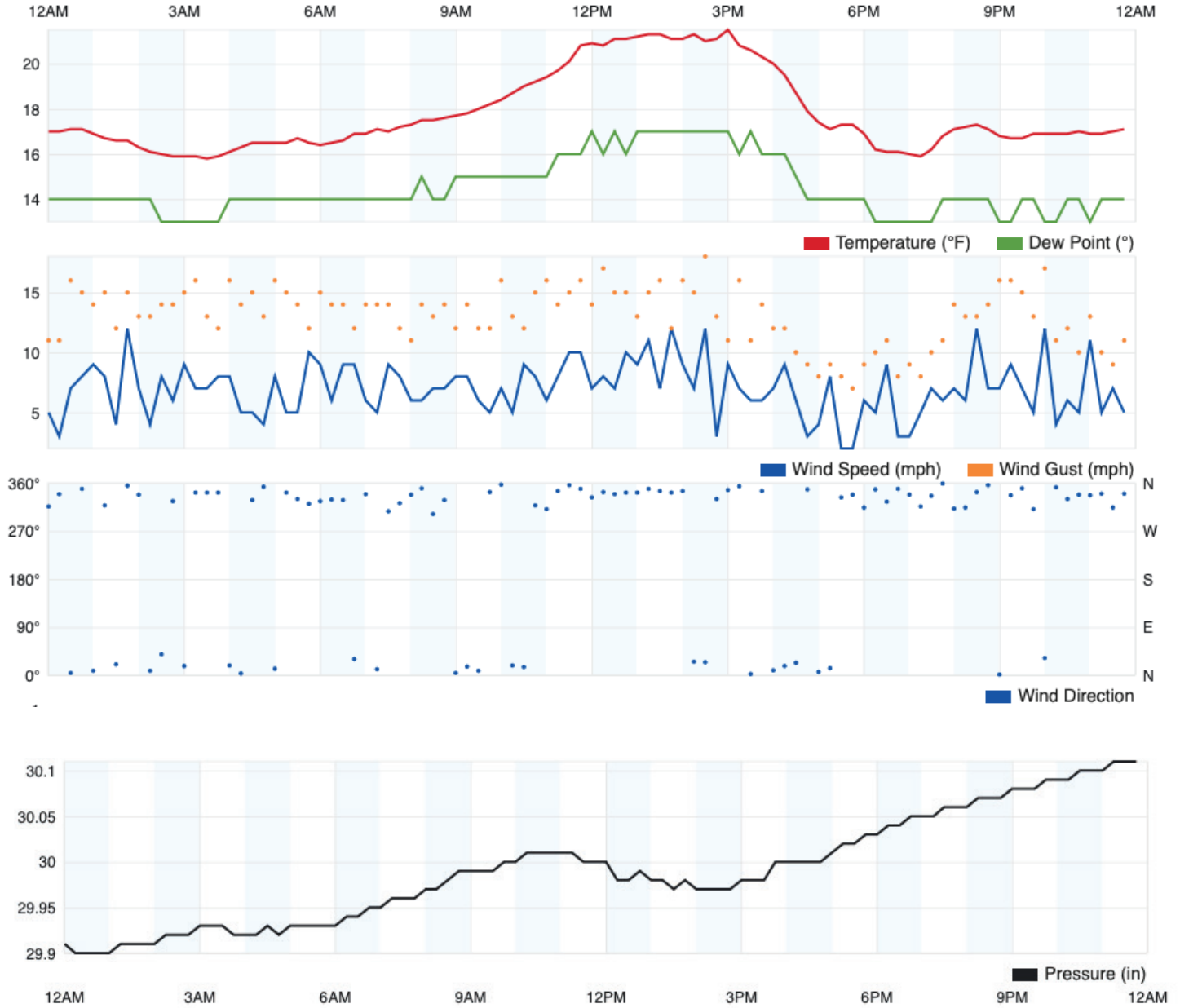
The House voted in December 2021 to hold Meadows in contempt for failing to cooperate with the committee.

Jacob covers federal policy as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.

Groton Daily Independent



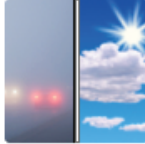




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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs








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Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
						
Mostly Sunny	Partly Cloudy then Patchy Fog	Patchy Fog then Mostly Sunny	Patchy Fog	Partly Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny
High: 22 °F	Low: -1 °F	High: 16 °F	Low: -1 °F	High: 22 °F	Low: 4 °F	High: 26 °F

Seasonal Temperatures and Dry

Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday
				
Morning Fog	Morning Fog	Morning Fog		
HI: 16 to 31	HI: 15 to 21 LO: 0 to 9	HI: 15 to 28 LO: 0 to 10	HI: 22 to 35 LO: 3 to 10	HI: 24 to 35 LO: 7 to 17

Updated: 1/5/2023 2:50 AM Central
NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

'Warmer' range for central SD & 'Colder' range for far northeast South Dakota and western Minnesota

Seasonal temperatures and dry conditions are expected through the next few days. Only real weather will be some morning fog we will have to contend with over the next few days.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 22 °F at 2:55 PM

Low Temp: 16 °F at 2:37 AM

Wind: 18 mph at 2:26 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 55 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 63 in 2012

Record Low: -32 in 1924

Average High: 24°F

Average Low: 3°F

Average Precip in Jan.: 0.10

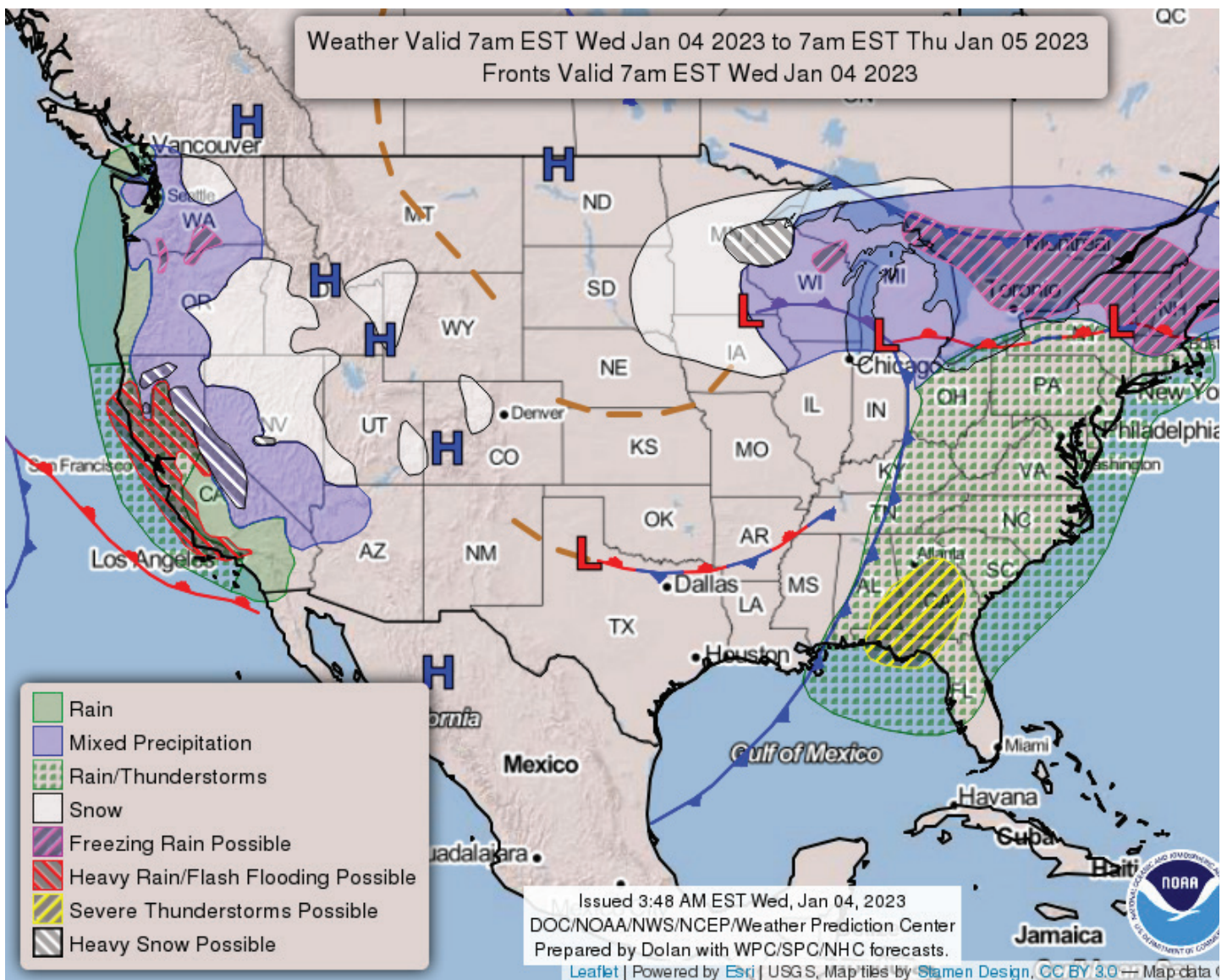
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.10

Precip Year to Date: 0.00

Sunset Tonight: 5:05:21 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:10:05 AM



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Today in Weather History

January 5, 1994: A low-pressure system traveled from the Dakotas, across southern Minnesota, and to the Great Lakes Region, from the late morning of the 5th, through the early evening of the 7th. By the early evening hours on the 7th, up to three and one-half feet of snow had fallen along the higher terrain of Lake Superior. The storm also produced heavy snow across parts of central Minnesota. Six inches or more occurred across much of central Minnesota. In west-central Minnesota, Wheaton and Artichoke Lake received 5 inches, with 6 inches at Browns Valley.

January 5, 2012: Numerous record high temperatures were broken across central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota throughout the week. Some of the records were broken by as much as 12 to 17 degrees and held 80 to 90 years. Aberdeen surpassed their record high for January by 3 degrees with 63 degrees on Thursday, January 5th. Kennebec tied their all-time record high for January with 70 degrees on January 5th.

1880: Snow began falling in Seattle, Washington, and would continue for much of the week. When it was over, more than 5 feet of snow was recorded.

1884: One of only two days in history during which the temperature at Louisville, Kentucky, never rose above zero. The low was 20 degrees below, with a high of 1 below zero.

1888: Snowfall amounts of 3.5 to 5 inches fell over Sacramento, California. The heaviest snow in recent history was two inches on February 4-5th in 1976.

1892: From the History of Fayetteville, Georgia, "Another traumatic event occurred in Fayetteville on the evening of January 5, 1892, about six o'clock in the evening. A terrible tornado or cyclone struck the town of Fayetteville just as many had sat down for dinner. The storm killed three people and injured many more as its raging force destroyed numerous residences, outbuildings, and structures, including the academy, as well as killing abundant livestock. The event was written about as far away as Savannah."

1962: Two tornadoes, about 100 yards apart and each making paths about 100 yards wide, followed parallel paths from southeast to northwest through the edge of the Crestview, Florida's residential area. These tornadoes killed one and injured 30 others.

1835 - It was a record cold morning in the eastern U.S. The mercury at the Yale Campus in New Haven CT plunged to 23 degrees below zero, and reached 40 below in the Berkshire Hills of Connecticut. (David Ludlum)

1904 - Bitterly cold air gripped the northeastern U.S. Morning lows of -42 degrees at Smethport PA and -34 at River Vale NJ established state records. (The Weather Channel)

1913 - The temperature at the east portal to Strawberry Tunnel reached 50 degrees below zero to tie the record established at Woodruff on February 6, 1899. (David Ludlum)

1982 - A three day rainstorm in the San Francisco area finally came to an end. Marin County and Cruz County were drenched with up to 25 inches of rain, and the Sierra Nevada Range was buried under four to eight feet of snow. The storm claimed at least 36 lives, and caused more than 300 million dollars damage. (Storm Data)

1987 - A massive winter storm spread heavy snow from the southwestern U.S. into the Rockies. In Utah, the Alta ski resort reported a storm total of 42 inches of snow. Winds gusted to 64 mph at Albuquerque NM. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thunderstorms helped produce heavy snow in the Lower Great Lakes Region. Snow fell at the rate of four to five inches per hour, and snowfall totals ranged up to 69 inches at Highmarket NY. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A strong Pacific cold front produced heavy snow and high winds in Nevada. Winds gusted to 80 mph north of Reno, while up to two feet of snow blanketed the Lake Tahoe ski area. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms produced heavy rain in the Central Gulf Coast Region. New Orleans, LA, was drenched with 4.05 inches of rain in 24 hours. An overnight storm blanketed the mountains of northern Utah with up to eleven inches of snow. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

HIDE AND SEEK

It's always a time of joy filled with delightful experiences when our grandchildren come to visit. Their youthful exuberance and innocent behavior fill our home with laughter and many unexpected surprises. One of their favorite games is one most of us enjoyed when we were children: hide and seek. They find nooks and crannies, closets and furniture as "obvious" places to hide, and then count from one to ten out loud. Then: "Ready or not, here I come!" is the usual cry before the search begins.

It only takes a few minutes before the one hiding is found by the one seeking. There is no space in our home that remains to be discovered. They know every place there is to hide.

Often we attempt to "hide" some of our deeds from God, thinking there may be a place where He cannot find us. We break His laws and turn our backs on His teachings and try to rationalize or even generalize our behavior: "You know God, everyone does it so it's not all that bad." Or, "Well, God, the devil made me do it because You didn't stop Him."

Unfortunately, those excuses will not change the facts of Scripture. "The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord that sheds light on one's inmost being." This "spirit" points back to Creation when "God breathed the breath of life into man," making him different and distinct from animals.

Obviously, if God created us He certainly must know us, understand us and have access to our most intimate thoughts and desires. We cannot hide anything from our Creator.

When God "ignites" His lamp and searches our "inmost being," it's "game over." He Himself conducts the investigation and knows exactly where to look. While we may attempt to hide our thoughts and desires from God, He knows exactly where to look! Guard against sinning!

Prayer: Father, we cannot hide our thoughts or actions from Your eye. May we earnestly work to live a life worthy of You, our Savior and Lord. Keep us close to You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord that sheds light on one's inmost being. Proverbs 20:27



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

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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)

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.03.23

25 29 33 41 44 18

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$940,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 31
Mins 55 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.04.23

2 12 30 37 46 1

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$33,970,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 31
Mins 55 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.04.23

2 5 11 13 40 15

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 1 Mins 55
Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.04.23

5 18 26 27 31

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 31
Mins 55 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.04.23

22 25 32 41 46 23

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 30
Mins 54 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.04.23

12 32 56 67 68 26

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$325,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 30
Mins 55 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

News from the Associated Press

County snow plow driver dies while clearing road

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A Minnehaha County snow plow driver has died while clearing a road. The Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported that the Minnehaha County Sheriff's Office released a statement saying the driver was helping a sheriff's deputy clear around about 1:30 p.m. Tuesday when the driver suffered a medical emergency.

The deputy tried to render aid and the driver was taken to a local hospital but later died, according to the sheriff's office statement.

No other details have been released.

FCS title tilt is battle of Dakotas: 'Tired of the Bison'

By ERIC OLSON AP Sports Writer

The tiny South Dakota town of Rosholt isn't all that far from the North Dakota state line and is a place where allegiances are split between the Jackrabbits and Bison year-round — and never more pronounced than this week.

The South Dakota State Jackrabbits from Brookings and North Dakota State Bison from Fargo will play for the Football Championship Subdivision title in Frisco, Texas, on Sunday. It's a matchup fans have been hoping for since the schools, separated by 189 miles, began their moves to Division I together in 2004.

Friends Lisa Braun and JoAnn Foltz sat at the same table during happy hour at the Corner Bar in Rosholt this week. Braun is Team Jackrabbit. Foltz is Team Bison.

Braun's son went to SDSU, and the recently retired physician's assistant used to drive across the state line to her job in Wahpeton.

"I was one of three SDSU fans at the clinic there having to put up with all the Bison fans for about 15 years," she said. Braun considers it a respectful rivalry but, speaking for fellow Jacks fans, said: "We're tired of the Bison always winning."

SDSU is a proud program that produced, among others, Pro Football Hall of Fame center Jim Langer and 24-year NFL kicker and career scoring leader Adam Vinatieri.

Still, the Jacks have been overshadowed for decades by the Bison, who were voted Division II national champions three times in the 1960s, won five Division II playoff titles from 1983-90 and will be playing for their 10th FCS crown in 12 years.

Jason Mork of Sioux Falls, who attended SDSU and has gone to Jacks games for 50 years, said something just feels right about playing NDSU in the final.

"There would be nobody more satisfying to beat," he said. "At the same time, there probably is nobody more horrible to lose to."

The game will mark the 114th time the teams have squared off since 1903, when the school then known as the North Dakota Agricultural College won 85-0. The Bison have won the three previous FCS playoff meetings and hold a 63-45-5 lead in the series.

The gap has narrowed recently. SDSU has won the last three meetings, including a 23-21 come-from-behind victory in Fargo on Oct. 15.

NDSU (12-2), however, continues to be the standard bearer in the second tier of Division I football. The Bison beat Montana State last season for their latest championship, and their record is a gaudy 179-32 since they became full-fledged Division I members in 2008.

South Dakota State (13-1) made its only previous title game appearance in May 2021, losing to Sam Houston State in the COVID-19 season pushed back to spring. The Jacks are an impressive 124-56 in their FCS era but remain the little brother in the dynamic with their neighbor to the north.

Watch parties will be held across the Dakotas, and the most ardent fans will make the long drive down Interstates 29 and 35 to see the game in person.

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Bison backers are expected to outnumber Jacks fans at Toyota Stadium. Each school received 4,500 tickets to sell, and those were gone within hours. Many NDSU fans expect the Bison to reach the championship game every year and buy their tickets well in advance. The bottom price for a ticket on the secondary market was \$143 at midweek.

Adam Timmerman, a two-time Division II All-America offensive lineman for the Jacks in the early 1990s before his 12-year NFL career, said the matchup is especially meaningful to players of yesteryear.

The rivalry was born in the days of the North Central Conference. SDSU and NDSU joined as charter members in 1922, and the NCC grew into one of the most powerful Division II leagues before schools began leaving for Division I in the 2000s.

Timmerman said he was skeptical when SDSU announced it would go along with NDSU to Division I. The Jacks had been a middling Division II team in the years immediately before the transition, so there was concern about how they would fare against better competition.

Timmerman credits former school president Peggy Miller, former athletic director Fred Oien and coach John Stiegelmeier for having foresight and the perseverance to overcome opposition on several fronts.

Stiegelmeier has bridged the Division II and I eras. He was a defensive assistant under two head coaches from 1988-96 before landing the top job in 1997. Stiegelmeier recently recalled how a former player once asked him why the Jacks even got on the bus for games at NDSU when, to the player, losing was a foregone conclusion.

"I thought, 'We're going to change that mentality,'" Stiegelmeier said, "and, ideally, we have."

Timmerman, who played on the 1993 SDSU team that ended a 16-game losing streak in the series, said the confidence Stiegelmeier has instilled in his players and the fan base is palpable.

"We have aspired to be what North Dakota State has been," Timmerman said, "for a long time."

AP college football: <https://apnews.com/hub/college-football> and https://twitter.com/ap_top25

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. January 3, 2023.

Editorial: Regents Plan To Extend Tuition Break A Good One

The South Dakota Board of Regents is attempting to bolster the numbers in its university system by extending its program to offer in-state tuition to out-of-state students.

Last month, the regents voted to add Illinois and Wisconsin to the South Dakota Advantage Plan, which offers in-state tuition rates to students from certain other states.

Other states covered on the Advantage Plan include Colorado, Iowa, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota and Wyoming. (Meanwhile, Minnesota and South Dakota have a deal agreed to in 1978 in which Minnesota residents attending public university in South Dakota must pay the higher rate between resident tuition at the school at which they enroll or the average rate of nine Minnesota schools.)

The aim of the plan is to make South Dakota a more attractive option for students from other states.

"We are always looking for opportunities to grow our enrollment and bring more people into South Dakota," said SDBOR Executive Director Brian Maher in a press release. "By increasing our regional reach and offering a competitive tuition rate, we're optimistic that our state will appeal to those students."

According to The Associated Press, these out-of-state students will pay in-state rates of \$253.85 per credit hour at Black Hills State University, Dakota State University and Northern State University; \$259.10 per credit hour in undergraduate studies at the University of South Dakota and South Dakota State University; and \$260.55 per credit hour in undergraduate studies at South Dakota School of Mines.

The move is a prudent one that will hopefully create some momentum in South Dakota university enrollment. The latest attendance numbers for the state system issued in September showed a modest 0.7% gain in overall enrollment, which snapped a five-year streak of falling numbers. According to a Press & Dakotan story, it marked only the second time the system has seen enrollment growth since 2013.

Also, the regents' decision could have an economic impact for the state. According to a regent press release, "Findings have shown that approximately 30% of nonresident students remain in the state after graduation. This educated workforce is critical to our state, filling growing high-tech jobs, meeting the demands in health fields, and keeping entrepreneurs in South Dakota."

Higher education is, among other things, a competitive business, and making South Dakota's offering more financially attractive can help bolster the overall picture. Of course, it can only be one facet of that effort — this state's universities must have the programs to attract the interest of prospective students in the first place — but improving the price tag can add an important and welcome incentive to that process.
END

GOP's McCarthy pressured to 'figure out' speaker race

By LISA MASCARO and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans are at a crossroads as leader Kevin McCarthy has failed over and over again to become House speaker, but he remains determined to persuade enough right-flank holdouts to vote for him and end the stalemate.

What started as a political novelty, the first time in 100 years a nominee has not won the gavel on the first vote, has devolved into a bitter Republican Party feud and deepening potential crisis.

McCarthy is under growing pressure from restless Republicans, and Democrats, to find the votes he needs or step aside, so the House can open fully and get on with the business of governing. His right-flank detractors appear intent on waiting him out, as long as it takes.

"No deal yet," McCarthy said late Wednesday before the House abruptly adjourned. "But a lot of progress."

The House, which is one-half of Congress, is essentially at a standstill as McCarthy has failed, one vote after another, to win the speaker's gavel in a grueling spectacle for all the world to see. The ballots have produced almost the same outcome, 20 conservative holdouts still refusing to support him and leaving him far short of the 218 typically needed to win the gavel.

In fact, McCarthy saw his support slipping to 201, as one fellow Republican switched to vote simply present.

"I think people need to work a little more," McCarthy said Wednesday as they prepared to adjourn for the night. "I don't think a vote tonight would make any difference. But a vote in the future could."

When the House resumes at noon Thursday it could be a long day. The new Republican majority was not expected to be in session on Friday, which is the anniversary of the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol. A prolonged and divisive speaker's fight would almost certainly underscore the fragility of American democracy after the attempted insurrection two years ago.

"All who serve in the House share a responsibility to bring dignity to this body," California Democrat Nancy Pelosi, the former speaker, said in a tweet.

Pelosi also said the Republicans' "cavalier attitude in electing a Speaker is frivolous, disrespectful and unworthy of this institution. We must open the House and proceed with the People's work."

Some Republicans appear to be growing uneasy with the way House Republicans have taken charge after the midterm election only to see the chamber upended over the speaker's race in their first days in the new majority.

Colorado Republican Ken Buck said he did not encourage McCarthy to step aside. "I told him he needs to figure out how to make a deal to move forward," he said.

McCarthy has vowed to fight to the finish for the speaker's job in a battle that had thrown the new majority into tumult for the first days of the new Congress.

The right-flank conservatives, led by the Freedom Caucus and aligned with former President Donald Trump, appeared emboldened by the standoff — even though Trump publicly backed McCarthy,

"This is actually an invigorating day for America," said Florida Republican Byron Donalds, who was nominated three times by his conservative colleagues as an alternative. "There's a lot of members in the chamber who want to have serious conversations about how we can bring this all to a close and elect a speaker."

The disorganized start to the new Congress pointed to difficulties ahead with Republicans now in control

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of the House, much the way that some past Republican speakers, including John Boehner, had trouble leading a rebellious right flank. The result: government shutdowns, standoffs and Boehner's early retirement.

A new generation of conservative Republicans, many aligned with Trump's Make America Great Again agenda, want to upend business as usual in Washington, and were committed to stopping McCarthy's rise without concessions to their priorities.

But even Trump's strongest supporters disagreed on this issue. Colorado Republican Lauren Boebert, who nominated Donalds the second time, called on the former president to tell McCarthy, "Sir, you do not have the votes and it's time to withdraw."

By McCarthy's own calculation, he needs to flip about a dozen Republicans who have so far withheld their backing as he presses on for the job he has long wanted.

To win support, McCarthy has already agreed to many of the demands of Freedom Caucus members, who have been agitating for rules changes and other concessions that give rank-and-file members more influence.

And a McCarthy-aligned campaign group, the Conservative Leadership Fund, offered another concession, saying it would no longer spend money on elections "in any open-seat primaries in safe Republican districts." The far-right lawmakers have complained that their preferred candidates for the House were being treated unfairly as the campaign fund put its resources elsewhere.

Pennsylvania Republican Scott Perry, the chairman of the Freedom Caucus, said the latest round of talks was "productive."

"I am open to whatever will give me the power to defend my constituents against this godforsaken city," said Texas Republican Chip Roy, another member of the conservative group.

But those opposing McCarthy do not all have the same complaints, and he may never be able to win over some of them.

"I'm ready to vote all night, all week, all month and never for that person," said Florida Republican Matt Gaetz.

Such staunch opposition carried echoes of McCarthy's earlier bid for the job, when he dropped out of the speaker's race in 2015 because he could not win over conservatives.

"We have no exit strategy," South Carolina Republican Ralph Norman said.

"There's nothing he can give me or any of our members that's going to be a magic pill," Norman said. "We're here to vet a speaker. Vet the person third in line for the presidency and that's a good thing."

Not since 1923 had a speaker's election gone to multiple ballots. The longest fight for the gavel started in late 1855 and dragged on for two months, with 133 ballots, during debates over slavery in the run-up to the Civil War.

Democrats enthusiastically nominated and renominated their House leader, Hakeem Jeffries, on all six ballots for speaker over the first two days. He repeatedly won the most votes overall, 212.

If McCarthy could win 213 votes, and then persuade the remaining naysayers to simply vote present, he would be able to lower the threshold required under the rules to have the majority.

It's a strategy former House speakers, including Pelosi and Boehner, had used when they confronted opposition, winning with fewer than 218 votes.

One Republican, Victoria Spartz of Indiana, voted present on Wednesday's rounds, but it only ended up lowering McCarthy's total.

Report: Prince Harry says William attacked him during row

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prince Harry alleges in a much-anticipated new memoir that his brother Prince William lashed out and physically attacked him during a furious argument over the brothers' deteriorating relationship, The Guardian reported Thursday.

The newspaper said it obtained an advance copy of the book, "Spare," due to be published next week. It said Harry recounts a 2019 argument at his Kensington Palace home, in which he says William called

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Harry's wife, the former actress Meghan Markle, "difficult," "rude" and "abrasive." Harry claims William grabbed his brother by the collar and ripped his necklace before knocking him down, the newspaper said.

"I landed on the dog's bowl, which cracked under my back, the pieces cutting into me," the book is quoted as saying. "I lay there for a moment, dazed, then got to my feet and told him to get out."

William later apologized, the extract says.

Neither Buckingham Palace, which represents King Charles III, nor William's Kensington Palace office has commented on the claims.

The book, scheduled to be released Tuesday, is the latest in a string of public revelations and accusations by Harry and Meghan that have shaken Britain's royal family,

Harry, 38, and the American actress married at Windsor Castle in May 2018. Less than two years later, the couple quit royal duties and moved to California, citing what they saw as the media's racist treatment of Meghan, who is biracial, and a lack of support from the palace.

Since then they have presented their side of the story in an interview with Oprah Winfrey and a six-part Netflix documentary released last month, which recounted the couple's bruising relationship with the U.K. media and estrangement from the royal family.

In the series, Harry claimed William screamed at him during a family meeting and accused palace officials of lying to protect his elder brother, who is now heir to the throne. Meghan talked about wanting to end her life as she struggled to cope with toxic press coverage.

Harry has recorded interviews with British broadcaster ITV and CBS in the United States to promote the book. Both are due to be broadcast Sunday.

In snippets released in advance, Harry told ITV that the royal household had cast him and Meghan as "villains" and "shown absolutely no willingness to reconcile." He told CBS that the palace's refusal to defend him and Meghan from attacks was a "betrayal."

Palace officials have declined to comment on any of Meghan and Harry's allegations.

The book also explains the reasons for its title, the Guardian said. It said Harry recounts the alleged words of his father to his mother, Princess Diana, on the day of his birth: "Wonderful! Now you've given me an heir and a spare — my work is done."

While William was destined from birth to be king, Harry — who is fifth in line to the throne behind his brother and William's three children — has often appeared to struggle with the more ambiguous role of "spare." He spent a decade in the British Army — years he has described as his happiest — before taking up full-time royal duties in 2015.

Faithful mourn Benedict XVI at funeral presided over by pope

By NICOLE WINFIELD, GIADA ZAMPANO and FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — With bells tolling, tens of thousands of faithful, political leaders and the pope himself mourned Benedict XVI, the German theologian who made history by resigning the papacy, at a rare requiem Mass Thursday for a dead pontiff presided over by a living one.

The crowd applauded as pallbearers carried Benedict's cypress coffin out of the fog-shrouded St. Peter's Basilica and rested it before the altar in the vast square outside. Pope Francis, wearing the crimson vestments typical of papal funerals, then opened the service with a prayer and closed it by solemnly blessing the simple casket — decorated only with the former pope's coat of arms. It was later entombed in the basilica grotto.

Heads of state and royalty, clergy from around the world and thousands of regular people flocked to the ceremony, despite Benedict's request for simplicity and official efforts to keep the first funeral for an pope emeritus in modern times low-key.

Many mourners hailed from Benedict's native Bavaria and donned traditional dress, including boiled wool coats to guard against the morning chill.

"We came to pay homage to Benedict and wanted to be here today to say goodbye," said Raymond Mainar, who traveled from a small village east of Munich for the funeral. "He was a very good pope."

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Ignoring exhortations for decorum at the end, some in the crowd held banners or shouted "Santo Subito!" — "Sainthood Now!" — echoing the spontaneous chants that erupted during St. John Paul II's 2005 funeral.

The former Joseph Ratzinger, who died Dec. 31 at age 95, is considered one of the 20th century's greatest theologians and spent his lifetime upholding church doctrine. But he will go down in history for a singular, revolutionary act that changed the future of the papacy: He retired, the first pope in six centuries to do so.

Francis has praised Benedict's courage in stepping aside, saying it "opened the door" for other popes to do the same.

Some 50,000 people attended Thursday's Mass, according to the Vatican, after around 200,000 paid their respects during three days of public viewing.

Only Italy and Germany were invited to send official delegations, but other leaders took the Vatican up on its offer and came in their "private capacity." They included several heads of state, at least four prime ministers and two delegations of royal representatives. In addition, a host of patriarchs joined 125 cardinals in the seats to the side of the altar, and the Russian Orthodox Church sent its foreign envoy.

Among those attending was Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen, who was given special court permission to attend the funeral. Zen was detained in May on suspicion of colluding with foreign forces under a China's national security law after he fell afoul of authorities over his participation in a now-silenced democracy movement. His passport was revoked when he was detained.

Benedict's close confidants were also in attendance, and the former pope's longtime secretary, Archbishop Georg Gaenswein, bent down and kissed a book of the Gospels that was left open on the coffin before the ceremony began.

Matteo Colonna, a 20-year-old seminarian from Teramo, Italy, said he came in part because of the historic nature of the funeral — but also because it had personal resonance for him.

"The first spark of my vocation started under the pontificate of Benedict, but then it became even stronger under Pope Francis," Colonna said, while sitting in prayer in St. Peter's Square at dawn. "I see a continuity between these two popes and the fact that today Francis is celebrating the funeral in Benedict's memory is an historical event."

But the service was also significant for what it lacked: the feeling of uncertainty that would normally accompany the passing of a pope before a new one is elected. With Francis in place, Benedict's death marked the end of an unusual decade in which a reigning pope lived alongside a retired one.

"Benedict has been the bridge between John Paul and Francis," said Alessandra Aprea, a 56-year-old from Meta di Sorrento near Naples. "We could not have Francis without him."

Early Thursday the Vatican released the official history of Benedict's life, a short document in Latin that was placed in a metal cylinder in his coffin before it was sealed, along with the coins and medallions minted during his papacy and his pallium stoles.

The document gave ample attention to Benedict's historic resignation and referred to him as "pope emeritus," citing verbatim the Latin words he uttered on Feb. 11, 2013, when he announced he would retire.

The document, known as a "rogito" or deed, also cited his theological and papal legacy, including his outreach to Anglicans and Jews and his efforts to combat clergy sexual abuse "continually calling the church to conversion, prayer, penance and purification."

Francis didn't mention Benedict's specific legacy in his homily and only uttered his name once, in the final line, delivering instead a meditation on Jesus' willingness to entrust himself to God's will.

"Holding fast to the Lord's last words and to the witness of his entire life, we too, as an ecclesial community, want to follow in his steps and to commend our brother into the hands of the Father," Francis said at the end.

During St. John Paul II's quarter-century as pope, Ratzinger spearheaded a crackdown on dissent as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, taking action against the left-leaning liberation theology that spread in Latin America in the 1970s and against dissenting theologians and nuns who didn't toe the Vatican's hard line on matters like sexual morals.

His legacy was marred by the clergy sexual abuse scandal, even though he recognized earlier than most the "filth" of priests who raped children, and actually laid the groundwork for the Holy See to punish them.

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As cardinal and pope, he passed sweeping church legislation that resulted in 848 priests being defrocked from 2004 to 2014, roughly his pontificate with a year on either end. But abuse survivors still held him responsible for the crisis, for failing to sanction any bishop who moved abusers around, refusing to mandate the reporting of sex crimes to police and identifying him as embodying the clerical system that long protected the institution over victims.

Mike McDonnell of the U.S. abuse survivor group SNAP said while Benedict passed new canon laws, he could have done far more to influence John Paul to take firm action. Referring to Benedict's nickname as "God's Rottweiler," he said: "You know, in our in our view, it was a dog bark without a bite. Certainly he could have done more."

A group representing German clergy abuse survivors called on German officials attending Benedict's funeral to demand more action from the Vatican on sexual abuse. Eckiger Tisch asked German leaders to demand that Francis issue a "universal church law" stipulating zero tolerance in dealing with abuse by clergy.

The funeral ritual itself is modeled on the code used for dead popes but with some modifications given Benedict was not a reigning pontiff when he died.

After the Mass, Benedict's cypress coffin was placed inside a zinc one, then an outer oak casket before being entombed in the crypt in the grottoes underneath St. Peter's Basilica that once held the tomb of St. John Paul II before it was moved upstairs.

While Thursday's Mass was unusual, it does have some precedent: In 1802, Pope Pius VII presided over the funeral in St. Peter's of his predecessor, Pius VI, who had died in exile in France in 1799 as a prisoner of Napoleon.

Beds run out at Beijing hospital as COVID-19 spreads

By ANDY WONG and KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Patients, mostly older people, laid on stretchers in hallways or took oxygen while sitting in wheelchairs as a COVID-19 outbreak stretched public health facilities' resources in China's capital Beijing, even after its reported peak.

The Chuiyangliu hospital in the city's east was packed Thursday with newly arrived patients. Beds ran out by midmorning, even as ambulances continued to bring more people in. Hard-pressed nurses and doctors rushed to take information and triage the most urgent cases.

The crush of people seeking hospital care follows China abandonment of its most severe pandemic restrictions last month after nearly three years of lockdowns, travels bans and school closures that weighed heavily on the economy and prompted unusual street protests in a country that quashes political dissent.

The outbreak appears to have spread the fastest in densely populated cities first. Now, authorities are concerned as it reaches smaller towns and rural areas with weaker health care systems. Several local governments began asking people Thursday not to make the trip home for the upcoming Lunar New Year holiday, signaling lingering worry around opening up.

Overseas, a growing number of governments are requiring virus tests for travelers from China, saying they are needed because the Chinese government is not sharing enough information on the outbreak. The European Union on Wednesday "strongly encouraged" its member states to impose pre-departure COVID-19 testing, though not all have done so.

Italy — the first place in Europe where the pandemic exacted a heavy toll in early 2020 — became the first EU member to require tests for passengers from China last week, and France and Spain followed with their own measures. That followed the imposition by the U.S. of a requirement for a negative test result within 48 hours of departure.

China has criticized the requirements and warned of countermeasures against countries imposing them.

World Health Organization head Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Wednesday he was concerned about the lack of outbreak data from the Chinese government.

At a daily briefing Thursday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said Beijing has consistently "shared information and data with the international community in an open and transparent manner."

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"At present, China's COVID-19 situation is under control," Mao said. "Also, we hope that the WHO secretariat will take a science-based, objective and impartial position to play a positive role in addressing the pandemic globally."

Local government appeals to avoid travel during the Lunar New Year holiday comes days before the formal lifting of many remaining restrictions — some already not being enforced — on Sunday.

"We recommend that everyone not return to their hometowns unless necessary during the peak of the outbreak," the government of Shaoyang county in Hunan province in central China said in a notice dated Thursday. "Avoid visiting relatives and traveling between regions. Minimize travel."

Similar appeals were issued by Shouxian county in Anhui province southeast of Beijing and the cities of Qingyang in Gansu province in the northwest and Weifang in Shandong on the east coast.

The appeals, which harkened back to the last few years of strict pandemic restrictions, showed that some officials remain nervous about lifting them too quickly.

The Weifang government notice said residents should celebrate the holiday with video and phone gatherings.

"Avoid visiting relatives and friends to protect yourself and others," it said.

Despite such concerns, Hong Kong announced it will reopen some of its border crossings with mainland China on Sunday and allow tens of thousands of people to cross every day without being quarantined.

The city's land and sea border checkpoints with the mainland have been largely closed for almost three years and the reopening is expected to provide a much-needed boost to Hong Kong's tourism and retail sectors.

Hearing, document release likely in Idaho slayings case

By REBECCA BOONE Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — The man accused in the November slayings of four University of Idaho students is back in Idaho, where he's charged with four counts of first-degree murder and felony burglary, and could make his first court appearance as early as Thursday.

Bryan Kohberger's return to the state also means sealed documents that could answer key questions in the closely watched case will soon be released publicly.

Kohberger, a 28-year-old doctoral student at Washington State University, was flown by Pennsylvania State Police to a small regional airport near the Idaho border and handed over to local authorities Wednesday evening. Uniformed law enforcement officers were waiting on the tarmac for the plane to land, and then escorted the handcuffed Kohberger to a caravan of five vehicles for the short drive from Washington across the Idaho border.

The public release of court documents could shed some light on Latah County Prosecutor Bill Thompson's reasons for accusing Kohberger in the Nov. 13 stabbing deaths of Kaylee Goncalves, Madison Mogen, Xana Kernodle and Ethan Chapin and answer key questions about how authorities built a case against him.

Kohberger was arrested at his parents' home in eastern Pennsylvania last week and agreed to be extradited to Idaho. His attorney Jason LaBar said Kohberger was eager to be exonerated and described him as "an ordinary guy." The attorney said that Kohberger would be represented by the chief public defender in Idaho's Kootenai County upon his return to the state.

Police have released few details about the investigation and a magistrate judge has issued a sweeping gag order barring attorneys, law enforcement agencies and other officials from discussing the criminal case.

The nighttime attack at a Moscow home near the University of Idaho campus spread fear through the surrounding community, as authorities seemed stumped by the brutal stabbings. Investigators appeared to make a breakthrough, however, after searching for a white sedan that was seen around the time of the killings and analyzing DNA evidence collected from the crime scene.

Investigators have said they were still searching for a motive and the weapon used in the attack.

The bodies of Goncalves, 21, of Rathdrum, Idaho; Mogen, 21, of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho; Kernodle, 20, of Post Falls, Idaho; and Chapin, 20, of Conway, Washington, were found Nov. 13 at the rental home where

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the women lived. Kernodle and Chapin were dating, and he had been visiting the house that night.

Latah County, Idaho, prosecutors have said they believe Kohberger broke into the victims' home intending to commit murder.

Although Moscow police have been tightlipped about the investigation, investigators last month asked the public for help finding a white sedan that was seen near the scene of the crime — specifically, a 2011-2013 Hyundai Elantra. Tips poured in and investigators soon announced they were sifting through a pool of around 20,000 potential vehicles.

Meanwhile, Kohberger apparently stayed in Pullman, Washington, through the end of the semester at WSU. Then he drove across country to his parents' home in Pennsylvania, accompanied by his father. They were in a white Elantra.

While driving through Indiana, Kohberger was pulled over twice on the same day — first by a Hancock County Sheriff's deputy and a few minutes later by an Indiana state trooper.

Body camera video of the first stop released by the Hancock County Sheriff's Office shows Kohberger behind the wheel and his father in the passenger seat on Dec. 15. Both men told the law enforcement officer that they were traveling from WSU before the officer sent them on their way with a warning for following too closely.

The Indiana State Police released bodycam footage of the second stop. The agency said that at the time, there was no information available to the trooper that would have identified Kohberger as a suspect in the killings. Kohberger was again given a warning for following too closely.

8 found fatally shot in Utah home, including 5 children

By SAM METZ Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Eight family members, five of them children, were found dead from gunshot wounds in a southern Utah home, according to authorities who did not provide more details or a potential motive for the killings.

The victims were found Wednesday when police did a welfare check at the residence, according to a statement by city officials in Enoch, a small town of about 8,000 people located 245 miles (394 kilometers) south of Salt Lake City.

Police said they did not detect any threat to the public.

Enoch City Manager Rob Dotson said the community was sent reeling by news of the eight bodies and that the deceased — all members of one family — were well known in the southern Utah town.

"Many of us have served with them in church, in the community and gone to school with these individuals," Dotson said in a video statement Wednesday night.

"This community at this time is hurting. They're feeling loss, they're feeling pain and they have a lot of questions," Dotson added, noting that officials planned on releasing more information as it becomes available and the police investigation progresses.

"We won't know the mindsets, the thoughts of the individuals who experienced this tragedy, but we all can pray that their families and the neighbors and all will come to an understanding of what happened in this place, probably in a day or two, or maybe longer," said Dotson, choking up at one point.

Welfare checks based on calls to the police department like the one that led them to the residence where the bodies were found are routine when individuals are not seen for extended periods of time, Dotson said.

The five children attended schools in the Iron County School District, officials said in a letter sent to parents.

Enoch, off Interstate 15 in rural Utah, just north of the city of Cedar City and about 80 miles (128 kilometers) west of Bryce Canyon National Park, had major flooding in 2021 that caused damage at hundreds of homes.

Utah Gov. Spencer Cox offered condolences in a tweet Wednesday night.

Hong Kong to start reopening border with China on Sunday

By KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong will start to reopen its border with mainland China on Sunday and allow tens of thousands of people to cross from each side every day without quarantine, the city's leader said.

The city's land and sea border checkpoints with the mainland have been largely closed for almost three years under China's "zero-COVID" strategy, which has restricted entry to the country, isolated infected people and locked down areas with outbreaks. The reopening is expected to provide a much-needed boost to Hong Kong's economy.

Thursday's announcement came as China is easing some of the world's toughest anti-virus controls. From Sunday, China will also gradually increase the number of flights between Hong Kong and the mainland and scrap the limit on passenger numbers for flights from the city, the Chinese government said in a statement.

"My personal inclination is, if factors permit, I want to allow a large number of people to go through because that has been the voice of a lot of people, both locally and overseas — wishing Hong Kong to proceed to normalcy as quickly as possible," Chief Executive John Lee said at a press conference.

During the first phase of the reopening, four border checkpoints that were closed for nearly three years will resume operations, bringing the number of checkpoints up and running in the city to seven, Lee said. Currently, all but three checkpoints in Hong Kong are shut.

The Hong Kong government will decide when to expand the scale of border reopening after reviewing the situation with mainland authorities, Lee added.

Under a quota system, up to 60,000 people can travel from Hong Kong to mainland China each day. The same cap is also imposed on the number of travelers entering the city from the north, he said.

But Hong Kong residents in mainland China who want to return to the city are not bound by the quota system, and neither are mainland Chinese residents in Hong Kong going north.

Travelers will have to obtain a negative COVID-19 test result within 48 hours before departure. Those crossing via designated land border checkpoints have to register online to secure a quota slot.

Hong Kong is a semi-autonomous Chinese territory that borders Guangdong province in southeast China. People must pass through immigration to cross between the two. The border restrictions imposed since 2020 have hammered the city's economy, especially the tourism sector.

Also starting from Sunday, the mainland will no longer require inbound travelers to quarantine, marking a major step toward fully reopening travel with the rest of the world.

Mainland Chinese residents will be allowed to visit Hong Kong for sightseeing purposes in a gradual and orderly manner, depending on the city's capacity and pandemic situation, the Chinese government added.

Between battles, Ukraine's soldiers have a place to recover

By VASILISA STEPANENKO Associated Press

KHARKIV, Ukraine (AP) — Sitting on comfy armchairs in a low-lit room smelling of lavender and pine trees, the men take deep breaths as they close their eyes and listen to meditation music.

But this is not a spa. Uniformed Ukrainian soldiers are taking a break at this rehabilitation center in the Kharkiv region to restore their bodies and minds before going back to the front line.

The relentless 10-month war has prompted a local commander to transform a Soviet-era sanatorium into a recovery center for servicemen to treat both mental and physical ailments.

"This rehabilitation is helping soldiers, at least for a week, to put themselves together," said Oleksander Vasylykovskiy, a lieutenant colonel in the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Vasylykovskiy remembers how soldiers suffered silently after returning home from fighting Russia in Ukraine's Donbas in 2014. Suicide rates among veterans increased in the following years, with many untreated cases of post-traumatic stress disorder. He hopes a center like this can raise awareness of the need for mental health care and prevent suicides in the future.

Here, soldiers are offered a variety of treatments: aquatic therapy in a hot pool to heal muscle aches; red light therapy to improve heart and blood circulation, a salt room for better breathing; and for those

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having nightmares, electrosleep therapy — a Soviet-era low-frequency electrotherapy that is said to relax the nervous system and induce sleep.

Psychologists are also available, not just for the soldiers but also for their families dealing with the traumas of war.

The servicemen also undergo medical checks, explained Vasylykovskiy. "It's the most important thing because a person develops several illnesses from the stress of fighting."

In addition to the psychological scars of war, soldiers also come here to treat meningitis, contusions, amputations, lung and nerve inflammations, sleeping disorders, skin diseases, and cardiovascular illnesses, among others.

"If someone has trauma and cannot walk, my department will put them back on their feet," said Artem a physical therapist working at the center who cannot reveal his last name for security reasons.

More than 2,000 soldiers have been treated here since the center opened in June. It receives support from international partners in Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Poland, the U.S. and Spain. The cost of one day of rehabilitation for one soldier is around 20 euros, according to Vasylykovskiy. But more funding is still needed, he said, "because (the war) is not over."

Viktor, whose last name cannot be published for security reasons, worked as a miner before joining the army. He took part in the military operation that pushed Russian occupying forces out of the Kharkiv region.

For months, he slept in muddy, cold trenches. "We worked in conditions that were bad for our health. It's bad, it's damp, it's wet," Viktor explained as he sat in a room where the walls and floors are covered in thick salt to clear his damaged lungs. "We have back pain, leg pain, we carry heavy equipment," he added.

Four days into the rehabilitation center he was feeling reenergized. "I'm already determined to go further, continue my work, destroy the enemy, and bring us each day closer to victory," Viktor said.

But perhaps the most appealing aspect of this rehabilitation center isn't the therapy but the ability to bring one's family along for a couple of days.

Maksym, who, like Viktor, cannot reveal his last name for security reasons, hadn't seen his wife and son in five months. One of the hardest parts of this war, he said, is when "you can't connect and speak to your loved ones." He was relieved they could join him for a few days at the rehabilitation center and relax together. Without official vacations, this is the only way that many soldiers can get proper rest.

"I can see that men are returning to the unit after a week, rested and gaining more strength. And the thoughts that they had before go away," Maksym said. Some of those haunting thoughts are the memories of friends who died on the battlefield.

Asked how many comrades he had lost, Maksym lowered his eyes and answered bluntly: "Too many."

EXPLAINER: Why has Syria's economic crisis hit a new low?

By ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Syria's economy has hit its lowest point since the start of its civil war nearly 12 years ago, with spiraling inflation, a currency plunge and severe fuel shortages in both government-run and rebel-held areas.

Life in Damascus has come to a near standstill. Streets are almost empty of cars, households receive a few hours a day of electricity at best, and the cost of food and other essentials has skyrocketed.

The increasing economic pain has led to protests in areas controlled by the government of President Bashar Assad, sometimes met by a violent response.

Here's a look at why the economic situation has gotten so dire and at the potential implications.

HOW BAD IS THE CRISIS?

The Syrian pound hit an all-time low of 7,000 pounds to the dollar on the black market last week before rebounding to around 6,000. It's still a significant plunge, given the rate was around 3,600 one year ago. The central bank increased the official exchange rate from 3,015 to 4,522 on Monday, apparently trying to entice people to use the official rate rather than trade in the black market.

Amid fuel shortages, the government has hiked the price of gasoline and diesel. At the official price, 20

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liters (5 gallons) of gas now cost nearly a full month's salary for an average civil servant, which is about 150,000 Syrian pounds, or \$25 at the black market rate. Some employees have stopped showing up for work because they can't afford transportation.

Since wages don't come close to meeting the cost of living, most people "live on remittances, they live on two or three jobs and on humanitarian assistance," said Joseph Daher, a Swiss-Syrian researcher and professor at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy.

Geir Pedersen, the U.N. special envoy for Syria, told the U.N. Security Council on Dec. 21 that the "needs of the Syrian people have reached the worst levels since the conflict began."

Protests have broken out in some government-controlled areas, particularly in the towns of Sweida and Daraa in the south. In Sweida last month, a protester and a police officer were killed after a demonstration turned violent.

WHAT IS DRIVING THE DETERIORATION?

Apart from years of war, sanctions and widespread corruption, Syria's economy has gone through a series of shocks since 2019, beginning with the collapse of Lebanon's financial system that year.

"Given the open borders between Syria and Lebanon and both of them (being) increasingly cash based economies," their markets are inextricably linked, said Nasser Saidi, a former Lebanese economy minister. The currency collapse and removal of subsidies in Lebanon has driven devaluation and higher prices in Syria, he said.

Syria was also hurt by the global economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine, which has driven up global fuel prices and pulled away the attention and resources of Damascus's ally, Moscow.

But the most crucial factor is a recent slowdown in oil shipments from Iran, which has been Damascus's main source of fuel since the early years of the conflict, analysts said. Before the war, Syria was an oil exporting country. Now its largest oil fields, in the country's east, are controlled by U.S.-backed Kurdish-led groups, so Damascus must import oil.

Jihad Yazigi, an economist and editor-in-chief of the Syria Report, noted that Damascus buys oil from Iran on credit, but "when they sell the oil into the markets...they sell it for cash." So the oil supply showdown also diminishes the government's cash supply.

Syria's Oil Minister Bassam Toamah, speaking to state TV in November, blamed fuel shortages on Western sanctions and lengthy delays in oil supplies, without explaining the reasons for the delays.

Iran officials did not respond to a request for comment.

WHAT IS THE SITUATION IN OPPOSITION-CONTROLLED AREAS?

Every year, residents of makeshift displacement camps in the last rebel-held stronghold in the north-western province of Idlib suffer through storms and freezing weather.

This winter, they have also been hit by the economic crisis in neighboring Turkey, which controls large swaths of territory, as well as by rising prices and shrinking aid caused by the Ukraine war, analysts said. Idlib has seen lengthy fuel lines.

Meanwhile, a recurrent battle between Russia and other international players over allowing aid to cross the border from Turkey into northwest Syria is playing out at the United Nations.

A six-month extension of the cross-border aid mechanism is set to expire Tuesday, with a vote by the U.N. Security Council to renew it scheduled the day before. Russia wants the aid deliveries to come through Damascus, arguing that the aid coming from Turkey is exploited by armed groups and that the international community is providing insufficient help to people in government-held areas.

Humanitarian organizations, however, paint a dire picture of the consequences of cutting off the cross-border assistance.

Tanya Evans, country director for the International Rescue Committee, said that fuel and food prices are rising, while funding for humanitarian aid is shrinking. This along with winter weather and a cholera outbreak "will be a deadly mix should the only lifeline left to this part of Syria be closed," she said.

COULD ANOTHER MASS UPRISING OCCUR?

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If the crisis continues, there will likely be more protests, analysts said. But they largely dismissed the possibility of a new nationwide anti-government uprising like the one that erupted in 2011, prompting a bloody crackdown that threw the country into civil war.

Daher noted that recent protests have been fragmented and localized.

For now, he said, the country will likely continue to limp along with the help of aid and remittances from abroad. Syrians surveyed as part of a soon-to-be-published study reported receiving on average \$100 to \$200 a month from relatives abroad, Daher said.

"People are very tired and thinking first of all to survive," he said. "And there's no political alternative to translate this socio-economic frustration into a political one."

Best of CES 2023: Wireless TV, delivery robots and in-car VR

By JAMES BROOKS, ADRIANA MORGA and RIO YAMAT Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Tech companies of all sizes are showing off their latest products at CES, formerly known as the Consumer Electronics show.

The show is getting back to normal after going completely virtual in 2021 and seeing a significant drop in 2022 attendance because of the pandemic.

On Wednesday, big names like LG and Samsung and smaller startups showcased their latest products for the media in Las Vegas. The show officially opens Thursday.

Here are some highlights:

NO MESSY WIRES

LG Electronics unveiled a 97-inch OLED TV with what it calls a Zero Connect Box that streams content wirelessly. The box, which still needs to be plugged in, just needs to be within 30 feet (nine meters) of the display.

But why would anyone want a wireless 4K television?

David M. Park, senior marketing manager at the South Korean tech company, says it means owners can place a TV in the center of the room without all the messy wires, or maybe mount it above a fireplace or perhaps on a hard-to-drill concrete wall.

LG says the 97-inch LG Signature OLED M (model M3) will be available in the second half of 2023. Pricing has not yet been announced.

ROBOT DELIVERIES

Picture yourself weaving through crowds at the airport on a busy holiday weekend, ignoring the rumble in your stomach as you speed past restaurants to make it to your gate on time.

Brooklyn-based Ottonomy.io is looking to ease that all-too-familiar travel anxiety with its fully autonomous delivery robots.

If you're traveling through airports in Cincinnati, Pittsburgh or Rome, for example, you might cross paths with one of these robots as they bring food directly to travelers at their gates.

Ottonomy unveiled its newest robot, the Yeti, on Wednesday at CES. It showed off its new self-dispensing feature, which eliminates the need for a human to be present to collect deliveries.

The company also provides outdoor curbside delivery services up to 4 miles (6.4 kilometers).

Ottonomy co-founder and CEO Ritukar Vijay said the price tag on its services varies depending on the number of robots a company wants to deploy and how many restaurants or retailers are included in the delivery footprint.

AUDIO GLASSES FROM PAULA ABDUL

Singer and dancer Paula Abdul came to CES to launch Idol Eyes, a line of audio sunglasses.

"I've wanted to get into the tech world for the longest time," Abdul told The Associated Press, "but I wanted to do it in a way that was authentic to who I am."

Starting at \$199, the sunglasses feature a five-hour battery life and play audio from the arms of the frames via Bluetooth connectivity. You can listen to music or answer calls.

The Grammy- and Emmy-award winning artist's first collection of eyewear is available in seven colors,

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with polarized and blue light filter lenses.

"I'm just marrying fashion, movement and technology," Abdul said. "That's where my heart is."

VR FOR YOUR CAR

Holoride, based in Munich, Germany, wants to make car rides more fun and less dizzy. The company's VR headset allows passengers to play video games, watch Netflix or scroll through Instagram while they ride.

If the car is moving, you move in the virtual world, helping to prevent car sickness, according to co-founder Daniel Profendiner. Rather than seeing the road, you might be flying and fighting robots or swimming under the sea.

"The car industry is super-focused on the driver but with more autonomous driving on the horizon, the passenger gets more into the focus as well," he said.

Previously, holoride was only available for Audis with an in-system retrofit so the headset could recognize when the car was moving. On Wednesday at CES, the company announced a new product that can be used in any car.

The retrofit pack, which includes the VR headset, holoride retrofit, a safety strap and a one-year subscription to holoride, is \$799.

ROKU GETS ITS OWN TVS

Roku is expanding its line-up of video streaming devices to include internet-connected TVs bearing its brand for the first time.

It's Roku's latest attempt to cement its position as a video streaming hub during the ongoing shift from TV provided through internet connections instead of cable and satellite systems.

When the sets roll out later this spring, it will mark the first time that Roku has made its own TVs. The San Jose, California, company will continue to team up with a variety of other manufacturers to include its steaming software in internet-connected TVs — an approach that Roku began in 2014.

The decision to make its own TVs while continuing to make its software available to competing manufacturers is similar to what Google has been doing with its Pixel smartphones since 2016. Google has continued to provide its Android operating system to Samsung and other smartphone manufacturers while using its Pixel line-up as a way to demonstrate how the software works best and to elevate awareness of its brand in the mobile market.

Roku's 11 television models, with display screens ranging from 24 inches to 75 inches, are expected to sell for about \$120 to \$1,000 once they arrive in stores.

Roku got an early edge in the now-booming industry nearly 15 years ago when it released its first streaming box after working on the device as a secret project within Netflix, which was in the early stages of building what is now the world's largest video streaming service.

As tech giants such as Amazon and Apple released their own streaming devices, Roku began to expand into internet-connected TVs made by other companies, sound bars and last year even got into original programming with a movie about satirical song maker Weird Al Yankovic.

Evacuations ordered as California storm knocks out power

By OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Officials in California ordered evacuations in a high-risk coastal area where mudslides killed 23 people in 2018 as a huge storm barreled into the state Wednesday, bringing high winds and rain that threatened widespread flooding and knocked out power to more than 100,000 people.

The storm was expected to dump up to 6 inches (152.4 millimeters) of rain in parts of the San Francisco Bay Area where most of the region would remain under flood warnings into late Thursday night. In Southern California, the storm was expected to peak in intensity overnight into early Thursday morning with Santa Barbara and Ventura counties likely to see the most rain, forecasters said.

"We anticipate that this may be one of the most challenging and impactful series of storms to touch down in California in the last five years," said Nancy Ward, the new director of the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services.

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San Francisco Mayor London Breed said at a news conference that the city was "preparing for a war." Crews cleared clogged storm drains, tried to move homeless people into shelters and passed out emergency supplies and ponchos to those who refused to go.

The city distributed so many sandbags to residents that supplies temporarily ran out.

Powerful winds gusting to 85 mph (136 kmh) or more forced the cancellation of more than 70 flights at San Francisco International Airport and downed trees and power lines. Firefighters rescued a family after a tree fell onto their car. The fire department reported "large pieces of glass" fell off the Fox Plaza tower near the Civic Center, although no injuries were reported. It was "highly possible" the damage to the skyscraper was wind-related, the department tweeted.

The new storm left more than 100,000 customers in the San Francisco Bay Area and the Central Coast without power.

The storm is one of three so-called atmospheric river storms in the last week to reach the drought-stricken state. California Gov. Gavin Newsom declared a state of emergency to allow for a quick response and to aid in cleanup from another powerful storm that hit just days earlier.

In Southern California, evacuations were ordered for those living in areas burned by three recent wildfires in Santa Barbara County, where heavy rain forecast for overnight could cause widespread flooding and unleash debris flows.

County officials did not have a firm number for how many people were under evacuation orders, but Susan Klein-Rothschild, a spokesperson in the county's emergency operations center, said sheriff's deputies went door-to-door and contacted at least 480 people.

Among the towns ordered to evacuate was Montecito, where five years ago huge boulders, mud and debris swept down mountains through the town to the shoreline, killing 23 people and destroying more than 100 homes. The town is home to many celebrities, including Oprah Winfrey and Prince Harry and his wife, Meghan.

"What we're talking about here is a lot of water coming off the top of the hills, coming down into the creeks and streams and as it comes down, it gains momentum and that's what the initial danger is," Montecito Fire Department Chief Kevin Taylor said.

Elsewhere, a 45-mile (72-kilometer) stretch of the coastal Highway 1 running through Big Sur was closed Wednesday evening in anticipation of flooding and rock falls. Further north, a 25-mile (40-kilometer) stretch of Highway 101 was closed due to several downed trees.

Drivers were urged to stay off the roads unless absolutely necessary, especially with heavy snow expected in the mountains.

The storm came days after a New Year's Eve downpour led to the evacuations of people in rural Northern California communities and the rescue of several motorists from flooded roads. A few levees south of Sacramento were damaged.

On Wednesday, authorities in south Sacramento County found a body in a submerged car — one of at least four victims of flooding from that storm.

Evacuation orders were in place in Santa Cruz County's Paradise Park along the swiftly moving San Lorenzo River, as well as in areas along the Pajaro River. Residents who fled wildfires in the Santa Cruz Mountains in 2020 were packing their bags as the towns of Boulder Creek, Ben Lomond and Felton were all warned they should be prepared to evacuate.

Sonoma County authorities issued an evacuation warning for a string of towns along the Russian River, which was expected to reach flood stage on Thursday.

The storms won't be enough to officially end the state's ongoing drought, now entering its fourth year. The U.S. Drought Monitor showed that most of California is in severe to extreme drought. Since the state's major reservoirs are low, they have plenty of room to fill with more water from the storm, officials said.

Trees already stressed from years of limited rain are more likely to fall now that the ground is suddenly saturated and winds are heavy. That could cause widespread power outages or create flood hazards, said Karla Nemeth, director of the state's Department of Water Resources.

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"We are in the middle of a flood emergency and also in the middle of a drought emergency," she said during an emergency briefing.

Storms also took a toll elsewhere in the U.S. In the Midwest, ice and heavy snow this week closed schools in Minnesota and western Wisconsin and caused a jet to go off an icy taxiway after landing in a snowstorm in Minneapolis. No passengers were injured, Delta airlines said.

In the South, a possible tornado damaged homes, downed trees and flipped a vehicle on its side in Montgomery, Alabama, early Wednesday.

In Illinois, staff from the National Weather Service's Chicago office planned to survey storm damage on Wednesday following at least six tornadoes, the largest number of rare January tornadoes recorded in the state since 1989.

8 found fatally shot in Utah home, including 5 children

By SAM METZ Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Eight family members, five of them children, were found dead from gunshot wounds in a southern Utah home Wednesday, according to authorities who did not provide more details or a potential motive for the killings.

The victims were found when police did a welfare check at the residence, according to a statement by city officials in Enoch, a small town of about 8,000 people located 245 miles (394 kilometers) south of Salt Lake City.

Police said they did not detect any threat to the public.

Enoch City Manager Rob Dotson said the community was sent reeling by news of the eight bodies and that the deceased — all members of one family — were well known in the southern Utah town.

"Many of us have served with them in church, in the community and gone to school with these individuals," Dotson said in a video statement Wednesday night.

"This community at this time is hurting. They're feeling loss, they're feeling pain and they have a lot of questions," Dotson added, noting that officials planned on releasing more information as it becomes available and the police investigation progresses.

"We won't know the mindsets, the thoughts of the individuals who experienced this tragedy, but we all can pray that their families and the neighbors and all will come to an understanding of what happened in this place, probably in a day or two, or maybe longer," said Dotson, choking up at one point.

Welfare checks based on calls to the police department like the one that led them to the residence where the bodies were found are routine when individuals are not seen for extended periods of time, Dotson said.

The five children attended schools in the Iron County School District, officials said in a letter sent to parents.

Enoch, off Interstate 15 in rural Utah, just north of the city of Cedar City and about 80 miles (128 kilometers) west of Bryce Canyon National Park, had major flooding in 2021 that caused damage at hundreds of homes.

Utah Gov. Spencer Cox offered condolences in a tweet Wednesday night.

Electric chair, firing squad's legality at S. Carolina court

By JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — South Carolina's highest court will hear arguments Thursday on whether a newly organized firing squad or the old electric chair are legal ways to execute inmates in the state, which has been unable to obtain drugs for lethal injections.

A lower court judge ruled in September that South Carolina lawmakers "ignored advances in scientific research and evolving standards of humanity and decency" when they passed a law effectively forcing condemned prisoners to choose between electrocution or the firing squad.

The state appealed and the South Carolina Supreme Court will hear arguments Thursday over whether

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the 2,000-volt electric chair or the bullets fired at the heart by a three-person firing squad violate state constitutional provisions against cruel and unusual punishment like those in the U.S. Constitution. They are not likely to issue a ruling for several months.

The death penalty remains under near constant scrutiny in the United States. Tennessee issued a report last week saying the state has not followed the new rules it made for lethal injections in 2018, killing inmates with drugs that hadn't been properly tested.

Missouri on Tuesday executed Amber McLaughlin, 49, believed to be the first transgender woman put to death in the U.S. after the governor denied her plea for clemency, which said her traumatic childhood caused mental health issues.

Four inmates in South Carolina have exhausted their regular appeals and could have death warrants issued as soon as the courts resolve the matter. The state Supreme Court likely won't rule for months, and whichever side doesn't like the ruling will likely file a federal appeal.

South Carolina hasn't executed a prisoner in nearly 12 years. Its supply of drugs for lethal injections has expired and pharmaceutical companies refuse to sell them more, knowing they will be used to kill someone.

From 1996 to 2009, South Carolina was carrying out an average of about three executions per year. The last one took place in 2011.

The South Carolina General Assembly passed a law in 2021 making the electric chair, which has been a legal method of killing prisoners in the state for more than a century, the default method of execution instead of lethal injection.

A death row inmate who did not want to be electrocuted could choose between the newly created firing squad or lethal injection if it were available.

Justice 360, a group fighting for fairness and transparency in death penalty and other major criminal cases, filed a lawsuit. The group argues that a firing squad and electrocution are both more painful and brutal ways to die than lethal injection, which was no longer a true choice in the state because prison officials failed for years to procure the needed drugs.

Circuit Judge Jocelyn Newman held a trial in August, siding with four death row inmates whose experts testified the prisoners would feel terrible pain whether their bodies were "cooking" by electricity or their hearts were stopped by bullets — assuming the shooters were on target.

Attorneys for the state countered with their own experts who said death by firing squad or the electric chair would be instantaneous and the condemned would feel no pain.

"Respondents have still not provided any answer (just as the circuit court didn't provide any answer) to questions like 'how much pain is too much pain' or 'how many seconds may a condemned inmate remain conscious' before a method of execution 'becomes' unconstitutional, lawyers for the state wrote in their brief to the Supreme Court.

Lawyers for the inmates said those are impossible questions to directly answer because the people who experience execution are dead.

"This is precisely the sort of situation in which expert testimony is necessary: experts in electricity and medicine cannot say with absolute certainty what anybody who dies in the electric chair experiences, but they can say to a reasonable degree of scientific certainty how the human body interacts with electricity," the attorneys wrote in briefs.

Public support and use of the death penalty continued its more than two-decade decline in the U.S. in 2022, a year in which many executions were "botched" or highly problematic, according to an annual report on capital punishment released in December.

There were 18 executions in the U.S. in 2022, the fewest in any pre-pandemic year since 1991. Outside of the pandemic years, the 20 death sentences handed out in 2022 were the fewest in any year in the U.S. in a half-century, according to the report by the Washington, D.C.-based Death Penalty Information Center.

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GOP's McCarthy rejected for House speaker — again and again

By LISA MASCARO and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans flailed through a long second day of fruitless balloting Wednesday, unable to either elect their leader Kevin McCarthy as House speaker or come up with a new strategy to end the political chaos that has tarnished the start of their new majority.

Yet McCarthy wasn't giving up, even after the fourth, fifth and sixth votes produced no better outcome and he was left trying to call off a nighttime session. Even that was controversial, as the House voted 216-214 — amid shouting and crowding — to adjourn for the night.

"No deal yet," McCarthy said shortly before that as he left a lengthy closed-door dinnertime meeting with key holdouts and his own allies. "But a lot of progress."

No progress at all was evident though the day of vote after vote after vote as Republicans tried to elevate McCarthy into the top job. The ballots produced almost the same outcome, 20 conservative holdouts still refusing to support him and leaving him far short of the 218 typically needed to win the gavel.

In fact, McCarthy saw his support slip to 201, as one fellow Republican switched to vote simply present.

Seeing no quick way out of the political standoff, Republicans voted abruptly late in the day to adjourn for a few hours as they desperately searched for an endgame to the chaos of their own making. They were due back in the evening, but McCarthy wanted to take a break until Thursday.

"I think people need to work a little more," McCarthy said. "I don't think a vote tonight would make any difference. But a vote in the future could."

McCarthy, the California Republican, vowed to fight to the finish for the speaker's job despite the grueling spectacle, unlike any in modern times, that threw the new majority into tumult for the first days of the new Congress. Animated private discussions broke out on the chamber floor and in huddled meetings throughout the Capitol between McCarthy supporters and detractors.

"Well, it's Groundhog Day," said Rep. Kat Cammack, R-Fla., in nominating McCarthy on the sixth ballot.

She said, "To all Americans watching right now, We hear you. And we will get through this — no matter how messy."

But the right-flank conservatives, led by the Freedom Caucus and aligned with Donald Trump, appeared emboldened by the standoff — though Trump publicly backed McCarthy,

"This is actually an invigorating day for America," said Rep. Byron Donalds, R-Fla., who was nominated three times by his conservative colleagues as an alternative. "There's a lot of members in the chamber who want to have serious conversations about how we can bring this all to a close and elect a speaker."

No other work could be done — swearing in new House members, forming committees, tackling legislation, investigating the Biden administration — until the speaker was elected.

As the hours churned, the dynamic proved no different from Day One, as Democrats re-upped their leader, Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, for speaker, and Donalds offered his challenge to McCarthy in another history-making moment. Both Jeffries and Donalds are Black.

"This country needs leadership," said Rep. Chip Roy, a Texas Republican noting the first time in history two African Americans were nominated for the high office. Lawmakers from both parties rose to applaud.

It was the first time in 100 years that no nominee for House speaker could take the gavel on the first vote.

The disorganized start to the new Congress pointed to difficulties ahead with Republicans now in control of the House, much the way that some past Republican speakers, including John Boehner, had trouble leading a rebellious right flank and ended up with government shutdowns, standoffs and early retirement.

Democratic President Joe Biden, departing the White House for a bipartisan event in Kentucky with Senate GOP leader Mitch McConnell, said "the rest of the world is looking" at the scene on the House floor.

"I just think it's really embarrassing it's taking so long," Biden said. "I have no idea" who will prevail.

Tensions flared among the new House majority as their campaign promises of competent leadership stalled out. Not since 1923 had a speaker's election gone to multiple ballots. The longest and most grueling fight for the gavel started in late 1855 and dragged on for two months, with 133 ballots, during debates over slavery in the run-up to the Civil War.

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A new generation of conservative Republicans, many aligned with Trump's Make America Great Again agenda, want to upend business as usual in Washington, and were committed to stopping McCarthy's rise without concessions to their priorities.

But even Trump's strongest supporters disagreed on this issue. Rep. Lauren Boebert, a firm Colorado conservative who nominated Donalds the second time, called on the former president to tell McCarthy, "Sir, you do not have the votes and it's time to withdraw."

Earlier Wednesday, Trump had done the opposite, urging Republicans to vote for McCarthy. "Close the deal, take the victory," he wrote on his social media site, using all capital letters. "Do not turn a great triumph into a giant & embarrassing defeat."

As the spectacle dragged on, McCarthy's backers implored the holdouts to fall in line for the California Republican.

"I do think members on both sides of this are getting a lot of pressure now," said Rep. Tom Cole, R-Okla. "So I think the message from home is, 'Hey, sort this stuff out.'"

The standoff over McCarthy has been building since Republicans won the House majority in the mid-term elections, eager to end the past two years of Democratic control of Washington. The conservative Freedom Caucus led the opposition to McCarthy, believing he's neither conservative enough nor tough enough to battle Democrats.

To win support, McCarthy has already agreed to many of the demands of Freedom Caucus members, who have been agitating for rules changes and other concessions that give rank-and-file members more influence.

And a McCarthy-aligned campaign group, the Conservative Leadership Fund, offered another concession, saying it would no longer spend money on elections "in any open-seat primaries in safe Republican districts." The far-right lawmakers complained their preferred candidates for the House were being treated unfairly as the campaign fund put its resources elsewhere.

But those opposing McCarthy do not all have the same complaints, and he may never be able to win some over.

"I'm ready to vote all night, all week, all month and never for that person," said Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla.

Such staunch opposition carried echoes of McCarthy's earlier bid for the job, when he dropped out of the speaker's race in 2015 because he could not win over conservatives.

Democrats enthusiastically nominated and renominated their House leader, Jeffries, on all six ballots for speaker over the two days. He repeatedly won the most votes overall, 212.

If McCarthy could win 213 votes, and then persuade the remaining naysayers to simply vote present, he would be able to lower the threshold required under the rules to have the majority.

It's a strategy former House speakers, including outgoing Democratic Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Republican Boehner, had used when they confronted opposition, winning with fewer than 218 votes.

One Republican, Rep. Victoria Spartz of Indiana, voted present on Wednesday's rounds, but it only ended up lowering McCarthy's total.

Man charged in university student killings arrives in Idaho

By REBECCA BOONE Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — The suspect in the November slayings of four University of Idaho students has arrived in Idaho, where he is charged with four counts of first-degree murder and felony burglary.

Bryan Kohberger, a 28-year-old doctoral student at Washington State University, was flown by Pennsylvania State Police to a small regional airport near the Idaho border and handed over to local authorities Wednesday evening.

Uniformed law enforcement officers were waiting on the tarmac for the the Pennsylvania State Police plane to land, and then they escorted the handcuffed Kohberger to a caravan of five vehicles for the short drive from Washington across the Idaho border.

Kohberger's arrival means the court documents filed in his case should soon be unsealed, potentially

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shedding some light on Latah County Prosecutor Bill Thompson's reasons for accusing Kohberger.

Kohberger was arrested at his parents' home in eastern Pennsylvania last week in connection with the stabbing deaths of Kaylee Goncalves, Madison Mogen, Xana Kernodle and Ethan Chapin.

On Tuesday Kohberger agreed to be extradited to Idaho, and his attorney Jason LaBar said Kohberger was eager to be exonerated.

Police have released few details about the investigation and a magistrate judge has issued a sweeping gag order barring attorneys, law enforcement agencies and other officials from discussing the criminal case. But court filings — including a document laying out Latah County Prosecutor Bill Thompson's reasons for accusing Kohberger of the killings — are expected to be unsealed now that Kohberger has arrived.

The nighttime attack at a Moscow home near the University of Idaho campus spread fear through the surrounding community, as authorities seemed stumped by the brutal stabbings. Investigators appeared to make a breakthrough, however, after searching for a white sedan that was seen around the time of the killings and analyzing DNA evidence collected from the crime scene.

Investigators have said they were still searching for a motive and the weapon used in the attack.

The bodies of Goncalves, 21, of Rathdrum, Idaho; Mogen, 21, of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho; Kernodle, 20, of Post Falls, Idaho; and Chapin, 20, of Conway, Washington, were found Nov. 13 at the rental home where the women lived. Kernodle and Chapin were dating, and he had been visiting the house that night.

Latah County, Idaho, prosecutors have said they believe Kohberger broke into the victims' home intending to commit murder.

Jason LaBar, the chief public defender in Monroe County, Pennsylvania, said Kohberger is eager to be exonerated and should be presumed innocent and "not tried in the court of public opinion."

After Tuesday's hearing, LaBar described Kohberger as "an ordinary guy," and said that after his extradition he would be represented by the chief public defender in Kootenai County, Idaho.

Although Moscow police have been tightlipped about the investigation, investigators last month asked the public for help finding a white sedan that was seen near the scene of the crime — specifically, a 2011-2013 Hyundai Elantra. Tips poured in and investigators soon announced they were sifting through a pool of around 20,000 potential vehicles.

Meanwhile, Kohberger apparently stayed in Pullman, Washington, through the end of the semester at WSU. Then he drove across country to his parents' home in Pennsylvania, accompanied by his father. They were in a white Elantra.

While driving through Indiana, Kohberger was pulled over twice on the same day — first by a Hancock County Sheriff's deputy and a few minutes later by an Indiana state trooper.

Body camera video of the first stop released by the Hancock County Sheriff's Office shows Kohberger behind the wheel and his father in the passenger seat on Dec. 15. Both men told the law enforcement officer that they were traveling from WSU before the officer sent them on their way with a warning for following too closely.

The Indiana State Police released bodycam footage of the second stop. The agency said that at the time, there was no information available to the trooper that would have identified Kohberger as a suspect in the killings. Kohberger was again given a warning for following too closely.

Amazon, Salesforce jettison jobs in latest tech worker purge

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE and MICHELLE CHAPMAN AP Business Writers

E-commerce giant Amazon and business software maker Salesforce are the latest U.S. technology companies to announce major job cuts as they prune payrolls that rapidly expanded during the pandemic lockdown.

Amazon said Wednesday that it will be cutting about 18,000 positions. It's the largest set of layoffs in the Seattle-based company's history, although just a fraction of its 1.5 million global workforce.

"Amazon has weathered uncertain and difficult economies in the past, and we will continue to do so," CEO Andy Jassy said in a note to employees that the company made public. "These changes will help us

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pursue our long-term opportunities with a stronger cost structure.”

He said the layoffs will mostly impact the company’s brick-and-mortar stores, which include Amazon Fresh and Amazon Go, and its PXT organizations, which handle human resources and other functions.

In November, Jassy told staff that layoffs were coming due to the economic landscape and the company’s rapid hiring in the last several years. Wednesday’s announcement included earlier job cuts that had not been numbered. The company had also offered voluntary buyouts and has been cutting costs in other areas of its sprawling business.

Salesforce, meanwhile, said it is laying off about 8,000 employees, or 10% of its workforce.

The cuts announced Wednesday are by far the largest in the 23-year history of a San Francisco company founded by former Oracle executive Marc Benioff. Benioff pioneered the method of leasing software services to internet-connected devices — a concept now known as “cloud computing.”

The layoffs are being made on the heels of a shake-up in Salesforce’s top ranks. Benioff’s hand-picked co-CEO Bret Taylor, who also was Twitter’s chairman at the time of its tortuous \$44 billion sale to billionaire Elon Musk, left Salesforce. Then, Slack co-founder Stewart Butterfield left. Salesforce bought Slack two years ago for nearly \$28 billion.

Salesforce workers who lose their jobs will receive nearly five months of pay, health insurance, career resources, and other benefits, according to the company. Amazon said it is also offering a separation payment, transitional health insurance benefits, and job placement support.

Benioff, now the sole chief executive at Salesforce, told employees in a letter that he blamed himself for the layoffs after continuing to hire aggressively into the pandemic, with millions of Americans working from home and demand for the company’s technology surging.

“As our revenue accelerated through the pandemic, we hired too many people leading into this economic downturn we’re now facing, and I take responsibility for that,” Benioff wrote.

Salesforce employed about 49,000 people in January 2020 just before the pandemic struck. Salesforce’s workforce today is still 50% larger than it was before the pandemic.

Meta Platforms CEO Mark Zuckerberg also acknowledged he misread the revenue gains that the owner of Facebook and Instagram was reaping during the pandemic when he announced in November that his company would be laying off 11,000 employees, or 13% of its workforce.

Like other major tech companies, Salesforce’s recent comedown from the heady days of the pandemic have taken a major toll on its stock. Before Wednesday’s announcement, shares had plunged more 50% from their peak close to \$310 in November 2021. The shares gained nearly 4% Wednesday to close at \$139.59.

“This is a smart poker move by Benioff to preserve margins in an uncertain backdrop as the company clearly overbuilt out its organization over the past few years along with the rest of the tech sector with a slowdown now on the horizon,” Wedbush analyst Dan Ives wrote.

Salesforce also said Wednesday that it will be closing some of its offices, but didn’t include locations. The company’s 61-story headquarters is a prominent feature of the San Francisco skyline and a symbol of tech’s importance to the city since its completion in 2018.

College scam mastermind Rick Singer gets 3.5 years in prison

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — The mastermind of the nationwide college admissions bribery scheme that ensnared celebrities, prominent businesspeople and other parents who used their wealth and privilege to buy their kids’ way into top-tier schools was sentenced to 3 1/2 years in prison Wednesday.

The punishment for Rick Singer, 62, is the longest sentence handed down in the sprawling scandal that embarrassed some of the nation’s most prestigious universities and put a spotlight on the secretive admissions system already seen as rigged in favor of the rich.

Prosecutors had sought six years behind bars, noting Singer’s extensive cooperation that helped authorities unravel the entire scheme. Singer began secretly working with investigators in 2018 and recorded

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hundreds of phone calls and meetings that helped authorities build the case against dozens of parents, athletic coaches and others arrested in March 2019.

Those sent to prison for participating in the scheme include "Full House" actor Lori Loughlin, her fashion designer husband Mossimo Giannulli, and "Desperate Housewives" star Felicity Huffman. Coaches from schools including Yale, Stanford, Georgetown and UCLA admitted to accepting bribes.

"The conduct in this case was something out of a Hollywood movie," Massachusetts U.S. Attorney Rachael Rollins told reporters after the sentencing.

Singer also was ordered to pay more than \$10 million in restitution to the IRS and forfeit millions more in money and assets to the government. He was ordered to report to prison in February.

Although Singer's cooperation helped authorities secure the convictions of a slew of defendants, prosecutors noted that he also admitted to obstructing the investigation by tipping off several of his clients who were under government scrutiny. He was never called by the government as a witness in the cases that went to trial.

In seeking leniency for Singer, defense attorney Candice Fields told the judge that her client took great personal risk by wearing a wire to record meetings for investigators and "did whatever was necessary" to assist the government. Fields had requested three years of probation, or if the judge deemed prison time necessary, six months behind bars.

"The investigation only achieved the notoriety it did because dozens of influential and sometimes celebrity defendants were prosecuted" and that only happened because of Singer, Fields said.

Singer apologized to his family, the schools he embarrassed in the public eye and the students he worked with over the years. He promised to spend the rest of his life working to make a positive impact in people's lives.

"My moral compass was warped by the lessons my father taught me about competition. I embraced his belief that embellishing or even lying to win was acceptable as long as there was victory. I should have known better," he said.

Singer pleaded guilty in 2019 — on the same day the massive case became public — to charges including racketeering conspiracy and money laundering conspiracy. Dozens of others ultimately pleaded guilty to racketeering, while two parents were convicted at trial.

Authorities in Boston began investigating the scheme after an executive under scrutiny for an unrelated securities fraud scheme told investigators that a Yale soccer coach had offered to help his daughter get into the school in exchange for cash. The Yale coach led authorities to Singer, whose cooperation unraveled the entire scheme.

For years, Singer paid off entrance exam administrators or proctors to inflate students' test scores and bribed coaches to designate applicants as recruits in order to boost their chances of getting into the school.

Coaches in such sports as soccer, sailing and tennis took bribes to pretend to recruit students as athletes, regardless of their ability. Fake sports profiles were created to make students look like stars in sports they sometimes didn't even play. The bribes were typically funneled through Singer's sham charity, allowing some parents to disguise the payments as charitable donations and deduct the payments from their federal income taxes.

Singer took in more than \$25 million from his clients, paid bribes totaling more than \$7 million and used more than \$15 million of his clients' money for his own benefit, according to prosecutors.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Stephen Frank told the judge that if she failed to impose a significant prison sentence, it would send a "devastating message that fraud pays and obstruction of justice pays."

"This defendant was responsible for the most massive fraud ever perpetuated on the higher education system in the United States," Frank said.

Before Singer, the toughest punishment had gone to former Georgetown tennis coach Gordon Ernst, who got 2 1/2 years in prison for pocketing more than \$3 million in bribes.

Punishments for the parents have ranged from probation to 15 months behind bars, although the parent who received that prison sentence remains free while he appeals his conviction.

One parent, who wasn't accused of working with Singer, was acquitted on all counts stemming from accusations that he bribed Ernst to get his daughter into the school. And a judge ordered a new trial for former University of Southern California water polo coach Jovan Vavic, who was convicted of accepting bribes.

Supply chain woes caused US auto sales to fall 8% last year

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Shortages of computer chips and other parts continued to hobble the U.S. auto industry last year, contributing to vehicle sales dropping 8% from 2021 to their lowest level in more than a decade.

But there's good news for consumers in the gloomy numbers: Vehicle supplies on dealer lots are growing, albeit slowly, and automakers expect at least a small easing in prices this year as inventories grow.

Automakers reported Wednesday that they sold 13.9 million cars, trucks, SUVs and vans last year as the parts shortage limited factory output amid high demand for new vehicles. It was the lowest sales number since 2011 when the economy was recovering from the Great Recession.

But sales were up slightly in the fourth quarter and inventories grew as parts supplies improved enough to increase production a little. Analysts are now expecting sales to grow by roughly 1 million to around 14.8 million this year as demand remains strong. But they'll still be far short of the normal 17 million per year before the pandemic.

With many models still in short supply, though, the average new vehicle price rose 2.5% in December to a record of just over \$46,000, according to J.D Power.

There are signs, however, that prices may be starting to ebb a little as inventories expand.

Toyota, for instance, finished the year with just under 24,000 vehicles on Toyota and Lexus brand dealer lots nationwide. That's up from about 19,000 at the end of 2021, but still far short of the 300,000 during normal years before the pandemic.

The improvement, although small, is allowing consumers to haggle a little on some slower-selling vehicles such as sedans, and even some luxury vehicles. But they're still getting top dollar for gas-electric hybrids and other more popular vehicles that are sold before they arrive on lots, said David Christ, general manager of the Toyota Division.

For most of last year, people who wanted new vehicles had to pay sticker price or above and take whatever models and colors dealers could get. But dealers have told Christ that changed a bit in the past two or three months for models that aren't as popular. Plus, he said more people are interested in lower-cost vehicles because inflation and higher interest rates are taking a bite out of their budgets.

"They're coming in and saying, 'Hey, can I get a deal here?'" Christ said. "I do think that on some vehicles, not just in our brand, and across the industry, there has become a little more of a buyer's market where the customer can negotiate."

Whether that holds up all year remains to be seen. If demand stays strong and people are willing to pay sticker price, then dealers will get that, Christ said. But if demand wanes or supplies increase dramatically, discounts could rise and prices could drop a bit.

Jessica Caldwell, executive director of insights at Edmunds.com, said Toyota's experience is likely to repeat itself through the industry with small price decreases on some models.

"There isn't as much disposable income to be put into a vehicle," she said. "We've seen prices high before, but we've never really seen higher prices with the (higher) interest rates."

But electric vehicles and other hot sellers will remain expensive because people want to buy them now, she added.

Caldwell doesn't see vehicle supplies or prices returning to pre-pandemic levels this year, and she's not sure if we'll ever get back to 2019 levels.

The computer chip shortage dates to the spring of 2020, when automakers were forced to shut down factories due to rapidly increasing COVID-19 cases. Chip makers shifted production to consumer electronics to feed a computer and gaming sales boom when people were stuck at home. When the auto plants

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restarted earlier than expected, chip makers weren't making as many semiconductors for automobiles, which must be made to withstand vibration and huge temperature extremes.

Auto chip production has improved, but still isn't back to pre-pandemic levels, so auto plants still aren't back to their full output.

As a result, the 13.9 million vehicles that automakers sold last year was about 1.2 million below 2021 numbers, according to Motorintelligence.com.

General Motors, with full-year sales up 2.5%, retook its traditional spot as the nation's top selling automaker. Toyota, which won the crown in 2021, saw its sales fall 9.6% last year. Ford reports sales on Thursday.

Sales at Stellantis, formerly Fiat Chrysler, dropped 13%, while Honda sales plummeted 32.9%. Hyundai posted just under a 1% increase to outsell Nissan, whose sales tumbled 25.4%. Kia sales fell 1.1% for the year, while Subaru was down 4.7%.

Electric vehicle sales hit more than 807,000 last year, up almost 65% from 2021.

Pickups and SUVs were 77.3% of sales while cars dropped to 22.7%.

NFL rallies to support Hamlin as his condition improves

By JOHN WAWROW AP Sports Writer

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. (AP) — As a sedated Damar Hamlin lay before him in a Cincinnati hospital bed surrounded by machinery feeding him oxygen and fluids, Indianapolis Colts safety Rodney Thomas provided a few words of encouragement to his friend.

"I just told him, I got him. That's all," Thomas said Wednesday. "Just saying the same thing: I got his back and you're going to get through it."

It didn't matter to Thomas whether the Buffalo Bills safety could hear him. More important to Thomas, who made the two-hour drive from Indianapolis to Cincinnati, was being by the side of Hamlin — his former high school teammate in Pittsburgh — and the player's family.

"It just calmed me down and made that trip home a lot easier," Thomas said. "I could just go home and I could just know that he's going to be straight. I've got him. The world's got him."

Two days after the 24-year-old Hamlin's heart stopped and he needed to be resuscitated on the field during a game at the Bengals, an immense outpouring of support continued.

After fans held vigils in Cincinnati and at the Bills home in Orchard Park, New York, on Tuesday, it was time for the NFL community — those who know Hamlin and those who had never heard of him before Monday — to express its support with most teams returning to practice.

Though he's still under sedation, Hamlin's recovery from cardiac arrest continues moving in "a positive direction," the player's marketing representative, Jordon Rooney, told The Associated Press by phone.

"We all remain optimistic," Rooney said, adding that Hamlin's family asked him not to go into further detail.

The Bills said Hamlin was still in critical condition but displayed signs of improvement. They said he was expected to remain in intensive care.

Rooney said Hamlin's family was buoyed by the words and acts of kindness the second-year player has received since being transported by ambulance to University of Cincinnati Medical Center.

"They are elated right now," Rooney said. "Damar is still their first concern. But for them, they always look at how they can turn a somewhat troubling situation into a good one. The bounce back from this, for him and his family is going to be incredible."

The family is quickly discovering how much of an impression Hamlin has made.

New York Giants coach and former Bills offensive coordinator Brian Daboll wore a cap with Hamlin's No. 3 on it.

Minnesota Vikings defensive tackle Harrison Phillips had dinner delivered to the hospital for Hamlin's family and medical staff.

"Damar was close to my locker and when I spent my time in Buffalo and helped out with my foundation because of his giving nature," said Phillips, who spent his first four seasons with Buffalo before signing with Minnesota. "But I was a bit surprised at how many people who have zero ties and zero connections

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to him or to Buffalo, and how much they're impacted because we are a brotherhood."

In Denver, rookie cornerback Damarri Mathis was too uncomfortable addressing the Broncos about Hamlin, his former University of Pittsburgh teammate. Interim coach Jerry Rosburg spoke up for him.

"To Damar Hamlin of the Buffalo Bills, Damarri Mathis, your teammate, our teammate, told us all about you," Rosburg said. "He told us of your high character and your friendliness. And he told us of your incredible ability to lead people to a loving commitment to others, community service and raising other people up. That's a remarkable thing. So, today, Damar, we honor you."

The Bills, meantime, were still dealing with the shock of seeing their teammate collapse on the field after making a tackle, his heart not beating.

After returning home early Tuesday once the game was suspended, the Bills held meetings and a walk-through practice without any media availability on Wednesday. They are expected to resume practice on Thursday ahead of their home game against the New England Patriots on Sunday.

NFL executive vice president Troy Vincent said his discussions with Bills coach Sean McDermott have focused solely on mental health and how McDermott and the team are dealing with what happened.

"It is tough. And coach is still battling," Vincent said, his voice cracking.

The Patriots also pushed back their media availability to Thursday, and noted the NFL approved giving both teams an extra day "due to these unique circumstances."

What remains unclear is whether the NFL will reschedule the Bills' game against the Bengals, which has major implications in determining the top spot in the AFC. The playoffs are set to open on Jan. 14.

The Chiefs (13-3) have a half-game lead over Buffalo (12-3), with the Bills owning the tiebreaker after beating Kansas City this season. The Bengals (11-4) are currently the third seed and have also defeated the Chiefs.

Hamlin was hurt in the first quarter when he was struck squarely in the chest while making what appeared to be routine tackle of Bengals receiver Tee Higgins. Hamlin briefly got up and adjusted his face-mask before collapsing backward.

Hamlin was selected by Buffalo in the sixth round of the 2021 draft out of Pitt. He spent his rookie season limited to special teams roles, and took over the starting safety job in Week 3 in place of veteran Micah Hyde, who remains sidelined by a neck injury.

Fans, team owners and players — including Tom Brady and Russell Wilson — have made donations to Hamlin's Chasing M's Foundation, which had raised more than \$6.6 million by late Wednesday afternoon.

"Damar would want to use this to help other people. He would hate for all his attention to just be on him and there not be a positive outcome," Rooney told reporters at the hospital. "So, I mean, that's Damar. I mean, his entire life is spent towards providing and serving other people. That's just who he is."

NOTES: The Bills signed S Jared Mayden off the New York Jets' practice squad, and released CB Xavier Rhodes. ... The Bills — out of respect for Hamlin — did not list him on their injury report.

Hamlin's collapse spurs new wave of vaccine misinformation

By ALI SWENSON, DAVID KLEPPER and SOPHIA TULP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Unfounded claims about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines proliferated in the hours and days after Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin collapsed during Monday's game, revealing how pervasive vaccine misinformation remains three years after the pandemic began.

Even before Hamlin was carried off the field in Cincinnati, posts amassing thousands of shares and millions of views began circulating online claiming without evidence that complications from COVID-19 vaccines caused his health emergency.

While cardiac specialists say it's too soon to know what caused Hamlin's heart to stop, they've offered a rare type of trauma called commotio cordis as among the possible culprits. Physicians interviewed by The Associated Press say there's no indication Hamlin's vaccine status played a role, and said there's no evidence to support claims that a number of young athletes have died as a result of COVID vaccinations.

Peter McCullough, a Dallas cardiologist and outspoken vaccine critic, amplified the theories on a Fox News segment hosted by Tucker Carlson on Tuesday, speculating that "vaccine-induced myocarditis," may

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have caused Hamlin's episode. While the Bills have not said whether Hamlin was vaccinated, about 95% of NFL players have received a COVID-19 vaccine, according to the league.

In his Tuesday segment, Carlson claimed McCullough and another researcher found that "more than 1,500 total cardiac arrests" have occurred among European athletes "since the vax campaign began."

But Carlson was citing a letter in which the authors' evidence was a dubious blog that lists news reports of people all over the world, of all ages, dying or experiencing medical emergencies. The blog proves no relationship between the incidents and COVID-19 vaccines; it also includes in its count reported deaths from cancer and emergencies of unknown causes.

"It's not real research, but he quotes it as if it's real research," said Dr. Matthew Martinez, director of sports cardiology at Atlantic Health System in Morristown Medical Center. "Anybody can write a letter to the editor and then quote an article that has no academic rigor."

Many social media users have also shared deceptive videos that purport to show athletes collapsing on-field because of COVID-19 vaccines. However, several of the cases shown have been proven to be from other causes.

Though anti-vaccine influencers have insisted that sudden cardiac arrests during sports games are unprecedented, cardiologists say they've observed these traumatic events throughout their careers, and long before the COVID-19 pandemic.

"There have always been cases of athletes having sudden cardiac death or cardiac arrest," said Dr. Lawrence Phillips, sports health expert and cardiologist at NYU Langone Health. "I have not seen a change in the prevalence of them over the last couple of years versus earlier in my career."

In fact, Phillips said, these rare medical emergencies are the main reason that doctors and activists have spent years campaigning for defibrillators to be on standby at sporting events.

That push, and the implementation of emergency action plans, has improved outcomes after cardiac events on the playing field, even as the number of such events has remained "remarkably stable," Martinez said.

Martinez, who has worked for the National Football League, National Basketball Association, National Hockey League and Major League Soccer, said he has investigated but not seen any signal that COVID-19 or vaccines are causing an increased incidence of cardiac events among athletes.

His research shows that among professional athletes who have had COVID-19, rates of inflammatory heart disease were about 0.6% — showing no increased risk compared to other viruses.

Online posts mentioning Hamlin and vaccines soared into the thousands within one hour of Hamlin's collapse, according to an analysis conducted for the AP by Signal Labs, a San Francisco-based media intelligence company.

It's not surprising that misleading claims about COVID-19 vaccines surged following Hamlin's cardiac arrest, given how much vaccine misinformation has spread since the pandemic began, said Jeanine Guidry, a Virginia Commonwealth University professor who researches health misinformation and vaccine hesitancy.

High-profile public events like Hamlin's collapse often create new waves of misinformation as people grasp for explanations. For people concerned about vaccine safety, Hamlin's sudden collapse served to affirm and justify their beliefs, Guidry said.

"This happened to a person in the prime of their life, on primetime television, and the people watching didn't immediately know why," she said. "We like to have clear answers that make us feel safer. Especially after the last three years, I think this is coming from fear and uncertainty."

Similarly unfounded claims about vaccine injuries surged last month following the death of sports journalist Grant Wahl, who died of a ruptured blood vessel in his heart while covering the World Cup in Qatar. His death was not related to vaccines.

Cuban migrants flow into Florida Keys, overwhelm officials

By CODY JACKSON and TERRY SPENCER Associated Press

MARATHON, Fla. (AP) — More than 500 Cuban immigrants have come ashore in the Florida Keys since the weekend, the latest in a large and increasing number who are fleeing the communist island and stretching thin U.S. border agencies both on land and at sea.

It is a dangerous 100-mile (160-kilometer) trip in often rickety boats — unknown thousands having perished over the years — but more Cubans are taking the risk amid deepening and compounding political and economic crises at home. A smaller number of Haitians are also fleeing their country's economic and political woes and arriving by boat in Florida.

The Coast Guard tries to interdict Cuban migrants at sea and return them. Since the U.S. government's new fiscal year began Oct. 1, about 4,200 have been stopped at sea — or about 43 a day. That was up from 17 per day in the previous fiscal year and just two per day during the 2020-21 fiscal year.

But an unknown number have made it to land and will likely get to stay.

"I would prefer to die to reach my dream and help my family. The situation in Cuba is not very good," Jeiler del Toro Diaz told The Miami Herald shortly after coming ashore Tuesday in Key Largo.

The Department of Homeland Security, which oversees U.S. Customs and Border Protection, said it would be issuing a statement Wednesday, but had not yet done so.

Dry Tortugas National Park, a group of seven islands 70 miles (110 kilometers) west of Key West, remained closed to visitors Wednesday as the U.S. evacuated migrants who came ashore there earlier in the week. Normally, about 255 tourists a day arrive by boat and seaplane to tour the islands and Fort Jefferson, which was built 160 years ago. Officials did not know when it would reopen.

In Marathon, some 45 miles (72 kilometers) northeast of Key West, about two dozen migrants were being held in a fenced-in area outside a Customs and Border Protection station where tents had been erected to provide shade. When Associated Press journalists tried to speak with the migrants through the fence, Border Patrol employees told them to leave.

Ramón Raul Sanchez with the Cuban-American group Movimiento Democracia went to the Keys to check on the situation. He told the AP that he met a group of 22 Cubans who had just arrived. They were standing along the main road, waiting for U.S. authorities to pick them up. Sanchez and Keys officials said the Biden administration needs a more coordinated response.

"There is a migration and humanitarian crisis, and it is necessary for the president to respond by helping local authorities," Sanchez said.

Cubans are willing to take the risk because those who make it to U.S. soil almost always get to stay, even if their legal status is murky. They also arrive by land, flying to Nicaragua, then traveling north through Honduras and Guatemala into Mexico. In the 2021-22 fiscal year, 220,000 Cubans were stopped at the U.S.-Mexican border, almost six times as many as the previous year.

Callan Garcia, a Florida immigration attorney, said most Cubans who reach U.S. soil tell Border Patrol agents they can't find adequate work at home. They are then flagged "expedited for removal" as having entered the country illegally. But that does not mean they actually will be removed quickly — or at all.

Because the U.S. and Cuba do not have formal diplomatic relations, the American government has no way to repatriate them. Cubans are released but given an order that requires them to contact federal immigration authorities periodically to confirm their address and status. They are allowed to get work permits, driver's licenses and Social Security numbers, but cannot apply for permanent residency or citizenship.

Garcia said that can last for the rest of their lives; some Cubans who came in the 1980 Mariel boatlift still are designated "expedited for removal."

"They're just sort of here with a floating order for removal that can't be executed," Garcia said.

A small percentage of Cuban immigrants tell Border Patrol agents they are fleeing political persecution and are "paroled," Garcia said. Under the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, they are released until they can appear before an immigration judge to make their case. If approved, they can receive permanent residency and later apply for citizenship.

On the other hand, Haitian immigrants almost always get sent back, even though political persecution and violence is rife there, along with severe economic hardship.

"That inconsistency has something that immigrant rights advocates have always pointed to," Garcia said.

A lion roars on Broadway as box office hauls reveal winners

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — It was feast or famine at the Broadway box office as 2022 wound down, with eye-popping revenue for popular shows — including a staggering new Broadway record for "The Lion King" — not lifting all strugglers.

Twenty-one of the 33 shows available broke the \$1 million mark for the week ending Sunday, and "The Lion King" made history with the biggest haul ever — an astonishing \$4,315,264 over nine performances for a 25-year-old show with no stars. It took the crown from "Hamilton, the first Broadway show to crack \$4 million, which it did with eight performances at the end of 2018.

"The Music Man" was close behind with two high-wattage stars in Sutton Foster and Hugh Jackman — \$3,971,531 over nine shows — followed by "Wicked" with \$3,152,679. The top average ticket price went to "The Music Man" with \$285.80, just about a dollar more than "The Lion King."

All shows bar one — "A Christmas Carol" — saw their numbers grow over the week ending Sunday. However, the usual bump was barely evident for "Topdog/Underdog," with just \$345,567 over eight shows, and "Ohio State Murders" pulling in just \$311,893 to a half-empty theater over nine performances despite the presence of six-time Tony Award winner Audra McDonald. A revival of the Pulitzer Prize-winning dark comedy "Between Riverside and Crazy" starring the rapper Common pulled in just \$260,085.

Box office numbers had been treacherous for new works even before the holidays — early closing notices were posted for shows like "Almost Famous," "KPOP," "A Strange Loop" and "Ain't No Mo'." The Broadway stalwart "The Phantom of the Opera" previously announced it would close in 2023 after 35 years. That announcement was met with a ticket spike.

The data is a reminder that Broadway has not fully rebounded from the pandemic, which wiped out live theater for 18 months and dried up its lifeblood — tourism.

Tom Kirdahy, a veteran producer behind the current starry revival of "The Piano Lesson" and the upcoming "New York, New York," said audiences are steadily coming back and could be back to normal by spring.

"It's very clear that buying patterns are different, but it's equally clear that audiences are craving good work, and I think the challenge is to remind people that New York is actually a safe place to be and that theaters are safe places to be," he said.

The 33 shows running on Broadway grossed \$51,912,862 last week, the biggest seven-day period since the last week of 2019, when the box office earned \$55,765,408. The holiday period is especially rough on performers and crew members who are usually asked to staff extra performances.

While January and February are among the bitterest months on Broadway, many producers were popping champagne after the latest numbers. The 26-year-old revival of the musical "Chicago" earned its biggest weekly total with \$1,299,404 and "The Piano Lesson" starring Samuel L. Jackson, John David Washington and Danielle Brooks became the highest-grossing August Wilson play on Broadway in history last week.

The Lea Michele-led revival of "Funny Girl" set a new box office record at the August Wilson Theatre with \$2,405,901. And the new musical "& Juliet" broke the box office record at the Stephen Sondheim Theatre, grossing \$1,639,788 for nine performances. "Harry Potter and the Cursed Child" broke the house record at the Lyric Theatre, grossing \$2,671,191 for its eight-performance week.

Sitting ducks? Russian military flaws seen in troop deaths

By FELIPE DANA and JOANNA KOZLOWSKA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The Russian military's top brass came under increasing scrutiny Wednesday as more details emerged of how at least 89 Russian soldiers, and possibly many more, were killed in a Ukrainian artillery attack on a single building.

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The scene last weekend in the Russian-held eastern Ukrainian town of Makiivka, where the soldiers were temporarily stationed, appears to have been a recipe for disaster. Hundreds of Russian troops were reportedly clustered in a building close to the front line, well within range of Ukraine's Western-supplied precision artillery, possibly sitting close to an ammunition store and perhaps unwittingly helping Kyiv's forces to zero in on them.

It was one of the deadliest single attacks on the Kremlin's forces since the war began more than 10 months ago and the highest death toll in a single incident acknowledged so far by either side in the conflict.

Ukraine's armed forces claimed the Makiivka strike killed around 400 Russian soldiers housed in a vocational school building. About 300 more of them were wounded, officials alleged. It wasn't possible to verify either side's claims due to the fighting.

The Russian military sought to blame the soldiers for their own deaths. Gen. Lt. Sergei Sevryukov said in a statement late Tuesday that their phone signals allowed Kyiv's forces to "determine the coordinates of the location of military personnel" and launch a strike.

Emily Ferris, a research fellow on Russia and Eurasia at the Royal United Services Institute in London, told The Associated Press it is "very hard to verify" whether cellphone signaling and geolocation were to blame for the accurate strike.

She noted that Russian soldiers on active duty are forbidden from using their phones — exactly because there have been so many instances in recent years of their being used for targeting, including by both sides in the Ukraine war. The conflict has made ample use of modern technology.

She also noted that blaming the soldiers themselves was a "helpful narrative" for Moscow as it helps deflect criticism and steer attention toward the official cellphone ban.

Russian President Vladimir Putin sought to move the conversation along, too, as he took part via video link in a sending-off ceremony Wednesday for a frigate equipped with the Russian navy's new hypersonic missiles.

Putin said the Zircon missiles that the Admiral Gorshkov frigate was carrying were a "unique weapon," capable of flying at nine times the speed of sound and with a range of 1,000 kilometers (620 miles). Russia says the missiles can't be intercepted.

Meanwhile, away from the battlefields, France said Wednesday it will send French-made AMX-10 RC light tanks to Ukraine — the first tanks from a Western European country — following an afternoon phone call between French President Emmanuel Macron and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday.

The French presidency didn't say how many tanks would be delivered and when. The NATO member has given Ukraine anti-tank and air defense missiles and rocket launchers.

Later Wednesday, President Joe Biden confirmed that the U.S. is considering sending Bradley Fighting Vehicles to Ukraine. The Bradley is a medium armored combat vehicle that can carry about 10 personnel, or be configured to carry additional ammunition or communications equipment.

The Pentagon has already provided Ukraine with more than 2,000 combat vehicles, including 477 Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles and more than 1,200 Humvees.

The weekend Makiivka strike seemed to be the latest blow to the Kremlin's military prestige as it struggles to advance the invasion of its neighbor.

But Ferris, the analyst, said "there should be a bit of caution around leaning too heavily on this (attack) as a sign of (the) Russian army's weakness."

As details of the strike have trickled out in recent days, some observers detected military sloppiness at the root of so many deaths.

U.K. intelligence officials said Wednesday that Moscow's "unprofessional" military practices were likely partly to blame for the high casualties.

"Given the extent of the damage, there is a realistic possibility that ammunition was being stored near to troop accommodation, which detonated during the strike, creating secondary explosions," the U.K. Defense Ministry said on Twitter.

In the same post, the ministry said the building struck by Ukrainian missiles was little more than 12

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kilometers (7.5 miles) from the front line, within “one of the most contested areas of the conflict,” in the partially Russian-occupied Donetsk region.

“The Russian military has a record of unsafe ammunition storage from well before the current war, but this incident highlights how unprofessional practices contribute to Russia’s high casualty rate,” the update added.

The Russian Defense Ministry, in a rare admission of losses, initially said the strike killed 63 troops. But as emergency crews searched the ruins, the death toll mounted. The regiment’s deputy commander was among the dead.

That stirred renewed criticism inside Russia of the way the broader military campaign is being handled by the Ministry of Defense.

Vladlen Tatarsky, a well-known military blogger, accused Russian generals of “demonstrating their own stupidity and misunderstanding of what’s going on (among) the troops, where everyone has cellphones.”

“Moreover, in places where there’s coverage, artillery fire is often adjusted by phone. There are simply no other ways,” Tatarsky wrote in a Telegram post.

Others blamed the decision to station hundreds of troops in one place. “The cellphone story is not too convincing,” military blogger Semyon Pegov wrote. “The only remedy is not to house personnel en masse in large buildings. Simply not to house 500 people in one place but spread them across 10 different locations.”

Unconfirmed reports in Russian-language media said the victims were mobilized reservists from the region of Samara, in southwestern Russia.

The Institute for the Study of War saw in the incident further evidence that Moscow isn’t properly utilizing the reservists it began calling up last September.

“Systemic failures in Russia’s force generation apparatus continue to plague personnel capabilities to the detriment of Russian operational capacity in Ukraine,” the think tank said in a report late Tuesday.

Ferris, of the Royal United Services Institute, said the Makiivka strike shows the Russian army is more interested in growing its number of troops, not in training them in wartime skills.

“That’s really how Russia conducts a lot of its warfare — by overwhelming the enemy with volume, with people,” she said. “The Kremlin view, unfortunately, is that soldiers’ lives are expendable.”

In a grinding battle of attrition, Russian forces have pressed their offensive on Bakhmut in Donetsk despite heavy losses. The Wagner Group, a private military contractor owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a millionaire businessman with close ties to Putin, has spearheaded the Bakhmut offensive.

U.S. intelligence officials have determined that convicts Wagner pulled from prisons accounted for 90% of Russian casualties in fighting for Bakhmut, according to a senior administration official who requested anonymity to discuss the finding.

The White House said last month that intelligence findings showed Wagner had some 50,000 personnel fighting in Ukraine, including 40,000 recruited convicts. The U.S. assesses that Wagner is spending about \$100 million a month in the fight.

NFL still considering scheduling options, Week 18 unchanged

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

The NFL is still considering various options following the suspension of the Bills-Bengals game, including possibly eliminating the bye week before the Super Bowl.

The Bills-Patriots game set for Sunday in Buffalo and the rest of the Week 18 games remain on schedule.

The pivotal Bills-Bengals game was suspended Monday night after Buffalo safety Damar Hamlin collapsed and went into cardiac arrest while making a tackle in the first quarter.

Hamlin’s recovery is moving in “a positive direction,” two days after the 24-year-old player had to be resuscitated on the field, his marketing representative said Wednesday.

The league hasn’t had discussions about postponing the Bills-Patriots game, which has playoff implications. The AFC East champion Bills (12-3) are vying for the No. 1 seed. The Patriots (8-8) would clinch a wild-card berth with a win.

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"Frankly, my concern is to make sure the men have what they need to function, and that's getting through this day. Tomorrow is going to take care of itself," league executive Troy Vincent said in a conference call. "So, from my communications with the club and those players, it's just strictly been around making sure they're OK to check in, and being able to access those resources that are available to them. It is tough. And Coach is still battling."

The Bills were scheduled to hold team meetings and a walkthrough practice without any media availability on Wednesday. They are expected to resume practice on Thursday. The Patriots returned to practice Wednesday but pushed back their media availability to Thursday.

"It's really important that we just keep the pulse of the coach and the players, and don't get in front of that," an emotional Vincent said. "And we'll allow (Bills coach) Sean (McDermott) and his team and his staff and the players, which are the most important thing here, to guide us if we have to make that decision collectively with the club and what's best for Sean and his team and the players."

NFL executive Jeff Miller said a decision on whether to resume the Bills-Bengals game at a later date will be made in the coming days. The outcome of the game impacts the AFC playoff structure because the Bills entered Monday night as the No. 1 seed.

"There's a lot of considerations in place there and a lot of people that we want to consult with, including the clubs involved, before that decision is final," Miller said.

The Bengals (11-4) have a one-game lead over Baltimore in the AFC North and also are in the mix for the top seed. The Kansas City Chiefs (13-3) surpassed the Bills for the No. 1 seed, pending the result of Buffalo's game against Cincinnati.

The NFL will lean on some of its guiding principles from the 2020 season when COVID-19 impacted the schedule and contingencies were in place in case every game wasn't played. The league wound up playing all 256 games in 17 weeks despite the pandemic.

The playoffs are scheduled to begin Jan. 14. Pushing the start back one week to complete the Bills-Bengals game is among the options. That would eliminate the bye week between the conference championship games on Jan. 29 and the Super Bowl on Feb. 12.

Other scenarios include playing the Bills-Bengals game and the NFC wild-card games on the same weekend and pushing the start of the AFC playoffs back one week. That also would eliminate the bye week before the Super Bowl.

The Pro Bowl Games featuring various skills competitions in Las Vegas are scheduled for the week before the Super Bowl, with a flag football game between the AFC-NFC teams on Feb. 5. That week could be pushed to after the Super Bowl or be canceled.

Not resuming the Bills-Bengals game would be the simplest option from a scheduling standpoint because it wouldn't require any other changes. The No. 1 seed and other playoff positions would then be determined by winning percentage. In that case, the Chiefs would have the inside track on securing a first-round bye and home-field advantage throughout the playoffs.

"Those guiding principles that got us through or took us into the 2020 season with COVID, all of those things will be things that guide us through this conversation and making sure that proper equity is in place," Vincent said. "As we saw, potentially, there may be a lack of equity where it may not be perfect, but it will allow those that are participating or have earned that right to play, to continue to play."

The Chiefs play the Las Vegas Raiders on Saturday in the first game of this weekend's slate.

"We know whatever scenario we have to go play to try to win the football game," said Chiefs coach Andy Reid, who coached the Philadelphia Eagles in a preseason game in 2012 just four days after his 29-year-old son died. "That's what we have to do. That's what we're going to do. And the players have worked through practice and done a nice job with it up to this point."

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Best of CES 2023: Electric skates, pet tech and AI for birds

By ADRIANA MORGA, HALELUYA HADERO and CARA RUBINSKY Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Tech companies of all sizes are showing off their latest products at CES, formerly known as the Consumer Electronics show.

The show is getting back to normal after going completely virtual in 2021 and seeing a significant drop in 2022 attendance because of the pandemic.

Exhibitors range from big names including Sony and LG to tiny startups. You might see the next big thing or something that will never make it past the prototype stage.

On Tuesday night, the show kicked off with media previews from just some of the 3,000 companies signed up to attend. CES officially opens Thursday.

Here are some highlights:

POKEMON, BUT MAKE IT BIRDS

Bird Buddy showed off a smart bird feeder that takes snapshots of feathered friends as they fly in to eat some treats. The startup says its AI technology can recognize more than 1,000 species of birds, allowing users to share through a mobile app what kind of birds they're feeding.

"We try to kind of gamify the collection so it's a really fun game that you can play — almost like a real life Pokémon Go with real animals and wildlife in your backyard," said Kyle Buzzard, the company's co-founder and chief hardware officer.

The product has already sparked some interest from consumers who want to show the world what birds are coming into their backyards.

The company, which began as a Kickstarter project in 2020, says it started shipping its bird feeders in September and has already sold all 100,000 in its inventory. The price for the basic feeder is \$199.

ELECTRIC SKATES

Journalists had fun zipping around the exhibit hall on remote-controlled, electric inline skates from French startup AtmosGear.

The battery lasts for 20 miles (32 kilometers), said founder Mohamed Soliman, who hopes people will see them as a viable way to commute, like electric bikes or scooters.

"My goal is for everyone to go skating again because it's so much fun, every time you see people skating you see them with a big smile," Soliman said.

A waist bag holds the battery and cables connected to the skates. They also can be used as regular skates when they need to be charged or skaters simply want to travel under their own power.

The \$500 skates are available for pre-order. The company has taken orders for 150 pairs so far and is aiming for 200 orders to start production.

DIGITAL TEMPORARY TATTOOS

A handheld device displayed by South Korean company Prinker allows you to quickly and easily apply temporary tattoos.

The device uses cosmetic-grade ink with a library of thousands of designs or the option to make your own with the company's app. After picking a tattoo, you just wave the device over wherever you want it applied. The tattoos are waterproof but wash off with soap.

The flagship model is \$279 and a smaller model is \$229. Ink cartridges good for 1,000 tattoos are \$119.

HELPING FIND YOUR WAY

Japan-based Loovic has created a device designed to solve the challenges of those who have difficulty navigating while they walk.

The device worn around the neck employs sounds and vibrations to guide users to destinations, enabling them to look at what's around rather than focusing on a phone's map app.

Loovic co-founder and CEO Toru Yamanaka said he was inspired to create the device for his son, who has a cognitive impairment making it difficult for him to navigate.

The prototype device is not yet available to the public.

A FITNESS TRACKER FOR YOUR DOG

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If you wonder what your dog is doing while you're not home, French startup Invoxia has a product for you. The company's smart dog collar monitors your pet's activity and sleep, sending the data to your phone.

The latest version unveiled at CES, which has a GPS tracker, includes more advanced heart health monitoring.

The collar is \$149 in the U.S. while a monthly \$8.25 subscription to the app monitors the data and shares it with your veterinarian.

METAVVERSE FOR KIDS

The creators of Roybi, an educational AI robot that helps children learn about STEM topics and new languages, are venturing into the metaverse.

The RoybiVerse is expected to offer stations where K-12 and higher education students can learn about a wide range of educational topics.

Users walking around the RoybiVerse will be able to visit an area where they'll learn about dinosaurs or walk over to the virtual library where they can pick a book and read it.

The RoybiVerse, which is expected to launch by mid-2023, will be available in virtual reality headsets and on a website. No robot needed.

Review: A grumpy Tom Hanks stars in 'A Man Called Otto'

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

Sentimental tales about grumpy old men and American decline have, until recently, typically been the domain of Clint Eastwood.

But in "A Man Called Otto," Marc Forster's adaptation of Fredrik Backman's bestseller and a remake of the 2016 Swedish film "A Man Called Ove," it's Tom Hanks prowling the neighborhood and irritably grumbling about how things used to be. In the original, Rolf Lassgård richly inhabited the role of Ove, a curmudgeonly widower — a Forrest Grump — whose suicide attempts are foiled by needy neighbors and, ultimately, his grudging, sincere devotion to them.

Exasperation, whether directed at a crying ballplayer or a slobbering canine, has always been squarely in Hanks' wheelhouse. But despondency or even plain get-off-my-lawn orneriness are less obvious traits possessed by the actor sometimes called "America's Dad." Following Hanks' villainous turn as Col. Tom Parker in "Elvis," the 66-year-old has found in "A Man Called Otto" another role that interestingly, if not always entirely successfully, caters to his strengths while tweaking his familiar screen presence.

It also may rob "A Man Called Otto," which opens with Otto buying rope to hang himself with, of some of its spirit. We know there are dark roads that Hanks just isn't going to go down, and some of the early, more caustic scenes of Forster's film strike a false note. But as "A Man Called Otto" makes its way through Otto's life, cutting between his present-day squabbles and flashbacks of happier times with his wife, Sonya (Rachel Keller), Hanks movingly tailors the role to himself. How "A Man Called Otto" unfolds won't surprise anyone, but it does the trick for a little post-holidays heart-warming.

"A Man Called Otto" is set in the prefab row-house development Otto has long lived in, where he tirelessly tisk-tisks any rule breakers, re-sorts misplaced recycling and berates drivers who violate the street's regulation against through traffic.

Screenwriter David Magee ("Life of Pi," "Finding Neverland") hues closely to the Swedish film as a kind of parable of community. Up and down the street are all the people the freshly retired Otto barely tolerates: friends-turned-enemies (Peter Lawson Jones, Juanita Jennings), a friendly exerciser (a delightful Cameron Britton), a transgender paper deliverer and former student of Otto's wife (Mack Bayda). Most of all there is Marisol (a terrific Mariana Treviño), a pregnant mother of two has just moved in with her husband (Manuel Garcia-Rulfo). Various needs — a stray cat, a borrowed ladder, driving lessons — intrude on Otto's desires for a peaceful death and, in between aborted suicide attempts, gradually rekindle his will to live.

It's sometimes too broadly drawn. Mike Birbiglia plays a predatory real estate agent from a company not-so-subtly called Dye & Merica. ("Sounds like Dying America, which it is," says Otto.) But "A Man Called Otto" is less after realism than it is a modern-day fable, with shades of Scrooge and the Grinch. As a tale

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of a solitary man, Hanks has made it a poignant work of family. Rita Wilson, his wife, is a producer and is heard singing a song in the film. The younger Otto is played in flashbacks by their son, Truman Hanks. Even Chet Hanks' "White Boy Summer" blares from a car radio.

Another tune, though, is a more thrilling needle drop. The less said probably the better, but suffice to say, it could be a sign that the Kate Bush renaissance so hearteningly kicked up by "Stranger Things" has not yet abated. If that's not life-affirming, I don't know what is.

"A Man Called Otto," a Sony Pictures release, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association for mature thematic material involving suicide attempts, and language. Running time: 126 minutes. Two and a half stars out of four.

Virginia attorney general investigating elite high school

By MATTHEW BARAKAT Associated Press

ANNANDALE, Va. (AP) — Virginia Attorney General Jason Miyares is launching an investigation into one of the state's most prestigious high schools, acting on complaints that students there weren't properly recognized for their achievements on a standardized test.

Miyares said at a news conference Wednesday that his Office of Civil Rights is investigating the Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology not only for its failure to timely notify students of a commendation they received in a scholarship competition, but also the school's recently overhauled admissions policies.

The public high school commonly known as TJ is located in the Washington, D.C., suburb of Fairfax County and regularly ranks as one of the best in the country. Admission to the school is highly competitive, and parents map out strategies to gain entry for their children years in advance.

A majority of students are Asian American and for many years African American and Hispanic students have been woefully underrepresented. In 2020, the Fairfax County School Board dramatically overhauled the admissions process, scrapping a high-stakes standardized test and setting aside a certain number of seats on a geographic basis.

The changes prompted claims of discrimination against Asian Americans who had fared well under the old system, and a federal lawsuit challenging the new procedures is going through the appeals process.

The politically charged atmosphere at the school has continued, so last month when news broke that the school delayed notification to students that they had earned "commended student" status in the National Merit Scholarship competition, some parents complained that the delays were part of a continued "war on merit" at the school that favors equal outcomes for all students over individual achievement.

Miyares announced the investigation one day after Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin, a fellow Republican, requested the probe.

Miyares said the Office of Civil Rights will investigate whether racial discrimination fueled either the admissions changes or the failure to quickly notify students of the National Merit commendations.

Asked what reason he has to believe that racial animus fueled the delay on handing out the commendations, he cited a parent's report that school officials were concerned that handing out the commendations would make those who didn't receive them feel bad.

"We're going to get to the bottom of this," he said. "That's why we have the investigation."

As for the admissions investigation, he acknowledged that the federal lawsuit is ongoing, but said his investigation will focus on state law, not federal law.

Miyares called TJ "one of the jewels of the commonwealth" and cited its importance to immigrant families looking to establish themselves in America in his remarks.

"That doorway at Thomas Jefferson High School is that doorway to the American dream," he said.

The school system has said it's conducting its own investigation into the commendations but preliminarily attributes it to "a unique situation due to human error."

Students who receive the "commended student" award finish in the top 3% nationally on a standardized test, but below the top 1% that qualifies them as a scholarship semifinalist.

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Letters dated September 2022 from the National Merit competition weren't distributed at the school until mid-November. Parents said the notification was too late for students to include the commendation in early-decision college applications that are increasingly common for students seeking to attend elite universities.

German cardinal guards Benedict's intellectual legacy

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — If ever there was an heir to the intellectual legacy of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, it's Cardinal Gerhard Mueller.

Benedict gave his fellow German theologian his old job — prefect of the Vatican's doctrine office. He entrusted his life's theological works to Mueller, who has spent nearly two decades organizing them in a 16-volume, 25,000-page opus along the lines of Thomas Aquinas' "Summa Theologica."

He even gave Mueller his old flat on the top floor of a Vatican apartment building, where he had lived as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

"Of course, he took his furniture with him, but the whole thing breathes the spirit of Joseph Ratzinger," Mueller said in an interview with The Associated Press on Wednesday, the eve of Benedict's funeral.

He meant the flat, but he could have been referring to himself.

Mueller is one of a dwindling number of cardinals firmly associated with Benedict's doctrinaire papacy, and he has taken up the late pope's mantle with gusto, thanks in part to his somewhat spectacular falling out with Pope Francis.

The Jesuit pope, who succeeded Benedict after his historic 2013 resignation, dismissed Mueller in 2017 after an unusually brief, single term as prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Mueller was only 69 at the time, well short of the normal retirement age. And in his free time since, besides compiling Ratzinger's theological magnum opus, he has become something of Francis' highest-ranking critic, singling out his two-year initiative to consult laity about everything from church teaching on sexuality to the roles of women.

"Is the church a political party or an NGO that changes all the time the program according to the applause of the multitude?" Mueller asked rhetorically as he sat in his apartment library that once belonged to Ratzinger. "Or is the church the mission of Jesus Christ, of God, to preach the Gospel?"

The numbers aren't necessarily in his favor, as Francis has appointed 81 of the 125 cardinals who are young enough to vote in a future conclave, many of whom share the pontiff's more pastoral approach to church leadership.

But Mueller is undeterred on resetting the church's course. Together with Benedict's longtime secretary, Archbishop Georg Gaenswein, he seems committed to ensuring the late pope's legacy.

Just this week, Italian publisher Piemme announced Gaenswein's tell-all memoir, "Nothing But the Truth: My Life Beside Pope Benedict XVI," would be published Jan. 12, a week after the pope is laid to rest. Piemme said the book would expose the "blatant calumnies" and "dark maneuvers" that sullied Benedict's reputation, but also celebrate his historic papacy and life.

"These voices in the mass media, they abused their power for making a primitive polemics against him. But they have no future," Mueller said of the often negative press that Benedict received. "In the long run of church history, all these stupid voices will become quiet and reason will win."

He got up from his armchair and opened the window to show a visitor how he used to look out in the morning and wave to Benedict, who did the same from the top-floor corner apartment of the Apostolic Palace a short distance away.

"So many, many links and connections," he said of their daily ritual.

The connections continued until recently. When Benedict announced on Feb. 11, 2013, that he would become the first pope in six centuries to resign, Mueller was marking the 35th anniversary of his priestly ordination.

On Dec. 31, the day Benedict died, Mueller turned 75.

"My 75th 'Earthen' birthday, and his heavenly birthday," he said. "Coincidences. But also some divine

providence.”

Israel’s new government unveils plan to weaken Supreme Court

By ISABEL DEBRE and JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s justice minister on Wednesday unveiled the new government’s long-promised overhaul of the judicial system that aims to weaken the country’s Supreme Court.

Critics accused the government of declaring war against the legal system, saying the plan will upend Israel’s system of checks and balances and undermine its democratic institutions by giving absolute power to the most right-wing coalition in the country’s history.

Justice Minister Yariv Levin, a confidant of Netanyahu’s and longtime critic of the Supreme Court, presented his plan a day before the justices are to debate a controversial new law passed by the government allowing a politician convicted of tax offenses to serve as a Cabinet minister.

“The time has come to act,” Levin said.

The proposals call for a series of sweeping changes aimed at curbing the powers of the judiciary, including by allowing lawmakers to pass laws that the high court has struck down and effectively deemed unconstitutional.

Levin laid out a law that would empower the country’s 120-seat parliament, or Knesset, to override Supreme Court decisions with a simple majority of 61 votes. Levin also proposed that politicians play a greater role in the appointment of Supreme Court judges and that ministers appoint their own legal advisers, instead of using independent professionals.

Levin argued that the public’s faith in the judicial system has plummeted to a historic low, and said he plans to restore power to elected officials that now lies in the hands of what he and his supporters consider to be overly interventionist judges.

“We go to the polls and vote, choose, but time after time, people who we didn’t elect decide for us,” he said. “That’s not democracy.”

The planned overhaul has already drawn fierce criticism from Israel’s attorney general and the Israeli opposition, though it is unclear whether they will be able to prevent the far-right government from racing forward.

Yair Lapid, former Prime Minister and head of the opposition, said he will fight the changes “in every possible way” and vowed to cancel them if he returns to power. “Those who carry out a unilateral coup in Israel need to know that we are not obligated to it in any way whatsoever,” he said.

If Levin’s proposed “override” law is passed, Netanyahu’s ultra-Orthodox and ultranationalist allies have said they hope to scrap Supreme Court rulings outlawing Israeli outposts on private Palestinian land in the occupied West Bank. They would also seek to allow for the protracted detention of African asylum-seekers and make official the exclusion of the ultra-Orthodox from the country’s mandatory military service.

In Israel, Supreme Court judges are appointed and dismissed by a committee made up of professionals, lawmakers and some justices. Levin wants to give lawmakers a majority in the committee, with most coming from the right-wing and religiously conservative ruling coalition.

“It will be a hollow democracy,” said Amir Fuchs, senior researcher at Jerusalem’s Israel Democracy Institute think tank. “When the government has ultimate power, it will use this power not only for issues of LGBTQ rights and asylum-seekers but elections and free speech and anything it wants.”

Recent opinion polls by the Israel Democracy Institute found a majority of respondents believe the Supreme Court should have the power to strike down laws that conflict with Israel’s Basic Laws, which serve as a sort of constitution.

In a speech Wednesday ahead of Levin’s announcement, Netanyahu appeared to back his justice minister by vowing to “implement reforms that will ensure the proper balance between the three branches of government.”

Since being indicted on corruption charges, Netanyahu has campaigned against the justice system. He denies all charges, saying he is the victim of a witch hunt orchestrated by a hostile media, police and

prosecutors. Levin said his plan is “not connected in any way” to Netanyahu’s trial.

Just hours before Levin’s speech, Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara, a prime target of the new government, declared her opposition to the ministerial appointment of one of Netanyahu’s key coalition partners who has been convicted of tax offenses. On Thursday, the Supreme Court is expected to hear petitions against Aryeh Deri serving as minister.

As part of negotiations to form the current government, Israel’s parliament last month changed a law to allow someone convicted on probation to serve as a Cabinet minister. That paved the way for Aryeh Deri, the leader of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, to serve half a term as the minister of health and interior affairs, before becoming finance minister. He will also hold the post of deputy prime minister. Deri was convicted of tax fraud and given a suspended sentence last year.

Good governance groups saw the legal maneuver as a green light for corruption by a government cavalierly changing laws for political expediency.

Baharav-Miara made her standing clear in a note to the Supreme Court. She said the appointment “radically deviates from the sphere of reasonability.” She has said she will not be defending the state in court against the appeals, because of her opposition.

Levin’s proposed changes also include eliminating the test of “reasonability” when reviewing government decisions.

Baharav-Miara was appointed by the previous government, which vehemently opposes Netanyahu’s rule.

Netanyahu’s allies have floated the idea of splitting up the post of attorney general into three roles including two that would be political appointments. That would water down the current attorney-general’s authority while opening the door for Netanyahu to install someone favorable to throwing out the charges against him.

Collapse of Bills’ Hamlin deepens Buffalo’s anguish, resolve

By CAROLYN THOMPSON Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown asked for a moment of silence on New Year’s Eve to remember those lost to tragedy in 2022. It was a year that had heaped miseries on the city, including a racist mass shooting in the spring, a deadly blizzard the weekend of Christmas and, just that morning, a house fire that killed five children.

Then, looking ahead to what he hoped would be a better 2023, Brown predicted a Super Bowl victory for the hometown Bills.

Football and the winning Bills had been a reliable bright spot for Buffalonians through their recent travails — until Monday night, when team safety Damar Hamlin suffered a cardiac arrest after making a hard tackle during a nationally televised game in Cincinnati.

Suddenly, a team that had been a beacon of good news became another source of despair.

The anguish on the faces of Bills players as they watched medical workers restart Hamlin’s heart was mirrored by legions of fans in a city still recovering from the catastrophic Christmas storm that trapped people in cars, left them freezing in powerless homes and killed more than 40 people.

Many in western New York had been looking forward to the game as a release after a week of trauma.

“The Bills are often like that warm hug,” said Del Reid, who owns a local apparel business and is a well-known team booster. “This hit the thing that is what gives us so much joy.”

The bond between Bills fans and their team grew particularly strong in the 1990s, as the region struggled with economic and population declines. That hardship coincided with the team’s heartbreaking heyday — a period when the Bills made it to four consecutive Super Bowls, only to lose them all.

The team’s recent run of success — they’ve clinched their fourth consecutive playoff berth — is reminiscent of that period, and expectations had been running sky-high before Hamlin’s frightening injury.

As Hamlin remained hospitalized in critical condition Tuesday, Buffalo found itself rallying behind a team that had sought to be a source of resiliency for its community.

After the white supremacist supermarket attack that killed 10 Black people in May, Buffalo Bills players

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and staff — along with those from the Sabres hockey team — arrived on buses to deliver meals, handshakes and hugs to the grieving neighborhood.

When as much as six feet of snow fell on some parts of the Buffalo region during a November storm, Bills players became the center of a feel-good story when they took to social media with accounts of neighbors digging them out so they could leave town to play – and win – their relocated home game against Cleveland in Detroit.

“This team has embedded themselves in this city,” Tom Calderone, chief executive and president of Buffalo/Toronto Public Media, which operates public radio and television stations in western New York and Canada.

While the NFL deliberates whether to reschedule the Bills-Bengals game, Bills supporters are focused on Hamlin’s health and looking for ways to honor the team.

Mayor Brown announced the dome of City Hall would be lit in red and blue Tuesday, the Bills colors “to signify our collective prayers for Damar Hamlin, his family, the Bills organization and his complete recovery.”

Canada’s Niagara Parks announced that nearby Niagara Falls also would be illuminated in blue.

Fans gathered outside the Bills stadium in Orchard Park twice Tuesday for prayer services, including one organized by the wife of retired Bills quarterback Jim Kelly.

“Within the last year, we’ve been through so much together, it’s just unimaginable,” one person said at the evening vigil, where others voiced similar messages.

Buffalo Sabres players arriving before their overtime win against the Washington Capitals Tuesday wore shirts emblazoned with “LOVE FOR 3,” Hamlin’s jersey number.

“There’s an emotional connection to the city from our team,” general manager Kevyn Adams said.

Mary Friona-Celani, who founded the Totally Buffalo website and stores to celebrate the region, said she’s been inundated with requests for a No. 3 T-shirt from fans who want to show support.

“Sports is our relief from politics and tragedy and death and destruction and so we turn to it. And when this happened it’s just a sucker punch,” she said, “and then to see these big, strong guys crying and just so heartsick, how could you not be affected by that?”

People have also been donating in droves to a charitable fundraiser started by Hamlin, giving millions of dollars the day after his injury.

Calderone said that kind of generosity doesn’t surprise him.

“That’s what we do here,” he said of Buffalo.

After the deadly supermarket shooting in May, millions of dollars in donations poured in for the victims’ families and, for weeks, memorials swelled with flowers, candles and condolence notes. During the recent blizzard, residents in and around Buffalo supported strained first responders by rescuing neighbors stuck in the snow, taking them into homes, and donating vast amounts of food.

“The story is not, Oh, darn, all this stuff happens to Buffalo,” said Reid. “The story is, when something happens, Buffalo addresses it and does good. Buffalo comes through.”

Some 200,000 turn out over 3 days to view Benedict’s body

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis praised Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI’s “acute and gentle thought” during a Wednesday general audience in the Vatican, as tens of thousands of admirers of the retired pontiff filed by his body lying in state in Peter’s Basilica on the final day of viewing.

By the time the basilica’s doors were shut to the public on Wednesday evening, about 200,000 people had paid their respects over three days of viewing.

After the closure, Vatican officials were preparing to place the 95-year-old German churchman’s body into a wooden coffin, ahead of Thursday morning’s funeral in St. Peter’s Square.

Among the last viewers were a married couple from Calabria. Gaspare Guadagnuolo, 73, and Lina Proto, 62, said they remember a visit by Benedict to that southern region years ago.

“I was struck by people’s participation,” Proto said. “There was a lot of intense emotion.”

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At his customary weekly audience, Francis was greeted by an enthusiastic crowd in Paul VI auditorium and shouts of "Viva il papa!" or "Long live the pope."

"It is my duty to come," said Małgorzata Nowaska, a Polish resident of Rome as she paid tribute Wednesday. She said she wanted to give Benedict "a last hug, a last prayer."

Francis is due to preside over Benedict's funeral, an event drawing heads of state and royalty despite Benedict's requests for simplicity and Vatican efforts to keep the first funeral for an emeritus pope in modern times low-key.

Only Italy and Germany were invited to send official delegations, and German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Italian President Sergio Mattarella confirmed their participation.

But other heads of state and government decided to take the Vatican up on its offer and come in their "private capacity." They included several other heads of state, at least four prime ministers and two delegations of royal representatives. All were attending in what the Vatican describes as a "private" role.

And in a further sign of officialdom, the Italian government announced it was lowering all Italian and European Union flags to half-staff on public buildings across the country Thursday.

Francis drew applause when he opened his remarks by giving a shout-out to all those who were outside paying tribute to Benedict, whom he called a "great master of catechesis."

"His acute and gentle thought was not self-referential, but ecclesial, because he always wanted to accompany us in the encounter with Jesus," Francis said.

Later Wednesday, Vatican officials were to place Benedict's body in a cypress coffin — the first of three coffins — along with a brief, written summary of his historic papacy, the coins minted during his pontificate and his pallium stoles.

After the funeral in the piazza, the remains will be carried back into the basilica, where the coffin will be placed inside a zinc one, and then finally into another made from oak.

In keeping with Benedict's wishes, his remains will be placed in the crypt once occupied by the tomb of St. John Paul II in the grottos underneath the basilica. John Paul's tomb was moved upstairs into the main basilica ahead of his 2011 beatification.

Benedict, who was elected pope in 2005 following John Paul's death, became the first pope in six centuries years to resign when he announced in 2013 he no longer had the strength to lead the Catholic Church. After Francis was elected pope, Benedict spent his nearly decade-long retirement in a converted monastery in the Vatican Gardens.

"We can't forget the example that he gave in his resignation, that he more or less said, 'Look, I'm not in this for the prestige, the power of the office, I'm in it for service, as Jesus taught,'" recalled Cardinal Timothy Dolan, whom Benedict named archbishop of New York in 2009 and cardinal in 2012.

Thursday's rite takes into account the unusual situation in which a reigning pope will preside over a funeral for a retired one, making important changes to a funeral ritual for popes that is highly codified.

Two key prayers, from the diocese of Rome and the Eastern rite churches, that were recited during John Paul's funeral, for example, will be omitted because Benedict wasn't pope when he died and because both branches of the Catholic Church still have a reigning pope as their leader: Francis.

While the funeral will be novel, it does have some precedent: In 1802, Pope Pius VII presided over the funeral in St. Peter's of his predecessor, Pius VI, who had died in exile in France in 1799 as a prisoner of Napoleon, the Vatican noted Wednesday.

Meta fined 390M euros in latest European privacy crackdown

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — European Union regulators on Wednesday hit Facebook parent Meta with hundreds of millions in fines for privacy violations and banned the company from forcing users in the 27-nation bloc to agree to personalized ads based on their online activity.

Ireland's Data Protection Commission imposed two fines totaling 390 million euros (\$414 million) in its decision in two cases that could shake up Meta's business model of targeting users with ads based on

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what they do online. The company says it will appeal.

A decision in a third case involving Meta's WhatsApp messaging service is expected later this month.

Meta and other Big Tech companies have come under pressure from the European Union's privacy rules, which are some of the world's strictest. Irish regulators have already slapped Meta with four other fines for data privacy infringements since 2021 that total more than 900 million euros and have a slew of other open cases against a number of Silicon Valley companies.

Meta also faces regulatory headaches from EU antitrust officials in Brussels flexing their muscles against tech giants: They accused the company last month of distorting competition in classified ads.

The Irish watchdog — Meta's lead European data privacy regulator because its regional headquarters is in Dublin — fined the company 210 million euros for violations of EU data privacy rules involving Facebook and an additional 180 million euros for breaches involving Instagram.

The decision stems from complaints filed in May 2018 when the 27-nation bloc's privacy rules, known as the General Data Protection Regulation, or GDPR, took effect.

Previously, Meta relied on getting informed consent from users to process their personal data to serve them with personalized, or behavioral, ads, which are based on what users search for online, the websites they visit or the videos they click on.

When GDPR came into force, the company changed the legal basis under which it processes user data by adding a clause to the terms of service for advertisements, effectively forcing users to agree that their data could be used. That violates EU privacy rules.

The Irish watchdog initially sided with Meta but changed its position after its draft decision was sent to a board of EU data protection regulators, many of whom objected.

In its final decision, the Irish watchdog said Meta "is not entitled to rely on the 'contract' legal basis" to deliver behavioral ads on Facebook and Instagram.

Meta said in a statement that "we strongly believe our approach respects GDPR, and we're therefore disappointed by these decisions and intend to appeal both the substance of the rulings and the fines."

Meta has three months to ensure its "processing operations" comply with the EU rules, though the ruling doesn't specify what the company has to do. Meta noted that the decision doesn't prevent it from displaying personalized ads, it only covers the legal basis for handling user data.

Max Schrems, the Austrian lawyer and privacy activist who filed the complaints, said the ruling could deal a big blow to the company's profits in the EU, because "people now need to be asked if they want their data to be used for ads or not" and can change their mind at any time.

"The decision also ensures a level playing field with other advertisers that also need to get opt-in consent," he said.

Making changes to comply with the decision could add to costs for a company already facing rising business challenges. Meta reported two straight quarters of declining revenue as advertising sales dropped because of competition from TikTok, and it laid off 11,000 workers amid broader tech industry woes.

Iran releases Oscar-winning film actress held over protests

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran released a prominent actress from an Oscar-winning film on Wednesday, nearly three weeks after she was jailed for criticizing a crackdown on anti-government protests, local reports said.

Iran's semi-official ISNA news agency said Taraneh Alidoosti, the 38-year-old star of Asghar Farhadi's Oscar-winning 2016 film, "The Salesman," was released on bail. Her mother, Nadere Hakimelahi, had earlier said she would be released in a post on Instagram.

After her release from the notorious Evin Prison in Tehran on Wednesday, Alidoosti posed with bunches of flowers, surrounded by friends. No further details have been released about her case.

Alidoosti was among several Iranian celebrities to express support for the nationwide protests and criticize the authorities' violent clampdown on dissent. She had posted at least three messages in support of the protests on Instagram before her account was disabled.

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One message had expressed solidarity with the first man to be executed on charges linked to the protests, which were triggered by the death of a woman in police custody and have escalated into widespread calls for the overthrow of Iran's ruling clerics.

The protests mark one of the biggest challenges to the Islamic Republic since it was established after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Security forces have used live ammunition, bird shot, tear gas and batons to disperse protesters, according to rights groups.

Mohsen Shekari was executed Dec. 9 after being charged by an Iranian court with blocking a street in Tehran and attacking a member of the country's security forces with a machete. A week later, Iran executed a second prisoner, Majidreza Rahnava, by public hanging. He had been accused of stabbing two members of the paramilitary Basij militia, which is leading the crackdown.

Activists say at least a dozen people have been sentenced to death in closed-door hearings over charges linked to the protests.

"His name was Mohsen Shekari," Alidoosti wrote on an account with some 8 million followers before her arrest. "Every international organization who is watching this bloodshed and not taking action, is a disgrace to humanity."

The Iranian reports on Alidoosti's release did not say whether she has been charged with anything or if she will stand trial. It was also unclear whether she faces travel restrictions as part of the terms of her release.

At least 516 protesters have been killed and over 19,000 people have been arrested, according to Human Rights Activists in Iran, a group that has closely monitored the unrest. Iranian authorities have not provided an official count of those killed or detained.

Hengameh Ghaziani and Katayoun Riahi, two other famous Iranian actresses, were arrested in November for expressing solidarity with protesters on social media. Voria Ghafouri, an Iranian soccer star, was also arrested that month for "insulting the national soccer team and propagandizing against the government." All three have been released.

The protests began in mid-September, when 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died after being arrested by Iran's morality police for allegedly violating the Islamic Republic's strict dress code. Women have played a leading role in the protests, with many publicly stripping off the compulsory Islamic headscarf, known as the hijab.

The protesters say they are fed up after decades of political and social repression. One of the main slogans has been "Death to the dictator," referring to Iran's 83-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has held the country's highest office for more than three decades.

Iranian officials blame the protests on the U.S. and other foreign powers. State-linked media have highlighted attacks on security forces, while authorities have imposed heavy restrictions on coverage of the demonstrations, including periodically cutting off internet access.

Khamenei, who has said little about the protests, spoke about Islamic dress on Wednesday in a meeting with women, saying the hijab is necessary but that those who do not "completely observe" the practice "should not be accused of being non-religious or against the revolution."

Even before the protests, many Iranian women wore the headscarf loosely, and authorities sometimes eased off on enforcing it, particularly during the presidency of Hassan Rouhani, a relative moderate who governed from 2013 to 2021. His successor, the hard-liner Ebrahim Raisi, had moved to tighten the restrictions.

Alidoosti had previously criticised the Iranian government and its police force before this year's protests.

In June 2020, she was given a suspended five-month prison sentence after she criticized the police on Twitter in 2018 for assaulting a woman who had removed her headscarf.

In "The Salesman," she played a woman whose relationship with her husband fractures after she is sexually assaulted in their apartment. The story unfolds against the backdrop of a local staging of Arthur Miller's classic play, "Death of a Salesman," in which the woman and her husband are cast as the main characters.

Other well-known movies Alidoosti has starred in include "The Beautiful City" and "About Elly."

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Today in History THUR JAN 05

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Jan. 5, the fifth day of 2023. There are 360 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 5, 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower proposed assistance to countries to help them resist Communist aggression in what became known as the Eisenhower Doctrine.

On this date:

In 1896, an Austrian newspaper, Wiener Presse, reported the discovery by German physicist Wilhelm Roentgen (RENT'-gun) of a type of radiation that came to be known as X-rays.

In 1914, auto industrialist Henry Ford announced he was going to pay workers \$5 for an 8-hour day, as opposed to \$2.34 for a 9-hour day. (Employees still worked six days a week; the 5-day work week was instituted in 1926.)

In 1925, Democrat Nellie Tayloe Ross of Wyoming took office as America's first female governor, succeeding her late husband, William, following a special election.

In 1933, construction began on the Golden Gate Bridge. (Work was completed four years later.)

In 1943, educator and scientist George Washington Carver, who was born into slavery, died in Tuskegee, Alabama, at about age 80.

In 1949, in his State of the Union address, President Harry S. Truman labeled his administration the Fair Deal.

In 1953, Samuel Beckett's two-act tragicomedy "Waiting for Godot," considered a classic of the Theater of the Absurd, premiered in Paris.

In 1972, President Richard Nixon announced that he had ordered development of the space shuttle.

In 1994, Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, former speaker of the House of Representatives, died in Boston at age 81.

In 1998, Sonny Bono, the 1960s pop star-turned-politician, was killed when he struck a tree while skiing at the Heavenly Ski Resort on the Nevada-California state line; he was 62.

In 2004, foreigners arriving at U.S. airports were photographed and had their fingerprints scanned in the start of a government effort to keep terrorists out of the country.

In 2011, John Boehner (BAY'-nur) was elected speaker as Republicans regained control of the House of Representatives on the first day of the new Congress.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama hailed a last-minute deal with Congress that pulled the country back from the "fiscal cliff," but warned in his Saturday radio and Internet address that he would not compromise over his insistence that lawmakers lift the federal debt ceiling.

Five years ago: Former Fox News Channel anchor and 1989 Miss America Gretchen Carlson was named chairwoman of the Miss America Organization's board of directors, with three other past pageant winners joining her on the board. In the first Rose Bowl to go into overtime, Georgia advanced to college football's national championship game with a 54-48 win over Oklahoma. Alabama advanced by beating top-ranked Clemson, 24-6, in the Sugar Bowl. Peter Martins, the longtime leader of the New York City Ballet, announced his retirement in the midst of an investigation into accusations of sexual misconduct. California launched legal sales of recreational marijuana, with customers linking up early for ribbon cuttings and promotions.

One year ago: Australia denied entry to tennis star Novak Djokovic, who was seeking to play for a 10th Australian Open title later in the month; authorities canceled his visa because he failed to meet the requirements for an exemption to COVID-19 vaccination rules. (Djokovic, a vocal skeptic of vaccines, would be confined to an immigration detention hotel as he began a court fight that eventually proved unsuccessful.) After being held out of the team's first 35 games because he refused to get vaccinated, Kyrie Irving scored 22 points for the Brooklyn Nets in his first game of the season as the team beat the Indiana Pacers 129-121 on the road; he was still unable to play in New York because of his vaccination status. The Grammy Awards ceremony in Los Angeles, scheduled for Jan. 31st, was postponed due to what organizers called "too many risks" from the omicron variant of the coronavirus. (It would be rescheduled for early April in Las Vegas.)

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Today's Birthdays: Actor Robert Duvall is 92. Juan Carlos, former King of Spain, is 85. Singer-musician Athol Guy (The Seekers) is 83. Former talk show host Charlie Rose is 81. Actor-director Diane Keaton is 77. Actor Ted Lange (lanj) is 75. R&B musician George "Funky" Brown (Kool and the Gang) is 74. Rock musician Chris Stein (Blondie) is 73. Former CIA Director George Tenet is 70. Actor Pamela Sue Martin is 70. Actor Clancy Brown is 64. Singer Iris Dement is 62. Actor Suzy Amis is 61. Actor Ricky Paull Goldin is 58. Actor Vinnie Jones is 58. Rock musician Kate Schellenbach (Luscious Jackson) is 57. Actor Joe Flanigan is 56. Talk show host/dancer-choreographer Carrie Ann Inaba is 55. Rock musician Troy Van Leeuwen (Queens of the Stone Age) is 55. Actor Heather Paige Kent is 54. Rock singer Marilyn Manson is 54. Actor Shea Whigham is 54. Actor Derek Cecil is 50. Actor-comedian Jessica Chaffin is 49. Actor Bradley Cooper is 48. Actor January Jones is 45. Actor Brooklyn Sudano is 42. Actor Franz Drameh is 30.