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Groton Community Calendar

Thursday, Feb. 2

Senior Menu: Beef stew, biscuit, Waldorf salad, sherbet.

School Breakfast: Oatmeal.

School Lunch: Pasta with meat sauce.

Basketball Doubleheader with Deuel in Groton. (Girls JV at 4 p.m. followed by Boys JV, Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity)

Groton Lions Dress Consignment, 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., Groton Community Center

Friday, Feb. 3

Senior Menu: Sloppy Joe on bun, oven roasted potatoes, coleslaw, pumpkin bar.

School Breakfast: Cereal.

School Lunch: Cheese breadstick with marinara, vegetable blend.

Wrestling at Presho

Groton Lions Dress Consignment, 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., Groton Community Center

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

Groton Daily Independent
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Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #14 Results

Team Standings: Jackelopes – 19, Coyotes – 19, Chipmunks – 16, Foxes – 12, Shihtzus – 10, Cheetahs – 8

Men's High Games: Brad Waage – 224, Brad Larson – 187, Doug Jorgensen – 186

Women's High Games: Lori Wiley – 208, Alexa Schuring – 180, Darci Spanier – 172

Men's High Series: Brad Waage – 597, Roger Spanier – 488, Doug Jorgensen – 479

Women's High Series: Lori Wiley – 492, Sue Stanley – 491, Darci Spanier – 458

Week 14 Fun Game – Most Fills – Shihtzus

Coyotes and Jackelopes have tied for the 2nd third.

A bowl off will need to take place to see who the winner is (sometime before the last third is complete).

Senate Passes Thune-Rounds Resolution Honoring SDSU's First Football National Championship

"It's a privilege to lead the Senate in recognizing the accomplishments of the players, coaches, and staff, and we commend them for bringing the first NCAA Division I national championship to South Dakota."

WASHINGTON — U.S. Sens. John Thune (R-S.D.) and Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) today announced that the U.S. Senate passed their resolution honoring the South Dakota State University (SDSU) Jackrabbits football team for winning the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Football Championship Subdivision title. The resolution also honors SDSU head coach John Stiegelmeier, who recently announced his retirement following 26 seasons leading the program.

"Congratulations to the SDSU Jackrabbits football team on a remarkable season," said the senators. "It's a privilege to lead the Senate in recognizing the accomplishments of the players, coaches, and staff, and we commend them for bringing the first NCAA Division I national championship to South Dakota."

On January 8, 2023, the Jackrabbits defeated the North Dakota State University Bison 45-21 to win their first national title in Frisco, Texas.

GDILIVE.COM

Looking for sponsors for these final games.

Junior High Boys Games - Ab Christian in Groton 2-6

Boys Roncalli C

Florence/Henry Boys C

Talent and Depth Added to Northern State Football on National Signing Day

Aberdeen, S.D. – The pack grew today as Northern State University head football coach Mike Schmidt announced the additions of 40 student-athletes to the Wolves roster. The 2023 class hails from 11 different states, as well as one international student-athlete. The group adds to nine position groups with 2023 high school graduates, collegiate transfers, and college graduates pursuing a master's degree joining the Wolves for the fall 2023 season.

"Most importantly, this group of signees fits Northern State, Aberdeen, and our football program," explained Schmidt. "They are winners on the field, in the classroom, and in life. We had an exceptional signing class last year and we feel like we backed it up with another championship-caliber class this year. I am really proud of the work our coaches put into this recruiting process."

The 2023 Northern State signing class includes 25 all-conference honorees, 18 all-state selections, three players of the year, seven conference champions, and three state champions. The class includes 17 student-athletes that were multi-year award winners and four school record holders.

The signing class welcomes two Midwest quarterbacks in Nate Kollath out of Sussex, Wisconsin and Dylan Wiggins from Hawarden, Iowa. "A major highlight of this class is the quarterback position," noted Schmidt. "Dylan played in two state championship games and was one of the best offensive players in the state of Iowa; and Nate threw for over 6000 yards and rushed for almost 2000 yards in his career, as a three year captain."

Nate Kollath – Sussex, Wis. / Sussex Hamilton

Nate Kollath is a 6-foot-3, 235-pound quarterback out of Sussex Hamilton. He was a 3-year starter and team captain for the Chargers under the direction of head coach Justin Gumm. Kollath tallied 6,173 career passing yards, including 2,639 yards his senior season. He threw for 73 touchdowns and rushed for 37, adding 1,880 career rushing yards. Kollath was the back-to-back Greater Metro Conference Offensive Player of the Year and a finalist for the Dave Krieg Quarterback of the Year award. He was a 2-time all-conference, all-region, and all-state selection. Sussex Hamilton won back-to-back GMC Championships and advanced to the Wisconsin State semifinals in 2022. He is the son of Brad Kollath and Kristin Sobicinski.

Dylan Wiggins – Hawarden, Iowa / West Sioux HS

Dylan Wiggins is a 6-foot-1, 185-pound quarterback out of West Sioux High School. He was a 3-year starter and senior team captain for the Falcons under the direction of head coach Ryan Schwiesow. Wiggins recorded 7,366 yards passing with 95 touchdowns in his prep career. He added a 63.0 pass completion percentage. He was a 2-time all-district and all-state selection, being named the District Offensive Player of the Year twice. In addition, Wiggins was named to the Des Moines Register All-State first team, Des Moines Register Top-50 Seniors list, Des Moines Register Top-100 list, KCAU Sportzone Player of the Year nominations list, and the Iowa Print Sports Writers Association All-State team. West Sioux HS tallied back-to-back state runner-up finishes. He is the son of Collin and Amanda Wiggins.

Schmidt added, "Our staff was able to identify and sign two great quarterbacks to our program. Nate and Dylan are two proven winners and exceptional talents."

The largest position group of the 2023 class brings in ten new faces to the wide receiver position from across the nation and world. "We really hit the jackpot at wide receiver," said Schmidt. "This group is filled

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with speed and size. We have amazing track stars and some big, long guys who can go up and get the ball in the air." The 2023 receiver front includes Carson Barnett (Harrisburg, S.D.), Collin Fritton (Lincoln, Neb.), Cole Jahner (Bismarck, N.D.), Teflon Lee (Baraboo, Wis.), Jack Oedekoven (Erie, Pa.), Trenton Peterson (Sioux Falls, S.D.), Richard Prescott (Cheyenne, Wyo.), Louie Schwabe (Wind Lake, Wis.), Julian Scott (Rapid City, S.D.), and Mahamadou Yattabare (Paris, France).

Carson Barnett – Harrisburg, S.D. / Harrisburg HS

Carson Barnett is a 6-foot-3, 190-pound wide receiver out of Harrisburg High School. He was a 2-year starter for the Tigers under the direction of head coach Brandon White. In the fall of 2022, Barnett tallied 750 yards receiving, averaging 26.8 yards per catch. Harrisburg won the South Dakota State Championship in the fall of 2021, the first title in program history. He is the son of Shawn and Alicia Barnett and brother of current Northern State student-athlete Ethan Barnett.

Collin Fritton – Lincoln, Neb. / Lincoln Southwest HS

Collin Fritton is a 5-foot-11, 180-pound wide receiver out of Lincoln Southwest High School. He was a 3-year starter and 2-year team captain for the Silver Hawks under the direction of head coach Andrew Sherman. As a high school quarterback, Fritton tallied over 3,700 yards passing with 31 touchdowns. He added 769 yards rushing and 11 rushing scores. Fritton was named to the Lincoln Journal Star All-City team and All-State honorable mention team in 2022. He is the son of Casey and Mindi Fritton.

Cole Jahner – Bismarck, N.D. / Bismarck HS

Cole Jahner is a 6-foot-4, 215-pound wide receiver out of Bismarck High School. He was a 3-year starter and senior team captain for the Demons under the direction of head coach Mark Gibson. As a senior, Jahner tallied 452 yards receiving with four touchdowns. He earned 11AA All-Conference honors in the fall of 2022. He is the son of Kelly and Justin Jahner.

Teflon Lee – Baraboo, Wis. / Baraboo HS

Teflon Lee is a 6-foot-4, 190-pound wide receiver out of Baraboo High School. He was a 2-year starter and senior team captain for the Thunderbirds under the direction of head coach Steve Turkington. In the fall of 2022, Lee tallied 211 yards receiving with two touchdowns. He is the son of Danny Stegall.

Jack Oedekoven – Erie, Pa. / Cathedral Prep / Robert Morris

Jack Oedekoven is a 6-foot-4, 200-pound wide receiver out of Cathedral Prep and Robert Morris University. As a prep, he was a 2-year starter for the Ramblers, recording over 1,400 career receiving yards. Oedekoven was a 2-time all-region and all-district pick, and a 2019 first team all-state selection. He played two seasons at Robert Morris, earning a bachelor's degree in Marketing. Oedekoven appeared in 14 games for the Colonials, averaging 10.3 yards per reception. He is the son of Mark and Kim Oedekoven.

Trenton Peterson – Sioux Falls, S.D. / Lincoln HS

Trenton Peterson is a 5-foot-11, 185-pound wide receiver out of Lincoln High School. He was a 2-year starter for the Patriots under the direction of head coach Jared Fredenburg. Peterson recorded over 800 yards receiving in his prep career with 11 touchdowns. In addition, he averaged 15.9 yards per reception. He is the son of Cassie Neuroth and Nate Peterson.

Richard Prescott – Cheyenne, Wyo. / Cheyenne Central HS

Richard Prescott is a 6-foot-3, 185-pound wide receiver out of Cheyenne Central High School. He was a 3-year starter and senior team captain for the Indians under the direction of head coach Mike Apadaca. Prescott was honored with all-conference and all-state accolades. In addition, he was named the all-around player of the year and special teams player of the year. Off the football field, Prescott is the reigning Wyoming State Champion in the triple jump (2022). He is the son of Steve and Stephanie Prescott.

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Louie Schwabe – Wind Lake, Wis. / Muskego HS

Louie Schwabe is a 6-foot-5, 195-pound wide receiver out of Muskego High School. He was a 2-year starter for the Warriors under the direction of head coach Ken Krause. Schwabe sits second all-time at Muskego High School in the career receptions and career receiving yards categories. In 2022, he was honored on the Classic 8 All-Conference team and Academic All-State team. Muskego won two conference championships in his tenure and made two state quarterfinal appearances. He is the son of Jeff and Joy Schwabe.

Julian Scott – Rapid City, S.D. / Stevens HS

Julian Scott is a 6-foot, 175-pound wide receiver out of Stevens High School. He was 3-year starter and senior team captain for the Raiders under the direction of head coach Michael Scott. Scott tallied 801 yards receiving and 115 yards rushing his senior season, with seven touchdowns. He averaged 18.6 yards per catch and 26.5 yards per kick return. In 2022, Scott earned ESD All-Conference and 11AAA All-State awards. He is the son of Jamie Tullo-Scott and Michael Scott.

Mahamadou Yattabare – Paris, France / Corot

Mahamadou Yattabare is a 6-foot-2, 225-pound wide receiver originally from Paris, France. Yattabare competed with the Cougars St Ouen L'auzone for two seasons. He tallied over 1000 yards receiving through 18 games, with 13 touchdowns. Additionally, Yattabare averaged 19.8 yards per reception. His program won back-to-back championships in France and the European Championship for Team France. In 2020, Yattabare recorded the most touchdowns in a single game for the program with four. He is the son of Cisse Aminata.

Staying with the offense, Northern State adds six student-athletes at the tight end, running back, and fullback positions. These offensive play-makers include tight ends Ben Harrington out of Parkers Prairie, Minnesota and Jensen Wallin out of Monticello, Minnesota; as well as backs Braxton Bundy (Casper, Wyo.), Karson Carda (Aberdeen, S.D.), Matt Larson (Rapid City, S.D.), and Logan Okstad (Grand Forks, N.D.).

Ben Harrington – Parkers Prairie, Minn. / Parkers Prairie HS

Ben Harrington is a 6-foot-6, 230-pound tight end out of Parkers Prairie High School. He was a 2-year starter for the Panthers under the direction of head coach Mike Johnson. Harrington tallied 111 receiving yards this past season with one touchdown. He was honored on the Section 4A honorable mention team. He is the son of Patrick and Linda Harrington.

Jensen Wallin – Monticello, Minn. / Monticello HS

Jensen Wallin is a 6-foot-2, 240-pound tight end out of Monticello High School. He was a 2-year starter and senior team captain for the Magic under the direction of head coach Andy Pierskalla. In 2022, Wallin tallied 130 yards receiving, averaging 18.6 yards per reception, with one touchdown. He was named to the all-conference team and honored as a Minnesota Vikings All-Star. He is the son of Chris and Elaina Wallin.

Braxton Bundy – Casper, Wyo. / Natrona County HS

Braxton Bundy is a 6-foot, 230-pound fullback out of Natrona County High School. He was a 2-year starter and senior team captain for the Mustangs under the direction of head coach Steve Harshman. Bundy tallied over 1,200 career rushing yards with 16 touchdowns. He is the son of Mark and Any Bundy.

Karson Carda – Aberdeen, S.D. / Central HS

Karson Carda is a 6-foot, 220-pound running back out of Aberdeen Central High School. He was a 2-year starter and senior team captain for the Golden Eagles under the direction of head coach Justin Briese. Carda rushed for over 2,600 yards in his final two seasons with a combined 21 touchdowns. He averaged 6.2 yards per carry in his career. Carda was named to the all-state team in both 2021 and 2022. In ad-

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dition, he earned ESD All-Conference and Argus Leader Elite45 honors, and was named the AA Running Back of the Year as a senior. He is the son of John and Brenda Carda. John is a Northern State football alum, who earned All-American honors in 1989.

Matt Larson – Rapid City, S.D. / Saint Thomas More

Matt Larson is a 5-foot-10, 180-pound running back out of Saint Thomas More. He was a 3-year starter and 2-year team captain for the Cavaliers under the direction of head coach Wayne Sullivan. Larson recorded nearly 2,000 career rushing yards with 26 touchdowns. He averaged 7.1 yards per carry in his career, adding 467 receiving yards. Larson is a 3-time Black Hills All-Conference selection, 2-time all-state linebacker, and 2-time Best of the West team member. He is the son of Todd and Shelly Larson.

Logan Okstad – Grand Forks, N.D. / Red River HS

Logan Okstad is a 5-foot-7, 185-pound running back out of Red River High School. He was a 2-year starter and senior team captain for the Rough Riders under the direction of head coach Vyrn Muir. As a senior, Okstad recorded over 1000 all-purpose yards, 484 yards rushing, 112 yards receiving, and 408 yards on kick returns. He averaged 6.8 yards per rushing with four rushing touchdowns and added two receiving scores. Red River won back-to-back EDC Championships and advanced to the state semifinals in 2022. He is the son of Mindy Johnston and Jason Okstad.

One of the most diverse groups of the 2023 class is the seven additions to the Northern State front line; hailing from six states. "We brought in another large group of offensive linemen, both quantity and physical size," noted Schmidt. "I love their demeanor. They all play the position the way it is meant to be played: With aggression and physicality." The big men up front include Jake Carbajal (Tempe, Ariz.), NSU familiar face Jake Oliphant (Spring Creek, Nev.), Nolan Pieper (Grand Forks, N.D.), Terrance Reeves (Milwaukee, Wis.), Ross Rowland (De Pere, Wis.), Jarrett Theisen (Watertown, S.D.), and Cooper Walder (Sauk Rapids, Minn.).

Jake Carbajal – Tempe, Ariz. / Corona Del Sol

Jake Carbajal is a 6-foot-2, 280-pound offensive lineman out of Corona Del Sol. He was a 2-year starter for the Aztecs under the direction of head coach Jake Barro. Carbajal blocked two field goals on special teams duty as a prep and earned back-to-back all-conference honorable mention honors in his final two seasons. He is the son of Manny Carbajal.

Jake Oliphant – Spring Creek, Nev. / Spring Creek HS / North Dakota

Jake Oliphant is a 6-foot-5, 300-pound offensive lineman returning to the Northern State sidelines after a season at North Dakota. A native of Spring Creek, Nevada, Oliphant joined the Northern State program as a tight end heading into the fall of 2018. He was a 2-time all-conference and academic all-state selection as a prep. Oliphant appeared in 18 games for the Wolves in 2019 and 2021 as a member of the offensive line. He played a critical role on the offensive line that provided protection for the Northern State offense that ranked 12th in total offensive and seventh in passing offense. That season he was named to the All-NSIC North Division second team and NSIC All-Academic Team of Excellence. Oliphant appeared in one game for the North Dakota Fighting Hawks before suffering a season ending injury in the fall of 2022. He is the son of Roger and Jackie Oliphant.

Nolan Pieper – Grand Forks, N.D. / Red River HS

Nolan Pieper is a 6-foot-2, 255-pound offensive lineman out of Red River High School. He was a 3-year starter for the Rough Riders under the direction of head coach Vyrn Muir. Pieper earned EDC All-Conference accolades in the fall of 2022 and was a nominee for the North Dakota Shrine Bowl. Red River went 8-3 on the year and advanced to the state semifinals. He is the son of Mike and Jennifer Pieper.

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Terrance Reeves – Milwaukee, Wis. / Homestead HS

Terrance Reeves is a 6-foot-6, 290-pound offensive lineman out of Homestead High School. He was a 3-year starter and team captain for the Highlanders under the direction of head coach Drake Zortman. Reeves was a 2-time North Shore Division All-Conference honoree, named to the honorable mention team in 2020 and first team in 2021.

Ross Rowland – De Pere, Wis. / De Pere HS

Ross Rowland is a 6-foot-2, 290-pound offensive lineman out of De Pere High School. He was a 3-year starter and senior team captain for the Red Birds under the direction of head coach Ben Strickland. Rowland earned first team Fox River Classic Conference All-Conference accolades in 2020, 2021, and 2022. In his senior season, Rowland was a nominee for the Joe Thomas award. He is the son of Jill and Mark Rowland.

Jarrett Theisen – Watertown, S.D. / Watertown HS

Jarrett Theisen is a 6-foot-4, 300-pound offensive lineman out of Watertown High School. He was a 3-year starter and senior team captain for the Arrows under the direction of head coach John Hodorff. In 366 total career pass plays, Theisen gave up just one sack and allowed 33 pressures. He is the son of Joanie and Kevin Theisen.

Cooper Walder – Sauk Rapids, Minn. / Sauk Rapids Rice HS

Cooper Walder is a 6-foot-8, 355-pound offensive lineman out of Sauk Rapids Rice High School. He was a 3-year starter for the Storm under the direction of head coach Phillip Klaphake. Walder allowed just one sack in his final two seasons and was honored on the all-district second team. He is the son of Brandy Walder.

Schmidt added, "Defensively, we continued to grow our front seven by signing five of the best defensive linemen in South Dakota and North Dakota. Not to be left out, we also signed four truly remarkable linebackers as well. This entire group is going to be a lot of fun to watch develop because they are so talented."

The defensive line core includes North Dakota native Kaydn Turnbow of Berthold, South Dakota natives Noah Hutmacher of Oacoma, Isaac Johnson of Brandon, and Gabriel Lindeman of Dell Rapids, and finally South Dakota transplant Brian Johnson of Aberdeen (originally Chicago, Illinois).

Noah Hutmacher – Oacoma, S.D. / Chamberlain HS

Noah Hutmacher is a 6-foot-3, 225-pound defensive lineman out of Chamberlain High School. He was a 4-year starter and 2-year team captain for the Cubs under the direction of head coach Jeff Rademacher. Hutmacher tallied 381 career tackles, including 64 tackles for a loss and 16 sacks. He added four pass break-ups, two fumble recoveries, one for a touchdown, and one interception. As a senior, Hutmacher was honored on the SESD All-Conference team, SD All-State team, Argus Leader Elite45 team, and the Academic All-State team. Hutmacher holds the state record for fastest wrestling victory by fall of four seconds. He is the son of Laura and Joe Hutmacher.

Brian Johnson – Chicago, Ill. / Central HS

Brian Johnson is a 6-foot-2, 240-pound defensive end out of Aberdeen Central High School. He was a 3-year starter and senior team captain for the Golden Eagles under the direction of head coach Justin Brieser. Johnson tallied over 40 career tackles, including seven sacks. He was named to the ESD All-Conference team and was voted to the all-state honorable mention team. He is the son of Serriah Stroud.

Isaac Johnson – Brandon, S.D. / Brandon Valley HS

Isaac Johnson is a 6-foot, 300-pound defensive lineman out of Brandon Valley High School. He was a 3-year starter and senior team captain for the Lynx under the direction of head coach Matt Christensen.

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As a senior, Johnson tallied 23 pancake blocks and allowed zero sacks on the BVHS offensive line. He added eight tackles and two sacks in his first two seasons. In 2022, Johnson earned ESD All-Academic, all-metro, and all-state honors. Brandon Valley won the South Dakota State Championship in 2019 and 2021. He is the son of Andrea and Sam Johnson.

Gabriel Lindeman – Dell Rapids, S.D. / Dell Rapids St. Mary

Gabriel Lindeman is a 6-foot-3, 240-pound defensive end out of Dell Rapids St. Mary High School. He was a 4-year starter and senior team captain for the Cardinals under the direction of head coach Ross Flemmer. Lindeman recorded 171 career tackles, including 22 sacks, as well as seven forced fumbles, three fumble recoveries, and one interception. He was a 2-time DVC All-Conference honoree, All-State recipient, and Argus Leader Elite 45 team member. Lindeman set two school records with 13 single season sacks in 2021 and 22 career sacks through four seasons. Dell Rapids St. Mary's won the South Dakota State Championship in 2021. He is the son of Nathan and Emily Lindeman.

Kaydn Turnbow – Berthold, N.D. / Minot HS

Kaydn Turnbow is a 6-foot-4, 235-pound defensive end out of Minot High School. He was a 3-year starter and senior team captain for the Magicians under the direction of head coach Chauncy Hendershot. Turnbow led the MHS defensive in sacks in both 2021 and 2022. He is a 3-time academic all-state recipient and 2-time WDA All-Conference team member and North Dakota All-State selection. He is the son of Kate and Brandon Turnbow.

The Upper Midwest funneled the linebackers to Aberdeen in 2023 with additions Jake Adams of Pulaski, Wisconsin; Gaabi Boucha of Warroad, Minnesota; David Coffman of New Berlin, Wisconsin; and Gabe Gutierrez of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Jake Adams – Pulaski, Wis. / Pulaski HS

Jake Adams is a 6-foot, 220-pound linebacker out of Pulaski High School. He was a 3-year starter and 2-year team captain for the Red Raiders under the direction of head coach Jerad Marsh. Adams tallied 206 career tackles, including 24 tackles for a loss. He was a 3-time FRCC All-Conference selection and All-Region performer. He is the son of Shannon and Bryan Adams.

Gaabi Boucha – Warroad, Minn. / Warroad HS

Gaabi Boucha is a 6-foot-3, 220-pound linebacker out of Warroad High School. He was a 3-year starter and senior team captain for the Warriors under the direction of head coach Gabe Richerds. As a running back for WHS, Boucha recorded 1,071 rushing yards his senior season. In addition, he was a 2-time all-conference selection. He is the son of Tara Boucha.

David Coffman – New Berlin, Wis. / Brookfield Central HS

David Coffman is a 6-foot-2, 200-pound linebacker out of Brookfield Central High School. He was a 2-year starter and senior team captain for the Lancers under the direction of head coach Joel Nellis. As a senior, Coffman recorded 87 tackles, including 13 tackles for a loss. He was named to both the Greater Metro All-Conference team and All-Region team in 2022. In addition, Coffman was honored on the academic all-state team. He is the son of Anne Coffman.

Gabe Gutierrez – Sioux Falls, S.D. / Lincoln HS

Gabe Gutierrez is a 6-foot-2, 225-pound linebacker out of Lincoln High School. He was a 4-year starter and 2-year team captain for the Patriots under the direction of head coach Jared Fredenburg. Gutierrez tallied 199 tackles, including 25 tackles for a loss, seven sacks, and seven forced fumbles in his prep career. He is a 2-time all-conference honoree, all-metro selection, and all-state recipient. In 2021, Gutierrez was honored with the Gerald Tschetter Most Valuable Player award. In addition, he was named to the Argus

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Leader Elite45 Team in both 2021 and 2022. Lincoln advanced to the South Dakota State semifinal round in his last two seasons. He is the son of Terri Lovaas and Emmanuel Gutierrez.

Northern State forged new paths on the recruiting trail in 2022-23 with additions to the staff and offerings from the university as a whole. Schmidt echoed the sentiment saying, "One new territory that we developed was the state of Nebraska. Coach [Jason] Glasco did a great job opening up the state for us, and we brought in some great players. The three defensive backs from Nebraska are great players. Also, the change to in-state tuition for Wisconsin students allowed us to continue our recruiting success in a state that I personally have so many ties to."

The Nebraska defensive back trio includes safety Brady Brau of Omaha, cornerback Kegan Mountain of Omaha, and cornerback Tairen Rahe of Lincoln. Highmore, South Dakota native Tate Hoffman rounds out the defensive back line-up for the Wolves heading into 2023.

Brady Brau – Omaha, Neb. / Millard West HS

Brady Brau is a 6-foot, 185-pound safety out of Millard West High School. He was a 3-year starter for the Wildcats under the direction of head coach Kirk Peterson. As a senior, Brau tallied 40 tackles, including 27 solo stops and four tackles for a loss. He added 15 pass break-ups, three interceptions, one fumble recovery, and one kick return for a touchdown. Millard West won the 2022 District 6 Championship. He is the son of Jeff and Jessica Brau.

Tate Hoffman – Highmore, S.D. / Highmore HS

Tate Hoffman is a 5-foot-10, 190-pound safety out of Highmore High School. He was a 4-year starter and 2-year team captain for the Pirates. Hoffman tallied 56 tackles, including six tackles for a loss and four sacks, his senior season. He added a pick-6, as well as 680 all-purpose yards and nine touchdowns. Hoffman was a 3-time CSDC All-Conference selection and 2022 all-state honorable mention team member. He is the son of Amy and Ken Hoffman.

Kegan Mountain – Omaha, Neb. / Millard West HS

Kegan Mountain is a 5-foot-11, 180-pound cornerback out of Millard West High School. He was a 2-year starter and senior team captain for the Wildcats under the direction of head coach Kirk Peterson. In his final two seasons, Mountain tallied 52 tackles, 22 pass break-ups, and four interceptions, with one returned for a touchdown. He earned 2022 all-district honors and participated in the Nebraska Shrine Bowl. The Wildcats won the District 6 Championships this past fall. He is the son of Wendy Brasel and Travis Mountain.

Tairen Rahe – Lincoln, Neb. / Lincoln Southwest

Tairen Rahe is 6-foot, 180-pound cornerback out of Lincoln Southwest High School. He was a 3-year starter for the Hawks under the direction of head coach Andrew Sherman. As a senior, Rahe recorded 19 solo tackles, four pass break-ups, and one interception. He was twice named a Class A All-Conference selection and holds the school record with 17 career break-ups. He is the son of Michelle and Jahswill Rahe.

The final group includes the snapper-kicker duo of transfers Hunter Auschwitz of Las Vegas, Nevada and Wade James of Bismarck, North Dakota. The pair join Northern State with a combined three years of collegiate playing experience.

Hunter Auschwitz – Las Vegas, Nev. / Barnsdall HS / Northeastern Oklahoma A&M

Hunter Auschwitz is a 5-foot-9 long snapper out of Barnsdall High School and Northeastern Oklahoma A&M. He was a 3-time all-conference selection and all-state honoree as a prep. Alongside his long snapping duties, Auschwitz rushed for 1,200 yards his senior season with 16 touchdowns. Auschwitz played

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two seasons with Northeastern Oklahoma A&M, where he was the team's starting a long snapper. He is the son of Jason Auschwitz and Misty Kanyak.

Wade James – Bismarck, N.D. / Century HS / Dickinson State

Wade James is a 6-foot-1, 195-pound kicker, joining the Wolves from Dickinson State. As a prep, James was a 2-year starter for the Patriots, earning WDA All-Conference honors in 2020. He tallied a personal best, 43-yard field goal and converted 98.0% of his PATs. James spent one season on the Dickinson State roster where he averaged 57.5 yards per kickoff and went 42-of-45 in PATs and 14-of-17 in field goals attempts, with a 53-yard long. James was named to the North Star All-Conference team and was honored as both a conference player of the week and NAIA National Player of the Week. Dickinson State won the 2022 North Star Conference Championship. He is the son of Jamie Stevenson.

To break it down, the 2023 Northern State football signing class joins the Wolves from South Dakota (11), Wisconsin (7), North Dakota (5), Minnesota (4), Nebraska (4), Nevada (2), Wyoming (2), Arizona (1), France (1), Illinois (1), Iowa (1), and Pennsylvania (1).

In addition, members joined the wide receivers (10), offensive line (7), defensive line (5), running/full backs (4), linebackers (4), defensive backs (4), tight ends (2), quarterbacks (2), special teams (2).

Northern State fans in the area are encourage to join the Wolves coaching staff at the annual Signing Day Party tonight (February 1, 2023) beginning at 5:30 p.m. in the Kessler's Champions Club Room; located in the Barnett Center. Stay tuned throughout the spring for Northern State football updates, including the 2023 schedule release, on nsuwolves.com.

Groton Senior Citizens January Meetings

January 9 Groton seniors met with eleven members. President Sarge Likeness led the flag pledge. A short meeting was held. Minutes and treasures reported on Oct., Nov., and Dec were read. The Lee Raines book is giving the money from the books to seniors citizens. Meeting was adjourned. Cards were played. The winner of each game. Pinochle - David Kleinsasser, whist- Dick Donovan, canasta- Pat Larson. Door prizes went to Dick Donovan, Bev Sombke, and Elda Stange. Lunch was served by Marilyn Thorson.

January 16 Groton Seniors met with 12 members. President had the flag pledge . The same officers were voted in for another year. Present- Sarge Likeness, vice president- Ruby Donovan, treasurer- Bev Sombke, and secretary- Elda Stange. A thank you was sent out to Lee Raines for the gift of money from the Lee Raines books. Cards were played . The winners of each game were Pinochle- David Kleinsasser, whist -Father Gregory, Canasta-Pat Larson and Elda Stange. Door prizes went to David Kleinsasser, Sarge Likeness, and Pat Larson . Lunch was served by Father Gregory.

January 23 Groton Seniors met for their potluck dinner with twelve members attended. After dinner Bingo was played . Pat Larson won Black out. Cards were played after bingo . Door prizes went to Dick Donovan , Ruby Donovan, Eunice McCollister. Lunch was celebrated for Darlene Fischer and Pat Larson's birthday with cake and ice cream the cake was made by Bev Sombke.

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The Bulletin by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

World in Brief

"strategic areas of the country." Washington will be able to better monitor Chinese activity in the South China Sea and around Taiwan. Read more about the U.S. military below.

- Colorado Rep. Lauren Boebert expressed concern on the House floor over reports that Americans own 46% of the world's civilian firearms, saying, "we need to get our numbers up."
- The Supreme Court is facing renewed calls for greater scrutiny after a letter sent to Congress said Chief Justice John Roberts' wife's work as a legal recruiter poses ethics concerns for the chief justice.
- Texas Governor Greg Abbott is considering new elections in Harris County after reports that a shortage of ballot paper was more widespread than previously estimated.
- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, a Russian missile wrecked an apartment building, leaving at least three people dead, as top European Unions arrived in Kyiv for a meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Two Russian soldiers recently fighting for Moscow have admitted that their forces carried out torture and killings in Ukraine.

- Donald Trump is encouraging Nikki Haley to abandon her "honor" amid reports that the former South Carolina governor will soon become his opponent in the 2024 GOP presidential primary.

- Vice President Kamala Harris described the police beating of Tyre Nichols as a "violent act" that "was not in pursuit of public safety" during remarks she delivered while attending Nichols' funeral in Memphis, Tennessee.

- The U.S. has reached an agreement to expand its military presence in the Philippines to four additional bases in

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W A N T E D

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Thune Announces Committee Assignments for 118th Congress

"I look forward to continuing to advance South Dakota's priorities by delivering common-sense solutions for families, farmers and ranchers, and businesses and ensuring South Dakotans have a seat at the table in Washington when important decisions are being made."

WASHINGTON — U.S. Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) today released the following statement after being selected to serve on the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry; the Senate Finance Committee; and the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation.

"I am honored to once again serve on these three important and effective committees that will help deliver meaningful results for South Dakota," said Thune. "I look forward to continuing to advance common-sense solutions for families, farmers and ranchers, and businesses and ensuring South Dakotans have a seat at the table in Washington when important decisions are being made."

The Senate Agriculture Committee has jurisdiction over matters relating to: U.S. Department of Agriculture activities, including farm programs, crop insurance, conservation programs, and livestock marketing rules; the Rural Utilities Service and Rural Development, which carry out important programs relating to rural energy development, rural business financing, and rural health care services; nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (known as food stamps); and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, which oversees futures markets.

The Senate Finance Committee has jurisdiction over matters relating to: taxation and other general revenue measures; bonded debt of the United States; customs, collection districts, and ports of entry and delivery; reciprocal trade agreements; tariff and import quotas; the transportation of dutiable goods; deposit of public moneys; general revenue sharing; health programs under the Social Security Act, including Medicare, Medicaid, and other health and human services programs financed by a specific tax or trust fund; and Social Security.

The Senate Commerce Committee has jurisdiction over matters relating to: the Coast Guard; communications; highway safety; inland waterways; interstate commerce; marine and ocean navigation safety and transportation; marine fisheries; merchant marine and navigation; nonmilitary aeronautical and space sciences; weather and atmospheric activities; regulation of consumer products and services and regulation of interstate common carriers, including railroads, buses, trucks, vessels, pipelines, and civil aviation; science; engineering; technology research and development and policy; sports; and transportation.

Thune also serves as the Senate Republican whip, the number two position in Senate Republican leadership, a position he has held since 2019.

Rounds Secures Key Committee Memberships for 118th Congress

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senator Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) today announced his membership on five committees for the 118th Congress.

Armed Services
Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs
Intelligence
Veterans' Affairs
Indian Affairs

Rounds Statement:

"I am grateful for the opportunity to serve on five key committees on behalf of the people of South Dakota and for the national security of our nation.

"Real, collaborative work to defend our country is done in the Senate Armed Services Committee. We have worked to strengthen our military, improve our nation's cybersecurity capabilities and provide much-needed modernization of the nuclear triad, which has deterred our nation's adversaries for over 60 years. Ellsworth Air Force Base, the future home of the B-21 Raider, will have a significant role in defending the United States and will have a significant economic impact on the Black Hills for generations to come. I look forward to expanding on this work to maintain our national defense.

"I will remain a member on the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs. South Dakotans deserve easy access to credit, housing that is affordable and traditional financial services. The Finance and Insurance sector is a significant contributor to our state's GDP as we are home to financial institutions of all sizes and charters that significantly add to our economic base. I look forward to promoting commonsense public policy that encourages economic growth, capital formation and consumer protection while also providing much-needed oversight to heavy-handed bureaucrats.

"I am pleased to join the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and look forward to learning from my new colleagues about how the committee helps fulfill our national security requirements. This includes the committee's oversight of the Intelligence Community through gathering good information. I want to learn the Intelligence Community's needs and help the committee make good decisions.

"South Dakota is home to one of the largest populations of veterans per capita in the country. Throughout my time working on the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, we have worked to save VA facilities in our state and improve the care our veterans receive. There is still more work to be done. In a typical year, over a quarter of all the requests for assistance my office receives are veteran related. Our veterans made a commitment to serve our country. Now, it is our turn to make sure they receive the benefits they have earned.

"The Native American population is an integral part of South Dakota. Too often, the federal government has failed to uphold its treaty and trust obligations to Native American tribes. I am pleased to remain on the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs and look forward to continue working with tribal leaders to uphold tribal sovereignty. By working together, we can make certain their unique circumstances and challenges are being properly addressed."

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Higher Power Sports



➤ **FREE Event**

➤ **OPEN TO THE PUBLIC!**

Groton Fellowship of Christian Students
presents **TWO** motivational speakers,

Tim Weidenbach & Deb Hadley

➤ **Sunday,
February 5th
3:16pm**
➤ **at the Groton
Methodist
Church**



Tim's Character Coaching & Be Kind Talk:

Higher Power Sports supports & serves HS & College athletes, coaches & families throughout the Midwest. He focuses on leadership, perseverance, opportunity, integrity, loyalty & making an impact on the teams he serves. Tim shares a fun & inspiring message on how kindness is contagious & encourages acceptance.

Deb's Overcoming Adversity Presentation:

Adversity is inevitable. Deb has had more than her share of loss. Often our students are caught off guard & lack the skill set to cope with hardships that come their way. Broken relationships, setbacks from COVID, bullying, lack of playing time, academic struggles, poor body image & low self-esteem, struggles at home &/or the death of loved ones, are some of the possibilities that can send the life of a student spiraling out of control. The goal of this seminar is to equip today's youth with the tools to help prepare them to handle the hardships that come their way & inspire them to turn their setbacks into opportunities to better their lives!

Thursday Night

Military Recognition Night

Girls Senior Parent's Night

Pep Band

Little Girls Dance Teams

GDILIVE.COM

Double Header - Deuel at Groton Area

Thursday, Feb. 2, 2023

Starts at 4 p.m. with Girls JV followed by Boys JV
Both JV games sponsor by Kent & Darcy Muller

followed by Varsity Games

Sponsored by

Bary Keith at Harr Motors

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Thunder Seed with John Wheeting



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



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COMMENTARY

Judging by some bills, South Dakota must have no real problems left to solve

DANA HESS

FEBRUARY 2, 2023 12:30 AM

Everything is OK in South Dakota. We've taken care of all our problems, big and small. We're on the right track and no one can stop us now.

Cynics who read the above paragraph and don't believe it should direct their attention to the Jan. 25 meeting of the House State Affairs Committee. During that meeting, the committee dealt with two pieces of legislation that prove we have no worries in the Sunshine State.

One bill the committee dealt with was House Concurrent Resolution 6006. This calls for the fair treatment of the Jan. 6 defendants who besieged the United States Capitol. The resolution says those prisoners have endured inhumane conditions; been subjected to cruel and unusual punishment; and been deprived of adequate food, medical care and access to religious services and attorneys.

Amended out of the original resolution, perhaps to make it more palatable to the committee, was a section saying the Jan. 6 defendants were exercising their First Amendment rights when they were breaking into the Capitol and have since been treated like terrorists. Another section amended out of the resolution said individuals who protested in the wake of George Floyd's death were treated differently than the Jan. 6 defendants.

The resolution's prime sponsor was Rep. Phil Jensen, a Republican from Rapid City. Jensen brought a show-and-tell for the committee — a real, live insurrectionist. Speaking in favor of the resolution was Treniss Evans III, who entered the Capitol illegally for nine and a half minutes on Jan. 6, resulting in a variety of federal charges. He was sentenced to 20 days in jail, 36 months of probation and a \$5,000 fine.

Evans is the founder of a legal advocacy group dedicated to helping the Jan. 6 defendants. The group is called Condemned USA. That name, alone, does not seem to hold out much hope for the fate of the Jan. 6 defendants.

Jensen was the sponsor of another bill on the committee's agenda that day, House Joint Resolution 5003. This resolution calls for bringing a constitutional amendment before the voters that would assure South Dakotans that they have the absolute right to forgo medical procedures like vaccines.

If lawmakers can spend their time bemoaning the fate of Jan. 6 insurrectionists or fight for the right to infect others by forgoing vaccines, then all must be right in our world.

Both resolutions were soundly defeated in the committee where they were delegated to the 41st day of the session, a procedure used to dispose of legislation. The resolution upholding the rights of Jan. 6 insurrectionists was defeated on a vote of 12-0. (It should be noted that concurrent resolutions don't have the weight of law but only represent a snapshot of what lawmakers believe.) Jensen managed to convince one committee member about the need to establish a right to decline vaccines. That bill was defeated 11-1.

All in all, the House State Affairs Committee spent about an hour dealing with and disposing of Jensen's resolutions. During any legislative session, many bills are assigned to the House and Senate State Affairs committees. The term "State Affairs" seems to cover quite a bit of terrain. A check of the agendas for the House State Affairs Committee shows that they have not missed a meeting yet this session. The same can't be said for other committees that may have a narrower scope and not as much legislation to consider.

At this writing, there had been 380 bills filed in the current session of the Legislature with three days

left in which any legislator could submit up to three more bills. In the South Dakota Legislature, each bill, no matter how daft, gets a hearing.

All of which gets us back to the topic sentence. If lawmakers can spend their time bemoaning the fate of Jan. 6 insurrectionists or fight for the right to infect others by forgoing vaccines, then all must be right in our world.

Every child in South Dakota goes to off to sleep in a warm bed with a full belly. Our senior citizens are cared for by loving staffs in cheerful facilities. Our Native American reservations have been wiped clean of poverty and drug abuse. Our schools are stocked with learned teachers who have the current technology needed to ensure that all the students are above average.

Toward the end of the legislative session, as the bills begin to pile up, the House State Affairs Committee is going to want back that hour it spent dealing with the Phil Jensen follies. Making state policies should be serious business. What it should not be is a method for lawmakers to try to establish their conservative bona fides by submitting legislation that manages to be both ridiculous and useless.

Dana Hess spent more than 25 years in South Dakota journalism, editing newspapers in Redfield, Milbank and Pierre. He's retired and lives in Brookings, working occasionally as a freelance writer.

Legislative out-of-state travel reform bill fails on House floor

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 1, 2023 4:25 PM

The House of Representatives shut down a Senate bill that would alter who approves legislative travel on the state's dime.

SB 68 sailed through the Senate with a unanimous vote last week, but was met with overwhelming opposition on the House floor, with 60 votes against and eight votes in favor.

The bill was prompted because of controversy surrounding legislators Spencer Gosch and Jamie Smith attending a December 2022 conference in Hawaii when they were not returning for the 2023 legislative session. Gosch lost a primary election in June 2022 and Smith lost the gubernatorial election against Gov. Kristi Noem.

The 12 South Dakota state lawmakers to attend the Hawaii conference racked up nearly \$32,000 in expenses, with Gosch's bill at \$3,341.83 and Smith's at \$2,713.79.

House Speaker Hugh Bartels, R-Watertown, and Senate President Pro Tempore Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, were prime sponsors of the bill, which would require the legislature's Executive Board to approve legislative trips.

Currently, the president pro tempore and the speaker of the House approve travel for members in their respective chambers, but Schoenbeck argued during a Senate State Affairs Committee hearing that the system was open to abuse.

Rep. Liz May, R-Kyle, urged representatives to vote against the bill because of potential timeline complications for booking out-of-state travel and lodging, suggesting that such plans are made before primary or general elections. She questioned how the Legislature would handle such complications.

"I just don't think legislation is necessary, and I don't want to put it into statute," May said. "What else are we going to put into statute? Leadership turns over. Let's let our leadership handle this and not put this law on the books for somebody to deal with down the road."

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.

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Senate censures Frye-Mueller

Vote to condemn Rapid City lawmaker's conduct is 33-1

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 1, 2023 3:28 PM

PIERRE – The South Dakota Senate took swift action today and censured one of its members, eight days after she allegedly made harassing comments to a legislative staffer.

The Senate voted 33-1 to censure Sen. Julie Frye-Mueller, R-Rapid City. The action also lifts the temporary suspension against her that had been in place since last week, and limits her interaction with Legislative Research Council staff during the current legislative session to the director and the director's designees.

It was a Legislative Research Council staffer, whose identity has been withheld, who alleged that Frye-Mueller sharply criticized the staffer for having the staffer's baby vaccinated. The staffer's written complaint also said Frye-Mueller offered lewd advice about how the employee's husband could help the staffer produce breast milk.

Sen. David Wheeler, R-Huron, chaired the Senate committee that investigated the complaint against Frye-Mueller and recommended a censure. The committee report said Frye-Mueller "engaged in harassment" that "had the effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual employee's work performance and creating an intimidating working environment."

Wheeler said Wednesday on the Senate floor, "We are here today to do a job that none of us want to do, or care to do, and that's to pass judgment on one of our peers."

Sen. Tom Pischke, R-Dell Rapids, cast the lone vote against the censure. He said Frye-Mueller did not harass the staffer.

"Due process is an absolute necessity," Pishke said. "There is still more information to attain."

Sen. Michael Diedrich, R-Rapid City, said the Senate must take its responsibility seriously to maintain a respectful and professional work environment.

"There was plenty of room for due process," Diedrich said. "A legislative body has the authority to make its own rules regarding a code of ethics for our own body. It's clear."

A censure is essentially a reprimand, reflecting the Senate's disapproval of the senator's behavior. The Senate rules also allow for exoneration, discipline and expulsion. The last time the Senate censured a member was in 2007.

The lifting of Frye-Mueller's suspension allows her to resume her duties as a state senator.

Frye-Mueller has filed a lawsuit in federal court against Senate President Pro Tempore Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, alleging her right to free speech has been violated. Former South Dakota lawmaker Steven Haugaard is her attorney.

"I disagree with the censure," Frye-Mueller told South Dakota Searchlight after the Senate vote. She and her legal team will continue to fight, she said.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

Attempt to change legal newspaper status fails in committee

BY: DANA HESS - FEBRUARY 1, 2023 6:40 PM

PIERRE — An attempt to change the rules governing the definition of a legal newspaper was defeated Wednesday morning by the senate local government committee.

SB80 would allow free distribution newspapers to publish public notices like local government minutes and bid notices if they had a minimum of 200 paid online subscribers and distributed 500 free copies. That's the business model of the Dakota Scout in Sioux Falls.

The bill's sponsor, Sen. David Wheeler, R-Huron, said it was time to recognize the changes in the newspaper industry.

"People are getting their news online more often," Wheeler said. "We need to adjust our definition of a

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legal newspaper to accommodate new business models and that's what this does."

Doug Cole, the publisher of the Belle Fourche Beacon, a free distribution newspaper, spoke in favor of the legislation.

"If you truly believe in the public's right to know, isn't it better to provide free distribution and access to everyone?" Cole asked the committee.

Lobbyists for the large school districts and South Dakota Municipal League also spoke in favor of SB 80. Speaking in opposition to the bill, Dave Bordewyk of the South Dakota Newspaper Association said SB 80 asked the Legislature to carve out a special exception to longstanding law to favor one or two businesses.

According to Bordewyk, current postal regulations ensure that a paid newspaper's circulation is verified while SB 80 offers no accountability for the way the free newspapers would be distributed. "There's no certainty that anyone received or picked up that free distribution product," Bordewyk said. There's "no means of verification or audit of that distribution."

Justin Smith, a lobbyist for SDNA, admitted to being a fan of The Dakota Scout but questioned the publication's business model. "There's no precedence in South Dakota for this business model to be successful at publishing legal notices," Smith said.

Smith noted that the 110 member newspapers of SDNA have met the standards set in South Dakota law to be considered a legal newspaper.

"But rather than adjusting their conduct to satisfy the law, the proponents are asking that the law be adjusted to recognize their business model," Smith said.

Also speaking against passage of the bill were Garrick Moritz, publisher of the Garretson Gazette and Mark Watson, editor of the Black Hills Pioneer of Spearfish.

Wheeler said opponents of the bill wanted new business models to conform to their old way of doing business.

Responding to a question from Sen. Tom Pischke, R-Dell Rapids, Joe Sneve, co-founder of Dakota Scout, said there was no way that his publication could conform with the current laws defining a legal newspaper.

"We chose to give our print product away for free," Sneve said. "We see price as a barrier to the information. If the idea is to inform the public of what the government is doing, we don't want to put a barrier to that information, to put a price on it."

A motion to send SB 80 to the 41st day, a tactic used for disposing of legislation, was endorsed by the committee on a 4-3 vote.

— This story is provided courtesy of the South Dakota Newspaper Association.

Dana Hess spent more than 25 years in South Dakota journalism, editing newspapers in Redfield, Milbank and Pierre. He's retired and lives in Brookings, working occasionally as a freelance writer.

Trade agreements, access to foreign markets debated in U.S. Senate farm bill hearing

Thune voices concern about Mexico's potential blockade of genetically modified corn

BY: ADAM GOLDSTEIN - FEBRUARY 1, 2023 6:08 PM

WASHINGTON – In its first meeting of the new congressional session, the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry gathered Wednesday for a hearing on the trade and horticulture titles in the upcoming farm bill.

The legislators prioritized enforcing the nation's agricultural trade agreements, expanding access to international markets and supporting underserved producers.

"The success of our agricultural economy requires continued investments in markets and opportunities for farmers," said Sen. Debbie Stabenow, a Michigan Democrat and chairwoman of the committee. "The farm bill helps farmers put food on tables here and around the world."

The farm bill is an "omnibus, multiyear law that governs an array of agricultural and food programs," according to the Congressional Research Service.

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The legislation provides funding for federal crop insurance, SNAP benefits, international food aid, and farm resource conservation, among other programs. The bill is renewed about every five years, and includes mandatory spending that must be in line with previous farm bills.

The current baseline expenditures for the 2023 farm bill are at roughly \$648 billion over the next five years.

In the last farm bill, projected spending under the horticulture title was roughly \$1 billion over five years, and projected spending under the trade title was roughly \$1.375 billion over five years.

Stabenow credited the programs under both titles in helping to generate a record \$191 billion in U.S. agricultural exports in 2022, amid a war in Ukraine and supply chain challenges.

"These titles represent the breadth of American agriculture," Stabenow said. "Supporting our specialty crop and organic farmers, strengthening our local food systems, building new markets abroad for all of our commodities and products, and delivering critical food aid across the globe."

Mixed picture on trade

The Senate committee received a mixed update on the state of U.S. agricultural trade from Department of Agriculture officials.

Under Secretary of Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs Alexis Taylor spoke to the economic activity driven by last year's record-high agricultural exports, which represented a 14% increase from the previous year. She said that 1 million jobs were supported last year by the agricultural export industry.

Yet despite these sizable numbers and record farm income, USDA Under Secretary of Marketing and Regulatory Programs Jenny Lester Moffitt pointed out 89% of American farmers are supplementing their income with off-farm jobs.

"Over the past few years, we have seen the challenges that farmers and ranchers face, particularly in accessing markets to capture their fair share of the food dollar," Moffitt said.

The under secretary added that strengthening local food systems remains an ongoing priority for the farm bill and broader USDA.

She highlighted the work of Eastern Market in Detroit and an Alabama farm-to-school initiative in combining state and federal funding to build local food systems.

"Leveraging resources in support of better and more competitive markets for us farmers, ranchers and consumers is in the best interest of our nation's economy, our nation's food system and the environment," Moffitt said.

Eliminating trade barriers

During the hearing, a bipartisan group of senators highlighted problems with uncontested barriers to trade, including Mexico's potential blockade of genetically modified corn.

In December 2020, the president of Mexico issued a decree calling for GMO corn to be phased out of human consumption nationwide by 2024.

Ninety percent of U.S. corn is grown with GMO seeds, and Mexico is the largest importer of American corn, comprising 27% of all U.S. exports.

Republican Sens. Chuck Grassley and Joni Ernst of Iowa, Roger Marshall of Kansas, John Thune of South Dakota, and Deb Fischer of Nebraska voiced concerns over the ban. They asked that the USDA commit to rejecting Mexico's position, and file for legal remedies via the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement.

"Our farmers feel like that this administration is putting Mexican assembly workers ahead of farmers," Marshall said. "What are we waiting for, to trigger this mechanism? I'm tired of talking about it. We think there's time for action."

In response, Taylor said that the USDA is "urgently negotiating" with Mexico, and that the department will assert its "science-based rights" to GMO corn exports.

Democratic Sens. Amy Klobuchar and Tina Smith of Minnesota spoke to the challenge of geo-indicators that put barriers on dairy exports to the European Union.

A geo-indicator on food is a name that reflects place of origin, like Asiago or Parmesan cheese. U.S. farmers can't label an exported product as "Parmesan cheese," for example, since it is not from Parma, Italy.

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Taylor committed to fighting for the rights of U.S. dairy producers in the face of these restrictions. She said the Department is negotiating with the World Trade Organization, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperative Forum, and European Union to reduce stringency for the dairy industry.

"I have yet to see feta on a map," Taylor said. "We are engaging to make sure that intellectual property rights are being respected, but that these generic names that we use do not become a barrier for our trade."

Diversifying international markets

Several committee members articulated national security interests in developing new markets for U.S. agricultural goods, especially given international competition and disagreements over biotechnology.

"I'm concerned about this administration's lack of attention to expanding market access for US agricultural products," said Thune.

Taylor said that the USDA believes Southeast Asia is a target sector for exports, noting that the region has the highest rate of economic growth globally. She added that Vietnam will have more than five million middle-class households in the next five years.

"We have an opportunity today and early on to create consumers, lifelong consumers of American agricultural products," Taylor said. She added that ongoing work in the Indo-Pacific Economic Agreement will be key to maximizing opportunities.

Taylor also pointed to Africa as a developing market for American agricultural goods, noting that Kenya is an "exciting market," and continued U.S. technical support in the African Continental Free Trade Act.

Helping small farmers

Other committee members also pointed to challenges for small and underrepresented farmers to take advantage of USDA programs in the last farm bill.

Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, said that the USDA and legislators needed to fix the Local Agriculture Market Program.

"I've heard concerns from organizations in Ohio about the application process," Brown said. "The program can be too difficult to access for lower-resourced and underserved communities. I know we can fix that."

The horticulture title of the 2018 farm bill created the program, which combined and expanded existing USDA farmers' market, local food marketing, and value-added processing grant programs. It was allocated \$50 million in annual mandatory spending in the 2018 law.

Taylor responded that in 2023, the application process will be more streamlined. She added that the USDA has worked with universities and producers to create guidebooks to help communities access the resources.

Senator Michael Bennet, a Colorado Democrat, asked Moffitt about the status of the burgeoning hemp industry, and steps being taken to guide farmers through the process of starting up an operation.

"Farmers in Colorado were eager to plant and grow it," Bennett said. "Unfortunately burdensome testing requirements and lack of processing facilities have stunted the potential for this versatile crop that people all over the country are interested in growing."

Moffitt responded that the USDA has taken steps to streamline and simplify the regulatory process for upstart hemp producers, and released the first National Hemp Report last week to provide market information to producers.

Adam Goldstein is the D.C. Bureau intern for States Newsroom. Goldstein is a graduate student at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, studying digital reporting. He is originally from San Francisco, and loves swimming, cooking, and the San Francisco 49ers.

Biden, McCarthy hold 'productive' and 'frank' debt limit talks as fiscal cliffs loom

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 1, 2023 5:56 PM

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden and U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy huddled behind closed doors at the White House on Wednesday in the first of what will likely be several conversations as the country approaches two fiscal cliffs this year amid divided government.

The top issue at the moment is when and how to address the nation's borrowing ceiling, known as the debt limit, ahead of an expected summer deadline.

Biden has remained adamant he won't negotiate with Republicans on the debt ceiling and that talks about government spending need to move on a separate track.

But the two issues are linked for McCarthy and many in the Republican Party, who want to see an agreement about spending cuts before they vote to address the debt limit, which provides borrowing authority for spending Congress already approved.

"I was very clear that we're not passing a clean debt ceiling. We're not spending more next year than we spent this year," McCarthy told reporters following the meeting, linking the two separate issues of debt limit and government spending.

'Productive conversation'

McCarthy said he would like to get to a place where House Republicans and Democrats, who control the Senate and the White House, know what they're going to spend during the next two fiscal years.

McCarthy said he didn't want to give any "misimpression" on the meeting with Biden, which lasted a little over an hour, but said the talk was better than he thought it was going to be.

"I thought this was a very productive conversation," McCarthy said. "Now, you know, in all these different things, if you had a productive conversation, and you both walked out saying, 'Let's continue it,' that's a positive for today."

Biden called McCarthy "a decent man" during a fundraising event Tuesday evening in New York City, though he questioned the deals McCarthy struck to hold the speaker's gavel. There were 15 ballots before McCarthy was elected.

"Look what he had to do," Biden said. "He had to make commitments that are just absolutely off the wall for a speaker of the House to make in terms of being able to become the leader."

A White House "readout" of the meeting said Biden and McCarthy "had a frank and straightforward dialogue."

"The President welcomes a separate discussion with congressional leaders about how to reduce the deficit and control the national debt while continuing to grow the economy. This conversation should build on the President's leadership in delivering a record \$1.7 trillion in deficit reduction in his first two years in office."

Schumer calls for GOP plan

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, said Wednesday morning that House Republicans were "struggling to grasp a harsh reality about being in the majority — there is no good substitute for having a plan."

"This is especially true when it comes to the debt ceiling," Schumer said. "For days, Speaker McCarthy has heralded this sit down as some kind of major win in his debt ceiling talks, but Speaker McCarthy is forgetting something obvious to everyone else; if you don't have a plan, you can't seriously pretend you're having any real negotiation."

Schumer said Democrats' plan is to "raise the debt ceiling without brinkmanship or hostage taking, as it's been done before."

Schumer's comments came around the same time House Republicans were huddled behind closed doors in the basement of the U.S. Capitol building, trying to hash out their plans for the debt limit and possible negotiations with Democrats.

House Budget Chair Jodey Arrington said following the meeting he believes McCarthy was taking more

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specifics to Biden than he was willing to discuss publicly and that the invite represented a win for Republicans.

"I think the first objective was to make sure that we got our Democratic colleagues to the table to have a conversation about responsibly raising the debt limit," Arrington said.

The Texas Republican said it would be irresponsible and reckless "to just blow by this opportunity and have a clean debt ceiling raised without any consideration for reducing spending or other fiscal reforms."

"That's been his position. That's been my position," Arrington said. "And I think we can already say that we have one step of success and one step in the right direction because the president is having the conversation with the speaker."

Extraordinary measures employed

The U.S. reached its debt limit of \$31.385 trillion in mid-January, after which the Treasury Department has been using accounting maneuvers called extraordinary measures to keep paying all the country's bills in full and on time.

Secretary Janet Yellen expects that authority will run out sometime this summer, though not before early June, giving Congress and the Biden administration time to pass legislation addressing the debt limit.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, reiterated Tuesday that it's up to McCarthy and Biden to broker a debt limit agreement this time around.

"I think a deal has to be cut, obviously, between the House majority and the Democratic president in order to have a chance to survive over here," McConnell said. "We're all behind Kevin and wishing him well in negotiations."

While McConnell has mostly bowed out of talks over the debt limit, 24 of his members sent a letter to Biden last week to voice support for pairing "structural spending reform that reduces deficit spending" with legislation to suspend the debt limit.

Tennessee Sen. Marsha Blackburn, Indiana Sen. Mike Braun, Alabama Sen. Katie Britt, North Carolina Sen. Ted Budd, Idaho Sen. Mike Crapo, Iowa Sen. Joni Ernst, Nebraska Sen. Deb Fischer, Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson, Oklahoma Sen. James Lankford, Kansas Sen. Roger Marshall, Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul, Nebraska Sen. Pete Ricketts, Idaho Sen. James Risch, Florida Sen. Rick Scott, Missouri Sen. Eric Schmitt, Alabama Sen. Tommy Tuberville and Ohio Sen. J.D. Vance were among the Senate Republicans who signed the letter.

Speaking from the Senate floor on Wednesday morning, McConnell said it is "right, appropriate and entirely normal that our need to raise the debt limit would be paired with negotiations around" government spending.

Budget resolution

Florida Rep. Byron Donalds said Wednesday morning after the House GOP's closed-door meeting that it's "possible" the party puts forward its full proposal for the debt limit in the fiscal year 2024 budget resolution that will likely be released in April.

That tax and spending blueprint, which moves as a concurrent resolution and not a bill, will need to include House Republicans' plans for defense spending, a topic Donalds said the party hasn't really talked about yet. Several high-ranking Republicans, however, have said the party won't move to reduce defense spending.

Donalds also said it would be challenging to try to balance the budget resolution by cutting just domestic discretionary spending.

"It makes it difficult. You're gonna have to have some of the things in there, like growth projections," Donalds said. "What are we going to do on tax policy over the next decade because the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act is going to start to expire, which is something we should address."

Discretionary spending funds the vast majority of federal departments and agencies annually, including the departments of Agriculture, Defense, Energy, Homeland Security and Veterans Affairs.

While Republicans have taken cuts to Medicare and Social Security off the table, Donalds said, it wasn't clear if they'd move to change the structure of Medicaid, the health care program for low-income people

and people with disabilities.

Those three programs mostly run on autopilot, meaning payments and increases to the total amount of funding they require happen unless Congress intervenes.

Oklahoma Rep. Tom Cole, chair of the Rules Committee, said the House GOP huddle on Wednesday morning was a "really good educational meeting."

Cole, who is also chair of the Appropriations subcommittee that funds the departments of Transportation as well as Housing and Urban Development, said he expects House Republicans will move to hold down discretionary spending during the next fiscal year.

"I suspect we'll put the brakes on discretionary spending," Cole said. "Probably, worst case scenario, from a Republican's standpoint, you'd end up in a CR, so it's not going to go up. It's going to stay where it's at. So we're going to make progress."

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States criticized for spending federal relief funds on tax cuts, prisons

BY: CASEY QUINLAN - FEBRUARY 1, 2023 5:47 PM

As states plan how they'll spend the \$25 billion remaining in federal COVID relief funds, some also are facing criticism and renewed scrutiny over how they allocated money already received from the American Rescue Plan Act.

Of the \$198 billion authorized by Congress in 2021, \$173 billion already has been appropriated by states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Much of the money went — as it was intended — to deal with the COVID-19 public health emergency, including social programs benefiting low-income communities, grants to help small businesses stay open and pay for essential workers. But civil rights groups and think tanks focused on economic and tax policy have pointed out that the money has gone to build prisons, offset tax cuts, and fund initiatives completely counter to improving public health, such as Arizona's \$163 million program to give grants to schools that didn't have mask mandates.

The American Civil Liberties Union in a letter earlier this month requested that the Treasury Department investigate the misuse of ARPA funds. The Institute of Taxation and Economic Policy has criticized tax cuts that it says are squandering revenue built up in part by the federal relief funds. And the GOP-controlled House Committee on Oversight and Accountability on Wednesday held the first of what its chair, Rep. James Comer (R-KY), says will be many hearings examining how federal pandemic relief dollars were spent.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a nonpartisan research institute, has analyzed the ARPA fund appropriations since 2021, and in a January report says that many have used the funds "constructively" toward economic recovery but it also suggests that states need to use the remaining funds to help the people most affected by the pandemic and prevent long-term damage to health, education, and social services in states.

According to the CBPP's data, capital construction made up 21% of the allocations — the largest share for all states — through December, with some states like Montana allocating 79% of their funds to capital construction projects. And while many state projects were for broadband and water and sewer infrastructure, some of the spending was unrelated to "an equitable recovery," according to CBPP policy analyst Iris Hinh, author of the report.

In 2021, Alabama allocated \$400 million, almost 20% of its funds, toward the construction of two new prisons. In Arizona, \$4.2 million in recovery funds was designated to fund offices for Department of Corrections staff. In its January letter to the Treasury Department, the ACLU urged the Deputy Inspector General to investigate the use of ARPA funds for jail and prison expansions saying such construction "does not mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and does not fall under any of the eligible uses

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of ARPA funds.”

Twenty-three percent of Florida’s funds were allocated to highway construction, according to the CBPP. Colorado, Louisiana and North Dakota also spent a large proportion of their funds on transportation construction.

Hinh noted in the report that “while spending on highways may help produce a stronger recovery, it is often poorly targeted to the communities that need help the most.”

Revenue replacement and unemployment assistance

Another big chunk of the relief funds — 13% across the nation — has gone toward replacing revenue losses from the pandemic, as allowed under the federal guidelines. The CBPP argues that although it makes sense to ensure that services that existed before the pandemic continue, states should use more of the funds to target inequities made worse by the pandemic, such as food becoming even less affordable for many families. In Wyoming, 58.8% of appropriations of these funds went toward revenue replacement, followed by New York at 57.2% of appropriations and Pennsylvania at 56.8%.

States allocated \$23 billion to unemployment insurance trust funds, but only a small portion of that, \$929 million, went toward upgrading unemployment insurance and improving access through IT changes and other advancements. The rest went toward rebuilding those trust funds after jobless claims increased due to the pandemic-related closures of businesses.

Nevada, for instance, which had borrowed from the federal government to pay unemployment claims during the pandemic used ARPA funds to pay off its loan rather than raise the unemployment tax paid by employers, according to the Nevada Current.

But Nevada is also using ARPA funds to modernize and streamline its system which buckled under the influx of claims during 2020, according to the Current. Colorado, Delaware, New Jersey, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia and Washington are also planning to use ARPA funds to update their systems.

Hinh said that states that are only choosing to rebuild their trust funds are missing out on opportunities to expand access and should instead raise the unemployment taxes paid by businesses.

Tax cuts

One of the more contentious uses of the ARPA funds has been to offset tax cuts. Since the law was intended to be a stimulus, it included a mandate: States could not cut taxes and then use federal funds to counteract the cuts.

In 2021, 21 state attorneys general, all Republicans, brought legal challenges against that part of the law. In January, the Supreme Court declined to hear Missouri’s case on the issue after a federal district court said the state didn’t have legal standing and the Court of Appeals for the 8th Circuit agreed. In a case involving 13 states, including West Virginia, Iowa, Arkansas and Florida, the Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit ruled in January that the provision was unconstitutional because there wasn’t clear notice for how to comply with the law.

At least 24 states are considering income tax cuts during their current legislative sessions, including Arkansas, Montana and Utah. Kentucky Republicans are trying to pass another cut in the personal income tax after the income tax rate already fell this year. In Kansas, North Dakota and Ohio, lawmakers are proposing flat tax rates, and political leaders in Arkansas, Indiana, Louisiana and West Virginia have pushed for getting rid of personal income taxes altogether, according to the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy. The flat tax proposal in Kansas would slash the budget by \$1.5 billion.

These tax policy changes will hurt the people most affected by the pandemic and weaken the impact of the recovery funds, said Hinh and Aidan Davis, state policy director with the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy.

“It’s during good times in the economy when states are flush with cash that they feel that they are most able to justify and to push for deep tax cuts,” Davis said. “I do think that they feel that they’ve been able to use that almost as a cover for something that they wanted to do year after year and they continue to push for year after year, but (they’re) not talking about what the long-term implications are, because you’re looking at a one time surplus.”

She added, "It really is a missed opportunity on a lot of fronts because with the legislation under ARPA, the state aid did a lot of good, but it could have done a lot more had much of it not been squandered on tax cuts in the state."

Hinh said that in the long term, states can either build off of the benefits of the recovery funds or suffer long-term consequences from cutting taxes.

"From the Great Recession, there were tax cuts that states implemented and I think, in many cases, that they still haven't recovered from, and that impacts your education systems, your healthcare, and things that are really critical to the well-being of families and communities," she said.

"While things like infrastructure improvements are great and needed, and water, sewer, and broadband, it's also important to think about the long-term consequences, and that can't be cutting taxes. It needs to be continuously building off of these funds and the programs and services they've been providing to people because the pandemic will have very lasting impacts and there are so many opportunities, still, with these funds."

Casey Quinlan is an economy reporter for States Newsroom, based in Washington, D.C. For the past decade, they have reported on national politics and state politics, LGBTQ rights, abortion access, labor issues, education, Supreme Court news and more for publications including The American Independent, ThinkProgress, New Republic, Rewire News, SCOTUSblog, In These Times and Vox.

U.S. House Judiciary's debut hearing on the border centers on blame for fentanyl crisis

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - FEBRUARY 1, 2023 5:01 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. House Republicans on the Judiciary Committee blamed the Biden administration for fentanyl drug smuggling at the U.S.-Mexico border during a Wednesday hearing.

Chair Jim Jordan of Ohio also blamed U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas for the number of migrants at the border, and said there are already hundreds of fentanyl-related deaths this year.

Democrats on the committee pushed back on the rhetoric from their Republican colleagues, arguing that most fentanyl is seized through U.S. Customs and Border Protection at ports of entry through screenings, and is not brought by migrants who are fleeing violence or economic hardship. Democrats instead advocated for bipartisan immigration reform.

Fentanyl is a powerful opioid that is one of the leading causes of overdose deaths in the U.S., increasing in recent years. In 2014, about 14% of opioid deaths were related to fentanyl, and in 2017, nearly 60% of deaths were related to fentanyl, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

It's also not the drug that is most commonly seized at ports of entry. For example, in CBP fiscal year 2022, more than 70,000 pounds of cocaine were seized and more than 175,000 pounds of methamphetamine were seized, compared to nearly 15,000 pounds of fentanyl, CBP statistics show.

The top Democrat on the Judiciary Committee, Rep. Jerry Nadler of New York, said that most drugs are seized at ports of entry, and not from individual migrants.

"The evidence does not show that asylum seekers are bringing drugs to our shores," Nadler said.

This is the first of many hearings that House Republicans plan to hold relating to immigration and the U.S.-Mexico border. GOP lawmakers have also already started to lay the groundwork for impeaching Mayorkas.

In January, when Republicans won control of the House, they introduced a resolution impeaching Mayorkas "for high crimes and misdemeanors." There are currently 39 Republican co-sponsors. The House Oversight and Accountability Committee is set to hold its own hearing on immigration on Feb. 7.

Nadler, defending the Biden administration policy, said while many migrants seeking asylum have come to the border, the White House has continued to keep in place a controversial Title 42 policy since 2020 that has expelled more than 2 million migrants from entering the country and claiming asylum.

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Fentanyl seizures

The Drug Enforcement Administration, an agency within the Department of Justice, seized more than 379 million deadly doses of fentanyl last year. According to the DEA, most of the fentanyl was mass-produced in labs in Mexico, with chemicals largely sourced from China.

Jordan introduced one of the witnesses, Brandon Dunn, whose 15-year-old son, Noah, died of a fentanyl overdose. Dunn now runs an organization, the Forever 15 Project, to spread awareness of the fentanyl overdose crisis.

Dunn, who lives in Texas, said he is aware that every year CBP has record-setting fentanyl captures, but asked lawmakers, how “many pounds of fentanyl are coming across the thousands of miles of sparsely policed or monitored southern border?”

Reps. Chip Roy of Texas and Andy Biggs of Arizona, among other Republicans, inaccurately stated the Biden administration had an “open border” policy at the U.S.-Mexico border, and inaccurately claimed that the administration was not enforcing the border.

Title 42 has been in place throughout Biden’s tenure, leading to migrant expulsions. Democrats and immigration advocacy groups have criticized the Biden administration’s continued use of Title 42, calling the policy cruel and inhumane, and a violation of U.S. law that allows for a non-citizen to claim asylum. The Supreme Court is set to decide this year whether to strike down Title 42.

One of the Judiciary witnesses, Cochise County Sheriff Mark Dannels, said the Biden administration was not properly addressing the border and said that Vice President Kamala Harris, who was tapped by President Joe Biden to address border issues, has not done a sufficient job.

According to the Arizona Mirror, Dannels has known ties to the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, which is labeled as an anti-government extremist organization by the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks domestic extremism. Arizona has become ground zero for an extremist, anti-government sheriff movement, the Mirror has reported.

Migrant support

One of the witnesses, Ricardo Samaniego, a county judge in El Paso, detailed to lawmakers how his county established a Migrant Support Services Center to help connect migrants with relatives and sponsors and provide safe passage for those migrants to reach their sponsors.

“No migrant is placed on a bus and shipped to another city without coordination and a sponsor waiting at the receiving city,” he said in his opening statement.

He said through this process, migrants are processed quickly, and he pushed back on the narrative that El Paso was overwhelmed with migrants and that there was no orderly process.

“There is no open border,” Samaniego said. “There is no invasion, nor are there hordes of undocumented immigrants committing crimes against citizens or causing havoc in our community.”

Samaniego said that narrative used to describe migrants is false and perpetuates violence. His community experienced a hate crime in 2019 when a white supremacist targeted a Walmart, killing 23 people and wounding 23 others because he believed a white nationalist and anti-immigration manifesto, and specifically targeted Latinos.

Rep. Lance Gooden, a Texas Republican, took issue with Samaniego’s statement, and said that “you’ve called several of us racists,” and also took issue with several Catholic charities that advocate for immigrants.

“Migrants are absolutely invading this country,” Gooden said.

Samaniego did not call any of the Republicans on the committee racist, or call out any particularly party. He said false narratives that argue numerous migrants are “invading” the country are racist and can lead to violence.

“What I said is using those narratives, creates more racism in a community,” Samaniego said.

More criticism of Mayorkas

Rep. Jeff Van Drew, a New Jersey Republican, said that no Republican on the committee was anti-immigration and that was not the purpose of the hearing.

He said that the issues at the U.S.-Mexico border need to be looked at because Mayorkas cannot be

trusted and is not upfront about what is happening.

"The guy's a liar," he said about Mayorkas. "When he tells me he's going to look at something, he doesn't. When he tells you he's going to do something, he doesn't."

Rep. Mary Gay Scanlon, a Pennsylvania Democrat, said Republicans on the committee have the radical plan to close off asylum to anyone.

"What I find particularly pernicious is the attempt to conflate the issues of migrants seeking legal asylum through our legal processes with the very real scourge of fentanyl trafficking," she said.

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U.S. House panel probes extent of fraud in federal COVID-19 relief programs

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - FEBRUARY 1, 2023 4:53 PM

WASHINGTON — From 2020 to 2022, a group of Minnesotans pretended to be serving meals to low-income children, all the while filing for reimbursement under a federal COVID-19 relief program aimed to buoy child nutrition as schools and childcare centers closed.

In all, the schemers defrauded the government of \$250 million, the Minnesota Reformer reported. Three defendants pleaded guilty in October.

Lawmakers on Capitol Hill Wednesday highlighted the conspiracy as just one example — albeit, a massive one — of the government's blind spots in tracking its pandemic relief funds.

Rep. James Comer gavelled in the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability's first hearing this Congress, promising to make sure government "works in an efficient manner" and guards American taxpayers from "fraudsters" — with a particular focus on the "massive waste, fraud and abuse in COVID relief programs," he said.

The Kentucky Republican accused Democrats of pandemic overspending last Congress when they held the majority and then failing to track whether those dollars were reaching intended targets.

"We owe it to the American people to get to the bottom of the greatest theft of American taxpayer dollars in history," Comer said in his opening statement.

Ranking member Jamie Raskin disagreed with the blame being directed toward Democrats, highlighting several held by the last Congress' House Select Committee on the Coronavirus Crisis.

"We used the spotlight and bully pulpit of a small subcommittee to expose and reverse colossal frauds taking place against the American people," Raskin, of Maryland, said, criticizing a lack of anti-fraud controls under former President Donald Trump that led to about \$84 billion in fraudulent small business loans, among other examples.

"I confess I'm troubled that some of our colleagues seem to want to cherry pick facts and deploy distorted figures to attack the underlying legitimacy of the programs themselves," Raskin said.

Trillions in aid

The \$2 trillion Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act received near unanimous support from lawmakers and was signed into law by Trump in March 2020.

The massive stimulus package provided direct relief checks to Americans, sent federal money to bolster state unemployment insurance and launched the Paycheck Protection Program, which gave small businesses forgivable or low-interest loans to cover payroll and employee benefits for eight weeks, as well as mortgages, rent or utilities.

The December 2020 Consolidated Appropriations Act extended some of those programs.

In March 2021, the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act passed the 117th Congress along party lines and was enacted by President Joe Biden.

The law expanded and added new pandemic relief programs, including providing approximately \$350 billion in flexible spending to states and local governments.

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So how much of those funds ended up in the wrong hands?

GOP committee members say hundreds of billions have been stolen, though a final total remains unclear. "It will be a while before the full extent of fraud is known," Gene Dodaro, U.S. comptroller and head of the U.S. Government Accountability Office, testified before the panel.

Dodaro told the committee that more than 1,000 people have been convicted or pleaded guilty to pandemic-related fraud, and over 600 charges are still pending against others.

Meanwhile, the Small Business Administration, the agency that administered the PPP loans, currently has 536 active investigations open by its inspector general, and the Department of Labor is opening roughly 100 new cases per week, Dodaro said.

"So this is going to go on for a while. There are definitely indications of widespread fraud," he said.

Urgency, improper payments

Dodaro cited lack of agency preparedness to track the funds, an urgency to quickly disburse the money and a "pervasive" government issue with improper payments, as factors that contributed to abuses of pandemic relief dollars.

Among their recommendations to the panel, Dodaro and Michael Horowitz, inspector general at the Department of Justice, advocated for congressional support for a permanent data analytics platform where programs and spending can be efficiently monitored.

"Taxpayers need that sophisticated tool to continue to exist," said Horowitz, who serves as the chair of the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee, established under the CARES Act.

Horowitz also advocated for adjusting the dollar figure threshold so that investigators can inspect fraud at lower dollar amounts, and he recommended extending the statute of limitations for pandemic unemployment insurance fraud to 10 years, up from five.

"The PRAC and the IG community is committed to using all of the tools we've been provided — criminal, civil and administrative — to pursue for the taxpayers every dollar that fraudsters stole from pandemic programs," Horowitz testified.

Comer promised more hearings examining pandemic relief fraud.

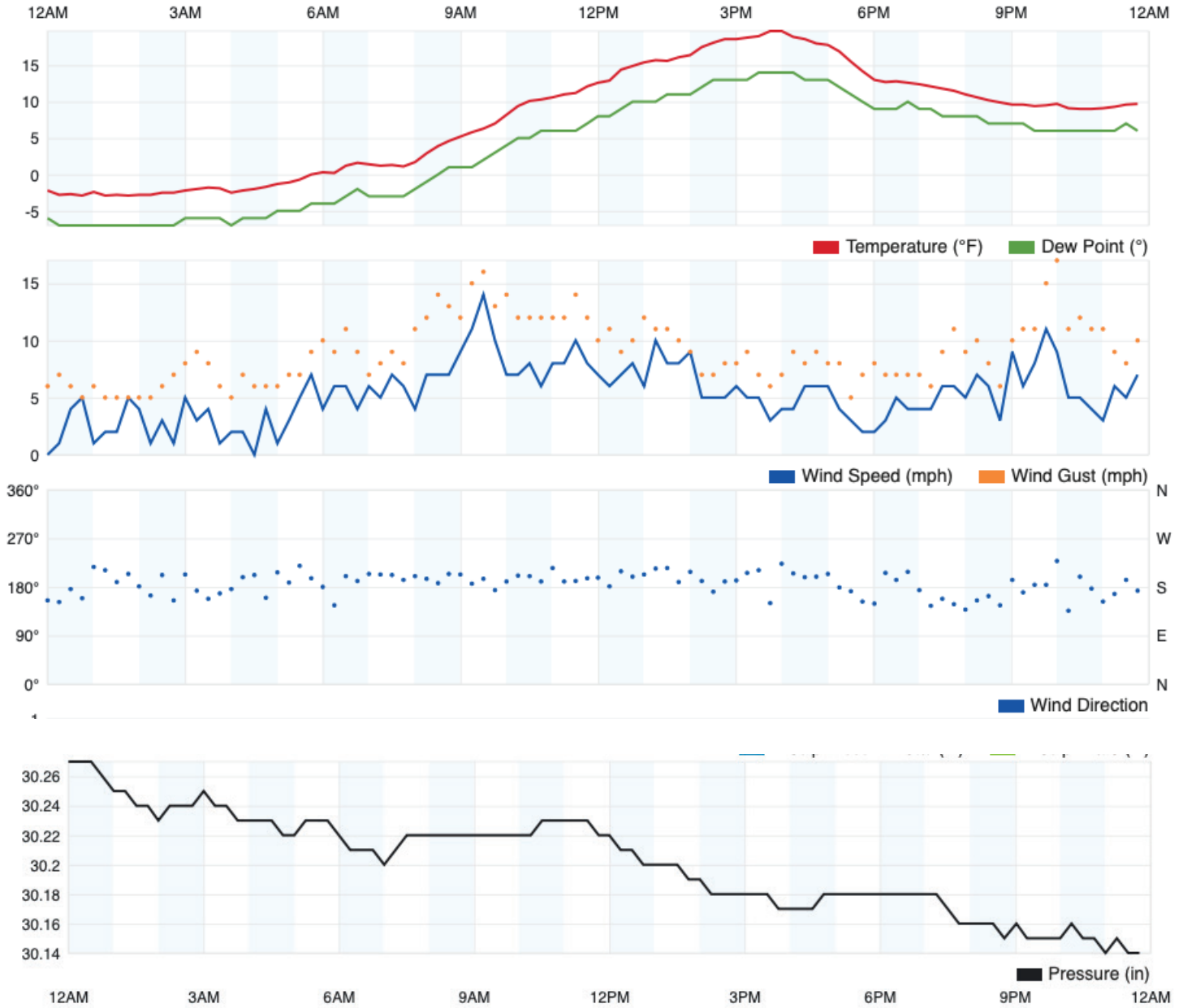
The Select Committee on the Coronavirus Crisis during the 117th Congress held hearings on the federal response to pandemic relief fraud, including in small business loan programs.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
Chance Flurries and Blustery then Mostly Sunny	Increasing Clouds	Partly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Partly Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny
High: 7 °F ↓	Low: -9 °F ↑	High: 11 °F	Low: 5 °F	High: 36 °F	Low: 22 °F	High: 33 °F

TEMPERATURES FALLING THROUGH THE DAY

Maximum Temperature Forecast

	2/2 Thu											2/3 Fri													
	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am	11am	12pm	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm	5pm	6pm	7pm	8pm	9pm	10pm	11pm	12am	1am	2am	3am	4am	5am	6am
Aberdeen	6	6	3	-2	-3	-3	-1	-2	-2	-1	-2	-3	-6	-8	-9	-9	-8	-8	-7	-6	-5	-5	-5	-4	
Britton	4	0	-6	-8	-8	-8	-7	-7	-6	-5	-5	-7	-10	-12	-13	-13	-13	-12	-11	-11	-10	-9	-8	-7	-6
Eagle Butte	10	8	7	5	2	4	5	7	8	9	9	9	7	6	5	4	4	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	1
Eureka	2	-2	-4	-8	-7	-5	-6	-5	-4	-4	-4	-5	-7	-8	-7	-7	-7	-7	-6	-5	-5	-6	-6	-6	-6
Gettysburg	6	3	-1	-3	-3	-2	-2	-1	0	-1	-1	-2	-4	-5	-4	-4	-4	-3	-3	-3	-3	-3	-3	-2	
Kennebec	17	14	12	10	8	8	7	7	6	8	7	7	4	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5
McIntosh	5	1	-5	-7	-4	-4	-4	-3	-2	-1	-1	0	-1	-1	0	-1	-1	-1	-2	-2	-2	-2	-1	-1	0
Milbank	9	5	0	-3	-5	-6	-7	-7	-7	-6	-6	-7	-9	-11	-12	-12	-12	-12	-11	-11	-10	-10	-9	-9	-9
Miller	11	7	4	4	4	4	0	0	0	1	0	-1	-4	-5	-4	-4	-4	-3	-2	-2	-2	-2	-2	-2	-1
Mobridge	5	1	-1	-2	-2	-1	-1	-1	1	0	1	1	-2	-2	-1	-2	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	-2	-1	-1	-2
Murdo	17	16	12	10	8	7	8	9	10	11	10	8	7	6	6	5	7	6	6	7	7	7	7	6	7
Pierre	15	12	9	7	7	8	8	7	8	8	8	7	6	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	5	5
Redfield	6	5	5	5	0	-2	1	1	1	0	0	-2	-4	-6	-6	-6	-5	-5	-5	-4	-3	-3	-3	-2	
Sisseton	6	2	-4	-8	-8	-9	-8	-8	-7	-5	-6	-7	-9	-11	-11	-11	-12	-12	-11	-10	-10	-9	-9	-8	
Watertown	8	8	2	-2	-5	-5	-5	-5	-5	-4	-4	-5	-8	-10	-11	-11	-11	-11	-10	-9	-9	-8	-8	-7	
Webster	6	4	-3	-8	-9	-9	-6	-6	-6	-5	-6	-8	-10	-12	-13	-13	-12	-11	-11	-10	-9	-9	-9	-8	-7
Wheaton	5	0	-3	-6	-7	-8	-10	-9	-9	-9	-9	-10	-12	-14	-13	-14	-15	-15	-15	-14	-14	-14	-13	-12	-11

*Table values in °F
 **Created: 2 am CST Thu 2/2/2023
 ***Values are maximums over the period beginning at the time shown.

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This morning will start out warmer than previous mornings, but it will become colder during the day due to an arctic front passing through the region. Tomorrow will be warmer as will the weekend.

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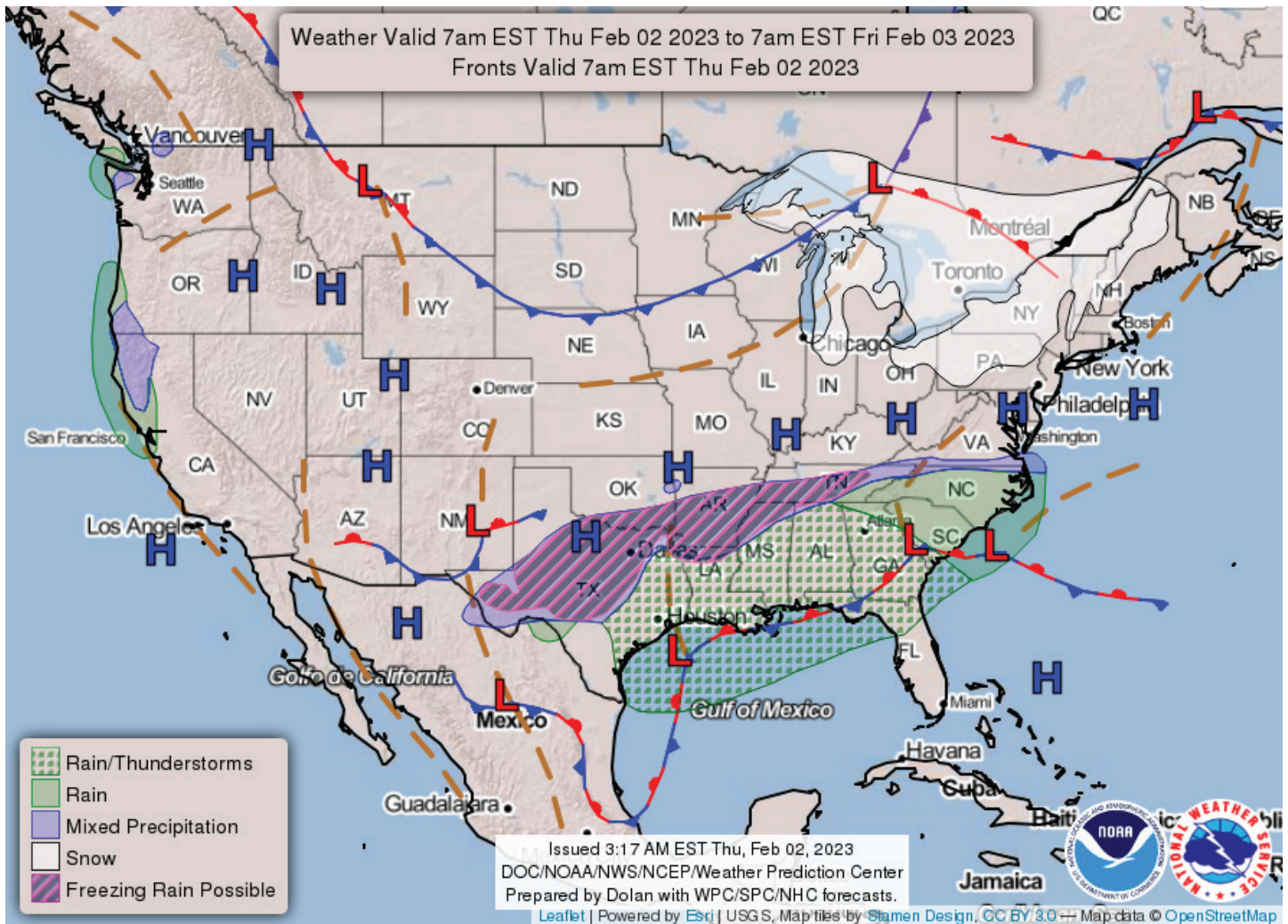
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 20 °F at 3:47 PM
Low Temp: -3 °F at 12:39 AM
Wind: 17 mph at 9:52 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 51 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 60 in 1991
Record Low: -39 in 1917
Average High: 25
Average Low: 2
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.04
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.59
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:41:51 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:49:03 AM



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Today in Weather History

February 2, 1960: Heavy icing from freezing rain accumulations from the afternoon of the 2nd to the afternoon of the 3rd occurred mainly across the eastern half of the state. Severe damage to power lines and telephone service happened in the Watertown and Wessington Springs area. Ice coatings of up to 3 inches thick and has an estimated weight of nine pounds per foot of wire formed around the telephone and some power lines over a wide area of the eastern counties. A 300-foot tower high collapsed at Wessington Springs, and in some areas, utility wires were entirely down for stretches of 2 to 3 miles. Some 170 long-distance telephone circuits were knocked out in larger cities, and 19 towns from Bonesteel to Watertown on the north were without phone service for two to three days after the storm. Many highways were treacherous, and numerous vehicles collided or slid off the road into the ditch. Many schools were also closed.

February 2, 2003: Widespread freezing rain developed across parts of central and into northeast South Dakota through the late-night hours producing significant icing of a quarter to a half-inch by the late morning hours. No significant tree damage or power outages occurred. However, travel was significantly disrupted with many accidents and vehicles sliding off the road. The freezing rain changed over to snow during the mid-morning hours and became heavy, with 6 to 9 inches of snow accumulating before it ended in the late evening. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Ree Heights, Miller, and Faulkton, 7 inches at Clear Lake, 8 inches at Bryant, and 9 inches at Milbank.

February 2, 2011: Blizzard conditions developed along and east of the Sisseton Hills late on February 2nd and continued into the mid-morning hours of February 3rd. Strong southwest winds of 30 to 40 mph, gusting to around 55 mph, picked up the existing snow cover causing blizzard conditions wreaked havoc along Interstate-29. Whiteout conditions and massive drifting brought traffic to a halt along a stretch of Interstate-29 from north of Wilmot to Sisseton. One-hundred fifty to two-hundred vehicles were stranded along this stretch. A full-scale rescue operation ensued during the night and continued into the next day. Interstate-29 was closed from Watertown to the North Dakota border as it took most of the day to clean up all of the stalled vehicles. There were also many accidents along the stretch of the interstate, with people stranded for up to twelve hours. No injuries occurred as a result of this incident. The Roberts County Emergency Manager was stranded and conducted emergency operations from his vehicle. Interstate-29 reopened the evening of the 3rd.

1870: Congressman Halbert Paine, who represented Wisconsin's Second District, introduced a joint resolution in the House of Representatives "to authorize the Secretary of War to provide for taking meteorological observations at the military stations and other points in the interior of the continent, and for giving notice on the Northern Lakes and seaboard of the approach and force of storms."

The House adopted the resolution by unanimous consent and, two days later, it passed the Senate. Five days later, on Feb. 9, President Ulysses S. Grant signed the joint resolution into law, officially creating the nation's first weather service.

1898: The naming of hurricanes after women was always the center of controversy. In the Southern Hemisphere near Australia, tropical cyclones were once called Willy-Willies. An Australian Meteorologist, Clement Wragge, is credited for giving girls names to tropical cyclones by the end of the 19th Century. On this date, Wragge's weather journal showed a Willy Willy named "Eline."

1996: An Arctic outbreak that lasted from late January through early February produced nearly 400 hundred record lows, 15 all-time low readings, and over 50 new record lows. Four states recorded their all-time record low temperatures, including Tower, Minnesota, on this date with a reading of 60 degrees below zero, canceling Tower's annual Icebox Days festival because it is too cold. Locations that reported their all-time record low or tied included: Cresco, IA: -36°, Osage, IA: -34°, Charles City, IA tied their record low with -32° and Lancaster, WI tied their all-time record low with -31°. International Falls, MN, and Glasgow, MT set records for February with -45° and -38°, respectively. The temperature at Embarrass, MN, plummeted to -53°. Rochester, MN, dipped to -34° for its coldest temperature in 45 years. Green Bay, WI only reached -16° for the high temperature for the day, their coldest high temperature on record in February. The place to be this day was in Orlando, FL, where it was a balmy 85 degrees.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

COMMITTED LIVING

Throughout the Book of Proverbs, Solomon does not allow “wiggle” room. It is either “this is the way” or “that is the way” or “do not forget the way.” It’s like a visit to a physician: “If you want to be healthy, you must follow these directions and take this prescription.” If anyone has a desire to honor God, live a life that is pleasing to the Lord, avoid doing what is wrong, and walk in the ways of the Lord, Solomon leaves no doubt about what we are to do. He is also very clear about the dangers and consequences of following our own ways and selfish ends.

“Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it fully.” There is little doubt about who Solomon had in mind when he wrote these words: Evil men are those who are committed to doing evil things. When we examine the lives of “evil men,” we find evidence of evil thoughts, evil deeds, and evil friends. Their lives are so centered on acts of evil that they have lost their understanding of justice. Their lives are so corrupt, so devious, and so unjust that they cannot see or even recognize “right from wrong.”

On the other hand, those who “seek the Lord” are fully capable of making the right choice when facing a difficult decision. From his own experience as a leader and from following the advice of his father, King David, Solomon learned that if anyone has a commitment to do what God will honor, God will grant that request and give him the power to overcome evil. When our thoughts come from God’s wisdom, choices become clear, and God’s power available.

Prayer: Empower us, Father, with the strength and courage that comes from Your Word, to do what is right. We know You will give us strength to live righteous lives. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it fully. Proverbs 28:5



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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2023 Community Events

- 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)
- 01/31/2023-02/03/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Drop Off 6-9pm, Community Center
- 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
- 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 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)
- 06/16/2023 SDSU Alumni and Friends Golf Tournament
- 07/04/2023 Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 09/10/2023 – Couples Sunflower Golf Tournament
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 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)
- 12/02/2023 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party
- 12/09/2023 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9-11am

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.31.23

7 9 18 29 39 13

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 21

DRAW: Mins 11 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.01.23

10 16 33 34 45 4

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$34,570,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 21

DRAW: Mins 11 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.01.23

11 19 31 33 46 10

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 15 Hrs 51 Mins 11

DRAW: Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.01.23

1 9 15 24 25

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$38,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 21

DRAW: Mins 11 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.01.23

4 23 39 57 63 26

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 20

DRAW: Mins 10 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.01.23

31 43 58 59 66 9

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$700,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 20

DRAW: Mins 10 Secs

[GAME DETAILS](#)

News from the Associated Press

'Dances With Wolves' actor due in court in sex abuse probe

By RIO YAMAT Associated Press

NORTH LAS VEGAS (AP) — A former "Dances With Wolves" actor who faces at least five felonies for allegedly sexually abusing Indigenous girls is scheduled to face a judge for the first time in the case on Thursday.

The possible charges against Nathan Chasing Horse, 46, include sex trafficking and sexual assault, according to court records. Clark County prosecutors have not said when they will formally charge him or whether more charges will be filed.

Las Vegas police arrested Chasing Horse this week following a monthlong investigation into alleged abuse that authorities said spanned two decades.

He remained held at a Clark County jail without bail Wednesday evening on the sexual assault charges. A judge on Thursday is expected to address his custody status and could set bail.

Known for his role as young Sioux tribe member Smiles a Lot in the Oscar-winning Kevin Costner film, Chasing Horse gained a reputation among tribes across the United States and in Canada as a so-called medicine man who performed healing ceremonies.

He is believed to be the leader of a cult known as The Circle with a strong following of people who believed he could communicate with higher powers, according to an arrest warrant.

Police said he abused his position, physically and sexually assaulting Indigenous girls and women, taking underage wives and leading the cult. He was arrested outside the home he shares with his five wives near Las Vegas.

Chasing Horse was born on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, which is home to the Sicangu Sioux, one of the seven tribes of the Lakota nation.

A 50-page search warrant obtained Tuesday by The Associated Press claimed Chasing Horse trained his wives to use firearms, instructing them to "shoot it out" with police officers if they tried to "break their family apart." If that failed, the wives were to take "suicide pills."

He was taken into custody as he left his home in North Las Vegas. SWAT officers were seen outside the two-story home in the evening as detectives searched the property.

Police found found firearms, 41 pounds (18.5 kilograms) of marijuana and psilocybin mushrooms and a memory card with multiple videos of sexual assaults, according to an arrest report released Wednesday.

Additional charges could be filed in connection with the videos of the underage girls, the report said.

There was no lawyer listed in court records who could comment on his behalf and Las Vegas police said Chasing Horse was "unable" to give a jailhouse interview Wednesday.

Las Vegas police said in the search warrant that investigators identified at least six sexual assault victims, including one who was 13 when she claims to have been abused. Police also traced sexual allegations against Chasing Horse to the early 2000s in Canada and in multiple states including South Dakota, Montana and Nevada, where he has lived for about a decade.

One of Chasing Horse's wives was offered to him as a "gift" when she was 15, according to police, while another became a wife after turning 16. He also is accused of recording sexual assaults and arranging sex between victims and other men who paid him.

His arrest comes nearly a decade after he was banished from the Fort Peck Reservation in Poplar, Montana, amid allegations of human trafficking.

Fort Peck tribal leaders voted 7-0 to ban Chasing Horse in 2015 from stepping foot again on the reservation, citing the alleged trafficking and accusations of drug dealing, spiritual abuse and intimidation of tribal members, Indian Country Today reported.

Angeline Cheek, an activist and community organizer who has lived on the Fort Peck Reservation most of her life, said she clearly remembers the tensions that arose inside the council's chambers when Chas-

ing Horse was banished.

"Some of Nathan's supporters told the members that something bad was going to happen to them," Cheek told the AP. "They made threats to our elders sitting in the council chambers."

Cheek said she remembered Chasing Horse visiting the reservation frequently when she was growing up, especially during her high school years in the early 2000s when she would see him talking with her classmates.

Cheek, now 34, said she hopes Chasing Horse's arrest will inspire more Indigenous girls and women to report crimes and push lawmakers and elected officials across the U.S. to prioritize addressing violence against Native people.

But she said she also hopes the cultural significance of medicine men doesn't get lost in the news of the crimes.

"There are good medicine men and medicine women among our people who are not trying to commercialize the sacred ways of our ancestors," she said. "They're supposed to heal people, not harm."

Records: 'Dances with Wolves' actor armed cult against cops

By RIO YAMAT Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Nathan Chasing Horse trained his wives to use firearms, instructing them to "shoot it out" with police officers if they ever tried to "break their family apart," according to records obtained by The Associated Press. If that failed, the actor from "Dancing With Wolves" said they should take "suicide pills."

The abuse that authorities said spanned two decades led Tuesday to the arrest of Chasing Horse following a monthlong investigation by Las Vegas police. He was taken into custody as he left the home he shares with his five wives in North Las Vegas. SWAT officers were seen outside the two-story home in the evening as detectives searched the property.

During the raid, police found memory cards with videos of the sexual assaults, firearms, 41 pounds of marijuana and psilocybin mushrooms in the home, according to an arrest report released Wednesday.

Known for his role as the young Sioux tribe member Smiles a Lot in the Oscar-winning Kevin Costner film "Dances with Wolves," Chasing Horse gained a reputation among tribes across the United States and in Canada as a so-called medicine man who performed healing ceremonies. But police said he abused his position, physically and sexually assaulting Indigenous girls and women, taking underage wives and leading a cult.

Chasing Horse, 46, will be charged with at least two counts of sex trafficking and one count each of sexual assault of a child younger than 16, child abuse or neglect and sexual assault, according to court records. Authorities have not said when he will be formally charged.

He was booked before midnight into Clark County's jail, where he remained held without bail on the sexual assault charges as he awaits his first court appearance, expected Thursday in North Las Vegas. There was no lawyer listed in court records for Chasing Horse who could comment on his behalf, and Las Vegas police said he was "unable" to give a jailhouse interview Wednesday.

According to a 50-page search warrant obtained by the AP, Chasing Horse is believed to be the leader of a cult known as The Circle.

At least two women told police that Chasing Horse had shown his wives a stash of "small white pills" that he called "suicide pills" sometime in 2019 or 2020, years before his arrest.

The women were instructed to "take a pill to kill themselves in the event he dies or law enforcement tries to break their family apart," according to the warrant.

One of Chasing Horse's former wives also told police that she believed his current wives would "carry out the instructions" to take the pills and open fire on law enforcement if officers came to the home to arrest Chasing Horse.

Las Vegas police said in the document they have identified at least six sexual assault victims, some who were as young as 14 when they say they were abused, and traced the sexual allegations against Chasing Horse to the early 2000s in multiple states, including Nevada, where he has lived for about a decade, and

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South Dakota and Montana.

"Nathan Chasing Horse used spiritual traditions and their belief system as a tool to sexually assault young girls on numerous occasions," detectives wrote in the warrant, adding that his followers referred to him as "Medicine Man" or "Holy Person" because they believed he could communicate with higher beings.

One of Chasing Horse's wives was offered to him as a "gift" when she was 15, according to police, while another became a wife after turning 16.

Chasing Horse also is accused of recording sexual assaults and arranging sex with the victims for other men who paid him.

He was arrested nearly a decade after he was banished from the Fort Peck Reservation in Poplar, Montana, amid allegations of human trafficking.

Fort Peck tribal leaders had voted 7-0 to ban Chasing Horse from stepping foot again on the reservation, citing the trafficking allegations in addition to accusations of drug dealing, spiritual abuse and intimidation of tribal members, Indian Country Today reported.

State attorneys general and lawmakers around the U.S. are looking into creating specialized units to handle cases involving Native American women.

In South Dakota, where police said Chasing Horse committed some of his crimes, the attorney general's office has put a new focus on crimes against Native American people, including human trafficking and killings.

Chasing Horse was born on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, which is home to the Sicangu Sioux, one of the seven tribes of the Lakota nation.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. January 30, 2023.

Editorial: Openness Needed In RC Senator's Case

The curious case of South Dakota State Sen. Julie Frye-Mueller has been made all the more intriguing because, frankly, we aren't permitted to know what exactly was going on until a few days later.

For four days, we were left in the dark as to why the District 30 Rapid City Republican was suddenly suspended and stripped of her legislative powers last week in a rare rebuke of an elected lawmaker.

According to The Associated Press (AP), the action occurred after what was described as "an exchange" she had with a legislative aide allegedly regarding childhood vaccinations and breastfeeding.

The AP added, "Sen. Michael Rohl, the Republican lawmaker who initiated the motion to suspend Frye-Mueller, said in a statement that it was based on 'serious allegations' and had been made to ensure the Legislature was creating a safe work environment for employees."

The Senate voted 27-6 to set up a committee to investigate Frye-Mueller's alleged misconduct.

Finally, on Monday, more details came out after Frye-Mueller filed a lawsuit against Senate Pro Tempore Lee Schoenbeck (R-Watertown), claiming that he allegedly violated her First Amendment rights when the Senate voted to suspend her.

With that, the statement filed by the aide on the situation became public. It alleged that, while the senator and the aide were initially discussing a draft bill, Frye-Mueller asked the female aide about her baby. The senator then asked about vaccinations, claiming that, according to the document, "vaccinating babies is wrong," adding that "you are taking away God's gift of immunity to your son." She also allegedly claimed the baby could develop Down syndrome and said "(the baby) will die from those vaccines." Frye-Mueller also allegedly made some remarks about breastfeeding that the aide felt were inappropriate.

So, now we know, at least to a better extent, what happened.

But it should not have taken so long.

Madison Daily Leader. January 30, 2023.

Editorial: Proposed scholarship is great; is it enough?

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Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt of Sioux Falls has introduced a bill to establish a new scholarship program for students pursuing degrees in the behavioral health field.

The scholarships would cover tuition and fees for students who attend South Dakota higher education schools to pursue degrees in psychology, counseling, therapy, social work or other similar occupations. The recipients would need to work in a behavioral health job in the state for at least five years.

It's an idea that is long overdue, as the shortage of such behavioral health professionals is at a crisis level. We read stories of extreme shortages at the Human Services Center in Yankton, causing danger to both staff and residents, as well as less-than-optimal treatment for those who need it.

There are needs for behavioral health professionals in every community in South Dakota, to help work with people with mental health issues, drug and alcohol addictions and other behavior problems. Many people with mental health needs go through the criminal justice system, which may not be the best path. That system is short of mental health professionals as well.

The proposed scholarship program would provide scholarships of about \$1 million in perpetuity (appropriation rules don't allow permanent financing, so the bill sets aside money into a trust fund to pay for future scholarships).

Just to use round numbers, let's say each school year would cost \$10,000, meaning that a four-year degree would require \$40,000. An appropriation of \$1 million would fund 25 graduates per year. We think that is a very small number, probably not even enough to cover retiring professionals each year.

In addition, a college scholarship may not be enough to attract the students. We believe improved pay at the HSC and in the corrections system is also needed to help boost the supply of professionals where they are acutely needed. We endorse Rep. Rehfeldt's bill and urge the Legislature to approve an amendment to increase funding for both the scholarship and for state employee mental health professional pay.

South Dakota Senate censures, reinstates suspended lawmaker

By AMANCAI BIRABEN and STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Senate on Wednesday censured and reinstated a Republican senator who was suspended last week amid allegations she harassed a legislative aide by telling the aide that she had harmed her child by getting him vaccinated.

The Republican-controlled Senate overwhelmingly approved a report from an investigative committee that concluded Sen. Julie Frye-Mueller harassed a staff member of the Legislative Research Council, which assists lawmakers with drafting bills and research.

The aide, who has not been publicly named, filed a complaint last week alleging that Frye-Mueller became aggressive when she asked about vaccines and told the aide her child could die from them or have health issues.

According to the complaint, the aide also said Frye-Mueller asked her about breastfeeding. When the aide said she wished she could breastfeed, Frye-Mueller allegedly suggested that the aide's husband could "suck on my breasts" to get milk to come in, the complaint said. The aide said in her complaint — which was released by the Senate's investigative committee this week — that Frye-Mueller's husband was in the room at the time and that he "smiled and nodded."

Frye-Mueller said she was voicing her opinion that people should be able to choose to get vaccines, and that the staffer brought up breastfeeding. Frye-Mueller's husband has said he tried to leave the room when the latter issue came up.

"The language contained in the staff person's statement was shocking and filthy and is not what I said or conveyed," the senator said in a statement Wednesday. "That aspect of the conversation was entirely fabricated. The permanent damage done to my reputation and that of my family is a stain that will not go away."

The senator has sued the Senate's leadership in federal court, arguing that her suspension, which was made without first holding a hearing, violated her right to due process and free speech and her ability to represent her constituents.

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"The Senate committee, in adopting its report, has clearly made a statement that we believe" the aide, Republican Sen. David Wheeler said. "We believe misconduct happened and some sort of discipline is appropriate."

Only one senator voted against adopting the report and its discipline: Republican Tom Pischke said he disagreed with nearly everything the Senate had done to discipline Frye-Mueller, that it had deprived her of due process and tried to cast doubt on the credibility of the aide.

Frye-Mueller, who is allied with a right-wing group of Republicans, will be reinstated to the Senate but barred from interacting with most of the Legislative Research Council staff. She was allowed back on to the Senate floor Wednesday after the vote.

"I completely disagree with the censure," Frye-Mueller told reporters. "The only reason I'm going back in is to be a voice for the voters of District 30."

Medical authorities say childhood vaccines are safe and help prevent potentially deadly diseases. They have long been celebrated as public health success stories, but vaccination rates among kindergarteners have dropped nationwide in recent years.

Abortion foes: 2024 GOP hopefuls must back federal limits

By SARA BURNETT and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Emboldened anti-abortion activists are looking to the 2024 presidential election as an opportunity to solidify their influence over the Republican Party.

Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America, the most influential group in the anti-abortion movement, is telling each potential GOP presidential hopeful that to win its backing — or avoid being a target of its opposition — they must support national restrictions on the procedure. Exceptions in cases of rape, incest or to save the life of the mother are acceptable, the activists say, but leaving the question for states to decide is not.

"It is a level of protection that goes to every single state. That's the baseline of what we're looking to do," said Frank Cannon, Susan B. Anthony's chief political strategist. "Anything less than that will not be acceptable and will not be somebody that SBA can support. So, it's that simple."

That directive is creating an early litmus test for Republicans considering entering the first presidential election since the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark decision that enshrined federal protections for abortion for roughly 50 years. While the hard-line stance could please anti-abortion activists who hold sway in GOP primaries, it could create problems for the party's eventual nominee in the general election.

Voters protected abortion rights via ballot measures in six states in 2022, including Kansas, a state former President Donald Trump twice won by double-digit margins. AP VoteCast, a survey of the midterm electorate, showed the Supreme Court's decision was broadly unpopular. About 6 in 10 said they were angry or dissatisfied by it, and roughly the same percentage said they favor a law guaranteeing access to legal abortion nationwide.

Supporters of abortion rights say the issue was a "game changer" that helped Democrats last year and that will motivate voters even more in 2024, after two years of seeing the effects of restrictions.

"We're in a nation where 18 states have no access to abortion, and that number is not going down. It's going to go up as additional court cases get decided," said Jenny Lawson, vice president of organizing and engagement campaigns at Planned Parenthood Action Fund. She predicted people will see headlines "over and over again" about pregnant children forced to travel out of state for abortions or people unable to get proper miscarriage care because doctors are afraid of liability.

Pressure from the anti-abortion movement has put Trump, who announced his third run for the presidency last year, in perhaps the most complicated position.

He is arguably more responsible for the overturning of *Roe* than anyone else, having appointed three anti-abortion Supreme Court justices who backed last year's ruling. But he has also made clear that he believes pushing any further will hurt Republicans, and he accused anti-abortion leaders of failing to do enough to help GOP candidates in the midterms.

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"I just didn't see them fighting during this last election, fighting for victory," Trump said in an interview with David Brody, a longtime commentator for the Christian Broadcasting Network.

Trump, who described himself as "very pro-choice" before entering politics, stressed that objecting to exceptions for rape, incest and the life of the mother makes it "much harder to win elections." He has criticized evangelical leaders who have been slow to endorse his latest run, blasting decisions by pastors like Robert Jeffress to wait to assess the rest of the field as "a sign of disloyalty."

Cannon called the notion that opposing abortion hurt the GOP last year "absolutely absurd," pointing to candidates like Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis — a top potential GOP presidential candidate — who easily won reelection. DeSantis signed into law last year a ban on abortion after 15 weeks of pregnancy.

The Republican candidates who got "clobbered," Cannon said, were those who tried to avoid the topic. "What you have to do is argue for protections that the American people see as reasonable versus the extremism of no exceptions, even late-term abortion," Cannon said. "And if you do that, it's a winning combination."

SBA Pro-Life America, which raised over \$60 million for 2020 campaigns along with its affiliated super PAC, is talking with each potential candidate, Cannon said. While records are being discussed, what matters in 2024 is what policies the candidates prioritize when they announce their bids. SBA's specific request is to support "at a minimum" a "heartbeat bill" or "pain-capable" bill, he said.

The heartbeat bill would make abortion illegal after cardiac activity is detected, which occurs at roughly six weeks of pregnancy — before some women know they're pregnant. Legislation that references the fetus feeling pain, such as a measure introduced last year by Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., would ban the procedure at around 15 weeks. Graham's bill didn't advance in the Democratic-controlled chamber, and even some fellow Republicans distanced themselves from it ahead of the midterms.

Trump's stance has provided an opening on the right for potential rivals like former Vice President Mike Pence and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, both of whom are evangelical Christians with long-held anti-abortion stances.

Pence has spent months visiting so-called crisis pregnancy centers that counsel women against abortions. And he has embarked on a tour of megachurches, including Jeffress' First Baptist Church in Dallas, and spoken before major anti-abortion groups.

His advocacy group, Advancing American Freedom, has pushed for Congress to pass legislation including a national abortion ban beginning around six weeks of pregnancy and a bill that would establish legal personhood at conception. Marc Short, Pence's former chief of staff and longtime adviser, said that when it comes to declared and potential 2024 candidates, "I see him as the most comfortable explaining his pro-life convictions and the basis for them."

For Pence, he said, the issue is about much more than politics.

"Mike does it because this is core to the reason that he ran for office and won for the first time. It's always been for him a top issue and it's a priority," he said.

Former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, who was U.S. ambassador to the United Nations under Trump, is another potential candidate who signed abortion prohibitions into law in her state. The 2016 law bans abortion at 20 weeks of pregnancy and includes an exception if the mother's life is in jeopardy but not for cases of rape or incest.

After the Supreme Court's decision, Haley said states, and not "unelected justices," should control abortion policy. That position puts her at odds with SBA and other anti-abortion groups.

Others see abortion as a potential vulnerability for DeSantis. A spokesperson for South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, who is also exploring a potential run, recently unloaded on DeSantis, questioning where he stands on the issue.

"Governor Noem was the only Governor in America on national television defending the Dobbs decision," Ian Fury wrote in an email to the National Review. "Where was Governor DeSantis? Hiding behind a 15-week ban. Does he believe that 14-week-old babies don't have a right to live?"

Cannon stressed that those in the anti-abortion movement are the "foot soldiers" of the Republican Party during elections and comprise a huge percentage of primary voters.

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"No Republican candidate can win the presidency without the backing of the pro-life movement," he said.

Targeting Iran, US tightens Iraq's dollar flow, causing pain

By QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA and ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — For months, the United States has restricted Iraq's access to its own dollars, trying to stamp out what Iraqi officials describe as rampant money laundering that benefits Iran and Syria. Iraq is now feeling the crunch, with a drop in the value of its currency and public anger blowing back against the prime minister.

The exchange rate for the Iraqi dinar has jumped to around 1,750 to the dollar at street exchanges in some parts of the country, compared to the official rate of 1,460 dinars to the dollar.

In Baghdad, exchange houses were closed on Thursday, while the Kurdistan Regional Government banned exchange companies in Sulaimaniyah from making transfers.

Mustafa Al-Karawi, a member of the parliamentary budget committee, told the state news agency that the Central Bank "must meet the requirements of the Federal Reserve to...reduce the scarcity of hard currency in the country." He said new domestic procedures would be rolled out to improve access to currency, while a delegation of Iraqi officials will travel to the U.S. for negotiations next Friday.

The devaluation has already sparked protests. If it persists, analysts said, it could challenge the mandate of the government formed in October after a yearlong political stalemate.

The dinar's deterioration comes even though Iraq's foreign currency reserves are at an all-time high of around \$100 billion, pumped up by spiking global oil prices that have brought increasing revenues to the petroleum-rich nation.

But accessing that money is a different story.

Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraq's foreign currency reserves have been housed at the United States' Federal Reserve, giving the Americans significant control over Iraq's supply of dollars. The Central Bank of Iraq requests dollars from the Fed and then sells them to commercial banks and exchange houses at the official exchange rate through a mechanism known as the "dollar auction."

In the past, daily sales through the auction often exceeded \$200 million per day.

Ostensibly, the vast majority of the dollars sold in the auction are meant to go to purchases of goods imported by Iraqi companies, but the system has long been porous and easily abused, multiple Iraqi banking and political officials told The Associated Press.

U.S. officials confirmed to the AP that they suspected the system was used for money laundering but declined to comment in detail on the allegations or the new restrictions.

For years, large quantities of dollars were transferred out of the country to Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Lebanon through "gray market trading, using fake invoices for overpriced items," a financial adviser to the Iraqi prime minister said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

The inflated invoices were used to launder dollars, with most of them sent to Iran and Syria, which are under U.S. sanctions, leading to complaints from American officials, he said.

In other cases, the currency is smuggled across land borders under the protection of armed groups that take a cut of the cash, said Tamkeen Abd Sarhan al-Hasnawi, chairman of the board of Mosul Bank and first deputy of the Iraq Private Banks League. He estimated that as much as 80% of the dollars sold through the auction went to neighboring countries.

"Syria, Turkey, and Iran used to benefit from the dollar auction in Iraq," he said.

A member of one of Iraq's Iran-backed militias, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly on the subject, said the majority of Iraqi banks are owned indirectly by politicians and political parties that have also used the dollar auction to their benefit.

Late last year, the Fed began imposing stricter measures.

Among other steps, at the request of the U.S., the Central Bank of Iraq started using an electronic system for transfers that required entering detailed information on the intended end-recipient of the requested

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dollars. One hundred Central Bank employees were trained by the Fed to implement the new system, the prime minister's financial adviser said.

"This system started rejecting transfers and invoices that used to be approved by the central bank," he said. "Around 80% of transactions were being rejected."

The amount of dollars sold daily in the auction plummeted to \$69.6 million on Jan. 31, from \$257.8 million six months earlier, according to Central Bank records. Far fewer of the dollars are going toward buying imports as well, down to around 34% from 90%.

Even when transactions are approved, it takes banks up to 15 days to get the funds rather than two or three days, Hasnawi said.

Unable to get dollars at the official price through banks, he said, traders turned to the black market to buy dollars, causing the price to rise.

In November, the Central Bank of Iraq added four new banks to the list of those banned from dealing in dollars. Two U.S. officials confirmed that the Fed requested the four banks be blocked because of suspected money laundering. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment on the case.

A spokesperson for the New York Fed declined to discuss the specific measures taken with regards to Iraq. But the Fed said in a statement that it enforces "a robust compliance regime" for the accounts it holds. The statement said that this regime "evolves over time in response to new information, which we gather in the regular course of monitoring transactions and events that may impact an account and in communication with other relevant U.S. government agencies."

The system of keeping Iraq's oil revenues at the Fed was originally imposed by U.N. Security Council resolutions after the 2003 ouster of Iraq's Saddam Hussein by the U.S.-led invasion. Later, Iraq chose to maintain the system to protect its revenues against potential lawsuits, particularly in connection to Iraq's 1990s invasion of Kuwait.

The new U.S. restrictions come at a time of increased tensions between the U.S. and Iran. Negotiations over a nuclear deal are floundering. Washington has imposed new sanctions and condemned Iran for cracking down on protesters and providing drones for Russia to use in Ukraine.

Also, in Iraq, allegations came to light in October that over \$2.5 billion in Iraqi government revenue was embezzled by a network of businesses and officials from the country's tax authority

The case "brought (U.S.) attention to the scale of corruption in Iraq" and how the corruption can benefit Iran and other parties hostile to the U.S., said Harith Hasan, head of the Iraq unit at the Emirates Research Center, an Abu Dhabi-based think tank.

The new Iraqi prime minister, Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, who came to power via a coalition of Iranian-backed parties, does not have a strong relationship with the U.S. that could have enabled him to soften the implementation of the new financial measures, Hasan said.

Al-Sudani has downplayed the current devaluation as "a temporary issue of trading and speculation." He replaced the Central Bank governor and instituted measures intended to ensure a supply of dollars at the official rate.

Al-Hasnawi said the government's recent measures will not stop the financial bleeding. If the current situation persists, he said, "within one year, most banks will declare bankruptcy" and there is likely to be mass civil unrest.

"This U.S. pressure impacts the Iraqi street in a clear manner, and we do not see clear solutions until now," he said.

EU officials visit Kyiv as Russia strikes civilian target

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Top European Union officials arrived in Kyiv on Thursday for talks with the Ukrainian government as rescue crews dug through the rubble of an apartment building in eastern Ukraine that was struck by a Russian missile, killing at least three people and wounding 21 others.

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The scene of devastation in the eastern Donetsk provincial city of Kramatorsk, where emergency workers spent the night searching for survivors after the missile hit late Wednesday, served as a grim reminder of the war's toll almost a year after Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

At least one more victim was believed to be under the debris, Ukraine's presidential office said.

Russia has frequently struck apartment buildings during the war, causing civilian casualties, although the Kremlin has denied targeting residential structures.

Russian shelling across Ukraine over the previous 24 hours killed at least eight civilians and wounded 29 others, the presidential office said. Along with the victims in Kramatorsk, the toll included four who died when a Russian mortar shell hit a basement where they were sheltering in the northeastern Chernihiv region.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was due to meet with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell before what officials described as a summit on Friday.

Borrell tweeted that the visit aimed "to convey EU's strongest message of support to all Ukrainians defending their country."

EU assistance for Ukraine, he said, has reached 50 billion euros (\$55 billion) since the start of Russia's war on Feb. 24.

"Europe stood united with Ukraine from day one. And will still stand with you to win and rebuild," Borrell tweeted.

It was Von der Leyen's fourth visit since the invasion. The last such summit was held in Kyiv in October 2021 — a few months before the war started.

Ukraine's anti-corruption drive was expected to be on the agenda of the talks. Kyiv's long path toward potential membership in the 27-nation bloc will be a key issue under discussion, with stamping out corruption a key condition for joining.

Von der Leyen tweeted: "We are here together to show that the EU stands by Ukraine as firmly as ever. And to deepen further our support and cooperation."

Zelenskyy on Wednesday took aim at corrupt officials for the second time in the space of a week. Several high-ranking officials were dismissed.

Zelenskyy was elected in 2019 on an anti-establishment and anti-corruption platform in a country long gripped by graft.

The latest corruption allegations came as Western allies are channeling billions of dollars to help Kyiv fight Moscow's forces and as the Ukrainian government is introducing reforms so it can potentially join the EU one day.

Ukraine's government is keen to get more Western military aid, on top of the tanks pledged last week, as the warring sides are expected to launch new offensives once winter ends. Kyiv is now asking for fighter jets.

Kyiv expects Russia to "attempt something" on the Feb. 24 anniversary, Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov told France's BFM television. He stressed his government's urgency on getting weapons without delay.

"We are telling our partners that we too need to be ready as fast as possible," he said in an interview late Wednesday.

U.S. President Joe Biden has ruled out providing F-16s to Ukraine. U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Thursday during a trip to the Philippines that the focus of American aid is to increase Ukraine's military capabilities by sending artillery, armor, air defense and providing training to Ukrainian troops.

The U.S. is "focused on providing Ukraine the capability that it needs to be effective in its upcoming anticipated counteroffensive in the spring," Austin said.

"And so we're doing everything we can to get them the capabilities that they need right now to be effective on the battlefield," he said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that strategy would backfire, by prompting Moscow to en-

sure that potential Russian targets were out of range.

"The longer range the weapons supplied to the Kyiv regime, the farther we would need to push them away from the territories that are part of our country," Lavrov said in an interview with Russian state media.

He said Moscow would like to see the war end, but noted that the length of the conflict was less important than its outcome: to protect Russian territory and "people who want to remain part of the Russian culture," reaffirming Moscow's declared goal to defend Russian speakers in Ukraine.

Florida city highlights conflicts over local gerrymandering

BY AYANNA ALEXANDER Associated Press

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (AP) — Not far from the postcard images of Jacksonville -- the white sand beaches, the riverfront fountain, the upscale shopping district — is another side of the city.

Here, neighborhood roads are pitted with potholes and sometimes unpaved. Weeds swallow abandoned cars in empty lots. Grocery stores are sparse.

The people who live in this other Jacksonville are mostly Black, and many of them lay blame for their neighborhoods' lack of services on the city's politics. They point to a lack of representation resulting in part from the way the districts have been drawn for the city council, the decision-making body for Jacksonville's 950,000 residents.

"It's about diluting Black representation, Black power and change that needs to happen in the Black community," said Moné Holder, a city resident who holds a leadership role at Florida Rising, a local voting rights group that focuses on communities of color. "Others may tell a different story as to why it is, but we see it in the lack of resources that go into those communities."

A group of Jacksonville residents and local civil rights organizations sued the city last year, alleging that the council's redistricting maps packed Black communities into four of the 19 council districts, five of which are at-large.

A U.S. district court judge last fall ruled in their favor and ordered the maps redrawn. Advocates said the city returned with more of the same, and in December the same court ordered that a map proposed by the advocates be used for Jacksonville's elections this spring.

"There's just naturally an incentive to keep things the same, and that's what you saw in the Jacksonville process," said Nick Warren, staff attorney with the ACLU of Florida.

The council argued in its court filings that the advocates' latest plan would be the third council map in less than a year and would "cause voter confusion and undermine voter confidence." The court rejected the appeal in early January, so voters will be casting ballots in new council districts for the city's March elections.

The fight over how Jacksonville's districts are drawn reflects an aspect of redistricting that often remains in the shadows. Redistricting for congressional and state legislative boundaries captures wide attention after new census numbers are released every 10 years, as the two major political parties seek mapmaking advantages that will help them retain or regain power at the federal or state level — a process known as gerrymandering.

No less fierce are the battles over the way voting lines are drawn in local governments, for city councils, county commissions and even school boards.

Conflicts over local redistricting erupted into public view late last year when a leaked audiotape revealed how Latino members of the Los Angeles City Council were plotting to gerrymander council districts in a way that would boost political power for their community at the expense of traditionally Black ones.

The exchange was punctuated with racist and graphic language and has widened racial fissures within the city, led the state Department of Justice to announce an investigation and prompted a legislative effort to remove the council's redistricting power.

"Self-interest should not be the deciding factor," said the bill's sponsor, Democratic state Sen. María Elena Durazo. "It should be the Voting Rights Act, the California Constitution and the U.S. Constitution."

When the city was going through the redistricting process, Los Angeles City Councilmember Marqueece

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Harris-Dawson recalled bringing up topics important to his constituents related to what he termed the "One Black district" but said he was ignored.

"Now I understand that that was on purpose," he said.

A U.S. Supreme Court ruling a decade ago gutting a section of the federal Voting Rights Act gave state and local governments tremendous freedom to change voting procedures and to redraw political boundaries, even if redistricting was done in a way that diluted the voting power of minority communities. Previously, some states and local governments were required to get approval from the Justice Department before making significant voting-related changes.

The gerrymandering for local government bodies receives far less attention than congressional or state legislative gerrymandering, in part because few local groups have the money and expertise to bring lawsuits against what they perceive as unfair maps.

Jacksonville is an exception. Local branches of the NAACP and the American Civil Liberties Union teamed up with community civil rights groups to challenge the maps the City Council approved in March 2022.

Some community activists trace the city's redistricting problems to a 1968 consolidation with Duval County, which allowed the city to grow but also changed its racial dynamics. At the time, it was hoped that a mix of predominantly Black council districts and at-large council positions would help boost Black representation.

Yet in the more than half-century since the merger, just six Black residents have served in the at-large positions, which are elected on a citywide basis, and just two of those were Democrats, according to research by Marcella Washington, a retired Florida State College at Jacksonville political science professor who is a plaintiff in the lawsuit.

Black residents made up at least 40% of Jacksonville's total population at the time of the consolidation, and today they account for a little over 30%.

While seven members of today's Jacksonville council are Black, Washington said they don't always vote in the interest of the Black community. As one example, she cited contentious votes over whether to remove Confederate monuments across the city. Other residents noted additional concerns in predominantly Black areas of Jacksonville they feel the council does not prioritize — city properties that are overgrown, problems with water and sewer service, inadequate services for homeless people.

Councilman Rory Diamond was the lone vote against the council's original map, saying it was designed to protect incumbents. But he also is critical of the redrawn map to be used in the upcoming elections because he believes it could have the unintended consequence of "destroying African-American representation on the City Council." Other council members declined to comment, citing the litigation.

Local activists say forcing Black residents into a handful of council districts has led to a sense in those communities that their voice doesn't matter. That has made it difficult to get them engaged politically, said Rosemary McCoy, a plaintiff in the lawsuit and CEO of the Harriet Tubman Freedom Fighters, a nonprofit that registers new voters.

"We understand that when you pack a group of people together, then these people don't have a say. Their vote happens to be wasted," McCoy said. "I ask people to sign petitions to put things on the ballot ... and many times they're telling us, 'My vote don't matter. My vote don't count. Why should I vote? Nothing's going to change'"

Ben Frazier, another plaintiff in the case and CEO of the Northside Coalition of Jacksonville, which focuses on injustice, said he would like the court fight in Jacksonville to inspire other groups around the country to challenge local redistricting maps when they appear to be drawn unfairly.

"I'm hopeful that there will be other cities and other states who look at Jacksonville and say Jacksonville moved against them, and maybe we should, too," he said.

Bank of England poised for big rate hike to tame inflation

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The Bank of England is expected to raise interest rates by as much as half a percentage point Thursday as it seeks to tame the double-digit inflation fueling a cost-of-living crisis, public-sector

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strikes and fears of recession.

The move would push the U.K.'s key rate to 4%. Economists suggest this may be the last big rate increase for Britain's central bank, which has approved 10 consecutive hikes since a post-pandemic surge in the world economy and Russia's war in Ukraine drove inflation to 40-year highs.

The U.S. Federal Reserve has already begun tapering its response, boosting its key rate by just a quarter-point on Wednesday. The European Central Bank, meanwhile, is expected to go big again, with a half-point hike Thursday.

Optimism grew that rate increases may begin to tail off after U.K. inflation eased for a second straight month to 10.5% in December, down from a peak of 11.1% in October. That's still far higher than in the U.S. and the 20-country eurozone, where inflation slowed to 6.5% in December and 8.5% in January, respectively.

With the cost of food and services rising and wage increases outstripping forecasts, most economists expect the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee, or MPC, to send the message that it is serious about fighting inflation. But it is likely to be a close decision, with some economists suggesting that the bank will opt for a quarter-point increase in its key rate as energy prices fall and concerns about sluggish economic growth take center stage.

"We expect the MPC to raise Bank Rate to 4% in February — likely its last 'forceful' hike in the tightening cycle," Sanjay Raja, Deutsche Bank's chief U.K. economist, said in a note to clients. But "with inflation past the peak and forward looking data continuing to point to both sluggish growth and easing price pressures, the MPC could opt to slow the pace of hikes sooner rather than later."

After more than a decade of record-low interest rates, the Bank of England began raising borrowing costs in December 2021, when its key rate stood at just 0.1%. The bank stepped up its fight against inflation last year, approving four big increases of a half-point or more since August to bring the rate to 3.5%.

Inflation soared after Russia's invasion of Ukraine fueled sharp increases in food and energy prices, leading to the U.K.'s biggest drop in living standards since the 1950s. That has triggered a wave of strikes — including the biggest day of industrial action in more than a decade on Wednesday — as nurses, train drivers, border guards and teachers demand pay increases. The government is trying to prevent higher wages from causing a second round of domestically driven inflation that could be more difficult to tame.

Rising prices also are choking off economic growth and squeezing public finances as the government spends billions to help consumers and businesses hit by high energy costs this winter.

The International Monetary Fund this week said that the U.K. was on track to be the only major economy to shrink this year, even as the outlook for the rest of the world improves. The IMF said that the country's gross domestic product was likely to contract by 0.6% in 2023, compared with a previous forecast of 0.3% growth.

The Bank of England will release its own updated economic forecasts Thursday, with economists expecting a more optimistic picture than the IMF's as energy prices stabilize.

Wholesale natural gas prices in Britain are down 75% from their peak in late August, which will translate into lower costs for businesses and consumers in coming months.

Martin Beck, chief economic adviser to economic forecasting group the EY Item Club, said that the central bank's November forecast for a record two-year recession now looks overly "downbeat."

"The significant fall in wholesale gas prices in the last few months means inflation should fall faster and the economy shrinks by less, and for less time, than the Bank of England anticipated three months ago," he said.

Sunak marks 100 days as UK prime minister as problems mount

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

London (AP) — U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has angry unions to the left of him, anxious Conservative Party lawmakers to the right and, in the middle, millions of voters he must win over to avert electoral defeat.

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It's a daunting situation for Sunak, who on Thursday marks 100 days in office, more than twice the number of his ill-fated predecessor, Liz Truss. Installed as Conservative leader after Truss' plan for huge tax cuts sparked panic, the 42-year-old Sunak calmed financial markets and averted economic meltdown after he assumed the post of prime minister on Oct. 25.

Next, Britain's youngest leader for two centuries — and its first prime minister of South Asian heritage — has promised to tame soaring inflation, get the sluggish economy growing, ease pressure on the overburdened health care system and "restore the integrity back into politics" after years of scandals under former Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Easier said than done.

"The things that happened before I was prime minister, I can't do anything about," Sunak told a group of health workers this week. "What I think you can hold me to account for is how I deal with the things that arise on my watch."

Jill Rutter, a senior fellow at the Institute for Government think tank, said Sunak had succeeded in overcoming the impression that the U.K. "had a completely lunatic government."

"You would chalk that up as the first thing that he had on his to-do list," she said. "Otherwise, it's slightly hard to see concrete achievements."

Sunak is a former U.K. Treasury chief, and his top priority has been the country's economic malaise. Gross domestic product remains smaller than it was before the coronavirus pandemic, and the International Monetary Fund forecast this week that the U.K. will be the only major economy to contract this year, shrinking by 0.6%.

Sunak blames global forces — disruption from the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Critics say the elephant in the room is Brexit, which has led to a sharp reduction in trade between the U.K. and the European Union.

Sunak, a longtime advocate of Britain's departure from the bloc, insisted Wednesday that the cost-of-living crisis had "nothing to do with Brexit."

Whatever the causes, Sunak has little economic room to maneuver. Annual inflation hit a four-decade high of 11.1% in October and remained at a painful 10.5% in December. The U.K. is in the midst of its biggest wave of strikes in decades as nurses, paramedics, teachers, border agents and other workers seek pay increases to offset the soaring cost of living and the stresses of holding a job in an increasingly threadbare public sector.

Meanwhile, a faction inside the Conservative Party is pushing for immediate tax cuts to encourage growth, despite the damage done by "Trussonomics" just months ago.

"We need growth or our debts will get bigger," lawmaker Iain Duncan Smith, a former Conservative leader, said this week. "Targeted tax reductions will help achieve that."

Sunak is resisting both labor unions and tax-cutting Tories. He argues that double-digit public sector pay raises would drive inflation even higher and that "the best tax cut right now is a cut in inflation."

Economists say U.K. inflation will likely fall during 2023, allowing Sunak to meet one of his key pledges. Other goals are likely to be harder to achieve.

He is seeking to improve relations with the 27-member EU, and both sides have made progress toward resolving a dispute over Northern Ireland trade rules that has burdened businesses and shuttered the regional government in Belfast.

But any agreement will anger Conservative euroskeptics, who are likely to see rapprochement with Brussels as a betrayal of Brexit. A compromise also faces opposition from Northern Ireland's British unionists, who say post-Brexit customs checks undermine Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom.

Sunak also has struggled to rid the Conservative Party of its reputation for scandal and sleaze. A member of his Cabinet, Gavin Williamson, quit in November over bullying claims. On Sunday, Sunak fired party chair Nadhim Zahawi for failing to come clean about a multimillion-dollar tax dispute. Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab is being investigated over allegations he bullied civil servants, which he denies.

The leader of the opposition Labour Party, Keir Starmer, alleged Wednesday that Sunak was "too weak"

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to tackle bad behavior.

U.K. voters haven't yet had their say on Sunak, who was chosen as party leader by the 357 Conservative members of Parliament. The government doesn't have to call a national election until late 2024, so Sunak may have time on his side.

Or, he may not. The Conservatives are trailing 20 or more points behind Labour in opinion polls, and poor results in May's local elections could spur calls for another change of leader.

Some Conservatives hanker for the return of Johnson, whose final words to Parliament as prime minister — "Hasta la vista, baby" — hinted at a comeback.

Some analysts say it may be too late for any Conservative leader to avoid defeat. An Ipsos poll released this week, considered accurate to within 4 percentage points, found 66% of respondents wanted a change of governing party. Only 10% thought the Conservatives had done a good job.

Steven Fielding, emeritus professor of politics at the University of Nottingham, likened the mood to the final years of Prime Minister John Major's government, wiped away by Tony Blair's Labour election landslide in 1997 that ended 18 years of Conservative rule.

"People are just waiting for them to go," Fielding said. "And the longer they are there, the more irritated (voters) are with them."

He said Sunak "is trying his best. But people aren't listening."

Adani scraps \$2.5B share sale after fraud claims hit stock

By KRUTIKA PATHI and SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Embattled Indian billionaire Gautam Adani said Thursday his conglomerate will review its plans for raising capital after calling off his flagship company's \$2.5 billion share offering following the loss of tens of billions of dollars in market value due to claims of fraud by a U.S.-based short-selling firm.

Adani Enterprises canceled the share sale late Wednesday, citing "market volatility." Stocks in the coal mines to ports empire sank after Hindenburg Research, which has a track record of sending stock prices of its targets tumbling, accused the group of "brazen" stock market manipulation and accounting fraud, among other financial abuses.

The share sale was seen as a crucial test of investor confidence in Adani, whose net worth shot up about 2,000% in recent years as share prices for his listed companies soared.

By the time trading closed Wednesday, Adani Enterprises was down by a whopping 28%. But the share offering had drawn nearly 51 million bids, exceeding the 45.5 million offered to the public. Stock in six of Adani's other listed companies sank between 2% and 19%.

Early Thursday, Adani Enterprises was down by 5%. Stocks in four of Adani's other listed companies were down by 10% and two others sunk between 5% and 8%.

In a video address Thursday, Adani said the decision to scrap the share offering was made "to insulate the investors from potential losses."

"For me, the interest of my investors is paramount and everything else is secondary," he said.

Adani Enterprises said in a statement that it would withdraw the transaction and return the money to its investors. The decision would not "have any impact on our existing operations and future plans," it said, adding that the group's balance sheet was "very healthy" with strong cashflows and secure assets.

Adani made a vast fortune mining coal as energy-hungry India grew swiftly after its economy was liberalized in the 1990s. Adani companies operate airports in major cities, build roads, generate electricity, manufacture defense equipment, develop agricultural drones, sell cooking oil and run a media outlet.

Hindenburg said it was betting against the group, accusing it of "pulling the largest con in corporate history." It said it judged the seven key Adani listed companies to have an "85% downside, purely on a fundamental basis owing to sky-high valuations."

Most of the allegations involved concerns about the group's debt levels, activities of top executives, use of offshore shell companies to artificially boost share prices and past investigations into fraud. It listed 88 questions for the group to answer.

Adani Group dismissed Hindenburg's allegations, and called its report a "calculated attack on India, the independence, integrity and quality of Indian institutions, and the growth story and ambition of India." On Sunday, it issued a 413-page report that rejected its questions, saying none were "based on independent or journalistic fact finding."

Adani's response included documents and data tables. It said the group has made all necessary regulatory disclosures and abided by local laws.

The stock losses on Wednesday cost Adani his title as the richest man in Asia and in India. Adani also slid from a ranking of being the world's third richest man to the 13th as his fortune plummeted to \$72 billion, according to Bloomberg's Billionaire Index. Prior to the Hindenburg report, his net worth was about \$120 billion.

Kidnapper leaves bloody trail in Oregon, hides under house

By ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. (AP) — Police converged in force on the tiny, unincorporated community of Wolf Creek in southwest Oregon the night of Jan. 26 as they hunted for a suspect who was wanted for kidnapping and torturing a woman nearly to death — and who had previously been convicted of a similar crime in Nevada.

Five days later, Benjamin Obadiah Foster was dead, finally located by police hiding in the crawlspace under a house in nearby Grants Pass, the same home where his victim had been found unconscious and bound a week earlier. In the interim, Foster entered another home and killed two strangers, leaving a gruesome scene as he evaded one of the biggest manhunts in the state in recent memory, police said Wednesday.

In 2019, Foster held his then-girlfriend captive for two weeks in her Las Vegas apartment while torturing her. Police said he broke seven of her ribs, blackened both her eyes, choked her to the point of unconsciousness and forced her to eat lye before she managed to escape. Foster already had a suspended jail sentence on a concealed weapons charge and was awaiting trial in another domestic violence case.

Two months after he cut a deal with prosecutors and was sentenced to one to 2 1/2 years, he was set free on Oct. 21, 2021, the same day he was transferred to a Nevada state prison. A Nevada corrections official said Foster was released because the judge credited him with 729 days of pre-sentencing jail time.

Fifteen months later Foster, a 36-year-old bartender, was in a relationship with a woman in Grants Pass. On Jan. 24 her friend grew concerned because she hadn't been seen for several days. The friend went to the woman's house, where she was found beaten to unconsciousness, bound and near death. The victim remained hospitalized in critical condition Wednesday.

The case rattled Grants Pass, a town of 40,000 that has seen high unemployment and poverty rates and public safety layoffs with the decline of the timber industry. Police said they were bringing all their resources to bear to find Foster.

"We are laser-focused on capturing this man and bringing him to justice," Police Chief Warren Hensman told a news conference Jan. 26. "This is an all-hands-on-deck operation."

That same night, Grants Pass police, sheriff's deputies, an Oregon State Police SWAT team and federal agents carried out the raid in Wolf Creek, set amid forested mountains with traffic on Interstate 5 zooming past nearby. Agents seized Foster's car, which he had driven over an embankment in an apparent effort to hide it, and arrested a 68-year-old woman for hindering prosecution. But Foster had vanished.

Investigators believed he had help fleeing the area. The next day, police announced that he was using dating apps to find people who could help him avoid the police or to find new victims. Authorities offered a \$2,500 reward for Foster and set up a tip line.

One call came from a cab company saying a man had requested a taxi from Sunny Valley, just south of Wolf Creek, Hensman said Wednesday. Police went around checking area homes to ensure residents were all right.

But through the window of one house, they saw what appeared to be a crime scene. They entered and found the bodies of Richard Lee Barron Jr. and Donald Owen Griffith, who were killed sometime between Monday afternoon and Tuesday morning and died of blunt force trauma, according to Oregon State Police

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Capt. Kyle Kennedy.

"It's a brutal scene, unfortunately, that we're processing," Kennedy said. There's no indication that Foster knew Barron or Griffith, who lived together, before the killings.

Several items were taken, as well as the men's dog. On Tuesday, Foster was spotted 20 miles (30 kilometers) to the south in Grants Pass — with the dog.

Law enforcement officers wearing helmets and bulletproof vests rushed to the neighborhood with rifles and at least one armored vehicle. They searched the nearby house where they had found the woman the previous week. It was a nerve-wracking situation, according to the police chief.

"While we're deploying teams to secure the residence, we also have to take into account what this man just did — he brutally murdered two innocents in Sunny Valley, and we didn't know when he was going to stop," Hensman said. Area residents were told to shelter in place.

Officers searched the house and didn't initially find anyone, but then they sent a sheriff's department robot to the crawlspace and found signs Foster was burrowed deep underneath the home. His presence was confirmed by a camera. The fugitive had water and other supplies stashed there, apparently in hopes he could wait out the police presence undetected.

The officers expected a gunfight, but instead Foster shot himself in the head, according to Hensman. Police moved in and found Foster unconscious, wedged under the house and holding a .45-caliber pistol. Officers had to cut into the floorboards to extract him.

Foster was taken to a hospital, where he died Tuesday night.

"This was a long and arduous task," Hensman said. "It ended with Benjamin Foster taking his own life."

Israeli settler population in West Bank surpasses 500k

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's West Bank settler population now makes up more than half a million people, a pro-settler group said Thursday, crossing a major threshold. Settler leaders predicted even faster population growth under Israel's new ultranationalist government.

The report, by WestBankJewishPopulationStats.com and based on official figures, showed the settler population grew to 502,991 as of Jan. 1, rising more than 2.5% in 12 months and nearly 16% over the last five years.

"We've reached a huge hallmark," said Baruch Gordon, the director of the group and a resident of the Beit El settlement. "We're here to stay."

The milestone comes as Israel's new government, made up of ultranationalist parties who oppose Palestinian statehood, has placed expanding settlements at the top of its priority list. Already the government has pledged to legalize wildcat outposts that have long enjoyed tacit government support and to ramp up approval and construction of settler homes around the West Bank.

"I think that in the coming years of this government there will be more building than there has been in the last 20 years of governments," Gordon said.

Settlements have flourished under every Israeli government, including at the height of the peace process in the 1990s. Even Israel's short-lived previous government, which included parties supporting Palestinian statehood along with those opposing it, continued to build settlements.

The report also comes as a new spasm of violence is shaking the region and days after a visit by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who pledged support for an independent Palestinian state. The settler population has continued to grow under the Biden administration, despite renewed American appeals to rein in construction following years of President Donald Trump's hands-off approach.

The settler population report does not include annexed east Jerusalem, home to more than 200,000 settlers. The West Bank and east Jerusalem are together home to some 3 million Palestinians.

Israel captured the West Bank, east Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians seek those territories for an independent state.

Although Israel withdrew troops and several thousand settlers from Gaza in 2005, it has charged ahead

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with settlement building in the West Bank and east Jerusalem. Dozens of settlements dot the territory, some as small as a few mobile homes and others sprawling cities, with malls and public transport of their own.

Much of the international community views the settlements as illegitimate and an obstacle to peace. The Palestinians see them as a land grab that undermines their chances to establish a viable, contiguous state.

"All settlements are illegal. There is no legitimacy for settlements or the presence of settlers in the Palestinian territories," said Nabil Abu Rudeineh, a spokesman for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. "The increase in the number of settlers is the result of Israeli government policies that do not believe in the two-state solution," which would create an independent Palestinian state next to Israel.

Israel claims the West Bank is disputed territory, rather than occupied, saying that terminology denies the Jewish people's historical presence in the land. It argues that the fate of settlements should be part of negotiations to bring about an end to the conflict.

Peace efforts have been moribund for nearly 15 years, while Israel continued to establish facts on the ground with more settlement construction and a Palestinian political rivalry complicated peacemaking.

The settlers and their many supporters in government view the West Bank as the biblical and historical heartland of the Jewish people and are opposed to any partition.

Palestinians and Israelis in the West Bank live under a two-tiered legal system that grants settlers special status and applies much of Israeli law to them including the right to vote in Israeli elections and the ability to access certain public services. Palestinians live under Israeli military rule and they do not enjoy the legal rights and protections afforded to settlers.

The open-ended military occupation has led three well-known human rights groups to conclude that Israel is committing the international crime of apartheid by systematically denying Palestinians equal rights. Israel rejects those accusations as an attack on its very existence as a Jewish-majority state and points to the achievements of its citizens of Palestinian origin to counter the argument.

The increasingly authoritarian and unpopular Palestinian Authority, established through agreements with Israel in the 1990s, administers parts of the West Bank, while the Islamic militant group Hamas controls Gaza, which is under an Israeli-Egyptian blockade.

Australia is removing British monarchy from its bank notes

By NICK PERRY and ROD MCGUIRK undefined

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Australia is removing the British monarchy from its bank notes.

The nation's central bank said Thursday its new \$5 bill would feature an Indigenous design rather than an image of King Charles III. But the king is still expected to appear on coins that currently bear the image of the late Queen Elizabeth II.

The \$5 bill was Australia's only remaining bank note to still feature an image of the monarch.

The bank said the decision followed consultation with the center-left Labor Party government, which supported the change. Opponents say the move is politically motivated.

The British monarch remains Australia's head of state, although these days that role is largely symbolic. Like many former British colonies, Australia is debating to what extent it should retain its constitutional ties to Britain.

Australia's Reserve Bank said the new \$5 bill would feature a design to replace the portrait of the queen, who died last year. The bank said the move would honor "the culture and history of the First Australians."

"The other side of the \$5 banknote will continue to feature the Australian parliament," the bank said in a statement.

Treasurer Jim Chalmers said the change was an opportunity to strike a good balance.

"The monarch will still be on the coins, but the \$5 note will say more about our history and our heritage and our country, and I see that as a good thing," he told reporters in Melbourne.

Opposition leader Peter Dutton likened the move to changing the date of the national day, Australia Day.

"I know the silent majority don't agree with a lot of the woke nonsense that goes on but we've got to hear more from those people online," he told 2GB Radio.

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Dutton said Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was central to the decision for the king not to appear on the note, urging him to “own up to it.”

After taking office last year, Albanese started laying the groundwork for an Australian republic by creating a new position of assistant minister for the republic, but holding a referendum to sever constitutional ties with Britain has not been a first-order priority for his government.

The bank plans to consult with Indigenous groups in designing the \$5 note, a process it expects will take several years before the new note goes public.

The current \$5 will be issued until the new design is introduced and will remain legal tender even after the new bill goes into circulation.

The face of King Charles III is expected to be seen on Australian coins later this year.

One Australian dollar is worth about 71 cents in U.S. currency.

British currency began transitioning to the new monarch with the release of the 50 pence coin in December. It has Charles on the front of the coin while the back commemorates his mother.

This week, there were 208 million \$5 notes in circulation worth AU\$1.04 billion (\$734 million), according to the Reserve Bank of Australia.

Australia’s smallest denomination accounts for 10% of the more than 2 billion Australian bank notes circulating.

Albanese’s center-left Labor Party is seeking to make Australia a republic with an Australian citizen as head of state instead of the British monarch.

After Labor won elections in May last year, Albanese appointed Matt Thistlethwaite as assistant minister for the republic. Thistlethwaite said in June there would be no change in the queen’s lifetime.

Australians voted in a 1999 referendum proposed by a Labor government to maintain the British monarch as Australia’s head of state.

When the queen died, the government had already committed to holding a referendum this year to acknowledge Indigenous people in the constitution. The government has dismissed adding a republic question to that referendum as an unwanted distraction from its Indigenous priority.

At one time, Queen Elizabeth II appeared on at least 33 different currencies, more than any other monarch, an achievement noted by Guinness World Records.

Punxsutawney Phil prepares to make Groundhog Day prediction

PUNXSUTAWNEY, Pa. (AP) — It’s Groundhog Day and people are waiting to learn whether a furry critter in a western Pennsylvania town will predict an early spring or six more weeks of winter.

People will gather Thursday at Gobbler’s Knob as members of Punxsutawney Phil’s “inner circle” summon him from his tree stump at dawn to learn if he has seen his shadow. According to folklore, if he sees his shadow there will be six more weeks of winter. If he doesn’t, spring comes early.

The “inner circle” is a group of local dignitaries who are responsible for planning the events, as well as feeding and caring for Phil himself.

The annual event in Punxsutawney originated from a German legend about a furry rodent. Officials in the community — which is about 65 miles (105 kilometers) northeast of Pittsburgh — are hoping the usual crowd of between 10,000 to 15,000 visitors comes out for the event, which will also be livestreamed.

According to records dating back to 1887, Phil has predicted winter more than 100 times. Ten years were lost because no records were kept, organizers said.

The 2021 forecast called for six more weeks of winter.

While Punxsutawney Phil may be the most famous groundhog seer, he’s certainly not the only one. New York City’s Staten Island Chuck will also make his prediction Thursday during an event at the Staten Island Zoo.

Biden approval steady after document discovery: AP-NORC Poll

By COLLEEN LONG and EMILY SWANSON Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — More U.S. adults disapprove than approve of the way President Joe Biden has handled the discovery of classified documents at his home and former office, a new poll shows, but that seems to have had little impact on his overall approval rating.

The new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research finds 41% of Americans say they approve of how Biden is handling his job as president, about the same as the 43% who said that in December. In the new poll, 77% of Democrats approve of how Biden is handling his job, while 91% of Republicans disapprove, both little changed since late last year.

Biden, who will address a joint session of Congress in his State of the Union address next week, needs all the support he can muster as he strategizes his expected reelection campaign, and has been working to focus voters on his agenda and big legislative wins instead of the documents flap.

Biden's attorneys discovered classified items in a locked closet in November, as they cleared out his office at the Penn Biden Center, a think tank where he briefly worked after he left government. The records were turned over to Justice Department officials. The discovery touched off a special counsel investigation and additional documents have turned up at his home in Wilmington, Delaware, in searches by his lawyers and by the FBI. Agents also searched Biden's vacation home in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, and his former office at the Penn Biden Center.

More people disapprove than approve of his handling of situation since the classified documents were found, 39% to 23%, Another 36% say they neither approve nor disapprove. Democrats are more likely to approve than disapprove, 44% to 15%, with 40% saying they have no opinion either way.

A majority of Republicans, 68%, say they disapprove, with 6% saying they approve and 24% expressing no opinion either way. Republicans are also somewhat more likely than Democrats to say they've heard at least some about the situation, 71% to 63%.

"To me, it seems like he's doing the right things, and this happens, people have these documents, Trump and now Mike Pence, too," said Candace Porth, 72, of Phoenix, a Biden supporter. "It happens. I think people who are supportive of Biden, they understand."

In follow-up interviews, some poll respondents said they distinguish between Biden voluntarily turning over documents and the behavior of former President Donald Trump, who refused to hand over hundreds of documents, prompting the FBI to raid his home. Still, many are troubled that leaders can't seem to properly handle sensitive information.

"I feel like it is a big problem in general," said Jenifer Hudgins, 36, of Gadsden, Alabama, a Democrat who voted for Biden. "I do not feel like any official should have classified documents in their possession, especially at personal residences. It does make you wonder why they have these documents at their residences."

Trump is facing a special counsel investigation into his retention of several hundred classified documents and other government records at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida — and his resistance to giving them up, which led to an FBI warrant and nighttime search to seize them last August.

Banty Patel, a 46-year-old Republican from New Brunswick, New Jersey, said it seems like the same problem to him, but Trump and Biden are being treated very differently.

"I think it looks worse for Joe Biden. He went on the news and said he'd always comply with the FBI and then later they discovered he had documents, too."

Most Americans have paid at least some attention to the ongoing investigation into classified documents, but they're not necessarily following it closely. The poll shows that 28% say they've read or heard a lot about the situation, while another 35% say they've heard some about it but not a lot. An additional 37% say they've heard little or nothing about it.

On Wednesday, the FBI searched Biden's home in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, but did not find any classified documents there, according to his personal attorney. The Bidens purchased that home, which overlooks a state park adjacent to the beach, in June 2017, months after he left the vice presidency.

Agents did take some handwritten notes and other materials relating to Biden's time as vice president for review, just as they did last month when they searched his Wilmington home, where they also found

classified items.

Biden has said he was surprised by the initial discovery of the documents. His lawyers have described his mishandling of the documents as a "mistake."

The administration's public response has been marked by delayed and incomplete information. There are many unanswered questions — on what information the documents contained, exactly how many were discovered and why Biden had them in his possession. Nonetheless, Biden's attorneys and officials in the White House counsel's office insist they are being as transparent as possible with the public.

"I am more favorable to Biden than Trump, but I think none of this should be in private hands, it is not correct. They should be kept in government buildings," said Memduh Can, 45, of Falls Church, Virginia, who said he was an independent who voted for Biden. "For me, though, the most important thing is the economy. If it is managed well, the country will be more secure."

After bitter RNC meeting, Democrats look to project unity

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A week after bitter divisions dominated a national Republican gathering, Democrats holding their own meeting are eager to showcase just how much they agree on.

There will be no party chair fight since Jaime Harrison isn't up for reelection until 2025. There is no candidate jostling for a White House bid since President Joe Biden is expected to seek a second term. And there is no national reckoning after a surprisingly strong midterm showing.

The only real point of contention for the Democratic National Committee's winter meeting in Philadelphia this weekend is a proposed overhaul of the 2024 presidential primary calendar, which has angered top party leaders in New Hampshire. But even that is largely moot since Biden isn't expected to face a major challenge for the nomination.

The DNC on Saturday is expected to approve a new lineup for the party's presidential primaries, deferring to Biden, who has championed South Carolina's primary opening voting on Feb. 3. New Hampshire and Nevada would jointly follow three days later, on Feb. 6, with Georgia coming next on Feb. 13 and Michigan two weeks after that.

The president has argued that replacing the party's leadoff caucuses in Iowa, a majority white state, with a presidential primary in South Carolina, where nearly 27% of the population is Black, would empower the voters of color whom Democrats rely on but have taken for granted.

The party is solidly behind Biden seeking a second term despite his being the oldest president in U.S. history and revelations that he may have mishandled official documents. Unity remains its mantra after Republicans took 15 ballots last month just to elect a House speaker, with GOP members nearly coming to blows on the House floor.

"We're fending off a Republican House that's crazy and actually defending our gains from the first years. So it just doesn't make sense to be saber-rattling right now about a future race when we're all just sort of in the fight together," said Adam Green, co-founder of the Progressive Change Campaign Committee, which backed Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, rather than Biden, in Democrats' 2020 presidential primary.

Warren, like Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders and other major 2020 Democratic presidential candidates, say they expect Biden to run again and will support him when he makes a bid official.

Sanders is instead urging the DNC to ban accepting funding from super PACs and other outside political groups during future Democratic primaries. That's an idea some Democratic elders have opposed, arguing that Republican candidates will continue to accept such financial support and that their party shouldn't "unilaterally disarm."

Still, most top progressive organizations and grassroots activist groups have also shied away from suggesting Biden could face a major primary challenge. President Jimmy Carter's loss to Republican Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election followed a strong primary challenge from Sen. Edward M. Kennedy.

Harrison, who rose to national prominence with an unsuccessful 2020 bid against South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, will remain chair until after next year's presidential race. That's in stark contrast to Ronna

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McDaniel, who won another term as head of the Republican National Committee during a contentious meeting last week in California. Members openly questioned the GOP's midterm performance and former President Donald Trump's continued hold on the party.

Harrison teared up during a December party rules committee meeting when Democrats' new primary calendar was first approved and predicts he may get emotional again this weekend. He recalled going to vote with his grandfather before his death in 2004 and how the U.S. Constitution once counted his Black ancestors in South Carolina as three-fifths of a person.

"They didn't always think I was a whole man in this state," Harrison remembered his grandfather saying, before urging him, "Never let anyone tell you that you don't matter."

"That this president would step into the tradition of the Democratic Party — go into Iowa, go into New Hampshire to say, you know what, it is now time that we elevate the voices of people like my grandfather, like my grandmother, to allow them to get a say in determining who should be president of the United States," Harrison added. "For me, I was emotional because of that."

But the new lineup has its detractors. New Hampshire, already a general election battleground state, has a law that mandates holding the nation's first presidential primary, which Iowa only circumvented with its caucus. Its Democrats have joined with top state Republicans in vowing to hold the nation's first presidential primary next year regardless of the DNC calendar.

That raises the possibility that, if Biden were to bypass a rogue New Hampshire primary, he could lose the state to a challenger who campaigns there unopposed.

Such a scenario may trigger "potential embarrassment" for Biden that creates "an opening for an insurgent candidate — serious or not — who can garner media attention and capitalize on Granite Staters' anger about being passed over," New Hampshire Democratic Party Chair Ray Buckley wrote to the DNC rules committee.

DNC rules committee member Joanne Dowdell of New Hampshire seized on the same theme, noting, "This is not how any of us would like to kick off a reelection campaign."

That's unlikely to keep the DNC from approving the new primary calendar. But the proposal has drawn some opposition beyond New Hampshire.

Matt Hughes, a DNC member who is second vice chair of the North Carolina Democratic Party, was the first signature on a letter released Thursday to DNC members from local officials in his state, as well as Nevada, Michigan and Georgia. It urged the party to choose the first primary state from a competitive state like those four — arguing that doing so would allow Democrats to concentrate campaign resources on areas that are more competitive in the general election than deeply Republican South Carolina.

Hughes said such calls shouldn't be seen as defying Biden. Instead, he said, the party having an incumbent president who won't face primary opposition is the perfect time to make changes that shape future cycles.

"What we should be thinking about is absolutely the long-term impact. In 2024, it makes a lot of sense. This is relatively low impact," Hughes said. "This is the perfect opportunity to talk about the lineup of states without regard to possible candidates in the field, who benefits and who losses."

House GOP preparing to oust Democrat from committee

By LISA MASCARO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans are preparing to oust Democratic Rep. Ilhan Omar from the House Foreign Affairs Committee for her past comments critical of Israel, an escalation of tensions after Democrats last session booted far-right GOP lawmakers from committees over their incendiary, violent remarks.

Thursday's vote is a quick turnaround by House Speaker Kevin McCarthy to solidify wavering Republican support for moving against the Somali-born Muslim woman in the new Congress. Some GOP lawmakers had expressed reservations about taking such a dramatic step. Removal of lawmakers from their House committees was essentially unprecedented until the Democratic ousters of hard-right Republicans Rep. Marjorie Taylor Green of Georgia and Rep. Paul Gosar of Arizona.

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Omar, a Minnesota Democrat, has apologized for comments that she has said she came to understand were antisemitic.

"We'll have enough votes," McCarthy said late Wednesday.

The resolution proposed by Rep. Max Miller, R-Ohio, a former official in the Trump administration, says, "Omar's comments have brought dishonor to the House of Representatives."

The chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas, argued for excluding Omar on the panel during a recent closed-door meeting with fellow Republicans.

"It's just that her worldview of Israel is so diametrically opposed to the committee's," McCaul told reporters in describing his stance. "I don't mind having differences of opinion, but this goes beyond that."

Omar has said that, in reality, "it is about revenge. It's about appeasing the former president," referring to Donald Trump.

McCarthy has already blocked Reps. Adam Schiff and Eric Swalwell, both California Democrats, from rejoining the House Intelligence Committee once the GOP took control of the chamber in January. While appointments to the intelligence panel are the prerogative of the speaker, the action on Omar requires a House vote.

Democrats have little recourse at this point. "We are united that she should be seated on the committee," said Rep. Gregory Meeks of New York, the ranking Democrat on the committee.

Several Republicans skeptical of removing Omar wanted "due process" for lawmakers who face removal. McCarthy said he told them he would work with Democrats on creating a due process system, but acknowledged it's still a work in progress and he's not exactly sure what shape it will take.

Here's what the Fed interest rate hike means for you

By CORA LEWIS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The Federal Reserve raised its key rate by a quarter point Wednesday, bringing it to the highest level in 15 years as part of an ongoing effort to ease inflation by making borrowing more expensive.

The rate increase will likely make it even costlier to borrow for homes, autos and other purchases. But if you have money to save, you'll probably earn a bit more interest on it.

The latest rate increase is smaller than the Fed's half-point rate hike in December and its four straight three-quarter-point increases earlier last year. The slowdown reflects the fact that inflation, while still high, is easing, and some parts of the economy seem to be cooling.

But it's still an increase, to a range of 4.5% to 4.75%. And many economists say they still fear that a recession remains possible — and with it, job losses that could cause hardship for households already hurt by inflation.

Here's what to know:

WHAT'S PROMPTING THE RATE INCREASES?

The short answer: Inflation. Over the past year, consumer inflation in the United States has clocked in at 6.5% — a figure that reflects a sixth straight monthly slowdown but still uncomfortably high.

The Fed's goal is to slow consumer spending, thereby reducing demand for homes, cars and other goods and services, eventually cooling the economy and lowering prices.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell has acknowledged in the past that aggressively raising rates would bring "some pain" for households but said that doing so is necessary to crush high inflation.

WHICH CONSUMERS ARE MOST AFFECTED?

Anyone borrowing money to make a large purchase, such as a home, car or large appliance, will likely take a hit. The new rate will also increase monthly payments and costs for any consumer who is already paying interest on credit card debt.

"It's already been a really rough year with folks with credit card debt, and it's only going to get worse," said credit analyst Matt Schulz of LendingTree. "The immediacy of the increase is what's hard — that it affects not just future purchases but current balances."

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That said, Scott Hoyt, an analyst with Moody's Analytics, noted that household debt payments, as a proportion of income, remain relatively low, though they have risen lately. So even as borrowing rates steadily rise, many households might not feel a much heavier debt burden immediately.

HOW WILL THIS AFFECT CREDIT CARD RATES?

Even before the Fed's latest move, credit card borrowing rates had reached their highest level since 1996, according to Bankrate.com, and these will likely continue to rise.

There are also signs that Americans are increasingly relying on credit cards to help maintain their spending. Total credit card balances have topped \$900 billion, according to the Fed, a record high, though that amount isn't adjusted for inflation.

"Right now, most people may have jobs and rising incomes, but they're looking to the horizon and seeing storm clouds start to build," said Nationwide Senior Economist Ben Ayers. "It's really an inflection point for the economy."

As rates have risen, zero percent loans marketed as "Buy Now, Pay Later" have become popular with consumers. But longer-term loans of more than four payments that these companies offer are subject to the same increased borrowing rates as credit cards.

For those who don't qualify for low-rate credit cards because of weak credit scores, the higher interest rates are already affecting their balances.

John Leer, chief economist at Morning Consult, a survey research firm, said its polling suggests that more Americans are spending down the savings they accumulated during the pandemic and are using credit instead. Eventually, rising rates could make it harder for those households to pay off their debts.

For those who have home equity lines of credit or other variable-interest debt, rates will increase by roughly the same amount as the Fed hike, usually within one or two billing cycles. That's because those rates are based in part on banks' prime rate, which follow the Fed's.

HOW ARE SAVERS AFFECTED?

The rising returns on high-yield savings accounts and certificates of deposit (CDs) have put them at levels not seen since 2009, which means that households may want to boost savings if possible. You can also now earn more on bonds and other fixed-income investments.

Though savings, CDs, and money market accounts don't typically track the Fed's changes, online banks and others that offer high-yield savings accounts can be exceptions. These institutions typically compete aggressively for depositors. (The catch: They sometimes require significantly high deposits.)

In general, banks tend to capitalize on a higher-rate environment to boost their profits by imposing higher rates on borrowers, without necessarily offering juicier rates to savers.

WILL THIS AFFECT HOME OWNERSHIP?

Last week, mortgage buyer Freddie Mac reported that the average rate on the benchmark 30-year mortgage dipped to 6.13% from 6.15% the week prior. A year ago, the average rate was much lower: 3.55%. That means the rate on a typical home loan is still almost twice as expensive as it was a year ago.

Mortgage rates don't always move in tandem with the Fed's benchmark rate. They instead tend to track the yield on the 10-year Treasury note.

Sales of existing homes have declined for 11 straight months as borrowing costs have become too high a hurdle for many Americans who are already paying much more for food, gas and other necessities.

WILL IT BE EASIER TO FIND A HOUSE IF I'M STILL LOOKING TO BUY?

If you're financially able to proceed with a home purchase, you're likely to have more options now.

WHAT IF I WANT TO BUY A CAR?

With shortages of computer chips and other parts easing, automakers are producing more vehicles. Many are even reducing prices or offering limited discounts. But rising loan rates and lower used-vehicle trade-in values have erased much of the savings on monthly payments.

"With the interest that you're going to pay, those payments might not look too dissimilar to what they were a few months ago," said Ivan Drury, director of insights for Edmunds.com. "It's like every single time we hear one piece of good news, it's being offset by pieces of bad news."

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Since the Fed began raising rates in March, the average new vehicle loan has jumped from 4.5% to 6.9%, according to Edmunds data. Used vehicle loans are up 2.5 percentage points to 10.6%. Loan durations are averaging roughly 70 months — nearly six years — for both new and used vehicles.

Edmunds says that since March, monthly payments have risen by an average of \$71 to \$728 for new vehicles. For used vehicles, it's up just \$3 a month to \$546.

Financing a new vehicle, with an average price of \$48,516 as of December, now costs \$8,769 in interest, Drury said. That's enough to chase many out of the auto market.

Any Fed rate increase is typically passed through to auto borrowers, though it will be slightly offset by subsidized rates from manufacturers.

HOW HAVE THE RATE HIKES INFLUENCED CRYPTO?

Cryptocurrencies like bitcoin have dropped in value since the Fed began raising rates. So have many previously high-valued technology stocks.

Higher rates mean that safe assets like Treasuries become more attractive to investors because their yields have increased. That makes risky assets like technology stocks and cryptocurrencies less attractive.

Still, bitcoin continues to suffer from problems separate from economic policy. Three major crypto firms have failed, most recently the high-profile FTX exchange, shaking the confidence of crypto investors.

WHAT ABOUT MY JOB?

The nation's employers kept hiring in December, adding a healthy 223,000 jobs. The unemployment rate fell from 3.6% to 3.5%, matching a 53-year low. At the same time, the jobs gain was the smallest in two months, suggesting a slowdown, with pay growth also easing.

"Things are moderating and slowing down, but the labor market is still relatively strong," said Nick Bunker, Economic Research Director at hiring site Indeed. "One of the reasons the Fed continues to raise rates is that it thinks the labor market is too strong."

Some economists argue that layoffs could slow rising prices, and that a tight labor market fuels wage growth and higher inflation.

While layoffs are now historically low, there's also the possibility there will simply be fewer job openings in coming months.

"I think a lot of the hikes are behind us," Bunker said. "But there's the potential the labor market is going to deteriorate for some people, so people should be alert to a continued slowdown."

WILL THIS AFFECT STUDENT LOANS?

Borrowers who take out new private student loans should prepare to pay more as rates increase. The current range for federal loans is between about 5% and 7.5%.

That said, payments on federal student loans are suspended with zero interest until summer 2023 as part of an emergency measure put in place early in the pandemic. President Joe Biden has also announced some loan forgiveness, of up to \$10,000 for most borrowers, and up to \$20,000 for Pell Grant recipients — a policy that's now being challenged in the courts.

IS THERE A CHANCE THE RATE HIKES WILL BE REVERSED?

It looks increasingly unlikely that rates will come down anytime soon.

"We're expecting inflation will still be too hot for the Fed even by the end of the year," said Nationwide's Ayers. "We predict it won't be until next year that they begin to lower rates."

US, Philippines agree to larger American military presence

By JIM GOMEZ Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — The United States and the Philippines on Thursday announced plans to expand America's military presence in the Southeast Asian nation, with access to four more bases as they seek to deter China's increasingly aggressive actions toward Taiwan and in the disputed South China Sea.

The agreement was reached as U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was in the country for talks about deploying U.S. forces and weapons in more Philippine military camps.

In a joint announcement by the Philippines and the U.S., the two said they had decided to accelerate the full implementation of their so-called Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, which aims to support

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combined training, exercises and interoperability.

As part of the agreement, the U.S. has allocated \$82 million toward infrastructure improvements at five current EDCA sites, and expand its military presence to four new sites in "strategic areas of the country," according to the statement.

Austin arrived in the Philippines on Tuesday from South Korea, where he said the U.S. would increase its deployment of advanced weapons such as fighter jets and bombers to the Korean Peninsula to bolster joint training with South Korean forces in response to North Korea's growing nuclear threat.

In the Philippines, Washington's oldest treaty ally in Asia and a key front in the U.S. battle against terrorism, Austin visited southern Zamboanga city and met Filipino generals and a small contingent of U.S. counterterrorism forces based in a local military camp, regional Philippine military commander Lt. Gen. Roy Galido said. The more than 100 U.S. military personnel have provided intelligence and combat advice for years to Filipino troops battling a decades-long Muslim insurgency, which has considerably eased but remains a key threat.

More recently, U.S. forces have intensified and broadened joint training focusing on combat readiness and disaster response with Filipino troops on the nation's western coast, which faces the South China Sea, and in its northern Luzon region across the sea from the Taiwan Strait.

American forces were granted access to five Philippine military camps, where they could rotate indefinitely under the 2014 EDCA defense pact.

In October, the U.S. sought access for a larger number of its forces and weapons in an additional five military camps, mostly in the north. That request would be high on the agenda in Austin's meetings, according to Philippine officials.

"The visit of Secretary Austin definitely, obviously will have to do with many of the ongoing discussions on the EDCA sites," Philippine Ambassador to Washington Jose Romualdez said at a news briefing.

Austin was scheduled to hold talks Thursday with his Philippine counterpart, Carlito Galvez Jr., and National Security Adviser Eduardo Ano, Romualdez said. Austin will separately call on President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who took office in June and has since taken steps to boost relations with Washington.

The U.S. defense chief is the latest senior official to visit the Philippines after Vice President Kamala Harris in November in a sign of warming ties after a strained period under Marcos's predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte.

Duterte had nurtured cozy ties with China and Russia and at one point threatened to sever ties with Washington, kick visiting American forces out and abrogate a major defense pact.

Romualdez said the Philippines needed to cooperate with Washington to deter any escalation of tensions between China and self-ruled Taiwan — not only because of the treaty alliance but to help prevent a major conflict.

"We're in a Catch-22 situation. If China makes a move on Taiwan militarily, we'll be affected — and all ASEAN region, but mostly us, Japan and South Korea," Romualdez told The Associated Press, referring to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the 10-nation regional bloc that includes the Philippines.

The Philippines and ASEAN members Brunei, Malaysia and Vietnam, along with Taiwan, have been locked in increasingly tense territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. The U.S. has been regarded as a crucial counterweight to China in the region and has pledged to come to the defense of the Philippines if Filipino forces, ships or aircraft come under attack in the contested waters.

The Philippines used to host two of the largest U.S. Navy and Air Force bases outside the American mainland. The bases were shut down in the early 1990s after the Philippine Senate rejected an extension, but American forces returned for large-scale combat exercises with Filipino troops under a 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement.

The Philippine Constitution prohibits the permanent basing of foreign troops and their involvement in local combat.

Hunter Biden seeks federal probe of Trump allies over laptop

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A lawyer for President Joe Biden's son, Hunter, asked the Justice Department in

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a letter Wednesday to investigate close allies of former President Donald Trump and others who accessed and disseminated personal data from a laptop that a computer repair shop owner says was dropped off at his Delaware store in 2019.

In a separate letter, Hunter Biden's attorneys also asked Fox News host Tucker Carlson to retract and apologize for what they say are false and defamatory claims made repeatedly about him on-air, including implying without evidence that he had unauthorized access to classified documents found at his father's home.

The request for a criminal inquiry, which comes as Hunter Biden faces his own tax evasion investigation by the Justice Department, does not mean federal prosecutors will open a probe or take any other action. But it nonetheless represents a concerted shift in strategy and a rare public response by the younger Biden and his legal team to years of attacks by Republican officials and conservative media, scrutiny expected to continue now that the GOP has taken over the House.

It also represents the latest salvo in the long-running laptop saga, which began with a New York Post story in October 2020 that detailed some of the emails it says were found on the device related to Hunter Biden's foreign business dealings. It was swiftly seized on by Trump as a campaign issue during the presidential election that year.

The letter, signed by prominent Washington attorney Abbe Lowell, seeks an investigation into, among others, former Trump strategist Steve Bannon, Trump's longtime lawyer Rudy Giuliani, Giuliani's own attorney and the Wilmington computer repair shop owner, John Paul Mac Isaac, who has said Hunter Biden dropped a laptop off at his store in April 2019 and never returned to pick it up.

The letter cites passages from Mac Isaac's book in which he admitted reviewing private and sensitive material from Biden's laptop, including a file titled "income.pdf." It notes that Mac Isaac sent a copy of the laptop data to Giuliani's lawyer, Robert Costello, who in turn shared it with Giuliani, a close ally of Trump's who at the time was pushing discredited theories about the younger Biden.

Giuliani provided the information to a reporter at the New York Post, which first wrote about the laptop, and also to Bannon, according to the letter. Hunter Biden never consented to any of his personal information being accessed or shared in that manner, his lawyer says.

"This failed dirty political trick directly resulted in the exposure, exploitation, and manipulation of Mr. Biden's private and personal information," the letter says, adding, "Politicians and the news media have used this unlawfully accessed, copied, distributed, and manipulated data to distort the truth and cause harm to Mr. Biden."

Mac Isaac declined to comment when reached by The Associated Press on Wednesday evening. Costello, asked to comment on behalf of him and Giuliani, called the letter "a frivolous legal document" and said it "reeks of desperation because they know judgment day is coming for the Bidens."

A lawyer who represented Bannon at a trial in Washington, D.C., last year did not immediately return a call seeking comment. A Fox News representative had no immediate comment.

The letter to the Justice Department was addressed to its top national security official, Matthew Olsen. It cites possible violations of statutes prohibiting the unauthorized access of a computer or stored electronic communication, as well as the transport of stolen data across state lines and the publication of restricted personal data with the intent to intimidate or threaten.

It also asks prosecutors to investigate whether any of the data was manipulated or tampered with in any way.

"The actions described above more than merit a full investigation and, depending on the resulting facts, may merit prosecution under various statutes. It is not a common thing for a private person and his counsel to seek someone else being investigated, but the actions and motives here require it," Lowell wrote in the letter.

A Justice Department spokesperson declined to comment.

Separate letters requesting investigations were also sent to the Delaware state attorney general's office and to the Internal Revenue Service. Spokespeople there did not immediately return emails seeking

comment.

Police: Oregon kidnap suspect killed 2 men before cornered

By ANDREW SELSKY undefined

SALEM, Ore. (AP) — The suspect in a violent kidnapping in Oregon — a man who spent little time behind bars for a similar crime in Nevada — killed two men before being cornered by officers and fatally shooting himself, police said Wednesday.

Benjamin Obadiah Foster, 36, died at a hospital Tuesday night, hours after he shot himself while hiding in a crawlspace underneath a house in Grants Pass. In a news conference the next day, law enforcement officers revealed details on the intensive manhunt for Foster, including finding the bodies of the two men in a rural area north of Grants Pass.

Richard Lee Barron Jr., and Donald Owen Griffith were killed sometime between Monday afternoon and Tuesday morning, Oregon State Police Capt. Kyle Kennedy said.

The men lived together in the unincorporated community of Sunny Valley and apparently did not know Foster, who police said left a gruesome scene and stole some of the victims' belongings, including their dog.

He had been the subject of a manhunt after a woman was found unconscious, bound and near death in a house in Grants Pass on Jan. 24. Authorities say Foster tortured the woman, who remained hospitalized in critical condition on Wednesday.

Foster was seen walking a dog Tuesday in Grants Pass, according to police.

Authorities converged on the neighborhood with rifles and at least one armored vehicle and searched the house where they had found the woman the previous week. Officers didn't initially find anyone, but then they sent a sheriff's department robot into the crawlspace and found signs Foster was hiding there. His presence was confirmed by a camera, Grants Pass Police Chief Warren Hensman said.

The officers expected a gunfight, but instead Foster shot himself in the head, according to Hensman. Foster was said to be unconscious and still holding a .45-caliber pistol while wedged under the house, and officers had to remove floorboards to extract him.

The fugitive had narrowly eluded a raid last Thursday in the unincorporated community of Wolf Creek, and police warned the public the next day that he was using dating apps to find people who could help him avoid authorities or to find new victims.

Foster then was seen Tuesday in the same neighborhood where the woman was found. He barricaded himself under the same house as police arrived in full force. Foster then shot himself, was taken into custody and died at a hospital, police said.

In 2019, before moving to Oregon, Foster held his then-girlfriend captive inside her Las Vegas apartment for two weeks. He reached a deal with Clark County prosecutors in August 2021 that allowed him to plead guilty to one felony count of battery and a misdemeanor count of battery constituting domestic violence.

A judge sentenced Foster to between one and 2 1/2 years in a Nevada prison. After factoring in the 729 days he had spent in jail awaiting trial, Foster could have been made to serve almost 200 additional days under the maximum sentence. Instead, he was released the day he was brought to prison, according to Nevada corrections department officials.

Hensman said last week that it was "extremely troubling" that Foster wound up being sought for attempted murder in Oregon instead of doing time in Nevada.

The attack on the woman and ensuing search by local, state and federal agents has rattled residents of Grants Pass, a town of some 40,000 in southwest Oregon.

Biden, McCarthy meet face-to-face on debt crisis worries

By LISA MASCARO and SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and House Speaker Kevin McCarthy met face-to-face Wednesday for more than an hour of highly anticipated budget talks — "a good first meeting," the new Republican leader said — but expectations were low for quick progress as GOP lawmakers push for steep cuts in a

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deal to prevent a national debt limit crisis.

Biden has resisted direct spending negotiations linked to vital action raising the nation's legal debt ceiling, warning against potentially throwing the economy into chaos.

McCarthy had all but invited himself to the White House to start the conversation before a summer debt deadline. And he emerged saying the meeting went better than expected: The two agreed to meet again, and the speaker said he expected to hear from Biden soon.

"No agreement, no promises except we will continue this conversation," McCarthy told reporters outside the White House.

He said he told the president he would not raise the debt ceiling without concessions from Democrats.

"I was very clear," he said. "We're not spending more next year than we spent this year."

And Biden's response? McCarthy said the president insisted on a "clean debt ceiling" vote without the budget cuts Republicans are demanding.

"We both have different perspectives on this, but I thought this was a good meeting," McCarthy said.

The White House said the president and the speaker agreed to continue the conversation. The president made clear that it is their "shared duty" to not allow a "catastrophic default," the White House said.

The House speaker arrived for the afternoon session carrying no formal GOP budget proposal, but he is laden with the promises he made to far-right and other conservative Republican lawmakers during his difficult campaign to become House speaker. He vowed then to work to return federal spending to 2022 levels — an 8% reduction. He also promised to take steps to balance the budget within the decade — an ambitious, if politically unattainable goal.

McCarthy said he told the president, "I would like to see if we can come to an agreement long before the deadline."

The political and economic stakes are high for both leaders, who have a cordial relationship, and for the nation as they work to prevent a debt default.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen notified Congress last month that the government was reaching the limit of its borrowing capacity, \$31 trillion, with congressional approval needed to raise the ceiling to allow more debt to pay off the nation's already accrued bills. While Yellen was able to launch "extraordinary measures" to cover the bills temporarily, that funding is to run out in June.

"Everyone is asking the same question of Speaker McCarthy: Show us your plan. Where is your plan, Republicans?" said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., ahead of the meeting.

"For days, Speaker McCarthy has heralded this sitdown as some kind of major win in his debt ceiling talks," Schumer said. But he added, "Speaker McCarthy showing up at the White House without a plan is like sitting down at the table without cards in your hand."

Raising the debt ceiling is a once-routine vote in Congress that has taken on oversized significance over the past decade as the nation's debt toll mounts. Newly empowered in the majority, House Republicans want to force Biden and Senate Democrats into budget cuts as part of a deal to raise the limit.

Ahead of the White House meeting, House Republicans met in private to discuss policies. And McCarthy met with Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell on Tuesday at the Capitol.

McConnell has a history of dealmaking with Biden during the last debt ceiling showdown a decade ago. But the GOP leader of the Senate, in the minority party, says it's up to McCarthy and the president to come up with a deal that would be acceptable to the new House majority.

Still, McConnell is doing his part to influence the process from afar, and nudging Biden to negotiate.

"The president of the United States does not get to walk away from the table," McConnell said in Senate remarks.

Slashing the federal budget is often easier said than done, as past budget deals have shown.

After a 2011 debt ceiling standoff during the Obama era, Republicans and Democrats agreed to across-the-board federal budget caps on domestic and defense spending that were supposed to be in place for 10 years but ultimately proved too much to bear.

After initial cuts, both parties agreed in subsequent years to alter the budget caps to protect priority

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programs. The caps recently expired anyway, and last year Congress agreed to a \$1.7 trillion federal spending bill that sparked new outrage among fiscal hawks.

McCarthy reiterated that he would not be proposing any reductions to the Social Security and Medicare programs that are primarily for older Americans. But other Republicans want cuts to those as part of overall belt-tightening.

Such mainstay programs, along with the Medicaid health care system, make up the bulk of federal spending and are politically difficult to cut, particularly with a growing population of those in need of services in congressional districts nationwide.

Agreeing on the size and scope of the GOP's proposed cuts will be a tall order for McCarthy as he struggles to build consensus within his narrow House Republican majority and bridge the divide between his conservative and far-right wings of the party.

McCarthy told reporters he's not counting on Republican support alone and wants Democratic help to pass a deal in Congress. But relying on a bipartisan approach could bring a revolt from McCarthy's hard-right flank of lawmakers who can threaten to oust him from his speakership.

After Wednesday morning's closed-door House GOP briefing, several Republican lawmakers insisted they would not allow the negotiations to spiral into a debt crisis.

"Obviously, we don't want to default on our debt. We're not going to," said Rep. Warren Davidson, R-Ohio. "But we are going to have to have a discussion about the trajectory that we're on. Everyone knows that it's not sustainable."

Rep. Kevin Hern of Oklahoma, chairman of the Republican Study Committee, held a separate briefing for his group, whose 175 or so members make up most of the House GOP majority.

Hern sent a letter to McCarthy outlining their principles for budget cuts ahead of the White House meeting.

The federal budget's non-mandatory programs, in defense and domestic accounts, have also proven tough to trim.

Russia said eyeing eastern Ukraine push; Kyiv targets graft

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia is mustering its military might in the Luhansk region of Ukraine, officials said Wednesday, in what Kyiv suspects is preparation for an offensive as the first anniversary of Moscow's invasion approaches.

Also Wednesday, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government continued its crackdown on alleged corruption with the dismissal of several high-ranking officials, prominent lawmaker David Arakhamia said.

Zelenskyy was elected in 2019 on an anti-establishment and anti-corruption platform in a country long gripped by graft. The latest allegations come as Western allies are channeling billions of dollars to help Kyiv fight Moscow and as the Ukrainian government is introducing reforms so it can potentially join the European Union one day.

Ukraine's Security Service said on the Telegram messaging app that an operation on Wednesday targeted "corrupt officials who undermine the country's economy and the stable functioning of the defense-industrial complex." It identified one as a former Defense Ministry official accused of embezzling state funds through the purchase of nearly 3,000 bulletproof vests that would inadequately protect Ukrainian soldiers.

Summing up the day's focus on fighting corruption, Zelenskyy declared in his nightly video address Wednesday: "We will not allow anyone to weaken our state."

On the battlefield, a Russian missile destroyed an apartment building and damaged seven others in the eastern Donetsk provincial city of Kramatorsk late Wednesday, killing at least three people and wounding at least 20, police said. Rescuers were searching the rubble for other victims. Russia has frequently attacked apartment buildings during the war, causing civilian casualties, although the Kremlin often denies such reports.

Zelenskyy used the attack to press again for more Western weapons: "No goal other than terror," he said on Facebook. "The only way to stop Russian terrorism is to defeat it. By tanks. Fighter jets. Long-

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range missiles.”

Elsewhere, the Kremlin’s forces were expelling residents near the Russian-held parts of the front line so they can’t tell Ukrainian artillery forces about Russian troop deployments, Luhansk Gov. Serhiy Haidai said.

“There is an active transfer of (Russian troops) to the region and they are definitely preparing for something on the eastern front in February,” Haidai said.

The Institute for the Study of War predicted “an imminent Russian offensive in the coming months.” Some predict it will coincide with the invasion anniversary on Feb. 24.

The General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine reported Wednesday that Russia was also concentrating in neighboring Donetsk province, especially in its bid to capture the key city of Bakhmut.

Donetsk and Luhansk provinces make up the Donbas, an industrial region bordering Russia that President Vladimir Putin identified as a goal for takeover from the war’s outset and where Moscow-backed separatists have fought Ukrainian forces since 2014.

Russian shelling of Bakhmut, from which most residents have fled while others shelter in cellars, killed at least five civilians and wounded 10 on Tuesday, Ukraine’s presidential office said.

Donetsk Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko posted images of the shelling aftermath, showing huge black holes in residential buildings in the embattled city, reporting that Russia is deploying more troops.

Donetsk was one of four provinces that Russia illegally annexed in the fall, but controls only about half of it. To take the remaining half, Russian forces have no choice but to go through Bakhmut, the only approach to bigger Ukrainian-held cities. Russian forces have been trying for months to capture Bakhmut.

Moscow-installed authorities in Donetsk claimed Russian troops are “closing the ring” around the city. But the Wagner Group, a Kremlin-controlled paramilitary group headed by businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, on Wednesday denied that Bakhmut was encircled. “When the city is taken, you will certainly know about it,” Prigozhin said in an online post.

Ukraine is keen to secure more Western military aid to fend off much larger Russian forces. It has already won pledges of tanks and now wants more.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described media reports about planned new U.S. military assistance to Ukraine as “a direct path to inciting tensions and taking the escalation to a new level.”

“It will require additional efforts on our part, but it won’t change the course of events,” he told reporters.

In other developments Wednesday:

—David Arakhamia, the head of a parliamentary faction, said several senior officials were targeted in the government’s anti-corruption drive. Among those dismissed were Yuri Sotnik, First Deputy Chairman of the State Forest Agency; Alexander Shchutsky, First Deputy Chairman of the State Customs Service; and Andrei Lordkipanidze, Deputy Chairman of the State Service for Food Safety and Consumer Protection, Arakhamia said. In addition, the deputy head of the customs service, Ruslan Cherkassky, has been suspended, according to Arakhamia.

The Security Service of Ukraine said two customs officials in northern Ukraine were placed under house arrest on accusations that they helped illegally import ambulances without paying customs fees. A third target was the former management of oil producing company Ukrnafta and refiner Ukrtatnafta. They were accused of tax evasion and “legalization of funds obtained through criminal means,” the Security Service said.

Ukrainian media reported that high-profile anti-corruption raids targeted oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky and former interior minister Arsen Avakov.

—Ukraine’s anti-corruption drive is expected to be on the agenda when the European Union’s two top officials, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Council President Charles Michel, meet with Zelenskyy on Friday. Ukraine’s long road toward potential membership of the EU will be a key issue under discussion, with stamping out corruption a key condition.

—Authorities in Russia’s western Bryansk province, which borders Ukraine, reported power outages after a Ukrainian rocket allegedly fell near an oil pumping station. No one was reported hurt. Putin met with officials to discuss alleviating damage from such cross-border attacks. Gov. Alexander Bogomaz told

Putin that in the Bryansk region, Ukrainian shelling has killed four people, wounded 22 and damaged 235 houses since the conflict started. Kursk Gov. Roman Starovoit said 23 apartment buildings and 379 private houses in his region have been damaged. Putin said "the priority task is to liquidate the possibility of shelling," repair damaged buildings and infrastructure, and compensate residents. Ukrainian officials have kept mum about most cross-border attacks, but emphasized their right to strike Russian territory.

—At a news conference in Kyiv with Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen, Zelenskyy condemned Austrian businesses, which "do not leave Russia and continue to support the terrorist state." He mentioned Raiffeisen Bank, which he said not only pays taxes but announced a tax holiday for mobilized Russian troops. "This is unacceptable in today's realities," Ukraine's president said. The bank didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. Austrian media quoted Raiffeisen Bank as saying it's required under Russian law to provide the tax holiday.

First sweeping federal gun crime report in 20 years released

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The most expansive federal report in over two decades on guns and crime shows a shrinking turnaround between the time a gun was purchased and when it was recovered from a crime scene, indicating firearms bought legally are more quickly being used in crimes around the country.

It also documents a spike in the use of conversion devices that make a semiautomatic gun fire like a machine gun, along with the growing seizure of so-called ghost guns, privately made firearms that are hard to trace.

The report comes as the nation grapples with a rise in violent crime, particularly from guns.

Much of the data from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives report hasn't been widely available before, and its release is aimed at helping police and policy makers reduce gun violence, said Director Steve Dettelbach. "Information is power," he said.

The report shows 54% of guns that police recovered in crime scenes in 2021 had been purchased within three years, a double-digit increase since 2019. The quicker turnaround can indicate illegal gun trafficking or a straw purchase — when someone who can legally purchase a gun buys one to sell it to someone who can't legally possess guns. The increase was driven largely by guns bought less than a year before, it said.

The number of new guns overall in the U.S. grew significantly during that time as gun sales shattered records during the coronavirus pandemic.

Most guns used in crimes changed hands since their purchase, the report states. It also found what Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco called an epidemic of stolen guns: more than 1.07 million firearms were reported stolen between 2017 and 2021. Almost all of those, 96%, were from private individuals.

Meanwhile, the report also documents a more than five-fold increase in the number of devices that convert a legal semi-automatic weapon into an illegal fully automatic one. Between 2012 and 2016, the ATF retrieved 814 of those, but that number jumped to 5,414 during the five-year period documented in the report.

A conversion device was used in a mass shooting that left six people dead and 12 wounded in Sacramento last April in what officers described as a shootout between rival gangs.

The document also traces the rise of "ghost guns," privately made firearms without serial numbers that have increasingly been turning up at crime scenes around the nation.

The ATF traced more than 19,000 privately made firearms in 2021, more than double the year before. That jump is the result in part of the agency encouraging police to send it the weapons so they can be traced, even though they typically haven't yielded as much information as typical firearms. The weapons do have unique ballistics and other characteristics that can be useful to investigators.

The report came after Attorney General Merrick Garland told the ATF to produce the first comprehensive study of criminal gun trafficking in more than 20 years.

Lawsuit can proceed against Kenosha shooter Kyle Rittenhouse

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By SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — A federal judge in Wisconsin ruled Wednesday that a wrongful death lawsuit filed by the father of a man shot and killed by Kyle Rittenhouse during a protest in 2020 can proceed against Rittenhouse, police officers and others.

The father of Anthony Huber, one of two men shot and killed by Rittenhouse, filed the lawsuit in 2021, accusing officers of allowing for a dangerous situation that violated his son's constitutional rights and resulted in his death. Anthony Huber's father, John Huber, also alleged that Rittenhouse, who was 17 at the time of the shootings, conspired with law enforcement to cause harm to protestors. John Huber is seeking unspecified damages from city officials, officers and Rittenhouse.

U.S. District Judge Lynn Adelman on Wednesday dismissed motions filed by Rittenhouse and the government defendants seeking to dismiss the civil rights lawsuit.

In allowing the case against Rittenhouse and the others to proceed, the judge said that Anthony Huber's death "could plausibly be regarded as having been proximately caused by the actions of the governmental defendants."

Rittenhouse attorney Shane Martin said in a phone interview that it's important to note the ruling doesn't address the merits of the case, it only allows it to proceed to the next phase.

"While we respect the judge's decision, we do not believe there is any evidence of a conspiracy and we are confident, just as a Kenosha jury found, Kyle's actions that evening were not wrongful and were undertaken in self defense," Martin said.

Attorneys and private investigators for John Huber spent over 100 hours trying to locate Rittenhouse, tracking down addresses in seven states before they found the home of his mother and sister in Florida. The lawsuit was served on Rittenhouse's sister, who said that he wasn't home. Adelman said that was sufficient to qualify as being served.

Rittenhouse had argued that the case against him should be dismissed because he wasn't properly served with the lawsuit. Adelman dismissed that, saying that Rittenhouse "is almost certainly evading service."

"Rittenhouse has been deliberately cagey about his whereabouts," Adelman wrote. "Although he denies living in Florida, he does not identify the place that he deems to be his residence."

Attorneys for the law enforcement and government officials being sued did not immediately return emailed messages seeking comment.

The ruling puts Anthony Huber's family "one step closer to justice for their son's needless death," said Anand Swaminathan, one of the attorneys for parents John Huber and Karen Bloom.

"The Kenosha officials that created a powder keg situation by their actions tried to claim that they cannot be held accountable for their unconstitutional conduct; that argument was soundly rejected today," Swaminathan said in a statement.

Rittenhouse was charged with homicide, attempted homicide and reckless endangering for killing Anthony Huber and Joseph Rosenbaum and wounding a third person with an AR-style semi-automatic rifle in the summer of 2020 during a tumultuous night of protests over the shooting of a Black man, Jacob Blake, by a white Kenosha police officer.

Rittenhouse was acquitted of all charges in November 2021 after testifying he acted in self-defense. Rittenhouse's actions became a flashpoint in the debate over guns, vigilantism and racial injustice in the U.S.

Rittenhouse went to Kenosha from his home in nearby Antioch, Illinois, after businesses were ransacked and burned in the nights that followed Blake's shooting. He joined other armed civilians on the streets, carrying a weapon authorities said was illegally purchased for him because he was underage.

Rittenhouse first killed Rosenbaum, 36, in the parking lot of an auto dealership and as Rittenhouse ran from the scene he stumbled and fell. Anthony Huber, 26, struck Rittenhouse with his skateboard and tried to disarm him. Rittenhouse fell to the ground and shot Anthony Huber to death and wounded demonstrator Gaije Grosskreutz, 27.

This case is one of several ongoing civil lawsuits filed in the wake of the shootings. Grosskreutz last year filed a similar lawsuit against Rittenhouse.

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Rittenhouse has maintained a high public profile, particularly on social media, where he is an outspoken advocate for gun rights. He has nearly 1 million followers on Twitter and has spoken at conservative gatherings.

FBI searches Biden's vacation home; no classified documents

By ERIC TUCKER, COLLEEN LONG and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The FBI searched President Joe Biden's vacation home in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, on Wednesday without turning up any classified documents, the latest turn in an extraordinary series of searches of his and his predecessor's properties.

Agents did take some handwritten notes and other materials relating to Biden's time as vice president for review, just as they had when they searched his Wilmington home last month where they also found classified items. Investigators searched his former office at a Washington think tank that bears his name in November, but it isn't clear whether they took anything.

The Biden searches, conducted with his blessing, have come as investigators work to determine how classified information from his time as a senator and vice president came to wind up in his home and former office — and whether any mishandling involved criminal intent or was merely a mistake in a city where unauthorized treatment of classified documents is not unheard-of.

Law enforcement searches of property are a routine part of criminal probes, but there is nothing ordinary about the FBI scouring a sitting president's home, even as Biden and his aides have sought to contrast his actions with those of his predecessor.

Former President Donald Trump is facing a special counsel criminal investigation into his retention of several hundred classified documents and other government records at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida — and his resistance to giving them up, which led to an FBI warrant and search to seize them last August.

On Wednesday, Biden's personal attorney Bob Bauer said FBI agents authorized by the Department of Justice spent three and a half hours searching the president's beach home and that "no documents with classified markings were found."

In a statement disclosing the search, Bauer sought to portray Biden and his team as fully transparent and cooperative. He described the search as "planned" and "a further step in a thorough and timely DOJ process we will continue to fully support and facilitate."

He did not mention Trump by name, but the statement seemed aimed at juxtaposing the Biden investigation with the Trump case, where months of fruitless Justice Department efforts to recover all the classified records taken to the former president's Florida estate culminated in the August search warrant and removal of nearly three dozen boxes of documents and other items.

Searches of Biden's former office and Delaware homes, by contrast, have all been done voluntarily and without a warrant. But the fact the FBI did its own search reflected the Justice Department's determination to retrieve any and all possible classified items rather than rely on assurances that such documents had been located.

Biden has said he was surprised by the initial trove discovered by his lawyers in November when they were cleaning out an office inside the Penn Biden Center.

The latest search follows the FBI's 13-hour, top-to-bottom check of his Wilmington, Delaware, home, where agents located documents with classified markings from his time as a vice president and senator and also took possession of some of his handwritten notes.

One week earlier, Biden's personal lawyers revealed that they had found a document bearing classified markings while searching the Wilmington property but said they had not found others during a separate inspection of the Rehoboth Beach home.

The White House did not disclose the Justice Department's investigation until last month, when it acknowledged the Nov. 2 discovery of a "small number" of classified documents by Biden lawyers as they closed an office at the Penn Biden Center, a think tank affiliated with the Ivy League school.

Though officials have not disclosed this, The Associated Press and other news organizations reported on

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Tuesday that the FBI had conducted a voluntary search of that office later in November.

The administration's public response has been delayed and incomplete. There are many unanswered questions - on what information the documents contained, exactly how many were discovered and why he had them in his possession, despite Biden's attorneys and the White House Counsel's insistence they are being as transparent as possible with the public.

"I think we've been pretty transparent from the very beginning," a spokesman for the White House Counsel's office, Ian Sams, said Wednesday. "We want to be careful to be very respectful of the integrity of that ongoing investigation."

Sams reiterated that Biden was working with Justice investigators.

"The president has been fully cooperative in offering unprecedented access to his home ... every single room of his home in Rehoboth as well as the one in Wilmington," he said.

The Justice Department declined comment on the Wednesday search.

Biden's lawyers have described the retention of the records as a "mistake." The Justice Department has historically brought criminal charges related to mishandling of classified records only when it can establish, among other things, that a person acted knowingly in improperly removing or storing sensitive records.

The Biden documents probe is being handled by a special counsel, Robert Hur, a former senior Justice Department official during the Trump administration who served as the top federal prosecutor in Baltimore. He is starting his work this week, inheriting a months-long investigation already undertaken by FBI agents and Justice Department prosecutors.

Attorney General Merrick Garland had assigned the U.S. attorney in Chicago, John Lausch, to conduct an initial review before announcing Hur's appointment last month.

In a separate effort that preceded the Biden probe, special counsel Jack Smith is investigating the retention by Trump of roughly 300 documents with classified markings that were taken from the White House to Mar-a-Lago. Agents last August obtained a search warrant to recover classified documents following what the Justice Department said were months of resistance by Trump and his representatives to return the records to the government.

Investigators in the Biden case have already conducted interviews, including of Biden's former executive assistant who helped oversee the packing of boxes that went to the Penn Biden Center. It is not yet clear if and when the Justice Department might look to question Biden himself.

The Bidens purchased their Rehoboth Beach home, which overlooks a state park adjacent to the beach, in June 2017, months after he left the vice presidency.

Review: 'Knock at the Cabin' twists the home invasion horror

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

Knock. Knock.

It being mid-winter (typically a doldrums in movie theaters), it's a cozy relief to be able to throw open the door and find M. Night Shyamalan standing there with his near-annual helping of high-concept thriller. His last one, "Old," about vacationers trapped on a private beach where aging is accelerated — a kind of high-speed "White Lotus" — fittingly arrived in the summer. But this quieter, gloomier time of year seems perfectly designed for Shyamalan to burst in with his signature brand of big-screen bonkers and some new twists to the age-old question of "Who's there?"

"Knock at the Cabin," which opens in theaters Friday, is at once like every previous Shyamalan film and a thrilling departure. Gimmicky set-up? Check. Queasy spiritualism? You bet. But as a self-contained, hand-somely staged thriller — after the knocking, the film takes place almost entirely within a remote cabin — Shyamalan's latest finds the filmmaker working in an appealingly straightforward and stripped-down fashion.

We have our cabin, our small cast of characters and, above all, our preposterous premise. Though Shyamalan's films often flirt with higher powers and existential conundrums, nothing reigns in his movie universe more than The Concept. And in the gripping "Knock at the Cabin," he carefully teases it, exploits it and dutifully follows it to its ultimate conclusion with the command of a seasoned professional.

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Just outside a cabin in a wooded forest, 7-year-old Gwen (Kristen Cui) is collecting grasshoppers in a glass jar. "I'm just going to learn about you for a while," she tells one as she slides it into the jar. Shyamalan, too, is gathering specimens into a hermetically sealed vessel for inquiry. One calmly walks right out of the woods. A hulking, bespectacled man (Dave Bautista) strides up to Gwen, politely introduces himself as Leonard and makes kindly chit chat while occasionally glancing back over his shoulder. Then he says the reason he's there makes him heartbroken. He describes it as "maybe the most important job in the history of the world."

Before you exclaim "Podiatry!" Leonard's job turns out to be a tad more sinister. He and three others, who soon also emerge from the forest, are there, as Leonard patiently lays out, to give Gwen's parents a choice that will dictate the fate of the world. After forcing their way into the cabin, Leonard — flanked by Sabrina (Nikki Amuka-Bird), Redmond (Rupert Grint) and Adriane (Abby Quinn) — informs Gwen's two dads, Eric (Jonathan Groff) and Andrew (Ben Aldridge) — that they must make a sacrifice to stave off global apocalypse. Each has come to the cabin after all-consuming visions — like warped versions of those that preoccupy the characters in "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" — of the doom that awaits if the family in this random cabin doesn't, within hours, kill one of themselves.

This isn't, like last year's "Barbarian," another chastening example of the dangers that lurk within the poorly chosen Airbnb, (though I, for one, will henceforth not be clicking "Shyamalanian allegory" in all future bookings). This is, like most of Shyamalan's schemes, a sincere metaphorical proposition. What's more important: Preserving one's family or the larger world?

There are, of course, reasons to be dubious of strangers who turn up in your vacation rental asking for blood to spare humanity. Are they delusional? Has this gay couple been targeted? Do their demands not sound a little like the nuttery of some of today's real-world attackers? Eric and Andrew sense the same kind of brutality that they've experienced all their lives as gay men. Flashbacks to their past, including moments of bliss and pain, suggest this lurid episode is part of a larger narrative of a loving family forged against a harsh world. "Always together" is the couple's mantra.

But the way the four intruders speak is at odds with that possibility. They seem genuinely concerned for the wellbeing of the family. They identify themselves as regular people, some with families of their own, who are reluctantly but necessarily carrying out a duty. They are making their own sacrifice, too. Bautista, in one of his finest performances, is more sweet than menacing, even while wielding a heavy weapon. Amuka-Bird, too, is an affectingly sensitive presence.

The performances, all around, are convincing, and Shyamalan arrestingly stages the intense standoff as blood begins to spill and calamities, seen on television, mount. The tale, adapted from Paul G. Tremblay's 2018 novel "The Cabin at the End of the World" with a notable tweak to the ending, cleverly inverts the home invasion thriller.

There are, undoubtedly, deeper avenues of exploration left unexamined. But there are also B-movie pleasures that deviate from horror convention, and even some of the director's own trademark sensibilities. Shyamalan doesn't pump up the violence, nor does he rely on plot twists to carry "Knock at the Cabin" along. Instead, the film works as a brutal, neatly distilled kind of morality play that toys with fatalism, family and climate change allegory. What most distinguishes Shyamalan's film is how it dares to consider whether some things are more important than family. In apocalyptic big screen spectacles, family is almost always the last and most abiding refuge. Here, it may be an impediment.

"Knock at the Cabin," a Universal Pictures release, is rated R by the Motion Picture Association for violence and language. Running time: 100 minutes. Three stars out of four.

Impassioned calls for police reform at Tyre Nichols' funeral

By AARON MORRISON and ADRIAN SAINZ Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — Tyre Nichols' family and friends remembered him with songs of faith and heartfelt tributes Wednesday, blending a celebration of his life with outraged calls for police reform after the brutal beating he endured at the hands of Memphis police.

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Nichols' mother, RowVaughn Wells, fought back tears as she spoke lovingly of her son.

"The only thing that's keeping me going is that I truly believe that my son was sent here on assignment from God. And I guess now his assignment is done. He's gone home," she said, urging Congress to pass police reform.

The Rev. Al Sharpton and Vice President Kamala Harris both delivered impassioned speeches calling on lawmakers to approve the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, a broad package of reforms that includes a national registry for police officers disciplined for misconduct, a ban on no-knock warrants and other measures.

Harris said the beating of Nichols, a 29-year-old Black man, by five Black police officers was a violent act that violated the stated mission of police to ensure public safety.

"It was not in the interest of keeping the public safe, because one must ask, was not it in the interest of keeping the public safe that Tyre Nichols would be with us today? Was he not also entitled to the right to be safe? So when we talk about public safety, let us understand what it means in its truest form. Tyre Nichols should have been safe," she said.

Nichols was beaten after police stopped him for an alleged traffic violation Jan. 7. Video released after pressure from Nichols' family shows officers holding him down and repeatedly punching, kicking and striking him with a baton as he screamed for his mother.

Sharpton said the officers who beat Nichols might have acted differently if there were real accountability for their actions. He also said he believes that if Nichols had been white, "you wouldn't have beat him like that."

"We understand that there are concerns about public safety. We understand that there are needs that deal with crime. But you don't fight crime by becoming criminals yourself. You don't stand up to thugs in the street becoming thugs yourself. You don't fight gangs by becoming five armed men against an unarmed man. That ain't the police. That's punks," he said.

Family of other Black men and women killed by police — including George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Botham Jean and Eric Garner — also attended the funeral and Nichols' mother called on officials to prevent more tragedies.

"We need to take some action because there should be no other child that should suffer the way my son — and all the other parents here have lost their children — we need to get that bill passed," Wells said. "Because if we don't, that blood — the next child that dies, that blood is going to be on their hands."

Tiffany Rachal, the mother of Jalen Randle, who was fatally shot by a Houston police officer in 2022, sang a rendition of the classic gospel standard "Total Praise" to rousing applause from the congregation and Nichols' family.

"All of the mothers all over the world need to come together, need to come together to stop all of this," Rachal said.

Civil rights attorney Ben Crump, who represents Nichols' family, referred to the graphic video showing the officers punching, kicking and beating Nichols, even after he lay helpless on the ground.

"Why couldn't they see the humanity in Tyre?" he asked.

Tyre's sister, Keyana Dixon, said she felt a pain like she had never experienced before "when those monsters murdered my baby brother." LaToya Yizar, whose mother was Nichols' godmother, read from a poem she wrote titled, "I'm Just Trying to Go Home," invoking Nichols' words to the officers.

Sharpton said he took his daughter Ashley early Wednesday to the site of the former Lorraine Motel, where the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot on April 4, 1968. He noted that King was in Memphis to support a strike by city sanitation workers, most of whom were Black.

"The reason why ... what happened to Tyre is so personal to me, is that five Black men that wouldn't have had a job in the police department, would not ever be thought of to be in an elite squad, in the city that Dr. King lost his life, not far away from that balcony, you beat a brother to death," Sharpton said.

Nichols, a skateboarder and amateur photographer who worked making boxes at FedEx, grew up in Sacramento, California, and loved the San Francisco 49ers. He came to Memphis just before the coronavirus pandemic and got stuck. But he was fine with it because he was with his mother, and they were incredibly

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close, she said. He even had her name tattooed on his arm.

Nichols made friends during morning visits to Starbucks and always greeted his mother and stepfather when he returned home with a sunny, "Hello, parents!" The baby of their family, Nichols had a 4-year-old son and worked hard to better himself as a father, his family said.

In the three weeks since Nichols' death, five police officers were fired and charged with murder. Their specialized unit was disbanded. Two more officers have been suspended. Two Memphis Fire Department emergency medical workers and a lieutenant were also fired. And more discipline could be coming.

Attorneys for two of the charged officers, Emmitt Martin III and Desmond Mills Jr., said they will plead not guilty. Blake Ballin, the lawyer for Mills, told AP that the videos "produced as many questions as they have answers."

Lawyers for the three other officers have not provided comment to the AP.

Nichols' death was the latest in a string of early accounts by police about their use of force that were later shown to have minimized or omitted mention of violent encounters.

Fed lifts rate by quarter-point but says inflation is easing

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve extended its fight against high inflation Wednesday by raising its key interest rate a quarter-point, its eighth hike since March. And the Fed signaled that even though inflation is easing, it remains high enough to require further rate hikes.

At the same time, Chair Jerome Powell said at a news conference that the Fed recognizes that the pace of inflation has cooled — a signal that it could be nearing the end of its rate increases. The stock and bond markets rallied during his news conference, suggesting that they anticipate a forthcoming pause in the Fed's credit tightening.

Throughout his remarks Wednesday, Powell sounded a dual message. He frequently acknowledged signs that high inflation is slowing.

"We can now say I think for the first time," he said, "that the disinflationary process has started."

Yet he also stressed that it was too soon to declare victory over the worst inflation bout in four decades: "We will need substantially more evidence to be confident that inflation is on a long, sustained downward path."

The Fed's rate increase Wednesday, though smaller than its half-point hike in December and the four three-quarter-point hikes before that, will likely further raise the costs of many consumer and business loans and the risk of a recession.

In a statement, Fed officials repeated language they've used before, that "ongoing increases in the (interest rate) target range will be appropriate." That is widely interpreted to mean they will raise their benchmark rate again when they next meet in March and perhaps in May as well.

The Fed chair said that so far, much of the inflation slowdown reflects the prices of goods, notably gas but also furniture, appliances and other finished products that have benefited from an unraveling of supply chain snarls.

But Powell reiterated his concern that prices for services — restaurant meals, health care, airline tickets and the like — are still surging. He has said he pays particular attention to services prices because they are labor-intensive. As a result, robust wage gains can keep services prices elevated and perpetuate high inflation.

The central bank's benchmark rate is now in a range of 4.5% to 4.75%, its highest level in 15 years. Powell appeared to suggest Wednesday that he foresees two additional quarter-point rate hikes:

"We're talking about a couple of more rate hikes to get to that level we think is appropriately restrictive," he said, referring to rates high enough to slow the economy.

Yet Wall Street investors have priced in only one more hike. Collectively, in fact, they expect the Fed to reverse course and actually cut rates by the end of this year. That optimism has helped drive stock prices up and bond yields down, easing credit and pushing in the opposite direction that the Fed would prefer.

Last summer, Powell took the opportunity in a high-profile speech in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to push

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back against market expectations of rate cuts anytime soon. His speech hammered home the Fed's intent to keep raising rates — even if it caused “pain” in the form of slower growth and higher unemployment.

On Wednesday, though, Powell declined an opportunity to defuse the market's buoyant expectations.

“Our focus,” he said, “is not on short-term moves but on sustained changes” in financial markets.

He noted instead that many financial gauges, like mortgage rates, are much higher than they were when the Fed began raising rates.

The divide between the central bank and financial markets is important because rate hikes need to work through markets to affect the economy. The Fed directly controls its key short-term rate. But it has only indirect control over borrowing rates that people and businesses actually pay — for mortgages, corporate bonds, auto loans and many others.

The consequences can be seen in housing. The average fixed rate on a 30-year mortgage soared after the Fed first began hiking rates. Eventually, it topped 7%, more than twice where it had stood before the hiking began.

Yet since the fall, the average mortgage rate has eased to 6.13%, the lowest level since September. And while home sales fell further in December, a measure of signed contracts to buy homes actually rose. That suggested that lower rates might be drawing some home buyers back to the market.

On Wednesday, Powell brushed aside any concern that the Fed will end up tightening credit too much and trigger a recession.

“I still think there is a path to getting inflation down to 2%,” the Fed's target level, “without a significant economic decline or significant increase in unemployment,” he said.

The U.S. inflation slowdown suggests that the Fed's rate hikes have started to achieve their goal. But inflation is still far above the central bank's 2% target. The risk is that with some sectors of the economy weakening, ever-higher borrowing costs could tip the economy into a downturn later this year.

Retail sales, for example, have fallen for two straight months, suggesting that consumers are becoming more cautious about spending. Manufacturing output has fallen for two months. On the other hand, the nation's job market — the most important pillar of the economy — remains strong, with the unemployment rate at a 53-year low at 3.5%.

The Fed's hike was announced a day after the government said pay and benefits for America's workers grew more slowly in the final three months of 2022, the third straight slowdown. Powell said the report was encouraging but reflected wage growth that was still too fast.

While higher pay is good for workers, businesses typically pass their increased labor costs on to their customers by charging higher prices, thereby perpetuating inflation pressures.

In December, overall inflation eased to 6.5% in December from a year earlier, down from a four-decade peak of 9.1% in June. The decline has been driven in part by cheaper gas, which has tumbled to \$3.50 a gallon, on average, nationwide, from \$5 in June.

In addition to the Fed, other major central banks are fighting high inflation with their own rate hikes. The European Central Bank is expected to raise its benchmark rate by a half-point when it meets Thursday. Inflation in Europe, though slowing, remains high, at 8.5% in January compared with a year earlier.

The Bank of England is forecast to lift its rate at a meeting Thursday as well. Inflation has reached 10.5% in the United Kingdom. The International Monetary Fund has forecast that the U.K. economy will likely enter recession this year.

US winter storm causes 3rd day of dangerous, icy conditions

By KEN MILLER and JEFF MARTIN Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — A deadly storm system lashed a large swath of the southern U.S. with bands of sleet and snow for a third day on Wednesday, grounding an additional 2,300 flights, leaving hundreds of thousands without power, forcing school closures and making already treacherous driving conditions worse.

Watches and warnings about wintry conditions were issued for an area stretching West Texas' border with Mexico through Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana, and into western Tennessee and northern Mis-

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Mississippi. Several rounds of mixed precipitation, including freezing rain and sleet, were in store for many areas throughout the day, meaning some places could get hit multiple times, forecasters said.

"It actually looks like it's going to be getting worse again across Texas, it is already a pretty big area of freezing rain across western and southwestern Texas," said Bob Oravec, a lead National Weather Service forecaster based in Camp Springs, Maryland.

Oravec said the icy weather is expected to move northeastward across parts of Oklahoma and Arkansas into western Tennessee and northern Mississippi before it starts to dissipate.

"By later in the day on Thursday it should be pretty much done, and all the ... precipitation will be well downstream across parts of the South and where it will be mostly heavy rain," Oravec said.

By late Wednesday morning, 2,300 U.S. flights had been canceled, including three-quarters of the flights at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport and more than two-thirds at Dallas Love Field, according to the flight tracking service FlightAware.com. Dallas-Fort Worth International is American Airlines' biggest hub, and Love Field is a major base for Southwest Airlines.

Many flights were also canceled at other airports, including in San Antonio, the Texas capital of Austin, and Nashville, Tennessee, compounding frustrations caused by the nearly 2,000 cancellations on Tuesday and roughly 1,100 on Monday.

Because of the storm, the Detroit Pistons were unable to fly home following their game Monday against the Dallas Mavericks, and the NBA postponed the Pistons' Wednesday night home game against the Washington Wizards.

Many schools throughout Arkansas have announced they would be closed on Thursday. School systems in Dallas; Austin, Texas; and Memphis, Tennessee, also canceled classes for Thursday.

In Texas, more than 350,000 customers were without power Wednesday afternoon as trees — heavy with ice — buckled onto power lines, according to PowerOutage, a website that tracks utility reports.

More than half of those outages were in Austin, where the city's utility warned residents who had been without electricity for 10 hours or longer that lights and heat may not come back on until Thursday. Overnight low temperatures were expected to fall to 33 degrees in Austin, with more chances for freezing rain, according to the National Weather Service. Austin Energy asked customers to prepare emergency plans and relocate before dusk if needed.

Pablo Vegas, who heads the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, vowed that the state's electrical grid and natural gas supply would be reliable and that there wouldn't be a repeat of the February 2021 blackouts, when the grid was on the brink of total failure.

As the ice and sleet enveloped Memphis, Tennessee, Memphis-Shelby County Schools announced it would cancel classes Wednesday due to freezing rain and hazardous road conditions. The school system serves about 100,000 students. The National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis also closed due to the weather.

Also in Memphis, the icy weather delayed the funeral service for Tyre Nichols, who died following a brutal beating by police during a traffic stop. But more icy weather was moving in from the southwest just ahead of the funeral, which was pushed back a few hours to Wednesday afternoon.

"The third and FINAL round of freezing rain and/or sleet will start this afternoon," the National Weather Service's Memphis office posted on social media Wednesday morning. The leading edge of a wintry mix of precipitation was about 25 miles (40 kilometers) south of Memphis late Wednesday morning, radar showed.

The Dallas school district, which serves about 145,000 students, also canceled classes Wednesday.

Emergency responders rushed to hundreds of auto collisions across Texas on Tuesday and Republican Gov. Greg Abbott urged people not to drive. At least six people have died on slick Texas roads since Monday, including a triple fatality crash Tuesday near Brownfield, about 40 miles (64 kilometers) southwest of Lubbock.

Two Texas law officers, including a state trooper who was struck by a vehicle while investigating a crash on Interstate 45 southeast of Dallas, were seriously injured, authorities said.

In Arkansas, Republican Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders declared a state of emergency Tuesday because of icy conditions. Her declaration cited the "likelihood of numerous downed power lines" and said road

conditions have created a backlog of deliveries by commercial drivers.

Here's what the Fed interest rate hike means for you

By CORA LEWIS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The Federal Reserve raised its key rate by a quarter point Wednesday, bringing it to the highest level in 15 years as part of an ongoing effort to ease inflation by making borrowing more expensive.

The rate increase will likely make it even costlier to borrow for homes, autos and other purchases. But if you have money to save, you'll probably earn a bit more interest on it.

The latest rate increase is smaller than the Fed's half-point rate hike in December and its four straight three-quarter-point increases earlier last year. The slowdown reflects the fact that inflation, while still high, is easing, and some parts of the economy seem to be cooling.

But it's still an increase, to a range of 4.5% to 4.75%. And many economists say they still fear that a recession remains possible — and with it, job losses that could cause hardship for households already hurt by inflation.

Here's what to know:

WHAT'S PROMPTING THE RATE INCREASES?

The short answer: Inflation. Over the past year, consumer inflation in the United States has clocked in at 6.5% — a figure that reflects a sixth straight monthly slowdown but still uncomfortably high.

The Fed's goal is to slow consumer spending, thereby reducing demand for homes, cars and other goods and services, eventually cooling the economy and lowering prices.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell has acknowledged in the past that aggressively raising rates would bring "some pain" for households but said that doing so is necessary to crush high inflation.

WHICH CONSUMERS ARE MOST AFFECTED?

Anyone borrowing money to make a large purchase, such as a home, car or large appliance, will likely take a hit. The new rate will also increase monthly payments and costs for any consumer who is already paying interest on credit card debt.

"It's already been a really rough year with folks with credit card debt, and it's only going to get worse," said credit analyst Matt Schulz of LendingTree. "The immediacy of the increase is what's hard — that it affects not just future purchases but current balances."

That said, Scott Hoyt, an analyst with Moody's Analytics, noted that household debt payments, as a proportion of income, remain relatively low, though they have risen lately. So even as borrowing rates steadily rise, many households might not feel a much heavier debt burden immediately.

HOW WILL THIS AFFECT CREDIT CARD RATES?

Even before the Fed's latest move, credit card borrowing rates had reached their highest level since 1996, according to Bankrate.com, and these will likely continue to rise.

There are also signs that Americans are increasingly relying on credit cards to help maintain their spending. Total credit card balances have topped \$900 billion, according to the Fed, a record high, though that amount isn't adjusted for inflation.

"Right now, most people may have jobs and rising incomes, but they're looking to the horizon and seeing storm clouds start to build," said Nationwide Senior Economist Ben Ayers. "It's really an inflection point for the economy."

As rates have risen, zero percent loans marketed as "Buy Now, Pay Later" have become popular with consumers. But longer-term loans of more than four payments that these companies offer are subject to the same increased borrowing rates as credit cards.

For those who don't qualify for low-rate credit cards because of weak credit scores, the higher interest rates are already affecting their balances.

John Leer, chief economist at Morning Consult, a survey research firm, said its polling suggests that more Americans are spending down the savings they accumulated during the pandemic and are using

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credit instead. Eventually, rising rates could make it harder for those households to pay off their debts.

For those who have home equity lines of credit or other variable-interest debt, rates will increase by roughly the same amount as the Fed hike, usually within one or two billing cycles. That's because those rates are based in part on banks' prime rate, which follow the Fed's.

HOW ARE SAVERS AFFECTED?

The rising returns on high-yield savings accounts and certificates of deposit (CDs) have put them at levels not seen since 2009, which means that households may want to boost savings if possible. You can also now earn more on bonds and other fixed-income investments.

Though savings, CDs, and money market accounts don't typically track the Fed's changes, online banks and others that offer high-yield savings accounts can be exceptions. These institutions typically compete aggressively for depositors. (The catch: They sometimes require significantly high deposits.)

In general, banks tend to capitalize on a higher-rate environment to boost their profits by imposing higher rates on borrowers, without necessarily offering juicier rates to savers.

WILL THIS AFFECT HOME OWNERSHIP?

Last week, mortgage buyer Freddie Mac reported that the average rate on the benchmark 30-year mortgage dipped to 6.13% from 6.15% the week prior. A year ago, the average rate was much lower: 3.55%. That means the rate on a typical home loan is still almost twice as expensive as it was a year ago.

Mortgage rates don't always move in tandem with the Fed's benchmark rate. They instead tend to track the yield on the 10-year Treasury note.

Sales of existing homes have declined for 11 straight months as borrowing costs have become too high a hurdle for many Americans who are already paying much more for food, gas and other necessities.

WILL IT BE EASIER TO FIND A HOUSE IF I'M STILL LOOKING TO BUY?

If you're financially able to proceed with a home purchase, you're likely to have more options now.

WHAT IF I WANT TO BUY A CAR?

With shortages of computer chips and other parts easing, automakers are producing more vehicles. Many are even reducing prices or offering limited discounts. But rising loan rates and lower used-vehicle trade-in values have erased much of the savings on monthly payments.

"With the interest that you're going to pay, those payments might not look too dissimilar to what they were a few months ago," said Ivan Drury, director of insights for Edmunds.com. "It's like every single time we hear one piece of good news, it's being offset by pieces of bad news."

Since the Fed began raising rates in March, the average new vehicle loan has jumped from 4.5% to 6.9%, according to Edmunds data. Used vehicle loans are up 2.5 percentage points to 10.6%. Loan durations are averaging roughly 70 months — nearly six years — for both new and used vehicles.

Edmunds says that since March, monthly payments have risen by an average of \$71 to \$728 for new vehicles. For used vehicles, it's up just \$3 a month to \$546.

Financing a new vehicle, with an average price of \$48,516 as of December, now costs \$8,769 in interest, Drury said. That's enough to chase many out of the auto market.

Any Fed rate increase is typically passed through to auto borrowers, though it will be slightly offset by subsidized rates from manufacturers.

HOW HAVE THE RATE HIKES INFLUENCED CRYPTO?

Cryptocurrencies like bitcoin have dropped in value since the Fed began raising rates. So have many previously high-valued technology stocks.

Higher rates mean that safe assets like Treasuries become more attractive to investors because their yields have increased. That makes risky assets like technology stocks and cryptocurrencies less attractive.

Still, bitcoin continues to suffer from problems separate from economic policy. Three major crypto firms have failed, most recently the high-profile FTX exchange, shaking the confidence of crypto investors.

WHAT ABOUT MY JOB?

The nation's employers kept hiring in December, adding a healthy 223,000 jobs. The unemployment rate fell from 3.6% to 3.5%, matching a 53-year low. At the same time, the jobs gain was the smallest in two

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months, suggesting a slowdown, with pay growth also easing.

"Things are moderating and slowing down, but the labor market is still relatively strong," said Nick Bunker, Economic Research Director at hiring site Indeed. "One of the reasons the Fed continues to raise rates is that it thinks the labor market is too strong."

Some economists argue that layoffs could slow rising prices, and that a tight labor market fuels wage growth and higher inflation.

While layoffs are now historically low, there's also the possibility there will simply be fewer job openings in coming months.

"I think a lot of the hikes are behind us," Bunker said. "But there's the potential the labor market is going to deteriorate for some people, so people should be alert to a continued slowdown."

WILL THIS AFFECT STUDENT LOANS?

Borrowers who take out new private student loans should prepare to pay more as rates increase. The current range for federal loans is between about 5% and 7.5%.

That said, payments on federal student loans are suspended with zero interest until summer 2023 as part of an emergency measure put in place early in the pandemic. President Joe Biden has also announced some loan forgiveness, of up to \$10,000 for most borrowers, and up to \$20,000 for Pell Grant recipients — a policy that's now being challenged in the courts.

IS THERE A CHANCE THE RATE HIKES WILL BE REVERSED?

It looks increasingly unlikely that rates will come down anytime soon.

"We're expecting inflation will still be too hot for the Fed even by the end of the year," said Nationwide's Ayers. "We predict it won't be until next year that they begin to lower rates."

Tom Brady retires at 45, insisting this time it's 'for good'

By FRED GOODALL AP Sports Writer

TAMPA, Fla. (AP) — This time, Tom Brady says he's done for good.

The seven-time Super Bowl winner with New England and Tampa Bay announced his retirement from the NFL on Wednesday, exactly one year after first saying his playing days were over, by posting a brief video lasting just under one minute on social media.

Unlike last winter, though, the most successful quarterback in league history, as well as one of the greatest athletes in team sports, said his decision was final.

"Good morning guys. I'll get to the point right away," Brady says as the message begins. "I'm retiring. For good."

He briefly retired after the 2021 season but wound up coming back for one more year with the Buccaneers. He retires at age 45, the owner of virtually every meaningful NFL passing record in an unprecedented 23-year career.

A year ago when he retired, it was in the form of a long Instagram post. But about six weeks later, he decided to return for one more run, citing "unfinished business" after an early playoff exit.

The Buccaneers — with whom he won a Super Bowl two seasons ago — made the playoffs again this season, losing in their playoff opener. And at the time, it begged the question about whether Brady would play again.

Only a couple of weeks later, he has given the answer.

"I know the process was a pretty big deal last time, so when I woke up this morning, I figured I'd just press record and let you guys know first," Brady says in the video. "I won't be long-winded. You only get one super emotional retirement essay and I used mine up last year.

"I really thank you guys so much, to every single one of you for supporting me. My family, my friends, teammates, my competitors. I could go on forever. There's too many. Thank you guys for allowing me to live my absolute dream. I wouldn't change a thing. Love you all."

Brady is the NFL's career leader in yards passing (89,214) and touchdowns (649). He is the only player to win more than five Super Bowls and has been MVP of the game five times. He also holds marks for

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regular-season wins (251), Super Bowl appearances (10), playoff games and wins (48, 35), as well as playoff yards (13,400) and TDs (88).

"Tom's legacy is unmatched in the history of this game. All the Super Bowl titles and statistical records speak for themselves, but the impact he had on so many people through the years is what I appreciate the most," Buccaneers general manager Jason Licht said.

"His imprint on this organization helped take us to the mountaintop. We will certainly miss him as our quarterback, but I will also miss him as a leader and friend," Licht added. "Our entire organization is indebted to him for what he provided us over the past three years. We won't ever forget the wins or the accolades, and his influence will be felt for years to come."

Brady announced his retirement one day after attending the premiere of "80 for Brady" — which comes out Friday — in Los Angeles. The movie tells the story of four lifelong friends, played by Lily Tomlin, Jane Fonda, Rita Moreno and Sally Field, who went to a Super Bowl to see Brady play.

He was asked Tuesday night whether he felt a connection working with women — the four stars range in age from 76 to 91 — who don't want to retire.

"They're working hard and they love it. So good for them," Brady told The Associated Press. "You know, it's just that's what life is about. You got to, you know, wake up every day with a purpose. And when you find something you love to do, you know, it's hard to stop. You really enjoy it. And there's a lot of aspects that you do enjoy. So they still bring it at this age. It's really unbelievable to watch them on set and how much energy they have. And I certainly was inspired by them and learned a lot of lessons on this whole experience."

Famously underrated coming into the NFL — he was picked 199th in the 2000 draft by the Patriots, behind six other quarterbacks, three kickers and a punter — Brady certainly wasn't expected to become synonymous with greatness. He played in one game as a rookie, completing one of three passes for six yards.

The next year, it all changed.

Brady took over as the Patriots' starter, the team beat the St. Louis Rams in the Super Bowl that capped the 2001 season and he and New England coach Bill Belichick were well on their way to becoming the most successful coach-QB duo in football history.

More Super Bowl wins came after the 2003 and 2004 seasons. The Patriots returned to football's mountaintop for a fourth time in Brady's era a decade later to cap the 2014 season, the start of three more titles in a span of five years.

He signed with Tampa Bay in free agency in 2020 and added a seventh Super Bowl ring to his collection in his first season with his new team. The Bucs and won 37 games (including postseason) with Brady at quarterback — third most in the league over the past three seasons behind Kansas City (46) and Buffalo (41).

"I think I've been on the record dozens of times saying there's no quarterback I'd rather have than Tom Brady, and I still feel that way," Belichick said in 2021 — shortly before Tampa Bay, with Brady, came to New England and beat the Patriots in a game dubbed "The Return." "I was very lucky to have Tom as the quarterback, to coach him, and he was as good as any coach could ever ask for."

Brady set league single-season records for completions (490) and pass attempts (733) while throwing for 4,643 yards, 25 touchdowns and nine interceptions in his final season. The Bucs, however ranked dead last in rushing offense and, forced to rely almost solely of Brady's arm, struggled to get the ball into the end zone.

After scoring 61 touchdowns in 2021, Tampa Bay slipped to 31 last season and averaged just 18.4 points per game — down from over 30 in Brady's first two seasons with the Bucs.

At 8-9, Brady's only losing season in over two decades as a NFL starter, the Bucs became just the fourth team in league history to earn a postseason berth with a losing mark in a non-strike year. The offensive struggles continued during a lopsided loss to Dallas in the NFC wild-card round.

Brady won three NFL MVP awards, was a first-team All-Pro three times and was selected to the Pro Bowl 15 times.

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Brady and model Gisele Bündchen finalized their divorce this past fall, during the Bucs' season. It ended a 13-year marriage between two superstars who respectively reached the pinnacles of football and fashion. It was announced last year that when Brady retires from playing, he would join Fox Sports as a television analyst in a 10-year, \$375 million deal.

Black history class revised by College Board amid criticism

By CHEYANNE MUMPHREY and SHARON LURYE Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — High school senior Kahlila Bandele is used to courses that don't address the African American experience. Then there's her 9 a.m. class. This week, it spanned topics from Afro-Caribbean migration to jazz.

The discussion in her Advanced Placement course on African American studies touched on figures from Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X to Jimi Hendrix and Rihanna. In her AP European History course, she said, "we're not discussing Black people at all" — even though they were colonized by Europeans.

Her school in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, is one of 60 schools around the country testing the new course, which has gained national attention since Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis threatened to ban it in his state. The rejection has stirred new political debate over how schools teach about race.

The official curriculum for the course, released Wednesday by the College Board, downplays some components that had drawn criticism from DeSantis and other conservatives. Topics including Black Lives Matter, slavery reparations and queer life are not part of the exam. Instead, they are included only on a sample list states and school systems can choose from for student projects.

The College Board, which oversees AP exams, said revisions to the course were substantially complete before DeSantis shared his objections.

"The fact of the matter is that this landmark course has been shaped over years by the most eminent scholars in the field, not political influence," the organization said in a written statement.

The revised curriculum will guide the course's expansion to hundreds of additional high schools in the next academic year. College Board officials said developers consulted with professors from more than 200 colleges, including several historically Black institutions, and took input from teachers piloting the class.

The students at Baton Rouge Magnet High School were aware of the political controversy over the course. But the class on Monday was filled with discussion of the Négritude and Negrismo movements that celebrated Black culture and a painting by the Afro-Asian-Latino artist Wifredo Lam.

Afterward, Bandele, 18, said she doesn't understand arguments that the course would indoctrinate children.

"I don't feel particularly indoctrinated," she said.

DeSantis, a possible Republican presidential candidate in 2024, said he was blocking the course in Florida because it pushed a political agenda.

"In the state of Florida, our education standards not only don't prevent, but they require teaching Black history, all the important things. That's part of our core curriculum," DeSantis said at a news conference last week. "We want education and not indoctrination."

A spokesperson for DeSantis on Wednesday said the state education department is reviewing the revised curriculum for compliance with Florida law.

Despite the College Board's assurances otherwise, the notion that the course changed because of political controversy generated fresh outrage Wednesday. "To wake up on the first day of Black History Month to news of white men in positions of privilege horse trading essential and inextricably linked parts of Black History, which is American history, is infuriating," said David Johns, executive director of the National Black Justice Coalition.

The course has been popular among students in schools where it has been introduced. In Baton Rouge, so many students were interested that Emmitt Glynn is teaching it to two classes, instead of just the one he was originally planning.

Earlier this week, his students read selections of "The Wretched of the Earth" by Frantz Fanon, which

deals with the violence inherent in colonial societies. In a lively discussion, students connected the text to what they had learned about the conflict between colonizers and Native Americans, to the war in Ukraine and to police violence in Memphis, Tennessee.

"We've been covering the gamut from the shores of Africa to where we are now in the 1930s, and we will continue on through history," Glynn said. He said he was proud to see the connections his students were making between the past and now.

For Malina Ouyang, 17, taking the class helped fill gaps in what she has been taught. "Taking this class," she said, "I realized how much is not said in other classes."

Matthew Evans, 16, said the class has educated him on a multitude of perspectives on Black history. He said the political controversy is just "a distraction."

"Any time you want to try to silence something, you will only make someone want to learn about it even more," he said.

The College Board offers AP courses across the academic spectrum, including math, science, social studies, foreign languages and fine arts. The courses are optional. Taught at a college level, students who score high enough on the final exam usually earn course credit at their university.

In Malcolm Reed's classroom at St. Amant High School in Louisiana, where he teaches the AP class, he tries to be mindful of how the material and discussions can affect students.

"I give them the information and I've seen light bulbs go off. I ask them, 'How does it affect you? How do you feel about learning this?'" he said. "It's also new for me, and I'm just taking it in stride. We're not just learning history, but we're making history."

Anti-Asian hate 'runs the gamut,' racist Yelp reviews show

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As if running a restaurant during a pandemic wasn't tough enough, Christopher Wong also had to contend with a racist troll.

"I will not have my dog eat in this place because they might cook him," read the Yelp review of Wong's eatery, the Curry Up Cafe in suburban Los Angeles. "The owner works for the Chinese government."

Yelp removed the review after Wong and several regular customers complained, but not before it had already been seen by an unknown number of potential customers.

"If one person read that and decided not to come in, that's someone who could have been a satisfied customer for years," Wong told The Associated Press.

Last year, Yelp, which is based in San Francisco, removed more than 2,000 racist business reviews before they went online — a nearly tenfold jump over the year before.

It's a sharp increase that reflects improved efforts by Yelp to combat racist content and shows how even a site known for reviews of restaurants and repair services can become ensnared in America's ongoing battle over online civility.

While the content included hate speech targeting Black, Latino and LGBTQ people, too, the largest increase was seen in reviews denigrating Asian Americans and Asian American-owned businesses, according to Yelp, which included the figures in its annual trust and safety report, released Wednesday.

In 2021, Yelp proactively removed only nine posts that included anti-Asian hate. In 2022, it removed 475.

Yelp first began tracking racial hate speech on its platform in 2020, just as Asian Americans experienced a rise in racially motivated hatred related to COVID-19, which was first identified in China. Then-President Donald Trump added to the controversy, referring to the coronavirus as "kung flu" and "the Chinese virus."

In that context, an increase in racist restaurant reviews isn't surprising, according to University of Michigan marketing professor Justin Huang, author of a recent study that found Asian restaurants saw an 18% drop in customers compared with non-Asian restaurants in the same communities in 2020, equating to more than \$7 billion in lost revenue.

"We've seen an increase in violent incidents, in random attacks," Huang said. "Anti-Asian stigmatization during the pandemic really runs the gamut."

In total, Yelp said, it removed 26,500 business reviews last year that violated its rules about hate speech,

threats or lewdness, an overall increase of 1,300 over the year before.

Similar to the increase in anti-Asian content, Yelp proactively removed hundreds of reviews containing anti-LGBTQ hate speech last year. Similar content has thrived on social media, both on fringe sites popular with extremists as well as broad platforms like Twitter, which has experienced a rise in racist posts following its purchase by Elon Musk.

Yelp has fine-tuned its efforts to identify and remove racist content since the pandemic began. In 2020, the platform started allowing businesses to identify that they had a Black, Latino, Asian or LGBTQ owner. As part of the designation, Yelp proactively assesses customer reviews for hate speech before they are posted online.

Noorie Malik, Yelp's vice president of user operations, said the company is "aggressive" when it comes to taking down "unreliable" reviews, including those that contain hate speech.

"The trust and safety of the Yelp community is a top priority," Malik wrote in a statement emailed to the AP. "Which is why we continue to heavily invest in both technology and human moderation."

Brady's unprecedented career filled with highlight moments

By TERESA M. WALKER AP Pro Football Writer

Nobody drove Tom Brady harder than the record-setting quarterback himself, even if his 23rd and final season after a brief retirement didn't end with him lifting yet another Lombardi Trophy.

He leaves the NFL with more wins, yards passing and touchdowns than any other quarterback. He even set a pair of single-season passing records at the age of 45. And yes, nobody has more Super Bowl rings than Brady with seven.

Brady competed so hard that he pulled his teammates along with him.

Tampa Bay center Ryan Jensen, the nine-year pro who hurt his left knee on the second day of training camp, came off injured reserve to snap to Brady in the Buccaneers' wild-card loss to Dallas — the quarterback's final game.

"Thanks for pushing me everyday this season mentally and physically to get back on the field," Jensen wrote on social media Wednesday. "I'm glad I was able to take the field with you one last time! Enjoy retirement, don't dog me too much in the booth. Love ya man!"

Brady did more than his part to fill the video vaults at NFL Films. Here are just a few of his greatest moments:

FINAL FINAL SEASON

Brady didn't finish his career with a winning record in his last season. He did, however, make his mark.

He set a pair of NFL single-season records, completing 490 passes on 733 attempts, and wound up ranking third in the NFL with 4,694 yards passing. And yes, he led the Bucs to a second straight NFC South title even with a losing record.

SUPER BOWL COMEBACK

Of course, the first Super Bowl decided in overtime featured Brady leading one of the greatest comebacks in sports history.

Trailing Atlanta 28-3 in the third quarter, Brady threw two TDs and then drove the Patriots 91 yards by completing six passes to set up the tying score inside the final minute. Once New England won the coin toss, Brady completed his first five passes as the Patriots won 34-28 for their fifth Super Bowl on Feb. 7, 2017.

OVERTIME DRIVE FOR SUPER BOWL

Already the oldest quarterback to play in a Super Bowl, Brady outdueled the NFL's young MVP in Patrick Mahomes in Kansas City on Jan. 20, 2019, with another Super Bowl berth on the line. Brady answered each big drive by Mahomes, especially in a thrilling fourth quarter in which the lead was swapped four times.

Once the Chiefs forced overtime, Brady took over after the Patriots won the coin toss. He converted on a trio of third-and-10s with a pair of passes to Julian Edelman and a third to Rob Gronkowski to set up the clinching TD run by Rex Burkhead.

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SEVENTH RING

Even coming close to Brady's record in Super Bowls will be very challenging after he won No. 7 in his first season in Tampa Bay. He threw two touchdowns to Gronkowski and a third to Antonio Brown as the Bucs routed Mahomes and the Chiefs 31-9.

And yes, Brady helped the Bucs become the first franchise ever to win the Super Bowl on its home field.

GIVE HIM SIX

Brady helped the Patriots put an end to Tebowmania in spectacular fashion. Brady tied a playoff record set first by Daryle Lamonica, then matched by Steve Young by throwing six TD passes in a divisional game against Tim Tebow and the Denver Broncos on Jan. 14, 2012.

He threw the first within the first two minutes to Wes Welker and wound up with all six in the Patriots' first nine drives. Brady threw three passes to Gronkowski. And two of Brady's six TDs came in the final two minutes of the first half.

Brady finished with 363 yards passing in the Patriots' 45-10 victory.

HEY PEYTON

Brady dominated his rivalry with five-time NFL MVP Peyton Manning, winning 11 of their 17 meetings and their first playoff showdown.

With the Patriots and Colts facing off in the AFC championship game on Brady's home turf on Jan. 18, 2004, Brady set the tone from the start. He capped an opening drive with a TD pass to David Givens and had the Patriots up 15-0 at halftime on the way to a 24-14 victory and another Super Bowl berth.

TUCK RULE

Brady gave a preview of postseason success to come on Jan. 19, 2002, in his only playoff game at old Foxboro Stadium, with a big assist from a replay review.

Trailing the Oakland Raiders 13-10 with 1:50 left, former Michigan teammate Charles Woodson knocked the ball out of Brady's hand. The Raiders recovered the fumble and celebrated only to have the call reversed on replay by referee Walt Coleman because of the little-known Tuck Rule. The rule was later eliminated.

Brady found David Patten on the next play for a 13-yard pass, setting up Adam Vinatieri's tying field goal. In overtime, Brady completed eight straight passes to position Vinatieri for the winning field goal that launched Brady and the Patriots on the way to their first Super Bowl title.

Pat Riley: Kareem never had potential, 'only greatness'

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

Pat Riley remembers just about every detail surrounding the events of Dec. 29, 1961. It was a cold night in Schenectady, New York. A little snowy, the roads a little icy. And when the bus carrying the opposing team from New York City arrived, all of Riley's Linton High teammates peered out the window.

They saw a giant.

Long before Riley and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar were winning NBA championships together as coach and player with the Showtime-era Los Angeles Lakers in the 1980s, they were opponents. Riley and Linton beat Power Memorial and Lew Alcindor — Abdul-Jabbar's name before converting to Islam — 74-68 that night.

Abdul-Jabbar, then a 6-foot-10 freshman, was held to eight points because he spent virtually the entire game in foul trouble. He has told Riley several times over the years that Linton won because Riley's father — a lifelong baseball man — had his umpiring friends refereeing the game.

"Which we did," Riley acknowledges.

Riley knew it then and came to appreciate it even more years later — there were only a few ways to stop the player who would eventually spend nearly four decades as the most prolific scorer in NBA history. Abdul-Jabbar is on the verge of being passed by the Lakers' LeBron James, the 38-year-old who was nearly nine months from being born when the unforgettable center made one of his signature sky hooks on April 5, 1984 to overtake Wilt Chamberlain and become the league's scoring leader.

"Kareem was a guy that never had any potential. He just had greatness," said Riley, now the president of the Miami Heat and one of the few who has worked with both Abdul-Jabbar and James. "You could see that. When you can bypass potential and you move right to greatness as a high school player, and then

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college and then the pros ... there are very few like him. There's a handful. Two handfuls, at the most."

James is one of them, going from high school straight to the NBA, and now in his 20th season, he is now just 89 points away from passing Abdul-Jabbar's record. The Lakers play Thursday in Indiana, then Saturday at New Orleans.

The most realistic target for the record-breaker is Tuesday in Los Angeles against Oklahoma City or — perhaps symbolically — next Thursday in L.A. when the Lakers play host to the Milwaukee Bucks, the team that Abdul-Jabbar started his NBA career with.

This past October, Abdul-Jabbar — on his Substack page where he discusses and offers opinion on a variety of topics, often nothing to do with sports — wrote that when James passed Kobe Bryant for No. 3 on the all-time scoring list in 2020, he "knew it was just a matter of time before he passed me too."

Abdul-Jabbar added that every time a record is broken, all people are elevated.

"When I broke Wilt Chamberlain's scoring record in 1984 -- the year LeBron was born -- it bothered Wilt, who'd had a bit of a one-sided rivalry with me since I'd started doing so well in the NBA," he wrote. "I don't feel that way toward LeBron. Not only will I celebrate his accomplishment, I will sing his praises unequivocally."

The relationship between Abdul-Jabbar and James seems complicated. Abdul-Jabbar was outside of the Cleveland locker room during the 2016 Eastern Conference finals as James was jogging by; the two embraced and shared a few kind words, prompting James to discuss the respect he has for Abdul-Jabbar and others who paved the way in his postgame remarks.

Abdul-Jabbar also has lauded James "as a community leader and athlete." But he criticized James for not doing more with his platform to encourage people to get vaccinated against COVID-19. And earlier this season, James said he has "no relationship" with Abdul-Jabbar.

There are ties that bind them, though. Both are champions. Both have worked to promote social justice and spoken out against racial inequality. Abdul-Jabbar played 20 years in the NBA; James is in Year 20. Abdul-Jabbar set the record while playing for the Lakers; James will do the same.

And if nothing else, James' pursuit of the record may have exposed a generation or two that never saw Abdul-Jabbar play to how great he was.

"We have to always acknowledge those who come before us, those who've paved the way," Lakers coach Darvin Ham said. "You think of all those points Kareem scored and he had, what, one 3-pointer? You think about all of that, and these kids get to learn about a different era. It's high, high-level education in the game of basketball, particularly NBA basketball."

When Abdul-Jabbar broke the record, Riley said Magic Johnson — then the Lakers' point guard — made sure he was the one who got the assist on the play. Johnson nearly put himself back into the game against Utah in Las Vegas that night when Abdul-Jabbar was two points away.

Years later, when the Lakers from those championship teams of that era gathered in Hawaii last summer for a reunion, Abdul-Jabbar was a day late because of personal matters. The Lakers in 2022 celebrated his arrival the same way they did the record-setter in 1984.

"He felt special because he was special, because he is special," Riley said of the man who once stood shoulder-to-shoulder alongside an embattled Muhammad Ali during the boxing champ's legal troubles in the late 1960s, and counted Bill Russell — another basketball giant and social-change champion — as a mentor. "He was treated as the patriarch by all the players. It was a great week for him. He was engaged, came to everything we did, gave some spontaneous talks. And he's a shy guy, but he felt very comfortable in his group."

Riley coached Abdul-Jabbar in Los Angeles and later lured James to Miami for a four-year run starting in 2010. He sees in James much of what he saw in Alcindor when that bus pulled into Schenectady in 1961.

"It's all about LeBron right now, and it should be, with his unique career and unique opportunity to do this," Riley said. "Training, travel, personal chefs, personal trainers, all that stuff has come into play since Kareem. I hope people realize Kareem's story as well and how different it was. He went to college for four years; LeBron came out of high school. But they both dominated from Day 1. They both turned potential into greatness from Day 1."

Google has the next move as Microsoft embraces OpenAI buzz

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Before the artificial intelligence tool ChatGPT was unleashed into the world, the novelist Robin Sloan was testing a similar AI writing assistant built by researchers at Google.

It didn't take long for Sloan, author of the bestseller "Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore," to realize that the technology was of little use to him.

"A lot of the state-of-the-art AI right now is impressive enough to really raise your expectations and make you think, 'Wow, I'm dealing with something really, really capable,'" Sloan said. "But then in a thousand little ways, a million little ways, it ends up kind of disappointing you and betraying the fact that it really has no idea what's going on."

Another company might have released the experiment into the wild anyway, as the startup OpenAI did with its ChatGPT tool late last year. But Google has been more cautious about who gets to play with its AI advancements despite growing pressure for the internet giant to compete more aggressively with rival Microsoft, which is pouring billions of dollars into OpenAI and fusing its technology into Microsoft products.

That pressure is starting to take a toll, as Google has asked one of its AI teams to "prioritize working on a response to ChatGPT," according to an internal memo reported this week by CNBC. Google declined to confirm if there was a public chatbot in the works but spokesperson Lily Lin said it continues "to test our AI technology internally to make sure it's helpful and safe, and we look forward to sharing more experiences externally soon."

Some of the technological breakthroughs driving the red-hot field of generative AI — which can churn out paragraphs of readable text and new images as well as music and video — have been pioneered in Google's vast research arm.

"So we have an important stake in this area, but we also have an important stake in not just leading in being able to generate things, but also in dealing with information quality," said Zoubin Ghahramani, vice president of research at Google, in a November interview with The Associated Press.

Ghahramani said the company wants to also be measured about what it releases, and how: "Do we want to make it accessible in a way that people can produce stuff en masse without any controls? The answer to that is no, not at this stage. I don't think it would be responsible for us to be the people driving that."

And they weren't. Four weeks after the AP interview, OpenAI released its ChatGPT for free to anyone with an internet connection. Millions of people around the world have now tried it, sparking searing discussions at schools and corporate offices about the future of education and work.

OpenAI declined to comment on comparisons with Google. But in announcing their extended partnership in January, Microsoft and OpenAI said they are committed to building "AI systems and products that are trustworthy and safe."

As a literary assistant, neither ChatGPT nor Google's creative writing version comes close to what a human can do, Sloan said.

A fictionalized Google was central to the plot of Sloan's popular 2012 novel about a mysterious San Francisco bookstore. That's likely one reason the company invited him along with several other authors to test its experimental Wordcraft Writers Workshop, derived from a powerful AI system known as LaMDA.

Like other language-learning models, including the GPT line built by OpenAI, Google's LaMDA can generate convincing passages of text and converse with humans based on what it's processed from a trove of online writings and digitized books. Facebook parent Meta and Amazon have also built their own big models, which can improve voice assistants like Alexa, predict the next sentence of an email or translate languages in real time.

When it first announced its LaMDA model in 2021, Google emphasized its versatility but also raised the risks of harmful misuse and the possibility it could mimic and amplify biased, hateful or misleading information.

Some of the Wordcraft writers found it useful as a research tool — like a faster and more decisive

version of a Google search — as they asked for a list of “rabbit breeds and their magical qualities” or “a verb for the thing fireflies do” or to “Tell me about Venice in 1700,” according to Google’s paper on the project. But it was less effective as a writer or rewriter, turning out boring sentences riddled with clichés and showing some gender bias.

“I believe them — that they’re being thoughtful and cautious,” Sloan said of Google. “It’s just not the model of a reckless technologist who is in a hurry to get this out into the world no matter what.”

Google’s development of these models hasn’t been without internal acrimony. First, it ousted some prominent researchers who were examining the risks of the technology. And last year, it fired an engineer who publicly posted a conversation with LaMDA in which the model falsely claimed it had human-like consciousness, with a “range of both feelings and emotions.”

While ChatGPT and its competitors might never produce acclaimed works of literature, the expectation is they will soon begin to transform other professional tasks — from helping to debug computer code to composing marketing pitches and speeding up the production of a slide presentation.

That’s key to why Microsoft, as a seller of workplace software, is eager to enhance its suite of products with the latest OpenAI tools. The benefits are less clear to Google, which largely depends on the advertising dollars it gets when people search for information online.

“If you ask the question and get the wrong answer, it’s not great for a search engine,” said Dexter Thillien, a technology analyst for the London-based Economist Intelligence Unit.

Microsoft also has a search engine — Bing — but ChatGPT’s answers are too inaccurate and outdated, and the cost to run its queries too expensive, for the technology to pose a serious risk to Google’s dominant search business, Thillien said.

Google has said that its earlier large language model, named BERT, is already playing a role in answering online searches. Such models can help generate the fact boxes that increasingly appear next to Google’s ranked list of web links.

Asked in November about the hype around AI applications such as OpenAI’s image-generator DALL-E, Ghahramani acknowledged, in a playful tone, that “it’s a little bit annoying sometimes because we know that we have developed a lot of these technologies.”

“We’re not in this to get the ‘likes’ and the clicks, right?” he said, noting that Google has been a leader in publishing AI research that others can build upon.

How to make a mummy: Ancient Egyptian workshop has new clues

By MADDIE BURAKOFF AP Science Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — For thousands of years, ancient Egyptians mummified their dead in the search for eternal life. Now, researchers have used chemistry and an unusual collection of jars to figure out how they did it.

Their study, published Wednesday in the journal *Nature*, is based on a rare archaeological find: An embalming workshop with a trove of pottery around 2,500 years old. Many jars from the site were still inscribed with instructions like “to wash” or “to put on his head.”

By matching the writing on the outside of the vessels with the chemical traces inside, researchers uncovered new details about the “recipes” that helped preserve bodies for thousands of years.

“It’s like a time machine, really,” said Joann Fletcher, an archaeologist at University of York who was not involved with the study. “It’s allowed us to not quite see over the shoulders of the ancient embalmers, but probably as close as we’ll ever get.”

Those recipes showed that embalmers had deep knowledge about what substances would help preserve their dead, said Fletcher, whose partner was a co-author on the study. And they included materials from far-flung parts of the world — meaning Egyptians went to great lengths to make their mummies “as perfect as they could possibly be.”

The workshop — uncovered in 2016 by study author Ramadan Hussein, who passed away last year — is located in the famous burial grounds of Saqqara. Parts of it sit above the surface, but a shaft stretches

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down to an embalming room and burial chamber underground, where the jars were discovered.

It was in rooms like these where the last phase of the process took place, said Salima Ikram, an Egyptologist at The American University in Cairo who was not involved with the study. After drying out the the body with salts, which probably took place above ground, embalmers would then take the bodies below.

"This was the last phase of your transformation where the secret rites, the religious rites, were being performed," Ikram said. "People would be chanting spells and hymns while you were being wrapped and resin was being anointed all over your body."

Experts already had some clues about what substances were used in those final steps, mainly from testing individual mummies and looking at written texts. But a lot of gaps remained, said senior author Philipp Stockhammer, an archaeologist at Ludwig Maximilian University in Germany.

The new finds helped crack the case.

Take the word "antiu," which shows up in a lot of Egyptian texts but didn't have a direct translation, Stockhammer said. In the new study, scientists found that several jars labeled as "antiu" contained a mixture of different substances — including animal fat, cedar oil and juniper resin.

These substances, along with others found in the jars, have key properties that would help preserve the mummies, said lead author Maxime Rageot, an archaeologist at Germany's University of Tübingen.

Plant oils — which were used to protect the liver and treat the bandages — could ward off bacteria and fungi, while also improving the smell. Hard materials like beeswax, used on the stomach and skin, could help keep out water and seal the pores.

Some of the substances came from very far away — like dammar and elemi, types of resin that come from the tropical rainforests of Southeast Asia. These results show that ancient Egyptians would trade far and wide to get the most effective materials, the authors said.

"It's interesting to see the complexity," Stockhammer said. "Having this global network on the one hand, having all this chemical knowledge on the other side."

Ikram said an important next step for the research will be to test different parts of actual mummies to see if the same substances show up. And these recipes probably weren't universal — they changed over time and varied between workshops.

Still, the study gives a basis for understanding the past, and can bring us closer to people who lived long ago, she said.

"The ancient Egyptians have been separated from us through time and space, yet we still have this connection," Ikram said. "Human beings all throughout history have been scared of death."

Beyoncé announces much anticipated 'Renaissance' world tour

The Associated Press undefined

Beyoncé is taking her "Renaissance" global — the superstar will start a world tour in Sweden in May with stops throughout Europe and the United States.

The highly anticipated tour announcement she made on Instagram and her website Wednesday comes days before the Grammy Awards on Sunday, where the global superstar is the most nominated artist and could make Recording Academy history.

Beyoncé, the most decorated woman in Grammy history with 28 wins, could break the late Hungarian-British conductor Georg Solti's record for most awards won if she wins four awards.

Her 2022 album "Renaissance" is a celebration of dance music and is nominated for album of the year. Her tour will make stops in London, Paris, Barcelona and Toronto before ending Sept. 27 in New Orleans.

There were hints that she might tour again after she performed an invite-only show in January in Dubai at the Atlantis The Royal Resort, her first show in four years. Her last solo tour was in 2016, but she went on tour with her husband Jay Z in 2018.

Ticketmaster said in a release that sales will begin Feb. 6 and fans will need to register through their Verified Fan system. Sale times will vary based on city.

'Dr. Phil' talk show to end daytime TV run after 21 years

NEW YORK (AP) — Daytime television psychologist "Dr. Phil" McGraw says he plans to end his talk show after 21 years in the coming months, but viewers haven't seen the last of him.

"Dr. Phil" was the most prominent spinoff from Oprah Winfrey's show, which once dominated daytime TV. The Texan's program debuted in September 2002 after he'd been featured as a regular guest on Winfrey's.

"With this show, we have helped thousands of guest and millions of viewers through everything from addiction and marriage to mental wellness and raising children," McGraw said in a statement. "This has been an incredible chapter of my life and career, but while I'm moving on from daytime, there is so much more I wish to do."

The traditional broadcast TV season ends in spring; there was no date given for Phil's final show.

McGraw, 72, said he wants to focus on prime-time programming and is planning an unspecified project for early next year.

In the meantime, while new "Dr. Phil" episodes won't be made, the show won't disappear from TV. CBS Media Ventures, which syndicates his program, said it will offer stations a package of reruns with occasional new wraparound content for future seasons.

That's a cost-saving path blazed by "Judge Judy," which aired its last original show in June 2021 but continues to be popular in reruns.

"We plan to be in the 'Dr. Phil' business with the library for years to come and welcome opportunities to work together in the future," said Steve LoCascio, president of CBS Media Ventures.

Brazil authorities probe Amazon ties to capital attacks

By FABIANO MAISONNAVE AND JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — On the edge of Brazil's Amazon rainforest, the Rovaris family is a symbol of a pioneering success story.

The family arrived in the state of Mato Grosso in the 1970s as part of a wave of agricultural expansion promoted by the country's then-military dictatorship. In a short span, the Rovaris clan accumulated vast wealth as agronomists figured out how to successfully grow soy in the hostile tropical climate.

Now, the family's scion, Atilio Rovaris, is being investigated in the sprawling criminal probe into how supporters of former President Jair Bolsonaro tried to subvert Brazil's democracy when they blocked highways right after the election and temporarily took over several government buildings in the capital of Brasilia in early January. Bolsonaro lost October's election to President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a result that many Bolsonaro supporters don't accept.

Much of the investigation is centered along the northern stretch of highway BR-163, built in the 1970s. It connects two of Bolsonaro's most substantial support bases. In Mato Grosso, these are Rovaris and other businesspeople from wealthy cities such as Sorriso, Brazil's largest soybean producer. In Para, they are land-grabbers, illegal gold miners, and loggers who sustain impoverished cities such as Novo Progresso, 700 km (438 miles) north of Sorriso.

Days after the failed takeover, Justice Minister Flávio Dino said that "agribusiness sectors" were among the leading financiers. And Environment Minister Marina Silva said some of the rioters were linked to criminal activities in the Amazon.

"A significant portion of the enraged crowd were individuals who, under the Bolsonaro government, believed their criminal activities, such as deforestation, land grabbing, illegal logging, illegal fishing, and illegal mining, would go unpunished," Silva told daily Folha de S.Paulo a few days after the Jan. 8 attack.

Bolsonaro won by big margins in population centers along the highway, as many people in these areas share his view that Brazil needs to push economic growth by rolling back environmental regulations aimed at slowing deforestation. They deem conservation units and Indigenous territories as barriers that undermine agribusiness. Protected areas in the region are reeling from invasions from cattle farmers, loggers and gold miners.

That so much support for Bolsonaro came from these areas could complicate Lula's promise to reach

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“zero deforestation” in the Amazon, as such efforts will require the buy in of locals and must be joined with sustainable forms of development.

Rovaris, an amateur rally car driver, has made no secret of his support for Bolsonaro. He was one of the biggest donors to his presidential campaign, contributing close to \$100,000, according to public election data.

Although no evidence in the fledgling probe has emerged publicly tying him to the rioters who vandalized Brazil’s presidential palace and congress, he is being investigated for alleged support of protests that blocked major highways for weeks in attempts to restore Bolsonaro to power after he lost the elections in October.

In November, a bank account belonging to a trucking company that Rovaris owns was one of 43 frozen by the Supreme Court as part of an investigation into possible crimes against Brazil’s democracy. In total, 30 of the frozen accounts belonged to individuals or companies from Mato Grosso — a sign of how deep support for Bolsonaro remains in one of Brazil’s key economic hubs.

“There is a repeated abuse of the right of assembly, directed illicitly and criminally, to propagate non-compliance and disrespect for the result of the election for president,” Justice Alexandre de Moraes wrote in the ruling.

Rovaris merely supported Bolsonaro in the campaign and had no involvement in anti-democratic acts, Larissa Gribler, his spokesperson, told The Associated Press. Gribler said Rovaris declined to answer further questions or give an interview.

During his first term as president, between 2003 and 2006, Lula started paving BR-163, a job later completed by Bolsonaro. As part of the environmental licensing to authorize the paving, conservation units were created along the highway. The goal was to “close the agriculture border” to prevent uncontrolled deforestation, as had happened in Mato Grosso.

In the Novo Progresso region in Para state, these conservation units have been largely invaded by land-grabbers, who have fought to annul them. The most prominent example is Jamanxin National Forest, the most deforested federal conservation unit in the Amazon.

A roadblock there lasted several days in November. Footage shows police cars being attacked with stones by an angry mob and a felled Brazil Nuts tree, a protected species, across the road. According to local press reports, about 30 Novo Progresso residents were arrested in Brasilia following the attack. Those included the owner of a sawmill.

“The city relies on illegal activities such as illegal gold mining, illegally harvested wood, cattle raised in off-limits areas within conservation units, and land grabbing,” said Mauricio Torres, a geographer from Para Federal University.

“Bolsonaro supported these illegal activities. And the people are willing to kill and die for it because they have no other option. So I don’t know how Lula will be able to implement the rule of law,” he added.

That is a different situation from Sorriso, where initial deforestation and land-grabbing were legalized decades ago, and the economy depends on soybean exports, Torres said.

Just as the profile of the Amazonian strongholds for Bolsonaro differ, combatting deforestation will require different approaches, depending on the place, according to deforestation experts.

Lula’s administration will have to act on many fronts, said Brenda Brito from Amazon Institute of People and the Environment, a group focused on sustainable development in the Amazon. It will have to reverse court decisions that have favored land-grabbers inside conservation units and offer a wide range of economic incentives, from forest land concessions to supporting ecotourism.

“Otherwise, even if we manage to remove invaders, the protected areas will be invaded again,” she said.

War’s longest battle exacts high price in ‘heart of Ukraine’

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Visitors used to browse through Bakhmut’s late 19th century buildings, enjoy walks in its rose-lined lakeside park and revel in the sparkling wines produced in historic underground caves.

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That was when the city in eastern Ukraine was a popular tourist destination.

No more. The longest battle of Russia's war has turned this city of salt and gypsum mines into a ghost town. Despite bombing, shelling and attempts to encircle Bakhmut for six months, Russia's forces have not conquered it.

But their scorched-earth tactics have made it impossible for civilians to have any semblance of a life there. "It's hell on earth right now; I can't find enough words to describe it," said Ukrainian soldier Petro Voloschenko, who is known on the battlefield as Stone, his voice rising with emotion and resentment.

Voloschenko, who is originally from Kyiv, arrived in the area in August when the Russian assault started and has since celebrated his birthday, Christmas and New Year's there.

The 44-year-old saw the city, located around 100 kilometers (60 miles) from Russia's border, gradually turned into a wasteland of ruins. Most of the houses are crushed, without roofs, ceilings, windows or doors, making them uninhabitable, he said.

Out of a prewar population of 80,000, a few thousand residents remain. They rarely see daylight because they spend most of their time in basements sheltering from the ferocious fighting around and above them. The city constantly shudders with the muffled sound of explosions, the whizzing of mortars and a constant soundtrack of artillery. Anywhere is a potential target.

Bakhmut lies in Donetsk province, one of four that Russia illegally annexed in the fall — but Moscow only controls about half of it. To take the remaining half, Russian forces have no choice but to go through Bakhmut, which offers the only approach to bigger Ukrainian-held cities since Ukrainian troops took back Iziurm in Kharkiv province in September, according to Mykola Bielieskov, a research fellow at Ukraine's National Institute for Strategic Studies.

"Without seizure of these cities, the Russian army won't be able to accomplish the political task it was given," Bielieskov said.

The deterioration in Bakhmut started during the summer after Russia took the last major city in neighboring Luhansk province. It then poured troops and equipment into capturing Bakhmut, and Ukraine did the same to defend it. For Russia, the city was one stepping stone toward its goal of seizing the remaining Ukrainian-held territory in Donetsk.

From trenches outside the city, the two sides dug in for what turned into an exhausting standoff as Ukraine clawed back territory to the north and south and Russian airstrikes across the country targeted power plants and other infrastructure.

The months of battle exhausted both armies. In the fall, Russia changed tactics and sent in foot soldiers instead of probing the front line mainly with artillery, according to Voloschenko.

Bielieskov, the research fellow, said the least-trained Russians go first to force the Ukrainians to open fire and expose the strengths and weaknesses of their defense.

More trained units or mercenaries from the Wagner Group, a private Russian military company led by a rogue millionaire and known for its brutality, make up the rear guard, Bielieskov said.

Bielieskov said that Ukraine compensates for its lack of heavy equipment with people who are ready to stand to the last.

"Lightly armed, without sufficient artillery support, which they cannot always be provided, they stand and hold off attacks as long as possible," he said.

The result is that the battle is believed to have produced horrific troop losses for both Ukraine and Russia. Quite how deadly isn't known: Neither side is saying.

"Manpower is less of a Russian problem and, in some ways, more of a Ukrainian problem, not only because the casualties are painful, but they're often ... Ukraine's best troops," said Lawrence Freedman, a professor emeritus of war studies at King's College London.

The Institute for the Study of War recently reported that Wagner forces have seen more than 4,100 die and 10,000 wounded, including over 1,000 killed between late November and early December near Bakhmut. The numbers are impossible to verify.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in a recent address, described the situation in Bakhmut as

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“very tough.”

“These are constant Russian assaults. Constant attempts to break through our defenses” he said, Like Mariupol — the port city in the same province that Russia eventually captured after an 82-day siege that eventually came down to a mammoth steel mill where determined Ukrainian fighters held out along with civilians — Bakhmut has taken on almost mythic importance to its defenders.

“Bakhmut has already become a symbol of Ukrainian invincibility,” Voloschenko said. “Bakhmut is the heart of Ukraine, and the future peace of those cities that are no longer under occupation depends on the rhythm with which it beats.”

For now, Bakhmut remains completely under the control of the Ukrainian army, albeit more as a fortress than a place where people would visit, work or play. In January, the Russians seized the town of Soledar, located less than 20 kilometers (some 12 miles) away, but their advance is very slow, according to military analysts.

“These are rates of advancement that do not allow us to talk about serious offensive actions. It’s a slow pushing out at a very high price,” Bielieskov said.

Along the front line on the Ukrainian side, emergency medical units provide urgent care to battlefield casualties. From 50 to 170 wounded Ukrainian soldiers pass daily through just one of the several stabilization points along the Donetsk front line, according to Tetiana Ivanchenko, who has volunteered in eastern Ukraine since a Russia-backed separatist conflict started there in 2014.

After its setbacks in Kharkiv in the northeast and Kherson province in the south, the Kremlin is hungry for any success, even if it is just seizing a town or two that have been pounded into rubble. Freedman, the King’s College London professor emeritus, said the loss of Bakhmut would be a blow for Ukraine and offer tactical advantages to Russian forces, but wouldn’t prove decisive to the outcome of the war.

There would have been more value for Russia if it could have captured a populated and intact Bakhmut early on in the war, but now the capture would just give its forces options on how to seize more of Donetsk, said Freedman.

A 22-year-old Ukrainian soldier who is known as Desiatyi, or Tenth, joined the army on the day that Russia started the full-scale war in Ukraine. After months spent defending the Bakhmut area, losing many comrades, he said he has no regrets.

“It is not about comparing the price and losses on both sides. It’s about the fact that, yes, Ukrainians are dying, but they are dying because of a specific goal,” said Desiatyi, who did not give his real name for security reasons.

“Ukraine has no choice but to defend every inch of its land. The country must defend itself, especially now, so zealously, so firmly, and desperately. This is what will help us liberate our occupied territories in the future.”

Today in History: FEB 2, ‘American Sniper’ Chris Kyle killed

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Feb. 2, the 33rd day of 2023. There are 332 days left in the year.

Today’s Highlight in History:

On Feb. 2, 1990, in a dramatic concession to South Africa’s Black majority, President F.W. de Klerk lifted a ban on the African National Congress and promised to free Nelson Mandela.

On this date:

In 1536, present-day Buenos Aires, Argentina, was founded by Pedro de Mendoza of Spain.

In 1653, New Amsterdam — now New York City — was incorporated.

In 1887, Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, held its first Groundhog Day festival.

In 1913, New York City’s rebuilt Grand Central Terminal officially opened to the public at one minute past midnight.

In 1914, Charles Chaplin made his movie debut as the comedy short “Making a Living” was released by

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Keystone Film Co.

In 1925, the legendary Alaska Serum Run ended as the last of a series of dog mushers brought a life-saving treatment to Nome, the scene of a diphtheria epidemic, six days after the drug left Nenana.

In 1943, the remainder of Nazi forces from the Battle of Stalingrad surrendered in a major victory for the Soviets in World War II.

In 1948, President Harry S. Truman sent a 10-point civil rights program to Congress, where the proposals ran into fierce opposition from Southern lawmakers.

In 1980, NBC News reported the FBI had conducted a sting operation targeting members of Congress using phony Arab businessmen in what became known as "Abscam," a codename protested by Arab-Americans.

In 2006, House Republicans elected John Boehner (BAY'-nur) of Ohio as their new majority leader to replace the indicted Tom DeLay.

In 2016, health officials reported that a person in Texas had become infected with the Zika virus through sex in the first case of the illness being transmitted within the United States.

In 2017, using a backhoe to smash through a barricade of water-filled footlockers, police stormed Delaware's largest prison, ending a nearly 20-hour hostage standoff with inmates; one hostage, a guard, was killed.

In 2020, the Philippines reported that a 44-year-old Chinese man from Wuhan had died in a Manila hospital from the new coronavirus; it was the first death from the virus to be recorded outside of China. Authorities in parts of China extended the Lunar New Year holiday break well into February to try to keep people at home.

Ten years ago: Former Navy SEAL and "American Sniper" author Chris Kyle was fatally shot along with a friend, Chad Littlefield, at a gun range west of Glen Rose, Texas; suspect Eddie Ray Routh was later convicted and sentenced to life in prison without parole. Coach Bill Parcells, Warren Sapp, Cris Carter, Jonathan Ogden and Larry Allen were elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Adrian Peterson of the Minnesota Vikings closed out the season with two of the top NFL awards from The Associated Press: Most Valuable Player and Offensive Player of the Year. Actor John Kerr, 81, died in Pasadena, California.

Five years ago: At the sentencing hearing in Michigan for former sports doctor Larry Nassar, a distraught father of three girls who'd been sexually abused tried to attack Nassar before being tackled by sheriff's deputies and hauled out of court. (Randall Margraves later apologized; the judge said there was "no way" she would fine him or send him to jail for trying to attack Nassar.)

One year ago: CNN President Jeff Zucker abruptly resigned after acknowledging a consensual relationship with another network executive. The relationship came to light during the investigation that led to the firing of the news network's anchor Chris Cuomo. Four men were charged with being part of the drug distribution crew that supplied a deadly mix of narcotics to actor Michael K. Williams of "The Wire," who had overdosed five months earlier.

Today's birthdays: Comedian Tom Smothers is 86. Rock singer-guitarist Graham Nash is 81. Television executive Barry Diller is 81. Country singer Howard Bellamy (The Bellamy Brothers) is 77. TV chef Ina Garten is 75. Actor Jack McGee is 74. Actor Brent Spiner is 74. Rock musician Ross Valory (Journey) is 74. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, is 71. The former president of South Korea, Park Geun-hye, is 71. Model Christie Brinkley is 69. Actor Michael Talbott is 68. Actor Kim Zimmer is 68. Actor Michael T. Weiss is 61. Actor-comedian Adam Ferrara is 57. Rock musician Robert DeLeo (Army of Anyone; Stone Temple Pilots) is 57. Actor Jennifer Westfeldt is 53. Rapper T-Mo is 51. Actor Marissa Jaret Winokur is 50. Actor Lori Beth Denberg is 47. Singer Shakira is 46. Actor Rich Sommer is 45. Country singer Blaine Larsen is 37. Actor Zosia Mamet is 35.