

Groton Daily Independent

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Sunday, Feb. 5

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

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

Open Gym: Grades JK-8; 2:00 PM to 3:30 PM, Grades 6-12; 3:30 PM to 5:00 PM

United Methodist Church: Worship with communion. Conde Worship, 8:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 10:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.; Sunday school after children's sermon; Sunday school sings in worship, 10:45 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Installation of council and WELCA; Sunday school, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 7 p.m.

Groton Lions Prom and Formal Dress Sale, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m., Groton Community Center

Groton Lions dress pickup of unsold dress, 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., Groton Community Center

St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Sunday school, 9:45 a.m.; Zion Lutheran worship with communion, 11 a.m.

Groton Community Calendar

Saturday, Feb. 4

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

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

DAK12-NEC Girls Clash at Madison: 12:30 p.m.: Groton Area vs. Canton

Boys at Elk Point-Jefferson with C game at 1 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity

Wrestling at Stanley County, 10 a.m.

Groton Lions Prom and Formal Dress Sale, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m., Groton Community Center

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

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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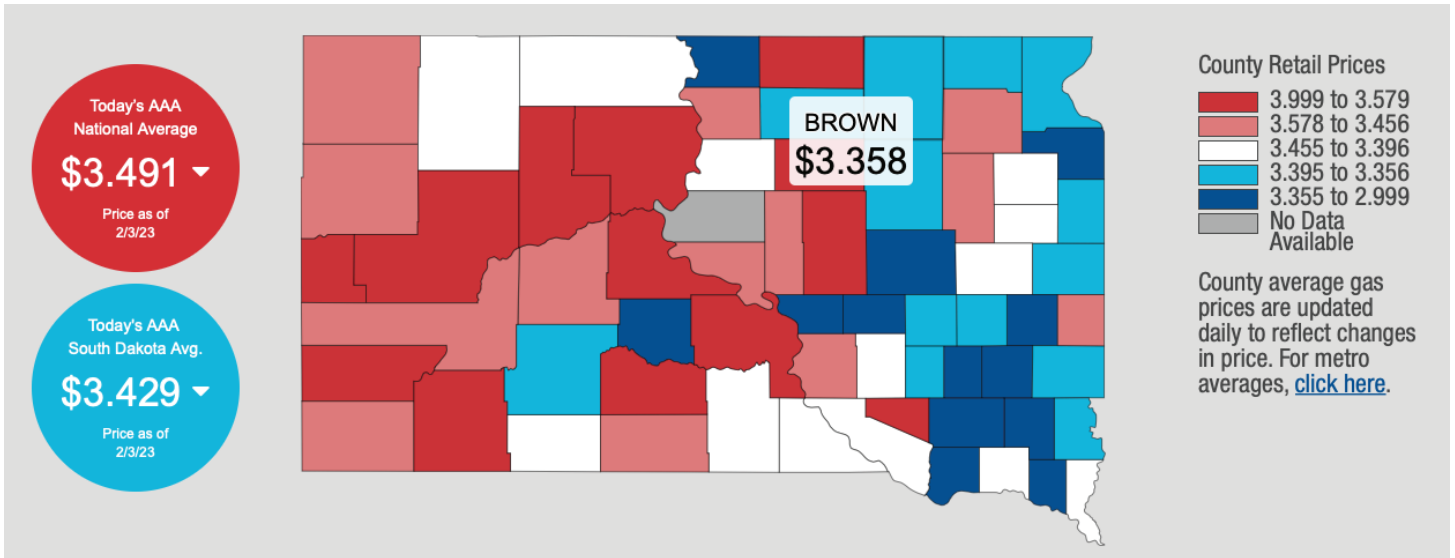
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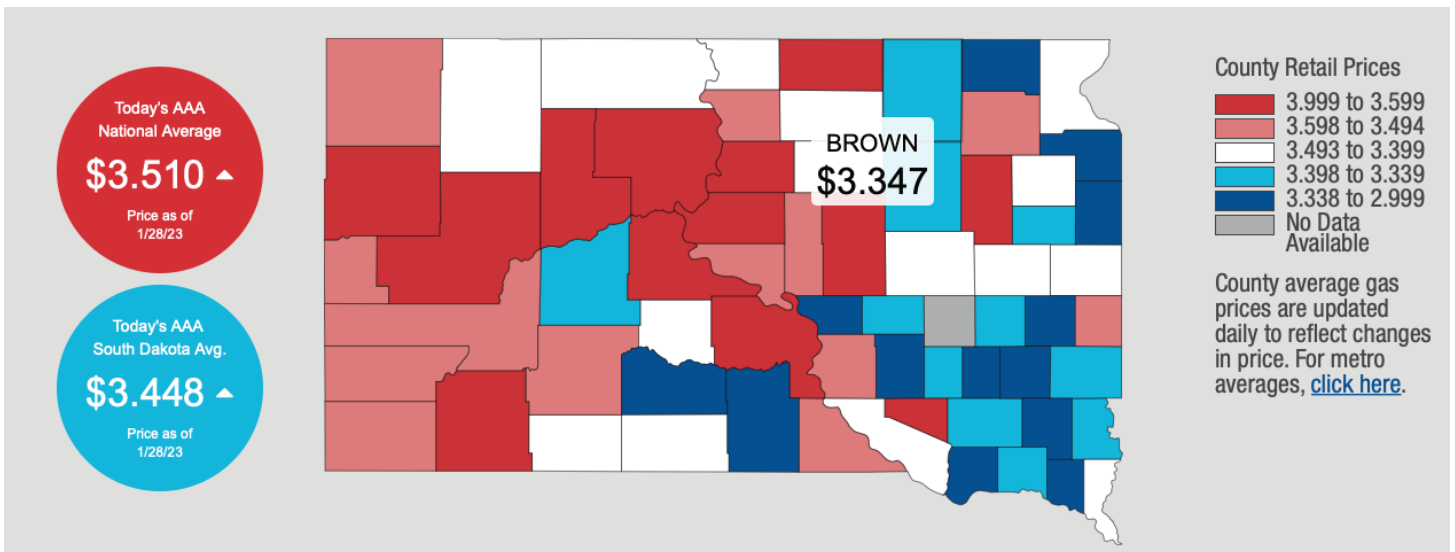
South Dakota Average Gas Prices

	Regular	Mid-Grade	Premium	Diesel
Current Avg.	\$3.429	\$3.562	\$4.029	\$4.447
Yesterday Avg.	\$3.434	\$3.568	\$4.037	\$4.443
Week Ago Avg.	\$3.445	\$3.580	\$4.006	\$4.442
Month Ago Avg.	\$3.122	\$3.309	\$3.805	\$4.276
Year Ago Avg.	\$3.272	\$3.370	\$3.720	\$3.677

This Week



Two Weeks Ago



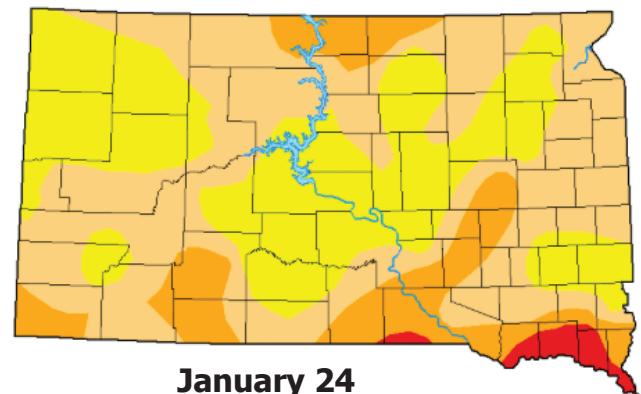
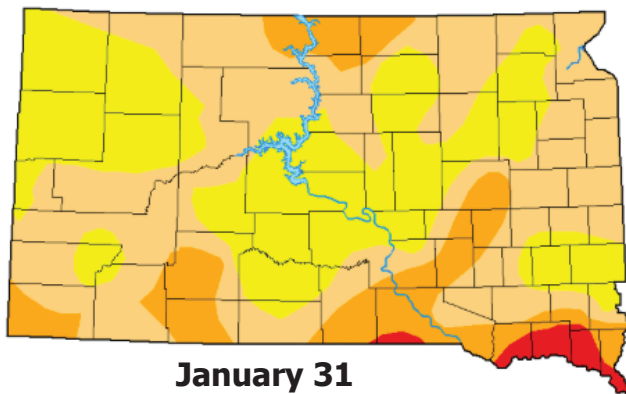
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Drought Classification



Drought Monitor



A half an inch or more of precipitation fell across parts of Colorado and Wyoming, mainly in the higher elevations, resulting in improvements to moderate to severe (D1-D3) drought and abnormal dryness (D0) in eastern Wyoming and improvements to abnormal dryness western Colorado. Much of the High Plains remains in a holding pattern as areas that received abundant snowfall over the Water Year are slow to make improvements due to the long-term nature of drought in the region.

Gov. Noem Signs Bills into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Governor Kristi Noem has signed several bills into law.

On Wednesday, Governor Noem signed SB 2, which revises Department of Corrections reporting requirements concerning abuse and neglect of individuals in private contracted facilities.

Governor Noem signed the following four bills into law:

- SB 22, which streamlines examination reports;
- SB 26, which transfers a property tax relief program, changes income requirements for certain property tax relief programs, and indexes certain income schedules to inflation;
- SB 29, which revises certain references to the Internal Revenue Code; and,
- SB 43, which revises certain provisions regarding money transmission.

Governor Noem has signed seven bills into law this legislative session.

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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!

Why Permanent E15 Ethanol Gasoline Year-Round Sales Can Reduce Foreign Oil Dependence and Green House Gas Emissions while Providing Economic Security for SD's Corn Growers and Rural Communities Scott Stahl, McCook County South Dakota corn farmer and President of the South Dakota Corn Growers Association

Last April, inflation rates at a 40-year high galvanized action from the Environmental Protection Agency to do something that South Dakota corn growers and ethanol producers had been waiting for; open year-round sales of E15. And while this was a step forward for the ethanol industry, this decision to date hasn't resulted in becoming a permanent change.

Typically, sales of E15 are banned June through September because of a concern for air pollution. However, an analysis conducted by the US Department of Agriculture in 2017 showed 'that U.S. corn-based ethanol reduces greenhouse gas emissions by 43 percent compared to gasoline'. In fact, the Fuels Institute has shared that air pollution from E15 is actually less than other gasoline already being utilized.

With continued inflation and green-house gas emissions still a major concern, year-round sales should be looked at to be a viable option helping to solve a part of these current and ongoing problems. And obviously I am not the only person to think so. Last April there were eight Governors including Governor Noem who had petitioned the EPA for a permanent waiver to allow gas retailers to sell E15 year-round in their respective states. Since then, one state has joined in on the request.

And while the Biden Administration championed E15 last summer, the EPA hasn't yet responded to this request. This past week a bipartisan coalition of seven Attorneys General including South Dakota has sent a letter to the EPA Administrator urging the Biden Administration to adhere to the law and respond to these Governors. The end result according to law should allow South Dakota to sell E15 year-round.

Increasing higher blends of ethanol is a win for not only our environment through improved air quality and reduced greenhouse gas emissions but also for the American corn farmer. It helps consumers save at the pump which is extremely helpful when we all have to tighten our belts in this tough economy. Ethanol has always been a great success story in South Dakota and year-round E15 sales will provide needed certainty to the market place for allowing access to higher blends at the pump.

According to the Renewable Fuels Association, South Dakota is the seventh largest ethanol producer in the nation with 51% of the total corn crop used for ethanol production. Not only does this help to stabilize market prices for corn farmers, it also enriches every community that South Dakota's 16 ethanol plants operate in. They employ nearly 26,000 full-time employees and impact surrounding household incomes by \$2 billion every year!

We are waiting and watching for the EPA's response and are hopeful that E15 is moving forward to becoming an every-day, year-round choice for South Dakotans who are looking to not only help the environment but save a few bucks at the pump.

E15 Facts from the Department of Energy

E15 is a low-level blend composed of 10.5% to 15% ethanol and gasoline. It has a higher-octane rating to improve engine performance, typically costs less than regular unleaded fuel, and is sold at more than 2,000 fueling stations in 30 states. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has approved using E15 in vehicles built before 2001 and newer passenger cars, light trucks, and medium-duty vehicles.

Good to Know! E15 is also known as Unleaded 88 or UNL88 at the Pump

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NSU Women's Basketball

Wolves Battle to Victory over Huskies on First Night of I Hate Winter

Aberdeen, S.D. – The Northern State women's basketball team opened the annual I Hate Winter weekend with a critical NSIC North Division victory over St. Cloud State by a score of 59-50. With the win the Wolves extended their home win streak to six games and improved to 9-2 this season in Wachs Arena.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 59, SCSU 50

Records: NSU 13-10 (8-9 NSIC), SCSU 15-6 (12-5 NSIC)

Attendance: 2,222

HOW IT HAPPENED

While both teams struggled to connect from the field in the opening quarter, Northern State was able to jump out to an early 8-4 advantage but St. Cloud State went on a 10-0 scoring run to lead 14-8 early in the second quarter

The Wolves were able to counter the Huskie scoring run with a 10-2 scoring run of their own with six points from Kailee Oliverson on a pair of momentum grabbing 3-pointers

The teams traded baskets mid-way through the second quarter before NSU was able to take a 27-25 lead into the halftime break, and later improved to 10-1 when leading at the break

St. Cloud State was able to momentarily grab a pair of 2-point leads in the opening minutes of the third quarter, however a 3-pointer by Morgan Fiedler with 5:23 remaining in the period gave the Wolves the lead for good

A pair of free throws by Laurie Rogers with 29 seconds remaining in the contest extended the Northern State lead to ten points, the largest lead by either team in the game

Northern State shot 18-22 (81.8%) from the free throw line in the victory, and Rianna Fillipi (8-8), Kailee Oliverson (3-3), Morgan Fiedler (2-2), and Jordyn Hilgemann (1-1) were all perfect from the charity stripe on the night

Oliverson notched her fourth double-double of the season with 23 points and 13 rebounds; the outing was her seventh game of 20 or points this season and fourth consecutive

Fillipi hit double figures in scoring for the 12th time this season with 14 points in the win, she also set a new career-high in blocked shots for the second consecutive game with four against the Huskies

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Kailee Oliverson: 23 points, 13 rebounds, 1 block, 2 steals

Rianna Fillipi: 14 points, 5 rebounds, 2 assists, 4 blocks, 2 steals

Laurie Rogers: 7 points, 7 rebounds, 4 assists, 4 blocks, 1 steal

UP NEXT

Northern State will look to continue protecting the home court against No. 16 Minnesota Duluth as they close out I Hate Winter weekend today. The Wolves and Bulldogs are scheduled for a 6 p.m. tip-off in Wachs Arena.

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NSU Men's Basketball

Northern Men Open Weekend on a High Note, Defeating St. Cloud

Aberdeen, S.D. – The (RV) Northern State University men's basketball team handily defeated St. Cloud State on Friday evening from Wachs Arena to open the I Hate Winter weekend. The Wolves shot 48.4% from the floor and knocked down ten from beyond the arc.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 79. SCSU 61

Records: NSU 18-5 (14-3 NSIC), SCSU 7-15 (4-13 NSIC)

Attendance: 3278

HOW IT HAPPENED

- Northern State led from the tip, scoring 43 points in the first and 36 in the second
- The Wolves recorded a game high 36 points in the paint, 18 points off turnovers, 10 made 3-pointers, ten steals, and eight blocks
- NSU added 38 rebounds, 15 assists, and 13 points off the bench
- They closed out the contest shooting 48.4% from the floor, 37.0% from the 3-point line, and 75.0% from the foul line
- Defensively, Northern held St. Cloud to shooting percentages of 32.9% from the floor and 22.2% from beyond the arc
- Sam Masten led three in double figures notching 27 points, hitting 10-of-12 from the floor; notching his third double-double of the season with a career high 12 rebounds
- Kobe Busch led the team off the bench with eight points and five rebounds in the win
- Both Jordan Belka and Michael Nhial tallied a team leading three blocks in the game
- The victory is the 298th of head coach Saul Phillips career

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

- Sam Masten: 27 points, 83.3 field goal%, 12 rebounds, 4 steals
- Jacksen Moni: 15 points, 63.6 field goal%, 2 rebounds
- Augustin Reede: 13 points, 2 rebounds

UP NEXT

Northern returns to Wachs Arena today at 4 p.m. versus Minnesota Duluth. Full I Hate Winter details can be found at nsuwolves.com/IHW.

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GHS Wrestling

Ehresman, Kucker pick up wins on the mat over Marion/Freeman

Groton Area traveled to Presho on Friday for a wrestling quadrangular. Lyman and Marion/Freeman both posted team wins over Groton Area. Groton Area's 18 points came from three forfeit wins against Lyman County. Christian Ehresmann and Korbin Kucker both posted wins over their opponent in the Marion/Freeman dual and Groton Area picked up three other wins by forfeit.

Lyman 38, Groton Area 18

- 195 Isaac McManigal (Lyman) wins by forfeit
- 220 Gunner Johnson (Lyman) wins by forfeit
- 285 Louie Thiry (Lyman) over Gavin Englund (Groton Area) (Fall 0:36)
- 106 Lane Olivier (Lyman) over Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) (Fall 3:07)
- 113 Skyler Langenbau (Lyman) over Jon Bisbee (Groton Area) (Fall 3:31)
- 120 Kellen Antonson (Groton Area) wins by forfeit
- 126 Double Forfeit
- 132 Braydon Oldenkamp (Lyman) over Tristan McGannon (Groton Area) (Fall 1:04)
- 138 Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) wins by forfeit
- 145 Easton Robbins (Lyman) over Nick Morris (Groton Area) (Dec 6-3)
- 152 Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) wins by forfeit
- 160 Tance Wagner (Lyman) wins by forfeit
- 170 Double Forfeit
- 182 Rory McManus (Lyman) over Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) (Dec 4-3)

Marion/Freeman 42, Groton Area 28

- 182 Double Forfeit
- 195 Raymond Arnold (Marion/Freeman) wins by forfeit
- 220 Gavin Englund (Groton Area) wins by forfeit
- 285 Double Forfeit
- 106 Brody Gossen (Marion/Freeman) over Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) (Fall 0:55)
- 113 Easton Tschetter (Marion/Freeman) over Jon Bisbee (Groton Area) (Fall 0:55)
- 120 Axle Schultz (Marion/Freeman) over Kellen Antonson (Groton Area) (Fall 3:39)
- 126 Finley McConniel (Marion/Freeman) wins by forfeit
- 132 Keaton Prehiem (Marion/Freeman) over Tristan McGannon (Groton Area) (Fall 0:31)
- 138 Isiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) wins by forfeit
- 145 Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) over Zac Saylor (Marion/Freeman) (MD 16-2)
- 152 Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) over Chris Flores (Marion/Freeman) (Fall 1:33)
- 160 Riley Tschetter (Marion/Freeman) wins by forfeit
- 170 Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) wins by forfeit

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GDILIVE.COM

Girls' Basketball DAK XII vs. NEC Clash at Madison
Saturday, Feb. 4, 2023
Groton Area vs. Canton at 12:30 p.m.

Sponsored by

Bary Keith at Harr Motors
Bierman Farm Service
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Groton Chamber of Commerce
Groton Ford
John Sieh Agency
Locke Electric
Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Bahr Spray Foam
Thunder Seed with John Wheeting



\$5 ticket to watch can be purchased at GDILIVE.COM.
GDI Subscribers can watch for free

GDILIVE.COM

Boys' Basketball at the Groton Area Arena
Tuesday, Feb. 7, 2023
Groton Area vs. North Central

JV game at 6 p.m. sponsored by Larry & Val Fliehs

Varsity Game to follow Sponsored by

Bary Keith at Harr Motors
Bierman Farm Service
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Groton Chamber of Commerce
Groton Ford
John Sieh Agency
Locke Electric
Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Bahr Spray Foam
Thunder Seed with John Wheeting



\$5 ticket to watch can be purchased at GDILIVE.COM.
GDI Subscribers can watch for free

GDILIVE.COM

Junior High Boys Basketball at Groton Area
Monday, Feb. 6, 2023, 5:30 p.m.



Groton Area vs. Aberdeen Christian



Sponsored by

Akaska Tavern & Bait Shop

\$5 ticket to watch can be purchased at GDILIVE.COM.
GDI Subscribers can watch for free

GDILIVE.COM

Boys' Basketball
Thursday, Feb. 9, 2023

Groton Area at Redfield

JH Boys game at 5 p.m. (1 combined game)
sponsored by Akaska Tavern & Bait Shop

JV game at 6 p.m. sponsored by Grandma & Grandpa

Varsity Game to follow Sponsored by

Bary Keith at Harr Motors
Bierman Farm Service
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Groton Chamber of Commerce
Groton Ford
John Sieh Agency
Locke Electric
Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Bahr Spray Foam
Thunder Seed with John Wheeting



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GDILIVE.COM

Girls' Basketball at the Groton Area Arena
Thursday, Feb. 9, 2023

Groton Area vs. Elk Point-Jefferson

JV game at 4 p.m. sponsored by Mr. Anonymous

Varsity Game to follow Sponsored by



Bary Keith at Harr Motors
Bierman Farm Service
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Groton Chamber of Commerce
Groton Ford
John Sieh Agency
Locke Electric
Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Bahr Spray Foam
Thunder Seed with John Wheeting



Games called by Shane Clark

\$5 ticket to watch can be purchased at GDILIVE.COM.

GDI Subscribers can watch for free

GDILIVE.COM

Girls' Basketball
Friday, Feb. 10, 2023

Groton Area hosting Redfield

C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV sponsored by Mr. Anonymous

Varsity Game to follow Sponsored by



Bary Keith at Harr Motors
Bierman Farm Service
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Groton Chamber of Commerce
Groton Ford
John Sieh Agency
Locke Electric
Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Bahr Spray Foam
Thunder Seed with John Wheeting



\$5 ticket to watch can be purchased at GDILIVE.COM.

GDI Subscribers can watch for free

GDILIVE.COM

Double Header Basketball at Mobridge-Pollock
Saturday, Feb. 11, 2023

Girls JV Game @ 1 PM in HS Gym sponsored by Larry & Val Flihs
Boys JV Game @ 1 PM in MS Gym sponsored by Ed & Connie Stauch

Varsity Games to follow Sponsored by



Bary Keith at Harr Motors
Bierman Farm Service
Blocker Construction
Dacotah Bank
Groton Chamber of Commerce
Groton Ford
John Sieh Agency
Locke Electric
Milbrandt Enterprises, Inc.
Spanier Harvesting & Trucking
Bahr Spray Foam
Thunder Seed with John Wheeting



\$5 ticket to watch can be purchased at GDILIVE.COM.

GDI Subscribers can watch for free



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Legislative roundup: Elections, transgender kids and Noem's first signatures

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 3, 2023 4:39 PM

PIERRE – Aside from the ongoing saga of censured-and-reinstated Sen. Julie Frye-Mueller and an emotional debate on transgender health care, elections were the major theme this week in the Legislature.

Our own Josh Haiar spent Friday morning in the House State Affairs Committee, where he heard debate on a few of the 46 election-related bills filed as of 1 p.m. Friday.

Here's a link to the election bills. Here's another for the "election verification" bills.

One of those bills, SB 55, would ban ranked-choice voting. It's an option that isn't currently used in South Dakota elections. The bill passed on the Senate floor Thursday and is headed to a House committee.

Josh is working on a rundown of the election proposals and the competing visions emerging from different factions of the Legislature.

Keep your eyes peeled, readers.

Another big topic this week? Trans health care.

We heard emotional debate on House Bill 1080, which would prohibit certain kinds of health care for transgender youth.

Supporter Rep. Brandei Schaeffbauer, R-Aberdeen, quoted Martin Luther King Jr.

Another supporter, Rep. Liz May, R-Kyle, compared gender-affirming health care to lobotomies and other medical procedures that were once common but are now frowned upon.

None of that sat well with the bill's opponents, including the South Dakota Legislature's first openly gay male lawmaker, Democrat Rep. Kameron Nelson of Sioux Falls.

Nelson called the MLK quote "reprehensible" in the context of HB 1080, and vowed to fight for the LG-BTQ+ community with this line: "I'm here, I'm queer, and I'm not leaving Pierre."

HB 1080 passed the House 60-10 and heads to a Senate committee.

Lastly, Gov. Kristi Noem signed the first 2023 bills into law this week.

The big one was Senate Bill 41, which frees up \$200 million in infrastructure funds to support the construction of workforce housing – funding that was supposed to be available last year.

Here's a press release covering other new laws, and another one about Noem's signature on an unemployment insurance tax cut.

Here's an update on what happened this week with the bills we're tracking:

Prison-jail costs: Those cost estimates for bills that would impact prison and jail populations? Unless Gov. Kristi Noem vetoes HB 1003, they're going away. The Senate passed the bill 33-1 on Monday, and it already passed the House.

Kids and crime: SB 3 would require law enforcement to notify schools of suspected student misbehavior. Makenzie Huber had a story on that one right here. SB 3 squeaked by 18-16 on the Senate floor and now heads to a House committee.

Free state IDs: HB 1103 would have let low-income South Dakotans get free state identification cards. The House Transportation Committee killed the bipartisan bill 8-3 on Tuesday. The Department of Public Safety was opposed, in part because the DPS "has no way to verify" if a person is actually below the poverty line.

Opioid harm reduction: HB 1041, another bipartisan bill, would legalize fentanyl test strips, which can detect the presence of the sometimes-deadly synthetic opioid in other drugs. The House passed that one

64-2. Next up: Senate Judiciary.

Adult day centers: HB 1078 would offer up \$5 million to support adult day centers for the elderly, which were once more common in South Dakota. It passed Joint Appropriations 13-0.

Medicaid: The House voted 60-8 Tuesday to advance House Joint Resolution 5004, which would put an amendment on the ballot to allow lawmakers to consider imposing work requirements for Medicaid recipients. Voters backed Medicaid expansion in November. That's on to Senate Health and Human Services.

Sales taxes: The House Committee on Appropriations threw its unanimous support behind HB 1137, a proposal to lower the state sales tax a half percentage point – which is a bigger tax cut than Gov. Kristi Noem has proposed. That vote came Tuesday.

Court-appointed attorneys: HB 1064 would create a task force to study South Dakota's approach to public defense. It's an expensive constitutional requirement for counties, and the state doesn't offer much financial help. Passage in the Senate would put it on Gov. Noem's desk.

Lawmaker travel: SB 68 would've changed the approval process for lawmakers attending out-of-state events. The House nixed it 60-8.

Lithium tax: A bill to levy a severance tax on lithium mining, which had passed the House, died on a 4-2 vote in a Senate committee.

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

Chinese surveillance balloon now drifting across the middle of the U.S., Pentagon confirms

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - FEBRUARY 3, 2023 12:14 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken will postpone his planned trip to Beijing after the U.S. detected a Chinese surveillance balloon hovering over Montana.

A senior State Department official said Friday that despite the Chinese government claiming the balloon had entered U.S. airspace accidentally, its presence was a "clear violation of sovereignty."

The Pentagon press secretary confirmed midday Friday that the balloon is now over the center of the U.S. and people can look up and see it. He told reporters that we're "not going to get into an hour by hour location of the balloon."

The balloon does not pose a "physical or military risk to people on the ground," said Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon press secretary.

He added that what makes this different from similar events "is the duration and length of which it has been over U.S territory."

President Joe Biden was briefed about the balloon Tuesday, according to White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre.

Ryder said midday Friday that the balloon was traveling at an altitude of 60,000 feet and was expected to remain over the U.S. "for a few days."

Ryder said the balloon is "maneuverable" and "has changed course," but would not answer reporters' questions about a specific location or when the aircraft changed its position.

U.S. Sen. Roger Marshall, of Kansas, early Friday afternoon posted to Twitter that the balloon was over his state.

"I can confirm the Chinese spy ballon (sic) is over NE KS. My staff is in contact with law enforcement officials," he wrote. "I condemn any attempts the Chinese make to spy on Americans. President Biden must protect the sovereignty of the U.S. whether it's our airspace or the southern border."

The Pentagon did not immediately answer an inquiry to confirm Marshall's assertion.

A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson on Friday characterized the vehicle as a civilian airship used for meteorological research that deviated from its planned flight path.

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"The Chinese side regrets the unintended entry of the airship into US airspace due to force majeure," the spokesperson said in a statement — in other words, an action that could not be anticipated or controlled.

Blinken was scheduled to depart for Beijing Friday night for what was meant to be a wide-ranging meeting with Chinese counterparts following President Joe Biden's November meeting in Bali with China President Xi Jinping.

However, after consultations with the Pentagon and Congress, the State Department concluded that "conditions are not right at this moment for Secretary Blinken to travel to China," the senior State Department official said, speaking to reporters on background.

Montana's U.S. Sen. John Tester said Friday morning that he has been monitoring the situation.

"I am in contact with DOD and Intelligence officials about this completely unacceptable provocation," Tester wrote on Twitter early Friday. "I am receiving a classified briefing once I return to Washington and will hold everyone accountable until I get real answers."

The Pentagon confirmed Thursday that the U.S. had detected and begun tracking the balloon, which is traveling at a high altitude, "well above commercial air traffic and does not present a military or physical threat to people on the ground," according to Ryder.

"Instances of this kind of balloon activity have been observed previously over the past several years. Once the balloon was detected, the U.S. government acted immediately to protect against the collection of sensitive information," Ryder said.

The "sizable" balloon entered U.S. continental airspace "a couple of days ago," a Pentagon senior official told reporters Thursday.

The official said the Pentagon is "very confident" the balloon belonged to the People's Republic of China and that the U.S. gained custody of the balloon when it entered U.S. airspace.

Officials decided not to shoot it down because of the risk to people and private property below, the senior official said.

The balloon is carrying a "payload" underneath, which Ryder described as surveillance equipment but would not give further details.

"It is big enough that, in reviewing our approach, we do recognize that any potential debris field would be significant and potentially cause civilian injuries or deaths, or significant property damage," Ryder said Friday.

The balloon was spotted within days of a Montana state Legislature hearing on a bill that would prevent foreign adversaries from buying up agricultural land in Montana, States Newsroom's Daily Montanan reported.

Montana is one of the several sites where U.S. nuclear missiles are based.

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

Workforce woes, nursing home closures pressure sustainability of long term care

Expert warns of industry 'crisis' becoming a 'catastrophe'

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 4, 2023 12:30 AM

Iley and Frank Petereit bought their burial plots two decades ago.

Frank likes to think of himself as a planner, so he has most everything worked out for when they eventually, in his words, "kick the can." The now 92-year-olds have a gravestone at the site, already etched with everything but the year of their eventual deaths.

But Frank hasn't planned for long term care.

The two have lived together in their southeastern Sioux Falls home for over 55 years — and they have no intention of moving.

"I think we'll just stay here until they carry us out," Frank joked. "It's kind of comfortable here. If I lived somewhere else, there might be a lot of people I might not want to talk to."

Three decades ago, the Petereits might not have had that choice — likely being sent to a nursing home when they reached a certain age. New technology and home health services are allowing more South Dakotans than ever to age in their homes.

But that trend is trouble for the long term care industry.

With more people aging at home and living longer, they need more care when many finally do enter assisted living and nursing homes, which requires more staff in an already difficult workforce landscape. And as the baby boomers near the end of their lives over the next 20 years, an increased demand in long term care services will further strain the industry.

"What's been a crisis is really starting to become a catastrophe," said Mark Deak, executive director of the South Dakota Health Care Association.

Nursing home closures pressure other long term care services

Many nursing home residents are dependent on Medicaid, the federal-state health insurance program for low-income people. While Gov. Kristi Noem has proposed to increase nursing homes' Medicaid reimbursement rates by 21%, up to about 90% of the cost to care for Medicaid patients, more nursing homes are likely to close over the next few years even if the Legislature approves the increase this session, long term care experts say.

That's because Medicaid reimbursement isn't the sole issue. The workforce shortage and low occupancy rates also play a role.

Fifteen South Dakota nursing homes have closed over five years, and seven have closed in the last 12 months, according to Deak. There are still around 155 state-registered assisted living facilities and over 90 nursing homes in the state. There are also a number of retirement communities, companies offering home health services and community-based adult day services.

The rise in assisted living facilities over the last 30 years mitigates the loss of nursing homes.

It was the state's plan to encourage investments in long term care options outside of nursing homes, said Kitty Kinsman, former secretary of the state Department of Health during the Mickelson and Janklow administrations. The state established a moratorium, or a limit, on nursing home beds to do so.

She said long term care has been a challenge for decades.

"As I'm sure you've heard, no one wants to go to a nursing home," Kinsman said. "No one wants to end up there. To the extent that society and community have created living options for people to stay longer and be healthier in a social setting that continues to improve their quality of life, we should be doing that. It makes sense from a cost-wise to social standpoint."

However, the state has seen a decrease in assisted living facilities over the past five years as well as nursing homes. Adult day services, which provide programming and supervision for aging and disabled adults during the day so they can continue to live in their homes, have decreased from 30 to three in the

last seven years.

Enough beds, but not enough workers

According to a June 2022 report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nursing facilities have seen the largest drop in employment in the health care sector since before the coronavirus pandemic. While South Dakota assisted living and home health care have dropped by 37 and 41 workers since 2020, respectively, nursing facilities have lost roughly 1,030 workers.

That's a problem as aging baby boomers require more long term care services. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that more than 27% of the state's population will be over age 60 in seven years — an increase of 38% from 2012.

Facilities have enough beds to accommodate the need, officials say, but not the staff.

Even though long term care facilities are already strapped for cash because of low Medicaid reimbursement rates, many have had to hire temporary staff and travel nurses to fill the immediate need, said Veronnica Smith, administrator of Countryside Living, a senior living community in Mitchell. Smith has worked in the long term care industry for three decades.

Countryside Living hired temporary staff to fill the equivalent of 2.5 full-time positions at \$50 an hour for two months last year, which is more than twice the cost of traditional staff.

"Financially, that brought us down to a very small margin," Smith said.

If long term care facilities can't find staff to fill positions or can't afford temporary staff, that impacts their ability to fill beds and forces them to shut down wings or reduce occupancy rates, said Tammy Hatting, chief operating officer with the South Dakota Association of Healthcare Organizations.

In March 2019, nursing homes in South Dakota operated at an average 84% occupancy rate. In December, they were at an average 77.66% — some around 50%, including nursing homes in Mitchell, Gettysburg, Winner, Eagle Butte and Sturgis.

Oftentimes, people who go into nursing homes become Medicaid eligible as the cost of the care depletes their savings. In an average nursing home, more than half of the residents are on Medicaid, said Doug Ekeren, regional president and CEO of Avera Sacred Heart and Queen of Peace hospitals.

If nursing homes aren't adequately reimbursed to make a profit and must close, that puts more pressure on the rest of the long term care industry, Ekeren said.

More people aging in their homes as nursing homes close

The demand for home services has never been greater.

Avera@Home, the health care system's home health services program, serves over 1,000 patients with another 500 or so through personal care services, said Sandy Dieleman, president and CEO of Avera@Home. Personal care services include cooking, cleaning, doing laundry and doing other household chores.

By comparison, Avera serves between 1,200 and 1,300 nursing home residents between its 10 facilities, Ekeren estimates.

The state Department of Human Services' Dakota at Home program receives about 14,000 calls a year inquiring about services to help people age in place, according to the department. And according to a national survey, 88% of adults say they want to age in their home, Dieleman added.

But even as home health becomes a more popular option, it's not the silver bullet to solve the state's long term care issues, because of South Dakota's geography and rural nature.

It isn't cost effective for home health nurses to drive an hour to visit one patient in rural South Dakota when they can see several more in the same timeframe in an urban setting, Smith said. That underscores the state's need for independent living and retirement communities in the coming years.

"Our smaller, rural communities are not going to have the ability they're used to of staying in their own community as they age," Smith said. "If you live in Tripp, you might have to travel to Sioux Falls or Rapid City to get services you need."

Finding workers and seeking further Medicaid reimbursement

Recruiting people into the long term care workforce is one of the biggest challenges the industry must tackle.

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Organizations are hoping to "widen the pool" of potential candidates, Hatting said, by reaching out to high school students, luring retirees back into the workplace and searching outside of the state. The South Dakota Association of Healthcare Organizations has extended a social media workforce recruitment campaign across the country.

Avera has hired nurses from outside the United States to fill open positions, Ekeren said. The health care system is also using its internal travel nursing agency to temporarily fill positions.

"This is a way for us to still retain them and provide them with new opportunities and challenges and help other locations where they need assistance," Ekeren said. "I think that is positive and has significantly lowered costs for travelers outside of Avera."

Sanford and the Good Samaritan Society are also hiring nurses internationally to staff hospitals, nursing homes and other long term care facilities. The integrated companies hope virtual care will serve as a solution as well, expanding access for South Dakotans by making it easier to make doctor appointments without travel and by freeing up nursing home staff to focus on bedside care while virtual nurses handle paperwork and records.

The health care system is also using benefits, flexible scheduling and professional training to entice potential employees, said Nate Schema, Good Samaritan Society president and CEO, in an emailed statement.

Meanwhile, the industry is waiting to see what the Legislature does with Gov. Noem's proposal to raise Medicaid reimbursement rates. Because of inflation, bumping Medicaid reimbursements to 90 percent of the cost of care is actually more like 84 percent, Deak said.

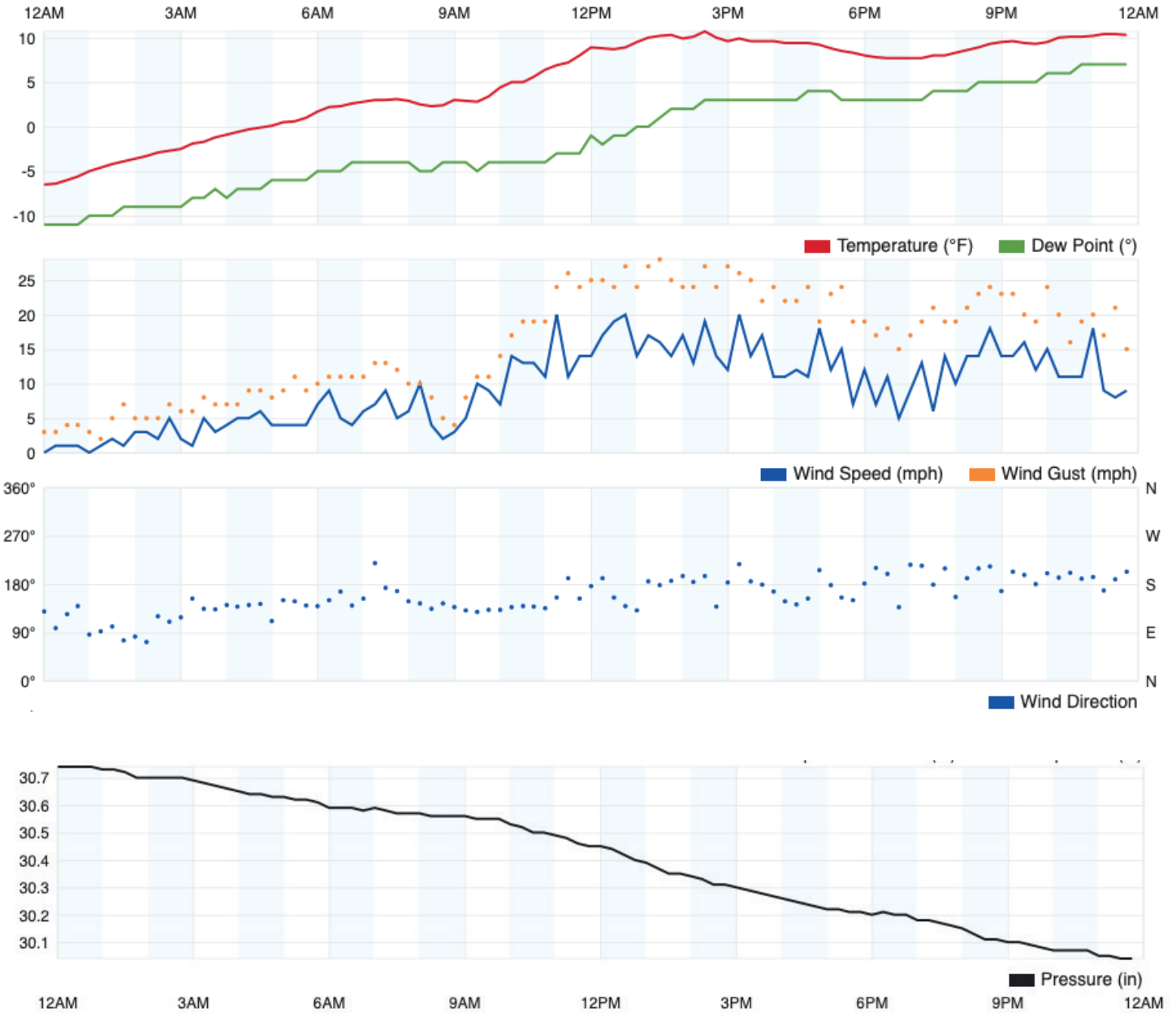
Ekeren said the increased reimbursement rate would "buy us some time as we work with the state to figure this out."

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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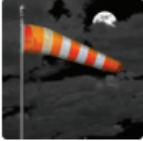



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday	Monday Night	Tuesday
						
Decreasing Clouds	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny	Increasing Clouds and Windy	Mostly Cloudy and Windy then Mostly Cloudy	Partly Cloudy and Windy	Sunny
High: 36 °F	Low: 19 °F	High: 30 °F	Low: 24 °F	High: 34 °F	Low: 19 °F	High: 36 °F

Today

Feb 4th, 2023



Highs 32 to 45°

Coldest northeast SD & west central MN, warmest central SD.

Sunday



28 to 43°

Monday



32 to 45°

Coldest northeast SD & west central MN, warmest central SD.



February 4, 2023 4:45 AM



Today will mark the first day of a long string of mild temperatures expected across the region. Highs will reach the 30s and 40s, with the warmest readings across central SD. After some morning mid and high level clouds, look for increasing sunshine during the afternoon hours. Keep in mind we will be dealing with some wind today as well, especially across north central SD. We will begin eating away at the snow pack over the next several days.

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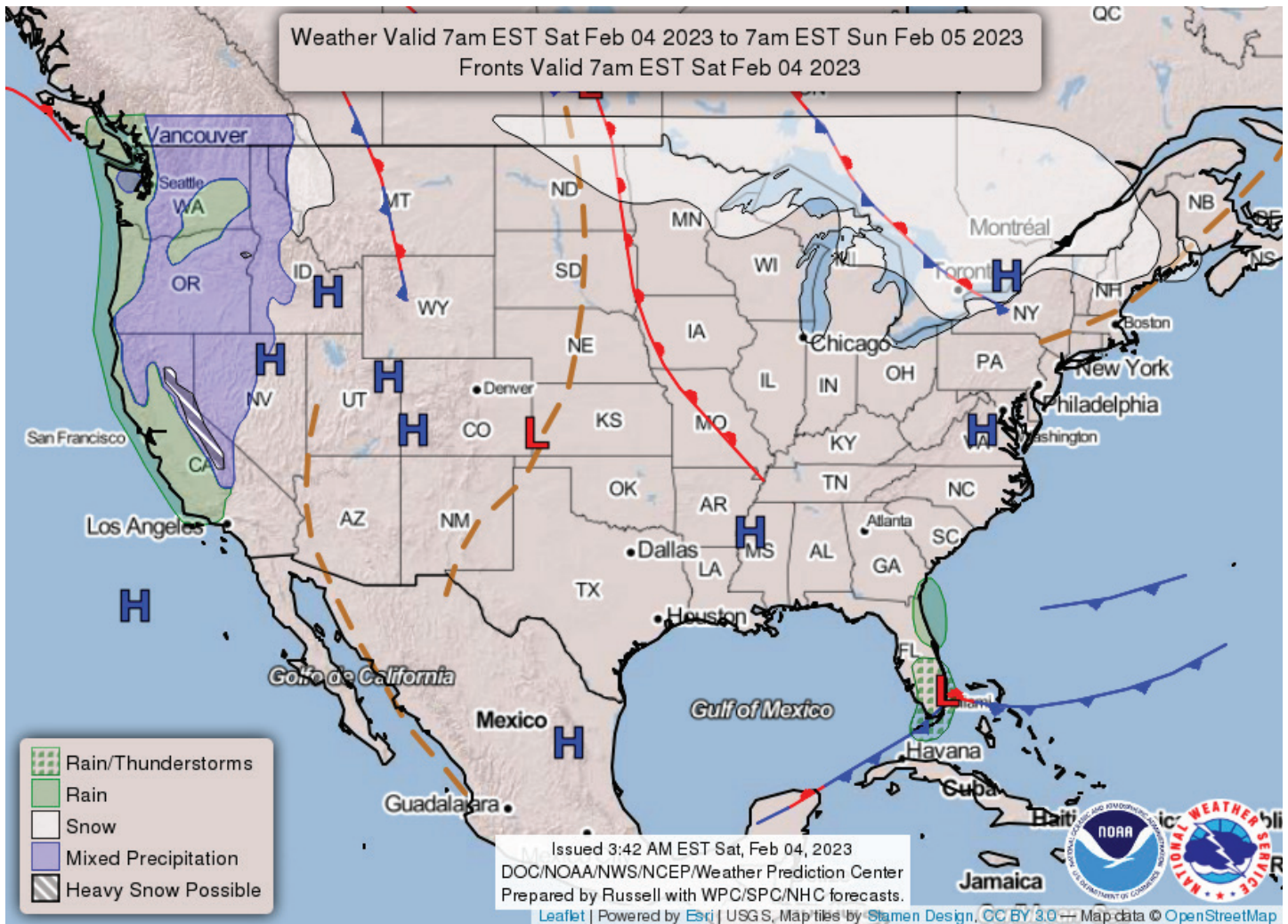
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 11 °F at 2:29 PM
Low Temp: -7 °F at 12:00 AM
Wind: 29 mph at 2:02 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 56 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 55 in 2005
Record Low: -36 in 1893
Average High: 26
Average Low: 3
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.08
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.63
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:44:45 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:46:31 AM



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Today in Weather History

February 4, 1984: A fast-moving blizzard pounded the northeast and east-central with light snow and raging winds. Snow amounts were less than 2 inches region-wide. As the storm progressed, temperatures dropped thirty degrees in three hours as winds gusted to 70 mph. Fierce winds struck quickly, plummeting visibilities to zero, and made travel difficult in a matter of minutes. No travel was advised across much of the area. Hundreds of travelers became stranded in the white-out, and the highway crews were pulled off the road to wait for decreasing winds. There were also some spotty power outages.

1842: A dreadful tornado passed over Mayfield, Kirkland, and other Cuyahoga and Lake Counties in Ohio. According to the Cleveland Herald, no less than 30 houses, barns, and buildings were entirely demolished or very much shattered. A "report from Kirtland says that one man and one child are dead."

1924: In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 20.3 inches of snow fell in 24 hours. This ranks as the most snowfall in 24 hours since 1884. This storm caused over \$1 million in damage. Streetcar and train service crippled. Snowdrifts of 8 to 10 feet high were common, along with much ice on trees and wires. Schools were closed, and several plate glass windows were broken.

1995: A massive nor'easter pounded areas from the southern Mid-Atlantic to northern New England. It would be the only significant storm in the 94-95 winter season. Over 20 inches of snow buried parts of upstate New York. Wind chills dropped as cold as 40 degrees below zero. Behind the storm, arctic air crossing the relatively warm waters of the Great Lakes produced intense lake effect squalls for nearly two weeks from the 4th through the 14th. Snowfall totals for the storm ranged from near two to seven feet. During the storm east of Lake Ontario, snow was falling at the incredible rate of five inches an hour! The heavy snow combined with strong winds produced whiteouts and hazardous driving. Actual storm totals downwind of Lake Erie included: Erie County: West Seneca 39 inches, Orchard Park 36 inches, Cheektowaga 36 inches, Colden 32 inches, and Buffalo Airport 31 inches; Genesee County: Corfu 38 inches; Chautauqua County: Sinclairville 27 inches and Jamestown 15 inches. Downwind of Lake Ontario, storm totals included: Oswego County: Palermo 85 inches, Fulton 60 inches, and Oswego 46 inches; Lewis County: Montague 66 inches, Highmarket 48 inches, and Lowville 36 inches; Cayuga County: Fairhaven 36 inches, Wayne County: Wolcott 22 inches; and Jefferson County: Adams 47 inches.

1961 - The third great snowstorm of the winter season struck the northeastern U.S. Cortland NY received 40 inches of snow. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Gales lashed the northern Pacific coast and the coast of northern New England. A storm in the central U.S. produced five inches of snow at Rapid City SD. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - A winter storm produced heavy snow from the Upper Ohio Valley to New England, with up to 12 inches reported in Vermont and New Hampshire. Strong northerly winds in the Upper Midwest produced wind chill readings as cold as 60 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Two dozen cities in the south central and northwestern U.S. reported new record low temperatures for the date. The low of 14 below zero at Boise ID was a February record. A winter storm continued in the southwestern U.S. Alta UT reported 49 inches of snow in four days, Wolf Creek CO reported 66 inches in six days, including 28 inches in 24 hours, and up to 84 inches buried the ski resorts of northern New Mexico in three days. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A winter storm produced heavy snow in the northeastern U.S. Snowfall totals in Maine ranged up to 13 inches at Gorham, with 11 inches reported at Portland. Totals in New Hampshire ranged up to 14 inches at Franconia, with 13 inches reported at Portsmouth. A mixture of snow, sleet and freezing rain caused numerous traffic accidents in eastern New York State resulting in three deaths and fourteen injuries. Subzero cold also gripped parts of the northeastern U.S. Caribou ME and Houlton ME reported morning lows of 15 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2004 - 7.15 inches of rain deluges Pinson, AL, setting an all-time record rainfall over 24 hours for the town. The Weather Doctor

2007 - Kahului reports a minimum temperature of 54°F, a daily low temperature record for the date. The Weather Doctor

2011: A winter storm settled four to six inches of snow over northern Texas, including Dallas, just days before the Super Bowl between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Green Bay Packers.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

EYES OF DISCERNMENT

Beware the "buts" of life. They are dangerous.

"You know I really love Larry, but he's too smart for his own good." Or

"You know Al is a great teacher, but he uses the NLT instead of the ESV in class."

Or

"Paula does a great job keeping all of the records of the College, but she is so slow in getting out our grades and even makes mistakes on my grades." Or

"I the 'Seeds,' but wish they used a different, larger sized print." Or

And the list goes on.

We use "buts" to hide our true feelings and intentions. We speak the truth and then try to cover it up so others will think we are tentative, thoughtful and want to give the other person the benefit of the doubt. In other words, we want it both ways so we won't be convicted of our true position or feelings.

"A rich man may be wise in his own eyes, but a poor man who has discernment sees through him." In other words, the rich man is unable to see himself for all the good things he thinks he is doing. He is unaware of his inadequacies, his deceit, his taking advantage of others, even his greed. Perhaps he unable to recognize what he is doing because he has too much.

What is more important than the words we use to describe others is the fact that we are more likely to see what we want to see as the faults and failures in others rather than the flaws and foolishness in ourselves. We must look upward to Christ and see ourselves as He sees us.

Prayer: Help us, Father, to look at ourselves in light of Your Word and correct ourselves before we condemn others. May our lives be an example to others at all times. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: A rich man may be wise in his own eyes, but a poor man who has discernment sees through him. Proverbs 28:11



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:
02.03.23

1 4 50 54 59 17

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$31,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.01.23

10 16 33 34 45 4

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$34,570,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 14 Mins 4 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.03.23

2 20 31 34 48 3

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 44 Mins 4 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.01.23

1 9 15 24 25

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$38,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 14 Mins 4 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.01.23

4 23 39 57 63 26

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 13 Mins 4 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.01.23

31 43 58 59 66 9

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$700,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 13 Mins 4 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Baltic 65, Parker 36

Bon Homme 53, Avon 44

Brandon Valley 78, Rapid City Central 58

Bridgewater-Emery 59, Gayville-Volin 27

Clark/Willow Lake 73, Sisseton 33

Colome 66, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 33

Corsica/Stickney 54, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 39

Deubrook 79, Arlington 42

Ethan 50, Kimball/White Lake 38

Great Plains Lutheran 63, Wilmot 56

Harrisburg 66, Aberdeen Central 33

Huron 65, Spearfish 58

Ipswich 64, North Central Co-Op 47

Irene-Wakonda 56, Menno 26

James Valley Christian 63, Faulkton 38

McCook Central/Montrose 51, Garretson 46

Milbank 42, Aberdeen Roncalli 34

Mitchell 57, Sturgis Brown 31

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 65, Chamberlain 50

Newell 40, Edgemont 34

Parkston 56, Gregory 43

Pine Ridge 55, Red Cloud 47

Rapid City Christian 73, Chadron, Neb. 61

Redfield 65, Webster 43

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 57, Rapid City Stevens 44

St. Thomas More 48, Winner 26

Sully Buttes 81, Potter County 71

Tripp-Delmont/Armour 59, Marty Indian 51

Viborg-Hurley 59, Freeman Academy/Marion 42

Wall 53, Kadoka Area 42

Watertown 57, Sioux Falls Washington 54

Waubay/Summit 78, Northwestern 55

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Andes Central/Dakota Christian 64, Colome 19

Arlington 58, Deubrook 35

Brandon Valley 45, Rapid City Central 38

Colman-Egan 59, Estelline/Hendricks 36

Elkton-Lake Benton 52, DeSmet 49

Ethan 61, Kimball/White Lake 28

Flandreau 49, Sioux Valley 47

Gayville-Volin 47, Bridgewater-Emery 35

Harrisburg 40, Aberdeen Central 38

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Huron 58, Spearfish 54
Irene-Wakonda 45, Menno 25
James Valley Christian 41, Faulkton 33
Mitchell 55, Sturgis Brown 30
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 55, Chamberlain 17
Newell 50, Edgemont 45
North Central Co-Op 51, Ipswich 44
Northwestern 44, Waubay/Summit 34
Parkston 56, Gregory 43
Pierre 59, Yankton 18
Rapid City Christian 62, Chadron, Neb. 36
Red Cloud 53, Pine Ridge 29
Sioux Falls Lincoln 51, Brookings 48
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 68, Rapid City Stevens 42
Sioux Falls Washington 49, Watertown 36
St. Thomas More 48, Winner 26
Sully Buttes 63, Potter County 52
Tiospa Zina Tribal 52, Flandreau Indian 24
Todd County 69, Bennett County 25
Tripp-Delmont/Armour 55, Marty Indian 42
Wall 65, Kadoka Area 43
West Central 64, Madison 31

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

Tribes, researchers debate final fate of P-22, famed LA puma

By STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The life of Los Angeles' most famous mountain lion followed a path known only to the biggest of Hollywood stars: Discovered on-camera in 2012, the cougar adopted a stage name and enjoyed a decade of celebrity status before his tragic death late last year.

The popular puma gained fame as P-22 and cast a spotlight on the troubled population of California's endangered mountain lions and their decreasing genetic diversity. Now, with his remains stored in a freezer at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, wildlife officials and representatives from the region's tribal communities are debating his next act.

Biologists and conservationists want to retain samples of P-22's tissue, fur and whiskers for scientific testing to aid in future wildlife research. But some representatives of the Chumash, Tataviam and Gabrielino (Tongva) peoples say his body should be returned, untouched, to the ancestral lands where he spent his life so he can be honored with a traditional burial.

In tribal communities here, mountain lions are regarded as relatives and considered teachers. P-22 is seen as an extraordinary animal, according to Alan Salazar, a tribal member of the Fernandeano Tataviam Band of Mission Indians and a descendent of the Chumash tribe who said his death should be honored appropriately.

"We want to bury him like he's a 'wot,' like a 'tomier,'" Salazar said, "which are two of the words for chief or leader" in the Chumash and Tataviam languages, respectively. "Because that's what he was."

Likely born about 12 years ago in the western Santa Monica Mountains, wildlife officials believe the aggression of P-22's father and his own struggle to find a mate amid a dwindling population drove the cougar to cross two heavily traveled freeways and migrate east.

He made his debut in 2012, captured on a trail camera by biologist Miguel Ordeñana in Griffith Park, home of the Hollywood sign and part of ancestral Gabrielino (Tongva) land.

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Promptly tagged and christened P-22 — as the 22nd puma in a National Park Service study — he spawned a decade of devotion among Californians, who saw themselves mirrored in his bachelor status, his harrowing journey to the heart of Los Angeles and his prime real estate in Griffith Park amid the city's urban sprawl. Los Angeles and Mumbai are the world's only major cities where large cats live — mountain lions in one, leopards in the other.

Angelenos will celebrate his life on Saturday at the Greek Theater in Griffith Park in a memorial put on by the "Save LA Cougars." P-22 inspired the group to campaign for a wildlife crossing over a Los Angeles-area freeway that will allow big cats and other animals safe passage between the mountains and wildlands to the north. The bridge broke ground in April.

P-22's star dimmed last November, when he killed a Chihuahua on a dogwalker's leash in the Hollywood Hills and likely attacked another weeks later. Wildlife officials said the puma seemed to be "exhibiting signs of distress," in part due to aging.

They captured P-22 on Dec. 12 in a residential backyard in the trendy Los Feliz neighborhood. Examinations revealed a skull fracture — the result of being hit by a car — and chronic illnesses including a skin infection and diseases of the kidneys and liver.

The city's cherished big cat was euthanized five days later.

Los Angeles mourned P-22 as one of its own, with songs, stories and murals crying "long live the king." Post-It notes of remembrance blanketed an exhibit wall at the Natural History Museum and children's paw print messages covered a tableau outside the LA Zoo.

While fame is fleeting for most celebrities, P-22's legacy lives on — though in what form is now up for debate.

The Natural History Museum took possession of the animal's remains, prompting swift condemnation by tribal leaders who feared P-22's body could be taxidermized and put on display. Samples taken during the animal's necropsy also are causing concerns among the tribal communities about burying the cougar intact.

"In order to continue on your journey into the afterlife, you have to be whole," said Desiree Martinez, an archaeologist and member of the Gabrielino (Tongva) community.

A year before P-22's death, Ordeñana — the wildlife biologist whose camera first spotted the cougar and is now a senior manager of community science at the Natural History Museum — had applied for a permit from the state for the museum to receive the mountain lion's remains when he died. Typically an animal carcass would be discarded.

Ordeñana and the state Department of Fish and Wildlife have apologized, saying they should have spoken with the tribes from the start.

Museum, state and other officials began talks with the tribes Monday in the hopes of reaching a compromise. Ordeñana and other scientists are advocating to retain at least some of P-22's tissue samples to preserve future research opportunities for the endangered animals as new technologies and techniques arise.

"We're trying to see what can we do differently — regarding outreach, regarding our process — that is feasible for us as an institution," Ordeñana said, "but respectful of both the scientific and the cultural-historic legacy of these animals."

Salazar and Martinez, however, do not believe samples should be taken from the animal's remains and held by the museum in perpetuity.

"We've been studied like the mountain lion has been studied," Salazar said. "Those bones of my tribal ancestors are in boxes so they can be studied by future generations. We're not a science project."

Beth Pratt, California executive director for the National Wildlife Federation and a key player in developing the wildlife crossing, said it's important to balance the different arguments to ensure the diminishing LA cougar population has a future.

"We do need data from these animals, even P-22, for science," said Pratt, who calls him "the Brad Pitt" of pumas.

Chuck Bonham, director of the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, said the P-22 discussions have

forced his agency and others to reckon with their outreach to California's tribes.

"I think he'll live forever in this way," Bonham said.

Martinez, of the Gabrielino (Tongva) community, said the beloved mountain lion's death also symbolizes how humans must take responsibility for respecting animals' lives.

"We are wildlife. We are creatures of nature, just as all the animals and plants are," Martinez said. "What can we do to make sure that the creatures that we are sharing this nature with have the ability to survive and live on — just like us?"

Pope encourages South Sudanese, will raise plight of women

By NICOLE WINFIELD and DENG MACHOL Associated Press

JUBA, South Sudan (AP) — Pope Francis sought Saturday to console the long-suffering people of South Sudan as he opened his first full day in a country beset by conflict, poverty and humanitarian crises by encouraging priests and nuns to serve their flocks by joining in their tears.

After arriving in the world's newest country on the first-ever papal visit Friday, Francis was spending Saturday ministering first to church personnel and then to South Sudanese who have been forced by fighting, flooding and other crises to leave their homes.

Francis was highlighting in particular the plight of South Sudanese women, half of whom are married before age 18, are subject to rampant sexual violence and then face the world's highest maternal mortality rate.

"Let us ask ourselves what it means for us to be ministers of God in a land scarred by war, hatred, violence, and poverty," Francis said in St. Theresa Cathedral in the capital, Juba. "How can we exercise our ministry in this land, along the banks of a river bathed in so much innocent blood, among the tear-stained faces of the people entrusted to us?"

Lush in oil and other natural resources but beset by years of civil war and conflict, South Sudan is one of the world's poorest countries and is responsible for Africa's worst refugee crisis: More than 2 million people have fled the country and another 2 million are displaced within its borders.

Joined by Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and the Presbyterian head of the Church of Scotland, Francis is seeking to draw global attention to the country's plight. The aim of the novel ecumenical visit is to encourage South Sudan's political leaders to implement a 2018 peace accord ending a civil war that erupted after the overwhelmingly Christian country gained independence from mostly Muslim Sudan in 2011.

The deal and many of its key provisions, including the formation of a national unified army, has stalled amid political infighting and continued clashes around the country that have forced the postponement of the first presidential election for another two years.

At the cathedral on Saturday, Francis urged South Sudan's bishops, priests, nuns and seminarians not to join religious life for social prestige, but to serve their flocks by accompanying them.

"It is precisely this art of stepping into the middle of our brothers and sisters that the church's pastors need to cultivate: the ability to step into the middle of their sufferings and tears, into the middle of their hunger for God and their thirst for love," he said.

On a day when South Sudan's suffering women are expected to take the pride of place, Francis heard of the horrific sacrifices some nuns have made. Sisters Mary Daniel Abut and Regina Roba Luete of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart Sisters were killed in a 2021 ambush along with two others.

"Thank you, on behalf of the entire Church, for your dedication, your courage, your sacrifices and your patience," Francis said.

Women and girls in South Sudan live a "hellish existence," the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan said in a report last year based on several years of interviews.

"South Sudanese women are physically assaulted while being raped at gunpoint, typically held down by men while being abused by others. They are told not to resist in the slightest way, and not to report what happened, or they will be killed," the report said.

"It's hard to convey the level of trauma of South Sudanese women whose bodies are literally the war zone," commission chair Yasmin Sooka said late last year.

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In his arrival speech Friday, Francis raised the plight of women and called for them to be protected and promoted.

Among those on hand for his visit to the cathedral on Saturday was Sister Regina Achan, who said Francis' visit would encourage other sisters to keep serving.

"We stand with them because we are their voices, we don't run away at difficult times," said Achan.

Francis' visit, she added, would awaken "serenity and peace in our hearts that we may work for peace and justice in this country."

Francis issued a blunt warning on Friday to President Salva Kiir and his onetime rival and now deputy Riek Machar that history will judge them harshly if they continue to drag their feet on implementing the peace accord.

Kiir for his part committed the government to return to peace talks — suspended last year — with groups that didn't sign onto the 2018 accord. And late Friday, the Catholic president granted presidential pardons to 71 inmates at Juba's central prison in honor of the ecumenical pilgrimage, including 36 on death row.

Francis has changed Catholic Church teaching to hold that capital punishment is inadmissible in all circumstances.

Dozens of soldiers freed in Russia-Ukraine prisoner swap

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Dozens of Russian and Ukrainian prisoners of war have returned home following a prisoner swap, officials on both sides said Saturday.

Top Ukrainian presidential aide Andriy Yermak said in a Telegram post that 116 Ukrainians were freed.

He said the released POWs include troops who held out in Mariupol during Moscow's monthslong siege that reduced the southern port city to ruins, as well as guerrilla fighters from the Kherson region and snipers captured during the ongoing fierce battles for the eastern city of Bakhmut.

Russian defense officials, meanwhile, announced that 63 Russian troops had returned from Ukraine following the swap, including some "special category" prisoners whose release was secured following mediation by the United Arab Emirates.

A statement issued Saturday by the Russian Defense Ministry did not provide details about these "special category" captives.

China plays down Blinken's canceled visit over balloon

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — China played down the cancellation of a visit by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken after a large Chinese balloon suspected of conducting surveillance on U.S. military sites roiled diplomatic relations, saying that neither side had formally announced any such plan.

"In actuality, the U.S. and China have never announced any visit, the U.S. making any such announcement is their own business, and we respect that," China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement Saturday morning.

Blinken was due to visit Beijing on Sunday for talks aimed at reducing U.S.-China tensions, the first such high-profile trip after the countries' leaders met last November in Indonesia. But the U.S. abruptly canceled the trip after the discovery of the huge balloon despite China's claim that it was merely a weather research "airship" that had blown off course.

The Pentagon rejected that out of hand — as well as China's contention that the balloon was not being used for surveillance and had only limited navigational ability.

Uncensored reactions on the Chinese internet mirrored the official government stance that the U.S. was hyping up the situation.

Many users made jokes about the balloon. Some said that since the U.S. had put restrictions on the technology that China is able to buy to weaken the Chinese tech industry, they couldn't control the balloon.

Others called it the "wandering balloon" in a pun that refers to the newly released Chinese sci-fi film

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called "The Wandering Earth 2."

Still others used it as a chance to poke fun at U.S. defenses, saying it couldn't even defend against a balloon, and nationalist influencers leapt to use the news to mock the U.S. One wrote wryly: "The U.S., because of the balloon incident, delays Blinken's visit to China."

Censorship was visible on the topic — the "wandering balloon" hashtag on Weibo was no longer searchable by Saturday evening.

"The U.S. is hyping this as a national security threat posed by China to the U.S. This type of military threat, in actuality, we haven't done this. And compared with the U.S. military threat normally aimed at us, can you say it's just little? Their surveillance planes, their submarines, their naval ships are all coming near our borders," Chinese military expert Chen Haoyang of the Taihe Institute said on Phoenix TV, one of the major national TV outlets.

The balloon was spotted earlier over Montana, which is home to one of America's three nuclear missile silo fields at Malmstrom Air Force Base, defense officials said.

President Joe Biden had declined to shoot down the balloon, following advice of defense officials who worried the debris could injure people below. Meanwhile, people with binoculars and telephoto lenses tried to find the "spy balloon" in the sky as it headed southeastward over Kansas and Missouri at 60,000 feet (18,300 meters).

The Pentagon also acknowledged reports of a second balloon flying over Latin America. "We now assess it is another Chinese surveillance balloon," Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, Pentagon press secretary, said in a statement.

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not immediately respond to a question about the second balloon.

Blinken, who had been due to depart Washington for Beijing late Friday, said he had told senior Chinese diplomat Wang Yi in a phone call that sending the balloon over the U.S. was "an irresponsible act and that (China's) decision to take this action on the eve of my visit is detrimental to the substantive discussions that we were prepared to have."

China has denied any claims of spying, and said it is a civilian-use balloon intended for meteorology research. Experts have said that their response was feasible.

But analysts said the unexpected incident will not help the strained ties between the two countries, and particularly China's initial response where it said they could not control the balloon and "regretted" that it unintentionally entered U.S. space.

On Saturday, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs again emphasized that the balloon's journey was out of its control and urged the U.S. to not "smear" it based on the balloon.

Wang said China "has always strictly followed international law, we do not accept any groundless speculation and hype. Faced with unexpected situations, both parties need to keep calm, communicate in a timely manner, avoid misjudgments and manage differences."

Alfred Wu, an associate professor at the National University of Singapore, said China's apology did not appear sincere.

"In the meantime, the relationship will not improve in the near future ... the gap is huge."

Qatar boosts influence in Lebanon amid multiple crises

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Most wealthy Gulf Arab nations followed Saudi Arabia's lead in recent years and ostracized crisis-hit Lebanon because of the growing influence of the Iranian-backed militant group Hezbollah. The exception was Qatar.

Doha has been silently expanding its influence in Lebanon. It continued receiving Lebanese leaders and pumped tens millions of dollars into helping the country's armed forces amid a historic economic meltdown.

The small, gas-rich nation in late January began seeing the fruits of its investment, when state-owned Qatar Energy replaced a Russian firm in an international consortium that will search for gas in the Mediterranean Sea off Lebanon's coast.

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And on Monday, Qatar will for the first time join a meeting in Paris along with officials from France, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. for discussions focusing on Lebanon's political and economic crises.

Qatar portrays itself as a more neutral force in a country where for decades outside powers have used Lebanon's sectarian divisions to fight their proxy battles. Saudi Arabia long backed Lebanon's Sunni Muslim factions and tried to push out Iran's influence through Shiite Hezbollah. The rivalry repeatedly pushed Lebanon to the brink of armed conflict.

Qatar, which has good ties with Iran, has been trying to advance negotiations between Tehran and Gulf nations. Its inclusion in the upcoming talks "is a signal that Iran will not be completely left out of that meeting and a recognition of the influence that Tehran has over Lebanon," said Mohamad Bazzi, a professor and director of the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University.

"With Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states less heavily involved in Lebanon, Qatar is trying to revive its mediator role in the country," he said.

Still, Qatar – one of the richest countries in the world with its natural gas wealth – so far "has shown little sign of being willing to bail out Lebanon on its own," Bazzi said.

Since late 2019, Lebanon's economy has collapsed under the weight of widespread corruption and mismanagement. The currency has lost more than 90% of its value, throwing most of the population into poverty. International donors, including Qatar, have been demanding the government implement reforms to release some \$11 billion in loans and grants. But Lebanon's politicians have resisted because reforms would weaken their grip in the country.

Qatar's involvement in Lebanon is not new.

After the 34-day war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006, Qatar helped rebuild several towns and villages that suffered major destruction in southern Lebanon. Giant billboards with signs reading "Thank You Qatar" popped up around Lebanon.

In May 2008, after Hezbollah and its allies battled their Western-backed rivals in Beirut's worst fighting since the 1975-90 civil war, Lebanese political leaders flew to Qatar, where they reached a deal known as the "Doha Agreement." The deal ended an 18-month deadlock and brought the election of a new president and formation of a new government. In the calm that followed, massive foreign investment flowed in, and Lebanon's economy grew at an average of 9% for three years.

In December 2018, then-President Michel Aoun inaugurated the newly rehabilitated Lebanese National Library in Beirut, funded by Qatar at a cost of \$25 million. The current emir's mother, Sheikha Moza bint Nasser al-Missned, had laid the foundation stone for the project in the heart of Beirut in 2009.

Saudi Arabia pulled back from Lebanon in recent years as Hezbollah's power grew. Last year, the main Saudi ally in Lebanon, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, a dual Lebanese-Saudi citizen, announced he is suspending his work in politics.

In 2020, Riyadh banned imports of Lebanese products after a Lebanese official derided the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen. Several other Gulf countries followed suit, but Qatar did not.

Qatar doubled down on its investment as Lebanon's economy melted down.

Qatari investors bought the famous Beirut Le Vendome hotel overlooking the Mediterranean in 2020. There are reports that Doha plans to pump money into Lebanon's struggling banking sector to buy one of the country's lenders.

In June, Qatar donated \$60 million to support the salaries of members of the Lebanese army. It was already supporting the army with monthly supplies of food. Strengthening Lebanon's military has long been a policy of the United States, which sees the force as a counterbalance to Hezbollah.

A week ago, three months after Lebanon and Israel signed a U.S.-mediated maritime border agreement, Qatari Energy Minister Saad Sherida al-Kaabi joined Lebanese officials in Beirut for a ceremony inking an agreement for Qatar to take a 30% share in a consortium for oil and gas exploration in Lebanese waters.

"For us in Qatar, this important agreement gives us an opportunity to support economic developments in Lebanon during this critical turn," al-Kaabi said at the event. "Qatar is always present to support a better future for Lebanon and its people."

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According to the agreement, Qatar Energy will take over the 20% stake vacated by Russia's Novatek in addition to 5% each from Italy's giant ENI and France's TotalEnergies leaving the Arab company with a stake of 30%. Total and ENI will have 35% stakes each.

"This is a win-win situation for Lebanon and Qatar," said Lebanon's former energy minister, Cesar Abi Khalil. Qatar gets a stake in the possible gas resources in Lebanese waters, while Lebanon gets the credibility of a Qatari company in the project.

In the political field, Qatar has not openly backed any party. But it reportedly supports the Lebanese Army commander, Gen. Joseph Aoun, to become the country's next president. Aoun, who is not related to the outgoing president, was invited to visit Qatar in December and met with high-level officials. Hezbollah is believed to oppose him.

As it often does, Qatar is advancing its economic and political interests together, said Lebanese economist Antoine Farah. It is ensuring income from its investments while gaining a political role in the country where it invests.

But Ali Hamade, a journalist with the Lebanese daily An-Nahar, said Qatar, like other Gulf nations, will want to see Lebanon's political leaders enact serious reforms.

"Lebanon should help itself in order for Arabs to help Lebanon. Lebanese politicians cannot sit and wait for money to rain from the sky," Hamade said.

Democrats set to shake up start of 2024 presidential primary

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Democrats are poised to reorder their presidential primary schedule beginning next year, replacing Iowa with South Carolina in the leadoff spot as part of a major overhaul meant to empower Black and other minority voters critical to the party's base of support.

The Democratic National Committee has worked for months to revamp the start of its voting calendar, and the full membership is set to vote on the plan on Saturday.

Although changes are still possible throughout the summer and beyond, the formal endorsement during the party's meeting in Philadelphia is acknowledgement that the start of 2024's primary will look very different than the one in 2020.

The proposal has been championed by President Joe Biden and would have South Carolina hold its primary on Feb. 3. That would be followed three days later by New Hampshire and Nevada, the latter of which is swapping the caucus it used to hold in favor of a primary. Georgia would vote fourth on Feb. 13, followed by Michigan on Feb. 27, with much of the rest of the nation set to vote on Super Tuesday in early March.

"This isn't just about us," Trev Robertson, president of the South Carolina Democratic Party, told a gathering of the DNC Southern caucus earlier this week. "This is a regional thing, and it's making us all look good."

States voting early in the primary have major influence since White House hopefuls struggling to raise money or gain political traction often drop out before visiting areas outside the first five. The move marks a major shift from the current calendar, which had started with Iowa's caucuses for the last five decades, followed by New Hampshire's primary and subsequent contests in Nevada and South Carolina.

DNC chair Jaime Harrison, a former Senate candidate from South Carolina, said the new schedule "allows the South to stand up, for our voices to be heard."

Four of the five states that will start Democrats' new primary schedule are presidential battlegrounds, meaning the eventual party winner can lay groundwork in important general election locales. Michigan and Georgia both voted for Donald Trump in 2016 before flipping to Biden in 2020.

The exception is South Carolina, which hasn't backed a Democrat in a presidential race since 1976, leading some to argue that the party shouldn't be concentrating so many early primary resources there. But the state's population is nearly 27% Black, and African American voters represent Democrats' most consistent base of support. The change means many will have an earlier impact on the Democratic primary than ever before.

The revamped Democratic calendar could be largely meaningless for 2024 since Biden is expected to

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seek reelection with no major primary challenge — and the DNC has already pledged to revisit the voting calendar before the 2028 presidential election.

Still, this year's changes could establish precedent, just as a new lineup that moved Nevada and South Carolina into early voting states did when the DNC approved a new primary lineup before the 2008 presidential election.

Saturday's vote doesn't mean the new calendar is locked. South Carolina, Nevada and Michigan have met party requirements to join the party's new top five. But in Georgia, Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger has said he'd be unwilling to change his state's Democratic presidential primary without the GOP moving its primary, which hasn't yet happened.

A DNC rules committee first approved the Biden-endorsed new lineup during its meeting in December, setting up this weekend's vote. Sixteen states and Puerto Rico made presentations before the rules committee last summer on why they should be allowed to go first — or at least join the new top five.

The proposed changes haven't come without divisions.

New Hampshire state law mandates that it hold the nation's first presidential primary, which Iowa had circumvented since 1972 by holding a caucus. New Hampshire Democrats have joined with top state Republicans in vowing to go forward with the nation's first presidential primary next year regardless of the DNC calendar.

New Democratic rules include penalties for states that attempt to jump ahead of others, including losing delegates to the national convention.

Top New Hampshire Democrats have warned that another Democrat could run in an unsanctioned state primary and, if Biden skips it in accordance with party rules, could win and embarrass the president — prolonging a primary process that wasn't supposed to be competitive.

That hasn't deterred Biden, who wrote to the DNC rules committee in December that, "for decades, Black voters in particular have been the backbone of the Democratic Party but have been pushed to the back of the early primary process."

"We rely on these voters in elections but have not recognized their importance in our nominating calendar," Biden said. "It is time to stop taking these voters for granted."

China balloon: Many questions about suspected spy in the sky

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and TARA COPP undefined

WASHINGTON (AP) — What in the world is that thing?

A massive white orb sweeping across U.S. airspace has triggered a diplomatic maelstrom and is blowing up on social media.

China insists it's just an errant civilian airship used mainly for meteorological research that went off course due to winds. With only limited "self-steering" capabilities.

However, the U.S. says it's a Chinese spy balloon without a doubt. And its presence prompted Secretary of State Antony Blinken to cancel a weekend trip to China that was aimed at dialing down tensions that were already high between the countries.

The Pentagon says the balloon, which is carrying sensors and surveillance equipment, is maneuverable and has shown it can change course. It has loitered over sensitive areas of Montana where nuclear warheads are siloed, prompting the military to take actions to prevent it from collecting intelligence.

A Pentagon spokesman said it could remain aloft over the U.S. for "a few days," extending uncertainty about where it will go or if the U.S. will try to safely take it down.

A look at what's known about the balloon — and what isn't.

IT'S A BIRD, IT'S A PLANE, IT'S A ... SPY BALLOON

The Pentagon and other U.S. officials say it's a Chinese spy balloon — about the size of three school buses — moving east over America at an altitude of about 60,000 feet (18,600 meters). The U.S. says it was being used for surveillance and intelligence collection, but officials have provided few details.

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U.S. officials says the Biden administration was aware of it even before it crossed into American airspace in Alaska early this week. A number of officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive topic.

The White House said that President Joe Biden was first briefed on the balloon on Tuesday. And the State Department said Blinken and Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman spoke with China's senior Washington-based official on Wednesday evening about the matter.

In the first public U.S. statement, Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, Pentagon press secretary, said Thursday evening that the balloon was not a military or physical threat — an acknowledgement that it was not carrying weapons. And he said that "once the balloon was detected, the U.S. government acted immediately to protect against the collection of sensitive information."

Even if it's not armed, the balloon poses a risk to the U.S., says retired Army Gen. John Ferrari, a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. The flight itself, he said, can be used to test America's ability to detect incoming threats and to find holes in the country's air defense warning system. It may also allow the Chinese to sense electromagnetic emissions that higher-altitude satellites can't detect, such as low-power radio frequencies that could help them understand how different U.S. weapons systems communicate.

He also said the Chinese may have sent the balloon "to show us that they can do it, and maybe next time it could have a weapon. So now we have to spend money and time on it" developing defenses.

LET IT FLY? SHOOT IT DOWN?

According to senior administration officials, President Joe Biden initially wanted to shoot the balloon down. And some members of Congress have echoed that sentiment.

But top Pentagon leaders strongly advised Biden against that move because of risks to the safety of people on the ground, and Biden agreed.

One official said the sensor package the balloon is carrying weighs as much as 1,000 pounds. And the balloon is large enough and high enough in the air that the potential debris field could stretch for miles, with no control over where it would eventually land.

For now, officials said the U.S. will monitor it, using "a variety of methods" including aircraft. The Pentagon also has said the balloon isn't a military threat and doesn't give China any surveillance capabilities it doesn't already have with spy satellites.

But the U.S. is keeping its options open and will continue to monitor the flight.

Rep. Jim Himes, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, suggested that it could be valuable to try and capture the balloon to study it. "I would much rather own a Chinese surveillance balloon than be cleaning one up over a 100-square-mile debris field," Himes said.

HOW DID IT GET HERE?

Deliberate or an accident? There's also disagreement.

As far as wind patterns go, China's account that global air currents — winds known as the Westerlies — carried the balloon from its territory to the western United States is plausible, said Dan Jaffe, a professor of atmospheric chemistry at the University of Washington. Jaffe has studied the role those same wind patterns play in carrying air pollution from Chinese cities, wildfire smoke from Siberia and dust from Gobi Desert sand storms to the U.S. for two decades.

"It's entirely consistent with everything we know about the winds," Jaffe said. "Transit time from China to the United States would be about a week." "The higher it goes, the faster it goes," Jaffe said. He said that weather and research balloons typically have a range of steering capability depending on their sophistication, from no steering at all to limited steering ability.

The U.S. is largely mum on this issue, but insists the balloon is maneuverable, suggesting that China in some way deliberately moved the balloon toward or into U.S. airspace.

SPY BALLOONS HAVE A HISTORY

Spy balloons aren't new — primitive ones date back centuries, but they came into greater use in World War II. Administration officials said Friday that there have been other similar incidents of Chinese spy balloons, with one saying it happened twice during the Trump administration but was never made public.

At the Pentagon, Ryder confirmed there have been other incidents where balloons came close to or

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crossed over the U.S. border, but he and others agree that what makes this different is the length of time it's been over U.S. territory and how far into the country it penetrated.

Craig Singleton, a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, said Chinese surveillance balloons have been sighted on numerous occasions over the past five years in different parts of the Pacific, including near sensitive U.S. military installations in Hawaii. The high altitude inflatables, he said, serve as low-cost platforms to collect intelligence and some can reportedly be used to detect hypersonic missiles.

During World War II, Japan launched thousands of hydrogen balloons carrying bombs, and hundreds ended up in the U.S. and Canada. Most were ineffective, but one was lethal. In May 1945, six civilians died when they found one of the balloons on the ground in Oregon, and it exploded.

In the aftermath of the war, America's own balloon effort ignited the alien stories and lore linked to Roswell, New Mexico.

According to military research documents and studies, the U.S. began using giant trains of balloons and sensors that were strung together and stretching more than 600 feet as part of an early effort to detect Soviet missile launches during the post-World War II era. They called it Project Mogul.

One of the balloon trains crash-landed at the Roswell Army Airfield in 1947, and Air Force personnel who were not aware of the program found debris. The unusual experimental equipment made it difficult to identify, leaving the airmen with unanswered questions that over time — aided by UFO enthusiasts — took on a life of their own. The simple answer, according to the military reports, was just over the Sacramento Mountains at the Project Mogul launch site in Alamogordo.

In 2015, an unmanned Army surveillance blimp broke loose from its mooring at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland and floated over Pennsylvania for hours with two fighter jets on its tail, triggering blackouts as it dragged its tether across power lines. As residents gawked, the 240-foot blimp came down in pieces in the Muncy, Pennsylvania, countryside. It still had helium in its nose when it fell, and state police used shotguns — about 100 shots — to deflate it.

Biden makes progress on 'unity agenda' outlined in 2022

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A year ago, President Joe Biden used his first State of the Union address to push top Democratic priorities that were sure to face a battle in the narrowly divided Congress but he also laid out a four-pronged "unity agenda" that would be an easier sell.

Biden's unity goals would be hard for anyone to argue against: improving mental health, supporting veterans, beating the opioid epidemic and fighting cancer. The president is still pushing for some of those big Democratic goals, like an assault weapons ban, but he's fared better on the unity goals.

Susan Rice, the president's domestic policy adviser, pointed to "very significant progress" on all four aspects even as she noted that issues like meeting the demand for mental health services or combating drug abuse won't be solved overnight.

"We're happy with the progress that's been made and we're determined to keep pushing forward and make more progress," Rice said in an interview.

A look at where things stand:

OPIOIDS

IN THE SPEECH: Biden asked Congress for increased funding for prevention, treatment, reducing harm and recovery. He also called for the elimination of rules that keep doctors from prescribing treatments, and he aimed to stop the flow of illicit drugs by having the federal government work with state and local law enforcement officials to go after drug traffickers.

SINCE THEN: Biden sent his first national drug control strategy to Congress, focused on harm reduction or preventing death and illness in drug users while trying to engage them in care and treatment. The strategy calls for changes in state laws and policies to support expanding harm reduction.

It also calls for targeting the financial activities of transnational criminal organizations that manufacture

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and traffic illicit drugs in the United States, reducing the supply of illegal drugs smuggled across U.S. borders, improving data systems and research that guide drug policy, and making sure the people most in danger of overdosing on drugs can get evidence-based treatments, including people experiencing homelessness and those in prison or jail.

The Department of Health and Human Services awarded nearly \$1.5 billion in grants to all states and U.S. territories to increase access to treatment for substance abuse, remove barriers to treatments like naloxone, which is used to reverse an opioid overdose, and expand access to support services and treatment programs.

The Food and Drug Administration approved several naloxone products in the past year, including a higher-dose injection as an additional option to treat opioid overdoses, a second generic naloxone nasal spray, and a naloxone auto-injector product for use by the military and for responding to chemical incidents.

MENTAL HEALTH

IN THE SPEECH: Biden emphasized mental health care for children, citing turmoil in their lives and in their schooling caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. He called for holding social media platforms accountable for their negative impact on children, strengthening privacy protections, banning advertising targeted at children and demanding that tech companies stop collecting children's personal data. And he urged parents to make sure their kids' schools use the \$122 billion in pandemic relief funds they got from Washington to hire teachers and help students make up for lost learning.

SINCE THEN: The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, the gun violence bill Biden signed into law last June, allocates more than \$1 billion over five years to mental health support for schools, in line with the president's goal of doubling the number of school counselors, social workers and other mental health professionals. The Department of Education has begun releasing those funds.

A new "988" national suicide and crisis hotline opened in July and has been receiving vastly more calls and texts than the old system did during the same time period the previous year, according to the White House.

Biden released a national strategy on mental health. But legislation to address children's tech privacy issues has not yet cleared Congress.

"This is an area where we still have more to get done," Rice said.

VETERANS

IN THE SPEECH: Biden asked Congress for legislation guaranteeing health care for veterans who became ill from their exposure to toxic smoke on bases in Iraq and Afghanistan.

SINCE THEN: In August, he signed into law a major expansion of federal health care services for millions of veterans who breathed the toxic smoke emitted from huge "burn pits," which were used to dispose of chemicals, plastics, medical equipment, human waste and other substances on U.S. military installations in the two countries.

More than two-thirds of disability claims that cited exposure to the pits were being denied by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The new law, known in Washington and among veterans as the PACT Act, directs officials to assume that certain respiratory illnesses and cancers were related to burn pit exposure. The change helps veterans, and their survivors, collect disability payments without having to prove their illness was caused by their service. Up to 3.5 million veterans could benefit, according to estimates.

The issue is a personal one for Biden, who many times has suggested that the aggressive brain cancer that killed his son Beau may have been caused by his exposure to burn pits in Iraq. Beau Biden was stationed in Iraq for about a year as a major in the Delaware Army National Guard.

Biden held a large White House bill-signing ceremony and gave the pen to the young daughter of Sgt. 1st Class Heath Robinson, who died of cancer and for whom the legislation is named.

Separately, veterans in need mental health care can now press 1 after dialing 988 to connect with the Veterans Crisis Line.

CANCER

IN THE SPEECH: Biden noted how personal the cancer issue is to him and his wife, Jill, as well as Vice President Kamala Harris, along with millions of people like them who have lost friends and loved ones to various forms of the disease.

Just before last year's State of the Union address, Biden announced that he was "reigniting" a federal cancer-fighting initiative that was first launched in 2016, when he was vice president and after his son Beau's death in 2015. As president, Biden set a new goal for the "cancer moonshot" initiative of cutting cancer death rates by at least half over the next 25 years.

He asked Congress in the speech to fund the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health, describing it as based on a Defense Department research agency that led to creation of the internet, GPS and more. He said the new health research agency's "singular purpose" would be to drive breakthroughs in cancer, Alzheimer's disease, diabetes and more.

SINCE THEN: ARPA-H was created in March 2022 in the Department of Health and Human Services.

The \$1.7 trillion government funding bill Biden signed in December included \$1.5 billion for the new health agency.

Man arrested, but motive unknown in Dallas Zoo monkey theft

By JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — The arrest of a 24-year-old man accused of taking two monkeys from the Dallas Zoo has shed some light on a mysterious string of events there as police said Friday that they've also linked him to the escape of a small leopard and a gash in the fence of another monkey habitat.

What's still unclear: What police believe led him to do it.

Davion Irvin, who was arrested Thursday, has been charged with six counts of animal cruelty and two counts of burglary, police said.

Irvin's arrest followed a sighting of him at another home for exotic animals, The Dallas World Aquarium, where an employee recognized him from news coverage of the missing monkeys.

"We do believe that (Irvin) was looking to commit another crime," Dallas police spokeswoman Kristin Lowman said at a Friday news conference.

After the two emperor tamarin monkeys — named Bella and Finn — went missing from their enclosure Monday, police had released a photo and video of a man they said they wanted to talk to. Police later said that man was Irvin.

But any information about a possible motive was still part of the ongoing investigation, Lowman said.

After getting a tip from the public, Bella and Finn were found Tuesday in the closet of a vacant house in Lancaster, a Dallas suburb about 15 miles (24 kilometers) south of the zoo. Their disappearance though, was just the latest in a string of odd events at the zoo.

On Jan. 13, arriving workers found that a clouded leopard named Nova was missing from her cage, and police said a cutting tool had been intentionally used to make an opening in her enclosure. The zoo closed as a search for her got underway, and she was found later that day near her habitat.

Zoo workers had also found a similar tear in an enclosure for langur monkeys, though none got out or appeared harmed, police said.

On Jan. 21, workers arriving at the zoo found an endangered lappet-faced vulture named Pin dead. Gregg Hudson, the zoo's president and CEO, called the death "very suspicious" and said the vulture had "a wound."

Lowman said Friday that they are still investigating but the death of the vulture has not been linked to Irvin.

"The last month has been an emotional roller coaster for the team here at Dallas Zoo," Harrison Edell, the zoo's executive vice president for animal care and conservation, said at the news conference.

Police have said the six counts of animal cruelty that Irvin faces are linked to taking the emperor tamarin monkeys — three counts for each. Lowman said one of the burglary charges comes from the taking of the emperor tamarin monkeys, while the other is related to the leopard.

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Lowman had said at the news conference that one of the burglary counts was related to the cut found in the langur monkeys' enclosure, but she later corrected that to say it was related to the emperor tamarin monkeys. She said Irvin has been linked to the cut in the langur monkey enclosure, though.

Police said Friday that they arrested Irvin after receiving a tip that he had been seen near the animal exhibits at The Dallas World Aquarium. Responding officers saw him boarding the city's light rail and later spotted him a few blocks away, police said. He was then taken to police headquarters for questioning.

Waylon Tate, an aquarium spokesperson, said Irvin had stopped an employee to ask questions about an animal, and the employee recognized him from the news.

Irvin remained in jail Friday evening on \$25,000 bond. Jail records did not list an attorney to speak on his behalf. Calls to phone numbers listed for his family were not immediately answered.

Bolsonaro ponders election defeat, as crowd chants 'fraud'

By TERRY SPENCER, ELEONORE HUGHES and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Only a few weeks after his supporters stormed the seat of his country's government, former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro on Friday expressed bafflement at how he could have lost October's election, then smiled silently as a crowd of supporters cried, "Fraud!"

He did not directly address the Jan. 8 assault on the buildings housing Brazil's Congress and Supreme Court during his appearance in Miami before a conservative group tied to former U.S. President Donald Trump.

Bolsonaro had mimicked Trump's strategy during his own 2020 reelection campaign, for months sowing doubts about the reliability of Brazil's voting machines and then filing a petition to annul millions of votes. He is now under investigation for allegedly inciting the uprising.

Like Trump, Bolsonaro has not conceded the election, though unlike the former U.S. president he also has never explicitly said he lost due to fraud. During a question-and-answer session with Charlie Kirk, head of the conservative Turning Point USA, the former Brazilian president rattled off his administration's accomplishments and then provided backers with an opening.

"Brazil was doing very well," Bolsonaro said. "I cannot understand the reasons why (the election) decided to go to the left."

After the cries of "fraud" died down, Kirk, who helped spread Trump's own election fraud lies after the former U.S. president's loss, replied, "All I can say is, that sounds very familiar."

The event took place at Trump's Miami hotel, underscoring the connection between two populist presidents who fanned suspicion of their democracies' elections, leading supporters to turn violent after their losses. The two were political allies who shared an overlapping set of advisers. Shortly before Bolsonaro's opponent, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, took office, Bolsonaro moved to Florida, the state where Trump has based himself.

Friday's appearance marked part of Bolsonaro's reemergence after spending several weeks in a central Florida suburb. He spoke to some supporters there earlier this week before taking the stage at Trump's hotel late Friday afternoon.

Much of Bolsonaro's Friday speech amounted to a defense of his four years in power, touting job gains, what he said was a lack of corruption in his administration and, in a reference that drew loud cheers, "freedom" for those who opted out of COVID-19 vaccinations.

After his 30-minute appearance, many in the several hundred-strong crowd, often clad in the national colors of yellow and green, swarmed around the 67-year-old former president.

Some of Bolsonaro's backers in Brazil have expressed disappointment that he left the country before Jan. 8 and has remained circumspect about the attack. The former president faces legal jeopardy not only from a mushrooming number of investigations into the Jan. 8 uprising but from the country's supreme court, which has censored websites that have spread what it calls lies about Brazil's election.

Reynaldo Rossi, a Brazilian farmer visiting Florida to explore a possible relocation there, said he is glad Bolsonaro is staying in the U.S. for now.

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"If he goes back, they are going to create a lot of trouble for him," Rossi said. "He would spend a lot of his time down there defending himself instead of leading us."

In his speech, Bolsonaro acknowledged Brazilians who have left the country for the U.S., seeming to include himself in that category.

"As well as we feel here, we always worry about our friends and family that stayed there," he said, referring to Brazil.

He also reassured the crowd about the country's future.

"I believe in Brazil, and I am certain that Brazil will not end with the current government," Bolsonaro said.

Chinese balloon high over US stirs unease down below

By MATTHEW BROWN and AMY BETH HANSON Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The Chinese balloon drifting high above the U.S. and first revealed over Montana has created a buzz down below among residents who initially wondered what it was — and now wonder what its arrival means amid a chorus of alarm raised by elected officials.

The balloon roiled diplomatic tensions as it continued to move over the central U.S. on Friday at 60,000 feet (18,300 meters). Secretary of State Antony Blinken abruptly canceled an upcoming trip to China.

Curiosity about the bobbling sky orb that's the size of three school buses swept the nation and the internet, with search terms like "where is the spy balloon now?" and "spy balloon tracker" surging on Google. There is no such tracker just yet, but a couple St. Louis TV stations offered grainy live feeds of the balloon.

Internet users posted wobbly videos and photos of white splotches in comments sections and speculative feeds. And online storm chasers, more accustomed to tracking raging systems and funnel clouds, offered updates on the balloon's path through cloudless skies.

It crossed into U.S. airspace over Alaska early this week, according to officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive topic.

In Montana — home to Malmstrom Air Force base and dozens of nuclear missile silos — people doubted Beijing's claim that it was a weather balloon gone off course. And the governor and members of Congress pressed the Biden administration over why the military did not immediately bring it down from the sky.

"I question whether or not we would even find out about this if people hadn't spotted it in Billings," said Chase Doak, a resident of the southern Montana city who appears to have captured some of the first known video footage and photographs of the balloon.

A white balloon with what appeared to be a solar array hanging beneath it was seen over Billings Wednesday afternoon, around the same time the local airport was temporarily shut down and a day before the Pentagon said it was tracking a Chinese spy balloon over the state.

Initial speculation over its origins ranged from the foreign to the extra-terrestrial.

When Todd Hewett's 10-year-old son saw it over Billings he thought it was a comet. Hewett got some shaky footage, using a cellphone to take video through a telescope, and was skeptical of the Chinese claim it was a civilian balloon.

"Shoot it down," he said. "If we could somehow pierce the bottom of it to allow some of the gas to escape to allow for a more controlled descent (that) would be nice .. but if we can't do that ... blow it up."

Montana has some experience with balloons launched by adversaries: Japan in World War II targeted the western U.S. with incendiary "balloon bombs" that were floated over North America with plans to harm people and start forest fires. More than 30 of the bombs made of rice paper landed in Montana, according to the Montana Historical Society.

In Oregon, five children and a pregnant woman on a church picnic were killed in 1945 when they found one of the bombs and it exploded.

On Friday in Kansas City, Missouri, the National Weather Service said it received reports of a large balloon in the Kansas City metro area and posted two images of white orbs taken from the weather station office in Pleasant Hill, Missouri. The service confirmed it was not a National Weather Service balloon.

A graphic generated by a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration online tool was eagerly shared

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on Facebook, showing the balloon's trajectory sweep into the U.S. South. Local National Weather Service offices were asked on Twitter whether the balloon was theirs. No, was their answer.

Tami Hansen, 44, saw the balloon overhead in Columbia, Missouri, and said she was not terribly concerned about the object flying over her city.

"I've heard all kinds of thoughts. Is it a spy balloon, is it a weather balloon? Who knows right now? It is what it is," she said. "We really try not to get too political out here," she said.

Montana U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, who chairs the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, said he would hold a hearing to get answers from the Biden administration. He called China's actions "a clear threat."

Rep. Ryan Zinke sent a poll to constituents early Friday saying the balloon was still over the state and asking if should be shot down. When the Pentagon said the balloon had since drifted over the central U.S., Zinke raised the possibility China had more than one balloon over the U.S..

"I don't know if that's the only balloon. We've asked for those answers," he told The Associated Press. He said the balloon should have been shot down. "The message that it gives to our allies is, we're not capable of dealing with a balloon," he said.

The Pentagon late Friday acknowledged reports of a second balloon flying over Latin America but officials did not specify where it was spotted.

Republicans in Montana have grown increasingly outspoken in recent years about China posing a threat to U.S. national security.

A bill pending before the state Legislature would ban "foreign adversaries" from owning, leasing or renting critical infrastructure or farmland. The measure's sponsor singled out China as being interested in acquiring U.S. lands and resources to "help them with spying efforts."

The heavy anti-China sentiment marks a shift from a just a few years ago, when Montana U.S. Sen. Steve Daines visited China, hosted the Chinese ambassador on a visit to a Montana ranch and helped secure a deal to export more beef to China.

The beef deal later fell through, and the Republican has transformed into a strong critic of China.

Daines on Friday rejected the Pentagon's contention that it was too dangerous to bring the balloon down over Montana. He told reporters there would have been "no better place" than his sparsely populated home state.

"You've got higher odds of hitting a cow or a prairie dog or an antelope than you would of hitting any kind of a structure or a person," he said.

Chinese balloon soars across US; Blinken scraps Beijing trip

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A huge, high-altitude Chinese balloon sailed across the U.S. on Friday, drawing severe Pentagon accusations of spying on sensitive military sites despite China's firm denials. Secretary of State Antony Blinken abruptly canceled a high-stakes Beijing trip aimed at easing U.S.-China tensions.

Aside from the government response, fuzzy videos dotted social media as people with binoculars and telephoto lenses tried to find the "spy balloon" in the sky as it headed southeastward over Kansas and Missouri at 60,000 feet (18,300 meters).

It was spotted earlier over Montana, which is home to one of America's three nuclear missile silo fields at Malmstrom Air Force Base, defense officials said.

Later Friday, the Pentagon acknowledged reports of a second balloon flying over Latin America. "We now assess it is another Chinese surveillance balloon," Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, Pentagon press secretary, said in a statement, declining to offer further information such as where it was spotted.

The U.S. actually had been tracking the initial balloon since at least Tuesday, when President Joe Biden was first briefed, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters. According to three U.S. officials, Biden was initially inclined to order the surveillance balloon to be blown out of the sky, and a senior defense official said the U.S. had prepared fighter jets, including F-22s, to shoot it down if ordered.

The officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, said Defense

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Secretary Lloyd Austin and Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, strongly advised Biden against shooting down the balloon, warning that its size — as big as three school buses — and considerable weight could create a debris field large enough to endanger Americans on the ground. The Pentagon also assessed that after unspecified U.S. measures, the possibility of the balloon uncovering important information was not great.

It was not the first time Chinese surveillance balloons have been tracked over U.S. territory, including at least once during former President Donald Trump's administration, officials said.

Blinken's trip cancellation came despite China's claim that the balloon was merely a weather research "airship" that had blown off course. The Pentagon rejected that out of hand — as well as China's contention that the balloon was not being used for surveillance and had only limited navigational ability.

Blinken, who had been due to depart Washington for Beijing late Friday, said he had told senior Chinese diplomat Wang Yi in a phone call that sending the balloon over the U.S. was "an irresponsible act and that (China's) decision to take this action on the eve of my visit is detrimental to the substantive discussions that we were prepared to have."

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement Saturday morning: "In actuality, the U.S. and China have never announced any visit. The U.S. making any such announcement is their own business, and we respect that."

According to Beijing, Wang said China "has always strictly followed international law, we do not accept any groundless speculation and hype. Faced with unexpected situations, both parties need to keep calm, communicate in a timely manner, avoid misjudgments and manage differences."

After passing the sensitive military sites in Montana, the balloon was moving southeastward over the heartland of the central United States during the day and was expected to remain in U.S. airspace for several days, officials said.

The development dealt a new blow to already strained U.S.-Chinese relations that have been in a downward spiral for years over numerous issues. Still, U.S. officials maintained that diplomatic channels remain open and Blinken said he remained willing to travel to China "when conditions allow."

"We continue to believe that having open lines of communication is important," he said.

Biden declined to comment on the matter when questioned at an economic event. Two likely 2024 re-election challengers, Trump, and Nikki Haley, the former South Carolina governor and U.N. ambassador, said the U.S. should immediately shoot down the balloon.

Several Republican congressmen said the same, and a number blasted the administration for "allowing" the balloon intrusion.

"The idea that Communist China has a spy balloon headed towards Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri right now — the home of the Stealth Bomber — is absolutely unbelievable," said Sen. Eric Schmitt, R-Mo. "No American should accept this. I don't."

Jean-Pierre did not shed light on why the administration waited until Thursday to make its concerns public.

Ryder, the Pentagon press secretary, refused to say Friday whether there was any new consideration of shooting the balloon down. He said it currently was posing no threat.

Ryder said it was maneuverable, not just at the mercy of the wind, and had changed course.

Still, weather experts said China's claim that the balloon had gone off course was not unfeasible. China's account of wind patterns known as the Westerlies carrying a balloon to the western United States was "absolutely possible — not possible, likely," said Dan Jaffe, a professor of atmospheric chemistry at the University of Washington.

As for Blinken's trip, Jean-Pierre said a diplomatic visit to China was not appropriate at such a time. She said that "the presence of this balloon in our airspace ... is a clear violation of our sovereignty as well as international law and it is unacceptable this occurred."

A State Department official said Blinken and Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman had both protested to the top official at the Chinese Embassy on Wednesday, a day before the Pentagon announced the discovery of the balloon.

Blinken's long-anticipated meetings with senior Chinese officials had been seen in both countries as a

possible way to find some areas of common ground at a time of major disagreements over Taiwan, human rights, China's claims in the South China Sea, North Korea, Russia's war in Ukraine, trade policy and climate change.

Although the trip, which was agreed to in November by Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping at a summit in Indonesia, had not been formally announced, officials in both Beijing and Washington had spoken in recent days about Blinken's imminent arrival for meetings on Sunday and Monday.

China, which angrily denounces surveillance attempts by the U.S. and others over areas it considers to be its territory and once forced down an American spy plane and held its crew captive on Hainan Island, was relatively conciliatory in its response to the U.S. complaints.

In a statement that approached an apology, the Chinese foreign ministry said the balloon was a civilian airship used mainly for meteorological research. It said the airship had limited "self-steering" capabilities and had "deviated far from its planned course" because of winds.

"The Chinese side regrets the unintended entry of the airship into U.S. airspace due to force majeure," the statement said, citing a legal term used to refer to events beyond one's control.

Jury: Musk didn't defraud investors with 2018 Tesla tweets

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — A jury on Friday decided Elon Musk didn't defraud investors with his 2018 tweets about electric automaker Tesla in a proposed deal that quickly unraveled and raised questions about whether the billionaire had misled investors.

The nine-member jury reached its verdict after less than two hours of deliberation following a three-week trial. It represents a major vindication for Musk, who spent about eight hours on the witness stand defending his motives for the August 2018 tweets at the center of the trial.

Musk, 51, wasn't on hand for the brief reading of the verdict but he made a surprise appearance earlier Friday for closing arguments that drew starkly different portraits of him.

Not long after the verdict came down, Musk took to Twitter — the bully pulpit he now owns — to celebrate. "Thank goodness, the wisdom of the people has prevailed!" Musk tweeted.

Musk's decision to break away from his other responsibilities to sit in on the closing arguments even though he didn't have to be there may have had an impact on the jurors, said Michael Freedman, a former federal prosecutor who is now in private practice working for a law firm that has represented celebrities and business executives.

"It shows he has a presence," Freedman said.

Nicholas Porritt, an attorney who represented aggrieved Tesla investors, said he was disappointed after urging the jurors in his closing arguments to rebuke Musk for reckless behavior that threatened to create "anarchy."

"I don't think this is the kind of conduct we expect from a large public company," a downcast Porritt said after discussing the verdict with a few jurors who gathered to talk to him. "People can draw their own conclusion on whether they think it's OK or not."

During their discussion with Porritt, the jurors told them they found Musk's testimony that he believed he had lined up the money from Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund without a written commitment to be credible. They also expressed doubt about whether Musk's tweeting was the sole reason for the swings in Tesla's stock price during a 10-day period in August 2018 covered in the case.

The trial pitted Tesla investors represented in a class-action lawsuit against Musk, who is CEO of both the electric automaker and the Twitter service he bought for \$44 billion a few months ago.

Shortly before boarding his private jet on Aug. 7, 2018, Musk tweeted that he had the financing to take Tesla private, even though it turned out he hadn't gotten an iron-clad commitment for a deal that would have cost \$20 billion to \$70 billion to pull off. A few hours later, Musk sent another tweet indicating that the deal was imminent.

Musk's integrity was at stake at the trial as well part of a fortune that has established him as one of the

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world's richest people. He could have been saddled with a bill for billions of dollars in damages had the jury found him liable for the 2018 tweets that had already been deemed falsehoods by the judge presiding over the trial.

That determination, made last year by U.S. District Judge Edward Chen, left the jury to decide whether Musk had been reckless with his tweeting and acted in a way that hurt Tesla shareholders.

"It may have not been that difficult for the jury," Freedman said, "because it sort of became like an up-or-down vote."

Earlier Friday, Musk sat stoically in court during the trial's closing arguments while he was both vilified as a rich and reckless narcissist and hailed as a visionary looking out for the "little guy."

Over the course of a one-hour presentation, Porritt had implored the jurors to rebuke Musk for his "loose relationship with the truth."

"Our society is based on rules," Porritt said. "We need rules to save us from anarchy. Rules should apply to Elon Musk like everyone else."

Alex Spiro, Musk's attorney, conceded the 2018 tweets were "technically inaccurate." But he told the jurors, "Just because it's a bad tweet doesn't make it a fraud."

During roughly eight hours on the stand earlier in the trial, Musk insisted he believed he had lined up the funds from Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund to take Tesla private after eight years as a publicly held company. He defended his initial August 2018 tweet as well-intentioned and aimed at ensuring all Tesla investors knew the automaker might be on its way to ending its run as a publicly held company.

"I had no ill motive," Musk testified. "My intent was to do the right thing for all shareholders."

Spiro echoed that theme in his closing argument.

"He was trying to include the retail shareholder, the mom and pop, the little guy, and not seize more power for himself," Spiro said.

Porritt, meanwhile, scoffed at the notion that Musk could have concluded he had a firm commitment after a 45-minute meeting at a Tesla factory on July 31, 2018, with Yasir al-Rumayyan, governor of Saudi Arabia's wealth fund, given there was no written documentation.

In his 90 minute presentation, Spiro emphasized Musk's track record helping to start and run a list of companies that include digital payment pioneer PayPal and rocket ship maker SpaceX, in addition to Tesla. The automaker based in Austin, Texas, is now worth nearly \$600 billion, despite a steep decline in its stock price last year amid concerns that Musk's purchase of Twitter would distract him from Tesla.

Recalling Musk's roots as a South African immigrant who came to Silicon Valley to create revolutionary tech companies, Spiro described his client "as the kind of person who believes the impossible is possible."

Native children welfare bill passes South Dakota committee

By AMANCAI BIRABEN Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A bill aimed at placing Native American children with other relatives when they are taken from their families during abuse and neglect proceedings was approved in a South Dakota House committee Friday.

The measure, introduced by Democratic Rep. Peri Pourier, passed the House Judiciary Committee on a 9-3 vote and goes next to the full House for consideration.

According to the National Indian Child Welfare Association, Native American children make up 60% of youth placed into the foster system in the state and, nationally, are in foster care at a rate nearly three times that of white children. The group attributes the disparities to systemic bias, historical trauma and high poverty and jobless rates.

Most instances of Native American children being removed from their homes are in negligence cases.

If it wins final approval, the South Dakota bill would require the Department of Social Services to act in culturally responsive and socially supportive ways in cases of removal involving Native American children and make every effort to keep them with other relatives.

This requirement for government agencies to keep children with their tribal relatives is also included

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in the Indian Child Welfare Act, which was passed in 1978 to address the disproportionately high number of Native American children being adopted from their families by non-Native ones.

Jessica Morson, Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe's Social Services Coordinator, said the measure addresses South Dakota's complicated position of containing not only a state government but also nine tribal governments. She urged the state to consider equity and cultural differences when it handles custody proceedings for Native American children.

Advocates say that when abuse and neglect proceedings address root causes and maintain cultural connections for Native populations, the outcomes can heal families.

Myrna Thompson, former Sisseton-Whapeton Oyate tribal secretary, said two nephews, ages 8 years old and 10 months old, were taken long ago and it was 50 years before they were reunited with family.

Thompson said it is critically important that Child Protections Services and social workers do everything they can to reunite children with their tribe and relatives.

"Many never find their people," she said. "They are lost. They have no culture to grab on to."

Jeremy Lippert, Director of Legal Services of the South Dakota Department of Social Services testified in opposition to the bill, arguing that the Indian Child Welfare Act outlines a higher standard than what is required of other families under state or federal law.

That argument is at issue in the pending Supreme Court case *Brackeen v. Haaland*.

Pourier responded that while the South Dakota bill has language included in the welfare act, it doesn't directly reference the act itself.

"We're talking about active efforts in preventing a child from being taken from the family home. We would like the state to provide active efforts in preventing termination of rights," Pourier said.

In South Dakota Senate, far-right lawmakers rankle GOP

By STEPHEN GROVES and AMANCAI BIRABEN Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The conversation between a state senator and a legislative aide started with a seemingly routine discussion about a bill. It suddenly spiraled as the senator allegedly harassed the aide because she had vaccinated her young child, plunging the Senate into a political drama that has divided South Dakota's Republican Party.

The Senate, where lawmakers pride themselves on a genteel code of conduct as they work from wooden desks that have been there for generations, has seemed largely insulated from the forces roiling the wider GOP.

But even here, controversy was inevitable as an insurgent brand of Republicans look to challenge the establishment by pushing for hardline stands on social issues and passionately staking out positions that defy evidence, whether it is from medical authorities or election officials.

South Dakota is dominated by Republicans, and Gov. Kristi Noem, who is widely seen as mulling a 2024 White House bid, has branded it as the country's most conservative state. But party tensions have grown in recent years.

A contrarian group has gained traction in the House with support from activists. The State Freedom Caucus Network, which is looking to push politics rightward and disrupt business-as-usual in state Legislatures, including Montana, Wyoming, Illinois, Arizona and Mississippi, has organized in Pierre.

"It's just sound and fury, it's blaming each other, talking smack about each other — and yet on most of the issues the principles are the same," said Michael Card, a former Republican official and political scientist at the University of South Dakota.

Nationally, the GOP has been plagued with similar strains of controversy. A politician like Rep. George Santos of New York is able to hold office despite lying about his background and facing multiple investigations into his personal and campaign finances. Former President Donald Trump remains an active and powerful force. And a handful of U.S. House holdouts were emboldened to hold up the selection of House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.

Statehouses have become fertile ground for nationalized politics, said Gerald Gamm, a professor of

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political science and history at the University of Rochester who has researched state-level politics.

"Polarization at the state level is probably as high today as it's ever been," he said.

Julie Frye-Mueller, the Republican senator involved in the incident with the aide, is among a group of hardline right-wing lawmakers who have clashed with top Republicans.

The encounter took place as the aide, who has not been publicly named, was discussing a draft bill in her office last week with Frye-Mueller and the senator's husband, Mike Mueller, who was at the Capitol assisting his wife and later in the week testified in support of a resolution expressing sympathy for those facing charges for the Jan. 6, 2021, U.S. Capitol riot.

Both the aide and Frye-Mueller have said their discussion turned to childhood vaccinations and breast-feeding, but their accounts differ.

According to the aide's complaint, Frye-Mueller asked if she had vaccinated her child. When the aide said yes, the senator pointed her finger and aggressively told her the child could have health issues or die, according to the complaint.

She also alleged that 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. Frye-Mueller's husband was in the room at the time and "smiled and nodded," it added.

Frye-Mueller disputed that account in testimony to a Senate committee investigating the complaint. She said it was the staffer who brought up breastfeeding. Frye-Mueller said she asked the aide whether she wanted advice she had received as a young mother, and when the aide said yes, she said, "Have your husband help."

Frye-Mueller said she was "falsely accused" and called the aide's complaint "shocking and filthy." She also framed her comments as an issue of freedom of speech.

The senator also testified that she questioned whether newborn babies in Pierre were receiving vaccinations and informed the aide about legislation that would have eliminated school requirements for childhood vaccinations.

Republicans, who hold 31 out of 35 seats in the Senate, moved decisively and treated the incident as a personnel issue and a serious harassment allegation. The body suspended her last week, launched an investigation and on Wednesday overwhelmingly voted to censure her. The Senate also ended her suspension and adopted a report that concluded she harassed the aide.

Senate Republican leaders, who initially kept the allegations a secret, faced backlash from local party activists, a lawsuit from Frye-Mueller and accusations of political retribution.

During her Senate testimony, Frye-Mueller even pointed to a Facebook post from the Republican Senate Pro Tempore Lee Schoenbeck about the death of a family cat. She alleged it was somehow proof of a conspiracy that he was employing a "dead cat strategy" of drawing attention to something shocking to distract media attention from another story.

Schoenbeck said he was, in fact, referring to the death of a beloved family pet.

The longtime lawmaker, known for wearing Mister Rogers-style sweaters and firing colorful insults at right-wing legislators, has limited his comments on Frye-Mueller's discipline and framed it as a personnel issue. Other Republican and Democratic leaders have sought to tone down the political context around her suspension and pointed out that all but one Senator voted for her censure.

In the past, however, Schoenbeck has called Frye-Mueller and others "wackadoodles" and funded campaigns to unseat them in primaries, with limited success.

Noem has also clashed with the right-wing lawmakers and last year supported a number of campaigns to defeat them — again, with limited success.

As her political ambitions stretch beyond South Dakota, she has shown a willingness to concede to hardline conservatives, however. When House lawmakers advanced a bill in 2020 to ban gender-affirming medical procedures for transgender minors, she criticized the legislation as trying "to fill parenting gaps with more government." This year, her spokesman has voiced support for a similar proposal.

"When you have a supermajority, you will always tear yourself apart," said Tom Dempster, a former

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Republican state senator who remains a close political watcher. "The primary system incentivizes extreme candidates."

Back in Frye-Mueller's home district, support for her remains strong. Activists in the Fall River County Republican Party drafted a resolution backing the senator.

"I'm conservative like she is — she votes the way I would," said Ken Updike, a local party leader who pushed the resolution. Senate leaders, he said, "are more aligned with Democrats than they are Republicans."

Election law changes moving forward in South Dakota

By AMANCAI BIRABEN Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Lead Republicans in South Dakota are advancing a package of bills that they say would strengthen security of the 2024 elections, with hearings that began this week.

The package of bills announced last week by Republican House and Senate leaders addresses issues such as runoff elections, recounts and ballot legitimacy. While lawmakers say they believe South Dakota elections are among the most secure in the country, they also say the system could be made stronger, and they are hoping the new proposals will help alleviate distrust.

"South Dakota has an excellent election system but we can always be better," said Republican Rep. Tony Venhuizen, who proposed that the timing of runoff elections for general elections should be extended to 10 weeks instead of eight, to avoid conflict with the deadline to certify ballots. "It's a pretty small piece of the puzzle in the scheme of things but I think it's a good issue to head off if we can."

The package of bills from Rep. Will Mortenson and Sen. Casey Crabtree includes language changes that would also allow candidates outside the primary election to run. In addition, candidates tied for second place would be required to run in the runoff election alongside the first-place candidates if the margin is less than 35%.

When it comes to recounts, Rep. Amber Arlint proposed establishing partisan recount boards that would ensure the state's dominant party has more representation. Registered Democrats would comprise a Democratic candidate's recount board and a registered Republican would comprise a Republican's board.

This modification stems from Arlint's personal experience. She won her position against two Democrats by so close a margin that a recount took place. Two registered Democrats and one registered Republican were among those counting her ballots.

"Recount boards can impact the outcome of an election. They make judgment calls and they can be charged with interpreting voter intent," Arlint said Monday.

The package also includes a bill from Republican Rep. John Sjaarda that would extend the requirement that counted ballots be stored for six months — up from the current period of one month — before being destroyed. He said retaining certified ballots for a longer period would address unresolved election disputes.

Jordan Mason, director of the far-right State Freedom Caucus Network, advocated for the bill. He pointed to current legal cases contesting election outcomes that lack evidence due to ballot destruction.

In the wake of former President Donald Trump's lies that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him, lawmakers across the country brought thousands of bills to change how elections are run. There is no evidence there was widespread fraud or other wrongdoing in the 2020 election.

Republican Rep. Tyler Tordsen on Wednesday cited concerns over electronic balloting systems and proposed modifying existing tabulation laws. Tordsen's bill would upgrade policy to outline voting tablet verification policies. From public demonstration notifications to post-election safeguarding, the bill would increase guidelines for how a test is to be conducted, how test results are communicated, how any errors are to be resolved and how a tablet is to be sealed after an election.

Among the minority of proposals rejected was Democratic Sen. Reynold Nesiba's attempt to address redistricting. Currently, multiple counties in the state share voting precincts, which means multiple elections take place at a single voting location. These situations have led to poll worker confusion, such as misplaced ballots, which have led to integrity concerns. Nesiba's bill outlined requirements to establish

voting precincts that “represent the interests and conveniences of voters in the county.”

“When we’re putting poll workers into this difficult situation where they’re having to run two elections instead of one at their precinct place, it allows for the possibility that more errors will happen, and it plays into this false sentiment voter fraud,” Nesiba said.

More issues dealing with election issues passed through the House State Affairs Committee on Friday, including a measure to regulate absentee voting that makes absentee ballot drop-boxes a misdemeanor and shortens the period a voter can request an absentee ballot. Other electoral system proposals that were scheduled for hearing Friday were postponed.

6th officer fired after beating death of Tyre Nichols

By ADRIAN SAINZ and JONATHAN MATTISE Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — A sixth Memphis officer was fired Friday after an internal police investigation showed he violated multiple department policies in the violent arrest of Tyre Nichols, including rules surrounding the deployment of a stun gun, officials said.

Preston Hemphill had been suspended as he was investigated for his role in the Jan. 7 arrest of Nichols, who died in a hospital three days later. Five Memphis officers have already been fired and charged with second-degree murder in Nichols’ death.

Nichols was beaten after police stopped him for what they said was a traffic violation. 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.

The officers who have been fired and charged are Black, as was Nichols. Hemphill is white. One other officer has been suspended, but has not been identified.

Hemphill was the third officer at the traffic stop that preceded the arrest but was not at the location where Nichols was beaten after he ran away.

On body camera footage from the initial stop, Hemphill is heard saying that he used a stun gun against Nichols and declaring, “I hope they stomp his ass.”

Along with breaking rules regarding the use of a stun gun, Hemphill was also fired for violations of personal conduct and truthfulness, police said in a statement.

Police announced Hemphill’s suspension on Jan. 30, but they said Hemphill was actually suspended shortly after the arrest.

Memphis police spokeswoman Karen Rudolph has said information about Hemphill’s suspension was not immediately released because Hemphill had not been fired. The department generally gives out information about an officer’s punishment only after a department investigation into misconduct ends, Rudolph said.

After the suspension was announced, lawyers for Nichols’ family questioned why the department did not disclose Hemphill’s discipline earlier.

“We have asked from the beginning that the Memphis Police Department be transparent with the family and the community — this news seems to indicate that they haven’t risen to the occasion,” attorneys Ben Crump and Anthony Romanucci said in a statement. “It certainly begs the question why the white officer involved in this brutal attack was shielded and protected from the public eye, and to date, from sufficient discipline and accountability.”

Also Friday, a Tennessee board suspended the emergency medical technician licenses of two former Memphis Fire Department employees for failing to render critical care.

The suspensions of EMT Robert Long and advanced EMT JaMichael Sandridge build on efforts by authorities to hold officers and other first responders accountable for the violence against Nichols. The Justice Department has opened a civil rights probe into the attack that was captured on video.

Three fire department employees were fired after Nichols died. Former fire department Lt. Michelle Whitaker was the third employee let go, but her license was not considered for suspension Friday. The department has said she remained in the engine with the driver during the response to Nichols’ beating.

Emergency Medical Services Board member Jeff Beaman said during Friday’s emergency meeting that

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there may have been other licensed personnel on scene — including a supervisor — who could have prevented the situation that led to the death of Nichols. Beaman said he hopes the board addresses those in the future.

Matt Gibbs, an attorney for the state Department of Health, said the two suspensions were “not final disposition of this entire matter.”

Board members watched 19 minutes of surveillance video that showed Long and Sandridge as they failed to care for Nichols, who couldn't stay seated upright against the side of the vehicle, laying prone on the ground multiple times. They also considered an affidavit by the Memphis Fire Department's EMS deputy chief.

“The (state) Department (of Health) alleges that neither Mr. Sandridge nor Mr. Long engaged in emergency care and treatment to patient T.N., who was clearly in distress during the 19 minute period,” Gibbs said.

Board member Sullivan Smith said it was “obvious to even a lay person” that Nichols “was in terrible distress and needed help.”

“And they failed to provide that help,” Smith said. “They were his best shot, and they failed to help.”

Fire Chief Gina Sweat has said the department received a call from police after someone was pepper-sprayed. When the workers arrived at 8:41 p.m., Nichols was handcuffed on the ground and slumped against a squad car, the statement said.

Long and Sandridge, based on the nature of the call and information they were told by police, “failed to conduct an adequate patient assessment of Mr. Nichols,” the statement said.

There was no immediate response to a voicemail seeking comment left at a number listed for Long. A person who answered a phone call to a number listed for Sandridge declined to comment on the board's decision.

An ambulance was called, and it arrived at 8:55 p.m., the statement said. An emergency unit cared for Nichols and left for a hospital with him at 9:08 p.m., which was 27 minutes after Long, Sandridge and Whitaker arrived, officials said.

An investigation determined that all three violated multiple policies and protocols, the statement said, adding that “their actions or inactions on the scene that night do not meet the expectations of the Memphis Fire Department.”

The fired officers involved were part of the so-called Scorpion unit, which targeted violent criminals in high-crime areas. Police Chief Cerelyn “CJ” Davis said after the video's release that the unit has been disbanded.

Mayor Jim Strickland said Friday that the city has ordered up a review of its police department — including special units and use-of-force policies — through the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, or COPS, through the Collaborative Reform Initial Technical Assistant Center program, and the International Association of Police Chiefs. The COPS group is also aiding a review of the law enforcement response to the Uvalde, Texas, elementary school shooting that left 19 children and two teachers dead.

The killing led to renewed public discussion of how police forces can treat Black residents with excessive violence, regardless of the race of both the police officers and those being policed.

At Nichols' funeral on Wednesday, calls for reform and justice were interwoven with grief over the loss of a man remembered as a son, a sibling, a father and a passionate photographer and skateboarder.

Austin mayor apologizes as city struggles to restore power

By PAUL J. WEBER and DAVID SHARP Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Widespread power outages in the Texas capital stretched into a third day Friday for thousands of residents following a winter storm that was spiraling into a management crisis as city leaders remained unable to say when all the lights would come back on.

Impatience among frazzled, freezing and fed-up families in Austin escalated even as milder weather returned. On Friday, the newly elected mayor stood before cameras and apologized after a week of slow repairs, failed technology and lacking communication with the public.

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"The city let its citizens down. The situation is unacceptable to the community, and it's unacceptable to me," said Mayor Kirk Watson, a Democrat who took office in January. "And I'm sorry."

While New England began shivering and closed schools under an Arctic blast expected to bring the coldest weather in a generation, temperatures finally started to moderate Friday and bring some relief to Austin, where at any given time about 30% of customers in the nation's 11th-largest city have been without electricity since the ice storm swept into Texas late Monday.

City officials said Friday that significant progress was finally being made as frozen equipment and roads thawed. About 117,000 customers still lacked power, according to Austin Energy, the city's utility. That's down from a peak of around 170,000 people, nearly a third of all customers.

But frustration was not melting away for residents who still had no assurances or sense of when their power would return.

"I just honestly think they were not prepared for any of this," said Edward Kim, 43, whose home had been without power or heat since Wednesday. He was using a generator to keep his house "on life support," while his wife took her 7-year-old daughter to her office to get a shower.

Steve Spencer, 63, had also been without power since Wednesday — despite the city's utility calling him twice to tell him his power was on, he said. "I don't know what's going on down there," he said.

Will Rison didn't lose power, but his parents, who are in their 70s, have been without electricity since Wednesday. They've been coming to his home to charge their phones and take showers.

"You can only wrap yourself in so many blankets and wait it out," Rison said.

For many, the outages stirred unpleasant memories of the 2021 blackouts in Texas, when hundreds of people died after the state's power grid was pushed to the brink of total failure because of a lack of generation. That was not the case this week, as the grid maintained sufficient reserves.

Energy experts said Austin's dense tree canopy made the outages caused by fallen trees and iced-over power lines more widespread. Most power lines are overhead, and Austin officials said burying existing lines would be expensive and more difficult to repair.

Austin Energy at one point said power would be fully restored by Friday evening but then backtracked, saying the damage was worse than originally calculated. The utility's online system for reporting outages also temporarily crashed this week, and city leaders did not hold a news conference to publicly answer questions until Thursday.

"This was a reminder you can have plenty of power plants but still have an unreliable grid," said Michael Webber, professor of energy resources at the University of Texas at Austin. "The wires and poles are the weak point of the system."

There have been no reports of deaths from this week's power outages, though the storm and freeze have been blamed for at least 12 traffic fatalities on slick roads in Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma.

Two fatal crashes occurred in Fort Worth as streets refroze overnight. Lows on Friday night could reach freezing and potentially glaze over the streets again.

In New England, temperatures began plunging Friday morning, and forecasters said wind chills — the combined effect of wind and cold air on exposed skin — in some higher elevations could punch below minus 50 (minus 45 Celsius). Winds in some of those spots have already topped 80 mph (130 kph).

Wind gusts began cutting power Friday to some homes in New England, and many communities opened warming shelters, including in Maine and Connecticut.

Schools closed Friday in Boston and in Manchester, New Hampshire's largest city. "This is simply too cold for students who walk home," read an announcement on the Manchester district's website.

Some ski areas in the two states scaled back operations, eliminating night skiing or reducing lift operations.

In Maine, the National Toboggan Championship pushed Saturday's races back by a day, just two weeks after relocating the competition because a pond wasn't yet frozen due to warm weather.

The irony of delaying competition because of frigid conditions wasn't lost on Holly Anderson, one of the organizers.

"We've done subzero competitions before. But the wind totally changes the environment. It just makes it untenable to be outside," Anderson said.

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Some of the most extreme weather was expected atop New Hampshire's Mount Washington, the Northeast's highest peak and home to a weather observatory, where winds gusted to nearly 100 mph (160 kph) and wind chills could reach minus 100 (minus 73 Celsius).

The system is expected to move out of the region Sunday.

Chinese balloon high over US stirs unease down below

By MATTHEW BROWN and AMY BETH HANSON Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The Chinese balloon drifting high above the U.S. and first revealed over Montana has created a buzz down below among residents who initially wondered what it was — and now wonder what its arrival means amid a chorus of alarm raised by elected officials.

The balloon roiled diplomatic tensions as it continued to move over the central U.S. on Friday at 60,000 feet (18,288 meters). Secretary of State Antony Blinken abruptly canceled an upcoming trip to China.

Curiosity about the bobbling sky orb that's the size of three school buses swept the nation and the internet, with search terms like "where is the spy balloon now?" and "spy balloon tracker" surging on Google. There is no such tracker just yet, but a couple St. Louis TV stations offered grainy live feeds of the balloon.

Internet users posted wobbly videos and photos of white splotches in comments sections and speculative feeds. And online storm chasers, more accustomed to tracking raging systems and funnel clouds, offered updates on the balloon's path through cloudless skies.

It crossed into U.S. airspace over Alaska early this week, according to officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive topic.

In Montana — home to Malmstrom Air Force base and dozens of nuclear missile silos — people doubted Beijing's claim that it was a weather balloon gone off course. And the governor and members of Congress pressed the Biden administration over why the military did not immediately bring it down from the sky.

"I question whether or not we would even find out about this if people hadn't spotted it in Billings," said Chase Doak, a resident of the southern Montana city who appears to have captured some of the first known video footage and photographs of the balloon.

A white balloon with what appeared to be a solar array hanging beneath it was seen over Billings Wednesday afternoon, around the same time the local airport was temporarily shut down and a day before the Pentagon said it was tracking a Chinese spy balloon over the state.

Initial speculation over its origins ranged from the foreign to the extra-terrestrial.

When Todd Hewett's 10-year-old son saw it over Billings he thought it was a comet. Hewett got some shaky footage, using a cellphone to take video through a telescope, and was skeptical of the Chinese claim it was a civilian balloon.

"Shoot it down," he said. "If we could somehow pierce the bottom of it to allow some of the gas to escape to allow for a more controlled descent (that) would be nice .. but if we can't do that ... blow it up."

Montana has some experience with balloons launched by adversaries: Japan in World War II targeted the western U.S. with incendiary "balloon bombs" that were floated over North America with plans to harm people and start forest fires. More than 30 of the bombs made of rice paper landed in Montana, according to the Montana Historical Society.

In Oregon, five children and a pregnant woman on a church picnic were killed in 1945 when they found one of the bombs and it exploded.

On Friday in Kansas City, Missouri, the National Weather Service said it received reports of a large balloon in the Kansas City metro area and posted two images of white orbs taken from the weather station office in Pleasant Hill, Missouri. The service confirmed it was not a National Weather Service balloon.

A graphic generated by a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration online tool was eagerly shared on Facebook, showing the balloon's trajectory sweep into the U.S. South. Local National Weather Service offices were asked on Twitter whether the balloon was theirs. No, was their answer.

Tami Hansen, 44, saw the balloon overhead in Columbia, Missouri, and said she was not terribly concerned about the object flying over her city.

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"I've heard all kinds of thoughts. Is it a spy balloon, is it a weather balloon? Who knows right now? It is what it is," she said. "We really try not to get too political out here," she said.

Montana U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, who chairs the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, said he would hold a hearing to get answers from the Biden administration. He called China's actions "a clear threat."

Rep. Ryan Zinke sent a poll to constituents early Friday saying the balloon was still over the state and asking if should be shot down. When the Pentagon said the balloon had since drifted over the central U.S., Zinke raised the possibility China had more than one balloon over the U.S..

"I don't know if that's the only balloon. We've asked for those answers," he told The Associated Press. He said the balloon should have been shot down. "The message that it gives to our allies is, we're not capable of dealing with a balloon," he said.

Republicans in Montana have grown increasingly outspoken in recent years about China posing a threat to U.S. national security.

A bill pending before the state Legislature would ban "foreign adversaries" from owning, leasing or renting critical infrastructure or farmland. The measure's sponsor singled out China as being interested in acquiring U.S. lands and resources to "help them with spying efforts."

The heavy anti-China sentiment marks a shift from a just a few years ago, when Montana U.S. Sen. Steve Daines visited China, hosted the Chinese ambassador on a visit to a Montana ranch and helped secure a deal to export more beef to China.

The beef deal later fell through, and the Republican has transformed into a strong critic of China.

Daines on Friday rejected the Pentagon's contention that it was too dangerous to bring the balloon down over Montana. He told reporters there would have been "no better place" than his sparsely populated home state.

"You've got higher odds of hitting a cow or a prairie dog or an antelope than you would of hitting any kind of a structure or a person," he said.

Authorities: 2 arrested in California shooting that killed 6

VISALIA, Calif. (AP) — Two gang members were arrested early Friday, one after a gunbattle, in the January massacre of six people including a baby at a central California home associated with a rival gang, the Tulare County sheriff said.

Sheriff Mike Boudreaux said Noah David Beard, 25, was taken into custody and Angel "Nanu" Uriarte, 35, was wounded in the shootout with federal agents and was undergoing surgery, but was stable and expected to survive.

"I'm happy we were able to put these two men behind bars," the sheriff said.

The suspects and members of the victims' family have a long history of gang violence but the motive for the shooting "is not exactly clear," Boudreaux said at a news conference at the sheriff's headquarters in Visalia.

The Tulare County District Attorney's Office charged both suspects with six counts of murder and other crimes. They face a potential sentence of the death penalty or life in prison without parole, prosecutors said.

The six victims, including a teen mother and her baby, were gunned down on Jan. 16 in rural Goshen, a community of 3,000 in the San Joaquin Valley.

Authorities said both suspects had been under around-the-clock surveillance since Jan. 23 in a massive investigation that culminated in Friday's arrests and involved sheriff's detectives, prosecutors, the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and other law enforcement agencies.

Search warrants were served at locations in Goshen and Visalia, and about eight inmate cells associated with the Nuestra Familia prison gang were searched in five state prisons, Boudreaux said.

He said sheriff's authorities waited until they had DNA evidence to make the arrests to bolster the case. No further details of the evidence were provided.

Both suspects had prior run-ins with the law. Uriarte was convicted in 2015 of assault with a firearm in association with a street gang, and Beard had juvenile convictions, prosecutors said in the court filing.

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The victims were identified as: Rosa Parraz, 72; Eladio Parraz, Jr., 52; Jennifer Analla, 49; Marcos Parraz, 19; Alissa Parraz, 16; and Nycholas Parraz, 10 months.

A surveillance video released by authorities Friday showed a teenage girl running outside and placing a baby on the other side of a fence, then jumping over it herself. Authorities said Beard shot and killed the teen and baby, who were both found dead in the street, shot in the back of the head.

Among the adult victims was a woman who was found kneeling and shot in the head, authorities said.

The sheriff has said Alissa Parraz had just been awarded full custody of her son after he spent months in the foster care system. The two were reunited on Jan. 13 — three days before they were killed.

The shooting was reported by a woman who called 911 during the violence. She is heard on a recording released by authorities frantically telling a dispatcher that her boyfriend was shot and that the shooters were still there.

"They're coming back," she said. "Please hurry, please!"

The Goshen killings were part of a violent and deadly month in California.

On Jan. 21, a shooting at Monterey Park dance hall killed 11 and wounded nine. The gunman later killed himself. On Jan. 23, shootings at two Half Moon Bay farms killed seven and wounded one before the suspect was arrested.

Jury: Musk didn't deceive investors with 2018 Tesla tweets

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — A jury on Friday decided Elon Musk didn't deceive investors with his 2018 tweets about electric automaker Tesla in a proposed deal that quickly unraveled and raised questions about whether the billionaire had misled investors.

The verdict by the nine jurors was reached after less than two hours of deliberation following a three-week trial. It represents a major vindication for Musk, who spent about eight hours on the witness stand defending his motives for the August 2018 tweets at the center of the trial.

Musk, 51, wasn't on hand for the brief reading of the verdict, after making a surprise appearance earlier Friday for closing arguments that drew starkly different portraits of him.

Alex Spiro, Musk's attorney, declined to comment as he walked out of the courtroom following the verdicts.

The trial pitted Tesla investors represented in a class-action lawsuit against Musk, who is CEO of both the electric automaker and the Twitter service he bought for \$44 billion a few months ago.

Shortly before boarding his private jet on Aug. 7, 2018, Musk tweeted that he had the financing to take Tesla private, even though it turned out he hadn't gotten an iron-clad commitment for a deal that would have cost \$20 billion to \$70 billion to pull off.

Musk's integrity was at stake at the trial as well part of a fortune that has established him as one of the world's richest people. He could have been saddled with a bill for billions of dollars in damages had the jury found him liable for the 2018 tweets that had already been deemed falsehoods by the judge presiding over the trial.

Earlier Friday, Musk sat stoically in court during the trial's closing arguments while he was both vilified as a rich narcissist whose reckless behavior risks "anarchy" and hailed as a visionary looking out for the "little guy."

The trial hinged on whether Musk's tweeting in 2018 misled Tesla shareholders, steering them in a direction that they argue cost them billions of dollars. The civil case centered on two tweets Musk posted Aug. 7, 2018 about a Tesla buyout that never happened.

The first tweet Musk declared he had "funding secured" to take Tesla private. A few hours later, Musk sent another tweet indicating that the deal was imminent.

The tweets caused Twitter's stock to surge during a 10-day period covered by the lawsuit before falling back after Musk abandoned a deal in which he never had a firm financing commitment, based on evidence presented during the trial.

Nicholas Porritt, a lawyer for the Tesla shareholders, urged the jurors to rebuke Musk for his "loose

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relationship with the truth.”

“Our society is based on rules,” Porritt said. “We need rules to save us from anarchy. Rules should apply to Elon Musk like everyone else.”

Alex Spiro, Musk’s attorney, conceded the 2018 tweets were “technically inaccurate.” But he told the jurors, “Just because it’s a bad tweet doesn’t make it a fraud.”

U.S. District Judge Edward Chen, who presided over the trial, decided last year that Musk’s 2018 tweets were false and has instructed the jury to view them that way.

During roughly eight hours on the stand earlier in the trial, Musk insisted he believed he had lined up the funds from Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund to take Tesla private after eight years as a publicly held company. He defended his initial August 2018 tweet as well-intentioned and aimed at ensuring all Tesla investors knew the automaker might be on its way to ending its run as a publicly held company.

“I had no ill motive,” Musk testified. “My intent was to do the right thing for all shareholders.”

Spiro echoed that theme in his closing argument.

“He was trying to include the retail shareholder, the mom and pop, the little guy, and not seize more power for himself,” Spiro said.

Porritt, meanwhile, scoffed at the notion that Musk could have concluded he had a firm commitment after a 45-minute meeting at a Tesla factory on July 31, 2018, with Yasir al-Rumayyan, governor of Saudi Arabia’s wealth fund, given there was no written documentation.

A text message that al-Rumayyan sent later in August that is part of the trial evidence also indicated that the Saudi fund was only interested in learning more about Musk’s proposal to take Tesla private at a time the company was valued at about \$60 billion.

“Apparently a \$60 billion financing commitment was obtained and no one wrote down a single word,” Porritt said, while asserting that amount was larger than the combined economic output of Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador.

Spiro, though, pointed to Musk’s track record helping to start and run a list of companies that include digital payment pioneer PayPal and rocket ship maker SpaceX, in addition to Tesla. The automaker based in Austin, Texas, is now worth nearly \$600 billion, despite a steep decline in its stock price last year amid concerns that Musk’s purchase of Twitter would distract him from Tesla.

Recalling Musk’s roots as a South African immigrant who came to Silicon Valley to create revolutionary tech companies, Spiro described his client “as the kind of person who believes the impossible is possible.”

Porritt put a different twist on Musk’s mindset during his presentation. “To Elon Musk, if he believes it, or just thinks about it, it’s true.”

In his concluding remarks, Porritt told jurors their decision boiled down to their answer to one question: “Do the rules apply to everyone, or can Elon Musk do whatever he wants and not face the consequences?”

Chinese balloon soars across US; Blinken scraps Beijing trip

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A huge, high-altitude Chinese balloon sailed across the U.S. on Friday, drawing severe Pentagon accusations of spying on sensitive military sites despite China’s firm denials. Secretary of State Antony Blinken abruptly canceled a high-stakes Beijing trip aimed at easing U.S.-China tensions.

Aside from the government response, fuzzy videos dotted social media as people with binoculars and telephoto lenses tried to find the “spy balloon” in the sky as it headed southeastward over Kansas and Missouri at 60,000 feet (18,300 meters).

It was spotted earlier over Montana, which is home to one of America’s three nuclear missile silo fields at Malmstrom Air Force Base, Defense officials said.

The U.S. actually had been tracking the balloon since at least Tuesday, when President Joe Biden was first briefed, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters. According to three U.S. officials, Biden was initially inclined to order the surveillance balloon to be blown out of the sky, and a senior defense official said the U.S. had prepared fighter jets, including F-22s, to shoot it down if ordered.

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The officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, said Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, strongly advised Biden against shooting down the balloon, warning that its size — as big as three school buses — and considerable weight could create a debris field large enough to endanger Americans on the ground. The Pentagon also assessed that after unspecified U.S. measures, the possibility of the balloon uncovering important information was not great.

It was not the first time Chinese surveillance balloons have been tracked over U.S. territory, including at least once during former President Donald Trump's administration, officials said.

Blinken's trip cancellation came despite China's claim that the balloon was merely a weather research "airship" that had blown off course. The Pentagon rejected that out of hand — as well as China's contention that the balloon was not being used for surveillance and had only limited navigational ability.

Blinken, who had been due to depart Washington for Beijing late Friday, said he had told senior Chinese diplomat Wang Yi in a phone call that sending the balloon over the U.S. was "an irresponsible act and that (China's) decision to take this action on the eve of my visit is detrimental to the substantive discussions that we were prepared to have."

After passing the sensitive military sites in Montana, the balloon was moving southeastward over the heartland of the central United States during the day and was expected to remain in U.S. airspace for several days, officials said.

The development marked a new blow to already strained U.S.-Chinese relations that have been in a downward spiral for years over numerous issues. Still, U.S. officials maintained that diplomatic channels remain open and Blinken said he remained willing to travel to China "when conditions allow."

"We continue to believe that having open lines of communication is important," he said.

Biden declined to comment on the matter when questioned at an economic event. Two likely 2024 reelection challengers, Trump, and Nikki Haley, the former South Carolina governor and U.N. ambassador, said the U.S. should immediately shoot down the balloon.

Several Republican congressmen said the same, and a number blasted the administration for "allowing" the balloon intrusion.

"The idea that Communist China has a spy balloon headed towards Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri right now — the home of the Stealth Bomber — is absolutely unbelievable," said Sen. Eric Schmitt, R-Mo. "No American should accept this. I don't."

Jean-Pierre did not shed light on why the administration waited until Thursday to make its concerns public.

Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, Pentagon press secretary, refused to say on Friday whether there was any new consideration of shooting the balloon down. He said it currently was posing no threat.

Ryder said it was maneuverable, not just at the mercy of the wind, and had changed course.

Still, weather experts said China's claim that the balloon had gone off course was not unfeasible. China's account of wind patterns known as the Westerlies carrying a balloon to the western United States was "absolutely possible - not possible, likely," said Dan Jaffe, a professor of atmospheric chemistry at the University of Washington.

As for Blinken's trip, Jean-Pierre said a diplomatic visit to China was not appropriate at such a time. She said that "the presence of this balloon in our airspace ... is a clear violation of our sovereignty as well as international law and it is unacceptable this occurred."

A State Department official said Blinken and Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman had both protested to the top official at the Chinese Embassy on Wednesday, a day before the Pentagon announced the discovery of the balloon.

Blinken's long-anticipated meetings with senior Chinese officials had been seen in both countries as a possible way to find some areas of common ground at a time of major disagreements over Taiwan, human rights, China's claims in the South China Sea, North Korea, Russia's war in Ukraine, trade policy and climate change.

Although the trip, which was agreed to in November by Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping at a sum-

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mit in Indonesia, had not been formally announced, officials in both Beijing and Washington had spoken in recent days about Blinken's imminent arrival for meetings on Sunday and Monday.

China, which angrily denounces surveillance attempts by the U.S. and others over areas it considers to be its territory and once forced down an American spy plane and held its crew captive on Hainan Island, was relatively conciliatory in its response to the U.S. complaints.

In a statement that approached an apology, the Chinese foreign ministry said the balloon was a civilian airship used mainly for meteorological research. It said the airship had limited "self-steering" capabilities and had "deviated far from its planned course" because of winds.

"The Chinese side regrets the unintended entry of the airship into U.S. airspace due to force majeure," the statement said, citing a legal term used to refer to events beyond one's control.

Lauded rebel fashion designer Paco Rabanne dies at age 88

By ELAINE GANLEY Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Paco Rabanne, the Spanish-born designer known for perfumes sold worldwide but who made his name with metallic space-age fashions that put a bold, new edge on catwalks, has died, the group that owns his fashion house announced Friday.

"The House of Paco Rabanne wishes to honor our visionary designer and founder who passed away today at the age of 88. Among the most seminal fashion figures of the 20th century, his legacy will remain," the statement from beauty and fashion company Puig said.

The newspaper Le Telegramme quoted the mayor of Vannes, David Robo, as saying that Rabanne died at his home in the Brittany region town of Portsall.

Rabanne's fashion house shows its collections in Paris and is scheduled to unveil the brand's latest ready-to-wear designs during the upcoming Feb. 27-March 3 fashion week.

Rabanne was known as a rebel designer in a career that blossomed with his collaboration with the family-owned Puig, a Spanish company that now also owns other design houses, including Nina Ricci, Jean Paul Gaultier, Carolina Herrera and Dries Van Noten. The company also owns the fragrance brands Byredo and Penhaligon's.

"Paco Rabanne made transgression magnetic. Who else could induce fashionable Parisian women (to) clamor for dresses made of plastic and metal? Who but Paco Rabanne could imagine a fragrance called Calandre — the word means 'automobile grill,' you know — and turn it into an icon of modern femininity?" the group's statement said.

Calandre perfume was launched in 1969, the first product by Puig in Spain, France and the United States, according to the company.

Born Francisco Rabaneda y Cuervo in 1934, the future designer fled the Spanish Basque country at age 5 during the Spanish Civil War and took the name of Paco Rabanne.

He studied architecture at Paris' Beaux Arts Academie before moving to couture, following in the steps of his mother, a couturier in Spain. He said she was jailed at one point for being dressed in a "scandalous" fashion.

Rabanne sold accessories to well-known designers before launching his own collection.

He titled the first collection presented under his own name "12 unwearable dresses in contemporary materials." His innovative outfits were made of various kinds of metal, including his famous use of mail, the chain-like material associated with Medieval knights.

Coco Chanel reportedly called Rabanne "the metallurgist of fashion."

French President Emmanuel Macron and his wife, Brigitte, saluted "an uncommon artist who blew the wind of renewal into the world of haute couture," his office said.

Paco Rabanne was among the first designers to put Black mannequins on the runway, and in 1983 opened Centre 57, devoted to the Black African and Caribbean diaspora. Artists, musicians, film-makers and hip-hop dancers frequented the center for several years, the statement from Macron's office noted.

"My colleagues tell me I am not a couturier but an artisan, and it's true that I'm an artisan. ... I work

with my hands," he said in an interview in the 1970s.

In the interview given when he was 43 years old and now held in France's National Audiovisual Institute, Rabanne explained his radical fashion philosophy, revealing a dark side of his complex character.

"I think fashion is prophetic. Fashion announces the future," he said at the time, adding that "the future for me is catastrophic."

Sure enough, the designer predicted a major catastrophe on Aug. 11, 1999, claiming that the Russian MIR space station would fall on France. Instead, a crowd opened champagne at his Left Bank headquarters for a "survivors' party."

Paco Rabanne retired in 2000, and the house didn't field a runway show for five years, from 2006 until the spring-summer 2012 show.

But the creator has also said that women are harbingers of what lies on the horizon.

The president of the Association of Fashion Designers of Spain, Modesto Lomba, said Rabanne "left an absolute mark on the passage of time. Let's not forget that he was Spanish and that he triumphed inside and outside Spain."

Police: Monkey thief charged with other crimes at Dallas Zoo

By JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — The man charged in the taking of two emperor tamarin monkeys from the Dallas Zoo has also been charged in two other recent incidents there involving holes that were cut in animal enclosure fences, authorities said Friday.

Davion Irvin, 24, has been charged with two counts of burglary to a building in connection with the cutting of the enclosure fences for a clouded leopard and langur monkeys, police spokeswoman Kristin Lowman said during a news conference. The langur monkeys didn't escape and weren't harmed. The leopard did but was later found safe near its pen.

Lowman said police were still investigating whether there's any connection to the suspicious death of an endangered vulture at the zoo.

"The last month has been an emotional rollercoaster for the team here at Dallas Zoo," Harrison Edell, the zoo's executive vice president for animal care and conservation, said at the news conference.

Irvin was arrested Thursday on six counts of animal cruelty — three each for the two emperor tamarin monkeys that were taken, police said. His bail was set at \$25,000 and jail records didn't list an attorney for him.

The tamarin monkeys went missing Monday and a cut was found in their enclosure's fencing.

After getting a tip, police found the small monkeys named Bella and Finn on Tuesday in the closet of a vacant home south of the zoo.

Earlier this week, police released a photo and a video taken from the zoo of a man they said they wanted to speak with about the missing monkeys.

Police said Friday that they arrested Irvin after receiving a tip that he had been seen near the animal exhibits at The Dallas World Aquarium. Responding officers saw him boarding the city's light rail and later spotted him a few blocks away, police said. He was then taken to police headquarters for questioning.

Waylon Tate, an aquarium spokesperson, said Irvin had stopped an employee to ask questions about one of the aquarium's animals, and the employee recognized him from the coverage of the missing monkeys.

"We do believe that (Irvin) was looking to commit another crime," Lowman said at the news conference.

The missing monkeys were the latest in a string of unusual events at the zoo over the past few weeks, including other enclosure fences that were cut and the death of the vulture.

The mysterious events at the zoo began on Jan. 13, when arriving workers found that the clouded leopard named Nova was missing from her cage, and police said that a cutting tool had been used to make an opening in her enclosure. The zoo closed as a search for her got underway, and she was found later that day near her habitat.

Zoo workers had also found a similar gash in an enclosure for langur monkeys, though none got out or

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appeared harmed, police said.

On Jan. 21, workers arriving at the zoo found an endangered lappet-faced vulture named Pin dead. Gregg Hudson, the zoo's president and CEO, called the death "very suspicious" and said the vulture had "a wound," but he declined to give further details.

Worries abound that Mexico's Maya Train will destroy jungle

By TERESA DE MIGUEL Associated Press

CALAKMUL BIOSPHERE RESERVE, Mexico (AP) — Miguel Ángel Díaz walks slowly so his footfall on dry leaves doesn't drive away what he's trying to find in this dense forest of seeded breadnut and sapodilla trees. Coming to a small wetland, a sign warns: Beware of the crocodile.

Díaz, a tourist guide, shines a laser pointer at a woodpecker and a toucan, and then moves it over to the blue tail of a Yucatecan jay. He learned years ago to decipher the sounds of the Calakmul jungle in Mexico's southern Yucatan.

Although it's high season, this recent morning Díaz had a hard time finding tourists to guide. Last year, just over 50,000 visitors came to Calakmul, home to an ancient Mayan city that today is a UNESCO world heritage site.

Díaz knows many more people will soon come.

"There will be more jobs for us guides," said Díaz, from the shade of a tree full of lianas. "But it's going to be a heavy blow to nature."

Some 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) from the crocodile wetland, bulldozers are felling the jungle for the Maya Train, a \$20 billion dollar project envisioned by Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. A path 40 meters (130 feet) wide is making way for the train, and logs are stacked along the narrow road to the hidden archaeological site. Currently, from the top of nearly-deserted pyramids, the roar of howler monkeys sounds across a sea of green.

The Maya Train is intended to drive economic development to some of the country's poorest areas, in part by bringing up to three million tourists each year.

Fonatur, the national tourism agency, says the train will address a lack of transport infrastructure in the country's southeast that has meant "not all our tourist destinations have been fully developed." There will be 20 stations along the ride, where hotels and commercial markets are planned. It will also be a cargo route for fuel and farm products.

The 1,500 kilometers (930 miles) of rail will pass through unique ecosystems, including the limestone formations filled with freshwater known as cenotes along the Mayan Riviera. This raised a wave of criticism and lawsuits last year that got international attention and temporarily halted the work.

Now the focus has shifted to this section that crosses the intact Calakmul jungle, which is part of the larger Mayan jungle, the largest tropical forest in the Americas after the Amazon.

"I'm not against the train, but for a megaproject of this type, planning normally takes more than 10 years," said British primatologist Kathy Slater, who has been working in Calakmul for a decade with the organization Operation Wallacea. "But this is without planning, it's crazy, they're not thinking about the impacts."

The president wants the train rolling by the end of this year, when his term ends, designating it a matter of "national security" so as to speed up the environmental and public hearing requirements. The army was put in charge of certain sections, including the one that crosses Calakmul.

A regional Indigenous council filed a complaint over lack of proper consultation and a judge agreed, issuing a stop work order that applied to the nearest city, Xpujil.

"They only talked about the benefits of the megaproject, not about the impacts or the damages," said Jesús León Zapata, a member of the Xpujil Indigenous Council. The United Nations human rights office warned in December that the national security decree threatened the rights of Indigenous peoples.

The Associated Press observed work in progress in Xpujil during a trip in January. The president has said several times the national security designation legally allows the work to continue.

"They haven't complied with court orders," said Gustavo Alanís, executive director of the Mexico Envi-

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ronmental Law Center. "It's a serious thing."

The train's path crosses the property of Norma Rosado. From her house with wooden planks and a tin roof, she said the government paid her the equivalent of \$5,800. Officials also have promised to improve the roads and, most important to her, to repair the water main, which only delivers water a few hours two days a week, leaving Rosado and her husband to collect as much as they can in an array of tanks on the patio.

The area has always been forgotten, said Omar Hernández, Norma's husband, "and from that point of view whatever they give us is significant. But these benefits are small scale because we're just farmers, we can't build hotels. Those will be built by investors."

Hernández hopes to sell organic honey he produces to tourists. He had to relocate his hives though, worried the heavy machinery would scare them away. Hernández, a big man, looks small as he walks through the new clearcut that runs through their land.

Slater, the primatologist at the University of Liverpool, said that for years environmental officials and non-profits have been trying to convince people to stop raising livestock and instead switch to beekeeping to preserve the forest.

"It's sad" that those efforts could be hindered, said Slater.

For the biologist Rodrigo Medellín, at Mexico's largest university, UNAM, the railway simply should not pass through there. "It is going to irreversibly fragment one of the country's most important strongholds for biodiversity," he said.

The Calakmul region is home to one of the most important jaguar populations in Mesoamerica, more than 350 species of birds and one hundred mammals, plus other endangered species — the tapir, puma and ocellated turkey.

"I have seen with my own eyes troops of spider monkeys coming through the canopy and suddenly reach the clearcut and there is no way for them to cross," he said.

Fonatur proposes 126 wildlife crossings along this section, but only six would be elevated, which large mammals need, said Medellín, known by many as Mexican Batman because of his expertise in bats.

As one approaches Volcan de los Murcielagos, a cave that is home to three million bats, the smell of guano gets more intense.

The first buzz is soft, like that of a hornet's nest. From the mouth of the cave, 50 meters (165 feet) deep, thousands of bats emerge in a tornado that reaches the sky and covers it with a blanket of black.

All agriculture in the southern Yucatan benefits from them because the bats eat 30 tons of insects nightly, controlling pests on corn, chile and bean fields. Yet one version of the rail plan had the tracks passing 700 meters (less than a half mile) from the bat cave. No one is certain of the current plan; there have been many versions. Fonatur communications manager Fernando Vázquez said the agency is not commenting on this section of the Maya Train right now.

In the more than 2,100 pages of environmental impact report for this one section of the railway, the cave is not mentioned. It does say the construction will have "severe adverse" impacts on protected species and will cause "habitat fragmentation," but concludes the project is environmentally "viable" because these effects can be mitigated. The plan is to reforest 74 hectares (183 acres), about ten percent of the 730 hectares (1800 acres) that will be cut down.

Some of that will be in the Valentin Gomez Farias communal farmlands. Residents there created an ecotourism project nine years ago that has visitors staying in tents under roofs of woven palm. Guests kayak in a lagoon, hike and observe wildlife as part of a project set up with camera traps.

With the Maya Train coming through, complete with hotel and tourism complexes, José Antonio Guzmán Hernández, who leads the project, fears Calakmul will turn into something more like Cancun or Tulum.

"We were always trying to keep that from happening," he said. "But with all this now it feels like it will be like a bomb, it's going to explode."

Google, Apple, Amazon give investors reason to fret

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Associated Press undefined

Wall Street had its eyes Friday on big tech after some of the biggest companies in the world posted lackluster quarterly financial performances.

That included Apple Inc. The company posted its first quarterly revenue drop in nearly four years after pandemic-driven restrictions on its China factories curtailed sales of the latest iPhone during the holiday season.

Amazon reported worse-than-expected fourth-quarter profits, but its revenue beat expectations boosted by sales in its cloud-computing unit AWS, which is also seeing a slow-down in growth.

Google's parent company Alphabet posted a lower profit and a small revenue increase for last year's fourth quarter, as a decline in online ad spending and competition from rivals weigh on the search giant. While overall revenue grew, advertising revenue fell by nearly 4% and revenue at YouTube declined 8% year-over-year.

Amazon ended Friday down 8.4% and Alphabet lost 2.8%. Apple bounced back, finishing the day up 2.4%.

G-7, Europe reach deal for price cap on Russian diesel

By RAF CASERT and DAVID McHUGH Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Friday that industrialized countries in the Group of Seven are imposing a price cap on refined Russian oil products such as diesel and kerosene, as part of a coalition that includes Australia and a tentative agreement from the European Union.

The cap follows similar price limits put on Russian oil exports, with the goal of reducing the financial resources Russian President Vladimir Putin has to wage the nearly year-long war in Ukraine.

"Today's agreement builds on the price cap on Russian crude oil exports that we set in December and helps advance our goals of limiting Russia's key revenue generator in funding its illegal war while promoting stable global energy markets," Yellen said in a statement.

On Friday, EU governments tentatively agreed to set a \$100-per-barrel price cap on sales of Russian diesel to coincide with an EU embargo on the fuel. Diplomats representing the 27 EU governments set the cap on Russian diesel fuel, jet fuel and gasoline ahead of a ban taking effect Sunday. It aims to reduce Russia's income while keeping its diesel flowing to non-Western countries to avoid a global shortage that would send prices and inflation higher.

Details about the cap were provided by a G-7 statement and diplomats from three different EU member nations, who agreed to discuss the cap on the condition of anonymity.

The \$100-per-barrel cap applies to Russian diesel and other fuels that sell for more than the crude oil used to make them. Officials agreed on a \$45-per-barrel limit on Russian oil products that sell for less than the price of crude.

The deal follows a similar G-7 agreement to limit the price of Russian crude oil to \$60 a barrel. All the price ceilings are enforced by a requirement for the world's largely Western-based shippers and insurers to abide by sanctions and handle oil products only priced at or below the limits.

Russia has said it will not sell to countries obeying the oil cap, but because its oil is selling for less than \$60 per barrel, it has kept flowing to the global market. The price caps encourage non-Western customers that have not banned Russian oil to press for discounts, while outright evasion — though possible — carries additional costs such as organizing off-the-books tankers.

The ambassadors of the 27 EU nations put forward the decision, and national governments have until early Saturday to react with a written objection. No changes to the deal were expected.

Europe has been steadily reducing its diesel supplies from Russia from around half of all imports. Diesel is key for the economy because it is used to power cars, trucks carrying goods, farm equipment and factory machinery. Prices have spiked since Russia invaded Ukraine on rebounding demand and limited refinery capacity in some places.

If the price cap works as intended and Russian diesel keeps flowing, fuel prices should not skyrocket, analysts say. Europe could get alternate supplies of diesel from the U.S., India and the Middle East, while

Russia could seek new customers outside Europe.

However, the impact of the cap will be unpredictable as shippers reroute flows of the fuel to new destinations, and longer sea journeys could strain tanker capacity.

Fossil fuel sales are a key pillar of Russia's budget, but European governments previously hesitated to cut off their purchases because the economy was heavily dependent on Russian natural gas, oil and diesel. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, that has changed.

Europe cut off Russian coal and later banned its crude oil on Dec. 5. Meanwhile, Moscow has halted most supplies of natural gas to Europe, citing technical issues and a refusal by customers to pay in Russian currency. European officials say it is retaliation for sanctions and an attempt to undermine their support for Ukraine.

Jupiter's moon count jumps to 92, most in solar system

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Astronomers have discovered 12 new moons around Jupiter, putting the total count at a record-breaking 92.

That's more than any other planet in our solar system. Saturn, the one-time leader, comes in a close second with 83 confirmed moons.

The Jupiter moons were added recently to a list kept by the International Astronomical Union's Minor Planet Center, said Scott Sheppard of the Carnegie Institution, who was part of the team.

They were discovered using telescopes in Hawaii and Chile in 2021 and 2022, and their orbits were confirmed with follow-up observations.

These newest moons range in size from 0.6 miles to 2 miles (1 kilometer to 3 kilometers), according to Sheppard.

"I hope we can image one of these outer moons close-up in the near future to better determine their origins," he said in an email Friday.

In April, the European Space Agency is sending a spacecraft to Jupiter to study the planet and some of its biggest, icy moons. And next year, NASA will launch the Europa Clipper to explore Jupiter's moon of the same name, which could harbor an ocean beneath its frozen crust.

Sheppard — who discovered a slew of moons around Saturn a few years ago and has taken part in 70 moon discoveries so far around Jupiter — expects to keep adding to the lunar tally of both gas giants.

Jupiter and Saturn are loaded with small moons, believed to be fragments of once bigger moons that collided with one another or with comets or asteroids, Sheppard said. The same goes for Uranus and Neptune, but they're so distant that it makes moon-spotting even harder.

For the record, Uranus has 27 confirmed moons, Neptune 14, Mars two and Earth one. Venus and Mercury come up empty.

Jupiter's newly discovered moons have yet to be named. Sheppard said only half of them are big enough — at least 1 mile (1.5 kilometers) or so — to warrant a name.

EU prepares more Russia sanctions; Kremlin readies offensive

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The European Union will unveil its 10th package of sanctions against Russia on Feb. 24 to mark the anniversary of Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a senior official from the bloc said in Kyiv on Friday, as Ukrainian forces gird for an expected Russian offensive in the coming weeks.

The sanctions will target technology used by Russia's war machine, among other things, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen told a news conference.

The sanctions will take aim in particular at components used in the manufacturing of drones, she said, naming Iran as a key supplier of Russia.

Closing loopholes that the Kremlin uses to circumvent sanctions will also be a priority, according to Von der Leyen, who was on her fourth visit to the Ukrainian capital since the war began.

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The exact measures in the next EU sanctions package must be agreed upon by the bloc's 27 member countries — a process that can take weeks.

Top EU officials met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a show of support for the country as it battles to counter the Kremlin's forces and strives to join the EU as well as NATO.

The last such summit was held in Kyiv in October 2021 — a few months before the war started. The highly symbolic visit is also the first EU political mission of its kind to a country at war.

The high-level meeting came as a 60-year-old man was killed and six others were wounded Friday when Russian missiles hit central Toretsk, in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region, the local prosecutor's office said in a statement on Facebook.

Ukrainian authorities reported Friday that at least six civilians were killed and 20 others were wounded over the previous 24 hours.

Among the dead were two brothers, ages 49 and 42, killed when Russian shelling destroyed an apartment building in the northeastern Kharkiv region, Ukraine's presidential office said. Their 70-year-old father was hospitalized with injuries.

Also, six people were wounded and 18 apartment buildings, two hospitals and a school were damaged in a Russian attack in the eastern city of Kramatorsk on Thursday, Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko told Ukrainian TV. Four people died when a Russian missile hit an apartment building in that city on Wednesday.

European officials were adamant about continuing to support Ukraine militarily and economically, but they didn't provide any new details about Ukraine's accession path to the EU.

Zelenskyy said Ukraine's goal "is to start negotiations this year." But the process will likely take years and require the adoption of far-reaching reforms, including a clampdown on endemic corruption as the country receives billions of dollars in aid. Kyiv formally submitted its application last June.

Zelenskyy said progress had been made to further integrate Ukraine economically into the EU across several sectors, including agriculture, industry, energy and customs.

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 has pushed the West to provide fighter jets and long-range missiles.

The U.S. announced Friday it will send longer-range bombs to Ukraine, along with air defense systems and other weapons and ammunition as part of a new \$2.17 billion aid package. The rocket-propelled, GPS-guided, ground-launched, small-diameter bombs (GLSDB) are fired from HIMARS rocket launchers and glide to targets up to 150 kilometers (93 miles) away, twice as far as the previously supplied U.S. rockets for HIMARS systems could reach.

Pentagon Press Secretary Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder noted that the bombs will give the Ukrainian armed forces a longer range capability and enable them to "conduct operations in defense of their country and to take back their sovereign territory."

Asked to comment on the U.S. move, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov pointed to Thursday's statement by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who likened the Russian action in Ukraine to fighting the Nazis in World War II and issued an ominous warning to the West for announcing new weapons shipments.

"Those who hope to defeat Russia on the battlefield apparently fail to understand that a modern war against Russia will be a completely different war for them," Putin said. "We do not send our tanks to their borders, but we have something to respond with, and it is not limited to the use of armour."

France and Italy also agreed Friday to supply Ukraine with a SAMP/T-MAMBA air-defense system, which French officials call the European equivalent of the Patriot system that the U.S. has given Ukraine. The missile battery is slated for delivery this spring.

Kyiv's forces "have a chance" of beating back an expected Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine if supplied with the right Western weapons, Zelenskyy said.

"Our task is not to give them (an) opportunity (for revenge) until our army is strengthened with appropriate weapons. I think we have a chance," Zelenskyy added.

Officials in the eastern Luhansk region said Russian forces have disabled mobile internet connections, stepped up shelling and deployed more troops in preparation for an offensive.

EU assistance for Ukraine has reached almost 50 billion euros (\$55 billion) since the fighting started,

according to officials from the bloc.

The EU is providing Ukraine with financial and humanitarian aid, and announced it is ramping up its military training mission, from an initial target of pushing 15,000 troops through the schooling to up to 30,000 troops. One focus is to train the crews of tanks that Western countries have offered Ukraine.

Ukraine pushes to exclude Russia from 2024 Paris Olympics

By HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — With next year's Paris Olympics on the horizon and Russia's invasion looking more like a prolonged conflict, Ukraine's sports minister on Friday renewed a threat to boycott the games if Russia and Belarus are allowed to compete and said Kyiv would lobby other nations to join.

Such a move could lead to the biggest rift in the Olympic movement since the Cold War era.

No nation has declared it will boycott the 2024 Summer Games. But Ukraine won support from Poland, the Baltic nations and Denmark, who pushed back against an International Olympic Committee plan to allow delegations from Russia and ally Belarus to compete in Paris as "neutral athletes," without flags or anthems.

"We cannot compromise on the admission of Russian and Belarusian athletes," said Ukrainian Sports Minister Vadym Huttsait, who also heads its national Olympic committee, citing attacks on his country, the deaths of its athletes and the destruction of its sports facilities.

A meeting of his committee did not commit to a boycott but approved plans to try to persuade global sports officials in the next two months — including discussion of a possible boycott.

Huttsait added: "As a last option, but I note that this is my personal opinion, if we do not succeed, then we will have to boycott the Olympic Games."

Paris will be the final Olympics under outgoing IOC head Thomas Bach, who is looking to his legacy after a tenure marked by disputes over Russia's status — first over widespread doping scandals and now over the war in Ukraine.

Bach's views were shaped when he was an Olympic gold medalist in fencing and his country, West Germany, took part in the U.S.-led boycott of the 1980 Olympics in Moscow over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He has condemned that decision ever since.

Russia has cautiously welcomed the IOC's decision to give it a path to the Olympics but demands it drop a condition that would leave out those athletes deemed to be "actively supporting the war in Ukraine."

Russian Olympic Committee head Stanislav Pozdnyakov, who was a teammate of Ukraine's Huttsait at the 1992 Olympics, called that aspect discriminatory. The IOC, which previously recommended excluding Russia and Belarus from world sports on safety grounds, now argues it cannot discriminate against them purely based on citizenship.

The leaders of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania urged the IOC to ban Russia and said a boycott was a possibility.

"I think that our efforts should be on convincing our other friends and allies that the participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes is just wrong," Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said. "So boycotting is the next step. I think people will understand why this is necessary."

The IOC said in a statement that "this threat of a boycott only leads to further escalation of the situation, not only in sport, but also in the wider context. It is regretful that politicians are misusing athletes and sport as tools to achieve their political objectives."

It added bluntly: "Why punish athletes from your country for the Russian government starting the war?"

Poland's sports minister Kamil Bortniczuk said as many as 40 countries could jointly condemn Russian and Belarusian participation at Paris in a statement next week but that it could stop short of a boycott threat. He told state news agency PAP that the IOC was being "naive" and should reflect on its position.

Denmark wants a ban on Russian athletes "from all international sports as long as their attacks on Ukraine continue," said Danish Culture Minister Jakob Engel-Schmidt.

"We must not waver in relation to Russia. The government's line is clear. Russia must be banned," he

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said. "This also applies to Russian athletes who participate under a neutral flag. It is completely incomprehensible that there are apparently doubts about the line in the IOC."

Asked by The Associated Press about the boycott threats and the IOC plan, Paris 2024 organizing committee head Tony Estanguet would not comment "about political decisions."

"My job is to make sure that all athletes who want to participate will be offered the best conditions in terms of security, to offer them the chance to live their dream," he said in Marseille.

Ukraine boycotted some sporting events last year rather than compete against Russians.

Huttsait said a boycott would be very tough, saying it was "very important for us that our flag is at the Olympic Games; it is very important for us that our athletes are on the podium. So that we show that our Ukraine was, is, and will be."

Marta Fedina, 21, an Olympic bronze medalist in artistic swimming, said in Kyiv she was "ready for a boycott."

"How will I explain to our defenders if I am even present on the same sports ground with these people," she said, referring to Russian athletes. She noted her swimming pool in Kharkiv, where she was living when Moscow invaded, was ruined by the war.

Speakers at the Ukrainian Olympic Committee's assembly meeting raised concerns about Moscow using Paris for propaganda and noted the close ties between some athletes and the Russian military.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Thursday if athletes from the two countries compete, "it should be absolutely clear that they are not representing the Russian or Belarusian states." Los Angeles will host the 2028 Olympics.

If the IOC's proposal takes effect, Paris would be the fourth straight Olympics where Russian athletes have competed without the national flag or anthem. The Russian teams at the Winter Olympics in 2018 and 2022 and the Summer Olympics in 2021 were all caught up in the fallout from a series of doping cases.

The last time multiple countries boycotted an Olympics was in 1988, when North Korea and others refused to attend the Summer Games in South Korea. The North Korean team was a no-show at the Tokyo Games in 2021, citing concerns about the coronavirus pandemic. The IOC barred it from the following Winter Games in Beijing as a result, saying teams had a duty to attend every Olympics.

Although the IOC set the tone of the debate by publishing advice on finding a way to help Russia and Belarus compete, decisions must be made for the governing bodies of individual sports that organize events on the 32-sport Paris program.

Those organizations, many based in the IOC's home of Lausanne, Switzerland, run their own qualifying and Olympic competitions and decide on eligibility criteria for athletes and teams.

The International Cycling Union signed on to the IOC's plan ahead of its Olympic qualifying events to allow Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete as "neutrals."

Track and field's World Athletics and soccer's FIFA were among most sports that excluded Russian athletes and teams within days of the start of the war. Tennis and cycling let many Russians and Belarusians continue competing as neutrals. Other governing bodies are more closely aligned with the IOC or traditionally have strong commercial and political ties to Russia.

One key meeting could be March 3 in Lausanne of the umbrella group of Summer Games sports, known as ASOIF. It is chaired by Francesco Ricci Bitti, a former IOC member when he led the International Tennis Federation, and includes World Athletics president Sebastian Coe.

ASOIF declined comment Friday, though noted this week "the importance of respecting the specificity of each federation and their particular qualification process" for Paris.

Why is R&B music more explicit than ever? It's complicated.

By GARY GERARD HAMILTON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Tank was nervous after sending his manager a preview of "When We" — he'd never released a song that explicit. "He's like, 'You're crazy, but it's jammin'!'" the R&B singer recalled. "It ended up being my biggest record ever."

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Released in 2017, the seductive chorus of “when we (expletive)” was obviously too explicit for radio, so a “clean” version used the phrase “when we touch.” Despite releasing his first album in 2001 and crafting hits like “Maybe I Deserve” and “Please Don’t Go,” it was “When We” that’s been Tank’s most successful, finishing No. 1 on Billboard’s 2018 year-end adult R&B airplay chart.

“I didn’t reinvent anything vocally — a little R&B here and there, tapped into my rap cadence, tapped into my Migos (style),” Tank, now 47, said. “I was competitive.”

Being competitive — and collaborative — with hip-hop is one of the reasons today’s R&B is more explicit. Last year’s Luminate Year-End report found that R&B/hip-hop is America’s most popular genre, accounting for the most U.S. on-demand song streams and the largest share of total album consumption.

“It just seems a little bit more extravagant now because some of the R&B singers are acting like rappers,” said Colby Tyner, senior vice president of programming at Radio One and Reach Media, which operates the largest urban radio network in the United States. “It was a clear separation of church and state. Now, it’s a little bit together and so the music reflects it.”

So how did R&B go from Boyz II Men’s “I’ll Make Love to You” to Chris Brown singing “(expletive) you back to sleep”? It’s complicated.

“It used to be that television and radio was where you got your content. And if it was television and radio, it was censored because of the FCC. Well, you got YouTube, you got all these streaming services and you got social media. So, we are in the authentic era,” said Tyner. “We (radio industry) are the last sort of bastions of ‘we can’t do that’ because we’re controlled by the government regulations.”

During interviews over several months, The Associated Press asked those who create the music and industry experts about changes in R&B. Ahead of Sunday’s 65th annual Grammy Awards airing on CBS and Paramount+, here are some of their thoughts in their own words:

THE HIP-HOP EFFECT

Just one offensive or curse word can lead to a parental advisory label, so what’s defined as explicit can be subjective. It’s the parent test: Would they want their children listening? While Hollywood has an independent ratings board, record companies and artists determine what receives a parental warning.

As hip-hop grew in popularity, Billboard had to adapt; Some charts began grouping rappers and singers together, triggering fights for airplay which remains a sore subject. And with the recent explosion of melodic rap — a blend of rapping and harmonizing — spearheaded by artists like Future, Drake, Lil Uzi Vert and Travis Scott, the Grammys now recognize it as a category.

In the 1990s, a period considered by some as R&B’s last golden age, it was almost unthinkable that an artist would curse because radio couldn’t play it. None of the top 25 songs on Billboard’s 1990 Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs chart required an explicit label. In 2022, with rap more dominant, all but one in the top 25 — Beyoncé’s “Break My Soul” — needed a clean version.

“There was definitely some explicit R&B ... but there’s no limit to what you can say sexually in hip-hop. And then when R&B and hip-hop merged, you had the hip-hop and R&B world — so that’s literally what happened. And so now, the R&B singers have taken that way of speaking from the hip-hop cats. And the hip-hop cats have taken the melodic singing.” — Robert Glasper, four-time Grammy winner, 2023 R&B album nominee.

“Chris Brown is the top of the food chain....He lives and rolls like a rapper. He has an entourage like a rapper. His energy is like a rapper — not like Tevin Campbell in the ‘Can We Talk Days,’” said Tyner. “He can make the most sensual, classic, urban AC or R&B record that you would love, but he also can express that other side as well.” — Colby Tyner, SVP of programming, Radio One and Reach Media.

“We started having to compete with rap music, which is extremely explicit — extremely ... When you’re trying to compete for space on a chart or in a playlist, and these are the things that they’re playing, how do you find your way? How do you even get into the conversation? And so, our language has kind of had to evolve to be competitive.” — Tank, five-time Grammy nominee.

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

Themes of romance and sensuality have always breathed within soul music, but much of today’s R&B has replaced innuendo with bluntness. But while profanity has increased, artists are divided on whether

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the actual content has changed, citing classics like Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing," "Prince's "Darling Nikki" and much of R. Kelly's sexually-charged catalog that dominated the '90s and early 2000s.

"The stuff my mama used to be listening to in the car: Marvin Sease and Clarence Carter — 'I be stroking!' That stuff was pretty vulgar! ... So, no, I don't think it's more explicit." — Muni Long, 2023 Grammy nominee for best new artist.

"A lot of R&B artists were just as savage back in the day — they just had to be tame. Think about it: the record companies forced them to be clean cut and preppy and all those things. I think now, artists have found their freedom." — Rico Love, vice-president of the Recording Academy and producer.

"I think music was still explicit back in the day — they just had a better way of delivering it. You go all the way back to Rick James, 'Super Freak' — they just had a beating-around-the-bush type of way that they would say things." — Yung Bleu, R&B recording artist

SOCIETAL SHIFT

While hip-hop's influence might be the lowest hanging fruit, it's only one factor within a larger explanation. Psychologist Jean Twenge, author of "iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood," says technology has decreased many rules of the past.

"More technology just allows people to be more independent. And that's been just a very, very steady change in culture in the U.S. and in many other countries over the past hundred years ... individualism is at the root of an enormous number of cultural changes that we see today," explained Twenge, who authored a study on the rise of swear words in American books. "These changes have affected everybody, not just young people. ... The society has definitely shifted more in that direction of being more casual and favoring self-expression more."

Film and TV have also become more explicit in depicting sexual situations, nudity, violence and language. Pop music carries more warnings than ever, and even friendly-family artists like Beyoncé and Taylor Swift have released albums labeled as explicit.

"It's not just R&B, the world is more explicit ... even in the 90s, it would have been great to use a couple of cuss words in a couple of songs. It would've just hit so much better if you could've just went there because it just would have said it better." — Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds, 11-time Grammy winner, 2023 best traditional R&B performance nominee.

"This generation has kind of become numb to it, the same way as like someone could be bleeding on the floor and someone will be on the phone and just step over that person ... we've become numb to a lot, and I think music is included." — Ashanti, Grammy winner.

"They say, 'the truth shall set you free.' So, I guess the more honest you are, the more free you're going to be. And that's where we at. We say whatever we got to say ... it's just direct — literally direct. And if you don't like it, you just don't like it, and that's how we feel." — Lucky Daye, Grammy winner, 2023 best R&B performance nominee.

EASY ACCESS

Generation Z and younger Millennials only know a world with the internet, and nearly all teens — 95% — have access to a smartphone, according to a 2022 Pew Research Center study. As information flows faster with each generation, some believe young people are learning mature subject matter earlier, and it trickles into what they create. Making and releasing music is easier than ever; expensive recording studios or record labels are no longer barriers.

"This generation feels very free and open, and a lot of people who wouldn't have had access to create music back then, they can now create in their bedroom. So, there is a vast amount of product coming out. So maybe that's why it seems like there's so much explicit music because there's just more music now, period." — Chloe Bailey, five-time Grammy nominee.

"I think art is a reflection of life ... this generation deals with those things more explicitly. I think there's more access — the internet made that so, where it's like we get information way quicker. As a father with little kids, they're getting things quicker than I ever did." — PJ Morton, 2023 Grammy nominee for best

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R&B album.

"I think it's just the natural progression of now it's the next generation. ... this generation just has everything at their fingertips." — Robert Glasper, whose "Black Radio III" is nominated for best R&B album.

GOING VIRAL

While it's not hard to guess most teenagers and social media are inseparable, 84% of adults 18-29 say they use at least one social media site, according to 2021 data from Pew. Naturally, social media behavior can influence the content choices people make with their music.

"The best way to get clicks and streams is let me be as wild as I could possibly be. So, if I'm an R&B singer talking about what sexual positions that I like and how I do it ... people are going to pay attention," said Tyner, the Radio One exec. "Artists would kill to have a "WAP" (by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion) or a big song like that because honestly, really, it only takes one song. You get that one song that's a monster record, you can live off that song for the rest your life."

"Everybody's just trying to outdo each other. It's all a popularity contest. So, whoever gets talked about the most, that's what it is. And the more risqué you are, the more attention, the more you get talked about." — T-Pain, two-time Grammy winner

"Sometimes you have to get out there and say things to catch people's attention...I like being creative and witty and having the double meaning for certain things and being subliminal. But some people like to just splat it on out there!" (laughs) - Ashanti

"Maybe people feel like that's what they need to do to get the sales or get the attention. You know, it's a lotta shakin' out there (laughs) ... there's a lot of lyrics that are like cringe if I'm listening to it with my daughter. But music is self-expression — people express themselves however they feel like they need to express themselves." — Brandy, Grammy winner

While there is crossover of younger artists on the adult R&B airplay chart, which generally features more traditional R&B, the content is far less explicit. Only 11 of the top 25 songs from last year's year-end chart were labeled explicit, with eight of the 11 by younger artists. On the year-end Hot R&B chart which tracks mainstream R&B, 19 of the top 25 songs carried an advisory.

Mary J. Blige, a nine-time Grammy winner who has been successful through R&B's changes since the 90s, says it's all about expression.

"Just like when we were growing up, we came from a place where we expressed ourselves from where we were living and how we were living. So, these new generations are expressing themselves," she said.

Blige, a nominee for album of the year at Sunday's Grammys, says she can relate to younger artists.

"I'm so proud of them. I love them. They're doing exactly what we did: They're speaking from their experience, and I respect that," Blige said. "I have so much respect for their artistry."

New rules would limit sugar in school meals for first time

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

U.S. agriculture officials on Friday proposed new nutrition standards for school meals, including the first limits on added sugars, with a focus on sweetened foods such as cereals, yogurt, flavored milk and breakfast pastries.

The plan announced by Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack also seeks to significantly decrease sodium in the meals served to the nation's schoolkids by 2029, while making the rules for foods made with whole grains more flexible.

The goal is to improve nutrition and align with U.S. dietary guidelines in the program that serves breakfast to more than 15 million children and lunch to nearly 30 million children every day, Vilsack said.

"School meals happen to be the meals with the highest nutritional value of any meal that children can get outside the home," Vilsack said in an interview.

The first limits on added sugars would be required in the 2025-2026 school year, starting with high-sugar foods such as sweetened cereals, yogurts and flavored milks.

Under the plan, for instance, an 8-ounce container of chocolate milk could contain no more than 10

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grams of sugar. Some popular flavored milks now contain twice that amount. The plan also limits sugary grain desserts, such as muffins or doughnuts, to no more than twice a week at breakfast.

By the fall of 2027, added sugars in school meals would be limited to less than 10% of the total calories per week for breakfasts and lunches.

The proposal also would reduce sodium in school meals by 30% by the fall of 2029. They would gradually be reduced to align with federal guidelines, which recommend Americans aged 14 and older limit sodium to about 2,300 milligrams a day, with less for younger children.

Levels would drop, for instance, from an average of about 1,280 milligrams of sodium allowed now per lunch for kids in grades 9 to 12 to about 935 milligrams. For comparison, a typical turkey sandwich with mustard and cheese might contain 1,500 milligrams of sodium.

Health experts say cutting back on sugar and salt can help decrease the risk of disease in kids, including obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and other problems that often continue into adulthood.

The plan, detailed in a 280-page document, drew mixed reactions. Katie Wilson, executive director of the Urban School Food Alliance, said the changes are "necessary to help America's children lead healthier lives."

But Diane Pratt-Heavner, spokeswoman for the School Nutrition Association, a trade group, said school meals are already healthier than they were a decade ago and that increased regulations are a burden, especially for small and rural school districts.

"School meal programs are at a breaking point," she said. "These programs are simply not equipped to meet additional rules."

Vilsack emphasized that the plan phases changes in over the next six years to allow schools and food manufacturers time to adjust to the new standards. He said in a press conference Friday that the USDA will also fund grants of up to \$150,000 to help small and rural schools make the changes.

"Our hope is that many school districts and food providers accelerate the timeline on their own," he said.

Courtney Gaine, president of the Sugar Association, said the proposal ignores the "many functional roles" sugar plays in food beyond sweetness and encourages the use of sugar substitutes, which have not been fully studied in children. Sugar substitutes are allowed under the new standards, Vilsack said.

As part of the plan, agriculture officials are seeking feedback about a proposal that would continue to require that 80% of all grains offered in a week must be whole grains. But it would allow schools to serve non-whole grain foods, such as white-flour tortillas, one day a week to vary their menus.

Another option suggests serving unflavored nonfat and lowfat milk to the youngest children and reserving chocolate and other flavored milks for high school kids.

A 60-day public comment period on the plan opens Feb. 7.

Shiriki Kumanyika, a community health expert at Drexel University's Dornsife School of Public Health said if they're done right some of the changes will be hard for kids to notice: "They'll see things that they like to eat, but those foods will be healthier," she said.

Sorry, not sorry: Some 1/6 rioters change tune after apology

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Appearing before a federal judge after pleading guilty to a felony charge in the deadly Capitol riot, former West Virginia lawmaker Derrick Evans expressed remorse for letting down his family and his community, saying he made a "crucial mistake."

Less than a year later, Evans is portraying himself as a victim of a politically motivated prosecution as he runs to serve in the same building he stormed on Jan. 6, 2021. Evans is now calling the Justice Department's Jan. 6 prosecutions a "miscarriage of justice" and describes himself on twitter as a "J6 Patriot."

"Some ppl have said I need to apologize and condemn #J6 if I want to win my election as the media will attack me," he tweeted recently after announcing his bid for a U.S. House seat in 2024. "I will not compromise my values or beliefs. That's what politicians do. We need Patriots not politicians."

Evans joins a series of Jan. 6 defendants who — when up against possible prison time in court — have expressed regret for joining the pro-Trump mob that rattled the foundations of American democracy only

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to strike a different tone or downplay the riot after receiving their punishment.

The very first Jan. 6 defendant to be sentenced apologized in court and then went on Fox News Channel shortly after and seemed to minimize the riot. Another defendant who called Jan. 6 "horrible and disgusting" later donned an orange jumpsuit to play the part of a distraught prisoner in a bizarre tribute to imprisoned Capitol rioters during a conservative conference.

Some defendants have drawn ire from judges or the Justice Department for their inconsistent comments. But there's not much the legal system can do for an adjudicated defendant. And because some conservatives hold up Jan. 6 defendants as martyrs, there's a political and possibly financial incentive for them to change their tune.

It could push judges to impose stronger punishments for rioters who haven't yet made it to the end of their criminal cases. Even before Evans' sentencing, the judge who heard his case began questioning the sincerity of rioters' apologies after he felt duped by another defendant, saying he was "all too familiar with crocodile tears."

In some cases, judges have questioned whether they should undo defendants' convictions or plea deals after they made statements in public that appeared to go against what they said in court. On Friday, U.S. District Judge Amit Mehta ordered an Illinois man convicted this week to explain why the judge shouldn't vacate his conviction after he agreed in court that he participated in the riot and then told a newspaper he didn't actually think he committed the crimes with which he was charged.

Before being sentenced last June to three months behind bars for a civil disorder charge, Evans said he regrets his actions every day and told Senior Judge Royce Lamberth he is a "good person who unfortunately was caught up in a moment."

Shortly after, prosecutors wrote to the judge about several statements Evans made on a radio show and that were "inconsistent with the contrition" he showed at sentencing. When asked whether he regretted his actions, Evans said on the show that he regretted the "situation" he was in. But he said he was "never going to have regrets when it comes to standing up and doing what's right."

Evans said in an emailed statement to The Associated Press that he still stands behind what he said in court.

"That was my message to the judge. This is my message to the media. It's time to tell the real story of what happened personally to me that day," he said.

Evans said he lost "almost everything" — including his job as a state delegate and time with his kids — because of his decision on Jan. 6. "How could I not regret that?" he asked. But he said he is "done being portrayed as a villain" when he is not, noting that he didn't overrun any officers and was inside the Capitol for only 10 minutes.

When determining an appropriate sentence, judges generally take into account whether defendants have taken responsibility for their actions and appear genuinely sorry. In some Jan. 6 cases, judges have faulted defendants for not appearing to show true remorse even before their punishment has been handed down.

A lawyer for Trennis Evans III, who took a swig of whiskey in a congressional conference room during the riot, told the judge in court papers that Evans was "sincerely remorseful, and duly contrite." But after Evans suggested at his November sentencing that Jan. 6 defendants were being treated unfairly — even though he said he condemned what happened that day — the judge said she didn't believe he showed "full and genuine remorse."

Months after he was ordered to serve 20 days in jail, the Texas man traveled to South Dakota to urge state lawmakers to support a resolution encouraging "the humane and fair treatment" of Jan. 6 defendants. The resolution failed by unanimous vote.

The first Jan. 6 defendant to get her punishment, Anna Morgan-Lloyd, told Lamberth that she was ashamed of the "savagely display of violence" at the Capitol before he sentenced her to probation. Shortly after, however, the Indiana woman told Fox News host Laura Ingraham that people were "very polite" during the riot and that she saw "relaxed" police officers chatting with rioters.

Lamberth apparently hasn't forgotten about it. The judge wrote in court papers that he hoped another defendant's "change of heart" was sincere because his hopes were "dashed" in her case. In another case,

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he wrote that he "often finds it difficult to ascertain the sincerity" of Jan. 6 defendants' remorse.

"Many defendants appear sincere at sentencing, boasting of their purportedly deep shame, regret, and desire to change and be law-abiding citizens," Lamberth wrote. "But this Court is all too familiar with crocodile tears."

Morgan-Lloyd's attorney has said that she believes her client was genuinely remorseful, was "played" by Ingraham and sent the judge a letter after her TV interview. When contacted by The Associated Press, Morgan-Lloyd's attorney said the woman would not comment.

After he dodged prison time in his Jan. 6 case, right-wing activist Brandon Straka donned an orange jumpsuit and red MAGA cap, sat in a fake jail cell and performatively wept for a procession of attendees at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Dallas last August. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Georgia Republican, entered the cage and embraced Straka before they appeared to pray together.

Months earlier, with a possible jail term hanging over his head, Straka referred to Jan. 6 as "nothing more than an incredibly shameful day that had absolutely no positive attributes whatsoever."

"I'm sorry that I was present in any way at an event that led people to feel afraid, that caused shame and embarrassment on our country, and that served absolutely no purpose other than to further tear away at the already heartbreaking divide in this country," he wrote in a letter to U.S. District Judge Dabney Friedrich, who sentenced him to 36 months of probation.

An email seeking comment was sent to Straka, from Nebraska. He has said that the CPAC performance was meant "to provoke a reaction about political division, human rights abuses & more" and accused critics of trying to "criminalize art."

Since his sentencing, the judge questioned whether he wanted to withdraw his guilty plea and said he could be opening himself up to prosecution for making false statements because of public comments she said seemed to contradict things he said in court.

A written statement of offense that Straka agreed was correct under his plea deal says that he yelled "Take it! Take it!" while filming others trying to take a police officer's shield. Straka later told Fox News host Tucker Carlson that he told his lawyer that he never made that comment. He suggested he admitted doing so because he was under pressure to take a deal.

An unexpected job surge confounds the Fed's economic models

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Does the Federal Reserve have it wrong?

For months, the Fed has been warily watching the U.S. economy's robust job gains out of concern that employers, desperate to hire, would keep boosting pay and, in turn, keep inflation high. But January's blowout job growth coincided with an actual slowdown in wage growth. And it followed an easing of numerous inflation measures in recent months.

The past year's consistently robust hiring gains have defied the fastest increase in the Fed's benchmark interest rate in four decades — an aggressive effort by the central bank to cool hiring, economic growth and the spiking prices that have bedeviled American households for nearly two years.

Yet economists were astonished when the government reported Friday that employers added an explosive 517,000 jobs last month and that the unemployment rate sank to a new 53-year low of 3.4%.

"Today's jobs report is almost too good to be true," said Julia Pollak, chief economist at ZipRecruiter. "Like \$20 bills on the sidewalk and free lunches, falling inflation paired with falling unemployment is the stuff of economics fiction."

In economic models used by the Fed and most mainstream economists, a job market with strong hiring and a low unemployment rate typically fuels higher inflation. Under this scenario, companies feel compelled to keep boosting wages to attract and keep workers. They often then pass those higher labor costs on to their customers by raising prices. Their higher-paid workers also have more money to spend. Both trends can feed inflation pressures.

Yet even as hiring has been solid in the past six months, year-over-year inflation has slowed from a peak of 9.1% in June to 6.5% in December. Much of that decline reflects cheaper gas. But even excluding

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volatile food and energy costs, the Fed's preferred inflation gauge has risen at about a 3% annual rate over the past three months — not so far above its 2% target.

Those trends have raised questions about a core aspect of the Fed's higher rate policy. Chair Jerome Powell has said that conquering inflation would require "some pain." And the Fed's policymakers have forecast that the unemployment rate would rise to 4.6% by the end of this year. In the past, an increase that large in the jobless rate has occurred only during recessions.

Yet Friday's report suggests the possibility that the long-standing connection between a vigorous job market and high inflation has broken down. And that breakdown holds out a tantalizing possibility: That inflation could continue to decline even while employers keep adding jobs.

"Their model is that this inflation is driven specifically by wage inflation," said Preston Mui, senior economist at Employ America, an advocacy group. "In order to get that down, they think we have to bring some pain in the labor market in terms of higher unemployment. And what the past three months have shown us is that that model is just wrong."

That said, it's possible that Friday's report could still nudge the Fed in the opposite direction: The consistently strong job growth might convince Powell and other officials that, despite signs that wage growth is slowing, a powerful job market will inevitably reignite inflation. If so, their benchmark rate would have to stay high to cool the pace of hiring.

With that outlook in mind, Wall Street traders are now pricing in an additional Fed rate hike this year: Investors foresee a 52% likelihood that the Fed will raise its benchmark rate by a quarter-point in both March and May, to a range of 5% to 5.25%. That's the same level that Fed officials themselves had predicted in December.

Many economists say the pandemic so disrupted the job market that it is acting differently than it has in the past.

"There are a lot of norms ... that aren't normal anymore," Labor Secretary Marty Walsh said Friday. "We're seeing a lot of companies maybe not doing layoffs in January that they normally would have because they went through a pandemic where they lost people and they didn't come back."

At a news conference this week, Powell argued that much of the easing in inflation since fall has reflected falling prices for goods — items like used cars, furniture and shoes — as well as sharply lower gas prices. Those price declines reflect a clearing of formerly clogged supply chains, he suggested, and will likely prove temporary.

And Powell reiterated one of his central concerns: That inflation in the labor-intensive services sector is still rising at a steady 4% pace and shows no sign of slowing. Much of that increase is a consequence of strong wage growth at restaurants, hotels and transportation and warehousing companies, with fewer workers available to take such jobs.

"My own view," the Fed chair said, "would be that you're not going to have a sustainable return to 2% inflation in that sector without a better balance in the labor market."

Yet even with the vigorous job gains, several measures of wage growth show a steady easing: Average hourly pay grew 4.4% in January from a year earlier, down from a peak of 5.6% in March.

"More focus should be placed on the earnings data," said Rob Clarry, investment strategist at Evelyn Partners, in a research note. "The high headline (job) reading does not appear to be translating into further inflationary pressure — an important finding for the Fed."

A surprising burst of US hiring in January: 517,000 jobs

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — For nearly a year, the Federal Reserve has been on a mission to cool down the job market to help curb the nation's worst inflation bout in four decades.

The job market hasn't been cooperating.

Consider what happened in January: The government said Friday that employers added a sizzling 517,000 jobs last month and that the unemployment rate dipped to 3.4%, the lowest level since 1969.

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The job gain was so large it left economists scratching their heads and wondering why the Fed's aggressive interest rate hikes haven't slowed hiring at a time when many foresee a recession nearing.

Friday's report added instead to the picture of a resilient U.S. labor market, with low unemployment, relatively few layoffs and many job openings. Though good for workers, employers' steady demand for labor has also helped accelerate wage growth and contributed to high inflation.

Still, the Fed's inflation watchers might be reassured somewhat by January's wage data: Average hourly pay rose 4.4% last month from a year earlier, slower than the 4.8% year-over-year increase in December. And from December to January, wages rose 0.3%, below the 0.4% increase the previous month.

On top of the sizzling job growth it reported for January, the government on Friday also revised up its estimate of the gains in November and December by a combined 71,000.

President Joe Biden called the jobs report "strikingly good news" and asserted that his Republican critics were wrong in their warnings of continued high inflation and a coming recession and layoffs.

"Our plan is working," Biden said, "because of the grit and resolve of the American worker."

January's hiring gain, which far exceeded December's 260,000, was broad-based across industries. A category that includes restaurants and bars added 99,000 workers. Professional and business services jobs, including bookkeepers and consultants, rose by 82,000.

Governments added 74,000, boosted by the end of a worker strike against California's state university system. Health care added 58,000 jobs, retailers 30,000. Construction gained 25,000 jobs. Manufacturing added 19,000.

Economists had collectively estimated that the economy added just 185,000 jobs last month.

"This is a labor market on heat," said Seema Shah, chief global strategist at Principal Asset Management. It would be difficult, she suggested, "to see the Fed stop raising rates and entertain ideas of rate cuts when there is such explosive economic news coming in."

The Fed has raised its key rate eight times since March to try to slow the job market and contain inflation, which hit a 40-year high last year but has slowed since then.

Yet companies are still seeking more workers and are hanging tightly onto the ones they have. Putting aside some high-profile layoffs at big tech companies like Microsoft, Google, Amazon and others, most workers are enjoying an unusual level of job security even at a time when many economists foresee a recession approaching.

For all of 2022, the economy added a sizzling average of roughly 375,000 jobs a month. That was a pace vigorous enough to have contributed to some of the painful inflation Americans have endured. A tight job market tends to put upward pressure on wages, which, in turn, feed into inflation.

But year-over-year measures of consumer inflation have steadily eased since peaking at 9.1% in June. At 6.5% in December, though, inflation remains far above the Fed's 2% target, which is why the central bank's policymakers have reiterated their intent to keep raising borrowing rates for at least a few more months.

Giacomo Santangelo, an economist at the jobs website Monster, said he doubted the Fed would take much comfort from the decelerating wage gains — or relent in its rate-hiking campaign.

"As long as unemployment continues to go down," Santangelo said, "as long as the economy continues to be strong, the Fed's going to keep fighting inflation."

The Fed is aiming to achieve a "soft landing" — a pullback in the economy that is just enough to tame high inflation without triggering a recession. The policymakers hope that employers can slow wage increases and inflationary pressures by reducing job openings but not necessarily by laying off many employees.

But the job market's resilience isn't making that hoped-for outcome any easier. On Wednesday, the Labor Department reported that employers posted 11 million job openings in December, an unexpected jump from 10.4 million in November and the largest number since July. There are now about two job vacancies, on average, for every unemployed American.

And in response, many employers have raised wages.

Stew Leonard Jr., CEO of Stew Leonard's, a supermarket chain in Connecticut, New York and New Jersey, said the company's series of hourly wage increases over the past two years have helped expand their job applicant pool. Entry-level hourly wages are now \$17.

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For more specialized workers like butchers and bakers, hourly wages start at \$25 to \$30. Those pay gains have helped the chain attract about 10 to 12 applicants per job posting, the same level as before the pandemic. Earlier, the chain had been receiving as few as seven applicants per posting.

"If you want good people, you have to pay," Leonard said.

He said he's unsure whether the company will have to keep raising pay.

"It's almost a day-to-day decision," he said. "But right now, we're happy."

Over the past year or so, the job market has earned the label "The Great Resignation" because jobs are so plentiful and many workers are willing to change jobs to seek better pay or working conditions.

Centura Health, a nonprofit that runs hospitals and clinics in Colorado and Kansas, has offered \$15,000 "retention" bonuses to retain nurses, respiratory therapists and others for 24 months; 2,500 have accepted the offer. And for employees who perform routine but vital tasks like changing sheets and delivering meals to patients, Centura has raised entry-level hourly pay as high as \$18.

By streamlining hiring and directing managers to prioritize the filling of vacancies, Centura has slashed the time needed between receiving an application and putting a new hire to work.

Sebastien Girard, who holds the title of "chief people officer," said Centura has about 1,500 job openings each month. The market for clinical staff, like doctors, nurses and radiologists, remains extraordinarily tight, he said, though it's eased a bit recently for other positions.

Girard doesn't think labor shortages are going away. He thinks America's aging population means there will be an ongoing scarcity of available workers.

"The Great Resignation is there to stay," he said. "It is a generational shift."

Boyhood collides with masculinity in Oscar-nominated 'Close'

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — When Lukas Dhont was 12, a camera was thrust into his hands. For Dhont, who would come out as gay as a young adult, the camera was an escape from the strains and stereotypes he was beginning to feel pushed on him.

"I needed this other reality in which I could disappear because my own reality was one where I very much felt the pressures of these expectations and these codes and these norms that were put upon my body just because I was male," the 31-year-old Belgian filmmaker says.

In his first home movies, Dhont created silly sci-fi shorts. His brother Michiel (now Dhont's producer) would play an alien or a zombie. Later, Dhont discovered a wider movie world through things like the films of Chantal Akerman, and realized that cinema could be a place to confront reality, not run from it.

"I stopped filming the zombies and turned the camera toward me," says Dhont.

Dhont's second film, "Close," dives back into that period of adolescence that was so formative for him. Set in the Belgian countryside, it's about a friendship between two 13-year-old boys — Léo (Eden Dambrine) and Rémi (Gustav De Waele) — whose tender intimacy is tested, tragically, when Léo, seeking to fit in with other, more macho boys, pushes Rémi away.

The film, which follows Dhont's acclaimed but controversial 2018 debut "Girl," is a sublimely delicate and devastating portrait of young friendship and the harsh intrusion of gender roles. "Close," which A24 is expanding in limited release in the coming weeks, won the Grand Prix in May at the Cannes Film Festival, the festival's second most prestigious prize. Last month, it was nominated for best international film at the Academy Awards. Dhont was at a New York hotel when it was announced.

"It was a sort of haze," Dhont said in a recent interview. "I think I must have screamed in a high-pitched voice that made part of the lobby really panicked."

For Dambrine and De Waele, "Close" has, itself, been an experience of friendship. Their own coming of age has happened over the course of making and releasing the film. Dambrine, whom Dhont cast after first seeing him on a train, was 13 when they began and just turned 16. De Waele was 12 when he auditioned and is now nearly 15.

"The funny thing is that they're teenagers now," Dhont says. "They have long hair and skateboards. It's

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been a real gift to be able to experience this whole journey through the eyes of 14-year-olds.”

“The first day of casting, we were immediately very close to each other,” Dambrine says, speaking on a Zoom interview with De Waele. “I felt a big connection between us. There were 13 boys at the casting and I was immediately close to Gustav because the other boys were a bit boring. Sorry to the other boys.”

At the end of the day, all the actors filled out a questionnaire. One question: Who’s your favorite person in the world? Hours after meeting each other, Dambrine wrote De Waele and De Waele wrote Dambrine.

“Lukas still thinks it was a plan,” says Dambrine.

“I think Lukas didn’t search for talent,” says De Waele. “He searched for friendship. When I came home from the casting, I said to my parents, ‘I made a friend.’”

Dhont’s first film, “Girl,” about a teenage ballerina’s gender transition, won the the Caméra d’Or for best first feature in Cannes. But when it arrived on Netflix, some in the LGBTQ community questioned Dhont’s casting of a non-transgender lead and criticized a scene of self-inflicted violence as perpetuating a false narrative of gender transition. Dhont has called the backlash a “process of learning” about perspective in storytelling.

Some reviewers have also criticized “Close” and its drastic mid-movie shift of being emotionally manipulative. Dhont, though, cites statistics that show how suicide rates increase among young males as evidence of the fraught nature of teenage years for boys.

“The stakes are really high. At least they feel so to me,” says Dhont. “We hope there’s a strong sense of hope for this tragedy to not happen, for it to be avoided. I understand why the film moves as it moves.”

Part of Dhont’s motivation in writing “Close” with co-writer Angelo Tijssens was a kind of personal atonement. While Dhont had his own experiences of friends falling away from him, he also distanced himself from some relationships as a kid, and now regrets it.

“There were some friends out there that I actively pushed away out of fear,” Dhont says. “I deprived not only myself but them from the love they felt — and I mean love in the broadest sense of the term. I think this film is also an ode to them.”

A key resource in expanding “Close” beyond Dhont’s own experiences was psychologist Niobe Way’s 2013 book “Deep Secrets: Boys’ Friendships and the Crisis of Connection.” She interviewed hundreds of boys between the ages of 13 and 18. Their conversations, strikingly over time, charted how intimacy and friendships give way to distrust and isolation as boys become men.

“I wanted to speak about this society that has this dominance-based masculine culture and tells young men from a early age that there are certain traits valued, like independence, being more distant with the emotional world,” says Dhont. “So we tear them apart, not only from each other, but we rupture the language that connects them to the inside. There are many problems — and I’d even dare to say for a film with a small scope, world problems — that start with what seems like a small rupture but is actually a very big one.”

Making “Close” — an intimate process that included months of rehearsals and a production that encouraged looseness and warmth — was for De Waele and Dambrine the kind of open-hearted experience for which many of the boys of “Deep Secrets” might have yearned.

“It really changed my vision of life,” says Dambrine, “how friendship really works.”

It’s also been head-spinning. Says Dambrine: “In Cannes, everyone acts like you’re super famous but you’re just a normal kid who skipped school to come to the festival.”

Now they’re headed to the Oscars for what will surely be an even more bewildering spectacle. They hope to see Austin Butler, a Cannes encounter, again. De Waele laments that it’s impossible for him to meet his most idolized filmmaker — Billy Wilder — on his first trip to Los Angeles (Wilder died in 2002).

“I also want to see Cate Blanchett,” says Dambrine.

“Yeah, of course,” echoes De Waele.

Both boys may be edging closer to adulthood but they’re giddy in a childlike way talking about their transformative time with “Close.” As they get ready to sign off, Dambrine adds one last observation that he’s clung to.

“The movie’s talking about judgment,” Dambrine says. “In your life, people will always judge you. So

why do you have to listen to them now and change for them, when you can just skip what they're saying and live your life and be happy with yourself?"

Advocates: Black cops not exempt from anti-Black policing

By DEEPTI HAJELA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — That the death of Tyre Nichols — young, Black, just trying to get home — came at the hands of Memphis police officers was a familiar refrain in the nation's seemingly endless lamentation of racism and police brutality aimed at Black people.

This time around, though, it was five Black officers who were fired and charged with second-degree murder in the horrifying Jan. 7 beating that was caught on video and led to Nichols' death in a hospital bed three days later.

But the fact that Black officers killed a Black man didn't remove racism from the situation. If anything, say reform advocates, it showed that a police culture of racial bias and dehumanization is pervasive enough to spread in all directions, even among minority officers whose presence in law enforcement is often touted as proof of reform efforts.

"What we have to understand is it is not the color of the officer," said Joshua Adams, an activist in Memphis. "It is the color of who's being policed. That's what creates the difference." The key question is "why does policing show differently for Black people?"

Black and brown officers can be conditioned to view Black and brown people as suspect, advocates say.

"With any organization or institution, there is a period of orientation where you are being introduced to core values and philosophies," said the Rev. Earle J. Fisher, senior pastor at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Memphis.

"I think this happens with police regardless of the color of the police officer. You have spent time in the indoctrination process, and part of that indoctrination is certain people on their face — from what some would call cultural bias, or others would call internalized white supremacy — you're indoctrinated to believe that certain groups are more prone to criminal behavior than others," he said. "And so you treat Black people as if they are guilty until proven innocent. You treat white people as if they are innocent until proven guilty."

Legal scholar Amara Enyia said "being Black and a police officer does not undo the inherent anti-Blackness in the policing system."

"That's one of the most insidious characteristics of the system, because we may buy into a notion that because they're Black means they can't possibly have adopted the norms and values of the system," said Enyia, policy and research manager for the Movement for Black Lives, a national advocacy coalition aligned with the broader Black Lives Matter movement.

Many of the highest-profile deaths, such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Michael Brown, were due to the actions of white officers. But other deaths, including Philando Castile, Freddie Gray and Sean Bell, showed that the officers responsible could come from a range of racial backgrounds.

And more broadly, in a country riven with as many racial fault lines as the United States, no one is exempt from absorbing some brand of racial messaging throughout their lives, said Derald Wing Sue, professor of psychology and education at Columbia University's Teachers College.

"We are all socialized into a society that imbues in us these images of one another," he said. "We can, as people of color, inherit these biases toward one another and often times to our own group as well. ... They come out in ways that can be very harmful unless we get in touch with them and give ourselves counter messages."

The officers charged in Nichols' death drew condemnation for being Black men who committed fatal violence against another Black man.

At Nichols' funeral on Wednesday, the Rev. Al Sharpton said that while he was in Memphis for the service, he visited the site where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968. He said King was in Memphis to fight for Black city workers to be able to work in sanitation and as police.

If not for the efforts of King and others in the civil rights movement, the five officers would not have had jobs in law enforcement or been assigned to an elite police squad, Sharpton said.

Not far away from the hotel balcony where King was fatally shot, the Black officers "beat a brother to death," Sharpton said in a eulogy.

Addressing the officers, he said: "There's nothing more insulting and offensive to those of us that fight to open doors that you walk through those doors and act like the folks we had to fight to get you through them doors."

"You didn't get on the Police Department by yourself. The police chief didn't get there by herself," he added. "People had to march and go to jail — and some lost their lives — to open the doors for you. And how dare you act like that sacrifice was for nothing?"

"You ain't in no New England state. You're in Tennessee, where we had to fight for you. And you take that position and do what we saw?"

Q&A: Shania Twain talks rebuilding confidence with new album

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Shania Twain felt the need on her new album to empower herself the same way she has uplifted listeners with hits like "Man! I Feel Like a Woman" and "She's Not Just a Pretty Face."

So she set aside all feelings of self consciousness — appearing braless for the album's artwork and letting listeners unabashedly hear her surgically repaired voice — on "Queen of Me." Throughout the album's 12-tracks, the 57-year-old country pop superstar confronts her physical vulnerabilities with authority in ways meant to uplift fans, and herself.

Twain's sixth studio album is her first since having open-throat surgery in 2018 to strengthen her vocal muscles after a long battle with Lyme disease. During the pandemic, the singer said she went into her "writing cave" at home to hone her songwriting skills and penned three albums worth of music with a clear understanding that her powerful vocals might not last forever.

In a recent interview with The Associated Press, Twain spoke candidly about the album, which is out Friday, regaining her confidence, singing during throat surgery and preparing for her global upcoming tour, which kicks off April 28.

Remarks have been edited for clarity and brevity.

AP: How do you define your new album, "Queen of Me"?

TWAIN: Self empowerment is about managing your mindset. Controlling your own mood. Your frame of mind. It just turned into "Queen of Me." I'm my own boss. I'm the boss of me. I have to tell myself how to think. What to think. It became the theme of the whole album. It ended up representing that uplifting mode of myself.

AP: Before I listened to your album, I was expecting ballads. But it's a more upbeat experience. What made you choose that route?

TWAIN: It was all happening in a mode of lifting my own spirit up. I wanted music that was going to make me want to dance. Even some of the songs that are a little more, for example, "Brand New Me" or "Pretty Liar." Those are songs that would have maybe stayed more in the melancholy vibe more ballady. But because I was really relying on my songwriting during that time to make me feel a positive energy, everything pretty much turned into this more poppy, dancey, beat-driven, upbeat-driven sounding album."

AP: You seem liberated on your album cover. Was that your intent?

TWAIN: That was the entire intention. You know, throw away the bra. I did a lot of nude photography in that session. That's obviously a partial nude. I wanted to be on a horse. One of the places I feel most liberated is riding a horse. You can fly. It's very empowering. It's like you take this unbridled posture to bridle your freedom. It's like facing a fear, facing something that's uncomfortable, getting myself out of my comfort zone — especially on a horse. That's freedom.

AP: I heard you sang during surgery. Is that true?

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TWAIN: Yes, I had to be awake, so that I could sing and speak. It was horrible. I'm not going to lie. But there was no way around it. It was the only way. The decision to do the surgery was quick for me, but the recovery was quite long and very very painful. They literally had to stretch the larynx, move everything over and put these crutches in there. You're singing and you speak, so they understand that you have symmetrical closure — which I didn't have before.

AP: What's been your thoughts after the surgery?

TWAIN: I may not have it forever. Just with age, the effect of it just might not stand up. So I've got to take advantage of it now, enjoy it, get out on the stage, make more records, because I'm not sure I would go through it again.

AP: I'm sure that's tough to hear. Do you think about when your voice might go again?

TWAIN: I don't think about it. I don't worry about it. I focus on how to manage my voice the way it is now. For example, before the surgery, it was like a two-hour warmup and so much physical therapy. I just couldn't sustain it. That's why I decided to have the surgery. The surgery has reduced all of that to about 20 minutes, which is very normal. That's ideal. But if I'm not singing for even a week or maybe two weeks, it takes me two to three days to get that voice going again. It's more work than I had to do before, but it's worth it.

AP: What was the first sign of your singing confidence?

TWAIN: The true confidence was three weeks after the surgery. I made a sound and there was resonance. Instant resonance. I'm like, "Oh, my God. I feel it. I feel it working." It was a small window, but that kind of put the fire under my butt, too, and I said, "All right, no more excuses." You've got this and you've got the best technology available. Top notch surgeon. All the physiotherapy education you need. Get out there and do it.

AP: With your retooled vocals, how are you mentally getting ready for your tour?

TWAIN: When I now go out on that stage, I am not afraid of the criticism. I'm not going to be perfect. My voice is not what it used to be. I sing differently. There'll be holes in it. I'm not the same body I used to be. All these things. But I go out there with the confidence that I'm the best I can be and that I've worked hard to be my best. I just am not afraid of the criticism. I'm there for the people that are embracing me for who I am. I will get out there and do my best to make everybody happy, as I always do.

Street honoring KKK leader renamed after student-led effort

MALVERNE, N.Y. (AP) — A street that honored a leader of the Ku Klux Klan in New York has a new name after a yearslong campaign led by high school students.

The village board of Malverne, on Long Island, voted last year to rename Lindner Place, named after Paul Lindner, a banker who helped develop the village more than a century ago and also served as great titan of the New York State Klan.

The change became official last week when Lindner Place became Acorn Way.

"The true meaning of justice is righting the wrongs that came before you," Malverne High School sophomore Olivia Brown told WCBS.

Brown was part of a group of students who began researching Lindner in 2020 and learned he was a Klan leader.

Students pressed for the street name to be changed in school forums and with the village board, which voted to change the name in September 2022.

They cheered as the new Acorn Way signs were unveiled Jan. 26.

Malverne High School senior Jamila Smith told WCBS, "This whole initiative showed me I do want to step up and be a leader."

Lorna Lewis, Malverne's schools superintendent, told the Long Island Herald, "I believe you've just witnessed the power of the Maverick public education and what our students can do when supported in their pursuit of civic engagement."

Many Americans associate the Ku Klux Klan with the South, but the group's rallies and cross burnings

drew large crowds in New York in the 1920s. The Klan of that era targeted Catholic and Jewish communities, as well as Black people.

Indian tycoon Adani hit by more losses, calls for probe

By KRUTIKA PATHI Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Shares in troubled Adani Enterprises gyrated Friday, tumbling 30% and then rebounding after more than a week of heavy losses that have cost it tens of billions of dollars in market value.

The company, the flagship of India's second-largest conglomerate, canceled a share offering meant to raise \$2.5 billion earlier this week after U.S. short-selling firm Hindenburg Research issued a report accusing it of market manipulation and other fraudulent practices. Adani denies the allegations.

Opposition lawmakers blocked Parliament proceedings for a second day Friday, chanting slogans and demanding a probe into the business dealings of coal tycoon Gautam Adani, who is said to enjoy close ties with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"We have no connection" with the Adani controversy, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi told reporters outside Parliament on Friday.

In an interview with CNN News 18, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman brushed off concerns that the losses would spook global investors and said India's financial market was "very well regulated."

"As a result, the investors' confidence which existed before shall continue even now," she said, adding that the controversy wasn't "indicative of how well Indian financial markets are governed."

At least one prominent international investor, French oil giant TotalEnergies, defended its investments in Adani. TotalEnergies said Friday it has limited exposure to the current problems and has not re-evaluated its stakes in Adani businesses.

The French company said it had carried out due diligence when it making \$3.1 billion in investments in Adani, and that the entities TotalEnergies invested in "are managed in accordance with applicable regulations."

Amit Malviya, the governing Bharatiya Janata Party's information and technology chief, said in a television interview that the opposition was using Adani's crisis to target the Modi government over a private company's shares and their market movements. "Regulators are looking into" what happened, he said.

The market watchdog, the Securities and Exchange Board of India, has not commented. The Economic Times newspaper reported, citing unnamed SEBI sources, that it had asked stock exchanges to check for any unusual activity in Adani stocks.

Shares in Adani Enterprises fell as much as 30%, to 1,017 rupees (\$12), on Friday. At the end of trading, the price had recovered to 1,531 rupees (\$18.70) but was still down by 2%. The company's share price has plunged more than 50% since Hindenburg released its report last week, when it stood at 3,436 rupees (\$41). Stock in six other Adani-listed companies was down 5% to 10% on Friday.

So far there has been no indication that the company's woes might threaten the wider financial sector in India. Its equities market is large enough to sustain the fallout at this moment, said Brian Freitas, a New Zealand-based analyst with Periscope Analytics who has researched the Adani Group.

"Adani stock forms a small part of the equities market and investor concerns right now are restricted to the company, not the whole system or market itself," Freitas said. India's Nifty and Sensex indexes were both higher on Friday.

It could take time for problems to surface, Shilan Shah of Capital Economics said in a report. "From the macro perspective there are few signs of contagion," he said. "But it is too early to sound the all clear."

The S&P Dow Jones indices said Thursday it would remove Adani Enterprises from its sustainability indices beginning Tuesday, following a "media and stakeholder analysis triggered by allegations of stock manipulation and accounting fraud."

That might dent the Adani Group's sustainability credentials and could affect investor sentiment, Freitas said.

Credit rating agency Fitch said there was no immediate impact on credit ratings for the Adani companies.

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Gautam Adani, who made a vast fortune mining coal and trading before expanding into construction, power generation, manufacturing and media, was Asia's richest man and the world's third wealthiest before the troubles began with Hindenburg's report.

By Friday, his net worth had halved to \$61 billion, according to Bloomberg's Billionaire Index, where he dropped to the 21st spot worldwide.

He has said little publicly since the troubles began, though in a video address after Adani Enterprises canceled its already fully subscribed share offering he promised to repay investors. The company has said it is reviewing its fundraising plans.

Hindenburg's report said it was betting against seven publicly listed Adani companies, judging them to have an "85% downside, purely on a fundamental basis owing to sky-high valuations." Other issues in the report included concerns over debt, alleged use of offshore shell companies to artificially raise share prices and past investigations into fraud.

Adani's speedy, debt-led expansion in recent years caused his net worth to shoot up nearly 2,000%. Even before last week, critics said his ascent was aided by his apparent close ties to Modi and his government. Analysts say he has been successful at aligning his priorities with those of the government by investing in key sectors, but point out that he also has major infrastructure projects in states that are ruled by opposition parties.

"The question now turns to the future of the Adani Group and how they will grow," said Aweek Mitra, founder of Aweekset Financial Advisory.

As a company heavily involved in infrastructure -- from airports and ports to highways -- it needs financing to grow in order to service its debt, which stands at \$30 billion, out of which \$9 billion is from Indian banks.

Adani may be able to sell some assets and continue its expansion, but at a much slower pace than earlier, Mitra said.

"Banks, financial institutions and investors will think five times before investing now," he added.

Dr Dre, Missy Elliott, Lil Wayne honored at pre-Grammy event

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — As Lil Wayne was honored for his musical achievements, the rapper opened up about the little he has been recognized previously in his career during a pre-Grammy event that also paid homage to Dr. Dre and Missy Elliott.

"I don't get honored," Wayne remarked Thursday night at the Recording Academy's Black Music Collective event in Los Angeles, where he, Dre and Elliott were given the Dr. Dre Global Impact Award. The honorees received the renamed award for their personal and professional achievements in the music industry.

DJ Khaled presented Wayne with the award and a hug, while Drake and Deion Sanders paid tribute to him through video messages. Swizz Beatz, 2 Chainz and Tyga performed some of Wayne's hits as well.

During his acceptance speech, Wayne explained how the responsibility of making adult decisions was first placed on his shoulders at age 12, when he signed his first record deal with Cash Money. The 40-year-old rapper thanked his mother, the mothers of his children and his kids.

"Where I'm from, New Orleans, you're not supposed to do this," the five-time Grammy winner continued as many in the audience at the Hollywood Palladium cheered him on. "Where I'm from, I walked into my momma room when I was 14, she asked me for a kid, because my dad was killed and her son had just blew up and went on his first tour. When I came home, she said, 'Son, I can't live in this house by myself. We're going to have to figure something out.'"

Dre talked about starting his musical journey with the initial thought of making enough money to "buy a decent pair of shoes" to wear to school. The producer-rapper recalled when he first heard hip-hop for the first time in junior high school, and spoke about his knack for collaborating.

"One of my passions is collaborations," the seven-time Grammy winner said. "I never in my entire career done anything alone. I don't even know if I want to be in the studio alone. It sounds boring."

Dre was honored with performances by Snoop Dogg, Kurupt and Ty Dolla Sign. Dogg performed "Nuthin'

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but a 'G' Thang" and "Deep Cover" before the threesome joined together to perform "Ain't No Fun (If the Homies Can't Have None)," which was produced by Dre.

Some in the audience were moved to tears by Elliott's heartfelt speech praising music executive Sylvia Rhone, who also received the impact award.

"She saw something in me that I didn't see in myself," the four-time Grammy winner said of Rhone, the Epic Records CEO who is regarded as one of the most influential executives in the industry. Rhone made history in 1994 when she was named chairman and CEO of Elektra Entertainment Group. At the time, the promotion made her the only African American and first-ever woman to hold the titles.

"She never told us 'no,'" continued Elliott, who recently became the first female rapper to receive a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame nomination. "She never told me, 'You need to lose weight.' She never told me, 'You need to change your records.'"

Chloe Bailey performed Elliott's "One Minute Man" and sang a rendition of Aaliyah's "One In a Million," a song Elliott produced with Timbaland. Ciara and Tweet hit the stage to perform Elliott's hits, while Busta Rhymes also performed in honor of Rhone.

The event marked a celebratory night for the Black Music Collective, a group of prominent industry leaders that formed in 2020 to find ways to drive Black representation and inclusion. Some of the honorary chairs include Jimmy Jam, Quincy Jones and John Legend, who was honored with the impact award along with MC Lyte and D-Nice last year.

Baltic leaders: Olympic boycott possible if Russians compete

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — The prime ministers of the three Baltic countries urged the International Olympic Committee to ban Russian athletes from next year's Paris Games because of the war in Ukraine, saying Friday a boycott was a possibility.

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said athletes from her country could be put in a situation where they are competing against Russians, claiming many of them "are soldiers."

"I think that our efforts should be on convincing our other friends and allies that the participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes is just wrong," Kallas said, adding in Russia's ally in the war. "So boycotting is the next step. I think people will understand why this is necessary."

Her Latvian counterpart, Arturs Krisjanis Karins, called it "morally reprehensible" to allow Russians to compete at the Olympics.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania border Russia and gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. They have been strong supporters of Ukraine, another former Soviet republic, in the war.

Ukraine is steadfastly opposed to letting Russians compete.

On Wednesday, the Latvian Olympic Committee threatened to boycott the Paris Games if Russian athletes are allowed and called on other countries to form a coalition to pressure international sports bodies. It was the first national Olympic body other than Ukraine to threaten to boycott rather than compete against Russia.

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda on Friday expressed support for the International Paralympic Committee's decision to bar Russian and Belarusian athletes from international competitions, the Baltic News Service reported.

"We support the IPC's decisions to suspend the NPCs and to ban athletes from the countries, which started the unprovoked and unjustified war in Europe and violate international law and human rights, from competing," Nauseda said after meeting with IPC president Andrew Parsons in Vilnius. "The international sports community cannot turn a blind eye to war crimes."

The IOC is pushing sports federations to allow any Russians or Belarusians who have not been "actively supporting the war in Ukraine" and argues it would be discriminatory to ban athletes based on their citizenship alone. The Olympic body wants to let them compete as "neutral athletes."

"Russian sportsmen will not fake it under a neutral flag because there is no neutrality in the current world," Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte said.

Other national Olympic sports bodies, including the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee, back the

IOC's efforts to find a path for Russians to compete.

LeBron's off-court legacy complements his basketball success

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

Mya Smiley is a student at the University of Akron thanks to an assist from LeBron James, and she is determined upon graduation to become a social worker that helps foster kids.

Her education and career path would not have been possible, the sophomore says, were it not for a scholarship and counseling that she received from the LeBron James Family Foundation. "He's life-changing," Smiley said.

For all his accomplishments on the basketball court — four championships, 19 All-Star Game nominations and an imminent coronation as the NBA's all-time leading scorer — it is James' ambitious pursuits off-the-court that may ultimately distinguish his legacy from other superstar athletes'.

James co-founded a successful media and entertainment company, bought stakes in storied professional baseball and soccer franchises and, with a big assist from product endorsements, his net worth is estimated to have grown above \$1 billion. The off-court achievement that James is most proud of, he says, is working to uplift the lives of people like Smiley in his hometown of Akron.

Many athletes have excelled in one or more of these areas. But few have done all of them as well as James, who is closing in on passing Kareem Abdul-Jabbar for the NBA's career scoring record.

"His goal, I believe, is to have 10% of his wealth go to causes and support communities, which is an amazing goal," said Lisa Delpy Neirotti, a professor of sports management at George Washington University. "I would say he's maybe above and beyond others, just on that aspiration alone."

James is, by any measure, an overwhelming success. And he makes Smiley — one of the many people in Akron who have received financial support from his foundation — believe that she can be a success as well.

"If I did not have the LeBron program, I probably wouldn't have ever gone to college. I would be living in a not-so-positive environment," said the 19-year-old Smiley.

"His ability to help people's futures," she added, "is what makes LeBron a great person."

James, who entered the NBA straight after high school in 2003, planned early on to use his talents, fame — and, yes, his growing financial resources — to have an impact on the world beyond basketball.

"Even before I got into the NBA, I knew I wanted to find a way to give back to my community," said James. Although James bounced from home to home during his childhood, and experienced financial insecurity for many of those years, he also was given enormous support from friends, neighbors and educators.

The LeBron James Family Foundation, founded in 2004, at first gained local attention by giving away bikes and backpacks. Then it began looking at after-school programs, with students scattered across several dozen schools, and eventually created a public school currently serving about 575 third through eighth graders. Today the school includes a family resource center that provides a wide-range of services to parents, including mental health, financial literacy, legal aid and GED courses.

Just down the street from the school, the foundation provides rent-free housing to as many as 16 different families — when needed — and it has plans to build 50 units of affordable housing.

"I couldn't have guessed how much it would grow," James said in late January. "But we got here by listening and responding to our community and what they need."

James has made over \$400 million in NBA salary during his time with Cleveland, Miami and the Los Angeles Lakers. Another \$100 million is on the way in the next 2-1/2 years or so.

James is a pitchman for Nike, GMC, AT&T and many more multinational companies. He owns a piece of the Boston Red Sox and Britain's Liverpool football club. His entertainment company, SpringHill — named after the modest apartment complex he grew up in — is valued at \$725 million and has produced movies for HBO and Netflix.

"He's been a brilliant example for millions of kids, especially kids with lesser opportunity and haven't had the same advantages as others," San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich said in 2018, a sentiment he's repeated many times since. "They see in this guy somebody who has consistently exhibited excellence in

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the workplace and gives them a voice and lets them know that you can speak about anything.”

James puts so much focus on giving back to Akron because of the help people there gave to him and his family. “He’s never lost sight of that,” said Michele Campbell, the executive director of James’ foundation. “I think that keeps him grounded.”

Just how down to earth “King James” really was got called into question in 2010. That’s when he went on television to announce that he was leaving Cleveland to play in Miami. Billed as “The Decision” — and broadcast on ESPN — the live event was widely ripped as egotistical. But from James’ perspective, the broadcast raised around \$4 million for charity, a fact that was largely overlooked.

Just a couple of years later, James would use his star power to help draw attention to a cause bigger than himself.

In the aftermath of the 2012 death of Trayvon Martin — a Black Florida teen who was wearing a hoodie when he was fatally shot by a neighborhood watch volunteer — James tweeted a photo of Heat players wearing hoodies and bowing their heads that included the hashtag “WeWantJustice.”

In 2020, James helped lead the “More Than A Vote” movement, which included registration and early-vote drives and stressed the need for people — particularly Black voters — to get to the polls to fight disenfranchisement.

Also in 2020, in the aftermath of the Minneapolis police killing of George Floyd, James was one of the players calling for an end to racial inequality and police brutality.

“Everything I do,” James said late last year, “has to have a purpose.”

James has all the money and all the fame that he ever wanted or needed. His NBA records, including the scoring title, are going to last for a very long time.

As will his off-court endeavors.

“His ability to help others and put others first is what makes him a great person,” Smiley said. “Not the baskets he shot.”

Today in History: FEB 4, Rosa Parks is born

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Feb. 4, the 35th day of 2023. There are 330 days left in the year.

Today’s Highlight in History:

On Feb. 4, 1783, Britain’s King George III proclaimed a formal cessation of hostilities in the American Revolutionary War.

On this date:

In 1789, electors chose George Washington to be the first president of the United States.

In 1801, John Marshall was confirmed by the Senate as chief justice of the United States.

In 1913, Rosa Parks, a Black woman whose 1955 refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, city bus to a white man sparked a civil rights revolution, was born Rosa Louise McCauley in Tuskegee.

In 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet leader Josef Stalin began a wartime conference at Yalta.

In 1974, newspaper heiress Patricia Hearst, 19, was kidnapped in Berkeley, California, by the radical Symbionese Liberation Army.

In 1976, more than 23,000 people died when a severe earthquake struck Guatemala with a magnitude of 7.5, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

In 1977, eleven people were killed when two Chicago Transit Authority trains collided on an elevated track.

In 1997, a civil jury in Santa Monica, California, found O.J. Simpson liable for the deaths of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend, Ronald Goldman.

In 1999, senators at President Bill Clinton’s impeachment trial voted to permit the showing of portions of Monica Lewinsky’s videotaped deposition.

In 2004, the social networking website Facebook had its beginnings as Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg

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launched "Thefacebook."

In 2012, Florence Green, who had served with the Women's Royal Air Force and was recognized as the last veteran of World War I, died in King's Lynn, eastern England, at age 110.

In 2020, thousands of medical workers in Hong Kong were on strike for a second day to demand that the country's border with China be completely closed to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus; the territory reported its first death from the virus and the second known fatality outside China.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama signed a bill temporarily raising the government's \$16.4 trillion borrowing limit, averting a default. British scientists announced they had rescued the skeletal remains of King Richard III, who lived during the 15th century, from the anonymity of a drab municipal parking lot. For the fifth straight week there was a new No. 1 in The Associated Press' men's college basketball poll: Indiana. Reg Presley, 71, lead singer for the Troggs on "Wild Thing," died in Andover, England.

Five years ago: The Philadelphia Eagles, led by backup quarterback Nick Foles, became NFL champs for the first time since 1960, beating Tom Brady and the New England Patriots 41-33 in the Super Bowl. An Amtrak passenger train slammed into a parked freight train in the early-morning darkness in South Carolina after a thrown switch sent it hurtling down a side track; the conductor and engineer were killed and more than 100 passengers were injured. Actor John Mahoney, who played the dad of two psychiatrists on the TV show "Frasier," died in Chicago at the age of 77.

One year ago: Chinese President Xi Jinping declared the Winter Olympics open at a ceremony at Beijing's Bird Nest Stadium. The Olympic flame was delivered by athletes Zhao Jiawen and Dinigeer Yilamujiang, a member of the country's Uyghur Muslim minority, which Western governments and human rights groups say China has oppressed on a massive scale. The Republican National Committee censured Reps. Liz Cheney of Wyoming and Adam Kinzinger of Illinois at the party's winter meeting for serving on the committee investigating the violent Jan. 6 insurrection.

Today's birthdays: Actor Jerry Adler is 94. Former Argentinian President Isabel Peron is 92. Actor Gary Conway is 87. Actor John Schuck is 83. Rock musician John Steel (The Animals) is 82. Singer Florence LaRue (The Fifth Dimension) is 81. Former Vice President Dan Quayle is 76. Rock singer Alice Cooper is 75. Actor Michael Beck is 74. Actor Lisa Eichhorn is 71. Football Hall of Famer Lawrence Taylor is 64. Actor Pamelyn Ferdin is 64. Rock singer Tim Booth is 63. Rock musician Henry Bogdan is 62. Country singer Clint Black is 61. Rock musician Noodles (The Offspring) is 60. Actor Gabrielle Anwar is 53. Actor Rob Corddry is 52. Singer David Garza is 52. Actor Michael Gorrjian is 52. TV personality Nicolle Wallace is 51. Olympic gold medal boxer Oscar De La Hoya is 50. Rock musician Rick Burch (Jimmy Eat World) is 48. Singer Natalie Imbruglia is 48. Rapper Cam'ron is 47. Rock singer Gavin DeGraw is 46. Rock singer Zoe Manville is 39. Actor/musician Bashy, AKA Ashley Thomas, is 38. Actor Charlie Barnett is 35. Olympic gold medal gymnast-turned-singer Carly Patterson is 35. Actor Kyla Kenedy (TV: "Speechless") is 20.