

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 1 of 90

Due to the Winter Storm Warning, poor visibility, and road conditions, the Groton Area School District will be closed on Wednesday, March 1, 2023.

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2-- Newsweek Bulletin](#)
- [2- Service Notice: Jackie Wagner](#)
- [3- GHS Boys' Basketball](#)
- [5- State Receives Presidential Disaster Approval for Winter Storm](#)
- [5- Gov. Noem Signs Bills into Law](#)
- [6- Paint South Dakota Campaign](#)
- [7- Maher resigns from Board of Regents](#)
- [8- Gov. Noem: "Temporary tax cut will hurt our families and businesses"](#)
- [9- SD Searchlight: House backs 'truth in sentencing'](#)
- [10- SD Searchlight: NorthWestern Energy considers building a nuclear plant in South Dakota](#)
- [11- SD Searchlight: Senate committee kills 'lewd or lascivious' drag show bill](#)
- [12- SD Searchlight: Biden student debt relief plan met with skepticism from U.S. Supreme Court conservatives](#)
- [15- SD Searchlight: U.S. House Ag panel hears industry complaints on regulations, scant crop insurance](#)
- [17- SD Searchlight: Wind and whales: 'No evidence' links projects to deaths](#)
- [19- SD Searchlight: Biden pick for U.S. archivist caught up in controversy over missing presidential documents](#)
- [21- SD Searchlight: How the judge who could ban the abortion pill won confirmation in the U.S. Senate](#)
- [25- Weather Pages](#)
- [31- Daily Devotional](#)
- [32- 2023 Community Events](#)
- [33- Subscription Form](#)
- [34- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [35- News from the Associated Press](#)

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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"Today, I choose to live with gratitude for the love that fills my heart, the peace that rests within my spirit, and the voice of hope that says all things are possible."
-Author Unknown

Groton Community Calendar Wednesday, March 1

Senior Menu: Vegetable soup, ham salad sandwich, fruit, cookie.

Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm

Groton Chamber Board Meeting, noon, at City Hall
St. John's Lutheran: Bible Study, 2:45 p.m.; Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lent Service, 7 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Sarah Circle, 5 p.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Soup Supper, 6 p.m.; League, 6:15 p.m. (Sunday school serves), Worship, 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Book Study with Lindsey Tietz, 4 p.m.; Confirmation, 4 p.m.; Groton Ash Wednesday Service, 6:30 p.m.; UMYF attend Ash Wednesday Service, 6:30 p.m.

Thursday, March 2

Senior Menu: Oven fried chicken, mashed potatoes, fruit, winter blend vegetables, dinner roll.

School Breakfast: Muffins.

School Lunch: Pasta with meat sauce.

Girls Basketball SoDak16

Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.

Groton Daily Independent

PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 2 of 90

The Bulletin by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

World in Brief

- The Supreme Court appears poised to reject President Joe Biden's \$400 billion student loan forgiveness program, which could see some loans being wiped off or reduced. Conservative Justice Amy Coney Barrett sounds to be a swing vote on the matter.
- Bola Tinubu of the ruling All Progressives Congress party has been declared the winner (36% of the votes) of Nigeria's tightest presidential election in decades. Rivals Atiku Abubakar (29%) and Peter Obi (25%), who called the polls a sham, trailed just behind.
- As the House select subcommittee on China held its first hearing, two protestors were escorted out after interrupting opening statements. "We need cooperation, not competition," said a woman who held a sign that read "China is not our Enemy."
- Ghislaine Maxwell asked a U.S. appeals court to withdraw her conviction Tuesday night for helping the financier Jeffrey Epstein sexually abuse teenage girls. Her lawyers claim several errors were made during her trial.
- Environmental activist Greta Thunberg was detained by Norwegian police during a protest to demand the removal of wind turbines. Read more about wind turbine campaigns below.
- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia's threats to use nuclear weapons are part of an "information operation" and is "extraordinarily unlikely," the Institute for the Study of War said. U.S. senators have called European allies to step up support for Ukraine, which has requested more war aid. NATO deputy secretary-general Mircea Geoană said Moldova would not be "weak militarily" despite its neutral status should Moscow attempt to attack the former Soviet state.

- Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot lost re-election Tuesday night, but her defeat does not equate to a victory for Republicans. Former Chicago schools CEO Paul Vallas and Cook County Commissioner Brandon Johnson will face off during an April runoff election after no candidate secured more than 50% of the votes.

- At least 36 people have died, and 85 others were injured after a passenger train carrying 350 people collided with a cargo train near the city of Larissa, northern Greece. Rescue teams continue to look for more survivors.

Service Notice: Jackie Wagner

Services for Jacqueline "Jackie" Sippel Wagner, 89, of Groton will be 11:00 a.m., Saturday March 11th at the Presbyterian Church, Groton. Rev. Terry Kenny will officiate. Burial will follow in the spring in Union Cemetery, Groton under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Visitation will be held at the chapel on Friday from 5-7 p.m. with a prayer service at 7:00 p.m. Jackie passed away at Avantara Groton on Monday, February 27, 2023.

GHS Boys' Basketball

Tietz scores 1,000th career point as Groton Area beats Webster in Region 1A

Groton Area junior Lane Tietz scored his 1,000th career point Tuesday night. He scored his 1,000th point early in the fourth quarter of the first round of the Region 1A boys basketball game against Webster. The Tigers won the game, 72-28, with Tietz having 30 points on the night.

Groton Area led at the quarter stops at 29-6, 44-12 and 62-20.

Tietz led the Tigers with 30 points, three rebounds, three assists and two steals. He was six of eight in three-pointers and four for four from the line. Jacob Zak was six of eight in two-pointers and finished with 14 points, five rebounds, two assists and four steals. Cole Simon had 11 points, two rebounds, one assist and two steals. Tate Larson had eight points, two rebounds, three assists and one steal. Logan Ringgenberg and Dillon Abeln each had three points. Teylor Diegel had two points, one rebound and one steal. Colby Dunker had one point, two rebounds and two assists. Cade Larson had two rebounds and two assists. Ryder Johnson had one rebound, four assists and one steal. Keegen Tracy had one assist. Holden Sippel had one rebound.

Groton Area made 18 of 35 two-pointers for 51 percent, eight of 14 three-pointers for 57 percent, nine of 14 free throws for 64 percent, had 21 rebound, five turnovers, 19 assists, 11 steals and four fouls.

Matthew Mount led the Bearcats with 12 points followed by Jaiden McCreary and Tommy Vergeldt with four each, and adding two points apiece were Gavin Sannes, Tate Mammenga, Jeron McCreary and Samuel Nelson.

The Bearcats made 13 of 38 field goals for 34 percent, two of four free throws for 50 percent, had 16 turnovers and 12 team fouls.

Groton Area is now 15-5 on the season and will play Milbank on Friday in Groton. Game time is 6:30 p.m. Webster finishes its season 4-16.

In the first game, Milbank defeated Redfield, 56-28.

- Paul Kosel



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 4 of 90



Jacob Zak (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Tate Larson (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Lane Tietz (Photo by Paul Kosel)

State Receives Presidential Disaster Approval for Winter Storm

PIERRE, S.D. – Governor Kristi Noem announced yesterday that South Dakota has received a Presidential Disaster Declaration that allows the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to help South Dakota local governments in 16 counties statewide recover from infrastructure damage sustained as a result of the severe winter storms that occurred this past December.

On February 9th, Governor Kristi Noem signed Executive Order 2023-03, which declared a disaster in the impacted counties.

Public infrastructure damage assistance will be provided to the counties of Bennett, Brookings, Clark, Day, Deuel, Hamlin, Jackson, Jones, Kingsbury, Mellette, Oglala Lakota, Potter, Roberts, Stanley, Todd, and Tripp. Federal resources will also help with the impacts of the storm for state, tribal, and local governments.

An estimated \$2,413,949 in qualifying costs were incurred during the December storms in those counties listed.

In December, much of South Dakota experienced hazardous travel conditions, road closures, damage to power infrastructure, and unexpected costs for snow removal.

Gov. Noem Signs Bills into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Yesterday, Governor Noem signed the following 5 bills into law:

SB 44 repeals provisions regarding the creation of river basin natural resource districts;

SB 56 revises requirements to relocate a county seat;

SB 98 identifies the means of conducting a criminal background check for the renewal of a gold card or an enhanced permit to carry a concealed pistol;

HB 1145 revises the order of precedence for the right to control the disposition of the remains of a deceased person; and,

HB 1222 limits the liability of permit and certificate-issuing entities and certified use of force instructors.

Governor Noem has signed 72 bills into law this legislative session.

VOLUNTEERS AND NOMINATIONS SOUGHT FOR 2023 PAINT – SOUTH DAKOTA CAMPAIGN

PIERRE, S.D. (2/28/23) – “Paint – South Dakota” is underway and South Dakota Housing is seeking volunteer painters and nominations for houses to be painted.

To get involved, an individual or group of people nominate someone in their community whose home is in need of a fresh coat of exterior paint and then pick a Saturday in June to pick up paint brushes and give of their time to help their neighbor.

The nominated home must be a single family, owner-occupied residence whose owner is physically or financially unable to paint their home themselves.

Since starting the program in 1998, nearly 550 homes across South Dakota have been painted, resulting in more than 10,655 gallons of paint and primer being applied by 7,884 local volunteers.

“South Dakota Housing is celebrating 50 years this year and in honor of our anniversary we are expanding the opportunity from 25 to 50 communities to participate,” said Executive Director Lorraine Polak. “We appreciate the volunteers who give of their time to assist their neighbors and help beautiful their community.”

Applications are due to SD Housing by 5 p.m. CT, April 21, 2023. Applicants will be able to select a weekend in June to complete the final painting of the home.

Additional information and a link to the poster and application can be found at www.sdhousing.org. Questions can be directed to Sheila Olson at 605.773.7603.

MAHER ANNOUNCES RESIGNATION FROM THE SOUTH DAKOTA BOARD OF REGENTS

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Dr. Brian Maher, Executive Director and CEO of the South Dakota Board of Regents (BOR), announced his resignation effective at the end of his current contract, which runs through June 2023.

The past few years have been a wonderful complement to a career in education," said Maher. "Beginning my professional life as first an educator, then a K12 administrator, and now as the Executive Director for South Dakota's public university system, I feel especially fulfilled."

Entering the Regental System in June 2020, Maher joined BOR during a time of uncertainty and opportunity. During the 2020 legislative session, lawmakers passed Senate Bill 55, which would become the groundwork for an in-depth look into the state's higher education system. Results from the task force, led by Maher, included prioritized system-wide services, increased viability for University Centers (now known as University of South Dakota - Sioux Falls and Black Hills State University - Rapid City), and more than 30 other initiatives.

Additionally, during a period of double-digit inflation, students saw nearly identical tuition rates year-over-year throughout Maher's tenure. This trend will potentially continue again this year due to efforts from the Board and legislative support.

"Brian's leadership over the past three years truly impacted higher education in South Dakota," said BOR Board President Pam Roberts. "The Board tasked Brian to focus on accessibility, affordability, and retention for our public universities, and he delivered. These issues were at the forefront of every meaningful conversation he had with the Board. We are excited to continue Brian's work with our next executive director."

Nathan Lukkes will succeed Maher as the next Executive Director and CEO for the Board of Regents.

"Throughout the years, Nathan has shown strong leadership within the public university system and successful collaboration with our stakeholders," said Roberts. "The Board is confident Brian and Nathan will work together in the coming weeks to ensure a smooth transition."

Joining BOR in 2014, Lukkes began as the System Assistant Vice President for Research and Economic Development; he currently serves as Chief of Staff and General Counsel. Prior to his roles at BOR, Lukkes served as the Deputy Commissioner of the South Dakota Governor's Office of Economic Development and as an attorney in Sioux Falls. Lukkes also served for ten years in the South Dakota Army National Guard.

"This departure comes with ease, knowing the Board Office is in such great hands," said Maher. "Nathan has been a leader within the system and is highly trusted and valued."

Gov. Noem: "Temporary tax cut will hurt our families and businesses"

PIERRE, S.D. – Yesterday, Governor Kristi Noem asked legislators to support a permanent tax cut. Governor Noem thanked the people of South Dakota for turning challenges into opportunities – and she advocated for the tax cut that the people of South Dakota overwhelmingly want: the grocery sales tax cut. You can watch Governor Noem's video [here](#).

"I want to help every single person who lives here in our great state. [The grocery sales tax cut] is the fairest tax cut for all people," Governor Noem said in the video. "It doesn't decide who gets a tax cut and who doesn't – because everyone who lives here eats: the single mom trying to put food on the table, the senior citizens living on fixed incomes, the family where both parents have to work to make ends meet with rising record inflation nationwide. Overwhelmingly, the people of South Dakota want this tax eliminated."

Eliminating the grocery sales tax is overwhelmingly supported by the people of South Dakota. A recent poll found that 58% of South Dakotans prefer this tax cut to other options. But last week, the House of Representatives opted to instead reduce the overall sales tax rate by 30 cents for every \$100 spent.

"If the legislature pursues a temporary tax cut and instead embraces a spending spree, it will hurt our families and our businesses," continued Governor Noem.

Yesterday, the Senate Tax Committee put a 2-year sunset on that tax cut because they know that the people will support repealing the sales tax on groceries in the near future. Legislators should be giving the people of South Dakota what they want now instead of thinking they know better how to spend someone else's money.

"As we go into the last two week of legislative session, my hope is that policy makers remember they work for the people and will be accountable to the people," continued Governor Noem. "They will present me a budget soon, and I will decide if it is worthy of my signature or not. I have proved in the past that I am willing to make hard decisions – and I will again, especially if it is something that respects our Constitution and the will of the people."

South Dakota can afford eliminating the sales tax on groceries because of our permanent economic growth. Our businesses are growing and expanding quicker than ever before, incomes are going up faster here than in almost any state, we have the lowest unemployment rate in South Dakota history, and our population is growing at 5 times the national average.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

House backs 'truth in sentencing'

Bill barring parole for violent offenders heads to Senate for consideration of amendments

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 28, 2023 6:19 PM

PIERRE — A bill to upend the state's parole system for violent offenders is one step from the governor's desk.

A majority of the House of Representatives went against the pleas of a former Department of Corrections secretary and the House Majority leader on Tuesday and passed Senate Bill 146, dubbed a "truth in sentencing" bill by its author.

The House vote was 53-17. The Senate passed the bill 32-3 on Feb. 3. The Senate will need to vote once again to sign off on two minor amendments added by the House Judiciary Committee before the legislation would head to Gov. Kristi Noem for a signature or veto.

If she signs the bill, people convicted of any one of the 13 violent crimes listed in the first section of the bill would need to serve their full prison terms. Those who commit one of the 10 other violent crimes listed in its second section would need to serve 85% of their terms before parole eligibility.

Rep. Sue Peterson, the bill's prime sponsor in the House, told the chamber that violent crime has spiked, citing figures about a spike in felony case filings from state's attorney's offices and referencing high-profile crimes committed by parolees. There were 13 officer-involved shootings investigated last year, Peterson said — a record number for the state.

"Most of those involved people on parole or offenders with a history of violent offenses," Peterson said.

Rep. Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids, spoke of the importance of "truth in sentencing" for victims, so that when a judge gives a sentence of seven years, "it means seven years."

Also on board was Rep. Greg Jamison, R-Sioux Falls, who said the bill would help ease public concerns about sentencing as they read stories about parolees committing new crimes.

"What Senate Bill 146 does is restore confidence in the justice system," Jamison said.

That confidence won't improve public safety, according to Rep. Tim Reisch, R-Howard, who served as Department of Corrections secretary for more than a decade, including a stint as interim DOC secretary under Gov. Noem.

Success in corrections is a matter of swift and certain sanctions, rehabilitation programming in prison, and parole supervision, he said, and removing the third plank puts citizens at risk.

"If this bill passes, even more violent crimes are likely to occur, because they'll be unencumbered by that pesky parole agent," Reisch said.

The initial shock of a prison sentence tends to push inmates to consider casting off their anti-social instincts through rehab programming, Reisch said. It doesn't take long for that to wear off, he argued, and a longer sentence does little change that.

"As the months and years wear on, the value of that sentence becomes less and less," Reisch said.

Reisch was echoing comments made to South Dakota Searchlight by his DOC successor, Denny Kaemingk.

Reisch made an unsuccessful attempt to amend the bill, restoring parole but requiring those convicted of violent crimes to serve 20% more time before becoming eligible.

Rep. Will Mortenson, R-Pierre, urged his fellow representatives to support Reisch's amendment. He initially supported the bill, but "the more I learned, the less I liked it."

The House majority leader cited statistics from the latest Division of Criminal Investigation report on crime in South Dakota, pointing out that crime overall is down 12% from five years ago. Burglary, rape

and simple assault arrests have all dropped, he said.

State's attorneys and sheriffs have told Mortenson otherwise, but the representative told his fellow lawmakers that reality doesn't appear to align with the day-to-day work of law enforcement.

"I know that what they're telling me is true in their lived experience, but it's not true in the numbers," Mortenson said.

Rep. Dave Kull, a former police chief, voted against the amendment and for the bill. Kull said he respects Reisch's position, but that "this is a bill that ought to pass on its merits or fail."

Rep. Mary Fitzgerald also backed the bill. She rejected the argument that it would endanger public safety, saying it addresses a significant concern for constituents across the state.

"The problem we have in South Dakota is that people who commit violent crimes are only serving half their sentences," she said.

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.

NorthWestern Energy considers building a nuclear plant in South Dakota

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 28, 2023 4:32 PM

An energy company is looking into the possibility of building a small nuclear plant in South Dakota.

The company, NorthWestern Energy, is targeting a potential construction date in 2030. The plant would produce between 80 and 320 megawatts. Conventional, large nuclear reactors can produce over 700 megawatts.

"A decision has not been made whether or not to build a plant," said Jeff Decker, NorthWestern regulatory specialist. He addressed a meeting of the state Public Utilities Commission on Tuesday in Pierre.

The estimated cost is \$1.2 billion to \$1.6 billion for a 320-megawatt plant. The company said it has two potential sites, but those locations are confidential.

It would be South Dakota's first nuclear plant since a test facility was briefly operated near Sioux Falls in the 1960s.

NorthWestern told the commission in a document that the need for nuclear power comes as "we are concerned about a number of factors outside of our control that may force us into early retirement of our coal-based generation facilities."

"This plant will provide the necessary 24/7 reliability that is needed for NorthWestern's customers as the existing coal plants in South Dakota are retired," Decker said in a document submitted to the commission.

To be eligible for federal Department of Energy funding, NorthWestern said it must complete parts of a study by May.

On Tuesday, NorthWestern received permission from the commission to defer the costs of conducting the study. The study costs will accumulate in an account, and the company will eventually seek the commission's approval to charge those costs to customers "over a period of time instead of passing them on to customers immediately," NorthWestern said in a document.

The commission is allowing NorthWestern to keep the study costs and timeline confidential for at least 10 years, on the grounds that the project development details are proprietary.

NorthWestern provides electricity or natural gas to 764,200 customers in Montana, South Dakota, Nebraska and Yellowstone National Park.

The 2023 South Dakota Legislature is also interested in nuclear energy. The House and Senate recently passed a resolution encouraging the Legislature's Executive Board to appoint a summer study committee to "examine the potential use of nuclear power in South Dakota, to include a nuclear power plant, for the establishment of a safe, clean, and reliable source of energy for South Dakota."

Meanwhile, a proposal to mine near Edgemont for uranium, which is the element used as fuel in nuclear

power generation, has been stuck in regulatory review for more than a decade.

Traditional nuclear power plants work by splitting uranium atoms to release energy. Heat from that energy is used to turn liquid into steam, and the steam is used to spin turbines and generate electricity. Nuclear energy does not produce large amounts of greenhouse gas emissions like other forms of energy such as coal and natural gas, but nuclear power production does produce radioactive waste that must be safely controlled and stored.

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

Senate committee kills 'lewd or lascivious' drag show bill

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 28, 2023 10:46 AM

A bill that would ban "lewd or lascivious" content at state institutions and public schools died in the Senate Education Committee on Tuesday morning.

The bill, introduced by Rep. Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, previously passed the House with a 60-10 vote. It was amended in a House committee to allow the South Dakota Board of Regents to prohibit minors from attending any program or event.

The bill was in response to a controversial drag show held on the South Dakota State University campus last year by a student organization that advertised the show as "kid friendly." The Board of Regents began drafting a new policy after the controversy, and placed a moratorium on minors attending events hosted by student organizations on university campuses. The board is still crafting the policy.

House Bill 1116 would ban state institutions and public schools from authorizing, expending public money or using any state-owned facility for "lewd and lascivious content." Such banned content includes obscene conduct that depicts sexual activity, nudity or "any physical human body activity" for sexual matters without political or artistic value.

Opponents to the bill included lobbyists for public school organizations, the South Dakota Advocacy Network for Women and the American Civil Liberties Union.

Garrett Satterly, a member of the public who testified remotely against the bill, argued it was "vague and overreaching."

Other opponents questioned if the bill would apply to "powderpuff football" events at schools, where females play flag football and males dress up as cheerleaders, or limit the dances that university dance teams perform at sporting events.

Sen. Tim Reed, R-Brookings, made the motion to kill the bill, saying that the bill would "expand state bureaucracy into content moderation." He added that there are several complications with private money being used for university facilities, such as the Performing Arts Center on the SDSU campus, that further muddy the bill.

"Everybody likes intellectual diversity until they disagree with it, and I'm afraid that's what is happening here," Reed said.

The bill initially failed to pass the committee before the committee voted 4-3 to kill the bill. This was one of two bills introduced during the 2023 legislative session to place limits on drag shows in South Dakota. The other bill, which would have expanded obscenity laws to include drag shows and prohibited exposing children to such performances, failed to advance out of a House committee earlier this month.

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.

Biden student debt relief plan met with skepticism from U.S. Supreme Court conservatives

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - FEBRUARY 28, 2023 8:29 PM

WASHINGTON — The majority conservative wing of the U.S. Supreme Court appeared skeptical Tuesday that the Biden administration had the authority to implement a federal student debt relief program that was estimated to potentially aid millions of borrowers.

The conservative justices, who hold a 6-3 majority on the court, questioned whether the Department of Education could implement a program without explicit congressional approval that would cost more than \$400 billion over the course of 30 years.

And they questioned the fairness of a program that would help those borrowers who qualify, but not every student loan borrower.

Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr., along with other justices, invoked the “major questions doctrine,” which holds that if the federal government is initiating a program with major national consequences, it must first clearly be approved by Congress.

Liberal justices pushed back and argued that Congress did give the Department of Education the authority to forgive federal student loan debt during a national emergency such as the coronavirus, and to act on that authority, preventing borrowers from default or a worse predicament.

The liberal justices also questioned whether the plaintiffs in the two cases that were argued even had the legal standing to sue.

One case was filed by six Republican attorneys general, *Biden v. Nebraska*. The other case, *U.S. Department of Education v. Brown*, was brought by two student loan borrowers. Both suits are seeking to permanently block the program.

On both cases, U.S. Solicitor General Elizabeth B. Prelogar — representing the Biden administration — argued that neither the states nor the two individual borrowers have legal standing.

Prelogar also argued that Congress gave the secretary of education the authority to enact this one-time relief under the Higher Education Relief Opportunities for Students Act of 2003, known as the HEROES Act, which allows for the secretary to “waive or modify any statutory or regulatory provision” to help borrowers in a national emergency.

Justice Elena Kagan, a member of the liberal wing on the court, said the language in the HEROES Act clearly gave the Biden administration the authority to act on its debt relief initiative.

Prelogar also noted that both the Trump and Biden administrations have used the HEROES Act to pause repayment on federal student loans because of the coronavirus pandemic for the last three years.

The Government Accountability Office has estimated that the pause on student loan repayment has cost the federal government more than \$100 billion.

However, Roberts argued the Department of Education’s decision was not a modest modification, bringing up the cost factor. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that the program would cost up to \$400 billion over 30 years.

“We’re talking about half a trillion dollars and 43 million Americans — how does that fit under the normal understanding of modifying?” Roberts asked.

More than 43 million Americans have student loan debt, and the Federal Reserve estimates that the total U.S. student loan debt is more than \$1.76 trillion.

Prelogar said the states “aren’t contesting that the ordinary meaning of waive means to eliminate an obligation in its entirety.”

“If you look at that phrase in the context of the statute, that means that modify has to mean making a change up to the point of wholesale elimination,” she said. “It would be really strange for Congress to say, ‘You can eliminate obligations altogether or tweak them just the littlest bit, but you can’t do anything in between.’”

She said to avoid defaults and delinquencies on federal student loans, Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona “invoked the HEROES Act to provide a measure of loan forgiveness to ensure that this unprec-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 13 of 90

edented pandemic does not leave borrowers worse off in relation to their student loans.”

Appropriations authority

Justice Clarence Thomas, a conservative, called the \$400 billion in relief a grant, and questioned if it overrides congressional appropriations authority.

The Biden administration estimated that up to 40 million Americans would potentially qualify for the program, which would forgive up to \$10,000 in federal student loan debt for single adults making under \$125,000 a year, or under \$250,000 for married couples. Borrowers who received Pell Grants are eligible for an additional \$10,000 in forgiveness of federal student loans.

Prelogar said that because implementing the program does not require any money being drawn from the Treasury, it doesn't raise an appropriations issue.

Suffering harm

In both cases, there were arguments on whether plaintiffs had suffered harm, granting them the right to sue.

Biden v. Nebraska was filed by Republican attorney generals in Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska and South Carolina. That suit originally argued that the Biden administration's student debt relief plan would financially harm the revenue of states that profit from federal loans, if those borrowers have their loans forgiven.

A lower court ruled against the Republican officials from six states, but an appeals court held in favor of the states, finding that Missouri would be harmed in the future. That judge filed a national injunction, effectively halting the program.

Missouri argued it had the right to bring its challenge before the court on behalf of a third party, a Higher Education Loan Authority the state created in 1981 to collect borrowers' payment on behalf of the government, known as MOHELA.

Four of the justices — Kagan, Sonia Sotomayor, and Ketanji Brown Jackson — on the liberal wing of the court and Justice Amy Coney Barrett, of the conservative wing, were skeptical that the state had legal standing.

“Usually we don't allow one person to step into another's shoes and say ‘I think that that person has suffered a harm,’ even if the harm is very great,” Sotomayor said. “We leave it to the person, him or her or itself, to make that judgment.”

Barrett questioned why, if MOHELA is its own state agency, Missouri didn't “strong arm” MOHELA into bringing its own case, since that agency had clear standing to bring forth a suit alleging harm.

Barrett also noted that Prelogar “conceded that if MOHELA was here, MOHELA would have standing.”

Jim Campbell, the solicitor general of Nebraska who is defending the states, said that reasoning was a “question of state politics,” and said “if it's a state-created and state-controlled entity that performs government functions, the state can speak for it regardless.”

Sotomayor pointed out that the state of Missouri had to file a special request for documents to get MOHELA to cooperate.

“You couldn't even get documents from MOHELA, without filing the state equivalent of a (Freedom of Information Act) request,” she said.

Campbell said he believes that shows MOHELA is a “state entity,” because it is subject to public records law.

Jackson questioned how an injury to MOHELA could be an injury to the state, when “the state is not liable for what happens to MOHELA.”

Prelogar said that when MOHELA has been sued, the state of Missouri has been absent, because “state law makes clear that Missouri cannot be on the hook for MOHELA liabilities.”

Student loan borrowers

Other questions were on whether the two borrowers in the second suit had standing to bring their case to the court.

U.S. Department of Education v. Brown was brought by a conservative advocacy group on behalf of two

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 14 of 90

student loan borrowers, Alexander Taylor and Myra Brown, who argue that the Biden administration did not go through the proper rule making procedure when enacting the debt relief plan, among other things.

Taylor is eligible for up to \$10,000 in student debt relief, but not up to \$20,000, which is for recipients of Pell Grants. Brown does not qualify for any loan forgiveness because her loans are now held by private entities. The Department of Education tried to allow borrowers such as Brown to consolidate their debt into a Direct Loan in order to qualify for relief, but it reversed its policy to avoid legal challenges.

The conservative justices questioned the fairness of the program, and if the Biden administration had taken into consideration people who would not benefit.

Justice Neil M. Gorsuch asked if the Biden administration had considered that some people had paid off their loans, or had deliberately "planned their lives around not seeking loans."

He said that this program could be seen as benefiting "one group of favored persons over others" — the basis of the argument in the suit brought by the two individuals.

Justice Samuel Alito asked if Education Secretary Miguel Cardona was required to create a policy to address student debt relief, which Prelogar said he was not.

He pressed again, asking why it was considered fair.

"It was fair because in the absence of this relief, it's undisputed that there are going to be millions of student loan borrowers who are not going to be able to pay their student loans," she said.

Jackson noted that in terms of fairness, there were billions given to various companies and organizations under the pandemic-era Paycheck Protection Program, "because Congress said to do it," and that not everyone was entitled to that money because they didn't own a business or nonprofit.

"I just don't know how far we can go with this notion of, to the extent that the government is providing much needed assistance to people in an emergency, it's going to be unfair to those who don't get the same benefit," she said.

Brown had a business loan forgiven through the Biden administration's Paycheck Protection Program, which was used to help businesses weather the coronavirus pandemic. She owns the Texas business Desert Star Enterprises Inc, which was granted a \$48,000 loan and \$47,996 was forgiven on April 27, 2022.

Sotomayor said that the other borrower in the case, Taylor, who qualified for up to \$10,000, would get nothing if this program is struck down.

"This is so totally illogical to me that you come into court to say 'I want more, I want to file a suit to get more, but I know I'm going to get nothing.'"

Campbell, from Nebraska, argued that the borrowers in the case want the Department of Education "to stop this program so that it can go through the proper process, so that we have an opportunity to comment and urge the secretary to forgive our debts right now."

He argued that Brown has \$17,000 in student loan debt for which she cannot get relief.

A decision from the court could take months but would come before the end of the term this summer.

The Biden administration has stated that regardless of the outcome, the pandemic-era pause on federal student loan repayments will lift on June 30, and those borrowers will be required to begin repayments either after the Supreme Court's decision or 60 days after the June deadline.

Rally outside

As both sides argued their cases before the court, more than two dozen organizations bused in hundreds of borrowers and supporters of student debt relief to rally outside the Supreme Court.

The legal challenges have left millions of federal student loan borrowers in limbo. The Department of Education has collected more than 24 million applications for the program and 16 million borrowers were accepted.

Due to the pending lawsuit, the Department of Education had to stop accepting applications after lower courts put the program on hold.

Democratic lawmakers who joined protestors included Sens. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, Bob Menendez of New Jersey and Bernie Sanders of Vermont, as well as Reps. Pramila Jayapal of Washington state, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, Judy Chu of California, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Cori Bush of

Missouri and Maxwell Frost of Florida.

The ranking member of the House Education and Workforce Committee, Democrat Bobby Scott of Virginia, said in a statement that the Biden administration's plan supports borrowers who need it most, arguing that 90% of the student loan relief would go to borrowers who make less than \$75,000 a year.

"Unfortunately, Republican politicians are denying borrowers — including an estimated 140,000 borrowers in my home district — the relief they need to make ends meet," he said. "Regardless of these political challenges, I will continue working to solve the underlying problems that caused the student debt crisis in the first place."

Warren has called for as much as \$50,000 in student loan forgiveness. She released a report in February that stated middle and low-income families would be provided with relief and the program.

"Over 40 million borrowers have their financial futures at stake as the Supreme Court hears the debt relief case, and the ones carrying the heaviest burden are those from low-income backgrounds, Black and Latino borrowers, and public service workers like teachers and nurses," according to the report.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York also said on the Senate floor the program was critical relief for low-and-middle-class families.

"This isn't a handout to the wealthy — far from it," he said. "This is critical relief to working and middle class families. For generations, higher education was the ladder up into the middle class — especially for millions of Black, Latino, and Asian Americans."

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

U.S. House Ag panel hears industry complaints on regulations, scant crop insurance

BY: ADAM GOLDSTEIN - FEBRUARY 28, 2023 8:24 PM

WASHINGTON — Members of the U.S. House Agriculture Committee listened to agribusiness executives on Tuesday rail against federal regulations, and lobby for new markets and reinforced crop insurance programs in the panel's first hearing of the new Congress.

With the 2018 farm bill expiring this fall, lawmakers who will shape the next version of the bill indicated they would seek to address challenges facing U.S. farmers: high costs, industry consolidation and a safety net that is insufficient to cover intensifying natural disasters.

"It is time to retire our dress shoes and put on our work boots," said Republican Rep. G.T. Thompson of Pennsylvania, the House Agriculture Committee chair. "I will need every one of you at the table to help us deliver a farm bill for the backbone of this country: the American producer."

Industry witnesses — including representatives from the National Farmers' Union, American Farm Bureau and the National Chicken Council — pushed committee members to consider hikes in commodity crop insurance reference prices, along with increased federal spending on market development and agricultural research.

They also requested clarity and consistency on environmental rules that impact agricultural business, like U.S. Department of Agriculture rules under the Packers and Stockyards Act and the Environmental Protection Agency's controversial definition of Waters of the United States, or WOTUS, for regulation under the Clean Water Act.

The farm bill is a multiyear law authorizing an array of agricultural and food programs, including federal crop insurance, food stamp benefits, international food aid and farm resource conservation. The bill is renewed close to every five years, and includes mandatory spending that must be in line with previous farm bills.

Reducing regulations

The industry witnesses said farmers were burdened by undue and unclear regulation on the farming

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 16 of 90

communities, and they asked for friendlier federal oversight.

"We need a supportive regulatory environment," said Zippy Duvall, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation. "Federal regulations have a direct impact on farmers and ranchers. So it becomes more and more important for farmers to have clarity on rules that impact their business and ability to operate."

Duvall decried the updated Waters of the United States rule from the EPA, which he said would represent the "largest land grab of the federal government in history."

Rob Larew, president of the National Farmers' Union, added that the expanded definitions of waters covered in the rewritten rule means that streams and farm ponds can now be regulated by the EPA, and increases the difficulty for farms to abide by the Clean Water Act.

Environmental advocates have said a robust interpretation of the rule is needed to maintain clean water.

Duvall said that several rewrites of the rule in different presidential administrations have farmers feeling "like a ping-pong ball going back and forth, not being able to make long-term decisions."

Iowa Republican Rep. Randy Feenstra asked Mike Twining, vice president of sales and marketing of Willard Agri-Service in Maryland, about the detrimental impacts of an unclear WOTUS rule on producers of all sizes.

"To not have that clear definition creates tremendous uncertainty that really just paralyzes our ability to do business and to produce food in an efficient manner," Twining said.

Packers and Stockyards

Industry witnesses and Republican lawmakers also took aim at proposed Biden Administration rules under the 1921 Packers and Stockyards Act that aim to protect producers from market manipulation by meat-packers and large commercial farms, and offer other protections in the agriculture industry.

Mike Brown, president of the National Chicken Council, said rules the Biden administration is considering under the Packers and Stockyards Act would create a "financially ruinous" set of regulations, which would collectively cost the chicken industry more than \$1 billion as processing speeds and holding capacity are reduced, he said.

"The American consumers and farmers have faced a lot over the past several years," Brown said. "Now is not the time to be layering on additional regulations that further drain consumers, farmers and the chicken industry."

Republican Rep. Tracey Mann of Kansas asked Brown about what changes to the law would mean for producers.

"Basically, what these rules would do is turn any interaction between a processor and a grower into a litigation flash point," Brown said. "It's going to add cost."

Crop insurance, research, and consolidation

Other members, including several of the panel's Democrats, inquired about reducing consolidation in the agricultural industry, and bolstering federal crop insurance programs amid increasingly extreme weather.

Republican Rep. Austin Scott of Georgia asked Duvall whether he felt reference prices on crop insurance plans were sufficient to reduce risk for commodity farmers, even if it meant an increase in spending.

"We're looked at as a very conservative organization," Duvall said. "(But) it's time to broaden the baseline. Because those targets that we use in the commodity programs, and the cost that we have to grow a crop, is nowhere near what it was when those targets were set. It needs to be modernized, and it needs to be a true safety net based on the cost of production today."

Georgia Rep. David Scott, the committee's ranking Democrat, asked Larew and Duvall how to increase the farmer's share of the consumer dollar in the upcoming farm bill and reduce the effects of market consolidation.

Larew pointed to the need to develop new market infrastructure for rural communities, especially regarding sustainable and locally produced products. But that change won't happen overnight, he said.

"You've got to create that opportunity for new markets, so investment in biofuels infrastructure is a huge thing for those rural communities," Larew said. "The investment in more local and regional processing is critical to make sure that that infrastructure is there."

Rep. Andrea Salinas of Oregon, a Democrat, asked Duvall if there would be value in expanding margin

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 17 of 90

protection insurance to specialty crop producers in the next farm bill.

"In our organization, our policy supports updating and broadening the safety net for farmers," Duvall said. "Regardless of what you're farming, you deserve to have the same safety net as the others do."

Responding to a question from Democrat Rep. Alma Adams of North Carolina, Larew called for greater antitrust enforcement in processing and grocery supply chains.

"The fewer there are, and the more pressure there is further down the stream, that puts even greater pressure on farmers and ranchers out there," Larew said. "Right now we don't see anything stopping that (consolidation), so we need greater enforcement for antitrust, greater oversight of the marketplace."

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

Wind and whales: 'No evidence' links projects to deaths

BY: ROBERT ZULLO - FEBRUARY 28, 2023 2:43 PM

The U.S. offshore wind power industry is in its infancy, with just a handful of turbines installed along the Atlantic coast.

But they're already being blamed for the deaths of whales that have washed up on beaches in New Jersey, New York, Virginia and elsewhere.

A Fox News story on Feb. 13 made strenuous attempts to link a dead right whale to Dominion Energy's Coastal Virginia Offshore Wind project, which currently consists of two small test turbines about 27 miles off the coast of Virginia Beach.

It was among a string of articles from local and national outlets on wind development and dead whales over the past several months that also saw a call for an offshore wind moratorium by 30 mayors of coastal New Jersey towns. The backlash comes as states and the federal government increasingly set aggressive offshore wind energy targets and as the industry tries to develop supply chains and solve transmission problems.

However, according to several federal agencies and scientists, there's no connection between offshore wind development and what the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration calls an "unusual mortality event" that's been afflicting whales up and down the East Coast, from Maine to Florida, since 2016, before the vast majority of Atlantic coast wind development began. At the time, the only U.S. wind project in operation was the five-turbine Block Island Wind Farm off the coast of Rhode Island. As of 2022, though, at least 20 projects were in various stages of development

"At this point, there is no evidence to support speculation that noise resulting from wind development-related site characterization surveys could potentially cause mortality of whales, and no specific links between recent large whale mortalities and currently ongoing surveys," NOAA said in a statement.

"We will continue to gather data to help us determine the cause of death for these mortality events. We will also continue to explore how sound, vessel and other human activities in the marine environment impact whales and other marine mammals."

Last week, the Marine Mammal Commission, an independent federal agency tasked with protecting whales, dolphins and other marine mammals by overseeing science, policy and management actions, said there had been 16 humpback whale strandings this winter, noting that 10 or more humpback whales have been stranded every year since 2016, with a high of 34 in 2017.

"Despite several reports in the media, there is no evidence to link these strandings to offshore wind energy development," the commission said.

Andy Read, a marine biology professor at Duke University and a member of the Marine Mammal Commission, said the biggest threat to humpback and severely endangered North Atlantic right whales, of which fewer than 350 remain in existence, are ships and fishing gear.

"I don't see offshore wind as a particularly acute threat at this time," he said, noting that about 40% of dead whales show evidence of being hit by a ship or getting tangled in fishing gear. "We know what the

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 18 of 90

big threats to large whales are in the coastal areas of the Atlantic ... they're ship strikes and entanglement in fishing gear and we shouldn't lose our focus on those two big threats."

Read said that, in the case of humpback whales, a combination of growing numbers and cleaner waters means they're coming back to areas previously abandoned because of pollution and the ravages of the whaling industry.

"We are seeing more whales in places we didn't see them before," he said. "That's a function of populations growing."

He added that younger whales often prefer to stay in the busy ship lanes of the mid-Atlantic during the winter, comparing them to kids playing on a highway.

"Younger animals feed in the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay where they're really vulnerable to ship strikes," he said.

The U.S. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, which oversees ocean energy extraction and manages federal offshore wind leases, requires that wind survey vessels, which use acoustic equipment to map the ocean floor, establish "exclusion zones" around the ships, meaning it must be clear of marine mammals or sea turtles for a length of time before the gear can be used. It also requires ships to use independent observers to watch for whales and other marine mammals to minimize the risk of a collision.

And BOEM says the technology used in the offshore wind industry's high-resolution geophysical surveys is much less powerful than the seismic airguns that have been employed for decades by offshore companies to look for oil and gas deposits beneath the seafloor.

"Overall, the sound sources used here are generally expected to be much lower in impact than seismic air guns," said Erica Staaterman, a bioacoustician at BOEM's Center for Marine Acoustics, during a press call in January. "There's no evidence that any of these sound sources used in HRG surveys are attributed to any of these kind of impacts to baleen whales."

The American Clean Power Association, a trade group of renewable energy companies, said offshore wind work at the moment amounts to a tiny sliver of the vessel traffic along the busy ports of the East Coast. The association blamed "groups opposed to clean energy projects" for spreading "baseless information that has been debunked by scientists and experts."

Indeed, news outlets have linked some of the organizations clamoring to halt wind development for the whales' sake to conservative opponents of renewable energy.

"It's unfortunate that so much misinformation is obscuring the facts of what's really happening off the shores of the East Coast. We have always worked alongside the environmental community to protect marine life and follow rigorous standards when developing projects," the association said in a statement.

As for the right whale that washed up in Virginia, a necropsy that came out just two days after the Fox article revealed that the whale appeared to have died of a vessel strike.

"While these whale deaths are tragic, they are not related to Dominion Energy's Coastal Virginia Offshore Wind activities," said Jeremy Slayton, a company spokesman. "There are currently only three offshore wind vessels operating off Virginia's coast and they were in port between Feb. 6 and Feb. 13."

Robert Zullo is a national energy reporter based in southern Illinois focusing on renewable power and the electric grid. Robert joined States Newsroom in 2018 as the founding editor of the Virginia Mercury. Before that, he spent 13 years as a reporter and editor at newspapers in Virginia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Louisiana. He has a bachelor's degree from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va. He grew up in Miami, Fla., and central New Jersey.

Biden pick for U.S. archivist caught up in controversy over missing presidential documents

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - FEBRUARY 28, 2023 2:25 PM

WASHINGTON — The nominee for archivist of the United States made her second appearance before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs committee Tuesday, after the panel blocked her last Congress following a high-profile probe into records at former President Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate.

Colleen Shogan, an executive for the nonprofit White House Historical Association and a Pennsylvania native, faced questioning from lawmakers for the second time since September, when Republicans on the evenly split committee voted against her nomination to head the National Archives and Records Administration.

The former Library of Congress and Senate staffer's nomination came as NARA transitions hundreds of millions of records from analog to digital and slogs through a sizable backlog of military records requests.

The agency also has received intense national attention for working with federal investigators to retrieve classified documents from the homes and personal offices of Trump, President Joe Biden and former Vice President Mike Pence.

While Democratic lawmakers again praised Shogan's credentials and endorsements for the role, GOP committee members, including Josh Hawley of Missouri and Rand Paul of Kentucky, pressed the political scientist on her past social media posts.

They also asked whether, as archivist, she would fulfill minority members' requests for communications between the NARA and the FBI regarding missing presidential records, as well as any records pertaining to the origins of COVID-19.

"Recent events have highlighted long-standing issues with presidential records management and classification, and I understand that many of my colleagues are eager for more information on these issues. But I want to stress that as you told us in your previous hearing, you are not able to provide details about current investigations related to presidential records because — this is a good reason — you do not currently work at NARA," said committee Chairman Gary Peters.

"Assuring the full and accurate preservation of our nation's history is a monumental task and requires an independent nonpartisan leader dedicated to serving the American public," the Michigan Democrat later continued. "I am confident that Dr. Shogan is the right choice to serve as the next National Archives."

Shogan replied to multiple GOP senators who asked if she would respond to their requests that at the National Archives "there is a principal value of transparency."

"So I will be responsive to any requests that you might have while following the law," she said.

The Boston College and Yale University graduate began her career as a legislative assistant in the U.S. Senate followed by seven years as an assistant and deputy director at the Congressional Research Service. She then worked in outreach and collections at the Library of Congress.

In 2018, Congress appointed her to vice chair of the Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission. She then joined the White House Historical Association in 2020 during the Trump administration, with which she worked "very effectively," she told the committee.

"I bring over 15 years of experience in the government sector and in the nonprofit sector in increasing positions of importance," Shogan said. "... I'm not a historian. I am a political scientist, but my areas of expertise were in American politics, in political philosophy and in methodology, and I've really focused on the intersection of political science and history."

Hawley zeroes in on tweets

Hawley, as he did in the first hearing, pressed Shogan on what he described as her "grossly partisan" tweets, including those criticizing Trump, and about a 2007 academic article she wrote titled "Anti-Intellectualism in the Modern Presidency: A Republican Populism."

Shogan's other academic works include a book titled "The Moral Rhetoric of Presidents," and she's the author of several "whodunit" murder mysteries set on Capitol Hill.

In criticizing her for not sharing a full account of her tweets, Hawley said "You responded as follows.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 20 of 90

And I quote, 'My personal Twitter account is comprised of posts about my mystery novels, events at the White House Historical Association, Pittsburgh sports teams, travels and my dog.'"

In a lengthy back and forth, Hawley highlighted Shogan's past tweets that included lamenting the lifting of mask mandates for school children, supporting stricter firearms laws and criticizing Texas Republican Sen. Ted Cruz.

"You talk about an assault weapons ban, retweeted a post 'Ban assault weapons now,' say you agree with this idea that you have to be a certain age to buy so-called assault weapons in America. Is that a post about sports teams or your dog or mystery novels?" Hawley asked.

Shogan repeated to each example, nearly a dozen times, "My social media is in my personal capacity, senator."

Kentucky's Paul said he was concerned about Shogan instructing a person on Twitter to complain to the Library of Congress regarding religious flags on display.

"It does worry me, not that you're liberal — I mean, that doesn't, I think if we got rid of liberals we might not have a lot of librarians or archivists, frankly — but I am worried about the idea that you would advise people at the Library of Congress about, you know, taking down religious flags in a public place," Paul said.

"If I am confirmed as archivist of the United States, without reservation, I will welcome all Americans to the National Archives," Shogan replied. "I will welcome them enthusiastically to the National Archives. I stand 100% percent behind that sentiment. I have a record of doing so at the Library of Congress where I oversaw visitor services for several years, and I will continue in that tradition and you have my promise and my word on that."

Paul also expressed concern over an incident in January when a guard at the National Archives asked a patron to cover a t-shirt bearing an anti-abortion message.

NARA released a statement earlier this month acknowledging the incident and a lawsuit that followed.

"Earlier this week, a lawsuit was filed against the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) stating that on the morning of January 20, 2023, the day of the March for Life, several visitors to our museum in Washington, D.C., were told by NARA security officers 'to remove or cover their attire because of their pro-life messages,'" the Feb. 10 statement read.

It continued: "As the home to the original Constitution and Bill of Rights, which enshrine the rights of free speech and religion, we sincerely apologize for this occurrence. NARA policy expressly allows all visitors to wear t-shirts, hats, buttons, etc. that display protest language, including religious and political speech. We are actively investigating to determine what happened."

Shogan's confirmation is expected to clear the Senate panel now that the Democrats hold a slight margin after the 2022 midterms.

Shogan enjoys support from West Virginia Republican Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, who introduced and praised the nominee during her September hearing.

The National Archives has been without a permanent chief administrator since May 2022. If confirmed, Shogan would become the nation's 11th archivist.

Shogan is a native of the Southwestern Pennsylvania region, where she graduated in 1993 from Norwin High School, just under 20 miles southeast of Pittsburgh.

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

How the judge who could ban the abortion pill won confirmation in the U.S. Senate

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 28, 2023 2:04 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. District Court judge who could end more than two decades of legal access to medication abortion underwent extensive questioning about LGBTQ equality at his December 2017 confirmation hearing — and very little about his views on abortion.

Matthew Joseph Kacsmaryk, appointed by former President Donald Trump earlier in 2017, spent much of his contentious Senate Judiciary Committee confirmation hearing explaining work he'd done at a conservative religious liberty legal organization. As the deputy general counsel for the First Liberty Institute since 2014, he had written extensively about same-sex marriage and other subjects.

Kacsmaryk told the panel the First Liberty Institute "is the largest national legal organization dedicated to restoring religious freedom for all Americans, with a heavy emphasis on all," in response to a question about the organization from Iowa GOP Sen. Chuck Grassley.

Kacsmaryk testified he "primarily focused on conscience litigation," during his time there. But Democratic senators on the committee were skeptical Kacsmaryk would be able to rule impartially as a judge.

Connecticut Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal challenged Kacsmaryk for writing a 2015 brief to the U.S. Supreme Court in which he argued that recognizing a constitutional right to same-sex marriage would lead the country on a "road to potential tyranny."

Kacsmaryk testified that as part of his job representing several religious organizations, he was making a point about free speech and the "importance of protecting religious dissenters."

In the end, Maine Sen. Susan Collins was the sole Republican to join Democrats in their opposition to the confirmation, arguing that Kacsmaryk was too "extreme" to sit on the bench. The Senate voted 52-46 in June 2019 to confirm him to the Northern District of Texas.

It was three years before a U.S. Supreme Court that had become dominated by conservatives would overturn the constitutional right to abortion, throwing the issue back to states, some of which have responded by instituting bans.

Other states have kept abortion legal, but their residents could have access to abortion medication overturned or limited by a Kacsmaryk ruling in the case, Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine v. U.S. Food and Drug Administration, expected any day.

Vetted by Cruz, Cornyn

Kacsmaryk was born in 1977 in Gainesville, Florida, though he grew up in Texas.

He graduated from Abilene Christian University in 1999 before going on to earn his law degree from the University of Texas School of Law in 2003, according to the questionnaire he submitted to the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Kacsmaryk worked as an associate at Baker Botts LLP in Dallas from 2003 through 2008, before becoming an assistant United States attorney for the North District of Texas.

After two years at the U.S. Attorney's Office Dallas division, he moved to the Fort Worth division from 2010 through 2013. Kacsmaryk then spent a semester as an adjunct professor at Southern Methodist University's Meadows School for the Arts in Dallas before becoming deputy general counsel for the First Liberty Institute in 2014.

In February 2017, he sent an application to a committee that Texas Republican Sens. John Cornyn and Ted Cruz established to vet potential nominees to the federal bench in their home state.

Members of the committee, known as the Federal Judicial Evaluation Committee, interviewed Kacsmaryk in March 2017 before the two senators interviewed him in April in Washington, D.C.

By the end of May 2017, the White House Counsel's Office and the Office of Legal Policy of the Department of Justice were interviewing Kacsmaryk. Then Trump nominated him in September.

Cornyn said during the confirmation hearing that he was confident Kacsmaryk "will serve the people of Texas while on the bench by faithfully applying the law, no matter who the litigants are, where they come from or what their station in life is."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 22 of 90

Cruz noted that President Barack Obama's first attorney general, Eric Holder, had recognized Kacsmaryk with the attorney general's award for excellence in furthering the interests of U.S. national security for a case that involved the prosecution of a terrorist, who received life in prison following a jury trial.

Kacsmaryk volunteered for several Republican campaigns before his nomination, including for Cornyn and Cruz. But he made donations exclusively to Cruz, according to filings with the Federal Election Commission.

Kacsmaryk donated \$500 to Cruz's Senate campaign in 2012, \$500 to his Jobs, Growth & Freedom Fund leadership PAC in 2014, \$500 to the Ted Cruz Victory Committee PAC in 2014 and \$1,000 to Cruz for President in 2015.

Kacsmaryk was also a co-founder in 2012 of The Federalist Society's Fort Worth Lawyers Chapter and served as vice president and programs director. The society, founded in 1982, describes itself in part as "a group of conservatives and libertarians interested in the current state of the legal order."

He has remained active. Even as he awaited a final brief in the abortion medication case, Kacsmaryk spoke to The Federalist Society's New Orleans Lawyers Chapter on Feb. 24, according to a post on the society website.

In other society activities, he was part of a deep dive into the criminal justice system in March 2022, was part of a virtual panel addressing sex and gender issues in February 2022 and appeared on a panel on religious freedom in January 2021. There are no videotapes, audiotapes or transcripts of his remarks on the Federalist Society website.

Senate hearing

At his confirmation hearing, his work at First Liberty Institute in connection with the group's opposition to the legality of same-sex marriage drew intense scrutiny from Democrats.

Delaware Democratic Sen. Chris Coons questioned why Kacsmaryk "asserted that the recognition of same-sex marriage would cast into disarray family values and put children at risk."

Coons contended that, in his experience, "same-sex couples are fully capable of providing loving and stable homes to children" and asked Kacsmaryk what evidence he could show "that recognition of same-sex marriage harms children or diminishes family values?"

Kacsmaryk said he didn't remember making that specific argument, but noted he has represented numerous faith-based adoption and foster care agencies.

"It is my experience as their counsel that they're willing to have all hands on deck, especially in Texas where we have an adoption/foster crisis," Kacsmaryk said. "Faith-based agencies, who may have a different definition of marriage or faith tradition, they acknowledge your point that we need all hands on deck in child welfare."

When Coons asked if it would be a mischaracterization of Kacsmaryk's views to say that somehow same-sex couples are not capable of being loving and supportive parents, Kacsmaryk replied that it would be a mischaracterization.

Illinois Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin asked about a 2015 piece where Kacsmaryk wrote about the Equality Act, a bill introduced in Congress that would have added sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of federally protected classes.

In the piece, Kacsmaryk laid out his view for how the LGBTQ rights movement was more like the sexual revolution than the civil rights movement.

The sexual revolution, Kacsmaryk wrote, "was rooted in the soil of elitist postmodern philosophy, spearheaded by secular libertines, and was essentially 'radical' in its demands."

"It sought public affirmation of the lie that the human person is an autonomous blob of Silly Putty unconstrained by nature or biology, and that marriage, sexuality, gender identity, and even the unborn child must yield to the erotic desires of liberated adults," Kacsmaryk wrote. "In this way, the Sexual Revolution was more like the French Revolution, seeking to destroy rather than restore."

The conclusion of that article, Kacsmaryk said during his confirmation hearing, was "that legislators and policymakers must balance constitutional rights — both the right to same-sex marriage and religious liberty."

In that writing, Kacsmaryk compared Supreme Court justices establishing a constitutional right to same-sex marriage to the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling, which established a constitutional right to abortion.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 23 of 90

"On January 22, 1973, seven justices of the Supreme Court found an unwritten 'fundamental right' to abortion hiding in the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and the shadowy 'penumbras' of the Bill of Rights, a celestial phenomenon invisible to the non-lawyer eye," Kacsmaryk wrote.

"But Roe did not resolve the fierce controversy of abortion," Kacsmaryk continued. "Instead, sexual revolutionaries suffered loss after loss when they rammed Roe into state and municipal policies restricting public funds or forced participation in the 'fundamental right' of abortion."

Kacsmaryk argued that supporters of marriage equality would face similar challenges to attempts to pass LGBTQ equality legislation in the last years of the Obama presidency, writing "the post-Obergefell trajectory will probably look less like a two-year dash to the finish line and more like the 'protracted' timeline of post-Roe litigation and legislation."

"That is, the new 'fundamental right' to same-sex marriage will be made to coexist alongside meaningful exceptions for religious dissenters," he wrote, referencing the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision.

Confirmation debate

Kacsmaryk's confirmation process stalled out following his December 2017 hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee, but debate began again when Republicans moved his nomination to the floor in June 2019.

Democrats predominantly focused on Kacsmaryk's past statements about LGBTQ rights during floor debate on his nomination, though some senators expressed concern about whether he could be impartial on cases addressing access to birth control and abortion.

"The Trump-Pence administration has taken every opportunity to undermine women's health and reproductive rights," Sen. Patty Murray, a Washington Democrat, said during floor debate.

"And we have seen far right Republicans across the country joining them, from state legislators working to pass extreme, harmful abortion restrictions to Republicans here in D.C. working to jam through extreme, harmful judicial nominees, like Mr. Kacsmaryk, who they hope will uphold blatantly unconstitutional restrictions on women's rights to safe, legal abortion and ultimately take away that right by overturning Roe v. Wade," Murray added.

Maine's Collins, the sole Republican to vote against Kacsmaryk, in a statement criticized his views.

"Mr. Kacsmaryk has dismissed proponents of reproductive choice as 'sexual revolutionaries,' and disdainfully criticized the legal foundations of Roe v. Wade," Collins said in a statement to Roll Call. "Such extreme statements reflect poorly on Mr. Kacsmaryk's temperament and suggest an inability to respect precedent and to apply the law fairly and impartially."

Immigration, birth control rulings

As a district judge, Kacsmaryk hasn't issued many nationwide rulings, but has gained attention for his decisions on an immigration case and birth control access for minors.

Kacsmaryk wrote in his birth control ruling in early December that the federal government's family planning grant program, known as Title X, "violates the constitutional right of parents to direct the upbringing of their children and Texas Family Code."

The case, Deanda v. Becerra, began in 2020 when Alexander R. Deanda sued the U.S. Health and Human Services Department, which administers the family planning program.

Deanda argued the program infringed on his parental rights to raise "his daughters in accordance with Christian teaching on matters of sexuality, which requires unmarried children to practice abstinence and refrain from sexual intercourse until marriage."

Because the federal family planning grants program didn't explicitly require providers to inform parents if their minor children seek birth control or other family planning healthcare services, Deanda argued it violated his rights under the U.S. Constitution and a Texas law.

The federal government has appealed the Kacsmaryk ruling, which sided with Deanda.

Kacsmaryk made headlines again in late December when for a second time he blocked the Biden administration from ending the "Remain in Mexico" immigration policy that required some immigrants seeking asylum to remain in that country while waiting for their hearing.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 24 of 90

The ruling followed the U.S. Supreme Court issuing an opinion in June 2022 that the Biden administration could end the program.

The justices, however, sent the issue back to Kacsmark's district court, where he was tasked with deciding whether a follow-up memo from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security was in line with the Administrative Procedure Act.

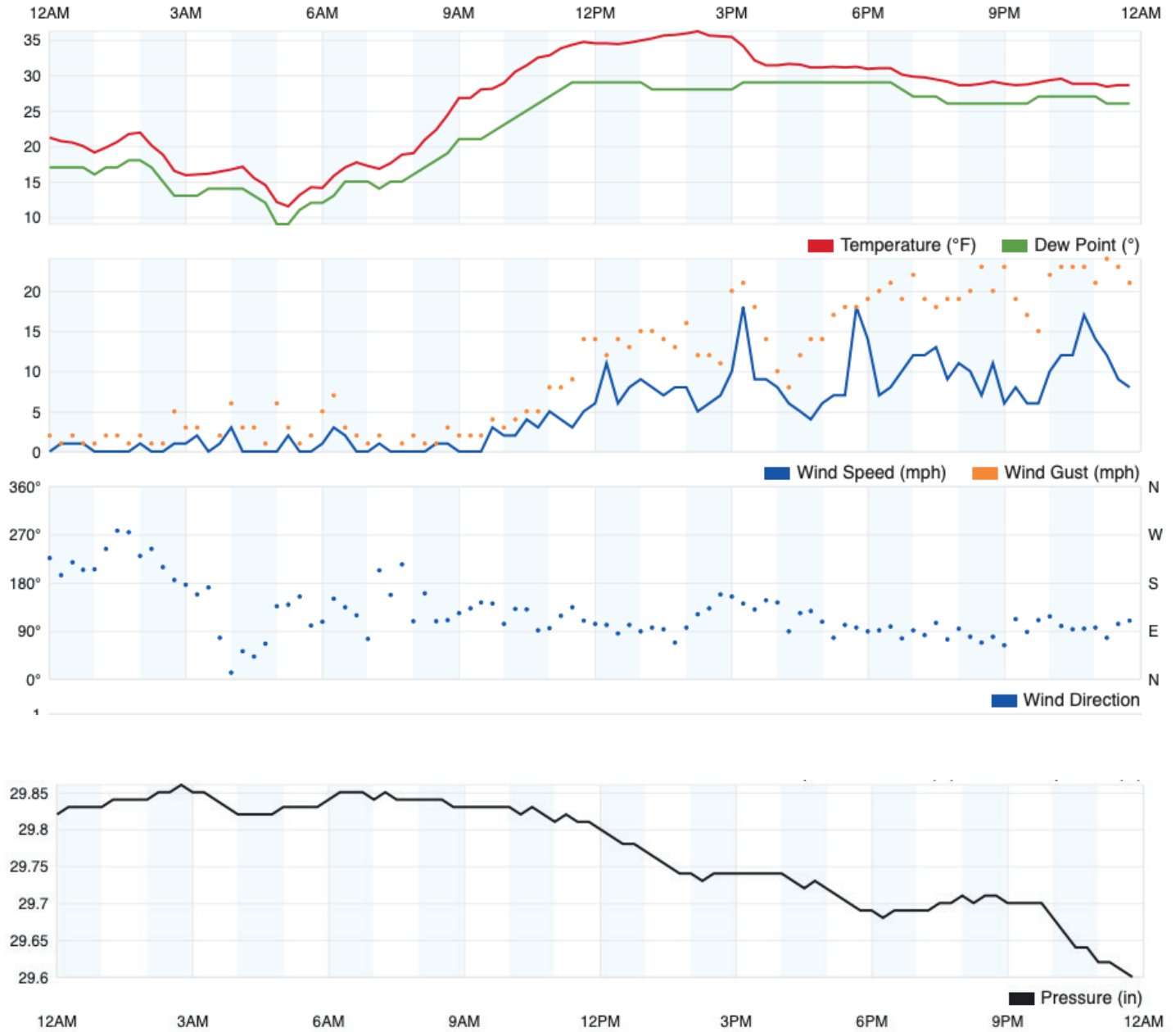
Kacsmark argued the October 2021 DHS memo on winding down the "Remain in Mexico" policy was not, writing the federal government's attempts to end the policy were done in an "arbitrary and capricious way."

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

Groton Daily Independent

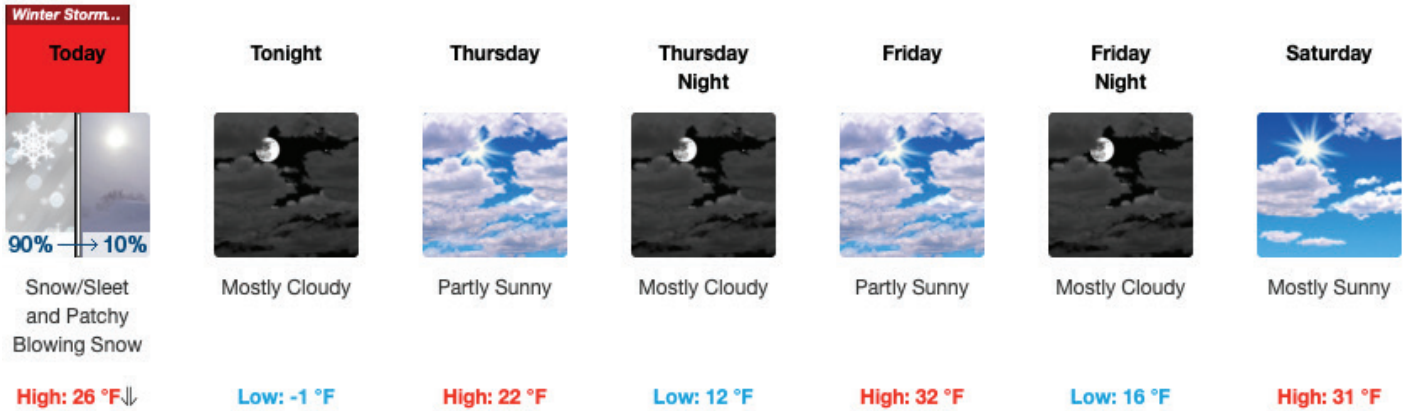
Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 25 of 90

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Broton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 26 of 90



Final Update-Snow Continuing This Morning March 1, 2023 3:32 AM

Key Points

- Northern portions of South Dakota has been upgraded to a Winter Storm Warning
- Moderate to heavy snow continues along the ND/SD border through the morning with wrap-around snow along the Missouri River.

Potential Impacts

- Morning commute impacted as snow continues to fall along with gusty winds, creating drifting and blowing snow
- Visibilities reduced in falling and blowing snow

Headlines

Weather Forecast Office
Aberdeen, SD
Issued Mar 01, 2023 1:26 AM CST

www.weather.gov/abr

Snow will continue to fall through the morning before tapering off by late morning/midday. Gusty winds continue which will create blowing snow, resulting in reduced visibilities

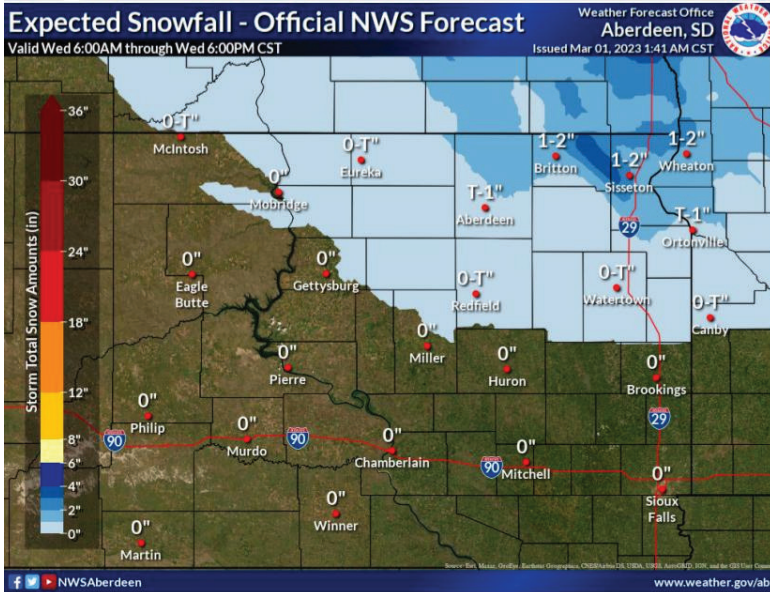
Broton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 27 of 90



Additional Snow Amounts & Timing Today

March 1, 2023
3:32 AM



Location	Wed 6AM	Wed 12PM	Wed 6PM	TF 12P
Aberdeen	<1"			
Watertown	T			
Britton	1-2"	T		
Milbank	<1"	T		
Redfield	T			
Pierre				
Eagle Butte				
Kennebec				
Gettysburg				
Sisseton	1-2"	<1"		
Mobridge				
Wheaton	1-2"	<1"		

6-hour Snow (inches) T= <=0.2"



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD



Gusty Winds This Morning

March 1, 2023
3:32 AM

Key Points

- The combination of falling snow and breezy winds will result in blowing and drifting snow through the morning
- Visibility may dip to one quarter mile at times, especially in open, rural areas.

Maximum Wind Gust Forecast

Location	3/1 Wed																Maximum
	3am	4am	5am	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am	11am	12pm	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm	5pm		
Aberdeen	26	26	31	39	40	44	41	39	38	35	31	30	26	23	20	44	
Britton	25	26	31	39	40	40	40	40	38	36	35	29	25	22	20	40	
Eagle Butte	24	22	25	32	30	28	26	22	21	18	18	16	14	13	12	32	
Eureka	45	41	38	35	32	31	32	31	28	25	23	18	16	14	12	45	
Gettysburg	31	33	33	32	32	28	28	25	24	22	21	20	18	14	13	33	
Kennebec	54	56	52	43	39	36	31	28	25	23	21	18	16	15	14	56	
McIntosh	22	18	21	25	25	25	25	23	20	17	15	14	10	10	8	25	
Milbank	23	22	20	17	16	17	24	29	31	33	35	31	28	26	25	35	
Miller	36	41	41	38	36	33	31	29	28	25	23	21	20	17	14	41	
Mobridge	41	40	36	28	26	28	25	24	22	21	20	17	15	14	12	41	
Murdo	44	43	41	40	36	32	26	23	22	18	17	15	15	14	14	44	
Pierre	43	43	39	33	30	26	24	21	20	18	16	15	13	12	10	43	
Redfield	16	16	23	35	36	38	38	35	32	29	29	25	23	21	17	38	
Sisseton	24	22	22	23	25	29	33	35	35	33	32	29	26	24	23	35	
Watertown	31	25	22	18	20	22	29	30	31	32	30	30	28	23	21	32	
Webster	24	18	18	21	26	33	40	39	37	35	35	32	29	25	22	40	
Wheaton	22	21	24	30	29	29	30	29	30	30	28	29	28	24	22	30	



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Winter Storm Warning

URGENT - WINTER WEATHER MESSAGE

National Weather Service Aberdeen SD

125 AM CST Wed Mar 1 2023

Brown-Marshall-Roberts-
Including the cities of Aberdeen, Britton, and Sisseton

...WINTER STORM WARNING IN EFFECT UNTIL 3 PM CST THIS AFTERNOON...

* WHAT...Heavy mixed precipitation. Additional snow accumulations of 1 to 6 inches and ice accumulations of a light glaze. Winds gusting as high as 45 mph.

* WHERE...Brown, Marshall and Roberts Counties.

* WHEN...Until 3 PM CST this afternoon.

* IMPACTS...Travel could be very difficult. Blowing snow could significantly reduce visibility. The hazardous conditions could impact the morning commute.

PRECAUTIONARY/PREPAREDNESS ACTIONS...

If you must travel, keep an extra flashlight, food, and water in your vehicle in case of an emergency.

The latest road conditions can be obtained by calling 5 1 1.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 30 of 90

Today in Weather History

March 1, 1970: Freezing rain and drizzle impacted much of South Dakota on March 1, 1970. Ice accumulation up to 1/8 of an inch thick was reported in Rapid City, with heavier amounts in the northwestern part of the state. Some utility lines were broken, but there was no extensive line damage. Also, some schools were closed due to icy roads.

March 1, 1998: An incredible amount of snow falls on Lead, South Dakota, from February 25 through March 1. The official storm total was 103 inches for five days.

March 1, 2014: Arctic air combined with strong northwest winds brought bitter cold wind chills to central and northeast South Dakota east of the Missouri River. Bitter wind chills of 35 below to around 40 below occurred. Some coldest wind chills include; 39 degrees below zero west of Long Lake, 40 degrees below zero at Highmore; 41 degrees below zero near Roy Lake; and 42 degrees below zero at Summit.

1849: The first recorded weather observation for Blowing Rock, North Carolina, occurred on March 1, 1849.

1910: The worst avalanche in US history regarding lives lost occurred in Wellington, Washington. Heavy snow occurred from February 26 through the 28th, which blocked the rail lines. Weather conditions turned on the 28th, with a thunderstorm occurring over the area. Just after 1 AM on March 1, a ten to the 14-foot-high mass of snow broke free from the mountainside and pushed the trains 150 feet down into the Tye River Gorge. In all, 96 people were killed by this avalanche.

1914 - High winds and heavy snow crippled New Jersey and New York State. Two feet of snow were reported at Ashbury Park, and at New York City the barometric pressure dropped to a record 28.38 inches. The storm caused complete disruption of electric power in New Jersey. (David Ludlum)

1980: March 1-3rd, North Carolina experienced a significant winter storm with heavy snow across the entire state and near blizzard conditions in the eastern part of the state. Widespread snowfall totals of 12 to 18 inches were observed over Eastern North Carolina, with localized amounts ranging up to 22 inches at Morehead City and 25 inches at Elizabeth City, with unofficial reports of up to 30 inches at Emerald Isle and Cherry Point.

1980 - Norfolk, VA, received 13.7 inches of snow to push their season total to a record 41.9 inches exceeding their previous record by more than four inches. (David Ludlum)

1980 - An unusually large Florida tornado, 500 yards in width at times, killed one person and caused six million dollars damage near Fort Lauderdale. (The Weather Channel)

1983 - A ferocious storm battered the Pacific coast. The storm produced heavy rain and gale force winds resulting in flooding and beach erosion, and in the mountains produced up to seven feet of snow in five days. (The Weather Channel)

1983: Two tornadoes caused damage in the Los Angeles areas during the morning hours. The strongest tornado was an F2 on the ground for 21 minutes.

1986: Light snow fell during the early morning hour in Jacksonville, Florida. A half inch of snow was reported at the Jacksonville International Airport, the highest amount ever recorded in March.

1987 - A storm crossing the Great Lakes Region produced heavy snow and gale force winds from Wisconsin to northern New England, with eight inches of snow reported at Ironwood MI. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Thunderstorms produced large hail and damaging winds in north central Texas. Baseball size hail was reported at Lake Kickapoo. Hail fell continuously for thirty minutes in the Iowa Park area of Wichita Falls. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - March came in like a lion, with snow and high winds, in the northwestern U.S. Winds gusted to 86 mph in the Rosario Strait of western Washington State. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2006: The day's temperature of 93 degrees at the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport in Texas broke a 107-year-old record. Other hot North Texas cities included Wichita Falls at 96 degrees and Fort Worth Meacham Airport at 90 degrees.

2007: An EF4 tornado traveled 10 miles through Enterprise, Alabama. The storm caused nine fatalities and injured 50 people.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 31 of 90

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

SOME FINAL WORDS

Often what we find depends on what we look for. Here are a few things to look for in the days we will face in the year to come:

Look for God's presence. When fear grips us or failure would defeat us, or if life's challenges seem to be larger than we are, or the nights are longer than usual, remember, we are never alone if Jesus rules and reigns in our lives. He promised that "He will never leave us nor forsake us." When life turns to shambles, He will wrap His loving arms around us and protect us because He is with us.

Look for God's power. The psalmist said that "God is our refuge and strength." Often we look to people for insights and advice when we are faced with difficult problems. But their solutions are never as good as the solutions that come from God. God is the greatest asset any Christian has but we must go to Him and draw from His strength and power.

Look for God's provision. "My God shall supply all your needs." Though we may fail Him, He will not fail us. Though we may fail to claim His promises, it does not mean they are not available. If we look to and trust in Him, He will not let us down.

Prayer: Father, we look to You in faith believing that You will meet our every need if we trust You. Lord, help our unbelief! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scriptures For Today: 1 Kings 8:56-58; Psalm 46:1-3; Philippians 4:19



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

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 32 of 90

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

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 33 of 90

The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 34 of 90



WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.28.23

14 16 40 52 59 13

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$167,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 36
DRAW: Mins 35 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.27.23

12 17 41 43 51 5

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$38,510,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 36 Mins 35
DRAW: Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.28.23

1 20 32 41 44 14

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 6 Mins 35
DRAW: Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.25.23

11 14 19 25 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$68,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 36 Mins
DRAW: 34 Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.27.23

8 27 33 34 44 5

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 35 Mins 35
DRAW: Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.27.23

16 28 49 51 55 23

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$143,000,000

NEXT 16 Hrs 35 Mins 35
DRAW: Secs

PREVIOUS RESULTS

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 35 of 90

News from the Associated Press

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. February 28, 2023.

Editorial: Tax Cuts, Sunset Clauses And The Future

South Dakota's tax cut saga has taken what could best be viewed as a cautiously logical turn in Pierre. Just days after the House committee rejected Gov. Kristi Noem's call for a repeal of taxes on groceries — and after the full House instead embraced a reduction in the state sales and use tax rate — a Senate committee on Monday approved a sunset clause for the sales tax cut.

The House cut would reduce the sales and use tax rate from 4.5% to 4.2%, which would represent a reduction of an estimated \$104 million.

The Senate Taxation Committee on Monday voted to add a sunset date of June 30, 2025, at which point lawmakers could extend it if they wish.

The tax cut probably does live up to the spirit of a 2016 tax increase passed by voters, which helped (briefly) raise salaries for educators. The measure stipulated that the increase would be rescinded once online sales tax revenues reached a certain level, which they have. However, adding the sunset clause would seem to be hedging on the bet, so to speak.

Nevertheless, the decision is probably a proper course moving forward, since we don't know the future of the food tax repeal that Noem proposed on the campaign trail last fall and legislative Democrats have been pushing for years (with a few Republicans hopping on board last year).

When Noem testified in favor of her proposed food tax repeal last week, she warned that considering another kind of cut could put the state in a bind two years down the road if voters decide at the ballot box to repeal the grocery tax.

That's the intent of at least two potential measures aiming for the 2024 ballot. One is an initiated measure while the other would be a constitutional amendment.

Meanwhile, the repeal of the grocery tax performs well in public opinion surveys, which is likely what Noem was alluding to and which, in turn, prompted lawmakers to insert the sunset clause for what could be described as the alternate tax cut.

So, the sunset clause makes sense in that respect, for it does give lawmakers options should the grocery tax be approved by voters ...

Of course, all this maneuvering might have been avoided altogether if lawmakers had advanced Noem's grocery tax repeal in the first place, or if lawmakers had been able to push through the food tax cut that briefly caught some momentum late in the 2022 session. (Last year, the House surprisingly passed a proposed cut, but the state Senate defeated the measure 22-9, then didn't appoint a conference committee to reconcile the proposal, thus squashing it.)

With South Dakota being one of only seven states that currently taxes food purchases, you get the feeling that most everyone in Pierre has a fairly good idea of what's coming, one way or another.

Until they figure it out or it's forced upon them by voters, this kind of maneuvering is going to continue until it's settled, likely by voters, in the not-too-distant future.

Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

SDHSAA Playoffs=

Class A Region 1=

Groton Area 72, Webster 28

Milbank 56, Redfield 28

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 36 of 90

Tiospa Zina Tribal 37, Aberdeen Roncalli 34
Waubay/Summit 56, Sisseton 20
Class A Region 2=
Clark/Willow Lake 63, Florence/Henry 35
Deuel 72, Estelline/Hendricks 47
Hamlin 59, Great Plains Lutheran 22
Sioux Valley 79, Elkton-Lake Benton 40
Class A Region 3=
Dell Rapids 64, Tri-Valley 31
Madison 69, Baltic 46
Sioux Falls Christian 83, Garretson 34
West Central 76, McCook Central/Montrose 47
Class A Region 4=
Dakota Valley 85, Parker 31
Elk Point-Jefferson 83, Canton 74
Tea Area 72, Beresford 47
Vermillion 51, Lennox 47
Class A Region 5=
Hanson 56, Wagner 42
Mt. Vernon 75, Bon Homme 47
Parkston 49, Kimball/White Lake 40
Platte-Geddes 64, Chamberlain 40
Class A Region 6=
Crow Creek Tribal School 91, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 61
Miller 64, Stanley County 52
Class A Region 7=
Lakota Tech 69, Little Wound 46
Pine Ridge 72, St. Francis Indian 28
Red Cloud 53, Todd County 41
Winner 78, Bennett County 23
Class A Region 8=
Belle Fourche 69, Hill City 61
Hot Springs 45, Custer 26
Rapid City Christian 84, Lead-Deadwood 31
Class B Region 1=
Aberdeen Christian 55, Britton-Hecla 17
Hitchcock-Tulare 45, Leola/Frederick 44
Northwestern 78, Langford 38
Warner 56, Waverly-South Shore 45
Class B Region 2=
Castlewood 79, Flandreau Indian 46
DeSmet 77, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 20
James Valley Christian 60, Deubrook 47
Wolsey-Wessington 60, Iroquois/ Lake Preston Co-op 29
Class B Region 3=
Bridgewater-Emery 60, Chester 40
Dell Rapids St. Mary 66, Canistota 58
Ethan 72, Mitchell Christian 47
Howard 64, Colman-Egan 30
Class B Region 4=

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 37 of 90

Freeman Academy/Marion 42, Freeman 35
Irene-Wakonda 62, Alcester-Hudson 49
Scotland 57, Centerville 54, OT
Viborg-Hurley 75, Gayville-Volin High School 46
Class B Region 5=
Gregory 66, Avon 26
Marty Indian 66, Corsica/Stickney 54
Tripp-Delmont/Armour 49, Colome 29
Wessington Springs 69, Burke 37
Class B Region 6=
Herreid/Selby Area 69, Lyman 67, OT
Highmore-Harrold 58, Sully Buttes 53
Ipswich 67, Faulkton 52
Lower Brule 84, Potter County 61
Class B Region 7=
Crazy Horse 74, Kadoka Area 56
Jones County 86, Wall 66
Philip 61, New Underwood 44
White River 123, Oelrichs 28
Class B Region 8=
Faith 64, Newell 33
Harding County 73, Bison 30
Tiospaye Topa 75, Timber Lake 71

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

Greek stationmaster arrested after crash kills at least 36

By COSTAS KANTOURIS and DEREK GATOPOULOS Associated Press

TEMPE, Greece (AP) — The stationmaster in the city of Larissa was arrested, Greek police said Wednesday, following a head-on collision between a passenger train and a freight train outside a nearby town that flattened carriages, killed at least 36 people and injured some 85.

A police statement identified the suspect only as a 59-year-old man. Another two people have been detained for questioning. The cause of the collision was not immediately clear.

Before dawn the next day, rescuers searched through twisted, smoking wreckage for survivors. What appeared to be the third carriage lay atop the clumped remains of the first two.

Multiple cars derailed and at least three burst into flames after the two trains ran into each other at high speed just before midnight Tuesday, near the town of Tempe in northern Greece.

Many of the approximately 350 people aboard the passenger train were students returning from Greece's raucous Carnival, officials said. This year was the first time the three-day festival, which precedes Lent, was celebrated in full since the start of the pandemic in 2020.

"This is a terrible tragedy that is hard to comprehend," said Deputy Health Minister Mina Gaga. "I feel so sorry for the parents of these kids."

On Wednesday, the government declared three days of national mourning.

"This is an indescribable tragedy," government spokesman Giannis Oikonomou said, adding that 500 workers from emergency services were at the scene of the crash.

After sunrise, rescuers turned to heavy machinery to start moving large pieces of the trains, revealing more bodies and dismembered remains. Officials said the army had been contacted to assist.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis was to visit the scene later in the day.

Costas Agorastos, the regional governor of the Thessaly area, told Greece's Skai Television the two trains

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 38 of 90

collided head on at high speed.

"Carriage one and two no longer exist, and the third has derailed," he said.

The trains crashed just before the Vale of Tempe, a gorge that separates the regions of Thessaly and Macedonia.

Survivors said the impact threw several passengers through the windows of train cars. They said others fought to free themselves after the passenger train buckled, slamming into a field near the gorge, about 380 kilometers (235 miles) north of Athens.

"There were many big pieces of steel," said Vassilis Polyzos, a local resident who said he was one of the first people on the scene. "The trains were completely destroyed, both passenger and freight trains."

He said dazed and disoriented people were escaping out of the train's rear cars as he arrived.

"People, naturally, were scared — very scared," he said. "They were looking around, searching; they didn't know where they were."

Eight rail employees were among those killed in the crash, including the two drivers of the freight train and the two drivers of the passenger train, according to Greek Railroad Workers Union President Yannis Nitsas.

Greece's firefighting service said some 66 people were hospitalized, including six in intensive care.

"The evacuation process is ongoing and is being carried out under very difficult conditions due to the severity of the collision between the two trains," said fire service spokesperson Vassilis Varthakoyiannis.

More than 200 people who were unharmed in the crash or suffered minor injuries were transported by bus to Thessaloniki, 130 kilometers (80 miles) to the north. Police took their names as they arrived, in an effort to track anyone who may be missing.

A teenage survivor who did not give his name to reporters said that just before the crash he felt a strong braking and saw sparks — then there was a sudden stop.

"Our carriage didn't derail, but the ones in front did and were smashed," he said, visibly shaken.

He added that the first car caught fire and that he used a bag to break the window of his car, the fourth, and escape.

Rail operator Hellenic Train said the northbound passenger train to Thessaloniki, Greece's second-largest city, had about 350 passengers on board.

Hellenic Train is operated by Italy's FS Group, which runs rail services in several European countries.

Ukraine official says military may pull back from Bakhmut

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's military could pull back from the key eastern stronghold of Bakhmut, an adviser to the Ukrainian president said Wednesday, amid a relentless Russian offensive that has sought for months to capture the city.

"Our military is obviously going to weigh all of the options. So far, they've held the city, but if need be, they will strategically pull back," Alexander Rodnyansky, an economic adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, told CNN. "We're not going to sacrifice all of our people just for nothing."

The battle for Bakhmut, in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region, has become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance as defenders hold out against relentless shelling and waves of Russian troops taking heavy casualties in a months-long campaign to capture it.

Rodnyansky noted that Russia was using the best troops of the Wagner Group, a private military company led by a rogue millionaire with longtime links to Russian President Vladimir Putin, to encircle Bakhmut. Recent drone footage shows the scale of devastation in the city, while Zelenskyy has described it as "destroyed."

Meanwhile, one of Zelenskyy's top advisers, Mykhailo Podolyak, denied on Wednesday that Ukraine had used drones to attack Russian territory following Russian official statements that Ukraine had targeted infrastructure deep inside Russia.

"Ukraine does not strike on the territory of the Russian Federation. Ukraine is waging a defensive war with the aim of de-occupying all its territories," Podolyak wrote on Twitter, suggesting the targeting of

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 39 of 90

Russian infrastructure was the result of "internal attacks."

Ukraine's western allies have discouraged Ukraine from attacking targets in Russia proper to avoid escalation of the conflict, and Podolyak's statement could reflect an attempt by Kyiv to maintain a degree of deniability in view of those Western concerns.

In the past, Ukrainian officials have stopped short of claiming responsibility for attacks in Russia, but also insisted that Ukraine has the right to strike any target on Russian territory in response to its aggression.

Asked about Podolyak's denial, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, "We don't believe it."

Pictures of one drone that fell near the village of Gubastovo, less than 100 kilometers (60 miles) from Moscow, showed it was a small Ukrainian-made model with a reported range of up to 800 kilometers (nearly 500 miles), but no capacity to carry a large load of explosives.

In the Russian Bryansk region, local Gov. Aleksandr Bogomaz said in a Telegram post that Russian forces had shot down another Ukrainian drone on Tuesday. Officials said the drones caused no injuries and did not inflict any significant damage.

Russia's Defense Ministry said Wednesday it prevented a massive drone attack on Crimea. According to Russian state media, six drones were shot down by air defense forces, while four more were disabled by electronic warfare systems.

In Ukraine, at least nine civilians were killed and 12 others were wounded across the country on Tuesday, the Ukrainian president's office reported Wednesday morning.

Fierce fighting continued in the eastern Donetsk province, with the cities of Bakhmut, Avdiivka and Vuhledar, along with 17 other towns and villages, coming under intense Russian shelling. "Shelling does not stop along the entire front line," the presidential office said in a regular update.

In the country's easternmost Luhansk province, regional Gov. Serhiy Haidai said that the Ukrainian military blew up a warehouse in Russian-held Kadiivka on the site of a factory where Russian forces were storing trucks packed with ammunition.

The Russian army attempted to break through Ukrainian defenses in Bilohorivka and near Kreminna, "but the Russian attack was repelled," Haidai said.

RFK assassin Sirhan Sirhan returns to 16th parole hearing

By JULIE WATSON Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — Nearly two years ago, a California parole board voted to free Robert F. Kennedy's assassin, but the decision was later overturned by the governor.

Sirhan Sirhan will once again appear before the board Wednesday at a hearing at a federal prison in San Diego County to ask to be let out.

Even if the board rules that Sirhan is suitable for release a second time, his lawyer, Angela Berry, said she doesn't expect it to change Gov. Gavin Newsom's mind because of his "affinity for R.F. Kennedy," who Newsom has cited as a political hero.

That's why she said she's also turning to the courts. The parole board hearing comes nearly six months after Berry asked a Los Angeles County judge to reverse Newsom's denial. The case is ongoing.

Newsom rejected Sirhan's freedom in 2022, saying that he remains a threat to the public and hasn't taken responsibility for a crime that changed American history.

Berry has said the 78-year-old man, who has spent more than 54 years in prison, is not a danger to society and should be released. She said that will be the main point she and Sirhan will make to the board, again.

"They found him suitable for release last time and nothing has changed," Berry said. "He's continued to show great behavior."

In a 3 1/2-minute message played during a news conference held by Berry in September, Sirhan said he feels remorse every day for his actions. It was the first time Sirhan's voice had been heard publicly since a televised parole hearing in 2011, before California barred audio or visual recordings of such proceedings.

"To transform this weight into something positive, I have dedicated my life to self-improvement, the mentoring of others in prison on how to live a peaceful life that revolves around nonviolence," he said. "By

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 40 of 90

doing this, I ensure that no other person is victimized by my actions again and hopefully make an impact on others to follow.”

Sirhan shot Kennedy moments after the U.S. senator from New York claimed victory in California’s pivotal Democratic presidential primary in 1968. He wounded five others during the shooting at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.

Sirhan originally was sentenced to death, but the sentence was commuted to life when the California Supreme Court briefly outlawed capital punishment in 1972.

He was denied parole 15 times until 2021, when the board recommended his release.

Sirhan’s younger brother, Munir Sirhan, has said his brother can live with him in Pasadena, California, if he is paroled. Sirhan Sirhan has waived his right to fight deportation to his native Jordan.

Berry filed a 53-page writ of habeas corpus asking the judge to rule that Newsom violated state law, which holds that inmates should be paroled unless they pose a current unreasonable public safety risk. Recent California laws also required the parole panel to consider that Sirhan committed the offense at a young age — 24 — and that he is now an older prisoner.

She is challenging the governor’s reversal as an “abuse of discretion,” a denial of Sirhan’s constitutional right to due process and as a violation of California law. She also alleges that Newsom misstated the facts in his decision.

Newsom’s office declined to comment.

Newsom overruled two parole commissioners who had found that Sirhan no longer was a risk. Among other factors, Newsom said the Christian Palestinian who immigrated from Jordan has failed to disclaim violence committed in his name, adding to the risk that he could incite political unrest.

The ruling split the Kennedy family, with RFK’s widow, Ethel Kennedy, and six of Kennedy’s nine surviving children opposing his parole. A lawyer representing those members of the family is expected to present their arguments at the hearing in opposition to his release.

China dismisses FBI statement on COVID-19 lab leak theory

BEIJING (AP) — For the second day in a row, China on Wednesday dismissed U.S. suggestions that the COVID-19 pandemic may have been triggered by a virus that leaked from a Chinese laboratory.

Responding to comments by FBI Director Christopher Wray, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said the involvement of the U.S. intelligence community was evidence enough of the “politicization of origin tracing.”

“By rehashing the lab-leak theory, the U.S. will not succeed in discrediting China, and instead, it will only hurt its own credibility,” Mao said.

“We urge the U.S. to respect science and facts ... stop turning origin tracing into something about politics and intelligence, and stop disrupting social solidarity and origins cooperation,” she said.

In an interview with Fox News that aired Tuesday, Wray said, “The FBI has for quite some time now assessed that the origins of the pandemic are most likely a potential lab incident in (central China’s) Wuhan.”

“Here you are talking about a potential leak from a Chinese government-controlled lab,” Wray said.

Referring to efforts to trace the origin of the coronavirus, he added, “I will just make the observation that the Chinese government, it seems to me, has been doing its best to try to thwart and obfuscate the work here, the work that we’re doing, the work that our U.S. government and close foreign partners are doing. And that’s unfortunate for everybody.”

On Tuesday, Mao pushed back at a report from the U.S. Department of Energy that assessed with “low confidence” that the virus that was first detected in Wuhan in late 2019 leaked from a nearby government laboratory.

The report hasn’t been made public and officials in Washington stressed that U.S. agencies are not in agreement on the origin of the virus.

Mao on Tuesday insisted that China has been “open and transparent” in the search for the virus’ origins and has “shared the most data and research results on virus tracing and made important contributions to

global virus tracing research.”

A World Health Organization expert group said last year that “key pieces of data” to explain how the pandemic began were still missing. The scientists cited avenues of research that were needed, including studies evaluating the role of wild animals and environmental studies in places where the virus might have first spread.

The Associated Press has previously reported that the Chinese government was strictly controlling research into the origin of the pandemic that has killed more than 6.8 million people worldwide, clamping down on some work and promoting fringe theories that it could have come from outside the country.

Some scientists are open to the lab-leak theory, but many scientists believe the virus came from animals, mutated, and jumped to people, as has happened with other viruses in the past. Experts say the origin of the pandemic may not be known for many years — if ever.

Ohio senators ready rail safety bill after fiery crash

By JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Railroads like the one involved in last month’s fiery crash and toxic chemical release in Ohio would be subject to a series of new federal safety regulations and financial consequences under legislation being introduced Wednesday by the state’s two U.S. senators.

An early copy of the Railway Safety Act of 2023, co-sponsored by U.S. Sens. Sherrod Brown and JD Vance, a Democrat and Republican, respectively, and several others of both parties, was obtained by The Associated Press. The bill responds to the fiery derailment of a Norfolk Southern freight train in East Palestine, in northeast Ohio near the Pennsylvania border, on Feb. 3, when 38 cars derailed and more burned.

Though no one was injured or killed, the accident and its aftermath imperiled the entire village and nearby neighborhoods in both states. It prompted an evacuation of about half the town’s 4,000 residents, an ongoing multi-governmental emergency response and lingering worries among villagers of long-term health impacts.

The Senate bill aims to address several key regulatory questions that have arisen from the disaster, including why the state of Ohio was not made aware the hazardous load was coming through and why the crew didn’t learn sooner of an impending equipment malfunction.

“Through this legislation, Congress has a real opportunity to ensure that what happened in East Palestine will never happen again,” Vance said in a statement. “We owe every American the peace of mind that their community is protected from a catastrophe of this kind.”

All trains carrying hazardous materials, including those that don’t fall under existing regulations for high-hazard flammable loads, would face new requirements under the bill. Rail carriers would need to create emergency response plans, and provide information and advance notification to the emergency response commissions of each state a train passes through.

That provision could mean changes across the industry. Hazardous materials shipments account for 7% to 8% of the roughly 30 million shipments railroads deliver across the U.S. each year. But almost any train — aside from a grain or coal train that carries a single commodity — might carry one or two cars of hazardous materials, because railroads often mix all kinds of shipments together on a train.

The Association of American Railroads trade group says 99.9% of hazardous materials shipments reach their destinations safely, and railroads are generally regarded as the safest option to transport dangerous chemicals across land. Still, the East Palestine accident showed how even one derailment involving hazardous materials can be devastating.

Railroad worker unions argue that operational changes and widespread job cuts across the industry in the past six years have made railroads riskier. They say employees are spread thin after nearly one-third of all rail jobs were eliminated and train crews, in particular, deal with fatigue because they are on call 24/7.

The bill would address that issue by setting train crews at a two-person minimum. The provision isn’t specifically in response to East Palestine — where the train had three crew members — but to an industry trend toward one-person crews. The Federal Railroad Administration was already considering a rule that

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 42 of 90

would require two-person crews, in most instances. That rule was proposed last summer, but the agency is still reviewing thousands of comments it received on it.

Brown said it shouldn't take a massive railroad disaster for elected officials to work across party lines for their communities.

"Rail lobbyists have fought for years to protect their profits at the expense of communities like East Palestine and Steubenville and Sandusky," he said in a statement. "These commonsense bipartisan safety measures will finally hold big railroad companies accountable, make our railroads and the towns along them safer, and prevent future tragedies, so no community has to suffer like East Palestine again."

Under the plan, the U.S. Department of Transportation would be required to revisit rules on train size and weight, and to work to prevent railroad delays from causing trains carrying hazardous loads to block rail crossings. That's as train lengths have grown to 2 miles (about 3 kilometers) or more, as railroads streamline operations to reduce their numbers of crews, mechanics and locomotives.

Unions argue the longer trains are more prone to problems, including breaking apart in the middle of a trip, and these monster trains also can clog rail lines, because they may extend farther than the current sidings for pulling off the main tracks.

Brown, Vance and the bill's other early co-sponsors — who include Democrats Robert Casey Jr. and John Fetterman, of Pennsylvania, and Republicans Marco Rubio, of Florida, and Josh Hawley, of Missouri — also would increase the maximum fine that the U.S. Department of Transportation can impose for safety violations. It would raise it from \$225,000 to up to 1% of a railroad's annual operating income, which could run into the tens of millions of dollars.

In addition, the bill requires long-haul railroads to pay for hazardous-materials training for local first responders, including police and EMTs, through an increase in their hazmat registration fees.

The National Transportation Safety Board determined the crew involved in the East Palestine accident was alerted by a device designed to detect overheating bearings, but not soon enough to prevent the crash. Even as federal rail regulators urged rail operators Tuesday to reexamine their practices for operating and maintaining such detectors, the Senate proposal would make them more prevalent.

The bill would set nationwide requirements for installing, maintaining and placing the devices — designed to automatically detect wheel bearing and other mechanical issues — and mandate that they scan trains carrying hazardous materials every 10 miles (16 kilometers), twice as often as the East Palestine train was being scanned. No federal requirements exist now for wayside detectors, though the sensors are widespread in the freight rail industry. Currently, railroads are left to decide where to place those detectors and what temperatures should trigger action when an overheating bearing is detected.

The Federal Railroad Administration would be required under the bill to update inspection regulations to assure rail cars carrying hazardous materials receive regular checks by trained mechanical experts. Railcar inspectors previously had about two minutes to inspect every railcar, but now they only get about 30 to 45 seconds to check each car, unions say. And signalmen who maintain signals and warnings at rail crossings have bigger territories to cover, making it harder to keep up with preventative maintenance.

Democratic U.S. Reps. Chris Deluzio, of Pennsylvania, and Ro Khanna, of California, introduced separate rail safety bill in response to the East Palestine derailment in the Republican-controlled House on Tuesday. Its goal is to ensure that trains carrying hazardous materials are properly classified and required to take the corresponding safety precautions.

Olive oil in coffee? New Starbucks line a curiosity in Italy

By COLLEEN BARRY AP Business Writer

MILAN (AP) — Putting olive oil in coffee is hardly a tradition in Italy, but that didn't stop Starbucks interim CEO Howard Schultz from launching a series of beverages that do just that in Milan, the city that inspired his coffee house empire.

The coffee-olive oil concoction — echoing a keto-inspired trend of adding butter to coffee, only with a sugary twist — has provoked both amusement and curiosity among Italians.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 43 of 90

Gambero Rosso, an Italian food and wine magazine, called the mixing of olive oil with coffee “a curious combination” but said it was reserving judgment, having not yet sampled the drinks.

It did praise featuring the staple of Italian kitchens as a main ingredient, not just a condiment. The magazine also noted the health benefits of consuming extra virgin olive oil, which some Italians do habitually straight from the bottle.

“Did we need coffee with extra virgin olive oil and syrups? Maybe yes, maybe no,” wrote the magazine’s Michela Becchi. But the chance to promote Italian excellence is a valuable one, she added.

Italy’s olive oil producers’ association, ASSITOL, welcomed “the daring innovation,” saying the line of drinks could “relaunch the image of olive oil, especially among young people.” The association has been promoting adding olive oil to cocktails.

Martina Lunardi, a student of cultural mediation, was sticking to her standard cappuccino on a recent Starbucks visit but said she wasn’t offended by the olive oil combos and might even try one someday.

“Anyway, I know where to get a regular cup of coffee,” Lunardi said.

Schultz came up with the notion of adding olive oil to coffee after visiting an olive oil producer in Sicily and teased the idea as a game-changer in his last earnings call. He worked with an in-house coffee drink developer to come up with recipes, the international coffee chain said.

Schultz presided over the launch of “Oleato” — meaning “oiled” in Italian — last week on the eve of Milan Fashion Week, with a Lizzo performance for an invitation-only crowd at the company’s Milan Roastery. The beverages will be rolled out in Southern California this spring and in Japan, the Middle East and Britain later this year.

The La Stampa newspaper in Turin taste-tested four of the beverages, giving them marks of 6.5 to 7.5 on a scale of 10. It noted that the only warm beverage on the menu, a version of *caffè latte*, “has a strong taste that leaves a pleasant taste in the mouth. Grade: 7.”

“The (positive) sensation is that Oleato could be something to drink all year, but most of all that it could be truly tasty in the summer,” La Stampa said because most are served with ice.

Tourists who throng the Milan Roastery are enticed to give the drinks a try by placards around the store and a special menu insert advertising the five-drink assortment, which ranges from 5.50 euros to 14 euros (\$5.85 to \$14.85) for a martini version with vodka.

“It’s good,” said Benedicte Hagen, a Norwegian who recently moved to Milan to pursue a modeling career. “I’m not a big coffee fan, that’s why I like to try drinks like this.”

She was sipping the Oleato Golden Foam Cold Brew, which includes vanilla bean syrup, and said she couldn’t really taste the oil. Still, she acknowledged asking the barista to add a shot of chocolate to make the drink even sweeter and would have added caramel if it had been available.

“It’s not so random,” Hagen decided.

Kaya Cupial’s Oleato Iced Cortado, meanwhile, was in a pretty V-shaped glass and garnished with an orange peel. It’s made with oat milk infused with olive oil, demerara syrup and a dash of orange bitters.

“It’s like normal coffee, but with orange. It’s not strong,” noted the 26-year-old from Warsaw, Poland, who was traveling with a group of friends. They also ordered the Golden Foam Cold Brew along with a pair of ordinary cappuccinos.

It is not the first time Italy has inspired Schultz. He acknowledges his debt to the Milan coffee bar, which he discovered during a trip to Italy in 1983, as his inspiration for building the now-global coffee chain.

Schultz waited until 2018 to bring Starbucks to Italy, aware that he was treading sacred coffee ground. Italians typically take their coffee standing at a bar, chatting with friends or the barista for a few minutes, before continuing their day. It is not something to be nursed.

Since then, Starbucks has opened some 20 stores in northern and central Italy. The Milan Roastery is often packed, while other locations in the city have shifted in the wake of the pandemic.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 44 of 90

Slovakia basks under NATO umbrella, sends Ukraine old arms

By KAREL JANICEK Associated Press

LEST, Slovakia (AP) — Former Soviet satellite Slovakia has been a NATO member since 2004, but the reality of belonging to the world's biggest military alliance really kicked in after Russia's invasion of Ukraine a year ago.

The small central European country now hosts thousands of NATO troops while allied aircraft patrol its skies, allowing Bratislava to consider becoming the first nation to send fighter jets to neighboring Ukraine — getting rid of its unwieldy Soviet-era planes at the same time.

Defense Minister Jaroslav Nad is grateful.

"I would say that the Slovak Republic is a more secure country in a less secure world," Nad told the AP in an interview in Bratislava.

"We remember well what it was like to have occupiers on our territory," he added, referring to the 1968 Soviet-led military invasion of former Czechoslovakia — from which Slovakia split peacefully in 1993, four years after the communist regime fell.

The country of 5.4 million hosts a battlegroup with troops from the United States, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Slovenia and the Czech Republic, as NATO moved to reassure members on its eastern flank worried about a potential Russian threat.

"The message behind deploying all of those units is simple," Czech Colonel Karel Navratil, the battlegroup commander, told the Associated Press. "Our task is deterrence ... to deter a potential aggressor from spreading its aggression to NATO member states."

Similar units have been created in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. They complement another four deployed in 2017 in the three Baltic states and Poland, to expand NATO's presence from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

In central Slovakia's Lest military training area, among snow-covered hills, the troops recently held joint drills with scenarios including drone or artillery assaults, responding to a chemical attack or recapturing areas seized by enemy forces.

The multinational force is scheduled to be "combat ready" in March, Navratil said.

Slovakia is also working to upgrade its own armed forces to NATO standards. And that has proved a boon to embattled Ukraine, where much of Slovakia's old Soviet-era heavy weaponry has ended up.

That has included S-300 air defense missiles, helicopters, thousands of rockets for Grad multiple launchers, and dozens of armored vehicles. In exchange, Slovakia has U.S. patriot air defense batteries temporarily deployed with American, German and Dutch troops, and received German Leopard tanks and Mantis air defense systems.

All in all, Slovakia has given Ukraine arms worth almost 168 million euros (\$179 million), and has also recouped over 82 million euros (\$87 million) through a dedicated EU fund.

Amid renewed appeals to Western countries for fighter jets, Slovakia is considering giving Ukraine 10 of its 11 Soviet-made MiG-29 planes — with the 11th reserved for a Slovakian museum, according to Defense Minister Nad.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy directly requested the planes from Slovakian Prime Minister Eduard Heger at a European Union summit in Brussels this month.

If Slovakia agrees, it will be the first NATO member to do so.

It grounded its MiGs in the summer due to a lack of spare parts and maintenance experts after Russian technicians returned home. But Ukraine's air force, which flies MiG 29s, would be happy to have them.

"We will never use the MiGs anymore," Nad said. "They have no real value for us. If we give them to Ukraine, they can help save their lives."

A final decision is expected within days or weeks.

Since Slovakia's MiGs were mothballed, fellow NATO members Poland and the Czech Republic have been monitoring Slovak air space, with Hungary set to join later this year.

Bratislava has signed a deal to buy 14 U.S. F-16 Block 70/72 fighter jets but the start of their delivery was postponed by two years to early 2024.

Nad stressed that his country responded to Ukraine's need for arms despite a long-term political crisis that resulted in the government's fall in December after a no-confidence vote.

"That Ukraine is able to defend itself against the Russian aggression is absolutely in our national, state, security and defense interest," he said.

Not everyone in Slovakia thinks so.

President Zuzana Caputova asked the government to stay on with limited powers till early elections in September, which the opposition stands a good chance of winning.

Its leaders include populist former Prime Minister Robert Fico, who opposes military support for Ukraine and EU sanctions on Russia and has said Slovakia's government has no mandate to deliver fighter jets to Ukraine.

The government is awaiting legal advice on the issue.

But Nad told The AP that the MiG arrangement would be "really a win-win for everyone involved."

"And from that point of view, I really cannot imagine anyone reasonably thinking that they would not want to help Ukraine, (saving) human lives while increasing our defenses," he added.

Nigeria's Bola Tinubu declared winner of presidential vote

By CHINEDU ASADU Associated Press

ABUJA, Nigeria (AP) — Nigerians awoke to a new president Wednesday, with ruling party candidate Bola Tinubu declared the winner of the country's election. As he thanked his supporters he appealed for reconciliation with his rivals, who are already demanding a revote in Africa's most populous nation.

The announcement by election officials overnight was likely to lead to a court challenge by the second- and third-highest finishers in the weekend vote, Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi. Abubakar also finished second in the previous vote in 2019, and appealed those results although his lawsuit ultimately was dismissed.

Tinubu's ruling All Progressives Congress party urged the opposition Tuesday to accept defeat and not cause trouble after they had demanded a revote, saying that delays in uploading election results had made room for irregularities.

Tinubu received 37% of the votes, or nearly 8.8 million, while main opposition candidate Abubakar won 29% with almost 7 million. Third-place finisher Obi took 25% with about 6.1 million, according to the results announced on live television by the Independent National Electoral Commission.

The president-elect thanked his supporters in the capital, Abuja, after his victory was announced and struck a reconciliatory tone in a message directed at his political adversaries.

"I take this opportunity to appeal to my fellow contestants to let us team up together," Tinubu said. "It is the only nation we have. It is one country and we must build together."

The announcement of his victory came after 4 a.m., but celebrations already had started late Tuesday at the ruling party's national secretariat where Tinubu's supporters had gathered in anticipation of his victory.

"None of the others matches his record!" said Babafemi Akin as he chatted excitedly about the prospects of a Tinubu administration. "I am sure he will do well."

Tinubu, 70, is the former governor of Lagos state, home to Nigeria's megacity of the same name. However, he lost the state in Saturday's election to Obi, who drew a strong following among younger voters eager for change.

The tightly contested election has redrawn Nigeria's electoral geography and produced results that are significantly different from those of past polls, with this being the first time that a president takes office with less than 50% of the vote and where four candidates won over a million votes, say analysts.

Tinubu "will have to strive to win the support of the larger majority who preferred one of the other candidates, particularly the youth, the Christian groups that were opposed to his Muslim-Muslim ticket and Igbos in the South East who again feel denied the presidency," said Nnamdi Obasi, senior adviser on Nigeria for the International Crisis Group.

From the onset, Tinubu will have to contend with challenges to his legitimacy, so he'll need to ensure an inclusive government and focus firmly on rebuilding national cohesion, he added.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 46 of 90

Tinubu clinched victory in part because the opposition vote was split and because his party had the strongest push to get people out to vote, said Amaka Anku, Africa director at the Eurasia Group consultancy.

Nigeria's current president, Muhammadu Buhari, congratulated his successor in a statement Wednesday, but said the election was not perfect. "Of course, there will be areas that need work to bring further transparency and credibility to the voting procedure. However, none of the issues registered represents a challenge to the freeness and fairness of the elections," he said.

The parties now have three weeks to appeal results, but an election can be invalidated only if it's proven the national electoral body largely didn't follow the law and acted in ways that could have changed the result.

The Supreme Court of Nigeria has never overturned a presidential election, though court challenges are common, including by Buhari, who doggedly fought his past election losses for months in vain.

The West African regional bloc, known as ECOWAS, called on political parties to appeal to their supporters to exercise maximum restraint and refrain from using provocative language, which would only "exacerbate political tensions, divisiveness, and violence at this critical stage", said the group in a statement.

Nigeria's presidential election has been closely watched as the country is not only the continent's largest economy but it is also one of the continent's top oil producers.

Observers have said Saturday's election was mostly peaceful, though delays caused some voters to wait until the following day to cast their ballots. Many Nigerians had difficulties getting to their polling stations because of a currency redesign that resulted in a shortage of bank notes.

Ancient restaurant highlights Iraq's archeology renaissance

By ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — An international archeological mission has uncovered the remnants of what is believed to be a 5,000-year-old restaurant or tavern in the ancient city of Lagash in southern Iraq.

The discovery of the ancient dining hall — complete with a rudimentary refrigeration system, hundreds of roughly made clay bowls and the fossilized remains of an overcooked fish — announced in late January by a University of Pennsylvania-led team, generated some buzz beyond Iraq's borders.

It came against the backdrop of a resurgence of archeology in a country often referred to as the "cradle of civilization," but where archeological exploration has been stunted by decades of conflict before and after the U.S. invasion of 2003. Those events exposed the country's rich sites and collections to the looting of tens of thousands of artifacts.

"The impacts of looting on the field of archeology were very severe," Laith Majid Hussein, director of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq, told The Associated Press. "Unfortunately, the wars and periods of instability have greatly affected the situation in the country in general."

With relative calm prevailing over the past few years, the digs have returned. At the same time, thousands of stolen artifacts have been repatriated, offering hope of an archeological renaissance.

"Improving' is a good term to describe it, or 'healing' or 'recovering,'" said Jaafar Jotheri, a professor of archeology at University of Al-Qadisiyah, describing the current state of the field in his country.

Iraq is home to six UNESCO-listed World Heritage Sites, among them the ancient city of Babylon, the site of several ancient empires under rulers like Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar.

In the years before the 2003 U.S. invasion, a limited number of international teams came to dig at sites in Iraq. During Saddam Hussein's rule, Jotheri said, the foreign archeologists who did come were under strict monitoring by a suspicious government in Baghdad, limiting their contacts with locals. There was little opportunity to transfer skills or technology to local archeologists, he said, meaning that the international presence brought "no benefit for Iraq."

The country's ancient sites faced "two waves of destruction," Jotheri said, the first after harsh international sanctions were imposed following Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait and desperate Iraqis "found artifacts and looting as a form of income" and the second in 2003 following the U.S. invasion, when "everything collapsed."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 47 of 90

Amid the ensuing security vacuum and rise of the Islamic State militant group, excavations all but shut down for nearly a decade in southern Iraq, while continuing in the more stable northern Kurdish-controlled area. Ancient sites were looted and artifacts smuggled abroad.

The first international teams to return to southern Iraq came in 2014 but their numbers grew haltingly after that.

The digs at Lagash, which was first excavated in 1968, had shut down after 1990, and the site remained dormant until 2019.

Unlike many others, the site was not plundered in the interim, largely due to the efforts of tribes living in the area, said Zaid Alrawi, an Iraqi archeologist who is the project manager at the site.

Would-be looters who came to the area were run off by "local villagers who consider these sites basically their own property," he said.

A temple complex and the remains of institutional buildings had been uncovered in earlier digs, so when archeologists returned in 2019, Alrawi said, they focused on areas that would give clues to the lives of ordinary people. They began with what turned out to be a pottery workshop containing several kilns, complete with throwaway figurines apparently made by bored workers and date pits from their on-shift snacking.

Further digging in the area surrounding the workshop found a large room containing a fireplace used for cooking. The area also held seating benches and a refrigeration system made with layers of clay jars thrust into the earth with clay shards in between.

The site is believed to date to around 2,700 BC. Given that beer drinking was widespread among the ancient Sumerians inhabiting Lagash at the time, many envisioned the space as a sort of ancient gastropub.

But Alrawi said he believes it was more likely a cafeteria to feed workers from the pottery workshop next door.

"I think it was a place to serve whoever was working at the big pottery production next door, right next to the place where people work hard, and they had to eat lunch," he said.

Alrawi, whose father was also an archeologist, grew up visiting sites around the country. Today, he is happy to see "a full throttle of excavations" returning to Iraq.

"It's very good for the country and for the archeologists, for the international universities and academia," he said.

As archeological exploration has expanded, international dollars have flowed into restoring damaged heritage sites like the al-Nouri mosque in Mosul, and Iraqi authorities have pushed to repatriate stolen artifacts from countries as near as Lebanon and as far as the United States.

Last month, Iraq's national museum began opening its doors to the public for free on Fridays — a first in recent history. Families wandered through halls lined with Assyrian tablets and got an up-close look at the crown jewel of Iraq's repatriated artifacts: a small clay tablet dating back 3,500 years and bearing a portion of the Epic of Gilgamesh that was looted from an Iraqi museum 30 years ago and returned from the U.S. two years ago. The tablet is among 17,000 looted artifacts returned to Iraq from the U.S.

Ebtisam Khalaf, a history teacher who was one of the visitors to the museum on its first free day, said, "This is a beautiful initiative because, we can see the things that we only used to hear about."

Before, she said, her students could "only see these antiquities in books. But now we can see these beautiful artifacts for real."

In Egypt, government and poor struggle with troubled economy

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — A group of women stands in front of a vegetable vendor at a street market in one of Cairo's oldest neighborhoods, yelling in frustration.

"Every day there are new prices," one said. "When will this war end?" another shouted, cradling a baby in her arms.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, now in its second year, has pushed up food and energy prices worldwide, adding another layer to Egypt's economic crisis. Soaring inflation, a severely weakened currency and other

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 48 of 90

problems have followed decades of government mismanagement and broader disruptions, starting with the turmoil from the 2011 Arab Spring popular uprising, then years of militant attacks, followed by the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

The crisis has pushed many Egyptians out of the middle class, while the country's poor — about one-third of the population — are cutting back on life's essentials. Many are asking how long they can survive like this.

Hany Hassan has found himself struggling to feed his four school-age children. His pay from his job as a bartender at a coffeehouse is buying less and less.

"This past year was the hardest in my life," said Hassan, 43, who earns roughly \$110 a month working 12-hour shifts seven days a week. "I am scared that one day I won't be able to feed the kids."

Annual inflation reached 26.5% in January, the highest in five years, with food prices in urban areas soaring 48%, according to official figures.

Many essentials including rice, cooking oil, bread and most recently, eggs, have all doubled in cost in Cairo's supermarkets. The prices of 1 kilogram (about two pounds) of chicken or other meat have almost doubled from a year ago, hitting 300 Egyptian pounds (roughly \$10) for meat and nearly 90 Egyptian pounds (roughly \$3), for chicken.

The surge has made those proteins a prohibitive luxury for all but the wealthiest.

The war in Ukraine, which rattled the global economy, hit Egypt where it is financially vulnerable. The most populous Arab country and world's biggest importer of wheat needs to buy a majority of its food from other countries to help feed its population of more than 104 million.

"It is, therefore, important to view Egypt's inflation problem within the context of its broader external position issues," said Callee Davis, an economist at Oxford Economics Africa.

Egypt's import bill first ballooned because of higher global prices for commodities like fuel and wheat that are purchased in dollars, and this led to foreign currency shortages, Davis said. That forced the Central Bank of Egypt to pass policies to preserve the country's foreign reserves, including restrictions on imports, which drove inflation even higher, Davis said.

The war also has slowed Egypt's economic growth. In February, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development revised its forecasts for Egypt's growth this year to 4.3%, down from its previous projection of 5%.

For many, hardships started in 2016 when President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi's government embarked on a reform program intended to reverse longstanding distortions in Egypt's economy in return for loans from the International Monetary Fund. The program introduced new taxes and included substantial cuts in state subsidies on basic goods — a policy that dated back decades.

Western governments and international financial institutions hailed the austerity measures. However, they have made life difficult for regular Egyptians. El-Sissi has blamed the war in Ukraine for the most recent inflation spike.

"Circumstances are tough for all the world. This crisis is not ours," he said in a recent speech.

To help poor and middle-class families face the repercussions of the measures, the government bolstered welfare programs, raised salaries of civil servants and postponed cuts to subsidized bread and planned electricity price hikes.

It also established hundreds of government-owned markets across the country that sell staples for cheaper prices.

Then the government resorted to the IMF for a new bailout loan last year, the fourth in six years. The hope is that the \$3 billion deal will help generate another \$14 billion from Egypt's international and regional partners, including wealthy Gulf monarchies.

But Gulf Arab states seem increasingly reluctant to help Egypt as they have over the past decade.

"We need to see reforms. We are taxing our people. We are expecting also others to do the same, to do their efforts. We want to help, but we want you also to do your part," Saudi Finance Minister Mohammed al-Jadaan said at the World Economic Forum's annual gathering in Davos, Switzerland, in January.

Egypt has pledged to uphold the IMF-guided reforms, including a free-floating exchange rate and less-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 49 of 90

ening the military's powerful grip on the economy — a significant concession.

The government in December adopted a privatization initiative, saying it would withdraw from industries not considered strategic by 2024. The policy aims to bolster the private sector's contribution to the economy to 65% by 2025 from 30% in 2021.

Leaders are facing criticism for their handling of the economy and costly infrastructure projects, including a new \$45 billion capital building, other developments and highways. Many have taken to social media to complain, with some calling for the government to step down.

One of the country's richest people, billionaire businessman Naguib Sawiris, recently told a Lebanese newspaper that Egypt needs a political and economic overhaul.

The government has repeatedly defended such megaprojects as essential for improving living conditions and generating jobs for the growing population.

HA Hellyer, a geopolitical expert at the London-based Royal United Service Institute for Defense Studies, said the pressures on the Egyptian economy would be staggering for any government.

"Some good moves have been taken, the question is whether these are sufficient to turn the economic crisis around or not, and if not, what other options are the authorities willing to entertain?" he said.

In the meantime, Egyptians are growing more despondent.

Samira Abdel-Wahab, an accountant working for the state-run electricity company, roamed from stand to stand at the Megharbleen street market in Cairo's Darb el-Ahmar neighborhood, looking for the cheapest prices.

"I fear the damage is beyond repair," said the 37-year-old mother of three.

California, beleaguered by earlier storms, gets fresh snow

By JAE C. HONG, AMY TAXIN and MARK PRATT Associated Press

RUNNING SPRINGS, Calif. (AP) — Fresh snow fell in the California mountains on Wednesday, adding to a staggering total that had blocked roads and stranded visitors for days.

The Sierra Nevada range in the north and Southern California mountains were under blizzard warnings for a storm that was expected to add several feet of snow overnight into early Wednesday, dumped more rain in many areas and chilled much of the state.

Record cold temperatures were possible with lows down to 28 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 2.2 degrees Celsius) and the National Weather Service issued freeze and frost warnings into early Wednesday in the San Francisco Bay Area and elsewhere.

The homeless and those without electricity were at special risk from the cold, the weather service said.

California wasn't the only area battered by fierce weather. The National Weather Service predicted that a powerful weather system would affect most of the lower 48 states into Thursday, with heavy snow across the Southwest and some portions of the High Plains but record high temperatures in the Gulf Coast into the Ohio Valley. Areas in the dividing line between hot and cold, such as the lower Mississippi Valley and Tennessee Valley, could see heavy rain, thunderstorms and some flash flooding.

The high could top 100 degrees F (38 degrees Celsius) across far south Texas and windy, dry conditions would make for a critical risk of wildfire conditions across southeast New Mexico into the Southwest to West Texas for the next few days, according to the weather service.

In Southern California, San Bernardino County declared a state of emergency as crews struggled to plow blocked roads.

Jennifer Cobb and her husband, vacationing in the San Bernardino Mountains, found themselves trapped for a week by a relentless series of storms.

"We hear the phantom sounds of plows, but they never come," said Cobb, 49. "Being stuck up here in this beautiful place shouldn't be awful, but it is."

In the mountain town of Crestline, some people unable to drive trudged on foot to the grocery store.

But Michael Johnstone said his family's store was running low Tuesday on key inventory.

"We're completely out of bread. Milk is getting really light. We're almost completely out of produce,"

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 50 of 90

Johnstone said. Authorities escorted two full grocery trucks up to the mountain community, he said, but just in time for the new storm to add more snow.

The latest storms have bookended the country, with snow closing or delaying the opening for hundreds of schools in the Northeast, which saw the most significant snowfall Tuesday of what has been a mild winter.

And Michigan again fought a battle with an ice after a storm Monday left thousands of customers without power in the central part of the state. To the southeast, around Detroit, some customers still lacked power nearly a week after a prior storm.

The storms have delayed travel, shuttered schools and overwhelmed crews trying to dig out of the snow and repair downed power lines. More than 72,000 customers were without power Tuesday night in Michigan and more than 59,000 in California, according to the website poweroutage.us.

Weather also continued to play a role in the cancellation of hundreds of flights and delays of thousands more around the country.

In California's Sierra Nevada, the weather service warned that travel could be difficult to impossible because blowing snow could cause whiteout conditions on roadways, while wind chill could drop temperatures to minus 30 F (minus 34.4 C) "could cause frostbite on exposed skin in as little as 10 minutes."

The Lake Tahoe area that straddles the California and Nevada borders in the Sierra Nevada was expected to have blizzard conditions with winds gusting to 100 mph along the ridgetops, while the lake itself could see waves large enough to capsize small boats, the weather service warned.

"If you risk travel you could become stranded in vehicles for hours," the weather service warned.

Yosemite National Park, closed since Saturday because of heavy, blinding snow, postponed its planned Thursday reopening indefinitely.

The University of California, Berkeley Central Sierra Snow Laboratory near Donner Pass reported that nearly 41.7 feet (12.7 meters) had fallen since October, more than in any snow year since 1970 and second only to the record of 66.7 feet (20.3 meters) in 1952.

For California's skiers and snowboarders, the parade of storms was too much of a good thing. Many ski resorts suspended operations on Tuesday, hoping to use the day to dig out so they could reopen Wednesday.

Mammoth Lakes, traditionally one of the snowiest places in California, had nearly 4 feet (1.2 meters) of snow over the past three days. Snow drifts were taller than houses and crews were working around the clock trying to keep roads and sidewalks clear.

The Mammoth Mountain ski resort has received 41.5 feet (12.6 meters) of snow since October and could be on a path to break the all-time snow season record of 55.7 feet (17 meters) set in 2010-2011.

But California also benefited from the back-to-back dumps of heavy snow. The Sierra snowpack provides about a third of the state's water supply and the water content of the snowpack Tuesday — in a state grappling with years of drought — was 186% of normal to date. It was 162% of the average on April 1, when it is historically at its peak, according to the state Department of Water Resources' online data.

Elsewhere, in a pattern that's lasted more than a week, much of the West and Northeast battled wintery weather while it simmered in Southern states.

Parts of Connecticut, New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Rhode Island had heavy snow forecast through Tuesday afternoon. Some areas of western Massachusetts and northern Connecticut got about 7 inches (18 centimeters). The Albany, New York, area saw less snow than expected — 2 inches (5 centimeters) to 5 inches (13 centimeters) — but it was enough to close schools.

Highs in the 70s and 80s were recorded in Georgia, and a south Alabama man was arrested on reckless murder charges after his 2-year-old child died Monday after being left in a hot car, police said.

The nation's high Tuesday was 98 F at Zapata, Texas. The low for the day was -21 at 4 miles east-southeast of Estcourt Station, Maine.

What to know about Alex Murdaugh's murder trial

By JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

Alex Murdaugh's family long dominated the legal scene in his small South Carolina county but for the past six weeks, Murdaugh has been on the other side of the courtroom, standing trial on murder charges in the shootings of his wife and son.

More than 75 witnesses have been called and about 800 photographs, reports and exhibits have been presented as evidence. Jurors are expected to visit the crime scene Wednesday, before both sides present their closings.

As the trial winds down, here are some takeaways:

WHAT HAPPENED WITH THE KILLINGS?

Alex Murdaugh called 911 on the evening of June 7, 2021, and said he'd found his son and wife dead when he returned home from a one-hour visit with his mother, who has dementia.

Authorities said Paul Murdaugh, 22, was shot twice with a shotgun, each round loaded with different size shot, while Maggie Murdaugh, 52, was struck with four or five bullets from a rifle. A crime scene report suggested both victims were shot in the head after initially being wounded near dog kennels on the Murdaughs' sprawling rural property.

Prosecutors took more than a year to charge the disgraced lawyer with murder but decided not to pursue the death penalty. Murdaugh, who is also charged with about 100 counts of financial and other crimes, has adamantly denied any involvement in the killings. If convicted, he faces 30 years to life in prison.

WHAT IS THE PROSECUTION'S CASE?

Prosecutors, who contend Murdaugh killed his wife and son to distract from his financial crimes, have not presented direct evidence against Alex Murdaugh.

They called 61 witnesses and introduced more than 550 pieces of evidence over 17 days of testimony — from descriptions of the brutality of the killings to numbing details about bank records.

The weapons used to kill the victims have not been produced. But prosecutors did get one key piece of evidence that both showed Murdaugh lied to police and put him at the kennels where his wife and son were shot just five minutes before investigators think they were killed because they stopped using their cellphones.

It's a video taken by Paul Murdaugh, locked in his cellphone for a year after the killings until federal agents could hack into it. Alex Murdaugh told the first police officer to arrive and every one after that he was never at the kennels. His voice is on that video.

"I did lie to them," was one of the first things Murdaugh said when he took the stand in his own defense, blaming paranoia about law enforcement because he was addicted to opiates and had a bottle of pills in his pocket when he was questioned.

STAR WITNESS

Murdaugh, 54, was the 72nd witness called during the trial.

His defense team wasted no time. Their first questions were whether he killed his wife or son, which he denied forcefully. He would deny ever hurting them again and again in questions from his lawyer and cross-examination by prosecutors.

Prosecutor Creighton Waters tried one last time: "Mr. Murdaugh, are you a family annihilator?"

"You mean, did I shoot my wife and son?" Murdaugh said in a measured tone. "No. I would never hurt Maggie Murdaugh. I would never hurt Paul Murdaugh under any circumstances."

Alex Murdaugh also admitted over and over that he lied and stole millions of dollars from his clients and his law firm. Waters detailed almost every victim and asked if he lied to their face.

"I took money that wasn't mine. And I shouldn't have done it. I hate the fact that I did it. I am embarrassed by it. I'm embarrassed for my son. I am embarrassed for my family," Murdaugh said.

Murdaugh is awaiting trial for the many financial crimes he admitted to on the stand and insurance fraud charges for asking someone to kill him so his surviving son could get his \$12 million in life insurance as well as tax evasion and money laundering charges.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 52 of 90

WHAT ABOUT THE DEFENSE?

The defense has called experts who said investigators didn't dust for fingerprints, collect and test blood, or photograph evidence with the angles or clarity needed to study it properly later.

The first officer arrived at the rural Colleton County estate 20 minutes after Murdaugh called 911. Almost immediately, the local sheriff turned the investigation over to the State Law Enforcement Division.

It took hours for agents from across the state to get deep into the South Carolina Lowcountry. During that time, more than a dozen family and friends walked around the scene, comforting Murdaugh.

The bodies of Paul and Maggie Murdaugh were covered with a sheet, which can absorb fluid, instead of a tarp. Then the sheet wasn't saved, meaning possible hair or DNA from a killer could have been lost. Intermittent rain fell and the runoff from the kennel roof fell on Paul Murdaugh's covered body.

When state agents arrived, they sent Murdaugh and his entourage to the home. Witnesses testified it hadn't been searched for weapons, bloody clothes and other evidence or even checked to see if a suspect was hiding inside.

The defense also called an expert who testified the killings likely required two shooters because both Paul and Maggie Murdaugh appeared to be taken by surprise. Their hands were not raised in defense and the shockwave, blood and gore after Paul Murdaugh was shot in the head at close range with a shotgun likely would have stunned the shooter for at least several seconds and Maggie Murdaugh would have responded by running to check or running away.

Alex Murdaugh is charged with both killings, which binds prosecutors to him being the only shooter.

"A little scary:" Iditarod begins with smallest field ever

By MARK THIESSEN Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — The second half-century for the world's most famous sled dog race is getting off to a rough start.

Only 33 mushers will participate in the ceremonial start of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race on Saturday, the smallest field ever to take their dog teams nearly 1,000 miles (1,609 kilometers) over Alaska's unforgiving wilderness. This year's lineup is smaller even than that of the 34 mushers who lined up for the very first race in 1973.

The small pool of mushers is raising concerns about the future of an iconic race that has taken hits from the pandemic, climate change, inflation and the loss of deep-pocketed sponsors, just as multiple big-name mushing champions are retiring with few to take their place.

The largest field ever was 96 mushers in 2008; the average number of mushers starting the race over the last 50 years was 63.

"It's a little scary when you look at it that way," said four-time winner Martin Buser, 64, who retired after completing his 39th race last year. "Hopefully it's not a state of the event and ... it's just a temporary lull."

The Iditarod is the most prestigious sled dog race in the world, taking competitors over two mountain ranges, the frozen Yukon River and treacherous Bering Sea ice in frigid temperatures before ending in the old Gold Rush town of Nome. The roughly 10-day event begins with a "ceremonial start" in Anchorage on Saturday, followed by the competitive start in Willow, about 70 miles (113 kilometers) to the north, on Sunday.

And while the world-renowned race has the highest winner's purse of any sled dog competition, the winner only pockets about \$50,000 before taxes — a payout that is less appealing amid inflation and the continued reverberations of the pandemic.

Many mushers supplement their income by offering uniquely Alaska experiences to cruise ship passengers, but for several years the pandemic has meant fewer summer visitors to shell out money for a sled dog ride on a glacier.

"There's a lot of kennels and a lot of mushers that rely on that to keep going," said Aaron Burmeister, a Nome native who is sitting out this year's race to spend more time with family. Burmeister, who works construction, has had eight top 10 finishes in the last decade.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 53 of 90

"Being able to race the Iditarod and the expense of putting together a race team became more than they could bear to maintain themselves," he said of mushers.

Inflation has also taken a toll, and several mushers said they'd like to see a higher prize purse to attract younger competitors.

Defending champion Brent Sass, who supplements his income as a wilderness guide, isn't surprised some mushers are taking a break to build up bank accounts.

Sass, who has 58 dogs, orders 500 bags of high-quality dog food a year. Each bag cost \$55 a few years ago, but that has swelled to \$85 per bag — or about \$42,500 total a year. That's about how much money Sass pocketed from his Iditarod win last year.

"You got to be totally prepared to run Iditarod, and have enough money in the bank to do it," said Sass, who lives in Eureka, about a four-hour drive north of Fairbanks.

With other race costs, Buser said running the Iditarod now can mean spending \$250,000 to win a \$40,000 championship.

The race itself has suffered under the increased inflation, Iditarod CEO Rob Urbach said. Supply costs have gone up about 30%, he said, and last year it cost nearly \$30,000 to transport specially certified straw from the lower 48 for dogs to sleep on at race checkpoints.

The Iditarod also continues to be dogged by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, which has targeted the race's biggest sponsors. Over the past decade, Alaska Airlines, ExxonMobil, Coca-Cola and Wells Fargo have ended race sponsorships after being targeted by PETA.

PETA took out full-page newspaper ads in Anchorage and Fairbanks in February with a husky — the predominate sled dog breed — prominently featured with the headline, "We don't want to go to the Iditarod. We just want the Iditarod to go."

But Urbach said the race's financial health is good, and payouts should be a little higher this year. The top 20 finishers receive payouts on a sliding scale, and every other finisher gets \$1,049, reflecting the stated mileage of the race, though the actual mileage is lower.

Urbach noted they are paying "the healthiest prize money" among competitive sled dog races and called the PETA campaign "pretty offensive, I think, to most Alaskans."

There's also worry about the future of the race because of climate change.

The warming climate forced organizers to move the starting line 290 miles (467 kilometers) north from Willow to Fairbanks in 2003, 2015 and 2017 because of a lack of snow in the Alaska Range. Poor winter conditions and urban growth likewise led the Iditarod to officially move the start from Wasilla about 30 miles (48 kilometers) north to Willow in 2008, even though Wasilla last hosted the start in 2002.

Moving the start of the race north will likely become more common as global warming advances, said Rick Thoman, a climate specialist at the International Arctic Research Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Ice on Alaska's western coast could also get thinner and more dangerous, he said.

"It doesn't have to be that there's waves crashing on the beach," Thoman said of the impacts of ice melt. "It just has to be at the point where the ice is not stable."

As challenges stack up, several veteran mushers with multiple championships have stepped away this year after decades of braving the frigid and windy conditions to train in the dead of the Alaska winter for the Iditarod. They are finding that few are willing to take their place, at least this year.

"I just got back from Cancun to see the Grateful Dead play on the beaches of Mexico," said four-time champion Jeff King, who is now 67. "I first said I was going to retire at 40, and I ran the race at 66, so I don't feel like I'm bailing on anybody."

Five-time champion Dallas Seavey said last year's race would be his last, at least for a while, to spend time with his daughter. Other past champions not racing include Dallas' father, three-time champion Mitch Seavey, and Joar Leifseth Ulsom and Thomas Waerner, who have one title each.

Waerner said sponsors are holding back, and it's too expensive to pay \$60,000 to get his team from Norway to Alaska.

Lance Mackey, another four-time champion, died last year from cancer. He is the honorary musher for

this year's race, and his children, Atigun and Lozen, will ride in the first sled to leave the ceremonial start line in Anchorage and during the competitive start Sunday.

That leaves two former winners in this year's field, Sass and Pete Kaiser.

Sass said he is confident the Iditarod will survive this downturn.

"If we can just keep the train rolling forward, I think it's going to come back, and hopefully our world can get things under control and things maybe get a little less expensive," Sass said. "I think that's going to help get our numbers back up."

Kobe Bryant family settles photo lawsuit for \$28.5 million

By ANDREW DALTON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The family of the late Kobe Bryant has agreed to a \$28.5 million settlement with Los Angeles County to resolve the remaining claims in a lawsuit over deputies and firefighters sharing grisly photos of the NBA star, his 13-year-old daughter and other victims killed in a 2020 helicopter crash, attorneys and court filings said Tuesday.

The figure includes a newly agreed upon payment from the county of \$13.5 million along with the \$15 million a federal jury awarded Bryant's widow, Vanessa Bryant, at a trial in August.

The agreement resolves any future claims by Bryant's three surviving daughters, related issues pending in state court, and other costs. A proposed settlement order, which a judge must approve, was filed Tuesday in federal court.

"Today marks the successful culmination of Mrs. Bryant's courageous battle to hold accountable those who engaged in this grotesque conduct," Bryant's attorney Luis Li said in a statement. "She fought for her husband, her daughter, and all those in the community whose deceased family were treated with similar disrespect."

Mira Hashmall, the attorney representing LA County, called the statement "fair and reasonable" adding, "We hope Ms. Bryant and her children continue to heal from their loss."

Kobe Bryant, the former Lakers star, five-time NBA champion and member of the Basketball Hall of Fame, was traveling with Gianna and seven others to a youth basketball game when the helicopter they were aboard crashed into hills in Calabasas west of Los Angeles on Jan. 26, 2020.

Deputies and firefighters responding to the crash scene shot phone photos of the bodies and the wreckage, which Hashmall argued at trial were an essential part of assessing the situation.

But the pictures were shared, mostly between employees of the county sheriff's and fire departments, including by some who were playing video games and attending an awards banquet. They were also seen by some of their spouses and in one case by a bartender at a bar where a deputy was drinking.

Li told jurors that the close-up photos had no official or investigative purpose, and were mere "visual gossip" shared out of a gruesome curiosity.

Hashmall argued that the sheriff acted swiftly and appropriately when he ordered the photos deleted.

Vanessa Bryant tearfully testified during the 11-day trial that news of the photos compounded her still-raw grief a month after losing her husband and daughter, and that she still has panic attacks at the thought that they might still be out there and her daughters might someday see them online.

The verdict in her favor was erroneously read as \$16 million in court, but was later amended to \$15 million.

Federal safety officials blamed pilot error for the crash itself.

Chris Chester, Vanessa Bryant's co-plaintiff at the trial, was also awarded \$15 million at trial, and reached his own settlement with the county in September for nearly \$5 million more.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 55 of 90

Ghislaine Maxwell's appeals arguments mirror earlier claims

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A federal appeals court should reverse the conviction of Ghislaine Maxwell or grant a new trial on charges that she joined and enabled the sexual abuse that Jeffrey Epstein committed on scores of teenagers and young women for more than a decade, her lawyers argued in court papers Tuesday.

The arguments the lawyers submitted to the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals largely repeated claims she unsuccessfully made to a trial judge who sent her to prison for 20 years.

The 61-year-old British socialite argued through her lawyers that the convictions violate an agreement Epstein reached with federal prosecutors 15 years ago, they violated the statute of limitations and should be tossed because a juror failed to reveal he was a victim of child sex abuse.

She also cited judicial error and a miscalculation of the federal sentencing guidelines range as reason to reject her conviction and sentence.

Maxwell is serving her sentence at a low-security federal prison in Tallahassee, Florida, where yoga, Pilates and movies are available.

She was convicted in December 2021 of luring teenage girls to be sexually abused by Epstein, an American financier who had hundreds of millions of dollars and an appetite for daily massages used to persuade vulnerable and mostly financially desperate girls to engage in sexual acts for hundreds of dollars.

Her lawyers had unsuccessfully argued previously that Maxwell became a scapegoat for prosecutors desperate for someone to blame after Epstein committed suicide in a federal prison cell in August 2019 as he awaited trial on sex trafficking charges.

Her trial featured testimony from some women who were victimized when they were children as well as the testimony of pilots who dropped the names of famous men — Britain's Prince Andrew, Bill Clinton, Donald Trump — who flew on Epstein's private jets.

Evidence showed that Epstein had transferred over \$30 million to Maxwell, his onetime girlfriend, during and after a stretch of years from 1994 to 2004 when they were most closely connected.

Lawyers for Maxwell, a once privileged daughter of a shipping magnate, said in court papers that prosecutors never should have been able to press their case against her because a deal Epstein reached in September 2007 with federal prosecutors in Florida protected not only himself from prosecution but "any potential coconspirators."

They also argued that a law used to convict her no longer applied once her accusers reached the age of 25, which all of them had by the time of the trial.

The lawyers repeated their claims that a juror's disclosure to reporters after the verdict that he had failed to reveal that he was a victim of child sex abuse even though he had been asked were grounds to reverse the verdict. They said the trial judge mishandled the controversy.

And they wrote that Maxwell's "deplorable conditions of confinement" at a federal jail in Brooklyn prior to trial left her "so disoriented and diminished that she was unable meaningfully to assist in her own defense, much less to testify."

They also criticized the judge for letting three of four women who testified about sexual abuse they suffered to use pseudonyms even though one granted an interview with the Daily Mail after the verdict and another made public statements even before testifying.

Fiery Greece train collision kills 32, injures at least 85

By COSTAS KANTOURIS and DEREK GATOPOULOS Associated Press

TEMPE, Greece (AP) — A passenger train carrying hundreds of people collided at high speed with an oncoming freight train in a fiery wreck in northern Greece, killing 32 and injuring at least 85, officials said Wednesday.

Multiple cars derailed and at least three burst into flames after the collision near the town of Tempe on Tuesday just before midnight. Rescue crews illuminated the scene with floodlights before dawn on Wednesday as they searched frantically through the twisted, smoking wreckage for survivors.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 56 of 90

Survivors said several passengers were thrown through the windows of the train cars due to the impact. They said others fought to free themselves after the passenger train buckled, slamming into a field next to the tracks near a gorge about 380 kilometers (235 miles) north of Athens where major highway and rail tunnels are located.

"There were many big pieces of steel," said Vassilis Polyzos, a local resident who was one of the first people on the scene. "The trains were completely destroyed, both passenger and freight trains."

He said dazed and disoriented people were escaping out of the train's rear cars as he arrived.

"People, naturally, were scared — very scared," he said. "They were looking around, searching; they didn't know where they were."

The trains crashed just before the Vale of Tempe, a gorge that separates the regions of Thessaly and Macedonia. Costas Agorastos, the regional governor of the Thessaly area, told Greece's Skai television the two trains crashed head on at high speed.

"Carriage one and two no longer exist, and the third has derailed," he said.

Rescuers wearing head lamps worked in thick smoke, pulling pieces of mangled metal from the cars to search for trapped people. Others scoured the field with flashlights and checked underneath the wreckage. Several of the dead are believed to have been found in the restaurant area near the front of the passenger train.

Hospital officials in the nearby city of Larissa said at least 25 of those hurt had serious injuries.

"The evacuation process is ongoing and is being carried out under very difficult conditions due to the severity of the collision between the two trains," said Vassilis Varthakoyiannis, a spokesperson for Greece's firefighting service.

The possible cause of the collision was not immediately clear. Two rail officials were being questioned by police but had not been detained.

Passengers who received minor injuries or were unharmed were transported by bus to Thessaloniki, 130 kilometers (80 miles) to the north. Police took their names as they arrived, in an effort to track anyone who may be missing.

A teenage survivor who did not give his name told reporters that just before the crash he felt a strong braking and saw sparks and then there was a sudden stop.

"Our carriage didn't derail, but the ones in front did and were smashed," he said, visibly shaken.

He added that the first car caught fire and that he used a bag to break the window of his car, the fourth, and escape.

Rail operator Hellenic Train said the northbound passenger train from Athens to Thessaloniki, Greece's second-largest city, had about 350 passengers on board.

Agorastos described the collision on state television as "very powerful" and said it was "a terrible night."

"The front section of the train was smashed. ... We're getting cranes to come in and special lifting equipment clear the debris and lift the rail cars. There's debris flung all around the crash site."

Officials said the army had been contacted to assist.

Hellenic Train, which has added highspeed services in recent years, is operated by Italy's FS Group, which runs rail services in several European countries.

As court debates student loans, borrowers see disconnect

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Niara Thompson couldn't shake her frustration as the Supreme Court debated President Joe Biden's student debt cancellation. As she listened from the audience Tuesday, it all felt academic. There was a long discussion on the nuances of certain words. Justices asked lawyers to explore hypothetical scenarios.

For Thompson, none of it is hypothetical. A student at the University of Georgia, she grew up watching her parents struggle with student loans and will graduate with about \$50,000 of her own student debt.

"It felt like people who could never understand why we would want something like this," she said. "I

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 57 of 90

wanted to be like, "Y'all don't understand. Y'all are focusing on this, but there's people out here who are struggling to find food for their families."

Much of the discussion in Tuesday's hearing centered on whether states had the legal right to sue over Biden's student loans plan. But the justices also were scrutinizing whether Biden had the authority to waive hundreds of billions of dollars in debt without the explicit approval of Congress, which decides how taxpayer money is spent.

It's not unusual for Supreme Court cases to hang on legal technicalities, even in cases of great public interest. Yet to borrowers following Tuesday's arguments, it felt isolating to hear such a personal subject reduced to cold legal language.

Thompson was among a few dozen borrowers who camped out in drizzle overnight to get seats at the court, where they watched conservative justices question the administration's authority to wipe away debt held by millions of Americans. Some of the court's liberal justices sought several times to turn the arguments back to the people who would benefit from the program, pointing out their need for relief. In response, conservatives asked if those who passed up college should pay for those who borrowed money to attend.

For Thompson's family, years of payments hang in the balance. Student loan payments have been on hold since the start of the pandemic, but they are set to restart 60 days after the court cases resolve — regardless of the outcome.

Thompson and her father are each eligible for \$10,000 in relief, she said. It would move her a step closer to financial stability, Thompson said, and it would eliminate the rest of her dad's loans.

"It just hurt my feelings a bit," she said of Tuesday's arguments. "I just want better for us, you know?"

The mood inside the court — quiet and ceremonious — was a contrast to the atmosphere outside as dozens of activists rallied in support of cancellation. Crowds chanted and listened to speeches from members of Congress, including Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., and Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt.

Advocates took to the podium to share stories about family sacrifices and life milestones deferred because of heavy student debt.

Ella Azoulay, a 26-year-old who lives in Washington, visited the rally to join the push for debt relief, which she calls a "family issue." A 2018 graduate of New York University, Azoulay has \$40,000 in student debt, while her dad has more than \$400,000 taken out on behalf of her and her two siblings.

"I can't really think about my future without thinking about this huge debt," she said. "My dad has no plans to retire. He's in his 60s and he has said for my whole life that he will never be able to retire. And that's really upsetting to hear."

During the hearing, liberal Justice Sonia Sotomayor said it would be a mistake for her fellow justices to take for themselves, instead of leaving it to education experts, "the right to decide how much aid to give" people who will struggle if the program is struck down.

Others justices also have shown a grasp of borrowers' plight. Justice Clarence Thomas, the court's staunchest conservative, has written about the "crushing weight" of his own student loans, which he paid off after reaching the nation's highest court.

Kayla Smith, 22, joined Thompson at the overnight campout for a seat inside the court. A recent graduate of the University of Georgia, she also felt the discussion missed the bigger picture.

Smith's mother borrowed more than \$20,000 in federal Parent Plus loans to help her pay for college. Smith sees it as the result of a broken system that forces people into debt for a shot at social mobility.

"They were focused on small, minuscule details," Smith, of Atlanta, said of the justices. "I even saw some of them laughing during the hearing, which was odd to me because people's lives are being affected. It's not a laughing matter to us, at least." _____

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Chicago Mayor Lightfoot ousted; Vallas, Johnson in runoff

By SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Paul Vallas and Brandon Johnson will meet in a runoff to be the next mayor of Chicago after voters on Tuesday denied incumbent Lori Lightfoot a second term, issuing a rebuke to a leader who made history as head of the nation's third-largest city.

Vallas, a former schools CEO backed by the police union, and Johnson, a Cook County commissioner endorsed by the Chicago Teachers Union, advanced to the April 4 runoff after none of the nine candidates was able to secure over 50% of the vote to win outright.

Lightfoot, the first Black woman and first openly gay person to lead the city, won her first term in 2019 after promising to end decades of corruption and backroom dealing at City Hall. But opponents blamed Lightfoot for an increase in crime that occurred in cities across the U.S. during the pandemic and criticized her as being a divisive, overly contentious leader.

She is the first elected Chicago mayor to lose a reelection bid since 1983, when Jane Byrne, the city's first female mayor, lost her Democratic primary.

Speaking to supporters Tuesday night, Lightfoot called being Chicago's mayor "the honor of a lifetime." "Regardless of tonight's outcome, we fought the right fights and we put this city on a better path," Lightfoot said. She told her fellow mayors around the country not to fear being bold.

At his victory party, Vallas noted that Lightfoot had called to congratulate him and asked the crowd to give her a round of applause. In a nod to his campaign promise to combat crime, he said that, if elected, he would work to address public safety issues.

"We will have a safe Chicago. We will make Chicago the safest city in America," Vallas said.

Johnson on Tuesday night noted the improbability that he would make the runoff, considering his low name recognition at the start of the race.

"A few months ago they said they didn't know who I was. Well, if you didn't know, now you know," Johnson said. He thanked the unions that supported him and gave a special shout-out to his wife, telling the crowd, "Chicago, a Black woman will still be in charge."

Lightfoot's loss is unusual for mayors in large cities, who have tended to win reelection with relative ease. But it's also a sign of the turmoil in U.S. cities following the COVID-19 pandemic, with its economic fallout and spikes in violent crime in many places.

Public safety has been an issue in other recent elections, including the recall of a San Francisco district attorney who was criticized for progressive policies. The pandemic also may shape elections for mayor in other cities this year, such as Philadelphia and Houston, where incumbents cannot run again due to term limits.

There are clear contrasts between Vallas and Johnson.

Vallas served as an adviser to the Fraternal Order of Police during its negotiations with Lightfoot's administration. He has called for adding hundreds of police officers to patrol the city, saying crime is out of control and morale among officers sunk to a new low during Lightfoot's tenure.

Vallas' opponents have criticized him as too conservative to lead the Democratic stronghold. Lightfoot blasted him for welcoming support from the police union's controversial leader, who defended the Jan. 6 insurrectionists at the Capitol and equated Lightfoot's vaccine mandate for city workers to the Holocaust.

Johnson received about \$1 million from the Chicago Teachers Union for his campaign and had support from several other progressive organizations, including United Working Families. The former teacher and union organizer has argued that the answer to addressing crime is not more money for police but more investment in mental health care, education, jobs and affordable housing, and he was accused by rivals such as Lightfoot of wanting to defund the police.

Johnson has avoided the word "defund" during the race, and his campaign says he does not want to cut the number of police officers. But in a 2020 radio interview, Johnson said defunding is not just a slogan but "an actual real political goal," and he sponsored a nonbinding resolution on the county board to redirect money from policing and jails to social services.

Crime was an issue that resonated with voters.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 59 of 90

Rita DiPietro, who lives downtown, said she supported Lightfoot in 2019. But she voted for Vallas on Tuesday, saying she was impressed by his detailed strategy to address public safety.

"The candidates all talk about what they'd like to do," she said. "This guy actually has a plan. He knows how he's going to do it."

Lindsey Hegarty, a 30-year-old paralegal who lives on Chicago's North Side, said she backed Johnson because "he seemed like the most progressive candidate on issues like policing, mental health" and public transit.

Race also was a factor as candidates courted votes in the highly segregated city, which is closely divided in population among Black, Hispanic and white residents. Vallas was the only white candidate in the field. Lightfoot, Johnson and five other candidates are Black, though Lightfoot argued she was the only Black candidate who could win. U.S. Rep. Jesus "Chuy" Garcia was the only Latino in the race.

Lightfoot accused Vallas of using "the ultimate dog whistle" by saying his campaign is about "taking back our city," and of cozying up to the president of the Fraternal Order of Police, whom she calls a racist. A recent Chicago Tribune story also found Vallas' Twitter account had liked racist tweets and tweets that mocked Lightfoot's appearance and referred to her as masculine.

Vallas denied his comments were related to race and says his police union endorsement is from rank-and-file officers. He also said he wasn't responsible for the liked tweets, which he called "abhorrent," and suggested someone had improperly accessed his account.

Lightfoot touted her record of investing in neighborhoods and supporting workers, such as by increasing the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. She also noted that the city had navigated unprecedented challenges such as the pandemic and its economic and public safety fallout to protests over policing.

Asked if she was treated unfairly because of her race and gender, Lightfoot said: "I'm a black woman in America. Of course."

Vallas, who has led school systems in Chicago, New Orleans and Philadelphia, lost a 2019 bid for mayor. This time, he was laser-focused on public safety, saying police officers who left the force under Lightfoot's administration will return if he's elected.

The other candidates were businessman Willie Wilson, Chicago City Council members Sophia King and Roderick Sawyer, activist Ja'Mal Green and state Rep. Kambium "Kam" Buckner.

Chilean circus has fought LGBTQ discrimination for 54 years

By PATRICIA LUNA Associated Press

SANTIAGO, Chile (AP) — The transformation begins as night falls on this semi-desert esplanade on the outskirts of Chile's capital, with Arturo, Alejandro and René applying makeup and donning wigs, feathers and sequins to become "Verónica Power," "Alexandra" and "The Crazy Purse Woman."

The characters are classics of the Timoteo Circus, a show that has fought prejudice and discrimination against Chile's LGBTQ community for more than a half century, even through a military dictatorship, in a country known for its devout Catholicism.

"Alexandra" — played by 65-year-old Alejandro Pavés — recalled life for the performers under the regime of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, which governed the South American country from 1973 to 1990.

"It was terrible to work under the dictatorship ... there was a lot of hatred for gays in Chile at that time," Pavés told The Associated Press, recalling the number of times he had been arrested, insulted and mistreated.

"The police would arrive and take us prisoner and if they found you dressed as a woman they would give you a sodomy" charge, which would mark you for the rest of your life, Pavés said. "The owners had to hide us."

Although it is called a circus, it is more of a sexual diversity show with humor, song and dance under a big top, and has 30 employees. At its peaks it had up to 70. The Timoteo Circus is one of the best known of Chile's 120 circuses.

"All Chileans know Circo Timoteo, it's like an institution," said Stéfano Rubio, a conductor and administrative manager of the circus.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 60 of 90

The show began in 1968 when one of the circus' female dancers was absent for a performance. Its founder, René Valdés, had one of the male performers dress as a woman and replace her on stage. The performance was so popular the dancer did five curtain calls to receive applause. The transformation circus was born and has been committed to sexual diversity ever since.

Arturo Peña, who plays "The Crazy Purse Lady," said that during the dictatorship the performers used to receive kicks and blows for their appearance, and the idea of carrying a purse in her act was to use in self-defense.

Pavés, who comes from a family with a strong military and religious tradition, hid his sexual identity from his family until a television program revealed what he did.

His family eventually accepted him but he says there always was the "shame of having a gay son, uncle or cousin."

Now, he cannot see himself having any other job than the Timoteo Circus, and that when he dies he wants his funeral to be held under the circus' big top.

"Today I work with more security, they accept me more" and the public understands the message better, he said.

While California wearies of snowstorms, Northeast greets one

By JAE C. HONG, AMY TAXIN and MARK PRATT Associated Press

RUNNING SPRINGS, Calif. (AP) — Jennifer Cobb and her husband planned on staying four days in their vacation rental in Southern California's San Bernardino Mountains. But that stretched into a week as they were trapped by a relentless series of storms that has piled snow so high they can barely see out the windows.

When they try to shovel themselves out, it just snows again. They're thinking of walking to a main road to see if they can hitch a ride down the mountain so they can get home to their teenage daughter and Cobb's elderly father in San Diego County.

"We hear the phantom sounds of plows, but they never come," said Cobb, 49. "Being stuck up here in this beautiful place shouldn't be awful, but it is."

Cobb and other beleaguered Californians weathered yet another storm Tuesday, as blizzard warnings blanketed the Sierra Nevada range in the northern half of the state, more snow was on its way to the southern mountains like the San Bernardino range, and forecasters warned that any travel was dangerous.

On the eastern flank of the Sierra, the Mono County Sheriff's Office bluntly tweeted: "The roads are closed. All of them. There is no alternate route, back way, or secret route. It's a blizzard, people."

Staggering snowfall totals have been reported this week from the storm. Mammoth Lakes, traditionally one of the snowiest places in California, had nearly 4 feet (1.2 meters) of snow over the past three days. The Mammoth Mountain ski resort has received 41.5 feet (12.6 meters) of snow since October and could be on a path to break the all-time snow season record of 55.7 feet (17 meters) set in 2010-2011.

The University of California, Berkeley Central Sierra Snow Laboratory near Donner Pass reported that nearly 41.7 feet (12.7 meters) had fallen since October, more than in any snow year since 1970 and second only to the record of 66.7 feet (20.3 meters) in 1952.

San Bernardino County has declared a state of emergency, with mountain residents trapped in their homes and motorists stranded. More snow was expected in many communities where residents, unable to drive through deep snow on roads that were closed anyway, largely got around on foot.

The latest storm in California was one of two bookending the country, with snow closing or delaying the opening for hundreds of schools in the Northeast, which saw the most significant snowfall Tuesday of what has been a mild winter.

And Michigan again fought a battle with ice after a storm Monday left thousands of customers without power in the central part of the state. To the southeast, around Detroit, some customers still lacked power for a sixth day after a prior storm.

The storms have delayed travel, shuttered schools and overwhelmed crews trying to dig out of the snow

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 61 of 90

and repair downed power lines. Nationwide, there were about 500 commercial flight cancellations and more than 3,000 delays as of Tuesday afternoon, according to FlightAware.com.

In the West, the weather was expected to last into Wednesday, with winter storm warnings stretching from the Oregon coast to many of Southern California's already-snow-laden mountains.

In the San Bernardino mountain community of Running Springs, the town is covered in snow with some mounds piling more than six feet (1.8 meters) high. Some residents walked to a grocery store to stock up on food and carried back the bags atop a plastic sled.

In nearby Crestline, Michael Johnstone said his family's grocery store was running low on key inventory even though they stocked up before the storm. Authorities are escorting two full grocery trucks up to the mountain community, Johnstone said — just in time for the new storm to add as much as a foot of snow.

"We're completely out of bread. Milk is getting really light. We're almost completely out of produce," said Johnstone, of Goodwin and Sons Market. "Beer — domestic beer — is really, really low."

Johnstone said many of the store's employees can't make it to work, so he has been using a plow truck to shuttle them to and from work for limited hours. Most customers are coming in on foot.

Christian Vinceneux, 60, is among them. He made it to Goodwin's on foot but the shelves were bare of bread and had minimal produce. Still, he said he felt lucky he was close enough to get there in a 15-minute walk.

"There have been people posting online where they're running out of groceries because they live in a part of town that's too far to walk to the grocery store," he said. "We haven't had any snow plows It's going to take a while before we can all get out."

For California's skiers and snowboarders, the parade of storms was too much of a good thing. Most resorts around Lake Tahoe suspended operations Tuesday. Big Bear Mountain Resort opened, but all roads leading there were closed. Mount Baldy Resort on the massive peak that looms over greater Los Angeles opened but also anticipated an early closure.

But California's Sierra snowpack, which provides about a third of the state's water supply, continued to benefit from the back-to-back dumps of heavy snowfall. The water content of the snowpack Tuesday — in a state grappling with years of drought — was 186% of normal to date and 162% of the average on April 1, when it is historically at its peak, according to the state Department of Water Resources' online data.

In the Northeast, parts of Connecticut, New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Rhode Island had heavy snow forecast through Tuesday afternoon. Some areas of western Massachusetts and northern Connecticut got about 7 inches (18 centimeters). The Albany, New York, area saw less snow than expected — 2 inches (5 centimeters) to 5 inches (13 centimeters) — but it was enough to close schools.

Deke Andrew, a Maine snowboarder, said he couldn't imagine such a thing as too much snow. The 51-year-old is living out of his Sprinter-style van at Sugarloaf, and was out snowboarding as snow was falling Tuesday.

"There really isn't any such a thing as too much snow in the wintertime," Andrew said. "We want as much as we can possibly get. It's incredible, and gives a purpose to the cold weather."

Duke beats N.C. State for fifth consecutive win, 71-67

DURHAM, N.C. (AP) — Jeremy Roach scored 20 points and helped Duke hold off North Carolina State in a 71-67 victory on Tuesday night to win its fifth straight game and complete a 16-0 home schedule.

Tyrese Proctor added 12 points, going 8 of 9 at the line, including four in the final 18 seconds to put the game away for Duke (22-8, 13-6). Kyle Filipowski scored 11 points and had 14 rebounds for the freshman's 13th double-double. Mark Mitchell scored 12 points and Dereck Lively II grabbed 12 rebounds.

Jarkel Joiner led the Wolfpack (22-9, 12-8) with 26 points, hitting six 3-pointers, and went over 2,000 points for his career. Casey Morsell and D.J. Burns scored 13 points each. Terquavion Smith, who along with Joiner averages over 17 points a game and scored 24 points in the Wolfpack's 84-60 win over the Blue Devils on Jan. 4, finished with eight.

Roach scored 12 points over the final 13 1/2 minutes with his consecutive baskets giving Duke a 12-point

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 62 of 90

edge with two minutes to go.

N.C. State made a final push and got within three with 32 seconds left after Joiner hit consecutive 3-pointers. Proctor made four free throws around a missed 3 by Joiner. Smith's 3 at the end made it a four-point margin.

Duke made just 2 of 19 3-point attempts but shot 21 of 36 inside the arc and made 23 of 29 free throws to only 7 of 8 for the Wolfpack.

The Blue Devils led 33-29 at halftime, taking the lead for good after a 9-0 run that Lively capped with a bucket with six minutes remaining before the break.

Duke finishes the regular season at North Carolina on Saturday. N.C. State has completed its regular season and is off until the ACC Tournament, which begins next Tuesday.

New China committee debuts, warns of 'existential struggle'

By KEVIN FREKING and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A special House committee dedicated to countering China began its work Tuesday with a prime-time hearing in which the panel's chairman called on lawmakers to act with urgency and framed the competition between the U.S. and China as "an existential struggle over what life will look like in the 21st century."

While some critics have expressed concern the hearings could escalate U.S.-Chinese tensions, lawmakers sought to demonstrate unity and the panel's top Democrat made clear that he doesn't want a "clash of civilizations" but a durable peace.

Tensions between the U.S. and China have been rising for years, with both countries enacting retaliatory tariffs on an array of imports during President Donald Trump's time in office. China's opaque response to the COVID-19 pandemic, its aggression toward Taiwan and the recent flight of a possible spy balloon over the U.S. have fueled lawmakers' desire to do more to counter the Chinese government. The new Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party is expected to be at the center of many of their efforts over the next two years.

The committee's chairman, Rep. Mike Gallagher, R-Wis., opened the hearing with a call for action. Addressing the difficulty of finding common ground on China-focused legislation, he said the Chinese government has found friends on Wall Street and in lobbyists on Washington's K Street who are ready to oppose the committee's efforts.

"Time is not on our side. Just because this Congress is divided, we cannot afford to waste the next two years lingering in legislative limbo or pandering for the press," Gallagher said. "We must act with a sense of urgency."

Gallagher is looking for the committee to shepherd several bills over the finish line during the next two years and issue a set of recommendations on long-term policies. So far, Gallagher appears to have Democratic buy-in and support. The vote to create the committee was bipartisan, 365-65.

Opponents on the Democratic side largely voiced the concern that the committee could stir an even greater rise in anti-Asian hate crimes. Gallagher said he is committed to ensuring the focus is on the Chinese Communist Party, not on the people of China.

Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi, D-Ill., the ranking Democrat on the committee, said both Republicans and Democrats have underestimated the Chinese Communist Party. He said its goal is to pursue economic and trade policies that undermine the U.S. economy.

"We do not want a war with the (People's Republic of China), not a cold war, not a hot war," Krishnamoorthi said. "We don't want a clash of civilizations. But we seek a durable peace and that is why we have to deter aggression."

The hearing was interrupted by two protesters, one saying, "this committee is about saber rattling, it's not about peace." Both were ushered out by police.

The witnesses for Tuesday's hearing included two former advisers to Trump: Matthew Pottinger, the deputy national security adviser who resigned immediately after the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 63 of 90

Capitol; and H.R. McMaster, who was national security adviser from February 2017 to April 2018.

McMaster and Pottinger delivered sweeping assessments of what they said was the challenge the United States was facing from China. That ranged from combatting TikTok's influence on Americans' online discourse and reducing China's dominance over supply chains to hardening Taiwan to make it impossible for China's military to take.

Pottinger said the main emphasis of his testimony was to open people's eyes to how the U.S. has become too complacent. "Before we can seize the initiative we have to react to the fact that our national interest has been deeply undermined over the course of the last quarter century," he said.

Tong Yi, a Chinese human rights advocate, amplified human rights concerns at the hearing. She was arrested in the 1990s after serving as an interpreter to a leading dissident who had urged the U.S. to condition trade on China's human rights performance. She spent nine months in detention before being handed a two-and-a-half year sentence for "disturbing social order" and sent to a labor camp, where she said authorities organized other inmates to beat her up.

"In the U.S., we need to face the fact that we have helped feed the baby dragon of the CCP until it has grown into what it now is," she said.

Scott Paul, president of an alliance formed by some manufacturing companies and the United Steelworkers labor union, testified that "51 years of wishful thinking by American leaders" has failed to alter the dynamic that the CCP represents a "clear and present danger to the American worker, our innovation base, and our national security."

The hearings come at a time of heightened rivalry and tensions between China and the United States. Both sides — the U.S. and its allies, and China — are consolidating military positions in the Indo-Pacific in case of any confrontation over self-ruled Taiwan, which China claims as its territory.

Last summer, Chinese warships and warplanes fired missiles over Taiwan in what were days of intense Chinese military exercises following then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to the U.S. ally. President Xi Jinping's government at the time rejected President Joe Biden's declarations that his administration had no control over the actions of U.S. lawmakers.

And three weeks ago, the Biden administration used a Sidewinder missile fired by an F-22 to end the journey of what the U.S. says was a giant Chinese surveillance balloon traveling across U.S. territory.

Both incidents, especially the balloon, captured American public and political attention, and put debate over how to handle China in the center of U.S. political debate.

"It's another indication of the negative slide, the downward spiral, in the U.S.-China relationship," Michael Swaine, a Washington analyst of Chinese security studies, said of Gallagher's committee. The hearings will add to political pressure on Biden, who has continued to stress a desire for limited dialogue with China, to take a harder line, Swaine said.

House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., said he worked with the Democratic leader, Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, D-NY., in forming the committee and that the U.S. failures with China are the result of not speaking with "one voice."

"We need to speak with one voice Republicans and Democrats alike," McCarthy said. "I think when you look at Gallagher and the work he's doing with the ranking member, we're trying to go in lockstep, and I think all of America is pretty much desiring for this."

Gallagher said he suspects there are at least 10 pieces of legislation that the committee can endorse in a bipartisan fashion. Still, he said the members will be looking for support from McCarthy before backing any legislation. One of the biggest challenges is that jurisdiction over the issues involving China is spread across numerous committees and members of those committees will want a say.

"I think we can play a constructive coordinating function between the committees to ensure that good ideas don't die just because of some committee's cracks or they get referred to multiple committees," Gallagher said.

Drones fly deep inside Russia; Putin orders border tightened

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Drones that the Kremlin said were launched by Ukraine flew deep inside Russian territory, including one that got within 100 kilometers (60 miles) of Moscow, signaling breaches in Russian defenses as President Vladimir Putin ordered stepped-up protection at the border.

Officials said the drones caused no injuries and did not inflict any significant damage, but the attacks on Monday night and Tuesday morning raised questions about Russian defense capabilities more than a year after the country's full-scale invasion of its neighbor.

Ukrainian officials did not immediately take responsibility, but they similarly have avoided directly acknowledging responsibility for past strikes and sabotage while emphasizing Ukraine's right to hit any target in Russia.

Although Putin did not refer to any specific attacks in a speech in the Russian capital, his comments came hours after the drones targeted several areas in southern and western Russia. Authorities closed the airspace over St. Petersburg in response to what some reports said was a drone.

Also Tuesday, several Russian television stations aired a missile attack warning that officials blamed on a hacking attack.

The drone attacks targeted regions inside Russia along the border with Ukraine and deeper into the country, according to local Russian authorities.

A drone fell near the village of Gubastovo, less than 100 kilometers (60 miles) from Moscow, Andrei Vorobyov, governor of the region surrounding the Russian capital, said in an online statement.

The drone did not cause any damage, Vorobyov said, but it likely targeted "a civilian infrastructure object."

Pictures of the drone showed it was a small Ukrainian-made model with a reported range of up to 800 kilometers (nearly 500 miles) but no capacity to carry a large load of explosives.

Russian forces early Tuesday shot down another Ukrainian drone over the Bryansk region, local Gov. Aleksandr Bogomaz said in a Telegram post.

Three drones also targeted Russia's Belgorod region on Monday night, with one flying through an apartment window in the capital, local authorities reported. Regional Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov said the drones caused minor damage to buildings and cars.

The Russian Defense Ministry said Ukraine used drones to attack facilities in the Krasnodar region and neighboring Adygea. It said the drones were brought down by electronic warfare assets, adding that one of them crashed into a field and another diverted from its flight path and missed a facility it was supposed to attack.

Russia's state RIA Novosti news agency reported a fire at the oil facility, and some other Russian reports said that two drones exploded nearby.

While Ukrainian drone strikes on the Russian border regions of Bryansk and Belgorod have become a regular occurrence, other strikes reflected a more ambitious effort.

Some Russian commentators described the drone attacks as an attempt by Ukraine to showcase its capability to strike deep behind the lines, foment tensions in Russia and rally the Ukrainian public. Some Russian war bloggers described the raids as a possible rehearsal for a bigger, more ambitious attack.

Andrei Medvedev, a commentator with Russian state television who serves as a deputy speaker of Moscow's city legislature and runs a popular blog about the war, warned that the drone strikes could be a precursor to wider attacks within Russia that could accompany Ukraine's attempt to launch a counteroffensive.

"The strikes of exploding drones on targets behind our lines will be part of that offensive," Medvedev said, adding that Ukraine could try to extend the range of its drones.

Russia hawks urged strong retaliation. Igor Korotchenko, a retired Russian army colonel turned military commentator, called for a punishing strike on the Ukrainian presidential office in Kyiv.

Another retired military officer, Viktor Alksnis, noted that the drone attacks marked the expansion of the conflict and criticized Putin for failing to deliver a strong response.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 65 of 90

Also on Tuesday, authorities reported that airspace around St. Petersburg, Russia's second-largest city, was temporarily closed, halting all departures and arrivals at the main airport, Pulkovo. Officials did not give a reason for the move, but some Russian reports claimed that it was triggered by an unidentified drone.

The Russian Defense Ministry said it was conducting air defense drills in western Russia.

Last year, Russian authorities repeatedly reported shooting down Ukrainian drones over annexed Crimea. In December, the Russian military said Ukraine used drones to hit two bases for long-range bombers deep inside Russian territory.

Speaking at Russia's main security agency, the FSB, Putin urged the service to tighten security on the Ukraine border.

In another development that fueled tensions across Russia on Tuesday, an air raid alarm interrupted the programming of several TV channels and radio stations in several regions. Russia's Emergency Ministry said in an online statement that the announcement was a hoax "resulting from a hacking of the servers of radio stations and TV channels in some regions of the country."

Meanwhile, satellite photos analyzed by The Associated Press appeared to show a Russian warplane in Belarus that Belarusian guerrillas claimed to have targeted as largely intact.

Tuesday's high-resolution images from Planet Labs PBC and Maxar Technologies showed the Russian A-50 early warning and control aircraft after what Belarusian opposition activists described as an attack on the Machulishchy air base Sunday outside the Belarusian capital of Minsk.

However, a discoloration could be seen on the aircraft's distinctive, circular rotodome above its fuselage that could be damage. That discoloration wasn't seen in earlier images of the aircraft at the air base. The Maxar image also showed what appeared to be vehicles near the airplane as well.

Belarusian activists supporting Ukraine alleged that the aircraft was seriously damaged. Russian and Belarusian officials did not comment on the claims.

In Ukraine, four people were killed and five others wounded Tuesday by renewed Russian shelling of the southern Ukrainian city of Kherson, regional Gov. Oleksandr Prokudin said in a Telegram.

A 68-year-old man was also killed as Russian forces shelled Kupiansk, a town in Ukraine's northeastern Kharkiv region, Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said.

The fiercest fighting continued to be in eastern areas of Ukraine, where Russia wants control over all four of the provinces it illegally annexed in September.

Ukrainian officials said Russian forces have deployed additional troops and equipment, including the latest T-90 battle tanks, in those areas.

In a video address, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy thanked U.S. industrialists for supporting Ukraine and voiced hope for their support in rebuilding the country after the war. Zelenskyy noted that the country faces a "colossal task" to restore hundreds of thousands of damaged sites, including "whole cities, industries, productions."

US sues chemical company over cancer risk to minority area

By MICHAEL PHILLIS and MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal officials sued a Louisiana chemical maker on Tuesday, alleging that it presents an unacceptable cancer risk to the nearby majority-Black community and demanding cuts in toxic emissions.

Denka Performance Elastomer LLC makes synthetic rubber, emitting the carcinogen chloroprene and other chemicals in such high concentrations that it poses an unacceptable cancer risk, according to the federal complaint. Children are particularly vulnerable. There is an elementary school a half-mile from the plant.

The former DuPont plant has reduced its emissions over time, but the Justice Department, suing on behalf of the Environmental Protection Agency, said the plant still represents "an imminent and substantial endangerment to public health and welfare," including elevated cancer risks.

"The company has not moved far enough or fast enough to reduce emissions or ensure the safety of the surrounding community," EPA Administrator Michael Regan said in a statement.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 66 of 90

Denka, a Japanese company that bought the rubber-making plant in 2015, did not immediately respond to messages seeking comment. A company spokesperson said in September that advocates described a crisis that "simply does not exist."

Denka's facility makes neoprene, a flexible, synthetic rubber used to produce common goods such as wetsuits, laptop sleeves, orthopedic braces and automotive belts and hoses. Chloroprene is a liquid raw material used to produce neoprene and is emitted into the air from various areas at the facility.

Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta said every community, no matter its demographics, should be able to breathe clean air and drink clean water. "Our suit aims to stop Denka's dangerous pollution," she said in a statement.

The lawsuit demands that Denka eliminate dangerous emissions of chloroprene. Air monitoring consistently shows long-term chloroprene concentrations in the air near Denka's LaPlace plant as high as 15 times the levels recommended for a 70-year exposure to the chemical, the complaint says.

The complaint is the latest move by the Biden administration that targets pollution in an 85-mile stretch from New Orleans to Baton Rouge officially known as the Mississippi River Chemical Corridor, but more commonly called Cancer Alley. The region contains several hot spots where cancer risks are far above levels deemed acceptable by the EPA. The White House has prioritized environmental enforcement in communities overburdened by long-term pollution.

Regan visited the parish in 2021 during a five-day trip from Mississippi to Texas that highlighted low-income, mostly minority communities adversely affected by industrial pollution. A Toxics Release Inventory prepared by EPA shows that minority groups make up 56% of those living near toxic sites such as refineries, landfills and chemical plants. Negative effects include chronic health problems such as asthma, diabetes and hypertension.

Last year, the EPA said it had evidence that Black residents face an increased cancer risk from the chemical plant and that state officials allowed the pollution to remain too high. The agency's letter was part of an investigation under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which says anyone who receives federal funds cannot discriminate based on race or national origin.

Local activists have long targeted the plant, arguing that nearby air monitoring demonstrates the plant is a danger to St. John the Baptist Parish residents.

The Justice Department, in its complaint, agreed, saying the plant is exposing thousands of people to lifetime cancer risks "multiples of times higher than what is typically considered acceptable."

Mary Hampton, president of Concerned Citizens of St. John the Baptist Parish, said emissions at the plant need to drop quickly.

"It's a positive move in the right direction," she said of the federal lawsuit. "It's been a long time coming."

Beverly Wright, executive director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, said the DOJ's lawsuit helps ensure that Black communities in Louisiana don't have to live with deadly pollution.

"For decades Black families have been human experiments for the petrochemical industry in Louisiana," she said.

Elizabeth Holmes has 2nd child as she tries to avoid prison

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — Disgraced Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes is citing her recently born child as another reason she should be allowed to delay the start of a more than 11-year prison sentence while her lawyers appeal her conviction for duping investors about the capabilities of her failed company's blood-testing technology.

The birth of Holmes' second child was confirmed in court documents filed last week in advance of a March 17 hearing about her bid to remain free during an appeals process that could take years to complete.

The filing didn't disclose the date of the birth or the child's gender, but the news isn't a surprise. Holmes, 38, was pregnant at the time of her Nov. 18 sentencing in the same San Jose, California, courtroom where a jury convicted her on four felony counts of fraud and conspiracy.

The start of that trial had been delayed so Holmes could give birth to her first child, a son. Holmes had

both children with her current partner, William "Billy" Evans. She met Evans after her 2016 break-up with her former lover and business partner, Ramesh "Sunny" Balwani, who was convicted on 12 counts of fraud and conspiracy in a separate trial.

Balwani, 57, is also trying to convince U.S. District Judge Edward Davila to delay the start of his nearly 13-year prison sentence. A hearing on his request was held earlier this month, but Davila hasn't issued a ruling yet.

Holmes isn't citing her two children as the only reason she should be allowed to stay out of prison during her appeal. Her lawyers contend that an array of mistakes and abuses made during her trial make it likely her conviction will be overturned. They are also pointing to Holmes' unblemished record while she has been free on bail during the four-and-half years since her criminal indictment as evidence that she isn't a flight risk or a danger to the community.

McCarthy defends giving Tucker Carlson Jan. 6 trove access

By LISA MASCARO and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Speaker Kevin McCarthy is defending his decision to give Fox News' Tucker Carlson "exclusive" access to Jan. 6 security footage of the Capitol attack, despite the conservative commentator's own work raising false claims and conspiracy theories about the 2021 riot over Joe Biden's election.

McCarthy vowed Tuesday to eventually make roughly 42,000 hours of sensitive Capitol Police security videos available to the broader public "as soon as possible," but made it clear the Fox News commentator had first dibs. The Republican McCarthy is also supportive of giving access to some of the nearly 1,000 defendants being prosecuted for their roles in the siege.

Five people died in the Jan. 6, 2021 attack and its aftermath after then-President Donald Trump encouraged a mob of supporters to "fight like hell" as Congress was tallying the election results from the states.

"I don't care what side of the issue you are on. That's why I think putting it out all to the American public, you can see the truth. See exactly what transpired that day," McCarthy told reporters at the Capitol.

"Have you ever had an exclusive? Because I see it on your networks all the time. So we have exclusive, then I'll give it out to the entire country," McCarthy said.

The speaker's decision to release the mountains of police security footage has set off a firestorm at the Capitol over the way the images will be potentially used as a political tool to rewrite the history of what happened that deadly day. Fox News is facing new scrutiny in a separate court case over its airing of false claims about the 2020 election that Trump lost to Biden.

It's also raising new concerns about sensitive security operations at the Capitol. While video from the Jan. 6 riot has already widely aired as part of the public hearings last summer by the House committee investigating the attack — including from the police cameras, documentarians like then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's daughter who filmed secret locations and even the rioters themselves — McCarthy is making available almost 42,000 hours of footage, three times what was first seen, from cameras stationed in all corners of the Capitol complex.

"We are deeply concerned that the release of footage related to the January 6 violent insurrection will reveal some security details that could create some challenges in terms of the safety and well being of everyone on the Capitol Complex," said Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y.

Rep. Bennie Thompson, the former chairman of the House Jan. 6 committee, said the panel went through a painstaking process to work closely with the U.S. Capitol Police to review and ultimately release approved segments of the surveillance footage as part of its public hearings.

"I'm supportive of a process, if this is true transparency, that would not compromise the integrity or the security of the Capitol," the Mississippi Democrat said.

When McCarthy told fellow Republicans behind closed doors about his decision Tuesday, he was greeted with applause, according to a person who was familiar with the private conference meeting but unauthorized to speak about it publicly.

The speaker has had a rocky relationship with Carlson, who has been critical of McCarthy's leadership, but the influential Fox News commentator ultimately stood down when the California Republican was battling to become House speaker in a dragged-out party vote earlier this year. It was seen as helping to boost McCarthy to the job.

McCarthy insisted he was taking measures to ensure security at the Capitol would not be jeopardized by the release, but declined to provide details — only to say that Carlson made it clear to the speaker's team he did not want to show "exit routes" used by lawmakers or others.

Access to the footage will also be available to defendants who are facing charges over their alleged involvement in Jan. 6. McCarthy said defendants have had access before, but if it's still needed, "We can supply that to them too."

The House Administration Committee's subcommittee on Oversight, which is chaired by Rep. Barry Loudermilk, R-Ga., is making accommodations for any attorneys representing defendants who have asked to view the footage, the person familiar with the situation said.

Democrats on the panel said they were "deeply troubled" by McCarthy's actions, warning that access to such large swaths of footage could expose security vulnerabilities to be used by those "who might wish to attack the Capitol again," according to a report. They vowed to conduct oversight.

But the Republican leader has made it clear he is working to set the record as he sees it, and repeatedly complained that other media outlets, including CNN, already had received exclusives to show video last year, when Democrats held the majority in House.

McCarthy also suggested it was unfair that the Jan. 6 panel, which disbanded once Republicans took control of the House, released security video during the riot of former Vice President Mike Pence fleeing for safety as well as the GOP leader's own staff scrambling to secure their office.

"It was disturbing to me that the January 6 committee would show the exit strategy of the vice president," McCarthy told reporters Tuesday. "What I thought would be best is if the entire world and the country could see what transpired."

Carlson has said that his producers have been on Capitol Hill since early February, poring over the footage after getting the "unfettered access" from McCarthy.

The archive is a potential trove of the inner workings of the Capitol and includes the hideaways of lawmakers as well as the evacuation routes that Capitol Police used to usher leadership and rank-and-file members to safety. It also includes long moments of empty hallways where nothing is happening.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said the release of tapes to Carlson was "despicable" and said he would not agree to release them to other media. "Security has to be the number one concern," Schumer said.

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell would not comment directly on McCarthy's move, saying his only concern is the security of the Capitol.

Supreme Court seems ready to reject student loan forgiveness

By MARK SHERMAN and JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Conservative justices holding the Supreme Court's majority seem ready to sink President Joe Biden's plan to wipe away or reduce student loans held by millions of Americans.

In arguments lasting more than three hours Tuesday, Chief Justice John Roberts led his conservative colleagues in questioning the administration's authority to broadly cancel federal student loans because of the COVID-19 emergency.

Loan payments that have been on hold since the start of the coronavirus pandemic three years ago are supposed to resume no later than this summer. Without the loan relief promised by the Biden plan, the administration's top Supreme Court lawyer said, "delinquencies and defaults will surge."

The plan has so far been blocked by Republican-appointed judges on lower courts. It did not appear to fare any better with the six justices appointed by Republican presidents.

Biden's only hope for being allowed to move forward appeared to be the slim possibility, based on the

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 69 of 90

arguments, that the court would find that Republican-led states and individuals challenging the plan lacked the legal right to sue.

That would allow the court to dismiss the lawsuits at a threshold stage, without ruling on the basic idea of the loan forgiveness program that appeared to trouble the justices on the court's right side.

Roberts was among the justices who grilled Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar and suggested that the administration had exceeded its authority.

Three times, the chief justice said the program would cost a half-trillion dollars, pointing to its wide impact and hefty expense as reasons the administration should have gotten explicit approval from Congress. The program, which the administration says is grounded in a 2003 law that was enacted in response to the military conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, is estimated to cost \$400 billion over 30 years.

"If you're talking about this in the abstract, I think most casual observers would say if you're going to give up that much ... money, if you're going to affect the obligations of that many Americans on a subject that's of great controversy, they would think that's something for Congress to act on," Roberts said.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh suggested he agreed, saying it "seems problematic" for the administration to use an "old law" to unilaterally implement a debt relief program that Congress had declined to adopt.

Neither justice seemed swayed by Prelogar's explanation that the administration was citing the national emergency created by the pandemic as authority for the debt relief program under a law commonly known as the HEROES Act.

"Some of the biggest mistakes in the court's history were deferring to assertions of executive emergency power," Kavanaugh said. "Some of the finest moments in the court's history were pushing back against presidential assertions of emergency power."

At another point, though, Kavanaugh suggested the program might be on firmer legal ground than other pandemic-related programs that were ended by the court's conservative majority, including an eviction moratorium and a requirement for vaccines or frequent testing in large workplaces.

Those earlier programs halted by the court were billed largely as public health measures intended to slow the spread of COVID-19. The loan forgiveness plan, by contrast, is aimed at countering the economic effects of the pandemic.

Prelogar and some of the liberal justices sought several times to turn the arguments back to the people who would benefit from the program. The administration says that 26 million people have applied to have up to \$20,000 in federal student loans forgiven under the plan.

"The states ask this court to deny this vital relief to millions of Americans," she said.

Justice Sonia Sotomayor said her fellow justices will be making a mistake if they take for themselves, instead of leaving it to education experts, "the right to decide how much aid to give" people who will struggle if the program is struck down.

"Their financial situation will be even worse because once you default, the hardship on you is exponentially greater. You can't get credit. You're going to pay higher prices for things," Sotomayor said.

But Roberts pointed to evident favoritism.

He offered a hypothetical example of a person who passes up college to start a lawn service with borrowed money. "Nobody's telling the person who is trying to set up the lawn service business that he doesn't have to pay his loan," Roberts said.

Republican-led states and lawmakers in Congress, as well as conservative legal interests, are lined up against the plan as a violation of Biden's executive authority. Democratic-led states and liberal interest groups are backing the administration in urging the court to allow the plan to take effect.

The justices' questions mirrored the partisan political divide over the issue, with conservatives arguing that non-college workers should not be penalized and liberals arguing for the break for the college educated.

Speaking on the eve of the arguments, Biden had said, "I'm confident the legal authority to carry that plan is there."

The president, who once doubted his own authority to broadly cancel student debt, first announced the program in August. Legal challenges quickly followed.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 70 of 90

The administration says the HEROES Act allows the secretary of education to waive or modify the terms of federal student loans in connection with a national emergency. The law was primarily intended to keep service members from being hurt financially while they fought in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Nebraska and other states that sued say the 20 million borrowers who would have their entire loans erased would get a "windfall" leaving them better off than before the pandemic.

"This is the creation of a brand new program, far beyond what Congress intended," Nebraska Solicitor General James Campbell said in court Tuesday.

The national emergency is expected to end May 11, but the administration says the economic consequences will persist, despite historically low unemployment and other signs of economic strength.

In addition to the debate over the authority to forgive student debt, the court is confronting whether the states and two individuals whose challenge also is before the justices have the legal right, or standing, to sue.

Parties generally have to show that they would suffer financial harm in order to have standing in cases such as this. A federal judge initially found that the states would not be harmed and dismissed their lawsuit before an appellate panel said the case could proceed.

Justice Amy Coney Barrett joined the three liberal justices in repeatedly questioning Nebraska's Campbell on that issue. But it would take at least one other conservative vote to form a majority.

Of the two individuals who sued in Texas, one has student loans that are commercially held and the other is eligible for \$10,000 in debt relief, not the \$20,000 maximum. They would get nothing if they win their case.

Among those in the courtroom Tuesday was Kayla Smith, a recent graduate of the University of Georgia, who camped out near the court the night before in order to get a seat. Biden's plan would lift a burden for her mother, who borrowed more than \$20,000 in federal student loans to help Smith attend college.

"It just seems kind of messed up that college is the expectation, higher education is the expectation, but then at the same time, people's lives are being ruined," said Smith, 22, who lives in Atlanta.

The arguments are available on the AP YouTube channel or on the court's website.

A decision is expected by late June.

Dior channels rebellious women at Paris Fashion Week

By THOMAS ADAMSON AP Fashion Writer

PARIS (AP) — After Milan, global fashion's spotlight shifted to the final stretch of ready-to-wear shows in Paris on Tuesday, as the industry looks to the future with all the final fall trends.

But displays in the French capital will also revisit the past this week, with homages to recently deceased designers Vivienne Westwood and Paco Rabanne.

Here are some highlights of Tuesday's fall-winter 2023-2024 collections, including Dior:

DIOR'S REBELS

A surreal and colorful organic world awaited guests inside Paris' Tuileries gardens.

A spectacular Dior installation suggestive of a giant octopus spanned the length and breadth of the runway, its color-rich fabric tentacles gleaming with thousands of tiny lights. It was the work of Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos, who wanted to explore how organic form interacted with the "feminine realm of artisanal savoir-faire." It made for a dazzling backdrop especially given the flurry of paparazzi flashes snapping guests including model Elle Macpherson, K-pop star Jisoo and actresses Maisie Williams and Charlize Theron.

If the decor seemed futuristic, designer Maria Grazia Chiuri used the past as a touchstone in the clothes, resulting in less exuberance — but no less flair.

Three women -- the house founder's sister Catherine Dior, a French resistance hero, as well as French singers Edith Piaf and Juliette Greco, each described as "rebellious, at once strong and fragile" -- were muses in this collection. It channeled the 1950s, Christian Dior's heyday.

A vintage air was evoked in a faded black leather menswear coat, crumpled houndstooth skirt and

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 71 of 90

wrinkled woolen socks.

Elsewhere, sweaters and skirts sported extra volume in the shoulders or hips in a nod to the thicker fabrics of the post-war period. Stand out pieces included a black textured skirt hung heavily with thousands of embellished flowers that cut a fine androgynous figure below a white shirt and tie. While mottled fabric featured a gleaming metallic thread sewn into it, revealing the skills of Dior's atelier.

Chiuri's empowering styles impressed Theron, who told The AP: "She loves women. And in loving women she understands that a woman is feminine but also masculine. We're vulnerable and we're strong. We're contradictions. We're a little bit of everything, and I love that she has that wisdom."

SAINT LAURENT ACCENTUATES SHOULDERS

Haunting discordant organ music, wafting incense perfume and dark lighting led VIPs such as Dua Lipa, Rose and Catherine Deneuve to a bewitching black runway lit dimly by five hanging golden chandeliers.

The venue intended to evoke the Intercontinental Hotel ballroom, so said the house, where YSL presented its couture collections for decades until 2001.

Regardless of the inspiration, it was clear that drama was in the air for Anthony Vaccarello this fall -- indicating that the lauded Saint Laurent designer is in a buoyant creative mood.

This season, theatrically sculpted and elongated shoulders defined silhouettes. The jutting shoulders -- on fluid gowns, minidresses and tuxedo "tailleur-jupes" above pencil skirts -- were so big that sashes and scarves were able to literally hang off, as if on scaffolding. So big in fact that one fashion insider commented that they might have been able to sweep the walls of Paris' famously narrow hallways.

The result was a bold, top-heavy silhouette reminiscent of the 1980s -- infused with styles from the early noughties, such as big hoop earrings and pointed-toe heels.

Some looks oozed mystique such as one pearly satin top with draped hood and pointy shoulders, worn atop slim pants on a model with infinitely long legs.

Elsewhere there were plays in transparency thanks to mousseline, chiffon and crepe-de-chine fabrics alongside see-through stockings.

MAME KUROGOUCHI, PAST AND FUTURE

The Japanese ready-to-wear brand of Mame Kurogouchi delves edgily between past and present, mixing traditional dressmaking with new technologies.

This was on full display at fall's minimalist take on the 80s -- as far as a decade that exuberant can be minimalist.

A gray pantsuit with crisp clean lines had a futuristic feel with a diagonal dynamic. A black scarf that gripped the neck like a hand tugged down the shoulder, complementing a black space age fanny pack that evoked a cummerbund.

A pared down color palette created a sanitized feel that worked nicely on the 80s references -- broad, flat apron silhouettes, hoods and thickly textured top-heavy ensembles.

VAQUERA GETS ITS KINK ON

"Obscene dress" read one emblazoned T-shirt at Vaquera's rather saucy collection. Although the look was among the least kinky in a show that served up inches of flesh, studded chokers, bare torsos, shredded bondage gear and multiple takes on 90s grunge and denim jeans.

This was the sophomore showing in Paris for designers Patric DiCaprio and Bryn Taubensee, who came to prominence six years ago in New York with their iconic U.S. flag gown. After a more commercial season last year, the talented duo got back to their bold antics.

Black-heavy, the concise 12-look display began with a masked headpiece and a patch over one breast on a naked female torso. The other breast was covered by the model's gloved hand. It would be a difficult look to wear on the street, but it got guests' cameras snapping. Next, a black cotton top constructed of myriad shreds for volume -- and edge. A skirt was deconstructed in flaps to evoke a bondage outfit, worn alongside a thermal hat in a woolen take on a bondage mask.

JetBlue pilot landing in Boston averts potential collision

BOSTON (AP) — A JetBlue pilot had to take “evasive action” while landing at Boston’s Logan International Airport when another aircraft crossed an intersecting runway, the Federal Aviation Administration said.

The close call occurred at about 7 p.m. Monday when the pilot of a Learjet 60 took off without clearance as a JetBlue flight was preparing to land on an intersecting runway, according to the FAA’s preliminary review.

The FAA is investigating just how close the two aircraft came, but flight data tracking service Flightra-24 said Tuesday that a preliminary analysis put the aircraft approximately 530 feet (160 meters) apart.

An air traffic controller instructed the pilot of the Learjet to line up and wait on one runway while the JetBlue flight landed on another, the FAA said in a statement.

“The Learjet pilot read back the instructions clearly but began a takeoff roll instead,” the FAA said. “The pilot of the JetBlue aircraft took evasive action and initiated a climb-out as the Learjet crossed the intersection.”

The FAA did not disclose any additional information.

The close call at Logan is the latest near miss involving commercial aircraft in the past few months. There was one at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York in January, a second in Austin, Texas, in February, and a third off the coast of Hawaii in December.

That prompted FAA Administrator Billy Nolen to say earlier this month that he was putting together a team of experts to review airline safety.

JetBlue Airways said it is cooperating with investigators in the Logan near miss.

“On Monday, February 27, JetBlue flight 206 landed safely in Boston after our pilots were instructed to perform a go-around by air traffic controllers,” the airline said in a statement. “Safety is JetBlue’s first priority and our crews are trained to react to situations like this.”

A Logan spokesperson deferred questions to the FAA.

Why do juries view crime scenes like the Murdaugh estate?

By JAMES POLLARD and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press/Report for America

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Jurors in Alex Murdaugh’s murder trial will get to see for themselves the rural hunting estate where his wife and son were killed, following in the footsteps of other juries that have viewed crime scenes in cases that captured the nation’s attention.

Crime scene visits by juries are relatively rare but have occurred in a number of other high-profile prosecutions, including the 1995 murder trial of O.J. Simpson and last year’s trial of Florida school shooter Nikolas Cruz.

Murdaugh, the disgraced South Carolina attorney, is accused of killing his wife and son at dog kennels near their home on June 7, 2021, as his career and finances were crumbling. Murdaugh has denied any role in the fatal shootings.

Here’s a look at the practice of having juries view crime scenes and some other notable cases:

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A JURY VISITS A CRIME SCENE?

In a criminal trial, both the defense and the prosecution can request that juries view a crime scene and it’s generally up to the judge to decide whether to approve it. In many cases, it doesn’t happen because the trial is taking place years later, so the scene has changed and taking jurors there could provide a false impression of what happened.

In some cases, however, crime scene visits can be useful to give jurors a sense of distance or other physical features that don’t come across in photos and other evidence presented in court, said Steven Benjamin, a Richmond, Virginia, defense attorney who is not involved in the Murdaugh case.

“It permits a 3D appreciation for what has otherwise been a two-dimensional presentation in court,” said Benjamin, a past president of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers.

When jurors are taken to the scene of a crime, they are generally advised not to share their thoughts

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 73 of 90

with one another because deliberations don't begin until both sides are done presenting evidence. The attorneys are typically present but instructed by the judge not to say or point out anything to the jurors, Benjamin said.

"What it is not is a scene reenactment," Benjamin said.

WHY DOES MURDAUGH'S TEAM WANT JURORS TO GO THERE?

The distance between the kennels where the bodies were found and the home where Murdaugh says he had been napping has been a key component of the trial.

Only 16 minutes passed between when the victims stopped using their cellphones and Murdaugh left the house about 1,100 feet (335 meters) from the crime scene. Defense attorney Dick Harpootlian said the jury must see the sprawling 1,700-acre (690-hectare) property to "appreciate the spatial issues."

Prosecutors opposed the visit because the scene has changed significantly in the 20 months since the killings. Trees planted between the Murdaugh home and the kennels have grown taller and thicker over that period — blocking the line of sight they allege would have allowed Murdaugh to see the kennel lights when he says he returned from visiting his mother.

Bill Nettles, a criminal defense lawyer and former South Carolina U.S. attorney who is not involved in the case, said the visit could give jurors a "sense of scale" to make more-informed decisions about the timeline and other questions — such as whether Murdaugh could have heard the gunshots across the grounds — that have arisen during the trial.

"I can see how both sides can benefit from a jury seeing that," Nettles said. "In the interest of justice, it is probably a good thing for them to see it."

IN WHAT OTHER CASES HAVE JURORS VISITED THE CRIME SCENE?

The most notable recent example was the sentencing trial for Cruz, who pleaded guilty to killing 14 students and three staff members at Parkland's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

The visit in that case was requested by prosecutors, who said jurors needed to see the scene to understand the horror of what happened. The defense vigorously objected, arguing that taking the jurors to the school would play to their emotions and that photos and videos were sufficient.

The building had been sealed off and left largely untouched — except for the removal of victims' bodies and some personal items — before jurors visited last year and retraced the steps Cruz took on Feb. 14, 2018. Inside, they saw bullet holes in walls and shards of glass from windows shattered by gunfire. Large pools of dried blood still stained classroom floors.

Nearly three decades earlier, jurors in the Simpson trial toured the scene where prosecutors alleged that he killed his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend, Ronald Goldman. Jurors saw the spot where Nicole Brown Simpson and Goldman's bloodied bodies were found on the walkway leading up to her Brentwood condominium.

Prosecutor Marcia Clark said at the time that taking jurors to see the narrow, confined walkway would show "the reason why one person could accomplish this, and how the victims were cornered."

Simpson was acquitted of the killings but was later found liable for the deaths in a civil suit.

In 2003, jurors went to the North Carolina home of novelist Michael Peterson where his wife's body was found at the bottom of a staircase. Defense attorneys argued that Kathleen Peterson had died in a 2001 accidental fall.

"They were very curious about how far up they can go up that stairwell," said Raleigh News & Observer reporter Demorris Lee, who went with the jurors, according to a Court TV report. "Many of them went up to about the fourth, fifth step and would turn back and look, even wave their hands to see, look behind them to see if they can fall or if they can possibly catch themselves."

That trial ended with Peterson's conviction for murder, but a judge later ordered a new trial, and Peterson entered a special plea in 2017 acknowledging prosecutors had enough evidence to convict him of manslaughter.

Endangered Mexican wolf population makes strides in US

By SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — Endangered Mexican gray wolves are making more strides, as more breeding pairs and pups have been documented since reintroduction efforts began in the southwestern U.S. more than two decades ago, federal wildlife managers said Tuesday.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released the results of its annual survey in New Mexico and Arizona, saying this is the first time the population has topped 200 and the seventh straight year that the numbers have trended upward.

In all, at least 241 of the predators were counted, marking a nearly 23% increase over the previous year and a doubling of the population since 2017.

Since the first wolf release in 1998, the program has had its share of fits and starts due to illegal killings, a lack of genetic diversity and legal wrangling over management.

“To go from zero wild Mexican wolves at the start to 241 today is truly remarkable,” Mexican Wolf Recovery Coordinator Brady McGee said in a statement.

The annual count started in November, with members of the interagency field team conducting ground and aerial surveys of a rugged forested area along the Arizona-New Mexico line. Aside from tracking radio-collared wolves, they used remote cameras and collected scat to estimate the population.

The work is done over the winter when the population is most stable.

It’s estimated that thousands of Mexican wolves once roamed from central Mexico to New Mexico, southern Arizona and Texas. Predator eradication programs began in the late 1800s and within several decades, the wolves were all but eliminated from the wild.

The rarest subspecies of gray wolf in North America, Mexican wolves were listed as endangered in the 1970s and a U.S.-Mexico captive breeding program was started with the seven remaining wolves in existence.

Wolf-livestock conflicts have been a major challenge of the reintroduction program over the past two decades, with ranchers saying the killing of livestock by wolves remains a threat to their livelihood despite efforts by wildlife managers to scare the wolves away and reimburse some of the losses.

Jim DeVos, Arizona Game and Fish Department Mexican Wolf Coordinator, said recovery for any endangered species is difficult and this has proven to be the case for the Mexican wolf. Still, he described growth over the last year as stunning.

“By every possible measure, progress was made,” he said, pointing to 31 breeding pairs that produced 121 pups, about two-thirds of which survived to the time of the count. The survival rate for pups in their first year is typically around 50%.

The field team was able to capture and collar 21 wolves during the survey. Officials said the additional collars will help them gain a better understanding of wolf activity and help with on-the-ground management.

The cross-fostering of captive bred pups with packs in the wild also has added to the population and has helped to address concerns about genetic diversity. This year, two of the 11 pups that were fostered survived.

Officials also documented the lowest annual total of wolf deaths since 2017 — six in Arizona and six in New Mexico for 2022. In 2020, 29 wolves were reported dead and another 25 the following year.

Environmental groups celebrated the numbers but cautioned Tuesday that more work needs to be done to improve genetics among the wild population and that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service needs to allow wolves to roam beyond what they call arbitrary boundaries that have been established for the recovery area.

Citing low survival rates for cross-fostered pups, the groups have been pushing for more family groups — adult wolves with pups — to be released into the wild.

Hate your signature? Try plastic surgery for autographs

By LEANNE ITALIE AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Doctors, lawyers, celebrities: There's a new cosmetic surgery, of sorts, for which they're all signing up.

By that, we mean handing over money to hire a calligrapher for a fresh take on writing one's own name in cursive. With a pen or another writing implement. On paper.

A corner of TikTok, Instagram and other social media is dedicated to signature design, and it's keeping practitioners busy.

Priscilla Molina in Los Angeles does a minimum of 300 custom signatures a month, offering packages that include up to three ways to sign, limitless drafts or a new set of initials. She charges between \$10 to \$55, using the motto: "Where originality meets legacy."

Molina said her Planet of Names clients include professionals and famous people in search of new ways to sign autographs, though her lips are sealed on the identities of high-profile signature seekers.

In general, Molina said, people come to her for signature makeovers for a simple reason: They're tired of the way they sign their names.

"They're not happy with their signatures. They don't relate to who they are. They don't give the message they want to convey to the world," she said.

Molina and other signature doctors promise a range of styles. For Molina, that includes but is not limited to elegant, subtle, dramatic, sharp, classic, artistic, condensed, curvy, legible — or even illegible.

She and others offer templates and stencils, encouraging clients to practice their newfound John Hancock, with results in a short couple of weeks if they put in the time.

John Hancock, for those light on U.S. history, was president of the Continental Congress and affixed his large and flamboyant signature to the Declaration of Independence when it was signed in 1776.

Fast forward to 2023, where — despite the rise of digital alternatives — signatures, to some, still matter.

Sonia Palamand in St. Louis, Missouri, began noodling with calligraphy in middle school. She drums up business on TikTok, charging \$35 for three signatures while promoting herself in videos that have her designing free of charge for select commenters.

"It's a way for people to reinvent themselves. The way that you present yourself on the outside can affect how you see yourself on the inside. I think with signatures, it's adding some intentionality," she said. "It's also an artistic pursuit."

Artistic, for sure, but what happens when a client's signature must be matched with a signature on file? Think voter rolls, passports, credit cards, health documents, wills, insurance or financial papers.

There's the option of reverting to an old signature, of course, though some happy customers choose to update their worlds of signatures on file to match the new.

But are the new signatures somehow easier for fraudsters to replicate?

James Green, a certified document examiner who has testified in more than 140 legal cases around the world, went through the customer experience at one of the signature design companies. He paid for a package that included three options.

"At this time, I can't throw the signature design services under the bus," he said. "However, the verdict is still out. If clients request a simplistic signature style or limit it to their initials, obviously, the opportunity for fraud increases."

The company Green used, Signature Pro, provided a writing template to help him become more proficient in signing the new way. Green, in Eugene, Oregon, said the three samples "could not be easily simulated due to flourishes, spacing, height relationships" and other proportions.

Asked about copyright, Signature Pro told him the company doesn't retain rights. Signature Pro charges \$170 to \$600 for a range of services, the priciest of which offers unlimited options, a signature for everyday use and another for special occasions.

In Miami, cargo pilot Juan Herrera decided to pursue a signature makeover after his wife gave him a \$750 Montblanc pen and he realized "my signature looked like my daughter's signature in fourth grade."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 76 of 90

He saw a post on Facebook from VipArtni Calligraphy Studio, and decided to dive in, paying about \$99 for 10 signatures from which to choose.

"I always felt that my signature was the same from high school without any style, and it was easy to copy," Herrera said.

He received practice sheets and soon became proficient in the one he picked.

"I use it every day," he said. "I also use it for legal documents."

Yevgeniya Ruzanova, co-founder of VipArtni, said she and an old friend launched the company during the pandemic, providing fancy digital signatures at first before expanding their offerings. The company is a side gig for Ruzanova, who does social media for a sports academy in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

"It's relaxing," Ruzanova said of the calligraphy work. "I was looking for peace of mind."

Most of her customers are in the United States, though she and other companies do serve clients all over the world. Ruzanova, her business partner and a third set of hands create signatures for 30 to 70 clients a month, charging \$99 to \$129. Among their services is providing videos so clients can see their new signatures being drawn, stroke by stroke.

So how long does it take to reinvent your identity in ink?

"I would say some people get used to the new signature within three days if they practice 15 to 20 minutes a day," Ruzanova said. "It all depends on how much effort they put into learning something new."

AP source: NFL owners to discuss Snyder at upcoming meeting

By ROB MAADDI and STEPHEN WHYNO AP Sports Writers

Washington Commanders owner Dan Snyder's future is on the agenda for discussion at upcoming committee meetings in Florida ahead of the annual NFL meeting in Arizona in late March, according to a person familiar with the docket.

The person, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity Tuesday because the person wasn't authorized to release details, said voting to oust Snyder if he chooses not to sell the team remains a possibility.

Indianapolis Colts owner Jim Irsay, at a league meeting in October, said there's "merit to remove" Snyder. That would take an unprecedented vote of 24 of the other 31 team owners to happen.

Two weeks after Irsay's comments, and with multiple investigations ongoing into the team's workplace culture, finances and Snyder himself, he and wife Tanya hired a firm to "consider possible transactions." Asked at the time if the Snyders were considering selling part or all of the team, a spokesperson said, "We are exploring all options."

The sales process has since included the likes of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, Philadelphia 76ers and New Jersey Devils owner Josh Harris and Houston Rockets owner Tilman Fertitta getting involved to various degrees. The New York Post reported that Snyder was blocking Bezos from putting in for a bid, despite him hiring a firm to explore that possibility.

The Commanders are taking issue with the contents of a newspaper report about the sale process and demands being made by Snyder. The team, in a statement late Monday, said a story published hours earlier by The Washington Post is "simply untrue."

Citing anonymous sources, the Post reported that Snyder and his attorneys have demanded that NFL owners and the league indemnify him against future legal liability and costs if he sells the team and threatened to sue if not. The Post said Snyder also wants the findings of a league investigation into him kept private and that his demands angered owners and renewed discussion about possibly taking a vote to remove him.

An NFL spokesperson declined to comment Tuesday on the Post report.

In the aftermath of The Washington Post story about Snyder seeking indemnification, ESPN on Tuesday reported that a federal grand jury has issued subpoenas related to team finances after prosecutors launched an inquiry into a \$55 million loan he took out without the knowledge and approval of his then-minority owners. ESPN said the criminal inquiry is being led by a team of FBI and IRS agents.

Snyder bought out minority owners Fred Smith, Dwight Schar and Bob Rothman in spring 2021 after

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 77 of 90

they sued him the previous November seeking an injunction to allow them to sell their shares of the team. That transaction was approved by league owners.

NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy said in a statement sent to The Associated Press that Snyder and his previous minority owners "had a series of disputes" before going through mediation with an arbitrator and Commissioner Roger Goodell and coming away with an agreement. McCarthy added, "The agreement included full releases of all claims that were or could have been asserted by any party in the arbitration proceeding."

Commanders counsel John Brownlee said in a statement that the team has been fully cooperating with the Eastern District of Virginia since it received a request for records last year.

"The requested records only relate to customer security deposits and the team's ticket sales and revenue," Brownlee said. "The team will continue to cooperate with this investigation."

A team spokesperson added that the Commanders are "completely transparent in sharing all financials with the league for their review and oversight."

Snyder and the team are still under investigation by former U.S. Attorney Mary Jo White, who was retained by the league to look into various aspects of the organization stemming from a congressional probe into workplace misconduct that also included a referral to the Federal Trade Commission for potential business improprieties, which the Commanders denied.

The Attorney General for the District of Columbia filed two suits in civil court against the Commanders late last year: one for a scheme to cheat fans out of ticket money and another naming Snyder, Goodell and the league, saying they colluded to deceive fans about an investigation into the team's workplace culture that ended with a \$10 million fine and no written report. The Commanders settled with the state of Maryland, agreeing to return security deposits to former season ticket holders and pay a \$250,000 penalty.

An investigation by the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Reform, launched in October 2021 and including testimony from Snyder, Goodell and many others, said the team fostered a toxic workplace culture. A final report by Democrats overseeing the investigation said the team had a pattern of "ignoring and downplaying sexual misconduct" and what female former employees described as hundreds of instances of sexual harassment by men at the top levels of the organization.

The Oscar universe belongs to 'Everything Everywhere'

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — They dreamt up universes of hotdog fingers, googly-eyed rocks and "Raccacoonie." But Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, in this world or another, never imagined the kind of runaway success "Everything Everywhere All at Once" would have on the Oscar trail.

For the past year, since "Everything Everywhere All at Once" debuted at SXSW, the filmmaking duo known as the Daniels has been living in what has sometimes felt to them like a parallel dimension. They never expected that their madcap multiverse tale would take them to the Oscars. They still, sometimes, don't believe it.

"It feels like we're in our movie sometimes," Scheinert says. "At some point we're going to get pulled out of this joke and be back to our own lives and be like, 'Oh, wouldn't that be cool? Too bad.'"

Yet "Everything Everywhere All at Once" has emerged as the most improbable of Academy Awards heavyweights. An absurdist indie that pairs existentialism and everything bagels, released way back in March last year, is not just heading for a few possible wins at the Oscars on March 12. It's poised to steamroll.

It's the favorite to win best picture, best director, best actress for Michelle Yeoh, best supporting actor for Ke Huy Quan and potentially best supporting actress for Jamie Lee Curtis. A movie with fanny-pack-styled kung fu about a middle-aged woman filing her taxes is on course to best blockbusters ("Top Gun: Maverick") and Spielberg ("The Fabelmans"), alike.

If "Everything Everywhere All at Once" — nominated for a leading 11 Oscars and already a winner with the predictive producers, actors and directors guilds — wins best picture, it will be one of the most anti-Oscar bait winners ever. Among other historic feats, it will almost certainly be the first best picture winner

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 78 of 90

to prominently feature butt plugs.

"In kink-positive people's defense, you can put almost anything up your butt," Scheinert says, laughing. "So, in a way, every single Oscar movie has a butt plug. You just have to be creative."

Getting creative has been part of the Daniels' method since they first met at while studying film at Emerson College in Boston. Kwan, a Massachusetts native, and Scheinert, from Alabama, started off making music videos and shorts. Their feature film debut, 2016's "Swiss Army Man," starred Daniel Radcliffe as a flatulence-emitting corpse. "Everything Everywhere All at Once" is just their second feature. The Daniels are each 35.

The unexpected success — the A24 release has grossed more than \$100 million worldwide against a \$14.3 million budget — has thrown off the trajectory the Daniels imagined they might be on. In a recent, rare lull between awards ceremonies, they spoke by Zoom from Kwan's home office. He apologized for the mess, a disorder that reminded him of their film.

"I keep saying I'll do it once the movie promoting is done," Kwan says, nearly a year after it opened.

However many Oscars "Everything Everywhere All at Once" ultimately wins — it won't be a bagel — it's clear to Kwan that nothing will ever be quite the same after their unexpected lurch onto Hollywood's highest stage.

"I've gone through so many cycles of euphoria and depression and manic episodes," Kwan, a gentle and introspective soul, says. "I've realized that I'm never going to get to back to my old life. That struck me at one of my low points and I had to actually mourn the loss of our lives. That can be both incredible and sad at the same time."

When "Everything Everywhere All at Once" landed in theaters, it ignited the specialty film business after two years of pandemic, driving moviegoers back to art houses and becoming A24's biggest box-office smash. But even then, awards talk was mostly farfetched. It wasn't until the fall, when it won best film at the Gotham Awards that the buzz started to get real. Affection for the film just kept building. Early naysaying that the film was too strange for older academy voters has proved wrong.

Scheinert wryly recalls telling cast and crew on set: "We're not making an Oscar movie here. This movie is about quantity, not quality." And yet, by a twist of fate, a movie made without any thought of the Academy Awards is set to conquer them.

"The industry at large is going through a lot of soul searching," says Kwan. "What happened with theatrical during the pandemic, what's happening now with streaming, the fact that OscarsSoWhite has caused the makeup of the academy to change. We are in such a moment of flux that I do think somehow this strange movie has stuck a chord."

"We feel like this film is reflective of what reality feels like, to us, at least," Kwan adds. "The fact that people are responding to it is really affirming: Oh, you see what I see."

At a time when Hollywood's main studio product is in franchises, remakes and sequels, "Everything Everywhere All at Once" is also a movie brimming with originality. (This is the first Oscar year two sequels, "Maverick" and "Avatar: The Way of Water," are nominated for best picture.) A vote for "Everything Everywhere All at Once" is a vote for something different.

"There's something really important about stretching your own imagination in your everyday life. We create these narratives about ourselves and then we accidentally get trapped in them often," says Kwan. "I grew up with a lot of self-doubt and self-loathing. The fact that I'm now a director who's been able to find some success is just such a narrative-shattering, imagination-stretching idea that I would have never been able to imagine a few years ago."

To Scheinert, the film's "secret weapon" is its cast. Even if the movie isn't to your taste, he says, "You can't hate Ke and Michelle." Yeoh, long one of the big-screen's martial arts powerhouses, has said throughout awards season that "Everything Everywhere All at Once" opened a new door to her as an actor. Quan, a former child star who had given up acting after years of struggle, has said an Oscar wasn't his goal. He just wanted a job.

"If our movie can un-typecast people and un-typecast the community, that's a pretty dope thing," says Scheinert.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 79 of 90

Reached by phone the morning of Oscar nominations, Yeoh said she never imagined, when they started making "Everything Everywhere All at Once," that they were destined for the Academy Awards.

"We're a tiny little movie with a big beating heart, without a doubt," said Yeoh. "We had ambitions because we felt that our story just needed to be told. In times of chaos and turbulence, this is a movie about healing. It's about love. It's about a very ordinary person — which we all are — who's given the opportunity to be a superhero with superpowers that are love and compassion."

On stage after stage, the Daniels, Yeoh, Quan and more have brought the house down with moving speeches about Asian representation. At the Screen Actors Guild Awards on Sunday, Quan said: "To all those at home who are watching, who are struggling and waiting to be seen, please keep on going because the spotlight will one day find you." Ninety-four-year-old James Hong, the film's crotchety patriarch, reflected at the SAGs on Hollywood's dismal history of depicting Asian and Asian-American life. Then he declared triumphantly: "Look at us now!"

"Everything Everything Everywhere All at Once," an antic metaphor for the immigrant experience of Asian Americans, has made its own case for a different movie universe, one where heroes look like Yeoh's Evelyn Quan Wang or Quan's Waymond Wang.

"If I was growing up with a film like this or with this conversation happening, I would be a very different kind of person and a very different kind of Asian American," says Kwan. "Most of my life, the Asian part of my experience was something to be erased or something to ignore because it felt more like a liability than a strength."

So there are many alternate realities to the lives behind "Everything Everywhere All at Once" — mostly less joyful ones where this movie doesn't exist for them, or anyone else.

Rewind exactly a year and a day from the March 12 Oscars and the Daniels and company were standing on the SXSW stage in Austin, Texas, with little idea of what was to come. Asked by an audience member what got left on the cutting room floor, Scheinert with a twinge of regret suggested another universe, entirely: Spaghetti Baby Noodle Boy, with a talking macaroni who doesn't understand why he's not spaghetti, voiced by Jenny Slate.

Another road not taken, yes. But as Scheinert noted, there's always the DVD.

Mexican president: Mexico has more democracy than US

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexico's president said Tuesday his country is more democratic than the United States.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's testy comments came after U.S. officials took note of heated public debate in Mexico over López Obrador's recently approved electoral reforms, which critics allege could weaken Mexico's democracy. The reforms would cut spending for the country's electoral authorities.

López Obrador angrily rejected any U.S. comment, even though U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price was careful to say in a statement Monday that "We respect Mexico's sovereignty."

The Mexican president responded "there is more democracy in Mexico than could exist in the United States."

"If they want to have a debate on this issue, let's do it," López Obrador said pugnaciously. "I have evidence to prove there is more liberty and democracy in our country."

The Mexican president is notoriously touchy about criticism, whether it comes from human rights groups, non-governmental organizations, the press, or Mexican regulatory or oversight agencies.

Price said in a statement that "Today, in Mexico, we see a great debate on electoral reforms on the independence of electoral and judicial institutions that illustrates Mexico's vibrant democracy."

"We respect Mexico's sovereignty. We believe that a well-resourced, independent electoral system and respect for judicial independence support healthy democracy."

At the root of the conflict are plans by López Obrador, which were approved last week by Mexico's Senate, to cut salaries and funding for local election offices, and scale back training for citizens who operate and oversee polling stations. The changes would also reduce sanctions for candidates who fail to report campaign spending.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 80 of 90

López Obrador denies the reforms are a threat to democracy and says criticism is elitist. He argues that the funds would be better spent on the poor.

Tens of thousands of people demonstrated over the weekend in Mexico City's main plaza, calling the cuts a threat to democracy.

Mexican president says Tesla to build plant in Mexico

By MARK STEVENSON Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexico's president announced Tuesday that electric car company Tesla has committed to building a major plant in the industrial hub of Monterrey in northern Mexico.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said the promise came in phone calls he had Friday and Monday with Tesla head Elon Musk. It would be Tesla's third plant outside the U.S., after one in Shanghai and one near Berlin.

López Obrador had previously ruled out such a plant in the arid northern state of Nuevo Leon where Monterrey is the capital, because he didn't want water-hungry factories in a region that suffers water shortages. But he said Musk's company had offered commitments to address those concerns, including using recycled water.

"There is one commitment that all the water used in the manufacture of electric automobiles will be recycled water," López Obrador said.

The president said it would be a large investment without giving a dollar amount, and did not specify what the plant would produce. He said it was unclear if it would produce batteries, an industry Mexico desperately wants despite not having any current domestic supply of lithium.

López Obrador said the company planned to release more details on Wednesday.

"This is going to mean a considerable investment and many, many jobs," López Obrador said. "My understanding is that it will be very big."

Monterrey is highly industrialized and close to the U.S. border, and had long been considered the front-runner for any Tesla investment.

But the city suffered water shortages in 2022 that were so severe that many homes went weeks with intermittent or no water supply. The government is building a 60-mile (100 kilometer) pipeline to bring more water in from a dam.

López Obrador had previously said his government "simply won't grant permits" for any new plants there. But apparently Musk's proposal overrode the president's stance.

Gabriela Siller, chief economist at Nuevo Leon-based Banco Base, said the Tesla investment — which she estimated could be worth \$10 billion — represented such a large amount that it trumped any of the president's objections.

López Obrador "could not turn this down. It would have had a very big political cost for him," said Siller.

The announcement was a disappointment for more water-rich southern states that had begun jockeying for the Tesla plant after López Obrador's comments last week.

The governor of Nuevo Leon state, where billboards went up last year saying "Welcome Tesla," crowed about Tuesday's announcement.

"Mexico won, Nuevo Leon (NL) won, WE ALL WIN!" Gov. Samuel García wrote in his Twitter account.

López Obrador said Mexico wouldn't match any U.S. subsidies to win the Tesla plant, referring to U.S. incentives under the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act.

"A subsidy like that, we cannot give subsidies like that," the president said, adding "Mr. Musk was very attentive, respectful" of Mexico's position.

Tesla is expected to announce plans for its "Gen 3" vehicle platform on Wednesday at its annual investor day at a factory near Austin, Texas.

Musk previously has floated the idea of building a \$25,000 electric vehicle, which would cost about \$20,000 less than the current Model 3, now Tesla's least-expensive car. Many automakers build lower-cost models in Mexico to save on labor costs and protect profit margins.

Musk also is expected to show off the company's production line at the Austin plant, as well as discuss long-term expansion plans, how it will spend capital investment dollars, and other subjects.

What time is it on moon? Europe pushing for lunar time zone

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer
CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — With more lunar missions than ever on the horizon, the European Space Agency wants to give the moon its own time zone.

This week, the agency said space organizations around the world are considering how best to keep time on the moon. The idea came up during a meeting in the Netherlands late last year, with participants agreeing on the urgent need to establish "a common lunar reference time," said the space agency's Pietro Giordano, a navigation system engineer.

"A joint international effort is now being launched towards achieving this," Giordano said in a statement.

For now, a moon mission runs on the time of the country that is operating the spacecraft. European space officials said an internationally accepted lunar time zone would make it easier for everyone, especially as more countries and even private companies aim for the moon and NASA gets set to send astronauts there.

NASA had to grapple with the time question while designing and building the International Space Station, fast approaching the 25th anniversary of the launch of its first piece.

While the space station doesn't have its own time zone, it runs on Coordinated Universal Time, or UTC, which is meticulously based on atomic clocks. That helps to split the time difference between NASA and the Canadian Space Agency, and the other partnering space programs in Russia, Japan and Europe.

The international team looking into lunar time is debating whether a single organization should set and maintain time on the moon, according to the European Space Agency.

There are also technical issues to consider. Clocks run faster on the moon than on Earth, gaining about 56 microseconds each day, the space agency said. Further complicating matters, ticking occurs differently on the lunar surface than in lunar orbit.

Perhaps most importantly, lunar time will have to be practical for astronauts there, noted the space agency's Bernhard Hufenbach. NASA is shooting for its first flight to the moon with astronauts in more than a half-century in 2024, with a lunar landing as early as 2025.

"This will be quite a challenge" with each day lasting as long as 29.5 Earth days, Hufenbach said in a statement. "But having established a working time system for the moon, we can go on to do the same for other planetary destinations."

Mars Standard Time, anyone?

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Suspect in Florida TV crew attack faces more murder charges

By FREIDA FRISARO Associated Press
FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — A 19-year-old Florida man is now facing three first-degree-murder charges related to a shooting last week that killed a television news reporter, a 9-year-old girl and a 38-year-old woman, sheriff's officials said Tuesday.

Orange County Sheriff's officials released an arrest warrant Tuesday morning that included two new murder charges against Keith Melvin Moses in the attack in an Orlando neighborhood last Wednesday.

Investigators said Moses fatally shot Nathacha Augustin seconds after the car she was riding in stopped to offer him a ride. A witness in the car described Moses as "acting strange" and sweating before the shooting.

Moses ran after the shooting and hours later returned to the scene while television crews were working on a story about the shooting, authorities said.

Investigators said Moses first went into a nearby house, where he shot T'yonna Major, a young gymnast, and her mother. The mother told investigators she woke up to her daughter yelling, "he shot me,"

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 82 of 90

as she ran and jumped on her bed, the warrant said. She said the man then shot her in the arm. She told investigators she barricaded herself and her daughter in the master bedroom until deputies arrived.

She said T'Yonna described the suspect and said he had come through the rear door to the home, the warrant said. The mother said she normally kept the doors locked but sometimes left them unlocked after letting the dog out.

T'Yonna died at a hospital a short time after the shooting.

After leaving the Major's house, the suspect walked to the vehicle belonging to the Spectrum News 13 crew, where he fatally shot reporter Dylan Lyons and critically wounded video journalist Jesse Walden.

Deputies responded to the scene after getting 911 calls from both locations.

Investigators talked to a reporter and videographer from WFTV, another news station that was covering the story of the initial killing.

They told deputies the man had been walking toward them with a gun and they were able to video him as he left the scene. They called 911 and then made their way to the Spectrum News 13 vehicle, where they saw Lyons and Walden had been shot, the warrant said.

Deputies found Moses a short distance from the area within minutes. They said he was sweating as he walked toward them. They found a Glock .40-caliber handgun in his pants which they noted was still hot to the touch, meaning it had been fired recently.

The warrant said a witness was able to identify Moses through a photo lineup.

The warrant noted the gun's slide was in the locked position and the magazine was still inserted, which is consistent with the firearm being shot "until it ran out of ammunition and the slide locking to the rear."

Moses was taken to a hospital where he was evaluated, but the warrant said he did not communicate with deputies or the hospital staff but made facial expressions, such as smiling. At times he "made hand symbols of guns as he pointed the gun at his head," the warrant said.

Once at the sheriff's office, he continued refusing to speak with investigators, pretending to be asleep. He tried to leave the interview room twice and when deputies grabbed his arms and tried to subdue him after he got out of the room, he screamed continuously, "I can't breathe."

The Office of the Public Defender for Orange and Osceola counties is representing Moses and has declined to comment. Moses waived the right to be in court during a first appearance hearing Tuesday, according to a spokesperson for the Orange County Jail.

Tom Sizemore's family 'deciding end of life matters'

LOS ANGELES (AP) — More than a week after Tom Sizemore suffered a brain aneurysm, a representative says the actor's family is "now deciding end of life matters."

"Today, doctors informed his family that there is no further hope and have recommended end of life decision," Sizemore's manager Charles Lago said in a statement issued Monday night. Lago said another statement would be issued Wednesday.

Sizemore collapsed early Feb. 18 at his home in Los Angeles and has been hospitalized since, remaining "in critical condition, in a coma and in intensive care." The brain aneurysm was the result of a stroke, Lago's statement said.

Sizemore, 61, has acted in films like "Saving Private Ryan," "Heat" and "Black Hawk Down." While he received accolades for his acting, his career foundered amid a litany of drug abuse arrests and run-ins with law enforcement, including domestic violence and abuse allegations. In 2003, he was convicted of domestic violence charges against his ex-girlfriend, former Hollywood madam Heidi Fleiss.

In 2017, a woman accused Sizemore of abusing her as an 11-year-old during production on the film "Born Killers." No charges were filed.

Sizemore has two children, 17-year-old twin boys.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 83 of 90

US economy sending mixed signals: Here's what it all means

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Maybe it was just too good to be true.

For a few weeks in late January and early February, the U.S. economy seemed to have reached a rare sweet spot. Inflation was steadily slowing from painful heights. And growth and hiring remained surprisingly sturdy despite ever-higher interest rates imposed by the Federal Reserve.

Perhaps, the thinking went, the Fed's inflation fighters were managing to nail a notoriously difficult "soft landing": A scenario in which borrowing and spending slow just enough to tame inflation without tipping the world's biggest economy into a recession.

"We were looking at landings that were pillow-soft," recalled Diane Swonk, chief economist at the accounting giant KPMG. "There was a bit of glee about that."

The financial markets roared their approval in the first six weeks of 2023, with stock prices surging on expectations that the Fed might soon pause and eventually reverse the series of aggressive rate hikes it began nearly a year ago.

Then something went wrong.

It began on Valentine's Day. The government said its closely watched consumer price index had surged 0.5% from December to January — five times the increase from November to December.

Over the next week and a half, two more government releases told essentially the same story: The Fed's drive to curb inflation wasn't even close to being won.

That realization brought a related worry: If high inflation was even stickier than we thought, then the Fed would likely keep raising rates — and keep them high — longer than was assumed. Those ever-higher borrowing rates would make it more probable that a recession, with layoffs and business failures, might occur.

"It's heartbreaking," Swonk said. "This has put the Fed back in defensive mode, and they're going to have to harden their resolve on rate hikes."

Unsurprisingly, the stock market has recoiled at the prospect.

Here's a closer look at the economy's vital signs at a perplexing time of high interest rates, still-punishing inflation and surprisingly strong economic gains.

INFLATION

Consumer inflation, not much of a problem, on average, since the early 1980s, started picking up in the spring of 2021 as the economy roared out of recession and Americans spent freely again. At first, Fed Chair Jerome Powell and some economists dismissed the resurgent price spikes as likely a temporary problem that would resolve itself once clogged supply chains had returned to normal.

But the supply bottlenecks lasted longer than expected, and so did high inflation. Worse, Russia's invasion of Ukraine a year ago sent energy and food prices rocketing. By June 2022, consumer prices were 9.1% higher than they'd been a year earlier — the hottest year-over-year inflation in more than four decades.

By then, the Fed had begun, belatedly, to respond. It has raised its benchmark rate eight times since March 2022 in its most aggressive credit tightening since the early 1980s.

In response, consumer inflation edged down from its mid-2022 peak. It posted milder year-over-year increases for seven straight months as supply chains unclogged and higher borrowing costs worked their way through the economy, putting a brake on overspending.

Financial markets appeared ready to declare the inflation dragon all but slain.

Then came January's unexpectedly hot consumer inflation data. Two days later, the government reported that wholesale prices had jumped 0.7% from December to January, nearly twice what forecasters had expected.

Next came bad news from the inflation gauge the Fed watches most closely: The government's personal consumption expenditures price index. It accelerated 0.6% from December to January, far above the 0.2% November-to-December uptick. On a year-over-year basis, prices rose 5.4%, up slightly from the annual increase in December and well above the Fed's 2% inflation target.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 84 of 90

The PCE report “adds to the difficult if not impossible task facing the Fed in terms of getting inflation back to its 2% target without driving the economy into a ditch,” said Joshua Shapiro, chief U.S. economist at the Maria Fiorini Ramirez Inc. consultancy.

One concern is that this time, inflation may prove harder to slow than it was initially. Households have increasingly shifted their spending away from physical goods like patio furniture and appliances to experiences like traveling, restaurant meals and entertainment events. Inflationary pressures, too, have shifted from goods toward services, where price acceleration can be harder to tame.

In part, that’s because chronic labor shortages at stores, restaurants, hotels and other service-sector industries have led many employers in those industries to keep raising pay to attract or retain workers. Those employers, in turn, have generally raised their prices to make up for their higher labor costs, thereby fueling inflation.

Some economists expect the Fed to raise its benchmark rate by a substantial half-percentage point when it next meets March 21-22, after having announced only a quarter-point hike when it met Jan. 31-Feb. 1.

THE OVERALL ECONOMY

The flipside of the disquieting inflation news is good news on the state of the economy — or what would be considered good news in normal times. Even burdened by rising borrowing rates, the economy has proved stronger and sturdier than most forecasters had imagined.

“This economy today looks very different from where we thought it was in mid-January,” said Peter Hooper, an economist at Deutsche Bank. “Before, we thought that things were slowing down, the labor market was softening, wage and price inflation was coming down.”

With inflation pressures still persistent, Hooper said, “there’s this growing expectation that the Fed has clearly more work to do.”

The economy regained its footing last summer after enduring an anemic first half of 2022. The nation’s gross domestic product — its total output of goods and services — contracted from January through March last year and again from April through June.

Though one informal definition of a recession is two straight quarters of negative growth, most economists set aside such concerns this time. They noted that the economy had shrunk in early 2022 because of factors unrelated to its underlying health: Leaner business inventories and a surge in imports, which widened the U.S. trade deficit.

GDP quickly regained momentum: It grew at a solid 3.2% annual rate from July through September and a 2.7% rate from October through December. Steady consumer spending contributed heavily to the growth.

Economists still foresee a recession sometime this year — they were always skeptical of a soft landing — but now see it coming later than they’d expected. A survey of 48 forecasters issued Monday by the National Association for Business Economics found that only a quarter of the respondents think a recession will have started by the end of March, down from half who had predicted so in December.

JOBS

The remarkable strength of the American job market has defied expectations throughout the economic tumult of the COVID years. 2021 and 2022 were the two best years for hiring in U.S. government records dating to 1940.

Job creation was expected to slow this year. Not so far. In January, employers added a blistering 517,000 jobs, far surpassing December’s 260,000 gain. And the unemployment rate reached 3.4%, its lowest level since 1969.

What’s more, American workers as a whole are enjoying nearly unheard-of job security despite some high-profile layoffs in technology and a few other sectors. The government’s count of monthly dismissals and layoffs sank below 1.5 million for the first time in 2021 and has stayed there since. There are now about two job openings, on average, for each unemployed American.

But a robust job market also puts upward pressure on wages — and therefore on prices. Which means further inflation.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 85 of 90

"The kind of wage gains we're seeing and the kind of tightness in the labor market is consistent with 3.5% to 4% inflation, not 2% or 3%," KPMG's Swonk said. "That's the hard reality of where we are."

CONSUMERS

Their jobs secure, their bank accounts still bolstered by pandemic-era savings, Americans have continued to spend, shrugging off higher interest rates and prices.

In January, retail sales rose at their fastest pace in nearly two years, rebounding from a tepid holiday shopping season. Even after accounting for inflation, consumers spent their after-tax dollars at the fastest pace since March 2021. Consumer spending on services, ranging from health care to dinners out to airline tickets, last year accounted for 95% of the economy's growth.

Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics, estimates that consumers still have \$1.5 trillion in "excess savings" — above what they'd have socked away if the pandemic hadn't hit — from government aid and from cutting back while stuck at home at the peak of the pandemic.

Still, inflation continues to cause hardships for millions of households. Adjusted for inflation, average hourly earnings have fallen for 22 straight months, government data shows. Many low- and middle-income families are turning to credit cards to sustain their spending.

HOUSING

The Fed's rate hikes, which so far have had only a limited effect on the overall economy, have walloped one industry: Housing.

Residential real estate depends on the willingness of people to borrow for what's typically the costliest purchase of their lives. As the Fed continually jacked up interest rates last year, the average rate on a 30-year fixed mortgage topped 7% last fall — more than double where it began 2022 — before dropping back slightly.

The damage has been severe. Sales of existing homes have dropped for a record 12 straight months, according to the National Association of Realtors. And the government's GDP report showed that investment in housing plunged at an annual rate of nearly 26% from October through December after having tumbled 18% from April through June and 27% from July through September.

How officials cracked case of eyedrops that blinded people

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The patients' eyes were painfully inflamed. They could sense light but could see almost nothing else. A doctor called one case the worst eye infection he'd ever seen.

It was the beginning of a national outbreak caused by an extremely worrisome bacteria — one that some say heralds an era in which antibiotics no longer work and seemingly routine infections get horribly out of hand.

At last count, 58 Americans in 13 states have been infected, including at least one who died and at least five who suffered permanent vision loss. All have been linked to tainted eyedrops, leading to a recall.

Experts marvel at how disease detectives pieced together the case: Patients were scattered across the country. The illnesses occurred over the span of months. The infections were found in different parts of the body — in the blood of some patients, in the lungs of others.

But scientists also shudder, because they have long worried common bacteria will evolve so that antibiotics no longer work against them.

"This really shows us that it's not something theoretical and in the future. It's here," said Dr. Luis Ostrosky, an infectious diseases expert at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston.

This account is drawn from phone and email interviews with U.S. disease investigators, health officials in three states and regulators in the U.S. and India.

The investigation started in May in Los Angeles County, California. A patient who'd recently been to an

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 86 of 90

ophthalmologist came in with a bad eye infection. A month later, local health officials got a second report. Another bad eye infection, same eye doctor.

Two more cases were reported in the county before the summer was over. The patients' eyes were inflamed with heavy yellow pus that obscured most of the pupil. Among the four, two had complete vision loss in the affected eye.

The hospital that reported the first infection determined it was caused by a bacteria called *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*. The institution, which was equipped to do advanced genetic testing, quickly realized the bacteria had a rare gene that protected it from the effects of commonly used antibiotics.

It was an early break for investigators, said Kelsey OYong, of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health.

OYong and her colleagues knew they were dealing with a scary germ, and they notified the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Pseudomonas infections are not new. Drug-resistant strains of the bacteria cause more than 30,000 infections annually among hospitalized patients in the U.S. and more than 2,500 deaths, the CDC said. It can spread through contaminated hands or medical equipment, and is particularly dangerous to fragile patients who have catheters or are on breathing machines.

But the California infections were in patients' eyes, not more common spots like the blood and lungs. Also, the lab analysis determined the infections were caused by a *Pseudomonas* germ that could resist just about every antibiotic.

The only thing that worked was a newer antibiotic called cefiderocol, administered by IV.

Over the summer, *Pseudomonas* outbreaks were seen at long-term care facilities in two other states.

In Connecticut, the first case was in June. Eventually, the bacteria was found in 25 patients from five nursing homes in different parts of the state, said Christopher Boyle, a spokesperson for Connecticut's health department.

In Davis County, Utah, north of Salt Lake City, the first of six cases was reported to the CDC in August. While the patients had the bacteria, none actually got sick, said Sarah Willardson of the Davis County Health Department.

L.A. County health investigators thought the cases there might be due to some kind of equipment contamination at the eye doctor's office.

But that suspicion faded in early October, when genetic testing showed the clusters in California, Connecticut and Utah were all caused by the same bacteria strain — a version of the germ that hadn't been seen anywhere before.

"That made us start thinking that this was some kind of a product," said Maroya Walters, the CDC official supervising the investigation.

As the year went on, other reports of drug-resistant *Pseudomonas* came in, including a Washington man who died with a bloodstream infection.

Given the initial cluster at the California ophthalmologist's office, investigators suspected an eye care product was the culprit, though that hypothesis was complicated by the fact that the infections at the long-term care facilities were mainly found in the lungs.

But it wasn't impossible. Tear ducts drain into the nasal cavity, which leads to the lungs and could provide a path to deep inside the body.

In early November, investigators determined most of the infected Connecticut patients had been given artificial tears, though it wasn't clear who had been given which brand.

Then, on Nov. 9, a Florida hospital contacted the CDC to report bad eye infections connected to an outpatient clinic. A check of artificial tears brands used in Connecticut, Florida and Utah pointed to one common product: EzriCare Artificial Tears, an over-the-counter product marketed in the U.S. by New Jersey-based EzriCare LLC and made in India by Global Pharma Healthcare.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 87 of 90

The *Pseudomonas* bacteria is “pretty much everywhere” in India and the drug-resistant germ is common in many hospitals, said Dr. Gagandeep Kang, who studies microbes in the Christian Medical College in the same state as Global Pharma’s factory.

In January, genetic sequencing confirmed the Florida cases were caused by the same bacteria strain as the clusters in California, Connecticut and Utah. On Jan. 20, the CDC urged doctors to avoid recommending the EzriCare product.

There was no recall or widespread public notice, however. Investigators had strong circumstantial evidence pointing toward the EzriCare drops, but didn’t get more conclusive proof until more than a week later after testing found the bacteria in seven open bottles of EzriCare Artificial Tears in Connecticut and New Jersey.

In early February, CDC officials issued a public health alert and the FDA recalled the EzriCare eyedrops and Delsam Pharma’s Artificial Tears, another product made by Global Pharma. Last week, the recall was expanded to include Delsam Pharma’s Artificial Eye Ointment.

Global Pharma didn’t respond to emailed requests for comment.

A month before the first recall, the FDA blocked imports of Global Pharma products.

FDA spokesperson Audra Harrison said the U.S. import ban was “unrelated to the outbreak,” and was instead based on the company’s “inadequate response” to a records request and problems with its manufacturing procedures. She wouldn’t say what those problems were.

The subsequent recall, she said, was recommended due to lack of microbial testing and issues with the product’s formulation and packaging.

The FDA, tasked with assuring the safety of drug products shipped to the U.S., has long struggled to inspect facilities in China and India that account for the vast majority of raw materials used in American medicines. A search of FDA’s online inspection database shows no records of agency staff visiting the plant.

Indian drug inspectors visited the plant and the country’s drug controller asked Global Pharma to stop making all products related to treating eye disorders until they finish their investigation, said P.V. Vijayalakshmi, the drug controller for southern Tamil Nadu state.

Ostrosky, the University of Texas expert, called the U.S. investigation “a public health victory” saying it shows that fighting drug-resistant bacteria requires international collaboration and investment. But he also said the case is disheartening.

An infection that’s usually easy to treat with common antibiotic eyedrops “has become an infection that can be deadly and has pretty much no treatment except one IV antibiotic,” he said.

Pseudomonas now joins a growing list of bugs — including bacteria that cause urinary tract infections — that are getting increasingly difficult to treat, Ostrosky added.

“It’s like a wave coming for us,” he said.

Nissan recalls over 800K SUVs; key defect can cut off engine

DETROIT (AP) — Nissan is recalling more than 809,000 small SUVs in the U.S. and Canada because a key problem can cause the ignition to shut off while they’re being driven.

The recall covers certain Rogues from the 2014 through 2020 model years, as well as Rogue Sports from 2017 through 2022.

Nissan says the SUVs have jackknife folding keys that may not stay fully open. If driven with the key partially folded, a driver could touch the fob, inadvertently turning off the engine.

This can cause loss of engine power and power brakes, and the air bags might not inflate in a crash.

The company says it’s not aware of any crashes or injuries caused by the problem.

Nissan hasn’t come up with a fix yet. Owners will be notified in March with an interim letter telling them not to attach anything else to the key ring. Then they’ll get another letter telling them to take their SUVs

in for repairs. The automaker says owners with keys that won't stay in the open position should contact their dealers.

Suspected schoolgirl poisoning attacks rattle a shaken Iran

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Over the past three months, hundreds of young girls attending different schools in Iran have become overpowered by what are believed to be noxious fumes wafting into their classrooms, with some ending up weakened on hospital beds.

Officials in Iran's theocracy initially dismissed these incidents, but now describe them as intentional attacks involving some 30 schools identified in local media reports, with some speculating they could be aimed at trying to close schools for girls in this country of over 80 million people.

The reported attacks come at a sensitive time for Iran, which already has faced months of protests after the September death of Mahsa Amini following her arrest by the country's morality police.

The authorities have not named suspects, but the attacks have raised fears that other girls could be poisoned apparently just for seeking an education — something that's never been challenged before in the over 40 years since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Iran itself also has been calling on the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan to have girls and women return to school.

The first cases emerged in late November in Qom, some 125 kilometers (80 miles) southwest of Iran's capital, Tehran. There, in a heartland of Shiite theologians and pilgrims, students at the Noor Yazdanshahr Conservatory fell ill in November. They then fell ill again in December.

Other cases followed, with children complaining about headaches, heart palpitations, feeling lethargic or otherwise unable to move. Some described smelling tangerines, chlorine or cleaning agents.

At first, authorities didn't link the cases. It's winter in Iran, where temperatures often drop below freezing at night. Many schools are heated by natural gas, leading to speculation it could be carbon monoxide poisoning affecting the girls. The country's education minister initially dismissed the reports as "rumors."

But the schools affected at first only taught young women, fueling suspicion it wasn't accidental. At least one case followed in Tehran, with others in Qom and Boroujerd. At least one boys' school has been targeted as well.

Slowly, officials began taking the claims seriously. Iran's prosecutor-general ordered an investigation, saying "there are possibilities of deliberate criminal acts." Iran's Intelligence Ministry reportedly investigated as well.

On Sunday, Iran's state-run IRNA news agency filed multiple stories with officials acknowledging the scope of the crisis.

"After several poisonings of students in Qom schools, it was found that some people wanted all schools, especially girls' schools, to be closed," IRNA quoted Younes Panahi, a deputy health minister, as saying.

A Health Ministry spokesman, Pedram Pakaieen, said the poisoning didn't come from a virus or a microbe. Neither elaborated further.

Ali Reza Monadi, a national parliament member who sits on its education committee, described the poisonings as "intentional."

The "existence of the devil's will to prevent girls from education is a serious danger and it is considered a very bad news," he said, according to IRNA. "We have to try to find roots" of this.

Already, parents have pulled their students from classes, in effect shuttering some schools in Qom in recent weeks, according to a report by Shargh, a reformist news website based in Tehran. On Tuesday, another suspected attack reportedly occurred targeting a girls' school in Pardis on the eastern outskirts of Tehran.

The poisonings come as getting verifiable information out of Iran remains difficult given the crackdown on all dissent stemming from the protests and internet slowdowns put in place by the government. At least 95 journalists have been arrested by authorities since the start of the protests, according to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 89 of 90

Overall, the security force crackdown has killed at least 530 people and seen 19,700 others detained, according to Human Rights Activists in Iran.

Attacks on women have happened in the past in Iran, most recently with a wave of acid attacks in 2014 around Isfahan, at the time believed to have been carried out by hard-liners targeting women for how they dressed. But even in the chaos surrounding the Islamic Revolution, no one targeted schoolgirls for attending classes.

Jamileh Kadivar, a prominent former reformist lawmaker and journalist, wrote in Tehran's Ettelaat newspaper that as many as 400 students have fallen ill in the poisonings.

She warned "subversive opposition" groups could be behind the attacks. However, she also raised the possibility of "domestic extremists" who "aim to replace the Islamic Republic with a caliphate or a Taliban-type Islamic emirate."

She cited a supposed communique from a group calling itself Fidayeen Velayat that purportedly said, "the study of girls is considered haram" and threatened to "spread the poisoning of girls throughout Iran" if girls' schools remain open.

Iranian officials have not acknowledged any group called Fidayeen Velayat, which roughly translates to English as "Devotees of the Guardianship." However, Kadivar's mention of the threat in print comes as she remains influential within Iranian politics and has ties to its theocratic ruling class. The head of Ettelaat newspaper also is appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Another prominent reformist politician, Azar Mansouri, also linked the suspected poisoning attacks to hard-line groups, referencing the Isfahan acid attacks.

"We said the acid attacks were organized. You said: 'You are disturbing public opinion!'" Mansouri wrote online. "If operatives of the attacks were identified and punished then, today a group of reactionaries would not have ganged up on our innocent girls in the schools."

Activists also worry this could be a disturbing new trend in the country.

"This is a very fundamentalist thinking surfacing in society," said Hadi Ghaemi, the executive director of the New York-based Center for Human Rights in Iran. "We have no idea how widespread this group is but the fact they have been able to carry it out with such impunity is so troubling."

Today in History: MARCH 1, Watergate figures indicted

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, March 1, the 60th day of 2023. There are 305 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 1, 1974, seven people, including former Nixon White House aides H.R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, former Attorney General John Mitchell and former assistant Attorney General Robert Mardian, were indicted on charges of conspiring to obstruct justice in connection with the Watergate break-in. (These four defendants were convicted in January 1975, though Mardian's conviction was later reversed.)

On this date:

In 1815, Napoleon, having escaped exile in Elba, arrived in Cannes, France, and headed for Paris to begin his "Hundred Days" rule.

In 1867, Nebraska became the 37th state as President Andrew Johnson signed a proclamation.

In 1893, inventor Nikola Tesla first publicly demonstrated radio during a meeting of the National Electric Light Association in St. Louis by transmitting electromagnetic energy without wires.

In 1932, Charles A. Lindbergh Jr., the 20-month-old son of Charles and Anne Lindbergh, was kidnapped from the family home near Hopewell, New Jersey. (Remains identified as those of the child were found the following May.)

In 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, back from the Yalta Conference, proclaimed the meeting a success as he addressed a joint session of Congress.

In 1954, four Puerto Rican nationalists opened fire from the spectators' gallery of the U.S. House of

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 236 ~ 90 of 90

Representatives, wounding five members of Congress.

In 1966, the Soviet space probe Venera 3 impacted the surface of Venus, becoming the first spacecraft to reach another planet; however, Venera was unable to transmit any data, its communications system having failed.

In 1971, a bomb went off inside a men's room at the U.S. Capitol; the radical group Weather Underground claimed responsibility for the pre-dawn blast.

In 2005, Dennis Rader, the churchgoing family man accused of leading a double life as the BTK serial killer, was charged in Wichita, Kansas, with 10 counts of first-degree murder. (Rader later pleaded guilty and received multiple life sentences.) A closely divided Supreme Court outlawed the death penalty for juvenile criminals.

In 2010, Jay Leno returned as host of NBC's "The Tonight Show."

In 2015, tens of thousands marched through Moscow in honor of slain Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, who had been shot to death on Feb. 27.

In 2020, state officials said New York City had its first confirmed case of the coronavirus, a woman in her late 30s who had contracted the virus while traveling in Iran. Health officials in Washington state, announcing what was believed at the time to be the second U.S. death from the coronavirus, said the virus may have been circulating for weeks undetected in the Seattle area.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama, still deadlocked with Republican congressional leaders, formally enacted \$85 billion in across-the-board spending cuts a few hours before the midnight deadline required by law. In Bangladesh, protesters clashed with police for a second day and the death toll rose to at least 44 from violence triggered by a death sentence given to an Islamic party leader for crimes linked to Bangladesh's 1971 independence war.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump announced that the U.S. would impose steep tariffs on steel and aluminum imports, escalating tensions with China and other trading partners and raising the prospect of higher prices for Americans. The Norwegian Nobel Committee, which selects winners of the peace prize, announced that someone using a stolen identity nominated Trump for the award. The committee leader said it appeared the same person was responsible for forging nominations in 2017, as well.

One year ago: Russian forces escalated their attacks on crowded urban areas, bombarding the central square in Ukraine's second-biggest city and Kyiv's main TV tower in what President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called a blatant campaign of terror. In his first State of the Union address, President Joe Biden aimed to rally the American public to bear the costs of supporting Ukraine's fight to stave off the massive Russian invasion. He also outlined his plans to combat soaring inflation.

Today's birthdays: Singer/actor Harry Belafonte is 96. Rock singer Mike D'Abo (Manfred Mann) is 79. Former Sen. John Breaux, D-La., is 79. Rock singer Roger Daltrey is 79. Actor Dirk Benedict is 78. Actor-director Ron Howard is 69. Country singer Janis Oliver (Sweethearts of the Rodeo) is 69. Actor Catherine Bach is 68. Actor Tim Daly is 67. Singer-musician Jon Carroll is 66. Rock musician Bill Leen is 61. Actor Bryan Batt is 60. Actor Maurice Benard is 60. Actor Russell Wong is 60. Actor Chris Eigeman is 58. Actor George Eads is 56. Actor Javier Bardem is 54. Actor Jack Davenport is 50. Rock musician Ryan Peake (Nickelback) is 50. Actor Mark-Paul Gosselaar is 49. Singer Tate Stevens is 48. Actor Jensen Ackles is 45. TV host Donovan Patton is 45. Actor Joe Tippett is 41. Actor Lupita Nyong'o is 40. Pop singer Kesha (formerly Ke\$ha) is 36. R&B singer Sammie is 36. Pop singer Justin Bieber is 29.