

# Groton Daily Independent

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

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

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## Groton Community Calendar

### 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.

### Friday, March 3

WORLD DAY OF PRAYER  
Senior Menu: Breaded Cod, rice pilaf, pea and cheese salad, apple crisp, whole wheat bread.  
School Breakfast: Eggs and sausage.  
School Lunch: Chicken quesadilla, Santa Fe Corn.  
6:30 p.m.: Boys Region 1A - Milbank at Groton Middle School All-State Band in Huron

### Saturday, March 4

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.  
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.  
Middle School All-State Band in Huron  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Land & Legacy at Bethlehem Lutheran, Aberdeen, 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.

## The Bulletin by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

### World in Brief

Zaid, an attorney representing some of the victims, who said it "lacks transparency" and "raises many red flags."

- Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves has signed a bill that will block transgender minors from receiving gender-affirming care, including surgery and hormone treatment, in the state. The bill is one of several being pushed in Republican states aimed at restricting healthcare for transgender people.

- Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has stated that "global governance has failed" in a speech to the Group of 20 foreign ministers' meeting in New Delhi, citing "financial crisis, climate change, pandemic, terrorism and wars" as evidence of his claim.

- Former Georgia defensive lineman Jalen Carter says he will return to Athens, where he believes he will be "fully exonerated of any criminal wrongdoing" in a fatal January crash that killed offensive lineman Devin Willock and a school recruiter. Carter has been charged with reckless driving and racing.

- Colon and rectal cancer rates are increasing in those under the age of 55 in the U.S., according to new data from the American Cancer Society. The report shows around 20% of new colorectal cancer cases in 2019, up from just 11% in 1995.

- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, the bloody battle for Bakhmut is about to become even more difficult as warmer weather conditions set in, the U.K. Defence Ministry said. Retired U.S. Marine Corps Colonel Mark Cancian told Newsweek that Ukraine will soon launch its own offensive to not only counter Russia but to show NATO allies that the war is moving past a stalemate.

### Bates Township Notice of Caucus

Bates Township

BATES TOWNSHIP ANNUAL MEETING NOTICE

Bates Township will hold its annual meeting and election on Tuesday, March 7th, 2023 at the home of the Clerk, 14523 409th Ave, Conde.

Election of officers and business meeting will be held at 6:30 p.m.

We will be receiving bids for road maintenance and gravel. Please mail bids to

Betty Geist, Bates Township Clerk, 14523 409th Ave., Conde, SD 57434 prior to meeting date.

Betty Geist, Township Clerk

Published February 22, March 1, 2023, at the total approximate cost of \$21.85 and may be viewed free of charge at [www.sdpublicnotices.com](http://www.sdpublicnotices.com). 21938

## The Life of Jacqueline Wagner

Services for Jacqueline "Jackie" Sippel Wagner, 89, of Groton will be 11:00 a.m., Saturday March 11, 2023, at the Presbyterian Church, Groton. The 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.

Jacqueline Ann Hinckley was born on August 6, 1933, to Max Hinckley and Ruth (Rix) Hinckley on her grandparent's farm north of Groton. The young family moved to Michigan and to Iowa as jobs were hard to find during the depression. In 1941, Ruth, Jackie, and her brother Rix moved back to the Groton area. Throughout her youth, Jackie spent a lot time with her Uncle Arden and Aunt Dorothy Rix and developed a special bond with her cousins Carol and Katie.

The family moved to Aberdeen where Jackie attended elementary and high school. During this time, her mother Ruth, married Joe Volk, and a new baby sister, Julie, was added to the family. Jackie adored her little sister, and they remained extremely close until Julie's death in April 2021.

Jackie graduated from Aberdeen Central in 1951 and attended Northern Teachers College earning her teaching certificate. Jackie's first teaching job was in Redfield, SD and then closer to home she taught at country schools north of Groton, and in Andover, SD. She married Orylin Sippel on October 15, 1955 and the couple moved to Pierpont, SD. To this union 2 sons were born, David and Dana. To her surprise, Orylin bought their farm east of Pierpont on the day Dana was born, using the money she had put away from her teaching jobs as a down payment on the farm. As Orylin and Jackie moved to their new home, Jackie continued to teach at area schools, and completed her bachelor's degree in education from Northern State College. Orylin passed away on November 18, 1981. Jackie continued teaching and operating the farm with her son.

On July 6, 1987, Jackie married Paul Wagner and the couple made their home on his family farm near Roslyn, SD. Paul and Jackie were great companions and loved to travel. They enjoyed many road trips with Paul's motor home and spent several years wintering in Texas. Paul and Jackie eventually moved to Groton, SD in 2007. Paul passed away on January 20, 2012. Jackie continued to live in Groton and enjoyed reconnecting with old friends in the area.

Throughout her life, Jackie's favorite place was Pickerel Lake. As soon as the weather allowed, she was "at the

lake" and waited until the last minute to close in the fall. Her extended family has a row of cabins together, so her time there was filled with family and fun. Everything was better "at the lake". Jackie shined as a grandmother and loved nothing more than spending time and spoiling her grandchildren. They also developed a love for the lake and spending time at "Grandma's cabin". As her health started to decline, she appreciated the watchful eye and help from her lake neighbors, cousin Arden Dohman and brother-in-law, Tom Job, which allowed her the independence to continue enjoying as much time as possible at the lake.

Jackie was a strong and independent woman, who devoted herself to her family. She was loyal, almost to a fault, had a great sense of humor, quick wit, and realistic outlook on life. She enjoyed running into former students and would joke "they changed quite a bit since Kindergarten, I almost didn't recognize them!" Recently, while reflecting on her life, she said "I think I did the best I could with what I had."

Jackie was a member of the Presbyterian Church in Groton. She also belonged to the Pierpont American Legion Auxiliary.

She is survived by her sons David Sippel, and Dana (Aimee) Sippel all of Pierpont, 4 step-children, Cheryl (Jay) Dwight of Langford, SD, Terry (Patty) Wagner, Bill Wagner, and Mary Wagner, all of Roslyn, SD, and Marilyn (Jim) Vietor of Pierre, SD, brother-in-law Tom Job of Sioux Falls, sister-in-law Joy (Andrew) Perkins, Texas. Grandchildren, Jill (Jeff) Serocki, Diane Sippel, Tory (Becca) Sippel, Jacob (Theresa) Sippel, Jordan (Jon) Lemke, Taryn Sippel, Sage Sippel and Bryn Sippel. She is also survived by many step-grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Close to her heart were her siblings' surviving children, nephew, Chris (Elizabeth) Hinckley, and niece, Jessica Job.

She was preceded in death by her parents, Ruth Volk Ingham and Max Hinckley, husbands, Orylin Sippel and Paul Wagner, her brother Rix Hinckley, sister Julie Job, niece Jennifer Job Massa, and step-son Loren Wagner.

Memorials may be directed to the Presbyterian Church or Groton Area Elementary School, to be used for children in need.

[www.paetznick-garness.com](http://www.paetznick-garness.com)



## No election in Groton this year

On Friday, February 24, 2023, incumbent candidate Grant Rix and candidate-elect Heather Lerseth-Fliehs submitted nominating petitions for two vacant seats on the Groton Area School Board prior to the 5:00 pm deadline. Incumbent candidate Steven R. Smith did not submit a petition for re-election. Since both Rix and Lerseth-Fliehs are unopposed, they are awarded new 3-year terms, beginning July 2023. There will be no Groton Area School Board April election.

There will be no election for the City of Groton either. Shirley Wells turned in her petition unopposed for a two-year term in Ward 2. Karyn Babcock turned in her petition unopposed for a two-year term in Ward 3. Jason Wambach turned in his petition unopposed for a one-year term in Ward 3.

The other incumbent, Jon Cutler, turned in his petition; however, he did not have enough valid signatures. His position is for a two-year term in Ward 1. The mayor will have to make a one-year appointment for that position which must be approved by the council.

## Reetz interned at Kolker Law

by **Dorene Nelson**

Drew Reetz, son of Lori and Jamie Reetz and a senior in Webster High School, was working as an intern in Groton with Kari Bartling, an attorney serving Groton in Family Law, Real Estate and Labor and Employment cases.

"This internship is part of a Career Technical Education (CTE) Youth Internship," Reetz explained. "We are required to find a place to serve as an intern in an area that we are interested in. I chose Kari Bartling because she does the kind of work and cases that interest me."

"The CTE Youth Internship class is part of our personal finance class, which all seniors are required to take," he said. "We learn how to budget, to problem-solve, to manage money, and other financial areas vital to life after graduation."

"I'm involved in several extracurricular activities such as Robotics, student council, Key Club, and cross country and track," Reetz listed.

"While working here, I shadow Kari as she goes to meetings, helps people organize their personal affairs, and travels to meetings such as an estate sale to meet with the families."

"I also answer the phone and visit with Kari's clients," he said. "I find the work to be very interesting and intriguing. Family law in the Mid-West involves a lot of farm transactions."

"After graduating from Webster High School this coming spring, I plan to attend the University of Minnesota to receive a degree in political science and law. I like to help people and being in this profession would provide many opportunities to do that."



**Drew Reetz at Kolker Law**

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## GHS Second Semester Interns

Featuring Flihs in band, Overacker at Next Level Nutrition, and Traphagen in fourth grade



**Kamryn Flihs**



**Kaylynn Overacker**



**Gracie Traphagen**

### by Dorene Nelson

Kamryn Flihs, who worked in an insurance agency office first semester, is also serving as an intern in the high school band room. "I really enjoyed the work I did first semester but have learned that I don't want a job where I just sit most of the day."

"Helping Mrs. Yeigh with setting up the band room, moving chairs and music stands where they are needed, and running off copies of music for the students, is an active job where I move around a lot," Kamryn explained. "This has led me to look at a job that requires physical activity so I shadowed an athletic trainer and really liked the kind of work that was involved."

Kaylynn Overacker did her interning first semester at Teddy Bear Day Care and really loved the little kids. This semester she is working at Next Level Nutrition.

"Daycare was fun and chaotic all at the same time, but it is not the kind of job that I'd seek in the future. I then decided to find something calmer and with less change," Kaylynn admitted. "I like working in this little shop and waiting on the customers. My job is to mix drinks, mainly the various teas that are available. Later I'll learn to make the shakes which are a bit more complicated."

Gracie Traphagen is serving as an intern in 4th grade with Mrs. Susan Fjeldheim. "Since I wasn't quite sure what I would take next year in college, I decided to try this 4th grade internship."

"I've always enjoyed working with kids," she smiled. "I like this age group too and was even allowed to substitute for Mrs. Fjeldheim one day!" I usually work individually with the students, especially helping kids get caught up who've missed school due to illness."

"I play girls basketball and am a member of FCCLA," Gracie listed. "Next year I plan to attend Northern State University and become an elementary teacher."

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**Visibility was reduced to a few hundred feet Wednesday morning as another winter storm swept through the area during the night and the morning. By Wednesday afternoon, the winds had died down, the sun was shining and the snow was melting on the roads and sidewalks.**

(Photo by Paul Kosel)

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

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## FFA Tractor Drive held Monday

The Groton FFA drove their tractors down Main Street Monday morning. FFA Week was the week before, but most activities were cancelled due to the blizzard. These are some of the tractors that were driven.



(Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



(Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



(Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



(Photo by Paul Kosel)



## Activities association seeks procedure for adding new sports

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — On Wednesday, the South Dakota High School Activities Association board of directors passed the first reading of a procedure that will provide a structure for adding new sports and fine arts activities.

"There's not really a formalized process," SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos told the board. "We thought a more structured policy in place would help us."

The new policy calls for a formal written request for a new sport or activity from a member school or the SDHSAA staff. That would be followed by a completed proposal with information about the history of the sport/activity, data about how many schools would be interested in offering the activity, recommendations for when during the school year the sport would be played and projected start-up costs for member schools.

After the proposal was made, the SDHSAA staff or a steering committee would study post season finances and venues, the impact on the staff, the impact on the school calendar of activities and sports and the impact on current programs.

If the new sport or activity is approved by the board, the SDHSAA staff would establish an advisory committee and develop a handbook.

The board approved the first reading of the policy. A second reading will be held at the board meeting in April or June.

Even with a formalized procedure in place, Swartos said he doesn't anticipate adding "a ton of activities" though he has fielded requests for adding rodeo, hockey, bass fishing and robotics.

At the meeting, the board also approved a report from its E-sports committee that recommends offering a pilot program for the sport in the 2023-2024 school year and fully sanctioning the sport in the 2024-2025 school year.

The committee recommended using Fenworks of Fargo, N.D., as the E-sports provider.

According to Swartos the pilot year will allow the association to develop a handbook and create guidelines for the kinds of video games that schools will use. "We obviously won't have any first-person shooters," Swartos said.

During that pilot year, schools can get the equipment they'll need and start competing.

Because the teams will be competing against other teams via the internet, there will be no travel involved until the state finals. Swartos said he hopes one of the state's universities would serve as a host for the tournament.

—30—

## Girls may get their own wrestling tournament

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — Because of the growth in the number of participants, it has been proposed that a separate girls' wrestling tournament be held next year. Currently the state wrestling tournament includes boys' and girls' divisions.

The South Dakota High School Activities Association board of directors heard about the proposal at its meeting Wednesday. The change will be voted on at the annual athletic directors' meeting before being formally proposed to the board.

SDHSAA Assistant Executive Director Randy Soma told the board that the sport of girls' wrestling has grown significantly during its three years of existence. He said the program started with 125 girls in 2021, grew to 284 participants in 2022 and this year the field of female wrestlers grew to 416.

Because of the growth in the number of participants, the state wrestling tournament days can go from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. "They are working long days at that tournament," Soma said.

If approved by the athletic directors and the SDHSAA board, the tournament would take place next year in the week before the boys' tournament at a venue to be determined.

States that have large enough venues are able to keep their boys' and girls' wrestling tournaments together, according to Dan Swartos, SDHSAA executive director. The only place with enough in the state is the DakotaDome at the University of South Dakota. Swartos said Vermillion would need to add 10 more motels to be able to handle the teams and spectators.

According to Soma, having the two tournaments on the same weekend in different locations isn't an option. At some schools, both squads have the same coach.

—30—

## Ejections in high school sports way up this year

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — A discussion about appreciation events for high school sports officials led to the revelation that there have been 87 ejections of players, coaches and fans at high school sporting events this year.

At Wednesday's South Dakota High School Activities Association board of directors meeting, SDHSAA Assistant Executive Director Randy Soma said there have been 87 ejections this year compared to 30 last year.

The increase in ejections may be due to officials being more aggressive at taking charge of games, according to SDHSAA Assistant Executive Director Jo Auch. "We did encourage officials to take care of business," Auch said.

Board member Eric Denning of Mount Vernon said at his school students have taken the message about the need for better sportsmanship home to their parents. He said students were reminded about how embarrassed they would be if the game was stopped and one of their parents was escorted out of the gym.

Students were told, "you need to go home and talk to your parents," said Denning, who noted that behavior in the stands is 75% better since talking to the students.

Board member Kelly Mesmer of Harding County High School said he talked to an official who said "he's appalled at the amount of technicals he's given to players. They're just not getting it."

Auch noted that in some school districts, officials are expected to police the crowd as well as officiate the game.

"That's what administrators are for," Auch said. "It's asking an awful lot of our officials."

This winter has been tough on officials, as many games have been postponed and rescheduled due to weather. "Our officials are tired," Auch said. "Their legs are just shot."

Schools have had appreciation events for sports officials during the fall and winter sports seasons and more events are planned for April for the officials of spring sports. The sportsmanship tab on the association's home page offers a look at some of the ways officials are being honored at South Dakota schools.

—30—



## South Dakota received \$14 billion of federal pandemic relief

Bart Pfankuch

South Dakota News Watch

South Dakota received nearly \$14 billion in federal COVID-19 funding from March 2020 through January, according to an internal state fiscal report obtained exclusively by South Dakota News Watch.

The document tallies the \$13.84 billion intended to help governments, businesses, organizations and individuals survive and recover from a pandemic that killed 1 million Americans and more than 3,100 South Dakotans.

The federal funding came from six separate acts of Congress and was part of an overall \$4.6 trillion in federal COVID-19 aid provided to states.

State government received about \$4.2 billion, while the remaining \$9.6 billion went directly local governments, health care providers, the education system, businesses and individuals, according to Gov. Kristi Noem's office.

The specific answer of where the money went lies amid a complicated conglomeration of spending initiatives undertaken by the state, local governments and federal agencies. The effort sought to save lives, protect a fragile economy and provide a sense of normalcy to how people will live in a post-pandemic world.

The state report reveals that multi-million-dollar initiatives were enacted to diagnose and treat people with COVID-19; to reduce further infections and provide life-saving vaccines; to help businesses stay afloat and keep individual workers employed, fed and in their homes; to provide critical aid to low-income and elderly populations; and to help educate children and adults during a massive disruption in the public education system.

The state report notes that some of the stimulus money was allocated but has not yet been spent. Some



**"The context was one of a national emergency, ... and it was a matter of trying to save lives and at the same time to prevent a total economic collapse."**

-- U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds, R-S.D.

funding may have shifted from one program or agency to another after it was received.

U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds, R-S.D., said the early days of the pandemic were a time of strong bipartisan efforts by Congress to provide states with the funding and resources necessary to battle one of the biggest crises in American history.

"The context was one of a national emergency," he told News Watch. "And it was a matter of trying to save lives and at the same time to prevent a total economic collapse because of what was anticipated to be a very severe pandemic."

### Where the money came from

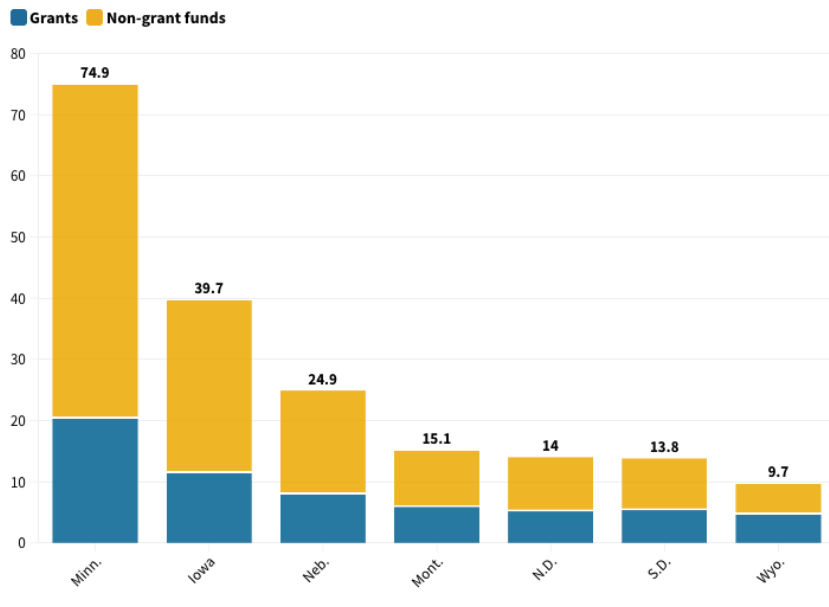
Here is South Dakota's share of the six major COVID-19 stimulus funding packages, according to the Congressional Budget Office and the state of South Dakota:

- \$5.85 million of the \$8.3 billion Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Appropriations Act, March 6, 2020
- \$194 million of the \$192 billion Families First Coronavirus Response Act, March 11, 2020
- \$8.74 billion of \$2.2 trillion Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), April 24, 2020

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## Federal pandemic funding in the Great Plains (in billions)



Source: Federal Funds Information for States, Inc. • Graphic: Michael Klinski, South Dakota News Watch

- \$64.3 million of the \$483 billion Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act, March 27, 2020

- \$1.1 billion of the \$1.4 trillion Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (\$900 billion for COVID), Dec. 27, 2020

- \$3.8 billion of the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act, March 11, 2021

Where the money went

Here is a summary of how much federal COVID-19 funding flowed into 14 separate state agencies and hundreds of businesses, community agencies and local relief efforts, as of January:

- Local programs: \$8.8 billion (grants and loans to medical providers, small businesses, employees, community groups and local agencies, etc.)

- Bureau of Finance and Management: \$2.9 billion

- Department of Education: \$675.1 million
- Governor's Office of Economic Development: \$488.8 million
- Department of Social Services: \$289.1 million
- Department of Health: \$282.1 million
- Board of Regents/Technical Education: \$162.3 million
- Department of Transportation: \$160.1 million
- Department of Public Safety: \$16.9 million
- Department of Human Services: \$16.5 million
- Department of Labor and Regulation: \$16.2 million
- Department of Tourism: \$6.8 million
- Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources: \$1.1 million
- Secretary of State: \$3 million
- Unified Judicial System: \$99,500
- Total: \$13.84 billion



Tim Rave

Noem declined a request for an interview but through her spokesman said the state used the federal stimulus money "wisely" to aid the state during the pandemic.

Spokesman Ian Fury said in an email to News Watch that the governor approached use of federal pandemic funding in a conservative fashion. She rejected former President Donald Trump's offer of extended unemployment benefits for state workers in August 2020 and also sent back more than \$80 million in rental assistance.

"We focused on solving long-term problems with one-time investments rather than creating new government programs," Fury wrote. "We are confident that we utilized that money more wisely than other states would have."

### Life-saving help

Tim Rave, CEO of the South Dakota Association of Health Care Organizations, said the federal funding provided to public and private health care providers in South Dakota is unquestionably a large amount.

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**The South Dakota medical community spent millions of dollars on diagnosing and treating COVID-19, including arranging for mobile testing that allow patients and practitioners to be safe.** Photo: News Watch file

Rave said.

But that funding must be considered amid the context of a once-in-a-century crisis that brought both medical and financial challenges to the state's health care industry and the population at large, he said.

"It was a lot of money, an unprecedented amount, but with what the world went through and with the pressures, certainly in the health care space, we really didn't have a choice," Rave said.

The federal funding saved lives during the height of the pandemic as well as after those initial uncertain months, he said.

"The big thing it bought was access, because without that money, it's not hard to imagine closures of health care facilities or limits on services. And when you start taking away access to health care, it ultimately leads to loss of life or increased burdens on families and patients,"

## 'Erred on the high side'

Rounds said the congressional funding packages generally followed a timeline that addressed four major needs during the pandemic:

1. The initial emergency funding was aimed at bolstering capacity and access to the health care system that was diagnosing and treating COVID-19 patients.
2. The second package provided money directly to help individuals, families, businesses and the national economy survive a potential "meltdown."
3. Congress then shifted its focus and funding to Operation Warp Speed, which provided \$10 billion to seek a cure for COVID-19 and vaccines to limit its spread.
4. And finally, later funding packages including the Paycheck Protection Program, helped keep businesses and employees afloat over a longer time period.

Rounds said Trump and Congress allocated funding to states and allowed some leeway on how money was spent on the local level, though Rounds argued for even more flexibility. Overall, federal lawmakers wanted to be generous in funding programs and at times approved supplemental funding efforts where need was demonstrated, he said.

"If anything, we erred on the high side in terms of authorizing resources," Rounds said. "There was a concern if we did nothing, there was a concern we could lose 5% of our population."

## Health care

Resting at the center of the entire COVID-19 pandemic, the health care industry in South Dakota endured some of the toughest challenges and also received some of the largest federal funding levels in response.

The state Department of Health received more than \$282 million in federal funding, and the state medical industry was allocated hundreds of millions more to diagnose, treat and respond to patients sickened by the coronavirus.

"I've been in health care since 1992, and it was by far the toughest thing I've ever seen," said Rave, whose group represents health providers and long-term care facilities across South Dakota. "The impact it had was hard to describe, from the health care capacity issues on top of 3,100-some people dying directly from COVID, it was tough sledding and I've never seen anything like it."

Hospitals and other medical facilities endured difficulties on several levels, from trying to learn about and treat COVID-19 cases early on, to keeping staff and administrators safe from infection, to coping with a workforce crisis in which many employees retired, stayed home to help family members or caught the virus themselves.

"The (number of) people who retired or just left the health care field was unprecedented during that

time," Rave said.

Major federal funding initiatives within the Department of Health included more than \$135 million for COVID-19 testing in communities and schools, at least \$70 million to administer vaccines and more than \$50 million to aid rural health care facilities or those that treated low-income patients.

Urban and rural hospitals received another \$445 million in other pandemic aid known as Provider Relief Funds that did not flow through the state health department.

Many health care providers had to pay bonuses to employees or hire traveling nurses and other providers that added significant operating costs, Rave said.

The pandemic funding was critical to aid in diagnosing and treating patients but also to maintain the financial viability of hospitals in South Dakota, which are mostly not-for-profit entities that operate at a profit margin of near zero up to 3%, he said.

"Without those dollars we'll never know what could have happened," Rave said. "It totally, totally stabilized the system. If you just objectively look at that and think about where the margins are in a normal year, and dump all that pressure of increased cost on it, you could only imagine if that had gone on much longer."

The federal funding helped keep people healthy in other ways.

About \$100 million was provided to provide food and nutrition to families and schoolchildren. Another \$235 million was provided in additional unemployment compensation to people who could not work during the pandemic.



**South Dakota nursing homes encountered unexpected expenses to keep residents, staff and visitors safe during the pandemic. In this 2020 photo, Tim Mercy hugs his mother, 88-year-old Patsy Mercy, through a "hugging wall" built with plastic barriers at the Edgewood Rapid City assisted-living facility.** Photo:

News Watch file



**Critical-care nurses, such as Christine Murphy of Monument Health in Rapid City, were in short supply during the COVID-19 pandemic, so health system spending rose to keep employees on staff or to hire traveling specialists.** Photo: Courtesy of Monument Health

## Nursing homes

Some of the federal funding went directly to help nursing homes and other long-term care facilities in South Dakota stay open and as safe as possible during the pandemic, said Mark Deak, executive director of the South Dakota Health Care Association.

The federal government provided \$50 billion in aid from the Provider Relief Fund to facilities that accept Medicare, including hospitals and skilled nursing facilities, which was aimed at giving providers up to 2% of their annual spending, he said. Nursing homes across the U.S. then received another \$7.4 billion from that fund, Deak said.

In South Dakota, skilled nursing facilities received about \$145 million overall in federal pandemic funding, which helped keep facilities open and keep staff and residents alive, Deak said in an email to News Watch.

"This funding was absolutely crucial during the height of the pandemic," he wrote. "No other health care providers were impacted by the pandemic to the extent that nursing homes were, particularly in the absolutely critical area of staffing."

Despite the federal funding, seven long-term care facilities in South Dakota have closed in the past year and others are struggling with continued challenges, particularly due to workforce shortages and underfunding of Medicaid programs.

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Deak said that a recent analysis by the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that nursing home staffing is down by more than 14% since early 2020, while hospital staffing has risen slightly since then.

## Business and industry

A sense of pure panic struck businesses both small and large across South Dakota in the spring of 2020 as initial fears of the pandemic brought supply chains and customer visits in large part to a halt.

Retail and service workplaces were shuttered; restaurants closed temporarily or for good; offices were unable to function; and the entire state economy slowed to a crawl as many people stayed home as dozens were dying and no vaccines were yet in sight.

News Watch documented a wide range of negative effects on South Dakota businesses in 2020-21. Articles focused on businesses that couldn't maintain inventory or had lost their customer bases in the tourism, dining, entertainment and retail industries. Worker shortages plagued health care, construction and government. Unexpected consequences befell numerous industries, including newspapers that saw advertising dry up, arenas that canceled big events, and even funeral homes that saw a temporary end to in-person wakes and services.

Tom Martin, an instructor at the Beacom School of Business at the University of South Dakota, called the multitude of challenges facing businesses at the time "a perfect storm" of negative influences and outcomes.

But businesses across the state and their employees were some of the biggest benefactors of federal programs aimed at keeping the state and national economies from entering a free fall.

The state Bureau of Finance and Management was the single-largest recipient of federal pandemic funds among all state departments, receiving almost \$2.9 billion, according to the state fiscal report.

The department allocated funding to public and private business entities through four major funding mechanisms: the Coronavirus Relief Fund (\$1.25 billion); the State Fiscal Recovery Fund (\$974 million); the Municipal Liquidity Facility fund (\$548 million) and the Capital Projects Fund (\$116 million.)

Availability of some of that money will stretch into 2024, according to the state report.

But huge amounts of federal funds flowed to South Dakota businesses and employees without moving through state agencies.

More than \$2.7 billion went to businesses to keep employees on the payroll through the Paycheck Protection Program of 2021. Another \$895 million in 30-year Economic Injury Disaster Loans were offered to small businesses and non-profit organizations in 2021. The state report also includes line items for Economic Impact Payments to businesses of \$795 million under the CARES Act and another \$1.1 billion in Economic Impact Payments that are available through the ongoing American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

The funding provided to businesses, much of it intended to counter direct losses caused by the pandemic, proved critical to keep businesses afloat during very hard times, said Scott VanderWal, president of the South Dakota Farm Bureau.

"The money that was sent to offset losses – that was frankly used to keep people in business," VanderWal said. "It literally kept some people in business and helped us to just go on."

## K-12 education

The state K-12 public education system was hit with an unprecedented crisis when the COVID-19 pandemic struck midway through the second semester of the 2019-20 school year.

In mid-March 2020, as the coronavirus began to appear in South Dakota, Noem declared a state of



**Phil Schmitz of George Boom Funeral Home in Sioux Falls prepares protective equipment used in handling the bodies of people who die during the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous industries, including the funeral home industry, suffered financially during the pandemic.** Photo:

News Watch file

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emergency, ordered state employees to work from home and instructed public schools to shut down.

The closure put school districts, teachers, staff and students in a tough spot. Across the state, administrators and educators worked together to quickly develop a system to conduct remote instruction of students to close out the 2019-20 school year.

Over the summer of 2020 and into the fall semester, schools also took expensive and time-consuming steps to make schools safer when students returned and to allow for effective instruction of students whose parents elected to have them taught remotely.



**Kirk Zeeck**

With nearly 24,000 students, 1,800 teachers and nearly 40 instructional buildings, the Sioux Falls School District had two main objectives, according to Kirk Zeeck, director of federal programs and language immersion for the district.

"We took steps to help kids and staff be safe and yet still try to get some learning done," he said. "It definitely wasn't like the traditional classroom setting prior to the COVID-19 pandemic."

In total, the South Dakota Department of Education received about \$675 million in federal pandemic relief funds, according to the state fiscal report. Most came through three rounds of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, which allocated about \$595 million to public schools across the state.

The Sioux Falls district received about \$58 million of that money, which was used the past three years and into this school year for a variety of efforts to keep schools and students on track, Zeeck said.

Initially, some money was used to accommodate remote learning, including buying laptops for all teachers and students and upgrading computer white boards in classrooms to reach both in-person and remote learners, he said.

The district also hired 14 reading specialists in elementary schools to help students catch up after the 2020 shutdown and added a summer academy program with the same goal.

In middle and high schools, additional teachers and educational assistants were hired to boost learning. New counselors helped students who suffered social or mental problems.

Federal money also paid for safety barriers in schools to block the spread of the coronavirus and for an upgrade of air filtration systems to make schools safer from all airborne diseases.



**Tracy Vik, principal of Sonia Sotomayor Elementary School in Sioux Falls, sat at a desk in a classroom where protective barriers were built to protect students in fall 2020. School districts faced major new expenses to keep staff and students safe during the pandemic.** Photo: News Watch file

The federal money was critical because all those needs weren't budgeted, and the district worked hard to use the funding wisely, Zeeck said.

"I think (in the end the) district did very well to help determine the best way to utilize those funds to maintain safety and help kids grow academically," he said.

## Universities

With workforce challenges a chronic problem in South Dakota, prior to and since the pandemic, keeping the state's public university system running during the COVID-19 crisis was critical, according to Brian Maher, executive director of the South Dakota Board of Regents.

"You plan and prepare for almost any eventuality, but not for a worldwide pandemic," Maher said. "It was a 'developing the airplane while you're flying it' situation."

Maintaining the education of students was a challenge heightened by the need to keep students, faculty and staff safe during an uncertain time, Maher said in an interview with News Watch.



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Significant federal funding received by the university system aided in both those missions, Maher said.

The federal government provided about \$86 million to the regental system over roughly the past three years and about \$83 of that funding has been spent so far, Maher said.

In a general breakdown, about \$39 million was used to provide as many as 33,000 students statewide with expenses related to disruption of campus operations. That money paid for food, lodging, technology, health care and child care for students, Maher said.

The system spent about \$8 million in federal funds to replace system revenues lost during the pandemic. Another \$1.3 million was used to reimburse students for monies paid in advance for services they did not then receive, he said.

Another \$33 million went to things to keep teaching and learning moving forward, such as for computer hardware and software, building safety renovations and cleaning and medical supplies.

Maher said the federal funding allowed the university system to keep staff and students safe while maintaining the pipeline of graduates needed to fill the many open jobs in the state.

"It was crucial, and that's not an overstatement," he said. "Think of the number of students we had in South Dakota at that time who were preparing to leave the university system and go into the workforce. That interruption could have caused a real blockage in preparing our workforce, and that was something we can't have in South Dakota."



**The South Dakota Board of Regents spent millions in federal COVID-19 stimulus funds to keep campuses open and as safe as possible during the pandemic, including at South Dakota Mines in Rapid City.** Photo: News Watch file

## Agriculture

The pandemic hit South Dakota farmers, ranchers and food processors hard, especially in the early days, said VanderWal, of the Farm Bureau.

Supply chain interruptions prevented producers from getting materials needed to operate and stopped them from selling or shipping their goods, he said. Meanwhile, major COVID-19 infections at meatpacking plants and other indoor ag facilities disrupted the ability of processors to accept livestock and keep their plants operational.

"From supply chain disruptions, to getting parts and livestock transported and processed, there were a lot of very negative impacts," VanderWal said.

News Watch reported on several effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the agricultural industry, including widely varying and generally low prices paid to beef producers; major losses by corn growers and the ethanol industry as Americans stopped traveling; and even how sheep farmers lost a major revenue pipeline when the cruise industry shut down.



**The South Dakota agriculture industry suffered huge financial losses during the pandemic, but federal funds helped bridge the gap. John Erk and his family altered their usual timeline for raising and selling sheep on their Butte County farm to avoid losses.**

Photo: News Watch file

Some employers in the agriculture industry in South Dakota benefited from the federal Paycheck Protection Program that allowed them to keep workers on the payroll during the most acute COVID-19 outbreaks

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**Warren Peterson, an enrolled member of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, and his wife Heather, were able to maintain their business, The Pizza Shoppe in Martin, S.D., on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, during the pandemic due in part to federal financial assistance.** Photo: News Watch file

in 2020, VanderWal said.

The primary program that helped farmers, ranchers and other producers was the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program. The state report shows that nearly \$1.4 billion in funding from that program was or will be provided directly to agriculture producers hit with price declines and additional marketing costs.

South Dakotans in the agriculture industry also benefited from the state Coronavirus Relief Fund, a part of the federal CARES Act, which provided roughly a half-billion dollars to nearly 6,000 businesses and individuals in 2021 who suffered losses due to the pandemic. About \$71 million of that money went to the agriculture, forestry and fishing industries, according to state records.

VanderWal said that agriculture, like many other industries, continues to suffer fallout from the supply chain interruptions and workforce shortage that began during the pandemic.

"One little thing affects everything down the line, and we're still suffering from that to some extent," he said.

## Tribes

In a November 2022 report by the U.S. Treasury, the federal government acknowledged that specific pandemic-era funding was needed to aid tribal govern-

ments that have suffered long-term inequities in federal funding.

"Many issues facing tribal communities, whether health care, poverty, education, food security, social justice, or economic development – including tax parity – all have one element in common, inequitable access to resources," the Treasury report said.

"Across Indian Country, the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, regionally and locally, were not all the same. However, it did result in one commonality; the pandemic made pre-existing inequitable conditions even worse."

The CARES Act of March 2020 provided two separate allocations specifically to U.S. tribal governments, including \$400 million under the Operation of Indian Programs appropriation and an \$8 billion funding effort for tribes within the Coronavirus Relief Fund.

The ARPA program signed by President Biden in 2021 has a \$20 billion funding allocation specifically for tribal governments. The state fiscal report does not break down federal funding allocated to South Dakota tribes, either directly or through state agencies, but examples abound of tribal nations using pandemic funds to help their residents.

As part of the CARES Act, the Oglala Lakota College on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation received nearly \$7 million to buy laptop computers for about 700 students so they could learn remotely and stay safe. The college also used federal pandemic funds to feed students during the lockdown.

The Rosebud Sioux Tribe in central South Dakota invested federal fiscal recovery funds to build affordable housing on the reservation, according to the Treasury.

The Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate in northeastern South Dakota embarked on several spending initiatives to help keep residents safe during the pandemic. The tribe used federal money to build a COVID-19 quarantine and recovery center next to a local Indian Health Services hospital to keep infected residents isolated and prevent further spread of the coronavirus.

The tribe used significant funding to educate residents about the virus, how to get vaccinated and how

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to obtain medical care if sickened. The tribe also used federal funding to provide food and other assistance to tribal members who were isolated in their homes during the pandemic.

## **Senators: History will be kind**

U.S. Sen. John Thune told News Watch in an email that Congress was highly responsive to the pandemic and did its best to keep individuals and the economy thriving amid a national crisis.

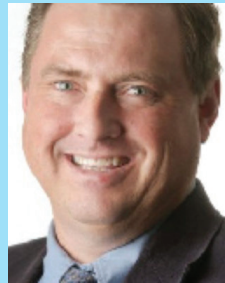
"Congress acted quickly, and in an overwhelmingly bipartisan way, to provide critical relief to thousands of individuals, families, and small businesses in states across the nation, including those throughout South Dakota when COVID threatened our economic security," Thune wrote

Rounds said he believes South Dakota received its fair share of federal funding during the pandemic and that history will largely look back upon government efforts to manage the COVID-19 crisis with a favorable view.

"I think they'll say that Congress did the right thing in doing its best to respond," he said. "And that while it may not have been perfect, it was near unanimous in support."

— This article was produced by South Dakota News Watch, a non-profit journalism organization located online at [SDNewsWatch.org](http://SDNewsWatch.org).

## **ABOUT BART PFANKUCH**



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## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

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### Primary voters would choose most statewide nominees under bill advancing to the House

BY: SETH TUPPER - MARCH 1, 2023 12:12 PM

A bill to switch the nomination process for most statewide offices from political conventions to primary elections is one step closer to becoming law.

The House State Affairs Committee voted 8-5 on Wednesday at the Capitol in Pierre to send the bill to the House of Representatives. It's already passed the Senate.

The legislation addresses an inconsistency in the way candidates for statewide offices are nominated to represent political parties in general elections.

Currently, nominees for governor and Congress are chosen in primary elections. Meanwhile, delegates to political party conventions choose nominees for lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state, state auditor, state treasurer, commissioner of school and public lands, and public utilities commissioners.

Senate Bill 40 would move party nominations for all but one of those offices into primary elections, which are held in June before November general elections. The one exception is for lieutenant governor nominations. The bill would give candidates for governor the authority to select their own running mate.

Rep. Roger Chase, a Republican from Huron, is the prime sponsor of the bill in the House. He said South Dakota is one of three states that chooses statewide nominees at conventions instead of primaries. That takes power away from hundreds of thousands of voters, he said, and hands it to several hundred convention delegates.

"Remember, our state motto is 'Under God the people rule.' It's not, 'Under the direction of a chosen few, delegates select our elected leaders,'" Chase said.

Opponents said the bill would invite more money into politics and make it more expensive to seek nominations for statewide offices, because candidates would have to run statewide campaigns instead of convention campaigns. Opponents also described the bill as a political power play and a reaction to events at recent conventions.

Last year, Gov. Kristi Noem won 76 percent of the vote in the June Republican primary election. But enough of her opponents secured positions as convention delegates that they nearly forced the selection of her defeated primary challenger, Steve Haugaard, as her running mate over Lt. Gov. Larry Rhoden.

Rep. Jon Hansen, a Republican from Dell Rapids, proposed an amendment to the bill that would have targeted only that situation, by deleting all of the bill except the part allowing candidates for governor to choose their own running mate.

"Some want to say that this isn't a reaction to the events of this one last convention, but let's face it, that's basically the case," Hansen said.

His amendment failed, and the committee sent the bill to the House for consideration before the main portion of this year's legislative session ends March 9.

#### Other bills

In other action Wednesday, the committee also recommended House approval of:

Senate Bill 189, which would prohibit government purchasing agencies from contracting with companies owned or controlled by countries including China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Russia and Venezuela.

Senate Bill 207, which would add a Class 1 misdemeanor penalty into an existing state law that prohibits

the spending of public funds to influence the outcome of an election (the current law lacks a penalty).

Senate Bill 197, which would prohibit spouses of legislators from being employed as a private lobbyist, in a move widely seen as targeting Mike Mueller, a registered lobbyist and husband of recently censured Sen. Julie Frye-Mueller, R-Rapid City.

And Senate Bill 113, which would set the second Tuesday in March of a general election year as the deadline to submit signed petitions to place an initiated measure on the ballot, in response to litigation and court decisions that threw out the existing deadline of one year prior to the election.

*Seth is editor-in-chief of South Dakota Searchlight. He was previously a supervising senior producer for South Dakota Public Broadcasting and a newspaper journalist in Rapid City and Mitchell.*

## U.S. Senate Democrats back FAA nominee, despite GOP attacks at confirmation hearing

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - MARCH 1, 2023 4:35 PM

Republicans on a U.S. Senate panel raised several objections Wednesday to President Joe Biden's pick to lead the Federal Aviation Administration, while Democrats indicated their support and called the objections "fake scandals" meant only to create a political controversy.

The Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee's confirmation hearing for Phil Washington, CEO of Denver International Airport, came more than seven months after Biden first nominated him and nearly a year since former Administrator Michael Huerta left office.

Senators of both parties said the agency needs a Senate-confirmed leader, amid a series of recent problems in the nation's aviation system. But committee members split largely along party lines about whether Washington was the right person for the job.

A group of Republicans, led by ranking member Ted Cruz of Texas, attacked Washington on myriad issues. They criticized his relatively light experience in aviation, his stated commitment to diversity and inclusion and an ongoing criminal probe into Los Angeles politicians that coincided with his time leading that county's transit agency.

Cruz also noted the FAA is required by law to have a civilian administrator and contended Washington, who retired from active duty in the U.S. Army in 2000, would need a congressional waiver in addition to a confirmation vote. Congress has routinely approved such waivers for other nominees.

"We would do the same for Mr. Washington if his record merited it," Cruz said. "But it doesn't, given his virtually nonexistent aviation experience, poor management record and legal controversies."

While a confirmation vote would require only a simple majority in the Senate, a waiver would need support from 60 senators and a majority of the Republican-controlled U.S. House.

There is a dispute, however, over if Washington, who is not an active-duty service member, would actually require a waiver.

Washington's home-state senator, Democrat John Hickenlooper, said in a written statement Wednesday that Washington is eligible without a waiver.

"A nominee to be Secretary of Defense only needs seven years of separation from the military to be considered a civilian, and even then only if they were commissioned officers," Hickenlooper said. "Phil Washington has been retired for three times as long and was never an officer. He's a civilian."

Washington addressed each issue Republicans raised over the course of a three-hour hearing, and several Democrats endorsed his character and qualifications.

Hawaii Democrat Brian Schatz called Republicans' objections "a hatchet job" and "a smear campaign," saying they were "trying desperately to turn every aspect of his career into a scandal."

"Mr. Washington is a skilled and dedicated public administrator with an extensive record showing that he knows transportation," he said. "Ignoring this to punish him over fake scandals is absurd. Mr. Washington is exactly the kind of person that we should want in public service."

Though it gave Republicans an opportunity to rail against him, the hearing was a sign of progress for

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Washington's confirmation, which has not advanced since July.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York has advocated for Washington and praised the committee Wednesday for holding the hearing.

"The FAA needs to have a leader as soon as possible," he said, adding that he would speak to the nomination more "in the coming weeks."

The committee hasn't yet scheduled a vote to send Washington's nomination to the Senate floor, where he'll need a simple majority of senators to be confirmed.

## Aviation experience a hurdle

Washington has been the top executive at Denver's airport since July 2021. He took that position after two decades in public transit management, including six-year stints leading transit agencies in Los Angeles County and Denver.

Before that, he served in the U.S. Army for 24 years, retiring as a command sergeant major.

Cruz and other Republicans said the two years at Denver International Airport was insufficient experience in an aviation-related position for the federal government's top aviation position.

Voicing concerns about Washington's aviation experience, Cruz and U.S. Sen. Ted Budd, a North Carolina Republican, quizzed Washington on airplane operations and FAA safety regulations.

Washington answered most of Cruz's questions, but was unable to answer many of Budd's that related to specific FAA rules.

"The FAA can't afford to be led by someone who needs on the job training," Budd said. "And for that reason, I'm going to be opposing your nomination."

Experience was the only area where any Democrat indicated any unease with the nomination. Sen. Jacky Rosen, a Democrat from Nevada, said she had "concerns" about Washington's qualifications, but didn't elaborate.

While not a licensed pilot or an experienced aviation official, Washington said, the leadership skills required to run large public transit agencies would translate directly to leading the FAA.

As the FAA spends grant money from the 2021 bipartisan infrastructure law that allows for airport upgrades, Washington's experience overseeing large construction projects in previous roles would be particularly relevant, he said.

## Diversity and safety standards

Washington, who could become the first Senate-confirmed Black person to lead the FAA, said diversity and inclusion initiatives are important, but could be pursued without sacrificing safety, which would remain the agency's top priority.

An FAA official devoted to equity would be necessary, he said, adding that he would hire one as a senior staff member.

Several Republicans, including Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee, J.D. Vance of Ohio and Eric Schmitt of Missouri, said Washington was overly focused on racial equity.

Vance said he would support some changes in the industry to boost pilots and federal administrators of color, but that safety standards must not be relaxed.

"There is an inconsistency between some of the diversity, equity and inclusion rhetoric on the one hand and the fact that we should hold everybody to equal standards no matter what," Vance said.

Washington told Vance he believed pilots and safety officials of all races would be held to the same standards.

Schmitt said Missourians didn't want "social cultural merits" to enter into aviation decision-making.

"Your track record seems to indicate that you're ... in line with this prioritization of diversity, equity, inclusion, climate change over safety and that is very concerning to me," he added.

Washington repeated that if confirmed, safety would remain the agency's top priority.

## Legal controversy

Cruz also invoked a pending criminal corruption case in Los Angeles County related to a Metro contract given to a politically connected nonprofit.

Washington was named in the search warrant served by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office. Former County Supervisor Sheila Kuehl appears to be the target of the investigation, but authorities also sought communications with Washington. The state attorney general's investigation remains ongoing, Cruz said.

A line in the warrant accused Washington of advancing the contract as a favor to Kuehl, Cruz said.

Washington denied any wrongdoing in the case. The contract at issue was initiated before he took office, he said. He never talked to Kuehl about the matter, which was handled by L.A. Metro department heads — not by Washington personally, he said.

"I never talked with anyone about that, that contract," he said. "The allegations are false."

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

## Noem threatens to pull budget support if lawmakers don't pass her food-tax repeal

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - MARCH 1, 2023 8:11 PM

SIOUX FALLS — A final showdown is looming between Gov. Kristi Noem and the Legislature over tax cuts.

During an unrelated bill-signing ceremony Wednesday in Sioux Falls, Noem responded to questions from the media and suggested she would not approve a state budget that does not include her proposed repeal of the states sales tax on food.

"I don't think anybody should ever take for granted that I will just automatically sign a budget," Noem said. "I think it's silly that they think in two weeks I have got to sign that budget if I don't like it."

Noem made similar statements in a Tuesday news release and video. She did not use the word "veto" in the release or during her statements to the media Wednesday. Later Wednesday, South Dakota Searchlight asked Noem's spokesman, Ian Fury, if Noem is threatening a veto.

"Her words speak plenty well for themselves," Fury replied.

The main run of this year's legislative session at the Capitol in Pierre ends March 9. If Noem issues any vetoes, legislators will return March 27 to consider overriding them with a two-thirds majority vote.

Noem promised to repeal the sales tax on food during her fall reelection campaign, arguing the state has a budget surplus and the tax hurts working-class families, especially during high inflation.

Some legislators view the state's financial situation more conservatively and oppose carving out an exemption for one category of purchases. Instead of supporting Noem's bill, legislators have brought a rival bill close to final adoption. That bill would cut the state's sales tax across the board — not just on food — from 4.5% to 4.2%. A sunset provision in the bill would move the tax back up to 4.5% after two years unless legislators take action to extend it.

A Senate committee voted 7-1 on Wednesday to send the bill to the full Senate. It's already passed the House, but because it's been amended since then, representatives would have to consider those changes if the Senate approves the bill.

Estimates say both bills would save taxpayers — and cost the state budget — upwards of \$100 million during the first year of implementation.

Noem criticized legislators for considering only a temporary tax cut, and she argued that repealing the food tax would provide more targeted relief to South Dakotans.

"We have historic revenues right now and we've permanently grown our economy," Noem said. "The taxpayers deserve to keep some of their own money in their own pockets."

Noem is also cautioning legislators that a proposed ballot question for the 2024 general election that would eliminate the food sales tax will likely pass.

"If they choose a different tax cut this year, they better make sure they can afford to do the repeal on the sales tax on groceries in a couple of years, too, because they're going to have to do both," Noem said.

## Business community greets new law to recognize out-of-state licenses

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - MARCH 1, 2023 7:11 PM

SIoux FALLS – A new law to recognize out-of-state licenses for most professions in South Dakota will “do a lot of good” for the state’s economy, according to Ken Amundson, president of Midwestern Mechanical in Sioux Falls.

“There will be more tradespeople coming to the state when they don’t have the red tape to deal with,” Amundson said.

Midwestern Mechanical offers plumbing, heating, air conditioning and fire protection services. Amundson said plumbers with 20 years of experience in one state would be hesitant to move to another state where they would have to re-test and re-license.

Governor Kristi Noem signed the bill into law Wednesday at Midwestern Mechanical. She said the legislation will help tackle South Dakota’s worker shortage by making it easier for employers to hire people from other states.

“Most of the businesses I go into, they say, ‘We could continue to expand, we could continue to explore new opportunities if we just had the workers,’” Noem said.

Noem said there are approximately 900 job openings in the state impacted by the bill, including 200 plumbing jobs and up to 300 electricians.

The Governor’s Office said in a statement the professions with the highest need for workers include accountants and auditors, elementary school teachers, electricians, secondary school teachers and plumbers – all of which the bill addresses.

South Dakota has over 23,000 job openings in the state, but only 11,000 people are unemployed and looking for work, said Department of Labor Secretary Marcia Hultman during an earlier hearing for the bill at the Capitol in Pierre.

The state Department of Education launched a program in 2017 to recognize some out-of-state licenses. The law will put that program into statute. Tamara Carns, a teacher from North Dakota now working in Yankton, took advantage of that program. She said the program saved her the trouble of requalifying to teach the subjects she already could in North Dakota.

“I believe the benefits of reciprocity could make a positive impact on other professionals in South Dakota as well,” Carns testified at an earlier committee hearing on the bill.

The bill’s prime sponsors, Rep. Tyler Tordsen and Sen. Jim Stalzer, both Sioux Falls Republicans, attended the bill signing. Noem praised them for ensuring the bill’s passage.

“It matters who sponsors these bills and stands up and champions them, because if they are respected, if they have integrity, and if they have credibility, their colleagues listen,” Noem said.

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

## House tanks last remaining bill to address Native American disparity in foster care placements

BY: JOHN HULT - MARCH 1, 2023 7:05 PM

PIERRE – The House of Representatives shot down a bill that would have created a task force to study the causes and possible solutions for the disparate representation of Native American children in the foster care system.

Senate Bill 191 sailed to the House with unanimous support from a House panel earlier this week. It



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passed the Senate 22-12 one week ago.

Two other bills would have made changes to child removal procedures in the interest of addressing disparate impacts, but each failed in committee.

Rep. Peri Pourier, D-Pine Ridge, pleaded with her fellow lawmakers to pass the task force during impassioned testimony on Wednesday. The enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe reminded the body that nearly two decades had passed since the last comprehensive study of Native children in foster care. She relayed the oft-repeated statistic that more than 60% of children in foster care in the state are Native, while around 10% of the population is Native.

She noted that those figures have scarcely changed since the 2004 study took place.

Then, as now, neglect is the most common justification for the removal of children from their homes.

"Being born and raised in one of the poorest counties in the country, I can tell you that neglect often looks like poverty," said Pourier, who was the lead sponsor of the two foster care bills that failed earlier in the session. The lead sponsor of SB 191 is Sen. Red Dawn Foster, D-Pine Ridge, another Oglala Sioux tribal member.

All nine of South Dakota's tribal nations signed on to support SB 191. The tribes would have had a seat at the table for the work of the two-year task force, with lawmakers and representatives from the state Department of Social Services.

Each tribe has cooperative agreements with the state on taxation, foster care and other governmental functions, which vary from tribe to tribe. That reality, coupled each tribal nation's unique needs, is why a task force is necessary, Pourier said.

"This is not a problem the tribes can solve on their own. This is not a problem the state can solve on its own. We need each other," Pourier said.

The bill was amended on the floor to appease concerns raised earlier in the week at the House Judiciary Committee, where members suggested that the task force's six study areas were too heavy a lift. Committee members also urged the inclusion of inquiries on substance abuse on that list.

Language requiring the study of substance abuse and addiction disorders was added; two study areas were removed. That was enough to earn the support of Rep. Scott Odenbach. The Spearfish Republican opposed the first two foster care bills, but said he was swayed by the continued concerns of the tribes.

"We heard, basically, unanimity from the tribes on this," Odenbach said.

The length of time for the study still came up on the House floor, however. The task force's eight meetings and 17 members would have taken a bigger bite out of the budget for the state's Legislative Research Council than the typical summer study, said Rep. Tony Venhuizen, R-Sioux Falls.

Only four of the 17 members would have been lawmakers.

"We're paying for it, but we're not staffing it," Venhuizen said.

The U.S. Supreme Court is considering a case that may overturn the federal Indian Child Welfare Act, which requires social service agencies to give priority to Native foster families in the placement of abused and neglected children.

"I'm not sure this is the right time to be looking at our state laws," Venhuizen said.

That case wouldn't change the goals of the task force or the importance of the issue in the state, Pourier said in rebuttal, just prior to the final vote.

"Regardless of the decision in the Supreme Court, we have to decide, as the state of South Dakota, what is important to us," she said.

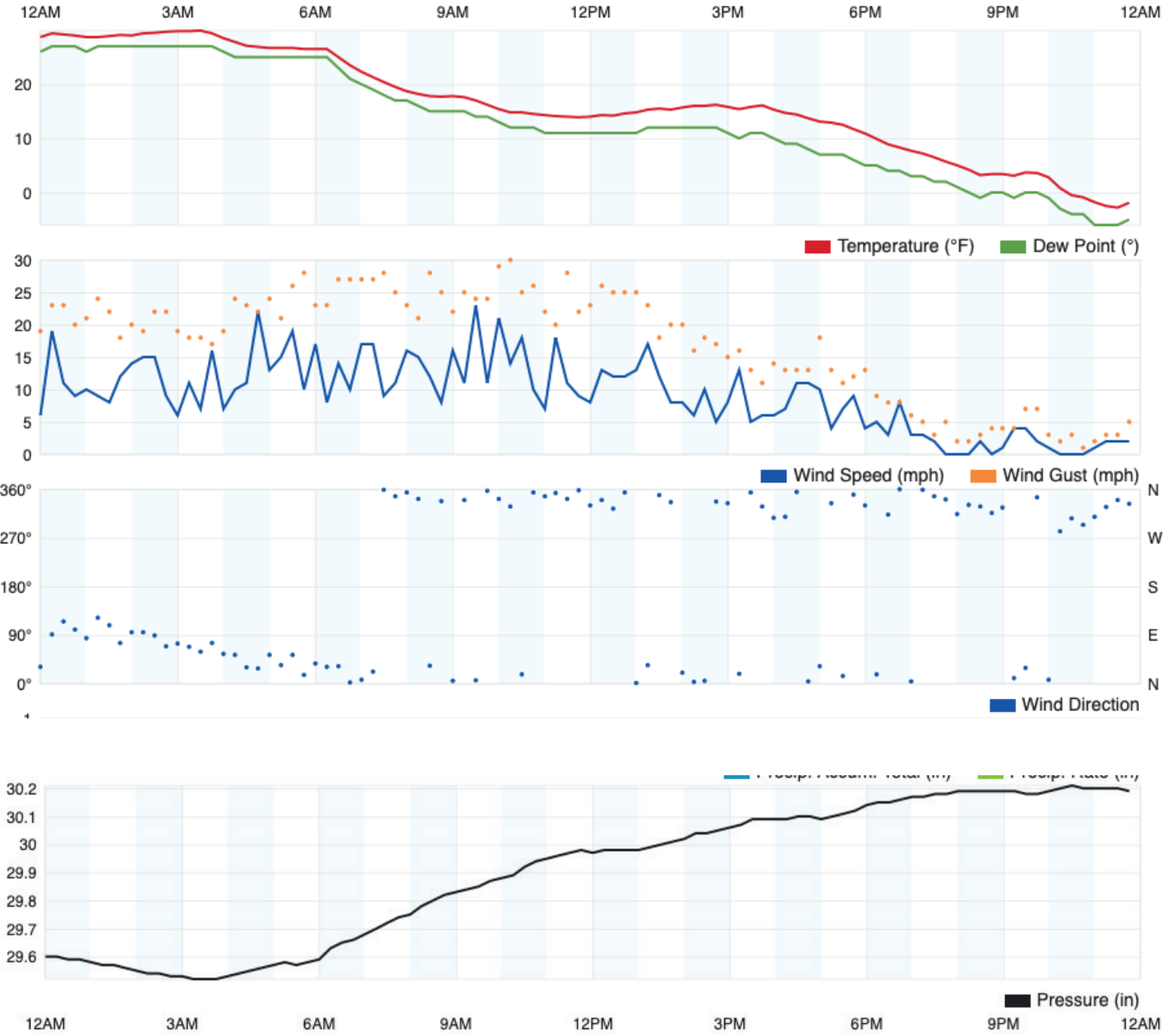
The House rejected the measure 42-26.

*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.*

# Groton Daily Independent








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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
						
Slight Chance Snow then Partly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Partly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Snow Likely and Patchy Blowing Snow
High: 22 °F	Low: 14 °F	High: 34 °F	Low: 12 °F	High: 32 °F	Low: 14 °F	High: 34 °F

## TEMPERATURES WARMING THROUGH THE WEEKEND, THEN FALLING NEXT WEEK

	Maximum Temperature Forecast						
	3/2 Thu	3/3 Fri	3/4 Sat	3/5 Sun	3/6 Mon	3/7 Tue	3/8 Wed
<b>Aberdeen</b>	23	35	33	34	30	26	24
Britton	23	32	29	30	28	24	22
<b>Eagle Butte</b>	35	37	38	36	27	25	24
Eureka	27	35	34	33	29	24	23
Gettysburg	31	38	38	37	29	26	24
Kennebec	37	41	42	45	34	31	29
McIntosh	33	35	35	31	25	22	21
Milbank	25	35	33	34	32	28	26
Miller	28	36	35	36	30	26	24
Mobridge	34	39	39	38	31	27	26
Murdo	43	43	45	49	34	32	29
<b>Pierre</b>	42	44	46	46	35	33	30
Redfield	24	35	34	35	30	26	24
Sisseton	25	35	32	32	32	27	26
<b>Watertown</b>	23	33	30	33	30	26	24
Webster	23	31	29	31	29	24	22
Wheaton	20	32	31	31	32	26	24

Don't see your city? Check out [weather.gov/forecastpoints](https://www.weather.gov/forecastpoints)

Expect temperatures to warm through the weekend. Then, there should be a cooling trend showing up next week. There are also a few chances for precipitation scattered about the 7-day forecast.

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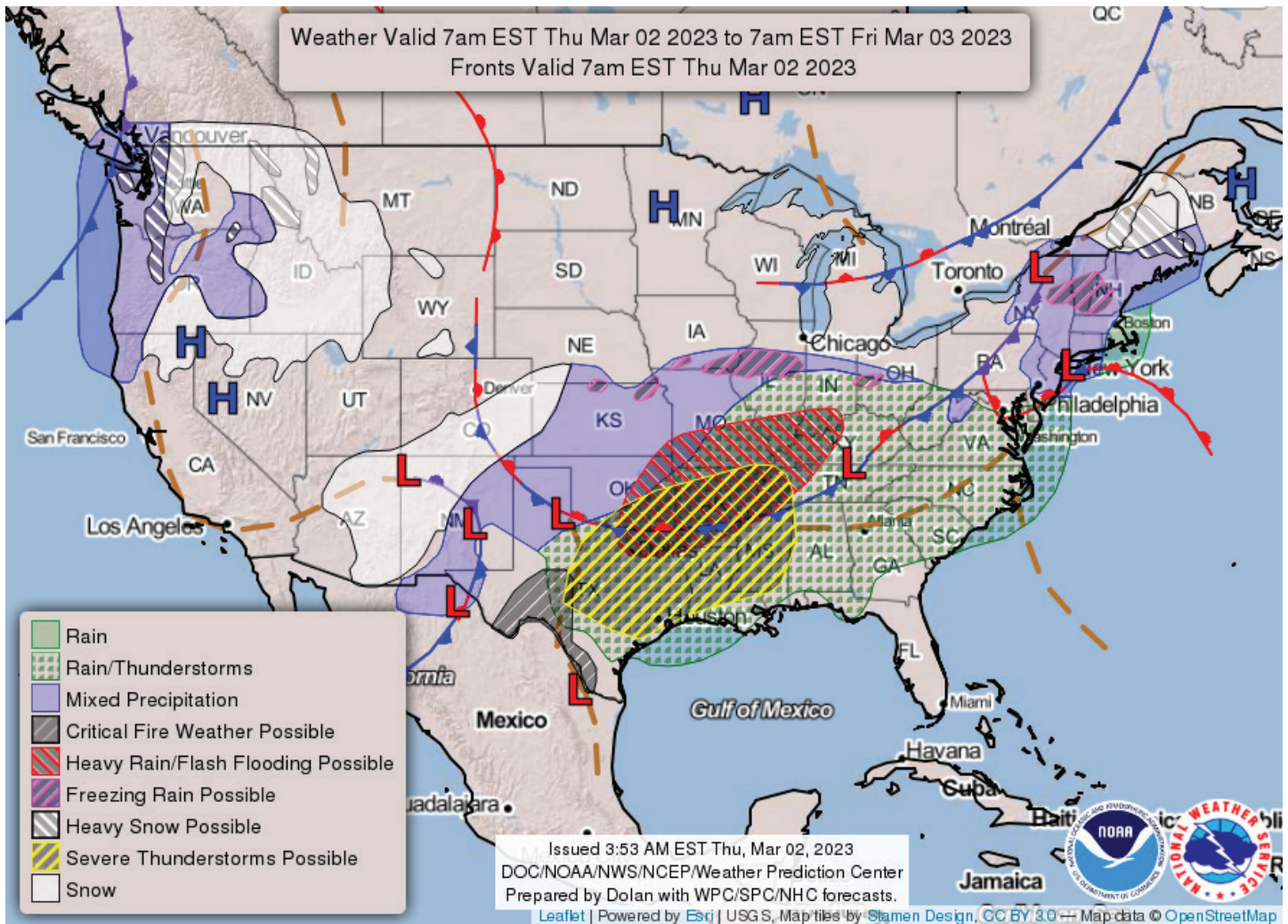
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 29.9 °F at 3:30 PM**  
**Low Temp: -2.8 °F at 11:30 PM**  
**Wind: 30 mph at 10:15 AM**  
**Precip: : 0.00**

Day length: 11 hours, 14 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 67 in 2021  
Record Low: -21 in 1913  
Average High: 34  
Average Low: 13  
Average Precip in March.: 0.05  
Precip to date in March.: 0.00  
Average Precip to date: 1.22  
Precip Year to Date: 1.58  
Sunset Tonight: 6:21:50 PM  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:05:22 AM



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## Today in Weather History

March 2, 1966: The blizzard began late on March 2 in the west and moved very slowly across the state, reaching the extreme east on the 4th and continuing into the 5th. Snow depths ranged from 2 to 4 inches in southeast South Dakota to nearly 3 feet in north-central South Dakota. Winds of 40 to 55 mph with gusts to 70 mph caused widespread blowing snow and near-zero visibilities during the storm. Drifts up to 30 feet were reported in sheltered areas with bare open fields. The storm caused massive livestock losses. Estimated losses were 50,000 cattle, 46,000 sheep, and 1800 hogs. The most substantial losses were in the central and north-central parts of the state. The heavy snow also collapsed many structures. The storm directly caused three deaths due to exposure, and three were indirectly caused by the storm; 2 due to heart attacks and one by asphyxiation. The blizzard was rated as one of the most severe that has been experienced in South Dakota. Many roads were blocked for days, and many schools and businesses closed.

March 2, 2007: An area of low pressure moved slowly northeast across the central and northern plains, bringing widespread snowfall and intense winds. The combination of the falling snow and the existing snow cover resulted in blizzard conditions with visibilities to zero at times. This blizzard event was part of the same upper-level low-pressure trough that brought the heavy snowfall to the area on February 28. Additional snowfall occurred across the region on March 1st and 2nd as a large area of snow wrapped in from the east. Widespread blizzard conditions developed by noon on March 2 and continued into the early morning hours of the 3rd. Snowfall amounts, including the snow on February 28, ranged from 2 inches to 22 inches across central and northeast South Dakota. The heaviest snowfall amounts were across north-eastern South Dakota, where total snow depths were in the 25 to 30-inch range. Northwest winds of 30 to 45 mph with gusts near 60 mph brought zero visibilities across the area, creating large snowdrifts. Schools, businesses, airports, roads, and interstates were closed for up to two days. Travel was not advised across the area. Also, many cars were ditched, along with several accidents. Many travelers were stranded, and several shelters were opened. The Emergency Operations Center was activated in Pierre, and the Governor declared the blizzard area a disaster. Some of the most significant snowfall amounts over the 3 days included 11 inches at Andover, Hosmer, and Redfield, 12 inches at Webster, 13 inches at Miller, 14 inches at Victor, Groton, and Clark, 15 inches at Castlewood and Summit, 16 inches at Watertown and Roy Lake, 19 inches at Sisseton, 20 inches at Milbank, 21 inches at Bryant, and 22 inches at Clear Lake.

1846 - A great storm hit Virginia and the Carolinas. The storm caused half a million dollars damage, and in North Carolina drowned fifty families and a thousand cattle on Notts Island. (David Ludlum)

1927: Raleigh, North Carolina, was buried under 17.8 inches of snow in 24 hours, a record for that location until 2000. On January 25, 2000, Raleigh saw 17.9 inches of snow in 24 hours.

1975 - The governor's Tornado in Atlanta did considerable damage to the governor's mansion and surrounding areas resulting in three deaths and 56.5 million dollars damage. (The Weather Channel)

1988: Thunderstorms produced severe weather in the south-central U.S. A tornado in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, injured two persons, and another tornado caused five million dollars in damage at the airport in Lafayette, Louisiana.

1990 - Mild weather continued across the northern tier of states. Highs of 52 degrees at Saint Johnsbury VT, 63 degrees at Olympia WA, and 64 degrees at Seattle WA were records for the date. (The National Weather Summary)

2005: Waterspouts were recorded in Redondo Beach in southern California. Pea size hail accumulated to a depth of one inch on Huntington Beach.

2012: The March 2 and 3, 2012, a deadly tornado outbreak occurred over a large section of the Southern United States into the Ohio Valley region. The storms resulted in 41 tornado-related fatalities, 22 of which occurred in Kentucky. Tornado-related deaths also occurred in Alabama, Indiana, and Ohio. The outbreak was the second deadliest in early March for the U.S. since official records began in 1950. Only the 1966 Candlestick Park tornado had a higher death toll for a tornadic system in early March.

Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN?

A homeless man was found dead trying to climb into a dumpster. When they looked in his pockets for his identification, they discovered several checks. They were worth thousands of dollars, but they did him no good. He never surrendered them to receive their cash value.

As we read God's Word, we find promise after promise - all having value to the believer. But as with the checks of the homeless man, they must be "turned into cash" to have any value for the Christian. We must go to God, through His Word, to claim His promises to meet our every need.

James said that God "does not resent your asking. But when you do ask Him, be sure you really expect Him to answer, for a doubtful mind is as unsettled as a wave of the sea "

There are times when it is easier to believe in God than it is to believe in the fact that He deeply cares for each of us and our every need. Surely, if He is bound by His Word, then we can go to Him "in faith believing." We must always remember one simple fact: nothing is so small that it escapes His concern, or that any problem is so large that He cannot solve it.

We limit God by the limitations we place on Him. The problems we have with our faith are our problems - not God's. "Whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you," said Jesus. What more can He say to assure us of His love and concern for our best?

Prayer: Father, give us a faith that is larger than our problems and a willingness to trust in Your power. Remind us that You are bigger than the universe You created. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. James 1:1-8



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

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## 2023 Community Events

- 01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
- 01/31/2023-02/03/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Drop Off 6-9pm, Community Center
- 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
- 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
- 05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 06/16/2023 SDSU Alumni and Friends Golf Tournament
- 07/04/2023 Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Golf Tournament
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
- 12/02/2023 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party
- 12/09/2023 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9-11am

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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.28.23

14 16 40 52 59 13

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$167,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 24

DRAW: Mins 37 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.01.23

8 14 17 38 41 7

All Star Bonus: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$38,760,000**

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 24

DRAW: Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.01.23

6 11 19 35 46 7

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 15 Hrs 54 Mins 37

DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.01.23

10 12 14 30 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$73,000**

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 24

DRAW: Mins 37 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.01.23

7 12 16 17 39 22

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 23

DRAW: Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

03.01.23

2 9 28 36 53 4

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$161,000,000**

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 23

DRAW: Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

## News from the Associated Press

### **South Dakota bills seek new regulations on foreign business**

By AMANCAI BIRABEN Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota lawmakers have passed a pair of bills that would set new regulations for the state's business relationship with foreign entities.

The bills, which are now on their way to Republican Gov. Kristi Noem's desk, were proposed in response to lawmakers' fears that foreign countries have maligned intentions.

One bill that passed would require agricultural landowners to report whether their businesses are owned by foreign entities to help legislators tally how much land is owned by foreign countries. And the other approved will prohibit government partnerships with businesses owned or controlled overseas.

These bills fall into Noem's agenda that targets Chinese economic influence. Already, she's banned Tik-Tok from state technology over concerns about surveillance and has reported that the state has no direct investments in that country. Some of her legislative ambitions have been curtailed by the legislature.

"I'm happy that we took this first step," Republican House Majority Leader Will Mortenson said following his bill's final hearing.

In a Senate hearing last week, Republican Sen. Jim Stalzer said his experience in military and government cybersecurity roles have shaped his concerns that foreign countries, namely China, could profit from U.S. data.

"It's an incremental step towards protecting our state from external threats, either cybersecurity, food security or economic security," Stalzer said. "Public funds should not be used as a revenue stream for foreign entities."

An additional proposal to ward off foreign influence died last week. Had it passed, it would have created a committee to determine whether certain countries could purchase over 160 acres (64 hectares) of land. Lawmakers pointed out the flaws in its mechanics. It was also unpopular among stock growers, who said it pitted national security against their business viability and property rights.

"We cannot support legislation that may lead to unintended consequences," South Dakota Farm Bureau President Scott VanderWal testified in opposing that bill.

Foreign entities and individuals control less than 3% of U.S. farmland, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and of that, less than 1%, or roughly 600 square miles (1,500 square kilometers) is owned by entities with ties to China. Lawmakers say it is unknown what percentage of South Dakota land is owned by overseas interests.

### **Midwest could add more ethanol to gasoline under EPA plan**

By SCOTT McFETRIDGE Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Gasoline with higher blends of ethanol could be sold year-round in eight Midwestern states beginning in 2024 under a rule proposed Wednesday by the Environmental Protection Agency.

The proposed rule is a victory for the biofuels industry, which for years has pushed to allow sales of gasoline blended with 15% ethanol during the summer, which hasn't been allowed because of concerns that it would worsen smog during hot weather. The industry and members of Congress welcomed the EPA's proposal, which had been requested by governors in the eight states. But they questioned why the new rules couldn't begin this summer.

Under the proposal, the higher blends could be sold during the summer in Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin. Most gasoline sold in the U.S. is now blended with 10% ethanol, which is allowed throughout the year.

The issue is especially important in those Midwest states because farmers there grow the bulk of the nation's corn, and nearly 40% of that crop is used to produce ethanol. As more ethanol goes into gas

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tanks, demand for corn should increase and prices for the commodity paid to farmers should also rise.

The American Coalition for Ethanol said in a statement that the group appreciated the EPA's proposal but argued there was no reason to wait until 2024. The group accused the agency of delaying the action because of pressure from the petroleum industry.

"The administration appears to be caving to refiner crocodile tears by kicking the can to 2024 instead," the coalition said. "This delay means consumers in conventional gasoline areas of the country will be forced to pay more at the pump this year and retailers who want to offer lower cost E15 to their customers will be penalized."

The group urged the EPA to allow the change to take effect in 2023 for the eight Midwestern states and for the Biden administration to allow the expanded ethanol sales in other regions of the country.

The EPA responded that there wasn't time to change the fuel supply for this summer.

"There is simply not enough lead time prior to the summer of 2023. The fuel production and distribution system would have already had to begin making the transition to provide a new lower volatility gasoline by now in order to meet a May 1, 2023, standard at the gasoline terminals," the EPA said in a statement.

"Were EPA to propose a summer 2023 effective date, it could lead to supply disruption."

The American Fuel & Petrochemical Manufacturers industry group said the EPA was right to delay new rules until 2024 because summer gasoline production is already underway. Even with more lead time, the organization predicted that creating a special blend for the Midwestern states would increase costs and could lead to tighter fuel supplies in the region because not all refiners, pipelines and terminals are ready to handle the different blend.

"Fuel manufacturers and regional pipeline and terminal operators have made clear to the Biden administration and the eight petitioning states that the push to outlaw the current blend of summertime gasoline and replace it with a boutique blend is going to impose major costs on the Midwest's fuel supply chain and consumers — ranging from \$500-\$800 million per year, and potentially higher if unforeseen interruptions occur," the organization said in a statement.

The EPA said it would hold a hearing on the proposed rule in late March or early April.

## Chasing Horse pleads not guilty in Nevada sex abuse case

By RIO YAMAT Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — A former "Dances With Wolves" actor pleaded not guilty Wednesday to state charges that he sexually abused Indigenous women and girls for a decade in Nevada.

Nathan Chasing Horse, 46, appeared briefly in Clark County District Court following his indictment last week on 19 charges, including sexual assault, first-degree kidnapping and drug trafficking.

He has been jailed in Las Vegas on \$300,000 bond since his arrest Jan. 31 near the home in North Las Vegas that he shared with five women he described as his wives.

Authorities describe Chasing Horse as the leader of a cult known as The Circle who took underage wives. They allege that at the time of his arrest he was grooming young girls to replace his older wives.

Born on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota, Chasing Horse is widely known for his role as Smiles a Lot in Kevin Costner's 1990 Oscar-winning film.

His arrest by Las Vegas police followed a monthslong probe that officials said was prompted by a tip from Canadian authorities investigating Chasing Horse in connection with a 2018 rape allegation in British Columbia.

Authorities in Las Vegas allege that his crimes in Nevada spanned a decade. According to court documents, they also uncovered a pattern of sexual abuse dating back to the early 2000s across multiple states, including Montana and South Dakota, as well as Canada.

Documents show at least six victims have been identified, including one who said she was 13 when sexual abuse began, and another who said she was offered to Chasing Horse as a "gift" when she was 15.

Criminal cases against Chasing Horse are mounting, and he now faces charges in four jurisdictions — in state court in Las Vegas, in U.S. District Court in Nevada, in British Columbia and on the Fort Peck Reser-

vation in northeastern Montana.

Inside Chasing Horse's home, court documents say detectives found firearms, psilocybin mushrooms, 41 pounds of marijuana and two cellphones containing videos and photos of underage girls being sexually assaulted. The footage led to federal child pornography charges.

## **The Carters: What you know may be wrong (or not quite right)**

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

PLAINS, Ga. (AP) — Exaggeration, misinformation and myth have always infected politics – even before social media took it to the extreme.

Misconceptions take especially strong hold where U.S. presidents are concerned: sometimes to their advantage, sometimes not. Some claims relate to policy, others to their biographies and personal traits.

That George Washington story about the cherry tree? Apocryphal. And his teeth weren't actually made of wood. (At least some of his "false teeth" were taken from the mouths of enslaved persons.) There's no evidence that William Howard Taft ever got stuck in a bathtub. (He was the heaviest president on record, though, at more than 300 pounds.)

James Monroe wasn't the principal force behind the Monroe Doctrine. (That would be his secretary of state and future president John Quincy Adams.) And Richard Nixon wasn't actually impeached. (He resigned before the full House could vote on the matter.)

As former President Jimmy Carter receives home hospice care at the age of 98, misconceptions about his life are coming into focus as well. Most are rooted in some truth but need more context:

**MISCONCEPTION:** Ronald Reagan freed the American hostages in Iran.

**MORE ACCURATE:** Carter and his administration negotiated their release, but Tehran wouldn't free them until after Reagan's inauguration on Jan. 20, 1981.

**THE DETAILS:** Iranian revolutionaries stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on Nov. 4, 1979. They would hold 52 U.S. citizens for 444 days. From the outset, Carter resolved not to start a shooting war in response. He authorized a rescue mission in the spring of 1980, but mechanical problems forced the helicopter operation to abort and one crashed, killing eight servicemen.

Carter, a Democrat, continued diplomatic efforts but suffered politically amid intense news coverage of the crisis. He lost in a Nov. 4 landslide to the Republican Reagan. A final round of negotiations began in Algeria after. The U.S. delegation was led by Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher. Iran and the U.S. finalized terms for the hostages' release on Carter's final full day in office, Jan. 19, 1981, and Carter remained in the Oval Office the next morning, Inauguration Day, seeing through details. They were released shortly after Reagan was sworn in. Reagan then sent Carter to West Germany to greet the freed Americans.

**MISCONCEPTION:** Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter founded Habitat for Humanity.

**MORE ACCURATE:** The Carters have been Habitat's most famous endorsers and volunteers. But the organization was established by wealthy businessman Millard Fuller and his wife, Linda, as an outgrowth of a Georgia commune where they spent time in the 1960s.

**THE DETAILS:** Habitat grew out of the housing ministry of Koinonia Farm, a multiracial commune in Carter's home county that was ostracized in the days of Jim Crow segregation. In 1965, Fuller came to the farm for what he'd later describe as spiritual renewal.

Carter biographer Jonathan Alter details that Martin Luther King Jr. befriended Koinonia's white founder, Clarence Jordan, during the civil rights movement. But the non-profit organization was accused in Georgia courts of being a communist front, and King's inner circle considered it radical. Jordan was beaten on the streets of Americus, a short distance from Plains. Against this backdrop, Alter writes, Jimmy Carter kept his distance. Jordan's nephew, Hamilton Jordan, would become Carter's White House chief of staff. Alter records the younger Jordan, who died in 2008, saying his uncle viewed Carter as "just a politician."

Koinonia's local housing programs were formalized as the "Fund for Humanity" in the late 1960s. Carter was running for governor then. The Fullers established Habitat for Humanity in 1976, the year Carter won

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the presidency. The Carters' first volunteer Habitat build was in New York City in 1984. That became the annual Jimmy & Rosalynn Carter Work Project, which would eventually build, renovate or repair 4,400 homes in 14 countries. The Carters worked alongside more than 104,000 volunteers, by The Carter Center's count.

MISCONCEPTION: Jimmy Carter was an unabashed liberal.

MORE ACCURATE: Carter was a moderate politician, campaigned deliberately and, once in office, pursued policies that don't fit easily under one label.

THE DETAILS: Carter sought the presidency in 1976 as an outsider in a party largely controlled in Washington by New Deal liberals and Kennedy loyalists. Carter was a "Southern Democrat" who never gelled with Massachusetts Sen. Ted Kennedy, who challenged him in a damaging 1980 primary. Carter had described himself in Georgia as both "conservative" and "progressive," depending on the issue, the audience and the campaign. Sometimes he even used those words together.

He was a good-government policy wonk who spent considerable political capital reorganizing government in Atlanta and then Washington. He pushed windfall taxes on big oil (unsuccessfully) but frustrated fellow Democrats on spending priorities and added little to the national debt compared to all his successors (less than \$300 billion in four years). The deregulatory era often associated with Reagan actually began with Carter loosening regulations on airlines, trains and trucking.

Carter advocated for a national health program but his top health care bill failed because it didn't go far enough for party liberals, including Kennedy. Carter grew more openly progressive as a former president, voting for Bernie Sanders in the 2016 presidential primaries. But he also warned his party ahead of 2020 not to move too far left if they hoped to defeat then-President Donald Trump.

MISCONCEPTION: Jimmy Carter is married to "RAHZ-lyn," and he was there when she was born.

MORE ACCURATE: It's "ROSE-lyn," and he met her as a newborn – but not immediately.

THE DETAILS: Eleanor Rosalynn (again, "ROSE-lyn") Smith was born in Plains on Aug. 18, 1927. The nurse who delivered her was Lillian Carter, the future president's mother. But Jimmy Carter, who was born Oct. 1, 1924, was back on the family farm in nearby Archery, outside Plains. "Miss Lillian" brought her her son back to the Smiths' house a few days later to see baby Rosalynn, who is now 95.

As for the pronunciation, remember the flower. The former president's affectionate name for her might help, too. He often calls her "Rosie."

## Greece: Grim train search moves 'centimeter by centimeter'

By COSTAS KANTOURIS and DEREK GATOPOULOS Associated Press

THESSALONIKI, Greece (AP) — Emergency crews cut through the mangled metal paneling of a passenger train on Thursday, progressing "centimeter by centimeter" in their efforts to pull more bodies from the burned wreckage of a head-on collision in northern Greece that left at least 43 people dead. Rail workers went on strike to protest years of underfunding they say has left the country's rail system in a dangerous state.

The passenger train and a freight train slammed into each other late Tuesday, crumpling carriages into twisted steel knots and forcing people to smash windows to escape. It was the country's deadliest crash ever, and more than 50 people remained hospitalized, most in the central Greek city of Larissa, six of them in intensive care.

Fire Service spokesman Yiannis Artopios said the grim recovery effort was proceeding "centimeter by centimeter."

"We can see that there are more (bodies) people there. Unfortunately they are in a very bad condition because of the collision," Artopios told state television.

WORKERS SAY TRAIN SYSTEM IS UNSAFE

Railway workers' associations called strikes, halting national rail services and the subway in Athens. They are protesting working conditions and what they described as a dangerous failure to modernize the Greek rail system, due to a lack of public investment during the deep financial crisis that spanned most of the previous decade and brought Greece to the brink of bankruptcy.

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The cause of the crash is still not clear, but a stationmaster arrested following the rail disaster is due to appear in court Thursday as a judicial inquiry tries to establish why the two trains were traveling in opposite directions on the same track.

Transport Minister Kostas Karamanlis resigned following the crash, his replacement tasked with setting up an independent inquiry looking into the causes of the accident.

"Responsibility will be assigned," Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said in a televised address late Wednesday after visiting the scene of the collision.

"We will work so that the words 'never again' ... will not remain an empty pledge. That I promise you."

Supporters of the strike plan to protest in central Athens later Thursday.

## CRASH SURVIVOR DESCRIBES FIERY ESCAPE

More than 300 people were on board the passenger train, many of them were students returning from a holiday weekend and annual Carnival celebrations around Greece.

Andreas Alikaniotis, a 20-year-old survivor of the crash, described how he and fellow students, escaped from a jack-knifed train car as fire approached, smashing windows and throwing luggage onto the ground outside to use as a makeshift landing pad.

"It was a steep drop, into a ditch," Alikaniotis, who suffered a knee injury, told reporters from his hospital bed in Larissa.

"The lights went out. And light had come from the approaching fire and the sparks that were flying. The smoke was suffocating inside the rail car but also outside," Alikaniotis said.

"I managed to remain calm and I was one of the few around who had not been seriously injured," he said. "Me and my friends helped people get out."

## ZELENSKYY, TURKEY SEND CONDOLENCES

Pope Francis and European leaders sent messages of sympathy. Among them were the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, whose country is recovering from devastating earthquakes last month. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy sent a message in Greek, writing "The people of Ukraine share the pain of the families of the victims. We wish a speedy recovery to all the injured."

## Russia claims Ukraine crossborder sabotage raid; Kyiv denies

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russian officials accused Ukrainian saboteurs on Thursday of crossing into western Russia and attacking local villages, an accusation that Ukraine denied and alleged would be used by Moscow to step up attacks.

The exact circumstances of the incident reported in the Bryansk region were unclear, including what the strategic purpose of such an attack would be.

If confirmed, it would be another indication following drone attacks earlier this week that Kyiv could be stepping up pressure against Moscow by exposing Russian defensive weaknesses, embarrassing the Kremlin and sowing unease among Russian civilians.

The announcement itself was a worrying development since it could be used by Russian authorities to step up its attacks in Ukraine in retaliation, as the war extends into its second year.

Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak described the Russian reports as "a classic deliberate provocation."

Russia "wants to scare its people to justify the attack on another country (and) the growing poverty after the year of war," he tweeted, suggesting that the attack was the work of Russian partisans.

Amid conflicting initial reports, Russia's Federal Security Service said fighting with the sabotage unit was taking place in the Bryansk region.

The Federal Security Service was quoted by the Russian state Tass news agency as saying that "activities to eliminate armed Ukrainian nationalists who violated the state border" were underway.

Tass, citing Russian law enforcement, reported earlier that the saboteurs were holding up to six people hostage. The local governor said the group had fired on a vehicle there, killing one man and wounding a

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10-year-old child.

Drones that the Kremlin said were launched by Ukraine flew deep inside Russian territory on Tuesday, including one that got within 100 kilometers (60 miles) of Moscow.

Thursday's apparent incursion was also embarrassing for Russian President Vladimir Putin, coming days after he ordered the Federal Security Service to tighten controls on Russia's border with Ukraine.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Putin canceled a planned trip to southern Russia set for Thursday and was receiving reports on the situation from the regional governor. Details of the alleged attack were still being clarified, he said.

Tass reported, citing an unnamed security official, that two villages in the Bryansk region — Sushany and Lyubechane — were under attack by "several dozen armed fighters."

Alexander Bogomaz, the governor of the Bryansk region, which borders Ukraine, said the group fired on a vehicle in Lyubechane, killing one man and wounding a child. He also said that a Ukrainian drone struck a house in the Sushany, setting it ablaze.

In Ukraine on Thursday, three people were killed and six others were wounded when a Russian missile hit a five-story apartment building in a southeastern city.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that several floors of the building were destroyed in the strike, which occurred while it was still dark.

The State Emergency Service said in an online statement that it had rescued 11 people so far.

Zaporizhzhia is a large city that had a population of more than 700,000 before Russia's full-scale invasion of its neighbor just over a year ago. It's the administrative capital of the partially occupied Zaporizhzhia region, which is home to Europe's largest nuclear plant.

Russian artillery, drones and missiles have pounded Ukrainian-held areas in the country's south and east for months. Moscow denies aiming at civilian targets, but its indiscriminate shelling has wrought wide destruction in urban centers.

The war largely slowed to a grinding stalemate during the winter months.

Zelenskyy said Russia "wants to turn every day for our people into a day of terror." He added: "But evil will not reign in our land."

Meanwhile, a fierce battle continued for control of Bakhmut, a key eastern stronghold where Ukrainian officials say they might strategically withdraw.

Ukraine's General Staff reported that the Russian forces "continue to advance and storm the city," but Kyiv's troops repelled some of the attacks on the ruined city. Donetsk regional Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko reported that one person was wounded in Bakhmut on Thursday morning.

Bakhmut was among cities and villages in the Donetsk region that came under Russian shelling, according to the General Staff update.

Taking the city wouldn't only give the Russian forces a rare battlefield gain after months of setbacks, but it might rupture Ukraine's supply lines and allow the Kremlin's forces to press toward other Ukrainian strongholds in Donetsk. \_\_\_\_

Follow AP's coverage of the war in Ukraine at <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine>

## At Gabon talks, a debate on who pays to save world's forests

By WANJOHI KABUKURU Associated Press

MOMBASA, Kenya (AP) — A summit on how to protect the world's largest forests underway in Gabon is set to be dominated by the issue of who pays for the protection and reforestation of lands that are home to some of the world's most diverse species and contribute to limiting planet-warming emissions.

French president Emmanuel Macron and officials and environment ministers from around the world are attending the One Forest Summit this week in the capital Brazzaville to discuss maintaining the world's major rainforests.

But absence of leaders from key nations like presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil and Congo's Félix Tshisekedi is likely to dampen the summit's momentum.

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Macron and his Gabonese counterpart Ali Bongo Ondimba hope the summit will nevertheless encourage solidarity between the world's three major tropical forests in the Amazon, the Congo Basin and in southeast Asia, where some countries say that protecting the forests needs to be profitable.

"Finance has not materialized at the necessary scale," said Simo Kilepa, Papua New Guinea's environment minister on Wednesday evening. "We need to be able to generate revenue from the protection of wild forests."

The summit in Gabon follows disagreements over cash for protecting forests at the United Nations' biodiversity summit in Montreal last December. Congo made a last-minute objection to the now-approved framework, urging for rich, industrialized nations to pay lower-income countries to help protect forests. Congo's calls were dismissed on a legal technicality. The country is sending a reduced delegation to Gabon.

Key environmental groups led by Global Witness are also piling pressure on France to exert its influence and rein in major European banks accused of financing deforestation.

"It's incredibly disheartening to still see that French and other EU-based financial institutions are continuing to pump millions of euros into the decimation of climate critical forests," said Giulia Bondi, a senior EU forests campaigner at Global Witness. Previously, Global Witness found that France's asset managers hold 966 million euros (\$1 billion) in forest-risk bonds and shares.

A report released on the margins of the summit also called for funding for to protect nature and safeguard Indigenous peoples and local communities. The Global Environment Facility and the International Institute for Environment and Development suggested that "biodiversity-positive carbon credits," where corporations and governments are paid for conservation efforts, could boost ambitions.

In Africa, protected areas and forests continue to bear increasing pressure from the competing interests of economic infrastructure development needs, environmental protection demands and climate action.

"Biodiversity and climate change are essentially one and the same problem," said marine scientist David Obura. "They must be resolved together and the financial flows to each must be integrated and made dual-purpose."

## SpaceX launches US, Russia, UAE astronauts to space station

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — SpaceX launched four astronauts to the International Space Station for NASA on Thursday, including the first person from the Arab world going up for an extended monthslong stay.

The Falcon rocket bolted from Kennedy Space Center shortly after midnight, illuminating the night sky as it headed up the East Coast.

Nearly 80 spectators from the United Arab Emirates watched from the launch site as astronaut Sultan al-Neyadi — only the second Emirati to fly to space — blasted off on his six-month mission.

Half a world away in Dubai and elsewhere across the UAE, schools and offices broadcast the launch live.

Also riding the Dragon capsule that's due at the space station on Friday: NASA's Stephen Bowen, a retired Navy submariner who logged three space shuttle flights, and Warren "Woody" Hoburg, a former research scientist at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and space newbie, and Andrei Fedyayev, a space rookie who's retired from the Russian Air Force.

"Welcome to orbit," SpaceX Launch Control radioed, noting liftoff occurred four years to the day after the capsule's first orbital test flight. "If you enjoyed your ride, please don't forget to give us five stars."

The first attempt to launch them was called off Monday at the last minute because of a clogged filter in the engine ignition system.

"It may have taken two times, but it was worth the trip," Bowen said.

NASA's space operations mission chief, Kathy Lueders, said Thursday's launch enhanced a night sky already showcasing a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter. The two planets have appeared side by side all week, seeming to grow ever closer.

"We added a bright new star to that night sky tonight," she told reporters.



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The space station newcomers will replace a U.S.-Russian-Japanese crew that has been up there since October. The other station residents are two Russians and an American whose six-month stay was doubled, until September, after their Soyuz capsule sprang a leak. A replacement Soyuz arrived last weekend.

Al-Neyadi, a communications engineer, thanked everyone in Arabic and then English once reaching orbit. "Launch was incredible. Amazing," he said.

He served as backup for the first Emirati astronaut, Hazzaa al-Mansoori, who rode a Russian rocket to the space station in 2019 for a weeklong visit. The oil-rich federation paid for al-Neyadi's seat on the SpaceX flight.

The UAE's minister for public education and advanced technology, Sarah al-Amiri, said the long mission "provides us a new venue for science and scientific discovery for the country."

"We don't want to just go to space and then not have much to do there or not have impact," said the director general of the UAE's space center in Dubai, Salem al-Marri.

The Emirates already have a spacecraft orbiting Mars, and a mini rover is hitching a ride to the moon on a Japanese lander. Two new UAE astronauts are training with NASA's latest astronaut picks in Houston.

Saudi Prince Sultan bin Salman was the first Arab in space, launching aboard shuttle Discovery in 1985. He was followed two years later by Syrian astronaut Muhammed Faris, launched by Russia. Both were in space for about a week.

Al-Neyadi will be joined this spring by two Saudi astronauts going to the space station on a short private SpaceX flight paid by their government.

"It's going to be really exciting, really interesting" to have three Arabs in space at once, he said last week. "Our region is also thirsty to learn more."

He's taking up lots of dates to share with his crewmates, especially during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month which begins this month. As for observing Ramadan in orbit, he said fasting isn't compulsory since it could make him weak and jeopardize his mission.

Bowen, the crew's leader, said the four have jelled well as a team despite differences between their countries. Even with the tension over the war in Ukraine, the U.S. and Russia have continued to work together on the space station and trade seats on rides there.

"It's just tremendous to have the opportunity to fly with these guys," Bowen said.

## Netanyahu denounces protesters after salon siege of his wife

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his allies on Thursday denounced protesters as "anarchists" after they massed outside a Tel Aviv salon where his wife was getting her hair done — a chaotic end to a day of demonstrations against the government's plan to overhaul the judiciary.

Sara Netanyahu has long been a polarizing figure in Israel, and the incident late Wednesday in a posh neighborhood in Tel Aviv reflected Israel's emotionally charged divide over the overhaul, seen by opponents as an existential threat to the country. Demonstrators outside the salon chanted, "shame, shame" — but did not try to force their way inside. Hundreds of police were sent to the scene and eventually escorted her into a limousine.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu and his political partners showed no signs of easing up on a push to pass a series of bills to overhaul Israel's judiciary. These moves have further inflamed an already deeply riven country and drawn the largest protests in over a decade.

Protest organizers planned more demonstrations Thursday, a day after their self-proclaimed "day of disruption" turned violent when police used a heavy hand against participants at a Tel Aviv rally.

Thursday's demonstrations in Jerusalem are expected to include speeches by former government ministers and senior security officials. Former top economists, including two former Bank of Israel heads and a Nobel Prize laureate, were set to speak at a conference in Tel Aviv about the economic fallout from the overhaul.

Justice Minister Yariv Levin, one of the architects of the judicial overhaul, said Wednesday night that

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despite the mounting public outcry, Netanyahu's government "will not stop the legislation."

The proposed bills would give politicians and parliament control over judicial appointments, the power to overrule the Supreme Court and the ability to pass laws impervious to judicial review.

Critics of the plan include a growing number of former military brass, academics, economists and business leaders. They say the changes will erode the country's delicate system of checks and balances and erode democratic institutions. Netanyahu and his ultranationalist and ultra-Orthodox allies say the changes are necessary to rein in the power of unelected judges.

The battle over the judiciary overhaul comes as Netanyahu's trial for charges of accepting bribes, fraud and breach of trust drags on. The longtime leader has dismissed the charges against him as part of a "witch hunt" by a biased law-enforcement, judiciary and press.

On Wednesday, tens of thousands of Israelis took part in demonstrations across the country against what they saw as an attempt by Netanyahu's new government to weaken the Supreme Court and concentrate power in the hands of the ruling coalition.

Protesters blocked highways and major intersections in Tel Aviv and massed outside the prime minister's official residence in Jerusalem. For the first time since protests began two months ago, the scene on the streets turned violent after Public Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, a hardline nationalist settler, ordered police to take tougher action against demonstrators he claimed were "anarchists." At least 11 people were hospitalized and police arrested dozens.

Wednesday's events reached a crescendo outside a ritzy north Tel Aviv salon where the prime minister's wife was getting her hair done.

Moshe Butbul, a hair stylist from the salon, told the Israeli news site Ynet that another client posted a selfie with Sara Netanyahu. He claimed that "within minutes thousands arrived," though the actual number of protesters may have been smaller, judging by videos posted online.

Reporters at the scene said the crowd kept its distance and did not attempt to break into the salon. Ben-Gvir then dispatched large numbers of security forces to the salon, saying on Twitter that he had ordered police to "save her life" from the demonstrators "besieging" the salon.

Hundreds of police officers, including mounted police, broke a path through the demonstration to let an SUV approach. Protected by a phalanx of police, Sara Netanyahu was escorted out of the salon and into the vehicle, which drove off under heavy police escort.

"The anarchy has to stop," Netanyahu said in a Facebook post accompanied by a picture of him embracing his wife. "This can lead to the loss of life."

Netanyahu's allies came to Sara Netanyahu's defense Thursday morning.

Galit Distel Atbaryan, Israel's public diplomacy minister, called the incident "three hours of terror in which one woman was besieged by an incited mob." Another Likud lawmaker wrote on Twitter that the prime minister's wife "was rescued from a lynch" by a mob of "anarchists."

Yair Golan, a former general and one-time Meretz party lawmaker, told Kan radio that "with all due respect, Sara Netanyahu is a political figure."

Referring to what critics consider her outsized political influence in the prime minister's office, Golan alleged that "she is involved in decision making on a national level and approves senior appointments left and right."

The Netanyahus have been criticized for being out of touch with regular Israelis and living a lavish lifestyle at taxpayer expense. Last week, an Israeli parliamentary committee approved new funding for Netanyahu and his family.

## Biden begins push for funding for pandemic fraud measures

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

President Joe Biden's administration is asking Congress to agree to pay more than \$1.6 billion to help clean up the mess of fraud against the massive government coronavirus pandemic relief programs.

In a strategy announced Thursday, the administration called for money and more time to prosecute cases, to put into place new ways to prevent identity theft and to help people whose identities were stolen.

On a call with reporters, White House American Rescue Plan coordinator Gene Sperling had hope that Congress, including the GOP-controlled House that is often hostile to the Democratic administration, would see the spending as an investment.

"It's just so clear and the evidence is so strong that a dollar smartly spent here will return to the taxpayers, or save, at least \$10," Sperling said, pointing to recoveries that have already happened. The U.S. Secret Service last year got back \$286 million sent out in fraudulently obtained loans through the Small Business Administration.

Sperling said the request would be part of the budget proposal Biden is scheduled to make March 9 — but the bulk of it will be separate from the one-year appropriation request. Details would need to be ironed out with Congress.

Soon after the swaths of the U.S. economy were shut down after the coronavirus hit the country in 2020, Congress began authorizing massive relief measures to help governments, businesses and individuals who were impacted. Relief measures — some signed by Biden and some by his predecessor, Donald Trump — totaled nearly \$6 trillion. That's more than the government spent annually before the pandemic.

Money went to boost unemployment insurance programs, help those in the gig economy who lost work, cover government costs and keep businesses afloat.

"On the whole, those programs did enormous good," Sperling said. "There were also cases where guardrails were unnecessarily lowered, which led to unnecessary and massive fraud."

A congressional committee found that financial technology companies did not properly screen applicants for the giant Paycheck Protection Program. Fraudulent claims for unemployment benefits overwhelmed state computer systems, which sometimes had trouble identifying the fake ones while slowing down many legitimate filings. The Labor Department estimated there was \$164 billion in improper unemployment fraud payments alone — much of it to fraudsters

Many of the scams relied on fake or stolen personal information.

Biden's plans aim to deal with prosecutions and prevention. He's asking for \$600 million for prosecution, including funds to create at least 10 new Justice Department strike forces in addition to the three that already exist to go after criminal syndicates and other fraudsters. He's also calling on increasing the statute of limitations for such crimes to 10 years from the current five, giving more time to investigate and prosecute cases.

And he's calling for policy changes to make sure that the Labor Department Inspector General's Office has ongoing access to data showing where the same identity was used to apply for benefits in multiple states. That office and other inspector general offices would share at least \$300 million to hire investigators.

Biden is also planning eventually to issue an executive order directing federal agencies on how to take action on identity fraud, including modernizing government systems to prevent identity theft.

A portion of the money would go to improve a Federal Trade Commission website, IdentityTheft.gov, a place for people to report identity theft and get help.

The proposal also notes that \$1.6 billion from the American Rescue Plan — the last of the big relief measures, adopted in 2021 — will be made available by June to help states improve their anti-identity theft measures.

## Shoe polish stands lose some shine

By MAE ANDERSON and TED SHAFFREY The Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — On a recent winter weekday at Penn Station Shoe Repair and Shoe Shine, men hop onto shoeshine chairs and pull out newspapers and phones to read while shoeshiners get to work applying polish and elbow grease to loafers, boots and other leather shoes. When finished, these customers hand over \$8 in cash at a counter where a sign reads “We’re not God, but we do save soles.”

Shoeshining has a vaunted history in the U.S. In the 1860s, Horatio Alger popularized the “rags-to-riches” American narrative with his book “Ragged Dick” about a shoeshiner (or “bootblack”) who works his way up to wealth. “Shoeshine boys” (and occasional girls) have subsequently been in countless movies and TV shows.

Today, the tradition of getting a quick polish from a rag-toting shoeshiner is greatly diminished, and many stands similar to the one in Penn Station have disappeared across the country. The decline has been exacerbated by the pandemic, remote working and the rise in popularity of more casual workwear when people did return to the office. SC Johnson, which makes the biggest shoe polish brand, Kiwi, even said in January that it had stopped selling the brand in the U.K. due to softening demand (they still sell it in the U.S.)

The last time the Census listed shoeshining as a discrete business was 2007, when only 30 establishments were counted. The more-encompassing shoe repair market has declined an estimated 23% between 2013 and 2023 to \$307 million, according to market research firm IBISWorld. Shoe polish sales in 2022 totaled 27.3 million units, down 29% compared with 2019, according to figures from Nielsen, a sign of the changes brought on by the pandemic.

Nisan Khaimov, who owns the Penn Station stand, said his stand would shine 80 to 100 shoes each workday before the pandemic. Now it’s between 30 to 50 on Tuesday to Thursday, and even fewer on Mondays and Fridays. Hybrid work is hurting his business.

“Until people come back to work, the problems will not be solved,” said Khaimov, who benefits from commuters traveling in and out of New York City who can’t get their shoes shined where they live. “And it’s not good for landlords and for tenants also like us. So, we’re waiting. But eventually it will go back to normal, we hope. But when we don’t know.”

Rory Heenan, 38, an accountant in Philadelphia, said that as a young boy he would take the train with his father on his way to work one Friday each month and watch him get a shoeshine.

“I would just sit here as a little guy, you know, observing,” he said. “And here I am, you know, 30 years later, doing the same thing. So, it’s certainly something that’s passed down over time.”

Across town, in the corridor between the subway and The Port Authority bus terminal, Jairo Cardenas is also feeling the pinch. Business at Alpha Shoes Repair Corp., which he’s run for 33 years, is down 75% compared with prior to the pandemic. He’s down to one shoeshiner, from the three he employed before the pandemic. His shoeshiners used to shine 60 or 70 shoes a day. Now a good day is 10 to 15 shins.

Cardenas’ landlord gave him a break on rent, but he’s still struggling, and has seen several other shoeshine stores in the area close. Still, he is noticing an uptick in people returning to work and hopes business slowly returns to normal by the spring.

Shoe repairs typically bring in more money than shins. At David Mesquita’s Leather Spa, which operates five shoe repair and shoeshine businesses, including two in Grand Central, the bulk of the business comes from shoe, handbag and garment repair. But shoeshines are still a key offering to draw people in to Leather Spa locations since they’re not available everywhere.

Pre-pandemic, Leather Spa had four shoeshine chairs in Grand Central and six shoeshiners rotating, who would do about 120 shins a day. Nowadays, there are three shoeshiners who do 40 or 50 shins on the best days.

But Mesquita is seeing people slowly coming back. His December 2022 shoeshine numbers were up 52% compared with December 2021. Mondays and Fridays are less busy than the middle of the week due to office workers’ hybrid schedules.

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"Traffic is slowly coming back in, we're seeing the commuters come in and everything, but we're still not back 100% of what we were," Mesquita said.

Mesquita said shoeshining is not something that will go away completely.

"I think it's just a little luxury," he said. "People like to treat themselves, you know, whether it's once a week or twice a week or, you know, once every two weeks. It's just nice."

Besides big city transit hubs, airports are one of the few remaining spots to reliably get a shoeshine. Jill Wright owns Executive Shine, which operates shoeshine stations in the Denver and Charlotte airports. Her business was devastated when air travel shut down.

When airports started to reopen, they were empty. The only people getting their shoes shined were pilots and crew, she said, which kept her company in business. Now, Wright says her businesses is still just 35% of what it was in 2019.

"Travel has really changed," she said. "Companies are starting to come back but not to the degree that they were."

Business travel is rebounding, but the U.S. Travel Association predicts 2023 business trips will still be down 10% from 2019, and will return to pre-pandemic levels in 2024. Meanwhile, people are dressing differently when they travel. Instead of traveling in workwear, some travelers that still want to get their shoes shined will travel in tennis shoes, pull out their dress shoes to get a shine, and then put them back in their bag, Wright said.

Like Mesquita, Wright expects demand for shoeshines will never go away completely, because it's more than just a transactional service. A shine is a moment of connection between two people, particularly at an airport where there is a lot of rushing around and stress, she said.

"People come for a shoeshine, but they also come for the connection and for the conversation and just for a place to relax and talk and be seen and feel some compassion," she said.

## What's driving the players behind Israel's legal overhaul?

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — In Israel's divisive debate over the government's planned legal overhaul, proponents claim that curtailing the power of judges and courts is good for the country.

But, as their opponents often counter, other factors may be in play: Some of the leading politicians clamoring for these changes either face legal problems or believe the courts are obstructing their ideological agendas.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's allies say the overhaul will rein in an unelected judiciary. Critics warn that it will upend Israel's system of checks and balances, give too much power to the premier and push the country toward authoritarianism.

Here is a look at the key players who are pushing ahead with the overhaul, despite mass protests and opposition from business leaders, security chiefs and legal officials, as well as concern from Israel's international allies.

### NETANYAHU ON TRIAL

Netanyahu is on trial for corruption, charged with fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in a series of scandals involving media moguls and wealthy associates.

While he was once seen as a defender of the courts, since being indicted, he has blasted the system for carrying out what he says is a witch hunt against him.

His detractors say Netanyahu is seeking an escape route from his trial. One part of the overhaul would give the government control over the appointment of judges. If that passes, Netanyahu, through his government, could install sympathetic judges who could decide his fate. Netanyahu denies the overhaul is linked to his trial.

Israel's attorney general has barred Netanyahu from dealing with the overhaul, citing potential conflict of interest. But that isn't expected to slow progress on it.

Netanyahu's justice minister, Yariv Levin, is barreling forward. Levin has even said the charges against

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Netanyahu helped spark the need for the overhaul.

## REPEAT OFFENDER

A Netanyahu ally in his coalition government is also burdened by criminal charges. Aryeh Deri was convicted and put on probation last year in a plea bargain for tax offenses. He also sat in prison for 22 months in the early 2000s for bribery, fraud and breach of trust for crimes committed while he was interior minister in the 1990s.

Deri was at the fulcrum of the country's battle over the power of the courts earlier this year when Netanyahu was forced to fire him after the Supreme Court determined that it wasn't reasonable for the repeat offender to serve as a Cabinet minister.

After the setback, the coalition doubled down on legislating Deri back into the government. In the meantime, he remains a force in parliament.

"Deri is driven by his own interests and vendetta," said Yohanan Plesner of the Israel Democracy Institute think tank. "There is no way he can serve in the government unless the court's authorities are dramatically cut down or reduced."

A Deri spokesman denied the allegation, saying the politician believes the overhaul is necessary to restore a balance between the executive and judicial branches.

## ULTRA-ORTHODOX INTERESTS

Israel's ultra-Orthodox Jews, who have a strong voice in the current government, have long felt that the courts threaten their way of life.

Their chief political objective is to continue exemptions for religious men from military conscription. Under a decades-old system, ultra-Orthodox men have been allowed to skip the country's compulsory military service to instead study Jewish religious texts. That has prompted resentment from secular Israelis who have challenged the system at the Supreme Court, which has demanded the government set up a more equitable framework.

Successive governments have tried to meet the standards of the top court, which has struck down laws seen as favoring the ultra-Orthodox and has emerged as a threat to the community.

The ultra-Orthodox consider religious study — and avoiding military service — key to protecting their insular communities. Experts see military service as a way to integrate the ultra-Orthodox into the workforce. Many men in the community, which makes up 13% of the country's population, do not work, putting a burden on the economy.

Secular Israelis and groups that promote Jewish pluralism have voiced concern that once judicial oversight is scaled back, the ultra-Orthodox will use their political clout to make the country's character more religious. They point to attempts by ultra-Orthodox lawmakers to limit business and public works on the Jewish Sabbath as examples of what could lie ahead.

## SLIGHTED BY THE DISENGAGEMENT

Pro-settler parties are an essential part of Netanyahu's government. Simcha Rothman, a West Bank settler, is spearheading the overhaul as head of a parliamentary committee.

The courts have both sided with settlers and opposed them in past rulings, including about unauthorized outposts built on private Palestinian land. Many settlers nonetheless see the justice system as hostile to their desire to expand settlements and ultimately annex the West Bank.

Much of the settlers' anger toward the court goes back to Israel's withdrawal of troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip in 2005, when the justices sided with the government. At the time, settlers and their supporters demonstrated in large numbers against the withdrawal, which they felt was unfairly imposed on them. The withdrawal frequently comes up in the current heated debate, with settler leaders claiming that large segments of Israeli society that support the current protests did not back them during what they say was a deeply troubling time.

"Where were you during the disengagement," firebrand settler leader and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich reportedly asked bank chiefs earlier this year when they warned about the overhaul's adverse effects on the economy.

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Commentator Raviv Drucker said this signals the settlers' real motivations. "The text was clear: The media and the judiciary rode roughshod over opponents of Israel's 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip," he wrote in the Haaretz daily. "And here's the subtext: Now, we're taking revenge on you."

Smotrich's hard-line views came up against the Israeli establishment during the disengagement. He was arrested in the lead-up to the event for reported involvement in a plot to damage infrastructure and block main highways.

Smotrich's governing partner, Itamar Ben-Gvir, has a long list of grievances. He believes the courts have been unfair to religious Jews and settlers and sided too often with Palestinians.

For years, Ben-Gvir, a far-right settler leader, was limited to the fringes of Israeli politics. He has been arrested dozens of times and was convicted of incitement and supporting a Jewish terror group.

In Netanyahu's new government, he is the national security minister and now oversees the country's police force.

## War, anger cloud Ukrainian athletes' path to Paris Olympics

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian diver Stanislav Oliferchuk proudly bears the name of his late grandfather, who died in brutalized Mariupol. Russia's troops turned the Ukrainian port city into a killing zone in the process of capturing it. The elder Stanislav could no longer get the cancer treatment he needed in the ruins, his grandson says. He was 74 when he died last October.

Another victim of the months-long Russian siege of Mariupol was its gleaming aquatic center. Oliferchuk had planned to use the refurbished sports complex as his training base for the 2024 Paris Olympics. But it was bombed the same day last March as the city's drama theater. The theater airstrike was the single deadliest known attack against civilians to date in the year-old Russian invasion. An Associated Press investigation determined that close to 600 people died.

So it takes no leap of the imagination to understand why Mariupol-born Oliferchuk is horrified by the idea that he and other war-traumatized Ukrainian athletes might have to put their anger and consciences aside and compete against counterparts from Russia and ally Belarus at next year's Olympics.

"I'm angry most of the time. I just can't stand it anymore when shelling happens," said the 26-year-old Oliferchuk, a European champion in 3-meter mixed synchronized diving in 2019. "I want Russia to let us live in peace and stay away from us."

Defying fury from Ukraine and misgivings from other nations, the International Olympic Committee is exploring whether to allow Russians and Belarusians back into international sports and the Paris Games. The IOC says it is mission-bound to promote unity and peace — particularly when war is raging. It also cites United Nations human rights experts who argue, on non-discrimination grounds, that athletes and sports judges from Russia and Belarus shouldn't be banned simply for the passports they hold.

For Ukrainian athletes setting their sights on Paris, the possibility of sharing Olympic pools, fields and arenas with Russian and Belarusian competitors is so repellent that some say they'd not go if it happens.

Sisters Maryna and Vladyslava Aleksivna — who won Olympic bronze in artistic swimming's team competition at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 — are among those who say they'd have to boycott.

"We must," Maryna said during an Associated Press interview at their training pool in the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv.

Russia is the giant of their sport, previously called synchronized swimming, having won all the gold medals at the past six Olympics.

Completing each other's sentences, the Ukrainian twins added: "Our moral feelings don't allow us to stand near ... these people."

Oliferchuk worries that enmity could spill over if Ukrainians encounter Russians and Belarusians in Paris — a likely scenario given that Olympians will be housed and dine together in accommodation overlooking the River Seine in the city's northern suburbs.

"Anything can happen, even a fight," Oliferchuk said. "There simply cannot be any handshakes between

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us.”

Having to train in the midst of war also puts Ukraine’s Olympic hopefuls at a disadvantage. Russian strikes have destroyed training venues. Air raids disrupt training sessions. Athletes have lost family members and friends, or are consumed by worries that they will. Because Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has also closed the country’s airspace, traveling to international competitions has become an arduous odyssey — often of long train rides to neighboring Poland, for onward flights from there.

“Our athletes train while cruise missiles are flying, bombs are flying,” Ukrainian Sports Minister Vadym Guttsait said in an AP interview.

He recalled a meeting he took part in between IOC president Thomas Bach and Ukrainian cyclists given refuge in Switzerland.

“Bach asked one of the cyclists how she was doing,” the minister recounted. “She started crying. He asked why. She said that day they (Russian forces) attacked her city, where her parents were, and she was very nervous.”

“This is how every athlete feels about what is happening in Ukraine,” the minister said.

Ukraine’s artistic swim team, including the Aleksii sisters, used to train in the Lokomotiv sports center in Kharkiv, the country’s second-largest city. A Russian strike with powerful S-300 missiles wrecked the complex in September, the region’s governor, Oleh Syniehubov, said at the time. He posted photos showing a giant crater and severe damage to the exterior.

Maryna Aleksii said they used to think of the sports center as “our second home.” Their substitute pool in Kyiv doesn’t have the same broad depth of water, making it less suitable for practicing their underwater acrobatics, the sisters said. On a recent morning when they spoke to the AP, air raid sirens interrupted their training and they had to get out of the pool and take refuge in a bomb shelter until the all-clear sounded.

The power also flickered briefly off at times. Russia has been systematically bombarding Ukraine’s electricity infrastructure for months. When attacks shut off the pool’s heating, the water gets so cold that the sisters train in full-body wetsuits — far from ideal for their elegant sport.

“It’s hard to move,” Vladyslava said.

The terrors of war also take a mental toll.

“Every day we read the news — explosion, explosion, air alert,” Maryna said. “We feel so nervous about our relatives.”

Oliferchuk said he cannot imagine a handshake between Ukrainian and Russian athletes for “the next 50, 100 years.”

The Neptune arena in Mariupol where he wanted to train for Paris was wrecked by a Russian strike last March 16. As with Mariupol’s drama theater also destroyed that day, civilians were sheltering at the sports complex from bombardments. They included pregnant women who moved there after a Russian strike the previous week devastated a city maternity hospital. Video posted on Facebook by the region’s governor showed the Neptune’s shattered front and a gaping hole in its roof.

The IOC’s possible pathway out of sports exile for Russians and Belarusians would see them compete as “neutral athletes,” without national flags, colors or anthems.

That idea is a non-starter for Ukraine’s sports minister and athletes who resent that would-be Olympians from Russia and Belarus aren’t taking a stand against the invasion.

“They just do nothing and say nothing. And precisely because of their silence and inaction, all this horror is happening,” Oliferchuk said. “A neutral flag is not an option. It is not possible.”

## **UK is grappling with vegetable shortages. How did it happen?**

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — When European Union chief Ursula von der Leyen visited Britain last week, some joked on social media: Can you please bring us some tomatoes?

People in the U.K. have had to ration salad staples like tomatoes and cucumbers for the past two weeks amid a shortage of fresh vegetables. Shelves of fresh produce in many stores have been bare, and most



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major supermarkets have imposed limits on how many salad bags or bell peppers customers are allowed to buy.

Officials blame the problem on recent bad weather in Spain and North Africa, saying the shortages could persist for up to a month. But many people were quick to point out that other European countries don't seem to be suffering the same challenges, leading some to wonder if it was a consequence of Britain's divorce from the EU.

Britain's government has rejected the suggestion that Brexit is to blame. But shoppers aren't happy, and Environment Secretary Therese Coffey's suggestion that consumers should "cherish" British produce and eat more turnips instead of imported food drew widespread mockery.

Experts say Brexit likely played a part in the food shortage, though a more complex set of factors — including climate change, the U.K.'s overreliance on imports during the winter, soaring energy costs and the competitive pricing strategies at British supermarkets — are more salient explanations.

A look at some of the factors contributing to what one European broadcaster has called Britain's "vegetable fiasco":

## COLD WEATHER, HIGH ENERGY BILLS

Unusually cold temperatures in Spain and heavy rain and flooding in Morocco — two of the biggest tomato suppliers to the U.K. — have led to poor yields and are cited as the primary cause of the shortage.

In Spain, farmers blame recent freezing temperatures following record heat and dry conditions last year.

In the southern province of Almeria, which grows 40% of Spain's fresh vegetable exports, the production levels of tomatoes, cucumbers and eggplants fell by over 20% during the first three weeks of February compared with the same period in 2022, according to FEPEX, an organization representing Spanish fruit and vegetable exporters. The group said the situation is improving.

Heat and drought in Europe last year also are affecting vegetable harvests in other countries, including Germany.

Separately, the Netherlands, another major tomato producer, has seen a drop in output because skyrocketing energy bills tied to Russia's war in Ukraine meant many growers couldn't justify the cost of turning on the LED lights in their greenhouses this winter.

Vegetable growers in the U.K. have reported that they, too, were forced to leave their greenhouses empty.

Richard Diplock, managing director at the Green House Growers based in southern England, said his energy costs are some six times higher compared with previous winters.

"We made the decision that we couldn't afford to heat the greenhouses in December and January, and we've held back planting until February. Lots of tomato growers are in a similar position," he said.

## BLAMING BREXIT

The shortages in Britain — and contrasting pictures of full vegetable shelves in supermarkets in mainland Europe — led to a degree of Brexit schadenfreude in some EU news outlets.

Experts say extra bureaucracy and costs associated with Brexit have played a part, though they stress it's not a main factor.

"One hypothesis for fewer exports to the U.K. is that if supply is constrained, why would you go to extra paperwork (to export to Britain)?" said Michael Winter, a professor of agricultural change at the University of Exeter. "If transaction costs are greater for exporting to one country compared to another, that's going to dictate where you go."

"Brexit has exaggerated the problem, without a doubt," Winter added. "But I don't want to overplay that. It's more to do with climate change and lack of investment in our industry."

## SUPERMARKET PRICING

Farmers say another factor is how Britain's biggest supermarkets have sought to stay competitive by keeping prices as low as possible even as food costs have spiked, a major driver of inflation that's at the highest levels in decades.

In some EU countries, like Germany, there are no empty shelves, but the prices for fresh vegetables have shot up massively. British supermarkets are reluctant to pay more or charge customers so much,

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Diplock said.

"Being in the U.K., you know every week the price of a cucumber is 75p (\$0.90) no matter what time of year it is," Diplock said. "North African and Spanish producers will see a better return for supplying European supermarkets."

"WHERE'S THE INVESTMENT?"

Even if energy costs hadn't risen so much, British growers would not come close to making up for the shortfalls in imported produce, Diplock said.

During the winter, domestic U.K. production only accounts for 5% or less of tomatoes and cucumbers sold in British supermarkets.

The National Farmers' Union has warned for months that overreliance on imported fresh produce leaves the U.K. vulnerable to unpredictable weather events and other external factors like the war in Ukraine.

Farmers also have complained about the lack of government investment in the sector and funding to help them cope with painfully high energy bills.

The government has spent billions to help consumers and businesses as European natural gas prices soared to record highs on Russia's curtailed supplies.

"The bigger question is why have we, in this country, neglected horticulture," Winter said. "This is a bit of a wake-up call."

## Legal fight over student debt a prelude to political battle

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Facing the possibility that the Supreme Court will reject President Joe Biden's plan for student loan forgiveness, the White House is aiming to turn the political heat toward Republicans while deflecting criticism from disappointed borrowers.

At stake is the loyalty of young, college-educated voters who are a critical part of the Democratic coalition that Biden is counting on to return him to the White House for a second term. And plenty of people are making sure he doesn't forget.

"The president still has the responsibility to ensure that we see this become a reality," said Wisdom Cole, national director of the NAACP Youth and College Division. "There are folks that are still suffering, and we want to ensure that they have the opportunity to see relief."

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Wednesday the president would make it clear to borrowers that "we have your back," but it's far from clear that the administration has a backup idea to cancel debt.

"We do not have another plan," she told reporters. "This is our plan. This is it."

In arguments this week, the court's conservative majority appeared deeply skeptical of Biden's plan, which would slash federal student loan debt burdens through an executive order he signed last year.

In all, up to 43 million Americans could benefit. Out of the 26 million who have applied for relief, 16 million have been approved, according to administration officials. However, all relief has been on hold amid legal challenges from Republicans.

"I'm confident we're on the right side of the law," Biden told reporters Wednesday at the White House. "I'm not confident about the outcome of the decision."

With a Supreme Court ruling expected by summer, the White House is vigorously labeling culprits — and is sure to hit that message even harder if the court kills the program.

"Currently, the only thing blocking that plan is opponents of the plan suing us," Biden said Monday during a Black History Month reception at the White House.

Foreshadowing what aides said would be his likely political message should the court overturn the plan, Biden criticized Republicans who sued and those in Congress who cheered them on.

"They're the same folks who had hundreds of thousands of dollars, even millions of dollars, in pandemic relief loans forgiven," he said. "And many of them in Congress, by the way, Republicans, who voted for tax cuts (that) overwhelmingly benefit the wealthiest people in America, who are the people who paid to bring these suits."

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Clearly, not everyone sees it that way. In fact, Republicans seem happy to fight over student debt relief, saying it's actually the Democrats' plan that is a "bailout for the wealthy."

"Biden's student loan cancellation unfairly punishes Americans who saved for college or made a different career choice," Ronna McDaniel, chairwoman of the Republican National Committee, said in a statement on Tuesday. "While hardworking families struggle with soaring costs, Biden is giving a handout to the rich, and voters see right through this desperate vote grab."

Some legal scholars have suggested that Biden's plan was always on shaky legal ground, and they've urged the administration to start over. However, White House officials insist they're still confident about their case.

One basis for that hope is that the justices may decide that the plaintiffs, which include several Republican-led states and two students, don't have legal standing to sue.

The administration also draws parallels to the tough questioning over the Affordable Care Act more than a decade ago. The court eventually upheld most of that law's provisions.

While publicly unwilling to entertain the prospects of a judicial brushback, Biden aides privately harbor the belief that for all the embarrassment, there is little to lose politically if the Supreme Court overturns the loan forgiveness program the president proposed and fought for.

The administration has communicated Biden's efforts to the tens of millions of people whose emails were collected as part of the application process.

Survey data suggest a college degree is increasingly tied to identification with the Democratic Party. Forty-one percent of Democratic voters in 2019 had at least a college degree, up from just 22% in 1996, Pew Research Center surveys show. By comparison, 30% of GOP voters in 2019 had a degree, up slightly from 27% in 1996.

Biden won support from a majority of college-educated voters in the 2020 presidential election, according to AP VoteCast data.

In 2022, VoteCast found that college graduates voting in the midterm elections were slightly more likely than those without a degree to approve of Biden's job handling student debt, 50% vs. 44%.

VoteCast also shows that the youngest midterm voters were especially likely to approve of Biden's job handling student debt. Sixty percent of voters under 30 approved, compared with 39% of voters ages 65 and older.

Biden issued his debt-forgiveness executive order only after months of pressure from activists, something that Democratic lawmakers reminded demonstrators of outside the Supreme Court this week.

"All of you rallied around this country to try to make sure our president, who at the time was hesitant, would finally realize that this was not just a politically viable thing, but it was the right thing to do," said Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn. "And after we get the president to sign the executive order, canceling student debt, bringing hope and promise to millions of people who had been begging, marching, what did Republicans do? What they always do, which is snatch hope from the American people."

Even if the broad debt cancellation is overturned, other major policies enacted by the Education Department would remain in place. For example, the agency revamped a loan forgiveness program for public workers, making it easy for them to get their debt erased after 10 years of payments. The department separately made it easier for borrowers to get their debt canceled if they were defrauded by their schools.

Through those policies and others, the department says it has already provided \$48 billion in loan relief to 1.8 million borrowers.

In perhaps the biggest change in the long run, the administration is now pursuing a new loan repayment plan that promises to serve as a safety net for borrowers. The plan would lower monthly payments for many borrowers and allow more to pay nothing at all while their incomes stay below a certain level. And for many borrowers, the plan would erase all remaining debt after 10 years of payments.

However, no issue has attracted the same amount of attention as debt cancellation.

Melissa Byrne, an activist who helped organize demonstrations outside the Supreme Court, said the issue won't go away if payments go back into effect.

"Every single month," she said, "they'll be reminded that the right-wing infrastructure stole their money."

## At G-20, high expectations for India as rising global power

By SHEIKH SAALIQ and KRUTIKA PATHI Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — With the foreign ministers of the Group of 20 leading economies meeting Thursday in New Delhi, host India is promoting itself as a rising superpower while leveraging its position on the global stage to bridge the gap between the West and Russia.

Experts expect India to be at the center of bitter global divisions, particularly over Russia's war in Ukraine. But it's also an opportunity for the South Asian nation to position itself as the voice of the Global South and as a potential mediator between the West and Moscow.

India is expected to adopt a neutral stance on Ukraine, as it has in the past. The event is likely to be overshadowed by the war in Europe and its impact on global energy and food security. However, senior foreign ministry officials said Wednesday that India was determined to focus on "equally important" issues of rising inflation, debt stress, health, climate change and food and energy security in developing nations.

"I really do believe that India stands the best chance of all countries to try to hold peace negotiations between Russia and not just the U.S., but the West, actually," said Derek Grossman, an analyst focused on the Indo-Pacific at the RAND Corporation.

He credited India's non-alignment and its rise as a global power for why it could be a potential peacemaker.

But the South Asian country has its own challenges, particularly with regional rival China. Tensions between New Delhi and Beijing remain high after a deadly border clash in 2020.

On Wednesday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said the country's foreign minister would be attending the G-20 meeting, and that "China attaches great importance with India." She added maintaining good ties between the two countries is fundamental to their interests.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar "have done a good job of steering this middle path in very turbulent times," Grossman said.

"You now have American, Russian and even Chinese diplomats supporting India. The country really is at the geopolitical crossroads of everything now that involves the Global South," he added.

So far, India has refrained from directly criticizing Russia. The two have been allies since the cold war era and New Delhi depends on Moscow for nearly 60% of its defense equipment. India has increasingly scooped up Russian oil since the invasion a year ago, initially facing scrutiny from the U.S. and other allies over its growing purchases. That pressure has since waned and India has continued to abstain from voting in U.N. resolutions that condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"It may appear unfathomable to many in the West that the reaction of the world's largest democracy to such a cold-blooded, egregious aggression would be so subdued. But for anyone who understands India's foreign policy, it's not surprising at all," said Michael Kugelman, director of the Wilson Center's South Asia Institute.

"New Delhi has a special relationship with Moscow, and it's not about to jeopardize it by turning on a longstanding partner," he said.

Thursday's meeting will nonetheless be challenging for India, especially after it was forced to issue a compromised chair's summary at the conclusion of the G-20 finance ministers meeting last week. Russia and China objected to a joint communique that retained language on the war in Ukraine drawn directly from last year's G-20 leaders summit declaration in Indonesia.

India has said that it stands by the Bali declaration in which major world powers strongly condemned the war in Ukraine, warning that the conflict was intensifying fragilities in the world's economy.

Grossman said it was concerning that the final statement issued in Bengaluru last week was watered down from the Bali declaration at the insistence of China and Russia. He said New Delhi allowing that to happen was worrisome, but India's "awkward predicament" to ensure a successful G-20 with everyone there, including Russia and China, meant the country has to make "compromises."

"I think that's what India is trying to do now," he said.

The summits are particularly important for Modi and his ruling party ahead of the 2024 general elections. A strong show during India's year as G-20 president will allow Modi's party to signal its diplomatic reach

and project power both at home and abroad.

Kugelman said the summit, due later this year, will advance important domestic political goals for New Delhi, and Modi's ultimate goal would be to "successfully manage the myriad geopolitical rivalries within the G-20, signal that India can rise above intense great power competition and seemingly intractable issues like the Ukraine war, and guide the prestigious club toward tangible achievements."

"In effect, Modi wants its G-20 presidency to yield meaningful achievements. That's a tall order, for sure, but it's important for New Delhi's foreign policy and domestic political goals alike," he said.

## Engagement vs entertainment: Murdaugh draws mass attention

By JAMES POLLARD Associated Press/Report for America

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — As the double murder trial of Alex Murdaugh wraps, the heaps of public attention poured on the case's many twists and turns are hardly waning.

Investigations stemming from the June 7, 2021 shooting deaths of the legal scion's wife and son revealed the prominent South Carolina lawyer stole millions of dollars from largely poor client's settlements and staged an attempt on his life to secure his surviving son a \$12 million life insurance payout, according to authorities.

In the process, true crime enthusiasts, concerned onlookers and many others found the latest subject of their fascination in the yearslong unraveling of a mystery that jurors must now weigh.

Experts say the small town saga's transformation into an international topic of intrigue highlights insights into the human psyche: People are wired to follow events that inform their perceptions of threat. And now, amid the commotion, some legal observers have found an important opportunity for education.

Coltan Scrivner, a researcher at the Recreational Fear Lab at Aarhus University in Denmark, said a human desire to avoid getting duped has developed into a natural curiosity for signs of danger. Those cues, he said, are especially strong when the schemes involve high-status circles with powerful and successful people — things the Murdaugh case taps into.

"We put it in our rolodex of possible simulations of what could happen in a bad situation," Scrivner said.

Amanda Vicary, a psychology professor at Illinois Wesleyan University, said the obsession with "true crime" is largely driven by women interested in its self-protective lessons. Many followers might subconsciously ask themselves what they need to look for in their own lives, she said.

Plus, the Murdaugh case's many aspects -- mystery, forensics, family, finances -- appeal to a variety of interests.

"Most popular true crime stories might only have one or two of those elements," Vicaray said. "It has a little something for everything going on right now."

Stephanie Truesdale said the combination of a wealthy family's fall from grace and the many unexpected developments piqued her attention from the start. The teacher from upstate South Carolina has been particularly interested to see how the state's legal system treats "one of their own."

For Truesdale, the attention manifested itself in a crafty way. She recently attempted a new crochet technique, and when searching for a subject to stitch, her mind inevitably turned to one of the trial's key figures: Creighton Waters. In addition to the state's lead prosecutor, Judge Clifton Newman and the family dog featured in a Snapchat video that pegged Murdaugh to the scene of the crime have also become homemade dolls on Truesdale's mantle.

The dolls went viral on social media. But other forms of involvement have been received less pleasantly. Several trespassers were found last weekend taking selfies outside the feed room where Paul Murdaugh died, according to defense attorney Dick Harpootlian. He described it as the "most distasteful thing" he had ever seen.

"If people are really paying attention, they could really learn a lot from what's going on right now, instead of just the more gruesome aspect of things," Truesdale said.

Sarah Ford, the legal director for the South Carolina Victim Assistance Network, said she has found that people want to better understand legal processes in connection to the case. Ford and former state

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lawmaker Mandy Powers Norrell began hosting Twitter spaces to answer questions about the daily proceedings. Ford said they recently drew 600 people for an hour-long conversation on YouTube Live.

For Ford, the trial has spurred conversations that can change common misconceptions about crime. People might be shocked that someone could be accused of killing their wife and son. But, she said, the focus has raised awareness of issues like the prevalence of intimate partner violence.

While Ford recognized the importance of community engagement, she also had a word of caution: "You don't want this to be something that takes over someone's life as entertainment. Because it's not. These are real people. These are real crimes. These have true, chilling, tragic effects for real people."

It's not the first time a South Carolina double murder trial has reverberated so widely. Susan Smith was sentenced to life in prison for the drowning deaths of her two infant children in 1994.

State Rep. Tommy Pope was the prosecutor in the case that drew hits on television programs led by personalities like Oprah Winfrey and Larry King. Pope said that the Smith trial coincided with the advent of reality television — possibly leading viewers to crave the "true reality" of such sensational cases.

"I think what people probably like about observing the Murdaugh case, for example, is the 'truth is stranger than fiction' aspect of it. It's like a soap opera but it's really happening with real people," said Pope, adding, "This is not entertainment. It is a tragedy and lives were lost."

He has also found an opportunity for public education. Pope said gavel-to-gavel coverage nowadays on Court TV — where he has served as an analyst during the Murdaugh trial — helps viewers reach their own conclusions and understand the legal system's "positives" and its "warts."

Streaming services have also responded to the interest in the mushrooming allegations of a powerful family's wrongdoing. Discovery released a three-part series one year after Maggie and Paul Murdaugh were first reported dead. Similarly, HBO Max launched its three-part documentary this past November. Last week, in the heat of the trial, Netflix premiered "Murdaugh Murders: A Southern Scandal" for U.S. audiences — with the filmmakers telling Vanity Fair they unearthed additional crimes in the process.

A bevy of 100 other charges including financial crimes — for which Waters drew many admissions of guilt last week — have yet to be taken to court.

But for many South Carolinians, the interest comes from a strong desire to see long-awaited justice served to a well-connected man who has only recently acknowledged lies and abuses of power that long went unchecked.

The jury is expected to begin deliberations Thursday after the closing arguments in the five-week trial that began Jan. 25.

Bill Nettles, the former U.S. Attorney for South Carolina, said he wishes every defendant's liberty received the same attention and resources.

"I don't know what the outcome is going to be," he said. "But we should all strive for a world where the effort to take anybody's liberty gets the same scrutiny as this case."

## Maui hate crime case spotlights Hawaii's racial complexity

By JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — In a case that reflects Hawaii's nuanced and complicated relationship with race, two Native Hawaiian men are scheduled to be sentenced Thursday for a federal hate crime in the brutal beating of a white man who tried to move into their remote, traditional fishing village.

A jury convicted Kaulana Alo-Kaonohi and Levi Aki Jr. in November, finding that they were motivated by Christopher Kunzelman's race when they punched, kicked and used a shovel to beat him in 2014. His injuries included a concussion, two broken ribs and head trauma.

Local lawyers believe this is the first time the U.S. has prosecuted Native Hawaiians for hate crimes. The unique case highlights the struggles between Native Hawaiians who are adamant about not having their culture erased and people who move to Hawaii without knowing or considering its history and racial dynamics.

Tensions began over a dilapidated, oceanfront home in Kahakuloa, a small village off a narrow road of

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hairpin turns and sweeping ocean views at the end of a valley on Maui, an island known for luxurious resorts.

Growing up in the village, Alo-Kaonohi would "hunt, fish, farm, live off the land," he wrote in a letter to U.S. District Judge J. Michael Seabright. "To make a little money, I would sell coconuts, mango, flowers, bananas on the side of the road to tourists who would be passing through to see the beautiful scenery of Kahakuloa."

Kunzelman and his wife purchased the house sight-unseen for \$175,000 because she wanted to leave Scottsdale, Arizona, to live near the ocean after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

"We loved Maui; we loved the people," Lori Kunzelman told The Associated Press, describing how her husband planned to fix up the house himself.

He was starting to do that when the attack happened, she said.

"It was obviously a hate crime from the very beginning," she said. "The whole time they're saying things like, 'You have the wrong skin color. No 'haole' is ever going to live in our neighborhood.'"

"Haole," a Hawaiian word with meanings that include foreigner and white person, is central to the case. It's a word often misunderstood by people who don't comprehend Hawaii's history of U.S. colonization and the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom by a group of American businessmen, said Judy Rohrer, author of a book titled "Haoles in Hawai'i."

White people who move to Hawaii are unaccustomed to being identified racially and are "not used to thinking about whiteness," said Rohrer, who grew up white in Hawaii and is now a professor at Eastern Washington University. "We're used to being in the majority and then we get to Hawaii and all of a sudden we're not in the majority, and that makes us uncomfortable."

Of Hawaii's 1.5 million residents, about 38% are Asian, 26% are white, 2% are Black, and many people are multiple ethnicities, according to U.S. census figures. Native Hawaiians account for about 20% of the population.

But it's more than racial, Rohrer said, explaining how the Hawaiian word has become part of Hawaii Pidgin, the creole language of the islands, to describe behavior or attitudes not in sync with local culture.

"Acting haole" means "acting out of entitlement, and like you own the place," she said.

In video recorded by cameras on Kunzelman's vehicle parked under the house, only one racial utterance can be heard, defense attorneys said. Aki is heard saying, "You's a haole, eh."

Kunzelman testified that what's not audible in the video is the men calling him "haole" in a derogatory way.

After the assault, Aki referred to Kunzelman to police as a "rich Haole guy," a "dumb haole," and a "typical haole thinking he owning everything ... trying to change things up in Kahakuloa," prosecutors said.

Tiare Lawrence, a Native Hawaiian community advocate on Maui, said she doesn't condone the attack but is deeply familiar with the tensions that permeate the case.

"The threat of outsiders coming in ... brings a lot of sadness for Hawaiians who are trying so hard to hold on to what little piece of paradise we have left," she said. As an example, she cited efforts to revitalize the Hawaiian language after it was banned in schools in the wake of the overthrow.

Attorneys for Aki and Alo-Kaonohi say it wasn't Kunzelman's race that provoked them, but his entitled and disrespectful attitude.

Kunzelman came to the village saying he wanted to help residents improve their homes and boost property values, without considering that higher property values come with higher property taxes in a state with the highest cost of living, the defense attorneys said. But the tipping point came when Kunzelman cut locks to village gates, they said.

Kunzelman testified he did so because residents were locking him in and out. He testified that he wanted to provide the village with better locks and distribute keys to residents.

In a letter to the judge, Aki said he doesn't see himself as racist: "Not only because I am almost half-Caucasian but also because I have people who I love and care about who are white."

Both men were prosecuted in state court for the assault. Alo-Kaonohi pleaded no contest to felony assault and was sentenced to probation, while Aki pleaded no contest to terroristic threatening and was sentenced to probation and nearly 200 days in jail.

Alo-Kaonohi was also sentenced to a year in prison for an assault at a Maui bar soon after the Kunzel-

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man attack.

For the federal hate crime, prosecutors are asking for a sentence of about nine years for Alo-Kaonohi and six-and-a-half years for Aki.

Lori Kunzelman acknowledged being unaware of Hawaiian history and said she has since learned about it. "But attacking an individual white man doesn't change history or improve things or justify actions on anybody's part," she said.

The Kunzelmans still own the Kahakuloa home but split their time between Arizona and Puerto Rico.

"We couldn't even sell it to anybody because it's not safe," Lori Kunzelman said. "It's not safe because of the animosity that's there."

In an attempt to convey the animosity, prosecutors during the trial portrayed village residents as saying things like, "this is a Hawaiian village," and "the only thing coming from the outside is electricity."

But several non-Hawaiians who live or have lived peacefully in the village told the AP they never had problems.

"I am 82 years old. I have lived here for 50 years," said Bruce Turnbull, a white, retired teacher who lives near Alo-Kaonohi's family. "I've learned in Hawaii, coming from the outside in, it's a good thing to live by the people around you and not tell them to live by you and your values."

## Carbon dioxide emissions reached a record high in 2022

By CATHY BUSSEWITZ AP Energy Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Communities around the world emitted more carbon dioxide in 2022 than in any other year on records dating to 1900, a result of air travel rebounding from the pandemic and more cities turning to coal as a low-cost source of power.

Emissions of the climate-warming gas that were caused by energy production grew 0.9% to reach 36.8 gigatons in 2022, the International Energy Agency reported Thursday. (The mass of one gigaton is equivalent to about 10,000 fully loaded aircraft carriers, according to NASA.)

Carbon dioxide is released when fossil fuels such as oil, coal or natural gas are burned to power cars, planes, homes and factories. When the gas enters the atmosphere, it traps heat and contributes to the warming of the the climate.

Extreme weather events intensified last year's carbon dioxide emissions: Droughts reduced the amount of water available for hydropower, which increased the need to burn fossil fuels. And heat waves drove up demand for electricity.

Thursday's report was described as disconcerting by climate scientists, who warn that energy users around the world must cut emissions dramatically to slow the dire consequences of global warming.

"Any emissions growth — even 1% — is a failure," said Rob Jackson, a professor of earth system science at Stanford University and chairman of the Global Carbon Project, an international group. "We can't afford growth. We can't afford stasis. It's cuts or chaos for the planet. Any year with higher coal emissions is a bad year for our health and for the Earth."

Carbon dioxide emissions from coal grew 1.6% last year. Many communities, primarily in Asia, switched from natural gas to coal to avoid high natural gas prices that were worsened by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the IEA said.

And as global airline traffic increased, carbon dioxide emissions from burning oil grew 2.5%, with about half the surge resulting from the aviation sector.

Global emissions have grown in most years since 1900 and have accelerated over time, according to data from IEA. One exception was the pandemic year of 2020, when travel all but came to a standstill.

Last year's level of emissions, though a record high, was nevertheless lower than experts had expected. Increased deployment of renewable energy, electric vehicles and heat pumps together helped prevent an additional 550 megatons of carbon dioxide emissions, the IEA said.

Strict pandemic measures and weak economic growth in China also curtailed production, helping to limit overall global emissions. And in Europe, the IEA said, electricity generation from wind and solar power



exceeded that of gas or nuclear for the first time.

"Without clean energy, the growth in CO2 emissions would have been nearly three times as high," Fatih Birol, the IEA's executive director, said in a statement.

"However, we still see emissions growing from fossil fuels, hindering efforts to meet the world's climate targets. International and national fossil fuel companies are making record revenues and need to take their share of responsibility, in line with their public pledges to meet climate goals."

Though emissions continue to grow at worrisome levels, a reversal that would help achieve the climate goals that nations have committed to remains possible, said John Sterman, director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan Sustainability Initiative.

Nations must subsidize renewables, improve energy efficiency, electrify industry and transportation, set a high price for carbon emissions, reduce deforestation, plant trees and rid the system of coal, Sterman argued.

"This is a massive, massive undertaking to do all these things, but that's what's needed," he said.

## Over 26,000 evacuated as floods hit Malaysia again; 1 dead

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — Rescuers in boats retrieved families trapped on rooftops and hauled others to safety as villages and towns in parts of Malaysia were submerged in floodwaters, leading to over 26,000 people being evacuated as of Thursday. One person died when his car was swept away by floodwaters.

The southern Johor state, neighboring Singapore, was the worst hit with some 25,000 people moved to relief centers in schools and community halls. The figure more than doubled from Tuesday, officials said. Five other states were also hit by floods after incessant rain on Wednesday deluged the area.

The country is experiencing its sixth episode of continuous heavy rain from the annual monsoon season that started in November, the Meteorological Department said, warning it could drag on until April.

In December, tens of thousands of people were also evacuated due to flooding.

The department warned that rain will persist in Johor and other parts of the country that could cause further flash floods Thursday.

Social media posts showed photos of a road that had collapsed due to overflowing water after a heavy downpour, vehicles and homes submerged in muddy waters, and shuttered shops.

In Johor, authorities said a man driving to work in a palm oil plantation was found dead after rescuers retrieved his car, which had been washed away by floodwaters.

Images posted by the National Flood Disaster Agency showed rescuers wading chest-deep in some areas in Johor to help victims trapped in their homes and carrying a baby in a bucket to safety.

The agency warned that waters in 25 rivers nationwide have reached dangerous levels. Data showed that 102 landslides have occurred since November due to heavy rain, it said.

## Obama praises woman behind 'Fired up' chant as she retires

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Former President Barack Obama, marking the retirement of the woman credited with popularizing the chant "Fired up, ready to go!" that epitomized his campaigns, says her energy played a key role in lifting his spirits and his candidacy.

"It was early in my campaign, and I wasn't doing that good," Obama recalled in a video provided to The Associated Press by the Obama Foundation, harking back to a 2007 campaign stop in Greenwood, South Carolina, on a dreary, rainy day.

But the small crowd, Obama said, was transformed as Edith Childs led them in the rousing, back-and-forth chant, "Fired up, ready to go!"

"Leadership and power and inspiration can come from anywhere," Obama said in the video to mark Childs' retirement after 24 years on the Greenwood County Council. "It just has to do with spirit, and nobody embodied that better than Edith."

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"Fired up, ready to go!" swiftly became part of the Obama campaign's ethos, manifested in T-shirts, signs and bumper stickers.

This week, Childs told the AP that she had come to know the "fired up" verbiage from its use decades ago, the words energizing participants during NAACP voter registration drives.

"Once we sang that song, it reminded us that, no matter what, we have to remain fired up and ready to go, and be prepared for whatever confronts you," she said.

Childs attended several events with the Obama family at the White House during his presidential tenure, led delegates in the chant during the 2012 Democratic National Convention and sat with first lady Michelle Obama at her husband's final State of the Union address in 2016.

In the years since, the chant has become ingrained in South Carolina's Democratic political scene. Politicians, including state Sen. Marlon Kimpson, regularly use it to amp up crowds at rallies across the state.

In 2020, it was adopted by billionaire businessman Tom Steyer, who ran a TV ad in South Carolina and other early-voting states featuring Childs' endorsement of his presidential campaign.

Looking ahead to the 2024 presidential campaign — and South Carolina's new first-in-the-nation Democratic primary — Childs said she was open to connect with candidates who might seek her support, although she said she wanted Democrats to be clearer about showcasing the party's accomplishments in trying to appeal to voters.

"When you're fired up about something, you put more into it," she said. "We're going in the right direction, but we need to be more vigilant about what we're doing."

## To the rooftops: Staggering snowfall in California mountains

By JOHN ANTCZAK, AMY TAXIN and BEN FINLEY Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Emergency crews in California scrambled Wednesday to shuttle food and medicine to mountain communities stranded by back-to-back winter storms that have dumped so much snow some residents can barely see out their windows.

In San Bernardino County east of Los Angeles, around-the-clock plowing is underway but it could take more than a week to reach some areas, said Dawn Rowe, chair of the county's board of supervisors. Residents are dealing with as much as 7 feet (2 meters) of snow, and sheriffs' authorities have conducted 17 rescue operations to help off-roaders and skiers. Emergency crews are trying to reach residents who need assistance.

Gov. Gavin Newsom on Wednesday proclaimed a state of emergency in San Bernardino and 12 other counties to support disaster relief by making state agencies and aid available and asking for federal help in clearing and repairing highways. The governor announced that the state was bringing in more snow plows and road crews to help clear roads and he authorized the California National Guard to mobilize for disaster response if needed.

In Crestline, the entire roof of Goodwin and Sons Market collapsed Wednesday as safety inspectors were onsite checking up on reported damage. Officials raced to salvage food that residents sorely need from its shelves.

Rowe said no one was injured.

"We know that roofs are starting to collapse," she said. "There are other businesses that will likely be affected by the weight of the snow."

The county has set up a hotline for residents dealing with issues like frozen pipes, roof problems and food shortages. The San Bernardino Mountains are a major tourism and recreation destination but also home to a large year-round population in small cities and communities around lakes and scattered along winding roads. About 80,000 people live either part- or full-time in the communities affected, said David Wert, a county spokesman.

Relieve was on the way as the mountain community continued to dig out, with much of California expecting drier weather on Thursday. A key mountain section of Interstate 5, a major north-south highway, reopened Wednesday afternoon following closures due to snowy conditions, while blizzard warnings expired in the Sierra Nevada further north.

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Anthony Cimino, a 51-year-old retiree, said he's been snowed in for about a week in the mountain community of Running Springs. He finally managed to clear his decks, but not for long.

"I woke up this morning and there was another two-and-a-half feet on them," he said. "It was kind of like Groundhog Day."

Residents of these towns are grappling with so much snow they're running out of space to put it; clearing one area adds heaps to another. Grocery shelves had run bare of some items, like bread, and were running low on eggs and milk Tuesday. Cars remained buried under snow and roads closed.

At David and Kelli Góra's home in Big Bear Lake, the snow on the roof is now touching the snow on the ground. They shoveled a small area to let their dogs go outside, but are mostly hunkered down.

"We've been through some big storms ... but this is just unreal," David Góra said. "I've never seen anything like it anywhere."

Over the past week, historic snowfall, ice and cold temperatures brought much of Portland, Oregon, to a standstill, trapping drivers on roads and highways, paralyzing government services and leading to at least two suspected hypothermia deaths.

While the West Coast grappled with wintry weather, forecasters warned a new, powerful weather system will affect most of the lower 48 states this week. Six to 12 inches (15 to 30 centimeters) of snow could eventually fall in upstate New York, Vermont and New Hampshire, meteorologist David Roth said.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, record high temperatures were expected Wednesday along the Gulf Coast and into the Ohio Valley while the southern Plains to the mid-South braced for possible tornadoes Thursday, according to the National Weather Service.

In Southern California, two mountain highways opened and the California Highway Patrol began escorting residents back up to their homes. Anyone who ventures up from the Los Angeles area to play in the snow should take two weeks' worth of food and supplies in case they get stuck, Rowe said. More snow is expected in the coming weeks.

Northwest of Lake Tahoe, on the California-Nevada border in the Sierra Nevada, an avalanche struck a three-story apartment building Tuesday evening, according to the local sheriff's office. No injuries were reported.

Yosemite National Park postponed its planned Thursday reopening indefinitely.

The heavy snow was expected to end in California on Wednesday afternoon after an additional 1 to 2 feet falls (30 to 60 centimeters), according to the weather service. In Arizona, snow began falling Wednesday morning as the storm moved eastward and was poised to dump as much as 2 feet (60 centimeters) of snow in northern Arizona by Thursday morning.

More than a foot of fresh snow fell in Flagstaff by Wednesday evening, adding to what's already well above average for the winter season. Long stretches of major roadways, including Interstates 40 and 17, were closed, as were public schools in the mountain city and some government offices.

Erin Irwin, a realtor in Flagstaff, used a shovel and snow blower to clear her driveway. This is the 12th snow day her three children — ages 11, 14, and 16 — have had since January.

"You would think my older kids would love it. I think they're all pretty much over it. They don't even want to play outside anymore," Irwin said. "The puppy is the only one who still loves the snow."

The Sierra snowpack provides about a third of California's water supply. Tuesday's water content of the snowpack — in a state grappling with years of drought — was 186% of normal to date, according to the state Department of Water Resources' online data.

The next, larger weather system was expected to spread across much of the country Thursday, and areas such as the lower Mississippi Valley and Tennessee Valley could see heavy rain, thunderstorms and some flash flooding. The high temperatures could top 100 degrees (38 Celsius) across far south Texas, and windy, dry conditions would make for a critical risk of wildfire in parts of the Southwest for the next few days, according to the weather service.

Recent storms across the country have delayed travel, shuttered schools and overwhelmed crews trying to dig out of the snow and repair downed power lines. More than 26,000 customers were without power

Wednesday night in Michigan, which is still recovering from ice storms, and more than 100,000 customers were in the dark in California, according to PowerOutage.us.

## **Intel agencies: No sign adversaries behind 'Havana syndrome'**

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. intelligence agencies cannot link a foreign adversary to any of the incidents associated with so-called "Havana syndrome," the hundreds of cases of brain injuries and other symptoms reported by American personnel around the world.

The findings released Wednesday by U.S. intelligence officials cast doubt on the longstanding suspicions by many people who reported cases that Russia or another country may have been running a global campaign to harass or attack Americans using some form of directed energy.

Most of the cases investigated appear to have different causes, from environmental factors to undiagnosed illnesses, said the officials, who say they have not found a single explanation for most or all of the reports.

Instead, officials say, there is evidence that foreign countries were not involved. In some cases, the U.S. detected among adversarial governments confusion about the allegations and suspicions that Havana syndrome was an American plot. And investigators found "no credible evidence" that any adversary had obtained a weapon that could cause the reported symptoms or a listening device that might inadvertently injure people.

The Biden administration has been under pressure to respond to Havana syndrome cases from government personnel who have reported injuries and their advocates, including members of Congress. President Joe Biden in 2021 signed into law the HAVANA Act, which provided compensation to people deemed to have sustained injuries consistent with what the government calls "anomalous health incidents."

Affected people have reported headaches, dizziness and other symptoms often linked to traumatic brain injuries. Some U.S. employees have left government due to the severity of their illnesses.

"Nothing is more important than the health and wellbeing of our workforce," said Maher Bitar, the White House National Security Council's senior director for intelligence programs, in a statement. "Since the start of the Biden-Harris Administration, we have focused on ensuring that our colleagues have access to the care and support they need."

Mark Zaid, a lawyer for more than two dozen people who have reported injuries, said the new assessment lacked transparency and left key questions unanswered.

"Until the shrouds of secrecy are lifted and the analysis that led to today's assertions are available and subject to proper challenge, the alleged conclusions are substantively worthless," he said in a statement. "But the damage it has caused to the morale of the victims, particularly by deflecting from the government's failure to evaluate all the evidence, is real and must be condemned."

Authorities in Havana said the findings reflect what Cuba has repeatedly stated: that no attacks occurred.

"We're not surprised," Johana Tablada, deputy director of the U.S. division of Cuba's Foreign Ministry, told The Associated Press.

Tablada noted that former U.S. President Donald Trump used the alleged attacks as an excuse to radically tighten sanctions against Cuba, including the partial paralysis of its consular services for more than five years. She said that, because of unfounded accusations, "very harsh measures were taken against our people in Cuba and in the United States that harmed Cuban families, exchanges between our countries (and) caused a downward spiral (of ties) that was practically irreversible."

Two officials familiar with the assessment briefed reporters Wednesday on condition of anonymity, under ground rules set by the U.S. Director of National Intelligence.

Investigators reviewed roughly 1,500 cases in 96 countries. Many of those cases, officials said, have been linked to other potential explanations aside from a foreign campaign: medical illnesses, malfunctioning air conditioning and ventilation systems, or electromagnetic waves coming from benign devices like a computer mouse. And some people may have come forward to report symptoms based on what they had heard about other cases or the exhaustive media reports about Havana syndrome, officials said.

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A core group of roughly two dozen cases identified in an interim assessment published last year has been exhaustively studied, officials said. None of the cases was linked to an attack by an adversary.

The officials stressed their investigation was exhaustive, with participation from seven U.S. agencies. One official described reviewing a report from an American who reported having possibly been hit by a car while driving. U.S. investigators tracked down the car and the driver and investigated that person's family connections and any foreign travel, the official said.

Some leads were followed for as long as nine months, the official said.

Officials briefing reporters declined to say how the latest assessment, first reported by The Washington Post, may affect payments under the HAVANA Act. The State Department has compensated affected employees with one-time payments from \$100,000 to \$200,000.

The leaders of the House Intelligence Committee insisted that "there should be no change" to compensation while they review the assessment.

"We will seek to ensure the review was conducted with the highest degree of analytical rigor and that it considered all the available intelligence and perspectives, documenting all substantial differences in analysis," said Reps. Mike Turner, R-Ohio, and Jim Himes, D-Conn., in their statement.

Havana syndrome cases date to a series of reported brain injuries in 2016 at the U.S. Embassy in Cuba. Incidents have been reported by diplomats, intelligence officers and military personnel in the Washington area and at global postings. Russia has long been suspected by some intelligence officers of using directed energy devices to attack U.S. personnel.

But the CIA last year said it believed it was unlikely that Russia or another foreign adversary had used microwaves or other forms of directed energy to attack American officials. The agency has faced criticism from those who have reported cases and from advocates who accuse the government of long dismissing the array of ailments.

Even with the lack of answers and attributions of responsibility, officials have sought to stress their commitment to victims' health.

"I want to be absolutely clear: these findings do not call into question the experiences and real health issues that U.S. government personnel and their family members — including CIA's own officers — have reported while serving our country," said CIA Director William Burns in a statement. "We will continue to remain alert to any risks to the health and wellbeing of Agency officers, to ensure access to care, and to provide officers the compassion and respect they deserve."

## Tesla says it will cut costs of next generation cars in half

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Tesla says it will cut the cost of its next generation of vehicles in half, largely by using innovative manufacturing techniques and smaller factories.

CEO Elon Musk and other executives outlined the goals during a 3 1/2-hour investor day presentation at Tesla's Austin, Texas, headquarters Wednesday as they presented the company's third master plan.

The changes could bring the cost of a new generation of vehicles to around \$25,000. Many investors were hoping to catch a glimpse of the next generation vehicles, but Musk said they wouldn't be shown until a proper product unveiling.

"We'd be jumping the gun if we answer your question," about the new vehicles, he told an analyst.

Shares of Tesla fell nearly 6% in after-hours trading during the presentation that ended just after 8 p.m. Eastern time.

Musk announced that Tesla plans to build a new factory in Mexico near Monterrey. Company executives said it will not take production from any other factories, where Tesla expects to expand production. They said the Mexican plant would build the next generation of vehicles, which also will be built at other factories.

It's likely that the next generation vehicles will be smaller than the current ones to bring the prices down, but that wasn't clear from the presentation. Many automakers build smaller vehicles in Mexico to save on labor costs and preserve profit margins.

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CFRA Analyst Garrett Nelson attributed the drop in Tesla's stock to the lack of details on the new vehicles as well as the company's history of seeing its share price rise ahead of big events, only to fall when the actual news is made.

He said the company's long-term focus may have disappointed some investors, but he sees Tesla's vision as justifying its high stock valuation versus other automakers.

"What they outlined really made the case that it deserves to trade at a big premium to the rest of the industry," he said.

Franz Von Holzhausen, Tesla's design chief, said the company must make another sharp reduction in costs in order to reach its ambitious electric-vehicle production target of 20 million vehicles per year by 2030. Tesla expects to manufacture 1.8 million this year.

The company, he said, will build the cars in smaller modular units, then bring those units together. The system uses less space. Executives said as a result, its next electric powertrain factory will be half the size of the one Tesla just built in Austin, costing 65% less.

"That also means we can build more factories at the same time," said Tom Zhu, who leads Tesla manufacturing.

Chief Financial Officer Zachary Kirkhorn said the company cut costs in half between the early Models S and X and the second generation, Models 3 and Y. It's planning to do that again for the next generation, but also will improve the cars at the same time, he said.

The company also said it would design vehicles so they have fewer wires and transistors, and use fewer expensive rare-Earth metals in the batteries.

"As we improve affordability, the number of customers who have access to our products increases," Kirkhorn said.

Musk said demand for Tesla vehicles is large, but many who want one now can't afford them.

Executives said Tesla is unique from other automakers because all the people involved in vehicle design and manufacturing are in the same room. The company also designs and makes many of its parts and software while others rely on tiers of parts supply companies.

The company also said it has opened 10 of its supercharger stations to owners of other electric vehicles as of Wednesday. And it plans to offer a package of unlimited home charging for \$30 per month in Texas using wind as the power source.

Kirkhorn said the new master plan includes product advances, rapid volume growth and technology advancement.

Musk began the session saying there is a clear path to sustainable energy on Earth, but it will take changing just about everything from fossil fuel power to electricity generated by renewable sources. The Earth can support more people than it does now without destroying natural habitats or huge austerity, he said.

## '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

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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.

"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 northwest 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

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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."

## Alex Murdaugh killed wife, son to buy time, prosecutor says

By JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

Alex Murdaugh's theft of millions of dollars was about to be revealed so he killed his wife and son to buy time to figure a way out, a prosecutor said Wednesday during closing arguments in the disgraced South Carolina attorney's murder trial.

Fearing his years of stealing from his law firm and clients would be exposed and hoping to maintain his lofty standing in the community, Murdaugh killed his wife and younger son in the hopes it would make him a sympathetic figure and draw attention away from the missing money, prosecutor Creighton Waters told jurors. Aided by his knowledge of how criminal cases are constructed, he hatched a clever plan to make sure they were at the family's Colleton County property on the night they were killed, June 7, 2021, he said.

"The pressures on this man were unbearable. And they were all reaching a crescendo the day his wife and son were murdered by him," Waters said. The defense will get to sum up its case on Thursday.

Murdaugh, 54, faces 30 years to life in prison if he is convicted of either murder count. Investigators said his 22-year-old son, Paul, was shot twice with a shotgun and his 52-year-old wife, Maggie, was shot four or five times with a rifle outside of the kennels on their property.

Jurors began the day with a visit to the crime scene, where a pool reporter said at least one of them carefully inspected the door frame of a storage closet where Paul Murdaugh was standing when he was killed.

The key piece of evidence connecting Alex Murdaugh to the killings is a video Paul Murdaugh shot from the kennels about five minutes before he last used his cellphone. It took more than a year for federal agents to hack into the young man's locked iPhone and find it.

Alex Murdaugh repeatedly told everyone, starting with the first investigator to respond to the killings, that he hadn't been at the kennels that night. But while testifying in his own defense, he admitted that he lied and that he had been there.

"Why in the world would an innocent, reasonable father and husband lie about that? And lie about it so early?" Waters said.



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Although the weapons used to kill the victims haven't been found, an expert testified that the markings on the bullet casings found near Maggie Murdaugh's body matched those found on casings at a shooting range on the family's property.

But there was no blood spatter linking the killings to Alex Murdaugh or anyone else, and prosecutors didn't spend much time laying out how they think Murdaugh could have killed his family, cleaned himself up, disposed of the clothes and weapons, and composed himself in the 15-minute window before GPS data shows he left the property to visit his ailing mother.

The prosecution's star crime scene expert said there wasn't enough evidence collected at the scene to definitely say whether there were one or two shooters at the kennels.

Still, Waters said there is enough evidence to link the killings to the financial crimes and to Alex Murdaugh being the only person with the motive, means and opportunity to kill his wife and son.

"As all of these pressures were mounting, the defendant killed Maggie and Paul," Waters said, pulling out his cellphone and waving it. "The forensic timeline puts him there. The use of the family weapons corroborates it. And his lies and his guilty actions afterward confirm that."

Waters said Alex Murdaugh has been lying for years to cover up his opioid addiction and the millions of dollars he stole, so it would be easy to lie about being at the kennels and killing his family, and to lie while testifying in his own defense last week.

"Always having to stay one step ahead of the game. Always have to literally beg, borrow and steal for over a decade to have the truth from being exposed," Waters said.

The prosecutor said he thought Murdaugh rehearsed his testimony and was scared to deviate, so he couldn't give specifics when Waters asked for details that would seem memorable such as his last conversation with his wife at the kennels before she died.

"This defendant has fooled everyone — everyone who thought they were close to him," Waters said. "He fooled Maggie and Paul, too, and they paid for it with their lives. Don't let him fool you, too."

The defense has said state agents conducted a poor investigation that focused too quickly on Alex Murdaugh and missed evidence such as fingerprints and shoe prints that could have led to the real killers.

They asked for jurors to be allowed to visit the property in order to help them understand how small the storage room is where Paul Murdaugh was killed and the distance between the two bodies.

Prosecutors opposed the visit, saying the scene looks different than it did in June 2021, as trees and vegetation have grown and no one has lived on the property since the killings.

Judge Clifton Newman allowed the visit but cautioned jurors about the differences in how the property looks now. They were also cautioned to watch for snakes.

Once closing arguments are finished, the jurors will get their instructions and begin deliberating what they learned during a trial that has included more than 75 witnesses and lasted more than six weeks. They will be able to review about 800 documents, photographs, videos of police interviews of Alex Murdaugh and other exhibits while deciding on a verdict.

## Explosive found in bag at Pennsylvania airport, man arrested

ALLENTOWN, Pa. (AP) — A Pennsylvania man faces federal criminal charges after he checked in a suitcase with an explosive device hidden in the lining on a flight to Florida, authorities said Wednesday.

Marc Muffley, 40, is charged with possessing an explosive in an airport and possessing or attempting to place an explosive or incendiary device on an aircraft, according to a criminal complaint.

Prosecutors allege that the material was found in a suitcase Muffley had checked in Monday at Lehigh Valley International Airport to Allegiant Air Flight 201, which was bound for Orlando Sanford International Airport in Florida.

After an alert during security screening, the bag was examined and found hidden in the lining was a "circular compound" about three inches in diameter encased in a wax-like paper and clear plastic wrap.

An FBI bomb technician X-rayed the compound and concluded that it contained a granular powder consistent with a "commercial grade firework" and "suspected to be a mixture of flash powder and the dark

granulars that are used in commercial grade fireworks.”

Attached to it was a “quick fuse” similar to a candle wick — apparently part of the original manufacture of the compound — as well as a “hobby fuse” that burns more slowly and appeared to have been added after the manufacture, authorities said.

Authorities said they concluded that both the black powder and flash powder “are susceptible to ignite from heat and friction and posed a significant risk to the aircraft and passengers,” according to the criminal complaint.

The baggage also contained “a can of butane, a lighter, a pipe with white powder residue, a wireless drill with cordless batteries, and two GFCI outlets taped together with black tape,” authorities said.

GFCI outlets are a type of circuit breaker.

Authorities said Muffley was paged over the airport’s public address system and shortly thereafter he was seen leaving the airport. He was traced to a Lansford address where he was arrested by the FBI late Monday night.

Officials said he remains in custody pending a probable cause hearing and detention hearing Thursday at 1:30 p.m. in Allentown, with Muffley attending via videoconference. A message was left Wednesday for Muffley’s federal public defender, Timothy Wright.

## Rescuers comb wreckage of Greece’s deadliest train crash

By COSTAS KANTOURIS and NICHOLAS PAPHITIS Associated Press

TEMPE, Greece (AP) — Rescuers searched late into the night Wednesday for survivors amid the mangled, burned-out wrecks of two trains that collided in northern Greece, killing at least 43 people and crumpling carriages into twisted steel knots in the country’s deadliest rail crash.

The impact just before midnight Tuesday threw some passengers into ceilings and out the windows.

“My head hit the roof of the carriage with the jolt,” Stefanos Gogakos, who was in a rear car, told state broadcaster ERT. He said windows shattered, showering riders with glass.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis called the collision of the passenger train and a freight train “a horrific rail accident without precedent in our country,” and pledged a full, independent investigation.

He said it appeared the crash was “mainly due to a tragic human error,” but did not elaborate.

The train from Athens to Thessaloniki was carrying 350 passengers, many of them students returning from raucous Carnival celebrations. While the track is double, both trains were traveling in opposite directions on the same line near the Vale of Tempe, a river valley about 380 kilometers (235 miles) north of Athens.

### STATIONMASTER ARRESTED; MINISTER RESIGNS

Authorities arrested the stationmaster at the train’s last stop, in the city of Larissa. They did not release the man’s name or the reason for the arrest, but the stationmaster is responsible for rail traffic on that stretch of the tracks. He was due to appear before a prosecutor Thursday to be formally charged.

Transportation Minister Kostas Karamanlis resigned, saying he was stepping down “as a basic indication of respect for the memory of the people who died so unfairly.”

Karamanlis said he had made “every effort” to improve a railway system that had been “in a state that doesn’t befit the 21st century.”

But, he added, “When something this tragic happens, it’s impossible to continue as if nothing has happened.”

The union representing train workers announced a 24-hour strike for Thursday, while protests by left-wing groups broke out in Athens late Wednesday. Athens metro workers also called a 24-hour strike for Thursday, saying they face similar problems as railway employees.

### WRECKAGE MAKES RESCUE EFFORTS DIFFICULT

Emergency workers used cranes and other heavy machinery to move large pieces of the trains, revealing more bodies and dismembered remains. The operation was to continue overnight, with firefighters proceeding painstakingly through the wreckage.

“It’s unlikely there will be survivors, but hope dies last,” rescuer Nikos Zygouris said.

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Larissa's chief coroner, Roubini Leondari, said 43 bodies had been brought to her for examination and would require DNA identification as they were largely disfigured.

"Most (of the bodies) are young people," she told ERT. "They are in very bad condition."

Greece's firefighting service said 57 people remained hospitalized late Wednesday, including six in intensive care. More than 15 others were discharged after receiving treatment.

More than 200 people who were unharmed or suffered minor injuries were taken 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.

Hellenic Train, which operates all of Greece's passenger and cargo trains, including those that collided, offered its "heartfelt condolences" to the victims' families. The company belongs to Italy's state railways.

Eight rail employees were among the dead, including the two drivers of the freight train and the two drivers of the passenger train, according to Yannis Nitsas, president of the Greek Railroad Workers Union.

The union called the one-day strike to protest what it said was chronic neglect of Greece's railways by successive governments.

"Unfortunately, our long-standing demands for staff hirings, better training and above all use of modern safety technology always end up in the wastepaper basket," it said in a statement.

## PASSENGERS SAY TRAIN CRASH WAS LIKE AN EXPLOSION

A teenage survivor who did not give his name to reporters said that just before the crash he felt sudden 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 used a bag to break the window of his car, the fourth, and escape.

Gogakos said the crash felt like an explosion, and some smoke entered the carriage. He said some passengers escaped through windows but that after a few minutes, crew members were able to open the doors and let people out.

Multiple cars derailed, and at least one burst into flames.

"Temperatures reached 1,300 degrees Celsius (2,372 degrees Fahrenheit), which makes it even more difficult to identify the people who were in it," fire service spokesperson Vassilis Varthakoyiannis said.

A man who was trying to ascertain the fate of his daughter, who was on the train, said he had a harrowing phone conversation with her before she was cut off.

"She told me, 'We're on fire. ... My hair is burning,'" he told ERT, without giving his name.

## GREECE GOES FROM CARNIVAL TO MOURNING

Many of the passengers were students returning to Thessaloniki from Carnival, but officials said but no detailed passenger list was available. This year was the first time the festival, which precedes Lent, was celebrated in full since the start of the pandemic in 2020.

The government declared three days of national mourning from Wednesday, while flags flew at half-staff outside all European Commission buildings in Brussels.

Visiting the accident scene, Prime Minister Mitsotakis said the government must help the injured recover and identify the dead.

"I can guarantee one thing: We will find out the causes of this tragedy, and we will do all that's in our power so that something like this never happens again," Mitsotakis said.

It was the country's deadliest rail crash on record. In 1968, 34 people died in a crash in the southern Peloponnese region.

Greek President Katerina Sakellariopoulou broke off an official visit to Moldova to visit the scene, laying flowers beside the wreckage.

Pope Francis offered condolences to the families of the dead in a message sent to the president of the Greek bishops conference by the Vatican's secretary of state,

Condolences poured in from around the world, including neighboring Turkey, Greece's historic regional rival. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed sorrow and wishes for a speedy recovery for those injured, his office said.

Despite the frosty relations between the two NATO members, Greece's leadership had called Erdogan

last month following a massive earthquake that killed tens of thousands in Turkey.

In Athens, several hundred members of left-wing groups marched late Wednesday to protest the train deaths. Minor clashes broke out as some protesters threw stones at the offices of Greece's rail operator and riot police and set dumpsters on fire. No arrests or injuries were reported.

## Chicago mayor's race shows impact of crime in COVID's wake

By SARA BURNETT and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Four years ago, Paul Vallas finished toward the bottom of the pack in a crowded race for Chicago mayor. Trying again, focused this time on crime, he was the top vote getter Tuesday, toppling the incumbent mayor and advancing to an April runoff to lead one of the country's largest cities.

His new campaign message, concentrated on citizens' safety and support for the police, resonated with voters in this Democratic city in a way it might not have before the COVID-19 pandemic, when rates of violent crime spiked.

"Public safety is the fundamental right of every American. It is a civil right," Vallas told a cheering crowd at his victory party. "We will have a safe Chicago. We will make Chicago the safest city in America."

That would be a tall order. But Vallas, a moderate Democrat endorsed by the police union, is promising what many voters want to hear, including plans to hire hundreds more police.

Those voters will have a choice. In the April runoff, Vallas will face Brandon Johnson, a progressive who is backed by the Chicago Teachers Union and says more money for police and incarceration isn't the answer to making the streets safer.

Both of them finished ahead of Mayor Lori Lightfoot — 34% for Vallas, 20% for Johnson and 17% for Lightfoot, who was criticized for her response to the increased crime and will depart as the first one-term mayor in Chicago in 40 years.

The city's election is the latest example of a churn in urban politics in the pandemic's aftermath. Crime was a top concern for voters in races to lead both New York and Los Angeles, and in San Francisco, a district attorney was recalled after frustration about public safety. Perceptions that Democrats were soft on crime also might have hurt the party during the November midterms in House races in places like New York, where Republicans scored surprisingly strong wins in suburban districts.

It's an issue that the GOP has hammered on and that has divided Democrats for years, particularly after the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in 2020 sparked protests and calls to "defund" the police.

Even as Joe Biden won the presidency in 2020, some moderates complained that the party wasn't quick enough to denounce the "defund" rhetoric coming from progressive activists.

Biden was able to largely neutralize that line of political attack by declaring to bipartisan applause in his first State of the Union: "The answer is not to defund the police. It's to fund the police."

Although his comment drew criticism from some Black Lives Matter activists and others who argue that larger problems with law enforcement persist, national Democrats have mostly been able to put that issue behind them.

But Chicago's results showed that concern about crime is continuing to resonate down-ballot, especially in urban centers, where steadfast support for Democrats is strongest.

Joe Trippi, a veteran Democratic strategist who is working with Vallas' campaign, said that in years of working on mayoral races he's never seen a contest where crime was so overwhelmingly the top issue for voters. Vallas was the only candidate who made it his core focus, he noted, and his success could be a message to other Democrats.

"I think that is important, for Democrats to make clear that you can be a progressive Democrat and make crime and public safety a top priority," Trippi said, noting that other goals can't be achieved if people don't feel safe.

The intraparty debate will be on full display in Chicago's April 4 mayoral election, with Vallas and Johnson making very different cases to voters.

Like many U.S. cities, Chicago saw violent crime increase during the pandemic, recording a 25-year high

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of 797 homicides in 2021, though the number decreased last year and the city has a lower murder rate than others in the Midwest, such as St. Louis. There are still major concerns about an increase in robberies and carjackings and a sense that criminals seem to have grown bolder, striking in neighborhoods that haven't historically been high targets.

Vallas, the only white candidate, performed best Tuesday in predominantly white neighborhoods that are home to large numbers of police officers and other city workers. Johnson, who is Black, did well in white, liberal areas on the city's north side and got just enough support everywhere else to stay in second, while Lightfoot won areas with higher Black populations on the south and west sides.

Johnson, 46, is a former teacher and union organizer who sits on the Cook County Board of Commissioners. Speaking to supporters Tuesday, he recalled teaching at a school in Chicago's Cabrini Green, a former downtown public housing complex where students could see through their windows one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the city, and having a student tell him he "should be teaching at a good school" instead.

Johnson argues for investing more in mental health care, schools and affordable housing, not more police. He avoided using the word "defund" during the race, and his campaign said he does not want to cut the number of Chicago officers. But after the protests over Floyd's death, he said on a radio show that defunding is "an actual real political goal," not just a slogan. He also sponsored a nonbinding resolution on the county board to redirect money from policing and jails to social services.

"We are going to finally retire this tale of two cities," Johnson said at his own victory party. "No matter where you live, no matter what you look like, you deserve a better, stronger, safer Chicago."

Vallas, 69, is the former CEO of the Chicago Public Schools and led school districts in New Orleans and Philadelphia. The son of Greek immigrants, he has two sons who were police officers — one of whom is now a firefighter — and was a consultant to the Fraternal Order of Police when the union was negotiating a new contract.

He has called for hiring hundreds more officers, and says many who retired or went to work elsewhere out of frustration with Lightfoot will return if he's mayor. He wants to return to a community policing strategy, with officers assigned to patrol each of the city's nearly 300 police beats, and keep schools open on evenings, weekends and holidays so kids have safe places to gather.

Vallas said he wants to rebuild trust between the community and the Chicago Police Department, which is under a federal consent decree to reform its practices after a long history of abuse, particularly in Black and Hispanic neighborhoods.

"I will support our law enforcement officers, but I will also support and have a zero tolerance when it comes to violating the law or violating the Constitution," he said.

Vallas has dismissed criticism that he is too close to the police union and its controversial leader, who equated Lightfoot's vaccine mandate for city workers to the Holocaust and voiced support for Jan. 6 insurrectionists. Vallas contends that his endorsement comes from the rank-and-file.

Will Marshall, president and founder of the moderate Progressive Policy Institute, said crime is a vulnerability that Democrats must address, and that avoiding talk of it plays into Republicans' hands. He said progressives nationally are focused on fighting systemic racism and not making people feel safer.

"These mayors don't have that luxury," he said.

## DC's cherry blossoms coming early due to confusing weather

By ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The cherry trees in the nation's capital are confused by Earth's changing climate, with the iconic blossoms appearing earlier than expected because of the unusually warm winter.

Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser and the National Park Service announced Wednesday that Washington's 3,700 cherry blossom trees would reach peak bloom this year from March 22-25. That's several days earlier than observers and experts had expected.

"This has been a challenging year to read the trees," said Jeff Reinbold, NPS superintendent for the national mall and memorial parks. One of the warmest winters on record, plus dramatic fluctuations in

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temperature have essentially sent confusing signals to the trees.

The district's winter featured dramatic temperature shifts, including a week in February where it hit 81 degrees one day and briefly snowed two days later. The end results, Reinbold said, are trees that he compared to a hormonal teenager. "There's a lot going on in there," he said.

The early bloom, by itself, isn't a huge problem, unless the temperatures drop suddenly again now that the vulnerable blossoms are emerging. "An early frost would definitely damage the blossoms," Reinbold said.

Cherry Blossom Festival President Diana Mayhew said this year's bloom dates aren't unprecedented, but they're the second earliest she had witnessed in 23 years with the organization. As a result, her organization has accelerated their own timetable, moving up multiple events planned at the Tidal Basin by a week.

Mayhew said she and city officials are expecting a boom year for the festival, which typically signals the unofficial start of D.C.'s tourist season. The 2020 cherry blossom season was essentially wrecked in real time by the creeping shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was moving across the country just as the festival was holding press conferences to announce that year's peak bloom. Organizers finally were forced to cancel most in-person events.

Washington's cherry blossoms date back 111 years to an original 1912 gift of 3,000 trees from the mayor of Tokyo. The Japanese embassy has remained deeply involved in their maintenance and in the annual festival — organizing a host of cherry blossom-themed events and performances.

Koichi Ai, head of chancery for the Japanese Embassy, said Wednesday that the trees hold "special status" within Japanese culture. Their brief but spectacular bloom cycle represents, "the transient nature of beauty and the everlasting cycle of life," he said.

The 2021 Cherry Blossom Festival took place fully under pandemic restrictions with organizers offering online bloom-cams and multiple virtual events and activities. Last year's season drew an estimated 1.1 million visitors — close to the pre-pandemic average of 1.5 million. This year, Mayhew said she hopes to match or exceed those pre-pandemic numbers.

In their ongoing quest to maintain and protect the trees, NPS officials have to contend with a second climate change-related issue — regular flooding in the Tidal Basin due to rising seas levels. The 107-acre man-made reservoir where the largest concentration of trees is located now floods twice a day at high tide, submerging a stretch of sidewalk next to the Jefferson Memorial. During heavy rains that routinely occur in Washington, the floodwaters completely overflow the sea wall in multiple locations and soak the tree roots with salty brackish water.

The original 1880s design of the Tidal Basin also simply wasn't equipped to handle the kinds of crowds and traffic the area now receives. That traffic has only increased as more monuments have been added to the Tidal Basin area over the years: a memorial to Franklin Roosevelt opened in 1997, and the Martin Luther King Jr. memorial was inaugurated in 2011.

In 2019, the NPS, along with the Trust for the National Mall and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, launched a long-term project to rebuild the basin's deteriorating sea wall and modify and expand sidewalks to accommodate modern crowds. Reinbold on Wednesday said the funding for the project had been secured and the proposed changes were in the design stage.

The twin impacts of confusing temperature shifts and Tidal Basin flooding represent a potential long-term threat to the health of the trees, according to Chris Walsh, a professor emeritus of horticulture at the University of Maryland. Warmer winters and fluctuating temperatures, he said, are producing similar early blooms this year in other flowering fruit trees such as apricots and pears.

"Everything's ahead of schedule this year," he said.

Since the cherry blossom trees aren't relied on to produce fruit, the impact on them should be minimal and won't harm the flowers — provided that there isn't a sudden cold snap. However, Walsh said the arboreal confusion could impact the annual development of protective bark, which could ultimately "put a lot of stress on the trees" and shorten their lifespan.

"If you add the stress of the fluctuating temperatures to the stress of salt on the roots, now you have two problems," he said.

## What is ESG investing and why do some hate it so much?

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — After sweeping through battles in statehouses across the country, the war against ESG investing is heating up in Congress.

The Senate voted Wednesday to overturn a Labor Department rule allowing retirement plans to consider environmental, social and governance factors when making investment decisions, following a similar vote by House Republicans on Tuesday. It sets the stage for a potential first veto by President Joe Biden.

Critics say ESG investments allocate money based on political agendas, such as a drive against climate change, rather than on earning the best returns for savers. They say ESG is just the latest example of the world trying to get “woke.”

The ESG industry, meanwhile, says it helps highlight companies that may be riskier than traditional investing guidelines alone might suggest. That could lead to more stable, safer returns for savers. It also says using an ESG lens could help investors find better, more profitable opportunities.

ESG has become popular across a wide range of investors, from smaller-pocketed regular people to pension funds responsible for the retirements of millions of workers.

### WHAT IS ESG?

It’s an acronym, with each of the letters describing an additional lens that some investors use to decide whether a particular stock or bond looks like a good buy.

Before risking their money, all investors including both traditional and ESG ones look at how much revenue a company is bringing in, how much profit it’s making and what the prospects are for the future.

ESG investors then layer on a few more specific considerations.

### WHAT IS E?

Environment. It can pay to avoid companies with poor records on the environment, the thinking goes, because they may be at greater risk of big fines from regulators. Or their businesses could be at particular risk of getting upended by future government attempts to protect the environment.

Such risks may not be as appreciated by those using just traditional investment analysis, which could lead to too-high stock prices, ESG advocates say. That in turn would mean too-high risk.

On the flip side, measuring a company’s environmental awareness could also unearth companies that could be better positioned for the future. Companies that care about climate change may be better prepared for its repercussions, whether that means potential flooding damage at factory sites or the risks of increased wildfires.

### WHAT IS S?

Social. This is a wide-ranging category that focuses on a company’s relationships with people, both within it and outside.

Investors measuring a company’s social impact often look at whether pay is fair and working conditions are good through the rank and file, for example, because that can lead to better retention of employees, lower turnover costs and ultimately better profits.

Others consider a company’s record on data protection and privacy, where lax protocols could lead to leaks that drive customers away.

Increasingly, companies are also getting called upon to take positions on big social issues, such as abortion or the Black Lives Matter movement. Some ESG investors encourage this, saying companies’ employees and customers want to hear it.

Not every ESG investor considers all these factors, but they all get lumped in together under the “S” umbrella.

### WHAT IS G?

Governance, which essentially means the company is running itself well.

That includes tying executives’ pay to the company’s performance, whether that’s defined by the stock price, profits or something else, and having strong, independent directors on the board to act as a powerful check on CEOs.

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## HOW BIG OF A DEAL IS ESG?

Investors who use one or more ESG criteria or push companies on such issues as a group controlled \$8.4 trillion in U.S.-domiciled assets in 2022. That's according to the most recent count by US SIF, a trade group representing the sustainable and responsible investing industry.

That's enough money to buy Tesla, one of the most valuable U.S. stocks, more than 11 times over. It also means ESG accounted for \$1 of every \$8 in all U.S. assets under professional management.

With stock and bond markets tumbling last year, the flow of dollars into ESG funds has slowed since setting a peak in early 2021. U.S. sustainable funds pulled in a net \$3 billion over the course of 2022, according to Morningstar.

Not only have sharp drops for all kinds of investment prices raised worries, so has the increased political backlash. During the final three months of 2022, which was a particularly tough period for financial markets, investors pulled nearly \$6.2 billion more out of sustainable funds than they put in, according to Morningstar.

Still, despite the slowdown, demand is still higher for sustainable funds than for their traditional peers.

## IS IT JUST MILLENNIALS DOING IT?

No, the vast majority of money in ESG investments comes from huge investors like pension funds, insurance companies, endowments at universities and foundations and other big institutional investors.

## WHAT IMPACT IS IT HAVING?

ESG investors are pushing for more engagement with companies, discussing their concerns about the environment, social issues and governance. They're also casting their votes at annual shareholder meetings with ESG issues more in mind.

In 2021 a relatively small fund known as Engine No. 1 shocked corporate America after it convinced some of Wall Street's biggest investment firms to approve its proposal to replace three directors on Exxon Mobil's board, citing a decarbonizing world.

Investors are also pushing executives across corporate America to give more details about their carbon emissions, measurements about their impacts on human rights and audits for racial equity.

It's all an evolution from the industry's early days, when "socially responsible" investing was quite simplistic. Early funds would just promise not to own stocks of tobacco companies, gun makers, or other companies seen as distasteful.

## AND THE BACKLASH?

Some politicians have denounced ESG as a politicization of investing.

Some in the business world also have been particularly critical of rating agencies that try to boil complex issues down to simple ESG scores.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk last year called ESG a scam that "has been weaponized by phony social justice warriors," for example. His criticism came shortly after Tesla got kicked out of the S&P 500 ESG index.

The index tries to hold only companies with better ESG scores within each industry, while holding similar amounts of energy stocks, tech stocks and other sectors as the broader S&P 500 index. That means Exxon Mobil could remain in the S&P 500 ESG index, even if it's pulling fossil fuels from the ground to burn, because it rates better than peer energy companies.

## ARE THOSE THE ONLY CONTROVERSIES?

No. Any boom brings in opportunists, and regulators have warned of some potentially misleading statements.

That could include firms claiming to be ESG-driven but owning shares in companies with low ESG scores. It's reminiscent of how products along supermarket aisles get accused of "greenwashing," or pitching their wares as "green" even if they're not.

Part of that could be how big the ESG industry has become, with some players taking a lighter touch.

Some funds pledge not to own stocks of any companies seen as dangerous, for example. Others will try to own only companies that get the highest ratings from scorekeepers on ESG issues. Still others try to buy only companies that score the best within their specific industry, even if the score is very low overall.



Such nuance can make for confusion among investors trying to find the right ESG fund for them.

## Ukraine official: Forces may pull out of key city of Bakhmut

By SUSIE BLANN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The Ukrainian military might pull troops back from the key stronghold of Bakhmut, an adviser to Ukraine's president said Wednesday in remarks that suggested Russia could capture the city that has become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance.

Kremlin forces have waged a bloody, monthslong offensive to take Bakhmut, a city of salt and gypsum mines in eastern Ukraine that has become a ghost town.

"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 has come to embody Ukraine's determination as the city's defenders hold out against relentless shelling and Russian troops suffer heavy casualties.

Bakhmut lies in Donetsk province, one of four provinces Russia illegally annexed last fall. Moscow controls half of Donetsk province. To take the remaining half of that province, Russian forces must go through Bakhmut, the only approach to bigger Ukrainian-held cities since Ukrainian troops took back Iziurm in Kharkiv province in September.

Analysts say the fall of Bakhmut would be a blow for Ukraine and offer tactical advantages to Russia, but would not prove decisive to the war's outcome.

Rodnyansky noted that Russia was using the Wagner Group's best troops to try to encircle the city. The private military company known for brutal tactics is led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a rogue millionaire with longtime links to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Prigozhin said Wednesday that he had seen no signs of a Ukrainian withdrawal and that Kyiv has, in fact, been reinforcing its positions.

"The Ukrainian army is deploying additional troops and is doing what it can to retain control of the city," Prigozhin said. "Tens of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers are offering fierce resistance, and the fighting is getting increasingly bloody by day."

Ukraine's deputy defense minister, Hanna Maliar, said earlier this week that reinforcements had been dispatched to Bakhmut.

Ukrainian military analyst Oleh Zhdanov told The Associated Press that the reinforcements may have been sent "to gain time" for strengthening Ukrainian firing lines on a hill in Chasiv Yar, 15 kilometers (9.3 miles) west of Bakhmut.

Zhdanov said the possible withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from Bakhmut "will not affect the course of the war in any way" because of the firing positions in Chasiv Yar.

Bakhmut is now partly encircled, and all roads, including the main supply route, are within range of Russian fire, Zhdanov said. The city lies in ruins and "no longer has strategic or operational significance."

"In Bakhmut, the Russians lost so many forces — soldiers and equipment — that this city has already fulfilled its function," Zhdanov said.

Recent drone footage showed the scale of devastation in the city, and Zelenskyy has described it as "destroyed."

Since invading Ukraine a year ago, Russia has bombarded various cities and towns it wanted to occupy. It also targeted Ukraine's power supply with missile strikes ahead of winter in an apparent attempt to weaken residents' morale.

While Western analysts have warned that warmer weather might give Moscow an opportunity to renew an offensive, Ukrainian officials nonetheless celebrated Wednesday as their traditional first day of spring.

Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba announced that his country had emerged from Putin's "winter terror."

"We survived the most difficult winter in our history," Kuleba wrote on Facebook.

Zelenskyy added in his nightly video address: "This winter is over. It was very difficult, and every Ukrainian

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felt this difficulty without exaggeration. But still, we were able to provide Ukraine with energy and heat.”

If the war becomes a protracted conflict, Latvian Prime Minister Krisjanis Kariņš said that would demand a response from Kyiv’s Western allies.

“This is potentially, for many years to come, where we will have to readapt our militaries, our military industry, to be able to step up to a much, much bigger challenge,” Karins said after talks in Berlin with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

Meanwhile, one of Zelenskyy’s top advisers, Mykhailo Podolyak, denied on Wednesday that Ukraine had used drones to attack Russian territory following official Russian 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 Russian infrastructure was the result of “internal attacks.”

Ukraine’s Western allies have discouraged Ukraine from attacking targets in Russia 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 they have the right to strike any target in Russian territory in response to its aggression.

Asked about Podolyak’s denial, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, “We don’t believe it.”

Pictures of a 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 many explosives.

Russia’s Defense Ministry said Wednesday it prevented a massive drone attack on Crimea. According to Russian state media, air defenses shot down six drones, while electronic warfare systems disabled four others.

Also Wednesday, Belarusian state TV attempted to knock down claims of another attack.

Belarusian activists supporting Ukraine alleged that a Russian A-50 early warning and control aircraft was seriously damaged Sunday in an attack on the Machulishchy air base outside the country’s capital, Minsk.

Belarusian state television on Wednesday called the report “fake” and said: “A-50 is safe and sound! The liner both performed and continues to perform its work within the framework of the allied grouping of Belarus and Russia, and is ready to take off at any moment.”

State TV showed nighttime video of the plane taxiing on a runway, but it did not state the date of the recording or whether the plane had been damaged, then repaired.

Satellite photos Tuesday from Planet Labs PBC and Maxar Technologies appeared to show the plane largely intact, with discoloration on the circular rotodome above its fuselage that could represent damage.

In other developments, the Ukrainian president’s office reported that at least nine civilians were killed and 12 others wounded.

Three people, including a 1-year-old boy, were wounded in Russian shelling of Ukraine’s southern Kherson province on Wednesday, regional officials reported.

Fierce fighting also continued in Donetsk province, with Bakhmut, the cities of Avdiivka and Vuhledar, and 17 towns and villages, coming under intense Russian shelling.

## COVID-19 conspiracies soar after latest report on origins

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — COVID-19’s origins remain hazy. Three years after the start of the pandemic, it’s still unclear whether the coronavirus that causes the disease leaked from a lab or spread to humans from an animal.

This much is known: When it comes to COVID-19 misinformation, any new report on the virus’ origin quickly triggers a relapse and a return of misleading claims about the virus, vaccines and masks that have reverberated since the pandemic began.

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It happened again this week after the Energy Department confirmed that a classified report determined, with low confidence, that the virus escaped from a lab. Within hours, online mentions of conspiracy theories involving COVID-19 began to rise, with many commenters saying the classified report was proof they were right all along.

Far from definitive, the Energy Department's report is the latest of many attempts by scientists and officials to identify the origin of the virus, which has now killed nearly 7 million people after being first detected in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019.

The report has not been made public, and officials in Washington stressed that a variety of U.S. agencies are not in agreement on the origin. On Tuesday, FBI Director Christopher Wray told Fox News that the FBI "has for quite some time now" assessed that the pandemic's origins are "most likely a potential lab incident in Wuhan."

But others in the U.S. intelligence community disagree, and there's no consensus. Many scientists believe the likeliest explanation is that the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 jumped from animals to humans, possibly at Wuhan's Huanan market, a scenario backed up by multiple studies and reports. The World Health Organization has said that while an animal origin remains most likely, the possibility of a lab leak must be investigated further before it can be ruled out.

People should be open-minded about the evidence used in the Energy Department's assessment, according to virologist Angela Rasmussen. But she said that without evaluating the classified report, she can't assess if it's persuasive enough to challenge the conclusion that the virus spread from an animal.

"The vast majority of the evidence continues to support natural origin," Rasmussen told The Associated Press Wednesday. "I'm a scientist. I need to see the evidence rather than take the FBI director's word for it."

Many of those citing the report as proof, however, seemed uninterested in the details. They seized on the report and said it suggests the experts were wrong when it came to masks and vaccines, too.

"School closures were a failed & catastrophic policy. Masks are ineffective. And harmful," said a tweet that's been read nearly 300,000 times since Sunday. "COVID came from a lab. Everything we skeptics said was true."

Overall mentions of COVID-19 began to rise after The Wall Street Journal published a story about the Energy Department report on Sunday. Since then, mentions of various COVID-related conspiracy theories have soared, according to an analysis conducted by Signal Labs, a San Francisco-based media intelligence firm, and shared with The Associated Press.

While the lab leak theory has bounced around the internet since the pandemic began, references to it soared 100,000% in the 48 hours after the Energy Department report was revealed, according to Signal's analysis, which combed through social media, blogs and other sites.

Many of the conspiracy theories contradict each other and the findings in the Energy Department report. In a tweet on Tuesday, U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Republican from Georgia, called COVID-19 a "man made bioweapon from China." A follower quickly challenged her: "It was made in Ukraine," he responded.

With so many questions remaining about a world event that has claimed so many lives and upended even more, it's not at all surprising that COVID-19 is still capable of generating so much anger and misinformation, according to Bret Schafer, a senior fellow at the Alliance for Securing Democracy, a Washington-based organization that has tracked government propaganda about COVID-19.

"The pandemic was so incredibly disruptive to everyone. The intensity of feelings about COVID, I don't think that's going to go away," Schafer said. "And any time something new comes along, it breathes new life into these grievances and frustrations, real or imagined."

Chinese government officials have in the past used their social media accounts to amplify anti-U.S. conspiracy theories, including some that suggested the U.S. created the COVID-19 virus and framed its release on China.

So far, they've taken a quieter approach to the Energy Department report. In their official response, China's government dismissed the agency's assessment as an effort to politicize the pandemic. Online, Beijing's sprawling propaganda and disinformation network was largely silent, with just a few posts criticizing or mocking the report.

"BREAKING," a pro-China YouTuber wrote on Twitter. "I can now announce, with 'low confidence,' that the COVID pandemic began as a leak from Hunter Biden's laptop."

## Harry, Meghan asked to leave UK home in further royal rift

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prince Harry and his wife, Meghan, have been asked to vacate their home in Britain, suggesting a further fraying of ties with the royal family amid preparations for the coronation of his father, King Charles III.

Frogmore Cottage, on the grounds of Windsor Castle west of London, had been intended as the couple's main residence before they gave up royal duties and moved to Southern California. The Sun newspaper reported that Charles started the eviction process on Jan. 11, the day after the publication of Harry's explosive memoir "Spare."

"We can confirm The Duke and Duchess of Sussex have been requested to vacate their residence at Frogmore Cottage," a spokesperson for the couple said in statement.

Disclosures Harry made in "Spare" deepened the rift between him and his family. The book included his account of private conversations with his father, and his brother, Prince William.

After they left Britain, Harry and Meghan had said Frogmore Cottage would remain their base when they visited the U.K.

In September 2020, a spokesman announced the couple had repaid 2.4 million pounds (\$3.2 million) in British taxpayers' money that was used to renovate the home when they were working members of the royal family.

The money "fully covered" the cost of the renovation, the spokesman said.

## Lilly plans to slash some insulin prices, expand cost cap

By TOM MURPHY AP Health Writer

Eli Lilly will cut prices for some older insulins later this year and immediately give more patients access to a cap on the costs they pay to fill prescriptions.

The moves announced Wednesday promise critical relief to some people with diabetes who can face thousands of dollars in annual costs for insulin they need in order to live. Lilly's changes also come as lawmakers and patient advocates pressure drugmakers to do something about soaring prices.

Lilly said it will cut the list prices for its most commonly prescribed insulin, Humalog, and for another insulin, Humulin, by 70% or more in the fourth quarter, which starts in October.

List prices are what a drugmaker initially sets for a product and what people who have no insurance or plans with high deductibles are sometimes stuck paying.

A Lilly spokeswoman said the current list price for a 10-milliliter vial of the fast-acting, mealtime insulin Humalog is \$274.70. That will fall to \$66.40.

Likewise, she said the same amount of Humulin currently lists at \$148.70. That will change to \$44.61.

Lilly CEO David Ricks said Wednesday that his company was making these changes to address issues that affect the price patients ultimately pay for its insulins.

He noted that discounts Lilly offers from its list prices often don't reach patients through insurers or pharmacy benefit managers. High-deductible coverage can lead to big bills at the pharmacy counter, particularly at the start of the year when the deductibles renew.

"We know the current U.S. health care system has gaps," he said. "This makes a tough disease like diabetes even harder to manage."

Patient advocates have long called for insulin price cuts to help uninsured people who would not be affected by price caps tied to insurance coverage.

Lilly's planned cuts "could actually provide some substantial price relief," said Stacie Dusetzina, a health policy professor at Vanderbilt University who studies drug costs.

She noted that the moves likely won't affect Lilly much financially because the insulins are older, and

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some already face competition.

Lilly also said Wednesday that it will cut the price of its authorized generic version of Humalog to \$25 a vial starting in May.

Lilly also is launching in April a biosimilar insulin to compete with Sanofi's Lantus.

Ricks said that it will take time for insurers and the pharmacy system to implement its price cuts, so the drugmaker will immediately cap monthly out-of-pocket costs at \$35 for people who are not covered by Medicare's prescription drug program.

The drugmaker said the cap applies to people with commercial coverage and at most retail pharmacies.

Lilly said people without insurance can find savings cards to receive insulin for the same amount at its InsulinAffordability.com website.

The federal government in January started applying that cap to patients with coverage through its Medicare program for people age 65 and older or those who have certain disabilities or illnesses.

President Joe Biden brought up that cost cap during his annual State of the Union address last month. He called for insulin costs for everyone to be capped at \$35.

Biden said in a statement Wednesday that Lilly responded to his call.

"It's a big deal, and it's time for other manufacturers to follow," Biden said.

He also noted that Americans "for far too long" have faced much higher drug costs than people in other countries.

Aside from Eli Lilly and the French drugmaker Sanofi, other insulin makers include the Danish pharmaceutical company Novo Nordisk.

Representatives for both Sanofi and Novo Nordisk said their companies offer several programs that limit costs for people with and without coverage.

Insulin is made by the pancreas and used by the body to convert food into energy. People who have diabetes don't produce enough insulin.

People with Type 1 diabetes must take insulin every day to survive. More than 8 million Americans use insulin, according to the American Diabetes Association.

Research has shown that prices for insulin have more than tripled in the last two decades. Pressure is growing on drugmakers to help patients.

The state of California has said it plans to explore making its own cheaper insulin. Drugmakers also may face competition from companies like the nonprofit Civica, which plans to produce three insulins at a recommended price of no more than \$30 a vial, a spokeswoman said.

Drugmakers may be seeing "the writing on the wall that high prices can't persist forever," said Larry Levitt, an executive vice president with the nonprofit Kaiser Family Foundation, which studies health care.

"Lilly is trying to get out ahead of the issue and look to the public like the good guy," Levitt said, adding that there's nothing stopping Lilly from raising prices again in the future.

Lilly officials said Wednesday that they have not raised the price of any of their insulins since 2017.

Ricks, the Lilly CEO, said the drugmaker made the changes announced Wednesday "because it's time and it's the right thing to do."

Indianapolis-based Eli Lilly and Co. became the first company to commercialize insulin in 1923, two years after University of Toronto scientists discovered it. The drugmaker then built its reputation around producing insulin even as it branched into cancer treatments, antipsychotics and other drugs.

Humulin and Humalog and its authorized generic brought in a total of more than \$3 billion in revenue for Lilly last year. They rang up more than \$3.5 billion the year before that.

"These are treatments that have had a really long and successful life and should be less costly to patients," Dusetzina said. \_\_\_\_\_

Follow Tom Murphy on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/thpmurphy>

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Science and Educational Media Group. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

## Elizabeth Holmes has 2nd child as prison sentence looms

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.

## UK: Remains of baby found after missing couple arrested

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British police said they found the remains of a 2-month old baby in woodland Wednesday after officers arrested the infant's mother and her boyfriend, who vanished after the child was born in early January.

Constance Marten, 35, and her boyfriend Mark Gordon, 48, a convicted sex offender, had crisscrossed England for weeks to avoid authorities, police said. Investigators suspect the pair used large amounts of cash to live off the grid, traveling around the country by taxi, covering their faces when near closed circuit cameras and moving frequently, often after dark.

They were detained Monday in Brighton, southern England, after a tip came from a member of the public. The baby was not with them.

The couple were initially arrested on suspicion of child neglect, and the grounds were upgraded Tuesday to suspicion of gross negligence manslaughter.

"A crime scene is in place, and work at the location is expected to continue for some time," Detective Superintendent Lewis Basford of London's Metropolitan Police force said in a statement. "This is an outcome that myself and the many officers who have been part of the search had hoped would not happen."

An autopsy will be performed to determine the cause of the infant's death, Basford said. Marten and Gordon remained in custody after police applied for a 36-hour extension of their detention period.

Before the remains were found, police had expressed concern that serious harm had come to the baby. Dozens of police officers, assisted with a helicopter and drones, searched for the child in woodland and open areas near where Marten and Gordon were detained. They also urged local residents to look in their outhouses and sheds.

Police launched a national search for Marten and Gordon after a car in which they were traveling was found in flames on a roadside on Jan. 5.

Police believe Marten gave birth in or near the car a day or two earlier. In the weeks before she and Gordon surfaced, officers said they were concerned for the family's welfare because neither Marten nor

the baby had received medical care.

Marten, who is from a wealthy, aristocratic British family, was reportedly a drama student when she met Gordon. He served 20 years in prison in the United States after being convicted in Florida of kidnapping and sexual battery, according to U.S. law enforcement records. He was deported from the U.S. after his release.

## Georgia star Jalen Carter charged with racing in fatal wreck

By CHARLES ODUM AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — Georgia defensive tackle Jalen Carter, projected as one of the top players in next month's NFL draft, has been charged with reckless driving and racing in conjunction with the crash that killed offensive lineman Devin Willock and a recruiting staff member.

The Athens-Clarke County Police Department has issued an arrest warrant, obtained Wednesday by The Associated Press, that alleges Carter was racing his 2021 Jeep Trackhawk against the 2021 Ford Expedition driven by the recruiting staffer, 24-year-old Chandler LeCroy, which led to the Jan. 15 wreck.

Carter had been due in Indianapolis on Wednesday for the NFL's scouting combine, and he is expected to address the arrest warrant when he returns to Athens, according to Lt. Shaun Barnett of the Athens-Clarke County Police Department.

"It is my understanding that Mr. Carter is making arrangements to turn himself in," Barnett said in an e-mail to the AP.

Carter, one of six players who was not present Wednesday for scheduled media interviews at the combine, issued a statement on his Twitter account saying he expects to be "fully exonerated of any criminal wrongdoing."

"This morning I received a telephone call from the Athens, Georgia, police department informing me that two misdemeanor warrants have been issued against me for reckless driving and racing," Carter said. "Numerous media reports also have circulated this morning containing inaccurate information concerning the tragic events of January 15, 2023. It is my intention to return to Athens to answer the misdemeanor charges against me and to make certain that the complete and accurate truth is presented. There is no question in my mind that when all of the facts are known that I will be fully exonerated of any criminal wrongdoing."

The crash occurred just hours after the Bulldogs celebrated their second straight national championship with a parade and ceremony, killing LeCroy and Willock.

Georgia coach Kirby Smart expressed his concern about the charges in a statement issued Wednesday.

"The charges announced today are deeply concerning, especially as we are still struggling to cope with the devastating loss of two beloved members of our community," Smart said.

"We will continue to cooperate fully with the authorities while supporting these families and assessing what we can learn from this horrible tragedy."

According to the arrest warrant, the investigation by Athens police found that LeCroy and Carter were operating their vehicles "in a manner consistent with racing" after leaving downtown Athens at about 2:30 a.m.

The warrant says evidence shows the vehicles switched lanes, drove in the center turn lane, drove in opposite lanes, overtook other motorists and drove at high rates of speed "in an apparent attempt to outdistance each other."

Police determined LeCroy's Expedition was traveling at about 104 mph (167 kph) shortly before the crash. The warrant says LeCroy's blood-alcohol concentration was .197 at the time of the crash. The legal limit in Georgia is .08.

Willock, 20, was pronounced dead at the scene of the crash. LeCroy was transported to a hospital, where she died from her injuries.

Georgia linebacker Nolan Smith became emotional on Wednesday when talking about Willock at the scouting combine.

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"This is the first time I'm talking about it," Smith said. "That's my guy. That's one person that never did anything wrong. I get sensitive talking about it just because I love him. He never did anything wrong in his three years."

Offensive lineman Warren McClendon, who had just announced plans to enter the NFL draft, sustained minor injuries in the crash. Georgia football staffer Victoria Bowles was hospitalized with more serious injuries.

The Jan. 15 wreck was not the only recent incident in which a Georgia player was accused of racing and speeding. Linebacker Jamon Dumas-Johnson, the second-leading tackler in 2022, was arrested on Feb. 22 on charges of reckless driving and racing.

According to Athens-Clarke County jail records, Dumas-Johnson was released on Feb. 23 after posting a combined bond of \$4,000 — \$2,500 for allegedly racing on highways/streets and \$1,500 for alleged reckless driving.

Georgia athletic department officials said on Jan. 28 that the vehicle driven by LeCroy was expected to be used only for recruiting activities, not personal use.

## Long-lost ship found in Lake Huron, confirming tragic story

By JOHN FLESHER Associated Press

TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. (AP) — Even for the Thunder Bay area, a perilous swath of northern Lake Huron off the Michigan coast that has devoured many a ship, the Ironton's fate seems particularly cruel.

The 191-foot (58-meter) cargo vessel collided with a grain hauler on a blustery night in September 1894, sinking both. The Ironton's captain and six sailors clambered into a lifeboat but it was dragged to the bottom before they could detach it from the ship. Only two crewmen survived.

The gravesite long eluded shipwreck hunters.

Now, the mystery has been solved, officials with Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary in Alpena, Michigan, said Wednesday. The Associated Press obtained details of the discovery ahead of the announcement.

A team of historians, underwater archaeologists and technicians located the wreckage in 2019 and deployed remotely controlled cameras to scan and document it, Superintendent Jeff Gray said in an AP interview. The sanctuary plans to reveal the location in coming months and is considering placing a mooring buoy at the site. Officials have kept the find secret to prevent divers from disturbing the site before video and photo documentation is finished.

Video footage shows the Ironton sitting upright on the lake bottom, hundreds of feet down — "remarkably preserved" by the cold, fresh water like many other Great Lakes shipwrecks, Gray said.

No human remains were seen. But the lifeboat remains tethered to the bigger vessel, a poignant confirmation of witness accounts from 128 years ago.

"Archaeologists study things to learn about the past. But it's not really things that we're studying; it's people," Gray said. "And that lifeboat ... really connects you to the site and reminds you of how powerful the lakes are and what it must have been like to work on them and lose people on them."

The search and inspections involved a number of organizations, including Ocean Exploration Trust, founded by Robert Ballard, who located the sunken wreckage of the Titanic and the German battleship Bismarck.

"We hope this discovery helps contribute to an element of closure to the extended families of those lost on the Ironton, and the communities impacted by its loss," Ballard said. "The Ironton is yet another piece of the puzzle of Alpena's fascinating place in America's history of trade," while the Thunder Bay sanctuary "continues to reveal lost chapters of maritime history."

Nearly 200 shipwrecks are believed to rest within or nearby the boundaries of the sanctuary, which includes the Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center in Alpena and some 4,300 square miles (11,137 square kilometers) of northwestern Lake Huron.

Several factors made the area a "shipwreck alley" for more than two centuries, until modern navigation and weather forecasting reduced the danger, said Stephanie Gandulla, the sanctuary's resource protection coordinator.

The late 1800s was a busy period for Great Lakes commerce. Thousands of schooners, or sailing ships,



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and hundreds of steamers hauled cargo and passengers between bustling port cities such as Chicago, Detroit and Cleveland.

The sanctuary area was something of a maritime highway cloverleaf. Vessels cruised to and from Lake Huron and Lake Michigan through the nearby Straits of Mackinac. Others ranged northward to Lake Superior, fetching iron ore for steel mills from mines in Minnesota and Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

"It's where the upbound and downbound shipping kind of crossed each other," Gray said. "Busy intersections are where most accidents happen."

The weather was notoriously unstable — dense fog, sudden storms. Islands and submerged reefs lurked.

On the fateful night, the Ironton and another schooner barge, the Moonlight, were being towed northward from the Lake Erie town of Ashtabula, Ohio, by a steam-powered ship — a common practice then, much as a train engine pulls freight cars on a railroad. They were bound for Marquette, a port city on Lake Superior.

The steamer broke down in heavy Lake Huron seas around 12:30 a.m. the morning of Sept. 26. The Ironton and the Moonlight disconnected their tow lines and drifted apart, with the Ironton crew setting sails and firing up its engine. It veered off course and ran into the Ohio, a freighter loaded with 1,000 tons of flour, about 10 miles (16 kilometers) off Presque Isle, Michigan.

The Ohio soon foundered, its crew of 16 rescued by the Moonlight. The Ironton stayed afloat more than an hour before going down.

Newspapers quoted William Parry as saying he and two other Ironton sailors bobbed in the heaving lake for about 30 minutes until another steamer, the Charles Hebard, showed up. Parry struggled aboard as the Hebard lowered a lifeboat with several of its crew.

They picked up the other two Ironton men. But a wave overturned the craft, flinging everyone into the water. Hebard crewmen tossed lines and pulled all to safety except Ironton mate Ed Boswick, who couldn't muster the strength to hold on.

"It's a powerful, tragic story," Gandulla said.

So fierce was the gale that it claimed yet another schooner, the William Home, farther west on Lake Michigan. Six of seven crew members died.

Staffers with the sanctuary, part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, took a sonar survey in the area of the Ironton-Ohio collision in 2017. They detected two images on the lake bed, one later identified as the Ohio. The other was a more recent shipwreck.

It took two more years to track down the Ironton several miles away. Ballard's organization provided an autonomous surface vehicle designed for seafloor mapping. After days of searching, it spotted a figure that later was confirmed as the Ironton.

A high-resolution scan in 2021 provided more details. The vessel is largely intact, Gray said. Its masts point skyward, with rigging and ropes tied to spars and lying on deck. The robotic camera also showed the lifeboat tied to the ship's stern.

The sanctuary awaits federal and state permits to plant the buoy, anchored by weights of up to 3,000 pounds (1,360 kilograms), on the lake floor. Divers could attach their boats to the floating device and head down to explore the long-lost craft.

"Then we get to share it with the rest of the world," Gray said, "and try to protect it so our grandkids can enjoy these sites the same way that we do today."

## 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

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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 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.

Opponents of the plan to wipe away debt held by millions of Americans have denounced it as an insult to those who have repaid their debt and to those who didn't attend college.

Thompson was among a few dozen borrowers who camped out in drizzle overnight to get seats at the court for Tuesday's hearing. 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.

Other 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 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 on Tuesday 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.

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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.

## NBC's Hoda Kotb off 'Today' show due to family health issue

NEW YORK (AP) — NBC's "Today" show is without both of its hosts and addressed Hoda Kotb's absence on the program Wednesday.

Kotb is dealing with an unspecified "family health matter," the show's Craig Melvin said. She'd been absent from the network morning show last week and this week without any explanation.

Meanwhile, co-host Savannah Guthrie tested positive for COVID when she wasn't feeling well Tuesday, leaving mid-show. News anchor Melvin, Sheinelle Jones and Al Roker were on the set Wednesday.

"We look forward to seeing Hoda and Savannah back here at the desk very, very soon," Melvin said.

There's no specific estimate on when either might return, a "Today" spokeswoman said.

## Today in History: MARCH 2, Wilt Chamberlain scores 100

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, March 2, the 61st day of 2023. There are 304 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 2, 1962, Wilt Chamberlain scored 100 points for the Philadelphia Warriors in a game against the New York Knicks, an NBA record that still stands. Philadelphia won the game, 169-147.

On this date:

In 1861, the state of Texas, having seceded from the Union, was admitted to the Confederacy.

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In 1877, Republican Rutherford B. Hayes was declared the winner of the 1876 presidential election over Democrat Samuel J. Tilden, even though Tilden had won the popular vote.

In 1917, actor, producer, director and bandleader Desi Arnaz was born in Santiago de Cuba.

In 1932, the 20th Amendment to the Constitution, which moved the date of the presidential inauguration from March 4 to Jan. 20, was passed by Congress and sent to the states for ratification.

In 1939, John Ford's classic Western "Stagecoach," starring Claire Trevor and John Wayne, opened in New York.

In 1943, the three-day Battle of the Bismarck Sea began in the southwest Pacific during World War II; U.S. and Australian warplanes were able to inflict heavy damage on an Imperial Japanese convoy.

In 1955, nine months before Rosa Parks' famous act of defiance, Claudette Colvin, a Black high school student in Montgomery, Alabama, was arrested after refusing to give up her seat on a public bus to a white passenger.

In 1985, the government approved a screening test for AIDS that detected antibodies to the virus, allowing possibly contaminated blood to be excluded from the blood supply.

In 1989, representatives from the 12 European Community nations agreed to ban all production of CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons), the synthetic compounds blamed for destroying the Earth's ozone layer, by the end of the 20th century.

In 1990, more than 6,000 drivers went on strike against Greyhound Lines Inc. (The company, later declaring an impasse in negotiations, fired the strikers.)

In 1995, the Internet search engine website Yahoo! was incorporated by founders Jerry Yang and David Filo.

In 2011, the Supreme Court ruled, 8-1, that a grieving father's pain over mocking protests at his Marine son's funeral had to yield to First Amendment protections for free speech in a decision favoring the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas.

In 2012, Some 40 people were killed by tornadoes that struck Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky and Ohio.

Ten years ago: The day after \$85 billion in across-the-board federal spending cuts went into effect, President Barack Obama and congressional Republicans refused to concede any culpability for failing to stave off the sequester. Alaska's 41st Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race kicked off with a festive ceremonial start in Anchorage.

Five years ago: At a funeral before an invitation-only crowd of approximately 2,000 in Charlotte, North Carolina, the children of the Rev. Billy Graham remembered "America's Pastor" as a man devoted to spreading the Gospel, and one who lived his life at home as he preached it in stadiums. A nor'easter pounded the Atlantic coast with hurricane-force winds and sideways rain and snow, grounding flights and leaving more than 2 million homes and businesses without power from North Carolina to Maine.

One year ago: Russian forces laid siege to two strategic Ukrainian seaports and pressed their bombardment of the country's second-biggest city, while the huge armored column threatening Kyiv appeared to be stalled outside the capital. Moscow's isolation deepened as most of the world lines up against it at the United Nations. Autherine Lucy Foster, the first Black student to enroll at the University of Alabama, died at age 92.

Today's birthdays: Actor John Cullum is 93. Actor Barbara Luna is 84. Author John Irving is 81. Actor Cassie Yates is 72. Actor, comedian Laraine Newman (Saturday Night Live) is 71. Former Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., is 70. Former Interior Secretary Ken Salazar is 68. Singer Jay Osmond is 68. Pop musician John Cowsill (The Cowsills) is 67. Former tennis player Kevin Curren is 65. Country singer Larry Stewart (Restless Heart) is 64. Rock singer Jon Bon Jovi is 61. Blues singer-musician Alvin Youngblood Hart is 60. Actor Daniel Craig is 55. Actor Richard Ruccolo is 51. Rock singer Chris Martin (Coldplay) is 46. Actor Heather McComb is 46. Actor Rebel Wilson is 43. Actor Bryce Dallas Howard is 42. Former NFL quarterback Ben Roethlisberger is 41. Actor Robert Iler is 38. Actor Nathalie Emmanuel is 34. Country singer Luke Combs is 33. Singer-rapper-actor Becky G is 26.