

Groton Daily Independent

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**Brown County Courthouse and Offices will open at Noon today.
No School at Groton Area today.
No Aberdeen paper delivery today.**

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Groton Community Calendar

Wednesday, April 5

Senior Menu: Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes, carrots and peas, Mandarin oranges, pineapple, whole wheat bread.

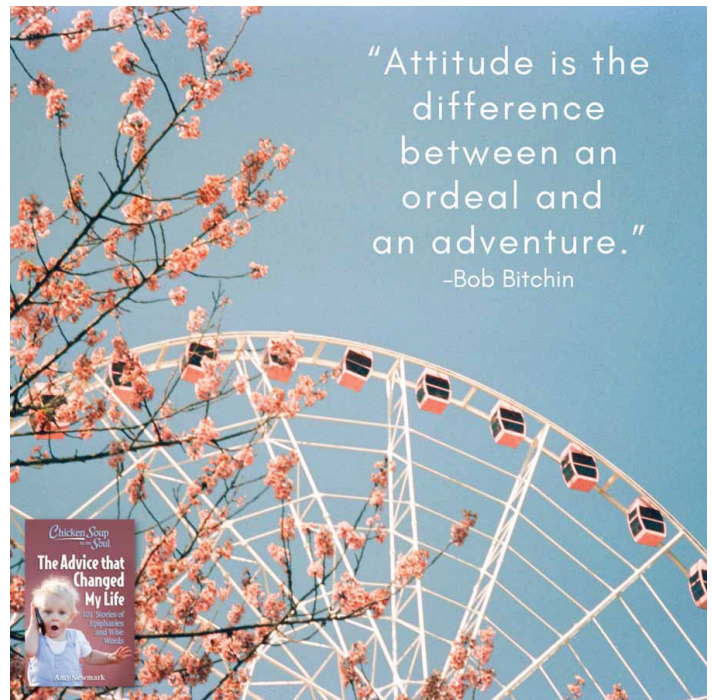
Postponed to Friday, April. 7: Living Stations at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church, 7 p.m.

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

Emmanuel Lutheran: Sarah Circle, 5 p.m.; Confirmation and League attend Stations of the Cross at SEAS, 6:30 p.m.

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

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



St. John's Lutheran: Bible Study, 2:45 p.m.
United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Book Study with Lindsey Tietz, 4 p.m.; Confirmation, 4 p.m.

Postponed to April 12th: Chamber Meeting, noon, at City Hall

Thursday, April 6

School Breakfast: Oatmeal.
School Lunch: Pasta and meat sauce.
Senior Menu: BBQ Chicken breast, rice pilaf, mixed vegetables, fruit, cookie.

Catholic: Holy Thursday Mass 7:00 pm with Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament until 10:00 pm

Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.; Worship with communion, 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Worship in fellowship hall with meal, 6:30 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Maundy Thursday Service with Communion, 7 p.m.

Postponed to April 11: FFA Career Development Event in Groton, 9 a.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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The Bulletin

by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

World in Brief

linger through the week in locations from the Mississippi Valley to the East Coast.

- Elon Musk has lost his place at the top of Forbes' annual World's Billionaire's List, falling to second place behind LVMH chairman Bernard Arnault, whose net worth increased by \$50 billion this year.
- The killings of four people near the beach of a Cancun resort were likely linked to drug gang rivalries, authorities said. Drug gang leader Hector Flores Aceves was involved, and the state is offering a \$50,000 reward for information leading to his arrest.
- A bill to ban transgender people from using public bathrooms or changing their name or gender on driver's licenses passed the Kansas State Legislature; however, it is expected to be vetoed by Democratic Governor Laura Kelly.
- Johnson & Johnson has agreed to pay \$8.9 billion to resolve tens of thousands of lawsuits alleging that its talc-based products cause cancer, marking a significant increase from its original \$2 billion offer.
- Israeli police clashed with worshippers in Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in what they say was a response to rioting, sparking protests across the occupied West Bank during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.
- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, the U.S. will send additional ammunition as well as air defense interceptors as part of its \$2.6 billion military aid for Ukraine ahead of an expected spring counteroffensive.

State Government Offices Remain Closed for Winter Storm

Offices Reopen in Certain Counties

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem ordered state government executive branch offices in certain counties remain closed on Wednesday, April 5, because of the winter storm with blizzard conditions in South Dakota. State offices will reopen in other counties.

State offices will be closed all day Wednesday in the following counties: Beadle, Bennett, Brown, Brule, Buffalo, Campbell, Corson, Day, Dewey, Edmonds, Faulk, Grant, Haakon, Hand, Hughes, Hyde, Jackson, Jerauld, Jones, Lyman, Marshall, McPherson, Mellette, Oglala Lakota, Potter, Roberts, Spink, Stanley, Sully, Todd, Walworth, and Ziebach.

While executive branch offices in these counties will be closed, state employees will be working remotely.

State offices will reopen Wednesday in the following counties: Butte, Clark, Custer, Fall River, Harding, Lawrence, Meade, Pennington, Perkins, and Tripp.

Winds in excess of 40 miles per hour will cause whiteout conditions across much of the state, and additional snowfall is anticipated. Citizens should be prepared to stay home if possible. Interstate closures have been announced in various parts of the state. If South Dakotans must travel, they should check the sd511.org or the SD511 mobile app.

• Former teacher Brandon Johnson was elected as Chicago's next mayor, defeating former Chicago Public Schools CEO Paul Vallas in one of the tightest races in the city's recent history. Johnson will succeed Lori Lightfoot.

• Wisconsin voters elected liberal Janet Protasiewicz to the state's Supreme Court, flipping control to a 4-3 liberal majority that could open the door to challenging matters like abortion access and district maps.

• AccuWeather predicts that the threat of severe weather storms, capable of generating even isolated tornadoes, will

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Big snow flakes were the order of the day, with it changing to snow pellets at times as the temperature hovered around the freezing mark. The snow had tapered off by Tuesday mid afternoon, but the wind continued to blow, making visibility in the country very bad and portions of US 12 were impassable.



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After our marathon five weeks straight of in-session activity, I am finally back in South Dakota for more than a few days. We even got a snowstorm as a welcome home! We will spend the next two weeks working back home and meeting with South Dakotans. I enjoy seeing you all out in Washington, but it's always better to be back in South

Dakota. We finished strong and stayed busy this past week, with meetings about topics ranging from cybersecurity to the economy to Missouri River management, and five different hearings across four committees. Here's my Weekly Round[s] Up:

South Dakota groups I visited with: Students from the Rapid City Youth Council; South Dakota Biotech Association; and Brett Hanson, Northwestern Lumber Association.

Meetings this past week: Michael Barr, the Federal Reserve's Vice Chair for Supervision; Col. Mark Himes, Commander of the Omaha District of the Army Corps of Engineers; Gen. Jacqueline Van Ovost, Commander of the U.S. Transportation Command; Eman El-Sheikh, Head of the Center for Cybersecurity at the University of West Florida; Jared Bernstein, Nominee for the Chair of the White House Council of Economic Advisors; and Maj. Gen. Paul Stanton, Commanding General of the Cyber Center of Excellence. I also attended meetings at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). We had our Senate Bible Study (Our verse of the week was 1 Kings 12:6, 8).

I spoke at the Coalition for a Prosperous America's annual conference about the need for Mandatory Country of Origin Labeling. Bill Bullard, CEO of R-CALF USA, moderated our discussion.

After getting back to South Dakota, I also gave the keynote address at a Palm Sunday brunch in Rapid City hosted by Catholic Social Services.

Met with South Dakotans from: Hereford, Rapid City, Sioux Falls and Sisseton.

Topics discussed: Our nation's cybersecurity practices, the importance of proper beef labeling for our South Dakota producers and spectrum auction authority.

Votes taken: 12 – one of these was on a joint resolution of disapproval of Biden's Waters of the U.S. (WOTUS) rule changes. This resolution would repeal the Navigable Waters Protection Rule, which expands federal regulatory authority over waters and wetlands that should be left to the control of states and landowners. I supported this resolution. It now goes to the president's desk for signature. We anticipate that he will veto this legislation, as it is repealing a rule put out by his administration. You can read more about WOTUS and the resolution [here](#).

Hearings: I attended five hearings this week: I had two hearings in the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and one hearing in the SASC Subcommittee on Cybersecurity, where I serve as ranking member.

I had one hearing in the Senate Banking Committee where we heard from officials with the FDIC, Federal Reserve and Treasury department about the recent Silicon Valley Bank collapse. You can watch a clip of that [here](#).

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Last but not least, I had one hearing in the Senate Armed Services Committee. We heard from Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley at a hearing in the Senate Armed Services Committee this past week, where I took the opportunity to ask them about DOD's use of the lower band of spectrum. They both agreed that requiring DOD to relinquish portions of the 3.1 – 3.45 GHz band of spectrum should be off limits until after the joint DOD-NTIA study has been completed later this year. This timeline is important as it will give members of Congress and administration officials an opportunity to make an informed decision that will protect our national security. You can watch a clip of that hearing [here](#).

Classified briefings: I had one classified briefing this week: our bi-weekly cyber education session.

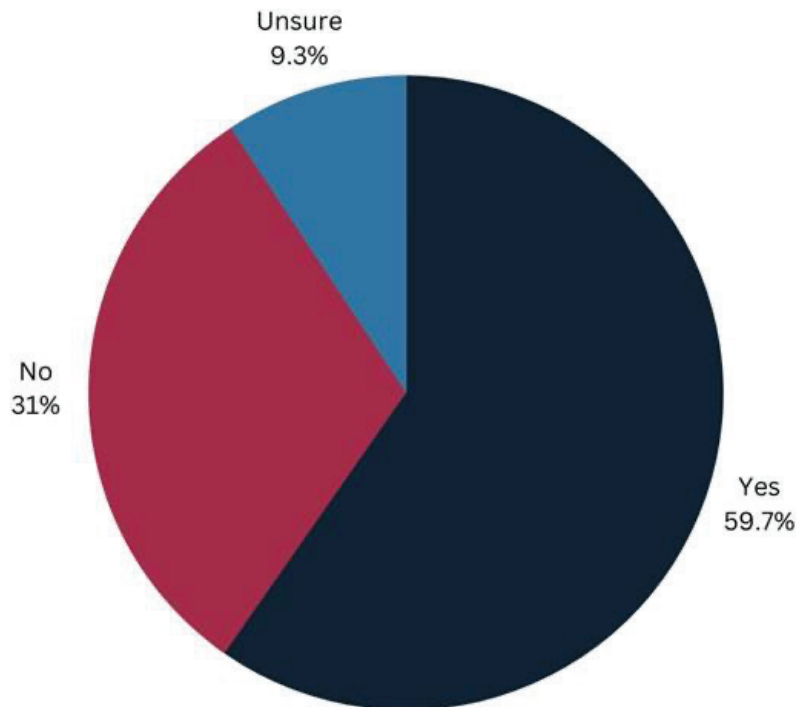
Upcoming events: This month, we are holding two Service Academy Days to give interested students and their families an opportunity to learn more about the U.S. service academies and the application process. Our Rapid City event is on Saturday, April 22nd and our Sioux Falls event is on Saturday, April 29th. You can read more about our Service Academy Days [here](#).

My staff in South Dakota visited: Deadwood, Faith, Hill City, Hot Springs, Keystone, Murdo, Onida, Parker, Sioux Falls, Sturgis, Vermillion and Webster.

Steps taken this week: 59,970 steps or 27.88 miles.

Answers of the week: In last week's Weekly Round[s] Up, I sent out a survey asking readers if they supported sending foreign aid and equipment to Ukraine as they defend against the Russian attack. We received thousands of responses. I agree with the majority of you that we must continue to support Ukraine. Providing support now will deter Russia and China from further, and even more costly, aggression in the future. The main objection I have heard from South Dakotans who oppose providing resources to Ukraine believe that our priority should be securing our southern border. I also believe we need to secure our southern border, and that this administration needs to do more to protect this country from mass illegal immigration, which includes alarming rates of both human and drug trafficking. Protecting our southern border and providing support to Ukraine, however, do not need to be mutually exclusive. Here are the results of last week's poll:

Do you believe the United States should continue to send foreign aid and equipment to Ukraine as they defend against the Russian attack?





Serenity Dennard disappearance: 2019 mystery still causing misery

Bart Pfankuch

South Dakota News Watch

One of the biggest mysteries in all of South Dakota — the unknown fate of 9-year-old Serenity Dennard — elicits one singular emotion more than any other for those who loved, cared for or searched for the precocious girl who disappeared from a Black Hills youth home more than four years ago.

Some people monitoring the missing person's case feel disappointed that Serenity was able to escape from the locked Children's Home Society facility on Feb. 3, 2019.

Others seethe with anger that employees of the complex near Rockerville waited 80 minutes to call 911 after she ran away in the middle of winter without a coat.

Many remain consumed with curiosity over how a young girl on foot with less than a five-minute head start could evade an initial search by employees and remain lost after a two-year, manpower-heavy search of the craggy, wooded Black Hills area.

And a few others, some with social media proclivities and only scant knowledge of the law enforcement investigation that took on national proportions, are pained by their insistence that Serenity was abducted by a stranger driving on a rural road, a neighbor of the children's home, an employee of the facility or even a member of Serenity's extended family.

But hovering above the entire tragedy is a painful sadness that remains top of mind and fresh of heart in all those who played a role in Serenity's life or the effort to find her and who want nothing more than to bring closure to a haunting mystery with no answer in sight.

"The lasting emotion for me is that I still hurt that she's not found," said Tony Harrison, a former captain in the Pennington County Sheriff's Office who oversaw portions of the physical search for Serenity and the missing person's investigation.

"I still hurt for the family. I hurt for the thousands of people who volunteered to search for her. I hurt for the investigators that absolutely poured their entire day every day for years into this case. And I hurt for myself a little bit as a dad because there's nothing worse than not being able to find a little girl."

Investigators followed 329 leads but stopped search

Authorities haven't ruled out anything but have settled on a working theory that the mischievous girl quickly made her way into the remote section of the Black Hills around the children's home, tried to hide and became lost before freezing to death, according to several law enforcement officials interviewed by News Watch in recent years.

While no individual has been conclusively cleared in the case, investigators said they do not believe a stranger or neighbor abducted her or that any member of her family or the children's home had a hand in her disappearance.

Their doubts about a possible abduction arise largely from the fact that a woman and girl were in a car



Serenity Dennard. Photo: Submitted

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The Black Hills Children's Home is located in a remote area of Pennington County about 20 miles southwest of Rapid City. This photo shows the path witnesses say Serenity ran down prior to entering the parking lot and venturing out to Rockerville Road, where she was last seen heading north. File Photo: Bart Pfankuch,

South Dakota News Watch

at the children's home and saw Serenity run away, then drove up and down Rockerville Road after her a few minutes later without seeing her or anyone else.

"I can't even begin to calculate the odds that someone who would be willing to violently abduct a child happened by on a rural western South Dakota road within the few minutes they had to do that and successfully abducted her," then-sheriff's detective Jamin Hartland said in 2020.

In January 2021, authorities officially halted the physical search for Serenity, her remains or any trace of her in the wooded area around the children's home. Yet the missing person's case is still open and active, according to Helene Duhamel, the sheriff's spokeswoman.

"The Pennington County Sheriff's Office remains committed to investigating any leads received regarding Serenity's disappearance," Duhamel wrote in an email. "To date, we have investigated 329 leads with the help of other law enforcement agencies throughout South Dakota and the nation. As this remains an open investigation, additional details are not being released at this point in time."

Nationwide search for Serenity Dennard included interviews with 538 people

The initial two-year investigation into Serenity's disappearance involved a dual track effort.

The physical search for Serenity included more than 1,500 personnel from 66 separate agencies who covered more than 6,000 miles of terrain during 220 search attempts involving people on foot, air searches and use of cadaver dogs. The first days of the search were hampered by rain that turned to snow and temperatures that dipped well below freezing.

A simultaneous investigative track sought to rule out foul play and search nationwide for Serenity. In all, 538 people were interviewed or contacted by authorities. The children's home, nearby residences and outbuildings were searched numerous times, and six search warrants were executed, officials said.

Harrison said the sheriff's office received numerous reports of sightings of Serenity during the investigation, none of which panned out. Oftentimes, well-intended people would contact the department, such as when someone in Las Vegas took photos of a young girl in a parking lot who resembled Serenity but which turned out not to be her.

Then-Sheriff Kevin Thom told News Watch in 2020 that the department took a "systematic, methodical approach" to the investigation that became the most exhaustive and expensive in county history.

He kept a large map of the area around the children's home on his desk, with a tangle of blue and red lines indicating each specific path taken by searchers and dogs.

Thom, who declined a request for an updated interview, said in 2020 that the case was stressful for his department. Duhamel said that when Thom was interviewed when he retired in December 2022 that he mentioned the Serenity case as one that will remain in his thoughts for years to come.

"It's emotionally taxing. It's always more emotional when it's a child, and people connect to that differently," Thom said in 2020. "We've had a lot of emotional ups and downs. .. There's some days you go out there and think this is the day we're going to find her and we don't. We've gone through that cycle many times, but we pick ourselves up and go back out."

Adoptive father: Serenity was smart girl who enjoyed being searched for

The inability to find Serenity or any evidence of her disappearance has compounded the anguish over

losing a child for those who loved her, including Darcie Gentry, 42, who adopted Serenity with ex-husband Chad Dennard in 2014 after fostering the girl for several months.

Gentry is Serenity's legal adoptive mother and retains secondary custody but did not live with her at the time of the disappearance.

For years after Serenity disappeared, Gentry kept a bedroom in her Rapid City-area home made up with stuffed animals and Serenity's favorite things in case she returned.

Serenity was a "super smart" and outgoing girl who brought joy and light to those around her, even as she battled emotional problems caused by uncertainty and abandonment during her childhood, Gentry said.

Chad Dennard, Serenity's adoptive father, said in 2020 that Serenity had spent time in a dozen foster homes and that her biological mother had served time in prison. He said Serenity was a highly intelligent girl who loved animals, babies, watching movies, singing along to music, riding her bike and spending time with her grandmother.

Chad Dennard acknowledged that Serenity had run away from home several times and enjoyed being searched for. He agrees with the theory that Serenity escaped from the home and somehow got lost to the point she couldn't find her way back or be easily found.

Adoptive mother has faint hope of Serenity's return

Gentry said she was disappointed that officials from the Children's Home Society let Serenity get away and also did not respond to her requests for a sit-down meeting to discuss the disappearance and search.

Gentry said she was impressed with the actions and emotional response of the law enforcement officers who worked on the case, though she remains puzzled that no evidence of Serenity has ever been found.

And yet, with all the boulders, ridges, lakes and elevation changes in the Black Hills, and the poor weather at the time of her disappearance, Gentry said it seems likely that Serenity found a hidden final resting spot.

"With all the search crews and everything, it was really miraculous to me that they never found a boot or something," she said. "But I know the Black Hills, and I know how vast that area is."

Gentry remains unable to shake the feeling, however slight, that Serenity is still alive and will make her way home someday.

"It's just like the perfect situation for her not to be found," Gentry said. "Part of me feels like if she was still out there (in society), somebody would have seen her long before now. But that being said, if she's up there in those woods, if she got dragged by an animal somewhere, we just really want to know."

Conspiracies and criticism prompted two suicide attempts

The pain and pressure from reading near-constant criticism and conspiracy theories on social media led Gentry to try to take her own life twice.

Some online commenters tried to implicate Gentry in Serenity's disappearance, even though she was at work as a nurse when the girl disappeared and was cleared by authorities.

Gentry agreed to have her suicide attempts reported by News Watch so people who make hurtful anonymous statements online will know that "words hurt, and words cut more than if somebody were to flat out punch me in the face."

She wants to encourage people to think of others who may be in great pain before posting hurtful or



KaSandra and Chad Dennard hold a photo of Serenity and her favorite stuffed unicorn while sitting on her bed in their Sturgis home in this file photo. Photo: Bart Pfankuch, South Dakota News

Watch

hateful comments.

"I definitely was needing help, and I eventually told myself, 'This is not me, and I need to be strong for Serenity in case she ever comes back,'" Gentry said.

Gentry said that when her husband was followed home from work and chased around their neighborhood in his car, the family had enough and decided to move to the Sioux Falls area, where they now live.

Chad Dennard told News Watch in 2020 that he and his family had also undergone extensive harassment after Serenity disappeared.

Strangers have driven by their home and taken pictures of his other children; his children were bullied at school; his and his wife's parenting skills were questioned on social media; and one commenter even suggested he had given Serenity a cellphone as part of an abduction plot, Chad Dennard said.

Ex-lawmaker impeded investigation with conspiracy theories

Harrison, one of the investigators, said the immense social media attention on the case and frequency of uniformed posts caused pain for those involved in the case and may have actually slowed the investigation.

At one point, former state Republican legislator Lynne DiSanto interviewed people and created videos and a website devoted to conspiracy theories surrounding the case. DiSanto, who now lives in Montana under the name Lyndi Meyer, hurt the investigation, Harrison said.

"Social media can be very helpful ... when people are doing it for the right reasons, which is to help the family out," he said. "But she (DiSanto) didn't do anything to make the case better. And she added confusion, so it was frustrating for us to go back and correct statements she made."

Children's Home Society faulted but no lawsuits filed

Gentry said she has considered but not proceeded with any legal action against the Children's Home Society.

News Watch checked state and federal court records but did not find any pending legal action in the case. A society spokeswoman confirmed no litigation or settlements have been filed.

"That would just cause a rift and drag this out for another 10 years," Gentry said.

The nonprofit children's society, which operates inpatient child treatment facilities in Sioux Falls and Rockerville, was the subject of strongly worded investigative reports by the South Dakota Department of Social Services and the federal Center for Medicaid Services in 2019.

Those reports concluded that several errors committed by staff of the Black Hills children's home played a role in Serenity's disappearance. Two employees were fired as a result.

Security improved at Rockerville and Sioux Falls locations

Janet Andersen, a spokeswoman for the society, said the organization that also provides adoption, foster care and child mental health services, made several changes to improve security at its facilities after Serenity's disappearance.

In a statement emailed to News Watch, the society wrote: "Children's Home Society is committed to providing a safe, caring and fulfilling home for the kids we serve. As we have stated previously, CHS has made adjustments to both physical security at our Rockerville Road and Sioux Falls campuses and enhanced our policies and protocols to address potential run away situations. Caring for children is a profoundly important life-mission for each member of our team."



Darcie Gentry, Serenity Dennard's legal adoptive mother, sits on the bed she keeps made for Serenity in case the missing girl ever comes home. Gentry said Serenity loved their cat, Stella, whose presence helps keeps Serenity close to Gentry's heart. File

Photo: Bart Pfankuch, South Dakota News Watch

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Andersen declined to provide specifics about the policy and procedural changes. But society director Michelle Lavalley told News Watch in 2020 that security improvements included adding cameras and new, more secure doors at the two treatment centers, where runaway prevention drills are done more frequently.

Lavalley said a new policy requires employees to immediately call 911 if they lose sight of a child, that a supervisor will always be onsite and that radios will be synchronized to avoid communication breakdowns. "You won't see this happen again today," Lavalley said in 2020.

'We just want some closure'

Harrison, now retired from the sheriff's office and working as a law enforcement training expert for a private company, said two cases from his 26-year career in front-line law enforcement still haunt him: The 2011 fatal shootings of two Rapid City police officers and Serenity's disappearance.

"This case will never just go away," he said. "But I take solace that at the end of the day, we did everything we could and literally left no stone unturned to the best of our ability to find her.

"I just hope and pray that someday, somebody comes across her and we can give some closure to the families."

In the years since Serenity's disappearance, Gentry and her family have fluctuated between the desire for Serenity's remains or some sign of her to be found and their wish for the long-shot dream that Serenity might someday return alive.

"We kind of go back and forth," Gentry said. "I still try and hold out a little bit of hope, but we just want to know that she's found. ... Anything."

Gentry said even receiving the worst possible news would provide some salve to an open emotional wound.

"Those of us who love her, her family and close friends, we just want some closure," she said. "If we could just have some closure, we could have a proper burial for her."

— This article was produced by South Dakota News Watch, a non-profit journalism organization located online at sdnewswatch.org.



ABOUT BART PFANKUCH

Bart Pfankuch, Rapid City, S.D., is the content director for South Dakota News Watch. A Wisconsin native,

he is a former editor of the Rapid City Journal and also worked at newspapers in Florida. Bart has spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and writing coach.

Public Notice Monthly

A service of the **Public Notice Resource Center**
and the **South Dakota Newspaper Association**



About those Disney notices ...

You may have heard that the Walt Disney Co. recently took steps to frustrate Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' attempt to strip the entertainment conglomerate of its power to appoint members of the board that provides oversight for Disney World.

According to a story published last week in the New York Times, the Disney-appointed Reedy Creek Improvement District (RCID) Board of Supervisors "quietly pushed through a development agreement" preventing the governor from replacing them with his allies, thereby maintaining Disney's governance of the world's largest theme park. The Board proposed the agreement at a public meeting on Jan. 25 and approved it at a follow-up meeting on Feb. 8.

The Times wasn't the only news organization that framed Disney's maneuver as a secretive procedure. That was the general tenor of the news coverage surrounding the story.

It's undeniable that Disney and its chosen representatives on the RCID Board hoped their maneuver would evade detection. Reedy Creek was established in 1967 by the Florida legislature with the Board serving as the governing body for the special district. Like all governing bodies, it prefers to control the flow of information to the public.

But Florida's public notice laws made it difficult for them to do that.

Title XI, Chapter 163, Section 3225 of the state's statutory code requires local governments — including special districts — to "conduct at least two public hearings" to create or change a development agreement. It also requires them to provide "(n)otice of (their) intent to consider a development agreement" by advertising each hearing "in a newspaper of general circulation and readership in the county where the local government is located." Reedy Creek straddles both Orange and Osceola Counties in east central Florida.

As the Times noted in its reporting, Disney provided such notice with ads published in the Orlando Sentinel. Both notices were also posted on the Sentinel's website and the Florida Press Association's statewide public notice site, a fact the Times appeared to be unaware of.

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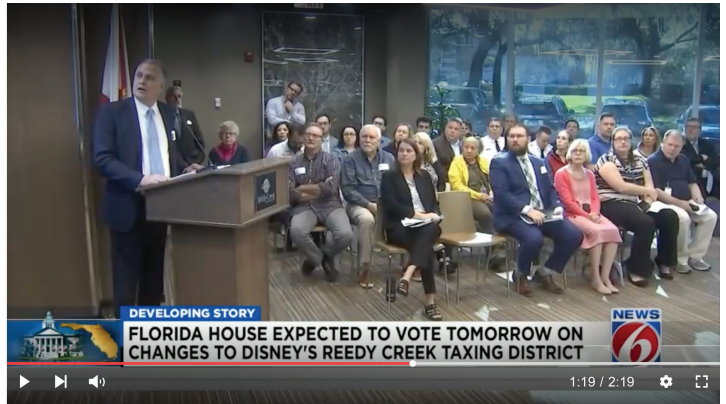
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That means the ads were published in a newspaper delivered to over 50,000 print and digital subscribers in the area, and they were posted on websites that collectively generate over 3 million monthly visits, according to the website traffic comparison site similarweb.com. Moreover, the Sentinel's website is the most-visited local news site in the Orlando area, according to Scarborough Research.

As far as we can tell the ads worked. Although the Board appears to hold its meetings in a relatively small room, news footage from the Feb. 8 hearing at which the development agreement was approved suggests it attracted a standing-room only crowd. (See screenshot below. WKMG News 6 later noted "several dozen spectators" attended the meeting.) There were also reporters and news cameras in the room.

So this was no secret deal cut in the middle of the night. It was approved during the course of two properly noticed public meetings that many people attended. But not a single news organization that originally covered the meetings reported on the significance of the agreement. In fact, the Sentinel appears to be the only local outlet that even mentioned that the Board discussed a development agreement.

Why didn't anyone in the packed room figure out what Disney was up to? Because they would have had to pick up a copy of the development agreement at RCID's office, and then read and appreciate the significance of the agreement — a legal document contained within an imposing 151-page paper festooned with maps, budgets, construction schedules and impenetrable legal descriptions of real property.



Florida's public notice law required Disney's RCID Board to make that document available to the public. But it didn't require them to stand on a table at the meeting and shout, "Hey DeSantis, we're going woke and there's nothing you can do to stop us!"

The only people in the state who might have uncovered Disney's plan were a relatively small universe of those with a professional interest in the future of Disney World and the expertise to recognize the impact of the development agreement. Most of the members of that cohort either work for or are allied with the DeSantis administration or Florida's GOP legislative caucus.

"Disney didn't do anything secret. They publicized (their plan), they advertised it," former Florida Republican legislator and law school teacher Juan-Carlos Planas told the Wall Street Journal. "If you're in Tallahassee, and you're replacing the board, how do you not know what that board is doing in their public meeting? This was negligence on the part of the governor's office and Republican legislators."

Nevertheless, Gov. DeSantis sent a letter yesterday asking Florida's Chief Inspector General to investigate the RCID Board's actions, claiming that among other "legal infirmities" it may have provided "inadequate notice."

It's worth noting that under the new law passed last year that made Florida the first state in the U.S. to allow local governments to publish notices on county government websites in lieu of publication in print newspapers and newspaper websites, Disney and the RCID Board will have even more power to conceal their plans from the public.

Think it's difficult to parse Disney's intentions now? Wait to see how much they can hide when they're allowed to move all their planning to the Orange County and Osceola County websites. According to similarweb, those sites collectively serve about 10 percent of the number of readers who regularly visit the Orlando Sentinel's website.

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and the **South Dakota Newspaper Association**

Trends emerge in public notice legislation



It used to be a relatively rare event when a bill remedying errors or omissions in public notice advertising was introduced. Or when legislation authorizing newspaper websites or e-editions to substitute for print was proposed. But those types of measures have proliferated in 2023, along with bills designed to fill jurisdictional holes in news deserts, which have been picking up steam for a few years now.

Georgia HB-254, which passed the legislature last week with the support of the Georgia Press Association, embodies all three trends. But its most significant element is the state's first fee increase in about 25 years. Public notice rates in Georgia will climb by at least 50 percent, from \$10 to \$15 for the first notice and from \$9 to \$14 for additional publications. The bill was approved 166-1 in the House and unanimously in the Senate; given those vote margins, Gov. Brian Kemp is very likely to sign the bill when it reaches his desk.

The bill also set the minimum circulation standard for official newspapers — Georgia calls them “legal organs” — at 100 copies per issue. And it established an alternative process for selecting a legal organ in counties that don't have a paper meeting that standard. Those counties would be able to select an otherwise non-qualifying newspaper to serve as their legal organ, including a free-distribution paper.

HB-254 also allows counties and municipalities to remedy text errors and tardy notices by electronically publishing a correct version of a notice within two business days of its original print publication date. The remedial notice must be posted on an official newspaper website or government website, and on the Georgia Press Association statewide public notice site. The web notice will be considered legally valid as long as local government authorities subsequently publish a correct version of the ad in their legal organ.

The **Idaho** legislature passed a bill last month that was similar in some respects to Georgia's HB-254 without the fee increase. Idaho H-90 allows notices to be published on the Newspaper Association of Idaho's (NAI) statewide website and mandates that the NAI-website notice satisfies all legal requirements as long as the original notice “appears in the next available edition of the printed newspaper or as otherwise required by law.” It also absolves government entities of failing to meet publication deadlines if their official newspaper is at fault. Gov. Brad Little signed H-90 into law on March 21.

The most surprising aspect of H-90 is that, apparently unbeknownst to everyone, the underlying statutory provision it amends has authorized “electronic publication” of notices on newspaper websites since the early days of the internet. That 1999 provision stipulates that electronic publication “shall have the same legal effect as a legal notice, advertisement or publication that is published in a newspaper.” Needless to say, the legislative intent of the provision is unclear.

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In addition to Georgia and Idaho, bills that would fix public notice mistakes were introduced in **Nebraska, Pennsylvania** and **Oklahoma**. The remedial process established by Nebraska LB-513 is limited to meeting notices and applies only to mid-sized municipalities in the state. It was approved unanimously in committee. The Oklahoma bill is already dead and the Pennsylvania measure hasn't budged since it was introduced early last month.

Many legislatures have passed laws requiring newspapers to publish notices on the web but those statutes still require print publication to be legally valid. The new "newspaper website" proposals proliferating in 2023 go further: They allow electronic publication to substitute for print. Some of these bills are expansive while others validate electronic publication only in limited circumstances.

Examples of the expansive version of newspaper-website legislation have been introduced in **Nevada, New York, Maryland** and **Texas**. All of them allow government bodies to run their notices on an official newspaper website in lieu of publication in a print edition of the paper. None have made it out of committee.

Legislation allowing newspaper websites to substitute for print editions in limited circumstances has been introduced in Kentucky, Ohio and Montana. The **Ohio** bill applies only to notices relating to public utility rate applications and hearings, while the one in **Montana** is limited to meeting notices. The Montana measure requires government bodies to post meeting notices and agendas on newspaper websites if they are "free of charge to the agency." It has passed the House with the support of the Montana Press Association.

Kentucky HB-534 also gives the force of law to newspaper-website notices in limited circumstances. It was signed into law last month by Gov. Andy Beshear after passing both the House and Senate by wide margins. Current law allows government units in the state's ten largest counties to publish notice on their own websites. But it also requires them to publish a brief version of the same notice in a newspaper to inform the public where the online notice can be found. HB-534 would allow government authorities in those counties to publish that brief notice on a newspaper website instead. (The bill additionally eliminates a circulation threshold in the public notice law, a provision that was added to the bill to convince the Kentucky Press Association to support it.)

In **North Dakota**, a bill pursued by the North Dakota Press Association authorizes government agencies to publish notices in the e-edition of an official newspaper in lieu of print. North Dakota HB-1197 was signed into law last month by Gov. Doug Burgum after passing the House unanimously and the Senate by a vote of 55-2. It's the first bill of its kind to become law. **Oregon** HB-3167 too would allow e-editions to substitute for print newspapers. It also adds content standards to the public notice law, and in areas where an official newspaper has ceased publication it relaxes continuous publication requirements and allows free-circulation papers to publish notice. It was reported out of committee in the House.

Bills in **Arkansas, Kansas, Rhode Island, Massachusetts** and **Texas** would also authorize notices to be published on newspaper websites, along with other types of non-governmental alternative platforms. (The bills in Massachusetts and Rhode Island would only apply to specific towns in those states — one town in Massachusetts and two in Rhode Island.)

The most unusual measure that would move newspaper notice to an alternative media platform was **Arkansas** HB-1616, which was defeated last week by one vote in a House committee. It would have allowed counties and municipalities to eliminate newspaper notice, aside from delinquent tax notices, beginning in 2028. Notice posted on "an independent third party website" selected by a legislative committee would supplant it. HB-1616 replaced an earlier, more conventional bill that would have moved most newspaper notice to government websites.

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Of course, Arkansas isn't the only state to see a government website bill in 2023. Similar bills have been introduced in at least 16 states this year. None have passed in their original form but more are getting hearings this year than in previous sessions. In **Arizona**, SB-1006 in its original form would have given cities and towns the choice to publish notices on their websites instead of a newspaper. After an amendment limited its application to municipalities in the state's largest county, it passed the Senate early last month by a vote of 16-13 and has been reported favorably out of two committees in the House.

Perhaps the state facing the most daunting challenge is **Connecticut**, where a bill that would allow municipalities to publish notices on their website in lieu of a local newspaper was reported out of a House committee last month by a 14-7 margin. More ominously, Gov. Ned Lamont's annual budget bill includes an identical provision and also provides state agencies with the option to post notices on their own websites.

Several other recent factors will make it more difficult to ensure newspaper notice prevails in the Constitution State. First, the Connecticut court system has already moved its notices from newspapers to the Connecticut Judicial Branch website. Second, municipalities were allowed to publish notices on their own websites under an emergency order issued by the Governor during the pandemic. Finally, a recent Connecticut Appellate Court decision in a zoning case, 9 Pettipaugh, LLC v. Planning & Zoning Commission of the Borough of Fenwick, ruled the tiny borough's notice at the center of the lawsuit was invalid because it failed to demonstrate the paper had "substantial circulation" within the jurisdiction as the state's public notice statute requires.

Fenwick is a tiny town (pop: ~52) where most residents stay only part of the year. The newspaper that published its notice had no subscribers in the borough and Fenwick failed to show that any of its residents saw the notice on the newspaper's website, so the decision will have limited application. Still, a court ruling raising doubt about the legal efficacy of any newspaper notice is less than ideal. Small-town officials are asking questions about the dilemma and those in the state who want to move notice to government websites are already making rhetorical use of it.

"(P)ractical difficulties encountered by the defendant in meeting its obligation to publish notice in a newspaper having substantial circulation in Fenwick ... do not absolve it from complying with the language of the statute," the court ruled. "Although compliance with the 'substantial circulation' requirement by commissions in small boroughs may be difficult, we cannot conclude that it necessarily leads to an absurd result or is unworkable."

The court ultimately suggested it was up to the Connecticut legislature to remedy the issues raised in the case.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Rapid City seeks climate funding after state turns it down; Sioux Falls undecided

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - APRIL 4, 2023 10:37 AM

After the state declined to seek federal grant money to reduce greenhouse gases and other air pollution, Rapid City has decided to apply and Sioux Falls is considering it.

South Dakota is one of four states that have not applied to participate in the Climate Pollution Reduction Grant program. It



A fall 2022 view of Rapid City from the hills above the South Dakota Mines campus. (Seth Tupper/South Dakota Searchlight)

would have provided state government with \$3 million for planning and access to a \$4.6 billion fund for implementation. The other states that did not apply by the March 31 deadline are Florida, Iowa and Kentucky.

The program also includes \$1 million in planning grants for each of the nation's largest cities — including Rapid City and Sioux Falls — and access to the \$4.6 billion grant pool for implementation if municipalities apply by April 28.

The Rapid City Council voted Monday evening to authorize its staff to apply. Sioux Falls has not yet taken action.

"We intend to gather information over the coming weeks and make a final decision on participation by the program's deadline," said Holly Meier, Sioux Falls sustainability coordinator.

A spokesman for Governor Kristi Noem said the state declined to apply because of concerns that more federal spending will make inflation worse, and because of possible "strings attached" to the money.

"We focus on solving long-term problems with one-time investments rather than creating new government programs," said Ian Fury. "We either decline or return money that we don't need, as we did when President Trump offered extended unemployment benefits in August 2020, and as we did when we returned more than \$80 million in federal renter's assistance money in 2022."

The Climate Pollution Reduction funding was allocated by last year's Inflation Reduction Act and is designated for state and municipal government projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and help mitigate climate change. Greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane trap heat in the atmosphere.

The funding would have helped South Dakota develop its own approach to climate change, according to Kara Hoving, a climate equity policy researcher and spokesperson for SoDak 350, an affiliate of the international environmental organization 350.org.

Hoving said everything from conservation incentives for farmers to energy efficiency aid for families was on the table.

"There weren't any mandates about the specific actions you had to include in your plan," she said. "It could have included agriculture, cover crops, all these things the people in this state support."

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.

COMMENTARY

Social studies standards would benefit from compromise and more work

SAMANTHA WALDER

A final vote on the proposed social studies standards by the South Dakota Board of Education Standards will be on the agenda for the April 17 meeting in Pierre. This is the last of four statutorily required meetings during the public comment process. As the only principal who served on the 2022 Revision Commission, I am not satisfied with the final proposal. We can do better for our South Dakota students and teachers.

Social studies education matters to all of us. The next generation of South Dakotans needs to know and understand the rights and responsibilities that come with being an American citizen.

In our South Dakota schools, the teachers and principals I work with each day are teaching a true and honest history of our Founding Fathers, both their sins and their successes. As principals, we do our job as instructional leaders to hold teachers accountable to the state standards and to apply brain science as well as short-cycle improvement science to immediately improve practices to promote student growth and understanding of challenging content in all subjects.

Educators, parents and local school boards alike provided feedback in opposition to the proposed K-12 Social Studies Content Standards. The opposition concerns include but are not limited to the lack of the inclusion of educators or transparency in the review process, the lack of developmental appropriateness of the content, the lack of South Dakota and Native American history at appropriate grade levels, and the overreach of state government into local school board decisions as the standards are oftentimes detailed like a curriculum.

Specifically, the class time needed to meet the secondary standards would not allow students to take all career and technical education coursework, such as the agricultural coursework required for FFA participation, and advanced welding or construction technology courses needed for critical workforce development in South Dakota today.

So far, 940 concerned citizens have submitted opposition (87% of the comments) and at least 27 local, public school boards have passed resolutions in opposition.

In the spirit of the American promise of compromise, the summer of 2022 commission members could reconvene alongside the summer of 2021 committee of teachers. We could find consensus taking into consideration the overwhelming number of public comments provided as well as testimony delivered at all four public hearings.

Dr. Samantha Walder is a mother, wife, educator and lifelong South Dakotan. Walder is in her 15th year in education, eighth as an elementary principal, and served as the only principal on the Social Studies Standards Revision Commission. Walder graduated from Castlewood High School and holds undergraduate degrees in history and political science with a master's degree in curriculum and instruction from SDSU. Walder earned her educational specialist in the principalship and doctorate in the superintendency from USD. Walder was named the 2023 South Dakota Elementary National Distinguished Principal.

Trump hit with 34 felony counts of falsifying New York state business records

BY: JACOB FISCHLER, ASHLEY MURRAY AND JENNIFER SHUTT - APRIL 4, 2023 5:06 PM

Former President Donald Trump pleaded not guilty Tuesday to 34 New York state felony offenses related to what prosecutors say were hush money payments to an adult film star.

In a brief but historic appearance in a Manhattan trial court, Trump, the first former president to face criminal prosecution, learned he was charged with falsifying business records 34 times from February to December 2017.

Trump's former attorney, Michael Cohen, paid Stormy Daniels, a porn actor who said she had a sexual relationship with Trump, \$130,000 in exchange for her silence about the supposed relationship during the 2016 presidential race, according to a 16-page indictment and attached statement of facts that were unsealed Tuesday.

Trump then repaid Cohen in 34 payments over the course of 2017, but described them in Trump Organization records as payments for legal services, meant to cover up the payment to Daniels, prosecutors said.

Trump, a Republican candidate for president in 2024, denies having an affair with Daniels.

"These are crimes in New York no matter who you are," Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg said following the arraignment.

"Everyone stands equal before the law," he added. "No amount of money and no amount of power changes that enduring American principle."

Responding to a question asking why Bragg brought charges after his predecessor and federal prosecutors declined to do so, Bragg said his office had new evidence that wasn't available to the prior district attorney and that New York state, as the "business capital of the world," had a particular interest in prosecuting business fraud cases.

Trump has accused Bragg of being motivated by politics.

Just before arriving at the arraignment, Trump posted to his social media site, Truth Social.

"Heading to Lower Manhattan, the Courthouse" he wrote. "Seems so SURREAL — WOW, they are going to ARREST ME. Can't believe this is happening in America. MAGA!"

Trump left the courthouse without commenting but is scheduled to speak later Tuesday at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida.

Payments covered up campaign crime, DA says

Cohen's payments to Daniels in 2016 exceeded campaign contribution limits — and because they were meant to boost Trump's White House bid, should be considered campaign funds, Bragg said. The records of Trump's payments to Cohen therefore were meant to conceal a crime, making the false business records criminal.

"He could not simply say that the payments were a reimbursement for Mr. Cohen's payments to Stormy Daniels," Bragg said. "To do so, to make that true statement, would have been to admit a crime. So instead, Mr. Trump's said he paid Mr. Cohen for fictitious legal services in 2017 to cover up actual crime committed the prior year."

The indictment said the false business record was done "with intent to defraud and intent to commit another crime and aid and conceal the commission thereof."

The payment to Daniels was part of a pattern Trump's 2016 campaign employed to suppress stories



Former U.S. President Donald Trump arrives for his arraignment at Manhattan Criminal Court on April 4, 2023, in New York City. (Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images)

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about alleged Trump affairs, according to prosecutors' statement of facts.

A longtime confidante of Trump, Cohen pleaded guilty in 2018 to campaign finance and fraud charges. He also pleaded guilty to lying to Congress.

He has said his crimes were in service of Trump's 2016 campaign and has cooperated with authorities.

House Republicans attack DA

Bragg and U.S. House Republicans have publicly quarreled over the case, with the Republican chairs of the House Judiciary, Oversight & Accountability and Administration committees accusing Bragg of conducting a politically motivated prosecution.

Judiciary Chair Jim Jordan of Ohio and Oversight & Accountability Chair James Comer of Kentucky said in a Tuesday statement that Judge Juan Merchan should not impose an order on Trump not to speak about the case.

"To put any restrictions on the ability of President Trump to discuss his mistreatment at the hands of this politically motivated prosecutor would only further demonstrate the weaponization of the New York justice system," they said.

"To even contemplate stifling the speech of the former commander in chief and current candidate for President is at odds with everything America stands for."

Merchan did not issue a gag order Tuesday.

Jordan, Comer and House Administration Chair Bryan Steil of Wisconsin wrote to Bragg last month calling his prosecution politically motivated and demanding documents.

Greene headlines muted protest

U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia traveled to New York City for a Tuesday morning rally in support of Trump across the street from the Manhattan Courthouse.

According to videos and photos posted to Twitter, the Georgia Republican spoke for roughly 10 minutes through a bullhorn as supporters and journalists surrounded her, but counter-protesters largely muffled her comments with drums and whistles.

New York Republican Rep. George Santos, who is under several legal and ethical investigations, made a brief appearance in the crowd prior to Greene's comments, according to news media reports.

Greenewrote on Twitter hours before the rally that protesters were "coming to commit assault that can cause audible damage to everyone's ears including NYPD."

She wrote that protesters' behavior should be considered "disorderly conduct" and that the "@NYCMayor better direct NYPD to lock these people up."

New York City Mayor Eric Adams said in a Monday press conference that Greene should be on her "best behavior" during her visit.

In a "60 Minutes" interview that aired over the weekend, Greene defended her support for Trump and said other Republicans — including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and former House Speaker Paul Ryan of Wisconsin — "failed."

Greene, a well-known 2020 election denier, sits on the House Committee on Oversight & Accountability and the Committee on Homeland Security.

Greene's rally was presented in conjunction with the New York Young Republicans Club, which released a statement on March 30 that read in part: "President Trump embodies the American people — our psyche from id to super-ego — as does no other figure; his soul is totally bonded with our core values and emotions, and he is our total and indisputable champion. This tremendous connection threatens the established order."

Apart from Greene's appearance in New York, major pro-Trump protests appeared limited across the country Tuesday. The U.S. Capitol remained calm.

Democrats call for fair trial

Reaction from other political figures split along party lines, with several Republicans alleging political bias in the criminal process and Democrats saying the case should play out.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre declined to comment on Trump's indictment.

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"I'm just not going to speak to this case. I'm not going to go beyond what the president shared with all of you," she said during the daily press briefing.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York released a statement following Trump's surrender. "I believe that Mr. Trump will have a fair trial that follows the facts and the law," Schumer said in the statement. "There's no place in our justice system for any outside influence or intimidation in the legal process. As the trial proceeds, protest is an American right but all protests must be peaceful."

House Judiciary ranking member Jerrold Nadler of New York said the indictment appeared well-reasoned and urged Republicans not to interfere with the judicial process.

"This matter will play out in the New York criminal justice system, no matter how MAGA Republicans try to obstruct the process," he said. "In a desperate attempt to protect Mr. Trump, the most extreme House Republicans are already trying to bully the law enforcement officers involved. I do not know how this case will be decided, but I do know that DA Bragg will not be deterred or intimidated by the political stunts Jim Jordan and (U.S. House Speaker) Kevin McCarthy throw at him."

House GOP leaders defend Trump

Republicans in Congress posted messages on Twitter criticizing the indictment.

House Majority Whip Tom Emmer, a Minnesota Republican, tweeted Tuesday was "a historic low for our nation."

"The Democrat Party has proven there is nothing they won't do to hold onto power — even if it means weaponizing our justice system to target a political opponent," Emmer wrote.

Fourth-ranking House Republican Elise Stefanik of New York posted to Twitter: "I stand with President Trump."

"Another dark day in our nation's history. The Far Left will stop at nothing to punish Joe Biden's number one political opponent Donald Trump," Stefanik tweeted about a half hour later.

House Deputy Whip Guy Reschenthaler of Pennsylvania blamed the indictment on the "extreme left."

"The Left's weaponization of our criminal justice system for their own benefit is truly un-American," he wrote on Twitter.

Tennessee Republican Sen. Marsha Blackburn said the "indictment is a gross abuse of power by a Democrat DA to get an outcome that the left has wanted for years."

Utah Republican Sen. Mitt Romney began his statement by saying that he believes Trump's "character and conduct make him unfit for office."

"Even so, I believe the New York prosecutor has stretched to reach felony criminal charges in order to fit a political agenda," he continued.

Other Republican members of Congress, however, were not focused solely on Trump.

Oklahoma Sen. Markwayne Mullin tweeted photos of a visit to Guymon, saying it was the first stop on his statewide tour.

"We discussed the ongoing drought, inflation, and the existential threat of communist China. Thanks to Mayor Kim Peterson for hosting us!" Mullin wrote.

Georgia Rep. Rich McCormick tweeted a photo of himself shaking hands with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as part of a congressional delegation to the country.

"I was able to ask questions AND witness firsthand the accountability of equipment and impact that our assistance is having," McCormick wrote. "I will continue to fight to hold the Biden Administration accountable for doing the right things and for doing things right."

Nebraska Sen. Pete Ricketts shared photos of a meeting with the Columbus Rotary in the afternoon after congratulating Finland for joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization earlier in the day.

"We heard firsthand about Finland's highly capable military during my recent official visit. They'll be a critical asset to the trans-Atlantic Alliance in the face of Russian aggression," Ricketts wrote.

Other charges possibly looming

As he readies for another White House run, Trump faces other criminal investigations.

The U.S. Justice Department is investigating his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol after

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the congressional committee tasked with probing the causes of the insurrection made a criminal referral to the department.

Federal authorities are also investigating Trump's handling of classified documents after his presidency. FBI agents retrieved boxes of classified material Trump took from the White House to his South Florida residence when he left office.

And a Georgia grand jury is looking into potential election interference from Trump during his reelection campaign in 2020. Trump was taped shortly after Election Day 2020 asking the Georgia secretary of state to "find" enough votes to overturn the state's election results in his favor.

South Dakota politicians react

Sen. Mike Rounds, R-South Dakota, issued this written statement after Trump's court appearance:

"Regardless of your political position or perspective, this prosecution should concern everyone. The integrity of our justice system has been called into question because of a politically-motivated district attorney who is bringing charges that the Department of Justice declined to prosecute. The indictment includes 34 counts of falsifying business records for allegations of activity that occurred more than six years ago. Despite the fact these charges are normally misdemeanor charges, the district attorney, in his indictment, is attempting to bootstrap multiple underlying crimes in order to elevate these charges to a felony level. While everyone, including the former president, is subject to the laws of this country, no one should be singled out for political purposes. Unfortunately, this soap opera of a prosecution appears to be just that."

Republican Gov. Kristi Noem said this in a tweet:

"A majority of Americans believe that this prosecution of President Trump is political. So do I. Murders and other major crimes have skyrocketed in NYC since Alvin Bragg took office. He should focus on his job: keeping people safe. He needs to get his priorities straight."

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.

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

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

Mortgage rates are stabilizing but that may not be enough to help house hunters

BY: CASEY QUINLAN - APRIL 4, 2023 4:09 PM

Home prices are cooling off and mortgage rates fell last week, but the fallout from recent bank closures could continue to make it hard for some Americans to buy homes, economists say.

Mortgage rates fell to 6.32% for a 30-year fixed rate mortgage, Freddie Mac data released on Thursday shows. Last fall, the 30-year fixed rate mortgage climbed to 7.08% — the first time in 20 years that rates rose above 7%.

Lower mortgage rates appear to have given home sales a boost in January and February, due to “pent-up buyer demand,” said Selma Hepp, chief economist at CoreLogic, which provides property, financial, and business intelligence.

Last week, the CoreLogic S&P Case-Shiller Index showed a 3.8% year-over-year rise in home prices in January falling from a 5.6% bump in December. There have been nine straight months of slowing annual home price growth and this is the lowest annual increase since before the winter of 2019, according to Hepp’s analysis.

But regional banks, which saw depositors leave for bigger banks after the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank last month, are now tightening credit. The result, according to a report from Fannie Mae, could be fewer residential construction loans and jumbo mortgages as many originate from small and mid-sized banks. Less supply will keep prices high and all of that will likely affect spring home-buying, Hepp said.

“If we had more inventory, we wouldn’t have the rate of appreciation that we had during the pandemic and, and the rate wouldn’t impact people to the extent that it does because home prices wouldn’t be as high,” she said.

Hepp is also watching the Federal Reserve’s action on interest rates. Many economists believe the Fed could stop raising rates after one more cycle. That would be good for mortgage rates but not every buyer will benefit, Hepp said.

“There’s two sides of this coin,” she said. “One is that we may see a more favorable mortgage rate during the spring home-buying season and into summer, but on the flip side, there may be some concern around the lack of mortgage lending,” Hepp said. “The mortgage lending that does end up occurring would be to very prime borrowers that have very strong credit, large down payments, and things like that.”

Lawrence Yun, chief economist at the National Association of Realtors, said he is concerned about how commercial lending would be affected by the banking crisis. Commercial real estate has already been affected by the pandemic and continuing remote work.

“Where someone wants to buy an office space or someone has a restaurant and they need to refinance their building, all this commercial real estate will come under stress just because it will be much more difficult to obtain those loans and community banks are trying to conserve as much cash as possible, not lend that out,” he said.

But that doesn’t mean that commercial real estate couldn’t end up affecting home-buying all the same, Yun added.

“Weakness in commercial real estate could hinder job growth. Job creation indirectly impacts home-buying in a sense that there is a [lesser] job creation, and that means it’s creating fewer potential home-buyers down the line,” he said.

Hepp said that the Fed may not be particularly concerned with the housing market right now, since it is rebalancing, with the possibility of “maybe over-shooting on a downside.” But credit availability will likely remain a concern, and there are things the Fed could do to address it.

“To whatever extent that there is liquidity in the market or there may not end up being liquidity in the market, I think that’s the point at which the Federal Reserve may end up utilizing some of the tools that they did at the onset of the pandemic,” she said. “In particular, I’m thinking about mortgage-backed securities.”

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Federal Reserve made large purchases of mortgage-backed se-

curities and took several other steps to keep the flow of credit going. Any policies that would improve the inventory and affordability of housing would also be helpful to the housing market right now, she said.

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

Storm delays hearing on paid family leave for state employees

BY: JOHN HULT - APRIL 4, 2023 4:00 PM

A little more than a week will pass before a state board considers extending paid family leave to 12 weeks for state employees.

The Civil Service Commission was set to hear about the proposal on Tuesday afternoon, but the meeting was postponed until April 13 because of winter weather-related state government office closures, according to staff attorney Mallori Barnett.

The meeting would have been a first step toward partial fulfillment of one of Gov. Kristi Noem's top legislative priorities going into the 2023 legislative session. Lawmakers rejected bills, backed by the governor's office, that would have offered 12 weeks of full salary to employees with new babies and sick family members and offered financial incentives for private employers to expand paid family leave benefits.

During debate on the bills, some legislators mentioned that parts of the bills' aims – namely moving from eight weeks of paid family leave pay at 60% of an employee's salary to 12 weeks at 100% pay – could be accomplished without legislation.

The proposal up for a hearing with the commission on April 13 would not offer leave to those with ill family members or those whose spouses depart for military deployments. It also wouldn't create an insurance pool for the public and private sectors to help cover the cost, as Noem's legislative bills would have.

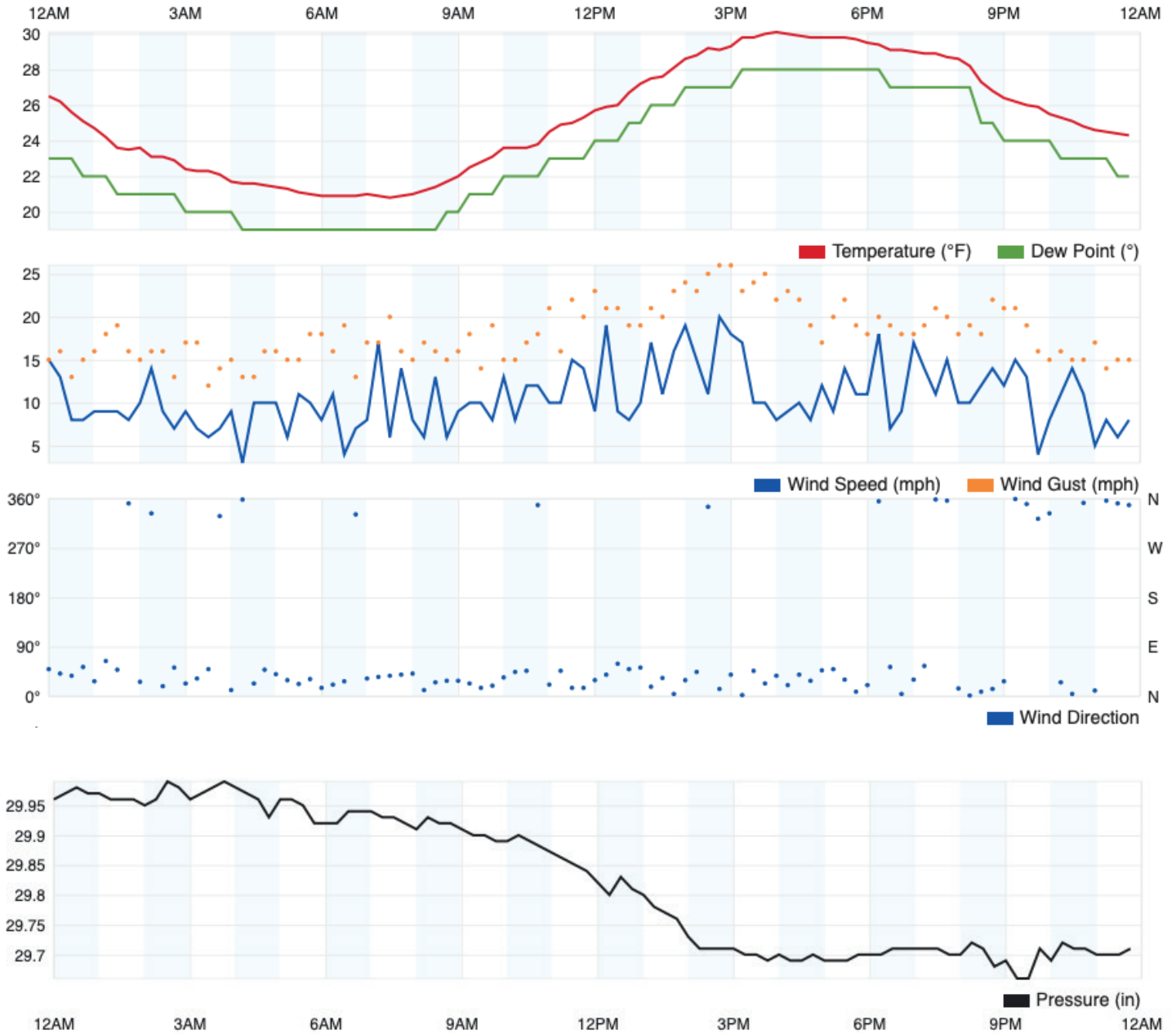
The commission meeting this month will take place virtually and begin at 11 a.m. on April 13.

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.

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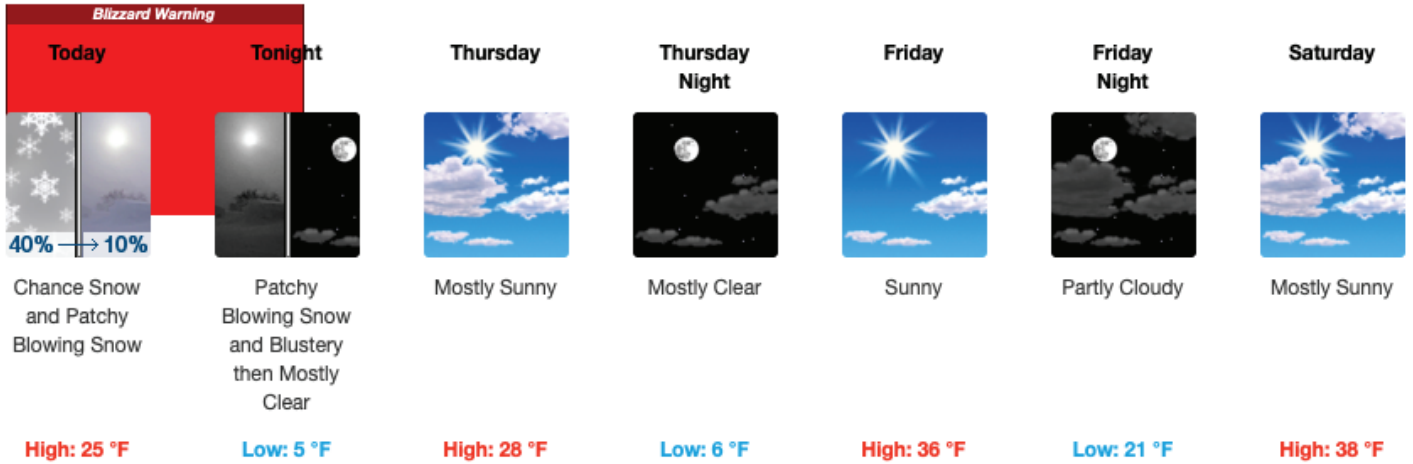
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

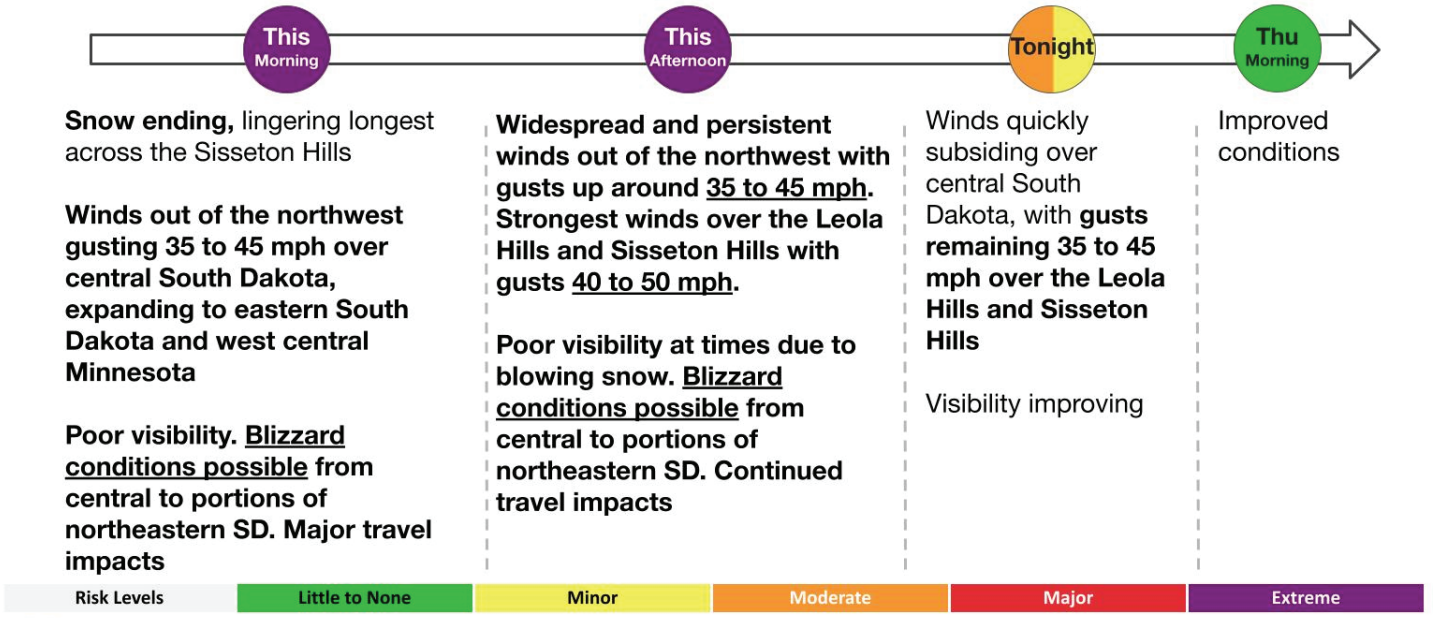


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Winter Storm Timeline April 5, 2023 4:49 AM



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

**National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD**

Falling snow continues to diminish in intensity and will end across most locations by 8 am, and across the Sisseton Hills and portions of west central Minnesota at noon. Gusty winds will still be a concern, gusting 35 to 45 mph over central South Dakota early this morning, and expanding across the rest of northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota shortly after daybreak. The strongest winds with gusts of 40 to near 50 mph over the Leola Hills this morning through the afternoon, and Sisseton Hills this afternoon.

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Blizzard Warning

URGENT - WINTER WEATHER MESSAGE

National Weather Service Aberdeen SD

307 AM CDT Wed Apr 5 2023

Campbell-McPherson-Brown-Walworth-Edmunds-Potter-Faulk-Spink-Hyde-
Including the cities of Herreid, Eureka, Aberdeen, Mobridge, Ipswich, Gettysburg, Faulkton, Redfield,
and Highmore

...BLIZZARD WARNING NOW IN EFFECT UNTIL 1 AM CDT THURSDAY...

* WHAT...Blizzard conditions. Additional snow accumulations of 2 to 3 inches. Winds gusting as high as 45 mph.

* WHERE...Campbell, McPherson, Brown, Walworth, Edmunds, Potter, Faulk, Spink and Hyde Counties.

* WHEN...Until 1 AM CDT Thursday.

* IMPACTS...Plan on slippery road conditions. Areas of blowing snow could significantly reduce visibility. The hazardous conditions could impact the morning or evening commute.

PRECAUTIONARY/PREPAREDNESS ACTIONS...

Travel should be restricted to emergencies only. If you must travel, have a winter survival kit with you. If you get stranded, stay with your vehicle.

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 30 °F at 4:02 PM

Low Temp: 21 °F at 7:25 AM

Wind: 27 mph at 2:02 PM

Precip: : 0.00 About 5-6" Moisture Content: 0.40

Day length: 13 hours, 03 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 86 in 1991

Record Low: 6 in 2007

Average High: 53

Average Low: 28

Average Precip in April.: 0.21

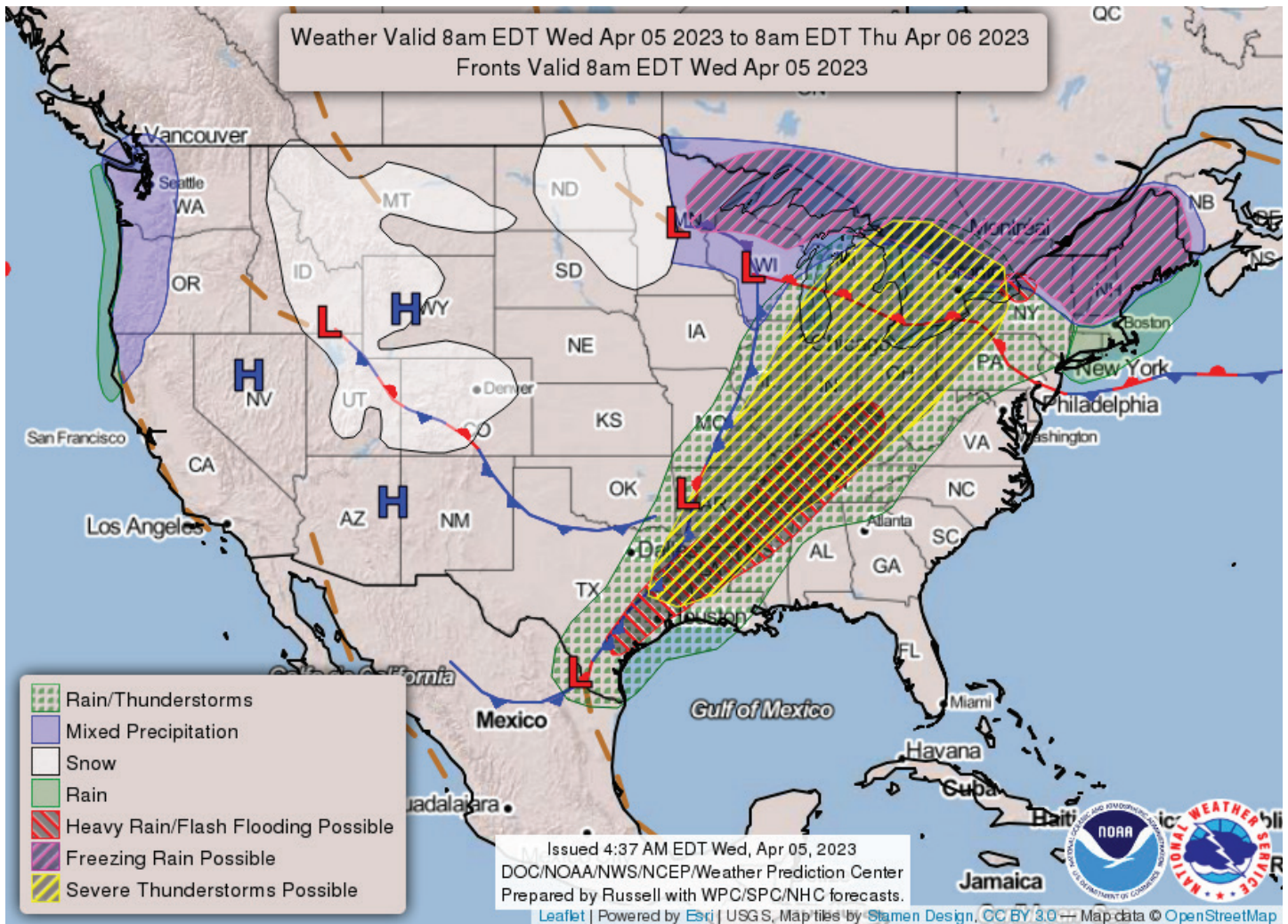
Precip to date in April.: 0.40

Average Precip to date: 2.27

Precip Year to Date: 4.33

Sunset Tonight: 8:06:43 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:01:34 AM



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Today in Weather History

April 5, 2000: High winds of 35 to 50 mph gusting to around 70 mph blew across central and north central South Dakota from the late morning to the late afternoon hours. As a result, several trees and many tree branches were downed, many structures, roofs, billboards, and road signs were damaged, a few mobile homes were overturned, and some power outages occurred. Not only did the high winds make driving challenging, but at some locations, they stirred up dirt causing visibilities to drop to near zero at times. Some detours and traffic collisions resulted due to the low visibility in blowing dirt. Airborne objects broke some windows across the area. One house had all of the windows on the front porch blown out. Also, a few semi tractor-trailers were tipped over by the high winds. Wind gusts included 60 mph at Pierre, 63 mph at Kennebec, 64 mph at Mobridge, 65 mph at Pollock, and 71 mph at McLaughlin. The high winds and extremely dry conditions combined with downed and arcing electrical lines, out of control burns, and smoldering embers from previous fires resulted in several grassfires across central and north central South Dakota. Several thousand acres of grassland, hundreds of hay bales and haystacks, along with some trees and fences were burned. Also, the smoke from some of these fires created low visibilities and difficult driving conditions on some roads.

1815: The Tambora Volcano in Java began erupting on this day. A few days later on the 10, Tambora produced the largest eruption known on the planet in the last 10,000 years. Ash from the volcano would circle the globe, blocking sunlight and leading to the unusually cold summer in 1816. On 6/6/1816, snow would fall as far south of Connecticut with some places in New England picking up 10 inches. On July 4th, 1816, the temperature at Savannah GA plunged to 46 degrees. Eastern North America and Europe had freezing nighttime temperatures in August.

1936: Approximately 454 people were killed in the second-deadliest tornado outbreak ever in U.S. More than 12 twisters struck Arkansas to South Carolina. An estimated F5 tornado cut a path 400 yards wide through the residential section of Tupelo, Mississippi. At least 216 people were killed, and 700 were injured. The tornado had a 15-mile long path and did \$3 million in damage. One of the survivors in Tupelo was a baby of an economically strapped family who had an infant they'd recently named Elvis Aaron Presley. Gainesville, Georgia had at least 203 fatalities and 934 injuries from an estimated F4 tornado that occurred early the following morning.

1945 - The temperature at Eagles Nest, NM, plunged to 45 degrees below zero to establish an April record for the United States. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1955 - The Northern Rockies and the Northern High Plains were in the midst of a four day storm which produced 52 inches of snow at Lead, located in the Black Hills of western South Dakota. (David Ludlum)

1972 - A tornado, 500 yards wide at times, touched down at a marina on the Oregon side of the Columbia River, and then tore through Vancouver WA killing six persons, injuring 300 others, and causing more than five million dollars damage. It was the deadliest tornado of the year, and the worst of record for Washington. (The Weather Channel)

1982 - An unprecedented April blizzard began in the northeastern U.S. One to two feet of snow fell across Massachusetts and Connecticut, and up to 26 inches was reported in Maine. New York City received a foot of snow. Winds reached 70 to 80 mph during the storm, and the storm also produced numerous thunderstorms, which contributed to the heavy snow. (Storm Data)

1987 - A storm produced unprecedented April snows in the central Appalachians. Mount Mitchell NC received 35 inches of snow, and up to 60 inches (six feet) of snow was reported in the mountains along the border of North Carolina and Tennessee. The total of 25 inches at Charleston WV easily surpassed their previous record for the entire month of April of 5.9 inches. The 20.6 inch total at Akron OH established an all-time record for that location. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Thirty-nine cities across the eastern half of the country reported record high temperatures for the date, including Saint Louis MO with a reading of 91 degrees. Laredo TX was the hot spot in the nation with an afternoon high of 100 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

LOVING SOME AIN'T EASY

A little girl was saying her evening prayers. There was a slight pause, and then she continued, "God, it must be difficult for You to love everybody. There are only four people in my family, and it's hard for me to love all of them."

Loving others does not always come easy. In fact, some people are almost impossible to love. As someone once said to me, "I love that person just enough to get into heaven."

But loving others is not an option, it is an obligation. Jesus said, "Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are My disciples." This was not a new commandment. It can be traced all the way back to Leviticus. But the disciples of Jesus saw a totally new way to love others. He taught them in and through His life and death to love others in a sacrificial way: His way - the way of the cross.

To love sacrificially demands that we go beyond the ordinary ways of helping people. It means that we are willing to be inconvenienced to help anyone who has a need we can meet. It means that we are willing to share the best of what we have - not only the surplus "junk" we no longer need. It means we may have to sacrifice something we value. But so was the way of the cross. This kind of love will draw others to Jesus because the world rarely sees it but needs it.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help me to show others how much I love You by the way I live and the way I love others. May my life be an example of mercy, grace, and kindness. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples. John 13:34-35



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 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/08/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
- 05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 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:

04.04.23

1 37 45 62 64 4

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$414,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 17 Hrs 39
DRAW: Mins 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.03.23

6 27 30 40 52 1

All Star Bonus: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,050,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 39 Mins
DRAW: 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.04.23

10 13 20 22 25 8

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 17 Hrs 9 Mins 46
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.01.23

6 7 11 26 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 39 Mins
DRAW: 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.03.23

5 10 16 30 40 20

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 38 Mins 45
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

04.03.23

16 30 31 54 68 1

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$170,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 38 Mins 45
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Risk of severe storms persists from Texas to Great Lakes

By SCOTT McFETRIDGE and SEAN MURPHY Associated Press Writer

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Severe thunderstorms were expected to bring hail, strong winds — and the threat of tornadoes — to parts of the Midwest and South that are reeling from a weekend of deadly weather. Officials warned residents to have shelter ready Tuesday night before going to sleep.

At least two tornadoes were confirmed Tuesday in Illinois as storms targeted the state and eastern Iowa and southwest Wisconsin before nightfall. Areas of southern Missouri, Arkansas, southwestern Oklahoma and northeastern Texas were most at risk overnight.

"This could be a night to just set up down in the basement to be safe," Tom Philip, a meteorologist in Davenport, Iowa, said Tuesday.

The National Weather Service issued tornado warnings in Iowa and Illinois on Tuesday evening and said a confirmed twister was spotted southwest of Chicago near Bryant, Illinois. Officials said another tornado touched down Tuesday morning in the western Illinois community of Colona. Local news reports showed wind damage to some businesses there.

The storms were expected to hammer some areas hit by severe weather and possibly dozens of tornadoes just days ago that killed at least 32 people, meaning more misery for those whose homes were destroyed in Arkansas, Iowa and Illinois.

When a tornado hit Little Rock, Arkansas, last Friday, Kimberly Shaw peeked outside to film the storm, then suffered a painful foot injury that required stitches when a glass door behind her shattered and wind nearly sucked her away. With another storm coming, Shaw said she intends to be far more cautious this time and will rush to an underground shelter at her home.

"The original plan was just, 'If we see a tornado coming, we'll get in the shelter,'" Shaw said. "But now it's like you're not going to see it coming. You're not going to hear it coming. You just need to get (inside the shelter) as soon as the warning goes out or if you just feel unsafe."

Earlier Tuesday, strong thunderstorms swept through the Quad Cities area of Iowa and Illinois with winds up to 90 mph (145 kph) and baseball-size hail. No injuries were reported, but trees were downed and some businesses were damaged in Moline, Illinois.

Northern Illinois, from Moline to Chicago, saw 75-80 mph (120-128 kph) winds and hail 2 to 3 inches (5 to 8 centimeters) in diameter Tuesday afternoon, National Weather Service meteorologist Scott Baker said. The agency received reports of semitrucks tipped over by winds in Lee County, about 95 miles (153 km) west of Chicago.

The Storm Prediction Center said severe storms could produce strong tornadoes and large hail Wednesday across eastern Illinois and lower Michigan and in the Ohio Valley, including Indiana and Ohio. The weather threat extends southwestward across parts of Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee and Arkansas. Farther south and west, fire danger remained high.

The fierce storms that started Friday and continued into the weekend spawned deadly tornadoes in 11 states as the system plodded through Arkansas and onto the South, Midwest and Northeast.

The same conditions that fueled those storms — an area of low pressure combined with strong southerly winds — were setting up the severe weather Tuesday into early Wednesday, said Ryan Bunker, a meteorologist with the National Weather Center in Norman, Oklahoma.

Those conditions, which typically include dry air from the West going up over the Rockies and crashing into warm, moist air from the Gulf of Mexico, are what make the U.S. so prone to tornadoes and other severe storms.

Dramatic temperature changes were expected, with Tuesday highs of 74 F (23 C) in Des Moines and 86 F (30 C) in Kansas City plunging overnight to 40 F (4 C) or colder overnight. In Little Rock, Arkansas, Tuesday's high of 89 F (32 C) tied the record for the date set in 1880.

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A blizzard warning was in effect for nearly all of North Dakota and most of South Dakota through at least Wednesday night. In Minnesota, a winter storm warning was in effect in the north.

Fire danger persisted across portions of far western Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle, northeastern New Mexico and far southeastern Colorado, with low humidity, dry vegetation and high wind gusts. In Oklahoma, officials urged some residents near the town of Weatherford to evacuate because of a wildfire.

Associated Press writers Trisha Ahmed in St. Paul, Minnesota; Margery A. Beck in Omaha, Nebraska; Claire Savage in Chicago; Lisa Baumann in Bellingham, Washington; and Ben Finley in Norfolk, Virginia, contributed to this report.

Severe storms including hail, tornadoes hit Midwest, South

By SCOTT McFETRIDGE and SEAN MURPHY Associated Press Writer

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — People still sorting through the wreckage of their homes after a weekend of deadly weather braced for another wave of strong storms that began rolling into parts of the Midwest and South on Tuesday evening. At least one tornado was confirmed Tuesday night, and officials warned residents to have shelter ready before going to sleep.

"This could be a night to just set up down in the basement to be safe," said Tom Philip, a meteorologist in Davenport, Iowa.

The National Weather Service began issuing tornado warnings Tuesday evening in Iowa and Illinois and said a confirmed twister was spotted southwest of Chicago near Bryant, Illinois. No damage was immediately reported.

The storms were expected to hammer some areas hit by severe weather and possibly dozens of tornadoes just days ago that killed at least 32 people, meaning more misery for those whose homes were destroyed in Arkansas, Iowa and Illinois. Dangerous conditions were predicted into the overnight hours Tuesday in parts of Missouri, southwestern Oklahoma and northeastern Texas. Farther south and west, fire danger remained high.

When a tornado hit Little Rock, Arkansas, last Friday, Kimberly Shaw peeked outside to film the storm, then suffered a painful foot injury that required stitches when a glass door behind her shattered and wind nearly sucked her away. With another storm coming, Shaw said she intends to be far more cautious this time and will rush to an underground shelter at her home.

"The original plan was just, 'If we see a tornado coming, we'll get in the shelter,'" Shaw said. "But now it's like you're not going to see it coming. You're not going to hear it coming. You just need to get (inside the shelter) as soon as the warning goes out or if you just feel unsafe."

Shaw added: "And there will be no videotaping."

Earlier Tuesday, strong thunderstorms swept through the Quad Cities area of Iowa and Illinois with winds up to 90 mph (145 kph) and baseball-size hail. No injuries were reported, but trees were downed and some businesses were damaged in Moline, Illinois.

The weather service and Illinois Emergency Management said a tornado touched down Tuesday morning in the western Illinois community of Colona. Local news reports showed wind damage to some businesses.

Northern Illinois, from Moline to Chicago, saw 75-80 mph (120-128 kph) winds and hail 2 to 3 inches (5 to 8 centimeters) in diameter Tuesday afternoon, National Weather Service meteorologist Scott Baker said. The agency received reports of semitrucks tipped over by winds in Lee County, about 95 miles (153 km) west of Chicago.

Tuesday's storms targeted northern Illinois, eastern Iowa and southwest Wisconsin. Areas of southern Missouri and Arkansas were most at risk overnight.

In Keokuk County, Iowa, where 19 homes were destroyed and more were damaged Friday, emergency management official Marissa Reisen worried how those cleaning up the damage will cope if another storm hits.

"All of the people who have been impacted by the storms Friday night are doing all this work, to clean

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up, to gather their stuff, to pile up the debris," Reisen said. "If a storm comes through and hits them again and throws all that hard work all over the place again, it will be so deflating to those people."

Severe storms could produce strong tornadoes and large hail Wednesday across eastern Illinois and lower Michigan and in the Ohio Valley, including Indiana and Ohio, according to the Storm Prediction Center. The weather threat extends southwestward across parts of Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee and Arkansas.

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A blizzard warning was in effect for nearly all of North Dakota and most of South Dakota through at least Wednesday night. The National Weather Service predicted parts of South Dakota could see up to 16 inches (40 centimeters) of snow and wind gusts as high as 55 mph (90 kph).

Dozens of schools in South Dakota closed Tuesday due to blizzard conditions. State executive branch offices were also closed in much of the state.

North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum signed off on \$20 million Tuesday for emergency snow removal grants to localities. Officials reminded residents to check on neighbors and keep their homes stocked with food, water and medicine, have battery-powered radios in case of power outages and ensure gas meters and furnace vents are clear of snow.

Fire danger persisted across portions of far western Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle, northeastern New Mexico and far southeastern Colorado, with low humidity, dry vegetation and high wind gusts. Officials issued a fire warning for Custer County in western Oklahoma and urged some residents near the town of Weatherford to evacuate their homes because of a wildfire.

Associated Press writers Trisha Ahmed in St. Paul, Minnesota; Margery A. Beck in Omaha, Nebraska; Claire Savage in Chicago; Lisa Baumann in Bellingham, Washington; and Ben Finley in Norfolk, Virginia, contributed to this report.

Report: Husband of ex-Scottish leader arrested

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The husband of former Scottish first minister and Scottish National Party leader Nicola Sturgeon has been arrested in a party finance probe, British media reported Wednesday.

Police in Scotland did not identify Peter Murrell as the 58-year old man arrested Wednesday "in connection with the ongoing investigation into the funding and finances of the Scottish National Party." However, Britain's Press Association, the BBC and others reported it was Murrell.

"Clearly it would not be appropriate to comment on any live police investigation but the SNP have been cooperating fully with this investigation and will continue to do so," the party said in a statement released after the arrest.

Sturgeon, 52, announced her resignation in February after eight years as party leader and first minister of Scotland's semi-autonomous government. Sturgeon said at that time that serving well was knowing when to make way for someone else.

"In my head and in my heart I know that time is now," she said. "That it's right for me, for my party and my country."

Sturgeon, had led Scotland since 2014, when Scots narrowly voted to remain part of the United Kingdom. While the referendum was billed as a once-in-a-generation decision on independence, Sturgeon and her Scottish National Party had pushed for a new vote, arguing that Britain's departure from the European Union had changed the ground rules.

The Scottish government wants to hold a referendum next October with the question "Should Scotland be an independent country?"

The U.K. government in London refuses to approve a vote, saying the question was settled in a 2014 referendum that saw Scottish voters reject independence by a margin of 55% to 45%.

Israeli strikes on Syria intensify, raise tensions with Iran

By BASSEM MROUE and JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Suspected Israeli airstrikes in Syria in recent weeks have killed two Iranian military advisers, temporarily put the country's two largest airports out of service, and raised fears of regional escalation.

While Israel has fought a shadow war with Iran in Syria for years, it has intensified recently, with near-daily airstrikes attributed to Israel by Syrian officials over the past week.

The escalation of attacks comes after what appears to be a rare infiltration by an armed man from Lebanon into Israel and Iran's reconciliation with regional rival Saudi Arabia last month. It also comes against the backdrop of a major domestic crisis in Israel over Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government plan to overhaul the judiciary.

Israel, which has vowed to stop Iranian entrenchment in neighboring Syria, has carried out hundreds of strikes on targets in government-controlled parts of that country in recent years — but rarely acknowledges them. Since the beginning of 2023, Syrian officials have attributed 10 strikes on Syrian territory to Israel, including four airstrikes within five days as of Tuesday.

The United States, Israel's closest ally, has had its own recent run-ins with Iranian forces in Syria. In late March, U.S. forces retaliated with airstrikes on sites in Syria used by groups affiliated with Iran's Revolutionary Guard following a suspected Iran-linked drone attack that killed a U.S. contractor and wounded six other Americans in northeast Syria. An official with an Iranian-backed group in Iraq said the U.S. strikes killed seven Iranians.

The flareup between the U.S. and Iran did not escalate, but some fear the back-and-forth between Israel and Iran could.

Since the early years of Syria's 12-year-old conflict, Iran has deployed hundreds of military advisers as well as thousands of Iran-backed fighters from countries including Iraq and Lebanon who helped tip the balance of power in President Bashar Assad's favor. Iran-backed fighters are deployed in different parts of Syria.

Israel has long considered Iran to be its top enemy, citing Iranian calls for Israel's destruction, its support for anti-Israel militant groups like Hezbollah and its nuclear program. Israel and Western countries say Iran is trying to develop a nuclear weapons — a charge Iran denies.

Iran has blamed Israel for attacks on its territory, including the killings of some of its nuclear scientists and damage to nuclear installations.

The airstrikes in Syria reflect Israel's concerns about fighters being deployed close to its northern border and fears that Iran is trying to transfer sophisticated weapons, such as guided missiles, to Hezbollah. Both Israel and Hezbollah have avoided an all-out war since their 34-day war in 2006 ended with a draw. Israel considers Hezbollah, which is believed to possess over 130,000 rockets and missiles, to be a major threat.

Lebanese military expert and former army general Hisham Jaber said Iran has about 1,800 military advisers in Syria, most of them deployed with Syrian troops.

The increase in strikes on Syria began with a Jan. 2 attack that temporarily put Damascus airport out of service, just after the most right-wing government in Israel's 74-year history took office.

The strikes continued despite mass protests in Israel, including open disagreement between Netanyahu and his defense minister, Yoav Gallant, over the government's controversial plans for a judicial overhaul.

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At one point, Netanyahu fired Gallant for criticizing the plan, but then backtracked and temporarily halted the push for the overhaul until parliament reconvenes in a month.

The two men have made a number of public appearances in recent days, alluding to military activity in Syria without overtly confirming it.

"We will not allow the Iranians and Hezbollah to harm us. We have not allowed it in the past, we won't allow it now, or anytime in the future," Gallant said this week. "When necessary, we will push them out of Syria to where they belong – and that is Iran."

Jaber, however, said he believes the recent strikes will not turn into a full-blown conflict, in part because the U.S. -- which is preoccupied with the ongoing war in Ukraine and its own tensions with China -- would try to dissuade a regional war.

Strikes attributed to Israel in Syria in recent weeks have targeted both Iranian-linked figures and infrastructure.

They have hit the airports of Damascus and Aleppo, a move which was apparently intended to prevent the flow of arms shipments into Syria, but which also disrupted aid shipments after the deadly Feb. 6 earthquake that struck Syria and Turkey.

On Feb. 19, the first reported Israeli strikes after the earthquake targeted residential areas in Syria's capital Damascus, killing at least five people and wounding 15. Opposition activists said the strikes targeted Iranian-backed militias.

In mid-March, the Israeli army said its soldiers had killed an armed man suspected of entering the country from Lebanon and blowing up a car. The incident, which wounded one Israeli, unnerved Israelis. Officials suspect the man infiltrated from Lebanon and may have been dispatched by Hezbollah or directly by Iran.

A few days after the alleged infiltration, a commander with the Palestinian militant group Islamic Jihad was shot dead outside his apartment building near Damascus in what the group described as an assassination by Israeli agents.

Last Tuesday, Netanyahu said Israel's intelligence agency Mossad helped Greece prevent a terrorist attack planned against at least one Jewish site in Athens. Greek authorities said two men described as being of Pakistani origin were arrested for allegedly planning an attack on a Jewish center.

On Friday, an Israeli strike on a southern suburb of Damascus killed two advisers from Iran's Revolutionary Guard. Hours later, Israel's air force shot down a drone that entered Israel from Syria and alleged that Iran was behind its launch.

Yoel Guzansky, an Iran expert and senior fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies, a Tel Aviv think tank, said Israel's stepped-up action in recent weeks could be in response to the recent alleged infiltration from Lebanon.

Guzansky noted that Iran rarely acknowledges the death of its officers and advisers as quickly as it did after Friday's attack. He said the swift public acknowledgement could signal that "Iran will avenge or respond to the Israeli attacks," possibly targeting Israelis abroad.

An official with an Iran-backed group in the region warned that if Israel continues with the strikes, Tehran and its allies will retaliate. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the issue with the media.

Iran's semi-official Tasnim news agency quoted the Revolutionary Guard as saying that the killing of two Iranian advisers "will definitely not pass without retaliation."

Federman reported from Jerusalem.

Zelenskyy visits Poland to thank ally and meet Ukrainians

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his wife were welcomed with military honors in Poland Wednesday at the start of a state visit that is meant as a gesture of thanks to the neighboring nation for its crucial support in Ukraine's defense against Russia's invasion.

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The visit is a rare foray for Zelenskyy out of Ukraine since Russia unleashed the war in February 2022. While it follows visits to the United States, Britain, France and Belgium, it stands out from the others because it was announced in advance without the secrecy of past visits.

It is also unusual that the president is joined by the first lady, Olena Zelenska. Marcin Przydacz, the head of Polish President Andrzej Duda's foreign policy office, described it as Zelenskyy's first visit of this kind since the war began.

The visit shines a light on Poland's rising international role in a new security order that is emerging after Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Poland, a member of NATO and the European Union, is modernizing its military with orders of tanks and other equipment from U.S. and South Korean producers, while the United States has also beefed up its military presence in Poland.

Warsaw has been a key ally for Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion last year, also becoming a hub for humanitarian aid and weapons to transit into Ukraine.

Zelenskyy has traveled through Poland on his other trips, but until now had not made Poland the focus of one his trips.

Zelenskyy is to meet with Duda and Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, attend an economic forum focused on the reconstruction of Ukraine and meet some of the Ukrainians who have found refuge in Poland. Poland has been a key destination for Ukrainian refugees, particularly those who want to remain close because they plan to return or want to be able to visit loved ones.

More than 1.5 million Ukrainians have registered with the Polish government since the war began, joining large numbers of Ukrainians who had already arrived in recent years for work. The exact number of Ukrainians present in the country at any given moment is impossible to measure, especially with many going back and forth.

But Zelenskyy's visit also comes at a delicate time, with Polish farmers growing increasingly angry because Ukrainian grain that has entered Poland has created a glut, causing prices to fall.

The grain is only meant to be stored and transit through Poland to reach international markets in North Africa and the Middle East. But farmers in Poland say the grain is instead staying in Poland, taking up space in silos and entering local markets, causing local prices to fall for the farmers. Romanian and Bulgarian farmers say they are facing the same problem.

Przydacz acknowledged in comments to reporters that the issue has caused tensions and said that would be a topic of the talks on Wednesday.

The anger of the farmers is emerging as a headache for Morawiecki's government ahead of general elections in the fall, particularly since his conservative ruling party, Law and Justice, gets much of its support in rural areas.

An hour before Duda was to welcome Zelenskyy, Poland's agriculture minister, Henryk Kowalczyk, who has been the focus of the farmers' anger, resigned from his post.

'He's a war criminal': Elite Putin security officer defects

By ERIKA KINETZ Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — On Oct. 14, a Russian engineer named Gleb Karakulov boarded a flight from Kazakhstan to Turkey with his wife and daughter. He switched off his phone to shut out the crescendo of urgent, enraged messages, said goodbye to his life in Russia and tried to calm his fast-beating heart.

But this was no ordinary Russian defector. Karakulov was an officer in President Vladimir Putin's secretive elite personal security service — one of the few Russians to flee and go public who have rank, as well as knowledge of intimate details of Putin's life and potentially classified information.

Karakulov, who was responsible for secure communications, said moral opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and his fear of dying there drove him to speak out, despite the risks to himself and his family. He said he hoped to inspire other Russians to speak out also.

"Our president has become a war criminal," he said. "It is time to end this war and stop being silent."

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Karakulov's account generally conforms with others that paint the Russian president as a once charismatic but increasingly isolated leader, who doesn't use a cellphone or the internet and insists on access to Russian state television wherever he goes. He also offered new details about how Putin's paranoia appears to have deepened since his decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022. Putin now prefers to avoid airplanes and travel on a special armored train, he said, and he ordered a bunker at the Russian Embassy in Kazakhstan outfitted with a secure communications line in October — the first time Karakulov had ever fielded such a request.

Along with information on Putin, Karakulov's testimony offers an intimate view of one man's decision to defect — without telling his own mother, who he said remains a strong Putin supporter. It raises critical questions about how deep the Russian public's acceptance of the war runs, and how Putin's opponents in the West and beyond might leverage any silent opposition.

While not speaking directly about his case, an official with a security background from a NATO country said a defection like Karakulov's "has a very great level of interest." He spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive political matters.

"That would be seen as a very serious blow to the president himself because he is extremely keen on his security, and his security is compromised," he said. "That's something that he would be very unhappy about — particularly if the compromise is to do with communications, upon which a great deal relies."

PUTIN IS 'SIMPLY AFRAID'

As an engineer in a field unit of the presidential communications department of the Federal Protective Service, or FSO, Karakulov was responsible for setting up secure communications for the Russian president and prime minister wherever they went. While he was not a confidant of Putin's, Karakulov spent years in his service, observing him from unusually close quarters from 2009 through late 2022.

Karakulov, his wife and his child have gone underground, and it was impossible to speak with them directly due to security constraints.

The Dossier Center, a London-based investigative group funded by Russian opposition figure Mikhail Khodorkovsky, interviewed Karakulov multiple times and shared video and transcripts of more than six hours of those interviews with The Associated Press, as well as the Danish Broadcasting Corporation DR, Swedish Television SVT, and the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation NRK. The Dossier Center confirmed the authenticity of Karakulov's passport and FSO work identity card, and cross-checked details of his biography against Russian government records, leaked personal data and social media postings.

The Associated Press reviewed the materials from the Dossier Center and independently confirmed Karakulov's identity with three sources in the U.S. and Europe, who were not authorized to speak publicly. The AP also independently corroborated personal details, including Karakulov's passport numbers, date and place of birth, two registered addresses, and the names and ages of family members, but was unable to verify details of his defection.

The AP also confirmed that Karakulov is listed as a wanted man in the Russian Interior Ministry's public database of criminal suspects. The ministry initiated a criminal investigation against Karakulov on Oct. 26 for desertion during a time of military mobilization, according to documents obtained by the Dossier Center and seen by the AP.

The FSO is one of the most secretive branches of Russia's security services.

"Even when they quit, they never talk, but they know a lot of details of the private life of the president and the prime minister," said Katya Hakim, a senior researcher at the Dossier Center.

The Kremlin did not respond to requests for comment. Neither did Karakulov's father or brother.

Karakulov moved as part of an advance team, often with enough specialized communications equipment to fill a KAMAZ truck. He said he has taken more than 180 trips with the Russian president, and contrary to widespread speculation, Putin appears to be in better shape than most people his age. Putin has only canceled a few trips due to illness and has annual medical checkups, he said.

Unlike the prime minister, Putin does not require secure internet access on his trips, Karakulov said.

"In all my service, I have never seen him with a mobile phone," he said. "All the information he receives

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is only from people close to him. That is, he lives in a kind of information vacuum.”

Karakulov’s work brought him to luxury hotels for summits, beach resorts in Cuba, yachts — and aboard a special armored train outfitted for the Russian president.

Putin’s train looks like any other, painted gray with a red stripe to blend in with other railway carriages in Russia. Putin didn’t like the fact that airplanes can be tracked, preferring the stealth of a nondescript train car, Karakulov said.

“I understand that he’s simply afraid,” he said.

Putin began to use the train regularly in the run-up to the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Karakulov said. Even last year, Putin continued to insist on strict anti-COVID measures, and FSO employees took shifts in two-week quarantine so there would always be a pool of people cleared to travel with Putin on the train, he said.

Putin has set up identical offices in multiple locations, with matching details down to the desk and wall hangings, and official reports sometimes say he’s one place when he is actually in another, according to Karakulov and prior reporting by a Russian media outlet. When Putin was in Sochi, security officials would deliberately pretend he was leaving, bringing in a plane and sending off a motorcade, when he was in fact staying, Karakulov said.

“The guys would talk about this, really laughing,” he said. “I think that this is an attempt to confuse, first, intelligence, and second, so that there are no assassination attempts.”

FACES OF WARRIORS

Karakulov’s defection was a surprising turn for a family steeped in patriotic military tradition.

Born in Dagestan, Karakulov was raised to be ready for war, believing it was his sacred duty to defend his homeland. After graduating from a military academy, he found his way into the FSO.

“To be close to the president — it sounded pretty cool,” he said.

Karakulov’s father is a former military man, who has worked as a professional photographer, among other jobs. He is working on a project he calls “Faces of Warriors,” a series of elegant, hagiographic portraits of Russian soldiers and veterans.

Karakulov’s brother is a local government official, records show, and served as the point person for a regional, government-backed project devoted to “civic patriotism” and honoring “Heroes of the Fatherland.”

Karakulov’s job introduced him to a world beyond his family. Even as his father and brother marched in patriotic military parades, his own doubts deepened. He’s horrified to think that he might also be rallying around the letter Z in support of the war in Ukraine if his job hadn’t taught him to see through the lies of Russian state television.

“Thanks to my work in the FSO, I have seen how information is distorted,” he said.

He also began to question the conspicuous spending of Russia’s top leaders. He said he saw officials convene large delegations at luxurious resorts that cost more each night than his monthly salary. They’d all attend a brief meeting and then hang out for a week, he said.

“If this is from the budget, then the question is, ‘Is it not too much to spend this kind of money on one person?’” he said. “If it’s not from the budget, then it’s total corruption.”

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was a breaking point, he said. He told his wife he wanted out. He didn’t want their young daughter brainwashed in preschool, where children were doing patriotic salutes and being told about bombs.

“This is not the future I would like for my child,” he said.

With Russia’s September mobilization drive, Karakulov realized that if he quit his job, he was likely to be drafted into a war he didn’t want to fight. But even if he stayed, he could get sent to the front.

He learned that some of his colleagues had been dispatched to Ukraine and killed. He saw photos of FSO crews destroyed by Ukrainian rockets, with dozens likely dead.

He was outraged that no one in Russia acknowledged those deaths.

“There’s no information about them,” Karakulov said. “What were they doing there? Why did they end up there? Why did they die there?”

The only conversations he had were with colleagues who seemed to relish the war. He imagined others

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must share his views, but he had no way to find them.

"They simply cannot even open their mouths," he said.

Karakulov said he couldn't tell his parents about his disillusionment either, because their minds had been molded by years of watching Russian state television.

As the war streamed in on the evening news, his parents seemed to savor the view from the front. He found it unbearable and asked his mother to turn off the TV. She refused.

He said he tried to explain to her that Ukraine is an independent country, but she immediately cut him off. "What is this?" she said to him. "You want to run away? Are you some kind of foreign agent?"

He never told them he was leaving.

In October, a series of official meetings in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, gave Karakulov his chance to run away. He and his wife packed their lives into three suitcases. He flew out Oct. 6 with the rest of his team. His wife and daughter joined two days later, staying in a separate hotel.

But each day, Karakulov found another reason not to go.

On the last day of the delegation, Oct. 14, he realized he couldn't postpone any longer. His wife collected his suitcase from his hotel room to avoid raising suspicion. He slipped away after lunch, telling colleagues that he was heading out to buy souvenirs.

He climbed in a taxi with his wife and daughter and set off for the airport around 3 p.m.

"From then on, it was only a matter of my own nerves," he said.

He got through check-in and started getting messages from colleagues asking where he was. The flight was delayed by an hour. He could feel a distant fury building against him. By 5 p.m., he figured people had started to look for him.

"You scumbag," read one message.

Fifteen minutes before takeoff, he switched off his phone.

His wife was very upset. They spent the 5 1/2-hour flight waiting for something to go wrong.

When they finally cleared passport control in Turkey, Karakulov said it was like a great stone had fallen from his soul.

He said he knows many people will accuse him of being unpatriotic, but he disagrees.

"Patriotism is when you love your country," he said. "In this case, our homeland needs to be saved, because something crazy and terrible is happening in our country. We need to fix this."

THE PRICE OF DISSENT

What the future holds for Karakulov — and anyone who might dare to follow in his footsteps — is far from clear.

He was not the only one who wanted out.

On Sept. 27, days after Russia's mobilization, an engineer at a regional FSO center in Siberia named Mikhail Zhilin sneaked through the forest across the border to Kazakhstan. Many Russians fled to Kazakhstan to avoid the draft, but the authorities refused Zhilin's request for asylum and sent him back to Russia. On March 20, a Russian court sentenced him to 6 1/2 years in a penal colony.

Abbas Gallyamov, a Russian political analyst now living in Israel who was a speechwriter for Putin from 2000 to 2001 and again from 2008 to 2010, said he believes the majority of Russia's elites secretly oppose Putin's war. He added that if the West had offered them an exit strategy instead of sanctions, more might have left.

"They are all shocked," he said. "From their point of view, there was no reason to do this because everything was okay ... now all of a sudden, everything collapsed. ... We're enemies of the world."

Gallyamov, like Karakulov, is on the wanted list of Russia's Interior Ministry. He said a defection like Karakulov's is a particular blow because the FSO is like a "royal elite" above other military and security structures in Russia, charged with protecting the state's most precious asset: Putin himself.

"They will be very angry," he said. "There will be hysterics."

Tatiana Stanovaya, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said Russian public opinion about the war is divided but there is little space for public dissent, especially for people

working within the system.

"The rule is that the elite stick to Putin," she said.

Those who do leave Russia often pay a price to keep their conscience clear.

Boris Bondarev, a career Russian diplomat in Geneva, quit in May and denounced the war.

Speaking from an undisclosed location in Switzerland, Bondarev told the AP he is living as a political refugee on a government allowance, with security constraints he'd rather leave "deliberately ambiguous." He can't find a job and has had to move apartments several times, for both financial and safety reasons. He can't travel freely — not even to meet a reporter for a cup of coffee in town.

"I sent my CVs to dozens of think tanks in the U.S., in the U.K., in Europe, and most were ignored," he said. "I got a few answers that 'sorry, but we already have Russia experts.'"

He said there are plenty of Russians who quietly oppose the war but don't dare speak out, for fear of losing their livelihoods. A few colleagues who quit Russia's Foreign Ministry after he did contacted him for advice. They were having trouble finding work. One returned to Moscow because he couldn't make a living outside of Russia, he said.

Bondarev said he sometimes has second thoughts when he sees pictures of people eating out at nice restaurants in Moscow, living the kind of good life he can no longer afford.

But then he remembers the price: brainwashing, propaganda, hypocrisy.

"I would come to my office at 9 and leave at 6 p.m. and in between I would have to produce numerous papers explaining why Ukraine attacked Russia," he said. "I don't want it. No, no, I can't complain today. ... I live very, very well."

Associated Press reporters Jamey Keaten in Geneva, Aamer Madhani in Washington and Joanna Kozłowska in London contributed to this report.

Takeaways from AP's report on elite Russian defector

By ERIKA KINETZ Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — In October, an officer in Russian President Vladimir Putin's elite personal security service defected while on a business trip in Kazakhstan.

Now a wanted man in Russia, Gleb Karakulov spoke out for the first time in a series of interviews with the Dossier Center, an investigative group in London funded by Russian opposition figure Mikhail Khodorkovsky. The AP took steps to review and verify the material.

"Our president has become a war criminal," said the 35-year-old engineer. "It is time to end this war and stop being silent."

Karakulov is one of few Russians to flee and go public who have rank, as well as knowledge of intimate details of Putin's life. Karakulov was a captain in Russia's secretive Federal Protective Service, or FSO, tasked with setting up secure communications for the Russian president and prime minister.

Here's what he had to say about Putin and the war in Ukraine.

PUTIN DOESN'T USE A MOBILE PHONE OR THE INTERNET

In 13 years of service, Karakulov said, he never saw Putin use a mobile phone. When the prime minister travels, he requires an electronic office, with secure internet access. Putin does not. He and others also say Putin insisted on strict anti-COVID-19 measures long after most other world leaders, including mandatory two-week quarantines for staff and COVID tests by Kremlin doctors.

"Our president is cut off from the world, he lives in an informational vacuum," Karakulov said. "He is pathologically afraid for his life. He has surrounded himself with an impenetrable barrier of quarantine and a lack of any information from the internet."

PUTIN APPEARS TO BE IN BETTER SHAPE THAN MANY PEOPLE HIS AGE

Karakulov said he has taken more than 180 trips with the Russian president, and contrary to widespread speculation, Putin appears to be in good health. Putin has only canceled a few trips due to illness and has annual medical checkups, he said. It was Karakulov's job to set up secure communications at the hospital

when Putin checked in.

PUTIN'S PARANOIA APPEARS TO HAVE DEEPENED SINCE UKRAINE INVASION

Putin began traveling by special armored train regularly in the build-up to Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, he said. Putin's train looks like any other, painted gray with a red stripe to blend in with other railway carriages in Russia. Putin didn't like the fact that airplanes can be tracked, preferring the stealth of a nondescript train car, Karakulov said.

"I understand that he's simply afraid," he said.

Putin has set up identical offices in multiple locations, with matching details down to the desk and wall hangings, and official reports sometimes say he's one place when he is actually in another, according to Karakulov and prior reporting by a Russian media outlet.

In October, Putin ordered a bunker at the Russian embassy in Kazakhstan outfitted with a secure communications line — the first time Karakulov had ever fielded such a request.

"I can understand why he's so isolated and why he must be very cautious about any external contacts. It's understandable," said Tatiana Stanovaya, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "Half of the world wishes him dead."

PUBLIC SUPPORT IN RUSSIA FOR WAR IN UKRAINE

The rare defection of a Russian insider raises questions about how deep public support for the war in Ukraine actually runs in Russia.

Karakulov wasn't the only one from the FSO who wanted out. An engineer at a regional FSO center in Siberia tried to flee to Kazakhstan in September, shortly after Russia's draft took effect. But authorities there sent him back to Russia, where he was sentenced to 6 1/2 years in a penal colony.

Boris Bondarev, a career diplomat in Geneva who quit in May and denounced the war, said there are plenty of Russians who quietly oppose the war but don't dare speak out, for fear of losing their livelihoods. A few Foreign Ministry colleagues quit after he did but didn't go public, he said. He added that, like him, they're having trouble finding work.

Bondarev is now living as a political refugee on a government allowance in Switzerland, with security constraints he'd rather leave "deliberately ambiguous." But he doesn't have regrets.

"You must do what your what your conscience tells you to do," he said.

Associated Press reporters Jamey Keaten in Geneva, Amer Madhani in Washington and Joanna Kozłowska in London contributed to this report.

Violence in Jerusalem at mosque raises fear of more fighting

By MAHMOUD ILLEAN and FARES AKRAM Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli police stormed into the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem's Old City early Wednesday, firing stun grenades at Palestinian youths who hurled firecrackers at them in a burst of violence during a sensitive holiday season. Palestinian militants in Gaza responded with rocket fire on southern Israel, prompting repeated Israeli airstrikes.

The fighting, coming as Muslims mark the holiday month of Ramadan and Jews prepare to begin the Passover festival on Wednesday evening, raised fears of a wider conflagration. Similar clashes two years ago erupted into a bloody 11-day war between Israel and the ruling Hamas militant group in Gaza. The official Palestinian news agency Wafa said that dozens of worshippers who were spending the night praying were injured in the police raid. The Israeli military said one soldier was shot in a separate incident in the occupied West Bank.

The mosque sits on a sensitive hilltop compound holy to both Jews and Muslims. Al-Aqsa is the third-holiest site in Islam and is typically packed with worshippers during Ramadan. Overnight, the scene of festive holiday-makers picnicking and praying at the holy site transformed into one of violence, as Israeli police stormed into the mosque, firing tear gas and stun grenades that shattered stained-glass windows and fiercely beating worshippers with clubs and rifle butts, witnesses said.

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The spot, known to Jews as the Temple Mount, is also the holiest site in Judaism, revered as the location of the biblical Jewish temples. The conflicting claims fuel constant tensions that have spilled over to violence numerous times in the past.

Since Ramadan began March 22, scores of Muslim worshippers have been trying to stay overnight in the mosque, a practice that is typically permitted only during the last 10 days of the monthlong holiday. Israeli police have entered nightly to evict the worshippers, stirring tensions with young Palestinians who demand to pray at the holy site until dawn.

Tensions over control of the holy site have been heightened by calls from Jewish ultranationalists to carry out a ritual slaughter of a goat in the compound, imitating the ancient ritual sacrifice executed on Passover in biblical times. Israel bars ritual slaughters on the site, but calls by Jewish extremists to revive the practice, including offers of cash rewards to anyone who even attempts to bring an animal into the compound, have amplified fears among Muslims that Israel is plotting to take over the site. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said he is committed to preserving the status quo at the compound.

After some 80,000 worshippers attended evening prayers at the mosque on Tuesday, hundreds of Palestinians barricaded themselves inside the mosque overnight to pray. Worshippers said that after they refused to leave, Israeli police moved into the mosque, descending on Palestinians with batons.

Israeli police said they moved in after "several law-breaking youths and masked agitators" brought fireworks, sticks and stones and barricaded themselves into the mosque. Police said the youths chanted violent slogans and locked the front doors.

"After many and prolonged attempts to get them out by talking to no avail, police forces were forced to enter the compound in order to get them out," police said.

Video released by police showed the repeated explosions of fireworks inside the mosque. One amateur video taken by Palestinians showed police scuffling with people and beating them — at one point breaking a chair over someone's head — as a woman's voice could be heard shouting, "Oh God. Oh God."

Outside the gate, police dispersed groups of youths with stun grenades and rubber bullets.

Police said one officer was injured in the leg, while some 350 people were arrested. They released images of fireworks and at least one large stone that appeared to have been hurled.

The Jordan-controlled Islamic trust that administers the site, known as the Waqf, condemned the Israeli actions at the holy site as a "flagrant violation of the identity and function of the mosque as a place of worship for Muslims."

Worshippers trickling out of the police station on Wednesday said they were released on the condition of not entering the mosque or the Old City for one week. Palestinians under the age of 45 were not permitted to enter the compound for dawn prayers.

Talab Abu Eisha, 49, said more than 400 men, women and children were praying at Al-Aqsa when the police encircled the mosque.

"The youths were afraid and started closing the doors," he said, adding that police forces "stormed the eastern corner, beating and arresting men there."

"It was an unprecedented scene of violence in terms of police brutality," he said, denying police claims that young men were hiding fireworks and rocks.

Palestinian militants responded by firing a barrage of rockets from Gaza into southern Israel, setting off air raid sirens in the region as residents were preparing for the beginning of the weeklong Passover holiday.

The Israeli military said a total of five rockets were fired, and all were intercepted. Hours later, Israel responded with airstrikes that the army said hit Hamas weapons storage and manufacturing sites.

"We don't want this to escalate," said Lt. Col. Richard Hecht, an army spokesman. But he said that if the rocket fire persisted, "we will respond very aggressively."

By early morning, the Jerusalem compound had quieted down, and a few dozen religious Jews were seen filtering through the site ahead of Passover during regular morning visiting hours, as small crowds of Muslims gathered around them shouting, "God is greater!"

Jews are permitted to visit the compound, but not pray there, under longstanding agreements. But such

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visits, which have grown in numbers in recent years, have added to Palestinian suspicions, particularly because some Jews are often seen quietly praying.

Mainstream Orthodox Jews, including Israel's chief rabbi, vehemently oppose Jewish visits to the site. Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, the head rabbi of the adjacent Western Wall, the holiest place where Jews can pray, said Tuesday that he would prevent any animals brought to the entrance to the site.

Tensions have been steadily rising since Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new far-right government took office late last year. The government is dominated by religious and ultranationalist hard-liners, and the overlap of the Jewish and Muslim holidays – when tens of thousands of worshippers make their way to contested Jerusalem — has raised fears of violence.

The police force is overseen by Itamar Ben-Gvir, an ultranationalist with a history of violent rhetoric and actions against Palestinians.

Ben-Gvir wrote on Twitter Wednesday morning that the government "needs to respond mightily to rocket fire from Gaza, rocket fire by Hamas demands a response beyond blowing up dunes and unmanned positions."

In Gaza, Hamas called for large protests and people started gathering in the streets, with calls to head for the heavily guarded Gaza-Israel frontier for more violent demonstrations.

The Palestinian militant groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad also called for Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Israel to gather around Al-Aqsa Mosque and confront Israeli forces.

Ziyad al-Nakhala, leader of Islamic Jihad, said the situation at Al-Aqsa was a "serious threat." He said that Palestinians must be prepared "for the inevitable confrontation in the coming days."

In the occupied West Bank, the Palestinian leadership condemned the attack on the worshippers. The spokesman of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Nabil Abu Rudeineh, warned Israel that such a move "exceeds all red lines and will lead to a large explosion."

The government of Jordan condemned the Israeli raid "in the strongest terms." The Foreign Ministry warned "of the consequences of this dangerous escalation and held Israel responsible for the safety of the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque."

The foreign ministries of Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia also condemned what they described as an Israeli intrusion into Al-Aqsa.

As violence was unfolding in Jerusalem, the Israeli military reported fighting in a Palestinian town in the occupied West Bank. It said residents of Beit Umar, near the volatile city of Hebron, burned tires, hurled rocks and explosives at soldiers. It said one soldier was shot by armed suspects, who managed to flee.

Earlier on Tuesday, a Palestinian suspect stabbed two Israeli soldiers near an army base south of Tel Aviv, the military said, in the latest incident in a yearlong spate of violence that shows no sign of abating.

Israeli-Palestinian violence has surged over the last year, as the Israeli military has carried out near-nightly raids on Palestinian cities, towns and villages and as Palestinians have staged numerous attacks against Israelis.

At least 88 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire this year, according to an Associated Press tally. Palestinian attacks against Israelis have killed 15 people in the same period. Israel says most of the Palestinians killed were militants. But stone-throwing youths and bystanders uninvolved in violence were also among the dead. All but one of the Israeli dead were civilians.

Akram reported from Gaza City, Gaza Strip. Associated Press writer Ilan Ben Zion in Jerusalem contributed.

In Ukraine, the grief-stricken bear the pain of war

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Mothers burying their sons, children burying their fathers. As the war in Ukraine enters its second year, men and women have been dying in droves on the front lines, fighting off Russia's invasion of their country.

For them, the fight is over. They paid the ultimate price. But it is their parents, their children, their siblings and their spouses who will carry the pain of war, the tears of the nation.

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Over a period of 15 days in February, numerous funerals were held in towns and villages near the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, for soldiers killed in fighting in Donbas, in the east of the country where most of the battles are now concentrated. The same scene is repeated day after day, week after week, in villages and cities across Ukraine as those killed on the battlefield return home for the last time.

The vast majority were not career soldiers. A carpenter, an ornithologist, a baker, a pharmacist, a student — they signed up to fight because of the war, leaving behind their civilian lives.

In small villages where they had once led ordinary lives, mourners from the entire village came to their homes to pay their respects to their families after they were killed. They were buried in their military uniforms.

Johnson elected Chicago mayor in victory for progressives

By SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Brandon Johnson, a union organizer and former teacher, was elected as Chicago's next mayor Tuesday in a major victory for the Democratic Party's progressive wing as the heavily blue city grapples with high crime and financial challenges.

Johnson, a Cook County commissioner endorsed by the Chicago Teachers Union, won a close race over former Chicago schools CEO Paul Vallas, who was backed by the police union. Johnson, 47, will succeed Lori Lightfoot, the first Black woman and first openly gay person to be the city's mayor.

Lightfoot became the first Chicago mayor in 40 years to lose her reelection bid when she finished third in a crowded February contest.

Johnson's victory in the nation's third-largest city capped a remarkable trajectory for a candidate who was little known when he entered the race last year. He climbed to the top of the field with organizing and financial help from the politically influential Chicago Teachers Union and high-profile endorsements from progressive Sens. Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. Sanders appeared at a rally for Johnson in the final days of the race.

Taking the stage Tuesday night for his victory speech, a jubilant Johnson thanked his supporters for helping usher in "a new chapter in the history of our city." He promised that under his administration, the city would look out for everyone, regardless of how much money they have, whom they love or where they come from.

"Tonight is the beginning of a Chicago that truly invests in all of its people," Johnson said.

Johnson, who is Black, recalled growing up in a poor family, teaching at a school in Cabrini Green, a notorious former public housing complex, and shielding his own young kids from gunfire in their West Side neighborhood.

He referenced civil rights leaders Martin Luther King Jr. and the Rev. Jesse Jackson and called his victory a continuation of their legacies. He also noted that he was speaking on the anniversary of King's assassination.

"Today the dream is alive," Johnson said, "and so today we celebrate the revival and the resurrection of the city of Chicago."

It was a momentous win for progressive organizations such as the teachers union, with Johnson winning the highest office of any active teachers union member in recent history, leaders say. For both progressives and the party's more moderate wing, the Chicago race was seen as a test of organizing power and messaging.

Johnson's win also comes as groups such as Our Revolution, a powerful progressive advocacy organization, push to win more offices in local and state office, including in upcoming mayoral elections in Philadelphia and elsewhere.

Vallas, speaking to his own supporters Tuesday night, said that he had called Johnson and that he expected him to be the next mayor. Some in the crowd seemed to jeer the news, but Vallas urged them to put aside differences and support the next mayor in "the daunting work ahead."

"This campaign that I ran to bring the city together would not be a campaign that fulfills my ambitions

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if this election is going to divide us," Vallas said.

In a statement, Lightfoot also congratulated Johnson and said her administration will collaborate with his team during the transition.

Johnson and Vallas were the top two vote-getters in the all-Democrat but officially nonpartisan February race, which moved to the runoff because no candidate received over 50%.

On Tuesday, Johnson took many of the predominantly Black southern and western areas where Lightfoot won in February, along with the northern neighborhoods where he was the top-vote getter back then, according to precinct-level results released by election officials. Vallas did well in the northwest and southwest areas that are home to large numbers of city employees, just as he did in February.

The contest surfaced longstanding tensions among Democrats, with Johnson and his supporters blasting Vallas — who was endorsed by Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, the chamber's second-ranking Democrat — as too conservative and a Republican in disguise.

Both candidates have deep roots in the Democratic Party, though with vastly different backgrounds and views.

After teaching middle and high school, Johnson helped mobilize teachers, including during a historic 2012 strike through which the Chicago Teachers Union increased its organizing muscle and influence in city politics. That has included fighting for non-classroom issues, such as housing and mental health care.

Vallas, who finished first in the February contest, was the only white candidate in that nine-person field. A former Chicago budget director, he later led schools in Chicago, New Orleans, Philadelphia and Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Among the biggest disputes between Johnson and Vallas was how to address crime. Like many U.S. cities, Chicago saw violent crime increase during the COVID-19 pandemic, hitting a 25-year high 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.

Vallas, 69, said he would hire hundreds more police officers, while Johnson said he didn't plan to cut the number of officers, but that the current system of policing isn't working. Johnson was forced to defend past statements expressing support for "defunding" police — something he insisted he would not do as mayor.

But Johnson argued that instead of investing more in policing and incarceration, the city should focus on mental health treatment, affordable housing for all and jobs for youth. He has proposed a plan he says will raise \$800 million by taxing "ultrarich" individuals and businesses, including a per-employee "head tax" on employers and an additional tax on hotel room stays.

That plan is no sure thing, as some members of the City Council and the state Legislature — whose support would be needed — already have expressed opposition.

Resident Chema Fernandez, 25, voted for Johnson as an opportunity to move on from what he described as "the politics of old." He said he saw Vallas as being in line with previous mayors such as Rahm Emanuel, Lightfoot and Richard M. Daley, who haven't worked out great for places like his neighborhood on the southwest side, which has seen decades of disinvestment.

"I think we need to give the opportunity for policies that may actually change some of our conditions," Fernandez said.

Associated Press journalist Teresa Crawford in Chicago and chief elections analyst Chad Day in Washington contributed.

Paying for paradise? Hawaii mulls fees for ecotourism crush

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — Repairing coral reefs after boats run aground. Shielding native forest trees from a killer fungus outbreak. Patrolling waters for swimmers harassing dolphins and turtles.

Taking care of Hawaii's unique natural environment takes time, people and money. Now Hawaii wants tourists to help pay for it, especially because growing numbers are traveling to the islands to enjoy the

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beauty of its outdoors — including some lured by dramatic vistas they've seen on social media.

"All I want to do, honestly, is to make travelers accountable and have the capacity to help pay for the impact that they have," Democratic Gov. Josh Green said earlier this year. "We get between nine and 10 million visitors a year (but) we only have 1.4 million people living here. Those 10 million travelers should be helping us sustain our environment."

Hawaii lawmakers are considering legislation that would require tourists to pay for a yearlong license or pass to visit state parks and trails. They're still debating how much they would charge.

The governor campaigned last year on a platform of having all tourists pay a \$50 fee to enter the state. Legislators think this would violate U.S. constitutional protections for free travel and have promoted their parks and trails approach instead. Either policy would be a first of its kind for any U.S. state.

Hawaii's leaders are following the example of other tourism hotspots that have imposed similar fees or taxes like Venice, Italy, and Ecuador's Galapagos Islands. The Pacific island nation of Palau, for example, charges arriving international passengers \$100 to help it manage a sprawling marine sanctuary and promote ecotourism.

State Rep. Sean Quinlan, a Democrat who chairs the House Tourism Committee, said changing traveler patterns are one reason behind Hawaii's push. He said golf rounds per visitor per day have declined 30% over the past decade while hiking has increased 50%. People are also seeking out once-obscure sites that they've seen someone post on social media. The state doesn't have the money to manage all these places, he said.

"It's not like it was 20 years ago when you bring your family and you hit maybe one or two famous beaches and you go see Pearl Harbor. And that's the extent of it," Quinlan said. "These days it's like, well, you know, 'I saw this post on Instagram and there's this beautiful rope swing, a coconut tree.'"

"All these places that didn't have visitors now have visitors," he said.

Most state parks and trails are currently free. Some of the most popular ones already charge, like Diamond Head State Monument, which features a trail leading from the floor of a 300,000-year-old volcanic crater up to its summit. It gets 1 million visitors each year and costs \$5 for each traveler.

A bill currently before the state House would require nonresidents 15 years and older visiting forests, parks, trails or "other natural area on state land" to buy an annual license online or via mobile app. Violators would pay a civil fine, though penalties wouldn't be imposed during a five-year education and transition period.

Residents with a Hawaii driver's license or other state identification would be exempt.

The Senate passed a version of the measure setting the fee at \$50. But the House Finance Committee amended it last week to delete the dollar amount. Chair Kyle Yamashita, a Democrat, said the bill was "a work in progress."

Dawn Chang, chair of the state Board of Land and Natural Resources, told the committee that Hawaii's beaches are open to the public, so people probably wouldn't be cited there — and such details still need to be worked out.

Rep. Dee Morikawa, a Democrat on the committee, recommended that the state create a list of places that would require the license.

Green has indicated he's flexible about where the fee is imposed and that he's willing to support the Legislature's approach.

Supporters say there's no other place in the U.S. that imposes a similar fee on visitors. The closest equivalent may be the \$34.50 tax Alaska charges to each cruise ship passenger.

Hawaii's conservation needs are great. Invasive pests are attacking the state's forests, including a fungal disease that is killing ohia, a tree unique to Hawaii that makes up the largest portion of the canopy in native wet forests.

Some conservation work directly responds to tourism. The harassment of wildlife like dolphins, turtles and Hawaiian monk seals is a recurring problem. Hikers can unknowingly bring invasive species into the forest on their boots. Snorkelers and boats trample on coral, adding stress to reefs already struggling with

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invasive algae and coral bleaching.

A 2019 report by Conservation International, a nonprofit environmental organization, estimated that total federal, state, county and private spending on conservation in Hawaii amounted to \$535 million but the need was \$886 million.

At the Diamond Head trail recently, some visitors said the fee would make the most sense for people who come to Hawaii often or who might be staying for several weeks. Some said \$50 was too high, especially for those who view a walk through nature as a low-cost activity.

"For a large family that wants to have the experience with the kids, that would be a lot of money," said Sarah Tripp, who was visiting Hawaii with her husband and two of their three children from Marquette, Michigan.

Katrina Kain, an English teacher visiting from Puerto Rico, said she thought the fee would "sting" some people but would be fine so long as it was well-advertised.

"If tourists were informed about it, then they would be OK with it," she said. "If that was a surprise \$50 fee, it would be a pretty lousy surprise."

The legislation says proceeds would go into a "visitor impact fee special fund" managed by the state Department of Land and Natural Resources.

Carissa Cabrera, project manager for the Hawaii Green Fee, a coalition of nonprofit groups supporting the measure, said this would ensure the state has money for conservation regardless of budget swings.

Mufi Hanneman, president and CEO of the Hawaii Lodging and Tourism Association, which represents hotels, backs the bill but said Hawaii must carefully monitor how the money is used.

"The last thing that you want to see is restrooms that haven't been fixed, trails or pathways that haven't been repaved or what have you — and year in, year out it remains the same and people are paying a fee," Hannemann said.

Taiwan defies China pressure before US House speaker meeting

By HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Taiwan defied threats of retaliation by China ahead of an expected meeting between the island's president and the U.S. House speaker Wednesday that will underscore her government's claim to sovereignty.

President Tsai Ing-wen is finishing a tour of Taiwan's remaining diplomatic allies in Latin America, Belize and Guatemala. The most politically sensitive part of her trip will be a meeting with U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in Los Angeles while she transits on her way back home.

Pro- and anti-Taiwan demonstrators gathered Tuesday night, local time, outside a downtown Los Angeles hotel in anticipation of Tsai's arrival. Her supporters lined a red carpet leading to the hotel's entrance, banging drums, chanting and holding Taiwanese flags and photos of the president. A smaller group demonstrating in favor of China gathered nearby on the sidewalk, at times chanting "One China."

China views Taiwan as its own territory and treats any dealings between U.S. and Taiwanese officials as a challenge to its sovereignty. Tsai's tour is a bid to demonstrate that her government has international support.

Belize and Guatemala are two of just 13 countries that formally recognize Taiwan, a number that has dipped as China has put pressure on and funneled money into isolating the island. Tsai's Latin American trip comes just a week after Honduras announced it was cutting ties with Taiwan in favor of China, potentially prompted by a \$300 million hydroelectric dam project in central Honduras built by a Chinese company.

Last week, and again on Monday, China threatened with countermeasures if Tsai met with McCarthy. The Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles issued a statement Monday saying it opposed any "any form of contact" between Taiwan authorities and the U.S.

"The reality and current situation that both sides of the (Taiwan) Strait belong to one China is very clear," the statement said.

A spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said at a daily news briefing Tuesday that China "will

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closely follow the developments and resolutely defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity.”

Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that it has never been part of China, and that China’s recent criticism has become increasingly “absurd.”

“Taiwan, the Republic of China, is a sovereign country, and has the right to make its own determination in developing relations with other countries in the world,” it said in a statement. “It does not accept interference or suppression by any country for any reason, and will not limit itself because of intimidation or interference.”

The United States’ longstanding “one-China” policy acknowledges that the Chinese claim Taiwan as their territory. However, the U.S. does not endorse that claim and remains Taiwan’s most important provider of military hardware and other defense assistance.

China has repeatedly asserted its claim to Taiwan, though Taiwan maintains its own democratic system of government since the sides split after a civil war in 1949.

Keeping up the military pressure, China’s People’s Liberation Army sent 20 warplanes toward Taiwan Monday to Tuesday as well as three warships in the latest round of exercises, which have increased significantly in recent years.

China regularly sends warplanes around the island and has at times seemingly used the exercises as a demonstration of its ire.

Last December, China sent 71 planes and seven ships toward Taiwan in a 24-hour display of force after it expressed anger at Taiwan-related provisions in a U.S. annual defense spending bill.

And last year, China responded to a visit by then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan with the largest live-fire drills in decades that included firing a missile over the island, which had landed in Japan’s exclusive economic zone.

The PLA’s increased military activity near Taiwan has raised concerns among regional governments, and also drawn greater international attention and rhetorical support for Taiwan’s defense. U.S. legislators have also started visiting Taiwan at a greater frequency, as anti-China sentiment and concerns over China’s strategic position grows in Congress.

Associated Press journalist Eugene Garcia in Los Angeles contributed.

Robotaxis aim to take San Francisco on ride into the future

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Two trailblazing ride-hailing services are heading toward uncharted territory as they seek regulatory approval to transport passengers around the clock throughout one of the most densely populated U.S. cities in vehicles that will have no one sitting in the driver’s seat.

If Cruise, a subsidiary of General Motors, and Waymo, a spinoff from Google, reach their goal before year’s end, San Francisco would become the first U.S. city with two totally driverless services competing against Uber, Lyft and traditional taxis — all of which depend on people to control the automobiles.

But Cruise and Waymo still must navigate around potential roadblocks, including complaints about their vehicles making unexpected, traffic-clogging stops that threaten to inconvenience other travelers and imperil public safety.

Cruise already has been charging people for driverless rides in less congested parts of San Francisco during night-time hours since last June. Waymo has been giving free driverless rides in a broader swath of the city while awaiting clearance to begin charging passengers in robotic vehicles that Google secretly began working on 14 years ago.

The effort to unleash dueling driverless services throughout San Francisco is shaping up to be just the first step in a far more ambitious expansion centered in California — a state where more than 35 million vehicles driven by humans are currently registered.

Cruise recently applied for permission to begin testing its robotic vehicles throughout California at speeds of up to 55 miles per hour (88 kilometers per hour) — 25 miles per hour (40 kilometers per hour) above

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the maximum speed for its robotaxis in San Francisco. Waymo is already testing its driverless cars in Los Angeles — the second largest U.S. city.

The California push comes on top of Cruise starting to test its robotaxis in Austin, Texas, as well as Phoenix, where since 2020 Waymo's driverless ride-hailing service has been carrying passengers on Arizona roads that are far less congested and challenging than the streets of San Francisco.

"We still have work to do, but it's improving at a pretty rapid rate," Cruise CEO Kyle Vogt told The Associated Press. "As it gets fine-tuned, it will get really elegant over time, but also the safety continues to improve."

Saswat Panigrahi, Waymo's chief product officer, expects the company's past experience to pay off as it transplants what it has learned from operating a driverless ride-hailing service in Phoenix to more heavily trafficked cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles.

"The uncertainty is definitely now far lower, having operated a fully autonomous service with real riders," Panigrahi said.

Both Cruise and Waymo recently announced their driverless fleets each have covered more than 1 million miles without a major accident. But their robotaxis also have experienced nagging problems in San Francisco that have caused traffic headaches and other nuisances that threaten to inconvenience people or, worse, block emergency vehicles rushing to a fire or other urgent calls for help.

"The expected things are easy, but it's the unexpected things that humans react to in real time that are a concern," said transportation expert Nico Larco, who is director of the Urbanism Next Center at the University of Oregon. "Best case, it will just causes confusion, havoc, congestion if the cars stop in the middle of the road. But the worst cases could actually be harmful to someone."

Meanwhile, dozens of other technology companies and automakers have joined in a race to develop self-driving car technology at a collective cost of more than \$100 billion. Their ultimate goal is to make money off robotic drivers that are safer and less expensive than human drivers. Robotaxis could also lower prices for passengers, although Vogt believes consumers may be willing to pay more for rides without a stranger behind the wheel.

The investments so far have produced a mixed bag of successes, flops and hyperbole from the likes of Tesla CEO Elon Musk, who predicted nearly four years ago that the electric automaker would be running a huge robotaxi service by the end of 2020 but still hasn't come close to realizing that ambition.

Concerns about robotaxis operating in ways that cause headaches for the people outside the vehicle was raised in a cautionary letter sent to California regulators in January by the San Francisco County Transportation Authority.

The letter cited at least 92 reported incidents of Cruise robotaxis making sudden stops in the street through Dec. 31. At least three of the incidents blocked the right of ways for public transportation for periods ranging from nine to 18 minutes.

Within the past year, driverless Cruise vehicles have also obstructed firefighters rushing to a three-alarm fire and or illegally entered into areas where there were ongoing efforts to douse a fire, according to the authority, which is asking regulators to hold off on unleashing robotaxis throughout San Francisco at all hours until there is more information about why and how often the cars periodically clog traffic. The abrupt braking and stops by Cruise's robotaxis have also been under investigation by federal regulators since late last year.

"We are just very wary," said Tilly Chang, the executive director for the San Francisco transportation authority. "We want to be supporters and help facilitate (driverless rides), but we have to make sure it's safe."

A pair of Associated Press reporters witnessed the the potential problems that robotaxis can cause in mid-February after a Waymo vehicle safely transported them on a trip through San Francisco that required navigating hilly terrain, turning in rush-hour traffic and yielding to pedestrians darting out into the crosswalks.

During one ride, the robotaxi stopped in the middle of the street after the AP reporters got out, and remained there for several minutes while a line of human-operated cars stacked up behind it. It turned out that a back door on the driver's side hadn't completely closed. In another glitch involving Cruise last

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September, an AP reporter took a roughly five-mile ride in a robotaxi nicknamed "Peaches," which repeatedly bypassed the designated destination. The reporter finally had to use the Cruise app to contact a dispatcher in a remote center so the car could be stopped — in the middle of the street.

Vogt noted that a number of improvements have been made since then, and indeed two different Cruise robotaxis — one named "Cherry" and the other named "Hollandaise" — dropped off the same reporter and his colleague at their designated designations on a follow-up trip, although Cherry stopped at a bus stop that briefly prevented the arrival of an oncoming bus.

Cruise's owner, the nearly 125-year-old General Motors, is nonetheless so confident robotaxis will drive more responsibly than humans and be able to expand its driverless service into more U.S. markets that it made the bold prediction last fall that Cruise would generate \$1 billion in revenue by 2025 — a big jump from Cruise's revenue of \$106 million last year when it also lost nearly \$2 billion.

That optimism is in sharp contrast to the disheartening experience of another storied automaker, Ford Motor, which paid \$1 billion in 2017 to acquire driverless startup Argo AI, only to shut down the division last October and swallow a \$2.7 billion loss after failing to find a buyer for the technology.

For McCarthy and Taiwan's leader, visit marks historic first

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — The moment will be historic — a U.S. House speaker meeting with the president of Taiwan for a rare visit on American soil, a high-profile encounter designed to boost support for the island government but already drawing blowback from an enraged China.

For Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen the meeting Wednesday with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in California is the most sensitive stop on her transit through the U.S. and Central America, a whirlwind diplomatic mission that is delicate, secretive and politically fraught.

But for the newly elected House speaker it is the start of his foray into foreign affairs. The Republican leader has focused more on domestic politics at home than international concerns abroad. Outspoken, even bellicose, against China, McCarthy sends a potentially provocative nod of support to Taiwan with the meeting.

"It's a very good debut," said Newt Gingrich, the Republican former speaker who led a delegation to Taiwan decades ago and advises McCarthy.

"I think it's a useful thing to communicate to a country — that's under enormous pressure — that they have real allies," Gingrich said. The Taiwanese, he said, will "see it as a morale boost."

The private meeting between Tsai and McCarthy comes against the very public backdrop of heightened U.S. focus on China over its actions at home and abroad, particularly China's potential aggression enforcing its claims over the island of Taiwan.

The Biden administration is watching China's interactions with Russia vis-a-vis the war in Ukraine, while Congress is probing China over a host of issues, from the Chinese spy balloon that floated over North America earlier this year to the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic to Chinese social media giant TikTok's data privacy practices.

The United States broke off official ties with Taiwan in 1979, when it formally established diplomatic relations with the Beijing government. While the U.S. acknowledges the "one-China" policy in which Beijing lays claim to the island of Taiwan as territory, the U.S. does not endorse China's claim to the island and remains Taiwan's key provider of military and defense assistance.

The session with McCarthy, who as House speaker is second in line of succession to the president, is Tsai's most high-level U.S. visit during her transit, which included a stop in New York last week. The private event Wednesday, which is expected to include Republican and Democratic lawmakers, has been closely held, a reminder of the pressures on her island government under the watchful eye of China. It would be the first known visit between a House speaker and a Taiwan president on American territory since the U.S. broke off formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, experts said.

"It's particularly an opportunity to demonstrate how strong the relationship with the United States is,"

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said Bonnie S. Glaser, the managing director of the Indo-Pacific program at the German Marshall Fund. "Of course, Congress is part of that," she said. Because the lack of formal diplomatic relations greatly limits any interaction between Taiwan and U.S. leaders, "it becomes even more important that they have meetings with members of Congress."

The Chinese government has expressed its displeasure ahead of Tsai's meeting with McCarthy, and threatened countermeasures over any contact with the House speaker. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Tuesday it will follow the developments and "resolutely defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity."

McCarthy, a sandwich shop operator in Bakersfield, California, before working as a congressional aide and being elected to Congress, is not known for vast foreign policy experience.

Unlike Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi, who used her speaker's gavel as a calling card to bring U.S. influence and aid around the globe, McCarthy is focusing his speakership more inward on the domestic needs of Americans.

While McCarthy has led congressional delegation trips abroad — to Israel, for example, and to Normandy, France, to mark the anniversary of the end of World War II — and had expressed interest in visiting Taiwan, he had not yet made plans for his own trip.

Pelosi's 2022 Taiwan visit drew fierce rebuke from China with live-fire drills that included firing missiles over the island. In December, China sent planes and ships toward Taiwan in a 24-hour display of force.

With the new speaker, it was decided that Tsai and McCarthy would meet in California.

McCarthy's more cautious foreign policy approach makes sense politically for the new leader as he tries to steer a Republican party that has become more isolationist, and less willing to engage the U.S. abroad as an earlier generation of lawmakers.

McCarthy barely won his own position as House speaker in January after a grueling party election that took 15 public ballots to win over his reluctant hard-right colleagues — a sizable faction of skeptics who could conceivably vote to oust McCarthy over any wrong turn.

Still, McCarthy stood up a new House Select Committee on China, drawing wide-ranging bipartisan support from Democrats, executing a long-running idea of his to drill down on the China's rising influence in the U.S. and the world.

The venue of the Reagan library and ranch in Simi Valley, near where McCarthy was raised in California's Central Valley, provides an evocative setting for him to try to lead more substantively on the global stage.

"He's grown up with Reagan Library," Gingrich said. "It communicates strength, optimism, deep patriotism and principles that worked."

Democrats' choice wins key Wisconsin Supreme Court race

By SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — A Democratic-backed Milwaukee judge won the high stakes Wisconsin Supreme Court race Tuesday, ensuring liberals will take over majority control of the court for the first time in 15 years with the fate of the state's abortion ban on the line.

Milwaukee County Circuit Judge Janet Protasiewicz, 60, defeated former Justice Dan Kelly, who previously worked for Republicans and had support from the state's leading anti-abortion groups.

The victory speaks to the importance of abortion as an issue for Democrats in a key swing state, with turnout the highest ever for a Wisconsin Supreme Court race that didn't share the ballot with a presidential primary.

In a jubilant scene at her victory party, the other three liberal justices on the court joined Protasiewicz on the stage and raised their arms in celebration.

Protasiewicz tried to downplay the importance of abortion as an issue in her victory, even though she and her allies, including an array of abortion rights groups including Planned Parenthood, made it the focus of much of her advertising and messaging to voters.

"It was really about saving our democracy, getting away from extremism and having a fair and impartial court where everybody gets a fair shot in the courtroom," Protasiewicz told The Associated Press after

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her win. "That's what it was all about."

The new court controlled 4-3 by liberals is expected to decide a pending lawsuit challenging the state's 1849 law banning abortion enacted a year after statehood. Protasiewicz said during the campaign that she supports abortion rights but stopped short of saying how she would rule on the lawsuit. She had called Kelly an "extreme partisan" who would vote to uphold the ban.

In addition to abortion, Protasiewicz's win is likely to impact the future of Republican-drawn legislative maps, voting rights and years of other GOP policies. It will also ensure that liberals will have the majority leading up to the 2024 presidential election and immediately after.

Four of the past six presidential elections in Wisconsin have been decided by less than a percentage point and Trump turned to the courts in 2020 in his unsuccessful push to overturn his roughly 21,000-vote loss in the state. The current court, under a 4-3 conservative majority, came within one vote of overturning President Joe Biden's win in the state in 2020, and both major parties are preparing for another close race in 2024.

Kelly is a former justice who has also performed work for Republicans and advised them on a plan to have fake GOP electors cast their ballots for Trump following the 2020 election even though Trump had lost.

Ahead of the vote, Protasiewicz called Kelly "a true threat to our democracy" because of his advising on the fake elector scheme.

Kelly had expressed opposition to abortion in the past, including in a 2012 blog post in which he said the Democratic Party and the National Organization for Women were committed to normalizing the taking of human life. He also had done legal work for Wisconsin Right to Life.

Kelly was endorsed by the state's top three anti-abortion groups, while Protasiewicz was backed by abortion rights advocates.

Kelly was appointed to the state Supreme Court by then-Gov. Scott Walker, a Republican, in 2016. He served four years before being defeated in 2020 on the same ballot as the Democratic presidential primary. Kelly was endorsed by Trump that year.

Trump did not endorse this year. Protasiewicz's endorsements included Hillary Clinton.

Kelly tried to distance himself from his work for Republicans, saying it was "irrelevant" to how he would work as a justice. He tried to make the campaign about Protasiewicz's record as a judge, arguing that she was soft on crime and accusing her of being "bought and paid for" by Democrats.

The Wisconsin Democratic Party gave Protasiewicz's campaign more than \$8 million, leading her to promise to recuse herself from any case brought by the party.

Protasiewicz said that while she anticipates many of the issues raised in the campaign will come before the court in the coming years, she pledged to be impartial and not beholden to Democrats and her liberal backers who poured an unprecedented amount of money into the race.

"I've told everybody on the entire time that I was running, despite the fact that I was sharing my personal values, every single decision that I will render will be rooted in the law," she said. "And that is the bottom line. They're independent and rooted in the law."

Kelly, in a statement after his loss, said Protasiewicz "made her campaign about cynical appeals to political passions, serial lies, and a blatant disregard for judicial ethics and the integrity of the court."

"I wish Wisconsin the best of luck," he said. "I think it will need it."

Protasiewicz was outspoken on Wisconsin's gerrymandered legislative maps, calling them "rigged." Kelly accused her of prejudging that case, abortion and others that could come before the court.

The state Supreme Court upheld Republican-drawn maps in 2022. Those maps, widely regarded as among the most gerrymandered in the country, have helped Republicans increase their hold on the state Legislature to near supermajority levels, even as Democrats have won statewide elections, including Tony Evers as governor in both 2018 and 2022 and Biden in 2020.

Protasiewicz will serve a 10-year term starting in August replacing retiring conservative Justice Pat Roggensack.

Trump's day in court as criminal defendant: What to know

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — For the first time in history, a former U.S. president has appeared in court as a criminal defendant.

Donald Trump surrendered to authorities Tuesday after being indicted by a New York grand jury on charges related to hush-money payments at the height of the 2016 presidential election.

Trump, a 2024 presidential candidate, pleaded not guilty to 34 felony charges in a Manhattan courtroom. He then flew home to Florida and spoke to a crowd of supporters at his home.

Here's what to know about Trump's day in court:

HUSH-MONEY PAYMENTS RELATED TO 2016 ELECTION

Prosecutors unsealed the indictment against the former president Tuesday, giving Trump, his lawyers and the world their first opportunity to see them. Trump was charged with 34 counts of falsifying business records in the first degree. Prosecutors said Trump conspired to undermine the 2016 presidential election by trying to suppress information that could harm his candidacy, and then concealing the true nature of the hush-money payments. The payments were made to two women — including a porn actor — who claimed they had sexual encounters with him years earlier, and to a doorman at Trump Tower who claimed to have a story about a child Trump fathered out of wedlock, according to the Manhattan district attorney's office.

DONALD J. TRUMP, DEFENDANT

Trump was only seen briefly outside the district attorney's office, where he surrendered to authorities and was booked and fingerprinted behind closed doors. Trump's mugshot was not taken, according to two law enforcement officials who could not publicly discuss details of the process and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

As the former president entered the courtroom, he briefly looked at a huddle of news cameras but did not stop to speak to reporters.

Inside the courtroom, Trump sat at the defense table with his hands in his lap and his lawyers at his side. He looked right at photojournalists who were briefly allowed into the courtroom as they snapped his photo. During the rest of the proceeding, he stayed still with his hands together and looked straight ahead. Trump only spoke briefly in court, telling the judge he was pleading "not guilty" and had been advised of his rights. The judge warned Trump that he could be removed from the courtroom if he was disruptive. Trump made no comment when he left court just under an hour later.

Trump's lawyer Todd Blanche said during the hearing that Trump is "absolutely frustrated, upset and believes that there is a great injustice happening" in the courtroom.

A 'SURREAL' DAY IN THE CITY WHERE HE GAINED FAME

Before he appeared in court, Trump made posts on his social media network complaining that the heavily Democratic area was a "VERY UNFAIR VENUE" and "THIS IS NOT WHAT AMERICA WAS SUPPOSED TO BE!" As his motorcade carried him across Manhattan, he posted that the experience was "SURREAL."

The Republican has portrayed the Manhattan case and three separate investigations from the Justice Department and prosecutors in Georgia, as politically motivated. In recent weeks, he has lashed out at Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, called on his supports to protest and warned about "potential death and destruction" if he were charged.

TRUMP ADDRESSES SUPPORTERS

Appearing in front of several hundred supporters at his Florida home, Mar-a-Lago, Tuesday night, Trump repeated his claims that the investigation was politically motivated. He and attacked Bragg and the judge in the New York case, the judge's family and other prosecutors investigating him in other cases.

"The only crime that I have committed is to fearlessly defend our nation from those who seek to destroy it," Trump said.

BRAGG SPEAKS BRIEFLY

Bragg, speaking publicly for the first time since the indictment last week, held a brief news conference after the court proceedings in which he said the hush-money scheme constituted "felony crimes in New

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York state—no matter who you are.”

“We cannot and will not normalize serious criminal conduct,” Bragg said. The Democratic prosecutor said accurate and true business records are important everywhere, but especially in Manhattan, because it’s the financial center of the world.

Bragg was asked at the news conference why he was bringing the case now and if the timing was political. The district attorney said his office had “additional evidence” that his predecessor did not.

“I bring cases when they’re ready,” he said.

WARNINGS AND POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES

The judge on Tuesday did not impose a gag order but warned Trump to avoid making comments that were inflammatory or could cause civil unrest. If convicted of any one of the 34 felony charges, Trump could face a maximum of four years in prison, but he’d likely be sentenced to less.

TRIAL WHILE CAMPAIGNING FOR PRESIDENCY

Trump is due back in court in December, but his lawyers asked that he be excused from attending that hearing in person because of the extraordinary security required to have him show up. Prosecutors asked the judge to set a trial for January — weeks before the first votes will be cast in the 2024 Republican presidential primary. Trump’s lawyers asked that it be pushed to the spring. The judge did not immediately set a date.

MIXED POLITICAL IMPACTS

Though he faces a swirl of legal challenges, Trump is running for president again and has sought to use the charges and other investigations to galvanize his supporters.

Most of the Republicans also running or eyeing campaigns have released statements supportive of Trump while slamming the investigations of him as politically motivated. Many Democratic elected officials have said little about the New York indictment, including President Joe Biden. Trump’s legal troubles are only expected to bolster Democratic voters’ opposition to him, but it’s unclear whether some Republicans and independent voters will see the legal problems as too much baggage.

A NEW YORK CIRCUS

A crowd of Trump supporters, thronged by journalists, gathered Tuesday outside the Manhattan courthouse. Republican Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia and George Santos of New York, who is facing multiple investigations over lies he told while running for office, were swarmed by cameras and reporters when they arrived and spoke mid-morning. A band of anti-Trump protesters appeared with a large banner saying, “Trump Lies All the Time.”

This story has been updated to correct that no trial date has been set but prosecutors asked for it to start in January. Associated Press reporters Michael Balsamo and Colleen Long in Washington contributed to this report.

India’s push for 24/7 clean energy from dams upends lives

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL and ASHWINI BHATIA Associated Press

KINNAUR, India (AP) — The pickup truck jostled away from the roaring Sutlej River and up the steep mountain path flanked by snow-capped Himalayan peaks, some nearly 7,000 meters (22,965 feet) high. The nine passengers, farmers-turned-activists campaigning to prevent more dams from being built, were traveling to the remote Kandar hamlet in India’s Kinnaur district.

The few-dozen Indigenous residents were forced to relocate after falling boulders destroyed most of their previous homes in 2005. And villagers believe tunneling for dams was to blame, although authorities deny it.

Indigenous activists like Buddha Sain Negi, 30, went there to learn more about the continued struggles faced by Kandar. Sitting atop a steep slope overlooking a 19-year-old dam, the activists heard residents speak of ways India’s hydroelectric push had upended their lives and led to nearly two decades of protest. Some families took shelter in sheds, and more lives were lost because of falling boulders before they got compensation to build new homes, although it wasn’t enough to mend livelihoods.

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For villagers like Raj Kumari, 48, the fear of that night remains. The farmer said her husband was out when the boulders began rolling down. "My daughter said that we'll get left behind and die, and only her father would survive," she said.

A favorite initiative of Indian governments, the push for dams has skyrocketed as the nation looks for round-the-clock energy that doesn't spew planet-warming emissions. Hydropower commonly is produced when fast-moving water spins turbines to generate electricity.

But natural water systems have been altered by dams in this region that receives little rainfall, and farmers are struggling to irrigate their orchards. Spring waters from melting glaciers they've historically relied on also are drying up with climate change.

Farmers found themselves turned into activists fighting against more dams, with thousands protesting last August after a fatal landslide in the district. Carving mountains to build tunnels that funnel river water has made deadly landslides more common — a risk scientists and locals have flagged, although authorities say they take precautions.

India's federal ministries for renewable energy and environment didn't respond to an email request for comment.

"This is a fight for our survival," said Buddha Sain Negi, the activist-farmer.

Dam opponents point to other impacts: Thousands of trees, including the rare Chilgoza pine whose nuts are prized and provide valuable income for local communities, are being cut to make way for construction. The Sutlej River is now dry in patches, meaning some families struggle to immerse the ashes of cremated loved ones. And some residents fear thousands of migrant workers, coming to work on the dam, could overwhelm them.

The district, home to around 100,000 people, already produces 4,000 megawatts of clean energy — the equivalent of four nuclear power plants, said Jiya Lal, a farmer who is part of an advocacy group for environmental justice in the mountains. He said locals here have been asked in the "national interest" to reconsider their objection to dams. He asked a question echoed across the Himalayas: "How much more can be demanded of us?"

The federal government aims to increase India's electricity output from dams to 70,000 megawatts by 2030 — an increase of 50% that could account for 8.5% of India's entire capacity. It also wants to add 18,800 megawatts of pumped-storage dams, which act as giant batteries that store energy by pumping water from one reservoir to another that's elevated then releasing it through turbines to produce power.

Only China and the U.S. have more dams than India's over 4,400. The country hopes dams can help solve the clean energy puzzle: How to keep the grid running on renewables when the sun doesn't shine or the wind doesn't blow.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that electricity generated by dams in Himachal Pradesh state would generate profits and jobs. "The wealth of water and forest in tribal areas is priceless," he said in October.

But recent disasters, including a holy town sinking in January, have resulted in "question marks" over the focus on dams as a way of ensuring round-the-clock clean power, said Vibhuti Garg, an energy economist at the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis.

About a tenth of India's power comes from the sun or wind, and large dams provide the "backbone" by allowing it to balance the grid when there are sharp changes in demand, said Ammu Susana Jacob, a scientist at the think tank Center of Study of Science, Technology and Policy.

To wean itself off dirty fuels and meet its 2030 goals, India needs to increase its energy storage capacity to 41 gigawatts, according to government estimates.

Bhanu Pratap Singh, director of the hydropower company Shree Bhavani Power Project, rued that dams hadn't received the same kind of governmental boosts that solar or wind had, but said this was changing.

Delays due to legal challenges of getting land meant that private companies were less keen to build large dams, Singh said. And with rising concerns about the risks of building dams in the fragile mountains, he said that those opposing dams and those building dams needed to be in "consistent and transparent dialogue".

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While dams, unlike battery storage, aren't reliant on expensive imports, they are still costly. Land needed to build them is scarce, and communities are often displaced. Cascading environmental impacts trigger local protests, like the one in Kinnaur, which add to costs. This helps make hydropower more expensive than solar or wind in India.

With global battery prices plummeting since 2017 and likely to get cheaper, India is faced with the "tricky" question of whether it makes sense to lock billions of dollars into new dams when other technologies are getting more viable, said Rahul Walawalkar, who heads the India Energy Storage Alliance, an industry group.

The sheer scale of India's energy transition — demand for electricity will grow more than anywhere else in the next 20 years — means there are limited options if the country wants to restrict imports. "It's a necessary risk," Walawalkar said.

In Kinnaur, the costs of India's answer to this question looms large for Shanta Kumar Negi, a local politician who says people in the higher reaches of the mountains buy water to irrigate fields, with dams exacerbating the water crisis triggered by global warming.

"If I don't fight to stop the wrong being done to us — how will I answer my children?" he asked.

Experts say the ongoing protests in Kinnaur and elsewhere underline the risks of pushing dams without thinking through potential impacts on the environment and the resulting financial costs. In 2019, at least 37 dams were delayed, and there were another 41 where construction hadn't begun for reasons ranging from financial problems to protests, according to a parliamentary report.

Signs of tensions over dam construction are visible on the national highway in Kinnaur: There are warnings about loose boulders on mountain walls, and ancient trees are painted with red crosses marking them for felling.

The situation reflects India's "siloed approach" to building big projects, such as dams, that don't take into account climate realities, said Abinash Mohanty, who heads climate change and sustainability at the global development organization IPE Global. The Himalayas are a more fragile ecosystem than others, disrupted by climate extremes and intense human activities — yet whether the environment had reached its tipping point wasn't taken into account.

Mohanty compared it to people trying to lift heavier weights than they can handle. "You'll either hurt yourself or drop it," he said.

Climate change is exacerbating threats. Over a fifth of 177 dams built close to Himalayan glaciers could be at risk of flooding if glacial lakes burst, according to a 2016 study. Five years later, a flood made worse by melting glaciers smashed two dams, killing at least 31 people.

Even some dams listed in government documents as designed to pump water to help store power aren't actually doing so. A 25-year-old dam in Gujarat doesn't pump water because of an engineering issue, while a second reservoir is still being built for another 17-year-old dam, according to the India Energy Storage Alliance.

India has drafted guidelines for boosting use of pumped-storage dams that suggest doing away with environmental assessments and public hearings for some projects.

But Walawalkar of the industry alliance said governments need to be careful about choosing the right locations to build dams. "Blanket environmental clearances could be a double-edged sword," he said.

Ghosal reported from New Delhi. Follow Aniruddha Ghosal at @aniruddhg1

Associated Press climate and environmental coverage receives support from several private foundations. See more about AP's climate initiative here. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Washington stocks up on abortion pills ahead of court ruling

By LISA BAUMANN Associated Press

BELLINGHAM, Wash. (AP) — Washington state has purchased a three-year supply of a leading abortion medication in anticipation of a court ruling that could limit its availability, Gov. Jay Inslee said Tuesday.

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The Democratic governor said he ordered the Department of Corrections, which has a pharmacy license, to buy 30,000 doses of the generic version of mifepristone at a cost of about \$1.28 million, or \$42.50 per pill. The shipment arrived in late March.

A two-pill combination of mifepristone and misoprostol is the most common form of abortion in the U.S. Research shows that medication-induced abortions are safe and effective. They were approved by the Food and Drug Administration over 20 years ago.

The awaited ruling in a Texas lawsuit brought by a Christian group — in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court decision last year to strip away the constitutional right to end a pregnancy — would affect states where abortion is legal as well as those that outlaw it.

"This Texas lawsuit is a clear and present danger to patients and providers all across the country," Inslee said in a statement. "Washington will not sit by idly and risk the devastating consequences of inaction."

Former President Donald Trump-appointed Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk heard debate in March over the Alliance Defending Freedom's request to revoke or suspend the FDA's approval of mifepristone. The conservative group claims it was improperly approved.

Kacsmaryk said he would rule "as soon as possible" without giving any clear indication of how he might decide.

The bulk pill purchase also comes as Washington state Attorney General Bob Ferguson pursues the issue from another angle: He's helping to lead a multistate lawsuit in federal court meant to further ease restrictions to the medication.

The lawsuit filed with Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum in February against the FDA accuses it of singling out mifepristone for excessively burdensome regulation despite evidence that the drug is safer than Tylenol, Ferguson said in a statement at the time.

The lawsuit asks the court to find certain FDA restrictions unlawful and to stop the federal agency from enforcing or applying them to mifepristone.

State lawmakers are also bringing legislation that will authorize the state Department of Corrections to sell or distribute the drug stockpile to licensed providers in Washington.

The bill's co-sponsor, Sen. Karen Keiser, of Des Moines, said the last year has made it clear that they can't be complacent when it comes to reproductive health.

"The Legislature is taking a number of crucial steps this session to protect abortion rights," Keiser said, "but those rights are meaningless without access to care."

Several moves have been made in Washington to strengthen abortion access, including a directive from Inslee instructing the Washington State Patrol not to cooperate with out-of-state abortion investigations. Other abortion and gender-affirming care bills are expected to pass the Washington Legislature this session.

Abortion has been legal in Washington since a 1970 statewide ballot referendum.

Trump charged with 34 felony counts in hush money scheme

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, ERIC TUCKER, JENNIFER PELTZ and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A stone-faced Donald Trump made a momentous courtroom appearance Tuesday when he was confronted with a 34-count felony indictment charging him in a scheme to bury allegations of extramarital affairs that arose during his first White House campaign.

The arraignment in a Manhattan courtroom was a stunning — and humbling — spectacle for the first ex-president to ever face criminal charges. With Trump watching in silence, prosecutors bluntly accused him of criminal conduct and set the stage for a possible criminal trial in the city where he became a celebrity decades ago.

The indictment centers on allegations that Trump falsified internal business records at his private company while trying to cover up an effort to illegally influence the 2016 election by arranging payments that silenced claims potentially harmful to his candidacy. It includes 34 counts of fudging records related to checks Trump sent to his personal lawyer and problem-solver to reimburse him for his role in paying off a porn actor who said she had an extramarital sexual encounter with Trump years earlier.

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"The defendant, Donald J. Trump, falsified New York business records in order to conceal an illegal conspiracy to undermine the integrity of the 2016 presidential election and other violations of election laws," said Assistant District Attorney Christopher Conroy.

Trump, somber and silent as he entered and exited the Manhattan courtroom, said "not guilty" in a firm voice while facing a judge who warned him to refrain from rhetoric that could inflame or cause civil unrest. All told, the ever-verbose Trump, who for weeks before Tuesday's arraignment had assailed the case against him as political persecution, uttered only 10 words in the courtroom. He appeared to glare for a period at Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, the prosecutor who brought the case.

As he returned to his Florida estate, Mar-a-Lago, where he delivered a primetime address to hundreds of supporters, Trump again protested his innocence and asserted on his Truth Social platform that the "hearing was shocking to many in that they had no 'surprises,' and therefore, no case."

In his speech, Trump lashed out anew at the prosecution and attacked in bitter terms the prosecutor and the judge presiding over the case despite being admonished hours earlier about incendiary rhetoric. In a sign of that other probes are weighing on him, Trump also steered his speech into a broadside against a separate Justice Department investigation into the mishandling of classified documents.

"I never thought anything like this could happen in America," Trump said of the New York indictment. "This fake case was brought only to interfere with the upcoming 2024 election and it should be dropped immediately."

The crowd at Mar-a-Lago included supporters like failed Arizona gubernatorial candidate Kari Lake and longtime ally Roger Stone. Trump's wife, Melania, was absent from his side and was also not seen with him in New York.

Even so, the indictment amounts to a remarkable reckoning for Trump after years of investigations into his personal, business and political dealings. It shows how even as Trump is looking to reclaim the White House in 2024, he is shadowed by investigations related to his behavior in the two prior elections, with prosecutors in Atlanta and Washington scrutinizing efforts by Trump and his allies to undo the 2020 presidential election — probes that could produce even more charges.

In the New York case, each count of falsifying business records, a felony, is punishable by up to four years in prison — though it's not clear if a judge would impose any prison time if Trump is convicted. The next court date is Dec. 4 — two months before Republicans begin their nominating process in earnest — and Trump will again be expected to appear.

A conviction would not prevent Trump from running for or winning the presidency in 2024.

The arraignment also delved into Trump's rhetoric on the case, with prosecutors at one point handing printouts of his social media posts to the judge and defense lawyers as Trump looked on. Supreme Court Judge Juan Merchan did not impose a gag order but told Trump's lawyers to urge him to refrain from posts that could encourage unrest.

The broad contours of the case have long been known, focusing on a scheme that prosecutors say began months into his candidacy in 2015, as his celebrity past collided with his presidential ambitions.

Though prosecutors expressed confidence in the case, a conviction is no sure thing given the legal complexities of the allegations, the application of state election laws to a federal election and prosecutors' likely reliance on a key witness, Trump's former lawyer and fixer Michael Cohen, who pleaded guilty in 2018 to false statements.

It centers on payoffs to two women, porn star Stormy Daniels and Playboy model Karen McDougal, who said they had extramarital sexual encounters with Trump years earlier, as well as to a Trump Tower doorman who claimed to have a story about a child he alleged the former president had out of wedlock.

"It's not just about one payment. It is 34 false statements and business records that were concealing criminal conduct," Bragg told reporters, when asked how the three separate cases were connected.

All 34 counts against Trump are linked to a series of checks that were written to Cohen to reimburse him for his role in paying off Daniels. Those payments, made over 12 months, were recorded in various internal company documents as being for a legal retainer that prosecutors say didn't exist. Cohen testified

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before the grand jury and is expected to be a star prosecution witness.

Nine of those monthly checks were paid out of Trump's personal accounts, but records related to them were maintained in the Trump Organization's data system.

Prosecutors allege that the first instance of Trump directing hush money payments came in the fall of 2015, when a former Trump Tower doorman was trying to sell information about an alleged out-of-wedlock child fathered by Trump.

David Pecker, a Trump friend and the publisher of the National Enquirer, made a \$30,000 payment to the doorman to acquire the exclusive rights to the story, pursuant to an agreement to protect Trump during his presidential campaign, according to the indictment. Pecker's company later determined the doorman's story was false, but is alleged to have enforced the doorman's confidentiality at Cohen's urging until after Election Day.

Trump denies having sexual liaisons with both Daniels and McDougal and has denied any wrongdoing involving payments.

Tuesday's schedule, with its striking blend of legal and political calendar items, represents the new split-screen reality for Trump as he submits to the dour demands of the American criminal justice system while projecting an aura of defiance and victimhood at celebratory campaign events.

Wearing his signature dark suit and red tie, Trump turned and waved to crowds outside the building before heading inside to be fingerprinted and processed. He arrived at court in an eight-car motorcade from Trump Tower, communicating in real time his anger at the process.

"Heading to Lower Manhattan, the Courthouse," he posted on his Truth Social platform. "Seems so SUR-REAL — WOW, they are going to ARREST ME. Can't believe this is happening in America. MAGA!"

Afterward, Trump lawyer Todd Blanche told reporters that it was a "sad day for the country."

"You don't expect this to happen to somebody who was president of the United States," he said.

Tucker and Weissert reported from Washington. Associated Press journalists Jill Colvin, Bobby Caina Calvin, Larry Neumeister, Karen Matthews, Larry Fleisher, Deepti Hajela, Julie Walker, Ted Shaffrey, David R. Martin, Joe Frederick and Robert Bumsted in New York; Colleen Long and Michael Balsamo in Washington; Adriana Gomez Licon in Palm Beach, Florida; and Terry Spencer in Palm Beach, Florida, contributed to this report.

Follow the AP's coverage of former President Donald Trump at <https://apnews.com/hub/donald-trump>.

UConn returns home to celebrations, vandalism on campus

By PAT EATON-ROBB Associated Press

STORRS, Conn. (AP) — UConn coach Dan Hurley let the moment envelope him Tuesday on the 40-mile ride from Bradley International Airport back to campus watching the fans who hung signs from highway overpasses and lined the streets leading into Storrs.

More than 7,000 people gathered inside Gampel Pavilion, Connecticut's home arena, to greet the team Tuesday afternoon with raucous cheers and standing ovations in a celebration of Monday's win over San Diego State. It was the program's fifth NCAA title in the last 24 years — the most of any program in college basketball.

"This is a big deal," Hurley said. "The NCAA Tournament is a big deal. Playing in the Final Four is a big deal. And obviously basketball is a big deal to the people of Connecticut. Men's and women's basketball, it's the pro sports team of the state and you just see the incredible pride that people have in their Huskies."

Junior guard Andre Jackson said he got emotional just looking at the spot in the rafters where his team's banner will hang alongside those commemorating the school's four other men's championships and 11 women's titles.

"It's literally basketball country," he said. "There's not much else to do out here. That's a part of the reason why I came here, was the environment, just being around the championship legacy programs and

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around so many greats that have come through this place.”

The Huskies landed at Bradley International Airport in Connecticut shortly after 3 p.m. and were given a police escort for the trip east to the campus.

Students began lining up outside Gampel Pavilion at about the same time and waited for about 2 1/2 hours for the team to arrive.

“As a student, it makes you really proud to be from Connecticut and to go to UConn,” said Jacob Levy, a 20-year-old sophomore from Woodbridge. “We’re a blue blood, 100%. I was saying that before even last night. We’re the most successful program of the last 25 years. I don’t think there’s any debate now.”

But not all of the celebrating was joyous.

Following the game Monday, some UConn fans pulled down signs and light poles, smashed windows and caused other damage on campus.

Fifteen people had been arrested Tuesday and 16 were taken to the hospital during the celebrations. None of the injuries were thought to be serious, UConn spokeswoman Stephanie Reitz said.

“The vast majority of those celebrating the Husky victory last night did so safely and responsibly,” she said in a statement. “A small number chose to risk their safety and that of others by vandalizing or destroying property after the game.”

Most of those arrested were students, she said. Police were investigating the damage, and any students found responsible could face expulsion, she said.

Gampel Pavilion was also open Monday night for students to watch the game, which was played in Houston. More than 10,000 people attended that watch party.

Much of the partying, which lasted into the early morning, was peaceful. However, social media and television video showed students taking down signs and light posts, with several using one pole to smash through the glass portion of a door at one campus building as a crowd cheered.

Reitz said the damage also included broken windows, a vehicle flipped on its side and fires set in trash dumpsters and on wooden benches.

“We were on the streets and people were going crazy,” said Nancy Toskova, a 20-year-old junior from Montreal, Quebec. “Everyone was celebrating. Everyone was happy. You felt good. Everyone came together. I was expecting something worse to be honest. I was expecting cars flipping and fires everywhere and people breaking everything, which happened but not to the extent I imagined.”

Crews worked feverishly through the morning to clean up the debris and make repairs. Classes and other academic operations were held as scheduled.

A victory parade and rally is planned around the state Capitol in Hartford on Saturday morning.

“The UConn Huskies men’s basketball team has been a dominating force in the NCAA Tournament and it will be an honor for us to welcome the coaches and the players to downtown Hartford and give them the celebration they deserve,” Gov. Ned Lamont said in a statement.

More AP coverage of March Madness: <https://apnews.com/hub/march-madness> and <https://apnews.com/hub/womens-college-basketball> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Funeral held for custodian killed in Nashville attack

By TRAVIS LOLLER and JONATHAN MATTISE Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Mike Hill, a 61-year-old custodian who was among the six people killed in last week’s attack at a Nashville elementary school, was remembered Tuesday for his loving nature, his culinary skills and his faith.

Hundreds of friends and family members turned out for Hill’s funeral at Stephens Valley Church, where pastor Jim Bachmann said the hearts of the congregation were aching for the man they called “Big Mike.”

“He was big, and he was strong, and he was tough,” Bachmann said. “But he was also soft and tender.”

“He hugged my kids and he hugged your kids, and he knew them by name,” Bachmann said. “As the first victim — maybe this is a sentimental thought, but it’s a comfort to me to think that Mike was there

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to welcome the children through the pearly gates.”

Hill was among the three adults and three 9-year-old students who were killed in the March 27 mass shooting at The Covenant School. Police shot and killed the 28-year-old former student who carried out the attack. At a news conference Tuesday, several officers described how they had to step around victims and run toward gunfire to find the attacker, amid smoke and smell of gunpowder.

Hill was one of the few African American members of Stephens Valley, a mostly white suburban church that he attended because of his friendship with Bachmann. The pastor previously founded Covenant Presbyterian Church, where the The Covenant School was located, and the two met and became friends while working there together, Bachmann said.

The pastor, who is white, said he and Hill were “about as different as two people could be” but shared a faith in Jesus through which “we will be together in heaven for all eternity.”

The funeral service blended worship traditions, alternating a powerful hymn from a Black gospel choir with meditative instrumental pieces for violin and piano. It concluded with a rendition of “Amazing Grace” played on the bagpipes and drums.

Hill had seven children and 14 grandchildren, and he liked spending time with his family and cooking, according to an obituary.

Bachmann recalled that Hill would often bring him freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. For special occasions, he might bring a pecan or chess pie.

“He led me into temptation. He did not deliver me from it,” Bachmann joked.

Addressing the shooting, Bachmann said tragedies like this evoke many emotions besides grief, including anger and confusion.

“People want change. They want action. They want leadership. They want something decisive to happen so that this sort of thing doesn’t happen again,” he said. “Of course we all want that.”

Bachmann said he doesn’t have the answers, but he called on those assembled to follow Jesus’s commandment to “love one another as I have loved you.”

“Love one another and we will have the kind of world we want,” he said. “And we’ll have peace like a river and righteousness like the waves of the sea.”

Chief John Drake told reporters at a later news conference that he has attended the five funerals held so far.

The Metro Nashville Police Department brought in several officers to recount how they pursued the shooter at the school.

Drake said the school’s active shooting training likely prevented more deaths, pointing out how school staff knew to have kids hide by standing against walls, away from windows and out of hallways.

The department has said that during the attack, the shooter fired 152 rounds before being killed by police. Two officers shot four rounds each, police have said. Police declined to get into additional specifics Tuesday about the gunfire that ended with the shooter’s death.

Rex Engelbert, one of the first officers to enter the school, said he wasn’t assigned to the precinct. He was heading to the police academy when he heard the shooting call and quickly redirected.

“I really had no business being where I was,” Engelbert said. “I think you can call it fate, or God, or whatever you want. But I can’t count on both my hands the irregularities that put me in that position.”

Engelbert’s response is shown on clips of his body camera footage released by the department. A school administrator handed him a key to enter the building, and he shouted out “I need 3!”, instructing other officers to follow him inside.

Det. Sgt. Jeff Mathes, who said he had never seen Engelbert before that day, entered the same way, alongside three detectives. As they cleared out rooms on the first floor, Engelbert and Mathes said they heard gunshots upstairs. Mathes said officers had to step over a victim while moving toward the gunfire.

“Doing what our training tells us to do in those situations and following a stimulus, all of us stepped over a victim,” Mathes said. “I, to this day, don’t know how I did that morally, but training is what kicked in.”

On another side of the school, Det. Michael Collazo said a school employee directed him to enter through

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the glass door that the shooter had shot through to get into the building. Clips of Collazo's body camera footage were also made public.

Collazo said that as he entered the school, he saw a person laid out on the ground, not moving. He hit a locked door to the second floor, then began checking rooms on the first floor until hearing shots from above and moved that way. Eventually, his group and Engelbert's caught up with each other as they moved toward the shooter's gunfire.

"Once we started hearing the first shots, it kind of kicked into overdrive for us," Collazo said.

Police have said Engelbert and Collazo were the officers who fired their weapons at the shooter.

Meanwhile, outside, Commander Dayton Wheeler was helping to set up ambulances when gunfire started firing down from the second-floor window. Police have released a photo of bullet holes in a cruiser.

The police chief noted that some officers didn't slow to put on ballistic helmets before heading into the building. Engelbert said he had not put on his rifle-caliber heavy body armor.

"They got prepared and went right in, knowing that every second, every moment wasted could cost lives," Drake said.

This version corrects the spelling of Det. Sgt. Jeff Mathes' surname.

Kansas passes trans bathroom bill; Arkansas OKs own version

By JOHN HANNA and ANDREW DeMILLO Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — A Kansas bill to impose some of the nation's broadest bathroom restrictions and ban transgender people from changing the name or gender on their driver's licenses cleared the Legislature by margins Tuesday that suggest backers could override the Democratic governor's expected veto.

Kansas Senate voted 28-12 with one vote more than a two-thirds majority needed to overturn any veto, giving final passage to an earlier House-passed version and sending it to Gov. Laura Kelly. Both chambers have Republican supermajorities.

The measure deals with bathrooms, locker rooms and other facilities, and defines "sex" as "either male or female, at birth," a move LGBTQ+-rights advocates said would legally erase transgender people and deny recognition to non-binary, gender fluid and gender non-conforming people.

The final vote came less than two hours after Arkansas lawmakers sent Republican Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders a bathroom bill after scaling it back following complaints it would have criminalized transgender people for simply using a public restroom. The Arkansas bill would allow transgender people to be charged with a misdemeanor for using bathrooms or changing rooms associated with their identities if cisgendered minors are present, but only if they enter it "for the purpose of arousing or gratifying a sexual desire."

Both state's measures are among several hundred aimed at rolling back LGBTQ rights pursued by Republicans this year across the United States. The wave of legislation has angered and vexed LGBTQ-rights activists, transgender people and parents of transgender children.

"I am what they are scared of," Ian Benalcazar, a 13-year-old northeastern Kansas transgender boy said during a recent LGBTQ-rights rally outside the Statehouse. "I am a human being and I deserve to be treated as such, and I deserve to be happy."

Arkansas is among seven states that have banned transgender students from using school bathrooms and locker rooms associated with their gender identities, its law taking effect this summer. However, the Kansas measure also covers prisons, jails, rape crisis centers, domestic violence shelters and other spaces "where biology, safety or privacy" prompt separate facilities for men and women.

The Kansas bill defines male and female based on a person's physical anatomy at birth.

The measure now headed to Kelly would declare that legally, "sex" means "biological" sex, "either male or female, at birth." And it adds, "important governmental objectives of protecting the health, safety and privacy" justify separate spaces for men and women like bathrooms and locker rooms.

"This will protect women's spaces currently reserved for women and men's spaces," said House Health Committee Chair Brenda Landwehr, a Wichita Republican who voted for the bill.

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Supporters framed their measure as a proposed "Women's Bill of Rights," similar to measures introduced in Congress and at least five other states. It was based on language circulated by several national anti-trans groups.

Senate President Ty Masterson, a Wichita-area Republican, said lawmakers are trying to protect families amid what people see as a small but growing number of cases of transgender girls or women using facilities with cisgendered girls or women.

"People are starting to pay attention," Masterson said.

Kansas House members included provisions requiring accommodations for some intersex people born with chromosomes, genitalia, or reproductive organs not associated with typical definitions for males or females.

The House vote last month was 83-41, one vote shy of the two-thirds majority necessary to override any veto, but one conservative Republican likely to support the bill was absent.

Kelly vetoed a proposed ban on transgender athletes in girls' and women's sports this year for the third straight year. Republican lawmakers in Kansas also are pursuing a bill aimed at stopping gender-affirming care for minors, something at least 11 states have done.

The governor promised LGBTQ youth lobbying lawmakers last week that she would "protect your rights" and "veto any bill that aims to harm or discriminate against you."

In Arkansas, lawmakers initially considered a version of their bill that would have gone further than a 2016 North Carolina bathroom law, through the North Carolina law didn't have criminal penalties. The Arkansas measure allows someone to be charged with misdemeanor sexual indecency with a child.

The Republican-dominated state Senate approved the revised bill on a 29-4 vote without debate. The House approved it last week without any "no" votes.

Doctors say reproductive anatomy at birth doesn't always align with strict definitions of sex and that binary views of sexual identity can miss biological nuances.

Carson Rapp, a Wichita, Kansas-area 15-year-old who identifies as bigender or embracing "both more masculine and more feminine traits," said expressing one's gender identity doesn't harm others.

"Why stop people from doing it if they're just being themselves and having fun and expressing themselves?" Carson said during an LGBTQ-youth lobbying day.

LGBTQ-rights advocates say having a driver's license or birth certificate confirm a transgender person's identity is important by itself but also can prevent daily hassles or harassment. The bill's language would prevent transgender people from changing both driver's licenses and birth certificates, but Kansas is under a 2019 federal court order to allow birth certificate changes.

Carson's father, Will Rapp, the Kansas managing director for GLSEN, a group advocating for LGBTQ youth, said it's discouraging to see what he called "pretty awful" legislation.

"I would like to think that if they were to get to know these young people, that would change their hearts, and we will always have hope for that," he said.

DeMillo reported from Little Rock, Arkansas.

On Twitter, follow John Hanna on Twitter: <https://www.twitter.com/apjdhanna> and Andrew DeMillo: <https://twitter.com/ademillo>

Queen Camilla: Charles' wife gets title on coronation invite

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — King Charles III's wife has been officially identified as Queen Camilla for the first time, with Buckingham Palace using the title on invitations for the monarch's May 6 coronation.

Camilla, who until now has been described as queen consort, is given equal billing on the ornate medieval style invitations that will be sent to more than 2,000 guests and were unveiled on Tuesday.

The new title is another step in the remarkable transformation of a woman once derided as a home-

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wrecker because of her role in the breakdown of Charles' marriage to the late Princess Diana.

Charles and Camilla met long before the future king married Diana in 1981 and their relationship continued throughout the tumultuous marriage. That made Camilla an object of scorn among Diana's many fans, who rallied around the princess as her marriage collapsed.

But Camilla has won over much of the British public with her warmth and down-to-earth humor since she married Charles in a civil ceremony in 2005. The late Queen Elizabeth II early last year issued a statement saying she hoped Camilla would be known as "queen consort" when Charles became king.

Camilla will be crowned alongside her husband on May 6 at Westminster Abbey.

The palace released a few more details about the coronation on Tuesday, announcing that 9-year-old Prince George, the king's eldest grandson, who is second in line to the throne, would be one of four pages of honor attending the monarch during the service. Camilla will also have four pages.

The eight young pages are either family friends or close relatives of Charles and Camilla and will carry the robes of prominent figures during the day.

The coronation invitations feature the ancient motif of the Green Man in a nod to the monarch's record of supporting conservation and environmental protection.

The Green Man is "an ancient figure from British folklore, symbolic of spring and rebirth, to celebrate the new reign," the palace said.

"The shape of the Green Man, crowned in natural foliage, is formed of leaves of oak, ivy and hawthorn, and the emblematic flowers of the United Kingdom."

The design, created by heraldic artist and manuscript illuminator Andrew Jamieson, will be printed on a recycled card with gold foil detailing.

Catan board game creator, Klaus Teuber, dies at 70

By The Associated Press undefined

Klaus Teuber, creator of the hugely popular Catan board game in which players compete to build settlements on a fictional island, has died after a brief illness, according to a family statement. He was 70.

The board game, originally called The Settlers of Catan when introduced in 1995 and based on a set of hexagonal tiles, has sold tens of millions of copies and is available in more than 40 languages. It has spawned dozens of spinoffs and new editions, including electronic versions, not to mention products related to the game.

"It is with great sadness and a heavy heart that the Teuber family announces their beloved husband and father Klaus Teuber passed away at the age of 70 on April 1, 2023 after a short and serious illness," said the statement posted on the German-language Catan website. The family requested privacy.

A statement from the Catan studio team on social media noted that "While Klaus' contributions to the board gaming industry are immeasurable, we will remember him most as a kind and selfless human being, an inspirational leader, and most importantly, as a friend."

Teuber was born in June 1952 in the German town of Rai-Breitenbach. He was working as a dental technician in the 1980s outside the industrial city of Darmstadt when he took up designing board games in his basement, he told The New Yorker magazine in 2014. "I had many problems with the company and the profession," he said. "I developed games to escape. This was my own world I created."

In the multi-player game, competitors use five resources to build their colonies, or settlements: wool, grain, lumber, brick, and ore. Teuber never thought his game would become so successful; he finally left his dental technician job in 1998 "when I felt like Catan could feed me and my family," he told the New Yorker. The game became a family business.

In the first five months of the pandemic in 2020, sales skyrocketed as people played games in quarantine, the company told NPR.

The Catan studio team urged those mourning Teuber to "honor Klaus' memory by being kind to one another, pursuing your creative passions fearlessly, and enjoying a game with your loved ones."

Relief, but some mixed feelings, as Finland joins NATO

By JARI TANNER and KOSTYA MANENKOV Associated Press

HELSINKI (AP) — The selling points of the charming bed-and-breakfast are its century-old buildings, its spacious rooms and its proximity to Russia, a short cross-country ski trip to the east.

For Russians, it was place to stay when they came to buy dairy goods and dish soap in the closest part of the European Union, which became a part of NATO on Tuesday. For Finns with roots in the Karelia region, which covers parts of both Finland and Russia, they could go across the border to buy cheap gas and car parts and visit sites of the clashes between Finnish forces and the Soviet Red Army during World War II.

The harmony of the Kuuksenkaari bed-and-breakfast was briefly interrupted Tuesday morning when owners Eija Hiltunen and Eero Tuomisto argued, peacefully and quietly, about the necessity of Finland joining NATO, the Finnish flag lifted alongside 30 others in Brussels.

For Eija Hiltunen, who moved to the northern Karelia region with her husband more than a decade ago, Finland becoming part of the world's biggest security alliance was an unnecessary provocation.

"For the past fifteen, twenty years now, things have been quiet here on the border. It has been easy to cross the border and there has been plenty of cross-border activity," said Hiltunen.

Her husband, a retired business journalist from Helsinki, was a stronger supporter of their country joining NATO.

"I think it feels somewhat safer now," said Tuomisto, whose grandfather fought against the Soviet Red Army in clashes in the region during World War II. "There is no uncertainty anymore. The previous crisis (World War II) isn't that far behind us. You can see it all around here. No one has forgotten our history with Russia."

Their area, Ilomantsi, in the easternmost tip of the EU, has several museums dedicated to war memorabilia and battles that Finns fought against the Soviet Union.

Finland shares a 1,340-kilometer (832-mile) border with Russia, so its entry will more than double the size of NATO's border with Russia. Though the alliance says it poses no threat to Moscow, the Russian Foreign Ministry warned that "it will be forced to take military-technical and other retaliatory measures" to a move that marks "a fundamental change in the situation in Northern Europe, which had previously been one of the most stable regions in the world."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov also pointed out Tuesday that Russia has no territorial disputes with Finland.

In Finland, Hiltunen pointed out that their area's distance from the capital, about 485 kilometers (300 miles) away, has affected their feelings about joining NATO.

"I would be awfully happy about NATO membership if I lived in Helsinki," said Hiltunen who moved to Ilomantsi from the capital 14 years ago. "But when you live here on the eastern border between NATO and Russia ... it makes you think and brings different kind of thoughts and feelings to your mind."

The NATO flags were raised alongside the national flags in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a building that was originally built for the military of the Russian Empire in the 19th century. Curious onlookers could be seen near the gates of the foreign ministry.

Aki Luhtanen, a professor of psychiatric nursing who was among those stopping by the Foreign Ministry, said Russia's war on Ukraine feels very close and NATO membership offers protection now, and for the long term.

"I think we should be aware and afraid of Russia," Luhtanen said. "And I think in the future (it) is very, very important to belong to NATO."

It was on that same ministry building that Finnish authorities projected the colors of the Ukrainian flag after Russia's invasion last year, in an early sign of strong support for Kyiv.

Newspapers, leaders and commentators alike agreed that Tuesday was a historic day for the Nordic nation of 5.5 million people.

"Until now, we have defended our country alone," Defense Minister Antti Kaikkonen told public broadcaster YLE on arrival in Brussels. "From now on, we can rely on getting outside help should things get

tough. And of course, we are ready to help should someone be in trouble.”

The ceremony in Brussels falls on the 74th anniversary of the signing of NATO’s founding Washington Treaty on April 4, 1949.

Finland’s parliamentary website was briefly paralyzed by a denial-of-service attack on Tuesday. The attacks — in which participants flood targets with junk data — made the parliament’s site hard to use, with many pages not loading and some functions not available. It was seen by cyber experts as a way to grab attention.

A pro-Russian hacker group known as NoName057 (16) claimed responsibility, saying the attack was retaliation for Finland joining NATO. The hacker group has taken part in a slew of cyberattacks on the U.S. and its allies in the past. Its claim could not be immediately verified.

The personal webpage of Prime Minister Sanna Marin was also briefly down due to a denial-of-service attack, the Finnish news agency STT said.

Trump’s surrender at courthouse creates New York spectacle

By BOBBY CAINA CALVAN and DEEPTI HAJELA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A small park built on a site that was once a swampy, sewage-filled pond was ground zero for the frenzy surrounding former President Donald Trump’s surrender Tuesday at a courthouse in Lower Manhattan.

Hundreds of onlookers, protesters, journalists and a few politicians swarmed into the confines of Collect Pond Park across the street from the criminal courthouse, where Trump pleaded not guilty to 34 felony counts. Ultimately, though, hardly anyone got a glimpse of Trump: He entered and left the courthouse out of view of demonstrators gathered in the park.

The crowd was small, by the standards of New York City protests, which routinely draw thousands. And fears that unruly mobs might force police to shut down swaths of the city proved to be unfounded, with security measures mostly disappearing within a couple of blocks.

But within the park and the surrounding sidewalks, there was plenty of chaos.

Metal barricades separated Trump supporters from anti-Trump protesters, and police stepped in to break up small skirmishes. Journalists, some of whom had taken turns waiting in line all night to reserve a coveted seat in the courtroom, pressed in on notable figures who appeared.

Whistles and jeers from anti-Trump protesters nearly drowned out remarks by U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Georgia Republican, who had come to support Trump. But she drew cheers from the pro-Trump contingent before making a fast exit as journalists jostled for position around her.

Also on hand to support Trump was U.S. Rep. George Santos, the besieged Republican congressman facing multiple investigations into lies about his biography that he told while running for office.

“I’m not here for the cameras,” he insisted to reporters. “I want to support the president, just because I think this is unprecedented, and it’s a bad day for democracy.”

The crowds grew larger in the moments leading up to Trump’s arrival at the courthouse to become the first president or former president in U.S. history to face criminal charges.

But the energy of the crowd faded as the hours passed Tuesday, and after it was clear Trump had departed, the park started to empty out quickly.

New York police had said they were ready for large protests by Trump supporters, who share the Republican former president’s belief that the New York grand jury indictment and three additional pending investigations are politically motivated and intended to weaken his bid to retake the White House in 2024.

A few hundred did show up to support Trump on Tuesday, waving Trump flags and wearing “Make America Great Again” hats.

But security was loose enough in the neighborhood that plenty of passers-by walked through the park just to see what was going on.

One woman went through what looked like a Tai Chi routine, steadfastly ignoring the reporters.

At one point, a tour guide led a group of tourists through the area. The guide stopped to take photos of

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the scene, then continued on. Others lingered after wandering near the large pack of journalists.

Kyle Heath, 37, from Carmel, Indiana, was in the city for a family vacation that had been planned for some time. He walked through the park amid the throngs of journalists, taking it all in.

"We wanted to come down and kind of witness what was going on, and say that we were as close to it as we could be," Heath said. "In Indiana, we don't have this much excitement."

In the late 1700s, Collect Pond Park was the site of a small body of water that had become an open sewer as the city grew. It was filled in in the early 1800s, but for decades was part of Manhattan's notorious "Five Points" slum, known for gang warfare.

A different sort of tension ran high around the courthouse and park Tuesday as news media jostled for position. Television networks hired security personnel who pushed people away. Some reporters had begun lining up for a seat in the courtroom on Monday afternoon, and stayed there all night or paid others to hold their place.

A small skirmish erupted when anti-Trump protesters unfurled a large banner that read "TRUMP LIES ALL THE TIME" in the middle of a Trump supporters. Police quickly diffused the scene.

"I think it's very important. I think it's very symbolic, you know, it shows that at least in New York with the DA that no man is above the law," said Gregory Williams, 57, who showed up with a life-size cutout of Hillary Clinton and a handmade sign saying "Lock Him Up."

Associated Press writer Paul J. Weber in Austin, Texas, contributed to this report.

US is providing Ukraine with \$2.6 billion in military aid

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. will send Ukraine about \$500 million in ammunition and equipment and spend more than \$2 billion to buy an array of munitions, radar and new weapons to help Kyiv counter drones in the coming months, the Pentagon said Tuesday, as Ukrainian troops gear up for a spring offensive against Russian forces.

The aid to be taken from military stockpiles so it can be in the war zone quickly includes "ammunition for U.S.-provided HIMARS, air defense interceptors, and artillery rounds that Ukraine is using to defend itself," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement. HIMARS are multiple rocket launchers.

The package includes at least two new weapons systems that are designed to counter drones — specifically the Iranian-made Shahed, which Tehran has provided to Russia and has been heavily used in attacks on Ukrainian cities.

The U.S., for the first time, will send nine 30mm gun trucks and an undisclosed amount of ammunition for them, and 10 mobile laser-guided rocket systems, also developed to counter drones.

The wide array of ammunition being sent from Pentagon stocks includes 155 mm artillery rounds for howitzers as Ukraine burns through the rounds fighting back against Russia's ground invasion. The Pentagon does not provide the amounts of munitions in most cases.

The immediate assistance also includes anti-armor systems, small arms, heavy equipment transport vehicles, 61 fuel tankers and maintenance support, the Pentagon said in a statement.

A senior defense official said the focus is on helping Ukraine change the dynamic on the ground. Right now, the official said, the battle lines are relatively static and neither side has gained much territory. The official, who briefed Pentagon reporters on condition of anonymity to provide military details, said the U.S. wants to help Ukraine advance and hold its positions in the expected counteroffensive.

"We very much appreciate everything that the United States has done specifically in the last month to help our army prepare itself for the counteroffensive," said Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, speaking at NATO headquarters in Brussels before a meeting with with Blinken. "The Biden administration has upheld its commitment to provide Ukraine with a lot of what we need and set an example to other allies."

The \$2.1 billion in longer-term aid, which is being provided under the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, will buy missiles for the National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System, or NASAMS, as well as radar, additional satellite terminals and fuel tanker trucks, anti-armor rockets and bridging systems. It also

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will fund additional training for Ukraine's forces.

The defense official said weapons already bought using the security assistance funding in previous packages are beginning to make their way to the battlefield. That is key because in some cases — such as with the 155 mm rounds — the Pentagon had been sending its own stocks, which are also needed for American troop training, and there is a finite supply. Now, the official said, the deliveries of 155 rounds Ukraine is getting include ammunition that was bought a number of months ago through the USAI program.

The new weapons and money come as Russia has continued to bombard Ukraine with long-range missiles and the hotly contested battle for the eastern city of Bakhmut drags on. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told The Associated Press in an exclusive interview that unless his country wins that fight, Russia could begin building international support for a deal that could require Ukraine to make unacceptable compromises.

Zelenskyy said if Moscow's forces take Bakhmut, Russian President Vladimir Putin would "sell this victory to the West, to his society, to China, to Iran."

The latest U.S. package, with its mix of short-term and long-term aid, involves a wide variety of ammunition from Pentagon stocks, 23 million rounds of small arms ammunition and 200,000 grenades, mortars, rockets and an array of precision guided munitions.

It brings the total amount of U.S. security assistance to Ukraine to more than \$35.1 billion since Russia invaded in February 2022. Defense leaders testifying on Capitol Hill last week said the U.S. is prepared to support Ukraine for as long as needed.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has echoed that sentiment, saying the alliance's foreign ministers meeting in Brussels were discussing how to step up support for Ukraine's armed forces. "Our support is for the long haul," he said before the meeting Tuesday.

The White House said last week that it has new evidence that Russia is looking again to North Korea for weapons as it also prepares for a spring offensive. Russia would provide Pyongyang with needed food and other commodities in return.

U.S. officials also are concerned that the president of Belarus has warned that Russian strategic nuclear weapons might be deployed in his country, along with part of Moscow's tactical nuclear arsenal.

Putin has said he planned to place tactical nuclear weapons in neighboring Belarus. Those weapons are comparatively short-range and low-yield. Strategic nuclear weapons, such as missile-borne warheads, would be a greater threat.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, while talking up the possibility of nuclear weapons, has also called for a cease-fire in Ukraine. He said a truce must have no preconditions and all movement of troops and weapons must be halted.

Russia, however, has rejected a cease in fighting, claiming that Ukraine has refused to enter talks under pressure from its Western allies.

Lee reported from Brussels. Associated Press writer Tara Copp contributed to this story from Washington.

Rory McIlroy returns to Masters in search of green jacket

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Sports Writer

AUGUSTA, Ga. (AP) — Rory McIlroy has had plenty of memorable moments on the back nine on Sunday, but two of the best have had nothing to do with the four-time major champion holding up a trophy at the end.

One came in 2018, when McIlroy was paired with Tiger Woods in the final group at the Tour Championship. McIlroy faded that Sunday at East Lake, but he was left with the best view possible to watch Woods win for the first time in five years.

The other came just last year, down the hill from the stately clubhouse at Augusta National, where McIlroy holed out from the bunker on the 18th to finish off his Masters — and then watched Collin Morikawa do the same right behind him.

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"Obviously the last time this tournament was played I walked away from the course and the tournament pretty happy with myself, as you can see over there," McIlroy said Tuesday, gesturing to a nearby photograph of him standing in the bunker, his club raised and the vestiges of a joyful cry still spread across the Northern Irishman's face.

What could top those two moments this Sunday? Perhaps a green jacket and a career Grand Slam.

That bunker shot that sent Woods-like roars through the towering Georgia pines last year left McIlroy with a 64, matching the best final-round score in Masters history, and three shots back of winner Scottie Scheffler in second place.

Yet it also left McIlroy with a feeling he carries into his 15th try at Augusta National this week: confidence.

"The only thing I could say is I proved to myself I could do it," McIlroy explained. "As much as I didn't really get into contention, there was part of me on the back nine last year that thought I had a chance. To play the way I did, and eagle 13 and have those feelings, in my mind anyway, I felt like it was a breakthrough.

"So any time I see an image like that," McIlroy said, glancing again at the photograph of him on 18, "or the video of me and Collin doing what he did as well, it brings back those good vibes."

The vibes haven't always been good at Augusta National.

By most rights, McIlroy should have slipped into the first of many green jackets 12 years ago. He had opened with a 65, reached 12 under by the end of the third round and was still leading when he made the turn on Sunday. But a wayward tee shot ricocheted through the trees to the left of the 10th and McIlroy made triple bogey. He made another bogey at the next. And when he splashed a shot into Rae's Creek at the par-3 12th, his meltdown was complete.

He shot a final-round 80, and the lasting image was not of the 33-year-old McIlroy standing triumphantly in a bunker a dozen years later but of a 21-year-old McIlroy, so publicly wounded, doubled over his club in anguish.

"I don't think every experience is going to be a good experience. That would lead to a pretty boring life," said McIlroy, whose life is anything but these days as he becomes one of the PGA Tour's leading voices in its showdown with LIV Golf.

"You have to learn from those challenges," McIlroy said, "and learn from some of that scar tissues that built up."

If anyone knows about scar tissue, figuratively and literally, it would be Woods. He played a practice round with McIlroy on Monday, and the five-time Masters champion might be the one person more confident in McIlroy than himself.

"It's just a matter of time. Rory has the talent. He has the game. He has all the tools," said Woods, the most recent player to join Gene Sarazen, Ben Hogan, Gary Player and Jack Nicklaus in completing the modern Grand Slam.

"Last year he made a great run, put himself right there," Woods said, "but I think it's just a matter of time, whether it's this year or next or whenever it comes. He will get it done. He will have a career Grand Slam. It's just a matter of when it will be."

It might be this week. McIlroy's game is certainly on point. He won in January in Dubai and was second at Bay Hill before advancing to the semifinals of the Dell Match Play a couple of weeks ago, where he lost to Cameron Young.

Those results, coupled with the way McIlroy has learned to navigate Augusta National, are why oddsmakers picked him, along with defending champion Scottie Scheffler, to have his most memorable moment on the 18th green this Sunday.

"It looks like this is another prime year," 1992 Masters champion Fred Couples said after watching McIlroy in a practice round this week. "He's playing very, very well. What does he have to do? I don't know. Is it surprising he's never won this? Of course it is, the way he plays and the way he putts and how high he hits and how far he hits it. But it's not that easy.

"He just does his own deal and plays like Rory can, he'll be just fine. Then he's got to beat two, four, five people on Sunday."

AP golf: <https://apnews.com/hub/golf> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

New IRS leader promises faster, easier tax filing process

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — New IRS Commissioner Danny Werfel delivered a tax-season pledge Tuesday that the agency will use an \$80 billion infusion of cash to become faster, more tech-savvy and provide “real-world improvements” to taxpayers.

Werfel, as he was ceremonially sworn in on Tuesday, said he would release a Strategic Operating Plan later this week laying out how the agency will use the money approved in last year’s Inflation Reduction Act. “This is our moment in history to transform the IRS,” said Werfel, who began working at the agency in mid-March.

“We have a great deal of work ahead of us to ensure a more modern and high-performing IRS that provides world-class services to taxpayers,” he said.

Some of the planned improvements include hiring more people to end long call wait times, additional locations for IRS staff to provide in-person service and expanded online accounts, so taxpayers and professionals will be able to address tax issues through electronic means, instead of paper mail.

President Joe Biden nominated Werfel to steer the IRS as it receives the new funding, which has come with much political consternation. Republicans have suggested without evidence that the agency would use the new money to hire an army of tax agents with weapons. They also say the IRS would increase audits on middle-class taxpayers.

Werfel navigated some of that controversy during his February confirmation hearing.

He pledged before senators not to expand tax audits on businesses and households making less than \$400,000 per year, as he faced rounds of questions before the Senate Finance Committee on how he would spend the agency’s big new infusion of money. He drew praise for being willing to leave a private consulting job to take on the top job at the troubled agency.

Werfel formerly led Boston Consulting Group’s global public sector practice and has previously served as an acting IRS commissioner.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, who presided over Werfel’s swearing in, said in a speech to IRS and Treasury employees that he will be tasked with “dramatically improving taxpayer service and ensuring that large corporations and the wealthy pay the taxes they owe.”

“The IRS will invest in data and analytics to help the agency audit large corporations, high earners, and complex partnerships that have not paid their full bill,” Yellen said. “The technology will be complemented by hiring more top talent – including accountants and attorneys.”

While the administration has showcased the boosting employee ranks with 5,000 new workers and investments in new technology, a March Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration report on the 2022 tax season states that the “ongoing backlogs of tax returns and other account work continued to challenge the IRS during the 2022 Filing Season.”

In a March 13 letter to employees, Werfel said “I returned to government to work with you and focus on this tremendous opportunity we have with the resources available under the Inflation Reduction Act.”

Eyedrops maker couldn’t ensure factory was sterile, FDA says

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The manufacturer of eyedrops recently linked to deaths and injuries lacked measures to assure sterility at its factory in India, according to U.S. health inspectors.

Food and Drug Administration officials uncovered about a dozen problems with how Global Pharma Healthcare made and tested its eyedrops during an inspection from late February through early March. The FDA released its preliminary inspection report Monday.

The company uses procedures that can’t actually ensure its products are sterile, FDA staff wrote. In

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particular, the inspectors found that the plant had used "a deficient manufacturing process" between December 2020 and April 2022 for products that were later shipped to the U.S.

The plant in India's southern Tamil Nadu state produced eyedrops that have been linked to 68 bacterial infections in the U.S., including three deaths and eight cases of vision loss. Four people have had their eyeballs surgically removed due to infection. The drops were recalled in February by two U.S. distributors, EzriCare and Delsam Phama.

The outbreak is considered particularly worrisome because the bacteria driving it is resistant to standard antibiotics.

Inspectors arrived at the plant Feb. 20, more than two weeks after the announcement of the first eyedrop recall on Feb. 3. The inspection appears to be the FDA's first visit to the plant, according to agency records.

The report has the agency's preliminary findings and is likely to be followed by a formal report and a warning letter to the company. An FDA spokesman said the inspection indicates that the company's products "may be in violation of FDA's requirements."

"We urge consumers to stop using these products which may be harmful to their health," FDA's Jeremy Khan wrote in an emailed statement.

The FDA is responsible for assuring the safety of foreign products shipped to the U.S., though it has long struggled to keep pace with international pharmaceutical supply chains that increasingly begin in India and China.

FDA inspectors cited worrisome sanitary conditions at the Global Pharma plant, noting that its floors, walls and ceilings were not "easily cleanable." At one point during the visit, an FDA inspector noted "none of the equipment on the filling machine was wrapped or covered." The inspector also noted the company didn't have rigorous procedures for ensuring bottles were fully sealed. Instead, a "manual visual inspection is the only test to detect any leak," according to the report.

Global Pharma has said little publicly about its recent recalls, instead referring questions to the U.S. companies that sold the products.

The FDA has been investigating the U.S. bacterial infections alongside the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC officials have detected the bacterial strain in opened bottles of EzriCare drops collected from infected patients. FDA officials are also testing unopened bottles of the drops.

CDC officials are worried the bacteria will spread and cases may be reported for weeks and months to come. The agency has been urging health care facilities treating patients to follow strict infection-control recommendations because the germ can spread rapidly.

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Community colleges are reeling. 'The reckoning is here.'

By JON MARCUS, The Hechinger Report undefined

When Santos Enrique Camara arrived at Shoreline Community College in Washington state to study audio engineering, he quickly felt lost.

"It's like a weird maze," remembered Camara, who was 19 at the time and had finished high school with a 4.0 grade-point average. "You need help with your classes and financial aid? Well, here, take a number and run from office to office and see if you can figure it out."

Advocates for community colleges defend them as the underdogs of America's higher education system, left to serve the students who need the most support but without the money to provide it. Critics contend this has become an excuse for poor success rates and for the kind of faceless bureaucracies that ultimately led Camara to drop out after two semesters. He now works in a restaurant and plays in two bands.

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With scant advising, many community college students spend time and money on courses that won't transfer or that they don't need. Though most intend to move on to get bachelor's degrees, only a small fraction succeed; fewer than half earn any kind of credential. Even if they do, many employers don't believe they're ready for the workforce.

Now these failures are coming home to roost.

Community colleges are far cheaper than four-year schools. Published tuition and fees last year averaged \$3,860, versus \$39,400 at private and \$10,940 at public four-year universities, with many states making community college free.

Yet consumers are abandoning them in droves. The number of students at community colleges has fallen 37% since 2010, or by nearly 2.6 million, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

"The reckoning is here," said Davis Jenkins, senior research scholar at the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University. (The Hechinger Report, which produced this story, is an independent unit of Teachers College.)

Those numbers would be even more grim if they didn't include high school students taking dual-enrollment courses, according to the Community College Research Center. High school students make up nearly a fifth of community college enrollment.

Yet even as these colleges serve fewer students, their already low success rates have by at least one measure gotten worse.

While four out of five students who begin at a community college say they plan to go on to get a bachelor's degree, only about one in six of them actually manages to do it. That's down by nearly 15% since 2020, according to the clearinghouse.

Two-year community colleges have the worst completion rates of any kind of university or college. Like Camara, nearly half of students drop out, within a year, of the community college where they started. Only slightly more than 40% finish within six years.

These frustrated wanderers include a disproportionate share of Black and Hispanic students. Half of all Hispanic and 40% of all Black students in higher education are enrolled at community colleges, the American Association of Community Colleges says.

The spurning of community colleges has implications for the national economy, which relies on their graduates to fill many of the jobs in which there are shortages. Those include positions as nurses, dental hygienists, emergency medical technicians, vehicle mechanics and electrical linemen, and in fields including information technology, construction, manufacturing, transportation and law enforcement.

Other factors are also contributing to the enrollment declines. Strong demand in the job market for people without college educations has made it more attractive for many to go to work. Thanks to so-called degree inflation, many jobs that require higher education call for bachelor's degrees where associate degrees or certificates were once sufficient. And private, regional public and for-profit universities, facing enrollment crises of their own, are competing for the same students.

Many Americans increasingly are questioning the value of going to college at all.

But they are particularly rejecting community college. In Michigan, for instance, the proportion of high school graduates enrolling in community college fell more than three times faster from 2018 to 2021 than the proportion going to four-year universities, according to that state's Center for Educational Performance and Information.

Those who do go complain of red tape and other frustrations.

Megan Parish, who at 26 has been in and out of community college in Arkansas since 2016, said she waits two or three days to get answers from advisers. "I've had to go out of my way to find people, and if they didn't know the answer, they would send me to somebody else, usually by email." Hearing back from the financial aid office, she said, can take a month.

Oryanan Lewis doesn't have that kind of time. Lewis, 20, is in her second year at Chattahoochee Valley

Community College in Phenix City, Alabama, where she is pursuing a degree in medical assisting. And she's already behind.

Lewis has the autoimmune disease lupus and thought she'd get more personal attention at a smaller school than at a four-year university; Chattahoochee has about 1,600 students. But she said she didn't receive the help she needed until her illness had almost derailed her degree.

She failed three classes and was put on academic probation. Only then did she hear from an intervention program.

"I feel like they should talk to their students more," Lewis said. "Because a person can have a whole lot going on."

Opinions among employers are mixed on the quality of community college students who manage to graduate, according to a survey released in December by researchers at the Harvard Business School. It found 62% agree or strongly agree that community colleges produce graduates who are ready to work.

Community colleges get less government money to spend, per student, than public four-year universities: \$8,695, according to the Center for American Progress, compared with \$17,540.

Yet community college students need more support than their counterparts at four-year universities. Twenty-nine percent are the first in their families to go to college, 15% are single parents and 68% work while in school. Twenty-nine percent say they've had trouble affording food and 14% affording housing, according to a survey by the Center for Community College Student Engagement.

Community colleges that fail these students can't just blame their smaller budgets, said Joseph Fuller, professor of management practice at Harvard Business School.

"The lack of resources inside community colleges is a legitimate complaint. But a number of community colleges do extraordinarily well," Fuller said. "So it's not impossible."

Ellen Dennis for the Seattle Times, Rebecca Griesbach of Al.com and Ira Porter of the Christian Science Monitor contributed to this report.

The Associated Press education team receives support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

This story has been updated to correct the share of employers who agreed in a survey that community colleges produce graduates who are ready to work. The employers who agreed amounted to slightly over 60%, not about a third.

About 5K GM salaried workers take buyouts, avoiding layoffs

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — About 5,000 white-collar workers at General Motors took the company's buyout offers, which the automaker says is enough to avoid layoffs at this time.

GM said Tuesday that the offers will save about \$1 billion per year in costs, about half of the \$2 billion it wants to cut annually by the end of 2024. The company now has about 58,000 salaried workers in the U.S.

The buyouts come at an uncertain time for the auto industry, which is in the midst of a transition from internal combustion to electric vehicles. GM has a goal of selling only electric passenger vehicles by 2035.

The Detroit automaker and its competitors are making huge capital outlays to develop and build new electric vehicles, all while continuing to make cars, trucks and SUVs with gasoline engines. They're also spending big to get scarce minerals and parts needed for EV batteries.

"The steps we are taking will allow us to maintain momentum, remain agile, and create a more competitive GM," the company said in a prepared statement.

GM hopes to get the remaining \$1 billion in savings by reducing vehicle complexity and expanding use of shared parts on internal combustion and electric vehicles. It also plans to cut spending across the company, including for travel and marketing, the statement said.

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At a Bank of America conference Tuesday, GM Chief Financial Officer Paul Jacobson said the company will take a \$1 billion first-quarter charge because of the buyouts, but said it will save \$1 billion per year as the workers leave later in 2023. "You've got a pretty quick payback," Jacobson said.

Last month GM offered buyouts to white-collar workers with at least five years of service, and global executives who have been with the company at least two years.

Jacobson said the number of workers taking the buyouts is about what GM expected. The company made the offers in an effort to reach cost goals without layoffs, he said.

"It's important that we were willing to pay for the voluntary program to incent people to go who maybe were closer to retirement or had just decided they wanted a change in career or lifestyle, at the same time to do everything we can to try to avoid involuntaries or layoffs," he said. "And I think we're in a position where we're going to be able to do that."

GM's statement didn't completely rule out layoffs in the future, though, saying that "involuntary separations are not a consideration at this point."

Employees taking the buyouts had to sign up by March 24, and those who are approved for the packages have to leave by June 30.

U.S. salaried workers are being offered one month of pay for every year of service, up to 12 months. They'll also get COBRA health care and part of the bonuses they would receive this year.

Finland joins NATO in major blow to Russia over Ukraine war

By LORNE COOK and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Finland joined the NATO military alliance Tuesday, dealing a major blow to Russian President Vladimir Putin with a historic realignment of Europe's post-Cold War security landscape triggered by Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

The Nordic country's membership doubles Russia's border with the world's biggest security alliance. Finland had adopted neutrality after its defeat by the Soviets in World War II, but its leaders signaled they wanted to join NATO after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine sent a shiver of fear through its neighbors.

"The era of nonalignment in our history has come to an end — a new era begins," President Sauli Niinistö said before his country's blue-and-white flag was raised outside NATO headquarters. A short distance away, outside the security fence, a few dozen people wrapped in flags of their own chanted, "Ukraine needs NATO."

In praising Finland's membership, U.S. President Joe Biden noted it came on the 74th anniversary of the signing of NATO's founding treaty on April 4, 1949.

"When Putin launched his brutal war of aggression against the people of Ukraine, he thought he could divide Europe and NATO. He was wrong," Biden said in a statement. "Today, we are more united than ever. And together — strengthened by our newest ally, Finland — we will continue to preserve transatlantic security, defend every inch of NATO territory, and meet any and all challenges we face."

The move is a strategic and political setback for Putin, who has long complained about NATO's expansion toward Russia and partly used that as a justification for the invasion.

"I'm tempted to say this is maybe the one thing that we can thank Mr. Putin for because he once again here precipitated something he claims to want to prevent by Russia's aggression, causing many countries to believe that they have to do more to look out for their own defense and to make sure that they can deter possible Russian aggression going forward," U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said before accepting the documents that made Finland's membership official.

The U.S. State Department is the repository of NATO texts concerning membership.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy sent his congratulations to Finland, writing on Telegram that "amid Russian aggression, the Alliance became the only effective guarantee of security in the region."

Russia warned it would be forced to take "retaliatory measures" to address what it called security threats created by Finland's membership. It had also warned it would bolster forces near Finland if NATO sends any additional troops or equipment to what is its 31st member country.

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The alliance says it poses no threat to Moscow.

Alarmed by Moscow's invasion of Ukraine last year, Finland, which shares a 1,340 kilometer (832 mile) border with Russia, applied to join in May, seeking protection under the organization's security umbrella.

"Russia tried to create a sphere around them and, well, we are not a sphere. I'm sure that Finns themselves feel more secure, that we are living in a more stable world," Niinisto said.

Neighboring Sweden, which has avoided military alliances for more than 200 years, has also applied. But objections from NATO members Turkey and Hungary have delayed the process.

Niinisto said Finland's membership "is not complete without that of Sweden. The persistent efforts for a rapid Swedish membership continue." Finland even gave its ratification of Sweden's application to Blinken as it joined.

In Stockholm, Swedish Defense Minister Pål Jonson congratulated Finland and said he believed it would improve Sweden's security but added that "it's no secret that we would like to have concluded it hand-in-hand."

Earlier, Russia's Foreign Ministry said Moscow "will be forced to take military-technical and other retaliatory measures to counter the threats to our national security arising from Finland's accession to NATO."

It said Finland's move marks "a fundamental change in the situation in Northern Europe, which had previously been one of the most stable regions in the world."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Finland's membership reflects the alliance's anti-Russian course and warned that Moscow will respond depending on what weapons NATO allies place there. But he also sought to play down the impact, noting that Russia has no territorial disputes with Finland.

It's not clear what additional military resources Russia could send to the Finnish border. Moscow has deployed the bulk of its most capable military units to Ukraine.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said no more troops would be sent to Finland unless it asked for help.

The country is now protected by what Stoltenberg called NATO's "iron-clad security guarantee," under which all member countries vow to come to the defense of any ally that comes under attack.

But Stoltenberg refused to rule out the possibility of holding more military exercises there and said that NATO would not allow Russia's demands to dictate the organization's decisions.

"We are constantly assessing our posture, our presence. We have more exercises, we have more presence, also in the Nordic area," he said.

In 1939 and 1940, Finland's tiny, ill-equipped forces fought in what became known as the Winter War against the Soviet Union. Over an exceptionally cold winter, Finnish fighters, sometimes cloaked in white bedsheets for camouflage and typically moving unseen on foot, snowshoes and skis, lost some territory to Moscow but forced out the invaders.

Finland says it can muster a 280,000-strong fighting force, built on near-universal male conscription and a large, well-trained reserve, equipped with modern artillery, warplanes and tanks. The country of 5.5 million joined the European Union in 1995,

Finland's Parliament, meanwhile, said its website was hit with a so-called denial-of-service attack, which made the site hard to use, with many pages not loading and some functions not available.

A pro-Russian hacker group known as NoName057 (16) claimed responsibility, saying the attack was retaliation for Finland joining NATO. The claim could not be immediately verified.

The hacker group, which has reportedly acted on Moscow's orders, has taken part in a slew of cyber-attacks on the U.S. and its allies in the past. Finnish public broadcaster YLE said the same group hit the Parliament's site last year.

Associated Press writers David Keyton in Stockholm, Sweden, and Jari Tanner in Helsinki contributed.

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

Kentucky high school football player dies after head injury

SOMERSET, Ky. (AP) — A Kentucky high school football player who suffered a head injury during a scrimmage last week has died.

The Kentucky High School Athletic Association said Monday in a statement on Facebook that it joined family, friends and teammates in mourning the loss of Pulaski County High School varsity football player Andrew Dodson.

"No words can explain, justify or rationalize tragedies such as these," the association wrote.

Alan Dodson told the Lexington Herald-Leader that his son was running the ball during his team's spring game when he was tackled by a teammate.

"It was not a violent hit or helmet-to-helmet. It was a simple, clean tackle," Alan Dodson said. "His head hit the turf, and Andrew suffered blunt-force trauma to the brain."

Andrew Dodson played tight end and defensive end for the Maroons during his junior season, WKYT reported.

Former top aide to Maryland governor dead after manhunt

By SARAH BRUMFIELD and LEA SKENE Associated Press

BALTIMORE (AP) — A one-time chief of staff for former Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan died Monday after being shot when FBI agents confronted him in a manhunt launched when he failed to show up for trial on corruption charges, his lawyer said.

Attorney Joseph Murtha said the FBI confirmed Roy McGrath's death to him. He added that it was not immediately clear if McGrath's wound was self-inflicted or came during an exchange of gunfire with agents.

William Brennan, an attorney for McGrath's wife, Laura Bruner, also confirmed the death and said she was "absolutely distraught."

According to an earlier email from FBI Supervisory Special Agent Shayne Buchwald in Maryland, McGrath was wounded during "an agent-involved shooting" about 6:30 p.m. in a commercial area on the southwestern outskirts of Knoxville, Tennessee. Buchwald said McGrath was taken to a hospital but did not elaborate.

Further details, including how McGrath was wounded and what led up to it, were not immediately released. The shooting was under investigation.

"The FBI takes all shooting incidents involving our agents or task force members seriously," said Buchwald, who declined to confirm that McGrath had died.

McGrath, 53, was declared a wanted fugitive after his disappearance, and the FBI said he was considered an international flight risk.

In a statement, Hogan said he and his wife, Yumi, "are deeply saddened by this tragic situation. We are praying for Mr. McGrath's family and loved ones."

Murtha called the death "a tragic ending to the past three weeks of uncertainty" and said his client always maintained his innocence.

After McGrath failed to appear at Baltimore's federal courthouse on March 13, Murtha said he believed McGrath, who had moved to Naples, Florida, was planning to fly to Maryland the night before. Instead of beginning jury selection, a judge issued an arrest warrant and dismissed prospective jurors.

McGrath was indicted in 2021 on accusations that he fraudulently secured a \$233,648 severance payment, equal to one year of salary as the head of Maryland Environmental Service, by falsely telling the agency's board the governor had approved it. He was also accused of fraud and embezzlement connected to roughly \$170,000 in expenses. McGrath pleaded not guilty.

McGrath resigned just 11 weeks into the job as Hogan's chief of staff in 2020 after the payments became public.

If convicted of the federal charges, he would have faced a maximum sentence of 20 years for each of four counts of wire fraud, plus a maximum of 10 years for each of two counts of embezzling funds from an organization receiving more than \$10,000 in federal benefits.

___ Brumfield reported from Silver Spring, Maryland. Associated Press writer Brian Witte in Annapolis

contributed to this report.

Virgin Orbit seeks bankruptcy protection after mission fail

By MICHELLE CHAPMAN AP Business Writer

Richard Branson's Virgin Orbit is filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection after a failed mission this year and increasing difficulty in raising funding for future missions.

The company laid off most of its staff on Friday and told the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the District of Delaware in a filing Tuesday that it was looking to sell its assets.

Virgin Orbit said that it has secured \$31.6 million in debtor-in-possession financing from Branson's Virgin Investments Ltd.

Virgin Orbit CEO Dan Hart said that once the financing is approved by the bankruptcy court, the funds are expected to provide Virgin Orbit with the necessary liquidity to continue operating as it attempts to sell the company.

"While we have taken great efforts to address our financial position and secure additional financing, we ultimately must do what is best for the business," Hart said.

The Long Beach, California, company said in its bankruptcy filing that it has between 200 and 999 estimated creditors. It had approximately \$243 million in total assets and \$153.5 million in total liabilities as of Sept. 30, according to a regulatory filing.

Last week Virgin Orbit said that it was cutting 675 jobs, about 85% of its workforce. Shortly before the announcement, the company said that it was pausing all operations amid reports of possible job cuts. At the time Virgin Orbit confirmed that it was putting all work on hold, but didn't say for how long.

In January, a mission by Virgin Orbit to launch the first satellites into orbit from Europe failed after a rocket's upper stage prematurely shut down. It was a setback in the United Kingdom which had hoped that the launch from Cornwall in southwest England would mark the beginning of more commercial opportunities for the U.K. space industry.

The company said in February that an investigation found that its rocket's fuel filter had become dislodged, causing an engine to become overheated and other components to malfunction over the Atlantic Ocean.

Virgin Orbit, which is listed on the Nasdaq stock exchange, was founded in 2017 by British billionaire Branson to target the market for launching small satellites into space. Its LauncherOne rockets are launched from the air from modified Virgin passenger planes, allowing the company to operate more flexibly than using fixed launch sites.

Shares of Virgin Orbit Holdings Inc., which traded above \$10 about two years ago, tumbled 24% before the opening bell Tuesday, to about 15 cents.

NHL's Pride nights collide with LGBTQ+ political climate

By ERICA HUNZINGER AP Sports Writer

Sports leagues and teams often use Pride nights to raise the visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people — as well as sell them tickets — and the NHL has been a leader. They can include special jerseys designed by LGBTQ+ artists, performances, information tables, even drag performances. And they're largely a hit.

But six NHL players recently opted out of wearing rainbow-colored jerseys on their teams' Pride nights for the first time, leading the league's commissioner to say it is weighing the future of the events.

That worries some fans and LGBTQ+ supporters, who say it's a sign that a political climate that has led to restrictions on expression, health care and transgender sports participation both in the U.S. and internationally is now threatening events that are meant to be fun and affirming.

"It's definitely fair to say that this political landscape is helping to sort of normalize people for opting out of the optional ways that they have been asked to show support for marginalized members of society," said Hudson Taylor, executive director and founder of Athlete Ally, an organization that works with teams and leagues to push for LGBTQ+ inclusivity.

Pro sports has been here before. In June, five pitchers with the Tampa Bay Rays cited their Christian

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faith in refusing to wear Pride jerseys, and a U.S. women's national soccer player skipped an overseas trip in 2017 when the team wore Pride jerseys and also didn't play in an NWSL game last year for the same reason.

This season, three NHL teams — the Chicago Blackhawks, the New York Rangers and the Minnesota Wild — that previously wore rainbow warmups decided not to. The Rangers and Wild changed course after initially planning for players to wear rainbow-themed warmup jerseys but did not specifically say why.

Between the players opting out and the team decisions, NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said the league will "evaluate" in the offseason how it handles Pride nights moving forward, calling the refusals a distraction from "the substance of our what our teams and we have been doing and stand for." Yet he also noted that the NHL, teams and players "overwhelmingly" support Pride nights.

The NHL has partnered for a decade with You Can Play Project, which advocates for LGBTQ+ participation in sports. No NHL players had previously opted out of Pride nights.

The changes come as Republican lawmakers across the U.S. pursue several hundred proposals this year to push back on LGBTQ+, and particularly transgender, rights. At the same time, international sports-governing bodies are instituting policies that ban all trans athletes from competing in track and field and effectively ban trans women from swimming events.

Internationally, a Russian law that restricts "propaganda" about LGBTQ+ people, including in advertising, media and the arts, has led at least one Russian NHL player to decline participation in Pride night. And Ugandan lawmakers recently passed a bill prescribing jail terms for offenses related to same-sex relations.

It's all connected, said Evan Brody, an assistant professor at the University of Kentucky whose media studies research often focuses on LGBTQ+ spaces in sports.

"The laws that are being passed, the players not participating, all exist within the same kind of eco-sphere," Brody said. "They all exist within this larger anti-LGBTQ discourse, which I think we are often very quick to point out about other countries and maybe less so to think about how that's affecting things in the United States."

In the NHL, many Pride nights are more about selling tickets, Taylor said. But because the league has been such a leader among men's sports in how to do Pride nights well, he said, it's "conspicuous" to see players and teams "roll back the ways in which they have historically shown support for and given visibility to the LGBTQ community."

Russian Ivan Provorov and Canadians James Reimer and brothers Eric and Marc Staal all cited religious beliefs for refusing to take part in warmups in rainbow-colored jerseys. Ilya Lyubushkin said he would not participate because of the law in Russia, where he was born. And Andrei Kuzmenko, another Russian player, decided not to wear the special uniform after discussions with his family.

"Some players choose to make choices that they are free to make," Bettman said Thursday night at a news conference in Seattle. "That doesn't mean they don't respect other people and their beliefs and their lifestyles and who they are. It just means they don't want to endorse it by wearing uniforms that they are not comfortable wearing."

Taylor noted that the fear of Russian retribution could be "very real" for a player like Lyubushkin, who has family in Moscow and visits often.

"I don't think the LGBTQ community should feel that NHL hockey players are turning their back on that community," new NHL Players' Association executive director Marty Walsh said. "A supermajority of players have worn the jersey."

The Twin Cities Queer Hockey Association took part in the Minnesota Wild's Pride night this season, with two teenage LGBTQ+ members of the association sitting on the bench during warmups, among other things.

Bennett-Danek, who cofounded the association with her wife in early 2022, said the Wild have "been nothing but supportive" of their organization and the community at large.

"Yes, canceling wearing the jerseys was wrong, but they did not cancel any other part of Pride night and they continue to support our group, even today," Bennett-Danek said. "They are also handing over the Pride jerseys with signatures for auction to further help support our LGBTQIA community here in the Twin Cities. ... So, in our mind they have righted the wrong. They have promised us that Pride next year

will not be canceled.”

The NHL hasn't given out a penalty or fine for anti-LGBTQ+ language since 2017, though the American Hockey League suspended a player in April 2022 for eight games for using homophobic language. And the vast majority of NHL players are participating in pregame Pride skates, which Edmonton's Zach Hyman said is "an obvious no-brainer."

"It doesn't go against any of my beliefs," Hyman said. "On the contrary, I think it's extremely important to be open and welcoming to that greater community just because they're a minority and they've faced a lot of persecution over the years. And to show that we care and that we're willing and ready to include them in our game and our sport is extremely important to me."

Contributing to this report were AP Sports Writers Stephen Whyno in Washington and John Wawrow in Buffalo, New York, and AP freelance writer Mark Moschetti in Seattle.

AP NHL: <https://apnews.com/hub/nhl> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Grassroots faith leaders navigate a Northern Ireland in flux

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

BELFAST, Northern Ireland (AP) — Teenagers from Catholic and Protestant youth groups lit candles on a Belfast street in memory of those who perished in the Holocaust, then listened solemnly to a warning about the dangers of Northern Ireland's own infamous religious bigotries.

"We all know what prejudice is," said Stephen Hughes, leader in charge of St. Peter's Immaculata Youth Centre, his voice robustly carrying over the twilight rush-hour traffic. "We were encouraged to hate each other because they're Protestant or they're Catholic."

The teens were too young, he noted, to remember "the Troubles" — three decades of sectarian violence that claimed more than 3,600 lives in the late 20th century and left countless more wounded and bereaved.

The violence largely ended 25 years ago this month with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, which laid out a political process for resolving Northern Ireland's future.

But that political process has been turbulent, skirmishes have periodically resurfaced, and Catholic and Protestants remain segregated in many ways.

Moreover, Catholics now outnumber Protestants in a land historically defined by its pro-British Protestant majority. But neither of them are in church as often as they used to be, those who profess no religion are growing, and Catholics have mixed views about uniting with Ireland, meaning it's not expected to come to a vote any time soon.

There's still plenty of work for those in the business of reconciliation and community-building.

The Holocaust memorial event on a January evening was one of a series of small yet earnest activities by two youth groups — the Catholic St. Peter's Immaculata and the Townsend Street Social Outreach Centre, located in an adjacent Protestant neighborhood. Their aim is to build communication and friendship across the walls and habits separating their communities.

The event was commemorating a genocide far greater than the Northern Ireland conflict, but the memorial offered a powerful and relevant warning, Hughes said.

"Our own hatred, the laughs and jokes we make about each other, can quickly escalate," he said.

He urged the teens to be peacebuilders. "Thankfully, you don't know that violence," he said. "The thing is, you's are the future."

And then the youths climbed back into their minibus for a stop at McDonald's, where they mingled over Big Macs and fries before heading home to their separate neighborhoods.

Religion, long a part of the problem, can be part of the solution, said Ruth Petticrew, longtime director of the Townsend Street organization. "Let's show people that love works, but it has to be genuine love, not preaching at them."

The 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement is arriving as Northern Ireland's population under-

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goes dramatic change.

Northern Ireland was created a century ago as a six-county entity with a two-to-one Protestant majority — fiercely loyal to the United Kingdom even as the rest of predominately Catholic Ireland won independence from it.

Long a minority, Catholics now comprise 42% and Protestants 37% of Northern Ireland's population of 1.9 million, according to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

But in another demographic jolt, the number of people who don't identify with any religion jumped to 17%, up from 10% a decade earlier.

Faith leaders in Northern Ireland say church attendance has shrunk even among those who still identify as Christian.

The Good Friday Agreement authorizes a referendum on Irish unification if polls ever indicate it would likely pass.

But nearly twice as many people in Northern Ireland — 50% vs. 27% — would vote to stay in Britain rather than to join Ireland if a referendum were held now, according to a 2022 survey published in the Irish Times.

What's more, only 55% of Catholics in Northern Ireland would vote to join Ireland. Most others would either stay in the U.K. or were uncertain.

Secular and other voters are even more mixed — with nearly a third uncertain.

"There's more and more and more people like myself who also don't actually identify with the idea or don't take a position on being part of the U.K. or part of the Republic of Ireland," said Boyd Sleator, coordinator of the group Northern Ireland Humanists. "We should just think about governing ourselves."

Even if religion is in retreat, faith-based groups are still working toward reconciliation on a grassroots level.

Few efforts are more striking than what's taking place at the Building Bridges Community Boxing Club.

It operates in what was once the fellowship hall of a Presbyterian church that has since closed. The building was acquired by 174 Trust, a faith-based community group, and turned into a boxing gym.

It's located astride one of the "peace walls" that divide neighborhoods in an effort to keep sectarian violence at bay. The gym's front door opens onto a predominately Protestant neighborhood, its back door onto a mostly Catholic neighborhood.

That enables the gym to stay open in the evening, accessible to youths from both neighborhoods — even after the gates to the peace wall are closed each night.

Unlike some sports, which are divided along sectarian lines, boxing brings out fans from all communities, said the Rev. Bill Shaw, CEO of the 174 Trust, which works closely with the boxing club. When one young boxer, a Protestant, began to have success in the ring, his newfound Catholic friends from the gym turned out to cheer him on.

"When people don't know each other and have no contact with the other, you can live with that prejudice and allow it to poison yourself," Shaw said.

But it's a different story, he said, "when they actually meet each other."

Much of Shaw's work is at The Duncairn, a community center located in another former Presbyterian church located a few blocks from the boxing gym in a historically embattled neighborhood. Within its stained-glass windows and Gothic arches, The Duncairn today hosts concerts, exhibitions, an Irish-language preschool, a café and support groups.

On a winter morning, Catholic and Protestant clergy gathered for prayer around a table at the Duncairn.

One by one, they earnestly prayed for an end to prejudice and hatred, followed by contemplative silences and quiet expressions of "amen."

The goal for such centers, Shaw said, is reconciliation rather than proselytizing.

"Faith is what motivates us," said Shaw. "It's not what we're selling."

Another faith-based initiative was evident on a winter evening, when scores of people from multiple churches and neighborhoods gathered in a Methodist sanctuary to pray together, listen to a Catholic speaker and worship with Psalms set to traditional Irish tunes accompanied by fiddle and tin whistle.

It was part of the larger 4 Corners Festival, an annual series of events seeking to bridge the religiously

fractured city.

"The legacy of conflict has left us with fear," said the Rev. Martin Magill, a Catholic priest and a festival organizer. "Being able to provide safe spaces is very important."

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US chip controls threaten China's technology ambitions

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — Furious at U.S. efforts that cut off access to technology to make advanced computer chips, China's leaders appear to be struggling to figure out how to retaliate without hurting their own ambitions in telecoms, artificial intelligence and other industries.

President Xi Jinping's government sees the chips that are used in everything from phones to kitchen appliances to fighter jets as crucial assets in its strategic rivalry with Washington and efforts to gain wealth and global influence. Chips are the center of a "technology war," a Chinese scientist wrote in an official journal in February.

China has its own chip foundries, but they supply only low-end processors used in autos and appliances. The U.S. government, starting under then-President Donald Trump, is cutting off access to a growing array of tools to make chips for computer servers, AI and other advanced applications. Japan and the Netherlands have joined in limiting access to technology they say might be used to make weapons.

Xi, in unusually pointed language, accused Washington in March of trying to block China's development with a campaign of "containment and suppression." He called on the public to "dare to fight."

Despite that, Beijing has been slow to retaliate against U.S. companies, possibly to avoid disrupting Chinese industries that assemble most of the world's smartphones, tablet computers and other consumer electronics. They import more than \$300 billion worth of foreign chips every year.

The ruling Communist Party is throwing billions of dollars at trying to accelerate chip development and reduce the need for foreign technology.

China's loudest complaint: It is blocked from buying a machine available only from a Dutch company, ASML, that uses ultraviolet light to etch circuits into silicon chips on a scale measured in nanometers, or billionths of a meter. Without that, Chinese efforts to make transistors faster and more efficient by packing them more closely together on fingernail-size slivers of silicon are stalled.

Making processor chips requires some 1,500 steps and technologies owned by U.S., European, Japanese and other suppliers.

"China won't swallow everything. If damage occurs, we must take action to protect ourselves," the Chinese ambassador to the Netherlands, Tan Jian, told the Dutch newspaper *Financieele Dagblad*.

"I'm not going to speculate on what that might be," Tan said. "It won't just be harsh words."

The conflict has prompted warnings the world might decouple, or split into separate spheres with incompatible technology standards that mean computers, smartphones and other products from one region wouldn't work in others. That would raise costs and might slow innovation.

"The bifurcation in technological and economic systems is deepening," Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore said at an economic forum in China last month. "This will impose a huge economic cost."

U.S.-Chinese relations are at their lowest level in decades due to disputes over security, Beijing's treatment of Hong Kong and Muslim ethnic minorities, territorial disputes and China's multibillion-dollar trade surpluses.

Chinese industries will "hit a wall" in 2025 or 2026 if they can't get next generation chips or the tools to make their own, said Handel Jones, a tech industry consultant.

China "will start falling behind significantly," said Jones, CEO of International Business Strategies.

Beijing might have leverage, though, as the biggest source of batteries for electric vehicles, Jones said. Chinese battery giant CATL supplies U.S. and Europe automakers. Ford Motor Co. plans to use CATL

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technology in a \$3.5 billion battery factory in Michigan.

"China will strike back," Jones said. "What the public might see is China not giving the U.S. batteries for EVs."

On Friday, Japan increased pressure on Beijing by joining Washington in imposing controls on exports of chipmaking equipment. The announcement didn't mention China, but the trade minister said Tokyo doesn't want its technology used for military purposes.

A Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman, Mao Ning, warned Japan that "weaponizing sci-tech and trade issues" would "hurt others as well as oneself."

Hours later, the Chinese government announced an investigation of the biggest U.S. memory chip maker, Micron Technology Inc., a key supplier to Chinese factories. The Cyberspace Administration of China said it would look for national security threats in Micron's technology and manufacturing but gave no details.

The Chinese military also needs semiconductors for its development of stealth fighter jets, cruise missiles and other weapons.

Chinese alarm grew after President Joe Biden in October expanded controls imposed by Trump on chip manufacturing technology. Biden also barred Americans from helping Chinese manufacturers with some processes.

To nurture Chinese suppliers, Xi's government is stepping up support that industry experts say already amounts to as much as \$30 billion a year in research grants and other subsidies.

China's biggest maker of memory chips, Yangtze Memory Technologies Corp., or YMTC, received a 49 billion yuan (\$7 billion) infusion this year from two official funds, according to Tianyancha, a financial information provider.

One was the government's main investment vehicle, the China National Integrated Circuit Industry Investment Fund, known as the Big Fund. It was founded in 2014 with 139 billion yuan (\$21 billion) and has invested in hundreds of companies.

The Big Fund launched a second entity, known as the Big Fund II, in 2019 with 200 billion yuan (\$30 billion).

In January, chip manufacturer Hua Hong Semiconductor said Big Fund II would contribute 1.2 billion yuan (\$175 million) for a planned 6.7 billion yuan (\$975 million) wafer fabrication facility in eastern China's Wuxi.

In March, the Cabinet promised tax breaks and other support for the industry. It gave no price tag. The government also has set up "integrated circuit talent training bases" at 23 universities and six at other schools.

"Semiconductors are the 'main battlefield' of the current China-U.S. technology war," Junwei Luo, a scientist at the official Institute of Semiconductors, wrote in the February issue of the journal of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Luo called for "self-reliance and self-improvement in semiconductors."

The scale of spending required is huge. The global industry leader, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corp., or TSMC, is in the third year of a three-year, \$100 billion plan to expand research and production.

Developers including Huawei Technologies Ltd. and VeriSilicon Holdings Co. can design logic chips for smartphones as powerful as those from Intel Corp., Apple Inc., South Korea's Samsung Electronics Co. or Britain's Arm Ltd., according to industry researchers. But they cannot be manufactured without the precision technology of TSMC and other foreign foundries.

Trump in 2019 crippled Huawei's smartphone brand by blocking it from buying U.S. chips or other technology. American officials say Huawei, China's first global tech brand, might facilitate Chinese spying, an accusation the company denies. In 2020, the White House tightened controls, blocking TSMC and others from using U.S. technology to produce chips for Huawei.

Washington threw up new hurdles for Chinese chip designers in August by imposing restrictions on software known as EDA, or electronic design automation, along with European, Asian and other governments to limit the spread of "dual use" technologies that might be used to make weapons.

In December, Biden added YMTC, the memory chip maker, and some other Chinese companies to a blacklist that limits access to chips made anywhere using U.S. tools or processes.

China's foundries can etch circuits as small as 28 nanometers apart. By contrast, TSMC and other global competitors can etch circuits just three nanometers apart, ten times the Chinese industry's precision. They are moving toward two nanometers.

To make the latest chips, "you need EUV (extreme ultraviolet lithography) tools, a very complicated process recipe and not just a couple of billion dollars but tens and tens of billions of dollars," said Peter Hanbury, who follows the industry for Bain & Co.

"They're not going to be able to produce competitive server, PC and smartphone chips," Hanbury said. "You have to go to TSMC to do that."

China's ruling party is trying to develop its own tool vendors, but researchers say it is far behind a global network spread across dozens of countries.

Huawei said in a video on its website in December it was working on EUV technology. But creating a machine comparable to ASML's might cost \$5 billion and require a decade of research, according to industry experts. Huawei didn't respond to a request for comment.

The day when China can supply its own EUV machine is "very far away," said Hanbury.

AP researcher Yu Bing in Beijing and AP Writer Mike Corder in Amsterdam contributed.

Tennessee House moves to expel 3 Democrats after gun protest

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Tennessee Republican lawmakers took the first steps Monday to expel three Democratic members from the GOP-dominant House for their role in a recent gun control protest at the state Capitol.

The extraordinarily rare move resulted in a chaotic and fiery confrontation between lawmakers and supporters opposing the move and has further fractured an already deep political division inside the Tennessee Legislature.

Resolutions have been filed against Reps. Gloria Johnson, Justin Jones and Justin Pearson after they led chants from the House floor with supporters in the gallery last Thursday. The resolution declared that the three had participated in "disorderly behavior" and "did knowingly and intentionally bring disorder and dishonor to the House of Representatives."

Republican Reps. Bud Hulse, Gino Bulso, and Andrew Farmer filed the resolutions. They successfully requested Monday that the House expedite the process and vote on the resolutions Thursday.

Despite support from the Republican supermajority, their requests sparked outrage among supporters watching in the gallery. Their loud jeers led House Speaker Cameron Sexton to demand that they be removed by state troopers. Also during the turmoil, several lawmakers engaged in a confrontation on the House floor. Jones later accused another member of stealing his phone and trying to "incite a riot with his fellow members."

Sexton deemed Jones out of order and cut off Jones' microphone.

Hundreds of protesters packed the Capitol last week calling for the Republican-led Statehouse to pass gun control measures in response to the Nashville school shooting that resulted in the deaths of six people. As the chants echoed throughout the Capitol, Jones, Johnson and Pearson approached the front of the House chamber with a bullhorn.

As the three shared the bullhorn and cheered on the crowd, Sexton, a Republican, quickly called for a recess. He later vowed the three would face consequences. Meanwhile, House Minority Leader Karen Camper described their actions as "good trouble," a reference to the late U.S. Rep. John Lewis' guiding principal.

By Monday, Sexton confirmed that the three lawmakers had been stripped of their committee assignments and said more punishments could be on the way. A few hours later, House Republican Caucus Chairman Jeremy Faison referred to Jones as the "former representative" during the evening session.

Pearson and Jones are both freshman lawmakers. Johnson has served in the House since 2019. All

three have been highly critical of the Republican supermajority. Jones was temporarily banned from the Tennessee Capitol in 2019 after throwing a cup of liquid at former House Speaker Glen Casada and other lawmakers while protesting the bust of Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest inside the Capitol.

Expelling lawmakers is an extraordinary action inside the Tennessee Capitol. Just two other House members have ever been ousted from the chamber since the Civil War.

DNA: Woman was on famed 17th century Swedish warship

By JAN M. OLSEN Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — A U.S. military laboratory has helped Swedes confirm what was suspected for years: A woman was among those who died on a 17th-century warship that sank on its maiden voyage, the museum that displays the ship said Tuesday.

The wreck of the royal warship Vasa was raised in 1961, and was remarkably well-preserved after more than 300 years underwater in the Stockholm harbor. It has since been placed at the Vasa Museum, one of Stockholm's top tourist attractions where visitors can admire its intricate wooden carvings.

Some 30 people died when the Vasa keeled over and sank just minutes after leaving port in 1628. They are believed to have been crew members and most of their identities are unknown.

For years, there were indications that one of the victims, known as G, was a woman, because of the appearance of the hip bone, Fred Hocker, research leader at the Vasa Museum, said in a statement.

Anna Maria Forsberg, a historian with the Vasa Museum, told The Associated Press that women were not part of the crew in the Swedish navy in the 17th century, but they could be on board as guests. Seamen were allowed to have their wives with them onboard unless the ship was going into battle or going for a long journey.

"We know from written sources that around 30 people died that day," Forsberg said. "It is thus likely that she was a seaman's wife who wanted to come along on the maiden journey of this new, impressive ship."

She said the exact number of people on board that day was not known "but we think there were around 150 people. An additional 300 soldiers were supposed to board further out in the archipelago," she said.

Since 2004, the Vasa Museum collaborated with the Department of Immunology, Genetics and Pathology at Uppsala University, which examined all the skeletons on Vasa in order to find out as much as possible about the various individuals on the doomed vessel.

"It is very difficult to extract DNA from bones that have been on the seabed for 333 years, but not impossible," Marie Allen, professor of forensic genetics at Uppsala University said in the statement. "Simply put, we found no Y chromosomes in G's genome. But we couldn't be completely sure and we wanted to have the results confirmed."

So they turned to the Delaware-based Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory. And thanks to the forensics laboratory specializing in DNA profiling at the Dover Air Force Base, "we have been able to confirm that the individual G was a woman, using the new test," Allen said.

The Vasa which was supposed to go to a naval base outside Stockholm to wait for the boarding of the soldiers, is believed to have sunk because it lacked the ballast to counterweigh its heavy guns.

Nadal, Alcaraz pull out of clay-court Monte Carlo Masters

MONACO (AP) — Rafael Nadal pulled out of the clay-court Monte Carlo Masters on Tuesday, saying he is not yet able to compete at the highest level.

The 22-time Grand Slam champion has been sidelined with a left hip flexor injury since the Australian Open. The Monte Carlo Masters begins on April 8.

"I will not be able to play in one of the most important tournaments of my career, Monte Carlo," Nadal wrote on Twitter. "I am not yet in conditions to play with the maximum guarantees and I continue my preparation process, hoping to be back soon."

Second-ranked Carlos Alcaraz and seventh-ranked Felix Auger-Aliassime also withdrew from the event.

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Alcaraz pulled out because of "physical discomfort" after his semifinal loss in Florida last week. The Spaniard had been so dominant recently, he hadn't lost a set since February before that defeat.

"I have post-traumatic arthritis in my left hand and muscular discomfort in the spine that needs rest to prepare for everything that is to come," the 19-year-old from Spain said.

Auger-Aliassime needs to rest his left knee.

"I have been struggling with my left knee for the past few weeks and decided it was the smartest decision to take some time off so I'm able to fully heal and recover," the 22-year-old Canadian wrote on Instagram.

Nadal has won the Monte Carlo tournament a record 11 times, including an Open Era record streak of eight consecutive titles from 2005-12. The 36-year-old Spaniard generally uses the event as a key part of his preparations for the French Open, which takes place May 28-June 11.

Nadal has won 14 of his major titles on clay at Roland Garros, including last year while dealing with chronic pain in his left foot.

In January, Nadal hurt his hip flexor during a second-round loss to Mackenzie McDonald at the Australian Open.

AP tennis: <https://apnews.com/hub/tennis> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Today in History: April 5, Rosenbergs sentenced to death

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, April 5, the 95th day of 2023. There are 270 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 5, 1951, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were sentenced to death following their conviction in New York on charges of conspiring to commit espionage for the Soviet Union.

On this date:

In 1614, Indian Chief Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas married Englishman John Rolfe, a widower, in the Virginia Colony.

In 1621, the Mayflower sailed from Plymouth Colony in present-day Massachusetts on a monthlong return trip to England.

In 1764, Britain's Parliament passed The American Revenue Act of 1764, also known as the Sugar Act.

In 1887, in Tusculum, Alabama, teacher Anne Sullivan achieved a breakthrough as her 6-year-old deaf-blind pupil, Helen Keller, learned the meaning of the word "water" as spelled out in the Manual Alphabet.

In 1976, reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes died in Houston at age 70.

In 1986, two American servicemen and a Turkish woman were killed in the bombing of a West Berlin discotheque, an incident that prompted a U.S. air raid on Libya more than a week later.

In 1987, Fox Broadcasting Co. made its prime-time TV debut by airing the situation comedy "Married with Children" followed by "The Tracey Ullman Show," then repeating both premiere episodes two more times in the same evening.

In 1991, former Sen. John Tower, R-Texas, his daughter Marian and 21 other people were killed in a commuter plane crash near Brunswick, Georgia.

In 2008, actor Charlton Heston, big-screen hero and later leader of the National Rifle Association, died in Beverly Hills, California, at age 84.

In 2010, an explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine near Charleston, West Virginia, killed 29 workers. In a televised rescue, 115 Chinese coal miners were freed after spending eight days trapped in a flooded mine, surviving an accident that had killed 38.

In 2016, UConn won an unprecedented fourth straight women's national championship, capping another perfect season by routing Syracuse 82-51.

In 2019, inspecting a refurbished section of fencing at the Mexican border in California, President Donald Trump declared that "our country is full," and that illegal crossings must be stopped.

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Ten years ago: Kansas legislators gave final passage to a sweeping anti-abortion measure declaring that life began "at fertilization." (Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback, a Republican, signed the measure two weeks later.) A federal judge in New York ordered the Food and Drug Administration to lift age restrictions on the sale of emergency contraception, ending a requirement that buyers show proof they were 17 or older if they wanted to buy it without a prescription. (After months of back-and-forth legal battles, the Obama administration agreed to lift the age limits.)

Five years ago: In his first public comments about Stormy Daniels, President Donald Trump said he didn't know about the \$130,000 payment his personal attorney Michael Cohen had made to the porn actress who alleged she had an affair with Trump. In a dramatic escalation of the trade dispute with China, Trump told the U.S. trade representative to consider slapping an additional \$100 billion in tariffs on Chinese goods. A Brazilian judge issued an arrest warrant for former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva as the once-popular leader tried to mount a political comeback ahead of October elections; da Silva had sought to stay out of prison while he appealed a corruption conviction. A federal immigration raid took 97 people into custody at a Tennessee meat processing plant.

One year ago: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy accused Russian troops of gruesome atrocities in Ukraine and told the U.N. Security Council that those responsible should immediately be brought up on war crimes charges in front of a tribunal like the one set up at Nuremberg after World War II. Barack Obama returned to the White House for the first time in more than five years to savor the 12th anniversary of his signature health care law and give a boost to President Joe Biden's efforts to expand it. Ivanka Trump, former President Donald Trump's daughter and one of those closest to him during the insurrection at the Capitol, testified before the House panel investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, attack.

Today's Birthdays: Movie producer Roger Corman is 97. Country singer Tommy Cash is 83. Actor Michael Moriarty is 82. Pop singer Allan Clarke (The Hollies) is 81. Writer-director Peter Greenaway is 81. Actor Max Gail is 80. Actor Jane Asher is 77. Singer Agnetha (ag-NEE'-tah) Faltskog (ABBA) is 73. Actor Mitch Pileggi is 71. Singer-songwriter Peter Case is 69. Hip-hop artist/actor Christopher "Kid" Reid is 59. Rock musician Mike McCready (Pearl Jam) is 57. Singer Paula Cole is 55. Actor Krista Allen is 52. Actor Victoria Hamilton is 52. Country singer Pat Green is 51. Rapper-producer Pharrell (fa-REHL') Williams is 50. Rapper/producer Juicy J is 48. Actor Sterling K. Brown is 47. Country singer-musician Mike Eli (The Eli Young Band) is 42. Actor Hayley Atwell is 41. Actor Lily James is 34.