

Groton Daily Independent

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Groton Community Calendar

Tuesday, June 13

Senior Menu: Scalloped potato with ham, beets, sunset salad, cookie, whole wheat bread.

Olive Grove: Ladies League, 6 p.m.; Bridge.

United Methodist: Bible Study with Amanda, 10 a.m.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

The Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., community center

Emmanuel Lutheran: Church Council, 7 p.m.

Legion at Claremont, 6 p.m. (2)

Jr. Teener at Webster, 5:30 p.m. (2)

U8 Red at Britton, 5:30 p.m. (2)

U8SB at Webster, 6 p.m. (2)

U10SB at Webster, 6 p.m. (2)

T-Ball black hosts Columbia, 5:30 p.m.

U10BB R/W hosts Columbia, 6:30 p.m. (2)

Wednesday, June 14

Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, lettuce

salad with dressing, mandarin orange salad, whole wheat bread, ambrosia.

Olive Grove: Men's League

United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

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

Legion at Sisseton, 6 p.m. (1)

Jr. Legion at Sisseton, 7:30 p.m. (1)

U12BB hosts Hannigan, 5:30 p.m. (2)

U10BB B/W hosts Hannigan, 5:30 p.m. (2)

U8SB at Claremont, 5:30 p.m.

U10SB at Claremont, 7 p.m. (2)

U18SB vs. Leola Merchants, 6 p.m.; and Claremont, 8:30 p.m.

Thursday, June 15

Senior Menu: Oven fried chicken, sweet potatoes, mixed vegetables, cookie, dinner roll.

Groton Transit Fundraiser, 5-7 p.m., Community Center

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Groton Daily Independent
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The Bulletin by Newsweek

JUNE 12, 2023

World in Brief

House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, who faced a revolt from hardliners within his caucus over the debt deal, has reportedly resolved a deadlock with some conservatives.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has signed a bill into law that will allow minor league baseball players to be paid less than the state's minimum wage. All Republicans in the state legislature supported the bill, with all but one Democrat voting against it.

Three people have been killed in a "serious incident" in Nottingham, England, the U.K. police said. A man has been arrested, though no further details have been released.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken credited the Biden Administration's diplomacy for slowing down the expansion of Chinese spying bases and projecting military power around the world. He is scheduled to visit China on June 18.

The Denver Nuggets are NBA champions for the first time in team history after beating the Miami Heat 94-89 last night.

Actor Treat Williams, known for his roles in Hair and Everwood, has died in a motorcycle accident in Vermont at the age of 71.

Eldridge Industries, a company owned by billionaire Todd Boehly, and Dick Clark Productions agreed to buy assets of the Hollywood Foreign Press Association's Golden Globe for an undisclosed price.

In the ongoing war in Ukraine, at least three people have died and about 25 others were injured after Russia launched a "massive missile" attack on the Ukrainian city of Kryvyi Rih, Ukrainian officials said..

TALKING POINTS

"I'm convinced that if he [Donald Trump] goes back to the White House, that the next four years will be all about him just settling scores ... with everybody who he thinks wasn't perfectly nice to him. And the bottom line is, if you're lucky enough to become the president of the United States, every day you should wake up thinking about what to do for the people in this country, not what scores you need to settle for yourself," Former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie said about Donald Trump during a town hall event airing on CNN.

"It manifested in ways such as: 'We will shut Twitter down in India', which is a very large market for us; 'we will raid the homes of your employees', which they did; And this is India, a democratic country," Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey accused India of threatening to shut down the social media giant if it refuses to comply with government's requests and restrict certain posts.

"This is not the first year the useable stockpile is increasing. That trend has been underway for a couple of years, but it is continuing and appears to be intensifying because of the combined effects of China, Russia, India, Pakistan and North Korea. The most significant contribution last year was the Chinese buildup," The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's Associate Senior Fellow Hans Kristensen told Newsweek that the number of useable nuclear warheads in military stockpiles increased worldwide in 2022.

WHAT TO WATCH IN THE DAY AHEAD

The consumer price index report for May is due at 8:30 ET. Economists expect overall inflation to drop to 0.1% on a monthly basis, but core inflation (which strips out volatile items like food and energy) will likely remain above the Federal Reserve's target range.



Federal judge vacancies come amid heavy caseloads

Stu Whitney

South Dakota News Watch

For the past 20 months, South Dakota’s U.S. District Court has had a judicial vacancy waiting to be filled by President Joe Biden’s administration, prompting political scrutiny of the process and a shuffling of workloads for other federal judges.

Now the situation enters a new realm of urgency, with a looming deadline and another judge on the cusp of retirement. Biden, a Democrat up for re-election in 2024, could seat two district judges to a heavy Republican state that already has a stable of Democratic-chosen lifetime appointees from the Clinton and Obama presidencies.

Veronica Duffy, a federal magistrate judge in Sioux Falls, is the latest candidate to be recommended from South Dakota for the district bench. So why hasn’t anyone been formally nominated for approval by the U.S. Senate?

News Watch spoke with several people involved in the recommendation process, all of whom cited a variety of reasons – rather than one convenient explanation – for the delay in filling the South Dakota vacancies. They also agreed that not having the allotted number of full-time judges for nearly two years



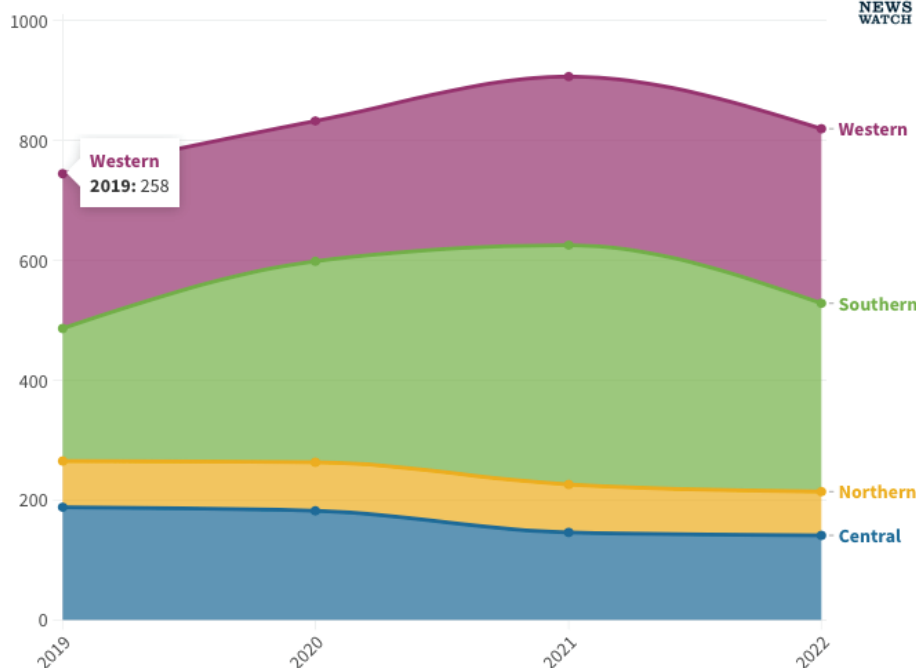
in civil and criminal courts is a problem that transcends politics.

The district of South Dakota – which consists of Southern (Sioux Falls), Northern (Aberdeen), Central (Pierre) and Western (Rapid City) divisions – handled 822 criminal and civil cases combined in 2022, according to Matt Thelen, clerk of courts.

“Federal courts in South Dakota are really busy,” said Neil Fulton, dean of the University of South Dakota School of Law and a chief of staff under former Gov. Mike Rounds.

“The criminal dockets are heavy because we have so much Indian Country jurisdiction and there’s a pretty robust civil docket, so it has a real impact on a lot of folks when there are vacancies for a long period of time.”

Cases filed in federal court in South Dakota by district



Source: Federal clerk of courts in South Dakota • Graphic: Michael Klinski/SD News Watch
Note: Cases are combined civil and criminal

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The federal courthouse in Sioux Falls, S.D.

Judges share workload to keep up with federal cases

Judge Jeffrey Viken of Rapid City retired on Oct. 1, 2021, but took senior status, a process by which qualified judges assume a reduced workload and create a federal vacancy. Viken continues to handle most of the criminal cases in the Western Division, including 174 (87%) of the pending 200 felony cases, according to Thelen.

The rest of the division's docket – including the entire civil caseload – has been distributed among Chief Judge Roberto Lange (Central, Northern Divisions), District Judge Karen Schreier (Southern Division), and two judges on senior status, Lawrence Piersol and Charles Kornmann.

Schreier announced in January that she plans to retire and take senior status upon the confirmation of her successor. That means there are two current lifetime seats that the Biden administration can fill.

Viken has a firm date of Oct. 1, 2023, when he intends to fully retire. When that happens, his entire caseload will need to be reassigned among the district's other judges. There's also the possibility of bringing in judges from other jurisdictions to help, but Thelen said there are no current plans to do that.

The Western Division handled nearly 40% (194 of 496) of the South Dakota criminal cases filed in 2022, followed by the Southern Division with 133 (27%), Central with 118 (24%) and Northern with 53 (11%).

"We look forward to the nomination of a capable person to take (Viken's) judgeship, and we very much hope that that nomination comes soon," said Thelen. "We're working hard to administer timely and proper justice to the fullest extent possible."

Rounds has 'discussions with White House' about nominees

The sense of urgency is compounded by the political reality that judicial confirmations become more daunting as a presidential election nears, especially in a state with two senators – John Thune and Rounds – from the opposite party of the White House.

Thune, the Senate Minority Whip, and Rounds have been watched closely by South Dakota Democrats for signs of impeding the judicial nomination process.

But Brendan Johnson, a former U.S. attorney and son of former Democratic U.S. Sen. Tim Johnson, told News Watch that he doesn't believe South Dakota's senators are at fault for the delay.

"I do not believe anyone is conspiring to keep Democratic nominees off the South Dakota District Court bench," said Johnson, now in private practice with the Robins Kaplan law firm. "I think everyone involved in this process, regardless of politics, recognizes the need to get these positions filled sooner rather than later. I place zero blame on (Thune and Rounds)."

Rounds told News Watch in a statement that his office "continues to have ongoing discussions with the White House concerning judicial nominees. I will not comment on recommendations to the White House or timelines at this time."

Thune's office did not respond to requests for comment on the judicial vacancies.

Herseht Sandlin turned down judicial candidacy in 2021

Part of the problem is the lack of a Democratic Party standard-bearer in South Dakota to shepherd the process of identifying, recommending and championing qualified candidates.

In most states, the recommendation process would be handled through the office of a Democratic statewide officeholder, as when then-Sen. Johnson shepherded the 2009 appointments of Viken and Lange under the Barack Obama administration.

With no statewide elected Democrats in South Dakota, the task fell to former U.S. Attorney and Democratic Party chair Randy Seiler, whose top choice fell through in April 2021 when former U.S. Rep. Stephanie

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Neil Fulton is the dean of the University of South Dakota School of Law. (Photo: USD)

Herseth Sandlin announced her intention to remain as president of Augustana University in Sioux Falls.

Seiler, who later recommended Duffy and was in the process of turning over party chairperson reins to Jennifer Slight-Hansen, died in April after suffering a heart attack while running at Oahe Dam near Pierre.

Fulton, a former federal public defender in the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, said that as the 2024 presidential election draws closer, with a potential shift in power in the White House and Senate, "you're not going to see out-of-party senators racing to confirm judges."

But he stopped short of saying that South Dakota's GOP senators don't want to see the

spot filled under a Democratic administration.

"In fairness, I think everyone wants to get this right, whether it's the White House or those in the Senate," said Fulton. "Are there politics involved? I'm sure there are. But there's also, I think for South Dakota, the acknowledgement that it's an important decision, and there's a degree of wanting to get it right as opposed to just getting it done."

Biden administration prioritizes women, minorities as judges

The wheels started turning in the fall of 2021, not long after Biden took office, when Viken went public with his plans to gradually step down from the bench.

He told the Rapid City Journal at the time that "a Native person would be an extraordinary candidate for this job," mirroring the Biden's administration's stated desire to nominate women and people of color as Article III judges (Supreme Court, Circuit Court, District Court), preferably those with experience in civil rights.

Circuit court judges, or appellate judges, serve in one of 12 regional circuits across the country, deciding among three-judge panels whether the law was applied correctly in district court. District court judges serve in one of 94 districts across the country and handle civil and criminal cases.

Despite the Biden administration's focus on diversity, Herseth Sandlin "would likely have been a shoo-in" for nomination, according to Drey Samuelson, a longtime Democratic operative who served as chief of staff for former Sen. Johnson.

But she pulled out of the process after being sworn into the federal bar in February 2021, sending Seiler back to the drawing board.

Search included enrolled members of American Indian tribes

The Democratic Party chair formed a six-person committee in April 2021 to review applications for judicial candidates. Fulton and Brendan Johnson both served on that committee.

Fulton said that Duffy, a Creighton Law School graduate who had a private practice in Rapid City before her appointment as a magistrate judge in 2007, "wasn't on the initial list that I saw. Veronica came later."

He said that the three candidates recommended by the committee were Tracy Zepher, then-attorney general of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe; Sarah Collins, an assistant U.S. attorney who is a member of the Oglala Lakota Tribe; and Troy Morley, an assistant U.S. attorney and member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa who currently serves as tribal liaison for the U.S. Attorney's Office.

"All are enrolled members of federally recognized tribes," Fulton said. "That mattered more to some committee members than others. But I think everyone recognized it was a pretty significant thing, given the volume of Indian County cases a (Western Division) judge would hear."



— “ —
I do not believe anyone is conspiring to keep Democratic nominees off the South Dakota District Court bench.

— ” —
Brendan Johnson, lawyer and former U.S. attorney

'Hard to get all the gears to align' to fill federal judge vacancies

One of the applicants withdrew their name from consideration, and the other two weren't advanced by the White House as formal nominees. Asked whether he was surprised by that, Fulton said "yes and no."

"Yes in that (diversity on the bench) has been a priority for the Biden administration, and no in that it's incredibly difficult to be nominated and confirmed as an Article III judge," he said.

"There's a background check process, political process, there could be other concerns from the White House or party. It's just hard to get all the gears to align for someone to move forward. People can derail it for many reasons. The White House may not think you're qualified, or they may not like your style. Lots of people have the ability to stop it in its tracks."

If someone's on the fence, having a U.S. senator

from the same party as the White House can make a difference.

When former Sioux Falls lawyer and assistant U.S. attorney Jonathon Kobes was nominated by former Republican President Donald Trump to the U.S. Court of Appeals in 2018, he was rated "not qualified" by the American Bar Association.

The ABA's letter to senators stated that Kobes "has neither the requisite experience nor evidence of his ability to fulfill the scholarly writing required of a United State Circuit Judge."

Kobes, general counsel to Sen. Rounds at the time, had tried just six cases at the time of his nomination. The ABA described him as a "conservative ideologue" who served on the board of a foster care agency that discriminated against same-sex couples.

But Rounds stuck with him, and Kobes was confirmed by a 51-50 vote, with then-Vice President Mike Pence breaking the tie.

Senators use 'blue slip' process to evaluate federal judge nominees

White House nominations typically go through a Senate tradition known as the "blue slip," which allows home-state senators to weigh in on whether the nominee should move forward.

That process can be used to stall or block district judges put up by the opposing party, especially if the nominee is seen as extreme on certain issues.

During the Trump administration, the Republican-led Senate went forward with circuit court judges in some cases without a positive blue slip from home-state senators. That helped Trump get 54 circuit court judges confirmed by the Senate during his four years, compared with 55 by Obama during eight years in office. Trump also had 174 district judges confirmed, while Obama had 268.

Samuelson, who is involved with a petition effort to bring open primaries to South Dakota, criticized Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer for resisting calls from fellow Democrats to abolish the blue slip tradition for district court nominations.

"The blue slip tradition is an anachronism and we should get rid of it, just as the Republicans did for appellate judges," Samuelson said. "The wheels of justice shouldn't stop just because they can't come to some agreement on how to proceed."

Red-state status could have something to do with delay

As of June 9, Biden has had 34 circuit court judges and 95 district court judges confirmed by the Senate. One possible explanation for the delay in filling South Dakota's vacancy, said Fulton, is that Biden and his team have not placed district court judges – especially those in red states with two Republican senators – high on their priority list.

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"Circuit court judges are appellate court judges, immediately below the Supreme Court, who are resolving legal issues and setting precedents to a greater degree than trial court judges," Fulton said.

"They would be perceived as more impactful, and in certain ways they are. They do move law in significant ways. But they're less impactful in that they decide fewer cases, so you could argue that trial court judges have more impact on individual people."

Biden did formally nominate two red-state district judges in Louisiana on June 8 to the Senate.

But Democrats withdrew votes in the Senate Judiciary Committee due to attendance issues, with Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.) ill and working from home. That came on the heels of controversy surrounding the extended absence of 89-year-old Sen. Dianna Feinstein (D-Calif.), who recently returned to Washington to resume work on the committee, where Democrats have a narrow 11-10 voting edge.

Despite the political wrangling and looming deadlines, Brendan Johnson said he remains optimistic that the South Dakota vacancies will be filled if qualified candidates are considered.

"I anticipate that if the White House provides senators with strong nominees, those nominees will be confirmed," Johnson told News Watch.

"District court judges in South Dakota handle the most difficult criminal docket in the United States. I think your political designation matters a heck of a lot less here than it does in other states."

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



ABOUT STU WHITNEY

Stu Whitney is an investigative reporter for South Dakota News Watch. A resident of Sioux Falls, Whitney is an award-winning reporter, editor and novelist with more than 30 years of experience in journalism.

Kaplan Strategies Reveals Results of Republican Voter Poll in South Dakota for Potential 2026 Primary Matchups

South Dakota, June 12, 2023 - Kaplan Strategies, a nonpartisan research firm, is pleased to announce the findings of its recent political poll, focusing on Republican voters in South Dakota and their preferences for the potential 2026 primary matchups.

Current Governor Kristi Noem is the most well-liked politician in the state by a wide margin. She boasts a 78%-18% favorable rating among Republicans in South Dakota. Senator Mike Rounds secured a 69%-25% favorable rating, while Congressman Dusty Johnson enjoyed a strong 70%-19% favorable spread.

Governor's race in 2026

In potential head-to-head matchups for the Governor's race, Congressman Dusty Johnson and Senator Mike Rounds emerged as strong contenders, both receiving 25% of the vote, while 50% remained undecided. With the inclusion of Lt. Governor Larry Rhoden, Mayor Paul Ten Haken, and Mr. Russ Olsen, Johnson obtained 26% support, and Rounds received 24%. Rhoden and Ten Haken garnered 9% and 8% respectively, with Olsen registering at 1%. It is worth noting that 33% of respondents remained undecided in the larger field.

The remaining candidates in the potential primary field exhibited lower name recognition but maintained net positive favorable ratings. Rhoden held a 40%-20% rating, Ten Haken secured a 43%-16% rating, and Olsen received a 26%-14% rating.

US Senate race 2026

In a potential head-to-head primary contest between Governor Noem and incumbent Senator Rounds, Noem exhibited a dominating lead with 53% of the support, compared to Rounds' 26%. Similarly, in a hypothetical matchup against Congressman Johnson, Noem held a massive advantage with 54% of the vote, leaving Johnson with 23%. Noem's lead was consistent across all age groups, as well as among both men and women.

Senator John Thune, enjoyed a favorable view among 64% of respondents, while 28% held an unfavorable opinion. Lastly, former President Donald J. Trump remains popular among South Dakota Republicans, as evidenced by his 73%-23% favorable/unfavorable rating.

The random survey, conducted by Kaplan Strategies, utilized an online panel of cell phone users, collecting responses through web and text platforms, as well as automated voice responses. It is important to note that the results are weighted. The poll was funded by Kaplan Strategies.

Groton Post 39 Jr. Legion Falls to Warner-Ipswich-Northwestern Jr Legion After Fourth Inning Score

Groton Post 39 Jr. Legion lost the lead late in a 5-4 defeat to Warner-Ipswich-Northwestern Jr Legion on Tuesday. The game was tied at four with Warner-Ipswich-Northwestern Jr Legion batting in the bottom of the fourth when Gavin Lane grounded out, scoring one run.

Groton Post 39 Jr. Legion got on the board in the first inning when an error scored one run for Groton Post 39 Jr. Legion.

Lane was credited with the victory for Warner-Ipswich-Northwestern Jr Legion. The righthander allowed four hits and four runs over five innings, striking out two.

Braxton Imrie took the loss for Groton Post 39 Jr. Legion. The righty surrendered five runs on five hits over three and two-thirds innings, striking out three.

Taylor Diegel went 2-for-3 at the plate to lead Groton Post 39 Jr. Legion in hits.

H Williams led Warner-Ipswich-Northwestern Jr Legion with two hits in three at bats.

Groton Jr. Teeners Drops Game to W.I.N. After Late Score

Groton Jr. Teeners stayed in it until the end, but W.I.N. pulled away late in a 15-11 victory on Monday. The game was tied at ten with W.I.N. batting in the top of the fourth when Mac Heinz drew a walk, scoring one run.

Despite the loss, Groton Jr. Teeners did collect eight hits in the high-scoring affair. Unfortunately, W.I.N. had eight hits on the way to victory.

In the first inning, Groton Jr. Teeners got their offense started. Easton Weber grounded out, scoring two runs.

Groton Jr. Teeners put up five runs in the third inning. Ethan Kroll, Lincoln Krause, and Braeden Fliehs each had RBIs in the frame.

W.I.N. scored nine runs in the second inning. Noah Bakeburg, Easton Bruns, Braydon Kroll, Logan Fischbach, Alec Mckellson, and Heinz powered the big inning with RBIs.

Mckellson was the winning pitcher for W.I.N.. Mckellson surrendered nine runs on five hits over two and two-thirds innings, striking out three. Gage Lnuppe threw two and a third innings in relief out of the bullpen.

Krause was on the hill for Groton jr. Teeners 14U. The righthander went three and a third innings, allowing 13 runs on seven hits and striking out two. TC Schuster threw one and two-thirds innings out of the bullpen.

Groton Jr. Teeners totaled eight hits in the game. Krause and Fliehs all managed multiple hits for Groton jr. Teeners 14U. Fliehs and Krause each collected three hits to lead Groton.

Mckellson went 2-for-2 at the plate to lead W.I.N. in hits.

Early Lead For W.I.N. Seals Fate For Groton Jr. Teeners 14U

Groton Jr. Teeners watched the game slip away early and couldn't recover in a 2-0 loss to W.I.N. on Tuesday. W.I.N. took the lead on a groundout in the first inning.

The pitching was strong on both sides. W.I.N. pitchers struck out 13, while Groton Jr. Teeners sat down five.

One bright spot for Groton Jr. Teeners was a single by Nick Groeblichhoff in the third inning.

Lincoln Kroll was the winning pitcher for W.I.N. Kroll went five innings, allowing zero runs on one hit and striking out seven. M Heinz and Number Forty Five entered the game out of the bullpen and helped to close out the game in relief.

Alex Abeln took the loss for Groton jr. Teeners 14U. The righthander surrendered two runs on eight hits over seven innings, striking out five and walking zero.

Groeblichhoff led Groton Jr. Teeners with one hit in two at bats. Groton Jr. Teeners didn't commit a single error in the field. Groeblichhoff had eight chances in the field, the most on the team.

W.I.N. was sure-handed and didn't commit a single error. L Fischbach made the most plays with 14.

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Groton Legion Post 39 Claims Blow-Out Victory Over Warner-Ipswich-Northwestern Legion, 9-2

Groton Legion Post 39 blew out Warner-Ipswich-Northwestern Legion 9-2 on Monday.

Groton Legion Post 39 got things started in the second inning when Logan Ringgingberg singled on a 1-0 count, scoring one run.

Ryan Groeblichhoff earned the win for Groton Legion Post 39. The pitcher allowed four hits and two runs over seven innings, striking out eight and walking zero.

Dawson Ward took the loss for Warner-Ipswich-Northwestern Legion. The righty went two innings, allowing six runs on three hits and striking out one.

Brevin Flihs led Groton Legion Post 39 with two hits in four at bats.

Henry Williams went 2-for-3 at the plate to lead Warner-Ipswich-Northwestern Legion in hits.

Groton Legion Post 39 9 - 2 Warner-Ipswich-Northwestern Legion

📍 Away 📅 Monday June 12, 2023

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	R	H	E
GRTN	0	4	2	2	0	0	1	9	6	3
WRNR	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	4	2

BATTING

Groton Legion Post	AB	R	H	RBI	BB	SO
B Flihs (SS)	4	1	2	1	0	0
C Simon (CF)	2	1	0	1	0	1
B Althoff (1B)	3	0	1	2	1	0
T Larson (3B)	2	2	0	0	2	2
R Groeblichhoff (P)	3	2	1	0	1	1
C Larson (C)	3	0	0	0	1	1
C Dunker (LF)	2	1	0	1	0	0
L Ringgingberg (R...)	2	1	1	3	0	0
B Imrie (2B)	4	0	1	1	0	1
CR: T Diegel	0	1	0	0	0	0
Totals	25	9	6	9	5	6

TB: B Flihs 2, B Imrie, B Althoff, R Groeblichhoff, L Ringgingberg, **SF:** C Simon, L Ringgingberg 2, **HBP:** C Simon, C Dunker 2, **SB:** R Groeblichhoff 2, T Larson, **LOB:** 6

PITCHING

Groton Legio	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	HR
R Groeblich...	7.0	4	2	0	0	8	0
Totals	7.0	4	2	0	0	8	0

W: R Groeblichhoff, **P-S:** R Groeblichhoff 106-73, **HBP:** R Groeblichhoff, **BF:** R Groeblichhoff 28

Warner-Ipswich-N	AB	R	H	RBI	BB	SO
D Fischbach (2B)	3	0	0	0	0	0
A Remily (1B)	3	0	0	0	0	2
Q Fischbach (SS)	3	1	0	0	0	0
K Stahl (LF)	3	1	0	0	0	1
D Ward (P)	3	0	0	0	0	2
H Williams (3B)	3	0	2	1	0	1
S Vetter (3B, P)	2	0	0	0	0	0
D Bakeburg (CF)	3	0	0	0	0	1
A Bishop (C)	2	0	1	0	0	0
X Kadlec (RF)	2	0	1	0	0	1
Totals	27	2	4	1	0	8

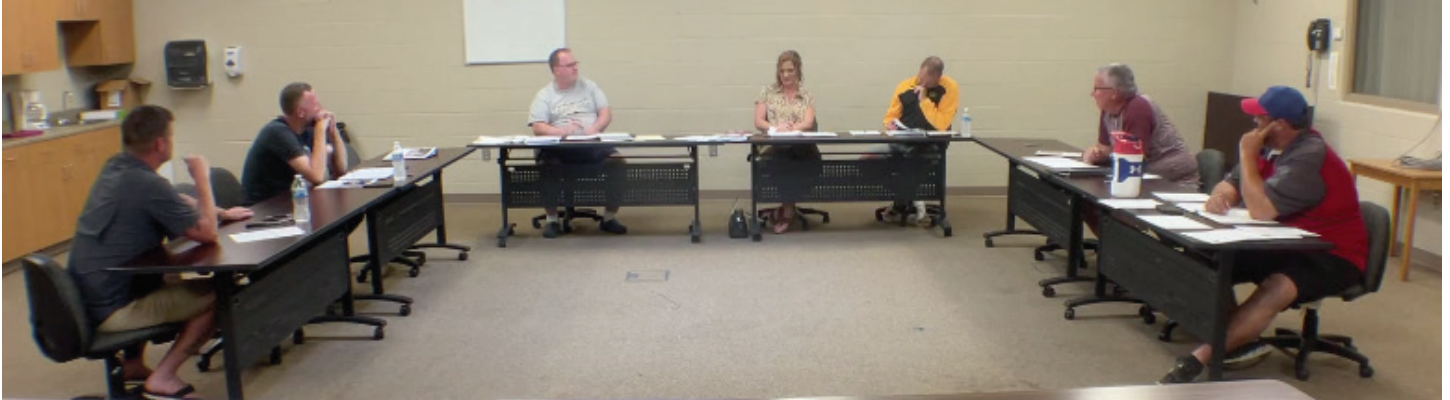
2B: H Williams, **TB:** A Bishop, H Williams 3, X Kadlec, **HBP:** S Vetter, **SB:** Q Fischbach, **LOB:** 5

Warner-Ipswi	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	HR
D Ward	2.0	3	6	4	3	1	0
S Vetter	5.0	3	3	0	2	5	0
Totals	7.0	6	9	4	5	6	0

L: D Ward, **P-S:** D Ward 54-26, S Vetter 84-47, **WP:** S Vetter, **HBP:** D Ward, S Vetter 2, **BF:** D Ward 14, S Vetter 22

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This was the last meeting for Groton Area School Business Manager Mike Weber. He will be retiring from his post after more than 35 years and 700 board meetings. Pictured are Brett Schwan, Grant Rix, Mike Weber, Deb Gengerke, Joe Schwan, Marty Weismantel and Tigh Fliehs. (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)

Renovations continue through summer at Groton Area schools by Elizabeth Varin

Though students are home for the summer, work continues to improve facilities at Groton Area School District.

HVAC duct work laid outside the high school arena as the school board met Monday evening.

Demolition and removal of old ventilators and ducting is underway as the district replaces the HVAC system at the arena, weight room, locker room and wrestling room. The concrete pad for the condensing unit was poured after the graduation ceremony in May, and crews are installing new equipment now, reported Superintendent Joe Schwan.

"There is no indication that there is anything there that would cause us a delay," he said.

Principal Brett Schwan asked if work would be completed before volleyball season begins, to which Superintendent Schwan said it should be.

Work is also taking place at the health science lab.

The district received a South Dakota Department of Education CTE Innovation Equipment Grant for \$236,522 to be used for the Health Science Simulation Lab. That grant includes equipment purchases, not updates to the existing facility.

The district is investing more than \$80,000 into the lab for demolition, new flooring, updated lighting, adding a stainless steel sink and painting the interior of the lab. Funding for renovations to the lab facility is coming from shifting some capital outlay funds.

During the last week of school, the room was cleared of furniture and supplies, Superintendent Schwan said. A demolition crew spent a day removing cabinets and tables from the room.

Last week, the asbestos tile floor was removed, he said.

Overall, he said, the project should be completed by early to mid-July, he said. A staff training session with SynDaver, a company that creates medical simulation models and task tammers, is scheduled for mid-July.

Materials have also arrived for the elementary school roofing work scheduled for this summer. Hub City Roofing plans to begin work at the end of June, Schwan said.

Work is also scheduled to begin at the end of June to replace the fiber line and run a new line between the school buildings.

While some projects are underway, others remain in the planning phase.

The school board reviewed a report from JLG Architects about the 1969 gymnasium improvements. However, more information is needed to move forward.

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"We're trying to come up with a list of per-item costs to try to tackle it in a more feasible way," Schwan said.

Some small projects that could be done include replacing the curtain between the main gym and east end of the addition, replacing some of the bleachers in the gym and replacing the stage floor. Those smaller project costs were not included in the architect report presented to the board.

Schwan asked the board to consider what smaller fixes they would like to see to improve the building.

Board President Deb Gengerke said she doesn't see a need for all the bleachers currently there. She asked for numbers on bringing in some replacement bleachers, possibly portable ones, and moving the elementary school concerts to the arena, as those are the only events that seem to require all the bleachers to be used.

Work is going to be driven by private donations, she said. In order to raise those funds, the district should have an ala carte list of project costs.

"I don't think I could speak to a decision because I don't have the information," she said.

Changes in insurance causes some concerns

The district board is looking at how to move forward with property and liability insurance.

One of the biggest changes for the 2024 fiscal year is the addition of a wind and hail damage deductible per building, said Royce Erdmann, insurance agent at CorTrust Bank. That deductible totals \$75,000 per building, though there are options to reduce that deductible.

Board Vice President Marty Weismantel asked when the last wind or hail damage claim was made by Groton Area School District.

"You're talking Castlewood," said Business Manager Mike Weber, referencing the tornado that tore through the school in 2022. "It happens."

If you're looking at that level of damage, Weismantel said, a \$75,000 deductible doesn't seem like it's that big of a deal.

The district has had weather-related claims before, including around 30 years ago when lightning hit the smoke stack at the high school, leaving rain to damage the computer lab located below, said Business Manager Weber.

The board has until July 1 to decide on a direction for the property and liability insurance.

June meeting the last for business manager Weber

Monday's meeting was Business Manager Mike Weber's last meeting after working for the school district for more than 35 years.

Superintendent Joe Schwan estimates Weber has been to about 700 board meetings.

"Thank you for your continued work and staying engaged," Schwan said to Weber.

Weber joked that those in Pierre are celebrating his retirement with a desk audit for fiscal year 2021.

Documents for the thorough audit were delivered to the state before the June 2 deadline, and Weber said he hasn't heard back about any more information needed. If they wait too long, though, he said the next business manager Becky Hubsch will be ready to answer their questions.

In other action:

- The board accepted the resignation of Adam Franken, ag teacher, cross country coach and FFA advisor. Franken, who has taught in Groton for 19 years, has applied for a recently-opened pastor position at a church in Aberdeen.

- The board reviewed plans for the 2023-2024 music trip. Instrumental music teacher Desiree Yeigh and show choir director Amy Warrington discussed the proposed May 18-21, 2024 trip to Branson, Miss. for an estimated 50 students and five adults. The trip usually takes place in February or March, but weather concerns have prompted the music staff to move the trip to May, Yeigh said. Board member Tigh Flihs asked if the music program has ever taken a trip to Branson, to which Yeigh said not since she's been with

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the district.

- The 2023-2024 Groton Area School District budget is set to be published, with a public hearing to discuss the financials scheduled for 8 p.m. July 10.

- The school district still has more than half a dozen staffing vacancies as of Monday's meeting. Open positions include a high school ag education instructor/FFA advisor, K-12 vocal music teacher, middle school/high school special education paraprofessional, head cross country coach, junior high wrestling coach and head boys soccer coach. There are also substitute teachers positions available.

- The board adopted new job descriptions for the school nurse and athletic director.

- The district business manager will be able to apply for a credit card from Dacotah Bank. The credit card had previously been with Well Fargo.



Groton Transit Fundraiser

Thursday, June 15, 2023

5 p.m. to 7 p.m.

Groton Community Center

***** Groton Transit Fundraiser will be held at the**

Groton Community Center

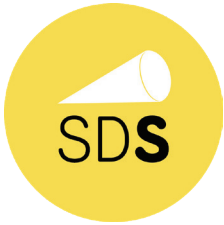
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SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Sioux Falls man now facing 16 counts of COVID-related fraud

BY: JOHN HULT - JUNE 12, 2023 6:16 PM

SIOUX FALLS — A Sioux Falls man already facing possible federal prison time for bank fraud has been charged with two additional counts of wire fraud for allegedly lying to secure another \$700,000 in COVID relief funds.

James Bunker, 52, of Sioux Falls, was initially indicted on a dozen fraud-related charges related to the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Main Street Lending Program, both of which were designed to offer economic relief for businesses impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The alleged fraud spanned from June 2020 through July 2021.

The first charges were tied in part to statements Bunker made to multiple South Dakota banks when applying for pandemic relief. Bunker "significantly underreported" his financial liabilities, the indictment says, by failing to make mention of a large tax lien and providing false financial statements for his businesses.

He also faced wire fraud charges for transferring the allegedly ill-gotten gains from a Nebraska bank to one in South Dakota, and he's accused of lying about his receipt of more than \$2 million in COVID loans in an application for loan forgiveness filed with the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA).

He was charged with two additional counts last May based on statements made to the SBA.

On Monday, U.S. District Court Magistrate Judge Veronica Duffy read him his rights on the two new charges, which were filed Friday for two wire transfers from the SBA for \$350,000 and \$350,400.

Each of the July 2021 transfers came when Bunker allegedly asked to increase the amount of previously secured SBA loans. Bunker now faces a total of 16 counts of fraud-related crime, and could be given up to 20 years in prison on each of the two new counts alone.

Duffy entered a plea of not guilty for Bunker at the initial appearance, saying he could change his plea at a future date after reviewing the charges. His only words in the courtroom came as answers to a series of yes-or-no questions on his understanding of his rights.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Paige Petersen said the two new counts also carry fines of up to \$250,000.

The indictment also says that if convicted, Bunker would need to forfeit four pieces of property in Sioux Falls and \$20,000.

According to the ProPublica Database of PPP loans, the companies owned or managed by Bunker that are mentioned in the indictment received several COVID-related cash infusions.

Genuine Builders of Arlington, for example, got a \$1.07 million loan in April 2020 to cover payroll, and the loan was forgiven in February of 2021. Bunker is "president, CEO, General Manager, and sole shareholder" of the concrete construction company, according to its website.

Tri-State Ag Services, also mentioned in the indictment, got a loan of \$1.4 million through the PPP program.

An investigation by the Associated Press says the U.S. government has charged more than 2,230 defendants with pandemic-related fraud crimes and is conducting thousands of investigations.

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.

COMMENTARY

Wilderness areas need restraint, not climbing hardware

DANA JOHNSON

We humans want the most out of life, so why shouldn't we push to get more of what we want?

That's what some rock climbers must be thinking. They want to enter designated wilderness areas in order to drill permanent anchors into wilderness rock faces, turning these wild places into sport-climbing walls.

When the Wilderness Act became law in 1964, it put wildlife and wild lands first, decreeing that these special places should be left alone as much as possible. This unusual approach codified humility, arguing that some wild places, rich in wildlife and natural beauty, needed as much protection as possible.

So far, the act protects less than 3% of what Congress called "untrammelled" public land in the Lower 48. These are unique places free of roads and vehicles and most manmade intrusions that afflict the rest of America.

The Wilderness Act also prohibits "installations," but to get around this, a group called the Access Fund has persuaded friends in Congress to introduce a bill that would, in effect, amend the Wilderness Act.

Introduced by Rep. John Curtis, a Republican from the anti-environmental delegation of Utah, and co-sponsored by Democrat Joe Neguse from Colorado, the "Protect America's Rock Climbing Act" (PARC Act) has been promoted as bipartisan.

Yet over 40 conservation groups, from small grassroots greens to large national organizations, have written Congress to oppose the bill. Wilderness is not about human convenience, they say, it's about safeguarding the tiny pockets of wild landscape we've allowed to remain.

The PARC Act directs federal agencies to recognize the legal use of fixed anchors in wilderness areas, a backdoor approach to statutory amendment that even the U.S. Forest Service and Department of Interior oppose.

In a hearing on the bill, the Forest Service stated that "creating new definitions for allowable uses in wilderness areas, as (the PARC Act) would do, has the practical effect of amending the Wilderness Act. (It) could have serious and harmful consequences for the management of wilderness areas across the nation."

Beyond the permanent visual evidence of human development, fixed anchors would attract more climbers looking for bolted routes and concentrate use in sensitive habitats. That impact is harmful enough, but the bill also sends a loud message: Recreation interests are more important than preserving the small bit of wilderness we have left.

What's coming next is clear. Some mountain bikers, led by the Sustainable Trails Coalition, have introduced legislation to exempt mountain bikes from the prohibition on mechanized travel in wilderness areas.

Then there are the trail runners who want exemptions from the ban on commercial trail racing. Drone pilots and hang-gliders also want their forms of aircraft exempted.

What's confounding is that climbing is already allowed in wilderness areas. This bill is simply about using fixed bolts to climb as opposed to using removable protection. That's apparently confusing to some people.

An article in the Salt Lake Tribune went so far as to wrongly state that, "a ban on anchors would be tantamount to a ban on climbing in wilderness areas."

But now, even some climbers are pushing back. The Montana writer George Ochenski, known for his decades of first ascents in wilderness areas, calls the Tribune's position "Total bullsh*t." In an e-mail, he said bolting routes "bring 'sport climbing' into the wilderness when it belongs in the gym or on non-wilderness rocks."

For decades, many climbers have advocated for a marriage of climbing and wilderness ethics. In Chouinard Equipment's first catalog, Patagonia founder and legendary climber Yvon Chouinard called for an ethic of "clean climbing" that comes from "the exercise of moral restraint and individual responsibility."

We don't like to think of recreation as consumptive, but it consumes the diminishing resource of space. And protected space is in short supply as stressors on the natural world increase. With every "user group" demand, the refuge for wild animals grows smaller. Meanwhile, a startling number of our animal

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counterparts have faded into extinction.

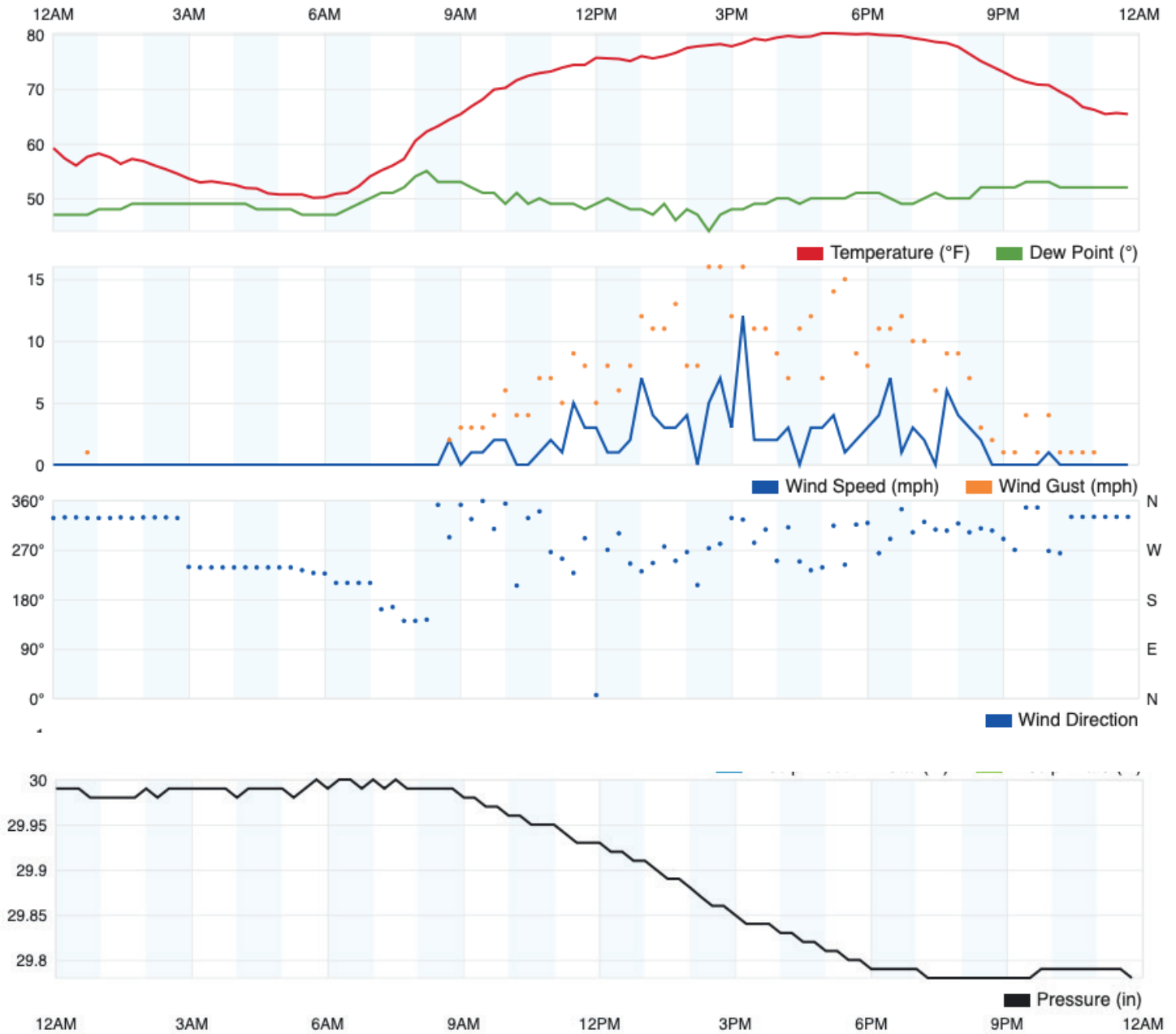
As someone who loves trail running, I understand the allure of wedding a love of wild places with the love of adventure and sport. But I've also come to see that the flip side of freedom is restraint, and wilderness needs our restraint more than ever.

Dana Johnson is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. She is a staff attorney and policy director for Wilderness Watch, a national wilderness nonprofit.

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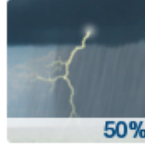
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



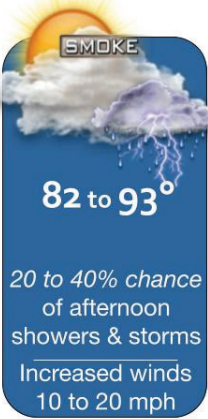



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Today	Tonight	Wednesday	Wednesday Night	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday
						
Mostly Sunny	Haze then Partly Cloudy	Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Sunny then Slight Chance T-storms	Chance T-storms	Chance T-storms
High: 88 °F	Low: 57 °F	High: 89 °F	Low: 60 °F	High: 93 °F	Low: 63 °F	High: 80 °F

Hazy sky continues!
Above normal temperatures through Thursday

Today	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
			
82 to 90°	85 to 91°	82 to 93° 20 to 40% chance of afternoon showers & storms Increased winds 10 to 20 mph	75 to 83° Slightly Cooler 30 to 60% chance of showers & storms Increased winds 10 to 20 mph

National Weather Service □ Aberdeen, SD □ weather.gov/aberndeen



Smoke from Canadian wildfires will result in a hazy sky for much of the work week. Most of this smoke is expected to stay elevated today, but some smoke making it to the ground remains possible. High temperatures will remain in the 80s to low 90s through Thursday, with a temporary return to near normal temperatures Friday. Our next chances for showers and thunderstorms will arrive Thursday, with a 20 to 40 percent chance of afternoon showers and storms. The potential for showers and storms will continue through Friday.

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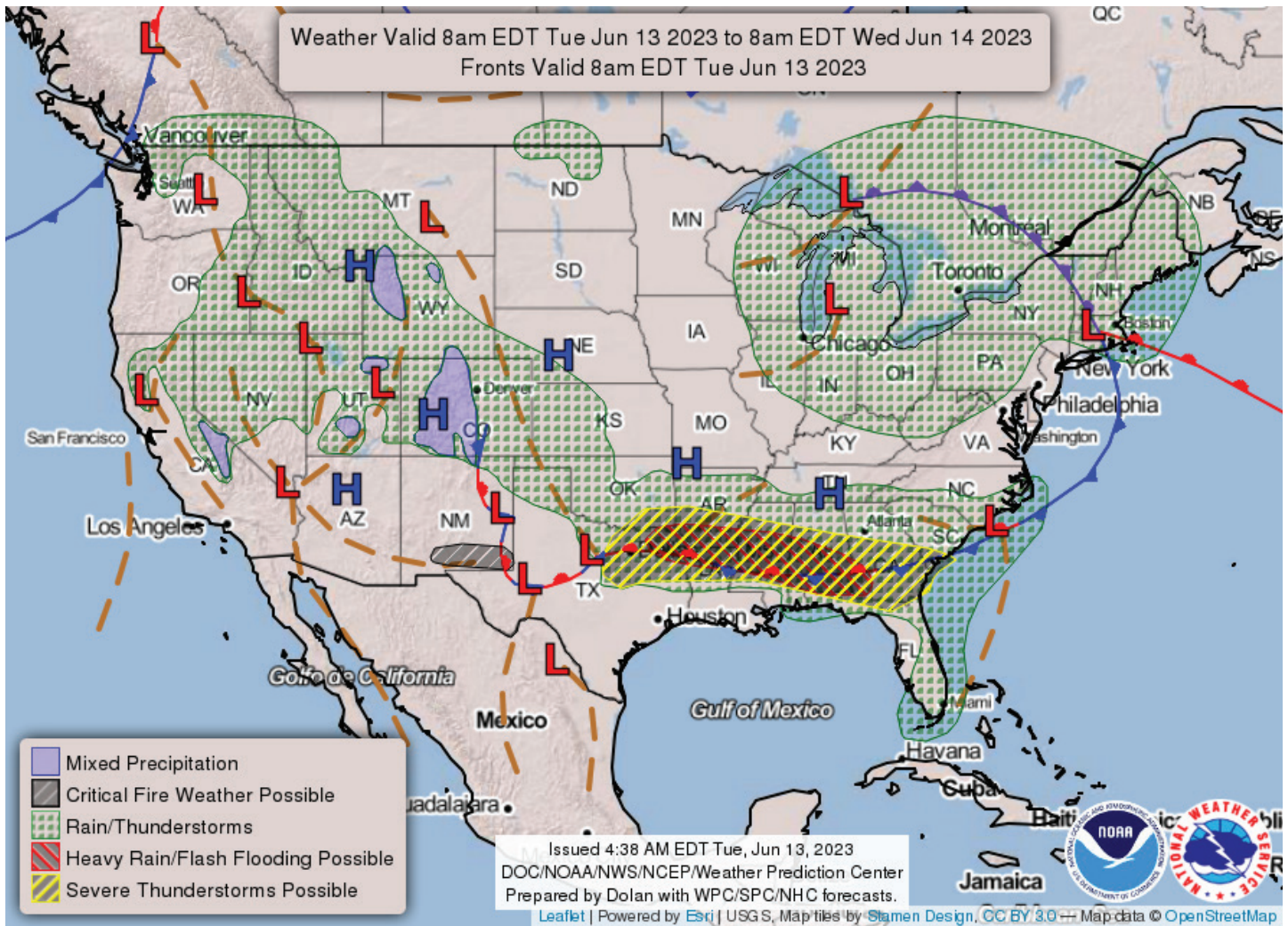
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 81 °F at 6:05 PM
Low Temp: 50 °F at 5:51 AM
Wind: 16 mph at 2:29 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 15 hours, 41 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 102 in 1936
Record Low: 36 in 1942
Average High: 80
Average Low: 55
Average Precip in June.: 1.53
Precip to date in June.: 0.51
Average Precip to date: 8.78
Precip Year to Date: 8.42
Sunset Tonight: 9:23:27 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:41:26 AM



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Today in Weather History

June 13, 1943: An estimated F2 tornado moved ENE, destroying a home on the southeastern edge of Highmore in Hyde County. A mother and her five children seeking shelter in the home were injured. Barns and outbuildings were damaged on a dozen farms. This tornado was estimated to be on the ground for about 8 miles and caused about \$10,000 in damage.

June 13, 1991: A small F1 tornado remained on the ground for 4 miles as it moved westerly from 10 miles west of Roscoe to 6 miles west of Roscoe, in Edmunds County. The path of the tornado continued for another 5 miles but was not consistently on the ground. It dissipated one mile west of Roscoe. Although the tornado had a long path, its width was 10 yards and traveled through open fields and cause little to no damage.

1889 - Forest fires in northern Wisconsin and northeast Minnesota were in the process of destroying millions of dollars of board feet of timber. (David Ludlum)

1907 - The temperature at Tamarack, CA, dipped to 2 degrees above zero, the lowest reading of record for June for the U.S. The high that day was 30 degrees. Tamarack received 42 inches of snow between the 10th and the 13th. On the 13th the snow depth was 130 inches. (The Weather Channel)

1972: Severe weather conditions over the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico begin to converge and form a tropical depression that would become Hurricane Agnes over the next two weeks. This hurricane affected most of the eastern United States with the Northeast being the hardest hit area with heavy rainfall.

1976: A deadly tornado moved across parts of the southwestern Chicago, Illinois suburbs killing three people and injured 23 others. The tornado, with winds over 200 mph moved from Lemont to Downers Grove causing \$13 million in damage when 87 homes were destroyed, and another 90 were damaged. The tornado passed over the Argonne National Laboratory, peeling part of a roof of the building housing a nuclear reactor. The tornadoes movement was somewhat erratic moving southeast to the north and finally turning northwest.

1984 - Severe thunderstorms struck Denver deluging the city with five inches of rain, and leaving up to six feet of water in some places. Softball size hail smashed windshields and ripped through metal cars. Snow plows had to be called out. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Fifteen cities in the north central U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date, including International Falls, MN, with a reading of 92 degrees. Mason City IA and Waterloo IA reported record highs of 100 degrees. Thunderstorms in the northeastern U.S. produced golf ball size hail around Hamilton Square NJ, along with high winds which tore the roof off a hospital causing a million dollars damage. Averill Park NY was deluged with 1.64 inches of rain in fifteen minutes. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Afternoon thunderstorms produced severe weather in the Southern and Central Plains Region. Forrest NM was deluged with 5.5 inches of rain in ninety minutes. Temperatures soared into the 90s across much of the eastern half of the nation, including New England. Northern Illinois reported a record twenty straight days of dry weather. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather from the Southern Plains Region to the Carolinas during the day and night, and continued to drench parts of Texas and Oklahoma with heavy rain. Oklahoma City reported 13.41 inches of rain for the first thirteen days of the month, and Fort Worth TX reported 29.56 inches for the year, a total more than 13 inches above normal. Severe drought continued to rage across South Texas. (The National Weather Summary)

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

UNEXPECTED REWARDS

He began playing the cello at an early age, and by the time he was eighteen, he enjoyed playing in a small European orchestra. Unfortunately, he became nearsighted and as a result, had to memorize his part and the parts of all of the other instruments if he was to play with the orchestra. Fortunately, he became very skilled at memorization.

One day the orchestra was to play before a large audience. Moments before the performance was to begin, the leader became ill. Arturo Toscanini, the cellist, was called upon to lead the orchestra because he was the only person who knew all of the parts of the other musicians. His performance was flawless, and the critics praised his skills. Other opportunities became available to him, and he went on to become a world-famous conductor. What may have defeated others became a successful career for him. He turned his loss into a victory!

God has great plans for each of us. He sees and knows every obstacle we might ever encounter from the day we are born until the day our lives end. His part is to bring all "things" together; our part is to work with Him to achieve the "good" that He has in store for us.

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to believe that You have great plans for each of us. May we never accept defeat but take each of Your gifts and use them for Your glory. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. Romans 8:28



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
- 06/17/2023 Groton Triathlon
- 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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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
06.09.23

3 19 53 60 68 13

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$260,000,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 43 Mins 25
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
06.12.23

1 29 32 41 46 7

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$3,940,000

NEXT 1 Days 14 Hrs 58
DRAW: Mins 26 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
06.12.23

9 26 27 35 41 17

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 15 Hrs 13 Mins 26
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
06.10.23

5 14 19 23 32

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$95,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 13
DRAW: Mins 26 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
06.12.23

9 15 22 54 64 19

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 42
DRAW: Mins 26 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
06.12.23

2 3 16 23 68 7

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$340,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 15 Hrs 42
DRAW: Mins 26 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

9 wounded in Denver mass shooting after Nuggets win and suspect taken into custody, police say

DENVER (AP) — Nine people were wounded in a mass shooting early Tuesday in Denver in an area where basketball fans had been celebrating the Nuggets first NBA title win, police said, and a suspect was taken into custody.

The shooting happened about 12:30 a.m. — about 3 1/2 hours after the game — and three of the injured were in critical condition, the Denver Police Department said in a statement. The suspect, a man, was one of the six people who suffered injuries believed to be non-life-threatening.

The shooting happened about a mile from Ball Arena, where the Nuggets defeated the Miami Heat on Monday night.

“As far as what led up to this altercation that resulted in the shots being fired, that’s still under investigation at this time,” police spokesperson Doug Schepman said. “It did occur in the area where we had largest gathering of folks celebrating during the night.”

A small crowd was in the area at the time of the shooting, he said, but had “diminished quite a bit at that point.” He said the shooting was in an area where a lot of people might have come out of bars after the game.

Police were interviewing witnesses and Schepman described the ongoing investigation “expansive.”

Nikola Jokic’s hometown in Serbia celebrates Denver Nuggets’ 1st NBA title

By DUSAN STOJANOVIC Associated Press

SOMBOR, Serbia (AP) — It was barely dawn when Nikola Jokic’s hardcore fans in his Serbian hometown of Sombor chanted “MVP! MVP!” and celebrated the Denver Nuggets’ first NBA title.

Denver trailed the Miami Heat at halftime of Game 5 but rallied to win 94-89, with two-time league MVP Jokic posting 28 points and 16 rebounds and collecting the trophy for the most valuable player of the NBA Finals.

Every shot, rebound or block the Serb center made sparked loud cheers and shouts in a decrepit sports hall in the small and otherwise sleepy northern Serbian city near the borders with Croatia and Hungary where fans watched the game on a large screen.

The loudest ovation came when the typically humble and stone-faced Jokic said in a post-game, on-court interview: “It’s time to go home.”

Soon, those fans who spent sleepless nights watching the NBA Finals will see him in person as he returns home to take care of his racehorses.

For the small Balkan state of just over 6 million people, June has been a month few will ever forget. A Serbian sweep gave Jokic his first NBA ring and tennis star Novak Djokovic a record-setting 23rd Grand Slam singles title when he won the French Open on Sunday.

“It’s just amazing,” Jokic’s father Branislav, who runs a local harness racing club on the outskirts of Sombor, said in an interview. “I don’t think this great accomplishment can ever be repeated again.”

The stables are called the Dream Catcher after the name of the first racehorse that Jokic ever purchased years ago, as he developed a strong passion for horses and horse racing.

Not far away is a basketball court where Jokic first trained near his elementary school, which features a large wall painting of him in a Nuggets’ No. 15 jersey and an inscription: “Don’t be Afraid to Fail Big.”

Branislav Jokic, wearing a blue Denver Nuggets jersey, said that nobody could have predicted Nikola’s success as a basketball player as he progressed from a small-town talent, “who was a bit overweight at one point,” to moving to the regional league and then signing his first contract with the Nuggets.

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"He had something special within him. I rarely mention it today, but I simply knew that he would be a good basketball player," he said. "But as to what heights he would reach, nobody could have known then."

Branislav Jokic said that although his son has trained hard to reach the top level, his mind was always set on a love of horses.

"He started growing, both in height and in size, and he started to become aware that he could be a basketball player, but he had a great desire in those days. He would say, 'Dad, I want to become a horseman.' And I used to tell him: 'Son, become a basketball player first, and you'll become a great horseman later,'" Branislav Jokic said.

Jokic became the lowest drafted player — 41st overall in the second round in 2014 — to win the MVP of the finals. He also became only the third second-round pick to win the award.

Jokic also became the first player in NBA history to lead the playoffs in points scored, rebounds and assists. With 600 points, 269 rebounds and 190 assists in total, he led in all three categories.

Jokic and Djokovic, once-in-a-generation athletes who grew up about a 2 1/2 hour-drive apart in a country not much more populous than Colorado, have been in the hunt to win titles and reach records that stamped their names in the history books.

"Sport is something that is special in Serbia. We have Novak, who is probably the best ever, Novak is the best ever for us, now we have an NBA champion," Jokic said in a news conference. "It's a very good feeling to be a Serb now."

AP NBA: <https://apnews.com/hub/NBA> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Trump will face judge in historic court appearance over charges he mishandled secret documents

By ERIC TUCKER and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Donald Trump was set to make his first court appearance Tuesday in a historic criminal case charging the former president with hoarding top secret government documents, boastfully displaying them to visitors and trying to hide them from investigators who demanded them back.

Trump approached his Miami court date with characteristic bravado, insisting as he has done through years of legal woes that he has done nothing wrong and was being persecuted for political purposes. But the gravity of the moment is unmistakable as he answers to 37 felony counts that accuse him of willfully retaining classified records that prosecutors say could have jeopardized national security if exposed.

The case is laden with political implications for Trump, who currently holds the dominant spot in the early days of the 2024 Republican presidential primary. But it also poses profound legal consequences given the prospect of a years-long prison sentence. Even for a defendant whose post-presidential life has been dominated by investigations, the documents probe has stood out for both the apparent volume of evidence amassed by prosecutors and the severity of the allegations.

It's also a watershed moment for a Justice Department that until last week had never before brought charges against a former president. Attorney General Merrick Garland, an appointee of President Joe Biden, sought to insulate the department from political attacks by handing ownership of the case last year to a special counsel Jack Smith, who on Friday declared, "We have one set of laws in this country, and they apply to everyone."

The arraignment, though largely procedural in nature, is the latest in an unprecedented public reckoning this year for Trump, who faces charges in New York arising from hush money payments during his 2016 presidential campaign as well as ongoing investigations in Washington and Atlanta into efforts to undo the results of the 2020 race. He's sought to project confidence in the face of unmistakable legal peril, attacking Smith as "deranged," pledging to stay in the race and scheduling a speech and fundraiser for Tuesday night at his Bedminster, New Jersey, golf club.

"They're using this because they can't win the election fairly and squarely," Trump said Monday in an interview with Americano Media.

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The court appearance is also unfolding against the backdrop of potential protests and unrest. Some high-profile backers have used barbed rhetoric to voice support. Trump himself has encouraged supporters to join a planned protest Tuesday at the Miami courthouse, where he is expected to surrender to authorities.

Some Trump supporters were also planning to load buses to head to Miami from other parts of Florida, raising concerns for law enforcement officials who are preparing for the potential of unrest around the courthouse. Miami Mayor Francis Suarez said the city would be ready, and police chief Manuel A. Morales said downtown could see anywhere from a few thousand up to 50,000 protesters. He said the city would divert traffic and possibly block streets depending on crowd size.

As Trump's motorcade slowed to a crawl as it entered his Miami resort on Monday, a loud cheer went up from about 50 supporters who had gathered across the street. He flashed them a thumbs up as he passed and they waved their pro-Trump signs and banners.

A near-brawl broke out just minutes before Trump's arrival when a man stood in front of the crowd holding signs and wearing a suit covered with a two-word phrase calling the former president an obscenity. Supporters rushed him and several screamed at him before Doral police interceded and moved him down the street.

A federal grand jury in Washington had heard testimony for months in the documents case, but the Justice Department filed it in Florida, where Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort is located and where many of the alleged acts of obstruction occurred. Though Trump is set to appear Tuesday before a federal magistrate, the case has been assigned to a District Court judge he appointed, Aileen Cannon, who ruled in his favor last year in a dispute over whether an outside special master could be appointed to review the seized classified documents. A federal appeals panel ultimately overturned her ruling.

It's unclear what defenses Trump is likely to cite as the case moves forward. Two of his lead lawyers announced their resignation on the morning after his indictment, and the notes and recollections of another attorney, M. Evan Corcoran, are cited repeatedly throughout the 49-page charging document, suggesting that prosecutors may see him as a key witness.

Trump has said he's looking to add to his legal team though no announcements were made Monday. But that matters because, under the rules of the district, defendants are required to have a local lawyer for an arraignment to proceed.

The Justice Department unsealed Friday an indictment charging Trump with 37 felony counts, 31 relating to the willful retention of national defense information. Other charges include conspiracy to commit obstruction and false statements.

The indictment alleges Trump intentionally retained hundreds of classified documents that he took with him from the White House to Mar-a-Lago after leaving the presidency in January 2021. The material he stored, including in a bathroom, ballroom, bedroom and shower, included material on nuclear programs, defense and weapons capabilities of the U.S. and foreign governments and a Pentagon "attack plan," the indictment says. The information, if exposed, could have put at risk members of the military, confidential human sources and intelligence collection methods, prosecutors said.

Beyond that, prosecutors say, he sought to obstruct government efforts to recover the documents, including by directing personal aide Walt Nauta — who was charged alongside Trump — to move boxes to conceal them and also suggesting to his own lawyer that he hide or destroy documents sought by a Justice Department subpoena.

Tucker reported from Washington. Associated Press writers Jill Colvin in New York, Adriana Gomez Licon in Miami and Terry Spencer in Doral, Florida, contributed to this report.

Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>

More on Donald Trump-related investigations: <https://apnews.com/hub/donald-trump>

As a stolen silver sleuth, German curator returns heirlooms Jewish families lost in the Holocaust

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

MUNICH (AP) — Matthias Weniger put on a pair of white cloth gloves and carefully lifted a tarnished silver candleholder, looking for a yellowed sticker on the bottom of it.

The candlestick is one of 111 silver objects at the Bavarian National Museum that the Nazis stole from Jews during the Third Reich in 1939. That's when they ordered all German Jews to bring their personal silver objects to pawn shops across the Reich — one of many laws created to humiliate, punish and exclude Jews.

What started with anti-Jewish discrimination and persecution in 1933, after the Nazis were voted to power in Germany, led to the murder of 6 million European Jews and others in the Holocaust before World War II ended with Germany's surrender in 1945.

Weniger, who is a curator at the Munich museum and oversees its restitution efforts, has made it his mission to return as many of the silver objects as possible to the descendants of the original owners.

"These silver objects handed in at the pawn shops are often the only material things that remain from an existence wiped out in the Holocaust," Weniger told The Associated Press in an interview last week at the museum's workshop where he displayed some silver items that have yet to be restituted.

"Therefore it's really important to try to find the families and give back the objects to them," he added.

Thousands of the pieces taken from the Jews were melted into around 135 tons of silver, and used to help Germany's war efforts. But several museums ended up with hundreds of silver pieces such as candlesticks used to light candles on the eve of Shabbat, Kiddush cups to bless the wine, silver spoons and cake servers.

Some of the items were returned to Holocaust survivors in the 1950s and 1960s, if they came forward and actively tried to retrieve their stolen possessions. But many former owners were murdered in the Holocaust or, if they succeeded to flee from the Nazis, had ended up in far-flung corners of the globe.

"Two thirds of the last owners did not survive the Shoah," Weniger said.

Despite these odds, and with a combination of thorough detective work, dedication and deep knowledge of history, Weniger has so far managed to return about 50 objects to the family members and relatives of the original owners.

He's convinced that he may be able to return almost all remaining objects by the end of this year.

First, he searches for the identity of the original owners. The little yellowed paper stickers on some of the pieces often help his efforts. They were put on the objects by the pawn shops — a testament to Germans' obsessive bureaucracy even in times of dictatorship and war. The numbers on the stickers are also listed on more than 80-year-old documents naming the Jews who had to give away their silver — sometimes beloved heirlooms that had been passed down in families for many generations.

Once Weniger discovers the names of the original owners, he starts looking up Jewish obituary and genealogy databases, in hopes that direct descendants or more distant relatives may have posted their names online.

"And so you get from one generation to the next generation and you end up with telephone books ... with LinkedIn, with Facebook, with Instagram or email addresses that correspond to a member of the younger generation of that family," the researcher explained.

In most of the cases, Weniger says he gets lucky and is able to track down the right relatives.

The majority of descendants live in the United States and Israel, but the museum has already or is in the process of also restituting silver pieces to France, the United Kingdom, Australia and Mexico.

Weniger makes a point of personally delivering the pieces to the families. He traveled to the U.S. earlier this year, and last week, he returned 19 pieces to families in Israel.

There, Weniger met up with Hila Gutmann, 53, and her father Benjamin Gutmann, 86, at his home in Kfar Shmaryahu north of Tel Aviv, and gave them a small silver cup.

Weniger had managed to track down the family with the help of the tracing service of Magen David Adom — Israel's version of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

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The cup was likely used for Kiddush to bless the wine on the eve of Shabbat — but nobody knows for sure because the original owners, Bavarian cattle dealer Salomon Gutmann and his wife Karolina, who were the grandparents of Benjamin, were murdered by the Nazis in the Treblinka extermination camp.

“It was a mixed feeling for us to get back the cup,” Hila Gutmann said. “Because you understand it’s the only thing that’s left of them.”

While the grandparents of Benjamin Gutmann were murdered in the Holocaust, their son Max — Benjamin’s father — survived because he fled from the Nazis to the British-mandated territory of Palestine, in what is now Israel.

Despite the pain triggered by the loss and return of the silver cup, the Gutmanns say they’re happy to have it back and plan to use it in a ceremony with all their other relatives on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, in September.

As for Weniger, the bearer of the cup, the Gutmann’s have nothing but praise for him and his work.

“He’s really dedicated to it,” Hila Gutmann said. “He treats these little objects with so much care — like they are holy.”

Associated Press religion coverage receives support through the AP’s collaboration with The Conversation US, with funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

This story has been corrected to show that Benjamin Gutmann is 86, not 83.

3 found dead and 3 injured in related violence in English city of Nottingham, police say

By JILL LAWLESS and BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — A man was arrested on suspicion of murder in the English city of Nottingham Tuesday after three people were found dead and three others were hit and injured by a van in related early-morning incidents, police said.

“This is an horrific and tragic incident which has claimed the lives of three people,” said Nottinghamshire Police Chief Constable Kate Meynell.

She said two people were found dead in one street just after 4 a.m. and a third on a different street. The three wounded by the van were at a different location and were being treated in a hospital. There was no immediate word on their condition.

Witness Lynn Haggitt told reporters that a white van pulled up beside her at 5:30 a.m. and she saw the driver look in his mirror and spot a police car approaching slowly from behind without its lights on. The van then drove into a man and woman at a street corner.

“He went straight into them, he didn’t even bother to turn, just went back straight into them,” Haggitt said. “The lady ended up on the curb, and then he backed up the white van and he went, speeded up Parliament Street with the police cars following him.”

She said the man appeared to have a head injury but was helped to his feet. The woman was sitting on the curb and appeared to be OK.

Police gave no immediate indication of a possible motive. The investigation was being led by local police, not counterterrorism officers.

“We believe these three incidents are all linked and we have a man in custody,” Meynell said. “This investigation is at its early stages and a team of detectives is working to establish exactly what has happened.”

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak called it a shocking incident and asked that police be given time to investigate the crime.

“My thoughts are with those injured, and the family and loved ones of those who have lost their lives,” Sunak said.

Images on social media showed police, some with rifles, standing near cordons at several locations in

the city center.

The city's tram network said it had suspended all services.

Nottingham is a city of about 350,000 some 120 miles (190 kilometers) north of London.

US military says helicopter accident in northeastern Syria left 22 American troops injured

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — A helicopter accident in northeastern Syria over the weekend left 22 American service members injured, the U.S. military said Tuesday, adding that the cause of the accident was under investigation and that no enemy fire was involved.

The military statement said the service members were receiving treatment and 10 were moved to "higher care facilities" outside the region.

"A helicopter mishap in northeastern Syria resulted in the injuries of various degrees of 22 U.S. service members," it said. "No enemy fire was reported."

A spokesman for the U.S.-backed Syrian Kurdish forces did not immediately respond to an Associated Press request for comment.

There are at least 900 U.S. forces in Syria on average, along with an undisclosed number of contractors. U.S. special operations forces also move in and out of the country, but are usually in small teams and are not included in the official count.

U.S. forces have been in Syria since 2015 to advise and assist the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in the fight against the militant Islamic State group. Since the extremist group was defeated in Syria in March 2019, U.S. troops have been trying to prevent any comeback by IS, which swept through Iraq and Syria in 2014, taking control of large swaths of territory.

However, IS sleeper cells remain a threat. There are also about 10,000 IS fighters held in detention facilities in Syria and tens of thousands of their family members living in two refugee camps in the country's northeast.

Over the past years, U.S. troops have been subjected to attacks carried out by IS members and Iran-backed fighters there. In late March, a drone attack on a U.S. base killed a contractor and wounded five American troops and another contractor. In retaliation, U.S. fighter jets struck several locations around the eastern province of Deir el-Zour, which borders Iraq.

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said at the time that the strikes were a response to the drone attack as well as a series of recent attacks against U.S.-led coalition forces in Syria by groups affiliated with Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

In a related development, Syrian Kurdish-led authorities announced Saturday that hundreds of IS fighters held in prisons around the region will be put on trial after their home countries refused to repatriate them.

Nuggets take home 1st NBA title in rugged 94-89 win over Heat

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

DENVER (AP) — Confetti flying in Denver. The Nuggets sharing hugs while passing around the NBA championship trophy.

Those scenes that, for almost a half-century, seemed impossible, then more recently started feeling inevitable, finally turned into reality Monday night.

The Nuggets outlasted the Miami Heat 94-89 in an ugly, frantic Game 5 that did nothing to derail Nikola Jokic, who bailed out his teammates with 28 points and 16 rebounds on a night when nothing else seemed to work.

Jokic became the first player in history to lead the league in points (600), rebounds (269) and assists (190) in a single postseason. Not surprisingly, he won the Bill Russell trophy as the NBA Finals MVP — an award that certainly has more meaning to him than the two overall MVPs he won in 2021 and '22 and the

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one that escaped him this year.

"We are not in it for ourselves, we are in it for the guy next to us," Jokic said. "And that's why this (means) even more."

Denver's clincher was a gruesome grind.

Unable to shake the tenacious Heat or their own closing-night jitters, the Nuggets missed 20 of their first 22 3-pointers. They missed seven of their first 13 free throws. They overcame that to take a late seven-point lead, only to see Miami's Jimmy Butler go off. He scored eight straight points to give the Heat a one-point lead with 2:45 left.

Butler made two free throws with 1:58 remaining to help Miami regain a one-point lead. Then, Bruce Brown got an offensive rebound and tip-in to give the Nuggets an edge they wouldn't give up.

Trailing by three with 15 seconds left, Butler jacked up a 3, but missed it. Brown and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope made two free throws each down the stretch to clinch the title for Denver.

Butler finished with 21 points.

"Those last three or four minutes felt like a scene out of a movie," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. "Two teams in the center of the ring throwing haymaker after haymaker, and it's not necessarily shot making. It's the efforts."

Grueling as it was, the aftermath was something the Nuggets and their fans could all agree was beautiful. There were fireworks exploding outside Ball Arena at the final buzzer. Denver is the home of the Larry O'Brien Trophy for the first time in the franchise's 47 years in the league.

"The fans in this town are unbelievable," said team owner Stan Kroenke, who also owns the Colorado Avalanche, the team that won its third Stanley Cup last year. "It means a lot to us to get this done."

The Heat were, as Spoelstra promised, a gritty, tenacious bunch. But their shooting wasn't great, either. Miami shot 34% from the floor and 25% from 3. Until Butler went off, he was 2 for 13 for eight points. Bam Adebayo finished with 20 points.

The Heat, who survived a loss in the play-in tournament and became only the second No. 8 seed to make the finals, insisted they weren't into consolation prizes.

They played like they expected to win, and for a while during this game, which was settled as much by players diving onto the floor as sweet-looking jump shots, it looked like they would.

The Nuggets, who came in shooting 37.6% from 3 for the series, shot 18% in this one. They committed 14 turnovers.

The tone was set with 2:51 left in the first quarter, when Jokic got his second foul and joined Aaron Gordon on the bench. Jeff Green and Jamal Murray, who finished with 14 points and eight assists on an off night, joined them there, too.

It made the Nuggets tentative on both sides of the court for the rest of the half. Somehow, after shooting 6.7% from 3 — the worst first half in the history of the finals (10-shot minimum) they only trailed by seven.

True to the Nuggets' personality, they kept pressing, came at their opponent in waves and figured out how to win a game that went against their type. Their beautiful game turned into a slugfest, but they figured it out nonetheless.

"What I was most proud about is, throughout the game, if your offense is not working and your shots are not falling, you have to dig in on the defensive end," Nuggets coach Michael Malone said.

It felt almost perfect that an unheralded and once-chubby second-round draft pick from Serbia would be the one to lift Denver to the top of a league that, for decades, has been dominated by superstars, first-round draft picks and players who lead the world in sneaker and jersey sales.

Over their near five-decade stay in the league, the Nuggets have been the epitome of a lovable NBA backbencher — at times entertaining, adorned by rainbows on their uniforms and headlined by colorful characters on the floor and bench. But never quite good enough to break through against the biggest stars and better teams to the east, west and south of them.

Before this season, there were only two teams founded before 1980 — the Nuggets and Clippers — that had never been to an NBA Finals. The Nuggets took their name off that list, then joined San Antonio as

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the second original ABA team to capture the NBA's biggest prize. The other two ABAers, the Pacers and Nets, have been to the finals but lost.

It was the Joker's blossoming into a do-everything force that made the Nuggets a team to watch. Not everybody did. A shift to winning couldn't change Denver's location on the map – in a weird time zone in flyover territory – and it didn't shift everyone's view of the Nuggets.

Even in Denver.

There's little doubt that this has always been a Broncos-first sort of town. No single Denver victory will outshine the day in 1998 when John Elway broke through and that team's owner, Pat Bowlen, held the Lombardi Trophy high and declared: "This one's for John!"

But this one? It won't take a back seat to much. It's for every Dan (Issel), David (Thompson), Doug (Moe) or Dikembe (Mutombo) who ever came up short or got passed over for a newer, shinier model with more glitter and more stars.

For the first time in 47 seasons, nobody in the NBA shines brighter than the Nuggets.

"You live vicariously through these guys," said Denver great LaPhonso Ellis, as he pointed to the big scoreboard announcing the Nuggets as champions. "And to see that there, '2023 NBA Champions' here in Denver, that's so cool, and I'm honored to be a part of it."

AP NBA: <https://apnews.com/hub/NBA> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

South Sudan's sluggish peace deal and unsteady road to elections

By SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

KOWACH, South Sudan (AP) — Martha Nyanguour didn't have time to bury her husband, son or granddaughter when they were killed by gunfire in September. Instead, the 50-year-old paid her respects by throwing bits of grass over their bodies, grabbed her remaining children and fled.

It had taken years for the mother of seven to muster the courage to return to South Sudan and trust its fragile peace deal ending a civil war. But weeks after she arrived in Atar town in Upper Nile state, fighting erupted between militias aligned with government and opposition forces.

"I thought if there was peace I was supposed to go back to my land," said Nyanguour, seated under a tree in Kowach village in Canal Pigi county where she now lives with thousands of other displaced people, five days' walk through swamp water from her home village. "I thought maybe there would be peace in the future, but now, hearing gunshots daily, I think South Sudan will remain in war."

In 18 months, South Sudan is supposed to hold its first presidential elections, the culmination of the peace agreement signed nearly five years ago to pull the young nation out of fighting that killed some 400,000 people. While large-scale clashes have subsided, violence in parts of the country persists, killing 2,240 people last year, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. Earlier this month at least 20 people were killed and more than 50 wounded during inter-communal clashes in a United Nations protection camp in the north of the country.

Implementation of the peace agreement has been sluggish. The elections, originally scheduled for this year, were postponed until December 2024. Other key elements of the deal have not been implemented, sparking concern that the country could see a return to war instead of a transfer of power.

"We are going to go for (the) electoral process without meeting the benchmarks that create a conducive environment for the conduct of elections," said Edmund Yakani, executive director for Community Empowerment for Progress Organization, a local advocacy group. "The return of the country to violence is more evident than the country staying in stability."

A permanent constitution still has not been drafted. A census has not been conducted. Security arrangements, considered the backbone of the agreement, are only partially complete. Some 83,000 soldiers from opposition and government forces are meant to unite in a national army, but so far 55,000 have graduated and are yet to be deployed.

Others languish in training centers with poor conditions and little food. Soldiers say many are rarely paid.

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Locals involved with the security arrangements say there's so little trust that the main parties have held back key fighters, sending less seasoned ones or new recruits.

In addition, Joshua Craze, a researcher on South Sudan, says, "The peace agreement signed in 2018 has enabled the government to fragment the opposition by encouraging defections and setting commanders against each other, intensifying violent conflict."

The opposition accuses the government of lacking political will to hold elections so it can keep plundering the nation's resources, which include oil. "They don't have genuine political will to implement the peace agreement because they look at the agreement from the angle that it is crippling their powers," said Puok Both Baluang, acting press secretary for the first vice president, head of the main opposition and former rebel leader Riek Machar.

South Sudan has billions of dollars in reserves but there is little transparency on where the money goes. The country was voted the second most corrupt in the world last year by Transparency International.

The international community is exasperated with South Sudan's lack of progress.

At a press conference in May, United Nations representative Nicholas Haysom cautioned that the conditions did not currently exist to hold transparent, free and fair elections. But some diplomats are concerned that another extension to the peace deal would send a negative message to South Sudanese citizens, investors and aid donors.

The government says it's serious about the peace process and will hold elections on time. During a conference in May on reconciliation and healing, President Salva Kiir vowed that "I will never take South Sudan and its people to war again."

The capital, Juba, appears peaceful. Billboards of Kiir and Machar shaking hands above the words "peace, unity, reconciliation and development" line the streets. Children of the political elites are returning with money and opening trendy restaurants, and construction is booming.

But outside the capital is a different reality.

The fighting that killed Nyanguour's family last year also sent tens of thousands fleeing, part of the highest displacement levels since the peace agreement was signed, according to a report by a U.N. panel of experts. It said government and opposition forces played facilitating roles in the violence.

The conflict in Upper Nile cut off access to healthcare, with some severely wounded people having to travel up to four days by canoe to the closest clinic, aid workers said. "The biggest issue was accessibility. It was hard to bring in supplies," said Kudumreng David, a supervisor for the International Medical Corps in Kowach.

Food has also become scarce as fighting worsens conditions after years of floods and cuts in food aid. In Kowach, some children rip leaves from trees into a pot for their only meal of the day.

Many people outside Juba said they didn't even know elections were set for next year.

"We heard there's peace but it hasn't reached here," said Roda Awel, a resident of Kowach. "People are still afraid."

Cases of check fraud escalate dramatically, with Americans warned not to mail checks if possible

By KEN SWEET AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Check fraud is back in a big way, fueled by a rise in organized crime that is forcing small businesses and individuals to take additional safety measures or to avoid sending checks through the mail altogether.

Banks issued roughly 680,000 reports of check fraud to the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, also known as FinCEN, last year. That's up from 350,000 reports in 2021. Meanwhile the U.S. Postal Inspection Service reported roughly 300,000 complaints of mail theft in 2021, more than double the prior year's total.

Early in the pandemic, government relief checks became an attractive target for criminals. The problem has only gotten worse and postal authorities and bank officials are warning Americans to avoid mailing

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checks if possible, or at least to use a secure mail drop such as inside the post office. Meanwhile, as the cases of fraud increase, victims are waiting longer to recover their stolen money.

Check usage has been in decline for decades as Americans have largely switched to paying for their services with credit and debit cards. Americans wrote roughly 3.4 billion checks in 2022, down from nearly 19 billion checks in 1990, according to the Federal Reserve. However, the average size of the checks Americans write rose from \$673 in 1990 — or \$1,602 in today's dollars — to \$2,652 last year.

"Despite the declining use of checks in the United States, criminals have been increasingly targeting the U.S. Mail since the COVID-19 pandemic to commit check fraud," FinCEN wrote in an alert sent out in February.

Checks are still frequently used by small businesses. Eric Fischgrund, who runs FischTank PR, a 30-person public relations firm in New York, had about 15 checks that were being mailed to him from clients stolen after they all went through the same Postal Service distribution center. Ten of them were successfully cashed by criminals.

The checks were stolen in March and Fischgrund became aware of the problem in April, when several of his clients who were never late missed payments. The Postal Service investigated and Fischgrund has recovered about 70% of the revenue, but some of the cases haven't yet been resolved.

According to the investigator on the case, the perpetrators used technology that melted ink in the "to" field of the checks so they could write in fake names. FischTank instructed all its clients to change their paper format because it was dealing with a check fraud issue.

Fischgrund said he'd never previously had an issue with check fraud in the nearly 10 years he has run his own business. Now he has a clause in invoices and new client contracts that asks for electronic payments only.

"I don't think we'll ever go back to asking for checks as an option," he said.

Today's check fraud criminals are not small operations, or lone individuals like the Leonardo DiCaprio character in the 2002 movie "Catch Me If You Can," counterfeiting checks from his hotel room and apartment. They are sophisticated criminal operations, with participants infiltrating post office distribution centers, setting up fake businesses or creating fake IDs to deposit the checks. "Walkers," or people who actually walk in to cash these checks, receive training in how to appear even more legitimate.

In one case in Southern California last year, nearly sixty people were arrested on charges of committing more than \$5 million in check fraud against 750 people.

Criminals are getting the checks or identification information by fishing mail out of U.S. postal boxes, looking for envelopes that appear to be either bill payments or checks being mailed.

The most common type of check fraud is what's known as check washing, where a criminal steals the check from the mail and proceeds to change the payee's name on the check and, additionally, the amount of money.

Some criminals are going further and using the information found on a check to gather sensitive personal data on a potential victim. There have been reports of criminals creating fake entities out of personal data obtained from a check, or even opening new lines of credit or businesses with that data as well. This allows fraudsters to create new checks using old account data.

That's why check fraud experts are saying Americans should avoid sending checks in the mail or at least take additional safety steps to avoid becoming a victim.

"If you need to mail a check, do not put a check in your residential mailbox and raise the flag to notify the postman. Drop off checks inside a post office if you have to," said Todd Robertson with Argo Data, a financial data provider.

Banks, keenly aware of the problem, are increasingly watching for signs of fraud at branches and through mobile check deposit services, including large check deposits. They're training branch employees to take steps such as looking at check numbers, because checks are typically written in order, or noticing when a check is being written for a much larger amount than the customer's previous history would indicate. Banks also now deploy software at their branches that can tell how risky a check might be.

But those systems become moot if criminals are able to persuade tellers — often at the front lines for

check acceptance — to look past any red flags.

"These fraudsters are much more aggressive than they were in the past, and they are pressuring tellers to override internal systems that might flag a potentially suspicious transaction," Paul Brenda, a senior vice president at the American Bankers Association.

Banks generally reimburse customers if they are victims of check fraud within days. However, due to the growing number of fraud cases, refunds have slowed down in recent months. In March, a trio of Democratic Senators asked the banking industry to be more prompt in reimbursing victims of check fraud whenever possible.

Another safety tip for businesses is to opt in to a bank's "positive pay" services with a business checking account. Positive pay means you pre-authorize checks for a certain amount as well as the check number, cutting down criminals' ability to wash the check and withdraw money for an amount that isn't pre-authorized.

AP Small Business Writer Mae Anderson contributed to this report from New York.

'Hair,' 'Everwood' actor Treat Williams killed in Vermont motorcycle crash

DORSET, Vt. (AP) — Actor Treat Williams, whose nearly 50-year career included starring roles in the TV series "Everwood" and the movie "Hair," died Monday after a motorcycle crash in Vermont, state police said. He was 71.

Shortly before 5 p.m., a Honda SUV was turning left into a parking lot when it collided with Williams' motorcycle in the town of Dorset, according to a statement from Vermont State Police.

"Williams was unable to avoid a collision and was thrown from his motorcycle. He suffered critical injuries and was airlifted to Albany Medical Center in Albany, New York, where he was pronounced dead," according to the statement.

Williams was wearing a helmet, police said.

The SUV's driver received minor injuries and wasn't hospitalized. He had signaled the turn and wasn't immediately detained although the crash investigation continued, police said.

Williams, whose full name was Richard Treat Williams, lived in Manchester Center in southern Vermont, police said.

His agent, Barry McPherson, also confirmed the actor's death.

"I'm just devastated. He was the nicest guy. He was so talented," McPherson told People magazine.

"He was an actor's actor," McPherson said. "Filmmakers loved him. He's been the heart of the Hollywood since the late 1970s."

The Connecticut-born Williams made his movie debut in 1975 as a police officer in the movie "Deadly Hero" and went on to appear in more than 120 TV and film roles, including the movies "The Eagle Has Landed," "Prince of the City" and "Once Upon a Time in America."

He was nominated for a Golden Globe Award for his role as hippie leader George Berger in the 1979 movie version of the hit musical "Hair."

He appeared in dozens of television shows but was perhaps best known for his starring role from 2002 to 2006 in "Everwood" as Dr. Andrew Brown, a widowed brain surgeon from Manhattan who moves with his two children to the Colorado mountain town of that name.

Williams also had a recurring role as Lenny Ross on the TV show "Blue Bloods."

Williams' stage appearances included Broadway shows, including "Grease" and "Pirates of Penzance."

Colleagues and friends praised Williams as kind, generous and creative.

"Treat and I spent months in Rome filming "Once Upon a Time in America," actor James Woods tweeted. "It can be pretty lonely on the road during a long shoot, but his resilient good cheer and sense of humor was a Godsend. I really loved him and am devastated that he's gone."

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down existing ones. But closing orphanages can be dangerous. Government officials have been threatened or forced to go into hiding as owners seek to keep generous donations flowing from abroad; U.S. faith-based donors are the largest funders of orphanages in Haiti, according to Lumos, a nonprofit that works to reunite children in orphanages worldwide with their families.

There is no group or association that speaks on behalf of orphanages in Haiti since the vast majority are individually owned.

Homes are a necessity for children whose parents cannot feed them or protect them from violence, said Sister Paesie, who founded religious organization Kizito Family in Port-au-Prince. It houses and offers free schooling to some 2,000 children from impoverished slums.

"The idea is to remove them from violence," she said, and parents are invited to visit.

Gangs control up to 80% of Port-au-Prince, according to the U.N., and have been blamed for a surge in killings and kidnappings, especially in areas where children at Kizito Family are from.

Sister Paesie condemned orphanages that are linked to the lucrative adoption business.

"It gives rise to so much abuse instead of trying to help the parents, which we always try to do," she said.

But reuniting children with parents is hard when they've fled violence and have no home, she said.

"In the last month, I have seen so many mothers sleeping on the streets with their children," she said. "I have dozens of mothers asking me every single day to take their children because they have no food to give them."

Reunification efforts have been successful in more rural parts of Haiti where gangs don't have as much control and families can grow their own food.

In rural southern Haiti, some 330 children are now living again with their families. When that day arrived for Mylouise, now 17, and her brother, they were so excited they ran out of the orphanage and left their sandals behind, recalled Renèse Estève, their mother.

They joined Estève, her new partner, their new child and one other sibling in a one-bedroom home by the foot of a mountain where farmers grow corn, potatoes and vetiver, a plant whose oil is used in high-end perfumes.

Wienberg's nonprofit built Estève the home as part of an effort to help support families after reunification to avoid further economic strain and another separation. Other efforts include hiring an agronomist to help families produce crops to eat or sell amid the crippling inflation that has pushed Haitians into even deeper poverty.

Two of the children sleep on the concrete floor; there are only two small beds in their house. Near the beds, the children keep their only toys: a small stuffed moose and teddy bear, a Hello Kitty purse and a "Black Panther" lunchbox.

Estève said leaving children at the orphanage was painful, even though she visited them occasionally. She didn't have a job or a partner to help feed and care for them. During their visits, the kids told her they weren't doing well and asked for food. Estève herself struggled to eat at home, thinking of her two children.

"Sometimes I felt like killing myself," she said.

One day, startled at the weight they'd lost, she decided to pick up the children with the help of social workers. She was convinced they'd be better off in grinding poverty than at the orphanage.

Key to reunification efforts are mentors such as Eluxon Tassy, 32, who works with children living on the street, in orphanages or in transition preparing to return home.

"I understand exactly what they're going through," he said.

He was 4 when his mother dropped him off at an orphanage on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, where he lived for nearly 15 years. He said he also was forced to spend two years with a family that exploited him as a child domestic worker, known in Haiti as a restavek. He never went to school despite promises from the family to enroll him in exchange for cleaning the house and tending to farm animals.

Tassy's first priority when helping children navigate the transition back home is gaining trust and building confidence. He uses art and music, singing the alphabet with the younger ones. He asks how they feel

about their orphanage but is careful not to question them too much.

Sometimes he has to explain the concept of a family and the importance of affection if a child doesn't remember his parents or has spent much time away from them.

In Estève's case, her children reconnected almost immediately with her. To celebrate, she cooked two meals that day: the traditional Haitian spaghetti breakfast, and later, rice and beans laden with a fish sauce.

"It was easy," she said. "We were a family again."

Often sidelined at Pride, transgender and nonbinary people move front and center

By SUSAN HAIGH Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — Kara Murphy, a transgender woman helping to organize the Union County Pride in a suburb of Charlotte, North Carolina, is heartened to see Pride celebrations across the country, big and small, shining a spotlight on transgender rights this year.

"When we look and see who's standing up for us, it kind of signals the strength of the movement," she said.

Whether it's transgender grand marshals at the massive New York City Pride parade or a photo display of transgender victims of violence at the much smaller festival in Hastings, Nebraska, many celebrations this June are taking a public stand against state legislation targeting transgender people.

Some Prides are putting transgender people front and center at events where they've often been sidelined because of a historical emphasis on gay and lesbian rights, along with the same sorts of prejudice and misinformation held by many straight, cisgender people about trans lives.

The growing number of new laws and policies, including restrictions on gender-affirming care, public bathroom use and participation in sports, has prompted Pride organizers to more fully embrace a segment of the LGBTQ+ populace that hasn't always felt included.

While trans activists have always been integral to steps toward greater LGBTQ+ rights, "too often, the larger LGBTQ movement ignored or even actively erased the voices of trans and nonbinary folks," Kierra Johnson, executive director of the National LGBTQ Task Force, said in an email.

"Uplifting trans voices and fighting for trans liberation must be at the forefront of our movement" when the rights of transgender and nonbinary people are "under a coordinated attack," Johnson said.

"We are specifically standing by and being supportive of those who are transgender, because we understand that they're under assault, that their rights are under assault," said Jonathan Swindle, organizer of Pride in Corpus Christi, Texas. Republican Gov. Greg Abbott recently signed legislation that would make Texas the most populous state to ban gender-affirming treatments for minors. At least 20 others have similar bans.

This year, Swindle said, steps to show solidarity include displaying the blue, pink and white transgender flag, offering Pride T-shirts in just pink and blue, involving trans advocacy groups at events, and offering resources for trans people, including legal help with changing gender designations.

Smaller events are also planned that bring people together, but Swindle said those won't be widely advertised because of security concerns and potential threats. This year, he said, "the static in the air and the temperament is so much different" from 2022, when Pride seemed more celebratory.

One transgender board member, he noted, abruptly resigned last month and deactivated their social media accounts because they didn't want to be in the public eye.

"This year, it's like no, we have to fight through our messaging, as well as reach the young generation to help them understand that it's going to be OK," Swindle said. "Yes, they're doing this, but we will be there. There are resources for you."

Prides across the U.S. are using the annual event, often held in June to commemorate the 1969 Stonewall rebellion in New York City — an uprising partly led by trans women of color — to highlight their support for transgender people.

Many are also supporting the drag community, which has also been the target of protests and legislation.

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In Reading, Pennsylvania, Pride organizer Enrique Castro Jr. said that instead of a parade, a march dedicated to both the trans and drag-performer communities is planned. In addition to displays of flags honoring those communities, there will be a rally afterward at which Dr. Ashley Grant, a specialist in gender-affirming care, will speak and march with the group to her clinic.

The recent Pride in Hastings, a central Nebraska city of 25,000, was "edgier" than past years, acknowledged organizer Randal Kottwitz. With the theme "Rise Up" and dedicated to victims of trans violence, it included a speech by state Sen. Michela Cavanaugh, who told the crowd, "You are loved and you matter." She led the unsuccessful fight against legislation signed into law by Republican Gov. Jim Pillen that bans abortion at 12 weeks of pregnancy and restricts gender-affirming medical care for people younger than 19.

In New York City, where this year's Pride theme is "Strength in Solidarity," organizers selected representatives of the trans community to be among the grand marshals of the June 25 parade. There are also plans to have a float carrying transgender people of color.

AC Dumlao, chief of staff for Athlete Ally, a group that advocates on behalf of LGBTQ and intersex athletes, and a transgender, nonbinary Filipino American, is one of the grand marshals. They welcome the attention at Pride this year.

"It's really important for me to take this opportunity and attention to spotlight kind of what is happening across the country," said Dumlao, noting how nearly half of U.S. states have banned trans athletes from playing in school sports. With a draw of about 2 million spectators on hand, they said the often-televised parade is a great opportunity to spread the message that trans athletes have "always been here."

Murphy said the number of expected spectators at her Pride in North Carolina, planned for September, will be tiny in comparison with New York and won't include a parade — but that the message will be no less meaningful.

"You can do so much just person to person, just walking around, meeting people at Pride," she said, noting how the festival becomes an opportunity for people to tap into an informal network of people who might know a therapist or doctor or have a trans child who is trying to make friends.

"At this kind of a rural area, you don't get the big demonstrations. You get the little assistance, person to person to person to person, that kind of starts to add up," she said. "And yeah, if I could, we would have a just a trans pride parade on Main Street if I could, but I can't do that."

In Connecticut, where restrictions on transgender people are not being proposed, organizers of the Middletown Pride still placed a major focus on trans rights in this year's events, which Democratic Gov. Ned Lamont attended.

"Just seeing everything that's happening in the legislation (elsewhere), we definitely wanted to make it a priority," said Haley Stafford, event coordinator for the Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce which helps to organize Middletown Pride. "Just because it's not happening to us right now doesn't mean that it can't end up happening further down the line."

Lawsuit pits young climate change activists against a fossil fuel-friendly state at trial

By AMY BETH HANSON and MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — Young people challenging Montana officials over inaction on climate change are expected back in state court on Tuesday in a first-of-a-kind trial of a lawsuit that environmentalists hope will spur changes in the fossil fuel-friendly state.

State officials have sought to downplay Montana's contributions to global warming as the trial that opened Monday is being closely watched for possible legal precedents even though the scope of the lawsuit has been narrowed in earlier rulings.

The trial is scheduled to last two weeks with 16 young plaintiffs and their attorneys seeking to persuade District Judge Kathy Seeley that the state's allegiance to fossil fuels endangers their health and livelihoods and threatens future generations.

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Grace Gibson-Snyder, 19, of Missoula, Montana — one of the plaintiffs — told the court that smoke from wildfires has gotten worse with climate change and become a “defining experience” of playing soccer in high school. The smoke regularly shrouded her hometown in unhealthy air, forced practice cancellations and kept teammates with asthma from taking the field.

“It’s not pleasant,” Gibson-Snyder said. “It’s so uncomfortable as you’re breathing deeper and deeper.”

After Monday’s opening court session, Gibson-Snyder said she felt empowered “to know we’re being heard. We are telling our stories and I am looking forward to a shift toward a better policy and healthier future for all of us.”

The case is the first of dozens of similar lawsuits to reach trial. Experts say it could set legal precedent but isn’t likely to spur immediate policy changes in Montana. Its state agencies have never denied a permit for a fossil fuel project and the state’s Legislature recently passed new laws favoring oil, gas and coal over renewable energy.

The lawsuit centers on Montana’s constitutional right to a “clean and healthful environment,” and whether that means the state should act to protect residents against worsening climate change. By enlisting plaintiffs ranging in age from 5 to 22, the environmental firm bringing the lawsuit is trying to highlight how young people are harmed by climate change now and in the future.

A lawyer for the state said sparsely populated Montana produces “minuscule” emissions. Montana Assistant Attorney General Michael Russell also said the harms alleged by Gibson-Snyder and the other plaintiffs can’t be traced to specific actions by state officials.

“Climate change is a global issue that effectively relegates Montana’s role to that of a spectator,” he said.

In the three years since the lawsuit was filed, the scope of the case has been narrowed to whether Montana’s Environmental Policy Act — which requires state agencies to balance the health of the environment against resource development — is unconstitutional because it does not require officials to consider greenhouse gas emissions or their climate impacts.

Judge Seeley has said she could rule that the state’s climate change exception in its environmental law is at odds with its constitution, but she can’t tell the legislature what to do to remedy the violation.

Environmentalists have called the bench trial a turning point because similar suits in nearly every state have already been dismissed. A favorable decision could add to a handful of rulings globally that have declared that governments have a duty to protect citizens from climate change.

Climate researcher Steve Running, who with other scientists was awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for their work on the issue, testified there was “no doubt” climate change was causing disruptions globally. Montana, he added, is particularly vulnerable to rising temperatures due to its reliance on adequate winter snow to keep rivers flowing year round.

Running described an increasingly dire situation of wildfires becoming more severe and more frequent in western North America — causing health impacts across the nation — as heavy fossil fuel use continues to churn out emissions at levels problematic for the atmosphere.

“Climate change is real and the earth is warming up,” Running said. “There’s no alternative explanation.”

Experts for the state are expected to counter that climate extremes have existed for centuries.

Carbon dioxide, which is released when fossil fuels are burned, traps heat in the atmosphere and is largely responsible for the warming of the the climate. Carbon dioxide levels in the air this spring reached the highest levels they’ve been in over 4 million years, the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration said earlier this month. Greenhouse gas emissions also reached a record last year, according to the International Energy Agency.

Brown reported from Billings, Montana.

US inflation may have eased in May, but underlying price measures likely remained high

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Consumer price increases in the United States likely slowed sharply last month, extending a steady easing of inflation over the past year. But a gauge of underlying prices may still reflect persistent inflation pressures.

Prices are forecast to have risen 4.2% in May from a year earlier, well below the 4.9% year-over-year increase in April, according to a survey of economists by the data provider FactSet. And measured from April to May, prices are expected to have increased only 0.1%, compared with the previous month's 0.4% increase.

Yet any slowdown in inflation is unlikely to convince the Federal Reserve's policymakers that they're close to curbing the high inflation that has gripped the nation for two years. The Fed tends to focus on "core" prices, which exclude volatile food and energy costs and generally provide a clearer view of inflation. And the data that the government will release Tuesday will likely show much less improvement in core prices.

Instead, core prices are expected to have risen by an uncomfortably high 0.4% from April to May — the sixth straight month of increases of that pace or higher. Measured year over year, though, core inflation is forecast to have slowed from 5.5% to 5.3%.

The stubbornness of underlying inflation reflects a fundamental challenge for the Fed: The economy has steadily defied long-standing forecasts for a recession, dating back more than a year. Instead, businesses have kept hiring at a healthy pace, average paychecks are climbing and workers are freely spending their larger wages.

Though a resilient economy is great for households and businesses, it may also be helping fuel chronically high inflation. Some economists argue that companies are keeping prices high to maintain larger profit margins. The nation's consumers might have to pull back, en masse, before most businesses will reduce prices. In the meantime, steadily robust hiring is allowing Americans, as a whole, to keep spending.

Tuesday's inflation figures will arrive just as Fed officials begin a pivotal two-day meeting, after which they are expected to leave interest rates alone after 10 straight hikes dating back to March 2022. On Wednesday, the central bank will likely announce that it's skipping a rate increase but perhaps also hint that it will resume raising its key rate as soon as July.

Top Fed officials have said they're leaning toward a so-called "skip" because they want to take time to assess how their rapid rate hikes have affected inflation and the overall economy. The Fed has raised its benchmark rate by a hefty 5 percentage points over the past 15 months — the fastest pace of rate increases in four decades.

Those hikes have led to much higher costs for mortgages, auto loans, credit cards and business borrowing. The Fed's goal is to slow borrowing and spending, cool the economy and tame inflation — without causing a deep recession. It's a notoriously difficult task.

There are some signs that the Fed's efforts are having the desired effect. Inflation is expected to take another big step down in the June figures that will be reported next month. Price growth could slide as low as 3.2% from a year earlier, according to some economists' estimates. That would be significantly below inflation's peak of 9.1% in June 2022, the highest level in four decades.

Yet any sharp declines in May and June will in part reflect the fact that prices soared in both those months last year. As those months drop out of the year-over-year inflation calculations, they are replaced with smaller monthly gains. The effect can sharply lower measures of annual inflation.

Still, core prices are expected to stay high in May, driven up by another jump in used car prices and steady increases in rental costs. Used car prices soared 4.4% just from March to April. Economists expect another increase, though not quite as large, from April to May.

Alan Detmeister, an economist at UBS, projects that higher rents and used car prices will account for about three-quarters of the May increase in core inflation. Yet he thinks both items will likely decline in the coming months. Wholesale prices of used cars have already started dropping. And rental costs are

"Working with Treat Williams in Mamet's "Speed the Plow" at Williamstown in '91 was the start of great friendship," tweeted writer, director and producer Justine Williams. "Damn it, damn it. Treat, you were the best. Love you."

"Treat Williams was a passionate, adventurous, creative man," actor Wendell Pierce tweeted. "In a short period of time, he quickly befriended me & his adventurous spirit was infectious. We worked on just 1 film together but occasionally connected over the years. Kind and generous with advice and support. RIP."

30,000 Haitian kids live in private orphanages. Officials want to shutter them and reunite families.

By DÁNICA COTO Associated Press

SAINT-LOUIS-DU-SUD, Haiti (AP) — Mylouise Veillard was 10 when her mother dropped her off at an orphanage in southern Haiti and promised her a better life. For three years, Mylouise slept on a concrete floor. When she was thirsty, she walked to a community well and hauled heavy buckets of water herself. Meals were scarce, and she lost weight. She worried for her younger brother, who struggled even more than she did at the facility.

It's a familiar story among the estimated 30,000 Haitian children who live in hundreds of orphanages where reports of forced labor, trafficking, and physical and sexual abuse are rampant. In recent months, Haiti's government has stepped up efforts to remove hundreds of these children and reunite them with their parents or relatives as part of a massive push to shut down the institutions, the vast majority of which are privately owned.

Social workers are leading the endeavor, sometimes armed with only a picture and a vague description of the neighborhood where the child once lived. It's an arduous task in a country of more than 11 million people with no residential phonebooks and where many families have no physical address or digital footprint.

"They're almost like detectives," said Morgan Wienberg, co-founder and executive director of Little Footprints, Big Steps, one of several nonprofits that help reunite children and families. "It definitely comes down to a lot of persistence."

The social workers fan out through cities, towns and villages. They walk up hills, navigate mazes of tin-roof shacks and knock on doors. With a smile, they hold up a picture and ask whether anyone recognizes the child.

They find that some orphanages relocated children without notifying their parents, or families were forced to flee violence in their community and lost touch with their kids.

On occasion, social worker Jean Rigot Joseph said he'll show children pictures of landmarks to see if they remember where they lived. If he locates the parents, he'll first determine whether they're open to reunification before revealing he found their child.

Like more than 80% of children in Haiti's orphanages, Veillard and her brother are considered "poverty orphans." Haiti is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, with about 60% of the population making less than \$2 a day. When parents can't afford to feed their children, they temporarily place them in orphanages, where they believe they'll receive better care.

"When parents give up their kids to orphanages, they really don't see it as giving their children up forever," Wienberg said.

Roughly 30,000 children out of some 4 million nationwide live in about 750 orphanages across Haiti, according to government figures. Many were built after the devastating 2010 earthquake that killed at least 200,000 people. In the months that followed, the number of orphanages in Haiti skyrocketed by 150%, leading to an increase in trafficking, forced labor and abuse.

A 2018 report by Haiti's Institute of Social Welfare and Research and others found that just 35 of 754 orphanages — less than 5% — met minimum standards and were allowed to operate. Meanwhile, 580 orphanages received the lowest score, meaning the government should order them closed.

In response to the report, Haiti's government has banned construction of new orphanages and shut

expected to fall because apartment vacancy rates have climbed.

"Inflation is becoming narrower," Detmeister said. "As those used car numbers come off, as those rents come off, that will be a big driver of inflation coming down."

California Gov. Newsom spars with Fox News host Hannity over Biden, immigration and the economy

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California Gov. Gavin Newsom sparred with Fox News host Sean Hannity on Monday night, insisting President Joe Biden is physically fit for a second term as president while refusing to say whether supporters have urged him to run against Biden on the 2024 ballot.

Asked if he believes Biden is "cognitively strong enough to be president," Newsom said yes, adding that he talks with the president "all the time" and has traveled with him aboard Air Force One.

"You never answered my question directly," Hannity responded. "How many times does your phone ping a day, people saying you need to get in this race because they agree with me that he's not up to the job?"

Newsom stammered somewhat before responding: "I'm not answering."

Newsom has repeatedly said he has no interest in running for president, saying he completely supports Biden's reelection campaign. In April, Newsom raised money for Biden during a fundraiser in Washington shortly after the president announced his reelection campaign.

But Newsom has continued to raise his national profile, fueling more speculation that he is laying the groundwork for a presidential campaign beyond 2024. After coasting to reelection as governor in 2022, Newsom took the millions of dollars left over in his campaign account to start a new political action committee.

Newsom said he plans to use the money to support Democrats running for office in Republican-dominated states like Arkansas, Alabama and Mississippi. Last week, Newsom said the committee would campaign for a 28th amendment to the U.S. Constitution to harden federal gun laws.

Fox News said Monday was Newsom's first interview on the network since 2010, back when Newsom was the mayor of San Francisco. Since then, Newsom has often joined the chorus of criticism against the conservative news outlet from Democrats who object to its coverage of guns and how some of the network's hosts have embraced former President Donald Trump.

Last year, Newsom conceded that Republicans were "winning right now" in part because he said Democrats were too timid, giving conservatives the most compelling narrative over the airwaves. He has since opted for a more confrontational style — which includes Fox News. Newsom has said he is a regular viewer of the network. Last year, his campaign paid for an ad on Fox News in Florida and urging residents there to "join us in California."

"We need more of these kinds of conversations, and we need to not just accuse each other of misleading the American people, but I think confront each other in the context of providing opportunities to address some of the facts that are often omitted in terms of the conversations and topics we choose to pick up," Newsom said.

Monday's interview had plenty of confrontation, with Hannity and Newsom often talking over each other. Hannity noted California lost population for the first time in its history as a state while Newsom was in office, offering that as evidence that the policies of Newsom and his fellow Democrats have failed. That includes California's income taxes, with a top rate of 13.3% that is the highest in the nation.

Newsom pushed back that only the wealthy pay that 13.3% income tax rate. He said that top tax rate was established before he was governor, emphasizing that he has opposed new tax increases on the wealthy, including campaigning against a proposal on the 2022 ballot that would have raised taxes on the wealthy to pay for more zero-emission vehicles and to help fight wildfires.

"I've never been a profligate Democrat. I've balanced budgets. We make the hard choices. I'm a business guy," Newsom said.

The interview was recorded previously in Sacramento before airing on Monday night. Hannity defended

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' use of taxpayer funds to fly migrants to California.

"You are an open sanctuary state! Why don't you embrace them," Hannity asked

"We embrace everybody here," Newsom said. "I sat down with these migrants. I talked to every single one of them. They were lied to, they were misled."

But it wasn't all criticism from Newsom. The governor said he had a good relationship with former Republican President Donald Trump during the coronavirus pandemic, saying Trump "played no politics during COVID with California."

"I've got a lot of critique from the left by saying that," Newsom said.

While the interview took up the full hour of Hannity's show on Monday, the two men still had more to talk about. Hannity said the rest of the interview will air later this week.

Trump prepares for court appearance as 1st ex-president to face federal criminal charges

By ERIC TUCKER and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Donald Trump arrived in Florida on Monday ahead of a history-making federal court appearance on dozens of felony charges accusing him of illegally hoarding classified documents and thwarting the Justice Department's efforts to get them back.

Trump's Tuesday afternoon appearance in Miami will mark his second time since April facing a judge on criminal charges. But unlike a New York case some legal analysts derided as relatively trivial, the Justice Department's first prosecution of a former president concerns conduct that prosecutors say jeopardized national security, with Espionage Act charges carrying the prospect of a significant prison sentence.

Ahead of his court date, he and his allies have been escalating efforts to undermine the criminal case against him and drum up protests. He's ratcheted up the rhetoric against the Justice Department special counsel who filed the case, calling Jack Smith "deranged" as he repeated without any evidence his claims that he was the target of a political persecution. And even as his supporters accuse the Justice Department of being weaponized against him, he vowed Monday to appoint a special prosecutor to investigate President Joe Biden and his family if Trump is elected to a second term.

Trump landed in Miami around 3 p.m. Monday and got into a waiting SUV. He was expected to huddle with advisers before his court appearance, as he looks to line up additional lawyers following the departure before his indictment last week of two attorneys who had handled the defense for months.

He's encouraged supporters to join a planned protest at the Miami courthouse Tuesday, where he will face the charges and surrender to authorities.

"We need strength in our country now," Trump said Sunday, speaking to longtime friend and adviser Roger Stone in an interview on WABC Radio. "And they have to go out and they have to protest peacefully. They have to go out."

"Look, our country has to protest. We have plenty to protest. We've lost everything," he went on.

He also said there were no circumstances "whatsoever" under which he would leave the 2024 race, where he's been dominating the Republican primary.

Other Trump supporters have rallied to his defense with similar language, including Kari Lake, the unsuccessful Republican gubernatorial candidate in Arizona who pointedly said over the weekend that if prosecutors "want to get to President Trump," they're "going to have to go through me, and 75 million Americans just like me. And most of us are card-carrying members of the NRA."

Trump's calls for protest echoed exhortations he made ahead of a New York court appearance in April, where he faces charges arising from hush money payments made during his 2016 presidential campaign, though he complained that those who showed up to protest then were "so far away that nobody knew about 'em," And just like in that case, he plans to address supporters in a Tuesday evening speech hours after his court date.

After his court appearance, he will return to New Jersey, where he's scheduled a press event to publicly

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respond to the charges. He'll also be holding a private fundraiser.

Trump supporters were also planning to load buses to head to Miami from other parts of Florida, raising concerns for law enforcement officials who are preparing for the potential of unrest around the courthouse. Miami Mayor Francis Suarez said the city would be ready, and police chief Manuel A. Morales said downtown could see anywhere from a few thousand up to 50,000 protesters. He said the city would be diverting traffic and possibly blocking streets depending on crowd size.

"Make no mistake about it," Morales said. "We are taking this event extremely serious. We know there is a potential of things taking a turn for the worse but that's not the Miami way."

The Justice Department unsealed Friday an indictment charging Trump with 37 felony counts, 31 relating to the willful retention of national defense information. Other charges include conspiracy to commit obstruction and false statements.

The indictment alleges Trump intentionally retained hundreds of classified documents that he took with him from the White House to his Florida estate, Mar-a-Lago, after leaving the White House in January 2021. The material he stored, including in a bathroom, ballroom, bedroom and shower, included material on nuclear programs, defense and weapons capabilities of the U.S. and foreign governments and a Pentagon "attack plan," the indictment says. The information, if exposed, could have put at risk members of the military, confidential human sources and intelligence collection methods, prosecutors said.

Beyond that, prosecutors say, he sought to obstruct government efforts to recover the documents, including by directing personal aide Walt Nauta — who was charged alongside Trump — to move boxes to conceal them and also suggesting to his own lawyer that he hide or destroy documents sought by a Justice Department subpoena.

Some fellow Republicans have sought to press the case that Trump is being treated unfairly, citing the Justice Department's decision in 2016 to not charge Democrat Hillary Clinton for her handling of classified information through a private email server she relied on as secretary of state. But those arguments overlook that FBI investigators did not find any evidence that Clinton or her aides had willfully broken laws regarding classified information or had obstructed the investigation.

New Hampshire Republican Gov. Chris Sununu, speaking Sunday on CBS News, said there was a "huge difference" between the two investigations but that it "has to be explained to the American people."

The Justice Department earlier this month informed former Vice President Mike Pence that it would not bring charges over the presence of classified documents in his Indiana home. A separate Justice Department special counsel investigation into the discovery of classified records at a home and office of President Joe Biden continues, though as in the Clinton case, no evidence of obstruction or intentional law-breaking has surfaced.

Trump's own former attorney general, William Barr, offered a grim assessment of Trump's predicament, saying on Fox News that Trump had no right to hold onto such sensitive records.

"If even half of it is true," Barr said of the allegations, "then he's toast. I mean, it's a pretty — it's a very detailed indictment, and it's very, very damning. And this idea of presenting Trump as a victim here — a victim of a witch hunt is ridiculous."

Colvin reported from New York. Associated Press writers Adriana Gomez Licon in Miami and Terry Spencer in Doral, Florida contributed to this report.

Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>

More on Donald Trump-related investigations: <https://apnews.com/hub/donald-trump>

Silvio Berlusconi's death draws tributes, even from critics, in Italy and beyond

ROME (AP) — Adored, scorned, impossible to ignore in life, former Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi in death drew tributes even from his critics, and ever more lavish praise from admirers, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, as well as prayers from Pope Francis.

Following word of Berlusconi's death on Monday in a Milan hospital, where he was being treated for chronic leukemia, reaction poured in from around the world, from national leaders to announcers who burst into tears on one of his television networks, for the populist three-time premier and media mogul.

Here are some of the reactions:

— In a condolence telegram, Putin hailed Berlusconi as a "patriarch" of Italian politics and a true patriot who had improved Italy's standing on the world stage.

"I have always sincerely admired his wisdom, his ability to make balanced, far-sighted decisions even in the most difficult situations," Putin said in the telegram released by the Kremlin. "During each of our meetings, I was literally charged with his incredible vitality, optimism and sense of humor."

Berlusconi hosted Putin twice at one of his Sardinia Emerald Coast villas, and the Russian reciprocated, including with a stay at Putin's dacha. For Berlusconi's last birthday in September, Putin gifted him bottles of vodka, even as the Italian government staunchly backed Ukraine in the war against the Russian invasion.

"Undoubtedly, he was a politician of the European and the world scale," Putin said. "There are few such people in the international arena now. He was a great friend of our people and did a lot to develop business, friendly relations between Russia and European countries." Berlusconi had expressed reservations about sanctions against Russian interests over the invasion.

— Former U.S. President George W. Bush, in a message from Kennebunkport, Maine, recalled Berlusconi as a "vibrant leader with a personality to match. (Wife) Laura and I were fortunate to spend a good deal of time with him during my presidency. There was never a dull moment with Silvio. He strengthened the friendship between Italy and the United States, and we are grateful for his commitment to our important alliance. Laura and I send our condolences to the Berlusconi family and the people of Italy."

— Far-right Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni, whose coalition government's junior partners include the Forza Italia party Berlusconi founded three decades ago, bid him "farewell, Silvio" in a video statement carried on Italian television. With his passing, "a great European political leader and a great Italian is gone. His intuitions, his battles, his commitment transformed our nation and opened spaces for authentic liberty."

— Pope Francis, in a condolence telegram sent to Berlusconi's eldest daughter, Marina Berlusconi, assured his closeness to all the family. The pontiff said that the late premier had carried out "public responsibilities with an energetic temperament." Francis prayed that God grant "eternal peace for him and consolation of the heart for those who weep for his passing." Francis said he joined in the condolences "with a fervent remembrance in prayer."

— The Biden administration extended its condolences to Berlusconi's family, friends "and to the government and people of Italy," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said. "The prime minister worked closely with several U.S. administrations on advancing our bilateral relationship. We stand with the people of Italy today."

— Tony Blair, a former U.K. prime minister, in a statement recalled his many interactions with Berlusconi. "Silvio was a larger-than-life figure with whom I worked closely for several years as Prime Minister. I know he was controversial for many but for me he was a leader whom I found capable, shrewd and, most important, true to his word."

— Former center-left Italian Premier Romani Prodi, who in 2006 narrowly defeated Berlusconi in an election to take the premiership, said that their rivalry "never exceeded into enmity on the personal level, keeping the confrontation in a context of reciprocal respect." A former European Commission president, Prodi expressed appreciation for Berlusconi's "support for the pro-Europe cause, above all because it was confirmed and reiterated in a period in which our common European destiny was harshly and unwisely under accusation."

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— “We had our political differences but on a personal level, he was always charming and engaging company,” Anders Fogh Rasmussen, a former Danish prime minister and former NATO secretary-general, said of Berlusconi.

— Italian President Sergio Mattarella, whose role as head of state was coveted by Berlusconi — he sought unsuccessfully in recent years to be chosen by Parliament for that position — in his tribute described the former premier as a “protagonist of long seasons of Italian politics.

“Berlusconi was a great political leader who marked the history of our republic, influencing its paradigms, customs and language,” Mattarella said.

— Former center-left Italian Premier Matteo Renzi, who now heads a centrist opposition party, recalled Berlusconi’s divisive legacy in a message on Twitter. “Silvio Berlusconi made history in this country. Many loved him, many hated him. All must recognize that his impact on political life, but also economic, sport and television, has been without precedence.”

— European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen tweeted about her sadness. Berlusconi “led Italy in a time of political transition and since then continued to shape his beloved country. I extend my condolences to his family and the Italian people.”

— French President Emmanuel Macron said Berlusconi was “a great entrepreneur, and he left his mark on Italian political life over the last few decades, and we send the Italian people and the Italian government our condolences.”

— Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani, Berlusconi’s top Forza Italia official, said the late premier was a “precious engine of ideas.” “Berlusconi changed the history of our country,” he said.

— In Washington, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken called Berlusconi “obviously a tremendously significant figure in the life of Italy, in the political life, in the public life of the country. Many American administrations worked with him over the years.”

— Fabrizio Marrazzo, a spokesperson for Italy’s Gay Party, recalled Berlusconi as “a liberal person who contributed to the dissemination of LGBT+ issues on his television networks,” including the first television interviews in Italy with gays, lesbians, bisexuals and trans people. Still, Marrazzo noted that Berlusconi’s solidarity on the political front sometimes wavered. In 2010, buffeted by sex scandals over his partying with women decades younger, Berlusconi offended many with his remark that it was “better to be passionate about a beautiful girl than a gay.”

— On one of the three private television networks in Berlusconi’s media empire, a pair of announcers hosting a live morning talk show choked up and shed tears when giving the audience the news of his death. Outside one of Berlusconi’s villas, in Arcore, near Milan, someone placed a scarf from AC Milan soccer club, which Berlusconi had long owned, next to bouquets of flowers.

— This story has been corrected to show that the spelling of the Gay Party spokesperson’s last name is Marrazzo, not Marazzo.

Pat Sajak announces ‘Wheel of Fortune’ retirement, says upcoming season will be his last as host

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Pat Sajak is taking one last spin on “Wheel of Fortune,” announcing Monday that its upcoming season will be his last as host.

Sajak announced his retirement from the venerable game show in a tweet.

“Well, the time has come. I’ve decided that our 41st season, which begins in September, will be my last. It’s been a wonderful ride, and I’ll have more to say in the coming months. Many thanks to you all,” the tweet said.

Sajak, 76, has presided over the game show, which features contestants guessing letters to try to fill out words and phrases to win money and prizes, since 1981. He took over duties from Chuck Woolery, who was the show’s first host when it debuted in 1975.

Along with Vanna White, who joined the show in 1982, Sajak has been a television mainstay. The show

soon shifted to a syndication and aired in the evening in many markets, becoming one of the most successful game shows in history. Sajak will continue to serve as a consultant on the show for three years after his retirement as host.

"As the host of Wheel of Fortune, Pat has entertained millions of viewers across America for 40 amazing years. We are incredibly grateful and proud to have had Pat as our host for all these years and we look forward to celebrating his outstanding career throughout the upcoming season," said Suzanne Prete, executive vice president of game shows for Sony Pictures Television.

In recent years, some of Sajak's banter and chiding of contestants have become fodder for social media. That prompted Sajak to remark in his retirement post about doing another season: "(If nothing else, it'll keep the clickbait sites busy!)"

McCarthy and conservatives reach a truce to allow House to move forward on bills

By KEVIN FREKING and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Speaker Kevin McCarthy appeared Monday to have resolved, for now, an impasse with some of the more conservative members of his caucus who had brought the chamber to a standstill last week.

McCarthy met with nearly a dozen lawmakers in his office in an effort to quell a revolt and jumpstart various priorities that had stalled last week amid the GOP infighting. He called it a productive meeting where "everybody's attitude was, 'How do we find where we all work together?'" McCarthy promised more meetings with last week's holdouts and a focus on reducing federal spending in the weeks ahead.

"We've got a lot more victories for the American people we want to fight for, and we're only able to achieve it if we stick together," he told reporters.

Last week, barely a dozen Republicans, mainly members of the House Freedom Caucus, shuttered House business in protest of McCarthy's leadership. Votes on a pair of pro-gas stove bills important to GOP activists could not be taken. At the heart of their displeasure was a compromise that McCarthy struck with President Joe Biden on suspending the debt ceiling, which they viewed as inadequately cutting spending.

While McCarthy expressed confidence the House would take up those bills this week, he also acknowledged he could face similar obstacles in the future in which members of his own party oppose routine procedural votes that prevent the House from taking up various GOP priorities. Last week's procedural rule vote was the first to fail in nearly two decades.

"Perhaps we'll be back here next week," warned Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., as he exited the meeting with McCarthy.

"You know, each day there's another challenge. I just wake up every morning, pray for the patience of Job and find a solution and move forward," McCarthy said of the potential threat from his right flank.

Gaetz said there was an agreement from McCarthy to further look at spending on various federal boards, commissions and other entities that could be cut back to save money.

But the most important message from the holdouts was that they need to see progress from McCarthy and the leadership team each week on spending priorities, or "the floor will stop, the functions will stop," said Rep. Matt Rosendale, R-Mont.

Relatives fight for custody of kids who survived plane crash and weeks in Amazon jungle

By REGINA GARCIA CANO and MANUEL RUEDA Associated Press

BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) — A custody battle has broken out among relatives of four Indigenous children who survived a plane crash and 40 harrowing days alone in the Amazon rainforest in an extraordinary showing of youthful resilience that captivated people around the world.

The siblings, ranging in age from 1 to 13, remained hospitalized Monday and were expected to stay

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there for several more days, a period that Colombia's child protection agency is using to interview family members to determine who should care for them after their mother died in the May 1 crash.

Astrid Cáceres, head of the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare, said in an interview with BLU radio that a caseworker was assigned to the children at the request of their maternal grandparents, who are vying for custody with the father of the two youngest.

"We are going to talk, investigate, learn a little about the situation," Cáceres said, adding that the agency has not ruled out that they and their mother may have experienced domestic abuse.

"The most important thing at this moment is the children's health, which is not only physical but also emotional, the way we accompany them emotionally," she said.

On Sunday, grandfather Narciso Mucutuy accused Manuel Ranoque of beating his daughter, Magdalena Mucuty, telling reporters the children would hide in the forest when fighting broke out.

Ranoque acknowledged to reporters that there had been trouble at home, but he characterized it as a private family matter and not "gossip for the world."

Asked whether he had attacked his wife, Ranoque said: "Verbally, sometimes, yes. Physically, very little. We had more verbal fights."

Ranoque said he has not been allowed to see the two oldest children at the hospital. Cáceres declined to comment on why that was the case.

The children were traveling with their mother from the Amazonian village of Araracuara to the town of San Jose del Guaviare on May 1 when the pilot of the Cessna single-engine propeller plane declared an emergency due to engine failure. The aircraft fell off the radar a short time later, and a search began for the three adults and four children who were on board.

For more than a month, the children survived by eating cassava flour and seeds as well as some fruits they found in the rainforest, which they were familiar with as members of the Huitoto Indigenous group.

They were finally found Friday and helicoptered to the capital, Bogota, and then to a military hospital where they have been given psychological services and other support. Officials have sought to do so in a culturally sensitive way, arranging for spiritual ceremonies and food the children are accustomed to.

As they convalesce, the children have told relatives harrowing details of their time in the jungle. The oldest, Lesly Jacobombaire Mucutuy, said their mother was alive for about four days after the crash before dying, Ranoque said Sunday.

Having a safe environment to talk openly about their experience and whatever emotions they may be feeling, be it grief or pride over having survived, will be key to recovery, said Dr. Robert Sege, a pediatrician and director of the Center for Community-Engaged Medicine at Tufts Medical Center in Boston.

How children process trauma can vary by age, he added.

"Our brains are always trying to make sense out of things," Sege said. "And if we're at different developmental stages, the way we make sense is going to be different."

The plane was found two weeks after the crash in a thick patch of rainforest. The bodies of the three adults were recovered, but there was no sign of the children, prompting hopes that they could be alive.

Soldiers in helicopters dropped boxes of food into the jungle, and planes fired off flares at night to illuminate the ground for crews searching around the clock. Rescuers also used speakers to blast a message recorded by the children's grandmother telling them to stay in one place.

The children were ultimately found last Friday about 5 kilometers (3 miles) from the crash in a small clearing. Gen. Pedro Sanchez, who led the search effort as chief of the military's Special Operations Command, said rescuers had passed within 20 to 50 meters (70 to 160 feet) of the site on a couple of occasions but missed them.

Relatives and officials have praised Lesly for guiding her younger siblings through the 40 days in the jungle, which teems with snakes, poisonous frogs, mosquitoes and other animals. The youngest turned 1 while they were missing.

"God forbid most teenagers get put into that position, but she clearly was able to gather her wits and figure out what needed to be done," Sege said. "That's really important to hold on to. The children, as they grow up, need to remember not just the tragedy but how they kept the baby alive."

Garcia Cano reported from Mexico City.

PacifiCorp could be on the hook for billions after jury verdict in devastating Oregon wildfires

By ANDREW SELSKY and GENE JOHNSON Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — A jury in Oregon on Monday found the electric utility PacifiCorp responsible for causing devastating fires during Labor Day weekend in 2020, ordering the company to pay tens of millions of dollars to 17 homeowners who sued and finding it liable for broader damages that could push the total award into the billions.

The Portland utility is one of several owned by billionaire Warren Buffett's Omaha, Nebraska-based investment conglomerate Berkshire Hathaway. The property owners, suing on behalf of a class of thousands of others, alleged that PacifiCorp negligently failed to shut off power to its 600,000 customers during a windstorm, despite warnings from then-Gov. Kate Brown's chief-of-staff and top fire officials, and that its power lines were responsible for multiple blazes.

There has been no official cause determined for the Labor Day fires, which killed nine people, burned more than 1,875 square miles (4,856 square kilometers) in Oregon, and destroyed upward of 5,000 homes and structures. The blazes together were one of the worst natural disasters in Oregon history.

In a written statement, lawyers for the plaintiffs called the decision historic and said it "paves the way for potentially billions of dollars in further damages for the class members."

PacifiCorp immediately said it would appeal.

"Escalating climate change, challenging state and federal forest management, and population growth in the wildland-urban interface are substantial factors contributing to growing wildfire risk," PacifiCorp said in an emailed statement after the verdict. "These systemic issues affect all Oregonians and are larger than any single utility."

The Multnomah County Circuit Court jury awarded more than \$73 million to 17 homeowners who sued PacifiCorp a month after the fires, with each receiving between \$3 million and \$5.5 million for physical damage to their property and emotional distress.

The jury also applied its liability finding to a larger class including the owners of nearly 2,500 properties damaged in the fires, which could push the price tag for damages well into the billions of dollars. Those damages will be determined later.

The jury heard testimony Monday afternoon over whether to make PacifiCorp pay punitive damages. Nick Rosinia, an attorney for plaintiffs, told the jurors they should award punitive damages totaling five times what they have already been awarded for the harm PacifiCorp caused.

"For its reckless and outrageous action on Labor Day, it's the only way they will truly get your message," Rosinia said.

Doug Dixon, an attorney for the power company, insisted no punitive damages were warranted. The company keeps working on safety and was not recklessly negligent, he said. And while lawyers for the property owners described PacifiCorp as deep-pocketed, the company is \$9 billion in debt.

Among those in court for the verdict was Rachele McMaster, whose home in the town of Otis near the Oregon coast was destroyed in the fires. Wearing a tie-dye T-shirt that read "keep Earth awesome," she wiped her eyes and clasped her spouse's hand after it was read.

The seven-week trial wrapped with closing arguments last Wednesday, Oregon Public Radio reported.

The plaintiffs alleged PacifiCorp was negligent when it didn't shut off its power lines despite extreme wind warnings over the holiday weekend.

"They have no real response to any of this," plaintiffs' attorney Cody Berne said during closing arguments. "(PacifiCorp) started the fires. They destroyed the evidence. And now they have come before you and are asking not to be held accountable."

Jurors were to determine PacifiCorp's responsibility in four of those blazes: the Santiam Canyon fires

east of Salem; the Echo Mountain Complex near Lincoln City; the South Obenchain fire near Eagle Point; and the Two Four Two fire near the southwest Oregon town of Chiloquin.

Attorneys for the plaintiffs said utility executives kept the power on even as the company's line workers took calls about damaged electrical equipment. The same executives, attorneys said, took no responsibility at the trial, saying it was front-line workers who make de-energization decisions, the news outlet reported.

In his closing arguments, Dixon said "alleged power line fires" in Santiam Canyon, where more than half the class members live, could not have spread to plaintiff's homes. Plus, PacifiCorp does not have equipment in some areas where they were accused of causing damage, he said.

The risk of wildfires is increasingly fraught for power companies in the West. Pacific Gas & Electric declared bankruptcy and pleaded guilty to 84 counts of manslaughter after its neglected equipment caused a fire in the Sierra Nevada foothills in 2018 that destroyed nearly 19,000 homes, businesses and other buildings and virtually razed the town of Paradise, California.

Johnson reported from Seattle. Mark Thiessen in Anchorage contributed.

1 dead after tour boat capsizes inside Erie Canal water tunnel cave in western New York

By CAROLYN THOMPSON Associated Press

A boat carrying hospitality workers capsized Monday during a tour of a historic underground cavern system built to carry water from the Erie Canal beneath the western New York city of Lockport, killing one person who became trapped beneath the overturned vessel, officials said.

All 29 people on board the flat-bottomed boat operated by Lockport Cave Tours were thrown into water between 5 feet and 6 feet deep when the craft tipped over toward the end of the roughly 300-foot route.

The tours take visitors on an underground boat ride through a dimly lit, rough-hewn tunnel, which was blasted out in the 19th century to transport canal water as an industrial power source.

Some passengers dunked into the water were able to get to safety on their own. Rescue crews using an inflatable boat rescued about 16 others, Lockport Fire Chief Luca Quagliano said.

Jeremy Swiatowy, 42, watched as rescue workers breached the wall to the tunnel with a sledgehammer before shimmying through the hole to reach people inside.

"The water in the caves is super cold," he said.

When rescuers reached the boat, some passengers had climbed on top of its upturned hull, Quagliano said at a news conference.

Authorities did not immediately release the name of the man who died. His wife was taken to a hospital.

A total of 11 people were brought to hospitals, mostly with minor injuries, the fire chief said.

All of the passengers were hospitality employees from across Niagara County, according to Andrea Czopp, chief operating officer at Destination Niagara USA. The agency organized the outing as part of a familiarization tour, she said.

Authorities said the specially built motorboat holds up to 40 people, who sit in rows about four across. During the ride, about two to three feet of space separate the boat and cave walls on either side.

Nobody on board had a life preserver, authorities said. It was unclear whether they were required or offered.

The company that operates the tours did not immediately respond to phone calls and an email seeking comment.

Lockport Mayor Michelle Roman said the attraction, located about 20 miles (32 kilometers) northeast of Niagara Falls, has operated since the mid-1970s, without incident. It will remain closed during an investigation.

"This is very sad for everybody," she said.

Police Chief Steven Abbott said the cave and canal are private property.

"We have a lot of questions that need to be answered," he said.

Video footage from the scene outside the Lockport Cave office showed one person talking as she was loaded onto an ambulance. Others wrapped in white towels were being escorted to a bus as a steady rain fell.

The water tunnel was once the subject of an episode of the Syfy network show "Ghost Hunters."

Associated Press writers Jennifer Peltz in New York City and Michael Hill in Albany contributed to this report.

2 active-duty Marines plead guilty to Capitol riot charges

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

Two men who were active-duty members of the Marines Corps when they stormed the U.S. Capitol pleaded guilty on Monday to riot-related criminal charges.

Joshua Abate and Dodge Dale Hellonen are scheduled to be sentenced in September by U.S. District Judge Ana Reyes. Both pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor count of parading, demonstrating or picketing in a Capitol building, according to a spokesperson for the U.S. Attorney's office for the District of Columbia.

Many Capitol rioters are military veterans, but only a few were actively serving in the armed forces when they joined a mob's attack on Jan. 6, 2021.

A third active-duty Marine, Micah Coomer, also was charged with Abate and Hellonen. Coomer pleaded guilty to the same misdemeanor charge in May and is scheduled to be sentenced by Reyes on Aug. 30.

All three men face a maximum sentence of six months of imprisonment.

As of May 19, the Marines were still in the service. No additional information was available Monday.

David Dischley, an attorney for Abate, declined to comment on his client's guilty plea. An assistant public defender who represents Hellonen didn't immediately respond to an email seeking comment.

Authorities arrested the three men in January: Abate at Fort Meade, Maryland; Coomer in Oceanside, California; and Hellonen in Jacksonville, North Carolina.

Witnesses stationed with Coomer at Marine Corps Base Quantico in Virginia and with Hellonen at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina identified them in videos of the Jan. 6 riot, according to the FBI. A third witness — also a Marine — identified Abate from footage captured inside the Capitol, the FBI said.

During a June 2022 for his security clearance, Abate said he and two "buddies" had walked through the Capitol on Jan. 6 "and tried not to get hit with tear gas," according to an FBI special agent.

"Abate also admitted he heard how the event was being portrayed negatively and decided that he should not tell anybody about going into the U.S. Capitol Building," the agent wrote in an affidavit.

After the riot, Coomer posted photos on Instagram with the caption "Glad to be (a part) of history." The angles of the photos and the caption indicated he had been inside the Capitol on Jan. 6, the FBI said. The phone number listed for Coomer in his military personal file matched the Instagram account.

Coomer drove to Washington on the morning of Jan. 6 from his military post in Virginia. He attended then-President Donald Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally with Abate and Hellonen before they entered the Capitol. Inside the Rotunda, they placed a red "Make America Great Again" hat on a statute before taking photos of it, prosecutors said. The three men spent nearly an hour inside the Capitol before leaving.

Less than a month after the riot, Coomer told another Instagram user that he believed "everything in this country is corrupt."

"We honestly need a fresh restart. I'm waiting for the boogaloo," he wrote, according to the FBI.

When the other user asked what that term meant, Coomer wrote, "Civil war 2."

"Boogaloo" movement supporters use the term as slang for a second civil war or collapse of civilization. They frequently show up at protests armed with rifles and wearing Hawaiian shirts under body armor.

Over 1,000 people have been charged with federal crimes for their conduct at the Capitol on Jan. 6. Approximately 600 of them have pleaded guilty, mostly to misdemeanors punishable by maximum terms of imprisonment of six months or one year.

___ Associated Press writer Lolita Baldor in Washington contributed to this report.

Young climate activists take Montana to court for its role in global warming

By AMY BETH HANSON and MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — Rikki Held decided to join other young plaintiffs in a lawsuit to force Montana officials to do something about climate change after watching wildfires blacken the sky over her family's ranch, drought stress the cattle and violent floods erode the banks of a nearby river.

Held and 15 other young people finally got their day in court Monday after suing state officials three years ago for failing to take action to curb global warming. The case is the first climate change lawsuit to reach trial among dozens filed across the U.S. in the last decade.

They are trying to persuade state District Judge Kathy Seeley over a two-week trial that the state's allegiance to fossil fuel development endangers their health and livelihoods and threatens future generations.

"I know that climate change is a global issue, but Montana needs to take responsibility for our part," testified Held, now 22. "You can't just blow it off and do nothing about it."

The state court case centers on a government's obligations to protect people against worsening climate change. Experts say it could set legal precedent but isn't likely to spur immediate policy changes in fossil fuel-friendly Montana.

A lawyer for the state sought to minimize the case's significance and said sparsely-populated Montana produces a "minuscule" emissions on a global scale.

Held's family ranch in southeastern Montana is near some of the planet's most abundant coal reserves in the sprawling Powder River Basin. State officials have continued to promote that fuel for export to out of state and overseas markets despite scientific consensus that fossil fuels are largely to blame for worsening climate change.

Held spoke on Monday about getting heat alerts on her phone for temperatures up to 110 degrees and about a fire that burned power lines and left her ranch powerless for a month, meaning they couldn't pump water for their cattle.

"It's stressful," Held said, her eyes welling with tears, when asked her feelings about climate change. "That's my life, and my home is there and it impacts the wellbeing of myself, my family, my community."

Attorneys for the state declined to question Held while she was on the stand.

Montana Assistant Attorney General Michael Russell said during opening arguments that the state had little control over global emissions. The harms alleged by Held and the other plaintiffs can't be traced to specific actions by state officials, he said.

"Montana's emissions are simply too minuscule to make any difference," Russell said. "Climate change is a global issue that effectively relegates Montana's role to that of a spectator."

Russell also suggested that the plaintiffs, who are backed by a well-financed Oregon law firm, had exaggerated the case's importance, which he said was "far more boring than the plaintiffs would make it out to be."

In the three years since the lawsuit was filed, the scope of the case has been narrowed to whether Montana's Environmental Policy Act — which requires state agencies to balance the health of the environment against resource development — is unconstitutional because it does not require officials to consider greenhouse gas emissions or their climate impacts.

Judge Seeley has said she could rule that the state's climate change exception in its environmental law is at odds with its constitution, but she can't tell the legislature what to do to remedy the violation.

The plaintiffs and their attorneys were cheered by supporters as they arrived outside the courthouse on Monday. Inside, Seeley's small courtroom was packed with observers and members of the media.

Environmentalists have called the bench trial a turning point because similar suits in nearly every state have already been dismissed. A favorable decision could add to a handful of rulings globally that have declared governments have a duty to protect citizens from climate change.

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The attorneys plan to use witness testimony to document the widespread effects climate change is having on Montana's environment and the profound consequences for its people. Climate researcher Steve Running, who with other scientists was awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for their work on the topic, said Monday there was "no doubt" climate change was being felt in the state.

Running described an increasingly dire situation of wildfires getting more severe and more frequent in western North America — causing health impacts across the nation — as heavy fossil fuel use continues to churn out emissions at levels problematic for the atmosphere.

"There's no alternative explanation," Running said. "If we do nothing and continue with business as usual, the planet models... suggest these accelerating disturbance rates, accelerating sea level rise, accelerating glacial retreat."

One reason the case may have made it so far in Montana is the state's constitutional requirement that government "maintain and improve a clean and healthful environment." Only a few states, including Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and New York, have similar environmental protections in their constitutions.

The plaintiffs criticize state officials for their alleged failure to curb planet-warming emissions while Montana pursued oil, gas and coal development that provides jobs, tax revenue and helps meet the energy needs of people in Montana and elsewhere.

They cite smoke from worsening wildfires choking the air they breathe; drought drying rivers that sustain agriculture, fish, wildlife and recreation; along with reduced snowpack and shortened winter recreation seasons.

Attorney Roger Sullivan said his young clients and their families already were suffering health problems and economic losses as climate change dries up rivers and worsens wildfires. He said Montana has a obligation to protect residents from climate change under its unusually protective state constitution.

"The state has approved numerous large fossil fuel related permits that are responsible for enormous quantities of greenhouse gas emissions," Sullivan said. "Every ton of CO2 we keep out of the air matters."

Experts for the state are expected to counter that climate extremes have existed for centuries.

Carbon dioxide, which is released when fossil fuels are burned, traps heat in the atmosphere and is largely responsible for the warming of the the climate. Carbon dioxide levels in the air this spring reached the highest levels they've been in over 4 million years, the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration said earlier this month. Greenhouse gas emissions also reached a record last year, according to the International Energy Agency.

Brown reported from Billings, Mont.

Kylian Mbappe informs PSG he will not trigger contract extension, AP source says

By JAMES ROBSON AP Soccer Writer

MANCHESTER, England (AP) — Kylian Mbappe has told Paris Saint-Germain he will not take up the option of a 12-month extension on his contract, which expires at the end of next season.

The France superstar confirmed his decision in a letter to PSG, a person with knowledge of the correspondence told The Associated Press on Monday. The person spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly.

The person also said PSG would not allow Mbappe to leave as a free agent, raising the possibility of an immediate bidding war by other clubs and potential transfer this summer.

The French club, which is owned by Qatar Sports Investments, has already seen Lionel Messi leave for nothing in return, with the Argentine great making a stunning move to MLS team Inter Miami.

There is also uncertainty about the future of another PSG star — Brazil international Neymar.

But the potential departure of the 24-year-old Mbappe would be the greatest loss to PSG, given that he is a national icon and widely considered one of the few players capable of taking over from Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo as soccer's biggest star.

Mbappe had until July 31 to trigger a one-year extension to his contract. He has been at the club since 2017 after signing from Monaco in a transfer worth a reported \$190 million.

In 2021, PSG turned down a bid of \$190 million from Real Madrid for the World Cup-winning forward, who went on to sign his current contract.

Mbappe hoped to help PSG win its first Champions League title, but the team suffered another disappointment in European soccer's top competition, which Manchester City went on to win by beating Inter Milan 1-0 in the final on Saturday.

The young striker is likely to be linked with a move to Madrid, particularly after Karim Benzema left the Spanish giant for Saudi Arabian team Al-Ittihad.

Madrid has already agreed to a deal for England midfielder Jude Bellingham. The potential acquisition of Mbappe would be a major statement of intent after it relinquished its Spanish league and Champions League titles this year.

PSG was planning a change of strategy after moves for the biggest stars failed to bring success in Europe. The new focus would be on young, French talent. Mbappe was expected to be at the heart of that shift and it had been hoped he would sign a longer-term contract.

Mbappe has won five French league titles with PSG and was a World Cup winner with France in 2018.

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More AP soccer: <https://apnews.com/hub/soccer> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Officials say driver lost control of gas-filled tanker before fire collapsed main East Coast highway

By RON TODT, MIKE CATALINI and MARC LEVY Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — The driver of a tractor-trailer hauling gasoline lost control on an off-ramp and flipped the tanker truck on its side in a wreck that set it afire and destroyed a section of the East Coast's main north-south highway, Pennsylvania's top transportation official said Monday.

In the first official accounting of a wreck that threw hundreds of thousands of morning commutes into chaos and disrupted untold numbers of businesses, state Transportation Secretary Mike Carroll said the driver was northbound "trying to navigate the curve, lost control of the vehicle, landed on its side and ruptured the tank."

The driver was feared dead, and a relative of a New Jersey truck driver who has not been heard from since Sunday told The Philadelphia Inquirer that investigators had contacted the family in an effort to identify human remains recovered from the wreckage.

Pennsylvania State Police said a body was turned over to the Philadelphia medical examiner and coroner, but did not identify the remains or respond when asked if they belonged to the driver.

Gov. Josh Shapiro, speaking of those on the roadway and not the trucker, said he "found myself thanking the Lord that no motorists who were on I-95 were injured or died."

Interstate 95 will be closed in both directions for weeks as the summer travel season kicks into high gear. The elevated southbound portion of I-95 will have to be demolished, as well as the northbound side, Carroll said. Motorists should avoid the northeast corner of the sixth-largest city in the country, transportation officials said.

The accident also disrupted the automotive route from Canada to Florida through the Boston, New York and Washington metropolitan areas, increasing Americans' dependence on air travel and on the interstate rail network.

Videos shared on social media showed a number of close calls around the accident, with people driving through the area as flames licked upward from the fire below.

The National Transportation Safety Board was on the scene Sunday night. Federal investigators have been collecting information about the truck and talking with the company and emergency responders in

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order to understand the sequence of events. They are expected to make a preliminary report within weeks.

The damaged I-95 segment carries about 160,000 vehicles daily, Carroll said. State police don't know if the driver was speeding, and no other vehicle has been found. Officials said they had been in contact with the trucking company, but they did not identify it.

Carroll said the highway span was 10 to 12 years old, had appeared sound, and officials blamed the damage on the heat of the fire, which took about an hour to control.

Shapiro signed a disaster declaration Monday, saying it gives state agencies the ability to skip normal bidding-and-contracting requirements so the span can be repaired faster.

He said a flight he took over the area showed "just remarkable devastation."

High heat from the fire or the impact of an explosion could have weakened the steel beams supporting the overpass, according to Drexel University structural engineering Professor Abi Aghayere. Bridges like the one that collapsed don't typically have fire protection, like concrete casing, he added. It could have been coated in a fire-retarding paint, but even then the beams could have been weakened.

"It just gives you time," he said.

Among many transportation changes across the region, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority said it was operating three extra morning and late afternoon trains on its Trenton, New Jersey, line, and adding capacity to regularly scheduled lines during peak hours following the collapse.

The collapsed section of I-95 was part of a \$212 million reconstruction project that wrapped up four years ago, state Transportation Department spokesman Brad Rudolph said. PennDOT rated the 104-foot span as in "good" condition earlier this year, with another inspection set for 2025.

Shapiro, a Democrat, said the complete rebuild of I-95 would take "some number of months," and in the meantime officials were looking at "interim solutions to reconnect I-95 and get traffic through the area."

Joseph L. Schofer, a retired professor of civil and environmental engineering from Northwestern University, said a big challenge for PennDOT in quickly replacing the bridge could be getting heavy-duty steel beams of a hundred feet or more.

Ensuring the precise length necessary — either by finding the construction records or taking measurements — and finding a fabricator to make them could take time, he said.

"You can't go online to Amazon and order it and have it delivered the next day," said Schofer, who also hosts a podcast on infrastructure.

In California, a similar situation happened with a highway ramp in Oakland. It was replaced in 26 days, he said.

"Now that's almost a miracle," Schofer said. In Atlanta, an elevated portion of Interstate 85 collapsed in a fire, shutting down the heavily traveled route through the heart of the city in March 2017. It took authorities there 43 days to replace it, Schofer said.

In Pennsylvania, officials were also concerned about the environmental effects of runoff into the nearby Delaware River.

After a sheen was seen in the Delaware River near the collapse site, the Coast Guard deployed a boom to contain the material. Ensign Josh Ledoux said the tanker had a capacity of 8,500 gallons (32,176 liters), but the contents did not appear to be spreading into the environment.

Catalini reported from Trenton, New Jersey and Levy from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Black Florida mother killed by white neighbor remembered for faith, devotion to 4 kids

OCALA, Fla. (AP) — Civil rights leaders and ministers demanded justice during a memorial service for a Black mother who was fatally shot in front of her 9-year-old son by a white neighbor firing through the door of her central Florida home.

Ajike Owens was remembered Monday for her deep faith and devotion to her children.

During a three-hour service at a church in Ocala, Florida, the Rev. Al Sharpton, civil rights attorney Ben

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Crump and others connected Owens' death to the killings of other Black Americans in recent years, such as Trayvon Martin by a neighborhood watch volunteer in Florida and George Floyd at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis.

"You can't kill our loved ones, just because of the color of their skin, just because they were living while Black," Crump said. "We cannot let them kill our loved ones for just knocking on a door, for loving their children, while Black."

Owens, a 35-year-old mother of four who went by the nickname "AJ," was killed June 2 in Ocala, about 83 miles (133 kilometers) north of Orlando. Her neighbor, Susan Louise Lorincz, 58, has been charged with the first-degree felony of manslaughter with a firearm, as well as culpable negligence, battery and two counts of assault.

Neighbors said Lorincz frequently called neighborhood children who played outside her home racial slurs and antagonized them, and that's what happened 10 days ago when she yelled at Owens' children as they played nearby and threw a pair of skates that hit one of them, according to the Marion County Sheriff's Office.

Lorincz told investigators that she acted in self-defense, and that Owens had been trying to break down her door before Lorincz fired the gun. But Sheriff Billy Woods said last week that the investigation, which included eyewitness statements, established that Lorincz's actions were not justifiable under Florida law. Before Lorincz's arrest, the sheriff had said that because of Florida's "stand your ground" law, he couldn't make an arrest unless he could prove the shooter did not act in self-defense.

Stand your ground and "castle doctrine" cases — which allow residents to defend themselves either by law or court precedent when threatened — have sparked outrage amid a spate of shootings across the country.

"We are going to stand our ground for the humanity of AJ," Crump said. "We are going to stand our ground for justice for AJ."

Both Crump and Sharpton urged Owens' children not to blame themselves in any way for what happened.

"Your mother chose to stand in danger's way for you," Sharpton said. "That's what mothers do. That is why we celebrate your mother."

Sharpton criticized Florida's Republican political leaders for saying little about the case.

Sharpton, a former candidate for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination, took particular aim at Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis who recently launched his own campaign for the 2024 GOP presidential nomination. DeSantis has championed sending immigrants from Texas to Democratic-leaning states and signed a slew of anti-LGBTQ+ laws that spurred the most prominent gay rights group in the U.S. and other civil rights organizations to issue warnings the Sunshine State may no longer be safe.

"You get outraged about migrants coming to Texas. You get outraged about those that have a different lifestyle," Sharpton said. "But I've been checking my Google, I can't find out: Does DeSantis have laryngitis?"

On a pulpit bedecked with pink and lavender flowers, relatives and friends described Owens as a woman of deep faith, who made sure her children were baptized, and she regularly attended church, sometimes dragging along a less-than-willing relative.

Owens' mother, Pamela Dias, has said she will now raise her four young grandchildren, ranging in age from 3 to 12. They were promised scholarships by local ministers to historically Black colleges in Florida during the memorial service.

"Please don't let our baby daughter's death be in vain," Dias said. "A change must come."

FTC sues to block Microsoft's takeover of video game maker Activision Blizzard

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

The Federal Trade Commission has sued to block Microsoft from completing its deal to buy video game company Activision Blizzard, the latest antitrust challenge to the proposed merger but one that could hasten a conclusion to the drawn-out dispute.

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The FTC's Monday filing in a San Francisco federal court seeks a temporary restraining order and injunction to stop Microsoft's \$69 billion purchase of the California company behind hit games such as Call of Duty, World of Warcraft and Candy Crush.

Microsoft, maker of the Xbox game system, has been struggling to win worldwide approval for the deal with just over a month before the deadline to close it, according to the contract it signed with Activision. While a number of countries have approved the acquisition, regulators for two important economies — the U.S. and the United Kingdom — have argued it could suppress competition in the video game market.

"We welcome the opportunity to present our case in federal court," said a statement Monday from Brad Smith, Microsoft's vice chair and president. "We believe accelerating the legal process in the U.S will ultimately bring more choice and competition to the market."

Activision CEO Bobby Kotick in a letter to employees also characterized Monday's FTC filing as a "positive development" because the companies would be able to more quickly present their arguments to a federal judge.

The FTC already took Microsoft to court last year to block the merger, but that case was brought to the U.S. agency's in-house judge in a trial set to start on Aug. 2. That administrative process didn't preclude the parties from closing the deal.

The contract between Microsoft and Activision says the deal is supposed to close by July 18, but the FTC's latest action seeks to stop that from happening. If Microsoft closes the deal now, and an FTC judge later finds that it was unlawful, it "would be difficult, if not impossible" to reverse course, the FTC said in asking a judge for a preliminary injunction halting the acquisition.

For example, the FTC said, the combined companies could begin altering Activision's operations and game development, access sensitive information and eliminate key personnel.

"Microsoft and Activision Blizzard have represented in the past that they cannot close their deal due to antitrust reviews of the transaction in other jurisdictions," the FTC said in a statement Monday. "But Microsoft and Activision have not provided assurances that they will maintain that position. In light of that, and public reporting that Microsoft and Activision Blizzard are considering closing their deal imminently, we have filed a request for a temporary restraining order to prevent them from closing while review continues."

One of Microsoft's thorniest obstacles is in the U.K., where antitrust regulators made a surprise decision this spring to block the acquisition.

The all-cash deal announced in January 2022 has been scrutinized by regulators around the world over fears that it would give Microsoft and its Xbox console control of Activision's hit franchises and give it an unfair boost in the emerging business of cloud-based game subscriptions. It could be the priciest tech industry merger in history.

Fierce opposition has been driven by rival Sony, which makes the PlayStation gaming system.

Microsoft sought to counter the resistance by striking a deal with Nintendo to license Activision titles like Call of Duty for 10 years and offering the same to Sony if the deal went ahead.

European regulators representing the 27-nation bloc approved the deal last month on condition that Microsoft make some promises meant to boost competition in the cloud-based gaming market. A number of other countries, including China, Japan, Brazil and South Korea, have also approved it.

But the blockbuster deal has remained in jeopardy because of the decision by the U.K.'s Competition and Markets Authority and the ongoing case in the U.S.

Microsoft in late May filed an appeal of the British regulator's decision and has voiced strong public opposition directed at top government officials. If Microsoft were to close the deal without Britain's approval, it could face new legal challenges there or possibly decide to suspend its broader game business in the country.

U.S.-based consumer advocacy group Public Citizen, an opponent of the deal, welcomed the FTC's move Monday.

"Microsoft is pushing to culminate the purchase of Activision before the agency can finish its process," said a statement from Public Citizen's competition policy advocate Matt Kent. "By filing in federal court

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to enjoin the transaction, the FTC is showing that it won't back down in the face of Microsoft's escalatory tactics."

'First of its kind' Illinois law will penalize libraries that ban books

By CLAIRE SAVAGE Associated Press/Report for America

CHICAGO (AP) — Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker on Monday signed into law a bill that he says will make Illinois the first state in the nation to outlaw book bans.

Illinois public libraries that restrict or ban materials because of "partisan or doctrinal" disapproval will be ineligible for state funding as of Jan. 1, 2024, when the new law goes into effect.

"We are not saying that every book should be in every single library," said Illinois Secretary of State Alexi Giannoulias, who is also the state librarian and was the driving force behind the legislation. "What this law does is it says, let's trust our experience and education of our librarians to decide what books should be in circulation."

The new law comes into play as states across the U.S. push to remove certain books in schools and libraries, especially those about LGBTQ+ themes and by people of color. The American Library Association in March announced that attempts to censor books in schools and public libraries reached a 20-year high in 2022 — twice as many as 2021, the previous record.

"Illinois legislation responds to disturbing circumstances of censorship and an environment of suspicion," said Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom and executive director of the Freedom to Read Foundation.

To be eligible for state funds, Illinois public libraries must adopt the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights, which holds that "materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation," or subscribe to a similar pledge.

Downers Grove Democrat Rep. Anne Stava-Murray sponsored the legislation in the Illinois House of Representatives after a school board in her district was subject to pressure to ban certain content from school libraries.

"While it's true that kids need guidance, and that some ideas can be objectionable, trying to weaponize local government to force one-size-fits-all standards onto the entire community for reasons of bigotry, or as a substitute for active and involved parenting, is wrong," Stava-Murray said Monday at the bill's signing, which took place at a children's library in downtown Chicago.

Despite Giannoulias' assertion that "this should not be a Democrat or Republican issue," lawmakers' approval of the bill splintered across party lines, with Republicans in opposition.

"I support local control," said House Minority Leader Tony McCombie, a Republican who voted against the measure, in an emailed statement. "Our caucus does not believe in banning books, but we do believe that the content of books should be considered in their placement on the shelves."

Savage is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Tom Holland describes 'The Crowded Room' as his 'hardest' and 'most rewarding' job so far

By ALICIA RANCILIO Associated Press

The words "Tom Holland" and "spoilers" can immediately illicit snickering. There are compilation videos on YouTube of the "Spider-Man" star accidentally revealing too much about the Marvel Cinematic Universe. His slip-ups and near-giveaways have become a running joke among his co-stars and filmmakers. The actor found himself in familiar territory with his new twisty, surprise-laden series "The Crowded Room," now streaming on Apple TV+ — and says by comparison, keeping quiet about Marvel is a piece of cake.

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"With Marvel... it's all about the villain, the costume, the locations, the end result. They're relatively easy to keep those things a secret," said Holland in a recent interview. "I know that sounds stupid coming from me because I spoil everything, but with 'The Crowded Room' there are so many twists and turns in this show that people won't be expecting. It really is a puzzle."

The limited-series takes place in 1970s New York with Holland as Danny, a young man arrested in connection with a crime. His accomplices are nowhere to be found and an investigator assigned to the case (played by Amanda Seyfried) conducts a series of interviews with Danny to piece together his involvement.

Holland and Seyfried filmed their scenes — out of order — "for almost three weeks straight" in an interrogation room.

"It sometimes was confusing. I needed to know exactly where I was in the process with Danny, how much we knew or how much the audience knew and how much (Seyfried's character) Rya knew," she explained. "It was tricky."

Holland credits Seyfried for keeping him on track as they "did over 100 pages of dialogue at that one table in that one room."

"Amanda is so talented, she's so professional. She's able to keep it light when it's dark," he said. "There were certain times in that room where we were both just losing our minds, just scenes after scenes, after scenes after scenes. We were just a great team."

Holland describes his work on 'The Crowded Room' as "the hardest job I've ever had, but equally probably the most rewarding.

"Danny is an exhausting character. Going to those places on a daily basis, having that haircut, shooting on the streets of New York, it was tough. It was not an easy show to make," but says watching the end result made him "happy that I dug my heels in and stuck with it."

"It was a really, really tough experience without a shadow of a doubt." He says halfway through filming he "was counting down the days that I could take ... off and have some time to myself."

He also served as a co-executive producer for the first time, which helped him to finally understand what the job entails.

"I spent the first 15 years of my career on set being like, 'What do all of these people do? They're all just sitting there.' But having been a producer now myself, it is one of the most stressful things I've ever done. You're shooting in a car and the car breaks down and all of a sudden you're trying to figure out how to get a new car or how to turn the scene into a walking scene and all that sort of stuff."

Since beginning his performing career at 11 in "Billy Elliott the Musical," in London's West End, Holland says his formal education has been "somewhat non-existent" so he appreciates the learning opportunities he gets from working.

With "The Crowded Room" Holland says "I learned a lot about myself. I learned about my capabilities as an actor. I learned about things that I can put up with. I feel like I'm much more capable at dealing with adversities and fighting against things that are going wrong on set. I learned a lot about mental health. I learned a lot about the power of the human mind and the amazing things we can do to protect ourselves, to heal and to survive."

Washington Post publisher Fred Ryan leaves paper after 9 years at helm

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

Washington Post publisher and chief executive Fred Ryan, who presided over explosive growth during the Trump years but couldn't avert the effects of the industry's downturn over the past two years, said Monday he's leaving the publication after nearly a decade.

Ryan, 68, will lead the newly formed Center on Public Civility at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation, the newspaper said. He'll be replaced at the Post on an interim basis by Patty Stonesifer, formerly chief executive of the Gates Foundation and a member of the Amazon board, newspaper owner and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos said.

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Ryan, the former CEO and a founder of Politico, oversaw the appointment of Sally Buzbee — the former Associated Press executive editor — as the Post's top editor, replacing Marty Baron, in 2021.

A year after Bezos bought the newspaper in 2013, Ryan was appointed to lead The Washington Post, taking over from Katharine Weymouth — granddaughter of legendary longtime CEO Katharine Graham — and ending the Graham family's eight-decade tenure as leaders of the largest newspaper in the nation's capital.

Under the motto "Democracy dies in darkness," the Post aggressively covered the ascension and presidency of Donald Trump with flair, essentially doubling its newsroom staff and sharply boosting its digital footprint.

While it's never easy to be at the top of such a large organization, "if you step back and look at the last nine years, it has been an excellent period at The Washington Post and for the journalism it holds dear," said Neil Brown, president of the Poynter Institute, a news industry think tank.

"He took an exceptional brand and modernized it with vibrant and important journalism," Brown said.

If the Post benefitted from a "Trump bump" like other news organizations, a Washington-based news organization was also susceptible to the problems that would come with that ending, said Tom Rosenstiel, a veteran Washington journalist and now professor at the University of Maryland.

Its list of digital subscribers grew to three million at the end of the Trump administration but has since dropped to over 2.5 million. Its digital site had 139 million visitors in March 2020, and was down to 58 million in December 2022, according to the Post.

"Did it make the full transition (to digital) that the (New York) Times has made?" Rosenstiel said. "By all measures, you would have to say no. And the last couple of years have been a lot harder."

The Post went through rounds of layoffs late last year and in early 2023, and saw cutbacks including the ending of its Sunday magazine. The pandemic and inflation has sorely impacted the news industry; the Los Angeles Times said last week it was cutting some 10% of its newsroom staff, and NPR said the same thing earlier this year. Gannett, the nation's largest newspaper chain, has laid off hundreds of journalists.

Ryan angered several at the Post late last year when he refused to take questions about layoffs from his own company's journalists at a newsroom meeting.

Ryan told the Post that his departure has nothing to do with the recent downturn.

"I have no doubt that the high-quality journalism of the standard of The Washington Post will always be successful," he said.

Ryan has led the Post "through a period of innovation, journalistic excellence and growth," Bezos said in a memo to the newspaper's staff. "His focus on the intersection of journalism and technology has been on great benefit to readers and has laid the foundation for future growth."

With Bezos bankrolling the Post, the organization and a new leader would appear to have ownership in place committed to keeping quality intact, Brown said.

Ryan also served as chief of staff to Reagan after he left the presidency until 1995 and is currently chair of the board of trustees at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute.

"If you think the news business is a challenge, taking on the challenge of bringing civility to public debates might be the only job Fred Ryan can find that would be potentially more daunting," Rosenstiel said of Ryan's destination.

60 years after Medgar Evers' murder, his widow continues a civil rights legacy

By EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — At 90, Myrlie Evers-Williams still speaks in a clear, strong voice as she says she terribly misses her first love, civil rights icon Medgar Evers, and as she reflects on his work — and her own — to push the U.S. toward a promise of equality and justice for all.

It's been 60 years since a white supremacist hid in the darkness of night and assassinated Evers outside the family's Jackson home, shooting the Mississippi NAACP leader hours after then-President John F. Kennedy gave a televised speech advocating civil rights legislation.

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Evers-Williams and the couple's three young children were in the house. After hearing the crack of a rifle, she rushed to her mortally wounded husband, who lay bleeding in the carport.

"Medgar is so very much a part of me, and he's here," Evers-Williams told about 200 people who gathered on a hot and humid morning last week for the ceremonial opening of the Medgar and Myrlie Evers Home National Monument, a unit of the National Park Service.

The monument is in a subdivision where people still raise families in modest two- and three-bedroom homes. A large bouquet of red roses and daisies stood in the carport Monday at the Evers home, which is open for tours by appointment. No appointment is needed at the new visitors' space nearby, which has a herb and vegetable garden.

Evers was a World War II veteran who fought in Europe and then faced the hostile realities of a deeply segregated society after returning home to Mississippi. As the first field secretary of the Mississippi NAACP beginning in 1954, he led voter registration drives and boycotts to push for racial equality. He also investigated lynchings, beatings and other violence that Black residents suffered at the hands of white segregationists. His wife worked alongside him as his secretary.

"When my husband was shot at the doorstep of our home — June 12, 1963 — I thought my life was over," Evers-Williams said. "And I realized it was just beginning because there were three children — Medgar's children, my children — who were looking up to me."

Mississippi's white power structure in the early 1960s prevented most Black people from registering to vote, and most public schools remained segregated until 1970.

Evers-Williams said her home state needed to overcome division and "show the rest of this nation that Mississippi was not at the bottom of the heap, but that we could rise to be what we should be." She and the children moved to California in 1964, and she raised them there.

In 1976, she married Walter Williams, a longshoreman and union activist.

"God was very good and sent another man in my life — a man who loved and appreciated Medgar," she said.

White supremacist Byron De La Beckwith stood trial twice in the 1960s in the killing of Evers, but all-white juries deadlocked. Prosecutors reopened the case in the early 1990s after new witnesses came forward. In 1994, an integrated jury convicted Beckwith of murder and sentenced him to life in prison, where he died in 2001.

Evers-Williams said Evers never wanted to give up on Mississippi, even when he knew he was in danger. He "gave his life so it could be better for all of us," she said.

During last week's ceremony at the Evers home, Jackson Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba said the family's work is honorable.

"I want you to recognize the humanity here," Lumumba told the crowd. "The humanity of a family that has given it all. The humanity of a family that did not allow a coward's bullet to stop them."

Evers-Williams has been a civil rights activist in her own right. She served as national chairperson of the NAACP from 1995 to 1998, winning the position within days of when Williams died of cancer. In 2013, she delivered the invocation during then-President Barack Obama's second inauguration.

The airport and the main post office in Jackson have both been named for Evers for many years, and a statue of him stands at a busy intersection.

About 38% of Mississippi residents are Black — the largest percentage of any U.S. state. In the six decades since Evers was murdered and the federal government enacted voting rights legislation, Black voter registration in Mississippi has increased dramatically. Black people have won hundreds of local offices and dozens of Mississippi legislative seats but no statewide offices. Among the state's four U.S. House members, one is Black.

In the past week, several events have been held in and around Jackson to commemorate the Evers family legacy. Young people attended seminars about human rights activism. A Voices of Courage and Justice gala honored people committed to social change.

At a "More Than a Widow" brunch for Evers-Williams, a gospel choir sang: "What do you do when you've done all you can? ... God has a purpose. Yes, God has a plan."

Evers-Williams' daughter Reena Evers-Everette accompanied her to the events. She said it's important for

people to learn about the Civil Rights Movement, even as politicians try to restrict how history is taught. "We are trying to ... make sure our history is never erased," Evers-Everette said.

She said the commemorative events are likely to be her mother's final big public appearances. After moving from California to Oregon and back to Mississippi, Evers-Williams is living in California again.

Evers-Williams, who spoke at the opening of the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum in 2017, said last week that she is proud of her native state — something she could not always say.

"I haven't said it's perfect or even near perfect," she said. "But it's changed so much since my birth, and I hope it continues to do so in a very positive way."

She chuckled as she mentioned being 90, and then said she remains committed to trying to eliminate racism and prejudice: "I hope I will be able to do so until I take my last breath."

US halts online asylum appointments at Texas crossing after extortion warnings

By VALERIE GONZALEZ and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

LAREDO, Texas (AP) — The Biden administration has stopped taking mobile app appointments to admit asylum-seekers at a Texas border crossing that connects to a notoriously dangerous Mexican city after advocates warned U.S. authorities that migrants were being targeted there for extortion.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection gave no explanation for its decision to stop scheduling new appointments via the CBP One app for the crossing in Laredo, Texas.

Several asylum-seekers told The Associated Press that Mexican officials in Nuevo Laredo, across the border from Laredo, Texas, had threatened to hold them and make them miss their scheduled asylum appointments unless they paid them. Humanitarian groups in Laredo say they had recently warned CBP of the problems and that certain groups were controlling access to the international crossing on the Mexican side.

Migrant advocates say the situation in Nuevo Laredo, which is plagued by cartel fighting and other problems, casts doubt on the administration's argument that Mexico is a safe place for the record number of people fleeing violence in Central America and elsewhere.

Rafael Alvarez, 29, who fled Venezuela, said that after he landed in Nuevo Laredo in early June, Mexican immigration authorities at the airport seized his travel documents, including a printout of the email confirming his CBP One appointment, and demanded he pay 1,000 Mexican pesos, about \$57. He was held with other migrants.

"They would tell us covertly, 'You're going to put the money in this envelope and pass it to us,'" Alvarez said, recalling what officials told him and other migrants.

The officials, he said, threatened to hold them so they would have their appointments canceled. Alvarez, whose appointment was the next day, said he refused to pay and was eventually released, but five Russians who were held with him paid a total of 5,000 pesos, about \$290. They initially were asked to fork over double that amount, but they told officials they did not have that much, he said.

Alvarez said other Venezuelan friends who flew to Nuevo Laredo in late May also paid to have their documents returned.

Thousands of asylum-seekers are stuck in Mexican border towns, waiting until they can get an appointment to seek refuge in the United States after being blocked during the COVID-19 pandemic by a public health restriction called Title 42 that was lifted last month.

Though the government opened some new avenues for immigration, the fate of many people is largely left to the CBP One app that is used for scheduling an appointment at a port of entry.

The government said it would continue to open 1,250 appointments daily by reallocating the slots for Laredo to the seven other crossings along the U.S.-Mexico border. It vowed to honor online appointments issued for the Laredo crossing before the June 3 change. The government schedules appointments two weeks out.

CBP gives priority to people with an app appointment, though people can try to be admitted by going

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in person without one. Anyone who has an acute medical condition or is under an immediate threat of kidnapping or death also can ask to be admitted in person.

Laredo was among the least busy crossings for asylum appointments, seeing only a fraction of appointments compared to San Diego and Brownsville.

There have been widespread complaints by migrants about being forced to pay bribes to Mexico's immigration sector, where corruption is deeply ingrained.

Earlier this month, the Mexican newspaper El Universal published video it obtained that was taken through a bus window, showing a federal agent taking bills from migrants and stuffing them in his pocket as he checked passports in the Pacific coast state of Jalisco. The agency said it had suspended two of its agents there and that it does not tolerate the rights of migrants being violated.

The newspaper also obtained government documents through a freedom of information request that showed the agency had opened 119 investigations against agents between 2017 and 2023 for misconduct.

Rebecca Solloa of Catholic Charities in Laredo said her organization and others met with CBP officials in person and on Zoom to warn them that migrants have told them that groups in Nuevo Laredo control the bridge and extort migrants there but she did not know who they are.

She said CBP "obviously received some sort of intel, or descriptions, or information from migrants coming through (about) what has happened to them."

"I'm kind of glad they did," she said, adding that the government's actions might have come because "this is happening way too much here at this border."

It was unclear if the problem was isolated to Nuevo Laredo and if so, why.

Narsher Nuñez, 29, flew to Nuevo Laredo in early June with her 6-month-old son, husband and adult nephew after securing an appointment in Mexico City through the app. She said she and her family were extorted at the airport.

The Venezuelan woman said Mexican officials took their documents and demanded they pay 1,500 pesos, or \$86, to get them back. They were held for hours with a group of Chinese migrants, she said. Her husband said one official told them: "If I have a good heart, I'll send you to Guatemala. But if you catch me in a bad mood, I'll send you to Venezuela."

Eventually they paid and were released, she said. The next day, Nuñez and her family went to their appointment and were admitted to the United States.

"All the immigrants who were caught there, they took money from us," said Nuñez, who is staying with her family for now at a shelter in Laredo.

The Department of Homeland Security said in an email to the AP that CBP One has been instrumental in creating a more efficient and orderly system at the border "while cutting out unscrupulous smugglers who profit from vulnerable migrants."

Neither the U.S. nor the Mexican governments addressed questions from the AP regarding the reports of migrants who use the app being extorted.

The app was criticized for technological problems when it started Jan. 12. The government has made improvements in recent weeks, but demand has far outstripped supply, prompting many to consider crossing the border illegally or giving up.

The administration has said anyone who does not use legal channels will be deported back to their homeland and face being barred from being able to seek asylum in the U.S. for five years.

Watson reported from San Diego. Associated Press writer Mark Stevenson in Mexico City contributed to this report.

Pulse nightclub victims remembered on 7th anniversary of massacre

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — Across central Florida, the 49 victims killed and dozens more survivors of the massacre at a gay-friendly nightclub were remembered with the unveiling of a 44-foot (13.4-meter) -wide mural, the ringing of church bells and an overnight vigil at the site of the Pulse club on Monday, the seventh anniversary of the tragedy.

Several people gathered at the site of the Pulse nightclub near downtown Orlando at 2 a.m. Monday, around the time that gunman Omar Mateen opened fire in 2016, leaving 49 people dead and 53 wounded. At the time, it was the worst mass shooting in modern U.S. history. But that number was surpassed the next year when 58 people were killed and more than 850 were injured among a crowd of 22,000 at a country music festival in Las Vegas.

Mateen was killed after a three-hour standoff by SWAT team members. He had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.

At the Orlando Museum of Art, a colorful, a 44-foot-by-18-foot (13.4 meters by 5.5 meters) mural depicting the victims was unveiled. In the afternoon, a downtown church rang its bells 49 times in what has become an annual tradition.

"After seven years, our hearts remain broken from the senseless act of violence that took the lives of 49 innocent people and injured so many others," Orange County Mayor Jerry Demings said. "It is comforting to know that our community has not forgotten the pain and suffering of the families and survivors, for it is the only way that love will prevail over hate."

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said that the Biden administration would pray for the families of the victims and "every survivor who still carries the trauma." At Monday's news conference, Jean-Pierre noted that President Joe Biden had designated Pulse as a national memorial in 2021.

"This Pride month, the Biden Harris administration is going to continue lifting the LGBTQI-plus community up and honor the victims who aren't here with us today," Jean-Pierre said.

Political collateral? Oregon GOP walkout on abortion, trans health bill threatens school funds

By CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press/Report for America

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Funding for schools, literacy programs and special education teachers in Oregon — a state where 60% of third graders can't read at grade level — could be jeopardized by a Republican walkout that has stalled hundreds of bills and derailed the Legislature for nearly six weeks.

The standoff over a bill that would expand access to abortion and gender-affirming health care could scuttle much-needed education funding in a year when the stars seemed to align for Oregon's budget.

Tax revenues have exceeded state economists' projections, allowing lawmakers to approve a record K-12 budget of \$10.2 billion. But the education spending legislation needs a vote from the Senate, which hasn't been able to conduct business since May 3 because of the GOP boycott, and time is running out, with just two weeks left until the legislative session ends.

"Supporting strong schools and improving student outcomes should be enough to make anyone show up for work," Democratic state Rep. Courtney Neron, the House Committee on Education chair, said at a recent rally against the walkout. "From early childhood through higher education, our schools and students need us to respond to serious challenges."

Oregon's Senate Republican office said in an email that "it is critically important that we make sure education is fully funded." Republican minority leader Sen. Tim Knopp also said in an email his caucus will return by June 25 to pass "substantially bipartisan" bills and budgets.

But Democrats say waiting until the session's last day to pass budgets isn't feasible and school districts need a sense of potential funding by early July to begin planning for the next school year.

"There's no way that we can pass all the budget bills on June 25," Democratic state Sen. Michael Dem-

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brow, the Senate Committee on Education chair, said in an email. "Just doing budget bills in both chambers will take several days."

If lawmakers don't return soon, Dembrow said he suspects Democratic Gov. Tina Kotek "will need to convene a special session at some point to do the budgets."

But Dembrow also said he was optimistic that an agreement to end the walkout could be on the horizon. In a weekly newsletter to constituents sent Sunday night, he said that top Democratic and Republican leaders had been involved in "several days of intense negotiations."

"It's too soon for me to say much of anything about these negotiations, but I can say that they are promising at this point. If they work out, we could be back voting on the Senate floor by midweek," Dembrow said.

As in other states nationwide, reading and math scores plummeted in Oregon following the pandemic. School closures hit young children particularly hard, depriving them of critical in-person instruction on how to read. About 60% of third graders in Oregon are not proficient in reading or math, according to the latest state assessment results.

In addition to the \$10.2 billion K-12 budget, which passed the state House with bipartisan support, the Senate Republican walkout also could derail education bills seeking to shore up pandemic learning losses and tackle the education workforce crisis.

One such bill aims to address shortages of teachers and other school staff, particularly in rural areas, and boost pay for special education teachers. Another would invest \$140 million in a new early literacy initiative for children from birth through third grade.

"This should be an emergency, a wake-up call," said Gini Pupo-Walker, an executive director of nonprofit advocacy group The Education Trust. "It's unfortunate that those really important bills that could really reshape the way reading is taught and could really transform student experiences with learning are ... now being held hostage to a totally separate issue."

The early literacy bill in particular received more than 150 written public comments. Among other things, the measure would fund tutoring for struggling readers and direct schools to base literacy instruction on science of reading research, which emphasizes the importance of phonics when teaching children how to read.

Anna Ingram in Eugene was among the parents who testified in favor of the bill. She described feeling angry, anxious and hopeless as she saw her son having trouble learning to read. His first-grade teacher provided a list of 200 common words he should memorize. In third grade, he was encouraged to guess words from their first letter and by looking at pictures, she said.

"Actually sounding out the letters in the word was not recommended," she said in written testimony. "He's learned to read because I shell out thousands of dollars a year to have him tutored with explicit, systematic instruction."

Education spending in coming years will be especially critical as one-time federal pandemic funds expire, said Jon Valant, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C.

"We have probably more need for thoughtful, smart, careful policymaking in education than we have in generations," he said of the pandemic.

"When the resources are potentially there, I think it is extremely important that we use them and use them well," Valant added. "Because the resources are not there forever."

Claire Rush is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

In Miami, Trump's ardent backers are a sign of the city's rightward shift

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Florida's shift to the right is perhaps nowhere more notable than in this vibrant swath of the state's southeast coast where the latest Donald Trump drama is unfolding.

Republicans have made steady inroads in this former Democratic stronghold in recent years, culminating in the GOP carrying Miami-Dade County in last year's midterm elections. The party's broader future could now hinge on what happens next in south Florida — but for a very different reason.

Trump, the former president who is again the front-runner for the 2024 GOP nomination, will make his first appearance in federal court Tuesday in Miami, where he faces 37 felony counts related to charges of illegal retention of classified information.

The charges have propelled Miami into the center of a storyline that, until recently, was largely thought to be unfolding in a grand jury room in Washington. And it has brought to the forefront Trump's rising popularity among Florida's Latinos, some of whom have drawn comparisons between the former president's prosecution and events abroad in which opposition leaders have been arrested or prosecuted in kangaroo courts — despite the U.S. tradition of respect for the rule of law and an independent judiciary.

"These are the sort of things that you see in the Caribbean and Latin America, where you have the party in power persecuting the opposition," said Kevin Marino Cabrero, a Miami-Dade County commissioner who is friends with Trump and served as the Florida state director for his 2020 reelection campaign. "This community, what it sees is injustice being committed."

Miami-Dade is the state's most populous county and home to 1.5 million Latinos of voting age. Democrat Hillary Clinton carried the county over Trump by nearly 30 percentage points in 2016. But Trump made gains in 2020, getting the margin down to 7 percentage points against Democrat Joe Biden.

Last year, the county flipped, with Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, who built his brand as a MAGA politician lifted by Trump from relative obscurity, defeating his Democratic opponent by more than 11 points.

The shift was on display last week when, on the day his indictment was unsealed, Trump was playing golf with Republican U.S. Rep. Carlos Gimenez, whose district covers parts of Miami-Dade. In 2016, the Cuban-born congressman voted for Hillary Clinton, but he backed Trump in 2020, even supporting efforts to reject the results of the election in the hours after the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection.

On Monday, Trump arrived at his golf resort in the Miami suburb of Doral, sometimes called "Doralzuela" because of its large population of Venezuelans. They make up one of the groups where the GOP has seen dramatic gains.

"There is no equal justice for all," said Ernesto Ackerman, a member of the Venezuelan-American Republican Club. "Trump has been persecuted for six years. They are looking for excuses to impeach him because they are terrified of him."

As if to stir up that Miami base, Trump in North Carolina over the weekend reminded voters of his hardline stance against Venezuela's president, Nicolas Maduro, contrasting it with the Biden administration's efforts to ease sanctions on the socialist leader.

"When I left, Venezuela was ready to collapse, we would've taken it over and would've gotten all that oil," Trump said at a campaign rally in Greensboro. "But now we're buying oil from Venezuela, so we're making a dictator very rich."

Trump supporter Hope Quant, a native Nicaraguan, spent three hours waiting outside the Doral golf resort to show her support for the former president when he arrived Monday. She said the prosecution of Trump reminds her of how the leftist Sandinista government in her homeland has gone after political opponents.

"What are they hiding?" It must really be something bad. Hopefully, one day we will find out," said Quant, who cited, in part, Trump's lies that the 2020 election was stolen from him.

Miami is also a hotbed for the far right, raising concerns that protests could get out of hand on Tuesday. At a news conference on the eve of Trump's court appearance, Miami Police Chief Manuel Morales declined to get into the specifics of the security precautions but said he didn't expect any problems.

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On Monday, security guards and federal officers were stationed outside the Wilkie D. Ferguson Federal Courthouse, a sleek, glass high-rise that's lined by palm trees. More than a dozen media tents were set up outside to cover the historic case.

Alex Otaola, a Cuban-born YouTube personality who is running for Miami-Dade County mayor, is rallying his multitude of followers to show up to protest against Trump's prosecution. Otaola is known for organizing pro-Trump caravans in Miami's Little Havana and other neighborhoods.

"Those of us who believe that America's salvation only comes if Donald Trump is elected for a second term, we will gather on Tuesday," Otaola said in a YouTube clip.

Miami has seen its share of high-profile national security cases before – from the 1990s prosecution of Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega to the trial of American al-Qaeda recruit Jose Padilla.

While Trump will make his initial appearance Tuesday in Miami, the case was filed in West Palm Beach, 70 miles to the north. It has been initially assigned there to Judge Aileen Cannon, a Trump appointee who was criticized for rulings in his favor during a dispute last year over a special master assigned to review the seized classified documents.

There's also the question of whether the fast-changing politics of South Florida could provide some tactical advantages to the former president's defense. Palm Beach County also turned red in the recent midterm elections.

Former federal prosecutor David Weinstein said Trump may have been summoned for his first appearance in Miami because of the large media interest and larger federal law enforcement required to keep the proceedings safe.

Although Trump contests the notion that he is enjoying the attention a federal indictment is giving him, he often boasts about the love he receives from his followers.

Before last year's midterm elections, Trump held a rally with U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio in Miami that was attended by thousands of supporters. They held aloft signs reading "Cubans for Trump," "Nicaraguans for Trump" and "Venezuelans for Trump."

After Trump referred to Hispanics as "great people," the crowd cheered and began to chant, "We love you! We love you!"

"Oh, do I love you, too," Trump said. "You have no idea how much."

Associated Press writers Terry Spencer and Gisela Salomon contributed to this report from Miami.

More on Donald Trump-related investigations: <https://apnews.com/hub/donald-trump>

This story has been corrected to show that Trump lost Miami-Dade County to Biden in 2020 by 7 points, not 9 points.

Marlon Wayans cited after luggage dispute with United worker at Denver airport

DENVER (AP) — Comedian and actor Marlon Wayans was cited for disturbing the peace after a dispute he said he had with a United Airlines employee over carry-on luggage at the Denver airport last week, police said Monday.

Wayans said on Instagram that a gate agent told him he had too many bags and, despite consolidating his luggage, he was told he would have to gate check his bag rather than carry it on. Wayans, who said his treatment constituted harassment, said he took his ticket and began walking onto the plane.

In response to questions about what had occurred, United issued a statement that did not refer to Wayans by name.

"In Denver on Friday, a customer who had been told he would have to gate-check his bag instead pushed past a United employee at the jet bridge and attempted to board the aircraft. The customer did not fly on United to his destination," it said.

Wayans said he booked a flight instead on American Airlines to Kansas City, saying he would rather fly coach on another airline than fly first-class on United. He apologized to his fans in Kansas City for missing a performance.

"Sorry KC I'm gonna miss tonight's shows due to a United gate agent who probably hated white chicks," Wayans said on Twitter, referring to his 2004 movie which also starred his brother Shawn Wayans.

A spokesperson for Wayans, Leslie Sloane, said Wayans had a backpack, a small carry-on and garment bag with a suit jacket in it and put his backpack inside the garment bag but was still told he had to check his bag on a flight that was not full.

She said it's important to Wayans that everyone feels safe and respected when flying, no matter what class they are in.

"He felt none of that," she said.

The citation issued to Wayans says he must appear in court in Denver on July 11.

Ukraine claims recapture of seven villages in early stages of counteroffensive

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian troops have retaken seven villages spanning 90 square kilometers (35 square miles) from Russian forces in the past week, the deputy defense minister said Monday as the early stages of Kyiv's counteroffensive notched small successes.

Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Maliar wrote on the Telegram app that the Ukrainian flag was again flying over the village of Storozhiv, in the eastern Donetsk province, and that her troops had also retaken three other nearby small villages and three in neighboring Zaporizhzhia province.

"The battles are tough, but our movement is there, and that is very important," President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address. He added that rainy weather is challenging his troops, and that he's discussed with his military commanders "which points of the front we need to strengthen and what actions we can take to break more Russian positions."

On Sunday, Ukrainian officials said their troops took the Donetsk villages of Blahodatne, Makarivka and Neskuchne — south of the town of Velyka Novosilka. Maliar reported Monday that the Zaporizhzhia province settlements of Lobkove, Levadne and Novodrivka were also now back under Ukrainian control.

Russian officials did not confirm Ukraine's gains, which were impossible to verify and could be reversed in the to-and-fro of war. The gains amounted to only small bits of territory and underscored the difficulty of the battle ahead for Ukrainian forces, who will have to fight meter by meter to regain the roughly one-fifth of their country under Russian occupation.

Recent fighting on the western edge of the 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line has been complicated by a dam breach that sent floodwaters into a part of the Dnieper River separating the two sides.

Western analysts and military officials have cautioned that an effort to rid Ukraine of entrenched and powerfully armed Russian troops could take years, and the success of the Ukrainian counteroffensive is far from certain. French President Emmanuel Macron said in Paris that the Ukrainian counteroffensive began several days ago and "is set to be deployed over several weeks, if not months."

Vladimir Rogov, an official with the Moscow-appointed administration of the Zaporizhzhia region at the western end of the front line, said "heavy battles" were raging in the area Monday involving Russian artillery, mortars and air power.

The villages are part of an area where the Russian front lines jut out into territory held by Ukraine. While just a few kilometers (more than 1 mile) deep, the protrusion has recently become one of several epicenters of intense fighting along the front line that cuts across southern and eastern Ukraine.

Despite their small size, the capture of the villages involved an incursion into the first line of Russian defenses and could allow Ukrainian forces to try a deeper thrust into occupied areas.

Russian forces control far less Ukrainian land than they did before a blistering Ukrainian counteroffensive last year that retook the northern city of Kharkiv and southern city of Kherson, among other places.

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On Saturday, Zelenskyy said "counteroffensive, defensive actions are taking place" without specifying whether it was the all-out counteroffensive that has long been expected after a vast infusion of Western firepower and air defense systems into Ukraine. A day earlier, Russian President Vladimir Putin asserted that the counteroffensive had started and Ukrainian forces were taking "significant losses."

Ukrainian forces have focused on the Zaporizhzhia region and an area near the devastated Donetsk city of Bakhmut, among other locations.

Russian authorities have said their troops are largely holding their ground.

But Semyon Pegov, a prominent Russian military blogger who goes by the nickname WarGonzo, acknowledged Russian troops had withdrawn from Blahodatne, Neskuchne and Makarivka, and said Ukrainian forces were trying to push forward along the banks of the Mokri Yaly River on Monday.

Alexandet Kots, military correspondent for Russian daily Komsomolskaya Pravda, said Ukrainian forces were attempting to advance, despite heavy losses, toward the town of Staromlinovka, which sits on a strategic highway leading to the port city of Mariupol. Russian forces captured the city over a year ago, after Ukrainian forces held out for several months in a grueling and desperate defense.

Separately Monday, the Ukrainian Defense Ministry said least four civilians were killed and 16 others wounded by Russian shelling over the last 24 hours.

In Donetsk, Russian shelling hit nine towns and villages and left one civilian dead and two others wounded. Donetsk Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko posted images of apartment buildings and a cultural center damaged by Russian strikes in the town of Avdiivka.

In Kharkiv, to the north, Russian forces pummeled several settlements with artillery, mortar and rocket fire, wounding at least three people, regional state administration chief Oleh Synhubov wrote on Telegram.

The reported Ukrainian advance came as authorities on both sides of the front line pressed on with rescue and relocation efforts for civilians in the Kherson region driven from their homes by flooding from the breach of the Kakhovka dam last week.

With many homes and shops submerged in polluted river water, the U.N. and other aid groups say access to fresh drinking water is crucial and that water-borne diseases pose a big risk. Thousands of people have been evacuated, though some remain.

Kherson Gov. Oleksandr Prokudin said Monday that water levels have been receding. They now average about 3 meters (nearly 10 feet) higher than normal — down from about 5 meters at the peak level last week. More than 32 towns and villages remain flooded, he said, and Russian forces have continued shelling inundated areas held by Ukraine on the river's western bank.

On Sunday, Prokudin said three people were killed when Moscow's troops opened fire on a boat evacuating people from Russian-occupied areas toward Ukrainian-held ones.

Associated Press writers Illia Novikov in Kyiv, Ukraine, and Yuras Karmanau in Tallinn, Estonia, contributed to this report.

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

Moms for Liberty rises as power player in GOP politics after attacking schools over gender, race

By ALI SWENSON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — To its members, it's a grassroots army of "joyful warriors" who "don't co-parent with the government."

To anti-hate researchers, it's a well-connected extremist group that attacks inclusion in schools.

And to Republicans vying for the presidency, it has become a potential key partner in the fight for the 2024 nomination.

Moms for Liberty didn't exist during the last presidential campaign, but the Florida-based nonprofit that champions "parental rights" in education has rapidly become a major player for 2024, boosted in part by

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GOP operatives, politicians and donors.

The group that has been at the forefront of the conservative movement targeting books that reference race and gender identity and electing right-wing candidates to local school boards nationwide is hosting one of the next major gatherings for Republican presidential primary contenders. At least four are listed as speakers at the Moms for Liberty annual summit in Philadelphia later this month.

Former President Donald Trump, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley and biotech entrepreneur and "anti-woke" activist Vivek Ramaswamy have announced they will speak at the meeting at the end of June.

The group said it is in talks to bring others to the conference, including Republican Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina and Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a fringe Democrat known for pushing anti-vaccine conspiracy theories.

The high interest in the event underscores how fights surrounding gender and race have become core issues for Republican voters. It also spotlights Republicans' eagerness to embrace a group that has drawn backlash for spreading anti-LGBTQ+ ideas and stripping libraries and classrooms of diverse material.

The group was founded in 2021 by Tiffany Justice, Tina Descovich and Bridget Ziegler, all current and former school board members in Florida who were unhappy with student mask and quarantine policies during the pandemic.

In two years, the organization has ballooned to 285 chapters across 44 states, Justice said. The group claims 120,000 active members.

It has expanded its activism in local school districts to target books it says are inappropriate or "anti-American," ban instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity, require teachers to disclose students' pronouns to parents, and remove diversity, equity and inclusion programs from schools.

The group also has sought to elect like-minded candidates to school boards. In 2022, just over half the 500 candidates it endorsed for school boards nationwide won their races, Justice said.

Moms for Liberty pitches itself as a nonpartisan, grassroots effort started by passionate parents who call themselves "joyful warriors." Yet the group's close ties to Republican organizations, donors and politicians raise questions about partisanship and doubts over how grassroots it really is.

Co-founder Ziegler, who stepped down from the board in late 2021 but remains supportive of the group, is married to the chairman of the Florida Republican Party. Still a school board member in Sarasota County, she also is a director at the Leadership Institute, a conservative organization that regularly trains Moms for Liberty members.

Marie Rogerson, who took Ziegler's place on the Moms for Liberty board, is an experienced political strategist who had previously managed the 2018 campaign of Florida state Rep. Randy Fine, a Republican.

The group also has quickly gained a close ally in DeSantis. In 2021, he signed Florida's "Parents Bill of Rights," which identified parents' rights to direct their kids' education and health care and was used to fight local student mask mandates. In 2022, he signed a law barring instruction about sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through the third grade, a ban opponents had labeled the "Don't Say Gay" bill and which has since been extended through 12th grade. Moms for Liberty had loudly advocated both pieces of legislation.

Ziegler appeared behind DeSantis in photographs of the latter bill's signing ceremony. When the group held its inaugural summit in Tampa last year, it hosted speeches by DeSantis and his wife, Casey, presenting the governor with a "liberty sword."

And though the group is a 501(c)4 nonprofit that doesn't have to disclose its donors, there are other glimpses of how powerful Republicans have helped fuel its rise.

Its summit sponsors, which paid tens of thousands of dollars for those slots, include the Leadership Institute, the conservative Heritage Foundation and Patriot Mobile, a far-right Christian cellphone company whose PAC has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in an effort to take over Texas school boards.

Maurice Cunningham, a former political science professor at the University of Massachusetts-Boston who has tracked Moms for Liberty's growth and relationships, said its ability to draw so many top Republican candidates to its second annual summit is a testament to its establishment support.

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"Yes, there are certainly moms that live in their communities and so forth who are active," Cunningham said. "But this is a top down, centrally controlled operation with big-money people at the top and political professionals working for them."

Justice said the group's work with conservative organizations and DeSantis shows they take interest in the group's cause, but doesn't mean it isn't grassroots.

Even as Moms for Liberty has aligned with establishment Republicans, researchers say its activism is part of a new wave of far-right anti-student inclusion efforts around the country.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks hate and extremism around the country, designated Moms for Liberty as an "anti-government extremist" group in its annual report released last week, along with 11 other groups it said use parents' rights as a vehicle to attack public education and make schools less welcoming for minority and LGBTQ+ students.

The label comes after some of the group's leaders and chapter chairs have been accused of harassing community members and amplifying false claims related to gender controversies.

Justice said calling Moms for Liberty's activities extremist is "alarming" and that the group's efforts to fund and endorse school board races show it is not anti-government.

She said the group removes chapter chairs who break its code of conduct and that it has members and leaders who are gay, including one member of its national leadership team.

A growing coalition of local organizations that promote inclusivity in education has begun to mobilize against Moms for Liberty and are petitioning Marriott to stop the upcoming conference. Defense of Democracy, a New York organization founded in direct opposition to Moms for Liberty, plans to bring members to Philadelphia to protest in person.

"They're so loud and so aggressive that people are kind of scared into silence," Defense of Democracy founder Karen Svoboda said of Moms for Liberty. "You know, if you see bigotry and homophobia, there is a civic responsibility to speak out against it."

Moms for Liberty, in turn, said it will increase security for its meeting. Marriott hasn't responded to the petition, and the Southern Poverty Law Center's "extremist" designation hasn't deterred any Republican candidate who plans to speak.

Haley responded by tweeting, "If @Moms4Liberty is a 'hate group,' add me to the list." Ramaswamy went onstage for a Thursday town hall with Justice and tweeted that SPLC stands for "Selling Political Lies to Corporations."

Those responses are unsurprising to Cunningham, who said in today's climate, the "extremist" label is "almost a badge of honor" within the GOP.

Moms for Liberty, for its part, is fundraising off it. After the SPLC report was public, Justice said the group quickly raised \$45,000, an amount a larger donor has agreed to match.

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The Great Grift: How billions in COVID-19 relief aid was stolen or wasted

By RICHARD LARDNER, JENNIFER McDERMOTT and AARON KESSLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Much of the theft was brazen, even simple.

Fraudsters used the Social Security numbers of dead people and federal prisoners to get unemployment checks. Cheaters collected those benefits in multiple states. And federal loan applicants weren't cross-checked against a Treasury Department database that would have raised red flags about sketchy borrowers.

Criminals and gangs grabbed the money. But so did a U.S. soldier in Georgia, the pastors of a defunct church in Texas, a former state lawmaker in Missouri and a roofing contractor in Montana.

All of it led to the greatest grift in U.S. history, with thieves plundering billions of dollars in federal COVID-19

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relief aid intended to combat the worst pandemic in a century and to stabilize an economy in free fall.

An Associated Press analysis found that fraudsters potentially stole more than \$280 billion in COVID-19 relief funding; another \$123 billion was wasted or misspent. Combined, the loss represents 10% of the \$4.2 trillion the U.S. government has so far disbursed in COVID relief aid.

That number is certain to grow as investigators dig deeper into thousands of potential schemes.

How could so much be stolen? Investigators and outside experts say the government, in seeking to quickly spend trillions in relief aid, conducted too little oversight during the pandemic's early stages and instituted too few restrictions on applicants. In short, they say, the grift was just way too easy.

"Here was this sort of endless pot of money that anyone could access," said Dan Fruchter, chief of the fraud and white-collar crime unit at the U.S. Attorney's office in the Eastern District of Washington. "Folks kind of fooled themselves into thinking that it was a socially acceptable thing to do, even though it wasn't legal."

The U.S. government has charged more than 2,230 defendants with pandemic-related fraud crimes and is conducting thousands of investigations.

Most of the looted money was swiped from three large pandemic-relief initiatives launched during the Trump administration and inherited by President Joe Biden. Those programs were designed to help small businesses and unemployed workers survive the economic upheaval caused by the pandemic.

The pilfering was wide but not always as deep as the eye-catching headlines about cases involving many millions of dollars. But all of the theft, big and small, illustrates an epidemic of scams and swindles at a time America was grappling with overrun hospitals, school closures and shuttered businesses. Since the pandemic began in early 2020, more than 1.13 million people in the U.S. have died from COVID-19, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Michael Horowitz, the U.S. Justice Department inspector general who chairs the federal Pandemic Response Accountability Committee, told Congress the fraud is "clearly in the tens of billions of dollars" and may eventually exceed \$100 billion.

Horowitz told the AP he was sticking with that estimate, but won't be certain about the number until he gets more solid data.

"I'm hesitant to get too far out on how much it is," he said. "But clearly it's substantial and the final accounting is still at least a couple of years away."

Mike Galdo, the U.S. Justice Department's acting director for COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement, said, "It is an unprecedented amount of fraud."

Before leaving office, former President Donald Trump approved emergency aid measures totaling \$3.2 trillion, according to figures from the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee. Biden's 2021 American Rescue Plan authorized the spending of another \$1.9 trillion. About a fifth of the \$5.2 trillion has yet to be paid out, according to the committee's most recent accounting.

Never has so much federal emergency aid been injected into the U.S. economy so quickly. "The largest rescue package in American history," U.S. Comptroller General Gene Dodaro told Congress.

The enormous scale of that package has obscured multibillion-dollar mistakes.

An \$837 billion IRS program, for example, succeeded 99% of the time in getting economic stimulus checks to the proper taxpayers, according to the tax agency. Nevertheless, that 1% failure rate translated into nearly \$8 billion going to "ineligible individuals," a Treasury Department inspector general told AP.

An IRS spokesman said the agency does not agree with all the figures cited by the watchdog and noted that, even if correct, the loss represented a tiny fraction of the program's budget.

The health crisis thrust the Small Business Administration, an agency that typically gets little attention, into an unprecedented role. In the seven decades before the pandemic struck, for example, the SBA had doled out \$67 billion in disaster loans.

When the pandemic struck, the agency was assigned to manage two massive relief efforts — the COVID-19 Economic Injury Disaster Loan and Paycheck Protection programs, which would swell to more than a trillion dollars. SBA's workforce had to get money out the door, fast, to help struggling businesses and their employees. COVID-19 pushed SBA's pace from a walk to an Olympic sprint. Between March 2020

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and the end of July 2020, the agency granted 3.2 million COVID-19 economic injury disaster loans totaling \$169 billion, according to an SBA inspector general's report, while at the same time implementing the huge new Paycheck Protection Program.

In the haste, guardrails to protect federal money were dropped. Prospective borrowers were allowed to "self-certify" that their loan applications were true. The CARES Act also barred SBA from looking at tax return transcripts that could have weeded out shady or undeserving applicants, a decision eventually reversed at the end of 2020.

"If you open up the bank window and say, give me your application and just promise me you really are who you say you are, you attract a lot of fraudsters and that's what happened here," Horowitz said.

The SBA inspector general's office has estimated fraud in the COVID-19 economic injury disaster loan program at \$86 billion and the Paycheck Protection program at \$20 billion. The watchdog is expected in coming weeks to release revised loss figures that are likely to be much higher.

In an interview, SBA Inspector General Hannibal "Mike" Ware declined to say what the new fraud estimate for both programs will be.

"It will be a figure that is fair, that is 1,000% defensible by my office, fully backed by our significant criminal investigative activity that is taking place in this space," Ware said.

Ware and his staff are overwhelmed with pandemic-related audits and investigations. The office has a backlog of more than 80,000 actionable leads, close to a 100 years' worth of work.

"Death by a thousand cuts might be death by 80,000 cuts for them," Horowitz said of Ware's workload. "It's just the magnitude of it, the enormity of it."

A 2022 study from the University of Texas at Austin found almost five times as many suspicious Paycheck Protection loans as the \$20 billion SBA's inspector general has reported so far. The research, led by finance professor John Griffin, found as much as \$117 billion in questionable and possibly fraudulent loans, citing indicators such as non-registered businesses and multiple loans to the same address.

Horowitz, the pandemic watchdog chairman, criticized the government's failure early on to use the "Do Not Pay" Treasury Department database, designed to keep government money from going to debarred contractors, fugitives, felons or people convicted of tax fraud. Those reviews, he said, could have been done quickly.

"It's a false narrative that has been set out, that there are only two choices," Horowitz said. "One choice is, get the money out right away. And that the only other choice was to spend weeks and months trying to figure out who was entitled to it."

In less than a few days, a week at most, Horowitz said, SBA might have discovered thousands of ineligible applicants.

"24 hours? 48 hours? Would that really have upended the program?" Horowitz said. "I don't think it would have. And it was data sitting there. It didn't get checked."

The Biden administration put in place stricter rules to stem pandemic fraud, including use of the "Do Not Pay" database. Biden also recently proposed a \$1.6 billion plan to boost law enforcement efforts to go after pandemic relief fraudsters.

"I think the bottom line is regardless of what the number is, it emanates overwhelmingly from three programs that were designed and originated in 2020 with too many large holes that opened the door to criminal fraud," Gene Sperling, the White House American Rescue Plan coordinator, said in an interview.

"We came into office when the largest amounts of fraud were already out of the barn," Sperling added.

In a statement, an SBA spokesperson declined to say whether the agency agrees with the figures issued by Ware's office, saying the federal government has not developed an accepted system for assessing fraud in government programs. Previous analyses have pointed to "potential fraud" or "fraud indicators" in a manner that conveys those numbers as a true fraud estimate when they are not, according to the statement.

Han Nguyen, a spokesman for the SBA, said Monday that "the vast majority of the likely fraud originated in the first nine months of the pandemic programs, under the Trump administration." For the COVID-19 economic injury disaster loan program, Nguyen said, SBA's "working estimate" found \$28 billion in likely

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fraud.

The coronavirus pandemic plunged the U.S. economy into a short but devastating recession. Jobless rates soared into double digits and Washington sent hundreds of billions of dollars to states to help the suddenly unemployed.

For crooks, it was like tossing chum into the sea to lure fish. Many of these state unemployment agencies used antiquated computer systems or had too few staff to stop bogus claims from being paid.

"Yes, the states were overwhelmed in terms of demand," said Brent Parton, acting assistant secretary of the U.S. Labor Department's Employment and Training Administration. "We had not seen a spike like this ever in a global event like a pandemic. The systems were underfunded. They were not resilient. And I would say, more importantly, were vulnerable to sophisticated attacks by fraudsters."

Fraud in pandemic unemployment assistance programs stands at \$76 billion, according to congressional testimony from Labor Department Inspector General Larry Turner. That's a conservative estimate. Another \$115 billion mistakenly went to people who should not have received the benefits, according to his testimony.

Turner declined AP's request for an interview.

Turner's task in identifying all of the pandemic unemployment insurance fraud has been complicated by a lack of cooperation from the federal Bureau of Prisons, according to a September "alert memo" issued by his office. Scam artists used Social Security numbers of federal prisoners to steal millions of dollars in benefits.

His office still doesn't know exactly how much was swiped that way. The prison bureau had declined to provide current data about federal prisoners. The AP reached out to the bureau several times for comment, starting June 2. Bureau spokesperson Emery Nelson said on Monday the agency had provided in February and March "all the necessary data" to the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee. Turner is a member of the committee.

Ohio State Auditor Keith Faber saw trouble coming when safeguards to ensure the unemployment aid only went to people who legitimately qualified were lowered, making conditions ripe for fraud and waste. The state's unemployment agency "took controls down because on the one hand, they literally were drinking from a firehose," Faber said. "They had a year's worth of claims in a couple of weeks. The second part of the problem was the (federal government) directed them to get the money out the door as quickly as possible and worry less about security. They took that to heart. I think that was a mistake."

Ohio's Department of Job and Family Services reported in February \$1 billion in fraudulent pandemic unemployment claims and another \$4.8 billion in overpayments.

The ubiquitous masks that became a symbol of the COVID-19 pandemic are seen on fewer and fewer faces. Hospitalizations for the virus have steadily declined, according to CDC data, and Biden in April ended the national emergency to respond to the pandemic.

But on politically divided Capitol Hill, lawmakers have not put the pandemic behind them and are engaged in a fierce debate over the success of the relief spending and who's to blame for the theft.

Too much government money, Republicans argue, breeds fraud, waste and inflation. Democrats have countered that all the financial muscle from Washington saved lives, businesses and jobs.

Republicans and Democrats did, however, find common ground last year on bills to give the federal government more time to catch fraudsters. Biden in August signed legislation to increase the statute of limitations from five to 10 years on crimes involving the two major programs managed by the SBA.

The extra time will help federal prosecutors untangle pandemic fraud cases, which often involve identity theft and crooks overseas. But there's no guarantee they'll catch everyone who jumped at the chance for an easy payday. They're busy, too, with crimes unrelated to pandemic relief funds.

"Do we have enough cases and leads that we could be doing them in 2030? We absolutely could," said Fruchter, the federal prosecutor in the Eastern District of Washington. "But my experience tells me that likely there will be other priorities that will come up and will need to be addressed. And unfortunately, in our office, we don't have a dedicated pandemic fraud unit."

Congress has not yet passed a measure that would give prosecutors the additional five years to go after

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unemployment fraudsters. That worries Turner, the Labor Department watchdog. Without the extension, he told Congress in a late May report, people who stole the benefits may escape justice.

Sperling, the White House official, said any future crisis that requires government intervention doesn't have to be a choice between helping people in need and stopping fraudsters.

"The prevention strategy going forward is that in a crisis, you can focus on fast delivery to people in desperate situations without feeling that you can only get that speed by taking down commonsense anti-fraud guardrails," he said.

McDermott reported from Providence, Rhode Island.

Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's tarnished 3-time premier, dies at 86

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Silvio Berlusconi cast a spell over Italy — and nearly led it to financial ruin.

Many Italians admired the media mogul for his wealth, his charm and his brash, boastful style, and they kept returning him to power, making him the country's longest-serving premier.

Nothing seemed to shake the one-time cruise ship crooner — not his corruption trials or diplomatic gaffes, not accusations that he was wrecking the country, not even the lurid scandals stemming from sex-fueled "bunga bunga" parties with young women at his villas that turned him into a global joke.

Berlusconi — who died Monday at the age of 86 — had a hold on Italian politics that he summed up in 2009: "The majority of Italians in their hearts would like to be like me."

That affection faded in 2011 when Europe's debt crisis turned Italy's economy into a shambles, and many blamed Berlusconi, forcing him from office. Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" rose from the crowd outside the government palazzo where he handed in his resignation to end his third and final term as premier, a leadership tenure spaced out over 17 years.

His Forza Italia political party lost much of its support in recent years but was a coalition partner with current Premier Giorgia Meloni, a far-right leader who came to power in 2022. Berlusconi held no position in the government, and his death is unlikely to have any repercussions on the stability of the government; allies have already declared their intention to keep the party going.

Berlusconi was admitted to the San Raffaele Hospital in Milan on Friday, his second recent hospitalization for treatment of chronic leukemia. A state funeral will be held Wednesday in the city's Duomo cathedral, according to the Milan Archdiocese.

Once Italy's richest man, Berlusconi used his television networks and other media holdings to launch his long political career, inspiring both loyalty and loathing.

Supporters saw him as a capable and charismatic statesman who sought to elevate Italy on the world stage. To critics, he was a populist who threatened to undermine democracy by wielding political power as a tool to enrich himself and his businesses.

But there was no arguing he radically changed Italian politics when he entered the public arena in the 1990s, introducing U.S.-inspired campaigns.

For a while, Berlusconi seemed untouchable.

Criminal cases against him were launched but ended in dismissals when statutes of limitations ran out in Italy's slow-moving justice system, or he was victorious on appeal. Investigations targeted the tycoon's steamy parties involving young women and minors, or his businesses, which included the soccer team AC Milan, the country's three biggest private TV networks, magazines and a daily newspaper, and advertising and film companies.

Ultimately, only one charge would stick — tax fraud, stemming from a film rights deal.

When it was upheld by Italy's top criminal court in 2013, he was stripped of his Senate seat, and banned from public office for several years in keeping with anti-corruption laws. Even then, he bounced back to become a lawmaker in the European Parliament at age 82 and returned to Italy's Senate in 2022.

He stayed at the helm of Forza Italia, the center-right party he created when he entered politics and

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named for a soccer cheer, "Let's go, Italy." With no groomed successor in sight, voters started to desert it.

Berlusconi's party was eclipsed as the dominant force on Italy's political right — first by the League, led by anti-migrant populist Matteo Salvini, then by Meloni's Brothers of Italy party, with its roots in neo-fascism. Following elections in 2022, Meloni formed a government with their help.

Berlusconi lost his standing as Italy's richest man, although his sprawling media holdings and luxury real estate still left him a billionaire several times over.

In 2013, guests at one of his parties included an underage Moroccan dancer whom prosecutors alleged had sex with Berlusconi in exchange for cash and jewelry. After a trial spiced by lurid details, a Milan court initially convicted Berlusconi of paying for sex with a minor and using his office to try to cover it up. Both denied having sex with each other, and he was eventually acquitted.

The Catholic Church, at times sympathetic to his conservative politics, was scandalized by his antics, and his wife of nearly 20 years divorced him, but Berlusconi was unapologetic, declaring: "I'm no saint."

Pope Francis sent a telegram of condolence to his family.

His second term, from 2001-06, was perhaps his golden era, when he became Italy's longest-serving head of government and boosted its global profile through his friendship with U.S. President George W. Bush. Bucking widespread sentiment at home and in Europe, Berlusconi backed the U.S.-led war in Iraq.

As a businessman who knew the power of images, he used U.S.-style party conventions and slick advertising that broke with the gray world of Italian politics, in which voters essentially chose parties and not candidates. His rivals had to adapt.

Berlusconi saw himself as Italy's savior from what he described as the Communist menace — years after the Berlin Wall fell. From the start of his political career in 1994, he portrayed himself as the target of a judiciary he described as filled with leftist sympathizers, and he always proclaimed his innocence.

When the anti-establishment 5-Star Movement gained strength, Berlusconi branded it a menace worse than Communism.

His close friendship with longtime Socialist leader and former Premier Bettino Craxi was widely credited for helping him become a media baron. Still, Berlusconi billed himself as a self-made man, saying, "My formula for success is to be found in four words: work, work and work."

He boasted of his libido and entertained friends and world leaders at his villas. In one party, newspapers reported the women were dressed as "little Santas." At another, photos showed topless women and a naked man lounging poolside.

"I love life! I love women!" an unrepentant Berlusconi said in 2010.

He occasionally selected TV starlets for posts in his Forza Italia party. "If I weren't married, I would marry you immediately," Berlusconi reportedly said in 2007 to Mara Carfagna, who later became a Cabinet minister. Berlusconi's then-wife publicly demanded an apology.

Berlusconi was nicknamed "Papi" — or "Daddy" — by an aspiring model whose 18th birthday bash he attended, also to his wife's irritation. Later, self-described escort Patrizia D'Addario said she spent the night with him on the evening that Barack Obama was elected U.S. president in 2008.

He loved to compose and sing Neapolitan songs, harking back to his days as a cruise ship entertainer. Like millions of Italians, he had a passion for soccer, and often was in the stands at AC Milan.

He delighted in flouting political etiquette. He sported a bandanna when hosting British Prime Minister Tony Blair at his estate on the Emerald Coast of Sardinia, and it was later revealed he was concealing hair transplants. He posed for photos at international summits while making an Italian gesture — which can be offensive or superstitious, depending on circumstances — in which the index and pinkie fingers are extended like horns.

He stirred anger after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States by claiming that Western civilization was superior to Islam.

When criticized in 2003 at the European Parliament by a German lawmaker, Berlusconi likened his adversary to a concentration camp guard. Years later, he drew outrage when he compared his family's legal woes to what Jews must have felt in Nazi Germany.

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Berlusconi was born in Milan on Sept. 29, 1936, the son of a middle-class banker. He earned a law degree, writing his thesis on advertising. He started a construction company at 25 and built apartment complexes for middle-class families on Milan's outskirts, part of a postwar boom.

But his astronomical wealth came from the media. In the late 1970s and 1980s, he circumvented Italy's state TV monopoly RAI by creating a de facto network in which local stations all showed the same programming. RAI and his Mediaset television network accounted for about 90% of the national market in 2006.

When the "Clean Hands" corruption scandals of the 1990s decimated the political establishment that had dominated postwar Italy, Berlusconi filled the void, founding Forza Italia in 1994.

His first government, also in 1994, collapsed after eight months when a volatile ally who led an anti-immigrant party yanked support. But aided by an aggressive campaign, including a mass mailing of glossy magazines recounting his success story, Berlusconi swept to victory in 2001.

Shuffling his Cabinet occasionally, he stayed in power for five years, setting a record for government longevity in Italy. But it wasn't easy.

A Group of Eight summit he hosted in Genoa in 2001 was marred by violent anti-globalization demonstrations and the death of a protester shot by a police officer. Berlusconi faced fierce domestic opposition and alienated some allies by sending 3,000 troops to Iraq after the ouster of Saddam Hussein in 2003. For a time, Italy was the third-largest contingent in the U.S.-led coalition.

At home, he constantly faced accusations of sponsoring laws aimed at protecting himself or his businesses, but he insisted he always acted in the interest of all Italians. Legislation passed when he was premier allowing officeholders to own media businesses but not run them was deemed by his critics to be tailor made for Berlusconi.

An admirer of U.S. President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Berlusconi passed reforms that partially liberalized the labor and pension systems, among Europe's most inflexible. He also was chummy with Putin, who stayed at his Sardinian estate, and he visited the Russian leader, notably going to Crimea after Moscow illegally annexed the peninsula in 2014.

In 2006, as Italy was ridiculed as "the sick man of Europe," with its economy mired in zero growth and its budget deficit rising, Berlusconi narrowly lost the general election to center-left leader Romano Prodi, who had been president of the European Union Commission.

In 2008, he bounced back for what would be his final term as premier. It ended abruptly in 2011, when financial markets lost faith in his ability to keep Italy from succumbing to the eurozone's sovereign debt crisis. To the relief of economic powerhouse Germany, Berlusconi reluctantly stepped down.

Health concerns dogged him over the years. He suffered from heart ailments, prostate cancer and was hospitalized for COVID-19 in 2020.

During a political rally in 2009, a man threw a souvenir statuette of Milan's cathedral at Berlusconi, fracturing his nose, cracking two teeth and cutting his lip.

Berlusconi was first married in 1965 to Carla Dall'Oglio, and their two children, Marina and Piersilvio, were groomed to hold top positions in his business empire. He married his second wife, Veronica Lario, in 1990, and they had three children, Barbara, Eleonora and Luigi.

They also divorced, and at the time of his death he was in a relationship with Marta Fascina, 33, who was elected to parliament last year for Berlusconi's party.

Retired Associated Press Rome bureau chief Victor L. Simpson contributed.

Jeffrey Epstein victims settle sex trafficking lawsuit against JPMorgan for \$290 million

By KEN SWEET and MICHELLE CHAPMAN AP Business Writers

JPMorgan Chase announced a tentative \$290 million settlement Monday with the victims of Jeffrey Epstein who had accused the bank of being the financial conduit that allowed the financier to continue

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operating a sex trafficking operation.

Epstein was arrested in 2019 on federal charges accusing him of paying underage girls for massages and then molesting them at his homes in Florida and New York. He was found dead in jail in August of that year, at age 66. A medical examiner ruled his death a suicide.

The lawsuit filed in Manhattan federal court in November sought to hold JPMorgan financially liable for Epstein's decades-long abuse of teenage girls and young women. A related lawsuit has been filed in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The proposed settlement comes roughly two weeks after JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon testified in a deposition for the case, where he denied knowing about Epstein and his crimes until the financier was arrested in 2019, according to a transcript of the videotaped deposition released last month.

"We all now understand that Epstein's behavior was monstrous, and we believe this settlement is in the best interest of all parties, especially the survivors, who suffered unimaginable abuse at the hands of this man," JPMorgan Chase said in a written statement early Monday.

The proposed settlement, which must still be approved by the judge in the case, totals \$290 million, according to lead plaintiff attorney David Boies.

According to the lawsuits, JPMorgan provided Epstein loans and regularly allowed him to withdraw large sums of cash from 1998 through August 2013 even though it was aware of his participation in sex trafficking. The anonymous victim in the suit, referred to as Jane Doe, said she was sexually abused by Epstein from 2006 and 2013.

Also on Monday, a judge ruled in favor of making Doe's lawsuit into a class-action lawsuit for all victims of Epstein's sex crimes.

"Money, which for far too long flowed with impunity between Jeffrey Epstein's global sex trafficking enterprise and Wall Street's leading banks, is decisively being used for good," said Sigrid McCawley, an attorney for Jane Doe and other Epstein victims, in a prepared statement. "The settlements signal that financial institutions have an important role to play in spotting and shutting down sex trafficking."

The bank continued to count Epstein as a client despite the fact that he was arrested and pled guilty in 2008 to sex crimes in Florida.

"Any association with him was a mistake and we regret it," the bank said in a prepared statement. "We would never have continued to do business with him if we believed he was using our bank in any way to help commit heinous crimes."

Both lawsuits were filed after New York state in November enacted a temporary law letting adult victims of sexual abuse to sue others for the abuse they suffered, even if the abuse occurred long ago.

Lawsuits are still pending between the U.S. Virgin Islands and JPMorgan Chase, and the bank is still pursuing its lawsuit against JPMorgan former executive Jes Staley.

The bank has denied the allegations and sued Staley, saying he hid Epstein's crimes to keep him as a client. Staley left JPMorgan in 2013 to later become CEO of the British bank Barclays. Staley stepped down from that role in 2021 due to his prior relationship with Epstein.

AP Writer Michael Hill contributed to this report from Albany. AP Writer Larry Neumeister contributed from New York.

What to stream this week: 'Extraction 2,' Stan Lee doc, 'Star Trek' and 'The Wonder Years'

By The Associated Press undefined

Albums from John Mellencamp and Killer Mike, as well as the return of Chris Hemsworth's gun-for-hire anti-hero in Netflix's "Extraction 2" are among the new television, movies, music and games headed to a device near you.

Among the offerings worth your time as selected by The Associated Press' entertainment journalists are

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season two of "Star Trek: Strange New Worlds," and new "The Wonder Years," about a middle-class Black family in Montgomery, Alabama, in the 1960s, returns for its second season.

NEW MOVIES TO STREAM

— Clinical death is just a minor obstacle for Chris Hemsworth's action hero Tyler Rake, who audiences can see again in "Extraction 2," debuting on Netflix on Friday. In this outing, he's assigned the dangerous task of rescuing a Georgian gangster's family from a prison. Director Sam Hargrave promised twice as much action and more emotion in this outing, produced again by the Russo brothers. And Hemsworth has said that they opted for practical stunts and set pieces over green-screen fakery, which could be a bit frightening filming a sequence atop a train going 40 miles per hour through the snowy Czech Republic while a helicopter hovered 23 feet in front of him flying backwards.

— "Chevalier," a lush, dramatic biopic of an accomplished Black man in Marie Antoinette's France who was all but erased, came and went in theaters without a lot of fanfare. But it's now headed to Hulu starting on Friday where audiences can learn about Joseph Bologne, the Chevalier de Saint-Georges, the son of a wealthy French plantation owner and an enslaved Senegalese teenager who rose through the ranks of French society due in part to his extraordinary musical talents as a composer and a violinist. Kelvin Harrison Jr. plays the title role in the Stephen Williams-directed film, which I wrote in a review "may be more fiction than history, but it's worthwhile with effective acting, tension (helped by Kris Bowers' score) and a decadently beautiful production."

— And on Disney+, a new original documentary about the late Stan Lee premieres on Friday. "Stan Lee," directed by David Gelb, promises to explore Lee's life and cultural impact. Lee, who died in 2018 at age 95, co-created an army of comic book characters including Spider-Man, the X-Men, Iron Man, the Incredible Hulk, the Fantastic Four, Ant-Man and many more who have in the past 15 years become household names thanks to the popularity of Marvel films, many of which feature fun Stan Lee cameos.

— AP Film Writer Lindsey Bahr

NEW MUSIC TO STREAM

— John Mellencamp's output is not slowing down. A year after releasing the album "Strictly a One-Eyed Jack," the heartland rocker is back with "Orpheus Descending." Many of the 11 tracks — including the anti-gun violence anthem "Hey God" and a song about the homeless crisis "The Eyes of Portland" — focus on social issues. "All of these homeless/Where do they come from?/In this land of plenty/Where nothing gets done," sings Mellencamp, 71, on the latter track.

— Father's Day may be around the corner, but Killer Mike is honoring his mother on his new solo album, "Michael." The single "Motherless" has Mike rapping about his late mother, featuring R&B singer Eryn Allen Kane: "I be missin' huggin' you, I miss kissin' you/I miss all the jewels and I miss all your wisdom, too." Another single is the Run the Jewels-like "Don't Let the Devil," in which he shows off his delinquent side, with the lyrics "Catch me after Sunday service disturbin' the church's workers."

— Loss is also in the DNA of the new album by multi-instrumentalist, singer-songwriter Meshell Ndegeocello. "The Omnichord Real Book" is an album made after she lost her parents. "This album is about the way we see old things in new ways," Ndegeocello says. First single "Clear Water" is a soul-searching Sly Stone-inspired song featuring Jeff Parker's bluesy guitar lines and vocals by Justin Hicks. The album was produced by Josh Johnson and also features Jason Moran, Ambrose Akinmusire, Joel Ross, Jeff Parker, Brandee Younger, Julius Rodriguez, Mark Guiliana, Cory Henry, Joan As Police Woman and Thandiswa.

— Only one band can make fonts sound cool and that's Queens of the Stone Age, who are out Friday, with the 10-track studio album "In Times New Roman..." On the spiky, off-kilter "Emotional Sickness," frontman Josh Homme sings "Use once and destroy/Single servings of pain/A dose of emotion sickness I just can't shake." But on "Carnavoyeur," he has a smooth, distant cool: "Flying high, realize/There are no more mountains to climb."

— AP Entertainment Writer Mark Kennedy

NEW SERIES TO STREAM

— The new "The Wonder Years" about a middle-class Black family in Montgomery, Alabama, in the

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1960s, returns for its second season on Wednesday on ABC. The show is told from the point of view of 12-year-old Dean Williams (played by Elisha "EJ" Williams) with Don Cheadle narrating as the adult version of Dean. It's already been announced that season two will feature several guest stars including Donald Faison, Bradley Whitford, Phoebe Robinson, Malcolm-Jamal Warner and Patti LaBelle.

— Season two of "Star Trek: Strange New Worlds" arrives on Paramount+ on Thursday. If you haven't watched yet, the show takes place about a decade before "Star Trek: The Original Series," so it features younger versions of some of the "Star Trek" characters viewers know and love. "Strange New Worlds" stars Anson Mount as Captain Christopher Pike when he led the USS Enterprise, with a crew that includes Ethan Peck as Spock, Rebecca Romijn as Una Chin-Riley (otherwise known as Number One), and Celia Rose Gooding as Nyota Uhura. The season one finale introduced Paul Wesley in the role of James T. Kirk and the actor reprises the role in this new season.

— Caitriona Balfe and Sam Heughan are star-crossed lovers in the time-traveling romance drama, "Outlander." It begins with a British nurse named Claire visiting Scotland after World War II who accidentally falls back in time to the 18th century when Scotland and England are at war. Claire has left her husband behind in the future, and feels like she will never get back there, so she begrudgingly marries a Highland warrior named Jamie. The two end up falling in love and embark on an epic romance. Season seven, premiering Friday on Starz, take place during the American Revolution. The story is based on the book series by Diana Gabaldon.

— "Gold Rush" fan favorite Todd Hoffman is trying to turn his fortune around by rehabilitating a rundown mine in Alaska in Discovery Channel's "Hoffman Family Gold." In season two, Todd has a small crew to help him including his father, Jack, and son, Hunter, but even with the familial assist, it's a major task and success is not guaranteed. On top of the pressure, Todd and Hunter are very competitive and no one pushes your buttons quite like family. "Hoffman Family Gold" season two debuts Friday.

— Alicia Rancilio

NEW VIDEO GAMES TO PLAY

— Formula One racing has been booming in America lately, thanks in large part to the popular Netflix documentary series "Drive to Survive." It's gotten so big that EA Sports, which bailed out early in the century, got back on the track in 2021. The publisher is billing F1 23 as "a fresh start," though longtime developer Codemasters is still behind the wheel. It includes 20 drivers and 10 teams from the real-life circuit, as well as a fictional story mode and a career-building "F1 World" series of races. There are also new courses in Las Vegas and Qatar, and a 35% race distance option that offers a quick challenge if you're short on time. Get your motor running Friday on PlayStation 5/4, Xbox X/S/One and PC.

— Lou Kesten

Catch up on AP's entertainment coverage here: <https://apnews.com/apf-entertainment>.

US decides to rejoin UNESCO and pay back dues, to counter Chinese influence

By ANGELA CHARLTON and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — UNESCO announced Monday that the United States plans to rejoin the U.N. cultural and scientific agency — and pay more than \$600 million in back dues — after a decade-long dispute sparked by the organization's move to include Palestine as a member.

U.S. officials say the decision to return was motivated by concern that China is filling the gap left by the U.S. in UNESCO policymaking, notably in setting standards for artificial intelligence and technology education around the world.

The move will face a vote by UNESCO's member states in the coming weeks. But approval seems a formality after the resounding applause that greeted the announcement in UNESCO's Paris headquarters Monday. Not a single country raised an objection to the return of a country that was once the agency's

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single biggest funder.

The U.S. and Israel stopped financing UNESCO after it voted to include Palestine as a member state in 2011. The Trump administration decided in 2017 to withdraw from the agency altogether the following year, citing long-running anti-Israel bias and management problems.

UNESCO's director general, Audrey Azoulay, has worked to address those concerns since her election in 2017, and that appears to have paid off.

"It's a historic moment for UNESCO," she said Monday. "It's also an important day for multilateralism."

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Richard Verma submitted a letter last week to Azoulay formalizing the plan to rejoin. He noted progress in depoliticizing debate about the Middle East and reforming the agency's management, according to the hand-delivered letter, obtained by AP.

The decision is a big boost to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, known for its World Heritage program as well as projects to fight climate change and teach girls to read.

While Palestinian membership in UNESCO was the trigger for the U.S. fallout with the agency, its return is more about China's growing influence.

Undersecretary of State for Management John Bass said in March that the U.S. absence from UNESCO had strengthened China, and "undercuts our ability to be as effective in promoting our vision of a free world."

He said UNESCO was key in setting and shaping standards for technology and science teaching around the world, "so if we're really serious about the digital-age competition with China ... we can't afford to be absent any longer."

The U.S. decision doesn't address the status of Palestine. While it's a member of UNESCO, on the ground, the Palestinians are further away from independence than ever. There have not been serious peace talks in over a decade, and Israel's new government is filled with hardliners who oppose Palestinian independence.

The Palestinian ambassador to UNESCO didn't comment on the U.S. decision. The only envoy who wasn't gushing with praise was China's ambassador, Jin Yang. He noted the negative impact of the U.S. absence, and expressed hope that the move means Washington is serious about multilateralism.

"Being a member of an international organization is a serious issue, and we hope that the return of the U.S. this time means it acknowledges the mission and the goals of the organization," the ambassador said.

UNESCO director Azoulay, who is Jewish, won broad praise for her personal efforts to build consensus among Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli diplomats around sensitive UNESCO resolutions. She met with Democrats and Republicans in Congress to explain those efforts. Thanks to those bipartisan negotiations, she expressed confidence that the U.S. decision to return is for the long term, regardless of who wins next year's presidential election.

"What's happened over the last years meant that UNESCO matters," she said. "And when you're absent from that ... you lose something. You lose something for your influence in the world, but also for your own national interest."

Under the plan, the U.S. government would pay its 2023 dues plus \$10 million in bonus contributions this year earmarked for Holocaust education, preserving cultural heritage in Ukraine, journalist safety, and science and technology education in Africa, Verma's letter says.

The Biden administration has already requested \$150 million for the 2024 budget to go toward UNESCO dues and arrears. The plan foresees similar requests for the ensuing years until the full debt of \$619 million is paid off.

That makes up a big chunk of UNESCO's \$534 million annual operating budget. Before leaving, the U.S. contributed 22% of the agency's overall funding.

A UNESCO diplomat expressed hope that the return of the U.S. would bring "more ambition, and more serenity" — and energize programs to regulate artificial intelligence, educate girls in Afghanistan and chronicle victims of slavery in the Caribbean.

The diplomat said that the agency would also "welcome" Israel back if it wanted to rejoin. There was no immediate response from the Israeli government.

Israel has long accused the United Nations of anti-Israel bias. In 2012, over Israeli objections, the state of

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Palestine was recognized as a nonmember observer state by the U.N. General Assembly. The Palestinians claim the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza Strip — territories captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war — for an independent state. Israel says the Palestinians' efforts to win recognition at the U.N. are aimed at circumventing a negotiated settlement and meant to pressure Israel into concessions.

The United States previously pulled out of UNESCO under the Reagan administration in 1984 because it viewed the agency as mismanaged, corrupt and used to advance Soviet interests. It rejoined in 2003.

Lee reported from Washington. Laurie Kellman in Tel Aviv and Masha Macpherson in Paris contributed.

Mount Washington, known for extreme weather, records its snowiest June

GORHAM, N.H. (AP) — A New Hampshire mountain known for its extreme weather conditions has recorded its snowiest June in 91 years of recordkeeping.

Snowfall on Saturday atop Mount Washington brought the total amount to 8.4 inches (21.3 centimeters) for the month of June, according to the Mount Washington Observatory.

But with a return to warmer weather, nearly all of it had melted by early Monday.

The observatory posted on Facebook that statistically speaking, the last snowfall of the season typically occurs in early to mid-June most years.

A quasi-stationary low sat over the region, delivering snow early every day of the month.

"With another low and cold air approaching in the days ahead, we could see that total grow further," the observatory said in a statement.

The observatory is at the summit of the Northeast's highest mountain, at 6,288 feet (1,916.5 meters).

Today in History: June 13, Johnson nominates Marshall

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, June 13, the 164th day of 2023. There are 201 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On June 13, 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson nominated Solicitor-General Thurgood Marshall to become the first Black justice on the U.S. Supreme Court.

On this date:

In 1865, Nobel Prize-winning poet-playwright William Butler Yeats was born in Dublin, Ireland.

In 1942, a four-man Nazi sabotage team arrived on Long Island, New York, three days before a second four-man team landed in Florida. (All eight men were arrested after two members of the first group defected.) President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Office of Strategic Services and the Office of War Information.

In 1966, the Supreme Court ruled in *Miranda v. Arizona* that criminal suspects had to be informed of their constitutional right to consult with an attorney and to remain silent.

In 1971, *The New York Times* began publishing excerpts of the Pentagon Papers, a secret study of America's involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967 that had been leaked to the paper by military analyst Daniel Ellsberg.

In 1977, James Earl Ray, the convicted assassin of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., was recaptured following his escape three days earlier from a Tennessee prison.

In 1981, a scare occurred during a parade in London when a teenager fired six blank shots at Queen Elizabeth II.

In 1983, the U.S. space probe Pioneer 10, launched in 1972, became the first spacecraft to leave the solar system as it crossed the orbit of Neptune.

In 1996, the 81-day-old Freemen standoff ended as 16 remaining members of the anti-government group surrendered to the FBI and left their Montana ranch.

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In 1997, a jury voted unanimously to give Timothy McVeigh the death penalty for his role in the Oklahoma City bombing. The Chicago Bulls captured their fifth NBA championship in seven years with a 90-86 victory over the Utah Jazz in game six.

In 2005, a jury in Santa Maria, California, acquitted Michael Jackson of molesting a 13-year-old cancer survivor at his Neverland ranch.

In 2016, a day after the Orlando, Florida, nightclub shooting rampage that claimed 49 victims, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton offered drastically different proposals for stemming the threat of terrorism and gun violence; Trump focused heavily on the nation's immigration system (even though the shooter was U.S. born) and redoubled his call for temporarily banning Muslims from the United States, while Clinton said that as president she would prioritize stopping "lone wolf" attackers and reiterated her call for banning assault weapons.

In 2020, Atlanta's police chief resigned, hours after the fatal police shooting of Rayshard Brooks; protests over the shooting grew turbulent, and the Wendy's restaurant at the scene of the shooting was gutted by flames.

Ten years ago: The White House said it had conclusive evidence that Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime had used chemical weapons against opposition forces seeking to overthrow the government. The U.S. Supreme Court unanimously threw out attempts to patent human genes, siding with advocates who said the multibillion-dollar biotechnology industry should not have exclusive control over genetic information found in the human body.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump declared that his summit with Kim Jong Un had ended any nuclear threat from North Korea, though the meeting had produced no details on how or when weapons might be eliminated or reduced. On the eve of the start of the World Cup in Russia, FIFA voters chose to award the 2026 World Cup to North America.

One year ago: The committee investigating the Capitol attack was told that Donald Trump's closest campaign advisers, top government officials and even his family were dismantling his false claims of 2020 election fraud ahead of Jan. 6, but the defeated president was becoming "detached from reality" and clinging to outlandish theories to stay in power. Nancy Brophy, a self-published romance novelist who once wrote an online essay called "How to Murder Your Husband," was sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole in Portland, Oregon for murdering her husband in 2018. Philip Baker Hall, a character actor of film and theater who memorably hunted down a long-overdue library book in "Seinfeld," died at age 90.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Malcolm McDowell is 80. Former U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is 79. Singer Dennis Locorriere is 74. Actor Richard Thomas is 72. Actor Jonathan Hogan is 72. Actor Stellan Skarsgard is 72. Comedian Tim Allen is 70. North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper is 66. Actor Ally Sheedy is 61. TV anchor Hannah Storm is 61. Rock musician Paul De Lisle (deh-LYL') (Smash Mouth) is 60. Actor Lisa Vidal is 58. Singer David Gray is 55. R&B singer Deniece Pearson (Five Star) is 55. Rock musician Soren Rasted (Aqua) is 54. Actor Jamie Walters is 54. Singer-musician Rivers Cuomo (Weezer) is 53. Country singer Susan Haynes is 51. Actor Steve-O is 49. Country singer Jason Michael Carroll is 45. Actor Ethan Embry is 45. Actor Chris Evans is 42. Actor Sarah Schaub is 40. Singer Raz B is 38. Actor Kat Dennings is 37. Actor Ashley Olsen is 37. Actor Mary-Kate Olsen is 37. DJ/producer Gesaffelstein is 36. Actor Aaron Johnson is 33.