

Groton Daily Independent

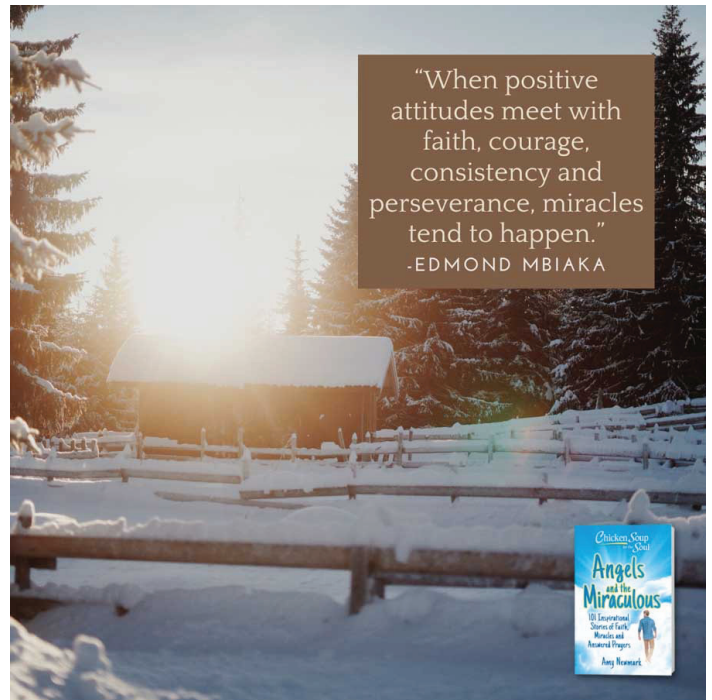
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Saturday, Feb. 10

Girls Wrestling at Brandon Valley.
Junior High State Wrestling at Pierre, 9 a.m.
Basketball Double Header with Mobridge-Pollock at Groton Area: Gym: Boys 7th at noon, Boys 8th at 1:00. Arena: Girls C game at noon, Girls JV at 1 p.m., Boys JV at 2 p.m., Girls Varsity at 3:15 p.m., Boys Varsity at 4:45 p.m.
Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

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



Sunday, Feb. 11

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.
First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m. (Milestones 1st and 4th grade); Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m. and at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.
United Methodist: Worship Conde, 8:30 a.m.; and at Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Caring Team, 9:45 a.m.; Sunday School (sings in worship), 10:30 a.m.
AAU Wrestling at Groton Area

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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1440

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Rafah Ground Operation

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has ordered his military to prepare plans to evacuate nearly 1.5 million civilians from Gaza's southern city of Rafah, considered one of the last refuges for displaced Palestinian civilians. The order comes ahead of an expected Israeli ground operation, with Netanyahu seeking to dismantle four of Hamas' battalions that are believed to be in Rafah.

Rafah sits near Egypt's border and was once a major commercial hub of roughly 280,000 people before the Israel-Hamas war began four months ago. Earlier in the war, Israel had ordered civilians from the northern Gaza Strip to move either west toward the Mediterranean coast or south toward Rafah (see maps). Since then, more than 1 million Palestinians (about half of Gaza's original 2.3 million people) have been sheltering in Rafah, with humanitarian groups expressing concern over spreading diseases and lack of food, water, and medical aid. See before and after satellite images of Rafah here.

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby has said the US would not support an intensive Israeli military operation in Rafah under current conditions.

Baltimore Ravens' Lamar Jackson wins second MVP award.

The 27-year-old Ravens quarterback made history as the youngest two-time MVP since the National Football League and the American Football League merged more than 50 years ago. Jackson is the ninth NFL player to win more than one Associated Press NFL MVP award since 1967 but is the only one who hasn't won a Super Bowl. Separately, the Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 2024 has been revealed; see here.

Former Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan announces US Senate bid.

Hogan (R) announced Friday his decision to run for retiring Maryland Sen. Ben Cardin's (D) seat. The 67-year-old Hogan was first elected governor in 2014 and then again in 2018, winning reelection by 12 percentage points. He left office in 2023 with high approval ratings (see here). Maryland has not had a Republican senator since 1987.

Former President Donald Trump wins Nevada's GOP caucuses.

Trump was expected to secure a victory in Nevada's Republican caucuses as he faced no major challengers and as former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley chose to instead compete in the state's primary earlier this week. The Nevada caucuses is the fourth contest Trump has won, claiming all 26 of Nevada's GOP delegates. See an overview on how the delegate process works here.

OpenAI CEO Sam Altman seeks up to \$7T for new project.

Altman is reportedly in talks with investors, including the United Arab Emirates government, to raise funding for a new initiative related to the global semiconductor industry and artificial intelligence. The project is expected to need as much as \$5T to \$7T in funding, a range that is far greater than the current size of the worldwide semiconductor industry. Global chip sales were \$527B in 2023.

SNL's Colin Jost to host White House Correspondents' Dinner.

The 41-year-old joined "Saturday Night Live" as a writer in 2005 and has cohosted the late-night show's "Weekend Update" segment since 2014. The White House Correspondents' Dinner, set for April 27, is one of Washington, DC's biggest events, with White House officials, lawmakers, celebrities, and journalists in attendance.

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Oscars add new best casting category for 2026 and beyond.

The award for casting directors is the first new category introduced since 2001, when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced a new category for best animated feature. Currently, 23 awards are handed out during the live on-air ceremony.

Humankind(ness)

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Shawna G. in San Manuel, Arizona.

"In January of 1997 I was discharged from the Marines in Quantico, VA. I had a Ryder truck, tow dolly with my car hitched to the back and a 6-month-old son and was ready to head to Arizona. I had one stop before heading out. As I turned down a road in a residential area, I realized it was a dead end and there was no place to turn. As I tried turning the truck and car, they slid down an icy embankment. I had to have a tow truck pull them out and it cost \$200, leaving me \$300 to get home (which was not possible)."

"People from homes came out to see what was going on. Among them was a fellow female Marine and her daughter; they saw how distraught I was and offered to let me and my son stay at her house for the night, since it was dark and late. As I was getting ready to leave in the morning, she gave me \$300 to help me get home. That was 27 years ago, and I still get emotional at that random act of kindness. I don't know how I would have gotten home without that help. I hope this reaches that lady and to tell her I still have not forgotten, nor will I ever forget, and it reminds me to continue doing random acts of kindness."

Today on

GDILIVE.COM

Saturday, Feb. 10, 2024

Basketball Double-Header

Mobridge-Pollock at Groton Area

Noon: 7th Grade Boys Game in Gym:

1 p.m.: 8th Grade Boys Game in Gym

These games sponsored for the grandparents watching!

Noon: Girls C Game in the Arena: Sponsored by Tom & Lindsey Tietz

1 p.m.: JV Girls Game in Arena: Sponsored by Tom & Lindsey Tietz

2 p.m.: JV Boys Game in Arena sponsored by Craig & Jodi Sternhagen

3:15 p.m.: Girls Varsity Game

4:45 p.m.: Boys Varsity Game

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Redfield Youth Wrestling Tournament Results for Groton Tuff Tigers

Tots 32-33: Watson Herron's place is 2nd.

Round 1 - Hayden Edgar (Redfield Youth Wrestling) won by fall over Watson Herron (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 2:51)

Round 2 - Hayden Edgar (Redfield Youth Wrestling) won by fall over Watson Herron (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 1:39)

Tots 38-41: Barrett Vedvei's place is 3rd and has scored 3.0 team points.

Round 1 - Fletcher Hoyle (Ipswich Area Youth Wrestling) won by fall over Barrett Vedvei (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:36)

Round 2 - Eric Shoultz (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) won by forfeit over Barrett Vedvei (Groton Tuff Tigers) (FF)

Round 3 - Barrett Vedvei (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by forfeit over Beau Knight (Warner/Northwestern) (FF)

Tots 41-44: Ryker Herron's place is 2nd and has scored 5.0 team points.

Round 2 - Ryker Herron (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Beau Irlbeck (Clark-Willow Lake) (Fall 1:10)

Round 3 - Brooks Sombke (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Ryker Herron (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 4:02)

Tots 41-44: Brooks Sombke's place is 1st and has scored 7.0 team points.

Round 1 - Brooks Sombke (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Beau Irlbeck (Clark-Willow Lake) (Fall 4:24)

Round 3 - Brooks Sombke (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Ryker Herron (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 4:02)

Tots 49-51: Brooks Vedvei's place is 2nd and has scored 5.0 team points.

Round 1 - Kade Edgar (Redfield Youth Wrestling) won by fall over Brooks Vedvei (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:58)

Round 2 - Brooks Vedvei (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Carter Brock (Huron tiger wrestling) (Fall 0:25)

Round 3 - Brooks Vedvei (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by decision over Shaden Leddy (Wolsey/Wessington) (Dec 10-9)

Tots 52-55: Vic Flihs's place is 2nd and has scored 5.0 team points.

Round 1 - Vic Flihs (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Cody Carey (Webster Area) (Fall 0:18)

Round 2 - Vic Flihs (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Lincoln Peckham (Warner/Northwestern) (Fall 0:52)

Round 3 - Kru Peterson (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) won by decision over Vic Flihs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Dec 14-12)

Bantam 53-59: Roman Bahr's place is 2nd and has scored 5.0 team points.

Round 1 - Roman Bahr (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by decision over Kasper Weisz (Redfield Youth Wrestling) (Dec 10-3)

Round 2 - Roman Bahr (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Rowan Marx (Clark-Willow Lake) (Fall 2:43)

Round 3 - Roman Bahr (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by decision over Case Dreis (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) (Dec 8-2)

Round 4 - Jory Heinrich (American Outlaws) won by fall over Roman Bahr (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 2:27)

Round 5 - Roman Bahr (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Brodie Waltman (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) (Fall 0:59)

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Midgets 61-64: Bo Flihs's place is 5th.

- Round 1 - Bo Flihs (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Blake Severson (Clark-Willow Lake) (Fall 3:40)
- Round 2 - Ian Backous (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) won by fall over Bo Flihs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:22)
- Round 3 - Selleck Roseland (Faulkton Trojans) won by fall over Bo Flihs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:27)
- Round 4 - Rowdy Jones (Miller AAU) won by fall over Bo Flihs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:35)
- Round 5 - Hunter Cole (Redfield Youth Wrestling) won by fall over Bo Flihs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 1:30)

Midgets 67-72: Micah Krause's place is 5th.

- Round 1 - Landyn Dargatz (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) won by fall over Micah Krause (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:29)
- Round 2 - Rusty Hanson (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) won by fall over Micah Krause (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 2:04)
- Round 3 - Micah Krause (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by decision over Treyton Hutson (Ipswich Area Youth Wrestling) (Dec 7-1)
- Round 4 - Heston Edgar (Miller AAU) won by fall over Micah Krause (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:27)
- Round 5 - Michael Dylla (Kingsbury County) won by fall over Micah Krause (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 1:30)

Midgets 74-79: Samuel Flihs's place is 4th and has scored 1.0 team points.

- Round 1 - Samuel Flihs (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Bennett Kaup (Gettysburg) (Fall 4:24)
- Round 2 - Samuel Flihs (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Eli Wacholz (Warner/Northwestern) (Fall 3:46)
- Round 3 - Aiden Odland (Redfield Youth Wrestling) won by fall over Samuel Flihs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:36)
- Round 4 - Lane McGaugh (Huron tiger wrestling) won by fall over Samuel Flihs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 3:34)
- Round 5 - Braxten Sombke (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Samuel Flihs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:31)

Midgets 74-79: Braxten Sombke's place is 1st and has scored 7.0 team points.

- Round 1 - Braxten Sombke (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by tech fall over Eli Wacholz (Warner/Northwestern) (TF 18-2)
- Round 2 - Braxten Sombke (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by decision over Aiden Odland (Redfield Youth Wrestling) (Dec 4-3)
- Round 3 - Braxten Sombke (Groton Tuff Tigers) won in sudden victory - 1 over Lane McGaugh (Huron tiger wrestling) (SV-1 6-4)
- Round 4 - Braxten Sombke (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Bennett Kaup (Gettysburg) (Fall 0:12)
- Round 5 - Braxten Sombke (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Samuel Flihs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:31)

Midgets 79-85: Huntley Overacker's place is 1st and has scored 7.0 team points.

- Round 1 - Huntley Overacker (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Dallas Stroud (Redfield Youth Wrestling) (Fall 0:27)
- Round 2 - Huntley Overacker (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Ryder Long (Warner/Northwestern) (Fall 0:56)
- Round 3 - Huntley Overacker (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Jacob Powell (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) (Fall 0:39)
- Round 4 - Huntley Overacker (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Brock Welch (Huron tiger wrestling) (Fall 0:13)
- Round 5 - Huntley Overacker (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Hudson Boomsma (Doland) (Fall 1:23)

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Midgets 110-118: Keenan Moody's place is 1st and has scored 7.0 team points.

- Round 1 - Keenan Moody (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Emmitt Waldrop (Miller AAU) (Fall 0:47)
- Round 2 - Keenan Moody (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by tech fall over Lincoln Pederson (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) (TF 16-0)
- Round 3 - Keenan Moody (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Ryder Steen (Ipswich Area Youth Wrestling) (Fall 0:29)
- Round 4 - Keenan Moody (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Kemp Jacobsen (Kingsbury County) (Fall 0:25)

Novice 65-74: Brayson Hubbs's place is 5th.

- Round 1 - Hunter Marx (Clark-Willow Lake) won by fall over Brayson Hubbs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:12)
- Round 2 - Brody Rude (Redfield Youth Wrestling) won by fall over Brayson Hubbs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:19)
- Round 3 - Nash Fischer (Gettysburg) won by fall over Brayson Hubbs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:55)
- Round 4 - Wyatt VandenHoek (American Outlaws) won by fall over Brayson Hubbs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 1:01)

Novice 72-77: Bentley Ehresmann's place is 6th.

- Round 1 - Bentley Ehresmann (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by decision over Leo Walraven (Watertown) (Dec 13-6)
- Round 2 - Chan Dreis (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) won by fall over Bentley Ehresmann (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 2:20)
- Round 3 - Bentley Hartman (Redfield Youth Wrestling) won by forfeit over Bentley Ehresmann (Groton Tuff Tigers) (FF)
- Round 4 - Logan Josephsen (Kingsbury County) won by forfeit over Bentley Ehresmann (Groton Tuff Tigers) (FF)
- Round 5 - Conner Parrish (Highmore) won by forfeit over Bentley Ehresmann (Groton Tuff Tigers) (FF)

Novice 80-83: Preston Hinkelman's place is 1st and has scored 7.0 team points.

- Round 1 - Preston Hinkelman (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Lane Madsen (Kingsbury County) (Fall 3:53)
- Round 2 - Preston Hinkelman (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Gavin Marx (Clark-Willow Lake) (Fall 2:10)
- Round 3 - Preston Hinkelman (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Tilden Edgar (Redfield Youth Wrestling) (Fall 1:43)
- Round 4 - Cruz Kimlicka (Redfield Youth Wrestling) won by major decision over Preston Hinkelman (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Maj 10-2)
- Round 5 - Preston Hinkelman (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Grayson Decker (Watertown) (Fall 2:22)

Novice 82-88: Adam Fliehs's place is 6th.

- Round 1 - Cayden Maunu (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) won by fall over Adam Fliehs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:41)
- Round 2 - Coy Stephenson (Faulkton Trojans) won by fall over Adam Fliehs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:44)
- Round 3 - Jacob Hofer (Doland) won by fall over Adam Fliehs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:20)
- Round 4 - Landon Schaffner (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) won by fall over Adam Fliehs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:25)
- Round 5 - Peyton Moss (Miller AAU) won by decision over Adam Fliehs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Dec 10-6)

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Novice 140-148: Hank Fliehs's place is 2nd and has scored 5.0 team points.

Round 1 - Tristan Powell (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) won by fall over Hank Fliehs (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:18)

Round 3 - Hank Fliehs (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Christian Lowe (Clark-Willow Lake) (Fall 0:15)

Girl Tots 58-62: Veda Stiegelmeier's place is 1st and has scored 7.0 team points.

Round 1 - Veda Stiegelmeier (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Amelia Wacholz (Warner/Northwestern) (Fall 0:19)

Round 2 - Veda Stiegelmeier (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Kylie Gowin (Hoven Greyhounds) (Fall 0:13)

Girls Midgets 74-80: Elsy Hagen's place is 1st and has scored 7.0 team points.

Round 2 - Elsy Hagen (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Kora Klapperich (Warner/Northwestern) (Fall 0:51)

Round 3 - Elsy Hagen (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Evie Decker (Governor Wrestling) (Fall 1:21)

Girls Midgets 84-93: Rosalyn Block's place is 1st and has scored 2.0 team points.

Round 1 - Rosalyn Block (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Karen Mitchell (Highmore) (Fall 0:21)

Round 2 - Rosalyn Block (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Karen Mitchell (Highmore) (Fall 1:37)



Women's Gathering

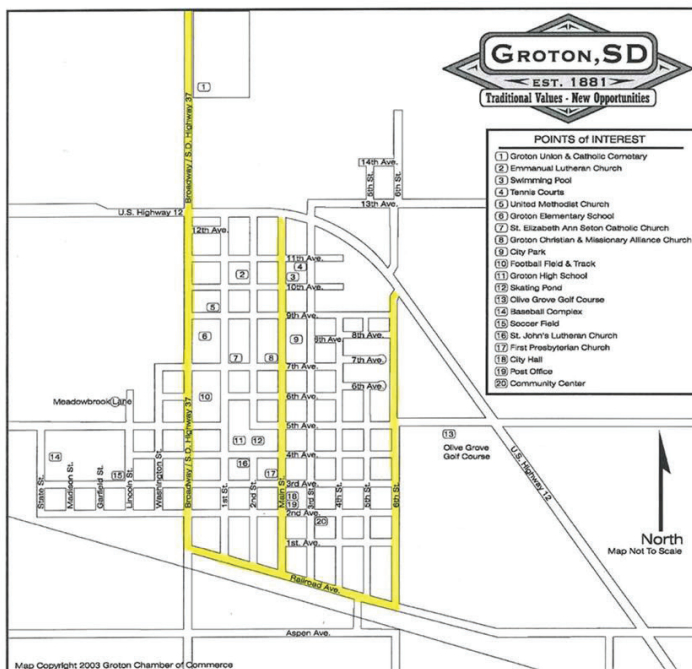
IF : 2024

IF2024.COM



12099 Rose Hill Road | February 23, 2024 | 6 - 10 pm
Langford, South Dakota | February 24, 2024 | 9 am - 4:30 pm

Notice of Garbage Pickup- Effective the week of February 12th



To help preserve our streets, Groton residents are asked to bring their garbage to the following locations until further notice:

Railroad Avenue, Main Street, Sixth Street, & Highway 37

Residents of the Broadway Mobile Home Park need to take their garbage to **Highway 37**.

Residents north of 13th Avenue (Olson and Jacobson Developments) need to bring their garbage to the **Bus Barns**.

Your cooperation is greatly appreciated during the spring thaw.

Please bring your garbage bags and/or cans to these locations for Tuesday pickup!

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BROWN COUNTY
BROWN COUNTY COMMISSION AGENDA
REGULAR MEETING TUESDAY

February 13, 2024 8:45 A.M.

COMMISSIONER'S CHAMBERS, COURTHOUSE ANNEX - 25 MARKET STREET, ABERDEEN SD

1. Call To Order - Pledge of Allegiance
2. Approval of Agenda
3. Opportunity of Public Comment
4. First Reading of Ordinance #266 - Rezone
5. Brown County Fair Foundation – President Laura Siefken
 - a. Annual Report
 - b. Request for Alcohol License
6. IMEG & John Florey, Highway Operations Supervisor
 - a. Opening of Micro-surfacing Bids
7. Rachel Kippley – Fair/Fairgrounds/Parks Manager
 - a. Award Expo Roof Bid
8. Approve & Authorize Chairman to sign following items for the Landfill
 - a. Contract with Houston Engineering
 - b. 2023 Annual Compliance Certification Report
 - c. 2023 Operational Report Air Emission Inventory Documents
9. Approve & Authorize Chairman to sign Inmate Housing Agreement with Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate
10. Consent Calendar
 - a. Approval of General Meeting Minutes of February 6, 2024
 - b. Claims/Payroll
 - c. HR Report
 - d. Travel Requests
 - e. Leases
 - f. Claim Assignments
 - g. Authorize Adverting & Set Date for Bid Opening for Landfill: Waste Tire Removal & Wood Waste Grinding
 - h. Bridge Inspection Resolution
11. Other Business
12. Executive Session (if requested per SDCL 1-25-2)
13. Adjourn

Brown County Commission Meeting

Please join my meeting from your computer, tablet, or smartphone.

<https://meet.goto.com/BrCoCommission>

You can also dial in using your phone. United States: [+1 \(872\) 240-3311](tel:+18722403311)

Access Code: 601-168-909 #

Get the app now and be ready when your first meeting starts: <https://meet.goto.com/install>

Public comment provides an opportunity for the public to address the county commission but may not exceed 3 minutes.

Public comment will be limited to 10 minutes (or at the discretion of the board).

Public comment will be accepted virtually when the virtual attendance option is available.

Official Recordings of Commission Meetings along with the Minutes can be found at

<https://www.brown.sd.us/node/454>

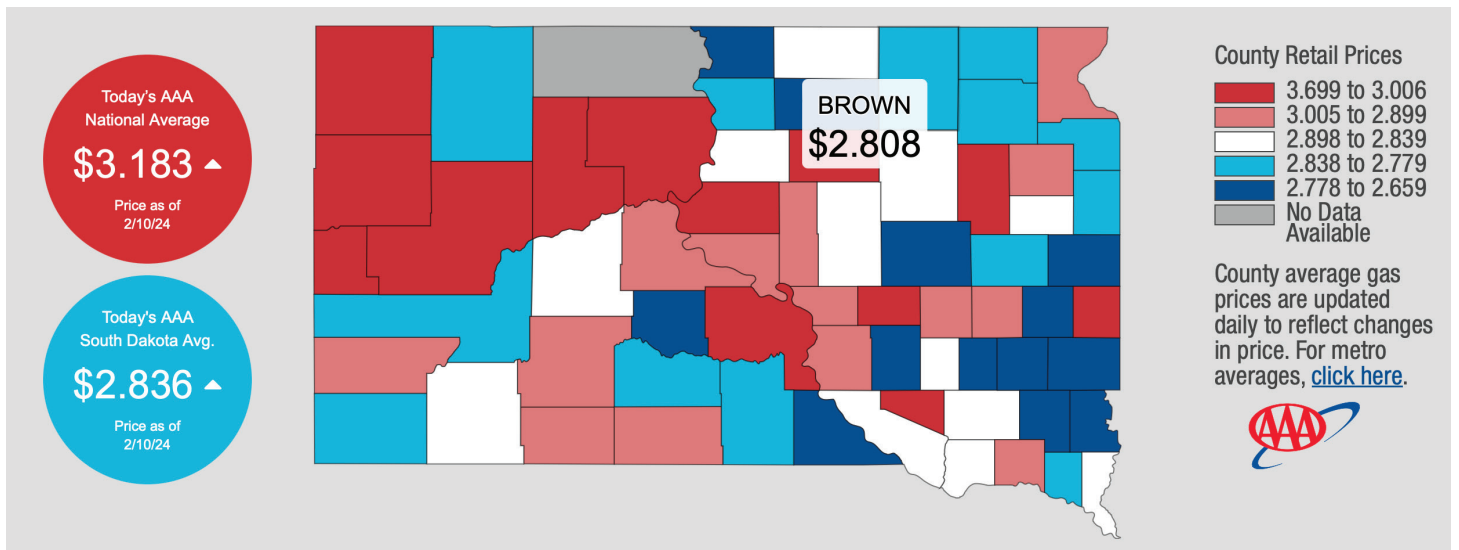
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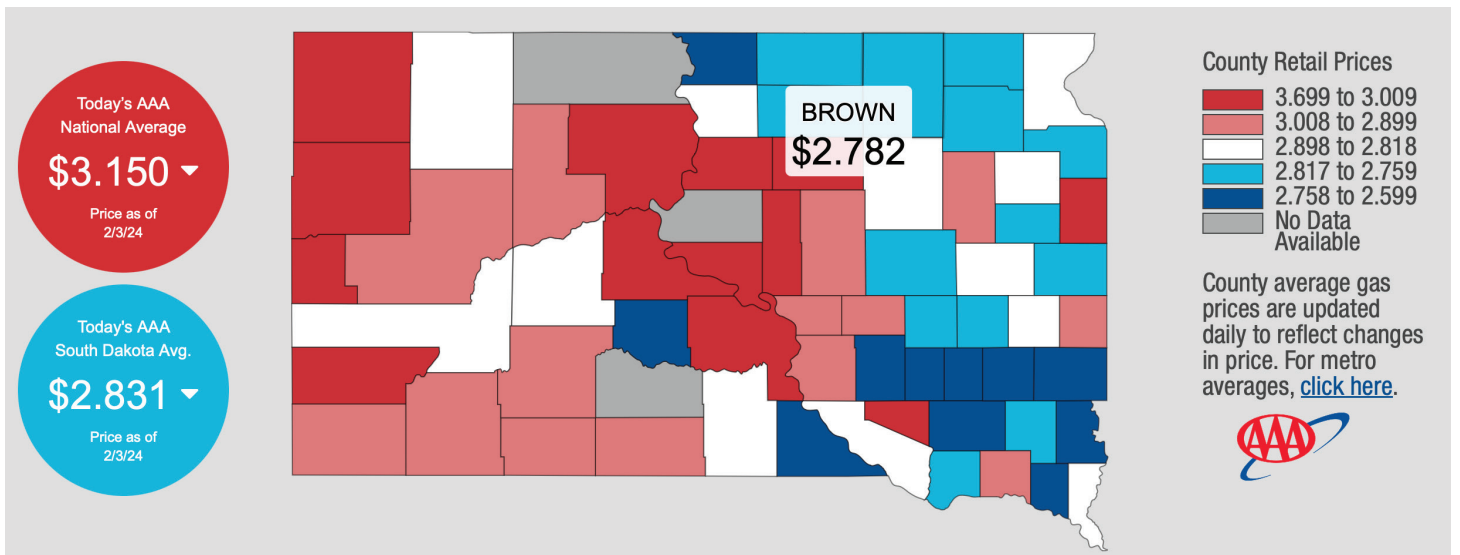
South Dakota Average Gas Prices

	Regular	Mid-Grade	Premium	Diesel
Current Avg.	\$2.836	\$2.999	\$3.468	\$3.617
Yesterday Avg.	\$2.822	\$2.985	\$3.469	\$3.578
Week Ago Avg.	\$2.831	\$2.993	\$3.458	\$3.592
Month Ago Avg.	\$2.898	\$3.073	\$3.550	\$3.728
Year Ago Avg.	\$3.391	\$3.544	\$3.994	\$4.322

This Week



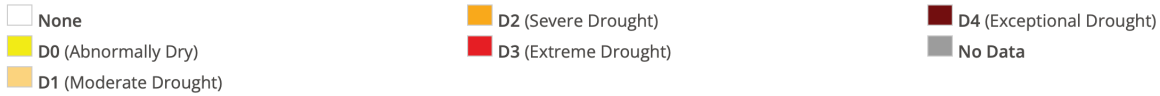
Two Weeks Ago



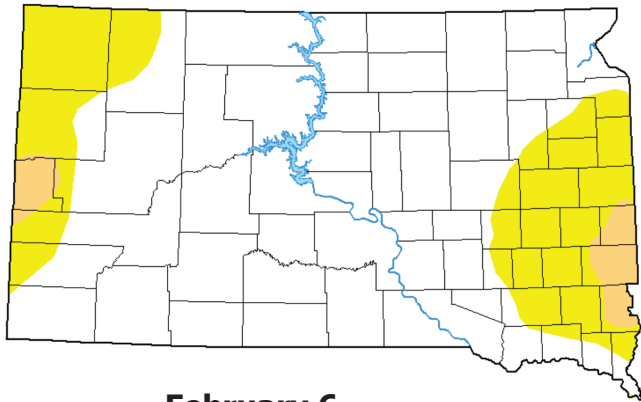
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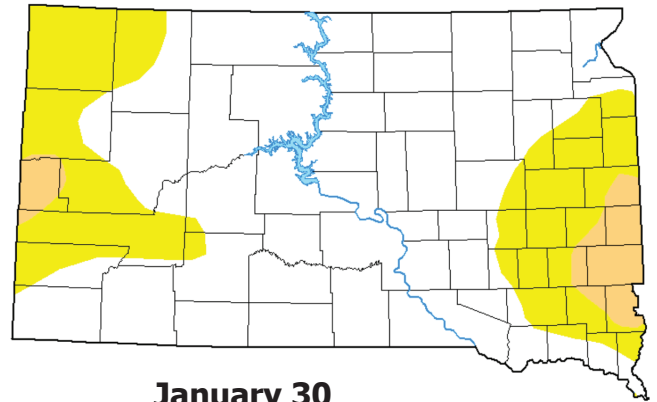
Drought Classification



Drought Monitor



February 6



January 30

High temperatures averaged about 8 to more than 20 degrees above normal. Precipitation of less than 0.25 inches fell across much of the Dakotas, eastern Nebraska, and southwest Kansas. The rest of the region recorded totals ranging from about 0.25 inches to just over 1 inch. Moderate drought (D1) improved in eastern South Dakota in response to above normal precipitation during the month of January. South-central Nebraska and northern and central Kansas also saw 1-category improvements to long-term drought areas. While short-term moisture deficits have largely been eliminated, a dry signal remains at timescales longer than about 6 months. Precipitation deficits of nearly 10 inches over the last year remain in drought areas in these states and impacts to deeper soil moisture levels and groundwater continue to linger.

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GHS Girls' Basketball

Tigers power in nine three-pointers in win over Redfield

Groton Area had three players in double figures Friday night as the Lady Tigers defeated Redfield, 61-37. The game was played in Redfield.

Groton Area held a 9-4 first quarter lead and a 30-16 lead at halftime. The Tigers scored 13 straight points in the third quarter and took a 48-28 lead into the fourth quarter.

Jerica Locke led the Tigers with 17 points as she was four of eight in two-pointers and three of five in three-pointers. Locke also had three rebounds, seven assists and five steals. Taryn Traphagen was four of six in three-pointers and finished with 14 points, three rebounds and one steal. Kennedy Hansen was two for three in two-pointers and two of four in three-pointers for 10 points and she had two assists. Jaedyn Penning finished with eight points, seven rebounds, four assists and two steals. Brooklyn Hansen had four points, two rebounds, one assist and two steals. Rylee Dunker had four points, two rebounds and two assists. Sydney Leicht had two points, two rebounds and one steal. Talli Wright had two points and two rebounds. Faith Trapahgen had three rebounds, two assists and three steals. Laila Roberts and Mia Crank each had one rebound. Emily Clark also played as she attempted one shot.

Groton Area made 17 of 37 two-pointers for 46 percent, nine of 23 three-pointers for 39 percent. Redfield had nine team fouls and the Tigers had five free throw attempts and missed all of them. Groton Area had 26 rebounds, 14 turnovers, 18 assists and 14 steals.

Katie Rozell led Redfield with 17 points as she was seven of eight from the line. Chloe Zens and Charli Jungwirth each had five points, Jadit Puok had four and Hayden Gall and Carmen Herrera each had three points. The Pheasants made 11 of 44 field goals for 25 percent, Groton Area had 18 team fouls while allowed Redfield to make 11 of 16 free throws for 69 percent. Redfield had 21 turnovers.

Groton Area led at the quarterstops at 12-5, 19-7 and 29-13 en route to a 41-15 junior varsity game win. Taryn Traphagen led Groton Area with 11 points while Laila Roberts had nine, Mia Crank eight, Faith Traphagen five, and Emerlee Jones, Kella Tracy and Talli Wright each had two points. Faith Traphagen, Roberts and Taryn Trapahgen each made one three-pointer.

Charli Jungwirth led Redfield with six points followed by Kinsey Smith, Karlie Brabant, Layla Hardie and Cora Krueger each had two points and Hayden Gall added a free throw.

Groton Area won the C game, 46-12, leading at the quarterstops at 12-0, 24-5 and 38-7.

Kella Tracy led the Tigers with 14 points followed by McKenna Tietz with eight, Teagan Hanten had six, Ashlynn Warrington, Brenna Imrie and Avery Crank each had four points and Emerlee Jones, Addison Hoffman and Estella Sanchez each added two points.

Rylen Frericks led Redfield with five points while Octavia Paulson had three, Hannah Schlechter had two points and Kathryn Evans and Adriana. Bagola each had one point.

All three games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. Varsity game sponsors were Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, BK Custom Ts & More, Bierman Farm Service, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Krueger Brothers, Locke Electric, The MeatHouse of Andover, Rix Farms/R&M Farms and Spanier Harvesting and Trucking. The junior varsity and C games were sponsored by Tom & Lindsey Tietz. Shane Clark and Paul Kosel did the play-by-play and Jeslyn Kosel operated the camera.

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SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

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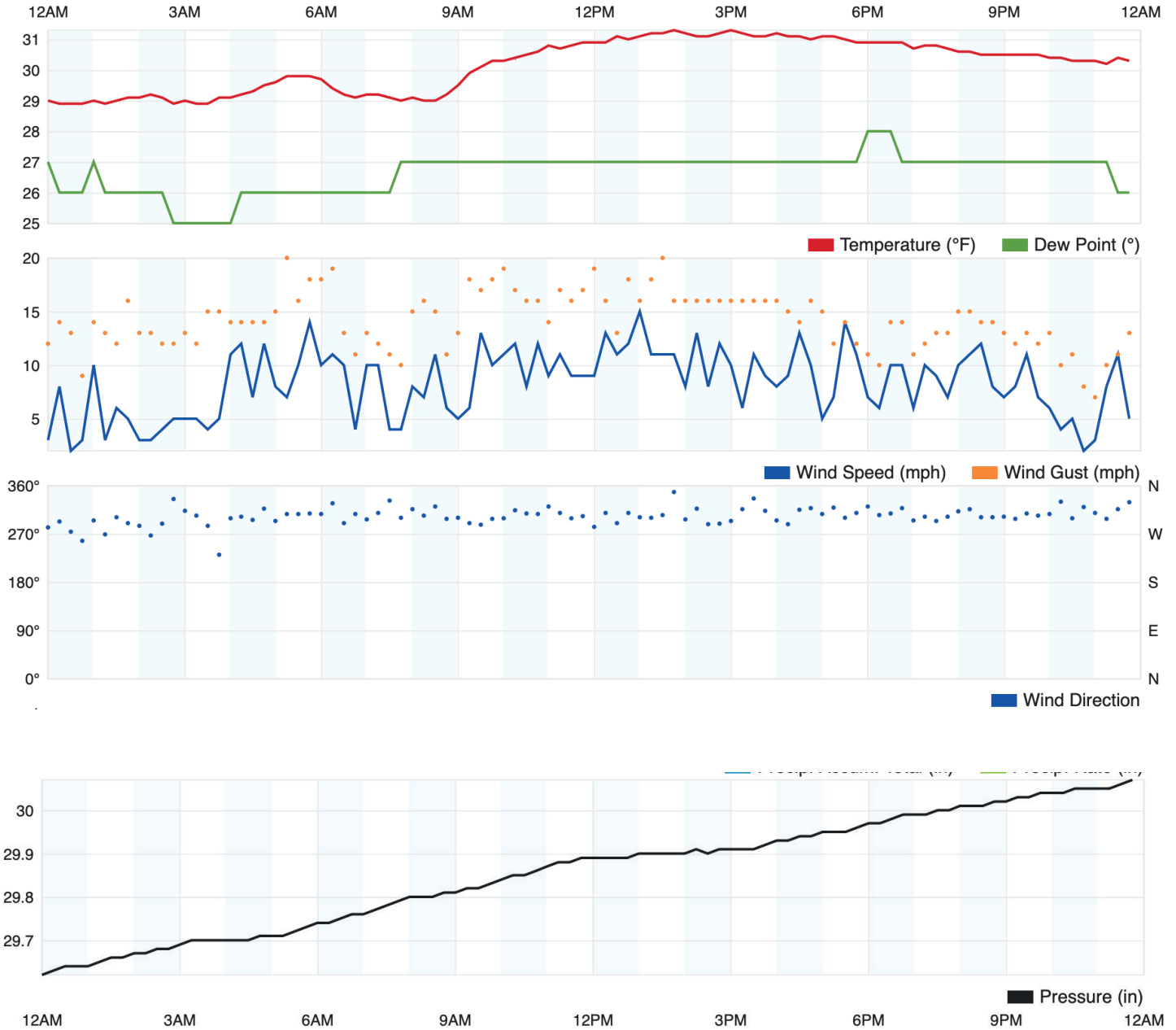
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
Feb 10	Feb 11	Feb 12	Feb 13	Feb 14	Feb 15	Feb 16
35°F	41°F	37°F	36°F	34°F	26°F	19°F
23°F	24°F	23°F	22°F	19°F	12°F	12°F
WNW	SSW	WNW	ESE	NW	NNW	N
10 MPH	13 MPH	8 MPH	10 MPH	11 MPH	15 MPH	15 MPH
			20%	20%		20%


Today
Mostly Cloudy with Morning Flurries
 Highs: 32 to 36°

Sunday
Clearing in the Afternoon
 Highs: 37 to 43°

Monday
 Highs: 35 to 42°

Tuesday
 Highs: 36 to 43°



Aberdeen, SD
weather.gov/aberndeen 

High pressure over the region this weekend will keep skies cloudy until Sunday afternoon. An upper level disturbance is producing scattered flurries across northern SD this morning but should exit by afternoon. Warming into the 40s Sun-Tues.

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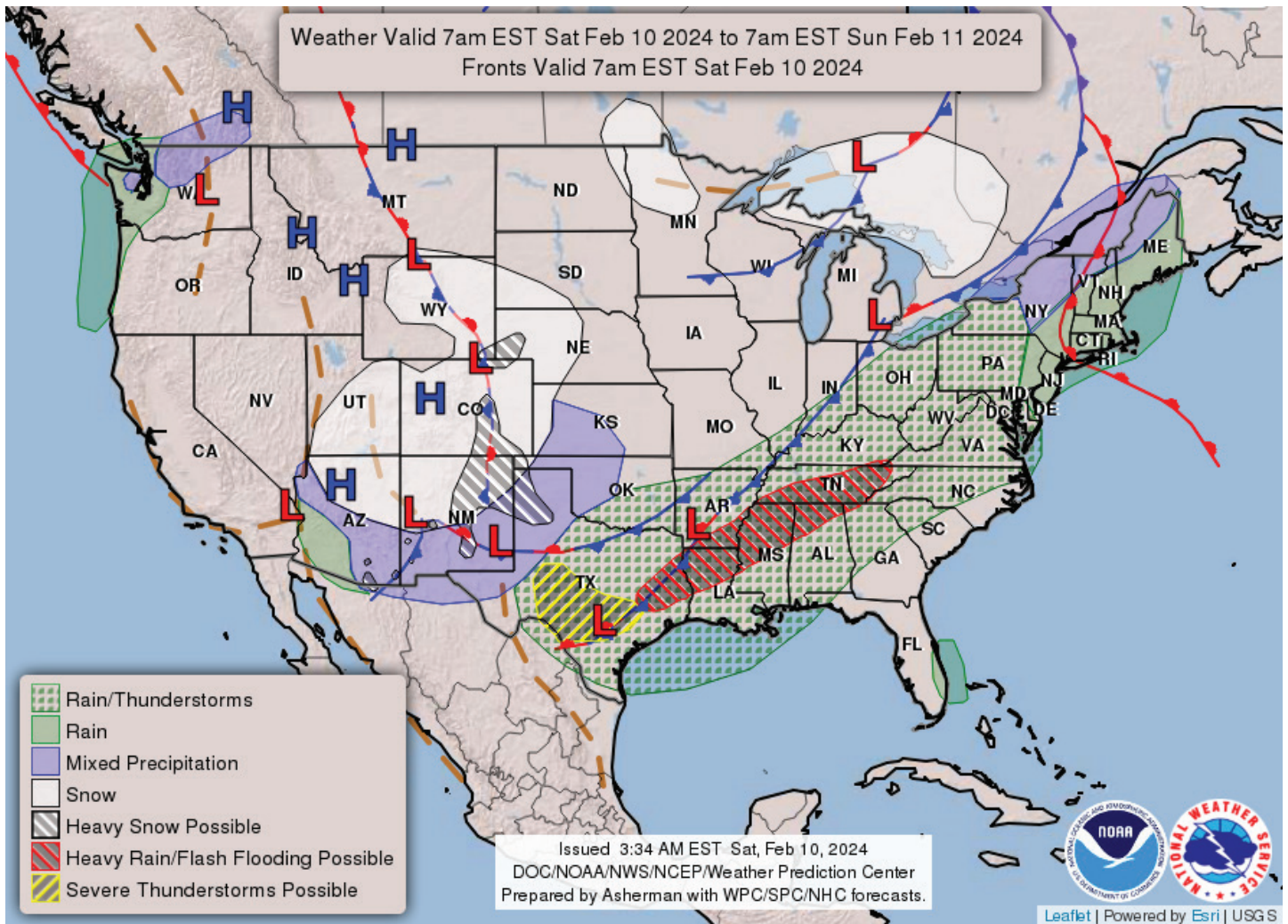
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 31 °F at 1:37 PM
Low Temp: 29 °F at 12:17 AM
Wind: 20 mph at 5:09 AM
Precip: : 0.07

Day length: 10 hours, 13 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 53 in 1977
Record Low: -27 in 1988
Average High: 27
Average Low: 4
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.20
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.07
Average Precip to date: 0.75
Precip Year to Date: 0.07
Sunset Tonight: 5:53:07 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:38:36 am



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Today in Weather History

February 10, 1993: Snow fell across South Dakota from the 10th to the 12th, with over 8 inches in south-central, west-central, and southwest. Some reports included 13 inches at Harrington, 12 inches at Midland, 10.5 inches at Winner, 10 inches near Stephan, Ardmore, and Wagner, 8.5 inches near Lead and Milesville, and 8 inches at Mitchell and Usta.

February 10, 1996: Across central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota, an intense area of low pressure and an Arctic high-pressure area created strong winds from 35 to 50 mph with gusts to around 65 mph through the afternoon and into the late evening. These high winds combined with the falling snow and the snow on the ground create blizzard conditions and slick roads across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota. Highway 12 from Webster to Summit was closed the evening of the 10th and Interstate-29 from Summit to Sisseton. Hundreds of travelers were stranded at Summit for several hours until conditions improved. Some wind gusts included 61 mph at Mobridge and 66 mph at Pierre and Aberdeen.

February 10, 2013: A powerful area of low pressure brought widespread heavy snow of 6 to as much as 19 inches across South Dakota and into Minnesota. The combination of heavy snow and powerful winds of 30 to 50 mph caused extensive blowing and drifting snow. Roads, highways, and Interstates 29 and 90 were closed for a time, and schools started late or closed on Monday the 11th.

1899 - The temperature at Monterey plunged to 29 degrees below zero, establishing record for the state of Virginia. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1921: Gardner, Georgia, was devastated by a massive, estimated F4 tornado that caused an entire small town section to disappear. The tornado killed an estimated 31 people and injured 100.

1959: St. Louis, Missouri, was hit by a massive F4 tornado that killed 21 and injured 345. Over 2000 buildings were damaged or destroyed, including the St. Louis Arena.

1973 - A major snowstorm struck the southeastern U.S. It produced as much as 18 inches in Georgia, and up to two feet of snow in South Carolina. (David Ludlum)

1978 - As much as eight inches of rain drenched southern California resulting in widespread flooding and mudslides. The heavy rainfall produced a wall of water which ripped through the mountain resort community of Hidden Springs drowning at least thirteen persons. The storm was one of the most destructive of record causing fifty million dollars damage. (David Ludlum)

1981 - A morning tornado at Bay Minette, AL, struck the local middle school severely damaging the gymnasium. 62 people were injured, 44 of whom were students.

1982 - Bismarck, ND, experienced its 45th consecutive day of subzero temperature readings which tied the previous record long string of subzero daily lows ending on the same date in 1937. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A storm in the northeastern U.S. produced heavy snow in southeastern Maine. Grand Falls and Woodland received 15 inches, mainly during the early morning hours, while most of the rest of the state did not even see a flake of snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Bitter cold arctic air gripped the north central U.S. International Falls MN was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 35 degrees below zero. Record warm readings were reported in southern California, with highs of 78 at San Francisco and 88 at Los Angeles. San Juan Capistrano CA was the hot spot in the nation with a high of 92 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - For the first time all month winter relaxed its grip on the nation. The temperature at Brownsville TX warmed above 60 degrees for the first time in six days, ending their second longest such cold spell of record. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front continued to produce severe weather across the southeastern U.S. through the morning hours and into the late afternoon. There were a total of twenty-nine tornadoes in twenty-nine hours, and 245 reports of large hail or damaging winds. Pre-dawn thunderstorms produced high winds which injured at least seventy persons in Alabama and Georgia, and caused more than twelve million dollars property damage. A tornado at Austell GA prior to daybreak injured two persons and caused two million dollars damage. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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2010: Cyclone Pat slams The Cook Islands with 125 mph winds, which destroyed about 80 percent of the island of Aitutaki.

2010 - A second major snowstorm, dubbed Snoverkill and Snowmageddon 2.0, further buries the Nation's Capital with 10.8 inches of new snow. Schools, businesses and even parts of the Federal government are shut down by blizzard conditions. The city now has a deeper snowpack, 28 inches, than the 20 inches in Anchorage, AK, or 27 inches in Marquette, MI.

2011 - The coldest day in Oklahoma history sees the temperature plunge to -31°F at Nowata, OK. A US National Weather Service station at Bartlesville recorded a reading of -28°F. Both locations break the previous low temperature mark of -27°F set in 1905 and tied in 1930. The Weather Doctor

2017 - Denver saw their all-time warmest temperature in February with a reading of 79 degrees.

2017: An atmospheric phenomena know as "moonbow" was seen in the Seattle area.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

NO CUSHION FOR HIS CROSS

A missionary told the story of watching a man, dressed like Jesus, carrying a cross through crowded streets during Easter week. He was intrigued by the scene and got as close to the man as possible. He wanted to observe him more carefully so he could tell the story to others. When he finally was a few feet from him, he noticed that under his garment was a pillow that cushioned the weight of the cross so it would not hurt or cause him pain.

We must never forget the weight of the cross that Jesus carried on our behalf. Picture, if you can, the scene: the heat of the day, the blood streaming down His face from the crown of thorns, and stripes down His back from the horrible beatings He endured before the nails were driven through His hands and feet, crowds laughing and taunting, alone and abandoned by His trusted friends and followers.

Too often we look at an empty cross and forget the reality of the cross and what it cost Jesus and His Father. Our religion has become a religion of convenience - not of conviction.

We have glamorized the cross as an object of art and made it into a piece of jewelry that adorns the necks of people who do not know or want to know the story of the extreme cost of our redemption. To many it is simply an ornament - something worn but not born. Jesus said, "If you want to be my follower, then shoulder your cross and follow me closely." No pillow required.

Prayer: Help us, Father, through Your Spirit, to understand the cost and value of our salvation. May we accept our part of the cost by shouldering our cross with You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Then, calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. Mark 8:34



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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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.09.24

17 22 29 46 69 1

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$425,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.07.24

2 5 17 20 25 9

All Star Bonus: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$2,900,000

NEXT 14 Hrs 53 Mins 16
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.09.24

8 12 18 27 48 17

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 15 Hrs 8 Mins 16
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.07.24

2 5 9 27 30

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$44,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 8 Mins 16
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.07.24

8 17 36 56 62 23

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 37 Mins 16
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.07.24

12 21 62 67 69 17

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$248,000,000

NEXT 15 Hrs 37 Mins 16
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Belle Fourche 61, Redfield 41
Brandon Valley 66, Sioux Falls Lincoln 56
Burke 63, Gayville-Volin High School 60
Colman-Egan 57, Deubrook 56
Dakota Valley 69, Dell Rapids 52
Edgemont 50, Oelrichs 39
Elk Point-Jefferson 56, Beresford 55
Faulkton 77, Langford 30
Gregory 70, Scotland 31
Harrisburg 69, Rapid City Central 43
Hettinger-Scranton, N.D. 72, Harding County 51
Hot Springs 66, Sturgis Brown 46
Huron 62, Aberdeen Central 48
Lemmon High School 67, Tiospaye Topa 46
Mobridge-Pollock 79, Faith 72
New Underwood 64, Bennett County 46
Northwestern 55, North Central 28
Pine Ridge 72, Lakota Tech 59
Platte-Geddes 66, Bon Homme 46
Rapid City Stevens 40, Yankton 39
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 66, Highmore-Harrold 56
Sioux Falls Jefferson 78, Brookings 51
Sioux Falls Lutheran 55, Wilmot 39
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 70, Sioux Falls Washington 43
Tea 48, Lennox 31
Tiospa Zina 64, Sisseton 34
Wagner 61, Chamberlain 43
Wakpala 62, Bison 41
Watertown 80, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 76
Wessington Springs 77, Hitchcock-Tulare 48
West Central 61, Madison 56
Winner 65, McLaughlin 47

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Avon 55, Andes Central-Dakota Christian 39
Bennett County 42, New Underwood 27
Bon Homme 44, Platte-Geddes 31
Chester 69, Canistota 50
Corsica/Stickney 65, Dell Rapids St Mary 28
Crofton, Neb. 55, West Central 22
Dakota Valley 79, Dell Rapids 44
Deubrook 38, Colman-Egan 28
Elk Point-Jefferson 67, Beresford 55

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Faulkton 49, Langford 36
Flandreau 65, Lyman 46
Flandreau Indian 64, Takini 8
Gregory 59, Scotland 34
Groton 61, Redfield 37
Hamlin 68, Howard 33
Harrisburg 67, Rapid City Central 56
Ipswich 53, Sunshine Bible Academy 44
Jones County 44, Bridgewater-Emery 42
Lemmon High School 68, Tiospaye Topa 38
Lennox 54, Tea 50
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 47, St Thomas More 41
North Central 51, Northwestern 44
Oelrichs 58, Edgemont 57
Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 59, DeSmet 58
Philip 53, Potter County 50
Rapid City Stevens 42, Yankton 26
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 48, Highmore-Harrold 34
Sioux Falls Jefferson 52, Brookings 35
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 59, Sioux Falls Washington 40
Stanley County 40, Dupree 37
Sturgis Brown 42, Hot Springs 37
Timber Lake 64, Newell 52
Viborg-Hurley 47, McCook Central-Montrose 46
Wagner 68, Chamberlain 24
Wakpala 70, Bison 41
Wall 70, Freeman 59
Waubay/Summit 51, Waverly-South Shore 24
Wessington Springs 49, Hitchcock-Tulare 35
White River 79, St Francis 29
Winner 45, McLaughlin 20

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

South Dakota deputy killed on duty honored with flashing emergency lights, packed stadium

MADISON, S.D. (AP) — Law officers from across South Dakota and out of state flashed their emergency lights in unison as hundreds of mourners packed a sports stadium to honor a South Dakota deputy killed in the line of duty.

Moody County Chief Deputy Ken Prorok, 51, of Wentworth, was remembered Thursday as a coach, mentor and a giving member of his community, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported. The funeral was so large that it took place at the Dakota State Fieldhouse in Madison.

Prorok was killed Feb. 2 when he was struck by a suspect's vehicle while placing spike strips during a police chase. Prosecutors charged Joseph Gene Hoek, 40, with first-degree murder and aggravated eluding. He is jailed without bond.

Roads leading to the fieldhouse were lined with flags at half-staff, and with people showing support for the fallen deputy and his family. At the fieldhouse, the dozens of police vehicles had their emergency lights on in tribute to Prorok.

"Ken was a quiet difference maker and an influencer to all who crossed his path, whether they knew it or

not," his sister-in-law, Robin Eich, said prior to the service. "Ken always told Renee (his wife) that he would be home after every shift no matter what. He just didn't know that this time 'home' would be Heaven."

Gov. Kristi Noem was among those at the funeral. Meanwhile, the South Dakota House and Senate observed a moment of silence to honor Prorok.

Special Agent Jeffrey Kollars of the South Dakota Division of Criminal Investigation wrote in a court filing that Madison police responded Friday afternoon to a call about a man, identified as Hoek, making "homicidal threats" near the business where the caller worked. Police spotted his car and tried to stop him, but Hoek sped off, Kollars wrote.

The chase reached 115 mph (185 kph). Prorok stopped to deploy stop spikes across Highway 34. A witness said he saw the approaching car intentionally swerve and strike Prorok before it went into the ditch and flipped, the agent wrote. Hoek ran but the witness caught him and detained him until officers arrived, the court filing stated.

Prorok died at the scene. Hoek was not seriously hurt.

Kollars wrote that Hoek told him he had gone to the business to collect from the caller, who he said owed him money. Investigators who searched the car found suspected THC vapes, suspected marijuana paraphernalia and "blunts," and containers of cold medicine, the agent wrote. Outside the car they found an apparent bong and an unopened bottle of liquor, he said.

Hoek's mother told investigators that she believed her son "was suffering from mental health issues and was self-medicating."

28 Palestinians killed in Israeli strikes in Rafah after Netanyahu says invasion there is inevitable

By NAJIB JOBAIN and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli airstrikes killed at least 28 Palestinians in Rafah early Saturday, hours after Israel's prime minister said he asked the military to plan for the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of people from the southern Gaza city ahead of a ground invasion.

Benjamin Netanyahu did not provide details or a timeline, but the announcement set off widespread panic. More than half of Gaza's 2.3 million people are packed into Rafah, many after being uprooted repeatedly by Israeli evacuation orders that now cover two-thirds of Gaza's territory. It's not clear where they could run next.

Word of the invasion plans capped a week of increasingly public friction between Netanyahu and the Biden administration. U.S. officials have said an invasion of Rafah without a plan for the civilian population would lead to disaster.

Israel has carried out airstrikes in Rafah almost daily, even after telling civilians in recent weeks to seek shelter there from ground combat in the city of Khan Younis, just to the north.

Overnight into Saturday, three airstrikes on homes in the Rafah area killed 28 people, according to a health official and Associated Press journalists who saw the bodies arriving at hospitals. Each strike killed multiple members of three families, including a total of 10 children, the youngest three months old.

Fadel al-Ghannam lost his son, daughter-in-law and four grandchildren in one of the strikes. Standing amid the rubble, he said the strike tore the bodies of his loved ones to shreds.

He feared even worse, with the looming ground invasion of Rafah and said the world's silence has enabled Israel to proceed. "To this day, the world has not been fair to us and given us our rights," he said.

In Khan Younis, the focus of the current ground combat, Israeli forces opened fire at Nasser Hospital, the area's largest, killing at least one person and wounding several, said Ashraf al-Qidra, a spokesman for the Gaza Health Ministry.

He said medical staff are no longer able to move between the facility's buildings because of the intense fire. He said 300 medical personnel, 450 patients and 10,000 displaced people are sheltering in the hospital.

The Israeli military had no immediate comment.

A RIFT WITH WASHINGTON

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The steadily climbing Palestinian death toll— now at almost 28,000 after four months of war, according to Gaza health officials — has contributed to the friction between Netanyahu and Washington.

Israel holds Hamas responsible for civilian deaths because it fights from within civilian areas, but U.S. officials have pushed back, calling for more surgical strikes. President Joe Biden said this week Israel's response is "over the top."

Israel says that Rafah, which borders Egypt, is the last remaining Hamas stronghold in Gaza after more than four months of war.

"It is impossible to achieve the goal of the war of eliminating Hamas by leaving four Hamas battalions in Rafah," Netanyahu's office said Friday. "On the contrary, it is clear that intense activity in Rafah requires that civilians evacuate the areas of combat."

It said he had ordered the military and security officials to come up with a "combined plan" that included both a mass evacuation of civilians and the destruction of Hamas' forces in the town.

It remains unclear where civilians can go. The Israeli offensive has caused widespread destruction, especially in northern Gaza, and hundreds of thousands of people do not have homes to return to.

In addition, Egypt has warned that any movement of Palestinians across the border into Egypt would threaten the four-decade-old peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. The border crossing between Gaza and Egypt, which is mostly closed, serves as the main entry point for humanitarian aid.

Rafah had a prewar population of roughly 280,000, and according to the United Nations is now home to some 1.4 million additional people living with relatives, in shelters or sprawling tent camps after fleeing fighting elsewhere in Gaza.

NORTHERN GAZA

Israel declared war after several thousand Hamas militants burst across the border into southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 people and taking 250 others hostage.

An Israeli air and ground offensive has killed roughly 28,000 Palestinians, most of them women and minors, according to local health officials. Roughly 80% of Gaza's 2.3 million people have been displaced, and the territory has plunged into a humanitarian crisis with shortages of food and medical services.

Netanyahu has said the war will only end with "total victory" for Israel, including crushing Hamas, a goal that is even viewed by some in Israel as unattainable.

Hamas has ruled Gaza for 17 years, since overrunning the territory in 2007, and has struck deep roots. Before the war, it ran a government apparatus with tens of thousands of civil servants and civil police.

In recent weeks, some Hamas policemen emerged in areas of northern Gaza from where Israeli forces had withdrawn, with the group saying they were determined to crack down on looting of abandoned properties and price-gouging.

Residents and first responders pulled bodies from the rubble of areas in western Gaza City from where troops had withdrawn earlier this week.

"The entire area has turned into rubble," said Assad Radwan, a Gaza City resident who lives close to Shifa Hospital, the strip's biggest. "Most of Gaza (city) has become unrecognizable for its own people."

In a sign of resilience, hundreds of people gathered Friday for outdoor prayers amid the destruction of the urban refugee camp of Jebaliya in northern Gaza. Friday prayers are the highlight of the Muslim religious week, and the mass gathering marked the first such service since the start of the war.

What to know about the situation in the Middle East this week

By BALINT SZLANKO Associated Press

Violence has continued this week in the Gaza Strip, as well as across the broader Middle East. The U.S. administration has been pushing for a prolonged cease-fire between Israel and Hamas, but so far has not succeeded. Here's what you need to know:

ISRAEL SAYS IT WILL FIGHT ON IN GAZA

Israel said Friday it would continue with its invasion of the Gaza Strip and push into the southern town of Rafah to uproot Hamas. More than half of the territory's 2.3 million people are packed into this city on

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the border with Egypt, and it's unclear where they can go. Egypt will not accept displacement of Palestinians on its territory, while much of the rest of the Gaza Strip is already under evacuation orders and is the scene of intense battles between Israel and Hamas.

The situation in Rafah is catastrophic: the town is packed, many people are living in tents, there is not enough food, electricity or water, and Israeli airstrikes kill people almost every day. Twenty-eight people died early Saturday. Close to 28,000 Palestinians have been killed since the conflict erupted, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry.

RIFT BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE U.S.

Israel's push for Rafah has widened the gap between it and the United States. The U.S. wants Israel to negotiate a cease-fire with Hamas, which would allow the remaining Israeli hostages to return home and help protect Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip. Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, snubbed Antony Blinken, the U.S. secretary of state, who visited Jerusalem with this message early this week; afterwards, Netanyahu called a press conference and said there would be no cease-fire and Israel would fight on until "total victory".

President Joe Biden on Thursday called Israel's approach to the war "over the top" and said that the suffering of civilians has "got to stop." Since the start of the war, these were perhaps the strongest words of criticism by Biden, who has broadly been supportive of the Israeli effort to destroy Hamas.

Israel launched its assault on the Gaza Strip after Palestinian militants killed 1,200 people in communities across southern Israel and kidnapped 250 on Oct. 7. Just over 100 Israeli hostages were swapped for Palestinian prisoners in a deal last November. About 100 are still held by Hamas; the rest are thought to have perished.

THE REGION REMAINS ON EDGE

The broader Middle East remains on edge as violence has also continued between the U.S. and armed groups allied with Iran. The U.S. military said on Friday it had launched another round of strikes against the Houthis in Yemen, targeting drone boats and anti-ship cruise missile launchers. The Houthis are an Iran-backed group that controls much of northern Yemen. They have been targeting international shipping in the Red Sea, one of the world's most important trading arteries, in an effort to put pressure on Israel to stop its campaign in Gaza.

The U.S. and Britain, in turn, have been bombing the Houthis, saying that they are trying to protect freedom of trade and navigation on the high seas. These attacks have so far not succeeded in deterring the Houthis: two more ships were targeted by their missiles on Wednesday.

Separately, a U.S. drone strike killed an Iraqi militia commander in Baghdad on Thursday. The U.S. said that the Kataib Hezbollah commander was responsible for "directly planning and participating in attacks" on American troops in the region. Kataib Hezbollah is one of many militias in Iraq that are backed by Iran's leaders. They use these armed groups to project power across the region and keep up pressure on their archenemy, Israel, as well as the U.S.

The groups have launched nearly 170 attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria since the start of the war in Gaza, last week killing three Americans and five Kurdish fighters allied with them. U.S. troops are in these places to contain the Islamic State group, which still has a presence in the deserts of eastern Syria and western Iraq.

EXPLAINER: Here's how to bet legally on the Super Bowl

By WAYNE PARRY Associated Press

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. (AP) — More people in the U.S. than ever before are expected to bet on this year's Super Bowl, including novice bettors attracted to the game due to the possible attendance of pop idol Taylor Swift, whose boyfriend Travis Kelce will be among the players.

With sports betting ads blitzing the airwaves with come-ons and promotions, things might be a bit confusing, especially for first-time bettors or those who don't fully understand how things work.

Here is a guide to betting on the big game between the Kansas City Chiefs and the San Francisco 49ers

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on Sunday night. We will deal here only with legal options from sportsbooks approved and regulated by government authorities in the U.S. This includes making bets in person at a casino or racetrack (call before you go; not every casino or track offers sports betting), or setting up an account from a computer or smartphone with online bookmakers.

And please keep in mind that this is supposed to be a fun form of entertainment, so only bet what you can afford to lose. Information about help with a gambling problem is included below.

WHAT IS A POINT SPREAD? OVER/UNDER WHAT?

Two of the most popular bets are on the point spread (the number of points by which a team must win the game in order for the bet to be a winner) and the total, also known as the over/under (the total number of points scored by both teams).

Contrary to popular belief, the point spread is not a consensus on how many points oddsmakers think one team will win by. Rather, it is a number designed to generate as close to an equal number of bets on both sides as possible. That way, the oddsmakers are guaranteed a profit through a cut of the action, called the vigorish, or "vig." (Many books call it "the price.") Most sportsbooks will keep 10% or more of a winning bet before paying you the rest, but they keep 100% of all losing bets. Prices on Super Bowl bets can vary significantly, so it pays to shop around to get the lowest price you can before making a bet.

Beating the spread is known as "covering." For the favored 49ers to cover their spread of 2.5 points, they must win the game by 3 or more points. Conversely, underdog Kansas City can cover by either winning the game outright, or losing by less than 3 points. (Odds and point totals are as of Friday from FanDuel Sportsbook, the official odds provider for The Associated Press. They could change before game time.)

Don't want to bother with points and just pick the winner? That's called the money line. A bet on the 49ers to just win the game, regardless of the score comes with less of a prize. You will have to bet \$130 of your own money just to win \$100. (Of course you get your original \$130 back as part of the \$230 payout.) A money line bet on Kansas City, however, will win \$110 on a \$100 bet, for a total payout of \$210.

If you believe the game will be a high-scoring affair, you might want to make a bet on the total, currently 47.5 points. That means if you bet the over, both teams combined must score at least 48 points for your bet to win. If it doesn't, people who bet the under will win.

CAN I MAKE MY OWN ODDS?

Yes. There are alternatives, but they can be costly. You can pick your own spread or total to improve your chance of winning, but the farther your pick deviates from the sportsbook's number, the less it will pay if you win. You also can choose a harder-to-reach number for a higher potential payout, such as betting that the 49ers will win by 20 points, but that's a very risky strategy.

Sportsbooks are also aggressively pushing combination bets, known as parlays, in which two or more outcomes must be accurately predicted. This can include the point spread, the total points scored, and whether a particular player reaches or falls short of a statistical milestone. The payouts for parlays are bigger, but for good reason: they're riskier bets. Every element of a parlay has to win or else the entire bet is a loser. It's not surprising that parlay bets are among sportsbooks' biggest money makers.

WHAT ELSE CAN I BET ON?

If this sounds like a lot to take in, there are much simpler ways to bet on the game, including some aimed at the casual fan or even someone who knows nothing at all about football. A perennial favorite is betting on the coin flip at the start of the game to determine which team can choose to get the ball first. There are only two choices: heads or tails, and it comes before the game even starts for those impatient to know whether their bet is a winner. You can even bet on which color of Gatorade the winning coach will be doused in at the game's conclusion.

This is what's called a proposition or "prop" bet. It involves betting on whether a particular event will or won't happen during the game, and there is a vast array to choose from. They can be disarmingly simple, such as guessing which team will get the ball first, whether the first score of the game will be a touchdown or a field goal, and whether or not the game will go into overtime.

Prop bets based on a particular player's performance are always popular during the Super Bowl. You can bet on whether Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes will pass for over or under 262.5 yards, how many

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catches his favorite target, tight end Kelce will have (over or under 6.5) and how many rushing yards 49ers running back Christian McCaffrey will gain (over or under 89.5).

CAN I BET WHILE THE GAME IS BEING PLAYED?

People with online sportsbook accounts can bet on ever-changing outcome odds as the game is being played; live-betting is the fastest-growing segment of sports betting. For instance, the game starts with the 49ers favored by 2.5 points, but say Kansas City scores two quick touchdowns to take a 14-0 lead. The in-game odds will change to reflect the current situation, and you can now bet on whether Kansas City will win by 14 or more points, or whether the 49ers will lose by less than that. Or say 49ers receiver Deebo Samuel is being shut down by Chiefs defenders, and appears unlikely to eclipse his pregame receiving yards total of 58.5 yards. Bettors can wager on whether he will or won't eclipse a lower number.

A word of caution, though: The number of these in-game bets and the rapidity with which odds change can be dangerous for those with a gambling problem, and many experts fear they could even tip a casual gambler toward becoming one with a problem. Some good advice: Set a budget in advance of money you can afford to lose, and stick to it. Look at betting on the game as a form of entertainment and not as a way to gain money that you need. If things head south, don't make additional bets to try to win back what you've lost. This is one of the quickest ways gamblers dig themselves a deep hole, and losses can rapidly pile up.

WHAT IF I THINK I MIGHT HAVE A GAMBLING PROBLEM?

Betting on the Super Bowl is supposed to be fun, and for most people, it is. But for others, compulsive gambling is a serious problem. For help, call 800-GAMBLER or visit www.gamblersanonymous.org.

It's not just Purdy: Several late picks and undrafted players making an impact for Chiefs, 49ers

By NOAH TRISTER AP Sports Writer

LAS VEGAS (AP) — If you're the last player picked in the NFL draft, at least you get a nickname — Mr. Irrelevant — and a certain amount of fanfare.

When you're taken a little bit earlier, you're just a normal seventh-round selection.

"I had no idea where I was going. If you had told me I went undrafted, I would be like, 'Makes sense, sure. I got it,'" said Kansas City guard Nick Allegretti, who was taken in the seventh round in 2019. "We didn't win a whole lot of games when I was in college, but I had confidence in myself."

Brock Purdy's journey from Mr. Irrelevant to Super Bowl starting quarterback is one of the main subplots of this year's game, but a handful of other late draft picks — and players who weren't drafted at all — have made contributions to the Chiefs and San Francisco 49ers. All of them are reminders that you can build a memorable NFL career no matter how long it takes someone to choose you.

Allegretti was drafted with the 216th pick overall. The Illinois product is now in his fifth season with the Chiefs, having already won two Super Bowls. He's played an important role this postseason, replacing injured All-Pro Joe Thuney for the AFC championship game.

Kansas City took running back Isiah Pacheco in 2022 with the 251st pick — 11 spots ahead of where the 49ers picked Purdy. Over two seasons, Pacheco has rushed for 1,765 yards and 12 touchdowns.

There's a school of thought that once you reach the latest stages of the draft, it's better not to be picked. Then you're a free agent and can shop around for the best situation.

But joining Kansas City and playing alongside Patrick Mahomes has worked out nicely for Pacheco.

"Being a seventh-round draft pick shaped me as a player knowing I was wanted," he said. "It didn't matter where you came from, just having an opportunity and making the best out of it."

Even for an undrafted player, there's always hope. Kurt Warner, for example, was the MVP of Super Bowl 34.

Jake Brendel came into the league undrafted out of UCLA. Now in his eighth NFL season, he's San Francisco's starting center.

"My first goal when I was a kid was just to get to college, and once I got to college, I was like, 'I'm pretty

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good at this. I could probably make it in the NFL," Brendel said. "Once I got in the NFL, it was, 'Let's get a multiyear deal.' That happened last year, and I was like, 'Let's rearrange my goals a little bit and see if we can get a Super Bowl.'"

San Francisco safety Tashaun Gipson has waited even longer. After 174 starts — regular season and play-offs — with five teams over 12 seasons, he's finally in a Super Bowl. Being undrafted has stuck with him.

"I think it meant the world. Honestly, I wouldn't trade my path to the National Football League. I think it made me who I am today. It made me have a chip on my shoulder," he said. "I don't think I ever got relaxed one moment, and it just kept me grounded as crazy as that may sound. I think that's probably paid the biggest dividends to be the man I am right now."

Gipson is a big reason the 49ers are in the Super Bowl. He forced a fumble in the NFC championship game that was crucial to San Francisco's comeback against Detroit.

But in truth, he's been good enough to reach a stage like this for a while. He just needed the right team.

That's true for a lot of players, particularly those who are undrafted or taken late. It's all about finding a good situation.

"I knew all I wanted was an opportunity, an opportunity to get somewhere," Allegretti said. "The fact I got an opportunity in Kansas City's been incredible — the organization, coach (Andy) Reid, (offensive line) coach (Andy) Heck. Awesome men to play for."

Pakistan hits back at criticism of election conduct and insists cellphone curbs were necessary

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Pakistan on Saturday hit back at criticism over the conduct of its parliamentary elections, which were held amid sporadic militant attacks and an unprecedented stoppage of all mobile phone services.

The strongly worded reaction from the Foreign Ministry insisted the vote was peaceful and successful.

The U.S. State Department said that Thursday's vote was held under undue restrictions on freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly. The European Union has also said it regrets the lack of a level playing field due to the inability of some political actors to contest the elections.

The ministry said it was surprised by "the negative tone of some of these statements, which neither take into account the complexity of the electoral process, nor acknowledge the free and enthusiastic exercise of the right to vote by tens of millions of Pakistanis".

It said such statements "ignore the undeniable fact that Pakistan has held general elections, peacefully and successfully, while dealing with serious security threats resulting primarily from foreign sponsored terrorism."

It said there was no nationwide internet shutdown and "only mobile services were suspended for the day to avoid terrorist incidents on polling day."

A Commonwealth observer group praised election officials for holding the vote despite multiple attacks, and said it received reports of intimidation and violence against candidates, members of the media and other citizens. Without naming any party, it said it also received reports of arrests and detentions, "especially of supporters and members of a main political party."

In Thursday's vote, no political party gained a simple majority and independent candidates backed by imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan took a lead in the vote count.

It forced Khan's main rival, three-time premier Nawaz Sharif, to announce plans to try to form a coalition government. Khan was disqualified from running because of criminal convictions.

Candidates backed by Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, or PTI, won 100 out of the 266 seats up for grabs in the National Assembly. Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League party captured 71 seats.

On Saturday, PTI chairman Gohar Khan accused authorities of rigging the vote but said despite that, his party would still form the government. He assured supporters that Khan would be among them soon after being freed, though he did not say how Khan would come out of prison.

Also Saturday, the leader of a political party was wounded and two police officers killed in a clash in the

country's northwest.

The violence broke out in North Waziristan when Mohsin Dawar and his supporters tried to march toward an army facility while protesting delays in announcing the election result, police official Zahid Khan said.

Taylor Swift prepares for an epic journey to the Super Bowl. Will she make it?

By FOSTER KLUG Associated Press
TOKYO (AP) — Will she make it?

Taylor Swift's last song will still be ringing in the ears of thousands of fans at the Tokyo Dome on Saturday night when the singer is expected to rush to a private jet at Haneda airport that will take her on a time-zone-spanning journey to see her boyfriend, NFL star Travis Kelce, play in the Super Bowl in Las Vegas.

The prospect of this race against time, crossing nine time zones and the international date line, has fired imaginations, and speculation, for weeks.

At Saturday night's concert, there was plenty of evidence of the unique cultural phenomenon that is the Swift-Kelce relationship, a nexus of professional football and the huge star power of Swift. In addition to sequined dresses celebrating Swift in the packed Tokyo Dome, there were Travis Kelce jerseys and hats and other gear celebrating his team, the Kansas City Chiefs. Some in Tokyo spent thousands of dollars to attend the pop superstar's concerts this week.

To call the worldwide scrutiny of Swift's travels intense is an understatement.

Fans have tracked her jet. The planet-warming carbon emissions of her globe-trotting travels have been criticized. Officials have weighed in on her ability to park her jet in Las Vegas airports.

Even Japanese diplomats have gotten into the act. The Japanese Embassy in Washington posted on social media that she could make the Super Bowl in time, including in their statement three Swift song titles — "Speak Now", "Fearless" and "Red."

"If she departs Tokyo in the evening after her concert, she should comfortably arrive in Las Vegas before the Super Bowl begins," it said.

Office worker Hitomi Takahashi, 29, bought matching Taylor Swift sweatshirts along with her friend and was taking photos just outside of the dome on Saturday. "I hope she can return in time. It's so romantic," she said.

She is aware of the criticisms Swift is facing about her private jets, but said the singer was being singled out unfairly.

"Many other people are flying on business, and she is here for her work. She faces a bashing because she is famous and stands out," Takahashi said.

Swift has been crisscrossing the globe this week already.

Before coming to Asia, she attended the Grammys in Los Angeles, winning her 14th Grammy and a record-breaking fourth Album of the Year award for "Midnights." The show was watched by nearly 17 million people. She also made a surprise announcement that her next album is ready to drop in April.

Then the four concerts in Tokyo, and now apparently a rushed trip to try to make it to Las Vegas to watch Kelce, the tight end for the Kansas City Chiefs, play in the Super Bowl. She has followed Kelce for much of the Chiefs' season.

If it all goes as planned she's then expected to fly to Australia later this week to continue her tour.

"This week is truly the best kind of chaos," Swift posted Wednesday on Instagram.

Delays, deals, nepo babies, trends and vote rigging: Five takeaways from Pakistan's elections

By RIAZAT BUTT undefined

LAHORE, Pakistan (AP) — Pakistan held parliamentary election last Thursday, with 44 parties fighting for a share of 266 seats in the National Assembly, or lower house of parliament. A further 70 seats have been reserved for minorities and women. If no party wins a majority of 169 seats, the one with the biggest share can form a coalition government.

The vote was overshadowed by violence, an unprecedented national shutdown of all mobile phone services and allegations of vote rigging.

Here are the five main takeaways from the election.

DELAYS, DELAYS, DELAYS

The national mobile shutdown was aimed at maintaining law and order following several attacks, but it was also responsible for a delay in the communication of results, according to authorities. The Election Commission hadn't published any results more than 15 hours after polls closed.

By Saturday midday, there were still a dozen results pending, with no reason given for the tardiness in announcing these. The list of new parliamentarians can only be published once all the results are out, prolonging uncertainty and instability.

Pakistan's national human rights body said there was no excuse for the hold-up and expressed concern about the lack of transparency. The international community, including the U.S. and European Union, was also worried about how long it was taking to publish all of the results.

VOTE-RIGGING AND OTHER TRICKS

Candidates observing the count at polling stations said they saw significant leads suddenly disappear or results that were announced in their favor only to be reversed to declare an opponent the winner. They said they were marched off polling station grounds or barred from entering once voting ended and that polling agents were stopped from collecting results.

The majority of irregularities and impediments were reported by independent candidates backed by imprisoned ex-premier Imran Khan's party. One of them, Salman Akram Raja, has filed a case at Lahore High Court challenging the results in his constituency.

TRENDS AND TURNOUTS

The Election Commission hasn't released information about voter turnout, saying it will do so once all the results are out. But early analysis from the Free and Fair Election Network said up to 60 million people went to the polls last Thursday, out of a total electorate of 127 million. That's a 47% turnout, lower than the one for the 2018 parliamentary polls.

The organization also said that more votes went to political parties or independent candidates backed by Khan's PTI party and that major parties have found support bases outside their traditional strongholds.

DEALS, DEALS, DEALS

No party won a majority of National Assembly seats. But two of them claimed victory anyway. A coalition is inevitable and the horse-trading has started.

By Friday midnight in the eastern city of Lahore, the younger brother of three-time premier Nawaz Sharif had met kingmaker and former president, Asif Ali Zardari, and his son, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari. The Bhutto-Zardaris run the Pakistan People's Party, which has 54 seats so far. Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League, or PML-N, party has 71. They could muster the remaining votes from other lawmakers to get the required number.

The independents, meanwhile, have to tell the National Assembly within 72 hours if they have joined a party or want to maintain their independent status. They have 100 seats, making them a valuable prize for the Sharifs and Bhutto-Zardaris.

NEPO BABIES

Pakistani politics are a family affair. Maryam Nawaz Sharif is the daughter of ex-premier Nawaz Sharif. Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's mother is the assassinated premier Benazir Bhutto. Benazir's father was Zulfikar

Ali Bhutto, also a prime minister.

Maryam Nawaz and Bilawal have increased their public visibility in recent years, him with his stint as foreign minister, and her taking on a greater role in party politics, especially during her father's four years of self-exile abroad in the UK to avoid prison sentences.

While Bilawal has been PPP's chairman since 2007 and is likely to be prime minister at some point because of his lineage, Maryam is being groomed for the top job and has been cast as heir of the PML-N, over her uncle Shehbaz and his son Hamza.

She accompanied her father at rallies, giving fiery and uncompromising speeches, and escorted him on polling day when he went to cast his vote. If she doesn't get a role in the cabinet, her father could slot her into the job of chief minister of Punjab province, seen as a stepping stone to the premiership.

As Indonesia goes to the polls, women and minority candidates face challenges

By NINIEK KARMINI Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — With a broad smile on his face, Jakarta city council candidate Rian Ernest answers almost every question about his faith with the same line.

"I'm Christian, but my wife and children are Muslims, so pray for me to get the guidance," Ernest said.

Ernest is one of thousands of candidates facing the contradictions of seeking office as a member of a minority in the world's third-largest democracy, which is holding national elections on Wednesday.

Elections in the country often reveal a tension between pluralism and the power of conservatives from its Muslim majority.

Nearly 90% of Indonesia's 277 million people are Muslims. There are just under a million Christians in Jakarta, out of around 10 million people.

Christians like Ernest hold around 14% of seats in the national legislature, while making up just under 9% of the general population, but they face constant questions about their faith. A national quota system has helped more women win office, but fallen short of its own targets. And in this election, a new party is seeking to win representation for marginalized groups like domestic workers and people with disabilities.

Ernest, a lawyer turned politician, is running for a seat in the city legislature in East Jakarta for Golkar, Indonesia's second largest party. The capital is one of the best places to run as a Christian, he says.

Jakarta elected an ethnic Chinese Christian governor in 2014, but he lost reelection after conservative Muslims accused him of blasphemy, and wound up jailed for it.

After Basuki Tjahaja Purnama accused rivals of misinterpreting the Quran to oppose a Christian governor, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in protests. Now Anies Baswedan, who rode the protests to victory over Purnama in the 2017 governor's race, is a leading candidate for president.

"It's the kind of mindset that might make some non-Muslim candidates think twice about campaigning in a conservative Muslim community," Ernest said. He added that most Indonesians are tolerant unless something triggers a conflict, and the country has a pluralist society that respects freedom of expression.

This year, Ernest is trying to win over voters by offering rice for around half the usual price, with a picture of Ernest, his candidate number and a campaign message in each one. He says it's a better alternative to vote buying, which is widespread in Indonesian elections.

Supriatna, a 22-year-old food vendor and first-time voter, said he appreciated the campaign stop in a neighborhood almost never visited by politicians. He said Ernest's faith does not concern him.

"The most important thing is that legislative candidates want to go directly to the grassroots, asking directly what the people need," said Supriatna, a first-time voter who, like many Indonesians, uses only one name.

Female candidates face perhaps a steeper uphill battle, despite a quota system requiring 30% of candidates to be women since 2004.

Since 2004, the number of seats held by women in the national parliament has climbed from around 8%

to just over 21%, according to World Bank figures. Women are even rarer in provincial and district legislatures, only 18% and 15% respectively, according to the General Election Commission. In 25 of Indonesia's 167 district parliaments, no women at all were elected in 2019.

"I want to be there to voice the needs and issues of women that must be accommodated by law," said Muharyati, another candidate in East Jakarta, who goes by only one name.

A 54-year-old single parent of two whose left hand is partially missing, Muharyati chairs the Indonesian Association of Disabled Women and says she had to endure ridicule because of doubts about her competence to sit in Jakarta's House of Representatives.

She is running with the newly formed Labor Party, which is putting forward candidates from marginalized groups in its races across the country.

Muharyati said many policies, laws and regulations tend not to side with women, especially women with disabilities.

"I will fight for equal rights for women and people with disabilities if I am elected to office," Muharyati said.

Another Labor Party candidate, Yuni Sri Rahayu, 41, is seeking to represent Indonesia's millions of domestic workers, who are not protected under Indonesian labor laws and regulations.

She has worked as a domestic helper since the age of 16, and is a board member of the National Advocacy Network for Domestic Workers.

Some 9 million Indonesians were in domestic work in the country and abroad as of 2020, according to an estimate by Indonesia's National Commission on Violence Against Women released in 2020.

Rahayu says her professional background has been an obstacle for her in convincing the residents to support her in February legislative election.

"I want to fight and encourage lawmakers to immediately pass the domestic worker protection bill into law," she said.

Lawmakers first proposed a bill to protect domestic workers in 2004, addressing issues of discrimination, abuse and humiliation, but it's never passed, despite at least three more attempts.

Domestic workers often work long hours without adequate rest or time off, and have little protection from violence from employers. They also do not receive no social security.

"Many people think it is an odd that a housemaid is contesting for legislator," Rahayu said. "But we seriously need representatives in the parliament to voice the rights of fellow domestic workers."

2 people dead after small plane attempts emergency landing on southwest Florida interstate

NAPLES, Fla. (AP) — Two people have died after a small plane attempted to make an emergency landing on Interstate 75 in southwest Florida on Friday afternoon, colliding with a vehicle and bringing traffic to a halt as a massive plume of black smoke rose into the air.

The crash landing happened near the Pine Ridge Road exit in Collier County, just north of where the interstate heads east toward Fort Lauderdale along what is known as Alligator Alley.

Brianna Walker saw the wing of the plane drag the car in front of hers and slam into the wall.

"It's seconds that separated us from the car in front of us," she said. "The wing pulverized this one car."

Walker and her friend spotted the plane moments before it hit the highway, allowing her friend to pull over before the crash.

"The plane was over our heads by inches," she said. "It took a hard right and skid across the highway."

Walker said an explosion of flames then burst from the plane with a loud boom. Pieces of the plane littered the highway.

"It feels unreal, like a movie," she said. "It was seconds between us dying."

The Federal Aviation Administration identified the aircraft as a Bombardier Challenger 600 jet and said five people were aboard when the crash happened around 3:15 pm.

The plane had taken off from an airport at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, at about 1 p.m. and was scheduled to land in Naples around the time of the crash, Naples Airport Authority spokesperson

Robin King said. A pilot had contacted the tower requesting an emergency landing, saying they had lost both engines.

The pilot was cleared to land on a runway but replied "we're not going to make the runway. We've lost both engines," according to a tape of the call cited by the the Naples Daily News.

The tower lost contact, and then airport workers saw the smoke from the interstate just a few miles away, King said.

King said they sent fire trucks with special foam to the scene, and three of the five people on board were taken from the wreckage alive.

Collier County Sheriff's Office spokesperson Adam Fisher confirmed two deaths, but said he didn't immediately know whether the victims had been passengers on the plane or were on the ground.

According to the FlightAware aircraft tracker, the plane was operated by Hop-a-Jet Worldwide Charter based in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The aircraft had been scheduled to fly back to Fort Lauderdale Friday afternoon.

Hop-a-Jet said Friday night that it had "received confirmed reports of an accident involving one of our leased aircraft near Naples" and would send a team to the crash site, the Naples Daily News reported.

"Our immediate concern is for the well-being of our passengers, crew members, and their families," the statement said. It didn't contain details of the crash.

A spokesperson for Ohio State University said the aircraft is not affiliated with the university, and they had no further information about it.

The FAA and the National Transportation Safety Board will investigate, with the NTSB leading the investigation. One NTSB investigator arrived at the crash site Friday afternoon, with several more expected to arrive on Saturday. They will document the scene and examine the aircraft, which will then be taken to a secure facility for further evaluation. A preliminary report about the cause of the crash can be expected in 30 days.

Southbound lanes of the interstate remained closed late Friday night, according to the Florida Highway Patrol.

How Biden and his allies are pushing back against a special counsel's claims about his memory

By STEVE PEOPLES, ZEKE MILLER and SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's Democratic allies are launching an aggressive defense against a special counsel's explosive claims that the 81-year-old president couldn't remember major milestones in his life, trying to diminish the significance of the prosecutor's allegations that Biden was too forgetful to be charged for mishandling classified material.

Biden set the angry tone hours after special counsel Robert Hur's report was released, dismissing the report's conclusions about his memory and insisting he hadn't forgotten the year his son Beau died, as Hur claimed. Democrats on Capitol Hill and around the country quickly followed.

"Republicans saying that Biden is old is the least surprising thing in American politics," Sen. Brian Schatz, D-Hawaii, said. "It's all they've got."

Democrats plan to answer the widespread questions about the 81-year-old president's age and readiness by affirming that Biden is capable of being commander-in-chief and trying to discredit people who portray him as enfeebled. Key to that strategy is drawing a core contrast with former President Donald Trump, the heavy Republican front-runner who is himself 77 and has also confused names and facts while also facing four indictments and multiple multimillion-dollar civil judgments.

The signs of support are crucial for Biden as he prepares for what could be a tight election against Trump. Even before the report's release, fears were mounting that the coalition that helped elect Biden in 2020 was fraying, making it all the more important for Biden to keep as many supporters as possible firmly on his side.

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The Biden campaign circulated talking points to allies that were obtained by The Associated Press. The talking points refer to Hur, who served as a U.S. attorney during the Trump administration, as a "MAGA-appointed attorney who doesn't have a case so he decided to lob personal attacks against the president."

The talking points also stressed that Hur is "a lawyer — not a doctor — so people should take his legal conclusions and ignore his political opinions."

The White House has also noted Biden cooperated with Hur, who declined to charge him with unlawfully retaining classified documents, while Trump faces an indictment in Florida after the FBI seized records from his Mar-a-Lago residence.

"The way that the president's demeanor in that report was characterized could not be more wrong on the facts and clearly politically motivated, gratuitous," Vice President Kamala Harris declared Friday in Washington. "I will say that when it comes to the role and responsibility of a prosecutor in a situation like that, we should expect that there would be a higher level of integrity than what we saw."

Indignation spread into South Carolina, where Biden scored a commanding victory in the first-in-the-nation Democratic primary on Feb. 3, which was designed by his campaign to project clear strength. Some saw Biden's forceful response to the special counsel as a promising sign.

"I truly believe this is bringing the best out in the president. It's showing that he's a fighter," said LaJoia Broughton, a 42-year-old small-business owner in Columbia who cast a vote for Biden in the primary.

Biden aides say they do not expect the president or his campaign to take on the age question more directly. They can't make Biden any younger, and note that attacks on the president over his age were also persistent four years ago, when Trump labeled him "Sleepy Joe."

Instead, they intend to draw on the blueprint of the 2020 campaign and argue many voters won't want a repeat of Trump's turbulent time in the White House. They also plan to highlight Biden's accomplishments and an economy that continues to show strength.

"The president has said that age is a fair question on voters' minds, but if you're an independent or persuadable voter across this country and you're worried about your kid facing gun violence while going to school, the prospect a national abortion ban, or the future of our democracy, you may think about the president's age, but at the end of the day the choice is easy," said Kate Berner, a former Biden deputy communications director in the White House. "Donald Trump is on the wrong side of all of those issues."

Some Democrats weren't so optimistic.

"This is a distraction. When you're running a presidential campaign, you don't like distractions," said Jim Messina, who led former President Barack Obama's last campaign.

Messina compared the special counsel's report to former FBI Director James Comey's October 2016 announcement that he was further investigating former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's handling of classified emails. Comey's announcement, which came 11 days before the election, has been blamed for helping Trump beat Clinton.

In this case, this week's report comes more than nine months before Election Day.

"There's just so much time to get through all this," Messina said. "Trump has all the trials coming up. I'd be surprised if this was an issue in a month."

Still, Trump's allies were emboldened this week.

Beyond celebrating the release of the special counsel's embarrassing descriptions of Biden, Trump won a new trove of delegates in Nevada's Thursday caucuses, where he ran unopposed.

"We all already know that Joe Biden is senile. What's being lost is that Joe Biden is a criminal who put American national security at risk," Donald Trump Jr. wrote in one of many messages highlighting the new report.

Barry Goodman, a Biden fundraiser from Michigan, said he's had some donors "take a wait and see approach" about supporting Biden, even before the special counsel's announcement.

"They wanted to see if someone else would get in or whether Trump would drop out — but no one else is getting in," Goodman said. "Of everyone I talk to, some are more excited than others."

Still, Goodman said this week's report did nothing to shake his support for Biden.

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Trav Robertson, a former South Carolina Democratic Party chairman, described the report as an obvious political liability for Biden. But he directed blame squarely at Attorney General Merrick Garland for allowing the report to include comments about the president's age, memory and cognitive function.

"Merrick Garland not doing his job only allowed a Trump appointee to feed a political narrative to deflect from Trump," Robertson said, adding, "Donald Trump can't lift a glass of water to his lips without using both hands because he's old."

Indeed, Biden's allies were eager to highlight a perceived double standard as Biden's gaffes get far more attention than those of other leading politicians.

Trump repeatedly confused former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Republican rival Nikki Haley in recent weeks. Biden didn't help himself, of course, by referring to the Egyptian leader as the president of Mexico late Thursday.

"There's a clear unfairness there that people feel," Rep. Dan Goldman, D-N.Y., a former U.S. attorney, said of the focus on Biden's gaffes, describing the special counsel's assessment of Biden's mental health as "improper," "inappropriate" and "shameful."

Rep. Robert Garcia, D-Calif., noted that even House Speaker Mike Johnson also recently confused Iran with Israel.

"Who cares?" Garcia said of the gaffes. "The president is going to win. I'm very confident in that. Most importantly, he's going to be running against a 91-time indicted criminal."

Trump tells NRA members 'no one will lay a finger on your firearms' if he returns to the White House

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Former President Donald Trump told thousands of members of the National Rifle Association that "no one will lay a finger on your firearms" if he returns to the White House, and bragged that during his time as president he "did nothing" to curb guns.

"During my four years nothing happened. And there was great pressure on me having to do with guns. We did nothing. We didn't yield," he said as he addressed the NRA's Great American Outdoor Show in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Friday evening.

Casting himself as "the best friend gun owners have ever had in the White House," Trump pledged to continue to protect gun owners' rights, even as the country grapples with a crisis of gun violence and mass shootings that have left more than 3,000 dead since 2006.

"Your Second Amendment will always be safe with me as your president," he said.

Fresh off another dominant win in the Nevada caucuses Thursday night, Trump used the NRA forum to highlight his support of gun rights, a major priority for GOP voters. The issue is also a major motivator for Democrats as well as younger voters who grew up participating in active shooter drills and have witnessed a spate of school shootings in recent years.

Next week will mark the sixth anniversary of one of those shootings, the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, that left 17 dead.

Trump grappled with Parkland and other mass shootings as president, and at times pledged to strengthen gun laws, only to back away from those vows.

At a meeting with survivors and family members of the Parkland shooting in 2018, Trump promised to be "very strong on background checks" and later scolded a Republican senator for being "afraid of the NRA," claiming he would stand up to the gun lobby and finally get results on quelling gun violence.

But he later retreated after a meeting with the group, expressing support for modest changes to the federal background check system and for arming teachers, while saying in a post on X, formerly Twitter, that there was "not much political support (to put it mildly)."

In December 2018, his administration banned bump stocks, the attachments that allow semi-automatic weapons to fire like machine guns and were used during the October 2017 shooting massacre in Las Vegas.

TJ Ducklo, a spokesman for Biden's reelection campaign, accused Trump of placating the gun lobby

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Friday night and said "the American people are the ones who will suffer and die if he's allowed anywhere near the Oval Office again."

Trump's appearance Friday in the critical swing state came as the Republican nominating contest that he has been dominating turns toward South Carolina. The state's Feb. 24 primary may prove the last chance for Nikki Haley, Trump's last remaining rival, to blunt the former president's march toward the nomination. He and Haley will hold dueling campaign events there this weekend.

Trump hopes that a commanding win in the first-in-the-South race will deliver a devastating blow to Haley, who has yet to win a GOP contest. Haley, who was elected South Carolina's governor twice, is betting that a home state advantage will lift her to a strong performance that could keep her in the race through Super Tuesday on March 5, when more than a dozen states will hold contests awarding a massive swath of the delegates needed to capture the GOP nomination.

"We're leading everybody," Trump said late Thursday following his Nevada victory. "Is there any way we can call the election for next Tuesday? That's all I want."

Trump had no competition in Nevada after Haley chose to skip Thursday's caucuses to participate in an earlier primary that offered no delegates. But even without Trump on that ballot, Haley came in a distant second, swamped by GOP voters who picked a "none of these candidates" option.

Beyond Haley's embarrassing Nevada defeat, Trump had an especially fortuitous week.

On Thursday morning, the Supreme Court seemed weary of attempts to kick him off the 2024 ballot under the Constitution's Insurrection Clause. Both conservative and liberal justices voiced skepticism during a hearing over Colorado's decision to disqualify Trump from its primary ballot because he refuses to accept the results of the 2020 election, which culminated in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Hours later, special counsel Robert Hur released a long-awaited and biting report that concluded criminal charges against President Joe Biden were not warranted but said there was evidence Biden willfully retained and shared highly classified information when he was a private citizen, including documents about military and foreign policy in Afghanistan. The report repeatedly pointed to Biden's hazy memory in language that has raised new concerns about the president's competency and age — a top concern for voters.

The findings will almost certainly blunt Biden's ability to criticize Trump over his handling of classified documents. Trump was charged by a different special counsel, Jack Smith, for illegally hoarding classified records at his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida after he left office and then obstructing government efforts to get them back.

Despite abundant differences between the cases, Trump, who insists he did nothing wrong, on Friday cast the decision to charge him and not Biden as "nothing more than selective prosecution of Biden's political opponent: me."

"Trump was peanuts by comparison," he claimed.

Trump's speech to the NRA — his eighth, according to the group — comes as the former political juggernaut has played a diminished role this election cycle amid financial troubles, dwindling membership and infighting.

The group's longtime CEO, Wayne LaPierre, resigned last month ahead of a trial in New York over allegations that he treated himself to millions of dollars in private jet flights, yacht trips, African safaris and other extravagant perks at the powerful gun rights organization's expense.

The New York attorney general sued LaPierre and three co-defendants in 2020, claiming widespread mispending and self-enrichment. The organization filed for bankruptcy and sought to incorporate in Texas instead of New York, but a judge rejected the move.

Magnitude 5.7 earthquake strikes Mauna Loa volcano on Hawaii's Big Island; no major damage reported

By AUDREY McAVOY and JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — A magnitude 5.7 earthquake struck the world's largest active volcano on Friday — Mauna Loa on the Big Island of Hawaii — knocking items off shelves and cutting power in a nearby town but not immediately prompting reports of serious damage.

The earthquake, which didn't cause a tsunami and which the U.S. Geological Survey initially reported as magnitude 6.3, was centered on Mauna Loa's southern flank at a depth of 23 miles (37 kilometers), 1.3 miles (2 kilometers) southwest of Pahala.

"It shook us bad to where it wobbled some knees a little bit," said Derek Nelson, the manager of the Kona Canoe Club restaurant in the oceanside community of Kona, on the island's western side. "It shook all the windows in the village."

There was a power outage affecting about 300 customers in Naalehu that appeared to be related to the earthquake, said Darren Pai, spokesperson for Hawaiian Electric Company.

The earthquake struck after 10 a.m. local time, less than two hours before an unrelated quake with a preliminary magnitude of 4.6 shook Southern California.

Mauna Loa last erupted in late 2022. It's one of five volcanoes that make up the Big Island, which is the southernmost in the Hawaiian archipelago.

Earthquakes can occur in Hawaii for a variety of reasons, including magma moving under the surface. In Friday's case, the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory said the likely cause was the weight of the Hawaiian Islands bending and stressing the Earth's crust and upper mantle.

That's what caused a magnitude 6.9 earthquake that struck off Kiholo Bay on the Big Island's northwest coast in 2006. That temblor damaged roads and buildings and knocked out power as far away as Honolulu, on the island of Oahu, about 200 miles (322 kilometers) to the north.

Helen Janiszewski, an assistant professor in the University of Hawaii at Manoa's Department of Earth Sciences, said the Hawaiian Islands lie on the Pacific oceanic tectonic plate and have some of the world's biggest volcanoes.

"So there's a huge amount of mass of rock associated with the islands and because of that, it's actually enough to slightly displace the Pacific oceanic plate beneath the islands," she said. "And that force causes earthquakes sometimes."

This type of earthquake tends to occur several tens of kilometers beneath the Earth's surface in the mantle, Janiszewski said. Quakes caused by moving magma tend to hit more shallow depths.

The observatory said Friday's earthquake didn't affect either Mauna Loa or a neighboring volcano, Kilauea.

There were no immediate reports of damage to telescopes on the summit of Mauna Kea, another nearby volcano that has some of the world's most advanced observatories for studying the night sky.

Jessica Ferracane, a spokesperson at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, said there was no apparent damage to its roads or visitor centers. Earthquakes are not uncommon, she said, but this one was "much more intense" than usual.

The Hawaiian Islands have been built by successive volcanic eruptions over millions of years. The vast majority of earthquakes in Hawaii occur on and around the Big Island. About once every 1.5 years, there is an earthquake in the state that is magnitude 5 or greater, according to the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory.

The Big Island is mostly rural and hosts cattle ranches, coffee farms and resort hotels. But it also has a few small cities, including the county seat of Hilo, population 45,000.

Friday's earthquake could be felt in Honolulu. Big Island Mayor Mitch Roth was at a cardiologist appointment there and initially thought he was experiencing side effects from a procedure: "All of a sudden I felt like I was getting dizzy."

He said he immediately got on the phone with his emergency management officials when he realized it was an earthquake, and that he was heading to the Honolulu airport to try to get an earlier flight back.

Grace Tabios, the owner of Will and Grace Filipino Variety Store in Naalehu, said the shaking knocked

down her husband, who was working at their coffee farm in Pahala. At the store, jars of mayonnaise and medicine from the Philippines fell off the shelves.

"Some things fell down but didn't break," Tabios said.

Uproar over Biden classified documents report carries echoes of 2016 Clinton email case

By ERIC TUCKER and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The release of a harshly critical Justice Department special counsel report on President Joe Biden has triggered instant flashbacks to history-shaping events of 2016. That's when FBI Director James Comey castigated Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton over her email practices despite recommending against charges.

In this year's already heated election season, the Justice Department cleared Democrat Biden, too, of criminal wrongdoing but painted a politically damaging picture of his handling of classified information.

Both announcements were derided by Democrats for their potential to unduly shape public perception in an election year — and for the inclusion of what they saw as gratuitous swipes at their candidates. In particular, Hur's detailed discussion of apparent memory lapses by Biden revived a long-running debate within legal circles about how much derogatory information is appropriate to place in the public realm about individuals like Biden and Clinton who are investigated but not charged.

"I think what we saw was a special counsel who was trying to be as complete as possible and trying to be as transparent as possible with the public about every aspect of the investigation," Robert Mintz, a former federal prosecutor, said of the Hur report.

"But ultimately," he added, "some of these observations were more subjective than objective, and I think it's fair for individuals to question whether or not some of the phrasing that was put in the report was entirely necessary."

To be sure, there are significant differences between the Clinton and Biden investigations, including that the Biden probe concluded a full nine months before this year's election while a final statement from Comey on Clinton came just nine days before voters went to the polls in 2016.

As FBI director, Comey broke from the norm by delivering a detailed public statement marking the conclusion of the Clinton email investigation, even though such announcements — to the extent they're made at all — normally would come from the Justice Department.

Hur, by contrast, was fulfilling his duties under Justice Department regulations by drafting a report that was presumably meant for public consumption. Such reports, like special counsel Robert Mueller's 2019 one about President Donald Trump and Russia, often include unflattering narratives about people who were not charged with a crime.

Justice Department regulations mandate that special counsels produce their reports, confidentially, to the attorney general. But they don't dictate what should be in those reports, said former Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who appointed Mueller and was once Hur's boss.

"The policy is about what you release to the public," Rosenstein said in an email, adding that the authority to release the memo rested solely with Attorney General Merrick Garland.

In both the Biden and Clinton cases, the language used to characterize the subjects has been as closely scrutinized — and criticized — as the decision not to prosecute.

Comey, in a July 2016 announcement at FBI headquarters, pointedly referred to Clinton as "extremely careless" in her handling of classified information on a private email server she used as secretary of state — even as he detailed all the reasons she shouldn't be prosecuted.

Hur said he would not have charged Biden, even independent of a Justice Department legal opinion that says sitting presidents cannot be indicted. But one particular prong of his reasoning for not prosecuting was especially notable — the potential that the president would come across to a jury as a "sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory." During an interview with Hur's office, the report said, Biden could not immediately recall the dates of his vice presidency or what year his son Beau died.

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Those comments prompted fierce pushback from Biden himself, who in a White House news conference grew visibly angry as he denied not knowing when his son had died. Insisting his memory was fine, he said of Hur's reference to Beau Biden: "How in the hell dare he raise that?"

Anticipating the explosive nature of the memory claims, the president's attorneys wrote Hur before the report was released to complain about the inclusion of what they said was "highly prejudicial" commentary. "Such comments have no place in a Department of Justice report, particularly one that in the first paragraph announces that no criminal charges are 'warranted' and that 'the evidence does not establish Mr. Biden's guilt,'" wrote Richard Sauber, special counsel to the president, and Bob Bauer, Biden's personal lawyer.

As with Comey's statement on Clinton, the report was delivered not only in an election year but in a bitterly polarized political climate. The FBI closed its investigation in July 2016 but reopened it less than two weeks before Election Day after potential new evidence was discovered. Comey cleared Clinton anew nine days before the election, but in a final jolt blamed by Democrats for contributing to her loss.

Though this year's election is nine months away, discussion of Biden's memory cuts to the core of deep-seated voter concerns about his age approaching the November contest.

"The prosecutor would absolutely be aware of the context in which he is publicizing these types of gratuitous and unnecessary remarks," said former Justice Department prosecutor Christopher Mattei. "And just looking at the reaction that they've gotten, it's quite clear, and totally predictable, that these types of remarks would have political ramifications, even during a primary season."

Hur's selection as special counsel in January 2023 was clearly meant to show a nonpartisan approach by Garland. Hur had held senior leadership roles in the Trump Justice Department, both in Washington and as U.S. attorney for Maryland, and as a younger lawyer clerked for William Rehnquist, the conservative Supreme Court chief justice.

Garland, meanwhile, has worked assiduously for the last three years to combat Republican claims of a politicized Justice Department by repeatedly taking steps designed to prove that he is not catering to the interests of Biden or his family. That includes the appointment of a different special counsel to investigate Biden's son, Hunter, who is now facing federal tax and gun charges in two states.

Yet once the report was released, Democrats and some former Justice Department officials appeared taken aback by the report's findings. Some openly undermine his findings.

A Justice Department spokeswoman declined to comment.

Like Comey, Hur's job was never going to be easy — especially not when a different special counsel, Jack Smith, already charged Trump with hoarding classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate. It fell to Hur to illuminate in his report the differences in the fact patterns and legal analyses that led to one 2024 candidate facing charges and the other not.

"I think part of the drama that's associated with this right in the moment is the circumstances that we find ourselves in: Biden had classified documents, Trump had classified documents, Trump got charged. There was no way the special prosecutor here was going to satisfy everybody," said Eric Gibson, a former Justice Department public corruption prosecutor.

Georgia Republicans say Fani Willis inquiry isn't a 'witch hunt,' but Democrats doubt good faith

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The Republican leading a specially-appointed Georgia state Senate committee that's supposed to investigate whether Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis committed misconduct proclaimed repeatedly Friday during the panel's first meeting that he seeks just the facts, but the lead Democrat begrudgingly serving on the panel said she doubts the group can overcome its partisan origins.

"It's important that the public understand that this is not any type of witch hunt," said state Sen. Bill Cowsert of Athens, the Republican picked to lead the panel. "This is a question of truth."

The majority Republican Georgia Senate voted 30-19 last month to create a special investigative commit-

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tee with subpoena power after allegations emerged that Willis had a conflict of interest in her prosecution of Donald Trump created by her "personal relationship" with a special prosecutor she hired for the case. Georgia legislative committees normally don't use subpoenas or require people to testify under oath.

A spokesperson for Willis didn't immediately respond Friday to a text message seeking comment.

Willis hired outside lawyer Nathan Wade to lead a team to investigate and ultimately prosecute Trump and 18 others accused of participating a wide-ranging scheme to illegally try to overturn the 2020 presidential election in Georgia. In a court filing earlier this month, Willis acknowledged a "personal relationship" with Wade.

That came in response to a motion filed by Trump co-defendant Michael Roman seeking to dismiss the case and to prevent Willis and Wade and their offices from continuing to prosecute the case. The filing said Willis paid Wade large sums and then improperly benefited personally from the prosecution of the case when Wade used his earnings to pay for vacations for the pair.

"You lose the confidence of the public in the fairness of our criminal justice system if they think prosecutors are engaging in prosecution so that their lovers can get rich and they can share in the benefits of that," Cowsert told reporters after the hearing.

Trump has repeatedly referred to Wade as Willis' "lover" in attacks on the prosecution.

In a sworn statement submitted earlier this month with the filing that acknowledged the relationship between Wade and Willis, Wade said the "personal relationship" began in 2022, after he was hired as special prosecutor for the election case. The filing also argued that a hearing on motions to disqualify Willis from the case wasn't necessary.

But in a new filing Friday, Roman's attorney Ashleigh Merchant doubled down on her argument that she has evidence that a romantic relationship between Willis and Wade began earlier than they acknowledged. In arguing that an evidentiary hearing is necessary, the motion says Wade and Willis were "not forthright" in the motion filed earlier this month and "there is no reason to believe they are telling the truth now."

The Senate panel doesn't have the power to sanction or remove Willis. It can only recommend changes in state spending or state laws. But it could have the ability to delve deeply into Willis' personal and professional life and air any dirty laundry widely. Lawyers for Roman and others are seeking to do the same in a court hearing next week, but the district attorney's office has said it will ask Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee to toss the subpoenas.

Cowsert said he would not be surprised if someone challenged the Senate panel's subpoena power, but expressed confidence it would be upheld.

The three Democrats on the nine-member panel voted to approve rules that will let the committee hire outside lawyers, researchers and investigators and let it take depositions privately, and could allow for closed hearings. Cowsert told reporters he expected the inquiry to take "many months," and said the pace of work might not pick up until after lawmakers conclude their regular session at the end of March.

Senate Minority Leader Gloria Butler, a Democrat from Stone Mountain, said during the meeting that "I can't say I'm looking forward to this" but said she wanted the committee to be productive and commended Cowsert for drawing up fair rules. She told reporters that she doubts partisan differences can be overcome.

"I think that a political witch hunt or show trial would damage Georgians' faith in both our political and legal system," Butler said during the meeting. "Our duty as public servants is to strengthen, not weaken, that faith."

Cowsert said "whistleblowers inside the Fulton County DA's office" have contacted senators to allege that federal and state funds have been misused.

"We have had people come forward that have asked to speak with us with relevant information," Cowsert told reporters after the meeting. "I don't know that information yet. I've not interviewed them."

That discussion echoes claims made by U.S. House Republicans, who last week subpoenaed documents from Willis relating to a former employee's claims that she was fired after discovering misused federal gang prevention grant funds.

Cowsert repeatedly said the committee wouldn't "interfere with any ongoing criminal prosecution." He

also said the committee would try to stay out of the way of a new prosecutorial oversight commission that Georgia lawmakers are trying to set up. Gov. Brian Kemp has said he prefers that commission, rather than the Senate, to investigate claims against Willis.

The state Senate is led by Republican Lt. Gov. Burt Jones, who describes himself as a "Trump guy," and includes other Republican lawmakers who also publicly backed Trump's efforts to overturn Georgia's 2020 election results. Willis was barred from prosecuting Jones by a judge after she hosted a fundraiser for a Democratic opponent. The panel also begins its work in a year when all of Georgia's legislative seats will be up for election.

Nearly 200 abused corpses were found at a funeral home. Why did it take authorities years to act?

By JESSE BEDAYN and COLLEEN SLEVIN Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — A county coroner reported suspicions about bodies being poorly treated by a Colorado funeral home more than three years before nearly 200 decomposing bodies were discovered inside a decrepit building in October, according to newly unsealed court documents that raise questions about how the mistreatment of corpses was able to continue for so long.

The concerns raised by the Fremont County coroner also included worries about the improper refrigeration of bodies and were reported to a state agency in 2020, according to the arrest affidavits for Return to Nature Funeral Home owners Jon and Carie Hallford. But the coroner received no response from the state agency, which has long struggled to effectively oversee the funeral home industry, according to the documents.

Colorado has some of the weakest rules for funeral homes in the nation with no routine inspections or qualification requirements for funeral home operators. The Hallfords allegedly stored bodies as far back as 2019, and the count grew over the next four years, as prosecutors claim they used the money they were taking from grieving families for lavish expenses.

"The fact that he made a complaint and nothing was done about it just completely blows my mind," said Tanya Wilson, who hired the funeral home to cremate her mother before learning that her mother's remains weren't in the ashes she had spread in Hawaii but languishing inside a building back in Colorado.

"Families could've been saved from this if they had done something about this," she said.

Colorado's Department of Regulatory Agencies on Friday confirmed that it did get an email from Fremont County coroner Randy Keller in May 2020 saying that he had gotten calls regarding refrigeration issues at a funeral home in his county but he did not say which one. Keller said he did not know if the concerns were justified and offered to do an inspection if the state wasn't able to, said department spokesperson Katie O'Donnell in a statement.

O'Donnell said the agency didn't have the power to inspect funeral homes at the time, with lawmakers giving the agency inspection authority two years later. It's unclear if the agency followed up after Keller's initial email, or if Keller did an inspection himself.

O'Donnell declined to elaborate on Keller's 2020 email and the agency's response. Keller did not respond to a phone call requesting comment.

The funeral home, which was based in Colorado Springs and used a building in nearby Penrose where the bodies were found as a mortuary, was first licensed in 2017. State regulators did not conduct any inspection of the funeral home while it was operating, according to the affidavits. Colorado lawmakers have dragged their feet in passing funeral home regulations on par with most other states — even after a separate Colorado funeral home's operators were accused of selling bodies years before the discovery at Return to Nature.

The bodies were finally discovered last year after neighbors complained of the smell coming from the building. Authorities who responded found a stain coming out the front door that they say was the result of the decomposition of bodies, according to the affidavits. That echoed descriptions of the floors inside being covered with the fluid from decomposition provided during court hearings for the Hallfords.

The affidavits describe how the bodies were strewn throughout the rooms and how Jon Hallford was seen on surveillance video treating a body more like a sandbag than a former human being. They say that buckets had been placed under some bodies to collect the fluid. About 40 bodies had been stacked on top of each other and some were stored in storage totes, according to the affidavits, which note the “unimaginable conditions” authorities worked in to remove the bodies while wearing protective equipment.

“I picture my mom in every single one of those situations,” said Wilson. “I imagine my mom folded up and put in a storage tote. I imagine my mom just being left on the floor within inches of decomposition fluids.”

“And it haunts me,” she said.

Investigators believe Jon Hallford moved some bodies from the main funeral home in Colorado Springs to the Penrose building in September after a complaint about odor at the main site. According to the affidavit, surveillance footage showed him flipping a body off a gurney and onto the floor at the Penrose building so he could use it to bring more bodies inside from a van on Sept. 9, 2023, a day after the complaint.

The affidavits also provided more details about previous allegations that the Hallfords used money families and insurance companies paid to cover cremations and burials to pay for lavish personal expenses, including trips to California, Florida and Las Vegas, \$31,000 in cryptocurrency, laser body sculpting and shopping at luxury retailers like Gucci and Tiffany.

From 2020 to 2023, Jon Hallford also bought over 600 pounds of concrete mix at Home Depot and investigators suspect the couple put it in urns instead of ashes, the affidavit says. Prosecutors have said some relatives of the deceased received fake ashes rather than the cremated remains of their loved ones.

The arrest affidavits have been sealed since November when the couple was arrested in Oklahoma after they allegedly fled, but were made public following an evidentiary hearing held Thursday for Jon Hallford. Carie Hallford’s hearing was held last month.

Jon Hallford is represented by Adam Steigerwald, an attorney from the public defender’s office, which does not comment on its cases. Carie Hallford’s lawyer, Michael Stuzynski, declined to comment.

They are each charged with 190 counts of abuse of a corpse, five counts of theft, four counts of money laundering and over 50 counts of forgery. They have not been asked to enter a plea yet.

Pakistan’s ex-PM Sharif says he will seek a coalition government after trailing jailed rival Khan

By RIAZAT BUTT and MUNIR AHMED Associated Press

LAHORE, Pakistan (AP) — The former prime minister of Pakistan expected his party would claim an easy victory in the country’s parliamentary elections, sending him to the top job for a fourth time. Instead, Nawaz Sharif faces a difficult path to power.

Independent candidates backed by his imprisoned rival, Imran Khan, were leading in the vote count Friday, a surprisingly strong showing given assertions by Khan’s supporters and a national rights body that the balloting was manipulated to favor Sharif.

That scrambled the plans of Sharif — and the security establishment backing him — forcing him to announce plans Friday to try to form a coalition government.

A day earlier, Sharif had gruffly rejected the idea of a coalition, confidently telling reporters after casting his vote that he wanted a single party running Pakistan for a full five-year term.

Khan, a former cricket star turned Islamist politician with a significant grassroots following, was disqualified from running in Thursday’s election because of criminal convictions. He contends his sentences and a slew of legal cases pending against him were politically motivated.

Khan’s party’s candidates were forced to run as independents after they were barred from using the party symbol — a cricket bat — to help illiterate voters find them on ballots.

Despite those setbacks — and with most of the 266 National Assembly constituencies announced by the election oversight body — candidates backed by Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, or PTI, had won 99 seats. Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League party had 71 seats. The election was postponed in one constituency because of the killing of one of the candidates.

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However, with a third major party in the mix, nobody could declare outright victory.

Sharif acknowledged that, telling supporters "we don't have enough of a majority to form a government without the support of others and we invite allies to join the coalition so we can make joint efforts to pull Pakistan out of its problems."

"We will have to sit together to settle all matters," he said.

However, Pakistan's deeply divided political climate is unlikely to produce a strong coalition pushing for the betterment of a country grappling with high inflation, year-round energy outages and militant attacks.

The lack of a majority did not stop Sharif's relatives and loyalists from appearing on a balcony at his party headquarters, waving to the crowds below. People threw rose petals on Sharif's car as he arrived to address party workers.

Meanwhile, PTI chairman Gohar Khan told Pakistani news channel Geo that his party's own count showed it securing a total of 150 seats, enough to form a government, though 169 seats are required for a majority in the 336-seat National Assembly, or lower house of parliament.

Observers had expected Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League to prevail and put him on track for a fourth term as prime minister due to the disadvantages faced by Khan's party. Along with Khan imprisoned and facing more criminal convictions, election officials and police blocked his party from holding rallies and opening campaign offices, and its online events were blocked.

The PTI said the moves were intended to prevent them from competing and gaining momentum with voters.

Sharif said he would approach the Pakistan People's Party of Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, the son of assassinated former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, as a coalition partner. The PPP has 53 seats. Sharif's rivals, including Bhutto-Zardari, criticized him on the campaign trail so the coalition he seeks is apparently aimed at keeping Khan in prison and the PTI out of politics.

U.S. State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said the elections included undue restrictions on freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly.

"We condemn electoral violence, restrictions on the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including attacks on media workers, and restrictions on access to the Internet and telecommunication services, and are concerned about allegations of interference in the electoral process," Miller said.

The European Union said it regretted the lack of a level playing field due to the inability of some political actors to contest the elections.

It called on authorities to ensure "a timely and full investigation" of all reported election irregularities.

Sporadic violence and an unprecedented nationwide cellphone service shutdown overshadowed Thursday's voting.

Violence persisted Friday, with two people killed and six injured in the northwest district of Shangla after clashes broke out between Khan supporters protesting against vote-rigging and security forces, police official Sadique Khan said. PTI supporters also protested against vote-rigging in Peshawar city, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Sharif and Khan's circumstances on election day represented a reversal of fortunes for the two men. Sharif returned to Pakistan in October after four years of self-imposed exile abroad to avoid serving prison sentences. Within weeks of his return, his convictions were overturned, leaving him free to seek a fourth term.

The ease of his comeback marked him as the preferred candidate of the security establishment, which casts itself as the ultimate arbiter of who comes to power in Pakistan and what decisions they make.

It's parliament that chooses the prime minister. But the success of Khan-backed candidates against the odds means Sharif will have to woo all politicians with assembly seats if he wants to lead the country again.

Israel seeks to evacuate Palestinians jammed into a southern Gaza city ahead of an expected invasion

By JOSEF FEDERMAN, NAJIB JOBAIN, and BASSEM MROUE Associated Press
JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Friday said he has ordered the military to prepare a plan to evacuate civilians from Rafah ahead of an expected Israeli invasion of the densely populated southern Gaza city.

The announcement came after heavy international criticism, including from the U.S., of Israeli intentions to move ground forces into the city that borders Egypt. Rafah had a prewar population of roughly 280,000, and according to the United Nations is now home to some 1.4 million additional people living with relatives, in shelters or in sprawling tent camps after fleeing fighting elsewhere in Gaza.

Israel says that Rafah is the last remaining Hamas stronghold in Gaza after more than four months of war. "It is impossible to achieve the goal of the war of eliminating Hamas by leaving four Hamas battalions in Rafah," Netanyahu's office said. "On the contrary, it is clear that intense activity in Rafah requires that civilians evacuate the areas of combat."

It said he had ordered the military and security officials to come up with a "combined plan" that includes both a mass evacuation of civilians and the destruction of Hamas' forces in the town.

Israel declared war after several thousand Hamas militants burst across the border into southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 people and taking 250 others hostage. An Israeli air and ground offensive has killed roughly 28,000 Palestinians, most of them women and minors, according to local health officials. Roughly 80% of Gaza's 2.3 million people have been displaced, and the territory has plunged into a humanitarian crisis with shortages of food and medical services.

Netanyahu has largely rebuffed international criticism of the civilian death toll, saying that Hamas is responsible for endangering civilians by operating and hiding in residential areas. But that criticism has grown in recent days as Netanyahu and other leaders vow to move into Rafah.

U.S. President Joe Biden said Thursday that Israel's conduct in the war is "over the top," the harshest U.S. criticism yet of its close ally. The State Department said an invasion of Rafah in the current circumstances "would be a disaster."

The operation will be a challenge on many levels. It remains unclear where civilians can go. The Israeli offensive has caused widespread destruction, especially in northern Gaza, and hundreds of thousands of people do not have homes to return to.

In addition, Egypt has warned that any movement of Palestinians across the border into Egypt would threaten the four-decade-old peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. The border crossing between Gaza and Egypt, which is mostly closed, serves as the main entry point for humanitarian aid.

Israel already has begun to strike Rafah from the air. Airstrikes overnight and into Friday hit two residential buildings in Rafah, while two other sites were bombed in central Gaza, including one that damaged a kindergarten-turned-shelter for displaced Palestinians. Twenty-two people were killed, according to AP journalists who saw the bodies arriving at hospitals.

GROWING FRICTION

Comments from top U.S. officials about Rafah have signaled growing friction with Netanyahu after a visit to the region by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Blinken, who has been working with Egypt and Qatar on trying to mediate a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas, left the region Thursday without an agreement. But he said he believed it was still possible to strike a deal that would include an extended pause in fighting in exchange for the release of many of the more than 100 hostages held by Hamas.

Netanyahu appeared to snub Blinken, saying he will settle for nothing short of "total victory." The Israeli leader has said the war seeks to destroy Hamas' military and governing capabilities and return all hostages home. With Blinken still in town, Netanyahu said achieving those goals would require an operation in Rafah. Vedant Patel, a State Department spokesman, said Thursday that going ahead with such an offensive "with no planning and little thought in an area where there is sheltering of a million people would be a disaster."

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John Kirby, the White House's national security spokesman, said an Israel ground offensive in Rafah is "not something we would support."

Aid agency officials have also sounded warnings over the prospect of a Rafah offensive. "We need Gaza's last remaining hospitals, shelters, markets and water systems to stay functional," said Catherine Russell, head of the U.N. children's agency UNICEF. "Without them, hunger and disease will skyrocket, taking more child lives."

With the war now in its fifth month, Israeli ground forces are still focusing on the city of Khan Younis, just north of Rafah, but Netanyahu has repeatedly said Rafah will be next, creating panic among hundreds of thousands of displaced people.

AIRSTRIKES OVERNIGHT

Shortly after midnight Friday, a residential building was struck near Rafah's Kuwaiti Hospital, killing five people from the al-Sayed family, including three children and a woman. A second Rafah strike killed three more people.

Another overnight strike, in the central town of Deir al-Balah, claimed nine lives. Also in central Gaza, a strike hit near a kindergarten-turned-shelter, damaging the building. It killed five and wounded several more people. Witnesses said shelter residents were asleep at the time.

A woman, carrying a small girl in her arms, shouted as she arrived at the local Al Aqsa Martyrs' Hospital: "What can we do? This is the work of the coward Zionist enemy that chooses innocent civilians. This girl is firing rockets at the Jews? May God help us."

Some of the wounded children were treated while lying on the floor.

WORKING FOR A CEASE-FIRE

Israel's 4-month-old air and ground offensive — among the most destructive in recent history — has killed 27,947 Palestinians and wounded more than 67,000, local health officials said Friday. The war has driven most people from their homes and pushed a quarter of the population toward starvation, according to the U.N.

Biden has said he continues to work "tirelessly" to press Israel and Hamas to agree on an extended pause in fighting.

Netanyahu has rejected Hamas' demands for a hostage deal, which includes an end to the war and the release of hundreds of veteran Palestinian prisoners serving long sentences in Israel for deadly attacks carried out as part of the long-running conflict. Netanyahu dismissed Hamas' demands as delusional, even as Blinken said he believes continued negotiations, through mediators Egypt and Qatar, are possible.

Israel's war goals appear increasingly elusive, as Hamas reemerges in parts of northern Gaza, which was the first target of the offensive and has seen widespread destruction. Israel has only rescued one hostage, while Hamas says several have been killed in airstrikes or failed rescue missions.

Here's what you can expect from Super Bowl commercials this Sunday

By MAE ANDERSON and WYATTE GRANTHAM-PHILIPS AP Business Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — Big name advertisers will be pulling out all the stops on Super Bowl Sunday — enlisting high-profile actors, investing in dazzling special effects and, they hope, going for laughs as they seek to win over viewers during game breaks.

In an increasingly fractured and polarized media environment — and with fewer people watching live TV — the Super Bowl is an anomaly. The big game's viewership has actually increased, with a record 115.1 million people tuning in last year.

So marketers will use the game on Sunday, which will air on CBS and stream on Paramount+, to draw attention to new products, brand extensions and their marketing message as they again vie for the eyes of more than 100 million expected viewers.

Almost as an escape from the divisive U.S. presidential election and conflicts deepening around the world, most Super Bowl advertisers appear to be doubling down on flights of fantasy or light humor, often with a dose of nostalgia and a lot of mini-reunions of TV characters.

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"Serious is out," said Kimberly Whitler, marketing professor at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business. "Marketers have figured out entertainment, enjoyment and escapism is the name of the ad game."

Many Super Bowl commercials have already been released. Here's what we know heading into this year's big game.

TV SHOW MINI-REUNIONS

Perhaps taking a cue from the success of last year's PopCorners ad that featured a reunion of "Breaking Bad" actors stars Bryan Cranston and Aaron Paul, this year there's a slew of mini TV show reunions in ads.

T-Mobile, which has been reuniting Scrubs co-stars in Super Bowl ads since 2022, teams up Zach Braff and Donald Faison to sing a version of "Flashdance...What a Feeling," with Jason Momoa — along with a cameo by Jennifer Beals.

In an ad stuffed with celebrity cameos — including "Judge Judy" Judy Sheindlin — e.l.f. cosmetics reunited "Suits" stars Gina Torres, Rick Hoffman and Sarah Rafferty in a courtroom spoof.

NBC sitcoms have quite a few reunion moments during the game. In an Uber Eats ad, which shows people forgetting things so they remember Uber Eats can deliver a wide variety of items, Jennifer Aniston seemingly forgets she ever worked with her "Friends" co-star David Schwimmer.

In an ad for Mtn Dew Baja Blast, Aubrey Plaza says she can have a 'Blast' doing anything, including reuniting with her "Parks and Rec" boss Nick Offerman as they fly on dragons.

And in an ad for Booking.com, Tina Fey hires body doubles to stay at different lodging because she has so many options on the site, including her "30 Rock" co-stars Jane Krakowski and Jack McBrayer.

Bringing well-known TV show characters together can help connect to the audience, said Northwestern University marketing professor Tim Calkins.

"A younger, more on-trend figure might be more exciting, but could lack the awareness of these well-established characters," he said. "Surprise is a key element of Super Bowl advertising, so unexpected reunions can work well."

NOSTALGIA, LIGHT HIJINKS

Humor and a touch of nostalgia can be found in many ads. Molson Coors' ad brings back their "Chill Train" that last appeared in advertisements nearly two decades ago, in 2005. A tongue-in-cheek ad shows the train crashing into a football watching party to bring partiers Coors Light. LL Cool J turns out to be the conductor.

For Sofia Colucci, chief marketing officer for Molson Coors, which is advertising for the second year after Anheuser-Busch ended its decades long exclusive sponsorship of the game, the Super Bowl is a unique venue to reach existing customers and attract new ones.

"One of the things we're really trying to be thoughtful about is making sure that we are retaining and protecting our core drinkers at the same time attracting new drinkers," she said. "The Super Bowl is a huge stage where you do have that opportunity to talk widely to those audiences."

In another hijink-filled ad, Doritos introduces its new Dinamita chips — the 24th year Doritos is advertising in the Super Bowl — by depicting two grandmotherly women in a store with actress Jenna Ortega. They reveal their action-prowess by taking off to pursue "Top Gun: Maverick" actor Danny Ramirez who grabbed the last bag of chips from a store shelf.

Frito-Lay North America CMO Brett O'Brien says Dinamitas is aiming to reach a "multicultural young audience" aged 16 to 24.

CELEBRITIES ABOUND

There are always tons of celebrities in ads, and the star power seems to go up and up every year.

"It's celebrity on steroids right now," Virginia Commonwealth University Brandcenter's Jessica D. Collins said. While that is not necessarily new or surprising for the Super Bowl, she added, "it's just going to be so heightened this year."

That means big names like Arnold Schwarzenegger starring in a State Farm ad, Ice Spice making an appearance for Starry, Christopher Walken facing imitations of himself for BMW, and Super Bowl Halftime Show headliner Usher showing up in an Uber Eats' spot.

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Many ads have stuffed multiple celebrities in ads. Beyond the TV show reunions, Michelob Ultra features soccer legend Lionel Messi, "Ted Lasso" star Jason Sudeikis and retired Miami Dolphins quarterback Dan Marino. BetMGM features Vince Vaughn, Tom Brady and Wayne Gretzky. And Paramount+ touts a star-filled lineup, including Drew Barrymore, Sir Patrick Stewart and Creed.

Squarespace also hired a big name for behind the camera with Martin Scorsese directing his first Super Bowl ad for the domain hosting site.

While star-power is exciting, it's always possible to overdo it. Advertisers can risk viewers remembering what stars they saw in a commercial but not the brand name, University of Minnesota associate professor of marketing Linli Xu notes.

One organic way advertisers can pull off celebrity appearances is to choose a featured star that already has a connection to the brand, Collins said, or tap into a recent pop culture moment.

"A lot of times you'll see a celebrity just show up and you're like, 'That person would have never used that product. Why are they there?'" she said.

SOME SERIOUS MOMENTS

Of course, this year's Super Bowl commercials won't all be laughs.

Robert Kraft's Foundation to Combat Antisemitism has said it will run an ad featuring Martin Luther King Jr.'s speechwriter Dr. Clarence B. Jones. Dove's ad focuses on the fact that low body-confidence leads to girls quitting sports. And Google's heartstring-pulling ad follows a blind man as he uses "Guided Frame" — Google's A.I.-powered accessibility feature for the Pixel camera that uses a combination of audio cues, high-contrast animations and tactile vibrations — to take pictures of the people and places in his life.

SURPRISES

As always, there will still be some game day surprises. Some advertisers such as Amazon have stayed mum on any plans. Upstart e-commerce site Temu has reportedly bought several ads. In a presidential election year, it's possible we might see a candidate ad. And while there have been no indications of such, many wonder if advertisers will capitalize on this year's Taylor Swift buzz in some way.

Regardless of whether or not she makes her way into the commercial-side of the big game, marketers say advertisers are taking note of the "Taylor Swift effect" and trying to reach everyone, not just sports fans.

"We have people that have never watched Football a day in their life now watching the entire game — not just for the ads, but for the game itself and for the celebrity sightings," Collins said.

5 Marines killed in helicopter crash identified as troops in their 20s

SAN DIEGO (AP) — The Marine Corps released the names Friday of the five Marines killed when their CH-53E Super Stallion helicopter went down in the mountains outside San Diego during a historic storm. All of them were in their 20s.

The decorated Marines were assigned to Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 361, Marine Aircraft Group 16, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing and were based at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar in San Diego.

"We have been confronted with a tragedy that is every service family's worst fear," said Lt. Col. Nicholas J. Harvey, commanding officer of the squadron. "The Flying Tigers family stands strong and includes the friends and community who have supported our squadron during this challenging time. We will get through this together."

The youngest was Lance Cpl. Donovan Davis, 21, of Olathe, Kansas, who was just promoted to the rank of lance corporal on New Year's Day. The oldest was Capt. Miguel Nava, 28, of Traverse City, Michigan.

Nava was a 2013 graduate of Comstock Park High School, near Grand Rapids. The school district said he graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 2017.

"Miguel dedicated his time to help, mentor, guide, encourage and support Comstock Park students. ... There is no greater example of what it means to be a Panther than Miguel," the district said.

Davis and Sgt. Alec Langen, 23, of Chandler, Arizona, were both crew chiefs. The rest were CH-53E pilots. "We will miss him dearly," his mother Caryn Langen told KNSD-TV of San Diego.

The other pilots on board were Capt. Jack Casey, 26, of Dover, New Hampshire, and Capt. Benjamin

Moulton, 27, of Emmett, Idaho.

The Super Stallion vanished late Tuesday night on its way back to Miramar from Creech Air Force Base. The craft was discovered Wednesday morning near the mountain community of Pine Valley.

The military confirmed Thursday that all five Marines were killed when their helicopter went down during stormy weather, and efforts were underway to recover their remains, which will take weeks because of the rough terrain and weather, said Col. James C. Ford, operations officer with 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing. In the meantime, Marines are staying with the remains round-the-clock to adhere to their ethos of never leaving any Marine behind.

The military is investigating the crash.

Ukraine's new army chief signals new momentum, but huge problems stand in the way

By SAMYA KULLAB and ALEX BABENKO Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's new military chief signaled Friday that he wants to build new momentum, saying his immediate goals are to improve troop rotation at the front lines and harness the power of new technology, at a time when Kyiv's forces are largely on the defensive in the war with Russia.

Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskiy, who previously was the commander of Ukraine's ground forces, spoke a day after President Volodymyr Zelenskyy put him in charge of the battlefield campaign with the war poised to enter its third year. He replaced the broadly popular Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi.

"New tasks are on the agenda," Syrskiy said on his Telegram channel.

Syrskiy emphasized the need for "maintaining a balance between the fulfillment of combat tasks and the restoration of units with the intensification of training," in an apparent reference to the need to rotate troops exhausted by nearly two years of fighting.

He also stressed the importance of "new technical solutions and the scaling of successful experience, such as the use of unmanned systems and modern electronic warfare means."

Though he provided little detail, his remarks appeared to align with Zelenskyy's stated aim of bringing "renewal" to the armed forces and adopting a fresh approach to the fight.

Later on Friday, Zelenskyy announced that he also replaced the chief of the military's General Staff, Lt. Gen. Serhiy Shaptala with Maj. Gen. Anatoliy Barhylyevych, whose experience and understanding of "the tasks of this war and Ukrainian goals" he noted. Shaptala was a close associate of Zaluzhnyi.

But the changes at the top won't solve some of Ukraine's biggest problems: a shortage of manpower that has helped sap morale and may require a mass mobilization, and the inadequate supply of Western weapons to take on Russia's might.

Kyiv officials are "rethinking" their war strategy "with a new emphasis on improved technology and updated command and control," said James Nixey, an analyst at London's Chatham House think tank.

One sign of that may be the claimed recent sinking of a Russian warship in the Black Sea by a new generation of Ukrainian naval drones.

"It's not going to be easy" for Syrskiy, said Marina Miron, a researcher at the War Studies Department of King's College London. "There are a lot of problems" for Ukraine at the moment.

She cited a lack of ammunition, uncertainty about new weapons from Ukraine's Western allies, a manpower shortage, people's reluctance to be drafted, the tiredness of troops getting no respite from the front lines, and the question of how Zaluzhnyi's departure might affect morale.

Whereas Zaluzhnyi was a proponent at this stage of the war of active defense — securing defensive lines while also searching for Russia's weak points and hitting rear areas with long-range strikes — Syrskiy "will try to push the Ukrainian forces. ... He will try to increase counterattacks possibly," Miron said in a telephone interview.

That would align with Zelenskyy's desire to take a more aggressive approach.

The Associated Press spoke to soldiers and commanders on the front lines, who expressed varied views about the changes at the top. Some said they would reserve judgement on Syrskiy until they witness

changes on the ground, while others said he was a competent and capable general.

The shake-up caused some apprehension on the streets of the capital, Kyiv.

Alisa Riazantseva, a 35-year-old marketing specialist, said she had been "generally satisfied" with Zaluzhnyi. "We hope that our government has not made a big mistake" by replacing him, she told the AP.

Oleksandr Azimov, 61, said there was "some discontent, some dissatisfaction" about the changes at the top.

The consternation appeared to be rooted in previous criticism of Syrskyi's strategy of holding on for nine months to the city of Bakhmut, which brought the war's longest and bloodiest battle and cost Ukraine dearly in troop losses, but also served to sap Russia's forces.

Later Friday, dozens gathered in Kyiv's Independence Square to protest Zaluzhnyi's removal. They chanted slogans in support of the former army chief and called for the ousters of Syrskyi and Zelenskyy. A soldier tried to reason with the protesters, telling them the government has a plan, but they were having none of it.

With the fighting about to enter its third year, Kyiv is largely dependent on support from Western countries where signs of war fatigue have emerged.

That has left Ukraine on the back foot while Russia has placed its economy on a war footing and is building up its weapon stockpiles.

Analysts detected no sign of a deeper malaise in Zelenskyy's move, which had been rumored for weeks.

"Command changes are normal for a state fighting a war over several years," the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington think tank, said late Thursday.

Asked about Zaluzhnyi's exit and Syrskyi's appointment, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Friday downplayed the reshuffle, saying that they wouldn't affect the course of the Russian operation.

Russian President Vladimir Putin used an interview broadcast late Thursday with former Fox News host Tucker Carlson to urge Washington to recognize Moscow's interests and persuade Ukraine to sit down for talks.

Meanwhile, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz was in Washington for talks with President Joe Biden on Friday about new U.S. military aid for Ukraine. The vital support is being held up by disputes in Congress.

Syrskyi, who was born in the Soviet Union and attended Moscow Higher Military Command School as well as serving in the Soviet Artillery Corps, is described as an obsessive planner, and his comments Friday said his first job was to ensure "clear and detailed planning."

He also placed emphasis on ensuring the well-being of troops. "The life and health of servicemen have always been and are the main value of the Ukrainian Army," he said — perhaps a reference to the Bakhmut criticism.

Syrskyi is viewed as the architect of the counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region in September 2022. That was the most significant Ukrainian victory of the war, allowing Kyiv to push the Kremlin's forces out of the cities of Kupiansk and Iziium.

Israel's next target in Gaza war is likely Rafah. Terrified people say there's nowhere left to go

By NAJIB JOBAIN and LEE KEATH Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Gaza's southernmost town, Rafah, is bursting at the seams. Nearly the last place spared an Israeli offensive so far, Rafah's population has more than quintupled with Palestinians streaming in to escape fighting. They pack by the dozens into apartments. Sidewalks and once-empty lots are clogged with tents full of families.

Panic and despair are rising after Israel said it intends to attack Rafah next. The estimated 1.5 million people sheltering there — more than half of Gaza's population — have nowhere to flee in the face of an offensive that has leveled large swaths of the urban landscape in the rest of the territory.

Some are just sick of running.

"We're exhausted. Seriously, we're exhausted. Israel can do whatever it wants. I'm sitting in my tent. I'll die in my tent," said Jihan al-Hawajri, who fled multiple times from the far north down the length of the

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Gaza Strip and now lives with 30 relatives in a tent.

U.N. officials warn that an attack on Rafah will be catastrophic, with more than 600,000 children there in the path of an assault. A move on the town and surrounding area also could cause the collapse of the humanitarian aid system struggling to keep Gaza's population alive.

Israel says it must take Rafah to ensure Hamas' destruction. On Friday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the military to come up with an evacuation plan after the United States said it opposes an attack on Rafah unless provisions are made for its population.

To "conduct such an operation right now with no planning and little thought in an area where there is sheltering of a million people would be a disaster," State Department spokesman Vedant Patel told reporters Thursday. "This is not something that we'd support,"

Still, Washington has continued its whole-hearted military and diplomatic support for Israel's campaign despite Israel shrugging off its previous calls to reduce civilian casualties. In response to those calls, Israel widened its evacuation orders as its forces moved south – yet the death toll in Gaza has continued to mount. Israel says Hamas is responsible for concentrating its forces in civilian areas.

But it's unclear where civilians would evacuate. Rafah lies trapped between Egypt to the south, the Mediterranean Sea to the west, Israel to its east and Israeli troops to its north. Earlier in the war, Israel declared a sliver of rural area on the coast neighboring Rafah, known as Muwasi, to be a safe zone. But in recent weeks it has bombarded the zone and sent troops to seize parts of it.

Many Palestinians in Rafah came from Gaza City and other parts of the north and want to return there. But so far Israel has shown no willingness to allow a mass movement back north, where it says its troops largely have operational control but still fight pockets of Hamas fighters.

Egypt has staunchly refused any mass exodus of Palestinians onto its soil, fearing Israel will not allow them to return. Israel is not likely to let hundreds of thousands of Palestinians take shelter on its own territory.

A large area of empty dunes between the town of Rafah and the sea is now built up with a dense tent city erected by those streaming in over the past month.

When winter rains hit, the area turns to cold mud, seeping into tents full of extended families with children. Women hang up bedding on clotheslines in the morning to keep them dry during the day, then lay them on the ground at night to sleep.

In Rafah town itself, the main squares and streets are full of tents. Other families fill classrooms at U.N. schools or crowd with relatives in apartments. Everyone is hungry and sick; colds, coughs and intestinal disorders run rampant. Even simple medicines are difficult to find, requiring an hourslong wait at the pharmacy.

The supply chain for everything from canned food and flour to diapers comes almost entirely from the trickle of aid trucks that Israel allows into Gaza for distribution by the U.N. and other humanitarian groups. Large impromptu outdoor markets packed with people fill main avenues as many sell parts of allotments they receive.

With such a limited supply, prices have skyrocketed. A chocolate bar that once went for the equivalent of 50 U.S. cents now costs \$5; a single egg can cost nearly \$1.

Groups of young men can sometimes be seen hanging around intersections, waiting for aid trucks to pass. They leap on the back and slash the ropes with knives to pull off bags of flour – to sell or give to their families.

U.N. officials say 90% of Gaza's population is eating less than one meal a day, and a quarter of the population faces outright famine, mainly in the north, where Israeli restrictions have blocked many aid convoys.

Rafah is the heart of the aid campaign, with trucks entering from Egypt or from a nearby Israeli crossing for distribution across the Gaza Strip.

"Any large-scale military operation among this population can only lead to additional layers of endless tragedy," Philippe Lazzarini, head of UNRWA, the main agency leading the humanitarian effort, told The Associated Press.

Israel has vowed to eliminate Hamas throughout the Gaza Strip after the group's Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel, in which some 1,200 people were killed and the militants abducted some 250 hostages – over

100 of whom remain in captivity. Netanyahu said Wednesday that preparations were underway for the military to move on Rafah, though he did not say when.

"We are on the way to an absolute victory," he said. "There is no other solution."

The Israeli onslaught has killed nearly 28,000 Palestinians and left much of northern Gaza a devastated wasteland. For weeks, fighting has focused on central Gaza and the southern city of Khan Younis, where bombardment and ground fighting has wreaked similar destruction.

In recent days, Israeli bombardment of Rafah has escalated. On Friday, strikes leveled two buildings, killing at least eight, including three children and a woman.

In the tent city, Najah Hasheasho said the wooden frame draped with plastic that her family lives in shakes every time a blast hits the area.

"We want to go back to Gaza City. That's our home," she said.

A neighbor in the camp, Nahed Abu Asi, said that like many, he believes Israel wants to push the population into Egypt permanently.

"We won't go into Egypt," he said. "We'll make our way back to Gaza City and die there — or in any place on the soil of Gaza."

Moore's hire at Michigan gives advocates hope that Black coaches at bluebloods can become the norm

By CLIFF BRUNT AP Sports Writer

Tyrone Willingham retired back in 2008, yet he has seen just a few Black men receive the kind of elite opportunity he got when he was hired as Notre Dame's first Black head football coach more than two decades ago.

He was encouraged when Michigan hired Sherrone Moore to replace Jim Harbaugh.

Black head coaches at the Division I level often have been given jobs at struggling programs with limited resources and thus smaller chance of long-term success. Moore, however, is taking the reins at a blue-blood program that just won a national title.

Willingham, 70, said the topic of Black coaches' previous lack of access to head coaching jobs at top programs has not just been a Black issue, it has been symbolic of a foundational American issue. In an email interview, he said he was glad to see Black men finally being considered rising stars in line for the best jobs. He sees Moore's hire as similar to Notre Dame hiring Marcus Freeman — the school's second Black head football coach — in 2021.

"Let us be about hiring the best, and that attitude will serve our country well in all aspects of our society," wrote Willingham, who also coached at Stanford and Washington. "I believe Sherrone Moore and Marcus Freeman meet that standard, and if given the correct resources, they will do very well. They are excellent leaders of young men and university communities."

Moore is well aware of how special his opportunity is.

"It's an honor," Moore said. "It's a privilege. It's something I don't take lightly. For all the African American men who have worked, I just want to show them that you can do it."

Michigan's hire came as the NFL added three Black head coaches -- Atlanta's Raheem Morris, New England's Jerod Mayo and Las Vegas' Antonio Pierce — this cycle. There will be at least nine minority head coaches to start the 2024 NFL season, the most ever.

"We've been waiting for this type of year for so long now, I began to wonder if it was ever going to come," said Richard Lapchick, founder of The Institute for Diversity and Ethics In Sport.

Floyd Keith, a former executive director of the Black Coaches Association, said it matters that programs such as Michigan, Notre Dame and Penn State have Black coaches. James Franklin has an 88-39 record since taking over at Penn State in 2014. With the backing of programs with rich histories and plentiful resources, Moore, Freeman or Franklin could become the first Black coach to win a national title.

Like Franklin, Moore's experience is on the offensive side of the ball. The 37-year-old coordinator went 4-0, including wins over Ohio State and Penn State, while Harbaugh was serving two separate suspen-

sions last season.

Maryland coach Mike Locksley founded the National Coalition of Minority Football Coaches in 2020. The organization provides professional training and educational programs to help prepare minority coaches for coaching jobs. Both Moore and Freeman have participated in the programs. Locksley said his organization's goal is to help coaches like Moore be ready when doors open.

"That to me is where the timing of it is," Locksley said. "It's not by accident that he was put in this role."

Moore got help from Black mentors along the way. He was a graduate assistant at Louisville before Charlie Strong made him his tight ends coach in 2012. Strong left Louisville to become head coach at Texas, becoming one of the rare Black coaches to land a head coaching job at a powerhouse program.

"Charlie is like a big brother and father figure," Moore said. "He gave me my first chance to be a position coach, and I'll be forever grateful for that."

Moore said he also admired two other Black coaches on the Louisville staff -- Vance Bedford and Clint Hurtt. Bedford was defensive coordinator at Louisville and Texas. Hurtt was just hired as defensive line coach for the Philadelphia Eagles after being defensive coordinator for the Seattle Seahawks.

Moore's biggest leap forward came this past season, when Harbaugh made him a playcalling offensive coordinator last season.

"Anything is possible," Moore said. "As long as you take your time, regardless of your background, you can earn an opportunity."

Three Black coaches – Moore, Derrick Mason at Middle Tennessee and Fran Brown at Syracuse – were hired at the top tier of Division I (Bowl Subdivision) this cycle. Two of the 13 Power Five conference hires and one of the 15 Group of Five hires were Black.

Overall, there are now 15 Black FBS coaches out of 134 schools — about the same percentage as there have been over the past decade in a division where about half the players are Black.

"We've seen some growth," Locksley said. "Is it corrected? No, it's not corrected yet. But to see these types of hires, and the success that these coaches have and continue to have or will have, are going to be the things that push us forward."

Toby Keith wrote all kinds of country songs. His legacy might be post-9/11 American anger

By BEN FINLEY Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — Toby Keith's songs accomplished, for some, what great art is intended to: They sustained people in challenging times, particularly U.S. service members and their families during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11. For others, Keith's work sowed division and was blindly patriotic — a wedge that deepened America's cultural fault lines.

Keith, who died Monday of stomach cancer at age 62, is being celebrated for his immense catalog across a diversity of subjects, from small-town heartache to his preference for red Solo cups. But in the fractured political landscape of 2024 America, it's the long-tail legacy of "Courtesy Of The Red, White And Blue (The Angry American)" that may be remembered most.

For many in post-9/11 America, the 2002 song caught the mood. It featured the lyric: "We'll put a boot in your ass. It's the American way."

Keith's steering of his music into overt nationalism defined his career and helped set country music — one strain of it, at least — on a more political path that continues to this day in the music of folks like Jason Aldean on the right and Jason Isbell on the left. And yet many observers say it would be unfair to dwell only on those pages from Keith's songbook.

"You have to recognize that (Keith) was a good songwriter, and that there are songs there to love no matter what political stripe you are," says Chris Willman, who wrote the 2005 book, "Rednecks and Blue-necks: The Politics of Country Music."

Willman says some people are struggling with Keith's legacy because of his overtly political songs. But

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the man also wrote funny tunes about male virility and smoking marijuana with Willie Nelson.

"You almost want to get defensive of him when people are making it all about a handful of songs," says Willman, chief music critic for Variety. "And yet at the same time, I totally get where people are coming from. And I'm not sure I disagree with them when they say that he had some negative effect in terms of making country music more about angry Americans."

COUNTRY MUSIC HAS ALWAYS HAD A POLITICAL THREAD

Country music has never been immune to the nation's social and political forces, says Amanda Marie Martinez, author of the upcoming "Gone Country: How Nashville Transformed a Music Genre into a Lifestyle Brand."

The genre emerged during 1920s Jim Crow America, when music executives traveled to the South and recorded along racial lines, establishing the myth of country music as "exclusively white culture," Martinez says. Conservatives have looked to country music over the decades to voice political beliefs and react to social change.

In the Vietnam War era, Merle Haggard sang "Okie from Muskogee" — an anti-progressive number in which he sings, "We don't burn our draft cards down on Main Street." And while Haggard became a hero among conservatives, he later backed prominent Democrats. The man who supported Ronald Reagan and performed for Richard Nixon would pen songs to promote Hillary Clinton and commemorate Barack Obama's inauguration. He also sang, "Let's get out of Iraq."

Like Haggard, Keith was politically enigmatic. He was a registered Democrat until 2008. He played at events for Presidents George W. Bush, Obama and Donald Trump.

"If we look for a kind of consistency throughout his career, it's his class politics," says Joseph M. Thompson, author of "Cold War Country: How Nashville's Music Row and the Pentagon Created the Sound of American Patriotism."

"He's aware of his humble roots," Thompson says, "and it is who he sings for."

'COURTESY OF THE RED, WHITE AND BLUE' WAS A POST-9/11 ANTHEM

In the weeks after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the nation felt somewhat unified. In that environment, "Courtesy" worked like traditional folk music in the way it reflected how many people felt at the time. And more musicians started writing songs that actually addressed wartime in near real time.

For instance, Alan Jackson penned his introspective "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)" about 9/11. It lacked the incendiary revenge in Keith's anthem, although Jackson sang that he couldn't tell you the difference between Iraq and Iran. There also were Darryl Worley's "Have You Forgotten?" and Clint Black's "Iraq and I Roll," among others.

Keith's song was by far the most popular. And it was at least partially bolstered by a public feud with The Chicks, then known as the Dixie Chicks, over Natalie Maines' opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Maines called Keith's song "ignorant," while Keith began performing in front of a doctored photo of Maines with Saddam Hussein.

KEITH WAS A FAN OF THE MILITARY, AND VICE VERSA

In the years following "Courtesy," Keith participated in 18 USO tours, performing for more than 250,000 service members in his lifetime. John A. Lucas, a U.S. Army veteran who served in Vietnam, says Keith's songs celebrated military personnel and their families in a fresh way.

"His songs speak to the men and women who win our wars," says Lucas, 80, who lives outside Richmond, Virginia, and now writes a personal blog on Substack, "Bravo Blue."

Lucas says Keith's songs resonated when his son deployed to the Middle East, including Iraq, several times in the 2000s as a member of the U.S. Army's special forces. Lucas says he and others sent CDs with Keith's song, "American Soldier," to the wives of the men serving with his son. Lucas wrote Keith for permission; Keith approved.

Lucas says "Courtesy" also spoke to people in uniform not unlike the way The Animals' more oblique "We Gotta Get Out of this Place" did during the Vietnam War. "Courtesy," says Lucas, packed a powerful punch.

"I think some people use it as a reason to say, 'Well, this is not a very nice song,'" Lucas said, referring

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to the "boot in your ass" line. "But I'm going to tell you that that resonates with an Army infantryman. He's talking to the Taliban."

KEITH'S MUSIC CONNECTS TO TODAY

Last summer, Aldean released the biggest hit of his career, the controversial "Try That In a Small Town." The music video shows Aldean performing in front of a Tennessee courthouse, the site of a 1946 race riot and a 1927 mob lynching of an 18-year-old Black teenager.

People called the video a "dog whistle"; others labeled it "pro-lynching." The outcry mobilized conservatives, whose support brought the song to No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100.

Willman, the Variety critic, sees a through-line from Keith's "Courtesy" to Aldean's "Try that in a Small Town" or Oliver Anthony's "Rich Men North of Richmond." Keith "emboldened others in country music to think viewpoints that might be perceived as angry and conservative were okay to express," Willman says.

That anger, he says, is part of Keith's legacy because it led some musicians to think, "Yeah, there's a market for this kind of righteous rage."

Pat Finnerty, who makes a YouTube show called "What Makes This Song Stink," also sees similarities between "Courtesy" and "Small Town."

"If we're using wrestling analogies — and why shouldn't we — Toby Keith is the Hulk Hogan," Finnerty says. "If Hogan's move was the leg drop, Keith's would be the flag. He is the Hulk Hogan of this brand of, 'We're Americans. We're the best country in the world. And we can never do any wrong.'"

Finnerty, 43, of Philadelphia, produced an hourlong video on why he thinks "Small Town" is a terrible track. The thing about "Small Town" and "Courtesy," Finnerty asserts, is that each feels calculated, as if it were written only to make money. Keith capitalized on 9/11, while Aldean exploited the nation's cultural divide.

"If you took 'Hey Jude' and made it about mufflers, it'd still be a great song," Finnerty says. "But if you took 'Small Town' and did that, it wouldn't work. It's only about the lyrics in these songs that is grabbing attention."

Harris slams 'politically motivated' report as Biden to name task force to protect classified docs

By ZEKE MILLER AP White House Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Vice President Kamala Harris on Friday slammed the report by a Justice Department special counsel into Joe Biden's mishandling of classified documents that raised questions about the president's memory, calling it "politically motivated" and "gratuitous," as the White House said the president would take steps to safeguard classified materials during presidential transitions.

The report from Robert Hur, the former Maryland U.S. Attorney selected by Attorney General Merrick Garland to investigate Biden found evidence that Biden willfully held onto and shared with a ghostwriter highly classified information, but laid out why he did not believe the evidence met the standard for criminal charges, including a high probability that the Justice Department would not be able to prove Biden's intent beyond a reasonable doubt.

The White House has said Biden erred in having the documents in his home and Ian Sams, a spokesperson for the White House counsel's office, said on Friday that Biden would soon name a task force "to ensure that there are better processes in place" to protect classified materials when administrations change.

The Hur report described the 81-year-old Democrat's memory as "hazy," "fuzzy," "faulty," "poor" and having "significant limitations." It noted that Biden could not recall defining milestones in his own life such as when his son Beau died or when he served as vice president.

Asked whether the White House would release a copy of the transcript of Biden's interview with Hur that could dispute Hur's characterizations, Sams said parts of it were classified, but that if parts of it could be declassified, "we'll take a look at that and make a determination."

Taking a question from a reporter at the conclusion of a gun violence prevention event at the White House, Harris said that as a former prosecutor, she considered Hur's comments "gratuitous, inaccurate, and inappropriate."

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She noted that Biden's two-day sit-down with Hur occurred just after the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas on Israel, where more than 1,200 people were killed and about 250 were taken hostage — including many Americans.

"It was an intense moment for the commander in chief of the United States of America," Harris said, saying she spent countless hours with Biden and other officials in the days that followed and he was "on top of it all."

She added that "the way that the president's demeanor in that report was characterized could not be more wrong on the facts and clearly politically motivated, gratuitous."

Harris concluded saying a special counsel should have a "higher level of integrity than what we saw."

Her comments came a day after Biden insisted that his "memory is fine." and grew visibly angry at the White House, as he denied forgetting when his son died. Beau Biden died of brain cancer in 2015 at the age of 46.

Sams suggested that the political environment led Hur, who was appointed as U.S. attorney by former President Donald Trump, to include the comments. "There's an environment that we are in, that generates a ton of pressure, because you have congressional Republicans, other Republicans, attacking prosecutors that they don't like," he said.

Former Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan is running for the US Senate

By BRIAN WITTE Associated Press

ANNAPOLIS, Md. (AP) — Former Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan announced Friday that he will run for U.S. Senate, giving Republicans a prominent candidate who is well-positioned to run a competitive campaign for the GOP in a state that hasn't had a Republican U.S. senator in 37 years.

The decision marks a surprise turnaround for Hogan, a moderate who had considered a presidential bid. During Hogan's tenure as governor, he became a national figure as one of the rare Republicans willing to criticize Donald Trump. Last month, Hogan stepped down from the leadership of the third-party movement No Labels.

"My fellow Marylanders: you know me," Hogan begins in a video released by his Senate campaign. "For eight years, we proved that the toxic politics that divide our nation need not divide our state."

The former governor added that he decided to run for Senate "not to serve one party, but to try to be part of the solution: to fix our nation's broken politics and fight for Maryland."

"That is what I did as your governor and it's exactly how I'll serve you in the United States Senate," Hogan said.

GOP leaders are eager to pick up the seat as they try to wrest control of the Senate from Democrats, who hold a slim majority and are defending more seats than Republicans in 2024.

In 2022, Hogan rebuffed an aggressive push from Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and other Republicans to run against Democratic Sen. Chris Van Hollen.

When he announced his decision not to run for Senate two years ago, Hogan expressed confidence he could win. "But just because you can win a race, doesn't mean that's the job you should do if your heart's not in it. And I just didn't see myself being a U.S. senator," he said then.

The former two-term governor who left office early last year will be running for an open seat due to the retirement of Sen. Ben Cardin. Hogan made his Senate bid known just hours before Maryland's filing deadline.

Hogan announced in March that he would not challenge Trump for the GOP's White House nomination. Last month, he squelched speculation of a third-party presidential run and endorsed former United Nations ambassador and South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley for the Republican nomination for president.

The rarely open Maryland Senate seat already has drawn U.S. Rep. David Trone into the Democratic primary, as well as Angela Alsobrooks, the county executive of Prince George's County in the suburbs of the nation's capital. Trone, the wealthy founder of a chain of liquor stores called Total Wine & More, has poured \$23 million of his own money into his campaign so far.

Seven Republicans have filed to enter the GOP primary, but none is as well known as the former governor. Hogan was only the second Republican governor to ever win reelection in Maryland, a state where Democrats outnumber Republicans 2-1.

He won his first term as governor in 2014 in an upset, using public campaign financing against a better-funded candidate. Running on fiscal concerns as a moderate Republican businessman, Hogan tapped into voter frustration over a series of tax and fee increases to defeat then-Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown.

Hogan, who had never held elected office before, focused on pocketbook issues from the outset. He lowered tolls, an action he could take without approval from the General Assembly, long controlled by Democrats. But he also faced challenges, including unrest in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray in police custody in 2015. Hogan sent the National Guard to help restore order.

In June of that year, Hogan was diagnosed with stage 3 non-Hodgkin's lymphoma but continued working while receiving treatment. He has been in remission since November 2015.

Maryland's last Republican U.S. senator was Charles Mathias, who served in the Senate from 1969 to 1987. Mathias was known as a liberal Republican who often clashed with his party over issues such as the Vietnam War and civil rights.

Flu hangs on in US, fading in some areas and intensifying in others

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The flu virus is hanging on in the U.S., intensifying in some areas of the country after weeks of an apparent national decline.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data released Friday showed a continued national drop in flu hospitalizations, but other indicators were up — including the number of states with high or very high levels for respiratory illnesses.

"Nationally, we can say we've peaked, but on a regional level it varies," said the CDC's Alicia Budd. "A couple of regions haven't peaked yet."

Patient traffic has eased a bit in the Southeast and parts of the West Coast, but flu-like illnesses seem to be proliferating in the Midwest and have even rebounded a bit in some places. Last week, reports were at high levels in 23 states — up from 18 the week before, CDC officials said.

Flu generally peaks in the U.S. between December and February. National data suggests this season's peak came around late December, but a second surge is always possible. That's happened in other flu seasons, with the second peak often — but not always — lower than the first, Budd said.

So far, the season has been relatively typical, Budd said. According to CDC estimates, since the beginning of October, there have been at least 22 million illnesses, 250,000 hospitalizations, and 15,000 deaths from flu. The agency said 74 children have died of flu.

COVID-19 illnesses seem to have peaked at around the same time as flu. CDC data indicates coronavirus-caused hospitalizations haven't hit the same levels they did at the same point during the last three winters. COVID-19 is putting more people in the hospital than flu, CDC data shows.

The national trends have played out in Chapel Hill, said Dr. David Weber, an infectious diseases expert at the University of North Carolina.

Weber is also medical director of infection prevention at UNC Medical Center, where about a month ago more than 100 of the hospital's 1,000 beds were filled with people with COVID-19, flu or the respiratory virus RSV.

That's not as bad as some previous winters — at one point during the pandemic, 250 beds were filled with COVID-19 patients. But it was bad enough that the hospital had to declare a capacity emergency so that it could temporarily bring some additional beds into use, Weber said.

Now, about 35 beds are filled with patients suffering from one of those viruses, most of them COVID-19, he added.

"I think in general it's been a pretty typical year," he said, adding that what's normal has changed to include COVID-19, making everything a little busier than it was before the pandemic.

Former Mets GM Billy Eppler suspended through World Series for fabricating injuries

By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Former New York Mets general manager Billy Eppler was suspended through the 2024 World Series on Friday by baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred, who concluded he directed team staff to fabricate injuries to create open roster spots.

Manfred said in a statement that Eppler directed “the deliberate fabrication of injuries; and the associated submission of documentation for the purposes of securing multiple improper injured list placements during the 2022 and 2023 seasons.”

Use of the so-called “phantom injured list” is thought to be common throughout baseball, but Eppler is the first to be disciplined.

“I cooperated fully and transparently with MLB’s investigation, and I accept their decision,” Eppler said in a statement.

Eppler will not lose any salary as a result of the suspension. The Mets paid the remainder of his contract, which was set to run through the 2025 season, after he resigned last fall the same day MLB’s investigation became public.

Eppler’s conduct involved about seven players, a person familiar with the investigation told The Associated Press. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the players were not publicly identified.

Major League Baseball said it “concluded that the pattern of conduct was at Mr. Eppler’s sole direction and without any involvement of club ownership or superiors.”

The suspension will prevent Eppler from taking a job with another team until reinstated. Eppler will be allowed to apply for early reinstatement, MLB said.

No other Mets personnel were disciplined by the commissioner’s office, a second person familiar with the investigation said, also on condition of anonymity.

MLB said it interviewed more than three dozen people in the investigation. Eppler was represented by lawyer Jay Reisinger.

Under MLB rules, a physician must certify an injury in the sport’s computer records. MLB concluded any other staff involved with the misconduct participated at Eppler’s direction.

Players have an economic incentive to go along with an IL stint. A player with a split contract calling for different salaries in the major and minor leagues would have received at least \$3,978 per day while on a big league IL last year; for many the pay while assigned to the minors ranged from as little as \$315 or \$630, depending on whether they were on a 40-man roster that year for the first time.

Eppler, 48, was the Mets general manager from November 2021 until he quit last Oct. 5, three days after owner Steven Cohen hired David Stearns as president of baseball operations.

The Mets said in a statement they “consider the matter closed and will have no further comment.”

Eppler was a New York Yankees assistant general manager from 2012-14 and then became GM of the Los Angeles Angels from 2015-20. He joined WME Sports in September 2021 as part of its baseball representation group, then two months later agreed to a four-year contract with the Mets and became their fifth head of baseball operations in 13 months.

MLB’s discipline is the sport’s most significant since Houston manager A.J. Hinch and general manager Jeff Luhnow were suspended in January 2020 through that year’s World Series for their roles in the team using a video camera to steal signs. Both were fired, the Astros were fined \$5 million and the team forfeited four high-round amateur draft picks.

Alex Cora, who had been Houston’s bench coach before becoming Boston’s manager, was fired by the Red Sox and suspended by Manfred for the coronavirus-shortened 2020 season for his role in the Astros’ scandal.

Atlanta lost 13 prospects and general manager John Coppolella was banned for life in November 2017 for circumventing international signing rules from 2015-17. Coppolella was reinstated in January 2023.

What a comeback! Three longtime friends have attended every Super Bowl — and don't intend to stop

By PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

KENNEBUNK, Maine (AP) — As long as they still have each other, they're still going to go to every Super Bowl.

That's the sentiment shared by three friends who say they are the final fans who can claim membership in the exclusive "never missed a Super Bowl" club. And they're back again for number 58 — Super Bowl 58 — this year.

The three fans, all in their 80s, are Don Crisman of Maine, Gregory Eaton of Michigan and Tom Henschel, who splits time between Florida and Pennsylvania. The three are gathering this weekend in Las Vegas for the big game, and they're hoping they can all make it to the sixtieth edition of the game two years from now.

The fans have sat together at the Super Bowl before, and they were still trying to make last-minute arrangements to do that for this year's game this week. At the very least, they planned to get together for brunch on Friday, as always.

Eaton, 84, who runs a ground transportation company in Detroit, has been especially invested in this year's football playoffs, as his beloved Detroit Lions won playoff games for the first time in more than three decades. The Lions fell just short of qualifying for their first Super Bowl, but Eaton said getting together with retirees Crisman, 87, and Henschel, 82, is the real draw of going to the big game year after year.

"Yeah, I'm a Lions fan," Eaton said. "But in two years, I just hope I'll be in good shape to be there again."

The men have attended every game since the first AFL-NFL World Championship Game, the forerunner to the modern Super Bowl, took place in Los Angeles in 1967. This year's game is at Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas on Sunday.

Crisman and Henschel first met at the 1983 Super Bowl, but they didn't meet Eaton until the mid-2010s. The fans have said in the past that they might be getting ready to let the tradition go, but every year they make the decision to do it again.

They're part of an ever-dwindling group of people who have attended every Super Bowl that has also included media members, football executives, groundskeepers and others. Norma Hunt, wife of late football pioneer Lamar Hunt, was the sole woman to attend every Super Bowl until she died in June.

The fans all said the one thing that could keep them from attending is if they or one of the other two was not healthy enough or mobile enough to do it. Health concerns have cropped up for all of them in recent years, but they all said they're feeling well enough to go this year and planning on the next two.

"I think that might be the factor that would definitely tip it," Crisman said. "I'm not looking to be the survivor. I just go for the fun, and the guys. We'll see what this year brings and address it in December '24."

The three men have witnessed all of the most iconic moments in Super Bowl history, but some of their most cherished memories of the game are a little more personal than David Tyree's "helmet catch" in Super Bowl 42 or Scott Norwood's missed field goal in Super Bowl 25. Crisman's home is adorned with Super Bowl ephemera, right down to a collectible hat commemorating the first Bud Bowl, a promotion about beer that ran during Super Bowl 23 in 1989.

Eaton fondly remembers he got his tickets to the first Super Bowl from a friend from Michigan State University, Herb Adderley, who played for the Green Bay Packers. Henschel recalls being especially excited for Super Bowl 3 because New York Jets quarterback Joe Namath, like himself, was from the Pittsburgh area.

Crisman hadn't yet acquired tickets for this year's game as of mid-January, when telecommunications giant Verizon surprised him with complementary passes for himself and his daughter, Susan Metevier. Getting to Las Vegas will be much easier than his trip to Super Bowl 2 in 1968, which involved a 24-hour train ride to Miami.

The three men reminisce fondly about the era when it was possible to get a ticket to the big game for \$8. Henschel recalls getting a face value ticket to Super Bowl 3 for \$12 on the day of the game. This year, the cheapest tickets available are more than \$7,000.

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Henschel, a Pittsburgh Steelers fan, has a friendly rivalry with Crisman, a New England Patriots fan, as the two teams have met frequently in the playoffs over the years.

This year, the Patriots failed to contend, and the Steelers made an early playoff exit. But old traditions die hard, Henschel said.

"It's funny because Don and I, he hates the Steelers and I hate the Patriots," Henschel said. "Every time we see each other for the first time, we give each other the finger."

It'll happen again this year. And they hope at least a couple more times after that.

From 200K to 1.5M people:

Startling images show war's impact on a small area of Gaza

By JON GAMBRELL AND PHIL HOLM Associated Press

Israel has identified the southern Gaza city of Rafah as the next target in its military offensive against Hamas.

Rafah, which borders Egypt, is normally home to 280,000 people. But its population has swelled to over 1.5 million – roughly three-quarters of Gaza's population -- as Palestinians flee fighting, destruction and hunger elsewhere in the territory. Sprawling tent camps now dot the city.

Satellite images from Planet Labs PBC taken three months apart and analyzed by The Associated Press capture the massive population shift since the onset of the Israel-Hamas war.

They show an area near the Tel al-Sultan refugee camp on Oct. 13, 2023, the war's sixth day, and Jan. 14 of this year. In what was once scrubland near farm fields, the newer image shows a tent city. Hundreds of makeshift shelters surround a warehouse that is a distribution center for the limited aid now entering the besieged Gaza Strip.

The area surveyed in both photos is part of the wider Rafah refugee camp, one of eight urban camps in the Gaza Strip that were built for families displaced during the war surrounding the creation of Israel in 1948.

The U.S. and other members of the international community have raised concerns about the safety of civilians if Israeli troops move into Rafah. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Friday he had ordered the military to draw up plans to evacuate civilians from the packed city before an expected Israeli ground invasion.

Israeli airstrikes hit central Gaza and Rafah overnight into Friday, killing nearly two dozen people including women and children, witnesses and hospital officials said.

Taylor Swift's connections to sports go back to her early days performing the national anthem

By DAN GELSTON AP Sports Writer

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Years before Taylor Swift grew into the global superstar who has become the talk of this Super Bowl, she was just a young Wyomissing, Pennsylvania, singer happy to strum her guitar and perform as the opening act for the biggest sporting events in town. The U.S. Open. NASCAR. The World Series.

No messy ticket rollouts necessary.

Swift was tied to Francis Scott Key before Travis Kelce in her formative years, as the unsigned artist looked for any kind of break by belting out the national anthem in front of as many packed crowds as she could find.

She sent her demo tapes "everywhere," she told Rolling Stone in 2008.

"When I was 11 years old, it occurred to me that the national anthem was the best way to get in front of a large group of people if you don't have a record deal," Swift said. "So I started singing the national anthem anywhere I possibly could."

Swift had a Philadelphia Phillies connection early in her career — both major leagues and minor.

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She sang the anthem before 45,900 fans at Game 3 of the 2008 World Series, a game the Phillies won on their way to their last championship. Tim McGraw — his name also the title of one of Swift's early breakout hits — delivered the game ball. Swift joined other Philly luminaries Patti LaBelle and John Oates as 2008 World Series anthem singers.

Before that, Swift made the short drive from her six-bedroom home — roughly 5 miles — for appearances at Reading Phillies Double-A games in 1999 and 2007.

She wore cowboy boots and a knit hat for her April 5, 2007, anthem, with some of the most famous names in the minors on hand for opening day. She played a stripped-down version of the song on the grass behind home plate as mascots Change-Up the Turtle, Blooper the Hound Dog and Bucky the Beaver solemnly stood with their right forepaws and other appendages on their prodigious chests. Swift triumphantly waved to the crowd alongside Screwball, his "R" cap askew and appropriately signature red tongue draped past his chin.

Baseball fans in the area saved some serious cash in those days to catch Swift in concert -- even if just a one-song set. But who would ever expect as teams at all levels churn through anthem singers night after night that one would pop as an eventual 14-time Grammy winner, including a four-time winner for album of the year?

Rob Hackash worked for Reading in various departments, notably as director of communications, for 21 years. He said this week that Swift was a standout at the mic, even at such a young age.

"To borrow an old scout's phrase, she had some mound presence," he said.

Hackash said the team mostly worked through Swift's family, including her parents Scott and Andrea, to snag an appearance.

"My memories are all fond of the Swifts in general," Hackash said. "(Her dad) wanted her singing the anthem in front of a crowd. Her first Reading game was kind of a stepping stone to get something on tape to send to the Sixers. That was kind of the reason they came to us. I always remember Scott as a good dude, good dad. She kind of took it from there and eventually did end up with the Sixers."

Swift got the call for the big time and sang the anthem at an April 5, 2002, Sixers game. Allen Iverson did not play in that one but Swift was there at 12 years old, dressed in an American flag sweatshirt and headband at center court in front of 20,754 fans.

The 76ers presented Swift with duffel bags full of souvenirs, including a jersey signed by members of the team.

"My mom and I were just jumping up and down we were so excited," Swift told The Reading Eagle for an April 19, 2002, story. "I just really love doing that sort of thing. It is an adrenaline rush."

How big of a step up for her career were the Sixers? The month before, The Reading Eagle noted Swift did another rendition of the anthem, only at Wyomissing High School for a basketball game between school faculty and members of the community.

Former Sixers manager of game operations Kathy Drysdale said in 2002 that Swift's voice caught her attention immediately on a tape submitted by Scott Swift.

"Her voice is so strong and powerful at 12 years old," Drysdale said. "You look at her and think, 'Did that come out of her mouth?'"

Swift nailed the performance.

Matt Cord has been the voice of the 76ers as their public address announcer since 1998. He quickly pulled up a picture on his phone of a young Swift singing the anthem at the Wells Fargo Center when asked about her and remembered specific instructions he had for her introduction.

"She was from Wyomissing, Pennsylvania and I didn't know that town," Cord said from his courtside seat. "Her dad was right here and he goes, 'Just say Reading.' So I went with Reading. We introduced her as a country star from Reading."

The Reading Eagle story ended on a hopeful note, where writer Jeremy Carroll noted, "Last month, the Swifts traveled to Nashville, where they distributed (her) CD to record companies in the hope of landing a record deal."

Oh, she signed that deal — and so much more in the years ahead. But her career was still in its infancy

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-- Swift dropped her debut album late in 2006 -- when she returned to Reading for the anthem, much to the delight and surprise of the organization.

"At this point, the first album was already out, it was already huge," Hackash said. "I kind of realized, this was a big deal. We had players from all different parts of the country and those guys, like the Texas kids, the South Carolina kids, they knew darn well who she was. They knew the 'Tim McGraw' song, they knew her. I was like, this has exceeded our little area here. By a lot."

Swift hasn't forgotten her Pennsylvania stadium roots, of course.

Only now she can cause a fan frenzy as she fills Lincoln Financial Field, the home of the Philadelphia Eagles, as she did for three nights last May. Swift gave a shoutout to the Eagles one night — "Guys, like, c'mon. I'm from Philly," she told the crowd — though her alliance now is clearly with Kelce and the Kansas City Chiefs.

AP-NORC Poll: Most Americans say air travel is safe despite recent scares

By DAVID KOENIG and LINLEY SANDERS undefined

Most U.S. adults believe that air travel is generally safe in the U.S., despite some doubts about whether aircraft are being properly maintained and remain free from structural problems.

About 7 in 10 U.S. adults say planes are a "very" or "somewhat" safe method of travel, according to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Even with that high level of trust, only about 2 in 10 U.S. adults have "a great deal" of confidence that airplanes are being properly maintained, or that they are safe from structural faults. Another half have a "moderate" amount of faith that this is the case.

The poll was conducted after a Jan. 5 accident in which a panel blew off an Alaska Airlines Boeing 737 Max 9 jetliner 16,000 feet (4,900 meters) above Oregon, leaving a gaping hole in the side of the plane. That led to the grounding of more than 140 planes and raised questions about Boeing's ongoing manufacturing problems as well as the Federal Aviation Administration's ability to address them.

U.S. adults are more confident in airline pilots' and air traffic controllers' ability to maintain air safety than they are in the commercial airlines, airplane manufacturers or federal government agencies charged with it. A majority have at least a "moderate" amount of confidence that each is ensuring safety.

Some with fears of flying expressed even more concern because of the Alaska Airlines incident.

"I don't enjoy flying. It is so unnatural — we're in a metal tube flying through the air," said Margaret Burke of Pensacola, Florida, who read accounts of the jetliner incident, which resulted in no serious injuries. "The fact that people do fly safely every day seems, to me, like a miracle."

Despite her fear, Burke will board a plane for a trip to California this spring because of the speed and convenience that air travel offers.

"I have a 3-year-old, and I can't put him in a car seat for three days straight, that's just unfair," she said.

Even with maintenance concerns, U.S. adults have a higher level of certainty that airline pilots and air traffic controllers are well-trained and engaged in proper safety procedures. Slightly fewer than half — 45% — have "a great deal" of confidence in pilots' training, while 38% say that about air traffic controllers.

About one-quarter of U.S. adults have a high level of confidence that air travel is safe from terrorist attacks, or that government agencies have enacted necessary safety regulations. Even with the variation, a majority of U.S. adults have at least "a moderate amount" of confidence that planes are safe, pilots are well-trained and the regulations are appropriate.

That may be because flying is still much safer than driving and also safer than rail travel on a per-mile basis, according to U.S. Department of Transportation figures.

Airline officials and aviation regulators like to point out that there has not been a fatal crash of a U.S. airliner since 2009, although in 2018 a passenger died on a Southwest flight after an engine explosion and in the past year there has been a sharp increase in close calls being investigated by federal officials.

Sherry Kohn, a retired English literature teacher in Pennsylvania, thinks that flying is generally safe — "I would get on a plane" — but she is among those who are only moderately confident that planes are manufactured safely.

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"Nobody is going to put something out that's going to kill people, I don't think," she said, "but Boeing has had a history of problems."

Kohn also worries about maintenance.

"They recycle these planes so quickly," she said. "It lands, somebody goes in and vacuums. I don't know that they are checking (the planes) as carefully as they should."

About one-quarter of U.S. adults say they travel by plane at least a few times a year when traveling long distances.

Those frequent flyers are more likely than those who fly less often to have a great deal of confidence on all categories: that airplanes are being properly maintained, are safe from structural faults, that air traffic controllers are well-trained, that pilots are well-trained, that government agencies have enacted the necessary safety regulations and that it's safe from terrorist acts.

Randi Niedfeldt, a retired physician assistant in Wisconsin, has a great deal of confidence in the planes, despite the recent incidents. Her husband is a recreational pilot, and he checks the type of plane they'll be flying on, but they don't avoid any specific make or model.

"How many big airplane crashes do you hear about?" she asked. "When they happen, they're catastrophic, but they don't happen very often for the amount of flying that is done."

The poll of 1,152 adults was conducted Jan. 25–29, 2024, using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4.0 percentage points.

Ed Dwight was to be the first Black astronaut. At 90, he's finally getting his due

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Ed Dwight grew up in segregated 1930s Kansas on a farm on the edge of town. An airfield was within walking distance, and, as a boy, he'd often go to marvel at the planes and gawk at the pilots. Most were flying back from hunting trips and their cabins were messy with blood and empty beer cans on the floor.

"They'd say to me, 'Hey kid, would you clean my airplane? I'll give you a dime,'" Dwight, 90, recalls. But when he was 8 or 9, Dwight asked for more than a dime. He wanted to fly.

"My first flight was the most exhilarating thing in the world," says Dwight, smiling. "There were no streets or stop signs up there. You were free as a bird."

It would be years before Dwight entertained the idea of himself becoming a pilot. "It was the white man's domain," he says. But while in college, he saw in a newspaper, above the fold, an image of a downed Black pilot in Korea.

"I said, 'Oh my God, they're letting Black people fly,'" Dwight says. "I went straight to the recruitment office and said, 'I want to fly.'"

With that decision, Dwight set in motion a series of events that would very nearly lead to him being among the first astronauts. As Dwight progressed through the Air Force, he was handpicked by President John F. Kennedy's White House to join Chuck Yeager's test pilot program at Edwards Air Force Base in California's Mojave Desert.

That fabled astronaut breeding ground, site of "The Right Stuff," might have turned Dwight into one of the most famous Americans and the first Black man in space. But at Edwards, Dwight was discriminated against even with Kennedy championing him. Dwight eventually departed for civilian life and largely receded from history.

But in recent years, Dwight is finally being celebrated. The new National Geographic documentary "The Space Race," which premieres Monday on National Geographic Channel and streams Tuesday on Disney+ and Hulu, chronicles the stories of Black astronauts — and their first pioneer, Dwight.

"When I left, everyone said, 'Well, that's over. We got rid of that dude. He's off the map,'" Dwight said

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in an interview by Zoom from his home in Denver. "Now it comes back full force as one of these I-didn't-know stories."

It wasn't until 1983 that the first African American, Guion Bluford, reached space. But two decades earlier, Dwight found himself at a fulcrum of 20th Century America, where the space race and the struggle for social justice converged.

In "The Space Race," astronaut Bernard Harris, who became the first Black man to walk in space in 1995, contemplates what a difference it might have made if Dwight had become an astronaut in the tumultuous '60s.

"Space really allows us to realize the hope that's within all of us as human beings," Harris says. "So to see a Black man in space during that period in time, it would have changed things."

"Ed is so important for everyone who's followed after, to recognize and embrace the shoulders they stand on," says Lisa Cortés, who directed the film with Diego Hurtado de Mendoza. "There's the history we know and the history that's not had the opportunity to be highlighted."

In 1957, when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik into orbit, it jolted its Cold War rival into action.

As the U.S. began pursuing a space program, political leaders were conscious of the image its astronauts could project of American democracy. The first astronauts, the Mercury Seven, were all male and white.

When the Aerospace Research Pilot School was established that November, the White House urged the Air Force to select a Black officer. Only Dwight met the criteria.

That November, Dwight received a letter out of the blue inviting him to train to be an astronaut. Kennedy called his parents to congratulate them.

Despite reservations, Dwight joined up. He was celebrated on the covers of Black magazines like Jet and Sepia. Hundred of letters hailing him as a hero poured in. But in training, he was treated with hostility by officers.

"They were all instructed to give me the cold shoulder," Dwight says. "Yeager had a meeting with the students and the staff in the auditorium and announced it — that Washington was trying to shove this N-word down our throats."

Yeager, who died in 2020, maintained Dwight simply wasn't as good as the other pilots.

Dwight was among the 26 potential astronauts recommended to NASA by the Air Force. But in 1963, he wasn't among the 14 selected. Dwight astronaut future took a more drastic turn when Kennedy was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963.

Kennedy was killed on a Friday. By Monday, Dwight says, he had papers in his mailbox shipping him out to Germany. He quickly met with Bobby Kennedy in Washington, who had the Pentagon cancel those orders.

Ultimately, Dwight was stationed at Wright-Patterson in Ohio in January of 1964. He graduated the program and totaled some 9,000 hours of air time, but never became an astronaut. He left the Air Force in 1966.

Asked if he was bitter about his experience, Dwight exclaims, "God no!"

"Here you get a little 5-foot-four guy who flies airplanes and the next thing you know this guy is in the White House meeting all these senators and congressmen, standing in front of all these captains of industry and have them pat me on the back and shake my hand," Dwight says. "Are you kidding me? What would I be bitter about? That opened the world to me."

In 1977, he earned his Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture from the University of Denver. Much of his work is of great figures from Black history such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Barack Obama. Several of his sculptures have flown into space, most recently one aboard the vessel Orion. NASA named an asteroid after him.

Dwight is filled with gratitude. His one recommendation is that every congressman and senator be flown on a sub-orbital flight so they can see the Earth from above. Everyone, he thinks, would realize the absurdity of racism from that height.

"I'd advise everybody to go through what I went through, and then they'd have a different view of this country and how sacred it is," Dwight says. "We're on this little ball flying around the galaxy."

City drops charges against pastor as sides negotiate over Ohio church's 24/7 ministry

By MARK SCOLFARO Associated Press

An Ohio city has dropped criminal charges against a pastor over his around-the-clock ministry to the homeless and others in need of help while the two sides work to end the dispute that has landed in federal court.

A municipal prosecutor this week moved to dismiss code violation charges against Dad's Place church Pastor Chris Avell, weeks after the church filed a federal lawsuit accusing the city of Bryan of trying to repeatedly harass and intimidate it. The city said it wanted to reserve the right to refile charges against Avell if needed.

The lawsuit remains pending, but a lawyer for the city told a federal judge on Monday that a mediation session last week "was productive and the parties continue to pursue resolution."

Jeremy Dys, a lawyer for Avell, said Friday that Dad's Place plans to continue to provide temporary shelter to people while it seeks to resolve disputes about the sanctuary's zoning status and conditions.

"The church will continue to temporarily shelter people at Dad's Place church, even while we continue to talk to the city about how Dad's Place is a productive member of the Bryan community," Dys said. He said a judge granted the motion to dismiss charges against Avell on Thursday.

Bryan Police charged Avell last month with 18 violations, saying the church was violating the city's zoning ordinance, lacked proper kitchen and laundry facilities and had unsafe exits and inadequate ventilation. The rented church building is beside a separate homeless shelter on Main Street in the city of about 8,600 in northwestern Ohio.

Dad's Place said in a statement released late Thursday that it will pursue building certifications, zoning permits and safety measures.

"I am thankful to God, the city, and for everyone who has been praying for this day to come," Avell said in the release. "Bryan is my home. I am eager to continue to serve God, my community, and the people I love."

The city's mayor, Carrie Schlade, said in the statement that officials appreciated the effort to negotiate and said work was continuing to resolve their disputes. She is a defendant in the federal lawsuit, along with the city and other Bryan officials.

Police sought charges against Avell for code violations in December. He pleaded not guilty in municipal court Jan. 11.

Church leaders decided almost a year ago to remain open around-the-clock as a temporary, emergency shelter. They've said about eight people have stayed there on a typical night, a few more in bad weather.

"I truly believe that everyone who walks through the door of Dad's Place walks out a better citizen," Avell told The Associated Press last month.

The church's "Rest and Refresh in the Lord" overnight ministry has included readings of the Bible piped in under dim lights, with people allowed to come or go. Two volunteers watched over things.

The city said police calls related to church activity began to increase in May for problems such as criminal mischief, trespassing, theft and disturbing the peace. A planning and zoning administrator eventually ordered the church to stop housing people in a zone where first-floor residential use is not allowed.

The church sued to ask the federal court to stop what it considers violations of constitutional rights to free exercise of religion and protections against government hostility to religion. It asked for a restraining order or an injunction against Bryan "enforcing or applying the city's ordinances to burden the plaintiff's religious exercise."

Before Usher hits the Super Bowl halftime stage, Apple Music builds anticipation ahead of big show

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LAS VEGAS (AP) — In a short film shown at the end of the Super Bowl halftime performer news conference, the show's headliner Usher comes up missing. The singer's sudden absence prompts instant panic from his friends including Ludacris, Lil Jon and Taraji P. Henson, sparking a search at various Las Vegas landmarks.

Ultimately, Usher is found splashing water while dancing in a Caesar's Palace fountain in the seven-minute film "Where's Usher!?" It's one of the many creative projects from Apple Music, which has made a concerted effort to amplify the anticipation around Sunday's halftime show.

Since Apple Music became the halftime show sponsor, the streaming service is pushing to leave an influential mark like never before.

"We're trying to extend the campaign to more than just a show on a Sunday afternoon," said Oliver Schusser, the vice president of Apple Music and Beats. The streaming service became the sponsor for the show in 2022 replacing Pepsi, which held the position for a decade.

Schusser said Apple Music stepped in as a company that understands the music landscape. He called their partnership a "very powerful" one with the NFL and Jay-Z's Roc Nation, which has produced the halftime show since 2019.

"We want to make the halftime show press conference the artist moment," Schusser said. "We really wanted to elevate that and make that great. We did that last year. This year, we made it even bigger."

So far, Apple Music has gotten off to a promising start. Last year, the streaming service built a campaign for Rihanna — while keeping her pregnancy a secret — leading up to her performance, which became the most-watched in Super Bowl halftime history with more than 121 million viewers.

As Usher prepares to headline this year's festivities, Apple Music created a strategic plan before he hits the Super Bowl stage. The streaming service has been working with the singer and his team since meeting with him during last year's Paris Fashion Week.

"It's been a journey with him and his management ever since," Schusser said. "We want to make this a bigger and global event. Between Apple Music, Apple Music Radio, the talent who have a deep understanding of music and culture and obviously Apple's ecosystem, I think we can amplify that."

Leading up to Sunday, it's all about Usher. Through the streaming service's app, listeners can check out the singer's halftime show trailer, his curated My Road to Halftime playlist featuring his own hits and collaborators. Usher and Jermaine Dupri created a mix of songs in spatial audio with jams including DJs Tiësto, Gryffin and BLOND:ISH.

Apple Music Radio's Nadeska Alexis had a livestreamed sit-down interview Thursday with Usher where the short film was shown.

There's a story of Usher in 20 songs, an editorial feature that gives an in-depth look at his 30-year career as a performer. The platform offers a four-night Usher takeover through their live broadcasting shows hosted by Lil Wayne and Estelle along with exclusive programming on Apple Music Radio that will chronicle the singer's evolution; workout music by past halftime performers through Fitness+ and ways to revisit his past projects before the release of his ninth studio album "Coming Home," which comes out Friday.

"From a marketing standpoint, we approach it like a product launch," said Tor Myhren, vice president of marketing communications at Apple. "You have all the unique things about it then bring those to life. With Usher, the approach is that Usher is fun. Usher is a party. He wants to have a good time. It's really about capturing the essence of that artist, putting that together with the essence of Apple Music."

Myhren said there's still a focus on Usher's performance after the Super Bowl. He said it's imperative to capitalize off the singer's show before turning the company's attention to next year's performer.

"We still want people to bask in the glory of the show," he said. "After any halftime artist plays, their streaming of their music the next week or two goes through the roof. We want to be in the middle of that. We want to give our customers a much better experience."

Myhren said the foundation has been laid.

"It's about the lead up to the show and how we can continue to reinvent that step," he said. "We want to continue to bring this very cool musical experience to a much more global audience."

Faced with wave of hostile bills, transgender rights leaders are playing "a defense game"

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

For decades, the plotline for LGBTQ+ activism in the U.S. was one of advances — often slow-paced and hard-fought but inexorably moving forward. Now, faced with unprecedented attacks in state legislatures, transgender rights leaders acknowledge they are playing defense — and two of the biggest groups are joining forces to counter the onslaught.

"This is going to be a defense game — and a movement-strengthening game," said Andy Marra, executive director of the Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund. "We have witnessed a sophisticated, well-coordinated and highly resourced effort to dismantle the years of progress that our movement has made."

The essence of the attack: Scores of bills enacted in Republican-governed states over the past few years targeting transgender people. Many of laws ban gender-affirming medical care for trans minors or bar trans athletes from competing on girls' and women's scholastic sports teams.

With a new wave of anti-trans measures already introduced this year, the TLDEF and the National Center for Transgender Equality announced in January that they plan to merge this summer. The new organization will be called Advocates for Trans Equality; Marra will be its CEO, while its executive director will be Rodrigo Heng-Lehtinen, who now holds that title with the NCTE.

Marra said a key moment in deciding to consider the merger came in 2022. Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton and Gov. Greg Abbott, both Republicans, directed state child protection workers to investigate families of trans children for what Abbott termed "abusive gender-transitioning services."

"I knew we needed a stronger, bolder response to the unprecedented vitriol and legislative attacks on trans people nationwide," Marra said.

Unlike some mergers, this one is not aimed at cost-cutting or consolidation, according to Heng-Lehtinen. He said current staff from each organization will be retained, and the new organization — after adding a few new hires — will likely have a staff of about 50 by the end of the year, working out of offices in New York and Washington as well as remotely.

"When you hear 'merger,' you think there's some kind of crisis or duplication," he said. "Not in this case — we simply think we'll be stronger."

For Marra and Heng-Lehtinen — and their allies in other LGBTQ+ rights organizations — it's crucial to keep litigating, state by state, against the anti-trans laws. While some of the measures have taken effect, others have been blocked by federal judges, including some appointed by Republican presidents.

Another priority, in this election year, is to engage in political campaigns.

"We need pro-trans elected officials winning their races and defeating candidates who are attacking trans people only to score political points," said Heng-Lehtinen. He depicted the anti-trans vitriol as a backlash to the broader gains made by the LGBTQ+-rights movement in recent decades.

"Anti-LGBT groups are shaking in their boots," he said. "We've made a lot of progress, and that's why they're fighting so hard."

He's been immersed in politics since childhood — his mother, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, served 30 years in Congress, starting when he was 3 years old.

At odds with most of her fellow Republicans in Congress, Ros-Lehtinen became a staunch supporter of LGBTQ+ rights — for example, becoming the first GOP House member to support the legalization of same-sex marriage. She was vocally in support of Rodrigo's decision to come out as a transgender man.

"What makes our family so very proud of Rodrigo is that he's so happy living an authentic life, being honest about who he is and bringing a lot of joy in our lives," Ros-Lehtinen said in a 2016 video urging

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parents to accept their trans children.

The national political environment — in regard to LGBTQ+ rights — has changed dramatically since then. Back in 2016, after North Carolina enacted a “bathroom bill” restricting trans people’s use of public restrooms, there was a major backlash, including cancellation of potentially lucrative business projects and sporting events.

Over the past couple of years, the corporate world has generally avoided similar threats as new anti-trans measures took effect in North Carolina and elsewhere. Sales of Bud Light plunged because of conservative backlash to an ad campaign featuring transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney.

Marra suggested that many corporations had become more wary of venturing into potentially divisive political issues, at a time when special-interest groups are scrutinizing how they deal with issues such as affirmative action and workforce diversity.

“We would like them to stay true to their values,” Marra said.

The cumulative impact of the anti-trans laws has been tangible, according to surveys finding that many trans people have considered moving to another city or state that would be more accepting. Several new organizations have emerged in the past few years offering emergency funding to individuals and families affected by anti-trans legislation, either to relocate or to obtain medical care or services outside their home state.

Marra, who has been active in the LGBTQ+ rights movement for 20 years, says she remains optimistic in the face of current setbacks.

“We are in many ways in the fight of our lives right now, but ultimately we are on the right side of history,” she said.

“This year, we have an opportunity to bring the next generation of voters along in the next chapter of the fight for equality in this country,” she added. “We need to be engaging everyday folks across the country, sharing our stories.”

Today in History: February 10

Chess champion Kasparov loses to IBM computer Deep Blue

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Feb. 10, the 41st day of 2024. There are 325 days left in the year.

Today’s Highlight in History:

On Feb. 10, 1996, world chess champion Garry Kasparov lost the first game of a match in Philadelphia against an IBM computer dubbed “Deep Blue.” (Kasparov ended up winning the match, 4 games to 2; he was defeated by Deep Blue in a rematch the following year.)

On this date:

In 1763, Britain, Spain and France signed the Treaty of Paris, ending the Seven Years’ War (also known as the French and Indian War in North America).

In 1840, Britain’s Queen Victoria married Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg (KOH’-borg) and Gotha (GAH’-thuh).

In 1936, Nazi Germany’s Reichstag passed a law investing the Gestapo secret police with absolute authority, exempt from any legal review.

In 1959, a major tornado tore through the St. Louis area, killing 21 people and causing heavy damage.

In 1962, the Soviet Union exchanged captured American U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers for Rudolf Abel, a Soviet spy held by the United States.

In 1967, the 25th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, dealing with presidential disability and succession, was ratified as Minnesota and Nevada adopted it.

In 1981, eight people were killed when a fire set by a busboy broke out at the Las Vegas Hilton hotel-casino.

In 1989, Ron Brown was elected the first Black chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

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In 1992, boxer Mike Tyson was convicted in Indianapolis of raping Desiree Washington, a Miss Black America contestant. (Tyson served three years in prison.)

In 2005, North Korea boasted publicly for the first time that it possessed nuclear weapons.

In 2013, at the Grammy Awards, Fun. won song of the year for "We Are Young"; Gotye's "Somebody I Used to Know" picked up record of the year.

In 2015, NBC announced it was suspending Brian Williams as "Nightly News" anchor and managing editor for six months without pay for misleading the public about his experiences covering the Iraq War.

In 2020, U.S. health officials confirmed the first case of the novel coronavirus among the hundreds of people who'd been evacuated from China to military bases in the United States; it was among the 13 confirmed cases in the U.S. Britain declared the new coronavirus a "serious and imminent threat to public health" and said people with the virus could now be forcibly quarantined.

In 2021, Larry Flynt, who turned his raunchy Hustler magazine into an empire while fighting numerous First Amendment court battles, died at age 78 in Los Angeles.

Today's birthdays: Opera singer Leontyne Price is 97. Actor Robert Wagner is 94. Singer Roberta Flack is 87. Singer Jimmy Merchant (Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers) is 84. Rock musician Bob Spalding (The Ventures) is 77. Olympic gold-medal swimmer Mark Spitz is 74. Walt Disney Co. executive Robert Iger is 73. Rock musician and composer Cory Lerios (Pablo Cruise) is 73. World Golf Hall of Famer Greg Norman is 69. Actor Kathleen Beller is 68. Country singer Lionel Cartwright is 64. Movie director Alexander Payne is 63. ABC News correspondent George Stephanopoulos is 63. Political commentator Glenn Beck is 60. Actor Laura Dern is 57. Writer-producer-director Vince Gilligan (TV: "Breaking Bad") is 57. Country singer Dude Mowrey is 52. Actor Jason Olive is 52. Actor Elizabeth Banks is 50. Actor Julia Pace Mitchell is 46. Reggaeton singer Don Omar is 46. Actor Uzo Aduba is 43. Actor Stephanie Beatriz is 43. Actor Max Brown is 43. Actor Barry Sloane is 43. Rock singer Eric Dill is 42. Actor Trevante Rhodes is 34. Actor Emma Roberts is 33. Actor Makenzie Vega is 30. Actor Chloe Grace Moretz is 27. Actor Yara Shahidi is 24.

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D

Double Header Basketball Game

Mobridge/Pollock @ Groton Area

Saturday, February 10th, 2024

Game Times/Locations:

Main Court in Arena	Main Court in Old Gym
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 12:00PM → Girls C- 1:00PM → Girls JV- 2:00PM → Boys JV- *GBB Senior Night prior to warm-ups.- 3:15PM → Girls Varsity- *BBB Senior Night prior to warm-ups.- 4:45PM → Boys Varsity<ul style="list-style-type: none">o Halftime Entertainment: Sugar Babes and Sweet Sensations Dancers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 12:00PM → 7th Grade Boys- 1:00PM → 8th Grade Boys

Prior to the Girls Varsity game, the National Anthem will be first, with Varsity Introductions/Lineups to follow.

ADMISSION & SPECTATORS: Adults: \$6.00 Students: \$5.00.

CONCESSIONS: Will be available

LOCKER ROOM: Mobridge/Pollock BOYS will use the last locker room down the JH hallway. Mobridge/Pollock GIRLS will be in the JH Girl's locker room located in the old gym.

Team Benches – Groton: South Bench
Mobridge/Pollock: North Bench

ATHLETIC TRAINER: There will be an athletic trainer on site. AED is located near the ticket booth.

Livestream: GDlive.com (must pay to watch) or NFHS

Old Gym → JH Officials: Jesse Zak and Brian Dolan

JH Scoreboard: Joe Schwan

New Gym → C/JV Official: Kristi Zoellner and Justin Hanson

C/JV Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

C/JV Book: Alexa Schuring

C/JV Shot Clock: Ryan Tracy

Varsity Officials: Austin Sumption, Derek Barondeau, Tim Steinwandt

Announcer: Mike Imrie

Varsity Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

Official Book: Alexa Schuring

Shot Clock Operator: Kristi Zoellner

National Anthem: Groton Area Senior and Miss Wolf Pack's Teen 2024, Anna Bisbee

Thank you, Alexa Schuring, Athletic Director