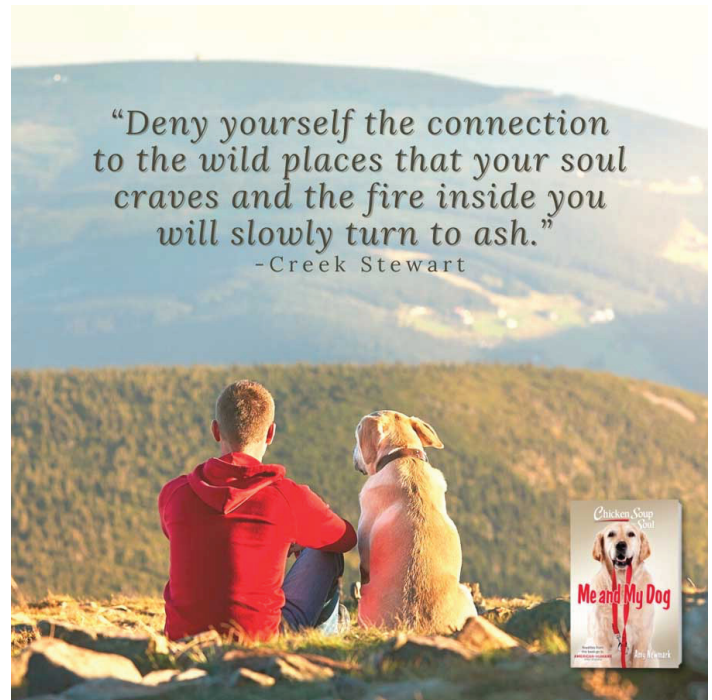


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Thursday, Feb. 29

Senior Menu: Baked pork chop, sweet potatoes, vegetable capri blend, chocolate pudding with banana, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: Pasta with meat sauce.

Girls SoDak 16

Emmanuel Lutheran: Northern Plains Pastor's Meeting, 7 p.m.

Special School Board meeting, 7 a.m.

Friday, March 1

School Breakfast: Biscuits.

School Lunch: Cheese pizza, green beans.

Boys Region 1A: 7 p.m.: Groton Area vs. Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton.

Saturday, March 2

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.

Sunday, March 3

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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

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1440

In partnership with [smartasset](#)

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott (R) issued a disaster declaration this week for 60 counties as the Smokehouse Creek Fire became the second-largest in Texas history. Thousands of people were ordered to evacuate as the wildfire remains 3% contained and other wildfires burned, leaving at least one person dead (see updates).

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) announced yesterday he would step down from the position following the 2024 election, two years ahead of the end of his current term. McConnell assumed the

post in 2006 and is the longest-serving Senate leader from either party.

Today is leap day, Feb. 29, a date observed only once roughly every four years in the international standard Gregorian calendar. While the extra day serves a technical function, its uniqueness prompts celebrations around the world—especially by the estimated 5 million Leaplings born on the rare day.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Richard Lewis, comedian and actor known for starring role on “Curb Your Enthusiasm,” dies at 76 of a heart attack. Michael Jones, WWE star better known by wrestling name “Virgil,” dies at 61.

NFL scouting combine workouts kick off today from Indianapolis; see schedule and preview.

Disney and Indian conglomerate Reliance will merge their media businesses in India, valuing the combined joint venture at \$8.5B. Donna Summer’s estate sues Ye, formerly Kanye West, and Ty Dolla \$ign for using an uncleared sample of Summer’s “I Feel Love” on Ye’s new album.

Science & Technology

Researchers pinpoint key mutation, which potentially leads to the loss of tails in humans and primate relatives roughly 25 million years ago.

Gene editing technique targeting the epigenome—compounds that help guide the human genome and tell it what to do—shown to help reduce cholesterol in mice for up to 11 months without drugs.

New study suggests faint dwarf galaxies born shortly after the Big Bang were responsible for clearing away the universe’s dense hydrogen fog, a key period known as reionization; long-running mystery was solved by data from the James Webb telescope.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close lower (S&P 500 -0.2%, Dow -0.1%, Nasdaq -0.6%) ahead of inflation data to be released tomorrow. Bitcoin surpasses \$63K for first time since November 2021.

Payments giant Stripe’s valuation rises to \$65B after inking deal with investors allowing current and former employees to cash out their shares. Google hit with \$2.3B antitrust lawsuit by Axel Springer, other European media companies over its advertising practices.

China’s Country Garden faces liquidation petition over nonpayment of \$205M loan. Amazon merchant aggregator Thrasio files for bankruptcy. Bumble to lay off 350 workers, or roughly one-third of workforce.

Politics & World Affairs

Judge rules former President Donald Trump must post full \$454M bond while appealing judgment in New York business fraud case; final decision on bond heads to five-judge panel. Supreme Court to hear arguments over whether Trump is immune from federal charges stemming from his role on Jan. 6; case expected during the week of April 22.

Hunter Biden testifies before House Oversight Committee and House Judiciary Committee in closed-door deposition as part of impeachment inquiry into his father, President Joe Biden.

Gaza’s last functioning hospital shuts down due to fuel shortage and lack of medical supplies, according to hospital official; see updates on the war.

Why 1440? The printing press was invented around the year 1440, spreading knowledge to the masses and changing the course of history. More facts: In every day, there are 1,440 minutes. We’re here to make each one count.

158 +/- ACRE LAND AUCTION

WEST HANSON TWP., BROWN CO., SD

We will offer at Public Auction the following land located from Groton SD, (Intersection of Hwy 12 & Hwy 37) 8 miles south on Hwy 37 & 3 miles west on 141st St. Watch for auction signs on:

THURSDAY, MARCH 14th, 2024 SALE TIME: 11:00 A.M.

Auctioneer's Note: This auction presents the opportunity to purchase 158 +/- acres of productive tillable land located in West Hanson Twp., Brown Co., SD. The farm is free for possession for the 2024 crop year. This auction will be held live on-site w/online bidding available.

This 158+/- acres of land, according to FSA information, has 156.85+/- cropland acres and is made up of predominately Class II soils with a Surety AgriData soil productivity index of 76.8. Per FSA information, this farm has a soybean base of 78.6 acres and a PLC yield of 25 bu., and a wheat base of 78.6 acres and a PLC yield of 35 bu. There is approximately 40+/- acres that are planted to winter wheat and this crop will go to the new buyer(s).

Legal Description: SE ¼ of Sec. 28, T-122-N, R-61-W, West Hanson Twp., Brown Co., SD

For additional information, terms, drone video, aerial, soil & plat maps and FSA-156EZ, please visit www.burlagepeterson.com, or contact Auctioneers.

MAKE PLANS TO ATTEND THIS AUCTION AND COME PREPARED TO BUY!

TERMS: Visit burlagepeterson.com for full sale terms. Possession for 2024.

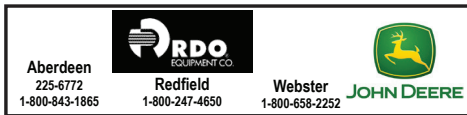
Gary and Sharon Van Riper Charitable Remainder Annuity Trust – Owners
First Bank & Trust – Trustee

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Groton Area 2024 March Calendar of Events

Friday, March 1

School Breakfast: Biscuits.
School Lunch: Cheese pizza, green beans.
Region 1A Boys Basketball at Groton Area
Senior Menu: Scalloped potatoes and ham, peas,
Mandarin orange salad, whole wheat bread.
World Day of Prayer

Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.
Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.
City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.
Senior Menu: Creamed chicken, au grain potatoes,
peas and carrots, pineapple/strawberry ambrosia.
St. John's Lutheran: Ladies Aid LWML, 1 p.m.

Saturday, March 2

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.

Wednesday, March 6

School Breakfast: Tiki egg bake.
School Lunch: Turkey gravy, mashed potatoes.
Groton Chamber Meeting, Noon at City Hall
Senior Menu: Chicken fried steak, mashed pota-
toes with gravy, oriental blend vegetables, baked
apples, whole wheat bread.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Sarah Circle, 5 p.m.; Soup
Supper, 6 p.m. (Sunday school host); Lenten wor-
ship, 7 p.m.; Luther League, 6:15 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lent
Service, 7 p.m.
United Methodist: Communion coffee hour, 9:30
a.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Lent Bible Study, 7 p.m.
Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult
Bible Study begins at 7 pm

Sunday, March 3

Open Gym: Grades JK-8 2:00-3:30 [Students ac-
companied by adults] Grades 6-12 3:30-5:00
Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Wor-
ship 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 with communion, 9
a.m. (Milestones 7th & 8th graders); choir, 6 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion: St.
John's at 9 a.m., Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday school,
9:45 a.m.
United Methodist: Worship with communion:
Conde at 8:30 a.m., Groton at 10:30 a.m.; Coffee
hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday school, 10:30 a.m.

Thursday, March 7

School Breakfast: Surfboard pop tarts.
School Lunch: Taco salads.
State GBB Tournament at Brookings
Senior Menu: Meatloaf, baked potato with sour
cream, creamed peas, frosted brownies, fruit, whole
wheat bread.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.

Monday, March 4

School Lunch: French bread pizza, corn.
Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Senior Menu: Beef noodle stroganoff, mixed veg-
etables, fruit cocktail, cookie, whole wheat bread.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

Friday, March 8

End of Third Quarter
School Breakfast: Ito eats egg wraps.
School Lunch: Mac and cheese, California blend
vegetables.
State GBB Tournament at Brookings
Senior Menu: Potato soup, ham salad croissant,
tomato spoon salad, Mandarin oranges.

Tuesday, March 5

School Breakfast: Surfs up waffles.
School Lunch: Oriental chicken, rice.
Boys Basketball SoDak16

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Saturday, March 9

State GBB Tournament at Brookings
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.

Sunday, March 10

Spring ahead for Daylight Savings Time
Open Gym: Grades JK-8 2:00-3:30 [Students accompanied by adults] Grades 6-12 3:30-5:00
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.; Sunday school, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran worship, 9 a.m.; Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday school, at 9:45 a.m.

United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:30 a.m., and at Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Confirmation Sunday, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday school, 9:30 a.m.

Monday, March 11

School Breakfast: oatmeal.

School Lunch: Chicken nuggets, mashed potatoes.

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Senior Citizens Meet at the Groton Community Center, 1 p.m.

Senior Menu: Tater tot hot dish, green beans, grape juice, pineapple tidbits, whole wheat bread.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

United Methodist: PEO Meeting (outside group), 7 p.m.

Tuesday, March 12

School Breakfast: Breakfast sandwich.

School Lunch: Scalloped potatoes, ham steak.

Middle School Talent Show, 7 p.m., GHS Gym

Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Senior Menu: New England ham dinner, fruit, cookie, dinner roll.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Council, 6 p.m.

United Methodist: Bible study, 10 a.m.

Wednesday, March 13

School Breakfast: French toast.

School Lunch: Tacos.

Senior Menu: Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, peas, apricots, whole wheat bread.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Soup supper, 6 p.m. (Nigeria Circle to host); Lenten worship, 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lent Service, 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Communion coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Lent Bible Study, 7 p.m.

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

Thursday, March 14

No School - Spring Break

State BBB Tournament at Rapid City

Groton Lions Club meeting, 104 November. Main, 6 p.m.

Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, corn, garlic toast, chocolate cake, fruit.

Friday, March 15

No School - Spring Break

State BBB Tournament at Rapid City

Senior Menu: Chicken cordon bleu hot dish, vegetable Catalina blend, pears, tapioca pudding, whole wheat bread.

Saturday, March 16

State BBB Tournament at Rapid City

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.

Sunday, March 17

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 with communion, 9 a.m.; No Sunday school, Choir, 6 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran worship, 9 a.m.; Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday school, at 9:45 a.m.

United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:30 a.m., and at Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; No Sunday school.

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Monday, March 18

School Breakfast: Pancake on stick.
School Lunch: Chicken patty, baked beans.
Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Senior Citizens Meet at the Groton Community Center, 1 p.m.
Senior Menu: Cranberry meatballs, mashed potatoes, mixed vegetables, fruit, whole wheat bread.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Christian Literature Circle, 7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 19

School Breakfast: Scones.
School Lunch: Meatballs, roasted potatoes.
Indoor track meet at Northern State University
Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.
Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.
City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.
Senior Menu: Baked fish, au gratin potatoes, 3 bean salad, tropical fruit, whole wheat bread.
St. John's Lutheran: Quilting, 9 a.m.
United Methodist: Spring Tea luncheon, 10:30 a.m.

Wednesday, March 20

School Breakfast: Cereal.
School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.
Senior Menu: Breaded pork cutlets, creamy noodles, broccoli/cauliflower blend, frosted brownie, fruit, whole wheat bread.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Luther League, 5:30 p.m.; Soup Supper, 6 p.m. (Luther League host); Lenten worship, 7 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lent Service, 7 p.m.
United Methodist: Communion coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Lent Bible Study, 7 p.m.; Groton Ad Council, 7 p.m.
Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm

Thursday, March 21

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.
School Lunch: Chicken strips, fries.
Senior Menu: Ranch chicken breast, long grain wild rice, vegetable capri blend, acini depepi fruit salad, whole wheat bread.

Friday, March 22

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.
School Lunch: Cheese sticks, peas.
Senior Menu: Tuna noodle hot dish with peas, California blend vegetables, Swedish apple square, whole wheat bread.

Saturday, March 23

East River Destination Imagination Tournament at Webster
Billy Shilhanek benefit at the Groton Legion, 3 p.m.
Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.
Groton Lions Easter Egg Hunt, 10 a.m., Groton City Park
Spring Vendor Fair, 10 a.m., GHS Gym
Men's Bowling Tournament, 1 p.m., Jungle Lanes
St. John's Lutheran: Questioning confirmands, 5 p.m.

Sunday, March 24

Palm Sunday
Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.; Easter Cantata entailed, "Because He Lives . . . Amen", 6:30 p.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 with communion, 9 a.m. (Palm procession by Sunday school), Choir, 6 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion: St. John's at 9 a.m., Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday school, 9:45 a.m.
United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:30 a.m., and at Groton, 10:30 a.m. with Sunday school singing; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.

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Monday, March 25

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.
School Lunch: Garlic cheese bread, cooked carrots.
School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.
Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Senior Citizens Meet at the Groton Community Center with potluck at noon.
Senior Menu: Autumn soup, peas, chicken salad croissant, cinnamon apple sauce.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.
PEO meeting (outside group), 7 p.m.

Tuesday, March 26

School Breakfast: Waffles.
School Lunch: Hot dogs, baked beans.
Indoor track meet at Northern State University
Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.
Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.
Senior Menu: Goulash, green beans, pineapple/mandarin oranges, breadstick.
United Methodist: No Bible Study.

Wednesday, March 27

School Breakfast: Egg bake.
School Lunch: Cheese nachos.
Senior Menu: Beef stew, buttermilk biscuit, Waldorf salad, sherbet.
United Methodist: Communion coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Lent Bible Study, 7 p.m.
Groton CM&A: Easter Cantata performed at Aberdean Alliance, 7 p.m.

Thursday, March 28

School Breakfast: Pop tarts.
School Lunch: Sloppy joes, baby bakers.
Senior Menu: Chicken cacciatore, rice pilaf, Italian blend vegetables, apple sauce bars, whole wheat bread.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 7 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Maundy Thursday service with communion, 7 p.m.

Friday, March 29

No school - Easter Break
Emmanuel Luther: If no community service, worship at Emmanuel at 7 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Good Friday service, 7 p.m.

Saturday, March 30

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.

Sunday, March 31

Easter Sunday
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 with communion, 7 a.m. (Breakfast by Luther League), worship with communion, 9:30 a.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Zion at 7:30 a.m.; St. John's at 9 a.m.
United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:30 a.m., and at Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 am.; No Sunday school.

Activities association takes another swing at name, image, likeness rules

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. NewsMedia Association

PIERRE—An amendment to the constitution of the South Dakota High School Activities Association had its first reading Wednesday, Feb. 28, at an SDHSAA board meeting. The amendment would clarify the standards governing name, image and likeness rules for student athletes.

NIL refers to the right of a student to control and profit from their name, image and likeness. In the past NIL rules applied to college athletes, but those opportunities have worked their way down to the high school level.

The association is trying to discern the rules for students who have monetized their social media accounts so they are not benefiting from their status as high school athletes. For the current rules to apply to student-athletes "It would have to be pretty blatant," according to SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos. "We're trying to put some guardrail around it."

Swartos explained that students could make money off of social media as long as they didn't identify themselves as an athlete. "It's completely separating you from the school," Swartos said.

The amendment clarifies the rules for student-athletes who seek to be paid for the use of their name, image, likeness.

According to the amendment, the activity must not interfere with academic obligations; remuneration must not be tied to athletic performance such as pay to play; the remuneration must not be used to induce an athlete to attend a particular school; the remuneration must not be provided by the school or agents of the school like booster clubs or foundations; SDHSAA or a member school's marks or logos must not be used nor the school's name or mascot; member school uniforms must not be worn or displayed; member school facilities must not be used; SDHSAA or member school awards or trophies must not be displayed; and students must not promote or endorse activities associated with alcohol, tobacco, vaping, controlled substances, gambling, banned athletic substances or other illegal substances or activities.

The amendment goes on to advise international students to consult U.S. visa and immigration laws as well as the laws of their home country before entering an NIL agreement. It also advises parents and students to seek legal counsel and tax advice.

Swartos said the NIL rules would apply to a "small number of kids across our state. It could be a decent amount of funding." Over the past two years, Swartos said only three or four parents have contacted him about NIL rules.

Students in violation of the NIL rules could lose their athletic amateur standing for a year. The NIL rules apply to students in taking part in sports, not those in activities like band or chorus.

The second reading of the amendment will be held at the board's April meeting. If the second reading is approved, the amendment would go out to a vote of the association's member schools.

In other action, after an hourlong executive session the board appointed Trent Osborne of Ipswich to join the board as its East River At Large member. Osborne, the Ipswich superintendent, will fill out the term of former board member Tom Culver of Avon who resigned. Osborne's term will last until June 30, 2025.

—30—

First reading of sports classifications, alignments endorsed

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. NewsMedia Association

PIERRE—The first reading of sports classifications and alignments for the next two school years received the endorsement of the South Dakota High School Activities Association board of directors at its meeting on Wednesday, Feb. 28.

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Despite some suggestions for changes from activities directors, the board accepted the alignments as offered by the SDHSAA staff. A second reading will be held at the board's April meeting.

The board typically has a "public forum" at the top of its agenda. Often unused, at Wednesday's meeting the board listened for 40 minutes as school representatives offered alternatives to the plan laid out by the SDHSAA staff in basketball, volleyball, wrestling and golf.

One suggestion was that more emphasis should be placed on enrollment when making regional assignments. SDHSAA Assistant Executive Director Jo Auch explained that the schools are assigned to regions based on geography first to cut down on travel. The second consideration is making the least amount of change.

Considering enrollment within regions, Auch said, was "different than we've ever looked at before." If that would be considered, it would be "back to the drawing board."

SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos said that enrollment is considered in the classification system that seeks to have schools of similar sizes compete against each other.

Swartos explained to the board that the staff uses a system of circles to try to find teams in each classification that are within the same geographical area. "It's all about perspective," Swartos said. "You could draw these things a million different ways."

Swartos said that if extensive changes are made to the classifications or alignments at the second reading, there could be a third reading.

The first reading of the classifications and alignments approved for the 2024-25 and 2025-26 school years include:

BOYS' and GIRLS' BASKETBALL

Class AA

Aberdeen Central, Brandon Valley, Brookings, Douglas, Harrisburg, Huron, Mitchell, O'Gorman, Pierre, Rapid City Central and Stevens, Sioux Falls Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington, Spearfish, Sturgis, Tea Area, Watertown and Yankton.

New to Class AA: Tea Area

Class A

Region 1A

Aberdeen Roncalli, Britton-Hecla, Groton Area, Milbank, Redfield, Sisseton, Webster Area.

New to Class A: Britton-Hecla.

Region 2A

Clark/Willow Lake, Deuel, Elkton-Lake Benton, Florence/Henry, Great Plains Lutheran, Hamlin, Sioux Valley.

Region 3A

Baltic, Dell Rapids, Flandreau, Garretson, Madison, Tri-Valley, West Central.

New to Region 3A: Flandreau.

Region 4A

Beresford, Canton, Dakota Valley, Elk Point-Jefferson, Lennox, Sioux Falls Christian, Vermillion.

New to Region 4A: Sioux Falls Christian.

Region 5A

Bon Homme, Hanson, McCook Central/Montrose, Mount Vernon/Plankinton, Parker, Scotland/Menno, Wagner

New to Class A: Scotland/Menno.

New to Region 5A: McCook Central/Montrose, Parker.

Region 6A

Chamberlain, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte, Crow Creek, Miller, Mobridge-Pollock, Platte-Geddes, Stanley County.

New to Region 6A: Chamberlain, Platte-Geddes.

Region 7A

Lakota Tech, Little Wound, Mahpiya Luta, Pine Ridge, St. Francis Indian, Todd County, Winner.

Region 8A

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Belle Fourche, Custer, Hill City, Hot Springs, Lead-Deadwood, Rapid City Christian, St. Thomas More.
Class B
Region 1B
Aberdeen Christian, Hitchcock-Tulare, Langford Area, Leola/Frederick Area, Northwestern, Tiospa Zina, Warner, Waubay/Summit, Waverly-South Shore, Wilmot.
New to Class B: Tiospa Zina and Waubay/Summit.
Region 2B
Arlington, Castlewood, De Smet, Deubrook Area, Estelline/Hendricks, Iroquois/Lake Preston, James Valley Christian, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland, Wessington Springs, Wolsey-Wessington.
New to Class B: Estelline/Hendricks
New to Region 2B: Wessington Springs
Region 3B
Bridgewater-Emery, Canistota, Chester, Colman-Egan, Dell Rapids St. Mary, Ethan, Flandreau Indian, Howard, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket, Sioux Falls Lutheran.
New to Class B: Sanborn Central/Woonsocket.
New to Region 3B: Flandreau Indian.
Region 4B
Alcester-Hudson, Avon, Centerville, Freeman, Freeman Academy/Marion, Gayville-Volin, Irene-Wakonda, Parkston, Tripp-Delmont/Armour, Viborg-Hurley.
New to Class B: Parkston.
New to Region 4B: Avon, Tripp-Delmont/Armour.
Region 5B
Andes Central/Dakota Christian, Burke, Colome, Corsica-Stickney, Gregory, Kimball/White Lake, Lower Brule, Lyman, Marty, Mitchell Christian.
New to Class B: Kimball/White Lake.
New to Region 5B: Lower Brule, Lyman and Mitchell Christian.
Note: Region 5B does not have a girls' basketball team from Mitchell Christian.
Region 6B
Faulkton Area, Herreid/Selby Area, Highmore-Harrold, Ipswich, North Central, Potter County, Sully Buttes, Sunshine Bible Academy, Tiospaye Topa, Wakpala.
New to Class B: North Central.
New to Region 6B: Tiospaye Topa, Wakpala.
Region 7B
Bennett County, Crazy Horse, Edgemont, Jones County, Kadoka Area, New Underwood, Oelrichs, Philip, Wall, White River.
New to Class B: Bennett County.
Region 8B
Bison, Dupree, Faith, Harding County, Lemmon, McIntosh, McLaughlin, Newell, Takini, Timber Lake.
New to Class B: Dupree and McLaughlin.

COMPETITIVE CHEER

Class AA
Aberdeen Central, Brandon Valley, Brookings, Douglas, Harrisburg, Huron, Mitchell, O'Gorman, Pierre, Rapid City Central and Stevens, Sioux Falls Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington, Sturgis, Tea Area, Watertown and Yankton.
New to Class AA: Tea Area
Class A
Belle Fourche, Bon Homme, Custer, Dakota Valley, Dell Rapids, Dell Rapids St. Mary, Deubrook Area, Elkton-Lake Benton, Faulkton Area, Gregory, Hot Springs, Iroquois/Lake Preston, Lakota Tech, Lyman,

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Parkston, Platte-Geddes/Andes Central/Dakota Christian, Sioux Valley, St. Thomas More, Wagner, Winner, Wolsey-Wessington.

BOYS' AND GIRLS' CROSS-COUNTRY

Class AA

Aberdeen Central, Brandon Valley, Brookings, Douglas, Harrisburg, Huron, Mitchell, O'Gorman, Pierre, Rapid City Central and Stevens, Sioux Falls Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington, Spearfish, Sturgis, Tea Area, Watertown and Yankton.

Region 1A

Aberdeen Roncalli, Britton-Hecla, Clark/Willow Lake, Deuel, Florence/Henry, Great Plains Lutheran, Groton Area, Milbank, Redfield, Sisseton, Tri-State, Webster Area.

New to Class A: Britton-Hecla.

Region 2A

Baltic, Dell Rapids, Elkton-Lake Benton, Flandreau, Garretson, Madison, McCook Central/Montrose, Sioux Falls Christian, Sioux Valley, Tri-Valley, West Central.

Region 3A

Beresford, Bon Homme, Canton, Dakota Valley, Elk Point-Jefferson, Ethan/Parkston, Hanson, Lennox, Parker, Vermillion, Wagner.

Region 4A

Chamberlain, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte, Crow Creek, Miller, Mobridge-Pollock, Mount Vernon/Plankinton, Platte-Geddes, St. Francis Indian, Stanley County, Todd County, Winner.

New to Region 4A: Mount Vernon/Plankinton and St. Francis Indian.

Region 5A

Belle Fourche, Custer, Hill City, Hot Springs, Lakota Tech, Lead-Deadwood, Little Wound, Mahpiya Luta, Pine Ridge, Rapid City Christian, St. Thomas More.

Region 1B

Aberdeen Christian, Castlewood, Deubrook Area, Estelline/Hendricks, Faulkton Area, Frederick Area, Hitchcock-Tulare, Ipswich, James Valley Christian, Langford Area, Leola, Northwestern, Tiospa Zina, Warner, Waubay/Summit, Wilmot.

New to Class B: Estelline/Hendricks, Tiospa Zina, Waubay/Summit.

Region 2B

Alcester-Hudson, Arlington, Centerville, Chester, Colman-Egan, De Smet, Dell Rapids St. Mary, Flandreau Indian, Gayville-Volin, Howard, Irene-Wakonda, Iroquois/Lake Preston, McCrossan, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket, Viborg-Hurley.

New to Class B: Sanborn Central/Woonsocket

Note: There is no McCrossan in girls' cross-country.

Region 3B

Andes Central/Dakota Christian, Avon, Bridgewater-Emery, Burke, Canistota, Corsica-Stickney, Freeman, Freeman Academy/Marion, Gregory, Kimball/White Lake, Marty, Menno, Mitchell Christian, Scotland, Tripp-Delmont/Armour.

New to Class B: Kimball/White Lake.

Region 4B

Herreid/Selby Area, Highmore-Harrold, Lemmon, Lower Brule, Lyman, McIntosh, McLaughlin, North Central, Potter County, Sully Buttes, Sunshine Bible Academy, Timber Lake, Tiospaye Topa, Wakpala, Wessington Springs, Wolsey-Wessington.

New to Class B: McLaughlin and North Central.

New to Region 4B: Lemmon and Tiospaye Topa.

Region 5B

Bennett County, Bison, Black Hills Christian Academy, Crazy Horse, Dupree, Edgemont, Faith, Harding

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County, Jones County, Kadoka Area, New Underwood, Newell, Oelrichs, Philip, Takini, Wall, White River.
New to Class B: Bennett County and Dupree.

FOOTBALL

Class 11AAA

Brandon Valley, Harrisburg, O'Gorman, Rapid City Central and Sevens, Sioux Falls Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington.

Class 11AA

Aberdeen Central, Brookings, Douglas, Huron, Mitchell, Pierre, Spearfish, Sturgis, Tea Area, Watertown, Yankton.

Class 11A

Belle Fourche, Canton, Custer, Dakota Valley, Dell Rapids, Lakota Tech, Lennox, Madison, Milbank, Rapid City Christian, Sioux Falls Christian, Tri-Valley, Vermillion, West Central.

Class 11B

Aberdeen Roncalli, Baltic, Beresford, Bridgewater-Emery/Ethan, Chamberlain, Clark/Willow Lake, Deuel, Elk Point-Jefferson, Flandreau, Groton Area, Hot Springs, Lead-Deadwood, McCook Central/Montrose, Miller/Highmore-Harrod, Mobridge-Pollock, Mount Vernon/Plankinton, Parker, Sioux Valley, Sisseton, St. Thomas More, Wagner, Webster Area, Winner, Woonsocket/Wessington Springs/Sanborn Central.

Class 9AA

Bennett County, Bon Homme, Britton-Hecla, De Smet, Elkton-Lake Benton, Florence/Henry, Freeman/Marion/Freeman Academy, Garretson, Great Plains Lutheran, Gregory, Hamlin, Hanson, Hill City, Kimball/White Lake, Leola/Frederick Area, New Underwood, Parkston, Redfield, Scotland/Menno, Stanley County, Tripp-Delmont/Armour/Andes Central/Dakota Christian, Viborg-Hurley, Waubay/Summit.

New to Class 9AA: Hill City, Redfield, Scotland/Menno, Tripp-Delmont/Armour/Andes Central/Dakota Christian, Waubay/Summit.

Class 9A

Alcester-Hudson, Castlewood, Centerville, Chester, Deubrook Area, Dupree, Estelline-Hendricks, Gayville-Volin, Harding County/Bison, Howard, Ipswich, Lemmon/McIntosh, Lyman, North Central, Philip, Platte-Geddes, Potter County, Timber Lake, Wall, Warner, Waverly-South Shore, White River, Wolsey-Wessington.

Class 9B

Arlington, Avon, Burke, Canistota, Colman-Egan, Colome, Corsica-Stickney, Dell Rapids St. Mary, Faith, Faulkton Area, Herried/Selby Area, Hitchcock-Tulare, Irene-Wakonda, Iroquois/Lake Preston, Jones County, Kadoka Area, Newell, Northwestern, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland, Sioux Falls Lutheran, Sully Buttes, Sunshine Bible Academy, Wilmot.

New to Class 9B: Sioux Falls Lutheran, Wilmot.

BOYS' AND GIRLS' GOLF

CLASS AA

Aberdeen Central, Brandon Valley, Brookings, Douglas, Harrisburg, Huron, Mitchell, O'Gorman, Pierre, Rapid City Central and Stevens, Sioux Falls Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington, Spearfish, Sturgis, Tea Area, Watertown and Yankton.

New to Class AA: Tea Area

Note: Douglas/New Underwood plays in Class AA girls' golf.

Region 1A

Aberdeen Roncalli, Dell Rapids, Groton Area, Madison, Milbank, Sioux Valley, Sisseton, Tiospa Zina.

Region 2A

Beresford, Canton, Dakota Valley, Elk Point-Jefferson, Lennox, Sioux Falls Christian, Tri-Valley, Vermillion, West Central.

New to Region 2A: Tri-Valley.

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Region 3A

Chamberlain, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte, Mount Vernon/Plankinton, Parkston, Redfield, Todd County, Winner.
New to Class A: Mount Vernon/Plankinton.

Region 4A

Belle Fourche, Custer, Hot Springs, Lakota Tech, Lead-Deadwood, Little Wound, Pine Ridge, Rapid City
Christian, St. Thomas More.

Region 1B

Aberdeen Christian, Britton-Hecla, Clark/Willow Lake, Doland, Edmunds Central, Faulkton Area, Florence/
Henry, Frederick Area, Great Plains Lutheran, Ipswich, Langford Area, Leola, Waubay/Summit, Waverly-
South Shore, Webster Area, Wilmot.

New to Region 1B: Edmunds Central, Faulkton Area, Ipswich.

Note: There is no Aberdeen Christian team in girls' golf.

Region 2B

Arlington, Castlewood, De Smet, Deubrook Area, Deuel, Elkton-Lake Benton, Estelline/Hendricks, Hamlin,
Hitchcock-Tulare, Howard, Iroquois/Lake Preston, James Valley Christian, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland, Sanborn
Central/Woonsocket, Wessington Springs, Wolsey-Wessington.

New to Region 2B: Castlewood, Deuel, Hamlin, Hitchcock-Tulare, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket.

Region 3B

Alcester-Hudson, Baltic, Canistota, Centerville, Chester, Colman-Egan, Dell Rapids St. Mary, Flandreau,
Flandreau Indian, Freeman, Freeman Academy/Marion, Garreston, Gayville-Volin, Irene-Wakonda, McCook
Central/Montrose, Parker, Viborg-Hurley.

New to Class B: Flandreau.

New to Region 3B: Chester, Colman-Egan, Dell Rapids St. Mary, Flandreau Indian.

Region 4B

Andes Central/Dakota Christian, Avon, Bon Homme, Bridgewater-Emery, Burke, Corsica-Stickney, Ethan,
Gregory, Hanson, Kimball/White Lake, Marty, Mitchell Christian, Platte-Geddes, Scotland/Menno, Tripp-
Delmont/Armour, Wagner.

New to Class B: Wagner.

New to Region 4B: Bridgewater-Emery.

Region 5B

Bowdle, Crow Creek, Eureka, Herreid, Highmore-Harrold, Jones County, Lower Brule, Lyman, McLaughlin,
Miller, Mobridge-Pollock, Potter County, Selby Area, Stanley County, Sully Buttes, Tiospaye Topa.

New to Class B: Mobridge-Pollock

New to Region 5B: Jones County, McLaughlin, Tiospaye Topa.

Region 6B

Bennett County, Bison/Hettinger/Scranton, Crazy Horse, Harding County, Hill City, Kadoka Area, Mahpiya
Luta, McIntosh, Newell, Philip, St. Francis Indian, Takini, Timber Lake, Wall, White River.

New to Class B: Mahpiya Luta, St. Francis Indian.

GYMNASTICS

Region 1AA

Harrisburg, O'Gorman, Sioux Falls Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington, Yankton.

New to Region 1AA: Harrisburg and Yankton.

Region 2AA

Aberdeen Central, Brookings, Huron, Mitchell, Pierre, Watertown.

Region 1A

Britton-Hecla, Deuel, Estelline/Hendricks, Madison, Milbank Area, Sisseton, West Central.

Region 2A

Chamberlain, Hot Springs, Kimball/White Lake, Parkston/Ethan/Hanson/Mount Vernon, Vermillion, Wagner/
Bon Homme, Wall/Kadoka Area/Philip.

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BOYS' SOCCER

Class AA

Aberdeen Central, Brandon Valley, Brookings, Douglas/St. Thomas More, Harrisburg, Huron, Mitchell, O'Gorman, Pierre, Rapid City Central and Stevens, Sioux Falls Christian, Sioux Falls Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington, Spearfish, Sturgis, Tea Area, Watertown and Yankton.

New to Class AA: Sioux Falls Christian and Tea Area.

Class A

Belle Fourche, Custer, Dakota Valley, Freeman Academy, Groton Area, Hot Springs, James Valley Christian, Rapid City Christian, Vermillion, West Central.

GIRLS' SOCCER

Class AA

Aberdeen Central, Brandon Valley, Brookings, Douglas/St. Thomas More, Harrisburg, Huron, Mitchell, O'Gorman, Pierre, Rapid City Central and Stevens, Sioux Falls Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington, Spearfish, Sturgis, Tea Area, Watertown and Yankton.

New to Class AA: Tea Area

Class A

Belle Fourche, Dakota Valley, Garretson, Groton Area, Sioux Falls Christian, Vermillion, West Central.

SOFTBALL

Class AA

Aberdeen Central, Brandon Valley, Brookings, Harrisburg, Mitchell, O'Gorman, Pierre, Rapid City Central and Stevens, Sioux Falls Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington, Spearfish, Sturgis, Tea Area, Watertown and Yankton.

New to Class AA: Tea Area

Class A

Beresford, Canton, Chamberlain, Dell Rapids, Elk Point-Jefferson, Lakota Tech, Lennox, Madison, Milbank, Mount Vernon/Plankinton, Parkston, Sioux Falls Christian, Sioux Valley, Sisseton, Tri-Valley, Vermillion, Wagner, West Central, Winner.

New to Class A: Mount Vernon/Plankinton.

Class B

Alcester-Hudson, Arlington, Avon, Baltic, Bon Homme, Castlewood, Chester, Colman-Egan, Deuel, Elkton-Lake Benton, Florence/Henry, Flandreau, Freeman/Marion/Freeman Academy, Gayville-Volin, Hanson, Kingsbury County, McCook Central/Montrose, Mobridge-Pollock, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland, Redfield, Scotland/Menno, Viborg-Hurley.

New to Class B: Flandreau, Kingsbury County, Mobridge-Pollock.

BOYS' AND GIRLS' TENNIS

Class AA

Aberdeen Central, Brandon Valley, Brookings, Harrisburg, Mitchell, O'Gorman, Rapid City Central and Stevens, Sioux Falls Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington, Watertown and Yankton.

Class A

Aberdeen Roncalli, Huron, Lennox, Madison, Milbank, Pierre, Rapid City Christian, Sioux Falls Christian, Spearfish, St. Thomas More, Vermillion.

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BOYS' AND GIRLS' TRACK AND FIELD

Class AA

Aberdeen Central, Brandon Valley, Brookings, Douglas, Harrisburg, Huron, Mitchell, O'Gorman, Pierre, Rapid City Central and Stevens, Sioux Falls Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington, Spearfish, Sturgis, Tea Area, Watertown and Yankton.

New to Class AA: Tea Area

Class A

Aberdeen Roncalli, Baltic, Belle Fourche, Beresford, Bon Homme, Britton-Hecla, Canton, Chamberlain, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte, Clark/Willow Lake, Crow Creek, Custer, Dakota Valley, Dell Rapids, Deuel, Elk Point-Jefferson, Elkton-Lake Benton, Ethan/Parkston, Flandreau, Florence/Henry, Garretson, Great Plains Lutheran, Groton Area, Hamlin, Hanson, Hill City, Hot Springs, Lakota Tech, Lead-Deadwood, Lennox, Little Wound, Madison, Mahpiya Luta, McCook Central/Montrose, Milbank, Miller, Mobridge-Pollock, Mount Vernon/Plankinton, Parker, Pine Ridge, Platte-Geddes, Rapid City Christian, Redfield, Scotland/Menno, Sioux Falls Christian, Sioux Valley, Sisseton, St. Francis Indian, St. Thomas More, Stanley County, Todd County, Tri-State, Tri-Valley, Vermillion, Wagner, Webster Area, West Central, Winner.

New to Class A: Britton-Hecla and Scotland/Menno.

Class B

Aberdeen Christian, Alcester-Hudson, Andes Central/Dakota Christian, Arlington, Avon, Bennett County, Bison, Black Hills Christian Academy, Bridgewater-Emery, Burke, Canistota, Castelwood, Centerville, Chester, Colman-Egan, Colome, Corsica-Stickney, Crazy Horse, De Smet, Dell Rapids St. Mary, Deubrook Area, Dupree, Edgemont, Estelline/Hendricks, Faith, Faulkton Area, Flandreau Indian, Frederick Area, Freeman, Freeman Academy/Marion, Gayville-Volin, Gregory, Harding County, Herreid/Selby Area, Highmore-Harrold, Hitchcock-Tulare, Howard, Ipswich, Irene-Wakonda, Iroquois/Lake Preston, James Valley Christian, Jones County, Kadoka Area, Kimball/White Lake, Langford Area, Lemmon, Leola, Lower Brule, Lyman, Marty, McCrossan, McIntosh, McLaughlin, Mitchell Christian, New Underwood, Newell, North Central, Northwestern, Oelrichs, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland, Philip, Potter County, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket, School for the Blind/VI, Sioux Falls Lutheran, Sully Buttes, Sunshine Bible Academy, Takini, Timber Lake, Tiospa Zina, Tiospaye Topa, Tripp-Delmont/Armour, Viborg-Hurley, Wakpala, Wall, Warner, Waubay/Summit, Waverly-South Shore, Wessington Springs, White River, Wilmot, Wolsey-Wessington.

New to Class B: Bennett County, Dupree, Estelline/Hendricks, Kimball/White Lake, McLaughlin, North Central, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket, Tiospa Zina, Waubay/Summit and Wilmot.

Note: There is no McCrossan in girls' track.

VOLLEYBALL

Class AA

Aberdeen Central, Brandon Valley, Brookings, Douglas, Harrisburg, Huron, Mitchell, O'Gorman, Pierre, Rapid City Central and Stevens, Sioux Falls Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Washington, Spearfish, Sturgis, Tea Area, Watertown and Yankton.

New to Class AA: Tea Area

Region 1A

Aberdeen Roncalli, Britton-Hecla, Groton Area, Milbank, Redfield, Sisseton, Webster Area.

New to Class A: Britton-Hecla.

Region 2A

Clark/Willow Lake, Deuel, Elkton-Lake Benton, Florence/Henry, Great Plains Lutheran, Hamlin, Sioux Valley.

Region 3A

Baltic, Dell Rapids, Flandreau, Garretson, Madison, Tri-Valley, West Central.

New to Region 3A: Flandreau.

Region 4A

Beresford, Canton, Dakota Valley, Elk Point-Jefferson, Lennox, Sioux Falls Christian, Vermillion.

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New to Region 4A: Sioux Falls Christian.

Region 5A

Bon Homme, Hanson, McCook Central/Montrose, Mount Vernon/Plankinton, Parker, Wagner.

New to Region 5A: McCook Central/Montrose and Parker.

Region 6A

Chamberlain, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte, Crow Creek, Miller, Mobridge-Pollock, Platte-Geddes, Stanley County.

New to Region 6A: Chamberlain and Platte-Geddes.

Region 7A

Lakota Tech, Little Wound, Mahpiya Luta, Pine Ridge, St. Francis Indian, Todd County, Winner.

Region 8A

Belle Fourche, Custer, Hill City, Hot Springs, Lead-Deadwood, Rapid City Christian, St. Thomas More.

Region 1B

Aberdeen Christian, Hitchcock-Tulare, Langford Area, Leola/Frederick Area, Northwestern, Tiospa Zina, Warner, Waubay/Summit, Waverly-South Shore, Wilmot.

New to Class B: Tiospa Zina and Waubay/Summit.

Region 2B

Arlington, Castlewood, De Smet, Deubrook Area, Estelline/Hendricks, Iroquois/Lake Preston, James Valley Christian, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland, Wessington Springs, Wolsey-Wessington.

New to Class B: Estelline/Hendricks

New to Region 2B: Wessington Springs.

Region 3B

Bridgewater-Emery, Canistota, Chester, Colman-Egan, Dell Rapids St. Mary, Ethan, Flandreau Indian, Howard, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket, Sioux Falls Lutheran.

New to Class B: Sanborn Central/Woonsocket.

New to Region 3B: Flandreau Indian.

Region 4B

Alcester-Hudson, Centerville, Freeman, Freeman Academy/Marion, Gayville-Volin, Irene-Wakonda, Menno, Parkston, Scotland, Tripp-Delmont/Armour, Viborg-Hurley.

New to Class B: Parkston.

New to Region 4B: Tripp-Delmont/Armour.

Region 5B

Andes Central/Dakota Christian, Avon, Burke, Colome, Corsica-Stickney, Gregory, Kimball/White Lake, Lower Brule, Lyman, Marty.

New to Class B: Kimball/White Lake.

New to Region 5B: Lower Brule and Lyman.

Region 6B

Faulkton Area, Herreid/Selby Area, Highmore-Harrold, Ipswich, North Central, Potter County, Sully Buttes, Sunshine Bible Academy, Tiospaye Topa, Wakpala.

New to Class B: North Central.

New to Region 6B: Tiospaye Topa and Wakpala.

Region 7B

Bennett County, Crazy Horse, Edgemont, Jones County, Kadoka Area, New Underwood, Oelrichs, Philip, Wall, White River.

New to Class B: Bennett County.

Region 8B

Bison, Dupree, Faith, Harding County, Lemmon, McIntosh, McLaughlin, Newell, Takini, Timber Lake.

New to Class B: Dupree and McLaughlin.

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WRESTLING

Region 1A
Brookings, Dell Rapids, Milbank, O'Gorman, Sioux Falls Jefferson and Roosevelt, Tea Area, Watertown, West Central.

New to Region 1A: Milbank.

Region 2A

Beresford/Alcester-Hudson, Brandon Valley, Dakota Valley, Harrisburg, Lennox, Sioux Falls Lincoln and Washington, Vermillion, Yankton.

Region 3A

Aberdeen Central, Chamberlain, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte/Dupree/Tiospaye Topa, Huron, Madison, Mitchell, Pierre, Todd County.

New to Region 3A: Madison.

Region 4A

Belle Fourche, Douglas/Rapid City Christian/New Underwood, Lakota Tech, Little Wound, Pine Ridge, Rapid City Central and Stevens, Spearfish, Sturgis.

Region 1B

Britton-Hecla, Clark/Willow Lake, Deuel/Deubrook Area, Doland, Faulkton Area, Groton Area, Hamlin/Castlewood, Ipswich/Bowdle, Kingsbury County, Potter County, Redfield, Sisseton, Sully Buttes, Tiospa Zina, Warner/Northwestern, Webster Area.

New to Class B: Sisseton.

Region 2B

Baltic, Canistota, Canton, Chester, Elk Point-Jefferson, Flandreau, Garretson, Hanson, Howard, Marion/Freeman, McCook Central/Montrose, Parker, Sioux Valley, Tri-Valley, Viborg-Hurley/Irene-Wakonda.

New to Class B: Baltic and Flandreau.

New to Region 2B: Hanson and Sioux Valley.

Region 3B

Andes Central/Dakota Christian, Bon Homme/Avon, Burke/Gregory, Crow Creek, Kimball/White Lake/Platte-Geddes, Lower Brule, Lyman, Miller/Highmore-Harrold, Mount Vernon/Plankinton/Corsica-Stickney, Parkston, Sanborn Central, Scotland/Menno, Sunshine Bible Academy, Wagner, Wessington Springs/Woonsocket/Wolsey-Wessington, Winner.

New to Class B: Scotland/Menno.

New to Region 3B: Lyman.

Region 4B

Bennett County, Custer, Elk Mountain, Faith, Harding County, Hill City, Hot Springs, Lead-Deadwood, Lemmon/McIntosh, Mahpiya Luta, McLaughlin, Mobridge-Pollock, Newell, Philip/Kadoka Area/Wall, St. Thomas More, Stanley County, Timber Lake.

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SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

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Legislature approves higher private school scholarships, sends bill to governor

Tax credits for insurance companies would increase to \$5 million

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 28, 2024 6:25 PM

PIERRE — A bill that would increase tax credits for insurance companies to help low-income students attend private school earned final legislative approval Wednesday.

The House of Representatives passed the bill 56-13 and sent it to the governor for her consideration.

"This is about empowering students," said Rep. Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids. "Particularly low-income students."

The legislation would raise the total tax credit cap available to insurance companies from \$3.5 million to \$5 million. The tax credits on insurance company premiums are one-to-one for every dollar the companies donate toward private-school scholarships.

Students must meet the state's free and reduced lunch program requirements to qualify for the scholarship program. About 2,500 students are supported by the scholarships.

The program's supporters claim it saves the state money by allowing students to attend private school with money provided by an insurance company's donations, rather than attending public schools with funding provided by state and local tax dollars. When challenged, those supporters have not produced data supporting the claim.

Opponents say students who were homeschooled or already attending a private school before receiving a scholarship are costing the state tax revenue it would otherwise get from insurance companies. Additionally, public school districts are potentially losing out on state funding if students leave public schools and go to private schools, because state funding is tied to enrollment.

Rep. Linda Duba, D-Sioux Falls, said the bill would result in "\$5 million of ongoing general fund revenue being taken out" of the state's tax revenue stream. She said the passing of the bill would result in using more "public fund dollars to fund private education." Other opponents have described the program as a "backdoor school voucher program."

Duba said the scholarship program was created as a compromise to help get South Dakota's 2016 sales tax increase for teacher pay over the hump, "or that would have never happened." Since then, she said, supporters of the program keep coming back for more tax credits.

At the time of the program's creation in 2016, the tax credit cap was \$2 million, and insurance companies earned 80% back in tax credits for every dollar donated.

A 2019 bill made insurance companies eligible for a 100% tax credit for total contributions. In 2022, lawmakers raised the tax credit cap to \$3.5 million.

The names of the insurance companies and how much they are donating to the scholarship program is treated as confidential tax information by state officials. The private schools are responsible for ensuring students meet the income qualifications.

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

200,000 comments submitted on Dakota Access Pipeline environmental review

BY: AMY DALRYMPLE - FEBRUARY 28, 2024 5:11 PM

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers received 200,000 comments on the Dakota Access Pipeline, with 30,000 that were unique and substantive, an official said Wednesday.

Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works Michael Connor responded to questions from U.S. Sen. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., related to the environmental impact statement of the pipeline.

Connor said the Corps is on track to issue a final environmental impact statement this fall with a record of decision expected 30 to 60 days after that. The draft environmental impact statement was released last fall, with a public comment period that concluded in December.

"I understand the frustration with how long it's taken. It's an example, though, of when we try and take shortcuts, and we do an environmental assessment as opposed to an EIS," Connor said during the hearing, adding that shortcuts can lead to litigation and further delays.

The Dakota Access Pipeline has been operating since June 2017, carrying crude oil from North Dakota to a transportation hub in Illinois on a route through South Dakota. In 2020, a judge revoked the easement for the pipeline crossing under the Missouri River north of the Standing Rock Sioux reservation, requiring additional study but allowing the pipeline to continue operating.

"That's why we're trying to think this through, do it right, respond, do correct tribal consultation, integrate their concerns and our responses into the process, and get this product done so that it can stand the test of time," Connor said.

Standing Rock Sioux Chairwoman Janet Alkire and Cheyenne River Chairman Ryman LeBeau of the Cheyenne River Sioux in South Dakota were among tribal leaders who participated in meetings with the Corps in Bismarck in November. The tribal chairs said the pipeline is operating illegally without an easement and should be shut down.

Meanwhile, North Dakota leaders argue the pipeline has been operating safely for six years. North Dakota officials say shutting down the pipeline would shift additional oil transportation to rail and lead to a loss in oil revenue for the state.

Amy Dalrymple is editor-in-chief of North Dakota's States Newsroom outlet, North Dakota Monitor. She previously was editor of The Bismarck Tribune and a newspaper journalist in Williston and Fargo.

Senate adds \$3 million to statewide public defender bill to reimburse counties

Legislation headed back to House for consideration of changes

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 28, 2024 4:29 PM

The Senate unanimously approved a bill Wednesday that would create a statewide public defender's office after adding a \$3 million one-time appropriation to reimburse counties for current indigent legal defense costs.

Under existing law, counties must cover the costs of attorneys for criminal defendants who can't afford them. The new state office would assume responsibility for a limited number of those cases.

The amended bill is a combination of priorities from the Unified Judicial System's indigent legal defense task force last summer — which proposed the original bill — and the Legislature's summer study committee on county funding. The county funding committee proposed another bill earlier this session that would have created such a fund to reimburse counties, but that bill failed last week.

The public defender bill now has a new price tag of \$4.4 million — \$1.4 million annually for the new office and \$3 million in one-time funding. The office itself could save counties an estimated \$2.1 million annually and provide a net savings of \$600,000 to taxpayers statewide.

The bill has already passed the House, which now must consider the Senate amendment.

Several senators who sat on the summer study committee applauded the amended bill, including Sen. Randy Deibert, R-Spearfish, who served as vice chairman of the county funding committee. He said the annual public defender budget in his county is \$680,000, and the budget for court-appointed attorneys is \$325,000.

"That's \$1 million paid for on the backs of 25,000 people that live in the county," Deibert said. "That's \$40 a piece. We really need help."

The office, which is in the governor's recommended budget, would take over criminal appeals; "habeas corpus" appeals, which are filed to challenge a suspect's detention; and child abuse and neglect appeals.

When the summer committees first convened, South Dakota was one of two states to saddle counties with the entire financial burden of providing legal representation to those who can't afford to pay lawyers.

South Dakota is now the last state in that category, and it currently ranks 49th in the nation in contributions to indigent defense from a statewide level, Greg Sattizahn, South Dakota state court administrator, told lawmakers earlier this session.

The issue has become a budget buster for some counties, particularly smaller ones that face high-profile felony trials involving the payment of expert defense witnesses. It's also becoming difficult to find lawyers to take on court appointments in rural areas as the majority of lawyers live in urban areas.

Pierre Republican Sen. Jim Mehlhaff sat on both groups this summer.

"This is an initial step forward to transform the way services are delivered. We think we can do it more efficiently and provide a more uniform and better representation for indigent defendants throughout the state," Mehlhaff told lawmakers. "But, going forward, that would be a discussion for next year on how we continue to provide this service."

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.

U.S. Senate Republican blocks legislation protecting in vitro fertilization

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT AND ARIANA FIGUEROA - FEBRUARY 28, 2024 6:09 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. Republican Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith of Mississippi blocked a bill from passing Wednesday that would have preserved access to in vitro fertilization nationwide, stalling a push by Democrats following a landmark Alabama state Supreme Court decision.

The court ruled earlier this month that frozen embryos counted as children under state law and parents could collect damages for their destruction, putting IVF programs in the state on hold.

Illinois Democratic Sen. Tammy Duckworth asked for unanimous consent to pass the IVF bill, a process that allows any one senator to prevent it from moving to the House.

Duckworth has said she'll press for a roll call vote on the bill at a later point to put every senator on record.

"My girls are my everything," Duckworth said, referring to her two daughters. "They likely would have never been born if I had not had access to the basic reproductive rights that Americans, up until recently, had been depending on for nearly a half century."

Duckworth said that after her service in Iraq, she struggled with infertility.

Hyde-Smith argued that the bill was "overreaching," and contained provisions with which she disagreed.

"I support the ability for mothers and fathers to have total access to IVF and bring new life into the world, and I also believe that human life should be protected," Hyde-Smith said.

She also argued that the Alabama case did not ban IVF. However, clinics in the state have paused treatments following the ruling.

Duckworth defended her bill, saying that it protects individuals who are seeking IVF technology without fear of being prosecuted, protects the rights of physicians to provide that treatment and allows insurance companies to cover reproductive technology.

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"It simply says you have a statutory right, should you choose to pursue assisted reproductive technology, that you would be able to do so," Duckworth said.

'These women have had their dreams shattered'

Washington state Democratic Sen. Patty Murray slammed Republicans for blocking the unanimous consent request to pass the bill.

"These women have had their dreams shattered because Republicans believe a frozen embryo kept in storage at an IVF clinic is the same and should have the exact same rights as a living, breathing human person," Murray said.

Sen. Tim Kaine, a Virginia Democrat, said that the first child born through IVF in the United States was in 1981, in Norfolk, Virginia. He added that it's estimated that 12 million people were born through IVF.

"She's raising her own family today," Kaine said. "What could be more pro-life than in vitro fertilization?"

Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden said that the repeal of Roe v. Wade has led to an "onslaught of court rulings just like this one in Alabama."

Nevada Democratic Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto said that when the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, "we could see from a mile away that IVF was in danger."

"It will not stop with Alabama," Cortez Masto said. "Attacking IVF was yet another chance for anti-choice Republicans to erode women's rights in this country."

Britt: Alabama taking action

Alabama Republican Sen. Katie Britt said in a brief interview with States Newsroom on Wednesday afternoon that her home state should be left to address the issue.

"So Alabama is, right now as we speak, working to protect IVF," she said.

Alabama state lawmakers advanced three bills out of committee on Wednesday that would protect access to IVF in that state.

The U.S. Senate's debate over access to IVF came just hours after the Senate Budget Committee held a hearing on "the economic harms of restricting reproductive freedom," which included testimony on access to the procedure.

Caitlin Myers, John G. McCullough professor of economics at Middlebury College in Vermont, told the committee that access to "reproductive autonomy isn't just about young people avoiding parenthood until they're ready, it's about all people being able to become parents when they want to."

"The economic evidence suggests that it allows women to spend more time seeking the right partner, investing in education and investing in their careers," she said. "And in a country and moment when we're increasingly seeing people delay parenthood, a lack of access to IVF is very concerning from an economic perspective."

44 co-sponsors with Duckworth

The Duckworth bill, dubbed the Access to Family Building Act, is nine pages long and aims to provide protections for patients and health care providers.

Duckworth introduced the bill in mid-January with Wisconsin Democratic Sen. Tammy Baldwin, Washington state's Murray and New York Democratic Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand as original co-sponsors.

Support for the legislation began increasing this week, with the number of co-sponsors rising to 44 as of Wednesday.

The bill says that it would bar limitations on "assisted reproductive technology services" that are "more burdensome than limitations or requirements imposed on medically comparable procedures, do not significantly advance reproductive health or the safety of such services and unduly restrict access to such services."

Assisted reproductive technology is defined in the legislation as what's included in Section 8 of the Fertility Clinic Success Rate and Certification Act of 1992.

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That law's definition says it encompasses "all treatments or procedures which include the handling of human oocytes or embryos, including in vitro fertilization, gamete intrafallopian transfer, zygote intrafallopian transfer, and such other specific technologies as the Secretary may include in this definition, after making public any proposed definition in such manner as to facilitate comment from any person (including any Federal or other public agency)."

GOP senators reject congressional action

Republican senators, speaking briefly with States Newsroom on Tuesday, all rejected the idea of Congress stepping in now to set a nationwide policy on access to IVF. And some expressed concerns with how the bill was written.

Utah Republican Sen. Mitt Romney said he would need to look over Duckworth's bill in detail, but said his "understanding is it's just substantially broader than dealing with IVF."

On IVF access generally, Romney said, he didn't believe that federal lawmakers had "enough of a window on that at this stage in that it's not been an issue for any state other than Alabama."

"And the Alabama Legislature, as I understand it, is attempting to deal with this legislatively, so I don't think it's an issue elsewhere," Romney said.

West Virginia Republican Sen. Shelley Moore Capito said that while she supports everyone having access to IVF, she's not sure Congress should approve legislation.

"I think we need to preserve access to IVF for families and folks suffering from infertility," she said. "But I think this is, right now, a state issue in Alabama. And I think they ought to fix it there first."

Indiana Republican Sen. Todd Young said access to IVF "has to be protected" and that he would look into supporting legislation to do just that, though he said he hadn't yet read Duckworth's bill.

"I would consider any proposals that are put forward here," Young said. "I have not read through the particulars on that. Some have characterized it as overbroad."

"But I would entertain legislation to preserve that important prerogative for women and families," Young said.

GOP senators say it is a state issue

Kansas Republican Sen. Roger Marshall said he believes the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned the constitutional right to an abortion, sent issues like IVF to state lawmakers.

"I think that the *Dobbs* decision clearly states that this should be a decision made at the state level," Marshall said. "I encourage the state legislators to support IVF. It's a beautiful thing, hundreds of babies are delivered every day across the country because of IVF."

The U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Dobbs* said the "Constitution does not confer a right to abortion; *Roe* and *Casey* are overruled; and the authority to regulate abortion is returned to the people and their elected representatives." That includes Congress.

Marshall said that Republicans throughout the country should "all lean into it that we are the pro-family party, and we should celebrate IVF."

"It's an incredible technique, something that I've participated in... close to 100 or more cycles and just lots of beautiful children I know from IVF," Marshall said.

Iowa Republican Sen. Joni Ernst said that it's "not yet" time for Congress to step in with nationwide legislation on IVF, though she said it's important that Americans have access to the process.

"I think the message that we have is that families should have access to IVF. That's extremely important," Ernst said. "I have a friend who has twin daughters because of IVF. So I hope we can work through this."

Alabama Republican Sen. Tommy Tuberville said the issue should be left to state lawmakers.

"Let them do it, just like they're doing abortion. Let everybody get a chance to vote on it," Tuberville said. "I think it will work a lot better than people complaining up here. We need to get our act together and worry about all the things that we can control."

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

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

Congress brokers deal on government spending deadlines, trying to avoid shutdown

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 28, 2024 5:29 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. House Republicans and Senate Democrats attempting to avert a partial government shutdown brokered an agreement Wednesday to extend government funding deadlines for a little while longer.

The bipartisan deal will give Congress until March 8 to pass six spending bills lawmakers have finalized, and until March 22 to pass another six bills still in negotiations that provide crucial funding for defense, health care and homeland security.

The agreement comes five months into the fiscal year, well past the deadline that lawmakers were supposed to meet for fiscal 2024. If enacted, the short-term spending extensions would avoid a partial government shutdown that would have begun for some agencies on Friday at midnight and the rest on March 8.

The House will likely put the bill up under suspension of the rules, which requires two-thirds support for passage. And the Senate will need approval of all 100 of its members, including several who enjoy holding up government funding deals, to meet that timeline.

The four top congressional leaders and the four leaders of the Appropriations committees announced the plan Wednesday evening in a joint statement.

"We are in agreement that Congress must work in a bipartisan manner to fund our government," they wrote.

"To give the House and Senate Appropriations Committees adequate time to execute on this deal in principle, including drafting, preparing report language, scoring and other technical matters and to allow members 72 hours to review, a short-term continuing resolution to fund agencies through March 8 and the 22 will be necessary, and voted on by the House and Senate this week," the group of eight added.

Lawmakers announced they've finalized the Agriculture-FDA, Energy-Water, Military Construction-VA and Transportation-HUD appropriations bills, all of which were supposed to become law by Friday under the current stopgap spending law.

They've also brokered a deal on the Commerce-Justice-Science and Interior-Environment spending bills.

The remaining six spending bills — Defense, Financial Services and General Government, Homeland Security, Labor-HHS-Education, Legislative Branch and State-Foreign Operations — would be due by March 22 under the new short-term extension.

The statement from lawmakers didn't indicate when they would release text of the bills that have been agreed to or the short-term spending bill that Congress will need to pass before Friday to extend their deadlines a bit longer.

Short-term extensions

Congress was supposed to complete work on the dozen annual appropriations bills before the start of the current fiscal year on Oct. 1, but have passed a series of short-term funding extensions to give themselves more time to negotiate.

Former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, a California Republican, and the Biden administration negotiated a deal on total spending levels for defense and non-defense discretionary spending last summer when they brokered the debt limit deal.

But House Republicans walked away from those spending levels when drafting their original batch of

spending bills.

Current House Speaker Mike Johnson, a Louisiana Republican, renegotiated those spending levels with President Joe Biden in early January.

Johnson then had to make a public statement inside the U.S. Capitol about a week later, saying that he would stick to the deal, amid comments from some members of the House Republican Conference that he was prepared to walk away from it.

That agreement set funding levels at \$886.3 billion for defense and \$772.7 billion for domestic discretionary spending.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat; Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican; Johnson; House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries a New York Democrat; Senate Appropriations Chair Patty Murray, a Washington state Democrat; Senate Appropriations ranking member Susan Collins, a Maine Republican; House Appropriations Chair Kay Granger, a Texas Republican; and House Appropriations ranking member Rosa DeLauro, a Connecticut Democrat, announced the agreement.

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

U.S. Supreme Court to decide if Trump is immune from prosecution for acts as president

Meanwhile, trial court on hold; SD's Jackley among attorneys general supporting delay

BY: JACOB FISCHLER AND JANE NORMAN - FEBRUARY 28, 2024 4:51 PM

The U.S. Supreme Court on Wednesday agreed to hear former President Donald Trump's argument that he should be immune from criminal charges related to the 2020 election.

In a one-page order, the court set an expedited briefing schedule, with oral arguments to be held the week of April 22. Proceedings in the federal trial court will be on hold while the Supreme Court case is ongoing, further delaying the trial originally scheduled to begin March 4.

The Supreme Court will consider only the question of "whether and if so to what extent" a former president is legally shielded from official actions while in office.

Trump and his lawyers had asked the high court to pause pretrial activities in District of Columbia federal court for the case brought by U.S. Special Counsel Jack Smith that alleges Trump tried to overturn the results of the presidential election.

Smith, in his brief to the court, had asked justices to turn down the plea for a delay, saying a speedy trial is in the public interest. The claims of absolute presidential immunity and protection under the impeachment clause raised by Trump, now the GOP presidential front-runner, lack the merit needed for the justices to grant a stay, Smith said.

GOP attorneys general weigh in

The Republican attorneys general of 22 states filed a brief to the court Feb. 16 endorsing Trump's request for a delay. South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley is included in that group.

Led by Alabama, the group of GOP states said Smith's effort to hasten a trial appeared to be politically motivated to damage President Joe Biden's likely opponent in November's election.

"Contrary to the prosecution's haste, the fact that the defendant is a former President is a reason to move carefully—to be sure the prosecution is constitutional from inception," they wrote. "And the fact that the defendant is potentially a future President is even more reason to ensure the appearance and reality of fairness."

Besides Alabama and South Dakota, the states represented in the brief are Alaska, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, West Virginia and Wyoming.

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Trump's district court trial has been postponed indefinitely while the presidential immunity arguments play out.

Charges against Trump

A four-count federal indictment last year after an investigation by Smith accused Trump of conspiring to subvert his 2020 reelection loss to Biden, eventually leading to the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

For weeks after the election, he fed his supporters a stream of lies claiming that he won the election but was denied a second term by voter fraud, the indictment said. He worked with attorneys, a U.S. Department of Justice official and a political consultant to organize slates of false presidential electors in seven states Biden won to take the place of Biden electors and pressured Vice President Mike Pence to reject the legitimate electors, according to the indictment.

Late last year, Trump asked to dismiss the charges, saying he could not be prosecuted for any actions he took as president. U.S. District Judge Tanya S. Chutkan denied that claim, a ruling Trump appealed to the D.C. Circuit.

A three-judge appeals panel appointed by both Democratic and Republican presidents unanimously denied Trump's request in a Feb. 6 opinion that found the former president's arguments "unsupported by precedent, history or the text and structure of the Constitution."

Trump then asked the Supreme Court to pause all proceedings in district court while he petitioned the appeals court to escalate his case to the full circuit and potentially the Supreme Court.

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

State lawmakers amend petition signature withdrawal bill to remove 'chaos factor'

As legislation advances, opponents question validity of emergency clause

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 28, 2024 3:20 PM

In response to a potential ballot measure that would reinstate abortion rights, the Senate State Affairs Committee amended and advanced a bill Wednesday in Pierre that would allow people to remove their signatures from ballot-question petitions.

The bill passed 8-1 and now heads to the Senate floor. An emergency clause in the legislation would make it effective immediately, before this spring's deadline for petitions to place questions on the Nov. 5 general election ballot.

Amendments to the bill alleviate some concerns raised throughout the bill's legislative process, including: Requiring that the withdrawal request is signed and notarized.

Removing the option to submit the request by email.

Requiring that the withdrawal notification be submitted before the petition is filed and certified for placement on the general election ballot.

Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, said the amendments would remove "the chaos factor" of the bill.

The bill's prime sponsor in the House, Rep. Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids, said the changes were a logical and reasonable compromise.

"I think it gives the power to the people," Hansen told lawmakers.

Opponents asked for the emergency clause to be removed, cautioning lawmakers that the bill would risk litigation.

Rapid City lawyer and former legislator Linda Lea Viken told lawmakers she questions whether an emergency clause is proper. According to the state constitution, emergency clauses may be used when legislation is necessary for the "support of the state government and its existing public institutions" or for

the "immediate preservation of the public peace, health or safety."

The bill originally used the state government emergency clause, but the amendment switched the emergency clause to the "public peace" explanation. According to an explainer on emergency clauses from the state's Legislative Research Council, the preservation of public peace, health or safety is synonymous with the "police power" of the Legislature, including actions for the public welfare and to "promote and protect a state's major industry."

The use of emergency clauses has been challenged 10 times in the South Dakota Supreme Court. If the court found an emergency clause improper, only the clause would be declared void and the rest of the law would take effect on July 1 rather than immediately after its passage.

Hansen did not address concerns about the emergency clause in his rebuttal testimony.

Hansen serves on the board of directors of South Dakota Right to Life, which supports a "Decline to Sign" campaign to keep the abortion-rights measure off the ballot. Currently, abortions are banned in South Dakota, and the state's only exception is to save the life of the pregnant mother.

Hansen also alleged abortion petition circulators are fooling South Dakotans who think they are signing a measure to repeal the sales tax on groceries but are being given the abortion-rights petition. The Dakotans for Health ballot question committee is circulating both petitions.

Hansen aims to establish a process for withdrawing signatures from petitions for initiated measures, initiated constitutional amendments and referendums. Initiated measures and referendums need 17,508 signatures from registered voters to make the ballot; initiated constitutional amendments need 35,017. Dakotans for Health has said it has more than 50,000 signatures on the abortion-rights ballot measure, but it has not yet submitted the petitions.

While Hansen said that he consulted the Secretary of State's Office to ensure the bill would not be a burden on the office, a representative from the secretary of state did not testify to the committee.

The committee's lone no vote came from its sole Democratic member, Sioux Falls Sen. Reynold Nesiba, who said the bill was "deeply problematic" because it would "change the rules in the middle of the game."

"When you have a viable signature, it should be carried to its full term and not be aborted," Nesiba concluded.

California, Idaho, Utah and Washington allow for signers of petitions to withdraw their signatures. Florida was on the list, but in 2009, that state Supreme Court said the state's signature revocation law was unconstitutional.

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.

Last-minute bill would require earlier voter registration due to 'perceived' election concerns

Legislation would also undo 30-day residency requirement imposed last year

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 28, 2024 2:01 PM

PIERRE — Despite county auditors saying it could result in fewer South Dakotans voting, a legislative committee endorsed a bill Wednesday that would require voters to register 30 days before an election rather than the current 15.

The House State Affairs Committee endorsed the bill with a 9-4 vote.

Rep. Kirk Chaffee, R-Whitewood, introduced the bill language on the 28th day of the 38-day legislative session, taking advantage of rules that allow legislators to wholly replace the text of bills after the bill introduction deadline has passed.

The legislation that Chaffee amended was previously a two-sentence bill to require the state Board of Elections to meet before each legislative session and recommend changes to election laws; the new, three-page bill still does that, along with the change to the registration deadline and a repeal of a strict

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30-day residency requirement imposed last year. Similar residency requirements in other states have sparked lawsuits asserting that an American citizen's right to vote in a federal election can't be denied by a local residency law.

Chaffee said the bill is necessary to alleviate "perceived concerns" regarding the integrity of the state's elections. He said moving the registration deadline 15 days earlier would "allow time to discover errors" and "ensure the prevention of fraud."

The bill would also add language into law saying "Only a citizen of the United States may vote in a municipal, county, primary, general, school district or any other election in this state." It would replace the 30-day state residency requirement with less stringent language saying a person must have "fixed a habitation" in the state to which they intend to return.

Some lawmakers have said the residency language passed last year won't withstand legal scrutiny, and some county auditors have said enforcing the residency requirement has been a headache. An attempt to undo that language failed earlier this session.

"This was a concern I had with legislation passed last year and it must be undone," Chaffee said.

County auditors run elections in South Dakota. Some of them testified against the change to the voter registration deadline in the bill.

"Our kids who are right out of high school, that era, they're not thinking far enough ahead, 30 days, to come register to vote," Kathy Glines, Harding County auditor, told South Dakota Searchlight after the bill passed. "But 15 days, they are."

"If we lose that 15 days for them, I think we're going to lose them as voters," she said.

After the committee hearing, the American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota issued a statement calling the bill "merely a pretext to disenfranchise voters."

"Restricting the terms and requirements of registration is one of the most common forms of voter suppression," wrote Samantha Chapman, ACLU of South Dakota advocacy manager.

Sen. Reynold Nesiba, D-Sioux Falls, signed on as the Senate prime sponsor of the bill when it was only two sentences requiring the state Board of Elections to meet annually and suggest election-law changes.

He became a vocal opponent of his own bill Wednesday after it was amended. He and the two Democrats serving on the House State Affairs Committee called the move to amend the bill a deception and said it would cause them to reconsider who they work with on legislation in the future.

"I am so angry about this," said Rep. Erin Healy, D-Sioux Falls.

The bill now moves to the full House for consideration.

Thomas Deadrick is the deputy secretary of state under Republican Secretary of State Monae Johnson, who is the state's top elections official. He testified that the office supports the bill.

Deadrick declined an interview and would not answer South Dakota Searchlight questions after his testimony.

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

Thune among possible successors after McConnell says he'll step down as GOP leader

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA AND JACOB FISCHLER - FEBRUARY 28, 2024 1:00 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky will step down as the Senate Republican leader in November, he said on the Senate floor Wednesday, announcing the end of a run as party leader that broke records for its length and shaped American politics over nearly two decades.

"One of life's most underappreciated talents is to know when it's time to move on to life's next chapter,"

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McConnell said. "It's time for the next generation of leadership."

McConnell, who turned 82 last week, cited the death of his wife's sister several weeks ago as an event that prompted him to think about his future.

"When you lose a loved one, particularly at a young age, there's a certain introspection that accompanies the grieving process," he said.

Senate Republicans will select a new leader in November. Possible McConnell successors include Minority Whip John Thune of South Dakota, Republican Conference Chairman John Barrasso of Wyoming and former Republican Whip John Cornyn of Texas.

Thune said it "will be hard to imagine a Senate in which Sen. McConnell isn't serving as Republican leader" but hinted he would try to succeed the Kentuckian.

"For decades, he's been a fierce defender of the Senate, our conference, and our party, and we're all better for his service," Thune said in a statement. "Mitch leaves enormous shoes to fill, and it's with humility that I look forward to having a discussion with my colleagues about what the future holds for the Senate Republican Conference and a new generation of leadership. Until then, thank you, Mitch."

Thune recently endorsed Trump, following earlier endorsements by Barrasso and Cornyn.

President Joe Biden, who spent decades in the Senate before he was elected vice president in 2008, said in impromptu remarks Wednesday that he highly respected McConnell.

"He and I have trust," he said, according to a White House pool report. "We've got a great relationship. We fight like hell but he never, never, never misrepresented anything. I'm sorry to hear he's stepping down."

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said in a statement that while he didn't see "eye to eye," with McConnell on various policies and politics, the New York Democrat said he was proud of what they were able to accomplish, despite their differences.

"I am very proud that we both came together in the last few years to lead the Senate forward at critical moments when our country needed us, like passing the CARES Act in the early days of the COVID pandemic, finishing our work to certify the election on January 6th, and more recently working together to fund the fight for Ukraine," Schumer said.

McConnell has faced increasing pressure to endorse the GOP presidential front-runner, Donald Trump. The two have a tense relationship that reached a breaking point following the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol after then-President Trump encouraged supporters to disrupt the certification of electoral votes in the 2020 election.

Former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, who is the last remaining Republican challenging Trump for the party's presidential nomination, said in a campaign stop in Utah that McConnell has had an amazing career.

"We obviously thank him for his leadership and his service," Haley said at an appearance in Orem, Utah. "But I applaud him for realizing that it is time for new generational change. I think what's more important is we need to understand we don't just need new generational change in Congress. We also need new general generational change in the White House."

Kentucky's longest-serving senator has shaped the federal judiciary system, including by leading Senate confirmation of 234 lifetime appointments to the federal bench.

He played an important role in establishing a conservative U.S. Supreme Court by blocking Democratic then-President Barack Obama from appointing a justice before the 2016 presidential election.

That conservative Supreme Court has handed down decisions in the past few years with major impacts on American society. The court ended the constitutional right to access abortion care, struck down the Biden administration's student loan forgiveness plan and expanded gun rights by limiting states' power to enact gun safety laws.

Leader election in November; Thune among possible successors

McConnell, who first arrived in the Senate in 1984 and became Republican leader in 2007, said he is "not going anywhere" until a new Republican leader is tapped. His Senate term is set to end January 2027.

"I love the Senate," McConnell said. "It's been my life."

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One of his potential successors, Cornyn, paid tribute to McConnell on social media.

"As the longest serving Senate leader in American history, Mitch McConnell has made an indelible mark on this institution and the Republican Party," Cornyn said in a post to X. "For more than 17 years, he has been the steady hand at the helm, guiding us through some of the most consequential debates and decisions in recent history."

Cornyn also thanked McConnell for protecting "the Senate's essential role under the Constitution," and called him "pragmatic, knowledgeable, humble, and effective."

Barrasso praised McConnell's career as the GOP leader and said that Republicans are focused on the November presidential election and flipping the Senate control.

"That's what my focus is," he told reporters Wednesday.

Accolades from other GOP senators

More allies among McConnell's Senate Republican colleagues rushed Wednesday to sing his praises.

North Carolina's Thom Tillis praised McConnell's achievements in shaping the judiciary and in enacting conservative policy goals in domestic and foreign policy.

"Leader McConnell is a true legend of the U.S. Senate," Tillis said in a statement. "Under his historic leadership, the Senate secured a conservative majority on the Supreme Court, passed historic tax reform, and enacted bipartisan legislation to save our economy from the brink at the start of the pandemic."

Montana's Steve Daines, who also chairs the GOP's Senate campaign arm, also touted McConnell's role in passing the 2017 tax bill that made sweeping changes to the U.S. tax code.

"He will be remembered not only as the longest-serving party leader in the history of the Senate but a consummate gentleman and committed public servant," Daines said in a statement.

Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia thanked McConnell for his "steadfast leadership and commitment to conservative principles."

South Carolina's Lindsey Graham wrote on X that McConnell will be "remembered as one of the most effective leaders in U.S. history."

"No one in the Republican Party has echoed the themes of peace through strength – the Reagan model of national security – better than Senator Mitch McConnell," he said.

Nebraska's Deb Fischer congratulated McConnell for his decades of work in the Senate.

"Leader McConnell has served as a bulwark of conservative leadership throughout his time in the Senate," she wrote on X. "His fierce reverence for our institution and shrewd consideration of the future made him an extraordinarily effective leader in all situations."

GOP division apparent

But the schism that emerged in the GOP in recent years between McConnell's establishment wing and an upstart faction more aligned with Trump was also apparent in the reaction to McConnell's announcement.

"I called on McConnell to step down over a year ago," Missouri Republican Josh Hawley tweeted. "This is good news. But why wait so long – we need new leadership now."

The House Freedom Caucus, an influential group of far-right lawmakers in that chamber, mocked McConnell in a tweet that identified him as a Democrat because he has pursued bipartisan measures to fund Ukraine's war effort against Russia.

"Our thoughts are with our Democrat colleagues in the Senate on the retirement of their Co-Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (D-Ukraine)," a tweet from the caucus' official account read. "No need to wait till November... Senate Republicans should IMMEDIATELY elect a *Republican* Minority Leader."

U.S. Rep. Bob Good, a Virginia Republican who is a member of the House Freedom Caucus, said McConnell's move could allow for more conservative leadership. Good floated Florida Sen. Rick Scott, who led a failed conservative challenge to displace McConnell as GOP leader in November 2022, as a potential successor to McConnell.

"Mitch McConnell stepping down provides a great opportunity for true conservative leadership in the

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Senate," Good said. Scott "would make a great Republican leader."

Wednesday, Scott again called for new leadership in the Senate.

"As everyone knows, I challenged Leader McConnell in 2022," he said in a statement. "This is an opportunity to refocus our efforts on solving the significant challenges facing our country and actually reflect the aspirations of voters.

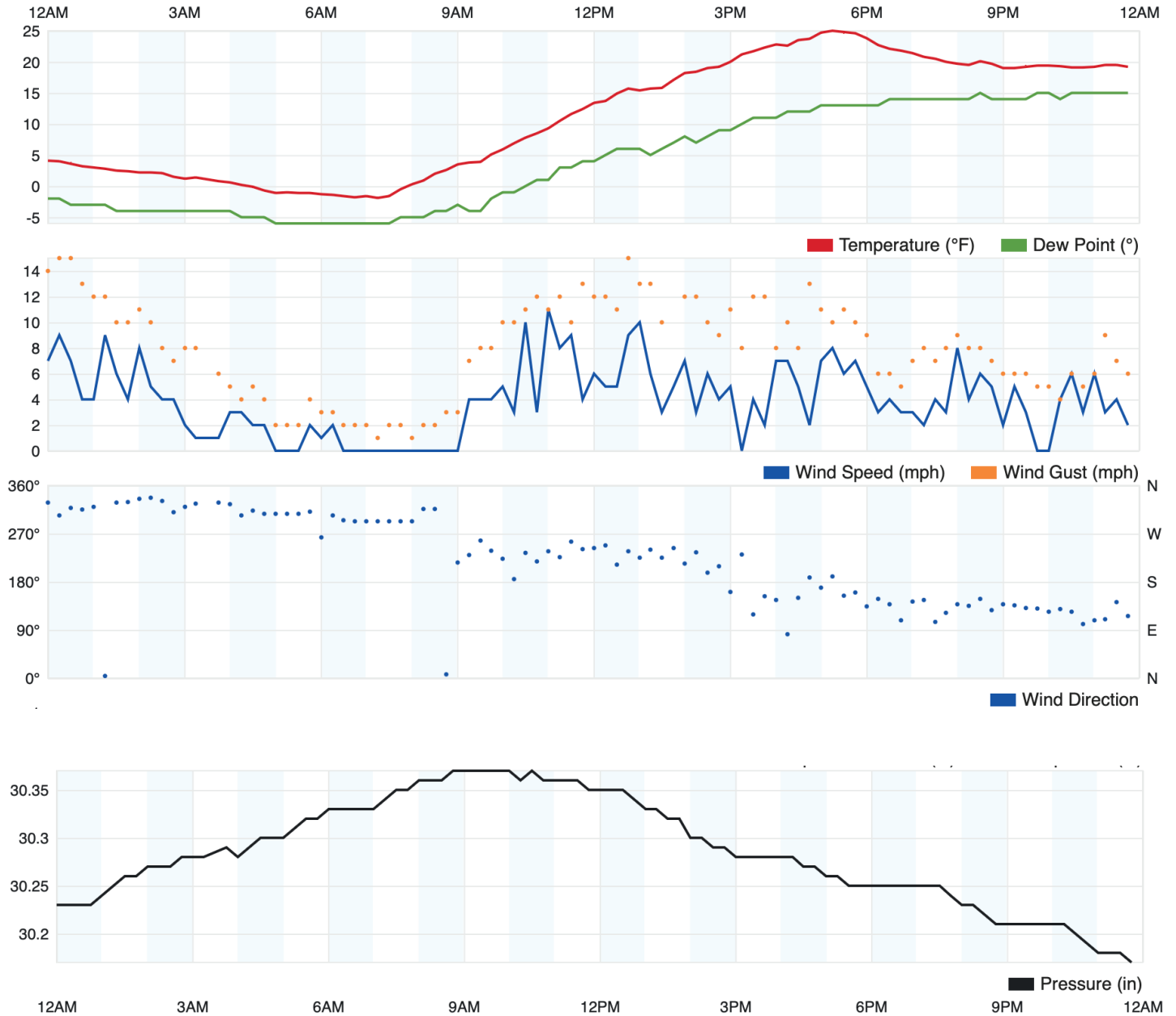
Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Sunny

High: 51 °F

Tonight



Mostly Clear

Low: 28 °F

Friday



Sunny

High: 63 °F

Friday
Night



Increasing
Clouds

Low: 29 °F

Saturday



Slight Chance
Rain/Freezing
Rain then
Slight Chance
Rain

High: 47 °F

Leap Day Forecast:

Highs in the 50s, except in the upper 40s over northeastern SD & west central MN



Friday Forecast:

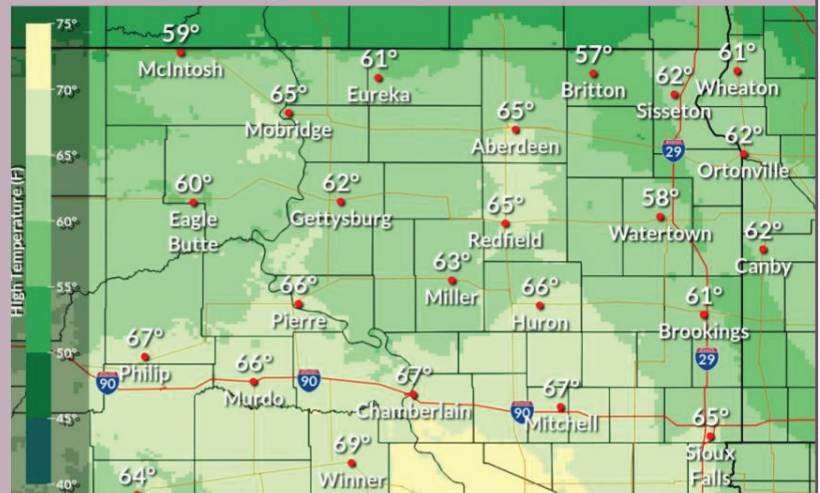
Warmer!

Highs in the 60s
for most locations
(around 30 degrees above normal)



weather.gov/aberndeen

Friday's High Temperature Forecast



Highs today will be in the 50s, expect in the upper 40s over northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota. Even warmer air will move in for Friday, with highs mainly in the 60s.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 25 °F at 5:10 PM

Low Temp: -2 °F at 7:17 AM

Wind: 16 mph at 12:19 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 10 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 61 in 1992

Record Low: -19 in 1960

Average High: 34

Average Low: 12

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.62

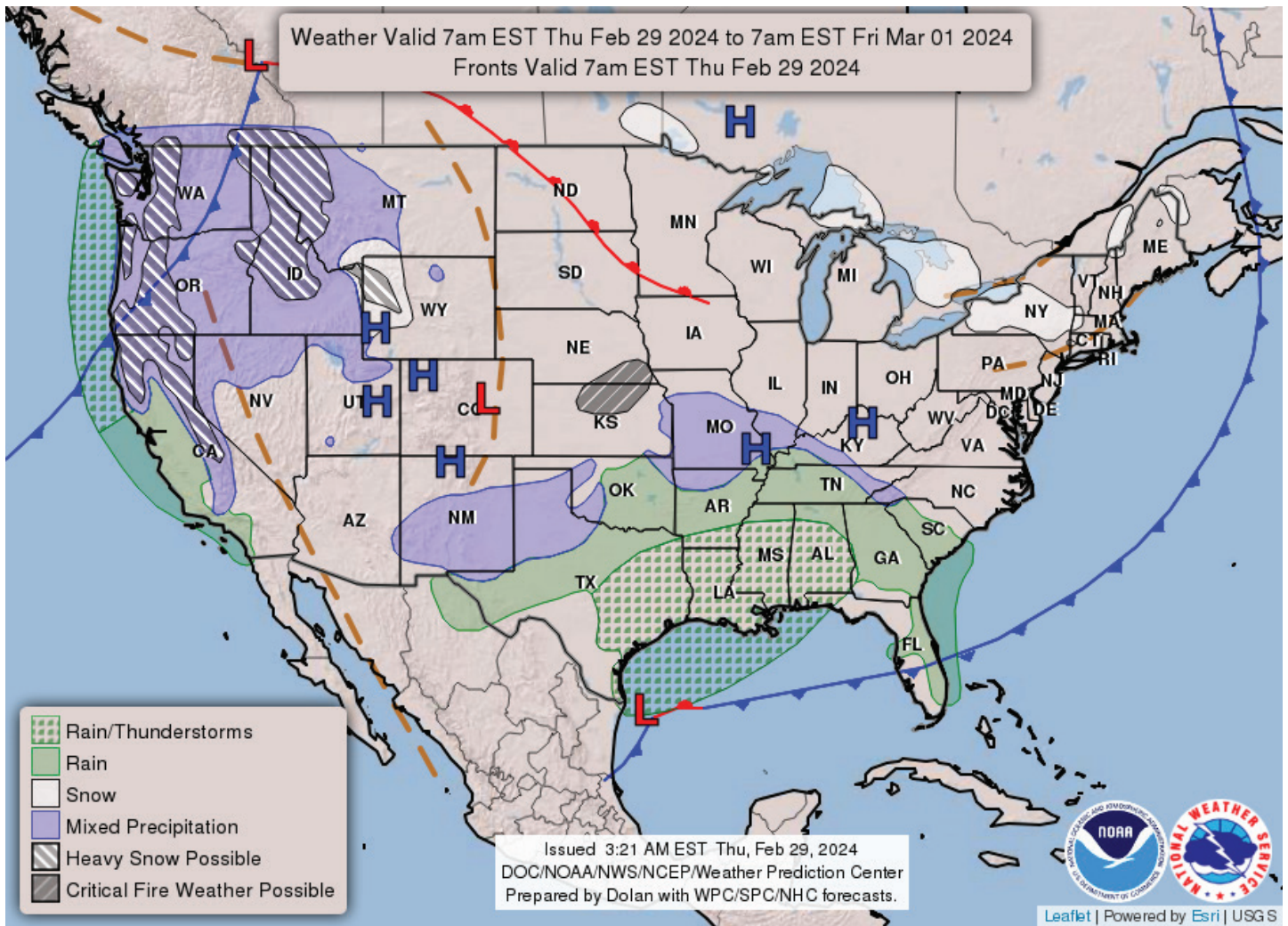
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.07

Average Precip to date: 1.17

Precip Year to Date: 0.07

Sunset Tonight: 6:20:07 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:07:35 am



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Today in Weather History

February 29, 2004: Heavy snow of 6 to 9 inches fell across parts of central and north-central South Dakota. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Isabel and Ree Heights, 7 inches at Gettysburg and Eagle Butte, 8 inches at Murdo, and 9 inches northeast of Isabel in southern Corson County. The snowfall ended during the late morning of March 1st.

February 29, 2012: An intense area of low pressure moved across the region, bringing blizzard conditions to much of central and northeast South Dakota. Snowfall amounts of 4 to 14 inches along with northwest winds gusting over 40 mph brought widespread low visibilities to less than a quarter of a mile at times. Most schools were closed on both the 28th and 29th. Interstates 29 and 90 were also closed for a while during the storm. There were several cars and semis stranded along with a few accidents. The power was out for a time for several hundred customers. Some snowfall amounts included, 6 inches at McLaughlin, Timber Lake, Pollock, Eureka, Seneca, and Murdo; 7 inches at Selby, Bowdle, Roscoe, and Webster; 8 inches at Aberdeen, Doland, and Gettysburg; 9 inches at Kennebec and Roy Lake; 10 inches at Miller and Victor; 11 inches southeast of Faulkton; 12 inches at Highmore and Little Eagle; 12 inches at Sisseton; and 14 inches west of Turton and west of Gann Valley.

1748 - The heaviest snow of the "Winter of the Deep Snow" in New England came to an end. Coastal Salem was left with more than thirty inches of snow on the ground. (David Ludlum)

1884: San Diego, California, saw its wettest February in history with 9.05 inches. February 1884 is currently the third wettest month on record (wettest: 9.26 inches in 12/1921). The year of 1884 ended as the wettest in San Diego history with 25.97 inches.

1964: Thompson Pass in Alaska finishes the month with 346.1 inches of snow, the highest monthly total ever for Alaska.

1988 - "Leap Day" proved to be a wet one for southern California, with 4.76 inches of rain reported at Tommys Creek in Ventura County. February went out like a lamb across much of the rest of the nation. Sixteen cities in the central and western U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2008 - The world's tallest snowwoman is unveiled in the western Maine town of Bethel, ME. "Olympia," named for Maine Senator Olympia Snowe, is about 122 feet tall, 10 feet taller than "Angus, King of the Mountain," which has held the tallest snowman record since 1999. He was named for Angus King, Maine's governor at the time. The Weather Doctor

2012: A tornado outbreak occurred across the central plains and the Ohio River valley region on the 28th and 29th. The most destructive tornado struck Harrisburg, Illinois, killing 8 people in one neighborhood. This tornado had EF4 strength with winds of 166 - 200 mph.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

COMMITMENT

A fascinating story of the Church in Russia has been passed on from one generation to the next. It occurred one Sunday as believers met in a house church. The small fellowship gathered together and began to sing their favorite hymns quietly but fervently. Suddenly, two soldiers walked into their midst with loaded weapons and began shouting. "If you wish to renounce your commitment to Christ and live, leave now!"

Two left. Then another. Finally, two more.

Closing the door, the officer snapped with the voice of a commanding officer, "Keep your hands up - but this time in praise to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We, too, are Christians."

The other officer then added, "We've learned by our experiences that unless people are willing to die for their faith, they cannot be fully trusted."

Nearing the end of his life, Paul often spoke of his loyalty and commitment to his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Through shipwrecks and imprisonments, disappointed by "best-friends and once fellow-servants," abandoned by his colleagues and followers when facing death, he remained committed. He had achieved high status in the Roman world, but one day realized that it offered nothing in comparison to what he discovered in Christ. He was willing to suffer and die for his Lord because he knew what mattered most: "For to me, living means Christ!"

Prayer: Our Father, we may never be called upon to suffer for You, and we may never need to sacrifice anything we value, but help us to be willing to do so if asked. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: But you should keep a clear mind in every situation. Don't be afraid of suffering for the Lord. Work at telling others the Good News, and fully carry out the ministry God has given you. 2 Timothy 4:5-8



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

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.27.24

6 18 26 27 49 4

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$607,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 50 Mins 10 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.28.24

16 18 25 37 46 7

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$3,650,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 5 Mins 10 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.28.24

2 9 19 28 34 12

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 20 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.28.24

8 12 17 18 31

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 20 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.28.24

14 38 41 47 67 7

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 49 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.28.24

16 26 29 38 50 6

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$443,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 49 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined
Yankton Press & Dakotan. February 26, 2024.

Editorial: South Dakota Bill Seeks To Undercut Voters Again

There's a memorable line from the graphic novel (and movie) "V for Vendetta" that declares, "The people should not fear their governments; the government should fear its people."

One could argue that the latter may be the case in Pierre, as it appears some lawmakers once again don't want to chance leaving a contentious issue to the voters.

House Bill 1244 would alter South Dakota's initiated measure process by allowing people who have signed a petition to withdraw signatures from the petition, even after it has been submitted and validated, if the initiated measure is still eligible to be challenged through the Secretary of State's office or on court appeal, according to South Dakota News Watch.

Tellingly, HB1244 also includes an emergency clause, which would allow the measure to take effect immediately.

This comes just as signatures are being collected for an initiated measure to enshrine expanded abortion rights in the state constitution.

What a coincidence.

Unfortunately, our lawmakers have a history of trying to undercut the will of voters.

As recently as 2022, for example, an effort was made via the proposed Amendment C to raise the level of approval from 50% plus one vote to three-fifths (60%) for any initiated measures that boost taxes or fees or required the state to commit \$10 million or more in the first five fiscal years. This measure was put to a public vote in the June 2022 primary ahead of the initiated fall 2022 vote on Amendment D, which called for Medicaid expansion. Amendment C proponents admitted they were pushing their proposal in June with the Medicaid initiated measure in mind. In other words, they were looking for a way to tamper with the democratic process by giving more power to the minority to thwart the will of the majority. They failed, as expansion passed by a 56%-44% margin.

To an extent, HB1244 is of a similar vein.

This comes amid claims by HB1244 proponents of wrongdoing by petition circulators. Proponents have "played videos purporting to show proof of unattended (abortion) petitions, which would violate state law, and of circulators providing misleading information to the public," according to the News Watch story.

In response, Rick Weiland, executive director for Dakotans for Health, the group conducting the petition drive, said their petition circulators are trained to follow state law in such matters.

If HB1244 passes and is signed into law, it will likely be challenged in court, according to a legal counsel for Dakotans for Health.

A similar effort was attempted in Florida in 2010 but was declared unconstitutional by that state's Supreme Court, which noted that such signature revocation would likely be politically motivated and not "neutral and non-discriminatory protection of citizens' interests," News Watch reported.

On the other hand, four other states — California, Idaho, Utah and Washington — had a codified process in place for revoking petition signatures.

In South Dakota's case, this appears to be an effort to gut a measure that might well succeed in a November vote, if recent results elsewhere around the country are any guide. Thanks to a 2005 trigger law, current South Dakota law reverted after the 2022 Supreme Court decision to strike down Roe v. Wade to a more stringent reading that makes it a felony for anyone "who administers to any pregnant female or prescribes or procures for any pregnant female" anything that serves as means for an abortion, except when the mother's life is in danger. Current state law does not allow for abortions in cases of rape or incest.

The current law belies the results of two different statewide votes in the early 2000s that rejected greater

restrictions on abortions other than in cases of rape, incest or if the mother's life was threatened.

Also, a 2022 News Watch poll found that 65% of respondents supported having a statewide referendum to determine South Dakota's laws regarding reproductive rights. Note that this doesn't say 65% are in favor of enshrining those rights; it says that people want to have a say on it at the ballot box.

But our lawmakers have other ideas — or fears — again.

That's not freedom, and it's not right.

END

Putin warns that sending Western troops to Ukraine risks a global nuclear conflict

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin vowed Thursday to fulfill Moscow's goals in Ukraine and sternly warned the West against deeper involvement in the fighting, saying that such a move is fraught with the risk of a global nuclear conflict.

Putin's warning came in a state-of-the-nation address ahead of next month's election he's all but certain to win, underlining his readiness to protect Russian gains in Ukraine.

In an apparent reference to French President Emmanuel Macron's statement earlier this week that the future deployment of Western ground troops to Ukraine should not be "ruled out", Putin warned that it would lead to "tragic" consequences for the countries who decide to do that.

Putin noted that while accusing Russia of plans to attack NATO allies in Europe, Western allies were "selecting targets for striking our territory and selecting the most efficient as they think striking assets and talking about the possibility of sending a NATO contingent to Ukraine."

"We remember the fate of those who sent their troop contingents to the territory of our country," the Russian leader said. "Now the consequences for the potential invaders will be far more tragic."

Speaking before an audience of lawmakers and top officials, Putin said the West should keep in mind that "we also have the weapons that can strike targets on their territory, and what they are now suggesting and scaring the world with, all that raises the real threat of a nuclear conflict that will mean the destruction of our civilization."

"Don't they understand it?" he said, alleging that Western leaders are playing with options of deeper involvement in the conflict, as in a simulation. "Those people haven't been through any tough challenges and they have forgotten what war means."

The strong statement followed earlier warnings from Putin, who has issued frequent reminders of Russia's nuclear might since he sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022 as he sought to discourage the West from expanding its military support for Kyiv.

Putin emphasized that Russia's nuclear forces are in "full readiness," saying that the military has deployed potent new weapons, some of them tested on the battlefield in Ukraine.

The Kremlin leader said they include the new Sarmat heavy intercontinental ballistic missile that has entered service with Russian nuclear forces, along with the Burevestnik atomic-powered cruise missile and the Poseidon atomic-powered, nuclear-armed drone, which are completing their tests.

He added that the Kinzhal and Zircon hypersonic missiles have proven their efficacy on the battlefield in Ukraine.

At the same time, he rejected Western leaders' statements about the threat of a Russian attack on NATO allies in Europe as "ravings" and again dismissed Washington's claim that Moscow was pondering the deployment of space-based nuclear weapons.

Putin charged that the U.S. allegations were part of a ploy to draw Russia into talks on nuclear arms control on American terms even as Washington continues its efforts to deliver a "strategic defeat" to Moscow in Ukraine.

"Ahead of the U.S. election, they just want to show their citizens, as well as others, that they continue to rule the world," he said. "It won't work."

In his speech that focused heavily on economic and social issues ahead of the March 15-17 presidential vote, Putin argued that Russia was “defending its sovereignty and security and protecting our compatriots” in Ukraine, charging that the Russian forces have the upper hand in the fighting.

He hailed Russian soldiers and honored those who were killed in fighting with a moment of silence.

Putin has repeatedly said that he sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022 to protect Russian interests and prevent Ukraine from posing a major security threat to Russia by joining NATO. Kyiv and its allies have denounced it as an unprovoked act of aggression.

The Russian leader has repeatedly signaled a desire to negotiate an end to the fighting but warned that Russia will hold onto its gains.

Putin, 71, who is running as an independent candidate in the March 15-17 presidential election, relies on the tight control over Russia’s political system that he has established during 24 years in power.

Prominent critics who could challenge him have either been imprisoned or are living abroad, while most independent media have been banned, meaning that Putin’s reelection is all but assured. He faces token opposition from three other candidates nominated by Kremlin-friendly parties represented in parliament.

Russia’s best-known opposition leader Alexei Navalny, whose attempt to run against Putin in 2018 was rejected, died suddenly in an Arctic prison colony earlier this month, while serving a 19-year sentence on extremism charges. Navalny’s funeral is set for Friday.

Strike on Palestinians waiting for aid kills 70, Gaza officials say, taking war’s toll past 30,000

By WAFAA SHURAFI and KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — A strike early Thursday on a crowd of Palestinians waiting for humanitarian aid in Gaza City killed at least 70 people, bringing the death toll since the start of the Israel-Hamas war to more than 30,000, health officials said.

Gaza City and the surrounding areas in the enclave’s north were the first targets of Israel’s air, sea and ground offensive, launched in response to Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack. The area has suffered widespread devastation and has been largely isolated during the conflict. Trucks carrying food reached northern Gaza this week, the first major aid delivery to the area in a month, officials said Wednesday.

Aid groups say it has become nearly impossible to deliver humanitarian assistance in most of Gaza because of the difficulty of coordinating with the Israeli military, ongoing hostilities and the breakdown of public order, with crowds of desperate people overwhelming aid convoys. The U.N. says a quarter of Gaza’s 2.3 million Palestinians face starvation; around 80% have fled their homes.

In the wake of Thursday’s strike, medics found “dozens or hundreds” lying on the ground, according to Fares Afana, the head of the ambulance service at Kamal Adwan Hospital. He said there were not enough ambulances to collect all the dead and wounded and that some were being brought to hospitals in donkey carts.

The Al Jazeera network showed footage of several dead and wounded people being brought to another nearby hospital, Shifa, after the strike on a main road running along the Mediterranean coast.

In addition to the dozens killed, another 280 people were wounded in Thursday’s strike, Health Ministry spokesman Ashraf al-Qidra said.

The Israeli military said it was looking into the reports about the strike.

Separately, the Health Ministry said the Palestinian death toll from the war has climbed to 30,035, with another 70,457 wounded. It does not differentiate between civilians and combatants in its figures but says women and children make up around two-thirds of those killed.

The ministry, which is part of the Hamas-run government in Gaza, maintains detailed records of casualties. Its counts from previous wars have largely matched those of the U.N., independent experts and even Israel’s own tallies.

The Hamas attack into southern Israel that ignited the war killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and the militants seized around 250 hostages. Hamas and other militants are still holding around 100 hostages and

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the remains of about 30 more, after releasing most of the other captives during a November cease-fire. The increasing alarm over hunger across Gaza has fueled international calls for another cease-fire, and the U.S., Egypt and Qatar are working to secure a deal between Israel and Hamas for a pause in fighting and the release of some of the hostages.

Mediators hope to reach an agreement before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan starts around March 10. But so far, Israel and Hamas have remained far apart in public on their demands.

Meanwhile, U.N. officials have warned of further mass casualties if Israel follows through on vows to attack the southernmost city of Rafah, where more than half of Gaza's population of 2.3 million has taken refuge. They also say a Rafah offensive could decimate what remains of aid operations.

Several hundred thousand Palestinians are believed to remain in northern Gaza despite Israeli orders to evacuate the area in October, and many have been reduced to eating animal fodder to survive. The U.N. says one in 6 children under 2 in the north suffer from acute malnutrition and wasting.

COGAT, the Israeli military body in charge of Palestinian civilian affairs, said around 50 aid trucks entered northern Gaza this week. It was unclear who delivered the aid. Some countries have meanwhile resorted to airdrops in recent days.

The World Food Program said earlier this month that it was pausing deliveries to the north because of the growing chaos, after desperate Palestinians emptied a convoy while it was en route.

Since launching its assault on Gaza following Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, Israel has barred entry of food, water, medicine and other supplies except for a trickle of aid entering the south from Egypt at the Rafah crossing and Israel's Kerem Shalom crossing. Despite international calls to allow in more aid, the number of supply trucks is far less than the 500 that came in daily before the war.

COGAT said Wednesday that Israel does not impose limits on the amount of aid entering. Israel has blamed U.N. agencies for the bottleneck, saying hundreds of trucks are waiting on the Palestinian side of Kerem Shalom for aid workers to collect them.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric on Wednesday countered by saying large trucks entering Gaza have to be unloaded and reloaded onto smaller ones, but there aren't enough of them and there's a lack of security to distribute aid in Gaza.

Hamas-run police in Gaza stopped protecting convoys after Israeli strikes on them near the crossing.

The Latest | Gaza death toll surges over 30,000 as a strike kills and wounds scores waiting for aid

By The Associated Press undefined

More than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed in the Gaza Strip since the start of the Israel-Hamas war nearly five months ago, health officials in the territory said as a strike on a crowd of people waiting for aid in Gaza City killed and wounded scores on Thursday.

At least 70 people were killed as Palestinians lined up for humanitarian assistance, said Gaza's Health Ministry spokesman Ashraf al-Qidra. Another 280 people were wounded, he said. The war has driven 80% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million Palestinians from their homes, and U.N. officials say a quarter of the population is starving.

After the strike, Gaza's Health Ministry said the Palestinian death toll from the war in the territory climbed to 30,035, with another 70,457 wounded. The ministry does not distinguish in its count between fighters and noncombatants. Israel says it has killed 10,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Israel's air, sea and ground offensive launched in response to Hamas' Oct. 7 attack has caused widespread devastation in Gaza City, largely isolating it from the rest of the territory for months, with little aid entering.

The war has unleashed a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and sparked global concern over the situation in Rafah, Gaza's southernmost town along the border with Egypt, where 1.4 million Palestinians have sought safety from Israel's daily bombardments.

The war began after Hamas-led militants stormed across southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking about 250 others hostage.

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Currently:

- Food aid reaches north Gaza for first time in weeks, and Israeli hostages' families push for release.
- U.S. sanctions Iranian deputy commander, Houthi member and ships that transport Iranian oil.
- Qatar's emir to discuss Gaza and hostages with Macron during a state visit to France.
- Biden implores Congress to avoid a government shutdown, send urgent aid to Ukraine and Israel.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

WHO OFFICIAL DECRIES GAZA DEATH TOLL, SAYS THESE ARE HUMAN LIVES, NOT "MERE STATISTICS"
CAIRO — A regional director of the World Health Organization decried on Thursday the latest surge in the Palestinian death toll in the Gaza Strip and urged world leaders to join her in a push for a permanent cease-fire.

Hanan Balkhy, who is WHO's head for the Eastern Mediterranean, said "concrete steps" toward peace are desperately needed.

"The 30 thousand are not mere statistics, they are human lives," Balkhy wrote on X, formerly Twitter. "As a doctor and humanitarian, I will keep advocating for the right of all people to life and health. I call on all leaders to join."

The WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus had previously described Gaza as "a death zone" and called repeatedly for a cessation of hostilities.

Last week, WHO warned at a regional news conference in Cairo that poor sanitation, the lack of access to clean water, and the over-crowdedness of settlements where displaced Gazans have relocated, could lead to further infectious disease outbreaks and ultimately more deaths in the battered territory.

PALESTINIAN DIPLOMAT AT THE U.N. IN GENEVA DENOUNCES LATEST STRIKE IN GAZA

GENEVA — The Palestinian ambassador at the United Nations in Geneva denounced Thursday's apparent Israeli strike that killed at least 70 people waiting for aid in Gaza City.

"Are these human shields? Are these Hamas combatants," asked Palestinian ambassador Ibrahim Khraishi, addressing his Israeli counterpart Meirav Eilon Shahar.

Khraishi spoke as the U.N. human rights chief was presenting a report from his office about the Gaza situation to the Human Rights Council.

"Hundreds of Palestinian citizens, civilians ... who were waiting for trucks loaded with humanitarian aid, and they were bombed by the occupying power," said Khraishi. "I would say to you: Let us put an end to the massacre."

Khraishi represents the Palestinian Authority that runs pockets of the occupied West Bank but not the Gaza Strip, which is under the control of Hamas. He reiterated that the authority had condemned Hamas' Oct. 7 attack that triggered the latest Israel-Hamas war.

Volker Türk, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, warned of the risk of famine in north Gaza, where aid groups have largely been denied access in recent weeks, and railed against the "carnage" in Gaza and the attacks in Israel that preceded them.

Eilon Shahar, who spoke right before Khraishi and after the U.N. rights chief, stressed that more than 1,200 people were "butchered" in the Oct. 7 attack while others were subjected to "unspeakable acts of violence" by Hamas,

She also criticized Türk's comments.

"The minimal reference to these horrific acts in your statement today is an affront to the victims and supports those who seek to remove these crimes from the narrative altogether," she said.

Dozens of diplomats were taking part in Thursday's council debate, which was focusing on recent developments in Palestinian areas.

AUSTRIA'S TOP DIPLOMAT ON MIDEAST TOUR APPEALS FOR A PAUSE IN FIGHTING AHEAD OF RAMADAN

BEIRUT — Austria's foreign minister on Thursday urged Israel and Lebanon's militant Hezbollah group against escalating the conflict along the volatile Israel-Lebanon border and expressed hope for a pause in

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the fighting in Gaza in time for the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in March.

The Middle East has witnessed enough devastation and cruelty, said Alexander Schallenberg, speaking after meeting his Lebanese counterpart in Beirut. He came to Lebanon after visiting Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian city of Ramallah in the Israeli occupied West Bank.

Overnight, Israeli airstrikes on Lebanese villages along the southern border killed two people and wounded 14 others in the village of Kafra, state-run National News Agency reported.

Since the Israel-Hamas war started on Oct. 7, after Palestinian militants stormed parts of southern Israel, killing 1,200 people and taking 250 hostage, Hezbollah started attacking Israeli posts, drawing return fire from Israel in daily exchanges.

More than 210 Hezbollah fighters and nearly 40 civilians have been killed since then on the Lebanese side. In Israel, nine soldiers and nine civilians have been killed in Hezbollah attacks since Oct. 7.

European and American officials have tried to ease the tensions in visits to Beirut, to avoid a full-blown war between Israel and Hezbollah, which has said it won't discuss any deals before the war in Gaza ends.

"Everybody is asked not to escalate and it always takes two sides," Schallenberg said.

RELATIVES OF HOSTAGES MARCH TO DEMAND FREEDOM FOR LOVED ONES

TEL AVIV, Israel — The Israeli families of hostages held by Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip and their supporters are launching a four-day march from southern Israel to Jerusalem to demand their loved ones be set free.

The march comes as negotiations are underway in Qatar to bring about a deal between Hamas and Israel that would lead to a cease-fire in exchange for the release of hostages. President Joe Biden has said such a deal was at hand but officials from Israel and Hamas have expressed skepticism about it.

Negotiators from the United States, Egypt and Qatar have been working on a framework deal under which Hamas would free some of the dozens of hostages it holds in exchange for the release of Palestinian prisoners and a six-week halt in fighting.

During the temporary pause, negotiations would continue over the release of the remaining hostages.

Hostages freed in a late-November deal, some of whom still have relatives held in Gaza, joined the march on Wednesday. It will end near the official residence of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu later this week.

In its Oct. 7 attack, Hamas abducted roughly 250 people, according to Israeli authorities, including men, women, children and older adults. Roughly 100 were freed about 50 days into their captivity. Some 130 hostages remain and Israel says about a quarter of them are dead.

The plight of the hostages has deeply shaken Israelis, who see in them an enduring symbol of the state's failure to protect its citizens from Hamas' assault.

Young South Korean doctors resist back-to-work orders, risking prosecution

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and JIWON SONG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — As South Korea's government made a last plea for junior doctors to end a walkout hours before a Thursday deadline, many were expected to defy orders to return to work, risking suspensions of medical licenses and prosecution.

Thousands of medical interns and residents have been on strike for about 10 days to protest the government's push to boost medical school enrollments. Government officials have warned that strikers would face legal repercussions if they don't return to their hospitals by Thursday.

As of Wednesday night, about 9,076 of the country's 13,000 medical interns and residents were confirmed to have left their hospitals after submitting resignations, according to the Health Ministry. It said that 294 strikers had returned to work.

There was no word on any others going back to their jobs as of 6 p.m. (0900 GMT).

Observers say many strikers are likely to defy the deadline, continuing the labor boycott for weeks or months. The government is expected to begin formal steps toward penalties on Monday, as Friday is a national holiday.

"We've said that we won't hold them responsible for leaving their worksites if they return by today," Vice

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Health Minister Park Min-soo told a briefing. "Doctors are there to serve patients, and those patients are anxiously waiting for you. This isn't the way to protest against the government."

Later Thursday, Park met some striking doctors at a Seoul building but the contents of their discussion weren't immediately made public. Park earlier said officials had invited 94 representatives of the strikers to the meeting, using a mass text message. It wasn't known how many doctors took part in the meeting.

Ryu Ok Hada, one of the striking doctors, told reporters that he wouldn't attend the meeting. He accused the government of treating the striking junior doctors "like criminals and inflicting humiliations on them."

Starting March 4, the government will notify doctors who miss the deadline that it plans to suspend their licenses, and will give them opportunities to respond, senior Health Ministry official Kim Chung-hwan told the same briefing.

Under South Korean law, the government can order doctors back to work if it sees grave risks to public health. Those who refuse to abide by such orders can have their medical licenses suspended for up to one year, and also face up to three years in prison or a 30 million won (roughly \$22,500) fine. Those who receive prison sentences would be stripped of their medical licenses.

Some observers say authorities will probably punish only leaders of the strike to avoid further straining hospital operations.

At the center of the dispute is a government plan to admit 2,000 more applicants to medical schools starting next year, a two thirds increase from the current 3,058. The government says it aims to add up to 10,000 new doctors by 2035 to cope with the country's fast-aging population. Officials say South Korea's doctor-to-population ratio is one of the lowest among industrialized countries.

But many doctors reject the plan, arguing that universities aren't ready to provide quality education to that many new students. They also say the government plan would also fail to address chronic shortage of doctors in essential but low-paying specialties like pediatrics and emergency departments.

But their critics say the striking junior doctors simply worry about expected lower income because of the sharply increased number of fellow doctors. The government's plan is broadly popular with the South Korean public, according to a poll.

"Doctors must cure sick people. If they all leave, who's going to treat them? Everyone would die," Kim Young Ja, an 89-year-old housewife, said near a Seoul hospital.

The country's 13,000 trainee doctors represent a small fraction of South Korea's 140,000 doctors, but they account for about 30%-40% of the total doctors at some major hospitals and perform many vital functions to support senior medical staff.

The doctors' walkouts have caused cancellations or delays to several hundred surgeries and other medical treatments at their hospitals, according to the Health Ministry. The ministry says the country's handling of emergency and critical patients remains largely stable, as public medical institutions extended their working hours and military hospitals opened their emergency rooms to the public.

But experts say if senior doctors join the trainee doctors' strikes, South Korea's medical service would suffer serious damage. The Korea Medical Association, which represents the country's 140,000 doctors, has said it supports the trainee doctors, but hasn't yet decided whether to join the walkouts.

A 60-year-old patient, who was diagnosed with breast cancer six weeks ago, said she hopes for an early end to the walkouts so that her treatment would go ahead smoothly.

"My cancer won't worsen only when I get cancer treatments at the right time. So I hope the trainee doctors would return to work as soon as possible, normalizing hospital operations," said the woman, who wished to be only identified as her surname, Yu, citing privacy concerns.

How Chinese science fiction went from underground magazines to Netflix extravaganza

By SIMINA MISTREANU Associated Press

CHENGDU, China (AP) — For a few days in October 2023, the capital of the science fiction world was Chengdu, China. Fans traveled from around the world as Worldcon, sci-fi's biggest annual event, was held in the country for the first time.

It was a rare moment when Chinese and international fans could get together to celebrate the arts without worrying about the increasingly fraught politics of China's relationship with the West or Beijing's tightening grip on expression.

For Chinese fans like Tao Bolin, an influencer who flew from the southern province of Guangdong for the event, it felt like the world finally wanted to read Chinese literature. Fans and authors mingled in a brand new Science Fiction Museum, designed by the prestigious Zaha Hadid Architects in the shape of a huge steel starburst over a lake.

But three months later, much of that goodwill turned sour as a scandal erupted over allegations that organizers of the Hugo Awards — sci-fi's biggest prize, awarded at Worldcon — disqualified candidates to placate Chinese censors.

The event embodied the contradictions that Chinese science fiction has faced for decades. In 40 years, it's gone from a politically suspect niche to one of China's most successful cultural exports, with author Liu Cixin gaining an international following that includes fans like Barack Obama and Mark Zuckerberg. But it's had to overcome obstacles created by geopolitics for just as long.

With a big-budget Netflix adaptation of his "The Three-Body Problem" set to drop in March, produced by the same showrunners as "Game of Thrones," Chinese sci-fi could reach its biggest audience yet.

Getting there took decades of work by dedicated authors, editors and cultural bureaucrats who believed that science fiction could bring people together.

"Sci-fi has always been a bridge between different cultures and countries," says Yao Haijun, the editor-in-chief of Science Fiction World, China's oldest sci-fi magazine. "Every author can have their own vision of the future, and they can coexist and be respected even if they clash."

A SMALL STEP FOR A PROVINCIAL BUREAUCRAT

Chinese sci-fi's journey abroad started with another convention in Chengdu three decades ago, but politics nearly derailed that one before it could get off the ground.

Science Fiction World planned to host a writers' conference in the city, known for its panda sanctuary and countercultural bend, in 1991. But as news of the brutal crackdown on student protesters in Beijing's Tiananmen Square circled the globe in 1989, foreign speakers were dropping out.

The magazine sent a small delegation to Worldcon 1990, hosted in The Hague, to save the conference.

Its leader was Shen Zaiwang, an English translator in Sichuan province's Foreign Affairs Department who fell in love with sci-fi as a child after reading Jules Verne books like "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea." He packed instant noodles for the weeklong train journey across China and the fragmenting Soviet Union.

In The Hague, Shen and former magazine editor Yang Xiao used toy pandas and postcards of Chengdu to make the case that the city — more than 1,800 kilometers (1,000 miles) from Beijing — was friendly and safe to visit.

"We tried to introduce our province as a safe place, and that the people in Sichuan really hope the foreign science fiction writers can come and have a look and encourage Chinese young people to read more science fiction novels," Shen says.

In the end, a dozen foreign authors attended the conference. It was a small start, but it was more than anyone could have imagined a few years earlier.

A GIANT LEAP FOR THE GENRE

Chinese sci-fi had faced decades of suspicion at home.

The genre flourished in China in the first half of the 20th century, fueled by an interest in new technol-

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ogy and translated stories from abroad. But it disappeared during the Cultural Revolution, a tumultuous decade beginning in 1966 when Maoist radicals targeted “bourgeois” elements including both scientists and many types of literature.

Sci-fi saw a resurgence as China began opening to the world after the Mao era in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Authors like Zheng Wenguang and Ye Yonglie wrote stories about traveling into space, while China’s nascent space program launched its first satellites into orbit. Regional magazines such as Chengdu’s Science Fiction World mushroomed.

But in the early 1980s, Beijing initiated a nationwide “spiritual pollution cleaning” campaign to quash the influence of the decadent West, and sci-fi was accused of being unscientific and out of line with official ideology. Most of the young publications were shuttered.

Down in Chengdu, Science Fiction World’s editors kept going.

“They believed if China wanted to develop, it needed to be an innovative country — it needed science fiction,” Yao, the editor, said in a recorded public address in 2017.

The magazine set out to change negative public perceptions about sci-fi. In 1997, six years after the Chengdu conference, it organized another international event in Beijing, headlined by American and Russian astronauts. The conference got attention in the Chinese press, giving sci-fi a cool new aura of innovation, exploration and imagination, Yao says. It also paved the way for an international liftoff.

LIU CIXIN’S BIG BANG

China’s growing sci-fi fandom was devouring translated works from abroad, but few people abroad were reading Chinese stories. Liu Cixin was going to change that.

A soft-spoken engineer at a power plant in the coal-dominated province of Shanxi, his stories — which mixed massive engineering projects capable of moving whole planets with moments of quiet human emotion — were hits with genre fans.

But “The Three-Body Problem,” first serialized by Science Fiction World in 2006, reached a level of popularity unseen by other Chinese works, says Yao, who edited the novel.

When it came out as a book, fans in Chengdu mobbed the release at a local bookstore, says Yang Feng, the founder of local independent publisher Eight Light Minutes Culture. They encircled the building, holding signs with “I love you, Liu Cixin!”

Authorities took note. The China Educational Publications Import & Export Corporation, the state-owned publications exporter, picked up the novel and its two sequels.

The trilogy’s plot, ironically, centers on the disastrous consequences of sending a message to a distant alien world. “The Dark Forest,” the second volume, is named for a view of the universe as a dog-eat-dog struggle for survival in which the best way to survive is to hide.

The translations were intended from the start as “a big cultural export from China to the world, something very highly visible,” says Joel Martinsen, who translated “The Dark Forest.” But no one could have anticipated the critical and popular success: In 2015, Liu became the first Asian author to win a Hugo Award for a novel.

“There was something quite fresh and raw and eye-catching, and even sometimes very dark and ruthless in his work,” says Song Mingwei, a professor of Chinese literature at Wellesley College. “That made readers feel like, ‘Wow, this is impressive.’”

Song says Liu hit a sweet spot between familiar Western genre tropes and references to China’s difficult history. The trilogy is now “a classic,” he added.

The next year, Beijing-based writer Hao Jingfang beat Stephen King to win a Hugo for short fiction with a story she originally published on a university web forum, about social inequality in a surreal version of China’s capital.

INTERCEPTED BY BEIJING

Liu’s translations were also a political breakthrough for the genre: In two decades, it had gone from barely tolerated to a flagship export of China’s official cultural machine.

The government encouraged the growth of an industry spanning movies, video games, books, magazines

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and exhibits, and set up an official research center in 2020 to track its rise. A blockbuster set in the world of Liu's short story "The Wandering Earth" broke domestic box office records and spawned two sequels; however, it saw limited distribution and mixed reviews abroad.

Worldcon Chengdu was to be the crowning achievement of these efforts.

When the location was announced, some international fans criticized the choice, citing human rights, censorship and concerns about the voting process.

The event itself was seen as a success.

But in January, when the Hugo committee disclosed vote totals, the critics' suspicions seemed to be confirmed. It turned out several candidates had been disqualified, raising censorship concerns. They included New York Times bestselling authors R. F. Kuang and Xiran Jay Zhao, both politically active writers with family ties to China.

Leaked internal emails — which The Associated Press could not independently verify — appeared to show that the awards committee spent weeks checking nominees' works and social media profiles for statements that could offend Beijing, and sent reports on these to Chinese counterparts, according to an investigation by two sci-fi authors and journalists. They don't show how the reports were used or who made the decisions about disqualification.

The Hugo awards organizers did not respond to requests for comment by the AP.

Liu himself is not a stranger to controversy. He faced backlash for defending the Chinese government's oppressive policies toward the Uyghur ethnic minority in Xinjiang in a 2019 interview with The New Yorker magazine. Netflix has faced calls to cancel the series over the controversy. Netflix representatives have not answered emailed questions by the AP.

NEW HORIZONS

Despite the frictions, Chinese sci-fi remains poised to continue its international rise. Netflix's adaptation of the "The Three-Body Problem" could bring it to a vast new audience, a coming-out orders of magnitude bigger than Shen Zaiwang's trip to The Hague.

And insiders like Song and Yao are looking forward to a new generation of Chinese sci-fi authors that's starting to be translated into English now.

It's led by younger, female writers who were educated abroad, such as Regina Kanyu Wang and Tang Fei. Their works explore themes that resonate with younger audiences, Song says, including gender fluidity and environmental crises.

"When doing anything with the endorsement of either the market or the government, imagination can dry up very quickly," Song says. "I think often the important thing happens on the margin."

Yao continues to believe in sci-fi's role as a bridge between cultures, even in turbulent times.

"As long as there is communication," he says, "we'll be able to find some things in common."

Firefighters seek to corral massive Texas wildfires before weekend of higher temperatures and winds

By SEAN MURPHY and JIM VERTUNO Associated Press

CANADIAN, Texas (AP) — The explosive growth of the second-largest wildfire in Texas history slowed as winds and temperatures dipped but the massive blaze was still untamed and threatening more death and destruction.

The Smokehouse Fire is the largest of several major fires burning in the rural Panhandle section of the state. It has charred 1,300 square miles (3,370 square kilometers) and crossed into Oklahoma.

Firefighters have made little progress corralling it — containment was at just 3% — but Thursday's forecast of temperatures in the 40s and a chance of rain offered a window to make progress before temperatures and winds increase this weekend. Authorities have not said what ignited the fires, but strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm temperatures fed the blazes.

An 83-year-old grandmother is the only confirmed death so far but with flames still menacing a wide area authorities have yet to conduct a thorough search for victims or tally the numerous homes and other

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structures damaged or destroyed.

Nim Kidd, chief of the Texas Division of Emergency Management, said the weekend forecast and "sheer size and scope" of the blaze are the biggest challenges for firefighters.

"I don't want the community there to feel a false sense of security that all these fires will not grow anymore," Kidd said. "This is still a very dynamic situation."

The largest fire recorded in state history was the 2006 East Amarillo Complex fire, which burned about 1,400 square miles (3,630 square kilometers) and resulted in 13 deaths.

This week, walls of flames were pushed by powerful winds while huge plumes of smoke billowed hundreds of feet in the air across the sparsely populated region. The smoke delayed aerial surveillance of the damage in some areas.

"There was one point where we couldn't see anything," said Greg Downey, 57, describing his escape as flames bore down on his neighborhood. "I didn't think we'd get out of it."

The woman who died was identified by family members as Joyce Blankenship, a former substitute teacher. Her grandson, Lee Quesada, said he had posted in a community forum asking if anyone could try and locate her. Quesada said deputies told his uncle on Wednesday that they had found Blankenship's remains in her burned home.

Quesada said she'd surprise him at times with funny little stories "about her more ornery days."

"Just talking to her was a joy," he said, adding that "Joy" was a nickname of hers.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott issued a disaster declaration for 60 counties. The encroaching flames caused the main facility that disassembles America's nuclear arsenal to pause operations Tuesday night, but it was open for normal work Wednesday.

Hemphill County Emergency Management Coordinator Bill Kendall described the charred terrain as being "like a moonscape. ... It's just all gone."

Kendall said about 40 homes were burned around the perimeter of the town of Canadian, but no buildings were lost inside the community. Kendall also said he saw "hundreds of cattle just dead, laying in the fields."

Tresea Rankin videotaped her own home in Canadian as it burned.

"Thirty-eight years of memories, that's what you were thinking," Rankin said of watching the flames destroy her house. "Two of my kids were married there ... But you know, it's OK, the memories won't go away."

The small town of Fritch, north of Amarillo, lost hundreds of homes in a 2014 fire and appeared to be hit hard again. Mayor Tom Ray said Wednesday that an estimated 40-50 homes were destroyed on the southern edge. Ray said natural gas remained shut off for the town of 2,200.

Residents are probably not "prepared for what they're going to see if they pull into town," Hutchinson County Emergency Management spokesperson Deidra Thomas said in a social media livestream. She compared the damage to a tornado.

Near Borger, a community of about 13,000 people, emergency officials at one point late Tuesday answered questions from panicked residents on Facebook and told them to get ready to leave if they had not already.

"It was like a ring of fire around Borger. There was no way out ... all four main roads were closed," said Adrianna Hill, whose home was within about a mile of the fire. She said wind that blew the fire in the opposite direction "saved our butts."

The Pantex nuclear weapon plant, northeast of Amarillo, evacuated nonessential staff Tuesday night out of an "abundance of caution," said Laef Pendergraft, a spokesperson for the National Nuclear Security Administration's production office at Pantex. Firefighters remained in case of an emergency.

Pantex tweeted early Wednesday that the facility was "open for normal day shift operations."

The Smokehouse Creek Fire spread from Texas into neighboring Roger Mills County in western Oklahoma, where officials encouraged people in the Durham area to flee. At least 13 homes burned in fires in the state's Panhandle region, officials said Wednesday.

Vertuno reported from Austin, Texas. Associated Press reporters Ken Miller in Oklahoma City, Lisa Baumann in Bellingham, Washington, and Christopher Weber in Los Angeles contributed to this report.

What is Super Tuesday? Why it matters and what to watch

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

The biggest day of this year's primary campaign is approaching as 15 states — plus American Samoa — vote in contests known as Super Tuesday.

The elections are a crucial moment for President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump, who are the overwhelming front-runners for the Democratic and Republican presidential nominations. As the day with the most delegates up for stake, strong performances by Biden and Trump would move them much closer to becoming their party's standard bearers again, setting up a likely rematch between the two in November.

The contest will unfold from Alaska and California to Virginia and Vermont. And while most of the attention will be on the presidential contest, there are other important elections on Tuesday.

Here are some things to watch:

DOES TRUMP KEEP ROLLING?

So far, the Republican presidential primary has been a snoozer. Trump has dominated the race and his last major rival in the race, former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, is struggling to keep up. She lost the Feb. 27 primary in Michigan by more than 40 percentage points. She even lost her home state of South Carolina, where she was twice elected governor, by more than 20 percentage points.

As the race pivots to Super Tuesday, the vast map seems tailor-made for Trump to roll up an insurmountable lead on Haley. His team has been turning up the pressure on Haley to drop out, and another big win could be a major point in their favor.

Haley's banked a considerable amount of campaign money and says she wants to stay in the race until the Republican National Convention in July in case delegates there have second thoughts about formally nominating Trump amidst his legal woes. But she's seen some of her financial support waver recently — the organization Americans For Prosperity, backed by the Koch brothers, announced it'd stop spending on her behalf after South Carolina.

She may not be able to afford another sweeping loss.

DO COLLEGE GRADS KEEP TURNING AGAINST TRUMP?

Amid Trump's commanding wins this primary season have been a notable warning sign for November — he's performed poorly with college-educated primary voters.

In New Hampshire and South Carolina's Republican primaries, APVoteCast found that college graduates picked Haley over Trump. Roughly two-thirds of voters in both states who went to graduate school after college voted for the former South Carolina governor.

In South Carolina, Trump won the suburbs but not by the same magnitude as his dominance in small towns and rural areas, essentially splitting the vote with Haley.

One of the biggest questions Tuesday night is whether Trump can start repairing that rupture. Weakness with college graduates and in the suburbs where they cluster is what doomed Trump in 2020.

DOES BIDEN END DOUBTS?

As sleepy as the Republican presidential primary has been, the Democratic one has been even quieter. Incumbent President Joe Biden has many political problems dragging him down in public opinion polls, but not, so far, at primary polling stations.

The one speed bump came in Michigan, where an organized attempt to vote "uncommitted" in the primary there to protest Biden's support of Israel during the war in Gaza garnered 13% of the vote, a slightly higher share than that option got in the last primary under a Democratic president.

There are no similar organized anti-Biden efforts on the Super Tuesday calendar, just the president's two longshot primary opponents who've yet to crack low single digits against him, Rep. Dean Phillips and self-help author Marianne Williamson, who revived her campaign after receiving a surprise 3% of the Michigan primary vote.

We should be alert for any sign of Biden weakness, but also for evidence that the president is in a stronger political position than might be assumed.

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WHAT HAPPENS IN CALIFORNIA'S SENATE RACE?

There's far more than the presidential primaries on the ballot Tuesday. One of the most consequential contests is the California primary for the U.S. Senate seat left open by Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein's death.

The seat's temporary occupant, Laphonza Butler, isn't running for a full term, and California's distinctive "Top Two" primary may determine who replaces her even before November. Rather than having the winners of party primaries face off in November, California throws every candidate into a single primary and has the top two vote-getters make it to the general election.

Democrats have a lock on statewide races in the overwhelmingly blue state, and for months the speculation was that two prominent House members from that party, Reps. Katie Porter and Adam Schiff, would battle it out until Election Day. But that's changed since former Dodgers great Steve Garvey threw his hat in the ring.

Garvey, 75, is both a Republican and a novice at politics. Schiff has been airing ads slamming him — or, more accurately, promoting him — as most likely to carry out Trump's wishes. The idea is to unite the state's outnumbered conservatives behind Garvey so he and Schiff finish in the top two, denying Porter a spot in November. Schiff would then be the overwhelming favorite for the seat.

It's an electoral bank shot with a long tradition in politics. California's Top Two primary was passed by voters in 2010, partly to stop partisans from engaging in primary shenanigans. Among other things, the state's Senate primary will be a test of whether, in the end, motivated politicians can game any system.

WHICH WAY ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE?

Voters in two of California's most famed urban areas — San Francisco and Los Angeles — will get to again grapple with questions of criminal justice and public order.

In Los Angeles County, District Attorney George Gascon faces 11 challengers in a primary amidst scathing criticism of his progressive approach that includes not seeking cash bail for misdemeanors and nonviolent felonies and not prosecuting juveniles as adults. His opponents have blamed him for a rise in property crimes in some parts of the county, including a brazen smash-and-grab spree at luxury stores.

Still, Gascon's weathered criticism before, including two failed recall efforts, one of which was in his first 100 days of taking office. The primary will determine who he faces in November and whether there are signs that Los Angeles' liberal voters are changing their minds.

In San Francisco, Mayor London Breed is pushing one ballot measure to expand police powers to use tactics like drones and surveillance cameras, and another testing single adults on welfare for drugs. The two initiatives come as the city has been wracked by homelessness and drug use, and Breed faces a cranky electorate in her own reelection in November.

ANOTHER GOP TEST IN TEXAS

Texas' Attorney General, Ken Paxton, last year survived an impeachment led by his own party. Now he wants payback, and Trump is helping him. The primaries here will be a test of how Republican voters are willing to regulate their own leaders.

The impeachment stemmed from Paxton's legal woes. He faces an April trial on felony security fraud charges, and an additional federal corruption probe over the allegations that he used his office to favor a campaign donor that was the foundation of the impeachment charges.

As payback, Paxton is targeting more than 30 Republican state lawmakers in the party's primary Tuesday, including the very conservative House Speaker, Dale Phelan. Paxton is also trying to remove three Republican judges on the state's conservative appeals court who voted to limit the attorney general's powers.

Paxton has been a staunch supporter of Trump, including the former president's attempts to overturn his own 2020 election loss, and Trump is helping Paxton in his primary campaign. The Texas purge will be a test of what Republican voters value the most in their elected officials.

CAN NC CANDIDATES UNITE PARTIES?

Most of the country picked its governors in the 2022 off-year elections, but North Carolina is gearing up for an intense race this fall. The major-party front-runners for the seat being vacated by term-limited

Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper both will need to demonstrate an ability to unite their parties in the primary.

The Democratic front-runner is Attorney General Josh Stein, who has Cooper's endorsement. His main competitor is former state Supreme Court Associate Justice Mike Morgan, who is Black. Watch whether Stein's able to hold onto a significant share of the primary's Black voters, which is essential for any Democrat who wants to be competitive in November.

The Republican front-runner is Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson, who is also Black. He's been a divisive figure for some for criticizing vocally the teaching of LGBTQ+ issues during sex education and for comments at a church that Christians are "called to be led by men." His GOP primary opponents — State Treasurer Dale Folwell and trial attorney Bill Graham — argue Robinson is too polarizing to win in November.

Robinson received Trump's support last year, but it's worth watching whether he shows the same weaknesses as the former president among college-educated, suburban voters. Biden's reelection campaign is targeting North Carolina because it thinks those voters can help him beat Trump there.

Charred homes, blackened earth after Texas town revisited by destructive wildfire 10 years later

By SEAN MURPHY and LISA BAUMANN undefined

FRITCH, Texas. (AP) — The small town of Fritch is again picking through the rubble of a Texas wildfire, a decade after another destructive blaze burned hundreds of homes and left deep scars in the Panhandle community.

Residents in and around Fritch and other rural towns fled for safety Tuesday afternoon as high winds whipped the flames into residential areas and through cattle ranches.

Fritch Mayor Tom Ray said on Wednesday the town's northern edge was hit by a devastating wildfire in 2014, while this week's blaze burned mostly to the south of the town, sparing the residents who live in the heart of the community.

"I said, 'Oh Lord, please don't come down the middle,'" Ray said.

The mayor estimated up to 50 homes were destroyed near Fritch, with dozens more reportedly consumed by fire in small towns throughout the Panhandle.

The cluster of blazes included a fire that grew into one of the largest in state history. An 83-year-old grandmother from the tiny town of Stinnett was the lone confirmed fatality. However, authorities have yet to make a thorough search for victims and have warned the damage to some communities is extensive.

The cause of this week's fires is still unknown but dry, warmer than average conditions combined with high winds caused blazes that sparked to grow exponentially, prompting evacuations across a more than 100 mile (160 kilometer) stretch of small towns and cattle ranches from Fritch east into Oklahoma.

Photos showed homes throughout the area reduced to unrecognizable piles of ash and bricks with charred vehicles and blackened earth.

Cody Bengé was a fire captain when a wildfire started about a block from his house on Mother's Day in 2014 and then tore through Fritch, decimating homes.

Bengé, who now lives in Oklahoma, immediately began checking on relatives and friends in Fritch when he heard about this week's fire.

"I immediately started praying and honestly, it brought back a lot of memories for me and the devastation that I saw," he said. "I can only imagine what everyone is seeing now."

Bengé battled the 2014 fire for at least 48 hours before he was able to get a break. As in the current fire, a cold front eventually moved over the area and allowed firefighters to gain some control of the blaze.

On Wednesday evening, more than a dozen exhausted-looking volunteer firefighters, many caked with ash and soot, gathered at the Fritch Volunteer Fire Department in the center of town. Residents had dropped off bagged lunches, snacks and bottles of water.

"Today your Fritch Volunteer Fire Department mourns for our community and those around it," fire officials wrote in a post on Facebook. "We are tired, we are devastated but we will not falter. We will not quit."

Meghan Mahurin with the Texas A&M Forest Service said they typically rely on heavy equipment to create containment lines around a wildfire, but the fire near Fritch jumped the lines in high winds.

"The wind has just been brutal on us," she said. "At one point the wind was so high and the flames were so tall that it was just blowing across the highway."

Lee Quesada, of Fritch, evacuated his residence Tuesday saying the fire got as close as two houses away. "I haven't moved so fast since I was like 20," he said.

His attention then turned to his 83-year-old grandmother Joyce Blankenship, who lived about 21 miles (33 kilometers) away in the town of Stinnett. He posted on a Fritch Facebook community page wondering if anyone knew anything or could check on her.

On Wednesday, he said deputies called his uncle to say they found her remains in her burned home.

"Brings tears to my eyes knowing I'll never see her again," Quesada said.

Whether more lives were lost as well as the extent of the damage from the fires wasn't yet clear on Wednesday, largely because the fires continued to burn and remained uncontained, making complete assessments impossible.

"Damage assessment ... is our next priority, after life safety and stopping the growth of these fires," Nim Kidd, chief of the Texas Division of Emergency Management, said Wednesday, adding that residents should remain alert as conditions favoring fire growth could return later this week.

The Moore County Sheriff's Office, which encompasses some of Fritch, posted on Facebook Tuesday night that deputies had helped with evacuations.

"We have seen tragedy today and we have seen miracles," the post said. "Today was a historic event we hope never happens again. The panhandle needs prayers."

Defense chief on the defensive: Lawmakers to confront Austin on secret hospital stay

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will face Congress publicly for the first time Thursday to explain his failure to quickly notify the president and other senior leaders about his hospitalization last month for complications from prostate cancer surgery.

He is expected to hear some sharp questions and criticism from members of the House Armed Services Committee for keeping his hospital stay secret for days, including from President Joe Biden. A number of Republicans have blasted him for the lack of transparency and used the incident to slam the Biden administration for not keeping Congress informed.

The lapse has raised questions about whether there were gaps in the command and control of the nation's armed forces, including its nuclear arsenal. The Pentagon has insisted there was no break in control as Austin transferred authorities to the deputy secretary.

Austin's remarks to the committee will likely mirror a mea culpa that he delivered in a press briefing early this month. He has taken full responsibility for the communications failures and apologized, and the department has ordered a number of changes and improvement in the procedures.

Austin was diagnosed with prostate cancer in early December and went to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for surgery on Dec. 22. On Jan. 1, he was taken back to Walter Reed by ambulance after experiencing significant pain, and was moved to the intensive care unit the next day.

Pentagon officials have acknowledged that public affairs and defense aides were told on Jan. 2 that Austin had been hospitalized but did not make it public and did not tell the military service leaders or the National Security Council until Jan. 4. Only then did Biden find out. It took four more days before the reason for his hospitalization was disclosed.

A newly released internal review — which was done by Austin's subordinates — largely absolved anyone of wrongdoing for the secrecy surrounding his hospitalization. The review concluded there was "no indication of ill intent or an attempt to obfuscate," and it blamed communications failures on privacy restrictions and staff hesitancy to seek or communicate timely information about Austin's health and condition.

The secretary spent several days in intensive care and transferred decision-making authorities to Deputy Secretary Kathleen Hicks during that time and when he had the initial surgery in December. He did not, however, tell her why and he did not inform the White House.

Department officials did a classified briefing with senators on Tuesday that got mixed reviews.

Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., criticized the decision to make the briefing classified, saying the public deserves to know details about the communications breakdown. And she said the Defense Department must, at a minimum, "consider how to inform Congress about future gaps in command — as required by current law."

The chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., called the internal review a "starting point" and said the briefing was intended to ensure that communications problems don't happen again.

In his press briefing on Feb. 1, Austin said the cancer diagnosis "was a gut punch. And, frankly, my first instinct was to keep it private." He acknowledged he handled the matter badly and said he apologized to Biden.

The internal review said procedures must be improved and information shared better when the defense secretary must transfer decision-making authorities to the deputy. The Defense Department's inspector general is also conducting a review, which has not yet been completed.

A brazen iPhone scam in Iran reflects its economic struggles and tensions with the West

By NASSER KARIMI Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — With flashy celebrity ads and promises of deep discounts, a shop in Iran's capital had offered consumers in the Islamic Republic one of the hottest products in the country — an iPhone that came out in 2021.

But instead of getting their hands on the handsets, police and prosecutors in Iran allege customers found themselves ensnared by a business owner running a multimillion-dollar Ponzi scheme.

Yet the controversy surrounding the Kourosh, or "Son of the Sun," Company extends far beyond just the alleged scheme.

It's a sign of the economic woes plaguing Iran after decades of Western sanctions, now accelerating as Tehran rapidly advances its nuclear program, helps arm Russia in Moscow's war on Ukraine, steps up support for proxy militias in the Middle East and violently cracks down on dissent ahead of parliamentary elections on Friday.

When the government last year banned Apple's iPhone 14 and 15 from the Islamic Republic, the ban spurred a parallel economy for the older handsets, jacking up prices for the devices as many sought to put their depreciating Iranian rials into any physical commodity.

And even though Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has denounced American luxury goods amid years of tensions with the West, consumers still want the phones and the prestige associated with them.

"There is a lot of demand," said Aram, a mobile phone shop keeper in Tehran who gave only her first name for fear of retaliation. Her customers keep asking for the "latest couple of iPhone models" — the ones that are banned.

"If they could allow legal imports ... it would be much better," she said.

In shops across Iran, iPhone 13s range in price starting from \$330 for refurbished models to \$1,020 for those still in the box — shiny and new, though still not quite the coveted iPhone 15 now available elsewhere in the world.

Even if you bring an iPhone 14 or 15 model into the country, it will stop working on the Iran's state-controlled mobile phone networks after one month, the time span for tourists who visit the county.

Imports of iPhones have long been a contentious point — government statistics suggest that about a third of Iran's entire \$4.4 billion mobile phone import market consisted of iPhones before the ban.

The private companies that import mobile phones have access to government-set exchange rates far lower than the rate of 580,000 rials to \$1 in exchange offices, making the business that much more lucrative.

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At the time of Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, the exchange rate was 32,000 rials for \$1. Khamenei pointedly criticized the iPhone imports in remarks to government ministers in August 2020.

"Excessive imports are something dangerous," Khamenei said at the time, according to a transcript on his official website. "Sometimes this import is a luxury product, meaning there is no need for it. I've heard about half a billion dollars were spent to import one type of American luxury cellphone."

But the demand is still there and iPhones remain a status symbol for many young Iranians.

"I prefer the iPhone to any other phone, at any price, because it cannot be compared to any other brand in terms of luxury," said Ehsan Ehsani, a 23-year-old architecture student in Tehran.

Rules on importing iPhones into Iran were always tough.

The phones could only be brought in individually by travelers, who would then register them at the country's entry point, declaring the iPhone was for personal use. At customs, people would give their passport numbers and pay a fee of 22.5% of the phone's price, as determined by the government or possibly a sales receipt.

This sparked a side business where iPhone traders would wait for passengers at the airport and pay them in exchange for getting their permission to use their passport numbers to register iPhones in their stock.

Navid Bahmani, a 26-year-old who works in an iPhone shop in Tehran, said he would usually pay travelers up to \$40 for their passport numbers at Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport.

"The price depends on the travelers," Bahmani said. "Some of them accept the first offer, some of them not."

Apple, based in Cupertino, California, did not respond to a request for comment.

Iran's economic problems have also played into schemes such as that of Kourosh, curiously also the name of the Persian throne under Cyrus the Great.

Inflation has overtaken any interest rate offered by a bank, while depreciation also has gnawed away at people's savings. As a result, many seek to buy a physical asset, whether a home, jewelry or even a car to protect against losses.

That's where the Kourosh Company came in.

The company offered iPhone 13s starting from the equivalent of \$360 — if you were willing to pay first and wait for a few weeks before receiving the device. Celebrities in Iran appeared in online ads for the firm, drawing even more attention.

Some customers initially received their iPhones, further fueling the frenzy surrounding the shop. The reformist newspaper Shargh estimated that the company made \$36 million in less than a year, though officials have not confirmed that.

Then the iPhones dried up.

Kourosh's 27-year-old CEO and the alleged mastermind of the scheme, Amirhossein Sharifian, suddenly left Iran in September — and is still on the run — with millions in dollars of payments, Iranian authorities say.

Sharifian could not be reached by The Associated Press for comment, though a company employee insisted in an online video posted two weeks ago that a supply chain issues was causing the delay in iPhone deliveries.

Iranian police spokesman Gen. Saeed Montazeralmehdi said investigators are still after Sharifian.

Despite the fracas, customers keep lining up outside the shop, including on a recent below-freezing day in Tehran.

"I paid for nine (iPhones)," said Moteza Zarei, 47, who runs a car repair shop. "I found it a good way to increase my investment. But I got none."

Biden, Trump try to work immigration to their political advantage during trips to Texas

By COLLEEN LONG, SEUNG MIN KIM and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and his likely Republican challenger Donald Trump both head to the U.S.-Mexico border in Texas on Thursday in a sign of how central immigration has become to the 2024 election and how much both candidates want to use it to their advantage.

Each has chosen an optimal location from which to underscore his respective points.

Biden, who wants to spotlight how Republicans tanked a bipartisan border security deal on Trump's orders, will go to the Rio Grande Valley city of Brownsville. For nine years, this was the busiest corridor for illegal crossings, but illegal crossings there have dropped sharply in recent months.

Trump, for his part, wants to continue his attacks on Biden and keep up his dialed-up rhetoric after saying migrants were poisoning the blood of Americans. He will do so from Eagle Pass, roughly 325 miles northwest of Brownsville, in the corridor that's currently seeing the largest number of crossings. Trump is expected to speak from a state park that has become a Republican symbol of defiance against the federal government's immigration enforcement practices.

In other words, the split screen moment couldn't possibly be more split, and each candidate is asking voters to side with his approach to immigration.

Among voters, worries about the nation's broken immigration system are rising on both sides of the political divide, which could be especially problematic for Biden.

According to an AP-NORC poll in January, the share of voters concerned about immigration rose to 35% from 27% last year. Fifty-five percent of Republicans say the government needs to focus on immigration in 2024, while 22% of Democrats listed immigration as a priority. That's up from 45% and 14%, respectively, from December 2022.

The number of people who are illegally crossing the U.S. border has been rising for years for complicated reasons that include climate change, war and unrest in other nations, the economy, and cartels that see migration as a cash cow.

The administration's approach has been to pair crackdowns at the border with increasing legal pathways for migrants designed to steer people into arriving by plane with sponsors, not illegally on foot to the border.

Arrests for illegal crossings fell by half in January, but there were record highs in December. The numbers of migrants flowing across the U.S.-Mexico border have far outpaced the capacity of an immigration system that has not been substantially updated in decades. Trump and Republicans claim Biden is refusing to act, but absent law change from Congress, any major policies are likely to be challenged or held up in court.

Trump this week said Biden was copying him by heading to the border, although the White House insisted the president's trip was quietly in the works before Trump's visit was announced.

"I finally found a way to get him down to the border," said Trump, who is again making immigration a centerpiece of his campaign. "We let it out that we're going on Thursday ... and all of a sudden, out of the blue, he announced he's going."

Unlike Trump, Biden has made few trips to the border. Since the president was last at the border a year ago, the debate over immigration in Washington has shifted further to the right. Democrats have become increasingly eager to embrace border restrictions now that migrants are sleeping in police stations and airplane hangars in major cities.

During bipartisan talks on an immigration deal that would have toughened access for migrants, Biden himself said he'd be willing to "shut down the border" right now, should the deal pass.

The talks looked promising for a while. But Trump, who didn't want to give Biden a political win on one of his signature campaign issues, convinced Republicans to kill the deal. House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., declared the deal dead on arrival.

Biden vowed to make sure everyone knew why.

"Every day, between now and November, the American people are gonna know that the only reason the border is not secure is Donald Trump and his MAGA Republican friends," Biden said earlier this month,

referring to the former president's Make America Great Again slogan.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said the president would meet with U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials, law enforcement officials, frontline personnel and local leaders during his trip to Texas.

Trump will speak from Shelby Park, an expanse along the Rio Grande owned by the city of Eagle Pass. It was taken over last month by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who then banned Border Patrol agents from operating there. The Biden administration sued, and the U.S. Supreme Court allowed federal agents to cut the razor wire encircling the park, but Abbott has since put more up in a defiant move that challenges federal authority.

While there, Trump is expected to lay out updated immigration proposals that would mark a dramatic escalation of the approach he used in office and that drew alarms from civil rights activists and numerous court challenges.

Some of those include reviving and expanding his controversial travel ban, imposing "ideological screening" for migrants, terminating all work permits and cutting off funding for shelter and transportation for people who are in the country illegally. He's also likely to bring up the killing of a 22-year-old nursing student in Georgia. The suspect is a Venezuelan migrant.

"The country can't survive this much longer," Trump said this week on Michigan's WFDF (910 AM), calling the suspect in the woman's death "an animal."

Trump claimed things were far better during his presidency and now "you have the worst border in history and the whole country's falling apart, and criminals are moving into our country by the millions. And I'll get it all stopped and I'll get it done fast."

Things to know about Idaho's botched execution of serial killer Thomas Eugene Creech

By REBECCA BOONE and GENE JOHNSON Associated Press

KUNA, Idaho (AP) — For nearly an hour, Thomas Eugene Creech lay strapped to a table in an Idaho execution chamber as medical team members poked and prodded at his arms and legs, hands and feet, trying to find a vein through which they could end his life.

After eight attempts Wednesday, the prison warden told them to give up. Creech, a 73-year-old serial killer who has been in prison for half a century, was returned to his cell — for how much longer, no one knows.

The botched lethal injection was the latest in a string of difficulties states have had carrying out such executions since Texas became the first state to use the method in 1982.

Here's a look at things to know about Creech's case and what comes next.

What happened?

Creech, one of the longest-serving death row inmates in the U.S., had a last meal of fried chicken and gravy Tuesday night. He was wheeled into the execution chamber at the Idaho Maximum Security Institution on a gurney at 10 a.m. Wednesday, where he was to die for one of his crimes: the 1981 beating death of a disabled fellow inmate who was serving time for car theft.

Three medical team members tried eight times to establish an IV, Department of Correction Director Josh Tewalt said. In some cases, they couldn't access the vein, and in others they could but had concerns about vein quality.

At one point, a medical team member left to gather more supplies. The warden announced they were halting their efforts at 10:58 a.m.

It's not clear why they had trouble. A variety of factors can affect the accessibility of someone's veins, including dehydration, stress, room temperature or physical characteristics. Creech's attorneys have said he suffers from several illnesses including Type 2 diabetes, hypertension and edema. Those illnesses could impact circulation and vein accessibility.

Medical experts also say the experience of the professional inserting an IV line can help determine whether the procedure is successful.

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The execution team was made up entirely of volunteers who, according to Idaho execution protocols, were required to have at least three years of medical experience, such as having been a paramedic. They were not necessarily doctors, who famously take an oath to "do no harm."

The identities and qualifications of the medical team members were kept secret. They wore white balaclava-style face coverings and navy scrub caps to conceal themselves.

What's next for Creech?

Creech's death warrant, issued by Fourth Judicial District Judge Jason Scott, said his execution had to be carried out by 11:59 p.m. on Wednesday. When the morning effort to execute him failed, his attorneys rushed to file a new request for a stay in federal court, before the state could try again, saying "the badly botched execution attempt" proves the department's "inability to carry out a humane and constitutional execution."

Tewalt, the correction director, quickly announced the state would not try again Wednesday, and the death warrant expired. The state will have to obtain another if it wants to carry out the execution.

"We don't have an idea of time frame or next steps at this point," Tewalt told a news conference.

Creech's attorneys were prepared to keep fighting for his life. The U.S. Supreme Court rejected their last-ditch appeals Wednesday morning.

"This is what happens when unknown individuals with unknown training are assigned to carry out an execution," the Federal Defender Services of Idaho said in a written statement.

Robert Weisberg, a law professor and the co-director of the Stanford Criminal Justice Center, said Creech's chances of convincing the Supreme Court justices that a second execution attempt would be cruel and unusual punishment are slim. The court ruled in 1947 that Louisiana could try again to execute a prisoner after an electric chair malfunctioned.

Creech's attorneys could argue that he has medical conditions that would make lethal injection execution impossible, and that further attempts would be torture, Weisberg said.

Does Idaho have other options?

A number of pharmaceutical companies in recent years have restricted sales of their drugs for use in executions, making access a challenge for states trying to carry out the death penalty. Before Idaho's last execution, in 2012, Tewalt — who was not yet the corrections department director — and a colleague flew to Tacoma, Washington, with more than \$15,000 in cash to buy the drugs from a pharmacist.

The trip was only revealed after University of Idaho professor Aliza Cover successfully sued for the information under the state public records act.

Against that backdrop, Idaho lawmakers passed a law authorizing execution by firing squad when lethal injection is not available. Prison officials have not yet written a standard operating policy for the use of firing squad, nor have they constructed a facility where a firing squad execution could occur. Both would have to happen before the state could attempt to use the new law, which would likely trigger several legal challenges.

Lawmakers also dramatically increased the secrecy about how the state obtains lethal injection drugs, and about the people or companies involved in supplying the drugs. The law requires that the identification of the execution team members be kept secret, and it prohibits the state's professional licensing boards from taking disciplinary action against a person who participated in an execution.

"It's really hard to know what went wrong here," said Robin M. Maher, the executive director of the Death Penalty Information Center. "That, to me, is the very best argument against these secrecy laws."

Creech's attorneys have argued that Idaho's refusal to say where it obtained the drug it planned to use on Wednesday violated his rights.

What's happened in other states?

Lethal injection is the main method of execution for the federal government and the 27 states that have the death penalty, including some that now have moratoriums on its use. But there have been some prominent examples of botched efforts.

Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey paused executions for several months to conduct an internal review after officials

called off the lethal injection of Kenneth Eugene Smith in November 2022 — the third time since 2018 Alabama had been unable to conduct executions due to problems with IV lines.

Smith in January became the first person to be put to death using nitrogen gas. He shook and convulsed for several minutes on the death chamber gurney during the execution. Idaho does not allow execution by nitrogen hypoxia.

In 2014, Oklahoma officials tried to halt a lethal injection when the prisoner, Clayton Lockett, began writhing after being declared unconscious. He died after 43 minutes; a review found his IV line came loose.

US adults fracture along party lines in support for Ukraine military funding, AP-NORC poll finds

By STEPHEN GROVES and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As Russia makes battlefield advances and Ukrainian soldiers run short on ammunition, U.S. adults have become fractured along party lines in their support for sending military aid to Kyiv, according to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Democrats are more likely to say the U.S. government is spending “too little” on funding for Ukraine than they were in November, but most Republicans remain convinced it’s “too much.” That divide is reflected in Congress, where the Democratic-held Senate — with help from 22 GOP senators — passed a \$95 billion package of aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan earlier this month. But the bill, which includes roughly \$60 billion in military support for Kyiv, has languished in the Republican-held House as Speaker Mike Johnson has so far refused to bring it up for a vote.

President Joe Biden, along with top Democrats and Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, passionately urged the Republican speaker during a White House meeting this week to take up the foreign aid package, but Johnson responded by saying that Congress “must take care of America’s needs first.”

Most Republicans still share Johnson’s view, and their opinions haven’t changed significantly since the fall: 55% say the U.S. is spending too much on Ukraine aid, compared to 59% in November.

Meanwhile, support for increasing Ukraine aid has grown among Democrats. About 4 in 10 Democrats say the U.S. is spending “too little” on aid to Ukraine in the war against Russia, up from 17% in November. The share of Democrats who say the U.S. is spending “too much” or “about the right amount” has also dropped over the same period.

Chloe Henninger, 24, a Democrat from West Hartford, Connecticut, was among those who said the U.S. is spending too little on aid to Ukraine. She said it was important for the U.S. to show commitment to democracies like Ukraine that are under siege.

“From a humanitarian point of view, there were sovereign borders agreed upon internationally. And then an autocratic power went and invaded a sovereign territory. The U.S., as one of the major military forces in the world, sort of has a duty to respond,” Henninger, who works as a cosmetic chemist, said.

The poll shows that two years after Russia’s initial invasion, the Ukraine war has become a partisan dividing line: Majorities of Democrats think it’s extremely or very important to prevent Russia from seizing more Ukrainian territory, to negotiate a permanent ceasefire between the two countries, help Ukraine regain its land and provide general aid to its military, while less than half of Republicans and Independents agree.

Biden and Democratic leaders in Congress have cast the conflict in Ukraine — the largest land invasion in Europe since World War II — as a potential turning point in history. Failing to repel Russian President Vladimir Putin’s assault, they warn, would have grave consequences, from destabilizing the rest of Europe to emboldening other potential foes such as China and North Korea.

At the same time, Donald Trump, the former president who appears to be marching towards the Republican nomination, has injected serious doubts about America’s involvement in Ukraine and the rest of the world. While McConnell, the top Republican in the Senate, has remained a strong advocate of robust American involvement abroad, Trump has swayed the party towards an isolationist stance, as well as at times heaped admiration on Putin’s strongman style of rule.

“We’re throwing all this taxpayer money to Ukraine and to Israel, and we can’t even take care of our

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own people," said Jeffrey Jackson, a 55-year-old Republican from Granbury, Texas. "The U.S. government needs to take care of our own people and then worry about the rest of the world later."

Jackson also holds deeply unfavorable views of Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. And while Jackson said he was not "pro-Putin," he liked the way Putin has led Russia more than how Biden has led the U.S.

Putin is broadly unpopular among U.S. adults, including Republicans. About 8 in 10 U.S. adults have an unfavorable opinion of Putin, including nearly 9 in 10 Democrats and three-quarters of Republicans. Views of Zelenskyy are more reflective of the divisions over the war itself. About 4 in 10 U.S. adults have a favorable opinion of Zelenskyy, with Democrats having a more positive view than Republicans.

Trump has also cast doubt on whether he would uphold commitments to defend fellow NATO countries if he became president again. Jackson agreed with that sentiment, saying he would like to see NATO dismantled.

However, a majority of U.S. adults – including 52% of Republicans – support the spirit of Article V of the NATO military alliance, that an attack on one NATO country represents an attack on all. Nearly 6 in 10 adults say they would favor the U.S. deploying U.S. troops to defend a U.S. NATO ally if it were attacked by Russian forces.

Still, when it comes to Ukraine, partisan divisions persist even on questions about basic diplomacy. For example, around 4 in 10 Republicans say that negotiating a permanent ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine should be an extremely or very important foreign policy goal for the U.S., compared to about 6 in 10 Democrats. Overall, half of adults say it's highly important for the U.S. to focus on stopping Russia from gaining more territory in Ukraine.

Six in 10 adults continue to support imposing economic sanctions on Russia. And half favor providing weapons.

Chris Bahr, a 41-year-old from Houston, Texas, who described himself as libertarian politically, said he liked the fact that most of the funding for Ukraine would be spent on U.S.-made weapons. He wanted Congress to approve the aid package "as soon as possible."

"It helps another allied country defend itself and helps America economically — getting rid of a lot of our older weapons as we're ordering new stuff," Bahr said. "I think it would save lives in the long run just to not let Russia become expansionist again."

The poll of 1,161 adults was conducted Feb. 13–18, 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 3.8 percentage points.

Wildfire grows into one of largest in Texas history as flames menace multiple small towns

By SEAN MURPHY and JIM VERTUNO Associated Press

CANADIAN, Texas (AP) — A cluster of wildfires scorched the Texas Panhandle on Wednesday, including a blaze that grew into one of the largest in state history, as flames moved with alarming speed and blackened the landscape across a vast stretch of small towns and cattle ranches.

An 83-year-old grandmother from the tiny town of Stinnett was the lone confirmed fatality. However, authorities have yet to make a thorough search for victims and have warned the damage to some communities is extensive.

Known as the Smokehouse Creek Fire, the largest blaze expanded to more than 1,300 square miles (3,370 square kilometers) and jumped into parts of neighboring Oklahoma. It is now larger than the state of Rhode Island, and the Texas A&M Forest Service said the flames were only about 3% contained.

"I believe the fire will grow before it gets fully contained," said Nim Kidd, chief of the Texas Division of Emergency Management.

The largest fire recorded in state history was the 2006 East Amarillo Complex fire, which burned about

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1,400 square miles (3,630 square kilometers) and resulted in 13 deaths.

Walls of flames were pushed by powerful winds while huge plumes of smoke billowed hundreds of feet in the air across the sparsely populated region. The smoke delayed aerial surveillance of the damage in some areas.

"There was one point where we couldn't see anything," said Greg Downey, 57, describing his escape as flames bore down on his neighborhood. "I didn't think we'd get out of it."

The woman who died was identified by family members as Joyce Blankenship, a former substitute teacher. Her grandson, Lee Quesada, said he had posted in a community forum asking if anyone could try and locate her. Quesada said deputies told his uncle on Wednesday that they had found Blankenship's remains in her burned home.

Quesada said she'd surprise him at times with funny little stories "about her more ornery days."

"Just talking to her was a joy," he said, adding that "Joy" was a nickname of hers.

Hemphill County Emergency Management Coordinator Bill Kendall described the charred terrain as being "like a moonscape. ... It's just all gone."

Kendall said about 40 homes were burned around the perimeter of the town of Canadian, but no buildings were lost inside the community. Kendall also said he saw "hundreds of cattle just dead, laying in the fields."

Tresea Rankin videotaped her own home in Canadian as it burned.

"Thirty-eight years of memories, that's what you were thinking," Rankin said of watching the flames destroy her house. "Two of my kids were married there ... But you know, it's OK, the memories won't go away."

The small town of Fritch, north of Amarillo, lost hundreds of homes in a 2014 fire and appeared to be hit hard again. Mayor Tom Ray said Wednesday that an estimated 40-50 homes were destroyed on the southern edge. Ray said natural gas remained shut off for the town of 2,200.

Residents are probably not "prepared for what they're going to see if they pull into town," Hutchinson County Emergency Management spokesperson Deidra Thomas said in a social media livestream. She compared the damage to a tornado.

Authorities have not said what ignited the fires, but strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm temperatures fed the blazes. Near Borger, a community of about 13,000 people, emergency officials at one point late Tuesday answered questions from panicked residents on Facebook and told them to get ready to leave if they had not already.

"It was like a ring of fire around Borger. There was no way out ... all four main roads were closed," said Adrianna Hill, whose home was within about a mile of the fire. She said wind that blew the fire in the opposite direction "saved our butts."

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott issued a disaster declaration for 60 counties. The encroaching flames caused the main facility that disassembles America's nuclear arsenal to pause operations Tuesday night, but it was open for normal work Wednesday.

The weather forecast provided some hope for firefighters — cooler temperatures, less wind and possibly rain on Thursday. However, the situation was dire in some areas Wednesday.

Sustained winds of up to 45 mph (72 kph), with gusts of up to 70 mph (113 kph), caused the fires that were spreading east to turn south, threatening new areas, forecasters said. But winds calmed down after a cold front came through Tuesday evening, said Peter Vanden Bosch, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Amarillo.

Breezy conditions were expected again Friday, and fire-friendly weather could return by the weekend, Vanden Bosch said Wednesday.

Kidd said the weekend forecast and "sheer size and scope" of the blaze are the biggest challenges for firefighters.

"I don't want the community there to feel a false sense of security that all these fires will not grow anymore," Kidd said. "This is still a very dynamic situation."

As evacuation orders mounted Tuesday, county and city officials implored residents to turn on emergency alert services on their cellphones and be ready to leave immediately.

"We got a great response from the community when they were asked to evacuate. They did," Kidd said. "We believe that saved lives, and we don't want people going back if the evacuation orders are still in place."

The Pantex nuclear weapon plant, northeast of Amarillo, evacuated nonessential staff Tuesday night out of an "abundance of caution," said Laef Pendergraft, a spokesperson for the National Nuclear Security Administration's production office at Pantex. Firefighters remained in case of an emergency.

Pantex tweeted early Wednesday that the facility was "open for normal day shift operations."

The Smokehouse Creek Fire spread from Texas into neighboring Roger Mills County in western Oklahoma, where officials encouraged people in the Durham area to flee. At least 13 homes burned in fires in the state's Panhandle region, officials said Wednesday.

The weather service also issued red-flag warnings and fire-danger alerts for several other states through the midsection of the country.

Judge orders Trump off Illinois primary ballot but puts ruling on hold

CHICAGO (AP) — A Cook County judge ruled the Illinois State Board of Elections must take former President Donald Trump's name off the state's March 19 primary ballot Wednesday. But she placed her order on hold until Friday to allow an appeal.

Judge Tracie Porter issued her decision after a group of voters trying to remove Trump's name from the primary ballot over the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol sued to counter the election board's unanimous rejection of its effort. The five voters argued Trump is ineligible to hold office because he encouraged and did little to stop the Capitol riot.

The case is one of dozens of lawsuits filed to remove Trump from the ballot, arguing he is ineligible due to a rarely used clause in the 14th Amendment prohibiting those who "engaged in insurrection" from holding office. The U.S. Supreme Court earlier this month signaled that it is likely to reject this strategy when it heard an appeal of a Colorado ruling removing Trump from the ballot there. Like the Illinois decision, that Colorado ruling is on hold until the appeal is finished.

Porter, in her 38-page ruling, wrote the petition by the group of voters should have been granted because they had met their burden and the Election Board's decision was "clearly erroneous."

"This is a historic victory," said Ron Fein, Legal Director of Free Speech For People, co-lead counsel in the case. "Every court or official that has addressed the merits of Trump's constitutional eligibility has found that he engaged in insurrection after taking the oath of office and is therefore disqualified from the presidency."

Trump campaign spokesman Steven Cheung issued a statement saying "an activist Democrat judge in Illinois summarily overruled the state's board of elections and contradicted earlier decisions from dozens of other state and federal jurisdictions. This is an unconstitutional ruling that we will quickly appeal."

Porter said her order would be put on hold if the Supreme Court's ruling is ultimately "inconsistent" with hers.

Climate change, cost and competition for water drive settlement over tribal rights to Colorado River

By FELICIA FONSECA and SUMAN NAISHADHAM Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — A Native American tribe with one of the largest outstanding claims to water in the Colorado River basin is closing in on a settlement with more than a dozen parties, putting it on a path to piping water to tens of thousands of tribal members in Arizona who still live without it.

Negotiating terms outlined late Wednesday include water rights not only for the Navajo Nation but the neighboring Hopi and San Juan Southern Paiute tribes in the northeastern corner of the state. The water would come from a mix of sources: the Colorado River that serves seven western states, the Little Colorado River, and aquifers and washes on tribal lands.

The agreement is decades in the making and would allow the tribes to avoid further litigation and court

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proceedings, which have been costly. Navajo officials said they expect to finalize the terms in the coming days.

From there, it must be approved by the tribe's governing bodies, the state of Arizona, the other parties and by Congress.

"We have the right Congress, we have the right president, and it's very hopeful," Navajo President Buu Nygren told The Associated Press on Wednesday. "Because next year might be a whole different ballgame. It's going to be very uncertain."

The proposal comes as Native American tribes, states in the Colorado River basin and Mexico are working on a long-term plan to share a diminishing water source that has served 40 million people. Tribes, including the Navajo Nation, were left out of a landmark 1922 treaty that divided the water in the basin among seven states.

The Navajo Nation has long argued that states treat the tribe as an afterthought. Any settlement reached would be separate from that long-term plan and stand on its own.

About one-third of the homes on the Navajo Nation do not have running water. Infrastructure projects outlined by the Navajo Nation include a \$1.7 billion pipeline to deliver water from Lake Powell to tribal communities. The caveat being that there is no guarantee that Congress will provide the funding.

Both the Navajo and Hopi tribes are seeking the ability to lease water and to store it in existing or new reservoirs and impoundments.

"Some of our families that still live within those communities still have to haul water to cook their food, to make lemonade in the summer for their kids, to make ice, all little simple things to make your daily life easy and convenient," Navajo Nation Council Speaker Crystalyne Curley said.

On Wednesday, the Navajo Nation cited climate change, cost, competition for water and the coronavirus pandemic as reasons to move toward a settlement. Arizona, in turn, would benefit by having certainty over the amount of water that is available to non-tribal users. The state has had to cut its use of Colorado River water in recent years because of drought and demand.

Tom Buschatzke, director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources, said Wednesday that while progress is being made on a settlement with the Navajo Nation, the agreement isn't complete.

Sarah Langley, a spokeswoman for Flagstaff, the largest city that is a party to the settlement, said it is hopeful the negotiations are productive.

Arizona — situated in the Colorado River's Lower Basin with California, Nevada and Mexico — is unique in that it also has an allocation in the Upper Basin. Under the settlement terms, Navajo and Hopi would get about 47,000 acre-feet in the Upper Basin — nearly the entire amount that was set aside for use at the Navajo Generating Station, a coal-fired power plant on the Navajo reservation that shut down in late 2019.

The proposal also includes about 9,500 acre-feet per year of lower-priority water from the Lower Basin for both tribes. An acre-foot of water is roughly enough to serve two to three U.S. households annually.

While the specific terms for the San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe remain under discussion, Congress could be asked to establish a small reservation for the tribe whose ancestral land lies in Utah and Arizona. The tribe's president, Robbin Preston Jr., didn't immediately respond to emailed questions from the AP.

The Hopi Tribe's general counsel, Fred Lomayesva, declined to comment.

The Navajo Nation, whose 27,000 square-mile (70,000 square-kilometer) reservation also stretches into New Mexico and Utah, already has settled its claims to the Colorado River basin there.

The Navajo and Hopi tribes came close to reaching a pact with Arizona to settle water rights in 2012. Both tribes rejected federal legislation that accompanied it, and the tentative deal fell through. It also wasn't broadly supported by Navajos and Hopis who saw negotiations as secretive, leading to a loose effort to recall then-Navajo President Ben Shelly and then-Hopi Chairman LeRoy Shingoitewa.

Recently, the Navajo Nation Water Rights Commission has been holding public hearings across the reservation to ensure tribal members are aware of what is involved in a settlement and why the tribe pursued it, tribal officials said.

"We have a united front to our chapters, our schools and even our small businesses, families," Curley

said. "It's inclusive of everyone. Everybody should be able to know what the terms are."

The federal government in recent years has poured money into tribal water rights settlements. The U.S. Supreme Court also ruled the government does not have a treaty duty to take affirmative steps to secure water for the Navajo Nation, complicating the tribe's fight for water.

Biden 'continues to be fit for duty,' his doctor says, after president undergoes annual physical

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

BETHESDA, Md. (AP) — President Joe Biden "continues to be fit for duty," his doctor wrote Wednesday after conducting an annual physical that is being closely watched as the 81-year-old seeks reelection in November.

Dr. Kevin O'Connor, Biden's physician, wrote that the president is adjusting well to a new device that helps control his sleep apnea and has experienced some hip discomfort but also works out five times per week.

"President Biden is a healthy, active, robust, 81-year-old male who remains fit to successfully execute the duties of the presidency," O'Connor said in a six-page memo on the president's health, following a physical that took Biden to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for more than 2 1/2 hours.

His memo added that Biden "feels well and this year's physical identifies no new concerns."

The oldest president in U.S. history, Biden would be 86 by the end of a second term, should he win one. His latest physical mirrored one he had in February last year when O'Connor described Biden as "healthy, vigorous" and "fit" to handle his White House duties.

Still, voters are approaching this year's election with misgivings about Biden's age, having scrutinized his gaffes, his coughing, his slow walking and even a tumble off his bicycle.

After he returned to the White House on Wednesday, Biden attended an event on combating crime and suggested that when it came to his health "everything is squared away" and "there is nothing different than last year."

He also joked about his age and people thinking "I look too young."

Former President Donald Trump, 77, is the favorite to lock up the Republican nomination later this month, which would bring him closer to a November rematch against Biden. Trump was 70 when he took office in 2017, which made him the oldest American president to be inaugurated — until Biden broke his record by being inaugurated at 78 in 2021.

O'Connor's report said that Biden's stiff walking was no worse than last year and was the result of arthritic changes in his spine. He said the president also noted "some increased left hip discomfort." There were no signs of stroke, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's or other similar conditions in what the report called an "extremely detailed neurologic exam."

Biden, last summer, began using a continuous positive airway pressure, or CPAP, machine at night to help with sleep apnea, and O'Connor wrote that the president had responded well to that treatment and is "diligently compliant" about using it.

A recent special counsel's report on the investigation into Biden's handling of classified documents repeatedly derided Biden's memory, calling it "hazy," "fuzzy," "faulty," "poor" and having "significant limitations." It also 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.

Still, addressing reporters the evening of the report's release, Biden said "my memory is fine" and grew visibly angry as he denied forgetting when his son died of brain cancer in 2015 at the age of 46.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said that O'Connor was one of a team of 20 different medical specialists who helped complete the physical.

Asked why Biden wasn't undergoing a cognitive test as part of the physical, Jean-Pierre said that O'Connor and Biden's neurologist "don't believe he needs one."

"He passes a cognitive test every day, every day as he moves from one topic to another topic, understanding the granular level of these topics," Jean-Pierre said, noting that Biden tackled such diverse issues

as Wednesday's crime prevention event before his planned trip to the U.S.-Mexico border on Thursday and next week's State of the Union address.

"This is a very rigorous job," she added.

That picture of the president doesn't reflect the type of struggles with routine tasks that might indicate the need for further tests, said Dr. Michael Rosenbloom, a neurologist at the University of Washington School of Medicine.

"Constantly questioning older folks who may have an occasional lapse is a form of ageism," Rosenbloom said.

From sleep apnea to arthritis, Biden's health report "seems pretty run of the mill for an 81-year-old person," said Dr. Jeffrey A. Linder, chief of general internal medicine at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine.

"His doctors are in a unique position to assess his cognitive ability on a daily basis," Linder said. "These doctors are able to see how he's functioning day to day. That's much more useful" than a cognitive assessment.

Many Americans, including Democrats, have expressed reservations about Biden seeking a second term during this fall's election. Only 37% of Democrats say Biden should pursue reelection, down from 52% before the 2022 midterm elections, according to a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Biden counters that his age brings wisdom, and he has begun to criticize Trump for the former president's recent public gaffes.

The president joked that his age was classified information and suggested during a taping in New York on Monday of "Late Night With Seth Meyers" that Trump mistakenly called his wife Melania, "Mercedes" during a weekend speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference -- though the Trump campaign says he was correctly referring to political commentator Mercedes Schlapp.

Trump has indeed had his share of verbal miscues, mixing up the city and state where he was campaigning, calling Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán the leader of Turkey and repeatedly mispronouncing the militant group Hamas as "hummus." More recently, he confused his Republican primary rival Nikki Haley with former Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

While he was president, Trump's annual physical in 2019 revealed that he had gained weight and was up to 243 pounds. With his 6-foot, 3-inch frame, that meant Trump's Body Mass Index was 30.4. An index rating of 30 is the level at which doctors consider someone obese under this commonly used formula.

Wednesday's report listed Biden as 6-foot tall and weighing 178 pounds.

Hunter Biden in defiant deposition blasts GOP, insists he did not involve his father in business

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hunter Biden was defiant Wednesday in a closed-door deposition on Capitol Hill, blasting a Republican impeachment inquiry into his father and the family's business affairs as a "house of cards" built on "lies" as he faced a battery of probing questions from lawmakers.

"For more than a year, your Committees have hunted me in your partisan political pursuit of my dad," Hunter Biden said in an opening statement obtained by The Associated Press. He accused Republicans of trafficking in "innuendo, distortion, and sensationalism" and insisted, "I did not involve my father in my business."

After the nearly seven-hour deposition wrapped, an attorney for the president's son told reporters that during the testimony Republicans "produced no evidence that would do anything to support the notion that there was any financial transactions that involved Hunter with his father. Period."

He added, "It seems to me that the Republican members wanted to spend more time talking about my client's addiction than they could ask any question that had anything to do with what they call their impeachment inquiry." The White House echoed their sentiments, with press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre

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saying its the probe is a "stunt" that has "dragged on for months and months."

But GOP lawmakers remained undeterred by Hunter Biden and his counsel's repudiation of their investigation. Rep. James Comer, one of the GOP chairmen leading the inquiry, came out late Wednesday to declare that it was a "great deposition," and said it helped back several pieces of evidence they've gathered thus far.

"But there are also some contradictory statements that I think need further review," the Kentucky Republican said, adding that the next forum for that will be a public hearing with Hunter Biden at a future date.

The deposition of President Joe Biden's son marked a decisive point for the 14-month Republican investigation into the Biden family. The probe has centered on Hunter Biden and his overseas work for clients in Ukraine, China, Romania and other countries. Republicans have long questioned whether those business dealings involved corruption and influence peddling by President Biden, particularly when he was vice president.

Yet after conducting dozens of interviews and obtaining more than 100,000 pages of documents, Republicans have yet to produce direct evidence of misconduct by the president. Meanwhile, an FBI informant who alleged a bribery scheme involving the Bidens — a claim Republicans had cited repeatedly to justify their probe — is facing charges from federal prosecutors who accuse him of fabricating the story.

Many expected Hunter Biden, who is currently under federal investigation, to spend the duration of the deposition asserting his Fifth Amendment rights. But the 54-year-old facing an indictment on nine federal tax charges and a firearm charge in Delaware did not assert those rights a single time throughout the grueling, hourslong session.

Instead, the few Republicans who spoke to reporters Wednesday said that Hunter Biden provided testimony that was "defiant and dishonest."

The majority of GOP lawmakers remained quiet as the deposition dragged into the afternoon, with Rep. Jim Jordan, the other Republican chairmen leading the inquiry, declining to answer reporters' questions in the hallways. He cited the sensitivity of a private deposition and said the release of the public transcript would speak for itself.

Democrats on the Oversight and Judiciary Committees came out several times to denounce the deposition, calling it an "embarrassing spectacle where the Republicans continued to belabor completely trivial points."

"This thing is over. A referee would stop the fight if this was a boxing match. A coroner would pronounce this thing dead," Rep. Eric Swalwell, D-Calif., said about the ongoing impeachment inquiry.

He added that Hunter Biden had "leaned in" and had not been afraid to answer any of the questions. "In fact, he's challenged a number of Republicans about their baseless theories," Swalwell said.

The task of interviewing Hunter fell primarily to Comer and Jordan. They first subpoenaed Hunter Biden in November, demanding that he appear before lawmakers in a private setting. Biden and his attorneys refused, warning that his testimony could be selectively leaked and manipulated. They insisted that he would only testify in public.

On the day of the subpoena, Hunter Biden not only snubbed lawmakers waiting for him in a hearing room — he did so while appearing right outside the Capitol, holding a press conference where he denounced the investigation into his family.

Both sides ultimately agreed in January to a private deposition with a set of conditions. The interview with Hunter Biden was not filmed and Republicans have agreed to quickly release the transcript.

Hunter is the second member of the Biden family questioned by Republicans in recent days. They conducted a more than eight-hour interview last week with James Biden, the president's brother. He insisted to lawmakers that Joe Biden has "never had any involvement," financially or otherwise, in his business ventures.

Looming large over the interview are developments on the other side of the country in Nevada, where federal prosecutors this month indicted an FBI informant, Alexander Smirnov, who claimed there was a multimillion-dollar bribery scheme involving the president, his son Hunter and a Ukrainian energy company. Prosecutors in court documents assert that Smirnov has had "extensive and extremely recent" contact with people who are aligned with Russian intelligence.

Smirnov's attorneys have said he is presumed innocent.

Republicans pressed the FBI last summer over the informant's claims, demanding to see the underlying documents and ultimately releasing the unverified information to the public. The claim was cited repeatedly in letters that House Republicans sent to impeachment witnesses.

Many GOP lawmakers say they have yet to see evidence of the "high crimes and misdemeanors" required for impeachment, despite alleged efforts by members of the Biden family to leverage the last name into corporate paydays domestically and abroad.

But Comer and Jordan remain unmoved by the series of setbacks to their marquee investigation. Jordan, who is the chair of the House Judiciary Committee, said last week that the informant's indictment "does not change the fundamental facts" that the Biden family tried to benefit off the family name in several overseas businesses. And Comer told Fox News on Tuesday that Smirnov was never "a key part of this investigation."

Meanwhile, Hunter Biden has no shortage of legal headaches off Capitol Hill as he faces criminal charges in two states from a special counsel investigation. He's charged with firearm counts in Delaware, alleging he broke laws against drug users having guns in 2018, a period when he has acknowledged struggling with addiction. Special counsel David Weiss filed additional charges late last year, alleging he failed to pay about \$1.4 million in taxes over three years.

He has pleaded not guilty in both cases.

Appellate judge refuses to halt Trump's \$454 million fraud penalty while he appeals

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A New York appellate judge on Wednesday refused to halt collection of Donald Trump's \$454 million civil fraud penalty while he appeals, leaving the former president less than a month to pay the staggering sum or secure a bond covering the full amount he owes.

Judge Anil Singh of the state's mid-level appeals court rejected Trump's offer of a \$100 million bond, though he did give Trump leeway that could help him secure the necessary bond before New York Attorney General Letitia James seeks to enforce the judgment starting March 25.

Singh granted a stay pausing part of Judge Arthur Engoron's Feb. 16 verdict that barred Trump, his company and co-defendants from borrowing money from New York financial institutions. The Republican presidential front-runner's lawyers had told the appellate court earlier Wednesday that the lending ban had made it impossible for him to secure a bond for the full amount.

Trump's lawyers warned he may need to sell some properties to cover the penalty and would have no way of getting them back if he is successful in his appeal. State lawyers said those disclosures suggested Trump — who has more than a half-billion dollars in pending court debt — was having trouble coming up with enough cash to foot the bill. The penalty is increasing by nearly \$112,000 each day because of interest and will eclipse \$455 million on Saturday.

Trump's lawyers proposed their smaller bond amount in court papers asking the appellate court for an order preventing James' office from enforcing the judgment while his appeal plays out. Singh, sitting in the Appellate Division of the state's trial court, ruled after an emergency hearing Wednesday.

Singh's decision is temporary. A five-judge appellate panel will consider Trump's request on an expedited basis, with a ruling expected in a few weeks. State lawyers must submit paperwork by March 11. Trump's lawyers have until March 18 to respond.

In all, Trump and his co-defendants owe more than \$465 million to the state. They have until March 25 to secure a stay — a legal mechanism pausing collection while he appeals the underlying verdict — before they are forced to pay the penalty or risk having assets seized. Posting a bond in the full amount would trigger an automatic stay.

"The exorbitant and punitive amount of the judgment coupled with an unlawful and unconstitutional blanket prohibition on lending transactions would make it impossible to secure and post a complete bond,"

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Trump lawyers Clifford Robert, Alina Habba and Michael Farina wrote in court papers detailing the \$100 million bond offer.

James' office opposed Trump's plan, saying his lawyers have all but conceded he has "insufficient liquid assets to satisfy the judgment."

"These are precisely the circumstances for which a full bond or deposit is necessary," Senior Assistant Solicitor General Dennis Fan wrote, saying Trump's offer would leave James' office and the state "with substantial shortfalls" if the verdict is upheld.

"A prevailing plaintiff is entitled to have her award secured, and defendants have never demonstrated that Mr. Trump's liquid assets could satisfy the full amount of the judgment," Fan wrote.

James, a Democrat, has said that she will seek to seize some of Trump's assets if he's unable to pay the judgment.

Engoron found that Trump, his company and top executives, including his sons Eric and Donald Trump Jr., schemed for years to deceive banks and insurers by inflating his wealth on financial statements used to secure loans and make deals.

Paperwork making the judgment official was filed on Feb. 23. That started a 30-day window for Trump to pay up or file an appeal and seek a stay.

Also Wednesday, white powder was found in an envelope addressed to Engoron at his Manhattan courthouse. Officials said preliminary testing showed it was negative for hazardous substances and no injuries were reported.

Trump filed his appeal on Monday. In their notices of appeal, his lawyers said they want the appellate court to decide whether Engoron "committed errors of law and/or fact" and whether he abused his discretion or "acted in excess" of his jurisdiction.

Trump wasn't required to pay his penalty or post a bond in order to appeal, and filing the appeal did not automatically halt enforcement of the judgment.

Trump would receive an automatic stay if he were to put up money, assets or an appeal bond covering what he owes. He also had the option to ask the appeals court to grant a stay with a bond for a lower amount — a gambit rejected Wednesday.

Trump's lawyers argued that his vast real estate assets and oversight mandated by Engoron's ruling, including supervision of his company by an independent monitor, "would alone be sufficient to adequately secure any judgment affirmed."

The \$100 million bond, they said, "would simply serve as further security."

Trump's lawyers did not ask to pause the monitor's oversight, but Singh did halt some other sanctions affecting the Trump Organization, at least temporarily.

The appellate judge paused Engoron's two-year ban on Eric and Donald Trump Jr. holding executive positions in New York corporations, meaning they can continue running the company. He also paused a similar three-year ban that applied to Trump, but said the company must move forward with hiring an independent compliance director to ensure it follows financial reporting obligations and rules.

Trump maintains that he is worth several billion dollars and testified last year that he had about \$400 million in cash, in addition to properties and other investments, but his legal bills are piling up.

In all, Trump has at least \$543.4 million in personal legal liabilities from Engoron's ruling and two other civil court judgments in the last year.

In January, a jury ordered Trump to pay \$83.3 million to writer E. Jean Carroll for defaming her after she accused him in 2019 of sexually assaulting her in the 1990s. Trump was also ordered to pay Carroll \$5 million a jury awarded Carroll in a related trial last year. He denies the allegations.

Idaho halts execution by lethal injection after 8 failed attempts to insert IV line

By REBECCA BOONE Associated Press

KUNA, Idaho (AP) — Idaho halted the execution of serial killer Thomas Eugene Creech on Wednesday after medical team members repeatedly failed to find a vein where they could establish an intravenous line to carry out the lethal injection.

Creech, 73, has been in prison half a century, convicted of five murders in three states and suspected of several more. He was already serving a life term when he beat a fellow inmate, 22-year-old David Dale Jensen, to death in 1981 — the crime for which he was to be executed.

Creech, one of the longest-serving death row inmates in the U.S., was wheeled into the execution chamber at the Idaho Maximum Security Institution on a gurney at 10 a.m.

Three medical team members tried eight times to establish an IV, Department of Correction Director Josh Tewalt told a news conference afterward. In some cases, they couldn't access the vein, and in others they could but had concerns about vein quality. They attempted sites in his arms, legs, hands and feet. At one point, a medical team member left to gather more supplies.

The warden announced he was halting the execution at 10:58 a.m.

The corrections department said its death warrant for Creech would expire, and that it was considering next steps. While other medical procedures might allow for the execution, the state is mindful of the 8th Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment, Tewalt said.

Creech's attorneys immediately filed a new motion for a stay in U.S. District Court, saying "the badly botched execution attempt" proves the department's "inability to carry out a humane and constitutional execution." The court granted the stay after Idaho confirmed it would not try again to execute him before the death warrant expired; the state will have to obtain another warrant if it wants to carry out the execution.

"This is what happens when unknown individuals with unknown training are assigned to carry out an execution," the Federal Defender Services of Idaho said in a written statement. "This is precisely the kind of mishap we warned the State and the Courts could happen when attempting to execute one of the country's oldest death-row inmates."

Six Idaho officials, including Attorney General Raul Labrador, and four news media representatives, including an Associated Press reporter, were on hand to witness the attempt — which was to be Idaho's first execution in 12 years.

The execution team was made up entirely of volunteers, the corrections department said. Those tasked with inserting the IVs and administering the lethal drug had medical training, but their identities were kept secret. They wore white balaclava-style face coverings and navy scrub caps to conceal their faces.

With each attempt to insert an IV, the medical team cleaned the skin with alcohol, injected a numbing solution, cleaned the skin again and then attempted to place the IV catheter. Each attempt took several minutes, with medical team members palpating the skin and trying to position the needles.

Creech frequently looked toward his family members and representatives, who were sitting in a separate witness room. His arms were strapped to the table, but he often extended his fingers toward them.

He appeared to mouth "I love you" to someone in the room on occasion.

After the execution was halted, the warden approached Creech and whispered to him for several minutes, giving his arm a squeeze.

A few hours afterward, Labrador released a statement saying that "justice had been delayed again."

"Our duty is to seek justice for the many victims and their families who experienced the brutality and senselessness of his actions," the attorney general wrote.

Creech's attorneys filed a flurry of late appeals hoping to forestall his execution. They included claims that his clemency hearing was unfair, that it was unconstitutional to kill him because he was sentenced by a judge rather than a jury — and that the state had not provided enough information about how it obtained the lethal drug, pentobarbital, or how it was to be administered.

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But the courts found no grounds for leniency. Creech's last chance — a petition to the U.S. Supreme Court — was denied a few hours before the scheduled execution Wednesday.

On Tuesday night, Creech spent time with his wife and ate a last meal including fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy and ice cream.

A group of about 15 protesters gathered outside the prison Wednesday, at one point singing "Amazing Grace."

An Ohio native, Creech has spent most of his life behind bars in Idaho. He was acquitted of a killing in Tucson, Arizona, in 1973 — authorities nevertheless believe he did it, as he used the victim's credit card to travel to Oregon. He was later convicted of a 1974 killing in Oregon and one in California, where he traveled after earning a weekend pass from a psychiatric hospital.

Later that year, Creech was arrested in Idaho after killing John Wayne Bradford and Edward Thomas Arnold, two house painters who had picked him and his girlfriend up while they were hitchhiking.

He was serving a life sentence for those murders in 1981 when he beat Jensen to death. Jensen was disabled and serving time for car theft.

Jensen's family members described him during Creech's clemency hearing last month as a gentle soul who loved hunting and being outdoors. Jensen's daughter was 4 years old when he died, and she spoke about how painful it was to grow up without a father.

Creech's supporters say he is a deeply changed man. Several years ago he married the mother of a correctional officer, and former prison staffers said he was known for writing poetry and expressing gratitude for their work.

During his clemency hearing, Ada County Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Jill Longhorst did not dispute that Creech can be charming. But she said he is nevertheless a psychopath — lacking remorse and empathy.

Last year, Idaho lawmakers passed a law authorizing execution by firing squad when lethal injection is not available. Prison officials have not yet written a standard operating policy for the use of firing squad, nor have they constructed a facility where a firing squad execution could occur. Both would have to happen before the state could attempt to use the new law, which would likely trigger several legal challenges.

Other states have also had trouble carrying out lethal injections.

Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey paused executions for several months to conduct an internal review after officials called off the lethal injection of Kenneth Eugene Smith in November 2022 — the third time since 2018 Alabama had been unable to conduct executions due to problems with IV lines.

Smith in January became the first person to be put to death using nitrogen gas. He shook and convulsed for several minutes on the death chamber gurney during the execution. Idaho does not allow execution by nitrogen hypoxia.

In 2014, Oklahoma officials tried to halt a lethal injection when the prisoner, Clayton Lockett, began writhing after being declared unconscious. He died after 43 minutes; a review found his IV line came loose.

Canada will reimpose some visa requirements on Mexicans, official says

By ROB GILLIES Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — Canada's government is reimposing some visa requirements on Mexican nationals visiting Canada, an official familiar with the matter told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

Quebec's premier has been urging the federal government to slow the influx of refugees which he says has been straining resources.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak ahead of the Thursday announcement. The official said the new rules will take effect late Thursday and they won't mean a complete return to pre-2016 rules. Canada's immigration minister is expected to announce details.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government lifted the visa requirement for Mexican visitors in late 2016, removing a major irritant in relations between the two countries.

But Canadian Immigration Minister Mac Miller has said asylum claims from Mexico have shot up since Canada lifted the visa restriction in 2016. Canada getting rid of visa free travel from Mexico is also expected

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to reduce the number of illegal crossings of Mexicans into the U.S. from Canada.

In 2023, Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board had 17,490 claims from Mexico, making up 19% of claims referred that year. A year prior, the number was 7,483 making up 12% of claims.

Previously, refugee service providers in Montreal have said that Mexican families are fleeing violence, insecurity and a lack of jobs in Mexico.

Canada only grants asylum to people it believes cannot safely live in any part of their home country because officials are unable or unwilling to provide those conditions.

During his daily press briefing Wednesday morning, Mexico President Andrés Manuel López Obrador suggested Canada was going to announce actions when he took a reporter's question about potential U.S. tariffs on Mexican steel exports and launched into a rambling complaint about a lack of respect coming from Mexico's North American neighbors.

The president said that conservative forces in Mexico had been lobbying in the United States and Canada for actions that would reflect poorly on his administration. He mentioned U.S. complaints about fentanyl production in Mexico and assertions by both the U.S. and Canada that Mexico was not doing its part to control immigration flows.

"The immigration issue, it's Mexico's fault," López Obrador mocked. "We're going to build a wall and that's how we'll solve the problem. We're going to militarize the border and that's how we'll solve the problem."

"And now Canada is doing the same, they're wanting to take measures against Mexico; we really regret it," López Obrador said. "They're negotiating to reach an agreement, that we can control the migration flows to Canada, as we always have. And we have acted generously toward them, with the administration of Prime Minister Trudeau, but they were already at the point of imposing unilateral measures, right now, when there are elections in Mexico."

López Obrador also raised the possibility that he would not attend the North American Leaders' Summit, scheduled for April in Quebec. "If there isn't respectful treatment, I don't participate," he said.

A tornado outbreak in February?

In the Great Lakes? Storms leave a trail of destruction

By RICK CALLAHAN and BRUCE SHIPKOWSKI Associated Press

Severe storms that appear to have spawned a rare February tornado outbreak sent sleeping Midwesterners scrambling for safety and left a trail of damage and power outages across four Great Lakes states, including the Chicago suburbs, ending a spell of summerlike, sometimes record temperatures.

Nearly two dozen confirmed or suspected tornadoes in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio littered roads with fallen trees and branches, shredded homes and barns, and scattered debris across city and countryside alike. No injuries were reported, despite the storm's timing at night.

In Michigan's Grand Blanc Township, near Flint, a confirmed tornado — only the second on record for February in that part of the state — damaged subdivisions, uprooted trees and broke gas lines in Wednesday's wee hours. Its strength was rated at EF-2, with peak winds of 115 mph (185 kph).

Police and firefighters moved residents in an area of gas leaks to a firehouse, and they were allowed to return when a utility made repairs, authorities said.

"There are still numerous reports of wires down in the area," police said. "While there is significant damage to houses in the area, no one was hurt."

More than 100 miles (160 kilometers) to the southwest, a confirmed tornado damaged homes and barns and knocked down trees and power lines in Calhoun County, near the city of Marshall, sheriff's and weather authorities said.

Warning sirens jolted residents of central Ohio awake as a possible tornado hit near Columbus.

Carole Essex's family — husband Andy, their infant and a 2-year-old — were asleep at their home in Columbus as the storm approached. When they became aware of the threat, they ran for cover.

"We woke up and went down to the basement. We grabbed the kids and went down," Essex, 29, told

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The Columbus Dispatch. "It sounded like our house collapsed. I looked at Andy and said, 'Oh, my god, we were hit by a tornado.'"

Storms destroyed a hangar and damaged planes at a small airport in Madison County, between Dayton and Columbus. Toppled trees closed roads in the area until the debris could be cleared.

At least five other storms in Ohio were confirmed as tornadoes — in Montgomery and Greene counties in southwestern Ohio; east of Columbus in Franklin and Licking counties; in Hilliard in Franklin County; east of London in Madison County and ending just south of West Jefferson; and near Springfield in Clark County. The latter was rated at EF-2 strength.

At one point, more than 50,000 customers in Ohio and Michigan lacked power Wednesday, according to PowerOutage.us.

The National Weather Service's Chicago office reported via the social media platform X that at least 11 confirmed tornadoes touched down in northern Illinois, including 10 in the Chicago area.

In Geneva, in the city's western suburbs, storms uprooted trees and left some homes with broken windows and shorn-off doors Tuesday evening, Fire Chief Mike Antenore said.

Geneva resident Rebecca Harrington said the storm "cycloned" into her home and collapsed its foyer area. "The back of my house is sort of hanging off," Harrington told WGN-TV, which reported no injuries.

The storms followed unusual warmth across much of the region in recent days. They were followed Wednesday by a return to winter weather, with snow and temperatures in the 20s in some areas.

Weather service teams throughout the region were trying to confirm tornado reports. One suspected tornado traveled across Chicago's southern suburbs — from Calumet City, Illinois, into East Chicago and Gary in northwestern Indiana — before heading out over Lake Michigan as a waterspout, weather service meteorologist Kevin Doom said.

The Grand Blanc Township tornado is only the second February tornado for the section of Michigan covered by Detroit's National Weather Service office since recordkeeping began in 1950, following one in Wayne County on Feb. 28, 1974, the service said.

The warm weather and severe storms, including hail up to an inch (2.5 centimeters) in diameter, on Tuesday and Wednesday are unusual for the area this time of the year, said meteorologist Dave Kook of the weather service's Detroit office.

"This is not typical of late February by any means," he said. "Basically, it's kind of a month ahead of schedule for southeast Michigan."

Robert Trapp, professor and director of the School of Earth, Society & Environment at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, agreed that February tornadoes in the state are "rare, but not unprecedented."

According to records dating back to 1955, four EF1 tornadoes touched down in the state on Feb. 28, 2017, while an EF2 tornado was recorded on Feb. 28, 1974, Trapp said. March tornadoes are also uncommon, occurring only in 1956, 1961, 1976 and 1983.

The weather service office that covers southwestern and central Ohio has recorded winter tornadoes almost every year since 2012.

Supreme Court sets April arguments over whether Trump can be prosecuted for election interference

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Wednesday agreed to decide whether former President Donald Trump can be prosecuted on charges he interfered with the 2020 election, calling into question whether his case could go to trial before the November election.

While the court set a course for a quick resolution, it maintained a hold on preparations for a trial focused on Trump's efforts to overturn his election loss. The court will hear arguments in late April, with a decision likely no later than the end of June.

That timetable is much faster than usual, but assuming the justices deny Trump's immunity bid, it's not clear whether a trial can be scheduled and concluded before the November election. Early voting in some

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states will begin in September.

The court's decision to intervene in a second major Trump case this term, along with the dispute over whether he is barred from being president again because of his actions following the 2020 election, underscores the direct role the justices will have in the outcome of the election.

Trump's lawyers have sought to put off a trial until after the election.

In the end, the timing of a possible trial could come down to how quickly the justices rule. They have shown they can act fast, issuing a decision in the Watergate tapes case in 1974 just 16 days after hearing arguments. The decision in *Bush v. Gore* came the day after arguments in December 2000.

By taking up the legally untested question now, the justices have created a scenario of uncertainty that special counsel Jack Smith had sought to avoid when he first asked the high court in December to immediately intervene. In his latest court filing, Smith had suggested arguments a full month earlier than the late April timeframe.

Trump wrote on Truth Social that legal scholars "are extremely thankful" the court stepped in to decide on immunity. "Presidents will always be concerned, and even paralyzed, by the prospect of wrongful prosecution and retaliation after they leave office," he wrote.

A Smith spokesperson declined to comment.

The trial date, already postponed once by Trump's immunity appeal, is of paramount importance to both sides. Prosecutors are looking to bring Trump to trial this year while defense lawyers have been seeking delays in his criminal cases. If Trump were to be elected with the case pending, he could presumably use his authority as head of the executive branch to order the Justice Department to dismiss it or could potentially seek to pardon himself.

Though their Supreme Court filing did not explicitly mention the upcoming November election or Trump's status as the Republican primary front-runner, prosecutors described the case as having "unique national importance" and said that "delay in the resolution of these charges threatens to frustrate the public interest in a speedy and fair verdict."

Trump's lawyers have cast the prosecution in partisan terms, telling the justices that "a months-long criminal trial of President Trump at the height of election season will radically disrupt President Trump's ability to campaign against President Biden — which appears to be the whole point of the Special Counsel's persistent demands for expedition."

The court said in an unsigned statement that it will consider "whether and if so to what extent does a former President enjoy presidential immunity from criminal prosecution for conduct alleged to involve official acts during his tenure in office."

The Supreme Court has previously held that presidents are immune from civil liability for official acts, and Trump's lawyers have for months argued that that protection should be extended to criminal prosecution as well.

Lower courts have, so far, rejected Trump's novel claim that former presidents enjoy absolute immunity for actions that fall within their official job duties. A panel of appellate judges in Washington ruled earlier in February that U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan, who would preside over the election interference trial, was right to say that the case could proceed and that Trump could be prosecuted for actions undertaken while in the White House and in the run-up to Jan. 6, 2021, when a mob of his supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol.

The issue reached the high court because the appeals court refused to grant the delay that Trump had sought.

The case is separate from the high court's consideration of Trump's appeal to remain on the presidential ballot despite attempts to kick him off because of his efforts following his election loss in 2020. During arguments on Feb. 8, the court seemed likely to side with Trump. A decision could come at any time.

The high court also will hear an appeal in April from one of the more than 1,200 people charged in the Capitol riot. The case could upend a charge prosecutors have brought against more than 300 people, including Trump.

The election interference case in Washington is one of four prosecutions Trump faces as he seeks to reclaim the White House. Of those, the only one with a trial date that seems poised to hold is his state case in New York, where he's charged with falsifying business records in connection with hush money payments to a porn actor. That case is set for trial on March 25, and a judge this month signaled his determination to press ahead.

A separate case charging him with illegally hoarding classified records is set for trial on May 20, but a pivotal hearing on Friday seems likely to result in a delay. No date has been set in a separate state case in Atlanta charging him with scheming to subvert that state's 2020 election.

Humorously morose comedian Richard Lewis, who recently starred on 'Curb Your Enthusiasm,' dies at 76

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Richard Lewis, an acclaimed comedian known for exploring his neuroses in frantic, stream-of-consciousness diatribes while dressed in all-black, leading to his nickname "The Prince of Pain," has died. He was 76.

Lewis, who revealed he had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2023, died at his home in Los Angeles on Tuesday night after suffering a heart attack, according to his publicist Jeff Abraham.

A regular performer in clubs and on late-night TV for decades, Lewis also played Marty Gold, the romantic co-lead opposite Jamie Lee Curtis, in the ABC series "Anything But Love" and the reliably neurotic Prince John in "Mel Brooks' Robin Hood: Men In Tights." He re-introduced himself to a new generation opposite Larry David in HBO's "Curb Your Enthusiasm," kvetching regularly.

"Richard and I were born three days apart in the same hospital and for most of my life he's been like a brother to me," David said in a statement. "He had that rare combination of being the funniest person and also the sweetest. But today he made me sob and for that I'll never forgive him."

Comedy Central named Lewis one of the top 50 stand-up comedians of all time and he earned a berth in GQ magazine's list of the "20th Century's Most Influential Humorists." He lent his humor for charity causes, including Comic Relief and Comedy Gives Back.

"Watching his stand-up is like sitting in on a very funny and often dark therapy session," the Los Angeles Times said in 2014. The Philadelphia's City Paper called him "the Jimi Hendrix of monologists." Mel Brooks once said he "may just be the Franz Kafka of modern-day comedy."

Comedians took to social media Wednesday to share their thoughts, including Albert Books who called Lewis "a brilliantly funny man who will missed by all. The world needed him now more than ever" on X, formerly Twitter. Other tributes came from Bette Midler, Michael McKean and Paul Feig, who called Lewis "one of the funniest people on the planet."

Following his graduation from The Ohio State University in 1969, the New York-born Lewis began a stand-up career, honing his craft on the circuit with other contemporaries also just starting out like Jay Leno, Freddie Prinze and Billy Crystal.

He recalled Rodney Dangerfield hiring him for \$75 to fill in at his New York club, Dangerfield's. "I had a lot of great friends early on who believed in me, and I met pretty iconic people who really helped me, told me to keep working on my material. And I never looked back," he told The Gazette of Colorado Springs, Colorado, in 2010.

"I'm paranoid about everything in my life. Even at home. On my stationary bike, I have a rear-view mirror, which I'm not thrilled about," he once joked onstage. To Jimmy Kimmel he said: "This morning, I tried to go to bed. I couldn't sleep. I counted sheep but I only had six of them and they all had hip replacements."

Unlike contemporary Robin Williams, Lewis allowed audiences into his world and melancholy, pouring his torment and pain onto the stage. Fans favorably compared him to the ground-breaking comedian Lenny Bruce.

"I take great pains not to be mean-spirited," Lewis told The Palm Beach Post in 2007. "I don't like to take real handicaps that people have to overcome with no hope in sight. I steer clear of that. That's not funny

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to me. Tragedy is funny to other humorists, but it's not to me, unless you can make a point that's helpful."

Singer Billy Joel has said he was referring to Lewis when he sang in "My Life" of an old friend who "bought a ticket to the West Coast/Now he gives them a stand-up routine in L.A."

In 1989 at Carnegie Hall, he appeared with six feet of yellow legal sheets filled with material and taped together for a 2½-hour set that led to two standing ovations. The night was "the highlight of my career," he told The Washington Post in 2020.

Lewis told GQ his signature look came incidentally, saying his obsession with dressing in black came from watching the television Western "Have Gun – Will Travel," with a cowboy in all-black, when he was a kid. He also popularized the term "from hell" — as in "the date from hell" or "the job from hell."

"That just came out of my brain one day and I kept repeating it a lot for some reason. Same thing with the black clothes. I just felt really comfortable from the early '80s on and I never wore anything else. I never looked back."

After getting sober from drugs and alcohol in 1994, Lewis put out his 2008 memoir, "The Other Great Depression" — a collection of fearless, essay style riffs on his life — and "Reflections from Hell."

Lewis was the youngest of three siblings — his brother was older than him by six years, and his sister by nine. His father died young and his mother had emotional problems. "She didn't get me at all. I owe my career to my mother. I should have given her my agent's commission," he told The Washington Post in 2020.

"Looking back on it now, as a full-blown, middle-aged, functioning anxiety collector, I can admit without cringing that my parents had their fair share of tremendous qualities, yet, being human much of the day, had more than just a handful of flaws as well," he wrote in his memoir.

Lewis quickly found a new family performing at New York's Improv. "I was 23, and all sorts of people were coming in and out and watching me, like Steve Allen and Bette Midler. David Brenner certainly took me under his wing. To drive home to my little dump in New Jersey often knowing that Steve Allen said, 'You got it,' that validation kept me going in a big, big way."

He had a cameo in "Leaving Las Vegas," which led to his first major dramatic role as Jimmy Epstein, an addict fighting for his life in the indie film, "Drunks." He played Don Rickles' son on one season of "Daddy Dearest" and a rabbi on "7th Heaven."

Lewis' recurring role on "Curb Your Enthusiasm" can be credited directly to his friendship with fellow comedian, producer and series star Larry David. Both native Brooklynites — born in the same Brooklyn hospital — they first met and became friends as rivals while attending the same summer camp at age 13. He was cast from the beginning, bickering with David on unpaid bills and common courtesies.

He is survived by his wife, Joyce Lapinsky.

Food aid reaches north Gaza for first time in weeks. Israeli hostages' families push for release

By WAFAA SHURAFI and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Aid convoys carrying food reached northern Gaza this week, Israeli officials said Wednesday, the first major delivery in a month to the devastated, isolated area, where the U.N. has warned of worsening starvation among hundreds of thousands of Palestinians amid Israel's offensive.

The increasing alarm over hunger across Gaza has fueled international calls for a cease-fire as the U.S., Egypt and Qatar work to secure a deal between Israel and Hamas for a pause in fighting and the release of some of the hostages seized by Hamas in its Oct. 7 attack.

Mediators hope to reach an agreement before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan starts around March 10. But so far, Israel and Hamas have remained far apart in public on their demands.

Increasing the pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to reach a deal, families of hostages on Wednesday launched a four-day march from southern Israel to Jerusalem to demand their loved ones be set free. Some of the around 100 hostages freed during a cease-fire in late November are joining the march, which is to end near Netanyahu's official residence.

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The plight of the hostages has deeply shaken Israelis, who see in them an enduring symbol of the state's failure to protect its citizens from Hamas' assault. In its Oct. 7 attack, the Palestinian militant group abducted roughly 250 people, according to Israeli authorities, including men, women, children and older adults. After the November releases, some 130 hostages remain, and Israel says about a quarter of them are dead.

Israel's assault on Gaza, which it says aims at destroying Hamas after its attack, has killed more than 29,900 Palestinians. U.N. officials warn of further mass casualties if it follows through on vows to attack the southernmost city of Rafah, where more than half of Gaza's population of 2.3 million has taken refuge. They also say a Rafah offensive could collapse the aid operation that has already been crippled in the fighting.

Across Gaza, more than 576,000 people – a quarter of the population – are a step away from famine, the U.N. says. But northern Gaza in particular has been gutted by hunger. The north has largely been cut off and much of it has been leveled since Israeli ground troops invaded in late October. Several hundred thousand Palestinians are believed to remain there, and many have been reduced to eating animal fodder to survive. The U.N. says one in 6 children under 2 in the north suffer from acute malnutrition and wasting.

A convoy of 31 trucks carrying food entered northern Gaza on Wednesday, the Israeli military office that oversees Palestinian civilian affairs said. The office, known by the acronym COGAT, said nearly 20 other trucks entered the north on Monday and Tuesday. Associated Press footage showed people carrying sacks of flour from the distribution site.

It was not immediately clear who carried out the deliveries. The U.N. was not involved, said a spokesperson for the U.N.'s humanitarian coordination office, Eri Keneko.

As of Sunday, the U.N. had been unable to deliver food to northern Gaza since Jan. 23, according to Philippe Lazzarini, the head of UNRWA, the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees that has led the aid effort during the war. On Feb. 18, the World Food Program attempted a delivery to the north for the first time in three weeks, but much of the convoy's cargo was taken en route by desperate Palestinians, and it was only able to distribute a small amount in the north. Two days later, the WFP announced it was pausing deliveries to the north because of the chaos.

Since launching its assault on Gaza following Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, Israel has barred entry of food, water, medicine and other supplies except for a trickle of aid entering the south from Egypt at the Rafah crossing and Israel's Kerem Shalom crossing. Despite international calls to allow in more aid, the number of supply trucks entering has dropped dramatically in recent weeks.

COGAT said Wednesday that Israel does not impose limits on the amount of aid entering. Israel has blamed U.N. agencies for the bottleneck, saying hundreds of trucks are waiting on the Palestinian side of Kerem Shalom for aid workers to collect them.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric on Wednesday countered saying large trucks entering Gaza have to be unloaded and reloaded onto smaller Palestinian trucks, but there aren't enough of them and there's a lack of security to distribute aid in Gaza. Police in Gaza stopped protecting convoys after Israeli strikes on them near the crossing. There is also "insufficient coordination" from Israel on security and deconfliction, which puts the lives of U.N. staff and other humanitarian workers at risk.

"That's why we've repeatedly asked for a humanitarian cease-fire," he said. The U.N. has called for Israel to open crossings in the north to aid deliveries and guarantee safe corridors for convoys.

The director of Kamal Adwan Hospital in northern Gaza said the number of children who have died in recent days from severe malnutrition and dehydration had risen to four.

Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya said that operations at the hospital will shut off starting Wednesday due to fuel shortages. "Dialysis, intensive care, childcare, and surgeries will stop. Therefore, we will witness more deaths in the coming days," he said.

But the pain from the lack of supplies extends across Gaza. Project Hope, a humanitarian group that runs a clinic in the central town of Deir al-Balah, said 21% of the pregnant women and 11% of the children under 5 it has treated in the last three weeks are suffering from malnutrition.

The Gaza Health Ministry said the death toll from Israel's offensive had risen to 29,954 people, with 70,325 wounded. The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants, but it says two-

thirds of the dead were children and women.

In its attack on southern Israel on Oct. 7, Hamas and other Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people, mainly civilians.

The Supreme Court appears torn about a Trump-era ban on a gun accessory known as bump stocks

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court appeared torn Wednesday about a challenge to a Trump-era ban on bump stocks, a gun accessory that allows semi-automatic weapons to fire rapidly like machine guns and was used in the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history.

The high court is weighing whether the Trump administration followed federal law when it reversed course and banned bump stocks after a gunman in Las Vegas attacked a country music festival with assault-style rifles in 2017. Many of the weapons were equipped with bump stocks and high-capacity magazines. More than 1,000 rounds were fired into the crowd in 11 minutes, killing 60 people and injuring hundreds more.

The arguments largely focused on whether guns with a bump stock can be considered illegal machine guns under federal law. A Texas gun shop owner argues that bump stocks don't change the core function of a semi-automatic weapon enough to make it illegal. The Biden administration says bump stocks fall firmly under the legal definition of machine gun.

It is the latest gun case to come before the justices and offers a fresh test for a court with a conservative supermajority to define the limits of gun restrictions in an era where mass shootings are exceedingly prevalent.

Conservative justices raised questions about whether machine-gun laws dating to the 1930s apply to bump stocks and about the Justice Department's previous finding that the accessories were legal.

"Intuitively, I am entirely sympathetic to your argument," said Justice Amy Coney Barrett, "I think the question is, why didn't Congress pass that legislation to make this cover it more clearly?"

Justices from the court's liberal wing suggested it was "common sense" that bump stocks would fall under laws originally aimed at Prohibition-era violence from gangsters such as Al Capone. "This is in the heartland of what they were concerned about, which is anything that takes just a little human action to produce more than one shot," Justice Elena Kagan said.

Federal appeals courts have been divided over bump stocks. The case before the court differs from other gun cases — including a landmark 2022 decision in which the six-justice conservative majority expanded gun rights — because it's not directly about the Second Amendment.

Instead, the plaintiffs argue that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives overstepped its authority in imposing the ban. The agency had previously decided bump stocks should not be classified as machine guns and therefore not be banned.

That changed after Las Vegas.

Marisa Marano, 42, survived the shooting at the show she attended with her sister, but struggles with the lasting effects on her life and community. "I will never forget the sound of a machine gun firing into the crowd that night as Gina and I ran for our lives," said Marano, who is now a volunteer for the group Moms Demand Action and hopes the Supreme Court upholds the ban.

Bump stocks are accessories that replace a rifle's stock, the part that rests against the shoulder. They harness the gun's recoil energy so that the trigger bumps against the shooter's stationary finger, allowing the gun to fire rapidly.

They were invented in the early 2000s. Under Republican President George W. Bush and Democrat Barack Obama, the ATF decided that bump stocks didn't transform semi-automatic weapons into machine guns. The agency reversed that decision at Trump's urging after the shooting in Las Vegas and another mass shooting at a Parkland, Florida high school that left 17 dead.

The plaintiffs argue that rifles with bump stocks are different from machine guns because the trigger keeps moving and the shooter must continue to exert pressure on the weapon.

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"It's still one shot per function of the trigger, even though the shots are coming out of the barrel a lot faster than they were before," said attorney Jonathan F. Mitchell, who argued on behalf of Texas gun shop owner and Army veteran Michael Cargill.

Government lawyers pointed out that traditional machine guns also require pressure from the shooter. They argued bump stocks fall under the legal definition of machine guns because the shooter's finger stays still while the gun fires hundreds of rounds per minute.

Brian Fletcher, principal deputy solicitor general, said that the ATF's previous findings were less in-depth than the review it undertook under Trump.

"After the Las Vegas shooting, the deadliest shooting in our nation's history, I think it would have been irresponsible for the ATF not to take another look at this prior interpretation," he said.

There were about 520,000 bump stocks in circulation when the ban went into effect in 2019, requiring people to either surrender or destroy them, at a combined estimated loss of \$100 million, the plaintiffs said in court documents.

Justice Neil Gorsuch questioned the Justice Department about the effects of the about-face on the millions of people who bought bump stocks while they were legal. Fletcher responded that the Justice Department doesn't intend to prosecute people who turned in their bump stocks under the new rule, though he later indicated that people who bought them after the rule was finalized could potentially face prosecution.

The high court took up the case after the New Orleans-based 5th Circuit Court of Appeals invalidated the ban, a finding that differed from a ruling from the federal appeals court in Washington to uphold it. Fifteen states and Washington have their own bans on bump stocks.

The high court is separately weighing another gun case this term challenging a federal law intended to keep guns away from people under domestic violence restraining orders. The justices appeared likely to keep that measure in place during arguments in November.

The bump stock challenge comes at a time when the 6-3 conservative majority has been increasingly skeptical of the powers of federal agencies. This term, the justices also are weighing challenges to aspects of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and the Securities and Exchange Commission.

A decision is expected by early summer.

McConnell will step down as the Senate Republican leader in November after a record run in the job

By MICHAEL TACKETT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Mitch McConnell, the longest-serving Senate leader in history who maintained his power in the face of dramatic convulsions in the Republican Party for almost two decades, will step down from that position in November.

McConnell, who turned 82 last week, announced his decision Wednesday in the well of the Senate, the chamber where he looked in awe from its back benches in 1985 when he arrived and where he grew increasingly comfortable in the front row seat afforded the party leaders.

"One of life's most underappreciated talents is to know when it's time to move on to life's next chapter," he said. "So I stand before you today ... to say that this will be my last term as Republican leader of the Senate."

His decision punctuates a powerful ideological transition underway in the Republican Party, from Ronald Reagan's brand of traditional conservatism and strong international alliances, to the fiery, often isolationist populism of former President Donald Trump.

McConnell said he plans to serve out his Senate term, which ends in January 2027, "albeit from a different seat in the chamber."

He spoke at times haltingly, his emotions evident, as he looked back on his career. Dozens of members of his staff lined up behind him on the back wall of the chamber, some wiping away tears, as family and friends looked down from the gallery above. Senators from both parties — most of them taken by surprise by the announcement — trickled into the chamber and exchanged hugs and handshakes.

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President Joe Biden, who has had a productive working relationship with McConnell, said he was sorry to hear the news.

"I've trusted him and we have a great relationship," the Democratic president said. "We fight like hell. But he has never, never, never misrepresented anything."

Aides said McConnell's announcement was unrelated to his health. The Kentucky senator had a concussion from a fall last year and two public episodes where his face briefly froze while he was speaking.

"As I have been thinking about when I would deliver some news to the Senate, I always imagined a moment when I had total clarity and peace about the sunset of my work," McConnell said. "A moment when I am certain I have helped preserve the ideals I so strongly believe. It arrived today."

The senator had been under increasing pressure from the restive, and at times hostile wing of his party that has aligned firmly with Trump. The two have been estranged since December 2020, when McConnell refused to abide Trump's lie that the election of Democrat Biden as president was the product of fraud.

But while McConnell's critics within the GOP conference had grown louder, their numbers had not grown appreciably larger, a marker of McConnell's strategic and tactical skill and his ability to understand the needs of his fellow Republican senators.

McConnell gave no specific reason for the timing of his decision, which he has been contemplating for months, but he cited the recent death of his wife's youngest sister as a moment that prompted introspection. "The end of my contributions are closer than I'd prefer," McConnell said.

But his remarks were also light at times as he talked about the arc of his Senate career.

He noted that when he arrived in the Senate, "I was just happy if anybody remembered my name." During his campaign in 1984, when Reagan was visiting Kentucky, the president called him "Mitch O'Donnell."

McConnell endorsed Reagan's view of America's role in the world and the senator has persisted in face of opposition, including from Trump, that Congress should include a foreign assistance package that includes \$60 billion for Ukraine.

"I am unconflicted about the good within our country and the irreplaceable role we play as the leader of the free world," McConnell said.

Against long odds he managed to secure 22 Republican votes for the package now being considered by the House.

"Believe me, I know the politics within my party at this particular moment in time. I have many faults. Misunderstanding politics is not one of them," McConnell said. "That said, I believe more strongly than ever that America's global leadership is essential to preserving the shining city on a hill that Ronald Reagan discussed. For as long as I am drawing breath on this earth I will defend American exceptionalism."

After his speech, Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, congratulated him in brief remarks, saying that she admired him "for stepping forward when it wasn't popular to do the right thing for our country and our world."

Trump has pulled the party hard to the ideological right, questioning longtime military alliances such as NATO, international trade agreements and pushing for a severe crackdown on immigration, all the while clinging to the falsehood that the election was stolen from him in 2020.

McConnell and Trump had worked together during Trump's time in the White House, remaking the Supreme Court and the federal judiciary in a far more conservative image, and on tax legislation. But there was also friction from the start, with Trump frequently sniping at the senator.

Their relationship has essentially been over since Trump refused to accept the results of the Electoral College. But the rupture deepened dramatically after the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol. McConnell assigned blame and responsibility to Trump and said that he should be held to account through the criminal justice system for his actions.

McConnell's critics insist he could have done more, including voting to convict Trump during his second impeachment trial. McConnell did not, arguing that since Trump was no longer in office, he could not be subject to impeachment.

Rather than fade from prominence after the Capitol riot, Trump continued to assert his control over the party, and finds himself on a clear glidepath to the Republican nomination. Other members of the Republican Senate leadership have endorsed Trump. McConnell has not, and that has drawn criticism from

other Republican senators.

McConnell's path to power was hardly linear, but from the day he walked onto the Senate floor in 1985 and took his seat as the most junior Republican senator, he set his sights on being the party leader. What set him apart was that so many other Senate leaders wanted to run for president. McConnell wanted to run the Senate. He lost races for lower party positions before steadily ascending, and finally became party leader in 2006 and has won nine straight elections.

He most recently beat back a challenge led by Sen. Rick Scott of Florida last November.

McConnell built his power base by a combination of care and nurturing of his members, including understanding their political imperatives. After seeing the potential peril of a rising Tea Party, he also established a super political action committee, The Senate Leadership Fund, which has provided more than a billion dollars in support of Republican candidates.

He is not a popular figure nationally, even among Republicans. According to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 45% of Republicans have an unfavorable view of McConnell. But he has reigned in the Senate.

"I love the Senate," he said. "It has been my life. There may be more distinguished members of this body throughout our history, but I doubt there are any with more admiration for it."

But, he added, "Father Time remains undefeated. I am no longer the young man sitting in the back, hoping colleagues would remember my name. It is time for the next generation of leadership."

There would be a time to reminisce, he said, but not today.

"I still have enough gas in the tank to thoroughly disappoint my critics and I intend to do so with all the enthusiasm which they have become accustomed to."

Philadelphia Orchestra's home renamed Marian Anderson Hall as Verizon name comes off

By RONALD BLUM Associated Press

The Philadelphia Orchestra's home is being renamed Marian Anderson Hall in honor of the pioneering Black American contralto, a rare case of an artist's name replacing a corporation.

The orchestra's auditorium in the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts was known as Verizon Hall from 1999 through 2023, as part of a \$14.5 million contribution agreed to by Bell Atlantic Corp. before its name change in 2000 to Verizon Communications Inc.

Anderson, who died in 1993 at age 96, was born in Philadelphia and in 1955 became the first Black singer to appear at New York's Metropolitan Opera. The renaming was announced Wednesday, a day after the 127th anniversary of her birth.

"Knowing Marian, she would be humble," said her niece, Ginette DePriest, the wife of late conductor James DePriest. "She always used to say: 'Don't make any fuss about this,' but I think that the fact that it's her hometown that she adores — I think she would be obviously honored but mostly humbled by this gesture."

Richard Worley and wife Leslie Miller, who live in suburban Bryn Mawr, are underwriting the name change with a \$25 million gift to the Philadelphia Orchestra and Kimmel Center, which united in 2021. Worley joined the orchestra's board in 1997 and served as its president from 2009-20; Miller was on the Kimmel Center board from 1999-2008, serving as acting president.

"A tribute to Marian Anderson of this nature, we think it's long overdue," Miller said. "She was an iconic artist and she fought discrimination at every turn with grace and grit and kept on going. She deserves this kind of recognition."

The newly named hall will reopen with a concert on June 8 featuring music director Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducting a program with Broadway star Audra McDonald, soprano Angel Blue and pianist Marcus Roberts.

Philadelphia orchestra CEO Matías Tarnopolsky made a presentation to the board in August 2022 to name the hall after Anderson.

"We feel that what we've done for the orchestra and other Philadelphia institutions is well-enough known

and well-enough recognized," Miller said. "We just thought with a non-corporate name and a name in honor of someone that deserves the honor we might be able over time to raise more money for sustaining the hall than if we named it after an individual donor."

A statue of Anderson is planned for the vicinity of the hall.

"We hope that in naming the hall Marian Anderson it will be an indication of the efforts that the orchestra is making to diversify its audiences, its programming, and in so doing, to be more relevant to all Philadelphians and beyond," Miller said.

Tarnopolsky and music director Nézet-Séguin have in recent years programmed music written by Black Americans Florence Price, Valerie Coleman and William Grant Still.

"We have a lot of catching up to do," Tarnopolsky said. "We began that journey several years ago and it's ongoing and we feel like we're making some really positive change. So what's the logical next chapter is what we asked ourselves. And we thought about the legendary artist, civil rights icon and Philadelphian Marian Anderson."

US asylum measure aimed at curbing claims has limited impact given strained border budget

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) — Inside giant white tents that house about 1,000 migrants near Tucson International Airport, Border Patrol agents demonstrate clockwork efficiency to release detainees within two days of arrest with orders to appear in immigration courts at their final destinations. Agents transmit information from the field to colleagues who prepare court papers while migrants are bused hours away to a processing center, minimizing time in custody.

Notably missing from the operations hub in the busiest corridor for illegal crossings into the U.S. are asylum officers who do initial screenings, which are intended to weed out weak claims that don't meet narrowly prescribed grounds for seeking protection, such as race, religion and political opinion.

Asylum officers were instructed nearly a year ago to apply a higher screening standard on those who cross the border illegally after passing through another country, such as Mexico, but they are too understaffed to have much impact. The Biden administration hails the higher standard as a cornerstone of its border policy in legal challenges, but its application in only a small percentage of arrests shows how budgets can fail to match ambitions.

Strained budgets continue to loom large as the White House again considers sweeping measures to limit asylum at the border.

The failure of a \$20 billion spending plan on border security this month has caused the administration to assess its priorities. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, facing a \$700 million hole this year, is considering cutting the number of detention beds from 38,000 to 22,000 and facilitating fewer deportation flights. These possible steps were first reported by The Washington Post and confirmed to The Associated Press by a U.S. official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss it publicly.

The failed spending package crafted by Senate negotiators would have given \$4 billion to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, including to add 4,338 asylum officers to screen applicants and make final decisions on claims — more than four times current staffing.

Arrests for illegal border crossings from Mexico plunged to the second-lowest monthly rate of Joe Biden's presidency, a month after the higher standard replaced COVID-19 pandemic-related asylum restrictions. The rule "is working as intended and has already significantly reduced encounters at the border," Blas Nuñez-Neto, assistant homeland security secretary for border and immigration policy, said in a court filing at the time.

Asylum-seekers subject to tougher screenings had a 59% pass rate through September, down from 85% in the five years before the pandemic, Nuñez-Neto said in another court filing.

While that suggests the policy has made a difference, its scope has been limited. Officers interviewed

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only 57,700 migrants under the new rule through September, according to Nuñez-Neto. That represents only about 15% of the nearly 365,500 migrants released by Border Patrol from June to September with notices to appear in immigration court.

The Department of Homeland Security declined to provide more recent numbers. It insists the higher screening standard is working as intended, while acknowledging it has failed to keep pace with unprecedented migration flows and calling on Congress to adequately fund the efforts.

Asylum officers did more than 130,000 screenings, known as “credible fear interviews,” at the border during the 2023 budget year, which was more than double the year before. But more than 600,000 migrants were released with notices to appear in immigration court in that time and another 300,000 with orders to report to an immigration office for a court date, a practice that has largely ceased.

The Border Patrol released Mbala Giodi, 42, after holding him for two days when he crossed the border in remote mountains east of San Diego. He was dropped off at a transit center and told he would have a chance to explain his case for asylum in court, with an initial hearing scheduled in New York in May.

“There wasn’t much problem,” said Giodi, 42, who calls himself a victim of government repression for being a student protestor in Angola.

To put the higher screening standard into effect, Citizenship and Immigration Services added about 1,000 staff to assist an existing 850 or so asylum officers, training former asylum officers and other employees for short stints, said Michael Knowles, spokesman for the National Citizenship and Immigration Services Council. The union represents workers at the agency, which also oversees work visas, green cards, citizenship applications and asylum claims that originate away from the border.

Assigning so many employees to border cases extended waits for other services, he said. Weekend overtime was mandatory, as was holiday work.

“We’re so overwhelmed and there’s so much pressure,” Knowles said. “Part of the border crisis is they didn’t hire enough of us to do the work.”

A lack of resources hampered another Biden policy that took effect in June 2022, empowering asylum officers to make final rulings on claims, not just screenings. It aimed to ease the workload of immigration judges, whose backlog of more than 3 million cases has allowed asylum-seekers with weak claims to stay in the United States for years — with eligibility for work permits — while their cases wind through the system.

Fewer than 6,000 asylum cases had been decided under the 2022 policy by the end of September.

“That is a very important program that got very little support,” Knowles said.

Advocates for asylum-seekers have sued over application of the higher screening standard. They argue it unfairly penalizes those who cross the border illegally while a heavily oversubscribed online appointment system, called CBP One, is virtually the only way to come through an official port of entry. The standard remains in effect while a judge’s ruling declaring the policy illegal is under appeal.

While migration flows dropped immediately after the higher standard took effect, border steady increased as migrants and smugglers adjusted to realities on the ground, peaking at an all-time high of 250,000 in December.

Melissa Crow, director of litigation at the Center for Gender & Refugee Studies, which is challenging the higher standard, said asylum-seekers eventually face tougher scrutiny before a judge even if the rule’s limited use at the border allows them to avoid screening. And, she said, Congress and the White House may agree in the future to provide more money.

French Senate approves a bill to make abortion a constitutional right

SYLVIE CORBET and BARBARA SURK Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — France’s Senate on Wednesday adopted a bill to enshrine a woman’s right to an abortion in the constitution, clearing a key hurdle for legislation promised by President Emmanuel Macron in response to a rollback in abortion rights in the United States.

Wednesday’s vote came after the lower house, the National Assembly, overwhelmingly approved the proposal in January. The measure now goes before a joint session of parliament for its expected approval

by a three-fifths majority next week.

Macron said after the vote that his government is committed to "making women's right to have an abortion irreversible by enshrining it in the constitution." He said on X, formerly Twitter, that he would convene a joint session of parliament for a final vote on Monday.

Macron's government wants Article 34 of the constitution amended to specify that "the law determines the conditions by which is exercised the freedom of women to have recourse to an abortion, which is guaranteed."

The senate adopted the bill on a vote of 267 in favor, and 50 against. "This vote is historic," Justice Minister Eric Dupond-Moretti said. "The Senate has written a new page in women's rights."

None of France's major political parties represented in parliament has questioned the right to abortion, which was decriminalized in 1975. With both houses of parliament adopting the bill, Monday's joint session at the Palace of Versailles is expected to be largely a formality.

The government argued in its introduction to the bill that the right to abortion is threatened in the United States, where the Supreme Court in 2022 overturned a 50-year-old ruling that used to guarantee it.

"Unfortunately, this event is not isolated: in many countries, even in Europe, there are currents of opinion that seek to hinder at any cost the freedom of women to terminate their pregnancy if they wish," the introduction to the French legislation says.

In Poland, a controversial tightening of the already restrictive abortion law led to protests in the country last year. The Polish constitutional court ruled in 2020 that women could no longer terminate pregnancies in cases of severe fetal deformities, including Down Syndrome.

Many in Iran are frustrated by unrest and poor economy. Parliament elections could see a low turnout

By The Associated Press undefined

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran is holding parliamentary elections this Friday, yet the real question may not be who gets elected but how many people actually turn out to vote.

Widespread discontent over the cratering economy, years of mass protests rocking the country, and tensions with the West over Tehran's nuclear program and Iran's support for Russia in its war on Ukraine have many people quietly saying they won't vote in this election.

Officials have urged people to cast ballots but tellingly, no information has been released this year from the state-owned polling center ISPA about expected turnout — a constant feature of past elections. Of 21 Iranians interviewed recently by The Associated Press, only five said they would vote. Thirteen said they won't and three said they were undecided.

"If I protest about some shortcoming, many police and security agents will try to stop me," said Amin, a 21-year-old university student who gave only his first name for fear of reprisals. "But if I die from hunger on the corner of one of the main streets, they will show no reaction."

Over 15,000 candidates are vying for a seat in the 290-member parliament, formally known as the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Terms runs for four years and five seats are reserved for Iran's religious minorities.

Under the law, the parliament has oversight over the executive branch, votes on treaties and handles other issues. In practice, absolute power in Iran rests with its supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Hard-liners have controlled the parliament for the past two decades — with chants of "Death to America" often heard from the floor.

Under parliament speaker Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, a former Revolutionary Guard general who supported a violent crackdown on Iranian university students in 1999, the legislature pushed forward a bill in 2020 that greatly curtailed Tehran's cooperation with the U.N. nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency.

That followed then-President Donald Trump's unilateral withdrawal of America from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers in 2018 — an act that sparked years of tensions in the Middle East and saw Iran enrich

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enough uranium at record-breaking purity to have enough fuel for "several" nuclear weapons if it chose.

More recently, the parliament has focused on issues surrounding Iran's mandatory headscarf, or hijab, for women after the 2022 death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in police custody, which sparked nationwide protests.

The protests quickly escalated into calls to overthrow Iran's clerical rulers. A subsequent security crackdown killed over 500 people, with more than 22,000 detained.

Calls for an election boycott have spread in recent weeks, including from imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize laureate Narges Mohammadi, a women's right activist, who called them a "sham."

"The Islamic Republic, with its ruthless and brutal suppression, the killing of young people on the streets, the executions and the imprisonment and torture of men and women, deserves national sanctions and global disgrace," Mohammadi said in a statement.

The boycott calls have put the government under renewed pressure — since its 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's theocracy has based its legitimacy in part on turnout in elections.

On Wednesday, Khamenei himself urged people to vote, describing it as a national duty. "There is no reasoning behind not voting," he said. "It does not solve any problem of the country."

He also said "those who express a lack of interest in the election and encourage others not to participate should think some more."

"If the election is weak, all face harm," he added.

Though ISPA, the polling agency, conducted election surveys in October, its results have not been made public. Figures from politicians and other media outlets suggest a turnout of around 30%.

In the 2021 presidential election that brought hard-liner Ebrahim Raisi to power, the turnout was 49% — the lowest on record for a presidential vote. Millions of ballots were declared void, likely from those who felt obligated to vote but did not want to cast a ballot.

The 2019 parliament race saw a 42% turnout.

Separately, Iranians will also vote on Friday for members of the country's 88-seat Assembly of Experts, an eight-year term on a panel that will appoint the country's next supreme leader after Khamenei, 84.

Barred from that race is former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, a relative moderate under whose term Iran struck the 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

Some who spoke to the AP said Iran's economic woes were the reason they are staying away from the polls. Inflation is reportedly at around 50%, with unemployment around 20% for young Iranians.

"I will not vote," said Hashem Amani, a 55-year-old fruit merchant in southern Tehran. "In 2021, I voted for Raisi to become president in hope that similar people in the government can work together and make a better life for me. What I got in return was rocketing prices for everything."

Morteza, a 53-year-old taxi driver who gave just his first name fearing reprisals, also expressed disenchantment.

"Why should I vote?" he asked. "I voted many times in the past yet I am paying for schooling of my three daughters. ... I am still a renter and continuously I keep moving to a poorer area."

Others, like 42-year-old Marzieh Moqaddam, insisted they would vote. She compared voting to a religious duty and insisted the country needs "to improve the Islamic culture, like the hijab."

However, Abbas Kazemi, a 32-year-old bank clerk, offered a far different reason why he is heading to the polls — protecting Iran's legislature from the influence of the hard-liners that have controlled it for decades.

"We have to keep the election alive, otherwise hard-liners will shut it down forever," he said.

States offer services for disabled kids, then make their families wait 10 years for them

By JOHN HANNA Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — When Lilly Miller was in elementary school, teachers told her parents they needed to immediately sign up their youngest daughter, who has Down syndrome, for a wait list so the state would

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pay for a day program when she grew up. The teachers predicted a six-year wait.

The Millers have been waiting 10 years. Lilly is now 21 and has aged out of special education programs in the public schools in their hometown of Wichita, Kansas. Her parents, also teachers, have hired a home caregiver. A day program, where she would learn new job skills or flex existing ones while socializing, would cost between \$1,500 and \$2,000 a month, Marvin Miller said.

Across the U.S., hundreds of thousands of children, adolescents and young adults with physical or intellectual disabilities are waiting for state-covered services. In Kansas, a legislative committee approved higher funding Wednesday, and another is expected to consider it Thursday. But even with more funds, it could take years to eliminate the state's waiting lists.

The services, which include day programs, employment assistance, and home care, are designed to foster independence and build work skills. Without them, Marvin Miller said, his youngest daughter isn't getting enough social interaction. "We've actually seen her regress."

"Someday, I won't be around anymore, and that's a parent's greatest fear," Miller said during an interview. "I want her to be at the place where, if something should happen in 15 years when I'm gone, she will still have a community of supports and friends and all the things that we take for granted when we work in jobs and have neighbors."

Parents across the U.S. have been stalled getting services for toddlers who are delayed developmentally. But many parents of children with intellectual or physical disabilities also must think years into the future.

At least 692,000 people with physical or intellectual disabilities are waiting for services in at least 40 states, according to a November 2023 survey by KFF, a health policy research group. Federal law doesn't require states to provide home and community based services, and what they cover varies.

Kansas expects to spend \$776 million under its current budget on such services for the disabled. That funding would have to jump by roughly 54% to about \$1.2 billion annually to eliminate waiting lists.

But Kansas also has seen its budget surpluses balloon since mid-2020 and they're now projected to approach \$4.5 billion by the end of June. Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly and the Republican-controlled Legislature both advocate big tax cuts, although they haven't been able to agree on the details.

Neil Romano, a National Council on Disability member, said it's "simply responsible" to help families so parents can be more productive in their jobs or attend to more family needs — even take weekend breaks.

"You're not just providing help for that family and that child," he said. "You're providing help for the community."

Kansas has separate in-home and community services programs for physically and developmentally disabled residents, together serving about 15,000 people. As of mid-February, the two waiting lists totaled about 7,500 people. That figure has grown 37% over the past five years, even with increases in funding.

Outside Topeka, Rick and Anna Elskamp's oldest daughter Sheridan is now 23, and the family recently received word in December that she was off the waiting list for intellectually disabled Kansas residents — after 10 years. A month later, after more administrative hoops, they said, they were still paying for day services themselves.

They said navigating the state's social services system has been time-consuming and, Rick Elskamp said, "All their acronyms and abbreviations are a whole new language."

The budget committee in the Republican-controlled Kansas Senate is considering a proposal from the Democratic governor for an additional \$23 million to shrink the state's waiting lists by a total of 500 people, with its debate set for Thursday.

When Kelly outlined her proposal earlier this month — weeks after presenting a proposed \$25.6 billion budget without it — Republicans in the GOP-controlled House already had been working on a plan twice as large. The House budget committee approved the larger plan Wednesday.

But disability rights advocates want lawmakers to be even more aggressive, particularly in attacking the more persistent and larger waiting list for people with intellectual disabilities. They'd like to spend roughly \$85 million more in the next budget, reduce both lists by a total of 1,600 people and eliminate both lists in five years.

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Instead of shrinking the waiting list for people with intellectual disabilities by 250 or 500, their plan would reduce it by 1,100 people.

"Very typically, 300 to 400 people can be added to the waiting list in any one year," said Rocky Nichols, executive director of the Disability Rights Center of Kansas, a former legislator. "So 500 slots may not reduce the waiting list much at all."

Oklahoma struggled for years to provide services to residents with intellectual disabilities and had 5,100 people on a waiting list, with some families waiting up to 13 years. With state revenue collections at record highs in 2022, lawmakers increased provider rates by 25% — and poured extra money into covering more people. It hopes to provide services to everyone who was on that list as of this spring.

Kansas lawmakers approved an additional \$283 million over the past five years on home and community-based services — but almost all of it went to increasing rates paid to providers and only \$3 million to shrinking the waiting lists, according to legislative researchers.

Officials said the state needed first to build up its network of providers and make sure they could attract enough workers. That's an issue states must tackle to eliminate waiting lists, said Alice Burns, associate director of KFF's program on the medically uninsured and state Medicaid programs.

"We could make a motion right now to fund all the slots, get rid of all the waiting lists, but we don't have the capacity," Republican state Rep. Les Mason, chair of a separate House committee on social services, said Wednesday. "It'll be a long-term process."

But Nichols and other advocates said Kansas has seen its waiting lists grow despite the extra dollars for providers because it hasn't committed additional funds specifically to covering more individuals. Burns agreed that states have to do that as well.

The funding issues in Kansas aren't likely to be resolved for at least another month. Parents like Miller, Padding and the Elskamps are juggling their advocacy with their jobs and caring for their children.

Sheridan Elskamp's parents said they don't leave her at home alone because cognitively, she's 6 or 7 years old. When she was in high school, they arranged their work schedules so one of them was home when she was out of school and Anna Elskamp took a demotion at her credit union job so that her schedule was flexible.

Marvin Miller considers his family fortunate, although he and his wife haven't been able to save for retirement and he drives a 1999 truck. Besides teaching, he's an ordained Assemblies of God minister, filling in at rural churches or for churches that are between permanent pastors.

"As a society, I think we owe it to take care of..." he said, searching for the right words, "our most vulnerable members, and to help them become successful."

We may be living in the golden age of older filmmakers. This year's Oscars are evidence

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — When Hayao Miyazaki was contemplating whether he would come out of retirement in 2016, he put together a curiously self-critical proposal.

"There's nothing more pathetic than telling the world you'll retire because of your age, then making yet another comeback," wrote the filmmaker, now 83. "Doesn't an elderly person deluding himself that they're still capable, despite their geriatric forgetfulness, prove that they're past their best?"

"You bet it does."

One's prime for artists is much harder to pin down than it is for, say, gymnasts or baseball players. A fastball is much easier to gauge than a film. Stanley Kubrick was 70 when he completed "Eyes Wide Shut." Akira Kurosawa made "Ran" when he was 75. Agnes Varda was 89 when "Faces Places" hit theaters.

But it's a cruel fact of creative life that the lion's share of the greatest works by most filmmakers tend to be made earlier in life. Filmmaking, a rough-and-tumble business that requires an army of collaborators and millions in financing, can be a grueling endeavor. Francis Ford Coppola once said it should be

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done "with all your cards, and all your dice and whatever else you've got." It's not historically been the providence of octogenarians.

We may be living in the golden age of the aged filmmaker, though. Old age may be debated as a liability on the presidential campaign trail, but not at this year's Oscars.

Miyazaki, who fought through his concerns to make "The Boy and the Heron," is the oldest director ever nominated for best animated film. If he wins on March 10, he'll be the oldest winner by more than two decades. "Napoleon," nominated for visual effects and production design, is the latest from 86-year-old workaholic Ridley Scott. Michael Mann, 81, also recently released "Ferrari" (much celebrated but un-nominated). Wim Wenders, 78, put out one of his very best films in "Perfect Days" (nominated for best international film). Meanwhile, Coppola, 84, completed shooting on his self-financed "Megalopolis."

And, of course, Martin Scorsese, 81, had the Osage epic "Killers of the Flower Moon," up for 10 Oscars. Scorsese is the oldest filmmaker ever nominated for best director. At the recent Producers Guild Awards, where he was given a lifetime achievement award, Scorsese recalled seeing Alfred Hitchcock accept the same honor in 1965.

"He said, 'First, when you receive such an award, you want to pinch yourself to make sure it isn't being made posthumously,'" Scorsese recalled.

Is "Killers of the Flower Moon" as good as "Taxi Driver" or "Goodfellas"? That's a hard question to answer and maybe not the right one to ask. Is it essential? Unquestionably.

Marrying the crime film with the Western, "Killers of the Flower Moon" is engaged — as much or more than any nominated film this year — in remaking American tropes and cliches. The daring darkness and the nimbleness of the editing (by Thelma Schoonmaker, 84, nominated for her ninth Oscar) suggest filmmakers half their age.

"I'm curious about everything, still," Scorsese said in an earlier interview. "If I'm curious about something I think I'll find a way. If I hold out and hold up, I'll find a way to try to make something of it on film. But I have to be curious about the subject. My curiosity is still there."

We have never had an older filmmaker quite like Scorsese, just as we hadn't had one like the younger Scorsese. He's spoken repeatedly about urgency, knowing that his time is short. By capitalizing on the desire of streamers to make their cinematic mark, Scorsese's films have only grown in scale and budget as he's gotten older, just as they have in their willingness to pry into the darkest corners of American history.

Many older filmmakers simply aren't offered the opportunity. Directors like Scorsese and the 93-year-old Clint Eastwood (whose latest is due out this year) have typically been the exception in an industry that tends to push out even its most celebrated elders. Buster Keaton, Billy Wilder, Orson Welles and Elaine May all spent their later years struggling to mount projects. In the mid-1970s, Scorsese befriended the great British filmmaker Michael Powell, who likewise was frozen out of the business after 1960's controversial "Peeping Tom." Since then, Scorsese and Schoonmaker — Powell's widow — have led an effort to revive Powell's legacy, including with a just-premiered documentary.

As a generation of American filmmakers from the fabled '70s era of moviemaking extend their careers, one of the defining directors of the '90s (and beyond) has said he plans to stop. Quentin Tarantino, 60, has said his 10th film, "The Movie Critic," will be his final feature. It's a stance he's maintained for at least 15 years, arguing that he didn't want to dilute his filmography with the "lousy" films that "most directors" peter out with.

"I'm an entertainer, I want to leave you wanting more. I don't want to work to diminishing returns," Tarantino told CNN in 2022. "I don't want to become this old man who's out of touch, I'm already feeling a bit like an old man out of touch when it comes to the current movies that are out right now, and that's exactly what happens."

Tarantino's declaration has cofounded some of his contemporaries.

"I could never do that," Paul Thomas Anderson, now 53, said in 2018. "As long as I'm able to do it, I'm going to do it." Christopher Nolan, also 53, whose "Oppenheimer" is expected to win best picture at the Oscars, has called Tarantino's attitude "a very purist point of view."

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Asked if he's simply built differently than Tarantino, Scorsese told The Associated Press in October: "I am." "He's a writer. It's a different thing. I come up with stories. I get attracted to stories through other people. All different means, different ways. And so I think it's a different process," Scorsese said. "I respect writers and I wish I could. I wish I could just be in a room and create these novels, not films, novels."

The debate gets at the heart of an age-old quandary: Is it better to have youthful passion or the wisdom of experience? At least for filmmakers like Scorsese, Scott and Mann, compulsion seems to never dim. Scott, who later this year will release a "Gladiator" sequel, is notorious for a pace that would exhaust most younger directors. "Every department," Scott told Deadline last year, "has to keep up with the speed that I work."

"Ridley Scott is the single biggest argument for a second term for Joe Biden," Sony chief Tom Rothman told The New Yorker.

Mann, too, is renown for relentlessness. "Ferrari," a film he's been trying to make for 30 years, is a prime example of the pleasures in following a master filmmaker through various stages of a career. "Ferrari," about a plate-spinning Enzo Ferrari in the tumultuous lead-up to a deadly cross-country race, extends Mann's lifelong obsession with obsession.

"I know for myself, I'm better at doing a picture that has me on the frontier," Mann said in an earlier interview. "Where it's something I haven't done before."

At the Academy Awards, directors won't be the only ones setting records. John Williams, nominated for best score for the 49th time, is, at 92, the category's oldest nominee ever. Others are making historic returns, too. Robert De Niro, 80, nominated for his supporting performance in "Killers of the Flower Moon," set a new record for longest span between first and latest acting nominations. Forty-nine years ago, he was nominated for "The Godfather Part II."

As for Miyazaki, "The Boy and Heron" has been celebrated as if not the absolute best by the anime master, then very nearly so. Opening with the firebombing of Tokyo during World War II, it could be called the most personal film for Miyazaki, whose early memories are of bombed-out Japanese cities. It's also a movie that, while full of poignance, is as lushly and uniquely imaginative as his earlier masterworks, like "Spirited Away" or "Kiki's Delivery Service."

Before the film had reached U.S. theaters, where it was Miyazaki's biggest hit yet, word had already leaked out: Miyazaki has already started work on another.

Do we judge these artists' earlier work against today's? Or just be grateful that they're still working — and at such a high level. The director Guillermo del Toro, introducing "The Boy and the Heron" at the Toronto International Film Festival, chose sheer gratitude at being alive when Miyazaki is still making movies.

"We are privileged enough," Del Toro said, "to be living in a time where Mozart is composing symphonies."

Pope Francis had diagnostic tests in a Rome hospital after his weekly audience

By PAOLO SANTALUCIA undefined

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis, who recently had the flu, was brought to a hospital in Rome for diagnostic testing after the papal audience Wednesday, the Vatican said, without giving further details.

The pope arrived at the Gemelli Hospital on Tiber Island in a small white Fiat 500, leaving again under escort in the same car after a short visit.

Earlier in the day, the 87-year-old pope was pushed in a wheelchair into the audience hall at the Vatican, appearing weary as he dropped heavily into his seat. In recent weeks he has walked the short distance to his chair, but he has been struggling with mild flu symptoms the past week.

The pope also canceled appointments Saturday and Monday due to the flu, but appeared as usual for the Sunday blessing from a window overlooking St. Peter's Square.

Last week, Francis coughed repeatedly as he presided over Ash Wednesday services at a Roman church, and opted not to participate in the traditional procession that inaugurates the church's Lenten season.

This time of year in 2020, just as the coronavirus pandemic was starting to hit Italy, Francis also suffered a bad cold that forced him to cancel several days of official audiences and his participation in the Vatican's annual spiritual retreat. The Vatican had already scrubbed the retreat for this year in favor of personal spiritual exercises.

The Argentine pope had part of one lung removed as a young man because of a respiratory infection, and in 2021 had a chunk of his colon removed because of an intestinal inflammation. He has been using a wheelchair and cane since last year because of strained knee ligaments and a small knee fracture that have made walking and standing difficult.

The Pope used his brief words at the end of Wednesday's audience to mark the 25th anniversary of the ratification of the Anti-Personnel Mines Convention, expressing his "closeness to the numerous victims of these insidious devices that remind us of the dramatic cruelty of war."

He also appealed for peace in the Middle East, Ukraine and prayed for the victims of attacks in Burkina Faso and Haiti.

At the end of the audience, the pope spent about an hour greeting the faithful from his wheelchair, stopping to talk, bless babies and exchange gifts.

The funeral of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny will be on Friday, spokesperson says

By The Associated Press undefined

The funeral of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who died earlier this month in a remote Arctic penal colony, will take place Friday in Moscow after several locations declined to host the service, his spokesperson said.

His funeral will be held at a church in Moscow's southeast Maryino district on Friday afternoon, Kira Yarmysh said Wednesday. The burial is to be at a nearby cemetery.

Navalny died in mid-February in one of Russia's harshest penal facilities. Russian authorities haven't announced the cause of his death at age 47, but many Western leaders have already blamed it on Russian President Vladimir Putin.

His widow, Yulia Navalnaya, accused Putin and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin of trying to block a public funeral. "We don't want any special treatment — just to give people the opportunity to say farewell to Alexei in a normal way," she wrote on X, previously Twitter.

Yarmysh described the difficulties his team encountered in trying to find a site for a funeral, saying that most venues claimed they were fully booked, with some "refusing when we mention the surname 'Navalny,'" and one disclosing that "funeral agencies were forbidden to work with us."

Ivan Zhdanov, the director of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, said the funeral was initially planned for Thursday — the day of Putin's annual state-of-the-nation address — but no venue would agree to hold it then.

"The real reason is clear. The Kremlin understands that nobody will need Putin and his message on the day we say farewell to Alexei," Zhdanov wrote on his messaging app channel.

In an interview with the independent Russian news site Meduza on Wednesday, Zhdanov said authorities were pressuring Navalny's relatives to "have a quiet family funeral" and move the burial to the Khovanskoye cemetery on Moscow's southwestern outskirts.

"They are again blackmailing relatives and saying: either hold a quiet family funeral, or nothing will really work out for you," Zhdanov said.

He said Navalny's lawyer, Vasily Dubkov, who helped Navalny's mother retrieve her son's body, was briefly detained on Tuesday "as some kind of suspicious person" when he went to visit the morgue, where Zhdanov said there currently is a strong police presence.

Zhdanov declined to comment on the circumstances of Navalny's death, but repeated claims by close Navalny associate Maria Pevchikh that there had been negotiations for a possible prisoner exchange in-

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volving Navalny before his death.

The exchange "was at the final stage" and would have taken place "with the mediation of the United Arab Emirates and Roman Abramovich," Zhdanov said.

Claims about negotiations for a prisoner exchange, which were repeated on social media by other Navalny aides, could not be independently confirmed.

Shortly after the announcement of the funeral plans, Navalny's widow addressed European lawmakers in Strasbourg.

Speaking at the European Parliament, she confirmed that her husband would be buried on Friday and expressed fears that the police might interfere.

"I'm not sure yet whether it will be peaceful or whether police will arrest those who have come to say goodbye to my husband," Navalnaya said.

Appearing tearful at some points amid applause from lawmakers but largely resolute, Navalnaya said her husband's death "showed everyone that Putin is capable of anything, and that you cannot negotiate with him."

She appealed to the European Parliament to be "innovative" in its approach to the Russian president and those close to him.

"You cannot hurt Putin with another resolution or another set of sanctions," she said, urging lawmakers instead to "apply the methods of fighting organized crime, not political competition."

She asked the parliament to investigate "financial machinations" and "mafia associates" in their countries and "discreet lawyers and financiers who are helping Putin and his friends to hide money."

Navalnaya and Navalny were married for more than 20 years, and she was at his side as he helped lead the biggest protests in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In introducing Navalnaya, the president of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, paid tribute to Navalny.

"For many in Russia and outside, he represented hope. Hope in better days. Hope in a free Russia. Hope in the future," she said.

Our ancient animal ancestors had tails. Why don't we?

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Our very ancient animal ancestors had tails. Why don't we?

Somewhere around 20 million or 25 million years ago, when apes diverged from monkeys, our branch of the tree of life shed its tail. From Darwin's time, scientists have wondered why — and how — this happened.

Now, researchers have identified at least one of the key genetic tweaks that led to this change.

"We found a single mutation in a very important gene," said Bo Xia, a geneticist at the Broad Institute and co-author of a study published Wednesday in the journal *Nature*.

The researchers compared the genomes of six species of apes, including humans, and 15 species of monkeys with tails to pinpoint key differences between the groups. Once they identified a significant mutation, they tested their theory by using the gene-editing tool CRISPR to tweak the same spot in mouse embryos. Those mice were born without tails.

Xia cautioned that other genetic changes may also play a role in losing tails.

Another mystery: Did having no tails actually help these ape ancestors -- and eventually, humans — survive? Or was it just a chance mutation in a population that thrived for other reasons?

"It could be random chance, but it could have brought a big evolutionary advantage," said Miriam Konkel, an evolutionary geneticist at Clemson University, who was not involved in the study.

As to why having no tails may have helped, there are many tantalizing theories — including some that link being tailless to humans eventually learning to walk upright.

Rick Potts, who directs the Smithsonian Institution's Human Origins Project and was not involved in the research, suggests being tailless may have been a first step toward some apes adopting a vertical body posture, even before they left the trees.

Not all apes live on the ground today. Orangutans and gibbons are tailless apes that still live in trees. But Potts notes that they move very differently than monkeys, who scamper along the tops of branches, using their tails for balance. Those apes hang below branches, swinging between them while hanging largely upright.

New York University biologist Itai Yanai, a co-author of the study, said that losing our tails was clearly a major transition. But the only way to certainly know the reason "would be to invent a time machine," he said.

Can conservative Latin American populists motivate the Hispanic vote? Republicans are counting on it

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

OXON HILL, Md. (AP) — On a recent evening outside Washington, the president of Argentina had the eyes and ears of a conservative crowd that had gathered to listen to Donald Trump. In a raspy voice, Javier Milei called out, "Hola a todos," or "Hello, everyone," before introducing himself as a lion.

"What a beautiful day to make the left tremble," Milei joked.

His eccentrics may have seemed novel to those in the crowd unfamiliar with how he has used lions as his brand to symbolize his fierce stance against socialism, but the far-right populist has become well-known among Latinos in the United States since winning the presidency last year. He was joined at the Conservative Political Action Conference by El Salvador's millennial president, Nayib Bukele, who delighted the crowd with a speech in fluent English deriding philanthropist George Soros and "globalism."

The Republican Party is aligning with some Latin American populists as a way of injecting star power and the political landscape of immigrants' home countries into this year's U.S. election. Having made inroads with Cuban and Venezuelan Americans in South Florida by attacking the self-declared socialist leaders of those countries, GOP leaders are replicating that model by promoting ties between Trump and leaders who are well known by Spanish-speaking voters across the country.

Mercedes Schlapp, a former Trump White House aide, told Spanish-language newscasters that Democrats have been nurturing the Latino vote for a long time, but when Trump was seeking reelection in 2020, he told his strategists to "do whatever you can to get the Latino vote." Schlapp said that pursuing the popular elected leaders to join the recent conservative gathering is part of that effort.

At nearly 2.5 million people, Salvadorans outnumber Cubans in the U.S., according to the Pew Hispanic Research Center. The Argentine diaspora is much smaller. But both Bukele and Milei have grabbed the attention of immigrants from Latin America as populist counterweights to the leftist strongmen scattered across Central and South America.

Jose Aliaga, a Peruvian immigrant who attended CPAC as a Republican leader of a township in Michigan, compared Bukele after his speech to Trump, who is closing in on his third GOP nomination and a rematch with Democratic President Joe Biden.

"Not only does Bukele say all the right things, he has results to show," Aliaga said. "Bukele and Trump have the same message. They want to stop crime, they want to improve the economy, offer more jobs and give everyone the opportunity to get ahead.

"They both want to rule with an iron fist, but one speaks Spanish and the other speaks English," he said.

Milei campaigned with a chainsaw as his prop to campaign on drastic cuts in Argentina and has declared his admiration for Trump. Milei didn't bring the chainsaw to CPAC, but when he saw Trump between their speeches, Milei rushed to Trump screaming "president!" and gave him a close hug before they posed for pictures. According to a video posted by one of his aides, Trump told him, "Make Argentina Great Again," referencing Milei's Trump-inspired campaign slogan.

The day before his visit, Milei met in Buenos Aires with Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other Biden administration officials. According to one of Milei's ministers, U.S. Ambassador Marc Stanley, a Texas lawyer and Democratic donor, tried to dissuade Milei from appearing alongside Trump, saying CPAC was a "very political" event.

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The State Department didn't respond to a request for comment. A spokesperson for the U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires said, "We make no comments on private meetings."

Republican Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, a Cuban American who has endorsed Trump, traveled to Argentina's Casa Rosada last week to meet Milei and asked him to autograph a mug with the slogan "No hay plata," for "There is no money," which Milei used in campaign to say the country will no longer subsidize public programs.

Eduardo Verástegui is a conservative activist who rose to fame in the 1990s as a Mexican telenovela heartthrob and tried to run independently for Mexico's presidency. He describes Trump as a friend and was invited in 2020 to advise him on Hispanic issues.

"Having them here on an election year is unique. It can awaken the Hispanic community in the U.S.," Verástegui said. "I think this could be a turning point."

Maca Casado, a spokeswoman for Biden's campaign, criticized Trump's plan to appeal to Latinos, saying his policies as president and proposals as candidates are anti-immigrant.

"We are talking about a man who has consistently demonized Latinos for his political gain, who used his time in office to attack the Latino community, who has even parroted dictators and said immigrants were poisoning the blood of the country," Casado said in a statement. "Our community knows the truth: The party of Trump doesn't give a damn about Latinos."

Benjamin Gedan, director of the Latin America Program at the Washington-based Wilson Center, warned that these leaders are "either intentionally antagonizing the White House or making an easily avoidable diplomatic misstep."

Bukele was perhaps even more popular at CPAC, followed by dozens of supporters after his speech Thursday who were blowing horns and shouting his name.

A Spanish-language journalist from Voz Media, a conservative outlet based in Texas, approached Bukele to ask questions about Biden and Trump. Bukele said the Biden administration "has not been interested in working with us." He said the relations between the two countries under Trump were "much better," but he stopped short of throwing his support for Trump. "I leave that to the people."

Bukele has become massively popular in El Salvador, as a result of his war on gangs that has led to 76,000 detentions, and among Salvadorans in the U.S., who can be found in large numbers in California, Texas and New York.

Bukele made a point in his speech to call out the Clinton administration for deporting members of a gang that was formed in the U.S. by Salvadorans who had immigrated escaping the 1979-1992 civil war. That gang was MS-13, which is often misunderstood as having been founded in El Salvador.

A Bukele adviser said the leader wanted to come to speak to conservatives to promote his efforts to turn around El Salvador. Homicide rates have fallen sharply and the country went from being one of the most violent to one of the safest in the Americas.

In a hotel right across the venue where conservatives met, two hotel maids knew exactly the time Bukele was set to appear and were hoping to catch a glimpse of the leader, saying their native El Salvador had changed.

When asked if they were equally excited to see Trump, they smiled and shook their heads.

Lower auto prices are finally giving Americans a break after years of inflationary increases

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Price increases for cars and trucks in the United States, which helped fuel inflation for nearly three years, are slowing and in some cases falling, helping cool overall inflation and giving frustrated Americans more hope of finding an affordable vehicle.

Behind the price slowdown is a vastly expanded number of vehicles on dealer lots after years of severe shortages. With more autos available, the pressures that had sent prices surging have eased. At the end

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of January, American dealers had 2.61 million new cars, trucks and SUVs on their lots, according to Cox Automotive. By contrast, the supply a year ago was just 1.74 million.

Though inventories of new autos are still well below the roughly 4 million level that prevailed before the pandemic, analysts and dealers say the rising availability suggests that 2024 will be the most affordable year of the past five in which to buy a new car or truck.

"When the lots are empty, there's not much of a bargaining position from a consumer standpoint," said Glenn Mears, owner of a four-dealership group around Canton and Dover, Ohio. "But now that we have inventory, it's much more competitive. Much more like it has been historically."

The price spikes that followed the 2020 pandemic were caused mainly by a worldwide shortage of computer chips, which are vital to auto manufacturing and had forced plants to curb production. As vehicle availability shrank, prices soared. By 2021, some dealers had no new cars at all in stock. Many frustrated buyers turned instead to the used market. The resulting surge in demand for used cars caused those prices to surge, too, elbowing many people out of the auto market entirely.

But with computer chips now abundant, auto production is rising steadily, especially since the United Auto Workers returned to work after strikes last fall.

The average price paid for a new vehicle in the United States fell 1.2% in January from a year earlier, to \$47,338, according to data collected by Edmunds.com. That's down 2.4% from a peak of \$48,516 set in December 2022. Though the drop is relatively modest, analysts predict that prices will keep falling this year, especially for new vehicles, as availability grows and automakers are compelled to lower prices.

The average price of a used vehicle — \$27,297 as of last month — is down 3% from a year ago and 12% below the peak of \$31,095 in April 2022. Analysts expect used-auto prices to fall further before rising slightly once the peak buying season resumes in the spring.

In January, automaker discounts on new vehicles, including rebates and low-interest financing, averaged \$1,469 per vehicle — five times what they had averaged a year earlier.

"What we anticipate is that there will be significantly more discounting, more incentives," said Michelle Krebs, executive analyst for Cox Automotive. "We're already seeing that."

When Gary Morrow of Pickerington, Ohio, started shopping for a new SUV earlier this month, he wasn't prepared to receive any discount at all. But he was pleasantly surprised when Larry Scott's dealership in Columbus, Ohio, offered a \$500 cash incentive, plus a five-year 4% loan — far below the roughly 7% average new-car loan — on a Hyundai Palisade SUV that cost him around \$47,000.

"You can't look a gift horse in the mouth," said Morrow, a retired teacher. "I was pretty comfortable with the final figure."

Thanks to the lower-cost financing, Morrow said he managed to keep some money he had set aside for the new vehicle invested, where he hopes it will deliver a higher return than the rate on his 4% loan.

New vehicle prices didn't rise at all from December to January, government figures show. Still, they're up more than 21% since the start of 2020, when the pandemic erupted and triggered severe parts shortages. For used vehicles, the average price dropped 3.3% last month, though at just over \$27,000 it remains 32% above the pre-pandemic average.

In contrast to conventional gasoline-powered vehicles, the average price of an electric vehicle actually rose 2% during the past year to \$60,630, according to Edmunds, despite a growing supply of EVs. But analysts say that sharp price cuts by Ford and Tesla, along with the introduction of some more affordable models, should help lower average EV prices.

Scott, the general manager of Germain Hyundai in Columbus, said that before the pandemic, he typically had 400 to 500 vehicles on hand. That figure plummeted at the height of the computer chip shortage to just 30-50 vehicles during some months. By last year, his average supply was about 150. Now, it's up to 250 to 275 — enough to compete with rival dealers who, like Scott, are offering discounts.

Even with prices edging down, Ivan Drury, director of insights at Edmunds, doesn't foresee sales of new vehicles rising dramatically this year. Still-high loan rates mean that monthly payments remain burdensome for many at a time when buyers are seeking affordable options. Edmunds envisions U.S. sales rising a

modest 0.5%, to about 15.7 million, this year, still short of pre-pandemic highs around 17 million.

Automakers, Drury said, are offering discounts mainly for slower-selling vehicles. But he said he thinks discounting will extend to additional vehicles in the coming months, meaning that buyers who don't need a vehicle right now might be wise to wait.

Unlike with new vehicles, there's still a limited supply of used cars, trucks and SUVs, which will likely serve to limit any price declines. That's mainly because the sluggish sales of new cars since 2020 has resulted in fewer trade-ins and vehicles coming off leases into the market, thereby keeping used-vehicle supplies tight.

Prices for some 1- and 2-year-old vehicles, Drury said, are nearly as expensive as the prices automakers are charging for new vehicles. Low-mileage 2023 Honda Accord EX models, for example, are being advertised at close to \$28,000. At \$31,000, the base price for a new one, including shipping, is not much more.

With an average used-vehicle loan rate of 11.5%, Drury said, it might be more cost-effective to pay slightly more for a new vehicle in order to secure a reduced rate from an automaker's finance arm.

For now, popular brands known for reliability, like Toyota and Honda, aren't offering discounts as generous as others.

"If you're willing to jump ship," Drury said, "be brand-agnostic. You can find a deal. They do exist."

How Hakeem Jeffries' Black Baptist upbringing and deep-rooted faith shapes his House leadership

By DARREN SANDS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Speaker Mike Johnson and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries stood together at the annual National Prayer Breakfast — an opportunity, in the words of one introductory speaker, to "put our political differences aside."

Such differences are vast between Johnson, a staunchly conservative Republican, and Jeffries, a hero to liberal Democrats. But at the prayer breakfast earlier this month, they collegially took turns reading Scripture — evoking how their shared Christianity confronts evil.

It was a fleeting moment of unity for the two Baptist leaders who work side-by-side in the House but are miles apart politically and theologically. Jeffries, whose faith is rooted in the Black social gospel, has not been shy — just not as outspoken as Johnson regarding the role faith plays in his political duties.

Jeffries spoke in depth with The Associated Press about his religious upbringing, which was centered at Cornerstone Baptist Church in the New York City borough of Brooklyn. He declined several invitations to comment on present-day dynamics in the House, including the lingering cross-party tensions brought on by Donald Trump's presidency and his efforts to contest the 2020 election.

However, Jeffries' religious commitment while in office has been noticed by his political peers.

"There's nothing that the public can detect more clearly than sincerity, especially young people — they know when you're real. In terms of being a person of faith and justice, Hakeem Jeffries is real," said former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi.

Jeffries, a New York Democrat who became minority leader in November 2022, handed the speaker's gavel to Johnson, a Louisiana Republican, on Oct. 25.

Outside of that ceremonial moment, the two hardly interact in public. When pressed at a recent news conference to characterize their relationship, Jeffries said it was "functional."

Johnson, 52, is a Southern Baptist — one of the white conservative evangelicals who are the majority in America's largest Protestant denomination. While celebrated by many on the Christian right, Johnson's expressions of faith and past legal advocacy have faced extensive scrutiny, including his positions against abortion and LGBTQ+ rights.

If anyone was curious about his views, Johnson told Fox News host Sean Hannity, "Go pick up a Bible off your shelf and read it — that's my worldview."

Jeffries also is deeply familiar with the Bible. For example, he has shared on social media a passage from the New Testament's Book of Ephesians evoking the need to "wrestle ... against spiritual wickedness

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in high places.”

For Jeffries, 53, his leadership in the House traces back to his formative days growing up and serving at Cornerstone, a historically Black congregation which he still attends.

“It certainly was an important part of my mother’s life, and therefore my younger brother’s and myself,” he told the AP.

Cornerstone in its heyday was the spiritual home for many grandchildren and great-grandchildren of enslaved African Americans who fled to Brooklyn from the South for better opportunities, including war-industry jobs. The church has long been part of the National Baptist Convention, the largest Black denomination in the U.S.

Cornerstone — and the Black Church more broadly — taught Jeffries how to build consensus, said the Rev. Al Sharpton, the civil rights leader who met Jeffries as a young lawyer. Navigating competing in-house constituencies and varied personalities gave him the temperament needed to lead a diverse, complex body of people, Sharpton said.

“He became committed to doing what he thought was right, rather than doing what was politically advantageous for his own benefit,” Sharpton added.

In his youth, Jeffries became one of Cornerstone’s white-gloved, dues-paying ushers, tending to crying babies and handling neighborhood traffic issues during worship services. Hakeem said that being an usher “taught me how to count, engage and serve.”

Jeffries said his maternal grandmother, a longtime Cornerstone member, often shared a prediction: “I think one day you’re going to be a preacher.”

Her grandson took another path of service, but Jeffries did make certain to get the blessing of two Brooklyn pastors, including Cornerstone’s, before entering his first New York legislative race.

Over the decades, Jeffries has been inspired by numerous Black leaders whose civil rights advocacy was fueled by their interpretation of the Gospel. Among them was the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. — a friend of Hakeem’s childhood pastor, the Rev. Sandy F. Ray.

Harry S. Wright, Cornerstone’s pastor after Ray’s death in 1979, said Jeffries’ upbringing at the church shaped him for a life of service.

“The emphasis was on being a wonderful person ... with an idea that you make your life count for something with your commitment to make the world better,” Wright said. “With his drive, training and genius, he just got into the right lanes, and we see the fruit of it in the kind of person that he is today.”

Jeffries came of age during an uptick in police brutality cases in New York and elsewhere. He says his decision to attend law school, and dedicate himself to the fight for racial justice, was motivated by the 1992 acquittal of four white policemen in Los Angeles after they had been shown on video brutally beating an African American man, Rodney King.

After getting his law degree, Jeffries spent 10 years in private practice before winning a seat in the New York State Assembly in 2007.

Since entering Congress in 2013, Jeffries has been true to his roots. For instance, he was lead sponsor of a 2015 measure outlawing police use of the chokehold and other tactics hindering a person’s breathing.

Early in his congressional career, when Jeffries needed help injecting theology into one of his speeches, he asked for the advice of Rep. Emmanuel Cleaver II, D-Mo.

Cleaver, an ordained United Methodist minister, said that kind of deference to himself and toward late former colleagues like John Lewis, John Conyers and Elijah Cummings endeared Jeffries to the Congressional Black Caucus.

“You know, this guy seems a little bit different,” Cleaver recalled telling a colleague. “One of the things I liked was he wasn’t trying to (wear) his Christianity on his sleeve.”

Nancy Pelosi hopes that Democratic success in November will enable Jeffries to claim her former position as speaker of the House. She depicts him as a man of deep faith who believes there’s a spark of divinity in everyone.

That ethos, Pelosi said, is clear in “Hakeem’s attitude, his language and the rest, and in fact, his beautiful

speech from the Bible on the podium when he was handing over the gavel to the new speaker – which he'll be receiving back in about 10 months."

In that speech, Jeffries said, "Every time we have faced adversity, the good news here in America is that we have always overcome. ... That is why America remains the last best hope on Earth."

About as many abortions are happening in the US monthly as before Roe was overturned, report finds

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

The number of abortions performed each month is about the same as before the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade and the nationwide right to abortion more than a year and a half ago, a new report finds.

The latest edition of the #WeCount report conducted for the Society of Family Planning, a nonprofit organization that promotes research on abortion and contraception, finds that between 81,150 and 88,620 abortions took place each month from July through September of last year, the most recent period for which survey results are available. Those numbers are just slightly lower than the monthly average of about 86,800 from April through June 2022, before Roe and just after was overturned.

But abortion data is seasonal, and the same survey found more abortions across the U.S. in the spring months of 2023 than it did in the period the year before leading up to the court's decision.

The report also finds that prescriptions of abortion pills by telemedicine have become common, accounting for about one in every six abortions in the most recent three months of survey results.

"Even when a state bans abortion, people continue to need and seek abortion care," Alison Norris, a professor at Ohio State University's College of Public Health and one of the co-chairs of the study, said in a statement. "We can't let the overall consistent number of abortions nationally obscure the incredible unmet need and disastrous impact of abortion bans on people who already have the least access."

The report estimates that if states had not been allowed to ban abortion, there would have been a total of 120,000 more during the survey period in the 14 states where bans on abortion at all stages of pregnancy are now in place.

Although the number of monthly abortions has dropped to nearly zero in states with bans, they have risen in states that allow abortion, including Florida, Illinois and Kansas, which border states with bans.

The tracking effort collects monthly data from providers across the country, creating a snapshot of abortion trends after Roe v. Wade was overturned. In some states, a portion of the data is estimated. The effort makes data public with less than a six-month lag, giving a picture of trends far faster than annual reports from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, where the most recent report covers abortion in 2021.

The report does not cover self-managed abortions obtained outside the formal health care system — such as if someone gets abortion pills from a friend without a prescription.

The Supreme Court's Dobbs v. Jackson ruling in June 2022 brought about immediate change in state policies. Currently, 14 states are enforcing bans on abortion in all stages of pregnancy and two more have bans that kick in after the first six weeks — often before women realize they're pregnant. Other Republican-controlled states have imposed lighter restrictions. Enforcement of some bans has been put on hold by courts.

Meanwhile, most Democrat-controlled states have taken steps to protect access to abortion. Several have executive orders or laws that seek to keep states with bans from reaching across state lines in abortion-related investigations. And five — Colorado, Massachusetts, New York, Vermont and Washington — have laws seeking to protect providers who give abortion care via telehealth.

The report's total numbers includes cases where providers in those states prescribed medication abortion to patients in states with abortion bans or restrictions on the pill versions in its national count but does not break down how many there were by state.

The U.S. Supreme Court is considering whether mifepristone, one of the two drugs most commonly prescribed in combination to cause abortions was properly approved.

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Today in History: February 29

Hattie McDaniel becomes first Black actor to win an Oscar

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Feb. 29, the 60th day of 2024. There are 306 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On February 29, 1940, Hattie McDaniel became the first Black actor to win an Academy Award when she took best supporting actress for "Gone With the Wind," which won eight Oscars overall including best picture.

On this date:

In 1504, Christopher Columbus, stranded in Jamaica during his fourth voyage to the West, used a correctly predicted lunar eclipse to frighten hostile natives into providing food for his crew.

In 1796, President George Washington proclaimed Jay's Treaty, which settled some outstanding differences with Britain, in effect.

In 1892, the United States and Britain agreed to submit to arbitration their dispute over seal-hunting rights in the Bering Sea. (A commission later ruled in favor of Britain.)

In 1904, bandleader Jimmy Dorsey was born in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania.

In 1916, singer, actor and TV personality Dinah Shore was born Frances Rose Shore in Winchester, Tennessee. (Shore, who claimed March 1, 1917 as her birthdate, died in 1994 just days before she would have turned 78.)

In 1936, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a second Neutrality Act as he appealed to American businesses not to increase exports to belligerents.

In 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower announced he would seek a second term of office. Serial killer Aileen Wuornos was born in Rochester, Michigan (she was executed by the state of Florida in 2002).

In 1960, the first Playboy Club, featuring waitresses clad in "bunny" outfits, opened in Chicago. Serial killer Richard Ramirez was born in El Paso, Texas (he died in 2013 while awaiting execution in California).

In 1968, at the Grammy Awards, the 5th Dimension's "Up, Up and Away" won record of the year for 1967, while album of the year honors went to The Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band."

In 1980, former Israeli foreign minister Yigal Allon, who had played an important role in the Jewish state's fight for independence, died at age 61.

In 1984, Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau announced he was stepping down after more than 15 combined years in power.

In 1996, Daniel Green was convicted in Lumberton, North Carolina, of murdering James R. Jordan, the father of basketball star Michael Jordan, during a 1993 roadside holdup. (Green and an accomplice, Larry Martin Demery, were sentenced to life in prison.)

In 2012, Davy Jones the heartthrob singer who helped propel the made-for-TV rock band The Monkees to the top of the pop charts, died in Stuart, Florida at age 66.

In 2016, Justice Clarence Thomas broke 10 years of courtroom silence and posed questions during a Supreme Court oral argument dealing with gun rights, provoking gasps from the audience.

Today's Birthdays: Former astronaut Jack Lousma is 88. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople is 84. Motivational speaker Tony Robbins is 64. Legal affairs blogger Eugene Volokh is 56. Actor Antonio Sabato Jr. is 52. Poet, musician and hip-hop artist Saul Williams is 52. Rapper Ja Rule is 48. Singer-musician Mark Foster (Foster the People) is 40. Former NHL goaltender Cam Ward is 40.