

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 1 of 82

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 News Headlines](#)
- [4- Land Auction Ad](#)
- [5- Groton Area boys advance to SoDak16](#)
- [18- South Dakota Average Gas Prices](#)
- [19- Drought Monitor](#)
- [20- SD Search Light: Funding support for counties whittled down from summer recommendations](#)
- [21- SD SearchLight: Lawmakers unwilling to accept defeat on Medicaid expansion](#)
- [23- SD SearchLight: Who wants the U.S. Supreme Court to limit abortion pill access? Here's the list.](#)
- [26- Weather Pages](#)
- [31- Daily Devotional](#)
- [32- Subscription Form](#)
- [33- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [34- News from the Associated Press](#)

## 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.  
District 4 AAU Wrestling Tournament in Redfield

## Sunday, March 3

Groton Legion hosting district meeting.  
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 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.

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



*"There will come a time when you believe everything is finished. Yet that will be the beginning."*  
LOUIS L'AMOUR

## Monday, March 4

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

## Tuesday, March 5

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

**OPEN:** Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.  
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# 1440

## Musk Sues OpenAI

Elon Musk is suing Microsoft-backed OpenAI and its CEO, Sam Altman, for allegedly breaching an agreement by prioritizing profits over the ChatGPT maker's founding mission of benefiting the public. The lawsuit pits two of the world's prominent tech leaders against each other over the future of artificial intelligence.

In partnership with [smartasset™](#)

Musk, who leads Tesla, SpaceX, and X (formerly Twitter), among other ventures, was a founding member of OpenAI, helping to form the nonprofit research lab in 2015 alongside Altman and OpenAI cofounder Greg Brockman. Musk resigned from the board in 2018, partly due to clashes over plans that year to create a for-profit arm of OpenAI. Microsoft, which began investing in OpenAI in 2019, has invested at least \$13B into the company and has a 49% stake in its for-profit arm's earnings. The for-profit entity is currently valued at \$80B.

The suit alleges OpenAI's partnership with Microsoft runs counter to its original goal of having a public, open-source artificial intelligence platform. Musk's suit seeks an injunction to prevent anyone, including Microsoft, from benefiting from OpenAI's technology.

### **The US plans to begin airdropping aid into Gaza in coming days.**

President Joe Biden announced the decision Friday, a day after more than 100 Palestinians were reportedly killed and hundreds of others wounded during a string of events involving Israeli troops at an aid delivery route. Conflicting reports describe the cause of the incident and the subsequent casualties; the United Nations and European Union are pushing for an independent investigation.

Editor's note: In Friday's digest, we mischaracterized the chaotic scene in Gaza City described above. The number of deaths and injuries attributable to gunfire versus the crowd surge was at the time, and remains, unclear. See an overview [here](#).

### **Thousands gather for Navalny's funeral in Moscow.**

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was laid to rest in Moscow Friday, drawing thousands of his supporters to pay tribute. Navalny died two weeks ago in an Arctic prison while serving multiple sentences for charges including extremism. Prison officials have claimed the 47-year-old died of sudden death syndrome, a catch-all term for various causes of cardiac arrest.

### **Fashion icon and New York designer Iris Apfel dies at 102.**

Apfel, a self-described "geriatric starlet," was known for her eclectic style and oversized glasses (see photos). She had nearly 3 million followers on her Instagram, was the subject of a 2014 documentary called "Iris," and once had her clothes featured in an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Between 1950 to 1992, Iris owned an international textile firm with her late husband, Carl, and helped restore the White House for nine presidents. The cause of her death wasn't disclosed.

### **CVS, Walgreens to begin selling abortion pill mifepristone.**

The pharmacy chains will start dispensing the pill as soon as next week in a phased rollout in states where it is legal. Mifepristone has been around for more than 20 years and is one of two drugs used for medically induced abortions. The Supreme Court will consider a lower court ruling this spring that weakened the Food and Drug Administration's 2016 and 2021 decisions to make the abortion pill widely available.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 3 of 82

## **CDC officially ends five-day COVID-19 quarantine guidance.**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention no longer requires people to stay at home for five days after testing positive for COVID-19. The agency said people don't need to quarantine if they have been fever-free and without symptoms for at least 24 hours and take precautionary measures, like wearing a mask. The new guidance is similar to recommendations for other common viruses, like the flu.

## **Boeing in talks to buy fuselage maker Spirit AeroSystems.**

The Wichita, Kansas-based Spirit AeroSystems was previously owned by Boeing until a spin-off in 2005. Boeing and Spirit AeroSystems have been under scrutiny for a door panel blowout during an Alaska Airlines flight in January and quality issues surrounding Boeing 737 Max models. Spirit AeroSystems is also considering selling its Northern Ireland business, which supplies parts to Boeing's rival Airbus.

New slug species discovered off southwest coast of UK.

The new slug species, named *Pleurobranchaea britannica*, is between two and five centimeters long and is a type of side-gill sea slug. The slugs were first found in 2018 and 2019 by researchers from the UK and Spain but identified as a new species only recently, according to an announcement Friday.

## **Humankind(ness)**

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Roger from Somewhere in the US.

"I am the daytime cashier at my local Walgreens. Yesterday, a customer purchased a \$50 Target gift card among a few other items, and at the end of the transaction, handed the card and activation code to me, and said, 'This is for you. You're a good guy.' I was momentarily stunned—literally!—then said, 'Wait, it's \$50...' But he had already turned and walked out of the store. I don't remember a previous memorable interaction with him, and don't even know if I'd recognize him when he came back. It was a totally unexpected (possibly even undeserved) act of kindness."

## 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 141<sup>st</sup> St. Watch for auction signs on:

**THURSDAY, MARCH 14<sup>th</sup>, 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](http://www.burlagepeterson.com), or contact Auctioneers.

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

**TERMS:** Visit [burlagepeterson.com](http://burlagepeterson.com) for full sale terms. Possession for 2024.

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

**BURLAGE PETERSON AUCTIONEERS & REALTORS, LLC**  
Land Brokers – Auctioneers – Realtors – Farm Managers  
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**BURLAGE  
PETERSON**  
Auctioneers & Realtors, LLC.

## Groton Area boys advance to SoDak16

Groton Area jumped out to a 7-0 lead and never looked back to defeat Aberdeen Roncalli and the right to advance to the SoDak16. The Tigers led at the quarterstops at 23-9, 37-19 and 54-25 en route to a 63-35 win. With about two minutes left in the third quarter, Groton Area had the 30-point lead which led to a continuous clock for the rest of the game.

Lane Tietz, who was a perfect eight for eight from the free throw line, led the Tigers with 26 points (four three-pointers), six rebounds, one assist and one steal. Ryder Johnson had a double-double with 17 points and 10 rebounds plus he had two assists and two block shots. Keegen Tracy had eight points (two three-pointers), two rebounds, four assists and one steal. Jacob Zak had six points (one three-pointer) and three rebounds. Logan Ringgenberg had two points and nine rebounds. Teylor Diegel, returning back to the court after an injury earlier in the season, had two points, one assist and one steal. Jayden Schwan had two points. Colby Dunker had one rebound and two steals.

Groton Area made 16 of 34 two-pointers for 47 percent, seven of 16 three-pointers for 44 percent, 10 of 13 free throws for 77 percent, had 31 rebounds, eight turnovers, eight assists, five steals, 16 team fouls and two block shots.

Maddox Miller led the Cavaliers with 17 points (three three-pointers), while Caden Shelton had six, Keegan Stewart and Aiden Fisher each had four points and Brody Weinmeister and Parker Grieben each had two points.

Aberdeen Roncalli made 13 of 28 field goals for 46 percent, six of 10 free throws for 60 percent, had 16 turnovers and 16 team fouls.

Groton Area, now 18-4, will advance to the SoDak16 in Watertown on Tuesday as the Tigers will take on Dell Rapids.

Aberdeen Roncalli finishes its season with a 14-8 record.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Bary Keith at Harr Motors, BK Custom Ts & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Farmers Union Coop, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Chiropractic Clinic, Groton Ford, Hanlon Brothers, John Sieh Agency, Krueger Brothers, Lori's Pharmacy, Professional Management Services, S & S Lumber, Spanier Harvesting & Trucking, Sun & Sea Travel, The MeatHouse, Witte Exteriors LLC. Paul Kosel did the play-by-play and Jeslyn Kosel ran the camera.

- Paul Kosel



**The Groton Area boys basketball team lifts the team ball after winning Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

# Groton Daily Independent




Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 6 of 82

## Boys SoDak16 Pairings




### #1 - West Central High School Colos...

 1 <b>Sioux Falls Christian</b>	22-0	3/5 7:00 PM CT
 16 <b>Sanborn Central/Woonsocket</b>	11-11	

### #2 - Arlington High School Main Gym

 2 <b>Hamlin</b>	19-3	3/5 7:00 PM CT
 15 <b>Hanson</b>	14-8	



### #3 - Chamberlain High School

 3 <b>Sioux Valley</b>	20-2	3/5 5:30 PM CT
 14 <b>Lakota Tech</b>	11-10	

### #4 - Wall High School

 4 <b>Pine Ridge</b>	20-1	3/5 6:00 PM MT
 13 <b>Cheyenne-Eagle Butte</b>	14-7	




### #5 - Corn Palace

 5 <b>Dakota Valley</b>	19-3	3/5 5:30 PM CT
 12 <b>McLaughlin</b>	16-6	




### #6 - Kadoka Area High School

 6 <b>Hot Springs</b>	18-3	3/5 5:30 PM MT
 11 <b>Vermillion</b>	15-7	

### #7 - T.F. Riggs High School

 7 <b>Rapid City Christian</b>	19-3	3/5 6:00 PM CT
 10 <b>Milbank</b>	17-5	

### #8 - Watertown Civic Arena Waterto...

 8 <b>Groton Area</b>	18-4	3/5 6:00 PM CT
 9 <b>Dell Rapids</b>	17-5	

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 7 of 82

<b>Groton Area</b> RV 17-4		<b>Dell Rapids</b> 16-5
<b>0</b>	<b>Pregame</b>	<b>0</b>
Tue Mar 5 @ TBD		

<b>Record</b>	17-4	16-5
<b>Points Per Game</b>	<b>67.4</b>	<b>57.6</b>
<b>Points Allowed</b>	42.1	51.5
<b>Points +/-</b>	<b>+25.3</b>	<b>+6.1</b>

OPPONENTS

Groton Area

Dell Rapids

<b>Hamlin</b> 18-3	<b>Lost -22</b> 36-58	<b>Lost -32</b> 41-73
<b>West Central</b> 12-9	<b>Won +17</b> 71-54	<b>Won +2</b> 61-59
<b>Aberdeen Roncalli</b> 14-7	<b>Won +11</b> <b>Won +28</b> 61-50 63-35	<b>Won +19</b> 50-31
<b>Milbank</b> 16-5	<b>Won +33</b> 61-28	<b>Won +19</b> <b>Won +8</b> 64-45 56-48
<b>Dakota Valley</b> 18-3	<b>Lost -5</b> <b>Won +17</b> 57-62 71-54	<b>Lost -17</b> 52-69
<b>Vermillion</b> 14-7	<b>Lost -9</b> 51-60	<b>Won +4</b> 65-61

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 8 of 82



**Anna Bisbee sings the National Anthem before the start of Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area senior Jacob Zak wins the ball toss against Aberdeen Roncalli senior Keegan Stewart at the start of Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson jumps for a shot in the first quarter of Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game in Groton.** (Photo by

Elizabeth Varin)



# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 9 of 82



**Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson jumps for a shot at Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area sophomore Keegen Tracy jumps for a shot at Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton.**

(Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 10 of 82



**The Groton Area student section cheers during Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 11 of 82



Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson jumps for a shot at Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Jacob Zak looks back at the bench while making his way up the court during Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz drives the ball toward the net at Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz jumps for a shot during Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 12 of 82



**Groton Area senior Lane Tietz dives after a loose ball with senior Logan Ringgenberg at Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 13 of 82



**Groton Area junior Teylor Diegel blocks during the first half of Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area senior Colby Dunker dives toward the ball at Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 14 of 82



**Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson jumps to block a shot from Aberdeen Roncalli senior Maddox Miller at Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area senior Lane Tietz jumps for a shot during Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 15 of 82



**Groton Area senior Colby Dunker steals the ball and runs down the court at Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area senior Jacob Zak jumps for a shot at Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area sophomore Keegen Tracy jumps for a shot at Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 16 of 82



**The Groton Area dance team performs at halftime during Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 17 of 82



**Groton Area senior Lane Tietz jumps for a shot at Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



**Groton Area junior Blake Pauli passes the ball at Friday's Region 1A Basketball Game against Aberdeen Roncalli in Groton.** (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

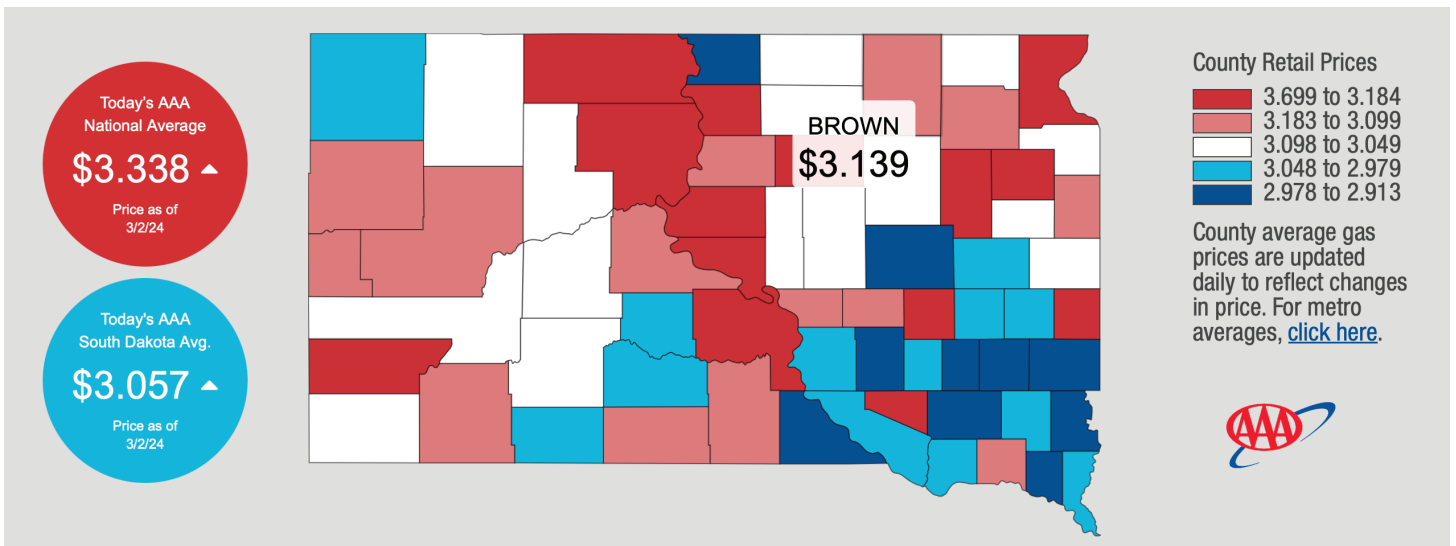
# Broton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 18 of 82

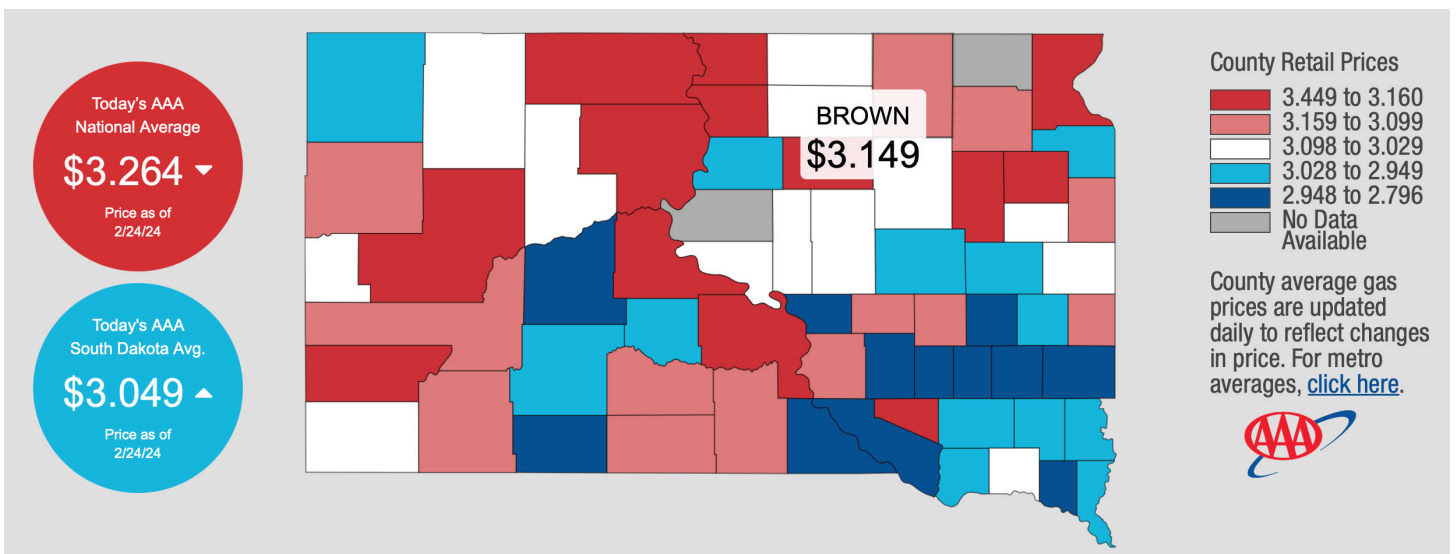
## South Dakota Average Gas Prices

	Regular	Mid-Grade	Premium	Diesel
Current Avg.	\$3.057	\$3.208	\$3.673	\$3.717
Yesterday Avg.	\$3.047	\$3.193	\$3.656	\$3.737
Week Ago Avg.	\$3.049	\$3.188	\$3.677	\$3.744
Month Ago Avg.	\$2.833	\$2.991	\$3.473	\$3.589
Year Ago Avg.	\$3.317	\$3.466	\$3.912	\$4.191

### This Week



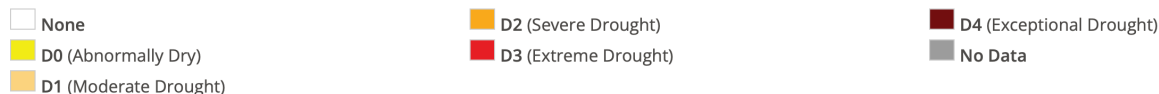
### Two Weeks Ago



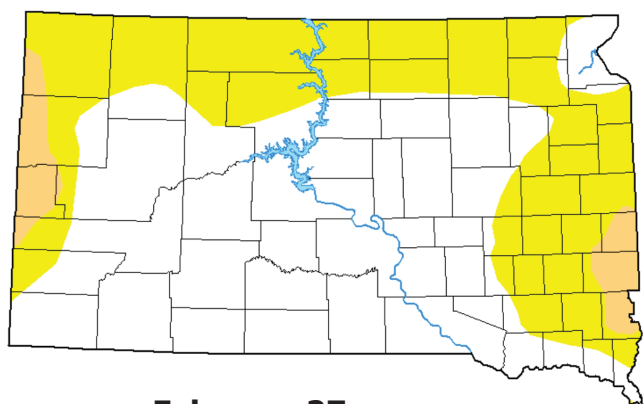
# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 19 of 82

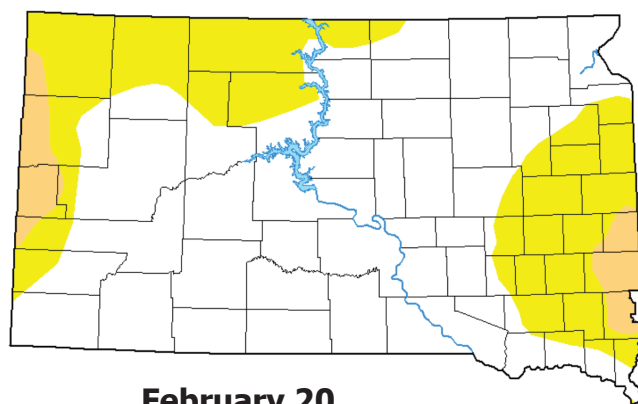
## Drought Classification



## Drought Monitor



February 27



February 20

There were a few areas of half an inch to locally 2 inches of precipitation in the High Plains region this week – in North Dakota and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. But the rest of the region had little to no precipitation. Daily high temperatures reached into the 80s F some days in Kansas and up to the 50s and 60s in the Dakotas. Weekly temperatures averaged 10 to 20 degrees above normal across most of the region, increasing evapotranspiration (ET). Since this is February and vegetation is still dormant, the above-normal ET had little effect on vegetation, but soil temperatures were well above freezing in southern parts of the region and the high ET helped to dry soils. D0 expanded in the Dakotas, and D1 crept into northwest North Dakota, to reflect the 1- to 2-month dryness and unusually warm temperatures, and D0 expanded in eastern Kansas where recent precipitation has been low and soils were drying. In Wyoming, very low mountain SWE (snow water content) and dry 1- to 4-month SPI values prompted the expansion of D0-D2.



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Funding support for counties whittled down from summer recommendations

#### Cybersecurity money, state public defender office among proposals still alive for legislative session's final week

**BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 1, 2024 4:37 PM**

Out of 13 recommendations made by the county funding summer study committee — consisting of a dozen lawmakers who dedicated their summer to understanding how to support county governments in the state — a handful have passed into law or are still alive in the Legislature.

Only two bills intended to bolster funding for counties in South Dakota are still in the works — one of them not having come from the summer committee. Five of the committee's 13 recommendations were never introduced as legislation.

"Any of the bills that required appropriations have really struggled," Spearfish Republican Sen. Randy Deibert, vice chair of the summer study, told South Dakota Searchlight.

The financial sustainability of counties has been discussed in the Legislature for years, with many of the state's 66 counties floundering as costs exceed their restrictive budgets and they receive little help from the state.

The summer study was created to focus on ways the state and county governments can partner to deliver services, whether regionalization and consolidation can make counties more efficient, and ways the county funding model could be changed to keep up with costs.

Convincing the state to alleviate some of the financial burden on counties is the long-term goal, Deibert said.

"It's not a one year fix. It's going to take several years to get most of these passed with the momentum that they need," Deibert said. "But I do believe we've had a lot of education that's taken place because of the summer study — especially with the committee members and the word they're getting out to constituents and fellow legislators about the hardships counties are having and why they're having it."

Aside from counties increasing property tax collections according to the percentage increase in property valuations, counties are limited to an additional 3% or inflationary increase, whichever is lower. Meanwhile, counties have rising, uncapped costs associated with inflation and other factors. Some counties are so cash-strapped that they've explored bankruptcy in recent years.

Going beyond those statutory limits requires a decision to opt out of them, which voters can reject.

"Counties are already tightening their belts and limiting services because they're forced to," Deibert told South Dakota Searchlight. "Opting out is not an option for most counties because voters won't participate. So, I think some education has come out of our summer study but there still needs to be more."

The remaining bills in play connected to the summer study recommendations include a bill that would create a statewide public defender office, including a \$3 million appropriation to reimburse counties for current indigent defense costs, and a bill allocating \$7 million toward cybersecurity efforts for counties and cities.

#### Public defender office would save counties \$2.1M, offer \$3M in reimbursements

Counties are currently responsible for the criminal defense costs of accused people who can't afford an attorney.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 21 of 82

A bill creating a statewide public defender office would reduce that burden. It was a product of a Unified Judicial System task force last year.

The new office would cost the state \$1.4 million annually but could save counties an estimated \$2.1 million. 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. The effort passed through the Senate unanimously after being amended to include \$3 million in one-time funds to reimburse counties currently covering indigent defendants.

The idea for additional money came from another bill, which was recommended by the county funding committee and failed earlier in the legislative session. It would have created an additional funding source for the office by using the state's alcohol tax. The bill would have reimbursed counties annually for indigent legal defenses that weren't covered by the statewide office.

A commissioner for Yankton County told the Joint Appropriations Committee that counties see an increasing number of cases and expenses for indigent defendants. The county budgeted \$500,000 for indigent defense costs this year and is expecting to exceed that cost.

The public defender bill now waits for the House of Representatives to approve of the \$3 million amendment.

## **\$7M for cybersecurity support**

Cybersecurity for local governments is one of the top non-governor-budgeted topics for both the House and the Senate Republican caucuses.

It's been a hot topic for years as local governments face cybersecurity threats without proper training or equipment to defend themselves and the taxpayer money and information they're entrusted with.

A bill introduced by Senate Majority Leader Casey Crabtree, R-Madison, would allocate \$7 million to strengthen cybersecurity needs for local governments.

The amount would cover the development of a centralized email system, similar to the K-12 school email system. Leftover funds could be used to strengthen the state's Project Boundary Fence program, where cybersecurity experts from Dakota State University test local governments' cybersecurity and offer recommendations to better protect themselves. Crabtree said the money could be used to fulfill some of the recommendations suggested by the program.

"This provides a needed feature for the taxpayer but at a more efficient rate" than simply disbursing grants to all of South Dakota's 66 counties, which was the summer study group's original plan, Crabtree said.

The \$7 million price tag is roughly what South Dakota would have received from the federal government over the last three years if South Dakota had enrolled in a federal grant program aimed at bolstering local government cybersecurity, Deibert told South Dakota Searchlight. South Dakota is the lone state in the nation not participating in the program, with Gov. Kristi Noem's administration saying there were too many strings attached to the offer.

Local governments would pay for the ongoing costs of the centralized email system.

The bill was unanimously approved by the Joint Committee on Appropriations, and it'll head to the House floor next.

*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.*

## **COMMENTARY**

### **Lawmakers unwilling to accept defeat on Medicaid expansion**

**DANA HESS**

Throughout the recent past, Republicans in the South Dakota Legislature have had a tempestuous relationship with Medicaid expansion. When the federal government offered a way to expand the pool of people who receive Medicaid benefits, the Republican supermajorities refused to go along.

When Medicaid expansion became a constitutional amendment in the 2022 election, Republicans took a

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 22 of 82

twofold approach to defeating it. Not only did they oppose the amendment, they forced onto the primary election ballot a constitutional amendment that would have required a 60% vote threshold on ballot measures that raise taxes or spend significant amounts of government funds.

Both strategies failed. Voters defeated the attempt to change the vote threshold and then, in November, approved encasing expanded Medicaid coverage in the state constitution.

Medicaid is a federal-state health insurance program. Those who are eligible include low-income adults, children, pregnant women, the elderly and people with disabilities. Currently, nearly 129,000 South Dakotans are enrolled. When Medicaid expanded, it opened the program to people whose incomes are at 138% of the federal poverty level or less. That's up to \$41,400 for a family of four.

Unable to head off Medicaid expansion at the ballot box, the next tactic was unique: indifference. According to a South Dakota Searchlight story, enrollments in expanded Medicaid are lower than expected because, as a representative of the Department of Social Services explained to the Joint Appropriations Committee, the state isn't advertising the fact that more people are eligible. The department is leaving that task for community health organizations who don't have anywhere near the resources of state government.

At the budget hearing, Rep. Linda Duba, a Sioux Falls Democrat, wondered if it might be more cost effective to sign up people while they are healthy. It seems 80% of new enrollees are placed on Medicaid rolls when they have a "health care issue."

"If we were more proactive, people would be using preventative services," Duba said, "instead of coming in when they're sicker or they're in greater need, which drives our utilization costs up."

It seems that a state that spends at least \$6.5 million to attract new workers through the Freedom Works Here campaign, in which the governor dresses up as various kinds of workers, could invest a little to ensure that the people who are already here know that they're eligible for Medicaid. Tracking those dollars in health care and measuring their success would likely be easier than it has proven to be in workforce development. One of the few quantifiable results of the Freedom Works Here campaign is that now the governor has a closet full of costumes for Halloween.

Now Republican lawmakers have decided that Medicaid will return to the ballot box this year in the form of Senate Joint Resolution 501, which would impose a work requirement on "certain individuals who are eligible for expanded Medicaid."

A similar attempt failed in the Legislature last year, making it through the House but failing in the Senate Health and Human Services Committee. This year's attempt to add the work requirement amendment to the ballot was approved 28-4 in the Senate and 63-7 in the House. Both were party line votes with Democrats in those chambers casting the only no votes.

Rep. Ton Venhuizen, a Sioux Falls Republican and a prime sponsor of the resolution, has characterized the work requirement amendment as a "clarification" of what the voters approved in 2022. However, the 2022 amendment specifically prohibits a work requirement. So does the federal government, which pays for 90% of the cost of the program. Venhuizen has said he hopes the federal rules change, but at this point the status of a work requirement seems pretty well clarified.

Opponents of SJR 501 are concerned about how the work requirement will be applied. Venhuizen said exemptions for work requirements for people on cancer treatment and for new mothers are things that "we all agree about" and can be worked out later.

However, the "we" Venhuizen refers to doesn't exist. The work requirement amendment will be on the ballot at the same time as Venhuizen and all of his legislative colleagues. There's no telling what the next batch of lawmakers would "agree" on as far as which Medicaid recipients should be required to work.

Far from a mere "clarification," legislation like this springs from a right-wing belief that the social safety net is nothing but a web of corruption. SJR 501 has its roots in the notion that poverty is a scam designed to fleece taxpayers into paying for luxuries like food stamps, government health insurance and free school lunches.

Instead of a work requirement amendment that's already superseded by federal guidelines and risks being defeated by voters, lawmakers could be working on legislation that would help raise their constituents out of poverty and ultimately off the Medicaid rolls.

*Dana Hess spent more than 25 years in South Dakota journalism, editing newspapers in Redfield, Milbank and Pierre. He's retired and lives in Brookings, working occasionally as a freelance writer.*

## Who wants the U.S. Supreme Court to limit abortion pill access? Here's the list.

**BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MARCH 1, 2024 2:06 PM**

WASHINGTON — Anti-abortion groups, attorneys general from 25 states and more than 140 members of Congress have signed on to dozens of briefs to the U.S. Supreme Court during the past two weeks, encouraging the justices to revert use and prescribing of the medication abortion pill mifepristone to what was in place prior to 2016.

The “friend of the court” briefs come just weeks before the court is scheduled to hear oral arguments on March 26 in a case that stems from a lawsuit that sought to overturn approval of the pharmaceutical.

Alliance Defending Freedom, an anti-abortion legal organization, filed the lawsuit on behalf of the Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine, American Association of Pro-Life Obstetricians & Gynecologists, American College of Pediatricians and Christian Medical & Dental Associations.

ADF's latest brief in the case argues that because some patients who use medication abortion — a two-drug regimen that combines mifepristone with a second pharmaceutical, misoprostol — will have complications, anti-abortion doctors will have to violate their religious beliefs to provide medical care to those women.

“It's not hard to see why doctors who consider abortion objectionable are harmed when they must complete a chemical abortion—even if the child is no longer alive,” ADF wrote in the 84-page brief.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has said that nothing requires doctors and other health care providers with conscientious objection to abortion to treat patients facing complications from medication abortion, but that isn't sufficient, ADF said.

“FDA insists that nothing forces Respondent doctors to perform the procedures they deem objectionable,” ADF wrote. “But this ignores that FDA expressly relies on doctors like Respondents to treat emergent and life-threatening complications from abortion drugs ... and that Respondents facing these emergency situations must act immediately.”

Changes the FDA made since 2016 to when and how mifepristone can be prescribed and distributed “create a substantial risk that Respondent doctors will see more women suffering emergency complications from abortion drugs, which threaten to inflict several concrete harms,” ADF wrote.

Those changes include:

Extension of the maximum gestational age a patient can use mifepristone to 10 weeks, up from the prior approval of seven weeks.

Health care providers qualified to prescribe medications, like physician's assistants and nurse practitioners, can now prescribe mifepristone, instead of only doctors.

Patients no longer needed to attend three, in-person doctor's office appointments to complete a medication abortion regimen.

Providers can now prescribe the medication via telehealth and have it delivered through the mail.

Earlier ruling

All of that would change if the Supreme Court decides to agree with a ruling from the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, which said in August 2023 that the FDA's prescribing guidelines should go back to what was in place before the changes began in 2016.

The federal government appealed that decision, leading to the current case before the Supreme Court, Food and Drug Administration v. Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine.

States Newsroom earlier reported on briefs submitted in late January by abortion rights supporters, major medical organizations, pharmaceutical groups and Democratic lawmakers supporting access to mifepristone.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 24 of 82

The medical groups wrote that since mifepristone was approved in 2000, "hundreds of medical studies and vast amounts of data have confirmed its safety and efficacy as part of this two-drug regimen."

"The scientific evidence is overwhelming: major adverse events occur in less than 0.32% of patients," the medical organizations added. "The risk of death is almost non-existent."

## Members of Congress, state AGs file briefs

A total of 145 members of Congress from 36 states, who opposed access to mifepristone remaining as it is today, submitted their own 39-page brief in the case, calling on the Supreme Court to limit access. The list of signers includes Sen. John Thune, R-South Dakota.

"Since 2016, the FDA has only required adverse events reporting for deaths resulting from chemical abortion drugs; reporting is otherwise voluntary," the members of Congress wrote, making the argument that reports are not required for injuries or impairment. "This action was not only arbitrary and capricious, but it also raised safety concerns for women seeking chemical abortion drugs."

The FDA's decisions in 2016 and 2021 to change prescribing guidelines for mifepristone, they wrote, "exceeded its congressionally authorized power."

Attorneys general from Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, West Virginia and Wyoming submitted a 28-page brief in the case, pressing for changes.

The state attorneys general argue that the FDA's decisions to change prescribing guidelines since 2016 "push constitutional bounds."

"Those actions test the separation of powers, sap federalism, and take important decisions from the people," they wrote. "This Court should therefore exercise searching review of those actions and reject the FDA's plea for deference."

The attorneys general wrote that because some states have severely restricted or banned abortion access or implemented requirements for mifepristone use in addition to what the FDA allows, the availability of the pharmaceutical erodes states' rights.

"The FDA's actions undermine these laws, undercut States' efforts to enforce them, and thus erode the federalism the Constitution deems vital," the attorneys general wrote. "Given these harms to federalism, this Court should view the FDA's actions with skepticism."

## More arguments

Attorneys general from Idaho, Kansas and Missouri wrote in a separate 32-page brief they "have an exceptionally strong interest in the outcome of this case."

They wrote the FDA's decisions, especially allowing the mailing of mifepristone, have "encouraged and enabled private parties to evade the States' laws."

"Beginning in summer 2023, organizations started shipping abortion drugs into all 50 States in large quantities in an attempt to evade state laws," the three attorneys general wrote.

Students for Life of America — an organization that aims "to abolish abortion and provide policy, legal, and community support for women and their children" — wrote in its 32-page brief that the FDA has "failed to consider the impact Mifepristone could have on the environment, specifically on endangered species or listed habitats."

Before the FDA approved the pharmaceutical, they claim, it should have consulted with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service as well as the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Students for Life called on the Supreme Court to uphold a ruling from U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas Judge Matthew Joseph Kacsmaryk, who issued a stay that would have removed mifepristone from the market.

That ban on access to the drug should remain in place until "the FDA conducts the proper consultation with the Services," they wrote.

"The FDA reviewed only the impact that packaging, production waste, and pharmaceutical waste would



# Groton Daily Independent

**Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 25 of 82**

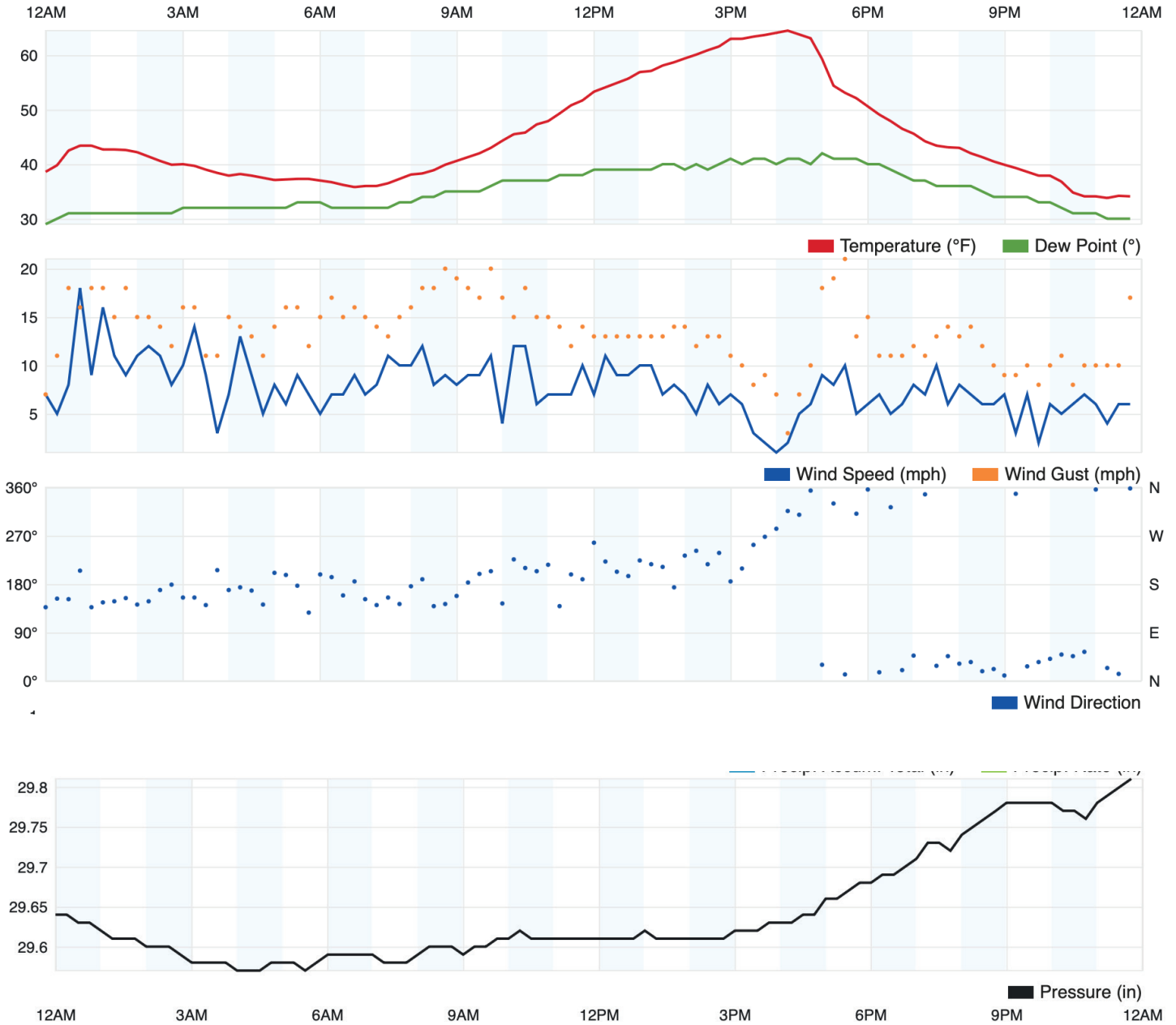
have on the environment, failing to examine the impact the excretion of Mifepristone itself would have on the environment," Students for Life wrote. "Further, the assessment underestimated the number of chemical abortions due to Mifepristone, which are today the most popular form of abortion."

*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.*

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 26 of 82

## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 27 of 82

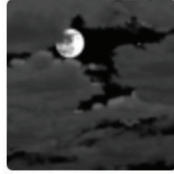
Today



Partly Sunny

High: 57 °F

Tonight



Increasing  
Clouds

Low: 35 °F

Sunday



Slight Chance  
Rain and  
Windy

High: 50 °F

Sunday  
Night



Partly Cloudy  
and Breezy  
then Mostly  
Cloudy

Low: 23 °F

Monday



Partly Sunny

High: 39 °F

## Cooler, mainly dry, & strong winds Sunday

Today: last *very warm* day



Highs: **50 & 60s**  
lowest near the ND/SD border

Sunday: strong winds and elevated  
fire weather concerns

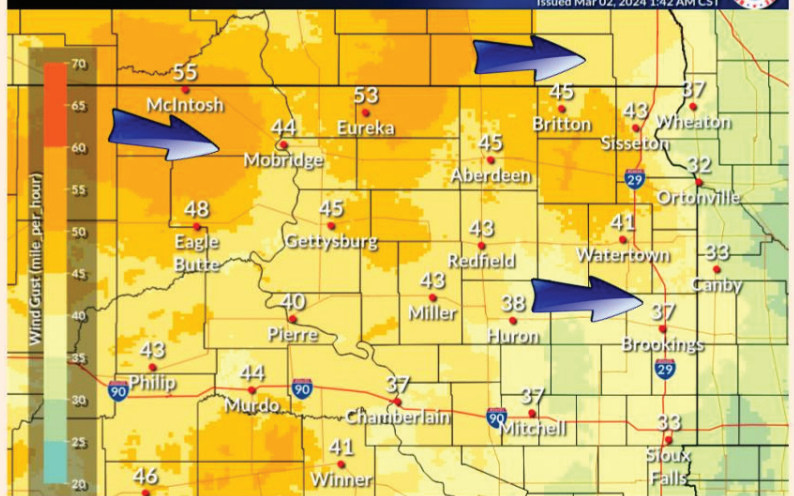


20% chance of mainly light precipitation  
over mainly north central SD. Peak wind  
gusts **40 to 55 mph** out of the west.

Highs: **40s**  
except 50s in far ne SD and w MN

Peak Wind Gusts Sunday Afternoon (mph)

Weather Forecast Office  
Aberdeen, SD  
Issued Mar 02, 2024 1:42 AM CST



Check out your specific forecast at  
[weather.gov/aberdeen](https://weather.gov/aberdeen)



While there is a 20% chance of precipitation over north central South Dakota tonight into Sunday morning, little to no accumulation is expected. Any rain that is falling will mix with and change over to light snow late Sunday morning behind an are of low pressure Sunday morning. Winds will increase out of the west on Sunday, with peak gusts of 40 to 55 mph during the late morning to early afternoon hours. These winds, dry air, and dry grasses and other ground cover will result in elevated fire weather concerns. Use extreme caution Sunday with anything that could cause a spark.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 28 of 82



## Winter 2023-2024 Summary

March 1, 2024  
8:49 AM

Top 5 Warmest Winter For Most Locations, with Below Normal Snowfall



	Aberdeen, SD (since 1893)	Pierre, SD (since 1933)	Mobridge, SD (since 1911)	Watertown, SD (since 1898)	Sisseton, SD (since 1932)
<b>Avg Temp (°F)</b>	25.7°	26.9°	26.5°	24.5°	26.5°
<b>Departure</b>	+9.5°	+5.2°	+6.6°	+9.0°	+9.8°
<b>Rank</b>	2nd Warmest (Tied)	12th Warmest (Tied)	4th Warmest	3rd Warmest	2nd Warmest
<b>Precipitation (Liquid/Melted)</b>	2.49"	2.25"	1.27"	2.13"	3.92"
<b>Departure</b>	+0.71"	+0.42"	-0.27"	+0.22"	+1.99"
<b>Rank</b>	31st Wettest	21st Wettest	50th Wettest	35th Wettest	4th Wettest
<b>Snowfall</b>	8.6"	17.6"	4.0"	12.7"	4.2"
<b>Departure</b>	-15.8"	-1.7"	-14.4"	-11.8"	-14.8"
<b>Rank</b>	15th Least Snowy	35th Snowiest (Tied)	7th Least Snowy	54th Least Snowy	4th Least Snowy



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Meteorological Winter (Dec-Feb) ended yesterday, so we thought we'd share the final numbers for Winter 2023-2024. We had a top 5 warmest winter for most locations, along with below normal snowfall. This was driven by the El Niño, which traditionally brings the our region a warm and less snowy winter.



## February 2024 - Temperature Similarity

March 1, 2024  
8:57 AM

Aberdeen, SD experienced the 3rd Warmest February on Record (14.2° Above Normal!)

**Aberdeen, SD**

**February 2024**  
Average High: 42.7°  
Average Low: 20.7°  
Average Temp: 31.7°

With temperatures in Aberdeen, SD significantly above normal during February,



our temperatures were very similar to a normal Kansas City, MO February!

**Kansas City, MO**

**February Normals**  
Average High: 43.6°  
Average Low: 23.6°  
Average Temp: 33.6°



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 29 of 82

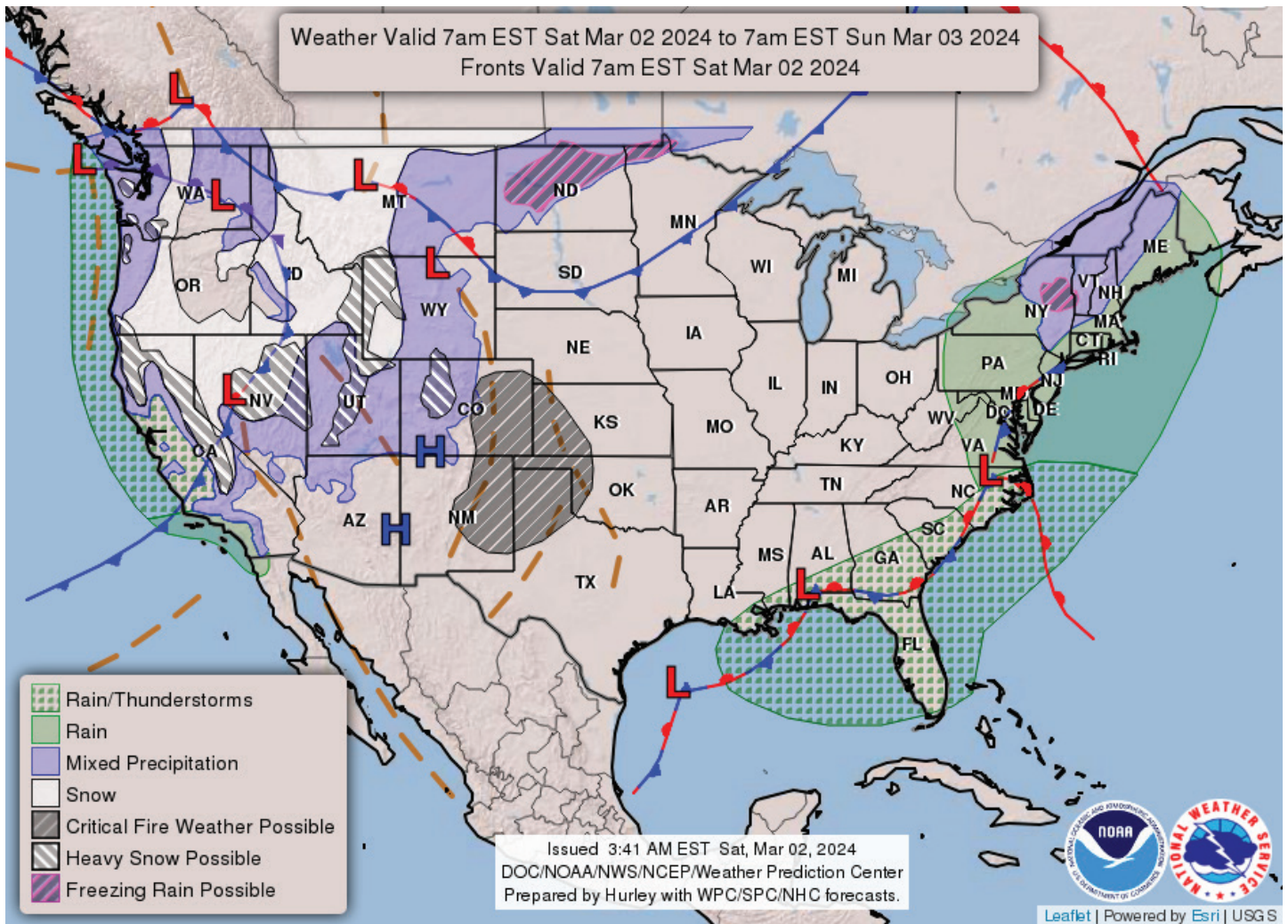
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 64 °F at 4:14 PM**  
**Low Temp: 34 °F at 11:10 PM**  
**Wind: 21 mph at 5:26 PM**  
**Precip: : 0.00**

Day length: 11 hours, 17 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 67 in 2021  
Record Low: -21 in 1913  
Average High: 34  
Average Low: 13  
Average Precip in March.: 0.05  
Precip to date in March.: 0.00  
Average Precip to date: 1.22  
Precip Year to Date: 0.07  
Sunset Tonight: 6:22:53 pm  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:04:00 am



# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 30 of 82

## Today in Weather History

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

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

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

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

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

1985 - A massive winter storm struck the Northern Plains Region. The storm produced up to 33 inches of snow in northeastern South Dakota, at Summit and at Milbank, and also produced high winds which whipped the heavy snow into drifts twenty feet high. (Storm Data)

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

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

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

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

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 31 of 82

Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### **SOMEONE IS ALWAYS LISTENING**

It was a luncheon designed to impress her friends from the neighborhood. Wanting to impress them, she asked her five-year-old son, Jamie, to return thanks.

"Jamie," she said politely, "will you please say grace?"

"Mommy, please, I don't really know what to say," he replied cautiously.

"Well, dear," she said encouragingly, "just say what you heard Mommy say this morning."

Bowing his head and folding his hands, he began, "Good Lord, why did I invite all these dumb people to lunch today."

Words can be a sword or a source of comfort or even a weapon that can leave a wound. Words once spoken can never be retrieved or marked "Void." Words take on a life of their own and will leave another person better or bruised, helped or hurt, encouraged or empty.

King David wrote, "May the words of my mouth...be pleasing to you, O Lord..." Another part of that verse states: "may...the thoughts of my heart be pleasing to you." David wanted his words to be sincere, appropriate, and approved by God as coming from the depths of his heart. He realized that if his thoughts were acceptable to God, they would be suitable as an offering to God that was worthy of sacrifice on His altar.

What a great prayer for us to offer to God each day!

Prayer: Father, "may the words of our mouths and the thoughts in our minds and the attitudes of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer." In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Psalm 19:14



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

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 32 of 82

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# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 33 of 82



## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.01.24

15 33 37 55 61 24

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$650,000,000**

NEXT DRAW:

[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: 14 Hrs 53 Mins 56  
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.01.24

1 7 29 36 44 4

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 8 Mins 56  
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.28.24

8 12 17 18 31

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$20,000**

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 8 Mins 56  
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.28.24

14 38 41 47 67 7

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 37 Mins 56  
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: 15 Hrs 37 Mins 56  
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 34 of 82

News from the  Associated Press

## Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

### **GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL**

SDHSAA Playoffs=

Class AA SODAK 16=

State Qualifier=

Brandon Valley 65, Brookings 49

Harrisburg 59, Sioux Falls Washington 38

Mitchell 53, Yankton 35

Rapid City Stevens 56, Rapid City Central 39

Sioux Falls Jefferson 52, Watertown 41

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 65, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 31

Spearfish 72, Aberdeen Central High School 48

T F Riggs High School 63, Huron 36

### **BOYS PREP BASKETBALL**

SDHSAA Playoffs=

Class A Region 1=

SODAK 16 Qualifier=

Groton 63, Aberdeen Roncalli 35

Milbank 59, Tiospa Zina 50

Class A Region 2=

SODAK 16 Qualifier=

Hamlin 67, Clark-Willow Lake 32

Sioux Valley 66, Flandreau 35

Class A Region 3=

SODAK 16 Qualifier=

Dell Rapids 77, Baltic 56

Sioux Falls Christian 66, West Central 50

Class A Region 4=

SODAK 16 Qualifier=

Dakota Valley 72, Tea 61

Vermillion 56, Lennox 52, OT

Class A Region 5=

SODAK 16 Qualifier=

Hanson 57, Bon Homme 35

Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 75, Parkston 66

Class A Region 6=

SODAK 16 Qualifier=

Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 55, Stanley County 46

McLaughlin 48, Mobridge-Pollock 44

Class A Region 7=

SODAK 16 Qualifier=

Lakota Tech 60, Winner 48

Pine Ridge 83, Mahpiya Luta Red Cloud High School 55

Class A Region 8=

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 35 of 82

SODAK 16 Qualifier=  
Hot Springs 60, Custer 49  
Rapid City Christian 50, St Thomas More 45  
Class B Region 1=  
SODAK 16 Qualifier=  
Leola-Frederick High School 77, Warner 44  
Waverly-South Shore 54, Aberdeen Christian 45  
Class B Region 2=  
SODAK 16 Qualifier=  
Castlewood 62, Wolsey-Wessington 46  
DeSmet 64, Deubrook 33  
Class B Region 3=  
SODAK 16 Qualifier=  
Dell Rapids St Mary 52, Bridgewater-Emery 50  
Howard 45, Chester 23  
Class B Region 4=  
SODAK 16 Qualifier=  
Centerville 75, Freeman 55  
Viborg-Hurley 86, Gayville-Volin High School 59  
Class B Region 5=  
SODAK 16 Qualifier=  
Gregory 44, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 25  
Wessington Springs 52, Corsica/Stickney 35  
Class B Region 6=  
SODAK 16 Qualifier=  
Highmore-Harrold 46, Faulkton 45  
Potter County 74, Lower Brule 59  
Class B Region 7=  
SODAK 16 Qualifier=  
Philip 64, Wall 53  
White River 64, Jones County 47  
Class B Region 8=  
SODAK 16 Qualifier=  
Faith 68, Harding County 42  
Timber Lake 54, Lemmon High School 53

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

## **A US appeals court ruling could allow mine development on Oak Flat, land sacred to Apaches**

ANITA SNOW and MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — An Apache group that has fought to protect land it considers sacred from a copper mining project in central Arizona suffered a significant blow Friday when a divided federal court panel voted 6-5 to uphold a lower court's denial of a preliminary injunction to halt the transfer of land for the project.

The Apache Stronghold organization has hoped to halt the mining project by preventing the U.S. government from transferring the land called Oak Flat to Resolution Copper.

Wendsler Nosie, who has led Apache Stronghold's fight, vowed to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court the decision by the rare 11-member "en banc" panel of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

"Oak Flat is like Mount Sinai to us — our most sacred site where we connect with our Creator, our faith,

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 36 of 82

our families, and our land," Nosie said. "Today's ruling targets the spiritual lifeblood of my people, but it will not stop our struggle to save Oak Flat."

Apache Stronghold represents the interests of certain members of the San Carlos Apache Tribe. The Western Apaches consider Oak Flat, which is dotted with ancient oak groves and traditional plants, essential to their religion.

Oak Flat also sits atop the world's third-largest deposit of copper ore, and there is significant support in nearby Superior and other traditional mining towns in the area for a new copper mine and the income and jobs it could generate.

An environmental impact survey for the project was pulled back while the U.S. Department of Agriculture consulted for months with Native American tribes and others about their concerns.

Apache Stronghold had sued the government to stop the land transfer, saying it would violate its members' rights under the free exercise clause of the First Amendment, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and an 1852 treaty between the United States and the Apaches.

The majority opinion of the appeals panel said that "Apache Stronghold was unlikely to succeed on the merits on any of its three claims before the court, and consequently was not entitled" to a preliminary injunction.

The dissenting five judges said the majority had "tragically" erred and will allow the government to "obliterate Oak Flat."

Apache Stronghold, represented by the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, has 90 days to appeal to the Supreme Court.

"Blasting a Native American sacred site into oblivion is one of the most egregious violations of religious freedom imaginable," said Luke Goodrich, vice president and senior counsel at Becket. "The Supreme Court has a strong track record of protecting religious freedom for people of other faiths, and we fully expect the Court to uphold that same freedom for Native Americans who simply want to continue core religious practices at a sacred site that has belonged to them since before the United States existed."

Vicky Peacey, Resolution Copper president and general manager, welcomed the ruling, saying there was significant local support for the project, which has the potential to supply up to one quarter of U.S. copper demand.

Peacey said it could bring as much as \$1 billion a year to Arizona's economy and create thousands of local jobs in a traditional mining region.

"As we deliver these benefits to Arizona and the nation, our dialogue with local communities and Tribes will continue to shape the project as we seek to understand and address the concerns that have been raised, building on more than a decade of government consultation and review," Peacey said.

U.S. Raúl M. Grijalva, an Arizona Democrat, called the court's decision "wrong."

"Tribal communities deserve the same religious freedom protections for their sacred sites that are respected for every other American," Grijalva said. "The court acknowledges that foreign-owned Resolution Copper will completely and irreversibly desecrate Oak Flat, but they're giving them the green light anyways."

"It's a slap in the face to tribal sovereignty and the many tribes, including the San Carlos Apache, who have been fighting to protect a site they have visited and prayed at since time immemorial," he added.

## What to know about the latest court rulings, data and legislation on abortion in the US

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

A judge in Montana rejected abortion restrictions, the attorney general in Missouri is accusing Planned Parenthood of illegally transporting minors for abortions and new data shows how the way abortions they're provided continues to shift in a nation where some states have bans and others are protecting access.

More than a year and a half since the U.S. Supreme Court ruled overturned Roe v. Wade and the nationwide right to abortion, the details of what that means are still in flux. With lawsuits still pending and ballot questions on the horizon, that's the one thing that's not likely to change quickly.

# Groton Daily Independent

**Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 37 of 82**

Here are things to know about developments across the country this week.

## MONTANA JUDGE BLOCKS RESTRICTIONS

A Montana judge on Thursday rejected restrictions on abortion that were adopted in 2021, possibly setting up a chance for the Montana Supreme Court to revisit its 1999 ruling that protected a woman's right to abortion until the fetus is viable.

The 2021 laws were put on hold and never took effect.

They would have banned abortion after 20 weeks' gestation, banned telehealth prescription of abortion pills, required a 24-hour waiting period after giving consent and required providers to show women an ultrasound or hear a fetal heart tone before providing an abortion.

The state government plans to appeal the ruling, possibly putting it on a path for another showdown at the state's top court. The high court has previously declined to reverse the 1999 decision — including when it backed up a lower court's decision to pause enforcement of the 2021 laws.

A judge last year also put on hold enforcement of more restrictions the state adopted last year, including a ban on dilation and evacuation abortions — the most common procedure after 15 weeks' gestation.

Abortion rights groups are pushing for a ballot question to amend the state constitution to protect reproductive freedom, including the right to abortion.

## REPORT FINDS CHANGES IN HOW ABORTIONS ARE PROVIDED

There have been legal and legislative battles over abortion access in the U.S. for generations, but everything changed when the U.S. Supreme Court in 2022 overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 ruling that had protected access nationwide.

Since then, bans have taken effect in most Republican-controlled states, including 14 where abortion is banned at all stages of pregnancy, with varying limited exceptions. Most Democrat-controlled states have sought to protect access.

Those changes are reflected in data released this week by #WeCount for the Society of Family Planning. The group finds that the number of abortions per month nationally is similar to what it was before the court's ruling.

Although the number of monthly abortions has dropped to nearly zero in states with bans, they have risen in states that allow abortion — and a larger portion of them use pills prescribed by telehealth.

## STATES PUSH VIDEOS TO DISCOURAGE ABORTION, CLARIFY POLICIES

West Virginia's state Senate this week approved a measure to require eighth and 10th graders to see a video on fetal development.

The "Baby Olivia" video is being used in classrooms in North Dakota and there's legislation that aims to require it in Iowa, Kentucky and Missouri.

Though it was approved in West Virginia's Senate, Republican Senate Majority Leader Tom Takubo, a pulmonologist, objected, saying the video has "grossly inaccurate information" contradictory to science. The bill now heads to the House of Delegates.

Meanwhile, South Dakota is looking to produce another video to guide medical providers on when to apply the one exception to the state's abortion ban. Under state law, abortion is allowed only to save the life of the woman.

This week, the state Senate approved the plan, which had already passed the House, this week. It now heads to Republican Gov. Kristi Noem for her signature.

## MISSOURI ATTORNEY GENERAL SUES PLANNED PARENTHOOD

Missouri's attorney general is suing Planned Parenthood, asserting that the organization is illegally transporting minors from Missouri — where most abortions are banned — to obtain them in Kansas.

The claim is based on a conservative group's hidden-camera video of someone seeking an abortion for a fictitious 13-year-old.

Planned Parenthood denies the claim.

The office of Attorney General Andrew Bailey, a Republican running for election this year, has not said whether criminal charges could be filed, too.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 38 of 82

## TEXAS OFFICIAL PUNISHED OVER MURDER CHARGE IN ABORTION CASE

The abortion bans across the U.S. seek to criminalize doctors and others who provide abortions and in many cases those who help women seeking abortions — but they stop short of allowing charges against those women themselves.

Still, a 26-year-old who self-managed an abortion in 2022 in Texas was charged there with murder and spent two nights in jail before being released and having the charges dropped.

It was revealed this week that the prosecutor who oversaw the case has been disciplined for his role in it. Starr County District Attorney Gocha Ramirez must pay a \$1,250 fine and have his license held in a probated suspension for 12 months under a settlement agreement with the State Bar of Texas.

Ramirez says he made a mistake and agreed to the deal because it will keep his office running.

## ALABAMA LAWMAKERS MOVE TO PROTECT IN VITRO FERTILIZATION AFTER COURT DECISION

Alabama lawmakers this week advanced bills to protect fertility clinics after the state's Supreme Court issued a ruling last month that could be devastating for them.

The court ruled that frozen embryos are the legal equivalent of children. Three large clinics quickly halted offering in vitro fertilization, a devastating outcome for people trying to expand their families.

Abortion rights advocates — including U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra on a visit to Alabama this week — have framed the court's ruling as a consequence of overturning Roe v. Wade and part of a conservative effort to ban abortion by declaring that embryos and fetuses have the rights of people.

## Ship earlier attacked by Yemen's Houthi rebels sinks in the Red Sea

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A ship attacked by Yemen's Houthi rebels has sunk in the Red Sea after days of taking on water, officials said Saturday, the first vessel to be fully destroyed as part of their campaign over Israel's war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The sinking of the Rubymar comes as shipping through the crucial waterway for cargo and energy shipments moving from Asia and the Middle East to Europe has been affected by the Houthi attacks.

Already, many ships have turned away from the route. The sinking could see further detours and higher insurance rates put on vessels plying the waterway — potentially driving up global inflation and affecting aid shipments to the region.

The Belize-flagged Rubymar had been drifting northward after being struck by a Houthi anti-ship ballistic missile on Feb. 18 in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a crucial waterway linking the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Yemen's internationally recognized government, as well as a regional military official, confirmed the ship sank. The official spoke on condition of anonymity as no authorization was given to speak to journalists about the incident.

The Rubymar's Beirut-based manager could not be immediately reached for comment.

Yemen's exiled government, which has been backed by a Saudi-led coalition since 2015, said the Rubymar sank late Friday as stormy weather took hold over the Red Sea. The vessel had been abandoned for 12 days after the attack, though plans had been made to try and tow the ship to a safe port.

The Iran-backed Houthis, who had falsely claimed the ship sank almost instantly after the attack, did not immediately acknowledge the ship's sinking.

The U.S. military's Central Command previously warned the vessel's cargo of fertilizer, as well as fuel leaking from the ship, could cause ecological damage to the Red Sea.

Satellite pictures analyzed by The Associated Press from Planet Labs PBC showed smaller boats alongside the Rubymar on Wednesday. It wasn't immediately clear whose vessels those were.

The private security firm Ambrey separately reported Friday about a mysterious incident involving the Rubymar.

"A number of Yemenis were reportedly harmed during a security incident which took place" on Friday, Ambrey said. It did not elaborate on what that incident involved and no party involved in Yemen's yearslong

war claimed any new attack on the vessel.

Since November, the rebels have repeatedly targeted ships in the Red Sea and surrounding waters over the Israel-Hamas war. Those vessels have included at least one with cargo bound for Iran, the Houthis' main benefactor, and an aid ship later bound for Houthi-controlled territory.

Despite over a month of U.S.-led airstrikes, Houthi rebels remain capable of launching significant attacks. That includes the attack on the Rubymar and the downing of an American drone worth tens of millions of dollars. The Houthis insist their attacks will continue until Israel stops its combat operations in the Gaza Strip, which have enraged the wider Arab world and seen the Houthis gain international recognition.

However, there has been a slowdown in attacks in recent days. The reason for that remains unclear.

## **A party like no other? Asia's richest man celebrates son's prenuptials with a star-studded bash**

By ASHOK SHARMA Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — What happens when the son of Asia's richest man is about to get married?

His father throws a three-day prenuptial bash four months before the actual ceremony.

Tycoons from around the world, heads of state, as well as Hollywood and Bollywood stars descended on the small western Indian city of Jamnagar on Friday where billionaire industrialist Mukesh Ambani is kickstarting a big fat wedding celebration for his youngest son.

The nearly 1,200-person guest list includes pop superstar Rihanna, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Sunder Picha, Ivanka Trump and Bollywood celebrity Shah Rukh Khan.

All eyes are on Anant Ambani, 28, and his long-time girlfriend Radhika Merchant, 29, who will tie the knot in July. Radhika is the daughter of Viren Merchant, CEO of Encore Healthcare Pvt. Ltd., and entrepreneur Shaila Merchant.

Such festivities keep up with the Ambani family's tradition of lavish and over-the-top parties while displaying the Indian billionaire's economic and political clout

Here is everything you need to know about the family and the prenuptial bash that captivated the country.

Who is Mukesh Ambani?

Mukesh Ambani, 66, is currently the world's 10th richest man with a net worth of \$115bn, according to Forbes. He is also the richest person in Asia.

His Reliance Industries is a massive conglomerate, reporting over \$100 billion in annual revenue, with interests ranging from petrochemicals, and oil and gas to telecoms and retail.

Under Ambani's leadership, Reliance — founded by his father in 1966 — sparked a telecom price war with the launch of the 4G phone and broadband service Jio in 2016. Today, it has more than 420 million subscribers and offers 5G services. Earlier this week, Disney struck an \$8.5bn deal to merge its India business with Ambani's Reliance Industries, forming a new media giant.

The Ambani family owns, among other assets, a 27-storey private apartment building, named Antila, worth \$1 billion in Mumbai. It has three helipads, a 160-car garage, a private movie theatre, a swimming pool, and a fitness center.

Ambani's critics say his company has flourished mainly because of political connections during the Congress governments in the 1970s and 80s and subsequently under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rule after 2014. They say "crony capitalism" in India has helped certain corporations, such as Ambani's, thrive.

Mukesh Ambani, 66, has started passing the torch to his two sons and daughter. The oldest son, Akash Ambani, is now chairperson of Reliance Jio; his daughter, Isha, oversees retail; and the youngest, Anant — who will wed in July — has been inducted into the new energy business.

Do you want a party like no other? The Ambanis have your back

Extravagant parties are the Ambani's specialty.

In 2018, when his daughter married, Ambani made the headlines because of the grand celebrations with pop sensation Beyoncé performing at the pre-wedding festivities. At the time, Former U.S. Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry were among those who rubbed shoulders with Indian celebrities and

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 40 of 82

Bollywood stars in the western Indian Udaipur city.

Later that year, the happy couple, Isha Ambani and Anand Piramal, officially celebrated their engagement overlooking the picturesque Lake Como in Italy. In December 2018, they got married at the Ambani residence in Mumbai.

What is so fascinating about the pre-wedding shindig?

The three-day pre-wedding bash offers a glimpse of the opulence expected at the July wedding.

The Ambanis are celebrating it at the family's hometown of Jamnagar — a city of around 600,000 in a near-desert part of Gujarat state — where they also have the business' main oil refinery.

Guests will don jungle-themed outfits to visit an animal rescue center run by the groom-to-be, Anant. Known as "Vantara," or "Star Of The Forest," the 3,000-acre (about 1,200-hectare) center houses abused, injured and endangered animals, particularly elephants.

The invitation also says guests will start each day with a new dress code, with mood boards and an army of hair stylists, makeup artists and Indian wear designers at their hotel to help them prepare.

There will also be traditional Hindu ceremonies in a temple complex.

The guests, many arriving by chartered planes, will be served 500 dishes created by around 100 chefs.

The guest list also includes Mohammed Bin Jassim al Thani, the prime minister of Qatar; Stephen Harper, former Canadian prime minister; and Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck and Queen Jetsun Pema.

On Wednesday, the Ambani family organized a community food service for 51,000 people living in nearby villages.

## **Navalny's mother brings flowers to his grave a day after thousands attended his funeral in Moscow**

By ELISE MORTON Associated Press

The mother and mother-in-law of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny were among mourners who brought flowers to his grave in Moscow on Saturday, a day after thousands turned his funeral into one of the largest recent displays of dissent.

Police kept a heavy presence at the cemetery but the situation was calm, Russian independent TV channel Dozhd (Rain) reported.

"The police let those wishing to bid farewell to the politician pass through and do not rush anyone," the outlet wrote on the Telegram messaging app, quoting one of its readers on the scene.

Dozhd also reported that "spontaneous memorials" to Navalny had been destroyed in several Russian cities. Flowers were removed in cities including St. Petersburg and Voronezh, it said.

Under a heavy police watch, thousands bid farewell Friday to Navalny after his still-unexplained death two weeks ago in an Arctic penal colony. The crowds who thronged to honor Navalny outside a church and cemetery in a snowy southeastern suburb of the capital chanted slogans for him and against Russian President Vladimir Putin and the war in Ukraine.

Police did not act against them, but at least 106 people were detained at events across Russia in Navalny's memory, said OVD-Info, a rights group that tracks political arrests. It said most were stopped while trying to lay flowers at monuments dedicated to victims of Soviet repression.

Navalny was buried after a short Russian Orthodox ceremony, with vast crowds waiting outside the church and then streaming to the fresh grave with flowers.

Navalny's widow, Yulia, was not seen at the funeral. She has vowed to continue his work, lovingly thanked him for "26 years of absolute happiness."

The funeral followed a battle with authorities over the release of his body. His team said several Moscow churches refused to hold the funeral for the man who crusaded against official corruption and organized massive protests. Many Western leaders blamed the death on the Russian leader, an accusation the Kremlin angrily rejected.



## Hard-liners are leading in Iran's parliamentary election which may have witnessed record-low turnout

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A day after parliamentary election concluded in Iran, hard-liners are leading in initial vote counting in the capital of Tehran, state media reported Saturday.

State-run IRNA news agency and state TV said 1,960 from 5,000 ballots in Tehran have been counted so far, based on an interior ministry report which is updated hourly.

Officials have not yet released the total voter turnout. However, IRNA said it was 41%, based on unofficial reports.

In the last parliamentary election in 2019, only 42% of eligible voters headed to the ballot stations. It was considered the lowest turnout since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Hard-liners have controlled the parliament for the past two decades — with chants of "Death to America" often heard while in session.

Under Iranian law, the parliament has a variety of roles, including overseeing the executive branch and voting on treaties. In practice, absolute power in Iran rests with its supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Friday's election was the first since the bloody crackdown on the 2022 nationwide protests that followed the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody.

Amini, 22, died on Sept. 16, 2022, after her arrest by Iran's morality police for allegedly violating the country's strict headscarf law forcing women to cover their hair and entire bodies. The protests quickly escalated into calls to overthrow Iran's clerical rulers. In the severe clampdown that followed, over 500 people were killed and nearly 20,000 arrested, according to human rights activists in Iran.

## Powerful storm in California and Nevada shuts interstate and dumps snow on mountains

By SCOTT SONNER Associated Press

RENO, Nev. (AP) — A powerful blizzard raged overnight into Saturday in the Sierra Nevada as the biggest storm of the season shut down a long stretch of Interstate-80 in California and gusty winds and heavy rain hit lower elevations, leaving tens of thousands of customers without power.

Up to 10 feet (3 meters) of snow is expected in some areas. The National Weather Service in Reno said late Friday it expects the heaviest snow to arrive after midnight, continuing with blizzard conditions and blowing snow through Saturday that could reduce visibility to one-quarter mile or less.

"High to extreme avalanche danger" is expected in the backcountry through Sunday evening throughout the central Sierra, including the greater Lake Tahoe area, the weather service said.

California authorities on Friday shut down 100 miles (160 kilometers) of I-80 due to "spin outs, high winds, and low visibility." They had no estimate when the freeway would reopen from the California-Nevada border just west of Reno to near Emigrant Gap, California.

Pacific Gas & Electric reported around 10 p.m. Friday that 24,000 households and businesses were without power.

A tornado touched down Friday afternoon in Madera County and caused some damage to an elementary school, said Andy Bollenbacher, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service Hanford.

Some of the ski resorts that shut down Friday said they planned to remain closed on Saturday to dig out with an eye on reopening Sunday, but most said they would wait to provide updates Saturday morning.

Palisades Tahoe, the largest resort on the north end of Tahoe and site of the 1960 Winter Olympics, said it hoped to reopen some of the Palisades slopes at the lowest elevation on Saturday but would close all chairlifts for the second day at neighboring Alpine Meadows due to forecasts of "heavy snow and winds over 100 mph" (160.9 kph).

"We have had essential personnel on-hill all day, performing control work, maintaining access roads, and digging out chairlifts, but based on current conditions, if we are able to open at all, there will be significant delays," Palisades Tahoe said Friday on X, formerly known as Twitter.

The storm began barreling into the region on Thursday. A blizzard warning through Sunday morning covers a 300-mile (482-kilometer) stretch of the mountains.

Some ski lovers raced up to the mountains ahead of the storm.

Daniel Lavelly, an avid skier who works at a Reno-area home/construction supply store, was not one of them. He said Friday that he wouldn't have considered making the hour-drive to ski on his season pass at a Tahoe resort because of the gale-force winds.

But most of his customers Friday seemed to think the storm wouldn't be as bad as predicted, he said.

"I had one person ask me for a shovel," Lavelly said. "Nobody asked me about a snowblower, which we sold out the last storm about two weeks ago."

Meteorologists predict as much as 10 feet (3 meters) of snow is possible in the mountains around Lake Tahoe by the weekend, with 3 to 6 feet (0.9 to 1.8 meters) in the communities on the lake's shores and more than a foot (30 centimeters) possible in the valleys on the Sierra's eastern front, including Reno.

Yosemite National Park closed Friday and officials said it would remain closed through at least noon Sunday.

## **In Senegal's capital, Nicaragua is a hot ticket among travel agents as migrants try to reach US**

By BABA AHMED Associated Press

DAKAR, Senegal (AP) — Gueva Ba tried to reach Europe by boat 11 times from Morocco, failing each attempt. Then, in 2023, the former welder heard about a new route to the United States by flying to Nicaragua and making the rest of the journey illegally by land to Mexico's northern border.

"In Senegal, it's all over the streets — everyone's talking about Nicaragua, Nicaragua, Nicaragua," said Ba, who paid about 6 million CFA francs (\$10,000) to get to Nicaragua in July with stops in Morocco, Spain and El Salvador. "It's not something hidden."

Ba, 40, was deported from the U.S. with 131 compatriots in September after two months in detention, but thousands of other Senegalese have gained a foothold in America. Many turn to savvy travel agents who know the route — touted on social media by those who've successfully settled in the U.S.

They are part of a surge in migration to the United States that is extraordinary for its size and scope, with more people from far-flung countries accounting for crossings at the border. And as with this route used by the Senegalese, more are figuring out plans, making payments, and seeking help via social networks, and apps like WhatsApp and TikTok.

Arrests for illegal crossings on the U.S. border with Mexico reached record highs in December. January saw a drop for the month, but arrests have topped 6.4 million since January 2021. And Mexicans account for only about 1 of 4 arrests, with the others coming from more than 100 countries.

U.S. authorities arrested Senegalese migrants 20,231 times for crossing the border illegally from July to December. That's a 10-fold increase from 2,049 arrests during the same period of 2022, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Many cross in remote deserts of western Arizona, like Ba, and California.

Word of the Nicaragua route began spreading early last year in Dakar and took hold in May, said Abdoulaye Doucouré, who owns a travel agency that sold about 1,200 tickets from Dakar to Nicaragua in the last three months of 2023, for the equivalent of several thousand dollars each.

"People didn't know about this route, but with social networks and the first migrants who took this route, the information quickly circulated among migrants," he said.

Some are motivated by Senegal's political turmoil — authorities delayed February's presidential elections by 10 months — but the sudden draw seemed to hinge largely on social media posts and the spread of the route there.

Spikes attributed to social media have occurred in other West African nations, whose people have historically turned first to Europe to flee. Mauritians have arrived at the U.S. border with Mexico in similarly large numbers, and migrants from Ghana and Gambia have come, too.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 43 of 82

Many are eventually released in the U.S. to pursue asylum in immigrant courts that are backlogged for years with more than 3 million cases.

Passports from many African countries carry little weight in the Western Hemisphere, making the journey by land to the United States difficult to even begin. Senegalese can fly visa-free to only two countries in the Americas: Nicaragua and Bolivia, according to The Henley Passport Index. Nicaragua is much closer than Bolivia and avoids the notoriously dangerous Darien Gap in Panama.

As U.S. sanctions against Nicaragua's repressive government have increased, the government of President Daniel Ortega has used migration to push back.

The Nicaraguan government went so far as to hire a Dubai-based firm to train Nicaraguan civil aviation to manage national immigration procedures for charter flight passengers. More than 500 charter flights landed from June to November, mostly from Haiti and Cuba, according to Manuel Orozco, director of the migration, remittances and development program at the Inter-American Dialogue.

But migrants from farther afield, like Ba, also made their way to Nicaragua on a series of connecting commercial flights from Africa. In African capitals, migrants typically buy multileg tickets from travel agents connecting through Istanbul or Madrid, followed by stops in Bogota, Columbia, or San Salvador, El Salvador, before ultimately arriving in Managua, Nicaragua. From there, they meet smugglers offering to take them to the Honduran border, or arrange the trip all the way to the U.S.

The U.S. State Department has called on Nicaragua to "play a responsible role" in managing hemispheric migration, but that has yet to be seen. Nicaraguan first lady and Vice President Rosario Murillo did not respond to a request for comment on the surge in extra-continental migration through her country.

In October, El Salvador began charging \$1,130 for citizens of 57 largely African countries and India transiting the country's airport. Authorities said most of those charged were on their way to Nicaragua aboard Avianca, a Colombian commercial carrier.

El Salvador's fee caused airfares from Dakar to rise toward the end of 2023, said Serigne Faye, an agent at the Touba Express travel agency in Senegal's capital. Some passengers instead fly through Bogota. Stopovers in Turkey are the most expensive.

While most asylum claims fail, the immigration court backlog means that people can remain in the U.S. for years, with eligibility for work permits. The asylum grant rate for Senegalese was 26% in the U.S. government's budget year ended Sept. 30, compared with 14% for all nationalities, according to Justice Department figures.

Ousmane Anne, 34, left Senegal on Sept. 25 with a plane ticket to Nicaragua, purchased from a travel agency. His journey took a month — longer and costlier than anticipated. Mexico was treacherous, he said, describing his traveling group as frequently harassed, threatened and robbed by gangs.

Despite the enthusiasm back home, he said, he'd be hard-pressed to recommend the trip to anyone who doesn't understand the risks. But he made it to New York, which has the largest Senegalese population of any U.S. metropolitan area, according to census data.

"I knew it would not be very easy to come here to the States, but the hope that I had was higher than all the obstacles and problems," Anne said. "I knew the opportunities would be greater here."

He recently attended a forum in Harlem, hosted by the Senegalese Association of America. He learned basics of U.S. law, heard some do's and don'ts from police officers about the e-bikes and mopeds that are popular with migrants, and got tips on navigating the health care system.

Even if he came away with more questions than answers, Anne said, he remains hopeful.

## Alaska's Iditarod dogs get neon visibility harnesses after 5 were fatally hit while training

By MARK THIESSEN Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — The Iditarod, the annual sled dog race celebrating Alaska's official state sport, is set to get underway Saturday with a new focus on safety after five dogs died and eight were injured in collisions with snowmobiles while training on shared, multi-use trails.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 44 of 82

For the first time, mushers who line up for the ceremonial start in Anchorage will have the chance to snag light-up, neon harnesses or necklaces for their dogs before they begin the days-long race that takes the dog-and-human sled teams about 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) over Alaska's unforgiving terrain.

The 38 mushers will trace a course across two mountain ranges, the frozen Yukon River and along the ice-covered Bering Sea. In about 10 days, they will come off the ice and onto Main Street in the old Gold Rush town of Nome for the last push to the finish line.

Mushers always have contended with Alaska's deep winter darkness and whiteout conditions. But the recent dog deaths even while training have put a focus on making the four-legged athletes easier to see at all times. Mushers typically wear a bright headlamp for visibility, but that doesn't protect lead dogs running about 60 feet (18 meters) in front of the sled.

"I can't make snowmachiners act responsibly, it's just not going to happen," said Dutch Johnson, manager of the August Foundation kennel, which finds homes for retired racing sled dogs. "But I can help make dogs more visible."

Two dogs were killed and seven injured in November on a team belonging to five-time Iditarod champion Dallas Seavey on a remote Alaska highway used as a training trail in the winter. It has recently become more popular with snowmobilers, bikers and other users, making it more dangerous for dogs.

Seavey said in a social media post that the snowmobile was heading in the opposite direction at about 65 mph (105 kph) when it slammed into the lead dogs on the team. The snowmobile driver was later cited for negligent driving.

In December, musher Mike Parker was running dogs for veteran Iditarod competitor Jim Lanier on the Denali Highway when a snowmobile driven by a professional rider struck the dog team. Three dogs died and another was injured. The driver, Erik Johnson, was testing snowmobiles for his employer, Minnesota-based manufacturer Polaris, and both were cited for reckless driving.

Julie St. Louis, the co-founder and director for the August Foundation, is close to the Lanier family and knew the dogs involved. When brainstorming with Johnson, they decided to use the nonprofit foundation to help outfit the dogs with harnesses and necklaces.

"It was one way we could step up and do something that was still within our mission, because we're all about keeping the dogs safe," she said.

The August Foundation has since secured an \$8,500 grant from the Polaris Foundation and raised another \$2,500 to buy 400 light-up harnesses, which were handed out to mushers at sled dog races in Fairbanks and Bethel earlier this winter.

The harnesses burn with bright neon-like colors that help illuminate the dogs in the darkness of the Alaska winter and pierce the clouds of snow sometimes kicked up by snowmachines, what Alaskans call snowmobiles.

They are now accepting donations to outfit as many dog teams as possible. Providing each team with four harnesses or lighted necklaces and one illuminated vest for the musher costs \$120. A separate effort, called Light Up the Lead Dogs, is raising money to buy lighted collars for dogs.

In each of the accidents, Johnson said the snowmobile that hit the dogs was riding behind another snowmobile, which obscured visibility by kicking up snow.

"What I've witnessed with these harnesses is they make a halo effect in that dust," Johnson said. "So they do give you some warning of where the lead dogs are."

Jeri Rodriguez, the vice president of the Anchorage Snowmobile Club, said the multiuser trails are getting busier and all users need to do all they can to be seen.

Johnson will hand out the lighted harnesses Saturday at the Iditarod's ceremonial start in Alaska's biggest city. The fan-friendly event includes a musher taking an auction winner in their sled over about 11 miles (18 kilometers) of trail. The race's real start comes Sunday in Willow, about 75 miles (121 kilometers) north of Anchorage.

The dog deaths are the latest pressure point for the Iditarod, which began in 1973 and has taken hits in recent years from the pandemic, climate change, the loss of sponsors and the retirement of several

big-name mushing champions with few to take their place.

The ranks of mushers participating this year dwindled even more last month as accusations of violence against women by two top mushers embroiled the Iditarod. Both were initially disqualified officially for violating the race's conduct rules. One was reinstated later but wound up scratching because he had leased his dogs to other mushers and could not reassemble his team in time.

Three former champions remain in the race: 2019 champion Pete Kaiser, defending winner Ryan Redington and Seavey, who is looking for a record-breaking sixth championship.

## **Ukrainian troops are rationing ammo. But House Republicans plan to take weeks to consider aid**

By STEPHEN GROVES and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ukrainian drones fly without ammunition. Russian artillery unleash deadly volleys from safe positions beyond the range of Kyiv's troops. Shortages of ammo and supplies are resulting in lost ground to Moscow, U.S. congressional leaders warn, yet the Republican-controlled House has shown little hurry to resupply Ukraine with military aid.

Across Washington, officials are viewing the drop-off in ammunition shipments with increasing alarm. It's now been over two months since the U.S. — which since World War II has fashioned itself as the "Arsenal of Democracy" — last sent military supplies to Ukraine.

But House Speaker Mike Johnson appears determined to chart his own course away from a \$95 billion foreign aid package passed by the Senate — a decision that could stall the package for weeks to come after an already arduous months-long wait in Congress.

With U.S. military shipments cut off, Ukrainian troops withdrew from the eastern city of Avdiivka last month, where outnumbered defenders had withheld a Russian assault for four months. Delays in military support from the West are complicating the task for Kyiv's military tacticians, forcing troops to ration ammunition and ultimately costing the lives of Ukrainian soldiers.

"If Ukraine gets the aid they will win. If they don't get the aid they will lose — with dire consequences to the United States," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, who visited Ukraine last week.

Defense officials are discussing options, which include possibly tapping existing stockpiles even before Congress approves funding to replenish them, according to Sen. Jack Reed, the chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee. And at a White House meeting this week, President Joe Biden, the two top Democrats in Congress and Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell all took turns intensely urging Johnson to take up a Senate-passed package that would provide \$60 billion worth of assistance for Kyiv.

So far, the Republican speaker has refused.

The Louisiana Republican — just four months into the powerful job as speaker, second in the line to the presidency — is under intense pressure from all sides. The leaders of 23 European parliaments have signed an open letter urging him to pass the aid. And within his own House ranks, senior Republicans are growing restive at the inaction, even as other far-right members have threatened to try to remove him from leadership if he advances the aid for Kyiv.

"The House is actively considering options on a path forward, but our first responsibility is to fund the government and our primary, overriding responsibility — and it has been for the last three years — has been to secure the border," Johnson said at a news conference.

Johnson responded to the pressure on Ukraine by saying the House had only received the funding legislation in mid-February after the Senate took four months to negotiate, including enforcement policies at the U.S.-Mexico border. The deal on border security swiftly collapsed after Republicans, including Johnson, criticized the proposal as insufficient. Yet Johnson and other House Republicans are once again hoping to secure some policy wins on border security.

When Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited Congress late last year, he told Johnson that the military aid would last into February. But as Congress entered March, Johnson so far has allowed House members to craft their own proposals and revealed little on his plans for the package.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 46 of 82

"We're beyond the time frame that this should have taken, this analysis and careful consideration by the House should have been completed before the end of the year or very shortly after the new year," said Rep. French Hill, an Arkansas Republican.

Hill and several other senior Republicans are pressing Johnson to act by crafting a new national security package in the House. That bill, which is being drafted by Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul and key appropriators, is expected to come in less than the \$95 billion Senate package but include many similar provisions — including money that Ukraine, Israel and Indo-Pacific allies could use to purchase U.S. military equipment, as well as some humanitarian assistance.

It may also include a version of the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity for Ukrainians, or REPO Act, which would allow the U.S. to tap frozen Russian central bank assets to compensate Ukraine for damages from the invasion, Hill said. He said it would save taxpayer dollars in the long run and help gain Republican votes in the House.

"This is more a matter of finding out the way to move forward," said seasoned Rep. Tom Cole, R-Okla., the chairman of the Rules committee. "But a substantial majority of both houses of Congress wants to help Ukraine. You had 70 over there," he said about the robust Senate support, "and the vote here will be well north of 300."

Rep. Annie Kuster of New Hampshire, who leads a caucus of centrist Democrats called New Dems, said many in her party are ready to help Johnson pass a military aid package if he brings it to the floor. But she said the bill already passed by the Senate would have the broadest support.

"We're at a critical moment right now, and I encourage Speaker Johnson to work with us," Kuster said. "He has such a slim majority."

Meanwhile, any decision by the Pentagon to send Ukraine weapons before Congress approves funding is fraught with risk. Since there is no money to replenish the equipment and weapons sent, the military would be depleting its stockpiles and potentially risking harm to unit readiness for war.

In addition, there are worries that action from the Pentagon could dissuade Congress from moving quickly on the funding bill.

Reed said it would make more sense for Congress to pass the supplemental package, because then the Pentagon "could immediately order the equipment they're drawing down. We run the risk without that of drawing down the equipment and not being able to replace it or being confident of replacement."

But he added, "There might be circumstances where the president would decide to ship equipment like ATACMS, even though it would be a difficult judgment."

The U.S. has sent medium-range ATACMS (Army Tactical Missile Systems) as well as HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems). But there has been pressure for the U.S. to send longer-range ATACMS. The U.S. has resisted out of concerns Moscow would consider them escalatory, since they could reach deeper into Russia and Russian-held territory.

Ukrainian leaders, however, could use the longer-range missiles to disrupt Russian supply lines — a capability that is seen as essential as Russian President Vladimir Putin looks to surge more troops this spring.

Ukraine also has made it clear that its forces also need additional artillery, including 155 mm howitzer rounds, as well as air defense ammunition.

Ukrainian officials have expressed confidence they can withstand a Russian offensive for several more months, said Shelby Magid, deputy director of the Eurasia Center at the Atlantic Council, which advocates for American cooperation with Europe. Yet she added that the Pentagon's consideration of using draw-down authority sent a somber message that officials view the conflict as having direct implications for U.S. national security.

Some are warning that if Congress fails to provide the aid, U.S. troops will next be called on to help defend NATO allies.

Schumer said that during his trip to Ukraine, "One leading American said to me if we don't get the aid, Russian tanks could be at the Polish border by December."

## Republicans in Idaho, Missouri and Michigan will meet to weigh in on the presidential race

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

More delegates are up for grabs Saturday as former President Donald Trump looks to get closer to clinching the Republican nomination and former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley seeks her first win.

Trump, who is especially strong in caucuses, is expected to add to his delegate lead in Republican caucuses in Idaho and Missouri, as well as at a party convention in Michigan.

There are no Democratic contests on Saturday.

The next contest is the GOP caucus in Washington, D.C., on Sunday. Two days later is Super Tuesday, when 16 states and American Samoa will hold primaries on what will be the largest day of voting of the year outside of the November election. Trump is on track to lock up the nomination days later.

### Idaho

Last year, Idaho lawmakers passed cost-cutting legislation that was intended to move all the state's primaries to the same date in May — but the bill inadvertently eliminated the presidential primaries entirely. The Republican-led legislature considered holding a special session to reinstate the presidential primaries but failed to agree on a proposal in time, leaving both parties with presidential caucuses as the only option. The GOP presidential caucuses will be on Saturday, while the Democratic caucuses aren't until May 23.

The last GOP caucuses in Idaho were in 2012, when about 40,000 of the state's nearly 200,000 registered Republican voters showed up to select their preferred candidate.

For this year, all Republican voters who want to participate will have to attend in person. They will vote after hearing short speeches by the candidates or their representatives.

If one candidate gets more than 50% of the statewide votes, that candidate will win all the Idaho delegates. If none of the candidates gets more than 50% of the votes, then each candidate with at least 15% of the total votes will get a proportionate number of delegates.

The Idaho GOP will announce the results once all the votes are counted statewide.

Trump placed a distant second in the 2016 Idaho primary behind Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas.

### Missouri

The Missouri Republican Party will hold presidential caucuses on Saturday, offering state voters their only chance to weigh in on who should represent the party on the November presidential ballot.

This year will be the first test of the new system, which is almost entirely run by volunteers on the Republican side.

The caucuses were organized after GOP Gov. Mike Parson signed a 2022 law that, among other things, canceled the planned March 12 presidential primary.

Lawmakers have failed to reinstate the primary despite calls to do so by both state Republican and Democratic party leaders. Democrats will hold a party-run primary on March 23.

Trump prevailed twice under Missouri's old presidential primary system.

### Michigan

A Michigan GOP convention in Grand Rapids on Saturday will allocate 39 of the state's 55 GOP presidential delegates, but a significant portion of the party's grassroots force won't be attending due to the aftereffects of a months-long dispute over who is leading the party.

Still, the party is expected to unite behind Trump on Saturday.

Trump won Michigan's Feb. 27 Republican primary handily, receiving 68% of the vote compared to Haley's 27%.

The win gave a clear indication of Trump's standing in Michigan ahead of November, but a majority of Michigan's GOP delegates will be awarded Saturday.

Michigan Republicans were forced to split their delegate allocation into two parts after Democrats, who control the state government, moved Michigan into the early primary states, violating the national Republican Party's rules.

## Peace, music and memories: As the 1960s fade, historians scramble to capture Woodstock's voices

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE Associated Press

BETHEL, N.Y. (AP) — Woodstock didn't even happen in Woodstock.

The fabled music festival, seen as one of the seminal cultural events of the 1960s, took place 60 miles (96.5 kilometers) away in Bethel, New York, an even smaller village than Woodstock. It's a fitting misnomer for an event that has become as much legend as reality — and has less to do with location than the memories it evokes about a society's state of mind at the close of a jumbled decade.

An estimated 450,000 people converged on a swath of land owned by dairy farmer Max Yasgur to attend an "Aquarian Exposition" promising "three days of peace, love and music" from Aug. 15 to 17, 1969. Most were teenagers or young adults — people now approaching the twilight of their lives in an era where only a small portion of the population has living memories of the 1960s.

That ticking clock is why the Museum at Bethel Woods, located on the site of the festival, is immersed in a five-year project to sift facts from the legends and collect firsthand Woodstock memories before they fade away. It's a quest that has taken museum curators on a cross-country pilgrimage to record and preserve the recollections of those who were there.

"You need to capture the history from the mouths of the people who had the direct experience," says music journalist Rona Elliot, 77, who has been working as one of the museum's "community connectors." Elliot has her own stories about the festival; she was there, working with organizers like Michael Lang, who entrusted her with his archives before his death in 2022.

Woodstock, says Elliot, is "like a jigsaw puzzle — a panoply of everything that happened in the '60s."

### A QUEST FOR ORAL HISTORIES

Woodstock attendees have done hundreds of interviews through the decades, particularly on major festival anniversaries. But the Bethel Woods museum is plunging deeper with a project that began in 2020, relying on techniques similar to those of the late historian Studs Terkel, who produced hundreds of oral histories about what it was like to live through the Great Depression and World War II.

"There is a difference between someone being interviewed for a paper or a documentary and having an oral history catalogued and preserved in a museum," says Neal Hitch, senior curator and director of the Museum At Bethel Woods. "We had to go to people where they are. If you just call someone on the phone, they aren't quite sure what to say when we ask you to tell us about these personal, private memories from a festival when they may have been 18 or 19."

To find and meet people willing to tell their Woodstock tales, the museum received grants totaling more than \$235,000 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services — enough money to pay for curators and community connectors such as Elliot to travel the country and record the stories.

The odyssey began in Santa Fe, New Mexico — home to the Hog Farm that provided hippie volunteers such as Hugh "Wavy Gravy" Romney and Lisa Law to help feed the Woodstock crowd. Museum curators have traveled to Florida, hopped on a "Flower Power" cruise ship and visited Columbus, Ohio, before making a California swing earlier this year that included a San Francisco community center located near the former homes of festival performers Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead.

Richard Schoellhorn, now 77, made the trip from his Sebastopol, California, home to San Francisco to discuss his experience at Woodstock. He was initially hired to be a security guard at the ticketing booth when the festival was supposed to occur in Wallkill, New York, before a community backlash prompted a late switch to the Bethel site.

Schoellhorn still reported for work in Bethel, only to promptly discover his services weren't going to be needed because the festival became so overwhelmed that organizers stopped selling tickets.

"I was walking around at Woodstock and Hugh Romney comes up to me and says, 'Are you working?'" Schoellhorn recalled to The Associated Press before sitting down to have his oral history recorded. "And I go, 'No, I just got fired!' He goes, 'Well, would you like to volunteer?'"

Schoellhorn wound up working in a tent set up to assist people having bad experiences on hallucino-



# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 49 of 82

genic drugs they had taken. He wound up getting stoned himself while reveling in the first concert he'd ever attended.

"It felt like everyone was in the same freaking boat," Schoellhorn said. "There wasn't like one section where people were rich. Nobody was special there, right from the get-go."

Before attending Woodstock, Schoellhorn said he was a loner intent on pursuing a career in marketing. After Woodstock, he became so extroverted that he wound up living in a Colorado commune for several years before spending 35 years as a dialysis technician.

## MEMORIES OF UP-CLOSE EXPERIENCES

Another Woodstock attendee, Akinyele Sadiq, also came to see the curators in San Francisco to excavate his memories of watching the festival from 25 feet (7.6 meters) away from the stage.

Although the festival wasn't supposed to begin until a Friday, Sadiq departed on a Bethel-bound bus on a Wednesday. When the bus broke down, he hitched a ride that delivered him to the festival site by noon Thursday, allowing him to claim a spot so near the stage that he is visible in photos taken during the performances.

By the time he left Bethel a few days later, in a hearse that a fellow festival-goer had converted into a van, Sadiq had changed.

"Before Woodstock, I didn't have real direction. I basically didn't have a lot of friends, but I knew I was looking for peace and justice and wanted to be with creative people who were looking to make the world a better place," Sadiq, now 72, told the AP before having his oral history recorded. "Before Woodstock, if you were living in a little town, you thought there might be a dozen people out there you might be able to get along with. But then you realized there was at least a half a million of us. It just gave me hope."

Hitch says curators have heard many life-changing experiences while collecting more than 500 oral histories so far and are convinced they will amass even more during the next year. Community connectors hit Florida last month and are heading to Boston in March and New York City in early April. That will be followed by return trips to New Mexico and Southern California.

The museum intends to focus on finding and interviewing festival attendees scattered across New York state, where Hitch estimates roughly half the Woodstock crowd still lives.

The museum will spend 2025 combing through the oral histories before turning to special projects such as reuniting friends who attended the festival together but now live in different parts of the country.

Elliot is convinced — "both karmically and cosmically" — that the oral history project is something she was meant to do.

"I want this to be a teaching tool," she says. "I don't want historians telling the story of a spiritual event that just appeared to be a musical event."

## As Sweden joins NATO, it bids farewell to more than two centuries of neutrality

By DAVID KEYTON Associated Press

STOCKHOLM (AP) — Sweden's last war ended in 1814, and when the rifles and cannons it aimed at Norway fell silent, the once-warring power would not take up arms again.

For the next two centuries, Sweden embraced a policy of neutrality, refusing to take sides in wars or join any military alliance. It was a stance that kept peace at home and contributed to the country becoming a prosperous welfare state and humanitarian superpower.

This remarkably long era of nonalignment is coming to a close as Sweden joins NATO. The ceremonial formalities are expected soon, after 18 months of delays while Turkey and Hungary held up ratification and sought concessions from other members of the alliance.

"Sweden is now leaving 200 years of neutrality and nonalignment behind us," Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said after Hungary's Parliament gave its approval Monday, overcoming the final hurdle. "It is a big step. We must take that seriously. But it is also a very natural step that we are taking."

Sweden, like neighbor Finland, had long ruled out seeking NATO membership. That changed practically

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 50 of 82

overnight when Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The attack sparked fears across Europe of Moscow's revived imperial ambitions — alarm that has grown as Russia gains momentum on the battlefield in Ukraine.

"It's the right path for us," said Jacob Frederiksen, a 24-year-old pilot, who like many Swedes has embraced NATO membership amid the breakdown of the post-World War II order that largely kept the peace for decades. "I think in this new era, it's better to be part of an alliance than being independent and neutral."

The invasion "had a shock effect on Swedish political life," said Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson, a political scientist at the University of Goteborg. He analyzed polling data showing that support for NATO membership surged from 35% in 2021 to 64% after the invasion.

"It was the largest and fastest shift in opinion that has so far been measured in Swedish political history," Ekengren Oscarsson wrote.

Still, new anxieties come with being part of an alliance amid rising tensions between Russia and the West.

Ulrika Eklund, a 55-year-old bank employee in Stockholm, said she feels uncertainty about being in NATO and the effect it will have on Sweden. But she understands why the step has been taken with "so much going on in the world and in Europe."

The country's neutrality has its roots in the early 19th century, when Europe was engulfed in the Napoleonic wars.

Though Sweden ended up on the winning side of battles against France's warrior-emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, the loss of territorial possession in Finland to Russia years earlier put an end to any illusions of Sweden continuing in a big-power role.

"After having gained Norway, the policy was aimed at staying outside the quarrels of the big powers and instead developing Sweden as a country. And that we did," said Robert Dalsjö, senior analyst with the Swedish Defence Research Agency.

The policy allowed Sweden to grow, Dalsjö said, putting it on the path to a modern state after being "one of the poorest and most backward countries in Europe in the early 19th century."

As Sweden adjusted to its new status, King Karl XIV John declared the country's neutrality in 1834. In a letter to the courts of Britain and Russia, he urged respect for Sweden's wish to stay out of their conflicts.

Preserved in the Swedish National Archives and considered the oldest document on Sweden's neutrality, the text reads: "We will request, as we do now, to stay totally outside of this struggle, and that Sweden and Norway, by keeping a strict neutrality towards the warring parties, can deserve, by our impartial conduct, respect and the appreciation of our system."

Along the way, Sweden's neutrality was tested — particularly during World War II, when it made concessions to Germany to stay out of war.

"The Second World War was a near-death experience for Sweden," Dalsjö said.

Many Swedes believed they remained at peace due to their neutrality, he said, but in reality "we were flexible in our application of neutrality: early in the war, making concessions to the Germans and later in the war, making concessions to the allies."

During the Cold War, when Sweden and Finland were buffer countries between NATO and the Warsaw Pact alliance, many Swedes — and Finns — felt that being outside either bloc was the best way to avoid tensions with Russia, the powerful eastern neighbor in the Baltic Sea region.

But that never meant a full embrace of pacifism. In the 1950s and '60s, Sweden had the fourth-largest air force in the world and the ability to mobilize around 800,000 men, including reservists, in case of war, said Andreas Ohlsson, curator at the Swedish Army Museum.

"Being neutral is not being naive. It's actually a way of thinking that we have to be self-dependent if the war comes," Ohlsson said.

As the years passed, the idea of Sweden as a voice for peace and nuclear nonproliferation became core to Sweden's identity. The home of the Nobel Prize institutions funded foreign aid programs, took part in peacekeeping missions abroad and relied on its neutral status to act as a mediator in regional conflicts around the globe.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 51 of 82

Olof Palme, Sweden's prime minister in the 1970s, described Sweden as a moral superpower that should "become active in situations where other countries, as a result of their foreign policy stance, have been incapable of engagement."

Fears of Russia's military power stretch back centuries and lasted into the twilight years of the Cold War. In 1981, a Soviet submarine ran aground in the Stockholm archipelago, coming close to the main Swedish naval base. Tense days followed.

After the Cold War, fears diminished, and Sweden cut back on defense spending. But in recent years, Sweden has invested more in its military and built up contacts with NATO, participating in training with the alliance.

A key catalyst was Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

In 2017, Sweden brought back conscription. The next year, a regiment on Sweden's strategically important Baltic Sea island of Gotland, northwest of the Russian territory of Kaliningrad, was reestablished after being disbanded in 2005.

Over time for Sweden — clearly rooted in the West and a member of the European Union since 1995 — the word "nonalignment" became more apt than "neutrality."

"For 30 years, we have edged away from the pure-hearted neutrality that was never so pure, to an alliance position," Dalsjö said. "And you might say that we finally consummate it by joining NATO."

## **'They wanted to humiliate us.' Palestinian women detained by Israel allege abuse in Israeli custody**

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Nabela thought the United Nations school in Gaza City was a safe haven. Then, the Israeli army arrived.

Soldiers stormed the place, ordering men to undress and hauling women to a mosque for strip searches, she said. So began six weeks in Israeli custody that she says included repeated beatings and interrogations.

"The soldiers were very harsh, they beat us and screamed at us in Hebrew," said the 39-year-old from Gaza City, who spoke on condition that her last name not be used for fear of being arrested again. "If we raised our heads or uttered any words, they beat us on the head."

Palestinians detained by Israeli forces in Gaza during the Israel-Hamas war have alleged widespread physical abuse and neglect. It's not known how many women or minors have been detained.

Nabela said she was shuttled between facilities inside Israel in a coed group before arriving at Damon Prison in the north, where she estimated there were at least 100 women.

Rights groups say Israel is "disappearing" Gaza Palestinians — detaining them without charge or trial and not disclosing to family or lawyers where they're held. Israel's prison service says all "basic rights required are fully applied by professionally trained prison guards."

Israel declared war after Hamas-led militants killed about 1,200 people and took roughly 250 others hostage on Oct. 7.

Since then, ground troops have arrested hundreds of Palestinians to search for suspected militants and gather intelligence. Images of blindfolded men kneeling, heads bowed and hands bound, have sparked worldwide outrage. In northern Gaza and the southern city of Khan Younis, troops rounded up dozens at a time from U.N. schools and hospitals, including medical personnel.

The military said it makes detainees undress to search for explosives, bringing detainees into Israel before releasing them back into Gaza if they're deemed innocent.

For Nabela, that process took 47 harrowing days.

Despite Israeli evacuation orders, Nabela and her family had decided not to leave Gaza City, believing nowhere in Gaza was safe. Troops entered the school where they sheltered on Dec. 24.

"I was terrified, imagining they wanted to execute us and bury us there," she said.

Forces separated Nabela from her 13-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son and loaded her onto a truck bound for a facility in southern Israel. According to the Israeli group Physicians for Human Rights-Israel,

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 52 of 82

or PHRI, all detainees in Gaza are first brought to the Sde Teiman military base.

"We were freezing and forced to remain on our knees on the ground," Nabela told The Associated Press from a school-turned-shelter in Rafah where she's staying with other recently released female detainees. "Loud music, shouting and intimidation — they wanted to humiliate us. We were handcuffed, blindfolded, and our feet were tied in chains."

Moved between several prisons, Nabela said she was subjected to repeated strip searches and interrogations at gunpoint.

Asked about her connection to Hamas and knowledge of the militants' extensive underground tunnel network, she maintained her innocence, telling interrogators she was a housewife and her husband worked for Hamas' rival, the Palestinian Authority.

## 'AN APPARATUS OF RETRIBUTION AND REVENGE'

One woman detained from Gaza, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of another arrest, told the AP that during a medical check before she was moved to Damon Prison, Israeli forces ordered her to kiss an Israeli flag. When she refused, a soldier grabbed her by the hair, smashing her face into a wall, she said.

In a report by PHRI, former detainees from Gaza alleged similar mistreatment.

One, whose name was redacted, said he was urinated on by guards at Ketziot Prison in southern Israel, and witnessed strip searches where guards forced naked detainees to stand close to each other and inserted search devices into their buttocks.

PHRI described Israel's prisons, also housing Palestinians from the West Bank and east Jerusalem held on security-related charges, as "an apparatus of retribution and revenge." It alleged the prison service and military "have been granted free rein to act however they see fit."

At the beginning of the war, prisons entered "lockdown mode," confining detainees to their cells for two weeks, the report said. Under wartime emergency measures, Israel's parliament in October suspended normal cell capacity requirements. Since then, inmates have slept on mattresses in overcrowded cells.

Phone privileges have been completely suspended, the report said. At some facilities, security wings were disconnected from electricity and water, plunging detainees into darkness for most of the day and rendering showers and sinks unusable.

During eight days at an unknown facility in southern Israel, Nabela said she did not shower and had no access to menstrual pads or toiletries. Food was scarce. Once, Nabela said, guards threw down the detainees' meals and told them to eat from the floor.

The military said each detainee receives clothing, blankets and a mattress. It denied that cells were overcrowded, saying detainees had sufficient access to toilets, food, water and medical care.

"The violent and antagonistic treatment of detainees described in the allegations is prohibited," the military said in response to an AP request for comment. "Cases of inappropriate behavior will be dealt with."

It referred questions about Ketziot and Damon prisons to the Israeli Prison Service, which did not comment on the allegations beyond saying it was uninvolved in the arrests and interrogation of Palestinians from Gaza.

## 'UNLAWFUL COMBATANTS'

Nabela said she never spoke with a lawyer or a judge.

Under a wartime revision to Israeli law, all detainees from Gaza can be held for 45 days without charge or trial.

Designated "unlawful combatants," they aren't granted the same protections under international law as prisoners of war. Their appearance before a court can be delayed and access to an attorney withdrawn, according to PHRI. The Israeli rights group HaMoked said there are 600 people from Gaza held as unlawful combatants in Israeli prisons, and more could be held in military facilities.

Palestinian detainees told PHRI that adequate medical care was rare, even for those needing insulin or chemotherapy treatments.

An official document obtained by the AP, laying out operations at the Sde Teiman military medical facility, specified that unlawful combatants be treated handcuffed and blindfolded.

Medical staff's names were kept anonymous "to maintain the safety, well-being and lives of the caregivers," it said. It did not require patient consent for medical procedures and said confidential medical information could be passed to detention center staff.

The military said the handcuffing of detainees was "done in accordance with their assessed level of danger and medical state." Israel's Ministry of Health did not respond to requests for comment.

Eleven Palestinian detainees have died in Israeli custody since Oct. 7, according to the advocacy group the Palestinian Prisoners' Club, and the most recent was just this week. At least five had chronic health conditions, which PHRI says raises concerns that they died because of medical neglect.

The Israeli military said it would examine the deaths.

'BETTER THAN GAZA'

Nabela's fortunes improved when she arrived at Damon. There, she met Palestinian women detained from the West Bank.

She said the women were kind. She had electricity and warm showers. Her interrogator wondered aloud why Nabela was detained.

A month and a half after her arrest, a prison administrator announced Nabela would be released with about 20 other women. Israeli buses brought them to a Gaza crossing, where they made their way to U.N. shelters in the southern city of Rafah, full of displaced Palestinians. She cannot travel to Gaza City, where her family remains.

Nabela, her face bruised, recalled one of her final interrogations. She had begun to weep, and her interrogator told her:

"Don't cry about it. You're better living here than Gaza."

## **A New Jersey city that limited street parking hasn't had a traffic death in 7 years**

By JEFF McMURRAY Associated Press

Street parking was already scarce in Hoboken, New Jersey, when the death of an elderly pedestrian spurred city leaders to remove even more spaces in a bid to end traffic fatalities.

For seven years now, the city of nearly 60,000 people has reported resounding success: Not a single automobile occupant, pedestrian or bicyclist has died in a traffic crash since January 2017, elevating Hoboken as a national model for roadway safety.

Mayor Ravi Bhalla was a City Council member in 2015 when a van struck 89-year-old Agnes Accera as she crossed Washington Street in the bustling downtown business district. Bhalla didn't know Accera but attended her wake and said her death inspired him to push for better safety.

"I felt it wasn't acceptable," Bhalla said. "Our seniors, who we owe the greatest duty of safety to, should be able to pass that street as safely as possible. For her to actually be killed was a trigger that we needed to take action."

Bhalla became mayor in 2018 and the city fully committed to Vision Zero: a set of guidelines adopted by numerous cities, states and nations seeking to eliminate traffic deaths. Proponents believe no accident is truly unavoidable and even want to do away with the word "accident" altogether when describing roadway fatalities.

Sweden originated the concept more than a quarter-century ago, and U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg touted Hoboken in 2022 when announcing his department would follow Vision Zero guidelines. Major U.S. cities including New York, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Baltimore and Portland, Oregon, have integrated aspects of the program into their safety plans, including at least some form of daylighting, the term for the removal of parking spaces near intersections to improve visibility.

Hoboken's success has chipped away at the notion that reaching zero traffic deaths is more aspirational than achievable.

"That goal is obviously bold," said Leah Shahum, founder and director of the Vision Zero Network, a

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 54 of 82

nonprofit advocating for street safety. "It's also meant to help us kind of shake off the complacency that we've had for too long that traffic deaths are inevitable, that what we're experiencing today is just an unfortunate and unavailable byproduct of modern society. That's not the case."

While Hoboken's plan has numerous components, including lower speed limits and staggered traffic lights, daylighting is often credited as one of the biggest reasons its fatalities have dropped to zero.

Ryan Sharp, the city's transportation director, said when roads need to be repaved, Hoboken takes the additional step of cordoning off parking to widen curbs and shorten crosswalks.

Many of the concrete barriers installed are equipped with bike racks, benches and even rain garden planters that help absorb stormwater runoff. If there isn't enough money for an infrastructure solution right away, the city puts up temporary bollards.

"There really isn't a silver bullet or any magic, innovative thing where we've cracked a code," Sharp said. "Our approach has been more about focusing on the fundamentals. We've created a program where we're layering these things in year after year."

But removing parking from a place where it's in short supply has critics.

Joe Picolli, who opened Hoboken Barber Shop on Washington Street in 2018, said the curb extensions — or bumpouts — have made it difficult for downtown merchants to win back business lost during the pandemic.

"Before the bumpouts, there were a lot more buses, a lot more cars, a lot more parking," said Picolli, who lives in Point Pleasant, New Jersey, and sometimes has to trail street sweepers to find parking. "It's good as far as people walking on the street, but it's bad because you're not getting the flow from other towns."

Although a bit larger than its Mile Square City nickname would imply, Hoboken ranks fourth nationwide in population density, trailing three other New Jersey cities and two spots ahead of New York, according to 2022 census data.

While the compact footprint means everyone is within range of public transit, cars still crowd the major streets and curbsides.

"We're not New York City, but we're not a suburb, either," said Tammy Peng, who has lived in Hoboken for more than 15 years. "We're kind of a weird in between. A lot of families keep a car because they want to run errands on the weekend, but Monday to Friday they're commuting into the city."

While daylighting slightly lengthens her trips to soccer practice or the grocery store, Peng said it's much easier to spot pedestrians crossing the street.

Overall fatality numbers have remained largely unchanged since New York joined the Vision Zero movement in 2014 with a plan that included widening some curbs. Mayor Eric Adams boosted the city's commitment in November by promising to daylight 1,000 intersections each year.

Some cities have even used the practice to beautify their downtowns. Baltimore hired artists to liven up curb extensions with geometric shapes and vibrant colors.

States are embracing daylighting, as well. More than 40 had enacted some sort of daylighting law when California's Legislature approved a new statewide rule in 2023 that prohibits parking within 20 feet (6 meters) of an intersection. Cities can set shorter distances with proof their plans are safe. Violators started receiving warnings in January and face fines beginning early next year.

Assemblymember Alex Lee, who authored California's legislation, said he was troubled by the fact that his state's traffic fatalities were even higher than the national average, with around 1,100 pedestrians killed in both 2021 and 2022. Deaths were recorded at a similar pace through the first six months of 2023.

Although cities in the nation's most populous state range from behemoth metropolises to sparsely populated rural communities, Lee figured a statewide standard would eliminate any confusion. The only thing better, he contends, would be a national standard.

"Just as I assume in every state you can't park in front of a fire hydrant or can't park close to the train track, it should be the same whether you're in California or Nebraska," Lee said.

Stefanie Seskin, director of policy and practice at the National Association of City Transportation Officials, said signs are fine, but not nearly as effective as infrastructure changes.

"It certainly takes a next level of chutzpah for a driver to park on a curb extension than it does to park where a sign says 'please don't,'" Seskin said.

Jeff Speck, author of the book "Walkable City," which makes the case for pedestrian-friendly downtowns, commends cities like Hoboken for improving visibility at intersections. However, he said some communities go too far by taking away too many parking spaces without adding physical barriers, creating broad "sight triangles" leading to increased speeding.

"What a number of cities have done is overreacted to the laudable goal of daylighting and placed oversized no-parking zones around every driveway and curb cut," Speck said. "That's counterproductive."

In 2012, Seattle was one of the first major U.S. cities to pursue zero traffic deaths. Mike McGinn, the mayor at the time, said he wanted to recalibrate the public's expectation of road safety to make it more akin to their thoughts on airplane safety, where no fatality is considered acceptable.

Why, he asks, should downtown areas where people work, shop, or attend entertainment events have to settle for a lower standard?

"This is literally the easiest real estate that should be given over to safety," said McGinn, now executive director of the pedestrian advocacy group America Walks. "It's low-hanging fruit."

## **Alabama IVF ruling highlights importance of state supreme court races in this year's US elections**

By CHRISTINE FERNANDO Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — The recent ruling in Alabama that frozen embryos are legally considered children created a political firestorm after the decision halted treatment for many couples seeking to have families through fertility treatments. It also has turned the spotlight on the importance of institutions that are poised to play a central role in this year's elections: state supreme courts.

Decisions by states' highest courts have become especially critical in the nearly two years since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a constitutional right to abortion. This year, campaigns for state supreme court seats are expected to be among the most expensive and bitterly contested races on the ballot. At stake are future decisions over abortion, other reproductive rights, gerrymandering, voting rights and other crucial issues.

"This is where the action is," said Jessie Hill, a law professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Law in Cleveland.

The ruling on Feb. 16 by the Republican-majority Alabama Supreme Court to consider frozen embryos created through IVF to be children under state law has unexpectedly made in vitro fertilization, or IVF, an emerging issue in campaigns up and down the ballot. With multiple providers pausing fertility treatments in the state, fearing criminal charges or punitive damages, the GOP-controlled Legislature is under pressure to come up with a fix.

After the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, eliminating federal protections for abortion rights, the decision unleashed a flurry of activity in the states, from legislation to lawsuits that often have ended up before state supreme courts. Those cases have magnified the stakes of having liberals or conservatives controlling a majority on those courts.

"Many people may not have realized that state supreme courts can decide on these kinds of issues that have such a direct impact on their everyday lives," Hill said. "But this Alabama ruling is a reminder that these courts hold so much power, especially now, over people's rights."

This year's elections bring 80 races for supreme court seats in 33 states, including a few such as Michigan, Ohio and West Virginia where partisan control is on the line. At least four states will have state supreme court races on Super Tuesday, including Alabama, Arkansas, North Carolina and Texas. Others, including Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Ohio, Oregon and West Virginia will have contests through the spring.

In Alabama, five of the nine seats on the all-Republican Supreme Court are on the ballot. Chief Justice Tom Parker, 72, who cited verses from the Bible and Christian theologians in his concurring opinion in the IVF case, is unable to seek another term because the Alabama Constitution does not allow judges older

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 56 of 82

than 70 to be elected.

Since Roe fell in the Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization decision, about 40 lawsuits challenging abortion bans have been filed in 23 states, and many have worked their way up to states' highest courts as advocates search state constitutions for protections to abortion rights.

According to the Center for Reproductive Rights, 30 state supreme courts have decided cases challenging abortion restrictions under their state constitutions. Of these, 12 have recognized protections for abortion rights in state constitutions, while four have denied their state constitutions protect abortion rights. Other state high courts have either upheld or blocked abortion restrictions without explicitly deciding on whether their state constitutions protect abortion rights.

These rulings have had direct consequences for those trying to access abortion care. In December, the Texas Supreme Court overturned a court order that would have allowed a Dallas woman to get an abortion after her story of being forced to leave the state to terminate her nonviable pregnancy sparked a national outcry.

Abortion rights are just one recent example of the U.S. Supreme Court deferring to states on major issues, said Douglas Keith, senior counsel in the judiciary program at the Brennan Center for Justice, which tracks spending in judicial races. The U.S. Supreme Court also stepped back from ruling on issues such as partisan gerrymandering and voting rights, often making state supreme courts the final word on those issues.

"The Dobbs decision and others made clear that these courts would be the ones to decide these fundamental issues during a time where the U.S. Supreme Court was taking a step back from protecting certain rights," Keith said.

State courts also are involved in the process of getting statewide citizen initiatives to the ballot, often deciding disputes over the technical requirements of petitions and the signature-gathering process. They will play a pivotal role this year, as reproductive rights groups seek to place measures protecting abortion before voters in a number of states.

State supreme courts are expected to rule on such measures planned in Florida, Missouri and Nevada.

Florida's Republican attorney general in January asked the state Supreme Court to keep a proposed abortion rights amendment off the ballot. In Missouri, an appeals court ruled in October that summaries written by Republican Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft, an abortion opponent who is running for governor, were politically partisan and misleading. The Missouri Supreme Court declined to hear Ashcroft's appeal of the ruling.

A Nevada district court judge in January approved an abortion-rights ballot measure petition as eligible for signature-gathering, despite a legal challenge by anti-abortion groups. In November, the judge rejected an earlier petition that was much broader, including protections for prenatal care, postpartum care, vasectomies, tubal ligations, miscarriages and infertility. Nevadans for Reproductive Freedoms, the group behind the petition, appealed that rejection to the Nevada Supreme Court and is awaiting a ruling.

Activists also aim to place abortion rights on the ballot in Arizona, where Republican governors have appointed all seven of the Supreme Court justices.

"In many cases, state supreme courts have a lot of power to shut down direct democracy by preventing a question from getting on the ballot," said Brian Fitzpatrick, a professor at Vanderbilt Law School.

Strategies that attempt to derail ballot initiatives are part of a blueprint created by anti-abortion groups in other states, including Ohio, where voters last year overwhelmingly decided to enshrine abortion rights in the state constitution.

Even with voter approval, the Ohio Supreme Court will be the "ultimate arbiter" of how to interpret the constitutional amendment and how it will affect existing abortion laws, said Hill, the Case Western law professor who served as a consultant to the Ohio campaign to enshrine abortion rights. This means the state's Supreme Court races this year, starting with a March 19 primary, will be vital to abortion rights in the state, as well as other topics including gerrymandering, environmental protections and criminal justice, she said.

With three seats up for a vote and a current 4-3 Republican majority, Democrats have an opportunity to



# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 57 of 82

flip the majority of the court for the first time since 1986 while Republicans will try to expand their control. The result of a heated race in Wisconsin last year already has had an impact, after that state's Supreme Court flipped to a liberal majority for the first time in 15 years.

In December, the new Wisconsin Supreme Court overturned Republican-drawn legislative maps and ordered new district boundary lines to be drawn. Wisconsin is a swing state but also is one of the most heavily gerrymandered in the country, allowing Republicans to have outsized majorities in the Legislature. A lawsuit challenging Wisconsin's abortion ban might also be headed to the state supreme court.

"There have been immediate consequences for redistricting that have fundamentally reshaped politics in Wisconsin," said Kyle Kondik, managing editor of an elections and campaign newsletter published by the University of Virginia Center for Politics. "It goes to show just how important these races are."

## Gov. Abbott says Texas wildfires may have destroyed up to 500 structures

By SEAN MURPHY and JIM VERTUNO Associated Press

STINNETT, Texas (AP) — Wildfires may have destroyed as many as 500 structures in the Texas Panhandle, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott said Friday, describing how the largest blaze in state history scorched everything in its path, leaving ashes in its wake.

Texas officials warned that the threat was not yet over. Higher temperatures and stronger winds forecast for Saturday elevated worries that fires in the Panhandle could spread beyond the more than 1,700 square miles (4,400 square kilometers) already chewed up this week by fast-moving flames.

The largest blaze, the Smokehouse Creek fire, which began Monday, has killed at least two people, and left a charred landscape of scorched prairie, dead cattle and burned-out homes. The cause of the fire remains under investigation, although strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm weather fed the flames.

"When you look at the damages that have occurred here it's just gone, completely gone nothing left but ashes on the ground," Abbott said during a news conference in Borger, Texas. He said a preliminary assessment found 400 to 500 structures had been destroyed.

Abbott praised what he called a "heroic" response from "fearless" firefighters.

"It would have been far worse and far more damaging not just to property but to people, but for those firefighters," he said.

The National Weather Service forecast for the coming days warns of strong winds, relatively low humidity and dry conditions that pose a "significant" wildfire threat.

"Everybody needs to understand that we face enormous potential fire dangers as we head into this weekend," Abbott said. "No one can let down their guard. Everyone must remain very vigilant."

In the hard-hit town of Stinnett, population roughly 1,600, families who evacuated due to the Smokehouse Creek fire returned Thursday to devastating scenes: melted street signs and charred frames of cars and trucks. Homes reduced to piles of ash and rubble. An American flag propped up outside a destroyed house.

"We had to watch from a few miles away as our neighborhood burned," Danny Phillips said, his voice trembling with emotion.

Phillips' one-story home was still standing, but several of his neighbors weren't so fortunate.

The Smokehouse Creek fire has also crossed into Oklahoma, and the Texas A&M Forest Service said Friday that it has merged with another fire. It was 15% contained Friday afternoon, up from 3% on Thursday.

Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller said individual ranchers could suffer devastating losses due to the fires, but predicted the overall impact on the Texas cattle industry and consumer beef prices would be minimal.

Two women were confirmed killed by the fires this week. But with flames still menacing a wide area, authorities haven't yet thoroughly searched for victims or tallied homes and other structures damaged or destroyed.

Cindy Owen was driving in Texas' Hemphill County south of Canadian on Tuesday afternoon when she encountered fire or smoke, said Sgt. Chris Ray of the state's Department of Public Safety. She got out of

her truck, and flames overtook her.

A passerby found Owen and called first responders, who took her to a burn unit in Oklahoma. She died Thursday morning, Ray said.

The other victim, an 83-year-old woman, was identified by family members as Joyce Blankenship, a former substitute teacher. Her grandson, Lee Quesada, said deputies told his uncle Wednesday that they had found Blankenship's remains in her burned home.

President Joe Biden, who was in Texas on Thursday to visit the U.S.-Mexico border, said he directed federal officials to do "everything possible" to assist fire-affected communities, including sending firefighters and equipment. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has guaranteed Texas and Oklahoma will be reimbursed for their emergency costs, the president said.

"When disasters strike, there's no red states or blue states where I come from," Biden said. "Just communities and families looking for help."

Abbott has issued a disaster declaration for 60 counties.

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

"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."

Jeremiah Kaslon, a Stinnett resident who saw neighbors' homes destroyed by flames that stopped just on the edge of his property, seemed prepared for what the changing forecast might bring.

"Around here, the weather, we get all four seasons in a week," Kaslon said. "It can be hot, hot and windy, and it will be snowing the next day. It's just that time of year."

Encroaching flames caused the main facility that disassembles America's nuclear arsenal to pause operations Tuesday night, but it was open for normal work by Wednesday. The small town of Fritch, which lost hundreds of homes in a 2014 fire, saw 40 to 50 more destroyed this week, Mayor Tom Ray said.

## Paramedic gets 5 years in prison for Elijah McClain's death in rare case against medical responders

By COLLEEN SLEVIN and MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BRIGHTON, Colo. (AP) — A Colorado paramedic was sentenced Friday to five years in prison in a rare prosecution of medical responders following the death of Elijah McClain, a Black man whose name became part of the rallying cries for social justice that swept the U.S. in 2020.

McClain was walking down the street in a Denver suburb in 2019 when police responding to a suspicious person report forcibly restrained him and put him in a neck hold. His final words -- "I can't breathe" -- foreshadowed those of George Floyd a year later in Minneapolis.

Peter Cichuniec and a fellow paramedic were convicted in December of criminally negligent homicide for injecting McClain with ketamine, a powerful sedative ultimately blamed for killing the 23-year-old massage therapist. Cichuniec also was convicted on a more serious charge of second-degree assault for giving a drug without consent or a legitimate medical purpose.

McClain's death and others have raised questions about the use of ketamine to subdue struggling suspects, and the prosecution sent shock waves through the ranks of paramedics across the U.S.

McClain's mother, Sheneen, raised her fist in the air as she left the courtroom following Friday's sentencing, as she has done after previous hearings.

In testimony before the sentence was handed down by Judge Mark Warner, Sheneen McClain said she once dreamed of being a firefighter and considered them heroes "until the day they took my son's life."

"You are a local hero no more," she said as Cichuniec sat with his attorneys at a nearby table. "Next time, think for yourself and do not follow the direction of a crowd of cowards."

She added that the other paramedics could have intervened "simply by just saying, 'Stop hurting my patient.'"

Cichuniec had faced up to 16 years in prison on the assault charge, and the five-year sentence was the

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 59 of 82

minimum the judge could have given him under sentencing guidelines. The second convicted paramedic, Jeremy Cooper, Cooper, is scheduled to be sentenced in April.

Cichuniec, who has been in custody since his conviction, asked the judge for mercy. He wiped away tears as family members and friends testified as character witnesses on his behalf, and later told the judge he had spent his 18-year career as a firefighter and paramedic putting his life on the line to save others.

"I have never backed down from a call and I've had more things happen to me than you can imagine," he said. "It sickened me when the prosecution said during their closing argument that I showed no remorse for Elijah. ... There was absolutely no intent to cause any harm to Elijah McClain."

As he was led out of the court in handcuffs, someone from his family called out, "Love you Pete" as Cichuniec looked back and waved.

Cichuniec's wife noted that the sentence was the most lenient her husband could have received, before starting to cry.

"It's almost better knowing," Katy Cichuniec said.

Before the hearing, supporters of Cichuniec took up some of the rows of seats on the prosecution side of the courtroom. When Sheneen McClain walked in and saw them, she said "You all supporting Elijah?" sarcastically, holding her hand to her heart.

Firefighters and officials from their union sharply criticized the state's prosecution of Cichuniec. They said it was discouraging firefighters from becoming paramedics, decreasing the number of qualified personnel in emergencies and thereby putting lives at risk.

"Convicting Pete for the death is not justice. It's the very definition of a scapegoat," said former Aurora Fire Lieutenant John Lauder, who recently retired after working with Cichuniec over two decades. "Will paramedics now be held responsible for outcomes beyond their control?"

But Assistant Attorney General Jason Slothouber said Cichuniec didn't follow his training and never properly assessed McClain before he knowingly authorized giving him more ketamine than was needed.

"Elijah was treated as a problem that could be easily solved with ketamine, rather than as a person who needed to be evaluated, spoken to, treated with respect and care," he said.

Paramedics who are not upholding their oaths to save lives should be held accountable, said Candice Bailey, a police reform advocate in Aurora, Colorado.

"If you're doing your job and you're living up to the oath of your job, why would we ever have a conversation outside of 'Thank you?'" said Bailey, who was upset that the longest sentence for killing McClain was only five years.

"Not one of them should have gotten away without 30 years on their backs," she said.

McClain's death received little attention initially but gained renewed interest as mass protests swept the nation after Floyd's death.

McClain was stopped by police after a 911 caller reported he looked suspicious walking down the street waving his arms and wearing a face mask on Aug. 24, 2019, in the Denver suburb of Aurora. McClain, who had been listening to music with earbuds, seemed caught off guard when an officer put his hands on him within seconds of approaching him. That began a struggle including a neck hold and a restraint that lasted about 20 minutes before McClain was injected with 500 milligrams of ketamine.

He suffered cardiac arrest on the way to the hospital and was taken off life support three days later.

Experts testified that the sedative ultimately killed McClain, who was already weakened from struggling to breathe while being pinned down after inhaling vomit into his lungs during the struggle with police.

Prosecutors said the paramedics did not conduct basic medical checks of McClain, such as taking his pulse, before giving him the ketamine. The dose was too much for someone of his size — 140 pounds (64 kilograms), experts testified. Prosecutors say they also did not monitor McClain immediately after giving him the sedative but instead left him lying on the ground, making it harder to breathe.

The case against the paramedics was closely followed by firefighters and medical responders across the country. A firefighter union leader, Edward Kelly with the International Association of Fire Fighters, told reporters after Cichuniec's sentencing that prosecutors were unfairly criminalizing split-second decisions by responders.

The case also highlighted gaps in medical protocols for sedations of people in police custody that experts said must be addressed so more deaths can be prevented.

"We failed to realize just how dangerous the restraint and chemical sedation of these individuals can be," said Eric Jaeger, a paramedic and EMS educator in New Hampshire. "For better or worse the criminal convictions are focusing attention on the problem."

The sole police officer convicted in McClain's death, Randy Roedema, was convicted of criminally negligent homicide. He was sentenced to 14 months in jail in January. Two other officers who were indicted were acquitted following weeklong jury trials.

## Fanatics founder Michael Rubin says company unfairly blamed for new MLB uniforms

By JIMMY GOLEN AP Sports Writer

BOSTON (AP) — Fanatics founder Michael Rubin says his company is being unfairly blamed for new Major League Baseball uniforms that have see-through pants and other fit and design problems.

"This is a little bit of a difficult position," he said on Friday at the MIT Sloan Sports Analytics Conference. "We're purely doing exactly as we've been told, and we've been told we're doing everything exactly right. And we're getting the s--- kicked out of us. So that's not fun."

Since reporting to spring training this month, some players have complained about the fit of new uniforms. The white pants worn by some teams are also see-through enough to clearly show tucked-in jersey tops.

"I know everyone hates them," Phillies shortstop Trea Turner said. "We all liked what we had. We understand business, but I think everyone wanted to keep it the same way, for the most part, with some tweaks here or there."

Rubin said uniforms were made to the specifications set by MLB and Nike. Fanatics has been making the baseball uniform since 2017, he said; Fanatics bought the company that has been making the uniforms since 2005, so there has been no real change in the manufacturer in almost two decades.

Rubin said Nike made changes "for all the right reasons" after getting feedback from players who wanted material more breathable and stretchable.

"Nike designs everything. Hands us a spec and says, 'Make this,'" he said. "We have made everything exactly to the spec. And Nike and baseball would say, 'Yes, you've done everything we've asked you do to.'"

Rubin said part of the problem is players needing to get used to the changes, saying a similar issue dissipated after NFL and NBA uniforms changed. But in the future he said he would try to involve more people in the decisions.

"They got certain players on board, not all players on board. When you change something so old and so nostalgic you need everybody to be on board with it," Rubin said. "I believe Nike will be proved right."

MLB did not respond to a request for comment.

Players' association head Tony Clark said Thursday his members had voiced their objections.

"The commentary that's being offered suggests that the powers that be are paying attention to the concerns that are there and are engaging how best to address them moving forward," Clark said.

## Gaza doctor says gunfire accounted for 80% of the wounds at his hospital from aid convoy bloodshed

By WAFAA SHURAFI and BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — The head of a Gaza City hospital that treated some of the Palestinians wounded in the bloodshed surrounding an aid convoy said Friday that more than 80% had been struck by gunfire, suggesting there was heavy shooting by Israeli troops.

At least 115 Palestinians were killed and more than 750 others injured Thursday, according to health officials, when witnesses said nearby Israeli troops opened fire as huge crowds raced to pull goods off an aid convoy. Israel said many of the dead were trampled in a crowd surge that started when desperate

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 61 of 82

Palestinians in Gaza rushed the aid trucks. Israel said its troops fired warning shots after the crowd moved toward them in a threatening way.

Dr. Mohammed Salha, the acting director of Al-Awda Hospital, told The Associated Press that of the 176 wounded brought to the facility, 142 had gunshot wounds and the other 34 showed injuries from a stampede.

He couldn't address the cause of death of those killed, because the bodies were taken to government-run hospitals to be counted.

Dr. Husam Abu Safyia, director of Kamal Adwan Hospital, said the majority of the injured taken there had gunshot wounds in the upper part of their bodies, and many of the deaths were from gunshots to the head, neck or chest.

The bloodshed underscored how the chaos of Israel's almost 5-month-old offensive has crippled the effort to bring aid to Gaza's 2.3 million Palestinians, a quarter of whom the United Nations says face starvation.

The U.N. and other aid groups have been pleading for safe corridors for aid convoys, saying it has become nearly impossible to deliver supplies in most of Gaza because of the difficulty of coordinating with the Israeli military, ongoing hostilities and the breakdown of public order, including crowds of desperate people who overwhelm aid convoys.

U.N. officials say hunger is even worse in the north, where several hundred thousand Palestinians remain even though the area has been isolated and mostly leveled since Israeli troops launched their ground offensive there in late October. U.N. agencies haven't delivered aid to the north in more than a month because of military restrictions and lack of security, but several deliveries by other groups reached the area earlier this week.

The United Nations says a U.N. team that visited Shifa Hospital in Gaza City reported "a large number of gunshot wounds" among the more than 200 people still being treated for injuries Friday from Thursday's chaotic aid convoy scene.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and several European leaders have called for an independent, credible investigation into what happened.

Acknowledging the difficulty of getting aid in, United States President Joe Biden said Friday the U.S. soon will begin airdropping assistance to Gaza and will look for other ways to get shipments in, "including possibly a marine corridor."

The announcement came hours after a Jordanian plane over northern Gaza dropped packages attached to parachutes, including rice, flour and baby formula.

"Innocent lives are on the line, and children's lives are on the line. We won't stand by until we get more aid in there," Biden said. "We should be getting hundreds of trucks in, not just several."

Aid officials have said airdrops are an incredibly expensive way of distributing assistance.

"I don't think the airdropping of food in the Gaza Strip should be the answer today. The real answer is: Open the crossing and bring convoys and bring meaningful assistance into the Gaza Strip," Philippe Lazarini, head of the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, said Thursday.

Thursday's convoy wasn't organized by the U.N. Instead, it appeared to have been monitored by the Israeli military, which said its troops were on hand to secure it and ensure it reached northern Gaza.

United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said Friday's convoy was also "coordinated and deconflicted with the Israeli authorities" because they control Gaza.

"We've been trying to do that every day," he said. "We have not been successful every day."

Thursday's shooting and bloodshed raise questions about whether Israel will be able to keep order if it goes through with its postwar plans for Gaza.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has put forward a plan for Israel to retain open-ended security and political control over the territory — an effective reoccupation — after Hamas is destroyed. Under the plan, Palestinians picked by Israel would administer the territory, but it's uncertain if any would cooperate.

That would leave Israeli troops — who, throughout the war, have responded with heavy firepower when they perceive a possible threat — to oversee the population during the massive postwar humanitarian and reconstruction operation envisioned by the international community.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 62 of 82

Israel launched its air, sea and ground offensive in Gaza in response to Hamas' Oct. 7 attack into Israel, in which militants killed around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducted around 250 others. Since the assault began, 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 more aid in, the number of supply trucks is far less than the 500 that came in daily before the war.

The Gaza Health Ministry said the Palestinian death toll from the war has climbed to 30,228, with another 71,377 wounded. The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its figures, but says women and children make up around two-thirds of those killed.

Thursday's bloodshed took place as a convoy of around 30 trucks entered Gaza City before dawn.

Many of the wounded described a scene of desperation and chaos, with people climbing on the moving trucks to get bags of flour when Israeli troops began shooting, including from a tank.

"I was holding a bag of flour on my way home. They shot me in the right foot and in the left foot. Shells were fired above our heads, gunfire," said Sameer Salman, who was being treated in Kamal Adwan.

The Israeli military said dozens of the deaths were caused by a stampede and that some people were run over by trucks as drivers tried to get away.

Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, the chief military spokesperson, said Israeli troops guarding the area fired shots "only towards a threat after the crowd moved toward them in a way that endangered them." He said the troops "didn't open fire on those seeking aid."

## Man charged with attacking police in Times Square, vilified in Trump ad, was misidentified, DA says

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A Venezuelan man who became the subject of national attention for allegedly kicking a police officer in Times Square, then flipping off news cameras on his way out of court, was cleared of wrongdoing on Friday after prosecutors concluded he played no role in the attack.

The stunning exoneration by Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg came weeks after Jhoan Boada, 22, was widely vilified as the "smug" face of a Jan. 27th brawl between migrants and New York City police officers that touched off widespread political furor.

He featured prominently in a pro-Trump political ad titled "Joe Biden's middle finger," which ended on a freeze frame of Boada making the gesture while leaving his initial arraignment.

In a Manhattan courtroom Friday, prosecutors told a judge that further investigation proved Boada did not participate in the attack. The man seen in the video kicking an officer with pink shoes — initially identified by police as Boada — is now believed to be a separate person. That man has been charged and is awaiting criminal arraignment.

An attorney for Boada, Javier Damien, said his client was the victim of a "rush to judgment" by media, police, and elected officials. "It was a political football, and people were attacked with a broad brush," he said. "It's very sad."

Boada, who lives in the city's homeless shelter, had maintained his innocence from the start. During his arraignment on Jan. 31, his attorney told the judge that Boada had requested the surveillance footage of the incident be shared widely because "everybody who watches the videotape will not see him on there."

Prosecutors agreed to release him without bail, noting that he did not have a criminal history and that they were still working "to conduct a thorough analysis of the incident and the defendant's role in it," according to a transcript of the proceeding.

At the time, news of Boada's release drew fiery responses from conservative media and the city's police officials. In an interview on MSNBC's "Morning Joe," NYPD Chief of Patrol John Chell suggested that Boada and others had fled the city on a bus — an allegation that was later contradicted by officials.

"To add insult to injury to all of us, and we're very benevolent people in New York City, to give us literally the finger on the way out the door," Chell continued. "This is a host of issues that we have to talk about,

and it stops right here.”

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul, a Democrat, also lashed out at prosecutors’ decision not to seek bail, adding that all those involved in the assault should be deported.

In the weeks after the brawl, the Manhattan district attorney acknowledged that some of the people initially accused of kicking police were found to have played a less significant role in the melee than previously thought.

“We have to ensure we identify and charge those individuals who actually committed criminal acts in this matter,” Bragg said. “The only thing worse than failing to bring perpetrators to justice would be to ensnare innocent people in the criminal justice system.”

The assault charges against a 21-year-old were downgraded to evidence tampering after prosecutors determined that he had not touched police officers, but he had traded his jacket with one of the men who fled the confrontation.

A 19-year-old widely reported to have attacked officers also did not physically touch the officers, but allegedly kicked a police radio. Prosecutors also dropped assault charges against a 21-year-old for a lack of evidence tying him to the brawl.

Damien, the attorney for Boada, said his client was confused when police arrested him on assault charges two days after the incident, but he struggled to defend himself in English.

“He was trying to explain to the cop that he wasn’t there,” the attorney said. “But they wouldn’t listen to him.”

## **The CDC has relaxed COVID guidelines. Will schools and day cares follow suit?**

By BIANCA VÁZQUEZ TONESS and MORIAH BALINGIT AP Education Writers  
BOSTON (AP) — Four years after the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools and upended child care, the CDC says parents can start treating the virus like other respiratory illnesses.

Gone are mandated isolation periods and masking. But will schools and child care centers agree? In case you’ve lost track: Before Friday, all Americans, including school children, were supposed to stay home for at least five days if they had COVID-19 and then mask for a set period of time, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Now, with COVID deaths and hospitalizations dropping, the CDC says children can go back to school when their overall symptoms improve and they’re fever-free for 24 hours without taking medication. Students are “encouraged” to wear a mask when they return.

Still, the change may not affect how individual schools urge parents to react when their children fall sick. Schools and child care providers have a mixed record on following CDC recommendations and often look to local authorities for the ultimate word. And sometimes other goals, such as reducing absences, can influence a state or district’s decisions.

The result can be a confusing array of policies among states and districts, not to mention workplaces — confounding parents whose lives have long been upended by the virus.

“This is so confusing,” said Gloria Cunningham, a single mom in the Boston area. “I just don’t know what I should think of COVID now. Is it still a monster?”

Cunningham, who manages a local store for a national restaurant chain, said her company requires her to take off 10 days if she gets COVID-19. And the school system where her son is in second grade has still been sending home COVID test kits for kids to use before returning to school after long breaks.

“I feel like we should just do away with anything that treats COVID differently or keep all of the precautions,” she said.

The public education system has long held varying policies on COVID. During the 2021-2022 school year, only 18 states followed CDC recommendations for mask-wearing in class. When the CDC lifted its masking guidelines in February of 2022, states like Massachusetts followed suit, but California kept the mask requirement for schools.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 64 of 82

And in the child care world, some providers have long used more stringent testing and isolation protocols than the CDC has recommended. Reasons have ranged from trying to prevent outbreaks to keeping staff healthy — both for their personal safety and to keep the day care open.

Some states moved to more lenient guidelines ahead of the CDC. California and Oregon recently rescinded COVID-19 isolation requirements, and many districts followed their advice.

In an attempt to minimize school absences and address an epidemic of chronic absenteeism, California has encouraged kids to come to school when mildly sick and said that students who test positive for coronavirus but are asymptomatic can attend school. Los Angeles and San Diego's school systems, among others, have adopted that policy.

But the majority of big-city districts around the country still have asked parents to isolate children for at least five days before returning to school. Some, including Boston and Atlanta, have required students to mask for another five days and report positive COVID-19 test results to the school.

Some school leaders suggest the CDC's previous five-day isolation requirement was already only loosely followed.

Official policy in Burlington, Massachusetts, has been to have students stay home for five days if they test positive. But Superintendent Eric Conti said the real policy, in effect, is: "It's a virus. Deal with it."

That's because COVID is managed at home, using the honor system.

"Without school-based testing, no one can enforce a five-day COVID policy," he said via text message.

Ridley School District in the Philadelphia suburbs was already using a policy similar to the new CDC guidelines, said Superintendent Lee Ann Wentzel. Students who test positive for COVID must be fever-free without medication for at least 24 hours before returning to school. When they come back, they must mask for five days. Wentzel said the district is now considering dropping the masking requirement because of the new CDC guidance.

A school or day care's specific guidelines are consequential for working parents who must miss work if their child can't go to school or child care. In October 2023, during simultaneous surges of COVID, respiratory syncytial virus and influenza, 104,000 adults reported missing work because of child care issues, the highest number in at least a decade. That number has fallen: Last month, child care problems meant 41,000 adults missed work, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Melissa Colagrosso's child care center in West Virginia dropped special guidelines for COVID about a year ago, she said. Now, they're the same as other illnesses: A child must be free of severe symptoms such as fever for at least 24 hours before returning to the center.

"We certainly are treating COVID just like we would treat flu or hand, foot and mouth" disease, said Colagrosso, CEO of A Place To Grow Children's Center in Oak Hill.

As for kids without symptoms who test positive for COVID? Most parents have stopped testing kids unless they have symptoms, Colagrosso said, so it's a quandary she has not encountered.

Still, some parents worry the relaxed rules put their communities at greater risk. Evelyn Alemán leads a group of Latino and Indigenous immigrant parents in Los Angeles County. The parents she represents, many of whom suffer from chronic illnesses and lack of access to health care, panicked when California did away with isolation requirements in January.

"I don't think they're considering what the impact will be for our families," she said of California officials. "It feels like they don't care — that we're almost expendable."

Other impacts of the pandemic linger, too, even as restrictions are lifted. In Ridley, the Philadelphia-area district, more students are reclusive and struggle to interact in-person with peers, said Wentzel, the superintendent. Interest in school dances has plummeted.

"Emotionally," Wentzel said, "they're having trouble."



## Dengue cases in Peru are surging, fueled by mosquitoes and high temperatures brought by El Niño

By CÉSAR BARRETO Associated Press

PIURA, Peru (AP) — Residents of Pedregal Grande, a poor neighborhood in the Peruvian city of Piura, receive water for only 30 minutes a day because of shortages, forcing them to collect it in plastic tanks that have become breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

Scorching temperatures and a lack of air conditioning force people out of their homes and they say the mosquitoes descend on them, fueling an alarming spread of dengue in this city and the South American country.

"You go out to get some air and the mosquitoes arrive suddenly and attack you," said Segundo Ramos, a Peruvian driver who got the disease several days ago.

"My neighbor has dengue, over there they also have dengue," said Ramos, sitting in his one-story house, shirtless, with shorts and sandals as he endures the 97 degree (36 degree Celsius) temperature. "There are three or four sick neighbors within 100 meters."

With 5,275 dengue cases, Piura was by Friday the second hardest-hit city in Peru. A few days ago, it was the hardest hit. In total, Peru has registered more than 34,000 cases of dengue in the first eight weeks of this year, twice as high as in the same period in 2023, according to the nation's health ministry.

Peru's government declared a health emergency in most of its provinces on Monday due to the rising number of cases, which come amid higher than normal temperatures caused by the El Niño weather pattern.

Authorities in Piura have begun setting up special areas in hospitals to receive dengue patients.

A dengue epidemic last year put Peru's public health system under strain as thousands sought care in emergency rooms. But while last year's epidemic killed 21 people in Peru, dengue has claimed the lives of 44 Peruvians in the first two months of this year alone.

Santiago Valdez, a specialist in tropical diseases sent to Piura, said the water shortage and storage practices are fueling the disease, which is spread by *Aedes Aegypti*, a mosquito that reproduces in hot and humid conditions.

"People are forced to collect (water) and no matter how much one tries to have closed containers, there is always carelessness and the mosquitoes take the opportunity to lay their eggs and reproduce," he said.

Although most dengue cases present light symptoms, the disease can cause severe headaches, fevers and muscle pains.

In December, the World Health Organization said that Peru's 2023 dengue epidemic was linked to rains and hot temperatures that helped mosquito populations to grow, especially in the north of the country.

Health Minister César Vásquez acknowledged on Thursday that dengue "is not under control" and the cases "will continue to grow."

## Judge indicates he will rule within next 2 weeks on bid to remove Fani Willis from Trump case

By KATE BRUMBACK and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The judge overseeing the Georgia election interference case against Donald Trump indicated Friday that he would rule within the next two weeks on whether to remove Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis from the case over a romantic relationship with a top prosecutor.

After several days of extraordinary testimony, Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee heard arguments over whether Willis' relationship with special prosecutor Nathan Wade amounts to a conflict of interest that should force them off one of four criminal cases against the former president.

Attorneys for Trump and some of his co-defendants accused Willis and Wade of lying on the witness stand about when their relationship began, and told McAfee that keeping the district attorney on the case threatens to undermine the public's confidence in the hugely consequential prosecution.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 66 of 82

"Think of the message that would be sent if they were not disqualified," said Harry MacDougald, who represents former Justice Department official Jeffrey Clark in the election case. "If this is tolerated, we will get more of it. This office is a global laughingstock because of their conduct."

Willis' office, meanwhile, said the lawyers have failed to provide evidence that the district attorney benefited financially from the relationship with Wade, which the pair say ended last summer. Adam Abbate, a prosecutor with the DA's office, accused the attorneys of pushing "speculation and conjecture" and trying to embarrass Willis with questions on the witness stand that Abbate said had nothing to do with the conflict of interest question.

"It's a desperate attempt to remove a prosecutor from a case for absolutely no reason, your honor, other than harassment and embarrassment," he said.

McAfee said at the end of the hearing that there are "several legal issues to sort through, several factual determinations that I have to make," adding that he "will be taking the time to make sure that I give this case the full consideration it's due."

Willis walked into the hearing after attorneys for the election case defendants wrapped up their arguments, and sat at a table where Wade and his attorney were also seated while listening to Abbate make his case.

The legal arguments follow several days of hearings filled with salacious testimony that has created a soap opera atmosphere overshadowing the underlying charges accusing the former president of working to overturn his 2020 election loss in a desperate bid to cling to power. Willis and Wade were forced to answer uncomfortable questions on the witness stand about their sex life and romantic getaways, underscoring the extent to which the focus of the case has wandered from allegations of election interference to the prosecutors' love lives.

Even if Willis fends off the disqualification effort, the allegations have threatened to taint the public's perception of the prosecution. Trump and others have seized on the relationship to try to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the case as the Republican presidential primary front-runner vies to reclaim the White House.

Attorneys for Trump and some of his co-defendants say Willis paid Wade large sums for his work and then improperly benefited when he paid for vacations for the two of them.

Willis and Wade have acknowledged the relationship, but say it has no bearing on the case against Trump. The pair said they didn't begin dating until the spring of 2022, after Wade was hired, and that they split travel expenses.

The hearings have at times wandered into surreal territory: Atlanta's mayor watching from the gallery as a former Georgia governor testified, details of romantic getaways, and Willis' father talking about keeping stashes of cash around the house.

Willis' removal would throw the most sprawling of the four criminal cases against Trump into question. But it wouldn't necessarily mean the charges against him and 14 others would be dropped. A nonpartisan council supporting prosecuting attorneys in Georgia would be tasked with finding a new attorney to take over. That person could either proceed with some or all of the charges against Trump and others, or drop the case altogether.

Even if a new lawyer moved forward on the path charted by Willis, the inevitable delay would seem likely to lessen the probability of the case getting to trial before November's presidential election when Trump is expected to be the Republican nominee.

At a hearing preceding testimony, McAfee noted that under the law, "disqualification can occur if evidence is produced demonstrating an actual conflict or the appearance of one." He said he wanted testimony to explore "whether a relationship existed, whether that relationship was romantic or non-romantic in nature, when it formed and whether it continues."

Those questions were only relevant "in combination with the question of the existence and extent of any personal benefit conveyed as a result of the relationship," McAfee said.

A Fulton County grand jury indicted Trump and 18 others in August on charges related to efforts to keep the Republican incumbent in power even though he lost the election to Democrat Joe Biden. Four people

have pleaded guilty after reaching deals with prosecutors, while Trump and 14 others have pleaded not guilty.

Willis and Wade's relationship was first exposed in a motion filed by an attorney for Trump co-defendant Michael Roman that sought to have the indictment dismissed and to bar Willis and Wade and their offices from continuing to prosecute the case. The motion alleges Willis and Wade were already dating when she hired him as special prosecutor for the election case in November 2021.

Robin Yeartie, Willis' former friend and employee, testified she saw the pair hugging and kissing long before Willis hired Wade. But Wade's former law partner and onetime divorce attorney, Terrence Bradley, expected to be a key witness for lawyers trying to disqualify Willis, was at times evasive during testimony, and said he had "no direct knowledge of when the relationship started."

In one of hundreds of text messages Bradley exchanged with Roman's attorney, Ashleigh Merchant, however, he told her that he "absolutely" believed the relationship began before Willis hired Wade. In other texts, which were obtained by The Associated Press, Bradley fed information to Merchant over a period of several months to help her prove her allegations.

Trump's attorneys filed an analysis of location data from Wade's cellphone that they say supports the assertion Willis and Wade began dating before he was hired. An investigator's statement says Wade's phone was in the neighborhood south of Atlanta where Willis was living at least 35 times in the first 11 months of 2021. Wade had testified he visited Willis' condo fewer than 10 times before his hiring.

## COVID-19 no longer means five days in isolation, CDC says

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Americans who test positive for COVID-19 no longer need to stay in isolation for five days, U.S. health officials announced Friday.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention changed its longstanding guidance, saying that people can return to work or regular activities if their symptoms are mild and improving and it's been a day since they've had a fever.

The change comes at a time when COVID-19 is no longer the public health menace it once was. It dropped from being the nation's third leading cause of death early in the pandemic to 10th last year.

Most people have some degree of immunity to the coronavirus from vaccinations or from infections. And many people are not following the five-day isolation guidance anyway, some experts say.

"Our goal here is to continue to protect those at risk for severe illness while also reassuring folks that these recommendation are simple, clear, easy to understand, and can be followed," said Dr. Mandy Cohen, the CDC's director,

However, some experts worry that the change may increase the risk of infection for older people and others who are more vulnerable to getting seriously ill.

### WHY ARE THE GUIDELINES CHANGING?

COVID-19 is not causing as many hospitalizations and deaths as it did in the first years of the pandemic. The change is an effort to streamline recommendations so they are similar to longstanding recommendations for flu and other respiratory viruses. Many people with a runny nose, cough or other symptoms aren't testing to distinguish whether it's COVID-19, flu, or something else, officials say.

It may not be as stringent, but the guidance emphasizes that all people with respiratory symptoms should stay home while they are sick, said Dr. David Margolius, the head of Cleveland's health department.

People are likely still contagious when they test positive, and that hasn't changed, said Jennifer Nuzzo, director of the Pandemic Center at Brown University's School of Public Health.

"What has changed is how much COVID is harming us as a population," Nuzzo said.

Officials noted that some other countries and California and Oregon have eased isolation guidance in a manner similar to CDC's latest change — and did not see an increase in cases.

### WHAT ARE THE NEW GUIDELINES?

If you have symptoms, stay home until your symptoms are mild and improving and it's been a day since

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 68 of 82

you've had a fever. But then you can remain cautious by wearing a mask and keeping a distance from others.

However, the CDC guidance for workers at nursing homes and other health care facilities is staying the same. That includes a recommendation that medical personnel stay home at least seven days after symptoms first appear, and that they test negative within two days of returning to work.

The agency is emphasizing that everyone should still try to prevent infections in the first place, by getting vaccinated, washing their hands, and taking steps to bring in more outdoor fresh air.

IS THERE OPPOSITION TO THIS CHANGE?

Yes, and even some who understand the rationale for the change have concerns.

"My biggest worry in all of this is that employers will take this change in guidance to require employees to come back to work ... before they are ready to, before they feel well enough, and before they are not likely to pose harm to their co-workers," Nuzzo said.

COVID-19 remains especially dangerous to older people and those with other medical conditions. There are still more than 20,000 hospitalizations and more than 2,000 deaths each week due to the coronavirus, according to the CDC. Those 65 and older have the highest hospitalization and death rates.

This week, the CDC said seniors should get another dose of the updated COVID-19 vaccine.

WILL SCHOOLS CHANGE THEIR RULES?

Not necessarily. Schools and child care providers have a mixed record on following CDC recommendations and often look to local authorities for the ultimate word. And sometimes other goals, such as reducing absences, can influence a state or district's decisions.

When California eased its guidance, it encouraged kids to come to school when mildly sick. It also said students who test positive for COVID-19 but don't have any symptoms can attend school.

IS THIS THE FIRST CHANGE FOR ISOLATION GUIDELINES?

No. The CDC originally advised 10 days of isolation, but in late 2021 cut it to five days for Americans who catch the coronavirus and have no symptoms or only brief illnesses. Under that guidance for the general public, isolation only ended if a person had been fever-free for at least 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medications and if other symptoms were resolving.

## **Jury convicts first rioter to enter Capitol building during Jan. 6 attack**

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The first rioter to enter the U.S. Capitol building during the Jan. 6, 2021, attack was convicted on Friday of charges that he interfered with police and obstructed Congress from certifying President Joe Biden's 2020 electoral victory.

Michael Sparks, 46, of Kentucky, jumped through a shattered window moments after another rioter smashed it with a stolen riot shield. Sparks then joined other rioters in chasing a police officer up flights of stairs, one of the most harrowing images from the Jan. 6, 2021, riot.

A federal jury in Washington, D.C., convicted Sparks of all six charges that he faced, including two felonies. Sparks didn't testify at his weeklong trial. U.S. District Judge Timothy Kelly is scheduled to sentence him on July 9.

Sparks was the "tip of the spear" and breached the Capitol building less than a minute before senators recessed to evacuate the chamber and escape from the mob, Justice Department prosecutor Emily Allen said during the trial's closing arguments.

"The defendant was ready for a civil war. Not just ready for a civil war. He wanted it," Allen told jurors.

Defense attorney Scott Wendelsdorf conceded that Sparks is guilty of the four misdemeanor counts, including trespassing and disorderly conduct charges. But he urged the jury to acquit him of the felony charges — civil disorder and obstruction of an official proceeding.

Wendelsdorf accused prosecutors of trying to unfairly blame Sparks for the violence and destruction perpetrated by other rioters around him. The lawyer said Sparks immediately left the Capitol when he realized that Vice President Mike Pence wouldn't succumb to pressure from then-President Donald Trump to overturn Biden's victory.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 69 of 82

"Michael Sparks may have started the game, according to the government, but he was out of the game on the sidelines before the first quarter was over," the defense attorney told jurors.

Sparks traveled to Washington with a group of co-workers from an electronics and components plant in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. They attended Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally near the White House on Jan. 6.

After the rally, Sparks and a co-worker, Joseph Howe, joined a crowd in marching to the Capitol. A cameraman's video captured Howe saying, "We're getting in that building," before Sparks added that if Pence "does his job today, he does the right thing by the Constitution, Trump's our president four more years."

Sparks and Howe, both wearing tactical vests, made their way to the front of the mob as outnumbered police officers retreated.

"Michael Sparks was more prepared for battle than some of the police officers he encountered that day," Allen said.

Sparks was the first rioter to enter the building after Dominic Pezzola, a member of the Proud Boys extremist group, used a police shield to break the window next to the Senate Wing Door. Other rioters yelled at Sparks not to enter the building.

"He jumped in anyway," Allen said.

A police officer pepper sprayed Sparks in the face as he leaped through the broken window. Undeterred, Sparks joined other rioters in chasing Capitol Police Officer Eugene Goodman as he retreated up the stairs and found backup from other officers near the Senate chamber.

Sparks ignored commands to leave and yelled, "This is our America! This is our America!"

Sparks believed that he was defending the Constitution on Trump's behalf and that Pence had a duty to invalidate the election results, according to his attorney.

"His belief was wrong, but it was sincere," Wendelsdorf said.

Allen said Sparks knew that he broke the law but wasn't remorseful.

"I'll go again given the opportunity," Sparks texted his mother a day after the riot.

Sparks and his co-workers returned to Kentucky on Jan. 7, 2021. By then, images of him storming the Capitol had spread online. On his way home, Sparks called the Metropolitan Police Department and offered to turn himself in, according to prosecutors. He was arrested a few days later.

Sparks and Howe were charged together in a November 2022 indictment. Howe pleaded guilty to assault and obstruction charges and was sentenced in October to four years and two months in prison.

## Canada plans state funeral for late Prime Minister Brian Mulroney

By ROB GILLIES Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Canada will hold a state funeral for Brian Mulroney, the prime minister who in the 1980s solidified trade ties with the U.S. and spoke out against South Africa's apartheid and whose death drew tributes Friday from world leaders.

Mulroney died Thursday at age 84, after a fall at his home in Florida. Mulroney's daughter, Caroline, said in a statement that her father died peacefully surrounded by his family.

The flag on the Peace Tower at Parliament in Ottawa was flying at half-staff Friday in Mulroney's honor, as lawmakers suspended Parliament for the day and agreed to offer tributes to him on March 18.

Leader of the Progressive Conservative party from 1983 to 1993, Mulroney served almost a decade as prime minister after he was first elected in 1984. Mulroney forged close ties with the United States through a sweeping free trade agreement.

President Joe Biden called Mulroney a tireless advocate for Canada and said he got to know him when he served on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"Mulroney worked with President Reagan to advance the Acid Rain Treaty, which has helped protect our waterways, and negotiated the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement. To guard our shared borders from defense threats, Mulroney signed the modern North American Air Defense Command (NORAD) agreement," Biden said in statement.

"Mulroney was fearless and not afraid to stand up for causes he cared about like advocating against

racial apartheid in South Africa," Biden said. "I saw firsthand his commitment to the friendship between our two nations, as well as his abiding love for Canada and its people," he added.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said Mulroney "holds a special place in South Africa's history."

"During his term, he spoke out against apartheid, advocated the economic isolation of the regime and took a stand when many in the international community were wavering," Ramaphosa said in a statement.

Mulroney had enduring friendships with former U.S. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush and eulogized both at their funerals.

Reagan and Mulroney became friends as two national leaders during the last decade of the Cold War. Mulroney's nine years in power overlapped with Bush's four.

Former President George W. Bush expressed sadness at Mulroney's death and credited him with helping end the Cold War.

In a statement referencing the Canadian leader's close relationship with his father, Bush quoted from Mulroney's words at the elder Bush's funeral: "But the best ships are friendships, and may they always be."

"May his ship sail on in fair winds and following seas," said the statement from Bush and his wife, Laura.

It was Mulroney's amiable relationship with his southern counterparts that helped develop a free-trade treaty, a hotly contested pact at the time. The trade deal led to a permanent realignment of the Canadian economy and huge increases in north-south trade.

Fred Ryan, chairman of the board of the Reagan Foundation and Institute, said in a statement that Mulroney was one of Canada's most consequential prime ministers.

"The world has lost a true champion of freedom and democracy," Ryan said.

## **Putin foe Alexei Navalny is buried in Moscow as thousands attend under a heavy police presence**

By DASHA LITVINOVA and KATIE MARIE DAVIES Associated Press

Under a heavy police presence, thousands of people bade farewell Friday to opposition leader Alexei Navalny at his funeral in Moscow after his still-unexplained death two weeks ago in an Arctic penal colony.

The crowds who thronged to honor Navalny outside a church and cemetery in a snowy southeastern suburb of the capital chanted slogans for him and against Russian President Vladimir Putin and the war in Ukraine, turning the event into one of the largest recent displays of dissent. But police did not act against them.

At least 91 people were detained at events across Russia in Navalny's memory, said OVD-Info, a rights group that tracks political arrests, with most stopped while trying to lay flowers at monuments dedicated to victims of Soviet repression. When his death was announced Feb. 16, police detained hundreds who tried to leave flowers.

Navalny was buried after a short Russian Orthodox ceremony, with vast crowds waiting outside the church and then streaming to the fresh grave with flowers.

Navalny's widow, Yulia, who was not seen at the funeral but has vowed to continue his work, lovingly thanked him for "26 years of absolute happiness."

"I don't know how to live without you, but I will try to do it in a way that you up there are proud of me and happy for me," she wrote on Instagram.

Navalny's 23-year-old daughter, Daria, also shared a tribute to her father.

"Ever since I was a child, you taught me to live by certain principles. To live with dignity. You gave your life for me, for mum, for (my brother) Zakhar, for Russia," she wrote on Instagram. "I promise you that I will live my life in the way that you taught me, in a way that will make you proud — and most importantly, with a smile on my face."

The funeral followed a battle with authorities over the release of his body. His team said several Moscow churches refused to hold the funeral for the man who crusaded against official corruption and organized massive protests. Many Western leaders blamed the death on the Russian leader, an accusation the Kremlin angrily rejected.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 71 of 82

Navalny's team eventually got permission from the Church of the Icon of the Mother of God Soothe My Sorrows, which was surrounded by crowd-control barriers.

As his coffin was removed from the hearse and taken inside the church, the crowd waiting outside broke into respectful applause and then chanted: "Navalny! Navalny!" Some also shouted, "You weren't afraid, neither are we!" and later "No to war!" "Russia without Putin!" and "Russia will be free!"

Western diplomats, including U.S. Ambassador Lynne Tracy, were among the mourners. Also paying respects were Boris Nadezhdin and Yekaterina Duntsova, anti-war politicians who wanted to run against Putin in this month's presidential election but were not allowed on the ballot.

Inside the church, Navalny's open casket showed him covered with red and white flowers. His parents, Lyudmila and Anatoly, sat beside it.

Navalny's closest associates live outside Russia and offered commentary on a livestream of the funeral on his YouTube channel, their voices occasionally cracking with emotion.

"Those people who follow what is happening, it is of course obvious to them that this man is a hero of our country, whom we will not forget," said Nadezhda Ivanova of Kaliningrad, a mourner who was outside the church. "What was done to him is incredibly difficult to accept and get through it."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov urged those gathering in Moscow and other places not to break the law, saying any "unauthorized (mass) gatherings" are violations.

After the short church service, thousands marched to the nearby Borisovskoye Cemetery, where the police were also out in force.

With the casket again open, Navalny's mother and father stroked and kissed his head. A large crowd gathered at the cemetery's gates, chanting: "Let us in to say goodbye!"

The coffin was lowered into the ground. In keeping with his irreverent sense of humor, music from the "The Terminator 2" was played, a movie his allies said he considered "the best in the world."

Mourners streamed by his open grave, tossing handfuls of soil onto the coffin as a large crowd waited at the cemetery's entrance. As dusk fell, workers shoveled dirt into the grave while Lyudmila Navalnaya watched. A mound of flowers, funeral wreaths, candles and a portrait of Navalny sat nearby. Mourners continued to stream into the cemetery until it was closed by police shortly after 10 p.m. local time.

Lyudmila Navalnaya had spent eight days trying to get authorities to release her son's body following his Feb. 16 death at Penal Colony No. 3 in the town of Kharp, in the Yamalo-Nenets region about 1,900 kilometers (1,200 miles) northeast of Moscow.

Even on Friday, a Moscow morgue delayed releasing the body, according to Ivan Zhdanov, Navalny's close ally and director of his Anti-Corruption Foundation.

Authorities near the penal colony originally said they couldn't release the body because they needed to conduct post-mortem tests. Lyudmila Navalnaya made a video appeal to Putin to release it so she could bury her son with dignity.

Russian authorities still haven't announced the cause of death for Navalny, who was 47. His team cited paperwork that Lyudmila Navalnaya saw that listed "natural causes," although the day before his death he had appeared in court via video link joking with officials.

At least one funeral director said he had been "forbidden" to work with Navalny's supporters, his spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh said on social media. They also struggled to find a hearse.

"Unknown people are calling up people and threatening them not to take Alexei's body anywhere," Yarmysh said Thursday.

Navalny had been jailed since January 2021, when he returned to Moscow to face certain arrest after recuperating in Germany from nerve agent poisoning he blamed on the Kremlin. His Foundation for Fighting Corruption and his regional offices were designated as "extremist organizations" by the Russian government that same year.

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, the platform formerly known as Twitter.

Moscow authorities refused permission for a separate memorial event Friday for Navalny and slain

opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, citing COVID-19 restrictions, according to former presidential hopeful Duntsova. Nemtsov, a 55-year-old former deputy prime minister, was shot to death as he walked on a bridge adjacent to the Kremlin on the night of Feb. 27, 2015.

Yarmysh also urged Navalny's supporters around the world to turn out.

Hundreds brought flowers and candles at the Russian Embassy in Tbilisi in a rally organized by those who fled Russia since the start of the war with Ukraine. In a rainy Rome, a delegation from the Italian Radical party went to Moscow's embassy for the Kremlin critic.

## **US to airdrop humanitarian aid into Gaza — how it can help and why it's so complicated**

ZEKE MILLER AP White House Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Friday announced that the U.S. will begin airdropping sorely needed humanitarian assistance into Gaza amid the ongoing Israel-Hamas war.

Here's what you need to know:

### **WHEN WILL THE AIRDROPS START?**

Biden said the airdrops will be coordinated with Jordan, which has conducted several rounds of airdrops into Gaza in recent months and will begin in the "coming days." The first deliveries are expected to be pallets of food — military rations known as MREs — with other assistance potentially to follow. National Security Council spokesman John Kirby didn't offer a more exact timetable for the airdrops but said the first round would not be the last.

### **WHY NOW?**

The Biden decision comes after at least 115 Palestinians were killed and more than 750 others were injured on Thursday trying to access aid in northern Gaza under disputed circumstances, according to Gaza's Hamas-run health ministry. Witnesses said Israeli troops opened fire as huge crowds raced to pull goods off an aid convoy, while Israel has said it fired only when its troops felt threatened and that most of the civilian casualties were from trampling.

The U.S. has been pushing Israel to speed the flow of humanitarian assistance into Gaza and to open a third crossing into the territory, but Friday's violence showed the challenges no matter the circumstances.

"The loss of life is heartbreaking," Biden said Friday as he announced his decision to order airdrops. "People are so desperate."

### **HOW WILL THE U.S. ENSURE AID GETS TO WHERE IT'S NEEDED?**

Asked how the U.S. would keep the supplies from falling into Hamas' hands, Kirby told reporters that the U.S. would learn over the course of the aerial operation.

"There's few military operations that are more complicated than humanitarian assistance airdrops," he said. Kirby said Pentagon planners will identify drop locations aiming to balance getting the aid closest to where it's needed without putting those on the ground in harm's way from the drops themselves.

"The biggest risk is making sure nobody gets hurt on the ground," Kirby said. He said the U.S. is also working through how the airdropped aid will be collected and distributed once it's on the ground.

### **WILL IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

The U.S. believes the airdrops will help address the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza, but they are no replacement for trucks, which can transport far more aid more effectively — though Thursday's events also showed the risks with ground transport. Kirby said the airdrops have an advantage over trucks in that planes can move aid to a particular location very quickly. But in terms of volume, the airdrops will be "a supplement to, not a replacement for moving things in by ground."

### **WHAT ELSE CAN BE DONE?**

The U.S. and allies have tried to broker a new temporary ceasefire between Hamas and Israel that would see the release of more hostages held by the militant group in Gaza, the freeing of some Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails and an up-to-six-week pause in the fighting. If a ceasefire were secured, the U.S. hopes it would allow large quantities of aid to flow into Gaza over a sustained period of time. Biden



on Friday also said the U.S. was working with allies on establishing a "maritime corridor" to provide assistance to Gazans from the sea.

## New York man who killed a woman after a wrong turn in his driveway gets 25 years to life

By MICHAEL HILL Associated Press

FORT EDWARD, N.Y. (AP) — A man who fatally shot a 20-year-old woman after the SUV she was riding in mistakenly drove into his rural driveway in upstate New York was sentenced Friday to more than 25 years to life in prison.

Kevin Monahan, 66, was convicted of second-degree murder in the death last April of Kaylin Gillis. She was riding in a caravan of two cars and a motorcycle that was trying to leave after pulling into Monahan's long, winding driveway while looking for a party at another person's house in the town of Hebron.

"I think it's important that people know that it is not OK to shoot people and kill them who drive down your driveway," Judge Adam Michelini said. Apart from the wider deterrent effect, Michelini said it's important that Monahan remain behind bars rather than be free to harm more people.

The judge handed down the maximum sentence after Gillis' father, boyfriend and best friend told Monahan and the packed court room about their anguish and the immeasurable void in their lives.

"Kaylin was a sweet and loving soul, something you can only wish to achieve," boyfriend Blake Walsh said from the stand, as Monahan sat with a stony face. "Kaylin was everything you wish you could be. I will never be able to forgive you for your actions. I wouldn't even think about it."

The judge sentenced Monahan to 25 years to life for the second-degree murder and handed down a consecutive sentence of one-and-a-third to four years for tampering with physical evidence. A sentence for reckless endangerment will be served concurrently.

Michelini scolded Monahan for showing no remorse.

"You murdered Kaylin Gillis. You shot at a car full of people and you didn't care what would happen and you repeatedly lied about it. You deserve to spend the maximum time in prison allowable under the law," the judge said.

Prosecutors had asked for the maximum. The defense asked for leniency. Monahan declined an opportunity to speak. And then he was led away, to applause and a shout of "coward" from the gallery.

Defense attorneys said they would appeal.

Gillis' death drew attention far beyond upstate New York. It came days after the shooting of 16-year-old Ralph Yarl in Kansas City. Yarl, who is Black, was wounded by an 84-year-old white man after he went to the wrong door while trying to pick up his younger brothers.

On the night of Gillis' death, the group of friends had realized their error and were turning around in the driveway. Monahan came out to his deck and fired two shots, the second striking Gillis in the neck as she sat in the front passenger seat of an SUV driven by her boyfriend, prosecutors said.

Monahan maintained the fatal shot was an accident and that the shotgun was defective. He also said he believed the house about 40 miles (65 kilometers) north of Albany was "under siege" by intruders, and said he came out to fire a warning shot to try to scare the group away while his wife hid inside.

Prosecutors argued that Monahan was motivated by an irrational rage toward trespassers.

A jury deliberated for less than two hours before returning guilty verdicts in January against Monahan for murder, reckless endangerment and tampering with physical evidence.

Walsh, who was behind the wheel of the SUV that night, told Monahan that he took the life of someone who "never, not for a second" threatened him. Alexandra Whiting, who was a passenger in the car, told the court she still struggles with the loss of her best friend.

"Not only do I never get to see my best friend again, but I now have a new deep-rooted fear and hatred for the world. I feel afraid in everyday situations," Whiting said in a soft, quavering voice.

Andrew Gillis told the court that the milestones of his daughter's young life — graduating college, getting married, having children — had been cruelly stolen from them.

"Every day we wake up to the harsh reality that that she's no longer here," he said. "We will never see her beautiful face, hear her laughter or simply be able to hug her."

## **New Jersey businessman pleads guilty and agrees to cooperate in Sen. Bob Menendez's corruption case**

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A New Jersey businessman pleaded guilty Friday to trying to bribe U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez, admitting that he gave the senator's wife a car to influence him and agreeing to a deal with prosecutors that calls for him to testify in the corruption case against the powerful Democrat.

Jose Uribe, of Clifton, New Jersey, entered the plea in Manhattan federal court to seven charges, including conspiracy to commit bribery from 2018 to 2023, honest services wire fraud, obstruction of justice and tax evasion.

As he described his crimes in court, Uribe told Judge Sidney H. Stein that he conspired with several people, including Nadine Menendez, to provide her with a Mercedes-Benz in return for her husband "using his power and influence as a United States senator to get a favorable outcome and to stop all investigations related to one of my associates."

He said he also hoped the gift would, if necessary, stop a "possible investigation into another person who I considered to be a member of my family," according to a transcript of the proceeding, which the media was not told about before it happened.

Uribe said he made certain payments on the Mercedes "in a manner to conceal my involvement because I knew it was wrong. I knew that giving a car in return for influencing a United States senator to stop a criminal investigation was wrong, and I deeply regret my actions."

According to a plea agreement, Uribe could face up to 95 years in prison, though he could win leniency by cooperating and testifying against the other defendants, which he's agreed to do. He also agreed to forfeit \$246,000, representing proceeds traceable to his crimes.

Uribe was among three businessmen charged in the corruption case against Menendez and his wife, which was revealed last fall. Authorities say the couple accepted bribes of cash, gold bars and the luxury car in exchange for his help and influence over foreign affairs.

The defendants have pleaded not guilty.

Uribe remains free on a \$1 million bond, which was set when he was arrested. His plea deal, dated Thursday, was signed by him on Friday.

Uribe's attorney, Daniel Fetterman, declined to comment. David Schertler, a lawyer for Nadine Menendez, declined to comment. Lawyers for the senator did not immediately comment.

Menendez, his wife and the two other New Jersey businessmen are scheduled to go on trial in May.

Federal prosecutors allege that Menendez, the former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, used his position to take actions that benefited foreign governments in exchange for bribes paid by associates in New Jersey.

An indictment contends that Menendez and his wife took gold bars and cash from a real estate developer, and that the senator used his clout to get that businessman a multimillion-dollar deal with a Qatari investment fund.

Menendez is also accused of helping another New Jersey business associate get a lucrative deal with the government of Egypt. Prosecutors allege that in exchange for bribes, Menendez did things that benefited Egypt, including ghostwriting a letter to fellow senators encouraging them to lift a hold on \$300 million in aid.

Menendez also has been charged with using his international clout to help a friend get a multimillion-dollar deal with a Qatari investment fund, including by taking actions favorable to Qatar's government.

Uribe was accused of buying a luxury car for Nadine Menendez after her previous car was destroyed when she struck and killed a man crossing the street. She did not face criminal charges in connection with that crash.

The indictment has said the senator helped Uribe by trying to persuade prosecutors to go easy on one of his business associates who was the subject of a criminal investigation.

Uribe provided more information about his involvement in obstruction of justice crimes from June 2022 to 2023 during his plea hearing Friday, saying that after investigators sent him a subpoena related to the probe of the senator, Nadine Menendez contacted him through another individual.

He said he met with her later that afternoon at a Marriott hotel, where she asked him what he was going to say if somebody asked him about the car payments.

"I told her that I would say a good friend of mine was in a financial situation and I was helping that friend to make the payments on the car, and when she was financially stable, she will pay me back. Nadine says something like: 'That sounds good,'" Uribe told the judge.

He said he later told his attorneys the same version of what happened and they transmitted that "false story" to prosecutors with his approval.

"Late in 2022, I received a check from Nadine paying me back for the car payments. I then deposited the check," he said.

## Appeals court ruling that vacates Capitol rioter's sentence could impact dozens of Jan. 6 cases

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

A federal appeals court in Washington has ordered a new sentence for a retired Air Force officer who stormed the U.S. Capitol dressed in combat gear, in a ruling issued Friday that could impact dozens of other cases stemming from the Jan. 6, 2021, attack.

While a panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit upheld Larry Brock's conviction, the court said a judge wrongly applied an enhancement that lengthened the recommended prison sentence range under federal guidelines.

The enhancement — on the grounds that Brock's conduct resulted in "substantial interference with the administration of justice" — has been applied in more than 100 other Jan. 6 defendants' cases, said Patricia Hartman, a spokesperson for the Washington's U.S. attorney's office. If the ruling stands, those defendants who have not already completed their prison terms may push for new sentences.

When asked whether prosecutors will appeal the ruling, Hartman said they are considering their options.

Brock was sentenced last year to two years in prison after being convicted of a felony charge of obstruction of an official proceeding and misdemeanor offenses. He is currently serving his sentence at a federal lockup in Missouri and is expected to be released in December, according to online Bureau of Prisons records.

Brock's attorney didn't immediately respond to an email seeking comment on Friday.

The obstruction felony charge is already at the center of another case the U.S. Supreme Court will hear arguments on next month that could upend hundreds of Capitol riot cases. The justices agreed to hear the appeal filed by lawyers for another rioter charged with obstruction of an official proceeding — one of the most widely used charges brought in the Jan. 6 attack.

In Brock's case, the appeals court said the "administration of justice" sentencing enhancement applies to judicial proceedings but does not extend to interfering with the certification of the electoral vote. That's what Congress was meeting to do on Jan. 6 when supporters of Donald Trump stormed the Capitol.

"Brock's interference with one stage of the Electoral College vote-counting process— while no doubt endangering our democratic processes and temporarily derailing Congress's constitutional work—did not interfere with the 'administration of justice,'" the three-judge panel wrote.

It's unclear to what extent Brock's — or other defendants' — punishments might be reduced on re-sentencing. With the sentencing enhancement, the range in Brock's case under federal guidelines was 24 to 30 months. U.S. District Judge John Bates sentenced Brock to the low end of those guidelines, which merely provide direction for judges when they are considering punishments and are not mandatory.

Brock's attorney has said in court papers that the misapplied enhancement likely increased his client's

sentence by about nine months. Prosecutors had recommended a sentence of five years in prison.

Brock, of Grapevine, Texas, was wearing a helmet and tactical vest when he joined the mob that attacked the Capitol and went onto the Senate floor only minutes after Vice President Mike Pence, senators and their staff evacuated the chamber. Brock picked up a discarded pair of zip-tie handcuffs and was photographed in a widely shared photo holding the cuffs on the Senate floor.

His lawyer said in court papers that Brock did not pick up the cuffs to do any harm.

## Why Missouri currently doesn't allow pregnant women to be legally divorced

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

A Missouri lawmaker has introduced legislation to clarify that the state's judges can grant divorces even when one spouse is pregnant.

The notion that they can't already has sparked anger from people who see it as an antiquated policy that controls women unfairly, possibly trapping them in abusive marriages.

But divorce lawyers say the practice – which goes beyond Missouri – is not meant to be punitive for pregnant women and has some important practical benefits.

Here's a look at the issue.

### CAN PREGNANT WOMEN GET DIVORCED?

The Missouri law on divorce does not specifically bar finalizing divorces for pregnant women, but "whether the wife is pregnant" is one of the eight pieces of information — along with things like where the parties live and when they separated — that's required when someone files for divorce.

Lawyers and advocates say judges in Missouri and some other states do not finalize divorces when a woman in the couple is pregnant. But that doesn't prevent someone from starting the process during a pregnancy.

Nevada Smith, a St. Charles, Missouri, lawyer who handles divorces, said it makes sense that judges will not finalize divorces during a pregnancy because a child would impact the custody and child support terms of a divorce. And divorces usually take months, even in the rare ones without contested issues.

"You kind of need to know if you have two children or if you have three," he said.

Or a child born with special needs could change the equation, too.

The situation is similar in other states, said Kris Balekian Hayes, a Dallas-based lawyer who handles divorces. She said that Texas judges also don't finalize divorces during a pregnancy of one of the spouses. Exactly which other states have similar practices is hard to determine since it's not spelled out in divorce laws.

Family law courts in many places are clogged with cases already, Hayes said, so it would not help to revisit them after the birth of a child.

"People have complained that it's so outlandish that we could force someone to stay married to the batterer," said Hayes, who said that in 25 years of divorce law, she can think of just four cases she handled that involved pregnancy. "It's not intended to be punitive to her but to account for the child's needs."

She said the first step in dealing with an abusive relationship is to seek a protective order, not divorce.

### WHY IS A MISSOURI LAWMAKER CALLING FOR CHANGES?

Missouri Rep. Ashley Aune, a Democrat who is up for reelection this year, said she wants to use the law to make it clear that divorces can be finalized even during pregnancy.

She said the issue was brought to her attention by a group that serves victims of domestic violence, which she said needed to build an additional facility to house women who have several children, partly because they're not allowed to get divorced while pregnant.

"If you can keep someone perpetually pregnant, it has devastating consequences," Aune said in an interview.

Aune said there are also men caught up in the policy, including cases where they're stuck in a marriage to a wife who is pregnant by another man.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 77 of 82

"Life is different in 2024 and I'd like to see our policies keep up with the times," she said.

WHAT'S THE OUTLOOK FOR THE LEGISLATION?

At a committee hearing in February, everyone who signed up to testify about the measure supported it.

In written testimony, Julie Donelon, the president of the Metropolitan Organization to Counter Sexual Assault, told lawmakers that the restriction on divorce during pregnancy "creates an unnecessary obstacle and delays a woman's ability to leave an abusive relationship."

But the path for the legislation isn't clear.

Aune said she's been revising the exact language of the measure.

And she said that even after that's fine-tuned, she's not sure it will advance, in part because she's a Democrat in a legislature dominated by the GOP — even though the sponsors of the bill include Republicans.

Rep. Bill Hardwick, chair of the House Emerging Issues Committee, where Aune's bill was assigned, said he's open to it but unsure whether it will be brought up for a vote.

"That's kind of a new frontier for some judges and some lawyers," Hardwick said. "I think we've just got to think through that responsibly."

## Mexico is about to have its biggest election ever. Here's what to know

By MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Campaigning formally starts on Friday for the biggest election in Mexico's history.

Voters will choose the president, along with the winners of 628 seats in Congress and thousands of local positions. Elections will occur in all 32 jurisdictions, with more than 20,000 positions up for grabs, making it the country's largest election, according to the National Electoral Institute.

The country of 130 million people has often been marked by its "macho" culture. Now it is almost certain to elect its first woman president.

Also at play are issues such as escalating cartel warfare, the political legacy of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and the long, often tumultuous relationship with the United States.

When is the Mexican election and how does voting work?

Parties selected their candidates well before the official start of campaigning for the presidential, congressional and municipal elections. On June 2, millions of voters will turn out at the polls to vote for their new leaders. The winner of the highly anticipated presidential elections will serve a six-year term.

While most eyes are on the presidential race, Mexicans will also vote for 128 senators, 500 congressional representatives and for tens of thousands of local government positions.

Who is running the Mexican elections?

Leading presidential candidate Claudia Sheinbaum has enjoyed a comfortable lead, with around 59% of the vote, according to a February poll. The former mayor of Mexico City, Sheinbaum is seen as a continuation of populist leftist leader López Obrador and is backed by his Morena party.

Senator Xóchitl Gálvez is in a not-so-close second with around 36% of the vote. Gálvez is a fierce critic of López Obrador and is running under the Strength and Heart for Mexico coalition. Trailing behind both is little-known Jorge Álvarez Máynez of the Citizen Movement party.

What are other risks in Mexico's elections?

In swaths of the country eclipsed by cartel violence, many have raised concerns about a security crisis that has spiraled under López Obrador. In the first two months of the year, a handful of candidates were slain before the election season officially began. Watchdogs warn that this year's elections could be Mexico's most violent on record.

For critics, the election has become increasingly about democratic concerns, which fueled massive February protests against electoral reforms made by López Obrador. However, the leader remain highly popular for many in Mexico's working class, López Obrador's base. With high inflation rates, such voters are likely to stick with a candidate that they feel will advocate for them. A great number feel that the president and his Morena party have done that.

Has there ever been a female president in Mexico?

A female president would be a huge step in a country with soaring levels of gender-based violence and deep gender disparities.

Mexico still has a famously intense “machismo,” or male chauvinism, culture, expressed in its most extreme form in a high rate of femicides, but also daily in hundreds of more subtle ways.

While Mexican women have advanced to positions of political power in public life — in part because of required representation quotas for public office — women suffer from high levels of gender violence. Femicides, or the killing of women because of their gender, have been a persistent problem for decades.

## **Protests, poisoning and prison: The life and death of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny**

By EMMA BURROWS and DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

Alexei Navalny, Russia’s top opposition leader and President Vladimir Putin’s fiercest foe, was buried Friday in a Moscow suburb in a funeral that drew thousands of mourners amid a heavy police presence.

Navalny, who was serving a 19-year sentence on charges of extremism, died Feb. 16, according to Russia’s prison service. He was moved in December from his former prison in central Russia to to a “special regime” penal colony — the highest security level — above the Arctic Circle.

In a span of a decade, he went from being the Kremlin’s biggest foe to Russia’s most prominent political prisoner.

Here’s a look at key events in Navalny’s life, political activism and the charges he has faced through the years:

June 4, 1976 — Navalny is born in a western part of the Moscow region.

1997 — Graduates from Russia’s RUDN university, where he majored in law; earns a degree in economics in 2001 while working as a lawyer.

2004 — Forms a movement against rampant overdevelopment in Moscow, according to his campaign website.

2008 — Gains notoriety for alleging corruption in state-run corporations, such as gas giant Gazprom and oil behemoth Rosneft, through his blogs and other posts.

2010 — Founds RosPil, an anti-corruption project run by a team of lawyers that analyzes spending of state agencies and companies, exposing violations and contesting them in court.

2011 — Establishes the Foundation for Fighting Corruption, which will become his team’s main platform for exposing alleged graft among Russia’s top political ranks.

December 2011 — Participates in mass protests sparked by reports of widespread rigging of Russia’s parliamentary election, and is arrested and jailed for 15 days for “defying a government official.”

March 2012 — Following President Vladimir Putin’s reelection and inauguration, mass protests break out in Moscow and elsewhere. Navalny accuses key figures, including then-Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov and Chechnya’s strongman leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, of corruption.

July 2012 — Russia’s Investigative Committee charges Navalny with embezzlement involving Kirovles, a state-owned timber company in the Kirov region, while acting as an adviser to the local governor. Navalny rejects the allegations as politically motivated.

December 2012 — The Investigative Committee launches another probe into alleged embezzlement at a Navalny-linked Russian subsidiary of Yves Rocher, a French cosmetics company. Navalny again says the allegations are politically motivated.

2013 — Navalny runs for mayor in Moscow — a move the authorities not only allow but encourage in an attempt to put a veneer of democracy on the race that is designed to boost the profile of the incumbent, Sergei Sobyanin.

July 2013 — A court in Kirov convicts Navalny of embezzlement in the Kirovles case, sentencing him to five years in prison. The prosecution petitions to release Navalny from custody pending his appeal, and he resumes his campaign.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 79 of 82

September 2013 — Official results show Navalny finishes second in the mayor's race behind Sobyanin, with 27% of the vote, after a successful electoral and fundraising campaign collecting an unprecedented 97.3 million rubles (\$2.9 million) from individual supporters.

October 2013 — A court hands Navalny a suspended sentence in the Kirovles case.

February 2014 — Navalny is placed under house arrest in connection with the Yves Rocher case and banned from using the internet. His blog continues to be updated regularly, presumably by his team, detailing alleged corruption by various Russian officials.

December 2014 — Navalny and his brother, Oleg, are found guilty of fraud in the Yves Rocher case. Navalny receives a 3 ½-year suspended sentence, while his brother is handed a prison term. Both appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

December 2015 — Navalny's Foundation for Fighting Corruption releases its first long-form video — a YouTube documentary called "Chaika," which means "seagull" in Russian but is also the last name of then-Prosecutor General Yury Chaika. The 44-minute video accuses him of corruption and alleged ties to a notorious criminal group and has piled up 26 million views on YouTube. Chaika and other Russian officials deny the accusations.

February 2016 — The European Court of Human Rights rules that Russia violated Navalny's right to a fair trial in the Kirovles case, ordering the government to pay his legal costs and damages.

November 2016 — Russia's Supreme Court overturns Navalny's sentence and sends the case back to the original court in the city of Kirov for review.

December 2016 — Navalny announces he will run in Russia's 2018 presidential election.

February 2017 — The Kirov court retries Navalny and upholds his five-year suspended sentence from 2013.

March 2017 — Navalny releases a YouTube documentary accusing then-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev of corruption, getting over seven million views in its first week. A series of anti-graft protests across Russia draw tens of thousands and there are mass arrests. Navalny tours the country to open campaign offices, holds big rallies and is jailed repeatedly for unauthorized demonstrations.

April 27, 2017 — Unidentified assailants throw a green disinfectant in his face, damaging his right eye. He blames the attack on the Kremlin.

October 2017 — The European Court of Human Rights finds Navalny's fraud conviction in the Yves Rocher case to be "arbitrary and manifestly unreasonable."

December 2017 — Russia's Central Electoral Commission bars him from running for president over his conviction in the Kirovles case, a move condemned by the EU as casting "serious doubt" on the election.

July 2019 — Members of Navalny's team, along with other opposition activists, are barred from running for Moscow city council, sparking protests that are violently dispersed, with thousands arrested. Navalny's team responds by promoting the "Smart Voting" strategy, encouraging the election of any candidate except those from the Kremlin's United Russia party. The strategy works, with the party losing its majority.

2020 — Navalny seeks to deploy the Smart Voting strategy during regional elections in September and tours Siberia as part of the effort.

Aug. 20, 2020 — On a flight from the city of Tomsk, where he was working with local activists, Navalny falls ill and the plane makes an emergency landing in nearby Omsk. Hospitalized in a coma, Navalny's team suspects he was poisoned.

Aug. 22, 2020 — A comatose Navalny is flown to a hospital in Berlin.

Aug. 24, 2020 — German authorities confirm Navalny was poisoned with a Soviet-era nerve agent. After he recovers, he blames the Kremlin, an accusation denied by Russian officials.

Jan. 17, 2021 — After five months in Germany, Navalny is arrested upon his return to Russia, with authorities alleging his recuperation abroad violated the terms of his suspended sentence in the Yves Rocher case. His arrest triggers some of the biggest protests in Russia in years. Thousands are arrested.

Feb. 2, 2021 — A Moscow court orders Navalny to serve 2 ½ years in prison for his parole violation. While in prison, Navalny stages a three-week hunger strike to protest a lack of medical treatment and sleep deprivation.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 80 of 82

June 2021 — A Moscow court outlaws Navalny's Foundation for Fighting Corruption and about 40 regional offices as extremist, shutting down his political network. Close associates and team members face prosecution and leave Russia under pressure. Navalny maintains contact with his lawyers and team from prison, and they update his social media accounts.

Feb. 24, 2022 — Russia invades Ukraine. Navalny condemns the war in social media posts from prison and during his court appearances.

March 22, 2022 — Navalny is sentenced to an additional nine-year term for embezzlement and contempt of court in a case his supporters rejected as fabricated. He is transferred to a maximum-security prison in Russia's western Vladimir region.

July 2022 — Navalny's team announces the relaunch of the Anti-Corruption Foundation as an international organization with an advisory board including Francis Fukuyama, Anne Applebaum, and the European Parliament member and former Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt. Navalny continues to file lawsuits in prison and tries to form a labor union in the facility. Officials respond by regularly placing him in solitary confinement over purported disciplinary violations such as failing to properly button his garment or to wash his face at a specified time.

2023 — Over 400 Russian doctors sign an open letter to Putin, urging an end to what it calls abuse of Navalny, following reports that he was denied basic medication after getting the flu. His team expresses concern about his health, saying in April he had acute stomach pain and suspected he was being slowly poisoned.

March 12, 2023 — "Navalny," a film about the attempt on the opposition leader's life, wins the Oscar for best documentary feature.

April 26, 2023 — Appearing on a video link from prison during a hearing, Navalny says he was facing new extremism and terrorism charges that could keep him behind bars for the rest of his life. He adds sardonically that the charges imply that "I'm conducting terror attacks while sitting in prison."

June 19, 2023 — The trial begins in a makeshift courtroom in the Penal Colony No. 6 where Navalny is held. Soon after it starts, the judge closes the trial to the public and media despite Navalny's objections.

July 20, 2023 — In closing arguments, the prosecution asks the court to sentence Navalny to 20 years in prison, his team reports. Navalny says in a subsequent statement that he expects his sentence to be "huge ... a Stalinist term," referring to Soviet dictator Josef Stalin.

Aug. 4, 2023 — Navalny is convicted of extremism and sentenced to 19 years, and he says he understands he's "serving a life sentence, which is measured by the length of my life or the length of life of this regime."

Oct. 13, 2023 — Authorities detain three lawyers representing Navalny after searching their homes, and his ally Ivan Zhdanov says on social media the move is a bid to "completely isolate Navalny." The raids targeting Vadim Kobzev, Igor Sergunin and Alexei Liptser are part of a criminal case on charges of participating in an extremist group, Zhdanov says. Navalny's spokesperson says if the opposition leader has no access to lawyers, "he will end up in complete isolation, the kind no one can really even imagine."

Dec. 2, 2023 — New charges are filed against Navalny. In comments passed to associates, Navalny says he has been charged under Article 214 of the penal code, covering vandalism. "I don't even know whether to describe my latest news as sad, funny or absurd," he writes on social media via his team. "I have no idea what Article 214 is, and there's nowhere to look. You'll know before I do."

Dec. 7, 2023 — Navalny's team erects billboards across Russia featuring QR codes that lead smartphones to a hidden website urging Russians to take part in a campaign against Putin, who is expected to run for reelection in March 2024. Navalny's team say the vote is important for Putin as a referendum on his war in Ukraine, rather than a real contest for the presidency.

Dec. 11, 2023 — Navalny is scheduled to appear in court via video link but does not appear, and his spokeswoman says prison officials are citing electricity problems. Navalny's allies express concern, saying neither they nor his lawyers have heard from him in several weeks.

Dec. 25, 2023 — Navalny's allies say he's been located in a prison colony in the town of Kharp, north of the Arctic Circle, notorious for long and severe winters. It's about 100 kilometers (60 miles) from Vorkuta,



whose coal mines were among the harshest of the Soviet Gulag prison-camp system.

Jan. 10 — Navalny appears via video link from Kharp for the first time. Russian news outlets release images of him in black prison garb and with a buzz cut, on a live TV feed from the “special regime” penal colony in Kharp, about 1,900 kilometers (1,200 miles) northeast of Moscow. At the hearing, Navalny cracks jokes about Arctic weather and asks if officials at his former prison threw a party when he was transferred.

Feb. 16 — Russia’s Federal Penitentiary Service says Navalny died at the penal colony at the age of 47. His team later cited paperwork that his mother saw that listed the cause of death as “natural causes.”

March 1 — Navalny is buried in a southeastern Moscow suburb amid a heavy police presence in a funeral that draws thousands of people who chanted anti-government slogans.

## **Bangladeshi leader says a shopping mall that caught fire had no emergency exits. Death toll climbs**

By JULHAS ALAM Associated Press

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) — A six-story shopping mall that caught fire in the Bangladeshi capital had no fire exits, the country’s prime minister said Friday, as the death toll climbed to at least 46 and rescuers searched for more victims.

The fire started late Thursday in a restaurant on the first floor of the Green Cozy Cottage Shopping Mall in downtown Dhaka. More than a dozen firefighting units were deployed.

Firefighters rescued survivors and pulled out bodies, and by early Friday, at least 43 people were confirmed dead. Three injured people died later, said Health Minister Samanta Lal Sen. He said the toll could rise as at least a dozen critically injured people were being treated in two state-run hospitals.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed her shock at the loss of lives and said that it was a result of negligence. “What could be more painful than this?” she said, speaking at an unrelated event in Dhaka.

“We always request our architects, at least when they design homes or buildings, (to) keep a small open balcony, a fire exit or ventilation. But architects ... will not design that properly and also the owners do not want to leave an inch of space,” she said.

Other violations were also reported. The Capital Development Authority, the official regulator, said the building was not permitted to open restaurants but it had at least eight food shops.

One survivor said people escaped by heading to the building’s roof.

“I knew about the fire when it was at the first floor. We moved to the roof of the building. Around 30 people were there. After the fire was under control, fire service personnel broke into one side of the roof and rescued us,” Mohammed Siam said.

Forty-one victims have been identified and 38 of the bodies have been handed to their families, said Bacchu Mia, who is in charge of a police outpost at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

“Overnight many families waited here for their loved ones. It’s a heartbreaking scene as they desperately looked for their family members who died in the tragedy,” Mia said.

Five members of one family were among the dead, while the toll also included students, teachers and two reporters. The fire broke out at the beginning of the country’s weekend and many people were dining.

A fire department team entered the charred building Friday morning to see if there were more bodies, and forensic experts began looking for evidence.

The cause of the fire has not been determined. But the fire service department said the building owner was served at least three times with notice to correct the building’s fire extinguishing system.

Bangladesh has a history of such fires in commercial buildings in Dhaka and outside. Experts say lax monitoring and violation of building codes by construction companies and owners have proved deadly.

# Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 02 2023 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 250 ~ 82 of 82

## Today in History: March 2

### Wilt Chamberlain scores 100 points in a game

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, March 2, the 62nd day of 2024. There are 304 days left in the year.

On March 2, 1962, Wilt Chamberlain scored 100 points for the Philadelphia Warriors in a game against the New York Knicks, an NBA record that still stands. Philadelphia won the game, 169-147.

In 1861, the state of Texas, having seceded from the Union, was admitted to the Confederacy.

In 1877, Republican Rutherford B. Hayes was declared the winner of the 1876 presidential election over Democrat Samuel J. Tilden, even though Tilden had won the popular vote.

In 1917, actor, producer, director and bandleader Desi Arnaz was born in Santiago de Cuba.

In 1932, the 20th Amendment to the Constitution, which moved the date of the presidential inauguration from March 4 to Jan. 20, was passed by Congress and sent to the states for ratification.

In 1939, John Ford's classic Western "Stagecoach," starring Claire Trevor and John Wayne, opened in New York.

In 1943, the three-day Battle of the Bismarck Sea began in the southwest Pacific during World War II; U.S. and Australian warplanes were able to inflict heavy damage on an Imperial Japanese convoy.

In 1955, nine months before Rosa Parks' famous act of defiance, Claudette Colvin, a Black high school student in Montgomery, Alabama, was arrested after refusing to give up her seat on a public bus to a white passenger.

In 1985, the government approved a screening test for AIDS that detected antibodies to the virus, allowing possibly contaminated blood to be excluded from the blood supply.

In 1989, representatives from the 12 European Community nations agreed to ban all production of CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons), the synthetic compounds blamed for destroying the Earth's ozone layer, by the end of the 20th century.

In 1990, more than 6,000 drivers went on strike against Greyhound Lines Inc. (The company, later declaring an impasse in negotiations, fired the strikers.)

In 1995, the Internet search engine website Yahoo! was incorporated by founders Jerry Yang and David Filo.

In 2011, the Supreme Court ruled, 8-1, that a grieving father's pain over mocking protests at his Marine son's funeral had to yield to First Amendment protections for free speech in a decision favoring the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas.

In 2012, Some 40 people were killed by tornadoes that struck Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky and Ohio.

In 2018, at a funeral before an invitation-only crowd of approximately 2,000 in Charlotte, North Carolina, the children of the Rev. Billy Graham remembered "America's Pastor" as a man devoted to spreading the Gospel, and one who lived his life at home as he preached it in stadiums.

In 2021, Bunny Wailer, the last surviving founding member of the legendary reggae group The Wailers, died in his native Jamaica at age 73.

In 2022, Autherine Lucy Foster, the first Black student to enroll at the University of Alabama, died at age 92.

Today's birthdays: Actor John Cullum is 94. Actor Barbara Luna is 85. Author John Irving is 82. Actor Cassie Yates is 73. Actor, comedian Laraine Newman (Saturday Night Live) is 72. Former Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., is 71. Former Interior Secretary Ken Salazar is 69. Singer Jay Osmond is 69. Pop musician John Cowsill (The Cowsills) is 68. Former tennis player Kevin Curren is 66. Country singer Larry Stewart (Restless Heart) is 65. Rock singer Jon Bon Jovi is 62. Blues singer-musician Alvin Youngblood Hart is 61. Actor Daniel Craig is 56. Actor Richard Ruccolo is 52. Rock singer Chris Martin (Coldplay) is 47. Actor Heather McComb is 47. Actor Rebel Wilson is 44. Actor Bryce Dallas Howard is 43. Former NFL quarterback Ben Roethlisberger is 42. Actor Robert Iler is 39. Actor Nathalie Emmanuel is 35. Country singer Luke Combs is 34. Singer-rapper-actor Becky G is 27.