From: Aspen, Blake
To: Aspen, Blake
Cc: Pinkerman, Justin
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 6-14-22
Date: Tuesday, June 14, 2022 8:17:17 AM
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AG VALLEY CO-OP

Eustis, NE

Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Jun 2022	7.70	4.00	08:05
Corn	Oct 2022	6.80	-40.00	08:04
Milo	Jun 2022	6.96	-70.00	08:05
Milo	Oct 2022	6.50	-70.00	08:04
Soybeans	Jun 2022	15.81	-55.00	08:00
Soybeans	Oct 2022	14.72	-65.00	08:01
Wheat	Jun 2022	10.81	-80.00	08:00
Wheat	Jul 2022	10.81	-80.00	08:00

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KLKN: Gov. Ricketts cancels trip after Democrats plan a gun safety & pro-choice rally (no video)
NPM: Candidates for Nebraska's 1st Congressional District Special Election Participate In Hour-Long, Televised Debate
NPM: One Year Later, Lincoln's Wastewater COVID Testing Continues to Prove Useful

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Nebraska Examiner: Bipartisan U.S. Senate deal on gun control met with praise from Biden, Democrats

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OWH: Ricketts opposes gas tax holiday, calls it a 'band-aid'

LINCOLN — Gov. Pete Ricketts hit the brakes Monday on the idea of using a gas tax holiday to give Nebraska drivers relief from rising fuel prices.

He said such a solution would only be temporary and, whether done by the federal government or the state, would leave the state short of money to maintain and expand its roads and bridges.

"I'm actually against Band-Aid type solutions," he said. "At the end of the day, that money is still going to have to be made up."

Ricketts commented during his monthly radio call-in show. He responded to a man identified as "James in Blue Springs," who asked whether the governor could implement such a holiday to help with inflation at the pump.

Eight states have temporarily suspended their gas tax or a gas tax increase this year, while the idea has been proposed in several others, according to Kiplinger magazine.

Maryland launched the first such holiday, but the 30-day break already ended on April 16. Among the others, Colorado postponed a 2 cents per gallon tax increase from July 1 this year until April 1, 2023.

Legislation to cut the 18.4-cent federal gas tax down to zero for the rest of the year has been introduced in Congress, but has so far failed to gain traction. The proposed holiday would make only a modest dent in fuel prices, which averaged $5.01 a gallon nationally as of Monday.

Drivers could see a little more savings from suspending the state gas tax. Nebraska's gas tax rate is at 24.8 cents a gallon for the first six months of the year. Under state law, it will be adjusted July 1 based on fuel prices and legislative appropriations.

While opposing a gas tax holiday, Ricketts said current levels of inflation are causing challenges for Nebraskans. The annual inflation rate accelerated to 8.6% in May, the highest in more than four decades, with energy prices leading the way.

"There is nothing more corrosive to our family's pocketbooks than inflation," he said.

Ricketts blamed the rise in prices on the Biden administration, including the president's decision to block construction of the Keystone XL oil pipeline. The pipeline was to carry Canadian tar sands oil through Nebraska and connect with refineries along the Gulf of Mexico.

The governor encouraged consumers to use ethanol-blended fuels in their vehicles to save money. He noted that the Environmental Protection Agency has approved the use of 15% ethanol-blended fuel through the summer, in a move directed by President Joe Biden to help curb fuel costs.

By Martha Stoddard

AP: Nebraska governor nixes Connecticut appearance amid protests

Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts, co-chairperson of the Republican Governors Association and a pro-gun rights and anti-abortion conservative, has canceled his planned appearance in Connecticut on Tuesday at a fundraising event for Republican gubernatorial candidate Bob Stefanowski.

Liz Kurantowicz, Stefanowski's senior advisor, said Monday that Ricketts "had a scheduling conflict" and cannot attend. The event, however, will still take place at a residence in Canton without Ricketts, she said.

A message was left seeking comment with Ricketts' media spokesperson. An official schedule shows he has a news conference on Tuesday in Nebraska to discuss the opening of a state transportation operations center and "out-of-state travel" commitments for the rest of the week.

Ricketts' planned appearance, first announced last month, has drawn criticism from state Democrats who labeled the Nebraska governor an "extremist" and questioned why Stefanowski would want to host a governor who said he wants his state to outlaw abortion if Roe v. Wade is overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court. The planned visit prompted local Democrats to organize a "Rally for Choice and Gun Safety" at a school that's near the fundraiser.

Katie Kenny, chair of the Canton Democratic Town Committee, said Monday the group still plans to hold its rally even though Ricketts won't be coming.

"I believe that they thought that they could play a double game, where they're saying that they're moderate on these issues, but simultaneously raising money off bringing someone who is basically red meat for their base and who would fire people up and get people to donate a lot to Stefanowski," she said. "And when they got caught, they backed out."

Asked whether the planned protest had anything to do with Rickett's cancellation, Kurantowicz repeated her earlier, brief statement about the governor having a scheduling conflict.

As a Republican in Connecticut, a state more politically liberal, Stefanowski has taken nuanced positions on some hot-button social issues. For example, on abortion, Stefanowski said last month he would not attempt to change existing Connecticut law — the state codified Roe in state law in

1990 — but thought the state “should consider” legislation that would impose a parental notification requirement for minors under age 16, except in cases of rape or incest.
Endorsed by the National Rifle Association in 2018 when he last ran for governor, Stefanowski this month said he’s “committed to enforce the existing Connecticut gun laws, they’re strongest in the nation.” But he noted, “I don’t think we should be talking about a lot of changes right now until we enforce what we have.”
By Susan Haigh

Stamford Advocate: Nebraska governor cancels plans to stump for Stefanowksi

Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts, an ardent critic of efforts to impose tougher gun controls following recent mass shootings, canceled a planned trip to Connecticut this week to stump for Republican gubernatorial candidate Bob Stefanowski due to a scheduling conflict, the latter's campaign said on Monday .
Democrats already announced plans to protest Ricketts' appearance at a Tuesday night fundraiser in Canton over the governor's public stances in opposition to gun control and abortion rights . The two-term governor was also scheduled to appear at a breakfast fundraiser for Stefanowski in Hartford on Wednesday morning hosted by the Republican Governors Association, of which Ricketts serves as the co-chairman .
Liz Kurantowicz, a spokeswoman for Stefanowski's campaign, said on Monday afternoon however that a "schedule change" had prompted Ricketts to cancel his trip. She said there were no plans to reschedule his appearance.
A spokesman for Ricketts' office in Nebraska did not respond to questions about the governor's schedule.
Stefanowski, a businessman who ran unsuccessfully for governor in 2018, has faced repeated attacks from Democrats and Gov. Ned Lamont over his association with Republicans such as Ricketts, whose conservative positions on issues like guns and abortion contrast with Stefanowski's moderate approach toward social issues and focus on an economic message, in particular hammering Lamont over inflation and rising gas prices.
Lamont's campaign has sought to undercut Stefanowski's moderate image in recent weeks, accusing Stefanowski of flip-flopping on stances he took four years ago and relying on the support of " extremist allies " in the national conservative movement.
The news of Ricketts canceling his planned visit to Connecticut prompted a similar line of attack from the Lamont campaign on Monday.
"After refusing to release his consulting clients and his 2018 NRA questionnaire, this is just the latest attempt from Bob to conceal his actual positions from the voters of Connecticut," Lamont campaign spokesman Jake Lewis said in a statement. "However Bob's record speaks for itself: from supporting Trump and Trump's justices that are on the verge of overturning Roe v. Wade, to his promise to 'veto any legislation that makes it tougher on gun owners.' The simple truth remains that Bob is too extreme for Connecticut."
Local Democrats, who helped organize the protest against Ricketts' appearance in Canton, also questioned the rationale behind the change in plans.
Katie Kenney, the chair of the Democratic Town Committee in Canton, said she was surprised at first when she heard of Ricketts' plans to visit the town, which went solidly for Democratic President Joe Biden in the most recent presidential election. Stefanowski won the town more narrowly in 2018 ,

when he surpassed Lamont by about 5 percentage points.
"In many cases the Republican Party in Connecticut has tried to present themselves as more moderate than that, so I was surprised that they would want to associate themselves with someone with such extreme positions," Kenney said.
In response to Lamont's comments on Monday, accusing the governor of seeking to distract voters from issues such as the mounting cost of living and an FBI probe into a former official in charge of overseeing school construction grants. She did say whether either fundraiser would continue to take place without Ricketts.
"While residents suffer at the hands of the Biden/Lamont inflation, Ned Lamont will continue to do anything he can to distract people from his high tax policies and corruption scandals that make every day harder in Connecticut," Kurantowicz said. "Bob has a plan to immediately tackle inflation, make Connecticut more affordable and state government more accountable so these kinds of scandals don't continue to plague our state."
Tuesday night's fundraiser was set to be hosted by former Hartford Life International CEO Greg Boyko at his farm in Canton. When reached for comment on Monday prior to the news that Ricketts had canceled the trip, Boyko declined to comment on Ricketts' views about gun control or the protest that Democrats planned to hold at an elementary school down the street.
"I'm just doing this to help my friend Bob Stefanowski get elected," Boyko said.
Boyko could not be reached again for comment later Monday afternoon. Kenney said she and other local Democrats were still planning on holding the protest starting around 5:30 p.m.
By John Moritz

CT Mirror: Fundraiser for Stefanowski by abortion foe Ricketts is cancelled

The private fundraiser for Republican gubernatorial candidate Bob Stefanowski by Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts, whose opposition to abortion in all cases had been problematic for Stefanowski, has been cancelled.
“Gov. Ricketts had a scheduling conflict,” said Liz Kurantowicz, an adviser to Stefanowski.
There are no plans to reschedule.
Ricketts, the co-chair of the Republican Governors Association, made national news in May when he proposed seeking a ban on abortion in all cases, including rape and incest.
Stefanowski says he favors maintaining Connecticut’s law codifying the tenets of Roe v. Wade, the landmark case that struck down state bans on abortion prior to fetal viability.
He supports adding a parental notification provision for minors, while Gov. Ned Lamont said the state’s current counseling requirement is sufficient.
Ricketts was to host a fundraiser for Stefanowski at a private residence on Tuesday in the Farmington Valley.
No public events were scheduled during the visit, according to the RGA. But a protest was planned in Canton.
By Mark Pazniokas

Kearney Hub: Kearney-based Guard MPs prep for year-long deployment to Middle East

KEARNEY — In just a couple of weeks 65 members of the Nebraska Army National Guard based in Kearney will be shipping out to Texas and then to an undisclosed location in the Middle East to help

with security and other needs of U.S. military forces in the region.
“We’re spending as much time with my brother as we can,” said Luis Avila of Kearney, whose brother, Adrian, is among the members of the 1057th Military Police Company. Soon Avila, an employee at Kearney’s Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center in his civilian life, will be joining other members of the 1057th MP Company in their mission to relieve a different contingent of the 1057th from Scottsbluff.
The first group departed Nebraska in October 2021. After they leave Kearney in a couple of weeks, the second group of the 1057th’s MPs will have additional training in Texas and then leave for the Middle East.
“You are ready and prepared for the job,” said Major Gen. Daryl Bohac during a formal sendoff for the 1057th in the Fine Arts Building at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. About 200 family, friends and Nebraska dignitaries attended the event. There were lots of tears and hugs exchanged.
Guard members and their families said they’ve been preparing for the year-long absence of their citizen soldiers.
“There has been lots of family time and camping,” said Staff Sgt. Megan Yada of Chadron as her 10-year-old daughter, Kinleigh, crawled into her lap.
Yada is leaving her two daughters,Kinleigh and 3-year-old Leighton, in the care of her husband, Wade.
“I’m very excited to utilize my training,” Yada said.
It has been a very busy couple of years for the 1057th, which had been a logistics unit specializing in truck transportation, but its role shifted to military police a few years ago.
Sgt. Brady Barton serves on the Lincoln Police Department. He was sharing long-distance farewells during the past week. Barton’s mother lives in Sterling, Colorado; his father is in Laramie, Wyoming, and his finance lives in Lincoln.
After his visit in Colorado earlier last week, Barton said his mother sent him back to Nebraska with a large batch of Doritos casserole, a favorite of Barton and his friends.
Facing the reality that, in a short while, he’ll be serving his country on the other side of the globe, brings out the jitters and a sense of achievement, he said.
“There are nerves. Being gone for a year and doing what we’ll be doing is something new,” Barton said. “This one is real life. We’re in the game, now.”
The past several years have been busy for the 1057th.
The 1057th assisted in January 2021 with security at the presidential inauguration, provided support during a COVID march and civil unrest in 2020, responded to flooding in Nebraska in 2019, aided security and recovery from hurricanes Gustav in 2008 and Katrina in 2005, and was at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Utah.
The 1057th also helped battle multiple Nebraska wildfires in 2000, 2002, 2006, 2007 and 2017.
Among speakers Sunday were Gov. Pete Ricketts and state Sen. John Lowe of Kearney.
“We as Americans are grateful for the sacrifices through the years and we’re grateful to the men and women of the 1057th,” Ricketts said.
Lowe said he is inspired when people like the soldiers of the 1057th demonstrate such commitment to their nation and state.
“I’m amazed to see the men and women who are willing to serve their country. I’m honored to be here,” Lowe said.
By Mike Konz

Route Fifty: The Big Question About 'Red Flag' Laws With the Gun Safety Deal

While a newly announced bipartisan framework in the U.S. Senate for gun safety legislation would create incentives for states to pass so-called red flag laws, it's unclear how responsive Republican governors and legislators will be in taking Congress up on that offer.

GOP leaders in some states have already signaled their opposition to the laws, which provide a pathway for authorities to temporarily seize firearms from people considered to be threatening. There's also latitude in how red flag laws can be designed, with some more strict than others. What steps Congress will take in trying to establish standards for states to follow with the policies is not yet certain.

In the meantime, whether lawmakers can even reach a deal that can clear the Senate remains uncertain as negotiators are still working on an actual bill text. But, as it stands, a key part of the agreement announced over the weekend would provide federal grants to encourage the 31 states that have not passed red flag, or "extreme risk," laws to do so.

In 19 states, those laws enable police, and in some cases family members, co-workers and school officials, to petition courts to have someone's guns taken away for set periods of time if they are deemed to be a danger to themselves or to others.

Already though, at least two Republican governors have suggested that the laws could trample people's constitutional rights.

A spokeswoman for Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts declined to speak specifically about the bill Congress is considering.

But Ricketts said last year that he opposed red flag laws "because they would violate the due process rights of gun owners."

Earlier this month, a spokesman for Ohio Republican Gov. Mike DeWine told Route Fifty that the governor also has concerns about the laws based on due process. On Monday, DeWine was focused on a different type of gun legislation, signing a law that will clear the way for educators to carry firearms in school after 24 hours of training.

In another solidly Republican state, a spokesman for South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem pointed out that Lt. Gov. Larry Rhoden, testifying on behalf of the governor, expressed opposition to a red flag proposal before a legislative committee in 2020.

"The express purpose of red flag laws are to deprive individuals of their liberty and property interests, specifically the right to own and use firearms," Rhoden said, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported at the time.

"While these laws may be well-intended, we cannot disregard our constitutional rights and reverse more than 200 years of legal history for legislation that will not prevent dangerous individuals from causing harm to others," Rhoden added.

Meanwhile, Louisiana Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards did endorse creating a red flag law in his state during a press conference last week. "If it's true that guns don't kill people, people kill people," Edwards said, "we should make sure the wrong people don't have guns."

However, the state's lawmakers have proposed making it easier to have guns by eliminating a requirement to have a permit to carry a firearm in public. And Edwards recognized that there may not be support for red flag laws in the Republican-controlled legislature.

"Truth is, I don't know," he said.

One leading gun control advocate, Mathew Littman, executive director of the bipartisan gun safety group 97 Percent, acknowledged in an interview that not every state will pass red flag laws even

with the newly proposed—but as yet unspecified—federal incentives in place.
Still, he said even some states with Republican governors might back them, noting that Florida passed such a law after a gunman in 2018 killed 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.
Senate Majority Whip Richard Durbin, an Illinois Democrat, shared a similar sentiment.
"Nineteen states have already passed them including Florida, with Governor [Ron] DeSantis [a Republican]," Durbin told Route Fifty. "It's not a red state versus blue state issue," he added.
Nico Bocour, government affairs director for the Giffords Law Center, noted that the Parkland shooting seemed to have shifted the political landscape around red flag laws, and that since then eight states passed the laws, five of them Republican-leaning.
Still, Bocour said some governors "haven't found the courage to do the right thing."
But she added that the recent mass shootings in Buffalo, New York and Uvalde, Texas, along with the bipartisan support in Congress for the laws, could make it harder for opponents "to hold the line in opposing such a well supported policy."
The bipartisan Senate framework does not go as far as some gun control advocates want, leaving out measures like universal background checks and bans on certain types of high-powered rifles.
But advocates say that expanding red flag laws could help to reduce gun deaths, including the thousands of suicides each year in the U.S. that involve firearms. In 2020, 54%, or 24,292, of all gun-related deaths in the U.S. were suicides, according to the Pew Research Center.
"It's a step in the right direction," Littman said.
Aides to senators involved in the negotiations did not return press inquiries. But it appeared that the deal will attempt to address a main concern about due process with red flag laws: How high to set the burden of proof law enforcement must meet to take away a gun.
Joseph Blocher, co-director of the Duke Center for Firearms Law, said that a statement released by the senators appears to indicate that they plan to leave it up to states to set these standards.
States with red flag laws have a variety of requirements. These range from lower legal bars, like "reasonable doubt," to the stronger ones, like "clear and convincing evidence."
The statement released by the senators about the framework says the forthcoming legislation would provide resources to states and tribes to create and administer firearms laws, as long as they are "consistent with state and federal due process and constitutional protections."
"I suspect they're saying: Do what you want, so long as it meets the requirements of due process," Blocher said.
Bocour agreed that it appears that the senators are envisioning giving states flexibility in defining how easy or difficult they make it for authorities to seize guns under their firearms safety laws.
By Kery Murakami

OWH: Number of COVID cases in Nebraska up for ninth straight week

COVID-19 cases are sharply up in Nebraska and are ticking up in Douglas County.
Nebraska reported 3,240 new virus cases for the week ending Friday. That's up from 2,354 the previous week and nearly double the 1,671 the week before that, according to a World-Herald analysis of data from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
Douglas County reported 847 cases for the week ending Saturday, which was up from the 796 cases reported a week earlier.
Nebraska still ranks below average nationally in case rates, though it now stands 32nd after a

months-long stretch of ranking among the lowest of the states. Cases in Nebraska also remain just a fraction of the levels seen earlier this year during the surge caused by the omicron variant.

Still, Nebraska added more new cases last week than at any time since January, and its per-capita case rate is at its highest level since early February. Last week marked Nebraska's ninth consecutive week of rising cases.

Nebraska is part of a string of neighboring states where cases last week were rising fast, with Missouri (1st), Colorado (3rd), Wyoming (4th), South Dakota (6th), Kansas (7th) and Nebraska (9th) all ranking in the top 10 in percentage case growth.

Nebraska's two-week case growth of 94% ranks third nationally after Wyoming and Colorado.

Dr. James Lawler, an executive director with the University of Nebraska Medical Center's Global Center for Health Security, said even the increase in cases "certainly is not a reflection of the true number of cases."

Many people infected with COVID aren't getting tested for it, and many of those who do test are using at-home antigen tests that aren't routinely reported or included in official counts.

"We're kind of flying blind again," Lawler said.

Lawler said some experts estimate that the true case count may be 10 times the number of officially reported cases — possibly more.

Iowa hasn't joined in the surge. It's among 26 states where case numbers have fallen in the past two weeks. Its current per-capita case rate is 25% below Nebraska's and ranks 46th among the states.

COVID hospitalizations in Nebraska also climbed last week. The 131 people hospitalized with the virus on Friday was up from 94 two weeks earlier. Hospitalizations tend to lag infections by several weeks.

Lawler said he thinks the state will see a repeat of what it saw last year. "We'll have a surge in the summer that will accelerate for us in the fall," he said.

While the subvariant BA.2.12.1 now is driving increases in the U.S., the newer and more transmissible BA.4 nd BA.5 are driving the latest wave in the United Kingdom. Those variants also have begun to increase in the U.S.

Preliminary data from the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services for the week ending June 4 indicates those variants have gained a bit of ground in Nebraska, although the dominant variant still is BA.2.

If the two newer variants continue to increase in Nebraska, the state will see an increase in July and August, just in time for school to resume, Lawler said.

No matter whether another new variant comes along in the fall, he said, immunity in most people will be down, given most people will be a year or more out from their last vaccination.

One saving grace, Lawler said, may be that young children likely will be eligible for the vaccine. Federal health agencies are expected to approve vaccines for kids under 5 next week. Children ages 5 to 12 also are eligible for a booster dose. Getting more kids vaccinated will slow transmission. However, the pace of vaccination in kids 12 and under has been slow, Lawler said. Getting kids vaccinated and boosted, implementing testing programs in schools and masking in classrooms all will be important.

Nebraska added 29 COVID deaths last week, bringing its number of total confirmed or probable deaths from COVID-19 to 4,323. More than 491,000 positive tests have been reported.

By Julie Anderson

LJS: Watch now: Wastewater surveillance serves as early indicator of COVID-19 cases

This month marks a year of partnership between the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department and Lincoln Transportation and Utilities Department to help track the transmission of COVID-19 locally.

When the pandemic began more than two years ago, local agencies began tracking the number of cases through tests that took days to produce a result.

Testing is much faster today, and it also takes less time to track the transmission of the virus in communities thanks to wastewater testing.

The idea to use wastewater as an indictor of transmission of COVID-19 came from its use in tracking cases of viral diseases in prior years, such as the flu.

Lincoln's Wastewater Treatment Facility at 2400 Theresa St. has been using Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) testing to help indicate where the community's risk dial will be for the following week.

PCR is a rapid test to detect genetic material from a specific organism, such as a virus.

As individuals with COVID-19 shed particles from the virus in their feces, these virus particles can be detected in the water.

Since June 2021, the wastewater treatment facility has been collecting 48 samples each day for testing.

Those samples, collected from a pipe at their Grit Collection Center, are taken into their lab for wastewater analysis. Smaller samples are placed in a bag, frozen and sent to Biobot Analytics in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

While each sample costs $350 for analysis, the testing is funded through federal COVID-19 relief.

Within two to three days, results are sent back and the data is sent to the Health Department and LTU.

Though not 100% accurate, “wastewater testing through Biobot is still proven to be quite a good correlation with our human testing results," said Scott Holmes, manager of the Health Department's environmental public health division.

The Health Department is able to examine the wastewater data alongside lab and hospitalization data to provide insight into transmission in Lincoln and Lancaster County. It's one of several parameters the Health Department uses to review the transmission of COVID-19, and is generally an early indicator of larger trends in the community.

“What we have found over the past year of COVID-19 testing is that wastewater testing has somewhat preceded the changes in numbers in our human testing sites," said Todd Boling, superintendent of water resource recovery facilities for LTU.

By Evelyn Mejia

Nebraska Examiner: ‘Wastewater epidemiology’ helping to track spread and prevalence of COVID-19

LINCOLN — Call it “CSI of the sewers,” but public works employees in Lincoln, Omaha and at least 11 other Nebraska communities are conducting surveillance of city wastewater to track the incidence of COVID-19.

The testing is a relatively new thing in the world of public heath and is giving epidemiologists and other health officials a new tool to track the spread of the coronavirus and decide best strategies to deal with it.

Scott Holmes of the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department said a rise in COVID-19 in wastewater has been an early warning that an increase in positive tests is coming in the community.

"It's an additional test that gives us a little better heads up" on what's ahead, Holmes said.

He was among Lincoln officials who conducted a tour Monday to explain how samples are drawn at Lincoln's Theresa Street Wastewater Treatment Plant, which is located along the Salt Creek near 27th and Cornhusker.

For the past year in Lincoln, a machine at the treatment plant has drawn a sample from incoming wastewater every half hour.

Every day, a 5-liter jar of wastewater is removed from a refrigerated storage area on the machine.

Lab in Massachusetts

Then, three 50-milliliter vials of liquid are drawn off and shipped overnight every Tuesday to a testing lab, Biobot Analytics, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. That firm was co-founded by a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) student interested in the potential of "wastewater epidemiology."

By Thursday or Friday, Lincoln health officials said they have a report back on how prevalent the COVID virus is in the Capital City's wastewater.

Holmes said that since the testing began, the highest peak was in January, when COVID registered more than 3 million "viral copies" per liter of water.

More recently, there was a rise in COVID cases in April, which raised readings in Lincoln to about 713,000 viral copies. The most recent tests, though, have been in the 600,000 range, Holmes said.

Testing costs $350 a week

The testing costs $350 a week, or about $18,200 a year, in Lincoln, an expense that is being picked up by federal coronavirus relief funds.

Holmes said the data is especially valuable since so many COVID cases go unreported now because of the prevalence of home tests — tests that don't generate a report to the local health department. Also, a person who becomes infected and does not show symptoms may not report.

He said the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department looks at five other factors besides the wastewater test findings to determine the local response. Those include positive tests, the positivity rate, hospital usage and COVID deaths.

Holmes said it was difficult to estimate the percentage of unreported cases, but one study found that for every COVID case reported, three to five may not have been.

State has surveillance program

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, in collaboration with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and University of Nebraska Medical Center College of Public Health, began issuing statewide "surveillance reports" every week around the first of the year from 15 testing sites in 13 communities.

The state is also tracking the mutation and evolution of COVID-19 through "genomic" testing to determine which variants are present in Nebraska.

All the reporting stations showed spikes in coronavirus cases in early to late January, with some showing slight increases in April.

The cities participating in the testing, besides Lincoln and Omaha, are Atkinson, Chadron, Columbus, Fremont, Norfolk, Grand Island, Kearney, Hastings, North Platte, Scottsbluff and Wayne.

By Paul Hammel

LJS: Judge issues injunction in medical marijuana lawsuit blocking state from enforcing ballot requirement

A federal judge has entered a preliminary injunction barring the state's top election official from rejecting proposed ballot initiatives for failing to gather support from 5% of voters in 38 of Nebraska's 93 counties, which has been required for more than 100 years.

The decision came less than a month before the July 7 deadline for submitting petition signatures to Secretary of State Bob Evnen's office to appear on the ballot in November.

Crista Eggers, campaign coordinator for Nebraskans for Medical Marijuana, sued Evnen last month, arguing the requirement was unconstitutional because it diluted the votes of residents who live in the state's more populated urban areas.

In a 46-page decision Monday, U.S. District Judge John Gerrard agreed.

"The plaintiffs in this case argue, among other things, that the 38-county rule violates the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, because it gives more power to voters in rural counties than in urban counties. And it does," he said.

The Fourteenth Amendment requires states to treat individuals the same way as others in similar conditions and circumstances.

Gerrard said Eggers and Nebraskans for Medical Marijuana are "more likely than not to succeed" on their equal protection claim and will be irreparably harmed by continued enforcement of the 38-county rule.

"The state's interest in enforcing its election laws is outweighed by the ongoing injury to constitutional rights," Gerrard said.

The judge blocked the state from taking any action to enforce its county distribution requirement for the qualification of proposed ballot initiatives.

The Nebraska Attorney General's Office, which is representing Evnen, had taken the position that requiring a petition be signed by 10% of legal voters, including 5% in two-fifths of the state's 93 counties, could not be severed from the right to initiative granted in the state constitution because they have been linked since the 1912 origin.

In other words, if the 38-county rule treats voters differently, then Nebraska's entire initiative and referendum process should be struck down.

Gerrard called the argument that the baby must go with the bathwater "eyebrow-raising" and said the right of initiative is a "fundamental right" that the citizens of Nebraska possess.

"So the state may not discriminate against them in their exercise of that right," he said. "And, the court finds, the power of initiative can be effectively exercised without discrimination."

He said Nebraska is free to require a showing of statewide support for a ballot initiative, but it cannot do so based on units of dramatically differing population, "resulting in discrimination among voters."

Under the state's constitution, a petition to enact a law needs signatures from 7% of Nebraska's registered voters, and a petition to amend the state constitution requires signatures from 10% of registered voters.

In addition to gathering signatures of roughly 87,000 registered voters, proponents of an initiative also have been required to gather signatures from at least 5% of the registered voters in at least 38 of the 93 counties in Nebraska.

Eggers' attorney, Daniel Gutman and the ACLU of Nebraska, argued that the 38-county rule violates the U.S. Constitution by making the signature and vote of a registered voter in a more populous

county "less meaningful than the signature and vote of other Nebraska residents in more sparsely populated counties."
And, they argued, it forces petition circulators to curtail their efforts in more populous counties in order to get signatures from other counties, limiting the number of people they can reach and making it more difficult to get their proposals on the ballot.
Solicitor General James Campbell argued that before doing anything, the federal judge should ask the Nebraska Supreme Court to weigh in on whether the 38-county rule could be severed from the rest of Article III, Section 2 and what would happen if that part were ultimately stricken.
But Gerrard said given the preliminary nature of the case, the only conclusion he could draw at this point "is that the plaintiffs are likely to succeed on that claim — not that they have."
So it wasn't an appropriate question to certify, "and the court seriously doubts that the Nebraska Supreme Court would entertain it."
In response to Monday's decision, Attorney General Doug Peterson said in an email: “This case raises important legal questions concerning the initiative process in Nebraska. Therefore we will take the steps necessary to get the matter before the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals as soon as possible.”
On the other side, Jane Seu, an ACLU of Nebraska attorney, said it will help protect democracy in Nebraska.
“Whether you live in Hall County, Sarpy County, Lancaster County or Scotts Bluff County, your signature on a petition ought to have just as much power as a signature in some of our state’s least populated counties," she said. "We’re proud of our progress in safeguarding Nebraskans’ rights to petition our government for change and we believe we are on track to earn a permanent victory in this case. The bottom line is that Nebraskans have equal rights to constitutional processes.”
By Lori Pilger

OWH: Judge in medical marijuana lawsuit issues injunction against Nebraska's ballot requirement

In a win for proponents of medical marijuana, a U.S. district judge ruled Monday to temporarily suspend enforcement of a multi-county signature requirement that likely would have kept the initiative off the ballot in November.
Under Nebraska’s constitution, ballot initiative or referendum campaigns must collect signatures from 5% of registered voters in 38 of the state’s 93 counties. Nebraskans for Medical Marijuana and the American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit against Secretary of State Bob Evnen in May, claiming that this requirement violates the First Amendment right to freedom of speech and the 14th Amendment right to equal protection and due process.
The plaintiffs claim that, because Nebraska’s counties vary so widely in population, the signature distribution requirement violates the 14th Amendment by giving “disproportionate influence to voters in sparsely populated counties.” For example, according to the lawsuit, 16 votes in rural Arthur County hold power equal to 19,462 votes in Douglas County.
They sought a preliminary injunction, also known as a temporary restraining order, to suspend enforcement of the requirement until the case is decided in further legal proceedings. In a 47-page opinion, U.S. District Judge John Gerrard granted the injunction.
“The plaintiffs in this case argue, among other things, that the 38-county rule violates the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, because it gives more power to voters in rural counties than in urban counties,” Gerrard’s opinion reads. “And it does.”

This decision comes more than than 50 years after the U.S. Supreme Court determined a similar Illinois multi-county requirement violated residents' 14th Amendment rights. Courts have struck down such requirements in other states, including Idaho, Utah and Wyoming.
In 2014, U.S. District Judge Joseph Bataillon ruled that Nebraska's requirement was unconstitutional in a case brought by former Omaha businessman Kent Bernbeck. The case was later overturned on a procedural matter.
Though the lawsuit was filed by Nebraskans for Medical Marijuana, the injunction will impact all ballot initiatives and referendums in the state. State Sen. Adam Morfeld, who serves as a campaign co-chair for NMM, views this as a victory that extends past the fight to legalize medical marijuana.
"Today's court order will help protect Nebraskans' political power in this critical stretch ahead of a final decision, and it suggests we're doing what we need to do to win this lawsuit and permanently end Nebraska's unconstitutional multicounty signature distribution requirement," he said.
By Molly Ashford

OWH: Flood map revisions update risk, change costs for hundreds of Omaha area residents

Insurance costs and estimates of flood risk are changing for hundreds of Omaha-area businesses and residents as a result of updated federal flood plain maps.
The maps, which apply to property along most creeks and streams in Douglas and Sarpy County, were produced by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.
New with this revision is the mapping of the flood plain of some creeks that have been paved over, notably Saddle Creek, said Amanda Grint, assistant general manager for the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District.
Grint said hundreds of properties are being newly designated as being in the flood plain and similarly hundreds are being removed.
For some of these streams, its the first time flood risk has been updated in about 25 years, so the conditions that cause flooding have changed. In other instances, it's simply that better technology is available to estimate flood risk, she said.
Property owners affected by the changes should have already received notice from their local government: Omaha, Bellevue, La Vista, Papillion, Gretna, Boystown, Ralston, Bennington and Douglas and Sarpy Counties, Grint said.
Not included are those areas of Sarpy and Douglas Counties that are along the Elkhorn or Platte River flood plains, she said.
Grint encouraged people with questions to attend one of two public meetings this month:
Wednesday, 5-7 p.m. at the Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District headquarters, 8901 S. 154th St. in Omaha.
June 21, 5-7 p.m., at the Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.
The meetings are being hosted by the NRD, FEMA and the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources. They will be held in an open house-type format, which means there is no formal presentation. Instead, members of the public will meet one-on-one with those hosting the meetings.
The maps calculate which areas are in a so-called 100-year flood plain. These are areas that have at least a 1% chance of flooding in any given year. Over 30 years, the life of a typical mortgage, the property has a 26% chance of being flooded, according to FEMA.

Any property in a 100-year flood plain and has a federally backed mortgage has to carry flood insurance.
As a consequence, those people whose properties are newly classified as being in the flood plain and who have federally backed mortgages will soon need to begin carrying flood insurance. Those people whose property is being excluded from the flood plain will no longer have to carry it.
FEMA cautions that no one who is outside this designated flood plain can assume their property won't flood. These maps are designed as an insurance tool, not a life safety or personal budgeting tool.
Once the maps are posted in the Federal Register, they will be subject to an official 90-day public comment period, she said.
The earliest the maps will go into effect will be in the late summer, early fall 2023, she said.
By Nancy Gaarder

OWH Midlands Voices: Want to know what's happening in your child's classroom? Ask the teacher — not social media.

On May 27, I walked out of school for the last time. Last fall, I made the decision to retire after a 29-year teaching career. My decision to leave had absolutely nothing to do with the students, COVID protocols or my workload. I felt very fortunate to have a position that I loved, I enjoyed going to school every day. I had amazing students and taught with a faculty that was incredible. What made my decision to leave easier was the proliferation of political implications invading schools and the amount of negative parental involvement.
I have often said that police and teachers are alike in that no one wants to do their jobs, but everyone wants to tell them how to do their jobs. So many people, who have no idea what a day at school is really like, are very willing to share their thoughts about what should happen at school. Perhaps they are thinking about how school was when they were young. Perhaps they are equating school to a business. Unfortunately, schools today are neither. No one goes into court and tells their lawyer how to try their case or tells their surgeon how to perform the operation. Teachers should be given the same respect and be allowed to do their job.
Politicians on all levels across the country have been speaking out about what they perceive is going on in schools. People so far removed from a classroom, such as state and national legislators, are trying to make school policy while having no working knowledge of what schools need. Those decisions would be best made by those working with students on a daily basis. Sadly, what politicians say is happening and what actually is happening is vastly different. No teacher is indoctrinating students with radical beliefs. We are not teaching hot-button topics. We have our hands full with district-approved curriculum.
If you want to really know what's happening, simply ask a teacher. Rather than doing basic research, which they learned how to do in school, people just assume that what their neighbor's friend's cousin read on a Facebook page is truth.
If teachers could indoctrinate students, it wouldn't involve political viewpoints. It would be to show up to class every day, come prepared and ready to engage in thoughtful discussion, homework done and presentations ready. That's what teachers want first and foremost. I had more than 200 students each semester of the 2021-22 school year. On any given day during the second semester, I was missing 25% of my students. I had a large number of students who missed 20, 25 or even 35 days of school. Parents would excuse their students out for a myriad of reasons. My personal

favorite was when a parent excused a student from my class because the student "has a test in another class coming up and they need to study for it." When a student is absent for whatever reason, it falls on teachers to get kids caught up. Not only is that what parents expect, they also expect their child, who may have missed upwards of a month of school to get an "A." If that doesn't happen, somehow it's the teacher's fault, not the fault of the student who didn't do any work at home, or the parent who excused them.

Shortly after I decided to retire, I was on cafeteria supervision. I was walking around and talking to the students, finding out what they did all summer. I was thinking to myself "Do I really want to leave this? I love it so much." After supervision, I went back to my desk and had two phone calls and three emails from parents directing me to ignore policy and best practices for their child. The tone of those communications were not very positive, to say the least. Thankfully, the administration fully supported me. Conversations like that happen all too often. Regularly, I would have phone calls from parents telling me what I was going to do and not do in my class.

Just to be clear, what parents think their children are doing in school and what they are actually doing are often two different things. It would benefit both sides if teachers were approached more as a team member and less as an enemy. Start by talking to the teacher and gain a better understanding of what's going on. Unfortunately, too often teachers end up having to defend themselves rather than having meaningful conversations. One other thing teachers would like: If we call home to talk about your student, at least take the time to return the call. Ignoring communication from school hurts a child and creates an incredibly frustrating situation for teachers who are trying to help. Fortunately, there still are amazing parents who send their kids to school with the expectation they are there to learn. Parents who work with teachers to enhance their student's learning, and hold their children accountable. Those parents are near and dear to teachers.

When I started teaching 29 years ago, the biggest thing we were learning how to deal with was ADD. Now, that's a simple thing to handle. I long for those days. Every year, all teachers in Nebraska are required to undergo mandatory training on suicide prevention, asthma protocols, and blood-borne pathogen training. Additionally, coaches must undergo training for concussion recognition, heat stroke and also be trained in CPR. Teaching now means that sometimes teaching is the last thing I get to do. I have to watch for signs of abuse, both from family and from their boyfriend/girlfriend. Many students come to school hungry; they haven't eaten that morning and may not have eaten the night before. They also may not be sleeping at their own house if they are sleeping at all. I have to watch for kids who are under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol, suffering from anxiety, depression or possibly suicidal, all while trying to deliver an engaging and entertaining lesson that will benefit the various levels of understanding my students have.

Believe me when I say that no teacher goes into teaching to have summers off (which is a fallacy). We do it because we love learning and want to share it with students. We want to see them grow and find success. Trust teachers to do their job and you will see amazing things happening. Will I miss teaching? Absolutely. Will I miss being around the kids and watching them become amazing humans? More than I can ever say. The rest, not so much.

By Sally Shepherd

LJS Local View: Procurement reform needed

The latest episode in the long-running debacle of Nebraska's failed procurement system involves the mismanagement of the $27 million no-bid Nomi contract for COVID testing, which inexplicably

mushroomed to $69 million according to recent auditor's findings.
To be clear, there's no evidence Nomi did anything wrong, but it points to an ongoing problem. Another state contract gone wrong, once again taxpayers snookered out of millions. The controversies involving Nebraska's inept procurement system stretch back to the 1990s multimillion-dollar contract for a DHHS computer system (NFOCUS) which turned out unreliable, requiring binders full of "workarounds" and decades of reprogramming.
Add to that the troublesome 2016 $1.2 billion contract with Centene for Medicaid Managed Care, the canceled $84 million Medicaid eligibility and enrollment upgrade after an estimated $60 million outlay with nothing to show for it, the 2019 failed $197 million St. Francis Ministries contract for abused and neglected children which required an additional $158 million bailout, and now the Nomi contract with "gaps in performance." A hundred million here, a billion there, it starts to add up.
It is disheartening to see the bungling of this magnitude, but taken as a whole, these contracts point to three underlying factors contributing to Nebraska's ongoing procurement woes:
1. Nebraska has not joined the majority of states who have adopted all or part of the American Bar Association's Model Procurement Procedures. This is a detailed code for state and local governments that ensures equitable treatment for everyone who deals with the procurement system.
2. Contracts with the state of Nebraska are not subject to judicial review by any court, unlike many states including Iowa, Colorado and Missouri. In the case of the $1.2 billion Centene contract, the losing bidders' only recourse was a written protest and a meeting with the director of the Department of Administrative Services, a Gov. Pete Ricketts appointee whose decision was final and not subject to further review.
3. Nebraska's weak, outdated campaign finance laws magnify the state's procurement disasters. Nebraska law has no restriction against "pay-to-play" except for lottery vendors. Pay-to-play in simplest terms is making campaign donations in hopes of receiving favorable treatment. Add to this, Nebraska has no limit on the amount any individual or non-individual may donate to state offices, unlike most states which limit contributions from individuals and limit or ban contributions from corporations. Nebraska law allows vendors to shovel unlimited sums to elected officials while their bids are under consideration. It is entirely legal and utterly unethical.
With the latest contract, past is prologue -- the heady brew of money and politics once again overpowered rational, data-based decision making. Promises were made, checks deposited, and taxpayers were stuck with the tab.
This all seems so avoidable, yet decades pass with nothing done. How many more legislative committees will convene, investigate and report with no action taken? Frankly it's a waste of everyone's time and money, unless you are one of those unethical public officials who profit so handsomely from it.
Kate High lives in Lincoln, retired from the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services and researches the role of money in politics. She has presented her findings to civic groups around the state and conducted OLLI courses.

CT Mirror: Ricketts' values are not Connecticut values

Today, Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts was supposed to be coming to Canton for a fundraiser for a gubernatorial candidate. To say Ricketts is one of the most extreme governors in the nation isn't hyperbole. His presence makes us wonder why he would be a draw in Connecticut considering he

doesn't align with our values.
Governor Ricketts recently said in an interview with CNN's Dana Bash that he thinks the state of Nebraska should require young girls to carry their pregnancy to term—even if they were victims of rape or incest. This view is not only out of step with the people of Connecticut, it's against what the majority of Americans think when discussing the possibility of Roe v. Wade being overturned. His goal is that once Roe falls, Nebraska will move to make abortion illegal as the ultimate end of the restrictive laws he already helped pass, without concern for people to control their own bodies, or even that restricting abortion increases maternal mortality rates.
Abortion isn't the only disconnect he will encounter here. After the Sandy Hook massacre, the Connecticut legislature moved swiftly to improve gun safety laws. Repeatedly, and as recently as last week, Governor Ricketts has opposed any legislation that restricts guns in any way and hopes to end commonsense training for concealed carry handguns. Like many of his colleagues, he prefers to focus, as many do, on the mental health of the murderers, yet he doesn't support red-flag laws which have been shown to prevent someone struggling with mental health issues from using a gun on themselves or someone else.
And there's the rub.
Governor Ricketts' position is that he is "pro-life" at all costs, even if the cost is borne by a child who was raped. But where is his concern for the thousands of people who have been shot and too often, killed, at schools, churches, temples, mosques, festivals, concerts, work, or any other location where hundreds of mass murders have occurred this year alone? The leading cause of death in children is now death by firearm as fatalities between those aged one to 19 increased 30% in 2020. Beyond his rhetoric about cherishing life, what do Governor Ricketts' actions tell us about what he really values, and why would anyone in Connecticut seek his support and endorsement?
This year, because Connecticut values women and their autonomy over their own bodies and reproductive health, the Connecticut General Assembly expanded access to abortion care. In addition, because we value our healthcare providers, we ensured that regardless of what archaic and abusive laws other states pass, abortion providers in Connecticut will be protected from another state's laws.
Over the last few years, Connecticut has also put the lives and safety of its citizens first by passing red-flag laws and safe storage laws, and by banning ghost guns (guns built at home with no serial number to trace them). States that fail to put basic protections like these in place see nearly three times as many gun deaths as states like ours. It's no surprise that politicians passing abortion bans are refusing to take action on gun safety—they do not care about our bodies or our lives.
While the fundraiser was cancelled with no plans to reschedule, the rally to oppose the ideas he espouses will continue as planned. Our community stands resolute in our commitment to the ideas of autonomy, public safety and choice as part of the very fabric of our steady habits, and our steady values.
Eleni Kavros DeGraw is a State Representative for Avon and Canton. Paul Honig is running to be State Senator for Senate District 8.

Nebraska Examiner: Smith, Democratic challenger, differ on solutions in wake of mass shootings

LINCOLN — U.S. Rep. Adrian Smith has rejected a congressional proposal to raise the age at which a person can buy a high-powered, semi-automatic weapon, instead calling for "real solutions" that

don't infringe on the rights of law-abiding gun owners.
In a "Washington Report" column released Friday, Smith said that while Americans are "understandably outraged and concerned" about gun violence in the wake of mass shootings by 18-year-old gunmen in Uvalde, Texas, and Buffalo, N.Y., he opposes a House proposal to raise to 21 the age at which a person can buy a semi-automatic rifle.
Smith, a Republican who has represented western Nebraska's 3rd Congressional District since 2007, also said he opposed a proposed "red flag" law that would allow federal judges to seize firearms and ammunition from anyone "on the wrong side of an accusation without due process."

'Bipartisan policies'

"To confront the issue effectively, we must advance bipartisan policies that address the root cause of violence in our communities," he said. "Certainly, we can reach a consensus to harden school security, expand access to mental health care, promote gun safety and training, and improve sharing of crime preventing information."
Smith's Democratic opponent in November, David Else of Overton, did not immediately respond to a phone message left Monday.
But on his Facebook page, Else questioned the need for high-powered, assault-style rifles like the AR-15 style weapons used in the Uvalde and Buffalo shootings.

'Why not pass the red-flag law?"

"Why not pass the red-flag law? And raise the age from 18 to 21. What the hell does that have to do with the 2nd Amendment?" Else added.
Smith, in his column, said Democrats had "rushed forward with misguided proposals" without seeking bipartisan solutions that "actually have a chance of passing."
According to the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 44 states, including Nebraska, allow 18-year-olds to purchase long guns, including semi-automatic rifles. Only six states have raised the purchasing age to 21: California, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Vermont and Washington State.

Higher age for alcohol, cigarettes

Meanwhile, the Giffords Center has said, Americans are not allowed to purchase alcohol or cigarettes until they are 21.
The Giffords Center was founded by former U.S. Rep. Gabby Giffords, D-Ariz., who was shot and wounded in a January 2011 attack by a gunman who killed six people at a public event. The center maintains that stricter gun laws do save lives.
By Paul Hammel

Nebraska Examiner: Bipartisan U.S. Senate deal on gun control met with praise from Biden, Democrats

WASHINGTON — The White House and Democratic leaders expressed support Monday for a framework on gun control legislation that 10 Senate Democrats and 10 Senate Republicans agreed to over the weekend.
The second-deadliest school shooting in a decade in Uvalde, Texas, where 19 children and two teachers were murdered on May 24, sparked pressure on Congress to pass gun control legislation, as did another mass shooting of 10 Black people on May 14 in Buffalo, New York.
"Families are scared, and it is our duty to come together and get something done that will help restore their sense of safety and security in their communities," the group of bipartisan senators said in a statement.

“Our plan increases needed mental health resources, improves school safety and support for students, and helps ensure dangerous criminals and those who are adjudicated as mentally ill can’t purchase weapons.”

There is currently no bill text, but the framework would:

- Provide funding to states to establish red flag laws.
- Allocate funding for school resources such as mental health and violence prevention programs.
- Require gun buyers under 21 to undergo a background check that includes a review of juvenile and mental health records.
- Curb the illegal trafficking of guns known as straw purchasing, where someone can acquire a gun for someone else.
- Require that convicted domestic violence abusers and those subject to domestic violence restraining orders are included in background checks, including “those who have or have had a continuing relationship of a romantic or intimate nature.”

The nine Senate Democrats and one independent in the bipartisan group are Chris Murphy of Connecticut, Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, Cory Booker of New Jersey, Chris Coons of Delaware, Martin Heinrich of New Mexico, Mark Kelly of Arizona, Angus King of Maine, Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Debbie Stabenow of Michigan.

The 10 Senate Republicans in the bipartisan group are John Cornyn of Texas, Thom Tillis of North Carolina, Roy Blunt of Missouri, Richard Burr of North Carolina, Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, Susan Collins of Maine, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, Rob Portman of Ohio, Mitt Romney of Utah and Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, said in a statement that he will schedule a vote for the bill as quickly as possible.

“After an unrelenting wave of gun-related suicides and homicides, including mass shootings, the Senate is poised to act on commonsense reforms to protect Americans where they live, where they shop, and where they learn,” he said.

President Joe Biden said in a statement that the framework “does not do everything that I think is needed, but it reflects important steps in the right direction, and would be the most significant gun safety legislation to pass Congress in decades.”

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said the president supports the framework but is still pushing for Congress to renew a ban on assault weapons and expand background checks on firearms, and is pushing for the Senate to confirm his nomination to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Steve Dettelbach.

“The president wants to see Congress act and wants to see this on his desk as quick as possible,” she said during a Monday press briefing.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell issued a statement Sunday commending the senators for making progress but didn’t yet endorse the plan.

“I am glad Senators Cornyn and Murphy are continuing to make headway in their discussions. I appreciate their hard work on this important issue,” said the Kentucky Republican. “The principles they announced today show the value of dialogue and cooperation.

“I continue to hope their discussions yield a bipartisan product that makes significant headway on key issues like mental health and school safety, respects the Second Amendment, earns broad support in the Senate, and makes a difference for our country.”

The last time Congress passed major gun control legislation was in 1994, when former President Bill Clinton signed into law a ban on assault riffles. But it was a temporary ban that ended in 2004.

“With bipartisan support, there are no excuses for delay, and no reason why it should not quickly

move through the Senate and the House," Biden said. "Each day that passes, more children are killed in this country: the sooner it comes to my desk, the sooner I can sign it, and the sooner we can use these measures to save lives."

The framework is short on detail, compared to the House's gun control package passed last week. The House package would raise the age of purchasing semiautomatic rifles from 18 to 21, create new requirements for storing guns in a home with children, prevent gun trafficking, require all firearms to be traceable and close the loophole on bump stocks, devices that increase the rate of fire of semiautomatic weapons, among other things.

The House package most likely would not be brought to the evenly divided Senate for a floor vote. Any successful Senate proposal would need 60 votes to advance beyond a filibuster.

"This bipartisan proposal is a first and necessary step to reduce gun violence in our communities," Sen. Tim Kaine, a Virginia Democrat who was not part of the bipartisan group, said in a statement. "Every moment that Congress does not act, another community bears witness to the heartbreaking consequences of gun violence. That's why the Senate must move quickly to pass this long overdue proposal."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in a statement that while the Senate proposal is an important step, Congress still needs to do more on gun control.

"America's epidemic of gun violence has reached a fever pitch — and Democrats will never stop working to end the bloodshed," Pelosi said. "As we move forward on this bipartisan framework, we are continuing to fight for more life-saving measures: including universal background checks, banning high-capacity magazines and raising the age to buy assault weapons, which must also become law."

"I joined these negotiations to ensure any agreement addressed illegal gun violence while upholding due process and protecting law-abiding Americans' 2nd Amendment rights," Cassidy said in a statement. "This agreement upholds that commitment."

By Ariana Figueroa

AP: Congress examines fraud in pandemic aid for small businesses

A congressional panel Tuesday will examine payouts under a federal coronavirus pandemic aid program intended to help small businesses weather the COVID-19 outbreak amid revelations that as much as 20% of the money may have been awarded to fraudsters.

The problems in the COVID-19 Economic Injury Disaster Loan program, overseen by the U.S. Small Business Administration, included a finding by congressional investigators that some 1.6 million applications for the loans may have been approved without being evaluated.

Separately, the SBA's Office of the Inspector General estimated that at least $80 billion distributed from the $400 billion program could have been potentially fraudulent, much of it in scams using stolen identities.

The program is expected to be at the center of a congressional subcommittee hearing that also will tackle broader fraud concerns with the flood of pandemic aid from multiple federal government programs for states, local governments, businesses and the unemployed.

The $5 trillion in total aid, delivered in a series of bills signed by Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden, have come with numerous complications.

Fraud overwhelmed enhanced unemployment insurance programs funded by the federal government and administered by the states. There was so much aid to governments that many

struggled to find a way to spend it all under the original regulations. And there have been questions about whether the Paycheck Protection Program to keep employees working was worth it.
The House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis says more than $10 billion allocated under two massive business loan programs has been returned because of investigations and bank actions.
Federal prosecutors have charged nearly 1,500 people with crimes related to fraud against the government over the business loans and enhanced unemployment insurance programs.
The government's Pandemic Response Accountability Committee says inspectors general for various federal agencies have at least 1,150 ongoing investigations into fraud from the different aid funds. Officials say it could take years to untangle all the problems.
One focus for the subcommittee is a report released Tuesday by its own staff that found up to 1.6 million applications for loans intended to keep small businesses open and making payroll were approved by a batch method. That could mean they were not even opened by officials before being greenlighted for funding.
The report blames the SBA for creating the batch approval function early in the pandemic, during the Trump administration.

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