From: Shelburn, Andrew
To: Shelburn, Andrew
Subject: Governor"s Office Daily Update - 6-2-22
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AG VALLEY CO-OP

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Commodity	Delivery	Price	Basis	Date (as of)
Corn	Jun 2022	7.32	-5.00	08:05
Corn	Oct 2022	6.51	-45.00	08:05
Milo	Jun 2022	6.77	-60.00	08:05
Milo	Oct 2022	6.41	-55.00	08:05
Soybeans	Jun 2022	15.81	-55.00	08:00
Soybeans	Oct 2022	14.53	-70.00	08:01
Wheat	Jun 2022	10.73	-85.00	07:58
Wheat	Jul 2022	10.73	-85.00	07:58

TV and Radio

The Axe Files with David Axelrod: Ep. 492 — Gov. Pete Ricketts
NPM: High Fertilizer Prices Produce Uncertainty, Higher Meat Costs

Governor

Nebraska Examiner: Rejected Nebraska license plate designs don't get much love
OWH: Nebraska auditor finds issues with Nomi Health TestNebraska contract
Public News Service: Nebraska Outperforms National Census in Tally of Latinos

Agency

LJS: State Penitentiary to resume normal operations for first time in three years
Nebraska Examiner: 'Staffing emergency' soon to end at Nebraska State Penitentiary
LJS: Second Department of Correctional Services employee targeted in Lincoln theft, police say

Coronavirus

Hastings Tribune: South Heartland COVID-19 case tallies back near 'high' range
LJS: Health Department to offer booster doses to kids ages 5-11

State, Local and Regional

OWH: Residents find few answers at community meeting on Nox-Crete fire
OWH: Amid teacher shortage, OPS floats $4,500 stipend for full-time staff for next 2 years

Opinion

OWH Editorial: Benson post office renaming is fitting honor for Omaha WWII hero

OWH Midlands Voices: There are reasons to be optimistic in the fight against Alzheimer's

OWH Public Pulse

1. Urban core
2. Love one another
3. Write elected officials
4. Intelligent insight?
5. Gun control
6. Vote for change
7. Safer country
8. Thank you

LJS Editorial, 6/2: Airport lands new flight and new opportunity

LJS Letters

1. Let's protect the born better
2. Defense contracts cloud issue

NP Telegraph: Jacobson: An honor to honor our fallen heroes

York NT: Just Melanie -- I'm actually a bad Nebraskan

National/Federal

AP: House panel taking up gun bill in wake of mass shootings

AP: Biden says he wasn't informed early on of baby formula woes

Nebraska Examiner: Rejected Nebraska license plate designs don't get much love

LINCOLN — Designing the Nebraska state license plate would be one thankless job, according to Omaha graphic designer Dana Osborne.

How could you satisfy everyone, Osborne wondered.

"You're opening yourself up to a lot of criticism," she said.

But when asked about Nebraska's newest license plate design, and about a handful of other designs that were rejected, Osborne and two other artists said the state could have done worse.

"I give it probably a B-plus," she said. "You're not going to make everybody happy."

Reviews on social media — mostly negative— poured in Tuesday after First Lady Susanne Shore, who led the effort to pick a new license plate design, unveiled the winning plate at a press conference hosted by her husband, Gov. Pete Ricketts.

The blue-and-white plate, which will be issued beginning in January, features a background image from a classical Roman mosaic at the State Capitol entitled "The Genius of Creative Energy."

On Wednesday, the Governor's Office released a handful of also-ran designs, which also didn't get an overwhelming thumbs-up from three artists interviewed.

Osborne said some of the trees looked like broccoli. And where did the honey bee plate come from, she asked.

None of those interviewed liked the plain, black plate— too much like Iowa, where a "blackout" speciality plate with white lettering has become a hit.

Stephen Dinsmore, a painter with studios in Lincoln, Maine and Florida, said it seemed corny, in 2022, to feature a windmill, as one plate did. Meanwhile, "The Genius" image, with his flowing hair

and ripped chest muscles, is too faint to be seen on the winning plate, he said.

Image doesn't 'pop out'

"I wouldn't have gone with any of them," Dinsmore said, adding that plates in Rhode Island, New Mexico and Kansas feature designs he admires.

"The Genius" may be a beautiful mosaic, but it doesn't "pop out" on the new Nebraska plate, he said.

"If the colors were different, maybe that would help," Dinsmore said. "If you're driving down the highway doing a cross-country trip, and you're looking at that plate, you'd just ignore it."

A third reviewer, a graphic artist out of Lincoln, didn't want to be named in a story but called the design chosen "not offensive."

And so it goes with Nebraska license plates, which have had a history of mishaps, miscues and misfires.

Like in 1984 when the Nebraska Legislature couldn't agree on a motto to put on the plate, so a completely plain, blue-and-white plate was chosen. Or in 2009, when a website called "CollegeHumor.com" hijacked an online poll to pick the winning design. Or in 2015, when the wrong version of "The Sower" statue atop the State Capitol was initially used.

The 'sport' of panning plates

Shore, at the Tuesday press conference, acknowledged that panning the state plate was a nationwide sport of sorts. Even her folks in Oklahoma could gripe about the license plates there, she said.

But Shore defended "The Genius" design as showing the creative spirit of the state, and the lead designer, Drew Davies of Omaha, said the artwork was the best among the hundreds of images in the State Capitol.

To be fair, Shore pointed out there are several design restrictions in state law that prevent the kind of graphics that are used on the state's nearly 40 specialty plates from being used on the regular plate. Lounging mountain lions, charging bison, a playful otter and a splashes of Van Gogh-like colors adorn some of the state's prestige plates, for instance.

Davies, on Wednesday, said he could not comment on why some of the also-rans were rejected. But he said that some violated the design restrictions on the regular plate, such as the contrast/legibility requirements, the type size for the word "Nebraska" and a limitation of using no more than two colors.

'Handsome' specialty plates

Dinsmore, who displays "Nebraska's First People" plates on his vehicles, said a consolation in this state is that vehicle owners have some "really handsome" specialty plates to choose from as alternatives to the new plate.

He and the two others in the art biz said Colorado's distinctive green-and-white plate, with the ring of mountains, was a classic.

"Someone should look at all the other states and pick out the plates they like, and ask, 'Why do I like these?'" Dinsmore said.

Osborne suggested one solution: a totally red plate with white letters, the colors of University of Nebraska-Lincoln sports teams.

"People can't complain about that," she said. "I think you would make a lot more people happy."

By Paul Hammel

OWH: Nebraska auditor finds issues with Nomi Health TestNebraska contract

The Nebraska state auditor found reason to question whether the state received nearly 400,000 COVID-19 tests promised in a contract with the Utah-based company that operated TestNebraska.
The question over the tests was just one issue the Nebraska Auditor of Public Accounts found with the TestNebraska contract between the state and Nomi Health in its audit of financial statements, according to a management letter released Wednesday.
As of November, state agencies had signed at least five no-bid contracts with Nomi Health, worth up to more than $69 million total. The auditor's findings related to the first of those contracts, for the effort to provide free COVID-19 testing across the state, known as TestNebraska.
The auditor noted issues with providing supporting documentation and keeping contract language clear and unambiguous — both issues that can increase risk for loss or misuse of funds, according to the letter.
The contract, signed April 21, 2020, stated that Nebraska would receive 1.2 million test kits, according to the letter. But the Department of Administrative Services, which handles state contracts, didn't have documentation proving the state received more than 803,000 of them.
It had a list showing 1.23 million kits were received, but it couldn't be traced to supporting documents, such as receipts, according to the letter. That led the auditor to question if the state had actually gotten nearly 397,000 of the kits — valued between $9.9 million and $12.9 million.
And, the letter states, the auditor couldn't verify that all the tests were received by dates set out in the contract.
In its response, DAS said that it provided records supporting that the test kits required by the contract where shipped.
"DAS' own records indicate that there was a lack of packing slip documentation maintained during the pandemic, particularly in the early months of June, July, and August 2020, however, such test kits were received," it reads. "Records of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) show that tests were administered at TestNebraska sites in these months."
It provided the number of tests performed according to lab records and a count of warehouse inventory, saying that those show the state received at least 995,900 kits. DAS said Nomi provided documentation that supports more than 1.2 million.
The department told teams receiving the kits about documentation procedures and expectations, which included filling out a form. However, DAS acknowledged some did not adhere to those expectations.
"DAS will ensure that such performance issue will not occur again in the next pandemic," it said.
Another issue: An amendment to the contract in October 2020 required Nebraska to pay Nomi Health for "services its asked to provide associated with the collection sites." Those payments, the letter says, were "largely retroactive," for services already performed. They totaled more than $2.9 million.
And, language in that October amendment wasn't clear that there would be additional service and management fees, according to the letter, yet those charges were on every invoice received by the state over five months the auditor analyzed.
"Consequently, during that five-month period, the State paid Nomi $3,489,063 in direct costs and an

additional $548,231 for management and service fees," the letter reads.
Agreements to make retroactive payments are "often problematic," according to the letter, and could violate a provision in the state's constitution that bars state and local governments from making extra payments for past services. In its response, DAS insisted it didn't violate the state constitution.
"When the State accepted and utilized these essential services in responding to the pandemic, the State became legally responsible to compensate the contractor for such costs, whether pursuant to an oral contract, implied contract, or quasi-contract," the DAS response reads.
It's best practice that agreements should be in writing, DAS wrote, but there weren't any disagreements between Nomi and DAS.
"DAS has procedures in place to ensure that deliverables are accurately tracked and documented, contracts are stated clearly, and agreements are put into writing before payment becomes due," it reads. "In this circumstance, there were gaps in performance in following these procedures under the stress of a global emergency. DAS will strive to ensure that such gaps do not occur."
Nebraska's initial contract with Nomi was worth about $27 million, but it grew to about $62 million. That contract ended July 31, 2021.
Gov. Pete Ricketts and others have praised TestNebraska for its role in helping the state double its testing early on in the pandemic as other states struggled. But the practice of inking no-bid contracts with Nomi has drawn criticism in Nebraska and elsewhere. Four state lawmakers in Nebraska called for the state to cancel its initial contract.
CEO and founder Mark Newman has said Nomi doesn't seek out no-bid deals but serves as a last stop in emergencies.
In other Nebraska contracts, Nomi committed to provide staff for COVID-19 testing and vaccination sites, provide COVID-19 vaccine scheduling services, provide nursing staff at the Central Nebraska Veterans' Home and run a call center to help hospitals find beds for patients.
Ahead of the call center contract, Nomi made a $20,000 donation to the Nebraska Republican Party. A Ricketts spokesperson has said the donation didn't influence the state's work with Nomi.
In 2021, state financial disclosure records show the company also donated $5,000 each to GOP gubernatorial candidates Jim Pillen and State Sen. Brett Lindstrom. It donated another $10,000 to Pillen, who went on to win the nomination, on May 2.
By Sara Gentzler

Public News Service: Nebraska Outperforms National Census in Tally of Latinos

Nebraska did a better job counting the state's Latino residents in the 2020 Census than new national undercount data suggests.
According to analysis by the Brookings Institution, 5% of Latinos in the U.S. went uncounted in 2020, three times the undercount in the 2010 census.
Lissette Aliaga-Linares, assistant sociology professor at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, said she was not surprised by the high national undercount.
"Many of the Latino community don't trust public institutions," Aliaga-Linares pointed out. "People

don't ask for help, even if their children are eligible for help, out of fear that will increase the threat of being deported."
Civil rights organizations had warned the Trump administration's hostile rhetoric toward immigrants -- including an effort to include a citizenship question on the census, which was rejected by the U.S. Supreme Court as unconstitutional -- would lead to a higher than average undercount.
According to the Urban Institute, Nebraska's undercount in 2020 is projected to be 3.6%.
The U.S. Constitution calls for a once-a-decade head count of everyone living in the United States, regardless of their immigration status. The stakes are high. Federal funding and political representation are determined by census numbers.
Aliaga-Linares noted volunteer civic engagement efforts across Nebraska were essential for getting a good count in the 2020 census, but the state still faces challenges going forward.
"There has been a lot of local initiatives for getting everybody counted," Aliaga-Linares acknowledged. "But if you don't have the support from the top, from the governor, from the state level, we will still face problems with undercounted minority populations here."
Latino leaders and advocates criticized Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts for failing to fund a state count committee, a commonly used tool for reaching historically hard-to-count communities. Many are now raising concerns about the fallout from the high national undercount over the next decade, which will impact funding for health care, public education, children's, veteran's, senior's programs, and more; along with political representation at the federal, state and local level.
By Eric Galatas

LJS: State Penitentiary to resume normal operations for first time in three years

The Nebraska Department of Correctional Services on Wednesday announced that the Nebraska State Penitentiary will return to a normal operational schedule on July 18.
The facility has been on a modified, seven-day, 12-hour operational schedule since October 2019, when an emergency staffing declaration was made.
Director Scott Frakes said the Department has hired 472 new employees, 410 in protective service positions. In December there were 76 vacant protective service positions at the state penitentiary. That has been reduced to 18 vacancies, Frakes said.
"Going to emergency staffing was our best option for dealing with the staffing shortage, but it was always our intent to fill the vacancies and return to normal operations," Frakes said. "Admittedly, it lasted longer than anticipated, but throughout the pandemic, the schedule served us well while dealing with the challenges brought by COVID."
The facility will return to a 16-hour operational day, which will mean more time for inmates to participate in volunteer programs, recreation and other prosocial activities.
"All things that contribute to higher satisfaction and a better quality of life for the inmate population," Frakes said.
Two other facilities — the Reception and Treatment Center and the Tecumseh State Correctional Institution — remain on modified schedules. Frakes said the plan is to take RTC from a four-day work schedule to seven days sometime this summer, with the caveat it will probably remain on

emergency staffing for a while longer.
The latest vacancy report for the Department shows 167 open protective service positions. In October last year the high was 427 positions. Turnover was also down in January, February, March and April compared to last year.
By Alex Lantz

Nebraska Examiner: 'Staffing emergency' soon to end at Nebraska State Penitentiary

LINCOLN — A staffing emergency in place since October 2019 at the Nebraska State Penitentiary in Lincoln will soon be lifted.
Nebraska Corrections Director Scott Frakes announced Wednesday that normal work schedules, and normal inmate activities, will return July 18.
Due to a shortage of staff, the State Pen has been on a modified, seven-day, 12-hour operational schedule, which also included cutbacks in visitation time for inmates, bag breakfasts delivered the night before and limits on inmate recreation and rehabilitation programs.
Frakes said that an influx of new hires, prompted by salary increases adopted last year and hiring bonuses, has allowed the emergency to end.
He said the department has hired 472 new employees in recent months, 410 of those in protective service positions such as corporal, sergeant and caseworker.
At the penitentiary, there are just 18 job vacancies in protective services now, compared to 76 in December.
The staffing emergency lasted longer than anticipated, Frakes said, "but throughout the pandemic, the schedule served us well while dealing with the challenges brought by COVID."
Staffing emergencies remain in place at two other prisons, the Tecumseh State Prison in Tecumseh and the Reception and Treatment Center in Lincoln.
Frakes said the agency is planning to take RTC from a four-day work schedule to seven days sometime this summer, though that prison will probably remain on emergency staffing for a while longer. He has said that ending the staffing problems at the rural Tecumseh facility may take longer.
Thirty-four jobs at the State Pen will remain on 12-hour shifts permanently at NSP. Frakes said the agency learned there is a benefit of having key posts remain at 12 hours, allowing a crossover between shifts.
Returning to a 16-hour operational day for inmates means four more hours a day for volunteer programs, recreation and other pro-social activities, which improves conditions for inmates, Frakes said. Returning to 40-hour work weeks for most employees helps with their work-life balance, he said.
The agency now has 167 open protective service positions compared to a high of 427 vacant positions in October.
By Paul Hammel

LJS: Second Department of Correctional Services employee targeted in Lincoln theft, police say

Lincoln Police are investigating after a Nebraska Department of Correctional Services employee had their department-issued ID badge, keycard and duty belt stolen from their vehicle over the weekend, according to authorities.

Sgt. Chris Vollmer said the 45-year-old employee reported the apparent break-in around 8 a.m. Tuesday at the Pinebrook Apartments near Fletcher Avenue and 33rd Street.

The employee reported their handcuffs, pepper spray and corporal badge were stolen along with the other items from their uniform.

Police did not observe signs of forced entry to the vehicle, Vollmer said. It's unclear if the car was unlocked.

An employee at the Tecumseh State Correctional Institution reported uniforms, an ID badge and duty belt stolen from a truck while parked in Lincoln on Friday night.

Vollmer said it's unclear if the two thefts are related, but noted the incidents occurred under "very different circumstances," pointing to the difference in location and time of day.

"Other than the items taken, there's nothing that obviously links them," he said. "But, follow-up is continuing."

By Andrew Wegley

Hastings Tribune: South Heartland COVID-19 case tallies back near 'high' range

The weekly number of confirmed new cases of the novel coronavirus disease, COVID-19, continues its uphill march in the South Heartland Health District, the district health department reports.

As of Wednesday, the rolling seven-day number of new cases in the district equaled 95 per 100,000 population — up from 73 per 100,000 on May 24.

The new number — an undercount since cases of COVID-19 identified through at-home testing rarely are reported to the health department — once again is knocking on the door of 100 cases per 100,000, which is considered high community transmission.

The South Heartland district encompasses Adams, Webster, Clay and Nuckolls counties. Health department offices are in Hastings.

For the week ending May 28, a total of 32 new confirmed cases in South Heartland residents were logged by the health department. That was equal to the 32 cases recorded for the week that ended May 21.

Tellingly, however, 27 additional cases had been recorded for Sunday through Wednesday of the current week — well ahead of pace to exceed 32 cases by week's end.

Since March 18, 2020, a cumulative total of 10,387 known cases of COVID-19 in South Heartland residents have been recorded.

The community test positivity rate, or "community positivity," increased to 35.5% for the week

ending May 28 — up from 25% the previous week. Community positivity doesn't take into account surveillance testing of residents and staff in long-term care facilities.
Testing for the week increased by 23% with 281 tests logged, compared to 228 the previous week. Again, those numbers don't include at-home testing.
A total of four long-term care centers in the health district have reported residents or staff members testing positive for COVID-19 in the past two weeks.
As of Wednesday, three in-patients in South Heartland hospitals were being treated for COVID-19, and 27% of the district's staffed intensive care hospital beds were available for new patients.
In Wednesday's weekly news release detailing COVID-19 conditions in the South Heartland district — the report was delayed by one day this week due to the holiday weekend — a health official said testing and vaccination remain important.
"We continue to encourage people to have at-home test kits on hand and to test if they have COVID-19 symptoms," said Michele Bever, health department executive director. "People with underlying health conditions should take precautions to reduce exposure, and we encourage everyone who is eligible to stay up to date on their COVID vaccinations."
According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, individuals are "up to date" when they have received all doses in the primary vaccine series and all boosters recommended for them when they are eligible.
Bever also used Wednesday's news release to explain the health department's authority and responsibility for monitoring and investigating disease such as COVID-19.
According to Bever, Nebraska's local health departments are assigned and authorized under state law to monitor and investigate more than 125 reportable diseases and conditions. These include food- and water-borne illnesses; vector-borne illnesses such as those carried by mosquitoes and ticks; and many other diseases caused by viruses, bacteria, fungi and parasites, as well as conditions causes by exposure to harmful gases and taxins.
Monkeypox, which is caused by a pox virus, is included on Nebraska's list of reportable diseases. As of Wednesday evening, 19 cases of monkeypox had been confirmed in 10 U.S. states, but none had been found in Nebraska.
"Some residents are wondering if they should be worried about monkeypox," Bever said. "The current risk of exposure is low. However, if you have symptoms of monkeypox, such as unexplained rashes or lesions, contact your health care provider. This is especially important if you have recently traveled to countries where monkeypox cases have been reported, or if you have been close to someone with monkeypox symptoms or who has been diagnosed with monkeypox."
For a list of locations within the South Heartland district offering COVID-19 vaccinations and testing, visit the health department's website, www.southheartlandhealth.org.
By Andy Raun

LJS: Health Department to offer booster doses to kids ages 5-11

The Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department on Wednesday announced that it will expand COVID-19 vaccination clinics to include booster doses for children ages 5 to 11 starting Thursday,

and it will hold walk-in clinics at schools throughout June.
The announcement follows recent approval by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of a Pfizer booster dose for children ages 5 to 11. The booster dose is recommended at 5 months after completing the initial two-dose series.
The move also comes as COVID-19 cases continue to trend much higher than they were earlier in the spring.
Lancaster County recorded 417 cases last week, which was a slight decline from the 422 cases recorded the previous week. It was the first weekly decline since early April.
However, the test positivity rate rose, and Health Department officials said wastewater sampling showed an increase in viral particles.
“COVID-19 is still circulating in our community," Health Director Pat Lopez said in a news release. "Booster doses help provide continued protection against COVID-19 and help prevent children from becoming seriously sick if they do get the disease."
Even though COVID-19 tends to be less severe in children than adults, during the omicron wave, more children were getting sick and being hospitalized, according to the CDC. Some can experience ongoing health problems after getting COVID-19.
The Health Department said it is contacting parents and guardians of vaccine recipients who fall within the new recommendations to schedule booster dose appointments. Walk-ins are welcome at all clinics. Parents and guardians can also schedule an appointment for their child at COVID19.lincoln.ne.gov.
All clinics will offer first and second doses for age 5 and older, first booster doses for age 5 and older, and second booster doses for those age 50 and older and those age 12 and older with weakened immune systems.
Here are the upcoming school-based clinics:
* Thursday, 3:30-6 p.m., Fredstrom Elementary School, 5700 N.W. 10th St.
* Saturday, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., Lincoln Northeast High School, 2635 N. 63rd St.
* Tuesday, 3:30-6 p.m., Arnold Elementary School, 5000 Mike Scholl St.
* June 9, 3:30-6 p.m., Clinton Elementary School, 1520 N. 29th St.
The Health Department also offers COVID-19 vaccinations at its clinics at 3131 O St.
By Matt Olberding

OWH: Residents find few answers at community meeting on Nox-Crete fire

Frustrated and scared by Monday’s massive chemical fire in their neighborhood, Omaha residents again sought answers Wednesday evening at a public meeting, and again came away with little information.
If anything, the meeting laid bare the city’s seeming unpreparedness for the unfolding disaster: Firefighters arriving at the Nox-Crete plant near 20th Street and Woolworth Avenue didn’t know what chemicals were in the building. Yes, the department had that information, but it wasn’t available to those at the scene. (The building’s owner showed up and provided information.)
The fire department lacked sufficient chemical firefighting tools for a fire of this magnitude. At least

two people recommended carbon dioxide, which is one method of fighting this type of fire. That's not something the Omaha Fire Department carries.

It does have access to foam and began applying it about 2½ hours into the fire, according to Assistant Fire Chief Kathy Bossman. Firefighters used 875 gallons of foam before running out, she said.

"This fire was so big, so hot, and there was such an extreme volume of fire, the amount of foam we had to suppress it was limited," Bossman said. Although some in the audience disputed the wisdom of using water, Bossman said it was the best choice available.

The emergency alert was only in English. That's not good for a metro area where 120 languages are spoken, said Kimara Snipes, a former board member with the Omaha Public Schools. Douglas County Emergency Manager Paul Johnson said the problem was fixed Wednesday and future alerts would also go out in Spanish.

To residents who wanted to know what chemicals were stored in the building, the answer was largely: Look it up. It's on the website of the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy under facility number 10550. None of the officials at the meeting, from the Douglas County Health Department to the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy, devoted significant time to walking people through the types of chemicals likely stored at the building and how a fire there might affect their health.

The confusion and lack of answers brought to mind residents' frustrations with the city's response to last year's natural disasters: a windstorm that blocked streets with trees and caused extensive power outages, and flash flooding that damaged an unknown number of homes and businesses.

Joe Giitter, who lives in the neighborhood affected by the fire and who has worked previously in emergency management and fire protection at the federal level, raised a number of concerns with the response.

"There were some command and control issues that I'd like to see addressed," Giitter said, calling for a thorough after-action review.

Among Giitter's concerns: The fire department lacked CO2 as a suppressant and used water, which he said can worsen some chemical fires.

Additionally, the voluntary evacuation was undertaken based on outdated wind information because the wind had shifted, he said. Thus, people who found themselves affected by the smoke were outside of the area of official concern.

And why, he asked, echoing the concerns of many, weren't mobile air samples taken since the main Douglas County Health Department air monitor was upwind of the fire?

"I'd like to see some lessons learned, because this event could have been a lot worse," he said.

Resident Jodi Hillhouse pointed out that many residents in this area can't afford a doctor's visit, so they will be dependent on publicly available information. And she noted that future disasters need to take into account that many residents don't have access to a car if they need to evacuate.

Another resident, identified only as Alex, said she was "glad we're making a really big deal like this. We can't normalize things like this happening."

And two of those attending asked why Mayor Jean Stothert was not in attendance Wednesday.

Tom Buell, an administrator for monitoring and remediation for Nebraska's environmental regulators, said the federal Environmental Protection Agency sent staff to Omaha Wednesday to formulate a plan to test the area for contaminants. He said it's probable that the testing will include soil and wipe-testing of objects. It may not include air sampling. The agency is still formulating its response, he said.

Roger Garcia, a member of the Douglas County Board who arranged Wednesday's meeting, said he will recommend that a multi-jurisdiction after-action review be undertaken.
The goal of the meeting was to give residents a chance to question officials face to face.
"I did not feel that a simple press release was enough," he said.
It's still too early, he said, for answers to some of the residents' questions. Environmental samples, especially, will take time, he said.
Nox-Crete did not send a representative to the meeting, but the company did issue a statement Wednesday afternoon, thanking first responders for being able to "control the situation in a way that has resulted in no injuries, for which we are grateful beyond description."
The company statement said the Omaha Fire Department and other authorities "are conducting a full investigation into the cause of the blaze. Nox-Crete continues to cooperate with local authorities and will defer to their expertise regarding questions about the fire."
The company acknowledged that nearly 2,400 of its neighbors lost power during the fire and it expressed its appreciation for the work of utility workers to quickly restore power as well as the efforts of the City of Omaha.
Nox-Crete noted that it has been on the same site in Omaha since 1956, employing nearly 50 Omahans.
"The fire affected Nox-Crete's main warehouse but did not affect our nearby offices or production facilities," the company said, "and as such, our team is back at work."
By Nancy Gaarder

OWH: Amid teacher shortage, OPS floats $4,500 stipend for full-time staff for next 2 years

Faced with a continuing staff shortage, Omaha Public Schools officials Wednesday announced a plan to temporarily boost pay for district employees.
The pay increase proposal, which would apply to all certified and classified full-time and part-time staff for the next two years, follows an exodus of teachers that occurred last month. Some employees cited poor working conditions that weren't improving.
Under the district's proposal, which will go before the school board for approval Monday, certified and classified full-time staff would receive an additional $4,500 per year, while part-time staff would receive an additional $2,250 per year provided they work 20 or more hours a week.
The raises require approval by the school board and the Nebraska Department of Education, since the money will come from federal COVID-19 relief, known as Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER). Because ESSER funds expire in 2024, the proposed stipends would be limited to the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years.
Superintendent Cheryl Logan said at a Wednesday press conference that the district would move money from its ESSER plan for long-term facilities maintenance to cover the new stipends. The stipends, if approved, would be distributed in three installments throughout the school year.
"Those needs are not disappearing, but we see the time-sensitive need to invest in our current staff, our returning staff," Logan said. "This acknowledges the additional needs and challenges of this time."

The district received 594 certified staff resignations and retirements as of May 19, according to a media release. That is a more than 43% increase from last year, when OPS only had 415 resignations and retirements.

Logan said the district also plans to meet with the Omaha Education Association to discuss compensation for teachers covering for others during their planning period.

Robert Miller, OEA president, said he was pleased to see the district recognize the work of all staff members and their dedication to students.

"It's a great start and we look forward to working together to address the various concerns within the classrooms and buildings," he said.

OPS, like other districts in the metro area and beyond, has struggled to retain staff during the pandemic.

During Wednesday's press conference, Logan said she expects there to be about 230 unfilled positions when the 2022-23 school year starts. She did not know the exact number of unfilled positions in previous years but said it is in the "three-digit range."

The district will be reorganizing classes within schools to help with the staff shortage, which will result in some larger class sizes, Logan said.

"Some students will not notice a change in their classroom," Logan said. "For others, the number of students could change from two to five students."

One OPS teacher said she feels the move is a great start for teachers to feel appreciated, but she hopes the district doesn't stop there. The teacher spoke on the condition that The World-Herald withhold her name due to concerns it could impact her job.

"It is something, but we still need support from administration, and most importantly, parents. We want your child to be the best he or she can be," she said. "For them to be successful, they need to be read to, know manners and not argue with teachers."

Logan said the district will be taking on a "herculean effort" to establish in-depth relationships with families to help with student misbehavior. This could include in-home visits that staff would be compensated for, she said.

"One of the key things that we want to happen this year is to deepen those family relationships and to ensure we have common expectations for student behavior in the classroom," she said. "Last year when we started school, I talked to (superintendents) about student behavior last fall. No one anticipated what we were faced with."

Candice Balkovic, who resigned from Lewis and Clark Middle School in January, said she wondered why the district decided to offer stipends now instead of earlier in the year.

"When we looked at where we were in terms of our needs, that's where we landed," Logan said when asked about the timing. "We did 70 input sessions and took the information from our input sessions to create our initial budget."

Balkovic said the new stipend won't make her return to OPS.

"I'm in a new position where I make $20,000 more with a cost of living increase and bonuses coming every July, so $4,500 extra ... nope," she said. "That stipend amount is the amount many companies give employees as a bonus regularly."

By Lauren Wagner

OWH Editorial: Benson post office renaming is fitting honor

for Omaha WWII hero

A hometown Omaha hero from World War II is finally getting some of the honors he deserved. Charles Jackson French saved the lives of his shipmates after their destroyer was sunk near Guadalcanal in September 1942. A Navy mess steward, French swam for several hours through shark-infested waters while towing a lifeboat filled with wounded comrades.

His story was widely told at the time and French, then 22, was called “the hero of the Solomon Islands.”

An African American, French had been recommended by his commander for a Navy Cross, the Navy’s second-highest award for valor. But at a time of prejudice and discrimination in the U.S. military and elsewhere, French received only a letter of commendation.

A number of efforts have been launched in recent years to ensure that French’s heroism is finally properly recognized.

Last week, the Senate passed a bill that will rename the Benson postal facility at 6223 Maple St. the “Petty Officer 1st Class Charles Jackson French Post Office.” The bill, sponsored by Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., earlier was passed by the House of Representatives.

A year ago, Bacon also had written a letter to the acting secretary of the Navy, asking for a review of French’s file to determine whether he had received the proper awards. That, in turn, led to an award ceremony last month where French’s relatives were presented in San Diego with a posthumous Navy and Marine Corps Medal, the service’s highest award for non-combat heroism.

In addition, the pool used for training swimmers at Naval Base San Diego was renamed in French’s honor.

Omahans may remember World-Herald reporter Steve Liewer’s story about French last June and the tribute paid to him by USA Swimming during the U.S. Olympic Swim Trials in Omaha.

French was born in Arkansas but moved to Omaha as a youth to live with his married older sister. He enlisted in the then-segregated Navy in 1937. After saving his shipmates, who were all White, he remained in the Navy until the end of the war, then took a civilian job with the Navy in San Diego. He died in 1956.

Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., who led efforts for the post office naming bill on the Senate side of the U.S. Capitol, called its passage “wonderful news.”

“This post office renaming is important to his family, the community of Omaha and the state of Nebraska,” Fischer said. “I’m proud we could come together to recognize his legacy of service and sacrifice.”

French’s selfless valor has inspired people for 80 years, but as time has passed too many have forgotten his extraordinary efforts. It’s fitting that Omahans are learning about him again, and that the Benson post office will stand as a permanent reminder for the future.

OWH Midlands Voices: There are reasons to be optimistic in the fight against Alzheimer's

Recently, I had the honor of attending the Alzheimer's Association's Advocacy Forum in Washington, D.C. This important annual event brings together family members, caregivers and advocates from all 50 states for a day of discussion and consciousness-raising with our legislators in Congress.

These meetings provided an opportunity for us to thank our political leaders for the support they have shown in the fight against Alzheimer's thus far. More importantly, however, these meetings served to remind our legislators of the work left to be done and the important actions needed to make that work possible.

There are currently 6.5 million people suffering from Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia in the United States. There are 35,000 Nebraskans suffering from the disease, and that number is expected to grow to 40,000 in just three years. There were 768 reported deaths in Nebraska from Alzheimer's in 2019.

This number does not take into account the many cases that go unreported or situations where Alzheimer's is not listed on death certificates as a primary cause of death, and, of course, it does not take account of COVID.

My father passed away from dementia in 2016 and I am currently caring for my mother with Alzheimer's. If we think about the longstanding, high-profile efforts of organizations like the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association, it is shocking to realize that it was not until 2011, when Congress passed the Alzheimer's National Project Act (NAPA), that Alzheimer's became the focus of a coordinated national effort guided by data and science.

In 2014, the Nebraska legislature passed a law establishing the Aging Nebraskans Task Force and calling for the development of a strategic plan to serve as a roadmap for dealing with Alzheimer's and its implications in our state.

The Nebraska plan focuses on the three main areas: information, support and safety. These issues are especially acute in largely agricultural states like ours, where the lack of trained health care providers, facilities specializing in memory care, and caregiver resources create even more difficulties for people with Alzheimer's.

NAPA is up for reauthorization, and there are plans to reinvigorate the Aging Nebraskans Task Force. Thanks to events like the advocacy forum, there are reasons to be optimistic. It's too late for my parents, but not for others.

For the Alzheimer's Association, the white flower symbolizes a cure for this devastating disease. Let's all look forward to a day when we can see a prairie carpeted with white flowers as far as the eye can see.

David Thompson is an elder law attorney with the Omaha firm of Burnett Wilson Law. He serves on the board of the Alzheimer's Association's Nebraska chapter, and he is chair of the Elder Law Section of the Nebraska State Bar Association. He can be reached at david@burnettwilsonlaw.com.

LJS Editorial, 6/2: Airport lands new flight and new opportunity

The Lincoln Airport -- and by extension, Lincoln -- got some good news last week with the announcement that United Airlines was adding a third destination to its flight offerings starting Sept. 1.

The Airport Authority approved the contract last week to add daily service to Houston, on top of current destinations of Chicago and Denver. United is expected to finalize the deal this week.
David Haring, airport executive director, expects once-daily flights on 50-seat regional jets to leave in the early morning and return in the evening, what he calls "an ideal schedule for us as business market."
The United hub at Houston George Bush International Airport puts Lincoln a single flight from destinations in Mexico, the Caribbean and south and central America.
When Delta -- with flights to Minneapolis and Atlanta -- pulled out of Lincoln earlier this year, it was tough blow at a time when the airport is undergoing a $55 million renovation and expansion.
The optics were less than ideal -- fixing up an airport that just lost a chunk of service -- but the fact is that facilities -- along with flight selection and ticket prices -- can help draw passengers. And passengers, along with financial incentives, can help draw airlines.
So Lincoln is poised to recoup the travel losses it sustained to COVID and competition from Omaha and, to a lesser extent, Grand Island, which has flights to popular recreational destination Phoenix and Las Vegas.
One new flight from United won't fix everything that ails Lincoln's airport. It still needs to win over travelers.
Director Haring, who has been on the job since 2014, told the Journal Star's Matt Olberding in January that the airport needs to rethink some strategies. While it's always been focused on good business travel destinations, Haring suggested that leisure carriers. Allegiant, which flies out of Grand Island and Omaha but ended its Lincoln service long ago, may not be a likely candidate, but there are others.
For the right traveler, Lincoln is a perfect option. A short drive, easy parking, short walks to the gate and uncrowded security checkpoints. Price and choice -- two key factors in travelers' decisions -- are places Lincoln can improve.
A smaller airport like Lincoln doesn't have a big margin for error. A pandemic, a lost carrier or a lost flight can have a big impact. But United's news is welcome. Lincoln Airport doesn't need to rival Eppley in Omaha, but it needs to find its niche. A solid airport is part of the foundation of a solid community.

NP Telegraph: Jacobson: An honor to honor our fallen heroes

This past Monday marked the passage of another Memorial Day. Although many see this weekend as the beginning of summer and the first opportunity to break out the barbeque grills, it is important to remember the significance of this holiday and the sacrifices made by so many to allow us to enjoy the freedoms we have today.
Memorial Day dates back to June 3, 1861, when the first Civil War grave was decorated with flowers in Warrenton, Virginia. At that time, Memorial Day was known as "Decoration Day" and "Northern states" started decorating the graves of fallen soldiers at certain times of the year. Communal potlucks for decorating volunteers were also common in the post-Civil War era, held by various church groups who sponsored the decoration of the soldiers' cemeteries. After World War I,

Decoration Day began to be observed in all states in honor of those who had died in all U.S. wars and its name was changed from Decoration Day to Memorial Day. Since 1971, Memorial Day has been observed on the last Monday in May. Memorial Day continues to be a holiday of special importance to those who have served in the American military, and family members who grieve for their lost loved ones (Gold Star families). Once a year, this holiday allows them to honor those who have died fighting wars in the name of their country. This is why the quote "All Gave Some, Some Gave All" is frequently used in relation to the holiday.

Although some see this holiday as the beginning of summer, make no mistake about it, this is a holiday that is first and foremost about sacrifice, bravery and valor and the remembrance of those who exhibited all of those traits to preserve the American way of life.

I was honored to spend Memorial Day at various celebrations throughout District 42. Wallace welcomed me to their service at Morning View Cemetery, which dates back to 1892. Wallace American Legion Post 213 hosted the service and a delicious community hamburger and hot dog feed following the celebration. My wife and daughter are members of the American Legion Auxiliary, so it is always special for me to support American Legion events.

Next, I joined Gov. Pete Ricketts at the Fort McPherson National Cemetery south of Maxwell. It was dedicated in 1873 and is the final resting place for soldiers who fought in the Indian Wars, the Civil War, World Wars I and II and more recent conflicts. The cemetery is enclosed by wrought-iron fencing with large vehicular gates supported by stone piers, all constructed in 1941. A white marble monument marks the mass grave of 28 soldiers killed in an 1854 encounter with the Sioux at Fort Laramie in the Wyoming Territory. Fort McPherson National Cemetery is the also the final resting place for four recipients of the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military decoration, given for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity and the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty."

Finally, I attended the ceremony at the North Platte 20th Century Veterans Memorial. Here, bronze statutes memorialize Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard veterans, as well as the volunteers of the North Platte Canteen. The five major conflicts of the 20th century, World War I, World War II, Korea War, Vietnam War and Gulf War, are depicted in a 15-foot-tall brick bas-relief mural.

It was truly a humbling experience to spend Memorial Day visiting the grave sites of our brave men and women who served. I am honored to have many veterans in my own family, including my father and father-in-law, who are no longer with us. I would challenge us all to live our lives in such a way that honors the sacrifice of those who died for us.

Thank you to all veterans and for those who died for our freedom!

Constituents can reach Senator Mike Jacobson at mjacobson@leg.ne.gov or 402-471-2729. Our door is always open.

York NT: Just Melanie -- I'm actually a bad Nebraskan

Yesterday, as the governor and his wife unveiled the new Nebraska license plate, I stared at its uniqueness after its meaning was explained. Nebraska is artistic. Nebraskans have long expressed heritage and grit. I guess I just stopped and thought about what makes Nebraska special.

I'm well-versed in the Nebraska traditions of the state fair, Husker football games, the regimen of harvest season, tornado-related protocol and the uses of Dorothy Lynch. I grew up going to the

state's only remaining original movie drive-in (located in Neligh); the incredible Ash Fall Fossil Beds are just north of where I was raised; and I know what a steak is supposed to taste like.
I've witnessed Milligan's June Jubilee; I've sat on the beaches of Branched Oak and Johnson Lakes; I've failed at waterskiing at Calamus; I dined at the first Valentino's restaurant; and I've walked through the hallowed halls of Nebraska's acclaimed capitol building.
I've worn green in O'Neill; donned patriotic colors in Seward; and had plenty of red Kool-Aid mustaches as a child (thanks, Hastings).
As a 4-Her, I ate a sandwich in the back yard of the governor's mansion; I hiked through the trees at the Nebraska National Forest at Halsey; I've been in a canoe on the Niobrara River; and I've floated on an inner-tube at Long Pine.
Yes, I've experienced many wonderful things that only Nebraska can provide and I always thought I had thoroughly felt the pulse of our interesting and varied state.
I think I know what it is to be a Nebraskan.
But the longer I think about it, the more I realize I'm actually a bad Nebraskan.
Why? I've still never seen some of our state's most amazing sites.
I've always been intrigued about the pioneers' trek across our country and through our state. Yet, I'm ashamed to say I've never actually seen one rut the covered wagons whittled into the plains. I know there are tourist areas where these can still amazingly be seen, but I've never bothered to travel there.
Also tied to the epic pioneer journey is the breath-taking and majestic natural landmark of Chimney Rock. I've always been intrigued by the photographs of this amazing wonder in the western part of our state. But have I ever actually driven there to see it firsthand? Incredibly, no. I think this should be a major goal to fulfill as a Nebraskan. According to stories I've read, natural erosion has caused the big rock to shrink over time – I better hurry before it disappears. It's already been there for 24-25 million years, it's time for me to make an effort.
Another destination I've never seen – well, I've driven under it – is the Great Platte River Road Archway at Kearney. This amazing museum over the interstate has played host to many visitors, even dignitaries and a sitting U.S. president. But has it ever lured me in? No. Why? Simply because I've never taken the time.
I've never seen the Golden Spike Tower in North Platte, the Indian Cave State Park on the banks of the Missouri River, the Strategic Air and Space Museum or the oddly intriguing Carhenge situation by Alliance.
And I'm most ashamed to admit that I've never witnessed one of the greatest natural phenomenons Nebraska has to offer . . . the migration of the Sandhill Cranes. We don't need a Jurassic Park – we already have a real one as this global movement has continued since prehistoric times.
It's just right down the road from me each spring. It's just to the west.
Those who have witnessed it, especially in the early morning hours, have proclaimed witness to its awe-inspiring beauty. The sheer numbers are mind boggling, I'm told.
And the mysterious biology of it all is just incredible to me.
The sin of it all is that I haven't made the quick trip to see them – yet, those cranes (and tens of thousands of other birds) travel thousands of miles to be in our back yard early each year.
Until I have these experiences, I really can't say I've seen all our state has to offer or that I've had all the unique experiences our little "fly-over" state can give us.
Until that list is achieved, I'm guess I'm just a bad Nebraskan. Maybe it's time to make time to correct my status. It might take me a decade or so, but maybe it would be worth the time.

By Melanie Wilkinson

AP: House panel taking up gun bill in wake of mass shootings

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House is beginning to put its stamp on gun legislation in response to mass shootings in Texas and New York by 18-year-old assailants who used semi-automatic rifles to kill 31 people, including 19 children.

The House Judiciary Committee will hold a hearing Thursday to advance legislation that would raise the age limit for purchasing a semi-automatic centerfire rifle from 18 to 21. The bill would make it a federal offense to import, manufacture or possess large-capacity magazines and would create a grant program to buy back such magazines. It also builds on the executive branch's ban on bump-stock devices and so-called ghost guns that are privately made without serial numbers.

The Democratic legislation, called the Protecting Our Kids Act, was quickly added to the legislative docket after last week's school shooting in Uvalde, Texas. A vote by the full House could come as early as next week.

With Republicans nearly in lockstep in their opposition, the House action will mostly be symbolic, serving to put lawmakers on record about gun control ahead of this year's elections. The Senate is taking a different course, with a bipartisan group striving toward a compromise on gun safety legislation that can win enough GOP support to become law.

But Rep. Jerrold Nadler of New York, the Democratic chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, defends the proposals as being popular with Americans. He says it's time for Congress to act.

"You say that it is too soon to take action? That we are 'politicizing' these tragedies to enact new policies?" Nadler said in prepared remarks for Thursday's hearing obtained by The Associated Press. "It has been 23 years since Columbine. Fifteen years since Virginia Tech. Ten years since Sandy Hook. Seven years since Charleston. Four years since Parkland and Santa Fe and Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh."

He added: "Too soon? My friends, what the hell are you waiting for?"

Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, the ranking Republican on the committee, told Fox News he'll press his GOP colleagues to oppose the bill.

"I'm going to do everything I can to encourage my colleagues to oppose this … hodgepodge of bills that I don't think would have made one difference in tragedies that we've seen recently," Jordan said.

Any legislative response to the Uvalde and Buffalo, New York, shootings will have to get through the evenly divided Senate, where support from at least 10 Republicans would be needed to advance the measure to a final vote. A group of senators has been working behind the scenes this week in hopes of finding a consensus.

Ideas under discussion include expanded background checks for gun purchases and incentivizing red-flag laws that allow family members, school officials and others to go into court and secure an order requiring the police to seize guns from people considered a threat to themselves or others.

The broader bipartisan group of almost 10 senators met again Wednesday — "a very productive call," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., in an interview.

"There's a tenor and tone, as well as real substantive discussion that seems different," he said.

Blumenthal has been working with a Republican member of the group, Sen. Lindsey Graham of

South Carolina, on a proposal to send resources to the states for red-flag laws. He said he was "excited and encouraged" by the response from the group.
"It really is time for our Republican colleagues to put up or shut up," Blumenthal said. "We've been down this road before."
President Joe Biden was asked Wednesday if he was confident Congress would take action on gun legislation.
"I served in Congress for 36 years. I'm never confident, totally," Biden said. "It depends, and I don't know. I've not been in on the negotiations as they're going on right now."

AP: Biden says he wasn't informed early on of baby formula woes

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Wednesday said he was not briefed on the prospect of nationwide shortages of infant formula for about two months as he acknowledged the strain on families while his administration struggles to address the situation.
Yet company executives at a meeting Biden hosted from the White House told the president that they knew the substantial impact that the shutdown of a major production plant in February would have on the U.S. supply almost immediately.
"They did, but I didn't," Biden told reporters later, saying he was not made aware of the severity until early April.
Under Biden, the government has imported foreign supplies and used the Defense Production Act to speed domestic production. But those steps did not begin until mid-May, once retailers began rationing supplies and store shelves were emptying.
"There's nothing more stressful than feeling you can't get what your child needs," Biden said, adding that as a "father and a grandfather," he understands how difficult the shortages have been for parents and their children.
Biden hosted the roundtable with leaders of manufacturers ByHeart, Bubs Australia, Reckitt, Perrigo Co. and Gerber. Notably absence was Abbott Nutrition, whose Michigan plant was shut down in February over safety concerns, leading to the domestic shortage. The White House did not respond to a request for comment on why Abbott was not included.
The meeting Wednesday was a chance to provide an update on what the administration is calling "Operation Fly Formula" to import formula and to use the Korean War-era production law to require suppliers to prioritize their orders in a bid to ease production bottlenecks.
Despite Biden's comment about not being informed of the looming crisis, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said the administration began acting within days of the plant closure.
"We have been doing this whole of government approach since the recall," she said. "We have been working on this for months, for months. We have been taking this incredibly seriously."
She acknowledged that Biden is "frustrated" by the situation.
Meanwhile, the White House announced the third and fourth round of formula shipments from overseas would begin next week, from producer Kendamil in Britain and from Bubs Australia.
The White House said the latest round of shipments would bring Kendamil formula from Heathrow Airport in London to U.S. airports over a three-week period, starting June. 9. The flights will carry

about 3.7 million 8-ounce bottle equivalents, shipped free of charge by United Airlines.
The first shipments will include Kendamil Classic Stage 1 and Kendamil Organic formulas, which will be available at Target stores across the United States.
Bubs Australia will ship the equivalent of 4.6 million 8-ounce bottles of its infant formula on Defense Department-contracted commercial aircraft from its hub in Melbourne, Australia, to Pennsylvania and California on June 9 and June 11, respectively.
The push on imports will help but will not immediately bring an end to supply shortages that have left people who depend on formula facing empty shelves or limits on purchases.
The Food and Drug Administration began focusing on Abbott's plant last fall while tracking several bacterial infections in infants who had consumed formula from the facility. The four cases occurred between September and January, causing hospitalizations and two deaths.
After detecting positive samples of rare but dangerous bacteria in multiple parts of the plant, the FDA closed the facility and Abbott announced a massive recall of its formula on Feb. 17.
U.S. regulators and Abbott announced an agreement last month that would help pave the way for reopening the plant, though production has not restarted.

Very Respectfully,

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