

McCarthy nears victory for speaker

Associated Press

WASHINGTON —Republican Kevin McCarthy flipped more than a dozen colleagues to support him in dramatic votes Friday for House speaker, a major sign of progress for the embattled leader on the fourth day and 12th ballot of a grueling standoff that is testing American democracy.

The changed votes from the conservative holdouts including the chairman of the conservative Freedom Caucus put McCarthy closer to seizing the gavel. The stunning turnaround came after McCarthy agreed to many of the detractors' demands — including the reinstatement of a long-standing House rule that would allow any single member to call a vote to oust him from office.

The showdown that has stymied the new Congress came against the backdrop of the second anniversary of the Jan. 6,

2021, attack on the Capitol, which shook the country when a mob of then-President Donald Trump's supporters tried to stop Congress from certifying the Republican's 2020 election defeat to Democrat Joe Biden.

For a few minutes in the House chamber. Republicans tiring of the spectacle walked out in protest when one of McCarthy's most ardent challengers railed against the GOP leader.

"We do not trust Mr. McCarthy with power," said Republican Matt Gaetz of Florida, as colleagues streamed out of the chamber in protest of his remarks.

Contours of a deal with conservative holdouts who have been blocking McCarthy's rise emerged, but was still out of reach after three dismal days and 11 failed votes in a political spectacle unseen in a century.

Arriving at the Capitol Friday

morning, an upbeat McCarthy said to reporters, "We're going to make progress. We're going to shock you."

But there's no deal yet, he told colleagues on a private morning call, according to a Republican familiar with the call and granted anonymity to discuss it.

Voting resumed after Republican Rep. Mike Garcia nominated McCarthy for a 12th time, also thanking the U.S. Capitol Police who were given a standing ovation for protecting lawmakers and the legislative seat of democracy on Jan. 6.

The chamber is unable to swear in members and begin its 2023-24 session. McCarthy told lawmakers there were no plans to adjourn for the weekend, one Republican said, but it might be difficult to keep them in town.

So far Republicans have been unable to settle on a new speaker — normally an easy, joyous task

for a party that has just won majority control. But not this time: About 200 Republicans are stymied by 20 far-right colleagues who say he's not conservative enough.

The agreement McCarthy presented to the holdouts from the conservative Freedom Caucus and others centers around rules changes they have been seeking for months. Those changes would shrink the power of the speaker's office and give rank-and-file lawmakers more influence in drafting and passing legislation.

Even if McCarthy is able to secure the votes he needs, he will emerge as a weakened speaker, having given away some powers, leaving him constantly under threat of being voted out by his detractors. But he would also be potentially emboldened as a survivor of one of the more brutal fights for the gavel in U.S. history.

Kremlin-ordered truce uncertain amid mutual mistrust

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — An uneasy calm in Kyiv on Friday was broken by air-raid sirens that also blared across the rest of Ukraine as a Russian cease-fire declaration for the Orthodox Christmas took effect. Ukrainian and Western officials have scorned the truce as a ploy.

No explosions were heard in the capital. And reports of sporadic fighting elsewhere in Ukraine could not immediately be confirmed. Clashes there could take hours to become public.

Kyiv residents ventured out into a light dusting of snow to buy gifts, cakes and groceries for Christmas Eve family celebrations, hours after the cease-fire

was to have started.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday ordered his forces in Ukraine to observe a unilateral, 36-hour cease-fire. Kyiv officials dismissed the move but didn't clarify whether Ukrainian troops would follow suit.

Moscow also didn't say whether its forces would retaliate if Ukraine kept fighting, but the Moscow-appointed head of the Donetsk region, Denis Pushilin, said they would.

The Russian-declared truce in the nearly 11-month war began at noon Friday and was to continue through midnight Saturday Moscow time.

Air-raid sirens sounded in Kyiv about 40 minutes after the Rus-

sian cease-fire was to come into effect. The widely used "Alerts in Ukraine" app, which includes information from emergency services, showed sirens blaring across the country.

Russia's Defense Ministry alleged that Ukrainian forces continued to shell its positions, and said its forces returned fire to suppress the attacks. But it wasn't clear from the statement whether the attacks and return of fire took place before or after the cease-fire took effect.

The ministry's spokesman, Igor Konashenkov, reported multiple Ukrainian attacks in the eastern Donetsk, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia regions. It was not possible to verify the claims.

Putin's announcement Thursday that the Kremlin's troops would stop fighting along the more than 680-mile front line and elsewhere was unexpected. It came after the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, proposed a cease-fire for the Christmas holiday. The Orthodox Church, which uses the Julian calendar, celebrates Christmas on Jan. 7.

But Ukrainian and Western officials portrayed the announcement as an attempt by Putin to grab the moral high ground, while possibly seeking to snatch the battlefield initiative and rob the Ukrainians of momentum amid their counteroffensive of recent months.

Cooler hiring could aid inflation fight

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. employers added a solid 223,000 jobs in December, evidence that the economy remains healthy even as the Federal Reserve is rapidly raising interest rates to try to slow economic growth and the pace of hiring.

With companies continuing to add jobs across the economy, the unemployment rate fell from 3.6% to 3.5%, matching a 53-year low, the Labor Department said Friday.

All told, the December jobs report suggested that the labor market may be cooling in a way

that could aid the Fed's fight against high inflation. Last month's gain was the smallest in two years, and it extended a hiring slowdown for most of 2022. What's more, average hourly pay growth eased in December to its slowest pace in 16 months. That slowdown could reduce pressure on employers to raise prices to offset their higher labor costs.

Average hourly wage growth was up 4.6% in December from 12 months earlier, compared with a 4.8% year-over-year increase in November and a recent peak of 5.6% in March.

"If these trends continue, we can feel more and more confident that the strength of this labor market is sustainable," said Nick Bunker, head of economic research at the online job site Indeed's Hiring Lab. "The outlook for next year is uncertain, but many signs point toward a soft landing," rather than a feared recession.

Traders on Wall Street appeared encouraged by the report's suggestion of milder pay growth. Stock prices rose sharply Friday morning.

The job gains capped a second straight year of robust hir-

ing during which the nation regained all 22 million jobs it lost to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet the rapid hiring and the hefty pay raises that accompanied it likely contributed to a spike in prices that catapulted inflation to its highest level in 40 years.

The picture for 2023 is much cloudier. Many economists foresee a recession in the second half of the year, a consequence of the Fed's succession of sharp rate hikes. The central bank's officials have projected that those increases will cause the unemployment rate to reach 4.6% by year's end.

Cubans stunned to hear of new US asylum limits

Associated Press

YUMA, Ariz. — Migrants who entered the U.S. illegally under moonlit skies and waist-deep cold water Friday were devastated to learn they may be sent back to Mexico under expanded limits on the pursuit of asylum.

About 200 migrants who walked in the dark for about an hour to surrender to Border Patrol agents in Yuma, included many Cubans — who were stunned to hear that a ban on asylum that previously fell largely on other nationalities now applies just as much to them. Several were political dissidents of the Cuban government who were driven to leave by long-standing fears of incarceration and persecution and a new sense of economic desperation.

President Joe Biden announced Thursday that Cubans, Nicaraguans, Haitians and Venezuelans will be expelled to Mexico if they enter the U.S. illegally, effective immediately.

At the same time, he offered humanitarian parole for up to 30,000 people a month from those four countries if they apply online, pay for their airfare and find a financial sponsor.

Mario Enrique Perez, 32, said he would rather be incarcerated in the U.S. than be returned to Mexico, where, he said, he and his wife endured many slights and poor treatment during a two-month journey across the country.

The vast majority of Cubans reach the U.S. by flying to Nicaragua as tourists and make their way to the U.S. border with Mexico. Perez said they trade information "like ants" about which routes are safest and easiest, which is why he picked Yuma.

The new rules expand on an existing effort to stop Venezuelans attempting to enter the U.S., which began in October and led to a dramatic drop in Venezuelans coming to the southern border.

Tsai visits base as China protests US ship transit

Associated Press

CHIAYI, Taiwan — Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen visited a military base Friday to observe drills while rival China protested the passage of a U.S. Navy destroyer through the Taiwan Strait, as tensions between the sides showed no sign of abating in the new year.

Beijing claims self-governing Taiwan as Chinese territory to be brought under its control by force if necessary, and regularly protests the passage of U.S. and other foreign warships through the Taiwan Strait, one of the world's busiest waterways.

Tsai's visit to the base in the central county of Chiayi comes as Taiwan is seeking to boost its defenses against the rising threat from China. That includes expanding the domestic shipbuilding and arms industry, buying more defensive weaponry from the U.S. and extending the national service requirement for all men from four

months to a full year beginning in 2024.

Meanwhile, China accused the U.S. of "publicly hyping" the passage Thursday of the guided-missile destroyer USS Chung-Hoon through the strait, adding that its forces monitored the ship the entire time.

"The Eastern Theater Command of the Chinese People's Liberation Army organized troops to monitor the U.S. ship's entire passage and was fully cognizant of all its actions," the command's spokesperson Col. Shi Yi said in a brief statement posted to social media.

The U.S. says the strait is international waters beyond the territorial sea of any state.

"Chung-Hoon's transit through the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the United States' commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. The United States military flies, sails and operates anywhere international law allows," the Japan-based 7th Fleet said in a statement.

'Bomb cyclone' brings wind, rain in Calif.

Associated Press

CAPITOLA, Calif. — Hurricane-force winds, surging surf and heavy rains from a powerful "atmospheric river" pounded California on Thursday, knocking out power to tens of thousands, causing flooding, and contributing to the deaths of at least two people, including a toddler whose home was crushed by a falling tree.

Raging seas damaged two historic piers, rock and mudslides closed down highways and deep snow piled up at ski resorts in the latest in a series of atmospheric rivers — long plumes of moisture stretching far over the Pacific — to reach the drought-stricken state. The "Pineapple Express" storm originated near Hawaii and was pulled toward the West Coast by a rotating area of rapidly falling air pressure known as a "bomb cyclone."

Even as rains were expected to let up and some evacuation orders lifted Thursday, crews were assessing damage, trying to re-

store power and beginning the cleanup while bracing for more wet and wild weather this weekend that could be particularly troublesome for communities along swollen rivers.

The blustery tempest that came ashore Wednesday knocked out power to more than 180,000 homes and businesses, according to poweroutage.us.

In Sonoma County, Aeon Tocchini, a 2-year-old boy, was killed when a redwood tree crumpled a section of his family's mobile home where he had been sitting on a sofa, authorities said. His father and neighbors freed the boy — nicknamed "Goldie" because of his light hair and sunny personality — but he couldn't be revived.

"He was the happiest child, always smiling and encouraging people," his teary-eyed grandmother Aileen Tocchini said outside the damaged Occidental home where a red tricycle and yellow dump truck were buried under broken branches. "He

was a love, an angel."

In Fairfield, a 19-year-old woman died after her vehicle hydroplaned on a flooded road and hit a utility pole, police said on Facebook.

The seaside village of Capitola in Santa Cruz County about 60 miles south of San Francisco suffered possibly the worst damage as waves that were forecast to top 25 feet crashed into homes and restaurants at the mouth of Soquel Creek and knocked out a section of its historic wooden pier.

Surf shattered the windows at Zelda's on the Beach, tossing furniture around inside the eatery. The Wharf House restaurant, at the end of the Capitola Wharf, was cut off from the mainland after a midspan of the wooden structure collapsed.

Hurricane-strength gusts as high as 101 mph toppled trees onto buildings and roads, knocked out power lines and blew down the roof on a gas station in South San Francisco.

Hawaii's Kilauea volcano begins erupting again

Associated Press

HONOLULU — Hawaii's Kilauea began erupting inside its summit crater Thursday, the U.S. Geological Survey said, less than one month after the volcano and its larger neighbor Mauna Loa stopped releasing lava.

The Hawaiian Volcano Observatory detected a glow in webcam images indicating Kilauea had begun erupting inside Halemaumau crater at the volcano's summit caldera, the agency said.

Kilauea's summit is inside Hawaii Volcanoes National Park and away from residen-

tial communities.

Earlier Thursday, the U.S. Geological Survey raised the alert level for Kilauea due to signs that magma was moving below the summit surface, an indication that the volcano might erupt.

Kilauea is one of the world's most active volcanoes. It last erupted for 16 months starting in September 2021. For about two weeks starting Nov. 27, Hawaii had two volcanoes spewing lava side by side when Mauna Loa erupted for the first time in 38 years. Both volcanoes stopped erupting at about the same time.

During the twin eruption, visitors to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park were able to see lava from both eruptions at the same time.

"It was a beautiful eruption, and lots of people got to see it, and it didn't take out any major infrastructure and most importantly, it didn't affect anybody's life," said Ken Hon, the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory's scientist in charge.

Mauna Loa lava didn't pose a threat to any communities, but got within 1.7 miles of a major highway connecting the east and west sides of the island.

Survey: 3.3M US adults displaced by natural disasters

Associated Press

More than 1.3% of the adult population in the U.S. was displaced by natural disasters in the past year, with hurricanes responsible for more than half of the forced relocations, according to first-of-its-kind survey results from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The Household Pulse Survey results said that 3.3 million U.S. adults were displaced by either hurricanes, floods, fires, tornadoes or other disasters. The two-year-old online survey asked for the first time about displacement from natural disasters in re-

sults released Thursday.

Some states were impacted more than others. In Florida, nearly 1 million people, or about 1 in 17 adult residents, were displaced in a state that was ravaged by Hurricanes Ian and Nicole in the fall. More than 409,000 people — or almost 1 in 8 residents — were displaced in Louisiana, which had a comparatively calm hurricane season in 2022 even though residents still were dealing with the devastating impacts from Hurricane Ida the previous year.

Among the states with lowest rates of the

adult population being displaced by disasters were Indiana, Maine, North Dakota, Ohio and Oklahoma.

Of the 3.3 million displaced adults, more than a third were out of their homes for less than a week. About 1 in 6 residents never returned to their homes, according to the survey.

The Census Bureau sent invitations to more than 1 million households to participate in the experimental survey and collected a total of 70,685 responses in mid-December.

SC court strikes down abortion ban

AP/Report for America

COLUMBIA, S.C. — The South Carolina Supreme Court on Thursday struck down a ban on abortion after six weeks, ruling the restriction enacted by the Deep South state violates a state constitutional right to privacy.

The decision marked a significant victory for abortion rights advocates suddenly forced to find safeguards at the state level after the U.S. Supreme Court overruled *Roe v. Wade* in June.

With federal abortion protections gone, Planned Parenthood South Atlantic sued in July under the South Carolina constitution's right to privacy. Restrictions in other states are also facing challenges, some as a matter of religious freedom.

But since the high court's momentous decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Or-*

ganization, no state court until Thursday in South Carolina had ruled definitively whether a constitutional right to privacy — a right not explicitly enumerated in the U.S. Constitution — extends to abortion.

"Planned Parenthood will keep working day by day and state by state to safeguard that right for all people," said Alexis McGill Johnson, president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, in a statement after the ruling.

The 3-2 decision comes nearly two years after Republican Gov. Henry McMaster signed the restriction into law, banning abortions after cardiac activity is detected. The ban, which included exceptions for pregnancies by rape or incest or pregnancies that endanger the patient's life, drew lawsuits almost immediately.

Justice Kaye Hearn, writing for the majority, said the state "unquestionably" has the authority to limit the right of privacy that protects from state interference with the decision to get an abortion. But she added any limitation must afford sufficient time to determine one is pregnant and take "reasonable steps" if she chooses to terminate that pregnancy.

"Six weeks is, quite simply, not a reasonable period of time for these two things to occur," Hearn added.

Currently, South Carolina bars most abortions at about 20 weeks beyond fertilization, or the gestational age of 22 weeks.

On Twitter, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre applauded the clampdown "on the state's extreme and dangerous abortion ban."

Idaho court tosses suits aiming to block abortion bans

Associated Press

Idaho's Constitution does not implicitly enshrine abortion as a fundamental right, the state Supreme Court ruled Thursday as it dismissed a series of lawsuits brought by Planned Parenthood.

The ruling was a blow against those who are fighting Idaho laws that took effect in August, including one criminalizing all abortions after six weeks of gestation except to save a pregnant person's life or because of rape or incest.

"This is a dark day for the state of Idaho. But our fight is far from over," Rebecca Gi-

bron, CEO of Planned Parenthood Great Northwest, Hawaii, Indiana, Kentucky, said in a statement.

Planned Parenthood and a family physician brought three lawsuits against the governor and leaders of the Legislature in an effort to block new abortion bans. One of the laws allows the potential family members of a fetus to sue a health care professional who performs an abortion. Another made it a crime for medical professionals to perform an abortion after electrical activity is detected. And a third effectively banned all abortions but allowed doctors to defend

themselves in court by proving that the abortion was done to save the life of their patient.

The Idaho Supreme Court heard arguments for all the lawsuits in a joint hearing last year. Thursday's ruling applied to all three of the cases.

Planned Parenthood claimed the laws offend constitutional principles such as equal protection and due process, the high court justices noted.

But a majority of the justices said in the ruling that the state Constitution offers no fundamental right to abortion.

Southwest eyes reputation repair after cancellations

Associated Press

DALLAS — With its flights running on a roughly normal schedule, Southwest Airlines is now turning its attention to repairing its damaged reputation after it canceled 15,000 flights around Christmas and left holiday travelers stranded.

CEO Robert Jordan said Thursday that Southwest has processed about 75% of the refund requests it has received. The airline has also returned most lost bags to their owners, and hired an outside firm to sift through requests for reimbursement of things like hotels and meals that stranded passengers paid out of their own pockets, he said.

The massive disruptions began Dec. 22

with a winter storm, and snowballed when Southwest's ancient crew-scheduling technology was overwhelmed, leaving crews and planes out of position to operate flights. It took the airline eight days to recover.

Jordan said in a brief interview that Southwest is still studying what went wrong, and he doesn't want to make changes in technology until that review is done. He expressed optimism but offered few specifics about avoiding a repeat meltdown.

Southwest is giving 25,000 frequent-flyer points to customers whose flights were canceled or significantly delayed between Dec. 24 and Jan. 2, and seems to be making progress on refunds, but executives concede it

will take many weeks to process the reimbursement requests.

Danielle Zanin is still waiting to hear whether Southwest will cover the \$1,995.36 that she spent during a four-day odyssey getting her family of four home to Illinois after their flight was canceled in Albuquerque, N.M. Even if she eventually gets the money, it may not be enough for her to try Southwest again.

"It would take a lot for the airline to prove to me that they can fix whatever technology they use to get flight crews and planes where they need to go. It's just not worth the hassle that I went through," Zanin said. She said she plans to go back to flying on American Airlines even if it costs more.

China seeking to minimize virus risk during travel rush

Associated Press

BEIJING — China is seeking to minimize the possibility of a major new COVID-19 outbreak during this month's Lunar New Year travel rush following the end of most pandemic containment measures.

The Transportation Ministry on Friday called on travelers to reduce trips and gatherings, particularly if they involve elderly people, pregnant women, small children and those with underlying conditions.

People using public transport are also urged to wear masks and pay special attention to their health and personal hygiene, Vice Minister Xu Chengguang told reporters at a briefing.

The call stopped short of asking citizens to stay home entirely, as the government had since the pandemic began, although some local governments have urged migrant workers not to return home.

Xu said authorities expect more than 2 billion trips to be made during the weeklong festival season, the most important time for visiting family and friends in the traditional

Chinese calendar. That is nearly double the number of last year and 70.3% over the same period in 2019 before the pandemic hit, Xu said.

Demand for family visits and tourism has "accumulated over the past three years of the pandemic to be met all at once," Xu said.

"We encourage people to make travel plans based on the situation of themselves and their family members," he said.

China abruptly ended a strict regime of lockdowns, quarantines and mass testing in December amid growing concerns about the economic impact and rare public protests in a country that permits no open political dissent.

China on Sunday is also ending mandatory quarantines for people arriving from abroad.

The current outbreak appears to have spread the fastest in densely populated cities, putting a strain on the health care system. Authorities are now concerned about the possible spread to smaller towns and rural areas that lack resources such as ICU beds.

In memoir, Prince Harry says William attacked him

Associated Press

LONDON — Prince Harry says his brother William physically attacked him during a ferocious argument — one of many startling allegations in a new memoir that includes revelations about the estranged royal's drug-taking, first sexual encounter and role in killing people during his military service in Afghanistan.

In the ghostwritten memoir, titled "Spare," Harry said that his brother Prince William lashed out during a furious argument over the siblings' deteriorating relationship. The Associated Press purchased a Spanish-language copy of the book ahead of its publication in 16 languages around the world on Tuesday.

Harry recounts a 2019 argument at his Kensington Palace home, in which he says William called Harry's wife, the former actor Meghan Markle, "difficult," "rude" and "abrasive." Harry said William grabbed his brother by the collar and ripped his necklace before knocking him down.

"I landed on the dog's bowl, which cracked under my back, the pieces cutting into me," Harry says in the passage, first reported by The Guardian.

Harry says he had scrapes and bruises as a result of the tussle, for which William later apologized.

The allegation is one of a slew in a book that exposes painful, intimate — and in some cases, contested — details about the lives of Harry and other members of the royal family. The memoir is the latest in a string of public revelations and accusations by Harry and Meghan that have shaken Britain's royal family.

It includes Harry's assertion that he killed 25 people while serving as an Apache helicopter co-pilot and gunner in 2012 as part of Britain's military campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Mom of Hunter Biden's child wants daughter's name changed to Biden

McClatchy Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The mother of President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden's "estranged" granddaughter wants her child's last name to be changed to "Biden," court documents show.

Previously, DNA testing proved "with near scientific certainty" that the president's son, Hunter Biden, is the biological father of an Arkansas woman's 4-year-old daughter, an Arkansas judge wrote in a state court filing in January 2020.

This came after the girl's mother, Lunden Roberts, sued Hunter Biden in May 2019 to establish the paternity of her daughter and to or-

der him to pay child support, according to court records filed in the Circuit Court of Independence County, Arkansas. The civil case was reopened in September.

While Roberts, of Arkansas, wants the Biden family to "remain estranged" from her daughter, she filed a motion in court requesting her child to bear the Biden name on Dec. 27.

"The Biden name is now synonymous with being well educated, successful, financially acute, and politically powerful," the motion states in part.

Roberts argues that her daughter would "benefit" by changing her last name to Biden and that it "would greatly impact and preserve her legacy."

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NFL: Bills-Bengals game won't resume

Associated Press

The NFL said Thursday it will not resume the Bills-Bengals game that was suspended Monday night after Buffalo safety Damar Hamlin collapsed and went into cardiac arrest on the field.

The league said some of the factors in coming to its decision included that “not playing the Buffalo-Cincinnati game to its conclusion will have no effect on which clubs qualify for the post-season. No club would qualify for the postseason and no club will be eliminated based on the outcome of this game.”

On Thursday, Hamlin’s doctors said he has begun to communicate in writing with his family and others who have been at his bedside since he went into cardiac arrest three days ago — and his first question was, “Did we win?”

“The answer is yes, Damar, you won. You’ve won the game of life,” Dr. Timothy Pritts told reporters in a conference call from the University of Cincinnati Medical Center, where Hamlin was rushed after collapsing

and being resuscitated on the field during the game.

Hamlin remains critically ill and in the hospital’s intensive care unit, but he began to wake up Wednesday night, and it appears his neurological function is intact, meaning he can follow commands and move, Pritts said.

“He still has significant progress he needs to make, but this marks a really good turning point in his ongoing care,” the doctor said.

Also, the NFL said playing the game between the Bills and Bengals would have required postponing the start of the playoffs by a week, and affecting all 14 teams that qualified for the post-season.

The NFL said its decision creates “potential competitive inequities in certain playoff scenarios.” The league said clubs on Friday, in a special league meeting, would consider a resolution recommended by the commissioner and approved today by the competition committee.

The Bills-Bengals game had major playoff implications for

the AFC. Buffalo (12-3) entered Monday night needing a win to maintain the AFC’s No. 1 seed. The Kansas City Chiefs (13-3) now hold that spot. The Bengals (11-4) had a chance to earn that top seed with two more wins and a loss by the Chiefs.

The scenarios approved by the competition committee include a potential neutral site for the AFC championship game. The league is considering several sites, including indoor and outdoor stadiums.

The resolution being presented to clubs for a vote on Friday are as follows:

The AFC Championship Game will be played at a neutral site if the participating teams played an unequal number of games and both could have been the No. 1 seed and hosted the game had all AFC clubs played a full 17-game regular season.

Those circumstances involve Buffalo or Cincinnati qualifying for the game as a road team. If Buffalo and Kansas City both win or tie this weekend, a Bills-Chiefs AFC title game would be at a neutral site.

If Buffalo and Kansas City both lose and Baltimore wins or ties, a Bills-Chiefs AFC title game would be at a neutral site.

If Buffalo and Kansas City both lose and Cincinnati wins, Bills or Bengals against Kansas City in the AFC title game would be at a neutral site.

Also, if Baltimore defeats Cincinnati in Week 18, the Ravens would have two wins over the Bengals, a divisional opponent, but will not be able to host a playoff game because Cincinnati will have a higher winning percentage for a 16-game schedule than Baltimore will for a 17-game schedule.

Therefore, if Baltimore defeats Cincinnati and if those two clubs are scheduled to play a wild-card game against each other, the site for that game would be determined by a coin toss.

However, if the Bengals win this weekend or if Baltimore and Cincinnati are not scheduled to play each other in the wild-card round, the game sites would be determined by the regular scheduling procedures.

Texas fires Beard amid felony domestic violence charge

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Texas fired basketball coach Chris Beard, who faces a felony domestic family violence charge stemming from a Dec. 12 incident involving his fiancée, with the school telling his attorney on Thursday that Beard is “unfit” for the position.

Beard had five years left on a seven-year guaranteed contract that included a provision he could be fired for cause if he was charged with a felony or committed other behavior unbecoming of his position or that reflected poorly on the university.

The charge of assault by strangulation/suffocation family violence carries a possible prison sentence of two to 10

years if convicted; the woman told police Beard strangled and bit her, but later denied he choked her.

Beard had been suspended without pay since he was arrested, and school officials had said they were conducting an internal investigation.

The university’s vice president of legal affairs, Jim Davis, wrote in a letter to Beard’s attorney Thursday that Beard engaged in “unacceptable behavior that makes him unfit to serve as head coach at our university.” Whether prosecutors continue with the case does not determine whether Beard engaged in conduct unbecoming of the school, Davis wrote.

Police responded to an emer-

gency call at Beard’s house after midnight on Dec. 12 and arrested him after Beard’s fiancée, Randi Trew, told officers he choked her from behind, bit her and hit her when the two got in an argument.

The Associated Press does not typically identify alleged victims of extreme violence, but Trew issued a public statement on Dec. 23 in which she denied telling police Beard choked her. She also said she never intended for him to be arrested or prosecuted.

“Chris did not strangle me, and I told that to law enforcement that evening,” Trew said in her statement. “Chris has stated that he was acting in self-defense, and I do not refute that.

I do not believe Chris was trying to intentionally harm me in any way.”

Trew’s statement did not address why she made the emergency call or other details in the police report, such as bite marks on her arm and abrasions on her face, and telling officers that she couldn’t breathe for about five seconds.

Beard’s attorney, Perry Minton, has said the coach is innocent and pointed to Trew’s statement in a letter sent early Thursday to the university, in which Minton pressed the school to keep Beard.

“Coach Beard has not done anything to violate any provision of his contract with the University of Texas,” Minton wrote.

Celtics end Mavs' 7-game win streak

Associated Press

DALLAS — Jayson Tatum had 29 points, 14 rebounds and 10 assists in his second career triple-double, and the Boston Celtics beat Dallas 124-95 Thursday, ending the Mavericks' seven-game winning streak.

Jaylen Brown scored 19 points for the NBA-leading Celtics, who bounced back from a 150-117 loss in Oklahoma City when the Thunder were missing 30-point scorer Shai Gilgeous-Alexander.

Luka Dončić scored 23 points after averaging 44.5 points the previous five games. The Mavs superstar didn't play in the fourth quarter, which started with Boston leading by 24.

Dončić hit buzzer-beating 3-pointers for the win in Boston's previous two Dallas visits.

There was never a chance for a third, or for the Mavs to extend the longest winning streak since their lone championship season in 2010-11.

Jazz 131, Rockets 114: Lauri Markkanen scored a career-high 49 points to lead Utah over Houston to snap a five-game skid.

Markkanen got out to a quick start with 18 points in the first quarter to help the Jazz to an early lead. Houston took the lead late in the third quarter, but Utah ended that quarter on a 10-0 run to go on top for good.

Jalen Green had 30 points and Kevin Porter Jr. added 23 for the Rockets, who dropped their sixth in a row.

Markkanen's highest-scoring game entering Thursday was 38, which he had achieved twice, most recently on Dec. 20 against

Detroit. He made six 3-pointers and all 13 of his free throws Thursday night to eclipse his previous best games.

Nuggets 122, Clippers 91: Jamal Murray sparked Denver early by scoring 13 of his 18 points in the first quarter, and the Nuggets led by as many as 43 in cruising to a win over Los Angeles.

The Nuggets picked the perfect time to turn in one of their best performances of the season. In a nationally televised game, Denver was pushing the pace and showing why the team is tied with Memphis for the top spot in the Western Conference. The Nuggets shot 50.6% from the floor and finished with 28 assists.

It wasn't even Nikola Jokić doing most of the damage, either. The two-time reigning NBA

MVP had 12 points, six rebounds and nine assists before taking the fourth quarter off. Kentavious Caldwell-Pope helped fuel a 19-0 run in the second quarter to turn the game into a rout.

Kawhi Leonard finished with six points while Paul George, playing with a sore hamstring, had three. Neither played in the second half and they were a combined 3 of 16 from the field.

Grizzlies 123, Magic 115: Ja Morant scored 32 points, Jaren Jackson Jr. added 31 points and 10 rebounds and Memphis beat Orlando for its fifth straight win.

Ziaire Williams came off the Memphis bench with 6-of-7 shooting and 16 points.

Paolo Banchero had 30 points and nine rebounds for Orlando. Franz Wagner added 22 points, 19 in a desperate fourth-quarter comeback attempt.

Late 3 gives No. 1 Purdue win over OSU

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Fletcher Loyer made a go-ahead 3-pointer with 11 seconds left and No. 1 Purdue bounced back from its first loss of the season with a 71-69 victory over No. 24 Ohio State on Thursday night.

The Boilermakers (14-1, 3-1 Big Ten) trailed 69-66 with 41 seconds remaining after Ohio State's Sean McNeil made a 3-pointer.

Zach Edey responded with a bucket on the other end, and Purdue forced a turnover on the Buckeyes' next possession to set up Loyer's 3.

Edey and Braden Smith each scored 16 points for Purdue.

Brice Sensabaugh scored 21 points for Ohio State (10-4, 2-1), which shot 50% from the field.

No. 2 Houston 87, SMU 53: Jarace Walker tied his season high with 23 points and grabbed 10 rebounds, Marcus Sasser added 14 points and a career high-tying seven assists and

Houston beat SMU.

Walker scored 18 points on 8-of-11 shooting in the first half as Houston (15-1, 3-0 American Athletic Conference) built a 49-23 halftime lead. The Cougars have won six straight.

Efe Odigie had 14 points and Zach Nuttall added 12 for SMU (6-9, 1-1).

No. 5 Arizona 70, Washington 67: Azuolas Tubelis had 18 points and 10 rebounds, and Arizona rallied from shaky starts to both halves to extend its home winning streak to 28 straight games with a win over Washington.

The Wildcats (14-1, 3-1 Pac-12) struggled against Washington's zone most of the night, keeping it close with long runs in each half. Arizona missed its first 10 shots of the second half before scoring 13 straight points to go up six, but still had a hard time shaking the Huskies (9-7, 1-4).

No. 9 Gonzaga 77, San Fran-

cisco 75: Rasir Bolton scored on a follow shot with 7 seconds left to give Gonzaga its first lead since the opening minutes and the Bulldogs beat San Francisco.

Gonzaga (13-3, 2-0 West Coast Conference) trailed nearly the entire way before Bolton rebounded a miss by Drew Timme and scored to break a 75-all tie. Bolton was fouled on the play but missed the free throw, giving the Dons (11-7, 0-3) one last chance.

But Khalil Shabazz mishandled his dribble and never got a shot off as San Francisco fell just short of ending a 24-game losing streak against the Bulldogs.

No. 10 UCLA 60, Southern California 58: Jaylen Clark scored 15 points and UCLA (14-2, 5-0 Pac-12) blew an 18-point lead in the second half before rallying to beat crosstown rival Southern California (11-5, 3-2) for its 11th straight victory.

James, Durant lead in All-Star starter voting

Associated Press

NEW YORK — LeBron James of the Los Angeles Lakers and Kevin Durant of the Brooklyn Nets might be headed toward yet another NBA All-Star Game rematch.

James is the overall leader so far in All-Star balloting, and Durant leads all Eastern Conference players in early voting returns — putting them on track to be All-Star captains for the third consecutive year.

James had 3,168,694 votes entering Thursday, topping the list of Western Conference frontcourt players. Denver's Nikola Jokić is second (2,237,768) and the Lakers' Anthony Davis is third (2,063,325).

Durant leads Eastern Conference frontcourt players with 3,118,545 votes. That's just ahead of Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo (2,998,327) and Philadelphia's Joel Embiid (2,226,712).

Saros makes Predators-record 64 saves

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Nashville goalie Juuse Saros made a franchise-record 64 saves and Mark Jankowski scored 5:06 into the third period to give the Predators their first lead in a 5-3 victory over the Carolina Hurricanes on Thursday night.

Saros matched the third-most saves in NHL history. Saros stopped all 28 shots in the third. Ron Tugnutt set the regular-season record of 70 in Quebec's 3-3 tie at Boston in March 1991 that included a five-minute overtime.

Filip Forsberg, Mattias Ekholm, Cody Glass and Colton Sissons also scored for Nashville.

Paul Stastny, Brady Skjei and Jordan Staal scored for Carolina.

The Hurricanes, who had a franchise-record 11-game winning streak end Tuesday night against the New York Rangers, have lost consecutive games in regulation for the first time since Nov. 6 and 9.

Oilers 4, Islanders 2: Connor McDavid set up power-play and short-handed goals in the first period to reach 500 career assists in Edmonton's victory over New York.

McDavid reached 500 assists in 527 games. Only five players in NHL history have done it faster — Wayne Gretzky (352), Mario Lemieux (433), Peter Stastny (507) and Bobby Orr (522).

Jack Campbell made 20 saves to help the Oilers (21-17-2) end a two-game losing streak and five-game home slide. Leon

Draisaitl had a goal and his 400th assist, Kailer Yamamoto, Dylan Holloway and Zach Hyman also scored and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins had two assists.

Mathew Barzal and Cal Clutterbuck scored for New York and Ilya Sorokin stopped 34 shots. The Islanders have dropped two of three to fall to 22-16-2.

Bruins 5, Kings 2: Trent Frederic scored twice in 34 seconds during the third period and Boston beat Los Angeles to extend its points streak to 12 games.

Frederic put in the go-ahead goal at 10:36 when he redirected Brandon Carlo's shot from the point. The Boston center then quickly picked up his career-high ninth goal of the season at 11:10 when he beat Phoenix Copley with a backhand.

David Pastrnak also had two goals and leads the Bruins with 27 on the season. Brad Marchand had a goal and an assist for the Bruins, who are 9-0-3 in their past 12 games and have an NHL-best 64 points.

Jeremy Swayman stopped 27 shots and beat Copley in the first NHL matchup of goalies born in Alaska. Copley made 17 saves.

Phillip Danault and Sean Durzi scored for Los Angeles.

Capitals 6, Blue Jackets 2: T.J. Oshie scored twice and Washington used a four-goal second period to beat Columbus for its franchise-record seventh straight road victory.

Washington has won 12 of its past 15 games, with points in eight straight. Columbus has lost nine of its past 10.

Rangers 4, Canadiens 1: Filip Chytil had two goals and New York scored three times in less than six minutes during the second period to beat skidding Montreal.

Chris Kreider had a short-handed goal and defenseman Braden Schneider also scored for the surging Rangers, who won their third straight and improved to 11-2-1 in their past 14 games. Jaroslav Halak made 17 saves.

Joel Armia scored for Montreal. The Canadiens have lost seven games in a row.

Blues 5, Devils 3: Ivan Barbashev tied it late in the second period and set up Brandon Saad's go-ahead goal early in the third in St. Louis' victory over New Jersey.

Robert Thomas scored twice, Jordan Kyrou added a goal and Jordan Binnington made 36 saves to help the Blues improve to 7-2-3 in their past 12 games.

Jack Hughes, who has six goals in his past four games, scored twice for New Jersey and Nico Hishier scored on a two-man advantage with 7:51 left. Akira Schmid, who was recalled from Utica earlier in the day because of a hand injury sustained by Mackenzie Blackwood, made 14 saves.

Kraken 5, Maple Leafs 1: Vince Dunn had a goal and two assists, Martin Jones stopped 26 shots and Seattle beat Toronto for its third straight victory.

Jared McCann had a goal and an assist to help Seattle improve to 21-12-4. Eeli Tolvanen opened the scoring for the Kraken on

the power play, with Matty Beniers and Alex Wennberg adding goals.

John Tavares had a power-play goal for Toronto and Matt Murray made 21 saves. The Maple Leafs dropped to 23-9-7.

Golden Knights 5, Penguins 2: Jack Eichel had a goal and two assists in his return from a lower-body injury and Vegas beat Pittsburgh.

Vegas leads the Western Conference and is tied for second in the NHL at its midway point of the season. Pittsburgh, a 2-1 loser in Boston on Monday in the Winter Classic, has lost six straight, going 0-4-2 since Dec. 27.

Canucks 4, Avalanche 2: Andrei Kuzmenko scored twice and Vancouver beat Colorado.

Brock Boeser and J.T. Miller also scored for Vancouver and Collin Delia stopped 29 shots. The Canucks snapped a three-game losing streak to improve to 17-18-3.

Mikko Rantanen and Samuel Girard scored for Colorado. The defending champion Avalanche are 0-4-1 in their last five to fall to 19-15-3.

Flyers 6, Coyotes 2: All-Star Kevin Hayes scored one of five goals for Philadelphia in the second period and Morgan Frost had four assists to help lift the Flyers past Arizona for their fourth straight victory.

Hayes was a surprise selection as the Flyers' selection to All-Star weekend, earning the nod over standout winger Travis Konecny or goalie Carter Hart.

Crosby, Ovechkin among 1st round of NHL All-Star selections

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Sidney Crosby and Alex Ovechkin were among the first round of All-Star selections revealed by the NHL on Thursday night.

Crosby, the longtime captain of the Pittsburgh Penguins, was

selected for his ninth All-Star Game and Ovechkin his 13th, a Washington Capitals record.

The league's hockey operations department picked the first 32 All-Stars, one from each team. Fans will choose the final 12 players who make it — three

skaters and a goalie from each division — with a Twitter component involved for the first time.

Reigning Norris Trophy winner and playoff MVP Cale Makar from the defending Stanley Cup champion Colorado Ava-

lanche was also among those chosen. Vegas' Logan Thompson was the first rookie goaltender to make an All-Star team since Anaheim's John Gibson in 2016.

All-Star Weekend is set for Feb. 3-4 in South Florida.