



Partly sunny 68/50 • Tomorrow: Mostly cloudy 66/41 B6

Democracy Dies in Darkness

SATURDAY, MARCH 16, 2024 • \$3

Settlement could lower the cost of house sales

Realtors group had been accused of inflating real estate commissions

BY JULIAN MARK, AARON GREGG AND RACHEL KURZIUS

The National Association of Realtors has agreed to settle litigation that accused the industry group of artificially inflating real estate commissions, setting up a reconfiguration of the housing market that could dramatically lower how much consumers pay in home transactions.

Under the proposed deal, the group representing 1.5 million real estate agents would change rules that plaintiffs and consumer advocates say have helped inflate commissions for home sellers, who for decades have paid Realtors 5 to 6 percent of the sale price. The association also would pay \$418 million more than four years to settle several cases.

“Ultimately, continuing to litigate would have hurt members and their small businesses,” said Nykia Wright, interim chief executive of NAR. “While there could be no perfect outcome, this agreement is the best outcome we could achieve in the circumstances.”

NAR said it continues to deny wrongdoing.

The rule changes have the strong potential to lower fees paid by sellers in home sales — and may even bring down home prices overall — by aligning fees closer to the true value of services from real estate agents, according to consumer advocates, academics and lawyers involved in the cases.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that this is going to bring about tremendous savings to homeowners,” said Michael Ketchmark, a plaintiff attorney representing Missouri home sellers in one of the cases, adding that he was confident that agreement would fundamentally change the real estate

SEE REALTOR ON A13



PHOTOS BY NANNA HEITMANN/MAGNUM PHOTOS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

In city under fire, Putin runs strong

For many voters in Russia’s Belgorod, barrages from Ukraine only deepen their support

BY FRANCESCA EBEL

BELGOROD, RUSSIA — As polling stations opened across Russia on Friday for a three-day presidential election that Vladimir Putin is certain to win, a volley of Ukrainian missiles crashed into the western city of Belgorod, damaging apartment buildings and injuring at least two people as thousands of residents scrambled, yet again, for shelter.

For most Russian voters, Putin’s two-year-old war in Ukraine remains largely unseen except on state-controlled television or social media. But Belgorod, a regional capital near the Ukrainian border, feels the war firsthand as it faces near-daily attacks.

For four days this week, the



TOP: A polling station in an area of Belgorod that was heavily shelled early Friday. Even as the city shut schools, restaurants and shops, voting continued. ABOVE: A truck hit by shelling. Belgorod’s air defenses went into motion four days this week.

Fears for Ukraine: U.S. anticipates a grim course if aid bill dies. A10

city’s air defenses struggled to intercept barrages of rockets and explosive drones, while east and south of Belgorod, the Russian army battled anti-Kremlin militias, which mounted assaults along the border aiming to portray Putin as unable to protect his country as he prepares to claim a fifth term in office.

But there is little sign that effort is succeeding, and for many residents, such attacks only deepen their support for Putin and drive home the Kremlin’s false narrative that Russians are the victims in the war, not its perpetrators. Cities across Ukraine are bombarded far more often than Belgorod, with Russian weapons that are far more powerful, including

SEE ELECTION ON A11

Willis can keep Trump Ga. case

WADE EXITS IN LINE WITH JUDGE’S ORDER

Claims around romance had stalled proceedings

BY HOLLY BAILEY AND AMY GARDNER

ATLANTA — The judge overseeing the Georgia election interference case against former president Donald Trump and his allies ruled that Fulton County District Attorney Fani T. Willis (D) may continue with the prosecution but only if Nathan Wade, the lead prosecutor she appointed and had a romantic relationship with, exited the case. Wade resigned hours later, citing his commitment to “democracy” and making sure the case moves forward “as quickly as possible.”

In a 23-page ruling issued Friday, Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee wrote that the defendants “failed to meet their burden” in proving that Willis’s relationship with Wade — along with allegations that she was financially enriched through trips the two took together — was enough of a “conflict of interest” to merit her removal from the case. But the judge also found a “significant appearance of impropriety that infects the current structure of the prosecution team” and said either Willis and her office must fully leave the case or Wade must withdraw.

“As the case moves forward, reasonable members of the public

SEE FULTON ON A4

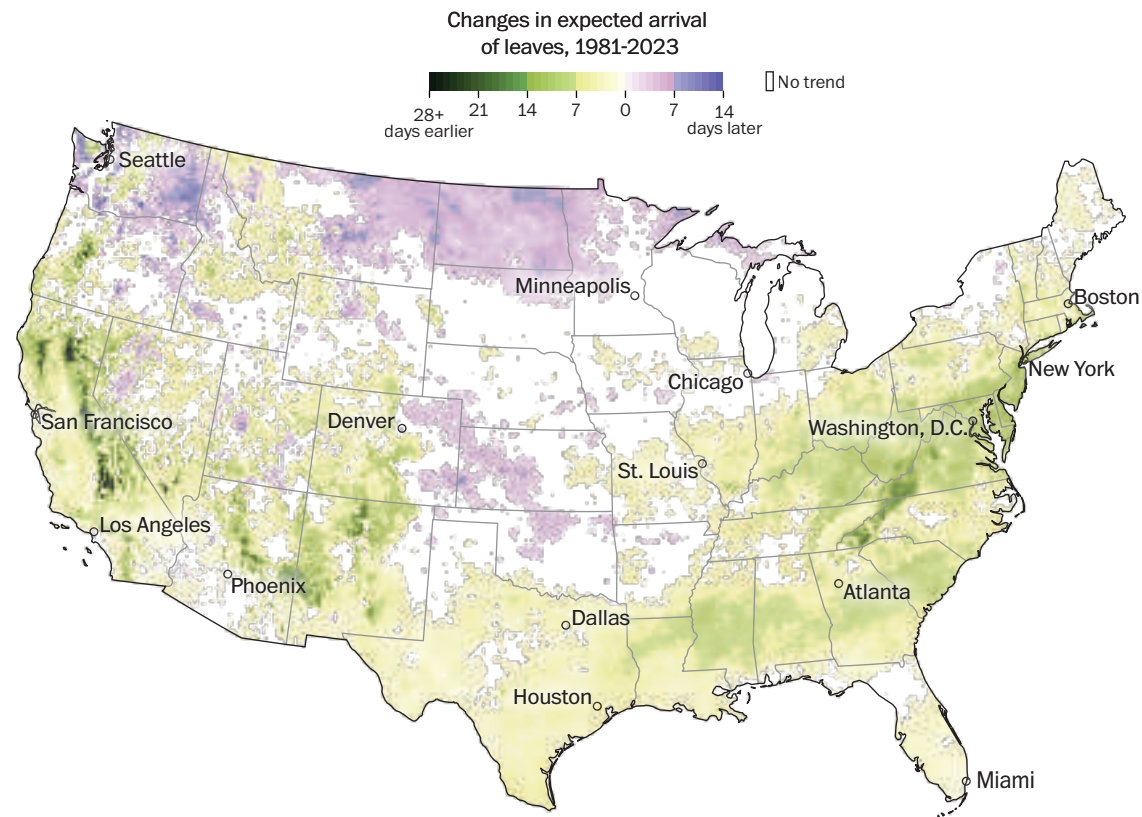
Hush money: Judge delays trial that was set to start this month. A5



Nathan Wade

Yes, spring really is coming earlier

Readers’ memories and our map tell the story of a shifting season



Note: Data only available for contiguous United States
Source: Washington Post analysis of data from USA National Phenology Network

CLIMATE LAB/THE WASHINGTON POST

Climate Lab columnist Harry Stevens looks at how as temperatures inch up, leaves are sprouting sooner across a vast U-shaped area of land spanning from coast to coast, according to an analysis of the data — and readers’ recollections. Story, A6.

Empty offices, fear of crime cast a shadow over downtown D.C.’s efforts to rebound

Splashy plans compete with public perceptions and business uncertainty

BY PAUL SCHWARTZMAN

Gary Cohen knows it may seem absurd to think people would move to a neighborhood dominated by offices that are often more empty than occupied. But hear him out: Downtown Washington — still reeling from the ravages of the pandemic — could be a cool place to live.

No, seriously. “We just need to give them a reason,” the developer said as he walked through an office building he’s turning into a 10-story apartment house at the corner of 20th and L streets NW. His reasons include sleek apartments, an outdoor swimming pool, a communal terrace, a health club, a yoga studio, a pet spa and a ninth-floor, AstroTurf-lined dog run.

Cohen is less certain about the vacant 8,000-square-foot storefront on the ground floor. For the past year, he has sought a buzzworthy restaurant to lease the space for \$33,000 a month. One deal fell through. Another may be



MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON/THE WASHINGTON POST

D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) touts downtown Washington at a gathering of business leaders and planners on Feb. 26.

coming together. His search, he worries, has been made more difficult by persistent reports of crime, vacant offices and A-list companies seeking to leave downtown. “That’s what keeps me up at night,” he said.

A year after Mayor Muriel E. Bowser launched a campaign to rescue downtown, her quest faces a slew of hurdles, not the least of which is uncertainty over whether

Ted Leonsis’s Washington Capitals and Wizards will remain at Capital One Arena. Office attendance is at 48 percent of pre-pandemic levels, as a preponderance of federal workers still work from home. More than 20 percent of downtown storefronts and offices are vacant, driving down the value of commercial real estate — a key source of tax revenue for city ser-

SEE DOWNTOWN ON A14

IN THE NEWS

Deadly tornado outbreak At least three people were killed in Ohio after severe storms swept across the middle of the country. A4

An ‘affront’ to her memory The family of the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg denounced this year’s slate of honorees for an award named for her. C1

THE NATION

The Supreme Court set rules for public officials who want to block critics on social media. A3
Former vice president Mike Pence refused to endorse Donald Trump in the 2024 election. A6

THE WORLD

Australia’s belated push for fuel emissions standards has set off a culture war. A7
An aid ship launched by chef José Andrés’s nonprofit delivered critical food to Gaza. A8

THE ECONOMY

Amazon was punished by federal labor regulators for its efforts to curtail unionization at a key air hub in Kentucky. A12
Silicon Valley Bank staged a comeback one year after its historic collapse, but hurdles remain to rebuilding customer trust. A13

THE REGION

Maryland House leaders voted to raise taxes, tolls and fees, forcing the Senate to negotiate on the state budget. B1
A Chicago-area man was arrested on charges accusing him of firing a pistol during the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol. B3

STYLE

Comic strips created by women faded from print as Gannett and other newspaper chains reduce their offerings. C1

SPORTS

The Washington Spirit enter the season with sweeping changes, from the roster to the uniforms. D1

BUSINESS NEWS.....	A12
COMICS.....	C5
OPINION PAGES.....	A15
OBITUARIES.....	B4
TELEVISION.....	C3
WORLD NEWS.....	A7

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