

NATIONAL BRIEFS

Judge declares 4 men wrongly accused of 1991 Austin yogurt shop murders innocent

AUSTIN, Texas — A Texas judge has declared four men who were wrongfully accused of the 1991 Austin yogurt shop murders innocent. State District Judge Dayna Blazey called her order “an obligation to the rule of law” in a packed Austin courtroom Thursday. The declaration was aimed at closing a dark chapter for the men and for a city that was shaken by the crime and investigators’ inability to solve it for decades. Four teenagers were found bound, gagged and shot in the head at the store where two of them worked. Cold case detectives announced last year that they had connected the killings to a suspect who died in a 1999 standoff with police.

US trade deficit declined in 2025, but gap for goods hits a record

WASHINGTON — The U.S. trade deficit slipped modestly in 2025, a year in which President Donald Trump upended global commerce by slapping double digit tariffs on imports from most countries. The Commerce Department reported Thursday that the gap between the goods and services the U.S. sells other countries and what it buys from them narrowed to just over \$901 billion from \$904 billion in 2024.

HUD proposes rule that would force noncitizens from public housing

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is proposing a rule that would limit public housing mostly to citizens, which advocates fear could lead to tens of thousand of people being evicted. The rule, published Thursday in the Federal Register, calls for limiting funding for those in public housing and other HUD-related housing to citizens and eligible noncitizens. Advocates fear the rule would hit mixed-status families hardest. The left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has estimated that up to 80,000 people could lose assistance due to changes in eligibility. A similar measure which was proposed but never finalized during the first Trump administration.

Wisconsin passes expanded Medicaid for moms, would leave Arkansas as only state without it

MADISON, Wis. — Women in Wisconsin will soon be eligible to receive expanded Medicaid coverage for up to a year after giving birth following passage of a measure by the Wisconsin Assembly. Passing the bill Thursday will leave Arkansas as the only state yet to expand such benefits. Wisconsin Democrats. Even most Republicans have pushed for years to expand Medicaid coverage for new mothers, only to be blocked by powerful Republican Assembly Speaker Robin Vos. The Assembly also passed another bill with bipartisan support to require insurance to cover additional cancer screenings for women with dense breast tissue.

Tariffs paid by midsize US companies triple

BY JOSH BOAK
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Tariffs paid by midsize U.S. businesses tripled over the course of past year, new research tied to one of America’s leading banks showed on Thursday — more evidence that President Donald Trump’s push to charge higher taxes on imports is causing economic disruption.

The additional taxes have meant that companies that employ a combined 48 million people in the U.S. — the kinds of businesses that Trump had promised to revive — have had to find ways to absorb the new expense, by passing it along to customers in the form of higher prices, employing fewer workers or accepting lower profits.

“That’s a big change in their cost of doing business,” said Chi Mac, business research director of the JPMorganChase Institute, which published the analysis Thursday. “We also see some indications that they may be shifting away from transacting with China and maybe toward some other regions in Asia.”

The research does not say how the additional costs are flowing through the economy, but it indicates that tariffs are being paid by U.S. companies. The study is part of a growing body of economic analyses that counter the administration’s claims that foreigners pay the tariffs.

The JPMorganChase Institute report used payments data to look at businesses that might lack



Mark Schiefelbein | Associated Press
President Donald Trump visits Coosa Steel Corporation in Rome, Ga., on Thursday.

the pricing power of large multinational companies to offset tariffs, but may be small enough to quickly change supply chains to minimize exposure to the tax increases. The companies tended to have revenues between \$10 million and \$1 billion with fewer than 500 employees, a category known as “middle market.”

The analysis suggests that the Trump administration’s goal of becoming less directly reliant on Chinese manufacturers has been occurring. Payments to China by these companies were 20% below their October 2024 levels, but it’s unclear whether that means China is simply routing its goods through other countries or if supply chains have moved.

The authors of the analysis emphasized in an interview that companies are still adjusting to the tariffs and said they plan

to continue studying the issue.

White House spokesman Kush Desai called the analysis “pointless” and said it didn’t “change the fact that President Trump was right.” The study showed that U.S. companies are paying tariffs that the president had previously claimed would be paid by foreign entities.

Trump defended his tariffs during a trip to Georgia on Thursday while touring Coosa Steel, a company involved in steel processing and distribution. The president said he couldn’t believe the Supreme Court would soon decide on the legality of some of his tariffs, given his belief that the taxes were helping U.S. manufacturers.

“The tariffs are the greatest thing to happen to this country,” Trump said.

The president imposed

a series of tariffs last year for the ostensible goal of reducing the U.S. trade imbalance with other countries, so that America was not longer importing more than it exports. But trade data published Thursday by the Census Bureau showed that the trade deficit climbed last year by \$25.5 billion to \$1.24 trillion. The president on Wednesday posted on social media that he expected there would be a trade surplus “during this year.”

The Trump administration has been adamant that the tariffs are a boon for the economy, businesses, and workers. Kevin Hassett, director of the White House National Economic Council, lashed out on Wednesday at research by the New York Federal Reserve showing that nearly 90% of the burden for Trump’s tariffs fell on U.S. companies and consumers.

“The paper is an embarrassment,” Hassett told CNBC. “It’s, I think, the worst paper I’ve ever seen in the history of the Federal Reserve system. The people associated with this paper should presumably be disciplined.”

Trump increased the average tariff rate to 13% from 2.6% last year, according to the New York Fed researchers. He declared that tariffs on some items such as steel, kitchen cabinets and bathroom vanities were in the national security interest of the country. He also declared an economic emergency to bypass Congress and impose a baseline tax on goods from much of the world in April 2025 at an event he called “Liberation Day.”

The high rates provoked a financial market panic, prompting Trump to walk back his rates and then engage in talks with multiple countries that led to a set of new trade frameworks. The Supreme Court is expected to rule soon on whether Trump surpassed his legal authority by declaring an economic emergency.

Trump was elected in 2024 on his promise to tame inflation, but his tariffs have contributed to voter frustration over affordability. While inflation has not spiked during Trump’s term thus far, hiring slowed sharply and a team of academic economists estimate that consumer prices were roughly 0.8 percentage points higher than they would otherwise be.

Arts panel approves White House ballroom proposal

BY DARLENE SUPERVILLE
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, a panel made up of President Donald Trump’s appointees, on Thursday approved his proposal to build a ballroom larger than the White House itself where the East Wing once stood.

The seven-member panel is one of two federal agencies that must approve Trump’s plans for the ballroom. The National Capital Planning Commission, which has jurisdiction over construction and major renovation to government buildings in the region, is also reviewing the project.

Members of the fine arts commission originally had been scheduled to discuss and vote on the design concept after a follow-up presentation by the architect, and had planned to vote on final approval at next month’s meeting. But after the vote to approve the design, the panel’s chairman, Rodney Mims Cook Jr., unexpectedly made another motion to vote on final approval.

Five of the seven commissioners — all appointed by the Republican president in January — voted once more in favor. Commissioner James McCrery did not participate in the discussion or the votes because he was the initial architect on the project before Trump replaced him. Commissioner Roger Kimball left the meeting early for another commitment, the panel’s secretary said.

The ballroom will be built on the site of the former East Wing, which Trump had demolished in October with little public notice. That drew an outcry from some lawmakers, historians and preservationists who argued that the president should not have taken that step until the two federal agencies and Congress had reviewed and approved the project, and the public had a chance to provide comment.

The 90,000-square-foot (8,361 square meters) ballroom would be nearly twice the size of the White House, which is 55,000-square-feet (5,110 square meters), and Trump has said it would accommodate about 1,000



Jon Elswick | Associated Press

Artist renderings and diagrams of the new White House East Wing and Ballroom, briefly posted on the National Capital Planning Commission’s website ahead of a March 5 hearing, are photographed Tuesday.

people. The East Room, the largest room in the White House, can fit just over 200 people at most.

Commissioners offered mostly complimentary comments before the votes.

Cook echoed one of Trump’s main arguments for adding a larger entertaining space to the White House: It would end the long-standing practice of erecting temporary structures on the South Lawn that Trump describes as tents to host visiting dignitaries for state dinners and other functions.

“Our sitting president has actually designed a very beautiful structure and, as was said, in the comments earlier, the United States just should not be entertaining the world in tents,” Cook said.

THE PANEL RECEIVED MAINLY NEGATIVE COMMENTS FROM PUBLIC

Members of the public were asked to submit written comment by a Wednesday afternoon deadline. Thomas Luebke, the panel’s secretary, said “over 99%” of the more than 2,000 messages it received in the past week from around the country were in opposition to the project.

Luebke tried to summarize the comments for the commissioners.

Some comments cited concerns about Trump’s decision to

unilaterally tear down the East Wing, as well as the lack of transparency about who is paying for the ballroom or how contracts were awarded, Luebke said. Comments in support referenced concerns for the U.S. image on the world stage and the need for a larger entertaining space at the White House.

Trump has defended the ballroom in a recent series of social media posts that included drawings of the building. He said in one January post that most of the material needed to build it had been ordered “and there is no practical or reasonable way to go back. IT IS TOO LATE!”

The commission met Thursday over Zoom and heard from Shalom Baranes, the lead architect, and Rick Parisi, the landscape architect. Both described a series of images and sketches of the ballroom and the grounds as they would appear after the project is completed.

Trump has said the ballroom would cost about \$400 million and be paid for with private donations. To date, the White House has only released an incomplete list of donors.

A LAWSUIT AGAINST THE PROJECT IS STILL PENDING

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has sued in federal court to halt construction. A rul-

ing in the case is pending.

Carol Quillen, president and CEO of the privately funded nonprofit organization, said the group was “puzzled” by both votes because the final plans had not been presented or reviewed. But with the votes, she said the commission had “bypassed its obligation to provide serious design review and consider the views of the American people,” including all of the negative public comments.

Quillen said that while her organization has always acknowledged the usefulness of a larger White House meeting space, “we remain deeply concerned that the size, location, and massing of this proposal will overwhelm the carefully balanced classical design of the White House, a symbol of our democratic republic.”

At the commission’s January meeting, some members had questioned Baranes, Trump’s architect, about the “immense” design and scale of the project even as they broadly endorsed Trump’s vision.

On Thursday, Cook and other commissioners complimented Baranes for updating the building’s design to remove a large pediment, a triangular structure above the south portico, that they had objected to because of its size.

“I think taking the pediment off the south side was a really good move,” said commissioner Mary Anne Carter, who also is head of the National Endowment for the Arts. “I think that really helps to restore some balance and make it look, just more aligned” with the White House.

Baranes said it was the biggest design change and that Trump had “agreed to do that.”

Trump quietly named his final two commissioners to the panel in late January. Pamela Hughes Patenaude has a background in housing policy and disaster recovery, and was as a deputy secretary at the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Trump’s first term. Chamberlain Harris is a special assistant to the president and deputy director of Oval Office operations.