

## Two Expelled Tennessee Lawmakers Are Both Seeking House Seats Again

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Two former Black Democratic lawmakers who were expelled by Republican colleagues in Tennessee say they want to be reappointed, then elected back to their seats, following their ouster for a protest on the House floor urging passage of gun-control measures in the wake of a deadly school shooting.

Nashville's metro council is likely to reappoint Justin Jones to the seat during a specially called Monday meeting. Mickell Lowery, the chairman of the Shelby County Commission, said in a statement Sunday that the panel will consider at a meeting Wednesday whether to reappoint Justin Pearson, who is from Memphis, to his seat.

Lowery said he understands the need to respond to those who "transgressed the rules" of the state House of Representatives.

"However, I believe the expulsion of State Representative Justin Pearson was conducted in a hasty manner without consideration of other corrective action methods. I also believe that the ramifications for our great State are still yet to be seen," he said.

Both former lawmakers told NBC's Meet the Press on Sunday that they want to return to their positions as lawmakers. Special elections for the seats, which have yet to be set, will follow in the coming months.

The expulsions have made Tennessee a new front in the battle for the future of American de-

mocracy. The former lawmakers have quickly drawn prominent supporters. President Joe Biden spoke with them and Vice President Kamala Harris visited them in Nashville.

"You know, we will continue to fight for our constituents," Jones said. "And one thing I just want to say ... is that this attack against us is hurting all people in our state. You know, even though it is disproportionately impacting Black and Brown communities, this is hurting poor white people. Their attack on democracy hurts all of us."

In separate votes on Thursday, the GOP supermajority expelled Jones and Pearson, a move leaving about 140,000 voters in primarily Black districts

in Nashville and Memphis with no representation in the House.

Pearson and Jones were expelled in retaliation for their role in the protest the week before, which unfolded in the aftermath of a school shooting in Nashville that killed six people, including three young students and three adults working at the school. The shooter was killed by police.

A third Democrat, Rep. Gloria Johnson of Knoxville, was spared expulsion by a one-vote margin. Johnson is white, spurring outcry at the differing outcomes for the two young, Black lawmakers. Republican lawmakers who split their votes have cited Johnson's points on the floor that her role in the protest was lesser — she didn't speak into the megaphone, for example.

Johnson has also suggested race was likely a factor on why Jones and Pearson were ousted but not her, telling reporters it "might have to do with the color of our skin."

Republican House Speaker Cameron Sexton said that's a "false narrative."

"It's unfortunate, she's trying to put political racism in this, which there was nothing on this," Sexton told Fox News on Friday.

GOP leaders said the expulsion actions — used only a handful of times since the Civil War — were necessary to avoid setting a precedent that lawmakers' disruptions of House proceedings through protest would be tolerated.

Pearson said the statehouse has been a "toxic work environment." He noted the scrutiny he received for wearing a black dashiki — a tunic-like garment that originated in west Africa — for session, rather than a suit and tie.

"It's about us not belonging in the institution because they are afraid of the changes that are happening in our society, and the voices that are being elevated," Pearson said on Meet the Press.



## Jazz Saxophonist, Edward 'Kidd' Jordan Dies at 87

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Jazz saxophonist and music teacher Edward "Kidd" Jordan died in his sleep Friday, surrounded by family at his New Orleans home, family publicist Vincent Sylvain said.

He was 87.

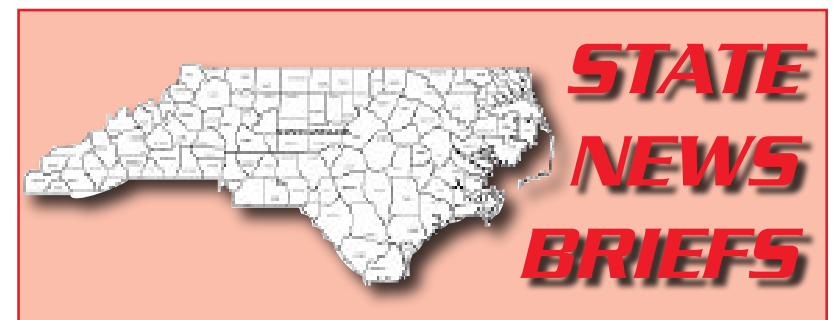
During his 50-year career, Jordan showcased his musical talents across New Orleans while also collaborating with music legends like Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder and more.

Born in Crowley in 1935, Jordan moved to New Orleans at 20 years old and created "The Improvisation Arts Quintet" in 1975. The group produced a diverse catalogue of avant-garde music described as "an evolution of complimentary imagery moving together and apart, each artist becoming an ear, an eye and most of all a heart for the sake of the creative spiritual soul."

He was a music professor at Southern University of New Orleans, later becoming chairman of the university's Jazz Studies Program.

During his 34 years at SUNO, "he shared his vision of improvisation and encouraged students to find their authentic creative voices," Sylvain said. "Mr. Jordan's legacy is solidified by his insistence that his students' music contain one critical element — originality. And he practices what he preaches."

Jordan also was an instructor at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation's School of Music for 25 years and served as Artistic Director for the Louis Armstrong Satchmo Jazz Camp. He retired in 2006.



### NEWLY VETO-PROOF NORTH CAROLINA GOP FILES TRANSGENDER BANS

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — On the heels of a Democratic state lawmaker's seismic shift to the Republican Party, North Carolina Republicans have filed a flurry of bills aimed at transgender youth as they look to capitalize on their newly attained supermajority.

Five Senate bills filed this week before the chamber's Thursday filing deadline would ban gender-affirming medical procedures for transgender youth and prohibit them from participating in middle and high school sports consistent with their gender identity.

Dozens of GOP lawmakers packed into a crowded briefing room Thursday to promote the first of those bills — the school sports restriction — which supporters say is needed to preserve opportunities for cisgender girls and protect their physical safety. At least 20 states have passed similar laws restricting transgender students' participation in sports, based on the assertion that they have an unfair advantage, despite a widespread lack of specific cases.

LGBTQ+ rights advocates say Rep. Tricia Cotham's switch to the GOP on Wednesday — which helped Republicans reach the three-fifths majority needed in both chambers to override Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper's vetoes — opened the floodgates to more extreme legislation that they didn't previously have the numbers to pass. State Republicans last held veto-proof margins in 2018.

Republican lawmakers across the U.S. have pursued several hundred proposals this year to push back on the rights on transgender residents, including sports bans, restroom restrictions, medical treatment prohibitions and requirements that schools alert parents when a child questions or changes their gender identity.

Before Cotham's announcement Wednesday, North Carolina Republicans had avoided some of the most stringent transgender restrictions passed in other Southern states, while the threat of Cooper's veto still loomed. That veto power, now diminished, was promoted by Democrats in last year's elections as the final barricade protecting North Carolinians from losing access to abortion and gender-affirming care.

Cotham said her shift in party affiliation doesn't indicate how she'll vote on every issue, meaning Republicans may still need to pull in a Democrat to override certain vetoes.

She ran last year on a platform of supporting LGBTQ+ protections and opposed past legislation restricting transgender access to public restrooms and preventing cities from enacting new anti-discrimination ordinances.

Her 2022 campaign website, which had been taken down as of Thursday morning, stated her commitment to "stand strong against discriminatory legislation" and "work to pass more protections" for LGBTQ+ North Carolinians.

Asked Wednesday what her Charlotte-area constituents should think about her party switch, given that they expected her to uphold Democratic positions on abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, Cotham told reporters she would "stand strong on my conviction" but wouldn't be "pigeon-holed" into any particular issue.

"We should all be able to evolve, and we should not be shamed for learning new perspectives at all," Cotham said.

She said she had made clear to GOP leaders that there were "some things I'm not changing on," but she declined to share specifics. Cotham's office did not respond to requests for comment Thursday on legislation relating to transgender youth.



Expelled Rep. Justin Pearson, D-Memphis, from left, expelled Rep. Justin Jones, D-Nashville, and Rep. Gloria Johnson, D-Knoxville, are recognized by the audience at Fisk University before Vice President Kamala Harris arrives, Friday, April 7, 2023, in Nashville, Tenn. (AP Photo/George Walker IV)

## 1st Texas, Now NC to Ban Crypto Mining

By Virginia Valenzuela

Beincrypt

Critics of bitcoin mining have raised concerns about the amount of energy it consumes and its associated carbon emissions. This has led some to label crypto mining as an environmental hazard, with North Carolina joining Texas in taking steps to regulate power usage.

But is this criticism fair? While it is true that Bitcoin miners consume a large amount of energy, other industries are often far worse for the environment. In fact, the banking industry alone far overshadows bitcoin in energy usage. Moreover, the Bitcoin Mining Council estimates that in Q4 2022, green energy accounted for 58.9% of the electricity used to mine bitcoin worldwide.

### The County's Argument

Buncombe County asserts that bitcoin mining has many negative impacts on surrounding communities in addition to energy use. Greenhouse gas emissions, e-waste, and noise are just some of the issues of concern.

The county claims that they want to prevent these consequences from hurting communities. And because crypto mining is not currently included in their zoning laws, they want to pause mining while they deliberate. They propose a one-year moratorium on crypto mining, which would allow the county time to restructure zoning laws.

They aim to define "cryptocurrency mining" as a specific land use, and go from there.

Pollution in Buncombe County In the last 10 years, residents

of Buncombe County and surrounding areas have submitted complaints to the EPA. Coal-fired power plants produced toxic water waste, and residents demanded harsher regulation.

Even to this day, the residents of Buncombe County have suffered continued environmental issues at the hands of coal. As recently as 2018, experts found alarming levels of radioactivity discovered near the Duke Energy plant in Asheville.

"Asheville happened to have the highest level of radium of any site I've looked at so far," Lisa Evans told the Citizen Times on Monday. She is the senior administrative counsel at environmental group Earthjustice.

Only in 2023 did Duke Energy declare plans to close these coal plants and move to green energy by 2035.

### An Unbiased Approach

As climate change becomes an increasingly pressing issue, it is important to consider how industries contribute to greenhouse gas emissions.

Ultimately, efforts to mitigate carbon emissions should take into account all sources of pollution, not just crypto mining. Climate change affects us all, regardless of industry, and it is only through comprehensive measures that we can make a meaningful difference.

It is encouraging to see Texas and North Carolina taking steps towards regulating the energy consumption of bitcoin mining, but more needs to be done to address the wider issue of climate change.

Commissioners have scheduled a public hearing on the issue for May 2, 2023.

## 40 Years Ago 'A Nation At Risk' Warned Of A 'Rising Tide Of Mediocrity' In US Schools

THE CONVERSATION—The National Commission on Excellence in Education's release of a report titled "A Nation at Risk" in 1983 was a pivotal point in the history of American education. The report used dire language, lamenting that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people."

Using Cold War language, the report also famously stated: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."

The report ushered in four decades of ambitious education reforms at the state and federal levels. Those reforms included landmark policy shifts like George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act, Barack Obama's Race to the Top

program and major state reforms in areas including teacher quality, school choice and test-based accountability for schools and teachers. But what is the legacy of "A Nation at Risk" 40 years after its publication? And what are the implications for school reform in the coming years?

As a scholar of education who specializes in standards-based reform and accountability, I believe important lessons can be learned about American education by examining what has taken place since the release of the report. Here are three:

1. Education reform has improved outcomes, but progress has slowed or reversed in the past decade

The U.S. has had major challenges with educational performance that long predate "A Nation at Risk." One is that too many students are not mastering grade-level material. Another is that not enough are enrolling in and

completing college given the benefits of college to individuals and society. Additionally, large gaps exist in both of those areas based on race and ethnicity and income.

Since the report, students from all racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups have continuously made achievement gains, and gaps have narrowed considerably since the 1970s — especially in the early grades. Yet low levels of achievement and gaps in achievement remain. For instance, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 34% of fourth graders scored below the "basic" level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, meaning they weren't reading at grade level. Since COVID-19, national assessment results in reading and math indicate the pandemic erased two decades of achievement gains; for instance, in eighth grade math the number of students scoring below basic increased from 31% in 2019 to 38% in 2022.

The nation has also made tremendous progress in outcomes beyond academic tests. For instance, the high school dropout rate has plummeted, dropping from about 14% around the time of the report to about 6% now. Meanwhile, the proportion of 25-to-29-year-olds with a four-year college degree has doubled to about 38%.

2. The reforms did not address the root causes of the problems

The report spurred four decades of intense reform led by states and the federal government. But these reforms have largely not addressed the major causes of poor educational performance — poverty and other factors outside of school, as well as highly decentralized educational systems that thwart meaningful school improvement.

For example, child poverty is still widespread; many students lack access to quality early child-

(See **MEDIOCRITY**, P. 2)

# 'Rising Tide Of Mediocrity' In US Schools—CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

hood education; and many children live in polluted environments that affect their learning.

The result of these factors in the early years is that only about half of children enter kindergarten healthy and ready to learn, and even fewer among children from low-income families.

While schools can help lessen these disparities in school readiness between more and less advantaged children, the report failed to look beyond schools for solutions to problems that stem from social inequality.

The narrow view of "A Nation at Risk" is notable because the widely accepted wisdom of the time, especially among Republicans, and going back to the 1966 Coleman Report, was that schools aren't a primary driver of inequality. After all, the Coleman Report found that differences in school resources, like money and books,

didn't account for differences in student achievement between more and less advantaged children.

Even the education efforts since the report have not been able to address the structural barriers in U.S. education to large-scale improvement. For instance, in a recent book I show that state and federal policies over the past 30 years that focus on improving schools through better and clearer standards have only modestly improved teaching.

A big part of why standards and other education reforms have failed has to do with the fact that school systems in the U.S. are remarkably decentralized. About 13,000 school districts and their individual teachers exercise substantial control over what actually happens in classrooms. The inability of policymakers at higher levels — such as states or the fed-

eral government — to meaningfully change school practice partially explains why other major reforms have failed to achieve real results. Examples include the Obama administration's US\$7 billion school turnaround plan and teacher evaluation reforms. In a more centralized system, policies enacted at the state and federal levels could be implemented as intended; that is rarely the case in U.S. education.

3. The political coalitions that brought reform have fallen apart

As on other topics, Americans are highly polarized on education policy. From "A Nation at Risk" through even much of the Obama administration, many aspects of the education reform agenda had bipartisan agreement. Governors of both parties came together to enact standards and testing reforms that set expectations for student learning and measured

student progress against those expectations in the 1980s and 1990s. Congress voted overwhelmingly for the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, calling for more rigorous standards and more frequent testing to drive educational improvement.

And some versions of school choice — especially charter schools — were supported by Republican and Democratic administrations in Washington and nationwide. Even the now-controversial Common Core standards, which aimed to create consistent expectations for student learning in math and English nationwide, were originally bipartisan. That is, they were created and endorsed by leaders from both parties.

This broad reform coalition is no more.

Debates over what to teach children in schools are driving a partisan wedge between schools

and parents. Republican states are removing racial and LGBT-related topics from the curriculum. Meanwhile, Democratic states mandate their inclusion.

And expanding choice programs continue to drive down public school enrollment in states across the nation. Over a million students have been lost from public schools, and private school enrollment has increased 4% since the onset of COVID-19.

The result of these trends is that the reform consensus that brought about a broadly national approach to education reform is splintering into red state and blue state versions. I expect red state reform will likely emphasize school choice and a back-to-basics curriculum focused on reading, math and the avoidance of controversial topics. I expect blue state reform will likely emphasize whole-child supports like mental

health, social-emotional learning and curriculum that is intended to reflect the culture of the nation's increasingly diverse student body.

The problems raised in "A Nation at Risk" remain as important as they were in 1983. In my view, national leaders need to continue to improve educational opportunity and performance for America's schoolchildren. Improved education benefits individuals — those with college degrees have longer life expectancies, higher earnings and wealth and even more happiness than those with a high school degree or lower. Education also benefits societies, leading to greater economic growth. But 40 years after the report, policymakers don't seem to have learned the lesson that schools alone won't solve the nation's educational problems. And if that's true, the nation remains at risk.

# Members Of Congress On TikTok Defend Reach To Voters

WASHINGTON (AP) — Rep. Jeff Jackson of North Carolina has used it to explain the complex fight over raising the debt limit. Rep. Robert Garcia of California has used it to engage with members of the LGBTQ+ community. And Sen. Bob Casey of Pennsylvania has used it to give an overview of Election Day results.

As pressure against TikTok mounts in Washington, the more than two dozen members of Congress — all Democrats — who are active on the social media platform are being pushed by their colleagues to stop using it. Many defend their presence on the platform, saying they have a responsibility as public officials to meet Americans where they are — and more than 150 million are on TikTok.

"I'm sensitive to the ban and recognize some of the security implications. But there is no more robust and expeditious way to reach young people in the United States of America than TikTok," Democratic Rep. Dean Phillips of Minnesota told The Associated Press.

Yet the lawmakers active on TikTok remain a distinct minority.

Most in Congress are in favor of limiting the app, forcing a sale to remove connections to China or even banning it outright. The U.S. armed forces and more than half of U.S. states have already banned the app from official devices, as has the federal government. Similar bans have been imposed in Denmark, Canada, Great Britain and New Zealand, as well as the European Union.

Criticism of TikTok reached a new level last week as CEO Shou Zi Chew testified for more than six hours at a contentious hearing in the House. Lawmakers grilled Chew about the implications of the app for America's national security and the effect on the mental health of its users. And the tough questions came from both sides of the aisle, as Republicans and Democrats alike pressed Chew about TikTok's content moderation practices, its ability to shield American data from Beijing and its spying on journalists.

"I've got to hand it to you," said Rep. August Pfluger, R-Texas, as members questioned Chew over data security and harmful content. "You've actually done something that in the last three

to four years has not happened except for the exception of maybe (Russian President) Vladimir Putin. You have unified Republicans and Democrats."

While the hearing made plain that lawmakers view TikTok as a threat, their lack of first-hand experience with the app was apparent at times. Some made inaccurate and head-scratching comments, seemingly not understanding how TikTok connects to a home Wi-Fi router or how it moderates illicit content.

Rep. Mark Pocan, D-Wis., who is active on the app and opposes a nationwide ban, called the hearing "cringeworthy."

"It was just so painful to watch," he told the AP on Friday. "And it just shows the real problem is Congress doesn't have a lot of expertise, whether it be social media or, for that matter, more importantly, technology."

Garcia, who said he uses TikTok more as a consumer, said most of his colleagues who are proposing a nationwide ban told him they had never used the app. "It gets hard to understand if you're not actually on it," the freshman Democrat said. "And at the end of the day, a lot of Tik-

Tok is harmless people dancing and funny videos."

"It's also incredibly rich educational content, and learning how to bake and learning about the political process," he said.

Rep. Jamaal Bowman, D-N.Y., who has more than 180,000 followers on the app, held a news conference with TikTok influencers before the hearing. He accused Republicans of pushing a ban on TikTok for political reasons.

"There are 150 million people on TikTok and we are more con-

nected to them than Republicans are," Bowman said. "So for them, it's all about fear-mongering and power. It's not TikTok, because, again, we've looked the other way and allowed Facebook and other platforms to do similar things."

Critics of TikTok in Congress say their opposition is rooted in national security, not politics. TikTok is a wholly owned subsidiary of Chinese technology firm ByteDance Ltd., which appoints its executives. They worry Chinese authorities could force

ByteDance to hand over TikTok data on American users, effectively turning the app into a data-mining operation for a foreign power. The company insists it is taking steps to make sure that can never happen.

"The basic approach that we're following is to make it physically impossible for any government, including the Chinese government, to get access to U.S. user data," general counsel Erich Andersen said during an interview

(See **TIKTOK**, P. 3)

# NC Aquarium At Fort Fisher Will Host U.S. Navy Divers

Fort Fisher, North Carolina — Aquarium enthusiasts with reserved tickets will have a unique opportunity to interact with United States Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) and U.S. Navy divers Thursday, April 13 in the 235,000-gallon Cape Fear Shoals habitat at The North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher (NCAFF) during Wilmington Navy Week. NCAFF will host four members of the Navy, who will engage with visitors underwater and at a special exhibit inside the marine building. Cape Fear Shoals is home to Sheldonn, the green sea turtle, two sand tiger sharks, a bonnethead shark, an eel, stingrays and a variety of other marine animals.

"We are honored to partner with the United States Navy to elevate the Aquarium immersive experience with visitors as one of the stops on their celebration of Navy Week. Seeing Navy EOD and Navy Divers in our largest habitat at the Aquarium will be very special for visitors, volunteers, and staff," said Deyanira Romo Rossell, communications manager, NCAFF.

The Navy personnel who will dive into Cape Fear Shoals are Navy Diver First Class Joseph Onweller and Explosive Ordnance Disposal First Class Hunter Bridwell. Lt. Andrew Kuo will join an Aquarium educator in front of the habitat to share information about the Navy and Navy Diver Chief Kyle Weiss will join our dive supervisor at the top of the habitat. Once out of the water, the dive team will spend time with the community and showcase Navy EOD and Diver equipment, including the EOD10 bomb suit, the small underground remotely operated vehicles (ROV's), and the Mark V and KM-37 dive helmets.

"Fleet visits are a tradition of the U.S. Navy to highlight the capabilities and contributions of our forces to Americans who

would otherwise not have the opportunity to see us firsthand," said Lt. Brittany Stephens, public affairs officer, United States Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal Group 2. "We are looking forward to showing the people of Wilmington and the guests at the NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher who Navy EOD and Navy Divers are, what we do, and how committed we are to serving this country. Thank you to North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher and the City of Wilmington for your hospitality."

Navy EOD and Navy Divers comprise the Navy Special Operations community. Navy EOD enable U.S. Navy forces to meet objectives around the globe by clearing explosive hazards in any environment, on land or water. Navy Divers provide mobile diving and salvage capability to conduct harbor clearance, salvage, underwater search and recovery, and underwater emergency repairs.

# NCCU Students Encouraged To Join Geer Cemetery Cleanups

Geer Cemetery, now in a dilapidated state, was the initial resting place of the Rev. Augustus Shepard, father of N.C. Central University founder James E. Shepard. The Rev. Augustus Shepard was born into slavery in 1842. After studying theology at Shaw University, he pastored Durham's White Rock Baptist Church from 1901 until his death in 1911. His remains were later moved to Beechwood Cemetery.

Other notable members of the Black community buried at Geer Cemetery include Edian Markum, founder of St. Joseph's A.M.E. Church and Margaret Faucette, founder of White Rock Baptist Church.

The 4-acre cemetery, located in northeast Durham at 800 Colonial Street, was the first African-American cemetery in Durham. In fact, it was the only cemetery for the city's African-Americans from 1876, when it opened, to 1924. Over 3,000 people, many of whom are former slaves, were buried in the space before it was closed in 1934 by the health department due to overcrowding.

"Out of the 3 largest African-American cemeteries that were established in the 1800s, this is the only one still standing," said Debra Gonzalez-Garcia, Board President of Friends of Geer Cemetery. "It contains the life stories of people who helped to establish Durham and make it what it is today." The Friends of Geer Cemetery have identified 1,500 of the initial 3,000 individual buried in the cemetery.

The Friends of Geer Cemetery is a group that was formed in 2003 to clean up and restore the space. Currently, four descendants of people buried in Geer cemetery are on the board of directors of the organization.

"We need to preserve Black cemeteries because they are these sacred locations, they're full of history, and the people [buried] here haven't gotten the respect they deserve if they're covered in ivy," said Parkwood high school student and volunteer for Friends of Geer Cemetery Kamillah Mayer.

According to OpenDurham.org Geer Cemetery - at times also called City Cemetery, Old City Cemetery, East Durham and Mason Cemetery - originated with the 1876 burial of an 11-year-old boy working on the farm of Jesse Geer. The boy had been killed after being dragged by a horse, and his family requested that he be buried under a tree near where he

was killed.

A year later, three men bought the land for \$50 and turned the area into the first Black burial ground in the city.

"Geer Cemetery was established in 1877 by three men who wanted a place to bury their kin," said Carissa Trotta, Friends of Geer Cemetery board member.

"Many of the folks here came out of slavery, and they moved into Durham for tobacco and to create their own livelihoods. There wasn't a place to bury kin. There was the lovely white cemetery Maplewood, but there wasn't a place for Black members to bury family."

"So they purchased the land from a man named Jesse Geer. They bought half of his property, and individuals of the Durham community could buy individual lots and bury their loved ones here."

Geer Cemetery is open to the public, but it isn't the prettiest

sight: it began to fall into disarray in the mid-1900s. When you arrive, you'll see overturned trees, broken tombstones, overgrown vegetation, unmarked graves, and massive pits on the ground where the graves are.

"The thing about this place was the Black members of the community were paying their taxes, but their tax money went to Maplewood. This was not city-owned, so their tax dollars weren't coming here. They were responsible for caretaking their own plots," said Trotta. "We found newspaper articles [from the 1900s] asking for more money from the city."

"There's a headstone here for Samuel Barbie who was an undertaker for the Black community," said Trotta.

"He buried many of the folks here and he himself is buried here. There's tremendous history in this space that has unfortunately over the years been disrupted by misuse and abuse."

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# Business & Finance

## Minority Access To Federal Contracts Needs Improvement

By Makenzie Holland

TechTarget

Federal tech buying evolving over the years has made it easier for government agencies to acquire new products and technologies from outside contractors. Yet experts argue that changes still need to be made to improve small and minority business access to federal contracts.

The federal government spent roughly \$665 billion on federal contractors in fiscal year 2022, or 10% of the federal budget, said Darrell West, a senior fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution, during a webinar. Most of that funding went to large companies on defense contracts, while small and medium-sized businesses received about \$154 billion in federal contracts.

The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) reported that in fiscal year 2021, only 1.6% of federal contracting went to Black-owned businesses, while 1.78% went to Latino-owned firms. Some of the barriers to small and minority-owned businesses include extensive application processes for fed-



eral contracting that small businesses often don't have the staff to handle as well as a lack of transparency among federal agencies when it comes to businesses they're contracting with, said Bibi Hidalgo, SBA associate administrator for the Office of Government Contracting and Business Development.

While applauding advances the federal government has made to the tech acquisition process, experts -- including Hidalgo -- pro-

posed a handful of suggestions to continue improving federal contract access for small and minority businesses during the Brookings webinar.

"We have to figure out ways to ensure that we continue to create efficiencies but also always [ensure] we're creating opportunity," Hidalgo said. "That is a critical tension we need to balance to make sure we're always creating avenues for firms to compete and for firms to inno-

vate and ultimately get their foot in the door."

*Improving small, minority and underserved business access to federal contracts*

The federal government has made improvements to its acquisition processes, including multiple award contracts, interagency contracting and streamlined acquisition procedures to help keep up with the "rapid pace of technological advancement," said Matthew Blum, associate

administrator for the Office of Federal Procurement Policy in the Office of Management and Budget during the webinar.

However, Blum said agency collaboration still needs improvement, including aligning requirements within different acquisition teams. He also said greater equity needs to be instilled within acquisition activities to improve small and underserved businesses' access to federal contracts.

Blum said the federal government also needs to strengthen acquisition data management.

"The federal government generates billions of data points on millions of contracts awarded annually, yet most of this data remains out of the reach of our workforce," he said.

In a paper on improving federal acquisition processes, West said the federal government should broaden the geographic distribution of federal contracts. He said 12 states currently get two-thirds of federal dollars. He also supported training of government procurement officers to ensure better understanding of contracting with small businesses and increasing transparency in the acquisition process.

One way small business contracting is already improving under President Joe Biden is through requirements for agency buyers to meet congressionally mandated goals for small business contracting as part of buyer performance evaluations, Hidalgo said. She believes tying performance evaluations to small business goals will help improve federal buyer connections to small firms.

## Housing Market Data Suggests Sector's Downturn Is Soon 'Coming To An End'

By Dani Romero

YahooFinance

Housing market data in recent weeks has offered some signs of stabilization as the spring selling season begins to ramp up.

Mortgage rates are on the downswing, with the average 30-year fixed mortgage dipping to 6.28% from 6.32% the week prior, according to Freddie Mac. This marked the fourth straight weekly drop as the bank crisis that began four weeks ago has pressured Treasury rates.

The slide in rates also comes as the Federal Reserve raised interest rates by a quarter point in March as it continues its aggressive campaign to cool rapid inflation.

The yield on the 10-year Treasury note, which is closely tracked by the average 30-year mortgage rate, stood at 3.41% at the end of the week, down from 4% at the beginning of March.

"While access to commercial mortgage loans could become increasingly difficult, residential mortgage loans are expected to be more readily available," National Association of Realtors Chief Economist Lawrence Yun said in a press release.

Mortgage applications fell 4.1% during the week ending March 31, according to the latest data from the Mortgage Bankers Association out last week.

Before this drop mortgage applications had risen for four straight weeks.

"Mortgage rates no longer are rising, but they likely will remain elevated for some time," Ian Shepherdson, chief economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics, wrote in a recent note to clients. "That leaves [home] prices to do the heavy lifting if affordability is to improve; prices have fallen by about 5% since the summer, but we look for a further 15% decline over the next year, restoring the pre-Covid price-to-income ratio."



Here's a roundup of where major housing data stands through the first few months of 2023.

### Pending Home Sales

Signed contracts to buy existing homes in the U.S. rose in February, the third-straight monthly increase, according to data released March 29 by the National Association of Realtors.

Contract signings increased in all regions of the country except for the West. Pending sales jumped 6.5% from last month in the Northeast, notched a 0.4% gain in the Midwest, and a 0.7% increase in the South; out West pending home sales fell 2.4%.

"The affordable U.S. regions — the Midwest and South — are leading the recovery," Yun said.

### Home Builder Sentiment

Confidence among U.S. home builders rose slightly in March, the third-straight month builders have increased their optimism about the U.S. housing market.

The National Association of Home Builders/Wells Fargo's index of builder sentiment increased 2 points to 44, figures released March 15 showed. Analysts had expected this index to come in at a reading of 40.

"Even as builders continue to deal with stubbornly high construction costs and material

supply chain disruptions, they continue to report strong pent-up demand as buyers are waiting for interest rates to drop and turning more to the new home market due to a shortage of existing inventory," NAHB Chairman Alicia Huey, a custom home builder and developer from Birmingham, Ala, wrote in the press release.

### Housing Starts

Housing starts rose 9.8% in February to an annualized rate of 1.45 million homes, the strongest pace of starts since last September, the Commerce Department said March 16.

Housing starts for single-family homes advanced 1.1% to an annualized rate of 830,000, while multi-family housing starts surged 24% to a rate of 608,000. Starts grew in all regions except the Northeast in February.

### Existing Home Sales

Existing home sales in February jumped 14.5% to an annualized rate of 4.58 million, the largest monthly percentage increase since July 2020, data from the National Association of Realtors out March 21 showed. This increase also marked the end of a 12-month slide.

The annualized rate of existing homes sold topped the 4.2 million expected by economists, ac-

ording to Bloomberg data. The median sales price for an existing home slid 0.2% to \$363,000, compared to a year ago, NAR data showed.

"We're seeing stronger sales gains in areas where home prices are decreasing and the local economies are adding jobs," Yun said.

About 57% of homes sold in February were on the market for less than a month.

### New Home Sales

New single-family home sales rose 1.1% in February to an annualized pace of 640,000, up from January's rate of 633,000 according to a report from the Census Bureau released March 23. This figure was 19% below the pace seen a year ago.

The median sales price of a new home in February stood at \$438,200, while the average sales price reached \$498,700.

At the end of the month, there was a seasonally-adjusted estimate of 436,000 new homes for sale in the market, representing about 8 months of supply at the current sales rate.

Zillow Senior Economist Orphe Divounguy wrote in a statement that low inventory suggested "builders still likely face challenges in completing units while buyer demand has also ticked up."

### Case-Shiller Home Prices

The S&P CoreLogic Case-Shiller U.S. National Home Price index fell 0.5% in January compared to the previous month, according to data released on March 28. On a yearly basis, the index climbed 3.8% in January, down from 5.6% in the previous month.

The report's 20-City Composite index, which tracks prices in the 20 largest metros, showed prices fell 0.6% over the prior month in January and rose just 2.5% over last year. All 20 cities reported lower prices in the year ending January 2023 versus the year ending December 2022, the report said.



TIKTOK

Continued from page 1

with the AP on Friday at a cybersecurity conference in California.

TikTok has been emphasizing a \$1.5 billion proposal to store all U.S. user data on servers owned and maintained by the software giant Oracle. Access to U.S. data would be managed by U.S. employees through a separate entity run independently of ByteDance and monitored by outside observers.

Republican Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina took the unusual step of releasing a public statement urging all members of Congress to stop using TikTok, including from his home state — seemingly a job at Jackson, who is one of the more active members with more than 1.8 million followers.

"I was just saying if we're having a discussion about TikTok then I think we ought to at least reduce the pull factor by elected officials who can simply come off of it," Tillis said this week, when asked about his statement. "I don't have a TikTok account. So that was an easy separation for me."

Loud warnings about TikTok have also been coming from President Joe Biden's administration. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and FBI Director Christopher Wray have told Congress in recent weeks that TikTok is a national security threat. Blinken told lawmakers the threat "should be ended one way or another."

But some members are unconvinced. "It's like turning your cell phone off on an airplane. You're supposed to do. And if it was super dangerous, I don't think we will be allowed to have the phone on the plane," Rep. Greg Landsman, D-Ohio, said Wednesday, "So if it was super dangerous for members of Congress to have this app on their phone, you have to imagine the administration or our government would say absolutely not."

He added, "You can't have it on a government phone, and that's good." Concerns about what kind of content Americans encounter online, or how their data is collected by technology companies, also aren't new. Congress has been wanting to curtail the amount of data tech companies collect on consumers through a national privacy law, but those efforts have stalled repeatedly over the years.

Supporters of TikTok on Capitol Hill are urging their colleagues to educate themselves about social media as a whole so Congress can pass legislation that deals with broader issues of data privacy, instead of hyper-focusing on a ban of TikTok, which could risk political backlash and a court fight over the reach of the First Amendment.

"We are uninformed and misinformed. We don't even understand how social media works. We don't know anything about data brokers and how data brokers sell our data to foreign countries and foreign companies right now," Bowman said. "So ban TikTok tomorrow, this stuff is still going to be happening."

## Solar Installers Settlement Approved By NC Utilities Commission

By Tim Tyler

CleanTechnica

A rate modification for solar customers in North Carolina was recently approved by the North Carolina Utilities Commission (NCUC). This has an impact on people living in North Carolina who want to use the utility grid that Duke Energy manages for what is essentially a form of energy storage, which is done through a process called net metering.

The "net metering" regulations for rooftop solar payments in North Carolina have been in effect since 2000. Customers whose solar panels generate more electricity than they immediately require receive "credits" on their bills for the amount of the excess energy production. In 2017 and 2021, the NC Legislature passed laws requiring state regulators to update those regulations. The North Carolina Utilities Commission (NCUC) followed



through by approving Duke Energy's plan in March 2023.

Early last year, Duke and the North Carolina Rooftop Solar Installers (NCRSI), a group that represents the state's rooftop solar business, intervened in the NCUC net-metering case and negotiated a settlement that prevented a sharp decline in the value of solar for NC solar customers. YES Solar's Stew Miller, David Hollister of Sundance Power Systems, and Southern Energy Management's

Bob Kingery served as the group's leaders, with assistance from 17 other solar businesses from across North Carolina.

The "Stipulation" that NCRSI and Duke agreed upon was approved and gives solar consumers the option of a bridge rate during the changeover period. People are now able to switch to solar energy under a plan that will enable a smooth transition (or something like that) to the prices listed in Duke's initial submission, which will

take effect on January 1st, 2027. That said, the long-term change is not appreciated or supported by the rooftop solar industry.

"The majority of people in North Carolina are in favor of customer-sited solar energy being expanded there. In order to get North Carolina's solar clients the greatest bargain, NCRSI worked hard to achieve this," said Sundance Power Systems' Dave Hollister.

"I hope that in a future docket

or law the legislature, NCUC and NC Public Staff iterate their views of small-scale solar and storage as valuable for the grid. With this support NC can grow into a leader in distributed generation solar like it has been in utility scale solar for years now," said Bob Kingery, Co-founder and CEO of Southern Energy Management.

The main driving force behind these legislative reforms is the growing allure of solar as an investment and an answer to the climate crisis. Supporting their traditional business models is a challenge for utilities nationally, including Duke Energy, if a large portion of the population is going solar. So they are trying to slow down rooftop solar adoption.

"Despite efforts like these to slow down customer generation of electricity, I remain confident that homeowners will continue to invest in solar to save money on rising electricity costs, reduce personal taxes

with the 30% ITC, and participate in the fight against climate change," said Stew Miller, co-founder and President of Yes Energy Solutions.

The solar industry was adamant about establishing consumer protections for residents of North Carolina in negotiations with Duke Energy. According to the NCUC's order, which was delivered on March 23, 2023, Duke must develop an online calculator within 60 days after that date. For systems created for a given site, the calculator will give an exact estimate of the electrical and financial return. According to NCRSI and others, this calculator is essential for the transition authorized by this order.

It looks like the time to go solar in North Carolina is right now, to sum it up. There is an opportunity for homeowners to protect themselves from present and future rate adjustments while reaping the benefits of solar.