



1-AAA QUARTERFINAL

Comeback

Science Hill fell behind by 19 early. That didn't last long. **C1**



UNCG 85, ETSU 74

Buc slide continues in overtime. **C1**

Johnson City Press

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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2021 | \$2.00



Power lines are shown Tuesday in Houston, where at least 15 hypothermia deaths were reported after days-long power outages. Officials said the main power grid in Texas was moments away from total collapse on Feb. 15.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Prep makes Texas-like grid failure less likely

While severe weather a wildcard, utility chief says resource diversity, ice-readiness help buffer region

By Robert Houk
PRESS SENIOR REPORTER
rhouk@johnsoncitypress.com

Could a collapse of the power grid like the one that crippled Texas during a major winter storm earlier this month happen in Northeast Tennessee?

While anything is possible during a once-in-100-years severe weather event like the one that swept through the nation's midsection nearly two weeks ago, BrightRidge CEO Jeff Dykes said this region's power provider is "in a much better position to handle" such a scenario.

'I think coming out of this there will be heavy planning for severe storms.'

JEFF DYKES
BrightRidge

He said the Tennessee Valley Authority, which provides power to most of the area's public utilities, relies on a more diverse mix of sources to generate the electricity that it sells.

And unlike the power grid in Texas, TVA is largely prepared to cope with the icy conditions and single-digit temperatures that left more than 4 million customers in the Lone Star State without

electricity.

WHERE THE POWER COMES FROM

Dykes told BrightRidge board members last week that more than 51% of electricity in Texas comes from natural gas-fueled power plants. In comparison, 20% of power comes from gas generation in the TVA system.

Coal accounts for 13% of power production in Texas. TVA still generates 19% of its electricity from coal plants.

Nuclear, which represents 40% of TVA's power generation, accounts for just 9% of energy production on Texas.

TVA produces 9% of its power from hydro generation, while there is no such option in

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THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A light ahead?

COVID's worst might be behind us, but experts say don't let your guard down

By Jonathan Roberts
PRESS STAFF WRITER
jroberts@johnsoncitypress.com

It was a brutal three months in Northeast Tennessee: Between Nov. 1 and Jan. 31, COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations and deaths soared to record highs, infecting more than 32,000 and killing 636.

Now, local health experts are cautiously optimistic we've seen the worst of the pandemic — that after nearly a year of battling the virus, this is the beginning of the end.

Though the curve of new cases has fluctuated wildly from month to month over the past 11 months, this time feels different. Over the past seven weeks, the region's seven-day average of new cases has experience a steep and rapid decline — tumbling from 456.2 on Jan. 7 to 83.6 as of Saturday, bringing Northeast Tennessee more in line with averages reported in early October.

Of course, in October, the virus was still spreading rapidly, with more than 5,900 infections and 76

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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A person wearing a face mask walks through steam vented from a manhole in Philadelphia in January.

For reporter, vaccination a blessing ... and a reminder



Public health nurse Codie Berry administers the COVID-19 vaccination to Johnson City Press reporter John Thompson on Saturday morning.

CAROLINE HURT

By John Thompson
ELIZABETHTON BUREAU CHIEF
jthompson@johnsoncitypress.com

ELIZABETHTON — Yesterday was a good day for me.

On Saturday morning, I received my first dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine at the Carter County Health Department's vaccination pod at the Workforce Development Complex.

As an Army Reservist, I've had my share of vaccinations and other injections, ranging from yellow fever to smallpox to many

See **VACCINATION**, Page A2

THERE'S MORE



• The House approved a \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief bill that was championed by President Joe Biden, the first step in providing another dose of aid as the measure now moves to a tense Senate. **D2**

• After a year of struggling to boost COVID-19 testing, communities across the U.S. are seeing plummeting demand. **D2**

No new COVID-19 deaths, 92 new cases reported in region

By J.H. Osborne
KINGSPORT TIMES NEWS
josborne@timesnews.net

The latest COVID-19 numbers from the Tennessee Department of Health's daily report for Saturday:

TENNESSEE

- 16 new deaths and 1,374 new cases.
- Pandemic totals are 11,393 deaths and 773,887 cases.
- 97% (748,739) of those cases were listed as "inactive/recovered."
- New deaths by age: seven in the 71-80 group; six in the 81-plus group; two in the 61-70 group; and one in the 51-60 group.

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FROM PAGE ONE



Sen. Jeremy McPike, D-Prince William, left, Sen. Louise Lucas, D-Portsmouth, center, and Sen. Adam Ebbin, D-Alexandria, right, confer on marijuana legislation before the floor session Saturday.

Virginia lawmakers vote to legalize marijuana in 2024

The Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — Virginia lawmakers gave final approval Saturday to a bill that will legalize marijuana for adult recreational use, but not until 2024, when retail sales of the drug would also begin.

With a compromise bill clearing the House and Senate, Virginia becomes the first Southern state to vote to legalize marijuana, joining 15 other states and the District of Columbia. The legislation now goes to Democratic Gov. Ralph Northam, who supports legalization.

The bill was a top priority for Democrats, who framed legalization as a necessary step to end the disparate treatment of people of color under current marijuana laws. But talks between Democrats in the House and Senate grew tense in recent days, and a compromise version of the massive bill did not emerge publicly until late Saturday afternoon.

“It’s been a lot of work to get here, but I would say that we’re on the path to an equitable law allowing responsible adults to use cannabis,” said Sen. Adam Ebbin, the chief sponsor of the Senate bill.

Several Democrats said they hoped Northam would send the legislation back to them with amendments, including speeding up the date for legalization.

“If we have already made the decision that simple possession should be repealed, we could have done that today and ended the disproportionate fines on communities of color,” said Sen. Jennifer McClellan.

“Let’s be absolutely clear — this bill is not legalization, and there are a lot of steps between here and legalization,” she said.

Northam’s spokeswoman, Alena Yarmosky, said the governor “looks forward to continuing to improve this legislation.”

“There’s still a lot of work ahead, but this bill will help to reinvest in our communities and reduce inequities in our criminal justice system,” she said.

Under the legislation, possession of up to an ounce (28.3 grams) of marijuana will become legal beginning Jan. 1, 2024.

Under a provision Senate Democrats insisted on, the legislation will include a reenactment clause that will require a second vote from the General Assembly next year, but only on the regulatory framework and criminal penalties for several offenses, including underage use and public consumption of marijuana.

The Senate had sought to legalize simple possession this year to immediately end punishments for people with small amounts of marijuana, but House Democrats argued that legalization without a legal market for marijuana could promote the growth of the black market.

Lawmakers last year decriminalized marijuana.

House Majority Leader Charniele Herring said that while the legislation isn’t perfect, it was a “justice bill.”

“This moves us in a ... direction to strike down and to address those institutional barriers, and over-policing, over-arrests,

over-convictions of African Americans who do not use marijuana at a higher rate than our white counterparts, but we seem to get the brunt of criminal convictions,” Herring said.

A recent study by the legislature’s research and watchdog agency found that from 2010-2019, the average arrest rate of Black individuals for marijuana possession was 3.5 times higher than the arrest rate for whites. The study also found that Black people were convicted at a rate 3.9 times higher than whites.

The bill calls for dedicating 30% of marijuana tax revenue — after program costs — to a Cannabis Equity Reinvestment Fund. The money would be used to help communities that have been historically over-policed for marijuana crimes, with funds going toward scholarships, workforce development and job placement services, and low- or no-interest loans for qualified cannabis businesses.

Virginians who have a marijuana-related conviction, have family members with a conviction, or live in an area that is economically distressed could qualify as social equity applicants who would get preference for licenses to get into the marijuana marketplace as cultivators, wholesalers, processors and retailers.

Groups that opposed legalization entirely have said they are concerned that it could bring more drug-impaired driving crashes and the use of marijuana among youth.

LIGHT: ‘Let’s be cautiously optimistic’

From Page A1

deaths reported. February has already seen more deaths (114) than October, though the region reported the fewest new infections since July this month. Northeast Tennessee’s test positivity rate, though trending down, also remains above the 5% standard, with more than 8% of tests coming back positive over the past week.

There’s also the threat of more transmissible, and potentially more deadly, variant strains of the virus that experts worry could trigger another surge if people relax their guard. Variants discovered in California and New York are already spreading at a torrid pace, while the U.K. variant is expected to become the dominant strain in the United States by the end of next month.

“We are seeing a downward trend in cases and hospitalization in the region and statewide, which would indicate we are on the down slope of this wave of the pandemic,” said Dr. David Kirschke, medical director of the Northeast Regional Health Office. “However, with only about 10% of our state population currently vaccinated and with the emergence of COVID-19 variants in Tennessee, it is possible we could experience another wave.”

And while the vaccines offer hope, it’s still unknown how effective they will be against the emerging variants.

“I think we can hope (we’re near the end),” said Jamie Swift, Ballard’s chief infection prevention officer. “It’s certainly too early for me to say that we’re out of the woods. There’s a lot of unknowns, we need to see what’s going to happen with the variant strains, we need to see how quickly we can get vaccine distributed and have more vaccine coverage and we need to see how that vaccine protection holds up against any variant strains that may be circulating.”

Swift said the region “still has a long way to go” and that the region “went from really, really bad, to just bad — we haven’t gone from bad to good or bad to it’s over.”

“There’s a lot of unknowns, and we know people are getting very excited and feeling like, ‘oh my gosh, it’s over,’ and I want to celebrate our wins, I want to celebrate that things are looking better right now, but I could not sit here and say this is over,” Swift said.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to returning to some sense of normalcy, however, is whether people can remain committed to mask-wearing and social distancing. The worst might be

behind us, but another surge could quickly materialize if people do not remain vigilant against the virus — allowing it to regain a foothold and costing the lives of even more people.

So close to the finish line, experts caution, it’s important not to celebrate victory too early.

“Let’s be cautiously optimistic and optimistically cautious,” said East Tennessee State University College of Public Health Dean Dr. Randy Wykoff. “Let’s keep focused on what we need to do.”

TENNESSEE LOTTERY

SATURDAY

Morning Drawing

Cash 3: 2-9-7
Cash 4: 3-6-5-0

Day Drawing

Cash 3: 5-1-9
Cash 4: 0-3-9-3

Night Drawing

Cash 3: 3-0-6
Cash 4: 3-7-1-2

CORRECTIONS

The Johnson City Press strives for accuracy in all its reports. Readers who notice factual errors in the newspaper should call the newsroom at (423) 722-0549.

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PREP: ‘Domino effect’ cited

From Page A1

Texas because the Rio Grande is not deep enough for hydro generation.

Solar accounts for 2% of power generation in Texas, and 4% in the TVA system.

Dykes said one big difference between Texas and TVA, which serves most of Tennessee, is the use of wind power. In Texas, nearly one-fourth of its total power supply comes from wind turbines.

Wind plays a very small part in TVA’s power grid, and most of it is purchased from other producers.

“The best place to put wind turbines in our area to maximize generation is the Great Smoky Mountains, and we know that is not going to happen,” Dykes said.

AN UNFORTUNATE SERIES OF EVENTS

Dykes said a “domino effect” led to a collapse of the Texas power grid during the week of Feb. 15. He said the high temperature for an average day at that time of the year in San Antonio, Texas, is in the lower 50s.

A major winter storm brought subfreezing temperatures and snow across the region, resulting in residents “cranking up their heat.”

At the same time, ice was beginning to freeze the wind turbines that were built to withstand typical winter weather in Texas, not for more frigid regions like Minnesota, where heating units and other costly safety measures are installed in generating equipment.

“When the wind turbines started icing over, they became out of balance and started shutting down,” Dykes said.

With the wind turbines going off line, Texas power officials were forced to increase production from the grid’s gas-powered generators. At the same time, homeowners with gas furnaces were turning up their thermostats.

This put a strain on natural gas supply and reduced pressure for both power generation and direct heat. Voltage drops resulted in rolling blackouts and a substantial loss of service throughout the Texas power grid.

A PLAN FOR MOVING FORWARD

Dykes said the recent problems with the Texas grid will no doubt lead power providers nationwide to take a closer look at their plans for dealing with severe storms in the coming years.

“I think coming out of this there will be heavy planning for severe storms, and they will be bringing in the equipment to deal with the next 100-year storm,” Dykes said.

He said the TVA system has not been immune to weather-related damages to power supply. Major winter storms in 1993 and 1998 brought down power lines and left many electrical customers in Northeast Tennessee without power for weeks.

More recently, thunderstorms and tornadoes have damaged TVA transmission lines in Middle Tennessee and the Chattanooga area.

REPORTED: 9.7% positivity

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NORTHEAST TENNESSEE

• No new deaths and 92 new cases for the eight-county region.

• New cases by county: 40 in Sullivan; 17 in Washington; 15 in Hawkins; eight in Carter; six in Greene; four in Johnson; two in Unicoi; and zero in Hancock.

• Active cases by county: 316 in Sullivan; 190 in Washington; 154 in Hawkins; 88 in Carter; 85 in Greene; 51 in Unicoi; 32 in Johnson; and eight in Hancock.

POSITIVE RATES

• Statewide: 5.93% of the 15,679 new test results reported statewide Saturday by the Tennessee Department of Health.

VACCINATION: Memories of polio scourge

From Page A1

varieties of flu shots.

Getting the COVID vaccination felt different.

This was a shot that really felt good to receive, knowing what terrible suffering could come from being infected by the virus and by the possible lonely death, even though the pandemic had taken so many lives.

Getting the vaccination on Saturday also felt satisfying because there are so many millions of people waiting to receive the shot but having to wait their turn. I was privileged because my advanced age of 70 put me in a higher priority.

Caroline Hurt, director of the Carter County Health Department, said 11,000 vaccinations have been given in Carter County since the program began. She said that represents about 13% of the population.

The vaccinations aren’t usually given on Saturday, but this week was a bit different because the bad weather that had such an impact on Texas and Memphis had disrupted vaccine delivery.

The local vaccination program has continued on despite such occasional disruptions. It has taken the coordinated efforts of the local health department staff and some dedicated members of the

area’s National Guard units.

The team has worked together long enough to have become extremely efficient in getting the patients in and through the procedure and making sure they rest for 15 minutes so they can treat any unexpected reaction. Despite being so well drilled, all the workers were very polite and friendly, making the patients feel comfortable.

In my case, I was met by National Guard Specialist Jasmine Duvall, who made sure all my information was correct and that I was ready for the shot. Then public health nurse Codie Berry administered a perfect injection in my left arm. A smooth entry and exit with no pain.

Hurt said the team continues to look for ways to be more efficient. On Saturday, the team was continuing to work with a new registration system. Although this was only the third day they had used it, “It seems to be working well,” Hurt said.

In addition to making me eligible for the shot on Saturday, my age also allows me to remember an earlier major effort made by the nation’s public health establishment to defeat another scourge.

I am old enough to have memories of the polio fears that racked the nation in the 1950s.

Although I was too young to take it seriously, I do have some vague memories of how worried mothers were about this disease.

Just as COVID seemed to be especially hard on my generation in the present time, so polio seemed to be especially terrible to the young boys and girls of the Baby Boomer generation.

Even to my young mind, polio seemed to be a particularly cruel disease, taking young and healthy children who enjoyed running and jumping and playing and forcing them into leg braces and iron lungs. All of us children had friends and relatives who walked with crutches. That made the disease seem more real to us.

Then Dr. Jonas Salk developed the polio vaccine.

I seem to remember waiting in line to get the shot, but I was so young I can’t recall any details. I just know there was a lot of gratitude for all the dedicated work that led to creation of such a wonder. I didn’t feel any pain when Nurse Berry gave me the shot on Saturday, but she did trigger those long forgotten childhood memories of believing I was safe from a scourge and wouldn’t wind up in braces or an iron lung.