

U.S. Consumer Confidence Drops In December

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. consumers peering over the “fiscal cliff” don’t like what they see.

Fears of sharp tax increases and government spending cuts set to take effect next week sent consumer confidence tumbling in December to its lowest level since August.

The Conference Board said Thursday that its consumer confidence index fell for the second straight month in December to 65.1, down from 71.5 in November.

The survey showed consumers’ outlook for the next six months deteriorated to its lowest level since 2011 — a signal to Lynn Franco, the board’s director of economic indicators, that consumers are worried about the tax hikes and spending cuts that take effect Jan. 1 if the White House and Congress can’t reach a budget deal.

Earlier this week a report showed consumers held back shopping this holiday season, another indication of their concerns about possible tax increases.

George H.W. Bush’s Family Seeks Privacy

HOUSTON (AP) — Former President George H.W. Bush’s family sought privacy and provided no new details Thursday about his medical condition, a day after his spokesman said he’s in intensive care after being hospitalized for treatment of a bronchitis-related cough.

Bush spokesman Jim McGrath said he would put out another statement “when events warrant it,” citing the family’s right to and desire for privacy.

Bush, 88, entered Methodist Hospital in Houston on Nov. 23 for treatment of what McGrath has described as a “stubborn” cough. He had spent about a week there earlier in November for treatment of the same condition.

It was hoped Bush would be well enough to spend Christmas at home. But while his cough improved, he developed a persistent fever. McGrath disclosed Wednesday that Bush, the oldest living former president, had been transferred to the intensive care unit Sunday and his condition was downgraded to “guarded.”

“He needs to rally,” McGrath said. “We continue to be cautiously optimistic.”

Makeover Of Mexico City Moves Forward

MEXICO CITY (AP) — The plan is as big as this mammoth city: Turn a seedy metro hub into Mexico City’s Times Square; clear swarms of feisty vendors and remodel the historic Alameda Central; illuminate the plazas and walkways of a park twice the size of New York’s Central Park.

Mexico City’s government is trying to transform one of the world’s largest cities by beautifying public spaces, parks and monuments buried beneath a sea of honking cars, street hawkers, billboards and grime following decades of dizzying urban growth.

Despite the challenges, the ambitious, multimillion-dollar program carried out by former center-left Mayor Marcelo Ebrard and continued by his successor, Miguel Angel Mancera, is winning praise from urban planners and many residents. And it’s turning the metropolis into an experiment in how to soften urban sprawl.

“It’s time to tame the city,” said Juan Carlos de Leo Gandara, head of the Iberoamerican University’s sustainable urban projects. “Today is about giving the city back to pedestrians.”

In the Alameda, made iconic in the Diego Rivera mural “Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda,” concrete sidewalks were replaced by marble, and makeshift vendor stands were kicked out — a renovation that cost about \$18.7 million. Instead of a motley patchwork of folding tables and tarps, the newly opened park, anchored by the art nouveau Palacio de Bellas Artes theater, is a sea of greenery and calm in the midst of racing traffic.

Newtown Keeping Kids Busy With Activities

NEWTOWN, Conn. (AP) — The children at the Sandy Hook Elementary school won’t be returning to classes for another week, but officials from the town, school district and local agencies are doing their best in the meantime to keep them occupied following a massacre at their school two weeks ago.

The students have not attended school since a gunman killed 20 of their schoolmates and six adults on Dec. 14. They are slated to return to a different school next Thursday.

In the meantime, they’ve been treated to field trips, toy giveaways and some organized play time.

“A couple of the teachers have done pizza parties,” said Janet Robinson, Newtown’s school superintendent. “Another met her kids at the library so they could have a little reading time together. The most important thing has been connecting the students back to their teacher and their classmates.”

The Newtown Youth Academy, a nonprofit sports center, opened its doors to all kids in town at no cost shortly after the shooting. But from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. last week, the building’s turf field, basketball and tennis courts, and giant inflatable obstacle course were reserved just for Sandy Hook Elementary students.

Putin Says He Will Sign Anti-US Adoptions Bill

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin said Thursday he will sign a controversial bill barring Americans from adopting Russian children, while the Kremlin’s children’s rights advocate recommended extending the ban to the rest of the world.

The bill is part of the country’s increasingly confrontational stance with the West and has angered some Russians who argue it victimizes children to make a political point.

The law would block dozens of Russian children now in the process of being adopted by American families from leaving the country and cut off a major route out of often-dismal orphanages. The U.S. is the biggest destination for adopted Russian children — more than 60,000 of them have been taken in by Americans over the past two decades.

“I still don’t see any reasons why I should not sign it,” Putin said at a televised meeting. He went on to say that he “intends” to do so.

UNICEF estimates that there are about 740,000 children not in parental custody in Russia, while only 18,000 Russians are now waiting to adopt a child. Russian officials say they want to encourage more Russians to adopt Russian orphans.

Children’s rights ombudsman Pavel Astakhov on Thursday petitioned the president to extend the ban to other countries.

“There is huge money and questionable people involved in the semi-legal schemes of exporting children,” he tweeted.

Kremlin critics say Astakhov is trying to extend the ban only to get more publicity and win more favors with Putin. A graduate of the KGB law school and a celebrity lawyer, Astakhov was a pro-Putin activist before becoming children’s rights ombudsman and is now seen as the Kremlin’s voice on adoption issues.

“This is cynicism beyond limits,” opposition leader Ilya Yashin tweeted. “The children rights ombudsman is depriving children of a future.”

The bill is retaliation for an American law that calls for sanctions against Russian officials deemed to be human rights violators.

Egypt

Opposition Leaders Under Investigation

BY SARAH EL DEEB

Associated Press

CAIRO — Egypt’s chief prosecutor ordered an investigation on Thursday into allegations that opposition leaders committed treason by inciting supporters to overthrow Islamist President Mohammed Morsi.

The probe by a Morsi-appointed prosecutor was launched a day after the president called for a dialogue with the opposition to heal rifts opened in the bitter fight over an Islamist-drafted constitution just approved in a referendum. The opposition decried the investigation as a throwback to Hosni Mubarak’s regime, when the law was used to smear and silence opponents.

The probe was almost certain to sour the already tense political atmosphere in the country.

The allegations were made initially in a complaint by at least two lawyers sent to the chief prosecutor earlier this month. They targeted opposition leaders Mohammed ElBaradei, a Nobel Peace laureate and former head of the U.N. nuclear agency, former Foreign Minister Amr Moussa, and Hamdeen Sabahi. Both Moussa and Sabahi were presidential candidates who competed against Morsi in the last election.

There was no immediate comment by any

of the three opposition leaders named but the opposition dismissed the allegations.

Emad Abu Ghazi, secretary-general of the opposition party ElBaradei heads, said the investigation was “an indication of a tendency toward a police state and the attempt to eliminate political opponents.” He said the ousted Mubarak regime dealt with the opposition in the same way.

Mubarak jailed his opponents, including liberals and Islamists. International rights groups said their trials did not meet basic standards of fairness.

ElBaradei was a leading figure behind the uprising against Mubarak and at one point, he was allied with the Brotherhood against the old regime.

The investigation does not necessarily mean charges will be filed against the leaders. But it is unusual for state prosecutors to investigate such broad charges against high-profile figures.

Morsi, Egypt’s first democratically elected president, asked the opposition on Wednesday to join a national dialogue to heal rifts and move on after a month of huge street protests against him and the constitution drafted by his allies.

Some of the protests erupted into deadly violence. On Dec. 5, anti-Morsi demonstrators staging a sit-in outside the presidential palace

in Cairo were attacked by Morsi supporters. Fierce clashes ensued that left 10 people dead.

The wave of protests began after Morsi’s Nov. 22 decrees that gave him and the assembly writing the constitution immunity from judicial oversight. That allowed his Islamist allies on the assembly to hurriedly rush through the charter before an expected court ruling dissolving the panel.

After the decrees, the opposition accused Morsi of amassing too much power in his hands. They said the constitution was drafted without the participation of liberal, minority Christian and women members of the assembly, who walked out in protest at the last minute.

Even though the constitution passed in a referendum, the opposition has vowed to keep fighting it. They say it enshrines Islamic law in Egypt, undermines rights of minorities and women, and restricts freedoms.

Morsi and Brotherhood officials accused the opposition of working to undermine the president’s legitimacy, and accused former regime officials of working to topple him.

Although he reached out to the opposition for reconciliation, Morsi did not offer any concessions in his speech Wednesday calling for a dialogue.

Storm Blows Through East; 200K In Dark In Ark.

BY HOLLY RAMER

Associated Press

CONCORD, N.H. — A muted version of a winter storm that has killed more than a dozen people across the eastern half of the country plodded across the Northeast on Thursday, trapping airliners in snow or mud and frustrating travelers still trying to return home after Christmas.

The storm, which was blamed for at least 16 deaths farther south and west, brought plenty of wind, rain and snow to the Northeast when it blew in Wednesday night. Lights generally remained on and cars mostly stayed on the road, unlike many harder-hit places including Arkansas, where 200,000 homes and businesses lost power.

By afternoon, the precipitation had stopped in parts of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, though snow continued to fall in upstate New York and northern New England. Parts of snow-savvy New Hampshire expected as much as 18 inches.

Dale Lamprey, who was clearing off the sidewalk outside the legislative office building in Concord, already had several hours of shoveling under his belt by 8:30 a.m. Thursday and didn’t expect it to get much better.

“I’m going to be shoveling all day, just trying to keep up with the snow,” he said. “Which is impossible.”

The Northeast’s heaviest snowfall was expected to be in northern Pennsylvania, upstate New York and inland sections of several New England states before the storm heads into Canada on Friday, National Weather Service



NABIL K. MARK/CENTRE DAILY TIMES/MCT

Terry Baney ducks under a branch as he removes snow from his driveway with a snow blower in State College, Pennsylvania, on Thursday. A major winter storm hit Centre County Wednesday and the clean up continues.

spokesman David Roth said.

While the East Coast’s largest cities — New York, Philadelphia and Boston — saw mostly high winds and cold rain, other areas experienced a messy mix of rain and snow that slowed commuters and those still heading home from holiday trips. Some inbound flights were delayed in Philadelphia and New York’s LaGuardia, but the weather wasn’t leading to delays at other major East Coast airports.

Forty-two students traveling to London and Dublin were stuck in

the Nashville airport thanks to weather in the Northeast. The frustrated students, from universities in Tennessee and Kentucky, were supposed to leave Wednesday and arrive in London on Thursday.

Joe Woolley, spokesman for the Cooperative Center for Study Abroad, said he hopes he can get them there just one day late. “It’s a two-week program, so it’s shortened already,” he said.

On New York’s Long Island, a Southwest Airlines jet bound for Tampa, Fla., veered off a taxiway

and got stuck in mud Thursday morning. Officials said there were no injuries to the 129 passengers and five crew members. Though the area received heavy rain overnight, Southwest spokesman Paul Flanigan said it wasn’t clear whether that played a role.

In Pittsburgh, a flight that landed safely during the storm Wednesday night got stuck in several inches of snow on the tarmac about two hours. The American Airlines flight arrived between 8 and 9 p.m., but then ran over a snow patch and got stuck.

EPA Administrator Jackson Announces Resignation

BY KEVIN FREKING

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, the Obama administration’s chief environmental watchdog, is stepping down after a nearly four years marked by high-profile brawls over global warming pollution, the Keystone XL oil pipeline, new controls on coal-fired plants and several other hot-button issues that affect the nation’s economy and people’s health.

Jackson constantly found herself caught between administration pledges to solve thorny environmental problems and steady resistance from Republicans and industrial groups who complained that the agency’s rules destroyed jobs and made it harder for American companies to compete internationally.

The GOP chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Rep. Fred Upton of Michigan, said last year that Jackson would need her own parking spot at the Capitol because he planned to bring her in so frequently for questioning. Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney called for her firing, a stance that had little downside during the GOP primary.

Jackson, 50, the agency’s first black administrator and a chemical

engineer, did not point to any particular reason for her departure. Historically, Cabinet members looking to move on will leave at the beginning of a president’s second term.

“I will leave the EPA confident the ship is sailing in the right direction, and ready in my own life for new challenges, time with my family and new opportunities to make a difference,” she said in a statement. Jackson will leave sometime after President Barack Obama delivers his State of the Union address, typically in late January.

In a separate statement, Obama said Jackson has been “an important part of my team.” He thanked her for serving and praised her “unwavering commitment” to the public’s health.

“Under her leadership, the EPA has taken sensible and important steps to protect the air we breathe and the water we drink, including implementing the first national standard for harmful mercury pollution, taking important action to combat climate change under the Clean Air Act and playing a key role in establishing historic fuel economy standards that will save the average American family thousands of dollars at the pump, while also slashing carbon pollution,” he said.

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