



## Sabres' Kulich back in his comfort zone

Coming off a minor injury, he's also shifting to center from wing | PAGE C1

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

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## Government shuttered amid partisan bickering



Clockwise, from top left: Transportation Security Administration officers at Buffalo Niagara International Airport will keep working during the government shutdown because they are deemed "essential," although they won't get paid for their work until the shutdown ends. Customs agents at the Peace Bridge also will stay on the job. The Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural National Historic Site, as well as other national parks and historic sites, could be closed, but mail delivery is expected to continue.

Initial impacts appear to be minimal in WNY

BY JERRY ZREMSKI  
News Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON – The mail will keep flowing and the border will remain open, and if you're expecting a Social Security payment or an appointment with a Veterans Affairs physician, you have no reason to worry.

But if you plan on applying for new federal benefits or visiting an indoor site run by the National Park Service, the 21st federal government shutdown in 50 years – which began

Wednesday – will matter to you.

The latest shutdown happened because when the new federal fiscal year began, Congress hadn't passed any of the 12 spending bills necessary to fund the government. Work on a seven-week stopgap measure went nowhere after the Trump administration and the Republican congressional majority refused to agree to Democratic demands to protect health care funding.

Characteristically, each side blamed the other.

"House Republicans did our job," said Rep.

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## Audit uncovers 'extortion' emails in Clerk's Office

Firm says no more money found missing, notes limited access

BY SANDRA TAN  
News Staff Reporter

An outside forensic audit of the Erie County Clerk's Office found unexplained references to "extortion money," deleted emails and check transaction issues at the hands of a disgraced deputy finance clerk now in state prison.

It also found no evidence that more public money was "misappropriated" from the Clerk's Office – on top of the hundreds of thousands of dollars that the county and state comptroller and law enforcement agencies already uncovered through its audits and criminal investigations in 2023 and 2024.

But the outside auditors said they can't conclusively state that no other money was lost, because County Clerk Michael "Mickey" Kearns refused to provide software access to financial data, leaving the auditor to rely on information shared by the County Comptroller's Office.

Meanwhile, other elected county officials have described some email references to "extortion," found by Texas-based accounting firm Weaver, to be deeply troubling.

In a statement, Kearns described the audit as covering old ground and a "questionable" use of county funds. He

stressed that no additional money was found to be missing.

"It is important to note, however, that this report – while largely duplicative – was produced at a considerable expense to taxpayers," he stated.

County Attorney Jeremy Toth told The Buffalo News that his department paid Weaver \$166,871 to conduct the audit.

Alexander McDougall, former deputy finance clerk, was sentenced to one to four years in prison in January after confessing to stealing more than \$320,000 in public money. The Erie County Comptroller's Office also discovered that a \$326,456 check from the Clerk's Office was intercepted and counterfeited by mail thieves in 2022. The County Legislature subsequently commissioned a forensic audit to determine whether there was any other criminal wrongdoing that may have been missed by other investigating agencies, among other things.

The final outside audit by Weaver shores up the original findings of the Erie County Comptroller's Office, State Comptroller's Office and subsequent criminal investigations by the Erie County Sheriff's Office and District Attorney's Office.

However, Weaver was also directed to determine

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### BUFFALO NEXT: BUSINESS OF SPORTS

## Sabres value climbs to \$1.36B, despite lengthy playoff drought

The Buffalo Sabres haven't made the NHL playoffs in 14 years. They play in one of the older and more antiquated arenas in the league at Key-Bank Center.

Yet, the valuation of the team continues to go up.

The value of the Sabres increased by 20% from last season and is now estimated to be \$1.36 billion, according to a report released Wednesday by sports business

website Sportico.

But even with the increase of about \$230 million from last season's rankings, the Sabres remain close to the bottom of the 32-team league, ranked at No. 29. That's a move up by one spot for the team, which was ranked 30th last season.

It is the result of the value of sports teams steadily climbing throughout all major sports, including the NHL. The collective worth of the league's teams is up to \$67.1 billion, or an average of \$2.1 billion. That is up \$5 billion from last season – a number that

continues to increase each season.

Sportico determines the value of each team according to "the sum of the enterprise value of an NHL franchise, combined with the value of team-related businesses and real estate holdings."

The Toronto Maple Leafs ranked first at an estimated valuation of \$4.25 billion, while the Columbus Blue Jackets rank last at \$1.3 billion.

Last year, the value of the Sabres, who start their 2025-26 regular season next week, was estimated

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### ANALYSIS

## A more polarized Senate is driving shutdown gridlock

BY CARL HULSE  
New York Times

WASHINGTON – The last time Senate Democrats found themselves taking the blame for a government shutdown, they quickly caved and raced to reopen federal agencies in 2018, as their more moderate members demanded a fast resolution after only three days.

This shutdown could be different.

The Democrats from red states who decried the shutdown strategy as a foolish miscalculation and pressed for an immediate reversal in

the showdown with President Trump seven years ago are long gone.

The ideological makeup of the party has shifted to the left, and Democrats are bracing for an extended confrontation with the White House and congressional Republicans, despite the clear political risks. The same dynamic is at play in the GOP, which has lurched to the right under Trump and no longer sees room for compromise.

Democrats believe they have a powerful message on health

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### WEATHER

Partly sunny and pleasant. High 73, low 52. Details on Page B8



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