

## Growth

From A1

The GDP report also showed that despite the robust pace of growth in the October-December quarter, inflationary measures continued to ease. Consumer prices rose at a 1.7% annual rate, down from 2.6% in the third quarter.

And excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called core inflation came in at a 2% annual rate.

Those inflation numbers could reassure the Federal Reserve’s policymakers, who already suggested they expect to cut their benchmark interest rate three times in 2024, reversing their 2022-2023 policy of aggressively raising rates to fight inflation. Some economists think the Fed could begin cutting rates as early as May.

Nathan Sheets, global chief economist at Citi, said that re-

cent experience suggests that economic growth can remain solid even as inflation cools.

“It underscores for the Fed that they don’t have to be in a hurry” to ease borrowing rates to aid the economy, said Sheets, who thinks the first rate cut will occur in June.

### Political outlook

After an extended period of gloom, Americans are starting to feel somewhat better about inflation and the economy — a trend that could sustain consumer spending, fuel economic growth and potentially affect voters’ decisions this fall. A measure of consumer sentiment by the University of Michigan, for example, has jumped in the past two months by the most since 1991.

There is growing optimism that the Fed is on track to deliver a rare “soft landing” — keeping borrowing rates high enough to cool growth, hiring and inflation

yet not so much as to send the economy into a tailspin.

Inflation touched a four-decade high in 2022 but has since edged steadily lower without the painful layoffs that most economists thought would be necessary to slow the acceleration of prices.

The economy has repeatedly defied predictions that the Fed’s aggressive rate hikes would trigger a recession. Far from collapsing last year, the economy accelerated — expanding 2.5%, up from 1.9% in 2022.

“Our expectation is for a soft landing, and it looks like things are moving that way,” said Beth Ann Bovino, chief economist at U.S. Bank. Still, Bovino expects the economy to slow somewhat this year as higher rates weaken borrowing and spending. “People are going to get squeezed,” she said.

At an appearance Thursday, President Joe Biden pointed to the strength of the GDP report

to tout his stewardship of the economy.

“The experts from the time I got elected were insisting that a recession was just around the corner,” he said during a visit to the swing state of Wisconsin. “‘Every month there’s gonna be a recession.’ Well, you know, we’ve got really strong growth.”

### A mixed picture

The economy’s outlook looked far bleaker a year ago. As recently as April 2023, an economic model published by the Conference Board, a business group, pegged the likelihood of a U.S. recession over the next 12 months at close to 99%.

Even as inflation in the United States slowed significantly, overall prices remain nearly 17% above where they were before the pandemic erupted three years ago, which has exasperated many Americans.

That fact will likely raise a pivotal question for the nation’s

voters, many of whom are still feeling the lingering financial and psychological effects of the worst bout of inflation in four decades. Which will carry more weight in the presidential election: The sharp drop in inflation or the fact that most prices are well above where they were three years ago?

Grocery inflation has plummeted from a year-over-year peak of 13.5% in August 2022 to just 1.3%, but a typical basket of groceries still costs 20% more than it did in February 2021, just before inflation began to accelerate. On average, chicken prices are up 25%. So, too, is bread. Milk is 18% more expensive than it was before the pandemic.

The cost to rent an apartment also soared and is still rising faster than before the pandemic. Rental costs are up 6.5% from a year earlier, nearly twice the pre-pandemic pace. At their peak in early 2023, rents rose almost 9% annually.

## Grooming

From A1

the Iowa Department of Education, said the bill allows the Board of Educational Examiners to take disciplinary action against licensed educators for “more nuanced forms of inappropriate relationships” with students.

Groups representing Iowa teachers and school administrators raised concerns about trying to define “grooming.” They said the wording in the bill was too broad and could discourage educators from forming close connections and having one-on-one interactions with students that are not inappropriate or sexual in nature.

“I will tell you grooming is a problem,” said Melissa Peterson, a lobbyist representing the Iowa State Education Association teachers union. “And we absolutely have no interest in doing anything to protect bad apples. ... That being said, again, we want to make sure we aren’t unnecessarily creating conditions where someone could fall under what this definition is just because they’re doing their job.”

House Study Bill 568 defines “grooming behavior” as “engaging in a pattern of flirtatious behavior, making any effort to gain unreasonable access to, or time alone with any student with

no discernible educational purpose,” and any behavior “that can reasonably be construed as involving an inappropriate, overly personal, or intimate relationship with or conduct toward or focus on a student, and engaging in any other individualized, special treatment not in compliance with generally accepted educational practices.”

Iowa Department of Education officials said their language came from a national organization of professionals that deal with teacher licensure.

“The point of this bill is to get a foothold into this issue so the DOE can take action in light of all of the evidence brought before them to consider,” St. Clair said.

### Supreme Court decision

Emily Piper, a lobbyist representing the Iowa Association of School Boards, recommended the bill be amended to include language from a 2018 Iowa Supreme Court decision that affirmed the conviction of an Eastern Iowa high school teacher who exchanged intimate Facebook messages and repeatedly hugged one of his underage students both at and away from school.

Bradley Wickes, a former social studies teacher at Camanche High School, challenged the District Court findings that his hugs with a student constituted “sexual conduct” under Iowa Code.

He also argued prosecutors failed to provide sufficient evidence to show he engaged in a pattern, practice or scheme of conduct to engage in sexual conduct with a student.

“It is important to note that nothing should prohibit teachers from hugging students for reassurance, comfort, or in congratulation without putting themselves at risk of being charged with the crime of sexual exploitation,” then-Justice Bruce Zager wrote in the court’s opinion.

But Wickes’ behavior “went far beyond a teacher trying to comfort and reassure a struggling student,” the court wrote.

The justices agreed with prosecutors and the lower court that the more than 600 pages of Facebook messages between Wickes and the student became flirtatious and sexual in nature and showed that the hugs the two exchanged were for the purpose of Wickes’ sexual gratification.

To determine whether Wickes engaged in “grooming,” justices wrote it required examining the actions of the teacher “in light of all of the circumstances to determine if the conduct at issue was sexual and done for the purposes of arousing or satisfying the sexual desires” of the teacher or the student.

Nathan Arnold, a lobbyist representing Professional Educators of Iowa, said schools have to re-

main “vigilant” in spotting and reporting abuse and misconduct, but raised concerns the bill “creates a presumption of guilt.”

Arnold read incidents he said have been listed by attorneys hired by school districts as grooming behavior by teachers. They included asking a student how many siblings they had and emailing students outside school hours.

While the problem identified by the Department of Education “is very real,” Arnold said the difficulty is using the word “grooming.”

“Except in very specific criminal context, (it) doesn’t really work as a legal term with any real definition or meaning,” he said. “... It is more of an internet smear than it is a workable legal standard.”

Arnold said the bill would have a “chilling effect” on teachers forming connections with their students “if there’s some sort of a stigma about meeting with a student.”

### Another bill advances

Lawmakers on a Judiciary subcommittee advanced a separate bill Wednesday that defined grooming as a crime in Iowa law and created penalties for violating the law.

The bill, House Study Bill 575, defines grooming as using the internet, written communications or in-person interactions to

“seduce, solicit, lure, or entice,” a child, child’s guardian or a person believed to be a child to commit a sex act.

Although lawmakers advanced the bill, members of the three-person subcommittee said they had a number of questions about why the bill was proposed and how it was worded.

Rep. Phil Thompson, R-Boone, said he’d like to speak with county attorneys about the necessity of the bill before moving it further along in the lawmaking process.

### ‘Common ground’

House Study Bill 568 passed the Education subcommittee on a 2-1 vote.

Rep. Sharon Steckman, D-Mason City, declined to sign off on it, wanting to see language of the proposed amendment by the Iowa Association of School Boards.

Reps. Bill Gustoff, R-Des Moines, and Brooke Boden, R-Indianola, said they agree with aim of the bill and voted to advance it to continue discussion.

Boden said school districts have asked for more detailed guidelines, and she believes the bill will help the Board of Educational Examiners “make better decisions and maybe expedite the process as well.”

“I agree that there’s maybe some (alternative) language we can look at here to find common ground,” she said.

## Doctors

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Tom Chapman, executive director of the Iowa Catholic Conference, said providers should have a right to exercise their conscience when dealing with patients. He pointed to existing protections for doctors who refuse to perform abortions and said the bill is an extension of that policy.

“No medical practitioner should be forced to participate in a procedure or medication to which he or she has an objection of conscience, or violate their oath to do no harm,” he said.

Opponents, though, said the bill could endanger patients and elevates the interest of providers over the health and needs of patients.

They said the effects would be particularly dire in Iowa, where rural populations face a severe lack of access to quality health care. Iowa is ranked among the

worst states in the nation for access to maternal health care.

“I have not once seen a health care worker forced to do something they don’t want to do,” said Francesca Turner, an OB-GYN at Broadlawns Medical Center in Des Moines. “Pharmacists refusing prescriptions and doctors denying care, especially in rural Iowa, will only exacerbate the already dire health care crisis in our state.”

A growing number of states have adopted similar laws, sometimes called “medical refusal bills.” Lawmakers in Florida and Montana both passed similar laws last year. Iowa lawmakers have also considered similar provisions in past years, but they have not been signed into law.

Maizie Stilwell, a lobbyist for Planned Parenthood Advocates of Iowa, said the proposed bill is “more extreme” than what has been put forward in the past and mirrors what other states have put in place.

“There is no original thought in this bill,” she told lawmakers on Wednesday. “What we have seen is that this is a culmination of all of these extreme provisions that we’ve seen shopped across the country all put into one bill.”

### Protecting beliefs

Existing state law already allows doctors to refuse to perform abortions based on their religious belief or moral convictions. The bill would add to those protections and require providers to offer prior written consent before being asked to perform or assist in an abortion.

Medical institutions and practitioners would be protected from discrimination based on their refusal. Practitioners could not be denied privileges or public benefits based on their decision to opt out.

Providers would receive whistleblower protections from retaliations if they report a facility for

violating the conscience objection law.

The bill would also protect doctors and other providers from being punished or having their license revoked by a state entity based on First Amendment protected speech, unless that speech directly harmed a patient.

### Pressure on procedures

The bill was advanced by a three-person Senate subcommittee on Wednesday. Republican Sens. Jason Schultz of Schleswig and Jeff Taylor of Sioux Center voted to advance the bill, while Democratic Sen. Janet Peterson of Des Moines voted against it.

Taylor said he had heard from medical students in past years who were concerned they would be pressured to perform procedures during their training they have a moral objection to. He invoked the Hippocratic Oath and said the bill would protect providers who do not want to perform

procedures they think would harm patients.

“The whole idea of, first, do no harm – We don’t always agree on what harm is,” he said. “Harm versus health, two medical professionals who have been well-educated and have lots of years of experience may see those in diametrically opposed ways.”

Peterson said she had not heard from any physician who said they had been pressured to perform a procedure against their moral beliefs. She said the bill would further strain health care for women.

“I think this bill is trying to fix something that is not broken,” she said. “I have yet to see a single example come forward. I also have an extreme level of concern about the number of bills that we continue to see going after Iowa’s access to health care.”

After passing the subcommittee, the bill is now eligible for a vote in the full Senate Judiciary Committee.

## THE COURIER

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