



Weather

Partly Cloudy; high 84, low 66

Saturday: Sunny; high 88, low 69



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Local



UI junior Adelaide Muir wins Metropolitan Opera National Council regional auditions
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Volition head honcho talks about the multi-million dollar industry of video games.
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Nations New Nickel
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Bush signs anti-abortion bill

'Highly suspect' law causes non-conservative backlash

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Bush signed into law the most far-reaching abortion restrictions in three decades Wednesday, an emotionally charged measure already challenged in three federal courts.

A federal judge in Nebraska called the law "highly suspect" and issued a temporary order blocking it from applying to four abortion-rights doctors who filed suit.

After years of frustration, legal setbacks and two presidential vetoes, hundreds of anti-abortion leaders rose in applause when Bush promised to vigorously defend the constitutionality of the law, known by its supporters as a "partial-birth abortion" ban.

"For years, a terrible form of violence has been directed against children who are inches from birth while the law looked the other way," Bush told religious leaders,

members of Congress and other abortion foes at a signing ceremony at the Ronald Reagan Building. "Today, at last the American people and our government have confronted the violence and come to the defense of the innocent child."

Abortion-rights groups said the law was overly broad, lacked any exemption for the health of a woman seeking an abortion and could outlaw several safe and common procedures. They also contended it

was the first step in a larger campaign to ban all abortions for the first time since the Supreme Court's 1973 landmark decision legalizing the procedure.

"This bill marks a concerted effort to set back decades of progress in achieving reproductive freedom," said Gloria Feldt, president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, which filed suit against the measure in San Francisco.

The bill gave Bush a major victory to show religious conservatives on the eve of a re-election year. But it also revived debate on a polarizing issue that could undercut his hopes of winning support from swing voters.

The bill outlaws a procedure generally performed in the second or third trimester in which a fetus is partially delivered before being

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HMO prices continue to rise

By **DEBRA PRESSEY**
News-Gazette Staff Writer

CHAMPAIGN — HMO premiums continued to rise last year for customers of Illinois managed care companies, but the additional dollars didn't necessarily buy more patient care, the Illinois State Medical Society says.

In a study released last month, the statewide doctors' organization found Illinois consumers who receive their health insurance through health maintenance organization plans paid nearly 13 percent more for their premiums in 2002 than they did the previous year.

The medical society looked at 24 HMOs that do more than 10 percent of their business in Illinois, among them Health Alliance Medical Plans in Urbana and Champaign-based PersonalCare, which is owned by Bethesda, Md.-based Coventry Health Care. Both plans

How does your HMO stack up?	
Illinois consumers pay more, but with less return.	
Champaign	Personal Care
Premium increase: 13%	Annual Premium: \$2,252
Urbana	Healthcare Alliance
Increase since 2001: 20.9%	Annual Premium: \$2,793
Illinois (state average)	
Increase since 2001: 12.7%	Annual Premium: \$2,157

Source: Illinois State Medical Society
Graphic by Sterling Sanders

also provide services in Vermilion County.

The study focused only on the companies' HMOs. The organization said comparable information wasn't available for other kinds of plans, such as PPOs, or Preferred Provider Organization plans.

Both PersonalCare and Health Alliance offer other kinds of plans, but the majority of their business is in HMOs, company officials said.

The medical society found 17 of the 24 HMOs, among them Health

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Illinois and Exelon seek power through merger

By **KATE CLEMENTS**
News-Gazette Capitol Bureau Chief

SPRINGFIELD — Illinois Power and Exelon Corp. won the first battle Wednesday in their fight to speed approval of a merger of the two utilities and the rate hike on which that deal hinges.

On a 7-3 vote, a Senate committee approved legislation that would allow the Illinois Commerce Commission to conduct a review of the proposed sale of Illinois Power within nine months, rather than 11, and to set rates now for 2007 through 2010.

The measure, an amendment to House Bill 2200, could be heard in the full Senate as soon as Thursday.

Exelon is seeking early permission to boost the prices its subsidiary, Commonwealth Edison, and Illinois Power are each allowed to charge when the state's mandated freeze on rates is lifted Dec. 31, 2006.

The increase of up to 9 percent would impact 85 percent of the state's power customers, costing the average residential customer as much as \$65 more a year, ac-

ording to Citizens Utility Board. Exelon has reserved the right to back out of its agreement to buy Illinois Power if that increase is not granted.

State Sen. James Clayborne, D-Belleville, emphasized repeatedly that the bill he is sponsoring does not specifically call for or require a rate increase, leaving that decision entirely in the hands of the Illinois Commerce Commission.

But consumer advocates, including Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn and Attorney General Lisa Madigan,

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School behavior is on the decline

Suspensions are at an all time high

By **ANNE COOK**
News-Gazette Staff Writer

URBANA — Equity and school climate reports suggest Urbana students' behavior in schools has deteriorated, and officials say they're stepping up enforcement.

They also say they're collecting more details every year about behavior infractions and that action

likely had an impact on data detailing suspensions and infractions from 1998 through the 2002-2003 school year.

"We find many students think if teachers ask them to change their seat, it's debatable," Urbana High School Principal John Woodward told school board members Tuesday of the climate at his building. "We've noticed a number of students using profanity to each other in the halls."

"We've told students there will be a higher level of enforcement," Woodward continued. "We've no-

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Armory readies for reopening



University of Illinois maintenance employees, from left, Justin Willis, Carlos Lattimore and John Dempsey (with rake, out of picture) place the last load of sand into the long jump pits on Wednesday afternoon on the UI Armory floor in Champaign.
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Soldiers killed in ambush

WASHINGTON (AP) — Just days before U.S.-led forces invaded Iraq, officials claiming to speak for a frantic Iraqi regime made a last-ditch effort to avert the war, but U.S. officials rebuffed the overture, the intermediary and U.S. officials said to

An influential adviser to the Defense Department received a secret message from a Lebanese-American businessman indicating that Saddam Hussein wanted to make a deal, they said. The businessman, Imad Hage, told the Associated Press today that he believes an opportunity was missed.

But senior U.S. defense and intelligence officials said today the war could not have been averted by the offer; numerous such prewar leads were pursued, they said, and the Bush administration viewed them largely as stalling tactics.

"The regime of Saddam Hussein had ample — well beyond ample — opportunity to avoid war," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told a Pentagon press conference.

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