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CATHY WURZER: This is *Minnesota Now*. I'm Cathy Wurzer. We'll look at violent crime in the state of Minnesota. It is up, according to the Minnesota BCA. It's up in the Twin Cities and in greater Minnesota. Minnesota's Sun Country Airlines turned 40 this year. We'll find out about its turbulent journey.

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Coming up also, we'll talk about an effort in Duluth to revitalize downtown and support BIPOC entrepreneurs. We'll hear about its successes and challenges so far. The band Salsa Del Sol, of course, is a band that many Minnesotans know and love. They're touring all over the state this summer. We'll talk about what's inspiring them. We'll also have the Song of the Day and the Minnesota Music Minute.

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Right now, the news.

LAKSHMI SINGH: Live from NPR News in Washington, I'm Lakshmi Singh. President Biden is expected to sign a sweeping tax, health and climate bill when he returns from vacation this week. NPR's Windsor Johnston reports the legislation, which is a core piece of Biden's agenda, is being touted as a legislative win for Democrats ahead of the midterm elections.

WINDSOR JOHNSTON: President Biden and members of his cabinet are expected to crisscross the country in the coming weeks to highlight the specifics of the bill. After more than a year of deadlocked negotiations, Democrats were able to reach a compromise on key provisions of the legislation, including the largest investment ever to fight climate change. With inflation at a record high, Democrats have touted the bill as a way to reduce everyday prices. The measure will help lower the cost of prescription drugs and federal health care premiums. It also caps out-of-pocket expenses at \$2,000 per year. The bill passed both the House and Senate last week, with no support from congressional Republicans. Windsor Johnston, NPR News, Washington.

LAKSHMI SINGH: Oil prices continue to fall from their recent highs. NPR's Scott Horsley reports the benchmark price for US crude oil has fallen below \$90 a barrel.

SCOTT HORSLEY: Sky-high oil prices in the spring produced a gusher of profits for energy companies. Saudi Aramco said over the weekend its second quarter earnings top \$48 billion, a 90% increase from a year ago. Oil prices have since dipped, however, partly on fears of a global economic slowdown. AAA says the average price of gasoline has dropped below \$3.96 a gallon.

As gas prices fall, shoppers have more to spend elsewhere. The Commerce Department is set to report this week on how retail sales fared in July. Scott Horsley, NPR News, Washington.

LAKSHMI SINGH: A Maryland company is asking the Food and Drug Administration to authorize a new COVID-19 booster. Here's NPR's Rob Stein.

ROB STEIN: A company called Novavax wants the FDA to authorize its vaccine as an alternative booster for anyone age 18 or older who was previously vaccinated with any of the COVID-19 vaccines. The FDA authorized the Novavax shots as a primary vaccine in July in the hopes that it might entice some of the people who still haven't gotten vaccinated. The Novavax vaccine uses a more traditional technology than the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech mRNA vaccines. Federal officials have been urging more people to get boosters to protect them against the highly transmissible BA.5 omicron subvariant, which has been driving a new surge of infections, even among people who have been previously vaccinated or infected. Rob Stein, NPR News.

LAKSHMI SINGH: Anne Heche was taken off life support last night. The actress was declared legally dead in California last Friday, following severe injuries she sustained in a fiery car crash August 5th. But she was kept on life support as doctors worked to determine if she was an organ match. Reports state at least one match was found. This is NPR News.

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CATHY WURZER: Around Minnesota right now, skies are a mix of clouds and sun. There's a chance of showers and thunderstorms today. Highs will be in the lower 70s and lower 80s. At noon in Fergus Falls, it's sunny and 75. It's 63 in Hibbing. And outside the Iron Skillet in Albert Lea, it's 68.

I'm Cathy Wurzer with Minnesota news headlines. Two former Minneapolis police officers rejected last and final plea deals in state court today for their roles in the killing of George Floyd. Jon Collins has more.

JON COLLINS: Prosecutors say they offered Tou Thao and J. Alexander Kueng a 36-month prison sentence in exchange for pleading guilty on manslaughter charges. Thao and Kueng both rejected the plea deal. In court, Thao said it would be a lie and a sin for him to plead guilty. Their former colleague took the same deal in May. The presumptive sentence for the top charge they face of aiding and abetting murder is 150 months, but prosecutors are arguing for a harsher sentence. I'm Jon Collins, Minneapolis.

CATHY WURZER: 15,000 nurses will vote today on a potential strike that could affect a range of health service providers across the Twin Cities and the Twin Ports. We have more from Tim Nelson.

TIM NELSON: The Minnesota Nurses Association says nurses are working without a contract following five months of labor negotiations with hospital systems in the region. Nurses staged informational picketing at more than a dozen hospitals in June. MNA president Mary Turner said in a statement that nurses are concerned about staffing levels and believe hospital executives are putting profits before patient care.

Hospital systems like St. Luke's in Duluth say facilities like theirs aren't profitable, that nurses' demands aren't aimed at better care, and that the pandemic has posed unprecedented staffing challenges. Voting is scheduled to take place through the day, with results possible later tonight. Two thirds support of the strike authorization would allow union leaders to call a strike with a 10-day notice to employers. I'm Tim Nelson.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CATHY Crime is one of the campaign issues in this fall's election. It's likely to increase in attention, given a report that
WURZER: came out late Friday. That's when the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension released a summary of crime numbers statewide for 2021. Violent crime is up statewide by 21%. That's not only in the Twin Cities, where crime was up by nearly 24%, but violent crime homicides, rape, assault is also up in greater Minnesota by 16%.

The report prompted some GOP hopefuls to blame DFL incumbents for their so-called soft on crime policies. But that's not quite accurate. To give us more insight and some perspective, I'm talking with Thomas Abt. He's a senior fellow at the Council on Criminal Justice in New York. Thomas Abt, welcome to the program.

THOMAS ABT: Good to be with you.

CATHY So as I mentioned, in Minnesota, violent crime, according to our BCA, is up substantially, double digits, by more
WURZER: than 20%. I know you've been tracking crime numbers in communities across the country. What did you see happen in 2021?

THOMAS ABT: Sure. I think the numbers that we see in the Minnesota report largely track the numbers that we've seen across the country. In 2021, there was a 5% increase in homicide in most cities overall. That's a 5% increase over 2020, which was a historic year, unfortunately, for homicide, where there was a 29% increase from the previous year. Aggravated and gun assaults rates were also up slightly, 4% and 8%, respectively. But property crime actually fell in 2021 across most cities in the United States.

CATHY Hm. I'm wondering about the homicide rates, the homicide rates and the aggravated assaults being so high. Why
WURZER: do you think that is?

THOMAS ABT: Well, it's very hard to understand crime trends as they're happening. And even looking backwards, it can be difficult. But experts generally agree on three major likely causes. The first, of course, is the pandemic itself, which placed the individuals who are at the highest risk for gun violence under enormous strain. But the pandemic also put the institutions that are responsible for engaging those individuals-- cops, courts, corrections, community-based organizations, and others-- it placed all of those institutions under tremendous strain, as well. So that's the first reason.

The second reason is the unrest following the murder of George Floyd, as your listeners well know in Minneapolis. There was a nationwide significant spike in violence in 2020 immediately after that event, and rates have increased ever since. And then finally, guns. There was a very large surge in legally purchased guns beginning at the beginning of the pandemic. And unfortunately, of those legally purchased guns, a larger share than normal have been actually getting into the wrong hands and finding their way to crime scenes.

CATHY I'm wondering, who do we know is committing the crime?

WURZER:

THOMAS ABT: Well, in relation to gun violence, we know that it is typically perpetrated by a small number of at-risk individuals, usually young men without a lot of opportunity or much hope. And it's important for your listeners to understand that this gun violence is much more concentrated than you might think. It's not concentrated generically among large classes of people or in whole neighborhoods. It's concentrated in microlocations, often known as hotspots, a particular nightclub or a particular liquor store or something like that, and it's concentrated among very small networks of young men, who are often involved in sort of back-and-forth retaliatory violence against one another.

CATHY Gang-related?

WURZER:

THOMAS ABT: Well, it can be gang-related, but the term gang means so many things to different people. So it could be gang-related. It could be crew, set, clique, whatever you want to call it. Gang sometimes implies that this violence is more organized than it actually is. But it is groups of young men acting against one another.

CATHY I remember talking to a local criminologist a few years ago. We were talking about violence at that time had also
WURZER: spiked, had gone up. And he had said that it's cyclical. It depends-- when you look at the young folks coming up, it's not always high. It's like a roller coaster. It goes up and down and up and down. Is that right?

THOMAS ABT: Well, I think that it certainly varies year to year, but I don't know if it's a concrete cycle. I don't think we can predict with certainty when violence is going to go up or down. We did see a significant surge, however, in the aftermath of the death of Michael Brown in Missouri. And so that may have been connected to the social unrest following the murder there, or the killing there, excuse me, and similar to what happened in 2020.

CATHY I know that this is going to be upsetting for a number of people, but when it comes to the number of rapes, that
WURZER: has increased 7% in Minnesota statewide, as much as 30% in one county. What are you seeing across the country when it comes to sexual assault?

THOMAS ABT: Sexual assault was not covered by our report. And the reason it was not covered is because the data city to city, in terms of reporting, is very spotty. And there's not always a very consistent methodology by how those sexual assaults are counted. And so one thing I would say is that is a very disturbing increase, but you need to look closely at the reporting practices of your particular jurisdictions.

CATHY When you look at crime stats across the country-- and of course, people can use these figures for-- especially
WURZER: when it comes to the politics of crime-- what's the big takeaway for you as you examine these?

THOMAS ABT: I think one thing to note is that violent crime, particularly gun violence, has been up everywhere. It's been up in red states, in blue states, in red cities, in blue cities. There's really not one political party that's associated with this rise in violence. And I also think it's important, as we examine what to do about this, to sort of avoid some of the easy answers.

I think that we see sort of a false choice that's being presented to people in the public that this is either all about getting tough and adding more police and those things or it's all about social justice and reducing mass incarceration. And I think it's important for people to know that we need a balanced set of responses. We need to continue to reform our criminal justice system while paying close attention to violent crime, and that we can do both at the same time.

CATHY All right. Thomas Abt, I appreciate your time. Thank you so very much.

WURZER:

THOMAS ABT: Pleasure to be with you.

CATHY Thomas Abt is a senior fellow at the Council on Criminal Justice, located in New York.

WURZER:

[MUSIC PLAYING]

(SINGING) The last time that I saw you, you had me housed up on your red, red rum. Stranded in the housing of our moving house and we were going to hit every port and every cape town.

It's your Minnesota Music Minute. I love this. This is *Alaskans* from Volcano Choir. The band is Bon Iver's Justin Vernon and members of Milwaukee band Collections of Colonies of Bees.

(SINGING) --new cohort. Damn, can't believe your father left his land. The creed--

12:15 here in Minnesota now from MPR. I'm Cathy Wurzer. Minnesota's Sun Country Airlines has had a pretty turbulent trip to where it is today. The airline, which turned 40 years old this year, barely survived its former owner Tom Petters' Ponzi scheme and a subsequent bankruptcy. But the airline went public last year, and says it's continuing to grow.

That's even after major missteps earlier this year that left travelers fuming. The story of Sun Country Airlines is pretty interesting. So we called Kyle Potter. He's the executive editor of the travel website Thrifty Traveler. He recently wrote about Sun Country. Hey, welcome back, Kyle. How are you?

KYLE POTTER: I'm great, Cathy. Thanks for having me.

CATHY WURZER: Good. Thanks for being here. I had forgotten that Sun Country was founded by the former employees of Braniff Airlines.

KYLE POTTER: You know what? This airline has such a fascinating history. And basically, we're right around the corner, if we haven't passed it already, they are now 40 years old. So there are a lot of ups and downs in the history of Sun Country, as we're going to talk about.

CATHY WURZER: No kidding. So let's start with the-- we'll start at the beginning. Why not? What was the reason that the Twin Cities was the home base for Sun Country? Do you know?

KYLE POTTER: You know, I would have to go look back at some of the stories. But the long and short of it is that Minneapolis really just needed an airline like this. It needed an airline that was focused primarily on carrying people to vacation-centric destinations, going south when it gets cold and going east to west when it's warmer in the summers. And that's a role that, despite all of the changes that Sun Country has been through over the last four decades, that has really been the DNA of the airline. It's just gone about it in several different ways. And as we'll talk about, and as we all know, it hasn't always been so smooth.

CATHY WURZER: No, it has not. I know, of course, it went bankrupt in 2008. So it barely survived at that point. And that was with the Tom Petters-- that's when Petters owned Sun Country, who was part of that big Ponzi scheme?

KYLE POTTER: Yeah. And you know what? That is an ugly and, I think, often forgotten part about Sun Country's history, because the last decade, in particular, has also seen a lot of changes that I think, in the minds of many Minnesotans, has kind of outweighed that more sordid part of its history. But it did make it through and changed a lot in the ensuing decade and a half at this point.

CATHY WURZER: Who was behind the transformation?

KYLE POTTER: You know, it's a couple of key changes. The first was, as Sun Country eventually got bought out by the Davis brothers, who own Cambria, they quickly brought on-- or not quickly, but eventually brought on a CEO from Allegiant Airlines, which isn't too well-known here in the Midwest, although we do have some Allegiant flights taking off from MSP these days. But this is really the most budget of budget airlines in the country. And so that brought on some changes, some very, very fundamental business changes. And then eventually, those were fueled, in part, by the acquisition by the Apollo Group, basically a New York-based hedge fund.

And so it really had a big DNA change, in terms of what Sun Country was. To that point, they had really been a beloved local airline by Minnesotans, for Minnesotans. And of course, Minnesotans love that story. Any company that can say that, they already are winning in Minnesotans' books.

CATHY Right. And--

WURZER:

KYLE POTTER: And in doing that transition, they really became more like a budget airline. So that means smaller seats, more fees, paying to pick your seats, let alone check a bag or bring a carry-on. So there were some big changes, in addition to the fact that they took the first-class seats out of Sun Country's planes over the course of a couple of years after these two really fundamental changes, bringing on a new CEO and a new ownership group.

CATHY I know there was grousing, but-- and revenue leapt from 300 and what, 308 million in 2011 to 709 million in

WURZER: 2019. I mean, the profits have been increasing. So they must be doing something right.

KYLE POTTER: Well, exactly. And when I spoke with CEO Jude Bricker last month, that was the point that they made, was that they came to a fork in the road, where Sun Country needed to decide, was it going to be the beloved local hometown airline that lost money or barely eked out profits, even in the boom times of heading into just those pre-pandemic years, or was it going to change course and become an airline that was sustainable and could grow?

And clearly, they picked the latter choice. It upset a lot of people here locally, but they still have a healthy airline that they can fly when they want to. And I don't want to say that Sun Country would have gone out of business eventually had they not made this pivot, but certainly they are on a much better path financially and sustainably as an airline.

CATHY What was the calculus behind going public last year, the risks versus the benefits of doing that?

WURZER:

KYLE POTTER: The biggest thing is an airline-- Sun Country has a big presence here in Minneapolis, but if you look over the course of airlines nationwide, they are very small. And growing when you don't have access to public markets as an airline is incredibly difficult. And so I think that combined with the fact that the folks who run the airline rightly saw that there was going to be an explosion in everyday travelers looking to get out after the worst of COVID, and looking to do so for cheap, I think they timed it right, ironically. It seemed very odd at the time, in March 2021, when they went public, that this was the time of all times to take an airline public, but getting ahead of the curve that we're clearly on right now, where people are just itching, coming out of the woodwork to go on vacation, getting those building blocks in place was really critical to get Sun Country to the point where it is today.

CATHY But not without its problems. Obviously, there were the flight cancellations that stranded passengers earlier this year. That was a mess. How much of a hit did they take? PR-wise, how much of a hit did they take?

WURZER:

KYLE POTTER: You know, I don't know that it's so much about what's happened this year or within the last year because Sun Country is not alone. Every single airline, big and small, across the country has suffered delays and cancellations. So I think that has kind of buffeted whatever the blowback would have been just from this year.

I do think, however, that Sun Country is still paying the price for what happened in 2018, when there was a historic snowstorm that just absolutely gobsnacked MSP. And Sun Country was at the end of its summer season at several airports down in Mexico. And it wound up stranding more than 300 passengers in a foreign country for several days, and left them to their own devices to make it back home.

I think every single time Sun Country is in the headlines, whether it's a good story or bad, that story from now four plus years ago still gets brought up. I think it's really been seared into the minds of Minnesotans. And I think the airline is still paying a price for that.

CATHY I wonder, then, I understand that the CEO told you that they're looking at flights to Europe in the future?

WURZER:

KYLE POTTER: You know, I think that's a lofty goal. And I think CEO Jude Bricker has said as much, that this is not something that they're thinking about anytime in the near future, that this is a three to five or more year goal that they have. But you know, Sun Country is growing. And as an airline grows, they have to think bigger and they have to find new markets to fly to.

And what he told me was basically, if you want to make money in the summer, which, especially for Sun Country, where so much of its business is on flying Minnesotans to California and Arizona and Mexico in the winter, if you want to make money in the summer and find a new market, there's no better market than flying over to Europe. So I don't know if this is ever going to happen.

If it does happen, I don't know that means that there will be nonstop flights from Minneapolis to places like Paris or London or Rome or anything like that. But I do think it's on their radar. And for the first time probably in company history, aside from a very, very brief, strange flight that they ran to London for just a brief summer in 2010, I believe, this is now a possible, feasible goal, again, five years down the line.

CATHY I wonder if they're able to pull it off, given all the snafus that occurred when they added the Vancouver flights.

WURZER: Remember that?

KYLE POTTER: Yeah, exactly. You know, and there have no doubt been some growing pains. And I think that's a big part of why this is not a we're going to do this in summer 2023, let alone this summer, next summer, the following, but several years down the line, is that every airline needs to grow back to where it needs to be in order to not have these kind of snafus. And that's a process that still is probably going to take most airlines several years.

CATHY You know, before you go here, we were talking about passenger flights and passenger travel, that kind of thing.

WURZER: I'm wondering, though, how big of a deal is it to the company's future to have this partnership with Amazon?

KYLE POTTER: I think it's massive. Cargo was a lifeline for every airline in the country during the worst of the pandemic. And Sun Country could not have timed that contract with Amazon any better. They very, very quickly scaled up their cargo operation on behalf of Amazon in 2020. And it's reliable. You know, when passengers come and go, it really doesn't matter. You can still run those cargo flights. And that is a sustainable lifeline for any airline. The fact that that is now in the mix for Sun Country is really important.

And I think it's going to be kind of a leading indicator, I guess, of where they go next, because I think a lot of the decisions that they make-- for example, flying to Europe, if they ever do it-- is probably going to be based upon inking something to do more with cargo first. So for example, getting the kinds of wide-body jets with two aisles that you need in order to fly all the way over to Europe, they're going to have to expand their cargo relationships, either with Amazon or another carrier, first in order to make that kind of a step for passengers.

CATHY Hm. All right, Kyle, thank you so much for the conversation.

WURZER:

KYLE POTTER: Always a pleasure, Cathy.

CATHY been talking to Kyle Potter. He's the executive editor of the travel website Thrifty Traveler.

WURZER:

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CATHY Well, we have a mix of sun and cloud cover out there this morning with-- this afternoon, sorry about that. It's raining right now at the Duluth Harbor, 59 degrees. Some light rain reported around Sioux Falls. Worthington has some light rain right now, 65 degrees. There is a chance of showers and thunderstorms here today.

WURZER:

Highs will be in the lower 70s to the lower 80s. Slight chance of rain tonight. And there's also a chance for some rain tomorrow. Kind of a coolish week this week with fits and starts when it comes to rain. More rain by the end of the week. Highs will be in the 70s for the most part. 68 degrees right now in Winona. It's a beautiful day in Winona. It's partly sunny there.

70 in Austin and Albert Lea. Partly sunny in Brainerd, where it's 70. 73 and sunny in Appleton. Grand Marais, mix of sun and cloud cover, 16, Grand Marais. A little bit of fog also. Fargo, Moorhead, mostly sunny and 73 in the Twin Cities. Skies are cloudy, and it's 71 degrees.

Say a reminder, if you have an idea for us, if you have a person we should talk to, a story idea, place we should go, why don't you send us an email? We have such great ideas from listeners. We, of COURSE take them. And we have some great stuff coming up here in the next few weeks from listeners, listener ideas.

Here's how you send us the email. It's minnesotanow@mpr.org, minnesotanow@mpr.org. We appreciate your comments as well, so keep them coming.

Todd Melby is standing by with a look at regional news at 12:28. Todd.

TODD MELBY: Thanks, Cathy. Two former Minneapolis police officers rejected last and final plea deals in state court today for their roles in George Floyd's killing. Prosecutors say they offered Tou Thao and J. Alexander Kueng a 36-month prison sentence in exchange for pleading guilty on manslaughter charges. Thao and Kueng both rejected the plea deal.

China has announced more military drills around Taiwan as the self-governing island's president met with members of a new US congressional delegation. The announcement threatened to renew tensions between Beijing and Washington, just days after a similar visit by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi angered China.

An Iranian government official has denied that Tehran was involved in the assault on author Salman Rushdie. However, a spokesman for Iran's foreign ministry justified the stabbing in remarks that represented the Islamic Republic's first public comments on the attack.

Senator Lindsey Graham says he plans to appeal a federal judge's ruling that he must testify before a special grand jury in Atlanta. The panel is investigating whether then-president Donald Trump and his aides broke any laws while trying to overturn his 2020 general election loss in Georgia. The Fulton County District Attorney opened the investigation last year. Prosecutors have indicated that they want to ask Graham about phone calls they say he made to Georgia's Secretary of State and his staff following the election.

The Taliban are marking a year since they seized the Afghan capital of Kabul. The rapid takeover triggered a hasty escape of the nation's Western-backed leaders, sent the economy into a tailspin, and has fundamentally transformed the country. Today, bearded Taliban fighters staged small victory parades on foot, bicycles, and motorcycles in the streets of the capital. This is MPR News.

CATHY
WURZER: Thank you, Todd. Wherever will you live? What do you think of your town's downtown? Is it thriving or barely hanging on? For decades, suburban malls have created a competition for central shopping districts. In Duluth, the Greater Downtown Council is supporting a pop-up market, featuring nine BIPOC entrepreneurs in storefront spaces in downtown Duluth.

Now, this is not the first time they've done this. So how successful is this pop-up idea? We're going to find out. Kristi Stokes is the president of the Greater Downtown Council in Duluth. She's on the line right now to tell us about what's happening. Kristi, welcome to *Minnesota Now*.

KRISTI STOKES:Hi. Thanks so much for having me.

CATHY
WURZER: Absolutely. Gosh, I remember doing a story several years ago, I think, of-- this was the first time that Duluth, with some of the vacant storefronts, open them up to fledgling businesses rent free. And I believe it was for the holidays. And it was a big success. So what are we talking about here with the pop-up collab?

KRISTI STOKES:Yeah. So we did do many of them over the years for the holiday season. And so this time, we wanted to take a look at the summer season and going into the fall. And we teamed up with the city of Duluth 1200 Fund so that there was actually additional financial assistance for the entrepreneurs as well.

And we looked at a space that was a building that had a couple storefronts in it so that it was a larger space that had been vacant in one of our blocks. And we just saw that as an opportunity to try to fill it and try to activate it. And that's exactly what we've done.

CATHY Where exactly is the building?

WURZER:

KRISTI STOKES: It's in the 300 block of West Superior Street-- so right in our Main Street in an area where there is some retail, right near some of our banks as well. And so it just felt like an area that was just in need of some assistance and a great way to activate it.

CATHY OK. So if I were to walk into this building, what would I see?

WURZER:

KRISTI STOKES: You would see-- so we have eight entrepreneurs there. They're all BIPOC entrepreneurs. And you would find anything from cheesecakes and urban clothing to lotions, soaps, cosmetics. And it was really just a total transformation of the space. The space has been vacant for a while. And when we walked in the first time, we really had to use our imagination of how it could look.

And what was great was to see these entrepreneurs really working together and using their creativity to transform the space in a short amount of time. They painted walls. They just transformed areas. And they really have it set up as kind of individual spaces. So it's kind of like walking into a market. There is a vacant space between their two buildings. But we kind of have a hallway that sends people right between both of the buildings.

CATHY So I'm wondering about the various businesses in the collab. Tell me, give me a story about one of them that

WURZER: really excites you.

KRISTI STOKES: Oh, gosh. You know, I hate to single one out over the others. [LAUGHS] But I'll tell you one that we've seen at quite a few different markets around the area. And that is Cheesecake and Company. And so they actually make various different flavors of cheesecake. And they do it in a jar. So you can get a small jar, and you can take it with you.

And I think they've just really had some great success at different markets. And it's just fun to be able to see them growing. Of course, many of us have had to sample it already. So we know that they have various different flavors-- red velvet and Reese's peanut butter cup and cookies and cream. So just many different varieties that you can have from that too.

So it's really fun to watch them see what they're finding that they might need to be in a brick-and-mortar space versus being out at a market

CATHY I'm wondering the reaction so far. What are folks saying?

WURZER:

KRISTI STOKES: I think it's really positive. One, just the fact that the space is activated. And two, really bringing more diversity to our downtown area and lifting up individuals who might feel like they didn't have opportunities before.

And so this is really giving them an opportunity to see what is it like to have a storefront, what is it like to have to be at that storefront from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM, six days a week, and really think about the ways of, even though we had a grand opening celebration, how do you keep those people coming in your door?

And so these are all things that they're learning of, OK, we need to do some additional marketing here, or how can we connect with people better? So I think it's always a great learning experience for individuals too.

CATHY I'm in downtown Duluth at least once a month at the Alworth Building there, where our studios are, at MPR. And
WURZER: so I get the opportunity to walk the Superior Street area there. And when you had the reconstruction, that really did not help, obviously, businesses, you know. So with these entrepreneurs, they're getting their feet wet right now.

If they feel they want to continue on, because you have so much in the way of empty storefronts in downtown Duluth, will you offer them reduced rent, perhaps, to fill in some of these gaps in downtown?

KRISTI STOKES: That's really going to be up to us thinking about it as we go into the future working with property owners. I suspect you will see us doing some additional pop-ups for the holiday season. So we're already having some of those conversations with some property owners. But we also want to make sure that we set people up for success.

So while there may be some vacancy in our downtown, that's not always prime vacancy. So it may be something that's hidden away or around an avenue or not necessarily in a main area. It might be on a skywalk connection. And so we just want to make sure that we're not putting someone in a space that doesn't see a lot of traffic.

For these individuals, I think, there's a lot of strength in numbers for them to have this collab and to be together as well. So I really get excited about thinking about, how do you expand a collab, or how do you have something like this moving forward into the future, and seeing what that looks like.

CATHY I mentioned, of course, the reconstruction of Superior Street, which was a little tough there at times. What did
WURZER: you lose in terms of business storefronts because of that?

KRISTI STOKES: We really didn't lose much. I want to say there were one or two businesses-- and our reconstruction of Superior Street came two years before the pandemic. And then our final year of Superior Street reconstruction was during the pandemic. And so some of those businesses in that final stretch kind of said, well, if there's any year to have a pandemic, it might be during a Superior Street reconstruction because we were already going to be losing some business already.

So I would say that many of our businesses fared well during the construction. Really worked closely with them on some of the marketing aspects. But we're all facing what every community has faced and still trying to get through things because of the pandemic as well.

CATHY Because Miller Hill Mall isn't exactly what it was years ago, are you seeing a growth in downtown?
WURZER:

KRISTI STOKES: I think, right now, it really all has to deal with the pandemic. Many downtowns across the country are just dealing with the fact that there are fewer employees still in their downtowns, including ours. We have not seen all of our employees come back nor will we ever see all of our employee base come back. So I think we really need to be looking at, what's that next mix?

And we know it will likely be the housing aspect of it. We have some housing in our downtown already so do many across the country. But I think you're going to see more conversions of that. Right now, I will even say in our building, where our offices are located, there are 38 residential units going up above us. So I think that activation also really helps grow some of the retail and grow some of that demand as well.

CATHY All right. We'll see what happens. Kristi Stokes, thanks for the conversation. I appreciate it.

WURZER:

KRISTI STOKES: Hey, it's always good talking to you. Thanks so much.

CATHY Likewise. Kristi Stokes is president of the Greater Downtown Council in Duluth.

WURZER:

[MUSIC PLAYING]

VOICEOVER: Programming is supported by the Minnesota Orchestra. A new season begins with guests, jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and Wynton Marsalis joining the Minnesota Orchestra on stage, September 23 and 24. Tickets at minnesotaorchestra.org.

VOICEOVER 2: Get the *Minnesota Today* podcast from MPR news. Every morning and afternoon, you'll get the most important stories from around the state in less than five minutes. Tell your smart speakers to play the *Minnesota Today* podcast, or search for *Minnesota Today* in your podcast app.

CATHY Hey, for the next few minutes, let's talk about getting your mail. The normally reliable US Postal Service is struggling to keep up with customers around the country, saying they're going days or even weeks without mail. That includes Rochester, Minnesota, where some folks say they've been asked to pick up their mail instead of having it delivered. Tim Nelson has the story.

TIM NELSON: That old post office motto, we deliver for you, is coming with a caveat more and more these days. They deliver mostly. Rochester doctor, Amy Oxentencko noticed it after she put her mail on hold for a family vacation earlier this summer.

AMY
OXENTENCKO: We had that first week we were back some fits and stops of several days without mail. And then we started in a spread of almost two weeks with only getting mail one day out of those two weeks.

TIM NELSON: It was a mystery until she talked to a neighbor who told her the carrier was out, and there wasn't a replacement. The neighbor went to the post office to try and get the missing mail. No luck there either.

AMY
OXENTENCKO: There are thousands and thousands of pieces of mail yet to be sorted.

TIM NELSON: A short distance away, Lori Mickelson said she waited two weeks for loan paperwork from a customer in Cannon Falls to make its way through the mail to her equipment dealership outside Rochester. About the same time in June, she put an outgoing letter in the mailbox on the street outside her Rochester home.

LORI
MICKELSON: I put it in on a Wednesday. It wasn't picked up Thursday, Friday, or Saturday, slipped the flag up.

TIM NELSON: Mickelson said she finally drove it to the post office herself the next week. It's a story that's been happening from Rochester to Red Wing, Vermont to California, even after a major financial overhaul of the Postal Service approved by Congress earlier this year, lifting an expensive mandate that the service prepay retiree health benefits.

The trouble now-- COVID, long-standing complaints about low pay, and a booming job market have left the Postal Service critically short of workers. Postal officials in Rochester alone have just posted nine job openings for city carriers as well as some rural carrier positions with pay starting at \$19 an hour.

A spokesperson said the Postal Service was shifting staff from elsewhere in the state to fill in the gaps and even held a hiring fair at the Olmstead County fair in late July. But the Postal Service also said that service interruptions may continue. US Senator Tina Smith says the situation has to improve.

TINA SMITH: It's just not acceptable that people should have such inconsistent mail service. People rely on the mail for their medicine in their package deliveries and to get their bills paid. So this is completely unacceptable.

TIM NELSON: She noted that Congress had already offered the Postal Service a major financial lifeline and that it was disappointing that the problem seemed to be growing.

TINA SMITH: I mean, we shouldn't have to legislate good service. Good service is in the DNA of letter carriers, and it should be in the DNA of the Postal Service.

TIM NELSON: Smith has sent a letter to the postmaster general, including a reminder that federal law requires six-day-a-week mail service. She's also asking for an accounting of what zip codes have been affected by these service disruptions, how long they've been going on, and when the Postal Service expects normal service to return.

Her counterpart, Democrat Amy Klobuchar, also sent a letter to the postmaster last week, noting that in an election year, delays could have a critical impact on voting as people rely on the mail to get ballots and voter information. Post office observers say customers nationwide are reporting similar experiences as the Postal Service, the focus of unusual controversy during the Trump administration, has taken unprecedented steps to write its financial ship.

The agency managed to have its losses in 2021 down from nearly \$9.2 billion in 2020. And it says it's doing everything it can to provide good service. But critics say former logistics executive and postmaster general Louis DeJoy's 10-year plan to prioritize package delivery raise prices, consolidate facilities, and make other changes is backfiring.

Annie Norman, with the nationwide Save the Post Office campaign, a coalition of postal unions and financial reform and advocacy nonprofits, says, authorization to provide basic financial products, like savings accounts and check cashing as well as other services could bolster the Postal Service's bottom line.

ANNIE NORMAN: Like bus passes, subway passes, and Wi-Fi access, hunting licenses, there's all kinds of opportunities to innovate and find new sources of revenue for the next century to build the people's post office of the future.

TIM NELSON: But whatever the solution, it's likely to be, like some of the mail in southeastern Minnesota, a slow process. Tim Nelson, MPR News.

[MUSIC - SALSA DEL SOUL, "ME LIBERE"]

[SINGING SPANISH]

CATHY That's the Twin Cities-based band Salsa Del Soul, recorded at one of their many outdoor performances around the Twin Cities. If you're a *Minnesota Now* listener, you know we love music. And Salsa Del Soul is a wonderful Twin Cities-based band. We love their music. Shai Hayo from Salsa Del Soul is joining us now to talk about the band's music and what's inspiring them lately. Shai, how are you?

SHAI HAYO: Good. How are you this morning? Thanks for having me.

CATHY Absolutely. Hey, tell me about the track we just heard.

WURZER:

SHAI HAYO: OK. So that track is a song called "Me Libere." It's like saying, I'm free, I've been freed. It's a typical salsa song from the band called El Gran Combo, a very famous band from Puerto Rico. And we do a version of that song just for its popularity and high energy. We really, really love that song, and it's a crowd favorite.

CATHY Ah. Tell me, by the way, about your band. Who are the members? How long have you been together?

WURZER:

SHAI HAYO: We've been together-- wow, I want to say, at this point, over 20 years, believe it or not. And it's gone by very quickly. Yeah. We've been performing as a group in all over the Twin Cities and the region since around 2001.

And it's been quite a journey for us getting to know the community and being able to provide the genres that we perform to a variety of audiences in many different platforms and venues. And it's just been an amazing experience for all of us.

CATHY I know you've been pretty busy this summer already.

WURZER:

SHAI HAYO: Correct.

CATHY [LAUGHS] What's been the highlight for you so far?

WURZER:

SHAI HAYO: Oh, my. I would say-- so for us, the highlight, in general, would be any of our outdoor performances, where we have just wonderful, spontaneous, involved community engagement and dancing folks out, just going crazy dancing to our music and participating and just providing us with wonderful feedback and smiling faces. It's just wonderful to see Minnesota out there enjoying music and dancing together.

CATHY OK. I want to listen to some music that inspires you. So you sent us some songs before the interview. This is the song "La Vida Es Un Carnaval" by Celia Cruz.

WURZER:

[MUSIC - CELIA CRUZ, "LA VIDA ES UN CARNAVAL"]

[SINGING SPANISH]

CATHY I can't sit still as I'm listening to this music. Tell me about Celia Cruz.

WURZER:

SHAI HAYO: OK. So Celia Cruz is known, I guess, you could say, as La Reina de la Salsa, which means the Queen of Salsa. She is a really super famous or was. She's passed now. But she was just an incredible figure in the Latin American music scene, especially for Cuban music and music of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

This song, in particular, is a very, very, very famous song that she sang. And we play it because it's just so very popular, and it has a great beat. And it has a wonderful message.

CATHY
WURZER: What do you like about this? Just the beat and the message and--

SHAI HAYO: I mean, the song is excellent. And it's just so fun to dance to and to play. It's just a great tune if we had the opportunity to hear the whole thing. And of course, you can come hear us play it any time.

CATHY
WURZER: Of course.

SHAI HAYO: But if you click on that link and check it out in the way you can, you'll see that it's a wonderful tune with a message that says, we shouldn't worry about-- we shouldn't worry about the bad. We should focus on the good. We should focus on the good things that happen in life and because life is a carnival, la vida es un carnaval.

CATHY
WURZER: I like that.

SHAI HAYO: Yeah, it's great.

CATHY
WURZER: Let's play something else that I know you like.

[MUSIC - OSCAR D'LEÓN, "JUANITA MOREL"]

[SINGING SPANISH]

CATHY
WURZER: Tell me about Oscar D'León.

SHAI HAYO: OK. Oscar D'León is a famous singer and bass player from Venezuela. And he's another artist who's very well known in Latin America. Interestingly enough, for this song, this is a style of music that comes from the Dominican Republic. And something that's really interesting to me and what I find is just wonderful is that he's a Venezuelan artist who helped make popular a song from a completely different country.

And this tune really, for me, it shows that spirit of collaboration that happens within Latin America and especially, within the Caribbean with regards to representing the different styles that are performed and the popularity that's expressed in the whole region. This song is just-- it's a wonderful song. It has a great beat. It's really well known, and it's another crowd favorite. And that's why we play it.

CATHY
WURZER: So Shai, when you're up on stage and you're playing music, how do you feel? Because I am just so smitten with this music, I can't sit still when I'm listening to it. How do you feel?

SHAI HAYO: I just love-- we all love what we do so much. It's inspiring to us for what we do personally, interpreting these songs and performing them and presenting them to an audience. And then at the same point, we really react to the energy that's given back to us by the crowd. And we feel that as if we establish this wonderful relationship with the audience, a give and take. And it makes each performance a very unique point in time a unique moment that we share together.

CATHY Ah. I tell you what, thank you for making my day here, Shai. I appreciate it.

WURZER:

SHAI HAYO: Well, thank you for having me here and bringing some attention to our band and our genre, et cetera, et cetera. And we hope to see you and everyone out there

CATHY Oh, yeah. We're going to be there. Shai Hayo from the band Salsa Del Soul. They've got a number of live dates this summer, including tomorrow night at the Minnetonka City Hall Amphitheater, Thursday night at the Highwood Hills Recreation Center in Saint Paul. Catch them if you can because they're amazing.

MAN: Roseville nursing facility--

ANNOUNCER: Get the morning's top stories or an afternoon wrap-up in your inbox every weekday. Our email newsletter will start your day with a forecast and a snapshot of the top stories from overnight. And in the evening, we'll put the day's headlines into context. Sign up at mprnews.org/newsletter.

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CATHY I cannot believe that the State Fair is next week. Next week, how fast the summer has gone. I get to kick off the fair with our friend Dr. Mark Seeley, climatologist, meteorologist, professor emeritus at the U of M. For years, Mark has done the State Fair Weather Quiz, where he asks the audience some questions. But fairgoers get to stump Mark to weather geek that I am. I'll host that State Fair Weather Quiz next Thursday at noon at the MPR State Fair booth.

Then Friday, the team from *Almanac* on Twin Cities PBS will take over the MPR booth and will record *Almanac* from the fair-- the first time since the pandemic that *Almanac* will be at the fair. So all that next week. Hope you can join us, and thank you for listening to *Minnesota Now* here on MPR News 91.1 KNOW Minneapolis, St. Paul.

Support for *Minnesota Now* comes from TrueStone Financial, a full-service credit union working to improve the financial well being of its neighbors since 1939, serving individuals and businesses at 23 locations and online at truestone.org, equal housing opportunity insured by NCUA. In the Twin Cities right now, cloudy skies, 71 degrees here in downtown St. Paul.

The high today should be around 78. Cloudy skies for the most part. Southeast winds, 5 to 10. Slight chance of rain after midnight tonight. Tomorrow, we have a 30% chance for showers. A chance of showers tomorrow morning, chance of rain tomorrow afternoon as well. But again, the chance is pretty small. Tomorrow's high should be around 78 degrees. Wednesday, the rain chances increase to 40%. We'll still be in the upper 70s. It's 1 o'clock.