



**16 January
2025**

Welcome to FREEPOD, a local news source for everyone in the Freeport area. This weekly podcast is brought to you by a large volunteer group dedicated to providing to objective, unbiased updates on what's happening in our community.

You can find us on Facebook as well as our website (www.freepod.org) and the website of our NPR partner WNJI Northern Public Radio (www.northernpublicradio.org), so please visit us there and continue to share about us on your own social media. Thanks for your support!

New owner for Freeport/Stephenson County Visitors Center

After being on the market for more than a year, the former Freeport/Stephenson County Visitors Center located on U.S. 20 just east of Freeport has a new owner. Connie Sorn, chairperson of the Freeport/Stephenson County Visitors Center Board which previously owned the building, says the sale closed on December 31st. Proceeds from the building's sale, as required by the board's bylaws, will be distributed to tourism-related non-profit organizations in Stephenson County.

BCG Group Incorporated bought the building and will be operating a nationwide, online classic car dealership called AutoSmart there. Brian Caldwell, owner of AutoSmart, says that the business is unique in that it is consignment-based, allowing them to sell a variety of products without needing a big inventory. AutoSmart will sell campers, trailers, used cars, and motorcycles as well as providing detailing services and selling a range of detailing products.

Caldwell is proud of the company's past community service and plans to continue that role in Freeport. He has been a Rotarian and involved in many drives for food and other goods as well as in efforts serving homeless veterans. As the business grows, he would like to start a Coffee and Cars discussion group that would offer free speakers and discussions of interest to motor vehicle enthusiasts. This has been popular at other locations. He expects the new business to be open in April.

"This business appears to be a good fit for Stephenson County and should positively affect our tax base," Sorn said.

The visitors center opened in 2005. The Greater Freeport Partnership eventually began operating the building but closed the facility in April 2023.

Freeport Art Museum sculpture installation at the Freeport Art Plaza

According to Jessica Modica, Executive Director of the Freeport Art Museum, installation of the Gateway Monument sculpture that began early this week is nearly finished at the Freeport Arts Plaza across from the Freeport Library. The Gateway will mark the corner entrance at Douglas Street and Chicago Avenue.

The major piece, which was designed by husband-and-wife Freeport architect duo Andrea Schulz Winter and Scott Winter, is designed to be a monumental interactive work of art. With its bold color and grand scale, it will help attract people to the downtown. As visitors pass through the sculpture they will be greeted by imagery and text that relays the history of the land and the development of the project. The sculpture also frames the mural wall on the opposite end of the plaza.

The piece was fabricated by Accurate Metals Illinois in Rockford. It was funded through a private family donation of \$500,000, a donation of \$250,000 from the Ferguson Foundation, and a \$400,000 capital grant from the State's Rebuild Illinois Program. You can see a short video from WIFR showing the installation in process at <https://www.wifr.com/2025/01/14/freeport-art-museum-installs-new-outdoor-sculpture/>.

Rebuilding Together receives grant

Rebuilding Together Stephenson County is receiving a \$25,000 grant from the Nicor Gas Foundation to support general operating costs associated with repairing homes, revitalizing communities and rebuilding lives. FREEPOD will report Rebuilding Together success stories throughout 2025.

Highland Community College Distinguished Alumni Awards

Last month, five prominent graduates from Highland Community College received Distinguished Alumni Awards from the Highland Foundation, including Tamisha Bonvillain (**bone-vill-ane**), Matthew Bordner, Delbert Bunker III (**the Third**), Deontae (**dee-on-tay**) Collier, Sr., and Darrel Wichman (**week-man**). Close to 16,000 students have earned certificates and degrees since the college and its Foundation were established in 1962, with fewer than 200 being named as Distinguished Alumni.

Bonvillain, from Freeport, is currently a family nurse practitioner with FHN. Delbert Bunker, also from Freeport, sits on the Board of Directors for Union Savings Bank and the Greater Freeport Partnership, and is a member of the National Auto Dealers Association and the Illinois Auto Dealers Association. Collier is also from Freeport and is Dean of Students for Freeport High School for the Lead Academy as well as a local Pastor. Bordner, from Monroe, teaches math at Monroe High School, and Wichman, who currently lives in Champaign, retired from Boeing in 2023 and now works actively as a consultant for Dayton Aerospace in weapon interface development and assessment and weapon systems engineering.

A photo of these distinguished alumni appears in the print version of this FREEPOD episode and more can be found about their many achievements at <https://highland.edu/news>.



The Highland Foundation's distinguished alumni for 2024, from left: Deontae Collier Sr., Matthew Bordner, Tamisha Bonvillain, Darrel Wichman, and Delbert Bunker III.

YWCA opens new Freeport location

YWCA Northern Illinois has opened a new location in Freeport at 1255 W. Empire Street, near Empire School. The new office also now houses the Immigrant Family Resource Program and the Child Care Resource and Referral program.

The Child Care Resource and Referral program helps families access affordable child care through referrals, parent education, and provider training, while the Immigrant Family Resource Program connects immigrant families and limited English speakers to public benefits that promote health, well-being, and economic self-sufficiency.

The Freeport office is open Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. and appointments are strongly encouraged to ensure families receive personalized help.

New star player for Freeport High School girls' basketball

Paityn London, who played girls basketball for Aquin last year and transferred to Freeport High School after Aquin's program closed, has scored a total of 1,000 points as a sophomore player at Freeport High School.

London averaged 20 points per game as a freshman at Aquin, plus seven rebounds, four and a half assists and four and a half steals, and was named second team All-State in Class 2A. In her first game with the Pretzels against Morrison she scored 34 points. She had 25 points in her first NIC-10 game against Belvidere and just before the holiday break she scored 30 points against Guilford.

One thing that has changed about London is her uniform number. She wore number 23 at Aquin and now wears number 21. That number goes back to her Aquin roots and her favorite player, Sophie Brunner. Brunner was the All-State player who led Aquin to back-to-back state championships a little

over a decade ago, went on to star at Arizona State, and then played professionally. London couldn't wear 21 at Aquin, because Aquin retired that number.

London's parents are Ron Jr. and Lucrecia London of Freeport.

Senior Resource Center Book Club

The Senior Resource Center recently launched a Book Club and is inviting the public to join. The group will meet the first Thursday of each month at 10:30 a.m. at the Center. The program is free to attend and books will be provided for loan at no cost. The next meeting of the group will be Thursday, February 6th to discuss the first book on the reading list, *The Boys in the Boat* by Daniel James Brown. To receive a copy of the book on loan prior to the meeting, contact Ann Marie Walker of the Center at awalker@srcntr.org or call 815-235-9777. That's 815-235-9777.

Freeport High School speech team boasts wins

The Freeport High School Speech Team placed fifth in a field of 27 schools at Grant Community High School in Fox Lake last weekend. Winners included Mya Ortiz winning a 1st in Special Occasion and a 3rd in Poetry, Asher Kittoe and Will Scudder placing third in Humorous Duet Acting, and Angela Gautam winning fifth place in Dramatic Interpretation. Congrats, Freeport Speech Team!

Foundation for Northwest Illinois approved for tax credit contributions

Donors to the Foundation for Northwest Illinois can now receive a 25% state income tax credit for qualified contributions. The Illinois Gives Tax Credit Act allows income tax credits for taxpayers who make authorized contributions to permanent endowment funds benefitting residents of Illinois or charities and charitable projects located in Illinois held by Qualified Community Foundations or QCFs.

The Foundation for Northwest Illinois, formerly known as the Freeport Community Foundation, can provide additional information to interested donors on the Illinois Gives Act, which is the State's first charitable tax credit and became effective January 1st. Find out more at <https://forwil.org/il-gives-act/> or contact the Foundation at 815-801-3035. That's 815-801-3035.

FHN visitor restrictions

Due to the increase in respiratory illness throughout the communities and amongst staff members, mask wearing guidance and visitor restrictions have gone into effect throughout FHN, where an influx of patients are being seen with COVID19, RSV, influenza, and colds.

Current visiting hours are between 8:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. daily, although they may be changed to promote further health and healing. Visitors must check in at the registration desk, be 18 or older, and only two visitors at a time are allowed in patient rooms. Masking is suggested for everyone due to the

increased number of respiratory illnesses and are required for visitors exhibiting certain symptoms, and are available at the information desk or nurses' stations.

Extension Office staff member recognized

Diane Reinhold, who represents Stephenson County with the University of Illinois Extension Office, recently was honored with national and state awards for three of her programs at the extension office. She won first and second place awards for her I Made That! and Food Allergies in Schools programs. I Made That! was geared towards youth in the kitchen and included cooking tips and fun activities. The Food Allergies program included guidelines to put nutrition policies in place in schools regarding allergies and training for kitchen staff on these issues. Congratulations, Diane!

Agronomy Summit at Highland

Every growing season, corn and soybean producers have to make numerous management decisions that affect their bottom line and as agriculture technology and research advance at a rapid pace, it can be difficult to keep up with the latest recommendations.

To provide producers with the latest research updates and information that will help them to confidently make important management decisions, University of Illinois Extension will host the Northwest Illinois Agronomy Summit on Wednesday, January 29th from 10:00 a.m. to 2:35 p.m. at the Highland Community College Conference Center.

This year's conference will feature research updates from University of Illinois faculty specialists, highlighting best management practices in the areas of soil fertility, corn and soybean management, and weed control.

Registration is \$25 and is required to attend. To register or for more information about the Northwest Illinois Agronomy Summit, visit go.illinois.edu/jsw or call U of I Extension at 815-235-4125. That's 815-235-4125.

Looking ahead

As we look ahead on our calendars, don't forget the **National Day of Racial Healing** this Saturday, January 18th. The Freeport Branch of the NAACP will host the event at the Stephenson County Farm Bureau building in Freeport from 9:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. It's free and open to the public, and you can still reserve your spot at [Eventbrite.com](https://www.eventbrite.com) by searching on "National Day of Racial Healing" and selecting the Freeport location. That's www.eventbrite.com, with "brite" spelled b-r-i-t-e.

Saturday night is the **Dance Against Cancer Ball** from 7:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. to raise funds for the Leonard C. Ferguson Cancer Center at FHN Memorial Hospital. Dance the night away from 7:00 to 11:00 p.m. with live music at the Eagles Club in Freeport. Tickets are \$25 in advance \$30 at the door, and with a 70s and 80s theme, they hope to see some vintage outfits on the dance floor. For more information, contact the Club at wqjt.info@gmail.com.

One Book One Freeport 2025 is coming up soon too! The book release party is scheduled for next Saturday, January 25th at the Library at noon. We'll have more on this popular community activity next week.

As a reminder, if you are looking for something to do this week or any week, visit the Greater Freeport Partnership website at www.greaterfreeport.com and click on "weekly events" for a comprehensive listing of many more entertainment and dining events and activities throughout Stephenson County. You can subscribe to their free weekly newsletter there too, and we have a link to a QR code in the print version of this newscast if you'd like to sign up that way.

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In closing...

In closing, we remind you of this week's in-depth interview where FREEPOD and TimBeck2 host Tim Connors spoke with Josh Elliott, owner of Elliott Graphix and Zealous Art Studio and Tattoo about tattooing, community involvement, and all things Freeport. Their conversation aired on Tuesday and can be found through our website, Facebook page, or the website of our NPR partner WNIJ in DeKalb. Be sure to tune in to next week's Tuesday in-depth interview featuring FREEPOD and TimBeck2 host Becky Connors speaking with Dianne Ludwig of the Freeport Public Library about the One Book One Freeport program that we just mentioned. Their conversation posts at noon on Tuesday, January 21st.

With that, time's up for this week. Tune in again next Thursday at noon for more about what's happening in Freeport, and be sure to subscribe to us on your favorite podcast platform to receive alerts as each new pod airs. You can also always click through to our pods through our Facebook page or the website of our partner, WNIJ National Public Radio in DeKalb, at www.northernpublicradio.org.

As always, FREEPOD couldn't come to you without the Mass Communication Department at Highland Community College and our community liaisons and reporters. We're also grateful to WNIJ for partnering with us in reaching even more listeners, including Spanish-speaking community members. Thank you, Team FREEPOD! For more info, including how to make a tax-deductible contribution to support our work, visit our website at www.freepod.org.

Listen next week for more about what's happening in the Freeport area!