



Episode #4
25 Jan 2024

Welcome to the fourth episode of 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 news specific to our community.

We're getting new listeners every week, and much of that is thanks to you. Please share about us on your social media and thank you for your enthusiasm – let's get started on the news you've been missing.

2023 Economy Summary Data

Last week we reported the first part of our three-part story on how the economy has been changing in Stephenson County. We'll have the last part in the next episode. Today, we look at our labor market.

In November of 2023, Stephenson County had 20,857 people in the labor force compared to 20,361 in 2022. Of that labor force, there were 19,983 people actually working compared to 19,427 people in 2022, or about 600 more than in 2022.

There were 874 unemployed workers in 2023 compared to 934 in 2022, lowering our unemployment rate for Stephenson County for the year to 4.2% compared to 4.3% in 2022. That 4.2% unemployment rate for the County was slightly less than 4.7% for the State of Illinois and slightly higher than the national rate of 3.7%.

The longer-term review of County employment is not positive, although much of the difference can be attributed to the lower total County population. The County's current employed population is over 4,765 less than our November 2000 total of 24,748 and 2,281 below our November 2010 total of 22,264. This overall population decline impacts local businesses, real estate, and sales tax revenues as we'll see in next week's report.

The City of Freeport specifically had 10,233 in the labor force in November 2023 with 9,712 people actively working. That resulted in 521 unemployed members of the workforce and a 5.1% unemployment rate. When focusing just on Freeport, the City's 5.1% unemployment rate is quite a bit higher than that national overall average of 3.7%.

As we wrap up this three-part report next week we'll take a look at where the jobs are, real estate numbers, and a report on sales tax revenues. We once again thank State Bank in Freeport for much of this data.

Winter Isn't Over

As our temperatures rebound into mostly double digits for both highs and lows, it's worth looking back at the extreme conditions the last couple of weeks. While we didn't break any records, our actual temperatures and wind chills were still historic.

We had one of the longest stretches of continual cold, barely breaking zero in nearly a week with breathtaking wind chills approaching minus-30 degrees. Two winter storms within a week dumped about a foot of snow on us too.

While temperatures are expected to hit 40 degrees soon, don't get carried away with the somewhat more seasonal temperatures ahead – it's still winter and the long-range forecast includes quite a few single-digit days in February. Be sure to drive safely and keep pets and livestock protected from extreme conditions.

First Female Police Supervisor in Freeport Retires

Lieutenant Robyn Stovall of the Freeport Police Department has retired after 27 years in various roles in the department. A pioneer with Department Stovall began her career as a patrol officer, moved on to being a K9 Handler, SLANT Inspector, Juvenile Detective and a member of the first Gang Unit created in the department. She was promoted to Patrol Corporal becoming the first female officer to hold a position of supervision in the department. Stovall then rose to Detective Sergeant and later Lieutenant. She also was a two-time Officer of the Year. Enjoy your retirement, Lieutenant Stovall! (photo included in this episode's download, courtesy of the Freeport Police Department)

In other Police Department news, several officers were recently promoted to new positions including Corporal Ben White, Corporal Blake Upmann, Sergeant Josh Leverton, Sergeant Dan Stott, Lieutenant Tim Weichel, and Lieutenant JoLynn Marcum. Congratulations to all! (photo also included in this episode's downloads, again courtesy of the Freeport Police Department)

HCC Distinguished Alumni

The Highland Community College Foundation recently recognized five Distinguished Alumni at an Awards Program at the Freeport Club. Honorees included:

- Benjamin Huber
- Terry Camplain
- Kristin Rademaker
- Steven Kenneke

- and Drew Groezinger

This is the 27th year the Foundation has recognized individuals who made their start at Highland Community College, have shown community leadership, and believe in the mission of higher education. To date, Highland has named more than 160 individuals as Distinguished Alumni.

Take a minute to read more about these impressive alumni at highland.edu. – they all boast some really impressive accomplishments!

Affordable Care Act Statistics for Stephenson County

Over 20 million people signed up for healthcare plans under the Affordable Care Act or ACA, sometimes referred to as Obamacare, during the recent open enrollment period that began November 1st and ended January 16th. This number significantly topped the more than 16 million new recipients during last year's enrollment period.

Locally, over 3400 residents of Stephenson County were enrolled in the ACA through August of 2023. Statewide, there were over 936,000 enrolled over that same time period.

Since its roll-out in 2011, the ACA has helped reduce the number of Americans without healthcare insurance almost by half to an all-time national low of 7.9% uninsured people. However, that still leaves over 26 million individuals in the United States without healthcare insurance coverage.

According to the Peter G Peterson Foundation, the U.S. is the only one of the world's wealthiest countries that does not guarantee some type of health coverage to all of its residents while still spending more than twice the global average on healthcare per person.

The Peter G. Peterson Foundation was established by billionaire Peter G. Peterson, former US Secretary of Commerce in the Nixon Administration and co-founder of the Blackstone Group financial services company. Check the script of this podcast on our website for a chart with details.

Local Graduates Put Freeport on the Map

It's always fun to hear about a Freeport native who made a dream come true. For 2007 FHS grad Alex Hartman, that dream was Broadway – and she recently made her debut in the National Tour of Funny Girl. Alex was a frequent actor at the Freeport School District's Jeannette Lloyd Theatre and danced competitively at S&R Dance. In the Broadway cast of Funny Girl, she plays Vera in the ensemble and is the understudy for Emma, Fanny Brice's assistant. She sings, dances, and acts in the show, which was famously made into a 1968 movie starring Barbra Streisand and Omar Sharif.

Alex was excited to play to an audience with a large group of Freeport locals at her recent stop in Milwaukee. The show continues throughout 2024 at multiple locations across the U.S. Her dad, John, and mom, Emily are also musically inclined: John owns John Hartman Music Services in Freeport and performs in several local bands, and Emily performs with the Ukulele Express 815, Freeport's five piece ukulele and vocal group.

Congratulations also go out to Freeport native Katelynn McIlwain, who will be a presenter at the Broadcast Education Association's annual convention in Las Vegas in April. Her paper -- "Journalist or Influencer? Exploring Young Public Radio Journalists' Perceptions of Individual Branding on Twitter" -- won first place in the Debut category of the Radio and Audio Media Division.

Katelynn, another local graduate who represented Freeport High School as an all-state speaker in Illinois High School Association speech competitions, is now the managing editor of KBIA 91.3 FM. It is the NPR-member radio station at the University of Missouri's school of journalism.

The Week Ahead

The 20th anniversary of the Lectures in American History Series at the Freeport Public Library will begin with a program titled, "The Prairie State and the United States Navy," on Tuesday, February 6th. Dr. Ed Finch, a retired Freeport High school teacher, will present the program which includes a discussion of the naming of more than 25 ships named to honor people, cities, and rivers in Illinois since the creation of the US Navy almost 250 years ago. This includes two ships named for a person from Stephenson County and one for the river that flows through the County. The free presentation will be held in Freeport Public Library and begin at 6:30 pm.

Secondly, the League of Women Voters candidate "Meet and Greet" planned for Tuesday the 23rd was rescheduled because of extreme weather. It has been rescheduled for Tuesday, January 30 at the same time and place: 6:00 pm at the Freeport Public Library. It's a great way to meet the candidates and learn about the upcoming election.

And finally, the second semester has begun at most Freeport-area schools, including Freeport School District 145, so keep your eyes open for kids walking to and from classes, don't talk on your mobile phone in no-cell-phone school zones, and respect school buses, their drivers, and passengers.

Until Next Week

Time's up for this week but as we close, we want to let you know that FREEPOD is proud to be part of a growing movement to stop and reverse the decline of local news sources in Illinois. Last week, the Governor's Task Force on Local Journalism that was signed into law in 2022 issued a report finding that more than one-third of the state's 102 counties have only a single source of news--or none at all.

Illinois has lost 232 newspapers since 2005. Across the United States, newsroom employment has decreased by 26% in the past 15 years but at 85%, Illinois has the dubious distinction of the highest percentage loss of newspaper journalists in the nation.

We've included the 22-page report in our script notes on the website and while the statistics aren't good, there are also optimistic recommendations. We're glad FREEPOD is part of the effort.

Check back next week for more news you've been missing and thank you for listening!

