

((Alan))

Hello, everyone! I'm Alan Wenzel and I welcome you to the very first episode of FREEPOD, a local news resource for everyone in the Freeport area.

This weekly podcast is brought to you by a large group of volunteers hoping to provide objective, unbiased, and non-partisan news specific to our community.

We are dedicated to accuracy so if you find any mistakes, please help us to correct our errors quickly and openly.

((Lynn))

And hi folks. I'm Lynn Feaver. It's January 4, 2024. Happy New Year!

Our stories today include an update on local health issues, some news about community plans for a national Day of Racial Healing, changes in the local business environment, the Freeport High School student garden, and more.

Let's get started on the news you've been missing by telling you a little bit about what FREEPOD hopes to be all about.

We're a local volunteer group that hopes to address our relative lack of local news by launching a weekly, short, free podcast to communicate local news. At around 8-10 minutes weekly, FREEPOD is not meant to replace full-scale daily news media but it is intended for everyone. We hope that FREEPOD will help our whole community—young families, neighborhoods, seniors, voters, and local businesses—stay informed.

As our efforts unfold, we hope to cover:

- News from local taxing bodies and governmental organizations such as school boards, the County Board, the City Council, and so forth
- Events of broad public interest, such as recreational opportunities, the arts, educational presentations, major school activities and similar community-wide events
- Significant local sports, business and organizational news
- And human interest and intriguing community history stories

((Alan))

Since we're only podcasting weekly, we aren't going to be the place where you can find the scores from last night's game or a complete list of community events, but if you check our website at

[www.freepod.org](http://www.freepod.org), you'll find links that are easy to use and will give you access to some of this information.

Because we wanted FREEPOD to be free to everyone, and since we're all volunteers, we decided to do a podcast instead of a printed news piece because it's much easier to produce and distribute, and less costly.

You can listen to FREEPOD on our website or if you have a podcast app such as Spotify or Apple Podcasts, we'll be listed in those too. We might not appear on your favorite listening platform immediately but we're working on it. If you sign up through our website we'll send a link to your computer or smart phone every Thursday when we post a new episode.

((Lynn))

A transcript of each episode is also posted on our website for those who prefer to read their news.

We'll tell you a little more next week about how we hope to find and report on the news you've been missing and the folks on our volunteer team. In the meantime, check out the website for more info, to sign up for each new episode, and maybe to help us make this all work.

So now let's hear some of the news we've been missing! Alan:

((Alan))

Our region hasn't been as hard hit as many urban areas, but people here are still getting sick with a variety of illnesses. Locally, the three diseases we hear most about are COVID, the flu, and RSV.

It's hard to gather local data on how widespread any of these are in our community. For example, because home COVID tests are readily available, many people who test positive at home don't feel sick enough to see a doctor.

Of the three diseases, right now, RSV seems to be the most prevalent, according to Margie Kochsmier of the FHN Infection Control and Clinical Quality Department. Margie reminds us that babies, toddlers, and those over age 60 are especially vulnerable to RSV.

In respect to COVID, Kochsmier states that this is not the same disease we've known in the past because it is a new COVID strain. The current COVID vaccine is just that, a vaccine, (not a booster) formulated to protect against severe illness caused by the new strains of the disease.

In case you're wondering how the symptoms of flu, COVID, and RSV overlap, check out a visual on our website [www.freepod.org](http://www.freepod.org)

By the way, Kochsmier says that it's not too late to be vaccinated against all three of these diseases.

For more information, visit FHN's website, contact your health provider or local pharmacy. We'll try to keep you posted on disease developments as the winter progresses.

Stay healthy!

((Lynn))

On a different note, here's an upcoming event that you may be interested in: As prelude to the national Martin Luther King Day holiday on January 15, a National Day of Racial Healing is scheduled in Freeport for Saturday, January 13 beginning at 9:30 at the public library.

Presentations and conversations are planned on a series of topics including why racial healing matters, health equity, intergenerational trauma, and growing up and being black in Freeport.

There's a long list of community residents you may know who will be participating in the program. This includes: LaFrancine Baker, Paulette Williams-Thomas, Ramon Viveros, Stacey Kleindl, Maria Adams, Karlene Johnson, and Reverend Leon Ishmon.

Also, Audrey Moore-Howard, Johnny Lewis, Danario Thomas, Dr. Shalonda Randle from the School District, and Dr. Julie Hartman-Linck from Highland Community College as well as others from the region who will be there.

Again, the event is being held at the Freeport Public Library and begins at 9:30 a.m. on Saturday, January 13, concluding shortly after noon. Check our website for the complete schedule. The community-wide coordinating committee hopes to see you at the library on the thirteenth.

((Alan))

Well, at the moment, it may be cold and grey outside, but at Freeport High School it's not too early to be thinking about spring!

The Freeport Student Garden and Urban Agriculture program has received several grants to build a new greenhouse that will be attached to the classroom, according to instructor Ben Skipor.

"Our greenhouse will be used for lab experiments, propagating houseplants, and planting seedlings," says Skipor. "We plan to start growing flowers too in addition to expanding our vegetable garden."

Sixty students are involved in the Urban Agriculture class and many others volunteer their time, do community service, or apply for a job in the busy summer season. Both classroom work – where students learn the principles of running an urban garden -- and hands-on labor working outside in the garden -- are part of the curriculum.

The program is already attracting attention for its innovative work. Freeport High School Ag students competed in a recent Food Production Career Development Event and scored 1st place out of eight high school teams. They are also the first known high school in the country to encourage broader access to fresh produce by accepting SNAP and EBT (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Electronic Benefits Transfer) payments for purchases from a student garden to encourage and allow broader access to fresh produce.

By the way, funds are still needed to complete the new greenhouse, and contributions can be made in honor or memory of someone special.

To find out more about the program go to "Freeport Student Garden" on Facebook, or access the school district's website at [fsd145.org](http://fsd145.org).

((Lynn))

Though you may not have heard about it, Freeport folks have received a lot of awards and recognition for in the past few months! We're going to have quite a few more to tell you about in the coming weeks, but to start us off, here's a story I'm really pleased to report:

Greta Harrell, who has worked for the Freeport School District since 1989, was recently honored with a statewide Outstanding Service Award at the Annual Illinois Joint School Board Conference in Chicago.

Harrell has served as Secretary for the Freeport School Board and assistant to the district superintendent for 23 years. She's a Freeport native and graduate of Freeport schools.

In his letter nominating Greta for the statewide award, Board President, Jack Sosnowski wrote: "I have never worked with anyone as devoted, passionate, and competent in their role as Greta Harrell."

And District Superintendent Dr. Anna Alvarado wrote: "Greta Harrell's...unwavering commitment to achieving and surpassing goals has set a remarkable precedent for all of us. She understands that the goal is to always put students at the forefront of decisions. Her innovative thinking [and] groundbreaking solutions have... enhanced the quality of everyone's work... her ideas will leave an indelible mark on our organization."

In addition to her duties at the school board, Harrell serves as vice-chair on the Freeport Housing Authority Board of Commissioners and as president of Citizens United for Rights, Respect & Equity.

Congratulations on the state school award, Greta, and thanks from the whole community for your excellent work and for being such a great ambassador for the Freeport area.

((Alan))

In local business “comings and goings,” a new Mexican restaurant – La Patrona – has opened at 1725 Ihm Blvd, off of South Street in the same location as the previous home of YakZies and Diamond Dave's.

Owned and managed by Gustavo Gomar and Claudia Palomino, La Patrona offers traditional Mexican recipes and specializes in birria, a braised shredded beef dish, and flights of margaritas.

Gustavo, who hails from Guanajuato, Mexico, loves to cook and is thrilled to serve the community. He says, “I have been in town for five years working at area restaurants, and am excited to now have La Patrona to bring new flavors to Freeport. We have been blessed with crowds during our soft opening. We have 12 employees working hard to keep our customers happy and we plan to expand in the future.”

There you have it, a new place to go out to eat! La Patrona is open 11:00 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and from 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. on Sunday.

Another new restaurant, Rockford staple, Beef-a-Roo, plans to open in spring or summer 2024 and locate in the Meadows Shopping Center on Freeport's south side. We'll provide more details on this addition as they become available.

In other local business news, Generations Boutique. Located on Chicago Avenue in Freeport for 14 years, the clothing, home décor, and gift shop will soon be closing its doors. Owner Sherry Moring says, “I plan to retire, and I join my staff in thanking the loyal customers who have supported the boutique over the years.” All items in the store are 50% off.

((Lynn))

As we said earlier, we're not going to be the right place to find out about every community sports activity, but here's a notable local achievement we want to pass long.

We congratulate Freeport High School senior Detric Macon who scored his 1,000th point as a Pretzel at a recent basketball game against Rockford East. That's a lot of buckets! His father, DeMetric also hit the 1,000-point milestone when he played basketball for the Pretzels.

Your next opportunity to see Detric in action will be this Friday January 5th against Belvidere North High School at 7:30 in the Freeport High School gym. Congratulations Detric!

((Alan))

Well this episode sure went by pretty fast! That's it for today but tune in again next week when we'll have more about Freeport area businesses, the area's economic condition, the City's plans and progress, more area rewards and recognition, and lots more.

FREEPOD couldn't come to you without the help of many local supporters. In particular, we'd like to recognize Highland Community College's Mass Communications Department for recording, final production, and podcast distribution. They're the folks who make this podcast easy to find and relatively easy on the ears. We couldn't do it without them.

If you would like to be involved, get in touch with us through our website at [www.freepod.org](http://www.freepod.org). You can send us feedback and ideas for future stories, and sign up to be notified when a new pod is posted. As we get going, you'll be able to find all of our previous podcasts and their written transcripts

((Lynn))

So, I'm Lynn Feaver, and along with Alan Wenzel we thank you for listening to this inaugural episode of Freepod! Please let your friends and neighbors know about us. We hope to provide local news you can trust and stories you'll enjoy – the news you've been missing.