



Coming up on this October 1st edition of Freepod — questions surrounding Freeport’s proposed 2027 budget, including some unusual spending decisions and concerns about transparency.

Plus, a growing dispute between the City of Freeport and the Greater Freeport Partnership. Hundreds of thousands of dollars in funding are at stake, and the disagreement could affect future economic development efforts.

And on a lighter note, downtown Freeport has a new look! Seven sculptures have arrived along Chicago Avenue, bringing artwork from across the country right into the heart of the city.

Those stories, plus community events and more from across northwest Illinois.

It’s Thursday, October 1st, 2026.

I’m Amy Fisher...

And I’m Matt Mullen...

And this is the news that you’ve been missing.

### **FREEPORT’S 2027 BUDGET RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT SPENDING AND TRANSPARENCY**

Freeport officials have begun reviewing the city’s proposed 2027 budget, with several spending decisions and accounting changes drawing attention. During the September 21st Finance Committee meeting, City Manager Rob Boyer said the city anticipates a roughly 20% increase in healthcare costs, while its contribution rate to the Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund is expected to decrease.

The city also plans to add a part-time employee to handle a growing number of Freedom of Information Act requests.

One notable staffing decision involves the city’s nuisance inspection program. Boyer acknowledged that money originally budgeted for two nuisance inspectors was redirected to hire an additional information technology employee, with the expectation that new software would improve efficiency.

Meanwhile, the city is proposing \$30,000 for administrative hearings, largely because of increased nuisance enforcement cases.

Another unusual disclosure involved the downtown revitalization loan fund. Boyer said the fund originally contained approximately one million dollars, but a substantial portion was used for demolition of the former Abet Books property. Only about \$60,000 is currently available for new loans.



A resident also questioned unexplained technology expenditures appearing throughout the proposed budget. Boyer attributed many of those changes to software and communication expenses being transferred from the central IT budget back into individual departments.

The city is additionally considering reducing distribution of its approximately 10,900 monthly printed newsletters.

Although officials invited public participation, Monday's entire meeting lasted approximately 27 minutes, including the budget presentation. No residents spoke during the final public-comment period.

Budget discussions will continue through November, with final approval expected in December.



#### **GFP AND CITY OF FREEPORT DISAGREE OVER FUNDING**

A funding dispute between the City of Freeport and the Greater Freeport Partnership continues, with city officials clarifying that the organization's current agreement has not been terminated.

The City Council voted in August to prevent the agreement from automatically renewing for 2027. The Partnership says that decision puts approximately \$400,000 in future funding at risk.

Another \$200,000 in remaining 2026 funding is being withheld.

In a new statement, the city says that money is a separate issue, explaining that it has requested outstanding documentation to reconcile public expenditures, including records involving tax-increment-financing services. The city says it remains willing to resolve the disagreement directly with the Partnership and considers economic development and tourism important priorities.

Partnership Executive Director Andrea Schultz Winter previously described the interruption in funding as unexpected.

The organization says its remaining 2026 events will continue, although future programming could face cuts without renewed financial support.

#### **FSD TO HOST "TALK SHOW" FOR OPEN DIALOGUE WITH COMMUNITY**

Freeport School District 145 is launching a new quarterly community conversation series designed to bring families and educators together.

The first "FACE TO FACE Community Talk Show" is scheduled for Thursday, October 29th, from 5 to 7 p.m. at Freeport Middle School, located at 701 West Empire Street.

Organized by the district's Family and Community Engagement Department, the event will feature Empire and Lincoln-Douglas Elementary Schools.

Parents, school staff, district leaders, board members and community partners are invited to share experiences, ask questions and discuss ideas for supporting students and families.



Organizers say the goal is to encourage open dialogue, strengthen relationships and give community members a voice in school-related conversations.

The event is open to everyone.



#### **FREEPORT PUBLIC LIBRARY FEATURES DISPLAY BY FIRST KID LIBRARIAN**

The Freeport Public Library has a new librarian on its team — and this one's a little younger than usual.

The library has introduced Alex, its first-ever Kid Librarian, as part of a new opportunity to get children involved in the world of books and reading.

Alex got a behind-the-scenes look at how the library operates and selected a personal collection of favorite books, which is now featured in a special display for visitors to explore.

Library officials are encouraging other young readers to get involved, too.

Children interested in becoming a future Kid Librarian can stop by the library's Youth Desk to pick up an application.

The Freeport Public Library is located at 100 East Douglas Street.

#### **PEARL CITY COUPLE RECEIVES 4-H RECOGNITION**

A Pearl City couple is being recognized for their decades of dedication to local youth.

Ryan and Nikki Keltner have received the 2026 Stephenson County 4-H Hall of Fame Award and were inducted into the Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame.

Both began their involvement in the organization as children. Ryan belonged to the Pearl City Hornets, while Nikki was a member of the Pearl Valley Rangers.



Their continued service has helped young people develop leadership, responsibility and lifelong skills.

The Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame recognizes volunteers for exceptional service and community contributions. This year's honorees were recognized during ceremonies at the Illinois State Fair.

The Keltners were among the volunteers honored statewide for their commitment to the next generation.



#### **FREEPORT PHOTO CONTEST WINNER ANNOUNCED**

The City of Freeport has announced the winner of its 2026 City Photo Contest.

A local photographer named Lucinda Carey was recognized for her winning submission and recently visited City Hall to celebrate the honor.

The annual contest invites residents to showcase Freeport through

photography, highlighting the community from the perspectives of the people who live and work here.

City officials congratulated Lucinda in a social media announcement and thanked everyone who participated in this year's competition.

The contest is part of the city's efforts to celebrate the community and encourage residents to share their creativity and appreciation for Freeport.

Officials say they're already looking forward to next year's competition.

### **DOWNTOWN SCULPTURE WALK UPDATED**

Downtown Freeport has seven new works of public art, bringing creativity from across the country to Chicago Avenue.

The newly installed sculptures feature work from artists around the nation, including Freeport, as part of the city's ongoing downtown sculpture walk.

The outdoor exhibition is coordinated through the Freeport Art Museum and builds on the Chicago Avenue Streetscape Project, which included dedicated spaces for public art when the downtown corridor was reconstructed.

The sculptures are displayed along Chicago Avenue, giving residents and visitors an opportunity to experience artwork while exploring downtown businesses and attractions.

The rotating exhibition is intended to make public art more accessible while supporting downtown revitalization.

Residents are encouraged to take a walk along Chicago Avenue and check out all seven installations.



### **STERLING DEACTIVATES ALL FLOCK CAMERAS**



The City of Sterling is eliminating its automated license plate reader cameras amid growing nationwide concerns about surveillance and personal privacy.

Sterling announced September 21st that it was immediately terminating its contract with Flock Safety and deactivating all cameras. The equipment will be physically removed later.

Police Chief Pat Bartel says the technology helped officers solve crimes, recover stolen vehicles and locate missing people. He emphasized that departmental audits found no evidence of misuse by Sterling officers.

However, the decision comes amid national scrutiny over how Flock collects, stores and shares information about motorists.

An Illinois state audit previously found that federal immigration authorities improperly accessed license plate data collected in Illinois, violating state privacy protections.

Other communities, including Boston, have also discontinued Flock contracts over data-sharing concerns.

Flock maintains that its technology is a valuable law enforcement tool and has announced additional safeguards.

Bartel says Sterling must balance crime-solving capabilities with constitutional rights and public trust.

### **JJ & FREDDIE'S MOVING TO LAKE CARROLL**

A longtime Stockton restaurant is preparing to close its doors, but the business isn't going away.

JJ and Freddie's has announced it will close its Stockton location January first, after 13 years in the community, as the restaurant transitions to a new home at the Lake Carroll Clubhouse.



Owners Jay and Sara thanked customers for their years of support, saying Stockton is where they raised their family, built their business, and developed lasting friendships.

The restaurant's catering and food truck operations will continue without interruption, and all previously booked events will be honored.

Existing gift cards will also remain valid at the Lake Carroll location.

The owners say all current employees have agreed to make the move, and both the Stockton restaurant building and the family's home will be listed for sale.



### **ILLINOIS CLOSING VISITOR INFORMATION CENTERS**

Illinois has closed all eight of its state-operated visitor information centers, including one serving travelers entering northwest Illinois.

The closures took effect at the end of September and include the Turtle Creek Visitor Information Center, located along southbound Interstate 90 in South Beloit.

State officials say the decision reflects changing travel habits, with more visitors relying on smartphones and online resources instead of traditional information centers.

The closures affect only the visitor information operations. The interstate rest areas themselves remain open, with restroom facilities and other services continuing uninterrupted.

Independently operated tourism centers run by local governments and regional organizations are also unaffected.

The change raises questions about how communities throughout northwest Illinois will reach travelers and promote local attractions without the state's traditional highway welcome centers.

### **PRITZKER CREATES AI CABINET**

Illinois Governor JB Pritzker is establishing a new advisory group to examine the risks of artificial intelligence and recommend additional state regulations.

An executive order signed last week creates an unpaid AI Cabinet consisting of experts and representatives from several state agencies.

The group will examine threats to public safety, privacy, water systems, schools and other critical infrastructure.

It will also consider tying data center tax incentives and operating approvals to safety standards, while examining the impact of data centers on Illinois' electrical grid and utility customers.

Illinois already passed legislation requiring major AI developers to undergo annual independent safety audits beginning in 2028.

The new cabinet will develop recommendations through 2027, with members appointed within 30 days of the executive order.



### **TEEN DANCE & GLOW BINGO WITH PARK DISTRICT**



The Freeport Park District is planning an evening of glowing entertainment for area teenagers.

Two special events are scheduled for Wednesday, October 14th, beginning with Glow Bingo from 4 until 6 p.m.

The traditional bingo game gets a neon makeover, offering participants an opportunity to socialize and enjoy some friendly competition.

Then, from 7 until 10, teenagers ages 13 through 17 can hit the dance floor for the Teen Glow Dance.

The party will feature neon colors, glow sticks, music, raffle prizes and opportunities to capture photos with friends.

The Park District says the events are designed to give young people a fun opportunity to connect with others.

Additional information and registration details are available at the Freeport Park District's website.

### **OAKDALE FALL FESTIVAL**

The Freeport Park District is inviting families to celebrate the autumn season at Oakdale Nature Preserve this Saturday.

The Oakdale Fall Festival takes place October 3rd, from noon until 4 p.m., featuring an afternoon of outdoor activities, entertainment and seasonal fun.

Visitors can enjoy wagon rides through the prairie, explore Oakdale's nature trails,



listen to live music around the fire and try their hand at yard games.

Other attractions include a hay maze, pumpkin painting, a fall-themed craft with the Freeport Public Library, a scavenger hunt and guided nature walks.

Food and treats will also be available from local vendors.

The festival follows the Autumn Leaf Five-K Run, which begins at 9 that morning.

Additional event information is available through the Freeport Park District.



### **AUTUMN LEAF RUN**

Speaking of the Autumn Leaf...

The Freeport Park District's Autumn Leaf Run takes place October third, beginning at nine a.m. at Oakdale Nature Preserve, located at 4433 South Cranes Grove Road.

The five-K course features wooded trails, moderate hills, prairie areas, bridge crossings and narrow trail sections. The event welcomes participants of all ages and experience levels, and the race will use electronic chip timing.

All proceeds benefit the Freeport Parks Foundation, helping fund future improvements at Oakdale Nature Preserve.

Registration for the run is available [here](#).

### **OKTOBERFEST IN GALENA**

Galena will celebrate German heritage this Saturday with the return of its annual Oktoberfest at Depot Park.

The celebration runs from eleven in the morning until ten at night, featuring food, beverages, and live entertainment.

Participating businesses include Potosi Brewing Company, Galena Cellars, Highway 20 Brewing Company, Goerdt's Brewhaus, and several local restaurants and food vendors.

Entertainment includes live music from Boogie Monster Funk.

The event brings together businesses and community organizations from throughout the Galena area, including the Galena Elks, Galena Eagles, and Hazel Green Lions Club.

Visitors can enjoy a full day of Oktoberfest festivities while exploring one of northwest Illinois' most popular tourism destinations.

Again, Galena Oktoberfest takes place this Saturday, October 3rd, from 11 am until 10 pm at Depot Park in Galena.





## **BATS OF ILLINOIS**

An upcoming presentation in Freeport will give residents an opportunity to learn more about one of Illinois' most misunderstood animals — bats.

The Northwest Illinois Bird and Nature Alliance will host “Bats of Illinois” Tuesday, October sixth, featuring Abby Pagels of the Illinois Bat Conservation Program.

Pagels will discuss bat biology, their role in controlling insect populations, and the threats facing bat species locally and around the world.

She'll also explain how researchers study bats using acoustic monitoring equipment, field surveys and other methods to better understand their populations and protect their habitats.

Weather permitting, attendees may even get to hear bat calls detected in real time during an outdoor demonstration in the parking lot.

The presentation begins at 7 p.m. at St. John United Church of Christ, located at 1010 South Park Boulevard in Freeport.

Additional information is available through the Northwest Illinois Bird and Nature Alliance.

## **IN CLOSING**

And that brings us to the end of this week's Freepod. Remember, if you prefer reading the news, every story from today's newscast is available in written form at [freepod.org](http://freepod.org). You can catch up on the latest headlines, revisit a story, or share it with someone who might have missed it.

And Freepod is always available on your schedule! New episodes are released every Thursday at noon, but you can listen anytime, wherever you get your podcasts. Whether you're commuting, working around the house, or just taking a break, we're here to help you stay connected to northwest Illinois.

And our interviews are also available any time. Like this past week's special interview with the owners of Two Friends Art Studio, Tina Cannova and Carla Donaldson. Freepod host Tim Connors sat down with Tina and Carla to talk about the inspiration behind their new venture, what visitors can expect, and their vision for supporting local artists.

We'd also like to thank our community liaisons and reporters for helping us bring you the stories that matter, our partners at WNIJ in DeKalb for helping us reach a wider audience, and the Media Studies Department at Highland Community College for producing this program.

And if you believe in the importance of local journalism, there are several ways you can support Freepod. Follow us on Facebook, subscribe to the podcast, and share our stories with your friends and neighbors.

You can also help keep local news accessible to everyone by making a tax-deductible contribution at [freepod.org](http://freepod.org). Every contribution helps us continue covering the people, places, and issues that shape our communities.

We'll be back next week with more news from across northwest Illinois.

This has been Freepod. Thanks for listening!