



**1 Feb  
2024**

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 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 – now here's news you've been missing.

### **Some economic figures for 2020**

Today we're sharing Part Three of our three-part economic update for the county. We've reviewed education and employment levels in the last two episodes of FREEPOD and today we'll look at where the jobs are and several other interesting statistics.

To set the stage for the numbers ahead, the County's economic conditions continue to be driven by relatively low median income. The 2020 census showed that Stephenson County's median household income was \$48,805, compared to the Illinois median of \$72,705 and the United States median of \$65,712.

In looking at jobs, 15.91% of the workforce in Stephenson County were employed in government jobs and 18.93% of our community worked in manufacturing in 2023. The third-highest employment sector was trade, transportation, and utilities at 15.62%, and in fourth place was education and healthcare at 14.62%.

Historically, the county's economic strength has been tied closely to manufacturing where more education and technological knowledge are often now required. We reported in an earlier podcast that 92.5% of the county's population age 25 or higher has a high school diploma and 19.6% of that same age group has a bachelor's degree or higher. Again, the County can benefit from the presence of Highland Community College and Columbia College, where graduates can earn both 2-year associate and 4-year bachelor degrees that can support manufacturing employment.

In consumer spending, the County saw an increase in 2023 of between 8 and 9 percent that resulted in Freeport receiving a larger disbursement from the State of Illinois than the previous year. In January, the State disbursed \$421,130.15 for home rule sales tax and \$511,196.71 for municipal sales tax to the city based on 2023 tax collections. This is quite a bit more than the disbursements for 2022 of \$389,881.79 for home rule sales tax and \$466,370.24 for municipal sales tax.

In 2023 home sales, the median quarterly home price in the third quarter dropped to \$113,000 from \$137,500 in the second quarter. The County reported 113 closed real estate deals in the third quarter of 2023, which was a 30% decrease compared to 162 in the same quarter of 2022. Previous data implies that the reduction in year-over-year sales is probably the result of fewer homes for sale, not lack of demand.

Thank you, again, State Bank in Freeport, for much of the information shared in this three-part economic series.

### **Street repairs**

Another local topic impacting pretty much everyone in Freeport this time of year is the condition of City streets. It's a challenge every winter to keep roadways in the best possible shape and even more so this season because of recent extreme and fluctuating weather.

Street crews have been busy trying to keep up with necessary pothole fixes in addition to snow plowing and other necessary water/sewer projects. Be patient and be careful when driving on any roadway this winter.



At a recent City Council meeting, Darin Stykel of Fehr-Graham recently told the City Council that about a dozen street repair projects for the City of Freeport have been budgeted for \$3.0 million for 2024.

In coming weeks, we'll have more information on local infrastructure projects and the partnership between Stephenson County and local entities to address those issues.

### **New leader at Stephenson County Health Department**

Dr. Kerry Whipple, the new Head of the Stephenson County Health Department, has always loved educating communities on how to live healthy and productive lives. So, it was an easy decision to leave academic life at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington after 18 years to recently move back to Illinois and assume the leadership position at our Health Department. "My heart is in being a public health practitioner," she said in a recent interview.

Having worked as a health educator at the Department from 1996 to 2001, Dr. Whipple is no stranger to Stephenson County. She plans to build on the work of previous leaders Jeff Todd and Craig Beintema to get programs and services to the people who need them and build productive coalitions with healthcare providers, community groups, and community leaders.

She leads all employees of the Stephenson County Health Department, including those in Family Services, Nursing, the Illinois Breast and Cervical Cancer Program, Environmental Health, Health Education, and many others.

Dr. Whipple looks forward to working on such issues as dental services, mental health and suicide prevention, access to and availability of services, and collaborating with other organizations to streamline community health needs assessments.

### **Freeport Art Museum Award and Event**

The Freeport Art Museum was recently presented the 2023 Stephenson County Community Champion Award at the Excalibur and Excelsior Awards in Rockford. Each award recipient received a cash prize to further its mission.

According to the Rockford Register Star, the Freeport Art Museum has demonstrated a deep love for the arts and a strong commitment to arts education since 1975. Executive Director Jessica Modica accepted the award.

James Rhyne, Executive Director at Boys & Girls Club of Freeport and Stephenson County was also honored as a finalist.

Speaking of the Art Museum, don't forget their annual wine tasting event tomorrow night! Wine, Chocolates, and Cheese runs from 6 to 8 pm at the museum Friday, February 2<sup>nd</sup>. Samplings of wine, bourbon, and tequila will be offered, as well as sweet chocolates and savory cheeses. General admission is \$40 per person and special VIP admissions are available at \$75. Tickets may be purchased online at [freeportartmuseum.org](http://freeportartmuseum.org) or at the door.

### **Freeport School District 145 paraprofessional one of two representing Illinois nationally**

The Illinois State Board of Education and Governor JB Pritzker have announced the nomination of Lakinda Brown, a paraprofessional at Freeport School District 145, as one of just two individuals to represent Illinois in the 2024 Recognizing Inspiring School Employees Awards, known by the acronym RISE. The award is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. The other Illinois representative is from Palatine.

Brown began her career at Freeport High School in 2021, supporting students with behavioral needs. As a paraeducator, she has applied quick thinking to de-escalate behavioral incidents before they become bigger disruptions. Brown organizes Black History Month luncheons for staff and Veterans Day fundraisers with the community, and tutors students after school through the Boys & Girls Club of Freeport and Stephenson County.

U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona will select a single school employee from state nominations to receive the national RISE Award in Spring 2024. Thanks for representing Freeport, Ms. Brown!

### **Speech Regionals – The Buzz**

Fourteen top speakers from Freeport High School's speech team will present their best work at The Buzz on Thursday, February 1 at 7:00 p.m. in Room 228 at the senior high school. That's tonight, folks!

Community members are invited to attend, giving students the opportunity to practice for Speech Regionals in front of a crowd. Events include Original Comedy, Special Occasion Speaking, Poetry, and more. Those finishing in the top four at Saturday's regional -- which includes 10 schools from our area including Eastland/Pearl City, Sterling, and Byron -- move on to the Sectional competition.

Spectators are also welcome at the Regional competition, which starts at 8:30 a.m. this Saturday February 3 at Freeport High School. Best of luck to the Pretz Speech team!

### **Pretzel City Transit reminder**

Especially in the winter when weather can make driving a challenge, Freeport residents appreciate the ability to get a ride from Pretzel City Area Transit.

The City of Freeport and the Senior Resource Center partner to provide this small bus or van transportation for trips to the store, doctor's visits, special events, and more. All residents of Freeport and Stephenson County are eligible to ride. Cost is \$3 each way within the city limits, and \$6 each way outside the city limits.

Pretzel City Area Transit operates Monday through Friday from 6 a.m. to midnight and Saturday from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. No Sunday service is currently provided.

To schedule rides, call 815-235-RIDE, which is the same as 815-235-7433.

### **Sports snapshot**

Two more local basketball players have hit the 1000 point mark in their playing careers. Congratulations to Ethan Petta of Pearl City High School and Grace Groezinger at Lena-Winslow for achieving those milestones!

### **More soon**

There have been a lot of stories recently about immigration issues, both nationally and locally. We plan to cover this topic in future episodes. In the meantime, if you'd like to learn about what your local, state, and national elected representatives think about this issue, check our website for how to contact them.

### **Looking ahead...and back!**

The Bill Murray hit film STRIPES will be screened next Wednesday, February 7th as part of the Select Pix Classic film series hosted by Ed Finch and Alan Wenzel at the Lindo Theatre. This 1981 comedy also stars John Candy and Harold Ramis. Show times are 1 and 7 pm and attendees are invited to stay after the movie for a brief discussion with Finch and Wenzel about the film. 2024 is the 14th year for the popular film series.

And to close, just a quick look back! Five years ago today, February 1<sup>st</sup> 2019, Freeport recorded its lowest temperature ever – minus 31 degrees Fahrenheit, a repeat of the temperature the day before. All temperatures were recorded at the Freeport Waste Water Treatment Plant. Freeport was geographically close to the all-time record for the whole state too, which was also recorded on January 31<sup>st</sup> in 2019. That new statewide record low was set in Mount Carroll at minus 38 degrees Fahrenheit. On that note, we're looking forward to good news about an early Spring on Groundhog Day tomorrow.

**Until next week...**

FREEPOD is proud to be part of a growing movement to stop and reverse the decline of local news sources in Illinois, and we invite you to tune in for news about Freeport businesses, City plans and progress, area rewards and recognition, local impacts related to state and national news, and more.

If you have story suggestions or would like to donate to support FREEPOD, check out our website at [www.freepod.org](http://www.freepod.org).

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