



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 more 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.

### **HAZMAT Team dispatched to downtown Freeport**

Downtown Freeport had some excitement last Wednesday, February 14, when a person who was unknown at the time engaged in what was described as an odd conversation with staff at Freeport City Hall and then discarded a bio-hazard bag containing an unknown substance in a trash can in the building before leaving.

According to Freeport Police Chief Chris Shenberger, the same individual had entered City Hall on Tuesday and had a similar encounter with staff. City staff reported these encounters to the Freeport Police Department and shortly after receiving the report, officers learned the same individual had entered the Police Department on both days as well and had again discarded unknown items in a trash can when leaving.



Following department protocol, the Freeport Police contacted the Freeport Fire Department, who dispatched their HAZMAT team and were able to confirm the discarded substances were nothing toxic or threatening. Both City Hall and the Police Department facilities were briefly closed to the public until the situation was under control.

The Police Department was able to identify the person of interest, who has been interviewed. There was no threat to the public and FREEPOD thanks our first responders for their quick action!

### **Chronic absenteeism in our schools**

Chronic absenteeism, which is defined as missing at least 10% of school days, has nearly doubled in the Freeport School District 145 since the pandemic. In 2019, the Education Advisory Board report for Freeport schools indicated 16% of students were chronically absent, while in 2022 the same report showed that number increased to 32-33% of students.

In an interview with Superintendent Ana Alvarado on February 12<sup>th</sup>, she noted that the most recent total attendance rate for the district was 90.7%, compared to the statewide figure of 92.5%.

Alvarado cited reasons for chronic absenteeism include family economic factors, parental job situations, and access to health care and appropriate nutrition. Safe routes to school and safety while at school can also affect attendance. She also said there is much greater need for mental health and trauma services for students since the pandemic.

Alvarado went on to explain that the district's attendance improvement efforts focus on prevention, not intervention. Every school in the district has a school improvement plan that includes attendance. She said all staff are mobilizing on this issue and utilizing data to identify the root causes of absenteeism and address the causes. Strategies include proactively addressing attendance issues, insuring a parent/home/school connection, looking for ways to incentivize attendance success, and offering resources that ensure access to resources like after school tutoring and transportation support.

Freeport is not alone in this effort, as data from the U.S. Department of Education released in December shows that almost 15 million students, or nearly 30%, were chronically absent in the 2021-2022 school year.

## Freeport wins at State competitions

Freeport High School was proud to chalk up a number of wins at Illinois High School Association competitions after already successful seasons!

The Freeport Middle School dance team qualified and competed at state finals in Springfield, and took 6th place in both the lyrical and hip-hop categories in the junior high division. We've listed all 13 team members online in the print script for this episode.

The Freeport Speech Team boasted several wins at the State speech competition. Rachel Sdao was the school's top performer, placing 8th in Original Comedy. Mya Ortiz placed 15th in Dramatic Interpretation, Max Krzeminski placed 16th in Original Oratory, and Nathan Redmore placed 17th in Informative Speaking. Nathan followed in the footsteps of his older brothers Noah, who placed in Humorous Interpretation in 2022 and Jacob, who placed in Extemporaneous Speaking in 2018.

We are also proud of competitors from other Freeport-area schools, including Pearl City 7th-grader Hendrix Feld, who won the Regional Spelling Bee.

In sports competitions, two Freeport High School girls competed as individuals at the Girls State Bowling Competition at Cherry Bowl in Rockford. Senior Cameren Plowman finished 20th and rolled an average of 202. Fellow Lady Pretz competitor Diem Beach, a junior, rolled an average of 199 and finished 29th.

Still in competition, Freeport Girls wrestler Cadence Diduch won first place at regionals and will be headed to State this weekend.

And of course there was really exciting news last week after Auburn lost to Guilford (54-72) and Freeport won against Belvidere (60-33) on Wednesday the 15<sup>th</sup>. This put the Pretzel boys' varsity basketball team in a tie for second place with Auburn in the NIC-10 conference for the first time in 20 years! They started in the Regionals playing Boylan last night.

As we reported last week in the story that came to us from the journalism class at Freeport High, Coach TJ Jackson has a lot of confidence in the basketball team...and so do we. Go Pretzels!

## River Park and River Walk

Freeport has been granted \$75,000 to develop a plan for a River Park and Riverwalk along the Pecatonica River from Tutty Baker Park to the Hancock Street bridge. The goal is to connect downtown businesses to the river's natural attributes. Various stakeholder sessions have been held and on February 15, the public was invited to two sessions at City Hall to provide input.

Funding for the plan comes from the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act, or ARPA, which directed funds to all U.S. cities. In September 2022, \$3.5 million was distributed by the State of Illinois to 42 communities in every region of the State via the Research in Illinois to Spur Economic Recovery program, also known as RISE.

Andy Reeder of Fehr-Graham presented poster boards with vision concepts for attendees to consider. The ideas include a bandshell, water edge planted land buffer, festival and marketplace pop up space, shared use paths, fishing pier, dog park, accessible dock for kayak launch, ropes course, hiking trails.

A plan with the final ideas, based on input from the community, will be submitted to the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity at the end of March by Fehr-Graham. Grantees can then apply to the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) for funds to develop the projects.

## Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys

The Academy of Country Music Awards won't happen until May but you can get a fascinating look at American Country Music this week! On Wednesday, February 28<sup>th</sup> Dr. Martin Quirk will offer a presentation titled, "Mamas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to be Cowboys: A History of American Country Music as a reflection of American Cultural Trends."



Tim Connors and the FHS Speech Team

The program will trace the changes in Country Music over time and how they are reflective of broader changes in American society and culture. Dr. Quirk's program is free to the public and part of the Lectures on American History series hosted by the Freeport Public Library Foundation. It will be held in Freeport Public Library and begin at 6:30 pm on Wednesday, February 28th.

### **Arctic Ale this Saturday**

We promised last week to give you a little more info on Arctic Ale, a great event coming up this Saturday, February 24<sup>th</sup>. Proving that fun can be found in February, the Greater Freeport Partnership will host this event for the fifth time from noon to 4 pm in downtown Freeport. More than 20 participating businesses will feature a local artist and the opportunity to taste a favorite beer or cider. A tasting cup is \$10 and can be purchased the day of the event.

To get a wristband and tasting cup, start out at the Partnership office at 110 W. Main St. A list of participating locations and other event information will be available at check-in, and can also be found at the Greater Freeport Partnership website or on their mobile app.

Artists and artisans in local shops will display their talents and offer their work for sale. Items being featured will include paintings, photography, pottery, fiber arts, jewelry, and more. Some of the artists also offer hands-on activities suitable for the entire family. Food and music will also be offered.

This is the first Freeport Festival District date for the year, which means patrons can purchase a beverage and carry it throughout downtown to enjoy all the attractions.

### **One of Freeport's first African-American entrepreneurs**

As we head into the last week of Black History Month, we're sharing the story of Abram Follock (like it sounds), who at age 16 enrolled in a county school near Oneco in northern Stephenson County. Abe's school record is one of a handful of documentations of people of color in the early days of the county.

Follock worked for the family of John K. Brewster, who eventually built Freeport's most famous hotel, The Brewster House in 1857. According to the 1850 census, Follock was born in New York and was listed as a barber by trade. Advertisements appearing in Freeport's local newspapers were placed by Follock to promote his barber services in the lobby of the Brewster House.

The Stephenson County Historical Society has Follock's barber chair in its collection – be sure to check it out on your next visit there!

### **Looking ahead...**

Looking ahead, we have a reminder and a new event that looks interesting.

First, a reminder that the Day of Racial Healing that was postponed in February due to bad weather will be happening this Saturday, February 24<sup>th</sup>. Presentations will cover topics such as why racial healing matters, health equity, and growing up and being black in Freeport. The event is being held at the Freeport Public Library and begins at 9:30 a.m., concluding shortly after lunch. The community-wide coordinating committee hopes to see you at the Freeport Public Library at 9:30 It begins at 9:30 a.m. and concludes shortly after lunch.

Secondly, next Tuesday February 27<sup>th</sup> the League of Women Voters will host a presentation by Matt Harvey of the Citizens Utility Board, also known as CUB. CUB is a non-profit organization that fights for consumers' utility rights and interests in Illinois. Harvey will review plans for rate hikes by utility companies as well as proposed legislation to limit their ability to raise prices in the future. There will be opportunity to ask questions and discuss concerns. This program will also be held at the Freeport Public Library and begins at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday.

Also next Tuesday, Local author Adam Moderow, who you might remember from his column in the Freeport Journal Standard, will launch his new book of short stories, *Songs to Dream By*, at Eilert's. Community members are invited to attend from 5:00-7:00 p.m., when Adam will sign books, answer questions, and read from one of his stories.

His debut effort includes eight stories that, according to one reviewer, “encapsulate the author’s eclectic versatility. Some stories are haunting, and others are playful, but every single tale in this collection lingers long after you’ve closed the book.”

A Stephenson County Board member, teacher at Highland Community College, and Eagle Scout, Adam is excited to add “published author” to his resume and share his new project with the Freeport community. If you can’t make the book launch, you can find *Songs to Dream By* online or from the publisher, ten16 press.

And finally, for all the Packer fans out there, Landon Koester, son of Freeport photographer Kurt Koester, is hosting his fourth annual Green Bay Packers clothing sale this Saturday, February 24th.

Landon, who works in the Equipment Department for the Packers, graduated from Aquin High School and Highland Community College in Freeport, and Clarke College in Dubuque. His sale will take place in his dad’s photography studio at 26 West Main Street in Freeport from 8:00 to 11:00 Saturday morning. For all the Green Bay Packer fans and friends out there, here’s a great chance to pick up official Packer merchandise!!

### **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.

As we’ve said before, FREEPOD couldn’t come to you without the help of many local supporters. As always, we’re especially appreciative to the Mass Communications Department at Highland Community College for all of their help producing this podcast, and to our many liaisons and reporters for the time they volunteer to bring the news to you. Thank you, Highland and Team FREEPOD!

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!