



Hello and welcome to FREEPOD. I'm Tim Connors...

And I'm Becky Connors...

In this week's episode, Freeport's Fire Chief announces his retirement...

Governor Pritzker signs a sweeping clean energy bill...

And a new scholarship is announced for Pretzel grads.

This is Freepod for January 15th, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

### **Freeport Fire Chief Announces Retirement**

Freeport Police Chief Scott Miller has announced his impending retirement. Miller made the announcement at the January 5th City Council meeting, indicating that January 31st will be his last day as Chief.

It was at this meeting that Miller received the Lifetime Achievement Award from City Manager Rob Boyer.

Miller originally served from 2013 through 2017 before moving out of state. In March of 2022, however, Miller returned to Freeport and his role as Fire Chief.



### **Krape Park South Entrance Improvement Project**



The Freeport Park District is moving forward with plans to expand and improve the south entrance to Krape Park. The project will open the entrance from one lane to two and address potentially hazardous trees located near the south entrance corridor.

Along with ease of access for regular vehicles, the new entrance will also allow for heavier vehicles, such as school busses, emergency vehicles, and construction equipment to more easily enter the park, since the north entrance has a weight restricted bridge.

The project is pending bond approval, but once that approval is received, the plan is to begin work in April of 2026, with an eye towards completion by fall.

Krape Park is the most heavily visited park in all of Freeport and is considered by many to be a jewel of the city.

### **SC Health Department is a Drug Overdose Prevention Program**

As the opioid crisis continues to grip our community and nation at large, the Stephenson County Health Department has announced free Narcan training and supplies are available.

Recognizing the signs of an opioid overdose and administering Narcan quickly has proven to be critical in saving lives.

Director of Health Education, Ashley McKinney, is available to do free trainings for businesses, organizations, and community groups in Stephenson County.

To schedule a training session, please email Ashley McKinney at [amckinney@stephensoncountyil.gov](mailto:amckinney@stephensoncountyil.gov) or call at (815) 599-8430.



### **Illinois AG Uses Illinois Hate Crimes Act for Carroll County Crime**

In 2018, the Illinois legislature amended the Illinois Hate Crime Act to allow the Attorney General's office to file civil lawsuits against perpetrators of hate crimes. And now, the first use of that provision has concluded with a couple of former Savanna residents being ordered to pay a \$90,000 penalty to their victim.

Carroll County Circuit Court Judge Jerry Kane has ruled that Chad Hampton and his mother Cheryl Hampton engaged in a months long campaign of intimidation against their former neighbor Gregory Johnson, who is black.

This intimidation included pointing Confederate flags with racial slurs at Johnson's home, displaying swastikas aimed at Johnson's home, and hanging a noose from a tree directly in view of Johnson's home.

Judge Kane ordered both Hamptons to pay a \$5,000 civil fine, as well as \$45,000 each in direct payment to Johnson for actual and punitive damages.

### **Gov. Pritzker Signs Historic Clean and Reliable Grid Affordability Act**

Governor JB Pritzker has signed a new law aimed at lowering energy bills through the promotion of clean energy. The Clean and Reliable Grid Affordability Act, or CRGA, will establish a 3 gigawatt grid-scale battery storage by 2030, lift the moratorium on new large nuclear reactors, and require utility companies to pay back participating households and businesses for using smart thermostats, solar panels, and electric vehicles.



In addition, the CRGA purports to strengthen Illinois's clean energy economy through investment and protections for clean energy companies operating in the state.

This new law is seen as building on the previously passed Climate and Equitable Jobs Act, which has thus far established more than 6 gigawatts of renewable energy, which is enough to power roughly 4.5 million homes.

The Illinois Power Agency says that the CRGA will save Illinois energy customers \$13.4 billion over the next two decades.

## **THE COST OF LIVING WITH CLIMATE CHANGE LECTURE SERIES**

### **SESSION 1: OUR CHANGING CLIMATE: THE SCIENCE, RISKS, AND GETTING TO SOLUTIONS**

**Tuesday, January 20, 2026**

Freeport Public Library, 100 E. Douglas St., Meeting Room at 6:30 pm

Dr. Don Wuebbles, the Harry E. Preble Emeritus Professor of Atmospheric Science at the University of Illinois, will provide an overview and update on the science and risks of climate change and getting to solutions.



sponsored by the Environmental Study Group  
**ESG**  
In partnership with the Northwest Illinois Trails Foundation, the University of Illinois Extension, the Northwest Illinois Bird & Nature Alliance, the Illinois Sierra Club, and the City of Freeport.  
For more information on each of the speakers, visit [freeportpubliclibrary.org/](http://freeportpubliclibrary.org/)



### **Environmental Study Group Presents “Our Changing Climate: The Science, Risks, and Getting to Solutions”**

While we’re on the subject of clean energy, don’t forget about the first lecture of the series from the Environmental Study Group happening this Tuesday, January 20th at 6:30 p.m. at the Freeport Public Library.

Dr. Don Wuebbles from the University of Illinois will give a presentation on “Our Changing Climate: The Science, Risks, and Getting to Solutions.”

Admission is free and there will be time allotted after the presentation for questions and discussion.

### **Trump Administration Attempts to Freeze \$1B in Federal Funds for Illinois Child Care & Social Services**

The Illinois Attorney General’s office and the Trump administration are in court fighting over a potential freeze of \$1B in funds for child care and social services.



On Tuesday of last week, the US Department of Health and Human Services announced that they were pausing funding for Illinois, California, New York, Minnesota, and Colorado based on what they described as potential fraud.

In response, the Attorneys General for those states sued in federal court, arguing that such a freeze had no legal basis, but was politically targeted and would create “operational chaos.”

On Friday, a federal judge stayed the HHS decision; offering no ruling on the legality of the action, but protecting the status quo for 14 days as the trial plays out.

The services in question serve more than 100,000 low-income families across the state.



### **Elizabeth Business Receives Economic Development Grant**

The Northwest Illinois Economic Development group has awarded Dittmar Farms and Orchard of Elizabeth with a \$19,000 grant.

Dittmar Farm and Orchard has been in operation since 1854, specializing in pumpkins, apples, and corn.

The business said they plan to use that money to help finish construction of an indoor space intended to extend the seasonal business.

The grant was provided from the Genz Small Business Development Fund, a fund created in 2020 to provide gap funding for regional businesses.



**Terry and Bonnie Suelman Scholarship**  
**Fund Established to Support Freeport High**  
**School Graduates**

A new scholarship is available for Freeport High School graduates looking to continue their education. The Terry and Bonnie Suelman Scholarship has been established by the Northwest Illinois Foundation and will provide one student with annual financial support.

The scholarship was established by the Suelmans to honor the legacy of former FHS teacher and counselor Karl McWilliams, who played a crucial role in helping Terry Suelman achieve his academic goals by providing access to financial resources to fund his bachelor's degree studies.

Scholarship applications are due by April 1. You can find the application at <https://fornwil.org/suelman-scholarship/>



**HCC 2025 Excellence Award Recipients**

Highland Community College has named Stephanie Hintz, Brian Leahy, and Michael Skwara as recipients of their 2025 Excellence Awards.

Hintz, a human resources generalist, was named the Administrative Professional award winner for her thoroughness and kindness in helping college employees navigate a transition in the college's insurance policy.

Leahy received the Classified Excellence award for his friendliness and competence in his role in Information Technology Services.

And Skwara was named the Faculty Excellence winner due to his continued professionalism, warmth, and expertise in both his role in the college's library as well as serving extra duties assisting students and faculty with the college's online learning management system.

Congratulations to Stephanie, Brian, and Michael for this well-deserved honor.

**Audition for the Pitmen Painters at HCC**

Staying with HCC, auditions for the spring production of the Pitmen Painters are coming up January 27 and 28 at 5 p.m. in the Ferguson Fine Arts Center.

The play tells the true story of a group of coal miners in 1930s England who discover the power and freedom of creating art. The production emphasizes the themes of creativity, class, and the courage to see the world differently.

The play is being directed by part-time Instructor Adam Moderow and is set to show in April.





### **Winter Trails and Naturalist Tales**

Naturalists: mark your calendars. On January 31, the University of Illinois Extension Office will present Winter Trails and Naturalist Tales at the Tortenson's Education Center in Pecatonica.

The event will feature three keynote speakers presenting four sessions featuring a naturalist tale along with an opportunity for a lovely winter hike.

Featuring presentations by speakers from The Morton Arboretum, the U of I extension office, and the Sand Bluff Bird observatory, the day will teach participants about galls, invasive plants, pests, and local raptors.

Registration for the event is required and the costs is \$15. The link for registration can be found here <https://extension.illinois.edu/events/2026-01-31-winter-trails-and-naturalist-tales-2026>.

### **Driftless Region Beef Conference**

The University of Illinois Extension Office is partnering with their sister operations at the University of Iowa and Wisconsin to present the 2026 Driftless Region Beef Conference on January 22 and 23 at the Grand River Convention Center in Dubuque.

The 14th annual conference will feature keynote speakers, break-out panels, and plenty of networking opportunities to help beef producers maintain and grow their operations.



Cost for registration is \$145. For more information, or to register, please visit <https://extension.illinois.edu/events/2026-01-22-2026-driftless-region-beef-conference>.

### **IN CLOSING...**

Before we close out this week's podcast, we remind you to check out the special weekly interview we posted this past Tuesday. I spoke with Kelsey Grove from Theraplay, a pediatric therapy clinic here in Freeport, about opportunities for local families in need of counseling and occupational therapy services. This week, Freepod host Alan Wenzel introduces us to Will Clark of local media production company 815 Natives. Will, an 815 Native himself, will tell us about what goes in to not only running a successful media production company, but how doing so in this particular community has its own challenges and rewards. That interview will be available starting at noon on Tuesday, January 20th. You can find it on our website, [www.freepod.org](http://www.freepod.org), or wherever you get your podcasts from.

We'd also like to thank our community liaisons and reporters for providing pivotal content for our program, our partners at WNIJ in DeKalb for helping to share Freepod to a larger community, and the Mass Communication department at Highland Community College for producing this podcast.

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In honor of the holiday celebrating Martin Luther King Junior's birthday this coming Monday, we'd like to close with a line from Dr. King himself: "If you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl. But whatever you do you have to keep moving forward."

This has been Freepod. Thank you for listening.



# **FREEPOD**

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