



**21 March
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 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.

Freeport City sales tax increased by 1%

A 1% city sales tax increase vote passed the Freeport City Council Monday night with the mayor breaking a tie vote. The tax will apply to all items except food and groceries not sold in restaurants, medical equipment, prescription and nonprescription medications, and vehicles. The revenue generated through this tax increase will be used solely for road repairs. The streets to be repaved have been selected by the Aldermen based on a 5-year infrastructure repair plan.

The vote follows a town hall-style meeting last Friday for community input on the tax increase proposal. City Manager Rob Boyer and Darren Stykel, city engineer from Fehr-Graham, outlined the necessity of the tax increase to address the problem of the City streets and roads to an audience of over 100 citizens and elected officials.

After decades of deferred maintenance, the 139 miles of Freeport's streets and the underlying infrastructure are crumbling. The old water mains beneath the streets burst frequently. While the life expectancy of a new street is 20-25 years, most Freeport streets are much older.

Between 2014 and 2023 only 16.5 miles have been repaved. In 2024, only 6.5 miles of repaving is planned. This leaves many miles of streets unrepaired. In addition to standard repaving, the cost of a mile of paved road with curbs, gutters and ADA compliant corner ramps is several thousand dollars extra and many of these crossings are required. Freeport is not alone in facing infrastructure challenges like this: similar situations are happening in cities across the country.

While moderating the question-and-answer session at the meeting, Alderwoman Cecelia Stacy polled the audience for a show of hands on the 1% sales tax proposal, and many indicated support of the plan. Others in the audience voiced distrust that the tax money would be used solely for road repairs and not diverted for other uses. Others also spoke to the financial hardship a 1% tax would cause for those on fixed incomes.

State and federal grants to help with funding are anticipated, but these large grants are not available without a financial infrastructure plan and commitment from the City. Fehr-Graham has been contracted by the City to design infrastructure improvement plans and to apply for these grants. FREEPOD will report on further developments to the plan as they occur.

FA Read Center sold

In downtown news, one staple of downtown Freeport business buildings has new ownership and big plans for the future. The FA Read Center located at 18 W. Stephenson St was purchased in January by local Realtor Kimberly Taylor for \$125,000. Taylor said she has plans to update the structure since it does need some maintenance work, but when that is completed it should be ready to welcome new tenants. She already has an insurance agency moving into the first floor and other professionals are interested in space in the building as well.

Starbucks closed for renovation

In other business news, the Freeport Starbucks will be closed for renovation for approximately 5 weeks beginning March 25th. According to manager Heidi Cox, the whole establishment in the West Avenue Shopping Center near JoAnn Fabrics and Aldi will be gutted and refitted with an entirely new look. Heidi says that an investment of this magnitude reinforces Starbucks' success in Freeport and its confidence in strong ongoing business. She is looking forward to serving customers in their new surroundings soon.

In the meantime, enjoy three of our other great coffee houses in Freeport. Visit Higher Grounds across from the South Street McDonalds at 1709 S West Avenue, 9 East at 9 E Stephenson St. in downtown Freeport, and Our Journeys Cafe and Boba Shop at Lincoln Mall. These Freeport coffee shops, along with other coffee-serving restaurants, can keep you fed...and caffeinated!

Presentation on Separation of Church and State

The League of Women Voters of Freeport are hosting a presentation by Dr. Andy Dvorak and Reverend Larry Thomson called "Separation of Church and State." It will cover the history of the separation of church and state in the U.S.A., going back to our earliest days as a new country, and will review why this is currently an important issue. Time will be available for questions and answers, as well as discussion.

The event will be held Tuesday, March 26th at 6:30 p.m. at the Freeport Public Library. Everyone is welcome to attend.

New outdoor recreation areas and modular classrooms for Freeport schools

Superintendent of Schools Dr. Ana Alvarado reports that the many improvements to District 145 facilities that people are seeing were made possible through \$20 million in grants the school district received from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds. These funds were obtained following the COVID crisis and the planned improvements are near completion. The ARP funds came in three phases and must be entirely spent by September of 2024.

We reported last week that Blackhawk School had received an award for their new playground facilities, and this week are reporting that new athletic fields and outdoor play areas at Lincoln-Douglas, Center, Empire, and Jones-Farrar are ready for full use with age-appropriate equipment for ages pre-school to 4th grade, including special needs children.

The new modular classrooms at Lincoln-Douglas and Blackhawk are another project entirely funded by ARP dollars that are nearing readiness after delays caused by material shortages. These buildings were green-lighted to alleviate COVID-related space constraints and address increased enrollment at the schools. The closing of Taylor Park School also impacted space needs.

The renovation of the Jeannette Lloyd Theatre and the former pool and locker room area at Carl Sandburg were also funded with ARP money. All schools will benefit with expanded space for music and art programs. New water fountains were installed in all buildings as well.

Dr. Alvarado continues to steer the development of a 5-year Capital Improvement Plan to keep on top of necessary renovations in each of the district's buildings. Keeping up with repairs and improvements is critical to preserving safe schools for students and staff.

Fifth anniversary celebration at Children's Hands-On Museum

The Children's Hands-On Museum of Northwest Illinois, also known as CHOM, is celebrating its fifth anniversary in the Lincoln Mall this month, and on March 23, there will be free admission and treats for all. Board member and spokesperson Gwynne French says they opened on March 22, 2019 and have grown dramatically. In 2023, the museum had nearly 7,500 visitors and has 250 members.

Gwynne characterizes CHOM as a place "where learning and play go hand in hand." The group is excited to debut new displays as grant money or donations become available. A recent addition was Blossom, a milk cow "model," that is a great salute to the area's agricultural community. A new Star Lab soon is coming soon, and many young parents may remember the Star Lab from their days at Freeport Schools.

Children ages 3 – 10 generally find the museum most appealing, but there is plenty to do and learn for all ages, according to Gwynne. Grandparents with grandchildren are frequent visitors, as are home-schooled children, classes on school field trips, and birthday party-goers. Gwynne says that children truly do have a wonderful time...young patrons often don't want to leave, and staff members hear cries of departure dismay as children pass the exit area.

If you'd like to visit the Children's Hands-On Museum, head out Thursday through Saturday from 10 until 2. Customized hours are available for parties or special events. Admission is \$6 per person and LINK members can receive a 50% discount. Those ages 2 and under are FREE. Or, if you think you might like to volunteer or become a member, they are eager to hear from you! For more information, check out their Facebook page or call 815-990-1734.

Looking ahead...

Two free Easter events that are open to the public are on the calendar!

The first is the 2nd annual Aquatic Easter Egg Hunt at the Family YMCA of Northwest Illinois this Saturday, March 23rd, from 9:00 a.m. to 12:30. Children will be teamed with others in their age groups and have the opportunity to hunt for Easter eggs in the Y's pool. Please check the discussion page for the Aquatic Egg Hunt under "Events" on the Y's website for details, including what times youngsters of different ages will be headed to the pool.

The Freeport Park District is also hosting an Easter Bunny Trail on Saturday, March 30th at Krape Park. The trail begins at the Carousel and walkways are stroller, wheelchair, and BUNNY friendly! The Easter

Bunny will be there, and families can participate in many fun activities including interacting with barn yard animals at a petting zoo.

Both events are free to the public and no registration is required.

A third Easter event is part of the 175th Anniversary celebration for St. John's Church. On Friday, March 29th, the church is hosting a showing of the original 1973 film *Jesus Christ Superstar* at 6 p.m. on Friday, March 29th and 2 p.m. on Saturday, March 30th at the church at 1010 South Park Blvd. The showing will include a live introduction and discussion with actor Ted Neeley, who played the role of Jesus in the film.

Tickets are \$10 for adults, \$5 for teens, and the movie is free for those 12 and under. Tickets are available from the church office or at the door and proceeds will help support other anniversary events and special projects for the church's Worship & Arts Fund. St. John's opened its doors in 1848, seven years before Freeport was incorporated as a city, by a small group of German immigrants.

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.

Before we go, we wanted to take a moment to recall March 2020 and what an impact this month had on the world four years ago. During just about a two-week timeframe, California issued the first stay-at-home mandate, a national emergency was declared, the NBA suspended play for at least 30 days, Tom Hanks and his wife were hospitalized with COVID in Australia, hospitals in some states began to be overwhelmed, and Congress passed the CARES Act, which was signed into law by President Trump and provided \$2 *trillion* in aid to hospitals, small businesses, and state and local governments. As many of our listeners are cheering their favorite teams in this year's March Madness NCAA tournament, we note that in 2020 COVID prompted the decision to cancel the whole event.

Unfortunately, COVID is still with us and almost 25,000 Americans have died of the disease since the beginning of this year. We hope you all are staying safe and healthy THIS March...and that everyone enjoys March Madness!

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 (now tax-deductible), check out our website at www.freepod.org.

Check back next week for more news you've been missing