



Hello and welcome to FREEPOD. I'm Paulette Williams-Thomas...

And I'm Pat Norman...

In this week's episode, a car versus cow accident leads to two fatalities...

The Freeport Art Museum unveils a new mural and honors local cultural leaders...

And the Pretzel City Brewfest is just around the corner.

This is Freepod for September 17th, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

2 DEAD, 1 INJURED IN CAR VERSUS COW CRASH

Two young Pearl City men have died following an early-morning crash involving cattle on a rural Stephenson County road.

The Sheriff's Office says 22-year-old Tyson Clark was driving east on West Loran Road near Lott Road around 2:20 a.m. September 7th when his car struck several cattle in the roadway and then landed in a ditch.



Clark died while being transported for medical treatment. Twenty-five-year-old passenger Kade Knoup suffered life-threatening injuries and died three days later. A third passenger, 25-year-old Travis Kaney of Freeport, suffered serious but non-life-threatening injuries.

Both men who died had strong ties to the Pearl City community.

Clark owned and operated his own trucking business and frequently worked with Fischer Excavating. His obituary describes him as hardworking and driven, with a love for motorcycles, dirt bikes, snowmobiling and spending time with friends and family.

Knoup was a Pearl City High School graduate, Eagle Scout, Air Force veteran and Pearl City firefighter. His family says his organ donations saved at least four lives.

The tragedy has prompted an outpouring of support throughout northwest Illinois, including communities displaying Pearl City's school color of red in remembrance.

The crash remains under investigation by the Stephenson County Sheriff's Office.



CONTROVERSIAL NOMINATION TO FREEPORT PUBLIC LIBRARY BOARD GETS VOTED DOWN

A controversial appointment to the Freeport Public Library Board has been rejected by the Freeport City Council.

Mayor Jodi Miller nominated Renee Blazeski to fill a vacant trustee position through May of 2028, but council members voted down the appointment September 8th. Blazeski had previously appeared at Library Board meetings raising concerns about the library's collection.

Opponents feared her appointment could lead to efforts to restrict library materials and potentially affect the library's eligibility for state grants. A petition opposing the nomination attracted roughly 500 signatures.

The library's nine trustees are appointed by the mayor, but appointments require City Council approval.

SIX MORE FLOODWAY PROPERTIES SLOTTED FOR DEMOLITION

Six vacant or deteriorated properties in Freeport are headed for demolition.

The Freeport City Council approved demolition and asbestos abatement for the properties at its September 8th meeting. The homes are located on South Hancock, North Wilbur, South Hooker, East Jackson and South Mary streets.



Funding will come from the FEMA Floodway Grant Program and the city's Neighborhood Housing Fund.

Fischer Excavating will handle four of the demolitions, while Alber and Son Earthworks will complete the other two.

City officials say removing the properties supports Freeport's strategic goals of improving neighborhood safety and encouraging more effective land use.



STEPHENSON COUNTY FACES EXPENSIVE PROBLEM WITH AGING SNOWPLOW FLEET

Stephenson County is facing a potentially expensive problem as it prepares its 2027 budget — an aging fleet of highway equipment.

County officials say at least 10 snowplow trucks need repairs or replacement, with some vehicles more than 20 years old. Replacing just one specialized snowplow can cost more than 250-thousand dollars.

County Board member Adam Moderow says delivery times for new equipment have also doubled or even tripled since the pandemic.

For now, the Highway Department is repairing some older trucks to keep them running.

Officials warn equipment shortages could eventually mean longer waits for snow removal, clearing fallen trees and completing routine road maintenance.

PUBLIC INPUT REQUESTED ON FREEPORT CITY BUDGET

Freeport residents will have an opportunity next week to weigh in on how the city spends its money.

The city is holding a public input meeting Monday, September 21st at 5:30 p.m. in the City Council Chambers at 314 West Stephenson Street.

City Manager Rob Boyer and Finance Department staff will review Freeport's budget process before residents are invited to offer comments and suggestions on the proposed fiscal year 2027 budget.

Budget work is expected to continue through November, with the final spending plan scheduled to go before the City Council for approval in December.



CITY OF FREEPORT SEEKS INPUT ON SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL



Freeport residents are being asked how the city can make walking and biking to school safer.

The city is developing a Community Travel Plan through the Illinois Department of Transportation's Safe Routes to School program. The plan will identify potential improvements to streets, sidewalks and crossings, with an emphasis on making it safer for students to walk, bike or roll to school.

Residents can identify problem areas and suggest improvements through an online survey and interactive map. Both will remain open through October 31st.

The completed plan could also position Freeport for future state grants to help pay for recommended improvements.

FREEPORT ART MUSEUM UNVEILS SEMIQUINCENTENNIAL MURAL

A new piece of public art celebrating Freeport's past and future has been unveiled at the Freeport Art Museum.

The "United We Create" mural was revealed Saturday, September 12th, during the museum's Freedom on the Rocks celebration.

Freeport artist and educator Ben Swords led the project, working with local students and community members to develop a design reflecting Freeport's history, cultural diversity and shared values.

The mural is part of the nationwide America 250 celebration and now has a permanent home on the museum's Arts Plaza.

The project was supported by grants from the Illinois Arts Council and the Foundation for Northwest Illinois. During the ceremony, the Freeport Art Museum also honored four individuals for their leadership and contributions to the arts in our community. Honorees included local artist Tina Cannova, owner of Zealous Tattoo



Shop and Elliott Graphics, Josh Elliott, and the mother daughter combo of Jill LaBallister-Heinrich and Elizabeth Ontiveros, who were recognized for their contributions as volunteers for both the museum and the museum's events, including Paint the Port.

STEPHENSON COUNTY TOURISM SEES A RISE IN 2025



Tourism is making a growing contribution to Stephenson County's economy.

New figures show visitors spent 56-point-3 million dollars in the county during 2025 — an increase of more than nine percent from the previous year. That spending supported more than 350 direct hospitality jobs, including positions at restaurants, hotels, retailers and local attractions.

Stephenson County's growth significantly outpaced Illinois as a whole. Statewide tourism spending increased three-and-a-half percent last year, reaching a record 50-point-2 billion dollars.

The Greater Freeport Partnership credits continued destination marketing and efforts encouraging visitors to stay longer and explore more of the county.

LIFELONG LEARNING CLASS AT HCC IN OCTOBER

From pickleball and pizza to beekeeping and birding, Highland Community College is offering a wide range of Lifelong Learning classes this October.

The non-credit program is designed for people looking to learn a new skill or explore an interest without grades or tests.

October classes include beginner pickleball, beekeeping, metal detecting, Chicago-style deep-dish pizza, Halloween cookie decorating, basic birding and nonfiction writing. Other offerings explore home improvement, art and the history of France's Merci Train.

Registration is available online through Highland's Lifelong Learning program, with most registration deadlines one week before the class begins.



FREEPORT PUBLIC LIBRARY HOSTING LEGO LEAGUE

Young people interested in robots, coding and engineering have a new opportunity at the Freeport Public Library.

The library is launching a FIRST LEGO League team, where students can develop problem-solving and STEM skills while designing, building and programming LEGO-based robots.

An informational meeting for interested students and parents will be held Thursday, September 17th from 6 until 6:30 p.m. in the library's Learning Lab.

Anyone interested but unable to attend can contact Amanda Meyers at the Freeport Public Library for additional information.

SCHOOL BUS OVERTURNS NEAR STOCKTON

A medical emergency is being blamed for a school bus crash that injured four people near Stockton.

The Jo Daviess County Sheriff's Office says a bus carrying a middle-school football team was traveling south on Illinois Route 78 September 8th when 80-year-old driver Charles Voight of Benton, Wisconsin, suffered a medical emergency.



The bus crossed the center line, struck an embankment and overturned near Chelsea Road.

Voight was trapped and unresponsive but was rescued and revived by law enforcement.

Three children and one adult were taken to area hospitals with minor injuries. All students aboard the bus were accounted for.

The crash remains under investigation.



ILLINOIS PUTTING \$26M INTO GROCERY-ACCESS PROGRAMS

Illinois is putting more than 26-million dollars into expanding access to grocery stores — including help that could benefit underserved communities in north-west Illinois.

The Illinois Grocery Initiative includes nearly 21-million dollars to establish stores in designated food deserts and four-and-a-half million for a new Grocery Rescue Program, designed to reopen stores that closed within the past year.

Another 750-thousand dollars will help existing grocers purchase energy-efficient equipment.

The program could be particularly important in rural northwest Illinois and parts of Freeport where transportation and access to fresh food have previously been identified as concerns.

Applications for new-store grants are open through December 9th.

MEDICAL-AID-IN-DYING LAW TAKES EFFECT

Terminally ill adults in Illinois now have a new end-of-life option under a controversial law that took effect September 12th.

Deb's Law allows mentally capable Illinois residents 18 and older, diagnosed with an incurable illness expected to cause death within six months, to request medication they must administer themselves. Two physicians must confirm the diagnosis.



The issue has divided northwest Illinois lawmakers. Rockford Representative Dave Vella supported the law, saying patients deserve autonomy, while Senator Dave Syverson opposed it, questioning whether its safeguards go far enough.

OSF HealthCare, which serves northwest Illinois, also opposes the law and says it will not participate in medical aid in dying.



BACKROAD RACEWAY RETURNS AT STEPHENSON COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS

Racing returns to the Stephenson County Fairgrounds this weekend.

The rescheduled Backroad Raceway event is set for Saturday, September 19th at the fairgrounds on South Walnut Road in Freeport.

Gates open at 10 a.m., with racing beginning at 1.

Spectators can watch a variety of vehicles compete, including side-by-sides, go-karts, four-wheelers and even racing lawn mowers.

General admission is five dollars, and organizers are promoting the event as family-friendly.

The race is presented by Kickabuda Promotions, with support from Freeport Honda Kawasaki and ABC Supply Company.

LWV HOSTING CANDIDATE FORUM

Freeport-area voters will have a chance to hear directly from candidates ahead of the November election.

The League of Women Voters of Freeport will host a Candidate Forum Tuesday, September 22nd at 6:30 p.m. at the Freeport Public Library, 100 East Douglas Street. The event is co-sponsored by the Freeport NAACP and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.



Candidates in contested races on Stephenson County ballots have been invited to answer issue-based questions they will not receive in advance. Retired Freeport High School social studies teacher James Winker will moderate, with candidates receiving equal response time.

The November 3rd ballot includes contested races for Stephenson County Clerk and several County Board districts, along with state and federal offices.

The September 22nd forum is free and open to the public.



PRETZEL CITY BREWFEST RETURNS

Beer lovers will have another reason to head to downtown Freeport later this month, as Pretzel City Brewfest returns Saturday, September 26th.

The Greater Freeport Partnership is limiting this year's festival to just 500 people, with organizers saying the smaller crowd will create a more exclusive tasting experience.

Brewfest runs from 1 until 5 p.m. on Chicago Avenue between Spring Street and Jackson Avenue, with VIP

admission beginning at noon. The 21-and-over event features local and regional craft breweries, food vendors, live music, games and special beer releases.

General admission is 40 dollars and includes 20 tasting tickets and a souvenir glass. A limited number of 75-dollar VIP passes include 30 tastings, early entry, special releases, a T-shirt, swag and access to the VIP lounge. Organizers say tickets could sell out before the event.

Pretzel City Brewfest attracted 650 people and 27 breweries last year.

Tickets and additional information are available at greaterfreeport.com/brewfest

You can also listen to this week's Freepod interview, as Freepod host Tim Connors spoke with Katie Gentz and Nicole Haas from the Greater Freeport Partnership about what's new for this year's event.

IN CLOSING

Before we go, a quick programming note. If you'd rather read the news than listen to it, we've got you covered. Every week, we post a complete written version of this newscast on our website at freepod.org. It's a great way to catch up on local news at your own pace or revisit a story you want to read in more detail.

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This has been Freepod. Thank you for listening.

