



FREEPOD

The news you've been missing.

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

And I'm Tim Connors...

In this week's episode, regional high schools are being investigated by the federal Department of Justice...

Some major roadwork begins in the area...

And Peter Pan Goes Wrong in all of the best ways.

This is Freepod for May 7th, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS UNDER INVESTIGATION BY FEDERAL DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Thirty-six Illinois public school districts are now under investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice, including several here in northwest Illinois.

Districts named in the review include Freeport, Oregon, Stockton, and Galena.

The DOJ says it's examining whether schools are teaching sexual orientation and gender identity content in grades pre-K through 12—and whether parents are properly notified of their right to opt their children out of that instruction.

The investigation will also look at how districts handle access to bathrooms, locker rooms, and participation in girls' sports, as well as compliance with federal Title IX regulations.

Combatting alleged "wokeness" in public schools has been a priority for the federal government since the current Trump administration took office.

In a statement, Freeport School District officials say they're unsure why they were selected but are confident their policies follow state and federal law. Oregon school leaders echoed that message, saying there's no reason for concern and that they'll fully cooperate with the inquiry.

Meanwhile, Illinois Governor JB Pritzker's office criticized the investigation, calling it politically motivated, while State Senator Andrew Chesney says he plans to contact local districts to better understand the situation.

The DOJ has not announced a timeline for the investigation or any potential findings.





COLUMBIA COLLEGE OFFERING DISCOUNT FOR HCC ALUMNI

Students and staff connected to Highland Community College in northwest Illinois could soon see a break on tuition costs.

Columbia College is offering a 30% tuition discount for the 2026–2027 academic year, marking 30 years of partnership between the two schools.

The discount is available to Highland employees, their families, and alumni who’ve completed at least three credit hours.

It applies to online bachelor’s, master’s, and certificate programs, and can be combined with other grants to reach the full discount.

College leaders say the offer is a way to thank the Highland community and continue expanding access to flexible higher education options.

School officials encourage interested students to reach out to Columbia College advisors to learn more.

Email: freeport@ccis.edu

Phone: (815) 599-3585

HCC HORTICULTURE SELLING SEEDLINGS

If you’re getting your garden ready for the summer season, Highland Community College students have you covered.

Students in the college’s horticulture program are now selling vegetable and flower seedlings as part of a seasonal fundraiser.

Orders can be placed online now through May 8th, with pickup scheduled for Thursday, May 14th.



Proceeds help support hands-on learning opportunities for students in the program.

For more information or to place an order, visit <https://veg-flower-order.cheddarup.com/>



STOCKTON FARMERS WIN CONSERVATION AWARD

A Jo Daviess County farm couple is being recognized for their leadership in conservation.

Greg and Janis Thoren, who raise crops and cattle near Stockton, have been named the 2026 Illinois Leopold Conservation Award recipients. The honor recognizes farmers who go above and beyond in protecting soil health, water quality, and wildlife habitat.

The Thorens will receive a \$10,000 award and be recognized at events later this summer.

On their 2,200-acre farm, the Thorens use regenerative practices like cover crops, no-till farming, and adaptive cattle grazing to improve soil and reduce erosion. Their approach also helps cut costs while strengthening long-term sustainability.

Named after conservationist Aldo Leopold, the award highlights landowners who inspire others through environmental stewardship.

Officials say the Thorens exemplify a growing movement focused on healthier soil, stronger farms, and more resilient communities.

FREEPORT ANNOUNCES ELECTRONIC RECYCLING EVENT

The City of Freeport is hosting an electronic recycling event next month for local residents.

The event will take place June 6th from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Stephenson County Fairgrounds.

Freeport residents can recycle items like TVs, laptops, computer monitors, and smartphones—with a limit of three screened devices per vehicle. Other electronics, including printers, keyboards, and speakers, will be accepted without limit.

Appliances will not be accepted, and proof of Freeport residency will be required.

Officials say the event is part of an effort to reduce illegal dumping and keep the community clean.

Drivers are asked to enter from Walnut Road and follow posted traffic directions. The event is first come, first served and may end early if capacity is reached.



FREEPORT REFRESH IS UNDERWAY



The City of Freeport is reminding residents how to take part in its monthly “Re-Fresh Freeport” cleanup program.

On the first Saturday of each month, Freeport residents can bring trash and bulk items to the Freeport Transfer Station on South Walnut Road from 8 to 11 a.m. A valid ID is required to prove residency, and officials stress the program is strictly for those living within city limits.

Items not accepted include yard waste, tires, hazardous materials like paint and oil, and electronics such as TVs and computers.

City leaders say several vehicles have recently been turned away for not meeting residency requirements. They warn continued misuse could put the program at risk of being discontinued.

Officials encourage residents to follow the rules to help keep the program available and reduce illegal dumping.

INVASIVE SPECIES OF TICK FOUND IN NORTHERN ILLINOIS

Health officials are warning northwest Illinois residents to be on alert as a potentially aggressive tick species continues spreading into the region.

The Kendall County Health Department reports Lone Star ticks have now been detected in northern Illinois, with confirmed findings in nearby counties and conditions favorable for



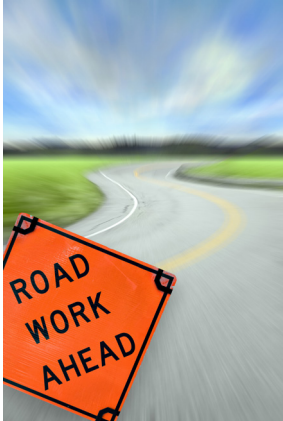
further spread.

Experts say the ticks—once mostly found in the southern U.S.—are moving into the Midwest due to warmer temperatures.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Lone Star ticks can carry illnesses like ehrlichiosis and tularemia, and have been linked to a rare red meat allergy known as alpha-gal syndrome.

While not yet confirmed as established in every county, officials say their presence is likely regional—including areas of northwest Illinois.

Residents are urged to take precautions as tick season ramps up this month, including using insect repellent, wearing long clothing, and checking for ticks after spending time outdoors.



MAJOR INTERSECTION BEGINS ROAD WORK

A major road construction project is now underway in northwest Illinois.

The Illinois Department of Transportation has started work to reconstruct the intersection of U.S. 20 and Illinois 73 in Lena.

The nearly \$12 million project will include roadway grading, culvert replacement, new turn lanes, and the installation of traffic signals.

Improvements will also extend along U.S. 20 from Rees Road to about a half-mile west of Illinois 73, with additional work just north and south of the intersection.

Drivers can expect lane closures and delays during construction.

The project is scheduled to be completed within one construction season, weather permitting.

NEW FOUR-WAY STOPS BEING INSTALLED

Drivers in Winnebago and Stephenson counties should prepare for changes at two local intersections starting this week.

The Illinois Department of Transportation says crews began installing new stop signs May 4th at Springfield Avenue and Safford Road in Rockford, and at Illinois 75 and Rock City Road in Rock City.

Both locations will be converted into four-way stops. Currently, only traffic on Safford Road and Rock City Road is required to stop.

IDOT says additional warning signs, flashing beacons, and pavement markings will be added to help alert drivers.

The project is expected to be completed by Memorial Day, weather permitting. Message boards will also be posted near each intersection to remind motorists of the changes.

MAJOR BRIDGE WORK IN JO DAVIESS COUNTY

If you're taking a trip to Dubuque soon, consider leaving a little earlier. The Illinois Department of Transportation says bridge work in Galena began Monday, May 4.

Crews are repairing the bridge deck on the span carrying U.S. 20 and Illinois 84 over the Galena River.

During construction, traffic will be reduced to one lane, controlled by temporary signals. The bridge will remain open to pedestrians throughout the project.

All lanes will reopen for the Memorial Day weekend, with lane closures resuming afterward. The project is expected to wrap up by the end of June.

Drivers are urged to use caution, follow posted signs, avoid distractions, and watch for workers in the construction zone.

FNWIL OPENING OFFICE IN GALENA

A new chapter is beginning for local philanthropy in northwest Illinois.

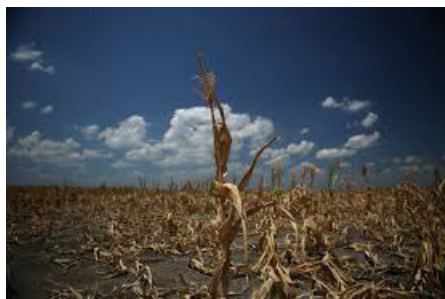
The Foundation for Northwest Illinois has officially opened a new office in Galena, having a ribbon cutting at its location on Spring Street.

Leaders say the new space will strengthen the organization's ability to serve residents and partners across Jo Daviess and Carroll counties.

For nearly 50 years, the foundation has supported community projects, grants, and charitable giving throughout the region.

Officials say the new Galena office will make it easier for individuals and organizations to start funds, apply for grants, and explore ways to give back locally.

The move reflects a continued commitment to growing community impact across northwest Illinois.



STATE LOOKING FOR DROUGHT SOLUTIONS

Ongoing drought conditions are raising concerns about long-term water supply across Illinois—including here in northwest Illinois.

While recent spring rains have helped improve surface conditions, experts say months of dry weather and above-average temperatures have taken a deeper toll on groundwater and rivers.

Illinois Department of Natural Resources officials say water levels in key river systems remain below normal for this time of year, highlighting the lingering effects of drought.

State climatologist Trent Ford says Illinois often has a “mirage of abundance” when it comes to water, but supplies are more limited than many realize.

Communities across the state have already taken action, with some issuing water restrictions earlier this year.

Now, lawmakers in Springfield are beginning discussions on long-term water management, including how to regulate high-use industries like data centers.



Officials say protecting water resources will be critical to maintaining quality of life across Illinois in the years ahead.

NUCLEAR SUBSIDIES BECOME FINANCIAL RELIEF FOR CONSUMERS

ComEd customers in northern Illinois could soon see some relief on their electric bills.

A provision in the state’s 2021 Climate and Equitable Jobs Act is now returning money to ratepayers, as rising energy prices and federal subsidies have boosted revenues for nuclear power operators.



The average residential customer is expected to see about a \$19 credit on monthly bills in the coming months.

The program was originally designed to support struggling nuclear plants, but includes a cap that sends excess revenue back to customers.

Since 2022, the initiative has provided more than \$1.8 billion in net savings to ratepayers.

Officials say the credits help offset rising energy costs while supporting reliable, carbon-free power across the region.



PINT NIGHT FOR FREEPORT CONCERT BAND

The Freeport Concert Band is getting a boost from the community with an upcoming fundraiser at Lena Brewing Company.

The band has been selected as the beneficiary of a special Pint Night happening tonight, Thursday, May 7th, starting at 5 p.m.

For every pint sold during the event, one dollar will be donated to support the band’s “Music Under the Stars” summer concert series.

Organizers say it’s a great opportunity to enjoy a night out while helping keep live music thriving in the community.

Everyone is encouraged to attend, bring friends, and show their support for the Freeport Concert Band.

ROYAL SCOTS PRESENTS VINYL MASTERS

Highland Community College’s Royal Scots are set to take the stage for their annual spring performance.

The 58th Annual Royal Scots Show, titled “Vinyl Masters: Hits of the 70s,” will be held Friday, May 8th at 7 p.m. in the Ferguson Fine Arts Center.

The show will feature a high-energy lineup of 1970s favorites, complete with choreography, vocal harmonies, and a live band with horns.



Audiences can expect music made famous by artists like Elton John, Chicago, Fleetwood Mac, and Stevie Wonder.

Director Randy Haldeman says the performance celebrates the sound and themes of the decade, many of which still resonate today.

Tickets are available at the door or here: <https://highland.vbotickets.com/events>.



6TH ANNUAL WORLD MIGRATORY BIRD DAY

A family-friendly event celebrating migratory birds is coming to Freeport.

The Northwest Illinois Bird and Nature Alliance is hosting its annual World Migratory Bird Day event Saturday, May 9th, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Oakdale Nature Preserve.

The free event will feature hands-on activities for all ages, including crafts, games, birdwatching, and guided trail walks.

Birdwatching outings will take place throughout the day, led by local experts, with accessible trails available.

Organizers say this year's theme highlights the importance of community involvement in bird conservation.

Guests are encouraged to bring binoculars, though some will be available to borrow. The event will be held rain or shine.

PRETZEL CITY WINEFEST THROWS IT BACK TO THE 80S

Downtown Freeport is turning back the clock this weekend as the annual Pretzel City Winefest returns with a new 1980s theme.

Hosted by the Greater Freeport Partnership, the event takes place Saturday, May 9th, from noon to 4 p.m., and is designed as a walkable tasting experience through downtown businesses.



Participants will check in at Re-Spun Records and Resale before visiting 18 locations offering wine and mocktail samples, along with opportunities to shop local.

Tickets are \$30 and include a tasting cup, \$10 in Partnership Cash, and a list of stops along the route.

Organizers say the goal is to bring people downtown while supporting small businesses.

New this year, a live DJ will play 80s hits on Chicago Avenue, adding to the retro atmosphere and giving visitors a chance to dance and celebrate throughout the day.

You can register online here: https://greaterfreeportpartnershipchamber.growthzoneapp.com/ap/Events/Register/MwF8G4mf8CeCg?fbclid=IwY2xjawQqfWJleHRuA2FlbQIxMABicmlkETfKukVvS3FreThvc05YRUdac-3J0YwZhchBfaWQQMjlyMDM5MTc4ODIwMDg5MgABHIMNjF00ccaUefL64bCCAJRHpr7BrwpxdPjiTrjltbO6s6L_Vaw-AJhTMwCp_aem_MAuacKXJv4boaMWKloshg



FHS PRESENTS PETER PAN GOES WRONG

Freeport High School is bringing comedy to the stage with its upcoming production of “Peter Pan Goes Wrong.”

Performances will run May 7th through May 9th at 7 p.m. at the Jeannette Lloyd Theatre, located at 701 West Empire Street in Freeport.

The play follows a fictional drama group attempting to stage the classic story of Peter Pan—only for everything that can go wrong to do exactly that.

Known for its physical comedy, missed cues, and chaotic mishaps, the show promises plenty of laughs for audiences of all ages.

Tickets are available through the Freeport School District, and the community is encouraged to attend and support local student performers.

IN CLOSING...

As we wrap up this week’s show, we’d like to remind you all to listen to this past week’s interview. Our own Tim Connors spoke with Katie Quittschreiber, the new owner of Lena Brewing Company. Tim and Katie talked about Katie’s plans for the taproom moving forward, as well as what it was like to go from employee to top boss.

This coming Tuesday, Becky Connors will be speaking with Bruce Cubberley. Bruce is the executive director of the Freeport Park District and he shares information about summer programming available through the park district. That interview will be available starting at noon on Tuesday, May 12th. You can find it, and all of our other interviews, on our website, www.freepod.org, or wherever you get your podcasts from.

We’d 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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This has been Freepod. Thank you for listening.

