



**2 October
2025**

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 updates on what's happening in our community.

You can find us on Facebook as well as our website (www.freepod.org) and the website of our NPR partner WNJI Northern Public Radio (www.northernpublicradio.org), so please visit us there and continue to share about us on your own social media. Now let's see what's happening.

FHN and Mercyhealth announce affiliation agreement

FHN announced plans on Tuesday for an affiliation agreement with Mercyhealth. FHN President & CEO Mark Gridley said this will allow FHN to benefit from greater economies of scale and as well as create opportunities for more efficient use of resources, cost savings, and reinvestment. Those savings will be used at FHN to enhance patient care, expand services, and upgrade facilities and technology.

He went on to describe the agreement as a proactive step to ensure that FHN will be able to continue to expand and grow. He noted that Mercyhealth shares FHN's history of providing care in rural communities and that the agreement will provide FHN patients with greater access to Mercyhealth's advanced clinical expertise and specialty care centers. Both organizations recognize that FHN has a strong tradition and identity in the communities it serves, which will be recognized with the new name Mercyhealth FHN for the affiliation.

As part of the agreement, Mercyhealth has committed to investing \$100 million in FHN over the next five years. These funds support major capital projects, including a new linear accelerator for the Leonard C. Ferguson Cancer Center at FHN Memorial Hospital and a robotic surgical system.

FHN has served the communities of northwest Illinois for more than 120 years and like other independent systems, it struggled in today's health care environment where less than 24% of US hospitals are independent. There are only a handful left in Illinois and FHN was one of the few that remained. The transaction will go through customary regulatory and closing conditions, which are anticipated to be completed by December 31st.



City leaf collection program

The City is beginning its annual leaf collection and reminds the community that...

- Leaves are collected in repeating cycles from west to east in the city until the first snowfall. Specific requests for leaf pile pickups are not accepted as a part of the Leaf Collection Program. If you missed a given cycle of leaf collection, your leaves will be collected on the next cycle.
- Leaves must be placed in a continuous row at the curb line.
- Only leaves are accepted; no grass clippings, yard waste, sticks, brush, or trash, all of which can clog the collection equipment. If such waste is placed curbside city crews will refuse collection.
- Storm sewer grates should not be covered with leaves. Also, even if you're not raking leaves yourself, please do not park vehicles on or immediately next to any leaf piles to ensure they can be easily picked up.

A collection map is available on the City website at www.cityoffreeport.org – just search on “leaf collection” or click <https://cityoffreeport.org/galleries/leaf-collection-map/>

As a reminder, residents can take woody waste to the Timber Industries location on Walnut across from the County Fairgrounds on Monday through Friday from 8:00 am to noon. This service is free to Freeport residents.

Highland Community College President announces retirement

Highland Community College President Chris Kuberski has announced that she will retire from her position at the end of this fiscal year next June. Kuberski has served as president since July of 2020 and is the ninth president of the college.

Doug Block, chair of the Highland Board of Trustees, was quoted as saying “President Chris Kuberski’s tenure at HCC has been outstanding. She has truly been instrumental in helping HCC fulfill its mission of providing education opportunities for the people of this district.”

Kuberski started at Highland in 2015 as the executive vice president. When she stepped into the presidency, she faced the challenges brought by COVID-19 and helped the College transition to online learning and then back to an in-person/online hybrid model to ensure that students and educators could seamlessly adjust to a dynamic, blended educational experience.

Kuberski has been instrumental in securing various grants that helped expand programs and facilities across Highland’s campus and also led the “reimagine” efforts on campus, which have resulted in new campus exterior signage, new welding and CNC machining labs, a nursing simulation hospital, mobile medical unit, renovations to fine arts including a new Estonia piano, expansion of the agricultural research farm, upgrades to student spaces, and several new software platforms. In total, the College has invested \$18.1 million on improvements to the campus during Kuberski’s tenure. President Kuberski also recently announced that Fall 2025 enrollment is up 9.1% by headcount and 1.3% by credit hours, and dual credit enrollment is also up.

Outside of her duties as college president, Kuberski serves on the boards of Greater Freeport Partnership, Northwest Illinois Economic Development (NWILED), and Region 1 Planning Council. In 2021, Kuberski was honored to receive the YWCA Women of Achievement Business Award.



After forty-one years serving in Illinois higher education, Kuberski is ready to complete this final chapter of her academic career. She carries with her a deep sense of gratitude as she reflects on her time at Highland and feels blessed to have worked alongside such dedicated and inspiring community of staff, faculty, and Board. Thank you for your leadership, Ms. Kuberski! (

Oakdale Fall Festival!

Although temperatures are still warm out, Fall is here and Oakdale Nature Preserve is celebrating at its annual Oakdale Fall Festival with a variety of activities. From noon to 4 p.m. this Saturday, October 4th, families are invited to explore Oakdale, located on Cranes Grove Road south of Freeport. There will be wagon rides, yard games, a hay maze, and live music featuring Nate Krause Music with country, folk, pop, and rock favorites the whole family will enjoy. Hiking trails will be open and hungry hikers can find plenty of food and snacks after their walks. Admission is free.



The Autumn Leaf Run is another popular part of the Oakdale Fall Festival and you can still register for the 5K run on October 4th between 7:00 and 8:30 a.m. The run begins at 9:00 a.m. and is open to all ages and skill levels of runners, walkers and nature enthusiasts and winds through diverse terrain, including wide tree-lined trails, moderate hills, prairie areas, bridge crossings and several single-track trail sections. The start and finish lines will be close in proximity. All proceeds go to the Freeport Parks Foundation to help fund upcoming projects at Oakdale Nature Preserve Park.



100 Women Who Care reach \$500,000 milestone

100 Women Who Care of Stephenson County has reached a significant milestone by surpassing \$500,000 in donations to local non-profits. The group of 120 women meets quarterly with each member contributing \$100 per meeting.

Over the years, 100 Women Who Care has donated to 32 different organizations, including efforts for flood relief, purchasing a bookmobile, and supporting non-profits during the pandemic...and FREEPOD!! We appreciate all you do, 100 Women Who Care!

Understand your property taxes

Understanding property taxes can feel overwhelming, but the Senior Resource Center in Freeport can help. Next Wednesday, October 9th at noon, the Center will host a presentation by Stephanie Helms, Stephenson County Treasurer & Collector and Angela Dieterman, Stephenson County Chief Assessment Officer. Treasurer Helms will cover key topics including the property tax cycle, billing, and payment options. Assessor Dieterman will review those all-important exemptions and deadlines.

The session is part of the Center's Lunch & Learn series and is free and open to adults age 60 and older. A complimentary lunch will be provided by the Treasurer and Assessor for session attendees so advance reservations are required to ensure enough food is available. For more information or to reserve your spot, call the Senior Resource Center at 815-235-9777. That's 815-235-9777.

Walk to Remember

While no parent should have to face the death of a child, especially a baby, for those that have, FHN wants those parents to know they are not alone in facing that grief and sadness.

FHN will host a special Walk to Remember event ceremony at 1:00 p.m. this Sunday, October 5th, outside FHN Memorial Hospital near Harlem Avenue. Parents can show support to other parents as FHN staff will read the names of infants who have died in honor of their memories. All families are invited to this event whether or not they are patients of FHN.

The Salvation Army needs your help!

The Salvation Army is urgently requesting winter coat donations to help meet community needs. They are currently 300 coats short before the first coat giveaway scheduled in October. In addition to winter coats, hats, gloves, mittens, and scarves are also needed. Donation can be dropped off at 106 W Exchange Street, Freeport.

The Salvation Army is also seeking volunteer bell ringers for the upcoming holiday season. Volunteer bell ringers play a crucial role in the holiday fundraising efforts and you can register online at www.registertoring.com

U of I Extension hosts invasive species program

Join University of Illinois Extension Natural Resource, Environment and Energy Educator Jay Solomon for an Invasive Species Fall Edition program. The program will begin at 1:30 p.m. next Tuesday, October 7th at the Jo Daviess County Extension Office, 204 North Vine Street in Elizabeth. The workshop is intended to help home owners with traditional yards as well as those with small acreages.

According to Solomon, invasive plants by definition are non-native, introduced by humans and can or do cause environmental or economic harm. Fall can be a good time to address some invasive plant issues as it is the best time to manage woody plants and some other perennials. He notes that most woody and many perennial plants tend to be putting nutrient reserves back into the roots to help jump start next year's growth during this time of year and disrupting this process by removing the above ground portion or selectively using herbicides can dramatically reduce the population next year. Woody invasive plants also tend to be the last to go dormant in the winter which makes them easy to locate.

Mechanical (cutting or pulling), chemical control, and combinations of methods will be discussed as well as a hands-on demonstration of some helpful tools. Plants that will be addressed during the workshop include woody invasives such as autumn olive, buckthorn, bush honeysuckle, and multiflora rose.

There is no fee to attend the program, but pre-registration is strongly encouraged by October 6th. To register or for more information visit us online at go.illinois.edu/jsw or call the Extension Office at 815-858-2273.

Wee Nats returns for young nature explorers

Families in Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago Counties are invited to join the Wee Nats, another program hosted by the University of Illinois Extension. Wee Nats is a free monthly environmental education program for children designed to encourage nature lovers ages 4 through 7 and their caregivers. Sessions will be held each month, October through May, in each county.

Each month, Wee Nats will explore a new nature-themed topic through hands-on activities, storytelling, and outdoor discovery, sparking curiosity and a lifelong love of the environment. A parent or guardian must attend with each child to help make it a fun, shared learning experience.

There is no charge to attend, but families are encouraged to dress for the weather, as time will be spent outdoors in nature. Registration is suggested and can be completed online or by calling your county Extension office. The number for Stephenson County is 815-235-4125 and numbers for Jo Daviess and Winnebago Counties are included in the print version of this episode or can be found online by

searching on “University of Illinois Extension county offices.” The number for Jo Daviess County is 815-858-2273 and it’s 815- 986-4357 for Winnebago County. That number again for Stephenson County is 815-235-4125.



FHN flu shot clinics begin

FHN is hosting a number of flu shot clinics again this year, beginning with a drive-thru event next Wednesday, October 8th from 3:00 to 6:30 p.m. at the FHN Family Healthcare Center - Burchard Hills in Freeport.

This year's immunizations are \$50 for adults under age 65 and \$100 for a high-dose vaccine for adults 65 and over. There is no out-of-pocket expense for those covered by Medicare Part B or a Medicare HMO accepted by FHN (covered persons must present an appropriate coverage card). No other insurance coverage can be accepted and per government regulations, no Medicaid cards can be accepted. Immunizations may be paid for by cash or check payable to FHN, and you can use your receipt for reimbursement from your health insurance carrier. Credit cards may be used for the drive-thru event at Burchard Hills.

You should NOT receive a flu shot at any of these clinics if you are allergic to eggs or the flu vaccine, are ill or have a fever, or have a depressed immune system. Everyone must present a photo ID to receive an immunization, and you should wear a shirt or top that makes your upper arm easily accessible.

These clinics are for adults only. For their own safety, children should be immunized at their regular healthcare provider's office. FHN offers pediatric flu shots at their office locations. For a full list of flu shot events throughout the region, visit www.fhn.org and search on “flu shots” or visit www.fhn.org/flushots.asp. If you need further assistance finding a provider location, call 815-599-7060. That’s 815-599-7060.

Local resident inducted into Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame

Local resident Rita Koch has been inducted into the 2025 Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame, recognizing her 25 years of service to the poultry program and local youth, according to a community announcement. The Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame honors volunteers who demonstrate outstanding service to 4-H or notable career and community achievement.

Koch has served as the 4-H Poultry Project superintendent in Stephenson County for 25 years. She has also been a poultry project leader, assistant club leader for the Country Cuzins 4-H Club and a poultry judge for neighboring counties for 15 years. She serves on the Stephenson County 4-H & Extension

Foundation Committee, supporting the growth of 4-H programs countywide. Koch is also a teacher in the Dakota Community Unit School District

The week ahead...

As we look ahead, don't forget that today is the last day to place your order for top-quality bird seed from Northwest Illinois Bird and Nature Alliance. Order online at the Alliance website at n-w-i-l-birdnaturealliance.org and click on "annual birdseed sale" or visit <https://nwilbirdnaturealliance.org/annual-birdseed-sale/>. Proceeds from your purchase support the programs and projects of the Alliance like monthly natural history programs, educational events for kids and families, and a wide variety of other conservation and preserve efforts that are open to the public.

If you're hungry tomorrow or Saturday, the Cub Foods Brat Stand this weekend will be run by supporters of the Freeport Alano Club. They'll be there both Friday and Saturday from 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. to serve up brats, burgers, hot dogs, and ribeye sandwiches.

As always, don't forget the Farmers Markets tomorrow morning both in downtown Freeport and near Higher Grounds on the south edge of the City, as well as in Lena (<https://www.stephensoncountyfarmersmarket.com/vendors>).



This Saturday, October 4th, is also the first Saturday of the month, so remember that The Re-Fresh Freeport program, a joint effort between the City of Freeport and Gill's Freeport Disposal, provides monthly free bulk trash disposal for Freeport residents on the first Saturday of each month. Bring your loads to the Freeport Transfer Station at 2133 S. Walnut Road from 8:00 to 11:00 a.m. To participate, bring a valid ID for proof of residency and cover your load with a tarp to prevent litter. The program does not accept yard waste, tires, hazardous waste like paint or oil, electronics, or appliances.

If you are looking for something to do this week or any week, visit the Greater Freeport Partnership website at www.greaterfreeport.com and click on "weekly events" for a comprehensive listing of many more entertainment and dining events and activities throughout Stephenson County. You can also subscribe to the City of Freeport's monthly newsletter at their website, www.cityoffreeport.org. We have links to both in the print version of FREEPOD episodes.

In closing...

In closing, if you haven't already done so be sure to listen to this week's in-depth interview where FREEPOD and TimBeck2 host Becky Connors visits with Jim Dole, director of the Doug Firebaugh Observatory and executive director of the Planetary Studies Foundation to talk about the observatory and how they'll be celebrating International Observe the Moon Day this Saturday, October 4th. The interview is available online and can be listened to anytime.

October is celebrated as National Bat Month and next Tuesday, FREEPOD and TimBeck2 host Tim goes a little batty with Adam Moderow. As the days grow shorter, more bats are out and about earlier and

they discuss the bat population in general as well as what to do if one decides to visit inside your home. This pod will post at noon on Tuesday, October 7th and be available to listen to then or at any time after that – just head to our website or your favorite podcast platform to select the programs of your choice.

As we've mentioned before, we need your help! When you're listening on your favorite podcast platform, please "like" or "follow" us – this helps us to move up in the rankings of podcasts and enables us to better promote ourselves throughout the region. On Facebook, also please click on "like" as the algorithms there also depend on user input to help us increase our presence.

And speaking of increasing our presence remember that FREEPOD is now on YouTube! The program is currently audio only but having it on the YouTube platform now gives you another way to listen. You can find both English and Spanish versions at <https://www.youtube.com/@FREEPOD61032/podcasts> or just head to YouTube.com and search for FREEPOD. Please tell all your friends and family members about our YouTube channel too – everything you do can help get local news out to our community!

As always, FREEPOD couldn't come to you without the Mass Communication Department at Highland Community College and our community liaisons and reporters. Thank you, Team FREEPOD! You can always find us on our Facebook page or the website of our National Public Radio partner, WNJI in DeKalb, at www.northernpublicradio.org. For more info, including how to make a tax-deductible contribution to support our work, visit our website at www.freepod.org.

With that, time's up for this week. Tune in again next Thursday at noon – or any time after that on our website or your favorite podcast platform – and thank you for listening!

Listen next week for more about what's happening in the Freeport area!

LINKS TO OTHER COMMUNITY EVENTS NEWSLETTERS BELOW



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While you're signing up for more of what's going on in our community, you can also subscribe to the City of Freeport's monthly newsletter at their website, www.cityoffreeport.org, or with the QR at the right.

