



**13 February
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 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. Thanks for your support!

Pretzel City NOT charging fees for medical rides outside Stephenson County

To being, we have a correction to one story from last week where we reported that Pretzel City Transit was beginning to charge for medical rides outside of Stephenson County. It is the Senior Resource Center which is now charging for medical rides outside the County to help pay for expenses such as gas, insurance, paid drivers, vehicle maintenance, and staff time required to coordinate and schedule rides that were previously being covered by a grant. The Center is planning to apply for another grant in 2025 to help with this situation. Pretzel City Transit does not operate outside Stephenson County at all, and we regret the error in the previous story.

Update on local ICE activities

The Freeport Police Department has acknowledged community concerns regarding immigration and enforcement by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, known by the acronym ICE, in local schools.

As Illinois is governed by the 2017 TRUST Act, any immigration enforcement is the responsibility of federal law enforcement agencies, and not associated with local authorities, and local authorities cannot comply with federal immigration warrants or detainers unless signed by a judge.

According to Freeport Police Chief Chris Shenberger, local authorities cannot search a person based on their immigration status or hold a person based on an ICE request. Shenberger further stated in a recent interview that the Freeport Police Department has not been in contact with anyone from ICE or the Department of Homeland Security and that the School Resource Officer assigned to the Freeport School District will be working with staff and students regarding any concerns they may have.

Respiratory illness level high for Illinois

According to the Illinois Department of Health, the state is now experiencing high levels of respiratory illness. The increase reflects what has been dubbed a “quad-demic” of four illnesses including flu, respiratory syncytial virus or RSV, COVID-19, and norovirus.

Vaccines remain the most effective defenses against flu, RSV, and COVID, and it is not too late to get your vaccines, as the seasonal respiratory season can extend late into the spring. There is currently no vaccine for norovirus although one is in development. Norovirus is commonly referred to as stomach flu and both highly contagious and impervious to hand sanitizer. To keep it at bay, experts recommend cleaning often-touched with bleach-based disinfectants and frequent, thorough handwashing.

So far, the 2024-2025 winter season illness level has not been as bad as it was last year but the season is far from over, so keep yourself and your family as healthy as possible.

Changes announced at Freeport School District 145

The Freeport School District 145 Board of Education has approved a Preschool Expansion Project that will expand and enhance the preschool program and unify all preschool classes into one central location at Jones Farrar.

According to the Board, this unified approach will ensure a consistent staffing model and necessary resources and support services in every classroom for improved kindergarten readiness, which is a vital factor for student success in subsequent grades. The rollout of the expansion will occur in four phases beginning in February and becoming operational in August.

As part of the transition, elementary schools will transition to a K-through-5th grade model and Freeport Middle School will transition to a 6th-through-8th-grade model, both beginning with the Fall semester. More details are being communicated by the Freeport School District.

Program for careers in agriculture approved at Freeport High School

In other School District news, the Illinois State Board of Education has approved Freeport High School's Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources pathway for the College and Career Pathway Endorsement. Brittani DeVries, among others, helped prepare the application and it was approved on the first try.

As a county with a large agricultural economy, FREEPOD is excited that Freeport students soon can take high school courses to gain college credit to pursue careers in Ag!

Big Read at Freeport Public Library

Next Thursday, February 20th, the Freeport Public Library invites you to join Aaron Lawler, a professor at Waubensee Community College, in a Big Read free presentation from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. as part of the Library's 2025 One Book One Freeport program.

The presentation will address big questions that many have asked at some point, such as “Who am I?”, “Why am I here?”, and “What does it all mean?” This presentation examines the intersection of

philosophy, poetry, and psychology in the quest for meaning and purpose, while also investigating how this quest affects the way we live.

The presentation is split into three interactive parts: personal identity, reflections becoming reality, and learning as transformation. Participants will explore work and ideas from VS Ramachandran, Elizabeth Loftus, David Parfit, John Locke, and Ray Bradbury, the author of *Dandelion Wine*, this year's One Book One Freeport book selection.

This event is produced by Freeport Public Library in partnership with Illinois Humanities.

Find out how to save on utility bills

On Thursday, March 6th, you can learn how you may be able to save money on your utility bills. From 5:30 to 7:30 p.m., join representatives from CUB – an acronym for the Citizens Utility Board -- Freeport's Environmental Study Group, and State Representative John Cabello at the Freeport Public Library to learn how to potentially reduce your utility bills and tap into money-saving, clean-energy programs.

Each participant will be able to speak one-on-one with a CUB counselor to receive a personalized analysis of their bills. Participants will also receive information on solar and electrification programs, rebates for energy saving programs, strategies for reducing energy costs through efficiency programs, and do-it-yourself solutions for home-owners, how to spot unnecessary charges on gas and electric bills, and how to register for income-qualified financial assistance programs.

Appointment spaces are limited so register early at

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSci1XTMIZj5jAQHTp8yJdNIWLF_-WpvVE_vrB8E-1UROSE3yw/viewform and be sure to bring copies of recent utility bills with you.

The Illinois General Assembly created the Citizens Utility Board in 1983 following local referendums that showed overwhelming support for the creation of an advocate for utility customers. The CUB Act gave the nonprofit, nonpartisan group the mission to fight for the rights of customers of investor-owned electric, gas and telecom utilities across Illinois.

GFP receives Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity grant

The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, known by the acronym DCEO, has announced awards for competitive grant funding opportunities totaling \$31 million, including \$144,000 to the Greater Freeport Partnership to identify and plan for future industrial corridors.

This grant will allow the Partnership to better prepare sites to attract future investment and new job opportunities in the industrial sector across Illinois Economic Development Regions. Having shovel-ready sites with necessary utilities and transportation options in Freeport and Stephenson County is vital to respond to new industrial development opportunities as well as assisting existing businesses in expansion efforts.

Trees in Freeport

Being a Tree City USA, Freeport takes environmental issues seriously. While 261 dead and dangerous trees were removed by City crews in 2024, 108 healthy trees were planted in and around Taylor Park and other areas, including oaks and other native species. These locations and species were carefully studied and selected by trained City staff.

Updates about 2024 activities like this can be found in the City's 2024 Annual Report on the City's website at www.cityoffreeport.org or https://drive.google.com/file/d/16qkKUlfR1Yk02gApcBK011mJy_V2kRIB/view



Senior Wellness event

The Senior Resource Center, in partnership with Fitness Lifestyles, will host a Senior Wellness Event next Wednesday, February 19th, at 1:00 p.m. at the Center at 206 East Stephenson Street in Freeport. This event can help older adults improve their stability, flexibility, and overall health through expert guidance, assessments, and interactive demonstrations.

Fitness Lifestyles staff will offer a number of free activities including balance screenings and assessments to improve stability and prevent falls; mini chair massages from licensed massage therapists; personal training interactive demos to enhance strength, flexibility, and overall fitness; and interactive exercise demonstrations including Silver Sneakers Circuit, strength and toning, and chair yoga. Space is limited so call 815-235-9777 to reserve your spot. That's 815-235-9777.

Senior Resource Center available for tax preparation assistance

In other Senior Resource Center news, as reported previously, the Center will offer free federal and state 1040 tax counseling, preparation and filing services for low and middle-income senior taxpayers residing in Stephenson and Jo Daviess counties as well as adults with disabilities. This service is provided

through the AARP Tax-Aide program by trained and IRS-certified volunteers and will run through April 15, 2025.

Appointments are required and can be scheduled by calling 815-235-9777 and the Center encourages those interested to set appointments early as spots are often quickly filled. To schedule, that number again is 815-235-9777.

Freeport Public Library Employees of the Year

The Freeport Public Library has honored Mark Heap and Erin Schrader with employee of the year awards. The awards recognize their professionalism and positivity on a daily basis and represent high praise indeed. Congratulations Mark and Erin!



*Mark Heap and Erin Schrader
of the Freeport Public Library*

Mom & Me Masquerade

Moms, your special young gentleman aged 10 or younger would love to escort you to an evening of dancing, prizes, and entertainment at the Masonic Event Center. The Freeport Park District's annual Mom & Me Masquerade event will be held from 6:00 to 8:30 p.m. on Friday, February 28t at the Masonic Event Center in Freeport.

Pre-registration is required by next Friday, February 21st and space is limited so be sure to call 815-235-6114 or go online at

<https://webtrac.freeportparkdistrict.org/wbWSC/webtrac.wsc/iteminfo.html?Module=AR&FMID=19076664> Fees are \$16 for Freeport residents and \$17 for non-residents. That's 815-235-6114.



The week ahead...

As a reminder, tomorrow is the last day to vote for a potentially new flag for the State of Illinois. If you'd like to see something different on the flagpole, just Google "vote for new Illinois state flag" or visit <https://www.ilsos.gov/special/IFC/home.html> to see options including 10 designs for a new flag, the current flag, the 1918 centennial flag, or the 1968 sesquicentennial flag.

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 subscribe to their free weekly newsletter there too, and we have a link to a QR code in the print version of this newscast if you'd like to sign up that way.



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 by using their QR code that appears below.



In closing...

In closing, if you haven't already done so be sure to listen to this week's in-depth interview that aired on Tuesday featuring FREEPOD host Alan Wenzel visiting with Julie Hilliger and Julie Wenzel, two members

of the executive team of 100 Women Who Care, a group of women in Stephenson County that over the last decade has distributed nearly a half-million dollars to charitable organizations in the County.

Next week, FREEPOD and TimBeck2 host Tim Connors talks with Rachel Gastel about overcoming challenges with alcohol. Their conversation will post at noon on Tuesday, February 18th.

As always, we remind you that FREEPOD couldn't come to you without the Mass Communication Department at Highland Community College and our community liaisons and reporters. We're also grateful to WNIJ for partnering with us in reaching even more listeners, including Spanish-speaking community members. Thank you, Team FREEPOD! For more info, including how to make a tax-deductible contribution to support our work, visit our website at www.freepod.org.

And with that, time's up for this week. Tune in again next Thursday at noon for more about what's happening in Freeport, and be sure to subscribe to us on your favorite podcast platform to receive alerts as each new pod airs. You can also always click through to our pods through our Facebook page or the website of our partner, WNIJ National Public Radio in DeKalb, at www.northernpublicradio.org. Thank you for listening to FREEPOD!

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