



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

And I'm Tim Connors...

In this week's episode, the Freeport School District announces plans to lay off some employees...

A Shannon woman is implicated in a human trafficking operation...

And the Annual Day of Racial Healing aims to unite the people of Freeport.

This is Freepod for March 12th, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

### FSD ANNOUNCES REDUCTION IN FORCE

The Freeport School Board has announced plans to implement a Reduction in Force, or RIF, due to financial hardships placed upon the school district.

At their meeting on March 3rd, the Board stated that the Illinois State Board of Education has required them to enact a deficit reduction plan. According to Board President Martha Furst, this past fiscal year, FSD had a deficit of \$3.4 million. But with rising costs for utilities, building and employee health insurance, as well as deep cuts in federal funding, the projected budget for this year increases that deficit to \$7 million.

Furst also told us that cutting employee positions will not make up that margin by itself.

*"I can tell you that, also we have to be finding savings on other fronts than just personnel."*

As of press time for this podcast, no plans have been solidified. But Furst did say that the Board plans on voting on a proposal at their March 24th meeting.

We also spoke to Freeport Education Association President Kelly Everding, and she told us that for her organization's members, these impending cuts are already taking a toll.

*"From an employee's perspective, it causes a lot of anxiety, even for our most seasoned teachers in the district, because, in a school, you become a family, you become a family of staff, you become a family within your department. You work with each other, you see each other every day. In some cases, you see the people you work with more than you see your family."*

*"And so to think that we might be losing any one of those people from our building or our department can be very difficult. At the same time, we also have a good working collaboratively relationship with the district administration. So I know that we'll be working to try to minimize, as much as possible any of these reductions in force."*



This will be the first RIF that FSD has had to implement in nearly 30 years; a milestone that Furst hopes does not sour a positive relationship between teachers and administrators.

*“But, I think that, hopefully, you know, we, we in recent years, we’ve actually done a good job of, having great relationships with our employees and with our unions. And, you know, so I very much hope we can come to some understanding where there’s still decent relationships with each of those parties. I mean, we want to, you know, we’ve we’ve just worked too hard in the past year to not come through this and position ourselves for further success.*”

*So I’m hoping it’s more of a short term issue, but honestly, it’s anybody’s crystal ball.”*

Freepod will continue to monitor this story and report back as more information becomes available.

### **CITY ANNOUNCES NEW ROAD PLANS FOR 2026**



At their March 2 city council meeting, the city of Freeport announced plans to install more than 12,500 tons of hot mix asphalt on city streets this year.

At this stage, the city has plans for upgrades on Carroll, Demeter, Dewey, Benton, and more streets throughout Freeport.

The work has been tasked to the Helm Group, for an estimated cost of \$835,000.

### **FREEPORT NAMES NEW FIRE MARSHAL**

Freeport has a new Fire Marshal. Brad Cox of the Freeport Fire Department was recently promoted to the position during a city council meeting.

Through ensuring the enforcement of fire codes, conducting safety inspections, and investigating the causes of fires, the marshal plays a critical role in our community; helping to ensure that all of us are as safe as we can be from the damages a fire can bring.



Congratulations, Brad, on your new position.



### **GROUNDBREAKING FOR NEW WELL AND WATER TREATMENT FACILITY**

The City of Freeport held a groundbreaking ceremony Monday for a major new water infrastructure project.

City officials gathered just off Forest Road at the south entrance of Krape Park to mark the start of construction on Well Number 12 and a new water treatment facility.

City leaders say the project will improve water quality and increase water capacity for Freeport’s low-zone service area.

The development is one of the largest infrastructure projects the city has undertaken, with about 31 million dollars in funding coming from the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency through emerging contaminants grants and forgivable loans.

## DEININGER FLORAL CLOSES ITS DOORS

After more than 85 years in business, a longtime flower shop in Freeport has closed its doors.

Deiningler Floral Shop says its final day of operation was February 28th. In a message to the community, the family-owned business thanked generations of customers and employees who supported the shop through the years.

The owners say it was an honor to be part of countless celebrations, milestones, and moments of comfort for families across Freeport.

They say changes in the floral industry and shifting consumer buying habits made it increasingly difficult to continue operating.

Deiningler Floral had served the Freeport community for more than eight decades. The family says they remain grateful to everyone who helped make the business part of the community for so long.



## SHANNON WOMAN IMPLICATED IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING OPERATION



A Shannon woman already serving prison time is now facing additional charges tied to a human trafficking investigation in northern Illinois.

Forty-year-old Crystal Houston of Shannon is charged with 18 counts including involuntary servitude, human trafficking, and money laundering. Prosecutors say Houston worked with Timothy Bennett of Belvidere in a scheme that targeted three young adult victims.

Authorities allege Houston housed the victims and helped force them into prostitution in the Rockford area between 2019 and 2023.

Investigators say about \$30,000 in profits from the operation was laundered through the Winnebago County Jail commissary.

Houston is currently incarcerated at the Decatur Correctional Center on a separate conviction and is scheduled to appear in court on the new charges April 8th.

## SSM HEALTH MONROE NAMES NEW PRESIDENT

SSM Health has named a new regional hospital president.

Chelsea Hardacre has been appointed president of SSM Health Monroe Hospital, the SSM Health Monroe Clinic Medical Group, and SSM Health St. Mary's Hospital in Janesville.

Hardacre brings more than 12 years of healthcare leadership experience and has been part of the Monroe team since 2015. She most recently served as chief nursing officer for both the Monroe and Janesville hospitals.

She stepped into the interim president role in December following the retirement of former president Jane Curran-Meuli.



Earlier this year, Hardacre received SSM Health's Presidential Coin, the organization's highest honor, recognizing her commitment to the health system's mission.



### **WARREN ELEMENTARY RECEIVES BLUE RIBBON AWARD**

Illinois is recognizing top-performing schools with a new statewide honor. And a regional elementary school was among the winners.

Warren Elementary was among the twenty-eight schools from across the state that were recognized at a ceremony at the governor's mansion in Springfield as the first recipients of the Illinois Governor's Blue Ribbon School Award.

The program was created last October after the federal National Blue Ribbon Schools program was eliminated by the Trump administration. State officials say the Illinois awards use the same rigorous standards previously used by the U.S. Department of Education.

Governor JB Pritzker praised the schools for their academic excellence and dedication to students, teachers and communities.

The honored schools include both public and private institutions from kindergarten through high school.

State officials say the Illinois program will continue in future years to recognize outstanding academic achievement across the state.

### **FARM BILL ADVANCES IN US HOUSE**

The U.S. House Agriculture Committee has advanced a new federal farm bill after an overnight debate lasting more than 20 hours.

The Republican-backed measure passed on a 34 to 17 vote, with support from seven Democrats. The more than 800-page bill now heads to the full House for consideration.

The legislation covers a wide range of agricultural and food programs and includes amendments dealing with issues like tobacco policy, wildlife connectivity, cover crops and virtual fencing.

Supporters say the bill will strengthen support for farmers and rural communities. But some Democrats criticized the process as partisan and warned the measure fails to address financial pressures facing farmers, including costs tied to global tariffs.

Congress has not passed a full farm bill since 2018, though the legislation is typically renewed every five years.



### **POLICE AGENCIES TO STEP UP SAFETY CAMPAIGN FOR ST. PATRICK'S DAY**



The Freeport Police Department is reminding drivers to celebrate responsibly this St. Patrick's Day.

Police are teaming up with the Illinois State Police and the Illinois Department of Transportation for a stepped-up traffic safety campaign running March 13th through 6 a.m. on March 23rd.

During that time, officers will be watching closely for drivers impaired by alcohol, cannabis, or other drugs, including some prescription medications. Seat belt enforcement

will also increase, especially at night when usage rates are lower.

Police say speeding, distracted driving and other traffic violations will also be strictly enforced.

Drivers are urged to plan ahead if they're celebrating — designate a sober driver, use a ride service, or public transportation. If you see a suspected impaired driver, call 9-1-1.

### **CERTIFIED FOOD PRODUCTION MANAGER TRAINING OFFERED**

The University of Illinois Extension Office is offering training for Certified Food Protection Managers in northwest Illinois.

The program will be on Monday, March 16th from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and Friday, March 20th from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Stephenson County Farm Bureau building in Freeport. To qualify for the state of Illinois exam, attendees must be present for both full days.

Registration is required and runs \$125. To sign up, please visit [go.illinois.edu/CFPMT](http://go.illinois.edu/CFPMT).



**Certified Food Protection Manager**

This course meets the 8-hour course work and examination required by the state of Illinois for the Certified Food Protection Manager certification.

- Must attend both full days to qualify for this exam.
- Bring a valid photo ID

Stephenson County Farm Bureau  
210 W. Spring Street Freeport, IL 61032

**Monday, March 16, from 9 AM - 3:30 PM**  
**Friday, March 20, from 8:30 AM - 4 PM**

**REGISTER TODAY!**  
**REGISTRATION REQUIRED**  
Call (815) 235-4125 or  
online at: [go.illinois.edu/CFPMT](http://go.illinois.edu/CFPMT)  
Registration fee is \$125.



  

University of Illinois Extension - Serving Jo Daviess, Stephenson & Winnebago Counties  
1290 W Pearl City Road, Freeport, IL (815) 235-4125 [go.illinois.edu/jew](http://go.illinois.edu/jew)



### **NIBNA BANQUET**

Spring is bringing a little humor to Highland Community College later this month.

The Northern Illinois Bird and Nature Alliance annual spring banquet will be held Tuesday, March 31st at Highland Community College. The featured speaker is Christopher Benda, also known as the Illinois Botanizer. Benda has spent more than 12 years teaching about plants, and is known for mixing science with

humor, puns, and pop culture references.

The evening includes a meal featuring roasted turkey breast and sweet corn from Drake's Farm in Baileyville.

While meal reservations must be made by March 21st, the public can still attend the program only, beginning at 7:30 p.m.

Admission for the program is five dollars for adults, and free for children and students. You can make your meal reservations here: <https://nwilbirdnaturealliance.org/banquet/>.

### **COST OF LIVING WITH CLIMATE CHANGE**

The Cost of Living with Climate Change Series is back with another presentation this week.

On Wednesday, March 18th, Dr. Trent Ford, Illinois's state climatologist, will present on the impact of climate change in Illinois "from farms to forests."

Dr. Ford will present data-driven information about the effects of climate change here in Northwest Illinois, as well as what federal, state, and community leaders are doing to address it.

The presentation will take place at the Freeport Public Library at 6:30 p.m. on March 18th, and the event is free and open to the public.





**GATSBY GALA**

Tickets are now available for the Foundation for Northwest Illinois's Gatsby Gala, a celebration honoring the work of women across northwest Illinois.

The event recognizes the legacy of social reformer Jane Addams and highlights women leaders continuing that work today.

The gala will feature 1920s-style food and cocktails, jazz music from the Ken Killian Swingtet, as well as live and silent auctions, a whiskey and spirits raffle, and opportunities to support local nonprofit organizations.

Doors open at 6:30 p.m., and tickets are available now. To get your tickets, just visit <https://fornwil.fcsuite.com/erp/donate/list/ticket>.

**DAY OF RACIAL HEALING**

The Freeport chapter of the NAACP invites the community to join them, along with the Boys & Girls Club and the United Way, in a day of racial healing.

The event will take place March 21st from 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at the Stephenson County Farm Bureau building in Freeport. This year's event is titled "How We Heal: Listening to Understand, Honoring Stories, Building Trust."

Included in the day's activities are speakers offering their perspectives on overcoming racial division in our community, as well as an opportunity for all participants to engage each other in a racial healing circle experience.

For more information, please visit <https://cityoffreeport.org/naACP-national-day-of-racial-healing-3-21-26/>.



**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. I spoke with my good friend Susan Bookless, an English teacher at Galena High School. Susan is the recent recipient of an Award of Special Recognition by the Illinois State Board of Education. We spoke about what that award means for Susan, and what effective teaching can mean both for students and the teachers themselves.

This coming Tuesday, the featured interview is with Marcia Meyers of the Lions Club. That organization is putting on a service carnival at the Lincoln Mall and District Governor Meyers sat down with Freepod host Alan Wenzel to talk about the event that aims to bring local service organizations and nonprofits together to let the community know what kind of services they offer. That interview will be available starting at noon on Tuesday, March 17th. You can find it, and all of our other interviews, on our website, [www.freepod.org](http://www.freepod.org), or wherever you get your podcasts from.

And make sure you listen to next week's regular podcast releasing at noon on Thursday, March 19th, as we once again hand the keys over to journalism students from Freeport High School. Under the guidance and leadership of their award-winning teacher, Jena Kleindl, the students will be responsible for writing and recording the entire episode. This one is always a great time, so you don't want to miss it.

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.

As always, please like us on Facebook, subscribe on the podcast platform of your choice, and share with your friends. If you'd like to make a tax-deductible contribution to support local news content, please visit our website at [www.freepod.org](http://www.freepod.org).

This has been Freepod. Thank you for listening.



# **FREEPOD**

**The news you've been missing.**