



**1 December
2025**

Welcome to FREEMOD, 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.freemod.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.

City news

The City agrees that November is a little early to stop leaf pickup so despite the near-record dumping of snow we got last weekend and a forecast for more snow to come, public works crews will continue leaf pickup after the snow melts enough to allow it. Thank you for your patience in this cooperation with Mother Nature!

Freeport business awarded grants

Three Freeport businesses were among the 47 awarded Small Business Capital and Infrastructure grants recently announced by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. The opportunity to apply for a share of \$10 million in grant funding was opened by the Department in the Spring 2025 to help businesses create and retain jobs, improve efficiencies, and grow local economies.

Grants were awarded to Pierce Athletics, Fitness Lifestyles, and Stooptown Revival. Their applications were facilitated with the help of the Greater Freeport Partnership. The program funding provides businesses with support and resources to improve infrastructure, acquire essential equipment, or purchase new property. Businesses can use these funds for projects including planning, land and building acquisition, buildings, additions, or structures, site improvements, rolling stock, and durable equipment. For more information about Partnership services like this or other questions, contact 815-233-1350 or visit www.greaterfreeport.com.

Lena-Winslow football team wins 1A state championship

The Lena-Winslow Panthers are back on top of Illinois Class 1A football with a dominating 58-13 win last week against Brown County of Mt. Sterling to secure the 1A state championship following two runner-up finishes the last two seasons. This is the seventh state championship in Lena-Winslow's history, with all seven coming since 2010.

The Panthers bolted out to a 38-6 lead at halftime. They quickly opened that up even more in the third quarter leading to a running clock and prompting head coach Ric Arand to go to his backups with more than three minutes still remaining in the third quarter.



Panthers' all-state running backs Aiden Wild and Alec Schlichting ran through, over, and past Brown County defenders. Wild rushed for 170 yards on 22 carries, and scored five touchdowns. Schlichting rushed for 146 yards on nine games, and scored two touchdowns. As a team, pictured at right, the Panthers rushed for 440 yards while averaging 8.8 yards per carry. Way to go, Panthers!

Lena Christmas Parade and Celebration

Lena kicks off the holiday season with the Lena Hometown Christmas & Lighted Parade this Saturday, December 6th beginning at 6:00 p.m. on Main Street in Lena. The parade features dozens of holiday-themed floats from local businesses and organizations and after the parade, Santa Claus will lead the countdown to the light the Community Tree.

Before and after the parade, enjoy a hay wagon ride along holiday-lit streets, visit stores, pick up treats from vendor booths, and let the kids enjoy a great array of inflatable bounce houses from 3:30 to 6:00 p.m. and again after the parade.



Santa and his helpers will await visitors in the North Pole Pavilion located near the south end of the Main Street from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. If you don't make it for a personal visit, Christmas wish lists can still be sent to Santa via special delivery from now through December 18th by placing letters to Santa in the special mailbox located by the community tree. Santa's elves will collect the letters and return a message if an address is included. For more information, visit the Lena Business & Professionals Facebook event page.

In other event news from Lena, the Winter and Spring program guide is now available from the Lena Community Park District. It includes lots of fun activities for the whole family in the coming months, including sky days at Chestnut Mountain, and you can find it online at www.lenaparkdistrict.org/about/registration/

New fundraising initiative for United Way

The United Way of Northwest Illinois has kicked off a new fundraising initiative called *Dine United*. The initiative is beginning with Lena Fast Stop and the Full Circle Cafe & Collective located in the lobby of the Freeport Public Library. Both of these shops have agreed to donate a portion of food sales to support those in our communities temporarily experiencing financial hardships in December.

The United Way is planning to make this a permanent fundraising campaign enabling the United Way of Northwest Illinois, based in Freeport, to provide direct aid to those temporarily struggling financially in our communities. Other businesses who would like to participate can contact the United Way directly to discuss their ideas at 815-232-5184. That's 815-232-5184.

This "nasty, hard-to-kill virus" is making an earlier appearance this year

A nasty, highly contagious virus is spreading across the country right in the middle of the holiday season, and it's not the flu or COVID. The norovirus, also known as the "winter vomiting disease", is notoriously difficult to kill because it is highly infectious, stable in the environment, and many traditional alcohol-based hand sanitizers are not effective against it. It has been on the rise in the U.S. since mid-October, earlier than its typical peak between December and February. Last year's outbreaks were the largest in a decade and the current high activity is especially noted in the Northeast and Midwest.

The virus is being tracked nationwide through wastewater scans, and concentrations of the virus have increased nationwide by 69% since October. While currently lower compared to last year's spike, outbreaks are expected to keep rising.

Symptoms of norovirus typically appear 12 to 48 hours after exposure and last a few days and include diarrhea, vomiting, fever, stomach pain, and body aches. To protect and prevent the spread of norovirus, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or CDC recommends several key measures:

1. Handwash vigorously with soap and water, which is crucial because hand sanitizers are less effective against norovirus.
2. Use a diluted bleach solution to clean common surfaces.
3. Wash infected clothes and linens with hot water and detergent.
4. Properly clean fruits and vegetables.
5. Stay home if you are sick and avoid contact with others.



If you do become ill, rehydration is key to replace lost fluids, and symptoms may require medical attention for older adults, young children, and those with weakened immune systems. While it's difficult to miss holiday celebrations with family and friends, no one wants to leave an unwelcome "gift" behind for others in the form of norovirus or any other contagious ailment. For more information and the latest updates, check with your healthcare provider or visit the CDC norovirus website at www.cdc.gov/norovirus/.

School funding from the State

If advocates, stakeholders, and members of the public were granted all their requests for public school funding next year, lawmakers would have to increase the state's education budget for grades K through 12 by nearly three-quarters of a billion dollars. That's the approximate total of all the requests that Illinois State Board of Education officials received online and in-person during a recent series of public hearings about a proposed budget for the next fiscal year.

The total is considerably smaller than last year's requests, which added up to more than \$2.2 billion in new funding. However, it is still more than what is likely to be available, given that Governor Pritzker is asking most state agencies to make plans for reducing spending by 4% in the current fiscal year in light of fiscal uncertainty at the federal level.

The list of requests reflects 51 categories of school spending with increases totaling \$747.9 million including funding in a number of areas both mandated and outside mandates. The State is expected to approve its official budget, including public school funding, in January. In the meantime, the uncertainty around the process can make it difficult for school districts to plan ahead for the 2026-27 school year. FREEPOD will report on any impacts for area school districts when the budget is finalized.

Music sounds strong at FSD 145

Related to that story, in a moment when many programs are scaling back their live musicians or relying entirely on soundtracks, Freeport High School found itself as strong as ever or even stronger in providing the instrumental performance for *Frozen*, the most recent musical at the school that was staged just before Thanksgiving. The event featured one of the largest pit orchestras assembled in years, a vibrant mix of Freeport High School band and orchestra students performing side by side with seasoned local professionals.

What stood out even more to the school staff was the professionals' approach. They didn't simply arrive, play the book, and head home. They invested in the students. They coached, encouraged, demonstrated, and modeled what it means to be a collaborative musician. That level of mentorship is rare, and it elevated the experience far beyond the notes on the page.

Constructing a pit orchestra is never simple and guiding actors from rehearsal tracks to a fully live ensemble, often with only a handful of joint rehearsals, requires precision, patience, and a keen musical instinct. The success of that transition rests squarely on the shoulders of FSD 145 Orchestra Director Scott Benson and Director Derek Simons, whose ability to unite these two musical worlds ultimately shaped the performance the audience experienced. Their work made the final product not only possible, but artistically richer. Thank you, Scott and Derek!

FHN collects letters to Santa

FHN is once again collecting letters to forward on to Santa Claus! Letters may be brought to Santa mailboxes at the Freeport Public Library children's desk or the lobbies of FHN locations in Freeport including Burchard Hills, Highland View Drive, and FHN Memorial Hospital.

Dear Santa,

My name is _____

I am _____ years old. I am a: ___ boy ___ girl

I would like it if you could bring me: _____

Thank you and Merry Christmas!

PARENTS - PLEASE COMPLETE THE FORM BELOW:

Parent Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Child's Name: _____

Write a letter to Santa and get a reply letter and a holiday craft.
Your child's letter to Santa can be dropped off at Santa's mailbox at the Freeport Public Library or the lobbies of FHN Memorial Hospital, FHN Family Healthcare Center - Burchard Hill, or FHN Family Healthcare Center - Highland View Drive.

A template for the letters to make it easy for young writers can be downloaded from the FHN website at www.fhn.org – just search on “letter to Santa.” A direct link is also provided in the print version of this newsletter (<https://www.fhn.org/docs/SantaLetter.pdf>)

Letters can also be mailed to Santa at The North Pole, 524 W. Stephenson Street, Suite 100, Freeport, IL 61032 and must be received by Sunday, December 14th to allow time for Santa to respond and send a holiday craft to letter writers in time for Christmas.

Support children who’ve lost parents to gun violence

The Boys & Girls Club of Freeport and Stephenson County is hosting the third annual event *Our Angel’s Kids: A Holiday of Love & Remembrance* next Saturday, December 13th, from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. at the Club location at 511 South Liberty Avenue in Freeport. The event is presented by Melanise Ellis, High Hope Freeport, and Faith Leaders for Peace.

This Christmas celebration is designed to bring comfort, love, and light at Christmas to children who’ve lost a parent to gun violence. You can help by providing gifts or monetary donations or by adopting a family. For more information, contact details are provided in the poster below.

3RD ANNUAL OUR ANGEL'S KIDS
A Holiday of Love and Remembrance

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2024
 1:00 PM – 4:00 PM
 BOYS & GIRLS CLUB OF STEPHENSON COUNTY
 511 S. LIBERTY AVE, FREEPORT, IL

ABOUT THE EVENT
 A CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION FOR CHILDREN WHO'VE LOST A PARENT TO GUN VIOLENCE — OFFERING JOY, REMEMBRANCE, GIFTS, AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT.

HOW TO SUPPORT

Gift Donations Adopt-a-Family \$\$ Donations

Contact: melaniseellis35@gmail.com
william.brown@highhopefreeport.org
vince.brooks24@gmail.com

Melanise Ellis • High Hope Freeport • Faith Leaders For Peace

Salvation Army needs your help

The shelves are still pretty bare at the Salvation Army and they need your help this holiday season. Items of particular need include cereal; cookies that don't melt; crackers; canned vegetables, especially corn, carrots, and peas; canned soups, including chunky versions, cream of chicken and cream of mushroom, chicken noodle, and vegetable; dried and canned potatoes; and pasta. They are also urgently requesting donations of winter coats, hats, gloves, mittens, and scarves to keep our community warm in the cold winter days that have begun.

Donations can be dropped off at 106 West Exchange Street, across the street from the Stephenson County Courthouse. You can also make a cash donation that the Salvation Army can use to purchase groceries at <https://centralusa.salvationarmy.org/freeport/>

Rockford interchange finalized

The new diverging-diamond or DDI interchange at I-39 and U.S. 20/Harrison Avenue in Rockford has been completed. The DDI interchange allows for better flow to I-39 and on U.S. 20/Harrison Avenue compared to a conventional cloverleaf interchange and makes it safer by reducing potential collision points and improving access to and from the interstate. If you're heading to Rockford for holiday events, be sure to be alert to the new traffic pattern at this busy interchange.

The week ahead...

As we look at the week ahead, we're looking forward to this year's Holiday Classic Movie presented by FHN as way to support local food pantries. The *Shop Around the Corner* from 1940 will air at 1:00 and 7:00 p.m. next Thursday, December 11th, as a special event in the Select Pix Classic Movies Series at Classic Cinemas Lindo Theatre in Freeport. Admission can be food items or a freewill monetary donation, all of which will go to local food pantries.

As with other movies throughout the year in the Select Pix Series, Ed Finch and Alan Wenzel will provide movie history and trivia before and after the movie, which features Margaret Sullavan and Jimmy (James) Stewart. The story follows the two lead actors as general store employees who disagree on almost everything but are unknowingly pen pals who fall in love through their letters. The movie was remade in 1988 as *You've Got Mail*, a classic romantic comedy starring Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks.

Tickets are still available for the Trans-Siberian Orchestra tribute event presented by the Greater Freeport Partnership. The Christmas Wizards will perform at the Freeport Masonic Temple on Saturday, December 13th at 6:00 p.m. Ticket prices range from \$25 to \$50 and are available online through the links below.

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/christmas-wizards-a-night-of-tso-tickets-1591864903779>

<https://aftontickets.com/event/buyticket/p79plny0xk>

<https://meetingsforevercom.ticketspice.com/christmas-wizards-2025>

Tickets are also still available for *The Messiah* at Highland Community College will be performed next Sunday, December 14th at 3:00 p.m. and tickets can be purchased at the Highland box office in the Center or online at www.highland.edu/boxoffice. *The Nutcracker*, performed by students and members of Studio 121 Dance in Freeport, will be presented on December 19th and 20th at 7:30 p.m. at Freeport's Masonic Temple. Tickets are available now at 815-275-0643 or online at <https://www.etix.com/ticket/o/17565/studio121dance>.

We'd also love to attend the Victorian Christmas Tea we mentioned last week. It's being held this Saturday, December 6th from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. at the beautiful and historic Taylor Mansion on the grounds of the Stephenson County Historical Museum at 1440 South Carroll Avenue in Freeport. Admission is free and guests can stroll through the elegantly decorated home, sip tea, and enjoy the nostalgic sights and sounds of the holidays as they were celebrated over a century ago. The Taylor Home will be open for tours and the Museum Gift Shop will also be open for holiday shopping. Parking is limited on museum grounds but visitors can use street parking or the church parking lot at the corner of Empire and Carroll.



Then of course Santa Claus is making a number of appearances around town, including tonight, December 4th and next Saturday the 13th. He'll be there tonight from 6:30 to 7:00 and from 2:00 to 2:30 next Saturday to read Christmas stories to children at the Freeport Public Library and listen to Christmas wish lists.

And finally, some of our liaisons thoughtfully contributed reminders about safe winter driving given the recent deluge of snow that are good to remember all winter. First, it's always a good idea to test your car's brakes before leaving your neighborhood to help determine how slippery conditions have become. All-wheel drive is great in snow and slush but no vehicle stops well on ice so if it's too slippery to get out of your driveway or off your home street, it is probably too slippery to try to go further. Then, remember that bridges, on and off ramps, and overpasses freeze first in cold weather so it's good to coast but not brake when approaching them. Finally, just like your parents may have told you, during potentially bad driving weather make sure that your gas tank is at least half full in case you run into long traffic back-ups or if get stuck somewhere. It's always better to be safe than sorry!

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.

We also wanted to remind everyone that we're really enjoying the great in-depth interviews you can hear every week on FREEPOD, and are sure you will too if you're not already! This week's interview featured FREEPOD host Alan Wenzel chatted with local resident Larry Feiner about building memories with family and friends by engaging in outdoor activities, which Larry does through hunting and fishing. The interview, which first aired the day before yesterday on Tuesday, is available online and can be listened to anytime.

Next Tuesday, FREEPOD host Alan Wenzel visits with local history author Ed Finch and Sharon Welton, director of the Stephenson County Historical Society Museum about Charles Guiteau, who was born in Freeport in 1841 and is probably best known for shooting President James Garfield in 1881, which led to the President's death shortly thereafter. His story unfolds in the new limited series *Death by Lightning* currently streaming on Netflix. While countless books, TV shows, and films have been produced about the likes of presidential assassins John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald, Guiteau isn't exactly remembered the same way. In fact, Charles Guiteau isn't really remembered much at all – outside Freeport that is. Finch and Welton provide details about Guiteau and his family in Freeport that give new insight into a chapter from Freeport's past. Their conversation will post at noon on Tuesday, December 9th 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.

In closing...

In closing, 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 YouTube gives you another super-easy way to listen. You can find both English and Spanish versions – just head to YouTube.com and search for FREEPOD or click the link in the print version at <https://www.youtube.com/@FREEPOD61032/podcasts>. 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!

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, WNIJ 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

What's Going on in Stephenson County?

Subscribe to our weekly event guide!



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.

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