



Hello and welcome to FREEPOD. I'm Paulette Williams-Thomas...

And I'm Pat Norman...

In this week's episode, the Freeport Police Department launches a safety campaign during a busy holiday travel season...

The Pec Playhouse prepares to open its new permanent home...

And Tutty Fest is fast approaching with a special tribute to service members from the Freeport area.

This is Freepod for June 25th, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

FPD LAUNCHES SAFETY CAMPAIGN

The Freeport Police Department is encouraging motorists to make safe choices behind the wheel as officers launch a summer traffic safety campaign.

The department says increased patrols will focus on speeding, distracted driving, impaired driving and seat belt enforcement during one of the busiest travel periods of the year. Officers are reminding drivers that even a brief distraction behind the wheel can have life-changing consequences.

Police say everyone can help reduce crashes by putting phones away while driving, obeying speed limits, buckling up, and never driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

The campaign is funded through federal highway safety grants administered by the Illinois Department of Transportation.



LAND BANK TRANSFORMS FORMERLY BLIGHTED PROPERTY

A formerly blighted property on Freeport's south side has been given new life thanks to the Northwest Illinois Land Bank Authority.

The organization recently completed redevelopment of a vacant property at 52 N. Bailey Street that had long been considered an eyesore. The rehabilitated home has now been returned to productive use, improving neighborhood appearance while helping strengthen local property values.

The Land Bank Authority continues working throughout northwest Illinois to acquire abandoned and tax-delinquent properties, returning them to private ownership and encouraging neighborhood revitalization.

Officials say every successful redevelopment helps stabilize surrounding neighborhoods while reducing the burden of vacant structures on local communities.

STEPHENSON COUNTY UNEMPLOYMENT RATES DROPPED IN APRIL

Stephenson County's economy continues to show encouraging signs.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the county's unemployment rate fell to four percent in April, down from five-point-two percent in March.

The improvement mirrors statewide gains as employers added jobs across several sectors, including education, health care, hospitality and construction.

Local business leaders say the stronger labor market is good news for area families and employers alike. However, many manufacturers, healthcare providers and skilled trades businesses continue reporting difficulty finding qualified workers to fill open positions.

Economic development officials say attracting and retaining a skilled workforce remains one of the region's biggest priorities.



VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR PRAIRIE STEWARDSHIP



The Northwest Illinois Bird and Nature Alliance is inviting community members to help restore native habitat during its upcoming volunteer stewardship program.

The NIBNA is hosting a series of prairie stewardship workdays at the Elkhorn Creek and Silver Creek Biodiversity Preserves and the Freeport Prairie Nature Preserve. The next session is scheduled for Saturday, June 27, from 7 until 9 a.m. at Elkhorn Creek's Sandy Slope.

Volunteers will help remove invasive plants and restore native prairie habitat that supports birds, butterflies and other wildlife. No experience is necessary, and tools, gloves, training and snacks are provided. Participants are encouraged to wear long sleeves and pants, sturdy footwear, and bring water.

For the complete schedule or to volunteer, visit <https://www.nibna.org>

AG OLYMPICS REGISTRATION COMING DUE

Young people interested in agriculture still have time to register for one of the area's most popular summer competitions.



Registration is coming due for this year's Ag Olympics, which brings together youth teams for friendly competition while teaching agricultural knowledge, teamwork and leadership skills.

Events typically include farm-related challenges, relay races and educational contests designed to showcase both problem-solving and agricultural awareness.

Extension educators say the event has become an excellent way for young people to learn about agriculture while building friendships and leadership experience.

Participants are encouraged to register before the deadline to guarantee a spot, and you can do so at <https://stephensoncfb.org/category/trips/>



EGG PRICES CREATE SHOCK FOR FARMERS

Egg prices may finally be coming down at the grocery store, but poultry farmers are facing a much different reality.

The American Farm Bureau Federation says egg supplies have rebounded as flocks recover from highly pathogenic avian influenza, with bird losses dropping dramatically since early spring. While that's helped lower retail egg prices by more than 60 percent compared to a year ago, the price farmers receive has fallen even further—down 93 percent.

Farm Bureau economist Bernt Nelson says many producers are now selling eggs below the cost of production, putting financial pressure on farms, especially smaller operations. Industry leaders warn that prolonged low prices could force some farms out of business despite the recovery in egg supplies.

JUNE IS DAIRY MONTH

June is Dairy Month, and throughout northwest Illinois the spotlight is on one of the region's most important agricultural industries.

Illinois dairy farms produce millions of pounds of milk each year while supporting thousands of jobs in farming, processing, transportation and food production.

Agricultural organizations are encouraging residents to recognize the contributions of dairy farm families by purchasing locally produced dairy products and visiting educational events throughout the month.

Many local farms continue using new technologies that improve animal care, environmental stewardship and milk quality while helping farms remain competitive for future generations.

Dairy producers say they appreciate the continued support of consumers who choose locally produced milk, cheese, yogurt and ice cream.



PEC PLAYHOUSE TO BREAK GROUND ON NEW THEATER



A new chapter is about to begin for the Pec Playhouse Theatre. The community theater will break ground on its new home at 10 a.m. on Wednesday, July 15, at 202 West Third Street in downtown Pecatonica.

The project will transform a former industrial building into a fully accessible theater featuring improved seating, lighting and sound systems. Pec Playhouse purchased the building in 2024 following a successful capital campaign.

The theater has been without a permanent home since its longtime Main Street building collapsed under heavy snow and ice in February 2021. Since then, performances have been held at local churches and schools. Theater officials say the new facility will ensure the organization continues serving audiences for years to come.

FORMER MINE NEAR GALENA CITED AS HEALTH RISK

A newly released public health assessment is urging caution around the former Bautsch-Gray Mine southeast of Galena.

The Illinois Department of Public Health and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry found elevated levels of heavy metals, including arsenic, lead and manganese, in mine waste and surrounding soils.

While the report says the site does not pose an immediate emergency, officials recommend people avoid disturbing mine tailings and limit unnecessary exposure to contaminated soil.

Residents are encouraged to review the report and submit comments during the public review period. A public information meeting is scheduled for July 16 from 4 to 7:30 p.m. at the Galena City Hall.



JO DAVIESS CONSERVATION FOUNDATION RECEIVES STATE PRAISE

The Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation is receiving statewide recognition for its ongoing efforts to protect some of Illinois' most unique natural landscapes.

A recent feature highlighted the foundation's stewardship of nearly 1,500 acres of prairies, forests, wetlands and historic sites throughout Jo Daviess County. Among the properties receiving recognition are Horseshoe Mound Preserve, Casper Bluff Land and Water Reserve, Valley of Eden Bird Sanctuary and the Buehler Preserve.

Foundation officials say protecting these lands preserves wildlife habitat while providing residents and visitors opportunities to hike, birdwatch and experience the Driftless Area's remarkable scenery.

MAJOR RESURFACING PROJECT UNDERWAY IN CARROLL COUNTY

If you're traveling through Carroll County this summer, plan on allowing a little extra time.

The Illinois Department of Transportation has begun a major resurfacing project along approximately ten miles of Illinois Route 84 between south of Savanna and the White-side County line.

The seven-million-dollar project includes pavement repairs, milling and resurfacing. Motorists should expect daytime lane closures controlled by flaggers through the end of October.

Drivers are reminded to slow down in work zones and remain alert for workers and changing traffic patterns.





ILLINOIS LIBRARIES TO EXPAND DATABASE ACCESS

Illinois residents will soon have expanded access to online information through their local libraries.

The Illinois State Library is expanding access to digital databases that provide free research materials, educational resources, historical archives, business information and career development tools.

Officials say the enhanced services will allow library cardholders to access high-quality information from home, helping students, educators, job seekers and lifelong learners alike.

Local libraries throughout northwest Illinois will continue offering assistance to patrons interested in exploring the expanded online resources.

ISBE FOCUSES ON IMPROVING MATH EDUCATION

Improving student math performance remains a top priority for the Illinois State Board of Education.

State education officials are continuing to implement new strategies designed to strengthen mathematics instruction and improve achievement across all grade levels.

The initiative includes expanded professional development for teachers, additional classroom resources and increased support for school districts working to improve achievement across all grade levels.

The initiative includes expanded professional development for teachers, additional classroom resources and increased support for school districts working to improve student outcomes.

Education leaders say strong math skills are critical for preparing students for college, careers and an increasingly technology-driven workforce.

School districts across northwest Illinois are expected to benefit from the state's continued investment in mathematics education.



PRITZKER SIGNS \$56B BUDGET

Governor JB Pritzker has signed Illinois' new \$55.9 billion state budget into law. The spending plan takes effect July 1st and includes continued investments in K-12 education, infrastructure, public safety and health care.

It also fully funds the state's annual Evidence-Based Funding increase for schools and restores property tax relief grants for participating districts. The budget raises new revenue through taxes on social media companies, digital assets and fantasy sports operators, while delaying this year's scheduled motor fuel tax increase until January.

Governor Pritzker says the budget keeps Illinois on solid financial footing, while Republican leaders argue the new taxes will make the state less affordable for families and businesses.

24TH ANNUAL GRAN FONDA BIKE RIDE AGAINST CANCER

Cyclists from across the Midwest will soon gather in northwest Illinois for one of the region's premier fundraising events.

The 24th Annual Gran Fonda Tour Against Cancer rolls out Saturday, June 27th, beginning and ending at Krape Park in Freeport.

Riders can choose from multiple route lengths designed for cyclists of all experience levels, with proceeds benefiting cancer care and support services for patients and families throughout the region.

Organizers say the annual ride has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years while promoting healthy living and bringing visitors to northwest Illinois.

Volunteers are also welcome to help with rider support and event operations, and you can register for any of the rides at <https://www.chainlinkcyclists.com/touragainstcancer>



FREEPORT CONCERT BAND TO HOLD PATRIOTIC CONCERT



Music lovers are invited to celebrate America's birthday with one of Freeport's longest-running summer traditions.

The Freeport Concert Band will present its annual Patriotic Concert on Sunday, June 28th, at 7 p.m. in the Koenig Amphitheater at Krape Park.

The free concert will feature patriotic favorites, military salutes, marches and other classic American selections performed by the community band.

Audience members are encouraged to bring lawn chairs or blankets and enjoy an evening of music under the summer sky.

In the event of inclement weather, updates will be posted by the Freeport Concert Band.

AMERICAN SON PERFORMANCE AT WINNESHIEK

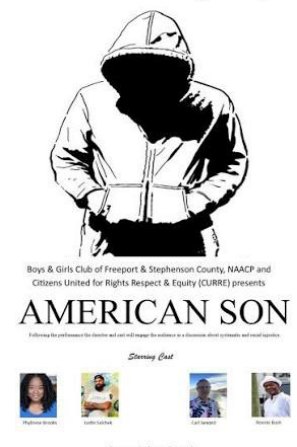
The stage is set for a powerful evening of live theater in Freeport.

Winneshiek Playhouse will present American Son, the acclaimed drama by Christopher Demos-Brown, on Friday and Saturday, June 26th and 27th, with performances beginning at 6 p.m.

The emotionally charged play follows an estranged interracial couple as they search for answers after their teenage son is detained by police, exploring issues of race, family, and justice in America.

Organizers say the production is intended to spark conversation while showcas-

Winneshiek Playhouse
June 26th and 27th, 6:00 p.m.



ing local theatrical talent.

Tickets are free, but donations are accepted. The production is being put on by the Boys & Girls Club of Stephenson County, with James Rhyne Jr. directing.



TUTTY FEST TO HONOR VETERANS

Tutty Fest is adding a special tribute to this year's celebration.

Organizers have announced that veterans will be honored during the annual festival, recognizing the service and sacrifice of local men and women who have served in the United States Armed Forces.

The tribute will include a special recognition ceremony during the festival weekend, with veterans and their families invited to attend.

Tutty Fest returns July 10th and 11th to downtown Freeport, featuring live entertainment, food vendors, the Tutty Baker Queen Pageant, the popular 5K run and walk, children's activities, a parade and one of the largest community celebrations in northwest Illinois.

Festival organizers say this year's recognition is intended to thank local veterans for their dedication and service to the nation.

IN CLOSING...

Before signing off this week, a programming note for our listeners. Did you know that you can read any of our scripts any time on our website? Along with "broadcasting" our podcast each week, we also publish a print version of each weekly news episode on our website, www.freepod.org. The print version allows you to move at your own pace to absorb the news you've been missing.

And because of the nature of a podcast, you can also get the news when you want it. While we release these newscasts every Thursday at noon, they are available anytime. So, while we appreciate it if you think of Freepod as "appointment listening," the reality is that you can download our episodes and play them whenever you have time.

And it's not just our newscasts either. Our interviews are available to listen to anytime as well, including this past week's interview. Freepod host Alan Wenzel spoke with outgoing president Chris Kuberski, incoming president Dr. Jamal Scott, and chair of the Board of Trustees Doug Block of Highland Community College. The three sat down with Alan to talk about the transition in leadership of the college during a pivotal time in the institution's history.

This coming Tuesday, we'll have an interview with Kris Valkema of the band Black Cat Manor. Freepod host Tim Connors spoke to Kris about juggling life as a professional musician and as a supportive member of the Freeport community. That interview will be available starting at noon on Tuesday, June 30th, but you can listen anytime after that, as well. 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 Media Studies department at Highland Community College for producing this podcast.

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This has been Freepod. Thank you for listening.



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The news you've been missing.