



Hello and welcome to FREEPOD. I'm Matt Mullen...

And I'm Lynn Feaver...

In this week's episode, Freeport School District announces a reduction in bus routes due to budget concerns...

Mount Carroll launches a fundraiser for their police K-9 program...

And the 23rd Annual Lincoln-Douglas 5K prepares to take off.

This is Freepod for July 16th, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

Before we get in to this week's stories, we have a quick correction from last week. In a story about the city's tree removal efforts, we improperly referred to the YIELD program as a city program. In reality, the YIELD program is operated by the Boys & Girls Club of Freeport & Stephenson County. We apologize for our mistake and reaffirm our commitment to being as accurate, and accountable, as we can be.

FSD CUTS BUS ROUTES DUE TO BUDGET DEFICIT

Budget problems are leading to transportation changes for some Freeport School District families when students return to class.

District 145 says it will eliminate one bus route serving 62 students at Center and Blackhawk elementary schools. The affected students live within a mile-and-a-half of school and do not have a designated serious safety hazard that would otherwise qualify them for transportation.

The change is expected to save about \$75,000 as the district works to address an estimated \$11 million dollar deficit.

Two crossing guards will be added at Adams and Galena streets, and the district says it will work with families on options including organized walking groups and daycare arrangements.

The district is also eliminating general education bus monitors. Monitors will remain on special-needs and pre-school routes.

Officials say the transportation budget has been cut about 36% over the past two years.





FREEPORT BEEF-A-ROO IS ONLY LOCATION STILL OPERATING AFTER MASS LAYOFFS

As Beef-a-Roo faces major financial problems and restaurant closures across the country, the message for Freeport customers is clear: the local Beef-a-Roo remains open.

The Beef-a-Roo at 1804 South West Avenue is independently owned and is not affected by the companywide layoffs that have hit corporate operations.

The restaurant chain, founded in Rockford in 1967, has closed its eight Rockford-area locations and other corporate-owned stores. Employees were notified last week of companywide layoffs, including the leadership team, as the company cited severe financial constraints. Some former employees are also reportedly still owed paychecks.

But those problems have not closed the Freeport restaurant. The South West Avenue location is locally operated and remains in business.

So while longtime Beef-a-Roo locations across the Rockford area have gone dark, Freeport's Beef-a-Roo continues to serve customers.

YMCA PURCHASES NEW FACILITY

The Family YMCA of Northwest Illinois has officially purchased the property that will become its new home in Freeport.

The YMCA has closed on the purchase of the former Stewart Centre West at 2900 West Pearl City Road, marking a major step forward for its Vision 2030 initiative.



The property will be transformed into what the YMCA calls a Healthy Living Campus, bringing childcare, fitness, wellness and community services together in one location.

The first phase calls for renovating 22,000 square feet for a new Early Learning Center. The YMCA says it plans to increase capacity from 103 children to 170, serving infants as young as six weeks through pre-K. Future phases could include expanded fitness facilities, an aquatics center and multi-use gymnasiums.

The YMCA says community and business support will be needed as development of the new campus moves forward.

TICKETS ON SALE FOR FREEDOM ON THE ROCKS



The Freeport Art Museum is inviting the community to celebrate America's 250th anniversary while supporting free access to the arts.

Tickets are now on sale for "Freedom on the Rocks," a special evening featuring cocktails, live music and all-American food.

The event will also include the unveiling of the "United We Create" mural and presentation of the Freeport Art Museum's Cultural Leadership Awards, recognizing contributions to arts and culture in the

community.

Proceeds from ticket sales will support the museum's mission, including keeping admission free and providing hands-on art experiences and programming for the region.

Additional information and tickets for "Freedom on the Rocks" are available through the Freeport Art Museum.

GFP SELECTED FOR ILLINOIS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PILOT PROGRAM

The Greater Freeport Partnership has been selected for a new statewide pilot program aimed at strengthening long-term economic growth.



The Partnership is one of just eight organizations chosen for the Illinois Economic Development Corporation's Regional Research Pilot Program, known as R2P2. Over the next 12 months, the program will provide customized economic research to help the Partnership identify growing industries, regional strengths and new opportunities for business attraction and expansion.

Partnership Executive Director Andrea Schultz Winter says the data will help turn economic insights into actionable strategies and create what she calls "a more prosperous future for our community."

The program will focus on economic growth across Freeport and Stephenson County.



AUDITION CALL FOR WINNESHIEK THEATER

Winneshiek Theater is looking for five versatile performers to sink their teeth into a fast-paced comedy this fall.

Open auditions for "Dracula: A Comedy of Terrors" will be held August 5th and 6th from 6 to 9 p.m.

The show puts a comic spin on Bram Stoker's legendary vampire story, with a style compared to Mel Brooks, Monty Python and "The 39 Steps."

Except for Dracula, performers will take on multiple characters, requiring quick costume changes, distinct voices and plenty of physical comedy.

Auditions are open, with no appointment required. Actors should simply show up ready to read for a role.

STEPHENSON COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE ARRESTS TWO WOMEN ON DRUG CHARGE

Two Freeport women are facing felony drug charges following a narcotics investigation by the Stephenson County Sheriff's Office.



Authorities say the Sheriff's Crime Suppression Unit, assisted by the Emergency Response Team, executed a search warrant at a home in the 500 block of South Beaver Avenue shortly before 1 a.m. Thursday, July 2nd.

Investigators say they recovered approximately 10.8 grams of crack cocaine and one MDMA, or Ecstasy, pill.

Forty-three-year-old Chaquita Washington was charged with possession with intent to deliver and possession

of a controlled substance. Fifty-four-year-old Farrita Venable was charged with possession of methamphetamine.

Both women were released with future court dates under Illinois law.

The charges are allegations, and both defendants are presumed innocent unless proven guilty.

DRUG SEARCH IN JO DAVIESS COUNTY YIELDS 3 ARRESTS

Three people are facing charges following a drug investigation in Jo Daviess County.

Authorities say deputies executed a narcotics search warrant at a home and garage in the 9100 block of South Whitton Road near Hanover at about 10:15 Monday night, July 6th.

Thirty-eight-year-old Brady Stevenson was arrested on charges including possession of methamphetamine with intent to deliver, possession of methamphetamine, possession of stolen property and drug paraphernalia.

Forty-six-year-old Raymond Greene faces methamphetamine and drug paraphernalia charges, while 43-year-old Shannon Bertucci is charged with possession of drug paraphernalia.

Stevenson and Greene are due back in court July 22. Bertucci is scheduled to appear August 6.

All charges are allegations, and the defendants are presumed innocent unless proven guilty.



MOUNT CARROLL HOLDING FUNDRAISER FOR POLICE K-9 PROGRAM

The Mount Carroll community is being invited to help support the city's police K-9 program with a special fundraiser.

A K-9 Pork Chop Fundraiser is scheduled in Mount Carroll on Friday, July 17th, ahead of the community's July 18th Cruise Night.

The fundraiser will help support Mount Carroll's police K-9 program and the costs associated with maintaining the specialized law-enforcement resource.

The City of Mount Carroll announced the fundraiser July 9th as part of its effort to raise community support for the program.

Additional information about the fundraiser is available through the City of Mount Carroll.

LAKE CARROLL FEST RETURNS

Lake Carroll Fest returns next month with an evening of summer fun for the entire family. The fifth annual festival is scheduled for Saturday, August 1st, from 4 until 10 p.m. on the Clubhouse grounds at Lake Carroll near Lanark.

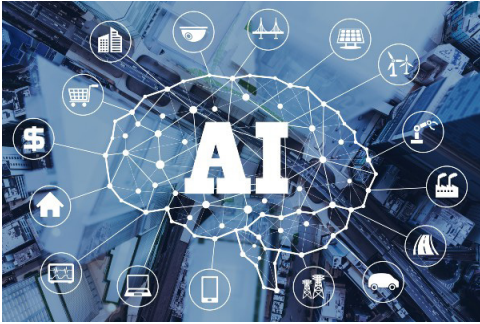
The event is open to the public and will feature live music, food and activities for all ages. Attractions include a rock-climbing wall, axe throwing, face painting, a petting zoo and a farmers market.

Organizers say the annual celebration is designed to showcase the Lake Carroll com-



munity while giving residents and visitors a chance to enjoy food, entertainment and family activities.

Lake Carroll Fest takes place August 1st at Lake Carroll.



PRITZKER SIGNS AI REGULATION BILL

Illinois is putting new safety rules in place for some of the world's largest artificial intelligence companies.

Governor JB Pritzker has signed Senate Bill 315, known as the Artificial Intelligence Safety Measures Act. The new law requires major AI developers to publicly outline how they address potentially catastrophic risks, report serious safety incidents and undergo annual independent third-party audits—a requirement state officials say is the first of its kind in the nation.

The measure targets the largest and most powerful AI developers and includes civil penalties for violations.

Supporters say the law creates needed safeguards as artificial intelligence rapidly advances, while critics have raised concerns about state-level regulations without a single national standard.

The law takes effect January 1, 2027.

ILLINOIS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS COULD SWAP TECHNICAL EDUCATION FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Illinois high school students could soon have the option to trade foreign language classes for career and technical education.

Senate Bill 3070 would allow students entering high school in the 2028-29 school year to meet a two-year graduation requirement by taking either a world language or approved career and technical education courses.

Supporters say the change would give students more flexibility to pursue training in fields such as manufacturing, engineering, computer science and health care, while also addressing a statewide shortage of language teachers.

The measure passed the Illinois Senate 58-to-nothing and the House 117-to-nothing, with four members voting present.

The bill now awaits action by Governor JB Pritzker.



FARM BANKRUPTCIES CONTINUE TO RISE IN ILLINOIS

Farm bankruptcies continue to rise in Illinois and across the Midwest as producers face mounting financial pressure.

Family farm bankruptcies nationwide jumped 46 percent in 2025, while Midwest filings increased 70 percent and Illinois filings rose 55 percent.

The trend has continued this year. Nationwide, 62 Chapter 12 farm bankruptcies were filed in April alone — the highest monthly total since February of 2020.



Farmers are being squeezed by low crop prices, high production costs, rising land rents and uncertainty in export markets. The U.S. Department of Agriculture projects total farm debt will reach a record 624.7 billion dollars in 2026.

Agricultural leaders warn the growing financial strain could have lasting effects on rural communities.

GERMAN VALLEY DAYS

German Valley Days returns this weekend with several new events joining the community's annual summer celebration.

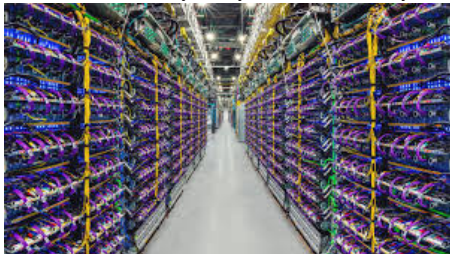
Festivities begin Friday, July 17th, at Ben Miller Park, where the German Valley Lions Club will serve pulled pork and ribeye dinners from 5 until 7 p.m. The evening will also feature the first Hometown Olympics, with teams competing in games organizers say will require some talent—and even more of a sense of humor.



Activities continue throughout Saturday, including a pancake breakfast, 5-K and 10-K runs, a parade, live music and the Little Miss and Mister contest.

A new Trivia Blitz, hosted by Game Show Gurus, begins at 7:30 Saturday night, followed by fireworks over Lake Baalton at about 9:15.

German Valley Days runs Friday through Sunday.



LWV OF JO DAVIESS COUNTY HOSTING FORUM ON DATA CENTERS

As data centers expand across Illinois, a free public forum in Galena will examine what that growth could mean for local communities.

"Let's Talk Data Centers: Our Water, Our Power, Our Communities" will be held Wednesday, July 22, from 6:30 to 8 p.m. on the lower level of the Galena ARC Community Center.

Experts from the Citizens Utility Board and Prairie Rivers Network will discuss how data centers can affect water supplies, the electric grid, utility bills, local economies and environmental health.

The event will also examine potential economic benefits and infrastructure improvements, along with regulations and protections at the local and state levels.

A question-and-answer session will follow the presentations.

The event is free and open to the public.

23RD ANNUAL LINCOLN-DOUGLAS 5K

Registration is now open for the 23rd Annual Lincoln-Douglas 5K in Freeport.

The race takes place Saturday, August 8th, at Taylor Park, with activities beginning at 8 a.m. and the 5K starting at 8:15.

The event also features a one-mile fun run and kids races to crown the "Fast-



est Kid in Town.” The 5K follows a flat, certified course through Taylor Park.

Registration is 25 dollars through August 3rd and 35 dollars after that. Proceeds benefit United Way of Northwest Illinois and its work across Stephenson, Jo Daviess and Carroll Counties.

Registration is available at <https://runsignup.com/Race/IL/Freeport/LincolnDouglas5KandFunRun>

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 Tim Connors spoke with Alex Lavolette and Dylan Shipley of the Freeport Pretzel Company. Alex and Dylan shared the story of what led them to launch their new endeavor, as well as what they have planned for their future.

This coming Tuesday, Alan Wenzel will speak with the owner/operators of Deerland Dairy. That interview will be available starting at noon on Tuesday, July 21st, 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.

