



FREEPOD

The news you've been missing.

Hello and welcome to FREEPOD. I'm Alan Wenzel...

And I'm Pat Norman...

In this week's episode, a Lena man is sentenced to 150 years in prison for exploiting children...

Pecatonica High School receives an honor for boosting their students' civic engagement...

And the Freeport Park District rolls out a program to keep kids moving to the rhythm during the summer months.

This is Freepod for May 21st, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

LENA MAN SENTENCED TO 150 YEARS IN PRISON FOR EXPLOITING CHILDREN

A Stephenson County man has been sentenced to 150 years in federal prison for the sexual exploitation of multiple children over a 13-year period.

The U.S. Department of Justice says 45-year-old Matthew Kaufman of Lena admitted to coercing children, including infants and toddlers, into sexually explicit conduct and recording videos of the abuse. Investigators say some victims were contacted through Snapchat.

Kaufman was arrested in October of 2023 after the Stephenson County Sheriff's Office executed a search warrant at a home on Logan Street in Lena. Authorities say Kaufman was already a registered sex offender in Illinois following a 2008 child pornography conviction, and began creating his own illegal material shortly after being released from prison.

Kaufman pleaded guilty in 2025 to three federal counts of producing child pornography. In addition to the prison sentence, U.S. District Judge Iain Johnston ordered him to pay \$28,000 in restitution to victims. Federal prosecutors described Kaufman as a longtime predator who repeatedly abused vulnerable children.



COM ED RATE SPIKE ANNOUNCED

ComEd customers across northern Illinois could soon see a noticeable jump in their electric bills.

According to the Chicago Sun-Times, residential customers are expected to pay about 12% more beginning in June, raising the average monthly bill from around \$107 to roughly \$120.

Energy experts say part of the increase comes from the expiration of a temporary credit tied to nuclear and renewable energy programs. But officials say growing demand for electricity is also driving prices higher, espe-



cially from energy-hungry data centers supporting artificial intelligence technology.

Northern Illinois is now home to more than 80 data centers, with dozens more planned. ComEd says some large facilities use as much electricity as nearly 1400 big-box retail stores.

At the same time, older power plants are shutting down while renewable energy projects are not being built fast enough to keep pace with rising demand.

FPD ANNOUNCES “CLICK IT OR TICKET” CRACKDOWN

The Freeport Police Department is joining law enforcement agencies across Illinois for the annual “Click It or Ticket” campaign running through the 26th during the Memorial Day travel period.

Officers will conduct increased day and nighttime patrols focused on seat belt enforcement. Police say drivers and passengers who fail to buckle up can expect to receive a ticket.

Illinois law requires everyone in a vehicle to wear a seat belt. While seat belt use in the state reached 93 percent last year, officials say unrestrained fatalities continue to be a major concern, especially during nighttime crashes.



The campaign is funded through federal highway safety funds administered by IDOT.



OGLE COUNTY SHERIFF RELEASES DISTRACTED DRIVING ENFORCEMENT NUMBERS

The Ogle County Sheriff's Office has released results from its April Distracted Driving Awareness Month enforcement campaign.

Deputies issued 65 speeding citations, 39 tickets for no insurance, and made 11 DUI arrests during the month-long effort. Authorities also reported 25 arrests for driving while license suspended or revoked, seven arrests for driving without a valid license, and nearly 100 additional traffic citations.

Sheriff Brian VanVickle says distracted driving remains a serious problem and warned that even a moment of inattention can have deadly consequences. The sheriff's office says it will continue high-visibility enforcement efforts throughout the year to encourage drivers to stay focused and put their phones away behind the wheel.

SEAGA MANUFACTURING ACQUIRES MICROMARKET COMPANY

Seaga Manufacturing has announced the acquisition of Three Square Market, a company known for its micro-market and self-service retail technology.



Seaga says the deal will strengthen its automated retail and vending operations while expanding services for workplaces, hospitals, campuses, and other high-traffic locations. Three Square Market specializes in kiosk technology, payment systems, inventory software, and complete micromarket design services.

Seaga CEO Mike Freund says the acquisition will help accelerate innovation and provide more flexible unat-

tended retail solutions for customers.

Seaga, headquartered in Freeport, has nearly four decades of experience in vending and inventory control technology, with operations serving customers around the world.



FSD NAMES NEW PRINCIPALS

The Freeport School District has named two new principals for the 2026-27 school year.

Aimee Kasper will lead the Early Childhood Learning Center, while Amber Lee-Black has been selected as principal of Jones-Farrar. Kasper currently serves as assistant superintendent in Crystal Lake School District 47 and began her career as a kindergarten teacher in Freeport. Lee-Black joins the district from Elgin, where she serves as assistant principal at Larsen Middle School, following more than a decade with Rockford Public Schools.

Superintendent Anna Alvarado says both leaders bring a strong commitment to student success, staff collaboration, and family engagement.

The appointments were approved during the May 5th school board meeting, with both principals set to begin July first.

STEPHENSON COUNTY FAIR LOOKING FOR JUNIOR VOLUNTEERS

The Stephenson County Fair is looking for young leaders to help make this year's fair a success.



Organizers are now accepting applications for Junior Fair Volunteers for teens and young adults between the ages of 14 and 21. Volunteers will assist with activities during fair week, including Taste the Fair, Glow Bingo, field trips, and children's crafts.

Participants will also help with planning meetings and community events leading up to the fair, including handing out fair guides during the Memorial Day Parade.

Organizers say the program offers hands-on leadership experience and a chance to get involved in the community.

More information and applications are available here: <https://form.jotform.com/220523686231047>.



YIELD PROGRAM HAS EXTRA TREES AVAILABLE

The Boys & Girls Club of Freeport and Stephenson County and the City of Freeport are encouraging residents to help grow the community's tree canopy through the YIELD Program.

Officials say extra oak seedlings, including swamp, red, and burr oaks, are available free of charge for Freeport residents with enough space for large shade trees. The program can even deliver and plant the trees for homeowners.

Organizers say properly planted shade trees can help improve air quality, reduce energy costs, and provide

long-term environmental benefits for neighborhoods.

Residents interested in receiving a tree are asked to contact the City of Freeport by emailing: pr@cityoffreeport.org.

PECATONICA HIGH SCHOOL WINS VOTER REGISTRATION AWARD

Pecatonica High School is being recognized for its efforts to encourage civic engagement among students.

The school received top honors in the Stateline High School Voter Registration Challenge during a ceremony hosted by the League of Women Voters of Greater Rockford. Officials say Pecatonica increased its student voter registration rate from 87% to 92% this year, earning the highest percentage in the regional competition for the second straight year.



Teacher Inga Danko says the goal is to eventually reach 100% voter registration among eligible students. School leaders say they hope the recognition inspires students to remain active and engaged in their communities long after graduation.



JDCF WELCOMES NEW CEO/PRESIDENT

The Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation has selected Nathan Aaberg as its new CEO and President following a six-month national search.

Aaberg will officially begin the role June 22, succeeding longtime executive director Steve Barg, who is retiring after 13 years.

Foundation leaders say Aaberg brings more than two decades of experience in conservation, education, fundraising, and sustainable agriculture programs.

Most recently, he helped launch the Illinois FarmLink program through The Land Connection. Aaberg and his wife moved to Galena last year and say they quickly fell in love with the Driftless region.

The conservation foundation will host public open houses on May 30th and June 20th, giving community members an opportunity to meet Aaberg and learn more about the organization's future plans.

You can learn more about the JDCF here: jdcf.org.

JO DAVIESS COUNTY TO HOLD PUBLIC HEARING ON ZONING AMENDMENTS

The Jo Daviess County Planning Commission/Zoning Board of Appeals will hold a public hearing on Wednesday, May 28th at 7 p.m. at the Jo Daviess County Courthouse in Galena to discuss proposed amendments to the county zoning ordinance.

County officials say the hearing will allow residents, property owners, and business owners to provide input on possible updates to land-use and development regulations.

The proposed amendments are part of an ongoing review of county zoning policies. Community members are encouraged to attend and share comments before recommendations are forwarded to the Jo Daviess County Board for further consideration.





CUTS TO SNAP HARMING SMALL GROCERY STORES

Independent grocery stores across Illinois are warning that new federal cuts to SNAP food assistance could hurt both families and local businesses.

Industry leaders say thousands of households are expected to lose benefits this month due to new work requirements and exemption rules.

Grocery retailers, already operating on slim one to two percent profit margins, say reduced spending could force some independent stores to close. Illinois Retail Merchants Association officials say grocers are also facing rising transportation, fuel, and energy costs. One southern Illinois grocer says losing local grocery stores can create a ripple effect throughout entire communities.

Food advocates warn food pantries will struggle to keep up with increased demand if SNAP benefits are reduced.

STATE LAWMAKERS DEBATE AI REGULATION

Illinois lawmakers are continuing debate over how to regulate the growing use of artificial intelligence across the state.

Legislators are considering proposals aimed at increasing transparency and protecting consumers as AI technology becomes more common in healthcare, education, hiring, and law enforcement. Supporters say new regulations are needed to address concerns over privacy, misinformation, and algorithmic bias.



Some proposals would require companies to disclose when AI is being used in decision-making or to label AI-generated content. Business groups and technology advocates warn overly strict rules could slow innovation and investment in Illinois.

Lawmakers say the challenge is finding a balance between encouraging technological growth while protecting the public from potential misuse of artificial intelligence.

LAWMAKERS QUESTION EDUCATION FUNDING PROCESS



Illinois lawmakers are raising questions about the state's current education funding policy as budget discussions continue in Springfield.

Some legislators say the evidence-based funding model, designed to direct more money to underfunded school districts, may need adjustments as districts face rising costs for staffing, transportation, and special education services. Critics argue some schools are still struggling despite increased state investments, while supporters say the formula has helped reduce funding gaps between wealthy and lower-income districts. Education advocates are urging lawmakers to maintain consistent funding increases to avoid setbacks for students and teachers.

The debate comes as legislators work to finalize the state budget before the end of the spring session.

MEMORIAL DAY PARADE AND PROGRAM IN CEDARVILLE

Area residents are invited to honor local veterans during Cedarville's annual Memorial Day Parade and program on Monday, May 26th.

The parade will begin at 10 a.m. in downtown Cedarville and will feature veterans groups, community organizations, emergency vehicles, and local participants. Following the parade, a Memorial Day ceremony will be held to recognize the sacrifices of military service members who gave their lives in defense of the country, as well as an indoor picnic lunch at the museum.

Organizers say the event is an opportunity for the community to come together in remembrance and gratitude ahead of the Memorial Day holiday.



AARP OFFERS SMART DRIVING PROGRAM

The AARP Smart Driver Program will be offered May 27th and 28th from 8:30 a.m. until 12:30 p.m. at the Midwest Medical Center in Galena.

The course is designed to help older drivers refresh their driving skills, learn updated traffic laws, and improve safety behind the wheel. Participants will review defensive driving techniques and strategies for navigating today's busy roadways.

The cost is \$20 for AARP members and \$25 for non-members. Some insurance companies may offer discounts for completing the course.

Organizers say advance registration is encouraged due to limited seating availability. To register, call (815) 235-9777.

PARK DISTRICT MUSIC & MOVEMENT PROGRAM FOR KIDS

The Freeport Park District is offering a fun and active Music and Movement program this summer for children ages 3 through 10.

Classes will be held Mondays and Wednesdays from noon to 1 p.m. at the Koenig Amphitheater in Krape Park. The program uses music, movement, and simple instruments to help keep kids engaged while encouraging physical activity and creativity.

Multiple two-week sessions will run throughout June and July, beginning June 1st. Registration costs \$20 for district residents and \$25 for non-residents.



More information is available here: https://webtrac.freeportparkdistrict.org/webtrac/web/search.html?Action=Start&SubAction=&_csrf_token=ia5Y025Z7005264M3E3D2S4I5I435J466N514R4O-601Q5N4S5D55025O5U4S5A6756565G5T6W624K5H58065O4K514J1K4Q474L536K5F6A6G5H1K5P-616K4X6N5V3S61&primarycode=&keyword=music+and&keywordoption=Match+One&display=Detail&module=AR&multiselectlist_value=&arwebsearch_buttonsearch=yes&fbclid=IwY2xjawR4cp5leHRuA2FlbQIxMABicmlkETFrN1ILV002Y1JLYVZqQk1tc3J0YwZhcHBfaWQQMjlyMDM5MTc4ODlwMDg5MgABHqHljRA8n6AgFa46ean-crHfUjDQJ_fCoEq3cVnIrKVISrYwvujdK_4DcbC7_aem_NK7K7cxUC6-TP8HLPf_LQ

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. Bing Wells is a Navy veteran, former law enforcement officer, and lifelong resident of Lena. And he played an integral role in bringing a retired F-4 fighter jet to Lena for a memorial. Freepod host Alan Wenzel spoke to Bing about the long and arduous process that culminates with a dedication ceremony this weekend.

This coming Tuesday, Tim Connors shares a conversation he traveled hundreds of miles to get. Tim flew to Lititz, Pennsylvania to speak with former mayor Tim Snyder about that town's new agreement with Freeport to be sister cities. That interview will be available starting at noon on Tuesday, May 26th. 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 Mass Communication 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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