



**25 December
2025**

Welcome to FREEPOD, 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.freepod.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.

Miller appointed to national position

Freeport Mayor Jodi Miller has been appointed to Vice Chair of the National League of Cities 2026 Small Cities Council. Miller was elected to a one-year term to develop and guide programs among local elected officials from similar communities. The appointment was announced by the organization's President Kevin Kramer, Councilmember of Louisville, Kentucky.

As a Vice Chair, Miller will play a key role among a diverse group of local leaders to encourage collaboration, networking and the development of resources and programs beneficial to communities that share demographics, size or location that can be replicated across the country. Congratulations, Mayor Miller – we're proud you will be representing Freeport in this national forum!

City update about EV chargers

The eight electric vehicle chargers in downtown Freeport will be operational soon! The chargers were partially paid for by a \$320,000 state grant through the Illinois EPA's Climate and Equitable Jobs Act program and \$240,000 from ComEd for interconnect installations, adding up to \$560,000 of the \$650,000 total cost and leaving just \$90,000 for the City to fund. The fees from the chargers will come back to the City.



Four chargers can be found in each of two locations, the municipal lot along North Chicago Avenue and the City Lot behind the Lindo Theatre. The Level 3 EV chargers will become highly visible on

maps for those seeking the service, inviting tourists and travelers to plan a stop in Freeport. Before these state-funded chargers were installed, there was only one charger at a local dealership visible on the map in Freeport.

HCC President receives recognition

The Community Foundation of Northern Illinois recently presented the Community Champion Award for Stephenson County to Highland Community College President Chris Kuberski at the annual Excalibur and Excelsior Award Ceremony in Rockford.

Kuberski guided Highland through the global pandemic, secured millions in grant funding for our local community, oversaw more than \$18 million in campus improvements, and expanded academic programs in critical fields. By aligning programs with regional industry needs, HCC ensures a steady pipeline of skilled workers, helping local employers thrive while attracting new investment to the area.

She currently serves on the boards of the Greater Freeport Partnership, Northwest Illinois Economic Development, and the Region 1 Planning Council. Congratulations, President Kuberski, and thank you!



Pearl City Elevator and Stephenson Service merge



**Pearl City Elevator and Stephenson
Service Company Announce an
Agreement to Merge Cooperatives**

Pearl City Elevator and Stephenson Service Company Board of Directors have unanimously approved and entered into a Merger Agreement. The two cooperatives are planned to be combined at the beginning of the fiscal year for both cooperatives on September 1st, 2026.

Stephenson Service Company, a member cooperative of Farm Service companies, is a leading agribusiness cooperative serving Jo Daviess and Stephenson counties. Since 1930, Stephenson Service has provided customers with fuels, lubricants, propane, plant nutrients, crop protection, seed, structures, vehicle service, and grain marketing assistance.

Pearl City Elevator, also known by the acronym PCE, is a well-established agricultural cooperative with headquarters in Pearl City and has served farmers, homeowners, and businesses for over a century. As a full-service agribusiness, Pearl City provides goods and services including fertilizer, crop protection, seed, and custom agronomic advisory support. Its animal nutrition division, Alliance Animal Nutrition, manufactures and distributes high-quality feed for livestock operations.

On the energy front, PCE provides fuels and propane to residential and commercial customers, offering delivery, testing services, and system management. It operates licensed grain-handling facilities in Lena, Pearl City, and Baileyville, collectively offering more than 5.6 million bushels of storage capacity and is the majority owner of Adkins Energy LLC, a modern, dry-mill corn-to-ethanol facility based in Lena.

The next step in the merger process is to obtain the vote of both cooperatives' shareholders. The shareholder voting day and Annual Meetings are scheduled for January 30, 2026.

Propane tank tips for winter

Speaking of propane, many of us in the Freeport area use propane for our homes or businesses and during the cold winter months it's important to help make it easier and safer for those who deliver it. It may be obvious that it's good to clear a path through snow to your tank and keep your driveways salted or sanded, but snow also makes it important to mark your tank with a flag or in some other way since they can be buried and therefore not even visible when we have as much snow as we've had so far this year. Also, keep your regulator clear of snow since if it becomes packed that could impact readings and become a safety concern. Finally, it's also important to keep an eye on your tank level. Even on an automatic schedule you should monitor the level and if it reaches 30%, schedule a delivery.

Freeport High School speech team posts wins

Congratulations to the Freeport High School Speech Team on their 9th place finish out of 30 schools at the recent Dekalb Corn Classic where awards were presented to Lucas Viveros, Naomi Sdao, Oliver Noble, Carl Duede, Corey McKillip, Gretchen Rudolph, Johanna Everding, Corrine Winter, and Kylie Weichel.

The team, coached by FREEPOD and TimBeck2 host Tim Connors, went on to finish 2nd Place out of 24 schools at the Rochelle Hub Holiday Speech Classic and notched their consecutive 2nd Place finish at the Byron Holiday Speech Classic. With an impressive list of 25 Varsity Finalists so far, the team will take a holiday break before heading to the suburbs for more competitions. Check out all their scores and finalists on Tim's Facebook page. Congratulations, Freeport Speech Team, and good luck during the rest of the season!

Icicles are pretty, but....



The Freeport Fire Department is reminding listeners that icicles may be pretty but they can also be hazardous. Please pay attention where you are walking as there is a potential for melting with the continuing freezes and thaws we have been experiencing, which can result in falling icicles that could injure you, your family, or livestock and pets. In addition, Freeport Fire has responded to a few calls where icicles were to blame for gas utility damage severe enough that gas had to be shut off.

So "heads up" when you see icicles: enjoy their beauty from a safe distance and be sure nothing is in their path should they fall. Thanks for the safety tip, Freeport Fire!

Two Freeport businesses closing

We're sorry to confirm that two well-known Freeport businesses are closing their doors.

Generations Brewing Company will be closing down on January 31st, or as they say, whenever the beer runs out. The craft brewery has been a popular gathering spot since it opened 11 years ago, and

management there has said that they hope customers will stop by during their final weeks to raise a few more glasses together.

The second business to which we must bid goodbye is Country Girl Floral & Gifts, a successful local gift and floral shop for 35 years. Business will continue as usual until their building at 411 West Meadows Drive near Fairway Ford is sold, with fresh flowers and gifts continuing to be available until then. Many sales are going on throughout the store just in time for year-end celebrations.

We wish the management of both establishments all the best in their next ventures.

Deadline extended for Marketplace health insurance enrollment

If you've been having a busy holiday season you'll be glad to know that if you buy health insurance on the state-run marketplace, the deadline has been extended to sign up for coverage for next year.

Officials at Get Covered Illinois, the new state-run marketplace for insurance sold under the Affordable Care Act, have extended the open enrollment deadline through next Wednesday, December 31st for coverage that begins January 1st. Consumers also have until January 15th to sign up for coverage that takes effect February 1st. Free enrollment support is available from the Get Covered Illinois customer assistance center or by calling 1-866-311-1119. That's 1-866-311-1119.

Many consumers can expect to see significant increases in the cost of their plans as enhanced federal subsidies will expire at the end of the year. Costs will also increase next year for people insured by Medicare, with Part B premiums going up 9.7% next year to \$202.90 per month and the standard deductible for Part B coverage rising by 10.1% to \$283. Medicare Part B is optional coverage that pays for outpatient services such as office visits, x-rays and preventive treatment. The standard deductible for inpatient hospital treatment under Medicare Part A will also be going up for next year, with a 3.6% amounting to \$1,736 per benefit period.

FACC now a site for UIC residency training

The Freeport Area Church Cooperative, also known by its acronym FACC, will now be a site for the University of Illinois Chicago Residency Training in Street Medicine. The effort is being funded by a federal Health Resources and Services Administration grant for care in medically underserved areas. Residents in the University program will provide care for unhoused individuals in the Freeport area beginning with half-day sessions twice a month.

The University will bring a mobile van staffed by a family medicine physician, an outreach worker, family medicine residents, and medical students to two FACC locations, the food pantry and the homeless shelter. Care provided includes care for many medical conditions, including hospital follow-up; Substance Use Disorder and Opioid Use Disorder support; mental health concerns; and wound treatment. Support will also be provided for assistance with Social Determinants of Health, which are the non-medical, everyday things like housing, income, education, food access, and neighborhood safety that have significant effects on health, well-being, and quality of life.

The University of Illinois Chicago Residency Training in Street Medicine Residency for family medicine was established in 1972. Since then, it has graduated over 440 family medicine physicians and in 2023 and 2024, 85% of the graduates in these classes now practice medicine in medically underserved areas.

AT&T ending landlines in Illinois

AT&T is ending its landline phone services in Illinois as the utility moves to a digital home phone service over the next two years. The utility is phasing out landline use as it works with customers to upgrade their copper-based service to newer, less expensive digital options.

Current customers can keep their existing landlines until they are discontinued in 2027 but cannot make changes to their existing service and new customers will no longer be offered landlines. According to AT&T, the phasing-out process will take multiple years and no customers will be left without access to voice or 911 service. Over 3 million Illinois adults had a landline phone as of July 2024.

Girls Scouts receive grant

The Girl Scouts of Northern Illinois recently received a \$3,250 Destination Pass grant from Girl Scouts of the USA to help older Girl Scouts in grades 6 through 12 cover costs for travel to significant destinations on trips promoted by the organization. The grant is aimed at making these enriching experiences accessible for those who might otherwise not be able to participate due to financial barriers. This specific grant helps fund trips to national destinations designated as significant by the Girl Scouts of the USA to broaden horizons for young leaders in the region.

Former Freeport student hits Broadway

When the curtain rose for a production of *Death Becomes Her* at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre on Broadway in October, Freeport High School graduate and Highland Community College student Alex Hartman stepped onto a stage she had been dreaming of since her childhood.



Hartman left Freeport around 2011 with just over \$1,000 she had saved and worked odd jobs in retail, waitressed, taught lessons, trained, and auditioned and landed plenty of roles off Broadway before the call from her agent that landed her in *Death Becomes Her* where she is performing with well-known stars like Megan Hilty, Jennifer Simard, Christopher Sieber, and Michelle Williams.

Following graduation from Freeport High School, Hartman spent two years at Highland Community College before heading to Illinois State University. At Highland, she was in the Royal Scots, many plays and musicals, and stated that Allen Redford, retired Highland music instructor and former

Royal Scots director, made a huge impact on her musical career. Of course her father, longtime Freeport musician and Highland instructor John Hartman had played a pivotal role in her interest in theatre and music throughout her whole life. He and Redford taught her musical theory classes at Highland.

Dr. Randy Haldeman, Highland's current music director, believes Alex's achievement reflects the broader mission of Highland's Fine Arts programs. Like productions presented by Freeport High School's theatre department, events at both schools have long been cultural cornerstones in northwest Illinois.

With a 398-seat theatre, rotating schedule of live productions, vocal and instrumental ensembles, and the Highland Gallery open throughout the year, the Ferguson Fine Arts Center at Highland offers a depth of opportunity not found at all rural community colleges. Congratulations, Alex, on reaching the bright lights of Broadway!

Reminder: REAL ID needed for some activities in 2026

Remember that starting February 1st, air travelers without a REAL ID or passport will have to pay TSA \$45 for a trip and \$90 if their trip lasts more than 10 days. You'll need several documents to get your REAL ID at the Department of Motor Vehicles office or a few other locations. For easy instructions and more information, just Google "real i-d in Illinois" or visit www.realid.ilsos.gov/

Feed the birds

The snow is here, the cold is here, and the birds in the Freeport area are looking for friendly birdfeeders! Here are some tips to keep them safe, fed, and filling your garden with their colorful feathers and winter songs.

1. First, be sure to keep your feeders filled, especially on very snowy and cold days! If you can, clean your feeders every two weeks with a 10% bleach solution to help reduce the spread of any disease and if they are movable, keep them as removed as possible from spots where predators may lurk or strong winds would make it difficult for birds to access them.
2. Then, try to use a variety of feeder types and foods, such as millet, safflower, peanuts, and black oil sunflower seed. Offer suet or bark butter for extra fat.
3. Finally, keep your heated bird baths full and clean.

In addition, if your native plants are still standing or you've kept some plants like hydrangeas for winter interest, they may be a good food source or shelter for birds. You can also create a brush pile and keep it available for shelter all winter, near your feeders if possible. This is especially helpful if your feeders are in an area not protected by wind and predators. You can also install roosting boxes where your nesting boxes were located during warmer months.

We miss The Red Apple Tree too!

Several listeners have noted that the iconic lighted apple tree holiday decoration at 630 West Stephenson Street across from Fitness Lifestyles was not lit this year. The tree at the home of Nancy Seiner, who passed away earlier this year following the death of her husband Stanley in 2013, has been a beloved holiday tradition in Freeport for over six decades. Known as the Red Apple tree, it was always decorated by the Seiners to honor childhood memories of Christmas apples from The Salvation Army and in the desire to provide joy and hope to the community.

It is our understanding from unofficial sources that the original tree has had to undergo pruning to rejuvenate it and hopefully will be up to its previous level of beauty in coming years. In the meantime, we were delighted and appreciative to see a large bush at the front of the house decorated as an apple.

It's lovely, and we thank those who decorated it for keeping this Freeport tradition and the wishes it conveys to the community alive during the holiday season!

The week ahead...



As we look to the week ahead, don't forget that you can still vote for your favorite tree at the Freeport Public Library until this Sunday, December 28th. As part of their annual Festival of Trees, FHN offers local non-profits the opportunity to compete for cash prizes based on community voting. Be sure to support your favorite and take some time to check out displays of holiday-themed books or participate in and enjoy the many other services available from our

Library, which is truly more than just books on a shelf.

We also found some interesting Christmas tree facts! As you enjoy many beautiful trees this time of year, spare a thank-you thought for the farmers who grew them for us at over 350 million Christmas tree farms throughout the USA. Trees are grown and harvested in all 50 states and Wisconsin is one of the top tree-producing states, and they've been a part of American holidays for a long time, with the first Christmas tree retail lot in the United States appearing in New York in 1851.

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 and TimBeck2 host Becky Connors visiting with LaFrancine Baker about Kwanzaa, an annual celebration of African-American culture based on African harvest festival traditions which begins this Friday and continues through January 1st. The interview, which first aired the day before yesterday on Tuesday, is available online and can be listened to anytime.

Next Tuesday, Becky joins FREEPOD and TimBeck2 host Tim Connors and FREEPOD host Alan Wenzel as they recall highlights of their 2025 interviews. FREEPOD brought you 52 in-depth Tuesday interviews on topics ranging from business to events to human interest stories as well as 12 interviews embedded in Thursday newscasts. That's a lot of interviewing! Their conversation will post at noon on Tuesday, December 30th 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, we'll continue to need your help in 2026! When you're listening on your favorite podcast platform, please "like" or "follow" us to help us move up in the rankings of podcasts and enable 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 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. Happy Holidays from everyone at FREEPOD, and we hope you have a wonderful year ahead in 2026! Thank you for listening!

Listen next week for more about what's happening in the Freeport area!

LINKS TO OTHER COMMUNITY EVENTS NEWSLETTERS BELOW



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