FREEPOD | OCTOBER 29, 2026

Welcome to Freepod, your source for the stories shaping northwest Illinois.

This week, questions about tourism spending and taxpayer accountability, millions of dollars in proposed infrastructure improvements, and important decisions ahead of Election Day.

We'll also look at upcoming community events and opportunities throughout the region.

This is Freepod — the news you've been missing.

STEPHENSON COUNTY BOARD CHALLENGES GFP ON TOURISM SPENDING FIGURES

The Greater Freeport Partnership is facing increased scrutiny from local government officials over tourism spending figures and its use of public funding.

During an October meeting, Partnership representatives told the Stephenson County Board that visitors spent $56.3 million dollars in the county during 2025, a 9.3% increase over the previous year.

The organization says tourism supports more than 350 jobs and generates approximately $2.2 million dollars in tax revenue.

But county board members questioned how those figures were calculated and whether they accurately reflect spending at local businesses.

The questions come amid ongoing tensions between the Partnership and the City of Freeport over financial accountability and public funding.

City officials have requested additional documentation detailing how taxpayer dollars provided to the Partnership are being spent, raising concerns about transparency and oversight.

The Partnership maintains that its tourism promotion and economic development efforts provide measurable benefits to the community.

Meanwhile, county board members are seeking more detailed information about the economic impact of tourism, including spending at local businesses and the effectiveness of marketing efforts.

The disputes highlight broader questions about how local governments evaluate economic development organizations and ensure public investments deliver results for taxpayers.

STEPHENSON COUNTY VOTES TO HOLD PROPERTY TAX LEVY EVEN

And while county officials are questioning how public money is being spent on tourism and economic development, they're also considering how much money taxpayers should be asked to contribute next year.

Stephenson County officials are working toward a 2027 budget that would not increase the county's property tax levy.

During its October 9 meeting, the County Board's Finance Committee voted to recommend a 0% increase, rejecting options that would have raised the levy by as much as five percent.

County staff estimated that a 5% increase would have generated approximately $530,000 dollars in additional revenue.

Committee members debated departmental funding requests, reserve targets, and how to distribute available revenue before deciding against an increase.

The committee directed county staff to adjust allocations among various funds to accommodate departmental needs while keeping the overall levy unchanged.

The recommendation must still receive final approval from the full County Board.

A flat levy means the county would collect the same overall amount in property taxes, but it does not necessarily mean individual homeowners will see unchanged tax bills. Those also depend on property assessments and levies from other taxing districts.

FREEPORT SCHOOL DISTRICT HOLDING PUBLIC HEARING ON TAX LEVY

Freeport School District 145 is preparing to consider its annual property tax levy as officials confront a projected $7.6 million operating deficit.

The district's Finance and Facilities Committee reviewed the estimated 2026 tax levy during its October 20 meeting, along with a proposed schedule for public review and final adoption.

The levy determines how much property tax revenue the district requests to support school operations and other expenses.

Under Illinois law, a public hearing is required if the proposed levy exceeds the previous year's request by more than five percent.
The discussion comes as District 145 works to address rising operating costs, declining revenues, and the expiration of federal pandemic assistance.

District officials say they've already made more than $6 million in spending reductions over the past year.

The public hearing will happen during the school board meeting November 3rd at Jones-Farrar school. Residents can review meeting information and upcoming hearing details through the district's website at fsd145.org.

CITY OF FREEPORT ANNOUNCES PROJECT UPDATES

Freeport officials are outlining plans to spend millions of dollars on street improvements as part of the city's proposed 2027 budget.

During an October budget review, City Manager Rob Boyer said the city's one-percent sales tax dedicated to road improvements is expected to generate approximately $4.2 million dollars.

The city also plans to transfer another $1 million from its general fund into the street improvement fund.

The sales tax increase was approved in 2024 as a way to address deteriorating roads throughout Freeport.
Meanwhile, the proposed budget includes approximately $300,000 for engineering work on the Hancock Avenue Bridge over the Pecatonica River.

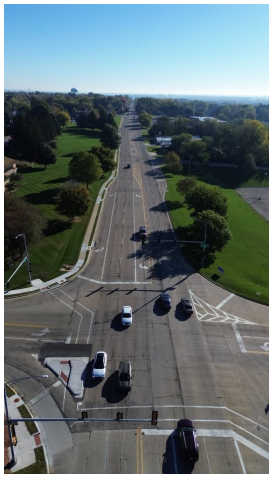
The Illinois Department of Transportation is expected to cover much of the bridge's construction costs through state bridge funding.

The proposals reflect the city's ongoing effort to address aging infrastructure while balancing other municipal spending priorities.

Budget discussions are continuing, and the proposed expenditures remain subject to final approval.

SOUTH STREET REPAVING DELAYED

But while Freeport is planning significant investments in its streets, one road improvement project will have to wait until next spring.



City officials say the planned repaving of South Street, between Locust Avenue and Galena Avenue, has been postponed until spring of 2027.

The project's contractor, Helm Group, notified the Illinois Department of Transportation and the city that scheduling conflicts would prevent the work from being completed before winter weather becomes a concern.

Officials say they explored options to finish the project this year but ultimately decided to delay construction.

The city says improving South Street and its infrastructure remains a priority for public health and safety.

LEAF PICKUP BEGINS NOVEMBER 2

Freeport officials are reminding residents to follow city guidelines as the annual leaf collection program prepares to begin November 2.

Leaves must be placed in a continuous row along the curb, without blocking storm drains.

Piles must contain only leaves. Grass clippings, sticks, branches, and other yard waste are prohibited because they can clog collection equipment.

City crews will not pick up piles that fail to meet these requirements.

Residents should also avoid parking vehicles near leaf piles to allow collection equipment access.

Crews will make repeated collection passes through the city, weather permitting.



JO DAVIESS COUNTY CONSIDERING NEARLY $460,000 IN BRIDGE REPAIRS



Jo Daviess County officials are considering nearly half a million dollars in repairs to four township bridges.

County committees reviewed a bid of approximately $309,000 for bridges on Rocky Hill Road, South Ridge Road, and West Culvert Road.

A separate bid of about $144,000 would cover repairs to the Rawlins Road bridge in Guilford Township.

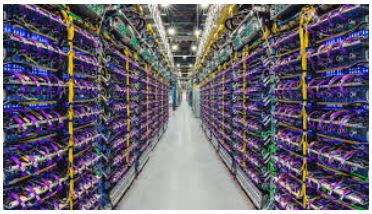
Together, the proposed projects total nearly $453,000.

The costs would be shared between the county and the townships where the bridges are located.

The proposals remain subject to final approval.

ROCHELLE TO CONSIDER REVISED DATA CENTER AGREEMENT

Rochelle officials are taking another look at a proposed data center development while Ogle County works to establish broader regulations for the growing industry.



The Rochelle City Council is scheduled to consider a revised agreement Monday with Midwest Power Investors for a data center near Steward Road and Interstate 88.

The council rejected an earlier agreement in April.

Under the revised proposal, the developer would pay millions of dollars for electrical, water, sewer, and roadway improvements.

City officials estimate the project could generate more than $1.3 million dollars annually in utility revenue.

Meanwhile, the Ogle County Board is developing regulations addressing water consumption, energy efficiency, noise, and environmental protections.

The proposed county ordinance would require closed-loop cooling systems and special-use permits for data centers in industrial districts.

Neither the county regulations nor Rochelle's revised agreement has received final approval.

COLLEGE FAIR AT HCC

Students considering their options after high school will have an opportunity to explore dozens of colleges at an upcoming event in Freeport.

Highland Community College will host the Northwest Illinois College Fair on Friday, October 30, from 9–11 a.m..

Representatives from colleges and universities will be available to answer questions about academic programs, admissions requirements, campus life, and opportunities for continuing education.

The event gives high school students and their families an opportunity to compare schools and begin planning for their educational futures.

The college fair will take place in Highland's Sports Center, located on the Freeport campus along Pearl City Road.

FARMER'S MARKET MOVING INDOORS AFTER THIS WEEK

The Stephenson County Farmers Market is wrapping up its outdoor season and preparing to move indoors for the winter.

The final outdoor market takes place Saturday, October 31, featuring Halloween treats for children and a special Kids Bucks Day sponsored by the Stephenson County Farm Bureau.

The winter market opens November 14 at the Farm Bureau building, 210 West Spring Street in Freeport.

More than twenty vendors will offer locally grown food and other products in two rooms.

The indoor market runs from 10 a.m.–1 p.m. on the second and fourth Saturdays of each month through April, with no market December 26.

Visitors can also enjoy free coffee and a place to gather.

More information is available on the Stephenson County Farmers Market Facebook page.

WILLY WONKA COMING TO THE JEANNETTE LLOYD THEATER

Freeport High School students are preparing to take audiences into a world of pure imagination with their upcoming production of the musical Willy Wonka.

Based on the beloved children's story, the musical follows young Charlie Bucket, whose life changes when he discovers one of five Golden Tickets hidden inside Willy Wonka's chocolate bars.

The prize? A tour of Wonka's mysterious candy factory, filled with colorful characters, Oompa-Loompas, and memorable songs.

Performances are scheduled for November 12 and 13 at 7 p.m., and November 14 at two and seven p.m.
All performances take place at Freeport High School's Jeannette Lloyd Theatre.

Ticket information is available through the school's performing arts department.

ELECTION DAY IS TUESDAY



Election Day is approaching, and voters across northwest Illinois will have an opportunity to help determine the direction of their communities, state, and nation.

The November 3 midterm elections include races for Congress, Illinois governor, U.S. Senate, state lawmakers, and county offices.

While national races often attract the most attention, local elections can have an equally direct impact on everyday life.

In Stephenson, Jo Daviess, Carroll, and Ogle counties, decisions made by elected officials influence everything from property taxes and road maintenance to public safety, economic development, and government spending.

Voting gives residents a voice in choosing the people who make those decisions.

And with many local races decided by relatively small numbers of votes, participation can make a meaningful difference.

Illinois residents can vote early through November 2, with locations and hours varying by county.

On Election Day, Tuesday, November 3, polls will be open from 6 a.m.–7 p.m..

Anyone in line by seven will be allowed to vote.

Not sure where to cast your ballot?

Visit the Illinois State Board of Elections website at elections.il.gov and select the polling place locator.

Voters can also contact their county clerk's office for information about polling locations, registration, and sample ballots.

Eligible residents who haven't registered can still do so at designated locations through Election Day.

Whether voting early, by mail, or on Election Day, the important first step is understanding the issues, researching the candidates, and making an informed decision.

Democracy depends on participation, and every eligible voter has an opportunity to be heard.

IN CLOSING

And that brings us to the end of this week's Freepod. Remember, if you prefer reading the news, every story from today's newscast is available in written form at freepod.org. You can catch up on the latest headlines, revisit a story, or share it with someone who might have missed it.

And Freepod is always available on your schedule! New episodes are released every Thursday at noon, but you can listen anytime, wherever you get your podcasts. Whether you're commuting, working around the house, or just taking a break, we're here to help you stay connected to northwest Illinois.

And our interviews are also available any time. This past week, Freepod host Alan Wenzel spoke with Paul Nolley, the Democratic Party's candidate for Illinois's 16th District in the US House of Representatives. Wenzel and Nolley spoke about his campaign and what he hopes to offer the people of Illinois's 16th. Freepod reached out to the campaign office of Representative Darin LaHood, Nolley's opponent in the race, but did not receive a response.

We'd also like to thank our community liaisons and reporters for helping us bring you the stories that matter, our partners at WNIJ in DeKalb for helping us reach a wider audience, and the Media Studies Department at Highland Community College for producing this program.

And if you believe in the importance of local journalism, there are several ways you can support Freepod. Follow us on Facebook, subscribe to the podcast, and share our stories with your friends and neighbors.

You can also help keep local news accessible to everyone by making a tax-deductible contribution at freepod.org. Every contribution helps us continue covering the people, places, and issues that shape our communities.

We'll be back next week with more news from across northwest Illinois.

This has been Freepod. Thanks for listening!