



Welcome to Freepod—your source for the people, events and stories shaping Freeport and communities across Northwest Illinois. I’m Alan Wenzel.

And I’m Lynn Feaver. We have a lot to cover this week, from new programs and development to honors for some familiar names in our community.

Albertus Airport earns statewide recognition, Freeport gets a boost to its credit rating, and a new program in Stephenson County aims to make encounters with law enforcement safer for people with autism.

We’ll also head to Jo Daviess and Carroll Counties for stories on new housing, agritourism and concerns surrounding a BNSF railroad bridge.

Plus, we’ll look ahead to several events happening around the region.

And later, we remember longtime Freeport educator and historian Dr. Ed Finch and the legacy he leaves behind.

Those stories and more are coming up.

It is October 8, 2026. And this is the news that you’ve been missing.

STEPHENSON COUNTY SHERIFF LAUNCHES AUTISM FRIENDLY PROGRAM

The Stephenson County Sheriff’s Office has launched a new program aimed at making interactions between law enforcement and people with autism safer and less stressful.

The Blue Envelope Program provides a recognizable envelope where a driver can keep a license, registration, insurance information and emergency contacts.

During a traffic stop, the envelope signals to deputies that the person may communicate or respond differently—or may need additional time to process instructions.

Sheriff Steve Stovall says the goal is to prevent misunderstandings and reduce anxiety while maintaining everyone’s safety.

The voluntary program is being offered in partnership with the Autism Hero Project. There’s no registration requirement, and envelopes and optional Autism Awareness vehicle stickers are available free at the Public Safety Building on West Exchange Street and the Sheriff’s Office at the Stephenson County Courthouse.

Stephenson County is getting an early start on an initiative that becomes statewide in Illinois January 1st.





CITY OF FREEPORT GETS CREDIT RATING UPGRADED

The City of Freeport is getting a financial vote of confidence from one of the nation's major credit-rating agencies.

S&P Global Ratings has upgraded Freeport's credit rating from "A" to "A-plus," while giving the city a stable outlook.

According to the city, S&P cited improvements in Freeport's operating reserves, growth in its tax base and a reduction in tax-supported debt.

The higher rating could also benefit taxpayers by helping the city secure more favorable borrowing costs when issuing debt for infrastructure and other major projects.

City officials say improving financial stability is part of Freeport's strategic plan, which calls for carefully managing debt and revenue while maintaining the city's infrastructure.

GFP RECEIVES STATE TOURISM MARKETING GRANT

The Greater Freeport Partnership is getting a boost from the state to help bring more visitors to Stephenson County.

The Partnership has been awarded an \$18,500 Illinois Tourism Marketing Partnership Grant. The money will help promote Freeport and Stephenson County's outdoor recreation, downtowns, attractions, cultural experiences and community events. The grant will be matched with local hotel and motel tax dollars.



The award is part of \$4.6 million in statewide tourism funding announced by Governor J-B Pritzker.

The investment comes as local tourism continues to grow. Visitors spent more than \$56 million in Stephenson County last year—up 9.3% from 2024—and supported more than 350 hospitality jobs.



FREEPORT MAYOR SEEKING INDIVIDUALS FOR PLANNING COMMISSION

The City of Freeport is looking for a resident interested in helping shape the community's future.

The Mayor's Office is seeking applicants to serve on the Freeport Planning Commission.

The commission plays a role in the city's comprehensive planning and reviews issues involving development, land use and zoning before recommendations move on to the City Council.

That can include decisions affecting how and where Freeport grows in the years ahead.

Anyone interested in serving can submit a Boards and Commissions application through the Mayor's Office at Freeport City Hall.

Additional information is available on the City of Freeport's website.

ALBERTUS AIRPORT RECEIVES STATE HONORS

Albertus Airport in Freeport has been named one of the top airports in Illinois.

The Illinois Department of Transportation has selected Albertus as its 2026 Large General Aviation Airport of the Year.

The award recognizes the airport's safety record, facility maintenance, customer satisfaction and cooperation with the state.

Albertus has served Freeport since 1945 and provides access for private and corporate aircraft—something city officials say makes the airport an important part of local economic development.

The recognition comes as Albertus continues to grow. IDOT has also programmed a \$1.8 million project to construct a new terminal building at the airport.

To hear about some the improvements coming to the Albertus airport, you can listen to my interview with airport manager Jeff Modica. That interview, along with all of our interviews, can be found on our website or anywhere you get your podcasts.



FREEPORT NATIVE RETIRES FROM UNITED STATES MARINE BAND

A Freeport native is retiring after two decades with “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band.

Master Sergeant Jamie Schwendinger was honored during a September 17th retirement ceremony, marking 20 years with the organization.

Schwendinger joined the Marine Band in 2006 as a music librarian before becoming its database administrator—and, in 2014, the first information systems administrator in the band’s history.

In that role, she oversaw computer systems and networks, helped strengthen cybersecurity and led major technology upgrades.

Before joining the Marine Band, Schwendinger studied flute at Illinois State University and worked as a musician and instructor.

Marine Band officials say her work will influence the organization for decades to come.



FREEPORT HOSTAGE TAKER SENTENCED TO MORE THAN 15 YEARS IN PRISON

A Freeport man who barricaded himself inside a tenth-floor apartment and exchanged threats with police has been sentenced to 15 years in federal prison.

54 year-old Grady Clark pleaded guilty to illegally possessing a firearm as a convicted felon.



In September 2024, Clark held a woman against her will inside the Hosmer Apartments on North Walnut Avenue before she escaped.

Police say Clark threatened officers, fired rifle shots from his apartment window and threw Molotov cocktails during a nearly 12-hour standoff.

Clark eventually surrendered. Authorities recovered multiple firearms, ammunition and illegal drugs from the apartment.



COMMUNITY RAISES CONCERNS OVER BNSF BRIDGE IN CARROLL COUNTY

Some Carroll County residents are raising safety concerns about a BNSF railroad bridge over Oil Valley School Road.

Residents Anthony Burkholder and Kodi Sweet say they found deteriorating concrete, exposed rebar and rusted bolts that could be moved by hand while examining the bridge. They also questioned whether portions of the structure were moving as trains passed overhead.

Carroll County Engineer Sara Renkes says the county contacted BNSF, which sent an inspector to evaluate the bridge.

BNSF says the structure is regularly inspected under federal requirements, continues to be monitored—and remains safe for the trains and loads it was designed to carry.

EAST DUBUQUE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT GETS CLOSER TO CONSTRUCTION

A major new housing development in East Dubuque is getting closer to construction.



The East Dubuque City Council has approved a redevelopment agreement with Dubuque-based Chad Ellis Construction for River Ridge Estates.

The project is planned for a 12-acre site off Hill Street and would bring a mix of single-family homes, duplexes and condominiums to the community.

City Manager Bob Seitz says East Dubuque hasn't seen a development like it in decades.

The project comes as communities across Jo Daviess County look for ways to expand their housing supply and attract new residential development.



BERNING ACRES OPENS AGRITOURISM VENTURE

A Jo Daviess County dairy farm is giving visitors a firsthand look at where their food comes from.

Berning Acres, near East Dubuque, is a second-generation family farm operated by Matt and Natalie Berning, with about 500 milking cows on 800 acres.

The farm has expanded into agritourism, offering hands-on tours where visitors

can milk a cow, bottle-feed a calf and learn about the technology used in modern dairy farming.

The Bernings say the goal is to connect families and tourists with agriculture—and give them a better understanding of how food gets from the farm to their table.

NEW REPORT CLAIMS DATA CENTERS COULD CREATE 120,000 JOBS IN ILLINOIS

A new study is putting numbers behind Illinois' growing debate over data centers—a debate that has reached Stephenson County.

Researchers project \$57 billion in new Illinois data center investment through 2035 could support about 121,000 jobs and generate nearly \$300 million annually in property tax revenue. But only about 2800 of those jobs are expected to be direct, permanent positions.

The report also estimates increased electricity demand could add about \$12 a month to an average residential electric bill.

That debate is playing out locally. Stephenson County approved a six-month moratorium on new data centers in August while officials develop regulations addressing concerns including energy and water use.



HCC STUDENTS TO GIVE FREE PERFORMANCE

Highland Community College students will take center stage Friday for a free afternoon of live music.

Highland's Applied Music Student Recital begins at 12:30 p.m. October 9th at the Ferguson Performing Arts Center in Freeport.

The hour-long program will feature student vocalists, pianists, percussionists, guitarists, string and wind players performing primarily classical selections, along with some musical theatre and jazz.

The recital also gives students valuable solo performance experience as they prepare for continued music studies.

Admission is free and the public is invited.

ACCESSIBLE BIRD & NATURE EVENT AT KRAPE PARK

A Freeport event is making birdwatching and nature more accessible to people of all abilities.

The Northwest Illinois Bird and Nature Alliance and RAMP are hosting their third annual Accessible Bird and Nature Event Sunday, October 11th, from 1 until 3 at the Krape Park Community Building.

The free event includes slow—or mindful—birding along paved trails, stationary birdwatching, tree identification and arts and crafts.



Northern Illinois Raptor Rehab and Education will also bring live birds of prey for visitors to meet.

The event is open to all ages and abilities, and organizers say activities will be held rain or shine.

No admission is required.



RAMP HOSTING BREAKING BARRIERS LUNCHEON

RAMP is preparing for its 36th annual Changing Attitudes Breaking Barriers Luncheon in Rockford.

The event is set for October 15th at the Hard Rock Casino and will feature inclusive-employment advocate James Emmett as keynote speaker.

Emmett has worked with major companies including Walgreens, Lowe's and Best Buy to develop employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

RAMP will also unveil "Hidden Talents 360," a new initiative developed with Emmett to connect overlooked workers with employment opportunities.

Registration information is available through RAMP's website.

WINE & WITCHES RETURNS

Downtown Freeport is getting a little spooky this month as Wine and Witches returns Friday, October 16th.

The free event runs from 4 until 9 p.m., with downtown businesses offering special evening shopping hours and regional wines available for sampling.



A limited number of VIP tickets are available for \$20 and include a wine glass, swag bag and special gifts from participating "boo-tiques."

Visitors can check in at Rootz and Branchez at 101 West Main Street to pick up their tasting glass and wristband.

More information and VIP tickets are available through the Greater Freeport Partnership.



REMEMBERING ED FINCH

Our final story this week is a personal one.

Freeport would like to honor the memory of a longtime educator, historian and community advocate who spent decades helping tell the story of his adopted hometown.

Dr. Ed Finch died September 28th at the age of 79.

Finch taught at Freeport High School for 30 years before continuing his commitment to education through local history. He served as director of the Stephenson

County Historical Museum and was president of the Lincoln-Douglas Society from 2004 to 2018.

His passion for history could be found throughout Freeport—from programs at Debate Square and the Freeport Public Library to presentations about Abraham Lincoln and the community's past.

Finch was also an author and, alongside Alan Wenzel, spent 15 years sharing another passion with the community as co-host of the Lindo Theatre's classic film series.

Ed Finch spent a lifetime teaching—not simply in classrooms, but throughout his community.

His legacy lives on in the history he preserved, the stories he shared, and the generations of Freeport students and residents he inspired.

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. Like this past week's special episode. Freepod News Director Jim Yeager spoke with Stephenson County Sheriff Steve Stovall and privacy advocate Dorothea Salo to put together a special Freepod Investigates story on Automated License Plate Readers, or ALPRs. These devices, probably better known by the brand name Flock, have been causing quite the stir across the country. And Yeager provides context about the debate specific to northwest Illinois. You can find that special report, along with any of our previous interviews, on our website or anywhere you get your podcasts.

We'd also like to thank our community liaisons and reporters for helping us bring you the stories that matter, our partners at WNII 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!

