



FREEPOD

The news you've been missing.

Hello and welcome to FREEPOD. I'm Lynn Feaver...

And I'm Alan Wenzel...

In this week's episode, the Pecatonica School District dismisses a teacher over pronoun use in the classroom...

The Stephenson County Animal Shelter seeks donations to move and expand...

And the United Way helps secure reading materials for children across northwest Illinois.

This is Freepod for January 29th, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

PECATONICA SCHOOL BOARD VOTES NOT TO RETAIN TEACHER OVER PRONOUN USE

The Pecatonica Community School District board has voted to not retain an elementary school music teacher after that teacher informed students that they use non-traditional pronouns.

The teacher, Lee Ross, was originally hired on a temporary contract after the Pecatonica Elementary School had been without a full-time music teacher since August. However, after a Facebook post criticized the teacher's non-binary identity and complementary pronouns, the school board voted 6-1 to not hire Ross full-time.

Following the vote, the district released a statement calling Ross a "qualified and experienced music educator," but adding that all classrooms must focus on age-appropriate instruction.



LENA-WINSLOW STAFF MEMBER CHARGED WITH OBSCENITY

A Lena woman employed as a school social worker has been charged with one count of obscenity and four counts of disorderly conduct stemming from an investigation by the Lena Police Department.

Morgan Stamm, who was listed on the Lena-Winslow School District website as a social worker for students in pre-K through 8th grade, was officially charged on January 22nd with five misdemeanor counts and will have her first appearance on February 26th. Other details are not being released at this time, as, according to the Lena Police Department, the case does involve minors.

FREEPORT SCHOOLS WELCOMES NEW HR LEADER

Starting on January 5, the Freeport School District has a new assistant superintendent of human resources.

Dr. Kendra Asbury steps in to the position to replace Susan Fumo, who will now serve as assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction.

Asbury comes to the Freeport School District with 6.5 years of experience in a similar position for Hononegah High School in Rockton. Prior to her administrative career, Asbury was an English language arts teacher and instructional coach.



HCC ANNOUNCES DEAN'S LIST FOR FALL 2025

Highland Community College has released their Dean's List for the Fall 2025 semester. The list is made up of students who achieved a 3.25 GPA or higher for the term, and is further broken down in to "Honors" for students who had a 3.25 to 3.49 GPA, "High Honors" for students with a 3.5 to 3.99 GPA, and "Highest Honors" for students with a perfect 4.0 GPA during the term.

All together, around 300 students earned their spot on the list.

For a full list of students, including their home towns, please visit <https://highland.edu/news/highland-fall-2025-deans-list/>



AREA MAN NAMED PRESIDENT OF ILLINOIS ASSOCIATION OF AGRICULTURAL FAIRS

The President of the Stephenson County Fair Board has been named as President of the Illinois Association of Agricultural Fairs.

Gary Mielke of Ridott will now bring his experience running the Stephenson County Fair to help in the delivery of other fairs to their respective communities across the state.

The Stephenson County Fair has been operating annually since 1854, making it one of the oldest county fairs in Illinois.



FREEPORT ANIMAL SHELTER HOLDING A FUNDRAISER TO EXPAND SERVICES

The Stephenson County Animal Shelter is looking to move facilities and needs community help to make that happen.

The shelter is hoping to relocate to 420 West Meadow Drive. It's a move that the Animal Control Warden says is for the safety and well-being of both animals and staff members.



To help fund the transition and expansion of services, the shelter is offering sponsorship opportunities. For \$250, community members and local businesses can sponsor a cat condo. \$500 gets you an outside dog run. And \$1000 or more will buy a dog kennel. Each of those tiers comes with a plaque on the appropriate facility naming the donor.

Of course, the shelter will accept any donations or supplies, even if it doesn't meet the sponsorship threshold. If you'd like to donate materials or a check, you can drop those off directly at 295 West Lamm Road. For the shelter's GoFundMe, please visit https://www.gofundme.com/f/donate-to-upgrade-stephenson-county-animal-control?fbclid=IwY2xjawPjZJNleHRuA2FlbQlxMABicmlkETFvM0s4YmNrRUpXWVplY3JRc3J0YwZhchB-faWQQMjlyMDM5MTc4ODlwMDg5MgABHvZrzgFyBEdwHK32j7qOCK04AFtsU1b7LbF9lLgMOMx93cTjGSgpU8oeYR-U_aem_yit9KVag7kocdGt8Yllgxc.

STEPHENSON COUNTY FARM BUREAU HOLDING FREEZER MEAL FUNDRAISER



The Stephenson County Farm Bureau is hosting a Freezer Meal Fundraiser to benefit the Stephenson County Ag in the Classroom program.

For \$60, you can get a two person or serving meal set consisting of white chicken chili, pork loin roast, chicken and biscuit casserole, chicken broccoli and rice casserole, and shepherd's pie. Meal sets for five to six people are \$125.

To order your freezer meals, call the Stephenson County Farm Bureau on or before February 20th. Meal pickups will take place on March 11 between 5 and 6 p.m. Their phone number is (815) 232-3186.



ILLINOIS PLANS TO WITHHOLD \$500M IN SPENDING

In light of uncertainty over federal funding, the state of Illinois is planning on withholding \$500 million in spending for the fiscal year. That amount constitutes less than 1% of the state budget, but will primarily lead to hiring freezes for certain agencies and stop the release of \$29.5 million for higher education that was already reserved in the budget.

Governor Pritzker's office said in that statement that this move is in direct response to the passing and signing of HR 1, better known as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. According to the Governor's office, HR 1 makes significant changes to tax policies, health care coverage, and distribution of federal funds to the states; with the impact of those changes on states yet to be seen.

Governor Pritzker will make a budget address on February 18th, where many are hoping to hear clarity and direction on the future of the state's finances.

ILLINOIS MEDICAID FACES LOOMING FUNDING CRISIS

Another impact of the One Big Beautiful Bill for citizens of Illinois is coming to the Medicaid system. Due to changes made in how funding is distributed to the states, lawmakers in Springfield are scrambling to find ways to keep Medicaid in Illinois salient for the foreseeable future.



According to the Department of Healthcare and Family Services, Illinois spent \$33.7 billion on Medicaid in fiscal year 2025, with 62%, or \$20.9 billion coming from federal funds.

But with the new changes, Illinois could stand to lose \$3.3 to \$5.3 billion a year in Medicaid funding by fiscal year 2033.

These changes do not take effect for another year, giving Illinois lawmakers time to either find new funding options or overhaul the program entirely.



**American
Red Cross**

AMERICAN RED CROSS CALLS FOR DONORS AMID SEVERE SHORTAGE

Citing the uptick in flu activity and extreme winter weather events, the American Red Cross says that there is a severe shortage of donor blood available to hospitals.

To help address this problem, and ensure that patients are treated in a timely manner, the American Red Cross is asking for donors to give a little extra this winter. In particular, platelets and blood types O, A-negative, and B-negative are in high demand.

To set up an appointment to donate, please visit [RedCrossBlood.org](https://www.redcrossblood.org).

OSF HEALTHCARE NAMES NEW PRESIDENT

OSF HealthCare has named Sister M. Mikela Meidl as the new president of the Peoria-based health care system.

Sister Meidl previously served as executive vice president and chief ministry officer for the Catholic health care company. She replaces Michelle Conger, who will move to her new position as CEO in April.

OSF HealthCare operates numerous facilities and hospitals in our region.



SORENSEN ANNOUNCES \$33M FOR WATER AND SEWER UPGRADES

Congressman Eric Sorensen has announced an earmark of \$33 million in federal funding for upgrading water and sewer infrastructure in Illinois's 17th District.

\$4 million of that allocation is being set aside for the city of Freeport, and \$3 million is earmarked for German Valley to rebuild their wastewater system.

Sorensen requested the funds through Community Project Funding overseen by the House Appropriations Committee. The funds were approved by the House, but have not yet been voted on by the Senate.



NEW ILLINOIS LAW SEALS NON-VIOLENT CONVICTIONS AFTER 3 YEARS

A new law in Illinois will automatically seal the non-violent convictions of offenders in the state 3 years after completing their sentence.

The Clean Slate Act, slated to take effect in 2029, was signed by Governor Pritzker and does not expunge an offender's record, but rather, simply removes the non-violent offenses from showing up on a background check.

Advocates for the law say that it will help reformed individuals to more easily get loans and jobs, as well as buying or renting a home.

The Clean Slate Act explicitly does not apply to violent offenses. Anyone convicted of a violent offense must continue the current process of appealing to a judge directly.



GREATER FREEPORT PARTNERSHIP ANNOUNCES ANNUAL DINNER & AWARDS

The Greater Freeport Partnership is hosting their annual dinner and awards ceremony on February 5th at the Masonic Event Center in Freeport.

The keynote speaker for the event is Rick Dickinson, the recently retired president and CEO of the Greater Dubuque Development Corporation. Dickinson will give a presentation

titled "Take the Road Less Traveled," where he'll draw on his more than 30 years of experience in collaborative community development to highlight partnerships, strategies, and skills that can be put to use here in Freeport.

The event starts with cocktails and networking at 5, a dinner option at 5:45, and the programming proper to kick off at 6 p.m.

To register, please visit <https://greaterfreeportpartnershipchamber.growthzoneapp.com/ap/Events/Registrar/4IFMRyeURCMCx>.

SENIOR RESOURCE CENTER TO HOST OUTREACH IN JO DAVIESS COUNTY IN FEBRUARY

The Senior Resource Center is hosting more free outreach events in Jo Daviess county in February. Every Thursday between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., the SRC will set up at a different location in Jo Daviess county.



Senior Resource Center

These events are designed to provide personalized assistance to seniors and their families in navigating aging and disability resources available to them.

Starting on February 5th, seniors can get help at the Warren Community Building. On the 12th, the SRC will be at the Hanover Township Park District. February 19th, residents can get assistance at the Stockton Township

Library. And on the 26th, head to the West Galena Township Building for appointments.

Appointments are required and you can call the Senior Resource Center to claim your spot. For more information or to register, visit www.seniorresourcecenter.net.



DOLLY PARTON'S IMAGINATION LIBRARY COMES TO NORTHWEST ILLINOIS

Country music icon Dolly Parton launched her Imagination Library back in 1995, and now, it has come to northwest Illinois.

The United Way of Northwest Illinois has partnered with local individuals and businesses to ensure that every child in Jo Daviess, Carroll, or Stephenson county can sign up for a free, age appropriate book to be mailed to their home every month, from birth until their 5th birthday.

The Imagination Library was started by Parton as a way to honor her illiterate father. Since it's inception, the program has gifted more than 200 million books worldwide.

To sign up, please visit imaginationlibrary.com.

TAKE PART IN THE 42ND ANNUAL BALD EAGLE WATCH

Every year, as many as 2,500 bald eagles settle in to the upper Mississippi River area for the winter. And on Saturday, January 31st, the US Fish and Wildlife Service is hosting the 42nd Annual Bald Eagle Watch in Fulton to see these incredible birds firsthand.

From 8:30 to 2:30, residents can watch for the majestic raptors from Lock 13 right on the river. If you're looking for more guided instruction, however, you can head to the Clinton campus of Eastern Iowa Community College just across the river. There, from 9 to 2, volunteers will put on exhibits and educational programs that include lectures, videos, stories, and live birds of prey.

All programs are free to attend.



42nd Annual Bald Eagle Watch

Saturday January 31, 2026

8:30 am - 2:30 pm

Eagle Watching at Lock #13, Fulton, IL

4999 Lock Rd., Fulton, IL 61252

- Dress for the weather!
- Light refreshments and warming station available.

9:00 am - 2:00 pm

Exhibits and Educational Programs

Clinton Community College

1000 Lincoln Blvd., Clinton, IA 52732

- Presentations at 10 am, 11 am, 12 pm and 1 pm
- Food and Beverage available for purchase.



For More Information

Contact:

US Army Corps of Engineers

(815) 259-3628

US Fish and Wildlife Service

(815) 273-2732

Brought to you by:



IN CLOSING...

Before we close out this week's podcast, we remind you to check out the special weekly interview we posted this past Tuesday. Freepod host Tim Connors connected with Lance Ferguson. Lance is not just the owner and operator of Davis & Company Productions, but is also a consistent presence at volunteer opportunities around Freeport. Tim and Lance talked about operating a small entertainment business, but also about the importance of being present and involved in your community.

This coming Tuesday, Alan Wenzel talks with Dr. Jack Hermann about a series of presentations being held at the Freeport Public Library revolving around global climate change and its impact on our community. That interview will be available starting at noon on Tuesday, February 3rd. 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 also 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.

As always, please like us on Facebook, subscribe on the podcast platform of your choice, and share with your friends. If you'd like to make a tax-deductible contribution to support local news content, please visit our website at www.freepod.org.

This has been Freepod. Thank you for listening.



FREEPOD

The news you've been missing.