



Hello and welcome to FREEPOD. I'm Tim Connors...

And I'm Pat Norman...

In this week's episode, the city of Freeport debates what to do about the stray cat population...

Sample ballots for the midterm election are released...

And the Freeport Community Concert Association is ready to fill the air with beautiful music.

This is Freepod for September 24th, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

FREEPORT DEBATES WHAT TO DO WITH STRAY CAT COLONIES

Freeport officials are debating how to address the city's growing stray and feral cat problem, with disagreements over whether managed cat colonies are part of the solution — or part of the problem.

During a recent city discussion, officials cited an estimate of roughly 1,800 feral cats in seven colonies, although that number has not been independently verified.

The group NIPCO — Networking Illinois Preventers of Cat Overpopulation — says it has sterilized more than 1,500 cats through trap-neuter-return efforts. Freeport ordinances specifically authorize NIPCO to trap community and feral cats.

But city officials say sterilized cats can still create problems when colonies spread onto private property. Complicating matters, local shelters have been full, leaving animal control with nowhere to take many captured cats.

Officials are considering expanded animal-control facilities, restrictions on feeding stray cats and possible placement of some cats with rural farms.

For now, the debate over how Freeport should manage its stray cat population remains unresolved.



Jo Daviess County



JO DAVIESS ZONING CHANGE FAILS TO PASS

A proposal to allow smaller residential lots in agricultural areas of Jo Daviess County has been rejected.

The County Board voted September 8th to accept a Planning Commission and Zoning Board of Appeals recommendation to keep the county's 40-acre minimum lot requirement rather than reduce it to 10 acres.

The issue had been sent back to the Planning Commission for additional consideration this summer before returning to the County Board.

The September 8th meeting record lists the final vote as 14-to-1.

The decision means the existing 40-acre minimum for residences in the county's Agricultural zoning district remains in place.

ROCHELLE CONSIDERING PROGRAM TO BUY AND REHABILITATE VACANT DOWNTOWN BUILDINGS

Rochelle officials are considering a new approach to bringing vacant and underused downtown buildings back to life.

City Manager Zeke Jackson says a proposed building preservation program would allow the city to purchase vacant or underused properties, rehabilitate them and then return them to the private market. The program would go beyond Rochelle's existing façade and interior improvement programs.



Officials say long-term financing could be used to make redevelopment projects more feasible while addressing vacant properties that can negatively affect neighboring businesses.

Community Development Director Michelle Pease is developing the program, with Jeff Starr expected to manage it if approved.

The proposal still needs funding included in the city budget before it can move forward.



MOUNT CARROLL PLANNING DOWNTOWN SIDEWALK IMPROVEMENTS

Mount Carroll is planning another round of improvements to sidewalks in its historic downtown.

The city is proposing construction of new ADA-accessible sidewalks designed to improve pedestrian safety and make the downtown district easier to navigate. A public notice issued this month says the project is aimed at improving the overall experience and safety for people walking downtown.

Mount Carroll has undertaken similar downtown sidewalk work in the past, including replacement of deteriorated pavement and brick pavers and improvements to drainage and accessibility.

The project would also support pedestrian access through Mount Carroll's historic business district, much of which is included in the community's National Register Historic District.

JO DAVIESS COUNTY SEEKS PUBLIC INPUT ON FUTURE SENIOR SERVICES



Jo Daviess County is asking residents to help shape the future of services for older adults.

The county's Social and Environmental Committee has launched a survey asking seniors, caregivers and other residents about transportation, healthcare, meals, housing, caregiver support and other needs. The county is also looking for information about barriers including cost, loneliness and internet access.



Three public forums are planned from 1:30 to 3 p.m. — September 29th at Calvary Church in Stockton, September 30th at the East Dubuque Public Library, and October 1st at Prairie Ridge in Galena.

County officials say the feedback will help identify service gaps and guide future funding and planning decisions.



OGLE COUNTY ADOPTS POLICY ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Ogle County is putting new rules in place governing how county employees can use artificial intelligence.

The County Board approved an acceptable-use policy for generative AI during its September 15th meeting.

Under the policy, Microsoft Copilot and Anthropic's Claude are currently designated as approved AI tools for county government.

The policy establishes a framework for employees using the technology while conducting county business, as local governments increasingly consider how AI can improve efficiency while protecting government information and maintaining oversight of AI-generated work.

The move gives Ogle County formal guidelines for a technology that is rapidly becoming more common in workplaces nationwide.

CFNIL SEEKING NOMINEES FOR EXCALIBUR EXCELSIOR AWARDS

The Community Foundation of Northern Illinois is looking for nominations recognizing people and organizations making a difference across the region.

Nominations are open for the 2026 Excalibur and Excelsior Awards.



The Excalibur Award recognizes an individual for excellence in community service, while the Excelsior Award honors an organization, group or initiative.

Four additional Community Champion Awards will recognize service and impact in each county served by the foundation — including Stephenson and Ogle counties, along with Boone and Winnebago.

That means individuals and organizations doing outstanding work in the Freeport and Stephenson County area can be nominated.

The deadline is October 1st, with nominations accepted at [ExcaliburExcelsior.com](https://www.excaliburexcelsior.com).



MIDTERM ELECTION BALLOTS RELEASED

Stephenson County voters can now get an advance look at what they'll see on the ballot in November.

The County Clerk's office has released its specimen ballot for the November 3rd General Election, allowing voters to review the candidates and other questions before heading to the polls.

The county says early voting begins today, Thursday, September 24th, at the Stephenson County Clerk's Office in Freeport. That's also the first day requested vote-by-mail ballots will be sent to voters.

The county has also posted information about polling locations and early voting.

Voters can view the specimen ballot and other election information through this link:

[https://cms7files.revize.com/stephensoncountyil/26nov3ilstephenson-Publication%20\(1\)%20\(1\).pdf?t=202609241539160](https://cms7files.revize.com/stephensoncountyil/26nov3ilstephenson-Publication%20(1)%20(1).pdf?t=202609241539160)

For more information about voting this November, take a listen to this past week's Freepod interview, as host Alan Wenzel spoke with Jazmin Wingert, Stephenson County Clerk. Wenzel and Wingert talked about what is involved with early voting and what changes voters should be aware of this upcoming election cycle. You can find that interview on our website, www.freepod.org, or wherever you get your podcasts.

RECYCLING EVENT IN MT. CARROLL

Northwest Illinois residents and businesses can get rid of unwanted electronics, tires, appliances and other materials at a recycling event this weekend in Mount Carroll.

The Jo-Carroll Solid Waste Agency will hold the collection Saturday, September 26th, from 9 a.m. until noon at the Carroll County Highway Department, 10735 Mill Road.

Small electronics, scrap metal, lead-acid batteries and unwanted prescription medications can be dropped off for free. Fees apply for tires, televisions and other screened electronics, large appliances, household recyclables and fluorescent bulbs.

Organizers say paint, household hazardous waste, sharps and paper shredding will not be accepted.

The collection is open to residents and businesses throughout Northwest Illinois.



STOCKTON VOLLEYBALL STARTING THE SEASON RED HOT



Stockton High School's volleyball team is once again establishing itself as one of the teams to watch in Northwest Illinois.

The Blackhawks opened the season with 19 consecutive victories, including wins over Galena, Lena-Winslow, Scales Mound, Pearl City, Milledgeville and Warren. Through September 17th, Stockton was 19-and-0 overall and unbeaten in conference play.

The strong start follows a memorable 2025 season when Stockton advanced all the way to the IHSA Class 1A state championship match, finishing as state runner-up.

With much of the conference schedule still ahead, Stockton is looking to turn another outstanding regular season into another deep postseason run.

PRITZKER ADMINISTRATION WARNS OF POSSIBLE PUBLIC HEALTH INSURANCE LOSS

Thousands of Northwest Illinois residents could be affected by major changes coming to Medicaid.

New federal rules will require many adults covered through the Affordable Care Act expansion to document at least 80 hours a month of work, education, volunteering or other qualifying activities, unless they qualify for an exemption.

State figures show more than six-thousand ACA-expansion Medicaid recipients across four Northwest Illinois counties — including about 2,750 in Stephenson County, 2,030 in Ogle County, 650 in Jo Daviess County and 650 in Carroll County.

Eligibility checks will also increase from once a year to every six months.

Illinois officials are urging Medicaid recipients to watch for notices and keep their contact information current as the new requirements take effect.



FREEPORT PARK DISTRICT ANNOUNCES PLAY AND PAUSE FOR YOUTH



The Freeport Park District is launching a new after-school program giving local kids a place to relax, socialize and stay active.

“Play and Pause” is open to kids ages seven through fifteen and will meet Tuesdays from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m., October 6th through November 3rd, at the Read Park Pavilion.

Participants can choose from music and videos, crafts, board games and sports, with snacks also provided.

The cost is 50 dollars for Freeport Park District residents and 55 dollars for non-residents.

Registration is due by September 29th. Families can register at https://webtrac.freeportparkdistrict.org/webtrac/web/iteminfo.html?Module=AR&FMID=107909131&_gl=1*100g8vl*_ga*MTAzNTQ0ODc3Ny4x-NzgWmzQxNDEx*_ga_04L6YDVBBC*_czE3ODk5MTg2MDEkbzMkZzAkDE3ODk5MTg2MDEkajYwJGwwJGgw*_ga_8290QPNFBD*_czE3ODk5MTg2MDEkbzMkZzAkDE3ODk5MTg2MDEkajYwJGwwJGgw

SCARECROW DECORATING CONTEST

The Greater Freeport Partnership is asking residents to help bring some fall color and creativity to downtown Freeport with its Scarecrow Contest.

Businesses, organizations, families and individuals can create a scarecrow that will be displayed on posts throughout downtown. Scarecrows should be three-to-five feet tall and two-to-three feet wide, and creators are asked to give their scarecrow a name.

There is no fee to participate, and entries will be judged with a winner selected.

Finished scarecrows must be dropped off by October 2nd at the Greater Freeport Partnership headquarters, 110 West Main Street in downtown Freeport.

The scarecrows are expected to remain on display throughout October, weather permitting.



KIWANIS PRETZEL DAY IS COMING

The Kiwanis Club of Freeport is hitting the streets Friday, September 25th for one of its biggest fundraisers of the year.

Kiwanis members will be at the intersection of Park Boulevard, Empire Street and Pearl City Road from 7 a.m. until 6:30 p.m., collecting donations in exchange for pretzels, rain or shine.

Pretzel Day is held twice each year, in the spring and fall. The last event raised more than five-thousand dollars, with proceeds going back into programs supporting local children.

Volunteers will work six shifts throughout the day, with student-athletes from Freeport High School and Highland Community College also helping out.

Pretzel Day is Kiwanis' second-largest annual fundraiser, behind its Pancake Day in March.

FREEPORT COMMUNITY CONCERT

A nearly century-old Freeport musical tradition continues next weekend with a free chamber music concert downtown.

The Freeport Community Concert Association will welcome Boston-based Ensemble Aubade to the Masonic Temple Sunday, September 27th, at 3 p.m.

The trio features Peter Bloom on flute, Francis Grimes on viola



and Steven Sussman on piano. Ensemble Aubade performs chamber music by both European and American composers and has appeared in concert series across the country.

The performance marks Ensemble Aubade's debut with the Freeport Community Concert Association, which is celebrating a tradition of bringing live music to the community that stretches back about 95 years.

Longtime organizer Marjorie Phillips, now 99 years old, has overseen the concert series for decades.

Sunday's performance begins at 3 p.m. at the Masonic Temple in Freeport, and admission is free and open to the public.

IN CLOSING

Before we go, a quick programming note. If you'd rather read the news than listen to it, we've got you covered. Every week, we post a complete written version of this newscast on our website at freepod.org. It's a great way to catch up on local news at your own pace or revisit a story you want to read in more detail.

And remember, podcasts are available whenever it's convenient for you. While new episodes are released every Thursday at noon, you can listen anytime—whether you're driving to work, mowing the lawn, or relaxing at home. Subscribe wherever you get your podcasts, or visit freepod.org to listen and read whenever it works best for you.

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 Media Studies 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.

