



Hello and welcome to FREEPOD. I'm Pat Norman...

And I'm Paulette Williams-Thomas...

In this week's episode, we look at a new clean drinking water grant awarded to the city of Freeport...

A new law with bipartisan support from two area lawmakers...

And a local athlete will be representing us all in the winter Olympics.

This is Freepod for January 8th, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

FREEPORT AWARDED \$31 MILLION FOR NEW WELL AND CLEANER DRINKING WATER

The city of Freeport has announced \$31 million in grant and forgivable loans from the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency for building out Well #12 and for continued improvements to Freeport's drinking water quality.



\$17 million of the funds were awarded through work done by Fehr Graham in early 2025, and the other \$14 million was given to the city in December.

Well #12 is supposed to be built near the south entrance of Krape Park and will serve the "low zone" of the city.



LIBRARY TO HOST LECTURE SERIES ON COST OF LIVING WITH CLIMATE CHANGE IN NORTHWEST ILLINOIS

The Environmental Study Group has announced a series of lectures to be held at the Freeport Public Library focusing on the impact of climate change on the everyday life of people living in Northwest Illinois.

In partnership with the Northwest Illinois Trails Foundation, the University of Illinois Extension, the Northwest Illinois Bird and Nature Alliance, the Illinois Sierra Club, and the city of Freeport, this free lecture series will bring in a different speaker every month from January to May.

The first presenter will be Dr. Don Wuebbles, who is the Harry E. Preble Emeritus Professor of Atmospheric Science at the University of Illinois. Dr. Wuebbles will provide an overview of the science and risks of climate change and present ideas on how we can come to meaningful solutions.

These lectures are free and open to the public, and will have refreshments provided.

Dr. Wuebbles's lecture begins at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, January 20 at the Freeport Public Library, and will also allow time at the end for questions and discussion.

FREEPORT PUBLIC LIBRARY HAS MORE TO OFFER

Speaking of the library, the staff at the Freeport Public Library want to remind our listeners that they have more to offer than just books.

Explore More Illinois is a free service that offers instant online access to free and discounted tickets to museums, science centers, sporting events, zoos, park districts, theatres, and other fun and local cultural venues. And if you already have a library card, then you're well on your way to getting these great benefits. To sign up for Explore More Illinois benefits, just visit exploremoreillinois.org.



And if you have budding scientists in your home this winter, you can also pick up a STEM kit from the Youth Services Department. These kits are developed to enhance your student's understanding of Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics, and include kits for robotics, problem solving, backyard bird watching, magnets, maze building, and more.



FLU CASES SURGING AND LIKELY TO GET WORSE

Influenza type A has been making a big impact this season, with the CDC estimating that at least 7.5 million Americans have contracted the virus.

This new surge is largely being attributed to a new strain – subclade K – which emerged in Australia over the summer.

While the timing of this year's flu season was expected, the severity and spread of this season's virus is taking experts by surprise.

To help reduce transmission of the virus, experts encourage us to wash our hands regularly and thoroughly, avoid touching your face if you've been in contact with someone showing signs of illness, and strongly consider getting this year's flu vaccination.

FHN IS NOW MERCYHEALTH FHN

Freepod reported on the merger of FHN and Mercyhealth back in October, but now that partnership will be reflected in the name of the local branches.

Starting January 1st, FHN services will now be known as Mercyhealth FHN. The partnership was approved by the Illinois Health Facilities and Review Board in November.

Currently, FHN employs around 1,000 employees and dozens of doctors. Numbers that will be added to Mercyhealth's pre-existing 7,500 employees and 900 doctors.



LOCAL LAWMAKERS SHOW BIPARTISAN SUPPORT FOR NEW NICU LEAVE LAW

Effective January 1st, Illinois workers with a newborn in a neonatal intensive care unit will now have access to job-protected unpaid leave. That is thanks to a new law titled the Family Neonatal Intensive Care Leave Act.

Local lawmakers Dave Vella, a Democrat representing Illinois's 68th District,

John Cabello, a Republican representing Illinois's 90th District, both supported the bill as it moved through the legislature.

The law requires any employer with between 16 and 50 employees to give workers with children in neonatal ICU care to receive 10 days of unpaid time off, with guarantees that they will not lose their job. Employers with more than 50 employees have to give workers up to 20 days off.

The Illinois law is not designed to replace the Family Medical Leave Act, best known as FMLA, but rather supplement it, as workers who are eligible for FMLA must exhaust that option before utilizing this new leave option.

NEW LAWS FOCUSING ON EDUCATION IN ILLINOIS

Last week, we told you about a few new laws taking effect in Illinois. Some of those new laws specifically focus on education in the state and have direct impacts on our community.

Two of those laws deal with undocumented students in public schools. House Bill 3247 guarantees public schooling options to students regardless of immigration or citizenship status. While House Bill 460 expands the type of scholarships students can qualify for regardless of immigration or citizenship status.

In response to the proliferation of artificial intelligence in education, the state also passed HB 1859; a law that requires community colleges to ensure that classes are taught by qualified humans, and not by AI. The law does clarify that instructors may use AI in courses.

For K-12 education, the state was less direct. Senate Bill 1920 simply directs the Illinois State Board of Education to develop guidance on the use of AI, including ethical uses of the technology and possible consequences for student data privacy.



SENIOR RESOURCE CENTER HOSTS MONTHLY OUTREACH IN JO DAVIESS COUNTY

The Senior Resource Center has announced a new slate of outreach programs for residents of Jo Daviess county.

These sessions are designed to provide personalized assistance to seniors and their families in navigating aging and disability resources. Topics covered include aging & disability benefits information, Medicaid, and more general aging questions.

Upcoming events include January 15 at the Stockton Township Library and January 22 at the West Galena Township Building. The events run from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and registration is required. To register for a session, please visit www.seniorresourcecenter.net.

PARK DISTRICT HOSTS FIT FOR LIFE

The Freeport Park District is inviting community members aged 45 and older to stay Fit for Life. These 4-week long classes are designed to help increase strength, flexibility, balance, and coordination.

Classes are held on Tuesdays from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. at the Krape Community Building.



Cost is \$25 for residents and \$30 for non-residents. And you can register by visiting <https://bit.ly/activeadult-fitness>.



ORANGEVILLE NATIVE MAKES IT TO OLYMPICS ROSTER

Orangeville native and standout Penn State hockey player Tessa Janecke has been named to the Women's Olympic Hockey roster.

Janecke was selected to represent the United States at the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan-Cortina Italy. But she is no stranger to international competition, having played with the US Women's Senior National team and racking up 13 goals and 15 assists in international games.

Janecke and the rest of the US Women's Olympic team takes to the ice for the first time on February 5th against Czechia, also known as the Czech Republic.

FREEPORT POLICE DEPARTMENT SWEARS IN NEW OFFICERS

The Freeport Police have three new officers among their ranks. Gabriel Owens, Caden Shenberger, and Darrin Holbert were all officially sworn in on December 29th.



CHRISTMAS TREE DISPOSAL



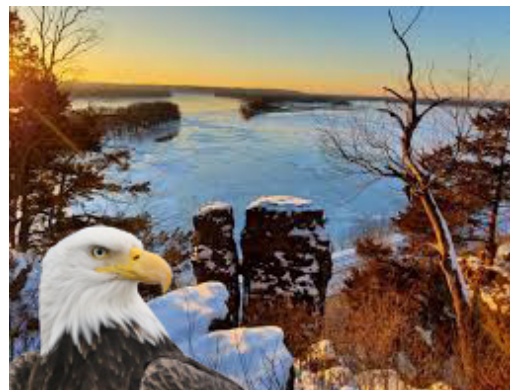
As you continue to clear out the Christmas decorations, the city of Freeport offers multiple locations to drop off your natural Christmas trees.

City residents can dispose of natural trees for free at the corner of E. Stephenson St. at Taylor Park, at the parking lot north of the office at Read Park, at the triangle of Adams, Float, and Winneshiek Streets, or at the city yard on North Island Avenue.

EAGLE VIEWING IN CARROLL COUNTY

Each winter, more than 3,000 bald eagles gather along the frozen banks of the Mississippi River. And right now is the perfect time to see these majestic specimens for yourself.

Head out to Mississippi Palisades State Park to watch the eagles soar above the bluffs, or stay warm inside your vehicle and watch along the causeway between Savanna and Sabula.



The eagles are often seen near the top of the tallest trees and even right on the frozen river near pockets of open water.



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
EXTENSION

For more information, or to register, please visit <https://extension.illinois.edu/jsw>

WEE NATS PROGRAMMING FOR JANUARY

The University of Illinois Extension Office is promoting their Wee Nats program for children ages 4 to 7. The program, short for Wee Naturalists, gives kids environmental education through stories, activities, crafts, and hikes.

For January, Wee Nats is hosting a program on Saturday, January 10 from 9:30 to 11 a.m. at the U of I Extension Office on the campus of Highland Community College. This session focuses on identifying tracks found in nature. The program is free to attend, but each child must stay with an adult for the duration of the program.

HIGHLAND BEGINS A NEW SEMESTER

Highland Community College begins their spring 2026 term this coming Monday, January 12. Classes are still available and express registration is open.

For a list of classes, please visit the Highland Community College website.



INDOOR FARMER'S MARKET THIS SATURDAY



The Stephenson County Winter Indoor Farmers Market is open this Saturday, January 10 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Stephenson County Farm Bureau Building.

The market features 20 vendors, free coffee, and plenty of space to sit and chat with your neighbors.

The market is held every 2nd and 4th Saturday until April 11th.

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 sat down with Mike Marten, owner and manager of Mort's Bar & Grill in downtown Freeport. This coming Tuesday, Becky Connors will chat with Kelsey Grove from Theraplay, a pediatric therapy clinic in Freeport. That interview will be available starting at noon on Tuesday, January 13th. You can find it 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.

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site at www.freepod.org.

This has been Freepod. Thank you for listening.



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