



FREEPOD

The news you've been missing.

Hello and welcome to FREEPOD. I'm Paulette Williams-Thomas...

And I'm Matt Mullen...

In this week's episode, Highland Community College raises tuition...

The Senior Resource Center expands its programming to Gale-na...

And Winneshiek Theater gets ready to introduce us all to a 6 foot 3 invisible rabbit.

This is Freepod for March 5th, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

HCC RAISING TUITION

The Highland Community College Board of Trustees have approved a tuition increase for students enrolling in the Fall 2026 semester. Beginning in August, students will now pay \$163 per credit hour in tuition, up from \$159 per credit hour. For senior citizens, the tuition rate will rise from \$119 per hour to \$122.

The college cites the state's shorting of funding as a primary reason for the increase, indicating that only roughly 9% of the college's funding the last three years has come from the state of Illinois; far short of the 33% that was originally planned when community colleges were established.

Even with the increase though, college leaders are still projecting a potential deficit for fiscal year 2027.



HCC JURIED ART EXHIBIT WINNERS ANNOUNCED

Regional artists were recognized at the 55th Annual District Juried Art Exhibit at Highland recently.

Best of Show for Community Members went to Ellen Bartels for her oil painting on wood panel titled "Subterranean Dream." On the student side, Khalia Adams's mixed media piece "Atrial" won the top prize.

Other pieces that were recognized included works in photography, spray paint on canvas, watercolors, and charcoal.

You still have time to see all of the works displayed. Just head to the gallery inside the Ferguson Fine Arts Center on Highland's campus any time through March 9.

FREEPORT ART MUSEUM LOOKING FOR ARTISTS

On the subject of artists, the Freeport Art Museum has put out the call for Illinois-based professional artists to apply for lead artist on their United We Create mural project.

The project is a community-driven mural celebrating the 250th anniversary of the United States and will be installed in the Museum's downtown plaza. The mural project is intended to bring community members together to explore shared histories, civic values, and collective visions for the nation's future.

The lead artist will receive a \$7,500 honorarium, provided for through a grant from the Illinois Arts Council and support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

The completed mural is set to be unveiled in a public celebration in September.

Applications for the lead artist position must be submitted by March 13. You can submit applications to info@freeportartmuseum.org.



KRAPE PARK ART WALK SEEKING ARTISTS

Local artists have another opportunity to show their work as the Krape Park Art Walk is looking for artisans. The Art Walk will happen on August 15th, but artists are encouraged to apply before May 1st.

The Art Walk is an annual event that pairs the unique and vibrant artisan community with the natural splendor and beauty of Krape Park. Artists are encouraged to showcase their work, connect with other skilled creators, and celebrate the work that makes each piece special.

There is a \$50 application fee for artists that apply before May 1st, and a \$75 fee for applications received before July 31st. No applications will be accepted after that date.

To apply, please visit <https://freeportparkdistrict.org/programs/krape-park-art-walk/>.

BOYS & GIRLS CLUB RECEIVES STATE GRANT

The Boys & Girls Club of Freeport and Stephenson County has received an \$18,000 grant from the state of Illinois.

The grant is from the Charitable Trust, a fund started in 2017 to help small Illinois nonprofits. The grant was awarded to the Boys & Girls Club because of their work in assisting people to stay in their homes and get job training.

The state funds come at a needed time for the Boys & Girls Club, having recently lost access to a federal grant they had previously qualified for.



BOYS & GIRLS CLUB
OF FREEPORT & STEPHENSON COUNTY



FREEPORT FIRE DEPARTMENT UPGRADING PROTECTIVE GEAR

The Freeport Fire Department is getting some new protective gear. Freeport City Council recently approved the purchase of 16 new sets of “turnout” gear to replace current equipment that has been found to have PFAs, chemicals linked to increased cancer risk.

Chief Tom Korte said that while the new gear is not completely free of the chemicals, it does mark a significant reduction in the potentially dangerous elements. Those PFAs are used on firefighter gear as a form of water-

proofing, keeping water from soaking in on both the outside and inside of the material. That waterproofing is critical to both prevent adding water weight to the already significant 20 to 30 pounds the suits and gear can weigh, as well as preventing steam burns to firefighters if sweat or moisture gets on the inside material.

Chief Korte spoke with us about these upgrades and said that, while the \$4,500 price tag for each set of gear might seem like a lot, each set has a usefulness timeline of 10 years before state regulations require them to be rotated out.

SSM MONROE NAMED TOP COMMUNITY HOSPITAL

SSM Health Monroe Hospital has been named one of the Top 100 Rural & Community Hospitals for 2026.

The honor comes from the Chartis Rural Hospital Performance Index, which has been identifying excellence in the specialized field of rural health care for 16 years. This is the sixth time SSM Health Monroe has made their list.



SSM, which stands for Sister’s of Saint Mary, is a Catholic health system that opened the facility in Monroe in 2012.

GALENA STUDENT HEADING TO NATIONAL SPELLING BEE



A Galena seventh grader is heading to the national spelling bee. Grant Karberg won the 44th Annual Carroll, Jo Daviess, and Stephenson County Regional Spelling Bee organized by the Regional Office of Education Number 8 back on February 10th.

Karberg won the spelling bee by correctly spelling “untenable.” And secured the title with his proper spelling of “aspish” to qualify for the Scripp’s National Spelling Bee in Washington DC in late May.

Eastland seventh grader Joseph Pasch won the first runner-up.

SRC EXPANDS PROGRAMMING TO GALENA

The Senior Resource Center is launching new programs for older adults and caregivers in the Galena area.

Taking place at the Midwest Medical Center and the Galena Art & Recreation Center, these programs are focused on the social, educational, and wellness of older adults in Jo Daviess county.

Free programs include Golden Gamers, Wisdom & Wellness, and Coffee, Cookies & Chapters; a gaming club, educational program, and book club, respectively.

Create & Connect and Chair Yoga are also being offered for a fee.

If you'd like to learn more about any of these programs, or sign up, please visit <https://seniorresourcecenter.net/community-events-education>.



SOYBEAN FARMERS FACE CHALLENGES AMID TRADE WARS

Illinois soybean farmers are set to receive federal “bridge payments” later this month to help offset losses tied to last year’s trade disruptions with China.

Farmers say the money will help — but only temporarily. Illinois is the nation’s top soybean producer, harvesting more than 639 million bushels in 2025. But when China, the state’s largest export market, sharply reduced purchases during escalating tariffs under President Donald Trump, prices fell and financial pressure intensified.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced 12 billion dollars in assistance through the Farmer Bridge Assistance Program, with 11 billion going to row crop producers.

Illinois Agriculture Director Jerry Costello the Second says the payments aren’t a long-term fix, warning that strained trade relationships — especially with China — could have lasting effects on family farms across the state.

ILLINOIS JOINS WHO

Illinois is joining a global disease monitoring network following the federal government’s withdrawal from the World Health Organization.

Governor J. B. Pritzker announced the state will become part of the World Health Organization’s Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network, known as GOARN.



The move comes after President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the WHO. Pritzker says that decision weakened the nation's ability to track and respond to global health threats, and Illinois won't "sit idly by."

By joining GOARN, Illinois health officials will gain direct access to global early-warning alerts, outbreak intelligence, and international response support.

State Public Health Director Dr. Sameer Vohra says disease knows no borders, and connecting to global experts strengthens Illinois' preparedness for future pandemics.

The governor says the move reinforces Illinois' commitment to science-based public health and keeping families safe.



HARVEY SET TO OPEN AT WINNESHIEK

Winneshiek Theater is getting ready to showcase local talent in their production of Harvey, opening March 13th.

The show is characterized as a heartwarming story that reminds us all that sometimes, being "oh, so pleasant" is the best way to be.

The story follows Elwood P. Dowd, a gentle, eccentric man whose best friend is an invisible, 6 foot 3 inch rabbit named Harvey.

The play is being directed by first-time director Angel Dodson. We spoke to Angel about why this particular show being put on at Winneshiek was important to her.

"So I kind of view this as sort of like a step back to its roots, because Winneshiek has done Harvey at least 4 or 5 times in the past. To me, I looked at the play as something that I've done, but it is such a classic play. And Winneshiek has never been afraid to do something unconventional. But we like to go back to the classics because it's what's comfortable. I guess it doesn't matter if you've seen your favorite movie's ending 50 times, you still like to sit and watch it because it's something that you enjoy. And I feel like Harvey kind of brings that part out of Winneshiek."



YMCA HOLDING SILENT AUCTION

The YMCA of Northwest Illinois is asking for donations for a Silent Auction.

The auction will raise funds to support the Y's programming efforts and will take place May 11th to the 14th. Themed gift baskets, gift certificates, merchandise or service donations, or even just financial contributions are all welcomed.

Donations must be made by May 1 and should be dropped off directly at the Y.

For more information, stop by the YMCA or contact them directly. Their phone number is (815) 235-9622.

FOUNDATION FOR NORTHWEST ILLINOIS OFFERING SCHOLARSHIPS

The Foundation for Northwest Illinois has announced three scholarship opportunities for new or continuing college students in our area.

The first is the Rachel & Roy Sellers Sr. Scholarship and it is open to any African-American Freeport High School graduating senior, with a preference given to someone who is the first generation of their family attending a post-secondary institution.

Next is the Craig A. Wilson Agriculture Scholarship. This scholarship is for any student living the Highland Community College district who will be enrolled as a full-time student at Highland pursuing an Associate of Science Degree in the agricultural fields.

Finally, there is the Terry & Bonnie Suelman Scholarship. This is a newly established scholarship for Freeport High graduates who would like financial assistance in completing their four-year degree at an Illinois college or university.

The application deadline for all three of these scholarships is April 1st, and you can find those applications here: <https://fornwil.org/scholarships/>.



CONSERVING LAND AND LEGACY PROGRAM

Community members interested in sustainable agriculture, natural resource stewardship, and long-term planning for their land or farm are invited to attend a three-part series called Conserving Your Land and Legacy.

The program is being provided by the University of Illinois Extension office and will run on March 24th, March 31st, and April 7th. All three sessions will start at 6:30 p.m. at the Lena Community Center.

The March 24th session will focus on conserving your land; the March 31st session is about conserving water; and the April 7th session is all about conserving your legacy.

Registration is \$15 for the full series and you can sign up here: <https://extension.illinois.edu/events/2026-03-31-conserving-your-land-and-legacy>.

STEPHENSON COUNTY FARM BUREAU HOSTING FUN RUN

Get some exercise for a good cause, as the Stephenson County Farm Bureau hosts their annual Bruce Johnson Memorial Farm to Farm 5K/10K.

Early registration for the event runs through March 6 and is also the deadline to guarantee a shirt and finisher medal. The event itself will take place on March 28th.



Participants can sign up for the 10K run, the 5K run, or the 5K Fun Run/Walk.



For more information, or to register, visit: <https://runsignup.com/Race/IL/Winslow/BruceJohnsonMemorial-FarmtoFarm5>.



Better Balance & Strength
for older adults

Led by experienced physical therapists, this class will guide you through gentle exercises to enhance mobility, prevent falls, and keep you moving toward better health.

- 1-1:45 pm Tuesdays
- March 17 - April 21
- Senior Resource Center Activity Room
- Minimum of 15 participants needed to start the class.
- \$45 for 6-week session

Bring a water bottle & comfortable clothing. Limited spots available, so reserve your place today!

Contact us for more information or to register

815-235-9777
awalker@srcntr.org

BETTER BALANCE & STRENGTH FOR OLDER ADULTS RETURNS

The Senior Resource Center is bringing back a popular program. Better Balance & Strength for Older Adults will resume on Tuesday afternoons starting March 17.

The classes are led by physical therapists and guide participants through gentle exercises designed to enhance mobility and prevent falls.

The class is \$45 for the six week session and takes place in the Senior Resource Center activity room from 1 p.m. to 1:45.

To sign up, or for more information, please call (815) 235-9777.

IN CLOSING...

As we wrap up this week's show, we'd like to remind you all to listen to this past week's interview. Freepod host Alan Wenzel spoke to outgoing Highland Community College President Chris Kuberski for an update on the athletic and learning facility being developed by the college.

This coming Tuesday, the featured interview is with Susan Bookless. Bookless is an English teacher at Galena High School and she spoke to Tim Connors about the challenges and rewards that educators in northwest Illinois routinely experience. That interview will be available starting at noon on Tuesday, March 10th. 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 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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This has been Freepod. Thank you for listening.

