This week on Freepod, tensions continue at Freeport City Hall as the future of funding for the Greater Freeport Partnership remains uncertain. Plus, questions about financial oversight at the Stephenson County Sheriff's Office.

We'll also look at improving graduation rates in Freeport schools, growing concerns over data center development across northwest Illinois, and a historic building destroyed by a suspicious fire in Oregon.

And we'll share some encouraging community news as the holiday season approaches.

These stories and more, from Jo Daviess, Carroll, Ogle, and Stephenson counties.

This is Freepod—

The news you've been missing!

FREEPORT BUDGET DEBATE PUTS GREATER FREEPORT PARTNERSHIP FUNDING IN QUESTION

The future of city funding for the Greater Freeport Partnership remains uncertain as Freeport officials consider the city's 2027 budget.

During Monday night's City Council meeting, residents and aldermen raised concerns about a proposed budget that does not specifically allocate tourism funding to the Partnership.

Former alderman and tourism official Mike Clark urged the council to restore funding, pointing to increased hotel tax collections as evidence of growing tourism activity.

Local business owner Josh Elliott warned that losing city support could jeopardize the Partnership's work in tourism promotion, workforce development, business recruitment, and downtown revitalization.

Council members also expressed frustration over the breakdown in negotiations between the city and the Partnership.

One alderman argued that both sides need to return to the negotiating table, warning that ending the relationship could prove to be a costly mistake.

But City Manager Rob Boyer said the proposed budget does not prevent future funding for the Partnership. Instead, tourism dollars would remain available for marketing grants and downtown activities, with the Partnership eligible to apply.

Alderman Donald Parker supported moving the budget forward while encouraging renewed negotiations, saying the city has other priorities, including street improvements, that cannot be delayed.

Other council members questioned whether approving the budget without dedicated Partnership funding would weaken the city's position in future negotiations.

The proposed appropriation ordinance received its first reading Monday night. A vote on the ordinance is expected to take place at the next City Council meeting on December 7.

STEPHENSON COUNTY BOARD MEMBERS QUESTION SHERIFF'S ACCOUNTING

The debate over public funding isn't limited to Freeport City Hall. Stephenson County officials are also raising questions about financial oversight, this time involving money collected for emergency communications.

Questions are being raised about the handling of $75,000 in 911 fees by the Stephenson County Sheriff's Office.

The money was reportedly placed into a separate account, prompting concerns about financial oversight, transparency, and whether the funds were handled in accordance with county procedures.

911 fees are intended to support emergency communications services, making accountability for those dollars especially important.

Among the questions is who authorized the separate account, how the money has been used, and whether county officials had appropriate oversight of the funds.

The existence of a separate account does not, by itself, establish that any laws or financial policies were violated.

The central issue is whether the transfer and management of the money followed applicable requirements.

FREEPORT SCHOOL DISTRICT SEES GRADUATION RATES CLIMB

Turning now to education, there's encouraging news from Freeport School District 145, where new state data shows students are making progress in several important areas.

Freeport School District 145 is reporting significant improvements in graduation rates, attendance, and reading proficiency, according to the latest Illinois School Report Card.

The district's four-year graduation rate reached 83.5% in 2026, up from 70.7% in 2023 — an increase of nearly 13 percentage points.

Graduation rates improved across several student groups, including Black students, whose graduation rate increased from 54.4% to 80.6%.

Chronic absenteeism also declined, falling from nearly 35% last year to 29.1% this year.

Reading proficiency increased from 27.9% to 31.8%.

However, challenges remain. Districtwide math proficiency stands at just 18.6%, and the district's graduation rate remains below the statewide average of 89.8%.

Superintendent Anna Alvarado says the improvements reflect the work of students, families, and staff, but acknowledges that math performance needs greater attention.

LOCAL 4-H EDUCATOR RECEIVES STATE AND NATIONAL HONORS



And while Freeport schools are celebrating improvements in student achievement, another northwest Illinois educator is receiving recognition for helping young people succeed outside the classroom.

A University of Illinois Extension educator serving northwest Illinois has received both state and national recognition for her work with young people.

Kelly Lafferty, a 4-H educator serving Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago counties, has received the Meritorious Service Award from two professional organizations.

The honors were presented by the Illinois Extension Professionals for Youth Education and the National Association of Extension 4-H Youth Development Professionals.
Lafferty has spent 15 years developing programs designed to help young people build leadership skills, explore career opportunities, and develop confidence.

Her work includes organizing 4-H camps, training youth counselors, and creating educational programs focused on mindfulness, environmental education, and career readiness.

University of Illinois Extension officials praised Lafferty's creativity, leadership, and commitment to helping young people succeed.

The awards recognize her contributions to youth development and her continued efforts to expand educational opportunities for young people throughout northwest Illinois.

JO DAVIESS COUNTY ESTABLISHES DATA CENTERS POLICY



From youth development to economic development, Jo Daviess County officials are establishing new expectations for an industry that's generating both opportunity and concern across the region.

Jo Daviess County is taking steps to protect taxpayers and natural resources as interest in large-scale data center development grows across northwest Illinois.

The County Board voted eight to seven in October to adopt a new policy establishing guidelines for evaluating future data center proposals.

Under the policy, developers must demonstrate how their projects would affect electricity supplies, water resources, air quality, infrastructure, and public services. The county also says developers should pay for infrastructure improvements required by their projects, to the extent allowed by law.

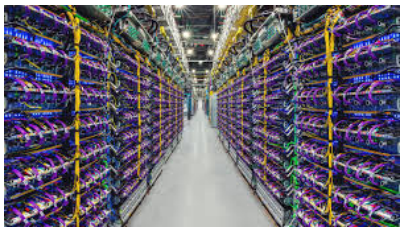
The policy prohibits financial incentives that would create unfunded obligations for county taxpayers.

Officials are particularly concerned about the enormous electricity and water demands associated with large data centers, and the possibility of those costs being passed along to residents.

All proposals must undergo a transparent public review process.

County officials say the goal is to encourage responsible economic development without shifting the financial or environmental risks of private projects onto the public.

ROCHELLE REJECTS DATA CENTER DEVELOPMENT AGREEMENT



And those concerns aren't limited to Jo Daviess County. In Rochelle, city leaders have once again rejected a proposed data center development agreement, despite the potential for millions of dollars in economic benefits.

The Rochelle City Council has rejected a proposed data center development agreement for the second time this year.

The council voted five to two on November 9 against an agreement with Midwest Power Investors for a proposed 360,000-square-foot facility near Interstate 88.

The project would have required up to 48 megawatts of electricity.

Under the agreement, the developer would have funded millions of dollars in electrical, water, sewer, and roadway improvements.

City officials estimated the project could generate more than $1.3 million annually for Rochelle Municipal Utilities and another $400,000 in utility tax revenue.

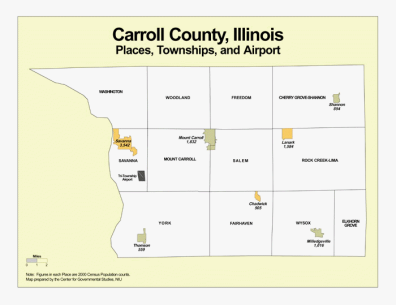
However, concerns remained about electricity consumption, infrastructure demands, and whether the economic benefits justified the development.

Mayor John Bearrows opposed the agreement, citing residents' concerns.

Council members Tom and Dan McDermott cast the only votes in favor.

The council previously rejected an earlier version of the agreement in April.

CARROLL COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT



Meanwhile, in Carroll County, officials are preparing for a change in leadership, as the county's top administrator announces plans to step down next spring.

In a letter dated October 26, Carroll County Administrator Robert Jachnicki notified County Board Chairperson Julie Bickelhaupt and board members that he will step down effective April 30, 2027.

Jachnicki thanked county officials for their support and collaboration during his tenure, describing his service to Carroll County as an honor.

He also pledged to assist with the leadership transition by completing outstanding projects, organizing administrative records, and preparing county staff.

As administrator, Jachnicki oversees implementation of county policies, budgets, and administrative operations.

His departure will leave the County Board responsible for selecting new administrative leadership.

THOMSON PRISON CLOSES MINIMUM-SECURITY SATELLITE CAMP



Also in Carroll County, a federal prison is making changes to its operations. But despite the closure of one part of the facility, officials say employees won't be losing their jobs.

The federal prison in Thomson is permanently closing its minimum-security satellite camp, but officials say no jobs will be lost.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons announced November 3 that the camp will no longer house inmates. Instead, the facility will be repurposed for staffing and administrative functions.

The closure does not affect operations at the prison's main facility.

Jon Zumkehr, president of the American Federation of Government Employees Local 4070, welcomed the news that jobs would be preserved.

However, Zumkehr warned that the Bureau of Prisons continues to face serious staffing recruitment and retention problems.

He pointed to rising health insurance premiums and inadequate compensation as major challenges.

Federal officials have not announced when the transition will be completed or where affected inmates will be transferred.

TIMBER LAKE PLAYHOUSE ANNOUNCES 2027 SEASON AND LEADERSHIP

And elsewhere in Carroll County, there's a much more encouraging story about the future of a longtime community institution. Timber Lake Playhouse is preparing for a new season after overcoming serious financial challenges.

Timber Lake Playhouse in Mount Carroll has announced its 2027 season and the return of former Artistic Director James Beaudry.

The announcement follows a financial crisis that threatened the theater's future earlier this year.

Thanks to community fundraising and restructuring, the organization says it has gone from nearly $800,000 in debt to financial stability.

Beaudry returns after nine years away, having previously served eight seasons as artistic director.

The six-show season opens May 28 with My Way, a tribute to Frank Sinatra, followed by Dear Evan Hansen, Dracula: A Comedy of Terrors, You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown, Camelot, and Misery.

The theater is also reducing overhead and focusing exclusively on summer productions.

Tickets and season passes are now available at timberlakeplayhouse.org.

OREGON PROPERTY DESTROYED BY FIRE ALLEGED TO BE DELIBERATELY SET



From the preservation of one northwest Illinois institution to the destruction of another historic property, investigators in Oregon are looking into a devastating fire that authorities believe was deliberately set.

A massive fire has destroyed the historic former Paragon Foundry building in Oregon, and investigators believe the blaze was intentionally set.

Firefighters from multiple departments responded to the vacant building along the Rock River on November 6. It took approximately five hours to bring the fire under control. No injuries were reported.

Oregon police say they've identified persons of interest and are gathering evidence.

The city purchased the property last year for $375,000, using tax increment financing funds, with plans to redevelop the site for riverfront retail.

Mayor Ken Williams says the fire will not change those plans.

Anyone with information, photographs, or video of the fire is asked to contact Oregon police at 815-732-2803.

STATE RELEASES NEW FIVE-YEAR FINANCIAL FORECAST



Turning now to statewide news, Illinois officials are warning that despite a stronger financial picture this year, the state could face significant budget challenges in the years ahead.

Illinois is projecting a budget surplus this year, but a new five-year financial forecast warns of significant deficits ahead.

The Governor's Office of Management and Budget released its annual report Friday, projecting a $927 million surplus for fiscal year 2027, driven by stronger-than-expected tax collections.

Governor JB Pritzker proposes using much of that money to prepare for federal funding cuts affecting healthcare, food assistance, and emergency services.

After those proposed expenditures, the surplus would shrink to approximately $199 million.

However, the outlook worsens next year, with Illinois facing a projected $2.4 billion budget shortfall in fiscal year 2028.

State officials warn that spending pressures are expected to outpace revenue growth in the coming years.

Pritzker is expected to address the projected deficit when he introduces his next state budget in February.

FREEPORT PUBLIC LIBRARY ANNOUNCES FROSTY FAMILY FUN NIGHT AND FESTIVAL OF TREES



And on a lighter note, the holiday season is approaching, and the Freeport Public Library is preparing to welcome families for a pair of festive community traditions.

The Freeport Public Library is getting into the holiday spirit with two seasonal events for the community.

The library is partnering with the Foundation for Northwest Illinois to present this year's Festival of Trees, featuring Christmas trees decorated by local organizations.

The public can vote for their favorite tree from November 30 through December 19, with one vote allowed per person each day.

The festivities kick off Monday, November 30, with Frosty Family Fun Night, from 5:30 to 7 p.m.

Families can enjoy holiday-themed activities, including making slime, playing bingo, creating reindeer food, and enjoying snacks.

Santa and Mrs. Claus will also be on hand to visit with children.

Both events take place at the Freeport Public Library, located at 100 East Douglas Street.

For more information, visit freeportpubliclibrary.org.

SHOWTIME FUNDRAISER



And the holiday spirit continues at Freeport High School, where student performers are putting their musical talents to work to help fund an upcoming trip to Colorado.

Freeport High School students are combining holiday music with an Italian dinner to raise money for an upcoming performance tour.

Showtime Adults Rendering Support, or STARS, is hosting Dinner and Song: Holiday Edition on Wednesday, December 2, at Cimino's Little Italy in Freeport.

The evening features performances of holiday favorites by the Freeport High School Varsity Choir, along with a buffet of pasta, pizza, salad, and bread.

Two seatings are available, at 5 and 7 p.m., with a maximum of 125 guests at each seating.

Tickets cost $40 per person and include one raffle entry for a chance to win a $50 Cimino's gift card. Raffle participants must be at least 18 years old and present to win.

Proceeds will support Freeport High School's SHOWTIME 47 students as they prepare for a performance tour to Colorado next spring.

Tickets must be purchased by Friday, November 27.

In Closing

And with that, we've reached the end of another edition of Freepod.

But the stories don't stop here. You can find written versions of today's news, along with additional local coverage, at freepod.org. It's an easy way to stay informed and share the stories that matter to our communities.

And if you missed part of today's program, you can always listen again. Freepod releases new episodes every Thursday at noon, and you can catch us anytime on your favorite podcast platform.

We want to thank our dedicated community liaisons and reporters, our partners at WNIJ in DeKalb, and the Media Studies Department at Highland Community College for helping bring this program to you each week.

Local journalism plays an important role in keeping our communities informed, holding decision-makers accountable, and making sure the stories that affect our lives don't go untold.

And we can't do that without you. Help us spread the word by following Freepod on Facebook, subscribing to the podcast, and sharing our reporting with family, friends, and neighbors.

You can also support independent local journalism with a tax-deductible donation at freepod.org. Your contribution helps us continue providing news and information to communities throughout northwest Illinois.

We'll return next Thursday at noon with the latest stories from Jo Daviess, Carroll, Ogle, and Stephenson counties.

Until then, thank you for making Freepod part of your week. Stay informed, stay engaged, and keep looking out for one another.

This has been Freepod—

The news you've been missing!