



FREEPOD

The news you've been missing.

Hello and welcome to FREEPOD. I'm Amy Fisher...

And I'm Matt Mullen...

In this week's episode, Highland Community College names their new President...

A Stockton man faces federal drug charges...

And Pretzel Fest 2026 is right around the corner.

This is Freepod for April 16th, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

HCC NAMES NEW PRESIDENT

Highland Community College has named its next president following a nationwide search.

The Board of Trustees has appointed Dr. Jamal Scott as the college's tenth president, effective June 15th. Scott brings more than 25 years of experience in higher education and college officials tout his history of collaborative leadership style and focus on student success.

He currently serves as Vice President of Undergraduate Education and Dean of the Undergraduate College at National Louis University, and previously held a leadership role at Waubensee Community College. Scott is also an Aspen Presidential Fellow and has served as a peer reviewer for the Higher Learning Commission.

Board Chair Doug Block says the college is looking forward to Scott's leadership and vision as Highland continues expanding educational opportunities across the district.

As president, Scott will focus on strategic priorities, community partnerships, and improving student opportunities.

He will succeed longtime president Chris Kuberski, who is retiring after more than 40 years in Illinois higher education.



MARIJUANA DISPENSARY GETS THE GREEN LIGHT



The Freeport City Council has approved plans for a new marijuana dispensary in the city.

Council members voted this week to grant the necessary permits, clearing the way for the business to move forward. City officials say the dispensary is expected to bring new tax revenue and economic activity to the area.

Supporters of the measure say it's another step in aligning Freeport with Illinois' legalized cannabis industry, while also providing regulated access for residents.

Some council members noted the importance of zoning, security, and community impact as part of the approval process.

The dispensary, proposed for the location of the old Rosati's on Illinois 26, will now move ahead with final preparations before opening, though an official timeline for opening day has not yet been announced.

GFP RECEIVES RURAL DEVELOPMENT GRANT

The Greater Freeport Partnership is receiving new funding to support local entrepreneurs.

A grant from the Illinois Farm Bureau will help fund the Partnership's BASE Camp program—an educational series designed for small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs.

The program offers hands-on classes covering key topics like financing, legal structure, business planning, and marketing, all led by local experts.

Organizers say the goal is to build a strong support network and help participants start or grow successful businesses.

Those who complete the program will also have a chance to compete in a business pitch competition, with an opportunity to win funding to expand their ideas.

Officials say the program is aimed at strengthening the local economy through small business development.



FHS HAS 20 ILLINOIS STATE SCHOLARS

Freeport High School is celebrating a major academic achievement this year.

School officials say 20 students have been selected as Illinois State Scholars, an honor awarded to high-performing high school seniors across the state. The recognition is based on a combination of ACT or SAT scores, class rank, and overall academic performance.

Illinois State Scholars are selected by the Illinois Student Assistance Commission and represent the top students in their graduating class statewide.

School leaders say the honor reflects the hard work of the students, as well as the support of teachers and families.

The students will be recognized by the school in the coming weeks.

STOCKTON MAN INDICTED ON FEDERAL DRUG CHARGES

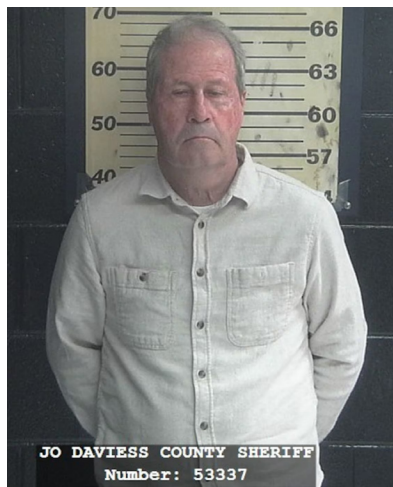
A Stockton man is now facing federal drug charges following an indictment handed down in March.

40 year old Khristofer E. Blair was indicted March 24 on one count of possession with intent to distribute five grams or more of methamphetamine, according to a media release.

Authorities say Blair has been in custody in Jo Daviess County since his arrest in January.

He had originally been charged at the state level with multiple felony drug offenses, including possession of methamphetamine with intent to deliver.

Those state charges have since been dismissed, and Blair has been turned over to federal authorities in connection with the new indictment.



HANOVER MAN PLEADS GUILTY TO CHILD SEX CRIMES

A Jo Daviess County man will spend years in prison after pleading guilty to sex crimes involving a minor.

68 year old Duane Potter of Hanover was sentenced by Judge John Hay after pleading guilty to aggravated criminal sexual abuse of a person under 18 in a position of trust, and aggravated criminal sexual abuse of a family member under 18.

Potter received 10 years in prison on the first charge, along with 12 months of mandatory supervised release, and 7 years on the second charge. Those sentences will be served at the same time.

He was given credit for 167 days already served and will be required to register as a sex offender for life.

Potter was originally arrested in October 2025 on multiple additional charges, including predatory criminal sexual assault of a child, which were dismissed as part of the plea agreement.

AUTOMATIC DRAFT REGISTRATION COULD BEGIN IN DECEMBER

Eligible men in the U.S. could soon be automatically registered for the military draft.

Currently, men ages 18 to 26 must sign up with the Selective Service System on their own. But under a new law approved by Congress, that process will become automatic starting in December.



The change is part of the 2026 National Defense Authorization Act, signed into law by Donald Trump late last year.

Officials say the move is intended to streamline registration and reduce costs.

If finalized, the rule would apply to all men in the U.S. between 18 and 26, including citizens and non-citizens such as green card holders, refugees, and undocumented individuals.

The rule is still under review and expected to take effect later this year.



AG VISA PROGRAM EASES LABOR SHORTAGES

Farmers across Illinois say foreign guest workers are becoming essential to keeping their operations running.

Many growers report ongoing labor shortages have forced crops to go unharvested in recent years. To fill the gap, they're increasingly turning to the H-2A visa program, which allows farms to hire seasonal foreign workers when domestic labor isn't available.

While the program helps address workforce needs, it comes with added costs, including housing, transportation, and visa fees.

Farm leaders say very few U.S. workers are applying for these jobs, making the program a critical lifeline. Illinois now ranks 18th in the nation for H-2A employment, with usage growing rapidly.

Still, farmers say the process involves significant red tape, even as federal officials work to streamline it.

Many say without the program, their farms wouldn't survive.

STATE ED OFFICIALS REQUEST PUBLIC SCHOOL BUDGET

State education officials are making the case for a \$10.9 billion budget to fund Illinois public schools in the next fiscal year.

Leaders with the Illinois State Board of Education say the state's Evidence-Based Funding formula is showing results. Graduation rates are at a 15-year high, achievement gaps are narrowing, and student performance now exceeds pre-pandemic levels.

The proposal represents a slight decrease from this year on paper, but officials say that's due to shifting early childhood funding to a new state agency. Overall, they say funding for K-12 schools would still increase.

The plan includes \$350 million for the Evidence-Based Funding formula and property tax relief grants.

Governor JB Pritzker's proposed budget does not include those relief grants, and some Republican lawmakers are questioning why increased funding hasn't lowered property taxes.

Lawmakers are expected to finalize the state budget by May 31st.





HCC HOSTS EXPRESS REGISTRATION

Highland Community College is making it easier for prospective students to get signed up for classes with a special Express Registration event.

The event is set for Friday, April 18th from 9 am to 1 pm and is designed to help new and returning students complete the enrollment process in one visit.

Attendees can meet with advisors, register for summer or fall classes, explore financial aid options, and get questions answered on the spot.

College staff will be available to guide students through each step, making the process quick and convenient.

Officials say Express Registration is a great opportunity for anyone considering college or looking to continue their education.

NATIONAL LIBRARY WEEK ACTIVITIES AT FREEPORT PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Freeport Public Library is inviting the community to take part in several events during National Library Week next week.

The week begins Monday, April 20th with “Right to Read Day,” encouraging readers of all ages to celebrate and support access to books.

On Tuesday, April 21st, the library will recognize National Library Workers Day, highlighting the contributions of local library staff.

Wednesday, April 22nd marks National Library Outreach Day, focusing on services that bring library resources out into the community.

The week wraps up Thursday, April 23rd with “Take Action for Libraries Day,” encouraging residents to show their support for local libraries.

Library officials say the events are a great way for the community to get involved and celebrate the important role libraries play in everyday life.



FREEPORT PARK DISTRICT OFFERS LET’S PLAY REGISTRATION EVENT

The Freeport Park District is inviting families to get active and creative with its “Let’s Play” youth programming registration event on April 22nd.

Programs are available for kids from toddlers to teens, offering a wide range of activities including golf, soccer, pickleball, tennis, t-ball, and a multi-sport introductory class.

Park District officials say the programs are designed for all skill levels, giving kids a chance to learn new sports, build skills, and have fun.

Beyond athletics, the district is also partnering with the Freeport Public Library to offer Tot Time for ages 0-4, featuring crafts, storytelling, games, and interactive play.

Families can learn more and sign up during the Let’s Play registration event happening on April 22nd from 5 to 7 pm at the Park District Administration Center on Burchard Avenue.

CELEBRATE ARBOR DAY WITH THE PARK DISTRICT

The Freeport Park District is inviting the community to celebrate Arbor Day with a special event focused on trees and the environment.

The event is happening Friday, April 24th from 11 am to 1 pm at the Gunkel Shelter in Krape Park. The Park District, in conjunction with the University of Illinois Extension Office, will offer a ceremonial tree planting, along with educational activities highlighting the importance of conservation and maintaining healthy green spaces.

Park District officials say Arbor Day is a great opportunity for families to learn about the role trees play in improving air quality and enhancing the community.

Residents of all ages are encouraged to attend and take part in the celebration.



PRETZEL FEST & POLKA FEST

Downtown Freeport is getting ready to celebrate one of its most iconic traditions.

Pretzel Fest returns for its fifth year Saturday, April 25th at 11 a.m., running through Sunday afternoon at 3, all in honor of National Pretzel Day.

Known as "Pretzel City," Freeport will once again spotlight its signature snack with a weekend full of family-friendly fun. Activities include a petting zoo, axe throwing, live performances, and plenty more throughout the downtown area.

Visitors can also take advantage of the Downtown Festival District, allowing them to purchase drinks from participating bars and restaurants and carry them while enjoying the festivities.

Local boutiques, shops, and restaurants will be joining in too—offering a wide variety of pretzel-themed food, merchandise, and treats.

Pretzel Fest is free to attend and open to the public.

And during the festival, you can swing over to the Masonic Event Center for Polka Fest.

The Pretzel City Polka Fest is set to bring lively entertainment to downtown, featuring live music from The Zweifel Brothers Band.

Attendees can enjoy food from The Traveling Chefs and Freeport Pretzel Company, along with drinks from Lena Brewing Company.

In addition to the music and food, the festival will include a silent auction and plenty of opportunities to hit the dance floor.

Organizers say the event is open to everyone—from experienced polka dancers to those just looking for a fun day out.



Tickets are \$10 per person and can be purchased in advance by following the link found here: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/pretzel-city-polka-fest-tickets-1983087034704>.



JOIN THE GREAT PRETZEL BITE

Before Pretzel Fest officially begins, the GFP is hosting a special event to set another world record.

To kick off Pretzel Fest 2026, you can come be a part of The Great Pretzel Bite. Community members are invited to gather on Chicago Avenue between Main and Stephenson at 10 a.m. on April 26th to all take a simultaneous bite of a pretzel at 10:30.

The goal of the event is to set another world record for the Pretzel city.

Last year, more than 600 people gathered to create the world's largest human pretzel image.

50/50 RAFFLE FOR DOWNTOWN FLOWER PLANTING

The Greater Freeport Partnership is holding a 50-50 raffle to help fund flower planting in downtown Freeport.

Tickets are \$5 each or 5 for \$20 and can be purchased at a range of downtown businesses.

The winner will be drawn during Pretzel Fest on April 25th, but the winner does not need to be present when the winning ticket is pulled.

To purchase tickets, visit any of the following:

- Greater Freeport Partnership
- Exchange Street Printery
- The Clothes Bin & Gift Shop
- Progressive Fighting Concepts
- Flair Boutique
- Sports, Recreation and Apparel
- Rite-Way Furniture & Appliance
- Ashley Jackson Beauty
- Re-Spun Records & Resale
- The Space Salon Studio

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 new Freeport Police Department Chief Jacquelyn Frausto. Alan and the Chief talked about her life story, as well as her vision and philosophies for running the department.

This coming Tuesday, Tim Connors will sit down with Delbert Bunker. Delbert is the President of the Bocker Auto Group, as well as an owner of the Freeport Beef-a-Roo. Bunker shares his insight in to both the car and fast food business here in Freeport. That interview will be available starting at noon on Tuesday, April 21st. 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.



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