



Hello and welcome to FREEPOD. I'm Lynn Feaver...

And I'm Alan Wenzel...

In this week's episode, severe weather wreaks havoc on our community...

Freeport High School journalism students are headed to state competition...

And the Freeport Public Library hosts an opportunity to learn more about the natural wonders surrounding us.

This is Freepod for April 23rd, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

SEVERE WEATHER DEVASTATES THE AREA

Northwest Illinois was rocked by several severe weather events in the past week, including a confirmed tornado touchdown in Lena.

The first major stormfront came through on Wednesday, April 15th and did significant damage in Carroll, Jo Daviess, and Stephenson County. In downtown Freeport, Royal Oaks Antiques had a large overhang ripped off the front of their building by the high winds and torrential rains.

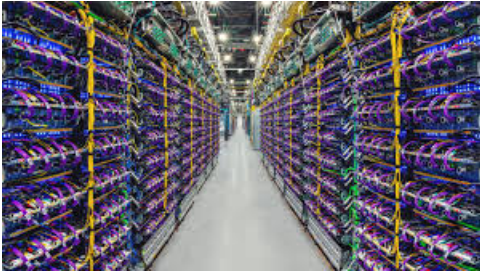
Then, on Friday, April 17th, a confirmed EF-2 tornado devastated Lena. Photos and videos immediately circulated on social media showing damage to homes, businesses, and roadways. Stephenson County Sheriff Steve Stovall gave a press conference that evening to put to rest rumors of fatalities occurring as a result of the storm. Instead, Sheriff Stovall said that while there was considerable damage to properties throughout Lena, there were no fatalities or serious injuries reported.

Sheriff Stovall went on to declare that access to the Village of Lena was "strictly restricted" to allow first responders from across northwest Illinois to work unimpeded in both cleaning up and checking on the safety of residents.

Even as crews worked diligently to clean up from the aftermath of the tornado, multiple roadways were closed off due to excessive flooding.

Though the weather cleared after the Friday storm, the impacts of this particular event are likely to have lasting effects on our community.





OGLE COUNTY RESIDENTS EXPRESS CONCERNS OVER PROPOSED DATA CENTERS

Concerns over potential data centers are growing in Ogle County.

Residents gathered at the old courthouse in Oregon to voice worries about possible future development, even though officials say no projects are currently planned.

Key concerns include water usage, environmental impact, and land use, with some residents pointing to issues seen in other communities.

County leaders say they are working to better understand the issue and may form a subcommittee to develop policies if proposals come forward.

Last year, more than 500 acres near the Byron power plant were rezoned from agricultural to industrial use, raising questions about future development possibilities.

Officials say their goal is to protect public health while ensuring fair and reasonable zoning decisions moving forward.

FORMER HOLIDAY INN GETS DEMOLISHED

The former Holiday Inn on Business 20 is set to have the last of its structure torn down this week.

The project, which is being handled by Alber & Sons Earthworks, has been moving quickly since being approved by the city on February 17th.



The building has been condemned since 2017, but legal wrangling over ownership delayed the demolition.

Ultimately, the city convinced a judge that the building was a threat to public health and safety due to a large number of reported trespassings in the vacant property.

The land itself is still owned by a private entity, but the city is seeking ownership through the courts. No word yet on what the city intends to do with the land if their lawsuit is successful.

SELLERS GIVES BLISTERING ANNUAL TOWNSHIP ADDRESS



Freeport Township Supervisor Patrick Sellers delivered his annual address this week, highlighting both progress and ongoing concerns in Freeport Township.

Sellers said township services remain strong and financially stable, but warned of growing issues including crime, drugs, and deteriorating neighborhoods.

He criticized what he called a lack of action from leadership and urged the community to confront problems more directly.

Sellers also called for greater accountability and public involvement, saying real change depends on residents demanding action from elected officials.

He closed by emphasizing that the future of the community rests in the hands of its people.

LEAD ARTIST NAMED FOR UNITED WE CREATE PROJECT

The Freeport Art Museum has announced a major step forward in its “United We Create” project.

Ben Swords, a lifelong Freeport resident and educator, has been selected as lead artist for the community mural initiative.

The project will celebrate America’s 250th anniversary, bringing together local youth and residents to help design and create a mural at the Arts Plaza.

Organizers say the effort will highlight shared stories and community pride through public art.

More information on the project is available here: <https://www.freeportartmuseum.com/united-we-create>.



UNITED WAY CREATES SEARCHABLE EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCE LIST

A new tool aimed at helping families and childcare providers is now available in northwest Illinois.

Through a grant from Birth to Five Illinois, local partners have launched a searchable online early childhood resource list.

The project was developed with support from regional Early Childhood Consortium members, and is designed to connect parents and providers with services and support in one convenient place.

Organizers say the list is still growing and they’re asking for public feedback to help improve it and identify any missing resources.

More information—and a link to explore the database—is available here: uwniearlychildhood10664.softr.app.

FHS JOURNALISM PROGRAM SENDS 10 EVENTS TO STATE COMPETITION

Ten students from Freeport High School’s journalism program are headed to state-wide competition.

In just their third year of competition, FHS journalism students had an outstanding showing at the IHSA Sectional competition this past weekend. Competing in events like editorial cartooning, headline writing, and yearbook theme development, 10 students from Jena Kleindl’s classes placed in 1st, 2nd, or 3rd place to qualify for the state competition.

Kleindl, herself a former journalist, spoke to us about how important opportunities like this are for any student, regardless of their chosen career path.

“It is super important for our students to be developing communication skills. Critical thinking skills, and journalism is kind of a one stop shop for them to really be successful in almost any career that they have, and many of them are passionate about it and committed to it, kind of based on what we can see with our sectionals results.”



If you'd like to get a sample of what these young scholars can do, take a listen to the March 19th episode of Freepod, which was entirely written and delivered by these very students.



YOUNG LEADERS FINISH MAJOR EFFORTS IN STEPHENSON AND CARROLL COUNTY

Young leaders in northwest Illinois are making a big impact in their communities.

The Carroll County Farm Bureau Young Leaders recently wrapped up their “Harvest for All” grain drive, raising \$28,000 dollars for local food pantries with support from area farmers and businesses.

Meanwhile, the Stephenson County Farm Bureau Young Leaders donated \$11,000 to the county’s Agriculture in the Classroom program.

Those funds were raised during the annual Bruce Johnson Farm to Farm 5K and 10K run held in late March, which brought out more than 200 participants.

Organizers say both efforts highlight the positive impact young people are making in agriculture and their communities.

Adults ages 18 to 35 interested in getting involved are encouraged to join their local Young Leaders program.

WARREN LIBRARY WINS CARNEGIE GIFT

A local library is celebrating a major gift tied to a historic milestone.

The Carnegie Corporation of New York has awarded a \$10,000 grant to the library in honor of America’s 250th anniversary.

The foundation, established by Andrew Carnegie, is recognizing the lasting impact of Carnegie libraries across the country.

Carnegie funded more than 1600 public libraries nationwide in the late 1800s and early 1900s—including this one, built in 1911.

Today, only a fraction of those original libraries remain in operation, making this site a point of local pride.

Library officials say the funding will help preserve the historic building and continue serving the community for years to come.



HANOVER MAN KILLED IN ONE CAR ROLLOVER CRASH



A fatal crash in Jo Daviess County has claimed the life of a 21-year-old man.

Authorities say Jordan Havens of Hanover died last week following a roll-over crash near Elizabeth.

According to the sheriff’s office, the pickup truck left the roadway after hitting loose gravel, then went airborne and flipped multiple times.

Havens, who was a passenger, was ejected from the vehicle and pronounced dead at the scene.

The driver, 18-year-old Dayan Havens, was taken to a hospital with non-life-threatening injuries and has been cited for failure to reduce speed.

The crash remains under investigation by the sheriff's office and Illinois State Police.

FATHER AND SON KILLED IN TRAIN V. TRUCK COLLISION NEAR SAVANNA

Authorities have released the names of two men killed in a train crash last week in Carroll County.

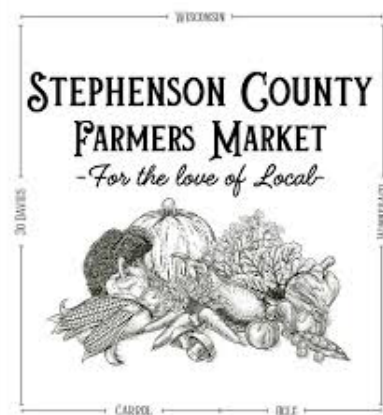
21-year-old Connor Sandrock and his father, 50-year-old Benjamin Sandrock, both of rural Lyndon, died after their pickup truck was struck by a southbound train near Savanna.



Investigators say the truck was pulling a boat and trailer across a private railroad crossing near Route 84 when the collision happened.

Multiple emergency agencies from Illinois and Iowa responded to the scene.

Officials say the crash remains under investigation.



STEPHENSON COUNTY FARMER'S MARKET ANNOUNCES TEMPORARY NEW HOME *(UPDATED TO REFLECT PREVIOUS ERROR ON LOCATION)*

The Stephenson County Farmers Market is preparing for a new season—with a temporary change in location.

Due to construction and repaving work at the downtown municipal lot, the market will be relocated just a few blocks away for the start of the season.

Vendors will set up in a parking lot at the corner of Exchange and State, with additional parking available nearby.

Opening day is set for Saturday, May 9th, with market hours running from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m.

Organizers say the move is temporary and thank Castor Home Health for providing the space.

They also promise a season full of new vendors and programs for the community to enjoy.

STEPHENSON COUNTY RESTAURANT WEEK BEGINS

The Greater Freeport Partnership is bringing back a popular local event.

Stephenson County Restaurant Week returns April 24th through May 2nd, inviting residents and visitors to explore featured dishes from restaurants across the area.



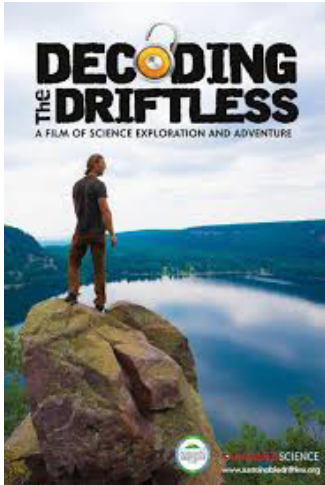
With more than 80 dining options in Freeport and throughout the county, organizers say it's a great opportunity to try something new and support local businesses.

Participants can also enter to win \$100 in Partnership Cash by posting photos of their meals on social media using the hashtag “StephCoEats.”

A winner will be selected May 6th.

Dine-in, carry-out, and delivery options will be available, and a full restaurant guide can be found here: greaterfreeport.com/restaurantweek.

Organizers encourage everyone to step out of their routine and discover new local favorites.



DECODING THE DRIFTLESS SCREENING AT LIBRARY

The Northwest Illinois Trails Foundation is inviting the public to explore the history behind the region’s scenic landscape later this month.

A special screening of the film Decoding the Driftless will take place Monday, April 27th at the Freeport Public Library, beginning at 6:30 p.m.

The documentary dives into the unique geology, wildlife, and ancient history of the Driftless Region—an area known for its rugged terrain and striking natural beauty.

The film will be presented by Nancy Breed of Sustainable Driftless, and features rare footage and insights from award-winning filmmakers.

Organizers say the event is a chance for residents to learn more about the landscape they know and love.

The screening is free and open to the public.

CREATIVE CONTAINER GARDEN PROGRAM OFFERED

Gardeners in northwest Illinois are invited to get inspired this spring.

The University of Illinois Extension is hosting a “Creative Container Gardens” program Thursday, April 30th at 1:30 p.m. at the Jo Daviess County Extension Office in Elizabeth.

Program coordinator Nikki Keltner will share tips on designing eye-catching container displays, including how to select plants, choose the right containers, and keep them looking vibrant all season long.

The session is part of the Spring Break Gardening Series, which features several upcoming programs on topics like landscaping, trees, and tomatoes.

Organizers say pre-registration is encouraged, and you can find the link to register, as well as more information about upcoming events, in the print version of this story on our website.

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 Tim Connors spoke to Delbert Bunker about vehicle maintenance and the Freeport Beef-A-Roo.



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
EXTENSION

This coming Tuesday, Becky Connors will share her conversation with Scott Stich. Scott is retiring as the conductor of the Highland Community College Wind Ensemble. Scott has served in that role for 28 years and will be conducting his final concert on Friday, May 1st. That interview will be available starting at noon on Tuesday, April 28th. 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.

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.



FREEPOD

The news you've been missing.