



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

And I'm Paulette Williams-Thomas...

In this week's episode, an update on the Freeport School District's efforts to reduce their deficit...

Major road repairs will disrupt Jo Daviess county traffic...

And Showtime 46 tests the premise if music is, in fact, contagious.

This is Freepod for April 2nd, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

### UPDATES ON FSD REDUCTIONS IN FORCE

Our top story this week is an update on the Reductions in Force taking place at the Freeport School District. As we reported previously, the Freeport School District is facing a massive budget shortfall and school board officials and administrators are making significant cuts to help bridge the gap.

This past week, school leaders notified around 60 employees that their positions were being terminated at the end of the school year. Half of those positions are individuals from the Certified Positions category; those are individuals with a Professional Educator License. This includes teachers, deans, multi-tiered system of supports specialists, and librarians.

According to Kelly Everding, President of the Freeport Education Association, these cuts will leave the entire district with only one certified librarian.

Everding also told us that, while most of the cuts were not teachers, the people being released are still critical parts of a student's education:

*"The majority of those cuts are coming from positions that might not be in front of a classroom 100% of the time, but they are definitely positions that support those teachers in the classrooms."*

The other major employee group being cut are the Classified staff. Secretaries, custodians, bus drivers, and lunch staff all fall in to this category.

When we asked Everding about other takeaways for the community, she told us:

*"I think I want the public to know that the district deficit reduction plan has another \$3 million in cuts slated for next school year. So we could be in this position again a year from now, either cutting classroom staff because I don't know who else they would cut, or cutting programs for students. And that is a huge fear of mine."*



The School Board will vote on the current RIF plan on April 7th, but the final decisions do not need to be delivered to the state until April 15th.



### **FREEPORT PD WORKS WITH DHS, FBI, AND IRS FOR LOCAL OPERATION**

The Freeport Police Department announced a successful joint operation with the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Internal Revenue Service this week.

The action took place across multiple locations in Freeport and while most details remain unknown, due to the investigation being ongoing, Freeport Police Chief Jacquelyn Frausto did explicitly state that the operation was not related to immigration matters.

We reached out to Chief Frausto, but she was unavailable for comment.

In an official statement, Chief Frausto said that they police department remains “fully committed to maintaining a safe environment for all residents and (they) encourage the community to continue placing their trust in (the police department).”

### **JCWIFI WITHDRAWS ZONING APPEAL**

We reported last week about a special townhall meeting that was called to discuss a proposed WiFi tower near the Firebaugh Observatory. However, shortly after our episode released, the proposal’s requestor, JCWIFI, withdrew their application entirely.

The tower requested was a 150 foot structure designed to allow JCWIFI’s signal to be more easily captured throughout the city of Freeport.

Opponents cited the tower’s possible interference with the Firebaugh observatory’s regular activities, as well as visual blight as reasons they spoke out against the proposal.

There is no word just yet on whether JCWIFI plans to look at another location for the tower, or scrap the project altogether.



### **MUNICIPAL PARKING LOT CLOSED FOR CONSTRUCTION**



Parking in a downtown Freeport lot will be unavailable for the next few months.

Beginning this past Monday, March 30th, the city-owned downtown municipal lot was closed for construction through late June. Parking will not be allowed in the lot during that time.

Drivers are encouraged to use alternate parking areas, including city lots at Exchange and Stephenson, State and Main, and Douglas and Galena.

City officials say they understand the inconvenience and appreciate the public’s patience as improvements are made to the heavily used space.

Drivers should note that electric vehicle chargers in the lot are expected to remain accessible during construction, with additional charging available at State and Main.

### **SHAWNEE/HANCOCK VIADUCT CONSTRUCTION RESUMES**

In more construction news, the Shawnee/Hancock viaduct project is back underway.

The project had been delayed for multiple reasons including Nicor needing permits from the CN Railway, but crews are now expecting to have the viaduct open by May 30.



The thoroughway has been closed to traffic since September 2nd. The project's ultimate purpose is to make a safe and permanent passage for semi-trucks and safety equipment that will need to access the Arcade area once work begins on the Hancock Bridge. So, establishing this route is critical for the eventual Hancock bridge project.

### **CIVIL CONSTRUCTORS WINS NEARLY \$12M CONTRACT FOR ROADWORK**

A major infrastructure boost is coming to northern Illinois, with a local company landing a key contract.



The Illinois Tollway has approved more than 50 million dollars in construction and engineering contracts, including nearly 12 million awarded to Civil Constructors Inc.

The Freeport-based firm will handle bridge rehabilitation work along the Reagan Memorial Tollway between Howland Creek and Route 26. Officials say the latest round of projects also supports small and diverse businesses, with dozens of minority- and veteran-owned firms participating through mentoring and contracting opportunities.

In total, the Tollway has now approved more than 105 million dollars in projects so far this year, as part of ongoing efforts to improve infrastructure and grow the construction workforce.

### **ROUTE 20 WEST OF STOCKTON TO CLOSE FOR REPAIRS**

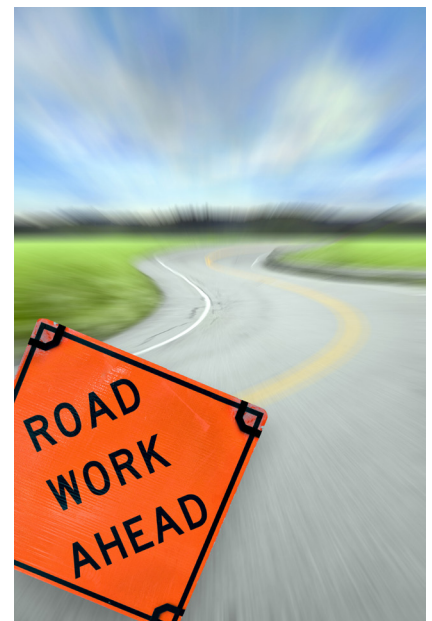
Drivers in Jo Daviess County should plan ahead for a temporary highway closure near Stockton.

The Illinois Department of Transportation says a stretch of U.S. 20 will be shut down from April 13 through April 24 as part of a \$31.6 million reconstruction project.

The closure runs from the west edge of Stockton, Illinois to Logemann Road, with traffic detoured along Illinois 78, U.S. 52 and Illinois 64, and Illinois 84. Officials say the shutdown will speed up construction and reduce long-term traffic disruptions. Work includes installing new culverts and preparing for a new roadway alignment and bridge over Rush Creek.

Local access will be maintained, and north-south roads will remain open.

The full project is expected to be completed in late 2027.





### JO DAVIESS COUNTY GETS A NEW SHERIFF

Jo Daviess County has a new sheriff; even as the former sheriff was the only name on the primary ballot.

Sheriff Craig Ketelsen retired earlier this month after accepting a position with the state of Illinois.

The Jo Daviess County Board voted on March 10th to appoint Chief Deputy Klaus Kretschmer as his replacement.

In a statement, Ketelsen thanked the community, calling county residents “some of the best people” he’s met, and praised local law enforcement for their courage and professionalism.

Ketelsen served 28 years in law enforcement and ran unopposed in the Republican primary earlier this month, with no one running for the Democratic Party’s nomination.

### AREA TICKS TEST POSITIVE FOR NEW VIRUS

Winnebago County health officials say ticks in the area have tested positive for Powassan virus for the first time.

The virus is spread through the bite of an infected tick and, while rare, can cause serious complications affecting the nervous system. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cases have been increasing in recent years, particularly in the Great Lakes region.



Symptoms can begin with fever and headache, but may progress to confusion, seizures, or even paralysis. Health officials say anyone experiencing symptoms should contact a healthcare provider and report any recent tick exposure.

There is no vaccine or specific treatment, so prevention is key. Experts recommend avoiding tall grass and wooded areas, wearing protective clothing, using insect repellent, and checking for ticks after spending time outdoors.

### GALENA LIBRARY OFFERS FREE SEEDS



The Galena Public Library District is helping residents get a head start on spring planting with its Seed Library.

Patrons can check out a variety of free vegetable, herb, and flower seeds, with the collection restocked each spring. Visitors can browse selections in person and speak with staff to take seeds home.

The program is open to library patrons at no cost and is part of ongoing efforts to promote gardening and sustainability in the community.

The library also hosts seasonal events like plant and seed swaps throughout the year.

Library hours are Monday through Thursday from 10 to 7, and Friday and Saturday from 10 to 5.

## **SCHOOL CELL PHONE BAN AND SOCIAL MEDIA REGULATIONS ADVANCE IN STATE LEGISLATURE**

Lawmakers in Springfield are advancing key parts of Governor J. B. Pritzker’s legislative agenda ahead of a committee deadline.

One proposal, known as the Children’s Social Media Safety Act, would require platforms to verify users’ ages, limit nighttime notifications for minors, and strengthen privacy protections. The measure cleared a House committee on a party-line vote but is expected to be revised.

Meanwhile, a separate bill targeting cellphone use in schools is gaining broad bipartisan support. The plan would require districts to ban phones during the school day starting in the 2027–2028 school year, with some exceptions for high school students and special circumstances.

Supporters say the goal is to reduce distractions, improve student focus, and address concerns about mental health and bullying.



## **COMMUNITY COLLEGES COULD SOON OFFER BACCALAUREATE PROGRAMS**

Another major proposal backed by Governor J. B. Pritzker that would expand access to four-year degrees is also moving forward in Springfield.

The House Executive Committee has unanimously approved a revised plan allowing Illinois community colleges to offer bachelor’s degree programs in high-demand fields.

The measure, sponsored by State Representative Tracy Katz Muhl, requires colleges to show the programs meet local workforce needs and that resources and student demand are in place.

Supporters say the goal is to make higher education more affordable and accessible, while helping fill job shortages.

The updated bill also requires community colleges to work with four-year universities to avoid duplicating programs.

Lawmakers say discussions are ongoing, but no major changes are expected before a full House vote.

## **COST OF LIVING WITH CLIMATE CHANGE PRESENTATION**

A free community lecture series on climate change continues in Freeport next month.

The Environmental Study Group is hosting the fourth installment of its series on the cost of living with climate change, focusing on how it’s impacting northwest Illinois now and in the future.

The event will be held Wednesday, April 8th at the Freeport Public Library, in partnership with several local and state organizations.

Featured speaker Jen Walling, executive director of the Illinois Environmental Council, will discuss good climate

### **THE COST OF LIVING WITH CLIMATE CHANGE LECTURE SERIES SESSION 4: GOOD CLIMATE POLICY, REAL SAVINGS: WHAT ILLINOIS HAS DONE AND WHAT WE CAN DO NEXT**

**Wednesday, April 8, 2026**

Freeport Public Library, 100 E. Douglas St., Meeting Room at 6:30 pm

Jennifer Walling, Executive Director of the Illinois Environmental Council will present information on state and local policies that affect climate change.



**ESG**  
In partnership with the Northwest Illinois Trails Foundation, the University of Illinois Extension, the Northwest Illinois Bird & Nature Alliance, the Illinois Sierra Club, and the City of Freeport.  
For more information on each of the speakers, visit [freeportpubliclibrary.org](http://freeportpubliclibrary.org)



policy and the real savings tied to actions taken in Illinois, along with what comes next.

The program is free and open to the public, beginning at 6:30 p.m., with time for questions and refreshments provided.

The final lecture in the series is scheduled for May 6th.



### SHOWTIME 46 OPENS

A revered annual tradition of the performing arts is back again at Freeport High School. Showtime 46 runs next weekend, April 9th through the 12th, at the Jeannette Lloyd Theater.

This year's show is titled "Music is Contagious," and it promises to keep the legacy of Showtime going strong in the Pretzel City.

Tickets are \$10 a piece and can be purchased here: <https://fsd145.vbotickets.com/events>.

### UNITED WAY CELEBRITY DINNER

The United Way of Northwest Illinois is hosting their Annual Celebrity Dinner and tickets are on sale now.



The dinner, taking place Saturday, April 18th at 6 p.m., is a unique event that turns the attendees in to the celebrities. Tables create their own themes and appoint a celebrity waiter to engage attendees with games, trivia, and challenges.

Prices for the event range from \$40 per person, or \$320 for a table of 8. Proceeds from the Celebrity Dinner help the United Way's Community Impact Initiatives in Stephenson, Jo Daviess, and Carroll counties.

For tickets, or more information, please visit <https://uwni.org/2026-celebrity-dinner>.

### 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. Regular Freepod host Alan Wenzel spoke to Rob Boyer and Randi Kohlbauer from the city of Freeport about infrastructure projects either already underway or soon to happen.

This coming Tuesday, Becky Connors presents her conversation with Emily Schaub, the new director of the Freeport Public Library. They talk about Emily's vision and plans for the library as she begins her tenure in the Pretzel City. That interview will be available starting at noon on Tuesday, April 7th. You can find it, and all of our other interviews, on our website, [www.freepod.org](http://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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**The news you've been missing.**