



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

And I'm Pat Norman...

In this week's episode, a major fire displaces several Freeport residents...

A local dairy gets a visit from the Governor...

And history buffs get ample opportunity to expand their horizons right here in Pretzel City.

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

RESIDENTIAL FIRE ON CLARK STREET

A major residential fire broke out in the early hours of January 30th. A multi-residential building on the 300 block of West Clark Street was fully engulfed in flames when Freeport firefighters arrived around 7 a.m.

Multiple nearby departments were called to the scene, as the fire had already started to spread to neighboring properties.

The original structure in question took more than \$100,000 in damages, and led to six adults and one child being displaced. That property was ultimately demolished due to safety concerns.

One of the neighboring properties has been deemed unlivable due to the damage it sustained, estimated to be more than \$60,000. Three adults were displaced from that building, and one pet was rescued and returned to its owners.

The other neighboring property suffered minor damage to the exterior and those residents were allowed to return to their home.

The Red Cross is assisting all of the families affected.



PEARL CITY CO-OP AND STEPHENSON SERVICE COMPANY SHAREHOLDERS APPROVE MERGER

Two of the largest agribusiness providers in our area have agreed to merge. Shareholders for Pearl City Elevator and Stephenson Service company voted to approve the proposed merger of the two companies during their annual meetings on January 30.



The agreement is scheduled to become finalized on September 1, with representatives from both co-ops celebrating the opportunities this new partnership will offer for the community.

The new unified organization will take their name from Stephenson Service Company and will be headed up by Jay Kempel, the current general manager of FS Cooperatives.

NEW YMCA TO FEATURE FIELD HOUSE AND AQUATIC CENTER

The Family YMCA of Northwest Illinois has revealed plans for their new facility at the old Stewart Centre West.

The new facility will include a field house with multiple basketball courts, a running track, and an aquatic center with two pools.

The new era of the YMCA, which they are calling Vision 2030, will begin with the relocation of early childhood services from their current location on the campus of Highland Community College, to the new facility by summer 2027.

There is no current deadline for total completion of the project, but representatives from the YMCA are touting the move as an “economic driver for our community.”

The YMCA move comes with the ending of a 50-year agreement with Highland Community College, as the college embarks on the building of a new athletics and learning facility.



CITY WAIVING LATE FEES FOR SOME RESIDENTS

A billing disruption with the city’s utilities department leads to the waiving of late fees on water bills for some Freeport residents.

According to the city, a portion of city residents who had water bills due by January 23 did not get their paper bills delivered through the US Postal Service in time. In response, the city acknowledges the problem and will waive late fees for customers that were affected.

The city wants to remind residents that they can always

view and pay water bills online, as well as enrolling in autopay.

To access your city of Freeport water bill, or enroll in autopay, please visit freeportil.municipalonlinepayments.com/freeportil.



ROE 8 GETS A NEW REGIONAL SUPERINTENDENT

The Regional Office of Education #8 has announced a new regional superintendent. Christopher Shockey was recently appointed the new regional superintendent following the retirement of Aaron Mercier.



Shockey was the assistant regional superintendent for ROE 8 prior to this appointment.

The Regional Office of Education #8 serves Stephenson, Jo Daviess, and Carroll counties and serves as an intermediary agency between local school districts and the Illinois State Board of Education.



POLO SUPERINTENDENT RECEIVES STATEWIDE HONORS

Dr. Kelly Mandrell, the superintendent of the Polo Community Unit School District, has been named the 2026 Northwest Region superintendent of distinction by the Illinois Association of School Administrators.

The association gives out 22 of these awards every year, with nominations and award selections coming from other superintendents across the state.

Dr. Mandrell has been serving as superintendent of Polo schools since 2020. Prior to that, she served as the principal of Pearl City High School.

OGLE COUNTY MAN CONVICTED OF MURDER & ARSON

An Ogle county man has been convicted of double murder and aggravated arson following the deaths of his ex-wife and 3-year-old son.

Duane Meyer was found guilty more than 9 years after the brutal crimes occurred.

According to prosecutors and forensic experts called during the trial, Meyer strangled his ex-wife before setting their Byron home on fire. Their 3-year-old son later perishing from the effects of the fire.

Meyer is due back in court on March 13 and faces life in prison without the possibility of parole.



LOCAL DAIRY HOLDS RIBBON CUTTING CEREMONY WITH STATE AND FOREIGN DIGNITARIES

Savencia Fromage and Dairy might be headquartered in France, but as owners of the former Kolb Lena Dairy, they have a strong foothold in northwest Illinois. This past weekend, Savencia held a ribbon cutting ceremony to celebrate an upcoming expansion of their production facility in Lena and Illinois's own Governor, JB Pritzker, was in attendance, along with representatives from the French consul's office.

The cheesemaker is adding a new production line that will create 50 new full-time jobs, while retaining the 125 jobs that currently exist.

This expansion is being done by taking advantage of the Economic Development for a Growing Economy, or EDGE, program. The program gives businesses state income tax credits for up to 10 years in exchange for in-

vesting in the key growth industries of next-generation agriculture, ag tech, and food processing.

PARTIAL OFFSET FOR MEDICAID CUTS TO RURAL COMMUNITIES ANNOUNCED

Illinois will receive 193 million dollars a year for the next five years to expand health care access for nearly two million rural residents, funding that comes from a new federal rural health program.

The money was created to soften the impact of Medicaid cuts approved by Congress last year, but hospital leaders say it won't come close to filling the gap.

State officials warn up to 360,000 Illinois Medicaid recipients could lose coverage under new work requirements, while other changes could reduce state Medicaid funding by billions of dollars a year by the end of the decade.

Nearly one-third of Illinois' rural hospitals already operate at a deficit, and advocates say shrinking reimbursements could force service cuts or closures.

State leaders plan to use the new funding for health care workforce recruitment, telehealth expansion, and regional partnerships, calling it helpful — but not a long-term fix.



COMED SEEKS \$15B GRID PLAN APPROVAL



Electric utility Commonwealth Edison is asking state regulators to approve a \$15.3-billion, four-year grid modernization plan, aimed at meeting rising electricity demand and protecting infrastructure from severe weather.

The plan, filed under Illinois' Climate and Equitable Jobs Act, would guide ComEd investments from 2028 through 2031, focusing on reliability, electric vehicles, data centers, and renewable energy connections.

If approved in full, ComEd says residential customers would see an average monthly increase of about two-and-a-half to three dollars, starting in 2028. That would be on top of other recent delivery rate increases.

Consumer advocates are already pushing back, calling the proposal expensive and potentially unnecessary right now.

The plan will undergo an 11-month review by the Illinois Commerce Commission before any decision is made.

ELECTRICAL TRANSMISSION LINE TO ILLINOIS CLEARS LEGAL HURDLE

Developers of the proposed Grain Belt Express transmission line cleared a major legal hurdle Friday, after the Illinois Supreme Court rejected a challenge to the project's state permit.



In a six-to-zero ruling, the court said Grain Belt Express met state law requirements showing it can finance the project without harming utilities or customers — even after a four-point-nine-billion-dollar federal loan guarantee was canceled last year.

The decision reverses a lower court ruling and allows the Illinois Commerce Commission's permit to stand. The project would build an eight-hundred-mile high-voltage power line, carrying wind energy from western Kansas through Missouri and nine Illinois counties, before connecting to regional power grids in Indiana.

Opponents, including the Illinois Farm Bureau and landowners, raised concerns about financing and state law. Remaining legal challenges will continue in the appeals court.

Project developers say they plan to move forward using private financing.



NEW DATA CENTERS COULD LEAD TO BALLOONING ELECTRICITY COSTS IN ILLINOIS

A new analysis from the Union of Concerned Scientists warns that data centers in Illinois could add up to 37 billion dollars to electricity costs over the next 25 years.

The report says rapidly growing data center demand could turn Illinois from a net exporter of power into a power importer, driving up costs for customers.

Researchers say the loss of fossil-fuel plants, combined with rising demand, is straining supply and pushing prices higher across the regional grid.

The study estimates data centers could account for more than 70 percent of new electricity demand by 2030, while also increasing pollution from coal and gas plants.

UCS is urging lawmakers to require data centers to report their energy and water use and secure their own carbon-free power — proposals lawmakers may consider this session.

CITY OF FREEPORT HOLDING GRAPHIC DESIGN CONTEST

The City of Freeport is putting on a graphic design contest for area creatives. All members of the community are invited to submit up to three designs. If selected, submitted designs will then be printed on t-shirts, with artist credit, and distributed at city events throughout 2026.

Entries must be submitted before 5 p.m. on February 28th and cannot feature faces, trademarked elements, derogatory or inappropriate material, or raw images.

For more information, visit bit.ly/graphicdesignCOF26. To enter, visit bit.ly/freeportdesign26.





FEBRUARY LUNCH & LEARN ON “THE RISE AND FALL OF THE WESTERN AS AN ART FORM AND MORAL MESSENGER IN THE US”

The Senior Resource Center invites the public to attend a free lunch & learn with Dr. Andy Dvorak on “The Rise and Fall of the Western as an Art Form and Moral Messenger.” The event begins at noon on February 12th in the activity room of the SRC building.

The program focuses on how the Western genre of books, radio, and film helped shape the values and ideals of Americans for over 100 years.

This event is free to attend, but registration is encouraged. Participants are welcome to bring a sack lunch to enjoy while taking in the presentation.

To register, please call (815) 235-9777.

LECTURES IN AMERICAN HISTORY AT THE FREEPORT PUBLIC LIBRARY

If you want to hear more from Dr. Dvorak, you can also attend his free presentation at 6:30 p.m. at the Freeport Public Library on February 12th. There, Dr. Dvorak will be presenting on Know-Nothingism: Anti-Immigrant Movements in US History.

This presentation is part of the library’s Lectures in American History series. The series continues on February 17th with Mike Banghart’s lecture on the Battle (or war) of the Toledo Strip. And then on February 26th, Martin Quirk will present on More than a River: Washington’s Crossing of the Delaware River and its Importance in American History.

All of these lectures are free and open to the public and take place at 6:30 p.m. in the meeting room of the Freeport Public Library.



FHS SPEECH TEAM TO PUT ON PERFORMANCE OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

The community is invited to come out to Freeport High School tonight at 7 p.m., February 5th, to see award-winning performances by members of the Freeport High School Speech Team.

“The Buzz” is an annual showcase put on by the Freeport Speech Team as both an opportunity for students to perform as well as a fundraiser for sending students to the state level competition.

The showcase starts at 7 p.m. tonight, February 5th, in room 228 of Freeport High School. Donations will be accepted in person.

HCC ANNOUNCES AUDITIONS FOR SUMMERSET

Highland Community College has announced auditions for the 51th Summer set show: The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee.

This show is well-known for its uproarious laughs and audience participation.

Auditions for the show will be held on Saturday, February 14th from 9:30 a.m. to 12 p.m. and again from 12:30 p.m. to 3 p.m.

Pre-registration is not required, but auditioners will be asked to complete an audition form upon arrival. For the audition itself, participants are encouraged to come with a short, prepared monologue of about 60 to 90 seconds. Auditions also include a brief choreography lesson and assessment, along with a singing portion.

The show itself will take place in mid-July.

For more information about the auditions, please visit <https://highland.edu/summerset/>.



IN CLOSING...

Before we close out this week's podcast, we remind you to check out the special weekly interview we posted this past Tuesday. Freepod host Alan Wenzel interviewed Dr. Jack Hermann about the lecture series on climate change being held at the Freeport Public Library. This series is intended to bring home the realities of how global climate change impacts our community in very real and very recognizable ways.

This coming Tuesday, Tim Connors talks with James Rivas, owner and operator of Pretzel City Barbershop. Tim and James discuss the unique culture that comes with barbershops in downtown areas, as well as what the future holds for this shop. That interview will be available starting at noon on Tuesday, February 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 also 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.

