



FREEPOD

The news you've been missing.

Hello and welcome to FREEPOD. I'm Tim Connors...

And I'm Alan Wenzel...

In this week's episode, the Catholic Diocese debates closing the Aquin Academy...

A local teacher gets honored by the state of Illinois...

And the Freeport Kiwanis gets ready to serve up some pancakes.

This is Freepod for February 26th, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

DIOCESE CONSIDERING CLOSING AQUIN ACADEMY

The Catholic Diocese of Rockford has sent a letter to alumni and current student families of the Aquin Academy, formerly Aquin High School, announcing that they are considering closing the academy out right.

According to the letter, the priests from four parishes supporting the school petitioned Bishop David J. Malloy asking that he cease operations. In response, the Bishop established a task force to explore options for the continuation or closure of Catholic education in Freeport.

The Diocese closed down Aquin High School in 2024 after years of enrollment decline and subsequent budgeting concerns.

Community members are being solicited for their input. You can email your thoughts to ctransier@rockford-diocese.org.



AQUIN
SCHOOLS

DEMOLITION BID APPROVED FOR OLD HOLIDAY INN



An abandoned hotel once operating as a Holiday Inn, a Ramada Inn, and then the Grand Victoria Hotel is now one step closer to demolition.

The building, located at 1300 E. South St. in Freeport, has been condemned since 2017, but due to long-running legal battles, the structure has stood and rapidly deteriorated ever since. However, at the city council meeting on February 17th, Director of Community and Economic Development Gertrude Heimerdinger announced that the city has accepted a bid for demolition of the property.

The demolition bid, awarded to Alber & Sons Earthworks, was noted as considerably lower than initial estimates.

While the demolition has been approved due to public safety concerns, the property is still owned by the pri-

vate entity; although the city is actively seeking ownership through the courts.

FREEPORT AWARDED ENROLLMENT IN DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION PROGRAM

Freeport has been selected as one of four cities nationwide to join the 2026 Recast Leaders cohort — a program focused on downtown revitalization and economic resilience.

Freeport’s effort will be led by the Greater Freeport Partnership in collaboration with the City of Freeport. The ten-month program begins February 18 and focuses on boosting small-scale manufacturing to fill vacant storefronts and strengthen local businesses.

We spoke with Katie Gentz, Main Street manager, and she said the program offers tremendous opportunities for the future of downtown Freeport.

“What our initial goal is to really what can we see for our downtown to help sell some storefronts? You know, we do have some vacancies that are available. And what could be some possibilities that could enter into those storefronts? Right now, we’re at the beginning stages of really trying to figure out what is it that downtown Freeport needs. We would love to fill it with local people, but at the same time, if there’s another business that’s successful in other communities and they want to build off and have a second or third location, why isn’t Freeport the next stop for them?”



STEPHENSON COUNTY SHERIFF’S OFFICE GIVES OUT AWARDS

Stephenson County Sheriff Steve Stovall has announced his office’s 2025 Employee Awards.

Lieutenant Mike Backus was named Manager of the Year, while SVU Investigator Koryn Brickson received Deputy of the Year. Jacob Hinde received the Corrections Officer of the Year honors, and Social Service Administrator Erica Erickson was given the Civilian Employee of the Year award. Deputy Jordan Brickson received the Aggressive and Criminal Enforcement, or A.C.E. Award.

Special recognition was also given to Deputy Matthew Carpenter for his role in saving a dog from a partially ice-covered Willow Lake in December.

Congratulations to all of the winners of this year’s awards.

CITY COMPLETES LEAF CLEANUP

City crews took advantage of “false spring” this past week to complete leaf pick-up for the season.

Listeners should remember that right in the midst of the regular leaf pick-up schedule last fall, our region was hit with an early snow dump that made completion of regular operations impossible. However, as the weather shifted, city crews took back to the streets to pick up the leaf debris that had previously been covered by snow and ice.

Regular leaf pick-up will begin again in the fall.



VENDOR SPACE STILL AVAILABLE!

STEPHENSON CO. HOME SHOW

Contractors Improvement Home Services

GREATER FREEPORT PARTNERSHIP

SATURDAY, MARCH 14
Free Admission
10 AM - 3 PM

Freeport Masonic Temple Ballroom

Meet and discuss your next project with local experts and professionals!

Relax. Explore. Belong.

STEPHENSON COUNTY HOME SHOW LOOKING FOR VENDORS

The Stephenson County Home Show is coming back for another year and they are looking for vendors to fill the Freeport Masonic Temple.

Any local business looking to network with homeowners and other contractors in the region can sign up to be a vendor. The Greater Freeport Partnership touts the event as a great opportunity to meet residents planning projects, build customer relationships, and boost your visibility.

To sign up as a vendor for the home show, please email mjoyner@greaterfreeport.com.

TESSA JANECKE WINS GOLD

Orangeville native and current Penn State star Tessa Janecke is bringing home Olympic gold.

Janecke and the rest of the US Women’s Olympic Hockey Team made history this week with a phenomenal undefeated performance throughout the games that culminated in a thrilling overtime victory over Team Canada in sudden death.

Throughout the entire Olympic games, Team USA only gave up 2 goals in 7 games, with Janecke racking up assists on 5 of the team’s 33 total goals.

Congratulations to Tessa and the rest of Team USA!



OREGON TEACHER RECEIVES HONORS



An Oregon Elementary School teacher, and Freeport native, has been named the Northwest Regional Teacher of the Year by the Illinois State Board of Education.

Courtney Gaulrapp, a 5th grade teacher at Oregon, was nominated by the Oregon Community Unit School District for her excellence in creating a student-centered learning environment which produces consistent student learning outcomes well above average.

We spoke with Courtney and she says that the award is fulfilling, but also very humbling.

"I guess it just shows me that, like, hard work pays off. I'm constantly that person who wants to do better and wants to keep changing. So this just kind of proved to myself that, like I am doing the right thing.

I feel not deserving too, because I feel like every one of my coworkers deserves this. Like, I wish it could be a group award."

Highlighting the reasons for the award, Gaulrapp told us that the award also reinforces her belief in continual improvement.

"It's boring for me to do the same lesson every single year. I obviously have to teach the same curriculum, but each student in each class is completely different. So you have to adapt your teaching style for the the students. So I think it's super important to learn new strategies, new techniques and keep adapting your, your, teaching for your students."

Gaulrapp will be officially recognized at an awards banquet in April.

FRIENDS OF THE PECATONICA RIVER LOOKING FOR NEW BOARD MEMBERS

Community members who have an interest in preserving, protecting, and fostering the vitality of the Pecatonica River are invited to join the Friends of the Pecatonica River Foundation board.

The organization is best known for its annual Pecatonica River cleanup event, but has also contributed picnic tables, water fountains, and canoe/kayak launches along the river.

If you're interested in learning more about the Friends of the Pec, or in joining their board, please visit pecriver.org.



PRITZKER ANNOUNCES NEW STATE BUDGET



Illinois Governor JB Pritzker is proposing a mostly status-quo budget as the state waits on federal court rulings and braces for possible funding cuts from the Trump administration.

The governor's \$56 billion spending plan for fiscal year 2027 begins July first. That's an increase of 1.6 percent — with most new spending going to required costs like education and pensions. Outside those areas, spending would grow by just half a percent.

Revenue for the state is projected at \$56.1 billion, a \$600 million increase in revenue, including a proposed new tax on large social media companies.

Funding for K-through-12 schools would rise by \$305 million, while college funding would increase one percent, and MAP grants would remain flat.

ILLINOIS SCHOOLS CHALLENGED BY SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST SHORTAGE

Over the past year, the Trump administration has canceled more than 10 million dollars in federal grants meant to help Illinois schools hire mental health professionals.

For some schools, the shortage of school mental health professionals is reaching a crisis point. National guidelines call for one psychologist per 500 students. But in many rural districts, it's closer to one per one thousand.



A grant through Northern Illinois University is training current teachers to become school psychologists, but that funding was also terminated. Illinois and other states are suing to restore more than two million dollars tied to the program.

Two additional grants supporting the Illinois State Board of Education were also cut.

A federal judge has ruled the cancellations unlawful, but schools are still waiting to learn whether the money — and new mental health hires — will return.



JOYS OF GARDENING PROGRAM THROUGH U OF I EXTENSION

Now that we've had a taste of warmer weather, many in our community are ready to get back to gardening. And the U of I Extension Office has programming to help.

On February 28th, the U of I Extension Office will hold the 27th Annual Joys of Gardening event on the campus of Highland Community College. The day kicks off with a keynote by Kathi and Michael Rock about how you can maximize your garden for hummingbird visitors. After that, participants can choose workshops to attend during two scheduled sessions.

**UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
EXTENSION**

Registration is \$15 per person and can be done online or by phone at (815) 235-4125 or <https://registration.extension.illinois.edu/start/joys-of-gardening-2026>

HCC CHAMBER ENSEMBLE CONCERT

Highland Community College is holding a free instrumental Chamber Ensemble concert on Sunday, March 1st.

The event begins at 3 p.m. and will be held in the Ferguson Fine Arts Center.



SRC LAUNCHES SCIENCE SERIES FOR OLDER ADULTS

The Senior Resource Center is launching a new interactive science series designed especially for older adults.

“Science Spot” begins March 2nd and will be held the first Monday of each month from 1 to 2:30 p.m. The hands-on classes will be led by Corinne Sosso, a science educator and frequent guest on WIFR’s Morning Blend.

The first session, “Celestial Ballet – Lunar Eclipse,” will prepare participants for March’s total lunar eclipse, exploring moon phases and how the sun, moon and Earth align.

Cost is five dollars per class at the Senior Resource Center on East Stephenson Street. To register, call (815) 235-9777.

UNITED WAY OF OGLE COUNTY HOSTING ADULT PROM

The United Way of Ogle County invites the community to A Night in Hollywood, an adult prom benefitting the work of the United Way.

The prom, happening Friday, March 6th at the Stronghold Center in Oregon, will feature heavy appetizers, a live DJ, a photo booth, a silent auction, and more.

Costs of the event are \$50 per individual or \$95 per couple. Entire tables of 8 are also available for \$350.



For more information, or to get your tickets, please visit <https://uwogle.org/a-night-in-hollywood-adult-prom/>.



KIWANIS CLUB PANCAKE & SAUSAGE DAY IS HERE

The Freeport Kiwanis Club has started selling tickets for their 72nd Annual Pancake & Sausage Day. The event is a cafeteria style service where residents can get a hearty breakfast while support a good cause.

The Kiwanis Club donates thousands back in to the community every year, with most of those donations coming from funds collected during events like this one.

Pancake and Sausage Day is March 7th and runs from 7 to 11:30 a.m. The

cost is \$12 per individual, or a booster pack is \$120 for 11 tickets.

To get your tickets, visit <https://www.zeffy.com/en-US/ticketing/72nd-annual-freeport-kiwanis-pancake-and-sausage-day>.

IN CLOSING...

Before we sign off this week, we'd like to remind you to check out this past week's special interview. I spoke to Wagner House owner operator Bill Green. Bill and I talked through the origins of the beloved downtown business as well as what they have in store for the future of Freeport.

This coming Tuesday, the featured interview is my conversation with Highland Community College President Chris Kuberski. I sat down with Chris to get an update on the college's proposed athletics and learning facility. That interview will be available starting at noon on Tuesday, March 3rd. 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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