



FREEPOD

The news you've been missing.

Hello and welcome to FREEPOD. I'm Matt Mullen...

And I'm Amy Fisher...

In this week's episode, Freeport could be getting its first marijuana dispensary...

Andrew Chesney proposes a bill that would classify transgender identity as a mental illness...

And the League of Women Voters give us all a chance to meet the candidates.

This is Freepod for February 19th, 2026 and here is the news that you've been missing...

FREEPORT COULD GET ITS FIRST MARIJUANA DISPENSARY

The Pretzel City is preparing to be the newest Illinois town to welcome its own marijuana dispensary. According to filings made with the city, a company has applied for a special use permit to open a dispensary in Freeport.

The process has a long way to go before any potential dispensary could open, but the public will have their chance to speak in favor or against such a permit at the zoning board of appeals meeting held at 5:30 p.m. on March 5.



Currently, the closest marijuana dispensaries to Freeport are in Rockford and South Beloit, requiring Freeport residents to travel 30 to 45 minutes away. The state of Illinois has collected around \$2 billion from taxes on marijuana since 2020, when the state legalized recreational marijuana use for adults.



FREEPORT LIBRARY NAMES NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The Board of Trustees at the Freeport Public Library has selected a new executive director following a nationwide search.

Emily Schaub will take the role February 23, succeeding Ashley Huffines, who resigned in November.

Schaub most recently served as teen services manager and interim co-director at the Peru Public Library and has also worked in Utica and Alpha Park, while serving on the LaSalle Public Library board.

Trustee Alan Greene says Schaub aims to make the library a true center of the community. Library board president Mary Kaufman told us that Schaub not only wants to bring the community to the library, but she shows a clear interest in going out in to this community as well.

(AUDIO CLIP)

TOP COP AND TOP FIREFIGHTER AWARDED BY CITY OF FREEPORT

The city of Freeport gave out honors for the Police Officer and Firefighter of the Year recently. Detective Justin Holden was named as both Officer of the Year and City Employee of the Year, while EMS Coordinator Adam Holtz was named Fire Department Member of the Year.



When given the awards by Chief Jacquelyn Frausto and City Manager Rob Boyer, Holden was described as being directly responsible for several key metrics that have helped improve safety in our community, as well as being a steady, calm and joyful force among his peers.

Holtz was recognized for his integral role in setting up the department's new record management system, his positive attitude on the job, and his versatility as a firefighter, EMT, investigator, and instructor.

Congratulations to Detective Holden and Coordinator Holtz.

FPD REVEALS KEY FIGURES FOR 2025



The City of Freeport has released its 2025 Annual Report and the information from the police department deserves some focused attention.

Specifically, the city reported that more firearms were recovered last year than in 2024, but the amount of shots fired reported by the Shot Spotter devices were lower than 2024.

Freeport Police officers wrote more than 2,500 traffic citations and made 1,151 arrests, including 14 as a result of investigations by the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force.

APPLICATIONS OPEN FOR DOWNTOWN FAÇADE IMPROVEMENT GRANTS

Owners of downtown Freeport properties are being invited to apply for the new round of downtown façade improvement grants being offered by the city.

The grants are provided in recognition of the marked positive impact façade restorations can have on the economic health of downtown areas.

Individual grants are maxed out at \$15,000 for a single project, with the total amount for all grants being budgeted at \$30,000. The deadline to apply is April 10 by 5 p.m.

Director of Community and Economic Development, Gertrude Heimerdinger, tell us that these grants are about a lot more than just aesthetics.

(AUDIO CLIP)



To apply for a downtown façade improvement grant, please go to <https://cityoffreeport.org/downtown-facade-improvement-grant-program-applications-now-open/>.

GFP NAMES A NEW CHAIR



The Greater Freeport Partnership has named Amy Baker as the new chair of their Board of Directors.

Baker has been on the GFP Board for 4 years; serving as vice-chair for the past two.

Along with serving on the GFP Board, Baker is also the President at Citizens State Bank. Baker has lived in the community for 47 years and says she values the networking opportunities provided by Greater Freeport Partnership events.

YMCA RECEIVES GRANT FOR FREE CPR TRAINING

The Family YMCA of Northwest Illinois has received an \$8400 grant from the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois to expand family safety training in the region.

The funding will provide free American Red Cross CPR, AED, and first-aid classes for up to 144 parents and caregivers with children under two years old.

YMCA staff member Alex Unis says that training proved lifesaving when his young son began choking at home.

Registration for winter and spring safety classes is now open through the YMCA. Call the YMCA at (815) 235-9622.



FEMA REJECTS ILLINOIS REQUESTS FOR DISASTER RELIEF



FEMA

Illinois Governor JB Pritzker says the Trump administration has denied federal disaster relief for severe summer storms that flooded neighborhoods across Illinois.

The state requested individual assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency after heavy August rains impacted more than 400-thousand residents in five counties, overwhelming sewers in parts of Chicago and nearby

suburbs.

FEMA says additional federal aid is not warranted.

Pritzker calls the decision politically motivated and says thousands of families are still dealing with mold, sewage damage, and health risks.

The White House defends the denial, saying disaster funds must be used carefully to support—rather than replace—state recovery efforts.

ILLINOIS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS FACE CHALLENGES

Illinois parents seeking day care, preschool, or early intervention often face a confusing, fragmented system. Governor J.B. Pritzker has created the new Illinois Department of Early Childhood to bring those services under one roof, but a new report from The Civic Federation says major challenges remain.



Nearly three-quarters of Illinois counties are considered child-care deserts, and licensed providers can serve only about a third of young children. Low pay and staffing shortages continue to drive high turnover, even as state funding has increased in recent years.

Officials also warn federal policy threats from the Trump administration could make care less affordable.

State leaders say improving access to early learning is critical, as fewer than one in three Illinois children arrive at kindergarten fully ready to learn.



ANDREW CHESNEY INTRODUCES BILL TO DEFINE TRANSGENDER IDENTITY AS MENTAL ILLNESS

State Senator Andrew Chesney of Freeport is promoting legislation that would classify transgender identity as a mental illness under Illinois' Mental Health Code, saying the goal is to steer people toward treatment rather than medical transition.

Chesney argues expanded mental-health resources are needed, pointing to high rates of depression and suicide cited in research from the Trevor Project. He acknowledges the bill is likely to face strong opposition in the Democratic-led legislature.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the handbook used by the American Psychiatric Association, only describes the distress of feeling gender dysphoria as potentially requiring clinical care, but not transgender identity in and of itself.

EARLY VOTING IN ILLINOIS IS UNDERWAY

Early voting is now underway across Illinois, giving voters a chance to cast a ballot before Election Day. Residents can vote in person at designated early-voting locations in their county, with many sites offering evening and weekend hours.

To participate, voters must be registered and bring a valid form of identification if required at their location. Registration is also available at many early-voting sites.

Officials with the Illinois State Board of Elections encourage voters to check polling locations, hours, and sample ballots online before heading out. Early voting continues through the day before the election, providing a convenient option to avoid long lines and ensure every vote is counted.



**LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS HOSTING A MEET THE CANDIDATES
EVENT**



Before you cast that early ballot, the League of Women Voters of Freeport, along with the Freeport NAACP and Delta Theta Sigma Sorority invite you to meet the candidates.

On February 24th at 6 p.m. at the Freeport Public Library, all candidates on the ballot for the March 17th primary have been invited to come introduce themselves to the crowd, as well as field questions from the audience.

SRC HOSTING “PROFESSIONAL WOMEN, FIRSTS”

The Senior Resource Center will host a free historical program, “Professional Women, Firsts,” on February 26th in partnership with Women of Courage & Commitment.



The presentation features live portrayals of trail-blazing women, including journalist Nellie Bly, true-crime author Ann Rule, business leader Anna Sutherland Bissell, sailor Mary Patten, and Civil War surgeon Mary Walker.

The event runs from 2 to 3:15 p.m., is open to the public, and registration is encouraged due to limited seating.

ADVENTURES IN THE BIG SKY READ ALOUD



The YWCA of Northwestern Illinois invites children from 3 to 5 to come to their Adventures in the Big Sky read aloud Thursday, February 26th at 5:30 p.m in Rockford.

The event encourages kids to pretend to be birds, astronauts, or even northern lights explorers as they come together in exploring the wonders of the night sky.

Space is limited, so reservations are strongly encouraged. For reservations, visit www.surveymonkey.com/r/NJ6TRJK.

SAVANNA FARM REPRESENTED DURING THE SUPER BOWL

A local farm is getting national attention in this year’s Super Bowl commercial for Lay’s Potato Chips.

The ad, “Last Harvest,” was inspired by Neumiller Farms in Savanna, where the Neumiller family has grown potatoes since 1955.

Now a third-generation operation led by Tom and Katie Neumiller, the farm produces thousands of acres of potatoes each year.

The national spotlight highlights the role of family farms and small-town agriculture in putting food on America’s tables.



IN CLOSING...

Before we sign off this week, we'd like to remind you to check out this past week's special interview. Freepod host Alan Wenzel spoke with Beth Johnson and Marci White from Regional Office of Education 8. Beth and Marci highlighted the value and background of that office's Family Enrichment Program and how it serves parents in Stephenson, Jo Daviess, and Carroll counties.

This coming Tuesday, Tim Connors will share his conversation with Bill Green, owner operator of The Wagner House in downtown Freeport. That interview will be available starting at noon on Tuesday, February 24th. 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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