



GREATER FREEPORT PARTNERSHIP

OUR MISSION

The Greater Freeport Partnership is a catalyst for dynamic economic growth fostering an inclusive environment where businesses thrive, and our community prospers. We are dedicated to nurturing new opportunities while enriching the fabric of Freeport and Stephenson County.

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The Greater Freeport Partnership devoted most of the fourth quarter to the crucial role economic opportunities provide to Stephenson County in supporting local businesses, enhancing tourism, and creating programs for future investment in Freeport and Stephenson County. Taking the time to listen and understand the needs of businesses in the community is essential to ensuring future growth which is why Partnership staff **met with 18 businesses** to learn about their needs, **conducted a county-wide small business survey**, **met with 11 entrepreneurs**, celebrated **five ribbon cutting events**, hosted **nine membership events**, and gained the support of **ten new members**. Engaging with the current and future business community is at the heart of all efforts at the Greater Freeport Partnership.

BUSINESS SURVEY RESULTS

The Partnership opened a business survey on September 11 for all businesses in Stephenson County. Regardless of size, membership, or industry, businesses were asked to address success and challenges within their industry and the local area. The survey received 174 responses by October 31. Key findings include:

84% STABLE OR GROWING
Responses from business owners reported their company was either stable and/or expanding its prospects.

TOP ADVANTAGES TO DOING BUSINESS

When asked to identify the top advantages to doing business in Freeport and Stephenson County, 39 percent listed the Greater Freeport Partnership services and network, and 32 percent listed their location in northwest Illinois as advantages.

DISADVANTAGES TO DOING BUSINESS

When asked to identify disadvantages to doing business in Freeport and Stephenson County, 49 percent listed taxes, and 41 percent listed workforce availability as disadvantages.

In response to these results, the Partnership planned a number of educational and business support programs in the fourth quarter of 2024 and into 2025. The Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES) presented on the Illinois Workshare Program to help employers who are facing a decline in business as an alternative to layoffs. In February 2025, a program featuring advantages of the Foreign Trade Zone will be offered to discuss the cost savings program for businesses that import goods.

BUSINESS RETENTION & EXPANSION

We engage with existing businesses on a continuous basis to better understand their needs. We identify solutions to challenges, and connect businesses with resources, and celebrate and promote their successes.

BUSINESS RETENTION VISITS

Eighteen visits in fourth quarter:

- Danfoss
- Seaga
- Berner Food & Beverage
- M45
- Savencia
- Super 8
- West Motel
- La Guera
- Full Circle Cafe
- Hershey Insurance
- Townhouse Motel
- La Patrona Cantina & Grill
- The Meadows
- YMCA Children's Center
- Surf Internet
- Ameresco
- Pretzel City Transit
- Landmark Restaurant

Common issues amongst businesses are:

- Downturn in ag markets lead to contraction in that sector and rippled throughout machinery industry.
- Change in federal administration causing nervousness for future tariffs and other legislative actions.



MEMBERSHIP EVENTS

- Three Women's Enrichment Network (WEN) meetings
- Five ribbon cutting events:
 - Surf Internet - new business
 - Freeport School district Fitness Court - new addition
 - Castor Home Health - new location
 - HCC Mobile Medical Lab - new program
 - HCC/CNC Manufacturing Lab - new addition
- Three Rise N' Shine breakfasts at YMCA, Oakley Courts, and Highland Community College
- Three Business After Hours at Hilldale Deli, Country Inn & Suites, and The Exchange hosted by the Greater Freeport Partnership.



The partnership between the Greater Freeport Partnership, the Academies of Freeport High School, and Highland Community College has played a vital role in enhancing workforce development and connecting local youth with job opportunities in Stephenson County. Initiatives such as the Career Expo and organized meetings with local manufacturers have improved community relationships and offered Freeport High School students valuable insights into real-world careers. This collaboration directly aligns with the Career Academy's mission to prepare students for success by establishing meaningful pathways to local employment and strengthening the connections between education and industry.

- Thedford F. Jackson, College & Career Academies Coach, Freeport High School



WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS

We connect and retain workers with job opportunities that build a talented workforce pipeline and create a community where workers feel welcome and connected.

Work in the fourth quarter included collaboration with our educational partners to connect area students to local employers to become aware of local career and job opportunities. The Partnership promoted these events and made individual asks to employers to participate.

October 17 was Manufacturing Day which involved 120 high students touring local manufacturing facilities, viewing Highland Community College (HCC) Industrial Technology labs and engaging with 16 companies at an employer expo.

In November, over 500 area high school students engaged with 43 employers at the HCC, Freeport High School Career & Job Fair. The Partnership helped coordinate the event, invite employers, and created a summary sheet of employment opportunities by sector for high school students.

In December, HCC hosted the NWIL Ag Industry Expo which showcased local opportunities for high school and college students.

Highland Community College was very grateful to have Greater Freeport Partnership working alongside us as we prepared and executed our 3rd annual Northwest Illinois Agriculture Industry Expo on December 6, 2024. They were eager and willing to communicate directly to their agriculture employer network about our event, and they also invested a significant amount of time helping us refine and update our invitation list. As a result of our efforts, 48 agricultural employers and over 150 students attended this event, with some students securing interviews and job offers on the spot. Additionally, GFP set up a table at the event engaging students with valuable information about their resources and services, particularly for aspiring agricultural entrepreneurs. GFP is a wonderful asset to our community, and we look forward to continuing to collaborate with them in the future!

- Monica Pierce, Agriculture Instructor at Highland Community College



WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS

CHILDCARE

Lack of childcare is not a unique problem to Freeport. We are looking at other communities that have created solutions and are seeing what we can take from their models that could work in Freeport.

- In October, we coordinated a tour of the Bright Minds Campus in Dubuque, IA with leadership of YMCA YCC and Amity Daycare to explore another model of childcare facility.
- We are working with area childcare agencies and Birth-to-Five to compile childcare data and the economic impacts. We will use this information to inform our businesses and partners of the many challenges our childcare shortage is creating for the workforce and beyond.



Amity has had the pleasure of collaborating with the Greater Freeport Partnership over the past year to delve deeper into childcare as a critical infrastructure issue. This partnership provided opportunities to explore innovative practices in other communities and participate in insightful tours. The Greater Freeport Partnership has been an invaluable resource, offering guidance and support throughout this journey. We deeply appreciate their efforts and the spirit of collaboration they bring to this important work. We look forward to continuing this partnership and working together to address the childcare desert.

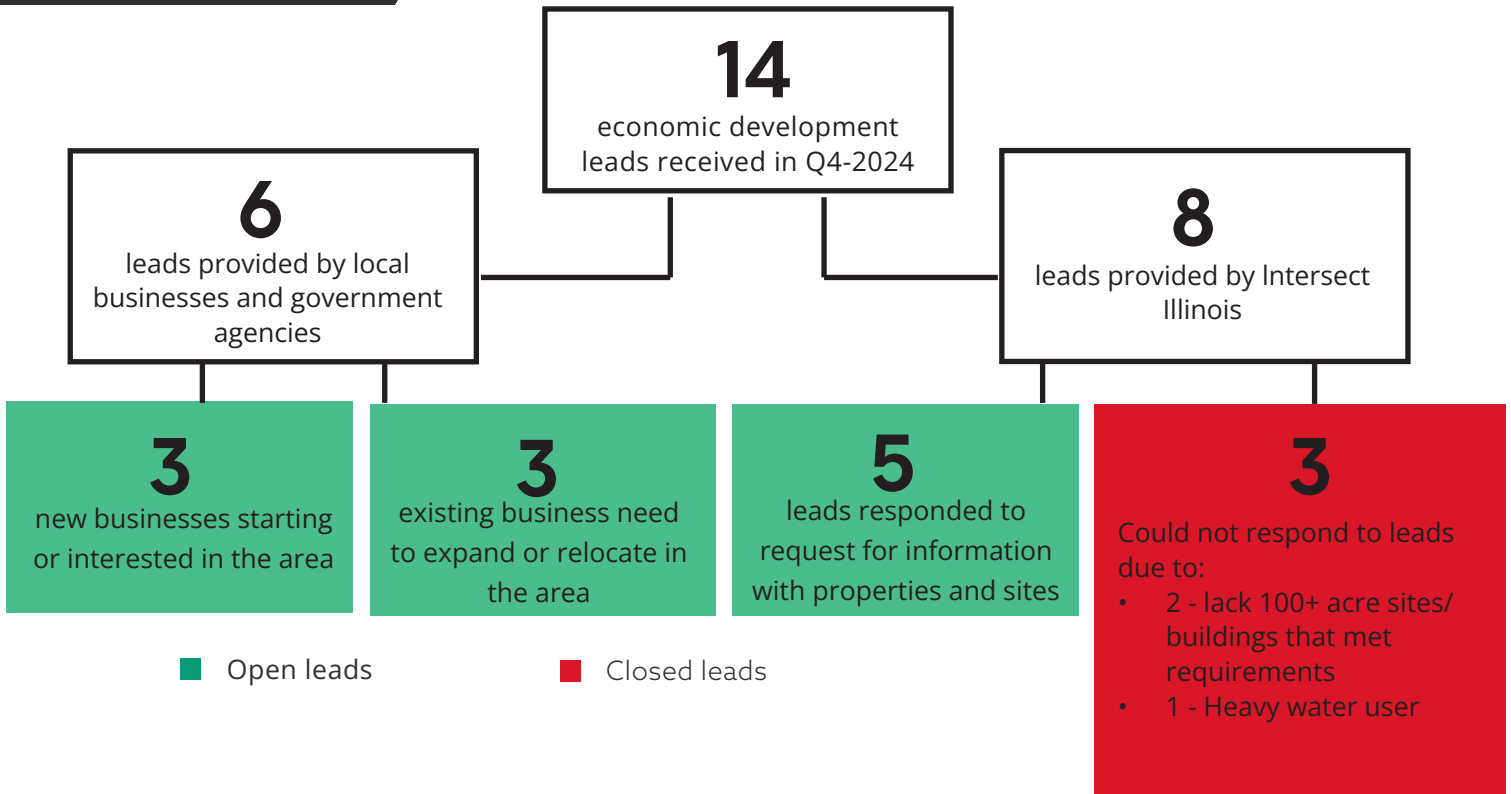
- Ashley Harms, Executive Director of Amity Daycare

HOUSING

Limited quality, affordable housing is a barrier to community growth and talent recruitment. Freeport and Stephenson County are not unique in their housing needs, as this is a national issue. However, locally the Partnership is tackling this issue by:

- Meeting with developers interested in small-scale in-fill housing developments in existing neighborhoods.
- New single-family development. The enterprise zone is a key incentive tool to help defray the cost of new construction. The Partnership created a residential enterprise zone development marketing sheet for further information on the program and to market to residential developers. To grow the zone and potentially open new areas for residential development, the Partnership is scheduling meetings with interested Stephenson County communities to discuss enterprise zone benefits and how inclusion in the zone could spur residential development.

NEW BUSINESS ATTRACTION & DEVELOPMENT



PARTNERSHIP MEMBERSHIP

MEMBER BREAKDOWN



- 243 Basic Members
- 113 Not-for-profits, Courtesy & Individuals
- 42 Partnership-Level & Government Partners

NEW MEMBERS

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Joined the Partnership in the fourth quarter of 2024.



MEMBER RETENTION RATE

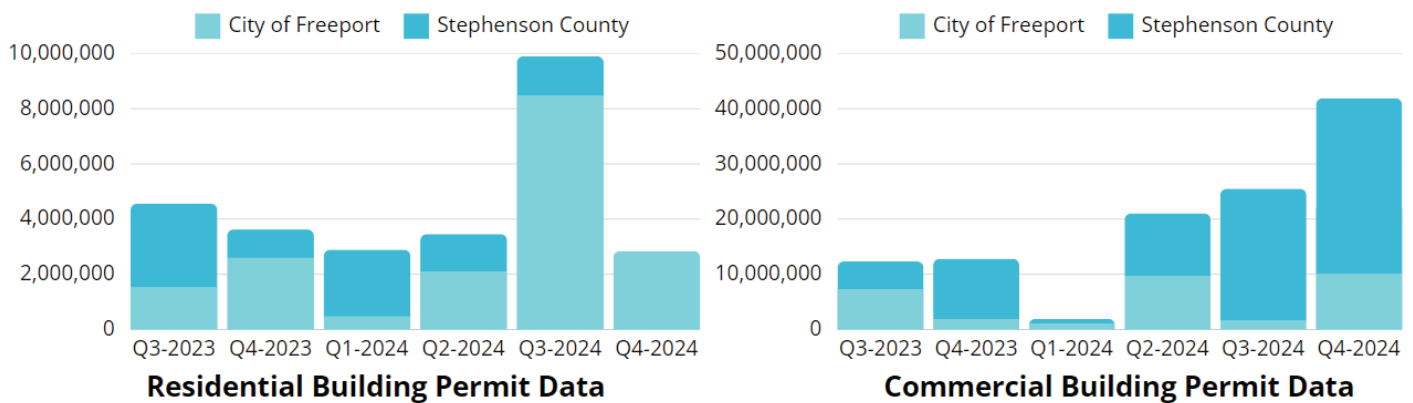
96.7%

In the fourth quarter of 2024, nearly all members renewed or upgraded their memberships with an overall retention rate of 97.5 percent so far this year.

NEW BUSINESS ATTRACTION & DEVELOPMENT

We understand and promote the assets of Freeport and Stephenson County and build on the strength of our existing businesses and workforce to attract new businesses. We make information available about the land, facilities, infrastructure, and resources easily accessible and share it intentionally and strategically.

4Q-2024 BUILDING PERMIT DATA



- The Partnership encouraged participation in IL Rep. John Cabello's International Business Forum on December 12. Five Stephenson County businesses attended to hear more about how they can work with global partners to increase their market.
- More than **\$5.1 million in investment utilized the Northwest Illinois Enterprise Zone in the fourth quarter**. All four projects (three commercial, and one multi-family residential) are within the City of Freeport. The largest project of \$5 million is the renovation of Lincoln Towers.
- The **Upstairs Downtown toolkit was created** to address investment barriers for current and future property owners. The three primary areas identified by current owners included: difficulty accessing capital, understanding and interpreting building codes, and marketing spaces to be filled.
- As a follow up to the 2024 BASE Camp series, **two additional classes were offered in the fourth quarter** to further address financial statements and how to use them, and marketing and social media use for small businesses. These classes were well attended and a great effort to promote the 2025 BASE Camp series that begins on January 28, 2025.

“BASE Camp absolutely exceeded my expectations and helped me to not only obtain valuable resources and information, but also get acquainted with individuals who are doing what I am. I listened to professionals who shared the “whats and hows” of being a business owner, and I learned how these professionals are capable and passionate to help manage my business in areas that I need that support. There was so much information offered that I didn't have before, action items I hadn't even considered previously, and hard truths that were easier to look at and work through because of the support in the group setting. There was always an overall feeling of empowerment and inspiration at each conclusion. Bill was an excellent facilitator. Everyone who contributed their time, energy, and talents to BASE Camp should consider this round a wildly fabulous success.

- Kate Frautschy, BASE Camp participant

ENTREPRENEUR SUPPORT

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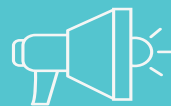
Entrepreneurs assisted in various stages of the business development process.

MARKETING THE REGION



We help prospective businesses and employees learn about the cultural, entertainment, and natural amenities to show the Greater Freeport region is a great place to live and work. Our communications are focused, intentional, and evaluated for impact.

- The Partnership attended and supported community activities such as the Lena Hometown Christmas, Pearl City Lighted Parade and Santa Breakfast, as well as promoting many others. Thanks to the support of a sponsor, the Partnership invested in a reusable lighted frame for attendees to use at each event to help identify the event to those who organized each.
- The Partnership compiled and designed a 12-month calendar to be distributed for free to local residents. The calendar was paid for with advertising from local businesses and events. Each organization could purchase a date on the calendar. The goal is to continue to make residents aware of the great things happening throughout the year with a day-to-day reminder. Eight hundred calendars were printed and distributed at local banks, FHN, Partnership events, and the Senior Expo.
- The 2025 Community Guide is nearly ready for print with distribution expected in March. The guide features information on area events, attractions, business listings, community highlights, and advertisements for local businesses.



The Partnership, its projects, and volunteers were honored by Illinois Main Street for Volunteer of the Year (Tim Connors), Volunteer Recognition (Pretzel Pickers), Promotion Approach (Rediscover Your Downtown), Economic Vitality (BASE Camp), and Organizational Approach.

2024 QUALITY OF LIFE EVENTS

- Wine & Witches Boo-tique Walk sold 75 VIP bags and welcomed nearly 300 shoppers and 13 participating businesses on October 11 in downtown Freeport.
- Mistletoe Walk was held as a one-day shopping and holiday event on November 23. Survey results from downtown businesses **reported more sales revenue and more pedestrian traffic than the event had in a two-day event in 2023.**
- The Christmas Wizards Concert sold nearly 600 tickets to a fantastic holiday show at the Freeport Masonic Temple on December 12. Proceeds benefit City of Freeport holiday decorations for future seasons.

VISITOR ATTRACTION

We engage and attract visitors to experience the cultural, natural, and historic places that are found in Freeport and Stephenson County. We engage and communicate with people who plan events, and manage places where visitors stay, eat, play, and visit to learn about their needs, develop solutions, and align our messaging for visitors to come to our community for a day or for a stay.

The Partnership hosted our annual Tourism Partner Meeting at Lena Brewing Company on November 14. Topics for discussion included highlights of audience demographics from the 2024 Choose Your Adventure campaign, hotel occupancy challenges and successes, event highlights, the importance of attracting groups, and future attraction expansion.

Most visitor attractions in Stephenson County are run by dedicated non-profit organizations and volunteers that face funding constraints for new projects and additions. The Partnership has been diligent to communicate grant opportunities to attractions as they become available and offer multiple options to help apply. One local attraction applied for two different funding opportunities with support from Partnership staff in the fourth quarter.



TOURISM & SHOP LOCAL CAMPAIGNS

The Choose Your Adventure campaign was wrapped up in October reaching over 650,000 viewers using Meta, YouTube and Google ads with engaging videos of shopping, family activities, dining, and attractions. The campaign was 50 percent funded by the Illinois Office of Tourism Marketing Partnership grant received by the Partnership.

In addition to the tourism campaign, the Partnership invested heavily into a "Shop Local for the Holidays" campaign to support spending in local businesses. Using a newly produced video, social media, billboards, print ads, radio advertising, and live interviews, audiences were encouraged to consider spending dollars locally and given links to do so.



2024 4th QUARTER OCCUPANCY

The Partnership continues to track the hotel occupancy of the three major hotels in Freeport but is engaging three additional hotels in Freeport for information to spur growth and investment. Hotel occupancy is a result of tourism efforts as well as business travel to the region.

According to Placer.ai, overall overnight visits to Stephenson County were 0.5 percent lower than 2023.

Hotel Occupancy Percentage for Q4-2024

