

Human Affairs and Racial Conciliation Commission
June 12, 2025

On this date, the Human Affairs and Racial Conciliation Commission held a meeting via video conference call beginning at 5:01 p.m.

Notice of this meeting was sent to all local news media.

Present: Co-Chair Jerome Harris, Carol Jackson, Carroll Frye, Tom Orth, Bonnie Cleaveland, Alvin Johnson, and Bob Simons.

Staff: Adrian Swinton, Melissa Cruthirds, Rebecca Dail, Katie Dahlheim, and Jasmine O'Neal recording.

1. Moment of Silence

The meeting was opened with a moment of silence led by Co-Chair Harris.

2. Public Comment Period

Max Sorgenfrey said she was speaking on behalf of the Charleston Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). She wanted to comment on the City's First Amendment ordinance. She said it felt like their protests were being pushed to places with less visibility. They also felt that the amendment included arbitrary clauses, such as those against temporary structures, which would keep protesters safe. She said the number of people gathered, which required a permit, was also low, at 24.

Allie Menegakis said she was an attorney and the Executive Director of South Carolina for Criminal Justice Reform. She had taken on 6 of the 7 protesters who were arrested earlier that year for disobeying a lawful order for not having a permit pro bono. In 2020, 40 people were arrested during a protest, and none of them filed a lawsuit, and many pled guilty and had their cases last for years before being dismissed. She said it was disgusting that the CPD was never held accountable for the excessive force they had shown towards those protesters. They needed to ask themselves how hard they were going to fight for their constitution and democracy. HARCC should express that excessive force and aggression were not okay. Also, if the City ever planned on cooperating with ICE, they needed to require them to comply with all CPD policies and procedures.

Mike Jones said he was also there with Charleston DSA. He asked them to help repeal the First Amendment demonstration ordinance. What united Americans was a strong belief in our rights and the ability to fight for those rights. The ordinance gave arbitrary discretion to the City to hinder people's free speech. It felt like it was the City's way to hinder and trap protesters.

Deborah Susay said she was concerned about the First Amendment demonstration permit. She said there had been multiple protests moved to Hampton Park when requesting a permit for a more visible location. She was reminded of a quote, "If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, did it make a sound?" She said the ordinance functioned against their First Amendment rights, and so did the need to obtain a permit to protest.

David Quick said he's lived in Charleston for 37 years, and his most impactful experience here was when thousands gathered to march across the Ravenel Bridge after the Mother Emanuel Church shooting. Something like that wouldn't be able to happen again under the ordinance. An organization he was a member of wanted to organize a similar protest, but every protest would be pushed into a corner of the City where they wouldn't be seen, and their permit requests were getting ignored.

Francis Baylotte said he was against the youth curfew that the City was trying to enact. The curfew would not solve the issue of violence or crime downtown. He said he thought Charleston was the best city in America and his daughter should be able to walk around downtown with the freedom he had as a teenager. There were nearly 30,000 teenagers in Charleston. Banning an entire demographic over the actions of a few was absurd. If law enforcement didn't have the resources, that should be addressed before enacting a curfew. From his experience, there were more unruly adults than teenagers downtown at night.

Marcus McDonald said he was the lead organizer of Charleston Black Lives Matter and was staunchly against the First Amendment ordinance. HARCC was formed out of protest. He said the idea of the ordinance amendment was sparked after a nonviolent protest against 2 officers who killed a man in a detention center, and the officers would not be charged. The City was continuously moving them out of public view. He said this country was created via protest.

Laura Perry said the First Amendment ordinance was unconstitutional. She urged the Commission to stand with democracy and not authoritarianism.

3. Approval of Minutes of 5/8/2025 Meeting

On a motion of Commissioner Simons, seconded by Commissioner Jackson, the Commission voted unanimously to approve the May 8, 2025 minutes.

Co-Chair Harris said the draft ordinance to renew the HARCC amendment was deferred at the last Community Development Committee (CD) meeting. HARCC would continue its work after the 3-year expiration of the ordinance until there was action by the City Council.

4. Community Survey Results Presentation by Rebecca Dail

Ms. Dail said she would review the highlights of the survey. They got 136 responses and visited 5 neighborhood associations. There were 8 categories that the survey questioned people on. She explained which issue in each category was deemed most important by citizens. In homelessness priorities, counseling services, which was closely followed by shelters for abused children/spouses, scored highest. In infrastructure priorities, improving streets/roads and drainage were tied. For the elimination of urban blight priorities, streetscape improvement scored the highest. Personal finance education scored the highest in employment and training priorities. In crime prevention priorities, neighborhood-based crime prevention scored highest. For community development priorities, public transportation and expand/improve parks/playgrounds topped the scores. Rehabilitation/modernization of public housing scored highest in housing priorities for

LMI persons. In economic development priorities, business creation/entrepreneurship and business expansion/retention were tied.

Commissioner Jackson said at the conference hosted by the Metro Chamber of Commerce that she learned that the program they launched in April was dependent on landlords to agree to accept a lease that would be case managed. They seemed optimistic about it, though.

Commissioner Johnson asked if there was any demographic information on the survey. Ms. Dail said she would have to ask the person who handled the results, but was sure they had that. Commissioner Johnson said it was important to analyze what communities were being surveyed while looking at the results. For example, they went to 5 neighborhood associations with this survey, meaning many people had homes. Their answers could be different from those of houseless individuals. Ms. Dail said they ran several surveys, some of which were specifically tailored towards unhoused individuals.

Co-Chair Harris asked what amount of the grant money for the 5-year plan would be used towards homelessness. Ms. Dail said she didn't have a specific number, but a good portion of their allocation would go to deposit and rental assistance, eviction prevention, and landlord and tenant negotiation. It focused more on preventative measures, though they did have a considerable amount set aside for possible rapid shelter.

Co-Chair Harris said the Charleston County school district had a goal of having 60.7% of all 5th graders reading at grade level, and there was slow progress being made towards that. The gap between white students and black students had also widened.

5. HARCC Manager's Update

Ms. Swinton said she had sent the Commissioners a few resources regarding her update. There was a Special CD meeting today, where they detailed where the grant money for the 5-year plan would be allocated.

6. Chairperson Comments

Co-Chair Harris said at the City Council meeting that the CPD indicated that they needed additional authority to intervene in situations with juveniles. The curfew was seen as a preventative measure. He said that prevention should take a broader look at the City and what they were doing. He asked Ms. Swinton to look into what work The Office for Children, Youth, and Families was doing around youth activities. He said there were a few programs for youth being run by other departments. As they enter the next budget cycle, the City should look at allocating funds towards intervention and coordination through positive youth development activities.

Commissioner Jackson said the lack of information reaching the citizens was a problem because while these programs exist, many weren't aware of them. She said HARCC should participate in helping grow awareness for these programs. The Housing Authority could also be a stakeholder in establishing such programs. She said it was unlikely that the curfew ordinance would fail to pass.

Therefore, HARCC should express that they did not like that this was a reactive solution instead of a proactive one.

Co-Chair Harris said it would be appropriate for the Mayor's Youth Commission to discuss the curfew. There were also discussions about doing a follow-up 6 months after the curfew was implemented to assess the impact. Commissioner Simons said he was also interested in hearing the thoughts of the Youth Commission on the curfew and said the demographic that would be hit the hardest by this ordinance was not the cause of unrest downtown. He said there had also been a steep decline in youth programs offered by the City as time went on. Commissioner Orth said it was insulting to force teenagers to stay inside every night, especially over the summer.

Commissioner Johnson said there was once a councilmember who said that King Street belonged to everyone. Charleston was one of the top tourist destinations in the world. He said he did not support the curfew and that the ramifications of the ordinance would disproportionately affect teenagers of color. When he was a teenager, King Street gave him and his friends a reprieve from the stress of school and let them experience the city.

Commissioner Cleaveland said the ordinance would likely be unequally enforced. She said it was easy to take away the freedoms of people who don't vote and were the most vulnerable, so it was their job to protect those groups.

Co-Chair Harris said there was a national youth violence strategy model that many cities had adopted. The idea was to build a network of positive youth development that could offramp youth violence. He said the police were involved in the model but not the center of it, mostly nonprofits, churches, and school systems.

On a motion of Commissioner Johnson, seconded by Commissioner Jackson, the Commission unanimously voted to go on the record expressing that they did not fully support the curfew ordinance.

Co-Chair Harris asked if anyone had thoughts on the First Amendment ordinance. Commissioner Cleaveland said the First Amendment gave the people the right to peacefully assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances. She said the City should value protesters' First Amendment rights to allow peaceful protests.

Commissioner Cleaveland asked if there was anyone present to advocate for the First Amendment rights of protesters while the public safety review a protest permit request. Ms. Dahlheim said it was her understanding that the request was reviewed, and there could be possible back and forth and an alternate location suggested, but that was all. Commissioner Cleaveland said that as the ramifications of the ordinance played out, there should be an investigation into any racially discriminatory practices in how it's enforced.

Commissioner Cleaveland said there were times when the police would corner a protest in a small area and tell them to disperse, whilst not allowing them to. Mr. McDonald said he has seen that behavior from the CPD.

Co-Chair Harris said the City's hate crime ordinance was enhanced recently, but there was a lack of data on hate crime incidents in the city.

Commissioner Jackson said that in light of recent and upcoming events, HARCC should go on record saying they go against the type of enforcement in the First Amendment ordinance. They should ask the City Council and the CPD to review the history of the First Amendment and the right to assembly. She said the purpose of the right to assemble was to call attention.

Commissioner Johnson said HARCC existed as a result of protest, and they should make a statement about ordinances like this one.

On a motion of Commissioner Jackson, seconded by Commissioner Cleaveland, the Commission voted unanimously to request City Council to review the ordinance in the context of the current challenges to First Amendment rights.

7. Adjournment

With there being no further business to discuss, the Commission adjourned at 6:40 p.m.

Jasmine O'Neal
Clerk of Council