

Human Affairs and Racial Conciliation Commission
February 13, 2025

On this date, the Human Affairs and Racial Conciliation Commission held a meeting via video conference call beginning at 5:00 p.m.

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

Present: Co-Chair Jerome Harris, Alvin Johnson (left at 5:42 p.m.), Carol Jackson, Carroll Frye, Tom Orth, Bonnie Cleaveland, Brandon Fish, and Bob Simons.

Staff: Adrian Swinton, Melissa Cruthirds, and Jasmine O'Neal recording.

1. Moment of Silence

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

2. Approval of Minutes of 1/9/2025 Meeting

On a motion of Commissioner Jackson, seconded by Commissioner Orth, the Commission voted unanimously to approve the January 9, 2025 minutes.

3. Manager's Update

Ms. Swinton updated the Commissioners on the terms of their membership.

She said the Racial Equity Core Group (RECG) had been working with the Office of Process and Service Improvement to analyze the results from the City employee survey. They wanted to improve communication to enhance job satisfaction and security.

The results of a Community Health Assessment report would be released soon. Also, CPD was accepting applications for the Citizens Police Academy.

Commissioner Jackson asked how the RECG decided who they would interview. Ms. Swinton said they were looking at previous surveys from 2019-2023 and seeing which departments needed more engagement.

Commissioner Fish asked about the Citizen's Police Academy. Ms. Swinton said the Academy was an opportunity for citizens to get a better understanding of CPD's operations.

Co-Chair Harris said there were a couple of Items on the City Council agenda that intersected with HARCC's work like the Minority & Women-Owned Business Enterprise Office report. The next Community Development meeting would include an update on the Rapid Housing project, and they would circulate the time and date of the meeting to the Commissioners.

He said the Council contemplated an amendment about allowing non-councilmembers to appoint people for Commissions if the Councilmember doesn't fill the seat. They also considered a staggered terms approach so everyone's terms on a Commission or Board didn't end at the same time.

4. Old Business

a. Human Affairs Working Group

Commissioner Cleaveland said the Working subcommittee had discussed the possibility of HARCC joining the South Carolina Human Affairs Commission and decided against it. She said due to changes in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practices at the Federal level and the State's potential to adopt those same practices, it would be risky to so closely associate with them at this time.

Commissioner Fish was asked to explain what Bill the State had introduced that brought the subcommittee to that conclusion. He said it was part of a national effort to eradicate DEI practices by the Federal government. The Federal government released an Executive Order for their agencies to review their policies and eliminate anything related to DEI, in name and practice. There were also threats to pull funding from organizations that continued to use DEI practices, HARCC potentially being one of them. The State introduced a bill to codify the Executive Order into law.

They were calling it the end of legal discrimination and the restoration of merit-based opportunity. Commissioner Fish said the Act would be an attack on the work HARCC does, they were created to address disparities. It also required training to avoid language that referred to race, gender, ethnicity, sex, etc. If passed, any recipient of State dollars would be required to follow those rules. As an example, the training his organization did on antisemitism, implicit bias, and hate wouldn't be able to get funding from the State.

If an organization was found in violation of their policies, they would have 180 days to change that, or the State would pull funding. Therefore, they didn't want to become affiliated with the State's Human Affairs Commission because HARCC could be censored. Commissioner Fish said he thought the Bill had a good chance of passing so they needed to prepare for that.

Co-Chair Harris and what the Bill number was and if it had passed the House yet. Commissioner Jackson said the number was 3927 and it hadn't come before the House yet.

Commissioner Johnson said he struggled to understand why DEI practices were under attack when disparity gaps still existed with it in place. Commissioner Cleaveland said some were also attacking DEIA, the 'A' meaning accessibility, so accessibility rights were at risk as well.

Commissioner Frye asked if antisemitism was something mentioned in the Bill. Commissioner Fish said no, it wasn't in the Bill or the Executive Order.

Commissioner Frye said he also didn't think they should join the State's Human Affairs Commission but for a different reason. He said he was always an advocate for smaller government and thought that what the Federal government was doing good. That the government had gotten too bureaucratic and should be reduced. He said he didn't agree with everything that had been done but if there were things temporarily halted that shouldn't have been they would be brought back.

Commissioner Johnson said if Commissioner Frye thought that rolling back policies on diversity, equity, and inclusion were good, he was in the wrong room. Commissioner Frye said he was prepared to resign if more people felt that way.

Co-Chair Harris called a Point of Order. He said they had to devise a strategy to understand what the City would do as it relates to DEI practices and analyze the potential impact.

Commissioner Jackson said she didn't see the termination of DEI practices as a cost-saving measure. She agreed that people voted for the government to be smaller and for things perceived as waste to be let go. However, dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion as a programmatic offering of the government under the guise of a cost-cutting measure was incorrect. She said targeting DEI had become a dog whistle to attempt to rid the country of the responsibility to address disparities that were statistically proven to be prevalent.

Commissioner Orth said he joined HARCC because they promoted equity, diversity, and inclusion. He said he was a college and high school teacher in the 1970s, a decade after the 3 major Civil Rights Acts and he saw that those Acts were under attack today.

Commissioner Fish said he worked for an organization that represented a politically diverse community, and it was difficult to unify them. He suggested that it would be easier to tackle these issues one at a time and outside of the context of political identities. He said it was important to have a diverse group of opinions in the Commission.

Commissioner Frye said he believed that the African American community in Charleston was treated terribly. He said it was an issue of people being misaligned on what they believe and how they should reach a certain goal. They should ask themselves what kind of opinions they want to hear in the Commission.

Co-Chair Harris said their collective opinions mattered because they shaped the advice they gave the City. He reminded them that HARCC was not a decision-making body, and their job was to alert City officials of the potential harm or benefit.

He said they could ask the Corporation Council about the potential impact of the passing of the Bill on parts of the City like the Office of Minority & Women-Owned Business Enterprise and the Flood Plan which had dimensions of environmental justice included in it.

5. Open Discussion

Co-Chair Harris said the Mayor and City Council issued a proclamation recognizing February as Black History Month.

Commissioner Jackson asked if the meeting about an African American burial ground was going to be at the Gaillard and was open to the public. Commissioner Simons said it would be at the Gaillard and was open to the public.

Commissioner Fish said the International African American Museum was doing a program at Mother Emmanuel Episcopal Church on Sunday.

6. Adjournment

There being no further discussion, the Commission adjourned at 6:08 p.m.

Jasmine O'Neal
Clerk of Council's Office