



COLUMBIA CITY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES TUESDAY, MAY 27, 2025

CALL TO ORDER

The Columbia City Council conducted a Special Called Meeting on Tuesday, May 27, 2025 at City Hall, (Council Chambers), 1737 Main Street, Columbia, South Carolina 29201. The Honorable Daniel J. Rickenmann, Mayor called the meeting to order at 3:04 p.m. and the following members were present: The Honorable Will Brennan, Mayor Pro-Tempore, The Honorable Aditi Bussells, The Honorable Tina N. Herbert, The Honorable Peter M. Brown, and The Honorable Tyler D. Bailey. The Honorable Edward H. McDowell, Jr. arrived at 4:05 p.m. Also present were Ms. Teresa Wilson, City Manager and Ms. Erika D. Moore Hammond, City Clerk. This meeting was advertised in accordance with the South Carolina Freedom of Information Act.

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

Upon a single motion made by Mr. Brennan and seconded by Mr. Bailey, City Council voted unanimously to amend the agenda by adding Executive Session for the receipt of legal advice relating to matters covered by attorney-client privilege pursuant to S.C. Code §30-4-70(a)(2) – Aid to Subdivisions and to enter into Executive Session for the Receipt of legal advice relating to matters covered by attorney-client privilege pursuant to S.C. Code §30-4-70(a)(2) – Aid to Subdivisions.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

Upon a motion made by Mr. Bailey and seconded by Mr. Brennan, Council voted unanimously to adjourn the Executive Session and reconvene the Special Called Meeting at 4:05 p.m.

INVOCATION

The Honorable Edward H. McDowell, Jr. offered the Invocation.

ORDINANCE - FIRST READING

1. Ordinance No.: 2025-043 - Repealing Ordinance No.: 2021-021 that Amended the 1998 Code of Ordinances of the City of Columbia, South Carolina, Chapter 14, Offenses and Miscellaneous Provisions, Article V, Offenses Involving Minors to add Division 4, Conversion Therapy for Minors Prohibited - *Deferred*



COLUMBIA CITY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES TUESDAY, MAY 27, 2025

Mayor Rickenmann said we are here today to begin discussions around Ordinance No.: 2021-021. He explained that in 2021, Senator Josh Kimbrell wrote a letter to Attorney General Alan Wilson asking him to have the City of Columbia repeal this ordinance. Senator Kimbrell wrote the same letter again in 2022. Senator Kimbrell also sponsored the Medical Ethics and Diversity Act. Since then, there was not any discussion until February 2025. He continued to outline important facts and dates that led to today's Special Called Meeting. He said the City of Columbia is being penalized and must identify another funding source if we do not repeal the ordinance.

Ms. Teresa Wilson, City Manager explained that there will be a public hearing, first reading and second reading of the budget. State law requires the city manager to present and advertise a balanced budget. On April 23, 2025, the decision was made to attach this very important discussion to the funding for the City of Columbia. The \$3.7 million in Aid to Subdivisions is a gaping hole in the general fund, which funds the core city functions. The hospitality tax dollars fund wonderful cultural events but that funding will be used instead of cutting core city functions or personnel. The proposed budget is 3% less than the current year's budget. There is no room in the general fund to replace \$3.7 million. This is not something that anyone planned for.

Mr. Bob Liming said your decisions are not easy. The former mayor voted against the adoption of this ordinance because he was concerned about the legal ramifications that might befall the city of Columbia. We do not need this ordinance. There are state and federal laws that protect all of us.

Mr. Rusty DePass said whatever efficacy you may believe exists in conversion therapy, save yourselves and the City of Columbia a lot of financial problems by repealing the ordinance.

Mother Caitlyn Keith, Episcopal Priest quoted the Book of Wisdom, Chapter 11. She said your leadership of this city is not God-ordained by your name but by every vote cast for your name. If we acquiesce on this, what authority will be arrested from our city next?

Mr. Sam Kennedy, Staff Attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of South Carolina apologized for the threats made by others. He said what seems to concern you is the pragmatics of whether this ordinance should continue and whether you have the authority to enact it. This is an act of financial legislative extortion. Where will it end if you capitulate?



COLUMBIA CITY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES TUESDAY, MAY 27, 2025

Ms. Christine Picozzi, Executive Director for the Harriet Hancock Center said I provided a letter with 429 signatures asking you maintain the ban. Last Tuesday, the center's advocacy coordinator provided a conversion therapy fact sheet. She invited the members of City Council to attend the upcoming First Sunday Supper on June 1, 2025. She asked City Council to maintain the ban on conversion therapy.

Mr. Matthew Butler, LGBTQ+ Advocacy Strategist for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of South Carolina said the blame should be at Chairman Bannister's feet for misrepresenting the City of Columbia's position. He asked the city to petition the governor to veto the proviso.

Mr. PJ Whitehurst, Community Health Worker for Reformation Lutheran Church shared how a kid was beaten when he came out to his family. He asked where is our humanity and are we going to trade dollars for children?

Ms. Susan Hazel, Bull Street resident said I love this city and I love the people. If you repeal this ban, you don't just affect people who are subjected to a reeducation practice. She said if you let that power go, we will never get it back.

The Honorable James E. Smith, Jr., former Representative for Richland County District 72 stated that the General Assembly does not have the authority to tell you to repeal this act. He said myself and an army of lawyers are ready to represent the city on a pro bona basis. He stated that conversion therapy is abuse masquerading as a treatment. He insisted that the budget proviso violates the Home Rule Act.

Mr. Clayton King, Earlewood Community resident outlined his many roles. He said I am many things, but I am not broken or in need of reparative therapy. He realized he was gay at the age of 15 and came out in 1978. He expressed gratitude for his supportive parents. He stated that reparative therapy kills people. He urged City Council to set the example and keep the ban in place so that our youth are protected.

Ms. Erin Davenport said the very purpose of this ordinance is taking a stand against violence. Being subjected to conversion therapy is deadly. She urged Columbia to continue to protect our young people and stand against bullying.

Ms. Elaine Cooper, Columbia resident said I have no skin in the game but I am led by my faith, which has taught me to love those who are not like myself. Columbia is the capital and we should set an unwavering message to all that Columbia does not



COLUMBIA CITY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES TUESDAY, MAY 27, 2025

buckle under any ultraright wing conservative agenda. She urged City Council to vote no and continue the ban on conversion therapy.

Ms. Irene Baerwalde, Lexington resident said if the current band has no teeth, create something that does, and then repeal the ban. She shared copies of studies on conversion therapy by the Minnesota Department of Mental Health, The Trevor Project, the American Association of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry and other organizations. She said conversion therapy is not only harmful but is detrimental to those that have been forced to go through it.

Mr. Wayne Dawson stated that proponents of the ban will point to individuals whose parents are trying to browbeat them out of being same sex attracted. He said this ordinance doesn't even apply to them. This doesn't apply to religious organizations that run those camps. He said that by discussing with his son the idea that it is not possible for him to be a girl, then I am guilty of "conversion therapy". He stated that the ordinance is deeply flawed and it should be repealed.

Mr. Zain Brandes identified as a trans male with minor exposure to conversion therapy. He said it doesn't change who we are and how we experience things; it suppresses who we are and causes trauma in the process. He stated that youth who undergo conversion therapy are 2.5 times more likely to commit suicide. When you pass laws that target us, you are sending a message that we don't belong. He urged Council to stand with them, protect them and let them live as their authentic selves.

Mr. Michael Watson said I appreciate the fact that this ban was put into place and I do not condone what has happened to Mayor Rickenmann. He stated that the United States Supreme Court will be taking up this issue in a Colorado case. He suggested that it would be prudent to wait for the Supreme Court ruling; otherwise, you run the risk of wasting a lot of people's time.

Mr. Dylan Gunnels said to fight fire with fire is not the answer and it is not the way of Jesus. He expressed feeling like a teenager who is being chastised for speaking out and standing up for what he believes is right. He asked City Council to stand up for what is right in the face of an oppressive government. He expressed feelings of disregard, a deep sense of regret, and remorse for not finishing the fight in 2021. He shared that SC Pride has prepared for potential budget cuts.



COLUMBIA CITY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES TUESDAY, MAY 27, 2025

Mr. James Agens, Executive Director for SC Equality said there are a lot of options and the city needs to take a stance. He said repealing this ordinance would harm our community's moral fabric, economic vitality and the spirit of inclusion. He insisted that Columbia act like a capital city and keep this ordinance.

Mr. Jared Johnson said you are too removed. Leadership is important and it doesn't mean sacrificing a marginalized group or minorities to appease a larger group. He urged Council to find ways to fight, vote to keep the current ban, and make it better.

Ms. Kim Feldt, West Columbia resident said thank you very much for your devotion and hard work. She reported that the American Medical Association, American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association have not supported conversion therapy because it does more harm than good. She said a small group of people with a little bit of money and power wish to impose their will on the entire population. She urged City Council to not allow this.

Ms. Are'anna Ford, Arcadia Lakes resident implored City Council members to reach out for community fundraising. She said it would be a shame to bend to the will of Attorney General Alan Wilson. She called for the rhetoric to change around how people should exist. She urged City Council to uphold the ban as a symbol while they work on something better.

Ms. Jessica Thomas said she is tired of watching this country be ran like a business. Public service is not about numbers; it is about care. The ban is real, it matters to the people who are afraid and to the people who came here today. The public has spoken and wants this ban upheld. She asked City Council to think about the humanity of the children in this city and be a city that protects all of its people.

The Honorable Allison Terracio, Richland County Council implored City Council to take some of the suggestions offered today. She said Richland County Council is dealing with the budget and looking at potential cuts and restraints. She said when dealing with an authoritarian government, it is important to not obey in advance.

Mayor Rickenmann said in the last decade there have been no reports on abuse. He said if kids are being abused, it should be reported. There is a problem with communication. He added that the Hate Crime bill has a lot of teeth.

Mr. Sam Kennedy, Staff Attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of South Carolina asked if it is possible that this ordinance is working.



COLUMBIA CITY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES TUESDAY, MAY 27, 2025

Mayor Rickenmann said I am more concerned that these things are happening and not being reported.

Mr. Bob Liming asked how many cases have been brought in light of the ordinance.

Ms. Teresa Wilson, City Manager said zero, but that has to do with reporting.

Mr. Jared Johnson said the majority of people want you to fight, find creative ways to partner with impacted communities and find a way to move forward.

Ms. Christine Picozzi, Executive Director for the Harriet Hancock Center asked City Council to consider why people don't come forward. She shared that she was sexually assaulted as a teenager and she learned that it was abuse and manipulation. She acknowledged that it took her 15 years to talk about this. There have to be systems to make people feel safe to come forward. The question should be why is it only zero.

Mr. Michael Watson added that it is not reasonable to expect underage children to report abuse. They have been made to feel broken and they are going to closet this.

Ms. Teresa Wilson, City Manager added that the city does not currently have a mechanism in place to determine who may be impacted. She emphasized that this is not an indication that individuals are not being affected.

Mr. PJ Whitehurst, Community Health Worker for Reformation Lutheran Church clarified that he is a mandated reporter and has worked with kids for over 10 years. He shared professional and personal experiences while noting that his parents tried to convert him but it did not work. Reporting is always done when needed.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Brennan and seconded by Mr. Bailey, Council voted six to one to defer consideration of Ordinance No.: 2025-043 - Repealing Ordinance No.: 2021-021 that Amended the 1998 Code of Ordinances of the City of Columbia, South Carolina, Chapter 14, Offenses and Miscellaneous Provisions, Article V, Offenses Involving Minors to add Division 4, Conversion Therapy for Minors Prohibited. Voting aye were Mr. Bailey, Ms. Herbert, Dr. Bussells, Mr. Brennan, Mr. McDowell and Mayor Rickenmann. Mr. Brown voted nay.



COLUMBIA CITY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES TUESDAY, MAY 27, 2025

Ms. Teresa Wilson, City Manager acknowledged the complexity of this issue and insisted that the genuine concerns do not go unnoticed. She explained that the educational component related to the budget was included because a deferral at this juncture would uphold the ordinance for an indefinite period. She reiterated that adjustments will be made to the budget and those adjustments may affect planned initiatives and reduce the city's ability to support certain programs and organizations. She noted that the city will not take a position on a gubernatorial veto. She acknowledged the pending Supreme Court decision. She asked for time to communicate with other groups that will be impacted. She stated that Council's deferral is a directive to move forward with the budget.

Mr. Brennan left the meeting at 6:05 p.m.

Ms. Irene Baerwalde, Lexington resident said instead of looking at this as money you have to raise to make up a shortfall, consider how many people will end up homeless or commit suicide.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 6:06 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:

Erika D. Moore Hammond, CMC
City Clerk