



BOARD/COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION

Human Rights Commission

Recommendation Number: 20240520-003

Defending Free Speech and Peaceful Protest: A Call to Protect Student Rights

WHEREAS, the Human Rights commission believes that free speech and peaceful protests are essential tools and rights in the struggle for a better world and the fight for justice and equality. We are deeply concerned about the recent use of multiple law enforcement agencies to suppress student protests at the University of Texas at Austin. The reports of heavy-handed tactics by law enforcement agencies are supported by videos and eyewitness accounts. The evidence depicts scenes of students being manhandled, pepper-sprayed, and arrested for exercising their constitutional right to assemble and voice their grievances.

WHEREAS, student protests have played an important role in our nation's history, advancing civil rights and opposing immoral wars. We believe the right to peaceful protest and free speech are fundamental pillars of a free society, and that it is crucial to defend these rights against all who seek to suppress them. From the pivotal lunch counter sit-ins that challenged segregation to the mass mobilizations against the Vietnam War, student activism has long been a driving force for positive change, holding institutions accountable and giving voice to the marginalized.

WHEREAS, the use of law enforcement agencies to silence dissenting voices is an affront to these principles, representing a concerning escalation of tactics that undermines the very fabric of our democratic freedoms, we cannot stand idly by, as overzealous law enforcement curtails the rights of our city's youth.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Human Rights Commission recommends to the Austin City Council to engage the University of Texas administration to immediately cease the use of police force to suppress student protests, and to work with student activists to find peaceful and constructive solutions to the issues that are being raised, protecting freedom of speech while ensuring safety for all. Open dialogue, facilitated by independent mediators, if necessary, must replace confrontation.

AND FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Human Rights Commission recommends to the Austin City Council to engage to make a call for Council to assess APD's mutual aid agreements with other public safety agencies and provide direction to the city manager to ensure that APD officers refrain from any activities that suppress legal speech or protests.

AND FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Human Rights Commission calls on the Austin City Council to investigate the recent use of force and arrests of student protesters, faculty, and media. A thorough and transparent investigation would be a sign that those attempting to unlawfully silence the voices of those that are solely seeking the right to assemble peacefully will be held accountable. The right to peaceful assembly is a core of our foundation. The upholding of that right is essential to safeguarding the public's trust and ensuring that those sworn to protect and serve do not violate the civil liberties they are duty-bound to safeguard.

Date of Approval: May 20, 2024

Record of the vote: The recommendation was approved on Commissioner Clemmons' motion, Commissioner Bryant's second on an 8-0 vote. Commissioners Raghavan, Weigel, and Stevenson were absent.

Attest: 
Eric Anderson, Staff Liaison, Office of the City Clerk