

January 6, 2026

Honorable Mayor Buffaloe and Honorable Members of the City Council:

The City of Columbia Commission on Human Rights has been weighing the human rights implications of the pedestrian safety ordinance (B 265-25). Our commission is charged with advising the city on human rights issues and endeavoring to eliminate discriminatory practices and encourage fair treatment for everyone. Therefore, we offer our perspective on the ordinance, based on these charges as requested by City Council.

In doing research in order to advise City Council, we look to the reliable and oft-cited Universal Declaration of Human Rights. From a basic human rights perspective, the proposed ordinance is problematic because it would restrict where people are allowed to move, rest, or exist. To further specify, Article 13 of this declaration states that everyone has the right to freedom of movement. Restricting people's movement on a median would violate this right. Additionally, Article 24 indicates that everyone has the right to rest. Preventing people from resting on a median would be a violation of this right.

While proposed as a safety measure, this ordinance would in effect function as a ban on panhandling and the visible presence of unhoused, homeless, or other low-income people in public spaces. People have a right to exist in public spaces without discrimination based on economic status. Additionally, people's ability to feed or house themselves is sometimes reliant on their ability to ask others for money. Banning peaceful solicitation could prevent a person's last-resort means of survival.

Moreover, this ordinance would likely increase contact between low-income individuals and law enforcement, which could result in fines or penalties that would serve to worsen economic hardship.

As the municipal body that hears discrimination complaints, our commission finds this ordinance raises red flags about equal access to public space and the potential for discriminatory enforcement. We encourage the council to vote no on the current ordinance (B 265-25) and to pursue safety strategies that protect pedestrians while also respecting people's basic human rights.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Amanda Hinnant, Chair, City of Columbia Commission on Human Rights