Groups challenge council's slur ban

LA meeting rules aim at curbing 'fighting words'

BrieAnna J. Frank
USA TODAY

Two civil liberties groups are demanding the Los Angeles City Council throw out its rule banning people during meetings from using two slurs – a racial epithet and a crude term often used to disparage women – alleging in part that the prohibition violates the First Amendment.

The council implemented the two-word ban in late July 2025. The motion the council passed putting in place the ban stated action was necessary because the two words had been used and disrupted its meetings 'on many occasions.' The sergeants-at-arms 'prevented fights that were on the cusp of breaking out' on at least two occasions, it said.

But free-speech advocates warned the council the move could put the city on a slippery slope toward unconstitutional censorship.

Among them were the First Amendment Coalition, which said the council's efforts stood to 'amplify the objectionable message and allow those who utter it to claim victory as defenders of free speech.' The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, or FIRE, also said the rule would 'implement an unconstitutional solution when better alternatives that do not infringe on the speech rights of your constituents are available.'

Both groups made similar arguments in a joint demand letter sent to the council July 23. It alleged the two-word ban, as well as a policy barring people removed from meetings from attending future meetings for a fixed time period, violates both the First Amendment and the Ralph M. Brown Act, a California law that allows legislative bodies to remove meeting attendees based on 'behavior that actually disrupts, disturbs, impedes or renders infeasible the orderly conduct' of the proceedings.

If the council does not repeal the ban within 30 days, the letter said the groups intended to sue over the matter.

'We're not here to defend the merits of the words themselves, or really any words for that matter,' said Zach Silver, staff attorney for FIRE. 'This case is not about these words – it's about the government's right to ban really any word.'

The council did not immediately respond to USA TODAY's request for comment.

The organizations are representing Los Angeles resident Stacey Segarra-Bohlinger, who serves on the Sherman Oaks Neighborhood Council. She's used unorthodox means of expressing her opposition to the word ban, such as through saying 'council is afraid of the word [crude word]' while singing to the tune of the 'Ghostbusters' theme song during the council's Halloween meeting.

After singing 'I'm not calling anyone a [crude word]' to the tune of Adele's 'Someone Like You' at the council meeting on Dec. 3, 2025, Council President Marqueece Harris-Dawson asked the clerk to pause Segarra-Bohlinger's time and issued what he said would be her only warning for violating council rule 7.

As Harris-Dawson was speaking, Segarra-Bohlinger noted that she'd used the term several times before he stopped her and rejected the notion she was being disruptive. Harris-Dawson then called on a city attorney, who told Segarra-Bohlinger it was 'not your opportunity to speak' given her paused time and said it was 'disruptive to interrupt the council president or any council member while they're speaking.'

Harris-Dawson then said Segarra-Bohlinger had one second remaining of her allotted time, to which she responded with the crude word.

'You are dismissed from this meeting and all future meetings today subject to rule 7 and rule 12,' Harris-Dawson said, a reference to both the word ban and the council's decorum rules. 'We'll look forward to seeing you next week.'

Segarra-Bohlinger said the conflict 'isn't about these words in particular' in a statement provided to USA TODAY.

'This is about the right of the public to speak freely without constraints – no matter how offensive or objectionable the government may find the feedback,' she said. 'Allowing the council to impose rules on which words are OK is a bad idea that opens the door to future censorship.'

The council's 2025 motion described the two words as 'offensive epithets' that are 'inherently harmful,' citing the Supreme Court's 1942 decision in Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire. The ruling said some terms 'by their very utterance inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace.'

Such 'fighting words,' the court found, are not protected by the First Amendment.

But Silver said the Supreme Court has not upheld a 'fighting words' conviction since then and that FIRE believes 'there's no word that is inherently disruptive.' He questioned whether it would be disruptive to read an excerpt from 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,' for example, or quote Los Angeles city records referencing a street formerly known as '[racial epithet] Alley.'

A spokesperson for Harris-Dawson previously told USA TODAY the rule was 'not a ban on offensive speech in general, nor does it limit the public's right to criticize, protest, or speak passionately.'

'Instead, it draws a line at language that, by consistent and documented use, has disrupted the Council's ability to conduct public business and discouraged public participation,' the spokesperson said.

USA TODAY's coverage of First Amendment issues is funded through a collaboration between the Freedom Forum and Journalism Funding Partners. Funders do not provide editorial input.

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