



## **D.C. statehood proponents plan convention, but foes warn of constitutional obstacles**

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Having just released a draft constitution for what they hope will become the 51st state, supporters of statehood for Washington, D.C., will put on a high-tech constitutional convention next month prior to sending the final autonomy proposal to City Council.

The next step after that, they say, would be a vote by District citizens in November.

“Frustration in the District is really boiling over,” Paul Strauss, a member of the New Columbia Statehood Commission and one of the District’s elected, unpaid “shadow senators,” told AMI Newswire.

He said District residents not only long to have voting representatives in Congress – something they now lack – but they’re fed up with seeing federal lawmakers continue to control local affairs for the District’s 600,000 residents.

“Congress has done such a bad job running the country, and we certainly don’t want them running our community,” Strauss said.

Seemingly on cue, the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee on Tuesday voted 22-14 on a bill that would repeal a budget autonomy law passed by Washington City Council. Republicans in the House had characterized that act as an unlawful attempt to usurp oversight powers that are reserved for Congress.

The issue has also popped up in this year’s presidential campaign. Last week, Democrat Hillary Clinton wrote in an opinion piece in a Washington newspaper that she would champion Washington, D.C., statehood as president. Republican Donald Trump told the *Washington Post* editorial board earlier this year that “I don’t see statehood for D.C.”

The District’s statehood commission, which includes Mayor Muriel Bowser, council Chairman Phil Mendelson and an elected three-member shadow delegation that promotes District statehood, sees its efforts culminating in a comprehensive statehood package being presented to Congress and a new president in 2017.

But some legal experts see the move as wholly misguided, arguing that a constitutional amendment rather than legislation would be required to create a state from land that, historically,

has been the national seat of government.

Roger Pilon, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Constitutional Studies, told AMI Newswire that Congress lacks the authority to carve out the new state by simply passing a bill.

The statehood process would shrink the federal district down to federal buildings and land surrounding the National Mall, but Pilon argues that the creation of the District in 1790 from 10 square miles of land ceded to the federal government by Maryland and Virginia is strong evidence that the framers intended a larger land mass for the nation's seat of government, not a small enclave.

Pilon said the consent of Maryland is also needed to create a new state in the District because Maryland ceded the land solely for the purpose of creating a seat for the federal government. Furthermore, every Justice Department since the Kennedy administration had concluded that Congress does not have the authority to alter the status of the District by simply passing legislation, he said.

"This is not going to go forward," Pilon said, adding the the 23rd Amendment would also have to be repealed to make the statehood plan work. "That's going to take a constitutional amendment, and that's going nowhere. There aren't the votes in Congress. It's not even close."

Strauss acknowledged only that a change in the 23rd Amendment, which grants the District the power to appoint electors for president and vice president every four years, might be necessary, but he characterized that process as "constitutional housekeeping."

The statehood plans would face an uphill fight in the current Republican-controlled Congress since most residents are registered Democrats. As a result, any statehood plan would give Democrats two additional votes in the Senate and one additional vote in the House. Strauss, however, sees the next election as "transformational," with the potential for a power shift in Congress.

"Every once in a while, members of Congress will vote to do the right thing," he said.

Strauss said that the statehood commission was following the so-called "Tennessee plan," which is a more aggressive path to statehood than simply waiting for Congress to enact enabling legislation. Under the Tennessee plan, which Alaska and other states used as a path to statehood, a constitution is drawn up, a ballot measure goes before residents to gauge their interest in statehood and "shadow" Congress members are elected to lobby Washington on statehood prior to any federal approval.

A high-tech constitutional convention is now scheduled in the District on June 18, said Strauss, who added that district residents will be welcome to send in amendments and comments via email, social media or in person. "You can tweet your constitutional amendment."

Although some polls have shown most Americans oppose statehood for the District, Strauss said the way the question is framed determines the response. For example, he said, most Americans

react affirmatively when asked if District of Columbia residents should have the same representation in Congress and the same ability to control their local affairs as other Americans.

Strauss also said that the statehood commission is preparing an outreach program designed to inform and educate people throughout the nation about the plans for statehood. And he stressed that the city's fiscal and political health is strong as a result of a succession of balanced budgets, along with the city's current budget surplus.

Although creating a new state would require paying for the offices of two new senators and a new representative, Strauss said that the effort could end up saving taxpayer dollars because Congress would no longer have to pay for staff and resources to oversee local matters in the District.

According to the draft constitution, the state of New Columbia would have a House of Delegates consisting of 13 members, a governor who would be elected every four years and an independent court system. The state's name could be changed as the process moves forward.