



District of Columbia: Mayor to Ask for Constitutional Convention for Statehood

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The D.C. chief financial officer is making a forceful argument for statehood: In 2014, the District paid more in federal taxes than 22 states and paid nearly the same amount as South Dakota, Alaska, Montana, Wyoming and Vermont combined. Those five states hold 15 seats in Congress, while the District has only one nonvoting delegate.

D.C. residents and businesses paid about \$26.4 billion in federal taxes, “which is likely the largest contribution in the city’s history,” but received only \$3.5 billion from the federal government — excluding matching Medicare payments — in 2014, according to a report by the chief financial officer’s office of revenue analysis. The District’s tax tab outstripped those of 22 states.

City leaders are preparing again to advocate for D.C. statehood. Efforts include changing the District’s license plates to read “End Taxation Without Representation” and calling for a constitutional convention to put a statehood ballot issue before D.C. voters in November’s general election.

But statehood for the nation’s capital would be difficult to achieve if history is any indicator. Elections, lobbying campaigns and a proposed amendment to the Constitution have failed over the past few decades to create a state in the 68.34 square miles that comprise the District of Columbia. By the Constitution, the city is designated as the seat of the federal government under the authority of Congress.

“The Constitution simply doesn’t contemplate [D.C. statehood], all the clever arguments to the contrary notwithstanding,” Roger Pilon, director of the Center for Constitutional Studies at the Cato Institute, told The Washington Times.

One big sticking point in granting the District statehood is that the federal government needs a “district” from which to conduct its operations, he said.

“If that district were a tiny enclave around the National Mall, the federal government would be utterly dependent on any new, surrounding state for all of its essential services, from water,

sewer, electricity, snow removal, fire, police and ambulance services, and much more,” Mr. Pilon said.

Such an arrangement would create “unhealthy cross-dependencies” that the Founding Fathers sought to avoid, he said.

D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser committed herself this month to advocating for a ballot initiative on a constitutional convention for statehood, and her arguments were similar to those of the city’s chief financial officer. The CFO said city residents and businesses have paid \$256 billion in federal taxes since 2002.

“The reason D.C. residents can’t have full access to the franchise is because there are too many Democrats,” Ms. Bowser said in an April 15 speech at the Willard InterContinental hotel. “Now, do you think access to democracy is a Democratic or Republican issue? No. It’s an American issue.”

With Democrats accounting for more than 60 percent of its registered voters, the District, as a state, likely would add a Democratic representative and two Democratic senators to the Republican-controlled Congress.

The District is represented in Congress by a delegate who can participate in House committees but cannot take part in floor votes. The current D.C. delegate is Eleanor Holmes Norton, a Democrat who has been at the forefront of statehood efforts.

D.C. Council Chairman Phil Mendelson, the at-large Democrat who also sits on the New Columbia Statehood Commission, wouldn’t commit to the mayor’s November deadline for a ballot initiative, but he has generally supported moving forward with the effort.

Drafting a state constitution for the District may seem like serious step, but it wouldn’t be the first.

In the 1980s, about 60 percent of D.C. voters approved the District of Columbia Statehood Constitutional Convention of 1979, which called for the creation of a state constitution.

The next year, the District elected delegates to a constitutional convention. The delegates drafted the constitution in May 1982 and chose New Columbia as the official name for the state. In November of that year, voters ratified the constitution. But in 1983, Congress quickly voted against allowing the District to become the state of New Columbia.

Ms. Bowser’s and the commission’s approach resembles that of Tennessee’s abbreviated path to statehood in 1796, when it was a federal property known as the Southwest Territory. The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, wrote about the Tennessee path in 1993 during a failed push for D.C. statehood.

According to the Heritage article, the four-part plan calls for a convention to draft a state constitution. Residents ratify the document, which then is sent to Congress for approval. Meanwhile, “shadow” senators and representatives lobby Congress for statehood, and lawmakers then vote to allow the territory to become a state.

It worked for Tennessee, the nation's 16th state, but the effort hasn't been successful in the District. Such an approach appears to be the quickest path if D.C. voters and officials want to make a major push for statehood.

Congressional Republicans have been staunchly against D.C. statehood, and many Democratic members of Congress haven't been actively pursuing the issue.