



## Statehood hearing for DC unlikely to spur change

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Congress is dusting off the notion of statehood for the District of Columbia for the first time in 21 years, but that doesn't mean residents of the nation's capital are any closer to gaining representation on Capitol Hill.

District leaders testified passionately about transforming most of the nation's capital into the "state of New Columbia" at a hearing Monday afternoon, saying only statehood would correct what even some opponents call an injustice: the inability of Washington's residents to fully participate in American democracy.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid supports statehood for the District, and President Barack Obama said recently, "I'm for it." But no further action on the bill is planned beyond the hearing. Sen. Tom Carper of Delaware, the Homeland Security Committee chairman, doesn't appear to have enough support from Democrats on his own committee to bring the bill to the Senate floor for a vote.

"My goal for this hearing is to educate a new generation of people about this injustice and restart the conversation about finding a more thoughtful solution," Carper said.

Some Democrats who haven't signed on as co-sponsors are running for re-election in swing states. In a political climate when coziness with Washington can lead to political defeat, vulnerable Democrats may not want to speak out on the statehood issue.

In the Republican-led House, the issue is a non-starter. GOP statehood opponents often point out that the nation's founders preferred keeping the nation's capital as a federal district. But there's also an unavoidable political reality: Three out of four registered voters in the District are Democrats, while Republican registration languishes at 6 percent. Republicans aren't likely to hand Democrats two new senators and an additional seat in the House.

"Here we are again debating this issue even though it has no chance of success in this chamber and is dead on arrival in the House," said Sen. Tom Coburn, an Oklahoma Republican.

Nonetheless, District boosters said the hearing was a positive step and that the city is in a strong position to push for statehood. The fast-growing District has 646,000 residents — more than

Vermont or Wyoming — a booming economy and a municipal government that, while still plagued by corruption, has delivered nearly 20 years of balanced budgets.

The effort to give the District full representation in Congress has moved in fits and starts over the past four decades. In 1978, Congress approved a constitutional amendment, but it was ratified by only 16 states.

The last time a statehood bill came up for a vote was 1993. It was defeated in the House, and momentum for the issue stalled.

Twenty years ago, “the city was in shambles, and people’s attention was diverted to making the city work and be functional,” statehood activist Josh Burch said. “This is a starting point, which we didn’t have in 1993. I think we have a really good case to make right now.”

The bill would shrink Washington, D.C., to a small federal district including the White House, the Capitol, the Supreme Court and the National Mall. Opponents raised constitutional concerns about such a small federal enclave surrounded entirely by a single state.

Anger over the District’s status is so ingrained in local politics that the city has the phrase “taxation without representation” on its license plates. Conservative legal scholar Roger Pilon of the Cato Institute, who spoke against the statehood bill, said the better solution would be to eliminate federal taxes for District residents and businesses.

After the hearing, Carper said he would continue to push for the city to gain greater autonomy, even if statehood proves too difficult. Asked whether he thought the District would ever become a state, he said, “I’m not sure.”

“Years ago, people weren’t sure that folks who were slaves or African-American, or women, would ever have a chance to have a vote either,” he said. “The world has changed, and the world is going to change in this regard, too.”