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D.C. statehood bill unlikely to advance beyond Senate panel's hearing

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For the first time in two decades, Congress will hold a [hearing](#) on whether to allow the District to become a state.

And that is where the exercise will end.

In [a bill](#) that will come before a U.S. Senate committee Monday, the District would become “New Columbia,” the 51st state.

The District’s mayor would become a governor and the D.C. Council a state legislature. For the first time since its founding more than two centuries ago, District residents would also be free to elect voting members to Congress.

By all accounts, the measure still has no chance on Capitol Hill.

Making a full-fledged state out of the nation’s capital, where 76 percent of voters are registered Democrats, would hand the party two seats in the Senate and one in the House, a prospect that Republicans unapologetically oppose. Even a majority of Senate Democrats have remained cool to the idea, with some in swing states fearing it could be viewed back home as a partisan power grab.

It’s not entirely clear why Sen. Thomas R. Carper (D-Del.) introduced the measure other than to appease advocates. He waited 20 months to hold a hearing. He scheduled it on a Monday, when many lawmakers typically remain in their home districts. Senate staffers said Carper has no plans after Monday’s hearing to push for a vote.

Even calling Monday’s event a hearing might be generous. It was unknown Friday how many of the bill’s 17 Democratic co-sponsors — let alone Republicans — would attend.

Carper’s prepared opening remarks called District residents’ lack of representation in Congress “unfair” and noted that the United Nations had deemed it a human rights violation. But he made clear that advocates should keep low expectations.

“My goal for this hearing is to educate a new generation of people about this injustice and restart the conversation about finding a solution,” Carper’s statement said.

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.), a self-proclaimed “warrior” for D.C. voting rights, declared victory in just getting a congressional hearing room reserved to talk about statehood for the first time since November 1993. That’s when the House last shot down the idea, by a vote of 277 to 153. Scores of Democrats voted against the measure then, including some from Maryland.

“We’re not going to let them go down this time without at least hearing from us,” said Norton, a reference to the looming midterm elections, which might tip the balance of power in the Senate to Republicans — and draw to a close what had seemed like a promising time for statehood advocates.

Mark Plotkin, a political commentator and outspoken proponent for statehood, railed against Norton for taking satisfaction from a hearing without a vote.

“We’re declaring victory when we get crumbs,” he said. “If we want to be honest with ourselves, nothing has changed, not in my lifetime, not in 50 years.”

“It’s important to keep pushing; it’s not naive,” Norton said, pointing to the long road of abolitionists and suffragists.

Norton and other statehood advocates thought they had an opportunity to renew the press for statehood starting in 2009, when President Obama entered office and Democrats controlled the House and Senate. But no serious push for statehood materialized, and halfway through Obama’s first term, Republicans retook the House.

Asked last year if he supported statehood, Obama said, “I’m in D.C., so I’m for it.” But as of Friday night, the White House had not responded to a letter from the D.C. Council asking him to reaffirm his support before Monday’s hearing.

All of which has left many statehood advocates increasingly hardened and largely resigned to their plight. Even their methods of protest feature a permanence that suggests the fight will continue for a long time: a license plate slogan, “Taxation Without Representation,” and the flashing, eight-foot-long electronic sign outside the city’s John A. Wilson Building, on Pennsylvania Avenue. Set on a stone platform, the scrolling sign continuously blares in large red numerals the billions of dollars that D.C. residents have paid in federal taxes even as they have been denied a vote on the federal budget.

The D.C. Council and Mayor Vincent C. Gray (D) have also scrubbed “Washington, D.C.” from the District’s official lexicon, trying to re-brand a city with a population bigger than either Vermont or Wyoming’s as some place other than the home of Congress and the White House.

“District of Columbia” now graces most welcome signs at the city’s borders, the tops of city-issued garbage cans and, most recently, new driver’s licenses.

Gray said he welcomed the Senate hearing even though he didn't expect much from it.

"It gives us a chance to talk about what we think are great advances in economic development, in public safety and education," Gray said. "In the past, those were criticisms surrounding statehood that are not an issue anymore."

Gray, Norton and members of the D.C. Council also point to smaller steps that they say are helping to set the stage for statehood.

Some Republicans in the House, for example, have backed District leaders' efforts to [eliminate congressional review of all local D.C. laws](#).

The council is also fighting in federal court to implement a voter-backed referendum that calls for more District [spending authority](#) without congressional oversight.

"Statehood is really a package of steps forward for democracy," said Walter Smith, executive director of the D.C. Appleseed Center for Law and Justice. Smith has testified before Congress numerous times for more rights, but he won't be there Monday.

Roger Pilon of the Cato Institute is the lone witness scheduled to testify against statehood. He believes the Founding Fathers didn't intend statehood.

"It's a company town, and the company is government," Pilon said. "That's not a state."

Josh Burch, a lifelong D.C. resident who says he's inspired to work on the cause so his daughter's vote would someday fully count, will attend to dispute Pilon.

"The Founding Fathers made a mistake. They made a mistake with women, with African Americans," he said. "This is about fixing the mistakes of our founders."