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For D.C. Statehood Advocates, a Hearing Marks Another Step Forward

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WASHINGTON — Washington residents lined the Capitol Hill hallways, waving the red and white District of Columbia flag. They stood outside the Metro handing out buttons that declared, “I AM a citizen,” and stickers that said, “I showed up 4 D.C. statehood.”

And they walked past more than 100 American flags with 51 stars — the one extra star representing their aspirations for voting rights — that had been placed along Pennsylvania Avenue by Mayor Muriel Bowser to mark the day.

For the first time in more than two decades, the House on Thursday gave the long-suffering movement for D.C. statehood a hearing, plunging back into the constitutional and political debate over whether the nation’s capital should become the 51st state.

It is unlikely that statehood legislation, championed by Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton, the District’s nonvoting House delegate, will prevail in the Republican-controlled Senate, where Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the majority leader, called it “full-bore socialism.”

But inside the Rayburn House Office Building, where multiple residents could recall when their parents could not vote for president, the hearing was another step in the decades-long fight to disentangle Washington from the federal government’s grip and give its 702,000 residents voting representation.

“This was certainly the time to have it,” Ms. Norton said in an interview after overseeing the hearing of the House Oversight and Reform Committee. “Nobody in the House says, ‘Well, unless the Senate is about to pass a bill — it looks like it’s right for the bill — maybe we should sit here and do nothing.’”

Statehood activists and local government officials have been galvanized by the new Democratic House majority in the 116th Congress, where more than 200 Democrats have signed on to the legislation. Democratic leaders, including for the first time Representative Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland, the majority leader, have offered their support, and lawmakers expect it to pass the House if given a vote.

“One of the greatest blots on our democracy is having 700,000 of our citizens unable to be represented in the Congress of the United States,” Mr. Hoyer said at the hearing. “The only way to remove that blot is D.C. statehood.”

Washington residents earned three electoral votes and the right to vote for president in 1961 with the passage of the 23rd Amendment, before securing the right to elect a nonvoting delegate a decade later. Since then, a brief agreement struck with Republicans that would have given that delegate the right to vote fell apart, and the statehood legislation has never survived a floor vote.

The legislation put forward by Ms. Norton would establish the State of Washington, Douglass Commonwealth, and allow for it to have two senators and a voting representative. It would shrink the federal district to the National Mall, the White House, Capitol Hill and some other federal property, and leave the rest of the land for the new state.

Those proposed borders drew scrutiny from Representative Thomas Massie, Republican of Kentucky, who questioned the motivation for putting the Trump International Hotel, which leases federal property on Pennsylvania Avenue, inside the state.

The debate on Thursday broke down along party lines, and it featured many of the same arguments that advocates and District of Columbia officials have grown to anticipate. Opponents argued that granting the overwhelmingly liberal city representation would unfairly guarantee the party votes in the two chambers. They pointed to the District’s history of financial turmoil as evidence that it could not handle being a state. And they said the entire premise of statehood goes against the Constitution.

“This is not what the founding fathers intended,” said Representative Jim Jordan of Ohio, the top Republican on the committee. “They understood, and they carefully crafted the Constitution, so that the seat of the federal government would purposefully and specifically not be within a state.”

Advocates for statehood disputed them all, arguing that the real reasons Republicans opposed granting voting representation to Washington, where black residents outnumber white ones and the vast majority of voters are Democrats, were their race and political preferences.

“It is true that we are more brown and more liberal than some of you, but denying statehood would be unfair, no matter who was affected,” Ms. Bowser said. “This is America, and Americans are entitled to equal protection under the law, and that’s why we are demanding statehood.”

Representative Gerald E. Connolly, Democrat of Virginia, said of Republicans: “When they say it’s not about race and partisanship, you can be sure it’s about race and partisanship.” (White Southern Democrats, who objected to the District increasing the chamber’s black ranks, helped lead the initial resistance to D.C. statehood.)

Roger Pilon, a constitutional scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute and witness for the Republicans, asked Mr. Connolly to withdraw his words, because, he said, “this is not about race.”

“Never,” Mr. Connolly shot back, to raucous applause from the mostly pro-statehood audience.

The hearing also offered a reminder of just how much of Washington’s existence is controlled by Congress. While the city has secured nominal control over its local affairs, Congress has final say over its budget, and can override laws passed by the D.C. Council.

Mr. Jordan also pushed to hear testimony from Jack Evans, a D.C. Council member accused of ethical and legal violations, arguing that he would be a state legislator if the District became a state.

Democrats denied the request, saying it was not relevant to the statehood debate.