

Advocates Push for D.C. Statehood in House Committee Hearing

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WASHINGTON (CN) – Advocates for Washington, D.C., statehood handed out stickers proclaiming “I Showed Up 4 D.C. Statehood” and packed the Rayburn House Office Building Thursday, for the first House committee hearing since 1993 on the proposal to make the District the 51st state in the U.S.

In 2016, the District’s city council adopted a state constitution and boundaries and voted for a referendum, which one with an 83% majority, to petition Congress for statehood.

Ratifying the District as a state, however, has received pushback from some congressional representatives, who argue that the Constitution requires a federal District to house the federal government. Opponents also argue that the Constitution’s 23rd Amendment, which gives equal voting representation to the District’s population, would have to be rewritten in order for the District to gain statehood.

Advocates contend that Washington, D.C., has a larger population than two states – Vermont and Wyoming – and that its more than 700,000 residents deserve a voting representative in Congress and the Senate.

While the District does have non-voting representation in Democratic Congresswoman Eleanor Norton, it lacks any representation in the Senate.

The new state could support itself without federal assistance, with an annual budget of \$15.5 billion, which is larger than that of 14 states. The District’s general fund balance totals \$2.8 billion.

Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser told the House Oversight Committee Thursday that the District also had no congressional vote on going to war but has sent nearly 200,000 individuals to fight for the country since World War I. She also said residents were subjected to the will of elected officials, which the District did not help appoint. This includes Supreme Court justices and prosecutors of criminal laws, who are federal officials.

“And, yes, it is true that we are brown and liberal, but denying statehood would be unfair no matter who was affected. It would be unfair if we were conservatives from a rural District built around agriculture or an industrial city in the heartland,” Bowser testified. “This is America and Americans are entitled to equal protection under the law and that’s why you should support statehood.”

Congressman Gerald Connolly, D-Va., also brought up the issue of race. He said opponents of forming the 51st state – primarily Republicans – consistently suppressed citizen’s rights to vote by denying them access to early voting, pushing voter identification laws and constructing other boundaries.

Earlier in the hearing, Connolly said Norton had been given the right to vote in the committee as a whole but repeatedly, that right has been taken away by Republicans.

“When they say it’s not about race or partisanship, you can be sure it’s about race and partisanship and that’s tragic,” Connolly said. “This isn’t about your right; they’re not going to respect that.”

Roger Pilon, a constitutional scholar at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, said the issue was partially about partisanship, but not about race. He requested Connolly withdraw his statement, to which Connolly replied, “never,” to applause from audience members.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., said the issue of D.C. statehood revolved around the history of slavery in the U.S. In 1862, the Compensation Emancipation Act was passed, freeing slaves in America for the first time in D.C., which caused many enslaved individuals in the surrounding area to migrate to the District for their freedom, she said.

Descendants of those freed in 1862 are again disenfranchised by being denied voting representatives, she said.

“And to uphold and to deny the statehood of the District of Columbia is to deny the impact of slavery in America. It is a form of denial of our history. And in order for us to achieve the full-borne justice and democracy that we promised, we need to give people in the District of Columbia the right to vote,” Ocasio-Cortez said.

The committee also heard testimony from Phil Mendelson, chair of the Council of the District of Columbia, Jeffery DeWitt, CFO for the District of Columbia, Kenneth Thomas, a legislative attorney with Congressional Research Service and Kerwin Miller, a veteran and resident of the District of Columbia.