

A 51st State? The District of Columbia Aims for its Star

Andrea Noble

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“You’re too small.”

“You’re badly governed.”

“The Constitution forbids it.”

One by one, Washington, D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser ticked off the arguments she’s heard made over the years against admitting the District of Columbia as the nation’s 51st state.

At the first U.S. House of Representatives hearing on D.C. statehood in 25 years, Republicans on Thursday did raise those same arguments—and some new objections as well—calling the District too financially unstable and corrupt to support itself as a state government.

“Any discussion about the future of D.C. would not be complete without a discussion about the District’s current challenges,” said Rep. Jim Jordan, the Republican ranking member on the House Oversight and Reform Committee. “We cannot ignore the elephant in the room. The District government currently faces serious allegations of misconduct.”

Jordan was referencing the ethics scandal involving longtime D.C. Councilmember Jack Evans, who recently resigned from the board of the local transit agency after an investigation found he knowingly violated ethics rules to aid friends and clients.

Eleanor Holmes Norton, the District’s non-voting representative to Congress, presided over the hearing and shot back that the allegations against Evans “have nothing to do with D.C. statehood and the fundamental suffrage of 700,000 American citizens.”

“The voting rights of American citizens and their representatives in Congress have never been and never will be contingent on state and local officials never engaging in misdeeds,” Holmes Norton said. “Certainly, officials in Ohio, if I may say so, have been the subject of multiple political scandals for many years.”

(Jordan is from Ohio.)

The statehood hearing comes as local lawmakers are advocating for passage of H.R. 51, a bill that would reduce the size of the federal District and create a new state out of the rest of present-day Washington, D.C., giving more than 700,000 residents voting representation in both houses of Congress.

Opposition to D.C. statehood has largely come down to politics. Republicans have consistently pushed back against statehood efforts, with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell

recently expressing concern that admitting the overwhelmingly Democratic enclave as a state would garner two more Democratic Senators.

With Republicans in charge of the Senate and President Trump in office, Cato Institute scholar Roger Pilon testified there was no chance of the bill going anywhere. But even when President Obama was in office and Democrats held both the House and the Senate, no statehood bills advanced.

Washington, D.C. has had its share of corruption, from the arrest and drug conviction of former Mayor Marion Barry in 1990 to the resignation in 2012 and 2013 of three councilmembers who each faced felony charges.

But D.C. also isn't entirely independent. The degree of D.C.'s local autonomy has vastly changed over the years, with the Home Rule Act of 1973 setting up the current governmental structure. That law also gives Congress authority to have final say on all D.C. legislation and allows it authority over the District's finances.

D.C. officials, including Mayor Bowser, D.C. Council Chairman Phil Mendelson, and Chief Financial Officer Jeffrey DeWitt sought to make the case Thursday that the District is on solid financial footing and able to govern itself without congressional oversight.

for the District of Columbia, Thursday, Sept. 19, 2019, on Capitol Hill in Washington. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin)

DeWitt cited the city's fiscal stability, noting the city has stashed away more than \$2.8 billion in reserve funds and can claim a AAA bond rating. The District, in general, boasts a growing and diversified economy, he said.

Mendelson testified about the impact congressional interference has had on local affairs, including the constraint of needing every piece of legislation passed by the D.C. Council to be reviewed by Congress. For example, lawmakers on the Hill have banned Washington, D.C. from using city funds to pay for needle exchange programs and that has contributed to difficulties fighting the spread of HIV and AIDS, Mendelson said.

"Because of Congress' ability to interfere in our programs and our laws we have seen a direct adverse effect on public health in the District," Mendelson said.

For others, the key sticking point in admitting Washington, D.C. as a state was how it would be done. Pilon argued the process would require an amendment to the U.S. Constitution, not just a law passed by Congress.

Rep. Clay Higgins, a Louisiana Republican, questioned whether Maryland would have to sign off on any approval because the state originally ceded its land to the federal government to form the District.

Though statehood advocates have run into many of the same hurdles before, supporters say they are buoyed by the momentum of the current movement.

In the week leading up to the hearing, D.C. leaders held a statehood parade complete with American flags emblazoned with a 51st star. The hearing on Thursday was full to capacity, with lines to get into overflow rooms snaking down the hallways of the Rayburn House Office

Building. Across the street, hundreds of supporters gathered in a park to watch the hearing on a large television screen.

Two-hundred and twenty Democrats in the House have signed on in support of H.R. 51—a far greater number than in 1993 when the last statehood bill to receive a vote was defeated 277-153 in the House.

“We can’t forget what has happened previously,” said former Mayor Vincent Gray, a current D.C. councilmember who sat in the front row for the hearing. “On the other hand, I think there is such a momentum at this stage. I don’t think the people of the District of Columbia will allow folks to get away with it.”