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## D.C. statehood: What to expect of the first House hearing on the issue in more than 25 years

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D.C. officials and advocates have agitated for generations to make the District the 51st state. On Thursday, they make their case to Congress.

For the first time since 1993, a House committee will hold a hearing on legislation that would turn most of the nation's capital into the State of Washington, Douglass Commonwealth.

Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) and D.C. Council Chairman Phil Mendelson (D) are among the witnesses who will testify for statehood; constitutional scholar Roger Pilon of the libertarian Cato Institute will represent the opposition.

The bill, sponsored by Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D), the district's nonvoting representative in the House, would reduce the seat of the federal government to a two-square-mile enclave, encompassing the White House, Capitol Hill and the Supreme Court. The rest of the District would become the new state.

The legislation is silent on how the District would disentangle itself from the federal government, which currently pays more than \$1 billion annually to fund much of the city's criminal justice system including the courts, prison services and supervision of offenders released into the community.

Democrats who control the House have embraced statehood for the District as a civil rights issue and the only way to give residents equal representation in Congress. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) made the issue a priority this session, and Norton's bill has more than 200 co-sponsors — all Democrats.

But Republicans who control the Senate are united in opposing statehood for the District, a move that some say would violate the intention of the framers of the Constitution.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) has said making the District a state would give Democrats an undue advantage because the city's diverse and politically liberal electorate is likely to elect two Democratic senators, increasing the party's influence in the Senate.

The argument irks Bowser, who said the question comes down to fairness.

“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,” she said in testimony prepared for the hearing. “This is America,” she added, “and Americans are entitled to equal protection under the law.”

***How can I follow the hearing?***

The hearing is open to the public and will begin at 10 a.m. in Room 2154 of the Rayburn House Office Building. Doors open at 9:45 a.m., and overflow seating will be available.

The hearing will be live-streamed on the committee's [YouTube page](#) and [Web page](#), and on [washingtonpost.com](#). Residents will also gather in Spirit of Justice Park just south of the Longworth House Office Building between C and D Streets, where TVs and speakers will broadcast the hearing live.

### ***What is the purpose of the hearing?***

Members of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform will hear testimony and question witnesses about Norton's statehood bill but have no plans to advance the legislation at the moment.

Committee Chairman Elijah E. Cummings (D-Md.) has said he will hold another meeting to prepare the bill for a vote on the House floor.

With their party in control of the House, Democrats are confident their bill can pass the House this session but acknowledge it has no chance in the Republican-controlled Senate.

The last House hearing on statehood was held in 1993 during Norton's second term in the House. [The bill failed badly](#) on the House floor.

### ***Can the District afford statehood?***

In 1995, the federal government appointed a control board [to manage the city's dismal finances](#), stripping the District government of much of its limited autonomy.

But today's reality is "a far cry from the image many still harbor about the District," Mendelson said in prepared testimony.

The Revitalization Act, a bill negotiated and passed by a Republican-led Congress as part of the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, helped rescue the nation's capital from the brink of bankruptcy by shifting certain District costs to the federal government.

With a \$15.5 billion budget and more than 700,000 residents, the District can financially support itself as a state, supporters of statehood say. District residents paid \$28.4 billion in taxes in 2018, more than the residents of at least 20 states.

### ***Who will testify in support of statehood?***

Kerwin E. Miller, a retired Navy Reserve commander and D.C. native, served in the military for 28 years. D.C. veterans have fought and died in every U.S. war since the American Revolution, and about 30,000 District residents are military veterans, he said in prepared remarks.

Lawmakers will also hear from Jeffrey S. DeWitt, the District's chief financial officer, and Kenneth R. Thomas, an attorney with the Congressional Research Service.

### ***How much will this cost?***

DeWitt said in prepared remarks that some functions currently managed by the federal government would fall to the new state.

“The true financial impact of District of Columbia statehood will depend on policy decisions yet to be made by Congress and the newly elected state government,” he said.

### ***Who will testify against statehood?***

Pilon of the Cato Institute has cited several objections to statehood.

The framers did not want the federal government to depend on any one state, and no one state should have disproportionate influence on the government, he argued. If Norton’s bill passes, he said, the federal enclave will rely on the new state for electricity, water, snow removal and other necessities.

Maryland would have to agree to make the District a state because Maryland originally ceded land to create the nation’s capital, not for “a new state on its border,” he said.

The 23rd Amendment gave District residents the right to vote for president. A downsized nation’s capital could control three electoral votes, unless the amendment were repealed, he said.

Critics have also said the District is too corrupt to be a state, and the hearing comes as Jack Evans, the longest-serving D.C. Council member, is the target of an ongoing federal grand jury probe into his official actions and his private consulting business.

Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio), the top Republican on the committee, and Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), called for Evans to testify because in a new state he would become a state legislator.

### ***What is D.C. government doing to advance statehood?***

The D.C. Council set aside \$1 million to promote the statehood campaign. Bowser on Monday led a parade, complete with American flags mocked up to feature 51 white stars, at a cost of \$31,206.

She also held a roundtable with military veterans on Wednesday, highlighting the sacrifice they made for a nation that doesn’t allow them full representation in Congress.