

Hearing on “H.R. 51: Making D.C. the 51st State”
House Committee on Oversight and Reform
10:00 AM, Thursday, September 19, 2019
2154 Rayburn House Office Building
Statement for the Record
Rep. Gerald E. Connolly (D-VA)

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding today’s hearing on H.R. 51, the Washington, D.C. Admission Act. As a longtime supporter of D.C. statehood, I commend Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton for introducing this bill and for her tireless efforts to fight for the rights of District residents.

Today’s hearing examines whether we are truly a democratic republic. Do we as a nation, want to continue to disenfranchise the nearly 702,455 Americans who currently reside in Washington, D.C.?¹ Are we okay with denying our neighbors the same rights as other U.S. citizens because they live on land suitable to a dinner table compromise between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton regarding the location of our nation’s capital? Our Founding Fathers denied many Americans the right to vote, but through centuries of work we have reversed their narrow view of the franchise – except here in the nation’s capital.

H.R. 51, the Washington, D.C. Admissions Act would admit the Washington, Douglass Commonwealth as the 51st state in the nation, and provides its residents with representation in the United States Senate and House of Representatives. Under H.R. 51, two square miles that include the Capitol Building, White House, National Mall, principal federal monuments, and federal buildings adjacent to the National Mall would remain the District of Columbia. The other 66 square mile area currently in the District’s boundary line would be admitted as the Union’s 51st state.

Since its inception on the Mason-Dixon line, Washington, D.C. has lacked the authority to govern its own people and to deliberate and implement decisions on the behalf of its people. Upon enactment of this bill, present-day District executive, legislative, and judicial officials would be deemed officials of the state. The Mayor, members of the Council, and the Chair of the Council would be deemed the Governor, members of the Legislative Assembly, and Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, respectively.

In the past, Congress has considered three factors when determining admission to the United States:

Q: Do the residents have a commitment to self-government?;

A: Yes. On October 28, 2016, the D.C. Council adopted a state constitution and boundaries. On November 8, 2016, D.C. residents approved an advisory referendum requesting that the Council petition Congress for statehood. Under the terms of the referendum, residents agreed to statehood, a constitution, boundaries, and a representative democracy.

¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, Estimates of the Voting Age Population for 2017, 83 Fed. Reg. 7142 (Feb. 20, 2018) (Notice).

Q: Do the residents support statehood?

A: The residents of the District demonstrated their support for statehood when they overwhelmingly approved the November 2016 referendum with more than 83 percent in favor.

Q: Does the proposed state have sufficient resources and population to support itself and its share of the costs to be part of the federal government?

A: The District currently has 702,455 residents. Two states have smaller populations: Vermont (626,299) and Wyoming (577,737) and six states have populations below one million. The Internal Revenue Service collects more in gross revenue from the District than it collects from 22 states and more per capita from the District than any state. Additionally, the District has a higher per capita personal income and GDP than any state.

The District's fiscal year 2020 budget is \$15.5 billion. By comparison, 14 state budgets were smaller than \$16 billion in fiscal year 2017. More than 99 percent of the funding source for the District's budget are the same as in state and local budgets. Less than one percent of the budget consists of congressional appropriations not available to other jurisdictions.

If it were a state, the District could certainly support itself.

Nearly 200,000 District residents are dedicated civil servants working for the federal government, and nearly 10,000 residents serve in the military.² Shouldn't they have a say in federal elections and control over local decisions?

This is an issue of particular importance to me because I served as Chairman of the Board of Supervisors in Fairfax County, where I had the authority to make great positive change for more than 1.1 million residents by expanding affordable housing opportunities, promoting reusable energy, and making critical transportation improvements. The people of the District of Columbia deserve to have leaders who have the authority to make change that reflects their local priorities.

Instead, the District of Columbia has been subjected to repeated attempts by the United States Congress to dictate how it spends its own money and to prevent it from implementing laws passed by the City Council, when it could not find a majority in Congress to override those laws. Under the Home Rule Act of 1973, Congress has to approve the District's budget and has a say over how it spends money it raises from local taxes. From 1999 to 2007, Congress blocked the District from using locally-raised tax dollars for needle exchange programs that have been proven to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS. This ban occurred at a time when HIV/AIDS exceeded epidemic proportions in the District. For ten years (1992-2002) Congress prevented the District from spending any funds to implement the Health Care Benefit Expansion Act, which allowed domestic partners greater rights. From 1988 until today, Congress inserted riders in

² Governing the States and Localities, Federal Employees by State (<https://www.governing.com/gov-data/federal-employees-workforce-numbers-by-state.html>).

annual appropriations legislation to prevent the District from using its own money to cover abortion services through Medicaid.

There is no issue too frivolous for some Members of Congress to want to get involved in. After the D.C. Council passed a law requiring companies that make wet wipes sold in the District to prove that products labeled “flushable” won’t damage the pipes or make it clear on the package that the wipes are not flushable, the nonwoven fabrics industry lobbied Congress to reverse the law. As a result, Congressman Andy Harris announced that would be reviewing the issue and consider ways to block the legislation.

I thank the Chairman for holding today’s hearing. Failure to grant the residents of this District the right to vote in federal elections would be a terrible blow to democracy. It has been 26 years since the House held a hearing to examine D.C. Statehood, and it is past time to act on this moral imperative. I thank Ms. Norton for leading the charge to grant equity and long-overdue representation to her constituents. This hearing serves as an important first step to ensuring democracy for all.