**NEW COLUMBIA STATEHOOD COMMISSION MEETING**

**Draft Minutes**

May 12, 2016 at 6:30 pm

Kellogg Center at Gallaudet University

**Members of the Commission**

* Mayor Muriel Bowser
* Senator Paul Strauss
* Senator Michael D. Brown
* Representative Franklin Garcia

Minutes

* Mayor Muriel Bowser opened the meeting at 6:55pm. She recognized a quorum of Commission members and noted that Chairman Mendelson would not be in attendance. The Mayor stated that she would open the meeting and then turn it over to Senator Strauss to give a presentation.
* Mayor Bowser reminded attendees that the DC Council passed legislation to establish the New Columbia Statehood Commission, tasked with efficiently pursuing becoming the 51st state of the Union. It is comprised of the Mayor, Council Chairman, two Senators, and our Representative. Most recently, the Commission approved a plan which puts the question of statehood on the ballot in November. The reason that this specific meeting was convened was to bring together individuals who want to be part of the working groups and discuss expectations of the working groups. Last week, the Commission approved the release of a draft Constitution for public comment and the Commission also approved a Constitutional Convention to be held in mid-June. She also expressed appreciation for Congresswoman Norton, who has been very supportive in this effort by introducing legislation in Congress for admittance as the 51st state. Now we will be working on a package that includes a new constitution and boundaries to present to the new Congress and new president starting in January.
* Mayor Bowser spoke about the recent endorsement from Presidential nominee Hillary Clinton for statehood. She expressed her excitement about the working group kickoff. The Mayor asked those in attendance if they were willing to go the distance for statehood and encouraged individuals to spread the word about statehood.
* Mayor Bowser explained that getting on the ballot would require a lot of public education. The process will take speed, it needs to be thorough, and must be convincing.
* Some in Congress are getting a little scared and fearful of momentum that DC residents are generating. Some items they haven’t been able to achieve in legal system, they will resort to using their political might. We must take incremental steps and fight. Mayor Bowser praised Chairman Mendelson for his pro bono help along with gaining budget autonomy. This demonstrates how important this fight is for statehood. We are working thoroughly and with deliberate speed to get a Constitution approved, send it to the Council to pass legislation that puts it on the ballot, and send it to the Board of Elections in July.
* Senator Michael Brown recognized Karen Szulgit, Theodora Brown, and Rachel Bernard who are staff for the New Columbia Statehood Commission. He commended the Mayor for her work. Senator Brown suggested a working group on the constitution. He attended three meetings to discuss the constitution with advocates. He stated it is important to iron out differences and make it as inclusive as possible. A hearing was held today and budget autonomy was addressed. We need to be all together when the referendum is on the ballot.
* Representative Franklin Garcia opened his remarks stating how pleased he is to see familiar and new faces. He explained that the residents are the champions to restore and bring democracy to the nation’s capital. Representative Garcia added that this large crowd can bring very good progress. He is hoping we can grow the size of the crowd building up to the constitutional convention.
* Senator Paul Strauss mentioned that the minutes from the last meeting were circulated and the calendar. He raised one concern about the dates of constitutional convention scheduled for a Friday and Saturday in June. This conflicts for individuals of various faiths. He wants to make sure that the convention is as inclusive as possible. He is hoping that we can find a way to expand the time on Saturday and eliminate Friday night. Senator Strauss did not agree that we need a separate working group for the constitutional convention.
* Mayor Bowser stated that we do not have voting items on the agenda. She suggested that we address the convention dates later. The Mayor outlined the rest of the meeting and stated that there would be a public comment period after the presentation. Mayor Bowser also noted that once she leaves, this would become an informational part of the meeting and there would no longer be a quorum.
* Senator Strauss stressed that the Commission has been meeting every week since the Mayor announced this bold initiative on Emancipation Day. The Commission has met and prepared a draft constitution. The plan is to follow the Tennessee plan which was replicated by other states. The constitution was released on May 6 and is available for public comment on statehood.dc.gov.
* Senator Strauss delivered a PowerPoint presentation which included the following:
  + Overview of the New Columbia Statehood Commission
  + The plan to achieve DC statehood
  + Historical background on the constitutional convention
  + Release of the Draft Constitution
  + Advisory referendum on the November ballot
  + The role of Congress
  + Timeline for community engagement
* Senator Strauss opened the floor for public comment following the PowerPoint presentation.
* Annise Jenkins with Stand Up for Democracy in DC commented that the DC delegation is unpaid and expressed admiration for what they are doing. She questioned what was included in the budget to help individuals attend the presidential nominating conventions.
* Senator Strauss replied that the Commission and delegation have modest budgets and that perhaps the role of the business advocacy working group would be to help fund some items. Philadelphia isn’t too long of a drive so there are ways to catch buses and Amtrak trains if need be.
* Senator Michael Brown added that there is no budget at this point and it is a serious mistake for a campaign. He has worked on national campaigns and expressed the need for a budget especially for a truncated time period.
* Harold Hunter from Ward 4 commended the panel. He questioned the wording of statehood stating that it be unambiguous for Israeli and Palestinian people. He questioned the three elements related to a state including land, revenue, and population.
* Senator Strauss responded that the language will clearly focus on statehood for the District of Columbia. Other territories around the world are interested in statehood. We will make clear what this referendum is about.
* Thomas Smith from Ward 8 commented that it should be made clear that the DC Statehood effort started with Mayor Washington. He suggested taking one year of parking traffic ticket funds and diverting it to the statehood budget. He also suggested reaching out to the Statehood Green Party who has had statehood as part of their platform.
* Senator Strauss agreed that we are standing on the backs of those who started this process. We are hoping to honor them and move the process forward in a way that will justify their efforts. In terms of the budget and resources, we want to make sure that this is well-funded. It is the first time that we have had paid staff and a budget for statehood under Mayor Bowser.
* Kimberly Prestidge from Virginia and graduate from Gallaudet University stated that she hopes to see an amendment on disabilities to the constitution. She also asked if the video online will include interpreters or be closed caption for deaf attendees.
* Senator Strauss responded that all meetings will have ASL interpreters present. It is his understanding that channel 16 includes closed caption. Senator Strauss thanked the hosts from Gallaudet University.
* Guy Durant from Ward 5 expressed that he is so proud of the work underway on statehood. DC’s population is larger than the states of Wyoming and Vermont yet in the draft constitution, the number of legislators is much less. The proposed size of the legislature is 13, same as the current size of the DC Council. The smallest legislature in the United States is 20 and the average is 39. Vermont and Wyoming have 30 each in Senate. Vermont has 150 and Wyoming has 60 in the State House. He argued that our legislature needs to be larger to match the population ratio and stated that we need a bicameral legislature. He asked how we can increase the number of legislators and how we achieve a bicameral form of government.
* Senator Strauss emphasized that the problem isn’t too few legislators; it is that we have too many. We have too many who have denied us of equal representation. We need to get rid of the 535 non-resident legislators in Congress and get them out of our business.
* Jennifer Goodwin, Ward 8 resident, questioned how the District will handle the budget once it becomes a state.
* Senator Strauss replied that once DC becomes a state, it will handle the budget the way other states do--without interference from Congress and more efficiently.
* Hector Rodriguez stated that if we could invest $2 dollars for every DC resident that would be $1.4 million for the movement.
* Jean Lee Akin of the DC Statehood Green Party questioned why we are not getting lobbying assistance from the international community. We should also be thinking about Puerto Rico to help them achieve what DC is trying to do.
* Senator Strauss responded that we are engaged in the international community. We have support and constant involvement from organizations such as UNPO which sends election observers around the world. Our focus will be on statehood for DC. Puerto Rico does not have the kind of consensus on statehood that we have here.
* Nick from Ward 1 commented that the current draft constitution prevents the appropriation of money. He questioned if the draft referendum will have four questions on it.
* Senator Strauss stated the referendum will be one question with four parts because it is a constitutional requirement for statehood.
* Henry Taylor asked how many constitutional experts are advising the process, who they are, and what makes them experts.
* Senator Strauss named Viet Dinh, a prominent Republican constitutional scholar, who testified on the statehood bill when Senator Carper held a congressional hearing on the bill. Some of the other scholar’s include Deans and Academics from area law schools like George Washington, Georgetown, Howard University, and UDC. Their job was to come up with a draft constitution as a starting point. The best way to access those scholars now is to submit online comments. Senator Strauss recognized Beverly Perry, Senior Advisor to the Mayor, who has been coordinating with the experts.
* Beverly Perry stated that she believes that it would be a great idea to have at least 2-3 lawyers at all the roundtables in the wards. We have Fred Cook from Howard University who drafted the 1987 Constitution.
* Representative Garcia encouraged attendees to watch the videos and read the minutes online on the statehood.dc.gov website.
* Senator Strauss concluded the meeting at 7:55pm to allow for working group breakouts.