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Senate version of CFO bill angers Norton

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D.C. officials have expressed shock over two Senate proposals that would replace a city bill creating an independent chief financial officer and codify in federal law the contract to partially close D.C. General Hospital.

D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, a Democrat, blasted the new chairman of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee on the District for legislation that would alter the chief financial officer (CFO) bill recently passed by the D.C. Council.

Mrs. Norton said Friday that Sen. Mary L. Landrieu, Louisiana Democrat, broke faith with the city and that her proposals "threaten home rule."

Mrs. Landrieu's legislation, to be included in the pending \$90 million 2001 budget supplement, would nullify a bill the D.C. Council passed July 10 to strengthen the powers of the CFO. The Landrieu provisions give the CFO hiring and firing authority over 1,200 D.C. agency financial officers and other budget and financial personnel; sole authority over the office's \$68 million budget; and independence from the city's procurement process. The legislation also seeks subpoena power for investigations by the CFO.

The current council legislation, which awaits the mayor's approval, allows the CFO hiring and firing authority over 10 percent of his staff of 1,200; allows the mayor and council to revise the CFO's budget, rather than just adding comments; and exempts the CFO from using the city's procurement process for one year, instead of permanently.

"These matters are particularly inappropriate for congressional intervention, and we are surprised that such anti-home rule language would be proposed from any member of the new Senate majority," Mrs. Norton wrote in a July 12 letter co-signed by Mayor Anthony A. Williams and D.C. Council Chairman Linda W. Cropp.

"We have appreciated that over the past few budget cycles, the Senate, under Republican leadership, has largely respected the views of the elected leadership of the District of Columbia. We would certainly hope for no less from a Democratic Senate."

City officials said the senator's bill weakens the CFO since it doesn't provide guidelines for hiring or terminating the CFO and doesn't include a five-year term for the position, as the council's plan does.

"The District government has spoken with one voice and deserves credit for having created one of the most independent CFO's in the nation," the letter from D.C. officials stated.

"Everyone is committed to having a new structure for the office of the CFO," said City Administrator John Koskinen. "But this [proposal] will create an unworkable relationship between the CFO and the executive branch. It is not a sound way to do business."

Mrs. Landrieu praised the District's success at reforming itself and improving its ability to manage its affairs, but didn't retreat from the proposals.

"In light of this success, the subcommittee has attempted to restore greater flexibility and control over local matters," she said in a written statement. "However, it is important to ensure that the District

has the tools, structures, and resources necessary to carry out these additional responsibilities."

City leaders are also protesting a second proposal that would codify the D.C. General Hospital contract, calling it "gratuitous and unnecessary," and stating that it "open wounds city officials are trying to heal."

Mrs. Norton called the move an attempt by the control board to prevent the D.C. Council from overturning the current contract for Greater Southeast Community Hospital to take over services from the partially closed D.C. General. Council opposition to the contract was almost unanimous.

D.C. officials are especially upset that they were not informed in advance of the proposals, but found out through "House sources." Mrs. Norton accused the senator's staff of a "sneak attack" and of not "doing their homework."

City leaders also expressed surprise that the Democrat-controlled Senate would interfere with the District in this manner.

After Vermont Sen. James M. Jeffords left the Republican Party in May to become a Democratic-leaning independent and tipped the Senate's power balance, city leaders were optimistic, believing they would see fewer battles over the D.C. budget, and an end to controversial riders attached to it.

But on Thursday, Mrs. Norton recognized that while Democrats have been traditionally more responsive to home rule, vowed that city leaders "aren't going to give a Democrat a pass to attach a rider, either."

Rep. Joe Knollenberg, Michigan Republican and chairman of the House Appropriations District of Columbia subcommittee, and Rep. Constance A. Morella, Maryland Republican and chairman of the House Government Reform District of Columbia subcommittee, said Thursday they will continue to push for a D.C. appropriations bill free of controversial riders.

"The congressman isn't inclined to accept riders," said Paul Welday, a spokesman for Mr. Knollenberg. "We want to see a clean bill."

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