

Rep. Morella's Vision for D.C.

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District DEL. Eleanor Holmes Norton, Mayor Anthony Williams and D.C. Council Chair Linda Cropp are in a state of high dudgeon over Rep. Constance Morella's reported interest in creating an advisory board to oversee the District once the financial control board goes out of business in September. In discussing the city's post-control-board phase in an interview with WAMU-FM this week, Rep. Morella, chairwoman of the House's D.C. oversight subcommittee, said Congress "can't just drop the control board concept and say everything will be fine." She added, "We want to look at something else that can be in place without a control board as such . . . even if it is sort of a shadow control board." Following an angry local response, Rep. Morella now says she has an open mind as to what mechanism "if anything" should be put in place after the control board shuts down. Her remarks, however, understandably brought howls in a city rubbed raw by years of congressional incursions into limited home rule.

Today, as Rep. Morella has acknowledged, the District is as financially healthy as it has ever been. The city has achieved four consecutive years of balanced budgets, healthy surpluses acquired two years ahead of the congressional mandate, the elimination of its accumulated deficit and a comfortable reserve fund. It would be unfair for Congress to mandate additional financial oversight of the District after the city has met or exceeded all the stated terms in the control board statute.

In fairness, it should be noted that Rep. Morella also said, "We do want the District of Columbia to make its own decisions." Congress's role, she said, is one of oversight, "not to dictate." That said, we believe Rep. Morella speaks for others on the Hill when she says she doesn't want to see the gains made by the city over the past five years slip away. Their concern is shared by many in the city, including us. On that score, it is reassuring that the city now has an independent chief financial officer who can't be fired by the mayor without the council's concurrence. The mayor and council also agree that the District needs a group of city-appointed economic watchdogs in the post-control-board era to review revenue estimates.

District leaders wish to produce their own safeguards against a repeat of the disastrous '90s. They should not be preempted by Congress. That the mayor and council will find themselves at odds as they work through their policy differences on this and other issues is to be expected. Disagreements in the post-control-board era should not undermine confidence in the city government. To the contrary, it can be argued that while the control board has served a valuable role, a congressionally imposed body in city affairs undermines local political accountability by taking the mayor and council off the hook. Rep. Morella says she wants the city to make its own decisions. Fine. It's time to let city leaders lead.

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