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Republican efforts to rein in Washington on pot, guns draw protests

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By Annika McGinnis

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Efforts by congressional Republicans to block new laws in Washington, D.C., decriminalizing marijuana possession and tightening restrictions on guns have provoked a summer tempest between residents of the capital and U.S. lawmakers.

The District of Columbia's non-voting representative in the House, Eleanor Holmes Norton and its residents are taking on Maryland Representative Andrew Harris, who is attempting to overturn a law that took effect last month making possession of small amounts of marijuana a civil, rather than criminal, offense. They also are focusing on Kentucky Representative Thomas Massie, who wants to cut off funding to enforce a ban on assault weapons in the city.

"No red-blooded American would take what these members have tried to do to this city," Norton said in a July 25 speech on the House floor, adding that residents of the liberal-leaning district were being treated as second-class citizens.

A 1973 law gave Washington an elected mayor and council and the city has had a non-voting House delegate since 1971. But Congress, which has constitutional oversight over the district, still must approve its laws and budget.

Harris and Massie's moves to block district laws through riders to a budget bill were an attempt to limit the autonomy of the city of 646,449 people, Norton said.

Massie's budget amendment struck funding to enforce the ban on assault weapons, as well as a rule forbidding the private sale of guns without background checks. About a week after his amendment passed on July 16, a federal judge also ruled unconstitutional the district's ban on carrying handguns outside the home.

The district was once known as the U.S. murder capital but in recent years the homicide rate has fallen to 50-year lows.

Massie said he did not believe "home rule means that you get to violate somebody's rights, basic civil rights" regarding guns.

Harris said he wants to safeguard children's health from the "devastating effects" of marijuana and that Congress was authorized "to stop irresponsible actions by local officials."

Although Washington voters ratified an act last year to release the city from congressional budget approval, a U.S. District Court ruled in May that only Congress could take that step.

Last month, a Senate Appropriations subcommittee proposed a district budget bill including self-rule for its laws and budget. President Barack Obama gave residents hope when he said last month he supported the idea of statehood for Washington but he conceded it was politically unlikely.

The fate of the gun and marijuana laws likely will be decided in compromise talks over the House and Senate versions of the bill in September.

Representative Jan Schakowsky, an Illinois Democrat, said the city council should be able to make its own decisions.

"I have long resented the fact that some lawmakers treat D.C. like a colony," Schakowsky said.

In July a group of residents stormed Harris' office to complain about more mundane district issues - potholes, an outdated sewer system and the need for more health clinics.

Residents met in small groups with Harris' chief of staff.

"If you're saying we're your constituents, then start helping our city," resident Barbara Helmick said. "We wish you cared just as much about potholes as you do about pot."

(Reporting by Annika McGinnis; Additional reporting by Moriah Costa; Editing by [Scott Malone](#) and [Bill Trott](#))

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