Good afternoon Chairman Brown and other members of the Council. I am Ilir Zherka, Executive Director of DC Vote, a non-profit advocacy organization dedicated to bringing full democracy and self-determination to the District of Columbia.

I am here to address an issue that is at the heart of DC’s struggle for self-determination: the continuing Congressional stranglehold on the District’s authority to spend its own local tax dollars.

We commend Mayor Gray for including language in the Budget Request Act that would allow the District to set its own fiscal year and remove federal mandates over the spending process.

Right now, there is some movement on Capitol Hill for a DC budget autonomy bill. Unfortunately, the District also faces serious impediments to winning budget freedom through congressional action – obstacles that demand a bold response from this Council.
As you know, the chairman of the House committee that oversees the District, Rep. Darrell Issa, supports budget freedom for DC. And, last week Senators Joseph Lieberman and Susan Collins introduced a DC budget autonomy bill.

Decoupling DC’s local budget from the highly partisan federal budget battles has the support of the Governors of Virginia and Maryland.

As you know, DC Vote supports efforts by you, Mr. Chairman, the Mayor and Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton to push budget autonomy legislation through the Congress.

As we have followed progress on the DC budget freedom bill on the Hill, a major roadblock has emerged. Once again, a national interest group has vowed to use the District’s fight for full democracy to advance a very narrow and divisive agenda.

The National Right to Life Committee recently publicly stated that it would work to kill any DC budget autonomy bill in Congress that does not include a permanent ban on the use of our local funds for abortion.

The NRLC’s legislative director told the Washington Post that his group is prepared to “score” any House floor vote on a budget autonomy bill that does not include abortion language. Douglas Johnson, the NRLC Legislative Director,
called for: “at a minimum, a permanent prohibition on taxpayer-funded abortions in the federal district.”

Mr. Chairman, we cannot allow a national special interest group that refers to DC derisively as “the federal district” to derail the drive for budget freedom.

We’ve been down this road before with pro-democracy legislation in Congress. The NRA thwarted the will of a bipartisan majority of both houses of Congress and killed the DC Voting Rights Act.

Today, we are proposing a new, parallel strategy for achieving DC budget autonomy.

We urge the Council to move legislation that would place a DC Home Rule Charter Amendment for budget freedom on the November 6 ballot. This Amendment, if adopted by voters, would amend the Charter to do what our supporters in Congress want: give DC greater budget autonomy, without having to give in to blackmail by a special interest group.

We believe the voters of DC will overwhelmingly support a budget autonomy charter amendment.

And, DC residents will send a powerful message: we should control the tax dollars that come out of our pockets – just like every other jurisdiction in American.
Our experience with the failure of the DC Voting Rights Act makes it clear that the referendum is prudent insurance against being held hostage by powerful national special interest groups.

DC Vote and our coalition will continue to fight hard for a budget autonomy bill in Congress. But, given the uncertainty of a positive outcome for the budget autonomy bill, it is time for the Council to take bold action and let the citizens of the District of Columbia engage in their own fight for budget freedom.