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Retirees Protesting Proposed 30 Percent Slash in Pension Clash With Police Outside Government House

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Ernice Gilbert **March 11, 2020**

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Retirees and police argued outside Gov't House on St. Croix today during a protest action calling on government officials to "save G.E.R.S." By. ERNICE GILBERT/ VI CONSORTIUM

ST. CROIX — Retirees on St. Croix were stunned when they were told by officials of the Government Employees' Retirement System at a town hall meeting Tuesday that a 30 percent reduction in their monthly pension was on the table, proposed by G.E.R.S.'s actuary, in what would be one of the last-ditch efforts to save the system. The shocking news resulted in a protest action outside Government House this morning.

At the town hall, held at the St. Croix Education Complex during the evening time, G.E.R.S. officials said the action was being considered because the Government of the Virgin Islands, which is the plan sponsor, had not done its part of funding the beleaguered system, which is projected to run out of money and collapse in 2023 — just about when Governor Albert Bryan completes his first term in office.

G.E.R.S. needs \$2 billion (though its unfunded liability is roughly \$5 billion) and important structural changes to be fully saved. To add a few years of life, the system needs between \$400 million to \$600 million. So far, senators have not come up with a strategy to salvage the pension system, though most of them ran on platforms vowing to work toward a strategy to keep it alive.

Governor Albert Bryan's main plan so far has been to legalize marijuana for recreational use, which he projects could bring in up to \$20 million annually. The funds would then be used to secure a bond of up to \$200 million, he told the Consortium [during a recent interview](#). However, Mr. Bryan's estimation of \$20 million being secured from sales of legalized marijuana annually is overly ambitious, and even if the pending industry were to grow to such levels, it would not be achieved quickly enough to avert collapse of G.E.R.S.

Furthermore, the Senate [held Mr. Bryan's amendment](#) to the original medicinal marijuana law, contending that more review was needed, and that the original law had yet to be established.

Mr. Bryan said his administration's goal is to get G.E.R.S. to \$1.2 billion in assets before his first term is over. This would include finding a money source, he said. "If we can't get there then we failed. When I say we failed, not me as an administration, we as a people, because then our retirees would be facing those cuts. And that means that it's all of us," the governor said during the Consortium interview.

During Wednesday's protest outside Government House, some retirees were expecting the governor to address their concerns. But according to Karl Knight, the Bryan administration's chief of staff, Mr. Bryan has been on the U.S. mainland since Monday in discussions with cruise ship officials. A release about the governor's departure was not provided to the media.

G.E.R.S.'s portfolio is estimated to be worth between \$600 million-\$700 million. But the system is paying out millions more to retirees than what it's collecting from active government employees. The problem is rapidly eating away at the pension system's assets.

The protest this morning represented a turning point for retirees, many of whom had mostly complained about G.E.R.S.'s impending doom, but had not taken such bold action. Mary Moorhead, a respected community activist, who also serves on the Board of Education, said retirees had been battered about far too long by leaders who say one thing but fail to deliver.

"I want the governor or the Legislature to do something to make sure that G.E.R.S. does not go insolvent. They have been talking and talking. They campaigned on it, they haven't done one thing yet. It is time for them to act before G.E.R.S. has to make a decision to decrease our annuity that we worked hard [for]. "... They want to just drop us on the side and we're not standing for it. This is the first act, next one will be up the intensity," said Ms. Moorhead at the protest.

Police and protesters argued during the action, with the protesters contending that the area was peaceful before law enforcement intervened and attempted to break up the crowd. According to longtime community activist and protester Eurman Fahie and at least one other protester, the officers threatened to use pepper spray to breakup the gathering of retirees if the action was not halted. "They said it came from the top," Mr. Fahie said.

Traffic was diverted to the road heading to Caravelle Hotel. Vehicles were backed up all the way to Thomas Bakery near Time Square. On the Bypass, motorists diverted from Christiansted caused long traffic lines as well.

For Mr. Fahie, who attended the Tuesday evening meeting, that G.E.R.S. would even consider such a draconian cut of retirees' pension, showed how unreasonably excessive the officials at G.E.R.S. were. "They say that's to help the retirement system limp along a little longer. But from my perspective, as [a] man who knows about the system and the abuse of the money, the misuse, it's unconscionable," he said.

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