The Virgin Islands Consortium

In Bold Move, Gittens Urges GERS to Launch Homeownership Program Using Hundreds of Acres Across the Territory

Senator Kenneth Gittens renewed calls for GERS to address the Virgin Islands' housing crisis by developing 170 acres on St. Croix and 120 acres on St. Thomas into affordable homes for members, framing the plan as key to retention and retirement security.

GERS / **Published On August 26, 2025 02:37 PM /**

Staff Consortium August 26, 2025

Senator Kenneth Gittens on Tuesday renewed his call for the Government Employees' Retirement System (GERS) to launch a Homeownership Program, pressing the system's leadership to act swiftly on plans to develop GERS-owned land on St. Croix and St.

Thomas into affordable housing for public sector workers.

In both a formal letter to the GERS Board and during a recent meeting with GERS Administrator Angel Dawson, Board Chairman Dwane Callwood, John Woods of Jaredian Design Group, and several members of the 36th Legislature, Gittens presented a strategy he said could tackle the territory's housing crisis while strengthening the financial health of the retirement system, according to a release the senator issued.

"We are seeing a disturbing trend where GERS members are leaving their jobs just before they reach the 10-year vesting period, cashing out their contributions, and relocating elsewhere for better opportunities," said Gittens. "This is not just a loss of skilled personnel, it's a threat to the long-term solvency of the retirement system itself."

The plan calls for the development of approximately 170 acres on St. Croix and 120 acres on St. Thomas—prime real estate owned by GERS but currently underutilized. Under Gittens's proposal, the land would be subdivided and developed in partnership with a reputable builder to provide quality, middle-income homes for GERS members such as teachers, nurses, police officers, and firefighters. Construction financing would also be offered through GERS for eligible employees.

"This is more than a housing initiative," Gittens explained. "It's a bold strategy to address workforce retention, retirement security, and economic development, all in one."

The senator noted that the GERS Board had previously explored a mixed-use development concept for its holdings on St. Croix, which included a town center and independent living facilities for retirees. He urged the board to revisit that vision, but with greater emphasis on creating homeownership opportunities for active and retired members.

"This is a smart, people-centered investment in our future," said Gittens. "It improves quality of life, keeps essential professionals rooted in the Territory, and ensures retirees can live with dignity. I urge GERS members and the wider public to speak up, get involved, and help push this idea forward."

Support for the initiative has also come from fellow lawmakers. Senator Novelle E. Francis Jr. underscored the importance of building out infrastructure alongside any housing development. "That means not only homes but roads, utilities, and community services — the full package," he said.

Senate President Milton E. Potter echoed the urgency of addressing what he called the Territory's "real housing crisis." Reflecting on the recent meeting with GERS leaders, he said, "Monday's meeting was an excellent opportunity to collaborate with the leadership of GERS to find tangible affordable housing solutions. I was very impressed with the caliber of discussions and confident that our efforts will bear fruit."

Senate Majority Leader Kurt Vialet also stressed that time is of the essence. "We have to act now," he declared. "We've had the conversations, and now we must aggressively follow up and take action to get people into homes. This is the kind of solution our community needs today — not years from now."

Gittens pledged to continue building consensus with both the legislature and the private sector to move the idea from concept to reality. He expressed appreciation to his colleagues—Senators Marvin Blyden, Dwayne DeGraff, Alma Francis-Heyliger, Marise James, Franklin Johnson, Carla Joseph, and Clifford Joseph—for participating in the fact-finding session with GERS.

“Together, we can turn this vision into reality, and create lasting benefits for our workers, our retirees, and our economy,” he concluded.

© Viconsortium 2026