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Former Senate President Ronald Russell Dies, Leaving Legacy in Law, Politics, GERS and Frederiksted Advocacy

Senator Kenneth Gittens confirmed Ronald Russell's death during Wednesday's Senate proceedings, where lawmakers paused briefly to honor the former Senate president, attorney, GERS trustee and longtime civic voice.

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Former Senator Ronald Russell.

Former Senator Ronald E. Russell, a longtime attorney whose public life spanned the Virgin Islands Legislature, the Government Employees' Retirement System Board of Trustees, community advocacy in Frederiksted and service in local athletics, has died.

Senator Kenneth Gittens confirmed Mr. Russell's death during Wednesday's Senate proceedings. Following the announcement, the body paused for a brief moment of silence in his honor.

Details surrounding Mr. Russell's death, including the cause, were not immediately announced during the session.

Mr. Russell was one of the more recognizable public figures in Virgin Islands civic and political life, having served in the Legislature and later as Senate president. Legislative records show that he served as vice president of the 26th Legislature and as president of the 29th Legislature, placing him among the territory's former legislative leaders.

A practicing attorney, Mr. Russell also remained active in major public debates beyond his time as an elected official. His legal career and public service often intersected, including during disputes involving the structure and authority of Virgin Islands government. In 2007, as a senator, he challenged the validity of judicial nominations and appointments to the newly established Supreme Court of the Virgin Islands, a case that reached the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit.

In more recent years, Mr. Russell served on the GERS Board of Trustees, representing retirees in the St. Croix District. He joined the board in May 2021, and his term had been scheduled to expire in May 2026. His time on the board included debates over the retirement system's finances, governance, and administrative decisions, including the board's controversial 2022 vote to [raise the salary of GERS Administrator Austin Nibbs](#) from \$180,000 to \$250,000, a motion Mr. Russell made and later defended.

In March, the GERS board voted to remove Mr. Russell from his trustee position, citing repeated unexcused absences under the board's meeting attendance policy. At the time, WTJX reported that court filings showed Mr. Russell had relocated off island for medical care. The board chair said the removal was based on attendance rules and that the seat, because it was elected by St. Croix retirees rather than appointed by the governor, would need to be filled through a retiree election.

Mr. Russell's public footprint extended well beyond elected office and GERS. He was also associated with Our Town Frederiksted, Inc., where he served as chairman of the Board of Trustees. In that role, he advocated for renewed attention to Frederiksted's development, cultural relevance and economic future.

During a [2022 hearing on proposed changes](#) affecting historic preservation and development in the territory's historic towns, Mr. Russell supported efforts aimed at encouraging investment and revitalization. "Our Town Frederiksted supports any legislation that would encourage and support investment and economic development for the town," he said at the time. "Social programs that address the young people in our territory are absolutely necessary."

He also said Frederiksted needed activity that could draw both residents and visitors, while balancing preservation and growth. "As an organization, we understand the complex dynamic of retaining the historic presence and ambiance, but development is needed. With the new technology available, our future generations of Crucian and Virgin Islanders can come to appreciate Frederiksted as a destination for residents to congregate and enjoy and for visitors to experience the historic and cultural relevance of Frederiksted," Mr. Russell said.

Our Town Frederiksted later described him as part of the organization's rebuilding effort following Hurricane Maria and the deaths of several of its core leaders. In 2023, as the organization announced the appointment of a new executive director, Mr. Russell said the group

had been quietly rebuilding and working to move Frederiksted forward.

“The vision of Our Town Frederiksted is to advocate for the community development and transformation of the town of Frederiksted and its surrounding areas,” he said then.

Mr. Russell also had a presence in the territory’s sports community. Legislative records identify him as president of the Virgin Islands Track and Field Federation during testimony in 2020 related to honoring Wallace Williams, an Olympic athlete and longtime figure in Virgin Islands athletics.

In 2024, Mr. Russell returned to the Legislature as a former senator to speak in support of honoring Claire Lorraine Brown Roker, praising her as a culture bearer and advocate for preserving Virgin Islands cultural heritage. His testimony reflected a recurring theme in his public life: the importance of civic memory, cultural preservation and community institutions.

Mr. Russell’s death marks the passing of a Virgin Islander whose career crossed multiple arenas of public life — law, politics, retirement-system governance, historic preservation, sports and community advocacy. His legacy includes service in the Legislature’s leadership, involvement in major institutional debates, and years of engagement with issues affecting St. Croix and the wider territory.