

The Virgin Islands Consortium

GERS Asks Retirees To Accept Reduction In Annuities, But Has Yet To Bill Government For Supposed Shortfall

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Ernice Gilbert **September 20, 2016**



ST. CROIX -- Senators met with G.E.R.S. board members, the system's actuary and an investment group on Monday, who attempted to explain in detail the ails of the system, where it has made gains and the cash infusion needed to save it.

At the summit, which continues today, the issue concerning the reduction of recently retired firefighters' annuities from 3 percent to 2.5 percent, translating into a substantial reduction in their monthly retirement check if they were to accept the offer, was often discussed.

For example, a firefighter who performed 21 years of service is eligible to receive 63 percent of his or her salary at the 3 percent annuity rate. At the 2.5 percent rate, the firefighter would only be paid 52.5 percent of the salary made when serving -- basically half the salary earned while active; a nonstarter for many.

Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly -- citing a section of a presentation made by Rocky Joyner, G.E.R.S.'s actuary, that points to pertinent details of Section 718 of Virgin Islands Code, which says, "the System shall not pay any benefits to an employee unless his and the employer's contributions adequately finance benefits and the related costs under this chapter" -- questioned whether G.E.R.S. was reading the law correctly when it decided to lower the firefighters' annuity percentage by .5 percent.

Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly pointed out that the firefighters had made all their payments, as well as their employer, the V.I. Fire Service, and that these employees had qualified and met retirement requirements and had even made higher monthly contributions into the system compared to other members. G.E.R.S. Board of Trustees Administrator, Austin Nibbs, challenged Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly's description of the law.

But when it was revealed that G.E.R.S. had not even attempted to bill the Government of the Virgin Islands for the missing contributions it said would be needed to allow the retirees to receive their earned and promised 3 percent annuity, there was a sigh of frustration, coming from some lawmakers and retirees in the room -- including Davidson Charlemagne, [who vowed last week not to accept the reduction](#).

G.E.R.S. had taken the steps necessary to reduce the retirees' annuities that will have a great financial effect on those who accept it, but the system had not yet billed the Government of the Virgin Islands for the missing amount. And that amount, Mr. Nibbs divulged, was not yet determined by the system, further frustrating retirees in the room, located at G.E.R.S.'s St. Croix offices.

"So they're asking us to take a reduction in annuities because of what the government owes -- even if we and our employer have made all our payments -- but they haven't even inquired to determine how much the government owes?" Mr. Charlemagne mumbled with annoyance.

Mr. Nibbs hurriedly said that notices to the government would start going out on Tuesday, but that was not enough to satisfy stupefied lawmakers and retirees.

Senator Kenneth Gittens, who left the meeting frustrated after Board Chairman Wilbur Callender asked that the senator stop referring to failed and bad investments, later issued a press release assailing the board.

"The system is in the predicament it is in because of bad decision-making by the board, it is clear," Mr. Gittens said. "Talk about the insolvency of the system, but yet we have realized that the system is not properly billing government agencies and departments for their contributions and they are not properly collecting the money that is due to ensure a constant revenue flow. We have people suffering because they cannot get the returns of the benefits that they have contributed for so many years and meanwhile the board and representatives are not operating like they want to keep the system alive -- operating in this manner must change."

On Monday, standing alone, retired V.I.P.D. employee Patricia Tranberg Stevens, stood outside G.E.R.S. here, near Subway Restaurant in Golden Rock, protesting what had befallen her because she had not received a single check from G.E.R.S. after retiring in December, 2015. Her home is facing foreclosure and her father is ill. At her wits' end, Ms. Stevens told us that when someone's backed into a corner, the only thing left to do is fight.

And she is not the only one going through adversity because of G.E.R.S.'s negligence. Rolston Friday Jr., who commented on the video The Consortium posted on its Facebook platform, [shared a similar story](#).

"Patricia, you're not alone. I also retired August 31, 2015. One year and one month since I retired after serving 30 years as a law enforcement officer, and to this date I have not receive a check from G.E.R.S.," he wrote. "I have used up all of my savings. I relocated to New York after I retired for personal reasons, however if I was home (STX) I would have also stood with you in protest. This is so unjust.

"When I mention to my fellow law enforcement officers in NY that another month came and gone and I [had not] received my check from G.E.R.S., I'm asked on numerous occasions that if St. Croix is a Third World country. I am hoping that the senators and the governor can come together with G.E.R.S. and work this issue out for God's sake for the benefit of all retirees and future retirees. God bless us all," Mr. Friday concluded.

The second and official day of G.E.R.S.'s summit will be held today at 9 a.m. at the V.I. Port Authority's administrative building conference room in St. Thomas, and transmitted via video conference to the port's St. Croix office at the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport terminal.

Feature Image: Patricia Tranberg Stevens protest outside GERS on Monday. (Credit: Ernice Gilbert, VIC)