

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mapp's Economic Doomsday Scenario For Sanes-Sponsored Retired Employees Bill Was Erroneous, Senators Say

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ST. CROIX -- Senators who make up the Committee on Finance were in a state of bewilderment Wednesday, wondering how Governor Kenneth Mapp had managed to so misinterpret a Senator Samuel Sanes-sponsored bill whose main aim is to assure that retired employees seeking reemployment with the government pay into the Government Employees Retirement System (G.E.R.S.).

As it stands now, they don't have to. The bill also seeks to amend the current system that allows retired employees who are already employed with, or are seeking reemployment

from the government to receive annuities while employed. The language is still being tweaked, but the overall goal of the bill, according to Mr. Sanes, is to save the government money while filling critical jobs in areas of shortage such as education and law enforcement.

"I'm really surprised at his statements," Mr. Sanes began. "The retirees never petitioned us and we never had any major meetings with them. This is something that was brought up at one of the meetings off of suggestions."

"It's basically this: if you retire and you come back to government, you have to pay into the retirement fund. There were a few exceptions, of course -- nurses, teachers and police officers -- but that's it, and we made some minor changes, but this is beneficial to G.E.R.S., to the retirement fund. So to say that it's detrimental to the budget or it's going to affect it, I just don't see where he got that information or I don't know who's advising him; I'm not going to judge him, but it was erroneous," Mr. Sanes said.

Mr. Sanes said the pool of retired law enforcement officers, nurses and teachers were not that many. For police officers, those looking to return were the ones who worked on cold cases, and about 64 retired teachers. "As you know we have a hard time bringing back teachers and that I understand, which is why we decided to give them the exception," Mr. Sanes said.

In fact, the introductory description of the bill [couldn't be clearer](#): "An Act to repeal provisions that allow persons who are receiving a retirement annuity from the Government Employees' Retirement System to return to work for the Government of the Virgin Islands without making contributions to the GERS."

The governor, however, had a different interpretation. "I thought we had long agreed that once you did your service to the people of the Virgin Islands, that we were going to thank you, and that you were going to take your retirement benefits and sail off and enjoy your retirement and your grandchildren and children, and do something else. And that we were going to make these jobs available to younger people in the community — your children and grandchildren, and that they could start off on their career and they could use their degrees and their training to build the Virgin Islands.

"But this bill seems to be a backdoor approach to set aside the young folks from job opportunities and to bring retirees back in without any consideration, or contributing to the G.E.R.S. in terms of benefits," Mr. Mapp said.

Senator Kurt Violet, at the beginning of Wednesday's budget overview hearing, disputed the governor's claim. "The interpretation given to the governor of what took place in the Senate was totally, totally wrong," Mr. Violet said.

The governor was right on [another bill](#) that seeks to give a 25 percent property tax reduction to retirees who are owed retroactive wages. Government testifiers — to include Nellon Bowry, Office of Management and Budget director, and representatives from the Tax Assessor's Office — spoke against the measure on Friday, contending that approving the bill at a time when the territory's financial standing remains unsteady, would be careless. The bill was held in committee unanimously -- and senators were again baffled as to why the governor made it an issue during his press conference on

Monday.

"I'm not going to quibble or argue with the retirees who feel they are owed retroactive wages, but this is not, at this time, in the best interest of the people of the Virgin Islands," Mr. Mapp said. He then spoke of a grim scenario were the measure to become law.

"The corollary is we lay government workers off to grant this credit. Because if we have a fiscal balance budget that went to the Legislature, it speaks to revenues matched with expenditures; no borrowing, and you want to siphon off revenues for something else, then we lay government workers off," Mr. Mapp said.

Even the bill's sponsor, Mr. Sanes, concurred that the time wasn't opportune, although he asserted that retirees who are owed retroactive wages should not be forgotten.

"I understand," Mr. Sanes said. "I understand that this time, perhaps we need to put it on hold, but let us not forget what we owe the retirees. So many retirees are waiting; some of them have passed away and they still haven't seen their money."