

The Virgin Islands Consortium

After Three Terms (6 Years), Senators Can Retire And Receive \$1,487 A Month From G.E.R.S.

Government / **Published On February 09, 2018 11:51 AM /**

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ST. CROIX -- A Virgin Islands senator can serve for three terms, which is equivalent to 6 years, and retire -- if the senator is satisfied with receiving \$1,487.50 monthly from the Government Employees' Retirement System (G.E.R.S.). That amount is based on 21 percent of the \$85,000 annual salary that senators currently make. Regular government employees can start receiving partial benefits after serving for 10 years.

The information, which was revealed during a town hall meeting the G.E.R.S. board held at the Cardiac Center's conference room at the Juan F. Luis Hospital on Thursday, roiled the packed room of G.E.R.S. members, all of whom attended out of concern for their pension, especially with the system's [2023 impending collapse](#) if nothing is done to save

it.

The board said senators are eligible to receive 21 percent calculated on the \$85,000 salary after serving three terms in office. Every other employee of any department or agency within the government whose pension is with G.E.R.S., is calculated at \$65,000, except for judges, said Terrence Thomas, a G.E.R.S. employee who read aloud the questions asked by town hall attendees, and also helped to simplify certain answers given by G.E.R.S. Administrator Austin Nibbs and board members.

And while government employees must wait 30 years before receiving full benefits, senators start enjoying those benefits after 20 years. Also, while someone who served as a senator only needs to be age 50 to start receiving full benefits, other employees must be age 60 and over.

"I'm not going to editorialize this; that's not my job here, but I think you need to let this sink in to realize where some of the problems lie," Mr. Thomas said.

The town hall on St. Croix followed a similar event in St. Thomas the day before. At both locations, G.E.R.S. members asked questions that revealed their many concerns for the retirement system. Some wanted to know whether they could pull out of the system (any G.E.R.S. member can request their funds from G.E.R.S. before 10 years), others sought information on some of the system's questionable investments, including the purchase of the Carambola Resort, which G.E.R.S. assumed control of after the prior owners [defaulted on a \\$15 million loan provided by G.E.R.S.](#) The Office of the Inspector General in a 2016 audit concluded that the loan was provided without proper due diligence.

Members also asked why the funds coming out of their paychecks for their retirement was not being sent to G.E.R.S. Mr. Nibbs said he was not sure, but pointed to tax refund checks that Governor Mapp said would be going out to residents.

Mr. Nibbs also said that G.E.R.S., even after multiple attempts, had not met with Mr. Mapp since 2015, suggesting that the issue was on the Mapp administration's end. The news surprised members, although Mr. Nibbs attempted to play it down, stating that a meeting with the governor had finally been planned for next week.

While members asked a variety of questions, the board restated what it has said for years: The plan sponsor, which is the Government of the Virgin Islands, owes G.E.R.S. \$1.6 billion and needs to fund the pension system.

A meeting between lawmakers and the board is planned, Mr. Nibbs made known, where multiple options will be discussed, among them giving members the option to pursue private 401k plans.