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GERS Trustee Ronald Russell Says St. Croix Retirees 'Treating Me Like a Pariah' After Letter of No Confidence is Read Into Record

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GERS Board member Ronald Russell.

In a contentious meeting, a retiree representative on the Government Employees Retirement System Board of Trustees found himself on the defensive against a vote of no confidence from those in his district.

The first GERS Board meeting for 2023 occurred on Thursday. Approximately 10 minutes in, Mary Moorhead asked whether correspondence sent to board members had been read into the record. It had not, and Board Chair Dwane Callwood invited Ms. Moorhead to do so. Trustee Ronald Russell objected, saying he had not received it, and suggested the correspondence be dealt

with next month, at the next meeting. After other Trustees confirmed that they had seen the correspondence and further that Mr. Russell had been included on the email circulation list, the chair again invited Ms. Moorhead to read the letter.

With technical difficulties presenting Moorhead with challenges, Trustee Leona Smith offered to read it instead, to which Trustee Russell again objected. After a short recess, Mr. Williams invited Ms. Smith to do so. She began to read a document which Ms. Moorhead interrupted to inform was incorrect, and Moorhead then read the correct letter, from Acting President of St. Croix Government Retirees Inc Debra Christopher.

Via that letter, Ms. Christopher informed the GERS board that members of her association voted, “in overwhelming consensus”, that they had no confidence in Mr. Russell as the retiree representative on the GERS Board for the St. Croix District.

“This individual has never had any communications with our retirees since joining the board,” the terse letter read, before concluding “Let it be known, this is the position of the Saint Croix Government Retirees Inc.”

The chair then turned to Administrator Nibbs, who presented his report, which included highlights of his appearances and meetings for the month, and statistics about GERS operations and financial performance.

As soon as Mr. Nibbs had concluded, Trustee Russell broke in on a point of personal privilege, and after some brief moments of confusion in which some board members mistakenly believed Mr. Russell was attempting to interrupt the GERS Administrator, who clarified that he had concluded his remarks, Russell was allowed to proceed.

Russell noted that he had won his place on the Board by default, since nobody else from the St. Croix district had offered themselves as an alternative when he submitted his name to represent St. Croix retirees on the GERS Board.

There was no one else to challenge him, Mr. Russell argued, even after he was “rejected” by the St. Croix retirees when he tried to rally support for an initiative of Government Retirees United for Fairness (GRUFF). After GRUFF encouraged him to seek a place on the Board, Mr. Russell said he made two attempts “to get St. Croix Retirees to submit a name to run for the leadership position in the GERS system.” Those efforts were unsuccessful, Russell said, and so he ultimately put himself forward.

As for the lack of engagement with the government retirees he is supposed to be representing, Mr. Russell argued that it was because he had only been invited to one meeting, which he was unable to attend, while the chair had been invited to several. “So they dealing with me like a pariah,” Russell contended. He went on to complain that the St. Croix retirees were not supportive of a number of his policy initiatives, and did not attend meetings he had convened. “They have never participated with me as a representative,” Mr. Russell said. “I hope the retirees on a whole dismiss that St. Croix retirees’ letter, because they have not cooperated with me, and they have not invited me to meetings.”

Russell claimed that his default nomination to the GERS Board of Trustees meant that the letter from the St. Croix Retirees was not written in good faith. “You got to take that with a grain of salt,” he advised. “They participating just to say they have a vote of no confidence in me and they are not participating in nothing?”

He concluded that it was the leadership of the St. Croix retirees' organization that opposed him, and that many others supported his efforts.

Correction: Jan. 27, 2023 at 12:27 p.m.:

An attribution error due to poor audio quality crept into our reporting and has been updated accordingly. The letter read by Ms. Moorhead, written by Ms. Christopher, represents the position of St. Croix Government Retirees Inc.

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