

Session Ends with a Mostly Positive Whimper for State Retirees

By Chuck Freedman

Once again funding for state retirees' COLAs was a no-show, and the disappointment for that in this time of massive surpluses cannot be overstated. However, other than that, this session was moderately positive for retirees with very little downsides for our issues. Another \$26.75 million was appropriated for a third consecutive bonus in FY '25.

HB 824 would create a new law enforcement retirement system, and HB 746 called for employees' supplemental compensations being included in calculating their retirement benefits. These two bills had high fiscal impact that would have competed for the funding necessary for our COLAs. Both bills failed to cross or light up another bill's Christmas tree.

HB 285 had its provisions stripped that would increase the permissible percentage of our pension fund which could be placed in alternative investments. Several bills passed the House but failed to get Senate approval. These include:

- HB 945 is a good bill which would protect SHBP members in certain circumstances.
- HB 1363 called for an actuarial study comparing the current method that SHBP uses for determining the reimbursements to pharmacies for filling drug prescriptions with another study.
- HB 343 would regulate pharmacy benefits managers and health plans to include requiring pharmacy benefits managers to calculate defined cost sharing for insureds at the point of sale and to cap the amounts charged to insureds.
- HB 472 would allow sworn law enforcement officers serving in and the commissioner and deputy commissioner of the Motor Carrier Compliance Division and the Capitol Police Division of the Department of Public Safety to be eligible for regular retirement benefits at the age of 55.

On the other side, some bills passed the Senate but failed to get House approval. These include:

- SB 117 would allow beneficiaries of ERS retirees to assign portions of their group term life insurance benefits to pay for funeral services for the retirees.
- SB 266 would provide for a fiduciary duty to invest retirement assets solely in the financial interests of participants and their beneficiaries and revise allowable benefit multipliers for current and future retirees of the Public-School Employees Retirement System. It failed to get House approval.

GSRA Presents Legislative Service Awards to Both Appropriations Committee Chairs

By Chuck Freedman

On March 13, 2024, GSRA was honored to award our 2023 Legislative Service Awards to Senate Appropriations Chairperson Blake Tillery and to House Appropriations Chairperson Matt Hatchett. Both Chairpersons were accessible and approachable throughout 2023. They provided GSRA assistance when they felt they could and gave us reasons when they felt they could not. Both supported including \$26.75 million in appropriations for one-time retirement adjustments in FY '23, '24 and '25. GSRA appreciates the jobs performed by these fine, dedicated public servants.

Chairperson Hatchett has lived his entire life in Dublin. He was a long-time analyst for Delta Airlines before opening his own dry-cleaning shop and, subsequently, other small businesses. He was first elected to the House in 2010 and has served in several leadership positions. He has been very active in community affairs and is married with two daughters.

Chairperson Tillery is an attorney from Vidalia. He was first elected to the Senate in 2016. He too has been very active in the community. He is married with one son.



Figure 1: Photo on Left include Chuck Clay, Chairperson Tillery and Chuck Freeman. Photo on the right include Chuck Clay, Chuck Freeman, Chairperson Matt Hatchett, and GSRA President Robert Riddle

GSRA appreciates the commitment and leadership of both Chairmans.

GSRA 2024 Annual Meeting Theme: “Teamwork Makes the Dream Work”

By GSRA Annual Meeting Committee

“Teamwork makes the dream work” is not just a catchy phrase, it is the best way to achieve anything worthwhile in life. In many ways it makes things happen easier and faster than individual efforts can. An example: This is our tenth year serving on the GSRA Annual Meeting Committee, and it is our tenth year working as a great team. For the first seven years, the team was Donna Buffum, Kip Mann and Allan Hill. For the last three years (after Donna re-retired), the team has been Laura Pike, Rhonda Floyd, Kip and Allan. If we do say so ourselves, we have put together some great Annual Meetings. Each of us has different talents and abilities which when used together make the planning and implementation flow smoothly.

We met in Macon, Savannah, Columbus, Unicoi State Park, and Lake Blackshear Resort. Prior to the COVID pandemic, we had terrific attendance. In 2014, 500 members were in Macon, when all three gubernatorial candidates addressed our membership. There were over 250 in Savannah in 2015, 300 in Macon in 2016, over 250 in Columbus in 2017 and Unicoi in 2019.

Then the pandemic struck, and the Annual Meeting was virtual in 2020 and 2021. We met in person again in 2022 at the beautiful Lake Blackshear Resort, and we had a disappointing total registration of under 110 members. In 2023, we met at the Historic Iron Works in Columbus, a great facility in a revitalized downtown, and we had less than 220 attendees. We asked ourselves, why were our members not showing up? Was it the location again, too far away from a central location in the state? Health concerns? Were the workshops not compelling? Was it too expensive? **OR** Was it resignation on the part of our members, feeling that our plight was hopeless? Have our members given up? That no matter what we did our message was not getting through, so what was the point?

The truth is our message is getting through. The COLAs that have been granted in the past two years, while much smaller than we wanted and needed, were the direct result of the efforts of GSRA. Our leadership has had numerous meetings over the last several years with influential members of the legislature and the Governor’s office, including the Governor himself, to present our case. Our members have responded in great numbers to Action Alerts, contacting their local legislators to press our case. Local chapters have invited their legislators to chapter meetings to meet their constituents and hear their stories. All of those efforts have paid off and continue to pay off. The current budget passed by the legislature not only includes \$27 million for current retirees, but \$500 million to shore up the unfunded liability of the ERS fund, a crucial step for future COLA’s.

Over the past several years, GSRA has created momentum that we need to continue. How do we do that? By expanding our **TEAMWORK** by continuing to increase our membership and continuing to press our case with the legislature and the Governor. Perhaps most importantly, by showing our Teamwork in action at this year’s Annual Meeting. We have

invited the Chairs of both the House and Senate Appropriations Committees, the Governor, and the Director of OPB, ERS, and DCH to participate in panel discussions at the meeting. A strong turnout of our members lets them know that we are passionate about our cause and committed to seeing it through by working as a Team to make the Dream happen. A poor turnout will give them the opposite impression, that we don't really care, so why should they.

We began this article by saying that we are on a great team planning these Annual Meetings, but our team is much bigger than Kip, Laura, Rhonda and Allan. Our team is the leadership of our GSRA Board. Our team is the Local Chapters around the State. Most importantly, our team is composed of almost 6000 members of GSRA. Our team is the over 57,000 current state retirees of ERS!

Like any team, we have to show the strength of our team on game day, which is the 2024 Annual Meeting. We must show the strength of our team by showing up in numbers at the Annual Meeting this October.

The purpose of the Annual Meeting has never been to make money; it is to bring us together as a team to review past efforts and work toward our future.

Mark your calendars now for Monday and Tuesday, October 7th & 8th, 2024 for the Annual Meeting at the Robert F Hatcher Jr. Conference Center on the campus of Middle Georgia State in Macon. We need to show our state leaders that we have a strong team that will continue to be strong in the future. Not only is the Annual Meeting important in getting our message through, but it is also fun and informative. You will attend great workshops, hear important speakers, reconnect with long-time friends and co-workers, and you will enjoy yourself.

We all have a dream of a secure future with the benefits that were promised to us as employees, and our Teamwork will make our Dream work.



Figure 2: Robert F. Hatcher, Sr. Conference Center is the location for the 2024 GSRA Annual Meeting.

We need all our team there! See you in Macon!

From the Home Office

By Robert Riddle

Hello GSRA Members,

I hope everyone is enjoying this beautiful Springtime weather (except for the pollen)!

We have wrapped up another Legislative session with the Governor and the Legislature putting \$500 million into the ESRGA fund. This appropriation does not provide COLAs to GSRA members but does help move the retirement fund to being fully funded, which is important. Your legislative committee worked hard to educate appropriations committees on appropriating state funds in a way that drew down \$184 million in matching federal funds but to no avail for this session. We have been promised that the Governor and the Legislature will add an additional \$500 million next year and hopefully we can convince them, if appropriated to individual agencies, that federal matching funds can be drawn down to match the state funds.

All this to say, the more money we can get infused into ESRGA the more likely we will again receive a meaningful COLA. Many legislators erroneously think these funds are directly funding cost of living increases for state retirees, but they are not. So please stay in touch with your Representatives and Senators to make sure they understand how these appropriations will be used.

I hope everyone had an enjoyable Easter and finds hope in this season of rebirth. I and the GSRA Board will continue to renew our efforts to get GSRA members the benefits we were promised and deserve.



Figure 3: GSRA President Riddle and grandson Reeve cheering on the Braves!

Local Chapter News

Coosa Valley Chapter

The Coosa Valley Chapter held its first quarterly meeting of 2024 at Georgia Highlands College, Cartersville Campus on February 29, 2024. It was decided at the previous meeting to alternate meeting locations rather than meet only in Floyd County. Twenty-one members from five counties were in attendance.

A presentation on “Telephone and Computer Scams” was planned but our speaker had to cancel due to a last-minute critical work meeting. Being resourceful former state employees, the group discussed their own experiences with scams and were able to share some helpful information on this topic.

The current officers have served since the Chapter was started in 2019 and feel that a rotation is needed. Several members felt that they needed more information about the duties and responsibilities of each office. This information will be obtained and sent to those attending today’s meeting.

Other topics discussed were subjects of interest and possible resources for future guest speakers, recruitment of new members, and the recent GSRA Newsletter.

The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, May 16, 2024, at 10:00 am in Rome. The location will be announced once space is reserved.

Macon Middle Georgia GSRA Chapter

The Macon Middle Georgia GSRA Chapter met on March 9th at Ole Time Country Buffett in Macon Ga. There were 24 members present on site and 6 were present via ZOOM.



Figure 4: Thirty Macon-Middle Georgia Chapter members met on March 9, 2024.

We had a special guest, Ms. Phyllis Tufts Hightower, a candidate running for State Representative District 149. She shared her thoughts on running for representative, she talked about wanting to represent us and sought our thoughts on why we are not currently getting a COLA. As a retired state employee, she also expressed an interest in joining GSRA.



Figure 5: Candidate for State Representative District 149, Phyllis Tufts Hightower, was the guest speaker.

President Clayton Teague stated, "We have a lot of things going on with the State of Georgia and cost of living raises are still priority". We need your support! Be sure to complete all surveys or action responses that are sent out from the state board. He shared all updates from the board meetings and reviewed information from the last three newsletters to be sure that everyone was abreast of the board's actions. The group was so glad to see the Treasurer, Ms. Bobby Joe Carver, in attendance after an extended illness. Ms. Carver reported that the chapter had \$301.55 in the treasury. The cost of membership may be going up a few dollars. We will let you know if and when that is official. We elected a new secretary, Valerie Ford, and Joseph Baden as assistant secretary.

President Teague urged members to continue to invite other retired or current state employees to chapter meetings and bring your spouse. We are always looking for new members to join and help with our mission. The membership chairperson asked for volunteers to assist with membership drives and 12 members volunteered. We will have these drives at different locations on Saturdays. Melissa Belk-Teague will reach out to the volunteers, and we will plan some activities. The membership chairperson will reach out to see if there is new outreach material and obtain some.

We had one new member to join and two members to renew during the meeting. We will continue to have zoom available for those who cannot physically attend. Next meeting will be June 8th. The location is to be announced later. Want to join Macon Middle Georgia Chapter? Reach out to Melissa Belk- Teague at melissabelk@maconmiddlegeorgiagsra.com.



Figure 6: Chapter President Clayton Teague provided GSRA updates to members.

Macon Middle Chapter thanks GSRA's Rhonda Floyd for setting up zoom so that members unable to attend the meeting could participate virtually.



Newsletter

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www.MyGSRA.com

March 2024

Welcome New Members!

Name	County	Name	County
Ronald Ardelean	Bibb	Jeanette Cannon	Butts
Kevin Dallmier	Chattooga	Alan Prisock	Cherokee
Harriett Young	Clayton	Gregory Peterson	Dekalb
Michael Hatcher	Emanuel	Carol Minshew	Floyd
Margie Hufstetler	Gordon	April King	Gwinnett
Robert Mallory	Jeff Davis	Wanda Eriksen	Lamar
Renee Barrett	Marion	Jennifer Easter	Muscogee
John Rheney	Oglethorpe	Joseph Andrews	Peach
Rhonda France	Richmond	Deborah Rickerson	Richmond
Clara Walker	Richmond	Allen Argoves	Talbot
Wade Clark	Treutlen	Mary Foster	Ware

ERSGA April 2024 Board Meeting

The Board of Employees Retirement System of Georgia (ERSGA) has a scheduled Board meeting in April. One item for discussion may be the allocation and distribution date of the \$26.75 million retirement bonus appropriated by the legislature.


The ERSGA Board meeting is open to all GSRA members and the public. The meeting details are below:

When: Thursday, April 18, 10:30am – 11:30am

Where: 2 Northside 75 NW, Atlanta, GA 30318


Location: ERS Board Room, First Floor





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