

ERS BOARD MEETS, CONTINUES TO DELAY DECISION ON FY '24 BENEFIT DOES NOT ADDRESS PRIOR DECISION TO DENY BENEFIT ADJUSTMENTS TO UNDER AGE 45 DISABILITY RETIREES; ELECTS NEW OFFICERS

By Chuck Freedman

At its regular June 15 meeting, the ERS Board received the usual secretary's report including an update on legislation and election of officers for FY '24. These are Homer Bryson, Chair, and Frank Thach, Vice Chair, both of whom are trustees who are elected by the other trustees. During the secretary's report, Executive Director Jim Potvin's comments included the following:

- HB 317, which would allow retirees' beneficiaries to assign portions of the retirees' benefits to funeral homes for retirees' funeral expenses, passed out of the General Assembly, but the Governor vetoed the bill. ERS had lobbied against the bill, and Mr. Potvin had not expected the veto, but is pleased with the result.
- The FY '23 one-time benefit adjustment will be about \$525. It will be distributed before the end of June.
- The decision on how to distribute the anticipated FY '24 annual benefit adjustment will not be made until the Board's annual meeting next April, assuming that the \$26.75 million appropriated for this purpose will still be available. Mr. Potvin informed the Board that he interprets the governor's message to disregard legislative intent for the appropriation to mean that the funding is still available, but that the General Assembly cannot dictate how the Board will distribute it.

Prior to the meeting, like prior to the last meeting, GSRA had requested to address the Board. For both meetings, GSRA advocated for two actions to benefit our members. First, we requested that the FY '24 appropriation be distributed as soon as administratively possible and that the decision not be put off until next April. Those many retirees whose benefits are insufficient to meet their financial obligations need help as soon as they can get it. Given that the State is projected to have a substantial surplus this year on top of the huge surpluses of the last two years, we do not share the concern that the \$26.75 million may not be available for its intended purpose.

However, we do agree that there is good reason for a short delay in the Board granting the FY '24 adjustment, and that is that neither the staff nor the Board have decided in what manner the adjustment should be granted. Director Potvin informed us that ERS will form a working group to study alternatives and related issues and develop a recommendation for the Board's consideration. In a very positive note, he has invited GSRA to provide members to participate in this working group.

The second matter which we advocated to the Board is that it reconsider its decision to deny eligibility for benefit adjustments to disability retirees under the age of 45. We do not understand why this decision was made, particularly since the Board granted eligibility to such retirees in other plans.

Like before the last meeting, GSRA's request to address the Board was again denied. This time we were informed of the possibility of being able to address the Board at either its October or December meetings, and maybe again at the February meeting.

Also, just as prior to the last meeting, GSRA sent messages to the Board which we requested that ERS management pass on to the trustees. We do not know if these requests were accommodated for either meeting.

The Board also again denied in-person attendance at its meeting for public observers. The public has had virtual access to the meeting via Zoom since the Board began limiting in-person attendance due to public health concerns during the pandemic. We understand that the Board will consider in-person attendance for FY '24 now that the public health emergency has passed.

At one point, as many as 193 people had signed on to the meeting on Zoom, which should convey to the Board that ERS beneficiaries are engaged and interested in its work on our behalf. Thank you to all those who took the time to "attend" and let your presence and interest be known.

GSRA TO JOIN WITH ERS IN DETERMINING BEST METHOD FOR DISTRIBUTING FY '24 ANNUAL BENEFIT TO RETIREES

In discussing with us the distribution of the \$26.75 million appropriated for annual benefit adjustments in FY '24, ERS Executive Director Jim Potvin told us that the board had not settled on a best way for doing that. He said that he was going to name a "working group" to develop a recommendation. At our request, Director Potvin agreed to add some GSRA members to the group. He will meet with GSRA representatives early next month. We welcome this opportunity to collaborate with ERS on this important issue. We will report on progress no later than the July newsletter.



Donate to GSRA Legal Fund

GSRA's Legal Fund was established as a dedicated legal fund in the event that leadership, on behalf of its members, ever has to retain legal counsel. The fund will be used to cover all appropriate legal fees related to ensuring that retiree benefits are not reduced or eliminated. Every donation makes a difference. For more information and to donate to this fund click on the link below.

[GSRA Legal Fund](#)



Top of Mind: On the Outside Looking In

By Beverly Littlefield

I logged on to the June ERS Board meeting a little early, just to avoid the last-minute rush and to make sure that the Zoom platform hadn't launched any last minute "updates" that would delay my entry to the meeting.

While the staff and trustees were gathering for the meeting, I could hear casual chitchat among some of the trustees: about people they knew in common, who had been having health problems, snook-fishing in Florida. I couldn't tell who was talking, but I learned something about them as they were learning about each other. Through casual, informal conversation. It's how relationships are formed and sustained, even among a board of trustees.

In years past, some of us would have been in the room and might have joined in on that snook fishing conversation. (At least two of our GSRA board members are avid fishermen.) As Chuck Freedman's lead article indicates, however, virtual attendance has been our only option to observe or participate in the Board meetings since the pandemic began. The current practice is to mute the audio and block the camera image of those Zoom participants who are considered "observers."

As the pandemic emergency ended, most business and government agencies resumed full operations. Continuing to limit public attendance at ERS Board meetings, offering the public virtual access only, seems to send a message: we generally are to be neither seen nor heard by the Trustees and staff during these meetings.

About 190 people in total logged in to the June 15th meeting on Zoom. Many names were familiar as GSRA members, but except for the tally of participants' names, we may as well not have been there.

I compared and contrasted this experience with what we encountered at the Capitol during this last Session. Capitol complex security measures continue in force, but constituents were all over the place. Limitations on gatherings in the Rotunda this year caused us to try a different style legislative event after not having had one for several years. But it worked out well. We enjoyed some good "face time" with a number of legislators who accepted our invitation for a conference-room lunch. It was another instance of people having the opportunity to learn about each other through casual conversation.



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The General Assembly, for all of its foibles, has embraced a measure of transparency by doing much of the people's business in full view of the people themselves. With the 2023 session, the legislators resumed their floor sessions and committee meetings much as they always have conducted them in pre-pandemic years. The sessions and meetings also are live-streamed, recorded, and archived for future viewing on demand.

We again attended many committee meetings in person. Even if we didn't always speak, our legislative team most often had opportunities to talk with the legislators casually...because we were in the room. Over time these informal encounters have fostered relationships that have contributed significantly to GSRA's steady progress in achieving our legislative objectives.

Our legislators understand the power of relationships. In fact, they know that their service as elected officials very much depends on them.

“A fiduciary is a person or organization that acts on behalf of another person or persons, *putting their clients' interests ahead of their own*, with a duty to preserve [good faith](#) and trust. Being a fiduciary thus requires being bound both legally and ethically to act in the other's best interests.” [Fiduciary Definition: Examples and Why They Are Important](#) ([investopedia.com](#))

In contrast, some of the ERS Trustees are executive appointees and the rest are elected by fellow trustees, with little meaningful input from plan members/beneficiaries, and by and large, with little, if any, contact with them. Continuing to restrict the public's physical access to Board meetings gives the *appearance* that Trustees are reluctant to interact directly with plan members and beneficiaries, to whom they owe the fiduciary duties of loyalty and care.

Trustees are to place the interests of all plan members and beneficiaries above their own interests, *and those of any third parties*, including, dare I say, even the authorities who appointed them. And this is where things must get really complicated for the Trustees. It must be difficult for them to hew to this exacting standard of loyalty to people whom they mostly only “know” as faceless names on a Zoom screen.

We've requested several times that physical access to the meetings be opened back up as public health concerns have subsided. We have been told a decision would be made by the “next” Board meeting, so we are asking one more time that the meetings be re-opened to the public.

Retirees' emotions run high over the stagnation and erosion of our pension benefits, the impact of sustained inflation, worsened by the long-time lack of significant annual cost of living adjustments (COLAs/raises). But Since GSRA was formed 16+ years ago and members began attending ERS Board meetings, there has not been one incidence of inappropriate behavior, not one angry outburst or

disruption of any kind. I can't imagine it happening now. While we are passionate about our issues, I can't conceive of any of our members behaving in any other than a respectful manner.

Besides, most of us are getting too old for marching in the streets, or laying siege to the Capitol and ERS headquarters, carrying placards, torches and pitchforks. We just want an opportunity to interact with the people who are *charged and entrusted* with the administration of our trust fund and our benefits. And for them to see us as real people and not adversaries. We are not out of line for expecting access to and accountability from those who owe us those fiduciary duties of loyalty and care.

Find your Georgia Legislators

Use this link to easily determine your current state legislators by entering your address.

[Open States - Find Your Legislators](#)

GSRA Announces Keynote Speaker for the Annual Meeting

By Kip Mann and Allan Hill

GSRA is pleased to announce that our keynote speaker for the GSRA Annual Meeting will be Laretta Hannon, writer, speaker and shameless promoter of joy and wonder. She also hosts the Front Porch Views podcasts. three and half minute musings on living in the South in today's world. Inspiring, funny, and thoughtful, she will kick off our meeting in grand and enjoyable fashion. Find out what to expect at www.LarettaHannon.com.

Plan to join us on October 9-10, 2023 for this year's Annual Meeting. We will gather in Columbus, at the Historic Iron Works in the Columbus Convention Center. Our host hotel is the Columbus Marriott, which is directly across the street from the Convention Center. As usual, we'll have speakers from ERS and SHBP to give us updates for the coming year, a variety of workshops both informative and fun, and an opening night reception with drinks and appetizers. Downtown Columbus offers a number of dining options within walking distance. Take this opportunity to renew past friendships with former co-workers and to make new friendships with your fellow GSRA members.

To register for the Annual Meeting online, click here: <https://gsra.memberclicks.net/2023-annual-meeting-registration#!/>

To register by mail, click here: <https://gsra.memberclicks.net/assets/documents/GSRA%20Registration%20Form%20-%20Annual%20Meeting%20Columbus%20GA%20Oct%209-10%202023%20Updated%20%20Kip.pdf>

To make reservations at the Columbus Marriott, click here: <https://www.marriott.com/event-reservations/reservation-link.mi?id=1681154462219&key=GRP&app=resvlinkour>

GSRA needs your support as we continue our fight for the benefits that were promised to us. A strong showing in Columbus is an important step in our ongoing struggle. Be there, get involved, voice your opinion, ask questions, and show your support!

Help enrich our voice and grow our support. Don't let those that we worked for so long continue to divide and fragment us so our concerns go overlooked and appear unneeded of their attention.

Local Chapter News

Columbus/West Georgia Chapter

Chapter Secretary Cindy Tharp reports that the Columbus/West Georgia chapter held its Annual Legislative Reception on May 16 at Epworth United Methodist Church in Columbus. There were approximately twenty members in attendance.

Legislators present included State Representatives Debbie Buckner, Richard Smith, and Teddy Reese as well as State Senator Randy Robertson. They discussed the most effective means to contact them, bills of interest in the last session and their current understanding of any potential COLA or the status of a one-time payment. A lot of good information was shared and the members were very appreciative of the time the legislators spent with them.



L-R: State Representatives Debbie Buckner, Richard Smith and Teddy Reese, State Senator Randy Robertson

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday, August 15 at 11am at the Epworth United Methodist Church in Columbus. For more information about the Columbus West Georgia Chapter, they can be reached by email at GSRAColumbus@gmail.com.



Members of the Columbus/West Georgia Chapter listen intently

Macon-Middle Georgia Chapter

Melissa Belk Teague has filed this report from the Macon-Middle Georgia chapter meeting on June 10. There have been many passionate pleas for help but this time the members were exceptionally passionate with their stories, sharing the hardships they have endured over the last ten years. State Representative Robert Dickey of Musella was in attendance and was a great listener and asked questions that really stirred the emotions in our members. He appeared to be very supportive of us getting a COLA, but he is not directly involved with the retirement committee. Rep. Dickey is on the appropriation committee and chairman of the agriculture committee. He promised to share our message with those on the retirement committee. The members thoroughly enjoyed having him come and speak with us. He did repeat the message from the governor that the ERS determines how the money is used once the general assembly appropriate the money for retirees within ERS system. The members asked him to find out why GSRA does not have anyone on the ERS board after the legislation was passed to give us a voice within our retirement system.

Chapter President Clay Teague gave the membership an update on the upcoming half percent COLA and the \$500 one-time payment that is supposed to be issued in June. Chapter Membership Chair Melissa Belk Teague is rotating off the GSRA board at the end of her term as she is returning to work. She plans to remain working locally to keep their chapter "Middle Georgia Strong." Chapter President-Elect Bill Lucas has agreed to step up and run for an at-large board member to replace Melissa at the end of her term.

A total of twenty-eight people were in attendance. Due to technical difficulties, they were not able to have their meeting available on Zoom for those who were unable to attend in person. Thank you for all the text and emails from those who tried to get into the meeting. Hopefully, they can iron this out and have it back on Zoom for future meetings. A couple of new members were in attendance as well as a few members that they had not seen in a while. Three members renewed and one new member joined. The chapter is committed to continue to grow their membership by mailing out the postcards and trying to recruit past coworkers. Their next meeting will be September 9th at 11:30 at the Ole Times Country Buffet, 1343 Gray Highway in Macon. For more information on the Macon/Middle Georgia Chapter, send an email to Melissa Belk at: melissabelk@maconmiddlegeorgiagsra.com.




Macon-Middle Georgia Chapter members pose with Representative Robert Dickey

Representative Dickey


Welcome new members!

MAY			
Name	County		County
Donna Adams	Unknown	Larry Kelley	Pike
Juanelle Allen	Jackson	Douglas Kirkland	DeKalb
Elvira Barghi	Gwinnett	Carol Moon	Elbert
Sharee Brown	DeKalb	George Sanders	Harris
Susan Brozovic	Fulton	Phillip Scott	Bryan
Tonya Curry	Fayette	Langdon Sheffield	Fulton
Donna Giddens	Richmond	James Smith	Habersham
Jewel Grantham	Unknown	Janet Stubbs	Muscogee
Jane Henderson	Out of State	Miriam Thomason	Butts
Jimmy Hilliard	Out of State	Roger Walker	Thomas
Linda Hopkins	Columbia	Keith Watson	Columbia
Maryette Horton	Gwinnett	Elizabeth Williamson	Cobb



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