



# Newsletter

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[www.MyGSRA.com](http://www.MyGSRA.com)

July 2021

## GSRA/Key State Officials Discuss COLAs

In our continuing, extensive efforts to have ERS COLAs restored, July 1st found GSRA President Jim Sommerville and President-elect Beverly Littlefield back in downtown Atlanta at the State Capitol to meet with Blake Raulerson, Governor Kemp's Policy Advisor, and Emily Jones, lead analyst in the Office of Planning and Budget (OPB) assigned to the Employees' Retirement System of Georgia (ERS). They were there to follow-up on GSRA's earlier April 28th meeting with Governor Kemp and key members of his staff.

Having Ms. Jones join in the discussion of GSRA's advocacy and legislative objectives marks another step forward toward achieving our goal of having the annual COLAs restored. OPB is the agency that researches and provides information to support the Governor's budget, policy, and legislative initiatives. That ERS is in Ms. Jones' management portfolio, as is the Teachers' Retirement System (TRS), is a very good sign. What makes this even better is that Governor Kemp has the issue of COLAs for retired state employees in his line of sight and facilitated this meeting.

President Sommerville started the meeting with a comprehensive overview of the options GSRA is proposing for funding the restoration of COLAs. Among the proposals discussed was a lump sum payment from the \$3.2 Billion budget surplus to the ERS to jump start the awarding of COLAs while the Actuarially Determined Employer Contribution Rate (ADEC) is gradually increased to cover the cost of the COLAs. In addition, Sommerville also urged

consideration of setting aside a portion of the ERS Fund's FY21 record setting \$3 billion return on investment increase (28%) to offset the cost of restoring the COLAs.

It is important to realize the vital role that GSRA and its members serve in preserving and communicating our institutional knowledge to each new generation of state decision makers. Due to their relatively brief tenures and service in state government, the majority of the current workforce in the Governor's Office have no frame of reference for how we started out and how we got to this point. The hour long meeting thus provided an opportunity for a discussion of the historical management of the ERS by the State. Sommerville laid out the sequence of ill-considered decisions the state has made over several decades (and across several gubernatorial administrations) that individually and cumulatively adversely impacted the ERS Fund to the point that in 2009 (and subsequently each year thereafter), the ERS Board, for the first time in 40 years, voted not to grant retirees a COLA.

As the meeting drew to a close, Sommerville drove home the point that the time is right, and has never been better, for the state to do the right thing and restore the annual COLAs to ERS retirees.

Mr. Raulerson and Ms. Jones were a receptive audience and both agreed to continue our dialogue as they work through the budget process in the upcoming months. GSRA will, of course, keep our membership updated on this process.

### GSRA 2021 Annual Meeting Georgia Veterans State Park, Oct. 4-5

**Hotel Reservations:** [www.lakeblackshearresort](http://www.lakeblackshearresort) or 800-459-1230, use Group ID – 368889  
See below for the latest update

## GSRA Meets With New DCH Commissioner

On July 1, 2021, Governor Kemp appointed Caylee Noggle as the new Commissioner of the Department of Community Health (DCH). Ms. Noggle replaces Frank Berry who retired on June 30, 2021.

GSRA leadership did not waste any time in setting up a meeting with Commissioner Noggle. On July 20th, President Sommerville, President-elect Littlefield, Board members BJ Bennett and Chuck Freedman, along with legislative liaison Chuck Clay, met at the DCH Atlanta headquarters with Commissioner Noggle and her leadership team. DCH staff also attending the meeting were Marial Ellis, General Counsel, Marsha Hopkins, Deputy Commissioner, Ryan Loke, Deputy Commissioner and Lewis Amis, Director of the State Health Benefit Plan (SHBP).

President Sommerville began the meeting by providing Commissioner Noggle with a brief description of who GSRA is as an organization and our purpose for the meeting. To our delight Commissioner Noggle was already familiar with GSRA and in fact mentioned that one or more of her state employee friends had in the past recommended to her that she consider joining GSRA. We, of course, encouraged her to join GSRA and left her a membership brochure.

Items of note gleaned from the meeting include:

- The DCH Board will meet in August to approve the SHBP premiums for calendar year 2022. Commissioner Noggle declined to disclose what, if any, rate increases may be on the table for approval by the DCH Board.
- In 2020, DCH had planned to advertise for bids from healthcare providers for new SHBP proposals for calendar year 2021 and 2022. However, the Covid-19 pandemic put those plans on hold. The plan is now to advertise for bids sometime in 2022, with any new plans or providers taking effect in 2023.

- DCH is still determining the full impact on the SHBP fund from the Covid-19 pandemic. Although there were savings realized by postponed or omitted medical care, high dollar claims (over \$100,000) increased - probably as a result of Covid-19. Mr. Amis also noted a significant increase in the use of tele-health services over the last year due to the pandemic restrictions on in person medical visits. When asked, Commissioner Noggle said that there were no plans at this time to use some of the \$4.6 billion Covid relief funds to reimburse the SHBP Covid-19 related claims.
- Freedman requested greater transparency in SHBP costs and reserve funding, along with participation in the advisory council process. We asked for a GSRA nominee to be added to the council, preferably as a voting member, or as a nonvoting member or observer. The commissioner said she understood the rationale behind our requests and would consider it.
- President-elect Littlefield asked DCH to consider a change in a Medicare Advantage option where the prescription copays would be included in the out-of-pocket maximum along with medical copays. Including both types of copays would mean that there would be a plan option maximum rather than a maximum for medical services and a maximum for outpatient drugs. DCH gave a noncommittal response. However, in previous conversations DCH indicated that the member would be required to pay for the expanded benefit to install an out-of-pocket maximum (medical and prescription drugs) in a Medicare Advantage option.

GSRA will monitor the August DCH Board meeting and report to our members any changes to the SHBP premiums approved at the meeting.

## GSRA Thanks and Honors Luther Lewis

The Georgia State Retirees Association (GSRA) Board recognizes the value of the many retirees who have volunteered their time and talents to manage and perform tasks for GSRA over the years since its inception in 2007. From time to time, we would like to recognize them and express our appreciation for their many significant contributions. The Board would like to begin this tradition by honoring Luther Lewis, one of the first GSRA volunteers.

We thank Luther for his service to GSRA and State Government in general. Although Luther continues as a dedicated member of the Association, he has to date volunteered and worked tirelessly as a member of the Policy and Operations Committee for the 15 years since its inception.

Luther was the Association's first Membership Chair in 2007. He is a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) and brought varied skills to the Membership Chair after having retired as the Director of the Georgia Building Authority. He had earned the Director position by serving as the GBA Chief Financial Officer and overseeing several State Office buildings in the Capitol Hill area. He was responsible for the operations of the Governor's Mansion, the Capitol building, at least two cafeterias, and a couple of event venues. These responsibilities gave him an opportunity to assure Georgia's Governors and their first ladies, legislators, and state agency heads of his dedication and success.



Luther's State service and his service as a member of the State Employees Credit Union board prepared him for demonstrating his varied skills as the first GSRA Membership Chair. He identified, drafted, and implemented policies regarding membership administration, including payment processes. He also recommended, drafted, and implemented policies for establishing GSRA local chapters. Luther and his CPA office staff worked tirelessly from 2008 until early 2020 to apply labels and mail GSRA newsletters to members who did not provide an email address.

In addition, Luther voluntarily prepared and submitted the GSRA tax forms to the federal government each year since inception until 2021. His wisdom and advice was very insightful on many issues.

We are not saying "goodbye" to Luther – just thanking and honoring him for his work and dedication to GSRA. Even as he steps away from regular involvement with GSRA, he will continue to be a valued member of our organization. We wish him well!



## Jim's View: GSRA is looking for leaders!

As the calendar turns to August, the planning activities for our Annual Meeting are intensifying. One important item that must be accomplished at the Annual Meeting is the election of new executive officers (President, President-elect, Treasurer, Secretary) and new Board members to replace those whose terms expire on December 31, 2021. The election of new officers and board members is very time sensitive. We must have a slate of nominees by the beginning of September in order to allow for online voting to occur in September.

The Nominating Committee is hard at work to identify prospective officer/board member candidates. It is not an easy task, and I appreciate very much the hard work that the

Nominating Committee members are doing now in order to present a full slate of candidates for consideration by our membership. I know from experience that you get more turndowns than you get people willing to step forward and assume a leadership position in GSRA.

Now is the time for those of you willing to step forward and take a larger role in GSRA to do so.

One of the concerns I hear most when talking to prospective board candidates is the time commitment placed on board members and executive officers. Because of the support GSRA receives from its members, we have been able to devote financial resources to the hiring of two contract workers to perform many of the tasks previously required to be completed by board members. The work

being done now by the contract workers has reduced the time commitments on our board members significantly. I think if you spoke with any of the folks who have served on the board or as an officer, they would tell you that their time spent as GSRA leadership was interesting and gratifying.

GSRA has accomplished a lot over the past couple of years. We have done this in spite of a very thin bench of prospective new leaders. In fact, many of GSRA's executive officers and board members have been serving in various volunteer capacities since the Association was conceived. If GSRA is to continue to grow as an effective voice for state retirees, new leaders will have to step up and assume a greater role in the management of GSRA. Existing board

members and executive officers cannot continue to serve forever. Nor should we want them to; new ideas and new perspectives are critical for moving forward.

So, please consider submitting your name to the Nominating Committee for consideration for a board position or to serve in one of the executive officer positions. Submit your name and the position you are interested in, board or officer, to [help@mygsra.com](mailto:help@mygsra.com), and copy [brlittfield1@yahoo.com](mailto:brlittfield1@yahoo.com). Your time and efforts will be well spent and appreciated!

Jim

## Annual Meeting Runs into Slight Snag

The Annual Meeting Committee has learned that, unfortunately, there has been a snag in securing an engine for our planned train ride to President Carter's farm. The Department of Natural Resources, which runs SAM Short Line Railroad, leases the engines from the Heart of Georgia Railroad freight line. When we first contracted with SAM Short Line for our meeting, they indicated that there would be no problem leasing the engine. But as of this Newsletter, DNR has been unable to secure an engine for us. The manager of SAM Short Line continues to work with the freight line and hopes to confirm an engine for us, but he cannot guarantee it.

Because of the uncertainty, we have decided to delay registration for the Annual Meeting. If we cannot get an engine by the middle of August, we will need to re-think the

agenda for Monday and change it completely. We were all very much looking forward to a fun day of train travel, and we hope it still happens. Until we know for sure, however, we cannot in good faith have our members register for the Annual Meeting knowing the agenda can change significantly.

We all regret this delay and hope to hear some good news soon. We are keeping our fingers crossed and will continue to work with SAM Short Line for a positive resolution. As soon as we know about the engine, one way or another, we will post it to the GSRA website and Facebook page.

Please bear with us, and thank you for your patience.



## 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](#)





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APCU partners with Members Wealth Management, a financial services program, to help our members with financial planning, investments, insurance, as well as retirement and estate planning strategies.

APCU has invited Shavon Roman, a Managing Associate with Members Wealth Management, to offer a great workshop, "Money Talk 101," at GSRA. This seminar is designed to facilitate conversations around financial milestones for retirees.

#### Topics will include:

- ★ The importance of setting financial goals
- ★ Understanding your current financial position
- ★ Preparing for a successful retirement
- ★ Income tax considerations
- ★ What your loved ones need to know

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