



MERS MESSENGER

SUSITA SUIRE ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT

Board of Trustees

Susan Percle, Chair
Retiree, City of Gretna

Phyllis McGraw,
Vice Chair
City Clerk, Bossier City

Mayor Mark Piazza
City of Abbeville

Mayor Donald Villere
Former Mayor of
Mandeville

Mayor Barney Arceneaux
City of Gonzales

Donald Clause
HR Director
City of Thibodaux

Mayor Michael Chauffe, Sr.
City of Grosse Tete

Senator Robert Mills
Senate Retirement
Committee

Rep. Phillip Devillier
Chairman, House
Retirement Committee

Treasurer John Schroder
State of Louisiana

Commissioner Jay Dardenne
Division of
Administration

In her 23 years at MERS, Susita Suire has literally done it all.

Susita started her career as a retirement analyst at MERS. She moved up through the ranks, eventually becoming the Retirement System Administrator.

Susita quickly became an expert on retirement processes and provisions. Four executive directors and numerous board members had the opportunity to work with her.

Susita's contributions to MERS have been so great, two people are needed to take her place! Susita has been managing the office, leading the retirement division, and serving as the secretary for the Board of Trustees. She has handled human resources, maintained our website, created forms, and served as the point of contact with the system actuary. Her knowledge of the law and history of MERS is astounding.



One of the critical legacies that Susita leaves for MERS is the new pension technology system that offers self service portals for both employees and employers. Anyone who has ever been involved with the installation of a new software system knows the time, effort, thought, frustration, and fulfillment that goes with the project. Susita has done a masterful job of working with our software vendor to tailor a program that will meet the needs of MERS and its members for many years to come.

Clerks from municipalities around the state have come to rely on Susita's advice and counsel. She has been a trusted source of information to many and a one-person educational outreach providing information about MERS to members and employers. Susita is proud of the relationships she has built over the years and will miss the clerks and payroll staff she counts as friends.

We wish Susita many happy and healthy years in retirement!



Front Row: Morgan Robertson and Tina Grant of LASERS; Rep. Rodney Schamerhorn
 Center Row: Maris LeBlanc, MERS
 Back Row: Clyde Hamner, LA Retired Teachers Assoc.; Rep. Mike Johnson; Douglas Swenson, TRSL and Rep. Chuck Owen

MERS Director Pushes for Changes to WEP/GPO

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- WEP/GPO2
- Federal Legislation 3
- Legislative Session4
- Trustee Election4
- Self Service Portal5
- Cost of Living Increase ..5
- Employer Information .6
- Self-Directed DROP7
- Deferred Comp.7
- Staffing Changes8
- Important Reminders ...8

MERS Executive Director Maris LeBlanc was part of a delegation that visited Washington, DC on March 2 and 3, 2022, to support changes to the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) and Government Pension Offset (GPO). The WEP and GPO are federal laws that result in a reduction to Social Security benefits for persons who draw a public pension, such as the pension offered through MERS.

The trip was organized by State Representative Mike Johnson of Pineville, LA. Group members included State Representatives Charles Owen and Rodney Schamerhorn, a representative of the Retired Teachers Association, and representatives of the LA State Employees’ Retirement System (LASERS) and the Teachers’ Retirement System of LA (TRSL).

Meetings were held with members of the Louisiana Congressional delegation and their staffs as well as other members of Congress who have been active in working towards repeal and/or reform of the offsets.



Legislative Instruments to Watch in Congress Include:

H.R. 82 (Rodney Davis) Social Security Fairness Act of 2021 (repeal bill)
256 co-sponsors, including Louisiana members Troy Carter, Garret Graves, Clay Higgins, Mike Johnson, Julia Letlow, Steve Scalise

H.R. 2337 (Richard Neal) Public Servants Protection & Fairness Act of 2021 (reform bill)
186 co-sponsors, including Louisiana member Troy Carter

H.R. 4788 (Julia Letlow) Wellbeing for Every Public Servant Act of 2021 (repeal bill)

H.R. 5723 (John Larson) Social Security 2100: A Sacred Trust (repeal bill)
200 co-sponsors, including Louisiana member Troy Carter

H.R. 5834 (Kevin Brady) Equal Treatment of Public Servants Act of 2021 (reform bill)
48 co-sponsors, including Louisiana member Mike Johnson

S. 1302 (Sherrod Brown) Social Security Fairness Act (repeal bill)
38 co-sponsors, including Louisiana members Bill Cassidy and John Kennedy

Legislative Session in Louisiana

MERS has one bill pending in the legislative session. It is Senate Bill 9, authored by Senator Robert Mills who sits as the Senate Retirement Committee designee on the MERS Board of Trustees.

The bill would:

- Limit retroactive payment of benefits to members eligible for retirement at termination to 60 days from date of application.
- Allow all participating employers, not just municipalities, to use conversion of leave for retirement credit.
- Remove special ethics rules as to food and drink that are unique to MERS.
- Remove the requirement unique to MERS to report expenditures made for board members to the legislature.
- Change the requirement for an actuarial experience study from every three years to every five years.
- Eliminate the rule that trustees may attend only one out-of-state conference at the expense of the system and eliminate the rule that a conference is allowed for trustees only if hosted by an association related to state retirement systems.
- Allow 10% of system funds to be maintained in cash, up from 1%.

As of the date of publication of the newsletter, the bill was approved by the Senate Retirement Committee and unanimously passed by the full Senate.

Trustee Election

Two seats for elected officials on the MERS Board of Trustees must be filled this year. Sincere thanks to Donald Villere, former Mayor of Mandeville, and Mark Piazza, ending his term as Mayor of Abbeville, for their service on the MERS Board.

One seat is for a full six-year term and the other is for the four years remaining in Mayor Piazza's term.

These seats must be filled by elected officials who have at least six years of creditable service in MERS.

Requests for nominations to the board will open in May. Nominating petitions will be available on the MERS website or can be mailed to interested parties. Signatures of at least 25 actively contributing members of MERS are necessary to qualify as a candidate.

MERS has contracted with *Yes Elections* to allow voting by mail, phone, and online.

Self Service Portal

The Self Service Portal is now live!

Each member of MERS, active and retired, should register their account online. Go to the homepage at mersla.com and click on Self Service Portal at the bottom of the page. By registering your own account, you help prevent fraudsters from trying to access your information.

Once your account is established, you may access your member information, contribution balances, service credit, and names of your beneficiaries. You will be able to submit address changes and direct deposit changes electronically via DocuSign.

Active members may generate an estimate of retirement and/or DROP benefits.

Retired members may print an income verification letter.

Please use a personal email address, rather than your work email, when you register. This account will then be available to you during your work years and your retirement.



Cost-of-Living Adjustments (COLAs)

A 1.6% cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for eligible retirees and beneficiaries was approved by the Board of Trustees for the Municipal Employees' Retirement System (MERS) at its March 17, 2022 meeting.

The COLA will be effective starting with the July 1, 2022 benefit payment and will be calculated on the original benefit amount. The dollar amount of the COLA will be reflected on the notice of deposit for the July benefit payment. No action is needed by those eligible to receive this increase. It will automatically be added to the monthly benefit payments.

To be eligible for the COLA, retirees must have an effective retirement date of July 1, 2021, or before. Beneficiaries (and/or the retiree) must have been receiving benefits since July 1, 2021.

Members should be aware that COLAs funded by the retirement system are not guaranteed. When granted, COLAs must be funded for the lifetime of all retirees who will receive the adjustment.

MERS has a Funding Deposit Account that may be used to fund COLAs. Monies are deposited into the account when the employer contribution rate is set at a rate higher than the rate necessary to fund the system. In the last fiscal year, balances in the Funding Deposit Account for both Plans A and B reached the level to fund a COLA with a maximum amount of 1.6%.

Since a COLA was granted this year, and the funding level of the system is less than 80%, current law states that the Board must wait four years before granting another COLA.

The Board at MERS understands the pressures inflation has put on its retirees. This adjustment is not enough to match inflation but is the highest that the system can responsibly fund.

EMPLOYER INFORMATION

News for Employers

Timely payment of employer and employee contributions to MERS is critical for the financial stability of the retirement system. Employers are urged to sign up for electronic (ACH) payment of contributions to assist in timely submission of their payments.

Payments are due on the tenth of each month.

If your municipality is paying by paper check it is not necessary to send a copy of your contribution report by mail. The electronic report you submit through the Employer Portal is sufficient.

Employer Contribution Rates

The Board of Trustees adopted the following contribution rates to be effective July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2023:

Plan A – 29.50%

Plan B – 15.50%

Both Plan A and Plan B rates are the same as last fiscal year.

Employer Contributions for Marshals

The Office of the Attorney General recently issued Opinion 21-0040A about marshals enrolled in MERS. If a marshal is paid by both a city and a parish, the opinion concludes that the parish is allowed to make employer contributions on behalf of the marshal. If the parish does not make the required contributions, the municipality remains responsible for contributions on all sources of the marshal's earnings.

Municipal Employees' Retirement System of Louisiana (MERS) Self-Directed DROP Plan

When members complete the Deferred Retirement Option Plan (DROP), 100% of their funds are transferred to a third-party administrator, Empower Retirement. Empower Retirement offers self-directed investment options for members who have completed DROP. MERS' Self-Directed Plan is a powerful tool that gives members the ability to manage funds to reach their retirement dreams. If you participate in DROP, once your funds are transferred to MERS Self-Directed DROP Plan, you will receive a personal identification number (PIN) letter from Empower Retirement. You will have access to your account 24 hours a day at 800-701-8255 or by logging on to LouisianaDCP.com. You will also receive a statement on a quarterly basis. You may also schedule a personal meeting with an Empower Representative.

There are many advantages to remaining in MERS' Self-Directed Plan. If you are approached by brokers or financial planners offering to manage your investments post-retirement, MERS encourages you to contact Empower Retirement to discuss these advantages to protect your retirement savings. Before making any kind of decision to move your account, be sure to compare all aspects and benefits available to you, particularly the exemption from state income tax. If you have any questions, please call Empower Retirement's Baton Rouge office at 225-925-8082.

Deferred Compensation Program

Public Employees in the State of Louisiana can choose to participate in the Louisiana Public Employees Deferred Compensation Plan (DCP). Your employer must be enrolled in the DCP for automatic payroll deductions. If your employer is not currently enrolled, request that your employer's payroll department contact Empower Retirement. This 457 Plan, administered by Empower Retirement, allows eligible employees to supplement their existing retirement/pension benefits by saving and investing before-tax and Roth after-tax dollars through voluntary salary contributions. When you contribute to the DCP, the amount of tax you pay is figured after your contribution, so you may pay less in taxes now if contributing pre-tax dollars or later if contributing Roth after-tax dollars. The amount you contribute will be automatically taken out of each paycheck and deposited in your 457 account. Go online to LouisianaDCP.com and click on Contact us to locate your local Retirement Plan Advisor and schedule a meeting with an advisor in your area. You can also call 800-937-7604 and receive enrollment assistance or schedule a Retirement Readiness Review.



Staffing Changes at MERS

In anticipation of Susita Suire's retirement, MERS is making some staffing changes.

Lacey Weimer, currently the Senior Retirement Analyst at MERS, will assume the position of Retirement Benefits Administrator in August. Lacey has worked at MERS since 2018 and is incredibly knowledgeable about the retirement process. She is also an expert on our pension technology software. Prior to working at MERS, Lacey was an analyst with the Sheriffs' Retirement System. Lacey is looking forward to working with the Clerks and payroll staff of the various MERS' employers.

Gay Courson recently came on board as Board Secretary/Office Manager. Gay has prior experience in state government and the private sector. She is quickly learning how MERS operates and is excited to be part of our team.

Aneita Smith is our new Retirement Analyst. With eight years of experience at the Teachers' Retirement System of LA, Aneita is a valuable addition to the MERS retirement division.

Monica Guidry, with 17 years of experience at MERS, has been promoted to Senior Accountant. Monica is an excellent point of contact for staff at participating employers who have questions about their contribution payments.

IMPORTANT REMINDERS

Upcoming Board Meetings

The MERS Board of Trustees meets regularly at 7937 Office Park Boulevard in Baton Rouge. Meetings typically start at 9 a.m. and are open to the public.

Meeting dates, agendas, and minutes are posted on the system's website, mersla.com.

Annual Contribution Statements

Annual contribution statements will be sent at the end of July to all active members and terminated members with a balance on deposit with MERS. If you have not updated your mailing address, please either complete an address change form or register for the self service portal to send in the change electronically. If you do not receive your annual contribution statement by the end of August, please contact our office.

Municipal Employees' Retirement System
7937 Office Park Boulevard
Baton Rouge, LA 70809-7606

Phone: 225-925-4810
Toll Free: 800-820-1137
Fax: 225-925-4816