

Retirement News Highlights

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City-paid trip to an Arizona resort illustrates a broader pattern of unaccountability

The Board of Estimates is ignoring the travel rules it instituted three years ago after Marilyn Mosby's overseas trip-taking was exposed. Here's the latest example.

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Baltimore Brew

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It may be a drop in the bucket financially, but the \$9,892 being spent this week by the trustees of the city's Employees' Retirement System (ERS) at a resort in Arizona underscores the laxness and latitude given to those in higher positions in Baltimore government.

Not to speak of how travel rules [Mayor Brandon Scott instituted](#) three years ago are being disregarded by the Board of Estimates that approved them.

Back in 2021, in the wake of an inspector general's report [verifying](#) frequent domestic and overseas [travel](#) by then State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby, reforms were put in place by the BOE regarding official travel on the public dime.

A press release from the mayor's office promised that the new rules would "emphasize the importance of transparency – where officials are traveling, who is paying for it, and how much it costs – as well as accountability – how much time are officials spending away from Baltimore doing what."

Among the reforms: all trips costing \$800 or more would have to be submitted and approved by the Board of Estimates "*prior to the date* of the planned travel."

Travel requests to the same event by more than one person "will normally *not be granted*," the new rules warned. If multiple employees from the same agency wanted to attend the same conference, "substantiation for the additional attendees" must be presented ahead of time to the spending board.

As a further check against junkets at taxpayers' expense, the revised Administrative Manual stated that "city employees approved for out-of-town travel may be selected at random to present trip reports at an open meeting of the Board of Estimates."

Such reports, Section 240-3 of the AM stated, "must specify how the information obtained as a result of approved travel can be applied to the employee's work responsibilities."

Mosby's then-husband, City Council President Nick Mosby, abstained from voting, while Comptroller Bill Henry voted no.

The new rules were approved by Christopher Shorter, voting on behalf of Scott, along with then-City Solicitor James Shea and then-Public Works Director Jason Mitchell.

Retroactive Approvals

None of the above procedures was followed for the five ERS trustees – led by Chair Deborah Moore-Carter and Vice Chair Helen Holton – who journeyed 2,000 miles to The Scott Resort & Spa in Scottsdale, Arizona, this week to attend a “public funds summit” underwritten by pension money managers and consultants.

Instead:

- The travel requests were retroactively approved today – the day of the scheduled return of the trustees from Scottsdale – by the BOE without comment or discussion.
- Justification for the attendance of five city employees – four more than the travel rules recommend – was not offered in writing or orally to the board.
- Each of the requests for travel money use identical language – “the exchange of ideas both in and out of the session halls” and “the importance of on-going education” – to explain the value of the conference.

The per diem rate in Scottsdale for federal employees, which Baltimore uses as its guide for paying employees, is \$220 a day for January 2024.

The five ERS trustees will be paid double that (\$429 a day) for lodging, food, ground transportation and what’s called “additional subsistence” in city records.

And that’s on top of the air fare.

In addition to Moore-Carter, who doubles as Baltimore’s labor commissioner, and Holton, a former councilwoman (D, 8th), Antoinette Ryan-Johnson, Dorothy L. Bryant and Patricia Roberts attended the conference held by the [Opal Group](#).

According to the agenda, attendees heard a keynote speech by Gregory Coleman, the FBI agent who brought down former penny-stock fraudster and current motivational speaker Jordan Belfort (chronicled in the Martin Scorsese film, “The Wolf of Wall Street”), learned about “the best real estate investment strategies,” were encouraged to interact more closely with actuaries, were invited to a golf outing and were given access to six private spa treatment rooms.

Another Fund, Another Destination

Next week, three trustees of Baltimore’s Fire & Police Employees’ Retirement System, a separate fund, will journey to Key West, Florida, for a forum hosted by Koried LLC, another group that designs conferences to connect public pension funds with money managers and financial consultants.

[Koried LLC](#) conducts its forums through an entity known as the Plan Sponsor Educational Institute, which holds its meetings at the Marriott Beachside Hotel.

This four-day trip for Thomas Nosek, Mildred “Mimi” Forbes and Robert Haukdal was approved without comment or discussion by the BOE today.

The \$5,576 travel allocation includes \$3,861 in room and meal costs at the Marriott Beachside Hotel.

With Mayor Scott not attending today’s BOE meeting, his “yes” vote came from City Administrator Faith Leach.

Council President Mosby approved the travel expenses, while Comptroller Henry adhered to his policy of abstaining on all travel requests and travel reimbursements coming before the board.