

Chief defends new Belize tax authority

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THE Director General of the Belize Tax Service (BTS), Michelle Longsworth, has defended the decision to become a semiautonomous revenue authority, known as SARA.

The transition will occur in December and the Public Service Union (PSU) says it is not convinced that the move will not affect its members, particularly as it relates to pensions, gratuities, and allowances that workers have earned over the years.

Under the new initiative, current employees will either be reassigned within the public sector or have to apply for a position in the new system.

'As public officers, if you resign from the public service right now, you know what your entitlements are. If you have served ten years, you are entitled to a gratuity. If you have served 15 years and more, you are entitled to a gratuity and a pension that remains intact,' Longsworth said in an interview.

She said nobody will lose if they choose to go over to the SARA, noting that currently 'if you choose to take early retirement, you receive all your benefits.

'If you're over 50 years, that does not change. And every staff member that our public officers, they know how we are governed under the public service regulations and that does not change.'

She said that discussions are taking place with the Ministry of Finance, regarding workers who are basically starting from scratch to build up their benefits again.

'So that is a discussion that we are having with the Ministry of Finance, and you are speaking to only persons who have, let's say five years to nine years and 11 months, those persons who have almost reached ten years.

'Okay...those are the persons we have a list of them. We have determined what it would cost to maybe offer them a compensation package, but that is in discussions with the Ministry of Finance. And once we have some approval or we will then take that to the staff who are in that category because there's only a small amount in that category.'

Longsworth told viewers she believes the new system will streamline operations and boost performance and that it is not just about efficiency, since there are also concerns about transparency.

There are concerns that SARA could open the door to shady spending through government-awarded contracts with Longsworth challenging that narrative saying all revenue collected will still go straight into the Consolidated Revenue Fund.

She said SARA won't have the power to spend taxpayers' money and neither will it be a private company, remaining under public scrutiny, just like any other government body.

'When you, in any organisation, in any business, when you plan, you have to plan for a future. You have to be prepared for the future. Having a new organisational structure or a governance structure, we have to take into consideration things that presently as a department we do not have in place, and we have to ensure that it is in place so that we can properly govern. -CMC