State of North Carolina Retirement Systems

Actuarial Valuation Report Process and Actuarial Terms Glossary

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Valuation Process and Glossary of Actuarial Terms

Overview

The North Carolina Retirement Systems Division (RSD) was established in 1941 to provide retirement benefits for public servants in the State of North Carolina. Today, under the management of the Department of State Treasurer, RSD administers seven public pension plans (defined benefit plans), three supplemental retirement plans (voluntary defined contributions plans), a health trust fund, a disability income plan, death benefit funds and a number of other benefit programs. This document provides detail regarding the valuation process and a glossary of terms for the North Carolina Retirement Systems annual valuation reports as of December 31, 2025 for Teachers' and State Employees' Retirement System ("TSERS"), Local Governmental Employees' Retirement System ("LGERS"), Consolidated Judicial Retirement System ("CJRS"), Legislative Retirement System ("LRS"), Firefighters' and Rescue Squad Workers' Pension Fund ("FRSWPF"), Registers of Deeds' Supplemental Pension Fund ("RODSPF"), North Carolina National Guard Pension Fund ("NCNGPF"), the Death Benefit Plans for TSERS and LGERS, the Separate Insurance Benefits Plan for Law Enforcement Officers, and the Retirees' Contributory Death Benefit Plan.

Purpose of an Actuarial Valuation

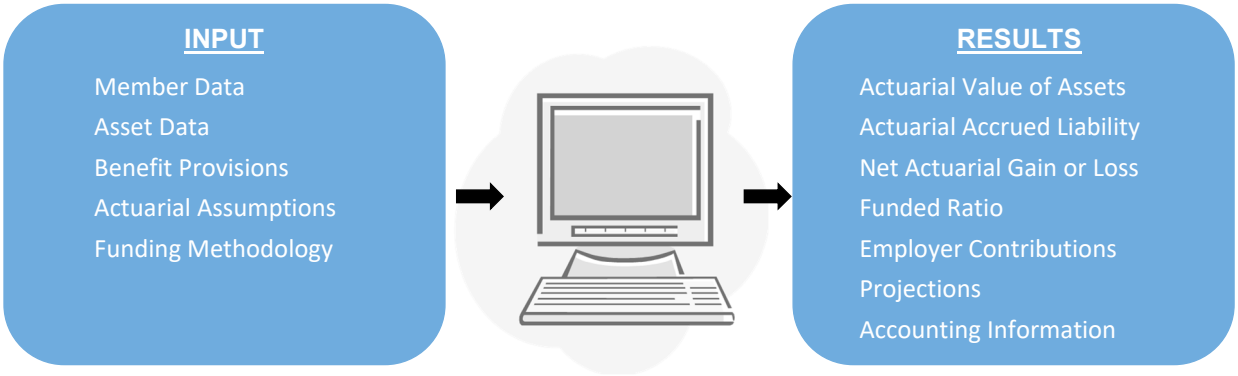
The majority of Public Sector Retirement Systems in the State of North Carolina are defined benefit (DB) retirement systems. Under a DB Retirement System, the amount of benefits payable to a member upon retirement, termination, death, or disability is defined in various contracts and legal instruments and is based, in part, on the member's years of credited service and final compensation. The amount of contribution needed to fund these benefits cannot be known with certainty. A primary responsibility of the Board of Trustees of a Retirement System is to establish and monitor a funding policy for the contributions made to the Retirement System.

While somewhat uncommon, in some jurisdictions, contributions are made by the plan sponsor as benefits come due. This is known as pay-as-you-go financing. More commonly, contributions for benefits are made in advance during the course of active employment of the members. This is known as actuarial pre-funding. For example, the State of North Carolina mandates for the Teachers' and State Employees' Retirement System ("TSERS") under G.S.135-8(d), that "on account of each member there shall be paid into the pension accumulation fund by employers an amount equal to a certain percentage of the actual compensation of each member to be known as the 'normal contribution' and an additional amount equal to a percentage of the member's actual compensation to be known as the 'accrued liability contribution'. The rate per centum of such contributions shall be fixed on the basis of the liabilities of the Retirement System as shown by actuarial valuation, duly approved by the Board of Trustees, and shall be called the 'actuarially determined employer contribution rate'…The actuarially determined employer contribution rate shall be calculated annually by the actuary using assumptions and a cost method approved by the Actuarial Standards Board of the American Academy of Actuaries and selected by the Board of Trustees."

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Actuarial Valuation Process

The following diagram summarizes the inputs and results of the actuarial valuation process. A narrative of the process follows the diagram. The reader may find it worthwhile to refer to the diagram from time to time.



Under the actuarial valuation process, current information about Retirement System members is collected annually by staff at the direction of the actuary, namely member data, asset data and information on benefit provisions. Member data is collected for each member of the Retirement System. The member data will assist the actuary in estimating benefits that could be paid in the future. The member information the actuary collects to estimate the amount of benefit includes elements such as current service, salary and benefit group identifier for members that have not separated service; for those that have, the actual benefit amounts are collected. The actuary collects information such as gender and date of birth to determine when a benefit might be paid and for how long.

The actuary collects summary information about assets as of the valuation date and information on cash flows for the year ending on the valuation date. Information about benefit provisions as of the valuation date is also collected. To bridge the gap between the information collected and potential benefits to be paid in the future, the actuary must make assumptions about future activities. These assumptions are recommended by the actuary to the Boards based on the results of an experience review. An experience review is a review of the Retirement System over a period of time, typically five years, where the actuary analyzes the demographic and economic assumptions of the Retirement System. Based on this review, the actuary will make recommendations on the demographic assumptions, such as when members will be projected to retire, terminate, become disabled and/or die in the future, as well as the economic assumptions, such as what rate of return is projected to be earned by the fund based on the Retirement System investment policy and what level of future salary increases is expected for members. To maintain the assumptions, the Board should adopt a prudent policy of having an experience review being performed every five years. The next experience review for the North Carolina Retirement Systems will be based on the five-year period ending on December 31, 2029 and will be presented during 2030. Using these assumptions, the actuary is able to use the member data, asset data and benefit provision information collected to project the benefits that will be paid from the Retirement System to current members. These projected future benefit payments are based not only on service and pay through the valuation date but includes future pay and service, which has not yet been earned by the members but is expected to be earned.

These projected future benefit payments are discounted into today's dollars using the assumed rate of investment return assumption to determine the Present Value of Future Benefits (PVFB) of the Retirement System. The PVFB is an estimate of the value of the benefits promised to all members as of a valuation date. If the Retirement System held assets equal to the PVFB and all the assumptions were realized, there would be sufficient funds to pay off all the benefits to be paid in the future for members in the Retirement System as of the valuation date.

The PVFB is a large sum of money, typically much larger than the amount of Retirement System assets held in the trust. The next step is for the actuary to apply the Funding Policy as adopted by the Board to determine the employer contributions to be made to the Retirement System so that the gap between the PVFB and assets is systematically paid off over time. The Funding Policy is adopted by the Board based on discussions with the actuary. When the Board develops a funding policy, a balance between contributions that are responsive to the needs of the Retirement System yet stable should be struck. There are many different funding policies for the Board to consider, and the actuary is responsible for discussing the various features of the funding policies under

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consideration. Funding Policies are generally reviewed during an experience review, but it is not uncommon to review a funding policy in between, particularly during period where large increases or decreases in contributions are expected. The Funding Policy is composed of three components: the actuarial cost method, the asset valuation method, and the amortization method.

Once the PVFB is developed, an actuarial cost method is used to allocate the PVFB. Under the actuarial cost method, the PVFB is allocated to past, current, and future service, respectively known as the actuarial accrued liability (AAL), normal cost (NC) and present value of future normal costs (PVFNC). The actuary computes the liability components (PVFB, NC, AAL, and PVFNC) for each participant in the Retirement System at the valuation date. These liability components are then totaled for the Retirement System. There are many actuarial cost methods. Different actuarial methods will produce different contribution patterns, but do not change the ultimate cost of the benefits. The entry age normal cost method is the most prevalent method used for public sector plans in the United States because the expected normal cost is calculated in such a way that it will tend to stay level as a percent of pay over a member's career.

The actuarial accrued liability (AAL) is also referred to as the amount of money the Retirement System should ideally have in the trust. The unfunded actuarial accrued liability (UAAL) is the portion of actuarial accrued liability that is not covered by the assets of the Retirement System. The UAAL can be a negative number, which means that the Retirement System has more assets than actuarial accrued liability. We refer to this condition as overfunded liability in this summary. Having UAAL does not indicate that the Retirement System is in failing actuarial health. Most retirement systems have UAAL. Another related statistic of the Retirement System is the funded ratio. The funded ratio is the percent of the actuarial accrued liabilities covered by the actuarial value of assets. The assets used for these purposes are an actuarial value of assets (AVA), not market. The actuarial value of assets is based on the asset valuation method as recommended by the actuary and adopted by the Board. An actuarial value of assets is a smoothed, or averaged, value of assets, which is used to limit employer contribution volatility. Typically, assets are smoothed, or averaged, over a period of 3 to 5 years. By averaging returns, the UAAL is not as volatile, which we will see later results in contributions that are not as volatile as well. The North Carolina Retirement Systems use an actuarial value of assets with a smoothing period of 5 years.

While having UAAL is common, it is acceptable only if it is systematically being paid off. The method by which the UAAL is paid off is known as the amortization method. The concept is similar to that of a mortgage payment. The Board adopts the amortization method used to pay off the UAAL over a period of time. The amortization method is composed of the amortization period, the amount of payment increase, whether the period is open or closed and by the amount of amortization schedules. The amortization period is the amount of time over which the UAAL will be paid off. This is generally a period of twenty-five years or less, but actuaries may recommend shorter periods. The payments can be developed to stay constant from year to year like a mortgage, but often they are developed to increase each year at the same level payroll increases. Amortization type can be closed or open. Under a closed period, the UAAL is expected to be paid off over the amortization period. This is similar to a typical mortgage. Under an open period, the amortization period remains unchanged year after year. The concept is similar to re-mortgaging annually. In many instances, an amortization schedule is developed, whereby the UAAL is amortized over a closed period from the point the UAAL is incurred. Finally, some amortization methods are defined by a schedule of payments, where a new schedule of payments is added with each valuation. Regardless of the amortization type or period, the funding policy should generate a contribution that pays off the UAAL, which results in the funded ratio trending to 100% over time. Caution should be used when an open method is used, because typically an open amortization policy does not result in the UAAL being paid off. North Carolina pays down the UAAL with level dollar payments over 15 years. This amortization method pays off the UAAL within a reasonable period.

To satisfy the requirements of the State of North Carolina, the actuary calculates the total annual contribution to the Retirement System as the normal cost plus a contribution towards UAAL. Said another way, this contribution is sufficient to pay for the cost of benefits accruing during the year (normal cost) plus the UAAL payment. The total contribution is reduced by the amount of member contributions, if any, to arrive at the employer contribution. Continuing to follow the prudent North Carolina contribution policy will keep the North Carolina Retirement Systems among the best funded in the United States.

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An actuarial valuation report is produced annually, which contains the contribution for the fiscal year as well as the funded ratio of the Retirement System. The primary purpose of performing an actuarial valuation annually is to replace the estimated activities from the previous valuation, which were based on assumptions, with the actual experience of the Retirement System for the prior year. The experience gain (loss) is the difference between the expected and the actual UAAL of the Retirement System. An experience loss can be thought of as the amount of additional UAAL over and above the amount that was expected from the prior year due to deviation of actual experience from the assumption. Similarly, an experience gain can be thought of as having less UAAL than that which was expected from the prior year assumptions. As an example, if the Retirement System achieves an asset return of 15% when the assumption was a 6.50% return, an actuarial gain is said to have happened, which typically results in lower contributions and higher funded ratio, all else being equal. Alternatively, a return of 2% under the same circumstances would result in an actuarial loss, requiring an increase in contributions and a funded ratio that is lower than anticipated. Experience gains and losses are common within the valuation process. Typically gains and losses offset each other over time. To the extent that does not occur, the reasons for the gains and losses should be understood, and appropriate recommendations should be made by the actuary after an experience review to adjust the assumptions.

The actuarial valuation report will contain histories of key statistics from prior actuarial valuation reports. In particular, a history of the funded ratio of the Retirement System is an important exhibit. Trustees should understand the reason for the trend of the funded ratio of the Retirement System over time. The actuary will discuss the reasons for changes in the funded ratio of the Retirement System with each valuation report. To the extent that there are unexplained changes in funded ratio corrective action should be explored and the actuary will make recommendations as to whether there should be changes in the assumptions, funding policy, or some other portion of the actuarial valuation process.

In addition to historical information, projections of contributions and funded ratio based on current assumptions can sometimes be found in an actuarial valuation report. Projections of contributions can allow the employer to plan their budget accordingly. Surprises in Retirement System contributions to be paid by the employer serve no one. A one-year projection based on “bad” asset returns can provide ample time for the employer to plan or allow for a discussion of changing the funding policy to occur. Contribution surprises are a primary contributor to employers considering pension reform. It is important to keep the employer apprised of future contribution requirements. A projection of funded ratio can serve the Trustees by illustrating the trend of the funded ratio over time. The funded ratio, under a prudent funding policy, should generally improve over time and unfunded liabilities should be systematically amortized. If a projection of funded ratio does not trend to 100% over time, consideration should be given to fixing the funding policy to achieve this goal. For the largest North Carolina Retirement Systems, projections are generally performed for the January board meetings.

The actuarial report will contain schedules of information about the census, plan and asset information submitted by Retirement System staff upon which the actuarial valuation is based. It is important that the Board of Trustees review that information and determine if the information is consistent with their understanding of the Retirement System. If after questioning staff, the Board of Trustees is not comfortable that the information provided is correct, the actuary should be notified to determine if the actuarial valuation report should be corrected.

Finally, the valuation report and/or presentation should contain sufficient information in an understandable fashion to allow the Board to take action and adopt the contribution rate for the upcoming year. It should also allow stakeholders to understand key observations over the past year that resulted in contributions increasing (or decreasing) and where contributions are headed. The actuary is always open to making the results understandable. Gallagher works with the North Carolina Retirement Systems Division to make your reports and presentations understandable and actionable. If something doesn’t make sense – speak up!!

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Valuation Process and Glossary of Actuarial Terms

Glossary

Note that the first definitions given are the “official” definitions of the term. For some terms there is a second definition, in italics, which is the unofficial definition.

Actuarial Accrued Liability (AAL)

The portion of the Present Value of Projected Benefits (PVFB) allocated to past service. Also difference between (i) the actuarial present value of future benefits, and (ii) the present value of future normal cost. Sometimes referred to as “accrued liability” or “past service liability.” The amount of money that should be in the Fund. The funding target.

Actuarial Assumptions

Estimates of future plan experience with respect to rates of mortality, disability, retirement, investment income and salary increases. Demographic (“people”) assumptions (rates of mortality, separation, and retirement) are generally based on past experience, often modified for projected changes in conditions. Economic (“money”) assumptions (salary increases and investment income) consist of an underlying rate appropriate in an inflation-free environment plus a provision for a long-term average rate of inflation. Estimates of future events used to project what we know now- current member data, assets, and benefit provisions – into an estimate of future benefits.

Actuarial Cost Method

A mathematical budgeting procedure for allocating the dollar amount of the Present Value of Projected Benefits (PVFB) between the normal costs to be paid in the future and the actuarial accrued liability. Sometimes referred to as the “actuarial funding method.”

Actuarial Methods

The collective term for the Actuarial Cost Method, the Amortization Payment for UAAL Method, and the Asset Valuation Method used to develop the contribution requirements for the Retirement System. The funding policy.

Actuarial Equivalent

Benefits whose actuarial present values are equal.

Actuarial Present Value

The amount of funds presently required to provide a payment or series of payments in the future. It is determined by discounting the future payments at a predetermined rate of interest, taking into account the probability of payment.

Actuarial Value of Assets (AVA)

A smoothed value of assets which is used to limit contribution volatility. Also known as the funding value of assets. Smoothed value of assets.

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Valuation Process and Glossary of Actuarial Terms (continued)

Glossary (continued)

Amortization Payment for UAAL

Payment of the unfunded actuarial accrued liability by means of periodic contributions of interest and principal, as opposed to a lump sum payment. The components of the amortization payment for UAAL includes:

- Amortization Period Length

  Generally, amortization periods of up to 15 to 20 years (and certainly not longer than 25) are allowed. Similar to a mortgage, the shorter the amortization period, the higher the payment and the faster the UAAL is paid off.

- Amortization payment increases

  Future payments can be level dollar, like a mortgage, or as a level percent of pay. Most Retirement Systems amortize UAAL as a level percent of pay which when combined with the employer normal cost that is developed as a level percent of pay can result in contributions that are easier to budget.

- Amortization type

  Amortization schedule can be closed or open. A closed amortization schedule is similar to a mortgage – at the end of the amortization period the UAAL is designed to be paid off. An open amortization period is similar to refinancing the UAAL year after year.

- Amortization schedule

  UAAL can be amortized over a single amortization period, or it can be amortized over a schedule.

The amortization payment for UAAL can be thought of as the UAAL mortgage payment.

Asset Valuation Method

The components of how the actuarial value of assets is to be developed. TSERS uses a five-year smoothing of asset gains and losses, which is the most commonly used method.

Experience Gain Loss

A measure of the difference between actual experience and experience anticipated by a set of actuarial assumptions during the period between two actuarial valuation dates, in accordance with the actuarial cost method being used. The experience Gain (Loss) represents how much the actuary missed the mark in a given year.

Funded Ratio

The percent of the actuarial accrued liabilities covered by the actuarial value of assets. Also known as the funded status. The ratio of how much money you actually have in the fund to the amount you should have in the fund.

Normal Cost

The annual cost assigned, under the actuarial funding method, to current and subsequent plan years. Sometimes referred to as “current service cost.” An amortization payment toward the unfunded actuarial accrued liability is paid in addition to the normal cost to arrive at the total contribution in a given year. The cost of benefits accruing during the year.

Present Value of Future Normal Cost (PVFNC)

The portion of the Present Value of Projected Benefits (PVFB) allocated to future service. The value in today’s dollars of the amount of contribution to be made in the future for benefits accruing for members in the Retirement System as of the valuation date.

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Valuation Process and Glossary of Actuarial Terms (continued)

Glossary (continued)

Present Value of Future Benefits (PVFB)

The projected future benefit payments of the plan are discounted into today's dollars using an assumed rate of investment return assumption to determine the Present Value of Future Benefits (PVFB) of the Retirement System. The PVFB is the discounted value of the projected benefits promised to all members as of a valuation date, including future pay and service for members which has not yet been earned. If the Retirement System held assets equal to the PVFB and all the assumptions were realized, there would be sufficient funds to pay off all the benefits to be paid in the future for members in the Retirement System as of the valuation date.

Reserve Account

An account used to indicate that funds have been set aside for a specific purpose and are not generally available for other uses.

Unfunded Actuarial Accrued Liability (UAAL)

The difference between the actuarial accrued liability (AAL) and actuarial value of assets (AVA). The UAAL is sometimes referred to as "unfunded accrued liability." funding shortfall, or prefunded amount if negative.

Valuation Date

The date that the actuarial valuation calculations are performed as of. This is also known as the "snapshot date".

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