**Name:** Jason Gonzales

**District running for:** 22nd State Representative

**Political party:** Democrat

**Political/civic background:** Trustee, Garfield Ridge Civic League, Civic Club of Chicago

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**Education:** Duke University: Bachelor’s in Economics and History, Massachusetts Institute of Technology: Master of Business Administration, Harvard University: Master of Public Administration - Kennedy School of Government

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**Chicago Sun-Times Editorial Board questionnaire responses**

**Taxes/Budget:**

Q. *Illinois has a massive state debt and crushing pension debt. Many elected officials from the governor to state lawmakers have indicated there is a need for additional revenue to help balance the budget.  If Illinois needs to generate additional revenue, which options would you support in a budget package:*

*1.     Increase the state’s income tax on individuals or corporations, either temporarily or permanently.*

*2.     Expand the sales tax to services.*

*3.     Tax retirement income in excess of $50,000.*

*4.     Adopt a progressive income tax.*

*If you oppose all tax hikes, please provide specifics on how you would reduce state spending by $7 billion to balance the state budget.*

A) In terms of taxes, I think we need to look at alternative options other than hitting working families and retirees, who are already paying some of the highest taxes in the country, with another tax hike. This calls for a combination of selectively increasing taxes on those who can afford it, creating new ways to generate revenue, and cutting spending in certain areas that can be reformed without hurting regular people. We need to look at reforming our outdated tax code and consider moving to a tax scale that is capped, but looks at ability to pay. I support a 3% tax increase on income over $1 million for non-employers and a small tax for buyers and sellers at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and the Chicago Board Options Exchange.

Q) *Do you support another legislative attempt at pension reform? If so, which proposed changes in the pension system would you support that you believe would pass constitutional muster?*

A) I believe that every promise the government made in terms of pensions and benefits must be upheld and any attempt not to would be both unconstitutional and immoral. I believe that the government has a responsibility to fulfill their obligation, just as the workers filled theirs. It’s offensive that the same politicians who mismanaged the pension fund tried to force retirees and current workers to foot the bill.

We need to pay what we owe and make sure that this crisis never happens again. We must implement restrictions, so that politicians can’t dip into the pension fund whenever they see fit. We need to change the system so that the workers can protect their money from being spent by the government. In order to pay off the debt we need a combination of generating new revenue, have the well-off pay a little more, criminal justice reform, and spending cuts where there is currently redundancy and waste.

Q) *Do you support a budget template developed by a bipartisan, bicameral group of legislators that would allow members to pass a budget without the consent of the legislative leaders?*

A) Our government is broken and the victims are the most vulnerable in our society, not the politicians that led to this mess. This should never happen and is a sign of irresponsibility of the Governor and legislators. The governor and Legislature should have a window of time to negotiate a budget, but after a certain point, I do support a pathway for a group of bipartisan legislators to pass a temporary budget until one is agreed upon in order to stop the most vulnerable in our society from paying the price of political games.

**Education:**

Q) *What, if anything, should we do to change how we fund schools?*

A) Illinois has frequently been one of the lowest in state K-12 public education funding, which is unacceptable. We need a complete reevaluation of our priorities to ensure every child in Illinois is entitled to a quality education. We can start by a Millionaire Tax on non-employers and a LaSalle Street Tax to help finance our schools. There needs to be a more equitable system that aids our struggling school, especially in high poverty communities. We should also look into using our TIF money to aid local school districts in desperate need of funding. We are spending too much, taking in too little, and have not been prioritizing education like we must. Education is the path to economic mobility and one of the highest priorities of our society, we must not neglect it.

Q) *Do you favor the state picking up the pension costs for Chicago teachers, as the state does for teachers outside Chicago? Do you favor school districts outside Chicago picking up their own pension costs, as Chicago does now?*

A) I think the state needs to do more to help pick up the pensions for Chicago teachers. Chicago is the only city required to pick up their own pension costs which causes Chicago tax-payers to get hit twice; they have to pay into the CPS teacher retirement fund and the Illinois teacher retirement fund.

I think it’s a worthy discussion, but I believe that by moving pensions to all local school districts, we will only be further increasing the disparities in school districts throughout our state. If we have a more equitable system, we can help stop some of the best teachers from leaving school districts with higher needs and those with teacher shortages for wealthier ones. However, we should look into moving some of the pensions in wealthy schools districts to the local level, where the teacher salaries are frequently higher in order to free up money for school districts in need.

Q) *State support for public higher education has declined for two decades. Do you favor the status quo or a significant increase in state funding? What is your plan to restore Illinois’ leadership in public higher education?*

A) We need to make a stronger investment in higher education, especially in schools that will offer job training programs and vocational schooling. It sends the wrong message when we continue to cut higher education spending yet increase budgets for prisons. Illinois needs to focus on increasing accessibility for scholarships and financial aid, while reducing the burden for in-state students. We must make sure the pathways of opportunity are available to all. If we make the right decisions, we can make sure that no person is limited in their ability to succeed and every student with the grades and the will to expand their education is able to live a brighter future.

**Transportation**:

Q) *Illinois has a tremendous backlog of infrastructure needs: roads, bridges, waterways, transit. What would be a good way to pay for it? Do you support an increased gas tax — and/or other taxes and fees — to finance infrastructure improvements, including public transit?*

A) Illinois desperately needs an investment in our outdated, deteriorating, infrastructure. This is an opportunity to create good jobs and invest in the future of our state. In order to pay for it, we should look into building a casino in Chicago; we already have them in Des Plaines and in Hammond Indiana, immediately across the border, which is only 30 minutes from The Loop. Illinois is losing that money and those jobs to Indiana and many people from Illinois both gamble and work at the Indiana based casinos. If we are smart in the location of this casino, we can help neglected communities that have been left without jobs and economic development. Building a casino isn’t everyone’s first choice, but it is a clear way to generate money and create consumers in ignored communities. Also, the millionaire tax on non-business owners, LaSalle Street Tax, and reforming our criminal justice system will help finance it.

Q) *Illinois’ public transportation formula provides money for operating costs, but not capital costs. Should Illinois create a reliable funding stream for capital costs?*

A) I think we need to make sure we have a reliable stream of revenue whether it’s from taxes or other sources of revenue to be able to keep our finances in order and account for the money that is going out, regardless of where it is going.

**Jobs:**

Q)  *Illinois has long been a strong manufacturing state. Today, Illinois employs fewer than 600,000 manufacturing workers and manufacturing’s share of the Gross State Product has dropped to 12.4 percent.  Our state saw the loss of nearly 10,000 manufacturing jobs in 2015 and announcements from some high-profile companies of job losses. The average manufacturing job pays more than $70,000 and helps create a strong middle class.  Name the top three things that you would do to help attract and retain manufacturing jobs in Illinois.*

A) We need to create the future of manufacturing here in Illinois, which includes precision and advanced manufacturing. We need to have the appropriate job training programs to allow for a reliable and sizable manufacturing workforce in Illinois. In order to attract and retain these manufacturers we need a regulatory climate that will invite them to come to our state and invest in the long term. Additionally, we should provide incentives to bring new manufacturing to our state because they will pay off with thousands of high-wage jobs that these companies will provide and the taxable incomes that come with these jobs.

**Energy:**

Q)  *Illinois has a very diverse energy portfolio and is a net exporter of energy in a deregulated marketplace. Energy is poised to be major issue in 2016 because of federal regulations and possible changes in Illinois’ energy portfolio. Nuclear energy emits zero carbon emissions at a time when the new federal rule requires Illinois to reduce carbon emissions by 44 percent. Do you support or oppose legislation backed by Exelon to create a low-carbon portfolio standard?*

A) Instead of the Exelon Bill, The Illinois Clean Jobs Bill is more beneficial for our state. The Illinois Clean Jobs Bill creates more jobs, saves more money for the state and consumers, and also provides an improvement of energy efficiency standards.

Q)  *Illinois’ current Renewable Portfolio Standard calls for Illinois to procure a certain percentage of renewable power by the year 2020.  The state is only halfway to its goal, and there is a proposal to increase the required amount of renewable energy and extending the time period to meet that goal. Do you support or oppose increasing Illinois Renewable Portfolio Standard even if the cost of power increases slightly? Do you support or oppose the Illinois Clean Jobs bill?*

A) I do believe that taking the necessary steps to protecting our planet is essential. By enacting the Illinois Renewable Portfolio Standard, we will be taking strides to improve the sustainability of earth. I also support the Illinois Clean Jobs Bill. By passing the Illinois Clean Jobs Bill, we will create many quality and long-lasting jobs that also protect our planet. Increasing clean energy production is not something that is inherently expensive. One common sense, low cost reform to increase energy production would be to add solar panels to utility and light poles around the state, which has already been done in other states.

Q)  *Illinois has to reduce carbon emissions by 44 percent under the federal rule.  Do you support creation of either a cap-and-trade program or a carbon tax to help mitigate carbon emissions in Illinois?*

A) I do believe that we need to meet and exceed these federal regulations. We need to start taking the threats facing our planet and environment as seriously as they deserve. We need to make a stronger investment in renewable energy and continue to reduce carbon emissions and our dependency on coal. There are vast swaths of spaces around the state of Illinois that can be used as solar farms. Look at New Jersey, while it is not the biggest state nor the sunniest state it is the second largest producer of solar energy in the country.

**Gun safety:**

Q) *Do you support tighter gun background check laws? Do you support limiting straw gun purchases?*

A) I believe that we must make sure that violent criminals and people with mental health disorders cannot walk into a gun store and purchase a gun. Instituting background checks is a sensible, first step in preventing mass murders and the violent killings that occur way to frequently in our communities. I will continue to stand with the far majority of Americans on the issuing of background checks and limiting straw gun purchases.

Q) *Do you support or oppose state licensing for all firearms dealers?*

A) I do support the licensing of all firearm dealers. I think it is essential for helping solve crimes and for holding the firearm dealers, who are acting unlawfully, accountable. These are common sense reforms that are badly needed.

Q) *Do you support or oppose allowing families to petition the courts to temporarily remove guns from people in crisis?*

A) I’m in favor of it. It is often the families and people closest to the person who know best if the person is a threat to themselves or society. I think this option should be available, but there must be a clear processes in place for enacting it. We have a responsibility to keep and prevent weapons from getting in the hands of dangerous people.

**Criminal justice:**

Q) *Do you support or oppose legislation to promote the transparency and preservation of police disciplinary records?*

A) I support it. I think there should be transparency in these records, so the department can be held accountable for not taking the appropriate steps for officers, who prove they are a risk to the public. In light of the most recent events, I think the time is now to preserve these records and increase transparency as a step towards reconciling the relations between law enforcement and the general public.

Q)  *Do you support the goal of reducing the Illinois adult prison population by 25% by 2025? Would you support sentencing reform such as reducing or eliminating prison terms for non-violent drug offenses? Would you support early release of aged and disabled prisoners predicated on an assessment of risk to public safety prior to release?*

A) I absolutely support a decrease of our prison population for non-violent, drug related offenders. We need to get people with addictions, treatment and those with mental health disorders the proper care they need rather than just incarceration. We need to drive down recidivism and get these people back on track to being productive members of society. Our criminal justice system is not attacking the root of the problem, but in some ways is enhancing it. We spend about $1.4 Billion on our criminal justice system each year, which is 4x the amount we are spending on our kids in CPS. I would consider supporting the early release of aged and disabled inmates on an individual-by-individual basis, if they are not a threat, depending on the crime.

Q) *Do you support automatic expungement and sealing of criminal records for all crimes after an appropriate period during which the former offender commits no crimes?*

A) I would support automatic expungement for non-violent, drug related crimes and other minor and victimless offense. However I don’t think it should be automatic for all offenses, but I do believe it should be an available option and should be determined on a person to person basis.

Q) *Given that there are more empty beds than youth now in the juvenile prisons, do you support closing one or more juvenile prisons?*

A) I think because of the low-rate of people in juvenile prisons, we need reduce the number of juvenile prisons in Illinois. They are costing too much out of our budget to operate, when we have room in other facilities within our state.

Q) *What is your view on a proposal to end the placement of juveniles on the state’s sex offender registry based on assessment of their risk and likelihood to reoffend and/or benefit from treatment? For adult sex offenders, what is your view on delivery of rehabilitation therapy and limiting sex offender registry restrictions only to those men and women assessed to pose a danger to others?*

A) I do not support an end to juveniles being on the state’s sex offender list. The sexual crimes perpetrated by minors frequently increase the likelihood of repeating offenses when they are adults. The protecting of the public from people who have committed these acts, has to be the first priority. I do believe rehabilitation therapy should be available to offenders and accessible even to people seeking help without committing a crime, but I do not support sex offenders being taken off of the registry.

Q) *Do you support a form of merit selection of judges?*

A) I believe that judges should be elected. We already have politicians and the well-connected influencing enough decisions over our state. For people making such consequential decisions, the people who are going to have to endure their decisions should determine those making them.

**Other:**

Q) *Do you support the pending constitutional amendment to create an independent commission to draw legislative districts?*

1. Yes. The Supreme Court upheld the right for states to have an independent commission for redistricting just this past year in Arizona State Legislature v Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission. It is not the job of the politicians to choose their voters, but the job of the voters to choose their politicians. It is an abuse of power that select politicians can choose the very people who elect them and their supporters to ensure a power block, especially when combined with a lack of term limits. Gerrymandering is a threat to our democracy and can easily be stopped, but we must take the proper steps to do so.

Q) *What changes in workers’ compensation or tort reform do you favor?*

1. I believe that every worker that is hurt on the job deserves fair compensation. However, I believe there must be a burden of proof that said injury occurred on the job and not on personal time. This system should not be overburdening as to wrongfully deny rightful claims, but to deter fraud from occurring in the first place. Workers’ compensation is a basic right of workers that must be protected, but can be improved.

Q) *Do you support or oppose automatic voter registration?*

A) Yes. As American citizens, we all have the right to vote. There is no point in making people jump through hoops, when they are already legally eligible to vote. In the democratic process, we should want as many people to play a part in our most fundamental civic process. Every voice needs to be heard in order to truly represent the people.

Q) *What sort of ethics and campaign-funding reforms does the state need?*

A) We need to stop dark money and unlimited restrictions in giving to Super PACs and Independent Expenditures. It is giving corporations and special interests an unfair advantage in our political system. The current system of campaign finance laws allows for essentially legal bribery, where corporations and outside groups will give candidates campaign contributions to vote one way or another on a specific issue. The regular people of our state don’t have that same access to resources to ‘buy’ politicians, which leads to legislation skewed too far away from the needs of our average citizens.

Q) *2016 is going to be a big year in education, as both state and the City of Chicago wrestle with fundamental issues of funding and school policy. Who was the most important teacher in your life and why?*

A) Like most, one of the people that had the biggest impact on my life was my high school English teacher, Dale Griffith. I had some really difficult struggles early on;

I was forced into an alternative school and dropped out of high school at 16. I eventually reenrolled and graduated at 21. It was Mr. Griffith who saw something in me that nobody else did. Most saw me as a lost cause, but he helped me grow academically and as a person. For the first time in my life someone told me how much potential I had and believed that I could accomplish anything. I have never forgotten the lessons he taught me or the words that helped inspire me. When I received my degrees from Duke, MIT, and Harvard, it was a testament to Mr. Griffith and the impact a teacher can have on someone’s life. The mark of a true teacher isn’t the amount of material one has taught, but the amount of lives impacted and that is how I regard Dale Griffith - an impact maker.