**Chicago Sun-Times**

**2016 Primary Election Questionnaire Key**

**District running for:** State Representative, 7th District

**Political party:** Democrat

**Political/civic background:** Former board member of the Proviso High School District 209

**Occupation:** Attorney

**Education:** B.S. from Northwestern University, J.D. from John Marshall Law School

**Campaign website:** electchriswelch.com

**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.*

I serve on appropriation committees for elementary and secondary education and higher education. To balance the budget through cuts alone would devastate our schools, colleges and universities, as well as social services that provide vital services to my constituents, such cancer screenings, meals to our seniors and services for the disabled. These are all programs that middle-class families rely on. It is important that the state lives within its means, while also protecting programs that help middle-class families. We need to find a balance between cuts and increased revenue to protect families across the state. I also believe it is important for everyone to pay their fair share, which is why I supported a constitutional amendment that would increase taxes on millionaires and put that money directly into our schools. I also support the creation of a progressive income tax and closing tax loopholes. I am interested in learning more about other proposals that would help bring in much needed to revenue to the state, but I want to make sure that these taxes do not place an unfair burden families and businesses in my district.

*2.     Expand the sales tax to services.*

I would like to learn more about any proposal that expands sales taxes on services. I believe that any revenue must be used to avoid devastating cuts to education, health care and social services that provide a lifeline to residents across the state. At the same time, I will continue to work with legislators on both sides of the aisle to identify ways we can cut wasteful spending and increase efficiencies to save state dollars. Any tax increase should be structured to ensure that everyone pays their fair share, which is why I supported establishing a millionaire’s tax and would support a progressive income tax that would protect working families.

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

Most seniors live on fixed incomes and do not see cost of living increases that keep up with their everyday expenses. In my district, many seniors rely on state services to help them get by. Any tax increase that is implemented should be used to protect these vital services that local seniors and families rely on, instead of creating an additional burden on them.

*4.     Adopt a progressive income tax.*

Yes, I support a progressive income tax that would ensure that everyone pays their fair share. I previously supported a constitutional amendment that would make millionaires pay a little bit more money to help schools throughout the state.

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

N/A

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?*

The state must do it’s part to help ensure that the pension system remains solvent for all of the employees who have paid into the systems expecting to receive their benefits after they retired. Any changes to the pension systems must be fair to taxpayers and to employees. All stakeholders should be at the table helping to find a solution to the underfunded pension system. After the Illinois Supreme Court ruling on previous legislation, any solution must not reduce any benefits to current state employees, teachers, university professionals and other currently in our pension system. Any effort to diminish those benefits would result in costly legislation and prolong the time before any changes to the pension systems are finally enacted.

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?*

This has many ideas that I support, such as paying off our backlog of bills, making full pension payments, requiring contractors to report of minority workforce participation and freezing property taxes. I also support the suggestion to fully fund social services that middle-class families rely on like the Child Care Assistance Program, Community Care Program and other vital services. I was disappointed when Gov. Rauner failed to fund these programs in his budget proposal and vetoed funding in the budget that was sent to him. Additionally, I am willing to consider some of the revenue proposals and make spending reductions so long as programs that seniors and middle-class families depend on are protected. I also believe that Democrats and Republicans can find common ground on important issues like reforms to worker’s compensation. Last year I supported a number of reforms to workers compensation that would have helped businesses realize more of the savings that were part of the previous worker’s compensation reform package, while also protecting wages and standard of living for employees.

I am, however, opposed to the proposal that would tax retirement incomes of seniors. I am also opposed to any legislation would drive down wages and reduce the standard of living for middle-class families. I will also do everything I can to protect programs that seniors and working families rely on like education funding, health care services for the homebound, breast cancer screenings, meals for the elderly and assistance to victims of domestic abuse.

**Education:**

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

As a former school board president, I know how much our school districts try to do for students with limited resources. The state must do a better job of fully funding education and ensuring that all of our schools have their fair share of resources. Legislators from across the state are still working on trying to find a way to change the school funding formula that helps bring more resources to all of our schools. There is still a long way to go to finding a solution, but one of the most important things we can do is to make sure schools have more resources to put in the classroom. I support a measure that would require millionaires to pay their fair share and bring in an estimated $1 billion each year for our students. This would be an important step in the right direction to improving how we fund schools.

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?*

No. Homeowners in my district are hurting due to the high property taxes that they are paying. Increasing costs on school districts and homeowners who fund our schools would substantially increase the financial burden placed on middle-class families.

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?*

Just as we need to increase funding for early childhood, elementary and secondary education, we must also begin to reinvest into our institutions of higher education. As a member of the Appropriations – Higher Education Committee, I have heard first hand from universities across the state about how they are trying to provide world-class education for students.

Last year, Gov. Rauner proposed slashing higher education spending by 30 percent. This would have destroyed many programs colleges and universities across the state. I opposed these cuts and voted for a budget that would have restored to its previous level. I was very disappointed to see the governor veto this legislation.

Legislators need to continue to go through the state budget line-by-line to eliminate wasteful spending. We must also continue to invest in programs that help students the most, including fully funding MAP grants. Finally, colleges and universities across the state need to go through their budgets to find ways to cut unnecessary and reduce administrative costs, which will allow them to invest more in their students.

**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?*

For too long the state has developed plans to upgrade infrastructure only when improvements are needed the most. Instead, we need to find a comprehensive approach to address the needs of our aging infrastructure on a yearly basis. I am open to ideas on how this can be funded as long as we ensure that the very wealthy are paying their fair share and that the burden is not unfairly placed on working families.

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

Yes. State officials need to come up with a plan to pay for capital improvements to our infrastructure annually. The dedicated revenue stream that should be developed should ensure that the extremely wealthy pay their fair share and an undue burden is not once again placed on middle-class families.

**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.*

To reestablish a strong manufacturing base, Illinois needs to show businesses across the country that Illinois is a great place to live and work. One of the most important ways we can do that is by showing that we put the stability of our state first. Businesses that are relocating look for government partners who can help provide stability and Illinois has not been able to do that. The governor must work with democrats to develop a budget that reduces wasteful spending, but also protects programs that provide cancer screenings, home health care for seniors, assistance to victims of domestic abuse and invests in education from early childhood through college. These investments show businesses that the state is committed to creating a community their employees will want to live in.

Secondly, the state needs to invest in our aging infrastructure. My district has many highways and railways that transport people and goods across the country. Illinois and Chicago are transportation hubs for the entire nation, but we need to continue to invest in our infrastructure every year to ensure businesses are able to transport goods efficiently.

One of the top concerns for employers is a readily available and educated workforce. That means that we need to continue to improve on our commitment to increase funding for education from early childhood through college. We also need to have strong workforce training programs that allow adults to learn new skills and be prepared to look and train for new jobs and opportunities. Improving our schools, college and universities will help bring competitive and high-paying jobs to our communities.

**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?*

The state needs to take steps to ensure that all of our energy demands are met. This should be done in a way that increases energy efficiencies and reduces the carbon output to begin to address the cause of climate change. I support low-carbon portfolio legislation because it helps saves jobs, lowers carbon emissions and increases the use of renewable energy sources.

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?*

I support the Illinois Clean Jobs bill because it helps our economy, environment and consumers at the same time. Through efforts to increase energy efficiencies and raise the renewable portofolio standard, savings will be passed on to consumers saving approximately $1 billion over the next 15 years. Additionally, the bill will help create more than 30,000 good-paying jobs, which people in my community and across the state need.

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?*

I support efforts to reduce carbon emissions by 44 percent.

**Gun safety:**

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

One of the biggest concerns in my district is public safety. Everyone wants to feel safe and secure in their home and neighborhood. One of the ways we increase safety is by making sure that guns do not get into the hands of the wrong people. Background checks need to be enforced on every gun purchase. We also need to make it more difficult for people to buy guns for other people. Finally, we need to make sure that guns are kept out of the hands of individuals suffering from mental illness and do everything we can to prevent tragedies like the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School from ever happening again.

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

Support.

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

Support.

**Criminal justice:**

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

Support.

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?*

I would support the goal of reducing the adult prison population by 25% by 2025, but we must do this in a well thought out way that balances the considerations and concerns of victims with efforts to give people a second chance.

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?*

Having a criminal record makes it much harder to find a job and stay out of the criminal justice system. We need to continue to have discussions about how we can give people a second chance in life, while also protecting the rights of crime victims.

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

This is an issue that we should start looking into, considering possible needs going forward and how the closure of a facility like this would impact the rest of the criminal justice system.

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?*

I support laws that protect community members and children from dangerous sex offenders.

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

Creating a merit selection takes the selection of judges out of the hands of voters and puts it in the hands of bureaucrats and politicians. The best way to ensure that the most qualified judges are elected is by making it easier for voters to obtain and understand ratings put together by bar associations.

**Other:**

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

One of the most important reforms we could make to the redistricting process would be to remove the arbitrary way disputes are settled when the governor and lawmakers cannot agree on a redistricting plan. I am open to considering other proposals, but I believe that any proposal would need to have serious safeguards in place to protect minority voting rights and the ability for minorities to serve in the Legislature. Additionally, when redistricting occurs and elected officials draw maps, voters have a greater ability to share their view and opinions about the maps as elected officials are ultimately accountable to the people they serve. I am willing to learn more about any proposal, but would have to review it thoroughly.

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

Last year I supported a number of proposals that would have helped businesses realize savings from worker’s compensation reforms that were passed in 2011. The proposals included a compromise with the governor on causation, traveling employees, repetitive and cumulative injuries and self-insured employees. It would have helped decrease costs on businesses, while also protecting worker wages and standard of living. I am open to continuing to find ways to compromise and help businesses save costs associated with worker’s compensation, but this must be balanced with provisions to protect middle-class families.

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

Support.

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

Elected officials have a responsibility to serve the people of Illinois honorably and the voters must be able to hold elected officials accountable. I would support legislation to create greater integrity by strengthening reporting requirements for lobbyists, putting in place more safeguards against public corruption and creating a new offense for the theft of public funds.

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?*

I have been fortunate to have many teachers who helped me academically and personally when I was in school. Two that come to mind are Mrs. Blackwell and Mrs. Leaf. Both of these teachers saw my potential and encouraged me to get involved at school and in the community. Mrs. Blackwell and Mrs. Leaf encouraged me to get participate in new activities at school, like plays and student government, and community groups, like the boy scouts. They helped teach me the benefits of being involved in my community, something that I try to pass on to the young people I meet every day.