**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Name:** Zerlina Smith

**Ward:** 29th

**Occupation:** Cosmetologist

**Education:** GED and certifications as a cosmetologist and nursing assistant.

**Previous political and civic experience:**

I grew up on the Near West Side of Chicago and lived for a time in a CHA housing project known as The Village, also called the ABLA Homes. I know what poverty is and what it feels like. I was a good student in school but had to cut my education short to help support the rest of my extended family when a series of personal tragedies struck.

I once worked 3 minimum wage jobs to keep us all afloat. Later I went on to earn a GED, but I didn’t stop there, earning certifications as a licensed cosmetologist and as a certified nursing assistant. I plan to return to college and get an advanced degree when circumstances permit.

My earliest inspiration was my grandmother, Cora Smith, who organized from within CHA public housing to fight for community resources and housing rights. Now as a homeowner in Austin and single mom with a 5 year-old, I am continuing her organizing legacy:

* As a member of Action Now I have helped lead efforts for a higher minimum wage, for affordable housing, and for fully funded neighborhood schools.
* I have been a Local School Council member at Maria Saucedo Scholastic Academy.
* I served as Chair of the Head Start Policy Committee of Chicago Public schools (CPS).

**City Pensions**

**Chicago's fire and police pensions are greatly underfunded, and the city is required by the state to make a $550 million payment into the pension funds by the end of 2015. Do you support restructuring the pension systems, inevitably reducing benefits, to put the funds on sound financial footing?**

**Yes or No:**

No

**Please Explain**:

There really is no pension crisis. There is a revenue crisis. To meet its obligations, the City needs to get behind an idea Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) President Karen Lewis suggested last spring. A modest financial transactions tax on trades at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and the Chicago Board Options Exchange could make the wealthy men and women who work on LaSalle St. “heroes” for coming to the rescue of the public workers who keep the city running.

Her proposal would require a change in state law and faces political opposition from the usual suspects. Paying the full pensions is not only the ethical thing to do, but should be seen as an important investment in Chicago neighborhoods where many of the retirees live. Money spent in the neighborhoods will help keep businesses and other institutions running while further stabilizing those communities.

Finally a recent court decision on state employee pensions suggests that the City has a legal obligation to pay these pensions. In addition, two lawsuits have been filed on behalf of city employees.

**Chicago's pension systems for municipal workers and laborers already have been restructured, reducing benefits, but the city has yet to identify where it will find the revenue to sufficiently fund those systems. Under what circumstances would you support a property tax increase to raise the needed revenue for the fire and police pensions and/or the municipal workers and laborers pensions?**

I would not support a property tax increase. It is time the wealthy corporations, investment houses and banks to pay their fair share.

**2) Chicago Public Schools pensions**

**Large and growing payments required to keep the Chicago Teachers’ Pension Fund solvent are squeezing CPS' budget, forcing cuts elsewhere and limiting investment. The Chicago Board of Education has increased property taxes, but it is not enough to keep up with the high annual costs. What measures do you support to ensure a solvent retirement system and to improve the district's finances?**

As I explained above, there really is no pension crisis. There is a revenue crisis. To meet its obligations, the City needs to get behind an idea CTU President Karen Lewis suggested last spring. A modest financial transactions tax on trades at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and the Chicago Board Options Exchange could make the wealthy men and women who work on LaSalle St. “heroes” for coming to the rescue of the public workers who keep the city running.

Her proposal would require a change in state law and faces political opposition from the usual suspects. Yet paying the full pensions should be seen as an important investment in Chicago neighborhoods where many of the retirees live. Paying the full pensions is not only the ethical thing to do, money spent in the neighborhoods will help keep businesses and other institutions running while further stabilizing those communities.

**3) Revenue**

**In light of the financial issues discussed above, do you support any or all of the following measures, each of which would require, at a minimum, approval by the Illinois Legislature?**

**\* A statewide expansion of the sales tax base to include more consumer services**

**Yes or No:**

Yes, if these are services are used primarily by the wealthy.

**\* A tax on non-Chicago residents who work in the city**

**Yes or No:**

Yes, if it were structured to exempt low wage workers.

**\* A tax on electronic financial transactions on Chicago’s trading exchanges, known as the “LaSalle Street tax”**

**Yes or No:**

Yes.

**Please explain your views, if you wish, on any of these three revenue-generating measures.**

Working class people already face a regressive tax structure and are struggling to make ends meet. We must change the Illinois Constitution to allow for progressive taxation so that those who can afford to pay, pay the most.

**4) Crime**

**Do you support hiring more police officers to combat crime and gun violence in Chicago?**

No.

**Please explain:**

Public safety is a major concern for people in my ward and in wards across the city. People are worried about violent crime because it is a serious problem, particularly in economically distressed sections of Chicago.

But more and more I am hearing the phrase, “Nothing stops a bullet more than a job.” There is much truth in that statement which is why I fight for investment in job creation, job training and better educational opportunities. We have many ex-offenders in my community who want to get back on the right track and these programs would help them. We also need more social services and recreational programs, especially for our youth.

It’s far better to prevent a violent crime than to have to investigate one. The money that Chicago would spend to put more police on the street would be better spent on preventing crime in the first place.

The Chicago Police Department (CPD) which deals with the issue of crime everyday, has some fine police officers who work with the community and are conscientious in their efforts to treat people with respect. However their work is seriously undermined by the Department’s long history of institutional racism, violence and political corruption.

The city has paid out millions to settle lawsuits resulting from police brutality. The CPD has even been cited by the UN Committee Against Torture.

There are residents of my community who fear both the police and the criminals. There are crime victims who feel that even calling the police is useless as they may not show up, or if they do, no effective action will be taken.

For this reason I support the idea of a democratically chosen police-civilian review board to replace the ineffective Independent Police Review Authority. That would be a first step in the right direction.

However reforming the CPD will not be easy and must be seen in the context of democratizing the authoritarian political culture of the city power structure as a whole.

**What legislation in Springfield would you support to try to stem the flow of illegal guns into Chicago?**

I think stronger background checks, and tighter regulation of gun shows might help somewhat, but realistically the guns are out there. I think efforts to deal with the systemic causes of domestic and community violence should be in the forefront.

**5) Elected school board**

**An advisory referendum on switching Chicago to an elected school board, rather than an appointed board, is expected to be on the ballot in more than 30 wards on Feb. 24. Currently, the mayor appoints all seven board members and the Schools CEO. Do you support a change to an elected school board?**

Yes

**Please explain:**

Chicago needs an elected representative school board. The present school board, appointed by the mayor and representing Chicago’s most powerful business interests, has consistently pursued policies detrimental to quality education. Board meetings are a caricature of democracy as Board members watch people try to cram complex issues into 2 minute presentations before they are hauled out by CPS security for going overtime.

The following are necessary changes that would benefit students in CPS. The current Board of Education seems unwilling and unable to accomplish any of them:

* An immediate end to the standardized testing abuse that is so damaging to actual education.
* Smaller class sizes with wraparound social and psychological support services and a commitment to allocate school resources on a racially equally basis.
* A rich curriculum for all students that includes physical education equipment, healthy food offerings, as well as classes in art, theater, dance, world languages, music, science and a wide variety of subject choices in every school.
* A library in every school with library professionals to staff it.

In addition CPS must halt the creeping privatization of education through charters and “turnarounds”. There is no evidence to suggest that they are an improvement on what can be accomplished in public schools.

Privatization is designed to weaken the Chicago Teachers Union which represents teachers and other education workers and to weaken Local School Councils which represent parents and the community.

A study done by Designs for Change showed how a school with strong administration, strong parent involvement and strong teacher involvement can result in signifiant student gains. Yet CPS does exactly the opposite, stripping the important stakeholders of influence.

**6) Tax-increment financing districts**

**TIFs are the primary economic development tool of the city. In a TIF district, taxes from the growth in property values are set aside for 23 years to be used for public projects and private development. Do you support increasing the annual TIF surplus that the mayor and the City Council have declared in each of the last few years, money that goes to the schools and other city agencies?**

Yes

**What reforms would you propose for the city's TIF program?**

Tax Increment Financing was originally supposed to be a method of revitalizing distressed communities facing disinvestment. And while some TIF’s have been used for that purpose, much of the money has served as a slush fund for politicians and business interests. There was even a serious proposal to use TIF money to revitalize the wealthy LaSalle St financial district. That was shelved after public outcry.

Too often TIF money has ended up being a cloaked corporate subsidy or as a way for the Mayor’s Office to pressure City Council members to vote the way the Mayor wants them to.

I support a moratorium on new TIF’s and a thorough investigation of existing ones. There should be complete transparency to the public about how existing TIF’s are organized. If an existing TIF is actually benefitting an economically distressed area, than it should be allowed to continue. If not, the money should be returned to the general property tax pool. If a TIF has not met its original legitimate development goals, it should be ended. If an existing TIF includes job creation goals and a company does not meet that requirement, the TIF subsidy should be returned.

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

**What would you do as alderman to boost economic development in your ward, and bring jobs to your community?**

First of all I do not want just any business to come into our community. Corporations like Walmart with their exploitative and unethical business practices would not be an asset to the 29th Ward as they displace local businesses and pay poverty wages.

We need businesses who provide quality goods and services, treat their employees well, make local hiring a priority and are willing to work with our community and business organizations on solving the many problems the 29th Ward faces.

I feel we need a good mix of economic types including family owned businesses, locally owned private businesses, worker co-ops, consumer co-ops, b-corp social enterprises and non-profit organizations.

I would like to see more businesses that are environmentally sustainable and do not contribute to pollution and climate change. We need solar collectors and solar panels on the roofs of apartment houses, local businesses and private homes so we can cut our energy bills while generating jobs for local residents.

A dream of mine is to establish a West Side technical institute that will educate people for 21st century jobs in hi-tech manufacturing and equipment maintenance so that we can generate jobs with a future. One of the institute’s programs would include a thorough grounding in the latest in green technology so West Siders can either create their own green businesses or seek jobs from existing green employers.

The 29th ward has suffered from massive disinvestment. We need massive reinvestment, but with the participation of people in the community so they are not priced out of their own neighborhoods as has happened in Lincoln Park and Lakeview. One reason that I supported the $15 an hour minimum wage was to get more money circulating within our community to stimulate economic development. That’s why I am a strong union supporter and why I fight to defend pensions and retirement benefits.

I will offer assistance to my constituents as we lobby for public investment and tax incentives from city, state and federal sources. We will talk to nonprofit groups about grants and to banks who are willing to offer low interest loans with favorable terms.

Community participation in economic planning is the key to success.

**8) Size of the Chicago City Council**

**The City Council has 50 members, but civic groups and other regularly argue for reducing the size of the Council. What should the size of the Council be? Please provide a specific number. And why?**

It is long past time to reduce the size of the Chicago City Council. A Better Government Association report published in December of 2010 revealed that Chicago City Council members each represented about 57,000 people whereas New York’s represented 164,000 people and LA’s represented 250,000 people.

Reducing the number of Chicago City Council members would save approximately $350,000 each for operating expenses alone. It would also reduce election costs to the city. It might even cut corruption with fewer City Council members to get into trouble over bribes and kickbacks.

The large number of City Council members makes it difficult to organize effective opposition to mayoral rule, ceding entirely too much power to one individual. Throughout most of Chicago history, the City Council has served as a rubber stamp for the Mayor’s office.

**9) A Chicago casino**

**Do you support, in general concept, establishing a gambling casino in Chicago?**

Yes

**Please explain:** While there are clearly drawbacks to casino gambling, the tax revenue and the good paying union jobs outweigh the negatives.

**10) Red light and speed cameras**

**Does the city have an acceptable number of red light and speed cameras currently, and are they properly employed?**

No.

**Please explain:**

While the speed cameras may have caused drivers to slow down, there are questions about how accurate they really are and if they are being deployed in the most appropriate places. It’s clear that their primary purpose was to raise revenue, which has been far below expectations. Apparently Chicago drivers have not been racing down the streets like it's the Indy 500, which is apparently what the Mayor had hoped for.

From the beginning the red light cameras were also designed to raise revenue. The program has been mismanaged and comes with a 2 million dollar bribery scandal. Its purported safety benefits were largely debunked in a recent Chicago Tribune study. In some traffic situations the program actually increased the number of accidents. It’s time to end this hi-tech scam.

**11) Ward issues**

**What are the top three issues in your ward — the ones you talk about most on the campaign trail?**

My highest priority is job creation and job training. We need to raise incomes in our community so we can reduce the stress of financial insecurity and reduce our social problems. Even among residents who are employed, there is anxiety about losing their jobs in the future. Job training should be more than simply learning new skills. There should also be education on how to improve working conditions on the job, both as an individual and through collective action with co-workers.

Residents of my ward are concerned about inadequacy of basic services. We have had massive disinvestment and the loss of both social services and key businesses. There are seniors who must travel outside of the community to get their prescriptions filled. Purchasing fresh healthy food can also mean people having to leave the community. Without a car, this can be complicated. We have seniors, young people, disabled people, ex-offenders, domestic abuse victims, AIDS patients and others who need both material assistance and counseling from social service agencies, yet help can be hard to find. We need funding from public, non-profit and private sources to address these issues.

The 2008 financial crash hit African Americans especially hard. The loss of home value was a major reason for this. The median wealth of whites is now 20 times that of African Americans who saw a 53% drop in their median wealth as compared to only 16% for whites. Often saddled with subprime mortgages, homes owned by African Americans were more likely to go into foreclosure. The 29th Ward is 83% African American and the devastation is obvious with boarded up buildings and people across the ward fighting the banks to prevent the loss of their homes. We need to resist pressure from the banks to foreclose by using hard-nosed negotiation and public protest if necessary. We also need more public investment in affordable housing and in programs to help properly maintain existing housing.