**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name:  Roderick T. Sawyer

Ward:  6th Ward

Occupation: Alderman

Education:  Chicago Kent College of Law, JD(1990), DePaul University, BS, Finance 1985

**Previous political and civic experience: Alderman of the 6th Ward since 2011, Committeeman since 2012.  LSC President at McDade Classical School (2000-2010), Member of Park Manor Neighbors, Chatham Avalon Community Council, Chesterfield Community Council and Greater Chatham Alliance.  Member of the Board for South Shore Drill Team and eta Creative Arts Center.**

**1) 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:

Please Explain:

**The problem is that none of the current plans, as presented place the pension funds on sound financial footing.  There is no way to solve this problem without revenue because the problem was caused by a government wide issue of avoiding politically difficult revenue conversations while balancing the budgets by skipping on pension contributions.  Whatever the final solution turns out to be, we must ensure that it does not end up as a delayed time bomb in the traditionally middle class communities that are home to many government workers and retirees.  If we think that the solution is simply to reduce benefits, there will come a time when retiree benefits will be outpaced by cost of living increases which will cause localized foreclosure crises and hurt small businesses in neighborhoods thus reducing employment.  We have to pay the proverbial piper, which means a real discussion about revenue outside of doubling property taxes and regressive fees and tickets.  We as a city must all be in this together, including our corporate citizens.**

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?

**My preference is that we come to a deal with all unions and set the price tag.  If we are going to pay our bills I would rather only have to make the case to the taxpayers once and not continually return to their wallets.  That said, Chicago property taxes trail those of the regional suburbs and counties so I would support a property tax increase that would help solve this issue while maintaining service.  I want to be clear that I do not believe that it is possible to solve the revenue side of this issue through property taxes alone.  It would require pension and service cuts too severe, or raise property taxes to a level that would destroy my community’s homeowners and local businesses.  We need to look across this country at cities and states that are addressing revenue from a sensible matter to create new revenue streams.**

**Outside of that, for the long term we must look at investing in infrastructure of other communities. By stabilizing business and entertainment districts outside of the central business district, we can increase sales tax and (Visitor based) revenue to the city.  We have to expand the amount of Chicago that is generating money in order to be stable in the long term.**

**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?

**I support an Elected Representative School Board because even on issues such as this there is not enough transparency of the issue with the public and the City Council.  Workers need to be involved in the pension negotiations and pensions need to be considered a substantial part of the compensation package.  I do not see how it makes sense to ask someone to give up future benefits in exchange for nothing but higher costs now.  The City does not have to change to privatize retirement plans, but if they were serious about the concept the proposals would include an increase in current salaries to give responsible workers to ability to invest more in private retirement plans if they so chose.  I don’t know how such a deal would be treated but it is the only way that these negotiations can even start on honest terms.**

**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:

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

Yes or No:

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

Yes or No:

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

**I am open to a broad discussion on revenue.  The fact is that the city needs more money and we need to ensure that we do not make life more difficult for our residents who can least afford it. The problem with the current administration is that they tend to avoid the discussions about the above referenced proposals, which I believe are all options worthy of debate.  I have personally brought up each of these proposals, only to be summarily dismissed without further discussion.  Its time that we begin the conversation to discuss the viability of each of these issues.**

**4) Crime**

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

Yes or No:

Please explain:

**We need more police officers.  The amount that the city is paying in overtime is problematic.  Fiscally it makes budgeting difficult to predict, but given recent events it is clear that having tired police is dangerous.  I work with many officers, sergeants, lieutenants and commanders in my ward and the super majority of them are dedicated individuals who put their life on the line day and night.  But they are human, and the idea of grinding them with the physical stress of 60 and 80 hour weeks is unconscionable and may lead some to make bad decisions.**

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

**I support increasing the waiting period on purchases and the ban of assault weapons, and I have always been in favor of titling guns like they were cars so that owners would be responsible for their purchases from first registration to disposal.**

**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 membersand the Schools CEO. Do you support a change to an elected school board?

Yes or No:

Please explain:

**Yes I fully support a change to the elected representative school board.  Over the past years that the Mayor has selected the school board we have seen increasing inequality and numerous calls for “reform” but no public discussion of the reform and it’s goals.  I fully believe in ensuring that every child has an equally high quality education.  My problem is that some reforms seem to be targeted more toward politics than the children.  Chicago needs vocational workers, but we have removed the pathway to vocational work in exchange for preparing children for an expensive college education that may not fit their interests or needs.  We have removed art and music and staff libraries, so that children who may be academically prepared for college are not culturally prepared for leadership.  There needs to be accountability in this system and by electing a school board you remove it as a political prop in Mayoral campaigns and elevate the education of our children to the level of public discourse that it deserves and is necessary.**

**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 or No:

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

**First there is a problem with the fact that TIFs are so much the primary economic development tool in the city that economic development can’t help but lag issues.  In the 80s and 90s Chatham and Park Manor had strong business districts and stable communities, so to endorse TIFs and accrue the “blighted” title was not attractive to the residents or representation of the area.  However, as Federal and State funding reduced there became no way to invest in communities which means that a stable community has to fall, approve a TIF then wait for it to get funded to get anything done, all while removing money from other agencies.  We need to get more creative, whether with finding ways for the city treasurer to invest City funds in infrastructure investment in communities, or a more liberal bonding program secured by committed property owners but collaterized by TIF funds, we have to find a way to keep our communities modern and safe without bankrupting the rest of the city.**

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

**In my first term I have approached economic development with a systematic approach.  My goal is to look at my business strips as areas and implement plans from an area standpoint.  There is not a large amount of vacant land so the focus is on small businesses and taking advantage of the natural resources of the area.  My ward is very accessible by public transportation so I have been working on bringing more transit oriented development near our redline stops.  This includes retail and potentially parking solutions to make the stops more attractive to commuters.  Secondly, we are working to make State Street along the Dan Ryan expressway more retail and pedestrian friendly.  The location should be attractive to the thousands of people who travel the expressway daily but are given no reason to get off.  We can provide that as well as outlets for residents if we slow the traffic and push the transition from the manufacturing and industrial roots of State street.  At the old Kennedy King location we are working with the city and private industry to locate a customer service based job engine that would bring good paying jobs to the community.  It is an attractive site because of it’s accessibility.  As one of the largest footprints in my ward, I believe that a job engine is more important than retail because if people are coming to work everyday at a location it becomes much more attractive to traditional retail and will have growth effects for the surrounding community.  Finally we are working to address the largest challenge to small businesses in our community which is access to capital.  Our buildings need a shot in the arm.  Working with local Chambers of Commerce has helped us stabilize and work to grow some small businesses and modernize some of their operations so they can grow.  In my second term we hope that we can do more as well as recruit new entrepreneurs to the area.**

**Despite all of that, we will not be able to really bring sustainable jobs to the community if we do not find a way to help develop our young people to have jobs.  I am a large supporter of having workforce development components tied to larger projects because we have to get our young people prepared to join the workforce.**

**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?

**I believe that City Council needs to remain it’s current size until the city is willing to have a broader discussion about the role of Aldermen.  The fact is that Aldermanic offices are generally overwhelmed with service complaints where the ability to complete them has been removed, and the Administration provides insufficient resources to act as legislators.  By reducing the number of Aldermen without explaining to the public the role of Aldermen, you are giving legislators twice as much space with no new resources to deal with service complaints as small as cracks in sidewalks and alley lights without restoring to them the ability to have a team to ameliorate the issues.  Fewer Aldermen without a redefinition of the role would end up more expensive for taxpayers than the current system because no elected official would sacrifice themselves by operating at the current budget level of expectations that they could not hope to meet.**

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

Yes or No:

Please explain:

**I am in support of the general concept of a Chicago Casino but I am aware that it will require major oversight.  Chicago loses too much revenue to surrounding casinos and boats that should remain at home.  There are many reasonable plans that can provide safeguards from having the institution bring in criminal elements or be predatory on low income communities.  As a general rule we need to be more open minded to legal businesses in the city of Chicago.**

**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?

Yes or No:

Please explain:

**I believe that the city should phase out its use of red light and speed cameras and I introduced an ordinance to that effect.  I believe that the statistics indicate that the cameras are not particularly effective at increasing safety and are mostly to generate revenue.  If the cameras were succeeding at their job on safety there would be decreased revenue as the driving habits of citizens adjusted.  The fairly constant stream of revenue from these cameras indicate that cameras are failing at improving driving habits.  Recent troubling reports about some incorrect data being presented to city council as well as legitimate questions about how some of the cameras were sold and placed in the city indicates that we should just end this experiment in a responsible manner for the city budget.**

**11) Ward issues**

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

**Crime/safety are the predominant issues constituents raise as I travel the ward.  Youth development/ education is also an issue brought up at great length.  But without adequate economic development, we cannot address any of these issues sufficiently.  If we don’t invest in our business corridors, criminal activity will be the only economic activity our youths will experience, either as perpetrators or victims. Lack of job skills training and placement will continue to decimate our neighborhoods.  We have to make it a point to invest in ourselves, and expand our tax base in our communities.**