**Chicago Sun-Times**

**2016 Primary Election Questionnaire**

**Name:** Sonya M Harper

**District running for:** State Representative of the 6th District of Illinois

**Political party:** Democrat

**Political/civic background:**

Executive director, Grow Greater Englewood

Founder, Wood Street Meet and Greet Community Garden

Community organizer, Resident Association of Greater Englewood

Community representative, Appointed Local School Council, Lindblom Math and Science Academy

Co-founder and campaign director, Englewood Votes!

Former director of outreach, Growing Home Inc.

**Occupation:** Small business owner, Executive Director of Grow Greater Englewood Inc.

**Education:** Bachelors Degree in Journalism from University of Missouri-Columbia

**Campaign website:** None.

**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.*

While I do not support tax increases for the sake of avoiding cuts and increasing government regulation, in the long run, I think this may be a viable option moving forward. Raising the income tax only marginally will help dig us out of the financial hole that has resulted after decades of financial mismanagement. This would allow us to properly fund education, invest in our communities, and allow us to maintain vital programs that aid vulnerable families such as child care services and medical care for children and seniors. While I would support an increase in the income tax, we must ensure that as a state we are getting our fiscal house in order, through cutting wasteful spending, eliminating fraud in our welfare system, and cutting corporate loopholes that allow corporations to circumvent paying their fair share.

*2.     Expand the sales tax to services.*

Again, I would be open to looking at new sources of revenue that would help us sustain vital programs that families depend on. We cannot simply cut ourselves out of our fiscal crisis. While I understand that this may further burden citizens of Illinois, it is much more preferable that leaving seniors hungry and education underfunded. But first, we must do everything we can as a legislature to lower the need for a revenue increase, through a thoughtful line-by-line analysis of our current spending.

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

I do not believe taxing income on seniors on a fixed income is the way the state should resolve it’s financial crisis. Most of our seniors live on fixed incomes, with many high expenses, such as healthcare. If we tax retirement income, we are going to push more seniors on to social programs, programs that are already overburdened. There are more sensible options to increase revenue, instead of taxing seniors on a fixed income.

*4.     Adopt a progressive income tax.*

I would be open to considering a progressive income tax. I firmly believe that individuals making over $1 million a year should be paying higher rates to fund critical programs and education. These individuals can reasonably afford a higher tax rate, where many families could not shoulder that burden of additional tax increases.

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?*

It is clear that something must be done to address our pension crisis. It is a drain on our budget, and projections for future costs are unsustainable. However, I agree with the Supreme Court’s decision that existing pensions benefits cannot and should not be diminished, and that a promise made should be a promise kept. We cannot and should not jeopardize the future of past and present hard-working state employees that have put in their time for the betterment of Illinois.

We have gotten into this mess through decades of financial mismanagement by trusted elected officials, and we are still seeing attempts on the part of cities and the state to delay payments to cover the costs. These measures are only deepening the crisis, and should be avoided at all costs. Unfortunately there is not easy fix to this situation, but I look forward to learning more about what we can do moving forward.

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?*

Many of the proposals brought fourth are, to me, common sense measures that I would support. These include, requiring reporting on minority workforce participation, making full pensions payments when they’re due, and funding vital programs such as childcare services, which Gov. Rauner attempted to slash last year. These are all tenets I would support. While I would be open to expanding the income and sales tax, I believe that first we must make thoughtful reductions in state spending.

However, as stated above, I am opposed to taxing the retirement income of seniors who are living on fixed incomes, as this would push more individuals on social programs, and put many seniors in a precarious position. I am also opposed to any measure that would drive down the wages and standard of living of middle-class and struggling families. That is **not** how you balance a budget, by sacrificing the longevity of the middle-class.

**Education:**

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

In Illinois, it should be our priority to provide a world-class education to our children, so they have the resources they need to compete in a global economy. However, in the state of Illinois, it seems that only wealthy districts are afforded the resources to do so. This is a precarious situation, as no student deserves to have their education diminished, but we must work to ensure that the resources we have are distributing funds fairly.

I support a millionaire’s tax to bring an extra $1 billion dollars to our education system, which would give us better latitude to adjust without cutting.

As a local school council member and mother, I oppose any proposal that would diminish needed funding for Chicago schools. I also adamantly oppose any efforts to eliminate the block grant for Chicago. Coming from Englewood, a community with 6 empty schools, the only answer is stronger accountability and increased and fairly distributed funding. This issue was one of great importance to my predecessor, Esther Golar, and I will keep working until we see equity in education between the suburbs and the city.

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?*

While I believe that the state picking up the pension costs of Chicago teachers is worthy topic of debate, we must consider both the short-term and the long-term effects of this. While this plan would relieve budget woes in Chicago, if not fully thought out, it would have adverse consequences for families, increasing pressures on state services and programs they may rely on.

As for outside of Chicago, no. I believe that local property taxes are already out of control, and further increases would devastate many 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?*

Not only is funding down for state universities, but so is enrollment. The more the state chooses to put universities on the backburner, the more the quality of our universities will fall. We must both increase funding for universities to attempt to keep tuition costs down, as well as provide adequate financial assistance to low-income students who otherwise would not have access to a higher education.

While we must increase funding, universities should also make a concerted effort to reduce costs. Administration costs, for example, have skyrocketed unnecessarily over the past few decades. We should increase funding, but we should not be funding reckless spending on the side of the universities.

**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?*

As is with most revenue increases, I’m open to ideas on how to fund vital services, like infrastructure repairs, but instead of further burdening the middle-class, I would be open to higher taxes on the extremely wealthy to help address our backlog in infrastructure repairs.

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, I believe we should proactively work to make sure that our infrastructure needs are covered, but in a way that does not leave the burden on the shoulders of middle-class and struggling 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.*

As a small business owner, I am sympathetic to the woes that many businesses face in Illinois. While I think we have a lot of work to do in improving Illinois’s business climate, my ultimate concern is not doing so at the cost of middle-class and vulnerable families. There are many ways to do this that uplifts local families, instead of increasing their burden.

The first thing we need to do is send the message to businesses that Illinois is a fiscally stable place. Having entered 2016 without a budget in place, we are sending a resounding message that we are a fiscal nightmare for any business. Governor Rauner has failed to work with the Legislature to develop a fiscally responsible budget that protects programs and services that our families rely on, and this refusal to work with the Legislature on a budget has sent the message to businesses that Illinois is no place to call home. As we enter spring session, I will continue to do everything I can to urge both sides of the aisle to come to a thoughtful and bipartisan resolution to our budget crisis, before we drive more businesses and people out of Illinois.

We should also look to investing in our crumbling physical infrastructure, such as roads and bridges. This is critical to job creation and attracting businesses to come to, or stay in, Illinois. We must create a proactive program that will provide for vital projects while also creating and maintaining jobs for Illinois workers. Illinois is the nation’s foremost transit center, with numerous airports, rail lines and interstate highways joining here, so it is critical that we keep maintaining our existing infrastructure, so we don’t squander the key tenets that drive businesses here.

The last thing I will work on is ensuring that Illinois can provide a world-class education that will create strong employees with relevant skills for a variety of trades. Illinois is competing in a global economy, so we must ensure the workforce here is educated and available to fill the needs of businesses wanting to come to Illinois. We must do this by improving standards for our grade schools and ensuring we are adequately funding our public university system. Our competitiveness as a state is directly linked to the quality of our workforce.

**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?*

I have many concerns about the bill and have been questioning how beneficial it would be. I am concerned about increased surcharges on customers, the fact it will make renewable energy much harder to bring to Illinois, and will ultimately block competition. While I understand the motivation behind the bill, my concerns must be addressed before I can support or oppose the bill.

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?*

As a member of the Renewable Energy and Environment committees, the Illinois Clean Jobs Bill is one I have been following closely. I support this measure for a variety of reasons, including that it is estimated to create more than 30,000 jobs a year when fully implemented, it will save consumers about $1 billion over the next 15 years, it increases energy efficiency standards, and raises the renewable portfolio standard.

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 any approach that will reduce carbon emissions in Illinois.

**Gun safety:**

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

Yes. With violent crime a major issue in my district, we should be weary of who we are allowing to buy firearms in Illinois. While this will not solve the issue of violent crime, it is a step in the right direction to keeping them out of the wrong hands.

While background checks would help, the real concern is keeping guns out of the hands of the mentally ill. The recent barrage of mass shootings in this country have been committed by those who are not mentally sound, so I believe we should make every effort to identify these individuals, and stop them from buying or using firearms.

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.

While I believe that the majority of our local police officers are dedicated to protecting us, there are a small number that are smearing the name of law enforcement. Therefore I do support greater transparency and preservation, because good officers have nothing to hide, and police departments have a right to know the history of whom they are hiring to protect and serve their communities.

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?*

Yes! I think our prison population is one of the most glaring issues facing the State of Illinois. I think drug-offences should be processed through a drug court, and these individuals should be given proper treatment and evaluation, instead of being thrown in jail and costing the state money it does not have. There should be no one in prison that does not pose and a threat to public safety, so long as these evaluations are sound.

Ultimately I believe we should focus most on lowering our recidivism rates, through expanding rehabilitation and redeploy programs.

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?*

While I am very passionate about restorative justice and ensuring former criminals are given a fair second chance in life, there are some cases in which I feel this would be inappropriate. Offences such as child abuse and sexually based crimes should not be sealed, but for most other offences I do believe this would be a step in the right direction.

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

Coming from a district fraught with violent crime, criminal justice reform issues are of great concern to me and I believe that they must be addressed thoughtfully. Consideration for these prisons I feel must be done on case-by-case basis, to ensure we are addressing short-term and long-term needs.

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 any laws that would protect neighbors and children from dangerous sex offenders and predators.

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

I do not believe that taking power away from the people to elect judges and giving it to politicians is a step in the right direction. There are other ways to draw attention to these races such as ratings by bar associations and better coverage by the media.

**Other:**

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

While I support reforming the redistricting process, I have some serious concerns that the current constitutional amendment does not protect minority voting rights and the ability of minorities to serve in the Legislature.

I am also concerned that the authority to draw legislative maps would be handed over to an unelected and unaccountable group. The people would have no route for holding anyone accountable for a legislative map that may have disenfranchised them.

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

Last year the legislature made great strides in workers’ compensation reforms in an effort to compromise with the governor, reforms that will help businesses see more of the savings that were part of workers’ compensation reforms passed in 2011 without decimating the wages and standard of living of middle-class families.

Moving forward, while I realize we must compromise, I will actively oppose any attempt to dismantle unions or the rights of workers to make a living wage.

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

I support this measure.

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

Illinois has a long-standing reputation of being filled with corruption and I hope in the coming years we can work to turn that name around. I would support legislation creating a new offense for the theft of public funds, laws that strengthen lobbyist reporting requirements, and tougher crackdowns on any public corruption on the part of elected officials.

While these would be significant improvements, they are only small steps. I would therefore be open to further changes that may be presented.

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?*

One of the most important teachers in my life was my sophomore English teacher Richard Lufrano. It was in Mr. Lufrano’s class at Lindblom Technical High School that I refined my desire to become a broadcast journalist, deepened my commitment to serving my community and learned how to push myself beyond the limits of things that I was used to doing as young person growing up on the south side of Chicago. I always knew that I wanted to go into journalism but it was Mr. Lufrano who supported this desire by allowing me to complete a research project that eventually became my guidebook on how to become a successful broadcast journalist. It was him who introduced me to the number one ranked journalism school, University of Missouri-Columbia, where I eventually earned a Bachelor of Journalism degree and also led several student organizations. It was because of Mr. Lufrano that I had mentors waiting for me on campus before I even arrived because of his introduction and connections. Mr. Lufrano had a profound interest in making students feel empowered to conquer their challenges and personal goals. When a classmate was shot and killed shortly before her graduation, Mr. Lufrano used his personal resources and connections to help start a scholarship fund and basketball tournament in my fallen classmates honor. Mr. Lufrano also sponsored the drama club and even convinced me to play a leading role in one of his productions. With his encouragement and direction I saw myself having experiences and successes I would have never had if it had not been for his urging, continual support and genuine interest in my life as a student and yes he was pretty good at teaching English too!