**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Name: Debra Silverstein**

**Ward: 50**

**Occupation: Alderman**

**Education: Graduate of University of Illinois - Chicago**

**Previous political and civic experience: Alderman of the 50th Ward, April 2011-present**

**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: No

**Please Explain:**

Legislators need to deliver on promises made to employees and retirees. I agree with the courts that Senate Bill 1, the legislation that cut COLA increases, was unconstitutional. I also agree with the Illinois Supreme Court’s decision in July that prevents any diminishment of health care benefits for retired state employees. I oppose further attempts to cut pension benefits for City employees and retirees.

**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 feel that the residents of the City of Chicago are already paying too much in taxes and a property tax increase would be an unnecessary burden on them. We must explore all other revenue generating options.

**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 an accountant (I was a practicing CPA with 25 years experience before I was elected to the Chicago City Council), I would support a graduated income tax with a fair tier structure. I also support a land-based casino in the City of Chicago. I would be in favor of supporting a sales tax on large-scale finance transactions, or what is referred to as the LaSalle Street Tax.

Corporations should not benefit from loopholes that choke the flow of tax dollars and fees into the City and CPS budgets and the City Council should pursue legislation to close loopholes that provide unfair tax breaks to businesses or even individuals. For example, this fall the City Council passed legislation to close a loophole in the use tax charged to Chicago businesses that buy products and goods elsewhere. This will result in an additional $17 million in annual revenue for the City of Chicago.

The City Council should continue to look at comprehensive TIF reform. I have signed on to a moratorium on additional TIFs until the program is audited and overhauled.

**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: No
**\* A tax on non-Chicago residents who work in the city**

Yes or No: No

**\* 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.**

**4) Crime**

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

Yes or No: Yes

**Please explain:**

We need more police on our City streets. The 24th and 17th districts are among the safest in the City of Chicago and I want them to stay that way. When the police shift resources to high-crime areas, that means less police officers in the 50th Ward and I want our resources to stay here in our community.

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

Like our City’s top police officials, I am completely disappointed that our local gun control laws have been rolled back by the federal courts because Chicago clearly has a gun problem. It is too easy for guns to end up in the hands of the wrong people.

The City should pursue all options when it comes to protecting the public and keeping dangerous people from accessing guns. I am in favor of strict sentencing rules. Those who use guns in the commission of a crime should receive steep sentences. Gun owners should be required to go through rigorous background checks. Straw purchases, during which one person buys a gun for someone else, should be restricted.

Additionally, I would consider supporting legislation that tracks the sale of ammunition or requires ammunition manufacturers to stamp unique serial numbers on cartridge cases so that ammo can be tracked back to the purchasers if it is used in a crime. There should be background checks and strict requirements for purchasing ammunition just as there are during a transaction for a gun.

We should explore legislation that would require gun manufacturers to incorporate smart fingerprint technology so the gun can only be used by the registered gun owner.

**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 or No: Yes

**Please explain:**

Had the resolution to place a referendum on the ballot to create an elected school board made it out of committee, I would have voted for it on the floor of the City Council.

I am on the record as supporting an elected school board or a partially-elected school board. I believe the Chicago Public Schools CEO should be selected by the school board and receive final approval from the City Council as well.

**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: Yes.

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

In 2011, I publicly joined Cook County Clerk David Orr in calling for a moratorium on new TIFs pending a comprehensive audit to evaluate how the TIF system can be reformed.

The City of Chicago is actively reforming its TIF program and implementing more sensible policies. The 2014 and 2015 budgets include a TIF Surplus of $50 million and $60 million respectively. Of this amount, 20 percent was earmarked for the City of Chicago, 50 percent was earmarked for the Chicago Public Schools and the remainder was designated for the City’s sister agencies, such as the CTA and the Chicago Park District. This systematic “surplusing” of the TIF funds allowed CPS to avoid scheduled budget cuts this year. These are dramatic steps in the right direction. I would like to see more TIF Surplus included in the budgets in the coming years.

However, there is a time and a place for TIFs and I have been very successful in carefully reinvesting TIF dollars in our community. Devon Avenue was struggling to retain businesses, dilapidated and borderline unsafe for pedestrians and drivers alike. The new Devon Avenue Streetscape Project is revitalizing one of the City’s great business districts, and while we have secured additional funding from the State of Illinois, this ongoing work is contingent on TIF dollars. When it is completed, the improved Devon Avenue will replenish the TIF and new tax dollars will flow into the City’s coffers.

My goal is to continue to use TIF dollars strategically to ensure these funds are solvent and used for smart, carefully selected projects that are supported by constituents and the business community.

However, I am aware there are instances when TIF dollars are not used in the original spirit of the TIF concept and I would be willing to review reform measures that eliminate or sunset TIFs that are deemed to be ineffective or no longer necessary.

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

For it’s diversity and it’s wealth of unique businesses that serve Chicago’s Indian, Pakistani, Jewish, Asian American and Russian communities, Devon Avenue is one of the City’s great business districts.

However, the infrastructure throughout our premier business district along Devon Avenue was crumbling and desperately out of date. In 2011, I set out to achieve the goal of redeveloping Devon Avenue to make it shine again. After petitioning the Office of the Mayor and City departments and working with other elected officials, I delivered a comprehensive multi-million dollar streetscape project for Devon Avenue.

The project was the result of long collaborative process with business owners and neighbors. After nearly a dozen meetings, the streetscape plan began to take shape. The scope of the project includes new streets, wider sidewalks, new lighting, street furniture, new planters, unique street identifiers and trees and features to improve pedestrian safety.

The multi-year project is currently underway and, as each phase is completed, it will serve to build the local economy and encourage reinvestment in what is truly one of Chicago’s diamonds in the rough. The first phase has resulted in an amazing transformation. Residents and business owners are already benefitting from an improved thoroughfare and Devon Avenue will help the City as a whole when it rebounds and reclaims its status as one of Chicago’s biggest contributors of sales tax dollars.

We have invested more than just money into Devon Avenue. Nearly every month, I meet with public safety officials and business owners to help make Devon Avenue safer for them and their customers. The number one complaint from business owners was parking for their customers. We changed the parking zone regulations in the neighborhood so they now make much more sense: Customers can park in residential areas during the day, when residents are elsewhere, and when residents return from work, the restrictions for visitors go into effect and the residents are able to find parking. Previously, the parking rules were reversed. It was a poor fit for all parties and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

There are other parts of the ward that need help. I would like to see improvements in the Touhy Avenue and Western Avenue business corridors and, while it will take time to realize these changes, I see a better future for these areas. Recently a strip of storefronts along the 2800 block of Touhy Avenue that were vacant for five to ten years were sold and we should see new businesses moving into those locations.

My Office has been effective in filing empty storefronts. A recently shuttered Dominick’s is now home to a completely refurbished Cermak grocery store. Additional new businesses include Starbuck’s, Petco, Ross Dress for Less, Chase, Culver’s (coming soon), Advance Auto Parts, O’Reilly Auto Parts, Wing Stop, Lickity Split (a new ice cream shop that should open this spring), Relish and a new Ted’s Market, among others.

I work closely with the ward’s largest employers, such as S&C Electric. One of Chicago’s oldest operating manufacturers, S&C has partnered with my ward office on several initiatives to give back to the 50th Ward community.

**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?**

A 50 member City Council is appropriate. The 50th Ward includes approximately 55,000 residents who deserve to have their service needs addressed in a quick, efficient and professional manner.

I am a full-time alderman and it is a 24-7 job. It would be impossible to be responsive, efficient and effective with double the number residents, at least at current aldermanic staffing levels. We are a small office, but we have decades of public service experience among our staff. My employees put the constituents first.

I have close relationships with the City’s department commissioners and I do not hesitate to contact them directly. We work tirelessly to fix potholes, clean sewers, complete tree trims and remove graffiti as quickly as possible. Prior to my election, this very basic work was ignored, but these days we are able to manage the requests for help that do come in. I do not know that we would be able to do the same with double the number of calls and emails.

I have maximized investment in our community to benefit our constituents and businesses. For example, our Ward’s streets and alleys were devastated by years of neglect. They were riddled with potholes and people avoided certain streets completely. Over a period of three years prior to my election as Alderman, very little in discretionary funding went into street repair. That ended in 2011 when I took Office. Since then, I have directed millions of dollars in discretionary funding to repave more than 100 streets in the 50th Ward.

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

Yes or No: Yes

**Please explain:**

The City needs new revenue and a casino in Chicago would be a new revenue source. Some estimates indicate a casino could bring in as much as $200 million annually, according to a 2012 report. The project should move forward as soon as possible and I would support earmarking those revenue dollars for covering pension costs and helping our schools.

**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: No

**Please explain:**

The red light camera system is not perfect and needs improvement. The yellow light timing of stoplights needs to be checked across the board not only for safety reasons, but also to ensure the City is not wrongly issuing tickets. Any expansion of the program should be suspended until the City Council can be assured that the program is operating in a fair and reasonable way that helps protect the public and targets for fines only those people who drive recklessly.

The program has increased safety when it comes to the most dangerous types of accidents, specifically the side-impact accidents that lead to the most serious injuries and fatalities.

In light of recent reports, the evaluation of the number and severity of rear-impact accidents should be thorough and ongoing. There should be time set aside in the near future for a review of these findings so adjustments can be made.

Devon Avenue has been the scene of several tragic accidents involving vehicles and pedestrians. The new streetscape project incorporates engineering solutions to slow traffic and prioritize pedestrians over motor vehicles. Upon completion, this roadway will be dramatically safer for everyone.

The red light camera program is not a comprehensive solution. I believe revenues should be set aside to provide funding for additional pedestrian and motorist safety measures such as traffic-calming engineering projects, green light synchronization to help the flow of traffic and pedestrian-friendly bump outs and islands to make crossing major streets easier.

**11) Ward issues**

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

**Public safety**

I have put a tremendous amount of work toward establishing a strong relationship among my Office, the 24th Police District, the 17th Police District, the Office of the Cook County Sheriff, my constituents and the business community. When I took Office in May 2011, these relationships did not exist.

Since the start of my term in Office, I, or someone from my staff, have attended all CAPS meetings with residents so we can better understand their concerns and work to identify solutions.

In 2011, we initiated a program during which we meet monthly with business owners to address specific issues. This first-of-its-kind program has been very successful and is ongoing. I talk with or text message with our ward’s public safety officials on a daily basis.

In partnership with Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart, I have hosted several day-long policing events with a multi-jurisdictional task force consisting of numerous public safety agencies, including the 24th Police District.

These events, which were the first of their kind in the City of Chicago, flooded the neighborhood with more than 50 Sheriff’s Police and Chicago Police officers. The taskforce has netted dozens of arrests in our community including the criminals with outstanding warrants, violent offenders and drug dealers. Drugs and weapons were taken off the streets. Other wards have adopted this program following the successes in the 50th Ward.

**Constituent Services**

We put constituent services first and I have the most responsive and efficient aldermanic office in the City of Chicago. I have close relationships with the City’s department commissioners and we work tirelessly to fix potholes, clean sewers, complete tree trims and remove graffiti as quickly as possible.

I have maximized investment in our community to benefit our constituents and businesses.

Our ward’s streets and alleys were devastated by years of neglect. For years, very little was spent to fix our city streets. Since 2011, I have secured millions of dollars in discretionary funding to repave more than 100 streets in the 50th Ward. These improvements were not only funded by the City of Chicago, but also by the State of Illinois. The infrastructure throughout our premier business district along Devon Avenue was crumbling and desperately out of date. After petitioning the Office of the Mayor and working with other elected officials, I delivered a multi-million dollar streetscape project that includes new streets, wider sidewalks, new lighting, street furniture, new planters and trees and features to improve pedestrian safety. This multi-year project, which is currently underway, will drive the economy and investment in one of the City’s most vibrant business districts.

The streetscape project includes $1.7 million in state funding.

I obtained an additional $1 million in state funding for an expansion of the North Shore Channel Bike Trail. This money will allow us to build a new crossing for the trail at Lincoln Avenue, giving the 50th Ward’s residents a beautiful and fully connected bike path that stretches for many miles to the north and south.

Additional state funding includes over $1 million for residential street lighting.

When I ran for Office, I pledged to improve our community’s many parks. I delivered on that promise and secured funding for eight state-of-the-art neighborhood playgrounds, one for each of the parks in the 50th Ward.

When the historic Indian Boundary Park Fieldhouse was destroyed by fire, we worked with the Chicago Park District to ensure it was restored to exacting standards.

**Education**

Before I took Office, there was no meaningful relationship between school officials and education advocates and the 50th Ward Alderman. I meet regularly with principals from the public and parochial schools in the 50th Ward. Additionally, I have sponsored Educational Forums to help parents learn more about early childhood, elementary and high school programs.

I have advocated for funding for infrastructure and other improvements and delivered million of dollars in City resources to 50th Ward schools.

In 2012 and 2013, Chicago Public Schools invested nearly $7 million in capital dollars in 50th Ward schools. That includes new lighting at Armstrong Elementary; flooding abatement, new lighting, new lockers and additional facility improvements at Boone Elementary; a new playground, HVAC and chimney repairs and new lighting at Clinton Elementary; new lighting at Decatur Elementary; structural improvements including brickwork, ADA upgrades, new lockers and lighting improvements at Rogers Elementary School; and lighting improvements and security cameras at Stone Elementary. All three un-air conditioned schools (Boone, Decatur and Rogers) now have air conditioning.

Additional funding has been earmarked for our schools for 2015.