**Name: Senator Patricia Van Pelt**

**District running for: Senator 5th District**

**Political party: Democratic Party**

**Political/civic background:**

**Occupation: State Senator**

**Education:** Doctorate

**Campaign website:** www.senatorvanpelt.com

**Chicago Sun-Times Editorial Board questionnaire responses**

**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.

2. Expand the sales tax to services.

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

4. Adopt a progressive income tax.

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

My number one choice for increasing revenue in Illinois is to reduce our spending. Pension reform is primary to that goal and reducing duplicative government units and agencies would free up resources as well. I also support closing corporate loopholes and implementing a fair tax. We have a great need for new revenue in Illinois. However, I believe that everyone should share the burden—not just the poor and middle-class. For that reason, I do not support an increase in the sales tax, which would largely lie on the backs of the poor and middle-class.

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?

Years of underfunding and skipping payments on Illinois pensions has lead to over a $100 billion deficit. It is imperative that we make significant and constitutionally-acceptable changes to our pension system now. I support using a previous model that was adopted by the Senate. It called for an agreement between government and state workers that would give state workers a ability to choose either higher wages or cost-of-living increases in exchange for pension reform

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?

It is critical that we pass a budget as soon as possible. I would need to learn more about the bicameral model and how it would play out. I am very open to the idea of passing the budget using different models.

**Education:**

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

Illinois' current school funding formula is outdated and ineffective. We need to focus on how we can provide adequate support to all of our schools. I do support developing a single formula for funding. It is unreasonable to support the wealthy schools with more funds than they need while ignoring the essential needs of the very poor schools. Currently, we rely too heavily on property taxes to fund our schools. I supported Senate Bill 318, which called for Republican and Democratic legislators to create a new funding formula so that all schools could be funded equitably across the board. In addition, I support Senate Bill 1 (School Funding Reform Act of 2015), which called for an overhaul of the current funding system and created a simplified formula that was based on local school districts' ability to pay and provided additional funding to areas with high concentrations of poverty.

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?

I have supported both the state picking up Chicago teachers pension costs as well as each district paying their own pension costs. However, my preference is that each school district pays their own pension costs and that the savings be used in a streamlined funding formula so that all schools are receiving equitable funding,improving education all over the state.

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?

I support a significant increase in funding to higher education and to all of our schools. It is important that Illinois continues to be relevant in the marketplace when companies are looking to setup in an area with highly educated workforce. University funding should be sacred, including MAP grants for our students that need funding the most.

**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

Having a good transportation system is very important for all Illinois residents and businesses. I do not support a gas tax increase as our gas prices are already high. I believe Illinois can get its fiscal house in order so we will have funds to improve transportation. Meanwhile, we should stop sweeping accounts that have been created to support our infrastructure improvements.

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

A reliable funding stream for capital expenses for our transportation system is necessary and very important. But until we can identify additional resources and cut costs it will be almost impossible to create a funding stream for this important area of our state infrastructure.

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.

The most important thing we can do to attract and retain manufacturing jobs in Illinois is to solve the pension crisis and address the revenue shortages that have created dire circumstances for many residents and companies in Illinois. Secondly, we must remove the red tape that slows businesses from getting established in Illinois and help to attract other local supports for businesses as well. Lastly, we should create additional incentives for manufacturing companies that will locate in low-to-moderate income areas.

**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 think this legislation could be a component of our solution. I also sponsored the Clean Jobs Bill, which focuses on renewable energy to reduce our carbon emissions.

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?

Currently I am a sponsor of the Illinois Clean Jobs Bill, which includes an increase in the Renewable Portfolio Standard. In addition, increased efficiency brought about by this bill will save Illinois residents nearly $1 billion by lowering electricity costs across the state. It will also create tens of thousands of jobs every year.

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?

The Clean Jobs Bill, which I sponsored, calls for the Illinois EPA to develop a mass-based cap and invest market. It also requires an exhaustive stakeholder engagement process that aims to ensure that the cost-effectiveness of this model is a reality. If Illinois along with other states join together to create a multi state market for carbon pollution Illinois can reduce costs further while raising additional revenue.

**Guns:**

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

Yes. There’s too much violence running rampant in Chicago. Gun violence must be reigned in. I support both tighter gun background check laws and limiting straw gun purchases. I also support pushing for tougher penalties for people that bring guns in from out of state to avoid waiting periods and tougher background checks. The vast majority of guns recovered in Chicago were originally sold in other states, including states with weaker gun laws.

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

I support licensing for all firearm dealers in Illinois. Any funds can be utilized to forge community partnerships around public safety initiatives.

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

Yes, indeed. We also must better fund our mental health services so less Illinoisans get to the point of crisis

**Criminal Justice:**

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

I am fully committed to supporting and introducing legislation to ensure transparency. In addition, I agree that all disciplinary files held by police departments across the state be permanently preserved and be open for review through FOIA. I believe that the local police unions should have a role in crafting the legislation. Transparency will improve public confidence and promote good policing throughout the state.

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?

Illinois is in need of criminal justice reform, especially in light of the state's financial challenges. I am a strong proponent of eliminating the use of prisons for non-violent offenders. I believe we could ensure public safety while these offenders are housed within communities using various options including mental health or drug rehab programs for drug offenders. Others can be kept from re-offending through electronic monitoring, home confinement and strict enforcement of probation requirements. This is especially important in my district because of the high rate of imprisonment for nonviolent offenses. Another major drain on the budget is recidivism. Nearly 50% of those exiting Illinois prisons return to prison within three years.

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

Yes

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?

The registry exists as a safety mechanism to help protect general public from sex offenders. In my view, youth that have not shown repeated behavior should not be subject to the registry requirement, especially because of all of the scientific research on the brain and cognitive development of young people. While I am all in support of public safety measures, we as Illinoisans do not have to look far to see that many youth charged with a sex crime do not need that label for the rest of their lives.

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

Yes.

 **Other:**

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

I believe the current system is probably as fair as an independent commission. My greatest concern is the possibility the voices of minority voters would be diluted or in some cases, silenced.

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

I like the progress we’ve seen over the course of last few years in regards to Workers’ Compensation Reform. Prices have dropped significantly; medical costs are down 15%, as well as overall Workers’ Compensation expenses. That progress came out of a series of negotiations between union leaders and the governor. I believe compromise is the key to creating equitable solutions with Workers’ Compensation, as well as tort reform.

Q) Do you support or oppose automatic voter registration?

● Support. I believe automation voter registration would improve public participation in the electoral process. There are approximately 2 million unregistered voters in Illinois. I strongly support a bill that updates the “motor voter” law. I believe this would add many new registered voters to the rolls and would signal to Illinois’ young voters, that their voice matters.

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

Over the years, advocates (myself included) have worked tirelessly to push for meaningful campaign reform measures in Illinois. Unfortunately, money in politics is similar to water on a roof; over time the water will always find a way to get in. With that in mind, I believe Sunshine Laws are the best option when it comes to campaign-funding reform. In addition, I would support a push for stricter laws around the revolving door between politics and lobbying.

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?

My most important teacher was Mr. Alexander, my 6th grade teacher at Jenner Elementary School located in the Cabrini Green Projects. Mr. Alexander was the first teacher I had that spent time talking to me and other students and helping us resolve issues that happened outside the school doors.