**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Name:** Juanita Irizarry

**Ward:** 26

**Occupation:** Statewide Housing Coordinator for Long-Term Care Reform, Office of the Governor, State of Illinois

**Education:**  Master of Public Administration, Harvard University, Kennedy School of Government, 2007 (Studied on a full-tuition scholarship as a Presidential Scholar/Public Service Fellow and received upon graduation the Littaeur Fellowship Award for Public Service, Academic Excellence, and Potential for Leadership)

**Previous political and civic experience:** Though I have long thought that I might eventually serve the community through government service, I have spent most of my career in the non-profit sector. I have 15 years of work at various non-profit organizations focused on comprehensive community development and housing policy, both in the West Town/Humboldt Park/Logan Square area and region-wide.

Among my accomplishments, I managed the lead hazard reduction component of the 6-agency, collaborative West Town Lead Project, a federal demonstration program; served as associate director of Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation for 4 years as it birthed a community organizing campaign and battled with then-1st Ward Alderman Jesse Granato who was a foe of the affordable cooperative housing, traditional multi-family affordable rental housing, and affordable single family homes that Bickerdike was developing and seeking to develop in the 1st, 26th, and 35th Wards during that period; ran The Resurrection Project’s small business development program and grew its nascent revolving loan fund to provide $1 million dollars in loans, with no defaults, to small construction companies; oversaw The Resurrection Project’s development of single-family homes and two-flats for moderate income families and provided homeownership training and education to prospective homeowners and families facing foreclosure.

Also, from 2001 to 2006, I rescued and relaunched a small non-profit advocacy organization that focused on housing, immigration, and early childhood education issues in the Latino community across the region.   That agency, Latinos United, eventually became the Latino Policy Forum.  The work I did during those years, the relationships I developed across the diverse Latino populations across the regions, and the Latino and African-American coalition-building work that Latinos United prioritized, built me a broad base and led to the first conversations others initiated with me about running for office someday.

Since then, my professional service also has included five years working in philanthropy at The Chicago Community Trust.  I helped direct grant funds to non-profit organizations across the region working to address basic human needs and community development concerns, including the areas of hunger, homelessness, disabilities, immigration, housing, and early childhood education.

In the midst of these many public service experiences, I worked—both in professional and volunteer roles—in organizing, advocacy, and political campaigns to engage and/or challenge aldermen and other elected officials to include in their community planning and policy agendas the voice and perspectives of low- and moderate-income community residents.  In the greater Humboldt Park area, much of my leadership and organizing was accomplished through various roles with the Near Northwest Neighborhood Network and its Humboldt Park Empowerment Partnership organizing collaborative, which grew out of efforts to attract federal Empowerment Zone funding to Humboldt Park in the mid-1990s. In the mid-2000s, I served on 26th Ward Alderman Billy Ocasio’s Affordable Housing Committee.  In 2010, then-City Clerk Miguel del Valle recruited me to direct his policy team for his mayoral campaign.

In January 2014, my 20 years of public service led to a professional role in government.  Currently, I am on leave from my job as Statewide Housing Coordinator for Long-Term Care Reform in the Governor’s Office of Health Innovation and Transformation, for which I was recommended by the disability advocacy community.  In that role, I chair an interagency panel working to implement a federal housing program that supports the State’s effort to reform its system of care for low-income people with disabilities to make it possible for them to move out of nursing homes and institutions, if they so choose, and into independent housing throughout Illinois.

**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:**  I do not believe that Chicago can with integrity regularly subsidize wealthy corporations while asking working people to forfeit pension benefits.  I believe that current commitments to pensions must be honored.

Other ways to deal with the pension crisis that I would support are:

* Re-amortization of the debt currently owed using a flat level dollar, rather than level percent of payroll, amortization schedule.  As I understand it, this will require a somewhat higher payment the first few years, but over time the payment required will remain flat rather than escalate.
* Renegotiating or terminating City of Chicago and Chicago Public Schools bond swap contracts.  As I understand it, cancelling the contracts might cost more in the short term, but save many millions of dollars in the long-term.  The threat of cancellation could be used to renegotiate the contracts to more favorable terms.

**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 based on how the property tax is currently structured.  Overall, I would only support specific revenue enhancements that could be accomplished in way that increases the progressiveness, and did not increase the regressiveness, of the current tax system.  Increasing property tax exemptions for owner-occupied homes based on the owner’s income (e.g., like with the Long-Time Occupant Exemption) would be one potential way to do this.  Long-term, changing the law to allow for a progressive property tax system is worth exploring (e.g., a progressive property tax system could be structured so that the portion of a property’s value below the median property value for the community as a whole would be taxed a lower rate than currently).

**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?**

A very longstanding issue that we need to continue to work on is underfunding by the State of Illinois, which has often ranked last among all states in the percentage of education expenditures provided by the state, requiring local tax revenues to provide the majority of revenue.  According to the state’s own standard for General State Aid, CPS should have received $1 billion more in General State Aid in FY14.  At the state level, I support maintaining the current income tax, to maintain current funding.  Long-term, I support changing the Illinois Constitution to allow for a graduated income tax. These type of revenue increases are more sustainable than the approved plan to borrow $17 million from private investors to expand early childhood education programs that will end up costing taxpayers perhaps twice that considering interest.

**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

\* 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.**

There needs to be a balance between increasing revenue and reducing spending in areas that doesn’t sacrifice the City of Chicago’s ability to assist residents to meet their basic human needs.  However, in the midst of very complex and deep municipal budget challenges that will not serve up easy solutions, I want to help use this election to send the message that it is not okay simply to balance the budget on the backs of the poor and the middle-class through budget cuts and fee increases.

I would support responsibly increasing revenue on those individuals and corporations who can afford to pay more in taxes, reducing spending on non-basic human needs and other strategies before supporting cuts to future public and private sector pensions and effective social programs.  Two revenue increases I support are modernizing the sales tax to include certain services and instituting a sales tax on large-scale financial transactions.  According to the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, Illinois taxes just 17 of 173 service categories, the narrowest base of all but four other states.  As far as a commuter tax, I am concerned that a tax as such, would disproportionately burden very low-income households in Chicago’s inner ring suburbs who come into Chicago to work at jobs in the service industry.

**4) Crime**

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

**Yes or No:** Yes

**Please explain:**  I am a former board member of the Community Renewal Society and strongly support the Reclaim Campaign to reduce violence by moving limited financial resources away from overly punitive criminal justice systems into community-based restorative justice, mental health, and substance abuse alternatives that rehabilitate lives and make our communities safer.

However, I also believe the Chicago Police Department needs more front line officers.  We have too few police and they are overworked and tired. In the era of Ferguson and other such challenges, we need our police to be at their best in order to appropriately address, without overreaching, perceived or real threats on the streets that we need them to patrol.  In my community, the closure of the 13th District police station has negatively impacted police service in the part of the 26th Ward that is now served by the 12th district, located all the way in Pilsen.

Community policing needs to be revamped and re-launched.  Serious engagement between police and the community, especially youth, is necessary. My experience as associate director of a local community development corporation that develops and manages affordable housing leads me to believe that the police often bring negative stereotypes about residents of affordable housing that they can only come to change if the police themselves work closely with the residents who are working hard to rid their own neighborhoods of gang and drug crime.

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

I would support SB 3659, introduced on May 13, 2014 by Senator Dan Kotowski, which would ban, with some exemptions, the possession, delivery, sale and purchase of many semi-automatic firearms and accessories, as well as .50 caliber rifles and cartridges unless the items have been previously owned and registered.  SB 3659 also amends the Firearm Owners Identification Card Act to require background checks for private transfers of firearms, except those between family members.

I oppose mandatory minimum sentences for gun crimes previously proposed by Mayor Emanuel, as they eliminate judicial discretion and contribute to overcrowding of the prison system.  Most importantly, evidence presented by the John Howard Association and others suggests mandatory minimum sentences are not a cost-effective way to decrease gun violence and create safer communities.

**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: I support an elected School Board.  An elected board would be accountable to the community as well as teachers, parents, students, and would be more diverse, reflecting the people it serves.  Election requirements could mandate specific qualifications and cap campaign expenditures, thus reducing the influence of money and politics on education. (My team of volunteers helped circulate petitions to get the advisory referendum on the ballot in the 26th Ward.)

**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?**

If I had been in office in 2013, I would have voted in favor of an ordinance declaring a larger surplus in Tax Increment Finance (TIF) districts that would have returned more money to the operating budgets of taxing districts.  Unfortunately, that ordinance failed.

TIFs can be a useful tool, as they provide direct funding for public works projects and they provide subsidies to encourage private development.  However, without adequate oversight TIFs can also have negative impacts:

* Divert revenue from other taxing districts, such as municipalities, public schools and libraries.
* Increase property tax bills when taxing districts have to increase their tax rate due to the freeze on assessments.
* Waste subsidies in areas where growth would happen even without a TIF district.

At a time when Chicago is facing massive budget shortfalls to pay for basic services, it’s past time for TIF reform.

I believe we need comprehensive TIF reform at the state and local level to make creation and management of TIF districts more transparent, so that the public and elected officials can make informed decisions about taxing and spending in their communities.  The reforms would also allow, under certain circumstances, overlapping taxing districts, particularly school districts, to benefit from some of the increase in property values over time that currently solely go to TIF—and/or opt out of TIFs altogether.

* Revise the definition of blighted areas, so that future TIF districts can only be created in districts where development would not happen “but for” the TIF.
* Within a municipality limit the land area and/or value of the tax base that can be included in a TIF.
* Require TIF districts to have more explicit purpose and goal statements at the outset to help evaluate the TIFs progress over time.
* Define a process through which TIFs that have fully met their goals, and therefore are no longer necessary to promote development, can be phased out prior to the originally planned date.
* Slow down the TIF approval process to allow more time for community evaluation and input.
* Require that the governing authorities of the overlapping taxing districts approve participation in a TIF by a majority vote of their governing board.
* Explicitly define a process to allow taxing districts to sign inter-governmental agreements with municipalities that allow them to share in the new property tax wealth available in TIF districts.
* Define a process through which individuals taxing districts can opt-out or limit their participation in a TIF.
* Index the Initial Equalized Assessed Value for properties in TIF districts to inflation, or some other measure, to allow taxing districts to benefit from some of the increase in property values over time.
* Have a clearer and more transparent process for identifying surplus TIF funds to be returned to overlapping taxing districts.
* Require that the portion of an individual’s tax payment being sent to TIF districts be made available to them.
* Define procurement standards for spending TIF funds.
* Have a well-defined and transparent process for determining when TIF funds can be ported from one TIF district to another.

Had I been in office when the City Council approved the $55 million TIF allotment for a Marriott Hotel and DePaul basketball arena in the south Loop, I would have voted against it.  I share the concerns detailed in Alderman Scott Waguespack’s analysis of the plan for DePaul Arena and McCormick Place Entertainment District.

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

I previously served on the Steering Committee of Humboldt Park Empowerment Partnership (HPEP), which promoted economic development and workforce development through collaborative action teams working across various local non-profits and local businesses. Although HPEP no longer exists, I think it still provides a good model for neighborhood development.

Through HPEP, I was part of efforts in the 26th Ward under the previous alderman, Billy Ocasio, to ensure that local residents receive training and prioritization for new jobs created by commercial and residential development in the ward.  At HPEP I also helped guide the development of the Carreras en Salud program to create a pipeline between Spanish-speaking workers in health care industry receiving job training and local hospitals.

While employed at The Chicago Community Trust, I also worked with several workforce development organizations, including Greater West Town Community Development.   As Alderman, I would work hard to strengthen connections between workforce development programs and local employers, like those in the Kinzie Industrial Corridor, which is across the street from the 26th ward on Grand Avenue.  I would also work collaboratively with the 27th Ward alderman to attract more businesses there.

Another priority would be to better promote Paseo Boricua (on Division Street, west of Western Avenue) as a thriving cultural and commercial strip, building on the Puerto Rican culture that has long been a centerpiece of the neighborhood.  To do this requires a strong Division Street Business Development Association to provide more effective technical assistance to existing and potential businesses.  I would work to attract appropriate developments and businesses to this strip.

**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 the number of City Council members should remain 50.  This is an issue where I can see both sides of the argument, but on balance I would not recommend any changes to the size of the City Council.  The financial savings of reducing the number of alderman would probably be minimal and not impact our budget problems. Efforts to change the number of City Council members could well be tied up in the courts and divert a lot of time and energy from more important issues.   Our neighborhoods need representatives that are closely connected to the realities of the communities. If our districts are too large, representation will be less effective.

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

**Yes or No:** No

**Please explain:** I oppose casino gaming in the City of Chicago because I think we should focus our energy on more progressive options to increase revenue and because of the negative impact it would have on existing businesses.

**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:** Undecided

Please explain:  I support initiatives to increase safety for automobile drivers, pedestrians, bicyclists and others. However, from the beginning the traffic light camera program has been been plagued by mismanagement, corruption and understandable perceptions that the main goal of the program is to generate revenue.  I would join alderman who have supported an ordinance to have the City Council hold hearings looking comprehensively at the traffic light camera program so that recommendations for reforming the program can be developed.  I cannot say without more information whether we have too many or whether they are in the wrong places, but recent newspaper reports suggest that each of these may be problems.

**11) Ward issues**

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

Based on a years of working with community groups and neighbors in the 26th Ward and a listening tour I conducted priorities to announcing my campaign, these are my highest priorities.

* Independence and Accountability: I will make decisions after listening to community desires, not what donors or other elected officials ask her to do.
* Strengthening Our Schools: I will fight to make sure that neighborhood schools stay open and have the resources they need to help our children succeed.
* Keeping Our Neighborhoods Safe: I will work to strengthen partnerships between community groups and the police to reduce crime and violence.
* Creating Jobs And Strengthening the Community: I will support businesses that pay living wage jobs, increasing the minimum wage, preserving affordable housing and other community development efforts that build on the current diversity of the ward.