**Name:** Andy Kirchoff

**District running for:** State Representative, 24th District

**Political party:** Republican

**Political/civic background:** Illinois Leader, Cafe con Leche Republicans.

**Occupation:** Scheduler, Independence Plus, Inc.

**Education:** Bachelor of Arts, Loyola University of Chicago

**Campaign website:**

**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.*

A) I am open to tax increases as part of a broader, long-term reform effort to alleviate Illinois’ state and pension debt. However, I could only support such tax increases on the condition that other changes are made to state government - changes that ensure a sustainable future for the 24th District and the State of Illinois.

I believe that it’s possible to reduce the overall tax burden on Illinois’ citizenry and businesses while alleviating the state’s fiscal crisis. Recent history demonstrates that this isn’t some conservative pipe dream: Ohio, under Republican Governor John Kasich, raised sales taxes while reducing income taxes. The end result has been a net job increase for the state and a budget surplus. Now, Illinois isn’t Ohio, and we will need to find our own solution to our own problems (could Illinois enact a carbon tax, while reducing income taxes? Could we reduce property tax burdens instead?). But as a blueprint for much-needed reform, Ohio isn’t a bad place to start!

Discussing bold and comprehensive solutions like tax reform probably strikes many as overly optimistic at best, and downright delusional at worst. Certainly, tax reform, by itself, is inadequate - spending must be reduced, and programs must be reformed. Right now, the state legislature won’t even grab the “low-hanging fruit” (we’re talking about a body that voted to increase its own pay, after all!). I’m in favor of cutting legislative pay, as well as the “no budget, no pay” bill in the General Assembly, but the “big ticket” items - public employee pensions, for example - are the real drivers behind this crisis. The State Legislature needs courageous and thoughtful leadership that is willing to tackle these issues. I’m willing to be a voice for a paradigm shift on this issue, and I think the residents of the 24th District are, too.

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?*

A) I supported the previous bipartisan pension reform effort during the last legislative session, led by Rep. Darlene Senger (a Republican) and Rep. Elaine Nekritz (a Democrat). I recognized it as a good faith, bipartisan effort to solve a glaring problem. In any case, the legislature played a roll in creating the state’s pension crisis; the legislature must play a role in fixing it.

I understand that the Illinois Supreme Court has already ruled that the state is obligated to pay out what it has promised to its employees, including pension payments. It is also my understanding that cost-of-living adjustments are not addressed in this jurisprudence, and I think COLA’s are an excellent starting point for pension reform discussions. Pension “double-dipping” and other abuses must also be addressed.

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?*

A) While I generally support a reduction of power in the General Assembly, I also recognize the necessity of a budget, and I think legislators need the ability to circumvent leadership when the common good demands it. I could tentatively support a budget template of this nature.

**Education:**

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

A) The status quo is completely unacceptable. The educational disparities that result in no small part from the current funding formula are unconscionable. I would love to see an increase in education spending, absolutely, but as with taxes and spending, priorities need to be re-examined and real reforms need to happen, too.

Education needs to be parent-centered, and parents deserve more input in how education dollars are spent. I think that the “school voucher bill” sponsored by Democratic Sen. James Meeks of Chicago was an imperfect way of placing power back in the hands of parents, and I would’ve happily supported that bill. I also appreciate Sen. Andy Manar’s efforts in increasing awareness of this issue, even as I disagree with his particular approach at addressing it.

The 24th District includes parts of both the city of Chicago as well as several of its suburbs. This puts its representative in the enviable position of hearing from both the suburban and urban perspectives on this issue. That said, from my experience, I can honestly say that the “city vs. suburb” rhetoric from state legislative leaders is really not on the minds of most parents. Most parents simply want to know: “Is this a good school? Will it prepare my child to succeed in life? Will it accommodate my child and his/her particular needs?” This is more important to me than the public vs. private and city vs. suburb “turf wars” that seem to suck all the air out of the education debate.

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?*

A) I oppose shifting pension costs from the state to localities, and vice versa. Either solution masks the underlying problem: both systems are unsustainable. Rather than shifting costs, Illinois needs to find ways of reducing costs.

I also think it’s important to separate the “pension cost” issue from the rest of education spending. I really don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that pension costs are holding essential services hostage.

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?*

A) Again, I generally support an increase in state funding for education, including higher education, but as with taxes and spending, there needs to be some real reform in how funding is allocated. Additional funding, be it for education or anything else, when the state is not meeting the obligations is currently has is simply not responsible.

**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?*

A) A gas tax would be the “option of last resort” for me. People across the country, to say nothing of Illinoisans, finally saw some relief from high gas prices in 2015. I don’t think raising the cost of gasoline is a viable option to pay for infrastructure.

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) I’m honestly curious as to why the current formula \*doesn’t\* include capital costs. As a Republican, I’m wary of creating new avenues for unnecessary spending, and I don’t want the state of Illinois to pay for new projects that aren’t needed. Yet failing to fund capital costs would seem to incentivize the status quo. I think that funding capital costs is a small step we can take to bringing about a more sustainable future for Illinois.

**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.*

A): The 24th District includes communities that were once some of the largest manufacturing hubs in the nation. There are many reasons for this change, but allowing for greater economic freedom in Illinois - lowering the cost of opening and running a business, reducing tax burdens for families and businesses, and restoring confidence in Illinois state government - will let entrepreneurs and “big business” alike know that Illinois is “Open for business!” once again. I believe that tackling the “tough issues” - including pensions - would be more effective at revitalizing Illinois than targeted legislation to benefit manufacturers.

**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?*

A) Having recently read Pope Francis’ new encyclical on the care for creation, I’ve renewed commitment to environmental sustainability. I support a “low-carbon model” as part of statewide energy policy.

However, I am equally convinced that Illinois needs less micromanaging on the part of the state government, including and especially from the legislature. I worry about the negative impact any change in standards will have on Illinois residents. This can’t be used as an excuse for a failure to address environmental concerns, but Illinois needs to do a better job of listening to groups of people that have traditionally been disenfranchised from the political process. We also can’t afford to lose more tax revenue to neighboring states. Net migration out of state reached 6 figures last year, and new standards shouldn’t be the “straw that breaks the camel’s back” for even more Illinois businesses and residents.

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?*

A) Illinois repeatedly fails to keep the promises it makes to its citizens. Better to focus on meeting the goal currently in place - even if that means an eventual failure - than to delay and have to “pay interest” on a broken promise. Similarly, I think the Illinois Clean Jobs Bill is not the right approach to progress in this area. I say this as a Republican who thinks my party has some room for improvement in the area of environmental sustainability.

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?*

A) A cap-and-trade program and/or carbon tax is a worthy idea irrespective of existing federal rules. I realize that I am in the minority of my party in saying that, and I would insist on broader tax reform before I signed on to \*any\* tax increase, but as part of a broader effort towards environmental and fiscal sustainability, a carbon tax or “cap-and-trade” policy is certainly “on the table” for me.

**Gun safety:**

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

A) I support the principle behind the U.S. Senate bill to require background checks for gun purchases. I have reservations about viable enforcement mechanisms for straw purchases (be it for guns or anything else) and I would likely oppose legislation limiting straw gun purchases.

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

A) While I am loathe to extend a licensing bureaucracy to firearm dealers, I have no objection to a licensing regime that can help to genuinely promote public safety.

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

A) Support.

**Criminal justice:**

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

A) I’m not sure what particular legislation this question is referring to, but I support efforts to promote transparency and preservation of police disciplinary records. I would also add that this same principle should apply in other parts of the public sector, as well as the private sector. It’s true that sunlight is the best disinfectant, and at a time when distrust in government is so high, efforts at increasing transparency should be lauded and encouraged.

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?*

A) I strongly support sentencing reform, including, but not limited to, reducing prison terms for non-violent drug offenses. I think that the state of Illinois’ work with churches and other religious groups with the prison population is laudable and should be expanded as a complement to other reforms. I’m wary, however, of goal-setting that would have to be met with undesirable or even untenable solutions. Illinois has a decades-long track record of promising too much and failing to deliver.

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?*

A) I don’t like the idea of automatic expungement, but as someone who strongly believes that change of heart and mind is possible, I want expungement to be an “option on the table.” I think a reasonable alternative would be for the state to inform someone with a criminal record that they are eligible for expungement, and to create a safe, easy avenue for such an option to be pursued.

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

A) If there is no other reason to keep the prison open, then yes, I would support closing juvenile prisons.

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?*

A) The advent of social media has, despite its benefits, allowed for new forms of sexual harassment to emerge. “Sexting” is emerging as an issue of major concern (I recall that Rep. Senger filed legislation dealing with this particular issue in the recent past), and in the spirit of that legislation, I believe leniency for juveniles is warranted for certain sexual harassment cases. I do recognize, however, that public safety warrants some sort of special designation for sex offenders, and there are cases where even juveniles will need to be on this registry. I don’t think it’s fair for me to commit to any existing piece of legislation at this time, but I believe in rehabilitation in principle - and leniency for juveniles in particular - be it for sexual harassment or for other crimes. It’s really important that we move towards a “reform” model in the criminal justice system for juveniles and adults alike. Our current system is seen as unduly punitive by many on both the right and left, and for good reason.

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

A) I am open to this, though I would want to retain some level of voter input, as well.

**Other:**

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

A) I strongly support the “Fair Maps” amendment. Illinois’ western neighbor, Iowa, has had a similar system in place for years, and it has successfully placed a check on both political parties. Right now, of course, such a change in Illinois favors my party, but eliminating the specter of one-party rule should be welcomed by people of all political persuasions. I believe that the Fair Maps amendment would do that.

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

A) Governor Rauner and others have suggested that the current worker’s compensation system is chasing businesses out of Illinois. I’m actually less inclined to change this system than others in my party, but I’m sympathetic to the Governor’s criticism of the “no-fault” system for workplace injuries. “Venue-shopping,” too, is something I’d like to find a way to curb. Illinois shouldn’t be a destination for liability lawsuits.

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

A) I oppose automatic voter registration, as well as mandatory voting.

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

A) The best way to restore ethics in Illinois government is to remove the temptation of power and influence from legislators (and other government officials). This is why I support the “People’s Amendment,” championed by State Representative Mark Batinick (R-Plainfield), which makes it easier for Illinoisans to create citizen ballot initiatives. I’m also supportive of recall initiatives, such as the bill recently introduced by Rep. LaShawn Ford (D-Chicago) to allow for a recall of the Mayor of Chicago.

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?*

A) I’ve been blessed with many good teachers in my life, but the most important teacher I’ve had during my school years - the one who continues to have the most lasting and positive impact on me - was my high school English teacher, Mr. Loch. He taught me how to think critically, to read carefully, and to balance compassion and common sense in dealing with life’s challenges. Thank you, Mr. Loch!