**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Name:** Jerry Paszek

**Ward:** 38th

**Occupation:** Police Sergeant – Cook County Forest Preserves

**Education:** Bachelor of Arts - University of Illinois at Chicago with a double major in Criminal Justice and Political Science.

**Previous political and civic experience:** I have participated in the civic process since volunteering for exit polling as a class project in 1987. I have been a precinct captain for two elected officials, and have volunteered and worked on a number of campaigns for both local and state candidates. In 1995, I was a candidate for Alderman of the 41st Ward and in 1998 for Commissioner of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District.

**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 will oppose any legislation or proposals seeking to diminish pension benefits while working diligently to come up with workable, fair and reasonable solutions to fund pension shortfalls. Any proposed changes to the pension system should affect only new hires. Retirees, who spent their careers in public service, planned their lives and retirements based on the guarantees they were given by their employers. Retirees and current employees had contributions to the pension plan automatically deducted from their paychecks and were never afforded a “pension holiday” to skip these payments. Additionally, retirees receiving a government pension who also worked other jobs paying into Social Security are subject to the Windfall Provision Act, which greatly reduces any Social Security benefits they would otherwise be entitled to. The discussion about funding the pension systems has unfairly characterized union and public sector employees as greedy and not deserving of the benefits they were guaranteed as part of their compensation package when accepting employment. The discussion surrounding pensions should focus on resolutions to putting the pension systems back on solid financial ground after years of mismanagement. This mismanagement was the result of the failure of our elected officials to budget properly and make the required payments necessary to ensure these programs’ viability.

New sources of revenue need to be identified along with eliminating wasteful spending. Some examples include, but are not limited to:

* Video Gaming - The Video Gaming Act was enacted in July 2009, authorizing the placement of up to five video gaming terminals in licensed retail establishments, truck stops, veteran and fraternal establishments. Chicago has placed a ban on allowing this type of gaming. As a result, Chicago residents are going to neighboring suburbs or across state lines in order to spend their entertainment dollars on video gaming. Reversing the ban would create a new source of revenue and benefit local business with increased patronage.
* TIF Program - The TIF program should be reevaluated. The amount of money held in reserve by the TIF program should be capped and any surplus should be allocated to fund pension and operating budget shortfalls. The City Council should be responsible for the oversight of this program and should have control of the revenue it generates.
* LaSalle Street Tax - The LaSalle Street Tax and the elimination of corporate loopholes are viable options to help fund the pension shortfalls, pay down existing debt and provide services.

**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 have identified and discussed several new sources of revenue, such as the reversal of the ban on the Video Gaming Act, the overhaul of the TIF program, the elimination of corporate loopholes and the implementation of the LaSalle Street Tax, as being viable options to generate the money needed to properly fund the city’s pension obligations. The Mayor’s statement of “Unfortunately there’s a thing called a contract” cannot just apply when the City enters into risky bond deals and financial institutions reap huge profits from brokering these deals. A contract is a contract, and the City must fulfill its obligations to its retirees. Retirees, who spent their careers in public service, planned their lives and retirements based on the guarantees they were given by their employer, the City of Chicago. No one, including myself, wants to see property taxes rise and such an increase should only be considered after exploring new revenue streams and eliminating corporate loopholes and wasteful spending. Any discussion of a property tax increase should guarantee that this “new revenue” be dedicated to funding the pension obligations and eliminated as soon as the systems are fully funded.

**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?**

Over 50% of our property taxes go the Chicago Board of Education. A taxing body that is responsible for over half of the property taxes assessed should be held directly accountable to the voters. I support a change to an elected School Board and CEO. I oppose the funding and expansion of charter schools. Charter schools have siphoned funds away from traditional public schools resulting in budget shortfalls. At the same time, several analyses have shown that these schools have underperformed in comparison to CPS.

As stated in the preceding answer, new sources of revenue need to be identified along with eliminating wasteful spending. The Video Gaming Act was enacted in July 2009, authorizing the placement of up to five video gaming terminals in licensed retail establishments, truck stops, veteran and fraternal establishments. Chicago has placed a ban on allowing this type of gaming. Chicago residents are going to neighboring suburbs or across state lines to spend their entertainment dollars on video gaming. Reversing the ban would create a new source of revenue and benefit local business with increased patronage. The TIF program should be reevaluated. The amount of money held in reserve by the TIF program should be capped and any surplus allocated back to fund pension and operating budget shortfalls. The City Council needs to have more oversight of this program and control of the revenue it generates. Additional revenue sources, such as the LaSalle Street Tax and the elimination of corporate loopholes, are viable options to help fund the pension shortfalls, pay down existing debt and provide services.

**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.**

The word “tax” makes most people cringe. Over the years, there have been countless reports of insider deals, mismanagement, kickbacks and bribes involving our elected officials and our tax dollars. Budget cuts alone won’t solve the financial problems and some cuts have had negative impacts such as those reported in the mental health and children’s service sectors. New sources of revenue need to be identified in order to provide the level of service the taxpayers want and expect. We also expect that our taxes be used efficiently.

Of the three taxes listed above, I favor the “LaSalle Street tax”. This tax will have the least impact on the average taxpayer. The tax on futures and derivatives contracts would be paid by the wealthy financial institutions or individuals making these trades, not by the exchanges. The General Assembly is considering HB 5929 which “imposes a tax on the privilege of engaging in a financial transaction on any of the following exchanges or boards of trade: the Chicago Stock Exchange, the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, the Chicago Board of Trade, and the Chicago Board Options Exchange. Provides that the tax is imposed at a rate of $1 per contract for all transactions for which the underlying asset is an agricultural product and $2 per contract for all other contracts. Provides that the term "financial transaction" means a transaction involving the purchase or sale of a stock contract, futures contract, swap contract, credit default swap contract, or options contract, but does not include a transaction involving securities held in a retirement account or a transaction involving a mutual fund.” The exchanges, which already collect transaction fees, could also collect the tax which some estimate could generate $10 billion for the State with $2 billion going to the city of Chicago.

I do not support a tax on non-Chicago residents working in the City and believe any such tax would be countered by surrounding suburbs with a tax on Chicago residents working in their suburbs. A statewide expansion of sale tax base to include more consumer services makes more sense. According to an article in Crain’s Chicago Business “taxing consumer services could generate $4 billion in sales tax revenue annually”. The state currently taxes 17 consumer services, well below the national average of 56. As the economy shifts to being more service based, taxing these services allows the state to shift the tax base from relying primarily on taxing goods.

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**4) Crime**

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

**Yes or No:** Yes

**Please explain:**

Proper staffing levels along with manageable district and beat boundaries would ensure adequate police coverage across the city. As Alderman, I would advocate for the Department to conduct a comprehensive review of the size of its districts and the beats of which they are comprised. The City needs to allocate resources to the Police Department budget to allow it to conduct testing on a regular basis in order to have a constant pool of qualified candidates to choose from instead of having to work through a list several times before exhausting that list. The Department needs to be proactive in its approach to fill vacancies due to attrition, not reactive to being short staffed hundreds of officers before a new test is given. Other major U.S. cities, such as Los Angeles and New York, recruit and test on a regular basis to fill vacancies and Chicago should follow their example.

The City must keep up staffing levels not only for patrol officers but also in the supervisory ranks. The Chicago Police Department must ensure proper allocation of resources necessary to conduct promotional exams on a regular basis. The Department should not balance its budget and also claim to be at full staffed by eliminating positions that are essential to its effective operation. These supervisory positions should be filled by qualified members of the force to ensure the proper functioning of the department. As a 23 year veteran and a Sergeant of 14 years with the Cook County Forest Preserve Police, I know that proper supervision is an important component in minimizing the number of lawsuits filed against the Department. When a department is efficiently supervised and trained, there are fewer lawsuits, resulting in better use of funds in which the Department can utilize to hire additional officers and continue career growth through promotions.

The 38th ward is within the borders of the Chicago Police 16th District. This district also polices the 41st ward and portions of four other wards; 30, 36, 39 and 45. A comprehensive review will need to be conducted in order to reevaluate the overall size of the district and the size of the beats within the district. Officers responding to emergency calls for service must traverse long distances at expedited speeds putting their safety, and the public’s safety, at risk. Having to travel long distances to reach calls for service results in longer response times. Geographically smaller beats would alleviate these problems.

Staffing levels must also be addressed. Staffing levels must not only keep up with attrition but also be increased to ensure adequate police coverage. Proper staffing allows officers the opportunity to be proactive in their policing approach by having units available to patrol the streets identifying and investigating suspicious activity.

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

I would support legislation that increased the penalties for anyone caught with an illegal firearm and anyone who illegally transferred such firearms. One of the most common ways criminals acquire guns is through straw purchase sales. A straw purchase occurs when someone who may not legally acquire a firearm, or who wants to do so anonymously, has a family member, friend or someone they paid buy it on their behalf. Other sources of illegal gun transactions are sales made by legally licensed but corrupt gun dealers or theft from dealers or owners. In all these circumstances, proper registration of guns will lead back to the guns origins. Anyone failing to properly transfer firearms must be held accountable for this crime and as an accessory to crimes committed by those using these illegal guns.

**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 a change to an elected School Board and CEO. A taxing body that is responsible for over half of the property taxes assessed should be held directly accountable to the voters.

**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**: No

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

The TIF program should be reevaluated. The amount of money held in reserve by the TIF program should be capped and the surplus could help pay off the city’s obligations. The City Council needs to have more oversight of this program and control of the revenue it generates. A recent analysis of the TIF program by the Civic Lab estimated the city had $1.7 billion in its TIF reserves. I would support a moratorium on new TIF districts until an audit was conducted and reforms initiated that ensure that the program details are transparent and that the funds are managed effectively. The spirit of this program is to spur economic development in blighted areas by providing financing to existing or new businesses in the area. I believe there are businesses and institutions in more dire need of these funds in areas more blighted than some of the current TIF districts.

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

People want to reside in an area that is properly policed and well maintained by a ward office that responds quickly to requests for city services. New business owners are attracted to a customer base that feels safe while venturing out to their local businesses. Addressing the first two needs will help attract and keep business in the area. The first year of a business is generally critical to the long-term success as they develop their customer base. I would advocate for the city to streamline the process of licensing and permitting and offer some tax credits to allow these new businesses the opportunity to grow. Working with the local Chambers of Commerce, I would help promote our local businesses to our area residents through the ward website and sponsoring an informational guide. The 38th Ward neighbors several suburbs which offer free parking for their businesses and the city needs to develop a plan to provide more free parking in order for our businesses to compete.

**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 do not believe that Chicago should reduce the number of alderman in the City Council. Each of the 50 aldermen serves a ward that is geographically bigger with larger populations, than many surrounding towns and villages. The average Chicago ward population is approximately 54,000 residents. The alderman is responsible for ensuring that the City is responsive to the needs of their communities. A reduction would provide some cost savings but lead to less efficient delivery of city services and the potential for a City Council under even more influence by the mayor or special interest groups. A City Council consisting of 25 aldermen means a majority only needs 13 aldermen to promote an agenda as opposed to the 26 currently needed.

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

**Yes or No:** Yes

**Please explain:**

Opponents have expressed legitimate concerns about the expansion of gambling and its effects on some families. However, Chicago residents are going to neighboring suburbs or across state lines to spend their entertainment dollars at casinos or on video gaming. Building a casino would create new construction and service industry jobs. A casino built in the downtown area would benefit our tourism and convention business. The city should also reverse its ban of the Video Gaming Act which authorizes the placement of up to five video gaming terminals in licensed retail establishments, truck stops, veteran and fraternal establishments. Reversing the ban would create a new source of revenue and benefit local business with increased patronage.

**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:**

Chicago’s traffic light program is despised by many for a number of reasons including the admission of bribery and kickback schemes surrounding the program. The shortening of its yellow lights generated 77,000 tickets and $8 million for the city in six months and overall the program generates approximately $60 million annually. Chicago has one of the nation’s largest speed camera programs with 130 cameras operating across the city near schools and parks. Speed cameras were estimated to generate $90 million in yearly revenue but that number has been revised to $40 million for 2015. Together these programs generated $100 million in much needed revenue.

These programs need a comprehensive review and monitoring to ensure that their original intent, to promote safe driving and reduce intersection related accidents, is adhered to. This review should examine the number of cameras in operation and where they are located. The City must make sure its vendors are not manipulating the system to increase revenue. Eliminating these programs will result in having to station police officers at high traffic areas that once had these cameras. With proper oversight these programs provide the benefit of changing driving behaviors in a positive way and help to enforce traffic laws without having to utilize police resources. The fines levied by these programs are avoidable by driving responsibly. No one wants to receive a ticket and pay a fine but the simple solution to avoid this is to slow down and stop at red lights.

**11) Ward issues**

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

Public safety, city services and protecting the pensions earned by retirees and those currently working towards a pension will be my main priorities if elected as Alderman of the 38th ward.

Public Safety: The 38th ward is within the borders of the Chicago Police 16th District. This district also polices the 41st ward and portions of four other wards; 30, 36, 39 and 45. A comprehensive review needs to be conducted reevaluating the overall size of the district and the size of the beats within the district. Officers responding to emergency calls for service must traverse long distances at expedited speeds putting their safety and the public’s safety at risk. Having to travel long distances to calls for service results in longer response times. Geographically smaller beats would alleviate these problems. Staffing levels must also be addressed. Staffing levels must not only keep up with attrition but also increased to ensure adequate police coverage. Proper staffing allows officers the opportunity to be proactive in their policing approach by having units available to patrol the streets identifying and investigating suspicious activity.

City Services: A well maintained community aids in keeping an area safe and attracts new business. Working street lights and trimmed trees allow residents to keep watch over their streets and be vigilant of suspicious activity. In order for our fire and police departments to respond to calls for service, our streets must be free of obstructions such as potholes, snow or flood waters. The residents of the 38th ward pay some of the highest property taxes in the city and deserve prompt responses to requests for city services and from its first responders.

Protecting Pensions: Many of our 38th Ward residents are public sector employees similar to me. Our public servants work tirelessly, with little recognition, to, among other things, maintain law and order, educate our children, care for our sick and elderly and keep our city functioning. We had our contributions to the pension plan automatically deducted from our paychecks and were never afforded a “pension holiday” to skip these payments. Possible cuts in pension benefits along with increased contributions for health care and rising property taxes will end up destroying our neighborhoods as these stalwarts of the community flee the City looking for a more affordable place to live. Retirees and current employees dedicated their careers to public service and planned their lives and retirements based on the guarantees they were given by their employer, the City of Chicago. The City cannot now turn its back on them. Revenue sources such as the ones previously discussed need to be considered as funding options.