

2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: John Arena

Ward: 45

Occupation: Alderman

Education: BFA, Northern Illinois University

Previous political and civic experience:

Alderman, 45th Ward since 2011

Vice President, Portage Park Neighborhood Association

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:

Four years ago I proposed a system of tiered benefits for workers not yet vested in the pension system. Recent court rulings have shown that such a system is not legal, that the current contracts with pensioners are constitutionally protected and that we cannot take benefits from existing retirees and employees.

Reducing benefits is not inevitable, but we must make changes to the system to keep it solvent. Police officers and firefighters put their lives on the line to protect us, and we should keep the promises we have made to them.

The city can solve its pension crisis through a slow ramp-up of spending on pensions until we reach sufficient funding levels. We must not take any additional pension holidays or shift funds around in financial shell games. I would consider several potential new revenue sources to ensure the city keeps its promises to workers without impacting the delivery of city services. One possible option is a small tax on financial transactions to help the city fund our pension obligations. This would generate revenue without reducing the spending power of Chicago's consumers.

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?

While a property tax increase may be necessary at some point to continue to provide good city services, I favor looking at two other options first: a commuter tax or a financial transaction tax would not reduce Chicagoans' spending power. A property tax increase would have a greater negative impact on the city's economy.

Additionally, any property tax increase to fix any pension fund should remain off the table until the TIF system is reformed. Otherwise, Chicago taxpayers will merely be paying more money into a system that is not transparent.

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?

The city's schools are improving academically, but there is still much work to be done. Financially, the system continues to suffer from funding disparities between Chicago and the rest of the state, and from under-funding that could be fixed in part by reducing the removal of TIF funds from property tax revenues.

We should also explore renegotiating the toxic swap deals CPS entered into. This could be one way to save tens of millions of dollars in unnecessary costs.

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: Yes

* 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 economy has shifted toward being more service-based than it has in the past, but our tax code still focuses primarily on goods-based sales tax. We should update the sales tax base to reflect our changing economy.

A commuter tax is only fair. Non-city residents who use city services and the infrastructure the city has built should help pay for those services and that infrastructure. The city pays for a system for commuters to get to work, and for the services that have attracted and supported that commuter's workplace. I generally support taxes that directly correlate to the service being provided, which is one of the reasons I support a commuter tax.

As mentioned above, a financial transaction tax can generate revenue for the city without impacting residents' purchasing power.

4) Crime

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

Yes or No: Yes

Please explain:

Chicago needs to hire more police officers to improve public safety. The city is hiring 500 new officers and needs to hire 1,000 more to keep up with recent attrition.

CPD resources should be devoted to neighborhood police officers walking or driving a beat and developing relationships in their communities. Addressing crime in a reactionary fashion through mobile saturation teams is less effective than investing in officers who work consistently in an area and know the people who live there.

A portion of the \$100 million per year the city spends on police officer overtime would be better invested in hiring and training new officers. Overtime can lead to overworked police, burnout, and poor reactions and decision-making abilities. An understaffed, overworked police force also tends to increase settlements that result from bad decisions.

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

I would support legislation to reduce straw man purchases, in which someone without a criminal background purchases a gun and gives it to a criminal. I would also support background checks on all gun buyers, a state system to keep track of gun ownership, and more stringent requirements and penalties for firearm owners who fail to report lost or stolen guns to police.

I would also support federal gun control legislation to help reduce buyers bringing guns into the state from Indiana. There are many gun show and straw man purchases of Indiana guns that end up in the hands of Chicago criminals, and I would support the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives cracking down on those transfers.

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:

Members of the school board should be elected so that the system is more responsive to voters. Last year's school closings were unpopular and made no financial sense, but happened in the face of overwhelming voter opposition because the school board is appointed.

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?

I will continue to fight for greater transparency in TIF creation and the spending of TIF funds. I will also push for a higher bar for creation and use of funds. There is no reason that the bustling River North neighborhood should have a TIF district. There should be clear criteria for the creation of a TIF district, clear goals for the TIF funds from a specific district, and sunset provisions so that once the goals are reached, the TIF district reverts back to normal taxation and spending. Excess TIF funds should be diverted back to their original source and used to pay for public schools and other services the entire city benefits from. I do not support the use of public money for a private development unless there is an agreement that includes a clear public benefit and shows that the public will receive a return on our investment. For example, I did not and will not support the use of \$55 million in TIF funds to buy land for Marriott and DePaul, two organizations that are able to stand on their own without investment of public dollars. I voted against those funds, and I will continue to support our public tax dollars being used primarily on public infrastructure.

7) Neighborhood economic development

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

I have successfully attracted employers to the 45th Ward since I was elected in 2011. This involved a layered approach, because there is no silver bullet to creating jobs and sustainable economic development. I worked to bring cultural attractions to the ward to make the area more attractive to both residents and potential employers. I focused on infrastructure improvements so that employers' workers are able to get to work and so that businesses are able to receive the city services they need to operate. I also supported reasonable density developments close to shopping districts and public transportation.

Finally, I reached out to potential employers. My office invites businesses to see the area, invites potential employers to come to dinner at a new restaurant in the area, tour the neighborhood – all in an effort to highlight the positive changes in the 45th Ward since my predecessor left office. Marketing new attractions and developments to potential new businesses has resulted in a snowball effect.

The 45th Ward is on track to open 22 new businesses just in the Six Corners shopping district, and more than 30 along the Milwaukee Ave. corridor. Since I was elected Alderman, I have worked with property and business owners to bring more than 80 new businesses to the 45th Ward. New businesses attract residents and shoppers, which attract new businesses, and so forth in a virtuous cycle that benefits residents and the city's finances alike.

I will continue to use these approaches to promote economic development throughout the 45th Ward, and I would like to see this approach replicated in other parts of the city.

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?

The Progressive Reform Caucus mapped out a 35-Ward map that would result in each Alderman representing about 72,000 people. Politically, this would increase the power of the legislature and improve City Council's ability to act as a check and balance against the executive branch and push back against bad ideas from the Mayor's office. If we were to reduce the number of Aldermen, I would push to keep neighborhoods together within a Ward in the process, using natural and common-sense boundaries instead of arbitrarily drawn lines driven by politics.

9) A Chicago casino

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

Yes or No: Yes

Please explain:

I do not prefer gambling as a revenue source. There are many other options we should examine first.

That said, I am a reluctant supporter of a Chicago casino to help the city's financial situation. Governance of any Chicago casino must fall under the Illinois Gaming Board. We should use some of the revenues to help treat gambling addiction. I favor a distributed model for casino licenses to spread casinos' economic benefits throughout the city.

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:

I support a traffic light camera program to the extent that it improves public safety, but in its current iteration, this program is another example of what I stand against: a bad idea rushed through City Council without sufficient review or oversight. It is an example of classic Chicago corruption. There is such corruption and such a lack of transparency around the traffic light cameras that the public does not trust that they are here to improve safety. Coupled with the outsourcing and privatization of the program, traffic light cameras look like just another way for the city to generate revenue.

A recent study suggested some improvements that could be made to the traffic light camera program which would improve traffic safety. Increasing yellow light times from 3 seconds to 3.5 seconds and following national guidelines would be a good first step. The city should also institute an annual review of traffic camera placement and timing as other cities have done.

11) Ward issues

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

I talk most on the campaign trail about fulfilling the promises I made four years ago and the need to continue this work. I have turned the ward around on three fronts: promoting economic development and bringing new businesses to our neighborhoods, creating an open and transparent ward office, and serving as an independent voice for the 45th ward.

I have worked to attract more than 80 new businesses to the ward since I took office. Among many other ways I make myself available to my constituents, I host ward night for two hours every Tuesday evening so that I can have a conversation with any resident who wants to talk with me. Finally, for each vote I make in City Council, I consider the impact on the 45th ward. I am a thoughtful, deliberative elected official and vote for the good of the community instead of following someone else's agenda for personal political gain.