

2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: Ray Suarez

Ward: 31

Occupation: Full-time Alderman

Previous political and civic experience:

- United States Marine Corps Vietnam War Veteran.
- Coordinated the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act Programs (C.E.T.A.) for the Department of Streets and Sanitation
- Mayor's Office Administrative Assistant, working with the Urban Development Action Grants (UDAG).
- Served on the Illinois Job Training Coordinating Council (IJTCC)
- Alderman, 31st Ward, since 1991.

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:

Yes. The workers (retired and current) did not cause the pension problem; poor decision-making did. We must fix the problem and make the system solvent for the future. I am committed to working to develop a revenue solution to solve Chicago's unfunded pension liability.

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 on the working and middle-class families of the 31st Ward.

We need new solutions to solve the city's current budget and pension crisis. This includes looking into TIF reform; the fact that scarce taxpayer dollars are being diverted with the overuse of TIFs means that I cannot in good conscience ask taxpayers to pay more before dealing with this issue. Additionally, I will work with the Assessor to develop ways to go after tax cheats, including those that may be fraudulently claiming vacancy relief on commercial property throughout the city. These tax cheats ultimately end up costing honest citizens more in taxes, which is an unfair situation.

I am also in support of other revenue ideas, including exploring the idea of a tax on large financial transactions and a Commuter Tax, as long as it does not increase the burden on the working and middle class families of the 31st Ward. I also fully support a shift to a progressive income tax (Fair Tax) at the state level.

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?

As I mentioned above, I would explore revenue methods, including TIF reform, financial transaction tax, Commuter Tax, etc.

Also, the city and CPS should initiate legal action to recoup some of the \$800 million in losses the city and Chicago Public Schools have incurred through bad interest rate swap deals.

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.

*I support exploring all of these measures in principle. However, before I would support them, I would first want to make sure that these measures do not place an increased burden on the working and middle-class families of the 31st Ward and Chicago as a whole.

4) Crime

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

Yes or No: Yes

Please explain:

We need more front-line public safety workers, especially police and fire personnel. I am supportive of hiring more, in combination with implementing creative revenue solutions to the city's budget shortfall and pension liabilities, which will free up funds for these hirings.

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

Gun violence is a major problem in Chicago. I support a wide array of common-sense legislation as a deterrent, including increasing the mandatory minimums for repeat gun crime offenders, and felons caught unlawfully possessing firearms.

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: Depends

Please explain:

I support exploring the idea of an Elected School Board. However, I first want to see how such a board has worked out in other cities and localities before making a decision as to which type to support. I simply want to make sure that we make the right decision before making such a dramatic change.

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?

We absolutely need TIF reform. I think it is unconscionable to ask working and middle class taxpayers to pay more in property taxes, when we have tax dollars sitting in funds that are not being used for their intended purposes. If there are major surpluses in certain funds, we should consider reverting the money back to the school district and taxing bodies that are currently starved for funds. We also need more accountability for those that receive TIF funds to make sure they are following through on their promises.

7) Neighborhood economic development

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

Economic development will continue to be a major priority of mine in the 31st Ward. In the last 4 years, I have brought over 2200 new jobs to the ward. I have a proven track record of bringing more businesses to the ward. Whether it's a new T-Mobile store, Chase Bank, or a new high-tech data center in the former Macy's warehouse that will bring 1000 new jobs to the community, I have been and will continue to fight for jobs and economic development in the 31st Ward.

Also, I try to get a commitment from all the new employers that move into the 31st Ward and receive assistance of the city, including TIF dollars, to require them to hire a proportion of residents directly from the ward. This is common sense – if we're giving employers tax incentives to locate in the ward, we should require them to hire local taxpayers for the jobs.

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 that 50 aldermen is the right number. In a representative democracy, everyone should have the chance to meet personally with his or her elected representatives. I have always strived to be an alderman that is open and available to his constituents. Even with my availability, ward nights every week, etc., time constraints mean that I can't meet with everyone who wants to meet with me. I am against reducing the number of aldermen, because larger wards would make it even harder for constituents to meet personally and voice concerns with their aldermen.

9) A Chicago casino

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

Yes or No: Yes

Please explain:

I support a casino in Chicago. While I am not personally a proponent of gambling, it is clear that the gambling legalization trend is not going to reverse itself. Currently, residents of the city are forced to go to the suburbs or across state lines to reach the nearest casino. At a time when the city is struggling with a major budget shortfall, the city shouldn't be losing out on casino revenues, and I support a Chicago casino with proper oversight and quality union jobs.

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: Depends

Please explain:

Traffic cameras are a controversial issue. I believe they have been put in for the right reasons – improving traffic safety. However, there is a perception that they are simply being used to raise revenue for the city. I would like to gather comments from residents of my ward about the cameras, and if a majority supports removing or changing the program, that is what I will support.

11) Ward issues

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

- **City Services** – I am always available to my constituents and take every service request seriously. I work to make sure that potholes are filled, trees are trimmed, and all of my constituents get the services they deserve. I realize that this requires hiring more front-line workers, and I will advocate for that.

- **Education** – I am dedicated to improving the quality of education and public schools in my ward. I have secured more than \$140 million in education funding for the schools in my district. I will continue to fight for reasonable class sizes, engaging and relevant curriculum and top-notch teachers.

- **Public Safety** – Keeping the 31st Ward safe is my top priority. I lead an annual anti-violence march and regularly attend neighborhood police roll calls to show a united force against crime. I will continue to advocate for more police officers to keep our neighborhoods safe.