**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Name:** CORNELL WILSON

**Ward:** 2nd WARD

**Occupation:** ATTORNEY, RESERVE MARINE CORPS OFFICER

**Education:** FLORIDA A&M UNIVERSITY (BA IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION)

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**Previous political and civic experience:** MILITARY SERVICE SINCE 2003. NO PRIOR POLITICAL OFFICE.

**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: Yes**

**Please Explain:**

Chicago is at a fiscal impasse due to decades of underfunding and slipshod financial planning that has kicked the responsibility for fully funding city obligations down the road. When considering any future pension changes or restructuring, however, we must respect the bounds of the Illinois constitution.

Straight talk and prudent, long range thinking are necessary. Stabilizing the remaining two pension funds is critical to pensioners and their families who have long-promised benefits. Retaining a sustainable revenue source—without jeopardizing or further burdening our residential tax base— is critical as well. We’ve taken that step with two of the four funds under municipal control.

Without substantive action to restore full funding for the remaining funds and further steps on the other end of the calculus - such as improving the annuities’ investment rate of return and assert reallocation - we risk the funds’ overall solvency. This could have even more disastrous ramifications for those who have bought into the system.

**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 am hesitant to place the burden on working and middle class taxpayers through increased property taxes. Likewise, the continued, imprudent use of taxable bonds places an added liability obligation on the City with the same salient problem: the uncertainty of revenue to pay it down.

Identifying sufficient revenue is not a political conjuring act or a one-time panacea. Nor should it be a political gambit, bandied about in rhetorical and not accounting terms. Rather, any revenue source must be part of a sustainable planned, solution. Together with the newly created Office of Financial Analysis we will need to identify areas what is feasible and I discuss some options regarding TIF funds below.

I support a participatory budgeting process in the 2nd Ward where holistic, community-driven solutions can be discussed and proposed. We will need opt-in from residents to make tough decisions that will affect all of us.

**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?**

With special attention paid to the severity of circumstance, I would propose investigating surplus declarations for stagnant TIF funds as a catalyst to begin increasing funding levels. The City has approximately 1.7 billion dollars in the TIF district system. While some are allocated for shovel-in-ground projects—their intended economic development purpose— a large portion of these funds lie accruing in dormant or non-blighted development areas. These represent an untapped cache of already collected property taxes that can be used for general fund purposes like fully-funding pension obligations to our teachers.

CPS has strained to make temporary budget fixes, including swapping its accrual method this fiscal year to paper over deficits. Moving forward, the district should needs to make significant accounting changes. It can make innovative, productive use of its large real-estate footprint, either through rehabilitation, re-use or repurposing if they cannot be sold on the market (as it appears). We also have a larger administrative apparatus in CPS and in K-12 education, generally, as a result of evolving trends in educational administration that emphasize management over classroom and supportive staff. Let’s focus the resources we do have on teachers in the classroom and fully funding supportive staff such as counseling and psychological services, which play an even larger role in compounding public health 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:** No

**\* 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:** No

Please explain your views, if you wish, on any of these three revenue-generating measures.

As mentioned in question two, I am reluctant to impose further taxes on the middle-class without a holistic, long-term take on our finances and their effects. I would like to investigate these options more fully to ensure that they are in the best interest of residents and a viable part of righting our upended budget. I have concerns with the long-term economic impact that all could have on Chicago. I believe we need to seriously examine TIF funds as described in the above question to address pressing budget needs.

**4) Crime**

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

**Yes or No:** Yes

**Please explain:**

Earlier this year, my campaign conducted a comprehensive poll that identified crime and gun violence as the most important issues for 2nd ward voters. Keeping the 2nd Ward safe and advocating for education and other essential services—such as mental health screening and supportive services for youth— that mitigate violence and criminal activity are top priorities of mine. The Police Department, specifically, has seen drawbacks in funding levels affecting manpower levels. Transfers out have led to spike in crime in many neighborhoods, and it is apparent that some changes in personnel allocation—and pushing the envelope on overtime—are ultimately not sustainable and only temporarily depresses crime rates.

I believe the City Council needs to work to address revenue solutions to restore funding and manpower levels, balancing this with the changes we need to make across the city services continuum.

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

As a Marine veteran, I understand the damage that guns can inflict when coupled with violent behavior. ‘Straw’ purchases of guns outside of city limits are an epidemic, and they challenge jurisdiction specific legislation, as the entry point for illegal weapons are often suburbs with less stringent gun laws.

This market route illustrates the need for complex policymaking across different agencies, non-profits, and law enforcement. I believe, strongly, that gun violence requires the redress of underlying stressors of poverty, unemployment and a greater emphasis on restorative justice, repairing the damage done by guns and transforming the traditional relationship between police and the communities they serve. Many experts in the field and public officials have aptly labeled illegal guns a public health crisis, arguing that an effective, holistic solution requires the concerted efforts of both policing and social / preventative services.

With that in mind, I do support the recent city ordinance that places reasonable regulations on gun stores that operate within the City of Chicago’s limits, as well as current state legislation limiting gun purchases to one a month and enforcing universal background checks. At the state level, we should also work to enforce parity between different jurisdictions and a level playing field between urban and suburban areas. Please see [www.CornellWilson.com/issues](http://www.CornellWilson.com/issues) for more details on my gun policy proposals.

**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:**

The proposed ballot initiative highlights the public’s unmistakable thirst for more involvement and agency in school policy.

As Aldermen consider an elected school board; however, I think we must ensure that it does not become an agency divided by politics. Having an executive appoint heads of agencies leaves no doubt as to who is responsible for their performance. Accountability remains a pressing issue in both educational administration and government.

I am also keenly aware that Chicago residents, many of whom were not here during the challenging times in which the switch to the appointed board was made, are growing frustrated with what they perceive as a lack of voice in education.

Since a successful education policy depends on both parent and community involvement, it is important that the public not feel disconnected from the schools. That is why I would first and foremost support a hybrid school board model, intermixed with Mayoral appointees and elected officials. Responsibility and redress for failed policies would still be linked to the Mayor’s Office while adding the element of public self-determination and agency.

**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?**

When TIFs are used unscrupulously, as a form of cronyism, they undermine the economic development benefits the program is intended to provide.

As with many other departments and policies, we need to instill a culture that prioritizes long-range, formal planning over political expediency. The fundamental problem with TIFs is philosophical abuse and while the County Clerk and City Hall have implemented several transparency measures, a substantial part of the needed burden of requests falls to the local ward level and aldermanic discretion.

The inclination of Aldermen and Mayor to play fast and loose with the statutory definition of “blighted” areas, and the overused practice of porting—transferring—locally raised development dollars from district to district, akin to a shell game, are issues that need to be both locally and systematically addressed.

Of similar concern is the *purposing* of TIF money, as a stop-gap for special, non-capital projects. We need to start creating and using TIF districts as they were originally intended to be used if we are to gain a long-term benefit.

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

Restaurants are integral to the economy and employment situation in the new 2nd ward. My team and I developed and unveiled over 20 policy proposals specific to the restaurant industry after an interview process with diverse Chicago restaurant owners and a review of legislative initiatives across the U.S.

The city can take substantive steps to encourage small-business ownership and make operation easier, including modernizing processes and regulations such as updating digital permitting and accounting for new technologies like automated ordering and check payment options. The city can make inspection criteria more clearly accessible and communicate with owners and proprietors how new city policies would impact them. Chicago has several technological firms that are also spearheading new infrastructural development that could make low-cost wireless internet service a reality, providing a cost-benefit to the city through advertising. Such a network would provide a large investment attraction and would reduce the duplicative and unnecessary costs (passed on to customers) of thousands of Chicago restaurants who purchase internet service individually.

There is also room for innovative changes in how we incentivize development in general. I would like to explore further the expanded use of the Small Business Investment Fund (SBIF) Program, a subsidiary fund within the TIF program. As of 2012, SBIFs were approximately 5% of grants offered through TIF funds, and were reduced in value through restrictions on using them as startup capital and on the dollar amount offered (under $100,000). SBIFs can help diversify and provide parity—and stability—in our tax base by making more financing opportunities available to local establishments

The benefits of supporting small, local businesses are many. Not only are they a large percentage of businesses in the ward, but they also keep investment and hiring local—an important barometer of business climate. It is important for both workers and employers that the ward cultivate an educated, competent workforce.

**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 am supportive of City Council consolidation. Chicago’s City Council members represent about 57,000 residents per capita. Meanwhile, New York City’s council is approximately the same size, with a council that represents almost triple that number per capita—roughly 157,000. Constituency for municipal officials in many major American cities falls within the 125,000-200,000 range, on par with the State Senate.

As the BGA has remarked, City Council members in most of these jurisdictions make roughly the same amount in salaries and often less. A reduction in operating funds given to individual ward offices would account for an even greater estimated savings that may be in the millions of dollars.

An ideal number of City Council members should be carefully and deliberately studied as this would require a substantial legal change that may be difficult to undo. This would be a good opportunity to task to the newly created Office of Financial Analysis

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

**Yes or No:** Yes

**Please explain**:

I am cautiously supportive of gambling in the City of Chicago with some qualifications. A gaming bill could bring increased revenue and provide jobs as well as revenue avenue to full-funding municipal pensions that would not place an added burden on middle-class taxpayers in the form of added property taxes.

I am concerned about lax regulations and monitoring, however. A more independent, assertive gaming board should also be a proviso of any proposed bill. City officials should hold public hearings and extend the approval process to ensure that the placement of a city casino fits in with long-term planning objectives.

**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 had a chance to read the commissioned Sun-Times study on Red-Light cameras and safety. The Sun-Times and other respected organizations have been correct to criticize aspects of the program. There is mounting evidence questioning how the Speed Camera and Red-Light programs are employed, from technical glitches, ticketing spikes and fluctuations in criteria for ticketing and yellow-to-red length and overall efficacy.

At the very least, improvements need to be made to ensure consistency across the program to restore the public’s trust, and a revamp and redeployment may be part of that.

**11) Ward issues**

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

The re-districting process completely reconstituted the 2nd Ward, fragmenting neighborhoods along seemingly arbitrary lines. I have heard repeatedly from residents that this has created a difficulty in maintaining their sense of community, as well as logistical challenges in which ward office they visit for their concerns. The process has also resulted in a lack of consistent services through the transition.

In short, it has upset continuity, and aggravated an already prevalent sense that the City Council does not represent them. One of my highest priorities in the intermediate period will be to establish a comprehensive ward plan on a neighborhood by neighborhood basis that would give greater continuity through redistricting and provide long-ranging goals for future development.

Crime and gun violence are two other issues that I have discussed often with residents. As discussed in question Four, my campaign team and I have rethought solutions to manpower shortages, chronic transfers, and the influx of illegal guns that puts emphasis on a holistic approach that incorporates social services and full-funding for manpower levels as well as education.