**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Name:** Shajan Kuriakose

**Ward:** 50th Ward in the City of Chicago

**Occupation:** Project Management Professional in the Telecommunication and Banking Industry

**Education:** Bachelor’s Degree in Business Administration from Robert Morris University

**Previous political and civic experience:**

I have had the privilege of serving as a member of the Board of Directors for the Indo-American Democratic Organization (IADO), a grassroots organization that is committed to engaging South Asians in the political process, for approximately five years. Finally, I have spent a considerable amount of time volunteering for Bombay Teen Challenge, a nonprofit that helps rescue women and children from human trafficking in India, over the last two years.

**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:** New revenue will be necessary to help sufficiently fund the police pension fund. The city has a responsibility to ensure that the pensions are funded adequately so that union employees, especially current retirees, receive what they were initially promised.  It is unfair for those employees, close to retirement age and current retirees, to receive fewer benefits given their years of service. Most, if not all, union employees who receive pensions forfeit social security benefits. Therefore, to ask them to independently create a way to replenish that income is unfair.

As such, generating new revenue streams through a comprehensive vision for economic development in the City of Chicago must be a top priority. I have laid out my economic development vision that will help create new revenue and new revenue streams to ensure proper funding of the police pension fund in my answer to question #7.

In addition to the new revenue streams that are a part of my comprehensive economic development plan and that I expanded on in question #7, I support the following additional sources of revenue:

* Elimination of corporate tax loopholes
* Reforming TIFs and restoring the revenues they divert to the city and school district
* Graduated income tax that would lower taxes for those in our community who can least afford it while expanding revenue for the delivery of public 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?**

None. I do not support any type of property tax increase. I strongly believe there are new revenue streams and additional sources of revenue that can be utilized. I have outlined these views in question #1 and question #7.

**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 has a responsibility to ensure the pensions are funded adequately so that union employees, especially current retirees, receive what they were initially promised. It is unfair for those employees, close to retirement age and current retirees, to receive fewer benefits given their years of service. Most, if not all, union employees who receive pensions forfeit social security benefits so to ask them to independently create a way to replenish the income that is being taken away from them with little to no time to do so is also unfair.

I do believe lowering pension benefits is unconstitutional under the rules laid out in the Illinois Constitution. Such commitments must be honored. I also support efforts to maintain affordable health care for retirees. Not only is it morally correct for the city to keep its promise of affordable health care for city retires, but it also will save money in the long term to have our retirees be part of a program that allows them to address preventable health care issues instead of letting them linger and become more complicated and more expensive.

It is important that new revenue streams be explored where it does not negatively impact working families. I have outlined new revenue streams in question #7. Additionally, as I alluded to in I support the elimination of corporate tax loopholes, reforming of TIFs, and a graduated income tax.

**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.**

**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 to make sure the Chicago Police Department is fully funded. One of the main reasons to make sure the department is fully funded is because we need to hire more police officers so that we are not just using overtime to get to the staffing levels desired. Once we do this, we can have the appropriate coverage in all parts of the city. This will make sure we prevent low crime areas from becoming high crime areas and give high crime areas the proper attention they need.

It is important that we recognize this is an issue of inadequate staffing levels, not the performance of our police officers who protect and serve our communities everyday.

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

I support House Bill 1183, which was sponsored and passed by Senator Kwame Raoul and Representative Michael Zalewski that closed the loophole on background checks and required reporting lost and stolen guns. I also support House Bill 1346, which would ban the sale or transfer of high capacity clips of 10 rounds of ammunition or more. Furthermore I would support any future legislation that helped fight against the flow of illegal guns in from outside of Chicago.

**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 membersand the Schools CEO. Do you support a change to an elected school board?

**Yes or No:** Yes.

**Please explain:** I call for the creation of an Elected School Board. To the best of my knowledge, the City of Chicago is the only major city in the United States of America that does not have an Elected School Board.

**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?**

The TIF process is opaque. This first and foremost needs to be fixed. The excess money in the TIF should be split between education spending and to paying down the pension payments. By spending money on those two areas, we will be investing in our future both at a city level and individual level.

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

I will work with community stakeholders to create a comprehensive economic development plan that will center on helping our businesses grow as that will create quality, high paying jobs for our residents and provide more resources for our community to utilize to help meet the goals of our other priorities.

Here are five key components of my comprehensive economic development plan:

* I will work to facilitate opportunities for businesses to learn about the very resourceful grants/programs that are available from the state, county, and municipal levels of government.
* I will work hard to support existing incubators/accelerators (tech, medical, and so forth) and help create more as they will enable entrepreneurs to start businesses, which would eventually lead to the creation of jobs and new revenue for the City of Chicago.
* I will work with other elected officials and community leaders to explore the creation of additional landmarks to boost our local economy, which would in turn create jobs and new revenue for the City of Chicago. One suggestion is the idea of a resort style hotel casino in the City of Chicago. If executed correctly, it would create thousands of union jobs and serve as a large, long term revenue source that we will be able to use to improve vital public services and meet our pension and other long-term debt obligations.
* Capitalize on Chicago’s unique regional strength by increasing tourism through more neighborhood and cultural events.
* Clearing out the red tape so that businesses can open faster to create a more active economy.

**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?**

At this time, given the crucial discussions of spending cuts, tax increases, public safety, vital services, education, and so forth, it is extremely important that each community have a representative at City Hall who best understands the needs of their neighborhoods. As such, I support maintaining the size of the City Council at 50 members.

That said, I do support further examination with respect to the number of aldermen in the City Council in terms of what would yield the most efficient and effective city government for our residents.

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

**Yes or No:** Yes.

**Please explain:** I strongly believe that the City of Chicago should capitalize on its regional strength by creating additional landmarks to boost our local economy through tourism, which would in turn create jobs and new revenue for the City of Chicago. One suggestion is the idea of a resort style hotel casino in the City of Chicago. If executed correctly, it would create thousands of union jobs and serve as a large, long term revenue source that we will be able to use to improve vital public services and meet our pension and other long-term debt obligations.

**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, and no, they are not properly employed.

**Please explain:** The City’s traffic light cameras have not improved safety and instead have just nickel and dimed its citizens in a new way. The city must find a better and more sustainable way to increase revenue rather than gimmicks like the Chicago traffic light camera program.

**11) Ward issues**

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

My three key priorities if I am elected to serve as the Alderman of the 50th Ward in the City of Chicago are as follows:

* Economic Development: I will work with community stakeholders to create a comprehensive economic development plan that will center on helping our businesses grow as that will create quality, high paying jobs for our residents and provide more resources for our community to utilize to help meet the goals of our other priorities. A key component of this is facilitating opportunities for businesses to learn about the very resourceful grants/programs that are available from the state, county, and municipal levels of government.
* Safety: Working to make sure our families are able to learn, work, and/or reside in a safe environment could not be more important to me. I will work with our residents, local organizations, and the police district to ensure that we are doing all we can to make our streets safe. That includes, possibly more than any other item, making sure the brave men and women serving our communities as police officers have the resources they need. I am passionate about this issue because, if our community is safe, there is nothing we can’t achieve.
* Services: As Alderman, I will work tirelessly to make sure our residents are receiving all of the services the City of Chicago is responsible for and provides on a daily basis. I strongly believe my role as a public servant is to continuously look for ways to make the lives of our working families a little bit easier every day. One way I will work hard to accomplish that is to make sure my office provides those constituent services in a timely fashion and/or helps when any issues with those services arise.

I initiated this commitment already by calling in potholes and other infrastructure issues as I am walking door to door and hear about these issues from residents.

Residents of the 50th Ward express their concerns and their lack of faith in the current Alderman on these three issues as I speak to them about my vision on how best to grow our community and give working families a fair shot.