

December 30, 2014

To: The Sun-Times Editorial Board
From: Sean Starr
Re: 2015 Candidate Questionnaire

2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: Sean Starr

Ward: 31st

Occupation: Attorney/ College English Professor

Education: MA in English from University of Illinois at Chicago; JD from DePaul Law School

Previous political and civic experience: This is my first political campaign. I am a labor and employment attorney and a college English professor who was urged to run for 31st Ward Alderman by my neighbors and fellow community members. I have spent the last ten years teaching writing to a diverse student body at Columbia College and the last four years as an attorney representing, among others, the Fraternal Order of police, Lodge No. 7. My wife is a CPS teacher. My mother is also a life-long CPS teacher. I have been an advocate for public employment, in some way or another, most of my life. I am running against the six-time incumbent, Ray Suarez, because he has become disconnected from his constituency and disloyal to the middle and working class. There are approximately 10,000 public school students living in my 31st Ward. I am running, in large part, to help protect their interests.

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: While I do support putting the pension system back on sound financial footing, I do not support reducing benefits to those that have already earned them. I am open to systemic changes that may reduce benefits of those not already earning pension benefits. I do not support taking benefits away from those who have already earned them for two reasons:

1. The men and women who have already partial or full pensions took their jobs with the understanding that what they sacrificed in terms of short term compensation would be recouped in the long run because of the public employee pension system.
2. The Illinois Constitution Article XIII, Section 5 clearly makes reduction in benefits illegal absent a constitutional amendment.

As such, I oppose any attempt to diminish pension benefits of retired, current or future employees of the City of Chicago. I likewise oppose any attempt to replace the defined benefit pension plans for City employees with defined contribution plans. I am staunchly in favor of public employees receiving the pensions they were promised. In step with that, I will support efforts to maintain a program of affordable health care for City retirees. As outside counsel for the FOP, I wrote the FOP's amicus brief in anticipation of pension litigation. I likewise drafted a set of talking points to make it easier for the FOP administration to communicate with its members regarding the pension situation and their respective rights. While the FOP has not yet needed to enter into any lawsuits, the election of Bruce Rauner underscores the need for all of organized labor to be ready to respond to any legal attacks on their clearly delineated pension rights. Illinois Circuit Court Judge John Belz's decision on Friday, Nov. 21, 2014—albeit a short term win—reaffirmed my conviction that the State of Illinois and City of Chicago need to find alternative sources of revenue for the grossly underfunded retirement systems.

Contemporary attacks on the public employee pension system are an attempt to destabilize the middle and working classes. When the Illinois Constitutional Convention amended the State Constitution in 1970 to include Article XIII, Section 5, it did so to ensure that the state would not renege on pension obligations to public employees during a financial crisis. Over the last several years, amidst a recession and continuing economic uncertainty, lawmakers and special interest groups have attempted to reinterpret the Pension Clause. The Pension Clause, however, provides a narrow constitutional guarantee: pension system members have an enforceable contractual right to benefits that cannot be unilaterally reduced without consent and consideration. While Illinois courts have said that pensioners cannot sue the State to guarantee funding levels, those same courts have consistently found that pensioners have a right to sue in the event funding levels default or approach default status, as Belz's decision reiterates. Current employees' benefits cannot be reduced in order to relieve Illinois' pension liabilities and if those liabilities are as severe as pension reformers would have the public believe, pensioners have a right to sue the state in circuit court to ensure their benefits.

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 willing to support generating revenues through higher taxes and fees to maintain and improve vital public services and pension revenues, provided a proper analysis and accounting is done to ensure such increases positively impact the largest number of Chicagoans. However, I am generally against property tax increases and believe that any property tax increase must be our last possible option. Alternatively, I would support a “fair and progressive income tax” that would help to narrow the gap between the excessively wealthy and the rest of society while replenishing the pension deficit. I would likewise support using some of the TIF surplus to replenish Chicago’s public employee pension funds.

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 stated above, I am willing to support generating revenues through higher taxes and fees to maintain and improve vital public services, provided a proper analysis and accounting is done to ensure such increases positively impact the largest number of Chicagoans. Towards these I support the following:

- ✓ I am wholeheartedly in favor of reforming the TIFs back into the public schools, city services, and pensions. The TIF system needs fixing. TIF money should be used—at least in part—to alleviate some of pension burden the City faces, instead of being used to build hotels or basketball stadiums;
- ✓ Raising the city’s portion of the property tax levy;
- ✓ Broadening sales tax on certain services;
- ✓ Instituting a city income tax—but only under certain clearly delineated circumstances—in particular in the form of a “fair and progressive income tax” that would help to narrow the gap between the excessively wealthy and the rest of society
- ✓ Instituting a sales tax on large scale financial transactions;
- ✓ Instituting a 1% commuter income tax would benefit the people who make the decision to live *and* work in Chicago;
- ✓ Any legislation designed to make corporations bear the brunt of a waning economy instead of individuals. Eliminating or shrinking corporate subsidies to offset the pension crisis would be step in the right direction.

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.

As explained above, I am open to alternative forms of revenue. Public employment is a basic building block of a functioning egalitarian society and must be protected and maintained. If elected, I will advocate on behalf of working class Chicagoans and work tirelessly to see that their interests are protected.

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 police. Escalating crime and gun violence are ravaging our city and more police are needed to help stem this tide. Additionally, as outside counsel for the FOP for the last several years, I saw firsthand the enormous pressures placed on the backs of the rank and file. More officers on more beats would serve to both decrease crime and alleviate the job-related stress that leads to burnt out officers more prone to police misconduct.

What legislation in Springfield would you support to try to stem the flow of illegal guns into Chicago? I will support any legislation that keeps guns off of our streets. I am a gun control advocate who believes that hand guns have no proper place in major metropolitan areas outside of the hands of law enforcement.

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 public schools are at the center of my campaign because I firmly believe that a strong public education is essential to any successful democratic society. So-called “reformists” seek to destabilize an institution that has proven itself on a global scale. Establishment of a democratically elected school board will ensure that the entire community has a voice in shaping the contours of public education. An appointed school board is not the answer. We need more collective involvement in the schools and an elected school board is first step in that direction.

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 do support a TIF surplus of any money already not committed to City projects or debt. The TIF surplus should be spread to cover our most needed City services and debts. TIF money should be used to fund the public schools, make pension payments, reopen mental health clinics, transform closed CPS schools into community centers, and used in concert with local communities to help create development and jobs. I also support placing a moratorium on any new TIFs. Before moving forward with any new TIF reforms, an independent audit should be conducted to determine how effective the current system has been. Any reforms that take place should be transparent and should involve all Chicagoans in the decision making process.

7) Neighborhood economic development

What would you do as alderman to boost economic development in your ward, and bring jobs to your community? Alderman should use zoning and TIF funds as a means to spur economic development and bring businesses into their wards that the community desires and that hire people from the ward to be their employees. Zoning and TIF development can be used to rejuvenate vacant properties and land and in turn create jobs and generate tax revenue. The

incumbent in my ward has long suppressed economic development in the ward. If elected, I will respond to the wishes of many of the ward's residents that I have spoken to who want new grocery store options, restaurants, shops, and bars. Likewise, I will be committed to bringing in businesses that will hire from within the ward.

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 not certain about this issue. While, I understand the good reasons to downsize, I am not yet in the position of an alderman and therefore, I do not know exactly what degree of commitment the job completely takes. As such, I am not sure that adding to an alderman's workload is what will most benefit the people of Chicagoan. I know personally how difficult it is to communicate with an alderman's office and I have heard from numerous constituents who feel the same. I am not sure how giving alderman a larger area of the city and more constituents will make them more available to their communities. I will therefore reserve judgment on this issue until I am in office.

9) A Chicago casino

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

Yes or No: Yes.

Please explain: I support casino gaming in the City of Chicago. It is what the people of Chicago want and it would create a great deal of revenue

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: Comprehensive studies have shown that the current red light camera system is incredibly flawed. In essence, the system functions much more like a revenue generating machine than a public safety tool. While they have shown to decrease side impact collisions, they have also shown to increase rear end collisions. Even more tellingly, studies indicate that the cameras have been disproportionately placed in intersections that do not have a history of accidents.

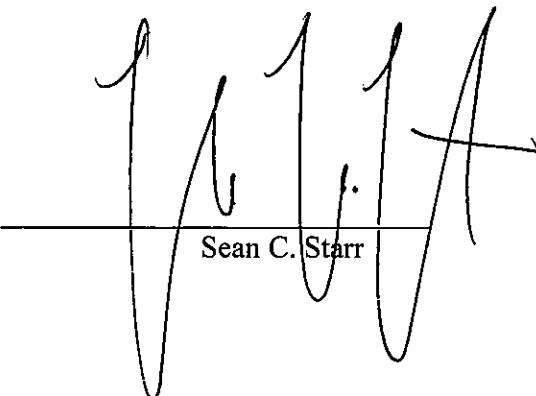
11) Ward issues

What are the top three issues in your ward — the ones you talk about most on the campaign trail? The top three issues in my ward are: 1) public schools; 2) public safety; and 3) economic development. I am running because I believe that our leaders have moved decidedly away for representing the interests of the common man and woman. The middle and working class are where my priorities lay.

I am running for the people of the 31st Ward and the people of Chicago. My primary focus is on improving the ward's public schools. The more resources we put into Chicago's schools, the more resources our children will have to not only succeed in, but also shape the future that awaits them. The incumbent has been starving the ward's schools for years; I plan to make them my main priority. Likewise, the ward's public safety has to be a community effort. If the ward's residents cannot live in a community without fear, then they do not have a community to live in. I plan to reverse the trend of violence and crime that the current incumbent has left unchecked by making public safety a shared community responsibility. Additionally, the ward's economy must be developed. If the ward does not concentrate on developing its employment rates, its economy will never grow. The incumbent has been adverse to any new business entering the ward that he could not control. I will welcome new business as a means to improve the quality of life and provide jobs for the ward's constituents. Finally, ensuring that the ward has affordable housing is also of high importance to me. If our ward cannot keep its residents in their community, then our ward will not have a community at all. All of these are independent issues. But if the 31st Ward does not have alderman who focuses on them interdependently, the entire ward will suffer.

In conclusion, I would like to express my thanks for the opportunity to discuss these very important education, government, legal, and social issues that impact everyone in Chicago. The Sun-Times is an important advocate for working and middle class contemporary Chicago, and its track record as a positive voice for change is unparalleled. It would be an honor to be endorsed by such an organization.

Sincerely,



Sean C. Starr