

2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: Omar Aquino

Ward: 36

Occupation: Outreach Coordinator, Congresswoman Tammy Duckworth

Education: Loyola University, Criminal Justice & Sociology degree

Previous political and civic experience:

- Worked with U.S. Congresswoman Tammy Duckworth on unemployment, minimum wage, immigration, education, senior advocacy, economic development and veteran issues as Outreach Coordinator.
- Illinois House of Representatives Legislative Aide in Office of the Speaker
- Bilingual Case Manager for senior adults on Chicago west side
- Loyola University Diversity Councilman
- Empowerment Pipeline Education Program Co-Founder
- Fluent in English and Spanish

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:

The workers (retired and current) did not cause the pension problem; poor decision making by politicians did. Additionally, benefit changes for current and retired workers are generally unconstitutional, as recent court rulings have demonstrated. We must fix the problem and make the system solvent for the future, but we cannot do that by reducing benefits for current and retired employees. I am committed to working to develop a revenue solution to solve Chicago's unfunded pension liability. I'm interested in exploring options such as a LaSalle Street Tax, Commuter Tax, TIF reform, and other ideas as a way to solve the budget problem. I would even be willing to consider a city

income tax on income above a certain amount – perhaps \$250,000 or more – similar to the millionaires’ tax that failed to pass in Springfield. However, I would want to make sure it is not so extreme a tax that it would drive large amounts of wealth out of the city limits.

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 unless it involved reducing the overall tax/fee burden on working and middle-class families. This relates to a revenue initiative I plan to work on -- what I call a **“progressive tax swap.”** Lately, the city has been balancing budgets on the backs of the working class and poor by adding regressive taxes and fees, such as high parking tickets, speed cameras, city stickers, cell phone taxes, etc. This unjust nickel and diming of Chicagoans hits those that can least afford it. We need greater transparency and honesty in the tax system, and we need to work to reduce the tax burden on the working and middle class. We need to more fairly spread the cost of maintaining our city and educating our children amongst all of the players involved. This “tax swap” would involve getting rid of most of these taxes and fees in exchange for raising the revenues needed through the property tax system. This would (if implemented correctly) result in an overall decrease in the tax/fee burden on the city’s working class, middle, and low income homeowners and renters by more fairly and openly spreading the tax burden amongst all of the stakeholders, and still raise more revenue for the city. We should be exploring innovative solutions like this so we can begin to rectify the current unjust situation where we have a budget crisis combined with a disproportionate tax/fee burden on those that can least afford it.

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 other revenue methods, including the “progressive tax swap,” TIF reform, LaSalle Street 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 36th 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 absolutely 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, including parts of the 36th Ward. With the recent court rulings and implementation of legalized concealed carry in Illinois, concerns about the proliferation of firearms continue to grow. I support a wide array of common-sense legislation as a deterrent. For instance, I support increasing the mandatory minimums for repeat gun crime offenders, including 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: Yes

Please explain:

I believe that an elected school board would result in more accountability to the parents, students, and ultimately the voters. An elected board would have been more thoughtful and had a more community-based process before closing schools. An elected, accountable school board would be more likely to support research-based methods to improve schools. Alongside an elected board, I would also want to make sure that there are viable campaign finance regulations in place to make sure that charter school interests and PACs cannot unduly influence the elections for school board, and that it remains a community-focused 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?

I support returning TIF “surplus” funds to the public. Currently, working and middle class families are feeling the squeeze, and public schools and other taxing bodies are dealing with reduced revenues. If money is sitting in TIF funds that are not being used for their intended purpose, the money should be returned to the appropriate taxing bodies. This is simply common sense.

Additionally, we need an overall assessment of TIF districts and whether or not they are being used for their intended purposes. For instance, some of the TIF districts in my ward were setup to encourage reinvestment in industrial corridors, yet the money often seems to be directed to other purposes. We also need more accountability for those that receive TIF funds to make sure that they are following through on their promises of providing jobs and other assets to the community.

7) Neighborhood economic development

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

I plan to work together with the local Chambers, business and union leaders, and entrepreneurs, to find ways to strengthen the local economy. I want to help attract new business (including union manufacturing and retail jobs), help existing businesses thrive and provide residents with new job opportunities close to home.

I will commission a comprehensive needs assessment of every business district in the 36th Ward, with the help of local chambers of commerce. This will help determine what infrastructure and other improvements are necessary to help attract businesses to the ward. I will then work closely with the local chambers and other groups to try to attract and court businesses to the 36th Ward's commercial corridors, including with the use and promotion of various incentives available. I also want a full assessment of all of the TIF districts in the ward, to make sure that the money is going to the intended purposes and is spent properly.

I will also advocate for the rejuvenation of the industrial corridors in my ward and the city as a whole. Downtown Chicago is doing great, while many Chicago neighborhoods, including those of the 36th Ward, that used to rely on manufacturing for economic development, are languishing. Large manufacturers such as Zenith, Schwinn, and others once provided thousands of good paying jobs to residents in the heart of the 36th Ward, and now most of the old buildings that once housed these giants sit empty. Additionally, just over the past 10 years since the Great Recession, we've lost even more of our manufacturing base. The city has created incentives and tools such as TIF districts, PMDs (Planned Manufacturing Districts), and Enterprise Zones, but still, there has been little progress to bring jobs back to these areas.

If elected, I will partner with academic institutions and local chambers to commission a comprehensive study of the manufacturing corridors in the 36th Ward. The study will aim to figure out which incentives and tools (TIFs, PMDs, Enterprise Zones) have worked and which haven't. I will look to experts to recommend other ways to attract good paying working-class (union!) manufacturing jobs to my ward and the city as a whole. And then I will formulate the results into what I would call a new industrial policy for the city – a way to rejuvenate industrial corridors throughout the city and bring back good paying working class jobs to the neighborhoods that used to depend on them. Partnerships

between labor unions, government, educational institutions, and manufacturers will undoubtedly be a major component. I will also make sure that any incentives that get passed on to new or expanded manufacturers in my ward come with an agreement to hire a certain percentage of local residents.

Finally, once such a policy is formulated, I will work to make sure it's implemented – it's great to have ideas and plans, but so often they are allowed to languish without the will to see them through to completion. I will do more than just talk about these ideas if elected – I will actively advocate for their passage. I plan to work tirelessly to make sure things actually happen.

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 probably the right number, though I am open to exploring a reduction in the number of city council members. However, I don't believe it would be a panacea that would save the city large amounts of money – for instance, we would still need to have nearly the same amount of staff available to deal with constituent requests. Additionally, one needn't look further than the 1980s Cutback Amendment, which reduced the size of the Illinois House to find an example of the law of unintended consequences; it seemed like a great reform measure at the time, but it ultimately resulted in the rise to power of the most powerful house Speaker in the country. Making the wards larger also might make it harder for grassroots candidates to get elected. In addition to reducing the number of aldermen, I am open to exploring other reforms of the city council– such as perhaps adding some at-large members that would be completely free to vote on issues of significance to the entire city, without reference to specific ward interests.

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: No

Please explain:

Traffic cameras are a controversial issue. They are often viewed by the residents of the 36th Ward as part of the nickel and diming of working class and middle class Chicagoans by the city. I want to see studies about their effect on increased adherence to traffic rules, but I think we at least need to explore the idea of removing some or all of the speed cameras, and potentially some of the red light cameras as well (especially after the recently released *Chicago Tribune* study showing that they generally have not resulted in a reduction in accidents). These cameras simply breed more mistrust of city government. If we really want to enforce the traffic laws, we should hire more police officers to do so rather than using an automated system that most people see as a way for the city to add more money to its coffers at the expense of its citizens.

11) Ward issues

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

- **City Services** – Residents of the 36th Ward deserve prompt response to their requests for city services. Especially with the dramatic new ward boundaries, many residents rightly feel that their neighborhoods have been ignored for years. Potholes are everywhere, rats abound, and streetlights and poles are in a sorry state of repair. Additionally, the city is years behind on tree trimming, and our storm sewer infrastructure is in need of major improvements to deal with flooding issues. I will deal with service requests at the ward level promptly, and follow up with city departments to make sure we get what we deserve and pay taxes for. I will also advocate for an increase in front-line workers in the city budget as a way to better provide these city services.

- **Education** – I attended Chicago Public Schools from pre-K to grade 12. I am the son of a CPS teacher's assistant. I am opposed to the continued proliferation of charter schools, as they have become simply another way to privatize public services. I support increased funding and support for neighborhood schools. I will be a champion for an elected school board, reasonable class sizes, quality school leadership, innovative programming and increased funding for CPS, early childhood education and after school programs.

- **Public Safety** – Keeping the streets safe is paramount. I support a comprehensive approach to safety, which includes working to hire more police as well as implementing

innovative new community policing ideas. I believe we need to help residents keep their homes, attract quality employment opportunities, increase the minimum wage, and keep children stimulated in after school programming. With robust opportunities geared towards improving the quality of life for everyone, we can reduce crime. Financial institutions also need to understand the profound impact of foreclosures with abandoned homes inviting trouble in our community. I will work to hold property owners, including banks, accountable for neglected properties that have a negative impact on the surrounding community.