**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name: **Keiana Barrett**

Ward: **7th**

Occupation: **Director of Strategy, Office of Family and Community Engagement (FACE), Chicago Public Schools**

Education:

**Masters in Human Services – Spertus College in Chicago, IL**

**Bachelors in Communications – Illinois State University, Bloomington/Normal, IL**

Previous political and civic experience:

* **7th Ward Chief of Staff;**
* **Director of Development & External Affairs, DuSable Museum of African American History;**
* **Director of Communications for the Congressional Black Caucus in Washington, DC;**
* **National Press Secretary, Rainbow/PUSH Coalition**

**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, though I challenge the assertion that any restructuring will “inevitably reduce benefits**.”

Please Explain:

***Moody’s says its negative outlook relating to Chicago’s credit rating “reflects [their] expectation that, absent a commitment to significantly increase revenue and/or materially restructure accrued pension liabilities to reduce costs, the city’s credit quality will likely weaken.” Moreover, they point to the fact that “Chicago’s revenue-generating capacity is substantial…” (***[***moodys.com***](http://moodys.com/)***)

The most recent Emanuel budget simply avoids the issue, deferring to state legislatures and the courts to make the tough choices necessary to truly chart a sustainable path. The court’s recent decision affirming government obligations relating to pensions ensures that we must come up with a solution. Among the limited options on the table, hope is not one of them.

Pension changes will likely be necessary to chart a sustainable path, but those will come at the state level. Bruce Rauner’s ascension to the Governor’s mansion does not change the fact that Mike Madigan still holds the speakership. Assuming that a pension fix is on the horizon would be totally irresponsible, and such faulty assumptions are largely responsible for our continued fiscal crisis. However, I am a strong opponent of any measure that attempts to defer the burden of responsibility for years of fiscal mismanagement onto retirees who played no role in creating this mess.***

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?

***There is no avoiding the fact that revenue increases must be included in any worthwhile plan. Chicago has significant untapped revenue potential through tax increases. I am in no way arguing tax increases that are so severe as to render the city non-competitive. Rather, I am strongly in favor of simplifying the code, ensuring it is fairly implemented (and does not disproportionately burden the most vulnerable). Moreover, I believe that when we have fully cleansed the infected wound that is our current fiscal house, rife with short-term and opaque solutions, we’ll gain a clearer picture of the vast sums of money that have been wasted in the name of kicking the can.***

**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?

***Financially, CPS confronts challenges similar to those faced in the broader Chicago fiscal context. Looming pension payments, enrollment uncertainties, and hard choices delayed by short term fixes have all led to this moment. The sale of the CPS Headquarters is a step in the right direction. However, we can no longer try to insulate ourselves from the consequences of years of bad fiscal decision-making. In the end, the only ones shortchanged will be the students we are charged to serve. We must confront revenue increases through property taxation (and simplifying the tax code) as a means of closing the budget gap. However, to supplement property tax revenues, we must direct some attention towards excise taxes, particularly with regard to gambling, tobacco, and alcohol sales. Along these lines, I support the creation of a casino within Chicago city limits.***

**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, provided the expansion was limited to luxury items and services**

\* 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**

**Special hearings should be held to review the viability of a ‘La Salle Street Tax’ and commuter tax, before they are casually dismissed as being labeled ill-suited for the current pension crisis we are facing. We must explore all options to increase revenue without taking the burden on the backs of working class families.**

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:

***Similar to getting our fiscal house in order, the City must take a long-term approach to improving public safety. Relying on overtime pay and saturation approaches are short-term solutions to vexing problems. The police have done a fine job of incorporating data analytics into their operations. However, we must recognize the unfulfilled potential of police officers as community stakeholders. Community policing on a block-by-block level should form the foundation of our public safety efforts, with police officers functioning as part of the fabric of their communities (as opposed to as members of an occupation force). Along these lines, I support the expansion of beat policing, block club supports, and CAPS efforts.***

***Moreover, one of the greatest means of improving public safety is through preventative measures. Well lit streets and occupied storefronts and residential units serve as a firewall against crime and disorder. Providing those youth most susceptible to the pull of illegal activity must be given viable alternatives within and outside of the school setting.***

***Likewise, along our business corridors where many Special Service Areas (SSAs) exist, there must be increased information sharing between CPD and private security firms (all should be required to attend Compstat meetings). Additionally, as Alderman, I would advocate for stricter laws and increased fines for complicit landlords, property owners and businesses, which allow for loitering and illegal activity to take place inside or near their properties.***

***Lastly, in a recent Chicago Sun Times report, it was discovered that a glitch in the system has resulted in hundreds of gun offenders not appearing on the city’s registry. The City Council must ensure the Chicago Police Department has a systematic process for ensuring all convicted gun offenders are required to register and penalties are strongly applied.***

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

***I would strongly support legislation that increased penalties for illegal weapons possession, as well as for the imposition of heavy penalties on individuals who do not properly report a missing firearm. That being said, I will also remain a strong proponent of national gun control legislation.***

***It is also important to note, that we must work to ensure we enact real gun laws in order to restore public safety. Without infringing upon the 2nd Amendment, we must eliminate the gross number of guns on our streets and in the hands of individuals who have a history of criminal behavior. Therefore, I support the notion that we must treat gun violence as a public health issue starting at the federal level. For example, public health researchers have identified certain risk factors that make people more likely to misuse firearms, such as prior violent crimes, abuse of drugs and/or alcohol, and mental illness. Presently, the federal law that prohibits the purchase and possession of firearms by certain individuals does not include all individuals with these risk factors.***

**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:

***As Alderman, I would strongly support and solicit community input and consistently work to educate my community on legislative proposals and potential impacts. Therefore, I support an elected school board that would further democratize our city government and provide increased sensitivity and accountability to the diverse communities and citizens that make-up the city. Particularly, as we stand at the 25th Anniversary threshold of the inception of Local School Councils in the district, we should promote community investment and full participation on policy matters. Thus, I circulated Elected School Board petitions along with my nominating petitions.***

**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: **Not without public engagement being the centerpiece of any appropriation of surplus dollars**.

What reforms would you propose for the city's TIF program?

***According to the City of Chicago website, "Under state law, areas proposed for TIF designation must possess numerous blighting factors to be eligible."(***[***cityofchicago.org***](http://cityofchicago.org/)***) TIF's have enormous potential to spur on economic development in blighted areas. However, the opacity associated with the process is unacceptable. Moreover, projects that are vaguely associated with economic development (South Shore International High School comes to mind) have received huge amounts of TIF funds. TIF funds are intended to provide a catalyst for economic development, and providing funding for public schools simply does not explicitly satisfy those criteria. As part of a broader agenda of simplifying the system, we must make the TIF process more transparent and qualifying projects meet clearly outlined but rigorous criteria.***

***In the 7th Ward, the majority of the TIF districts are shared with neighboring wards, which is why I am a very strong proponent of greater transparency and a standardized process for planning, implementation and fund allocation. For example, this year was the inaugural year for Cook County property owners to formally learn whether they reside in a TIF district, and if so, how much money is being directed to the TIF. This same level of transparency would also be expanded to the findings and proposed reforms made by the city’s TIF Taskforce; affording increase public discretion as to how surpluses are justly distributed to current District schools that warrant investment. Additionally, we must thoroughly review the viability of the SBIF and NIP programs to ensure that small businesses and property owners, from all neighborhoods with varying financial portfolios, are actually able to benefit.***

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

***My empowerment plan includes:***

**-Convene business owners in the 7th ward and city-wide to understand economic trends and adapt our strategy to make us competitive and attractive to businesses of all sizes**

**-Connect job seekers with professional mentors, resume & interview coaches, as well as prospective employers**

**-Modernize the 7th Ward's infrastructure for the new economy, including providing free WIFI in more public spaces and repurposing unused and underused buildings into laboratories for innovation**

**-Advocate for the elimination of barriers to investment and innovation in city hall and on the state level**

**-Promote development (maximizing existing TIF districts and considering new districts)**

**-Protect existing residents from displacement**

**Additionally, *as Alderman, I will construct a 7th Ward Real Estate Taskforce, comprised of local realtors, attorneys, investors/multi-unit property owners, to conduct a thorough analysis of all the vacant store fronts along our existing corridors. We would engage these owners to discuss my empowerment plan and encourage the immediate re-facing of the facades (window wraps designed by local artists in our community), along leveraging our federal partners to declare 75th, 79th, 83rd, 95th, Empowerment Zones , making the areas eligibility for New Market Tax Credits. A common thread woven through all of these plans is strong community engagement, local participation and community benefits agreements.***

**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?

***As a former Chief of Staff, I am immensely sensitive to delivering high quality constituency services to all tax payers. Given the recent remap, we have already experienced the increased demands on public service offices. Therefore, while I acknowledge the need to consider reducing the number of city council seats, it must be done in a measured fashion, not compromise services and access to city services.***

***It would be wise to consult with other major cities that currently have smaller councils representing large geographical footprints. It is critical to strike a balance between decentralizing authority (having more representatives) and allowing for a city council that truly represents the diversity of interests of the city.***

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

Yes or No: **Yes**

Please explain:

***Given our current fiscal situation, we must explore all potential additional revenue streams. Gambling revenues (provided the casino development process was properly implemented) could provide an important source of funds to the city coffers. Moreover, the development process in creating the physical structure combined with the jobs that will result could be a crucial economic catalyst in our city at a time when one is desperately needed.***

**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.**

Please explain:

***No. Aside from the questionable contracting process, the traffic light camera program encapsulates the short-term fiscal fixes that have allowed us to avoid making truly hard decisions. Trying to squeeze revenue out of every possible alternative source (such as drivers) is as ineffective as it is irritating. Moreover, a traffic light ticket will have a far greater impact on a poor or working class family than a wealthy family. I do not support this program.***

**The Chicago Tribune's excellent investigative series on red-light cameras validates what many people have already concluded:  That these cameras were installed for the primary purpose of generating revenue for the City of Chicago.  As the Chicago Tribune study revealed, many intersections have not reduced accidents since red-light-cameras were installed, in fact, in most cases these intersections have seen an increase in rear-end accidents.  In the 7th Ward where I am a candidate for Alderman, more than $6 million was generated at the red-light intersection of 89th and Stoney Island Avenue before that light was removed.  This ‘tax’ on working families in my ward, at a time of financial challenges for many of the residents, was onerous and unfair.**

**I am convinced that these undemocratic "taxes" on the backs of my neighbors must stop and that the only conclusion one can draw is that red-light cameras must be suspended immediately within the City of Chicago.  I would support legitimate ways to reduce traffic accidents as well as financially responsible ways to generate revenue.  In my estimate, red-light cameras do neither and need to be discontinued.**

**11) Ward issues**

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

**Based upon my in-depth conversations with my neighbors and community stakeholders, my campaign platform is prioritizing the following:**

* **Public Safety**
* **Economic Investments/Workforce Development**
* **Education**
* **Community Renewal**

**In order to be an effective legislator it is important to build relationships with your constituents, key organizations, community stakeholders, your fellow colleagues and the mayoral administration . As Alderman, I plan to cast votes that are in alignment with the interests and needs of my community. From both my years as an activist as well as my years in local government I am very familiar with the various interests in my community, and I will continue to communicate with all of the stakeholders to make sure that decisions are made from the perspective of those most affected.**

**While I will represent my community, I will also continue to be a bold leader and independent thinker. I will not buckle to pressure from outside forces but will instead remain true to commitment to serve and represent my community. In an effort to create teachable moments amongst my neighbors, I will analyze existing ordinances, propose new legislation, engage city officials and other resident experts, along with my colleagues to build consensus for passage of laws, designed to strengthen and advance our communities and the entire city. Likewise, I will call for hearings on current policies that are adversely affecting my neighborhood or misguided in their application.**

**Having worked in both national and local politics, I recognize the importance of educating constituents on public policy issues in advance of formal introduction and voting at City Hall. Therefore, as Alderman I will encourage my constituents to attend monthly committee meetings, public hearings, City Council meetings and Board of Education hearings and public meetings. Following City Council meetings, my office will publish a Legislative Digest, which will outline the legislation which has passed and how it may impact our quality of life.**

**Among the legislation that I will look to write, sponsor or co-sponsor in my first year in office are:**

* **An educational reform ordinance to revamp policies and procedures of charter school operators (Disciplinary policy, Annual RPF process and State Commission appeal process)**
* **A community investment ordinance, targeting economically insecure zip codes;**
* **A ordinance to establish guidelines/taskforce regarding privatization;**
* **A community mental health investment ordinance; and**
* **A modified public notification/input period for Special Use Business Licenses.**