**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name: Annisa Wanat

Ward: 33

Occupation: Independent Consultant – non-profit management, cross-cultural training

Education: Bachelor of Science in Education from Miami University, Master of Arts in Russian and East European Studies from Indiana University, and Master of Public Affairs from Indiana University, Organizational Development Certificate from DePaul University.

Previous political and civic experience: Appointed as community representative to LSC at Albany Park Multicultural Center in December 2013. Elected to same post for a two-year term in April 2014. Currently volunteer at the Albany Park Community Center and am an active member in several neighborhood groups.

**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:

*I do not support restructuring the pension system by reducing benefits to the retired or those near retirement. Based on my conversations with voters, everyone seems to agree that once retired, benefits – including health care – should not be changed, but there is no consensus on what to do with someone in their 30s, who still has time “to make it up,” or how to address mid-career employees. In order to dig ourselves out of this financial mess, we need to accept that everyone – individuals and corporations, unions and government – are going to have to sacrifice a little. As alderman, I will continue to be an honest voice about the pension situation and to fight to ensure that taxpayers will not be left to pick up the entire financial burden for this situation.*

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 until after all other sources of revenue are examined. It astounds me that our elected officials have demonstrated such weak leadership on pensions and they have the situation get this out of control. In order to identify the money necessary to properly fund our pensions, we need to:*

*(1) Examine all possible avenues of revenue generation instead of focusing on regressive taxes, like property taxes – I support a congestion tax for the loop, a luxury tax on goods/services, and ensuring the city is collecting fines that are already in place (esp. environmental fines).*

*(2) Reform the Tax Increment Financing (TIF) Program – I support a moratorium on any new TIF districts until we evaluate the effectiveness of the TIF program and passing the TIF Surplus Ordinance (more details in answer #6)*

*(3) Streamline the government processes – I support reducing the size of the city council and electoral reform to save the city money (more details in answer #8)*

*(4) Empower the Inspector General (IG) - There are several ordinances that have been stuck in the City Council’s Rules Committee since May 2013, ordinances that would empower the IG to perform its duties more effectively. These include ordinances that would give the IG the ability to enforce subpoenas and would ensure city employee cooperation during investigations. If passed, these ordinances would allow the IG to be better positioned to conduct thorough investigations on behalf of taxpayers.*

*(5) Review and renegotiation contracts and financial deals (esp. interest rate swaps) – Other cities are looking to renegotiate “bad” agreements and I will support such efforts in Chicago.  It is imperative we explore all options available fund our pension debts and improve our city services.*

*(6) Pension watchdog – I support addressing key areas about pensions that the public perceives as “unfair” – such as those they see as “taking advantage” of taxpayers by receiving multiple government-funded pensions, receiving a larger pension payment than their retirement salary, or receiving a pension while in prison. Although these abusers of the system are the exceptions rather than the rule, until these situations are addressed, it will be difficult to have a constructive public debate on next steps.*

*(7) Stop Irresponsible Privatization – I support the passage of the Privatization Transparency and Accountability Ordinance that would require a complete analysis of any privatization program. All aldermen should also be able to request legislative analysis through the Office of Financial Analysis (COFA) – and COFA should be staffed and operational as soon as possible.*

**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?

Since education is under complete control of the executive office, the Mayor has prioritized the formation of selective enrollment and charter schools, which has resulted in a system in which a majority of students are relegated to struggling, under-funded, traditional neighborhood schools. Chicago needs to develop a more equitable education system; in order to do this, we need to have elected representatives on the school board, increased public oversight of the CPS budget, and a moratorium on new charter schools.

Public support for an elected school board is increasing and will be an advisory referendum on the ballot in 30+ wards in February 2015. I believe the best approach is a hybrid model, in which some members are appointed based on professional credentials, and others are elected from the pool of current Local School Council members, in order to protect the interests of the geographic area they represent.

I believe a hybrid model will also allow for increased transparency into the CPS budget, which currently is confusing to even the most eager policy wonks. Lack of transparency has led to a lack of understanding among the general public about how public education is funded in our city. For example, we were told the school closings would save money, but then we were told the closings did not save money because of unanticipated moving and utility costs. We have also been told that charter schools are more cost effective, but then we were told that charter schools get more money per student than most neighborhood schools – which is counterintuitive. We need a moratorium on opening any additional charter schools until these questions are answered and investigations into charter school operators are resolved. All of these actions are aimed at increasing transparency in the CPS budget and will allow for better decision-making on how to close the current CPS funding gap – which will address the underfunded pensions as well.

**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: NO

\* 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.

*Expansion of the sales tax base – I support exploring a luxury tax for high-end, nonessential goods and services.*

*Commuter tax – Families should not be penalized if two people in the same household have to work in different cities. In addition, many Chicagoans commute to the suburbs who may just get hit with a similar tax if we pass this.  Finally, a flat rate tax per person is a regressive tax, so I would not support it.*

*Financial Transaction Tax (FTT) – I am not opposed to a small FTT on derivatives trading, but I am opposed to the “LaSalle tax” of a $1-2 fee per transaction that is talked about by some aldermanic candidates. It is also important to point out that in many countries with a FTT, it did not generate the anticipated revenue, so although I support the FTT in theory, I would focus efforts elsewhere.*

*Other tax proposals – My ideas for new revenue sources include a congestion tax for the Loop, which would also have a positive impact on traffic and the environment. We also need an analysis of how many city fines, especially environmental fines, go uncollected and what it would cost to start collecting these fines. Finally, as city leaders, the aldermen should lobby Springfield for a constitutional amendment to allow for a progressive income tax.*

4) Crime

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

Yes or No: YES

Please explain:

*We must stop relying on our officers to commit to overtime in order to provide the policing we need. For two consecutive years, this has resulted in overruns in our overtime budget – but more importantly, this policy leads to burnout in our police force. At a minimum, this leads to high turn-over in the force, but in the worst case scenario, it can lead to poor on-the-job decision making due to fatigue, which in this profession could have deadly consequences. We need to hire and train a larger police force – even if this is more expensive than the overtime option – it is the responsible decision.*

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

*If I were in Springfield, I would focus on ensuring that effective violence prevention programs, such as CeaseFire, are receiving government funding from the state and that the state is paying these organizations on time. Too often good nonprofits are not as effective as they could be because donors are slow in payments and the nonprofit is forced to make staffing cuts. At the city level, here are many important approaches that can be taken to address the demand for illegal guns, including:*

*(1) Strengthening neighborhood schools – Sending students to schools outside of our communities threatens public safety; when neighborhoods send their children away to school, parents are less likely to know their children’s friends and parents. Strengthening neighborhood schools means that fewer students will travel for school and more neighborhood children will study and play together. Strong neighborhood schools increase interaction among neighbors and, as a result, can reduce the influence of gangs in a community.*

*(2) Promote neighborhood schools as community centers – Encourage their use as community centers by offering more after-school and adult programs.*

*(3) Better mental health services in our schools.*

*(4) Promote restorative justice programs in our schools and prisons.*

**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 believe the best approach is a hybrid model, in which some members are appointed based on professional credentials, and others are elected from the pool of current Local School Council members, in order to protect the interests of the geographic area they represent.*

**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?

*Tax Increment Financing (TIF) Reform is a cornerstone of my platform to advocate for more responsible budget decisions in our city. Other cities successfully implement TIF programs as a revitalization and development tool, but the Chicago method of identifying TIF districts and distributing money needs to be reformed. As alderman, I will work to ensure our TIF dollars are being used responsibly and spent in a way that reflects our priorities. I will oppose the creation of new TIF districts, including those in my ward, until recommendations from the Mayor's 2011 TIF Reform Panel are implemented.*

*A priority recommendation from the Reform Panel is to evaluate the impact that each TIF district has had on the area it serves. With my background in community development, I am uniquely positioned to undertake this evaluation for the TIF districts in my ward. Upon completion, I will advocate for the process to be replicated around the city. We also need to come up with a common definition of “blight” and close those TIF districts that are not in blighted areas or, based on evaluation, have not been effective drivers of community revitalization. Although officially closing these TIF districts will require action from Springfield, the City Council could pass a moratorium on any new activity in these TIF districts. If combined with passing the TIF Surplus Ordinance that was introduced in 2013, these two pieces of legislation would return money to the general budget to be used to pay for schools, pension obligations, and other public services.*

*Another key area of the TIF program that needs to be reviewed is the Small Business Improvement Fund (SBIF) program. Some TIFs have this option and some do not. For TIF districts that have been deemed effective, we need to expand this program so that more local business owners can take advantage of SBIF. Finally, we need to reform our policies on porting TIF funds to reduce (or eliminate) the amount of money collected in one area of the city but spent in another.*

7) **Neighborhood economic development**

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

*I currently am an active participant in the Special Service Area (SSA) meetings in the 33rd Ward. Most recently, I worked with the SSA to develop an evaluation system so their façade improvement grants program can be awarded in an open and transparent fashion. In addition, I am a constant voice advocating that the SSA distribute materials in multiple languages so they are accessible to all the small business owners in the diverse 33rd Ward.*

*As alderman, I will create a revitalization plan for the ward by gathering input from citizens and stakeholders on their ideas about how to develop the ward without pricing hard-working families out of their homes. As part of this plan, I will organize community groups and nonprofits to improve unused spaces in the ward to increase local recreation options. As more people spend time in the ward, they spend more money in the ward, which also attracts more local businesses. In addition, I will market the ward to draw in new businesses, jobs, non-profits, and social enterprises, and I will advocate for expansion of the Small Business Improvement Fund (SBIF) program. I will also work with nonprofits to encourage apprenticeship and job training programs and will advocate for increased funding for neighborhood schools; both of these efforts will make hiring local residents more attractive to employers. Finally, I will use my knowledge of corporate social responsibility principles to promote local businesses that reinvest in the ward and hire locally. If necessary, I will provide training to businesses who want to improve their corporate social responsibility efforts.*

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?

*Reducing the size of city council is necessary to save our city money, as well as make service provision more effective. The ratio of aldermen to residents in Chicago is 1:55,000, while the ratio for in LA is 1:162,000 and in NYC it is 1:255,000. There was a time, before we had the technology to track potholes and garbage collection, that Chicago's ratio might have been necessary, but this is no longer the case. The Better Government Association (BGA) estimates that if the number of aldermen were reduced to 25, the city would save between $2.7 and $4 million in aldermanic and staffers salaries (depending on if the decision was made to increase the staff with the increased number of constituents). Ald. Burke has estimated this would save up to $10 million a year. Alds. Fioretti and Waguespack have also outlined a proposal for 35 aldermen, which wouldn’t save as much money, but their map would align more closely with the current Chicago neighborhoods. Both of these proposals should be debated openly.*

*In addition to reducing the size of the council, we should reform our electoral code to move the municipal elections to coincide with the November general elections. This would save money by not having to hold separate elections and could increase turnout, as turnout is usually higher in November than in February. Finally, we should reform the electoral code to introduce instant run-off voting, which would eliminate the need for separate run-off elections during the municipal cycle – another cost savings to tax payers.*

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

Yes or No: YES

Please explain:

*Casino gambling can have many positive impacts on a city in terms of jobs and city revenue, but it can also have negative social implications as well. Casinos are an issue that should be the subject of vigorous public debate. After hearing from ward and city residents, I would be better able to decide this issue.*

**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:

*One of the reasons I am running for City Council is to fight the waste of taxpayers' money through the irresponsible privatization of public assets.  As representatives of the taxpayers, aldermen need to be vigilant in identifying both ill-conceived contracts, such as the parking meter fiasco, and the mismanagement of contracts, such those in place for the red-light camera program.  In a recent report, the Inspector General (IG) found that mismanagement of these contracts has resulted in inconsistent ticketing, possibly affected public safety and definitely decreased public trust. Unfortunately, the IG’s review was limited and questions still remain.  Was anyone held accountable for the mismanagement of the Redflex contract?  Why was the city not transparent about the change in the timing on the yellow-light violation?  How much money did it cost taxpayers for another firm to review individual tickets?  Has the city revised its policies for contract oversight or are other government contracts still costing the taxpayers money because of gross mismanagement?

We still need to see a more comprehensive IG audit and/or a public hearing on the red-light camera program. This will be a step in the right direction by promoting increased oversight of city contractors, greater accountability for our tax dollars, and as a result, improved public services and increased trust in city government.  Until such an audit or public hearing takes place, the red-light camera program must be labeled “irresponsible privatization” and mismanagement of our public assets – which I am firmly against.*

**11) Ward issues**

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

*The biggest concern I hear from ward residents is about the irresponsible budget decisions that are made on the taxpayers’ behalf (i.e. pensions, school closings, red-light cameras). These poor decisions have resulted in higher taxes/fees for individuals and decreased services in our ward – whether for neighborhood schools, infrastructure, or public safety. The second major concern is that the current alderman is not keeping an eye on the “big picture” for the ward in terms of education, infrastructure, job creation, public safety, and filling empty storefronts. Since the alderman was appointed 18 months ago, public services and responsiveness of the ward office have declined. Finally, there is a deep frustration with lack of transparency in city dealings the role that nepotism played in the appointment of our alderman in 2013. As a result of these issues, public trust in elected officials is on the decline.*

*To increase public trust, we need more aldermen who recognize that we make better decisions when we make them together. As alderman, I will hold public discussions on the important issues that face our city, such as the annual budget, TIF reform, strengthening neighborhood schools, and addressing our pension obligations. It is also important to have public discussions on ward-level issues. As alderman, I will lead residents in public discussions to develop a revitalization plan to promote development - without pricing hard-working families out of our diverse ward. We need to work as a community to make decisions on zoning, economic development, and developing opportunities for recreation in the ward. By providing more opportunities for citizens to have input into the process, we will generate more ideas on how to address important policy issues and increase public trust in our elected officials.*