**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name: Willie B. Cochran

Ward: 20th Ward

Occupation: Two term Alderman

Education: Graduate of Northwestern University, Illinois Institute of Technology and Eastern Illinois University. Community Police and IFF Organizing training.

Previous political and civic experience:

In 1977, I became a Chicago Police Officer and retired from law enforcement in 2003 after 26 years of dedicated service as a patrolman, investigator, sergeant and federal marshal. After retiring from the police department, I went on to work as organizer for the Woodlawn's New Communities Program. During my tenure as a community organizer, I participated in extensive community planning activities designed to improve the quality of life and create solutions to problems that have plagued neighborhoods, such as crime, ineffective schools, and lack of affordable housing, jobs, health, and economic development. I directed and organized the same type of quality of life initiative in the Washington Park community where I led the development of its New Communities Program, the Washington Park Consortium. In addition to being an active resident of the community, I operated a family owned business in Woodlawn for 14 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:

Please Explain:

Growth is the key to the funding of the fire and police pension fund. At present, all the proposed solutions are aimed at reducing the pensions of those who put their faith and their money into a pension plan. The shortfall is not the fault of the public servants of the city whose pensions run from a modest $34,000 a year to a still pretty modest $78,000 a year for a retired teacher.

Grow the economy, restore full positions to the fire and police force so that there are more contributions into the pension fund, make certain that the investments of the pension funds are sound (the stock market has never been higher, those heights should help pension funding).

If taxes are needed, don’t use the regressive ‘fees’ that are currently in place – which reported added up to $481 per household per year over the past four years. They place the burden on the working people of the city. Better to use property taxes or progressive income taxes.

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?

Chicago has one of the best trained and experienced union workforces covering all facets of service, construction and city services in the country. However, in recent years, the city’s budget has been balanced on the backs of workers with an unprecedented number of furlough days, staff cutbacks and an unwillingness to replace the large number of city workers that are retiring while workloads are increasing. I strongly believe that there are other ways to generate new revenue, and that we must be more exhaustive in our efforts to develop those new revenue streams, including in burgeoning industries as alternative energies and advanced manufacturing. However, I do recognize that the demand for city services continues to grow and will consider supporting an increase in taxes and fees only to the extent necessary to continue to provide the optimal delivery of services.

I support a sales tax on large-scale financial transactions and taxing those who make millions at a more fair level. I am not in support of raising taxes on working people and the middle class. Also, I don’t believe any benefits should be cut once a person retires unless they are collecting several government pension that place them in the top 1 percent. I also believe there a tax on guns that are sold to Chicago residents should be allocated to emergency responders pension fund.

**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 best way to enhance revenues is to build the economy. Searching for and securing a variety of revenue enhancing options supplies communities with the needed jobs and income. If used correctly, these funding bases can benefit all Chicago workers and communities.

**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:

As previously stated, I support a sales tax on large-scale financial transactions, include consumer services and supportive of raising wages and restructuring income taxes to close loopholes for the very wealth.

\* A tax on non-Chicago residents who work in the city

Yes or No:

I am not in support of raising or imposing taxes on working people and the middle class. As a major city, we want to continue to welcome and attract the best and brightest from the region to work at companies who currently call Chicago home. In addition, we want to let companies who are considering relocating, that Chicago has a pool of worthwhile employees who can help to make their business be successful. By introducing a tax on non-Chicago residents, we possibly shrink the number of people who live in and/or do business in the city.

\* A tax on electronic financial transactions on Chicago’s trading exchanges, known as the “LaSalle Street tax”

Yes or No:

This is a very interesting suggestion. Some believe that implementing the tax would turn LaSalle into a ‘ghost town’ while others believe that a transaction tax on sellers and buyers of futures, future options and securities option contracts traded by the Merc and Chicago Board Options Exchange could produce a $12 billion-a-year windfall for the state and “make heroes” out of the wealthy men and women who work on LaSalle Street.

Currently the ‘LaSalle Street Tax’ is prohibited by state law. I strongly believe we should work to achieve some reasonable tax revenue from electronic financial transactions.

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 I Do.

Please explain:

I think the safety of our citizens is of the utmost importance and having a fully staffed police force should be at the top of the list. I do support realigning beats to increase safety in higher crime neighborhoods. I do not think paying $100 million a year in overtime is rational. I have advocated for increased hiring of new police officers for my two terms in office and still believe we should have every position filled. I have seen 300 additional police assigned to district stations in the 20th ward but numbers are reducing once again. As a former police officer, I’ve seen first-hand the trauma crime and violence can bring to a community.

However, I also believe that we must balance this by introducing and expanding programs that offer real opportunities so those who want to take advantage of the opportunies can. This help our most vulnerable communities, families, residents and youth prevent them from moving toward crime.

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

As Alderman I have sponsored and co-sponsored legislation to increase jail terms for gun crimes and gang members. However, the flow of illegal guns into Chicago is rampant. We have to close the loopholes in legislation that allow for guns to be sold to suspected criminals by introducing tougher penalties for those who supply guns illegally to criminals.

As a father and former police officer, I will continue to support any constitutional and practical gun control legislation to protect the safety of all Chicago residents.

**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 I believe some members of the school board should be elected and others appointed.

Please explain:

By implementing a system to elect the Chicago Public school board, you take the accountability of their actions off of the elected chief executive of the City who appointed them, and place it on the election process and the elected board members. Unfortunately, the Alderman of the city council don’t have a vote on the board of education’s decisions. The hybrid system would give the public and the mayor representation.

CPS board needs to work with the CTU to find efficiencies, craft common-sense labor agreement and ensure future spending is focused on the most important academic priorities.

**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?

TIF is an important economic development tool to encourage development and investment where it would not otherwise occur. However, I believe that the TIF program is in need of serious reform.

I believe that the City can make adjustments to the TIF system that could provide both immediate and long-term relief for cash-starved taxing bodies in Chicago, including such measures as allowing older TIF districts to be dissolved, if necessary, before the end of their 23 year life span, or indexing the frozen tax baseline to inflation, so the taxing bodies dependent on this revenue can keep pace throughout the life of the TIF as their costs increase. As to the reduction of TIF districts, I believe that such a decision should made after careful evaluation as to whether the funds are truly being appropriated to “blighted” or “conservation” areas, staying true to the original purpose of TIF. Finally and most importantly, any spending of City dollars, TIF or otherwise, must be a part of a transparent budget process. TIF budgeting and, in particular, the subsidies given to various entities within TIF districts, has occurred behind closed doors for too long. As our elected representatives, the City Council must be given a larger role in the process with strong public participation.

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

The best way to enhance revenues is to build the economy.

In August 2011, the 20th Ward was awarded HUD’s first $30.5 million Choice Neighborhoods Initiative (CNI) grant in response to a powerful proposal put forth by a partnership that included neighborhood leaders and organizations. The CNI award has expanded and accelerated my Woodlawn plans to go beyond housing and attracted other private, philanthropic and public funders. The plan includes upgrading and integrating every aspect of the community from housing to parks, education to public safety, from job creation to improved streetscapes and landscapes. In addition, we were able to secure $5.5 million in grants to homeowners, $1.7 million directly to existing small businesses and tax incentives to manufacturing businesses.

By searching for and securing a variety of revenue enhancing options the 20th ward could supply the needed jobs and income. With the expansion of the intermodal yards in the 20th ward I would also advocate for the development of warehouses and transportation hubs. I also advocate for more housing restoration and new home development.

**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? No change. The cost savings would be minimal compared to the dissatisfaction local residents would have.

All aldermen have close ties to their communities and 50 aldermen allow residents to have easy access to their elected representative who have been tasked with ensuring that they are receiving all the necessary city services.

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

Yes or No:

Please explain:

I have reservation regarding establishing a gambling casino in Chicago. The expert opinions are mixed on the issue and so am I. In order to gain my consideration, processes must be put in place that ensure that there are clear cut economic development benefits of casino development and not another revenue producing entity that preys on societies most vulnerable population. Therefore many more discussions, insurances and legislation will have to be enacted prior to establishing a gambling casino in Chicago.

**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: Yes I do believe we have enough.

Please explain:

There are serious flaws in Chicago’s traffic light camera program that has not only garner the negative attention of me and my fellow council members but has also sparked anguish by the residents of the city. The disproportionate program is in great need of reform that should be centered around the safety of citizens and not enhancing the revenue of the City. We have to examine this program and create a better product for all Chicago residents

**11) Ward issues**

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

My priorities have always been increasing safety, economic development and education opportunities in my ward and the area. After years of neglect and in partnerships with residents, businesses and institutions in our ward, we have accomplished much. One of those accomplishments has been the compilation of written community plans for four of five communities I serve. Those road maps clearly state what the community wants tackle that could impact the quality of life in all their neighborhoods.

From the increasing public safety and decreasing crime and violence, creating innovative economic development – and establishing quality schools we can address many of the problems that have negatively impacted the 20th ward.

As Alderman, I will continue to ensure that city services are being provided in the most fiscally efficient manner possible to continue to provide the optimal delivery of services. While I am proud of our accomplishments much remains to be done to address the needs and potential of the 20th Ward.