**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

**\* I wrote this questionnaire with no outside influence or staff help. Thank you so much for the opportunity, I look forward to our in person meeting.**

Name: **Steve Niketopoulos**

Ward: **2nd Ward**

Occupation: **Educational TV Producer (Resigned to run for Alderman)**

Education: **Bachelor's of Science, Loyola University Chicago**

Previous political and civic experience:

**President of the Ukrainian Village Neighborhood Association**

**Local School Council Representative, Columbus Elementary**

**Precinct Captain/Volunteer, Will Guzzardi for State Representative**

**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?

**No**

Please Explain:

**Right now people are paying more for less. Police officers I have talked to now suggest they are getting 80 cents on the dollar, forcing them to pull more from their salary to create separate retirement accounts. This is an outrage, and it's a problem that comes from the lack of leadership down state and in our city. I'd look at restructuring city spending and putting more pressure on Springfield. I think there are way too many pet projects and secret accounts in Chicago, this need to be cleaned up. If the city looked at it's spending we could tighten things up and find the additional funding needed to fix the pension problem. This also needs to happen with financial help from Springfield, something that also continues to get pushed down the road. I'd also like to see CPD pay for the equipment officers need for patrol, so we need to fix financial issue like these sooner rather than later.**

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 raising property taxes until I felt like the city wasn't holding any money back. Priorities in spending need to reflect what Chicagoans want to see fixed, we are supposed to represent the needs of the city and anticipate additional problems down the road. The longer we push off a restructuring the worse the situation will get. Again it's an issue that also involves Springfield. I think starting with tightening city spending, looking closely at TIF reform, we should be able to fill some of the gap. New revenue streams could also assist in future payments while holding the city back from attacking retirees health benefits. It's a national trend, attacking the health benefits, and it needs to stop. If we continue to mismanage so many funds and push the problem off year after year we get closer to bankruptcy. Instead of having a forced restructuring, Chicago needs to voluntarily come up with a plan of action to avoid creating an economic crisis beyond our current levels.**

**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 budget has a lot of hidden elements, and the review process is rushed and incomplete. But it all comes down to how the City is being managed. We need to look hard at the ways Chicago can restructure it's funding for CPS. Again looking at additional TIF reform we should be able to fill some of the gap in the CPS budget.**

**As for measures, I am in favor of a fair tax, but in conjunction with tightening city spending with more citywide transparency. If we are to adjust tax levels, we need to show that the money is going where it is supposed to go. I also think eliminating corporate loopholes is in the best interest of everyday Chicagoans, but we need to strengthen the local economy so that we do not lose big business with this plan. Making it harder for corporations to justify staying in Chicago, or coming to Chicago, is very tricky business.**

**TIF money aside, I think we need to remind big business that Chicago is central to the country. The national economy is on an upswing, this could be the best time to make this push to close corporate loopholes. We need to solve the pension and bond crisis so that the city will not continue to shortchange those who are retired, or the future generations and their schooling. The city needs to step up on more programs for kids, more after-school funding, more internships, and more specialized training programs for our youth. This all has the added benefit of giving kids more options, while helping to stop the cycle of violence in some of our neighborhoods.**

**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

**No**

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

**No**

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

**No**

Please explain your views, if you wish, on any of these three revenue-generating measures.

**I feel like Chicagoans are taxed enough, and some of these ideas sound nice but don't address the larger problems of bad fiscal management by the city. I feel like the city council needs to build more trust in the management of city money, the start is to look at projects that go way over budget. Once those are addressed we can see where we really stand financially and what taxes need to be increased or proposed. Specifically I worry about taxing consumers more than we are, I'm not sold on the non-resident taxes or how effective they would be. I think the LaSalle street tax could potentially do more harm than good. If we build new streams of revenue while tightening the spending it will make a bigger dent in the financial issues our city has. We can't keep taxing the residents for the City's mismanagement problems.**

**4) Crime**

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

**Yes**

Please explain:

**I have a lot of experience with crime prevention in my community. I know many of the officers, sergeants, lieutenants and commanders. We need more officers for many reasons, but a simple enough reason is that we are paying huge amounts of overtime to have tired and overworked officers on the streets. Also, these overtime officers are sometimes working in different districts, making it hard to have a connection with the community.**

**Because of these issues, I designed a new system of community policing to help our officers by utilizing social media and simple door knocking campaigns. Community policing can work if you introduce new methods of communication to neighbors. CPD, due to its staffing problems, cannot keep up with the technological requirements to do this, let alone make sure there are enough cars on the street. Closing police stations made it harder for officers to report in with a suspect, or handle paperwork, while still on patrol. In my district a patrol car might be out of the neighborhood for an hour if they have to book someone. The cost cutting decision of consolidating districts was done as a business move, not a community move. Closing police stations was hurtful for neighborhood trust, something that makes it harder for officers to build a connection with neighbors and business owners. The city needs to consider this as it moves forward.**

**Community policing, at its best, is a neighborhood working together to help the police in every way they can. When you are part of something, you look out for other people who are also involved. My online community covers over 10,000 neighbors, and if polled many would like to see another 1,000 to 2,000 officers hired. I would like to see more efforts put into encouraging community feedback with new services and technology. Just because we have a red light camera at an intersection doesn't mean we don't also need a patrol car nearby. Shootings are up in the city, if the community gets more involved in reporting troubled houses or gang locations, without the fear of retribution, it could go a long way to curbing gun violence. Every single day we can all play a role in watching out for each other, but there needs to be a system in place for us to trust that our reporting helps solve the problem, and that there is adequate staffing in place to handle these reports.**

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

**We need the help of Chicagoans to identify and educate each other on where guns are ending up. Locations across the city are found all the time as trafficking sites for illegal guns sales. This is also a national issue, but also one which applies to states next to Illinois. Racketeering statutes are one method, strengthening the kind of trouble gun runners can get into. But we also need community alternatives for our youth to break the cycle. I think providing more school programs, after school opportunities and even new paths to apprenticeship training can help break up the constant violence that our youth find themselves involved in.**

**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**

Please explain:

**I think a hybrid would work so the mayor would appoint some people and some are elected, at least I think that is the first step in the process towards having a full elected school board. There have been too many CEOs over the years with little consistency. They always have new ideas for what can work, but if the mayor doesn't like the direction things are heading in he can call for a change whenever he wants one. Now that we finally have a large portion of Chicago weighing in on the idea we can finally see what needs to be done to reflect the views of citizens of Chicago. I think in the near future we will see some elected school board members.**

**This also speaks towards a larger problem within city hall of the lack of discussion on major city-wide issues. Parliamentary maneuvers are way too common, we need to see more coalitions and cooperation across all channels.**

**I am encouraged to see more involvement from the community, which means more safeguards against mismanagement. Regarding the issues within schools, having a good principal who can look out for the needs of the school and plan far ahead to avoid budget issues is an ideal situation. But schools also have principals who use the system to their advantage to make the morale and culture of the school under their control. I am concerned about the over-testing of students, classroom sizes being way too large, the pressure on our teachers imposed by standardized testing, and small windows of opportunity for teachers to show how effective they can truly be. I'd like to see these things addressed in future negotiations between CPS and CTU, and I want to see a school board that reflects the views of the citizens of Chicago.**

**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?

**No**

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

**This program has done good things and it has done bad things. Most neighbors I talk to are not familiar with TIF's, or what they are designed to do. In my mind there is a lack of transparency, which means you have to be an insider to really know where the TIF money is being spent. I am all for alternative ways to increase funding to schools and blighted communities, but when things like the Depaul arena are slipped into the omnibus of a city council meeting, that says to me there are a lot of things not coming to light about TIF's in this city. I would like to see the mayor account for how much money there is, and where it is going more often. I think that there are many things everyday Chicagoans want to see fixed first before pet projects get funding. For those who are familiar with TIF's, I have not yet met anyone who says they want to see TIF funds protected before we fix pensions or our bond debt problems. That says to me that we need to look at where our money is being spent, and where out priorities are as a city.**

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

**I think the first step is making sure the Finkl/Lakin/Guttman redevelopment stays mostly industrial, which would allow for new development centers or assembly plants to come into the area. Even the chance of bringing working lofts or a microbrewery to that area of the ward looks good. This would definately increase the amount of jobs in the ward, but also helps us redefine some of the traffic routes for cars and bikes. Along Elston avenue is also seeing a boom in retail. I'd like to make sure cars and pedestrians can easily get in and out of the area, which would draw more business to that sections as well. I'd consult with the Chambers of Commerce and neighborhood associations as well to discuss areas of the ward that could be improved, and what types of business they would like to see. For me it's about having an open dialogue with neighbors and other business owners about what I can do to help encourage new business 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?

**You have to evaluate whether alderman are currently doing a full time job or not. It should be mandated as a being a full time job, I certainly think of it as two full time jobs. Any alderman that really cared about the work would spend a full amount of time in the community as well as city hall. So that said, if each alderman really did the work needed for each ward, and openly worked alongside and coordinated with their neighboring ward alderman, yes there could be a lower number. The ward maps hardly represent community areas, so assuming the maps could reflect neighborhoods more closely we could easily have less alderman. If communities played more of a role in self identifying ward issues it would help the office better manage those concerns. The confusion of ward maps often leads to issues in coordinating neighborhoods. If the maps were reflective of community areas or neighborhoods, and alderman worked together on coordinating city services, you could cut the number of alderman in half.**

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

**Yes**

Please explain:

**On paper this would enhance the tourist industry, bring in more convention business and provide the city with some much needed revenue. But gambling in Illinois has been on the decline, and there are many issues with the oversight and transparency involved in how this operation could be run. I like that the Illinois gaming authority would be involved with oversight, and the State and City could benefit equally from the revenue. But corruption is a big worry for me. If you look at the example of Illinois lottery, there are many things about this which could harm those who don't have the extra money to spend. I would be very concerned with the effect this would have on Chicagoans and the surrounding area the casino would be located in. My approval would come with a clear structure of how this would solve some of the City's main issues without causing harm. If money clearly did go towards pensions, education and capitol projects I could see the benefit of having a 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?

**No**

Please explain:

**The city has the largest camera operation in the country, and most people are confused or frustrated about how this happened. Going back to 2002 when a city employee was taking bribes for each approved camera, we know that too many cameras were rolled out too quickly. There is no transparency about why cameras are placed where they are, and no records of the process behind these decisions. The entire program has just too many faults to it. Of the 190 cameras (give or take) across the city, only 40-50 seem to be needed as deterrents to unsafe intersections. I would assume the $70 million a year the city earns from these cameras makes most lawmakers happy to have the revenue. I would rather remove some that are causing more rear ending accidents because of drivers slamming on the brakes to not get a ticket. Do cameras increase crash possibilities, I think they do. Do some cameras keep drivers more accountable, I also think they do. We need to find an accountable middle ground to move forward. We need to explore lengthening the yellow lights to 3.5 seconds, or at least making sure they are a full 3 seconds, to cut down on accidents.**

**11) Ward issues**

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

**The main reason I'm running is to make sure that voters in this oddly shaped (and un-democratically designed) ward feel like they are well informed and involved. The only way to do that is to create a system of participation. I have a history of hosting in person meetings and forums. I find a well educated community stays the most involved in it's improvements.**

**I will make sure services in the ward are equal and balanced, with plenty of communication both ways on what needs to be done. I will introduce participatory budgeting, giving each community a chance to discuss and vote on a project that applies to their neighborhood.**

**Ward office communication is a big issue for me, since I have worked with multiple offices over the years and seen staffers come and go who are easily overwhelmed. A well managed staff can better manage requests and allow for me to make the time to be part of each community. Each neighborhood will see me and have the chance to work with me on all ideas and concerns. My goal is to provide a regular online and home delivered newsletter, along with hosting community meetings and engaging in social media.**

**But overall, I will bring more accountability to local government. I believe this city needs to reflect those living in it. I will not staffing out my responsibilities. I will be a full-time alderman, with no other jobs to weigh me down. I want the new 2nd ward to be the most open and transparent ward in the city in how it operates, but also in my own communications with constituents about what is happening at city hall. I will increase ward meeting times and create satellite offices for all corners of the new 2nd Ward.**

**With that, I hope you see that I am a genuine person who is running with your best interest in mind.**