**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name: Rey Colón

Ward: 35

Occupation: Alderman

Education:

Roosevelt University – Public Administration

Columbia College – Radio Broadcasting

Previous political and civic experience:

I am lifelong ward resident who attended Darwin Elementary School, Schurz High School, Columbia College and Roosevelt University’s Community Management Program in the Office of Public Administration. I am excited about the possibility of serving the new ward boundaries which include Albany Park, Avondale, Hermosa, Irving Park, and Logan Square. My career has been devoted to creating opportunities for children and their families. Since the 1979 murder of my brother in a drive-by gang shooting, I have been committed to providing positive alternatives and serving my community in various capacities:

· Executive Director, McCormick Tribune YMCA, Facilitated a $7.5 million fundraising effort and directed construction of the YMCA in Logan Square;

· Executive Director, Logan Square Boys and Girls Club, Launched a volunteer program to provide mentors for inner-city youth and received the National Honor Award for Program Excellence two years in a row. Achieved a 90% graduation rate with Satellite High School Program.

· Area Manager of the Chicago Park District,

Directed the operations of 45 city parks and play-lots, beautified public green space, and piloted innovative programs throughout the Humboldt Park/West Town communities, which are now implemented city-wide.

Elected Alderman and serving since May 5, 2003. My specialty has been creating a clean, healthy, economically-viable and safe community.

**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:

We have to strike the right balance of putting the pension system in sound financial footing while maintaining an adequate retirement for City employees who do not receive Social Security.Collective bargaining agreements should be honored once they are made and it is unfair to cut pension benefits for City employees and retirees.The reforms made in 2014 for the City's Municipal and Laborers' pension funds is a small, yet good first step towards addressing our pension crisis. Time and money have now run out in reforming the City's Police and Fire pension funds. In this next term, we will be confronted with this monumental challenge and forced to make the tough decisions that will include making further city budget reductions, targeting potential tax and fee increases and eliminating corporate loopholes; all without jeopardizing our local economy. Specific reforms must be worked out collaboratively between Chicago’s elected leaders and State legislators to ensure that these funds are stabilized without cutting essential services or putting an unreasonable financial burden on taxpayers.

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?

We must exhaust all available options before even considering increasing taxes and fees.

**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?

There is no way to tax your way out of this.I don’t have an immediate solution for the monumental pension fund crisis that according to the Civic Federation equates to a liability of $20,000 per Chicago resident. It took many years of inadequate employer/employee contributions and investment losses to get us into this predicament and it will take many years to fully stabilize adequate funding levels. With fewer employees to support the rising number of beneficiaries, every option will be painful and will require a state-wide solution.

**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:

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

Yes or No:

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

Yes or No:

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

Every option is worth discussing. We must find new and efficient ways to provide services, continue to reduce waste, eliminate corporate loopholes and make sure everyone is paying their fair tax share before increasing any fees or taxes.

**4) Crime**

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

Yes or No:

Please explain:

The performance of the Chicago Police Department is secondary to having an organized citizenry. People should not confuse more police with better policing. The disinvestment in the CAPS program has interrupted the regularity of monthly communication between residents and beat officers. Bi-monthly beat meetings change the momentum of resident involvement and only the committed few participate every other month. We need to restore the monthly meetings and promote better relationships between the police and the people they are protecting. We also need to better empower neighbors and residents.

My office and I participate in the local beat meetings and encourage residents who contact my office with safety concerns to attend. We maintain high communication with police districts and communicate all reported concerns and issues. Crime in the 35th Ward has gone down significantly since I’ve taken office. I have organized several community meetings with the District Commander and beat officers to encourage communication and invite residents to form a positive relationship with law enforcement. When major incidents occur, we organize outdoor roll calls with police and residents to bring attention to the matter and make each event a teachable moment in working together for safety. Over time we have had success in involving residents without citizenship status by having them come to our office for services, encouraging them to report crime when they see it and participate in preventive activities with their neighbors. This is especially necessary in areas where crimes occur, but there are few to no calls for service.

I promote having annual “Block Parties” on every street in the ward. While the event is only 1-day a year, the entry-level organizing process provides opportunities for local engagement and builds relationships among neighbors that may not occur naturally. We encourage residents to learn the names of the children on their block. I have seen improved local relationships lead to other empowered activities like clean-ups, requesting speed humps, residential-zoned parking, collective garage sales, etc. Public safety is higher when relationships are strong on a block. Police and local officials are always more responsive when local residents are organized. It is my ongoing goal to increase resident involvement on every block in the ward.

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

Our problem goes beyond the State of Illinois. If we can’t strengthen the gun laws nationally with background checks and regulation of secondary private gun transfers, the flow of guns into our state will continue.

**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:

Please explain:

I could support an Elected school board if ensures a higher quality education, a solvent retirement system and an improvement of the district's finances. I am not convinced this will occur. I would specifically like to know how an elected school will improve CPS' finances, advance capital projects, reduce annual operating costs and fix the solvency of Chicago Teachers’ Pension Funds. CPS is currently showing gains in academic improvement. It remains to be demonstrated how an Elected School Board would function better than the current system and what financial reform an Elected school board will have over a mayoral appointment.

**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:

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

I don’t have a problem with that although a significant amount of TIF has gone towards building new schools in my ward and others. I am proud of the TIF allotments used in the 35th Ward during my tenure to leverage economic growth and investment in the area. The Tax Increment Financing (TIF) program has more transparency than ever before and is closely scrutinized by the public, media and other interested parties. I have no plans to create, expand or extend any TIF districts in the 35th Ward, but did submit a request that all proceeds for the Irving Park TIF be dedicated to the land acquisition and construction of a new Independence Park Library. The Independence Park Library has been operating from an inferior, rental facility for over a century. TIF recipients should be required to demonstrate how their projects will create jobs, generate revenue and pay for themselves over time.

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

Promoting economic development in the ward is not a singular activity.

It requires multiple approaches from different levels to attract investment.

Public infrastructure improvements to leverage private investment, creating historic landmark districts, establishing partnerships with artists and businesses, starting a farmer’s market, establishing annual festivals, launching a campaign to change the image of an area, fighting crime, improving schools, attracting new academic institutions, supporting existing small businesses and creating a business-friendly environment for all potential employers are all components which have helped to create the climate of economic growth in my ward. I have identified existing amenities and things that people value in the ward and worked to build upon them.

The alderman must function like a business partner and expeditor to ensure that time and money is not wasted due to the slow pace and red tape in government. The alderman must take people’s business plans and ideas seriously. Two out of ten people who come to see you about a potential business may be the only ones to succeed, but you must continue to keep an open mind and help them get through what can often be a difficult process. When Revolution Brewing was looking for early investors, I supported their Small Business Improvement Fund SBIF, assured their bank that I would support their license, assisted with zoning, amended the Planned Manufacturing District PMD and basically did whatever needed to be done for business to occur. For example; Two years before Longman & Eagle opened, the owners came to see me about a Beauty bar (Martinis & Manicures) concept. It died. They later came back with the restaurant, whiskey bar, bed & breakfast concept that now has a Michelin Star and has received national recognition. As with L&E, once a local business is successful, many will look for opportunities to start another one.

The alderman must leverage and attract both local businesses and national chains where appropriate. When Sears Holdings proposed the possibility of Chicago’s first Olive Garden going to Addison and the Kennedy Expressway, I held community meetings and asked them to commit to local hiring. Today, a significant number of their 200 employees live within walking distance.

The 35th Ward has been fortunate to welcome many new businesses and art venues like: Tour de Fat, Milwaukee Avenue Arts Festival, the Logan Square Farmer’s Market, Boulevard Music Fest, Revolution Brewing, Cole’s, A Day in Avondale, Logan Square Studio, Longman & Eagle, Yusho, Logan Theater Renovation, Comfort Station Restoration, First Ascent (Chicago’s Largest Climbing Wall is in process), Intelligentsia Coffee, Webster Wine Bar, Chicago Diner, Olive Garden, Northeastern University’s El Centro Campus <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=a613d684-3581-4f60-b6a4-edd8579f1665&c=dab23ac0-51b9-11e3-9d5e-d4ae527536d1&ch=dc5e3d10-51b9-11e3-9d92-d4ae527536d1>and other developments that have boosted the local economy.

**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 welcome the opportunity to serve more residents. If the number of aldermen is reduced, there are certain trade-offs that people may have to consider. The alderman is the closest layer of government that everyday people have to communicate with and improve their quality of life. In Chicago, many people rely on their alderman to navigate through bureaucracy, create jobs, provide responsive services and represent their interests. Reducing the number of aldermen would mean fewer opportunities for new candidates to get elected.

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

Yes or No:

Please explain:

I don’t gamble nor do I advise anyone to, but those who do should be able to do so in Chicago and we should be able to keep our revenue here in the City.

**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:

Please explain:

Overall, I support the concept of using cameras for traffic enforcement. The scandals behind the red-light cameras don’t take away from their usefulness in preventing motorist from eating red lights and improving driving behavior. On Fullerton and Kedzie for example, crashes and tickets were greatly reduced. The cameras were eventually moved. He days of cops sitting in cars with radar guns is replaced with camera technology.

Speed cameras also regulate driving behavior, but quite frankly, some of the areas where they have been placed are clearly money-traps rather than an improvement in safety for children. They successfully slow down traffic and catch speeders where they exist, but I often struggle to visually see the relationship between the school and park they are supposed to be protecting. Parks and Schools are a good rationale for the cameras, but in some areas it appears as an excuse. We should put them wherever we believe there is a need. Having traffic enforcement cameras everywhere has become somewhat overwhelming, but in my opinion it improves needed traffic enforcement on our streets, frees up police to serve and protect instead of writing citations. The fact that cameras don’t discriminate, profile or favor certain drivers is also a plus. I support officers wearing them also.

**11) Ward issues**

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

The new 35th Ward captures Hermosa, Logan Square, Avondale, Irving Park and Albany Park. Each community has its distinct challenges and opportunities. Responsive city services, improved public safety and representing the interests of the ward are the basics. It is necessary to have a vision and goal for each neighborhood. Issues and priorities vary from neighborhood to neighborhood.

**Hermosa** is a working-class area that is improving, but more must be done to organize and involve residents and businesses in keeping the area safe and clean. There are gang issues and the commercial area on Armitage needs to be revitalized. There is a high concentration of faith-based institutions in Hermosa that will be a great resource for me moving forward.

I am working with the owners of Walt Disney’s Birthplace at 2156 N. Tripp to restore the home, landmark it, leverage youth programs for the community. My goal is to promote the Disney family history in Hermosa to make it a future destination and tourist attraction.

**Logan Square** and **Avondale** have become very popular in recent years. The growth in the local economy also presents a challenge of housing affordability. New development must leverage housing opportunities for our workforce. I have collaborated with the Metropolitan Planning Council MPC to facilitate a series of public "Imagineering" meetings; the Corridor Development Initiative (CDI).  <http://www.metroplanning.org/news/article/6974?utm_source=%2flogansquare&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=redirect> This participatory planning process allowed residents to explore the development of the city-owned Emmett Street Parking Lot at 2630 N. Emmett Street and the Logan Square CTA Blue Line station at Kedzie and Milwaukee Avenue. The input gathered is being incorporated into an RFP to create affordable housing, commercial options, open space, arts and entertainment venues.

I am committed to leading by example in eliminating the city’s inventory of property in my ward using it for the public’s benefit. The Mindful Living Garden <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=695b1c98-b066-426e-934c-f43490a00ea2&c=a8aa75b0-51b9-11e3-9c5b-d4ae527536d1&ch=aaa0ee80-51b9-11e3-9c6f-d4ae527536d1> is a small example of this with a long-lasting local benefit.

There are also opportunities for community exchanges. I have put successful Park Advisory Councils in contact with others who were not as organized or starting off. The sharing of resources and assistance from neighborhoods that are currently flourishing with others that are in need is important.

In **Irving Park**, the Independence Park Library is within the new 35th Ward boundary and has served the community for the last century from rented facilities. I have had many requests to support the creation of a plan for a new, Independence Park Library. I met with the City of Chicago's Budget Office, Department of Planning and Development, and State Elected Officials to dedicate the Irving Park TIF for this purpose and initiate the process of getting funds from the state for site acquisition.

**Albany Park** is truly one of Chicago's most eclectic neighborhoods. The whole world is represented in this community with more than 70 languages spoken in restaurants and shops from over 40 countries. Albany Park also has three stops on the CTA's bustling Brown Line.

Last year, I facilitated the inaugural Albany Park World Fest on Saturday & Sunday, August 16-17 at the busy intersection of Kimball (3400 W.) and Lawrence Avenue. I am currently working on coordinating a unique Community Market this summer. Like Logan Square 10-years ago, this community needs common gatherings places, organizing of organizations and image promotion. Albany Park needs to be nurtured and I believe will be the next “up and coming” neighborhood.