**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name: **Bita Buenrostro**

Ward: **2nd Ward**

Occupation: **Executive for Restaurant Management Corporation**

Education: **Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from North Park University**

Previous political and civic experience:

**I am proud to say that I have lived the American Dream. I am an immigrant who worked my way up, becoming a successful executive and community leader. I was born in Iran, my family migrated to Sweden as political refugees when I was 9. At the age of 19, I arrived in Chicago with $30 in my pocket and a full scholarship to North Park University. I studied Political Science and polished my skills at speaking 5 languages. While in school, I earned extra money waiting tables, and worked my way up in the corporation to be an executive today. In 2004, I proudly took the oath to become a United States Citizen. In 2006, I married my husband, Marcus, a Chicago Police Officer of 19 years.**

**I am so proud of my home here in Chicago, the city that welcomed me. I have started Neighborhood Watches and Block Watches in various neighborhoods. I have been a member of Chambers of Commerce and Merchants’ associations, I have participated in CAPS meetings.**

**You might have seen me cleaning streets and parks on the weekends, or supporting local charities with both time and money, or helping to place safety address signs on residents’ homes and garages.**

**I actively support St. Jude’s Children’s Research Hospital, the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, the Chicago Police Memorial Foundation, the Hope Institute for Children, the Wounded Warrior project, and the Lynn Sage Breast Cancer Program.**

**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:

**Lawrence Msall, President of the Civic Federation, has asked, "What happens if we don't get pension reform? Where will they come up with the $550 Million?" I agree that this "ticking time bomb" is the most important financial challenge that our city faces. The State of Illinois has taken legislative action to force our city to prepare for its financial obligations.**

**As the spouse of a union Chicago Police Officer, I clearly understand the pension situation. Pensions must be there, in full, for city workers. For our city workers and their families, I want to help find the best way to ensure that Chicago’s pension fund is funded at a reasonable level. Revenue will have to come from multiple sources.**

**Pensions for new employees are a different situation. COLAs for new employees should be more closely tied to the rate of inflation, similar to Social Security payments. New employees should be expected to contribute more to their pensions and healthcare.**

**I do not believe that unilaterally restructuring collectively bargained pensions and benefits is constitutional. Illinois courts have been quite clear in similar cases involving other such restructuring by other levels of government. All changes to pensions and pension plans must include organized labor "at the table” to avoid costly lawsuits.**

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?

**The restructuring of the pension systems has been challenged in court, and given the rulings that I referenced earlier, I am not optimistic that the restructuring will be upheld by Illinois courts. There are other streams of revenue besides a property tax increase that we should look at. We can broaden the sales tax by taxing services. We can carefully consider a city-licensed casino to boost revenue. I feel that during dire financial emergencies such as the one that we currently face we can also change our laws to reallocate the currently-held excess TIF funds to pay our bills. I do not support a property tax increase.**

**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?

**Our city government’s recent ‘interest rate swap’ activities affect CPS. Some articles show that the financial benefits of these activities are in question. Our city could recoup nearly $1 billion of lost revenue by filing for a 3rd party review under federal regulations. Moving forward, we should continue to review these policies. I commend the CTU for bringing these issues to light.**

**In addition to other sources of revenue generation described in Question #1 for fire and police pensions such as TIF fund reallocation, I feel that we can look at these interest rate swaps. If cuts and cost savings can be found with organized labor at the table, I would also support them, similar to what happened in the negotiations with the Park District labor unions.**

**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. I’d want to know the details of the tax rate and which services would be taxed.**

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

Yes or No:

**No.**

**This tax would do more the drive jobs out of the city than almost any other measure. Proponents of this tax imply that workers who come from the suburbs are of no economic benefit to the city. They already pay the higher Chicago sales tax on purchases they make, exorbitant parking taxes if they drive, higher gas taxes if they buy gas, higher taxes on tobacco if they smoke, and higher alcohol taxes if they socialize in the city.**

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

Yes or No:

**No**

**State law would need to be changed and I believe that is unlikely to happen. In addition, I believe that this brings a real danger of driving the trading exchanges out of our city.**

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:

**I am married to a decorated Chicago Police Officer of nineteen years. I know that our Chicago Police Department has been a force for good in neighborhoods across the city. Our police, in partnership with neighborhood groups and with residents have significantly reduced crime, even many types of violent crime, over the past two decades.**

**A trusted police force protects our families and respects the rights of everyone. Our police force continues to evolve to use the latest, best tactics, such as barring of chokeholds. Our police have started a task force to better address domestic violence calls and they and have recently increased the types of crimes that can be reported online. They are also protecting our transit infrastructure with minimally-disruptive explosive screenings. This type of innovation and flexible responsiveness should be encouraged and continued.**

**While the statistics are encouraging, they are of little comfort to those in neighborhoods plagued by crime, and Garry McCarthy has publicly acknowledged that shootings have increased in the past few years.**

**I feel that community involvement, including both residents and businesses can help to promote safety and security in our neighborhoods. Economic growth also helps to prevent crime. A boarded up storefront will never call the police, but a small business owner in that same location is likely to report criminal activity. I have started neighborhood watch programs, and I have provided almost 20,000 residents of the 2nd ward with window signs that tell criminals to stay away from this block, that "we call police." I have organized 'Positive Loitering' Events and I will help communities start "Block Watches." I will encourage our local citizens and business leaders to participate in mentoring programs at our local schools, churches, and community centers. I will also encourage citizens to attend CAPS meetings.**

**Even with community involvement, tactical and outreach innovation, and supporting legislation, it is clear to me that we need more "beat cops". I feel we should have more police available, on staff, rather than paying almost $100 million per year (2014) in overtime costs. Police presence keeps our homes and families safe.**

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

**Almost everyone agrees that in urban areas, illegal firearms present a problem. I support efforts to ensure that firearm dealers act responsibly, perform valid background checks, prevent straw purchases, and are good members of their community. I support mandatory minimum sentencing for the illegal use of a gun. I feel that "Universal Background Checks" should be required for purchases and stiff penalties should be imposed for failure to report theft or transfer of a firearm. I support a ban on automatic “Assault Weapons.” The City of Chicago cannot do this alone, supporting legislation must occur at the state and national level.**

**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:

**A school board with the correct balance of expert skill and public representation presents a complex challenge for our city. Similar to the ones implemented in New York City and in Washington D.C., and favorably reviewed, I support a Hybrid School Board, partially elected and partially appointed. This will require a change in State Law. This allows for mayoral appointees and a strong public voice.**

**Currently, 36 wards present an elected school board as a non-binding referendum on the ballot, although this is not the case in our 2nd Ward. If, however, the people of the City of Chicago show overwhelming support for an elected school board, I would support it.**

**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?

**More Transparency. Our taxpayers deserve to know how their money is spent. Decisions made by individual aldermen regarding allocation of TIF money to projects and developers should be more deliberative and open to public input.**

**In times of dire financial emergency, we should be able to sweep excess TIF funds into general revenue. I generally agree with Ald. Reilly's proposal to amend our TIF statute for more flexibility and to ensure that TIFs are shut down when they have achieved their stated, measurable goals. I also am happy to see that our city is beginning to return unspent TIF money back to the districts. I also would consider changing the law to lower the 23 year period for setting aside property tax growth.**

**I am generally against additional TIFs. If we must create them then they should be linked to measurable, specific goals. When those goals are met, the TIF should be disbanded. The city has done this sporadically in recent years.**

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

**The ward is diverse, it touches a manufacturing area (PMD) along the River.**

**The Finkl Steel site, near Goose Island, along with some other real estate there presents a great opportunity for economic growth in our 2nd Ward. I will build a coalition of residents and developers to ensure that the future use of that site is an economic benefit to our ward.**

**On the western side of our ward, Ukrainian Village is truly 'a village.' We have many small businesses including art galleries, hair salons, and neighborhood grocery stores. I will work to streamline licensing for these small businesses. Since the first year of life for a small business determines whether it survives or not, I will propose a plan to defer some licensing fees for 1st-year businesses. Our ward office will be active in licensing issues to minimize delays. I will work with businesses and residents to ensure thoughtful zoning that leads to economic growth.**

**One thought is to promote general tourism and hospitality of the City of Chicago. This industry is a large employer in the eastern portion of the 2nd Ward.**

**In general, the 2nd Ward has experienced and economic rebound relative to other areas of our city. According to city statistics, the western portion of the ward has experienced an increase in estimated value of building permits of nearly 300% since 2011. The near north portion of the ward has seen a 100% increase.**

**2nd ward residents walk, bike, and use public transit. Transportation enables commercial growth by helping employees and helping patrons get to where they need to go, whether it is to a job in the 2nd Ward or to an office in the loop. I generally support Public Transportation, and will consider requesting CTA to restore the #11 Lincoln Bus route.**

**I will also ensure that our 2nd ward residents have access to Job Fairs. Since vacant storefronts are good for no one, I will compile an inventory of vacant stores to help prospective merchants and small businesses find the best possible location.**

**I intend to work directly with the Wicker Park and Bucktown Chamber of Commerce, Magnificent Mile Association, and the Chicago Loop Alliance to help our businesses be a strong part of our community. A thriving small-business community will not only bring jobs, but it will help to beautify our ward.**

**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?

**Our 2nd ward is, geographically, one of the most distributed wards in the city. To be a successful alderman of the 2nd Ward, I am currently planning the most efficient way to provide first-class service to five different diverse neighborhoods.**

**Chicago is historically a city where the alderman manages city services for residents. Though modern technology such as 311 and the "Chicago Works" app can streamline city services and lower costs, many residents of the 2nd ward are not "tech-savvy" and will expect service from their alderman's office.**

**I am not fundamentally opposed to a reduction in the number of alderman, and I will consider it, but based on my experience with our campaign and planning to provide service to nearly 60,000 residents, I feel that concentrating power and responsibility into fewer aldermen is not the best plan. I do not believe that a change in the current number of aldermen is in the best interest of the 2nd Ward or of the City of Chicago.**

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

Yes or No: **Yes**

Please explain:

**Studies show that a casino could bring up to $1.2 billion in initial fees from licenses and an ongoing revenue of $270 million per year. The process to license and build such a casino must be transparent to the public and properly regulated. It is an option that we should investigate.**

**Revenue from a casino is no panacea and it will not solve all of our city’s fiscal problems, but it will bring some financial relief.**

**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:
**After speaking with residents in our ward, overwhelmingly, we have heard negative reports about cameras. The process to contest these tickets seems unfair. Recent press reports state that repair staff "were directed to keep the systems operational rather than ensuring that the equipment function accurately." This indicates that the camera system was used as a revenue generator rather than to promote safety. Some audits have led to questions about the initial placement of the cameras: whether they were placed into documented dangerous intersections. On the other hand, Red Light Cameras may increase safety and promote safer driving, especially around schools and high pedestrian areas.**

**I would like to see an increase in the minimum yellow light time to a standard 4 seconds. I would like cameras to be "shut down" when roads are wet, slick, or under construction. I do not support an increase in the total number of cameras.**

**I am happy to see that Xerox has worked with our city to make oversight of the program easier and I think that we should continue down this path. I think that where negligence has been clearly proven, the city should provide refunds to recipients of tickets.**

**In short, I would return the program to its stated goal of safety, not revenue.**

**11) Ward issues**

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

* **People of the 2nd Ward and Chicago have good-paying jobs and we foster Economic Development. In our 2nd Ward, zoning at the Finkl steel site presents a great opportunity, and we need to ensure that its development results an economic driver for our ward and for the city. I also know that in the Gold Coast, we need to promote tourism and hospitality while promoting small businesses and merchants throughout the ward with a focus on small businesses in the tightly-knit community in the Ukrainian Village.**
* **Public Safety is a city service, we need more beat cops on the street in the 2nd Ward. People of the 2nd Ward receive their fair share of city services, including local school funding and efficient and effective service from all city departments.**
* **City of Chicago to become more fiscally responsible.
We are facing the ‘Pension Cliff’ in 2016. In the past we have used one-time windfalls to cover budget gaps. I would like to see our budget move toward a sustainable plan with controlled spending and find new ways to achieve revenue without raising taxes. I would also like to minimize TIFs and make the entire financial situation of the city much more transparent to voters and to the press.**