**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name: **Tara Stamps**

Ward: **37th**

Occupation: **Teacher at Jenner Elementary School**.

Education: **I hold a B.A. from Central State University and two master’s degrees in education.**

Previous political and civic experience:

**I am a dedicated community leader and lifelong Chicagoan who has spent the past twenty years working for strong neighborhood schools, good jobs, and civil rights on the West Side of Chicago.**

**I am the proud mother of an adult daughter, Naajidaah, and two boys, Nazareth and Naahylee, as well as grandmother to 3-year-old Nikosi. I am an alumna of Chicago Public Schools and the founding director of In the Company of Sisters, a theater company dedicated to lifting up the voices of African-American women. I hold a B.A. from Central State University and two master’s degrees in education.**

**I was first inspired to become a community leader by my mother, the late Civil Rights activist Marion Stamps, who fought tirelessly for racial equity and affordable housing in Chicago. Following in my mother's footsteps, I have consistently fought for living wages, economic justice, and fairness in the workplace for all Chicagoans.**

**For almost twenty years, I have been a committed and decorated classroom teacher. I began my teaching career in the 37th Ward at Leslie Lewis Elementary and currently teach fifth grade at Jenner Elementary School. I am a staunch advocate for public schools, a leader with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), and coordinating secretary for the CTU’s Black Caucus.**

**I also sat on the Board of the Near North Health Service Corporation for ten years, which has locations in both the near north and west side communities, and where I supported their programming to care for families, including those affected by community violence.**

**In 2013, I organized parents, students, teachers and community members to oppose the closing of 50 schools in Black and Brown communities. When elected officials turned their backs on our families and schools committees, I decided to run for Alderman.**

**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:

**My position is that the City of Chicago has both a moral and legal responsibility to meet its pension obligations. Not only did the city’s firefighters, police officers, and teachers accept lower pay relative to the private sector for years in exchange for the security of a defined benefit pension, but these retirees make up a critical dimension of the City’s economic base. Their pension income, which comes in lieu of social security, creates jobs and supports businesses in many neighborhoods that are already economically depressed. Reducing their modest pension income would cause some retirees to lose their homes or to relocate voluntarily, further depressing these neighborhoods and their local economies. I have stated elsewhere in this survey that the answer to meeting these challenges cannot be more cuts. Chicago’s working families cannot afford any more reductions to vital social services that they depend on for survival and opportunity. The City has no choice but to find additional revenues to satisfy its pension obligations and fund the critical and quality services Chicago’s citizens deserve.**

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 support raising revenues through property taxes under the condition that we have exhausted the possibility of raising revenues through other more progressive taxation schemes like a financial transactions tax, a city income tax, a commuter tax, TIF reform and adding more progressivity to the state income tax. As I have said before, I believe that the City of Chicago has a moral and legal responsibility to honor its pension obligations to municipal workers, and but for years of mismanagement and evasion, would be in much better position to do so. The solution to this largely self-inflicted problem cannot be benefit cuts for fixed income retirees, many of whom still live in Chicago and comprise the economic base of the City’s neighborhoods. That said, property taxes are arguably the most punitive of taxes at our disposal, particularly in terms of working class Chicagoans, because property values tend to rise so much faster than income. The reason we can’t afford to take property taxes off the table entirely is because it is the revenue source that the City of Chicago has the most control over, with the possible exception of TIF reform. All the other proposed schemes, while certainly preferable, will require some cooperation from Springfield. As Alderman, my first priority would be to build the political will in Chicago and the rest of Illinois to make these far more desirable revenue schemes a reality.**

**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?

**As a veteran classroom teacher with a strong record of helping low-income students achieve reading and math proficiency, I have deep appreciation for the dedicated teachers, students, and parents that have worked together to improve CPS graduation rates. Yet my experience still tells me that the City’s current education policy is failing too many Chicago families. CPS’s financial challenges are well-documented, however the public narrative has ignored the poor choices that are responsible. Despite having the fifth largest GDP in the United States, the state’s leadership chooses for Illinois to be 33rd in terms of public education expenditures. Instead of spending every available local property tax dollar on public education, the City’s leadership chooses to funnel millions of dollars through unaccountable TIF districts right into the hands of downtown developers. Instead of being fiscally responsible by meeting yearly pension obligations and prudently managing its public debt, the City’s leadership chooses to punt its obligations down the road and fund operations with risky loans and costly toxic swaps. And instead of investing in strong neighborhood schools with quality wraparound services, the Mayor chooses to throw money at charter schools which are less accountable, often corrupt and according to recent studies, lower-performing than traditional public schools .**

**During the CTU strike, teachers argued that if the Mayor wanted a longer day, he needed to provide the resources for a better day. Despite promises to the contrary, teachers, students, and parents woke up to a doomsday scenario of school closings, turnarounds, teacher lay-offs, budget cuts, and privatized charter scandals. 37th Ward schools saw their budgets cut by $3.3 million in FY 2015; cuts on top of the previous year’s which left the 37th Ward with 4 schools with no art teachers, 10 schools with no librarian, and 13 schools with no one to teach computer education. That’s why at my school, Cabrini Green’s Jenner Elementary, we successfully organized against the Mayor’s proposal to shut us down. We knew closing buildings never taught a kid to read or put food in their belly at night.**

**Creating strong neighborhood schools, which the majority of Chicago parents favor, isn’t rocket science. It requires controlling class sizes, providing rich extracurricular activities and robust wraparound services like counselors, social workers, and nurses, directing more resources to most disadvantaged students, quality and universal early education, respecting and developing teachers as professionals and partners, kept facilities, parental involvement, and most critically, full funding. Since CPS is moving in the opposite direction of these common sense proposals it is time for an Elected Representative School Board to return accountability to education policy in this City. We need a moratorium on charter schools until we can add enough accountability measures to prevent the next UNO or FBI raid of a Concept School. And we need to move forward on the revenue proposals that will allow us to do right by Chicago’s future, our students and Chicago’s present, the thousands of dedicated education professionals and hardworking parents that are Chicago’s backbone.**

**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: **No**

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

Yes or No: **Yes**

\* 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.

**Additional revenues should come through a combination of a financial transactions tax, often called the LaSalle street tax, a commuter’s tax, a progressive city income tax and finally returning a percentage of TIF surpluses to taxing bodies. Chicago’s elected leadership must also lead a statewide coalition to add progressivity to Illinois’ state income tax which currently advantages the wealthy. Though detractors attempt to scare the public with predictions of capital flight, economic collapse, and the specter of Detroit if these reforms are implemented, the reality is that Chicago has a GDP greater than $500 billion. If the City’s leadership can find a way to raise an additional half percent of that GDP in revenues on an annual basis, it will be able to solve its pension crisis, fill its budget holes, and improve services across the board. Chicago has many wonderful attributes that make it a World Class city, but Chicago won’t realize its full potential until it makes a real commitment to serving the needs of every resident and every neighborhood.**

**To make that happen, we need visionary leadership that actually believes in a Chicago that has something to offer businesses and affluent citizens other than subsidies and tax breaks. Because if we do, then we shouldn’t feel ashamed to ask those individuals and corporations that benefit the most to contribute a little more to the public good so that we can ensure all our seniors retire with dignity, all our children are educated, all our streets are safe, and all our neighborhoods are vibrant. All of my proposed revenue schemes are progressive, lucrative and achievable and none of them would reduce Chicago’s competiveness to comparable cities like New York. Sales taxes are typically regressive, and I would only support expanding sales taxes to the extent all other possibilities were exhausted.**

**4) Crime**

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

Yes or No: **Yes**

Please explain:

**First and foremost, I believe that we must invest in comprehensive solutions to violence that deal with the root causes of criminal activity. It is no coincidence that the city’s most violent neighborhoods—including parts of the 37th Ward—are also those hit hardest by disinvestment. I support public investment in good jobs and increasing year-round access to wrap-around services for at-risk youth, particularly in the neighborhoods hit hardest by blight and unemployment.**

**I support measures that break the cycle of violence and incarceration, including job training and re-entry programs for formerly incarcerated people, increasing access to juvenile expungement, and expanding restorative justice approaches within our education and criminal justice systems.**

**Regarding the Chicago Police Department, I believe that the Mayor’s policies have damaged relationships between police and the communities they serve. Mayor Emanuel’s focus on “Broken Windows” policing, which disproportionately targets Black and Latino men for minor offenses, has made it more difficult for police to build the relationships necessary to acquire information on major criminal activity. His decriminalization policies have failed to make a dent in real and perceived racial disproportionality in drug arrests. An overreliance on police overtime has put exhausted and traumatized officers on the streets. More police must be accompanied by reform to these broken policies. Lingering questions about how the city reports homicides, how to address the legacy and continued effects of police torture, and the CPD’s defense of a commander facing multiple brutality complaints have further eroded trust. The failures of these policies are particularly pressing in this moment, with cases of police violence against unarmed Black men in Missouri and New York drawing national attention.**

**We must prioritize comprehensive, community-based solutions to violence that foster trust and collective responsibility, and do not contribute to a cycle of disinvestment and criminalization. In my own community, I have worked to build greater safety in several ways. First, as an elementary school teacher, I have dedicated my life to supporting and nurturing at-risk youth both in the classroom and through extracurricular activities. Additionally, I am providing for my adoptive brother, who is formerly incarcerated, and I am working with him to make sure he can find a job, get back on his feet, and become the part of the fabric of the community once more. I also sat on the Board of the Near North Health Service Corporation for ten years, which has locations in both the near north and west side communities, and where I supported their programming to care for families, including those affected by community violence.**

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

**I would support the Governor Quinn’s Illinois Public Safety Act as a good first step on curbing illegal guns. I would not support Mayor Emanuel’s mandatory minimum bill, because it would exacerbate the incarceration crisis in black and brown communities without dealing with root causes of gun violence, like poverty and disinvestment.**

**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:

**As a CTU member I am a staunch advocate for an Elected Representative School Board and I collected signatures to ensure that the initiative made the ballot in the 37th Ward. Having lived through the last 15 years of completely unaccountable leadership at the Board of Education, culminating in the closing of 50 schools against the wishes of the public, I am more convinced than ever that democratic representation is needed if we are to have the type of schools we deserve. The recent revelations about the Board of Education’s irresponsible financial dealings have only re-enforced the need for democratic participation and oversight. The fact that Chicago Public Schools is the only school system in the state of Illinois without an ERSB speaks to the urgency of the policy change.**

**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?

**The city’s TIF program has become increasingly unaccountable over the years. Contrary to its promise as a source of development dollars for blighted neighborhoods, recent empirical and anecdotal evidence clearly demonstrate that TIF funds have disproportionately flowed downtown to subsidize development projects; many of which arguably would have been built without the subsidies. For example, between 2004 and 2008 $1.56 Billion out of $2.45 Billion TIF dollars went to the Loop, Near North Side, Near South Side, and Near West Side. While there may have been a justification for redevelopment of these areas, it is clear that now they are in position to benefit from market based development. Currently over $500 million a year paid to taxing bodies that fund public services like parks and schools are being funneled into TIF districts. This is occurring at the same time park and library hours are being cut and schools are being closed.**

**All of this might not be so troubling if there was evidence that TIF projects created equitable employment opportunities. But a recent study by the Grassroots Collaborative suggests that permanent employment gains are also concentrated amongst white collar downtown dwellers and suburbanites and that the city’s working class citizens have largely missed out on permanent TIF related job growth. Today there is an estimated $1.4 billion sitting in TIF districts and the City of Chicago needs those resources to provide adequate public services to communities across the City.**

**Therefore to reform the TIF program, I join others in proposing that a fixed formula be used to declare a portion of all downtown TIF money a surplus to be returned to the local taxing bodies and that a “Robin-Hood Porting” measure be created to divert TIF dollars in prosperous neighborhoods to ones truly suffering from urban blight. There are important projects that still need to be funded to improve communities and stimulate employment both during and post construction. We just need to make sure that TIF dollars marked for development go to where we need them most.**

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

**The 37th Ward is comprised of three economically depressed neighborhoods, Austin, West Garfield Park and West Humboldt Park. In Austin unemployment is 26% and the poverty rate is 36%. These numbers are reminiscent of the Great Depression. However unlike the Great Depression, the political responses to the conditions in these communities have been at best ineffective and at worst, non-existent. What the residents of the 37th Ward need first and foremost are good jobs with good wages. The first step is turning low-paying jobs into well-paying jobs by raising the minimum wage to a living wage. Given the relative growth in low-wage jobs in health care, food service, and retail, overnight this would bring millions of dollars of disposable income into the 37th Ward, attracting more businesses, both small and large, to the Ward. In practice this would mean advocating for a living wage ordinance and supporting labor’s efforts to organize these industries.**

**The second component of bringing more economic development to the 37th Ward is reducing its persistently high unemployment rate. This would require a city-wide policy anchored by the restoration of public services like public education and public safety to pre-austerity levels and a public works programs targeting other critical community needs such as childcare services, community beautification, and green restoration. Assuming an adequate revenue base secured via several new sources, these public works programs could be designed to rapidly reduce unemployment in the City’s most disadvantaged zip codes, including the 37th Ward. By producing residents with disposable income, this program also incentivizes private investment in the Ward without the need for direct subsidies.**

**To help 37th Ward residents take advantage, I would support efforts to eliminate red tape and provide support services and access to capital for local entrepreneurs seeking to satisfy the new consumer demand. In terms of private sector incentives, I would advocate that any public-assisted private development be required to meet local hiring benchmarks in the construction and post-construction phase, and I would only support public subsidization of industries or events that could provide good jobs for broad cross-sections of the City’s residents. I would also work with 37th Ward community organizations to draft Community Benefits Agreements to hold private developers accountable for bringing good jobs and other resources to communities in exchange for public assistance.**

**By focusing on jobs first and then private development, I would reduce the possibility of today’s 37th Ward residents being forced out of the community by development-driven gentrification, which has been the norm. To date I have helped spur economic development in the 37th Ward, by first teaching in the Ward at Leslie Lewis Elementary and helping my students acquire skills necessary to compete in the local economy and secondly by purchasing a home in the Ward and consistently patronizing businesses in my community including those of some of my former students at Lewis. As a rank and file activist with the Chicago Teachers Union I have also been on the frontlines of the Fight for Fifteen and restoring funding for Career and Technical Education programs to CPS.**

**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 don’t think Chicago should reduce the number of aldermen, because I tend to think more democracy is a good thing all else being equal. I am not familiar with any evidence that suggests eliminating wards and reducing representation will increase the influence of everyday Chicagoans in City Hall. In fact the real problem is not too many aldermen, but too little aldermanic dissent to the Mayor’s regressive policies. Therefore structural reforms should focus on making it easier for independent-thinking non-incumbents to wage viable campaigns challenging the “rubber-stamp” orthodoxy that dominates the City Council today. Such reforms would include a public campaign finance program**.

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

Yes or No: **No**

Please explain:

**In my estimation, casinos equate to regressive taxation of the poor. As I discussed previously, there are several far more progressive taxation schemes available, and those options should be pursued prior to 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: **No**

**Please explain:**

**Chicago’s traffic light camera program is just one example of backwards thinking on revenues and services. Faced with real fiscal challenges, Mayor Emanuel, who touts his record as a tough decision-maker, has consistently made the cowardly decision; to cut services and raise costs for the city’s most economically vulnerable residents while rejecting sustainable and progressive revenue sources that might impact the affluent. While one would expect the alderman of a ward with upwards of 25% unemployment and 35% poverty rates to lead the fight against these regressive taxes, 37th Ward Alderman Emma Mitts happily supported both Mayor Daley’s red light camera policy and Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s speed light camera policy.**

**Both policies have been mired in scandal and lawsuits since their inception, and Mayor Emanuel’s recent decision to not refund close to $8 million dollars suctioned from Chicago’s motorists by abbreviated yellow lights only re-enforces the predatory aspect of the program. When combined with the perception that cameras have disproportionately targeted Black and Brown neighborhoods and a recent study that shows these cameras do not improve traffic safety, this latest decision not only hurts Chicagoans but further erodes faith in civic institutions. What we need are not conspiracy theories and show hearings, but real legislation to eliminate these cameras and replace them with less exploitive and more effective traffic safety measures. Finally, City Council must use this opportunity to advance real revenue reform so that these nickel and dime tactics become a thing of the past.**

**11) Ward issues**

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

**My highest priorities for improving the 37th Ward are the same priorities I have for improving Chicago: finding comprehensive solutions for public safety, spurring job creation and equitable economic development, and promoting strong neighborhood schools that provide a full range of wraparound services to students and the communities. Beyond these three main issues, I find that residents of the 37th Ward are fed up with the continued nickel and diming of city residents, the unequal and biased delivery of city services from the current Alderman’s office, and a lack of basic amenities like restaurants, pharmacies and grocery stores in the Ward. These issues are what I talk about the most on the campaign trail.**