Name: Michael E. Hastings

District running for: 19th Legislative District

Political party: Democratic

Political/civic background: Vice President, High School District #230 (Andrew, Sandburg, & Stagg High Schools); Former U.S. Army Captain, Bronze Star Recipient

Occupation: Attorney & Illinois State Senator

Education: B.S., United States Military Academy at West Point; M.B.A. w/ Honors, University of Illinois; J.D., The John Marshall Law School

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Chicago Sun-Times Editorial Board questionnaire responses

Taxes/Budget:

Q. Illinois has a massive state debt and crushing pension debt. Many elected officials from the governor to state lawmakers have indicated there is a need for additional revenue to help balance the budget. If Illinois needs to generate additional revenue, which options would you support in a budget package:

1. Increase the state’s income tax on individuals or corporations, either temporarily or permanently.

2. Expand the sales tax to services.

3. Tax retirement income in excess of $50,000.

4. Adopt a progressive income tax.

If you oppose all tax hikes, please provide specifics on how you would reduce state spending by $7 billion to balance the state budget.

A) Our state’s economic woes have been caused by poor decisions of legislators for decades. The upcoming generations have a lot of work to do to ensure our fiscal solvency. I believe that we need to explore various revenue streams along with reductions in state spending in order to balance the budget.

Some revenue options that I believe should be on the table are a “fair” or “progressive” income tax. Illinois places too much of its burden on the middle class and the poor. I also support a millionaire’s tax, which gained more votes from the people of Illinois than the Governor did in the past election. The state also has the opportunity to close numerous loopholes that we give to corporations. According to my estimates, we could gain an additional half billion dollars more alone from this.

Through government efficiencies, we have the ability to save as well. Majority of our IT infrastructure and the way we operate as a government costs our money. Investing in modern technology so government agencies can interface with state providers can eliminate the costs we incur.

Q) Do you support another legislative attempt at pension reform? If so, which proposed changes in the pension system would you support that you believe would pass constitutional muster?

First, I believe that it is unconscionable to change benefits to those who paid into the system and to those who have already retired with a pension. Those who have been living on their retirement planned for their retirement based on a promise made by the state.

However, we have serious problems when it comes to funding these pensions. There are a few reforms that I would like to be debated over the next four years in office. First is revisiting elements from Senate Bill 2404, which was an agreed upon pension reform by majority of labor organizations. It gives employees various choices in the pension plan. We should also revisit the way we assume our rates of return on our investments coupled with a “refinancing” to our pension payment schedule.

We should also explore new ways of providing long term financial planning for those who have not entered into the pension system. Last, we should eliminate pensions for any new members to the General Assembly.

Q) Do you support a budget template developed by a bipartisan, bicameral group of legislators that would allow members to pass a budget without the consent of the legislative leaders?

A) It is an embarrassment that we have not passed a budget this year, and I am open to any solutions to bring compromise to the budget process.

Education:

Q) What, if anything, should we do to change how we fund schools?

A) I voted for Senate Bill 318 which would temporarily freeze property taxes for two years while creating a panel of bipartisan lawmakers to construct a new system of funding public education. The goal is twofold, to find more money for education funding and ensuring that it is spent equitably across the state. However, the property taxes that are paid in the south suburbs are disproportionate to the City of Chicago. I refuse to balance the checkbook of our state’s education system on the backs of suburban property tax payers. Property tax reform must be a part of education funding reform.

Q) Do you favor the state picking up the pension costs for Chicago teachers, as the state does for teachers outside Chicago? Do you favor school districts outside Chicago picking up their own pension costs, as Chicago does now?

A) I am strongly against shifting pension costs to local school districts, especially in the south suburbs. This shift would again balance our pension problem on the backs of suburban taxpayers. Moreover, it would force property tax hikes across the south suburbs. That, I can assure you, I am against.

Q) State support for public higher education has declined for two decades. Do you favor the status quo or a significant increase in state funding? What is your plan to restore Illinois’ leadership in public higher education?

A) We should fund education adequately at all levels. I have always held the belief that investing in our children’s future will pay dividends for us in Illinois. Our economy has the ability to grow when we have a well-educated workforce.

We also should be cognizant of the cost of education to college students. With the rising cost of college and the debt that students incur, we hinder rather than help our students. I have the honor to represent Governor’s State University, Moraine Valley Community College and Prairie State College. All of these institutions provide a top-tier education at an affordable price. However, we have a population of students that receive MAP grants along with other subsidies. Currently these students are held hostage as a part of an overall budget negotiation. Ending this practice and focusing on our future leaders would most definitely restore some of our leadership in higher education.

Transportation:

Q) Illinois has a tremendous backlog of infrastructure needs: roads, bridges, waterways, transit. What would be a good way to pay for it? Do you support an increased gas tax — and/or other taxes and fees — to finance infrastructure improvements, including public transit?

A) For the last three years in the south suburbs, we have had over $200,000,000 invested into our local infrastructure. However, that was due to neglect for the past twenty years to our local roads, bridges and waterway transit. Projects like the I-294 & I-57 interchange and the South Suburban Airport are projects that we badly needed. We must continue to rebuild the south suburbs.

However, we cannot truly rebuild the south suburbs or the state until we get our financial house in order. We must be fiscally responsible with the money that we have set aside for infrastructure improvements. Sweeping funds as a measure to keep the state afloat should only be used as an emergency measure, not as a matter of fiscal practice. With sound budgeting and fiscal responsibility, we will be able to ensure that financing our infrastructure improvements is something we can plan for not do only in emergency situations.

Q) Illinois’ public transportation formula provides money for operating costs, but not capital costs. Should Illinois create a reliable funding stream for capital costs?

Jobs:

Q) Illinois has long been a strong manufacturing state. Today, Illinois employs fewer than 600,000 manufacturing workers and manufacturing’s share of the Gross State Product has dropped to 12.4 percent. Our state saw the loss of nearly 10,000 manufacturing jobs in 2015 and announcements from some high-profile companies of job losses. The average manufacturing job pays more than $70,000 and helps create a strong middle class. Name the top three things that you would do to help attract and retain manufacturing jobs in Illinois.

A) I am proud to represent one of Illinois largest manufacturing companies. They are proud to operate here in Illinois for many reasons. First, Illinois has an educated workforce. We have learning institutions like University of Chicago, Northwestern, University of Illinois among many, many others. Second, we have access to major transportation networks. The south suburbs in particular, we have I-80, I-57, I-294 and I-355; countless rail hubs and intermodals. Third, we have great communities to raise a family. From Matteson to Markham to Tinley Park and New Lenox, residents can raise a family in a safe environment.

However, in order to keep great manufacturing companies and draw more here they need stability in our state government. Holding certain parts of state hostage for budget negotiations is unacceptable. We need to fix our budget related problems and those externalities that could have an effect on our budget. Moreover, we need to reduce our unnecessary regulatory burdens. There are so many levels of governments and licensing requirements that burden business owners, we need to streamline and make them more user-friendly.

Energy:

Q) Illinois has a very diverse energy portfolio and is a net exporter of energy in a deregulated marketplace. Energy is poised to be major issue in 2016 because of federal regulations and possible changes in Illinois’ energy portfolio. Nuclear energy emits zero carbon emissions at a time when the new federal rule requires Illinois to reduce carbon emissions by 44 percent. Do you support or oppose legislation backed by Exelon to create a low-carbon portfolio standard?

A) I sponsored the Clean Jobs Bill, and am open to learning more about the Exelon bill as part of a larger solution that prioritizes taxpayer savings and renewable energy.

Q) Illinois’ current Renewable Portfolio Standard calls for Illinois to procure a certain percentage of renewable power by the year 2020. The state is only halfway to its goal, and there is a proposal to increase the required amount of renewable energy and extending the time period to meet that goal. Do you support or oppose increasing Illinois Renewable Portfolio Standard even if the cost of power increases slightly? Do you support or oppose the Illinois Clean Jobs bill?

A) I am a proud sponsor of the Clean Jobs bill and was named an Environmental Champion by the Illinois Environmental Council. Through the Clean Jobs Bill we have the ability not only to reduce our carbon footprint, but update our modern energy grid so that we are not solely dependent on a single energy source. The Clean Jobs Bill also will lower energy costs, make our planet healthier for future generations along with creating over 32,000 jobs across Illinois.

Q) Illinois has to reduce carbon emissions by 44 percent under the federal rule. Do you support creation of either a cap-and-trade program or a carbon tax to help mitigate carbon emissions in Illinois?

A) I support the Illinois EPA developing a mass-based cap and invest market. We have the ability as a state to partner with other states in the region to create a multi-state market for carbon pollution. We can benefit by both gaining access to new buyers for our clean energy sources and to potentially less expensive clean energy solutions for our electricity customers as well.

Gun safety:

Q) Do you support tighter gun background check laws? Do you support limiting straw gun purchases?

A) Illegal guns and gun violence is tearing our communities apart, our families deserve to feel safe in their neighborhoods. We need smart and effective gun laws that are able to get guns away from those that commit crimes, not responsible gun owners. I support background check laws and limiting straw gun purchases.

Q) Do you support or oppose state licensing for all firearms dealers?

A) Support. We need to ensure that all dealers of firearms are properly vetted to ensure that criminals and other restricted citizens do not get ahold of guns. Licensing will allow for this.

Q) Do you support or oppose allowing families to petition the courts to temporarily remove guns from people in crisis?

A) I support in certain situations. I also support more funding for mental health services which would help those who commit gun violence due to mental illness.

Criminal justice:

Q) Do you support or oppose legislation to promote the transparency and preservation of police disciplinary records?

A) I served for 10 years in the military, we had personnel files on all of our soldiers and for serious disciplinary records, we kept them on file permanently. I would support legislation that promoted transparency and preservation of these files. However, I am a leader who includes all stakeholders. I would work with policing agencies across the State of Illinois that would provide the greatest transparency without hindering the public safety in our communities.

Q) Do you support the goal of reducing the Illinois adult prison population by 25% by 2025? Would you support sentencing reform such as reducing or eliminating prison terms for non-violent drug offenses? Would you support early release of aged and disabled prisoners predicated on an assessment of risk to public safety prior to release?

A) First, our prison system has been inundated with prisoners who have serious mental health problems and developmental disabilities. The reason they are in prison is primarily due to the fact that they were not able to get treatment from community service providers, or through poor decision making for which the State of Illinois deemed that it was not necessary to treat them. We should focus on investing in mental health treatment to this population. The majority of the mentally ill in our prison would not be in there if they were to get the proper treatment.

Second, regarding the release of non-violent drug offenders, anytime we release anyone from the prison system we need to focus on public safety. I am fully cognizant of the fact that releasing prisoners can save the State of Illinois money, but I will not support the release of the prison population if it puts lives at risk. If and when we do find that some prisoners are not a threat to society, we should focus on successfully re-integrating them back into society. The majority of prisoners who leave the system end up back in the system. This may partly be due to a lack of effort on the prisoners part, but also due to the state’s lack of providing resources to integrate back into society.

Q) Do you support automatic expungement and sealing of criminal records for all crimes after an appropriate period during which the former offender commits no crimes?

A) This a very broad question, I would need more specifics. I would generally support expungement of criminal records for various misdemeanor and non-violent crimes.

Q) Given that there are more empty beds than youth now in the juvenile prisons, do you support closing one or more juvenile prisons?

A) Yes.

Q) What is your view on a proposal to end the placement of juveniles on the state’s sex offender registry based on assessment of their risk and likelihood to reoffend and/or benefit from treatment? For adult sex offenders, what is your view on delivery of rehabilitation therapy and limiting sex offender registry restrictions only to those men and women assessed to pose a danger to others?

A) The primary focus should be on public’s safety.

Q) Do you support a form of merit selection of judges?

A) A merit selection of judges takes place through the various legal associations and bar associations who evaluate judicial candidates. I believe a merit selection of judges is subject to your typical “political insider” deals. The voting electorate is educated enough to do their research on the judicial candidates and vote for them. They also have the ability to vote them out of office as well.

Other:

Q) Do you support the pending constitutional amendment to create an independent commission to draw legislative districts?

A) No.

Q) What changes in workers’ compensation or tort reform do you favor?

A) In 2011, the Illinois Legislature passed a comprehensive worker’s compensation package. Medical payments fell nearly 15% and Illinois average payment is lower than Indiana’s. Moving forward into the upcoming years, I am committed to working with both sides on this issue to ensure that our state is competitive against other states. Moreover, I am committed to making Illinois a state where companies want to do business.

Q) Do you support or oppose automatic voter registration?

A) I support it. One of the main issues I hear from voters is the fact that some people do not know how or where to register. A “motor voter” law to allow for those that are getting driver’s licences to be automatically registered to vote would help people get more involved in the election process. Through this law, we also allow for voters to have the ability to opt-out of the process if they choose to do so.

Q) What sort of ethics and campaign-funding reforms does the state need?

A) It is unfortunate that billionaires can spend their money to buy elections. Eliminating big money from politics should be a focus. We can start by mandating a disclosure of funding sources used by non-for-profit organizations to include the expenditures they make on behalf of candidates. We also need to extend the rules that are applicable to state PACs to super PACs who very rarely disclose their information.

We should also enact tougher “revolving door” laws. I support a one year “cooling off” period between a legislator and staff member resigning and taking a lobbying job.

Q) 2016 is going to be a big year in education, as both state and the City of Chicago wrestle with fundamental issues of funding and school policy. Who was the most important teacher in your life and why?

A) The most important teacher in my life would be my mother. My mother raised six children, three boys and three girls. She taught me values to respect others, give back to the community, and be a voice for the voiceless. Moreover, she taught me to choose the harder right over the easier wrong and to be relentless in pursuing my dreams. Both of my parents worked countless jobs to support our family and to ensure we had a better life than them. That is why I am running for the Illinois State Senate. I want to ensure that our future for the residents in our state is better than it currently is.