

2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: William D. "Will" Burns

Ward: Fourth Ward

Occupation: Alderman

Education: BA University of Chicago 1995 and MA University of Chicago 1998

Previous political and civic experience:

Illinois State Representative 2009-2011

Deputy Political Director, Quinn for Illinois 2010

Vice President, Conlon Public Strategies 2007-2009

Content and Issues Department, Obama for America 2008

Deputy Chief of Staff to the Senate President 2005-2007

Senior Advisor to the Senate President 2003-2005

Vice President, Chicago Urban League 2001-2003

Education and Tax Policy Manager, Metropolitan Planning Council 2000-2001

Deputy Campaign Manager, Obama for Congress 2000, 1999-2000

Staff Analyst, Office of the Senate Minority Leader, 1998-1999

Campaign Coordinator, Democratic Party of Illinois 1998

Community Outreach Coordinator, State Senator Barack Obama 1996-1998

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: Yes

A multi-pronged approach is necessary to put Chicago's police and fire pension funds on firm footing. First, the city must commit the revenue necessary to allow the systems to meet their obligations. Given recent court decisions, the city and the annuitants must come to an agreement regarding reduction of benefits for current and future pension fund participants.

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?

As I mentioned above, revenue will be a part of the solution to the pension funding crisis, but the revenue must be part of an agreement where benefits are reduced to preserve the defined benefit program.

I think it's quite important all feasible revenue options be evaluated before raising property taxes, because the property tax is not related to a person's ability to pay.

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 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) suffers because of the on-going crisis in education funding at the state level. For too many years the portion of funding for public schools in Illinois that comes from the state has consistently ranked at 49 of the 50 states. The lack of state support creates additional budgetary pressures for CPS. It should also be noted that the State of Illinois is solely responsible for the downstate Teachers Retirement System (TRS) and consistently underfunds the Chicago Teachers Pension Fund (CTPF). Even if the State restored its full contribution to CTPF, CPS and the Chicago Teachers Union will also need to agree to pension reform plan that would include a reduction in pension benefits for current annuitants.

As a state representative, I supported higher income tax rates to fund important state services including education. I hope that the Legislature will seriously consider the impact of reducing the current income tax rate on public education.

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, if the services are more likely used by upper income people. We should avoid taxing services used by moderate income folks.

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

Yes or No: Open to considering

* A tax on electronic financial transactions on Chicago's trading exchanges, known as the "LaSalle Street tax"

Yes or No: Open to considering

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

There is no such thing as the perfect tax. Every tax involves a trade off. The property tax is resilient to downturns in the economy, yet it is unfair to people with low incomes. The income tax can be more aligned to a person's ability to pay, but is far less resilient to recessions than the property tax. A value added tax is less transparent than a property tax.

The concept of a commuter tax is attractive because it implies no additional tax burden on Chicago residents. But it is not a realistic revenue source, because it requires legislators from the suburbs to authorize a tax on their constituents that their constituents do not directly benefit from. Legislators pass bills and laws with a keen eye toward cost and benefit to their constituents. For those reasons I find it highly unlikely that a commuter tax will ever pass the Illinois Legislature or be signed into law by a governor.

The same logic applies to a state financial services tax. The LaSalle Street tax has a populist appeal, but the likelihood that such a tax would be imposed by the Illinois legislature is extremely low.

4) Crime

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

Yes or No: Depends

Please explain:

The easiest thing for a politician to say is that we need more police officers on the beat. But is that really the case? I have asked my police commander on a fairly regular basis if he needs more officers. His response is that he needs the right kind of officers in his district.

Some data support his conclusion. According to the Chicago Justice Project, as of 2010, Chicago has the highest per capita number of police per 100,000 residents of the top five largest US cities.

This year Chicago is on pace for the lowest total number of homicides since the mid 1960s.

We know that there are other factors that are critical to combatting crime and gun violence.

Statistically, young people commit most of the crimes. Young people need supervised activities like mentoring, after school programs, and employment. The Crime Lab at the University of Chicago has shown, empirically, that these interventions have demonstrable impact on reducing criminality in young people.

To my commander's point, we need involved police officers who are willing to get out of their cars and interact with the public.

Police officers must be allocated in relationship to criminality.

Third, we need everyday people to call 911. There are times when constituents complain about a drug house or other illicit activity, but the police have no calls for service. Calls for service highlight to police supervisors that there are problem areas for that require additional police resources.

Fourth, the community and alderman have to go after bad property owners and businesses in the ward. Working with a community development corporation and block clubs I was able to revoke the licenses of a liquor store that featured prostitution, drug dealing, and gun crimes. Apartment building owners and property management companies must be held accountable for the behavior of their tenants. Tenants who commit crimes have to be evicted by their landlords. I have met with apartment building owners in response to community concerns about tenants and security. On a monthly basis apartment building owners, CHA, and the Chicago Police Department meet with my office to share information on problem tenants and intelligence on gang activity.

Finally, we need state and federal gun laws that make it harder for criminals to get access to guns in the first instance. The simple and unfortunate truth it is too easy for a criminal who wants a gun to get a gun.

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

I would support a ban on assault weapons, high capacity ammunition cartridges, gun registration, state licensure of gun dealers, and limiting gun purchases to one firearm per month.

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 members and the Schools CEO. Do you support a change to an elected school board?

Yes or No: No.

Please explain:

Mayoral control of the Chicago Public Schools is a double-edged sword. The right mayor, vested with those powers, can be a singular force for improving teaching and learning and serves a singular point of accountability. But there is an incongruity in that CPS is the only school district in the state where the mayor has control of the public school system as compared to every other school district in the state where a democratically elected school board controls the public schools.

I am open to supporting a hybrid system of government where the mayor would appoint some members of the school board and the public could elect a number as well.

I do think that if we want to increase democratic participation in public education that we would do well to revisit the purpose and role of the Local School Council (LSC). How can LSCs be strengthened? What additional powers could be devolved to principals and LSCs?

Finally, I would like to know what data or reports exist on school system governance models and education outcomes. Do elected school boards lead to better education outcomes than mayoral control systems?

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?

I support the reforms recommended by the 2011 TIF Reform Taskforce. These recommendations include: ensuring that TIF recipients meet their obligations over time, establishing clearer goals for TIF districts, providing insight as to where TIF funds were invested and to assess the impact of those investments.

TIF funded projects should also be projects that would not otherwise occur without public investment. To me that means that TIF projects should be focused in neighborhoods outside of the Central Business District (CBD). Moreover, if the public is investing in TIF development deals, then the public should have the right to a return on the investment. Finally, TIF projects should include higher levels of minority and female owned business participation than privately funded deals.

7) Neighborhood economic development

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

Business people want predictability and a partner from the government – not an impediment. My office makes it a priority to attract development by leveraging the office to ensure that the ward receives the retail and residential amenities that residents have sought. I have attended the International Conference of Shopping Centers (ICSC) convention and events. When entrepreneurs seek to open businesses in my ward, I meet with them as quickly as possible. If I make a commitment to support a project, I keep my word. I also inform developers when potential retailers are counter to community values or hurtful to long existing businesses. In short, I'm a straight shooter, and I have found that business people appreciate understanding exactly where they may stand with the community and my office.

Working with community development corporations, institutional partners and special service areas (SSAs) we have invested in placemaking, beautification, neighborhood festivals, and enhanced cleaning services to make commercial corridors more attractive.

We've also held developers accountable. We've ensured that new residential developments include affordable housing. We've made sure that commercial development has included community input and hired workers from the community. We believe that good community partnership is good business.

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 think that the current size of the City Council works given the current functions performed by aldermen.

If Chicago reduced the number of aldermen in the City Council, then the entire structure of city government would need to change. Currently, aldermen possess executive and

legislative power in their wards. Aldermen make decisions every day on zoning, resource allocation, land disposition, and permitting. There is also the cultural relationship that Chicagoans have with the aldermanic office. Constituents demand the opportunity to spend time with their alderman – to see the tree that needs to be trimmed, the street that should be repaved, or a stop sign that should be installed. Aldermen are expected to weigh in on parks, schools, and, where applicable, public housing.

The current demands and decisions required of the office suggest that a large council with smallish constituencies is necessary. If, however, the office of alderman were to become largely a legislative/oversight function then the council could become smaller with larger constituencies.

But I would offer a word of support for the current system. In the neighborhoods, City Hall might as well be on a different planet. For some constituents their voices carry no weight with a utility company ready to cut off their service, an indifferent government bureaucrat, or a bank ready to foreclose on their home. The alderman, in a city of nearly three million, can advocate for the everyday person and the needs of the community. I suppose that's why I like what I do so much. You become, if you are willing, part of the warp and woof of the city itself.

9) A Chicago casino

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

Yes or No: Yes

Please explain:

I am open to potentially supporting a land based casino in Chicago under certain conditions: the land based casino must be sited to attract business from conventioners and tourists; all of the gaming positions must be located within the casino; and special attention must be paid to ensure minority and women owned business enterprises participate in the management of the casino; revenue from the Chicago casino would be used to reduce the city's unfunded pension liabilities.

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:

The traffic light camera program has been mired in scandal, given the charges pending against Redflex and former CDOT staff. The data that some red lights had faster yellow lights than recommended by USDOT is troubling. These are problems that can be fixed. Previously issued tickets can be examined. I think the administration must do everything in its power to restore confidence in the fairness of the program.

The honest truth is the red light camera revenue is an important component of the city's revenue stream and opponents to the program have not identified an alternative source of revenue.

11) Ward issues

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

Economic development, job creation, and education are the most important issues raised on the campaign trail.

I should mention as well that the Fourth Ward is one of the most diverse wards in Chicago. Blacks, whites, Asians, Latinos, straight, LGBT, poor, middle class, and wealthy all live cheek by jowl. My highest priority is to build a community from the basis of our great diversity. Communities are built through amenities like parks, shopping, housing, streetscapes which bring people together and encourage usage by all members of the polity.

The greatest concern I hear from residents of my ward their desire for the services and amenities is just as valid as the needs as the central business district (CBD). My focus is keeping our ward vibrant and competitive, while making sure that long term stakeholders and new residents consider our ward a great place to live, work, and raise a family.