**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name: **Adolfo Mondragón**

Ward: **15**

Occupation: **Attorney (solo practitioner)**

Education: **William H. Seward School, Chicago, IL, 1988, Diploma**

**Marie S. Curie High School, Chicago, IL, 1992, Diploma**

**Yale, New Haven, CT, 1996, B.A. in Political Science**

**University of Chicago Law School, Chicago, IL, 2001, J.D.**

Previous political and civic experience:

**I ran in the 2010 and 2012 Primary against State Senator Tony Muñoz for the Democratic Party’s nomination for the State Senate seat in the 1st District.**

**In 2010, I won 32% of the vote (3,740/11,863) despite having no previous name recognition, a paltry campaign budget, no support from the political gentry, and a historic low voter turnout. I was able to get one out of every third voter, which was no small feat, because I ran an efficient campaign with a compelling story that garnered the endorsements of the Chicago Tribune and the Chicago Sun-Times.**

**In 2012, I tried to capitalize on my previous run but was hampered by the redistricting that cut out the 22nd Ward and portions of the 12th Ward where I had done well and replaced those areas with a large section of the 23rd Ward. Nonetheless, I won 24% of the vote (2,645/8,229) despite once again having a paltry campaign budget, no support from the political gentry, and a historic low voter turnout (the lowest since 1942!). I was also able to garner the endorsement of the Chicago Tribune. The Chicago Sun-Times did not make endorsements in any race that year.**

**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**.

Please Explain:

**Chicago’s four pension plans are badly underfunded and reform and improved funding are needed to solve the crisis.**

**First, the City needs to create either a new Defined Contribution plan or a new Defined Benefit plan with a less-costly tier of retirement benefits for both new and current employees because the present plans provide benefits that are far more generous and costly than those available in the private sector and because the City cannot afford to continue to incur these costs.**

**The key is prospective implementation of a second-tier of benefits for current active employees as well as new employees because prospective implementation for only new Chicago employees would mean relatively little in current savings to Chicago and very little in reduced pension costs over the next several years under the current funding policy of the City. Our courts, however, will have the final say on that issue.**

**Second, the City needs to increase annual funding of the pensions in accordance with actuarial standards to the level of the annual required contribution instead of in accordance to some notion of what the City can afford to pay. Any increased contributions necessary to attain the annual required contribution should be shared by the City and employees.**

**These steps may be painful medicine, but it’s in no one’s interest to do nothing and let the pension funds run out of money.**

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?

**Before supporting a property tax increase, I would demand that the City procure TIF surplus money to shore up the City pensions. After all, TIFs have played a role in underfunding the pensions.**

**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?

**I need more time to review this issue.**

**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**.

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

Yes or No: **No**.

\* 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.

**4) Crime**

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

Yes or No: **No**.

Please explain:

**Although there is a shortage of police officers due to attrition, the cost of hiring more police officers currently outweighs the benefit. Adding more police officers to combat crime and gun violence will only have a marginal and short-term effect. The City needs long-term investments in public education, job training, affordable housing, drug rehabilitation programs, and mental health services to adequately tackle the problem of crime and gun violence.**

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

**I need more time to review proposed legislation regarding this issue.**

**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:

**I support an elected school board because elections provide an egalitarian process that will make it more likely that members will answer to the community instead of answering solely to the Mayor.**

**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. I would support a TIF Surplus Ordinance requiring non-committed money in TIF districts that had revenues of more than $1 million to be part of a surplus that could be used to help out the Chicago Public Schools and to shore up the City pensions**.

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

**I support proposals to include TIF spending in overall city budgets; to measure the performance of TIF districts and projects; to hold developers accountable for providing agreed-upon benefits by including provisions in subsidy contracts that call for repayment of subsidies if targets are not met; to take more steps towards greater transparency; and to close districts once they fulfill their initial redevelopment plan.**

**I do not support expansion or extension of TIF districts because TIFs consume too much money--$450 to 500 million a year. Much of that money could be better spent to pay to educate our children and to care for the marginalized residents of our City.**

**I do not support the $55 million allotment of TIF funds to buy land for a Marriot Hotel and DePaul basketball arena because the City should have used the Michael Reese site—which the City already purchased for $91 million using TIF dollars—for that project.**

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

**The new 15th Ward is one of the City’s most marginalized wards and is in dire need of employment opportunities. I would pursue both traditional and non-traditional approaches to attract more employers to the new 15th Ward, including but not limited to the following.**

**I would invest menu money in upgrading the ward’s infrastructure to increase safety and to ease the flow of people and goods along the commercial thoroughfares, like the stretch of 47th Street between Ashland and Kedzie.**

**I would support development of the industrial corridors located in the adjacent wards, such as the Stockyards Industrial Park.**

**I would encourage contractors with job sites anywhere in the City to meet the requirements of the McLaughlin Ordinance by hiring residents of the ward.**

**I would develop relationships with corporations, schools, government agencies, and NGOs that could train residents for the workforce.**

**I would try to lure Grameen America, the microfinance organization founded by Nobel Peace Prize recipient Muhammad Yunus, to the ward to provide microloans, savings programs, financial education, and credit programs to the women of the 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?

**Chicago aldermen represent far less constituents than their counterparts in New York City, Los Angeles, Houston, Phoenix, Philadelphia, San Antonio, Dallas, and San Jose. According to the Better Government Association, Chicago alderman represent approximately 57,000 constituents while council members in New York City represent approximately 164,000 constituents and council members in Los Angeles represent approximately 250,000 constituents. Consequently, reducing the number of alderman in the City of Chicago would be a reasonable manner of streamlining government.**

**Accordingly, I would support an effort to reduce the City Council by half. This measure would save the City 2.7 million dollars in aldermanic salaries, 4.4 million dollars in salaries for aldermanic aides, and 1.8 million dollars in discretional expense accounts for alderman. On top of those savings, consolidating wards would also cut in half offices of ward superintendents. These savings would not solve the City’s financial problems, but they would be a step in the right direction.**

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

Yes or No: **No**.

Please explain:

**I am against establishing a casino in Chicago for numerous reasons, including the following. First, casino revenues nationwide are going down because of oversaturation. Indeed, in the Chicagoland area there are numerous casinos within driving distance in every direction. Second, gambling triggers addiction. Third, gambling cannibalizes local businesses because gamblers spend most or all of their money in the casinos. Fourth, gambling attracts crime. In Illinois, gaming officials don’t have the resources to adequately oversee video gambling much less to ensure that organized crime doesn’t get a foothold in a proposed casino. Fifth, gambling victimizes the poor who spend their limited resources on the vice.**

**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:

**Before I can support Chicago’s Traffic Light Camera program, the City must satisfactorily address several key issues.**

**First, the City must implement measures that will guarantee motorists their due process right to receive adequate notice before the City changes the rules of play. The City must never again surreptitiously lower the 3-second threshold or the trigger speed of 15 mph. The public’s confidence in the program is contingent on fair enforcement of the law and the City’s gross missteps have convinced many that the program’s primary aim is to raise revenue instead of to improve safety.**

**Second, the City must stop shifting the burden of proof at administrative hearings. As a threshold matter, the City must present testimony from an employee abreast of the working conditions at the time of the alleged violations of the traffic lights at issue to rule out the kind of malfunctions that caused the spikes of tickets at 800 West Fullerton and 6200 North Lincoln Avenue. It need not be the employee that calibrated or repaired the traffic light, but someone with overall knowledge of the working conditions even if it’s based on second-hand information. The $100 fine for a red-light ticket is a hefty cost for most motorists and, therefore, it’s important that motorists who take time to challenge their ticket get a fair hearing with a presumption of innocence.**

**Third, the City must re-evaluate every intersection where a camera is installed in an attempt to drastically reduce if not eliminate the rear-end crashes that negate the camera-attributed benefits of decreased right-angle crashes. The camera program is not worth keeping if it has no overall benefit to public safety.**

**11) Ward issues**

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

**The 15th Ward is comprised of 3 distinct communities. Brighton Park is a lower middle class, Latino neighborhood. West Englewood is an urban poor, African-American neighborhood. Back of the Yards is an immigrant, working-poor neighborhood. The problems in each neighborhood have slightly different dynamics, but the one thing all three neighborhoods have in common is that they are marginalized communities.**

**Residents of the ward are concerned with a number of issues, but they are most concerned with the education of their children, the high unemployment they suffer, and the violent crime that is a part of their daily life. These issues, of course, are interconnected. Without a good education, one is less likely to get a good job, and without a good job, one is more susceptible to committing crimes or being the victim of crimes. It is a vicious cycle akin to that which the Nobel-Laureate Gunnar Myrdal wrote about in the American Dilemma so many years ago.**

**As Myrdal, I believe that the key to breaking out of the vicious cycle is education. I can attest to this because I grew up in a working poor family in the Back of the Yards and was able to overcome poverty though educational success. But, unlike others, I did not use my education as a ticket out of the neighborhood. I used it to give back.**

**Education reform is a long-term endeavor. It's a difficult issue to tackle, but it will be my priority to raise the educational standards in the 15th Ward so that posterity can break out of the vicious cycle and enjoy the American Creed.**