**Name: Cristina Castro**

**District running for: 22nd, Senate District**

**Political party: Democrat**

**Political/civic background: Commissioner, Kane County Board, 20th District**

**Occupation: Marketing and Communications**

**Education:** M.B.A., Northern Illinois University and Bachelor of Science, Marketing, Northern Illinois University

**Campaign website:** castroforstatesenate.org

**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:***The state’s massive debts are inhibiting the proper funding of much needed services and programs. In order to move forward, we need to take a balanced approach to addressing these issues, one of those approaches is identifying new revenue streams. In terms of generating new revenues, we cannot keep asking working families to pay more while others have not paid their fair share. One idea I suggest is eliminating the tax loop holes. Another idea would be to enact the millionaires’ tax that was approved by over 65% of Illinois voters in 2014. I believe it's time that these huge corporations and multi-millionaires pay their fair share for state infrastructure, road repair, public safety, education and more. If a tax is necessary, after all alternative options have been explored and others have contributed their fair share, I would consider supporting a fair tax. Flat tax rate increases hurt the state’s poorest residents the most while the fair tax adjusts accordingly to one’s income level.**

*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) **N/A**

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?*

A) ***We need to address the pension issue. The fact we have not, has placed added pressure to the state budget limiting the general assembly in the ability to place funds in areas that need the funding the most (i.e. Education, Mental Health, etc.). We need to go back to the drawing board. We need to work with urgency across the aisle to pass efficient, sustainable, and legal reform. I am interested in revisiting a pension reform bill proposed back in 2013, SB 2404. The bill brought all parties to the table, and would not have been subject to a successful legal challenge – unlike SB1. We also need to revisit a 2011 extensive study on what would and would not pass constitutional muster to explore additional options.***

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) ***While I would need to study the template and its impact further, as a member of the county board, I’ve always worked in a bipartisan fashion to address the needs of the county and its residents. Working together will help move our state forward and address the pressing issues we are facing today.***

**Education:**

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

A) ***If we get public education right everything else will follow. If we get it wrong, not much else will matter. Our goal must be to first make every public school great for every child. To that end we must focus on raising funding for all districts to equitable levels. SB318 and SB1 are a good start to a conversation on addressing school funding reform and elevating some of the property tax burdens residents our facing. What I do not support about this in SB 1 is that it seems like we are robbing Peter to pay Paul and I do not support the shifting of large amounts of funds from our suburban school districts. When achieving funding reform, we need to help all districts.***

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) ***While I understand the dire straits that CPS is facing with its pension shortfalls, it is not the fault of the state or the people in the 22nd District. There has been a lot of waste and mismanagement by the administrators of CPS and it is time for some accountability to take shape. The best way to bring accountability to CPS is by passing legislation that will allow for an elected school board just like the rest of the state. The mismanagement at CPS has resulted in schools that are crumbling, classrooms that have teacher-to-student ratios that are unacceptable and inhibit learning, and are far behind other large school districts from across the state and the nation. CPS needs to address the issue and we cannot keep kicking the can down the road as what was done with state pensions, eventually you will have to address the issue before it’s too late.***

***I’m opposed to shifting the burden of pensions to local school districts because it would result in increased property taxes and less funds for programs/classrooms that would result in unnecessary cuts.***

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) ***A strong economy is dependent on a well-educated and well-trained workforce. We cannot continue to cut MAP grants and funding for higher education. The state has not been paying its share which put pressure on community colleges and public universities to raise tuition and to pass referendums (community colleges) to pay for operational and capital expenses. With the rising costs, Students are going elsewhere, mostly out of state, or not going at all. We need to stop taking money from higher ed to plug holes elsewhere, when it comes to education whether its K-12 or higher education that should never be touched or as a last resort.***

**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) ***Transportation is essential to our economy, when businesses look to relocating to Illinois, transportation is at the top of their lists. Expanding public transportation options for the suburbs is key, we have limited to no direct access to the CTA and Pace Buses aren’t able to expand service due to lack of funds. Many in the district rely on public transportation to get to and from work, expanding this network will help increase use of public transit and address some of the gridlock issues that many drivers face today on the state’s tollway system.***

***At this moment the number one and two issues we need to address are the state’s current financial situation and pension crisis. Once those two issues are on more sound footing we can begin to look into much needed capital investment needs. Some have said that we should increase the gas tax, I’m opposed to that. The first answer should never be to tax our way out of our problems. The state has mismanaged transportation funds, it is now time we work to solve these issues by eliminating waste and streamlining processes so we have a capital program that’s acted upon each year versus passing one every five years. This will help us become more proactive versus reactive to needed expansions/updating of infrastructure for years to come.***

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

***Yes, other states do both. We should look to fix the transportation formula so there are regular funds for operating and capital. At the county board level, we currently have a fund for both operating and capital, this allows us to budget and predict which projects will be funded for improvements versus waiting for something to crumble and break. Being proactive helps in mitigating the costs associated with the project if you wait too long it could be more expensive to repair versus just fixing it once an issue has been identified. That’s just basic, good business practice, which unfortunately the state’s not following.***

**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) **The biggest obstacle in attracting jobs and businesses to Illinois is the state’s financial mess. Why would anyone want to come to this state when lawmakers and the governor can’t even pass a budget? The state’s uncertainty makes it unattractive for anyone to move here or even live here. We need to pass a budget, we need to begin to address pension reform. We cannot keep kicking the can down the road as we have been doing year after year after year. We also need to look at raising the minimum wage. Why? Because a higher wage puts more money in people’s pockets who will then spend the money, especially in the local economy. People spend more when they have more which results in a strong economy and more jobs.**

**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) **Oppose. I feel the Illinois Clean Jobs bill achieves more and helps us move toward renewable Energy sources than the Exelon bill does.**

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 support the Illinois Clean Jobs bill. The benefit to the state, the environment, and taxpayers create a net positive. It is an opportunity to build an innovative, diverse, and clean electricity system that costs less, delivers reliable power and creates thousands of good paying jobs. By enacting the bill, we can meet and exceed proposed EPA carbon pollution rules and make Illinois a better place for all in the future.**

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) **Yes, I would support a cap-and-trade**.

**Gun safety:**

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

A) **Yes and Yes. We need more common-sense laws to help prevent gun violence and to get guns out of the hands of violent offenders. With the increase of mass shootings across the country and congress’ inability to act on sensible gun control it is up to us to make those changes. The public are demanding these changes and if Congress won’t begin to listen then we should.**

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

A) **Support. Again this is another common sense approach. Firearms dealers also have a responsibility to keep the public safe by maintaining and reporting records of hand gun purchases especially if someone has had their privileges revoked due to mental illness or violent past and tries to purchase a gun. These laws, while some dealers may view as inconvenient, will help address illegal hand guns in the hands of those who should not have one.**

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

A) **Yes. The state continues to cut funding to mental health providers that will help address those who are in crisis. Across the nation this is a major problem and contributing factor to gun violence, yet we have not acted upon addressing it enough. As a state, we need to increase funding for mental health in addition to removing fire arms from those who are suffering a mental illness. In addition, we also need to actually remove firearms from those who are on the FBI’s terror watch list, have committed violent crimes and those accused/convicted of domestic violence. Common sense laws that will help reduce shootings in Illinois.**

**Criminal justice:**

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

A) **Support. There are good officers in uniform and it’s unfortunate that a few bad apples are taking away and shedding a negative light on those who honorably serve and protect. By having access to these documents police departments, the legislature, and the public can identify ways to improve policing and their relationship with the general public.**

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) **As chairwoman of the Judicial and Public Safety committee on the Kane County board, I support all of these reforms. Kane County was selected as one of three judicial circuits in Illinois for a pilot program in which it prepare a Public Safety Assessment for people arrested on felony charges. The assessment is one tool used by judges in determining bond, with the goal of reducing recidivism, controlling the jail population and keeping the public safe. If this pilot works, we should look to implement it statewide to help achieve the goal of reducing the adult prison population by 25% by 2025. Yes, I would support sentencing reforms that would reduce or eliminate prison terms for non-violent drug offenses. Our jails are crowded with those who have committed these offenses and offenders are often left tarnished for life because of these offenses unable to pass background checks or find work. Making adjustments to these sentencing guidelines will help make sure those who deserve to be behind bars should be and frees up officers time to focus on apprehending those dangerous criminals.**

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) **Not for all crimes. Violent crimes such as sexual assault, assault, major drug offenses, murder etc. should never be expunged or sealed. I would be more inclined to support expungement/sealing for non-major offenses, 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) **I do support closing/merging the juvenile prisons. Currently in Kane County, we have a partnership with DuPage, Kendall, DeKalb, and McHenry counties where the county houses and rehabilitates juvenile offenders. This partnership allows other counties to free up funds to focus on other areas of the justice system.**

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) **I would like to learn more about this and examine the proposal carefully. My first priority is public safety and while these lists can be problematic, especially for juveniles, we should differentiate between certain crimes to protect the public.**

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

A) **Yes. When it comes to the judicial system, politics should stay out of it. A qualified committee should have the option to select the best qualified candidates for a judicial position. Many times there are judges listed with no information about them, their background, and what makes them the best choice. Selections based on merit will be the right step in removing partisan politics from the courtroom.**

**Other:**

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

A) **Support. I support this initiative because it places the drawing of maps into the hands of an independent committee free of political influence. A fair map will strengthen the voice of voters.**

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

A) **While some changes could be an option, I would not want to impact or restrict the rights of individuals who are injured on the job. We also need to make sure the savings that resulted in previous worker’s comp reforms are actually passed on versus kept by insurance providers.**

Q) *Do you support or oppose automatic voter registration?*

A) **Support. By enacting this across the board, it will achieve two objectives. 1. All eligible to be registered to vote will be and 2. The unfunded mandate pressures faced by many counties (including Kane) to enact different variations of voter registration laws would be lifted, allowing counties to focus on educating voters as to where to vote and who the candidates are in an upcoming election.**

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

A) **There are always opportunities to strengthen ethics and campaign-funding reforms. One idea I have is to strength our revolving door policies by placing a one-year grace period on legislators, executive level staff members from becoming lobbyists. On the Kane County Board, I was a part of the group that provided feedback and passed more enhanced ethics reform measures from the revolving door to vendors being required to list all campaign contributions to board members prior to being awarded a contract.**

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) **I cannot narrow it down to one specific teacher because there were many who had an impact in my life especially in high school. My teachers and counselors helped me to succeed and emphasized why education was so important. When others would say I wouldn’t go to college, these women and men helped me work harder in order to prove them wrong. If it wasn’t for my teachers, I wouldn’t be who I am today. When folks tell me it can’t be done, I say why not and yes it can. That is my approach in life, politically, professionally, and personally. As State Senator, I plan to roll-up my sleeves and start solving these issues. Future generations depend on us to do so.**