**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name: Michael A. Davis

Ward: 18th Ward, City of Chicago

Occupation: Senior Account Executive

Education: Bachelor of Business Finance – Western Illinois University (2008)
Master of Business Administration – Western Illinois University (2010)

Previous political and civic experience:

Candidate for 18th Ward Alderman 2011
Student Organizer for Barack Obama Presidential Campaign (2007-08)
Field Organizer for the re-election of President Barack Obama (2012)
President – 86th Place Block Club (2013-14)

Member of the Wrightwood Improvement Association

Founder and President of the Next Generations Solutions Group (NGSG)

**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:

As the proud son of two retired Chicago Police Officers there is no greater issue to me personally than the solvency of our public employee pension systems. Thousands of retirees, including my parents, worked their entire careers for guaranteed pension benefits, and are not eligible for Social Security or Medicaid. The City can and must act to find new revenues with which to meet their fiduciary responsibilities. That said, I do not support any stripping away at benefits that were promised to our current retirees; however, as Alderman I would be willing to work with our public employees to negotiate ways to improve our pension systems for future hires.

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?

The 18th Ward is home to more foreclosures than most other wards in the City of Chicago, which has contributed to drastic declines in our home property values. Not to mention, we have yet to see the unemployment rates in our ward show any signs of significant improvement. At a time when so many are struggling to keep a roof over their heads, I believe it would be catastrophic for our City to vote on any increases in the property tax.

Therefore, the only circumstance for which I would entertain the idea is once we have exhausted all other options, including but not limited to, finding new and creative revenue sources, and conducting an independent audit of the City’s budget.

**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?

Once again, I believe that finding new and creative revenue sources will be key in funding all of our public employee pension systems. However, in the case of the CPS specifically, I would also suggest that as a City Council we take the lead from other municipal borrowers (i.e. Houston, TX, and Pittsburg, CA) and demand compensation from the banks that are underwriting our auction rate debt. It has been reported by the Sun-Times and other news sources that the CPS has been misled by banks that failed to disclose that they were propping up the auction-rate market. As a result, our CPS will likely pay $100 million more in interest costs each year – money that could have instead been used to improve the district’s finances and contribute to the retirement system.

**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.

The 18th Ward is home to many local barber shops, beauty salons, etc. that would be ill effected by any new taxes to their services. Therefore, I would look to other measures of generating revenues before supporting an additional tax on consumer services.

However, I do believe that those who work in the City of Chicago rely on its public services just the same as our residents. Therefore, I don’t believe it unreasonable to ask that they contribute in the form of a “commuter tax.” Along those same lines, I believe that financial transactions that take place on Chicago trading exchanges should be taxed and could generate an estimated $10 billion annually for the State, with about $2 billion going directly to the City.

**4) Crime**

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

Yes or No:

Yes

Please explain:

I am a lifelong resident of the 18th Ward, and it concerns me that in recent years my home has reported more incidents of violent crimes than at any other point in our history. I realize, of course, that there are many contributing factors, but one I feel is the most concerning is the lack of police manpower and presence. There are beats like mine (835) that have but one beat car assigned to a large and active area. At our neighborhood CAPS meetings I listen at neighbors each month complain about the lack of police presence and declining response times.

As the proud son of two Chicago Police Officers I am also deeply aware of the City’s need to increase manpower to the adequate staffing levels. As a City, we must stop asking our officers to do more with less – paying exorbitant amounts in overtime, and requiring them to work days off. It is time that we get serious about crime and safety, and that involves having enough police to adequately serve and protect.

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

One of the most important pieces of legislation that I would support in Springfield is the need for an expansion in background checks – particularly at gun shows and fairs. News sources like the Sun Times have reported that many of the illegal guns picked up in the streets of Chicago are the result of either straw purchases or without background checks at a gun show. We must demand the State act on this issue to stem the flow of illegal guns coming into Chicago.

**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 was proud to have gathered petitions in my neighborhood calling for a referendum on switching Chicago to a democratically elected school board. My campaign collected hundreds of signatures from neighbors who agree that this subject should be decided on by voters and not dictated to us by the Mayor.

Although no schools were closed in my ward recently, I stood with the affected teachers, parents, and students to advocate on their behalf. The CPS’ appointed board seemed completely out-of-touch in those meetings, and refused to grasp the affect that a school closing could have on the surrounding communities. Since that time I have remained a staunch advocate for an elected school board, and believe that voters should have the right to decide on this issue.

**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:

No. Rather than increasing the TIF surplus, I would instead declare a surplus on the nearly $1.7 billion in unused TIF Funds that aren’t committed to any specific projects or debt.

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

I believe, like other progressive candidates, that the TIF program needs a complete overhaul to ensure transparency. The 18th Ward, like many South Side communities, has truly “blighted” business districts with scarce economic development. Yet, historically we continue to sit back and watch as the Mayor and the City Council vote to approve over $1.5 billion (with a b), in projects for our City’s central business districts (i.e. the Loop, Near North Side).

As Alderman, I would propose a moratorium on any new TIFs, and demand an immediate and complete audit of the program. Once again, I would declare a surplus on the unused TIF Funds, and use those funds to reopen mental health clinics, pay towards the school budget, and convert abandoned schools in my ward (i.e. Luther South High School) to much needed community centers.

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

Politics was not my first career choice. Having earned both Bachelor of Finance and Master of Business Administration degrees, it was always my dream to work as an entrepreneur and bring private industry to my hometown. But I realized shortly after returning from my education, that my hometown looked entirely different.

If you drive through our business districts today you see entire strips of vacant, abandoned, and crumbling store fronts. Unemployment is so prevalent that many have to bus far out of the ward in order to find work. I realized then that in order to truly spur economic development that changes had to happen within City Council.

As Alderman, I want to champion new and creative programs in my ward to encourage economic growth. For starters, I plan to work with our local institution of higher education, Daley College, on co-sponsoring career training and job fairs for the neighborhood. I will also require that at least one of my full-time staff have experience in business plan and grant writing. I want my office to serve as a helpful way for residents with great ideas to get help starting a business or non-profit in their neighborhood.

I would also try creative, out-of-the box ideas to encourage our aspiring entrepreneurs and recent graduates to get their start. For instance, I’d champion a program partnering with local commercial property owners and create a program by which long abandoned office space can be donated rent free for 3-6 months for local entrepreneurs that are approved by our residents, and the local Chamber of Commerce. This way the community can be involved in the success of a start-up, and long abandoned properties can once again be utilized by entrepreneurs looking to bring jobs and services to our neighborhood.

**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 agree with the most civic groups, and would support reducing the Chicago City Council by at most half (25). In comparison to other major US cities (i.e. New York City, Detroit), Chicago has one of the largest Councils on record. If we as a City are asked to make tough choices on areas to cut (city services, mental health clinics, police manpower), then we cannot exempt our City Council.

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

Yes or No:

Yes

Please explain:

I believe that a casino, if administered properly by the State and the City, could be a source of much needed revenue in the City of Chicago. Each week I observe a number of my neighbors’ bus and drive to Indiana to visit and spend money at casinos. At a time in which our pension systems are grossly underfunded, and cuts are inevitable, we must look at any creative source of revenue on the table – including a casino.

**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:

News sources, like the Sun Times, have long reported on the need for more transparency regarding the City’s red light and speed camera program. Since its very inception this program has been plagued with mismanagement, malfunction, and even a $2 million bribery scandal. More recently, investigations have even found that they fail to deliver on drastic safety benefits, and in some cases, increased certain types of injury crashes. I have attended enough community meetings on the subject, and one thing I can say with certainty is that the residents of the 18th Ward (including myself) do NOT agree with this program, nor do they feel it was properly deployed.

**11) Ward issues**

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

Our ward is the 2nd largest in the City of Chicago, and as such the issues may change depending on the demographic. However, the three most talked about issues in my ward are (1) public safety, (2) unemployment and economic development, and (3) accessibility.

Generally speaking, my neighbors want to see an end to the senseless violence plaguing our ward. I can only imagine that local reporters grow weary of reporting these tragic headlines, just as we as a community grow weary of reading and experiencing them first hand. As Alderman, I want to make my ward a safer place to live, work, and play. To put an end to the senseless violence plaguing my hometown, and ask for preventative mentorship programs for our youth to keep them from gangs and destructive lifestyles. I also want to see the CAPS program expanded to better the relationships between the community and law enforcement. In light of recent national events (i.e. Mike Brown, Eric Garner), I find myself talking with neighbors about this subject more and more each day.

Many also realize that our neighborhood cannot truly improve until our residents have access to jobs, and can shop and spend money at businesses in their own backyard. The 18th Ward borders many thriving suburbs (i.e. Oak Lawn, Evergreen Park), and many of our neighbors have to venture outside their ward, and outside of Chicago, to shop and find work. Meanwhile, I drive down entire business districts in my ward plagued by “for sale” and “for rent” signs in the windows of once thriving businesses. As Alderman, I want to help our struggling business, recruit new businesses, and bring new jobs to my hometown.

Lastly, no matter where you visit in the ward you will hear from most residents that they either don’t know or have had very little interaction with our current Alderman. Many grow frustrated by her unwillingness to attend community meetings or forums – to simply be accessible to those that elected her to office. Even the reader of this endorsement questionnaire may have a hard time answering the question “who is Lona Lane?” Even more troubling is the fact that in spite of all of our wards challenges referenced above, you would be hard pressed to find any ordinances or stances from our elected Alderman. Therefore, my top priority will be to earn the title of “hardest working Alderman in City Council.” I want to guarantee my neighbors a full-time, round-the-clock, and transparent Alderman. I also plan to represent their interests in City Hall, and not simply vote based on the wishes of the Mayor’s Office.