**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name: Matthew J. O’Shea

Ward: 19th

Occupation: Full-Time Alderman

Education: B.A., Political Science, Saint Mary’s University, Winona, MN

Previous political and civic experience:

Alderman, 19th Ward

Democratic Committeeman, 19th Ward

Delegate to 2004 Democratic National Convention, Illinois 3rd Congressional District

Chicago Police Memorial Foundation – Board of Directors

Chicago Police Chaplain’s Association – Advisory Board

Beverly Arts Center – Board of Directors

John McNicholas Pediatric Brain Tumor Foundation – Board of Directors

**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:

Please Explain:

Chicago’s retired police officers and firefighters already receive pension benefits that are significantly less than most other public employees. In fact, if the pension reforms that were passed for State workers were applied to our police and fire, most would see a benefit increase. What’s more concerning however, is that our police and fire receive benefits less generous than their suburban and downstate counterparts.

Most pension reform proposals derive a bulk of their savings through adjustments to the compounding cost of living adjustment (COLA). While police and fire throughout suburban Cook County and Illinois typically enjoy a 3% compounding COLA, Chicago police officers and firefighters born after 1954 receive a 1.5% non-compounding COLA.

I support creating one statewide police pension fund and one statewide fire pension fund. The merged funds would pay out benefits similar to those currently received by Chicago’s police and fire. Under this scenario, I would support small tweaks to the current pension system provided they were negotiated with the police and fire unions.

**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?**

Chicago’s property tax burden is already too high. I view a property tax increase as a last resort. However, clearly new revenue is needed to stabilize our municipal pension funds. I support a statewide progressive income tax provided that local municipalities benefit from the increased revenue through the local government distributive fund. Governor Quinn’s temporary income tax did not include any additional revenue for local governments; had municipalities shared in this new revenue, Quinn may have had more success in extending it.

I also support extending the sales tax to certain luxury services. These new revenue changes should place the additional burden is placed on the wealthy, not the middle class. I also support a Chicago owned casino with revenue directly benefiting our pension funds.

**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?

In addition to the new revenue measures suggested above, I also support shifting the burden for teachers’ pensions to local units of government. As a resident of Chicago, I see no reason why I should pay for the pensions of both Chicago Public School teachers, and for the pensions of teachers throughout the state. Especially when I have no ability to elect the people who oversee contract negotiations for teachers outside Chicago.

**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, I support the expansion of the sales tax base to include luxury services. This expansion should place additional tax burden on the wealthy, not the middle class.

\* 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: I am open to this concept but would want to see a full plan before committing.

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

While I am open to each of these measures, my preference is first for a graduated income tax, and then for a taxpayer owned Chicago casino.

**4) Crime**

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

Yes or No: Yes

Please explain:

The City certainly needs additional manpower to combat our crime, gang and gun problem. Relying heavily on overtime is a short-term solution. While it is a good stopgap measure, it is not a feasible long-term solution. Unfortunately, until the police and fire pension crises are permanently addressed, the City will not be in a position to make any significant investments in manpower.

While more police will certainly impact crime and violence, that alone will not solve this problem. Chicago needs to create opportunities for young people, especially those that live in poverty. The Chicago Sun-Times recently reported on a study showing the incredible impact of an experimental summer jobs program. That study found that at-risk youth accepted into the program committed almost half as many violent crimes as those not accepted into the program. More importantly, this trend continued well beyond the life of the two-month program.

Unfortunately, many communities in Chicago have a distrust of law enforcement. The police can only be successful with strong support from the community. In my ward, I host quarterly meetings with residents and our 22nd District Police Commander. In between these meetings, I also host seminars to educate residents on when to call 9-1-1 and what information will best help the police. We have established phone trees for 9-1-1 calls on high crime blocks. I have also hosted several burglary prevention seminars for residents to hear directly from convicted burglars on what they look for in a target home.

The foreclosure crisis has also created a new public safety problem. I aggressively pursue problem homes through building and demolition court. At any time, my staff and I are tracking 10-12 problem homes. During the past two years we have secured several demolition orders for homes or garages that were known staging areas for drug sales.

Aldermen are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between law enforcement and the communities they serve. We have a responsibility to foster strong working relationships between residents and the police. These relationships will be the backbone in our fight against gang violence in Chicago.

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

While I support the second amendment, I also recognize that illegal guns contribute to Chicago’s endemic violence problem. I am open to any reasonable gun control measure that could help curb that violence. Strong gun legislation is another key component to addressing our violence problem; current gun laws do not give the police the tools needed to combat this plague.

Specifically, I see a strong need for legislation requiring gun owners to register firearms and to report loss or theft of a firearm to law enforcement. This would significantly cut down on straw purchases of guns. I also support legislation sponsored by Rep. Zalewski and State’s Attorney Alvarez creating mandatory prison time for certain weapons offenses.

**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: Open

Please explain:

I maintain a close relationship with the current school board and find them to be very open and responsive to the needs of our schools. I am concerned that an elected school board would further politicize public education and increase administrative costs. Should the general assembly create an elected school board, I would work closely with whoever is elected to improve our schools.

**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?

Excess TIF dollars should be returned to the original taxing bodies on an annual basis through a surplus declaration based on existing and projected commitments. While TIFs are a useful tool to spark economic development, in these challenging financial times, it would be irresponsible to allow funds to collect year after year with no project designated. Given our budget problems, the looming pension crises, and similar troubles at Chicago Public Schools, I would also support a moratorium on new TIF creation.

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

Economic development is especially challenging in border wards like mine. Businesses can operate just outside the City limits with far fewer regulations and taxes while still attracting Chicago customers. As Alderman, I have invested in our infrastructure and public spaces in an effort to make our retail districts more attractive to new businesses and customers.

I have aggressively marketed city owned land returning a vacant fire station to the property tax rolls and creating new manufacturing jobs. Currently, we are in negotiations to transfer a vacant library and an underutilized city parking lot to a family owned business. I have also marketed small business tax incentives to help several new businesses open including Horse Thief Hollow Brewpub, Janson’s Drive-In, and Pizzeria Deepot, and prevent existing successful businesses from relocating to the suburbs.

I have also been a strong advocate for business friendly policies and regulations. I worked with the Department of Business Affairs and Consumer Protection to reduce the number of business licenses making it easier for businesses to open. I also voted to eliminate the head tax, and negotiated an exemption for small businesses in the City’s plastic bag ban.

Representing a community on the City’s border, I was also one of the most vocal and public opponents of a Chicago-only minimum wage increase. This single issue represents the greatest hurdle to economic development in my community. The disparity in minimum wage between Chicago and our neighboring suburbs will absolutely push businesses, and with them plenty of sales and property tax revenue, out of the City. Moving forward, I will continue to lobby the General Assembly for a statewide minimum wage increase so that the gap is not as significant as it is now.

**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?

Residents in my community deserve a strong voice in local and citywide policies. Reducing the number of aldermen would increase ward size and dilute the impact of each resident. I work diligently each day to be responsive to the needs of my residents. Significantly increasing the number of residents in each ward would reduce the level of service we can offer each resident.

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

Yes or No: Yes

Please explain:

Casino gaming is a strong possible revenue source for our cash-strapped City. While I am not personally a gambler, I do know of many people from my community who travel to Indiana and Michigan for their casinos. I see no reason to cede that revenue to other municipalities or states.

Should Chicago get a casino, I would support dedicating revenue to our pension funds.

**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:

Speed and red light cameras generate badly needed funds for the City. Moreover, the speed of vehicular traffic is one of the most common complaints I receive, especially near schools and parks. In theory, I support these programs, primarily as revenue streams, but also for the impact they can have on pedestrian safety.

During the past several months, several important issues have been raised about the operation and placement of these tools. I support a moratorium on new camera installation until a thorough review of both programs can be conducted by both the Department of Transportation and the Inspector General’s Office.

Moving forward, I would also support shifting oversight of these programs from the Department of Transportation to the Office of Emergency Management and Communication. OEMC already maintains the blue light camera network, and has data related to accidents and reported to 9-1-1 and 3-1-1. They are better equipped for these responsibilities.

I would also support changes to the ordinance authorizing speed cameras. Specifically, speed cameras should be required to be adjacent to the school or park that is used to establish the safety zone and not just within a certain amount of feet. The current ordinance allows for placement of cameras near but not directly next to the park or school. Moreover, there should be a legal requirement to relocate the camera when average speed levels fall to a specific point.

Currently, the cameras are placed by CDOT in zones with no one zone having an overconcentration of cameras. I would support modifying this requirement to ensure that every ward has an equal number of cameras, and that the community have input in placement.

While I am troubled by media reports of problems with cameras in other areas of the City, the cameras in my ward have had the desired impact on pedestrian safety.

**11) Ward issues**

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

Public Safety, Education, and Economic Development.

**Public Safety**

Public Safety & the Foreclosure Crisis are always among the top concerns residents in my community have. Vacant and abandoned homes can become hot spots for crime and drive down property values on an entire block. In addition to my work with the police described above, I also work very closely with the Cook County Land Bank to ensure that homes do not remain vacant for too long.

Currently, I am working with the City’s Law Department and Department of Water Management to explore ways we become better partners with the Land Bank in their ongoing efforts to reactivate vacant buildings. Accrued water fees are often one of the biggest hurdles faced by the Land Bank when working in Chicago. As a City, we must do everything possible to attract new families to the vacant homes that threaten our neighborhoods.

**Education**

Education and the perceived lack of a quality public high school is another common concern among 19th Ward residents. To address this situation, I worked with CPS and the State Legislature to lift the enrollment cap at the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences. This magnet high school was built with a state mandated enrollment cap of 600 students.

However, the principal and LSC believed that the building could reasonable accommodate 720 students. Given that, I worked to not only expand that cap, but also fight for an increase in the number of seats set aside for local students. Today, Chicago Ag is thriving.

Morgan Park High School is the neighborhood school that services the entire 19th Ward. When I took office, Morgan Park was on a downward spiral; they had no principal and no real direction. Ultimately, the school landed on academic probation.

Morgan Park needed a fresh start. Working with the Board of Education, Mayor Emanuel and a local University, that is exactly what it got.

After meeting with the Local School Council, it became clear that parents were frustrated with the curriculum. Students in the prestigious International Baccalaureate Program (IB) were excelling, but very few others were. Given that, I lobbied the Board of Education to expand the IB program to the entire student body.

After months of meetings and discussions, last year Mayor Emanuel announced that Morgan Park would transition to a “wall-to-wall” IB program. Through this model, already successful at other high schools, all children in the school would be exposed to an IB style education. This meant not only changes to the curriculum, but also significant professional development for teachers.

With this innovative new curriculum announced, I contacted the President of Saint Xavier University to see if they might “adopt” Morgan Park. As a result of that effort, and over a year of regular meetings with Saint Xavier and CPS, we now have a very unique dual enrollment partnership between the two schools.

This robust partnership allows high performing students to attend classes and earn college credit at SXU, offers pedagogical and content based teacher development, and provides assistance for students who perform below grade level. Moreover, Saint Xavier provides assistance with things like college applications and essays, financial aid and scholarship information, and preparing for the college transition. Having a respected University interact with the students throughout four years of high school creates an expectation that students will go to college and they will succeed.

I also worked with Saint Xavier and CPS to apply for a major grant from the Illinois State Board of Education to help fund this partnership. This grant will allow Saint Xavier to extend many of these services, specifically professional development and support for students performing below grade level, to Barnard Elementary, a MPHS feeder. We are all very excited about the possible impact of this partnership on our students.

With so many major universities, colleges, and even junior colleges in Chicago, we should pursue more dual enrollment options and extended University/High School partnerships. Individual Alderman are uniquely positioned to recognize not only the needs of specific schools, but also the willingness and capacity of local universities. Currently, I am exploring possible University partners for my second public high school, the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences.

**Economic Development / Vacant Storefronts & Property**

For years, residents in my community have lived with retail strips that do not match the caliber of our residential housing stock. While that is still the case, much progress has been made during the past few years.

When I took office, the Beverly Arts Center, a major economic engine for the community faced financial disaster. Like many non-profits, they expanded heavily during the economic boom, and were ill equipped to meet their debt requirements during the recession. Nothing would destabilize a community quicker than a huge foreclosed upon arts center on a highly visible retail corner.

The Beverly Arts Center was a destination point in the community that not only created hundreds of jobs, but also generated traffic for many nearby bars and restaurants. When I took office, the center was $5 million in debt with a lender actively pursuing foreclosure.

As a member of the board of directors and the local alderman, I oversaw a complete organizational turnaround. With assistance from Mayor Emanuel and State Representative Fran Hurley, we secured an immediate $350,000 to reduce some principle debt. This show of good faith allowed us to renegotiate our debt and launch a major fundraising campaign.

We brought in new leadership at the board level and conducted a nationwide search for a new executive director. Today, through the generosity of several key donors and our lender, our debt has been reduced to approximately $1 million. I am very proud to say that this community anchor is now thriving.

We have also seen an influx of new businesses and existing business expansion. New restaurants like Home Run Inn, Horse Thief Hollow, and Barraco’s have opened. As I write these words, demolition is taking place for a new Buona Restaurant at the long vacant corner of 107th & Western Ave. Several existing businesses have completed major expansions as well – specifically Optimo Hats opening a second location dedicated solely to its manufacturing operations and Brandenberger Commercial Plumbing significantly expanding to create new office and showroom space.

However, the greatest improvement to our commercial strip comes at the intersection of 115th & Western Ave. For over 30 years the north and south east corners of 115th & Western were vacant blighted eyesores dragging our community down. Previous Aldermen worked with a string of developers to bring a high quality use to this location.

Four years ago, I campaigned on a promise to bring a recreational use to this site. Today, the entire community excitedly watches construction crews building the Morgan Park Sports Center – an indoor ice rink and gymnastics facility that will become a major destination point on the southwest side. This development will draw thousands of new potential customers to Western Ave. while offering young people the opportunity to learn ice-skating, hockey, figure skating and gymnastics.