**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

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Ward: 33

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Previous political and civic experience: Union delegate at Roosevelt High School, strike captain at Roosevelt High School in 2012, Executive Board member, Chicago Teacher’s Union, education justice activist with Communities United (formerly Albany Park Neighborhood Council).

**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 a public sector worker, I care deeply about public pensions and the welfare of all public sector workers. I stand against reducing pension benefits as a means of making up for payment shortfalls, which are caused by politicians who willfully ignored their obligation to pay into the pension fund for decades. The employees never missed a payment. Not only is pension theft unconstitutional, it is an unsound policy: it takes from working families and pushes off the pension crisis into the future. I support creating new revenue streams, such as the LaSalle Street financial transaction tax, as a means of finding the revenue to fully fund pensions and will fight against the use of pension holidays in order to prevent this crisis from occurring in the future.

*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?*

I would support an increase in property taxes only with proper exemptions and planning. For example, expanding Illinois’ property tax circuit breaker beyond seniors and disabled people to include more middle- and low-income residents, who struggle equally with property tax increases. This would ensure that the wealthy pay their fair share in property tax increases, rather than place the brunt of the burden on working people. However, increasing property taxes is not a long-term solution to insufficient revenue for pensions, or any other public sector entity for that matter. Ultimately, property taxes are a regressive form of taxation, and I will fight to find revenue streams that make the very wealthy and corporations pay their fair share for the public services from which they benefit. For this reason, I support the LaSalle Street financial transaction tax and commuter taxes. Public-sector workers should not face the consequences for politicians willfully ignoring their responsibility to pay into the pension system and the very wealthy and corporations shirking their social responsibility to the public sector, from which they benefit.

**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 Teacher’s Pension Fund has averaged over 8.6% return over the past 35 years, including the recession. We pay 9% of our salary into the pensions, but only 2% is actually taken from my paycheck. The other 7% is held by CPS, under a deal worked out in the 1980s between CPS and CTU. The idea was to provide a tax benefit to CPS. But if CPS isn’t making its pension obligations, I am not only losing my pension benefit but an additional 7% of my salary; this amounts to wage theft. CPS assumed responsibility for making payments in 1995, then promptly went on an almost-annual pension holiday for more than a decade.

There are three solutions to the CPS budget shortfall. First, restore the responsibility for making payments to City Council and their budget. Second, eliminate the ability of the state to grant pension holidays and other gimmicks—no more games. The reason we face balloon payments now is because of years of “holidays.” Finally, we have a revenue crisis, not a pension crisis. We need to identify new sources of revenue, such as the financial transaction tax. We also need to stop toxic rate swaps and TIF theft from our schools, parks, and libraries. CPS loses an estimated $250 million to TIFs annually.

The pension “crisis” has been deliberately created through irresponsible practices, such as pension holidays, approved by our elected leadership and their appointees—not the public sector workers of Chicago who pay into the pension system on time, every time. Why is it that the people who contract with the City to make pension investments contribute to politicians like Rahm and Rauner, who want to destroy public pensions? It is because they see lucrative opportunities for themselves to profit from the transfer of money from defined benefit plans to defined contribution plans. They will use fees and manipulate the market to steal the life savings of public sector workers. Privatization does not produce a better service, nor does it come at a lower cost. This is the case whether you’re talking about pensions, custodial services, or charter schools, etc. It serves only to enrich the campaign contributors of politicians like Emanuel and Rauner.

**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:* 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 cause of Chicago’s budget shortfalls is a failure on the part of our elected officials to fairly tax the very wealthy and corporations. Chicago’s economic development strategy has depended on a narrow toolkit, which includes subsidies to the wealthy and corporations, and privatization deals. These policies have been pursued to create jobs and increase the tax base along with city revenue; however, they have proven time and again to fail on both accounts, though they have tremendously benefited the private corporations that receive subsidy packages and city contracts. This narrow economic development toolkit has siphoned money from the public sector, creating the “need” to cut public services. Ultimately, a strong economic base relies on a well-funded public sector that generates both middle-class jobs and the physical and social infrastructure that companies look for when moving to cities. Solving our budget crises and moving toward a fully-funded, quality public sector requires that we find ways to tax the very rich and corporations whose wealth-creation depends on Chicago’s public sector workers and public services. For this reason, I support a financial transaction tax and a commuter tax, which act as more creative and meaningful solutions to Chicago’s budget problems.

**4) Crime**

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

*Yes or No:* It depends.

*Please explain:*  The most cost-effective means of encouraging public safety are policies that can attack the root social issues that cause crime. These policies include a $15 minimum wage and a fully-funded public sector, which would strengthen schools with extra-curricular programs, stronger social services, and more full-time, well-paid job opportunities. Closing clinics and schools is a tried and true method to destabilize neighborhoods. I also believe that police should be required to engage more directly with the communities they serve and protect. Patrolling the streets from their vehicles is an ineffective way to build the strong relationships necessary to diminish crime. Police should remain in their beats and should spend two to four shifts a month walking their beats, getting to know residents and building trust in the community. Relocating police to high-crime areas is not effective and can be distressing to law-abiding residents in those areas.

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

Anyone who sells a weapon should be accountable for who they sell it to. Guns should have titles like automobiles or real estate do. Right now legal gun owners purchase from legal dealers and then sell weapons on the black market with no accountability. I would support legislation that requires all gun sales to be reported to the state, so weapons recovered by police can be traced back to the arms dealers.

**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:* Yes

*Please explain:* Our campaign was instrumental in getting the referendum on the ballot in the 33rd ward. I strongly support an elected representative school board (ERSB), and am, to my knowledge, the only candidate in this aldermanic race to do so.

Our current, appointed board is unaccountable to any person except for the mayor, and it shows. As community members and parents across the city plead, petitioned, and cried to the board as they considered dozens of school closings, virtually everything they had to say to the board fell on deaf ears. At the board meetings I have attended, board members have texted or even fallen asleep while parents, students, and teachers were speaking. The mayor and other defenders of an appointed board charge that CPS will be further politicized if board members are elected by the public. This is ridiculous. Education is political, and it always has been; mayoral control did not change that. Far from being the magic bullet in solving educational challenges, mayoral control has been the primary catalyst for privatization of our public schools. I wrote about the perils of privatization for the *Sun-Times* in an editorial published last year (“CPS Starving Its Schools to Justify Privatization”). The mayor is able to give direct control of our school system to bankers and hedge fund managers, whose interests are in liquidating public assets to make money for themselves, not a genuine interest in improving education for the residents and children of Chicago. Their expertise is in finance and profit-making, not in education policy. Deborah Quazzo and her clear conflict of interest is a perfect example of why we need an elected board.

**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 support increasing the TIF surplus to 100%

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

I argue for the abolishment, not reform, of TIF. Existing TIF districts should be allowed to sunset (as was the original intent of TIF), to make way for more planned, democratic forms of development finance. In the short term, any TIF surpluses should be placed back into the city agencies they were taken from; i.e., schools, parks, and libraries. While TIF began with good intentions of solving urban blight, in the 1990s, it transformed into the City’s primary form of economic development. Since the TIF process is extremely opaque, it is easy for moneyed developers and elected officials to push through unnecessary development that benefit their individual needs while diverting money from our public schools, transit, and other essential services. The $55 million allotment of TIF funds for the Marriott and DePaul basketball arena provides an apt example. Despite widespread outcry, the City pushed through this TIF allotment while later claiming TIF surplus funds could not be secured to shore up the CPS budget gap. TIF money comes from our property taxes and is often advanced through selling bonds. Abolishing TIF, therefore, will only mean fewer competing TIF districts, which serve to fracture these revenue sources and hamper democratic say in how they are spent. Additionally, if TIFs continue to exist, funds should not be portable to contiguous districts. Neighborhood money is used to fund downtown projects in this manner.

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

I believe a strong economic development strategy in my ward will be achieved in two ways. First through a fully funded public sector: fully funding the public school system, for instance, creates a well-educated workforce and puts in place programs that help prepare people for jobs; a fully funded and more robust public transit system creates greater access to jobs that do or could exist in the neighborhoods. These types of policies promote the kind of healthy physical and social infrastructure that employers seek out when making locational decisions. Secondly, I advocate for improved services in the ward through reprioritizing the city budget to direct funding to our neighborhoods, and not just to the downtown. Chicago’s current economic development strategy has poured the lion’s share of city resources into the downtown and away from our neighborhoods and has relied on public subsidies and tax breaks to lure private corporations to the Loop. This strategy has succeeded in using public funds for the enrichment of private corporations, but it has failed in creating good paying jobs for working people and, more importantly, it has taken money away from fully funded public services in all neighborhoods. As a result, the majority of Chicagoans are left with closed schools, shuddered clinics, and a dilapidated transit system. As a CPS teacher and a member the Chicago Teachers Union I have fought to ensure that all residents have equal access to quality public schools. As an Alderman I will be able to expand this political project to advocate for a fully funded public sector to ensure residents of the 33rd Ward and Chicago have equal access to the public services they need and deserve. A fully funded public sector (schools, transit, social services, etc) is not only possible through sustainable revenue policies, such as progressive taxes, but it is necessary to create the sound infrastructure for sustainable economic development and a high quality of life in the 33rd Ward and all of Chicago.

**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’s ward system is an inefficient political system that allows competition between neighborhoods to drive development and distribution of city funds. Although I believe Chicago would benefit from a reduction in the number of alderman, there are other more pressing, winnable issues that can resolve the problems created by the ward system. For example, competition between neighborhoods for scarce funding can be alleviated through sustainable, fair, and progressive revenue generation, which would provide more money for essential public services for all neighborhoods. Moreover, I advocate for increased democratic decision-making and an end to mayoral control of all city agencies. Democratically elected boards for CPS, the City Colleges, the Chicago Housing Authority, and the Chicago Transit Authority would allow for a more centralized and city-wide democratic forum to overcome the shortfalls of our 50-ward system.

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

*Yes or No:* Depends

*Please explain*: Gambling is not a sound revenue generation policy. It acts as yet another form of regressive taxation, disproportionately taking from working people. I advocate for taxing the very wealthy and corporations in the City of Chicago and I will fight for a LaSalle Street financial transaction tax. On the other hand, Chicago is surrounded by casinos; arguments that we are missing out on a much needed revenue source and that some jobs would be created locally by a casino appear to have merit. So I am undecided at this time until I further study the issue.

**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:* I oppose the red light camera program. First, it’s regressive taxation; they are another form of revenue generation disproportionately coming from the pockets of working families and working people in the 33rd Ward and the city. As an elected official, I will fight for more creative and sustainable forms of revenue, such as the financial transaction tax, which can more effectively raise money for our city. Secondly, the red light program demonstrates a troubling trend in City policy: the privatization of city services. In selling off essential city services to private companies, our elected leaders have transformed the City government’s responsibility from providing services towards ensuring profit and revenue for private companies, often the mayor’s campaign contributors. The red light camera, as well as the parking meter and Ventra debacle, are all examples of this trend. I will fight for a moratorium on privatization and more sustainable, fair forms of revenue creation.

The manipulation of yellow light times by the city suggests that the primary intention of the program is revenue, not safety. Rahm’s motorcade routinely blows off red light tickets while the rest of us must pay.

**11) Ward issues**

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

1. Economic justice, including a $15 minimum wage and more affordable housing, is a top issue. Sixty percent of ward residents work in the service sector, often at low-paying jobs; one in five families with children are below the poverty level. Working people shouldn’t have to live in poverty. A living wage keeps families in their homes, it keeps children from going hungry, and it boosts the local economy.

2. We want property values to increase and the neighborhood to improve, but not at the expense of the people who already live here. The 33rd ward is one of the most diverse in the city, and we want to protect and strengthen that. That’s why we support investing in people, not in property. That means fully funded schools and universal, quality Pre-K programs at neighborhood schools, and public services, such as clinics, that ward residents rely on.

3. Finally, we want more transparency and democracy at the ward level, as well as in the City Council. That’s why we support a ward advisory council with public meetings and public minutes, as well as participatory budgeting practices. We oppose the nepotism and political dynasties that have tainted ward politics for too long; we are running a legitimately independent campaign.