**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name: **Michael S. Diaz**

Ward: **45**

Occupation: **Attorney at Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation, Division of Banking**

Education: **B.A. and Ed.M – University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Juris Doctor – Loyola Chicago School of Law.**

Previous political and civic experience:

**I am a recipient of the NALEO Ford Motor Company Fellowship, which afforded me the opportunity to gain valuable legislative experience in Washington D.C office of the Hon. Luis V. Gutierrez. I also served on the Latino Advisory Council for the Office of the Illinois State Treasurer and served as Vice President of Region IX of the National Hispanic Bar Association; and am the former chair of the Local Government Committee for the Chicago Bar Association.**

**Today, I sit on the Board of Directors of Prevention First, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to preventing teen drug use throughout the State of Illinois, where I serve as Treasurer.**

**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:

**I oppose any measure that will unilaterally cut the pensions of retirees. If we are going to ask them to sacrifice for years of politicians and institutions failing to adequately fund their retirement, then we must require that everyone step in and balance this system. For current city employees we cannot ignore that the current system will undoubtedly leave them without a pension if things do not change. For this reason, I will support a comprehensive solution that fixes the problem and shares sacrifices evenly. I envision any solution being limited in duration – once the problem is solved the shared sacrifices end – and holding our elected officials accountable is key. To this end, I would propose a balanced budget ordinance that penalizes lawmakers for failing to adequately fund our pensions. If they don’t do their job and adopt budgets that pay the bills, then they should not get paid.**

**We must also rethink how to restructure benefit packages for newly-hired city workers. To this end, I propose establishing a working committee that will be dedicated to researching best practices in the area of employee benefits. If we want to retain the best workers to service our residents then we must incentivize them to stay, whether the incentive is in the form of a comprehensive benefit package or higher pay. More importantly, we owe it to our retirees and current city workers to find a solution for them first.**

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?

**We should explore all available options to free up funds in order to meet our pension and long-term debt obligations before turning to higher taxes and fees. I would like to first cut waste and inefficiency out of our budget before considering higher taxes and fees. If we must seek new revenue, I support the voter-approved Millionaire’s Tax that would give middle class families the relief they desperately need.**

**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?

**First, and foremost, we must demand the legislature in Springfield pass fair share legislation. The City of Chicago is the economic engine of the state. Yet, the state has failed to provide the city the resources we need to adequate fund our public schools and infrastructure. In fact, the city is paying more than its fair share to the state and is largely responsible for paying the pensions of teachers beyond the city limits. Second, we need to fight for the addition of a progressive tax to our constitution. The working poor and the middle class are the drivers of our economy. If we continue to weigh them down with excessive taxation the upward mobility of our residents and economy will be stifled.**

**Last, we must increase our tax base by making the City of Chicago a destination for families. By increasing our population as a city we also broaden our tax base. Such broadening of our tax base is essential to economic development and minimizing the burden posed by high property taxes.**

**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: **No.**

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

**I am not opposed to any measure that will help us pay our obligations. However, before any tax increase is put on the table the policies I introduced in question 2 (above) should be addressed.**

**4) Crime**

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

Yes or No:

Please explain:

**I support the hiring of more police officers. First and foremost, we need to become less dependent on overtime in order to fill voids in the force. A recent report indicated that payments for overtime exceeded $100 million in 2013, and has been in excess of budgetary projections the past three years. We need to be honest with residents and admit we have to hire additional personnel. Although I do not support investing every overtime dollar in new personnel, we should consider a hybrid program or ordinance that requires the hiring of new personnel when overtime expenditures exceed 100% of budgetary forecasts. Our budget should be accurate and stable.**

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

**Eliminating or hampering the flow of illegal guns into the city will not, in and of itself, solve the harm caused by criminals using guns illegally. Although I am supportive of mandatory sentencing for any person in possession of a firearm not licensed to carry in the state, a legislative initiative will do little to stem the impact that the illegal flow of guns is having in our city streets. In order to combat the flow of illegal guns in Chicago we must address three core areas: (1) the number of full-time officers on the streets and serving on gang task units; (2) the need for robust pedagogy and quality schools in high risk areas; and (3) access to meaningful and gainful employment.**

**First, by hiring new full-time officers for our police force we can provide additional resources to high crime areas where gun violence is a challenge. Most importantly, if our officers are provided these resources I believe they can quell any threat that will lead to any surge in gun violence or violent crime generally.**

**Second, quality schools that provide an extended day of instruction are fundamental to combating gun violence. This is why I support a longer school day for all CPS students. We no longer live in an agrarian society where students must rush home to help out on the farm and accomplish other chores. I am also an advocate for and supporter of block scheduling. Time on task is essential to learning and the development of substantive pedagogy. Going from 45 minutes of math to 2 hours and 45 minutes of math block scheduling, for example, will allow teachers the opportunity to develop innovative curriculum and students the time to work with and comprehend new ideas and models. Keeping students in school longer, instead of on the streets, to master subject matter is something we all should support.**

**Last, we must keep Chicagoans in Chicago. So in addition to a robust and progressive minimum wage, we must work to fill the almost 8,000 manufacturing jobs that are empty today. If we can prepare our residents for these jobs, Chicagoans will stay and invest further in our great city and others will see Chicago and the 45th ward as an area to run to, not away from.**

**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:

Please explain:

**On an elected school board, although I generally believe the mayor should appoint the board, I think having an elected school board is an idea worth looking into. To that end, I would work with council members and establish a committee to study the issue.**

**I have fundamental questions that I think must be answered before I can form a qualified opinion on the matter. First, I would want to know how board members will be chosen, and whether a background in education should be a requirement. Second, I would want to know how many wards each member will represent and whether they would have control over the purse strings. Last, I would want to be assured that the role of politics would be minimized on the board. At the end of the day we need to know who will be accountable when challenges arise, and we must be able to move swiftly when the times require action.**

**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:

**TIF’s should be used to accomplish the dual goals of economic growth and stability in economically depressed areas and the areas they impact. Once goals are met, TIF districts should be eliminated.**

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

**To provide clarity on when goals are achieved, we must pass rules or regulations outlining what factors must be met in order for a TIF to be eliminated. To date, I am not aware of any guidance that will help decision makers’ responsibly eliminate or expand a TIF. Until such guidance is in place I will not move quickly in supporting the expansion or extension of any TIF district within the 45th Ward without overwhelming community support.**

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

**We must engage our neighborhood schools and community colleges to focus on job ready sectors, such as technology and light manufacturing, in order to grow our economy and decrease unemployment realities for new workers.**

**In addition, we have to utilize Small Business Administration programs and TIF dollars to incentivize employers to expand their operations within the ward. We must also create job-training clusters throughout the city utilizing our neighborhood schools and city colleges. These clusters should be welcoming centers for displaced workers and offer them an opportunity to retrain, learn new skills, and obtain advanced certifications for the jobs that exist today.**

**I would also seek to establish a choice employer program. Employers that invest in worker training initiatives and pay a fair wage should be provided targeted investments to expand their operations or hire additional employees.**

**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 are the first point of contact for constituents seeking assistance and services. Responding to those residents is beyond a full-time job for aldermen, and reducing the size of City Council would make it more difficult for our citizens to access Chicago government.**

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

Yes or No:

Please explain:

**I do support the concept of a gambling casino in Chicago, because it is irresponsible to lose tourism dollars to the suburbs or our neighbors in Indiana. To have a thriving tourism industry we cannot cede such a valuable resource without a fight.**

**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:

Please explain:

**I am supportive of measures designed to slow traffic around parks and busy thoroughfares. Although I do not like the Big Brother-esque feel of the traffic light camera program, I do appreciate the opportunity to cross a busy street without having to dodge oncoming traffic traveling at speeds in excess of 30 miles per hour, and I like that drivers are more aware of their surrounding as they approach intersections.**

**11) Ward issues**

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

**Jobs – We must work to attract light or micro manufacturing into the ward.**

**Education – a large percentage of the students enrolled in our schools are low-income and achieving at or above state averages. We have to invest further in these students by creating an additional gifted or magnet school in our ward. We must also invest in our seasoned worker population who are willing and ready to work, but need adequate training.**

**Infrastructure/Investment – As a former small business owner I understand the importance of foot traffic to a thriving commercial district. When people drive through the 45th Ward I want them to slow down, look around, stop and shop – we have to rethink how people travel through our ward and adopt a plan to enhance the consumer experience. Our residents should not have to travel to Niles, Norridge or Des Plaines to get the commercial goods they require.**