**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name: **Mary E. O’Connor**

Ward: **41**

Occupation: **Alderman, City of Chicago 41st Ward**

Education: **Attended High School at Resurrection High School and received a Bachelor of Science in Business with an emphasis on Nutrition from Eastern Illinois University**

Previous political and civic experience:

**41st Ward Democratic Committeeman**

**President – Edison Park Chamber of Commerce**

**Board of Directors- Edison Park Community 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: (yes)

Please Explain:

**The 41st Ward is home to many of Chicago’s first responders. As such, I am committed to finding a solution to our pension crisis that will allow these brave men and women to retire with the economic security they deserve.**

**Our government made promises to our public employees and unfortunately, our elected leaders did not fully appreciate the consequences of failing to live up to those commitments.**

**Instead, we delayed and deferred on our obligations. A deep economic recession and the near financial collapse of our market were also contributing factors.**

**And while I am certainly sensitive to the genuine concerns of our public workers, I do not believe our pension crisis can be fixed solely on the backs of taxpayers, many of whom lost their jobs and watched as their 401K plans disappeared over the last decade.**

**Moving forward, I think it is clear that there has to be some give and take on all sides to resolve this problem. The leaders that are here today, myself included, have to make the difficult decisions and find a compromise that will save our pension system and avoid bankruptcy.**

**We must also separate the needs from the wants and make sure our tax dollars are being spent wisely. We cannot afford costly projects that don’t benefit the City as a whole. City Council must prove that it is up to the task and that it can be trusted.**

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?

**In terms of revenue, I owe it to our retirees to consider all reasonable options, which might help stabilize our pension systems.**

**I will evaluate these options on individual basis, but I am very concerned about the impact of an across the board property tax increase in my ward. I would prefer that we pursue other avenues to generating revenue.**

**We also must prevent bankruptcy of the system. Retirees deserve to retire with peace of mind and financial security.**

**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?

**Again, I owe it to our retirees to consider all reasonable options, which might help stabilize our pension systems.**

**We need to identify a suitable and permanent revenue stream. It’s also time for Springfield to fulfill its own obligations and better fund our public schools so that more dollars can go into our pension systems.**

**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- There are a wide range of services, particularly luxury items, which should be taxed. Circumstances require that we expand our tax base.**

\* A tax on non-Chicago residents who work in the city

Yes or No:

**No – this measure might do more harm than good, as neighboring municipalities might impose their own commuter tax on residents in Chicago that commute to one of our neighboring suburbs.**

\* A tax on electronic financial transactions on Chicago’s trading exchanges, known as the “LaSalle Street tax”

**Yes** or No:

**I would certainly support a minimal tax on these financial transactions; however, it is extremely unlikely that this measure will gain the necessary support in Springfield.**

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

**4) Crime**

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

Yes or No: **Yes.**

Please explain:

**While the 41st Ward is made up of the safest neighborhoods in Chicago, I have no doubt my ward would benefit from an increased police presence.**

**I support hiring additional police officers and making sure that every police district is properly staffed. We must do more than simply keep up with the rate of attrition.**

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

**Cutting off the flow of illegal guns remains the single greatest impediment to reducing violent crime in many communities throughout Chicago. These weapons also threaten the safety and security of our men and women in uniform.**

**I would like to see state and federal law enforcement agencies take action on background checks, tougher sentencing laws, mandatory jail time for gun offenses, and ending the trafficking of weapons across state lines.**

**Our focus should remain on going after criminals who have shown no respect for the rule of law without impeding the constitutionally protected rights of gun owners.**

**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: **No.**

Please explain:

**I do not support an elected school board.**

**The 41st Ward has benefited from unprecedented investments in our neighborhood schools in recent years, and I want to continue that momentum. Schools that were once dangerously overcrowded are now receiving beautiful new annexes to help accommodate our growing student population. Schools that were once crumbling from decades of neglect are now getting the critical capital improvements they so desperately need. Taken together, many of our students and educators are already benefitting from improved working conditions.**

**These investments in our local schools were the result of a collaborative effort between my office and a wide range of stakeholders within each of the affected communities.**

**While I do believe the Board of Education is long overdue for a series of reforms, I am not convinced that an elected school board would place a great emphasis on addressing the needs of my neighborhood schools in the 41st Ward.**

**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.**

**The 41st Ward is the only one in the City of Chicago that does not benefit from TIF district, so I am inclined to support measures that return surpluses to their respective taxing body.**

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

**A TIF can be a useful tool for spurring economic development and creating good, high paying jobs for many residents in communities throughout Chicago. Ideally, they should produce a positive return on our investment by establishing a stronger local economy that will produce significant tax revenues. I support reforms that keep the focus on this goal, and also make the process more transparent.**

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

**As a small business owner and former President of the Edison Park Chamber of Commerce, I have had significant experience attracting employers into my neighborhood and revitalizing once struggling commercial districts.**

**I will continue to work with local chambers and neighborhood groups and also with colleagues on ways to cut the red tape at City Hall and establish an environment that encourages entrepreneurship.**

**As alderman, I have fought to ensure that my community directly benefits from economic activity in the surrounding area. For example, I introduced an ordinance that requires a percentage of non-federally funded projects at O’Hare Airport to be awarded to local residents.

I will continue to hold absentee landlords responsible for making sure their vacant storefronts are appropriately maintained, both inside and out. These neglected storefronts inhibit the growth and success of a business district. As alderman, I will continue to utilize every resource available to my office to hold these individuals responsible and ensure that the health of our local business districts are not jeopardized by a few bad actors.**

**Whenever I meet with prospective businesses or developers, I strongly encourage them to hire locally, support union workers, join their local chamber of commerce and identify ways to support the community they seek to do business in.**

**I also work closely with the City of Chicago Department of Housing and Economic Development and other groups that foster development to strengthen our approach to growing our commercial districts. We must also continue making investments in our local infrastructure, which in turn incentivizes potential business to make long term investments in the 41st Ward.**

**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 have the largest ward in the entire City of Chicago geographically, and properly maintaining that territory is already a demanding task, one that I consider to be a full time job and then some. This is in addition to fulfilling an alderman’s legislative responsibilities. Decreasing the number of aldermen will only strain an alderman’s capacity to effectively deliver basic city services on behalf of his or her constituents. Residents in Chicago expect to be able to contact their alderman and submit a wide range of service requests. If the City Council were cut in half, the vast majority of those services would have to be centralized, a decision that I do not believe a majority of residents would support.**

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

Yes or No: **Yes.**

Please explain:

**The time has come to break the impasse and move forward with the establishment of world class, land-based casino in Chicago. I also support slot machines at O’Hare and Midway Airport.**

**This will grow our economy and promote tourism, which in turn generates revenue to help us begin to address our growing pension obligations. A land-based casino will also create jobs across a wide range of industries.**

**We can no longer afford to sit back and watch as residents and visitors flock to Indiana. I prefer they spend that money right here in Chicago.**

**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 was not in office when the red light camera program was enacted. The public is understandably suspect of these devices and I can’t blame given what we now know about the former red-light camera vendor and how the program was grossly mismanaged. I am encouraged that the appropriate action has been taken to root out the failures in the program and that those individuals that abused the system are now being prosecuted.**

**While my preference has always been to have more officers on hand to enforce these traffic laws, I ultimately supported the establishment of Child Safety Zones because the issue of reckless driving around our neighborhood schools and parks is one that many parents and community members in my ward contact the service office to share their concerns about.**

**Furthermore, a portion of those revenues are redirected back into traffic safety for things like speed humps, improved signage and street markings, and youth education programs.**

**I am encouraged that motorists are beginning to obey the law as evidenced by the fact that the anticipated revenues from this program are falling far short of the initial projections.**

**11) Ward issues**

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

1. **Expanding the number of sworn police officers in our ranks and making sure that every district, in every corner of the City is adequately staffed.**
2. **Continue making investments in our local infrastructure. While we've made great progress in recent years, we must continue to invest in our neighborhoods. Let's put more people back to work rebuilding our great city.**
3. **Working to reduce the impact of aircraft noise on my communities in the 41st Ward as a result of the O’Hare Modernization Plan.**
4. **I want to build on my record of securing investments in our local schools. In addition to our capital needs, we must also do more to ensure our schools are adequately funded.**