**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Name:** Zehra Quadri

**Ward:** 50th

**Occupation:** Executive Director, ZAM’s Hope Community Resource Center

 Former Cook County Grant Management Administrator

**Education:** Aligarh University, India — B.S., 1986

 Political / Social Science

**Previous Political / Civic Experience:**

My primary civic commitment has been to successful delivery of services by the ongoing operations of ZAM’s Hope Community Resource Center, which I founded in 2000 to help women in need of social services in the Rogers Park area. In order to raise the level of awareness for both public and private assistance needed to support the services ZAM’s Hope provided, I became more involved in government, politics, and the local business community through my volunteer work on political campaigns.

**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, unless it is a voluntary agreement between the pension stakeholders and the city.

Please Explain:

I think the Illinois Supreme Court has made it clear that it is illegal for governments to reduce existing pension benefits for people enrolled in the public pension systems, so that is not an option for the inevitable pension reforms that must take place. Whatever was contractually promised in the past needs to honored, regardless of the irresponsibility of the public officials who made those promises for short term political safety or gain at the time the decisions were made. If every government was allowed to nullify the actions of previous administrations and legislative bodies, no rational person would deal with the government.

Structural pension system reforms affecting newly hired employees will need to take place so that the pension system remains solvent for future generations. Structural pension reforms and any change in benefits for existing employees or retirees must take place with the voluntary agreement of this affected or they are null and void.

**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 order to solve our immediate problem of funding our pension system so that it is solvent, I propose that we work to get state legislative authorization for a one-time transfer of our TIF Fund excess to the city pension funds that are deficient, then work to restructure our current long term debt to fill the gap. Moving forward I would reduce the amount of money being irresponsibly shifted from the basic daily operational funding of the city, including pension fund payments, to TIF funds which have been used as a slush fund to help favored political insiders as well as for extravagant downtown beautification projects that are less of a priority that the basic infrastructure of our city. I value beauty and understand its role in attracting tourists, but if the streets, sewers, water pipes, mass transit system and education system are collapsing, it really doesn’t matter if “Maggie Daley Park” wins the best new design award from Home & Garden magazine.

**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?**

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**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. It is a regressive tax on working families.

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

**Yes or No:**

No. This is a ridiculous idea that immediately lead to suburbs taxing Chicago commuter employees, so it would nullify any benefit and create an additional tax burden for individual workers. For some businesses and employees, it may be the last straw which leads them to abandon Chicago. It is a short sighted and counterproductive idea.

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

**Yes or No:**

No. All modern trading is no electronic and able to be relocated to wherever the owners want. If you tax LaSalle Street beyond at a rate that is not competitive with another state or city, they will just move and will never come back. We need them, they don’t need us.

**4) Crime**

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

**Yes or No:**

**Yes.**

Please explain:

I would like to bring the Chicago Police force up to the budgeted number of officers, which I do not believe we have now. You could have a cop on every other street corner and it still would not eliminate crime, so I don’t think more cops is the final answer to eliminating crime, but I think that a consistent depletion of the ranks will lead to more crime. Having been a participant IN CAPS and having established a relationship with patrol officers as well as district commanders in my area, I strongly believe that it is up to family responsibility and community participation to keep a community safe and secure. We all need to help out, and that means reporting suspicious activity and working to eliminate abandoned or run down residential and commercial buildings that may invite criminal activity.

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

The state legislature has always allowed for one set of laws for Chicago and Cook County and another set of laws for the rest of the state. Many laws begin with “In cities of over 2,000,000 people…”. Given the diversity of our state and extreme difficulty in passing statewide gun control measures, I think we should set up two sets of laws —one for Cook County and one for the rest of the state.

In Cook County, gun ownership and registration would be necessary, but not in the rest of the State of Illinois. Violation of the law would carry more severe penalties, but convicted gun offenders would be required to go to a prison just for gun offenders and required to perform hard labor for the length of their incarceration. After one term in prison, it is unlikely they would want to return.

I believe the legislation would have little resistance from downstate legislators because they have less of an interest in what happens on the streets of Chicago and it would not impose any further restriction on the firearms they cherish so deeply. They benefit to Cook County would be safer streets and healthier families, both physically and mentally, who will live in less fear of gun violence.

**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: No.

Please explain:

If Chicago were less political, I think an elected school board would be a good idea. But, we are what we are. School board elections would not be rational arguments by the people best qualified to manage our education system, but knock down, drag out political knife fights financed by political insiders fighting to keep political control of a patronage rich government entity and teachers unions seeking to control both sides of the contractual bargaining table. They only people who lose are the students, their parents and the businesses who will ultimately rely on an under-educated workforce to keep our economy competitive.

Since the people we elect now control our school system, if we don’t like the way the schools are run then we should toss them out of office. My opponent Alderman Deborah Silverstein is one of the rubber stamps Rahm Emanuel uses to approve any change in the school system he desires. We need Alderman who will actively participate in policy evaluation and school reform, not 50 Aldermanic robots who do whatever the Mayor tells them. That political servant system is what caused Chicago to it’s the brink of its current financial collapse.

**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?

I believe at least 80% of TIF fund balances should be emptied out to fund our current pension and school system deficits. Moving forward, TIF districts surpluses should be increased by creating a cap on the amount allowed to be used in each TIF fund. Anything above the cap would revert to its intended property tax purpose, the operations of the City of Chicago.

**7) Neighborhood economic development**

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

The 50th Ward has an abundance of business owners with much experience and success in retailing, modern technology and international business. We have the ability to expand our local economy to be a hub of international financial and commerce, but the local business leaders need to have a far sighted partner in the government to champion their efforts. We do not have one.

**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 think the size of the city council should be reduced to 20. We never needed 50 Alderman, it’s just an elected official patronage scheme. I assume it was concocted 100 years ago so that various ethnic groups would feel they were protected and the Alderman would be able to enrich himself at the expense of his constituents. 20 Wards would provide a manageable geographic area for an Alderman to monitor and provide oversight. The decrease in cost for aldermanic salaries and office space can be redirected toward substantive staff at City Hall to provide reasonable support and research to alderman.

Resources would also need to be reallocated for larger aldermanic field offices since they would have to serve larger constituencies.

**9) A Chicago casino**

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

Yes or No: Yes

Please explain:

I personally do not approve of gambling, but my personal beliefs cannot be my guide in determining what is best for the economic future of the city. Equally attractive cities in warmer climates offer gambling to attract conventions and tourists, and by not having a single casino in downtown Chicago, I believe we are at an economic disadvantage when competing for tourism/convention business.

I oppose slot machines and video gaming at local businesses. It is a detriment to local working families and provides little in terms of local economic progress.

**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:

In my area, yes. Throughout the city, no.

Please explain:

While some red light and speed cameras serve a legitimate public safety purpose, I believe the push to continue installing them through the city is a revenue grab into the pockets of Chicago working families. At some point it is not about safety, but money. Our city elected officials have botched the job of planning our financial future and want to make up the difference by sticking fees and taxes on those people least able to afford it, and that means parking fines, red light fines, speeding fines and worst of all, right turn on red fines if you stop but don’t wait 8 seconds before turning. The fact that they illegally shortened yellow light timing to create more ticket/fine money says it all.

**11) Ward issues**

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

Aldermanic participation in the community, the lack of public service on our streets and allies, and the lack of economic development and jobs in our main commercial corridors.

Most people in our Ward have never met the Silversteins, either the Alderman or her husband the State Senator. They are the equivalent of absentee slumlords that only come around to ask for rent, but in their case, they only come around to ask for votes. The deterioration of the 50th Ward infrastructure, community morale and economic viability are directly related to lack of leadership from Alderman Deborah Silverstein. She disappeared immediately after being elected and has rarely been seen in the community since.

One problem in helping attract new business to our community, as well as helping reduce crime in the neighborhoods, is to insure the basic cleanliness of the streets and sidewalks. While residents and businesses do their part to keep the area around their residences and businesses clean, the Alderman needs to make sure our city services staff are clearing waste from the streets, the alleys and the sidewalks. Garbage cans need to be placed and emptied wherever needed in the public ways. Business owners know that customer want to eat, shop and gather in clean and attractive retail districts, and our Alderman has abandoned her responsibility in this regard.

As I stated before, the 50th Ward has an abundance of business owners with much experience and success in retailing, modern technology and international business. We have the ability to expand our local economy to be a hub of international financial and commerce, but the local business leaders need to have a far sighted partner in the government to champion their efforts. We do not have one.