**2015 CHICAGO SUN-TIMES CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name: Jesus Garcia

Occupation: Cook County Commissioner

Education: Masters in Urban Planning and BA, both from University of Illinois at Chicago

Previous political and civic experience: Past Member of the Chicago City Council and the Illinois State Senate, Founder of Enlace Chicago, past Board Member of the Woods Fund.

**1) Top Priorities**

Please name your top three priorities for the city, and explain how you will make changes in those three areas.

My main focus will be reducing gang and gun violence through improved police-community relations and by putting 1,000 additional appropriately trained police on the street. I will strengthen our local public schools and make them the center of neighborhood life and activity. I will work equally hard to create new jobs and opportunities for our fellow Chicagoans who want to work. I explain how I will make changes in those three areas in my responses to your questions below.

**2) 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:

This is a problem we created together as a City, and it is a problem that will require everyone’s participation to resolve. The solution is necessarily two-fold as it is both a matter of dealing with existing debt in the form of inadequately funded liabilities and future benefits that are better aligned with our ability to provide for the retirement of future city workers. In dealing with existing liabilities, the payments that will be needed to bring the retirement systems to solvency will have to be drawn from savings that we may achieve on pension benefits for future workers and from revenues that are earmarked for bringing down the debt. In addition, changes to future benefits must be structured so that we never again defer on obligations that are owed to future retirees.

That said, I do not support cutting benefits for current retirees. Many retired City workers have only their pensions to see them through their old age. They have worked hard and paid into their pension funds for years, and it would be wrong to change the rules on them now. Although the Supreme Court of Illinois has not yet weighed in on the matter, I was not surprised that the Circuit Court ruled recently that the State pension legislation violated the clear language in the State Constitution, declaring pensions to be a contractual right of pensioners. If the Supreme Court accepts the Attorney General’s argument that the State may limit pension benefits as an exercise of its police powers, we will carefully review the ruling and its implications for further addressing this very serious problem.

Regardless of the outcome of that litigation, I would consider reducing the City’s contribution to pension benefits for future employees and other cost-saving measures. However, I believe in the right of collective bargaining and the important social policies that it reflects, and I would prefer to negotiate such changes with the elected union leadership. I respect the contributions our workers make to our city, and I believe we will be able to come up with a solution to everyone’s advantage, so long as we work together from that foundation of respect.

I also have a record of reducing taxes on Cook County taxpayers, including the sales tax, and I think it is important for our families and businesses to know we will not try to balance our books on their backs. I do not support a property tax rise to fund pensions, because I know too many families – and especially senior citizens -- who are already struggling to pay their existing tax bills.

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?

**3) 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?

This year, working with President Preckwinkle, I helped pass a County budget that the Civic Federation praised. They called us “accountable and efficient” stewards of public resources. Unfortunately, the City of Chicago continues to move in the opposite direction. Getting City finances back on track will take new leadership, and it is one of the principal reasons I am running for Mayor.

The City’s use of long-term bonds to fund operations and short-term expenses -- “scoop and toss” -- is not justified. The practice is unsustainable, and it is expensive. Instead of paying off $120.8 million in bonds as scheduled in 2015, the City refinanced them at an additional total interest cost of $229 million over 30 years. In other words, poor financial decisions cost the City $229 million that could have been used to create new jobs, educate our children or make our streets safer.

As a City, we have to find better ways to fund infrastructure and operations. We cannot keep borrowing money to pay debts, and leaving the looming financial problems to future generations. That kind of approach will bankrupt local government and destroy our City’s future. One possibility is finding better efficiencies in cooperation with the County. This has not been aggressively pursued by the current City administration, but it can lead to reduced costs and savings, while providing improved and expanded services, especially in transportation and health care. We cannot cut our way out of the structural deficit but we can and must operate more efficiently as part of the solution. In addition to better coordination of services among local governments, efficiency means cutting waste and looking for new revenue sources.

**4) 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

\* 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

A financial services tax is a huge gamble and is aimed at the one “industry” in which Chicago excels and a center for innovation. The actual markets are electronic and can be moved to other locations. The “market makers” are the people who create these markets, and their loss has potentially huge consequences.

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

Please see my comments above.

**5) Economic development**

What will you do as mayor to bring jobs to the city and boost economic development?

We should all celebrate the fact our Central Business District is growing again, as the nation emerges from the Great Recession. Continuing this growth and expanding prosperity across the entire City will require a real investment in our neighborhoods. That is why I have put forward an agenda to strengthen our neighborhood-based schools and make our streets safer in every community. Great cities have great neighborhoods, and we simply cannot attract new high-growth industries to our city without strong neighborhoods where their workers will want to live.

We have invested heavily in developing the downtown area and making it more attractive for the last 20 years. It is truly a success that we can and should be proud of. We should be pleased this investment is paying off with over 540,000 jobs now located in the downtown area. We want these workers to stay and live in Chicago, raise their families here and pay their taxes here. However, not everyone who works downtown can or will live downtown. That is why we need vibrant neighborhoods for these workers to live in – communities with safe streets, good schools and local retail options for shopping, as well as affordable housing opportunities.

Just as our neighborhoods depend on each other, our City depends on the continued growth of Northeastern Illinois. As Mayor, I will work collaboratively with surrounding communities to fund our airports and other transportation modes, secure stable power sources, and strengthen communications lines, because these are the necessary ingredients to continued economic growth.

Downtown may be the crown jewel of the city economy, but the neighborhoods must be regarded as forming the crown itself. The industrial corridors on the City’s west, south and northwest sides are the historic backbone of the City’s economy. The businesses in the corridors were the sources of thousands of good paying jobs. These wage earners put their kids through school, supported a vibrant local retail economy, and paid the taxes that made Chicago the City that Works.

The new Digital Manufacturing and Design Innovation Institute on Goose Island can play an important role in bringing new manufacturing back into the city, but this can only happen if we work with manufacturing innovators, neighborhood community development organizations, new breeds of venture capitalists, and the real estate community to re-shape these old corridors into new manufacturing centers. But, it does not stop with just DMDII. Argonne is a major player in the research on new battery design: batteries that range from large scale systems for storing electricity generated by windmills to batteries that can power a vehicle for long distances. Our focus should be on creating the right kinds of conditions for businesses that are innovating new ways to take advantage of these emerging technologies to meet the needs of global markets.

A Garcia administration will begin with a comprehensive assessment of the City’s transportation network of streets, highways, rail, water and airport systems from the viewpoint of what needs to be done to improve the viabilityof manufacturing, warehousing and commercial spaces that comprise the economic framework of the City.

**6) Crime**

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

Yes or No: Yes

Please explain:

Violent crime is a staggering problem throughout the entire city. As Mayor, I will keep the promise that Rahm Emanuel broke by putting 1,000 additional police officers on the streets, but I would make sure these new officers are adequately trained to truly serve and protect. The existing police force is not only insufficiently oriented, but also insufficiently staffed to effect true community policing. Significant overtime currently is unavoidable, which reduces the effectiveness of current officers.  With the 265 current patrol vacancies and the 580 vacancies in Sergeants, Lieutenants, and Detectives reported by the Police Superintendent, the Department will remain understaffed for the foreseeable future unless we act to correct this problem.

However, we need to take a multi-faceted approach that addresses the root causes of violence by addressing the employment needs in our neighborhoods. As a recent study by the University of Chicago Crime Lab demonstrated, a public summer jobs program for high school students from disadvantaged neighborhoods in Chicago reduced violent crime arrests by 43 percent over a 16-month period. Sadly, that same report found youth employment in the summer months is near a 60-year low.

There must also be a long-term and on-going commitment to Community Policing. True community policing remains a proven and effective way to both solve crimes and actually to prevent it. It constitutes a genuine partnership with a neighborhood based on trust built over time between long-term beat officers and neighborhoods they serve. It takes training and commitment.

Here in Chicago we have tried many approaches and run through numerous police chiefs without solving major problems—and in some cases exacerbating them. I know community policing works, because I have witnessed firsthand the difference it has made in my own neighborhood of Little Village. There, the community group I founded, “Enlace Chicago,” has partnered with the Chicago Police Department and North Lawndale Employment Network to reduce youth violence and to improve community-police relations.

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

As evidenced by the continual increase of shootings and the unacceptably high rate of gun-related crimes, the need for gun control cannot be overstated. In light of the current United States Supreme Court interpretation of the Second Amendment, many effective approaches to gun control are regrettably not available. But much more can and should be done to decrease the widespread presence of handguns in our City. As Mayor, I will support strict and enhanced enforcement of all existing laws regarding gun registration and background checks. In addition, as most of the gun violence epidemic in Chicago can be traced to the use of guns by street gang members, I will support enhanced penalties for illegal use of weapons by criminal street gang members, including aggravated crimes of violence. I will also support any legislation that gets to the root of gun violence by addressing economic inequality, promoting police engagement and community response, and allocating resources for job training and mental health.

**7) 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: Yes

Please explain:

I believe it is necessary to change course dramatically from the so-called "reforms" offered by Mayor Emanuel and instead take a new, holistic approach to our city’s schools. A sound public education system should the right of everyone one in our society, as it is the very foundation of a functioning democracy and a healthy economy.

My plan involves giving the school system back to the people through an elected school board; reducing to the barest legal minimum the plethora of high-stakes, standardized tests by which we falsely judge schools, students, and teachers; placing a moratorium on further charter schools; expanding public education to include pre-kindergarten and even earlier; and reducing class size, which is one of the largest in the state.

We must further provide a multitude of proper books, libraries, and recreational facilities and course offerings in languages, literature and the arts. As Mayor, I will make sure critical bilingual and dual-language programs will be available to all students that need and desire them. We need a serious expansion of dual language programs into all communities in Chicago. There is solid evidence that fluency in a second or even third language, starting at an early age, helps students academically across the board, putting them in position to be truly college and career ready. These programs are also essential in our increasingly global economy, as recognized by the recently established Illinois State Seal of Biliteracy.

I do not support a further expansion of charter schools, and I think any discussion on savings within the public school system must recognize charters have become the new coin of political patronage. A glaring example is the UNO group, until recently led by Juan Rangel, who was forced out after reports of cronyism and corruption in its charter network, which has received more than $100 million in state money. Rangel, who earned $260,00 a year, was a co-chair of Emanuel’s mayoral campaign while UNO personnel worked in local campaigns against Emanuel’s critics.

This is classic pinstripe patronage, typically funneled through contracts with lawyers and bond issuers. Now it’s an unconscionable mix of money and politics, short-changing the debt-plagued public school system, punishing children and taxpayers alike.

**8) 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?

TIFs are a valuable tool in funding specific construction or development projects and should continue to be used. However, the original design of TIFs in Chicago envisioned the TIF district being used to support development in areas where such development would not otherwise occur within a reasonable timeframe, and being shut down after the main projects in the district were completed. TIFs became a problem when they started being used to support developments that were commercially viable without the TIF. To the extent that this continues to occur, the City, our schools and parks, are being denied important sources of revenue.

Use of TIF revenues for specific projects which, in turn, increase property tax receipts is smart fiscal policy. However, using TIFs to hijack money from other revenue-strapped local governments is unfair and unwise. We need to keep those TIFs alive that are needed to complete planned projects or development initiatives (such as school construction) and terminate the remainder. We need to earmark more specific projects for TIF funding, such as support for new manufacturing and the development of affordable housing, which result in improving the City’s economy and helping our residents live better and more productive lives. Absent such specific, and publically supported plans, excess TIF funds should be returned to the tax base. I would support TIF Advisory Councils in the neighborhoods to help make these determinations. Returning TIF funds to the property tax base of the schools and other taxing bodies would reduce the property tax rate, which would reduce the burden on individual taxpayers.

**9) 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?

The city council should continue to have 50 members to ensure that all Chicago residents have adequate representation. Each alderman helps supervise the provision of city services to 55,000 residents. If the size of the city council were cut in half, then each alderman would have to serve 110,000 residents, and they would know less about their communities, residents, and the services actually being delivered. While it is true that some city councils in other states are smaller, like Los Angeles with its 15 members, others, like New York with its 51 members, have more than Chicago. Small city councils like those in the Chicago suburbs operate more like corporate boards of directors, but Chicago's city council allows it to act as a legislative body, which is an important and necessary function.

**10) A Chicago casino**

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

Yes or No: Depends on implementation

Please explain:

I continue to be concerned about the impact of gambling on low-income communities, but I would consider any proposal that could be fairly and effectively implemented.

**11) 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:

The traffic light program is simply another tax on city residents required to fund the $1 billion increase in spending under Mayor Emanuel during the last 4 years. I would severely restrict the program or end it entirely.

Under this administration, vehicle sticker costs are up, cable TV and phone taxes are up, water and sewer fees are up. As the Tribune reported, the additional city tax, fee and fine collections resulting from the increases in the mayor's four spending plans “will easily pump more than $700 million annually into city coffers.”

I agree with the Tribune’s analysis that these fee increases amount to a 60% increase in property taxes for the typical Chicago homeowner. I would add the traffic light fines to the cost of this stealth tax put on our families by the Emanuel Administration. Our families have been simply stretched to the breaking point, and it is time for a new direction.

I would keep only those traffic cameras that can be fully proven to have reduced accidents. If the cameras are simply another source of revenue, I would remove them.