

## Candidate Questionnaire

**If the economy continues on its current path, and continues to impact the city the way it has, what is the first step you would take to reduce spending? Would you cut city jobs as a first resort or last resort in that effort?**

The current economic situation has severely damaged the housing market and the private sector, which, in turn, has reduced expected revenues to the City. When the first clear signs of the national problem emerged in early 2008, we immediately began holding back on budgeted spending, put a hiring freeze into effect and looked for ways to maximize revenues without raising taxes.

Cutting currently held jobs is neither a first nor last priority. Our priority is to maintain public safety and to continue providing essential services, such as clean water, snowplowing, etc.

With a weakened economy, demand for some services may be reduced, allowing us to cut costs. If it is necessary to cut services due to revenue constraints, I will prioritize in the areas that would have the least impact on residents.

The 2009 budget is quite lean with most of the costs of contractual union employee wage increases covered by cuts in other areas. Excluding the Library and the Election Commission (over which we have no direct control) taxes from the city will constitute about 20% of your total property tax bill. Considering the large number of services the City provides, I believe we provide excellent value.

**Has Aurora effectively used its lobbyist? What are specific examples of how he has or hasn't had a direct impact on particular city projects?**

While Aurora has an excellent group of elected officials at the federal and state level, they rely on us in city government to keep them apprised of our needs and that is where our lobbyist comes in. The reality is that every large government entity, whether it be a county, city or even township, needs a presence in both Springfield and Washington D.C. in order to make certain that their citizen's interests are considered. In fact, based at least, in part on their observations of Aurora's successes in Springfield and Washington D.C., the city of Elgin has now hired a lobbyist.

There are many examples of success, so I will just focus on a couple from this previous year. In 2008, Aurora applied to have a downtown TIF district extended and while the Illinois legislature was still considering and passing TIF extensions, it had become common practice for the Governor's Office to sit on or veto TIF bills. Our lobbyists, worked closely with our state elected officials to move the issue through the appropriate committees, assembling and distributing research to gain bipartisan support. They also stayed in contact with the Governor's Office to keep staff informed of the bill, its benefits and consequences of delay. In the end, SB2678 was passed by both the Illinois House and Senate. The Governor signed the bill into law last fall. This was the ONLY TIF

legislation signed by the Governor in 2008 and could result in \$18 million in new tax revenues in the next twelve years.

Another significant example is the work our lobbyist has done on Canadian National's purchase of the Elgin, Joliet and Eastern Railway. Our lobbyist worked with city staff to research the issue and identify opportunities for legislative action. They also reached out to Illinois agencies and regional planning groups to ensure Aurora's concerns were considered in their individual STB environmental response filings as well as coordinated meetings with several high ranking state and federal elected officials.

On December 24, 2008, the STB approved the acquisition, but required CN Canadian National to pay for an unprecedented amount of mitigation in order to alleviate anticipated transportation congestion along the Ogden Ave crossing. The STB typically requires railroads to pay no more than 5%. Canadian National is required to fund 67% of the total costs for an Ogden Ave. over/underpass estimated to be \$50 million.

Given the millions of dollars our lobbyist has helped bring to the city of Aurora over the past three years, the benefits of having a lobbyist far outweigh the costs.

**How, specifically, can voters distinguish your record and approach from your opponents' on economic development? On job growth? On taxes?**

### **Economic Development**

I would characterize my approach to economic development as aggressive, thoughtful, and collaborative.

It was clear to me when I took office that after years of development in the green fields of the far east and far west sides, that those opportunities were dwindling. At the same time, it seemed an awful waste to let much of our downtown and riverfront sit dormant or idle when the Fox River, the adjacent land, and the beautiful architecture downtown presented such promise and economic development potential.

If we were going to change the unfortunate history of Aurora Downtown over the past 30-40 years, however, we would need to develop a comprehensive plan and we would need to find business partners in the business to clean up our environmentally challenged riverfront. These "brownfield" areas cannot compete with green field areas in other towns as development areas without a public/private partnering on clean-up.

My office worked closely with Seize the Future to bring the business community, professional planners and environmental activists together to develop a master plan for our downtown riverfront. We worked with the deputy governor, Rep. Linda Chapa LaVia and State Senator Linda Holmes to pass the River Edge Brownfield Redevelopment Initiative, which gave us access to \$2 million in clean up money.

We have acquired another \$1 million in state grants and foundation dollars to clean up and enhance our riverfront. We have established private sector development partners to

not only defray some of the clean-up costs, but to help transform our riverfront and downtown from an unused or underused area into a generator of jobs, tax revenues and excitement.

Despite a worsened economy, River Street Plaza is built and work continues on Phase II. The extremely complicated clean-up process continues on the Shodeen site, including the newly purchased Builders Supply property. The city's financial commitments on both of these projects will be TIF financed by the increased assessed valuations that the once-blighted properties will produce.

Smaller projects such as Ballydoyle Irish Pub & Restaurant, which will open soon, bring attractive, high quality entertainment and recreational opportunities to our downtown, complimenting existing amenities like the Paramount.

### **Job Growth**

We have generated more than 4,300 new jobs in the last four years according to the Illinois Department of Labor statistics. The Eola Road Tollway Interchange, which this administration succeeded in getting done, will provide an abundance of development opportunities and several thousand new jobs over the next decade. And we have brought distinguished national and international corporations into the fold in recent months, despite the national economic downturn. FHP, Inc. is building its North American headquarters in Aurora. McKesson, Inc. is building its regional headquarters here and Cabot Microelectronics, a high-tech manufacturer with a global market, has expanded operations into a second building.

### **Taxes**

Earlier in my administration, it became clear that the police department had languished for too long in a dilapidated building, which lacked the tools and technology need to fight crime in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After talking with community groups and city leaders, I made the decision to recommend that the city set aside a portion of the property tax rate to build a new state of the art police facility. In March, the APD will begin moving into to part of the building with the main headquarters opening early in 2010. I stuck to my promise and every dollar of the increase is dedicated exclusively to pay for the new APD facility.

The result to the average homeowner of Aurora with a \$180,000 home was a \$60 increase, much less than they've seen from other taxing bodies. Some people said this move would cost me the next election. But, I believe the true job of the Mayor is to do what's best for the community...not what's best for re-election chances. I believed then, as I believe today, that the citizens of Aurora value safe neighborhoods, so I don't regret for one minute the choice I made.

Today, many governments are contemplating increasing taxes to compensate for the decreasing revenues. I understand that right now people need more, not less money in their pockets. That is why I held the line on the city's 2009 budget and property tax levy, which will likely result in a reduced tax rate for most Aurora homeowners.

**What is your philosophy regarding revitalizing downtown? What has or hasn't worked over the last four years, and what should be done differently?**

In the middle of our downtown, Aurora has a magnificent jewel – the Fox River. But throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, we had allowed river edge properties to become a breeding ground for trash and toxic chemicals of all sorts. Until we clean up these properties, we will not see meaningful development downtown.

My plan, quite simply was to inspire people to work together on a common plan for downtown Aurora and then do something that politicians rarely do...listen. Under my leadership, business and environmental groups came together to recommend a downtown plan to preserve the riverfront and encourage commercial investment. The City Council unanimously approved that plan, and since that time my job has been to execute a common vision for a vibrant and active downtown Aurora.

I aggressively targeted vacant contaminated parcels and sought partnerships with private developers who were willing to take on the difficult challenge of cleaning up the mess made by our forebearers. Meanwhile, I recommended incentives for developers who were willing to invest in our downtown today.

While the job has been more difficult than even I imagined and the economic downturn has slowed our efforts, progress is still evident.

An illegal riverfront dump site with tires and roofing tiles piled 30 feet high has been cleaned up. New condos have gone up along the river, a new 30 acre RiverEdge Park is coming together, and by the end of the month Ballydoyle, a new full service restaurant and entertainment venue, will be open for business.

At the same time, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency has already issued the letters needed to complete the clean-ups for half of the parcels originally acquired for a large scale mixed-use development on the south east side of the downtown riverfront, with the remaining letters expected in early summer.

While we've had many successes, there have also been some speed bumps. We in Aurora have been so excited about the progress being made downtown, but not everyone has been quick to embrace the progress. Case in point- Com Ed. To date, the City and developer have not reached a final agreement with Com Ed to relocate their antiquated substation along the Fox River, although the discussion remains positive and I am confident we are approaching a mutually beneficial solution. I believe the people of Aurora deserve both reliable electric service and a blight free riverfront, so I will continue to encourage Com Ed to update its infrastructure.

**Please list a few ways you would encourage new businesses to locate in Aurora. Do you believe financial incentives, such as tax rebates, are a good tool for commercial development, or should they be used sparingly?**

In today's global economy, Aurora not only competes with neighboring towns for businesses, but with cities around the world. In areas, where development is stagnant, I believe in using every resource and tool available to Aurora to turn the corner.

Business incentives are actually investments in both corporations and the community. I believe successful cities need to make sound investments in strong corporations that will pay "dividends" to the community through increased property values, higher revenues and jobs for citizens. As mayor, before I recommend the city invest in any company, I do my research. Potential investments are reviewed by a highly qualified team of professional advisors and analyzed by an outside financial firm. This review evaluates factors such as: growth potential, track record, financial stability, etc, so that the city limits its exposure and can maximize future gains.

When Aurora citizens read about incentives to spur downtown development, these are mainly Tax Increment Financing projects and, as such, these incentives do not cost current property owners one nickel in the long run, because they are covered by new revenues generated by the project, and the increased value of nearby properties in the limited "TIF Zone."

Tax Increment Financing districts are an excellent way to provide incentives to businesses because the financial incentive is generated by the additional taxes brought in by the new business not from homeowners. At the same time, these new developments create jobs for Aurorans and sales tax revenues. Then, when the incentive is paid off, our tax base is permanently strengthened.

Sales tax incentives are reasonable for businesses that generate substantial sales tax and might otherwise choose to locate elsewhere. Half of \$2 million in sales tax is better than the zero percent we would receive if the business locates in a neighboring town or state.

**What are your thoughts on Aurora's debt load?**

The city failed, in the years just prior to my election, to move forward on several projects needed to secure Aurora's future. A sanitary sewer main upgrade, while costly, was a prerequisite to projects like River Street Plaza and Waubonsee Community College's new \$50 million dollar Aurora campus. Because of the previous lack of investment, there had been little appreciable development of Aurora's downtown for many years. To top it off Aurora's current police headquarters was literally falling apart. The majority of debt increase is due to the costs associated with replacing this out-dated, dilapidated facility with a state-of-the-art modern police headquarters complete with the tools and technology needed to fight crime in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. All of these projects are sound investments, necessary to secure Aurora's future.

There is an increase in city debt obligations, not simply because we are doing so much to improve our city now, but also because we were doing so little before.

In any case, Standard & Poors, one of the nation's foremost bond-rating companies, upgraded both the city's general obligation bond rating and water bond rating to a AA+, one of the highest ratings among Illinois governments. This allows the city to borrow money for capital projects at a lower rate. In their rating of Aurora, S&P categorized Aurora's debt load as "average," and based the upgrade on Aurora's "strong tax base growth, consistently strong financial performance, and strong financial management."

### **What strides has Aurora made since 2005 that are most overlooked?**

For years, each time there was a murder in town the newspapers did several stories on the crime. Today, crime is at the lowest level in more than two decades, yet many people don't realize how safe Aurora has become. Unfortunately, the fact that zero murders or shootings occurred in town on a given day doesn't make the front page except once a year when the paper reports on overall crime statistics. In 2008, there were multiple stories in the newspaper on old murders and there were numerous stories about the two murders that took place in Aurora last year, but stories about the lack of crime and murder are infrequent.

Early in my administration, Aurora partnered with Franklin Covey to set measurable goals to keep the city accountable for performance. We call these Wildly Important Goals. Across city departments there are more than 100 small goals that support the city's broader goals of reducing crime, expanding economic development and improving customer service. Many mocked this process and the city WIGs, but today crime is down, economic development has boomed and the latest customer service survey indicated that the city is doing better in each and every comparable area of service since I took office. And in 2008, for the second time in a row, Money Magazine named Aurora as one of the top 100 communities in the United States in which to live, work, and play. That is a sign of real progress.

One of the biggest improvements in Aurora cannot readily be seen and is often overlooked. Upgrading our sanitary sewer systems has cost millions of dollars. These projects are often considered less impressive than a new road or bridge and thus are often ignored by elected officials; but our sewer infrastructure is equally as important. Upgrading our sewers has not only paved the way for increased development downtown, but it also provides relief for countless homeowners in older neighborhoods that for years worried about sewer back-ups during heavy rains. These improvements also reduce the likelihood that overflow sewage will make its way into the Fox River, preserving this asset for future generations to enjoy.

### **Do you agree that Aurora's government is too top heavy? Why or why not?**

Yes and no. During my administration, I have worked to eliminate patronage positions that were created over time to reward workers who had done their time at the city. I

eliminated an entire department of executive employees, opting to contract out when necessary – a move that saved the city more than a half million dollars the first year.

During these challenging economic times, I instituted a hiring freeze on all but essential service personnel and thus far, we've been able to provide the same high quality services that citizens expect.

Overall we have a motivated workforce that has proven they can and will accept new challenges. While I believe we have made good progress cutting out the fat, I will continue look for ways we can operate leaner and more efficiently and reward employees who step up and take on additional responsibilities.

**What reasons should make residents believe the Shodeen project will be completed by 2013?**

That is a good question. When the downtown plan was first revealed, I had two choices: clean up and revitalize contaminated downtown parcels to make them productive, or let them remain, for another 25 years, as blighted polluted and unproductive symbols of a tired downtown and a city with low expectations. I chose to the former route, for the sake of Aurora's future. In this, I had the full support of our business community and the great majority of the City Council.

Some people believe that we are not making progress on the Shodeen development. This belief is encouraged, if not embraced, by my opponents.

The fact is that, although the combination of the various environmental issues has slowed the pace of the project, substantial progress is being made. On half of the original six zones of the project, the city has already received approval from the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency to move forward and a fourth zone is expected to receive the go ahead later this month. At the same time, Shodeen has closed on three properties: Baje Steele, Builders Supply and La Flama De Oro restaurant, firming up its commitment to Aurora.

Simply removing the soil was not deemed to be cost effective for all of the zones; some needed more sophisticated approaches, which requires lengthy IEPA review and approval. We expect clean-up of the remaining properties to proceed through the 2009 construction season, with building construction to begin in 2010.

The environmental delays have become a blessing in disguise, with the bear market for residential housing likely to be much improved by the time the units become available. Unlike many firms, Shodeen's strong financial position allows the company to weather the economic downturn.

**From conceptual and financial perspectives, what is right and wrong about the RiverEdge Park project?**

The Fox River is undoubtedly Aurora's most beautiful natural asset. Yet, for years, it has languished hidden behind blighted brownfields downtown. As a result, downtown has been underutilized and development has been stunted.

RiverEdge Park is designed to be a regional amenity located in the heart of the City of Aurora as well as a community gathering space, which can be enjoyed by all Aurorans. And, much like Millennium Park, which detractors railed against during its construction, RiverEdge Park also has those who do not believe positive changes can occur along our riverfront. But just as Millennium Park has been a catalyst for economic development south of the river downtown Chicago, RiverEdge Park will serve the same function here in Aurora, albeit on a smaller scale.

The park will create a dynamic public gathering place paired with blight removal, Fox River restoration and brownfield clean-up to stimulate significant neighborhood enhancement, reinvestment and property value increases. Located less than a block from the Metra station and a PACE bus hub, it is part of a transit-oriented redevelopment strategy developed in partnership with the business community.

Once completed, the park will provide an anchor for mixed-use development, act as a catalyst for an estimated \$160 million of private investment and generate more than 450 new jobs downtown Aurora.

**In your role as an elected official, who specifically – names, not groups -- do you lean on to establish your priorities for the city?**

There are many people on who I depend for sage advice. As mayor, it is easy to get insulated from what is going on unless you make a concerted effort to spend time in the community talking with citizens. Most of my evenings and weekends are devoted to doing just that.

My senior staff, who are well known to the Beacon and experts in their various fields, are an invaluable resource to me. I meet with several of our aldermen as often as possible to hear their perspective on what's happening in their wards. Likewise my long-term relationships with several neighborhood leaders keep me in touch with neighborhood concerns.

I depend on so many people that it is difficult to name only a few. My goal is to surround myself with people of integrity from all different walks of life – people whose ethnic, social, political and family experiences differ from my own so that I can broaden my perspective and make the best and most inclusive decisions on behalf of all Aurora citizens. Here is a representative group of a few of the people I call on from time to time to seek guidance or advice – this list is in no way comprehensive, and I appreciate each and every person on this list and others that graciously share their time and experience to make Aurora a great place to live, work and raise a family.

Gerry Jones, Chuck Anderson, Jesse Vasquez, Marge Schuler, Theodia Gillespie, Rep. Linda Chapa LaVia, Ed Bonifas, Archie Needham, Dick Hawks, Bob Vaughan, Avis Miller, Arlene Shoemaker, Scott Roscoe, Lillian Perry, Shirley Myers and of course, my wife, Marilyn Weisner.

**Does Aurora need – and can it enforce – a campaign finance ordinance? How does such an ordinance become law without becoming as politically charged an issue as it was in 2008?**

Last May, I proposed sweeping campaign finance reform legislation to provide another layer of protection against the pay-to-play politics that has become rampant in Illinois politics at the state level. Despite the numerous safeguards already in place at the City of Aurora, my proposal was designed to give the public added confidence in the professionalism and integrity of the city's procurement process.

My 2008 proposal would have capped the amount that companies that do business with the city in excess of \$10,000 (or seek to do business with the city) may donate to municipal campaigns to \$1,500 per reporting period - an amount that allowed business to exercise their constitutional right to participate in the political process while avoiding even the appearance of any impropriety. The ordinance also proposed candidates pledge not to spend more than \$20,000 of personal funds on their own campaign to make certain political office is accessible to everyone regardless of income.

I've said before and I will say again that both my opponents are eager to compare Aurora to the State of Illinois for their own political gain when in fact our two governments are nothing alike. There are many checks and balances in city contracting. In fact, no executive official, including the mayor, can authorize a contract in excess of \$10,000 without the entire city council first reviewing and authorizing the purchase, leaving virtually no room for mischief in city contracting. In the mayor's role of tie-breaker, I have never voted on a major city procurement contract.

The challenge with campaign finance laws is preserving the rights of both citizens and business owners, who pay taxes and have a legitimate interest in Aurora's growth and success. Because of the problems at the state level, honorable people who choose to exercise their constitutional right and have chosen to participate in the political process locally may become targets of unfair accusations. I believe our political processes should encourage inclusivity and participation, not divisiveness and apathy. By setting reasonable contribution limits and committing to full reporting and transparency required under the law, I believe we can protect taxpayers, businesses and candidates.

Enforcing these laws is possible. In fact there are many examples in different levels of government. Some governments take action based on filed complaints, which generally is much less staff intensive and thus less costly. Others hire staff to monitor and oversee campaign finance.

**What other issues do you believe will shape the city over the next four years?**

It is clear the economic crisis that is griping our nation will not be solved overnight. Because of declining revenues, governments at all levels are being forced to make difficult choices and do more with less. Aurora is no exception. As mayor, I have the experience necessary to guide the city through this difficult time.

The depressed housing market coupled with the financial lending debacle has lead many Aurorans to face foreclosure, which threatens to further decrease property values and jeopardize the quality of life in our neighborhoods. I have already taken proactive steps as mayor to help citizens navigate the foreclosure situation and worked to pass new laws to ensure our neighborhoods and homes are properly maintained.

With crime at a 22 year low, there is no question that Aurora has made great strides over the past 4 years to reduce crime in our neighborhoods. By partnering with federal and state law enforcement agencies, we've targeted gangs and the destructive force they can be in the lives of our young people. If we want this success to be lasting, we now need to focus on providin productive alternatives for the youth in our community. Through education and investment in our youth, we can break the cycle of violence.

