

5th Congressional District Election Questionnaire

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Birth date: *1966*

Political affiliation *Democrat*

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Do you live in the district? *Yes.*

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Marital status *Married* Spouse's name *Leah Wheelan*

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Name of any relatives on public payrolls: *None.*

Name of your federal campaign committee *Wheelan for Congress*

Campaign treasurer *Harry Pascal*

Please attach sheets with names of your finance committee; dates, locations and names of hosts of fundraisers, and copies of solicitation letters issued by your committee.

Have you had any kind of program for top donors or fundraisers (for example seminars, briefings, golf outings)?

No.

List lobbyists assisting you, directly or indirectly, in raising money for your campaign.

None.

Will you pledge to disclose in advance where and when your fund-raising events occur?

Yes.

Please explain how your occupation and your life experience qualify you for the 5th Congressional District seat.

I have spent my career in and around public policy. As a lecturer, writer and author of the book Naked Economics, I am well-versed in the issues necessary to take on our most critical challenge: fixing the economy. I have also worked as Policy and Communications director for Chicago 2020, a civic group that promotes healthy regional growth in the Chicago area. I live in the district with my wife and three children.

Issues:

Please attach any materials you wish describing your key issues.

Attached.

DOMESTIC ISSUES

What are your top three district-specific priorities?

The Economy – This is the most treacherous global economic situation since the 1930's. I am running for Congress primarily because my background in public policy and economics makes me uniquely qualified to address this challenge. Our economic policy going forward must have two components: 1) Immediate action to put Americans back to work; restore liquidity to the capital markets; improve investor and consumer confidence; protect homeowners facing foreclosure; tighten the social safety net; and otherwise deal with the current economic crisis. And 2) A longer term effort to improve the regulatory structure (without erring on the side of over-regulation) to strengthen the financial system going forward. The economy is obviously not unique to the 5th District, but it is unequivocally the number one concern on voters' minds.

Infrastructure Investment – The federal stimulus, if done correctly, should contain significant new investments in transportation infrastructure. These are investments that will make us more productive as a nation, as well as help invigorate the economy. The Chicago region, and the 5th District in particular, will benefit from an upgraded transit system. Our public transit systems are in desperate need of investment. In the future, dense metropolitan regions will enjoy a significant economic advantage from the efficient movement of people and freight. I was deeply engaged in this issue during my tenure at Chicago Metropolis 2020.

Foreign Policy – There are five or six places in the world right now that, if they continue to unravel, have the potential to change life as we know it—a nuclear Iran; a conflict between Pakistan and India; a wider Arab-Israeli conflict; a destabilized Afghanistan. Then, of course, there is the ongoing link between our foreign policy and the effectiveness of our battle on terrorism. We should be paying attention to these challenges in the 5th District because the cost of not paying attention is so potentially high. I am the only candidate in this race with extensive foreign policy experience. I teach an international policy course at the University of Chicago and have spent time “on the ground” in places ranging from Bangalore to Amman talking with government officials, U.S. diplomats, journalists, representatives of NGOs, and other policymakers. I suspect that I am the only person in this race who has been briefed by both the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem.

Do you feel TARP has been effective so far? Why or why not? If not, what would you change? Are you satisfied with the transparency and accountability of the program?

The TARP program has been reasonably effective so far in dealing with a difficult and uncertain situation. We have not seen a major bank go into bankruptcy since the program went into effect. TARP signaled that the government was prepared to deal flexibly with the unfolding crisis, and that was an important move. While it is always important to support more “transparency and accountability,” it is also true that much of the value of the program lies in the ability of the Treasury Department to act quickly and to change strategies when necessary. Accountability and oversight come at a cost in terms of discretion. That trade-off must be weighed with any modifications to the

program.

Two of the major challenges remaining are the reluctance of banks to lend, and the ongoing cycle of foreclosure and falling real estate prices. I support more aggressive government assistance for homeowners at risk of losing their homes.

Before becoming President Obama's chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, was on track to be speaker of the House, which would be a coup for Chicago and Illinois. There have been persistent rumors that Emanuel might wish to return to the 5th Congressional seat for that very purpose. Yes or no, in those circumstances, would you be willing to step aside?

My most immediate goal is to get elected and address the current economic crisis. If Rahm Emanuel were to leave the White House in several years with the intention of returning to Congress in the 5th District, I would consider stepping aside for two reasons: 1) The people of the 5th District would be well served by having the Speaker of the House as their representative. If I'm running for Congress to make my constituents better off—which I am—then stepping aside for someone who would be in a unique position to help them and the entire region should be a consideration. 2) Rahm Emanuel made a selfless decision to join the White House staff. It is not unreasonable for him to want to return to the job that is his primary interest.

I have had no contact with Rahm Emanuel on this question, and I would have to evaluate the circumstances at the time this situation arose. However, it is entirely possible that the people of the 5th District would be best served by having me step aside so that Rahm Emanuel could become Speaker of the House.

Do you support President Obama's proposed stimulus package? Explain.

I am a major supporter of an economic stimulus package in principle. Monetary policy is no longer effective now that interest rates are close to zero and banks are resistant to lending. An economic stimulus plan should include both social programs which reinforce the safety net during this economic downturn, as well as major investments that will make our country more productive. However, the stimulus package passed recently by the House of Representatives is not a good bill. It contains too little investment in productive activities (research; infrastructure; technology) and too many extraneous pork-barrel provisions. I particularly object to the "Buy America First" provision, as it repeats one of the most egregious policy mistakes of the Great Depression when the Smoot-Hawley tariff set off a global trade war and exacerbated the effects of the economic crisis. President Obama has also opposed this provision. I am hopeful that the Senate will improve the bill to produce a stimulus that will help promote economic recovery.

Do you have a plan to ensure access to higher education? Explain.

That is just one piece of my approach to education. I believe that education is the single most important long-term issue facing our nation. Our collective skills determine our productivity, which in turn determines our wages and standard of living. The United States needs a systematic strategy for upgrading our “human capital” that stretches from early childhood education all the way to effective job training for unemployed adults. Increasing the college graduate rate (and other kinds of advanced training) as well as funding for college preparation and access, must be a priority. Better access to funding for college is an important part of that strategy.

However, it is important to recognize that money is only one barrier that keeps students out of college. Many are not prepared to do the work. Others drop out of high school or do not have college aspirations. Ironically, the best long-term approach to improving access to college would be expanded access to early childhood education, particularly for children from disadvantaged families. Research overwhelmingly supports the cost effectiveness of such programs. They change the trajectory of the students involved and make college a realistic option 14 years later.

Are you in favor of universal health care or some other plan?

Yes. The richest nation in the history of civilization ought to be able to provide health care to all of its citizens. Our current system has also become a source of anxiety for middle class families who fear losing their benefits when they lose a job. The American health care system is also a huge fiscal burden for small businesses and a threat to the competitiveness of large corporations whose international competitors do not have to pay large health care costs for their workers.

I support health care reform that incorporates all of the following:

- *Universal coverage for all Americans, built upon the current employer-based system.*
- *Mandatory insurance coverage for those who can afford it.*
- *Government subsidies to enable low-income individuals to buy insurance coverage.*
- *Better data collection to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of different procedures.*
- *A cost-containment mechanism that limits reimbursement for the provision of care that is not cost-effective.*
- *Health care portability as we work towards universal coverage.*

I would prefer a plan that is based on the current employer-based system, but would also support a single-payer system if there was a politically-feasible proposal pending in the House of Representatives.

How do you propose we fix Social Security?

The tools for restoring the long-term health of Social Security are straightforward and well known. It is just a matter of political will. We must enact some combination of the following four policies to ensure social security's long-term solvency:

- 1. Reduce benefits for future retirees (most likely by raising the retirement age, or by taxing the benefits of high-income retirees). We should not reduce the benefits of current retirees or those who are near retirement, as they have not had sufficient time to plan for such policy changes.*
- 2. Increase the payroll tax, either by raising the tax rate (currently 12.4% split between employers and employees) or raising the cap so that the tax is levied beyond the current cap of \$102,000 .*
- 3. Allow more young immigrants into the U.S., so they can begin paying taxes into the system.*
- 4. Increase worker productivity so existing tax rates can generate enough new revenue to fund the extra burden of an aging population. This is a lovely solution but we have no direct control over productivity.*

I would likely support some combination of these measures. The most logical would be raising the retirement age (since life expectancy has grown far beyond what it was when the program was designed) and raising the cap so that the payroll tax is collected on a higher proportion of the incomes of wealthy Americans.

Social Security is the easy issue, however. The more significant long-term fiscal challenge is Medicare, as it represents a "blank check" for the health care costs of all future retirees rather than the promise of a fixed payment. With health care costs increasing much faster than inflation, the Medicare program is not sustainable in its current form.

Flooding has been a persistent problem in some areas of the 5th District. As its congressman, what steps would you take to help your constituents?

Many of our flooding problems are related to environmental degradation and poor land use. (For example, large impermeable parking lots promote the excessive runoff that contributes to flooding.) I would support a holistic look at the problem that stresses green infrastructure and other measures that cure the problem rather than merely treating it. I would also try to ensure that a portion of the capital money given to Illinois

under the President's economic stimulus plan be used for flood prevention and control. These are exactly the kind of long-term investments that belong in the stimulus package.

What should Congress do about immigration? Should it pass a border-enforcement bill first and then vote on a guest worker program and a measure to provide a means to legalization for illegal immigrants? Or should it pass one comprehensive bill?

I will work hard to create a more diverse and inclusive nation. To that end, I support a comprehensive immigration bill that includes both border enforcement and a path to citizenship for undocumented individuals who currently reside in the United States. I would also support increasing the number of visas granted to family members of U.S. citizens and permanent U.S. residents. Similarly, I support an increase in the number of HB-1 visas (those issued to highly-skilled foreign workers), in order to strengthen our workforce and move our economy forward.

To reduce carbon emissions, do you favor a carbon tax or a cap-and-trade system or neither? Explain.

I favor a carbon tax. It is the most direct and efficient way to change behavior in a way that will reduce CO2 emissions. I would fully or partially offset this new revenue with cuts in the payroll, individual income, or corporate income taxes. In other words, we should tax behaviors that harm society and use the revenue to reduce taxes on productive activity. The benefits of this policy are legion. It would reduce conventional pollution; it would reduce CO2 emissions; it would promote work, employment, and investment; it would encourage investments in alternative energy; and it would reduce our dependence on foreign oil.

I would support a cap-and-trade system if it were the only politically viable plan for reducing CO2 emissions—but not before speaking out in favor of a carbon tax.

FOREIGN POLICY

What is your timetable for withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq?

I support President Obama's plan to withdraw our troops gradually over the next two years. However, the withdrawal should not have a specific timetable, as it would be a mistake to withdraw precipitously in a way that further destabilizes the country and the region. We should not compound our error of going into the country unwisely by withdrawing unwisely.

What role should the United States have in bringing about peace in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict?

This is an area in which I have unique experience. As an undergraduate, I was an Asian studies major with a specific focus on the Middle East. Since then, I have spent time in the region speaking to policymakers in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Amman, Ramallah, Beirut, Kuwait, Cairo, and Ankara.

All U.S. policies regarding Israel and the region must be consistent with the long-term goal of creating a durable, two-state solution to the Palestinian situation. The specific details of any agreement must be determined by the democratically-elected governments of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. It cannot and should not be imposed by the U.S. or any other external parties. Nonetheless, the U.S. has a huge stake in facilitating such an agreement. Not only is such an agreement imperative from a humanitarian standpoint, but it is the only way to guarantee the long-term security of Israel and a more stable Middle East.

Any resolution of the conflict must improve the lives of people on both sides. American policy must guarantee the security of Israel while respecting the dignity and aspirations of the Palestinian people, who have been victims of historical circumstances and decades of poor political leadership.

This is an issue on which I would like to lead in Congress.

Do you support a proposed troop surge in Afghanistan? How long are you willing to have troops stay there? How do you propose to bring stability to the nation once most of the troops are withdrawn?

I do not have a good answer on Afghanistan. I recognize the importance of fighting al Qaeda and the Taliban. And I also recognize that an unstable and lawless Afghanistan is dangerous for the region and for the United States. However, I do not feel sufficiently informed on the issue to know how effective our current military strategy has been. The military strikes have killed dangerous militants, but they have also angered local populations, which in the long run, may promote radical groups. I would have to learn more about this issue as a new member of Congress.

What steps should the United States take to reduce its dependence on foreign oil?

By publicly calling for a carbon tax, I've embraced the most significant and powerful tool for changing behavior, conserving energy, and protecting the environment, including

weaning ourselves off our dependence on foreign oil. I was trained as an economist. The best way to reduce consumption of certain goods is to raise the price. (By using the carbon tax revenues to lower the taxes on productive activities, we would also be “lowering the cost” of working and investing.) The ancillary benefits of a carbon tax in terms of environmental protection and CO2 reductions would be huge.

Please e-mail the completed questionnaire, a candidate biography and a recent photograph to swarmbir@suntimes.com.