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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. As we told you before the break Mayor de Blasio is working from his home borough of Brooklyn this week as part of the City Hall in Your Borough initiative. He joins me now from Brooklyn Bridge Park. Good evening Mr. Mayor, very good to see you.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: It's good to be with you Errol. It's a beautiful night here in Brooklyn Bridge Park.

Louis: You picked a very good spot and you picked a very good night. Unlike some of the other boroughs, I imagine that while this is a listening tour and a chance to hear from constituents, you also come to this with some knowledge about the borough and what it needs. What do you think is the number one concern for Brooklyn?

Mayor: For Brooklynites, it's clearly affordability. You know wherever I go in Brooklyn, people are concerned about the cost of housing in particular. We in fact today were in East New York talking about the impact of the recent rezoning that's going to result is thousands of affordable apartments both new and preserved. And that's the most important thing by far to people. But there are a whole lot of other concerns, you know this week we will be talking about the L train shutdown and all the things that the City is going to be doing with the MTA to make sure that people can get around smoothly despite that. You know we are talking to people about all the other ways to get around. Obviously you know ferry service has been a really big improvement here in Brooklyn. It's made a big impact. We are going to be doing a lot more with bikes and other ways for people to get around, so – select bus service, you name it. So these are the kinds of things that my constituents talk to me about. I'm going to be having a town hall meeting in Canarsie later on in the week. We are going to have an open house resource fair at Borough Hall. And those are opportunities for people to raise all their concerns and you know I love that because I like to hear directly from my constituents, what they need and this is why City Hall in Your Borough is such a good idea. We are doing it for the second year now, I intend to do it through out my administration, bring the government out to people, hear from them directly. It also focuses us on issues that need resolution and there's nothing like getting the government to actually live in the borough for the week to actually get things done.

Louis: Okay, now speaking of what's going on in the borough as you know there are about 275 yeshivas there and there's a very small subset of those that your chancellor recently wrote an open letter about. It turns out that after three years, the DOE was denied entry to half of the schools on a list of 29. They were barred from all of the high schools. You know back at your office at City Hall, critics were saying that the investigation was slow walked, that is was deferential and that essentially people are breaking the law with impunity here.

Mayor: No, that's just not right you know. A complaint was filed and like any other complaint, you know, you don't take it as gospel truth. It's something that has to be investigated and I'm sure the complaint was put forward in good faith but it was something that we had to hear both sides on. We did that. In fact we found with 15 of the 30 schools in question that they were welcoming of help and guidance, worked with us to change curriculum, to change the way teachers were trained. We found it to be a very corporative situation. We made a lot of progress over that time. It was never for me, the idea that we are trying to play got you or accuse people of something or create division. It was to go into schools productively and say hey, there are concerns about the quality of instruction. By the way we have some of those same concerns in some traditional public schools – our job is to fix it. Well in the 15 of those schools, there was a welcome mat, there was a willingness to work with us and real progress has been made.

But in the other 15 Errol, after multiple attempts at dialogue, we didn't get what we needed. We've sent that information to the State Department of Education, we've made it public. And we've said to these yeshivas, the ball is your court, open the door, let the Department of Education in, let's address these issues. If there is a problem, let's fix it, but hiding from is not helping anyone.

Louis: But Mr. Mayor, isn't that what you said on day one three years ago? And what they have said to you was essentially, you know, kind of flipping the bird? Right? I mean you said –

Mayor: Well Errol, that's just – again, no because the proof is in the pudding – 15 schools that did work with us, of course we hoped the other 15 would. We hope the fact that we were getting somewhere would encourage the others to get involved. And I have a lot of history working with the community and I'll tell you there's been many times where there are differences but we work constructively. Pre-K is a great example. When we first put together Pre-K there was a lot of resistance in the orthodox community to participate. We had a series of discussions over a year or more, we got to common ground, there's now a very big, substantial Pre-K program in the yeshivas. And that's been a good thing for everyone. It's a very rigorous, instructional program. It's good for everyone involved but you're talking about religious schools that do have their own rights, they are not directly under our preview, we don't just you know waltz in or knock down the door. There is a dialogue that has to happen, that is about constitutional rights too. And again we say some real progress with some, [inaudible] repeatedly with others, time was up, it was time to say to the State Department of Education, we need your guidance because the law says the State Department of Education is the deciding entity – we need your guidance as to what to do about these schools and what the consequences will be if they are unwilling to open their doors.

Now of course, the minute we did that, now some of them are coming forward and saying they will cooperate but you know, I want to see that happen before I just assume that's going to happen.

Louis: As far you know, what are the potential consequences?

Mayor: You know I don't know the law, as you know the law was recently changed in Albany. I don't know if it has ramifications for funding streams. There are funding streams that go to religious schools for things like special education and transportation. I don't know if any of those would be affected. The State has more power obviously when it comes to educational policy but I think it's abundantly clear that these schools need to deal with this problem now. They should open their doors, let our leadership at DOE in to assess the situation. If they are doing things right, they got nothing to worry about. If they are doing things wrong, we are going to work with them to fix it but they need to really corporate. If they do that, it's a good thing for everyone.

Louis: It strikes me that somebody who was in ninth grade when this issue was first brought to the attention of the DOE is going to have essentially graduated from high school before there's any kind of real investigation or fact finding about what when on over the last three soon to be four years.

Mayor: Errol, again you know if people think it's a matter of like flipping a switch and just mandating – it's not as simple as that. We have realities around non-public schools that are different. They are not under the government's direct domain. And so by definition there's a give and take. And it was a situation where we saw a way to actually improve the situation and that's – look I've been at this a long time. What people want all over the city is to see things get better. They understand it doesn't always happen overnight, sometimes things take real work. Again, some of our traditional public schools are in a path of progress that doesn't all happen in one year or two years. But the bottom line was, was there a path way to make things better that was constructive, not conflictual – if we all ended up in court that was not necessarily going to get us anywhere. We found that to be working. What I wish is that the rest of those schools had participated. Had I known in the beginning they were going to stone wall, we would have said much earlier to the State that you know these guys are not going to do it, but we saw some real progress and we were hoping we could get that with the others as well.

Louis: Okay, stand by Mr. Mayor, I want to talk with you about jails and garbage and a whole bunch of other fun topics. We will be right back with –

Mayor: A lot of fun topics.

Louis: A lot of fun topics. We will be right back with Mayor de Blasio in just a minute, stay with us.

[...]

Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall where I am speaking with Mayor Bill de Blasio. He is joining us from the promenade at Brooklyn Bridge Park. And Mr. Mayor, I wanted to talk to you

about the jails plan. You released some of the plan to replace Rikers Island with some borough-based jails. It struck me that, I was seeing it for the first time, the level of difficulty appears to have really increased by quite a bit if you're talking about demolishing the Brooklyn House of Detention which is not even a mile from where you're sitting right now, the Queens House of Detention, closing the tombs in Manhattan which I had never heard was under consideration. What is going on here?

Mayor: I think it all makes a lot of sense actually. The basic idea is this. Rikers Island has obviously been failing. It is a jail complex that's 85 years old. It has been impossible to update it the way it needed so it doesn't really facilitate rehabilitation. It's not a facility that's fair to either the inmates or the officers. We need to get off Rikers Island for a lot of reasons including getting the inmates closer to their communities, closer to the court houses so the justice system works better, closer to families who could help them with rehabilitation.

There's a lot of reasons for this. One site – there's four sites – one is going to be on the police [inaudible] in the Bronx. It's an open site that we can work with pretty well. There's a lot of room. One is going to be at the Queens House of Detention which is minimally used right now so, yeah, we've got to build up a new facility there but there's not – we're not going to be having to move inmates around or anything in any appreciable way.

The other two are more challenging on their face but we're going to be able to do it by staggering the work in the right way and the – you're right, the Brooklyn site, we would have to build on the existing site but we believe that's a viable plan. And then finally in Manhattan, a new idea came up recently and it was a good one and a lot of folks in the community including the Council member agree with it – to use another publicly owned site nearby, put the new jail facility there.

That would make the existing facility unnecessary. I think that's a good plan. It is a lot for people to catch up on but I have to tell you it's been a great process working with the City Council. Speaker Johnson and the four Council members involved have been, I think, intelligent, focused, forward looking, all devoted to getting us off of Rikers Island once and for all and moving this along as quickly as possible. And I'm convinced this is a plan that's going to work.

Louis: Okay, let's talk a little bit of politics, Mr. Mayor. You were campaigning this afternoon with Zellnor Myrie in my neck of the woods in Brooklyn. What kind of reception did you get?

Mayor: It was great. I was thrilled. Zellnor Myrie, to me, is a very impressive up and coming leader, a guy who did not come up out of traditional political structures, didn't come out of the club house, a grassroots activist willing to take on someone who unfortunately worked with the IDC and worked with the Republican Party.

And so I think the bottom line is that you know Zellnor is a real Democrat, a progressive Democrat. That's what the community wants, I fundamentally believe that. The reception at the subway stop we were at was fantastic. We were at Franklin Avenue. It was an incredible, incredible response from people there. And I love being out.

You know, Errol, I've been at this a long time. I like being out in communities. I like campaigning. I like talking to people. I think it was important to a lot of people who came by to know that Zellnor Myrie has a lot of support and also to remind people that the election – this is the other thing that we have to tell people 1,000 times over – the election is not on a Tuesday. It's Thursday, September 13th. And we're all going to have to remind people of that to make sure we have the participation this deserves.

Louis: Yeah, we're certainly doing that. Can I ask your opinion about that by the way? It always struck me as a little bit peculiar that 9/11 happened to be a primary day back in 2001. So, every so often, almost every time an election comes up, there's this question about is it too close to the actual date of commemoration which strikes me as ironic since 9/11 was first and foremost an attack on our democracy. And I always think what better way to celebrate it than to go about our business and hold our elections?

Mayor: I think you make a great point and one of the things we've said ever since is the right response to any effort to intimidate us or change us is to keep doing what we do. And New Yorkers have been amazing. Even when we've had incidents of terror people show their resolve by continuing on. So I think it's really important that our elections are on a Tuesday. Whether we say it should not be on the 11th it should be on the following Tuesday, that's the kind of thing that certainly is worth discussing. But I do think as a general rule people are used to Tuesday and until something bigger changes we should really focus on that.

Louis: Let me ask you about another endorsement that somehow slipped past us. You have endorsed Martin Dilan versus Julia Salazar who is a young progressive challenger. Martin Dilan, of course, has nothing to do with the IDC but what were your considerations there?

Mayor: It's very personal. I've known Martin Dilan and especially his son, Eric Dilan, who I served with in the Council. I have been very close to them personally. I've worked with them closely. I've seen them do really – both of them, obviously, serve in Albany. They've both done really good work for the city.

And when they asked for my support I knew what I was getting. I knew that they had both been good, loyal Democrats who had done a lot of good work for the city. I hear good things about the opponent too but I don't happen to know her so I went with someone that to me was proven.

Louis: We've got three weeks and three days until the primary. Are you planning to weigh in on the attorney general's race?

Mayor: I'm going to make decisions on all the other – the statewide races soon. Obviously, it's getting to be the point where I got to make some final decisions. But as soon as I do, you will be the first to know, Errol.

[Laughter]

Louis: Have you talked with all four of the candidates?

Mayor: I've talked to some. I need to talk to others.

Louis: Okay, I understand that there's going to be some official citywide or city-funded outreach to inactive voters. What is that about?

Mayor: Yes, well this is an idea that we actually really put two and two together on very, very recently but it makes a lot of sense. After that horrible situation in the presidential primary in New York in 2016, where 200,000 voters were purged by the Board of Elections which was absolutely horrifying and a moment that I think woke a lot of people up to the problem of the Board of Elections and the need for fundamental reform. Well it turns out that enough has changed since then. The Board of Elections signed a consent decree.

They were supposed to go over all the 200,000 voters who were purged. They didn't do it. There are still a lot of voters who we don't know if they were ever reached, and if their situation was fixed. They are supposed to be reporting monthly on their compliance with the consent decree. They haven't done it. So, first of all I'm saying right now the Board of Elections has got to live up to that consent decree immediately.

But we're taking matters into our own hands. It turned out there was a way to purchase the list of – a different list but a very important one – voters who had been put into a “inactive status” because their address apparently changed or they may have moved but it wasn't confirmed. It was that the Board of Elections received a report from either the Postal Service or the DMV that these folks may have moved. We know many, many times the flow of information among bureaucracies is wrong.

So, what we're doing is we found a way to get a list of all those people. We're going to mail to them. We're going to text them. We're going to do everything we can – a robo-call – anything that will alert them that their name is no longer on the active voter list, that they can reactivate right away in time to be a part of this upcoming primary on September 13th and the general election on November 6th.

And we're going to do that again before the general election. We're also adding another feature. We're going to be providing funding to the Board of Elections to increase the pay for the poll workers, bring it up to the new higher minimum wage so we can hopefully make sure there's plenty of poll workers to facilitate workers and keep the lines from getting so long.

All these things need to be done because the Board of Elections, and especially on this outreach to make sure people are not purged wrongly – the Board of Elections has not done a good enough job at communicating with voters.

The City of New York is going to do that now more and more, and you're going to see an important referendum item on this in the fall election because of the charter revision. We've got to reach voters more. We've got to tell them where they vote accurately, when they vote, we've got to remind them, we've got to make sure no one is purged wrongly, we've got to actually make our democracy work. The current board is not doing it. The City is going to step up.

Louis: Alright right before I let you go, Mr. Mayor, the New York Times story detailed how over 200 trash cans were removed from Harlem with a predictable result being garbage everywhere, vermin all over the place, people up in arms. Is this decision going to be reversed?

Mayor: Well, we have to look at it and assess it. I do understand the theory that some public trash cans unfortunately have attracted a lot of residential trash meaning instead of people putting their residential trash wherever they're supposed to in front of their building or down a chute in their building or whatever it is they put it in the public trash can. It overflows the public trash can. That attracts rats. That creates a mess.

So in some cases Sanitation has felt that if they took them out it would actually be a net gain but of course the problem is what you just delineated. Sometimes it goes the other way. I'm going to certainly talk to the Sanitation Commissioner. We've got to see if there's a better way to do this. I don't want the streets to be dirty but we've also got to say people have got to stop putting their household trash in those public trash cans because that just creates a mess for everyone.

Louis: Okay. I mean of course the City has to pick it up no matter where it is so for a lot of people it doesn't make a lot of sense but we'll trust that you'll get on top of that. Thank you for joining us, Mr. Mayor. Enjoy your week in Brooklyn and we'll see you next week.

Mayor: Thanks, Errol. You take care.

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