

THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
NEW YORK, NY 10007

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: October 5, 2020, 7:20 PM
CONTACT: pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov, (212) 788-2958

TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall, where we are keeping our focus on the rise of coronavirus in the nine ZIP codes in Brooklyn and Queens. I spoke with Mayor de Blasio a short time ago about the City's plan to close schools in those areas and his proposal to close non-essential businesses as well. Here's our conversation. Mr. Mayor, thanks for joining us.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: How are you doing, Errol?

Louis: Just fine, thanks. The big news of course, are the shutdowns in these selected areas and I'm wondering what changed since either last Monday when you and I spoke, or even just this last Friday when I spoke with Dr. Katz, the head of Health + Hospitals, who's running the test and trace operation. Did you get some bad news over the weekend that convinced you that stronger action needed to be taken?

Mayor: Look, Errol. When we increased the amount of testing and we certainly had a lot of engagement in the community, a lot of support from community leaders, obviously we were hopeful that people following the practices that we know work, the mask wearing, the social distancing plus a lot more testing, we were hopeful all this was adding up over the course of the last week or two, and unfortunately numbers were going in the opposite direction. So really it was the data we saw that we analyzed on Saturday that convinced all of us it was time to do something more rigorous. You always hope when you apply those tools, all that outreach, all that enforcement, all that education and certainly more testing, you hope it will give you a better result. And in places like Sunset Park, Soundview, Southeast Queens back in August, September, we did see that exact formula lead to much better results quickly. But here we did not.

Louis: Governor Cuomo made a point of saying today that as far as he's concerned, handing out masks is not enforcement, reminders are not enforcement, that only rigorous summonses is really what amounts to enforcement. Do you agree with that?

Mayor: Well, Errol, I think the goal here is to get people to comply, and I think throughout this whole crisis – look, it's been seven months, not only a health care crisis, an economic crisis. We've said repeatedly, our goal is not to shut down businesses, deprive people of their livelihood, or even with an average New Yorker to give them a fine, you know, that they would have to pay. A lot of them just don't have money to pay, that's not what we hope to do. Those tools are to create consequences when other measures don't work. The vast majority of New Yorkers have been following the rules around social distancing. The vast majority of businesses have been doing what we ask them. And what we try to do is say, okay, we're going to really blitz with mask distribution, education, if someone refuses a mask, then they're getting a fine, right away. But the goal is to get people to change the behavior and keep it changed and to bring the community into the process. We saw a lot of success in the last week or two getting community leaders, elected officials, community institutions, to be part of the solution. But again, it's still, it's a bigger problem. It's not just Brooklyn and Queens, as you know, it's Rockland County, it's Orange County, it's Nassau County. There's a bigger problem here that requires a bigger solution.

Louis: If as the Governor says, only a couple of dozen summonses are handed out when there's widespread violation of the public health rules, in some ways that's educating people as well, right? It's educating them that they can kind of get away with not really following the rules.

Mayor: No, I think it's quite clear that wherever we were doing a summons activity, wherever we doing an enforcement, if people would not comply, they got summonses. And what happened the vast majority of time is that people did comply. We saw this consistently over the last months around this city, when presented with a mask and told you got to get this on, or you're about to get a summons, people complied and it did help change behavior on a wider level. I think the fact is that we're unfortunately, because of a trend that has built over these last few weeks, in a way we've never seen previously in this epidemic that – in this pandemic that we need a different kind of impact now that enforcement alone can't do. We need clear restrictions on businesses and schools in the nine ZIP codes that are most deeply affected.

Louis: It seems like mass gathering is the real culprit here, right? I mean, individuals may or may not have a mask, but if you allow a couple of hundred people to get together inside it doesn't matter how many people are wearing masks, you've got a real problem there.

Mayor: I think there's nothing – you're right – nothing as bad as a mass gathering indoors without distancing, without masks. But I don't want it to for a moment to seem like that's the only challenge. In everyone's everyday life we want to see people wearing masks, we want to see people practicing social distancing, even extended families, and, you know, that's something to realize here. That there's not just one culprit where you could say, oh, well there was some celebrations and that was everything. No, I think it's travel between places, families getting together with other families. I think it's a lot of pieces, but it largely surrounds this central point, folks not wearing masks consistently and not social distancing consistently. That's what we've got to change. Right now, we've got an immediate challenge, Errol, but we've got to both address this, turn it back, and then keep that behavioral change in place for the long haul until there is a vaccine.

Louis: Let's make clear for people whose livelihoods are on the line and who are very concerned about this, what is going to happen with businesses that are in the, let's call it the hot zones, these areas where the coronavirus is spreading at an unacceptably quick rate, are they going to be closed? Are they not going to be closed? Is it going to be stepped up enforcement, new rules? What is supposed to happen, exactly?

Mayor: In those nine particularly challenged ZIP codes, the City of New York has made clear, I've made clear, we want the non-essential businesses closed on Wednesday morning. We have ongoing conversations with the State. The State has still not given approval. We're urging the State to act quickly. If the State wants to modify this plan, that is there right, obviously. But until further notice, the plan that I have presented is

to move on Wednesday morning because we have to move aggressively. Obviously, we're expecting an answer from the State tonight or tomorrow during the day so that we can get in position and do the enforcement we need to if those restrictions are in place.

Louis: To the extent that a public health crisis is also a public communications crisis, you know, we in the media are trying our best to hold up our end of all of this, that sounds like confusion to me, honestly, Mr. Mayor. Like we don't know what the State is going to say. So, you've laid out a compelling case that we should do a certain thing by Wednesday, but we can't really report that that's what's going to happen because we don't know if that's what's going to happen.

Mayor: Well I think you're right that there's always a challenge when all the pieces aren't in place, but Errol, that's the last seven months of our lives dealing with a lot of unknowns and a lot of changing dynamics. Here's what I'd say, the City of New York. I made clear yesterday what we wanted to see happen. I put business owners on alert with no joy, I mean, obviously, it pains me. This is not something I want to see happen, but it's something we need to do hopefully only for a matter of weeks. But Errol, the point was to say, this is what the city needs, this is what we have to have happen. Now we accept, and I said it very clearly yesterday, the State gets to make the final decision and we're urging them to move quickly because we don't have time to waste. I think if you're a business owner in those nine ZIP codes, the message is clear, prepare as early as Wednesday morning if you're a non-essential business. Again, that doesn't mean a pharmacy. That doesn't mean a supermarket. It means non-essential businesses. Prepare to close as early as Wednesday morning. Stay tuned for the final decision by the State, which again we expect tonight or tomorrow. So, the business owners at least are on alert, they can make the appropriate arrangements and then the State will make us decision and everyone will act accordingly.

Louis: Okay. this is a quote from the Public Advocate, Jumaane Williams, he said this on Twitter, "the back and forth between the Mayor and Governor on the scope and method of enforcement for additional restrictions and specific ZIP codes as COVID cases rise is an echo of what we saw in mid-March when delays and power plays led to lives lost." I wanted to get your reaction to that.

Mayor: I would say two things. One in March, we were all trying to deal with something we had never dealt with before, and we didn't have testing, and we didn't have federal support, and the City and State were doing their best to make sense of an unprecedented situation. And by and large, we've agreed throughout on the need for tough measures and that's what helped bring us back from the worst situation in the country to the best for many months. In the immediate situation, look, Errol what I have found is when I know we have to take a course of action, it's my obligation to tell the people of this city what we have to do, and that often helps ensure there is action. Rather than long detailed that can often not result in action, the best way to get action is to say publicly, this is where we need to go, and then the State ultimately decides. So yeah, for now there's a question mark, but that question mark, going to be answered very quickly and then we'll go from there.

Louis: Well, I think what he's getting at is a dynamic that you and I have talked about before. It almost seems predictable at this point that whatever it is that you want to do for the reasons that you just described, the Governor is going to almost go out of his way to make sure that that's not what happens. So, you say you wanted to close on Thursday, he'll say, well no, we're going to close tomorrow, you know, and on and on and on. And it becomes enormously, not just confusing, but in some ways really sort of dispiriting that our government refuses to work together, that we've got to listen to two briefings that are going to give us information that doesn't quite align and we have to spend a lot of extra time trying to figure out what's really going to happen.

Mayor: You know, Errol, I appreciate the point obviously, but I would say, first of all, if you look at the history here, New York City has managed to do – in the scheme of a very tough crisis – do a lot of the right things to fight this disease back, and we had almost four months where we really have been the envy of the nation, and now we're facing a challenge, but we're going to overcome it. The fact that the City and State aren't always aligned, well, that's been true for generations, but I think the fact is here ultimately – sometimes there's some back and forth – but ultimately we tend to get some place that is the right kind of decision that helps us move forward for our people. I don't think it's dispiriting to the vast majority of New Yorkers. I think what the vast majority of New Yorkers want to see is aggressive action to address this. The City's presenting the plan. That's my job, present the plan, say, let's do this. If I had all the control myself, if I didn't have to think about the federal government and the State government, I would do a lot of things differently, but guess what? There's different levels of government. So long as people see there are clear ideas, clear proposals to make an impact, and that quickly they get resolved. And every single time they have gotten resolved within a very short timeframe and then we go to work. That's what matters to the average New Yorker.

Louis: It is time for a short break. I'll bring you the rest of my conversation with Mayor de Blasio in just a minute. Stay with us.

[...]

Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall in my weekly conversation with Mayor de Blasio. This week, we're talking about the surge of coronavirus in multiple neighborhoods across Brooklyn and Queens. Here's part two of that conversation.

Mr. Mayor, we've got some questions that are still out there about school closings. School closings in the affected ZIP codes are going to happen, that's based on the ZIP code of the address of the school. Is that right?

Mayor: That's correct, Errol. Nine ZIP codes – those schools will be closed now, so they will not be open for students tomorrow morning. So, it's all the public schools and non-public schools in those nine ZIP codes.

Louis: Okay. So, I'm assuming that most people, including myself, don't really know the ZIP codes of most schools, right?

Mayor: No, of course not. I was a public-school parent, you wouldn't think about the ZIP code, but it's really easy to find out.

Louis: Okay. So, one question that comes up, of course, is that if, as you've said, on this program the public schools were not really the source of the problem, yet they're being asked to close down at tremendous inconvenience and educational harm to the students and the families that are going to be affected – is that fair?

Mayor: Errol, look, Lord knows this is not what I want to see, but I do think we have to think about the whole picture here. So, first of all, the school communities – look, everyone had come back to school, there was a lot of joy, there was a lot of sense of satisfaction that kids were back in the classroom. And then, today, school communities had to reach out to parents and say, hey, this, you know, for a period of time will be shut down in these nine ZIP codes. That's no fun for anyone. But, again, we hope this is a matter of weeks only. Obviously, the schools have the ability to go remote. Here's why it's important – you're closing down non-essential businesses. You're obviously not allowing gatherings. You do not want to see a large number of kids and staff going back and forth to schools, whether the public or non-public in the exact same area where you're trying to limit activity deeply. It's what we learned before, if you really limit what happens in a geography, if you really, you know, make sure there's a minimum, not a maximum of activity, that's what turns the situation around quickly, and we need to move quickly. So, I, obviously, deeply, deeply wanted to see our schools open and stay open. But for these particular ZIP codes, the right thing to do is to take them down for a period of time. Hopefully in a matter of weeks, there'll be right back up.

Louis: You mentioned today, Mr. Mayor, that there are a couple of other ZIP codes that might be added to the list. Do you know when there'll be a decision about whether or not the hot zone, so to speak, is expanding?

Mayor: So, the only way you get on that list is to have seven consecutive days above three percent. Right now, there's two ZIP codes that are in that danger area, if you will, or in that cusp that they might go up. Both of them have five consecutive days each. So, obviously, within 48 hours – you know, I hope it doesn't happen – but both of them could be on the list as well.

Louis: The Governor said something today that was worth reflecting on, Mr. Mayor. He said that he specifically is willing to take the blame if there's a lot of blowback and that people are – if people are objecting over a heavy-handed treatment or if they feel that their particular religious institutions are being targeted and so forth. The implication there is that local leaders, including the Mayor of New York have been avoiding some of the political consequences of putting really tough enforcement in place.

Mayor: Yeah. Errol, look, throughout this crisis – and I would say one thing – you've watched Mayors in New York City – my reality is I make decisions all the time, there's a lot of consequences to the decisions I make. There's no one more than a mayor who has to make tangible, practical decisions and take the heat, especially in New York City. So, this comes with a job. I would say, the farther away you get from the people – State government, federal government, the more insulation. There's no insulation here. So, from my point of view, it's we call them like we see them. I came to the conclusion by the end of Saturday that we needed to close down these communities. I don't like it. I don't feel good about it, because I don't want to see anyone suffer, but it's necessary. It's the right thing to do. I put it out there. I didn't look for cover. I didn't look for anyone else to explain it. I put it out there, because it was the right thing to do. And that's what we've been doing throughout. I think when it's time to take a tough action – obviously, I called for shelter in place – one of the first elected officials in the country to call for that for his own jurisdiction. I've called for a lot of things that were tough and acted on them. But I'll tell you something, Errol, so long as we have a chance to get something done without such restrictive measures and so long as we have the ability to maximize community buy-in and participation in solutions, of course, that's the preferred route whenever that will work. And that's what worked in Sunset Park. That's what worked in Soundview. That's what worked in Southeast Queens. That's what we were trying to do here.

Louis: What was described today is that there'll be State-led task forces that will be staffed with local personnel, meaning, you, as the City of New York, will need to come up with some folks from either, I don't know, the Sheriff's department or the NYPD and other kind of places, maybe the Health Department, that will be directed by the State to figure out enforcement. Is that pretty much what's going to happen in the next few days?

Mayor: I think it's a little different in the sense that we already last week throughout the week, we had a thousand officers per day out in these target ZIP codes. And you're talking about sheriff, Office of Special Enforcement, NYPD, Health Department, Sanitation Department, many others out there doing that enforcement work and doing that education work. So, we've already fielded a huge force and we're going to keep on it, especially if, God forbid, we have other ZIP codes we have to be in. We're going to work with the State. We all have the same interest here. And, in fact, we have to make sure that this situation is handled in Brooklyn and Queens. And we also, I want to be real, this is a metropolitan area problem. We have to make sure that Nassau County, Rockland County, Orange County, those situations are handled too, or else that's going to still be a threat to New York City and vice versa. We're all in this together, but we need a bigger solution for the metropolitan area.

Louis: Okay. Before I let you go in our last minute, Andy King has been expelled from the City Council by a vote of the Council. It's been a quite a while – not, I think in our living memory that this has happened. I think the last time was in the 1950s. Are you planning to call a special election?

Mayor: Yeah. First of all, I have to say, it's very sad that it came to this and this is something that, you know, I feel bad for the people of his district and for the people of this city. But we're going to move past it. We will call a special election at some point this week and let's get that community representation that deserves.

Louis: Okay. Thanks very much for joining us, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Thank you, Errol.

###