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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: February 12, 2018

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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Josh Robin: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. Forget about the State of the Union or even the State of the State. New York City gets its close up tomorrow night when Mayor de Blasio gives his State of the City address laying out his priorities for the first year of his new term. Mayor de Blasio joins me now to talk with all about this and more. It's our weekly Monday's with the Mayor interview. Welcome to be here.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Thank you.

Robin: Let me ask you, big speech tomorrow. State of the City is strong; I suspect you're going to say.

Mayor: Yes.

Robin: Can you toss us a nugget about what you're going to talk about?

Mayor: Sure. I can even show it to you.

Robin: Oh, there you go.

Mayor: This is the message. I talked about this on Inauguration Day. This concept, the fairest big city in America is not only going to be the focus of year one, it's going to be the focus of all four years. And it's a simple notion that says whatever we do, whether it's a budget decision, a policy decision, a personnel decision. We're going to ask the question, does it help us become the fairest big city in America? And that means addressing income inequality that means improving the relationship between police and community. That makes sure it means making sure that people have access to better education for their kids, a whole host of things. Plans that are largely in place and growing right now, but that we're trying to wrap together in a single strategic imperative that will determine again all of the big decisions we make going forward. And he is the other piece of the equation addressing the fact that we cannot continue to improve our City if we don't go straight at the crisis of the democracy that's facing this city right now.

And that's the challenge that people have with voting and participating. So I am going to put forward a plan called DemocracyNYC that literally will I hope reinvigorate civic participation and voting in this city.

Robin: So you're obviously re-elected, turn out wasn't great. In the primary it wasn't great either. It hasn't been for a number of years. My understanding is that you want to create a chief democracy officer and also make it easier for school kids to register in school. Is your hope whether they vote for republicans, democrats, anyone –

Mayor: Absolutely.

Robin: That you just want – I mean do you have a particular number that you want to see turn out go to?

Mayor: Look, right now let's start at the beginning. We've got a million New York City residents who are eligible to register and aren't registered. Now, some of that is broken laws in Albany. We don't have same day registration. People are not encouraged to vote because we don't have early voting. So one of the parts of this 10-point plan is to go to Albany and get those big legislative fixes. But, right here there are a lot of things that we could do better, certainly registering our young people. Tens of thousands of young people are 17 years old about to be 18 in our public schools typically seniors. We could use that opportunity to register the vote, whoever they're going to vote for. We can use our government offices a lot better to make sure voter registration is more widely available. That's what that chief democracy officer is going to focus on. But here is the other thing; we need a charter revision commission. We need to go at the specific idea that one of the things that most discourages people is money in politics. We've seen this all over the city and all over the country. People want to get money out of the political process as much as possible. The best tool is public financing. I've been saying it for a long time. We can do a lot better. We have a good campaign finance system in this city, one of the best in the country. But we can do a lot more with public financing to make sure that people know that private donations are not the basis of our political system, but public money.

Robin: What do you want – this to me is new about the charter revision commission. What specifically would you want them to pass?

Mayor: Look, I am going to call the commission. I am going to ask them to focus on public financing of elections to make sure that we again take our very good system and make it a lot stronger to find every way we can to get money out of politics and make it easier for people to run for office. I also think we have a fundamental problem with the board of elections. Now that's governed by state law. And clearly I understand we were going to have to go to Albany. And I think there are some real changes we could get in the board in Albany I would like to believe. But at the same time I believe the state – excuse me, I believe the city could do a lot more on our own. Even with an existing city law to reach voters to help them to have a better experience in the voting process to get a lot more information. I am going to present that tomorrow, how that's something we could also do through a charter revision commission.

Robin: There was talk that the Governor is going to be mandating or at least trying mandate early voting, one polling place at least in each county. Anything that you know about this, it seems like a plan that's just emerging.

Mayor: Look, I welcome any progress. But it's already proven and dozens of states around the country that this works. It's a better process – you know think about how crazy it is in a modern society with people's schedule how busy people are; families dealing with all the challenges that they have, folks who work two jobs. I mean they're going to give you any number examples of how a system that only allows you to vote on a single day for a single set of hours. And then you confront lines and confusions and lot of times you don't know your poll site has changed, whatever it is. This is not a modern appropriate way to engage people in the democratic process. If you have early voting and you see it all over the country people get to go in different times that work for them. They vote in some cases, weeks in advance. It encourages a lot more participation, same with vote by mail. There are states that have had extraordinarily positive experiences with vote by mail. We've got none of it. We are literally one of the most backwards states in the country when it comes to election reform. So, we've got to fight that fight in Albany. And I think the energy is growing. I mean 2018 is going to be an extraordinary energetic year in the political process because of everyone that's happening around the country. But now I think we can also do a lot more here. And so what I am going to focus on tomorrow is all the ways that we in New York City can fix our own problems and create a more democratic society.

Robin: Another thing that was mentioned in addition to the chief democracy officer is more investment in the census, more disclosure of contact between lobbyists and top city hall officials. Any other nuggets that maybe isn't directly related to increasing voting that you want to toss out before your speech?

Mayor: I'll go through all of that tomorrow. It's a 10-point plan, but each piece of it contributes to enfranchisement to people knowing that they matter in a democracy. I mean look, I will be very blunt about this tomorrow. There has been systemic efforts over the years to exclude people from participation. It's not just some of the horrible examples we see in some states of restrictive laws that are clearly meant to reduce the number of people that vote for often very partisan reasons. It's other things, it's a state like New York. We want to be proud of New York State. But guess what? Our election laws, unfortunately and this is a bipartisan problem were built as incumbent protection programs. They were not built to encourage participation. And I've been very clear before there has been very cynical actions, especially by News Corp as a great example of programming over decades that gave people the sense that their vote didn't matter, their participation didn't matter. We're at a point where our democracy is very fragile. A lot of what's happening in Washington since President Trump was elected is causing people real concern about the future of our democracy. We can't take that line down, we have to act now. And so the plan I am going to put forward it's a number of pieces but with a very clear common thread giving people their democracy back.

Robin: In 2016 you announced trolley service along the Brooklyn/Queens waterfront. Is that frankly going to happen?

Mayor: Well, that's quite a segue. Josh, it's something I believe in, it's a plan whose time has come. You look all over this country; light-rail service has been expanding in cities all over the country. Why? Because it will allow you to do things that you could do with the subway but building a new subway takes a lot more time. It's a lot more expensive, a lot more difficult. We have in this city – we're a growing city. We're going to be at 9 million people as soon as 2030. We need more mass transit practically in the outer boroughs. Light-rail on top of the new ferry service we started and things like select bus service is a part of the solution. So I am very excited about that.

Robin: Right, it just seems like that ferry – you've got a lot of kudos for it. It's working well, but with the light-rail service it seems like it's blocked. Financing might not be there. I'm just wondering if you feel like it's actually going to move along within this term?

Mayor: Look, we've put forward an initial plan. I said from the beginning there is a lot to work out. There is a big, big endeavor. Clearly want to get resources to help it along and this takes us all to the infrastructure debate that will now start to rage. I am happy to say some infrastructure money got into that budget agreement, last week in Washington. So, that's a good sign. It's great to have Senator Schumer as the democratic leader in the Senate. Now, the minority leader I think very soon to be the majority leader. That's great for the city in terms of the infrastructure. So to do something this magnitude of course we're going to need help. But I am very excited about what it could mean and that it is not just about one line, its then about that line being the trail blazer for a lot more.

Robin: Okay, we have to take a break. Stay right there.

Robin: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. I am speaking with Mayor Bill de Blasio. We are moving from State of the City now, this coming year –

Mayor: That's a segue, there we go –

Robin: Yes, yes, we are moving now to NYCHA. Obviously, a very important issue. I want to ask you a couple of questions about it. City Council members say that they plan hold another hearing on this and they want to bring in your Deputy Mayor Alicia Glen. As you know, in court papers, she said the Council members are “often extremely confused and ill-informed and not that smart.” Considering that and considering that they're having that – not a great reaction, as you can imagine, to that, do you think that she can get a fair hearing in the City Council?

Mayor: Yeah, look, I was a City Council member for eight years. I've said very clearly that comment – I have immense respect for Alicia Glen, she's been a great Deputy Mayor but that comment was a real mistake and not fair to the Council and she apologized as she should. She is going to obviously in her dealings with the Council members going forward, she's going to have to show good faith and good will to overcome that unfortunate comment. I'm sure she will.

I don't doubt she'll get a fair hearing. I think the Council always has tough questions for any administration, you know, mine or any other administration. That's the nature of democracy as

we were talking about before. There's supposed to be attention there in a good sense. So, we welcome those questions and you know we'll have answers for them.

Robin: Hot off the presses – there's a story that the New York State Health Department is investigating the New York City Housing Authority. Obviously, there's a lot of concern about NYCHA – something that you have talked about at length. Can you respond specifically to this investigation as we're learning about it?

Mayor: Look, to put it in perspective, my administration has addressed the challenges of NYCHA head on in a way that bluntly previous administrations didn't. For a long time in this city, mayors tried to keep as much distance as they could from the housing authority. We said we're going to go right at the problems. I have, since I took office, my budgets have invested \$2.1 billion in capital funding into NYCHA buildings, \$1.6 billion in new expense money to address a whole host of problems. We've made developments safer, we've gone at the fundamental problem of how long repairs take.

A lot has changed, there's a lot more to do, no doubt. A whole lot more to do but on the question of lead paint, the history is real clear. When we came into office, unfortunately those inspections that were mandated by City law were not happening. When it was discovered, we acknowledged it and acted on it. It took a while to get it right, there's no two ways about it but we've not inspected those apartments several times – all the apartments in question. We have done remedial action. We'll continue every year to inspect and take remedial action.

All of the issues that we face in public housing – these are buildings that go back many decades that were supposed to get regular federal investment, didn't. There are estimates of \$20 billion, \$25 billion in unmet physical needs in NYCHA buildings. We're doing our best to keep up and to prioritize the biggest problems. But look we are trying to fix a whole history of neglect and we're going to do it consistently.

I would say when it comes to health issues, the New York City Department of Health is the gold standard in this country. You know, we have the strongest public health capacity anywhere in the country, always are partners in making sure that NYCHA residents are healthy. When we see a problem, we address it and we're going to keep doing that.

Robin: Let's talk about what happened on Rikers Island on Saturday. You have been briefed on it, you might have seen the video. The Correction Officers Union says, "This mayor has taken away tools to control the environment and indeed there is an increase in inmate-on-staff violence between the last two fiscal years." Do you feel that things are on the right track and do you have any thoughts about whether officers' hands are tied in disciplining those who are behind bars and that might have to deal with this?

Mayor: Look, let's first talk about the officer himself, Jean Souffrant – lives in Crown Heights, a man who wanted to serve this city in a very proud tradition of families that come from other places to New York and then make New York a better place. I spoke to him over the weekend –

Robin: An immigrant from Haiti.

Mayor: Yes, and he is a very noble man even though he's going through this horrible challenge. His attitude was positive and he wanted to talk about all we can do to make the situation better on Rikers Island. I really admire that. I spoke to his wife and his sister as well, and I said to them we're all devoted to this and in fact we've put over \$200 million in the last four years to do things that bluntly weren't done before – to add a lot more officers, to give more training to our officers for their safety and everyone's safety, to stop the flow of weapons and contraband which is part of what endangers everyone. There's a lot more to do on that front. We need help from Albany with the scanners that would help us to do that better.

It's been a concerted effort. There are now security cameras all over the complex that didn't used to be there before. So, this work has to deepen. Some elements of safety have gotten better, some are just not good enough at all. That's a truth that I have to grapple with and my team has to continue to do more work on.

But here's what I do know, with real respect for the men and woman who do this work, what their union has called for is to return to punitive segregation, you know, solitary confinement. People have seen what has happened in our jails and our prisons over decades, how much injustice was done, how much harm was done, how much – how many lost opportunities to rehabilitate people and turn lives around. Solitary confinement doesn't make people better, it doesn't make them more conducive to being orderly or well-behaved. Solitary confinement, unfortunately, eats away at the human soul. So I understand how frustrating it must be for officers who feel that sense of danger and we feel for them, we want them to be safe and that's why we're investing and we're going to be doing a lot more to make sure they're safe, but solitary confinement is not the answer.

Robin: Let me ask you – we only have a couple of minutes left, I want to ask you a political question. Senator Gillibrand was on 60 Minutes last night, I'm not asking you a 2020 question, I'm asking you a 2018 question. When she represented this upstate district she got an A-rating from the NRA and she was against sanctuary cities. She says she was now wrong, that she was – regrets those. But at the same time, my question is, for Democrats to win across the country, arguably, they need to have positions that are different than what would get a Democrat elected here. Would you ever campaign for someone who gets an A-rating from the NRA or has a different position on sanctuary cities if you felt that it was for the overall better purpose of having a Democratic-controlled House?

Mayor: Okay so let's try and simplify that question in my view. I don't do hypotheticals, so this is what I'd say. Do I think there's a perfect litmus test to apply to every candidate everywhere? No. I think you have to look at the specific conditions obviously. I do think Democrats are going to be better served going forward, and this is something I felt – this is everywhere, this is the whole party, the most local level up to the national level, are going to be better served by declaring our views and being consistent particularly on economic issues.

Look, I think we need to tax the wealthy more. We need to make sure the wealthy pay their fair share in taxes. We need to have a very clear message for people about improving their economic circumstances, higher wages and benefits, getting money out of politics, stopping the role of

corporations with the DNC. That kind of consistent message I think can break through in every part of the county.

Robin: Like Joe Manchin – Senator Manchin from West Virginia. Obviously you are different from him –

Mayor: Right.

Robin: – on a number of issues, but presumably you would rather have him be the senator from West Virginia than a Republican.

Mayor: Absolutely. And so I don't think anyone can say there's a perfect litmus test. But I do think we need to change the Democratic Party to have a central message, a central vision. That vision needs to be about economic empowerment, and saying to working-class and middle-class people, again, we're going to actually help you improve your standard of living which has been declining for decades. That should be something that unifies Democrats across the whole country.

Robin: Very, very quickly, did you see the portraits that the Obamas –

Mayor: Yes.

Robin: – unveiled. Have you thought about your own portrait and if you'd like to go for something different, and the First Lady?

Mayor: That's not what we're thinking about right now, Josh. That's a long way in the future. We've got a lot of work to do right now.

Robin: Okay. Thank you Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Thank you.

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