



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
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CONTACT: pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov, (212) 788-2958

RUSH TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO DELIVERS REMARKS AT FIRST CORINTHIAN BAPTIST CHURCH

First Lady Chirlane McCray: Good morning.

Audience: Good morning.

First Lady: Praise the lord.

Audience: Praise the lord.

First Lady: I am so happy and grateful to be back here at FCBC.

[Applause]

I want to thank Pastor Mike and Reverend LaKeesha for all the support that they have shown for our family from day one. And I want to thank all of you too. This has been absolutely amazing.

Before our mayor speaks, I want you to know that I am – I feel so blessed to be able to serve as your first lady.

[Applause]

And I want you to know I'm working hard.

[Laughter]

I am. I'm working hard.

My focus has been mental health.

Audience: Amen.

[Applause]

First Lady: There is no health and there is no wellness without mental health.

Audience: Yeah!

First Lady: And I'm leading up a multi-agency effort so that we can rebuild our mental health system. I'm glad to see Commissioner Mary Bassett here today, who [inaudible].

[Applause]

First Lady: [inaudible].

[Applause]

First Lady: Now, as part of this effort, we're – we're hosting feedback sessions with all types of providers – social workers, psychiatrists, teachers, business leaders. Most recently we had one for faith leaders, and Pastor Walrond – Pastor Walrond attended.

And we want you to be part of this effort too. So I'm inviting you to attend borough-wide feedback sessions that we're holding, beginning June 9. The first one's going to be in the Bronx –

[Applause]

– on June 9, hosted by Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz. And I invite you to attend that, or you can go to the one in Manhattan, which will be on June 30, in the Municipal Building on 1 Centre Street. Now, all this information – we're going to make sure you get this information again, but it will also be posted on nyc.gov/health – and I really hope that you can make it to at least one, because we need to hear from you about what we can be doing better to provide services where you live, where you work, where you go to school – especially services for our children, because we know that [inaudible] so much more.

So, I hope you can make it, and it's now my pleasure to introduce my husband, our mayor, [inaudible].

[Applause]

[Cheers]

[Music]

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning, everyone.

Audience: Good morning.

Mayor: First, I want to give honor to God – without Him, this day would not be possible.

Audience: Yes.

[Applause]

Mayor: And there's – I've got a lot I want to say and I'm going to try and say it quickly, because I have a lot I'm feeling today.

But first, I wanted to note – a lot of times, when you see elected leaders greet their spouse, they do that little embrace or that little peck on the cheek. But when I greet Chirlane McCray, I have to kiss her, because she's so beautiful.

[Applause]

[Cheers]

Our first lady – our first lady is fighting every day to reach so many people who have not been reached, to create the actual reality we deserve – mental health for those who need it, services for those who need it, especially our children. Do you know how many children's lives could be turned around if we could just reach them early enough with the mental health services they need? And we are blessed. I am not only blessed to have the most wonderful wife in the world – New York City is blessed to have a first lady fighting for us every day. Let's give her a hand.

[Applause]

And FCBC, you are blessed –

Audience: Yes.

Mayor: – in so many ways. You are blessed to have leaders of such integrity, such deep spirituality and deep social commitment simultaneously.

[Applause]

I have traveled the same journey you have traveled. I've gotten to know Pastor Mike. Pastor Mike – to borrow from a phrase from yesteryear – to know you is to love you. To know this man is to respect him, is to want to seek his counsel and guidance, is to want to hear his voice that calls out for justice every day.

[Applause]

And I thank you for your friendship and your leadership and what you have built in this extraordinary house.

[Applause]

Now, in our household, we have an important phrase we use. We have banished some of the old school thinking – Chirlane took a leadership role on this. We do not say, “Behind every great man stands a great woman.” This suggests something or lesser, wouldn’t it? There’s no “behind” in our lexicon. We say, “Beside every great man stands a great woman.”

[Applause]

[Cheers]

And Pastor LaKeesha is that great woman.

[Applause]

[Cheers]

We thank you for your leadership.

That partnership has made us all stronger. This church has not only made the village of Harlem stronger, you have made this entire city stronger. And we commend you, because, as Pastor noted, faith communities are so crucial to the future of this city. They’re crucial to the work we try to do every day in government to better people’s lives. You know, there was an article a few weeks back in the New York Times, and there was a certain amount of surprise – you could tell in the voice of the writers of the article – a certain amount of surprise that Chirlane and I believed it was essential to embrace faith communities in our work, that we thought faith leaders were crucial to making this city better, that we thought the people of faith were the people who would help turn this city towards the greatness it should achieve. I don’t know why that is surprising to some, but it’s natural for us, because we see in faith communities the strength, the solidity, the belief, the hope that can make this city better. It is so in evidence here today. It is so in evidence.

And so all of us in my administration consider everyone in this room a partner. That’s how we actually change society. Change does not happen – sometimes it happens from the top down, but rarely, I think. Change happens from the grassroots up, from the people up.

[Applause]

And so everyone who works for and with me believes we are partners.

I want to just acknowledge these folks who are here in my administration, because they are so extraordinary.

You saw her stare down the Ebola crisis and become a voice of sanity, nationally, in the process – our extraordinary health commissioner, Mary Bassett – [inaudible] –

[Applause]

– a proud – a proud child of Harlem and Washington Heights who has hit the big time as our health commissioner.

I want to thank a woman who does extraordinary work every day on a tough, tough topic. We are fighting to acknowledge the reality of domestic violence in this city, to bring it out of the shadows, to talk about it, identify it, and then reduce it and combat it – and the woman who leads our effort so ably is Commissioner Rose Pierre-Louis. Let’s thank her for all she does.

[Applause]

I want to thank a man who is listening every day to the needs of communities and bringing them to City Hall and turning those needs into action, our commissioner for community affairs, Marco Carrion – thank you.

[Applause]

Now, I want to talk about this city. This city works when it's for everyone – when it's for everyone. That is our history. That is the glue. The magic of this place has been it's open to all. I always stop at this moment and say I am not suggesting our history is filled with perfection. I am not suggesting there was no prejudice. I am saying that our history makes clear people can find an opportunity here. They could find a place they could afford to live. They could find a job. They could create something. They could open a door for the next generation. So many people in this room lived that history.

[Applause]

You are the success stories that came from that history – until recent years. And then our city, for the first time, started to change in a dangerous way. We can talk about the pros and cons of gentrification, and we can acknowledge that it's not all good or all bad, but we do know one thing – gentrification has changed us rapidly. And with it have come profound challenges.

Cost of housing going up all over has changed us.

[Applause]

The Great Recession has changed us – and not for the better. It threw people into poverty and they haven't recovered. Something's changed.

When things change, you can bury your head in the sand or you can do something about it. It's time to act to keep this a city for all, because it won't work if it's not a city for all.

[Applause]

So right now, we have a status quo that is unacceptable. I've talked about [inaudible] many times before – the tale of two cities. I talked about income inequality – greater than it's been at any time since before the Great Depression, in the 1920s. And we work every day to change that.

We are building affordable housing.

We're giving families better wages and paid sick leave and benefits to make their lives better.

[Applause]

We're giving families things they used to have to pay for. [inaudible] they deserve to have full-day pre-k for their children.

[Applause]

After-school programs for our middle school kids so they're safe and sound and learning.

[Applause]

These changes have happened in these last 17 months, and we will deepen them. We will deepen them.

But meanwhile, there's a status quo that's hanging on, that if we don't defeat it, it will change the face of this place. It will make this a gilded city – a city for only those wealthy enough to afford to be here – and we will not accept that.

Audience: That's right. Yes.

[Applause]

Mayor: And we don't accept the old rules of the game, because the old rules of the game were that those who already had wealth and power got more wealth and power.

Audience: That's right.

Mayor: That doesn't sound particularly egalitarian to me. That doesn't sound like American values. That doesn't sound like the values of this city to me.

And so, for years and years – and you've seen it – developers would come along and say they wanted to build something. They wanted to build it their way, their rules, their profits, and government just went along with it. So who was actually calling the tune? Those elected to represent all of us or was it the developers? Well, in fact, most of the time, it was the developers. And we came in and said no – we are not going to approve development that doesn't help the people.

[Applause]

We said if you're going to develop something, it's going to come with affordable housing. That is the requirement in this city.

[Applause]

Well, now we're at a moment of decision. And I want to make this stark for you. There's just days left – days – before those in Albany conclude the legislative session and will make decisions that will affect everyone in this room, and our children, and future generations. This is a moment of decision that we have rarely seen in terms of the magnitude of what's hanging in the balance. It's a moment where we all better make our voices heard.

Because if we do not change the rules, we will continue to slip backwards. If developers still call the tunes, if developers still get subsidized – right now in New York City, according to state law, a developer who creates a luxury condominium gets a tax break for that – is that what you want your tax dollars to go to?

Audience: No!

Mayor: Do you think people who create luxury condominiums need a tax break to begin with?

Audience: No!

Mayor: Do you know these condominiums are going for \$1 million, \$2 million, \$5 million, \$10 million, \$20 million, and more? Do you know there was a condominium in this town that went for \$100 million dollars for one apartment? And there was someone who paid that. And those condominiums got a tax break.

Not anymore, brothers and sisters.

[Applause]
[Cheers]

Right now, we have a chance to change this whole picture.

We have proposed to Albany some simple ideas to change the rules of the game.

First of all, we said if someone can afford to buy one of those luxury condominiums, then we think it's fair there should be a modest tax on them so we can create affordable housing for the people.

[Applause]

We call it the mansion tax, because if you can afford a mansion, you can afford to help your brother and sister [inaudible].

[Applause]

In Albany, they will make a decision on that proposal in the next eight days.

In Albany, they will decide whether to continue or eliminate rent regulation for over 2 million New Yorkers. If you live in a rent-controlled or rent-stabilized apartment, I hope you feel the magnitude of this moment, because if Albany doesn't act, rent control and rent stabilization go away. All those protections go away. All those guarantees go away. The market takes over – and we have seen what the market has done to so many hardworking families, haven't we? We've seen people displaced too many times, haven't we? And Albany not only has a choice to keep rent regulation or to eliminate it, they could do the right thing and strengthen rent regulation so more and more people are protected.

[Applause]

It won't happen without your voice. Over 2 million of us – more than a quarter of this city – affected by this decision. But our voices have to be heard in Albany, because the message has to be clear. We cannot accept this status quo. If rent regulation isn't strengthened, you know what will keep happening? We will lose not just thousands, tens of thousands of affordable units. More and more people will not only be forced out of the neighborhood they love, they'll be forced out of this city altogether.

Audience: That's right.

Mayor: It will not be the same place. And we value the place it has always been. So I need you to make your voices heard.

And listen this – right now, under the current rent law, when the rent hits a certain level for an apartment, the landlord gets to take away all rent control, all rent stabilization – no more rules, no more limits. The current law gives them a loophole to take the apartment out of any kind of regulation. We've got to close that loophole. We've got to end vacancy decontrol right now.

[Applause]

Under the current law, whenever an apartment just turns over – one tenant leaves, another one comes in – the landlord can up the rent by 20 percent. It doesn't mean they did anything to make it better. They just get to up the rent by 20 percent. It's called a "vacancy bonus." Why should you get a bonus just because you got a new tenant?

Audience: Amen.

Mayor: End the vacancy bonus for landlords now and we will protect [inaudible] affordable housing in this city.

[Applause]

Under the current law, if the landlord in fact does something to improve the apartment, they get to up the rent and keep it up. Doesn't matter if all of the costs they incurred is paid back by the rent – they just get to keep it up at a permanently high level. In our lives, if we have a cost and we pay the cost, case closed. The law lets the landlords just keep on getting more and more money out of us. And we have to close that loophole, because if we don't we just keep losing the apartments that people need.

[Applause]

Now, I'll be very clear. In Albany, the Assembly acted. To their credit, they acted. They voted for all these reforms and changes. They voted to strengthen rent regulation. God bless the Assembly – they stood up and they did the right thing.

Now just yesterday, the governor felt the voices of the people and put out a plan that also would achieve these reforms, and I commend him for that.

But now, we need to take these concepts and turn them into action. And there's only eight days. The Senate in Albany has not spoken.

All of our leaders have to now get us to action. They have to understand that if they do not act, they will be damning this city to become unaffordable for more and more people. Eight days – and our lives hang in the balance.

Make your voices heard. All those who represent you in Albany need to hear from you now.

And brothers and sisters, last I checked it's still a democracy.

Audience: That's right.

Mayor: The democracy is not functioning as well as it should, but it's still a democracy. Let them hear you. Make your voices unescapable, make your voices loud – and we have a chance to make the changes we need.

Now, if the plans I just discussed are achieved – the mansion tax, and the strengthening of rent regulation – you know what we will be able to do? We will be able to create affordable housing for 160,000 more New Yorkers.

[Applause]

160,000 people will not be forced out of their neighborhood. Is that enough to excite your interest?

Audience: Yeah!

Mayor: Are you going to make your voices heard in Albany?

Audience: Yeah!

Mayor: And let me tell you one other thing. Let's say those who believe in the status quo don't want to hear our voices. So they want to continue tax breaks for developers. This is this thing you've heard about lately called 421-a – innocuous sounding phrase, but what it really means is tens of millions of dollars constantly changing hands and going into the pockets of developers.

If Albany will not give us the changes we need, if Albany will not strengthen rent regulation, if Albany will not pass a mansion tax, if Albany will not protect us, then here's what I think about any tax breaks for condominiums – luxury condominiums – any tax breaks for developers who are not going to create affordable housing – I say end those tax breaks once and for all.

[Applause]

If Albany won't mend it, let's end it.

And one other thing I need you to hear. We are going to keep fighting right here, right now to protect all the affordable housing we have, to protect the rights of 400,000 people who live in public housing in this city. We will make our public housing better and stronger. We will protect them.

We will protect people who are being harassed by their landlords illegally and forced out. We will give them legal aid to protect their rights.

[Applause]

We just want Albany to do something.

And I'll conclude with this point – I mentioned the state of our democracy. Well, listen – I said earlier, we – we deepen our democracy by working with communities of faith. Because as Pastor Mike said, if you want to find people who really believe in community and neighborhood, if you want to find people who want to be part of the solution, just visit a house of worship and you will find them.

[Applause]

We want to deepen that sense so that neighborhoods get to determine their own destiny. It should not be decided by those who are just wealthy and powerful. It should not just be decided in our state capitol. It needs to be decided here among us more and more – that's what a democracy looks like.

[Applause]

And we want to hear the voices of faith communities and we want a deeper partnership.

You know, I've had the honor over this last year of working with an extraordinary organization called COREL – it's the Council of Religious Ecumenical Leaders. It was founded and chaired by Cardinal Dolan. It's leaders of all different faiths, and it's a great, great group of leaders who help us think about the work we have to do.

But I want to do something more – and I want to announce it today. I want to develop a group of clergy leaders all over the city who will advise me directly on how we can best achieve real change on the ground in our communities, how we can best reach people in need, how we can hear the voices of the people better at City Hall. Because if we ever want to get somewhere, if we ever think we're on the right path, then we have to deepen our commitment to listening to the voices of the people.

When we stop wanting to hear the voices of the people, we will stop making change. And I won't let that happen.

[Applause]

So I'm going to create a group of clergy leaders of every faith to advise us and deepen our connection to the grassroots and help us move forward. Now I thought to myself – who could provide the right leadership of such an organization?

[Applause]

[Cheers]

[Music]

Let's just think about the characteristics you would be looking for. You would want a dynamic leader of course.

Audience: Yeah!

[Applause]

Mayor: You would want a highly intelligent leader.

Audience: Yeah!

[Applause]

Mayor: You would want a leader who could talk to kings and common people simultaneously.

Audience: Yeah!

[Applause]

Mayor: You want a leader who hungers and thirsts for change every single day.

Audience: Yeah!

[Applause]

Mayor: It wouldn't hurt if he was strikingly eloquent and passionate.

[Applause]

[Cheers]

Let me think about this for a minute.

[Laughter]

[Music]

Wait a minute! I've got it!

[Laughter]

I think Pastor Mike should chair the [inaudible]!

[Applause]

[Cheers]

[Music]

Mayor: [inaudible]!

Thank you and God bless you all!

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