

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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: August 31, 2020, 7:00 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. As we told you before the break Mayor de Blasio today announced that he would delay sending layoff notices to 22,000 municipal workers, as the city continues to navigate the impact of the pandemic on the budget deficit. And as City Hall looks for ways to cope with the fiscal crisis, it could soon be dealing with a possible teachers' strike as we get closer to the start of the school year. Joining me now to talk about that and much more from the Blue Room, we've got Mayor de Blasio. Good evening, Mr. Mayor.

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

Louis: Just fine. Thanks. I want to pick up right where we left off. We heard from Greg Floyd from the Teamsters Union that he and other labor leaders have been trying to meet with you to suggest some ways short of layoffs to deal with the budget deficit. Wanted to give you a chance to respond. We all know you've been busy.

Mayor: Sure. Thank you, Errol. I've spoken to a number of labor leaders in just the last week. And I respect Greg Floyd a lot and known him a long time. And if he wants to meet, I'd be happy to meet. He has my cell number. I wish he had let me know. I would have happily met with him whenever he wanted to. But I know for a fact that some labor leaders are saying that early retirement could be the solution. I think early retirement can be a helpful piece, but we're talking about a \$1 billion deficit we need to close for the current fiscal year. Early retirement won't be enough, not by a long shot. So I understand why labor leaders are talking about that as an obvious, a less painful solution, but it's not going to get us there. We need this borrowing to avert these layoffs. That's just the fact.

Louis: What are they telling you from Albany about the likelihood or possibility of getting that borrowing authority?

Mayor: Well, look, I think the conversation has improved in the last week or more for a variety of reasons. I think everyone saw the federal stimulus collapsed. I think a lot of folks of good will, honestly, Errol in Albany were assuming eventually the federal government would get its act together. When they didn't, that was a very sobering moment. City Council has obviously made clear their support in the voice of Speaker Johnson, but also they're planning on voting on a resolution in favor of long-term borrowing soon. So I think, you know, and more and more labor unions are clearly stepping up and making their voices heard. So I am more hopeful that Albany will come back and address this. But, you know, we need to see evidence of that or else at some point we have to go ahead with these layoffs. I don't want to Lord knows, but I also have to. I

owe it to the people of this city and the taxpayers to balance this budget no matter what. I just hope, you know, Albany will affirm to us soon that they're coming back.

Louis: Well now, these strategies are not mutually exclusive right? I mean, it strengthens your hand in making the case for the need for borrowing if you can show that you've tightened your belt and done a lot of creative ways of saving money here in the city, right?

Mayor: Well, we've done that over multiple budgets, but particularly in this last budget you're talking about a huge reduction, almost \$7 billion in our budget. Lots of agencies, lots of programs cut. I mean, folks in Albany saw that. And we've warned them about additional cuts coming, just because of the revenue dynamic here next fiscal year, very tough. Then I've heard from plenty of the Legislative members that they know the State might be making cuts to this city and a lot of other cities in this state. So the State government starts to cut us, unfortunately it becomes ever more clear why we need this help. I think the pieces are starting to become clearer and clearer. The last thing I want it to be Errol, is that what gets people into action is when they see people being laid off. I hope we can solve things well before that.

Louis: I got a question for you. This came from a man named Awad on Twitter. And I just want to read it to you because I think he phrased it just right. Mr. Mayor, do you really want to be on the wrong side of history? Let's say schools reopen and COVID spreads unexpectedly by thousands and kills dozens. Scholars would say you're solely to blame by disregarding warnings of principals, teachers, officials, and spikes in kids COVID. What's your sense of how much you've got on the line in making this decision to go forward?

Mayor: By definition Errol it is a tough decision. And I don't take any of this lightly. But I'll tell you something. The health care leaders of this administration have been part of this conversation over months now. They recognize we have an extraordinarily low infection rate in this city. The American Society of Pediatrics has said that the kids are going to suffer if they don't get a chance to come back to school. They're going to suffer in many ways. We have to factor in everything. We have to think about kids whose education has already been disrupted. But not only that, their mental health, their physical health, nutrition, all the things they get in school. So it's not a simple choice by any means, but we also have not only an incredibly low infection rate in the city, the envy of the nation. But every one in those school buildings will be wearing a mask, which has proven to be in many ways, the single most important strategy. We're cleaning all the time, social distancing, so many things in place to protect people. And obviously a rigorous test and trace operation. So now to your – to the person asking the question, we've thought about this endlessly and put the safeguards in place to protect kids and to protect adults in the buildings alike. But we have the ability to reopen schools for our children, for our families. They're asking us to do it. A clear majority of our parents and families want their kids back in school. And I do have an obligation to serve them and to do it safely. And we can.

Louis: The United Federation of Teachers has said among other things, there's real concern that there won't be enough testing in place on a regular basis to make sure that people coming in and out of these buildings are not infected. What's the answer to that? Is there – it strikes me as the kind of thing where there's not a lot of room for compromise, because either you're testing a whole lot of people or you're not?

Mayor: I disagree Errol. We've had really productive conversations with all the unions that represent the folks who work in our school system, UFT, CSA, DC 37. There's a lot of stakeholders and everyone wants to keep our schools safe. So there's a whole spectrum of ways you can go about testing. What's clear looking around the world, including some of the countries that have done the best in fighting the coronavirus, who have the best health care systems who have had the most successful school experiences. They actually are not doing a mandatory testing. But there's lots of different approaches we can take. And we're having that very productive conversation with the unions about what allows us to strike the balance, make sure people are safe, do it on a consistent basis. And be able to move our school system forward. I, you know, I'll tell you one thing – I have not heard a single educator say our kids can get the same education, as good an education solely from remote. I haven't heard any of them say that our kids who are remote will get the same mentoring and counseling and mental and physical health support as the kids who come into a school building. So we have to make it safe, but we're working with the unions to figure out what that can be.

Louis: Okay. Let me ask you, before we go to the break, there's a broad question about whether or not people are leaving New York and not intending to come back. And it seems to me, we're moving from anecdotal evidence, which we all see, this is the end of the month, for example. And I, you know, you go outside, you see a bunch of moving vans, to sort of harder numbers. Where the New York Times is reporting, you know, hikes in the price of housing in Westchester and in Long Island, moving companies saying that they're overbooked because everybody's trying to get out of the city and so forth. And you know, back in May, about 400,000 plus people left the city between March and May we know of. And we're not sure who has come back. Is there some point at which you want to express concern about that? Or make some kind of a plan to address it?

Mayor: It's a good question Errol, but I want to tell you, we can't overrate the moment. We are clearly the safest place in America right now when it comes to the coronavirus. I literally had a conversation last weekend with someone who told me that they worked between New York and Miami and moved their family to New York, because it was a lot safer than Miami in terms of the spread of this disease. So I think in fact, people in this country are looking at New York City becoming safer and safer, healthier and healthier in terms of the coronavirus. They're seeing our economy starting to come back. I think a lot of folks who went and went to their country homes are going to wait until they feel it's the right moment. A lot of them are going to come back. I think when we get a vaccine, our economy is going to start to rebound more profoundly and everything that's been true about New York through its history is going to be true again. And people are going to come here. Will some leave? Unquestionably, but I believe others will come to take their place.

Louis: Okay. Do you want to make a public statement that you don't want people to leave our city?

Mayor: Of course I don't want people to leave, but I don't look at it that way. I would say if someone said to me, what should you do? You should stay in New York City because we have a very bright future because we've come back from every crisis we've ever had and actually come

back stronger. And this is a place of amazing opportunity. So I'd say if you asked my advice? Stay, there's going to be a lot of great things up ahead here. But if someone's made up their mind Errol again, I'm not going to beg people to stay. I know this city will rebound. I know it. And I know others will come. They have for generations. We can't overrate this moment in history. It is a passing moment. There will be a vaccine. And then all the strengths of New York City will reassert again. And I guarantee, absolutely guarantee, there will be a day in the next few years when you start to have stories about all the people coming in because they sense opportunity and the population going up and the economy rebounding. It's -- we've seen it before. We're going to see it again.

Louis: Okay. Can't happen soon enough. Standby, Mr. Mayor, we're going to take a quick break. I'll be back with Mayor de Blasio in just a minute. Stay with us.

[...]

Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. I'm, once again, joined by Mayor de Blasio, who's joining us from the Blue Room. And Mr. Mayor on WNYC last Friday, you suggested in response to a call that tackling the issue of segregation in our schools and in our city would require, among other things, more support for your efforts to tax the wealthy. And I just found like a disconnect there because much of what needs to get done, if you want to break down the segregation, is not a budget item, it's not really a revenue item, it's really more about implementing policies.

Mayor: I would say it's about redistributing wealth. And I think that is on one level policy, on one level absolutely is through taxation. It has been the best tool ever to redistribute wealth. What do we have here? We have vast segregation, but the mistake, in my view, I've said it for years, is those who say, 'Oh, it's the schools that did it.' No, the schools didn't do it. It is economic segregation and housing segregation. It is based on the horrible American phenomenon of both economic and racial discrimination that have held back working people of color from having the opportunities they deserve. So, I say to that, let's really go at this. Let's not do magical thinking about, you know, wave a wand and suddenly you can desegregate every school. Let's actually go at the heart of the matter so people who have been excluded from certain neighborhoods actually get the opportunity. That means building a lot of affordable housing in places where there's often been resistance to it. It means putting more money in people's pockets so they can afford a variety of neighborhoods. If you really want to go with the root cause, let's go at it. There's a lot we can also do on a policy level to make schools more diverse, but I just always want to start at the beginning of the equation.

Louis: But the schools are the solution. The schools are not simply a problem. The whole idea is that you desegregate the schools, communities, families, and neighborhoods get to know each other a little bit better and you start changing society. That was the whole idea. It's not simply -- it's not like people can't afford houses in Breezy Point. I can afford a house in Breezy Point. If I go down there, all of the real estate agents, they're going to tell me there's nothing available. That's the problem.

Mayor: Well, I think you're affirming my point, respectfully. I think this is about jobs and housing and economic and racial discrimination. And I think that's the heart of the matter. So, I agree with you, the more people experience each other, the better off we'll be as a society. But I don't think that's the essence of this debate. I believe – look, where we have seen tremendous success in diversification and desegregation efforts, District One and District Three in Manhattan, District 15 in Brooklyn, where DOE and communities worked together to come up with a plan, get community buy-in, and build it out. That's what we're striving to do in districts all over the city. We did not see success when I tried to do something, which I thought would have been a very sensible policy change, which is to end the use of a single test for our specialized high schools, which are the pinnacle of segregation, and try and diversify them with a different admissions approach. Obviously, got huge blow back on that. A lot of people also agreed with me, but we got huge blow back. My point only is, we can take actions in schools and it will move things some, but it won't solve the fundamental problem that we have a lot of communities in this city that are largely of one ethnicity and over extensive areas. And if we want to break through that we have to go to more fundamental economic change. And yeah, taxing the wealthy is one of the ways that you have the resources to do that.

Louis: When it comes to the specialized tests, when it comes to where the district lines are drawn at the community level, you're not going to just do this by consensus, right? I mean, you grew up in Boston in the 1970s, you know that this is something that requires the strong hand of government. It requires people being told, no, this segregated community you want to maintain that you think is so charming and so much fun, it happens to be against the Constitution and we're going to change some things around. In other words, there's no easy way to just talk our way into this, right?

Mayor: I agree with – look, I think where you're pointing, Errol, I'm obviously kindred with you that, one, we don't accept housing discrimination. We need to go at it very aggressively with real penalties, clearly. And if we really want to help change it, we need to build affordable housing in communities that have often resisted it. I mean, let's be clear, more privileged communities talk a good game a lot of times – this is part of my frustration with a lot of people who happen to be privileged and they love to talk about this issue, but when was the last time they were at a rally to bring more affordable housing into their community so they could diversify their own community. We've been trying incessantly with the rezonings and other actions to build more affordable housing, including in places where people pushed back hard. And so, I want the toughest anti-housing discrimination laws, but I also want to see affordable housing built on a huge scale. That is one of the best ways to create desegregation.

Look, I want to see redistribution of wealth. One of the things we did with all the school-oriented funding, the Pre-K for All, 3-K for All, Advanced Placement for All, is we consciously – free afterschool – we've been redistributing wealth to families that had less. They then have more money to work with if they want to move into a different community that costs more, that's one of the ways to help them, but we've got to do that on a much bigger scale. So, of course, I agree with you, fight discrimination. But I even think it's more powerful to put money in people's pockets so can become more mobile.

Louis: As you know you're being sued – you know, your administration is being sued by the Anti-Discrimination Center because the community preference, which I know long predates your administration, giving people preference if they happen to live in a community board when you build affordable housing, actually contributes to segregation. Professor Andrew Beveridge did this whole study. He looked at seven million applications for the affordable housing program and found that the vast majority of people are applying for affordable housing outside of their community board. And so, by designating half of all of these new units for whoever happens to be living right there, you are really just kind of freezing things in place. Whereas people actually are saying, they're voting with their feet and their applications, they want to live somewhere else. they don't want to live in segregated neighborhoods,

Mayor: Right. And so, the fact that – first of all, the real issue is, are we going to have the affordable housing to make available to people? That 50 percent – and you're right, this does predate me, but let's look at the virtue in the current formula. 50 percent goes to people from all over. Well, that's part of what we need to do. As you said, bring people to opportunity wherever they're from. They can go wherever they want. But we have to get the affordable housing built for it to be real for people. One of the things we have found consistently is communities want to know that there's some benefit for them if they're going to allow development. And this is especially true in gentrifying communities. So, now the other side of the coin, which is real and you know, Errol, you've watched it, you live in one of those communities, folks who say, 'Hey, my community has changed, maybe it is safer, maybe the values of the property has gone up and now I'm being forced out as opposed to having an opportunity to live in my own community with new affordable housing that's built.' The 50-50 actually I think strikes a balance, but I still go back to, this is an economic challenge first and foremost. And so how do we put people – how do we put money in people's pockets so they could have opportunity? Raise wages, raise benefits, redistribute wealth. I don't know how all these people talk about school desegregation – when I say redistribute wealth, let's have that conversation, I don't hear people pick up on it. I'd love them to pick up on it because that's how we actually start to change things.

Louis: Okay. We're going to have to agree to disagree on that and say good night for now. Thanks, Mr. Mayor. We will see you next week.

Mayor: Thank you, Errol.

###