



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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: July 22, 2015

CONTACT: pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov, (212) 788-2958

**RUSH TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO DELIVERS KEYNOTE REMARKS AT
THE SYMPOSIUM ON CITIES AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Thank you most, signore. Thank you for your leadership, and for this extraordinary gathering.

I want to thank Jeffrey Sachs, who I think has a voice that penetrates internationally as a powerful guide to the kind of changes we have to make. I want to thank him for his friendship. We've spoken many times – I've often turned to him for guidance in the work we're doing in New York – and thank you for always being so available to us in the work that we are doing. I know a lot of people around the world feel the same – that you extend yourself to us as we do this work. So thank you, Jeffrey.

My colleagues here – my good friend Mayor Marino, I appreciate – when you are acting to improve the eternal city, it has a special meaning for all of us. And you're showing in this complicated place – complicated because of history and complicated because of current dynamics – that change can happen. Ecological change can happen. Government can be made better. Corruption can be fought. And I want to thank you for your leadership and your bravery in that fight. And let's –

[Applause]

As I said yesterday, we in New York City generally have a difficult time praising California. But I am forced to praise California, because –

Unknown: The truth comes out.

[Laughter]

Mayor: I'm forced to do it. Our coastal rivalry must be put aside for the good of the earth. And – but Governor Brown has been a literal inspiration to a lot of us, because he has been unafraid. And there's a beautiful, simple scriptural passage that says, "Be not afraid." I think if we're going to confront these issues, overcoming the fear that exists in all of our societies – the fear of change, the fear of losing some of the convenience and consumerism that has overtaken us – and the encyclical speaks so powerfully to that cultural and human phenomenon.

We're going to have to stare down the fear, and certainly the political fears, that pervade so much of the work we public servants do. I alluded to that a little bit yesterday. Governor Brown has struck a fearless stance in continuing to raise the bar on what we have to do to address climate change. And, Governor, I notice each time you do that, the Republic still stands. The State of California still functions. And it's a reminder to people that we're obligated.

I'm noting also Jeff's point about how bold we're going to have to be in breaking our reliance on fossil fuels. And I'll reference our own work in New York City in just a moment, but think about it – what Jeff said was a pretty radical thought. I love that phrase – what was the word you used about leaving the resources in the ground?

Economist Jeffrey Sachs: Stranding.

Mayor: Stranding – stranding the fossil fuel resources. That's a – to many people on this earth, that would be unimaginable. It would be unimaginable because we've spent our whole lives coveting those resources. It would be unimaginable by any traditional notion of economic development.

But what we confronted in New York City – I think everyone in this room is confronting in different ways – is what is our very concept of development, if our traditional model of development is slowly killing us? And the encyclical, again, speaks so powerfully on trying to upend the logic.

And I say this to so many great leaders assembled here – I know I may be preaching to the converted a bit – but I'm saying it because each of us is traveling this path and trying our best to interpret the challenges. It is an interesting and difficult thing to have spent a lifetime believing we needed fossil fuels, believing we needed more, and we needed cheaper – to realize, at this point, that that's a trap, and that we have to reset the entire equation in favor of renewable energy, in favor of conservation, in favor of governing differently and demanding a different reality from businesses and consumers. That takes a lot of courage and a lot of creativity.

And so in New York City, we borrow liberally from examples elsewhere. We borrow from the Pope's ideas. We borrow from the work that Jeff has done, the work our colleagues have done – and, again, California's been particularly influential in our thinking, because it points out just how necessary it is to set the high goals.

And I would remind you – and this is what pervaded our thinking about the OneNYC plan – given the depths of the crisis, we simply won't get where we need to go by setting incrementalist goals. Whether just or unjust for each of us as leaders – and I'm saying this – my goal today is to be collegial and sympathetic, and I'm not working from a formal statement, as much as talking leader to leader.

This moment we find ourselves in will not be politically convenient. It will not be comfortable. It will often be daunting. But the beauty of the high goals – the beauty of the strong, forceful goals is that we declare ourselves to our people, and then we actually will find there will be

tremendous energy toward meeting the goals. The problem in incrementalism is it doesn't fit the reality materially, but the other problem in incrementalism is it actually represses action.

We said in our One New York plan that we had to change the very concept of urban planning. Previously, my predecessor Michael Bloomberg had done a great thing. He created a plan – a much more comprehensive plan for New York City than ever had existed before – it's called PlaNYC. And it focused on population growth – the fact that New York City is well on its way to 9 million people as a population just within our city limits, even before you talk about our metropolitan area. It focused on an economic growth and diversification, and it focused on resiliency and sustainability – all noble, all important, and a lot of great specifics that sparked action. But the problem with the plan was it didn't have enough of an equality frame to it. And we recognized the growing inequality crisis gripping our city and gripping our nation. So we updated the plan, and thought about how you put metrics into the equation that are bold and demand equality and fairness economically, at the same time as demanding sustainability.

One of the things I said when we announced this plan a few months ago is think – it's a very simple of human equation – think about the fact that we all as leaders strive for environmental sustainability and we strive for economic inclusion, but think about how incomplete society would be with just one rather than the other. A wonderfully, environmentally sustainable city or nation in which inequality was rampant, and there was no actual economic inclusion, would be considered a failure. Equally, the most prosperous – the most economically prosperous city or nation that was slowly degrading environmentally would also be considered a failure. We now have to raise both bars simultaneously. And thank God – they intersect.

There are tremendous positive economic opportunities in truly reworking our environmental sensibility. What employment will be created around renewable energy – about – around restoration of our wetlands and recycling and so many other – retrofitting – so many other areas of economic endeavor that are specifically related to sustainability. There's a great potential, that we've only begun to tap, to marry together environmental sustainability and economic sustainability.

And, obviously, we have no choice but to go down the road and find what's possible. So in our plan, we borrowed from California and said 80 by 50. And that process – and I think of so many cities and other groups in this room have gone through the process – and I know a number of you have reached that goal or other powerful goals.

What we found in the process was there were many artificial roadblocks that we had to account for and overcome. There was – I'm sure everyone will nod knowingly – there was bureaucratic intransigence. We found – we like to believe we have a fairly progressive and advanced governmental personnel cohort in New York City, but we immediately found in many meetings the classic formulation: "this is not the way we've done things before." And I have a rule whenever I'm in a meeting and someone from my government – the traditional government staff – the civil service staff – tells me that something hasn't been done that way before. I immediately tell them that's exactly why we're going to go in a different direction, and that we don't really allow that sentence in our meetings. It's an automatic disqualifier.

So we had to convince our own bureaucracies that 80-by-50 was an absolutely necessary goal – and more recently, as we’ve tried to keep up with Jerry Brown, as I said yesterday, 40-by-30, each process is so fascinating, because it follows the kind of classic psychological trend. First there’s denial, and then you go through the different stages. And in each case, what was increasingly clear as you went through the conversation was there was not a physical impossibility of reaching these goals.

Yes, there were financial obligations that went with it, fiscal challenges, but fiscal challenges related to survival – and we are one of the ultimate coastal cities in the world, so climate change is very personal for us. Fiscal investments related to survival seem rather justified. So in terms of any sense of budgetary prioritization, it made sense to advance those investments and also look at what they could do for us economically – again, the job creation that could go with it.

So we had to overcome each of these roadblocks internally, but then we found the challenge of the private sector. And each government is government – each government has different powers – but what we said was very simple – that the private sector had two choices in New York City – and this was particularly true vis a vis building retrofits – our biggest pollution source, because we’re so densely populated, our biggest pollution challenge comes around our buildings. So we said, look, what we’d love to do is find a cooperative model where we’ll all sit down, with our real estate community and our major business sectors, and come up with a pathway to 80-by-50 together – and we would love to do that voluntarily and we think there’s a lot of enlightened people in the business community who would embrace that notion, understand it’s good for their bottom lines as well – but we were going to do that on a very tight leash. And if over a year or so, we did not find sufficient progress with a voluntary model, we would go to a mandate model. Again, we had capacity, legally and otherwise – our regulatory capacity allowed us to do that.

And I think this is something for all of my fellow leaders in the room. I think this is a cautionary tale. We will constantly find people – business leaders and leaders of other constituencies – telling us why we need to go slower or keep our goals lower. And at this point in history, as Jeff pointed out, we’ve passed that. That’s part of our past. We can’t talk about half-measures anymore.

So I believe fundamentally in the notion of giving our private sector friends an opportunity to come along peacefully. And if that’s not going to work, to put strong mandates and clear mandates on. And I believe, but the way, that that has tremendous public support, because the change we’ve seen in public consciousness over the last few years around these issues, based in human’s experience, really should put the wind in the sails of our more aggressive efforts to compel private sector action.

The other thing I want to say very quickly is as we developed our plan, we – again, same kind of trajectory related to 80-by-50 – to our goal of having zero percent of our waste stream go to landfill over the next two decades – and that, again, in a place like New York City, seems an outrageous concept on first blush, until we looked at each and every one of the component parts and realized it was an achievable goal if we were willing, again, to break with past practice, if we were willing to do tremendous, extensive public education and make key investments. We also learned, as with so many of these areas, that those investments would ultimately save us a lot of

money – not only be good for the environment, but they'll ultimately save us a lot of money – so, short-term investment that would pay off later, both environmentally and fiscally.

So we went through the environmental goals and then we asked the equality question. And as we looked at the equality question, it became clear that the level of inequality in our city was so rampant that we had to do something very different. And just to give you an easy example of this – there are almost 2 million New Yorkers below our federal poverty level. There are almost 4 million New Yorkers at or near our poverty level. So put in dollar terms, there's almost 4 million people in New York City who are living – family of four, under \$40,000. And if you know anything about the cost of living in New York City, that means people are barely able to make ends meet, particularly because we have some of the highest housing costs in the nation.

So I govern over a city that is, on its face, prosperous and with a great diversified economy and so many strengths, and yet, if you look underneath it, a huge percentage of our population either literally in poverty or barely getting by economically. We decided we had to address this issue very directly, and again, through the prism of high goals, and that it had to connect to our sustainability goals. So we set a simple challenge for ourselves – over the next ten years, to bring 800,000 people out of poverty. Now, 800,000 people in a city that's about 8.5 million now – so almost a tenth of our population.

We said we would bring out of poverty, through a variety of investments – things like affordable housing and other investments by the city that would lower people's costs and improve their family economics – but also through increasing wage levels and benefit levels, both through what we could do and through what other levels of government could do, and through pushing our private sector to compensate people better.

I'll finish on this note because I hope it's helpful to you as my colleagues that, again, on the face of it, saying we're going to get 800,000 people out of poverty – there'd be a lot to recommend going in the opposite direction – meaning, being silent or speaking in platitudes. Why did we decide to marry that goal to the goal of 80-by-50? Because we found them equally necessary for a sustainable society, and we thought the same concept applied in both cases.

The very act of setting the goal starts to change behavior. The very act of setting the goal, first of all, tells the public that the aspiration is formalized and serious; second, tells all of the other stakeholders that they'll be held to account against this formal decision by the city of New York to achieve this kind of change. It sends a message to our federal government, our state government, our private sector that they too will be judged against this standard.

It's the audacity that we as local leaders have to exercise right now. Again, I think we have an international phenomenon of lack of national government leadership on issues of equality and issues of sustainability. I'm not saying every nation, but many, many nations are experiencing what we in the United States are experiencing – of the most dynamic leadership being local and as you higher up through government, less dynamic, less effective leadership. Ergo, the local level has to set the pace and has to be bold to pull the whole debate toward change.

And finally, we set the goal to discipline ourselves. And I think this is true vis a vis our internal bureaucracies, but it's true also in terms of our own work and our own sense of discipline. By setting the high goal, we actually force ourselves each day to take action related to it.

If the goal were lower or the goal were diffuse we'd all be doing – I think we can say this commonly – we'd all be doing good and important work. Setting the higher goal forces our hand in a much deeper and I hope more noble way.

I borrow liberally from Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal Era in the United States when I say this, because I think that was the high watermark in our nation for audacious goals that shockingly came true. And we learned in the process the very power of setting goals, including some that on their surface seemed impossible in the first instance, but increasingly became so prevalent in the minds of leaders and of the populace that they came to take form and they came true over time.

So, I'll finish by saying this to me has been – this planning process we've gone through – the OneNYC process has been ultimately inspiring. And I'm sure many of you have your own planning process that mirrors some of the same reality. I welcome you to look at what we've done, and we'd be – me and my team, of course, would be happy to offer any ideas and insights from our process. But I would – I would conclude by saying I think the power of this – and this is what's been inspirational to me – is to say once you recognize we're in a new reality – and I'll bring it now back and finish with the climate reality – once you recognize we're in a new reality, it liberates us. It liberates us to think differently. It liberates us to set the kind of goals our predecessors would not have. And I actually think the public is yearning. The public is yearning for that kind of honesty and boldness. I think they're yearning for us to marry our analysis with what's happening to our earth with equally strong and bold goals. And I think to the extent we do, we will find a surprising level of support from our people urging us on and helping us to get to those goals.

Thank you.

###